



WAITRESS

AT THE

SHADOW

RIDGE INN

ABBIE
ZANDERS

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BY ABBIE ZANDERS

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue—One Year Later](#)

[Connect with Abbie](#)

[Also by Abbie Zanders](#)

[About the Author](#)

I STIFLED a yawn and opened the window, filling the car with crisp, fragrant air. Of all the places I'd traveled in the past year, the mountains were my favorite. Having lived in a bustling suburb most of my life, I appreciated the green space.

I liked my privacy.

How long had I been driving now? Four hours? Six? I scarcely noticed the passage of time anymore. I spent more time on the road than off it these days. If that was the price of keeping me and those I cared about safe, so be it. Thinking of it as a grand adventure helped, but even that was beginning to wear thin.

My stomach rumbled. It had been hours since I'd put anything in it. The caffeine and sugar I'd consumed earlier that morning were long gone, and I was feeling that weird combination of weary and restless.

I reached over for the bag of snacks on the passenger seat, frowning when I found it empty. No more chips, no more crackers, no more cookies to break the monotony. That was probably a good thing. I'd logged more than a hundred thousand miles over the past year. That, combined with at least that many boredom-consumed junk calories, were making themselves known in my ever-expanding ass. I'd always been curvy, but my hourglass shape was in danger of becoming a pear if I wasn't careful.

I glanced at the faded sign along the highway as I whizzed past. *Shadow Ridge, 10 miles. Food — Fuel.*

I felt a familiar tingle at the nape of my neck. I liked to think it was my guardian angel sitting on my shoulder, giving me a nudge. The fact that it was mild and pleasant suggested stopping was a good idea.

My arms and legs were stiff. I could use a bathroom break as well as a meal that wasn't soaked in grease and had three times the daily recommended allowance of sodium. Maybe they'd have an ATM there too. I avoided using them whenever possible, but if I was stopping anyway, I might as well.

Shadow Ridge it is.

I took the exit, which led me down into a peaceful-looking valley, past huge patches of forested land and a smattering of farms, into a village that looked as if time had passed it by. I had to laugh at the budget motel sign on the outskirts of town, proudly advertising in-room color TV. I kept going, soon entering the town proper. Shadow Ridge appeared to consist of one main street that followed the natural curve of the river, filled with quaint shops and small businesses on one side and a walking trail on the other.

A sense of peace and calm washed over me as I cruised the main strip, familiarizing myself with the layout. I liked to be aware of my surroundings, to get the vibe, to know the quickest way in and out, just in case.

It didn't take long. In the span of a few blocks, I had the lay of the land. I could get everything I needed and be back on the road in no time.

I made another pass. I filled up and cleaned my windows at the service station at the edge of town, then parked in a public lot and took care of the rest on foot. It was a nice day, and I needed the exercise. I stopped at the ATM and replenished my cash, frowning when I saw the balance printed on the receipt. My wanderlust funds were running low. I'd have to rectify that later.

But first, food.

I continued to the cozy-looking colonial-style inn for lunch.

I liked the place immediately. It was an elegant white brick structure with dark shutters and carriage lamps that suggested a long and interesting history. As I stepped through the double French doors, adorned with shining brass fixtures, I knew I'd made the right choice. Delicious, savory aromas permeated the air, and the friendly chatter of patrons made for a soothing white noise.

I gave my guardian angel a mental high five. She had yet to let me down. It was only when I ignored her gentle prods and warnings that I ran into trouble.

I stopped near the hostess podium, uncertain as to whether I was supposed to seat myself or not. I decided to wait. I wasn't anxious to get back in the car and drive for another eight hours.

I occupied myself by looking around. I'd mentioned I liked to be aware of my surroundings, right? To my right was a well-stocked bar. Straight ahead, a casual lounge with square tables, a small stage in the corner, and a big picture window taking up most of the outside wall.

And another exit.

Good. I liked options.

A petite fifty-something woman with short black hair and glasses appeared from somewhere beyond my line of sight and smiled in welcome. Slim and weathered-looking, she exuded anxious energy.

"Welcome to the Shadow Ridge Inn. Here for lunch?"

I nodded.

"Our dining room is closed for a private event today," she informed me, "but the lounge is open. Sit anywhere you'd like. Someone will be with you in a moment."

The place wasn't crowded. Of the two dozen or so tables in the lounge, only about half were occupied. I moved forward, catching a brief glimpse of the dining room past the bar and down a short hallway to my right. It looked elegant with white linen tablecloths and hurricane lamps.

I chose a table along the interior wall, near the alternate exit. Its placement allowed me to see the whole room. Through the big window, I had a spectacular view of the park across the street, the meandering river glistening just beyond, and the mountain rising up sharply in the background. It looked like a postcard.

“What do you want?” A teenage girl glared down at me, somehow managing to look simultaneously bored and put out.

She didn’t seem old enough to be out of high school, but she must have been since it was early afternoon on a weekday. She, like me, might’ve just looked young for her age. No one could believe I was twenty-seven either.

“What are my choices?” I asked calmly.

The girl huffed, her lips thinning in annoyance. “Didn’t you see the specials on the board when you came in?”

I glanced toward where I’d come in and squinted. “No. I must have missed it.”

“Larissa,” snapped the older woman. “Table four’s order is up. Go on. I’ve got this.”

The girl scowled at me like I was the source of all her problems and left, and the feisty woman with the pixie cut approached my table with a laminated menu of lunch specials.

“I’m sorry about that,” the woman apologized. “She hasn’t quite gotten the hang of things yet. I’m Rose. Can I get you something to drink while you’re looking over the specials?”

“Unsweetened iced tea, please.”

“You got it.”

I looked over the menu, my stomach growling as I did so. Everything sounded good, and if the smells coming from the kitchen were any indication, I wouldn’t be disappointed. Remembering my growing ass, I chose the soup and salad special, dressing on the side, when Rose returned with my iced tea.

My order was out within minutes, dropped unceremoniously on the table by Larissa without comment. I

thanked her anyway, earning myself a lip curl. She probably thought I was being snarky, but I wasn't. I'd waited enough tables to know it was a tough job. Maybe she was just having a bad day.

As I tucked into my healthy and surprisingly delicious meal, I casually took stock of the goings-on around me. I'd picked a good time. The lunch crowd was gone, and it was too early for dinner. A couple of older guys sat at the bar, watching ESPN on the flat screens hanging inconspicuously in the corners. A trio of middle-aged women sat a few tables to my right, heads leaning in, no doubt sharing a particularly juicy piece of local gossip. A lone man, absently stirring a bottomless cup of coffee, read the paper as his pie sat, untouched. And ...

Hello there.

A guy about my age entered through the back entrance and strode directly to the bar. Silky-looking brown hair, nicely built physique. He didn't look my way once, so I only saw his profile, but it was a nice one. He leaned on the bar and spoke to Rose, who grinned at him and scurried off into the kitchen.

The man straightened, ran a hand through his hair, and glanced around. Before he could make eye contact, I dropped my gaze and gave my phone my full attention. It wasn't turned on, but he didn't know that.

I knew immediately when his gaze landed on me. I *felt* it. It was curious. Probing. Wondering who I was and what I was doing in his town.

I'm no one. Just a passer-through having lunch. Nothing to see here.

Rose returned, and the sense of being in his sights ceased immediately. I chanced a glance, confirming my original observations. He was a good-looking man. About my age, maybe a little older. Clean-shaven. Well-built and tanned, like he spent a decent amount of time outside. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with a name and logo I couldn't quite make out from where I was.

Rose gave him a takeout bag; he handed her money and wished her a good day. Then, he turned and headed toward the door in which he'd entered.

Right past me.

I kept my head down and thumbed my blank screen. I sensed him slowing as he walked by, as if waiting for me to look up.

I didn't. There was no point.

He kept going and exited through the back door.

I exhaled discreetly and returned my attention to my meal. The portion sizes were huge. I wouldn't have to eat again for the rest of the day.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me," Rose exclaimed a short while later, her shrill voice carrying across the lounge. "John!" she called. "Get over here. We have a problem."

A sturdy-looking man with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair loped into view. I pegged him immediately as former military. A Marine maybe. Retired.

He leaned down and brushed a kiss on Rose's cheek. "What's up, beautiful?"

Even from where I sat, I could see Rose soften. I knew instinctively that they were married and he was her rock. Don't ask me how. I just did.

"We have a bus with seventy-five people fifteen minutes out, and Shannon just called and said her car won't start. Michelle's in school, and I can't get ahold of Sandy. Larissa can't handle seven, let alone seventy-five."

A large, powerfully built man in a white chef's coat joined the party. His long black hair was pulled back tightly into a ponytail; his features were too rugged to be called handsome. Striking maybe. He reminded me of a bear. Or a wood carving of a bear, done with a chain saw.

Rose repeated her concern, her voice sounding more panicked the second time.

When the bear-man spoke, his voice held a slight Southern twang. “What do you wanna do, boss lady?” he asked. “I’ve got fixin’s for seventy-five ready to go back there.”

Rose looked like she was about to explode into a thousand tiny pieces, and I felt that tingle at the back of my neck again.

I checked my watch. My goal was to make it to Virginia today, find a cheap place to stay, then spend a couple of days checking items off my dwindling bucket list—Skyline Drive, Luray Caverns, Colonial Williamsburg.

I had time. And if I could put a couple of bucks in my pocket, all the better.

On impulse, I stood and approached them. “Excuse me. Maybe I can help.”

The cook’s eyebrows rose in surprise while Rose looked me over and apparently found me lacking.

“Thanks, honey, but we’ll figure something out.”

I straightened my spine. I was no taller than Rose, which meant I could look her right in the eye.

“Forgive me for eavesdropping, but it sounds like you’re in a bind. You’ve got a bus coming. I’ve got experience, a couple of hours to kill, and I could use some extra cash in my pocket. What do you say?”

I felt more than saw the two men regarding me with amusement. Neither of them said anything, leaving the decision up to Rose.

She narrowed her eyes, then blew out an exhale. “Oh, what the hell? I’m screwed either way. Welcome aboard. You’re hired.” Turning to the cook, who was now grinning from ear to ear, she said, “Lou, give our new waitress ...” She paused and looked at me expectantly.

“Casey,” I provided helpfully.

“Give Casey an apron and a quick tutorial and cross your fingers.” She tilted her face toward the ceiling. “Lord Jesus, I don’t know why you feel the need to keep testing me. Should have stayed in Baltimore ...”

Rose walked away, mumbling to herself.

Lou chuckled and shook his head. “Well, come on then, darlin’. Let’s see what you’ve got.”



WHEN THE LARGE tour bus pulled away some three hours later, filled with glowing, satisfied customers, I sat down with Rose. I passed on the celebratory liquor she’d offered but accepted the cup of coffee.

“You did amazing today,” she said, sliding an envelope across the table.

It was slim, but I hadn’t expected any different. It held fifteen bucks at most. Minimum wage didn’t apply to servers, and I’d only worked three hours. The tips, however, stuffed my pockets. Customers loved me, especially older folks who appreciated a smile and manners.

“Thanks.” I chanced a glance across the lounge, where Larissa was wiping down and refilling a tray of saltshakers.

She hadn’t fared nearly as well. Might’ve been the scowl permanently etched on her face. Or her blatant rudeness.

“Seriously,” Rose continued, “we couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Glad I could help.”

“So ... what brings you to Shadow Ridge?” she asked, leaning back and sipping her high-end bourbon.

“I’m just passing through.”

“To where?”

I shifted. I had no intention of sharing my plans. The fewer people who knew where I was, the less chance I had of being found. “South.”

She considered that for a moment. “Are you on a tight schedule?”

I almost laughed at that. I had nothing but time. “Not particularly. Why?”

“Because we have another bus coming tomorrow.”

Subtle. I felt my lips quirk. “Do you?”

Rose nodded. “Every day this week.”

“Not to be rude or anything, but why?” From what I could see, Shadow Ridge was a nice place, but not *busloads of people come to visit nice*.

Rose wasn't offended. In fact, she laughed. “I thought the same thing when John and I first came here a few years ago. There's a casino about ten miles down the road, literally in the middle of nowhere. The smaller bus companies like to stop here because we offer them a great deal during the week and they're able to keep their package fares low. On the weekends, we get a lot of people coming in from the surrounding counties for the farmers market and such. In case you haven't noticed, we're the only place in town that can handle a crowd. Well, at least when we're not short-staffed. And—I know this is going to sound weird—but there's something about Shadow Ridge that keeps drawing people back.”

It didn't sound that weird. Unlike so many of the places I'd visited, Shadow Ridge felt comfortable. It checked all my boxes too. Out of the way. Low-key. Easy and uncomplicated.

She looked at me with hopeful eyes, and I had to admit, it was tempting. Staying in Shadow Ridge for a few days wouldn't be a hardship. A couple more busloads like today, and I wouldn't have to stop at another ATM for a month.

“Is this place actually an inn?”

“Not for the last hundred years,” Rose said. “We had dreams of restoring the upper floors, but the bar and restaurant are about all we can handle right now. The casino will charge you an arm and a leg for a room, but there's a place just off the interstate that's cheap and clean. You probably passed it on your way in.”

“All right, Rose,” I said. “Why not?”

I STACKED THE PLATES, glasses, and silverware on the big oval tray, hefted it up onto my shoulder, and carried them back into the kitchen. Max, our busboy, had his hands full, and I didn't mind helping.

The inn was busy tonight, but that was nothing unusual. It was popular—and literally the only place in town. Great food. Great atmosphere. Great prices. What wasn't to like?

I'd agreed to stick around for a couple of days. Those couple of days had turned into a week. Then two. I was still here, waitressing nearly every day, staving off one crisis after another. I served food, did kitchen prep, bussed tables, and helped behind the bar sometimes. Rose thought I was the greatest thing since sliced bread, and I got along with everyone. Well, not Larissa. She was still cranky, lazy, and rude to everyone, except the hot guys who came in frequently.

I neither minded nor cared about the guys. She was welcome to them.

The fact that she didn't even try to do a good job? That pissed me off. I didn't have a lot of patience for slackers. I never had.

I kept telling myself I would leave soon, but I felt no sense of urgency to do so. I liked it here. The quirky staff—apart from Larissa—was growing on me. Rose, with her spitfire personality and quick temper, and John, with his capable, calming presence. Lou, with his ever-present devilish grin and frequent allusions to a sketchy but memorable past. Shannon,

who was my age and already had three kids and a fourth on the way. Sandy, the other full-time waitress, who was quiet and didn't say much. CJ, the strong, silent bartender, who doubled as a bouncer. The high school-aged twins, Michelle and Max, who waited and bussed when they weren't in school. And Jessie, the self-proclaimed psychic-slash-kitchen helper. They were a motley crew, to be sure, but good people.

Then there were the customers. I was getting to know the regulars by name as well as their drink and food preferences. They were small-town folk, content to live in this idyllic little valley and leave the rest of the world to handle its business. Apparently, I was inclined to do the same because, as I'd said, I was still here.

It wasn't as if I had any place I had to be. Or someone waiting for me. No one cared where I was or what I was doing.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. My friend Angie insisted that I check in occasionally to assure her that I was alive and well. She was the only one I'd kept in contact with since I'd slipped away and left that life behind. I never told her where I was beyond the vaguest of terms. Even now, she knew only that I was somewhere in the northeast US, working my way south.

It was safer that way. For both of us.

The people at the inn didn't know anything about that, of course. I shared nothing of my prior life with them. When they asked, I'd smile, say something vague about indulging my wanderlust before I settled down somewhere, and adroitly change the subject.

They didn't need to know that I'd been the victim of a deranged stalker and nearly died. Or that I'd been so traumatized by the event that I could barely function for weeks afterward. Or that, when I'd finally learned to take a full breath again, he'd once again made his presence known by threatening not just me, but those around me as well.

I'd decided I couldn't live like that anymore. It was hardly living at all. I was cowering in fear, waiting for the inevitable,

afraid that he would use those around me to get what he wanted.

So, I'd left, and here I was.

Alone but alive.

I knew I'd have to leave again eventually. But not yet. I was enjoying my temporary respite in Shadow Ridge. And why wouldn't I? Thanks to Rose, I was staying in a cozy little caretaker's cottage with an idyllic view for practically nothing. Lou was making me delicious meals to take home every night, and the tips were putting plenty of cash in my pocket. Bonus: thanks to the many hours I was waitressing, my arms were toning up, and my ass was nearly back to its pre-road trip size.

I used my hips to push my way through the swinging doors and into the kitchen, carrying the tray of dirty dishes to the back, where the industrial sinks were.

"How are you holding up there, sweetheart?" drawled Lou, glancing up from the grill.

It was easier to picture him in black biker leather than the white chef's coat he was wearing. His long black hair was pulled tightly back and secured at the nape of his neck, his intense, dark eyes focused intently on me. It had unnerved me at first, but I had come to realize that was just Lou being Lou. He was big and scary on the outside, but inside, he was a marshmallow with the heart of a protector.

"I'm hanging in there," I told him, and I was. My feet ached from being on them so long, but my pockets were full, and the vibe in the place was a good one tonight.

"You're kicking serious ass," I told him. "Everyone is raving about the food."

He gave me a hundred-watt grin. "That's 'cause it tastes better when you serve it, darlin'."

I snorted and rolled my eyes—something I was not normally prone to do. "Right."

"It ain't packed out there because *my* ass looks fine in black denim."

He winked, and I laughed. Politically incorrect, I knew, but my self-confidence didn't mind a flirtatious boost now and then, especially from Lou. Despite his teasing, he was as chivalrous as they came, often walking me to my car at the end of a shift or, at the very least, watching from the window to ensure I made it to my vehicle safely.

“Case.” Michelle leaned her upper body through one of the swinging doors. “A group just came into the lounge and wants drinks.”

“On it,” I said.

Michelle wasn't eighteen yet, so legally, she was unable to carry or serve alcohol, and Shannon was late again.

“How long on those apps, Lou?” I asked.

“Gimme five.”

“You got it.”

I deposited the tray and left the kitchen, headed for the lounge. Like the dining room and the bar, every table was occupied, but I had no trouble spotting the newcomers.

I immediately pegged them as out-of-towners. Probably office workers out and about for a bit of male bonding, by the looks of them. Their skin was too pale, their hair too neat. Their indigo jeans looked brand-new, as did their bright flannel shirts. I knew that if I looked beneath the table, I'd find nice kicks without scuffs or wear.

Tourists.

“Did you guys just come in from the hayride?” I asked, noting the lingering strands of straw on their clothes.

The largest farm in the area, Ziegler Farms, held adult-only hayrides on Friday and Saturday nights from Labor Day through Halloween. I hadn't been on one myself, but I'd heard lots of customers rave about them.

“Yeah,” answered one of the men. “How'd you know?”

I reached out and pulled a piece of straw from his hair. “Lucky guess.”

He smiled and blushed in a shy *I crunch numbers for a living* kind of way. It was cute. Back in my prior life, I'd worked with dozens of men just like him.

“What can I get for you?”

“What do you recommend?” asked one of his buddies.

I leaned in slightly, as if to impart a great secret. “Well, if it were me, I'd order a couple of pitchers of Guinness Black Lager and the Real Man Sampler. That's two-dozen hot wings, cheddar bacon cheese fries, sliders, and pot stickers.” I paused, glancing at each of them with amusement. “You're all in good health, right?”

They laughed and assured me they were.

“We'll have that,” one of them said.

“Well, all right then. Be right back.”

I navigated my way through the crowd to the bar. “CJ, two pitchers of the Black.”

He nodded in acknowledgment while simultaneously pouring, taking orders, listening to stories, and scanning to ensure everyone was behaving themselves.

I left him to it and looped back toward the kitchen to drop the order for the heart-stopper special and pick up the apps for tables two and seven. On the way, I grabbed the nearly overflowing bus tray. Max was doing his best, but like I'd said, it was a full house, and he was doing double duty with kitchen prep. Rose really needed to hire more help to accommodate crowds like this.

I found Jessie at the sink, up to her elbows in suds and dirty dishes.

“Don't tell me the dishwasher's down again.”

The thing had been breaking every other day, and each time, Rose insisted the local handyman could coax it into lasting a while longer. It was a losing battle, but from what I'd been able to gather, Rose was tight with the purse strings, and commercial-grade dishwashers weren't cheap.

“Okay, I won’t,” Jessie replied, glancing over her shoulder with a wry smile. “Hey, what are you still doing here? I thought you were supposed to get off at seven. Wait. Don’t tell me. Shannon called out again, and Rose asked you to cover.”

I didn’t need to answer. We both had a keen grasp of the obvious, though Jessie claimed her abilities went way beyond that. Since I tended to rely heavily on instincts and feelings myself, I certainly wasn’t going to judge. But I didn’t go around claiming to be a psychic either, and I kept my guardian angel’s occasional nudges to myself.

I shrugged. “I had nothing better to do.”

Jessie paused, straightened, and turned around to give me her full attention. Not for the first time, I wondered how old she was. Rose had told me she was fifty-two, but I wasn’t sure I believed that. Jessie’s face didn’t have a single wrinkle, though her eyes—a metallic silver—were ancient and intense beneath slashes of ebony brows. They coordinated perfectly with her striking hair—jet-black on top and pure silver underneath. I’d assumed the monochromatic hair color was as intentional as the black stretchy pants and white T-shirts she always wore, but she’d claimed it was purely natural.

I brushed against her as I placed the bin on the counter.

Jessie’s gaze, eerie at the best of times, appeared to darken, then lighten, as if someone were playing with a dimmer switch. The rest of her went unnaturally still for several seconds. It didn’t freak me out like it had initially, but I found myself holding my breath anyway.

“There’s no luck about it, Casey,” she said, her tone unusually somber. “It’s fate. You’re supposed to be here tonight.”

I suppressed the shiver that ran down my spine. I didn’t like thinking about fate. I preferred to think that I had some control over my life. Otherwise, what was the point of leaving behind everything I had known to forge a new path?

“My car has been acting up lately,” I said, throwing her a bone. “I suppose the extra tips will come in handy when it

conks out on me.”

“No,” Jessie said. “That’s not why you’re here. I had a vision about you.”

I kept my expression schooled at mildly amusing, but inside, my heart was racing. If Jessie really was psychically inclined, there was no telling what she might have seen. The last ten years had held some particularly dark times for me. I’d refused Jessie’s repeated requests to do a reading for exactly that reason.

What I said was, “You know I don’t believe in that stuff.”

“What you believe—or admit to believing—has little to do with what *is*. Only what you do about it.”

The hairs on the back of my neck lifted, and my skin tingled. I crossed my arms and smiled patiently. My guardian angel wanted me to listen to her, so I would. “All right, I’ll bite. Tell me about this vision.”

“You are going to meet someone tonight.”

I waited for more. When she didn’t continue, I said, “That’s it? That’s all you’ve got? I meet people every night, Jessie.”

“Not like this. This someone is going to have a great impact on your life.”

“Good impact or bad impact?”

She frowned. “I don’t know. Just that it’s going to change everything.”

Fear and paranoia tried to rise from the depths of my recent complacency. I shoved them back with a promise to unpack them later. For now, it was imperative I continue to play the part of a carefree woman, living life day by day.

My smile grew. “Let me guess. A tall, dark, and handsome stranger is going to come into the bar and sweep me off my swollen, aching feet.”

Jessie’s eyes narrowed. “You’re mocking me.”

I exhaled and shook my head, my smile fading. “I’m sorry, Jessie. I just can’t take this stuff seriously. And I really need to get out there. We’re slammed tonight.”

“THANKS FOR COVERING AGAIN,” Shannon said when she finally showed up around ten. “I had to wait until Mike Jr. fell asleep. He has another ear infection, and he’s been miserable. He won’t settle down for anyone but me.”

“It’s no problem,” I assured her. I didn’t have any personal experience with kids, but I remembered how cranky and clingy I’d been when I was sick at that age. My mother would drop everything and make me feel like I was the most important thing in the world. I was happy to help while I could.

“Looks like we’re having another banner evening,” Shannon commented, struggling to tie her apron around her bulging middle.

Most of the dining room had cleared out by then, but the lounge was still packed, people were stacked three deep at the bar, and there was no sign of things slowing down.

“It’s been busy,” I agreed.

“I heard Zieglers had to triple the number of haunted hayrides this year to meet demand.”

I wouldn’t be surprised. The closer we got to Halloween, the bigger the crowds became. Ziegler Farms was wildly popular, especially during autumn, and the exemplary weather as of late had been bringing people to the area in droves.

Also wildly popular? The Ziegler boys themselves, though they could hardly be called *boys*. There were at least four of

them, and they were each ridiculously handsome. They came into the inn occasionally, were always polite and well-mannered, and left fabulous tips. And that guy I'd seen that day when I stopped for lunch? He was one of them. We hadn't spoken outside of the normal server-customer dialogue, but I felt him watching me sometimes. I might have taken a few surreptitious peeks at him too.

Don't judge me. He was nice to look at.

"And they all end up here," I said to Shannon, wrangling my thoughts back to work.

"Good for us though, right? My kids are going to have a good Christmas this year."

"Good for us," I agreed. "But exhausting."

Shannon smiled sympathetically. "You've put in a hell of a long day. Why don't you go on home? I can take it from here."

Home. The word sounded foreign to me. I didn't think of the caretaker's cottage where I was staying these days as home. Granted, it was so much better than the budget lodge, but it was still just a temporary place to be when I wasn't at the inn. The old couple who owned the estate were friends of John and Rose and liked to travel, and the rent was crazy cheap. I suspected Rose had had something to do with that. Maybe it was her way of getting me to stick around longer.

It had worked. Obviously.

"I think I will," was what I said to Shannon.

The inn had been nonstop all day, and Rose wanted me in early tomorrow. The new Sunday brunch buffet was proving to be almost as popular as the weekend hayrides.

"I'll just deliver these, and then I'm outta here."

CJ put the last of the drinks on the bar tray. I slid my hand beneath it and lifted it smoothly, like the seasoned server I was, then wove my way toward my waiting customers. I passed a rowdy table of new arrivals and was secretly glad Shannon would be dealing with them. Most people were pretty cool, but there were always a few assholes.

“Hey, beautiful,” one of them called out as I passed by. “What’s your hurry?”

I pretended I hadn’t heard him. Given the noise level in the lounge, it was entirely plausible that I hadn’t. Unfortunately, my destination table was right behind his, so I couldn’t *keep* going.

“Hey. I’m talking to you,” the beefy man said, raising his voice.

I summoned up my patience, turned, and offered what I hoped was a pleasant smile. “Please bear with us tonight. As you can see, we’re very busy. Your server will be around in just a moment.”

“Maybe we want you.”

“Sorry, this is it for me. Shannon will take good care of you.”

I continued to hand out beverages to my table, answering their sympathetic smiles with one of my own. I had three drinks left on my tray, and thankfully, they were for a group on the far end of the room.

I straightened, anxious to move away. The skin at the back of my neck was prickling—and not in a good way. I took a step and stopped. The loudmouth had shoved his seat back and into the narrow space between the tables. Without leaving his chair, he lunged for me, grabbing the wrist that wasn’t holding the tray and narrowing his eyes.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” he said, his voice rough and menacing. “Aren’t we good enough for you?”

“Cool it, Jim,” said one of his buddies, shifting uncomfortably. “We don’t want any trouble. Just relax and have a good time, yeah?”

Curling his lip, the one called Jim made a rude sound and shoved me away—hard—right into a guy making his way toward the men’s room. The action upended my tray, dousing me with beer and liquor before hitting the floor and shattering glasses and bottles.

“I’m so sorry,” I said to the random guy I’d just unintentionally body slammed.

I’d taken the brunt of it, but he’d gotten some splashback.

He looked down at me, then at himself, and gave me a loose, alcohol-assisted smile. “All good,” he said. “You?”

“All good,” I assured him. “Go on. I’ve got this.”

After a moment’s hesitation, he nodded and continued on his way. I bent down to gather the broken pieces of glass before someone got hurt. Under my breath, I cursed the arrogant jerk who’d pushed me.

Before I knew it, CJ was right there, crouching before me and offering me a wad of bar rags. “You okay, Case?”

“I’m fine,” I muttered, which was only partially true. I wasn’t physically hurt, but I hated being the focus of so much attention.

The noise level had reduced significantly, and I could feel the eyes of everyone in the bar and lounge looking over to see what had happened. I kept my head down and concentrated on what I was doing.

I felt CJ’s big hand patting my shoulder—a surprisingly gentle touch for someone as large and scary as he was. Six and a half feet of solid, tattooed muscle, he managed to make even Lou look small.

He rose to standing and addressed the troublemakers. “Apologize,” he commanded in a deep, rumbling voice that sounded a lot like the Harley he rode. “Then, take your business elsewhere.”

“I like it fine right here,” the loudmouth said.

A hush fell over the lounge, and even I paused, wondering what would happen next. I’d never seen anyone openly defy CJ before. By the tense silence, I guessed not many other people had either.

“Jesus, Jim. Shut the fuck up, will you?” hissed one of his friends. Then, presumably to CJ, he said, “Sorry, man. We don’t want any trouble. We’ll go.”

“Fine,” Jim spat. “The service here sucks anyway.”

Their chairs slid back.

CJ placed himself in their path. “Aren’t you forgetting something? Apologize.”

“Sorry, man,” the same guy repeated.

“Not you. Him. And not to me. To her.”

The jerk looked at me, then at CJ, then back at me. I could see him weighing his options. “Sorry,” he muttered, proving he had at least a few working brain cells.

CJ made sure they found the exit without further issue. Conversations resumed almost immediately. I breathed a sigh of relief and went back to cleaning up the mess.

“Here, let me help.”

His voice reached me first, low and smooth, sliding over my skin like dark silk. Then his scent. Fresh, crisp air, sweet hay, and a hint of something masculine and spicy. Sandalwood or cedar maybe.

I didn’t look up right away. I already knew who it was. Steve Ziegler. The man with silky chestnut hair and incredible hazel eyes. Broad shoulders for days and forearms that gave me a serious case of the tinglies when he rolled his shirtsleeves back. Talk about arm porn! All the Ziegler brothers were sinfully handsome, but Steve was the only one who made my heart beat faster upon sight.

Which was exactly why I stayed far, far away from him whenever possible. Except he came into the inn nearly every day for lunch.

He’d say something like, “Hi,” or, “What’s the special today?” or something equally innocuous, and I’d get weak in the knees.

“Casey, right?”

I wasn’t surprised that he knew my name. People couldn’t suddenly show up in Shadow Ridge, decide to stick around for a couple of weeks, and expect to remain under the local radar.

I nodded mutely.

“I’m Steve. Steve Ziegler.”

I didn’t respond.

“I was afraid something like this would happen,” he said, dropping a few broken pieces onto my tray. “I’m sorry. That guy was a jerk.”

I did look at him then. And promptly forgot to breathe. This close, I could see that I’d been wrong about his eyes. They weren’t just hazel. They were liquid waves of green and brown with gold flecks. Flecks that flashed in the lights of the bar, hypnotic and beckoning. For a long moment, I couldn’t look away.

My only thought: *If I had a type, he was it.* The perfect combination of rugged and rakish.

Then, he smiled, and my eyes dropped to his lips. They were some fine lips. Full. Soft-looking. Supremely masculine. One side lifted slightly higher than the other, I noticed. His breath smelled of cinnamon, and suddenly, I had a powerful urge to taste those lips. Maybe nibble on them a little. Dip my tongue inside and experience that sweet spiciness.

I needed to get a grip.

I dropped my gaze again and vigorously wiped the floor instead, intent on capturing every last shard of glass in my rag.

“Why do you say that? Are they your friends or something?” I asked.

“Hardly,” he said with the hint of a grunt. “They were on the last hayride. I didn’t realize how obnoxious they were until it was too late. Now, I’m thinking I should’ve just left them in the woods.”

Despite myself, I felt my lips curl in the hint of a smile.

Now that I wasn’t looking at him, my brain started functioning again. The Ziegler boys never came in until after the last ride, but here he was.

“I thought the hayrides ran until midnight.”

“They do,” he admitted.

“So, what are you doing here?” I winced inwardly, realizing how rude that sounded.

“My brothers have it covered,” he said, not really answering my question. “And I wanted to give CJ a heads up.”

And then his words penetrated my brain fog. “*I was afraid something like this would happen.*”

Before I could fully process that, Shannon appeared with a rolling bucket and a mop.

It was the distraction I needed. “Thanks.”

I grabbed the tray, now loaded with broken glass and rags, and got to my feet. “Thanks for your help,” I said to Steve in a clear dismissal.

“Anytime,” he responded.

“Looks like you got it good,” Shannon said, nodding at my torso.

I glanced down, mortified to see that my white button-down was soaked and nearly transparent. The lightweight cotton clung to my skin and put my lacy bra with the pink bow on display.

“Oh shit,” I mumbled.

“Go on. I’ve got this,” Shannon said.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I repeated the order I’d been attempting to serve, then hoofed it into the kitchen. After dumping the broken glass into the trash, I went out the employee entrance and kept going.

THE RIDE back to the cottage took about twenty minutes. The road meandered up the mountain with farmland on one side and thick forest on the other. As usual, I encountered no other cars once I exited the town proper.

Normally, the drive was perfect for decompressing after the chaos that was a Saturday night at the inn. Tonight, not so much. I was soaked in booze, sticky and uncomfortable, and mentally, I was discomfited. Instead of enjoying the ride, I spent every one of those twenty minutes questioning myself and the sanity of staying in Shadow Ridge.

That wasn't unusual. I started and ended each day with the same question since I'd been here. I answered myself with one or more of the three reasonable rationalizations I'd come up with.

I'm putting some money in my pocket.

I'm taking a moment to pause and breathe.

I'm avoiding reality.

All true, of course. But every time I was ready to go, something else happened that would keep me from doing so. Another bus trip. Another no-show. Record weekend crowds.

It worried me. I was getting comfortable here, starting to feel like I belonged, and that was bad. I couldn't afford to make ties that I couldn't easily break. I thought I'd been doing a good job of it, too, but the people here had a way of subtly endearing themselves.

As for the town, well, Shadow Ridge was nice, but it wasn't the only scenic, sleepy mountain town I could disappear in. I could pick up a waitressing job practically anywhere, and that kind of work was easy to walk away from. When I wasn't at the inn, I kept to myself and avoided potential social entanglements of any kind. It hadn't been difficult.

Until tonight.

Images of gold-flecked hazel eyes came to mind, along with cinnamon-scented lips curled in a crooked smile. If anyone could tempt me to break my self-imposed no-fraternization rule, it was him. I imagined what it would be like to lean into him and kiss those lips. To feel those strong arms wrap around me and pull me close. To explore and taste and surrender control.

When my core warmed to uncomfortable levels and my nipples started pebbling, I lowered the window. The cool night air dragged across my soaked shirt and made me shiver, but it was as effective as a cold shower to put the kibosh on my steamy thoughts. I could take those romantic fantasies out and unpack them later, along with everything else I'd shoved far back into the corners of my mind. Only once I had a shower and slipped beneath the covers would I allow myself the luxury of reflection and erotic delusions.

Even then, I had to be careful. I couldn't do anything that would blur the line I'd drawn around myself.

I turned off the mountain road onto the winding drive, past the empty manor house, nothing but an inky silhouette in the silvery moonlight. I continued to the cottage, taking comfort in the soft glow of the carriage lights. I had them on timers so I never had to return to a dark house at the end of a shift.

I parked the car and began my nightly routine. I scanned the area, pleased when I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Pepper spray in one hand, my COP—Club of Persuasion—in the other, I made a quiet pass around the cottage, checking the little things I'd placed around the exterior that would let me

know if anyone had tried to get in. Only once I was satisfied that everything was as I'd left it did I go inside.

I repeated a similar process from within, checking doors and windows with the same results.

I sighed in relief. I had no reason to suspect that my stalker had found me, but I couldn't afford to let my guard down. The ten-minute safety check was worth the peace of mind it gave me.

Peeling off my boozy clothes, I tossed them in the washer, then indulged in a hot shower with scented shampoo and body wash. Donning my favorite flannel nightshirt, I fixed myself a cup of warm coconut milk, added a teaspoon of vanilla bean sugar, then got a fire going in the fireplace—a skill I'd acquired since coming here—and sank wearily down onto the comfortable sofa.

This was my favorite place to be. The low-cost accommodations where I typically stayed rarely had more than a bed and a cheap desk, let alone a fireplace and a sofa that didn't make me want to put on a hazmat suit before stretching out on it.

I would miss the cottage when I left, which, after tonight, I knew would have to be sooner rather than later. I'd dawdled long enough. Even if I wasn't inclined to believe Jessie's prediction that a mysterious stranger would enter my life and change everything, my window of escaping unscathed was closing.

Maybe Jessie was right after all, I mused. Maybe the loudmouthed asshole was the impetus that would jump-start the next phase of my journey.

I could leave Shadow Ridge tonight with enough cash to get me through the next couple of months, fond memories, and zero regrets. At worst, I'd occasionally indulge in vague and wistful what-if scenarios.

But that was all they would ever be. Despite this pesky, innate reluctance to get back on the road, I needed to keep

moving. I couldn't afford to let anyone get close because I wouldn't allow anyone to get hurt because of me again.

Images of Steve tried to slip into my thoughts, but I wasn't ready to give myself over to those yet. I picked up one of the prepaid burner phones I'd bought in Albany and called Angie instead.

"Hello?" Her voice was sleepy.

I glanced at the clock. It wasn't that late, not for a night owl like Angie.

"Hey, Ang. I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

A yawn. "Yeah. I must've fallen asleep, watching TV."

"I can call back another time."

"Don't you dare! Just give me a sec."

I heard her moving around, and then the sound grew muffled, as if she'd put her hand over the microphone. I could have sworn I'd heard a male voice murmuring, and suddenly, I realized why my night-owl friend had been in bed before midnight.

"Okay," she said clearly, the background noise now silent.

"You're not alone."

"No," she confirmed.

I felt my lips curving into a smile. "I want details."

She laughed softly. "No, you really don't. And I'd much rather talk about you. Where are you?"

A tiny frisson of annoyance, laced with guilt, skittered through me. She knew I wouldn't answer that question or any other that might put her in harm's way, yet she always asked.

"I'm still in the northeast," I replied vaguely.

"Still? I thought you were planning on heading south."

"I was running low on cash, so I decided to pick up some seasonal work." It was mostly true.

“How could you be running out of cash? Your parents left you a fortune.”

Her tone was light, but I heard the subtle undercurrent of resentment.

Yes, my parents had been well off, and when they were unexpectedly killed in a car accident when I was eighteen, everything went to me. Most of it was in a trust that I couldn't touch until I was twenty-five, which meant I'd only had access to my college fund and a small stipend back then. My father had had a strong work ethic and wanted me to understand the importance of earning a living, as he had. Of course, they hadn't expected they'd both die so early and leave me without access for seven years.

Angie's background was much different. Her father had taken off when she was a kid, and her mother never saw her or her siblings as anything other than a burden. As such, she had a natural dislike for anyone who came from money or a loving family. I'd had both. We'd ended up on the same dorm floor freshman year—her on a scholarship and me with my college fund—and she pretty much hated me on sight.

Had anyone told me then that we'd become good friends over the next several years, I would have said they were delusional. But that was exactly what had happened, and when we both ended up getting jobs at the same firm, we had moved into an apartment together.

“You still haven't claimed it yet, have you?” she asked.

“No.” Claiming my inheritance required more than signing a paper. “Besides, every withdrawal leaves a digital footprint,” I reminded her. “You know this.”

Angie sighed. “Yes, I do. Has something happened that I don't know about?”

“No, it's been quiet,” I assured her. “But a psychic did tell me that I would meet someone tonight who would have a great impact on my life.”

She snorted in disbelief. “You went to a psychic? Seriously?”

“Not exactly. She’s someone I work with. Believe me, the prediction was completely unsolicited.”

“Hmph,” she said. When I didn’t say more, she prompted, “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Did you? Meet someone, I mean.”

Gorgeous hazel eyes once again came to mind.

What I said was, “Yes, but I meet new people every night.”

“Oh God, you’re not a hooker, are you?”

I laughed. “Not even close.”

“Traveling carnival worker? Waitress? Farmhand?”

“Angie ...”

“You can give me a hint, you know. Otherwise, I’m going to think the worst. There aren’t that many legal temp jobs that pay under the table.”

“Fine. I’m working as a waitress.”

“Nice place or dive bar?”

“It’s nice. And I’m renting a cute little place on the mountain with a great view. But that’s all you’re getting out of me. Besides, it’s only a temporary gig. I’ll be hitting the road again soon.”

“Heading south?”

Another flash of annoyance. “Perhaps,” I said. “I might change things up. Everyone migrates south for the winter. Maybe I’ll do the unexpected and head north.”

“If you do, maybe we could meet up at a ski resort or something. Remember our girls’ weekend ski trips? Hitting the slopes all day, then letting hot guys buy us drinks in the lodge at night. That was so much fun.”

I said nothing. *She’d* had fun. I’d usually spent the evening in the common room with her hookup’s wingman, playing cards or watching funny videos or something. I was done

talking about myself, and I wasn't going to answer any more questions.

"Guess not." She exhaled heavily. "It was worth a shot."

"Have there been any more deliveries?"

When seconds ticked by in silence, I had my answer. "When?"

"Last week. A bouquet arrived at the office, addressed to you. The notecard was one of those generic occasion ones. It wasn't signed."

"What did it say?"

"Tell her I'm thinking about her."

My blood chilled. "Did you take it to the police?"

"No. I called the detective in charge of your case. He said there's nothing they can do. Sending flowers isn't a crime, there was nothing threatening about it, might just be a well-wisher, blah, blah, blah."

Maybe the police didn't consider it a threat, but I knew better.

"Same as always then."

"Pretty much."

"You're taking extra precautions, right?"

"Of course, but as far as anyone knows, I haven't seen or talked to you since you left."

"Good. Let's keep it that way. I couldn't bear it if anything else happened to you because of me, Ang."

"I know," she said softly. "But don't worry about me. I'm fine."

Telling me not to worry was pointless. She knew that. But we pretended anyway.

"I hope whoever is in your bed is treating you right."

"He is—for now."

I didn't know what to say to that. Angie went through men like I went through romance novels. In my personal experience, I found book boyfriends to be far less disappointing than the real thing. And the sex in books was way hotter than I'd ever experienced. Not that I'd had a lot of experience, but I wasn't exactly virginal either. I was *selective*. Or at least, I had been before I decided to become transient.

I guessed that made me kind of a hobo. Like Jack Reacher, one of my favorite fictional heroes. Unlike Jack, however, I wasn't a badass. Or getting any.

"I'll call again soon, okay?"

"Okay. I miss you, Case."

"I miss you too."

I disconnected the call, then turned off the phone. I'd run over it with my car in the morning, then drop it in a recycle box at one of those big electronic stores eventually. There wasn't any place like that around Shadow Ridge—that was for sure.

After finishing the last of my warm milk, I pulled a blanket over me and curled deeper into the sofa. I stared at the flames and let them lull me to sleep.

WHEN I COME TO, I have no idea where I am or what is happening. My head is pounding, and my ears are ringing. I don't know how I got here. I'm vaguely conscious but very groggy. I can't speak. I can't move my arms or legs.

I am cold though. Brutally cold. And wet.

I'm on the ground. Rain is pouring down, hitting my face, going up my nose, and filling my mouth each time I try to take a breath.

I force my eyes open. I can't focus. My vision is fuzzy. Lightning flashes, blinding me for a moment.

A loud crack of thunder rends the air almost immediately.

My self-preservation instincts urge me to do something, anything. I summon up every bit of strength I have and will myself to flip over and curl into a ball before I drown in the deluge.

I must black out again because the next thing I know, I'm rolling down a wet, grassy embankment, unable to stop myself or slow down. Pain explodes in my head as I slam into something hard and immovable, followed by white-hot splinters piercing the back of my skull.

I manage to twist my head to the side and wretch, violently emptying the contents of my stomach. The coppery scent and taste of blood is strong, and I feel the warmth of it mixing with the cold rain on my face.

I know I have to move. Water is rushing around me, as if I'm in some sort of drainage ditch. If the water level continues to rise, I'll either drown or be swept away.

I fight to remain conscious, but I can feel myself fading quickly. The buzzing in my ears grows louder as well, but I become aware of other sounds as I drift in and out. The sound of an engine. The slam of a car door from somewhere above me. I have no way of knowing if it's real or if I am imagining it.

I open my mouth to yell for help, but I suck in water, and then the blackness swallows everything ...

THE SCREAM LODGED in my throat as I woke up with a start, arms swinging, legs kicking, trapped under the quilted blanket. It took me a few moments to get my bearings.

I wasn't lying in a ditch. I was cocooned in a blanket on the floor in front of the couch, the fire before me down to embers. I must have fallen off in the grips of my nightmare.

I sat up and rubbed my face, willing my heartbeat to slow with calm, measured breaths. I focused on the expansion and contraction, counting each one. Odd numbers on the inhales. Even numbers on the exhales. I did this over and over until I stopped shaking.

There was a time when I couldn't close my eyes for more than a few minutes without being dragged back into that nightmare. But it was more than just a recurring bad dream. It was a memory.

A memory of something awful that my conscious mind had blocked.

I didn't get them as often now. A couple of times a week maybe.

The therapist I'd been seeing after *the incident* warned me that might happen. That eventually, my mind might heal enough to be able to handle the events that had taken place that Halloween night nearly two years ago now. Or that sometimes, certain things could trigger them, like stress or fear.

I wondered what had triggered this one. Did talking to Angie right before I fell asleep have something to do with it? Or perhaps my subconscious latched on to Jessie's prediction, retrofitting it into my personal experience? Most likely, it'd had something to do with being grabbed by that loudmouthed jerk.

Ever since *that night*, I'd had a strong aversion to people touching me. The therapist had said it was a subconscious defensive mechanism.

I knew from experience that getting back to sleep wouldn't be easy. I took my mug to the sink and rinsed it out. Another cup of warm milk wasn't going to cut it. So, I did something I didn't normally do. After verifying that all the doors and windows were locked, I went into the medicine cabinet and grabbed the pack of over-the-counter sleep aids that I'd picked up months ago. They weren't nearly as powerful as the ones the doc had prescribed for me, but they did help me relax enough to doze. If I didn't take one, I'd be up all night, jumping at every tiny sound, and I'd be a complete zombie, working the brunch shift at the inn.

I popped one in my mouth, chased it down with a glass of water, then grabbed a book about the local logging history of Shadow Ridge from the bookshelf, and settled back on the

couch. Thirty minutes later, the sleep aid and the dry prose did the trick, and I drifted in and out of light slumber until my windup travel alarm clock went off in the morning.

I DRAGGED my butt into the inn the next morning, reminded of why I didn't like using sleep aids. Not only had I not gotten the deep, dreamless rest I'd craved, but fatigue continued to plague me like a fog. If the brunch hadn't been buffet-style, I would've had a lot of unhappy customers, I was sure.

Rose had me and Michelle on, as usual, and we were running our asses off from the time the dining room opened until Lou shut down the buffet tables at one. The place cleared out quickly after that. The out-of-towners were on their way back to wherever they had come from, and the locals went home to do whatever it was they did on Sunday afternoons.

The good news was, I would not be putting in another double shift. Shannon had promised that, come hell or high water, she *was* coming in to handle the dinner shift later so I could have a night off.

I was due. Larissa had quit, though honestly, she hadn't really done much when she was there. Between Shannon's sick kids, Sandy's no-shows, and Michelle's school commitments, I had been putting in *a lot* of hours.

Too many. Sure, the tip money was nice, and it wasn't like I had anything better to do, but Rose was coming to depend on me too much. I needed to pull her aside and quietly remind her that she needed to hire more help because I couldn't continue to extend my stay indefinitely.

Again.

We'd had that discussion several times over the past month. Each time, Rose gave me the puppy eyes and asked me to stay "just a little while longer." I wondered if she was even looking. I hadn't seen her interviewing anyone since the week Larissa had quit.

Lou, Max, and Jessie were working on the mess in the kitchen—the dishwasher was still down. Michelle and I took care of clearing and resetting the dining room while CJ covered the handful of people in the bar and lounge areas. It wasn't a big deal. Most of them were older guys who liked watching sports with other older guys. They didn't require more than occasional refills on their beers and complimentary pretzel bowls.

I spotted Rose and John sitting at a table with an older couple. Something about the couple seemed vaguely familiar, but I didn't think much of it. All the locals came to the inn at one point or another.

They were talking as if they were old friends. Maybe they were. It didn't matter to me, beyond the fact that I'd have to wait to talk to Rose. Perhaps that was for the best. I wasn't sure I could keep the frustration out of my voice. I was tired and cranky and mentally done with smiling and dealing with people for the day.

Rose caught my eye, and when her hand began to rise, I knew she was going to summon me over. I pretended I hadn't noticed and scooted back into the dining room.

"Do you know when Sandy's coming back?" I asked Michelle as I cleared the last table and put the dirty dishes, glasses, and silverware into yet another bus tray.

"She's not."

My irritation swelled. "Why not?"

"The scoop is, she hooked up with some country-singing wannabe and followed him to Nashville."

Shit. I reminded myself that it wasn't my problem. The inn had done just fine before I showed up, and it would continue to do so long after I left.

“Reset or laundry?” I asked, giving Michelle the choice, knowing which she’d choose.

She shivered and took the bus tray from my hands. “Reset.”

I chuckled to myself. Michelle refused to go into the basement. She said the place was haunted by the mischievous spirit of a previous owner. I didn’t know if that was true. If it was, he hadn’t yet made his presence known to me. Although I would admit to experiencing the occasional cold spot and maybe—*maybe*—the sense that I wasn’t completely alone. As my guardian angel seemed content, I didn’t worry about it.

I grabbed an armful of dirty table linens and took them down to the lower level, where the pair of commercial-grade Speed Queens were.

I liked it down here. It was cool and quiet and peaceful, and no one bothered me. I removed finished linens, napkins, and bar towels from the dryers and put them into baskets. Moved items from the washers into the dryers and then reloaded the washers with the stuff I’d just brought down. I carried the baskets to the long rectangular tables that were probably older than I was and began folding.

It was mindless work and exactly what I needed after a restless night and the craziness of the brunch shift.

I wasn’t sure how long I had been down there, but when I returned to the bar with a stack of clean, folded towels, I found my coworkers huddled together around the bar and speaking in low tones. Their conversation ceased abruptly when they saw me. Any doubts that I was the subject of their discussion evaporated when I caught Lou’s smirk and Rose’s knowing grin.

“Am I missing something?” I asked dryly.

CJ handed me a glass of iced tea with not one, but two slices of lemon, and I knew I was not going to like whatever I was going to hear next. The sense of doom intensified when I saw Michelle practically bouncing on her toes.

“The Zieglers just left.”

Suddenly, I knew why the older couple had looked vaguely familiar. I might not have seen them before, but I had seen their sons often enough. One in particular had been on my mind a lot lately.

What I didn't know, however, was what their being here had to do with me.

"Okay. So?"

"They wanted to meet you."

"Me?" I asked, genuinely perplexed. "Why?"

Max, Michelle's elder twin by minutes, shook his head in sympathy. While he and his sister shared the same dark hair and eyes, their personalities were as different as night and day. Max was as quiet and shy as Michelle was bubbly and outgoing.

"You walked into an ambush," Max said soberly. He shot the others a disapproving look before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Something you're not telling us, darlin'?" Lou teased, his eyes dancing with amusement.

"*Like?*" I prompted.

"Like something going on between you and Steve Ziegler," Michelle provided unhelpfully.

"Who?" I asked sweetly.

"Don't even try to pretend you don't know," Michelle said. "Shannon already filled us in on how you two were making googly eyes at each other last night. What was it she said, Rose?"

Rose grinned like the Cheshire cat. "That the sparks between you two were so intense that even she felt the heat."

Speaking of heat, my cheeks felt as if they were on fire. "Sounds like Shannon picked up a fever from one of her kids."

CJ snorted.

“He’s hot, Casey, and he’s clearly interested,” said Michelle.

“His mother thinks so too,” Rose agreed, swirling her ever-present glass of bourbon. “She said Steve’s been preoccupied lately, and his brothers told her it’s because he’s got a crush on you.”

“A crush? What are we, in high school?” I asked irritably, then added, “No offense, Michelle.”

“None taken.”

“Besotted then. Fascinated by. Infatuated with,” said Rose in a singsong voice.

Yeah, she was already on her way to being toasted.

“Steve Ziegler is no more interested in me than I am in him,” I said firmly, “and to be clear, I am *not* interested. This”—I waved my hand around vaguely—“is just temporary, remember?”

It was obvious from their smirks and smug expressions that they didn’t believe me. Maybe because actions spoke louder than words, and I was still here.

“Come on, darlin’,” Lou said unhelpfully. “Give the poor man a break. A little sugar goes a long way.”

“I think you’re all on crack,” I said irritably. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“No,” they answered in unison.

I growled a little in the back of my throat, frustrated with the conversation. Nothing I said was going to change their minds, so I took my iced tea and retreated to the kitchen. I found Max there, prepping things for the dinner crowd. He glanced up and nodded in silent welcome and empathy. At least I knew *he* wouldn’t get on my case.

“I’ll get some more bowls and give you a hand.”

I moved to the back, where Jessie was finishing up the last of the brunch dishes.

“Hey, Jessie, I just came to grab some bowls.”

Up to her elbows in sudsy water, she cast a glance over her shoulder at me. “Is that all you have to say to me?”

I blinked, at a loss. “Uh, your hair looks nice today?”

Jessie laughed. “Nice try. Admit it. I was right, wasn’t I?”

“About ...” I prompted, but of course, I already knew.

Jessie had heard the others prattling on and believed the man who was going to change my life was Steve Ziegler.

She smiled knowingly.

I groaned. “Not you too. You shouldn’t listen to gossip, you know.”

“What do you think of him?”

I reached up and plucked several large stainless steel bowls from the shelf. They’d do well for keeping the homemade coleslaw and potato salad chilled.

“If you’re referring to Steve Ziegler, I don’t think anything, other than he seems like a nice guy. There was an incident in the lounge last night, and he was kind enough to offer a hand. That’s it. That’s all. Hardly a great impact on my life,” I said, the words coming out sharper than usual. But as I’d said, I was tired and cranky and done with this conversation.

Did I find Steve Ziegler incredibly attractive? Yes, absolutely. Did I think he was interested in me? Also yes. The way he looked at me sometimes ... well, it incited the kind of tinglies best experienced in private. Under different circumstances, I’d find that very flattering and be willing to go out with him. But that wasn’t an option.

Jessie stopped what she was doing and turned to face me. Her teasing smile faded into something softer and sadder.

“I don’t know what happened to you, but it doesn’t take an intuitive to know that it marked you. You need to accept that bad things happen to us for a reason. They shape us into the people we’re meant to be.”

I snorted. My therapist had said something similar. I'd thought it was bullshit then, and I thought it was bullshit now. My parents' deaths and my attack were not preordained stepping stones to an end goal of me wandering around the country to avoid a sociopath. If that were the case, then God or destiny or fate or whatever was an asshole.

I bit my tongue to keep from saying so.

"You don't believe me," Jessie said, narrowing her eyes.

"I believe that you believe."

If that was what she needed to sleep at night, more power to her.

My words disappointed her—I could tell, even before she said, "You're too young to be so jaded, building walls around yourself and not letting anyone in. You've got your whole life ahead of you and people who care. Let them in, Casey."

Jessie meant well, but she didn't understand that those walls had been built to protect others as much as myself. Coming home one night to find my apartment vandalized and my best friend unconscious had been enough to convince me I had to do something. As long as I stuck around, Angie and anyone else I potentially cared about would be in danger. The whole point of my transient, solitary lifestyle was to ensure that no one else got hurt because of me.

As a psychic, Jessie should have picked up on that, I thought meanly.

"No offense, but I didn't ask for your advice—or anyone else's for that matter. You don't know anything about me."

"I know you are a good soul," Jessie said quietly. "A good soul that is crying out in pain."

Jessie removed her gloves, took the bowls from my hands, and placed them on the counter. Before I realized what she was doing, Jessie placed her hands over mine. I tried to pull away, but she was surprisingly strong. Her grip tightened, closing like iron cuffs around me. Her skin grew pale, and her features contorted, as if in pain.

“Jessie! Jessie! What’s happening? Let go!”

I once again tried to extricate myself, but to no avail. Jessie was visibly shaking now, her eyes filled with horror. With effort, she dropped my hands and stepped backward, tears streaking unchecked down her face.

“Are you okay?” I whispered.

Clearly, she wasn’t, but I didn’t know what else to say. I’d never seen anything like that outside of the movies.

“Oh, Casey. I am so, so sorry. No wonder you don’t let anyone close.”

Without another word, Jessie turned, grabbed her sweater, and left through the back door as if she couldn’t move fast enough.

I stood there, frozen in place. I had no idea what had just happened. Admittedly a skeptic when it came to Jessie’s psychic abilities, I couldn’t deny that something incredibly freaky had happened when she touched me.

“Hey, Case, did you find those bowls yet?” Max called, breaking me from my reverie.

Because of the wall that separated the cooking and dishwashing areas, he hadn’t seen any of what had just occurred. Thank God.

“Yeah, be right there,” I answered, grabbing them from the counter and returning to the kitchen, but my mind was on Jessie.

I WAS PUTTING plastic wrap over the third and final bowl of homemade coleslaw when Michelle came through the swinging doors with an order in hand. I glanced up at the clock, surprised to see that it was the beginning of the early dinner rush. Lou had taken a couple of well-deserved hours off, and Max had been handling the occasional orders of deep-fried bar food while I'd taken over prep.

I hoped Shannon showed soon. I was running on fumes.

“Is Shannon here yet?” I asked.

“Not yet. But someone else is.”

Given the way her eyes were glittering, I could guess who she was talking about. I was in no mood to play that game though and went about doing my thing.

“Can you handle it?” I asked without looking up. “I’m just about done here.”

“No. He wants you.”

She grinned at her own double entendre. I stifled a groan. Steve Ziegler might check a lot of my boxes, but he was a complication I neither needed nor wanted. Well, needed anyway. What I wanted was irrelevant.

Max shot me a sympathetic look over his shoulder. “Sorry, I’ve got to finish prep.”

“Rose said if you don’t get your butt out there right now, I’m supposed to tell Big Lou to pick you up and carry you

out.”

I smirked. “Lou’s not here.”

“Yes, he is, darlin’,” drawled Lou, entering from the back. He gave me a wink that said he’d do it in a heartbeat.

My smirk faded, and ire rose up within me, knowing this wasn’t a bluff.

I wasn’t a bitch. I made an effort to be kind and nice and polite to everyone. But the moment someone started pressuring me, I got my back up. It was just the way I was wired.

Note to self: Talk to Rose and put in your notice tonight. For real.

Lou rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “Well? What’s it going to be?”

“Fine,” I growled, grabbing my notepad and shoving my way past Michelle and Lou.

Any false hopes I’d had of this being a prank faded right about the same time butterflies took flight in my core. Seeing Steve had that effect on me.

He looked up, and our eyes met. My heart sped up, adding to the butterfly thing. And—*oh good*—the tinglies were back.

He graced me with one of those crooked smiles, and I could feel my bones melting, right along with every sound, logical reason why I could not and should not give in to the inexplicable attraction I felt to this man. I didn’t believe in love at first sight or soul mates, but I didn’t *not* believe in them either. Regardless, I was not at a point in my life where I could do anything about it.

I summoned up my resolve and a polite smile. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

“Michelle said you asked for me?”

“Yes.” His hand came up to the back of his neck and he looked adorably self-conscious. “I wanted to apologize.”

That was unexpected. “Apologize? For what?”

“I understand my parents were in earlier.”

Realization began to dawn. In that moment, I considered the possibility that I might have completely misread the situation. Maybe the attraction was purely one-sided, and Steve Ziegler’s so-called interest was nothing more than the fabrication of a bunch of amateur matchmakers.

“Rose said they’re old friends.”

“They are, which means collusion is not just possible, but probable,” he said with a wry grin. “I’m sorry if that made things awkward for you.”

I blinked. I hadn’t expected that either.

“So, you’re saying you *don’t* want to ask me out?” I blurted out.

“Oh, I do,” he informed me. “But it’s none of *their* business.”

Keeping my lips from pulling into a smile required much effort. The man was as charming as he was gorgeous. Confident yet oddly humble. If things were different, I could definitely see myself going out with him.

But they weren’t, and I couldn’t. My next words didn’t come easy and felt all kinds of wrong, but I said them anyway. “Let me save you some time. The answer is no.”

He seemed neither surprised nor disappointed. He inclined his head slightly and regarded me with curious interest, almost as if I’d said exactly what he’d expected me to say. “May I ask why?”

“It’s nothing against you. In fact, you seem like a really nice guy. But I don’t plan on sticking around for much longer. I’m not into one-nighters, and I’m not willing to start something I can’t finish. I’m sorry.”

He continued studying me for several long seconds with those beautiful eyes. I feared he saw more than most.

Finally, he nodded. “Fair enough. Thanks for being honest.”

Equal parts relief and irrational disappointment speared through me at his easy acceptance. “You’re welcome.”

He gave me that crooked smile again. “It’s better to know where I stand up front. I have a feeling once wouldn’t be nearly enough when it comes to you.”

My bones melted a little more. Heat was rising in my cheeks for sure.

I thought he’d get up and leave then, but he didn’t. His gaze dropped meaningfully to the pad and pen in my hands, reminding me of where I was and what I was supposed to be doing. This man had a way of short-circuiting my brain. I felt the heat in my cheeks intensify.

“What can I get for you?”

“Coffee, please. And maybe a slice of pie.”

I couldn’t help myself. “Won’t that ruin your dinner?”

He laughed. “Probably. But seeing as I was just shot down by a beautiful woman, I think some comfort food is warranted.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. Even when rebuffed, he retained his good humor.

“Apple, pumpkin, chocolate cream, or shoofly?”

“Apple.”

“Warmed up with a scoop of vanilla bean and a caramel drizzle?”

He placed his hand over his heart. “It’s like you can see inside my soul.”

“It’s a gift,” I said lightly. “I’ll bring that right out.”

“Thanks, Casey.”

I returned to the kitchen, feeling the oddest mixture of lightness and sadness. Thankfully, neither Michelle nor Lou was in sight to give me flack about it.

“Hey, I’m here,” Shannon said, breezing in from the back entrance. “Consider yourself officially relieved.”

Relief was what I *should* be feeling, but I wasn’t.

I prepped Steve’s order, added a healthy puff of whipped cream on top, and said to Shannon, “This is for table seven. See you tomorrow.”

Then, I slipped out the back like the coward I was.

TWO WEEKS LATER, nothing had changed. I was still working nearly every day. Rose still hadn't hired someone to lighten the load. And Steve Ziegler was still coming in several times a week with his sparkling eyes and crooked smile and looking gorgeous and being a complete gentleman.

He hadn't asked me out again. Hadn't even flirted really. Just came in—sometimes alone, sometimes with one or more of his brothers—ate, then left.

That didn't mean I wasn't one hundred percent fully aware of his presence or the fact that he shot surreptitious glances my way when he didn't think anyone was looking. I couldn't fault him for that since I was basically doing the same thing. I couldn't help it. He was easy on the eyes, and my days seemed a little brighter when he was around.

Which was yet another reason why I should get the hell out of Dodge. I was thinking about him way too much, and it was getting harder and harder to remember why going out with him was a bad idea.

If Angie were here, she'd take one look at him and tell me I was an idiot for not hitting that. More likely, she'd tell me he was not my type and go after him herself. Because, yeah, that had happened a few times.

I hadn't minded so much then because she was right. Those guys hadn't been my type. But Steve ... he was, and the thought of Angie being anywhere near him filled me with something dark and possessive.

Huh.

My stomach growled angrily. I supposed it was a form of karmic payback. I'd slipped out of the inn without my usual takeout box of Lou's goodness. Jessie had been loitering in the back at the end of my shift, and I knew she wanted to talk to me. I'd been avoiding her since the episode in the kitchen.

To assuage the hunger, I poured myself a bowl of cereal, took up residence on my sofa, and tried not to think any more thoughts about Steve Ziegler or Jessie's premonitions.

Flipping through the channels, I found nothing remotely appealing. I scanned the books on the shelf with similar results. I'd already read most of them, but I wasn't opposed to a reread. Perhaps a good, steamy romance would improve my mood and allow me to escape for a few hours.

It didn't. I kept picturing Steve as the hero character, and that was not helpful at all.

Exasperated, I gave up and reached for one of the prepaid burners. It'd only been two weeks since I'd called Angie, but I needed to talk to someone.

The phone rang several times before she answered. "Hello?"

I could hear people talking and laughing in the background.

"Hey, Ang, it's me. Sorry if this is a bad time. Sounds like a party."

"Casey? Hang on. Let me get somewhere quieter."

I heard her speaking briefly to someone. Several moments later, she was back, and the background noise had disappeared.

"Okay, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I just needed to hear a friendly voice."

"Bullshit. I know you, remember? Who do I need to kill?"

I laughed. Angie always had my back. "No one. Seriously. Are you at a party?"

“Yeah, a football party.”

“Since when do you like football?”

“I don’t. But it’s better than spending the day alone in my apartment.”

Like I was, basically. The difference was, I was perfectly content with spending a Sunday afternoon curled up with a good book. Angie had always been more of a party girl.

“Anyone I know?”

“Kayden McKellan,” she said smugly.

“Kayden McKellan?” I echoed incredulously, glad she couldn’t see me because I was certain my eyebrows reached my hairline.

The über-handsome head of security was six-plus feet of luscious, muscled, auburn-haired Scot and the source of many feminine fantasies. He was also not the polished professional Angie typically set her sights on. I wondered if he had been the one in her bed the last time I spoke to her.

“Oh my God. Is that who was at your apartment when I called?”

“No.” Before I could say anything more, she veered the conversation back to more familiar territory. “So, where are you? Did you move on, like you’d said?”

“No, not yet.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m just ...”

“Ready to come home?” she finished. “Because if you are, don’t.”

Alarm bells immediately went off in my head. “Why? Did something else happen?”

“Remember I told you about the flowers that came to the office a few weeks ago? Well, Friday, I came back from lunch, and there was a card sitting on my chair. It had my name on it,

but when I opened it up, it said, *Did you tell her about the flowers?*”

I sucked in a breath. “Oh, Angie. That’s creepy.”

“Yeah, I thought so too.”

“Who knows that we’re in contact? Did you tell anyone?”

“No, of course not. He’s probably just grasping at straws.”

“I’m so sorry I put you in this position.”

“You didn’t. Your psycho stalker did.”

“You’re being safe, right?”

“Yes, Mom.”

On Angie’s end, I heard a knock, followed by Angie calling out, “Be out in a minute.”

“Are you in a bathroom?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she confirmed. “It was the only room that didn’t have people in it. I should go though. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it’s all good. Have fun, okay?”

“I will.”

“Bye, Ang.”

“Bye, Case.”

I disconnected the call, feeling worse than ever, turned off the phone, and tossed it aside.

I’M SITTING at one of the high tables at the back of the room, taking everything in. We’re in someone’s basement, but the place is nicer than some of the actual bars I’ve been to. Dark wood. Recessed lighting. A jukebox sits on the far side. Through a series of open arches, I can see a pool table, an air hockey table, and at least one pinball machine. The place is huge, spanning the length and width of the stately manor home above.

I sip a non-alcoholic cocktail and people watch while Angie does her thing. I need to stay sober. Either I'll be driving a tipsy Angie back to our place at the end of the night, or Angie's snag-a-man plan will be successful, and I'll be driving myself home.

She seems to be having a good time, flitting around in the sexy fairy costume that highlights her tall, lithe figure to perfection. In contrast, I stick to the shadows, more comfortable in my dark Druid ensemble, consisting of a long black dress, flowing hooded robe, and some creative makeup gleaned from YouTube videos.

I've never been much for dressing up, and I'm not a fan of parties in general. I prefer spending my free time doing things that don't involve crowds and copious amounts of alcohol. Some of that could be attributed to the fact that my parents had been killed by a drunk driver the night of my high school graduation.

But I was bound by the friend code. Angie was here, so I was here too.

I secretly wonder how much longer we'll have to stay. As the night wears on, people are getting drunker, and the vibe is getting rowdier.

I remind myself that I'm here for Angie, not for me.

She heard that Henry, the super-hot guy in IT, was going to be here, and she had been crushing on him for weeks. She'd tried everything to get him to notice her, like learning his schedule so they could conveniently cross paths throughout the day. She even went so far as to stick a paper clip in her laptop port so she had a reason to contact him. Despite her efforts, she'd received nothing more than the same friendly, professional interest he showed to everyone.

So, here I am, bored and uncomfortable, wishing we could leave. As the night wears on, it becomes increasingly apparent that Angie will not be going home with Henry. In fact, he seems to be actively avoiding her. I haven't seen him in a while. Not that I am watching him or anything.

“May I?” asks a deep male voice from my left.

I turn and see Zorro—aka Henry, the hot IT guy—looking at me expectantly. Like me, he’s dressed completely in black. Behind his black mask, his light-blue eyes sparkle vividly.

He gestures to the empty seat beside me.

I nod and look around for Angie, but she’s not where she was a minute ago.

He puts his glass on the table and sits down. “What are you drinking?” he asks, pointing at my drink.

“Virgin colada.”

“Not much of a drinker, huh?”

I shake my head.

“Me neither.”

“I’m just here for my friend,” I say, seeing this as an opportunity to be a good wingman—uh, wingwoman. I could mention Angie’s name and gauge his potential interest by his reaction.

“Oh? Who’s your friend?”

“Angie Molinaro. She’s the one in the fairy costume.”

Because I’m looking at him, I see his lips thin. I guess he’s not only aware of Angie’s pursuit, but not thrilled with it either. He wouldn’t be the first, unfortunately. He shifts his weight, as if preparing to bolt, but he had nothing to fear from me.

“How about you?” I ask.

He offered a small smile. “This is my place.”

Clearly, he’s making more than I am if he can afford a place like this. “Oh, I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

He tilts his head. “Why are you sorry?”

“Well, it seems rude to show up at a party without knowing who’s throwing it.”

“I won’t take it personally,” he says with a grin.

“Thanks. It’s a really nice place.”

“Don’t be too impressed. I inherited it.”

That’s something I can understand. My parents’ place is still waiting for me to claim it, and I will, soon.

He smiles again and I can see why Angie finds him so attractive.

“You work in accounting, right?” he continues.

“Yes.”

“I’m Henry. I’m in IT.”

“Nice to meet you, Henry.”

We chat for a little while. He’s quiet and soft-spoken with intelligence sparkling in his eyes. I attempt to bring Angie into the conversation again, but it’s apparent that he’s not interested.

I don’t push. Instead, we talk about good restaurants and local attractions. As it turns out, he’s something of an outdoor buff too. He asks me about local hiking and biking trails and seems especially interested in the white-water rafting packages offered nearby.

Eventually, others come over to talk with him, and I quietly slip away. I’m more than ready to call it a night. I scan the dance floor, looking for Angie, but I don’t see her anywhere.

I make a pass around the room. When I still don’t find her, I seek out the relative quiet of the restroom and pull out my phone to text her. Maybe she’s given up on Henry and left with someone else. Kind of rude of her not to tell me, but Angie does tend to get wrapped up in the moment, especially when she’s had a few.

Me: Where are you?

Angie: In an Uber on my way home

Angie: How could you

Angie: I thought you were my friend

I blink at my phone, confused.

Me: How could I what?

Angie: Henry was MINE

I stare at the screen, trying to make sense of what she was saying. Angie must have seen me sitting with Henry and thought I was hitting on him.

Me: It's not like that

Angie: Yeah right

I send at least a half-dozen more texts. Angie doesn't respond to any of them.

With Angie gone, there's no reason to stick around any longer. I leave the party and walk several blocks to my car, typing as I go.

The farther I walk, the angrier I get. The only reason I'd even gone to that party was because she'd begged me to. Worse, I'm hurt that she'd accused me of hitting on a guy she liked.

I know it's the alcohol talking. Angie and I had been friends long enough for her to know better. And long enough for me to know that alcohol has a way of intensifying Angie's insecurities.

Tonight, I'd let her sleep it off. But tomorrow, we were going to have a chat.

I unlock my door and reach for the handle when a wave of nausea washes over me.

My skin prickles, and a shiver runs down my spine, along with the sense that someone is watching me. I look around. There aren't many people out at this hour, and no one is paying any attention to me.

I quickly get into my car and lock the door, taking a moment to look up and down the street again. After the weird

cards and gifts that had been showing up from “a secret admirer” lately, I’m on my guard.

Another wave washes over me, this one stronger than the last. My head starts to swim and I feel like I’m going to pass out. I rest my head on the steering wheel, waiting for the dizziness to subside ...

I WOKE UP, shivering, my skin covered in a sheen of cold sweat. Typically, when I dreamed of that night, it was of waking up alongside a trail in the woods, not of the events that had led up to that point.

Was my subconscious trying to tell me something? Some important detail I might have forgotten?

I got up and shuffled my way into the shower. The hot water helped with the chills. I sank down onto the floor and leaned my back against the tiles, taking comfort in the heat and steam. I breathed slowly, counting. Odd numbers on the inhale, even on the exhale, up to fifty. Then, I did it again and again.

When sufficiently calm and warmed, I wrapped myself in a fluffy robe and padded out to the kitchen. I made some herbal tea, then went out on the cobblestone patio and watched the sun rise over the mountains.

I WASN'T SCHEDULED to go into the inn until later.

I busied myself with doing laundry, tidying up the cottage, and spending some time outside. The weather was unseasonably warm, the sky clear and the sun bright. I took a walk, raked leaves, pulled weeds from the flower beds, and brushed away cobwebs and bug carcasses from the outside porch lights.

It was cathartic. I needed the instant gratification. I'd spent so much of the last year running, but never actually getting anywhere. That took its toll, and sometimes, I needed to stop, take a breath, and recharge.

That was what these last six weeks had been for me. A much-needed respite.

I would miss the little cottage when I continued on. It was cozy and secluded, and I doubted I'd find another place I'd like as much. I'd miss Shadow Ridge, too, with its beautiful scenery and laid-back simplicity. I'd miss the inn and the unique, quirky people who, despite my best efforts, had grown on me.

That was the one downside of doing mindless tasks—I had too much time to think while doing them.

I thought about putting Shadow Ridge in my rearview mirror, going home, and finally claiming my inheritance. I'd stay only as long as it took to get things done. I couldn't afford to linger, not with my stalker still out there, watching and waiting for me to reappear.

I still felt like a victim. Someone was obsessed with me, and I was no closer to figuring out who it was than I had been when I left. I knew only that whoever they were, they were a danger to me and anyone around me.

I couldn't do that to Angie, especially now that she seemed to be happy. I'd called her the night before, and she said she'd found someone. Hopefully, he was worthy, but the fact that she didn't seem keen on talking about him or telling me his name was a red flag. That had suggested she didn't think I'd approve, and she was probably right.

Angie was my best friend, and I loved her, but when it came to men, she exhibited poor judgment, in my opinion. She would set her sights on a guy and make him the center of her world. Too much, too soon. Things would end badly, and she'd be devastated and inconsolable. Then, she'd see another guy, and the cycle would begin all over again.

I couldn't fault her for that. She'd had a tough life, and she wanted the happily ever after. Didn't we all?

A vision of chestnut hair and hazel eyes filled my mind's eye. In leaving, was I potentially sabotaging what might be *my* possible HEA?

I shook my head. I was being ridiculous. So what if simply thinking of him made my heart beat faster and awakened parts of me that had been dormant for a long time?

My guardian angel wasn't much help on the subject. She remained quiet and sulky and didn't seem inclined to confirm that leaving was the best thing to do. While my head insisted that going was the right choice, my heart was quietly whispering, *Why can't we stay?*

Eventually, it was time to go to work. I cleaned up, donned my black jeans and white button-down, pulled my hair back and secured it at the nape, and made the drive into town. I'd been psyching myself up to talk to Rose, but neither she nor John were there when I arrived. In fact, no one was.

The universe was conspiring against me—I was certain of it.

The lot was empty, and the employee entrance at the back was locked. Mondays were typically our slowest day of the week, but they weren't *that* slow.

I walked around toward the front. Through the windows, I could see that the place was dark, except for the security lights that were always on.

My mind immediately went to bad places. Clearly, something terrible must have happened, and I didn't know because I kept my phones powered down. All of them. The prepaid burners I used to call Angie and occasionally the police to see if there'd been any progress on my case and the one I'd given the inn the number for. My reasons for doing this were simple. One, I didn't want anyone tracking me or my whereabouts. And two, there was nobody I wanted to talk to. The less involved with people I was, the better it was for everyone.

Except, possibly, in situations like this.

I made it to the front double doors and breathed a sigh of relief when I saw the sign.

Closed for staff party.

I'd forgotten all about that, probably because I'd had no intention of going. I had a natural aversion to parties, particularly after what had happened the last time I attended one. And Halloween-themed parties? Forget it.

Of course, no one at the inn knew that. Nor would they.

I was walking back to my car when someone stepped out from the shadows. I had my finger on the trigger of the pepper spray, ready to let loose, when I realized who it was.

"Michelle! You startled me! What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Shouldn't you be at the party?"

"Yes, and so should you. Rose didn't think you'd show, so she sent Max and me to your place, but we passed you on the way and followed you back here." She scanned my outfit and grinned. "You forgot, didn't you?"

“I did,” I admitted. I didn’t tell her that had I remembered, I would have made myself scarce.

“No worries. We can head over now.”

I shook my head and looked down at my clothes. “Like this? I don’t think so.”

“Fine. We’ll go to your place first so you can change.”

“How about I meet you there?” I tried.

“No can do. Max dropped me off and took the car. The only way I’m getting there is if you take me.”

Gah. I sensed collusion. Again.

“Fine. I’ll drop you off, then go change.”

“You know Rose will just send Big Lou out for you then, right?”

Yes, she probably would. I envisioned hiding my car in the woods behind the manor house and spending the night in the trees until Lou and whoever else Rose dispatched gave up and went away. I’d mentioned that I got my back up when I felt pressured, hadn’t I?

“Why?” I said, my tone carrying more bite than usual. “Why can’t she—and everyone else around here for that matter—take no for an answer?”

Michelle’s eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Why can’t *you* loosen up and at least try to have a good time?”

“Because I already know I won’t,” I said, mimicking her stance.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t we good enough for you?”

That gave me pause. “What? No, of course you are. Why would you think that?”

“Because you go out of your way to avoid everyone. Every time we try to include you in something, you balk and find some excuse. I thought you were just shy at first, but that’s not it, is it?”

Shit. There was no graceful way out of this. “I’m just a private person, okay?”

Michelle snorted. “You mean, a solitudinarian.”

“Solitudinarian?”

She shrugged. “My English teacher is big on making us learn a new word every day.”

Sometimes, I forgot that Michelle was still in high school. Not only was she a hard worker, but she also managed to keep her grades up and have an active, healthy social life too. She was more mature than some of the adults I knew.

“Please, Casey?” Michelle pleaded. “Come, even if it’s only for a little while. If you’re not having a good time, you can leave, but at least make an effort. It would mean a lot to everyone.”

What could I say to that without sounding like a complete and total bitch?

“Fine,” I grumbled, walking to my car. “Get in.”

ACCORDING TO MICHELLE, Ziegler Farms consisted of about five hundred acres of prime agricultural land, nestled among gently rolling hills, striped in wide swaths of green and brown. Most of it was actively farmed, but not all. Some was left as forested land, other parcels for open space.

The Zieglers had their own store, where they sold farm-fresh produce and products as well as homemade baked goods and unique items made by local craftsmen. The place was popular with locals and tourists alike, Michelle told me. That was something I'd already known, as I'd stopped several times over the course of the last month.

What could I say? I had a weakness for whoopie pies.

After turning off the main road, we made our way down the long drive, lined with stately old oaks and maples on either side, ablaze with autumn colors. Hand-painted signs held warm welcomes and promises of good family fun. Grinning scarecrows and gauzy, friendly ghosts pointed the way.

The scenic lane opened into a large, well-lit clearing, where a handful of cars were already parked. There weren't nearly as many as I'd expected. The lot was usually packed.

"Zieglers is closed to the public tonight too," Michelle explained, as if reading my thoughts.

I recognized Max's project car, an old Chevy Nova, as well as John's platinum-colored Lexus SUV. Lou's gleaming pickup truck was there too, parked next to a minivan that had seen better days. I assumed the van was Shannon's. I scanned

the few remaining vehicles out of habit, looking for out-of-state plates or rental stickers, finding none.

We got out of the car, and I took a moment to look around. The sun hadn't yet gone down completely, and there was enough light to see beyond the lot. It was pretty in a picture-postcard way. Grassroots Americana at its very best.

I could live here and be happy, I thought.

Various trails led outward, like spokes on a wagon wheel, with signs explaining where they went. The path straight ahead directed people toward pick-your-own patches of pumpkins and gourds as well as orchard and cider-making tours. To the left was a massive, digitally designed corn maze. The maze was so large that each party was given a handheld GPS device, programmed with interactive clues as well as a highlighted exit path for those who wanted a quick out. To the right was an obstacle course, created almost solely of hay bales and what looked like a dirt racetrack, complete with tricycles. And, of course, there was a path leading into the woods for the haunted hayrides.

I stifled a shudder. At one time, I would have enjoyed coming to a place like this. Now, the thought of being trapped in a maze or having things jump out at me from the dark was enough to set my heart thumping furiously and chill my blood. I could feel the panic skulking around the edges of my mind, looking for the slightest crack in my defenses.

You can do this, Casey. Nothing is going to happen. Smile, put in an appearance, then leave quietly with no one the wiser and your dignity intact.

As if sensing my desire to flee, Michelle looped her arm through mine and led me toward the large barn looming before us. It was painted a deep shade of red and adorned with intricate and brilliantly colored Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs. The big doors were open, and sounds of music and laughter drifted out to us.

It looked and sounded like people were already having a good time. Still, I might have turned tail and fled had it not been for the mouthwatering aromas emanating from within. I

inhaled deeply, able to discern some of my favorites. Tangy barbecue. Grilled burgers and hot dogs. Fresh apple cider. Deep-fried powdered doughnuts.

And though I couldn't smell them, I knew there would be whoopie pies. Lots of whoopie pies. Chocolate. Red velvet. Vanilla. Pumpkin spice.

Yep, this was my happy place.

I thought I'd gained five pounds just from the smells alone. For the record, I was totally okay with that.

My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I'd had nothing to eat but cereal for over twenty-four hours. I'd planned to grab something at the inn, as usual, but clearly, that wasn't happening. I decided I'd stay long enough to be polite, partake in some of the treats, then slip away.

Rose beamed when Michelle marched me through the door. I was welcomed warmly. So warmly, in fact, that I felt a twinge of guilt. Had it not been for Rose's scheming—yes, I knew Michelle's escort services were her doing—I wouldn't be here.

After saying hello to everyone, I helped myself to cider and a hot dog and mentally whispered, *Later, beautiful*, promises to the whoopie pies.

I hefted myself up onto a rectangle of hay that had been covered with a thick cloth. Feet dangling, I was content to sit and watch those around me until enough time passed that I could leave without being rude.

Rose and John were the center of attention, as usual. They regaled the group with outrageous but very funny stories from their time overseas. John had been stationed in Asia, Europe, and South America while in the Navy. I'd never been out of the country, but after listening to them, I moved *international travel* up on my bucket list. I'd already seen a good portion of the US.

I recognized nearly everyone there, and those I didn't, I was able to guess at. The long-haired guy with piercings hanging close to Michelle had to be her boyfriend, Jason. The

beefy, bearded guy wearing a Peterbilt cap and laughing with CJ was Shannon's husband, Mike.

"I see Rose's plan worked." Shannon smirked, coming up beside me.

"It did," I agreed.

"Don't even try to sneak out of here early," she warned. "Rose told us to keep an eye on you."

Well, there went that idea. I was going to have to get extra crafty.

"Who is the tall, stunning Cher look-alike with Lou?" I asked, changing the subject.

"That's his wife, Kim."

My jaw dropped. "You're kidding! I didn't know he was married."

Shannon laughed. "Oh, yeah. They've been married for ten years at least. Their relationship is, shall we say, unique."

Before I could ask what she meant, she said, "Uh-oh, it looks like Mike and CJ are plotting something. I'd better get over there and put a stop to it. Remember what I said." She put two fingers up to her eyes, then turned them around to face me in an *I'm watching you* gesture before moving away.

I went back to people-watching. I didn't need a name to know the guy next to Max was a Ziegler. I hadn't seen him before, but he had the same chestnut hair and hazel eyes as his brothers and was just as attractive. I'd learned there were five sons, ranging in age from seventeen to thirty. I guessed I was looking at the youngest.

I wondered if the others would show. Or rather, if one Ziegler brother in particular would be here.

As always, my pulse sped up at the thought of Steve. I knew he wasn't here yet—I'd been discreetly scanning from the moment I arrived. *Was he staying away because he knew I might be here?*

I ignored the pang of disappointment and told myself it was for the best.

I told myself that it didn't matter, because I hadn't changed into my best ass-hugging jeans on the off chance that I might see him. Nor had I selected the hooded, dark lilac three-quarter-length-sleeved top that people said brought out the violet in my blue-violet eyes because of him. And I definitely hadn't taken an extra minute to release my dark hair from its working ponytail and spritz it with curl-enhancing gel.

I'd done those things purely for me, because doing them with him in mind would have been wrong. It would have sent mixed signals and contradicted my *don't want to start something I can't finish* philosophy.

"Looking mighty fine there, darlin'," Lou said, ambling up to me.

"Why, thank you, Lou. You clean up pretty good yourself," I replied honestly.

Like me, Lou had chosen to wear his hair free. It was as long as mine, if not longer, and thick. With his black T-shirt and plaid flannel, he reminded me of a hillbilly version of Jason Momoa.

"Kinda makes you want some, doesn't it?" he said with a wink.

"And ... you ruined it," I said lightly. "What does your wife think of your shameless flirting?"

His eyes glittered wickedly. "We have what you'd call an open relationship."

"Oh. *Ohhh*," I said, drawing the word out as realization dawned. I now understood what Shannon had meant when she called Lou's marriage unique.

"But just so you know, she thinks you're cute too."

I was pretty sure Lou was implying that his wife would be down with a three-way, and I didn't know how to respond to that.

I went with, “Thanks, I think, but no thanks. I’m flattered though. Really.”

He laughed at my obvious discomfort and looked over my shoulder. “I’m telling you, man, it’s like I have a *get out of jail* free card and I can’t get arrested.”

I turned around and looked into beautiful hazel eyes, and my heart rate went from normal human to racehorse between one blink and the next. In the lights of the barn, they looked more green than brown tonight.

“Hi,” he said in that soft, quiet way he had. It calmed and excited me at the same time.

“Hi,” I echoed.

He looked amazing. The dark brown thermal he wore clung to sculpted pecs beneath the open red-and-brown flannel, and as usual, he had the sleeves pushed back to his elbows, treating me to another free peep show of arm porn.

“I’m glad you came,” he said, his mouth curling into that crooked grin. “They were taking bets on whether or not you’d show, you know.”

“I didn’t, but I can’t say I’m surprised. Which way were you leaning?”

His grin widened. “I never bet against Rose.”

Warmth pooled in my core, and butterflies took flight in my belly.

“This place is great,” I managed.

“I think so, but I’m biased. Would you like a tour?”

My heart pounded out a thump-stutter rhythm that was probably the Morse code equivalent of, *Yes, please, and thank you*. “I’m sure you’re busy.”

“Not until the hayride. Come on.” He held out his hand to assist me off the hay bale. When I made no move to take it, he said, “I mean, since you’ll be leaving soon and all ...”

Damn it, he was right. This might be the only chance I had to spend time with him before I left. And it was just a tour.

With lots of people around. Nothing was going to happen.

“All right.”

I took his hand, and the moment his strong fingers curled around mine, I felt warmth flowing into me from the point of contact. Not the surface warmth you felt when you touched another warm body, but the kind of penetrating heat that wrapped around you on the inside and spread, like a hug.

I glanced up at Steve, and based on the widening of his eyes, he'd felt it too.

Everyone and everything around us faded into the background. Even time seemed to pause.

Yep, I know. Weird. But true nonetheless.

My body started leaning toward his, totally without permission, as I was mesmerized by those sparkling gold flecks. It would be so easy to get lost in those depths. Something told me that if I did, I'd need more than a GPS to find my way out.

Thankfully, a roar of laughter from somewhere beyond brought me back to my senses.

I took a step back, reclaimed my hand, and shoved both hands into my pockets.

“Come on,” he coaxed again. His voice sounded huskier than it had before, though that might have just been my imagination. “I promise to behave, no matter how tempted I might be to do otherwise.”

He was giving me that crooked smile again. The tingles in my fingers spread to other places.

Lord help me, I'm not sure I can promise the same.

“I can only hope,” Steve murmured, and I realized I hadn't just thought those words, but I'd said them aloud.

Mortification ensued.

I clamped my lips together, dropped my gaze, and began walking toward the exit. I didn't have to look back to know Steve was right behind me. I could feel his presence.

Thankfully, I did manage to restrain myself, and Steve went back to being the easygoing, soft-spoken gentleman. He didn't touch me again, but remained close enough that one misstep was all it would take to make contact. I was ashamed to say, I considered tripping accidentally on purpose multiple times over the course of the next thirty minutes.

That was what being around this man did to me. Made me think crazy things and contemplate aberrant behavior.

The temperature had cooled off just enough, making it perfect for a leisurely stroll. A heaviness hung in the air that had nothing to do with my proximity to Steve and everything to do with the approaching storm front that would put an end to the unseasonably warm weather.

As we walked, Steve talked about his family and how the Zieglers had been working the land since before the Revolutionary War. From the warmth in his voice and the frequent smiles, it was obvious he cared about them very much.

I liked listening, but honestly, he could have been reciting the dictionary, and I would have enjoyed it. His voice was deep and soft, like velvet, yet smooth, like silk, and conveyed a depth of emotion beyond words. I liked the way it made me feel too. I could easily picture myself pressed against him, feeling the gentle caress of those strong fingers, while he talked in that calming, comforting purr.

He didn't speak much about himself, which I found refreshing and contrary to personal experience. Most of the guys I'd dated—back when I actually did that sort of thing—talked about nothing *but* themselves. Their accomplishments, their prowess, their possessions. Angie used to say they were hardwired that way, that there was an innate, primitive biological belief that the caveman with the biggest club collection got to drag the girl back to his cave. The analogy always made me smile.

Thankfully, Steve didn't seem opposed to answering when I asked the occasional question, which I also considered a

check in the positive column. People who continually deflected usually had something to hide.

Like me, for example. I was an expert in deflection and vague nonanswers.

Despite my determination not to get involved, I wanted to know more about him.

He told me he was twenty-eight, the second born of five sons, and that the only time he'd been away from Shadow Ridge was the four years he was at college, earning a degree in electrical engineering.

"You're an engineer?" I asked, surprised. "I thought you were ..." I clamped my lips shut before I could stuff my foot in there completely.

"Just a farmer?" he finished with a wry grin.

"I'm sorry," I said, shaking my head. "That was incredibly rude, especially coming from a pub waitress."

"No offense taken," he said easily. "My family has been farming this land for generations. It's good, honest work, and there's no shame in that. But my parents insisted we attend college or learn a trade so we would have something to fall back on." He laughed. "I did both. I got my degree, then apprenticed in the trade."

"Overachiever, huh?"

"Not really. Sitting behind a desk wasn't for me. I need to be outside, and I like working with my hands. Farming isn't the only Ziegler family business, you know. We have a construction company too. In addition to helping out around here on nights and weekends, I'm also a certified master electrician by day."

"Wow," I said, genuinely impressed.

"And something tells me you are way more than a pub waitress, Casey."

He cast a probing glance my way. I said nothing, neither confirming nor denying. Thankfully, I didn't have to. We ended up back at the barn where we'd started, and everyone

was climbing into the back of the big wagon for the haunted hayride.

“Looks like I’m up,” Steve said.

I felt a stab of disappointment that my time with Steve had come to an end. I’d enjoyed his company. Sure, he was gorgeous and gave me the tinglies in all the right places, but he was also funny, intelligent, modest, and easy to be around.

“Thank you for showing me around. You’re an excellent tour guide.”

“You’re not coming on the hayride?” he asked, frowning slightly.

“No. Not my thing.”

“You could sit up front in the cab with me. Climate-controlled, lots of speakers, and awesome cupholders.” He said the last with a waggle of his brows, as if that could entice me.

It couldn’t, but *he* could.

I was tempted, but no. I’d already pushed the boundaries where he was concerned. Besides, with everyone else on the hayride, I could make a quiet escape.

I shook my head and stepped back. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Come on, Casey!” Michelle called from the wagon, patting an open space on the bale beside her.

I waved dismissively. “You guys go ahead.”

Shouts of, “Don’t be a chicken!” mixed with, “Ah, come on,” and, “But you have to come.”

I ignored them. I’d heard enough stories over the past few weeks to know that the haunted hayride wasn’t for me. The thought of someone jumping out of the darkness was enough to make my blood run cold and send me spiraling into a panic attack that not even Steve’s mysterious calming powers would have a prayer of holding at bay.

“You’re going to stick around, right?” Steve asked.

The idea of spending more time with Steve was appealing, if ill-advised, but I could see where this evening was headed. Shannon's husband and CJ were well on their way to being drunk, and Rose wasn't far behind. I had no problem with people letting loose and having a good time, but I had no desire to watch the evening degrade to the level I thought it would.

"I should probably go."

"What if I said please?"

He looked at me with those beautiful eyes, and I felt myself falling into them again. Falling ... and caving.

"Bawk, bawk, bawk, ba-gawk," clucked Shannon's husband loudly, standing up and flopping his arms like a chicken.

The others laughed.

"I said no!" I yelled back at them. "Get off it and grow the fuck up, okay?"

They stared at me in stunned silence. They'd never seen me lose my temper. Or heard me drop the F-bomb. I looked back at Steve. He didn't seem as stunned as he was concerned. Then, his lips quirked.

"I like a woman who stands up for herself. Tell you what. How about I get one of my brothers to drive the tractor tonight? You and I could stay here, drink cider, and talk a little more. I saw the way you were ogling those whoopie pies," he added.

Just like that, my anger cooled. The man had a gift for soothing ruffled feathers.

"You're not wrong," I said, smiling now. "I thought I was slicker than that. But I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking; I'm offering. I'm not ready to let you go yet, Casey. I like spending time with you. Please."

Once again, my bones melted. And maybe, just maybe, I wasn't ready to go either despite my head telling me it was the right thing to do. But I had to think about everyone else too,

and what it would look like if I let Steve stay back with me while he got someone else to take the group out.

“Go, do the hayride. I’ll wait until you get back.”

“Yeah?” he asked. “You promise?”

I returned his smile with one of my own. “I promise.”

“Go on then,” Jessie said, appearing beside me. She must have arrived while we were out walking. “I’m not going either. We’ll keep each other company.”

Well, hell.

WITH ONE LAST look at me, Steve walked away with the easy, confident stride of a man who was comfortable in his own skin. He pulled himself up into the tractor with equally appealing masculine grace. I might have looked at his butt. In my defense, he had a really nice butt.

It took several moments before I realized Jessie was talking to me.

“I never liked those things either,” she said as the loaded wagon drew away. “Once you’ve seen the real thing, it’s hard to find any fun in it.”

Isn't that the truth?

Resigned to spending the next hour with Jessie, I followed her back into the barn and kept my promise to those whoopie pies. I felt a slash of guilt for avoiding her lately. She was a nice person. I just didn't want her looking any deeper than the facade I'd created around myself.

Thankfully, Jessie didn't bring up the weird encounter in the kitchen, and neither did I.

Mostly, Jessie talked, and I listened, which suited me fine. I learned that, in addition to sharing an aversion to jump scares, we had several other things in common. We were both only children. We'd both lost our parents at a relatively young age. We both had an appreciation for offbeat British comedies, Abbott and Costello movies, and steamy romance novels.

The most surprising thing I learned was that Jessie had spent several years with the New York City Ballet company in her youth. Her promising career had been cut short by the tragic fire that robbed her of her family and her ability to dance. It was only after her near-death experience, she confided, that the visions had started.

I didn't tell her about my guardian angel's nudges. Mild as they were, they could be unsettling too. I couldn't imagine what it was like to have full-blown visions. If, in fact, she did. I was less skeptical now than I had been, but I still wasn't one hundred percent convinced.

"One person's visions are another's delusions," Angie had told me once when a psychic came forward and offered her services to help me identify my stalker—for a hefty fee, of course. Angie had threatened her with a restraining order if she tried to contact me again.

The hour passed quickly and pleasantly, and before long, we heard the rumble of the tractor approaching, barely audible over the cacophony of loud voices and raucous laughter.

"Oh my God! You should have seen the look on your face, Michelle," Max teased, nearly doubling over with laughter as they entered the barn. "I think you pulled poor Jason's arm out of his socket."

Jason agreed, dramatically rubbing his wounded shoulder.

"Yeah, well, at least I didn't piss myself!" Michelle shot back.

"I spilled my drink!" Max insisted.

"Yeah. Uh-huh. Sure you did."

Judging by their smiles and high spirits, they'd had a good time, but I was glad I'd stayed back.

I scanned faces as more people came in and moved toward the refreshments, looking for one in particular. I didn't see him. It occurred to me that Steve probably had to put the tractor away before he could return to the festivities.

I was so intent on watching the door that I didn't realize anyone had come up behind me.

"Come with me," a deep, evil voice hissed against my ear.

My hood was pulled up over my head, and then strong arms wrapped around me and jerked me backward. The barn instantly disappeared, and I was suddenly thrust into my nightmare. I was encased in darkness, being dragged against my will. Except I wasn't drugged this time.

I lashed out with everything I had, kicking and punching and scratching for my life. I managed to land several blows against my attacker before I found myself on the ground with someone pinning me down.

"Casey! Jesus, calm down, darlin'."

The voice penetrated the haze. I knew that voice.

"Lou?" I rasped.

He exhaled heavily. "Yeah, darlin'. You okay?"

No, I wasn't okay, not by a long shot. My heart felt like it was going to pound right through my chest. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

"Get off me," I wheezed.

The pressure lifted, but he didn't let me go.

"You back with us now?" he asked cautiously.

I sucked in a lungful of air as the barn came into focus. "Yeah. What happened?"

Lou looked up at something behind me and scowled. "Mike's a dick—that's what happened."

Everyone was staring at me, their expressions ranging from concern to horror. I felt my face burning with embarrassment.

"Let me up."

He helped me to a sitting position and said, "Give it a minute."

Rose was suddenly in my face, shoving a glass into my shaking hand. “Drink this. It’ll help.”

It smelled like whiskey. So did she. I pushed them both away.

“What the hell happened?” Steve demanded, entering the barn and finding me on the ground, surrounded by a circle of people.

“Mike thought it would be fun to scare Casey,” Shannon said angrily.

Steve was in Mike’s face a moment later, grabbing his shirt with both hands. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” he growled.

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean anything by it. How was I supposed to know she’d freak out like that?”

I glared up at Mike, taking perverse satisfaction in seeing the scratches I’d made on his face and arms. Lou was right. Mike *was* a dick. But I had overreacted. They didn’t know about my issues. They didn’t know my triggers.

Steve looked like he was ready to do some damage. I had to defuse the situation.

“Steve, let him go. I’m okay.”

He looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes practically glowing. Beneath that easygoing exterior, Steve Ziegler was a fierce protector at heart. And at that moment, he was protecting *me*. That tempered my rage somewhat.

“Please.”

His eyes softened, just a little. He released the death grip on Mike’s shirt, then shoved him backward. “Stay away from her,” Steve warned.

Mike put his hands up in surrender and backed away. Shannon took his arm and pulled him off to the side. I couldn’t hear what she was saying, but her tone and hand gestures showed she was clearly angry.

Lou turned to Steve. “You got this?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, I got this,” Steve assured him.

“All right, show’s over,” Lou said, waving everyone off and herding them backward.

Most people obliged. Except Rose. She was hovering, stubbornly trying to push another glass into my hands, sloshing booze onto me in the process. Thankfully, John intervened and gently but firmly guided her away.

“How about some fresh air?” Steve asked, now crouched beside me.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Thanks.”

He extended his hand. I took it without hesitation and let him pull me to my feet. We walked outside, and I took a moment to inhale deeply. The air was heavier now, rife with the scent of approaching rain.

He stepped up next to me, a quiet, solid presence.

I wanted him to put his arms around me and hold me close. He didn’t, and I didn’t blame him. I’d just put my crazy on display for everyone to see. I imagined they’d be giving me a wide berth from now on. The upside, if there was one, was that it would make it easier for me to leave.

We stood in silence as the minutes ticked by. Me with my arms wrapped around myself. Him with his hands shoved down deep into the pockets of his jeans.

“I should go,” I said finally.

He nodded, which, for some reason, felt like a knife in my chest. I did want to go, but some part of me wanted him to not want me to. To offer a protest, even a feeble, superficial one.

“I’ll drive you,” was what he said.

The blade twisted.

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’m fine. I haven’t had anything stronger than cider tonight.”

He frowned, and I knew that wasn’t what concerned him.

“I overreacted, is all,” I said quietly. “And now, I just want to go.”

He considered that. I could practically hear the debate raging in his head, his chivalrous, protective side at odds with respecting my wishes.

“All right,” he said finally. “I’ll follow you.”

I shook my head. “No. You have things to do here, and I’d prefer to be alone right now.”

His lips thinned, and his eyes darkened to a deep bronze. He wasn’t happy about letting me go, but this was about me and what I wanted, not about him and what he wanted.

“Will you text me the moment you get home?”

It was an acceptable compromise. I nodded.

“Give me your phone.”

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a burner, and handed it to him. He typed in his number, and a moment later, I heard his phone ring. Now, he had my number too.

“As soon as you get home,” he said, handing my phone back to me.

I nodded. “Good night, Steve.”

“Good night, Casey.”

ONLY ONCE I was on the main road did I fully exhale. I'd become adept at holding everything inside and keeping up pretenses, but eventually, it had to come out. Tonight had pushed me beyond my limits.

The tears I had been holding at bay could no longer be contained. A hot drop spilled over my lashes, the first of many. I swiped at them with the back of my hand when my vision began to blur.

Damn Rose for setting me up tonight.

Damn Mike and his childish pranks.

Damn Steve for his caring and kindness.

And damn me and my triggers and the stalking bastard who had put me in this position to begin with.

I was better than this. Stronger. At least, I used to be.

My body and soul were weary; my mind whirred with regret. I was tired of running. Tired of living in fear. Tired of allowing myself to feel like a victim.

I turned onto the mountain road that would lead me back to my little cottage. Big, heavy clouds were moving in, preceding the powerful front forecasted to bring an end to the string of abnormally warm and beautiful weather. The canopy of trees on either side of the road kept the increasingly limited moonlight at bay. To make matters worse, a thick, rolling fog was moving over the ground, making it hard to see exactly where the road was. A mist formed on my windshield as I

ascended into the cooler air, forcing me to turn on my wipers. I slowed even more, my headlights barely making a dent in the fog and inky blackness. The road I'd traveled nearly every day for more than a month suddenly appeared as foreign as if I'd never been on it. It was disorienting. I wasn't even sure where I was.

I shivered and gripped the wheel until my knuckles turned white, holding the panic at bay. More bad memories came to the surface. It had been suffocatingly dark and foggy that night too. Damp with a charge in the air and the scent of rain and fallen leaves. The sense of impending doom was nearly overwhelming.

Keep your head. It's just a little fog. You've driven in far worse and on more remote stretches than this. Hell, you learned to drive in the middle of winter with lake-effect snow. This is nothing.

I reached for the radio, thinking some music might help. I didn't see the large buck until it was nearly too late. One moment, nothing but fog and darkness had lain ahead. The next, a huge fourteen-point male was standing in the middle of the road, staring me right in the eyes.

I stomped both feet on the brakes at the same time I cut the wheel hard to the right. With no shoulder, the car skidded off the road, the front wheels dipping down at a sharp angle. Just as I thought I'd be making an express trip back down the mountain in the worst way possible, a massive oak stopped any further forward progress.

The impact was substantial enough to deploy the driver's airbag. I was treated to a violently erupting nylon pillow hitting me hard in the face and snapping me backward with great force. And ... *ow*.

While the bag deflated, I took deep gulps of chemically scented air and tried to gather my wits. I was shaking like a leaf, and I felt like I'd taken a good beating, but nothing seemed to be broken. With great care, I was able to extract my legs from the now-mangled front end and crawl out the driver's window.

I walked gingerly around the car to survey the damage. The back half appeared unscathed, but the front had crumpled like an accordion, particularly on the passenger side. My already-low spirits plummeted further. Driving away from this wasn't likely. For the hell of it, I crawled back into the driver's seat and tried to turn the engine over anyway.

It didn't work.

"Any accident you can walk away from is a good one," I mumbled, echoing the words my father had said to me after my first fender bender.

I supposed there was wisdom in that, but it was hard to find much *good* in my current situation. Stuck in the middle of nowhere with the temperature dropping rapidly and an approaching storm, my ribs and head aching, didn't inspire positivity.

I turned on the interior lights and groped around for my phone without success. Because of the damage, I could only reach so far. It had been on the passenger seat. Now, it was probably in the black void beneath the glove compartment, which was currently also in the passenger seat.

Awesome.

I hauled myself out of the vehicle again. Massive quantities of ibuprofen and Epsom salts were definitely in my future.

The passenger door wouldn't open, and no amount of heaving, yanking, or pulling on my part changed that.

I exhaled heavily and looked up toward the sky. "What else could go wrong?"

I shouldn't have asked. The clouds chose that moment to open up. Big, heavy drops of icy-cold rain hit my face like buckshot, soaking me to the skin almost instantly.

I scrambled into the backseat as fast as my aching limbs would allow. My bruised knee landed on something hard—my phone!—and for a moment, I thought the universe was taking pity on me. Then, I powered it up and discovered I was in a dead zone.

The deluge of rain was deafening. I was chilled to the bone, and my body was shaking hard enough to make me the human equivalent of a jackhammer. Curling myself into a ball, I huddled into the corner and considered my options. There weren't many. Stay here until conditions improved or get out, find the road, and start walking.

I looked out the window and saw nothing but blackness. No lights, no landscape in the distance that would provide a clue as to where I was. I could be one mile away from my cottage or five.

Decision made, I pulled my arms out of my sleeves and wrapped them around my torso to preserve body heat. Then, I brought my knees, throbbing from where they'd been thrust into the dash, up to my chest and settled in for what was sure to be a long night.

The tears began to flow again in earnest. I'd officially reached the limit of what I could take. Sobs racked my body. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on me. In my determination to keep everyone at arm's length, I'd ensured no one would notice that I was missing for some time.

Strength depleted, I gave myself over to the darkness with one final thought. *I can't do this anymore.*

I WASN'T sure how long I'd sat like that. A couple of hours maybe. It felt like forever. The rain continued to pour, and the wind howled. Every now and then, a strong gust came along, rocking the car and making me think about mudslides and rockslides and the fact that I was somewhere on the side of a mountain road in a crunched metal box.

Something struck the glass above my head. My first thought was debris, like the kind I'd seen in a storm chaser video once. I curled into an even tighter ball against the door, ducking down as far as I could get. There weren't many things that could make the situation even worse, but a branch spearing through the window and skewering me was one of them.

That thump was followed by another dull thud, and this one was powerful enough that I felt the vibrations. I vaguely registered a flash of light before the door opened, and I tumbled out onto the wet, cold ground. I screamed, certain that either (a) a bear had decided I looked like a canned snack or (b) I was plunging to my death.

“Casey!”

That voice. I knew it. It was Steve's voice. Some people saw their lives flashing before their eyes when they were about to die. I heard Steve.

“Look at me, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart. He called me sweetheart. What a nice way to go, I decided.

But I wasn't falling anymore. I wasn't moving at all. I opened my eyes and looked into gorgeous hazel orbs, framed by thick sable lashes.

“Steve?”

Relief passed over his features. “Yeah.”

“How ... why ...”

“Christ, you're freezing. Let's get you someplace warm before we do the Q and A. Are you hurt? Is anything broken?”

“N-no, but ...”

“Hush now.”

I hushed. He took the baseball cap off his head and put it on mine, then lifted me into his strong arms, as if I were a child, and started walking up the hill. It was still raining, I thought, but I didn't care. To be honest, I didn't know if I was awake or in the grips of another flashback, minus the overwhelming sense of terror.

The bright light was blinding when he opened the cab door and set me on the bench seat. He had to pry my hands from his quilted flannel jacket. He spoke in low, soothing tones as he did so. I couldn't tell you what he said. My teeth were chattering too loud to make out the words.

Then, the door shut, and I was alone, but not for long. He appeared again, coming through the driver's door this time. He covered me with a blanket, then pulled me close and held me. I knew it was probably to get my body heat back up to a normal level, but the romantic part of my brain was willing to create its own ideas. All I knew was, I liked it. A lot.

It took several minutes before I stopped shaking enough to say, “Th-th-thank y-y-you.”

He pulled back but left the blanket. In the light of the dashboard, I could see the concern etched in his beautiful features. As if he'd really been worried about me. It made me want to cry again.

“What happened?”

“D-d-deer,” I said simply.

“Do you need medical attention?”

I shook my head.

He nodded once, put the truck in gear, and pulled out. The fog wasn't as thick as it had been earlier. I supposed the cold rain had chilled the ground enough to reduce the ground-air temperature difference by that point.

We drove in silence. In my peripheral vision, I could see him shooting worried side-glances my way.

He pulled into the long drive a short while later. As it turned out, I had only been about five minutes away from the cottage. Had I known that, I could have walked it easily.

“How do you know where I live?” I asked, pleased that the chattering had all but stopped.

His lips did that crooked-tilt thing. “This is Shadow Ridge. Someone new comes to town, everyone knows. But I had an inside scoop. My parents and the Muellers are good friends.”

The Muellers were the elderly couple who owned the estate and lived in the big manor house and were renting me the cottage.

“They are?”

He nodded.

The party, the storm, being stranded along the road—it was an alternate version of one of the worst nights of my life. But I was no longer freaking out. The panic was steadily subsiding because of *him*. That was twice he'd come to my rescue tonight.

The cottage was dark, which was odd. I usually turned the outside lights on before I left, and I had timers on several inside lamps so I never returned home to a dark house. A bolt of lightning ripped through the sky, and within seconds, thunder cracked out, loud enough that I could *feel* the shock waves rolling through my body. The hairs on the back of my neck rose.

“Did the storm knock out electricity?” I asked.

“Might have,” he said. “It was raging pretty hard there for a while.”

Yes, I knew, but I’d lost the ability to blindly accept the most likely explanation when something was amiss. I silently called upon my guardian angel and felt nothing. No warning, no sense of impending danger.

“Want to come in for coffee?” I asked. It seemed like the least I could do.

He snorted, as if the question were ridiculous. “I’m not going anywhere until I know for certain you’re okay.”

Warmth bloomed in my center, and at that moment, I had neither the will nor the desire to fight it.

He helped me out of the truck and to the door, then went right to the fireplace and started tossing out orders over his shoulder.

“Go take a hot shower. I’ll get a fire going and make coffee. Unless you prefer tea or hot chocolate.”

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it again when I saw his eyes narrow in warning. This commanding, *don’t even think of arguing with me right now* vibe was yet another side of Steve I hadn’t seen before. While I typically eschewed bossy men, I was willing to cede control for a little while. And on *him*, it was crazy hot.

“Any of those sound great, thank you.”

He grunted. I took it as a sound of approval. Despite the situation, I found myself smiling stupidly as I walked away, anxious to peel off my wet clothes and stand under hot water to chase the chill from my bones.

When I returned to the living room, I felt much better, both mentally and physically. My body was warm; my clothes were soft, comfortable, and dry; and the ibuprofen was starting to kick in. The smell of hot chocolate filled my kitchen, and a fire was blazing in the hearth.

I didn't see Steve at first. Then, he appeared from the tiny mudroom in dry clothes.

"I keep a change of clothes in my truck," he said, answering my unspoken question. "Feeling better?"

"Much."

"Good." He waved toward the couch. "Sit. I made hot chocolate."

My lips quirked. "You're being very bossy."

Another supremely masculine grunt.

I sat on the sofa, and Steve carried two mugs over. Before sitting down himself, he took the lap blanket and draped it over my legs. It was such a thoughtful thing to do. I wasn't used to that.

"I put a shot of Baileys in there," he told me. "I figured you could use it."

I definitely could. That was why I kept a six-pack of single-serving Baileys shots with me wherever I was staying. For occasions just like this.

"Thanks."

I expected him to start lobbing questions at me right away, but he didn't. I knew instinctively that he was giving me time, and I appreciated that as much as the blanket and the coffee.

"How did you know?" I asked finally.

"I didn't, not really. I just wanted to make sure you'd gotten home okay. You'd seemed pretty upset when you left. Then, you didn't text, and you weren't answering your phone."

He paused, giving me a chance to say something, and when I didn't, he continued, "When I saw the cottage was dark and that your car wasn't in the drive, I started cruising the mountain roads, looking for you. I must have driven past you half a dozen times before I found you. If it hadn't been for that bolt of lightning lighting things up at just the right moment, I might still be out there."

"I'm so glad you did," I said sincerely.

I couldn't imagine anyone else looking for me. Even Angie, my best friend, had waited three days after I disappeared to call the police and report me missing. She'd said it was because she'd been avoiding me because of the thing with Henry and thought I was doing the same with her.

I gripped my mug and sipped. I'd become so paranoid; I saw malicious intent in even the most natural of things.

"Want to talk about what happened tonight?" he said softly.

"No," I answered just as quietly. "But I would like you to stay for a little while longer, if that's okay."

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere."

COLD RAIN HITS my skin and into my already-soaked clothes, bringing me back to consciousness. I realize I must have passed out again.

I couldn't breathe. Why couldn't I breathe?

Hands reach out and grab at me, dragging me out of the pool of water I am lying in. Pain explodes through my chest as something hits me with hard, powerful thrusts. Suddenly, I'm violently expelling water from my lungs. I feel myself being rolled roughly onto my side as I cough and sputter, my lungs and throat and nose burning with liquid fire.

Spent and exhausted, I'm on my back again, looking up at a solid, hooded shadow. A black smudge in the dark. It looks roughly human-shaped, but my vision is blurry and I can't make out any features. My delusional brain connects the dots and comes up with ... the Grim Reaper.

"Death?" I rasp. I certainly feel like I am dying.

My companion says nothing.

Death examines me, running leathery fingers over my face, along my arms and legs. I howl—or try to—when he attempts to lift me.

The pain is excruciating. I can't stand it.

"Have mercy. Make it stop," I beg.

Death says something in a low voice, but the words are lost in my screams. Then he's gone...

I BOLTED UPRIGHT, the scream lodged in my throat. Disoriented and still in the grips of the vivid dream—memory?—I glanced around frantically, ready to lash out.

I was in my bedroom, in my bed, alone.

I took deep breaths, wincing when I felt the aches up and down my body. It took me a minute to remember why I hurt. Right. My car had gone off the road, and I was knocked around. Steve had found me and brought me back here. He must have carried me to my bed after I fell asleep on the couch.

I shook my head to clear away the last vestiges of my nightmare, immediately regretting it when my neck screamed in protest. Being slammed by an airbag inflating at over one hundred miles an hour could do that.

Gingerly swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I slowly got to my feet. I attempted a gentle stretch and twist to alleviate the stiffness, pleased when nothing protested overmuch.

I shuffled my way to the bathroom and glanced at my reflection. I didn't look *too* worse for wear, all things considered. The dark purplish circles under my eyes wouldn't win me any beauty contests, but liberal use of concealer and foundation would go a long way in making them less noticeable.

As I brushed my teeth and washed my face, I wondered if anyone else knew about what had happened. Shadow Ridge was a small town, and everyone knew everyone else's business, but I didn't think Steve was the type to run and tell.

Well, if they didn't already know, they would soon because I had to see about getting my car towed and fixed.

I ran a comb through my hair, then gathered the mess into a big clip. I'd worry about making myself presentable after coffee and another dose of ibuprofen.

I ventured into the kitchen to do just that. I spotted the neatly folded blanket and pillow on the couch and smiled. Steve had stuck around, just like he'd said he would.

I didn't see him, but the blaze in the hearth and the pot of freshly brewed coffee suggested he hadn't been gone long.

I poured myself a cup and took a moment to appreciate all the kind things he'd done for me over the past twelve hours. The man was definitely a keeper.

That was when it hit me. Really hit me. I wanted more. I wanted to take a chance and see where things went. There was a connection there, a connection I hadn't felt with anyone else, and it went deeper than surface attraction or appreciation for his kindness and generosity. I *felt* different when I was around him. I didn't want to keep him at arm's length; I wanted to pull him closer.

But as much as I might want something more, it wasn't feasible. I was in the wind, running away from an obsessed psycho and trying to protect my friends. I had too many secrets, secrets that not even I knew. How could I consider a potential relationship when I was such a hot mess?

The only answer: I couldn't. Not in good conscience. It wouldn't be fair to either of us.

I sipped my coffee—the man even made good coffee—and looked out the window. Graphite-gray clouds hung low and heavy; last night's ferocious storm had calmed into a steady, soaking rain. Tomorrow's forecast called for sunshine and clear skies.

That seemed symbolic somehow. I had to get through my own storm to see the sunshine again. All I'd been doing thus far was trying to outrun it. Last night, I'd already decided that things had to change. I was ready to remember. Ready for this to be over, once and for all.

One thing at a time, Casey.

I began making a list of things to do.

- Get my car towed and fixed or find another ride.

- Talk to Rose and put an end date on my employment there.
- Return to Chicago and meet with my family's lawyers.

Maybe, while I was there, I'd reach out to a forensic hypnotherapist. It was possible there was enough incriminating evidence locked away in my traumatized brain to identify my stalker and put him away.

Then, and only then, could I think about coming back to Shadow Ridge ... and Steve.

I was on my second cup of coffee when Steve came through the mudroom with an armful of firewood. He looked as fresh and handsome as ever in his faded Levi's and state university hoodie.

"Good morning," he greeted warmly.

I imagined what it would be like to hear him say those words, sleepy-eyed and naked in my bed. It was a nice visual.

"It is," I agreed, "thanks to you."

He deposited the logs in the circular holder beside the hearth and shrugged as if it was no big deal. It was to me. When he joined me at the counter dividing the kitchen from the rest of the living space, I handed him a cup of coffee.

"I'm glad I could help," he said. "I get the impression you don't allow many people to do that."

He wasn't wrong.

"Why is that?" he prompted. "Did someone hurt you, Casey?"

I didn't answer. I didn't want to lie, and telling him the truth would only spawn more questions. Instead, I said, "You've done so much already, but can I ask you for one more favor?"

His eyes narrowed, letting me know he didn't like me evading his question. "Of course."

“Would you give me a ride into town? I need to see about getting my car towed.”

He leaned back against the counter and crossed his arms over his chest. I was momentarily distracted by the way his muscles flexed against the cotton.

“Are you going to tell me who you’re running from?”

“Who says I’m running from anyone?”

His eyes narrowed further until they were barely more than slits. “So, it’s going to be like that, is it?”

“Like what?”

He snorted. “Let’s get a few things straight. First, I’m not stupid. Second, I’m not buying this *I’m an island* bullshit. Talk to me, Casey. Maybe I can help.”

It was things like this—tenderness and concern—that were the hardest to defend against. *This* was why I kept moving and avoided getting close to people.

But I wanted to tell him. I wanted to confide in him and have him pull me into his arms and tell me everything was going to be all right. I liked to think I was a strong woman, but there were times—like now—when I really wanted to lean on someone, if only for a little while.

“Why do you care?” I whispered.

“Isn’t it enough that I do?”

My lips parted, ready to tell him all the reasons why he shouldn’t, but I didn’t get the chance. Instead of pushing him away, my terse words seemed to have the opposite effect. In one long stride, he was there, towering over me with his much larger frame. The adrenaline that raced through me wasn’t from fear, but from something else. I sucked in a breath, drawing in scents of freshly washed cotton, rain-scented air, and something woodsy and masculine that was uniquely Steve.

He curved his index finger beneath my chin and tilted my face upward. I stared into his eyes and knew to the depths of my soul that he was going to kiss me. Desire, want, need, and longing formed a knot and swelled inside me. I craved the

physical touch of another human being—*this* human being—with a frightening intensity.

“I could have lost you last night, and that is *not* okay.”

He paused, giving me an opportunity to say no. To stop him.

I didn't.

He hummed softly—or maybe that was me—and lowered his head to brush the gentlest of kisses over my lips. It was soft and tender, quite possibly the sweetest kiss I'd ever had.

And the most powerful, given the way my heart was racing and my entire body was practically vibrating with tingles. *What was it about this man that flipped all my switches?*

“I've been wanting to do that since the first moment I saw you,” he murmured.

I had to bite my tongue to stop from responding in kind or asking if there was anything else he'd been wanting to do. Or worse, telling him the things I'd been imagining doing to him.

“Let me in, Casey. Give me a chance.”

I wanted to tell him that I had no chances to give, but his kiss made that impossible. The moment his lips touched mine, the impossible suddenly seemed possible, and my logical, rational side was shoved forcibly back by my illogical, emotional one.

I wanted this man. Right here. Right now. Good sense be damned.

I licked my lips. His eyes snapped to my mouth and followed the movement of my tongue. My heart pounded so loudly that I was certain he could hear it. My nipples pebbled. My core clenched, wanting desperately to *let him in*. No man had ever elicited such a fierce and immediate response from me—and certainly not from a chaste kiss and a softly spoken plea.

“I'm not convinced I should,” I said, my voice unintentionally husky. “Maybe you should kiss me again.”

A smile slowly curved his lips. A wicked smile that told me he was right there with me.

I knew there would be consequences. I didn't care. I would deal with them later. At that moment, I just needed *him*.

His next kiss was anything but chaste. Deep, slow, and thorough, it left me breathless and electrified every cell in my body. His big hands splayed across the curve of my waist, and he pulled me closer. I could feel the hard length of him against my stomach and nearly groaned at the thought of having that inside me. It had been so long since I'd allowed anyone into my personal space, and those before couldn't hold a candle to this. My breasts pressed against his chest, anxious for contact, any contact. When his hands moved down and cupped my ass, I was a goner. I loved the feel of his hands on my ass. Big and solid and possessive.

"You don't play fair," I told him.

"Never said I did," he replied with lust in his eyes and a smirk that ensured my panties were thoroughly drenched.

His hand slipped under the hem of my flannel shirt and down into my stretchy pants. The feel of his callous hand on my sensitive skin made me shiver. After a few deft and most welcome caresses, he extended his reach and discovered the soaked state of my panties for himself.

"Fuck, Casey," he murmured.

His fingers pushed the material aside and then slid along my slick folds, teasing, exploring while he continued to kiss me. Somewhere in the far reaches of my mind, a tiny voice told me I should stop him, but I didn't *want* to. After a weak rally, that voice disappeared entirely.

The sensations continued to build. I closed my eyes and let my other senses take over. The feel of him touching me. The sounds of pleasure, both mine and his, as he skillfully played my body. The scent of fresh, clean, delicious man.

I ground myself into his hand as I got closer and closer to my peak. His fingers were long and thick and knew exactly where to curve inside me to make me forget everything else. I

curled my nails into his biceps as I came undone, clamping down on his fingers hard.

He cursed again. The next thing I knew, my feet had left the floor, and I was sitting on the counter.

“Off,” he commanded roughly, stroking the edges of my flannel.

Instead of lifting it over my head, I began to unbutton it slowly. His eyes watched my fingers with lusty fascination, and I felt a surge of feminine satisfaction. His fascination turned audible when I peeled the sides apart. I wasn't wearing a bra.

He wasted no time in cupping my breasts and lowering his mouth. His tongue was magical. When he sucked a hardened tip, I felt it all the way down into my toes. I thrust my hands into his silky chestnut hair and scratched his scalp in encouragement, even as I arched my back in a silent plea for more.

Just that quickly, I was panting and needy again.

Steve tugged impatiently at my yoga pants, making quick work of both them and my soaked panties. Then, he was dragging me forward, positioning my legs over his broad shoulders, planting his ass on a chair, and burying his face between my thighs.

I made a sound I was certain I'd never made before in my life and leaned back on my arms to give him better access. No man had ever attacked me with such fervor, as if there was nothing he wanted more than to devour me.

Nor had I ever encountered a man so damn good at it.

I lifted my hips and rode his face like a woman possessed because in those moments, that was exactly what I was. His lips, his tongue, his fingers worked together in seamless harmony, bringing me to a swift and brutal second peak, this one even stronger than the first one.

I wondered if I'd blacked out for a moment because I'd no sooner screamed out his name than there he was, wrapped and

ready and so incredibly thick and hard, his broad head nudging my entrance.

“Tell me no, and this ends now,” he grated out, searching my eyes.

As if.

“In me,” I rasped. “*Now.*”

He didn’t need to be told twice. He pushed his hips forward, impaling me as I stretched to accommodate him. Even as primed as I was, it was a snug fit. I could see the strain on his face as he struggled to go slow. It was at once agony and ecstasy—for both of us.

When he was seated so fully inside me that I could feel his balls tight and heavy against me, he asked, “Okay?”

“Better than,” I assured him breathlessly.

Yes, I was reduced to one- and two-worded responses because at that point, my mind was capable only of conveying the most primitive of urges in the most expedient way possible.

I kept one hand on the counter for support, but moved the other to his shoulder, basking in the sensation of his muscles flexing while he pumped into me. It wasn’t long before he pressed his thumb against my clit and I was coming again, this time with him inside of me and me screaming in absolute bliss.

As good as the first two orgasms had been, they couldn’t compare. Lights exploded behind my eyes. My body became weightless. I swore I heard music as I clenched around him and felt him pulsing against the inner walls of my channel. The primal woman in me wished I could feel his wet heat filling me too. I’d never allowed a man to come inside me before, so that fierce longing for him to was unexpected.

Then again, nothing about this man was expected.

When we were both spent, he rested his forehead against mine.

“You okay?” he asked softly, his eyes probing.

I almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. Three orgasms in a row, each one better than the last? Physically, I was soaring.

However, I didn't think he was talking about physically, and I wasn't ready to deal with any other aspect yet. There would be plenty of time for introspection and regret later.

"Seriously?" I said, pretending to misunderstand. "Me screaming your name didn't clue you in?"

His lips quirked a little at that.

"Although, to be honest, that wasn't exactly what I meant when I asked you to give me a ride," I added cheekily.

He laughed, a low rumbling sound, and countered with, "And that wasn't what *I* meant when I asked you to let me in."

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. Now that I was free-falling my way back to earth, I was regaining some of the modesty that had gone completely off-grid when he kissed me.

"I guess we both have to work on our communication skills. But for the record, feel free to misunderstand me again."

His eyes blazed with heat and hunger before he shuttered them. He pulled slowly out of me, leaving me feeling strangely bereft. Then, he helped me off the counter and held me for a minute while my still-quivering legs remembered how to hold me up.

"Get dressed," he said in that quiet yet commanding way of his, "and I'll take you into town."

STEVE WAS WAITING for me when I returned to the kitchen, fully dressed and wearing enough makeup to make the burgeoning purple shadows under my eyes barely noticeable. Our mugs and the coffeepot were washed and sitting in the drainer.

“Do you rescue puppies too?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Well, you rescued me last night, not once, but twice. You gave me three orgasms this morning. And you did my dishes. It’s a logical question.”

He smirked at me. Normally, I found smirks arrogant and unattractive, but on him, it was damn sexy.

“Not lately, but I am planning on taking you to breakfast. We can stop at the shelter on the way and see what happens.”

My nipples began to pebble again.

“Don’t you have to go to work or something?” I asked, forcibly veering away from thoughts of getting him naked and returning some favors. Of getting my hands on him. Or my mouth.

Stop it.

His eyes glowed, as if he could read my thoughts. “I took the day off.”

“Can you do that?”

“One of the perks of being my own boss.”

“I thought you said you worked for your family.”

“I said my family owned a construction business. They hire me for their projects, but technically, I’m self-employed.”

“Hmm,” I hummed.

I’d often thought of going into business for myself. Once I claimed my inheritance, I wouldn’t have to work, but I would miss having a job and the sense of purpose that went with it. Maybe after I stopped running and faced my demons, I’d open up my own small-business accounting office. I wondered if Shadow Ridge had a CPA.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Just about. Give me a minute.”

I went around the cottage, ensuring the windows and doors were locked, discreetly placing Scotch tape and toothpicks and strands of hair around so I’d know if anyone entered while I was away.

I could feel Steve watching me. He said nothing, but by the time I stood by the door and said I was good to go, his expression was somber, and the muscles in his neck and shoulders were tense.

He opened the passenger door for me and waited until I climbed in. It was such a Steve thing to do—pull off a gentlemanly move after completely and totally ravishing me.

“You really are a unicorn,” I murmured. “Not many men open doors for women these days.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Not at all.”

“Good.”

As we made our way down the mountain, we passed the spot where I’d gone off the road. Just a hundred yards farther was a steep drop-off that probably resembled Niagara Falls when we got a lot of rain. I could only imagine what it had

looked like during the height of last night's storm. Or how long it would have taken to find my body had I gone off there.

"I don't know how you found me," I told him, suppressing a shudder. "It's daytime, and I can't even see my car."

"That's because it's not there. I called Chuck this morning. He came up and towed it back to the garage already."

This. Man.

"You didn't have to do that."

He shrugged, as if he hadn't just done yet another kind, wonderful thing. "It's no big deal. Looking out for one another is what we do around here."

It was so, so much more than that. At least to me.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"I don't know how I can repay you for everything you've done."

His fingers flexed on the wheel, and he shot a sideways glance at me. "You can talk to me. You know that, right? Maybe I can help."

"You already have," I whispered. "More than you know."

How could I tell him that he had given me hope that I could have a life again? And that hope gave me the strength and resolve I needed to stop running and start living?

Before long, we were cruising the main street of Shadow Ridge, headed toward the one and only service station at the western edge of town, the one I had stopped at that very first day.

The scenery had changed a lot in the last twenty-four hours. Leaves and branches littered the streets and sidewalks. The stately oaks and colorful sugar maples so prevalent along the river were decidedly sparser. The storm front had moved through and continued on its northeast path, leaving a lingering drizzle and a chilly bite to the air in its wake.

I could see my car in one of the bays, raised high enough to properly inspect damage beneath. Chuck waved in greeting, then wiped his hands on a greasy rag and ushered us into his tiny office. It was a cramped and untidy space, filled with the scents of motor oil and new car parts, nothing like the professionally decorated dealerships my parents used to frequent. And the owner, Chuck—he was a bona fide mechanic, not a showroom manager trying to upsell me something. I appreciated that about him.

Something else I appreciated about Chuck—he spoke directly to me, not to Steve, about my car. Some things I understood, like engine, transmission, and frame damage. Other things sounded like he was speaking a different language. My eyes started to glaze over within the first two minutes.

“You’re speaking Greek to me,” I said, putting up my hand to stop him. “What’s the bottom line?”

“Between parts and labor ...” He mentioned a figure far larger than I’d expected. It was almost more than I’d paid for the car to begin with.

“Insurance should cover most of it,” Chuck said.

I shook my head. Insurance companies required forms and reports, and while I’d pretty much decided I was going to go back and handle my business, I wanted to keep Shadow Ridge and my time here off the radar for the time being, just in case.

“I don’t want to involve the insurance company.”

“You sure about that?” he asked skeptically.

“I’m sure. How long will you need to fix it?”

“Three weeks.”

“That long?”

“Maybe longer. I’m planning on heading up to the you-pull-it place later this week. I can see what’s available. Chances are, I’ll need to order a couple of components right from the dealer. Plus, I’m kinda swamped right now.” He took

off his hat, scratched the back of his head, then replaced the cap, looking almost apologetic.

In another town and under different circumstances, I might have suspected the mechanic was trying to inflate the time and cost estimate, but one look around the lot assured me that he had plenty of business and didn't need mine. I knew then that Steve had probably called in a favor to get Chuck to look at my car as quickly as he had.

The money wasn't an issue. I kept a small balance in a "traveling" account, which was the one I used on the road in case someone stole or skimmed my ATM card. When funds dipped too low, I'd locate a secure internet connection and transfer money from my regular account, the one to which my previous employer had deposited my paychecks and held more. Since I'd been living off my tips, I hadn't had to do that in a while. Keeping my digital footprint to a minimum was important. I had no idea who my stalker was or what he might have access to.

But I needed a vehicle.

"Do you know where I could get a replacement for less than the cost of repairs?"

"I've got some good, reliable used vehicles out back. Not much to look at, but they'll get you where you want to go."

"Perfect. Do you take cash?"

Chuck laughed. "Of course I do. Come on. I'll show you what I've got."

We walked around to the back, and Chuck showed me his version of a used car lot. There were half a dozen vehicles. Three trucks, one Jeep, a compact, and a base model sedan that wasn't much different than the one I'd been driving. While the sedan seemed like the most obvious choice, I was drawn to the Jeep. There was something rugged about it, something that said it could handle just about anything. I found that appealing. My guardian angel must have thought so, too, because the back of my neck tingled every time I walked by it.

“I want this one,” I confided to Steve.

“Can you drive a stick?” he asked, peering inside.

“Yes,” I answered simply.

My father taught me. He said if I could drive a stick, I could drive anything. Of course, the Jeep was slightly different from my dad’s Jaguar F-Type, but the principle was the same.

Yes, my father had taken me out on a private course and taught me how to drive on a luxury sports car—because he was awesome like that.

Steve grinned. “Yeah, I can see you as a Jeep girl. And you’ll appreciate the four-wheel drive in the winter.”

My heart twisted at the thought of spending the winter here. Of seeing the mountains covered in snow. Shadow Ridge would be a winter wonderland—I was sure of it.

“It seems a little pricey for something with nearly a hundred thousand miles on it though,” I mused.

“Jeeps are made to last a hell of a lot longer than that. Plus, we can get him down on price. Chuck loves to haggle.”

“I’m not much of a haggler,” I admitted.

“How attached are you to your sedan?” he asked, lifting his chin toward the bay.

“Not at all,” I answered honestly. It was a means to get from point A to point B as unobtrusively as possible.

“Do you trust me?” he said with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Of course.”

Fifteen minutes later, I was shaking hands with Chuck, sealing the deal on my used-but-new-to-me Jeep. Steve had worked out a sweet deal, involving a trade-in of my accordion car and a reasonable cash price.

“Can I pick it up later today?”

“You can take it now,” Chuck said.

“But I haven’t paid for it.”

Chuck glanced at Steve, his eyes twinkling, and shrugged. “I’m not worried.”

Still, I didn’t feel right about driving away in something I hadn’t paid for and said so.

I turned to Steve. “Is your offer for breakfast still good?”

“It is.”

“Do you mind if we make a quick stop along the way?”

“Not at all.”

With a promise to return later, Steve and I climbed back into his truck and left.

“There’s an IHOP in the next town over, about thirty minutes out. That okay?” he asked.

“Perfect.”

I SAT BACK and rubbed my stomach, feeling satisfied in ways I hadn't felt in a long time. Maybe never. And it wasn't just because of the massive combo platter I'd just inhaled. Steve had awoken something inside of me this morning, and with him in close proximity, parts of my body continued to hum.

He chuckled.

“What?”

“I've never seen such a tiny woman eat so much.”

“I worked up an appetite.”

Just like that, his eyes grew heated as he, too, remembered the events of the morning. Then, they shuttered, and it was almost as if I could hear his thoughts.

“Stop it,” I said.

“Stop what?”

“Overthinking it. We're both adults. We both wanted it. It happened. It was fantastic.”

His lips quirked. “Fantastic, huh?”

“Stop fishing for compliments. You know it was.”

“It was,” he agreed, but his smile quickly faded. “But you were feeling vulnerable. I shouldn't have taken advantage of that.”

I shook my head. “You didn't take advantage. If anything, I took advantage of you.”

He still didn't look convinced.

"Do *you* regret it?" I asked.

"No, of course not, but ..."

"But what?"

He sat back and ran a hand through his hair, looking adorably nonplussed, and it hit me.

"You're wondering why the one-eighty, and you're afraid this morning was a form of thanking you because of everything you did for me last night."

He winced. I could see the truth in his eyes, and it gutted me.

"Well, it wasn't," I assured him firmly. "That theory doesn't even make sense. You gave me three orgasms and only took one for yourself. I hardly call that taking advantage."

Behind me, I heard a gasp and a clatter as plates and silverware hit the floor. Great. I'd just scandalized our grandmotherly-looking server.

I forged ahead anyway. "The truth is, I've been attracted to you since I first saw you. I've been resisting your charms because, well, like I said, I didn't want to start something I couldn't finish."

"So, what changed?"

"I did," I said softly. "Before you found me last night, I'd decided a few things. What I'm doing, regardless of the reasons, is not living, not really. I'm tired of hiding. Tired of running and living in fear. I don't want to do it anymore."

He studied me carefully. "Will you tell me?"

I exhaled. "I'm not sure it's a good idea, but, yes, I will. But not here, okay? Let's swing by a bank, pick up my Jeep, and go back to my place."

TWO HOURS LATER, we were back in my rented cottage. Steve got the fire going while I made a pot of coffee. Mentally

speaking, I'd swung back and forth so many times between the *should I or shouldn't I tell him* dilemma that I felt like a human pendulum. And now, I had another issue I had to deal with. The balance on my bank account—my primary one—after today's withdrawal was pitifully low. I was fine for the moment, but if I was going to leave Shadow Ridge, I would be doing so without the financial cushion I'd once had.

I settled at one end of the couch and tucked my feet up beneath me, facing him at the other. "You're sure you want to hear this?" I asked, giving him one last out. "We could ... do what we did this morning instead."

He was shaking his head before I finished talking. "I'm sure. As fantastic as this morning was, I want more than that with you, Casey."

There was that warmth again, seeping into my chest.

"Not sure you'll feel that way after I tell you," I muttered.

"Only one way to find out."

He was so calm, so relaxed. I hated that I was going to ruin that.

I took a deep breath. *Rip off the Band-Aid, Casey.*

"I have a stalker," I blurted out. "I was drugged and abducted, but things went wrong, and I ended up in the hospital. Then, he went after the people I care about. So, I ran, and I've been running ever since."

I wasn't sure how'd he'd react to me vomiting the super condensed version of my real-life horror story like that. Anger? Disbelief? Definitely surprise. Instead, I received a furrowed brow in response to my big reveal.

A furrowed brow and a very *unsurprised*, "I thought it was something like that."

I gaped at him. "Seriously?"

"You show up out of the blue in Shadow Ridge, take a job under the table, pay everything in cash, hide up here in the Muellers' cottage, and keep everyone at a distance. No one knows anything about you, except the tiny, vague crumbs you

drop when you're cornered. We're a small town, Casey, but we're not stupid. Rose had you pegged as a runner from the moment you walked into the inn."

I didn't know what to say. I sipped my coffee and tried to process the fact that I'd been fooling myself into thinking I was fooling them.

"If it makes you feel any better," Steve continued, "you're not the first person to come to Shadow Ridge and decide it's a good place to disappear."

I glanced up at him and studied his face. He was being completely serious. I thought of Rose and John. Of CJ. Of Big Lou and Jessie. None of them were natives. No wonder I fit in at the inn so well.

Talk about a light-bulb moment. I cleared my throat. "Wow."

He offered me a small, encouraging smile. "You're safe here, Casey. With us. With me."

Tears began to build in my eyes, and I blinked rapidly.

"Hey now," he said softly, moving closer and taking my hand in his. "That wasn't supposed to make you cry."

"I just ..." I sniffed, once again failing to find the words.

"It's okay," he said soothingly and gently tugged me against him.

I went willingly, laying my head on his shoulder, soaking in the warmth of his body and the feel of his arms around me. I wasn't usually so emotional. It was him. He laid waste to my defenses and wrapped me in this bubble of safety and acceptance. I had no resistance against that.

That was when I started talking, and once I got started, I couldn't stop. I had so much bottled up inside me, and it needed to come out.

I told him about my parents dying in a car crash on the night of my high school graduation. About dragging myself to college a few months later because that was what they would've wanted me to do. About meeting Angie and how

we'd gone from freshman year enemies to postgraduate coworkers and roomies.

"I felt like I was finally getting the hang of being an adult. I had a nice apartment and a decent job with crazy hours. I went out occasionally, mostly as Angie's designated driver, but sometimes, a guy from the office would ask me to dinner or an event. I wasn't much of a partier—probably because of what had happened to my parents—but Angie was.

" 'Coerced socialization by association,' she used to say.

"I guess it was about six months after we were hired that the cards and flowers started coming. I didn't think too much of it at first. It seemed harmless enough, and Angie thought the idea of a secret admirer was kind of romantic."

I paused, conscious of what a naive fool I'd been.

"What happened?" he prodded gently.

"It stopped being romantic and edged into disturbing. My admirer started leaving notes in the cards, saying things like, *I can't stop thinking about you*, and, *You're mine*. They'd show up taped to the door of my apartment or tucked under my windshield wiper. He was letting me know that he knew where I lived, what kind of car I drove. I felt like someone was watching me wherever I went, and soon, I didn't want to go anywhere."

"Did you report it?"

I nodded. "Yes, multiple times. The police agreed that it was creepy, but said it wasn't illegal and there wasn't anything they could do. If I knew who it was, they could have a talk with him, but I had no idea who was behind it.

"Things came to a head when Angie talked me into going to a Halloween party. She knew about my stalker but said everything would be fine because there would be so many people there.

"So, I went. Angie's guy was there. It was at his house, in fact. But apparently, he didn't feel the same spark of interest for Angie that she did for him. He spotted me sitting off in a corner and, as the host, felt compelled to come over and talk to

me, I guess. It was all very innocent, but Angie saw us, got the wrong idea, and left without telling me. I knew it was the booze talking, but it still hurt that she thought I'd do that to her, you know?

“Anyway, I left shortly after she did. There was no point in sticking around; I'd only gone there for her to begin with. I remember walking to my car and feeling a little off. I got in, closed my eyes, and ...” I shrugged. “Next thing I knew, I was waking up on a wooded trail during a thunderstorm.”

“You don't remember anything about how you got there?”

I bit my lip. “I didn't at first, but then I started getting these nightmares. I don't know if they're actual memories or my brain trying to fill in the blanks, but they sure feel real.”

I filled him in on the bits and pieces, disjointed as they were. The storm. The drainage ditch. My personified Grim Reaper forcibly expelling water from my lungs. Waking up in the hospital days later with a concussion, a broken arm, snapped ankle, cracked ribs, and pneumonia.

“My therapist said the nightmares might be my mind's way of revealing what happened in little pieces, but so far, I've remembered nothing that might be helpful. It's so frustrating!”

Steve pulled me closer and kissed the top of my head. At some point, he started stroking my arm, and it gave me the courage to continue.

“The police suspect someone slipped me something at the party, but they couldn't prove anything because too much time had passed. The tox screens were inconclusive.”

“How long were you out there before someone found you?”

“Four days.” Three had passed before Angie had reported me missing. An unknown Samaritan had found me and called it in a day after that.

“Jesus, Casey.”

“I was in the hospital for about a week. My company, Kleiner, was great. They let me work from my apartment

while I continued to recover. The police had no suspects, and with me unable to provide help, the investigation stalled and got moved to the back burner. Angie was super supportive. She did all the shopping and didn't pressure me to leave the apartment. I was scared of my own shadow at that point, afraid my attacker was still out there somewhere, biding his time, waiting for the next opportunity.

"Everything was quiet for a while, and I thought maybe, just maybe, whoever it was had given up and moved on. I even started going back into the office. Then, the cards and flowers began showing up again, and this time, they included pictures of Angie—getting into her car, going into our apartment building, shopping at the grocery store. On the backs were handwritten notes, like, *She can't watch over you all the time.*

"Then, one day, I came home and found Angie unconscious. She'd left work early, surprised someone in the apartment, and gotten a blow to the back of the head for it."

"Surely, the police took that seriously."

"They did, but there was no evidence linking her attack to my stalker. There'd been a series of break-ins in our complex, and they said our apartment might've just been next on the hit list."

"Jesus," he said again.

"I know. Maybe it wasn't related, but my instincts told me it was, and I wasn't willing to take the chance. I convinced Angie to move to another apartment. A nicer one with better security. I resigned from my position with the firm, packed a suitcase, bought the most boring used car I could find, and hit the road. I've been traveling ever since. I check in with Angie occasionally so she knows I'm still alive, but that's it."

"I can't even imagine what that's been like for you," Steve said, pressing his lips to the top of my head.

"It hasn't been all bad," I told him truthfully. "I've gotten to see a lot of places I might not have otherwise. The most important thing is, the cards and gifts stopped coming—at least for a little while. A few weeks ago, Angie told me that a

bouquet showed up at the office with a note that said, *Tell her I'm thinking about her*. Again, no name, no threat, nothing to say definitively that it had anything to do with me, but ...” I shuddered.

“Who knows you’ve been in contact with her?”

“No one, as far as I know, and Angie assured me she hasn’t told anyone. But she has been known to let something slip when she’s had a few. That’s why I only use burners to contact her and never actually tell her where I am.”

He considered that for a while, absently stroking my arm. I was perfectly content to stay where I was, tucked against his body, feeling drained but also a lot lighter for having shared.

“That’s a hell of a way to live, Casey,” he said finally.

“I know. I can’t keep it up much longer. I need to go back.”

“I disagree.”

I repositioned myself so I was straddling his legs and could see his eyes.

“Are you saying that because you don’t think it’s safe for me to go home or because you want me to stay?” I whispered.

He grunted, pulled me closer, and kissed me soundly. “What do you think?”

I knew what I *wanted* to think. Instead, I said, “Honestly? After what I just told you, I’m surprised you haven’t left skid marks on your way out the door.”

“You don’t have a clue, do you?”

“A clue about what?”

He ignored my question and patted the outside of my thighs. “You should call Rose and tell her you want the night off.”

I glanced up at the wall clock and gasped. It was much later than I’d thought.

I reluctantly climbed off his lap and pushed myself away. “Shit. I have to get ready. And how did you know I was

working tonight?”

He laughed. “You work every day.”

“Good point.”

“Take the night off. Let Shannon cover for you for a change.”

“What if her kids are sick again?”

“Then, Mike can miss his weekly poker game and take care of them,” Steve said. “After that stunt he pulled, I’d say he owes you one.”

The idea had merit. I was tired and sore and mentally exhausted from baring my soul. Spending a quiet, cozy evening with Steve sounded heavenly. And incredibly dangerous. I was falling hard for this guy, and if I wanted a chance at something more, there were a few things I needed to take care of before I could jump into those waters.

Still, I could take *one* night off ... right?

Just as I was thinking that, Steve’s phone buzzed. He fished it out of his pocket, looked at the screen, and grinned.

“Shannon just texted me,” he said. “Rose said I’m to use whatever means necessary to keep you from coming in tonight.”

His phone buzzed again.

“And she’s holding me personally responsible for ensuring your well-being.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

He turned the phone around so I could read the messages, and, yep, he wasn’t kidding.

“Do you think Rose is playing matchmaker?”

“No doubt in my mind.” He shook his head. “I don’t know who’s worse—Rose or my mother.”

“Guess I’m not going into work tonight,” I said on an exhale, relieved that the decision had been taken out of my

hands.

“Then, how about you take a hot bath and I make us some dinner?”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes, I do,” he said, shaking the phone at me, eyes twinkling. “Otherwise, I’ll face the wrath of Rose *and* my mother, and I’m just not that brave.”

I laughed because how could I not? The man made me feel lighter inside.

“Fine. If you want to hide out here, I’ve got your back. But I don’t have anything to make dinner with. Lou usually hooks me up. Unless, of course, you like cereal. I’ve got a couple of boxes of that.”

His lips quirked. “I think we can do better than that. Why don’t you come back to my place? My kitchen is fully stocked.”

I was about to decline when he added, “Did I mention I have a Jacuzzi?”

I blinked. “A Jacuzzi?”

He nodded.

“You don’t play fair,” I told him again, then went off to pack an overnight bag.

WHEN I SAW the sign for Ziegler Farms, I experienced a moment of panic. “You don’t live with your parents, do you?” I asked.

Steve laughed. “No, I have my own place. My parents gifted each of us with fifty acres.” He shrugged. “It’s a family tradition.”

“Nothing wrong with wanting to keep your family close,” I murmured.

“No,” he agreed, “and this is their not-so-subtle way of ensuring their eventual grandchildren are nearby,” he said with a grin.

“None of your brothers are married, are they?”

“Not yet, but Eli’s pretty close.”

A wave of something—envy?—washed over me and made my chest tighten at the thought of Steve marrying and making babies. Irrational, I knew, but I was discovering there was nothing rational about the way I felt about him.

We barely knew each other, and yet it didn’t feel like that. Being with him filled me with a sense of peace and comfort that I couldn’t explain. Being with him felt right. It felt like *home*.

This was an idyllic place to raise a family, and something told me Steve would be a great dad. He’d already shown himself to be kind, supportive, and compassionate with strong protector tendencies.

I was pretty sure he'd make a damn fine husband too.

We drove past the main entrance to the farm and continued for a short while before Steve turned onto a dirt road covered in gravel. His parcel was on the southeast slope of the family land. A quarter mile in, we approached a sprawling ranch house, surrounded on three sides by patches of forest.

"Here we are," he said, pulling into a three-car attached garage. "Home sweet home."

He helped me out of the truck, grabbed my overnight bag, and led me into the house. A big, furry monster of a dog greeted us. Part of one ear was missing, and there was evidence of old scarring around his muzzle.

I turned to Steve in disbelief. "You really do rescue puppies, don't you?"

"That's Oscar. And he was no puppy when I found him. I think someone hit him with a car and kept going. The vet didn't think he'd make it."

He spoke like it was no big deal. Like anyone would stop and save a dog.

"Is he friendly?"

"Never met one friendlier. Don't let his size fool you. He's a harmless, lazy beast."

I went down on one knee and petted Oscar. He, in turn, licked my face.

Steve laughed. "See what I mean? Enough, Oscar."

Steve gently pulled me to my feet and nudged me forward. The house was bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside with an open-space floor plan and lots of natural light. Casual but comfortable, it was a stunning combination of old-world charm and modern convenience. I liked it immediately.

Subtle scents of cut lumber and fresh paint lingered in the air, prompting me to ask, "New construction?"

"Relatively. It's a work in progress," Steve told me. "The living room and kitchen are done as well as the master

bedroom suite. Everything else, I get to when I have time—usually nights and weekends when I’m not at the farm. It’s taking a while, but I want to do it right.”

I admired that. Looking at the wood, the floor, the cabinetry, I saw a lot of craftsmanship and quality.

He put his hand on the small of my back and led me past the sunken living room on our right and toward the gleaming kitchen beyond. Before we reached that, however, he guided me down a corridor on the left.

“This leads to the master suite, which is where the Jacuzzi is,” he told me.

I sucked in a breath when he opened a door to a massive bedroom with a walk-in closet the size of my first apartment, a sitting area, a fireplace, and a bathroom straight out of my fantasies. Jacuzzi tub, six-head steam shower. When traveling with my parents, I’d stayed in five-star hotels that weren’t as nice.

“Go on then. Have a good soak. It’ll take me at least an hour to make dinner.”

“You aren’t real,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m dreaming all this, aren’t I?”

He chuckled softly, leaned down, and pressed a kiss to the top of my head. “If you need anything, let me know.”

Oh, I needed something all right.

I reached out and snagged his hand. “Join me?”

His eyes lit up from within, but he banked it. “Later,” he said huskily. “If I get in there with you, we won’t be eating dinner anytime soon, and I promised you a meal.”

My lips formed a pout until he added, “It also provides incentive for you to stick around after I feed you.”

“I’ll say it again. You don’t play fair.”

STEVE ZIEGLER WAS A WISE MAN. After soaking for an hour and turning on *all* the jets, I felt much better. My stress level

was down, and my body was soft and suitably pliant. How did I thank him for his thoughtfulness? I raided his closet and wrapped my upper body in one of his soft flannel shirts over my stretchy yoga pants before finding my way back to the kitchen.

Judging by the way he paused and regarded me with an appreciative, possessive look in his eye, he didn't mind me poaching his clothes too much.

After a delicious meal of a perfectly grilled steak, salad, and a baked potato, I sat back, took a sip of wine, and said, "You need to stop."

"Stop what?"

"Being so damn good to me."

He smirked. "It's called wooing, and I have no intention of stopping. How else am I going to convince you to give me a chance?"

I sighed. "I'm already convinced. The problem isn't you, Steve; it's me. There are things I need to do before I can consider getting involved with anyone."

"Like what?"

"Like come to terms with and reconcile my past so I can move on." I hadn't intended to share my plan, but he deserved that from me. "To do that, I need to visit a hypnotherapist who can help me recall what happened that night."

His brow furrowed. "Is that possible?"

"My psychiatrist seemed to think it was, but suggested I wait until I was ready to attempt it. It's going to bring a lot back to the surface, and I need to know I can handle it."

He thought about that for a minute. "Okay," he said, drawing out the word. "I understand where you're coming from, but couldn't you do that without going back? Your stalker is still out there. If you return, he's not going to stand idly by, waiting for you to identify him."

"I don't plan on advertising it," I told him, though his concern did send ripples of warmth through me.

And I did see his point. It would be safer to seek those answers far away from Chicago. The East Coast had enough large cities that I should be able to find someone who could do what I wanted.

But there were other reasons to return home as well. Several million of them, in fact, just sitting there, waiting for me to claim them.

I kept that to myself. It wasn't that I didn't trust Steve. I'd learned early on that money had a way of changing people's perception. Angie was a perfect example. She'd taken one look at my clothes and designer bags freshman year and judged me without even knowing me. It had taken a long time for her to accept that I wasn't just a rich, spoiled princess, living on a stipend until I could claim my full inheritance. It had taken years of seeing me work my ass off instead of just having things handed to me.

I wanted people to like me for me, not my family's money.

If things worked out the way I hoped, then after I did what I needed to do, I'd return to Shadow Ridge and come clean about everything.

"When?" Steve asked, unaware of the path my thoughts had taken. When I looked at him blankly, he added, "When are you planning on going?"

"Soon. I'm going to talk to Rose next time I go in and put in my two weeks' notice."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. "All right. That should give me enough time to rearrange a few things."

I blinked at him. "Excuse me?"

"You don't think I'm going to let you go alone, do you? It's dangerous, Casey. You need someone to have your back."

I felt tears welling behind my eyes as a wave of emotion washed over me. The fact that he would even think about doing that went above and beyond simple kindness.

"Hey now," he said softly, brushing a tear away with the pad of his thumb.

“Why? Why would you do that?” I asked.

“Because I feel something for you, something I’ve never felt for anyone before. And, yeah, I know that’s probably the last thing you want to hear after dealing with a crazy stalker, but I swear, I’m not—”

I grabbed his face with both hands and shut him up with a kiss. There was nothing stalkerish about this man. I knew exactly what he was saying because I felt the same way about him. Only time would tell, but my soul was telling me that Steve was my person. My other. My *one*.

“I know,” I said softly, breaking the kiss.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So, you’re okay with me tagging along?”

I shook my head. “No. Not because I don’t want you there, but because you have a job. A life. And this is your busiest season. Your family needs you here.”

“They’ll manage,” he said stubbornly. “And—”

I shut him up with another kiss, overwhelmed. I reached between us and stroked him through his jeans.

He made a low, growly sound and scooped me up into his arms.

“We’re not done talking about this,” he said, carrying me back to the bedroom.

Much later, we lay, sated and exhausted, in his bed. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt so content or so complete. It only reinforced my determination to close the last chapter of my life and start a new one.

I WOKE UP BEFORE DAWN, taking a moment to appreciate the beautiful man sleeping beside me. He looked even younger in slumber, his face relaxed, his hair falling haphazardly over those amazing eyes that I'd gazed into as he made slow, sweet love to me. Afterward, he'd pulled me close against him, and that was how we'd drifted off together. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept so soundly. No night terrors. No bad dreams. I felt safe with him, and apparently, my subconscious did too. Being in his arms was better than any pharmaceutical.

At some point during the night, Oscar had made his way into the bed with us. Thankfully, it hadn't been when we were, uh, busy.

Eventually, I got up and padded to the kitchen, intent on cleaning up the mess we'd left in favor of other things. He'd been so good to me; doing the dishes and making breakfast before he took me home were the least I could do.

Oscar came with me. He let himself out through the doggie door. I filled his water dish and poured some kibble from the bag I'd seen Steve use the night before.

I brewed a pot of coffee and foraged for everything I'd need. He wasn't kidding about having a well-stocked kitchen. I gathered eggs, sausage, potatoes, onions, and peppers—all fresh and locally sourced—and made an omelet to end all omelets.

I was just plating my masterpiece when I looked up and saw him leaning against the wall, watching me from the

hallway. He was shirtless and barefoot, a pair of loose gray sweats riding low on his slim hips and showcasing a fantastic happy trail and ... other things. Add in his sleep-tousled hair and shadowed jaw, and I was a goner.

My first thought: *I could definitely get used to seeing this every morning.*

My second thought was ... well, I didn't have a second thought. The man had a way of short-circuiting my brain.

"I thought you couldn't cook," he said, moving forward.

"Of course I can cook. But why should I when I have handsome men to do it for me?"

He came up behind me, put his hand on my hip, and coaxed me into a kiss that felt primitive and possessive. The hard bulge pressing against me was pretty nice too.

"Handsome *men*?" he growled.

I smiled because who didn't like teasing a playful, mildly jealous sex god?

"Okay, well, Lou's not nearly as good-looking as you are, but he has a way with pasta. Now, sit down before breakfast gets cold."

I patted him on his tight behind in a primitive, possessive gesture of my own and received a purely masculine grunt in response.

Pouring him a cup of coffee, I slid that and a plate onto the counter in front of him, then sat down with my own. The past twenty-four hours had been amazing, but it was time to get back to life.

"Will you have time to run me back to the cottage before you go to work?" I asked.

"Of course," he said casually. "Or you could stay here."

As much as I liked the idea, things were moving quickly between us. Our connection was strong, but our relationship was too new—and held too much potential—to rush things. He might be settled and ready, but I needed my space and time

to adjust from being “an island,” as he’d called it, to letting someone in.

I said as much because I wanted him to understand. Amazing man that he was, he did.

“Are you taking another day or going in to work tonight?” he asked.

“I’m going in. I’m not looking forward to the third degree I’m going to get though. Hopefully, we’ll be slammed, and they won’t be able to grill me.”

He looked at me with sympathy. “Do you really think that’s going to stop them?”

I exhaled. “No. I might have to hide in the basement. No one else likes going down there.”

“Because of Horace.”

I gaped at him. “You know about Horace?”

“*Everyone* knows about Horace,” he told me, then switched lanes. “I was thinking about what you said last night. About hypnotherapy. There might be a simpler alternative.”

“Oh? What?”

He chewed slowly, then swallowed. “Have you considered talking to Jessie about it?”

“Why would I?”

“Jessie ... knows things. Or sees things, I guess is a better way of putting it.”

“You don’t believe in that stuff, do you?” I asked.

“Don’t you?”

“To be honest, I’m not sure what I believe. I’m willing to accept that some people are more intuitive than others,” I said carefully, thinking of my guardian angel’s nudges. “Maybe she sensed something, but not even I know what happened that night. How could I expect her to?”

“I don’t pretend to understand it, but I do believe Jessie’s the real deal. Sometimes, when she touches another person or

certain objects, she catches glimpses into their past or their future.”

“She told me once she’d had a vision that I was going to meet someone who would have a great impact on my life.” I paused. “It was the night that jerk grabbed my arm and you helped me.”

“Was she wrong?” he said, his lips quirking.

“No,” I admitted, smiling back at him. “But it was such a vague statement and open to interpretation. She didn’t mention you specifically or what the impact would be. Do you know how many people were in the inn that night? Maybe she just got lucky. Even a broken clock is right twice a day.”

“You’re skeptical. I get it. I was too at first, but she’s been right too many times to dismiss it entirely.”

“How so?”

“My dad didn’t believe in going to the doctor unless he had to. Said there was no reason to if he was feeling fine. Then, Jessie bumped into my mother at the post office, went still, and told my mom in no uncertain terms to get my dad in to see Doc Harber for a complete physical as soon as possible. It freaked my mom out enough that she pestered my dad until he went. Turned out, he was in the beginning stages of prostate cancer. Because they caught it early enough, they were able to take care of it.”

“Might have been a coincidence,” I said.

“That’s what I said too. But then another time, CJ handed Jessie a glass, and their fingers touched or something. She told CJ not to let his fiancée drive home alone that night, that something awful would happen.”

“Wait. CJ is engaged?”

“*Was*,” Steve corrected somberly. “Both CJ and his fiancée laughed it off, and Jessie left the bar in tears.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“The roads were fine, but the bridge was icy. Addy’s car slid off the road. They pulled her and her car out of the river

the next day.”

“Oh my God. That’s terrible!”

“There are at least a half-dozen other instances of things like that, but you get the idea. Jessie touches someone or something and sees things. It’s one of the reasons she wears gloves all the time.”

“Not all the time,” I said, remembering what had happened in the kitchen when Jessie tried to help me.

I told him about the weird encounter.

His expression grew even more serious. “She didn’t warn you off doing something or going somewhere, did she?”

“No. She started crying and saying she was sorry.”

“When did this happen?”

“A couple of weeks ago.”

“Before the staff party at the farm?”

“Yes.”

“And she hasn’t said anything since?”

I shook my head. “Maybe she’s afraid to. I told her I didn’t believe in that stuff, and then, I’m ashamed to say, I tried to steer clear of her. I don’t think I talked with her again until the hayride.”

“If Jessie thought you were in danger, she would say something,” Steve said firmly. “Maybe she didn’t see something from your future, but from your past.”

“Maybe,” I agreed doubtfully.

“Casey,” Steve said slowly, “maybe if Jessie saw what happened to you, she saw *everything*, even the parts you don’t remember yet.”

AFTER STEVE DROPPED me off at the cottage, I thought a lot about what he'd said. Though I wasn't entirely convinced Jessie could help, I agreed it was worth a try. Regardless, I still needed to go back to Chicago and tie up loose ends.

I also debated on whether or not to give Angie a heads-up. In the end, I figured it was better to let her know. She'd never forgive me if she found out I'd gone home and not told her.

"Angela Molinaro," she greeted in a businesslike tone.

"Hey, Ang. It's Casey."

"Why are you calling me at work?" she asked in a low tone.

"Because I'm working later tonight and I wanted to give you a heads-up."

"About what?"

"I'm coming home."

"You're what? Hang on."

Her end of the connection became muffled as if she'd covered the microphone, but I was able to make out muted office noises in the background.

"Okay," she said a minute later. "I'm outside. What's going on?"

"I can't do this anymore," I said simply.

"But the recent deliveries ..."

“He’s never going to stop, Ang.”

I could hear her heels clacking over stone and pictured her walking into the courtyard behind the office building where I’d once worked. It was a nice space with benches and tables and ornamental trees and shrubs. We used to eat lunch together out there sometimes when the weather was nice.

“What brought this on all of a sudden?”

“I met someone.”

“Who? When?”

“His name is Steve, and we met a few weeks ago. Ang, I think he might be the one.”

A telling pause. “How could you possibly know that after a few weeks?”

“I can’t explain it, other than to say I’ve never felt like this before.”

She snorted. “Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. Didn’t you used to lecture me when I said the same thing?”

Maybe I had. Okay, I definitely had. But that was because Angie tended to *find the right one* every couple of months.

“Maybe you just need to get laid,” she added for good measure.

“I *did*, and it only made things worse. Or better, I should say.”

“Holy shit! You slept with someone without dating them for six months? It *must* be the real thing.”

Her sarcasm was anything but subtle, and it wasn’t the first time she’d wielded it against me. She and I had different opinions when it came to dating and other ... activities. Suffice it to say, Angie was more outgoing than I was. I wasn’t a prude. I was selective.

What I said was, “You know me so well.”

“I don’t understand. If he’s *there* and making you happy, why do you want to come *here*?”

“Closure,” I said simply. “It’s time I moved on. I’m going to sell my parents’ house, claim my trust, and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Is *he* asking you to do this?”

“No,” I assured her. “I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong. Steve has no idea who my parents were. He knows only that they died in a car accident and that I went to college and got a job. Believe me, he doesn’t need my money.”

“Let me guess,” she said, her voice once again bordering on mocking. “He’s rich *and* gorgeous.”

Yes, he was.

“And kind and compassionate and sexy and—”

“Okay, okay, stop rubbing it in. I get it. He’s *perfect*.”

From what I’d seen, he *was* perfect—for me. Only time would tell. But I wasn’t going to rub it in, especially since she put so much effort into finding her Mr. Right, and fate or whatever had placed Steve right smack in my path. If the situations were reversed, I might be a little bitter about it too.

“You’re going to find your person, Ang.”

“Maybe I already have,” she said with a sniff.

“Seriously? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Because I didn’t want to jinx it.”

“Anyone I know?”

“Maybe,” she hedged.

An awkward silence descended while I waited for her to say more. She didn’t. I guessed she was still worried about jinxing things, but that in itself seemed like a red flag.

I bit my tongue to keep from saying so and instead said, “I’m thinking of trying that hypnotherapy that my psychiatrist recommended too.”

“Oh, Case, why? Aren’t you afraid that dredging up the past will throw you back into a bad place? I remember what it was like for you. The nightmares. The paranoia. Maybe you’re not *supposed* to remember.”

“Maybe,” I agreed, wishing she were a bit more supportive. “But I’m still having nightmares, only now, I’m seeing a little more with each one.”

“A face? A name?”

“Not yet, but I’m close, Ang—I can feel it. It’s like the answers are right there, just out of reach. I think I might finally be ready to deal with what happened that night, and maybe, just maybe, I’ll be able to identify my attacker and get him put away for good. Anyway, I haven’t made up my mind about the hypnotherapy yet. I might try something here first.”

“Like what?”

“Remember I told you about that psychic I work with?”

She scoffed. “You can’t be serious.”

“I know; it sounds crazy. But apparently, she’s the real deal. And something weird happened. Something that makes me think she might be able to see what happened that night even if I can’t.”

For the second time that day, I relayed the story of the incident in the kitchen.

“I honestly don’t know how to respond to that.”

“You don’t have to. I just wanted to give you a heads-up.”

She sighed heavily. “Fair enough. So, when are you coming?”

“Not for another two weeks. I’ve got to make some calls to the lawyers handling my family’s estate so they can get everything ready, and I need to talk to the owners here when I go in for my shift tonight. They’ve been good to me, so I don’t want to leave them in a lurch.”

Another sigh. “All right. Sounds like you’ve made up your mind. What do you need from me?”

“Nothing. I just wanted you to know. Maybe we can get together when I get there. Have some dinner, catch up.”

“Is your man coming with you? Do I get to meet Mr. Perfect?”

“I don’t know. He’s offered, but I’m not sure I want to drag him into my hot mess until I’ve got a better handle on things.”

“Only you could call claiming your inheritance a hot mess.”

I couldn’t see her, but I imagined her rolling her eyes.

“It’s more than that, and you know it. What if my stalker realizes I’m there?”

“How would he know that?”

“I don’t know,” I said irritably. “How did he know anything about me?”

“Good point,” Angie agreed. “Your man can protect you.”

“He is the protective type,” I admitted. “I think he’s going to do what he can to convince me to bring him along.”

“With sexual favors?” she asked.

“Probably.” I laughed. “To be fair, he’s really, really good at it.”

“You bitch. I’m totally jealous now.”

“I’ll keep you posted, okay?”

“You’d better.”

AS EXPECTED, I was the hot topic of conversation at the inn. From the moment I walked through the door, I was bombarded with questions. Word had gotten around about my car, and everyone wanted to know what had happened.

Apparently, Rose had been calling the number I'd given her—the number of the burner I rarely turned on. When attempts to reach me were unsuccessful, several people tried to contact Steve. He had responded simply with, “She’s fine,” which raised even more questions.

Rampant speculation ensued. People wanted *details*.

Well, they weren't going to get them from me. They already had most of the pertinent information about the accident from Chuck anyway.

I answered the most obvious questions simply and honestly without providing additional information. Those queries I deemed too personal or intrusive—like those about Steve and me—I either deflected or ignored outright.

“Where’s Jessie tonight?” I asked during one of my escapes to the kitchen.

Max wasn't a gossip, and while Lou liked to tease me, the man knew how to mind his business.

“Off,” Max told me. “Rose finally broke down and bought a new commercial dishwasher. They installed it yesterday, so Rose told her to take the night off.”

So much for talking to Jessie tonight.

I cornered Rose instead. “I need to talk to you. In private, please.”

Judging by the sparkle in her eye, she thought I was going to divulge some of those details. Boy, was she going to be disappointed.

Rose led the way to the small office she kept in the back. She rarely used it; she preferred to do business at the bar or in the lounge. I thought, at one time, the tiny room used to function as a larder.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Rose asked, closing the door behind us.

“I’m putting in my two weeks’ notice.”

Her lips parted, and her eyes opened wide before narrowing. There was that disappointment.

She shook her head. “No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean, no. I’m not accepting your resignation. If this is about people getting up in your business, I’ll tell them to back off, okay?”

“It’s not that,” I told her.

“Then, what?”

I wasn’t about to go into all that. I liked Rose—I really did—but there were aspects of my personal life I wasn’t willing to share with her or anyone else in Shadow Ridge. Steve was a glaring exception, and even he didn’t know the half of it.

“I told you up front that this was a temporary thing,” was what I said.

She waved her hand dismissively and made a *pfft* sound. “Please. No one believed that.”

“Excuse me?” I said, sitting up straighter.

“Jessie said you were going to be with us for a long time.”

“Well, Jessie was wrong.”

“Jessie is never wrong. And you can’t leave. I don’t have anyone to cover your shifts.”

I gave her a small, tight smile to cover my annoyance. Maybe she would have coverage, if she’d actually tried to hire someone.

“I’m happy to train my replacement as long as you hire him or her within the next two weeks. That’ll get you through Halloween.”

A muscle ticced along Rose’s jaw. “Why are you doing this? What do you want? Less hours? A raise? I’ll talk to John. I’m sure we could find a little wiggle room in the budget.”

“It’s not that. I have some things I need to take care of, and I need to leave town for a while.”

“What things? How long will you be gone? I can hire some temporary help to cover until you return.”

“It’s personal. And I don’t know how long it will take.”

Her scowl deepened. “But you *are* coming back?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. I intended to, yes, but my future was anything but clear at this point.

“Does Steve know about this?”

I ignored the question. My annoyance was reaching critical levels, and I knew I had to step away before I said something I would later regret. I liked Rose, and I liked Shadow Ridge. I didn’t want to burn any bridges that might make it awkward to return. Small towns had long memories.

Max chose that moment to knock on the door. “Sorry to interrupt, but we’ve got orders stacking up and getting cold.”

“I’d better get back out there,” I said.

Rose couldn’t say no to that; I was the only one serving.

“We’re not done talking about this,” Rose called out behind me.

But we were.

OVER THE COURSE of the next week, Rose tried on several occasions to get me to reconsider, but I remained resolute. I understood that my leaving would make things difficult for her, but this wasn't about *her*. I had to do this for *me* so that I could move forward.

Rose, unfortunately, didn't see it that way. She acted as if it were a personal affront. Eventually, she changed tactics and started giving me the cold shoulder.

No one was happy about me leaving, which I supposed was a good thing, but at least they were being mature about it.

Lou summed it up nicely when he told me, "We don't want to lose you, darlin', but you gotta do what you gotta do."

Thankfully, the closer we got to the end of the week, the busier business became, and the less time there was for talking and moping. The weekend was shaping up to be a perfect storm. Halloween fell on a Saturday night, which meant both Friday and Saturday, we were going to be slammed. Steve and his family were just as busy. Great weather was predicted with the next front forecasted to move through late Sunday night.

I lingered in Steve's bed on Friday morning, knowing we probably wouldn't be spending much time together over the next forty-eight hours. Despite my intention to keep things slow, we'd ended up at either his place or mine every night this week.

I wasn't complaining. We'd settled into a nice, comfortable routine. I began each day with Steve's special brand of morning wake-up, and then I made breakfast while he showered and got ready for work. I had the rest of the morning to myself, then went to the inn and worked until the dining room closed. Afterward, I found Steve, or he found me, and he made me forget everything, except how wonderful it felt to be in his arms.

"Have you had a chance to talk to Jessie?" Steve asked, stroking his big hand along the curve of my back while I waited for my heart rate to return to normal.

“Not yet. She went home with a migraine on Wednesday and called out yesterday. Lou said, sometimes, the bad ones last for days.”

“I’ve got a job over by her place this afternoon. Text me if she doesn’t come in today. I’ll check in on her before I head back to the farm, see if she needs anything.”

“You are such a nice guy,” I said, pressing a soft kiss to his lips.

He palmed my backside and gave me a squeeze. “Nice, huh?”

“Yeah, nice.”

He growled and rolled us so that he was on top, then grinned wickedly down at me. “Let’s see how *nice* you think this is ...”

What he did ... well, it wasn’t *nice*. It was fantastic.

THE INN WAS ALREADY HOPPING when I arrived for my shift. From the moment I walked through the door and tied my apron around my waist, it was all hands on deck. Max and Lou were rock stars in the kitchen. Shannon and I had our hands full with the dining room and lounge. John was helping CJ behind the bar, and Michelle had been relegated to dish duty.

Even with the slick, new dishwasher, plates had to be scraped and rinsed before they could be loaded. We were putting the thing through its paces tonight. Within seconds of finishing, it was emptied, reloaded, and running again.

Jessie ended up going home early *again*, and Rose was close to popping a blood vessel.

“I don’t know how we’re going to do this without you,” Shannon said as we passed each other, me with a loaded bus tray going into the kitchen and her with a tray of dinners coming out.

“No luck on the hiring front?” I asked, knowing full well there wasn’t.

The work was hard, the hours were long, and the base pay was shit. Don’t get me wrong; the locals were good tippers, and I did enjoy the job, but it wasn’t something I would have considered had I not been running low on cash and looking to work under the table.

Rose claimed she couldn’t afford to up the wage or hire enough people to distribute the load fairly, which I found hard to believe, given the success of the inn. Then again, as a CPA,

I'd seen plenty of successful businesses go under due to poor management and bad financial decisions, and while I liked Rose and John, I thought they were more suited to the social aspects of owning the place than the business ones. In my former life, I might've been able to help with that.

IT WAS MUCH, much later when I reset the last of the tables in the dining room and sank down onto a chair. Technically, my shift had ended more than two hours earlier, yet here I was. I couldn't, in good conscience, leave when there was still so much to do, especially when I was planning on leaving in a week.

Five minutes. I just needed five minutes off my feet before I made another pass through the lounge and called it a night.

Shannon sank down beside me, looking every bit as tired as I felt. Here I was, complaining, and she'd put in a full day as a pregnant mom with three kids before her waitressing shift even started. At least when I left here, I had no one to think about besides myself.

"Hell of a night, huh?" she commented.

"You can say that again."

"Phenomenal tips though."

Another wave of shame rose up within me. Shannon needed her tips to put presents under the tree. I used mine for gas and snack money, which was why I felt no qualms in occasionally padding her pockets with extra bills when she wasn't looking.

I closed my eyes and stretched my head from side to side. The tendons between my neck and shoulders were tight from hefting trays and bus bins for the last ten hours.

"Did Rose talk to you?"

"About changing my mind? Yes. Repeatedly."

"She doesn't want to lose you, Case. None of us do."

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. It’s always been a temporary thing. I’ve been up front about that.”

“I know. Still sucks. But that’s not why Rose was looking for you. Someone was in earlier today, asking about you.”

“Oh? Who?”

“I don’t know. Some guy. Rose said he wasn’t a local.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck lifted, and my skin prickled. We got lots of out-of-towners on the weekends, and many of them were repeats. Sometimes, people wanted to say hello, particularly sweet, older customers. They felt compelled to sing my praises to Rose for something as simple as ensuring their coffee was fresh and piping hot or giving them extra breadsticks when I saw them slip a few into their quilted Vera Bradley bags. I hoped that was the case here.

“What did he look like?” I asked, silently praying Shannon would describe a senior citizen, knowing she wouldn’t. My guardian angel was awake and alert and sounding the alarm.

“Fortyish, dark hair, dark eyes. Polished. Handsome in an intense kind of way, according to Rose. Sound like anyone you know?”

“Not really.” Inside my chest, my heart was pounding, and all traces of exhaustion had vanished.

“Rose thought he might be an ex or something,” she said, clearly fishing for info.

I struggled to keep my expression neutral and unaffected when I shook my head. “Not one of mine.”

“Good, because Steve’s a good guy, and I like you two together.”

“I do too,” I agreed. “What did Rose tell him?”

“That no one was here by that name, which was true at the time, I guess. That doesn’t mean someone else didn’t say something though.”

I exhaled and shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.” I opened my eyes, rolled my shoulders, and got to my feet with

a feigned groan, even as my mind was screaming, *Run!* “I’m going to make one more pass through the lounge, and then I’m going to take off. Something tells me tomorrow’s going to be even busier.”

“It’s Halloween *and* a full moon,” Shannon agreed. “We’re doomed. Hey, Case?”

“Yeah?”

“If you’re in some kind of trouble, we’re here for you. You know that, right?”

“Thanks, Shannon. I appreciate that. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

I knew to the depths of my soul that my stalker had found me. I’d always known this was a possibility. That, one day, he would catch up to me.

That was why I’d kept moving.

But I’d become complacent. I’d let my guard down. I’d allowed myself to be selfish, and I’d put everyone here in danger.

I came off as standoffish and distant, but in truth, I’d come to care about these people. Yes, they were nosy. Yes, they could be pains in the ass, but that was what family did, and truly, the motley crew of misfits at the Shadow Ridge Inn had started to feel like a family to me. I wouldn’t let them wind up in the crossfire.

To keep up an appearance of normality, I made another pass around the lounge, as I’d said I would. I scanned each and every face in the crowd, looking for a fortyish man with dark hair, dark eyes, and an intensity about him. Physically, there were several who fit the bill, but I didn’t believe any of them were my stalker. None of them was alone. None of them expressed undue interest. The skin on the back of my neck remained prickle-free.

The kitchen was closed and had been for a while, so there wasn’t much to collect from the tables besides a few empty plates and tips. While I smiled and thanked people and wished

them a good night, my mind was trying to figure out what I was going to do next.

My number one priority was not putting anyone in harm's way.

An extremely close second was ending this madness once and for all. I'd already been working on that, but this asshole had just accelerated my timeline.

The irony wasn't lost on me. I'd told myself I was done running, and yet that might be the only way to accomplish both goals.

I stacked the trays in the kitchen, hung up my apron, and took several deep, calming breaths. I hated thinking that this might be the last time I was here. Of leaving without saying goodbye. But what choice did I have?

The lot was still pretty full despite the late hour. I scanned over it, left to right, front to back, half-expecting him to be there, waiting and watching. Small groups of people were hanging around, having come out to grab a smoke or chat before they headed out for the night. From the skunky smell lingering in the air, it wasn't just cigarettes and vapes they were smoking.

Good news: no lone stalkers in sight.

Yet.

I held my keys in one hand, and in the other, my thumb and forefinger were prepped and ready to fire the pepper spray in my pocket. I didn't think I'd need either with people around, but I was on high alert. I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other and appear calm.

"Casey."

My name, called out from the darkness, nearly gave me a heart attack. I jumped and looked off to the right, where Lou was stepping away from a trio of biker types—regulars at the inn and some of the nicest men I'd ever met.

He eyed me critically. "You all right there, darlin'? You look a little tense."

“What do you expect, sneaking up on someone like that?”

He grinned and held out a joint. “This might help.”

Given the way I felt as if I was about to jump out of my skin, it was tempting, but I shook my head. “No thanks. One hit of that right now, and I’ll be asleep before I get out of the parking lot.”

“Suit yourself. Seriously, everything all right?”

“Yeah, of course. I’m just tired. Long shift.”

“And a man who’s keeping you from getting enough sleep at night,” he said, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Yeah, that too,” I agreed.

“Lucky bastard,” he muttered. “All right then, darlin’. Go home, get some rest, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

I felt his eyes watching me as I climbed into my Jeep, and I breathed a little easier. As much as Lou liked to tease and flirt, he was a good guy, and I felt better, knowing he was there.

As soon as I was out of the lot, my anxiety began to rise again. If my stalker found out where I worked, might he also have discovered where I lived? Did I dare go back to my cottage?

I could just take the main street, head up onto the highway, and keep going. If I wasn’t here, he’d have no reason to stick around.

I seriously considered doing just that, but the farther away from the inn I got, the more I calmed down. Rational thought began to return.

I didn’t *know* my stalker was in Shadow Ridge. Perhaps it had just been the power of suggestion, spurred on by rampant paranoia and the mental fog I’d been dealing with from lack of sleep and anxiety. Other than the shiver I’d felt when Shannon told me about the mysterious customer, there hadn’t been any

of the usual warning signs. No neck prickles. No lingering sense of dread.

I could be overreacting. If my stalker were in Shadow Ridge, wouldn't I have sensed him? Wouldn't he have returned to the inn to see if I showed up?

Unless, of course, he had decided the inn was too public and he was waiting right now at the cottage, where it was dark and secluded and no one would know I was missing until I didn't show up for my shift tomorrow. I'd be the server who'd simply left work and disappeared, never to be seen again.

I shuddered. *If* my stalker were here and *if* he'd discovered where I worked, then it seemed reasonable to assume that he'd discovered where I lived as well.

I looped the block and headed up the mountain. There was only one way to find out.

I DROVE past the turnoff to the Mueller estate, then went another mile or so and pulled over to the right as far as possible. The road wasn't wide enough to make a U-turn, so I executed a K-turn instead.

Traffic was nonexistent on this road, especially at this time of night, which was why I felt safe doing what I did next. I put all the windows down, shut off the engine and the headlights, and gave my eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness. The sky was clear. With the full moon's peak less than twenty-four hours away and zero light pollution, I could see the road clearly. The silvery moonlight lit up the trees and the leaves that clung stubbornly to branches, spilling over the faded black asphalt like a shimmery, translucent blanket.

I depressed the clutch and let the Jeep glide noiselessly downhill, putting my right foot lightly on the brake pedal to keep from gaining too much speed. When I approached the access road, I wrenched the wheel—steering was a lot harder without the engine on—and guided the Jeep onto it. I took my foot off the brakes and drifted in as far as I could, no longer visible from the road.

After setting the emergency brake, I eased out of the vehicle and made my way downward until I could see the caretaker's cottage below.

Nothing looked amiss. The outside lights were on, as were the inside lights I'd left on timers. The curtains were open,

allowing me to see inside. I watched and waited. I saw no movement.

I circled around the cottage, sticking to the shadows and moving quietly on thick beds of fallen pine needles, looking for a vehicle that might have been hidden, finding none. No red flag warnings from my guardian angel either.

Satisfied, I returned to my Jeep. I drove back to the cottage and pulled around to the side, as close to the mudroom as I could get. If someone came down the driveway, they wouldn't see it right away.

I went inside and followed my normal routine, closing curtains as I made my way through the house. Everything was exactly as I'd left it.

I went into the bedroom and began tossing my minimal wardrobe into my travel bags, leaving out only what I would need for the next day. My stalker wasn't here, but the possibility that he could be at any time accelerated my timeline. I needed to be ready to go at a moment's notice.

It didn't take long to gather my clothes. I sat down on my bed, pulled out a phone, and typed out a message to Steve, tears falling as I did so. I couldn't leave suddenly without giving him some explanation, and I might not have the time later.

I rewrote it so many times. Conveying what I felt in words was not one of my strengths. In the end, I had only a few concise sentences.

Me: You're my person. I'll explain everything when I come back.

BASIC, I knew, but it summed up everything nicely. Steve *was* my person, and he needed to know that I'd not only realized that, but accepted it as well. He also needed to know that, come hell or high water, I would do everything in my power to return.

I saved it as a draft. I'd wait until the last possible moment, and then I'd hit Send.

I was moving toward the bathroom to gather my toiletries when there was a knock at my door. I froze.

My first thought was that my stalker had come. Then, I realized that if he had, he probably wouldn't knock.

My second thought was that Steve had decided he didn't want to spend the night without me. As much as that warmed my heart, it also made dread pool in my stomach. If there was even a chance of trouble tonight, I didn't want Steve here.

Then, a voice rang out with the incessant knocking and blew both of those theories to hell.

Angie? It couldn't be.

I ran to the door and peeked out, and sure enough, there was my best friend, looking like she was one step away from breaking the door down.

I pulled open the door and stared at her. "Angie? What the hell are you doing here? How did you—*oof!*"

Air whooshed out of my lungs as Angie wrapped herself around me and squeezed. "Thank God you're okay! I'm not too late."

"Too late for what?" I asked.

"I know who your stalker is, Casey, and he knows where you are."

I pulled Angie inside and closed the door. She was shaking like a leaf and looked like she was about to fall where she stood.

"Are we in immediate danger?"

"I don't think so." She peered cautiously around me, as if looking for something. "Is your boyfriend here?"

"Not tonight," I answered. "Come in and sit down. I'll make us a pot of coffee, and you can tell me what the hell is going on."

A SHORT WHILE LATER, we were sitting on the couch with cups of coffee in hand and the remains of my single-serve Baileys shots within reach.

Her lips lifted in the ghost of a smile as she picked up a mini bottle, unscrewed the top, then tossed it back. “I forgot how much you liked these.”

She opened a second and dumped it into her coffee, taking in the fireplace, the exposed beams, and the rustic furnishings. Her earlier panic seemed to have been replaced with blatant curiosity.

“This is nice. Cozy. Not what I would have expected for an heiress, but I can see the appeal.”

“*Angie.*”

Her eyes snapped back to mine, and her expression sobered. “Right.” She took a deep breath. “Aaron Carrington is the one who’s been stalking you.”

I gaped at her, certain I’d heard wrong. “Aaron Carrington? Our old boss’s boss?”

Tall, dark, and classically handsome, he was the personification of Clark Kent in the looks department. Personality-wise, he was incredibly reserved, serious, and professional. Other than mandatory staff meetings, I’d rarely seen him.

Angie nodded. Her face was pale, emphasizing the dark circles under her eyes. “He’s obsessed with you.”

I shook my head. Aaron Carrington and I hadn’t exchanged more than ten words over the course of my employment, and he’d certainly never indicated an interest in me. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Remember how he always used to sit in the back during those boring meetings? He used to watch you when everyone else’s attention was elsewhere.”

“I find that hard to believe. And even if it were true, that hardly qualifies as obsessive behavior.”

She shook her head, as if she was disappointed in me. “Are you really that oblivious? I thought that was just an act.”

I ignored that. “Tell me you’re basing your theory on more than that.”

“It’s not a theory, and, yes, I am. I found a file on you on his laptop.”

“He’s a second-level manager. He probably has files on everyone who works for him.”

“Not like this,” she said gravely. “He’s got pictures of you. Personal information. A list of the places you’ve been over the past year.”

Okay, that *was* weird.

“How did you get a look at his laptop? Please tell me you didn’t sneak into his office.”

“No. I’ve been sleeping with him. A lot. We’re practically living together.”

“Wait. You and *Aaron*?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, me and Aaron. We started seeing each other and things progressed rather quickly.”

“I guess,” I murmured. I grabbed one of the Baileys and sucked it down. “That’s ... unexpected.”

Her lips curled, but it could in no way be described as a smile. “You think he’s out of my league? That I’m not good enough for him?”

“What? No, of course not. It’s just ...”

How could I explain without making it seem as if that was exactly what I thought? Aaron was professional and smooth in a Wall Street kind of way, and Angie was more of a Jersey shore kind of girl. I didn’t mean that in a bad way, just in a *these two things don’t go together* sort of way.

“Just what?”

“He doesn’t seem like your type,” I finally managed. “Weren’t you the one who used to say he probably only

unclenched his butt cheeks long enough to take a ... well, you know.”

For a moment, she seemed amused by that. “I did say that, didn’t I? Well, let’s just say, people aren’t always who we think they are.”

“Fair enough. Okay, tell me. Start at the beginning and don’t leave anything out.”

She sighed. “I was working late one night, and so was he. You’d called earlier that day, and I was having a hard time, you know? If I stayed at work, I didn’t have to go back to an empty apartment or think about how I’d let you down. If I hadn’t jumped to the wrong conclusion the night of Henry’s party, you wouldn’t have walked alone to your car that night, and you wouldn’t have been taken by that psycho.”

I waved my hand in a dismissive gesture. “I know you never meant for anything bad to happen, Ang. I don’t blame you. I never did.”

She frowned and nodded, but couldn’t seem to look me in the eye. “Anyway, Aaron walked me to my car, and we ended up going for coffee. He’s a good listener. Coffee became dinner. He came back to my place, and, well ...” She paused, letting me fill in the blanks. “He’s nothing like I thought he was. There’s a lot of passion hidden under that zipped-up professional mask he wears.”

Her face took on a dreamy look, which I recognized as the same one I saw in the mirror after spending the night with Steve. I nodded encouragingly.

“Things were going great. Then, these last few weeks, something changed. He seemed distracted. I thought ... I thought maybe he was cheating on me. So, when he was in the shower, I swiped his phone and uploaded the contents to my laptop. Then, I started going through his call list.

“There was one number he’d called several times. I assumed it was a woman, but it wasn’t. It was a PI. I found texts, too, that mentioned files the investigator had emailed to

him. So, when Aaron was at the gym, I hacked his laptop.” She sniffed and sipped her coffee.

“So, let me get this straight. Aaron Carrington hired a PI to find me?”

Angie nodded.

“But *why?*” Nothing about the über-proper upper manager suggested deranged stalker.

“Because he’s sick, Casey. Here. I knew you wouldn’t believe me, so I took these.”

Angie reached into her pocket and extracted her phone, pulled up her picture gallery, and handed the device to me. I swiped through screenshot after screenshot. I saw pictures of me at the office, my apartment, the grocery store, office parties. Online articles from the paper about my “accident.”

My horror grew with each one. When I reached the one of a digital map with location pins of everywhere I’d been in the last year, I felt as if I was going to throw up. The spot with the biggest location tag was Shadow Ridge.

“I thought he loved me,” Angie said quietly. “But now, I think the only reason he was with me was to get to you.”

I dropped my hand and stared at the fireplace, my mind frantically assembling the pieces of a terrifying puzzle.

“Say something,” Angie said.

“Honestly, I don’t know what to say. I need a minute to wrap my mind around this.”

It seemed surreal. I pictured Aaron Carrington in my mind. Tall, lean, impeccably dressed in bespoke suits. Clean-shaven with a strong jawline that always seemed clenched. Intense dark eyes peering out from behind ever-present black-rimmed glasses.

Shannon’s earlier description came back to me. *Not a local. Fortyish, dark hair, dark eyes. Polished. Handsome in an intense kind of way.*

I shuddered. “Someone came into the bar, asking about me earlier today. It might have been him.”

Angie’s eyes practically glowed. “When?”

“Sometime before my shift.”

“They didn’t tell him where you lived, did they?”

“No, they didn’t tell him anything.” Something niggled at the back of my thoughts. “Angie, how did you know where to find me?”

She looked away. “Aaron’s map got me to Shadow Ridge. I knew you worked in a bar, so I went there first, but it was already closed. You told me you were renting a place on a mountain, so I pulled up a map app and started cruising.”

I didn’t remember telling her that, or the fact that I worked in a bar but clearly, I must have. “You can’t see this place from the road.”

“News flash,” she said irritably, “you can’t see *any* place from the road around here. I finally pulled over and brought up that app that gives you a three-hundred-sixty-degree street view and started checking out every driveway one by one, and here I am.”

“Which means Aaron can do that too,” I muttered.

“Eventually,” Angie agreed, “but he doesn’t know about your living arrangements, or he would’ve been here already. I figure we’ve got maybe twenty-four hours.”

I set my coffee down and rose, wondering where a 911 call would get routed. Shadow Ridge had a very small police department, consisting of a sheriff and a deputy, both of whom had other jobs. Yeah, the crime rate in Shadow Ridge was practically nonexistent.

“I have to call the police.”

“No,” Angie countered, shooting to her feet. “That’s exactly what you *don’t* want to do.”

“What? Why not?”

“Have the police ever helped you, Casey?”

“But we have evidence now.”

“We have screenshots that could have come from anywhere. There’s no proof this came from Aaron’s laptop, only my word. Hell, they might think *I’m* your stalker. And even if they do believe us, it’s all circumstantial. There’s nothing that definitively links him to what happened to you that night.”

I pondered that, knowing she was right and hating it.

“The most they could probably do is call him in for questioning. It’s not like Aaron’s going to admit anything. He’ll slink back into the shadows and wait for another chance. Worse, he’ll know where the information came from, and he’s already proven he’s not above violence.”

Angie paused, her eyes too bright, almost crazed. “You said you wanted this to be over. That you found your person and your chance at a real happy ending. Do you really want to give that up?”

Her lips wobbled. She was talking about my happy ending while trying to deal with the realization that hers was going up in smoke. Again.

“All you did by running away was delay the inevitable,” she said. “He’s not going to stop, not unless someone makes him.”

“Without the police, what are the options?”

Angie took a deep breath. “I’ve been giving this a lot of thought,” she said slowly, her voice calmer than it had been only moments ago. “The way I see it, we have two choices. One, you claim your inheritance, and we use it to disappear and go off-grid for real. Or two, we stand our ground and end this once and for all.”

Her blunt words hit home. I did want this nightmare to end, but I hadn’t envisioned a *last stand* scenario. I thought I’d seek help to remember what had happened, then use that to identify, investigate, and eventually prosecute my attacker. The authorities were trained in this sort of thing. What were two accountants going to do?

“How would we even do that?” I asked.

“Easy. He’s looking for you, right? So, we let him find you.”

Fear turned my blood to ice. Limited memories of what it had been like the last time he found me rose violently to the forefront of my mind. I might not remember everything, but I knew I never wanted to go through that again.

“I barely survived the last time,” I said, my voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

“This time will be different,” she insisted. “You’ve got me right here with you. And he doesn’t know that we know, right? But we do, and we’ll be prepared.”

I wrapped my arms around myself and began to pace. “So, I’m just supposed to wait here like a sitting duck?”

“No, that could take too long. Do what you normally do. Put yourself out there. Make yourself visible.”

“I’m supposed to work. What if he shows up at the inn?”

Angie shook her head. “He won’t. Aaron is too smart to try anything in public. He’ll wait until he thinks you’re alone and vulnerable. If he hasn’t already figured out where you live by then, he’ll follow you back here. I’ll be here, out of sight, ready and waiting. The moment he shows up, I’ll call the cops.”

I was already shaking my head. “It’ll take them a minimum of twenty minutes to get here, probably longer if the sheriff has his hands full with something else.”

“Then, you’ll just have to keep him occupied.”

“Seriously? What am I supposed to do, invite him in for a coffee and a late-night snack?” I said irritably.

Angie frowned. “You’re forgetting one thing. Aaron is obsessed with you, and you don’t even know he exists.”

“I don’t see how that’s helpful.”

“All you have to do is talk to him. Engage him in conversation. Pretend like you’re pleasantly surprised to see

him. Maybe make him think that you've always harbored a secret crush but thought it would be inappropriate. I don't know."

That was a big ask. "How am I supposed to accomplish that while I'm trying not to piss myself?"

"Turn on the Casey magic. Charm him like you've been charming every other man who has ended up in your sights since freshman year."

There was a bitterness to her tone that I didn't appreciate. She made it sound like *I* was the man-crazy one.

My expression must have relayed some of my thoughts because she exhaled and rubbed her forehead. "Sorry. It's late, and it's been a really, really long day."

She could say that again.

"Why don't you catch some sleep?" she suggested. "You look like you're going to face-plant any minute."

She wasn't wrong. The adrenaline that had been shooting through me was fading, leaving me bone-tired.

"What about you?"

"I'm too wired. Go on. I'll keep watch, then grab some z's later."

I nodded and reluctantly headed toward my bedroom. I understood the importance of getting some rest, but I doubted my mind would allow me to sleep anytime soon.

"Ang?" I called back over my shoulder. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too," she said softly.

I MANAGED to get several hours of fitful sleep in before I gave up and went to relieve Angie. I found her curled up on the couch, sound asleep. So much for being a sentry. I supposed the physical and mental stress of the situation had taken its toll.

Dawn was on the horizon. I put the coffee on, then moved silently around the cottage, peering cautiously out of every window, scanning the exterior of the cottage on all sides. I saw nothing unusual or out of the ordinary. No strange vehicles, no one lurking about. Not that I expected to see anything. My stalker—Aaron—was too clever to make such a stupid mistake.

With daylight came a sense of temporary safety. Aaron wouldn't come now. Even if he'd worked out where I was, he'd wait until nightfall.

By the time I finished my rounds, the coffee was done brewing. I made myself a cup and padded to the shower, thinking of how this morning was so different from yesterday's. I missed sleeping next to Steve. Feeling his strong arms around me. Hearing his heartbeat beneath my ear. Burrowing into his fragrant warmth and losing myself in the bliss of his touch.

I wanted that. Today, tomorrow, and beyond. If I made it through this, I was going to make sure he knew that.

I was on my second pot of coffee when Angie finally roused. Unlike me, she'd had no trouble sleeping deeply and

soundly. A pang of guilt went through me for feeling slightly bitter about that. Because of her, I had crucial information and a plan.

I still wasn't convinced we were doing the right thing, but I'd been unable to come up with anything better. Part of me wanted to call the sheriff. I'd met both him and his deputy several times, and they seemed like decent men. But I also knew that as men of the law, their hands would be tied unless an actual crime was committed.

"Morning, sunshine," I said.

She growled at me, and I almost laughed. She'd never been a morning person.

I knew better than to try and hold a conversation with her until she had at least one full mug, so I poured myself a bowl of cereal and forced myself to eat it. My appetite was nonexistent, but the acid in my stomach from worry and too much coffee needed something to churn.

She poured a second cup and glanced up at me expectantly—a sign that conversation could now commence. "Are you ready?"

"No," I answered honestly.

"You'll do fine."

"I have to make it through a shift, pretending nothing's wrong, knowing my stalker is probably going to be waiting for me."

She waved her hand dismissively. The anxiety that had been in her eyes the night before was now absent, replaced by determination and something that looked a lot like vengeance.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out the way you wanted them to, Ang. I know how hard this must be for you."

She regarded me then, tilting her head. "Do you? Have you ever had a man use you to get to another woman?"

"No."

“Didn’t think so.” She sipped her coffee. “What about your boyfriend, Mr. Perfect? Is he going to be an issue?”

I scowled but kept my comments to myself. She was hurting. “I was supposed to head over to his place tonight after my shift, but I’ll text him and tell him there’s been a change of plans.”

“You can’t tell him why.”

I nodded. Steve was so innately protective; he would go nuts if he knew what we were planning. I knew I would if our places were reversed. Still, I couldn’t help but think we needed more if we were going to pull this off. I said as much to Angie.

She nodded, then went over to her bag and pulled out something I didn’t want to see. A handgun.

I recoiled and took a step back. I’d never liked guns. “Jeez, Angie, put that away before someone gets hurt.”

She laid it on the counter between us and glared at me. “It’s insurance. You won’t actually have to use it. Just wave it around if stalling him with conversation doesn’t work.”

“I could never shoot anyone!”

“But he doesn’t know that, does he? Look, we don’t even have to put bullets in it. Point it at his kneecaps or something. Or better yet,” she said with a manic gleam in her eye, “his dick. That’ll put the fear of God into him.”

“Or really piss him off,” I said. “It could escalate the situation.”

“You act like you have to do this alone,” Angie snapped. “I’ll be here too, remember? As soon as I call the police, I’ll provide backup. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Do you have a gun too?”

“No, that’s the only one I have.”

“Then, *you* take it.”

“You’re going to be the one face-to-face with him, not me.”

“I’ll have my pepper spray. And I’ll stash my Club of Persuasion by the couch or something.”

“Club of Persuasion?” she said, her lips quirking.

“It’s a billy club I picked up at a craft show,” I said with a sniff. “A guy was making them on his lathe. Solid hardwood with grooves cut in to do some damage.”

“Right, well, you do you. It’s Mr. Glock for me.”

It was crazy—that was what it was—and here I was, taking part. “All right, tell me again how you think this is going to go down.”

“You do your waitress thing, then come back here. I’ll be in hiding. When Aaron reveals himself, I’ll call the cavalry. They’ll come, and you tell them Aaron broke in and threatened you.”

“Or we could call the sheriff, and *he* could be here, waiting,” I suggested, wondering why I hadn’t thought of that before, but Angie was already shaking her head.

“No, he can’t. First of all, it’s Halloween. No small-town sheriff is going to make himself unavailable on a night like tonight for something that *might* happen. Even if you could convince the sheriff to stake the place out, Aaron would know he was here. He’s smart, Casey. If he gets wind of the cops, he’ll know that we know, and we’ll lose the advantage.”

She paused and took a breath, as if searching for patience. “And second, Aaron has to do something more than simply appear on your doorstep. We need evidence of intent.”

I chewed my lip. It made sense when she laid it out like that, but I still felt as if I was missing something important.

“Listen, it’s not that hard. All you have to do is get him to admit that he’s the one who’s been stalking you. I’ll record everything, and it will be the evidence we need to put him away for good.”

In theory, it could work, but there were so many opportunities for things to go wrong.

“Stop overthinking this, Casey. It will work. Trust me.”

I'D SPENT the rest of the morning catching up with Angie, each of us pretending we weren't about to do something incredibly stupid and ill-advised. But desperate people did desperate things, and when past experiences with the authorities left you wanting, your vision got cloudy, your judgment was skewed, and rationalizations abounded.

Over those several hours, I did realize a couple of things. One was that Angie hadn't changed much, except maybe to become more of what she already had been. Edgier. Sharper. She had a caustic wit and a penchant for blaming others when things didn't go her way.

But me? I had changed. I was a different person now than I'd been when I left. My travels had expanded my horizons and given me a new perspective. I'd like to think I was more open-minded, more aware, and more appreciative of simple pleasures. Had I stayed in the same place, with the same people, doing the same things, I wouldn't have changed much either.

Steve texted at one point, saying he missed me, and included a selfie of him with Oscar. My heart stuttered, and I got a goofy smile on my face, prompting Angie to snatch the phone from my hands.

"Is that him?" she asked, her eyes lighting up. "Wow, you weren't kidding. He is hot. I'd fuck him in a heartbeat. Does he have brothers?"

Usually, I just laughed it off when she said something like that, but this time, her flip comment irritated me. Something dark and possessive rose up inside of me. There was no way I was telling her about Steve's brothers.

I snatched the phone back. I might have growled a little.

She scowled at me. "Selfish much?"

When it came to Steve, yes, apparently, I was.

Her scowl became a devilish smile. "Oh, you *do* have it bad, don't you?" She nodded at the phone. "You'd better make

sure lover boy keeps his distance tonight. Don't want him getting caught in the crossfire."

My stomach lurched, and I felt the color draining from my face. "There's not going to be any crossfire. No bullets, remember?"

"It's an *expression*. But if he shows up when Aaron is here, there's no telling what Aaron will do."

She was right, and I hated that she was right.

"Go on," she coaxed. "Tell him you can't see him tonight."

"I will," I said. "Right now, I need to get ready for work."

I DIDN'T THINK it was possible, but the inn was even more packed than it had been the day before. That kept me from giving in to my fears and calling the whole thing off. I was so busy, I didn't have a lot of time to dwell on what might happen later that night. But it was always there, hovering in the back of my mind.

What didn't help? A lot of the patrons were in costumes. As I'd established, I had issues with people in costumes.

I texted Steve at one point, snapping a picture of the crowd, telling him it was going to be another really late night and that instead of heading over to his place after my shift, I'd be there midmorning and expected him to make me his magic waffles. I felt a physical pain in my chest when I hit Send, but it was for the best. I only hoped I would be able to make it.

I was half-tempted to seek out Jessie, pull her aside, and ask her if she had any insights.

Like I said, desperate times.

I didn't get the chance. Jessie didn't show, and according to Max, she hadn't even bothered to call in.

Steve surprised me by showing up partway through my shift. He said he missed me, and he didn't want to wait until the next day to see me. From the concern in his eyes, I knew it was more than that. He knew how hard Halloween was for me.

If I hadn't already figured out that he was my person, that would have done it. That made what I had to do so much harder. I had so much more to lose if things didn't go as planned.

I took a five-minute break and coaxed him out back. I needed fresh air and a few moments in his arms if I was going to get through this night.

We spent most of those five minutes kissing.

"You okay?" he asked softly.

"I will be," I told him. "This helps."

He grinned that crooked grin, and my heart skipped a beat.

"Good."

I could hear Lou ringing the bell in the kitchen. "I have to go. Michelle's doing double duty tonight."

"Jessie didn't show up again?" he asked, his brow creasing in concern.

"No, and I'm a little worried. Max said she didn't call in."

"Did anyone call her?"

"I doubt it. Rose is still pissed at her for going home early yesterday."

"I'll swing by her place on my way back."

"You are a good man, Steve Ziegler," I said, rising up on my toes to press my lips to his.

He growled and pulled me against him, deepening the kiss until I felt dizzy from it. "Tomorrow, be ready for extra sausage with those waffles."

IT WAS WELL after midnight when I hung up my apron and prepared to leave. A nearly overpowering sense of déjà vu came over me. Last night, I'd left the inn, expecting I wouldn't be back, and here I was, twenty-four hours later, thinking the same thing.

I'd said my final goodbyes as I'd tipped out CJ and Max, doing my best to sound like I did every other night, but it wasn't easy. Regardless of what happened, I wouldn't be coming back to work here.

I paused at the door, taking one last look around. This place had become so comfortable, so familiar. I knew the people who worked here. Maybe not the details of their pasts, but I had a good grasp on the essence of who they were, beneath the smiles and jibes and surface grouching.

The same went for the inn itself. I knew which tables required a coaster or two to keep them from wobbling, the best way to remove stains from linens, and the secret to killer wings. I'd been determined to remain detached, but somehow, this place and these people had made that impossible.

My knuckles were white as I turned off the narrow mountain road onto the private drive. Up ahead, I could see that the porch lights were on, burning brightly and forming pools before being swallowed up by the darkness. The inside lights, the ones on timers, glowed from within behind *closed* curtains. I knew it was part of the plan Angie and I had worked out, but it still sent a shiver of fear down my spine. I

couldn't see inside as I drew closer. I didn't know what, if anything, was waiting for me.

I lowered my windows and sucked in crisp, cool air, heavy with scents of autumn. Fallen leaves. A hint of peat and wood smoke. My heart was pounding as I looked and listened for an indication of what was about to go down.

I saw nothing. Heard nothing.

Maybe Angie had been wrong. Maybe Aaron wasn't coming. Maybe the night would pass without incident.

Even as I thought that, the knot that had taken up residence in my stomach tightened. I could feel darkness hovering nearby, like the charge in the air right before a storm. My guardian angel sensed it too. The urge to turn the Jeep around and flee was powerful.

Tempting, but I couldn't do that to Angie.

I parked in the driveway, like I usually did, and hesitated. This was it. I knew to the bottom of my soul that tonight, everything would change.

I put my windows up, opened the door, slid out of my Jeep, and listened. Other than the ticking of the engine cooling off, I heard nothing. The usual nocturnal sounds—crickets, frogs, owls, chattering squirrels—were absent.

The silence was utterly deafening. And so wrong.

There was no sign of Angie. I hoped that meant everything was going according to plan. That she was safely hidden away, phone in hand, ready to make that call and have my back. I couldn't allow myself to believe otherwise or else I wouldn't be able to do what I needed to do. I had to stay focused and alert and have faith that everything was going to work out.

Clutching my pepper spray in one hand, I grabbed the oversize bag from the passenger seat and slid it over my shoulder. Inside was my Club of Persuasion. I adjusted the tote so the tip of the club was behind my shoulder, out of sight but accessible. With one step back and a quick twist, it would be in my hand, ready to do some damage. I knew because I'd practiced the move over and over and had it down.

I ran through the sequence in my head. A shot of pepper spray to the eyes, a few well-placed swings of the club to disable, and then, if feasible, use the zip ties I also had in the bag to contain my would-be attacker until the police arrived.

You've got this, Casey.

My rubber-soled shoes made little noise as I climbed the three wooden steps and crossed the covered porch. I offered up a silent prayer and willed my hand to stop trembling enough to insert the key into the lock. The door creaked as I opened it, the noise ringing out like a gunshot in the silence. Taking a deep breath, I stepped inside.

My guardian angel freaked out. My skin prickled, not just at the back of my neck, but all over my body. My muscles tensed, and adrenaline flooded my bloodstream. Someone was here.

My courage evaporated instantly. *What the hell had I been thinking? I couldn't do this.*

I turned, prepared to run back to my Jeep, call the sheriff, and let the authorities handle this.

I didn't make it.

A large hand clamped over my mouth at the same time a strong arm wrapped around my waist and hauled me back against a lean, muscular male body. I struggled, but it did little good. He was nearly a foot taller than me and much stronger.

"Stop," a deep male voice commanded against my ear. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to *help* you."

I went still. I recognized that voice. I had heard it in my head at night only a few weeks ago, even if I hadn't comprehended the words it had spoken.

Not Death then. A flesh-and-blood man. *This* flesh-and-blood man.

"Will you listen?" he asked.

I swallowed and jerked my head in a nod the best I could with him holding me as tight as he was. *What choice did I have?*

He pulled us both farther into the room, removing his hand from his mouth but keeping me in his grasp. He relieved me of my pepper spray and my shoulder bag, tossing both toward the kitchen.

The moment he released me, I whipped around and looked at him. Angie had been right. It *was* Aaron Carrington.

He looked different, but it was him. Instead of a custom-tailored suit, he wore dark jeans and a dark hoodie. His perfect hair was disheveled, as if he'd been running his hands through it. His normally clean-shaven jaw held a day or two of scruff. His dark eyes, usually so cool and professional, burned with an emotion I couldn't immediately identify.

I backed away as far as I could, wrapping my arms over my chest. He didn't pursue me, but he remained between me and any means of escape. Over his shoulder, I saw the closet door open ever so slightly and nearly collapsed in relief. Angie was here!

My panic subsided just enough to allow my brain to function. I had to remember my part. I needed to keep him talking, get him to admit what he had done so Angie could record everything. The police should already be on their way, and if they weren't, they would be soon.

"So, you're my stalker," I said as haughtily as I could.

"Stalker?" He barked out a laugh, but there was no amusement in the sound. Only sadness. "Yes, I suppose I am. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

The words were familiar. Only, the last time I'd heard them, I hadn't registered them as anything more than unintelligible mumbles. "You said those words to me once before."

He looked surprised. "You remember that?"

I nodded. "I thought you were a hallucination. I thought you were Death."

His mouth turned downward, but there was a glimmer of hope in his eyes, which I found bizarre. "What else do you remember?"

I shrugged, as if it wasn't one of the worst memories of my life. "Lying in a drainage ditch in excruciating pain, thinking I was dying. Why? Why did you do it?"

"Are you seriously asking me why I saved your life?"

It was my turn to frown at him.

"You *were* dying, Casey. You were unconscious, and you were drowning."

Anger rose within me, shoving the fear aside. "I wouldn't have been either if you hadn't drugged and kidnapped me in the first place!"

He gaped at me as if I'd lost my mind. "You think *I* did that?"

"Didn't you?"

"No! I'm the one who *found* you. The one who dragged you from the ditch and expelled the water from your lungs and called 911. If I hadn't, you'd be dead. Just like we both will be if we don't leave *right now*."

That didn't make sense. None of this made sense. It had to be a trick to get me to go with him.

Keep him talking, Casey.

"Seriously? You expect me to believe that? That I'm going to just get in the car with you and drive off into the sunset? Why don't you at least admit what you did?"

His jaw clenched. "We don't have time for this. I'll explain everything, but you have to trust me. We need to leave. She knows where you are."

"Who does?"

"Angela. And if we don't leave now, she'll—"

Aaron suddenly collapsed. Behind him, Angie stood, holding my club, staring down at his crumpled form with an odd look on her face.

"Oh my God!" I stepped forward, feeling like I'd suddenly entered some bizarre, surrealistic dream.

Aaron was on the floor, unmoving.

Zip ties. We needed zip ties.

I scrambled to where he'd tossed my bag.

"Did you call the sheriff yet?" I asked Angie. "Better tell him to send an ambulance too."

Angie didn't answer. I grabbed the plastic bands and turned around, finding her kneeling beside him, gently pushing the hair from his forehead.

"Angie!" I snapped.

She looked at me, her eyes filled with pain and grief while she continued to stroke his face. "No sheriff. And no ambulance."

She'd lost it. She truly had. I was barely holding on to my sanity by a thread myself. I'd have to be the one to call the police.

I pulled out my phone, about to do just that when Angie said, "Don't."

I ignored her. Aaron needed medical attention, and I needed this to be over.

"I said, *don't*." A quiet snick punctuated the command.

I looked up and froze. Angie was no longer kneeling beside Aaron. She was on her feet, Glock in hand, pointing it straight at my chest.

"Angie, what the hell?"

"Put the phone down, Casey." Her voice was weird. Hollow. "You're not calling anyone."

When I didn't move, her hand shifted, and she squeezed off a shot. I felt the bullet whiz past my ear.

"Put the phone down. Sit on the couch. And put those zip ties around your own ankles."

I put the phone down and sat on the couch. "What is happening right now?"

Her smile was chilling. “You really are stupid, aren’t you? All these years, I thought it was an act. The innocence. The naivete. The whatever it is that draws guys to you, wanting to be your knight in shining armor.” She sneered. “You make me sick. And this? This is exactly what you deserve.”

None of this made any sense. I was looking at a puzzle with gaps, and the pieces I had weren’t fitting in. “I don’t understand. Why are you doing this?”

“Because you need to be stopped. Because I can’t take it anymore. Because life is better without you in it. You couldn’t just stay away, could you?”

The vehemence and hatred in her tone were tangible. Gone was the flirty, sarcastic, broody girl I’d thought was my friend. In her place was a deranged woman with only malice and madness in her eyes.

“Everything comes so easy for you,” she scoffed. “Rich mommy and daddy. Nice house. Good grades. All you have to do is bat those pretty eyelashes, and men fall over themselves to do your bidding. To give you the best accounts. Promote you before anyone else.”

I stared at her. Clearly, she’d forgotten that my *rich mommy and daddy* had died horribly, leaving a huge, gaping hole in my chest. Or how, while everyone else was out partying at the frats, I was holed up in the library, studying my ass off because that was the only way to keep the grief at bay. And that promotion I’d gotten? I’d earned that by taking on extra accounts and working seventy-hour weeks.

“And it *still* wasn’t enough,” she was saying. “You weren’t happy unless you stole every guy who showed even the slightest bit of interest in me, were you?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I yelled. Hurt, angry tears rolled down my face. “I never stole anyone from you.”

“Billy Cameron. Ken Masters. Mark Kaufmann. Tony Cappelletti. Henry Davidson. Fucking Aaron Carrington!” Her voice rose with each name.

I recognized them all. Billy and Ken were guys I'd gone out with once or twice in college on those rare occasions when I tried to have a normal life. Mark was hired at the firm around the same time we were and asked me out to dinner, which I declined. Tony and I were often assigned to the same team and shared takeout when we worked through lunches and dinners, but it was never anything more than that. The others—Henry and Aaron—I'd spoken to only in passing.

With the obvious exceptions of Henry and Aaron, I'd had no idea Angie was interested in any of them. I said as much.

“Oh, come off it,” Angie snarled. “Everyone else might buy that airhead routine, but I know you. I've been in your shadow for nearly ten fucking years. Henry was the last straw. I saw you that night, you know. You waited until I went to the bathroom, and then you made your move. You knew I wanted him, but you were ogling him all night, waiting for your chance. That's why I slipped a little something into your drink. You were supposed to go pass out somewhere. But you couldn't even do that right, could you?”

I shook my head. I was at a loss for words, but I doubt she would have listened to anything I said. She was beyond reason.

She looked down at the floor, her face softening for just an instant before it became hard again. “Aaron is mine!” she shrieked. “You can't have him!”

What happened next was a blur. The door slammed open, and Sheriff Kerrigan's bulk filled the frame.

“Lower your weapon,” he commanded in an authoritative, booming voice.

Angie jerked backward, swinging the gun from me to the sheriff. Her eyes were wild.

“I don't think so,” Angie said.

“You have to know this is not going to end well for you,” the sheriff said calmly, as if he did this kind of thing every day. “Lower your weapon, and let's figure this out.” He took a step forward.

“I’ve got it all figured out,” Angie said. “It’s you and everyone else who need to catch up.” She pointed the gun back at me. “Take one more step, and she dies.”

The sheriff stopped immediately.

“Now, you put your gun on the floor and kick it to me.”

The sheriff hesitated, then lifted his hands in a surrender gesture and slowly bent down to the floor. My heart plummeted.

Angie laughed. “See, Casey? Men will do *anything* for you. Even risk their own lives.”

But Angie didn’t know that the deputy had come in through the mudroom and was silently closing the distance between them. I kept my eyes on Angie, not wanting to give him away.

“Get down,” the sheriff commanded sharply.

I didn’t hesitate. I hit the floor, even as the shot rang out. I dared not lift my head, watching feet as they scuffled around, as I listened to Angie’s screams of protest until she was on the floor too.

I turned my head, watching in disbelief as the woman I’d believed was my friend was subdued on the floor five feet away from me. She continued to struggle. The deputy had one knee on Angie’s lower back, one hand resting at the top of her spine, holding her down while the sheriff straddled her legs and placed cuffs around her wrists. Her eyes met mine, and the pure loathing in them chilled my blood.

“Clear!” the sheriff barked, and more people streamed in.

Seconds later, I was being lifted into strong, familiar arms.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked, running his arms over me, checking for injuries.

“I’m fine,” I whispered.

I wasn’t fine. Not even close.

SEVERAL HOURS HAD PASSED. The shock was wearing off, and exhaustion was taking over. I was on the couch in Steve's house with a cup of herbal tea in my hands, a blanket over my lap, and Oscar curled up against me.

I couldn't wrap my mind around the seething hatred Angie had secretly harbored all these years. Maybe I was every bit as naive as she'd accused. TSTL—Too Stupid To Live. That was what Angie used to call the heroines in the romance books I adored. The ones who needed to be saved by the big, strong alpha male heroes.

Was that what I was?

Steve and the sheriff were speaking quietly at the door. I'd given my statement, which was basically an abbreviated version of the last couple of years of my life. I went into more detail on recent events. I spoke mechanically and felt nothing. It had been like reciting someone else's story.

Steve had wanted me to go to the ER and get checked out, but I'd declined. Physically, I was unharmed. Mentally and emotionally, I was dealing with things the only way I knew how. By temporarily shutting down until I could process.

Having Steve nearby helped. He was a calming, soothing presence. A balm to my frayed nerves. I was questioning everything in my life at that moment, but not him.

"What's going to happen to her?" I asked softly.

“They have enough to hold her in the county lockup until they can figure things out, but based on what she’s already said, there will be more charges forthcoming.”

“She needs professional help.”

He nodded. “She’ll get it.”

“What about Aaron? Is he going to be okay?” I asked.

Steve sat down on the couch beside me and gently coaxed me against his chest. I went willingly.

“The doc is hopeful but said the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours are critical. He took a heavy blow to the head.”

I didn’t understand Aaron’s part in this, other than the fact that he seemed to be one of Angie’s obsessions. We’d have to wait for the answers. He’d been unconscious when they loaded him into the ambulance.

“I owe him my life. She would have killed me.”

A chill went down my spine at the truth in that statement.

Steve stroked my arm and kissed the top of my head. “He must care deeply for you.”

I heard his unspoken question.

“No, he doesn’t. That’s the weird thing.” As if there were only one weird thing about this whole situation. “He was my manager’s manager. We spoke maybe ten words in the years I worked there. He wasn’t interested in me.”

Steve laughed softly behind me. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that. You’re impossible *not* to notice.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I’d never been particularly outgoing. I had a few close friends and a couple of boyfriends in high school. But after my parents died, I had neither the time nor the desire for a social life. I carried a full course load and worked part-time, waiting tables and interning, then trying to make a name for myself at the firm. I hadn’t wanted to screw that up by dating someone I worked with—and certainly not a superior.

We could speculate, but Aaron's involvement wasn't a question either of us could answer. I knew that in the coming weeks and months, I'd be combing over the last few years, looking for the signs I'd obviously missed.

We sat in silence for a while. I leaned against Steve, taking comfort in his warmth and strength and scent as I tried to process. Steve held me, gently stroking my arm, assuring himself that I was okay.

I closed my eyes and soaked it all in. I was lucky, and I knew it. If the sheriff hadn't shown up when he did ...

My eyes flew open, and I sat up. Oscar made a soft grunt of protest and resettled himself.

"How did the sheriff know to come to the cabin?"

"Because I told him."

"What? How did *you* know?"

Steve tugged me back against him. "I wasn't going to tell you this until later, but ... after I left you, I swung by Jessie's to check on her. She rents the second floor of a Victorian over on Elm, only a few blocks from the inn. When she didn't answer her door, I woke the lady who owns the house and got her to use her key. We found Jessie on the floor, barely conscious."

"Oh no! Is she okay?"

"They're keeping her at the hospital for another night for evaluation, but yes, she's going to be fine," Steve assured me.

I sighed in relief. I didn't know if migraines could be so severe that they made someone pass out, but I knew the meds had serious side effects. My mother had suffered from awful headaches. The pills she'd been prescribed had knocked her out for hours at a time and left her groggy and feeling out of it for hours afterward.

Then, I connected the dots.

"Jessie didn't pass out from a migraine, did she?"

Another heavy sigh. “No. Apparently, Angie had paid her a visit while you were at work yesterday.”

My head began to swim again. “What? What possible reason would Angie have to go to Jessie’s? How would she even know about Jessie?”

Steve was quiet for several heartbeats, and then I realized the horrible truth.

“She knew about Jessie because *I* had told her. I’d told Angie about what happened that day in the kitchen and that I was planning to ask Jessie to do a reading. Oh my God.”

I started shaking again. This was all my fault. I was the one who’d brought Angie here. I’d left to keep the people I cared about safe, and all I’d done was make things worse.

“Stop,” Steve chided, as if reading my thoughts. “This is not your fault. Angie needs help, and now, she’s going to get it.”

“How can you be okay with this?”

“Okay?” he said in disbelief. “Casey, I’m not okay with *any* of this. In fact, I’m barely holding it together right now. You could have been killed. Again. Do you have any idea what that does to me?”

I turned in his arms and looked at him. Really looked at him. The gold flecks were flashing wildly in his beautiful eyes, and though his tone and his touch were gentle, his expression was hard. I’d been so caught up in myself that I hadn’t considered how this was affecting him.

“Steve, I’m so sorry. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this.”

My words only seemed to make him angrier.

“What exactly *were* you thinking? Please, tell me because I am racking my brain, trying to figure out, on any level, how you thought this was going to play out.”

He knew about the *plan* because he’d been with me when I laid it all out to Sheriff Kerrigan. Steve had sat there and held

my hand and said nothing. I closed my eyes and pictured him as he'd been then. Tense. Controlled. His expression blank.

"I was thinking I wanted to move on," I whispered. "That I finally had a chance to end this. I know it was stupid, but I was so desperate to have a life with you that—"

"No," he said firmly. "We talked about this. We had a plan. One that didn't involve you risking your life."

The barely repressed anger made his voice rough. The only other time I'd heard him speak like that was the night in the barn, after Mike had played his ill-conceived prank.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"You should have told me about Angie. And about that ridiculous stunt you'd planned. But you didn't because you knew I sure as hell wouldn't go along with it."

"You're right. I'm sorry," I said again.

"Goddammit, I'm falling in love with you, Casey. Don't you get that? What if something had happened to you?"

I crawled into his lap and straddled his powerful thighs. I felt his strong hands gripping my hips as I looked into his gorgeous face. It wasn't just anger I saw there. It was fear. And hurt.

"I'm falling in love with you too. I'm sorry."

His expression softened, but his voice didn't. "No more secrets, Casey."

"No more secrets," I agreed, pressing my lips to his.

He hesitated at first, but then I felt his hands move up my back and pull me closer. He deepened the kiss, telling me more than words could ever say.

He held me like that, cradled against his chest, stroking my back. We had a couple of hours to bask in relative peace. Both of us were exhausted and mentally drained. We managed a few much-needed hours of sleep on the comfy couch before Steve's family arrived en masse.

News traveled fast in Shadow Ridge, even more so when you were related to the sheriff. Apparently, Sheriff Kerrigan was Steve's mother's brother and therefore Steve's uncle.

We were inundated with comfort food and company. Most shocking to me was the fact that no one seemed to blame me. In some ways, that made me feel even worse.

I wanted them to yell at me. To tell me how stupid I was. To demand to know why I'd brought this to their doorstep. Why, that one day seven weeks ago, when I'd stopped for food and fuel, I hadn't just kept going.

Because those were the questions I was asking myself.

Regardless of what Steve or anyone else said, this was my fault. If I'd seen the signs, if I'd paid more attention, if I'd thought about someone besides myself, I could have prevented all of it.

AFTER A FULL DAY and a half of being pampered at Steve's, I returned to the cottage to clean and pack up the rest of my things. It didn't take long. I didn't have much, and I'd already packed most of it before Angie's arrival. It seemed like so long ago, but really, it'd been less than a week.

Convincing Steve that I'd recovered enough for him to go back to work took some doing. As much as I loved having him around, I needed time to myself. I'd spent most of the last decade handling things on my own. Learning to talk and share and lean on someone else was going to take time.

Steve had said he understood, but I wasn't sure he did. Our life experiences had given us different perspectives. He had a big, close-knit family that he saw practically every day and friends that he'd had since preschool. He had grown up in a town where everyone knew everyone else, and when someone was in trouble, the community pitched in.

I'd started out with a loving family, though it had just been my parents and me. And in the upscale Chicago suburb where I'd grown up, people generally kept to themselves. When my parents died, there was no one there to help me through it. In one fell swoop, I'd lost practically everything. I had, in fact, become an island.

The important thing was, Steve was willing to let me do what I needed to do despite the fact that it was the last thing he wanted. It was a true-life example of the old adage, *If you love something, set it free.*

Steve was setting me free, metaphorically speaking. Giving me space while letting me know he was only a call or text away. Trusting me enough to take care of my business so that I could return to him, whole and sure and without doubt. If there was one thing I was absolutely one hundred percent certain of, it was that I loved that man.

Another thing I knew? *He* was my future.

Once the cottage was scrubbed clean, I loaded everything into my Jeep and drove out to the hospital. I stopped by Aaron's room, pleased to find him sitting up in bed, scowling at his laptop. Despite the hospital gown he wore, he looked more like the Aaron I remembered. His hair was combed and tidy, his jaw shaven, his Clark Kent glasses perched on his nose.

I rapped on the door, poked my head in, and said, "Can I come in?"

"Casey, yes. Of course."

He closed the laptop and set it beside him. "Are you okay?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that? You're the one in the hospital."

"I'll be fine."

I sat down in the chair beside his bed and waved at the computer. "Are you supposed to be doing that?"

"Only in small increments," he said, his mouth curving down at the ends. "Looking at the screen too long gives me a headache."

I dropped my head. "Mr. Carrington, I'm so sorry."

"I think you can call me Aaron," he said with a slight quirk to his lips. "The doctors assured me it's temporary. But what are *you* sorry about? *You* didn't hit me."

"No, but you got hurt because of me."

He tilted his head and considered me. "I suppose that's true, but it's not your fault."

We'd have to agree to disagree about that. He wouldn't have gotten hurt if he hadn't been trying to help me, which was yet another thing I didn't understand.

"Will you explain it to me? Why you were there. How you knew. Why you cared enough to ..." I let the sentence hang.

He exhaled. "Yes, I suppose my showing up on your doorstep unannounced, deserves explanation." He paused thoughtfully, as if trying to decide where to start. "I've been watching you for a while, Casey."

I couldn't help my sharp intake of breath. He had admitted to being a stalker the other night, hadn't he?

"Not like that," he hastened to add, as if reading my thoughts. "More like I was looking out for you."

"Why would you do that?" I asked, confused.

"Because I knew your father."

"You did?"

He nodded slowly. "A long time ago. I was an intern in your father's company—and not a very good one at that," he said, smiling faintly at the memory. "Your father took me under his wing and taught me everything I know about business. He said he saw something of himself in me. He was a good man, your father.

"A few years after he and your mother passed, I was offered a management position at Kleiner, and I took it. Imagine my surprise when I saw your name on the new-hire list."

"You never said anything."

"No. I thought it would be inappropriate. After looking at your résumé, I knew I wanted you on my team, and I didn't want it to appear as if you'd received any special consideration because you hadn't."

"Why would it? We'd never met before."

"We had. At a company picnic. Your father introduced us. I think you were around sixteen at the time. Far too young for

a seasoned twenty-five-year-old man like me to do anything more than nod politely and acknowledge your presence.”

I thought back to the annual company picnics my father had sponsored for his employees. They were held at a local park in the summer. My dad would rent the whole place out, and employees could bring their immediate families for a day of fun, food, and games. Everyone raved about those days, and I’d met so many people.

“I don’t expect you to remember,” Aaron said, drawing me back from my memories. “Regardless, I thought some people might view employing my mentor’s daughter as impropriety, especially when it came to promotions, as it inevitably would. You were too good for it to be otherwise. That’s why I put you under Dax Roberts and not under me directly. I knew right away that hiring you was a smart decision. You would have made your father proud.”

“Thanks for that,” I said softly.

His expression sobered.

“Your friend Angela, however, was a different story. She was trouble right from the beginning. Her work was mediocre at best, and several male colleagues accused her of harassing them.”

His words, while harsh, were not surprising. Angie wasn’t afraid to go after what she wanted, and when she had a few, she used to joke that her primary career goal was to find a husband who could provide for her so she wouldn’t have to work.

“You didn’t fire her though.”

“I couldn’t. Letting someone go is a complicated process. I needed documented justification and a lot of it. Some of the complainants went to Dax about it. He encouraged them to talk to HR. If any of them did, nothing came of it. No formal complaints ever made it to my desk.

“Dax attempted to broach the subject with Angela on several occasions, but to no avail. So, I called her into my

office. I realized later that I should have had someone in the office with me.”

“She came on to you, didn’t she?”

He nodded. “When I rebuffed her advances, she threatened to file discrimination and harassment complaints herself. It would have been her word against mine. Who do you think they would have believed? I don’t need to tell you that the firm frowns on scandal in any form, especially in today’s litigious environment.”

No, he didn’t need to tell me that. I understood all too well. Optics were everything.

“She was doing the minimum required of her job in terms of the accounts. We could keep her from advancing, but we couldn’t terminate her based on her performance alone. And without a formal complaint on conduct ...”

“I know,” I said wearily, having heard the same thing repeatedly from the authorities. “There was nothing you could do.”

“Not officially, no. But ... Dax and I agreed that something had to change, so we did what we could to minimize disruptions. As projects were completed, we assigned her work she could complete on her own. Smaller clients, the ones who didn’t require a full team. As you can imagine, she did not take kindly to that. Around the same time, Dax promoted you, and Angela accused him of favoritism. It wasn’t, of course. Your promotion was justified. You were logging more hours than anyone else and we’d received nothing but praise from your clients and coworkers.

“Needless to say, I was watching her closely, as was Dax. Angela was growing bolder. We suspected it was only a matter of time before she did something we could use as grounds for dismissal.

“I noticed subtle things that suggested she wasn’t as good of a friend as she pretended to be. The way she would look at you sometimes. The things she would say to others, making unfounded accusations about you receiving preferential

treatment—not to mention the insinuations of *why* your predominantly male bosses were favoring you. Frankly, I was worried for you, Casey.

“I was there the night of the Halloween party. I knew she was pursuing Henry; he was one of those who’d spoken to Dax and asked to be reassigned to another team because of her unprofessional advances. I saw the way she was looking at you and Henry, and it sent chills down my spine. I admit, I felt relief when she stormed out. I think everyone did.

“Then, you didn’t show up for work the following Monday, and my mind immediately went to dark places.

“It was no secret that you and Angela shared an apartment. I asked Angela if you were ill, and she said no, that you two had an argument and you were staying at a friend’s. She wouldn’t say who. She was lying. I knew it, but I couldn’t prove it.

“As the day went on, more people asked about you. Angela became more agitated. Eventually, she asked to leave early so she could go to the police and file a report.

“Several hours later, I was on my way home when I saw her pulling out from the entrance of that wooded nature hiking trail along 287. It seemed like an odd place for her to be, given that it had been storming for two days. I pulled off farther down the road, grabbed a hooded slicker, and doubled back on foot. I can’t explain why I did it. All I can say is, I felt compelled to do so.

“Anyway, I was wandering around the trail, questioning my own sanity, and that’s when I spotted you in the ditch below. I don’t think I would have realized what I was looking at if I hadn’t been searching specifically for you. I rushed down as quickly as I could and dragged you out. I thought you were dead. You were so cold. I did the Heimlich anyway. You started coughing and breathing again, and that’s when I called 911.”

I recalled the excruciating pain. The fierce squeezing. The hooded figure in black looming over me.

“But you didn’t identify yourself. You didn’t stick around. Why?”

He looked down at his hands. “Because I thought they’d think I’d had something to do with what happened to you.”

I opened my mouth to protest, then shut it. Hadn’t I thought exactly the same thing? I’d believed my abductor was a man. The man in black who spoke to me in my nightmares. That was what I’d told the police, wasn’t it?

“That’s what you thought, isn’t it?” he prompted. “I saw the look in your eyes that night. You were terrified. You had no idea what was happening. You thought *I* was the one who’d done that to you.”

My silence was my confirmation.

He sighed. “And I couldn’t prove otherwise. While I waited for help to arrive, I ran through various scenarios in my mind, and I knew it didn’t look good for me. I’d gone home alone after the party that night. No one could verify my whereabouts. I was the one who found you in an isolated section of the woods, but only after attention had been drawn to the fact that you were missing.

“I didn’t give Angela enough credit. I think she knew I had been looking out for you. She must have also known I suspected she was lying about where you were. Hell, she might have even waited for me on that stretch of road, knowing I’d see her there and investigate.”

He laughed sarcastically. “I walked right into it. She was framing me, and there was nothing I could say that would prove otherwise. So ... as soon as the paramedics arrived, I disappeared.”

Again with the proof.

“Angela kept her head down for a while. She did a good job, playing the part of the dutiful friend and roommate, but I knew better. Then, you left, and Angie ... changed.”

“Changed how?”

“Her performance improved, as did her behavior in and around the office.”

I felt his words like a blade to the heart. It was hard, hearing that you were the bane of someone’s existence and how much better their life was without you in it. On those occasions I’d called her, she’d seemed happy. Now, I knew it was only because I hadn’t been around.

“She told me you two were involved,” I said.

He shook his head, then winced and closed his eyes. “Sorry,” he said apologetically when he opened them again. “I keep forgetting not to do that.”

I felt a stab of sympathy for him. He had put some of the pieces in place for me, but there was still more I was missing.

“How did you end up in Shadow Ridge?” I asked.

“I suspected Angie was in contact with you. She couldn’t afford to lose track of you completely. What if your memories began to return? I knew you wouldn’t be safe. So I called on a friend of mine, one who knew something about covert surveillance.”

“So that much was true,” I murmured, then explained, “Angie said you’d hired a PI to keep tabs on me.”

His eyes widened. “Not *you*, Casey,” Aaron corrected. “*Her*.”

I shook my head, confused. “I don’t understand. She showed me images on her phone, pictures she said she’d taken from your laptop. She said you’d been keeping tabs on me all along.”

“I wasn’t, but apparently, she was.”

After the past week, I didn’t think I would hear anything that would shock me more than what I’d already learned. I was wrong.

“You managed to stay one step ahead of her, however. She didn’t learn of your whereabouts until after you’d already moved on. Until recently, anyway.”

Until I stopped in Shadow Ridge.

Aaron continued. “My friend believes—and I agree—that Angela was your stalker all along. She was the one sending flowers and cards. She had even paid a neighbor kid twenty bucks to take random photos of you and her. And ultimately, she was the one behind your abduction.”

I heard what he was saying, but I was still having trouble reconciling it with what I knew. “But she was attacked in our apartment,” I said weakly.

“Was she?” he mused. “Was there any evidence, other than her version of events and the bump on her head?”

I thought back on the events of that day, then shook my head.

“It would have been easy enough to stage. She could’ve slammed her own head into the wall, for all you know.”

The possibility had never even crossed my mind. I mean, who would do something like that?

“Someone who’s not right in the head,” he said darkly, making me realize I’d voiced my thoughts aloud.

“When word got back to me that Angela had left work abruptly one day last week after receiving a phone call, I feared the worst. I contacted my guy and he tracked Angela here. I knew I had to warn you.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?”

“And tell them what exactly? That your friend was coming to visit you? Or that the only reason I knew that was because I’d hired someone to keep tabs on her?”

I saw his point. “So, you came to the inn, looking for me that Friday.”

“Friday? No, I didn’t arrive until Saturday morning. It must have been the PI. He got here before me, and I asked him to stick around and keep an eye on you until I could get here.”

Aaron was throwing even more pieces of the puzzle onto the table, and I had no idea where they fit.

“What happened to him? Your friend, I mean.”

“He left once I arrived. While he was willing to help a friend, he wasn’t particularly keen on sticking around. I suspect not all of his methods for obtaining information are completely legal.”

This, I understood. Since his efforts had saved my life, I was perfectly okay with keeping my mouth shut. “His secret’s safe with me,” I said.

Relief passed over Aaron’s features. “Thank you.”

“You’ve already spoken to the sheriff, I take it?” I asked.

“At length,” he said with a wry smile. “He came by last night, listened to what I had to say, then stayed and played cards with me. I like him.”

“I don’t know him well, but he seems like a good guy.”

“So ... you and his nephew, huh?”

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. “Yes.”

“Does he make you happy?”

“Yes, he really does.”

“Good. You deserve happiness.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely.

“What are you going to do now? Will you return to Chicago?”

“Only long enough to take care of things,” I told him. “Then I’m coming back. I like it here. Shadow Ridge has really grown on me. Who knows? I might even open an office here. Apparently, this town doesn’t have a CPA to handle small business accounting needs.”

He smiled at that. “That’s how your grandfather started, you know. Your dad would be so proud of you, Casey.”

His words meant more than he knew.

“Thanks. What about you? When are you heading back?”

“I don’t know,” he said thoughtfully. “Kleiner is great. The company has been good to me, but I miss being hands-on. Working with the numbers. Getting involved in the day-to-day business. Feeling like I accomplished something more than completing paperwork and performance reviews at the end of the day. Knowing my customers out of the office as well as in.”

“Hmm,” I hummed. “I might have a lead on something. A start-up in a small town. It’s just an idea at this point, but I bet someone with your knowledge and experience could make it happen.”

He grinned, hearing what I wasn’t saying outright. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“You do that.”

I STEPPED out of the hospital into the warm autumn sunshine, feeling better than when I had gone in. Things were much clearer now.

My next stop was Jessie's.

"Come on in," she said in greeting. "I thought I might be seeing you today."

"Another vision?" I asked.

"Not exactly. Steve stopped by earlier to bring me those," she answered, pointing to a basket of delectable goodies from the farm. "He suggested I might be seeing you sometime today. Do you have time for tea before you go?"

I didn't ask her how she knew I was leaving. If Steve had told her I would be stopping by, he had probably told her that too.

"Only if you sit down and let me get it."

She looked like she was about to protest, but then she nodded and sat down at the small kitchen table. Her movements were slow and deliberate. The dark circles under her eyes were fading from a purplish black to a sickly yellowish green. It was odd, seeing splashes of color on her alabaster skin.

I felt something against my legs and looked down. A massive black cat was rubbing against my calves. It was a hefty thing.

“Well, hello there,” I said.

“Sebastian likes you,” Jessie commented, looking at me strangely.

“You sound surprised.”

“I’m ... intrigued,” she countered mysteriously.

I waited for her to say more. She didn’t.

She’d already had a kettle simmering on the stove and two mugs and a teapot prepped—because of course she did. All I had to do was pour and carry everything over to the table.

“So ...” I said while the tea steeped. “I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

She looked at me with those silvery eyes. “For what?”

“For what happened. If I hadn’t—”

“Stop,” she commanded. “Things happened exactly the way they were supposed to.”

“How can you say that? If I hadn’t come here, if I hadn’t told Angie about you, if I had believed you—”

“If, if, if,” she said impatiently, waving her hand. “If your father had worn a condom, you wouldn’t be here at all. Should we blame him too?”

I gaped at her.

“All I’m saying is, things happen for a reason. Sometimes, the paths change, but the destination is the same. It’s no accident you ended up here when you did.”

She’d said something similar that night in the kitchen when I was working late. That I was meant to be there. That was the night I’d met Steve.

“What did you see the night you touched my hands, Jessie?” I asked.

Her eyes clouded. “Everything.”

“Will you tell me?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Is this a test?”

“No, I need to know what happened the night I was attacked,” I said sincerely.

She blinked, surprised. “You mean, you don’t remember?”

I shook my head. “No. I get glimpses sometimes in my dreams. Well, nightmares really. But there are huge gaps. It’s like a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.”

She slid her arms halfway across the table, palms up, and I hesitated, remembering what had happened the last time.

“Maybe now’s not the best time to do that,” I said. “You’re recovering.”

She nodded and pulled back. “You’re right. It’s already up here anyway.” She tapped her temple.

She sat back, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes.

“It started with you in a car. You were in the driver’s seat, your head against the wheel. You weren’t feeling well, and you worried about driving home. A woman appeared and rapped on the window. It’s the same woman who came here the other day. You knew her, but you were surprised to see her. Surprised and relieved. You couldn’t see the black aura of malice clinging to her, but your guardian angel did.”

I gasped. “You know about my guardian angel?”

“Well, of course,” Jessie said, as if I’d asked a silly question, then went back to relaying what she’d seen. “You ignored your angel’s warnings because they didn’t make sense to you. She was your friend. You trusted her. At her request, you unlocked the doors. She helped you out of your car and into another.”

“Wait. Are you saying I was conscious for this?”

Jessie nodded. “Conscious, yes, but not cognizant. You couldn’t take a step without her support. I suspect you were drugged at some point before then.”

“Go on,” I encouraged, needing to hear the rest.

“She drove away with you in the car. There was a period of darkness; you must have fallen asleep. When you woke up, the

car was parked in a wooded area. She pulled and tugged on you in an attempt to get you out of the car. You resisted. You just wanted to sleep, but she was persistent. She told you that you were probably roofied and that you needed to stay awake. That you needed to walk it off.

“She led you farther into the woods, along a trail. The moon was nearly full, but the trees filtered the light, making it hard to see where you were going. She told you to stop for a moment and drink water to flush the drugs out of your system. You did. She propped you against a wooden post, a trail marker or something. You were so tired. You closed your eyes, just for a minute. The next thing you knew, pain exploded in your skull, and you felt yourself falling. You reached out to stop yourself, but you couldn’t. The next image I have is of you regaining consciousness as you rolled down an embankment during a thunderstorm.”

Jessie opened her eyes and looked at me, sympathy swirling in her silvery eyes.

“She really hated me, didn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“How could I have been so blind?”

“You have a good heart, Casey. A pure soul. That level of evil wasn’t on your radar. But... there’s more. I saw what happened through her eyes too, when she attacked me,” Jessie said quietly.

I inhaled deeply, not sure I wanted to hear what she had to say, knowing I had to. “Tell me.”

“She left you on the trail, expecting someone to find you, but when Monday came around and there were no reports of a woman’s body being found, she went back and discovered you weren’t where she’d left you. Then she spotted you in a ditch below with the water rising and figured she was safe.”

“She just left me there. She wanted me dead.”

“Yes.”

I exhaled heavily. I think, in the back of my mind, I'd already figured that out, but had needed someone else to say it before I could fully accept it.

"Thank you, Jessie. I should have listened to Steve. I should have come to you earlier, and then we might have avoided all this."

"There you go, second-guessing fate again," she said with a small smile. "If you had come to me, would you have believed me?"

I thought about that. "Honestly, I don't know."

She nodded, as if I'd proven her point. "You needed to see her betrayal for yourself. You needed proof, just like the authorities did."

"But why did so many people have to get hurt?"

She shrugged. "Bad things happen."

That made me smile. "Seriously? All that psychic woo-woo stuff you've got going on, and that's all you've got?"

She laughed. "Yes. Occam's razor. The simplest answer is usually the right one. Besides, some good did come out of all this, yes?"

"Yes," I agreed. "Speaking of, I've got one more stop to make before I go."

"Tell everyone I said hi."

"I will. Thank you, Jessie. I'm sorry I ever doubted you."

"Part of the process. I knew you'd come around eventually," she said with a knowing smile.

"Goodbye, Jessie."

"Nope. Not goodbye. We'll be seeing each other again very soon."

This time, I believed her.

I TOOK a minute to stare at the inn before I went inside. It looked much the same as it had the first day I came here. It was still regal. Still beautiful with its white brick and black shutters and abundance of carriage-style lamps. But it felt different. It was no longer just a building from a bygone era. It felt almost ... alive. I had the oddest sense that the building was regarding me every bit as much as I was regarding it.

I shook my head. Now, I was starting to sound like Jessie.

“There she is,” Lou drawled as I entered through the back. “How are you doin’, darlin?”

“I’m doin’,” I said.

“Rough couple of days, huh?”

“You can say that again.”

I looked around at the multitude of warming trays. “Senior bus trip today?”

“You know it. Did you come to say goodbye?”

I nodded.

“Knew it was coming. Doesn’t make it any easier though.”

“Is Rose in her office?”

“If by office, you mean the bar, then yes.”

“Thanks, Lou.”

The place was quiet—the calm before the storm of senior citizens that would be descending soon. I felt a small pang of

regret that I wouldn't be the one serving them. Most of them were a hoot.

Max and Michelle weren't around, but I hadn't expected them to be. It was a weekday, and they were both in school. Shannon was in the dining room with a woman I'd never seen before, and she was showing her how to do a proper place setting.

Shannon's eyes widened when she saw me. "Casey!"

She dropped the silverware with a clang and came over as if to hug me, then stopped short. I wasn't a hugger—but today, I'd make an exception.

"It's okay, Shannon."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. It wasn't horrible.

"I heard what happened. God, you must have been terrified. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"That's all anyone's talking about, you know. Shadow Ridge hasn't seen this much excitement in a long time."

The woman beside her shifted, her gaze hooded but curious.

"Oh, this is Brianna, by the way," Shannon said, turning to the other woman. "She's our new waitress. Today's her first day."

For as much as I'd been bugging Rose to hire someone, this was a bittersweet moment for me. Being replaced came with a twinge of melancholy even if it was what I'd wanted.

I looked around at the tables that had been moved to accommodate the seniors, the buffet tables, the stacks of extra linen napkins, the rolling carts with plates, glasses, and silverware, waiting for the guests, and remembered my first day at the inn.

“Trial by fire, huh? That’s how I started too.”

“Brianna,” Shannon said, “this is the Casey you’ve been hearing so much about.”

By the way her eyes widened, Brianna must have gotten an earful.

“Nice to meet you,” she replied.

I turned back to Shannon. “Is Rose still in the bar?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?”

I laughed at that. Having taken quite a few walks in the woods around the cottage, I could say definitively that they did. “Thanks. I’ll see you around, okay?”

“That means you’re planning on coming back, right?” she called out as I was walking away.

I didn’t answer. While I was planning on coming back to Shadow Ridge, I had no intention of waitressing again. But if the last few days had taught me anything, it was that I wasn’t particularly good at predicting what was going to happen. Maybe I should have asked Jessie while I was at her place.

I found Rose in the lounge at the table closest to the bar. Papers covered the surface, her ever-present glass of bourbon within reach. She was scribbling with a pencil, muttering, erasing, and then writing again.

“Bad time?” I asked.

Rose looked up, then shot to her feet and gave me a fervent hug—another first. “Casey, I’m so glad to see you! Deputy Dan was in earlier and filled us in. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

She stepped away and pinned me with a disapproving glance. “I’m not happy with you, you know. You should have told us you were in trouble.”

“I didn’t think I was,” I said honestly, which was mostly true—at least until very recently. “I never meant to bring any of that to Shadow Ridge.”

“Oh, honey, believe me, this town has seen far worse than that. Sit down.” She called out, “CJ, bring Casey a drink.” She turned back to me. “What do you want?”

“Iced tea,” I said, sliding into the seat across from her.

“Are you sure you don’t want something stronger?” she asked, looking at me doubtfully. “I’d say you’ve earned it.”

“I’m sure. I’ve got a long drive ahead of me.”

The corners of her mouth turned downward. “You’re still planning on leaving?”

“Yes.”

Her frown deepened. I felt a lecture coming on and hurried to stop it before it got started.

“Working on the accounts?” I asked, glancing at the table.

“Yes,” she said on an exhale. “It’s hopeless.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

I expected a protest. Usually, Rose was closemouthed about the financial details of running the inn, preferring to stick with generalities. She surprised me by waving her hand over the disarray. I didn’t know if it was because I was leaving or because the situation was so dire that it didn’t matter.

A few minutes later, I had my answer. It wasn’t because I was leaving.

“These accounts are a hot mess, Rose,” I said.

She snorted. “Is that your professional opinion?”

“As a matter of fact, it is. I’m a CPA.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re kidding me.”

“No. In fact, my last job was analyzing recently acquired failing businesses and creating plans to make them profitable again.”

She blinked. “And you were working as a waitress?”

I nodded. “I was keeping a low profile. As a rule, CPAs don’t get paid under the table.” *And make a hell of a lot more*

than five dollars an hour, I silently amended.

“CPAs don’t get ...” she echoed, then shook her head. “Honey, if you can find a way out of this, I’ll pay you any way you want.”

“When is the bus due to arrive?”

She checked her smartwatch. “In about twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes. Rose would be busy schmoozing them for about two hours, give or take.

I had time. My Jeep was packed, and I wasn’t in a hurry to put Shadow Ridge in the rearview. It hadn’t even been eight hours, and I was already missing Steve. I wasn’t looking forward to a week of sleeping without his arms around me. Or waking up alone instead of spooned against his hard, aroused male body. Mostly, I was going to miss just being with him. I felt calmer, more in control when I was with Steve, and this week was going to be rough emotionally.

“Can I use your office?”

“Don’t you have to leave?”

I shrugged. “I should probably eat something first.”

“Of course,” she said, her grin widening. “I’ll ask Lou to bring you a plate from the buffet.”

“That would be great, thanks.”

Two hours later, I sat back and exhaled. Saying the books were a hot mess didn’t even begin to scratch the surface. They were a resounding confirmation that while Rose and John were good people, they didn’t know the first thing about running a small business. The only reason they’d lasted as long as they had was because they had mortgaged everything to the hilt and had been borrowing against their retirement funds for the past couple of years. If they lost the inn, they’d lose *everything*.

The good news was, while the situation was dire, it wasn’t hopeless.

I drafted a list of suggestions, then called John into the office. Of the two, he was more likely to listen. I gave it to him

straight up, no bullshit. He wasn't expecting me to be so blunt, but then, he'd never seen this side of me before. I told him if they wanted to stay in business, they would have to start making some hard decisions right away.

The rest I'd handle when I returned.

Because, yes, I was determined to return.

Afterward, I slipped out the back. Everyone was busy cleaning up after the bus trip, and I didn't see the point of long-drawn-out goodbyes.

I found Steve in the lot, leaning against my Jeep. My pulse immediately sped up at the sight of him, tendrils of joy wrapping around my heart. He looked good enough to eat. Well-washed, faded jeans clung to his muscular thighs, a thermal showcased his broad chest and tight abs to perfection, and an unbuttoned dark green-and-brown flannel brought out the flecks in his gorgeous eyes.

"About time," he said, shooting me one of those crooked smiles that melted my bones every time. "I was about to go in there after you."

My body wanted against his. I refrained. Barely. "What are you doing here?"

"Throwing myself on your mercy."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I know I said I was fine with letting you take care of business, and I am. But ..."

"But?" I prompted.

"But you shouldn't have to do it alone. What I mean is, I want to be there for you, in whatever capacity you need. Hell, I'll even stay in another hotel if that's what you want. What if you need a hug, or a back massage, or someone to talk to?" He grinned. "Or, you know, epic sex to take your mind off things for a little while."

Heart. Melting.

"Epic sex, huh?" I said, stepping into his arms.

“That’s your takeaway?”

I kissed the underside of his jaw. “I’m sorry. My mind blanked everything else out.”

He laughed and kissed me. “Does that mean I can come?”

“I’m counting on it,” I murmured rubbing my hips suggestively against his. I could do double entendres too.

He groaned.

“What about your job?”

“I haven’t taken a vacation in five years. I think I’m due. Besides, I can’t work even if I wanted to. My brothers decided to come by last night and steal my tools.”

“Why would they do that?”

“I think my mother put them up to it. She likes you and has told me in no uncertain terms that I’d be a fool to let you go. Which I totally agree with, by the way. So, you see, not only will I be inconsolable if you don’t let me tag along, but I’ll also be stuck here with nothing to do but get in trouble.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop?” I mused.

“Exactly.”

“Well, in that case, I should probably take you with me.”

“Yeah, you should.”

That ache I’d been feeling in my chest disappeared.

I scanned the lot. “Should I follow you back to your place so you can get a few things?”

“Not necessary.” He stepped around my Jeep and returned with a duffel bag. “I’m ready to go when you are.”

“Where’s your truck?”

“In my garage. My brother dropped me off.”

Again, I’d been had. “A bit sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Hopeful,” he corrected and opened the door for me.

I climbed in with a big, goofy smile on my face. Suddenly, I wasn't sad about leaving Shadow Ridge anymore because I was taking the best part of it with me.

EPILOGUE—ONE YEAR LATER

I put the last of the potted mums in place, then stepped back to admire my work. With the mini hay bales, decorative scarecrows, and varied assortment of pumpkins and gourds, our house looked like it should be in a brochure promoting autumn in small-town America.

After returning from Chicago, I'd moved in with Steve. I'd considered going back to the cottage, but the truth was, I'd probably be spending most nights at Steve's anyway. Both the woman and the accountant in me recognized it as a win-win.

I didn't know what I would have done without him in Chicago. That had been a rough week. I'd signed the papers, and my parents' substantial estate legally became mine. Thankfully, the firm handling the executorship agreed to stay on and help me take care of everything. Still, going through my parents' things was emotionally draining, as was putting the house on the market. Steve was my rock. My port of calm in an otherwise chaotic sea of transference.

Then, there was the situation with Angie. She had been brought back to Chicago and was being held without bail. I retained an attorney and provided my statement. Angie offered no contest and accepted a plea, so the case wouldn't go to trial, and we wouldn't have to deal with the media circus that would have drawn. On the advice of both counsel and the psychiatrist assigned to Angie, I hadn't attempted to visit her. I didn't know if I ever would. She was getting the help she needed, and that was the important thing.

So, yeah, when Steve had asked me to move in with him upon our return, I didn't hesitate. Was it too soon? Not for us. All I could say was, when it was right, it was right.

Besides, I'd found a better use for the cottage. After spending the holidays in Florida, the Muellers decided to relocate there permanently and put their estate up for sale.

Guess who bought it.

Yep.

My father had always said real estate was a solid investment. I'd used some of the money from the sale of my parents' mansion to purchase the Mueller estate. Now, Shadow Ridge's very own bed-and-breakfast was open for business. It provided a nice alternative to the no-frills budget motel on the outskirts of town and the overpriced casino hotel ten miles away for those who wanted to experience our idyllic small-town charm and stay for more than a few hours.

Ziegler Construction had handled the renovations, and Greta Barnes—a local woman who'd once run a five-star hotel in New York City—managed the place and oversaw the day-to-day operations. Of course, we partnered with the Shadow Ridge Inn for lunch and dinner packages.

As for Rose and John, they were doing well. It'd take a while before they were fully debt-free, but they were on their way. There were plenty of fresh new faces working there now. Convincing Rose to hire more people at a decent wage had been a struggle, but she couldn't argue with the results. Sufficient staff and happier employees meant happier customers and ultimately, more revenue.

Another hard but necessary change? Taking away Rose's unrestricted access to the bar and making the top-shelf liquor available only to paying customers.

By far, the most important thing had been shifting responsibilities. Rose was a fantastic hostess, but she didn't know the first thing about running a successful restaurant business, which meant she was not the one who should be handling the finances. Neither was John, to be honest. He was

great at ensuring things got done, but not so great at figuring out what needed to be done.

Aaron and I had come up with a practical business plan. Rose was now solely in charge of PR, John actively managed staff and day-to-day operations, and Reardon & Carrington Financial Services handled the finances.

Yes, I'd made my dream a reality. I invested in my own accounting business and convinced Aaron to sign on as a full partner. We haggled a bit, but he was every bit as ready to walk away from the corporate greed and grind for the slower pace of a small, privately owned firm. We bought a place right there on Main Street. In addition to handling the accounting needs of the inn, the B & B, and the multitude of businesses under the Ziegler umbrella, we picked up more local businesses every month.

Max and Michelle graduated last spring. Max was training to become a certified automotive technician, working part-time and weekends at Chuck's. Michelle got a scholarship and recently started her first official semester as a premed student. I always knew she was a smart girl.

Shannon had had her baby shortly after Christmas—an adorable little girl she named Holly Nicole. She and Mike had separated shortly afterward. Rumor had it that Mike had had an affair with Larissa—remember her? When word got back to Shannon, Shannon kicked his ass out and moved her mother in. Last I'd heard, Mike was trying to get back in Shannon's good graces, but that was going to be an uphill battle. Shannon was still working part-time at the inn, but with her mom around to help care for the kids, she was taking online classes in tax accounting and loved it. Who knew? The way our business was growing, R & C might be bringing her in as an intern at some point.

Jessie and I had become good friends. She bought the place next to R & C and started her own tea and coffee shop. I'd become addicted to her vanilla jasmine herbal blend. She also did readings by appointment and at her discretion and carried a collection of crystals, stones, and hand-painted tarot

cards and runes. She'd been building quite a reputation as a legitimate psychic, and business was booming.

I guessed the long and the short of it was, life was good, and I'd never been happier.

I heard Steve's truck before I saw it. Oscar rose from his prone position in the shade, his tail wagging in greeting when he saw his master.

Said master stepped up behind me, wrapped his arms around me, and pressed a kiss to my neck. The touch of his lips sent delicious shivers down my body. I was glad I'd chosen to wear a sports bra because the snug, supportive fabric made the effect less noticeable.

"Looks beautiful," my favorite person in the world murmured against my skin.

I tilted my chin to give him better access. "It does, doesn't it?"

"I was talking about your ass, but the decorations look good too."

His hand dropped down to possessively cup my bottom, and I laughed. I might have gained a few pounds over the past year, having an inside supplier of whoopie pies as I now did. My man was appreciative, and I was happy and healthy. No one else's opinion mattered.

I rubbed my bottom against him suggestively. He groaned.

"Damn it, woman. I can't show up at the farm, sporting wood."

Right. We were expected at the farm tonight. Ziegler Farms was once again running their autumn program, and they were busier than ever. It was all hands on deck, and as Steve's person, my hands were included in the tally. I helped out in the store while Steve drove the tractor for the hayrides. I'm happy to say that I no longer had a fear of being in the woods at night, thanks to Steve and his creative brand of *therapy*.

"How much time do we have?" I asked, pressing a kiss to the underside of his jaw.

“I told Mom we’d be there around six.”

“And what time is it now?”

“About quarter of.”

“Plenty of time for a quickie.”

His eyes instantly heated. “You’re insatiable, you know that?” he muttered, leaning down to nibble the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

I felt the resulting tingles in several other places too. Heat exploded in my core.

“Got a problem with that?” I managed.

“None whatsoever.”

The next thing I knew, I was no longer standing on my own two feet. One of his arms supported my upper back, and the other was tucked beneath my knees while he carried me into the house bridal-style. We made it as far as the living room before I found myself bent over the back of the sofa with my pants and panties down around my ankles.

A quick swipe of his fingers relayed just how ready I was, and then I was experiencing the bliss of him pushing into me. It was fast and bordering on carnal, but my climax was no less satisfying because of it. Besides, I knew we’d both make up for it later.

“See?” I said, panting. “Plenty of time.”

He grunted out an affirmation as he leaned against my back. It was the closest thing to a cuddle I’d get, which was one of the downsides of a quickie. Still worth it though.

We took a few minutes to clean up. He, of course, was faster than I was. By the time I emerged, Steve was outside.

Oscar was already curled up in his therapeutic doggie bed, half-asleep. I took a moment to pet him, then went outside.

Steve was waiting for me on the passenger side of the truck. I didn’t think much of it. He liked opening the door for me, and I liked when he did. Except this time, he didn’t just open the door. He put his hands around my waist and lifted me

into the cab so that my legs were dangling out the side. He stepped between my knees before I could swing them inside.

“What are you up to?” I asked.

“I was going to wait until later, but I can’t wait any longer.”

“Okay,” I said slowly, a frisson of unease snaking up my spine.

He was so serious. Serious and ... uncertain? Anxious? Had I done something? Forgotten to do something? Said something I shouldn’t have?

“Do you know what today is?” he asked.

“Uh, the 7th.”

He chuckled. “Yes. It’s exactly one year since that obnoxious jerk pushed you and made you spill a tray of drinks.”

Relief and disbelief flooded through me. “You remember that?”

“How could I not? That was the night I looked into the eyes of my soul mate.”

My insides went all gooey. “Do you know you are the most romantic man I’ve ever met? You put those romance novel heroes to shame.”

“I’m glad you think so because if you thought *that* was romantic, you’re going to love this.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small velvet box. Immediately, my heart started pounding against my chest. He opened it, and inside, a beautiful diamond ring glinted brilliantly in the late autumn sun.

I sucked in a breath.

“Casey Evelyn Reardon, from that moment, I knew you were the woman for me, and there hasn’t been a single second since where I’ve thought any different. I’ve been good. I’ve waited a whole year. I don’t want to wait anymore. I love you. I want to love you every day for the rest of my life. I want my

ring on your finger. And when you're ready, I want my babies to grow inside you. I want to raise a family and grow old with you. Please, Casey, say you'll marry me."

"Wow. You weren't kidding about the romantic thing, were you?" I whispered.

I tore my gaze away from the stunning solitaire and looked at him. "A year ago, I looked into your eyes and felt something shift inside me. Now, I can't imagine going a day without losing myself in their depths or spending a night without your body next to mine. You are my calm, my peace, my *person*. Yes, Steven Michael Ziegler, I would love to marry you."

"You're not so bad with the romance yourself," he said, slipping the ring onto my finger.

Then, he stepped closer and kissed me.

I couldn't begin to count how many times this man had kissed me over the past year, and every one of them had been fantastic. But this kiss? I felt it in my soul. It was everything and nothing less than our entire future. And it was going to be one hell of a future.

When he pulled away, we were both breathing hard. The gold flecks in his eyes were swirling like glitter in a snow globe.

"I love you," I said.

"I love you too."

"Ready to go see the in-laws?"

"Ready," I said with a big, goofy grin on my face.

Steve closed my door and moved around to the driver's side, then got in.

I stared at the diamond on my hand. "How long do you think it'll take before someone notices?"

"A second, maybe two."

"Seriously?"

“Haven’t you noticed the way my mom’s eyes go right to your left hand every time we see her?”

“She knew you were going to propose?”

“Jessie told her,” he said, shooting me a grin.

“What, did she go to Jessie for a reading or something?”

“No,” Steve said on a laugh. “Jessie saw me coming out of the jeweler’s.”

I laughed too. “Occam’s razor,” I said, remembering that conversation with Jessie nearly a year ago.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

We made the short trip, holding hands and smiling all the way. I felt a tingling at the back of my neck, and a feeling of utter peace and contentment settled over me. My guardian angel was giving me her blessing and everything was going to be okay.



If you enjoyed *Waitress* at the Shadow Ridge Inn, I invite you to check out ***Dangerous Secrets***, the first book in my Callaghan Brothers Series - a series of seven hot former Navy SEAL Irish brothers who live in the pub inspired by the Shadow Ridge Inn.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abbie Zanders is a USA Today Bestselling Author with more than 60 published romance novels to date. Her stories range from contemporary to paranormal and everything in between. She promises her readers two things: happily ever afters, always, and no cliffhangers, ever.

Born and raised in the mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania, where she sets most of her stories, she's known for small town romance featuring golden-hearted alpha heroes and strong, relatable heroines. Besides being an avid reader and writer, she loves animals (especially big dogs), American muscle cars, and 80's hair bands.

