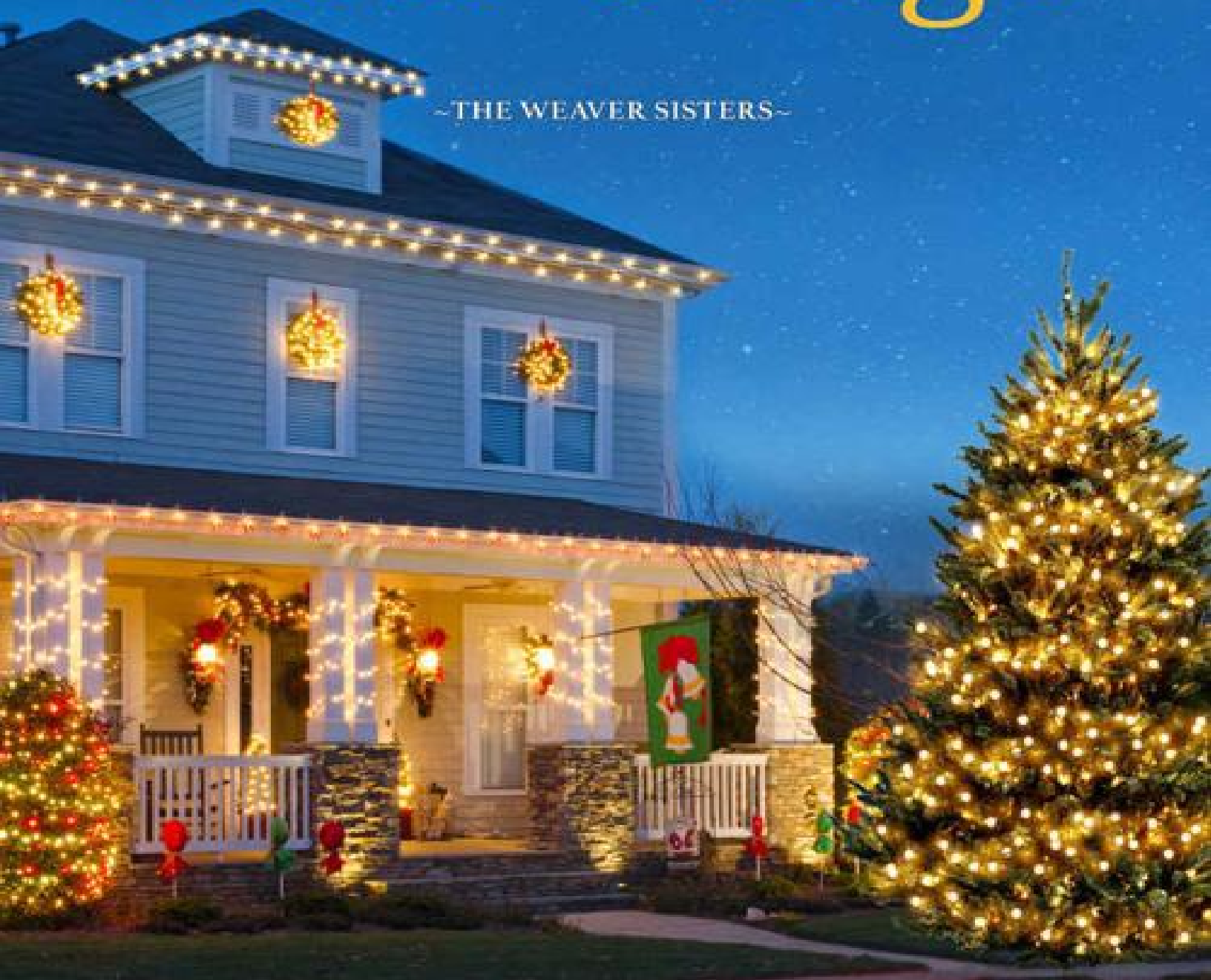


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NAN REINHARDT

*Christmas
in
River's Edge*

~THE WEAVER SISTERS~



Christmas in River's Edge

A Weaver Sisters Romance

Nan Reinhardt



Christmas in River's Edge

A Weaver Sisters Romance

Nan Reinhardt



Christmas in River's Edge
Copyright© 2023 Nan Reinhardt
Kindle Edition

The Tule Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Publication by Tule Publishing 2023

Cover design by Lee Hyat Designs

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-961544-16-1

Christmas in River's Edge
Copyright© 2023 Nan Reinhardt
Kindle Edition

The Tule Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

First Publication by Tule Publishing 2023

Cover design by Lee Hyat Designs

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-961544-16-1

Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and tl New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our new [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

*Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks
reader giveaways:*

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and their New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and reader giveaways:

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



Dedication

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

Dedication

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

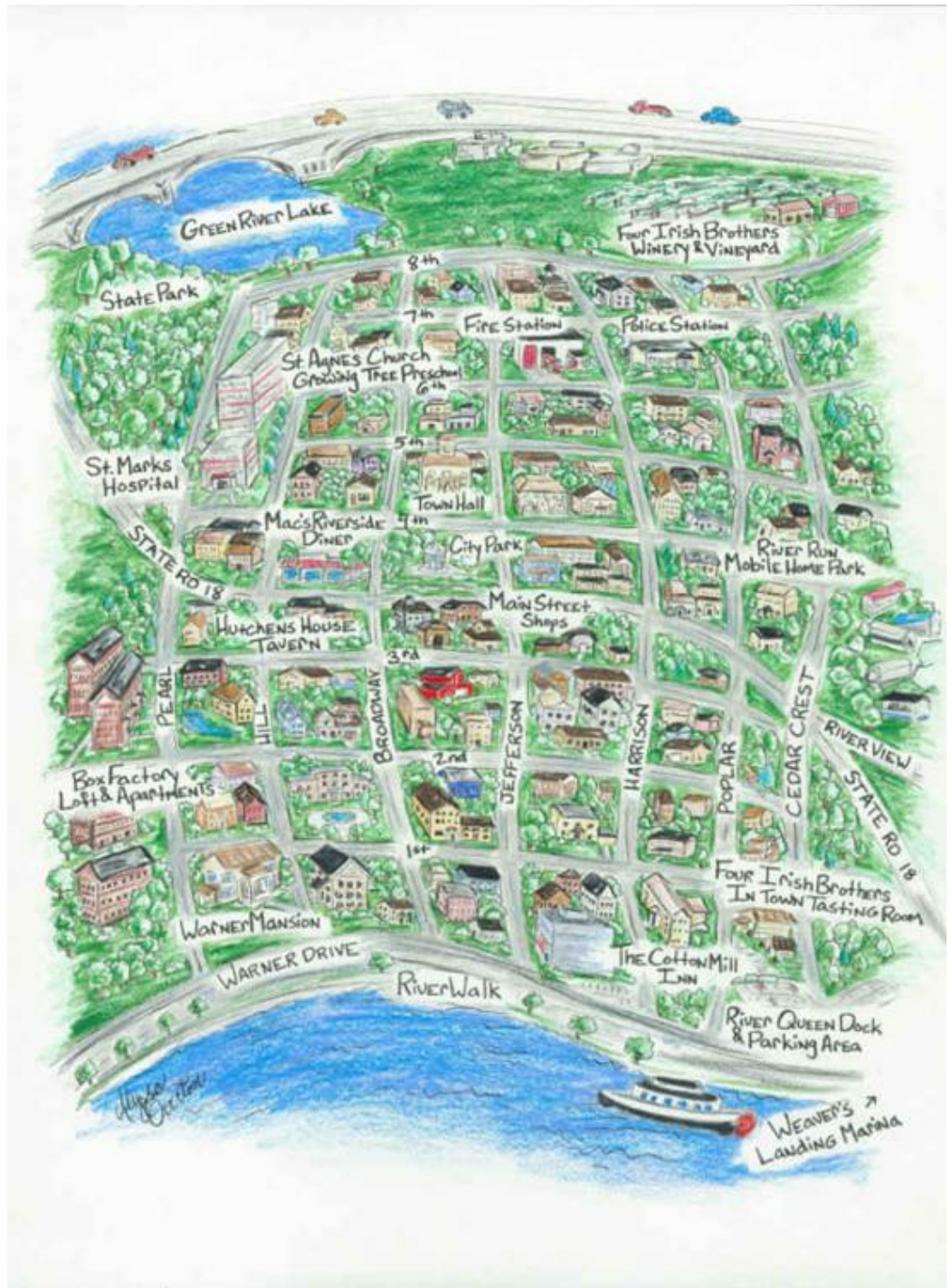


Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

River's Edge Map

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

The Weaver Sisters series

More books by Nan Reinhardt

About the Author

Chapter Twenty

The Weaver Sisters series

More books by Nan Reinhardt

About the Author

Chapter One

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

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

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

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

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

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

“He is a good-looking guy,” Jo agreed, as Jazz nodded, her eyes w
Jazz grinned. “There you go, Jenny. A new hot guy in town. Go fo
Jen chuckled. “Interesting idea, if I weren’t old enough to be his m
“Older sister, maybe.” Jo giggled and took a sip of wine. “Could
into cougars.”

The conversation had taken a ridiculous turn, which was fine with
it took her mind off Jo’s imminent departure, and the fact that she’d b
a confidant and Weaver’s Landing Marina would be minus on
mechanic. Jo had been working hard all fall, winterizing and storing l
the family business, trying to get as many done as possible before s
but there would be a big hole in the works and in the family when s
gone. They would all miss her terribly. It was hard to feel bad, though
they saw how Jo glowed simply at the mention of Alex Briggs. S
happy, and in Jenny’s opinion, no one deserved that happiness more t
six-minutes-older sister.

Jazz refilled all three wineglasses—the Four Irish Brothers pinot n
going down pretty easily with the charcuterie board of fruit, meats, c
olives, and the warm crusty bread. They’d nearly demolished it all in t
they’d been sitting on Jen’s porch, enjoying the crisp early October e
“Jo and I are both in love, Jen, so now it’s your turn.”

Jen shrugged. “Oh, I’m pretty content here with Luke. He’s all I
The thought of her young son brought a smile to her lips. He was curre
at the marina, helping his grandfather and great-grandfather detail bo
should be home any minute since he needed to get showered and in
Tomorrow was a school day.

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

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

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

Jen narrowed her eyes. “I’m sure he is, but he lives in Pittsburgh
really into the whole long-distance thing.”

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

ide. A shiver traveled down Jenny's spine at the thought of Gabriel Dr. "their geeky classmate who'd come back during the summer for their first high school reunion and blown every woman there away with how much he's changed. His bristly crewcut had grown out to lush, longish dark hair that made her long to run her fingers through it, and his deep-brown eyes, longer hidden behind thick-lensed glasses, gave him a bit of a mysterious downbrooding Heathcliff air.

the boat Gabe and Jen had hit it off over reunion weekend and had exchanged a few emails and texts since he'd returned to Williamsburg, Virginia, where he left, was an adjunct professor of Archaeology and Colonial History at Virginia Mary University. But that weekend had been rushed and as the semester, when he had transitioned, classes kept him occupied, while summer, with fall semester second, was the busiest time at Weaver's Landing Marina, where she had worked as bookkeeper/webmaster. "Gabe and I aren't a *thing*. Again distance. It was fun to get to know him again at the reunion, though she realized that the last time he and I had spoken to each other was finally senior year when he drilled me on history facts to get me through the time Cooper's American history class." She shook her head, remembering teenaged and very nerdy Gabe sitting on the counter in the marina, repeating dates and places while she restocked the spinner bait display "need." "Too bad there was no chemistry back in the day," Jazz observed bluntly up "You could've avoided years of misery with Tuff."

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

The kid in question came through the front gate before Jo could reach Byron dragging his heels and looking beat down to his socks. Jenny's heart melted. He is mushy at Luke's disheveled appearance, his chestnut hair awfully sweatshirt damp and grubby. He was earning video game money help. Not at the marina, and knowing her grandfather, Roy Weaver, she was sure he'd worked hard for it. "Hey, dude. Looks like you could use a shove. Good Dr. some food."

"I'm wiped." Luke dropped down on the step next to Jo. "Grandpa

Lawson, isn't so tough, but Grandpa-Great sure is."

Jen chuckled. "Yeah, I remember. Grandpa Roy can be a real ch he'dboss."

Jo ruffled Luke's hair. "Detailing boats is hard work, kiddo. What yes, nohave you on?"

Luke leaned his head against the porch post. "The shop vac." He

his eyes briefly. "Man, if I missed a tiny piece of anything, he made angled aback and redo the whole carpet. Nine boats, Mom. *Nine*. My shoulders

Jenny rose. "Shower first or food? We have some stuff left." She Williamher head toward the charcuterie board on the low table in front of the s

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

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

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

With an affectionate smile, Jenny sat back down, reached into the ls weekcooler beside her, and handed her son a frosty bottle of water. "Here

gh Mr.drink up. Then you can get a shower and fall into bed. Do you ha nberinghomework?"

His mouth full of sausage and cheese, he simply shook his he

Jenny watched in amazement as her son finished off everything left l wryly.tray, except the pickles, which he hated.

Lucas was built exactly like his father—tall for his age and nd nowalready showing signs of the burly man he would one day become. Je

ad beenmoment of regret that Tuff was missing out on so much of his son's l missiveshe'd had no choice. She simply could no longer be near Tuff in l

ir awayHe'd made Lucas's and her lives miserable with his cruel rebukes, fo l, "Likeby weepy, drunken apologies, making promises and then never showir

get Luke when it was his time to have his son. He'd made only half- espond, objections when she'd floated the idea of returning to River's Edge to

turnedher family. Both she and Luke were so much happier here.

And now her family was changing again. Jenny gazed over at he ing outtousled head before turning her eyes on her sister, Jo, whose coun

certainreflected exactly how blissful she was to be going off to Durham ver andCarolina, with her love. Even through the tinge of envy that Jen c

deny, she was truly happy for Jo and for her other sister, Jazz, whose a Markturned upside down for the better when she returned to River's Edge c

Year's Eve and renewed her relationship with her high school sweetheart, fierce Walker. Everyone was in love. Everyone but her.

What did he



closed PROFESSOR GABRIEL DAWSON fidgeted in the St. Mark's Emergency waiting area, anxious to get back to wherever his mom had been taken to. "I got hurt." hour earlier. He rose and paced the length of the room, peering into the tilted windows on the double swinging doors to the treatment rooms, waiting for the doctor. What would happen if he just stormed the place and demanded to see her?

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

Chris squeezed his arm—hard. "Gabe? Mom?" Gabe's heart fell. *Dammit.* He hadn't meant to lose track, but he had. Florida. He plucked the fern from her hair, handed it to her, and led her out of the waiting room, past the row of vinyl chairs by the window, where the afternoon sun shone through the glass, onto the immaculate tile floor. "I got to the house just as the ambulance arrived," he explained. "I'm here to check out a dig down the river area. Some workman found what they think might be a Shawnee settler's encampment in the cliffs while they were digging foundations for their son's condos that are going in about a few miles east of town. What's interesting is they're finding both indigenous and Colonial artifacts at the place up there and—"

Florida. He plucked the fern from her hair, handed it to her, and led her out of the waiting room, past the row of vinyl chairs by the window, where the afternoon sun shone through the glass, onto the immaculate tile floor. "I got to the house just as the ambulance arrived," he explained. "I'm here to check out a dig down the river area. Some workman found what they think might be a Shawnee settler's encampment in the cliffs while they were digging foundations for their son's condos that are going in about a few miles east of town. What's interesting is they're finding both indigenous and Colonial artifacts at the place up there and—"

Chris squeezed his arm—hard. "Gabe? Mom?" Gabe's heart fell. *Dammit.* He hadn't meant to lose track, but he had. Florida. He plucked the fern from her hair, handed it to her, and led her out of the waiting room, past the row of vinyl chairs by the window, where the afternoon sun shone through the glass, onto the immaculate tile floor. "I got to the house just as the ambulance arrived," he explained. "I'm here to check out a dig down the river area. Some workman found what they think might be a Shawnee settler's encampment in the cliffs while they were digging foundations for their son's condos that are going in about a few miles east of town. What's interesting is they're finding both indigenous and Colonial artifacts at the place up there and—"

part, Elidiscovery in the cliffs above the Ohio River was the most e
archaeological find he'd heard about in several years, and he already
Mom was hurt, but okay—Chris didn't. He shook his head and came
the here-and-now. "Right. She's been back there for about thirty minut
was cleaning the gutters on the back of the house, which I told her last
Room would take care of when I got here today."

n a half Chris cringed. "I told her Jeremy and I would do it this weekend.
nto the fell off the ladder?"

ndering "Yeah, and landed half on the deck and half in the roses she
er. trimmed back. Fortunately, she turned instead of landing flat on her ba
wn hair her leg is definitely broken and possibly also her arm."

her job "Oh, God." Chris sighed. "Gabe. What are we going to do wi
he shop She's only fifty-four, but she still doesn't belong up on a twelve-foot
flowerscraping crap out of her gutters. Daddy always did that and—"

of fern "And she's determined to do everything the way Dad would have
1 doing Even if it means she breaks her neck in the process," Gabe finished
around sigh.

"She's going to have to move in with me while she heals,"
s sister declared, already strategizing, which was her way. As the older of t
his very and the one who'd stayed in River's Edge, she'd always been mature
calming age. She chewed her lower lip. "Maybe we can move a bed into the
hen she room, although, dammit, I don't have a shower on the first floor
le fear. simply have to—"

He touched her arm. "Sis, slow down. If she's broken both her a
ver to her leg, I imagine they'll put her into rehab for a while. Wait until w
through what's going on. Besides, Mom is the one who decides what she w
balancedo." He grinned. "She is a grown-up. We'll figure it out . . . all three o
ways—together."

ment or Dr. Lauren Mitchell-Lange shoved through the double doors just th
he new face unreadable. "Chris!" She came over to where they sat and tugg
akes it up into a hug. Gabe rose too. He didn't know Lauren well, althoug
all over graduated from River's Edge High with her brother-in-law, Ryker Lan
knew her husband, Rye's younger brother, Max, slightly. He'd r
briefly when he was home for his fifteen-year high school reunion i
but the and she seemed pleasant, although distracted and tired from doing
residency.

exciting She released Chris and gave Gabe a nod and a smile. “Okay, here
y knew we know for sure. Claire has fractured her tibia and possibly crush
back to shoulder. She’s headed down to radiology so we can get some pict
tes. She what we’re dealing with. The tibia isn’t a compound fracture. The
: night I bone sticking through the skin, but we think it may be comminuted
she paused when Chris held up one hand for her to slow down—“brok
So she least three places,” she clarified.

Gabe’s heart dropped to his socks. “Oh, God. She must be in agony
e’d just “We’ve given her a touch of pain med so she can get through the
ack, but halfway comfortably,” Lauren assured him. “No signs of concussion
awake and clear. She assured us she didn’t hit her head and she didn’t
th her? her back, which could’ve been disastrous.” She gave them an encor
ladder, smile. “All in all, she’s been pretty lucky, given what could have happ
a fall from a twelve-foot extension ladder.”

done it. Chris gripped Gabe’s bicep so hard, he winced, but he simply slip
with arm away, put it around her, and pulled her close to him. She had t
least as panicked as he was, but they both needed to hold it together. “
’ Chris we looking at surgery?” he asked.

the two Lauren nodded. “Most likely for the shoulder and possibly for t
for her We’ll know more when we see the X-rays. We’ve got Sam Carlyle, ou
diningsurgeon, on standby.” She extended an arm. “Why don’t you guys con
. We’ll and see her real quick? Then give me your cell numbers and go ge
coffee or a late lunch. It’s going to be a while.”

rm and “Will you do surgery right away?” Chris’s eyes shimmered with te
e know “Depends on what we see in the pictures,” Lauren hedged, an
rants to didn’t blame her. They really didn’t have enough information yet. She
f us . . . her blonde head toward the swinging doors. “Come with me.”

ren, her
d Chris



gh he’d GABE PULLED HIS Land Rover up to the curb on Primrose Lane, slightl
ge, and from Jenny Tuffington’s cottage, and peered through the darkness. S
net her home. There were lights on in the house, which, of course, there woul
n June, wasn’t that late—only about eight thirty. It *seemed* late, though, becau
her ER been at the hospital for hours. This was probably a terrible idea,

's what wanted to see Jenny—*needed* to see her—although he had no idea
ned her was instinct, almost as if the Rover had turned up Primrose Lane of
ures of volition with an exhausted Gabe at the wheel.

re's no A deep breath later, he was out of the car and headed up the sidewalk
and"—leaves crunching under his feet when he opened the wrought iron
en in at Jenny's front yard. The porch light was on, and as he came up the sidewalk

noticed an empty wine bottle on the settee table, along with three glass
y." cushions on the chairs and settee were crushed and creased, as though
e X-ray had been lounging in them. She must have had company earlier
—she's glasses. Perhaps her sisters. Maybe he should've called or texted first.

land on Well, he was here now, and there was no point in lurking
uragingshadowed porch. He pressed the doorbell just as the sound of another
ened in spun him around. A sleek, low-slung Corvette came to a stop right in

the gate, bass thumping from its interior. The person inside—it was de
ped his a man's silhouette—sat for a moment, shaking his head to the beat
o be at blaring music before turning the car off.

'So, are Gabe watched with interest as the guy opened the car and hopped
hip-checked the door shut, and then vaulted over the low gate . . .

the leg. Unfortunately, he'd misjudged the height and caught the back of his
ir ortho jacket on one of the spikes across the top. "Dammit!" He turned,
ne back futilely to release the fabric, but he was in an awkward position. With
at some muttered oath, he slipped his arms out of the sleeves and, as he yanked

jacket free, Gabe heard the sound of ripping denim. That jacket was pr
ars. a goner.

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

Gabe squared his shoulders. "I might ask you the same question."
y down The man lifted his chin and stepped onto the porch, his shoes
he was squeaking on the shiny wood floor. "This is Jennifer Tuffington's
ld be. It right?"

se he'd "Who wants to know?"

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

Ah-ha, that's why he looks familiar. It was Ryan "Tuff" Tuffington

why. Ituber-popular football hero in high school, who wouldn't have so n
its own glanced in nerdy Gabe Dawson's direction back then.

"Ex-husband?" Gabe reminded him with a dubious gaze. "I though
dewalk, was divorced."

gate at Tuff merely looked down his nose at Gabe, an expression he'd n
eps, hemastered in high school and perfected in the ensuing years. "Look,
es. The don't know who the hell—"

gh folks Suddenly, the front door swung open and there was Jenny, dre
—three jeans and a WEAVER'S LANDING MARINA sweatshirt, her long hair swept
a messy bun, and her brandy-colored eyes flashing. "What the hell's g
on the out here?"

her car
front of
finitely
t of the

ed out,
sort of.
; denim
, trying
another
ked the
robably

ouldn't
a belly
ket, the
alfway

neakers
house,

ton, the

uber-popular football hero in high school, who wouldn't have so much as glanced in nerdy Gabe Dawson's direction back then.

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

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

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

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

Jen held open the storm door, uncertain what to do. In the almost years she’d been back in River’s Edge, her ex-husband had never darkened her door. Despite a pretty clearly spelled-out arrangement, stated that she had full custody of their son and Tuff had visitation he’d actually only seen his son twice since she’d moved—both times been she who’d flown down to Florida to bring Lucas to his father stayed in a hotel, spending time with a couple of old friends who abandoned her after her divorce, or else she lounged by the hotel reading, while Ryan played father of the year and took Luke to Disney and other Central Florida attractions.

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

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

Tuff gave Gabe what could only be described as a triumphant grin and swaggered past Jen and into the house with a “Later, loser,” to Gabe who merely backed up slightly into the shadows.

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

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

rather
inkyard

"Not your fault," he said. "You weren't expecting me. Or *him*, I suppose."

lthough
r other

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

it smile
?" The

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

Alarmed, she touched his arm. "Oh, God, what happened? Is your arm okay?"

ost two
r once
, which
rights,
s it had

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

. She'd
hadn't

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

l pool,
r World

"She's in a room and knocked out with pain meds right now. The nurse called Chris and me home. Told us to come back tomorrow morning after noon. My expression turned shy. "I don't know why I'm here. I—I just wanted to see you."

n here.

ian she
at Tuff.

Instinct took over and Jen reached for him, drawing his lean frame into a hug that wasn't intended to be anything more than comfort for a moment. But when he put his arms around her, her insides turned all melty, and she

,"
n as he
e, who

gave in to the urge to stroke the soft flannel of his shirt. Sudden as he realized he was shivering, whether from the cool air or shock, she was sure. Rubbing her hands up and down his muscular back, she made a decision right then and there and tipped her head back to stare into his eyes. "Come in. Are you hungry? I've got some vegetable soup I can heat up for you, or at least a cup of coffee?"

e porch.

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

with his Jen narrowed her eyes. “He’s going to go upstairs, visit with his k
xy? His few minutes, and then he’s out of here.” She released him, despi
trendily delicious it felt to be in his arms, and took his hand.

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

spect.” He was right, although that didn’t make letting him leave any
ed up as appealing. She sighed, and held onto his hand, which was sort of roug
.”

guy who spent his days in a classroom. Maybe it was from the archaeo
school? dig he’d spent his summer working on in Virginia. Scraping around
find up dirt, looking for artifacts, was no doubt hard on one’s hands. “
had just probably right. I didn’t even think. What *is* he doing *here* on a Tuesda
in the middle of football season?”

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

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

Gabe pulled her closer to him and looked down at their clasped
red the “I’m going to be here for a while, I think. At least until we know
a long going to happen with Mom.” He pulled her even closer and pressed

kiss to her forehead. “Go on in and deal with”—he gave her a wr
magine—“*him*. Text me later if you like.”

Jen closed her eyes as his lips touched her hairline, aching to simp
ey sent him, drag him into her bed, and ravish him. It had been too long sinc
ie.” His been this physically close to a handsome man, and the good profess
l to see setting off all kinds of zings and pinwheels in her veins. The l

disappointment in his eyes told her chances were good he wouldn’t res
e to her Suddenly, he peered down into her face. “You’ll be okay, right? .

friend, he isn’t . . . he wouldn’t . . .” Color rose in his cheeks. “I’m sorry. Y
and she he . . . not really any of my business. But . . . you’re *safe*, right?”

ly, she Jen smiled and ran her hand over his stubbled cheek and down
wasn’t flannel covering his bicep, enjoying the firm muscles there. He worke

decision neither that or archaeology was more work than she knew. How c
ome on scrawny, shy, bespectacled kid from high school turn into this warm,
u. Or at man? How had she missed that this was who was lurking beneath the

façade all those years ago? “Yes,” she reassured him. “I’m fine.”

ie door. He looked like he wanted to say more; instead, he merely touched her cheek and released her hand. "I'm a text away. I can be here in less than five minutes."

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

Jen crossed her arms over her breasts and shuddered at the thought of what more was waiting for her inside. *One step at a time*, as Grandpa Roy had always said. First, she needed to find out why Tuff had shown up on her doorstep. A logical feeling of dread washed over her. Whatever had brought head coach Tuffington from Central Florida all the way to River's Edge in the middle of Eastman University's football season couldn't possibly be good. It was a rainy night.



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

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

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

, hunky Glancing around the kitchen, he wondered what was around to snore. It was a nerdy Mom might not be able to cook to save her soul, but she could bake

hed her champ. Plus, she always had great snack food around—cookies, chips, granola, cereal, even fruit and juice and always, always coffee. Her dual coffee maker was an expensive machine that served either a pot or a single cup of coffee. The basket sitting next to it had a variety of pods from French roast to the front Kona blend to decaf. Mom knew coffee and made the best oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies in town.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He sent back a heart emoji, even though he objected to emojis on principle—what was wrong with using actual words? Grabbing his plate like a cookie, a paper towel, and his coffee, he debated clearing the breakfast table. Instead, he carried his makeshift

candy, past the dining room—that table was actually pretty clear except for a maker of mail—and headed to the den/library, which was his favorite room in coffee, mom’s house.

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

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

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

Gabe nibbled on a warm cookie, letting the sensation of sugar and chocolate and peanut butter fill his senses and bring memories of days in this room as a child. He’d learned his love of American history here from his dad, who prepared his lessons on the antebellum South, the Civil War, Reconstruction. The shelves contained volumes on every possible aspect of American history, and Gabe had found his own passion in the books of Colonial America, the Founding Fathers, and the birth of a nation.

He rose and wandered slowly around the room, pulling out a book and then, and tucking it back in place. At the credenza, he stopped and opened the bottle of Evan Williams, sniffing the familiar aroma of vanilla and caramel and oak. Turning up a short glass, he poured a finger’s worth and tasted it. *Nope. Sorry, Dad.* Even though the liquor warmed him all the way

a stackdown to his stomach, he just wasn't ever going to be a bourbon connoisseur in his except maybe in eggnog at the holidays. Fortunately, it wasn't a requirement

for a professor to enjoy Kentucky whiskey, although as a kid, Gabe had been heavy, wanted nothing more than to emulate his father in everything.

sk. The Settling back into the chair and nabbing another cookie off the tray as they clear away the taste of the whiskey, Gabe's thoughts turned to the

memory of a Weaver . . . Tuffington. He'd never get used to thinking of her as an old friend any day, except Jenny Weaver. He'd had a mad crush on her in high school, but

she had taken him too long to work up the courage to even speak to her, much less ask her out on a date. As a cheerleader, she'd always dated football

players, finally ending up going with Ryan Tuffington through the end of junior and senior years.

his heart. What she saw in him, Gabe had never figured out. To him, Tuffington was David nothing more than a big gorilla who liked cute girls, sneaking between classes to

play football, in random order. He was at least twice Jenny's size and always seemed so small and fragile next to Tuff's brawny frame. Gabe

drank his coffee, enjoying that warmth much more than the whiskey's, and he had been head back and closed his eyes.

She had always been friendly and kind, even turning to him for help when she was practically failing history class senior year. He still recalled sitting at the

counter in the marina shop going over and over dates and facts with her, trying to get her ready for the final. God, that had been heaven. She'd been a

library student, although her first love was unquestionably working in her father's

shop. He did remember she was an avid reader. She always had a stack of books if he ran into her at the library, and she loved to doodle. The margins

of her history notebook were covered with delicate drawings of flowers, birds, rabbits, squirrels, and other woodland creatures.

Her face, and Jenny's image, her big golden-brown eyes, long dark-brown hair, and her

gentle smile appeared in his thoughts, something that had happened a long time ago on their high school reunion weekend in June. He'd longed to kiss her,

but he hadn't—kiss her—the night of the dance when he'd brought her home after he'd

rescued Alex Briggs's yacht out on the river, but he'd chickened out, and the last time he'd seen her, the evening had ended just like tonight, with her

blush on her cheek. He was going to be home at least until the docs decided what was the way best for Mom's recovery. Maybe he could take some leave, stay with

drinker, and help her out. He could teach his classes online, at least 1
irement Thanksgiving, and do office hours through Zoom or GChat. He grab
be had phone and started thumbing thoughts into the Notes app. Hanging
would also allow him time to really check out the find at Rising Sun. /
plate to smiled, perhaps even spend some time with Jenny.

o Jenny
y name
it it had
ich less
all and
gh most

iff was
er, and
and she
e sipped
laid his

p when
tting on
h her to
. decent
amily's
stack of
nargins
lowers,

air, and
ot since
—really
they'd
nd that
a peck

ould be
1 Mom,

and help her out. He could teach his classes online, at least through Thanksgiving, and do office hours through Zoom or GChat. He grabbed his phone and started thumbing thoughts into the Notes app. Hanging around would also allow him time to really check out the find at Rising Sun. And, he smiled, perhaps even spend some time with Jenny.

Chapter Three

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

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

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

Tuff pulled Luke over onto his lap, where the boy settled with a contented sigh. “You got any beer?”

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

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

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

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

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

“You earning date money? Got a girlfriend?” Tuff teased, and Jen squeezed at the sound of her son's happy laughter.

“Daa-aad,” Luke drew the word into two long syllables. “I'm old enough to date. I'm only eight.”

“But you're going to be nine in a few weeks. Your mom and I were dating when we were about nine, didn't we, Jens?” Tuff looked up

offering the disarming grin that had always gotten him pretty much anywhere in the world he wanted. Even after everything that went down between them, he could still be charming.

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

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

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

Luke's eyes gleamed. "My friend Zoey is a girl and she's pretty nice." Tuff high-fived him. "That's my boy."

As much as she hated to break up this reunion, Luke needed to go to bed. Seven thirty A.M. and the school bus both came early. "Guys, it's bedtime."

"Nooo . . . wait!" Luke curled closer to Tuff's broad chest. "Can you read to me tonight?"

Jenny eyed Ryan, who looked as expectant as Luke. "We've just finished reading Harry Potter this fall. You up for a chapter?"

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

Jenny met them at the end of the couch. "Got a hug for your old

nythingkiddo?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

get into
s about



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

7 Potter She glanced up, finished typing, saved, and shut the laptop. “I can’t stand on keep him in pants.” She cocked her head toward the still-warm pot of coffee on the counter. “Coffee?”

d mom,

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

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

“He gave her a chagrined smile and patted his belly. “Trying to lose weight, so I had to pick either sugar or cream. The cream was easier to let go of.” “Ah.” There was nothing more to say. Tuff *had* gained some weight since the last time she’d seen him earlier in the summer in Florida.

“I like your house. It’s cozy. Didn’t this used to be the Coles’ place?” “It was, but Kate’s out at River Bend with Alzheimer’s.” She nodded at his stricken expression. “Yeah, for a couple of years now. Harley and Beck Lange last summer, and they bought that big brick place with the wrap-around porch on Evergreen—the one up on the hill right before the faded Methodist church?” She pointed, although the house wasn’t visible from the kitchen.

“Becker Lange married Harley Cole?” Disbelief colored his words. “Didn’t his parents ever send him any news from River’s Edge?”

“Yup.”

“Are you renting here?”

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

He must have sensed the chill in her voice because, immediately, he grinned. “Beck Lange and Harley Cole—man! That’s a couple I would’ve put together. Not in a million years.”

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

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

“It was the perfect opening, so Jenny grabbed it. “Why *are* you here?” “I miss my kid,” Tuff dissembled and he wasn’t meeting her eyes.

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

His eyes widened, and this time he did look at her—with a rather

“I can grin. “You keep track of our schedule?”

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

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

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

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

?” “Hold up. We’re super busy detailing and storing boats right now, added at well know, and Luke had a Scout camping trip already planned that we married I can’t pull him out of his activities on a moment’s notice. That car with the money and he really wanted to go.”

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

Jenny opted to ignore the nerd comment. Gabe Dawson was involved in Tuff’s business. “My dad took him, and they had a great time.”

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

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

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

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

“It’s under investigation, but they’re accusing me of paying one of Beck’s recruits and his parents. They’re claiming I bought the parents a condo in Tampa so they could be close to their kid and watch him play. That I’m paying him and giving them money to keep him on the field.” He

“And that I paid other students to take tests for him.”

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

“There’s more.”

but it’s Jenny blinked. *More? What more could there be?*

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

r cocky “A-are you . . . are you *serious?*”

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

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

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

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

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

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

granite
with him.”



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

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

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

“He’s at his parents’ house, right?”

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

“The old Lyle Lovett song?”

“Yes.” Jenny sighed. “When he came downstairs, it was like . . .”

guilty as when he used to put Luke to bed when he was little. Tuff seemed so
to leave be with his kid, you know?”

n, from “Then he dropped the bomb?”

r a few “When I asked him what he was doing home on Monday night
middle of football season, he tried to put me off by saying he only
ds and Luke. But I’m not stupid.” She gazed at Jazz. “Do you think he did

mean, is he truly capable of—” She stopped short as she spotted Jo ar
ill keep headed for the front door. “I’m not going to mention this to Jo right

They’re leaving this morning, and she’d feel like she had to stay
illing its supportive when there’s really nothing she can do.”

Prison? Jazz nodded. “I won’t say anything.”

“We brought bon voyage doughnuts from Paula’s!” Jo singsonged
x I am? and her fiancé entered the store. “Is the coffee on?”

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

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

pe off a “Well, that’s about the cutest thing I’ve seen all summer.” Alex
er back doughnuts, along with a smaller bakery bag on the counter by the regis
ver. Ah smile as blissful as Jo’s. “You three knock me out. No kidding.”

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

nded to Jo hurried over to take the carafe and bring it to the counter. Ja
cleared off earlier in anticipation of this celebration. “I love you, Mo
this is better. A long good-bye will only make me weepy, and beside
m him, be back at Christmas with Alex’s whole family in tow.”

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

Alex craned his neck to peer out the side window toward the

glad to yacht at the end of the line of slips. “He’s coming up now.”

Jenny set out nine cups and started pouring, swallowing the lump in her throat. She was not going to cry. Honestly, she probably was going to cry, but she was going to make an effort to keep her sorrow at Jo’s departure under control. This was good-bye, but it was also the start of a wonderful new life for Jo with a man she clearly loved and who adored her. Her sister and Alex every moment of happiness, and Jenny wasn’t about to be a Debbie Downer now. This morning. Which was another reason she chose to keep her ex-husband’s sudden appearance under her hat.

“I’m going to run back for half-and-half and sugar and spoons,” she said, turning away so Jo wouldn’t see the tears shimmering in her eyes. “I got ‘em,” Gram announced, coming in from the repair shop with Grandpa Roy on her heels.

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

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

Again, with a unison, “Hear, hear,” they all touched cups and drank again.

Jenny caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep it from trembling. Life without Jo would be strange and different, but adulthood meant that she wouldn’t be together forever—at least, not physically. However, their sisters were connected in such an elemental way, their bond could never be broken by mere miles between them. They would text and call and FaceTime, we’ll stay in close touch was so much easier these days.

After Jo got to Durham and Jenny figured out what exactly was going on with Tuff, she’d have Jazz over for wine and a long video chat with her sister. The knot in her stomach tightened. She couldn’t think about Tuff’s yacht. Taking another bite of apple cider doughnut, she shoved it into her mind, focusing on Jo and the journey she was about to embark on, literally and figuratively.

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

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

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

Downer *If only . . .*
his band’s

he said,

with Dad

, except
special
ised his
tsburgh

Grandpa
ou find
dded at

sipped

umbling.
that they
ie three
dn’t be
ie Time.

going on
th their
ff now.
back of
n, both

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

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

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

If only . . .

Chapter Four

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gabe dropped down onto the chair across the bed from his sister. “I’m not saying that, Mom, but there are some jobs that nobody, no matter how

their age, should do alone. Gutter cleaning falls in that category—as you know.”

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

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

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

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

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

He was already planning to stay here through the holidays and do most of his classes online. But coming back to town for a weekend in June had gotten him longing to return home. When his pal, Josh, a professor at State College had sent him that message about the new find upriver at Rising Sun, he immediately spoke to his department head about taking some time to check it out. Also, he couldn’t deny that Jenny Weaver—thinking of Jenny *Tuffington* made his eye twitch—was another reason to consider returning for a while. And now, Mom . . .

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

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

Claire’s eyes grew wider and Gabe could only imagine what was

you now on in her head. Chris and Jeremy's house tended toward chaos with working parents and two kids under the age of ten. "Oh, honey, that was about that's the last thing you and Jeremy need with the holidays coming a little hard for you to do your annual open house with me in a hospital room in your dining room."

for a kid. Chris waved away Mom's concern. "We can skip the open house this year. It's safe."

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

English *Go down.* Gabe bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing out loud. Nothing and nobody kept his mom from doing whatever she damn well pleased. Apparently, not even broken bones. He shot a warning glance at Christine, who'd already opened her mouth. "How's it gonna go down, Mom?" "I'm going to do whatever the docs tell me to do, including spending a few weeks in rehab if that's what they recommend, so I can heal and get strong for Thanksgiving. Christine, you live your life and bring me some flowers when you and the kids come to visit." She turned to Gabe. "Come on, I don't care if you're here to check out that new find in Rising Sun you told me about. It's all means, stay at my house. That way, I won't have to stop the mail. The mail someone will be there to keep an eye on things. But"—she wagged her finger at him—"don't let *me* be the reason you take time off teaching. Do it for Warner 'cause stopping the mail is no big deal and I can have the neighbors clean up the house." Once again, Claire looked from brother to sister, her expression dead serious. "Are we all straight here?"

for her as Gabe nodded his head while Chris hesitated, but finally agreed to consider "Okay," he said. "What can we do for you *today*, Mom?"

"Go finish cleaning my gutters." She chuckled, jerking a thumb toward Christine. "Take your sister with you. Because you know, the whole *keep time be alone while you're on a ladder* thing is important."

no." "Mom, I was going to stay here and keep you company," Chris offered. "The kids are at school, Jeremy's at the store, and Sandy gave me a few days off."

Claire laughed. "Go spot your brother while he finishes my gutter. I'll be going that, come back, and if you don't mind, would you please bring my if

with two my phone with you? Oh, and maybe a meatloaf sandwich from Mac's. Thank you, night was Monday night meat loaf, so he'll have sandwiches today. On. Bemayo, please."

I bed in Gabe pushed up out of the chair. "We're on it, Mom. You get some rest. I'll be back tonight."

use this



id to be

8. I love EIGHT THIRTY P.M. and Jenny's day had finally wound down enough for her to take a glass of Four Irish Brothers pinot noir out to the front porch and sit on it. It was an unusually warm October evening. Her days of porch-sitting would be cut out loud, fewer as the weather cooled off. Leaves were beginning to fall, and she grimaced at the carpet of color on her pocket-handkerchief-sized yard. "I have to get the rake out at some point and get them cleaned up before the rain arrives on Saturday. Or maybe Holly and Aidan's son, Luke, could come by and run the mower over them. Hadn't she read online somewhere that it was better to mulch them?"

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

"What are you doing out of bed, kiddo?" She held out her arms and Luke finger-pushed open the door and rushed into them. "Oof." She settled him on her lap. "You're getting so big, pretty soon, you won't fit on my lap anymore." Luke snuggled his sturdy frame into her embrace, resting his head on her shoulder, his breath warm on her neck. "I can't sleep."

"Have you tried?"

"Yes, but my mind is too busy."

"What's in there, bud?"

Luke sighed deeply. "Is Dad okay?"

Jenny's chest tightened. Had he heard Tuff talking last night? "No, you ask?"

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

After Jenny chewed her lower lip, debating how much an almost-nine-year-old could

’s? Last kid could process. “Dad’s on a little vacation from school right now.”

lotsa “Who’s coaching?”

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

“He said we were going to go to the high school on Saturday and the football. He says I’m a-agile? He says I should be fast. He wants t me to be a . . . a running back?” He tipped his head to look at her. “W r her to running back?”

d enjoy “It’s a position in football, honey.”

become “Do I have to go? I’m supposed to sell popcorn at Deke’s on S and shewith Ali and a couple other kids from Scouts, and later, Grandpa is g . She’d pay me and Jake and Paulie to start scrubbing the docks.” He sat up a fore theher a pleading look. “I almost have enough dollars saved up for Mario Mateo, “I’ll talk to your dad. You committed to do those other thi e that it Saturday, so you need to do them.”

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

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

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

Jenny tugged him closer and kissed his sweet-smelling hair. “Do asleep here, sweetie. You are too big for me to carry up to bed.” I continued to rock and hold him, relishing the mom-cuddles time th becoming more and more infrequent as her son matured.

In no time, Luke’s breathing slowed. He’d fallen asleep, but Jen Why do too comfortable and too tired to try to wake him. A few minutes mo she’d lead him up to bed. Right now, though, the sounds of autumn—he was leaves, an owl’s lonely hooting somewhere down the street—the scen low in neighbor’s wood-burning fireplace, and her son snuggled close in h left her feeling perfectly content.

ear-old Headlights came up the street from the corner and, peering i darkness, Jenny recognized Gabe Dawson’s old Land Rover as it sto

front of the house. Her heart beat a little bit faster as his tall, lean man stepped out of the driver's door.

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

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

Saturday Gabe leaned against the porch column, his arms crossed over his chest, looking at the faded image of Indiana Jones on his sweatshirt, but he didn't give her a second glance. "She's doing okay. Probably be home in a few days, before they send her to River Bend for rehab." He smiled and, wow, the dimples through his scruff about her out of her chair. "She doesn't let much get her down. By next week she'll be cleaning up leaves around the rehab and bossing doctors' hearts." He chuckled. "All from a wheelchair."

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

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

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

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

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

"What?" He came up to the porch from his spot on the top step.

in form perched on the settee across from her.

Heat rose up her neck. “Nothing.” She met his eyes. “I need to get her lapkid up to bed.”

“Want me to carry him up?”

“Could you? That would be great, thanks. Otherwise, I’ll have to shiver him up enough to make him walk.” She loosened her hold as Gabe

slid his hands under Luke’s knees and back and lifted him from her lap as easily as if Luke had been a bag of feathers. The man’s lean form was deceptive—he was the kid strong. The back of his hand brushed her chest, causing another strange sensation when, suddenly, his fingers got wrapped up in the ties of her chest hoodie. He stopped, hovering over her, his coffee-scented breath warming her cheek and she ached to turn her lips to his.

Gently, reluctantly, she untangled them so he could step back and breathe some air, but the connection had happened. He felt it too. She caught his eyes and in the slight upturn to the corner of his mouth. She put her hand to her forehead, gaze from his and tilted her head toward the door, then slipped past him and held it open while he passed.

“Up?” He lifted his chin in the direction of the walnut staircase. She nodded and led the way, too aware of how right it felt to be with this incredibly handsome man to participate in a rather intimate parenting moment with her. Up in Luke’s room, she straightened the *Star Wars* comforter on the bed and stood back as Gabe laid her son ever so carefully down, pulled up the covers, and picked up Luke’s well-loved stuffed beaver that was lying on the pillow nearby.

“Who’s this?”

“Wally.”

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

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

“Cute.” He placed Wally under the blankets with Luke.

Luke mumbled, clutched Wally to his chest, and rolled over on his side. Jenny lingered a few seconds, long enough to drop a kiss on his forehead and run a hand down over his blanket-covered calf and

“Love you, love you,” she murmured and followed Gabe out into the hallway, turning off the light on the dresser as they passed by.

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

ily as if He sipped his wine and nodded appreciatively. "Those Flaherty
s really sure mastered pinot, haven't they? Are they growing the grapes or im
orm of them?"

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

Gabe nodded. "Frankly, I'm not a big wine drinker. When I drink
d allow isn't very often, I generally drink beer, sometimes rum, but I'm lea
d see it new appreciation for wine. I have a colleague—well, um . . . a friend—
lled her big into Spanish wines and California reds, and she's trying to teach n
him to hold the glass up to the porch light and peered at her through i
learning."

She. Jenny caught the pronoun that he'd tossed into the conversa
for this blithely as well as the way he'd corrected the description. Her heart d
noment Apparently, he was already involved with someone in Virginia, des
r on the interest he'd seemed to show when he was home for the reunion th
lled the summer. And why would that be a surprise? He was a thirty-four-y
ying on college professor who'd been away from River's Edge for years. Of
he has a life back in Virginia. Inwardly, she swallowed her disappoint
didn't matter. There was no point in looking for anything beyond
friendship with the delectable Dr. Dawson since he'd be gone again i
, weeks anyway.

hes old
e *It To*

side.
r son's
id foot.
nto the

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

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

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

Gabe nodded. "Frankly, I'm not a big wine drinker. When I drink, which isn't very often, I generally drink beer, sometimes rum, but I'm learning a new appreciation for wine. I have a colleague—well, um . . . a friend—who's big into Spanish wines and California reds, and she's trying to teach me." He held the glass up to the porch light and peered at her through it. "I'm learning."

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

Chapter Five

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

She straightened, peering through the dim light. “I’m back here, honey.”
“Mom, Mommy! Look!” Luke wove his way through the boats, his feet crunching on the gravel floor.

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

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

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

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

“You and Daddy went to Cincinnati today?” The puppy sat still in Jenny’s hands, its eyes huge, clearly frightened. Tuff had said they were going hiking in the state park when he picked Luke up this morning. He hadn’t mentioned driving to Cincy—and he sure as shootin’ didn’t remember buying their son a dog. “Where is Daddy?” She peered toward the back doorway, hoping to spy Tuff’s little sports car, but saw only the

parking lot and the bright midafternoon sun. He'd damn well better not have dropped Luke off with a puppy and driven off with no explanation.

"He had to go pick up Grammy and Grandad for a show at the car show. He dropped me off 'cause we saw your car was here."

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

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

Jenny sighed as Luke continued murmuring to the puppy, who was looking at her with no question about that. But she knew nothing about dogs. The Weavers had always been cat people—Evinrude and Mercury were the current marijuana. They kept the mouse population to a minimum and enjoyed treating the fishermen who came in with a full catch after a day on the river. The gray tabbies slept in baskets back in the Parts department and wandered around the property at will, never venturing up to the road or into the parking lot. They seemed to know instinctively where danger lurked. Or at least they did, since their bread was buttered on since Jenny kept their bowls filled with puppy, and dry food.

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



THEY ARRIVED AT Happy Pets, the pet shop tucked into the bottom floor of an old brick building at the corner of Harrison and 4th Streets, with only one empty

not have minutes to spare before closing. Pearl Douglas's parents had opened Pets in the late fifties, and when they retired to Arizona some fifteen years ago, they passed the business to Pearl and her wife Bea. Pearl and Bea immediately made changes, opening up the storefront by replacing the picture window with one twice as large, which allowed the eastern sun to flow in and brighten the whole shop. They repainted the faded gray walls a soft buttery yellow, had a new sign made, added bright pendant lights from her high ceiling, and replaced all the aquariums along the back wall.

Bea welcomed them with a warm smile. "Hello there." She eyed Luke from behind the heavy wooden counter, which she and Pearl had refinished, but hadn't replaced, in order to keep some of the old-fashioned vibes that made the store a favorite of pet owners in River's Edge. "Who have you brought, and where, young man?" Luke held up a very sleepy puppy. "This is Harry Potter. I want to get a Cavapoo."

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

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

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

Jenny shrugged. "I have no idea if he has papers. His dad got him some papers in Cincinnati this afternoon. I'm just grateful you're open on Sundays."

Bea looked askance. "Tuff's back in town?"

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

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

The two women edged over to the pet food section, where Jenny rolled her eyes at a huge, disgusted sigh.

Bea's smile was knowing, but she kept her voice low. "Is it possible to assume Tuff didn't discuss this . . . *acquisition* with you?"

Jenny closed her eyes for a second. "He didn't even have the time to come in with Luke. Just dropped him at the marina, puppy in hand."

Happy “That was low.”
n years Jenny snorted. “But typical.”
Bea had Without responding, Bea handed Harry to her and reached for a
e smallfood. “Here’s a good starter chow for him.” She held it up. “You’re g
light toneed a crate—it’s the only way to potty train a puppy, in my opinion. I
wall aa couple of used ones in the back—you can borrow one of ’em for now
s to thepeered across the shop at Luke. “How ya doin’, kid?”

“I found green! My favorite color.” He shook a narrow, lime-gree
d Lukecollar above his head. “I’m going to see if you have a leash to match.”
inished, Bea put the food on the counter and headed to the back room whil
be thatsnuggled a snoozing Harry against her sweatshirt and went back over
you gotLuke.

“Mom, don’t we need a bed for him?” He fingered a plaid sherp
He’s adog bed.

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

his dad “Here we go.” Bea came out of the back carrying a small blue crat
pair of heavy-looking clay dishes. “I found a couple old dog dish
ie aisle,They’re weighty, so he won’t be able to knock them around so easil
rs. Sheset everything on the counter. “I like the green, Luke. It’ll go good v
brown fur.” She held the nylon leash up to the sleeping puppy’s back.
for him “Thanks so much, Bea.” Jenny’s sense of being overwhelmed had
” to subside somewhat. *A puppy. That rat.* She’d been composing a fie
to Tuff in her head all the way to Happy Pets, but feeling the war
ar and acritter snuffling at the hood of her sweatshirt, along with Bea’s ki
” seemed to ease some of the anger. Not all of it, by any stretch, but
a greatprobably better to calm down before she spoke to her ex, anyway.

er wear “Can’t believe this boy doesn’t have papers or early vaccination f
I’d check with Tuff. You’ll want him to have a thorough vet check as
releasedpossible.” Bea fished a business card from a holder on the coun
handed it to Jenny. “John Price. Best in the area, and you don’t wa
safe toaround other dogs until he has all his shots.” She rang up the sale, and
shake of her head at Jenny, who had dug out her credit card, accep
balls tofifty from a proud Luke, and gave him change, along with an eight
form. “Pearl is starting a new beginners’ obedience class in two week

lifted her chin. “Let’s get you and Harry signed up. In the meantime I reached under the counter and brought out a couple of pamphlets—a bag of some information about housebreaking and such. Luke, you and Molly are going to have to teach Harry Potter not to go potty if I’ve got the house.”

“See?” She Jenny handed the puppy back to her son, whose eyes shone with pride.

That expression was the only thing saving Ryan Tuffington from having his nylon butt kicked across the Ohio River. She watched as Bea stepped from behind the counter and explained to Luke how to fit the adjustable collar around Jennydog’s neck, demonstrating the quick release buckle and showing him the proper help-finger rule for fitting. “You should always be able to fit two fingers between the collar and Harry’s neck and you’ll have to pay close attention to the a-lined grows.”

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

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

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

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

“See?” Luke crouched a few feet away from her. “Come here, Harry. Come here soon as me.”

“See?” Bea held the leash very loosely and tossed a smile at Jenny, waiting for him to put the carrier and supplies in the back of the car. Harry tipped his head with his head back, and with a pleading look at Bea, rose and trotted right to Jenny, pressed his head into her hand like a cat seeking affection. Jenny was surprised that he didn’t seem to notice the collar. Then, much to her pleasure, he trotted over to the grassy verge by the sidewalk and squatted.

—she Bea unclipped the leash and removed the collar, and handed them
“here’s Jenny. “It’s best to start slow, getting him accustomed to the collar and
m read He’s got a lot to get used to, and so do you two. Let him settle in, and
potty in we can start with the collar and leash and the rest of his training.” Bea
the back door and Luke got in with Harry, cuddling him close and mur
ure joy. to him. “This breed is smart and they want to please you, so t
/ing his shouldn’t be too hard if you stay consistent.”

behind Jenny gave Bea a quick hug. “Thanks so much, Bea. I really app
und their.”

he two- Bea offered an encouraging smile. “It was a lousy thing for Tuff
etween Jenny, but that boy is already in love. It’s going to be okay.”

1 as he Jenny glanced at her son in the back seat as, with a sigh, she ope
driver’s door. “From your lips to God’s ears, Bea.”

fingers



r a new

“OH, JEN! WHAT a crappy, crappy thing to do.” Jazz didn’t even both
t home. *hello* as her face appeared on Jenny’s phone screen. Her disgusted exp
ow him matched Jenny’s state of mind. “So typically Tuff, huh?”

lk with Jenny had texted her sisters as soon as she and Luke had gotten the
fed and settled into his crate for the night. She found a certain f
rt leash pleasure in digging an old Eastman College sherpa-lined half-zip sw
phlets I of Tuff’s out of a bag intended for the church shelter, cutting the zippe
it door, it, and lining Harry’s crate with it. The puppy bunched the fabric into
s he set curled up amidst the folds, and promptly fell asleep. Luke was in the s
on hissing, and Jen had made herself a cup of tea, which she was enjoyi
ase justa doughnut left over from the box her dad had brought to the mari
morning.

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

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

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

ed.

both to “No kidding!” Jo agreed, and envy streaked through Jenny as Jo d leash.back against Alex’s broad chest and he rested his chin on her dai id later, “What the hell is a Cavapoo, and why on earth would Tuff get Luke a openedwithout talking to you first?”

muring Jenny sipped her tea. “It’s a cross between a miniature poo trainingCavalier King Charles spaniel. Ask me anything about them. Luke and been googling like crazy since we got home from Bea and Pearl’s. A appreciatewhy Tuff would do such a thing to me is the question of the hour.”

“That big jerk.” Jazz scowled, then brightened. “Go get it so we f to do,what it looks like.”

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

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

er with “*Jenny did not get a puppy!*” Jenny rebuked. “Jenny had a puppy c expression on her by a man who is going to be in severe pain the next time s him.”

e puppy Jazz’s fiancé, Eli Walker, appeared behind her, a smile wreath iendishhandsome, stubbled face. “Ha! Hey, Jen. You got a dog? That’s cool.”

eatshirt “No, *I* didn’t get a dog. Tuff got Luke a puppy in Cincinnati out ofwithout a word to me, and I’m going to kill him. I just need you guys to a pile,me figure out a way to get rid of the body after I’ve done it.”

shower, Jazz laughed. “Oh, come on, sis. It’ll be okay. We’ll help you v ng withpuppy. I’ll bet Lukie is over the moon.”

ina that “He is.” Jenny sighed. “And in typical Luke fashion, he’s on hi learning everything he can about training a puppy.”

f of the “It’ll be fine. They can grow up together,” Jo offered from h fiancé,position in Alex’s arms. “Boris is amazing.” She referred to Alex’s he sofa whom she had fallen almost as much in love with as his master. ‘ believe we never had a dog as kids.”

Jazz giggled. “We never had a dog because Mom is not a dog and I’mDad was fine with cats. We got our dog time at Gram and Grandpa’ snapped her fingers. “There you go, Jen. Grandpa will help you an with the puppy. He’ll be way into it.”

leaned Jenny nodded. “He will. I’m going to have to take him in to work v
rk hair since Luke’s in school. The information that Bea gave us says they need
a puppyout pretty frequently at first.”

“They do when they’re small, but look”—Alex held up his phone-
lle and here Cavapoos are smart dogs and it’s their nature to want to plea
l I have You’re already ahead of the game.”

nd yes, “Thanks, Alex,” Jenny murmured as she noticed a text notificatio
top of her screen, then another. “Shoot. Tuff’s texting me, the big ch
can see Her phone pinged a third time. “Oh, oh, and Gabe just texted.”

Jazz chuckled. “Sounds like you’ve got stuff to deal with, fr
n’t stop ridiculous to the sublime. We’ll let you go.”

sleep in “Wait! Gabe Dawson?” Eli had plopped down on the couch close
n curly so he could peer into her phone screen too. “Are you two”—he lee
winked—“a *thing*?”

ed over Even though her heart beat a little faster seeing Gabe’s name
message notifications, Jenny doubted it was anything other than kind
lumped had prompted his “*How was your day?*” text. “We’re friends, Eli.” Sh
he seeshated saying it out loud because she was pretty sure she’d like her fri
with the handsome professor to be more.

ing his Jo snickered. “Well, ignore Tuff for tonight and go text-flirt w
good Dr. Dawson.”

i today Jazz grinned. “Excellent advice. Or send Tuff an angry emoji text
to help him stew—he deserves it.”

How she loved her sisters, and the guys they loved were pretty gr
with the She tried not to feel like an outsider, a literal fifth wheel in their cir
and Alex were terrific, and they teased and treated her like their own
is iPad, but Jazz and Jo had entered a world that Jenny wasn’t part of anymo
they feel as though they were on the outside with their noses pressed
er cozy the glass when she married Tuff and moved away to Florida? Her hear
sheltie, a little bit, despite being glad for her sisters’ joy in their newfound love
‘I can’t Would it ever be her turn again? Did she even want it to be?

fan and
s.” She
d Luke

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

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

Nope, the device wasn't under the stack of papers he'd left there; it was on the lamp table. Where was the damn thing? He stood for a moment listening, then followed the sound to the wing chair. Tossing aside a colorful throw pillow, he reached down into the cushions and pulled his phone out too late to catch the call. Notifications told him he'd not only missed a call from Jenny, but a text as well. When she hadn't answered his text earlier, he'd gotten caught up in the information Josh had sent him, figuring he'd talk to Jenny at some point. Hell, he wasn't even sure who'd texted her, except that she'd been on his mind all day.

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

He pulled his mind from Josh's notes and photos and focused entirely on the woman on the phone. "Hey, you. Sorry I missed your call. I could have left my phone."

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

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

She sighed. "I'm . . . um . . . kerfuffled, as my gram would say."

"What's up?"

"Tuff got Luke a puppy."

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

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

"I'm guessing that's not his current age of . . ." He waited for her to say the number, although he thought the boy looked to be about eight years old. Gabe knew very little about children, but he enjoyed his colleagues when he was around them, which wasn't very often.

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

"So you're keeping it?" Gabe's logical mind went immediately to the idea of rehoming a puppy, although he was guessing that once a kid fell in love with a dog, the dog would be staying.

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

"Harry?" Gabe chuckled, quickly adding, "No wait, let me guess. Is he a magical Hogwarts wizard?"

Jenny's light laugh made him wish they were in the same room instead of talking on the phone. He wanted to see her whiskey-colored eyes light up and wait for the little curve of a dimple to show as she smiled. "Got it in order, but rather quiet."

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

"Yup, and thankfully, a sleeping little boy right now. I think the trick is to rely on Cincy did him in. It sure did Luke. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, even though he was certain he'd be awake all night thinking about Harry."

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

"God, no. He's in a crate in the kitchen. He ate a little puppy chow and a drink of water, did his business outside, and knocked off as soon as Luke opened the crate door." There was a rustling sound and Gabe imagined her

onto her plaid sofa, stretching, maybe pulling that fuzzy red blanket over his legs, before realizing he was missing part of what she was

“ . . . worrying whether he’d cry all night. I’ve heard puppies do that when they’re first taken away from their mothers.”

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

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

He’d sat in a chair as she gathered up the few personal items she’d left in his apartment over the months they’d been together—shampoo, a toothbrush, a makeup bag, a couple of nighties, a sweater, a four-pack of vanilla yogurt, and a bottle of wine—and shoved them into the capacious bag that she carried everywhere. He hadn’t said a word as she gave him a long, hard look instead of before storming out. What was left to say? Frankly, he was too aware of how blessed quiet after she’d left. Naomi was a talker, which normally didn’t bother him, but upon occasion, he’d wished she’d simply given him the highlights of her day instead of every excruciating detail. He’d even stopped picking up from ignoring her phone calls now and again because he knew he’d be in for a good hit more than he ever wanted to know. That probably should have been enough about that he and Naomi weren’t meant to be.

Why did he now long to stay on the phone with Jenny, hear all the news as to Harry Potter and the rest of her day? She’d charmed him so much despite the puppy’s curly brown fur, he’d even grabbed his iPad so he could look at the breed while she shared her day. Gleaning information from a Craigslist website, he peppered her with questions to keep her on the phone and to prevent himself from asking something inane, like, *What are you wearing?*

over her. That wasn't where they were—not yet, anyway. He chewed his lower lip, once again picturing Jenny, who had become even more beautiful in the years since he'd tutored her for the history final. But attracted as he was to his former high school crush, he didn't know whether she had any interest in anything beyond friendship.

Well, despite having known several women over the years, he still didn't have a clue how to read them. Jenny had been kind and welcoming back in the fall for the reunion and they'd exchanged texts since then—friendly, chatty texts about goings-on in River's Edge or pictures of Luke scrubbing the deck or photos of his own work at Jamestown or even a quick picture of the trees in Williamsburg. Nothing even faintly romantic or suggestive—text messages he'd exchange with Chris. But they'd been enough to keep him from calling Naomi or seeking out any other female companions. Now that he was here and planning to stay, at least for a while, maybe he should. He stopped overthinking as she asked about his mom and if he'd been to the dig yet. He hadn't, but he was anxious to get out there. It was the first week of October, and who knew how much longer the weather would hold. He was planning a trip out at the end of the week, but Gabe really wanted to get left in before then. “Would you be interested in doing a drive-by with me tomorrow or the next day?” He surprised himself with the question.

Judging from Jenny catching a little breath, he'd surprised her too. That she'd liked that pleased him. “Would it be okay? I've never seen an archaeologist stare before; well, except at the Barnhardt Settlement. You used to work there in the summers, didn't you?”

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

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

“Did you?” Gabe was surprised to hear her admission. “Honestly, I didn't realize you even knew I existed back then.” Dammit, he hadn't meant to say that out loud. Her silence made him cringe. “I mean, you were always

ver lip, popular. A cheerleader, dating athletes, and I was, well, pretty much a
ie years Nothing except Jenny's breathing on the other end of the call. He
s to his up his neck as he gave it another go, no doubt just digging himself a
t in him hole. "I-I sorta watched you and your sisters from afar. Until senior
when Mr. Caldwell assigned me to be your tutor." Crap. Now he w
i't have coming across as some kind of perve. "I mean . . . you were . . . I . . ."
June at She finally rescued him with a warm laugh. "Of course I know
y text existed. You and all the other brainiacs intimidated the hell out of me."
ocks or He let out a low sigh of relief. "I can't imagine why. All I wanted
autumn be able to make a three-point shot like Conor Flaherty, instead of galu
he kind around gym class like some awkward giraffe. Oh, and date a cheerlead
to keep "You were our valedictorian, Gabe. Basketball wasn't your wheelh
onship. "Neither were girls." He chuckled. "I wanted to ask you out s
. . . badly, but I just couldn't work up the courage."

een out
the end
d? Josh



d to go "REALLY?" JENNY'S HEART thumped as she drained the dregs of h
maybe Another cup sounded good, but she'd have to get up and walk to the k
and she was too comfy there on the sofa, cuddled up under the fur
o. And blanket. Besides, Harry was in the kitchen and the last thing Jenny wa
ical dig do was disturb the puppy. "Yet you took *Jo* to prom."

k there He snorted a laugh. "An act of charity on her part. I'd asked
Carlson to go with me and she'd said yes. Rented the tux, bought the c
nuseum—all the right things, you know? Two days before the dance, she t
rned to she'd gotten a better offer—Brent Foster, star baseball player. .
ere and standing at her locker and heard the whole thing before I skulked awa
I had a class break, she stopped me and asked me if I'd go with her since she
have a date."

in high Jenny had heard the story completely differently—that Gal
censes, graciously asked Jo to go at the last minute after he discovered she
ilous of have a date. Jo even joked that her sisters might have paid him to ta

She never revealed what she knew about Gwen tossing Gabe over for
I didn't And what a crummy thing was that for Gwen to do? Jenny had seen
t to say now married and frazzled, with three kids and an overweight, blu
vays so

nerd.” husband, eyeing Gabe at the pub the night before the reunion. *Sorry at crept you, Gwennie. You had your chance.*

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

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

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

“Sure you’re interested? As I recall, history wasn’t your favorite subject.” “It was remembering the dates that killed me,” Jenny admitted. “Ever since I developed a whole new appreciation for it since I’ve been home, and I have made a couple trips to the Barnhardt Settlement. Wow, so very some place. I still can’t believe you worked there all those summers. What did you do?”

“Everything. From just being a kid playing old-fashioned games to the people passed through to working in the fields and helping reconstruct the barn and other buildings. My last gig there was as the assistant to the blacksmith. It was hot, sweaty work, but I sure learned a lot about life in early nineteenth-century Indiana.” Gabe’s enthusiasm was palpable, even over the phone. “And the dig now?” Jenny stifled a yawn. She was truly interested to have had been a long, exhausting day.

Gabe must have heard the yawn. “You know, it’s late, and I know Gwen probably going to be up early with Harry. Like I said, I’m going to go to the dig tomorrow morning—just a drive-by, well, a hike-by—Josh would like to get the county to close the gravel road up to the site since there are other houses around there and Beakins Construction is being great. Next letting him be onsite until we see what’s up there. Any chance you could have didn’t a break from work and ride along?”

Jenny considered the next day’s schedule. There was nothing urgent about the marina was going into its slow time. Just some boats to put into storage. She could help Grandpa with those after lunch, and Gram could handle the store, which would be going onto reduced hours soon, anyway. “I can’t Brent, some time after I get Luke on the bus. Around nine thirty or so?”

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

A little shiver of pleasure skimmed through her at his words. “I

y about Gabe. Good night.”

She hugged the phone to her chest before tossing back the red
out the hopping up, and doing a little happy dance right there in the living

She’d forgotten that feeling, that rush of fluttery breathlessness with
deep burr of a special man’s voice sounded in your ear. It had been
ged the long . . . so very long since she’d even been interested in a man, a

r. What rightly blamed Ryan Tuffington for putting her off men and relationships
much easier and safer to close her heart. But here was Gabe, knocking

object.” heart’s door, and she was tempted, very tempted, because Dr. Dawson
but I’ve not only gorgeous, he was kind and intelligent and fascinating.

and Luke He was also only here for a few weeks, which made him safe and
; that’s fear of getting too involved because the good professor would be

s. What Virginia before either of them had a chance to actually develop any
strong feelings for each other.

s while She tiptoed to the kitchen and bent down to peer into the crate
t cabins sleeping puppy. Harry snuffled in his sleep and burrowed deeper in

smith—fleece. Ah, good, still sleeping. She backed out, silent as a cat, and went
teenth—into the living room, turning out lights as she passed them.

ie. Upstairs, she changed into her jammies, washed her face and brushed
d, but it teeth, but grabbed her robe and her pillow and took them down

deciding that it was probably best to sleep on the sofa in order to keep
you’re puppy if he started whining. Sliding back under the fuzzy throw, she

o out to up her phone and flipped through her photos until she found two she’d
as able the night of their fifteenth reunion a few months ago—one of Gabe

are none meet-and-greet at the tavern. She’d taken that one from a distance un-
t about pretext of simply getting shots of the event. And a selfie of her and

uld take standing on Alex Briggs’s huge lovely yacht the night of the reunion.

Gabe looked delicious in both shots—tall, muscular, his black hair
nt since long, but combed back to show his lean jaw and sculpted cheek

storage. Carefully groomed scruff and his dark, soulful eyes gave him a per-
idle the appearance that had turned the head of every woman at the reunion.

an take heard the whispered comments that followed him through the tavern
meet-and-greet.

’ Gabe *Who is that?*

Surely that’s not Gabe Dawson!

Me too, *God, he’s McDreamy.*

I'll take me some of that.

throw, And he had been completely oblivious, or at least it had appeared so. Jenny and Gabe sat, tucked away in a back booth, catching up on the couple of beers. The server kept bringing drinks over to Gabe, who took a sip and smiled uncomfortably at whoever had sent it, but never made a word of any of them. By the time he left, after being there only about a half hour, there were at least six glasses on the table between them, and he'd joked on her they looked like a couple of lushes. The next night at the reunion, when Gabe was practically begged her to take him with her to help out a stranded boat, she realized how shy he still was, despite being a college professor, looking like a fun. No GQ model, and no doubt beating back women in Virginia with a stick. She chewed her lower lip and pulled the cover up to her chin. Had she truly been married? Engaged? In the several conversations they'd had, she'd asked and he'd never offered. Despite his offhand mention of a wine list to the female colleague/friend, he seemed very available, which was somewhat disconcerting. Jenny had closed off that part of her life after the incident, devoting herself to Lucas and the family business. She was—she searched for the term—*wary*. That was the word. She was wary and unable to imagine herself with a man again. Tuff had scorched her heart and she wasn't sure she could ever completely heal. But a little holiday fun with a charming, handsome guy was basically just passing through?

She picked up her glass. *Maybe.* She yawned and closed her eyes. *Maybe.*

a little
bones.
piratical
Jen had
at the

I'll take me some of that.

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

She chewed her lower lip and pulled the cover up to her chin. Had he ever been married? Engaged? In the several conversations they'd had, she'd never asked and he'd never offered. Despite his offhand mention of a wine-loving female colleague/friend, he seemed very available, which was somewhat disconcerting. Jenny had closed off that part of her life after the divorce, devoting herself to Lucas and the family business. She was—she searched for the term—*wary*. That was the word. She was wary and unable to imagine life with a man again. Tuff had scorched her heart and she wasn't sure she'd ever completely heal. But a little holiday fun with a charming, handsome guy who was basically just passing through?

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

Chapter Seven

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jenny stuffed her gloved hands into her coat pockets, mostly because she was dying to pick up the bits and pieces on the table, but she was afraid of disturbing anything. Each piece had a number written under it. What if she put something back down in the wrong spot? The table did interest

though. A broken pottery jug sat nestled against a little glass bottle that
have held medicine, while a round metal plate took its place next
—“Good grief, what is *that*?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

it might “Come on, let’s go. It’s cold, and Josh’s team will be out here
xt to aGabe led her away from the table and out into the sunshine again,
sure to close the flap and secure it with the Velcro fastenings. He held
closelyhand, and they clambered over the rocky path down to the road w
pouch.fingers snug in his grip. When they got to the car, he turned on the hea
air andold Rover. “I can’t believe how cold it is for the end of October.”
off their Jenny rubbed her hands over her arms. “It’ll be Christmas befo
y to theknow it.”

air and “Halloween tomorrow, though, then Thanksgiving, *then* Chri
ouch it.Gabe reached behind him to grab a plaid wool throw. “Here, wrap up
: of hisSometimes it takes the old girl a few minutes to warm up.”

“Thanks.” She allowed him to open up the blanket and arrange it
elet outhers shoulders, enjoying the simple act of someone taking care of he
; nearlychange. His breath on her cheek as he snugged the throw sent a fri
ogethersensation through her—all she had to do was turn her face toward h
eded toThe atmosphere in the old Land Rover warmed up and not merely l
er hairhe’d cranked up the heater.

er by.” Suddenly, his hands stilled and he canted his head, a question in hi
y like itbrown eyes and his lips mere inches from her own. “Jenny, I-I . . .
kindredscent of coffee and cinnamon accompanied his whisper, and it was as
ing twohad stopped for a moment and in the whole world, there were only the
ndship.them. The car windows were beginning to steam up, and Jenny’s he
about to pound out of her chest.

rehead. There was really only one thing to do—she framed his face w
being apalms and kissed him full on the mouth.

s were
sters all



practiveAT FIRST, GABE was too startled to react and he just sat there, lips close
open. Her lips were warm, despite the chill in the car, and the kiss l
antasticdeeper. Although this was a fantasy come true, he wasn’t prepared
muddyrush of feeling. Somehow between the ages of eighteen and thirty-fou
had managed to keep the low embers of his feelings for Jenny
inted tobanked. Now they were back and building into a bonfire. Sudder
ught ofGabriel Dawson was eighteen again, awkward, turned on, and unsure

soon.”do next. His teeth bumped against hers and she pulled back, her making colored eyes huge and her breath uneven. “Gabe, I’m sor—”

out his He touched a finger to her lips. “Shh. Let’s try that again.” This t with her initiated the kiss, soft and gentle at first, then building in urgency. He t it in the his tongue to the seam of her lips and she welcomed him in. His hear burst—this was Jenny! *Jenny!* His hands shook and he tugged her close ore you the blanket as their tongues thrust and parried. Heat shimmered b them, and he longed to touch her, slip his hands under her coat, un stmas.”WEAVER’S LANDING sweatshirt, and find all her curves and soft skin.

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

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

im . . . He closed his eyes, too aware of the effect she was having on him because He shook his head and met her concerned gaze. God, she was beautif kiss-swollen lips, her amazing, expressive eyes, her hair tousled whe is dark-tugged the knit cap from her head. He knew, in that instant, he’d do a .” The for her. He smoothed the strands and cupped her cheek. “It’s been a lo if timesince I’ve made out in this car.”

two of Her lips curved upward in a shy smile. “Yeah? When was the last t art was He swallowed hard, trying to get his emotions and his body ba control. “Never, come to think of it.” He glanced down ruefully with her console. “How do people do this?”

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

became He chuckled. “Yeah, it’s in my mom’s garage at the moment.” He for that her wistfully. “We do have two houses available and no parents to in r, Gabeus.”

Weaver She touched his cheek, and he wondered if the stubble that had gro ily, Dr.in the past couple of days was a turnoff. He hoped not. “That’s true. what to speaking of parents, I promised mine I’d be back before lunch. Dad h coming in and there are more boats to get into storage. Snow’s in th

sherry-think, even though it's only Halloween."

Impulsively, he leaned in and pressed his lips to hers again—c
ime, *hetouch* of her mouth before he took her back. A few hot minutes la
ouchedsettled back into his seat, glad that she'd reacted with the same passio
t nearlyfelt from her earlier.

ser with She loosened her scarf and fanned herself with it. "Where did you
etweenkiss like that, Dr. Dawson?"

ider the The awkwardness, the uncertainty, disappeared. He straightened
seat. The clumsy eighteen-year-old slipped away and he was a gr
it of hisagain. Unable to contain his delight at her flushed face, he grinned. "
into hiswasn't the only subject I worked hard at in college."

and he Her laugh rang out in the confined space of the Rover. "I had no id
offered a degree in kissing at IU."

"Well, that was actually part of my graduate work." He pulled l
l. "No."belt across his chest and snapped it. "Buckle up, Jenny Weaver, and l
ul—heryou back to the twenty-first century."

re he'd They rode back to her house in comfortable silence, although he w
nythingconscious of her, the scent of her perfume—a gentle mix of citr
ng timeflowers—wafting toward him as she raked her fingers through her lo

When they got back to her house, she didn't hop out right away. Inste
ime?" turned to him.

ck into "Are you going to be passing out candy at your mom's tomorrow r
at the His stomach dropped. "Oh crap, am I supposed to do that?"

She chuckled. "It's not mandatory. Turn off the porch light and
whichwill come to your door." Inspiration showed in her expression. "As a
a dozenof fact, why don't you come over and help me? Tuff is taking Luke ou
ation ator-treating, so I'll be on my own."

ie day." He jumped on the invitation. "What time? What can I bring?"

"Be here around six and just bring yourself."

e gazed "Is this a costume thing?"

nterrupt She smiled. "I usually dress up—this year I'm going to be Princess
"The slave costume? The gold bikini?" Despite the fact that
own outteasing, his mouth watered at the thought.

. Sadly, "Hardly." She smirked. "Sorry, professor, it's the white robes v
as partsheavy belt and the hood. Luke is going to be an Ewok. I worked for a
ie air, Ion his costume. Sewing that fuzzy fabric is hard! He looks darling, tho

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

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

learn to “I would argue that.”

l in his She smiled. “Thanks for showing me the dig. May I go again some

own-up His heart soared. “Of course. Maybe Luke would find it interesting

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

lea they



his seat

l’ll take“WHY DO YOU want your dad’s old, beat-up leather jacket?” Gabe’

glanced up at him as he pushed her wheelchair down the hall in River as veryRehabilitation Center the next morning. She’d just finished her first

us andwith the physical therapist, and Gabe had been pleased with how well ng hair.done. “It’s in the attic, in that green trunk with all his other old army st

ad, she Should he confess he was trying to impress a woman on Hallow

felt incredibly high school, although, really, how was it any differen light?” putting on a suit and tie for a date? “I’m going to help Jenny Weaver p

candy tonight, and we’re dressing up.”

no one She was quiet as he wheeled the chair into her suite and helped

mattercomfortable in the recliner next to the bed. When he plopped down

it treat-wheelchair opposite her, she gave him a knowing smile. “There’s also

old canvas messenger bag and a holster and belt if you need them.

have to improvise the gun and the whip.”

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

His mom chuffed a laugh. “Of course I do. You may be well in ; Leia.” thirties, sweetie, but you’re still my son, and I know you better than a

he wasShe reached out and patted his knee. “Come by and show me, or at least

Jenny take a picture of you and text it to me, okay?”

with the He nodded. “I will.”

month A few seconds of silence and then, “You want to tell me what’s ugh.”

pletely her?"

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

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

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

Mom pursed her lips and looked at him over the top of her glasses. "You're out of her life now, though, isn't he?"

Gabe's heart squeezed. "Not entirely. They have a kid together, and he'll always be there."

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

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

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

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

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

He caught his breath. This wasn't like his adventurous mother who had always encouraged him to *go for it*. It was *she* who'd pushed him to pursue a double major in history and archaeology when he waffled about going to grad school, telling him that teaching high school history would never be a career. She was the one who encouraged him to take the trips to Egypt, to the ruins of Rome, to Brazil, and the castles in the south of France during his summer

Caution was never his mother's advice, and yet... "Are you telling me I shouldn't think I should try to see what's possible with Jenny?"

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

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

"Gabriel, you've finally started teaching after years of going all over the tutoring world, digging in the dirt, and she's recently out of what I understand was a difficult marriage. She may not be ready for another relationship. I'd like to see either of you get hurt." She held up her hands defensively. "I know. He'll know. You are both adults and I wouldn't dream of telling you how to run your love life. Have I ever? Just be careful, okay?"

With a long look at his mother's furrowed brow, Gabe finally decided to drop a kiss on her forehead and lied through his teeth. "I guess I've kept Mom. Jenny is just a friend."

probably
day had
woman's

school
"And

mother's

school,
with her

er, who
pursue a
; for his
enough.
ruins in
breaks.

Caution was never his mother's advice, and yet... "Are you telling me you don't think I should try to see what's possible with Jenny?"

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

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

"Gabriel, you've finally started teaching after years of going all over the world, digging in the dirt, and she's recently out of what I understand was a difficult marriage. She may not be ready for another relationship. I'd hate to see either of you get hurt." She held up her hands defensively. "I know, I know. You are both adults and I wouldn't dream of telling you how to handle your love life. Have I ever? Just be careful, okay?"

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

Chapter Eight

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

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

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

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

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

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

The whole discussion had taken place in hushed tones to keep Luke from overhearing, despite the fact that Jenny wanted to scream at Tuff and tell him to buzz off. Shoving the last pin into her hair, she turned around. “You need to stop trying to buy his affection. He loves you, okay? You’re his dad. You’re not to be a dad. Stop trying to be his buddy or his playmate.”

Tuff winked. “Dads are boring.”

She glared at him. “They don’t have to be.” As she brushed past

head up the stairs, he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

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

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

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

one you behind the same round goggles off her “Let me.” She stood behind him and worked on the strip of fabric. “Watch now, it’s cross over, then through, around again, tuck it in, and pull a tug, and voilà.” She produced a perfect Windsor knot in the strip of fabric before picking up the scarf and wrapping it jauntily around his neck. “Hold on”—she opened a drawer in the vanity and plucked out a long strip of fabric—“we need to make Harry’s scarf, right?”

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

you’re and brushed his dark hair back to reveal it.

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

hed his Potter. Jenny wrapped her arms around him and pulled him back to her, dropping a kiss on the top of his silky hair. “Not a bit. You make a wonderful Harry Potter.”

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

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

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

I’ve got ad. Just “Coming!” Luke headed for the door, but stopped and turned. “You’re really pretty, Mom.”

him to Jenny sighed. “Thank you, sweetheart.” She reached behind her back. “Don’t forget your wand.” She followed him downstairs, gathering up the wand.

fabric pumpkin bag she'd made for him, too, and making sure he pulled puffer jacket on under the cape—it was chilly out there.

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

Jenny frowned. “You can beg treats off your eight-year-old son, y’see,” she baby.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Look! My dad is Hagrid!”

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

Luke eyed him up and down, then walked a slow circle around which gave Jenny the perfect opportunity to stare at him herself. W

know! You’re Indiana Jones. Mom and I just watched it the other night. I’m Standing there looking killer in a worn leather jacket over a khaki and dark-brown pants, Gabe shoved the sable-colored fedora back head and chuckled. “You aced it, kid.” He took a couple of packets of Skittles from his jacket pocket and dropped them in Luke’s bag.

“Thanks!” Luke pointed to the pistol at Gabe’s waist. “Is that a real if we Gabe pulled it out. “Nope, it’s a toy from when I was your age, holster is regular army and so is the bag. They were my dad’s.” He pointed to the canvas messenger bag slung across his chest. “The whip I borrowed the kid next door to my mom.”

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

had his “I don’t know. We can give it a—”

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

you big “Oh, okay.” Luke gave Gabe a sunny smile. “Thanks for the 500
Indy.”

t Clyde “Have fun, Harry.” Gabe waved as Tuff hurried Luke out the front door
face atwithout so much as a glance at Gabe, and allowed it to slam shut behind
ry, let’s Gabe sauntered up the steps, stopping on the top one and giving her a
and a bow. “Your Highness.”

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

He came up onto the porch. “What happened to your Ewok?” He peeked
next door where Luke and Tuff were already ringing the doorbell.
e steps,mind. I think I can guess.”

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

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

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

but the Meghan, dressed in a severe pants suit with her hair up in a bun tinted
inted toheld in place with a yellow #2 pencil, and wearing oversized black
ed fromcame up with her little Finn, dressed up as, of all things, an Ewok,

She waved at Gabe. “Indy! Why aren’t you Han Solo? We seem to
g fromtheme going here this year.”

Gabe rose and offered his hand to Jenny so she could stand up to

touch of his fingers sent zings of electricity through her. “Had I but
ng coatHi, Meg. Sam.” He nodded to both women. “I get the hippie, Sam, but

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

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

id him. Sam eyed him, then gave Jenny a raised brow. She could only i
r a nodwhat was going through her friend’s mind. Sam was an inco
matchmaker, but she merely chuckled. “You and Indy sure make archa
look smokin’, Gabe.”

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

“Nope, it’s a toy.” Gabe crossed over and knelt so he was at ey
vith thewith the boy, who looked exactly like a baby version of his dad,
rafe of“Crazy about your ears, Groggu.”

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

ld help Jenny watched Gabe tease and interact with the little ones as he c
r of thecandy into each bag. Why was this man not married and a father? His
love it.with kids was heartwarming and so genuine. Thank heaven he
married, though. He wouldn’t be here if he were. When she glanced
steppedcaught both Sam and Meg looking at her curiously. With a little shaki
chin tohead, she scooted over to the steps and held out her phone. “I want a
on herof me and the kids.”

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

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

up two
stumes,



hat wasGABE COULDN’T DISAGREE—JENNY did look beautiful in her long white
glasses,with her shiny brown hair in the braided coronet that was Leia’s si
in tow.look. He pulled out his own phone and snapped a couple of photos of t
have aWars entourage, then waved Megan and Sam over and went down
sidewalk so he could take a picture of the three friends together. “
oo. The

known social media, this one would go on Instagram tonight.” He shot them
Meg?” couple of different angles as they mugged for his camera.

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

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

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

re level “Do *not* quote *Star Wars* to me. We get enough of that nerdy cra
Conor. Brendan. He’s already got Maggie watching the original films an
barely two,” Sam teased as she lined up the shot. “Closer. Put yo
around her, Indy.”

ropped “It’s never too early to introduce a kid to *Star Wars*. They’re cl
rapport Gabe said as he obligingly draped his arm around Jenny’s shoulders ar
wasn’t her against his taller form. She fit perfectly and his body tighten
up, she warmth of her through their layers of clothing. He looked down and
e of her her gazing up at him, her smile sweet and intimate, her sherry-brov
pictures sparkling in the porch lights. When she slipped her arm around his w
swallowed hard, resisting the urge to kiss those plump pink lips. Mayl
re with pick her up and carry her inside. What did Princess Leia wear unde
robes, anyway? More clothes? Sexy, skimpy underwear? Or possibly—
earlier, “Want to try one looking at the *camera*, you two?” Sam’s sardor
brought him back to the chilly October night. She nodded when the
looked forward. “There we go.”

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

e robes, With thank-yous and good-byes wafting through the crisp a
gnature Flaherty’s left, but that didn’t mean he was alone again with Jenny be
the *Star* continuous stream of costumed kids and adults came through the gate
to the next two hours. At one point, Jenny went down and propped the wood
If I did open with a flowerpot, so it was easier to access. They barely had time
a seat and grab a cracker or a slice of cheese, let alone have a sip o

from before another troupe of trick-or-treaters turned up.

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

in your Luke flew up the porch stairs, carrying a pumpkin bag that was overflowing with treats, while Tuff came along at a more leisurely pace, lingering to tidy up the flowerpot and shut the gate. It took him an awful long time to get the latch closed, and when he turned around, his stilted walk told Gabe he had a few treats himself. Apparently, old Clyde Schwimmer was still passing up from mulled cider spiked with cinnamon whiskey to the parents of trick-or-treaters and she's Luke was wired, chattering a mile a minute about all the places they'd been, who they'd encountered, the costumes other kids had worn, and

Matt Santos and Aidan Flaherty had worn top hats and tails and tap shoes, their way down Main Street. "Mom, their feet made this clicking sound, did you know how?"

At the Jenny had pulled Luke onto the settee between them and Gabe caught a scent of little boy sweat and sugar wafting from him and his bag of given eyes. She smoothed the kid's dark hair away from his damp forehead, he said, he fully on her son. "No. Tell me how."

be even "Little pieces of metal on the bottom of their shoes. Matt showed me those, was so cool! I want to learn how to tap-dance."

— "Pfft." Tuff snorted as he swayed up the steps. "Aidan Flaherty's a little bit of a dick, but he's raisin' that kid to be jus' like him. You need to play football, get a scholarship to a good school. Dancin's for"—he grabbed the pillow and leaned against it—"the guys who couldn't make the varsity team. He closed his eyes.

Luke's face fell and the settee moved slightly as Jenny stiffened and pressed a kiss to Luke's forehead. "We can talk to Aidan about it, maybe he and Matt can teach you." She took the bag of candy from the boy's lap and set it next to her on the porch floor. "When you get up and get out of your costume and into your jammies, take a break, handed him a short bottle of water from the small cooler under the table. "Take this and drink it, brush your teeth, wash your face." She

him a little push. "I'll be up in a few minutes to tuck you in."

and Gabe Tuff opened one eye. "I can tuck 'im in."

when had Jenny gave the kid a little nudge. "Say your good nights, sweetie."

for one Luke startled Gabe by standing up, launching himself at him, and her, he him a hug. Even though Chris's kids hugged him every time he saved kids, Luke's little arms snugged tight around Gabe's neck for mere seconds

him inexplicably. This was different. This was Jenny's son. His heart bulging as he returned the hug. "Good night, Harry. Happy Halloween."

to move Luke stepped back and grinned. "Good night, Indy. Thanks for get the Mom tonight."

he'd had "My pleasure."

ing out Luke moved on to his dad, putting his arms around his father's waist and holding on. "Thanks for taking me trick-or-treating, Dad. You they'da good Hagrid."

and how Tuff hauled himself off the pillar and managed to hug his son -danced tipping over and crushing the poor kid. Somehow, he was even able id. You back into his character, lowering his voice gruffly. "I had fun, 'arry. S on Saturday, okay?"

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

Her lips pressed tight together and her hands clenched in her lap l me. It waited until Luke's tread on the stairs inside had disappeared before sl with Tuff. In the meantime, the man had dropped into the wicker r s a ham chair, his head thrown back. The ridiculous beard and wig had gone cc , Lukie, and was covering his nose and one eye.

lar next She popped to her feet and took a sip of cider before going over t team." in front of Tuff, her spine straight, her hands on her hips, and lookin regal. "Ryan." She paused, while Gabe debated whether he should stay ed her. If he knew how Tuff was going to behave, he'd get up and go in the after the while she handled her ex, but Ryan Tuffington was a big guy and Jen g full of small, if fierce. He watched and waited.

y don't Jenny prodded Tuff's shin. "Ryan. Get up and go home."

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

e settee She prodded him again, this time with a full-on kick in the shins. re gave Ryan."

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

“Giving Jenny held out her hands. “Give me your keys.”

“I’ve them, Tuff stuffed the hair into his coat pocket, where it peeked out, and moved like a half-mad tribble. “No.”

“swelled She held her ground. “Your keys, Ryan. You’re not driving home.”

“It’s jus’ a few blocks.” Tuff walked stiffly to the steps. “I’ll be fine helping

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

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

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

“without Gabe couldn’t stand it another minute. This wasn’t his rodeo, but he’d to fall was in no shape to take himself home, and it was obvious Jenny was

“see you the end of her tether. “I’ll drive him home and walk back while you get tucked in.” He crossed the porch and took Tuff’s arm. “Give me your planned old pal.”

“Good Tuff’s eyes widened as he opened his mouth to object, but then snapped shut, and without another word, he shrugged and handed over his car

“Jenny allowing Gabe to lead him down the steps and settle him into the passenger seat of the ’Vette.

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

“to stand ng very y or go. e house ny was

“Now,

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

Jenny held out her hands. “Give me your keys.”

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

She held her ground. “Your keys, Ryan. You’re not driving home.”

“It’s jus’ a few blocks.” Tuff walked stiffly to the steps. “I’ll be fine.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Nine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

How predictable. Gabe sighed. "Not open for discussion. Stay around."

"No, no . . ." Tuff laid his head against the seat back. "Wait. You're not. None of my business. Jen's a free agent now." His face fell. "I screwed up."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tuff’s brows came together in a V. “*What?*”

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

“Trudy Morrow’s boarding?”

“That’s my understanding.”

Tuff’s eyes narrowed. “So you think I should shovel horse crap?”

“It’s a job.”

“Think I might be a little overqualified, Professor?”

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

id Gabe
l to do



the ex-THE EIGHT-BLOCK WALK back to Jenny's was chilly, and Gabe was
forward to a cup of something hot and some time alone with her. Bu
y form,he arrived, the porch light was off and he saw only one light on insid
ook, gopeered in the glass at the top of the door. He wasn't sure he should r
bell—what if it woke up Luke? Biting his lower lip, he debated, then
wn-lowtried the knob. The heavy wood door opened with nary a squeak, an
' Tuff'sstepped into the small foyer. "Hello?" He kept his voice low, so as
1 prettydisturb either Luke or the new puppy.

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

ntract's Jenny's expression was one of perfect peace, which surprised him
rubbedhow her evening had ended. He was loath to wake her, but on the othe
she probably didn't want to sleep on the sofa all night in her Prince
s so far robes with a dog in her arms. He stroked a gentle finger down her che
im, hishe merely murmured and burrowed deeper into the cushions.

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

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

opened a "Hello, Your Highness." He touched her nose. "You probably need
lp." Heup to bed."

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

"It's a little after ten."

"How'd it go with Ryan?"

t of the "He's home and, hopefully, sleeping it off."

ices. "Was he crappy to you?"

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

“What did he have to say?”

“Nothing much.” Gabe wasn’t about to share any of what Tuff had been looking at—him—that was something the two of them had to discuss, and it was probably best if he stayed out of their broken marriage. “It was a pretty quiet ride as he was driving the truck. She rose and rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m so sorry you had to see that.” She gave him a small, slow smile. “You’re a very kind man, Gabe. Thank you for taking care of Dawson.”

“You’re easy to be kind to, Jennifer Weaver.” He touched his fingers to Harry’s soft curly fur. “Shall I put him back in his crate?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

enjoying the experience, so he threaded his fingers higher and had toldmassaged her scalp.

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

d to do Gabe continued the quiet pressure, feeling her relax even as h i, Gabemuscles began to tighten—some more than others. “Not lately.” Hi

came out raspy, and he was too aware of the effect touching her so int heek towas having on his senses. Surely, if he slipped one arm around her,

her back against him, she would feel what was happening and would y to thehis arms and—

is eyes. Suddenly, she yawned. An enormous, jaw-cracking yawn. As muc he firstwanted to sweep her up into his arms and carry her up the stairs

romance-hero fashion, it was clear he wasn’t going to be making old himJenny Weaver tonight.

t know, With a final whisk through her hair and a quick kiss on the top head, he turned her toward the steps. “Go to bed. I’ll turn off the fire a pleasanthe door on my way out.”

’t catch She took one step up before rotating to face him. They were nearly level. “But, Gabe, I meant for us to have some wine and raid chocolate stash and—”

within He put one finger to her lips. “Shhh. You’re practically asleep c e fuzzyfeet. I’ll see you soon.”

egan to She framed his face in her small hands and kissed his lips—a kis l with awith intention and maybe . . . promise? “Thank you,” she said, and behindhim again, quicker, lighter. “I feel like all I’ve said to you tonight i you. You’re a good person, Gabe.”

ost and Gabe touched his forehead to hers, all the while fighting the imp With aabandon all gentlemanliness and just make love to her right there te robe,stairs. “Get some sleep,” he whispered, and went in for one more kiss. night, Jenny Weaver.”

sion on
und her
ie dark,



d not to“I HAVE NO idea what the man is thinking. He’s a complete myster ress hisminute, he’s kissing me, then he’s gone for days on end. And the way clearly

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

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

tugged “I like it. Whose is it?” Jenny stepped closer to examine the watercolor in the Warner mansion dressed up in snowy holiday garb. “Harper Gaine’s. She’s Dot and Mary Higgins’s niece.” Jazz held up another picture as he one a photograph of Main Street all ready for the holidays, with lights in true lights and garland around every lamppost and storefronts decorated for love to Christmas. “It’s Annabelle’s—don’t you love it?”

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

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

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

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

pulse to Jenny considered dumping the whole story about Tuff and the car on the mess and Gabe having to drive a slobbered Tuff home and the disappointment. “Good end to the evening, but it had been too long since she’d had a private moment with her sister. She didn’t want to waste it complaining about Tuff. Tuff seemed to have disappeared beyond a couple of phone calls since Halloween. He hadn’t turned up for his visitations with Luke in over two weeks, but she got were texts saying he’d be *in touch*, whatever that meant.

y. One As for Gabe, he hadn’t totally disappeared, but he was so wrapped up in the dig up at Rising Sun and tag-teaming his mother with his sister, Cliff that he had little time for anything beyond the occasional quick, late

st thingphone call. It wasn't as if he was deliberately avoiding her, but he felt
ie frontShe was hoping Jazz could shed some light. After all, her sister ha
e right.dating experience than she herself had, which wasn't hard to do. Jer
married her high school sweetheart at twenty-two. She'd only ever sle
enniferone man in her entire adult life. Not that Jazz had had that many boy
backedbut she had dated in DC and even sorta almost lived with a guy bef
came home and fell back in love with Eli Walker.

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

e—this Jazz's *are-you-kidding-me* glance was a bit irritating. "To *him* yo
twinkleHe crushed on you all through high school, and you were too nuts abc
ted for to see any other guy. It's been fifteen years, though. Gabe has a life

Virginia. Maybe there's a woman he's involved with, and even if h
d at thehe's got a solid career teaching *and* he spends every summer traveling
the world, working on digs. He's not good husband or stepfather n
e." Jazzsis."

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

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

indow, Jenny scowled. "I can fling." She paced the airy space, admiring a
believehung with red-and-green, shiny, hand-blown glass balls. "And he does
like a guy who's involved with someone else."

e Ewok "Forgive me, sis, but I'm sure all the women Tuff cheated on yo
thought the same thing about him." Jazz continued unwrapping piece:
rostumetea set without looking up.

ointing Wow. *Low blow*. Perhaps Jazz *wasn't* the one to talk to about h
nomentlife. And Jo was so wrapped up in her new life with Alex and settli
ff, whotheir condo in Durham, she probably wouldn't be much help either
loween.blinked at the sudden stinging in her eyes.

and all Jazz looked up from her task and then set the box aside and walk
to Jenny. "Oh honey, I'm sorry. That was a crappy thing to say."

d up in "It was." Jenny swallowed hard, but let herself be drawn into her
ristine,embrace. "I want to be in love again, Jazz—grown-up love, the foreve
te-nightlike you and Eli or Mom and Dad. And I'm so damned attracted to Gal

distant. Jazz chuckled and pressed a kiss to Jenny's cheek before releasing her. "Who wouldn't be? The man's gorgeous."

Jenny had said, "He is, but it's not only that. He's sweet and smart and funny and s...
...pt with Luke."

friends, "He may be all those things, but, honey, he's also temporary." Jazz
...ore sheback to the box she was unpacking.

Jenny perched on the low sill of the tall window that faced the street. She
...it about know, and I don't want Luke to get too attached to him for that very

He's had enough of men disappearing. Tuff's in the wind again. You
...u were canceled four days with Luke in the last two-and-a-half weeks."

But Tuff said, "I saw him at Mac's night before last." Jazz arranged the tea servi
...back in small gate-leg table near the fireplace. "I went in to pick up carryout
...e's not, and Eli. He was sitting with Trudy Morrow, of all people, and the
...around pretty focused on their conversation. He didn't even glance my way."

Material, "Trudy? Really?" Jenny tapped her index finger against her lips.
...interesting. Is she divorced yet?"

That I'm Jazz shrugged. "No clue. That ass that left her way back in Janua
...: guy—she's pretty much run her stable alone all these years, anyway. I know

...taken on several boarders and plans to open a riding school as soon as
...You so crew gets her indoor arena done. She came in a couple months ago and

...if I could recommend someone to design flyers for her. I gave her
...mobile Gaines's name—she's a darn good artist."

...n't kiss "Why would *Tuff* be having dinner with her?"

Jazz smiled. "He used to ride, remember? All those sweaty nights
...ou within the stands at the county fair, watching him rodeo. Seems like I rem
...s of the he was pretty good."

"He was supposed to pick up Luke tonight and have him for the w
...er love but he texted he couldn't make it. Something's up." Jenny shrugged and
...ng into "I need to get back to work. Inventory in Parts. You know how much
... . Jenny is."

Jazz laughed as she followed her out to the foyer, watching as
...ed over shrugged into her coat and tugged on her gloves. "It's getting cold ea
... year."

sister's "Almost Thanksgiving. I wonder if Gabe might like to come for d
...er kind, Mom and Dad's. Jo and Alex won't be here until Christmas, but you
...be." "Will be there." Jenny's heart thumped at the thought, but then she s

ng her. “Nah, he’ll go to his sister’s. Plus, he said his mom was getting out o
next Tuesday.”

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

zz went “No?” Jenny lifted one shoulder.

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

reason.

1. He’s

ce on a

for me

y were

“That’s

ry. But

w she’s

s Jack’s

d asked

Harper

s sitting

member

weekend,

nd rose.

fun that

s Jenny

rly this

inner at

and Eli

obered.

“Nah, he’ll go to his sister’s. Plus, he said his mom was getting out of rehab next Tuesday.”

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

“No?” Jenny lifted one shoulder.

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

Chapter Ten

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

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

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

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

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

Jenny pulled out her credit card. "Going well, Mac, thanks. We're pretty much done storing boats and looking forward to *a long winter's nap* when the story goes."

"Your mom and dad were in for dinner a couple nights ago, and they'd already gone to winter hours."

Jenny nodded. "Yeah, winter's our slowest time. We make up for it from April to the first of November, though." She slid her hand into the hair

the bag and started to lift it off the counter when cold air suddenly struck back. The door had opened and, as she turned, there was Gabe, rosy-cheeked, tall and lean in jeans, a flannel shirt, and a puffy vest. A slow smile spread across his face as their eyes met, and Jenny didn't even realize she'd let go of the bag handles until Mac grabbed it before it hit the stool next to her. "Now. There's soup in there."

Figgins, for the simple greeting. Gabe's smile lit up the room. "Hey there, Jenny." His deep voice cut through the simple greeting.

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

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

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

milady, 't want Gabe glanced behind her at Mac, then around the room. Jenny felt a little feeling that the other diners were waiting with bated breath as well, and she thought she heard a general sigh of relief when his smile grew larger. "Let me order something and we can go down in my car—it's right outside."

on the "Great." Jenny sat down on the nearest stool while Gabe ordered coffee for her, but ignoring, the fact that her own vehicle was parked outside the Center. She'd get it later. As he ordered, she caught Sandy Thorpe, the florist from Posey Pushers, waggling her brows. Jenny frowned and gave a slight shake of her head, but all she got was Sandy's knowing smile. She and Gabe would be a hot topic at the flower shop today, and most of the people up and down Main Street.

it from idles of Janet Knowles, who owned the Yarn Basket, rose from her seat

uck her from Sandy and walked over to stand behind Jenny. “Gabe, how’s you heeked, doing?”

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

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

re were Jenny tipped her head. “K & C?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

ir momthings got awkward.

Gabe backed out of the diagonal spot and headed toward the back inbefore giving her a quick side-eye. “Think Sandy and Janet mised onwondering what’s up between us?”

ted that Jenny nearly choked on her next breath. The man was more insight straightforward than she ever imagined he would be. Considering thers andtime they’d shared since Halloween was late at night on the phone, i C. Giveleading question. She fidgeted for a few seconds because she suu dissembling or even flirting and yet, she didn’t want to let this oppo go. They were nearly to the marina. She swallowed hard. “Um . . . is for theSomething between us, I mean?”

cheting Gabe pulled into the parking lot and parked in a spot near the bac is morethen turned off the car, unbuckled his seat belt, and shifted toward her. join ushope so.” The earnest look in his dark eyes sent pinwheels rocketing t her veins.

I don’t “Gabe, I-I . . .” *Dammit*. She wanted to hurl herself into his arms a him stupid, but something other than the two bags of food in her lap k ’s arm.in her seat. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she just go for i y, thentheir wicked attraction *hell bent for election*, as Gram would say, u ou twowent back to Virginia? What would be so wrong with spending tir kind, fun, hot-as-a-pistol man’s arms with no expectations, no complic tuggedTo think of nothing but her own pleasure for a little while? She could ’s sake,couldn’t she?

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

o were
e make
er town



GRATEFUL SHE’D ALLOWED him to drive her back to the marina, and rted thethankful that she was sitting in his front seat again, Gabe tucked a silky of Jenny’s hair that had fallen from the clip behind her ear. He was gla nile. “Itkept her hair long and, more than anything, he wanted to rake his fingersthrough it, wrap it around his hand, tug her head back, and kiss her u t aboutlips were swollen and crimson. But he didn’t because she was staring rassingbags in her lap and her cheeks were pink and she was stuttering. f when

blown it again? Memories came rushing back—his awkward attempt to flirt with her all those years ago and how she'd stared at him, confusion in her beautiful, beautiful, beautiful brandy-colored eyes. She'd merely shaken her head and said,

"I'm dating Tuff," in a tone that he heard as, *Are you stupid? Why would I ever want to go out with a nerd like you?*

He only immediately, he shoved the memory away, along with the teenage girl who'd heard the words as a rejection of who he was, and not making a reminder that she was already spoken for. He slipped one finger under her chin and gently brought her face up. "Jenny, talk to me."

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

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

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

7 strand Blinking the old memory away, he touched the tip of her cold nose. "Did she get it wrong?"

fingers She smiled and put one hand on his cheek, making him very aware that he hadn't shaved in several days. "No, you didn't. Not at all." On the way out, she gripped the handles of the bags, she leaned into him and kissed him. Her lips were cool, but warmed up fast as he tipped his head to respond.

They kept the contact—only their lips touching—for a few seconds.

t to ask before she pulled away. “I’m scared, Gabe, and I’m confused, and in those worried I don’t know how to do this anymore. It’s been so long and hard, “But the only person I’ve ever”—she sighed—“ever dated or even *been with* would I whole life is Tuff. I don’t know how to have a . . . a fling. I don’t know how to be casual about it.”

aged boy His heart pounded and he could hear the rushing beats in his ears. “I really amakes you think I want to be casual?”

der her Her brow furrowed. “What else can we be? You’re going to be gone for the holidays, back to your real life—teaching and going on digs all over the golden-world, and I’ll be here, raising my son, working in my family business. No, attracted to you as I am—and oh, Gabe, I am so *very* attracted to you, don’t you think?” His belong here. I know that as surely as I know you are full of wanderlust. Her lips curved up in a teasing smile and she leaned in again. Her breath fell over his lips and he shivered. “On the other hand, just because I’ve never had a fling doesn’t mean I’m not willing to give it a try.”

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

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

hroom, Gabe released her and plopped back down into the driver’s seat, nearly out as he did, that Jenny’s father was peering through the window of the back door. He took several deep breaths to get his body and mind back in control there. Anything he wanted to say to her would have to wait. “There’s your coffee. You look hungry.”

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

that he His head was spinning. One minute she was scared, the next she was in the hand fling, and then the next she wanted to dismiss the heat that had just happened between them. He needed time, he needed to breathe, but whatever she said next would determine where they went from here. She was putting the second his court, something that had never happened to him with any other v

nd I'm Usually, he let relationships run their course until the woman got fr
onestly, and left. It was an easy, lazy, and probably a kinda crappy way to do
h in my but he'd never had a romantic relationship he was willing to fight fo
ow how now. "Jenny, I don't want merely a holiday fling with you, and I kn
could get very complicated. To be honest, I mostly avoid complicated
"What you're willing, I think I'd like to give it a try."

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

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

st." Her
danced
ver had

him as
ive her,
ied her
fingers
around
he bags

g hard.

oticing,
re shop
control.
dad. He

e than I

anted a
ppened
he said
e ball in
woman.

Usually, he let relationships run their course until the woman got frustrated and left. It was an easy, lazy, and probably a kinda crappy way to do things, but he'd never had a romantic relationship he was willing to fight for. Until now. "Jenny, I don't want merely a holiday fling with you, and I know this could get very complicated. To be honest, I mostly avoid complicated, but if you're willing, I think I'd like to give it a try."

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

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

Chapter Eleven

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

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

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

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

“Slept funny last night.” Gram waved away her concern. “No worries about young Dr. Dawson?”

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

“Has he asked you to do that?”

Jenny scoffed. “No. We haven’t had more than an hour to talk since he blew into town. Between his mom needing him, my ex showing me the archaeological dig he was telling you about at lunch the other day, and my job here and Luke . . . Well, suffice to say, he may be a world-class kisser, but that’s all I’ve had a chance to discover. Even if I thought he

be interested, talk of the future, of what we *could* be, isn't even on the Gram pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I thought you said Tuff around lately."

"Yeah, and now there's that." Jenny threw her hands up in despair as if it was in my face right up until Halloween, which he royally screwed up. "It's almost Thanksgiving, and he's been by to get Luke exactly or didn't even come in, only honked, and you know how I hate that."

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

Jenny gasped. "How long have you been here?" Tuff's smile was tired but, surprisingly, not smirky as he stood there with his hands down at his sides. "Long enough to learn that old Gabe Daw apparently picked up some new skills since he was president of the club. And that I'm still on your shit list for Halloween. I'm sorry, Jenny." Jenny glanced at Gram. "Hi, Lila. Do you mind if I talk to Jen for a few minutes?"

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

Tuff came around into the Parts department and placed two cups from The Tea Leaf on the counter before pulling a white bag from his coat pocket. "Earl Grey for me, Lady Grey for you, two sugars, and I've opened the bag—" "turkey cookies, since Thanksgiving is three days away."

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

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

Jenny couldn't keep the surprise off her face. "Thanks." Then she asked, "What's the favor?"

"Can I have Luke for Thanksgiving Day? Mom and Dad are driving to the farm."

table.” Indy to see my grandparents—they moved into a condo in a big
wasn’t retirement village up there last month. Golf course, indoor pool, all kinds
activities—and they’re dying to see him. The center is putting on a big
dinner. “He’ll be here for the residents and their families.” He put up one hand to stop
me. Now instinctive rejection. “We’ll be gone overnight—there’s a guesthouse
and premises that Mom rented for us. I promise I’ll have him back on
afternoon. I have to be at work on Saturday, anyway.”

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

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

ns.” He “You’re shoveling horse poop?”

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

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

l davits. “Yup. That’s also how I got this”—he handed her a check and a
kept her stack of bills—“extra Christmas cash.” He went back to the Parts van
and reached across for his tea and calmly downed the rest of his cookie
led one Jenny was too stunned to even move, let alone speak. “But . . . but
held up about—” she finally managed as she shoved the check and bills into her
wait for pocket.

ash for “Eastman?”

“Yes.”

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

g fancy “Oh, Ryan, I-I . . .”

kinds of “Look, I’m sorry I lied to you. I should’ve been up front from the get-go. I should have been a lot of things, but I’m trying now, Jen. I’m trying to be a man who’s worthy of you and the kind of dad that Luke can look up to and be proud of. I haven’t had a drink in three weeks and two days. For the first time since I started at Trudy’s, I’m so damn tired at the end of the day, I just go into bed, but it’s a good kind of tired, you know? The kind that says, “I’ve accomplished something worthwhile.”

Carhartt Jenny hardly knew what to say, but she didn’t have a chance to say anything before he’d look rushed on.

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

g them. Jenny’s heart pounded, then sank. He was talking so fast and furious that she could hardly take it all in. “Ryan. What are you talking about?”

Travis “Us. You and me and Luke.” He sounded so reasonable that she almost believed him. “I thought I’d see if Luke wants to take riding lessons. God, I’d forgotten how much I love being around horses—riding, working them—hell, even shoveling out their stalls. It’s peaceful, good, honest work.”

and so She raked her hair back with her fingers and stepped away from the kitchen, trying to ignore the hulking heat. “Ryan, we’re divorced.”

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

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

Taking a deep breath, she went back to his original question. “You can have Luke for Thanksgiving. He’ll have fun being the kid of the house. Your parents and grandparents. Why don’t you come get him on Wednesday night and take him out to see the horses? He loves them, and that’s pr-

something the two of you could do together that he would truly enjoy.’
he very Tuff’s jaw dropped and he stared past her for a moment down t
ying to that led to the repair shop. His fingers spread and curled at his sides—
k up to she knew well. It meant he was preparing an argument—not physic
rankly, Tuff was never violent. This was his all-too-familiar *preparing-to-*
just fall Jenny posture. She moved behind the counter, picked up her tea, and
ys I’ve sipping as he stood there, silent.

Shock of all shocks, he said nothing, simply sipped his tea and
as Tuff “That’s a good idea. Can you have him packed and ready to go about
Wednesday? I’ll come by and get him and we’ll head out to the farm
, and Inight. A couple of bachelors.” He turned toward the door, stopped, at
quity. I back around. “Thanks, Jenny. I appreciate this. My grandparents wil
ing the happy to see him.”

her, his Floored at the change in him, she merely nodded.

Cold air entered the hallway as he opened the door, raising goose
ous, she on Jenny’s arms under her sweatshirt. He turned, his expression exp
like he was prepared to say something she was fairly sure she didn’t t
: Jenny hear. He surprised her again. “Oh, hey, Trudy named the farm Windst
nd hey, the horse I won the state fair championship rodeo on senior year. H
en how with her; an old man, but good for lessons.” He offered a small smile a
l, even



om his

THANKSGIVING WAS ONLY two days away, and Gabe was at loose en
married mom needed another week in the rehab, which was disappointing t
o more and Jeremy, who’d hoped to take her to Jeremy’s parents’ in Lexing
the long holiday weekend. Since the rehab *was* willing to give her an
ult time hour pass on Thanksgiving Day, Gabe insisted that his sister and her
as only go ahead to the Kavanaghs’, and he’d make a meal for Claire. What c
handed so hard about roasting a turkey? And no, Chris did *not* need to leave
her ex, instructions. He could google all he needed to know on Thank
morning before he picked up his mom.

’ou can He’d fit in a trip to Deke’s Market for a small frozen turkey, a
ur with stuffing, and a pumpkin pie, along with some broccoli and a co
lnesday potatoes. He was ready.
robably

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

—a sign “*Help! How do I thaw this turkey before tomorrow?*”

al. No, Her reply came back with a couple of surprised-face emojis. “*You -cajole-take it out of the freezer and put it in the fridge a couple of days ago?*”

waited, “*Was I supposed to? I was going to google all this Thanksgiving tonight.*”

sighed. “*Do you cook at all?*”

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

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

It’s still Her chuckle warmed him across satellites and the few blocks between their houses. “What else do you have besides a frozen turkey?”

He walked out to the kitchen. “A box of instant stuffing, two pounds of some broccoli, and”—he pulled out the freezer drawer—“oh, damn, a pumpkin pie.” He shoved the drawer shut with his knee, not even bothering to take out the pie. “I’m screwed, aren’t I?”

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

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

freezer, “Mom will be overjoyed,” she assured him. “She asks about Claire time.”

“Okay, then.” His heart soared. “Can I bring something? I don’t *didn’t* what that would be . . .” He wandered over to his mom’s wine rack, several bottles rested on their sides. “Mom has wine here. A couple of *ig prepnoirs* and a Four Irish Brothers sparkling Traminette.”

“Bring wine if you like. That would be wonderful. We’re eating thirty.”

ing and “Perfect, thank you. We’ll be there.” A little satisfied silence fell, which Gabe said softly, “I’ll be glad for a chance to see you. It feels like w ood. To seem to land in the same space at the same time alone.”

with a “I’m all alone now . . . Well, except for Harry, who’s sleeping pe between on the rug in front of the fireplace.” Her voice took on a new, seducti visiting that was unfamiliar and intoxicating.

He took a deep breath. “I can be there in ten minutes.”

de him
nded to



etween IT ACTUALLY TOOK fifteen because he grabbed a three-minute shower, on clean clothes from the inside out, and ransacked the duffel he’d sta potatoes, the closet, hoping against hope he’d find some protection tucked ins *ifrozen* luck. He wasn’t surprised. Carrying around little foil packets for *just* othering when he traveled wasn’t how he rolled, and nothing in town was of late the night before Thanksgiving. They’d figure it out, and maybe possibly getting too anticipatory, anyway. Touching Jenny, kissing her, learn r me at soft skin and curves had been part of every fantasy since he was sev ur own but he didn’t want to blow it by being overzealous or misreadi Eli and intentions.

orphans He pulled up in front of her house and sat in the car for another mi u think two, staring at the blue-painted Craftsman-style cottage. When he ope eyes, he noticed that she’d already started putting up outside Christma box of—they weren’t turned on yet, but twinkle lights were wound arou) at the porch pillars, wreaths hung in all the windows, the wrought iron fence y at the lighted green garland draped across the top, and even the coach liq re you either side of the front door were decorated with red bows. The hou

all the homey and welcoming, yet he was gripping the steering wheel and practically hyperventilating. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the headrest. He had to chill a little or he was going to make a fool of himself, wherever she'd . . . He shut off the thought before it could complete itself. It was Jenny. It would be fine. She would be wonderful. They would be wonderful together.

When she opened the door, gorgeous in snug dark-brown pants and a cream-colored V-necked sweater that emphasized her petite curves, he nearly buckled his knees. "Hi." She held open the door, granting him access to the warm cottage, where a gas log fire and low lights created a romantic ambiance that, even a couple of weeks ago, would have made him nervous. Heck. But all the uneasiness melted away with her smile and the inviting tone of her whiskey-colored eyes. This was where he belonged, at least for now. She closed the door and locked it, both the knob and the dead bolt. "No interruptions tonight, okay?"

He nodded, hung his dad's worn leather jacket—for reasons he couldn't explain, he'd been wearing it since Halloween—on the coat rack, and as an afterthought, removed his phone from his jeans pocket and slipped it into the inside pocket of the coat. *No interruptions.* "It smells good in here. Yeast rolls and apple pie."

"Where's Harry?" He glanced around, but the puppy was nowhere to be seen.

"In his crate." She raised one brow and her lips curved in the hint of a smile. "Did you need him?"

"No." His voice was thick, husky with longing as he reached for her. "I need you."

minute or
ned his
s lights
nd the
e had a
ghts on
ise was

homey and welcoming, yet he was gripping the steering wheel and practically hyperventilating. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the headrest. He had to chill a little or he was going to make a fool of himself and then she'd . . . He shut off the thought before it could complete itself. This was Jenny. It would be fine. She would be wonderful. They would be wonderful together.

When she opened the door, gorgeous in snug dark-brown pants and a cream-colored V-necked sweater that emphasized her petite curves, her smile nearly buckled his knees. “Hi.” She held open the door, granting him access to the warm cottage, where a gas log fire and low lights created a romantic ambiance that, even a couple of weeks ago, would have made him nervous as heck. But all the uneasiness melted away with her smile and the invitation in her whiskey-colored eyes. This was where he belonged, at least for tonight. She closed the door and locked it, both the knob and the dead bolt. “No interruptions tonight, okay?”

He nodded, hung his dad’s worn leather jacket—for reasons he couldn’t explain, he’d been wearing it since Halloween—on the coatrack, and almost as an afterthought, removed his phone from his jeans pocket and shoved it into the inside pocket of the coat. *No interruptions*. “It smells good in here.” He followed her to the sofa, appreciating the graceful, easy swing of her hips.

“Yeast rolls and apple pie.”

“Where’s Harry?” He glanced around, but the puppy was nowhere to be seen.

“In his crate.” She raised one brow and her lips curved in the hint of a smile. “Did you need him?”

“No.” His voice was thick, husky with longing as he reached for her. “I need you.”

Chapter Twelve

THE SUN WARMED Jenny's face and she rolled over onto her back, str like a lazy cat in the beams streaming in through the window. S amazing. Better than she had in months, maybe years. The incredible she'd had last night left her sated and inexpressibly happy. Sudder eyes flew open. *It was no dream!* And neither was the gorgeous man on the edge of the bed next to her, his waffle-weave Henley unbuttoned to reveal the soft dark mat of hair on his tanned chest.

"Good morning, sleepyhead." Dimples creased Gabe's stubbled chin. "You're still here."

Immediately, his expression sobered. "Not okay?"

She was too aware that she was clad only in Gabe's plaid flannel under the rumple of bedsheets. "Very okay." She glanced around. "How do I get up here? The last thing I remember is you and me on the sofa . . . a . . . She flushed with heat, aware that a red blush was spreading up her neck into her cheeks. Even in thirteen years of marriage, she'd never had a moment like the one they'd shared—passionate, raw, intoxicating. She'd only been with Ryan, who had been more concerned with his own gratification than hers and unwilling to experiment or play. Gabe's remarkable skill left her gasping and longing for more of something she'd never known in her life. He'd explored every inch of her, inspiring her to do the same for him, and opening up a whole new world of pleasure.

"I carried you." His dark, sultry eyes sent a shiver down her spine. Memories of the previous night returned full force. How they flooded her, making her heart race and sensation bubble up in her core.

She pressed her palms to her hot cheeks. "We . . . we . . ." The words were stuck in her throat.

He stroked his thumb across her lower lip. "Yeah." His voice was low. "Creatively, but, yeah, we did." Passion flared in his eyes, and he pressed his forehead to hers. "You are my fantasy, Jenny Weaver. Always have been. Feeling like an inexperienced girl, she was afraid to even touch

frightened that, if she did, he'd disappear, and the magic she remembered from the night before would vanish with him. How foolish to be embarrassed with a man who now knew every inch of her, a man whose lean body she discovered at length last night, yet she couldn't seem to look him in the

etching she felt dreamily, her sitting oned to eek.
"I'll be better prepared next time, so we can . . . you know . . ."
flushed, too, and his brow furrowed. "I mean, assuming you want time." He lifted her chin to stare into her eyes.

Jenny could have sworn she felt her heart stop and then restart with his touch. She was already hungry for him again, for his hands on her shoulders, his lips on hers. "I do," she whispered fervently, and ran her fingers through his thick, black hair before drawing his face down to hers. "Oh, I do," she repeated after a long, hungry kiss. "Gabe, I-I had no idea." She brought her lips down to hers again, putting into the caress all the things she wanted to say, but couldn't find the words to express.

He placed his hands on either side of her, and as he pressed her back against the pillow, it was as if she could hear the acceleration of his heartbeat. He burrowed his face into the V of the plaid flannel shirt, kissing beneath her chin, touching his tongue to her throat, working his way lower down her neck and . . . suddenly a high, sharp bark drew both their attentions to the bedroom door.

Gabe sat up. "Harry, how did you get up the stairs?"
Jenny turned her head on the pillow and scowled at the puppy, hating the loss of Gabe's warm breath on her skin. Harry didn't seem to care. He scooted into the room on his stubby legs and plopped down at Gabe's feet. Good lord, even the man's feet were sexy—nails perfectly trimmed, the faintest tan lines showing where he'd worn sandals over the summer. With a sigh, she sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "The question is, Harry, how did you get out of your crate?"

"I let him out a little while ago." Gabe picked up the dog and held him aloft. "He was whining, so I went down and took him outside to do some business, gave him a bit of kibble, and left him in the kitchen to eat. I don't know how he's gotten past the gate thingy." He offered a rueful smile. "I put him in his crate. Apparently, it didn't stay."

Jenny glanced at the clock and gasped. "Lord, it's nearly eleven. I need to get ready. Mom I'd be there at noon to help her get ready." She swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"Yeah, I need a shower before I collect my mom from River Bend."

mberedrose and extended the hand that wasn't full of puppy. "C'mon. We'll
irressedthis"—he lifted his chin toward her with a smoldering look—"later to
y she'dHe set Harry back down on the floor, tugged her to her feet, kissed her
e eye. thoroughly, and headed for the door.

. ." He "Wait!" She couldn't bear the thought of him leaving. "Your shirt."
a next "I'll get it later." He gazed at her, longing in his expression. "I
another second, you and I will not be making it to Thanksgiving
t at hisAlthough"—one dark brow rose—"I'm open to texting everyone.
kin, histhem know why we won't be there . . ."

ugh his She closed her eyes and dropped her head back, clutching the open
o," sheof his shirt around her as Harry Potter scampered around her ankles
ight hisShe tipped her head toward the hallway. "Go before I decide to take
nted toon that offer."

He winked. "See you in a couple hours."

er back Jenny stood still until she heard the front door close and the ruru
artbeat.Gabe's Rover, then she picked up Harry and took him downstairs.
eath herflannel shirt brushed against her skin as she walked, bringing Gabe's r
r whentouch back to her mind. Was this what Jazz shared with Eli? What
door. with Alex? This fluttery sensation in her belly was new. This ache to
him from the moment he walked out the door, unfamiliar. This e
ting thesense of completeness being with him last night, foreign.

simply How had she missed this overwhelming longing with Ryan? Had
e's baremarriage not been a marriage at all? Merely a convenience? A habit
ed, andwhat was she supposed to do with all these feelings—this . . . *okay*,
ummer.*own it*. This falling in love? Because as surely as Thanksgiving would
he realway to Christmas, she was falling in love with Gabe Dawson. The real
along with the sure and certain knowledge that he felt exactly the same
eld himwarm tingle through her. She ignored the little nudge in the back of her
do hisreminding her that he lived far away and his lifestyle was not conduc
le mustfamily or children or staying in a small river town. Right now, she
t it up.wanted to bask in the pleasure.

Harry snuffled against her shoulder, and his curly fur tickling her
! I toldbrought her back to the kitchen and reality. Setting the dog on the floor
over thesnugged the baby gate in the doorway. "Okay, Harry, you stay in here
get a shower. You can come with me today if you promise to
." Gabeyourself." The puppy gave a quick bark and spun in a circle before s

l revisiton the glossy wood floor and sliding a few feet on his bottom. *Goofy d*
onight.”

er quite



” “JEN, THIS CRITTER is darling.” Jazz took Harry from his crate, which
f I stayhad brought in after she’d carried in a pie, three Ziploc bags of yea
dinner, and a small container of food for the puppy.

Letting “I didn’t feel right about leaving him home alone.” Jenny shrugged
her coat and hung it on a hook in the mudroom. She’d dressed with
n sidescare after Gabe had left, choosing a new, blue cotton corduroy shirtdr
. “Go.” she’d picked up on sale the last time she’d gone to Cincinnati with Jo
you upcombined the full-skirted dress with a wide, brown leather belt s
around her waist and a pair of tall, brown leather boots with hee
enough she almost felt leggy. Her hair was pulled up in a messy b
nble ofshe’d even used a bit of mascara and blush instead of eschewing mak
rs. Theusual.

nagical Cuddling the puppy, Jazz gave her the once-over. “You look fabi
Jo hadassume this is for the good Dr. Dawson. Mom said he and Claire are
be withus.”

uphoric “Thanks.” She ignored her sister’s query as she came into the
delicious-smelling kitchen. Grabbing one of the colorful aprons t
ad theirmother kept on a peg inside the pantry door, she looped it over he
it? And“Mom, what can I do?”

Jenny, Her mom gave her a smile. “Look at you, all fancy. I love that dres
ld give “Well, it’s the holiday.” Jenny hugged her mom, then her grandi
ization, who was arranging fresh cut-up veggies on a glass tray. “Hi, Gram.”

, sent a “That dog is adorable.” Gram wrinkled her nose at Jazz, who hel
r mind, on her shoulder and was stroking his soft fur, much to the pup’s deligh
ive to a Jenny sighed. “Yeah, he’s already stolen Luke’s heart and mine.”

re only “He’s not the only one, is he?” Jazz plopped down on a sto
cuddling Harry. “You have that look about you.”

er chin “What look is that?” Jenny dissembled, even though she knew
or, shewhat Jazz was talking about. She’d seen it in the mirror not half an hou
while I

“That *I’m falling madly in love* glow, sis. Did you see Gabe last nig

behave “I did.” She didn’t even pretend to be coy. “And this morning.”

slipping

og. Jazz's eyes widened and she held up one hand. "Oh, my God, details, but wait. I'm going to take Harry out to join the men first. I scooted through the dining room, past the long, elegantly set farmhouse and into the living room, where she passed Harry off to Eli.

1 Jenny Jenny chuckled, watching her from the kitchen doorway, merely curious. She rolled up the dough, a slight lift of her shoulders when Jazz returned, practically panting with anticipation.

1 out of "Tell me everything."

special "Do you really imagine I'm going to share intimate details of my life with Gabe?" Jenny opened a cupboard and pulled out a couple of sheets to warm up her rolls. "Especially here? In front of Mom and Gram and a houseful of men just two rooms away?"

ls high Jazz waved away her concern. "The guys are busy with the dog—" un, and "And there's nothing you can reveal that will shock your mom or Gram, as Gram inserted with a grin. "We've both been around a long time."

Her mom turned away from the stove, where potatoes boiled vigorously. "Jenny, I don't think I've seen a look like this on your face since you were a child. Even on your wedding day, you were so full of apprehension. Today, you look . . . happy."

warm, Jenny scanned the three faces, so full of love, and her heart expanded. "I am happy." She leaned back against the countertop, careful to avoid the ceramic casserole of stuffing and a bowl of cranberry sauce. "Gabe is amazing. I only wish"—she blinked back the sudden sting against her eyes—"that I'd seen that fifteen years ago. Because now, it's too late."

mother, Gram snorted. "For Pete's sake, you were both entirely different people fifteen years ago."

1 Harry Jazz frowned. "Besides, it doesn't seem *too late* to me. He's here, and you're here. You clearly enjoy each other's, ahem, company. What's the problem?"

Jenny's shoulders drooped and she gazed at her hands for a moment, still wishing in vain that she'd had time to do her nails before she arrived in life in Virginia and all over the world. You should see his face when he talks about the digs he's been on, and how excited he is about the discovery of a site over near Rising Sun. He's not interested in settling down here with a girl? "made family."

"How do you know that? Have you asked him?" Jazz's question was perfectly reasonable.

I need . . . Suddenly, it occurred to her with a flash of blinding light why a . . . t.” She with Gabe seemed so impossible, and she straightened, squaring her shoulders. It wasn’t about him. It was her. As much as she wanted him to follow her, she wouldn’t follow him to Virginia and spend her life waiting for him while she offered up the past. She’d done that once before and lost herself in the process. “I *don’t* know, and of course I haven’t asked him.” She said to Gabe, “Here’s the thing, though. I’m only beginning to find out who Jenny is. Gabe is . . . He’s incredible and I’m pretty crazy about him, and it’s just so nightwonderful, so good. I have to do what’s right for *me*, though, and for my cookie. She shrugged. “And even for Tuff, because he has skin in this game, too. I am and that’s why he’s back in River’s Edge to stay.”

Her mother came over to put an arm around her. “Honey, honey, wait here. Back up. Your gram is right. You and Gabe need to get to know each other—who you are *now*. So many things have changed in both your lives.”

A quick shoulder squeeze and Mom was back in front of the stove, stirring the potatoes with a long-handled fork into the pot of potatoes. “Why not chill and just enjoy the time with him over the holidays?”

ion, but



ided. “I

void a . . . EVEN THOUGH THERE were still at least four hours of Thanksgiving left in the house, she had turned on her holiday decorations and the house was lit up for Christmas. The white lights around the porch pillars twinkled, as did the lights in every window and the white lights on the greenery draped over the people. Even the red bows on the coach lights on either side of the door shimmered with glitter. Despite the wintry weather, Jenny’s heavy front door was cracked, which Gabe interpreted as an invitation for him to walk in, so he called out, “In here with Harry.” Her voice carried from the back of the house. “His name is Harry.” He hung up his leather jacket and scarf, following the scent of something wonderful to her brightly lit kitchen. He had no idea how he could possibly be hungry after the enormous Thanksgiving feast he’d enjoyed at the ready-Weavers’ earlier. The day had been great for both him and his mom, and he had managed to be in the thick of everything, despite the casts on her arms. She was arm, chattering and helping in the kitchen with Lynn, Lila, Jazz, and J

a future they got the meal ready.

ing her Thanksgiving tradition in the Weaver household was that the
im, she cooked, then the men took over the kitchen to clean up, a concept for
while he Claire, who'd scraped and stacked the plates around her at the table, un
rself in let the brake off the wheelchair and pushed her into the living room v
sighed. rest of the womenfolk. The guys had joked and laughed as they v
s again. clearly at ease with one another in the homey kitchen. Roy had hande
feels soan electric knife and set him to cleaning off the partially carved turke
Luke." the others rinsed dishes, loaded the dishwasher, and filled storage disl
o, now Ziplocs with leftovers.

The good-natured camaraderie reminded Gabe of his childho
whoa up holiday meals with his parents and Chris and assorted aunts, uncl
w each cousins. The memory was bittersweet. He'd missed more Thanksgivin
' lives." he'd attended in the last ten years or so. So many holidays, he was at
cking a hunkered down in museums and libraries around the world, doing rese
oy your preparation for the next dig. As an adjunct at William and Mary, he ha
freedom to wander, and he took full advantage, traveling all o
Americas, mostly, but also to Europe and Africa and Asia.

The warmth in the Weavers' busy kitchen, the laughter, the
reminded him of what he never knew he'd been missing. Later, seeing
; Jenny perched on the arm of the sofa with her head tipped toward his mom's
ristmas. shared a story made him yearn for something he'd always believed he
wreaths want or need. A family. A home. The empty place inside him th
e fence. covered up with digs or research or half-hearted relationships was *fil*
ne with the more time he was back in River's Edge.

open a The teakettle whistled on the stove as he got to the baby gate and
he did, was pulling a plate out of the microwave. His heart lurched when she
and smiled. *She's so beautiful.* "I'm warming up pie and making us a
. tea." She cut another slice of pie and popped it in the microwave to
nething before she shut off the burner under the kettle. "Step over the gate. I
possibly out of his crate."

at the He ambled to the table near the window—an old-fashioned,
. Claire Formica job with four matching upholstered chairs that reminded hin
leg and grandmother's kitchen, causing more poignant memories to wash ov
enny as He and Chris at their grandmother's table, eating tomato soup and
cheese sandwiches, beating Grandpa at Scrabble and losing to him at

piles of homemade noodles drying on cut-up brown paper bags . . .
women He noticed a large sketchbook, graphite and charcoal drawing pad, a box of watercolors taking up space on the tabletop. Had they been there until Lilawhen he came downstairs this morning? If so, he'd been so focused with the getting Harry out to do his business and going back up to Jenny that he hadn't noticed.

and Gabe "Sorry for the mess. You can just set that stuff over on top of the table while safe," Jenny suggested, as she poured boiling water over a strainer and loose tea into a brown ceramic teapot.

He started to pick up the palette of watercolors and set it and the pencil and pencils aside, but the drawing on the pad caught his attention, and instead of reaching over to the wall and switched on the low-hanging light above the table. It was a sketch of two little girls—one dark-haired and one blonde, both in a buckskin beaded dress, the other in calico with an apron over it. They were barefoot. They were playing a game with a web of string between them, their faces full of joy. Underneath was printed—*Aponi and Clarissa have been friends since they were babies.*

He flipped the page back one and found more images, small sketches of the girls, a log house, a teepee, a wagon, a fire, and clothing Jenny both native and Colonial. And they were good . . . very, very good. As they page back were brief notes in a tidy script, *Trail of Tears, hair jewelry, Shawnee, Tecumseh . . .*

at he'd When he looked up, Jenny was watching him, her expression calling up "Oh, God, sorry, Jenny. I-I wasn't snooping . . ." He smiled and pointed to the sketch pad. "You're writing the story."

and Jenny She lifted one shoulder slightly. "I thought I'd give it a shot."

returned He leaned over the table and examined the sketchbook more closely. "Amazing! I remember you used to sketch and doodle all over your warm notes, but I had no idea you were such an artist."

Harry's She brought a tray with two mugs, the teapot, and two slices of pie to the table. "I've always loved to draw and play with watercolors. And I've had a yellow journal since I was ten or so. In Florida, I designed and maintained a notebook for several local businesses, but I played with writing a novel. Several of them always ended up being about a foolish and tragic woman with a frustrated, grilled husband." She rolled her eyes. "I never thought about writing a chick flick until the other day at the dig."

He stared at her for a moment. How did he not know this about pencils, course he didn't. They had traveled in different circles in high school, and there opportunity to learn Jenny Weaver never really presented itself. As he pulled a chair out for her and sat opposite her, bringing the sketchbook towards her, he hadn't. The discovery only made him want to know more. "This is so cool," he reached for her hand. "Tell me the story."

the pie
full of

had and
read, he
love the
de. One
it. Both
in them,
had been

pencil
sketches,
Another
jewelry,

enthusiastic.
intended to

closely.
history

due to the
he kept a
websites
additionally, it
faithless
children's

He stared at her for a moment. How did he not know this about her? Of course he didn't. They had traveled in different circles in high school, and the opportunity to learn Jenny Weaver never really presented itself. As he pulled a chair out for her and sat opposite her, bringing the sketchbook toward him. The discovery only made him want to know more. "This is so cool." He reached for her hand. "Tell me the story."

Chapter Thirteen

“**M**OM! MOM! THERE’S Dad. Can I go pet the horse?” Gabe noted that he practically vibrated as he pointed up Warner Drive by the River Walk. Not far enough, there was Tuff, dressed in livery and a top hat, sitting on the driver’s seat of a carriage that was decked out in white twinkle lights.

Jenny, Gabe, and Luke had attended the tree lighting together with her family, and Claire, who was bundled up in her wheelchair. Luke had played a small part as an older elf in a skit that Harley Lange had put on for her nursery school kids. He hadn’t been sure at first, but after he found out that Matt Santos was going to be in the show, too, he’d hopped onboard. Matt had told him earlier that Matt and Aidan had taken him on as a student. The kid had been soft-shoeing and tapping all over the house. Gabe hadn’t been to the town Christmas tree lighting in years, was surprised how much he enjoyed the whole affair, particularly when elfin Luke managed to do a simple soft shoe with Santa, played by Mac Mackenzie, during the performance. The light in the kid’s eyes when he’d tugged on Luke’s peaky cap and Luke congratulated him on being a stellar dancing elf had warmed Gabe’s heart.

River’s Edge was well into the holiday spirit, with the tree lighting square, hot chocolate stands, Christmas music, and lights everywhere. Not a single lamppost was spared garland and twinkle lights, and all the shops, restaurants, and nearby homes were bedecked for the holidays. Gabe was enchanted. Although he did spend at least one day every year in Williamsburg with colleagues, soaking up the Colonial Christmas, he always flew home to River’s Edge a couple days before Christmas Eve. He was back again by December twenty-seventh, preferring to use the time away from his classes for research. He enjoyed his family, especially since his niece and nephew were born, but he was always itchy to get back to whatever was currently captured his interest.

It was different this year. Sharing the festivities with Jenny and Claire had created a lightness he’d never known before. Outside of the time he spent spending with Josh at Rising Sun, he was content—euphoric, really.

simply be a part of his hometown, his family, and Jenny's. The whole night was out on this crisp starry night, and he'd enjoyed catching up with his friends, stopping by the Flahertys' booth for a cup of mulled wine and eating Paula's frosted sugar cookies, and just walking with Jenny's hand snug in his.

at Luke Jenny glanced up at him. "Shall we go pet the horse?"
k. Sure "Sure." He turned back to Clara and Ben, who were following
driver's with Chris and Jeremy and Claire. "You two want to go for a carriage ride?"
Chris, The kids clamored their yesses, and he even got a very grateful nod
ike had from his sister and brother-in-law, who wheeled his mom over to a break.
on with "Dad!" Luke led the way to the carriage with authority, and Gabe
and out blame the boy for his slightly cocky attitude. His dad was the one driving
Jenny Tuff's brow furrowed as the three kids approached with him and
ent, and trailing behind, hand in hand. When they got up by the horse, Tuff
e, who down, and Gabe also noted that the beer belly had flattened somewhat.
at how Halloween and that the other man's eyes were clear under the brim of
aged a hat. "Hey, Tuff." Gabe extended his hand and, after a second's hesitation,
rogram. Tuff shook it briefly. "How much for a ride? Did we need a reservation?"
ap and Tuff kept an eye on the kids as they gathered around the big draft horse.
part. "Sixty for half an hour, but you gotta go right now. I've got a reservation for
; on the eight thirty."
Not a Gabe nodded. "Okay, you guys, hop in."
shops, The kids piled in, boys on one seat and Clara on the other as they
be was plaid blankets over their knees.
in old Gabe pointed at Clara. "Sorry, kiddo, go sit with the boys. This seat
usually patted the front-facing leather seat—"is for Jenny and me. Ben, Luke
as gone over. Make room for Clara." He handed Jenny in before dropping into
y from seat next to her. "Hand over one of those robes, you guys."
ce and Tuff stood, unsmiling, outside the carriage as they settled in.
project, bucks." His expression said he wanted to say much more, but he
waited, his phone with a credit card reader attached in his hand.
d Luke Gabe pulled out his money clip and peeled off some bills that included
he was generous tip. Tuff gave the money a short perusal, then he shoved it
illy—to coat pocket.

le town “Dad, can I ride up there with you?” Luke asked, his eyes shining with oldeagerness.

la chat, “Sorry, Lukie. Insurance says I’m the only one who can ride up to nittenedleaned in and touched Luke’s cap. “Even elves have to stay in carriage.” Tuff clambered up to the driver’s seat, his long caped coat draped over the low back of the seat. “Everybody set?”

behind A chorus of assent and they were on their way, the horse *clip-clop*, ride?” Warner Drive. The kids kept up a constant stream of chatter and waved smilepassersby, while Gabe slipped his hand under the robe to twine his inch forwith Jenny’s. Her smile was one of perfect happiness and contentment felt all the way down to his socks. *So this is it?* What he’d been avoiding didn’tthese years. What Naomi had wanted, but he couldn’t seem to give her, ring thehe been afraid—or simply aware in some soul-deep part of him—that would be waiting one day?

l Jenny “Trudy’s really expanding her business. I think that’s wonderful,” jumpedobserved loud enough that Tuff turned his head. “When did she e sincecarriage?”

the top “Bout a week ago.” Tuff scooted around enough to answer her situation, still watch the horse’s path up Pearl Street, past the Box Factory construction?” lofts. “Drove up to Indy to get it and old Ransom here. We thought t horse. Justin Dykeman could use a little competition.” He puffed up a little, but ation atfocused entirely on Jenny.

As they passed Third Street, they noticed Justin’s lighted carriage couple of blocks, rolling along with a full load and Gabe chuckled. tuggedlike there’s enough business for both of you.”

Tuff merely grunted and turned to face forward for the rest of the at”—heresponding only to the kids’ myriad of questions. Gabe didn’t care whether, scoothe spoke to him and Jenny or not. After all, Jenny’s hand was gripped into thenot Tuff’s. His muscles tightened as he thought about the two nights shared. He wanted more, even though she’d told him she wasn’t coming. “Sixtyhaving him stay overnight while Luke was home. In spite of how he merelyfor her, he didn’t argue. He was happy to be with her whenever it worked doubt there would be times when Luke would be with Tuff. They’d finished luded aout. And that attitude—the easy, *this will work out* feeling she wrote t in hishim—convinced him even more they were meant to be.

After the ride ended, Tuff hopped down and handed the kids out

ng with carriage while Jenny folded the plaid robes that had kept them all warm. "I'll take care of that," he said shortly and, with a hard look a op." He offered his hand to her to step down.

ide the When he didn't release her immediately, all of Gabe's instincts v flowing point, another new sensation. He couldn't remember a time he'd f protective of a woman.

ping up Tuff continued to hang on to Jenny, clearly ignoring Gabe's ving to frustration. "You want to bring Luke out to the farm tomorrow or Su fingers she asked, swinging their hands between them like they were a co that teenagers on a date. "I can lead him on Jasper, start getting him comi ding all in the saddle."

er. Had Jenny took a step back, allowing Gabe enough space to jump down t Jenny behind her, and place one hand on the small of her back. He hated bei proprietary guy, but the look Tuff had just given him told him he'd " Jenny down a metaphorical glove with the invitation to the horse farm. He get the Jenny took one step away from him, forcing him to drop his hand. He message. *She* needed to handle this. *Okay*. He peered around Tuff to and yet the kids were petting Ransom's wide neck and oohing and aahing. los and come on. Let's go find some hot chocolate and cookies."

maybe Luke, Ben, and Clara whooped as he gathered them around his gaze preparing to cross Warner Drive to the River Walk. Tuff pulled out the bills Gabe had given him earlier.

down a "Use this." He peeled off a twenty. "You overpaid."

"Looks "That's your tip." Gabe took Luke's hand on one side and Ben's other.

he ride, Roughly, Tuff shoved the bill into Gabe's jacket pocket. "I don whetheryour charity."

l in his, Gabe's ire rose even further. *What an ass hat move in front of his* : they'd took a deep breath and glanced at his watch. Tuff's next fare would comfortable any minute. "Fine. Whatever. Clara, Ben, Luke, look both ways. Aa e ached we're off." With that, he left with the three kids in tow and without s ked. No as a backward glance at Ryan Tuffington.

figure it
ught in



t of the

toasty JENNY WRINKLED HER nose and, with a little difficulty, tugged her hand out of Gabe, her ex's grasp. "What was *that* about?"

Tuff scowled. "Are you sleeping with that nerd?"

She closed her eyes for a second. Surely, he wasn't planning on venting on *this* discussion in the middle of Warner Drive, amid a good bit of the population of River's Edge. She opted to ignore the question and air her huff of the earlier one instead. "We can't come out tomorrow, but maybe Sunday?" "Jenny, I don't want him around my son. He's probably the real culprit of poor kid was dancing around up on the stage tonight like a damn fool broke off at her warning look.

"Do not." She held up one hand. "Do *not* go there. Luke is taking a vacation, standing on the showboat with Aidan and Matt for a couple of weeks so he can enjoy himself in the Christmas Eve show, and he's loving every minute of it. Do not dare say anything to make him believe it's not the best idea ever."

Tuff's disgusted expression was enough to make her walk away, however, she got the was Luke's father. They were stuck with each other and she needed to know where it work if she could. She softened her tone. "He loved staying with the kids, Wednesday night. Helping you clean stalls and brush horses. Be glad you got a kid who wants to do something besides sit in front of a screen all day." "I am," he grumbled, as he finished folding the lap robes and tucked them on the back-facing seat. "It's just . . . I don't trust that guy. He's not slick."

"Um, didn't you just refer to him as *that nerd*?" Jenny couldn't keep her gaze away from Gabe across the street at Paula's booth, where he was passing out hot chocolates. He looked up from handing Luke a cardbo

"There's nothing *slick* about Gabe Dawson, and you know it."

Ryan's blue eyes darkened in the glow of the streetlights. "He doesn't belong here anymore."

She cocked one brow. "Oh really? So it's okay for *you* to come home to your hometown, but not him?"

"I had a good reason to come home. It's where my family is. Where I belong here?"

Jenny had to bite her tongue to keep from reminding him that he returned because he got fired from his position at Eastman. What was the point? "It's where *his* family is, too, Ryan."

l out of “Then he needs to stick with *his* family and leave *mine* alone.”

Jenny sighed. “We’re divorced, Ryan. Luke is your family. *I* am not.” She tipped her head to the side. “Luke is always my priority, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to move on with my life.”

of the “Is that what you’re calling it?” Tuff’s tone was harsh. “*Moving out* answered the creepy gravedigger?”

lay.” Jenny pulled off her knit cap, raked her fingers through her hair, and then she tugged the cap back over her ears. She couldn’t believe the inanity of the conversation. “Oh, for God’s sake, what is this? Eighth grade? I thought you told me you were a changed man. This”—she waved a hand between them—“feels a lot like the guy I left back in Florida.”

n be an He had the grace to look abashed, but his eyes still sparked. “I *am* not you to change, Jen. I-I just hate the idea of you with *him*.” He scowled at the man who had knelt down to help Luke with his hot chocolate cup. “I beat that guy out of him once, and I’ll do it again if I—” His jaw snapped shut at her.

o make Baffled, she grabbed his arm. “You *what*?”

ith you Tuff shook her off and busied himself with the lap robes again, separating the pile and putting some on the other seat before pulling a couple of robes out of a box under the driver’s seat. “Never mind. It was a long time ago, but I stacked stalked up to the horse and held out a carrot on the flat of his palm.

le’s too “*What* are you talking about?” she persisted.

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again as Conor and Deep her Flaherty appeared with their three little ones, along with Mac Mac who was who’d changed out of his Santa suit, and his partner, Carly Hayes.

ard cup Conor’s daughter, Ali, looking darling in a pink jacket and matching hat, marched right up to Tuff. “We’re here for our carriage ride. Can I ride the horse?”

doesn’t Four-year-old Griff squealed, even though Conor held him firmly in his hand. “Me too!”

back to “Wait for Mr. Ryan to take you up to the horse, you two,” Sam said.

“Hey, Jenny, how are you?” She gave her a quick hug while their son Liam, clung to her knees.

With a frustrated whoosh of breath for Tuff, Jenny returned to him warmly. “I’m good, thanks.”

ould be Sam glanced over her shoulder at Gabe, who was standing by the booth, with a cup in each hand and three cookie-munching kids wandering

and fro in front of him. "I guess you are." She wagged her auburn broom. "Can I just say, *yum*?"

Jenny side-eyed Tuff, but he was busy helping the kids and Conor with affection on Ransom. "You can, absolutely."

Sam grabbed Liam before he could toddle under the carriage. "I'm definitely meeting for lunch next week. I need deets."

"There really aren't any *deets* to share. I'd love to meet up, though, if you and the rest of the gang. We need a girls' night." Jenny snapped her fingers. "How about Wednesday evening, we all meet at Mario's for the two-price pizza and five-dollar pitchers?"

"Deal!" Sam gave her a thumbs-up. "I'll get together all the Flanagan trying can. You get Jazz and the Langes. Six thirty?"

"I'll be there with bells on." Jenny's heart sang. She'd missed the crap nights since Jo had left. Maybe they could FaceTime her in for part of a pizza party on Wednesday. With another hug for Sam, Jenny called to Gabe. "I'll text you about Sunday."

"Fine." He kept his face to the horse, not turning or acknowledging any other way.

"*Dammit*, just when she thought maybe things could be okay between them, he suddenly starts channeling the ass she left back in Florida. Couldn't life be simple? Divorced couples got along all the time, and Sam separations where the woman led her life and the man went on with his life. *Kenzie*, they peacefully shared custody of their children. What was wrong with her and her ex? Trust Ryan Tuffington to virtually disappear from her life and then to reappear just as she was beginning to get comfortable with herself. She stared at his stiff back and sighed. *Jerk. Jerk.* Then she turned, shook her shoulders, and strode across the street to her son and Gabe.

by the



m said.

toddler, "HE'S ALMOST ASLEEP." Jenny came into the kitchen and sat down across from Gabe at the table. "I hope I don't regret letting him have Harry's crate in the hug room." She drummed her fingers on the Formica surface. "Well, once he's asleep, a bomb wouldn't wake him, so I'll go in before I go to bed and see if Paula's the goofy dog outside one last time."

ering to

ows and “I imagine it’ll be fine. You’ve really mastered the housetraining. I was impressed with how seriously Jenny and Luke took Harry’s showertraining. Even though they still pretty much kept him in the kitchen and the nearly fifteen-week-old pup had learned to let them know when “We’re needed to go outside and rarely ever had an accident in the house.” It was Harry’s first time to stay with Luke.

. I miss Jenny merely smiled wanly.

ped her Gabe reached for her hand. “You want to tell me what’s on your mind or half-You’ve been . . . weird since our carriage ride.”

She shrugged, but didn’t meet his eyes.

hertys I He tilted his head and peered into her face. “Come on. What’s up?”
“Something Ryan said.” She grimaced. “This is so stupid.”

d girls’ He waited, watching as she shifted in her seat, fidgeting, lacing his fingers with his, releasing him, and weaving them together again.

o Ryan, At last, she met his gaze. “He said he beat the crap out of you once. How did he do that?”

g her in For a second, Gabe was baffled until he recalled a stupid incident from too many years ago. With a burst of laughter, he pulled her over onto his lap. “Well, if shoving me up against the door of the Rover and threatening to castrate me and serve them to me on a paper plate if I ever came near you again qualifies as beating the crap out of me . . .”

s, while Her eyes widened. “When and where did that happen?”

with her “Graduation day, in the parking lot at school.” He chuckled. “It’s just a faint memory, so faint and ridiculous, although the reason for Tuff’s attack is still crystal clear. “I think he really hated that you hugged me in the line after the ceremony.” He pressed a kiss to her lips, just inches from her mouth and tasted chocolate and peppermint. “Mmm. You taste good on Christmas.”

Jenny cuddled into him, resting her head on his shoulder, and he ran his fingers through her hair. “Gabe, I’m so sorry that happened. Maybe one day Tuff and I will actually leave high school.”

e in his “I wouldn’t hold my breath.” He put a finger under her chin and tilted her face back to look into her beautiful face. “If high school, or college, or anything else matters, is a guy’s *best* time, they rarely get past it.”

She ran her fingers over the scruff on his cheeks, her expression soft. “None of us are the same people we were back then. Too much of it has changed.”

” Gabemany years have gone by. Even so, I’m glad you and I found each other again.” She took a long, deep breath, then slowly let it go. “I’m not going to let Ryan come between us, Gabe. I’m not.” She tried to offer a reassuring smile, but it got lost somewhere between her lips and her eyes.

Tonight

in your mind?

,

holding her

face. Did

pull him

from

his lap.

Was he

going to cut

you out

of the

picture

was

halfway

to his own,

like

he

stroked

her hair

and

she

was

so

solemn.

Life, too

many years have gone by. Even so, I'm glad you and I found each other again." She took a long, deep breath, then slowly let it go. "I'm not going to let Ryan come between us, Gabe. I'm not." She tried to offer a reassuring smile, but it got lost somewhere between her lips and her eyes.

Chapter Fourteen

“**Y**OU’RE ABSOLUTELY SURE you’ll be okay without me?” Gabe glanced over his shoulder at his mother as he shoved another shirt into his duffel. “I’ll be here for someone else proctor the finals and Zoom office hours.”

Claire leaned heavily on a four-legged cane as she stood in the doorway of his old bedroom. “I made it up the stairs, didn’t I? And I’ve got my freedom of movement in the walking cast. This cane is just for extra support if I need it. Plus, I’m using the arm more every day.” She grinned. “I’ll get the mend, son.” The grin turned to a bit of a scowl. “Besides, you’ve got to be sure I won’t be alone.”

“You betcha.” He looked around the room to make sure he’d packed everything. “Andi McNair said she’d be here around noon today, and she’s staying until I get back.”

Claire’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know why you’re spending the money to have her here. I have a phone on me at all times. You can’t afford to let my insurance will cover a nurse visit a couple of times a week.”

“You don’t need to worry about—” Gabe began, but his mother cut him off with a wagging finger.

“*Don’t* tell me not to worry about the money,” his mother scolded. “It’s not your responsibility.”

Gabe shook his head. “You kinda are until you’re completely healed. Andi is staying, or I’ll unpack right now, and you’ll feel guilty because you’re missing finals week.” He hovered a hand over the zipper on his duffel bag. “I’ll call.”

Claire glared at him, then waved a hand—the hand on her healed arm in a rare moment of submission. “Okay, okay. Andi and I will play board games of Phase Ten, eat too many cookies, and watch every single Christmas movie on Netflix and Hallmark.”

Gabe zipped the bag and shouldered it. “That’s my girl.”

“Mother,” Claire muttered.

“Sorry?” Gabe had heard her just fine, but he figured he’d won this

so he may as well let her have her say. He was happy to see his mom her old self, tart-tongued and full of purpose. But it was too soon for stay alone—and that wasn't only him or Chris being overprotective. someone stay with her was per the doctors' advice.

Claire straightened her shoulders and gave him a haughty look. your *mother*, Gabriel James Dawson, not your *girl*. I love you more t
ed over own life, but, honestly, the longer you stay here, the bossier you g
can let need to go back to your own life and leave mine alone.”

He grinned and turned her toward the stairs. “What if I told y
oorway thinking of leaving school in May and moving back here?”

“Good God!” Claire stopped dead and awkwardly lowered hersel
it more onto the second to the last step, nearly landing on his boot-clad feet.
balance on earth are you thinking?” She stared up at him, disbelief in her dark
‘I’m on
e made

Gabe tapped her shoulder. “Let’s go have this conversation in
more comfortable place.”

He led her to the kitchen, where she perched on a stool at the islan
packed d she’s he made coffee and popped bread into the toaster. “Josh invited me t
this dig with him. It’s the most exciting thing that’s happened to archa
oney to in Indiana in my lifetime. I don’t want to miss it.”

“How will you live?” It was purely a mom question, and Gabe c
is, and fault her for it.

He’d lived on research grants, fellowships, federal grants, and
cut him donations to digs since he’d entered grad school. The adjunct pay at V
d. “I’m and Mary was decent enough to keep him in an apartment and g
while he applied for work on digs, but that wasn’t where his heart v
aled, so liked teaching; he *loved* being on digs and writing about them.

Despite wanting to remind her that he was a thirty-four-year-ol
ise I’m with a PhD, he opted not to call her out for questioning him. He knew
of PhDs who were struggling to make ends meet, even a couple who s
rm—in to live with their parents. “Mom, Josh has private funding for this one
endless as a state grant. I’ve checked and Warner will take me on as adjunc
stinking History Department next fall. Besides, remember, I have textbook roy
two of my own and four I coauthored. Josh and I have already started
about a book coming out of the Rising Sun project. So no worries, eh?”

“I’m sorry.” Her shoulders drooped. “That was inexcusably rud
s battle, don’t owe me any explanations about your finances. You may be my

back to you're an adult, and unless you start selling drugs or robbing banks or
r her to squat in my basement for the rest of your life, how you pay your
Having none of my business. That's not really what I'm asking, anyway." She
her sling arm on the counter. "I'm wondering if that dig is enough re
. "I am move back here when, years ago, you were so miserable you couldn't
han my leave. I vaguely recall the words *never coming back* and *when hell*
et. You over being tossed around."

The heady scent of fresh brew tickled Gabe's nostrils as he stared
ou I'm coffee dripping into the pot. He took two mugs from the cupboard ab
added a little stevia to both before filling them and carrying them
f down island. He sliced two bananas, then the toast popped up, warm and
"What He buttered each piece, serving them with a pot of strawberry jam
eyes. considered his mom's question. Finally, he sat.

a safer, "It's not the only reason," he admitted, more to himself than to her
this town and that nerdy teenaged angst behind, determined to r
d while myself. But in the ensuing years, I figured out that the nerd is who I'll
o work be, PhD, Lasik surgery, and other physical and emotional c
eology notwithstanding."

Claire gave him a wry smile. "And now you're back, all Indiana
ouldn't and falling in love with the cheerleader who wouldn't give you a
glance so many years ago."

private Gabe sipped his coffee, feeling just a little uncomfortable. This w
William conversation he should be having with his mother. It was one to ha
ceries Jenny. He glanced at his watch. Seven thirty. He had to get going or l
vas. He traffic in Richmond. "Jenny and I are both different people now, I
don't know where we're headed, but I'll tell you this much—there's
d adult been a hole in me that I couldn't fill up until now. I'm happy when I'
7 plenty her and Luke."

still had "That's all a mom ever asks for her kids—that they be happy." (C
as well expression sent a little spark of warmth to his heart. This trip had sho
t in the how strong his mom was and he was so proud of how she'd tal
alties—accident in stride, determined to heal and get on with her life.

talking He was ready to come back to River's Edge. He *wanted* to come h
" Jenny, to the dig, and to recoup all the time he'd lost with his family c
e—you years. He'd figure it out—a way to have everything he wanted, eve
kid, but he'd missed. "And it's all a kid ever wants for his mom. I'm glad to :

decide on the mend. You'll be back at the bank before you know it." He rose, bills in cup and plate in the sink, and dropped a quick kiss on her cheek. "I've rested here." He collected his duffel and laptop bag, then held up the leather sash to "Okay if I take this?"

wait to She grinned. "Sure. Why not take the fedora too? You may as well freeze out."

He slipped his arms into the coat. "Even *I'm* not that nerdy. I'm dead at the front door unlocked for Andi." He stopped in the kitchen doorway to give you, Mom."

to the "Love you back. Let me know you got there safe."
golden.

1 as he



Jo: "I left "GIRL POWER." JAZZ held up her glass of beer, and Jenny and the others at the table raised theirs in a toast, repeating, "Girl power," in unison.

always Somehow they'd managed to get everyone to Mario's on the same evening—Jazz, Jenny, Sam, Meg, Tierney, Holly, and Kitt and Harley

who were drinking club soda because both were pregnant. Even Claire Jones, Max's wife, had gotten time off from her ER rotation to join the

second Jenny's heart warmed as she stared down the table at her dear, dear friends—some she'd grown up with, others she was still learning about, but each

wasn't as every one of them were true kindred spirits. She'd brought her iPad around with her up at one end of the table, so Jo could join them via FaceTime.

he'd hit "I say we need to change that to *woman* power!" Jo announced to Mom. In Durham, North Carolina, where she and her scientist fiancé, Alex, were

always all settled into his condo. "Oh, it's so great to see you all! Lean in! Lean in with me!"

Obediently, each of them bent forward so Jo could check out all their faces on the iPad camera. Kitt and Harley even rose so she could catch

Claire's their bellies—Harley's was bigger, even though Kitt was due first. Even though Harley denied that she and Beck were having twins, Jenny couldn't help but incline to think maybe it was possible.

While the others chattered and laughed, a lump formed in Jenny's throat as she

toasted the two pregnant women showed off their baby bumps. She'd desperately wanted another child, but two miscarriages after Luke, plus discovering Tuff's unfaithfulness, had forced her back on the pill. Her mind automatically

see you

, set hiswent to Gabe and the fantasy of a beautiful, raven-haired, dark-eyed gi
m outtawith Gabe’s amazing brain and dimples and her organizational skill
‘ jacket.now-familiar rush of heat whenever Gabe crept into her thoughts b
well up inside her and she blinked to focus on her sisters and friends.

l go all Gabe was in Virginia and, even though they’d texted, he’d been :
with finals and office hours and sharing the Rising Sun find with coll
leavingthey hadn’t actually spoken in a couple of days. Jenny had been finis
. “Love the year-end inventory and updating the Weaver’s Landing v
Evenings, she’d been hard at work on her children’s book, which onl
had seen so far. The pleasure the story was bringing to her life m
smile, and Jazz elbowed her gently.

“What are you thinking about? Or do I need to ask?” she wh
underneath the clatter of the servers bringing pizzas. “You’ve got th
aroundagain.”

Jenny leaned away and looked down her nose at her sister. “Actua
e samething about a new project I’ve got going. So there, smarty, who thi
Lange, knows everything.”

Lauren, “A project? Please tell me you’re finally going to change that awfu
e party.paint in the dining room.” Jazz craned her neck, checking out the
iends—pizzas that had been placed on the table. “Oh, I want the veggie.”

ach and Jenny shook her head. “No, I *like* the paint in the dining room.”

nd set it Jazz gave a sheepish smile and helped herself to a slice of pizza.
okay.”

nd from “Are you dissing my paint again?” Harley asked from across th
re now “I’ll have you know, that combination of sage green with white chai
in in!” very on trend right now. I put the exact same paint in my new dining
ill theirand I’m thinking we might extend it into the kitchen if I can get B
ompareboard.”

st, and Lauren grabbed a slice from the pizza tray as it went past. “Oh, fo
ny wassake, Harles, if you wanted to hang gold-leaf-flocked wallpaper in
room of that old house, Beck would hock his precious Camaro to ma
s throatyou had enough money to do it. He’s your slave.”

erately Harley’s satisfied smile made Jenny’s heart clutch. “Yeah, he i
overinghe?”

atically “Max, on the other hand, has an opinion about everything we do
condo,” Lauren continued. “Honestly, sometimes I think he mis:

girl childcalling. He should've been a decorator, not a doc."

ls. That "Rye's exactly like him. I was thinkin' sky blue in the wee one's
egan tobut he wants yellow, and he hates the cloud decals I found online

patted her baby bump, and her smile said she clearly was not at all u
so busythat her policeman husband had an opinion about their nursery.

eagues, Jenny sighed. Tuff had skipped going nursery furniture shopping v
hing upduring her pregnancy with Luke. *Too busy. Away games. Besides, that*

vebsite.job. He'd told her to pick out whatever she liked, but when she foun
y Gabebeautiful fog-gray country pieces that she loved, he'd had a fit and

ade hershe switch it out for a practical, golden oak convertible crib and c
drawers. She'd given in, but the furniture had stayed behind in Flori

isperedshe found a wonderful, whimsical, boat-shaped trundle bed that Luk
at lookin an artisan furniture shop in Vevay.

As she gazed around the table at her friends, each one more
lly, I'mmarried than the next, her heart ached. She'd wasted all those years tr

nks shemake her marriage to Ryan work, unaware until after the fact that
destined to fail because she was the only one putting in any effort.

il greenlooked back, she could see that she'd nearly turned into Ryan's
severalmother—an obsequious, servile doormat for a loud, demanding m

wonder he'd been so shocked when she finally left—that was all he k
marriage.

"Oops, "What's the project?" Jazz's question jerked her out of her ruminat

Jenny started to answer, then stopped. She thought she wanted to
e table.the book first, maybe shop the concept out to a few agents or pul

r rail isbefore she talked about it. Not that Jazz and Jo wouldn't support her f
g room,would be tossing out ideas for more stories and Jazz would be organiz

beck onefforts, looking for possible places to send it and helping with queries.
a good idea to bring them in? Her sisters knew she'd always kept a

r Pete'sand that she toyed with sketching and watercolors. After all, from th
n everythey were little, she was the one who always created the cards fo

ke sureparents' and grandparents' birthdays and other celebrations. But sor
held her back. Maybe a desire to bring to fruition a dream that was

is, isn'ther own. "It's Christmas. Don't get nosy."

Jazz merely offered a quirked brow and a shrug as Sam leaned aro
o in the to tap Jenny's shoulder.

sed his "Dish, girl. What's up with the luscious Gabriel Dawson?" she ask

the question seemed to quiet the entire table.

room, “Well . . .” Jenny longed to spill all her joy, doubts, and fears. “Sam and Gabe were definitely headed somewhere, but where? Their lives were so different. What did Gabe want? What did *she* want, for that matter?”

When she thought her life had settled into a pleasant routine since her return to River’s Edge, two different men had appeared to put her right back into emotional chaos and for two very different reasons. Ryan, she had to handle. He was a fact of life. Gabe, she yearned for. She insisted that was a fact of life now too. The plain truth was, she had no idea how to answer Sam’s question. Until she saw Gabe again, until they’d had a chance to sort out the heat between them and see what was possible, she didn’t have a clue. So many things in play, but the one thing she knew for certain

“He sure can kiss.”

She winked at Sam, and the chatter and laughter around the table picked up again as the conversation turned to the holidays, the Christmas Eve show and party—all the things that made Christmas at River’s Edge so dear.

an. No
new of

ion.
to finish
polishers
fully. Jo
ring her
. Was it
journal
he time
or their
nothing
entirely

und her

ed, and

the question seemed to quiet the entire table.

“Well . . .” Jenny longed to spill all her joy, doubts, and fears. She and Gabe were definitely headed somewhere, but where? Their lives were so very different. What did Gabe want? What did *she* want, for that matter? Just when she thought her life had settled into a pleasant routine since coming back to River’s Edge, two different men had appeared to put her right back into emotional chaos and for two very different reasons. Ryan, she could handle. She had to because he was a fact of life. Gabe, she yearned for, and that was a fact of life now too. The plain truth was, she had no idea how to answer Sam’s question. Until she saw Gabe again, until they’d had a chance to sort out the heat between them and see what was possible, she didn’t have a clue. So many things in play, but the one thing she knew for certain was, “He sure can kiss.”

She winked at Sam, and the chatter and laughter around the table started up again as the conversation turned to the holidays, the Christmas Candlelight Walk, the Advent play at St. Agnes Church, Aidan and Holly’s annual Christmas Eve show and party—all the things that made Christmas in River’s Edge so dear.

Chapter Fifteen

GABE WAS HOME! Jenny had been wrapping Christmas gifts at the room table when he appeared, totally unexpectedly, on her doorstep, tousled and delicious and . . . happy. Truly *happy* to see her. They'd had a little contact while he'd been back in Virginia that she'd started wondering if he would return at all. She didn't even try to contain her joy. She threw her arms around him, kissing him with gusto right there in her open doorway with Luke not ten feet away on the sofa.

After a very satisfying hello, she leaned back in his arms. "Welcome home." She sucked in a sharp breath. She hadn't meant to say that. Embarrassed, she backpedaled. "I mean . . . not *home*. I know this isn't *home* anymore, but I'm glad you're—" She gave a rather strangled laugh that finished lamely, "You know, *here*."

He touched his lips to hers in a quick kiss. "I'm happy to be here." He picked up the large shopping bag with handles that he'd set on the floor beside him. "For you and Luke."

Luke, focused on a video game, hadn't been paying attention, but he looked up, his eyes wide. "You brought us stuff? What?"

"Come look." Gabe shut the door and held out the bag.

Luke dropped the game controller and raced over, taking the bag. As Gabe hung his jacket on a hook. Then he took the bag back. "No, Luke. A minute. Some of this is for your mom."

Jenny's heart filled up. "Christmas is still two weeks away."

Gabe's dimples showed through the scruff on his cheeks. "These are Christmas gifts, so we're okay." He pulled out a bottle of wine. "Red from Benton Farm Winery, just outside of Williamsburg." He handed Luke the bottle. "Cab Franc. I thought it tasted pretty good." He brought out a wrapped box. "And something for your tree."

Luke was practically bouncing on his toes. "What about me?"

Gabe chuckled. "You? You get . . ." He drew out the word as he reached into the bag and brought out a tin. "Christmas candy from the candy store."

Williamsburg. And”—he brought out a long, flat box wrapped in plain paper—“a Colonial toy that requires no batteries, no screens, and not plug in except your imagination.”

Luke tore the paper off the box and gazed at the picture on to second before taking the box to the sofa.

dining
looking
had so
ering if
rew her
orway,
elcome
y that
it's your
igh and

Jenny, carrying the bottle of wine and her own wrapped box, fo watching over the back of the couch as Luke slowly and carefully ope box. Gabe came up behind her and put one hand on her should tingling surge his touch always caused started there and spread thro her whole body. “What is it?” she whispered.

“You’ll see.” His warm breath stirred the hair that was falling ou ponytail over her ear. She longed to lean back against his lean body, strong arms around her.

Luke took out a jointed, carved wooden puppet, a round stick, a f board, and a single sheet of paper. His brow furrowed as he rea limberjack. Dancing Dan?” The words rose on a question as he looke Gabe.

“I thought since you were learning to dance, you might get a kick re.” He him.”

ie floor Luke’s eyes lit up. “How do I make him work?”

Gabe grinned. “Read the instructions and see if you can figure it ou

now he As Luke focused on his toy, Gabe took the bottle of wine and set i table beside the couch. “Open yours.”

wn bag
iang on
e aren't
d wine
her the
a gift-

Jenny shook her gift, which was also wrapped in plain brown except hers had a narrow purple ribbon. Whatever was inside made clunking sound—like wood against wood. As she untied the ribbon, h sped up, and she tried to sort out what he might be saying by b presents.

Upon opening the box, her throat clogged with tears. Nestled in paper were two small, carved wooden ornaments—one a dark-hair dressed in painted indigenous buckskin clothing, the other a blonde g in a painted calico dress and pinafore. Each had a loop and a length c to hang them from the boughs of her Christmas tree. She turned them her hand. On the back of the carvings, the artist had signed their initi labeled each figure appropriately, APONI and CLARISSA.

reached
store in “Oh, Gabe,” she breathed, stroking the delicate figurines with one

“These are . . . exquisite.”

Gabe blushed, but his dimples showed his pleasure that she liked them.

“A friend of mine works in a woodshop in Williamsburg. He does ornaments for every Christmas, so I asked him to make these for me.”

Jenny held them up. “They’re perfect.” She led the way to the Christmas tree by the front window and hung the two ornaments together, from the center. When they were placed exactly right, she looked up at him, her tenderness in his expression nearly took her breath away. “You really thought I can do this, don’t you?”

“Absolutely.” He touched his lips to hers in a soft kiss. “It’s a great honor and your illustrations are fantastic. As a matter of fact”—he pulled a card from his shirt pocket—“here is the name of my agent. She works with a lot of authors, not just boring old textbook writers. I mentioned your book to her and she’d like to take a look.”

Jenny’s breath caught, and she pressed her palms to her chest. Unable to speak, her voice came out squeaky. “Seriously?”

He grinned and nodded. “Yup. How close is it to done?”

“It’s . . . it’s . . . I-I . . .” Jenny was speechless.

“Breathe, Jenny.” Gabe gathered her into his arms, patting her back and rocking her.

At last, she leaned back, blinking away the tears that stung her eyes. It was possible to feel joy, excitement, and terror all rolled into one, sitting there. She took the deep breath he’d recommended. “I only need to complete the illustrations for the last few pages.” She swiped a hand over her cheek. “I hadn’t even thought that far yet—I mean about how to go about getting my book published. I figured I’d google publishers after the holidays.”

Gabe quirked one dark brow. “Want to start with Janine?”

Suddenly, Jenny laughed. “Yes. Yes!” She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tight. “Thank you. Thank you.”

Clacking from the couch separated them as Luke squealed. “I see! Look! He’s dancing!”

The wooden man was indeed dancing. Luke had inserted the rod through the hole between the doll’s shoulders and placed the thin board under his feet. And although awkwardly, the puppet was tap-dancing. Luke’s eyes shined. “He called, ‘Gabe, c’mere! He’s dancing!’”

“I think you’re a hit, Dr. Dawson. Go,” Jenny encouraged. “I’m going to get the camera.”

get us some cookies and coffee. I'll be right back.”

his gift. “Would you make mine milk?” Gabe settled on the sofa next to Lu

aments “You betcha.” She scooped up the gift wrappings and the bottle

and headed to the kitchen, humming as she put coffee on to brew and

ristmasChristmas cookies out of the freezer. As she artfully arranged

ont anddifferent varieties on a plate, she spoke aloud, “Alexa, play Ch

and theClassics.” Immediately, Andy Williams’s voice filled the house with “

believeMost Wonderful Time of the Year,” and Jenny couldn’t help g

Christmas was going to be extra wonderful this year. For the first

at storymore years than she could remember, she wasn’t dreading the h

ard outworrying about traveling from Florida, or stressing over whether Tuff

ll kindsbe sober. No trying to schedule their time evenly between their fa

k to herhoping his mom and dad wouldn’t buy Luke every toy in Target, or

sister time because Tuff insisted on being at his parents’, then havi

Finallydisappear with his old buddies to the tavern.

Last year was a bit easier because she and Luke had moved home

their own house, and she’d managed to allocate Luke’s time evenly b

the families. Tuff’s parents were still treating her quite coolly, but they

ack andnever dream of being outright hostile. She held all the cards

relationship, and although she wouldn’t dream of doing such a thing, s

es. If itrather grateful they feared she might cut them off from Luke. It gave h

he wasup in a situation that was never going to be very comfortable.

olor the But this Christmas, Luke was having a blast learning soft shoe

week. “Iwith Mateo and Aidan for the Christmas Eve show, and Jo and he

etting itAlex, would be home in another week. Jazz was over-the-moon happ

Eli and her job as the director of the new River’s Edge Arts Comm

Mom, Dad, Gram, and Grandpa Roy were healthy and strong, and the

und hishad had a fantastic year. *She* was writing a children’s book! And, the

change, Tuff was mostly behaving.

did it! She took a breath as she enumerated her many blessings and finis

litany with *Gabe*. This holiday, there was Gabe—strong, kind,

into thedeliciously sexy Gabe, who clearly shared her attraction, who was gre

s thigh,Luke, who seemed already to understand who she and Luke were, wh

hone aswanted.

*But he lives over six hundred miles away, plus a career he loves ta
going toall over the world. He’s gone for days, even weeks at a time, which*

him a poor prospect for a husband or a stepfather, the wary devil inside her head reminded her. Mentally, she swatted the intrusion away and winetold the little devil to shut up. She wasn't looking for a husband or a pulledstepfather. She merely wanted to bask in the pleasure of having a good time severalin her life, even if only for a little while.

ristmas

'It's the

inning.



time inGABE WATCHED AS Luke got the hang of the Limberjack, making the v
olidays,puppet dance merrily on the end of the board. The kid had a good s
f wouldrhythm, which Gabe totally did not, and was managing to get the little
amilies,dance to the beat of the holiday song that was playing on Alexa. Jenr
missinghave turned on the music. The house, redolent with the piney and cir
ng himscents of Christmas, filled with Luke's joy at the old-fashioned wood
and the gas logs burning in the fireplace, felt like home.

and had Gabe glanced over his shoulder, peering through the dining room
etweenkitchen, where Jenny was plating cookies and swinging her hips and
/ wouldalong with the same version of "Winter Wonderland," he remembered
in thathis childhood. When the song ended and switched to Harry Conn
she wasrendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas," his throat tightened.

er a leg He couldn't remember the last time he'd truly cared about being h
Christmas. But this year, he couldn't wait to get through finals, grad
and taplast-minute office hours. He'd gotten a thrill he'd never felt before, cl
er love,the gifts from old Williamsburg for Luke and Jenny. He'd even b
py withChristmas shopping for his mom and Chris, Jeremy, and the kids. Eve
nission.was wrapped and in the back of the Rover, waiting to go under Chri
marinaon Christmas morning.

biggest For Luke's Christmas gifts, he'd found an easy-to-read biography
dancer Savion Glover online, as well as a couple of games for his Ga
hed herHe'd slip them under the tree after Luke went to bed tonight.

smart,Christmas gift was harder. What said *I think I'm falling in love w*
at without coming on too strong or scaring her half to death? He'd es
at theybuying her a ring, although that was the very first thing that had c
mind as he'd wandered a jewelry store in Williamsburg. It was too s
*kes him*that, despite the fact that he was absolutely sure of what he wanted.

! makes

l voice It was in the museum shop that he found the perfect Christmas
ay and exactly what he wanted to say to her. It was a sterling silver and citr
id or a necklace. Throughout history, bees, like fairies, were often con
od manguardians of the natural world, eternally linked with love, mag
romance. The golden citrine reminded him of her eyes, and all that
symbolized convinced him it was the perfect gift. Wrapped in silv
paper and tied with a red ribbon, it was tucked in his coat pocket. He
put it under her tree before he left.

wooden “You want to?” Luke’s question and a tap on his shoulder broug
ense of back to the present.

guy to Smiling, he turned his focus back to Luke. “I’m sorry, Luke,
y must drifting. Do I want to what?”

namon “Play Super Mario Kart?” He’d put the dancing man back in its b
len toy, offered Gabe a video game controller.

Gabe hadn’t played a video game since he and his buddies had
into the Super Mario 64 and Zelda when they were all only a couple years old
singing Luke. “Sure, okay.” He hoped he still remembered how, particularl
ed from game controllers had gotten a lot smaller, and his hands, as well
ck Jr.’s screens, had gotten a lot bigger.

Turned out, it was like riding a bike. Gabe got into the game
ome for immediately, laughing and whooping with Luke as they sent their cha
les, and careening across the screen. He was so involved that he didn’t hear the
roosing in the kitchen until one of them—a deeper one—uttered a curse. T
iad fun couple of sharp barks from Harry. Gabe dropped the controller and
rything up. “Stay here,” he said to Luke, sounding more like a father tha
s’s tree actually intended, but whatever was going on in the kitchen, the kid

need to be part of it. “Keep going. I’ll be right back,” he added, hop
7 of tap game would keep Luke engaged enough not to wander out to the kitch
me boy. Quietly, he moved into the dining room, but he couldn’t see Je
Jenny’s Tuff. He’d assumed it was her ex, but now he was sure. Tuff’s gravell
ith you was hard to miss, particularly when it was raised in anger.

chewed “I told you I didn’t want him near my kid,” Tuff snarled.

ome to And that was all Gabe needed to step over the baby gate into the l
oon for lit kitchen. Cold air blew in through the back door where Tuff sto
broad shoulders filling the opening. Gabe came up behind Jenn
appeared to be giving Tuff a wide berth. “Tuff.” He nodded briefly

his gift—other man's direction.

Jenny turned to him, her eyes filled with a combination of disappointment and disapproval. Thankfully, he didn't see fear. "Ryan was just leaving, and dropped off Luke's hat and gloves. He left them in his truck last night." Tuff's eyes narrowed at Gabe. "Wasn't expecting to see you here, Gabe. I thought you'd left."

"I'm back." Gabe put one reassuring hand between Jenny's shoulder and the dog before kneeling to rescue the knit hat and gloves from Harry, who'd panted for him on them just as Gabe walked in. He had no idea how they wound up on the floor, but he suspected Tuff had tossed them there. Harry had one glove in his mouth, so Gabe rubbed the puppy's head in an effort to get him to release it. "Give it up, Harry."

The dog opened his mouth, and the glove dropped into Gabe's lap. Harry panted in anticipation of a game. Gabe petted him again. "Good boy." Picking up the dog, he moved toward the kitchen door and threw it open. "It's starting to snow. Thought we could take Harry and Luke for a walk before it gets too dark."

Relief was palpable in Jenny's expression. Striding to the back door, Gabe took hold of the knob. "Thanks for bringing these by, Ryan. We'd have almost searched everywhere for them."

"Jen, I want to talk to you." Tuff's cheeks had reddened, but as Gabe could tell, he was sober. "Alone."

Gabe stepped over the baby gate into the dining room with the dog on his back, hopped down, slipping around the doorway so he was out of sight, but within earshot. As he listened, Jenny remained calm, which made it nearly impossible for Tuff to continue his ugliness. "We'll see you tomorrow evening during the Candlelight Walk, and afterward, you can take Luke to your mom's for the Christmas party."

"Mom wanted you to come too."

"I doubt that seriously." Jenny's tone dripped irony. "But she can't take him overnight if she likes. I'll pack his backpack."

"That's all Mom and Dad get?" Tuff's voice rose once more. "Or are you going to be here a couple of weeks before Christmas?"

"Of course not. He's out of school now until January third. There's plenty of time for them to have him. We can talk about a holiday schedule when you bring him back to me on Monday." With an exasperated

Jenny started closing the door. "Right now, you need to go."

A long silence followed as Gabe stood by, listening . . . waiting. Finally, Tuff grumbled, "Monday, I'm taking him downriver to reindeer farm and have lunch with Santa, remember? We're staying over here. So he can play in the pool at the hotel there." The belligerence in his tone made Gabe's skin crawl. "I'll pick him up from Mom's, so pack enough for two nights, and include something decent for him to wear. No holey jeans." "Fine." Somehow, Jenny managed to keep her temper, although Gabe had no idea how.

The door slammed shut, rattling the wineglasses sitting on an open shelf in the hutch on the wall next to Gabe. That surely wasn't Jenny's door. He peered around the doorway.

She gave him a wan smile. "Thanks. He can be such an ass." "I didn't want to interfere." He stepped back over the baby gate and Harry down on the floor. "On the other hand, he was getting pretty loose out there." He unlocked the back door before pulling her into his embrace. "He doesn't know me around Luke, does he?"

Jenny buried her face in his sweater, muffling her voice. "Nope. I've been really don't care. No matter what he thinks, he has no jurisdiction here. He gave me full custody when I moved home. He only has visitation rights as far as the law is concerned."

"I don't want to be the reason you and he are always butting heads." Suddenly, she stepped back, eyes narrowing. "Look, if this is going to be too hard for you, we can just forget it. Go back to . . . to what was before . . . old classmates? Friends? Whatever." She stalked to the kitchen, running water and talking so low and fast, he almost couldn't hear her. "I'm not asking anything from you. You have a perfectly fine life out there in Virginia. You don't really need the burden of a single mom and a kid and all the baggage that comes along with that." She twisted the water out of the dishrag she was rinsing with more force than necessary.

He blinked, completely taken aback by the fierceness in her tone. "What the hell?" "Jenny—"

She tossed the dishrag in the sink and spun around, then crossed her arms over her chest, her expression a weird combination of defiant and . . . "I won't do this again. I *won't* do this again. Do you understand me?"

Confused and, frankly, scared, he released a little frustrated breath. "I don't. Do *what* again? What is it you think I want?"

“You tell me, Gabe, because I don’t know where we’re headed and I can’t . . . lose myself in another man again. I need me and, as crazy as it may seem, I see the about you, right now, I want *me* more than anything . . . even more than I want you.” Gabe’s stomach tightened, and his hands curled into fists at his sides. What exactly was she saying? Was she sending him away? Confused questions tumbled through his mind like rocks in a rushing river. “I can’t.” What were the right words to say to bring her back into his arms? Gabe had said, “Look, never mind. Just . . . just go, okay?” She turned her back on him and his heart sank to his socks.

When she didn’t say anything more or face him again, he didn’t know what else to do except retreat. So that’s what he did. He stepped out the doggie gate and walked away, trembling. He stroked his fingers through Luke’s silky tousled hair as he passed the sofa, but the boy had set down the game controller in favor of his Gameboy and was completely absorbed. He grabbed his coat and scarf from the rack in the foyer and quietly closed the door behind him, even though what he really wanted to do was slam it.

Thanks to Tuff, there’d been enough door slamming for one night, but I thought. Wrapping his wool scarf around his neck, he got as far as the car. He before he stopped with his hand on the latch, his mind whirling. He saw the frost on the windshield of the old Rover—it was going to be another night. Even colder if he couldn’t figure out what to do. He shook his head and chewed his lower lip. *No. No way.* He wasn’t leaving like this, not when they had no idea what he’d done to piss her off. Like a lightning bolt, it struck that it wasn’t *him* she was angry with—it was Tuff, and he was getting it. “I’m blowback from her encounter in the kitchen with her ex. He turned here in and hurried back up the sidewalk and then climbed the steps, his treat on the wooden porch. Just as he raised his hand to knock, the door opened and there she was—his Jenny, her expression open and vulnerable, her eyes soft and shimmering with tears.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was ragged. “I-I took my anger at him out on you . . .” She sighed.

He reached for her, tugging her out onto the porch and into his arms. “This jacket, surrounding her with his heat. “It’s okay. It’s okay,” he murmured against her hair.

“No, I’m not,” she slid her arms around his waist and clung. “No, it’s not okay. I’m not him and you could never be him, thank God.” She tipped her head

id I just back. “I meant what I said, though. I can’t lose me again. I *won’t* lose me as I am. Not even for whatever we may turn out to be.”

n you.” He touched his forehead to hers. “I hope to hell not, Jenny Weaver. Her sides are a remarkable woman. I would never ask you to change for me or for me. It’s you and me in this”—he struggled for a word to describe what was growing between the two of them, but gave up for fear of frightening her. “I . . .” the intensity of his emotions—“we’re *us*, and whatever happens in the future, on him, I’ll always respect you, what you need, what you want, and I’ll expect you to do the same for me, okay?”

t know “Okay.” With a smile that told him she believed him, but would probably never remain wary, she touched his cheek. When she kissed him, softly, he did a little flip thing. “Don’t worry about Tuff. If it wasn’t you, he’d be something else to be pissy about. He’s just an unhappy person.”

d. Gabe He nodded, hating the fact that she even had to deal with a morose Ryan Tuffington’s many issues. “Just one thing?”

. “What’s that?”

: night, “Do you ever”—Gabe wasn’t sure how to phrase the question, but he should even ask it, but he plunged ahead—“worry that he’ll do something that would hurt you or Luke?”

ier cold “Physically?” She shook her head firmly. “Not at all. That’s not his problem. He gets loud and verbally mean, but he would never ever touch me or hurt me when he’s in anger.”

hit him She knew better than he did, so he’d have to trust her on that one. Nonetheless, he would remain vigilant. He dropped a kiss on her forehead before releasing her. “Come on, let’s grab Luke and Harry and see what the heavy goofy pup thinks of snow.”

opened

er eyes

out on

ns, into

rmured

y. You

er head

back. “I meant what I said, though. I can’t lose me again. I *won’t* lose me. Not even for whatever we may turn out to be.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “I hope to hell not, Jenny Weaver. You are a remarkable woman. I would never ask you to change for me or expect that. It’s you and me in this”—he struggled for a word to describe what was growing between the two of them, but gave up for fear of frightening her with the intensity of his emotions—“we’re *us*, and whatever happens in the future, I’ll always respect you, what you need, what you want, and I’ll expect you to do the same for me, okay?”

“Okay.” With a smile that told him she believed him, but would probably remain wary, she touched his cheek. When she kissed him, softly, his heart did a little flip thing. “Don’t worry about Tuff. If it wasn’t you, he’d find something else to be pissy about. He’s just an unhappy person.”

He nodded, hating the fact that she even had to deal with a moment of Ryan Tuffington’s many issues. “Just one thing?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you ever”—Gabe wasn’t sure how to phrase the question or if he should even ask it, but he plunged ahead—“worry that he’ll do something . . . you know . . . like . . . *hurt* you or Luke?”

“Physically?” She shook her head firmly. “Not at all. That’s not his style. He gets loud and verbally mean, but he would never ever touch me or Luke in anger.”

She knew better than he did, so he’d have to trust her on that one. But nonetheless, he would remain vigilant. He dropped a kiss on her forehead before releasing her. “Come on, let’s grab Luke and Harry and see what that goofy pup thinks of snow.”

Chapter Sixteen

“**L**OOK AT US,” Jenny whispered, as she cuddled closer to Gabe on the couch. “All alone for another whole night.”

“Whatever will we do with ourselves?” Gabe murmured against her hair and tightened his arm around her.

Jenny had relished the last couple of days. She and Gabe and Luke had wandered the Christmas Candlelight Walk the previous night with Harry on a leash and then transferred to an infant carrier on Gabe’s chest when the puppy got too tired to trot along beside Luke. Jenny had dug the carrier out of the box of baby things in the attic, and it turned out to be just right for Luke to be snuggled up to Gabe’s warm chest. Folks stopped to chat along the way, welcoming Gabe and admiring Harry. They felt like a family, and all the time Jenny could tell Clyde, Gloria, Noah, Dot, and the others who called out greetings were popping with curiosity, nobody asked any questions, giving them knowing smiles.

After the Candlelight Walk, Ryan had been right on time picking up Luke to go to his parents’ holiday party, waiting with a lot of eye rolls and sighs while Luke had a long farewell with Harry Potter. Considering Luke was the one who’d gotten Luke the dog, his reaction was a tad annoying. Luke’s sighs had gotten even deeper when Gabe appeared from the kitchen with Luke’s stuffed beaver, Wally.

“You gonna need this guy, pal?” Gabe held up the well-loved toy beaver that was sitting on the table.”

“Thanks, Gabe.” Luke accepted Wally with a sheepish grin. “I found him there after breakfast by accident.” He unzipped his backpack and stuffed Wally inside.

“You really think *that* needs to go to Grandma’s?” Ryan raised one eyebrow. “She has stuffed animals.”

Jenny put her hands on Luke’s shoulders and gave Ryan a warning look. “Wally’s special.”

Ryan shook his head and flipped his hand. “Whatever. Come on, Luke,

Let's go. Grandma's waiting."

After more hugs and promises to take Harry for a walk to practice work, she finally got them out the door. She and Gabe had shared a and afterward, she'd showed him Aponi and Clarissa's nearly complete He'd been impressed with her watercolor illustrations and loved the na commenting and offering a couple of historical reference suggestions read through. They'd brainstormed a title, settling on *Friendship of the* although Gabe warned her a publisher might change it.

The two of them sitting at the table together last night, discussing book and the possibilities for others, had felt so natural. Jenny made while they talked, and ideas filled her imagination. That feeling of rir continued as they'd closed up the house and he'd followed her up the stopping halfway to sweep her into his arms for the kisses she'd become addicted to. Hot, hungry kisses that told her that he wanted r Harry much as she ached for him.

She'd spent Monday at the marina, showing her mom and dad the r although to the website, adding the new inventory to the Parts pages, and led out started on the taxes while Gabe went out to the dig with Josh and hi merely But now they were together again, watching the flames lick at the g and kissing by the light of the Christmas tree while Harry snoozed on ip Luke dog bed near the hearth.

Ryan had texted photos of Luke petting reindeer at the farm, sitting huge Santa's knee at the luncheon, and splashing in the pool at the hotel g Ryan looked happy and excited and Ryan's comments had been kept to ng. His friendly captions, no snark or questions about what she was doing w an with had their son. Maybe he was finally figuring out that they could y. "He harmony and share their time with Luke without contention.

"Hey." Gabe lifted her chin and kissed her. "Got something I want eft him to you about."

Jenny's heart clutched. *Here it comes—he's heading to Egypt or or Peru.* She sat back so she could see his face. He looked happy, t tucked n brow. *Has to be a new dig.*

"Okay," she said cautiously, mentally preparing herself, although ig look. really wished he'd waited until after Christmas to drop any bomb scooted back a few inches.

But he reached out to stroke one finger down her cheek. "It's nothi ig guy.

Jenny. Get that *gird-your-loins* look off your face.”

the leash “Habit.” She took his hand and pressed a kiss into his palm. “Once a pizza, years of *I need to talk to you* and not once was it *good news*.”

the story. His smile—those dimples—sent a shiver through her. “I’m hoping irrelative, think this is good news.”

as he “Try me.”

Heart, “Josh got a second grant for the dig and he’s invited me to join the

Officially, I’m committed to William and Mary until May, even though I’m free to leave now. But they’ve already got my classes scheduled for the next semester, and I don’t want to slam that door, because they’ve given me the opportunity for digs over the last few years. But I can be *here* and teach my classes online, just go back regularly for office hours and stuff. In May, though, I’m already home for good.”

to her as She blinked. “You . . . You’re moving back to River’s Edge?”

He nodded, his grin even bigger. “That’s my plan. I’ve already talked to the History Department head at Warner. In the fall, I can get an assistant professor position there that could turn into a full professorship. They’d really like to expand their department to include more archaeology classes, particularly since this discovery at Rising Sun.”

to a plaid Jenny’s breath caught in her throat. *Gabe’s coming home*. It was the last thing she expected him to say, and she was so surprised, she couldn’t say a word.

to Luke His teeth caught his lower lip, and his eyebrows pulled together in a simple, strained apprehension. “I need you to say something . . .”

while he “I’m stunned. I never imagined you’d want to come back.” The words came out croaky.

“When I left all those years ago, I thought I could leave geeky stuff behind me.” He gave a sardonic laugh. “Turns out, you can’t run away from yourself. You just have to learn to like who you are inside, even if you can’t manage to make some changes to the outside.” He took both her hands and smiled excitedly. “I’m still that nerdy guy, Jenny, but I never stopped thinking about you. Wishing I’d been different. For you.”

though she “Oh, Gabe, you wouldn’t have wanted me back then. I-I—” She closed her eyes and suddenly her cheeks were scorching hot. She really didn’t want to admit this to him, but if they had any chance at all, she had to be as honest as she could. “I was grateful that you helped me pass history, but I never

beyond that, at who you really were. *You* never needed to be different. You were funny and smart and kind. But at seventeen, I was shallow and I didn't know those were the things about you I should have been treasuring. His dark eyes grew more intense. "We were both different people as kids. We never would've worked because we wanted different things. I've seen and done a lot in the world since I've been away. Met a lot of people, dated a few, even had a couple of relationships, but you were always there, tucked away in a secret place in my heart. And when it came time to really commit, I couldn't do it because . . ." He shrugged. "Because that's just you."

Jenny's heart rose to her throat. "I wasted so much time. Tried so hard to make my marriage work for Luke and because I'd promised, you know I lost *me* and Ryan didn't care or even notice. He just wanted me to be the cheerleader who was always in the stands for him. I should've fought for me." She laced her fingers with Gabe's. "I've lived a small life, but I want it to be bigger, fuller, and oh, how I want you in it. But I'm scared I don't like to leave you back from all that you love. The digs, the traveling. Plus, I don't want you to ever have to be in the middle of my battles with Ryan."

Gabe bit his lower lip. "So here's the thing about Tuff. I'm very competitive. It never occurred to me back then to fight for you. You had no fantasy and I was no good at—"

Jenny touched two fingers to his lips. "I don't know who you're talking about when you say things like that. I don't want to be a fantasy. I'm just plain Jenny Weaver, a mom, a woman who's trying to rebuild her life. I don't want you to want the *real* me, not the person who's been taking up so much of your head all these long years."

Gabe sucked her fingertips between his lips, touching his tongue to her skin in a gesture so sensual, Jenny felt its effect all the way to her toes. "She didn't let me finish."

Tears stung her eyelids and she blinked to keep them at bay. "What do you want?" "I know the real you—I've seen who you are these past few years. You're good and kind and talented and fierce and beautiful, inside and out. And maybe a little sad, but I'm going to work on that. It's not my nature to compete, but Jenny, I promise you, if you'll have me, I'll be right by your side. I'll slay dragons and ex-football heroes and protect you and Luke to my last breath." His rapt, yet tender, expression was her undoing.

nt. You Tears streamed down her face. “I think I’m pretty crazy about you. I’m a little foolish. I love you, Gabriel Dawson.”

ring.”

and just

gs. I’ve

women,*SHE LOVES ME!* Gabe’s heart nearly pounded out of his chest as he gazed at her, Jenny. He hadn’t planned on telling her that he was moving back home, but time couldn’t hold it in any longer. He was ready to start a new life with her. There was Luke. Even Harry Potter. He’d been a little frightened that all the time she’d shown him might have been simply a woman who’d been too hard to love without physical affection, even though he knew in his heart that she was his. But Jenny’s way.

He touched her forehead, and she smiled. “You’re not a woman who’s hard to love without physical affection, even though he knew in his heart that she was his. But Jenny’s way.”

He swiped her cheeks, collecting the tears on his thumbs. “Yeah, it’s harder, but I’m glad to hear that because I’ve been pretty crazy about you for as long as I can remember.” He kissed her, tasting salty tears and wine as her lips pressed against his. “We’ll figure this out, okay?”

She nodded, sniffing. “Okay.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “And we talk. Always. No pretending. We’re not someone we’re not, no assuming we already know what the other person wants. Open, honest, real.”

She chuckled. “I’ve never done that before. My instincts are always talking. Please.”

“You please me,” he said fervently. “You’ve got that mastered.”

She sobered. “Don’t change your life for me, Gabe. Don’t change your pace. That’s what I did when I married Ryan. I stopped growing, stopped being who I was, and it was awful. Promise me, you’ll go on digs, you’ll do what you want. You’ll be my Indiana Jones.”

Gabe laughed out loud. “Oh, sweetheart. Indy’s real name was Indiana, and he was just a small-town nerdy kid following his dad around the world. I’ve been around the world. Now, I’m ready to be home, to settle, to start a life with you and Luke. And if a dig turns up somewhere that I think I can’t pass up, we’ll talk about it and make decisions together. Heck, maybe you can come along if you want to.” He kissed her again. “We’ll communicate. Always.” He reached for her and tugged her over onto his back, holding her to his chest, loving how she fit against him perfectly, how she rubbed her nose

ut you, scruff of beard.

“Speaking of communicating . . .” She put her arms around his neck.

“Here?” He quirked one brow. “On the sofa, in front of Harry Potter the Christmas tree?”

The puppy jumped up at the mention of his name, but only stared at the fluffy blanket on the dog bed, and curled back up.

but he Jenny started unbuttoning Gabe’s shirt, kissing his exposed patch of skin as she loosened each button. He closed his eyes and dropped his head back, allowing her to take the reins, blissful in her warm breath on his long chest.

wasn’t All of a sudden, her phone chimed, and she raised her head and glanced at it sitting on the table beside the sofa. “It’s Luke on his iPad,” she said. “Man, up. As she did, she glanced at the big clock over the fireplace. Nine o’clock as I” “He should be asleep.”

curved The alarm in her voice cooled the ardor immediately, and he stepped behind him and nabbed the phone. “Here.”

She slid off his lap and tapped her phone and Luke’s face appeared on the screen, shadowed and clearly frightened. “Luke? Why aren’t you in bed?”

wants. “Mommy, I need you.” Blankets pulled up to his chest, Luke cried. “Wally. “I’m all alone. I don’t know how to turn on the light.”

ways to Jenny frowned. “Honey. Honey. Take a breath. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Dad’s g-gone,” Luke choked out, his voice was full of fear and tears. “What do you mean, he’s gone? He’s not in the hotel room with you?”

ge you. “No, he’s gone!” Luke cried. “I don’t know where he is. His phone is ringing me here, but he’s not.”

ou love, Jenny swallowed hard. “Honey, check the bathroom.”

“The bathroom’s dark.”

Henry, “Check anyway.” She rose and paced. “The switch for the bedside lamp is on the bottom of the lamp. Shine your iPad there and push the switch.”

be with The room lit up, and then came a rustle of sheets and the patter of feet, footsteps, and Luke was back. “No, he’s not here.”

and Luke Gabe jumped up, ran to the coat rack in the foyer, and grabbed his always phone. “What hotel?”

his lap, Jenny scrunched her nose, followed Gabe to the coat rack, pulled on his winter jacket, and slipped into her boots. “The Traveler, I think. The one with an indoor pool. Luke, I’m on my way, honey. We’ll find Dad.”

Gabe slid his jacket and shoes on, too, and they were out the door. "One in Chandler? That's only about twenty minutes away."

She nodded. "Yeah, near the reindeer ranch. Luke, get back in bed. I'm staying with you all the way."

Luke took a shaky breath and nodded. "Hurry, Mommy."

"We're coming, honey. Just keep talking to me."

Gabe googled as he walked, nearly tripping over the gate at the end of the sidewalk. "Dammit." He opened the gate and then they were in the street, heading east.

Jenny had stayed online with Luke, who was still tearful and frigid. Gabe's heart ached for the poor kid.

He thanked the universe that he'd installed a new sound system that included a Bluetooth receiver, as his own phone finally connected to it.

He tapped on the number of the Traveler Hotel that he'd found on the internet and waited for the desk clerk to pick up, but when she did, she immediately put him on hold.

He side-eyed Jenny, who was calming Luke by asking him about the reindeer and talking to Santa, while piano music wafted from the speaker. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he pushed

Rover slightly past the posted speed limit, although the road was curving. "The last thing they needed was to end up in the river. His mind was wandering."

What the hell was Tuff thinking, leaving an eight-year-old kid alone in a hotel room? Maybe he just ran down to the ice machine or something. She'd been gone at least ten minutes as far as they knew and nobody talked long to grab a bucket of ice or hit a vending machine.

At last, the desk clerk picked up, and Gabe asked her to check the room for Ryan, but she said she was not allowed to leave her post and had to clear a busload of seniors who were late arrivals. "Can you connect me to the bar?"

She dithered. "Well, the bar's pretty busy right now. I doubt the bartender will pick up since it's too late for reservations."

Gabe released a frustrated breath. "Connect me to housekeeping. My own name is Ryan."

He glanced at Jenny as the phone went quiet for a second before it rang again. "Maybe I can get someone from there to go to the bar and find her for me." Jenny looked like she was going to cry as she muted her phone. "What's the name of the bar?"

"Well, unless he had a heart attack at the ice machine or fell down

r. “Theof stairs . . .” He gritted his teeth. *Where is housekeeping?*

“He said he’d stopped drinking.”

l. Don’t “Yeah, well . . .” He didn’t know what to say, but all his instincts to the bar was where they’d find Tuff.

Housekeeping’s voicemail answered at last, and Gabe tapped his p disconnect. No point in leaving a voicemail. They were nearly the d of the Luke was as safe as they could make him.

Rover, Fury began a slow simmer in his belly as Jenny went back to dis and soothing her son. He pressed the accelerator a little harder. I htended.beginning to understand what drove a man to violence because, moment, all his protective instincts were on point, and he was se em that considering throat-punching Ryan Tuffington when they got to the hot the car.

Google
mediately

petting
the car
hed the
ry and
hirling.
ne in a
ng. But
kes that

bar for
heck in
e bar?”
rtender

; then.”
ringing
im.”
‘You’re

a flight

of stairs . . .” He gritted his teeth. *Where is housekeeping?*

“He said he’d stopped drinking.”

“Yeah, well . . .” He didn’t know what to say, but all his instincts told him the bar was where they’d find Tuff.

Housekeeping’s voicemail answered at last, and Gabe tapped his phone to disconnect. No point in leaving a voicemail. They were nearly there, and Luke was as safe as they could make him.

Fury began a slow simmer in his belly as Jenny went back to distracting and soothing her son. He pressed the accelerator a little harder. He was beginning to understand what drove a man to violence because, at this moment, all his protective instincts were on point, and he was seriously considering throat-punching Ryan Tuffington when they got to the hotel.

Chapter Seventeen

GABE WAS BARELY parked in front of the two-story hotel before Jenny out of the Rover. He had to hustle to catch up to her. She smiled at her screen as she sped to the well-lit hotel lobby. “Luke, I’m here. I’m going to find your dad and get the room key, okay?” She passed her phone to Gabe and he rushed up behind her and held the big glass door. “Will you stay with me while I go check the bar?”

He took the phone and grinned at the screen. “Hey, Luke!” He mouthed the words into the phone. “Do you want me to go up to the room?”

She shook her head, grateful that he was letting her take the lead, though she could see from his expression that he was as concerned as she was. “I don’t know what room, so hang here for a sec, okay? I don’t want Ryan following me up there if he’s buzzed.”

Gabe nodded and offered an encouraging little smile. “Gotcha. I’ll be right here.” He jerked his head in the direction of the lounge area of the lobby, where several conversation areas with sofas and chairs were scattered around a huge stone fireplace. White lights twinkled on a gaily decorated Christmas tree in the corner and the mantel was hung with ropes of cedar boughs that scented the air.

If she hadn’t been furious, she might’ve taken a moment to enjoy the scene, but her entire focus was on the bar at the far end of the lobby where chatter and laughter spilled out of the open doors. With a deep breath she stalked to the entrance and gazed around the wood-paneled ceilinged space.

And there he was, sitting at the bar with his back to her, a nearly empty beer glass in his hand and two empties in front of him, yukking it up with a guy who looked vaguely familiar. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and wound her way past crowded tables. When she got to within two feet of her ex, the guy Ryan was talking to snapped his mouth shut in the middle of a sentence. Then he nodded toward her.

“Um, dude . . .”

Ryan spun around on the stool. His reddened face was a st
bewilderment. “What the hell?”

Drawing on every ounce of patience she could muster, Jenny held
hand. “Your room key.”

Ryan blinked, then blinked again as if he couldn’t believe his ow
hopped “What are you doing here?”

r phone “Rescuing my son.” She stepped closer, deliberately getting i
going to personal space—a move that she ordinarily wouldn’t make, but th
Gabe as about Luke. “Your key. *Now.*”

ith him “R-rescuing?” His voice rose on the word. He stood up, towerin
her, a tactic he’d used during their marriage if he knew he was in the
It used to make her cower, but this time, Jenny didn’t back away.

ited the “You left him alone in a strange hotel room, Ryan.” She kept he
even with an effort. “He’s only eight years old.”

d, even “He’s fine. He was sound asleep.” Ryan sat back down and attempt
as she charming smile, but it only appeared smirky, which made Jenny want
’t want punch him. “I only came down for a Coke, but”—he jerked a thumb c
shoulder—“look who I ran into. You remember Bart, right?”

I’ll be She did remember Bart Summers, the kicker from River’s Edg
of the School’s team fifteen years ago. Jazz had told her that he’d gotten bor
t up by the reunion, and his very embarrassed and angry wife had yanked him
ristmas the party. Clearly, the guy had enjoyed more than one drink here at th
ghs that bar—his pupils were pinpricks and his cheeks were rosy.

joy the Jenny acknowledged him with a cursory nod before setting her i
on Ryan. “He woke up and you weren’t there, and he panicked. I’m
. Music him home. Give me your key.”

breath, Ryan rolled his eyes. “Oh, for . . . It’s only a couple beers, Jen.” He
, high- at her for a few seconds. “C’mon, I’ll go let you in. You’re
melodramatic. He’s going to want to”—he rose again, putting a hand
r empty bar as he stood—“stay with me.”

with a *Only a couple of beers, huh?*

another “He’s not going to be given that option.” Jenny put one hand on
) within chest and with hardly any pressure, sat him back down on the stool
it in the She felt the room keycard in his shirt pocket and plucked it out.
number?”

He scowled. “Two seventeen, but hang on . . .”

study in She turned her back on him and marched away.

Gabe was pacing in the lounge when she got to the bottom of the out her curving staircase that led to a mezzanine and the second floor of the hotel.

She held up the keycard and started up the stairs—it was way faster than the elevator at this point. But midway up, she paused and turned around, jerking her head toward the bar. “Please, if you can keep him down to his without getting in a fight, will you?”

His was Gabe nodded. “Go get him. I’ll be here.” As she hurried up the stairs, she heard him say, “Luke, your mom’s on her way up now.”

Big over It took three tries with the room key because she was trembling, sliding it in and out too fast. At last, the damn green light came on, and she shoved the handle down.

Her voice Luke was on the other side, barefoot, clutching Wally to his chest, his pjs, and looking so small. “Mommy!” He threw himself into her arms, and she knelt down, and she gathered him close.

to gut- “It’s okay, love. I’m here,” she murmured, inhaling the sweet scent of his hair and basking in the pure pleasure of having her son safe in her arms.

After a moment, he leaned back. “Did you find Dad?”

Je High She nodded. “He ran downstairs for a minute and got waylaid by a friend. But we decided it might be best if you came home with me and stayed in your own bed tonight. Let’s get your stuff together.”

the hotel “Okay!” Clearly relieved, Luke hugged her tight again, then leaned his head in her arms again. “Is Dad . . . will he be mad if I go home?”

re back “Dad will be fine. He’ll be back at the ranch in the morning, and you can take him out to see him and the horses in a couple of days. You can wear your jammies home. Just put your socks and shoes on, and I’ll pack your backpack.”

being Hurriedly, she packed his iPad, a Ziploc bag full of tiny Star Wars figurines and weapons and ships, the clothes he’d discarded on the chair, his toothbrush from the bathroom, while Luke pulled on his socks and shoes. “Is this everything you brought with you?”

Ryan’s He peered into the case before looking around the room. “Yeah. Oh, and there’s this too.” From the nearby desk, he produced a sheaf of papers, “Room together with a large red paper clip—holiday scenes he’d colored at the event—and a waxed paper bag with two cookies in it. “Dad said I could eat the cookies for breakfast.”

She tucked them on top of the other things in the pack. “Okay. I don’t want to put Wally in here?”

“No, I’ll carry him.” Tongue sticking out between his teeth, more than concentration, Luke tied his shoes, which was still a bit of an awkward process, as, thanks to Velcro shoes, he’d only recently learned how to do it.

Jenny zipped the bag shut and gathered his coat, hat, and gloves. “Come on, sweetie, let’s go.”

In the hallway, she glanced up and down. Ryan was nowhere to be seen, so she stopped long enough to zip Luke into his jacket before leading him up the staircase. Over the mezzanine railing, she saw Gabe first, his back to her, and she crossed over his chest as he watched the stairs from a wing chair by the fireplace. Across from him on the sofa, his back to the stairs, sat Ryan, leaning forward, head down, his hands hanging between his knees. As soon as Gabe saw her, he stood and came toward the staircase.

As soon as Luke caught sight of Gabe, he gave a little squeal of surprise and raced down the steps.

s.



an old

TIME HAD SEEMED to slow down after Jenny went upstairs, and Gabe was dreading the inevitable encounter with Tuff. He sure as heck didn’t want a scene in the back middle of a hotel lobby, but he’d told Jenny he wouldn’t let Tuff in with her taking Luke, and he wouldn’t, even if meant wrestling the you can man to the floor. He swallowed, hoping against hope that would be necessary. He might be in better shape than he had ever been in his life, but Jenny’s ex was a big guy and could probably take Gabe down pretty easily.

All Gabe had on his side was his strong desire to protect Jenny and Luke, and maybe the fact that Tuff might not be fully on his game after a beer or two. Tuff didn’t disappoint. Within minutes of Jenny’s disappearance, he’d stormed out of the bar and stalked to the elevator, punching the Up button with more force than necessary. He didn’t even wait, in Gabe’s direction.

The desk clerk, craning her neck to catch sight of whoever was in the Santa elevator, called, “Sorry, sir, the elevator is downstairs while housekeeping cleans the car for tomorrow. It’ll be out of commission for a few minutes.”

Do you Tuff uttered an oath and headed to the stairs, stopping at the bottom. He noticed Gabe loitering near the stairs. "What the—" he growled, but his lips in fact smoothed into the old disdainful expression that had intimidated and taskout of Gabe years and years ago. On Tuff's haggard face, it was now sad. "I should've known she'd drag you along."

"Come "No dragging necessary." Gabe stayed put, keeping the fat newel post at the bottom of the staircase between him and Tuff.

He seen, "I'll bet." Tuff sneered. "Only way *you* could get into her pants is to get her to call him to her beck and call."

His arms *Good grief. It's high school all over again.*

by the Tuff swaggered across the wide stairway to stand only a few feet from Ryan, Gabe. "She's always been in love with *me*."

. When As the other man drew closer, Gabe saw the fear in his blue eyes that was gone anymore.

joy and Tuff started up the stairs, and Gabe came around the post. "Dude, don't go up there. She's pretty pissed. You don't want Luke to see that."

Suddenly, Tuff swung about and crumpled against the banister, falling on his butt on a step midway up. "I can't lose them." He dropped his head into his hands, his shoulders shaking.

ited for Gabe closed his eyes. *This* was not what he was anticipating. Angry in the sardonic and cruel comments, for sure. But despite seeing it on Hal's interfering night, vulnerable Ryan Tuffington was still disconcerting and rather a little bigger. He took a deep breath. "Get off the stairs," he suggested quietly. "Come on, don't behave and sit down."

ife, but Tuff heaved a sigh, pulled himself up, and followed Gabe to the landing easily. He stood by the fireplace. "I can't lose my son." He fell back onto the floor, dropping his head and sighing.

two. Gabe sat down across from him in a chair that allowed him a clear view of the stairs. Tuff seemed to be in control of his temper for now, but he could be off once he saw Jenny with Luke. "You won't lose him. He'll always be his dad."

Tuff thrust his fingers through his hair, pressing it back against his forehead and closed his eyes. "I screwed up with Jen. I don't want to mess up keeping Luke."

tes." "Then don't."

"Just that easy?" Tuff lifted his head and leaned forward, his elbow

m as he his knees. “What do you know about parenting?” Surprisingly, the q
fore his wasn’t hostile.

the hell “Not a damn thing,” Gabe admitted. “But I’m pretty sure if you lo
merely the rest comes along.”

“I do love him.” Tuff stared at his shoes. “Sometimes, though, I
post at sure what to do with him. He’s such a different kid.”

“That’s a reason to love him more.” Gabe spoke from his hear
to be at always been the *different kid*.

Jenny and Luke appeared at the top of the stairs. When Luke gave
squeal and raced down the wide steps, Gabe rose, met him at the bottc
et from swung him up into his arms. Luke slid his arms around Gabe’s neck a
on tight, then he tipped his head back. “Wally was scared of the dark.”

s. “Not Gabe chuckled, delighted to see Luke in good spirits. “I imagine I
Lucky you were there with him.”

3, don’t “I kept him safe.”

“You sure did, kiddo.” Gabe kept the boy in his arms, looking to
landing for his next move.

is head She tilted her head toward Tuff, who’d risen from the sofa a
watching, his hangdog expression about as tragic as any Gabe had ever
er, yes. Gabe hugged Luke, then whispered in his ear, “Go say good-bye
lloweendad and give him a hug. He’s not feeling very well, so we’re taki
shock, home.”

ne over Luke immediately slid out of Gabe’s grasp and ran to Tuff, who
the boy up into his arms. “Dad, I’m sorry you’re sick,” Luke said and
seating Tuff’s cheek. “Get well fast ’cause we’re supposed to ride
ie sofa, remember?”

Tuff threw Gabe a grateful glance as he clasped Luke close. “I rem
ar view I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll talk to Mom about what day she can bring
all betsto the ranch, okay? Jasper’s waiting for you.”

You’ll “Can we make him trot?” Luke’s utter innocence as he gaze
complete trust into Tuff’s face made Gabe’s stomach lurch.

is head Tuff was right about one thing—Gabe knew nothing about being a
up with But he wanted to learn, not only for Luke but also for the possibility
and Jenny might one day have a child together. The very thought
shiver of excitement through him as Jenny came up beside him.

ows on “Sure, Lukie, we can try a trot, but you’ll have to hold on tight

questions smiled and swallowed hard as he pressed a kiss to Luke's cheek and down. "Love you, buddy. Go with Mommy and . . . and Gabe, and we'll see you later."

Luke grinned. "I love you, too, Dad. Feel better, okay?" He turned to Jenny, but then spun around again, his sneaker squeaking on the polished pine floor. "You should rest. Grandpa-great says a nap is best. He's got everything."

Tuff chuckled. "Grandpa-great's a smart guy. I think I'll go upstairs and get a little go to bed right now."

Jenny handed Luke his hat and gloves. "Put these on, sweetie. I'll be right out there." She touched his cheek. "Go on with Gabe. I'll be right out there."

he was.



JENNY WAITED UNTIL the heavy glass door closed behind Luke and Gabe. She turned to Ryan with a tired sigh.

He met her gaze, looking abashed and pretty beat himself. "I'm sorry, Jen. I messed up. It won't happen—"

"Just stop." She held up one hand. "No promises. I'm too mad at you to hear them. I need you to be out of my sight for a while."

He released a frustrated breath. "Listen for a minute."

"No. *You* listen to *me* this time." She strode up to within a few feet of him, and the heat off the fireplace warmed her cheeks. "If you can fall asleep in a wagon this easily and forget that your eight-year-old son is in a strange room all alone, then you need to get some help."

"I didn't forget him. It was a mistake, that's all." His tone was defensive and whiny.

Jenny was in no mood to take it all apart. She only wanted to get on with her life.

"That's even worse. You thought it was *okay* to leave him alone."

"Jen . . . I didn't plan to have a drink. I ran into Bart and—"

She raised both hands, palms outward. "Not right now. Get some rest. We'll talk tomorrow or the next day."

"Are you going to bring him out to the ranch?" Ryan's tone had changed from defensive to wistful.

"I don't know yet."

"Tuff

set him “He wants to ride Jasper.” He straightened his slumping shoulders
I’ll see him his own saddle and blanket for Christmas.”

“He’s got rehearsal with Aidan and Matt every morning until Ch
toward Eve, so if we come, it’ll have to be in the afternoon.” She was still
on the she wanted to throttle him, but she knew how much Luke wanted to ri
p fixes didn’t want to have to tell him that she had no faith in his dad, even
at that very moment, she didn’t trust Ryan Tuffington to take his son
airs and cream. “Text me tomorrow.” She turned away.

“Jen, wait.” Ryan came up, stopping a few feet from her. “I’m
t’s cold Truly.”

’ She stared at him for a moment. What had happened to the guy
fallen in love with so many years ago? “Get some help, Ryan
shouldered the glass door open, heading for Luke and Gabe and
peace.

before

1 sorry,

: you to

feet of
. off the
ge hotel

turned

) leave.

e sleep.

:hanged

“He wants to ride Jasper.” He straightened his slumping shoulders. “I got him his own saddle and blanket for Christmas.”

“He’s got rehearsal with Aidan and Matt every morning until Christmas Eve, so if we come, it’ll have to be in the afternoon.” She was still so mad she wanted to throttle him, but she knew how much Luke wanted to ride. She didn’t want to have to tell him that she had no faith in his dad, even though, at that very moment, she didn’t trust Ryan Tuffington to take his son for ice cream. “Text me tomorrow.” She turned away.

“Jen, wait.” Ryan came up, stopping a few feet from her. “I’m sorry. Truly.”

She stared at him for a moment. What had happened to the guy she’d fallen in love with so many years ago? “Get some help, Ryan.” She shouldered the glass door open, heading for Luke and Gabe and blessed peace.

Chapter Eighteen

JENNY RACED FROM the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Had to be Jo. She and Alex had gotten into Louisville over three hours ago. Jo had texted after she landed, “*Monday night dinner ready? On my way.*” Jenny hadn’t bothered to remind her it was Tuesday. It didn’t matter a bit. Only three days until Christmas Eve, and the triplets were going to be together again at last.

She threw open the door to find not only Jo, but Jazz, too, both cheeks red from the cold and loaded down with bags. She held the screen door open and took a sack from each sister. “Come in, come in!”

They set the rest of their packages down while they discarded their gloves, hats, and purses, piling them on the coatrack by the door. Jenny practically bounced on her toes, anxious for hugs.

Jo was first, tossing her arms around her sister. “God, I’ve missed you!” The joy in her voice brought a lump to Jenny’s throat and she held her breath tighter for a few seconds.

“I’ve missed you too.” Jenny blinked back tears.

“None of that now,” Jazz scolded as she joined in, turning the embrace into their familiar three-way hug. Her eyes shimmered, as well, so Jenny wrinkled her nose as they all clung together for longer than usual. Practically everyone else in the house was home. Jazz broke the circle first. “Let’s get this stuff to the kitchen. Did you preheat your oven on to four hundred?”

Jenny grabbed a couple of bags and led the way. “I did, but I thought I was cooking tonight. I made chicken velvet soup and a gorgeous salad.”

Jazz tutted. “We weren’t about to let you do everything, sis. I brought a pie that needs to bake while we eat supper and some of Gram’s refrigerator pickles and three kinds of olives from the new olive bar at Deke’s.”

“And I brought”—Jo pulled a long loaf of bread out of the net bag she was carrying—“French bread from Mac’s, and Carly even snuck in this.” She brought out a small container and opened it. “Ta-da! Truffle butter!”

Jenny laughed as she swiped a finger across the top of the soft butter and licked it clean. “Oh, yum! I can’t believe she did that! D

see? He never lets that stuff leave the diner.”

Jo shrugged. “Dunno. It is Truffle Butter Tuesday, so I think w good.”

Jazz grinned as she pulled out a jar of pickles and containers of ol think Carly occasionally giving away truffle butter behind Mac’s back thing. She does it, he knows she does it, but they pretend he doesn’t kn does it. It’s a game. I need your four-pocket plate, Jen.”

She and
ter they
't even
ee days
last.
h rosy-
en door
r coats,
. Jenny

“In the cabinet above your head.” Jenny pointed, basking in the pu of the three of them together in her kitchen.

Jo looked around. “Where’s Luke? And Harry, the wonder pu dying to meet him.”

“You’ll meet him soon. Tonight they’re at Ryan’s mom and dad’s. Vicki bought stuff for Harry. I saw her coming out of Bea’s place ear week, and she was insistent that Luke bring him to Christmas dinner to

“Aren’t they going to be in town on Christmas Day?”

“Nope, they’re heading to Indy right after Aidan’s party on Ch Eve.”

d you!”
on a bit

Jo’s eyes widened. “Luke’s not going with them, is he?”

Jenny shook her head. “No. They had him for Thanksgiving. Chris mine.”

mbrace
ny just
igmatic
ou turn

Jazz glanced at Jo, then side-eyed Jenny. “You’re being damn ge letting Tuff have him at all after . . . everything.”

Jo looked up as she pulled a bread knife from the rack on the c “What *everything*? I don’t live here anymore. What did I miss?”

ought I
ought a
igerator

Jenny frowned at Jazz. She didn’t want tonight to be all ab problems with her ex. There was too much other news to share. Shak head, she stirred the pot of soup, making sure it wasn’t scorching as sl

ought a
igerator
bag she
s!” She

Jo the quick-and-dirty version of the whole hotel fiasco, leaving presence out entirely simply because she wasn’t ready to dish with her about that relationship yet. One day soon, but not yet. She ended with been really cautious about letting Luke be with his dad. I’m staying ranch while he’s out there for riding lessons, and if Ryan wants to spe with him otherwise, it has to be here with me in the next room.”

yellow
id Mac

Jo heaved a disgusted sigh. “Thank heaven you got full custody kid. Is Tuff kicking and screaming about *supervised* visitation?”

“Not really.” Jenny pondered the days since she’d picked up Luk

hotel. Ryan had been unusually quiet, almost submissive, which was out of character. He was polite to her and loving and fun with Luke, him on Trudy's old gelding, Jasper, at the ranch, playing video games. "Building with Legos when he visited here at the house. He even texted her when he was stopping by, and although he seemed tired after a day of working with the horses, his eyes were clear and the florid cast to his cheeks was diminished. Obviously, he'd stopped drinking. Again. Jenny was afraid to trust him, but she was blissthus, and he seemed to be respecting that for now.

"The guy needs to get some help. Maybe AA or rehab or some other place?" Jazz carried the filled relish tray to the table while Jenny set three placemats, soup bowls and plates for salad and bread.

"I think I can see Tuff in rehab. Not!" Sarcasm dripped from Jo's tongue. She sliced the warm French loaf and tucked it into a towel-lined basket. "I'll be home tonight." She was charming the cleaning staff into leaving a six-pack in his trash can.

Jenny gave her a severe look, causing Jo to look abashed. "Sorry, I was probably a little too on target for comfort."

Chances were good Ryan was merely biding his time, keeping her waiting until she relaxed, before he did something else stupid and they'd have Christmas all over. As much as Luke loved his dad, sometimes she couldn't help wishing Ryan hadn't screwed up his life in Florida so badly. That was generous, lived down there and was satisfied with quarterly visits with his son. She pushed the unhappy thoughts aside, she carried the bowls to the soup pot on the counter and filled them. "C'mon, grab the salad and dressing from the fridge. Let's eat. I'm starving."

When they were finally all seated, the overhead light glinted on Jenny's ring on her hand as she smeared truffle butter on her bread. Jenny dropped her oven mitt and gave and grabbed Jo's hand, where a gorgeous emerald-cut diamond solitaire on Gabe's finger glistened. "What is *this*?"

Jo grinned. "An early Christmas gift from Alex."

Jazz hopped up and came around to stand behind Jo's chair as she got up at the ring up to the light. "Jo-Jo, this should've been the first thing I mentioned as we walked in the door!"

"I wanted to see if you two would notice it." Jo shrugged and handed her a glass of that wafted off her in waves that warmed Jenny right down to her toes.

"Jo, you're getting married!" Jenny exclaimed.

"I am."

totally “When?” Jazz demanded, plopping back down in her chair and reading for the blue cheese dressing.

“I don’t know yet,” Jo admitted, going back to buttering her bread before just gave it to me last night—totally unexpected because we’d talked with the trying to find a house before I start work in April, so I thought wishing skipping gifts this year.” Jo had found a gig repairing boats at a small marina on Silver Lake just outside Durham, and she and Alex had been hunting on the lake.

“More importantly, *where?*” Jenny passed the truffle butter to Jazz. “Jo looked at her as if she’d just suggested joining a satanic cult.

here, of course. Where else? We want something small and not as shealthough I can promise you Alex’s mom will want to go for something he’d be *élégant*. That said, *I’m* thinking St. Agnes for the wedding and, if Aida can.” booked, the riverboat for the reception, or I’ll talk to Sean and Conorsis, that using the winery or maybe even Walkers’ party barn if we wait for something.

“Can’t you just see my future mother-in-law sitting on a hay bale in her happy & Gabbana dress and Jimmy Choos? I love her, but man . . .” She started to starthead. “Anyway, you two will be my only attendants.”

Jazz had gone unusually quiet, her expression solemn, yet there he still air of excitement about her as she probed for more details. “Will it be moving spring, do you think?”

Jo, in the midst of a bite of bread, gave her a curious look. “I’m not sure, Jazz. Why?”

“Could you try for some time *after* May?” An enigmatic smile lifted Jazz’s lips up and she leaned back, placing one hand on her stomach. “I’ve already been planning an announcement on Christmas Day, but I can’t hold on another second. I’m pregnant! We’re going to get married very quietly in a chapel at St. Agnes on New Year’s Day.”

Jo squeezed Jenny’s forearm and squealed, “I’m going to be an auntie again! *We’re* going to be aunties!” while Jenny sat dumbfounded, burning her eyelids. *Jo married! Jazz married and a mother!* What could this year had wrought.

Finally, she managed a choky, “How far along are you?”

“Four months.” Jazz’s expression was one of perfect contentment. “I’ve been dying to tell you, but I wanted to wait for Jo to get home, so I could tell you together.”

teaching Both Jenny and Jo jumped up to hug Jazz. “Oh, we need a new
this family,” Jo said. “Luke is growing up too fast.”

ad. “He “You’re glowing, Jazzie.” Jenny swiped her cheeks with her palm
d aboutso happy for you and Eli.”

re were “Eli’s feeling pretty proud of himself.” Jazz laughed. “And I coul
. familyhappier or more terrified.”

n house “Perfectly normal.” Jenny ate a spoonful of soup, then another, bef
caught Jo’s wistful expression.

’ “Won’t it be wonderful when Alex and I come back summers, all t
“Well,us sitting on your porch, Jenny? Our kids playing on the steps and ou
fancy,yard?” Jo fantasized aloud. “Alex is a little worried about passing the
ing *très*diabetes to our kids; however, it’s not going to stop us from getting l
m’s notsoon as we’re married. We want a houseful of little Briggses.”

r about “And one day, grands,” Jenny added. “I’m counting on Lu
ummer.grandkids.”

r Dolce Jazz giggled. “He’s only eight, Jen. You’ve got a while. Maybe yo
ook herto ramp up the thing with Indy. Luke needs a little sister or brother. W
all have babies together!”

was an Jenny chuckled, ignoring Jazz’s not-so-subtle hint. “Poor Gabe’
e in thegoing to live down that Halloween costume, is he?”

Jazz winked and sipped her soup. “Nope.”

ot sure. Jenny dug into her salad, and for a few moments, they all focused
food. Then Jo asked, “So how *are* things with the delectable Dr. D
curvedJazz told me he’s been around a lot.”

‘Eli and “He’s good. Great, in fact,” Jenny said, smiling. “I think I’m . .
ld it in*we’re* . . . deeply in *like*.” The *love* word hadn’t actually been spoken b
y in theher and Gabe yet, although they’d danced around it more than once
were both all in, yet it felt like tempting fate to say it to her sisters
i auntieshe’d actually said it to him.

d, tears “I knew it!” Jazz chortled. “You can’t get through a FaceTi
hangeswithout talking about him.”

Jenny held up both hands. “We’re taking it slow. There’s L
consider, and Gabe’s going to stay at William and Mary until May, as
t. “I’vework on Josh’s dig over at Rising Sun. He’ll teach some classes onli
uld tellhe’s still going to have to be in Virginia a good bit of spring. But, oh, r
Jenny’s heart thumped harder at the thought of Gabe’s toe-curling kis

baby in I'd only known what I was missing back in high school."

"If you'd ended up with Gabe, you wouldn't have our sweet Luke is. "I'm pointed out reasonably enough. "Although I hate that you had to de Tuff's nonsense to get that accomplished."

dn't be Jenny couldn't disagree. Her son was her heart, and in truth, some very best things about him were traits of Ryan Tuffington's—his wry ore she his persistence, his love of reading, and animals. Luke wouldn't b without Ryan's genes. "You know, weird as it sounds, Ryan taught n three of about life and myself. *He* didn't know that was what he was doing a it in the years, but he did. Now, I'm pretty sure I know who I am and what I wa e type 1 tired of always trying to please everyone else. And most importa busy as finally discovered what's been missing in my life. A real gr romance."

ike for "Then a toast to old Tuff." Jo raised her glass of water.

"Oh crap, I forgot to open the wine." Jenny pushed her chair back. ou need Jo waved her hand to stop her. "Forget the wine for now. Jazz car e could it, anyway, and I'm happy with water."

"Okay"—Jenny pulled back up to the table and held up her gla s never Tuff. He may be a punk, but he gave me Luke and helped me see wha want."

After they clinked glasses and sipped, the conversation tur on their weddings and, by the time the oven dinged to let them know Jazz's a awson? was done, they'd pretty much planned her and Eli's intimate New Yea ceremony, right down to having a reception for family and close fri . well, the church fellowship hall afterward. A quick call to the pastor and etween chairperson of the church events committee, who just happened to l e. They friend, Harley Lange, and the whole thing was easy to arrange. They before discussed dates—midsummer—for Jo and Alex's impending nuptials would most certainly be a more lavish affair, although no less romantic ne call While Jazz and Jo rinsed the dishes, Jenny stole away to her little off the living room. It was time to show her sisters what she'd been u .uke to fall.

well as Clutching the large sketch pad to her chest, she paused outs ine, but kitchen, absorbing for a moment the sweet sounds of her sisters ch ny . . ."like a couple of teenagers who'd been apart too long. Once again, she ses. "If Jo hadn't moved to Durham, even though in her heart, she knew th

exactly where her sister belonged. Jo and Alex fit together like peanut butter and jelly, and Alex's research into a cure for diabetes was too important with him to leave his lab at Duke. The good news was that, thanks to his fund, money was never going to stop them from coming back to Riverdale whenever they wanted. Perhaps the three sisters weren't destined to live in the same town, but over the years, their connection had withstood the miles between them. It would do this time too.

"Hey, you two, come see." She laid the sketch pad carefully on the table, making sure first that there were no stray crumbs or food on the surface. "Whatcha got, sis?" Jo dried her hands on a tea towel and tossed it aside as they walked over to peer at the tablet.

"I wrote a children's book. Not *little* children. More like for early school kids four to eight." Jenny opened the pad to reveal the title page: *Friendship of the Heart*, proud of the lovely little watercolor sketch of Jo and Clarissa, hand in hand in a grove of trees—the one she hoped wouldn't have on the cover of the book.

Neither Jazz nor Jo said a word, merely stared in mute silence at Jenny. She lifted the page to reveal the beginning of the story of the two little girls and their friendship. As she started to turn that page, too, Jo put a hand out to stop her.

"No, wait." She hip-checked Jenny aside and pushed the sketch pad to the center of the table, directly under the light and stared. "Jenny, this is so beautiful. It's *amazing!*"

Jazz stepped closer, too, until the three of them were standing shoulder to shoulder. "My God, Jenny! How long have you been working on this?" She touched the bottom of the next page almost reverently.

"Since around Thanksgiving," Jenny admitted. "I went out to the store with Gabe and saw this"—she pulled her phone out of her pocket and brought up the photos she'd taken of the braided bracelet—"and the story just came to me. So I started playing around with it, then I dug out my pencils and drew a few pictures to go with the story. I got so into it, I ordered a couple sketchbooks and watercolors from Amazon."

"You never said a word! Not one word all the times we've been together," Jazz accused. "These are incredible."

"I wasn't sure I could do it, so I kept it a secret. I finally showed it to Gabe, and we talked out the story, and suddenly, there it was." Jo was still focused on the pictures on Jenny's phone. "What

t butterthing?”

tant for “It’s a braided hair bracelet, but look, there are two different colors. The hair is braided with the leather—one dark, one light. It made me wonder if Edgewood might’ve made it. What their story was. Of course, we have no way of knowing, so I made one up.”

always “How fascinating.” Jo watched intently as Jazz turned the pages of the sketch pad, and they read the story of the two little girls—one Shawnee, the other the daughter of settlers—who lived on the cliffs above the river. They discovered they were kindred spirits, despite their cultural and language barriers, and how the tribe welcomed the settlers and the settlers respected and became friendly with the Shawnee. The girls’ friendship lasted until one night, Clarissa’s father, always full of wanderlust, announced that the family was leaving, moving West to Oregon. The two little girls were devastated they would be torn apart. Then Aponi had the idea to make jewelry to remember each other by. Both girls cut a lock of their hair and they braided them together with leather thongs to make the bracelet. “Oh, Jenny, this is so touching.” Jo sniffed as they reached the last picture of Clarissa, the bracelet on her arm, waving from the back of the covered wagon that floated down the Ohio River on a flatboat, and she started running along the shore, holding the arm with her bracelet high above her head.

“You really don’t feel like it’s good-bye forever, just good-bye for now, even though you know they’ll probably never see each other again, is this?” sighed as they all stared at the last picture. “It’s brilliant, Jen, just brilliant!”

Jo dropped into a chair. “Jenny, when you changed your major from psychology to marketing and graphic design, we all thought it was the sensible way to go because you didn’t want to be a teacher. You did all that website design in Florida, which was great. But seeing this . . .” She extended her hand toward the story and gazed up at Jenny, her expression full of wonder. “It’s newsworthy, your calling, honey. Please tell us you’re going to submit this good story to publishers.”

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while. A lump formed in Jenny’s throat and she swallowed hard before she could respond. “Gabe wants me to send it to his agent.”

“Do it!” Jazz and Jo cried in unison.

“I’m going to.” Jenny’s heart soared. *It is a good story!* “I have an idea. There’s been a middle-grade story series in my head since Luke

reading—a boy detective—he and his pals travel through time, colors of mysteries. It'll take some research, but I've jotted down almost a notebook full of ideas. And I want to do more stories from the dig. Give me a couple of ideas that will teach Indiana history, as well as tell a story.'

Jo shook her head in obvious disbelief. "Jenny, I'm so thrilled for us, too, because we're going to be reading your stories to our kids, she grinned. "I can't wait to say, *your auntie Jenny wrote this book—*"

How Jazz hugged Jenny tight as she laughed and completed the concept language "And this book and this one and this one. Jenny, we're so proud of you!" "Bravo, sister!"

p grew,
ced the
s were
o make
ng hair
ts.

st page,
ck of a
. Aponi
ove her

or now,
l." Jazz
iant."

m art to
y to go
n down
er hand
r. "This
orgeous

ore she

e more
started

reading—a boy detective—he and his pals travel through time, solving mysteries. It'll take some research, but I've jotted down almost a whole notebook full of ideas. And I want to do more stories from the dig. Gabe has a couple of ideas that will teach Indiana history, as well as tell a story."

Jo shook her head in obvious disbelief. "Jenny, I'm so thrilled for you. For us, too, because we're going to be reading your stories to our kids!" She grinned. "I can't wait to say, *your auntie Jenny wrote this book—*"

Jazz hugged Jenny tight as she laughed and completed the concept with, "And this book and this one and this one. Jenny, we're so proud of you! Bravo, sister!"

Chapter Nineteen

“MOM, YOU OKAY in there?” Claire had been in the bathroom long enough that Gabe was starting to worry. It was her first shower without Chris with her, but now that she had the Aircast, she’d insisted she could handle all herself. He’d installed two grab bars in the shower stall in her bathroom before she got home from rehab, and there was a built-in seat, but she and Gabe were wet and despite the rough floor in the stall, shampoo suds and soap made them slippery.

“I’m fine,” Claire called through the closed door. “Just getting ready to dry my hair, and it’s a little tricky because I have to keep lowering my arm.”

“Do you want me to help you?” Gabe made the offer, even though he’d never dried anyone’s hair except his own. But this was his mom. She’d needed help, he’d dig deep for his inner hairdresser and blow-dry her hair.

“I’ve got it, babe.” Claire sounded pretty confident, so he went back upstairs and pulled his fleece vest from the closet. It wasn’t quite as cold as it had been earlier in the week, however, The Weather Channel had predicted snow showers by nine P.M. He’d never been on Aidan Flaherty’s *Riverboat* riverboat, so he had no idea whether it was hot or cold or what. He gripped the handle of the mirror above the dresser. He was going to the Flaherty Christmas Eve party, something he couldn’t have imagined doing in high school. He and Conor Flaherty were friendly enough in those days, and they traveled in different social circles.

He chuckled. It was laughable to even think of himself in a social circle in high school. Although he had hung out every once in a while with a group of guys to play D&D or video games, he’d barely spoken to anyone since. He’d totally lost track of those two since graduation. The class reunion list had listed both as *MIA*, and since he wasn’t on Facebook or other social media, he wasn’t motivated to find them. He’d been what people used to call a loner, and back then, that suited him just fine.

Fifteen years had certainly brought a lot of changes, not the least of

was that he was actually looking forward to joining Jenny and Luke
own family at the Flahertys' Christmas Eve party and show this aft
Luke was going to be an elf in a dancing-Santas number that Matt and
had come up with, and the kid was about to fly out of his curly-toed
with excitement.

enough
or Andi
andle it
throum
howers
id soap
eady to
my left
gh he'd

The previous night, Gabe had watched Jenny resew a couple o
brass buttons on the elf jacket Luke had worn for the tree lighting, he
lip tucked under her front teeth as she concentrated. Luke had ke
playing with Harry Potter by the light of the Christmas tree. Earlier
day, Harry had gotten ahold of a couple of wrapped packages and t
paper, which meant he'd been banished to the kitchen for a bit, but
giggling boy and the puppy roughoused together, Gabe had baske
warmth of simply being there. A fire in the fireplace, a mug of hot ch
for Luke and sweet, rich eggnogs he'd sprinkled with nutmeg for h
Jenny, a card game he and Luke had been playing, abandoned on the
table after Harry was allowed to join them again—it all felt very right.

If she
air.
it back
old as it
redicted
Queen
nned at
hertys'

This is what marriage would be like. This warm, cozy fee
belonging. He thought about his mom and dad, about Chris and Jere
and Alex, Jazz and Eli—couples whose intimacy was practically a t
thing. He could see it, feel it, whenever he was with any of them. It w
he shared with Jenny at last. His heart had surged, and for a momer
wished he'd bought her the ring, that they could have a double weddi
Jazz and Eli on New Year's Day or even with Jo and Alex in the s
because right here with her was where he wanted to spend the rest of h

in high
lthough

She'd glanced up from her task, and delicate pink color filled her
when she caught him staring at her. "What?"

He was sure that naked longing was evident on his face, but it w
because it was reflected back to him in her gorgeous golden-brown
was enough for now, so he'd merely smiled and asked if she needed
on her eggnog. They had time . . . plenty of time.

l circle
couple
e. He'd
booklet
edia, he
a loner,
f which

Blinking the memory away, he zipped his vest over a red-and-gree
flannel shirt and raked his hair back with his fingers, aware that he p
should have made time for a haircut before the holidays got under w
shrugged at his reflection. *Too late now.* Besides, later Jenny would
fingers through it while they kissed in the firelight—

"Hey?" His mom's voice interrupted the fantasy. "Are you ready?"

and his gonna be late.”

ernoon. “Coming!” He thundered down the steps and met her at the kitchen. She looked terrific, healed and back to her old self in leggings and a leather slipper sweater with gaily wrapped packages embroidered across the front.

She gave him an arch look. “*That’s* your idea of festive?”

He glanced down. “It’s red and green. Christmas colors.”

“I can’t believe you don’t own a Christmas sweater.” She went into the kitchen and pulled a pie carrier from a bottom cupboard. “Come to this in the I don’t think I’ve seen you in any kind of holiday sweater since you were fourteen and you wore the one with the fuzzy snowman on it that was at the grandparents’ house in Louisville. Remember that sweater?” She pulled in the couple of her delicious pumpkin pies out of the fridge to add to the chocolate table at the potluck.

Gabe chuckled. “I do, and I suffered grave humiliation at the hands of Dawson cousins as I recall. I swore I would never again wear a Christmas sweater, and I’ve managed to avoid it ever since.”

“That was before ugly Christmas sweaters were a thing. You’d be in my, Jo fashion at today’s party if you still had it . . . or one like it.” She snapped her fingers. “Oh, oh . . . hang on, I’ll be right back.” She limped out, calling over her shoulder as she left, “Stick those two pies in the carrier, will you?”

He was pretty sure what her mission was. No doubt, he was going home wearing the red sweater with the light-up-nose reindeer that his dad had bought on his last Christmas before his heart attack. “Mom, I’m fine.”

She didn’t respond, so he packed the pies, too aware that it didn’t matter what she brought back with her. He’d put it on, kiss her cheek, and

that she hadn’t broken her neck in the fall from the ladder. Wearing an okay Christmas sweater to a town event was a small thing to do to please his eyes. It Besides, Luke would get a kick out of the light-up nose.

She came back with a padded mailer that had never been opened.

She handed it to him. “Try this.”

“What’s this?” He turned the package over in his hands, before reaching for the pull tab on the back and tearing it across as she smiled away. Heenigmatic smile. He pulled a red-and-green sweater out of a plastic bag and sifted her hook it out. On the front was the knitted face of The Dude himself—

Lebowski—on a background of snowflakes, with the word ABIDE above it. We’re and a row of marmots trimming the bottom of the sweater. *The*

Christmas sweater. “Wh-where did you . . .?” He was practically spe
n door,as he yanked off his vest and flannel shirt and tugged the sweater c
ong redHenley.

His mom laughed, even though after he popped his head through th
of the sweater, he saw tears glistening in her eyes. “I bought it for yo
the year he died. I had it hidden in the back of my closet so he wouldn
into thebefore Christmas Eve. I just this minute remembered it, so it never got
nk of it,charity when your sister and I cleared his stuff out this past spring
u wereleaned back a little and gave him an assessing look. “I like it. It’s your
o your Smoothing the sweater over his chest, Gabe’s throat tightened
ulled aswallowed hard. “I could totally see Dad in this. We loved that movie.
dessertwe watched it every time I came home.”

“It looks great on you.” Her voice was a little husky.
s of my He reached out and pulled his mom into a bear hug. “I love you
ristmasThanks.”

“I love you too.” She returned the embrace, pressing against his cl
right ina few seconds before patting his back and saying briskly, “Come on
ped herlet’s go.”
ng over



ig to be
id wornJENNY LOOKED OUT at the crowd from her place behind the sweep of
across the showboat’s stage. It was a great group for early aftern
: matterChristmas Eve, close to a hundred townsfolk mingling, laughin
be gladchatting. The Weavers filled an entire round table, while behind ther
an uglyfamily, the Walkers, chattered noisily. Eli tipped his chair back
s mom.something to his brother, Jack, who looked handsome and brawny in a
blue sweater covered in snowflakes. His cousins, Cameron and Jo
“Here.”gone all out with the ugly Christmas sweaters—one with a Grinch a
with a sweater that actually said UGLY CHRISTMAS SWEATER inside a
eachingTheir sister—gorgeous, willowy Annabelle Walker—had chosen
a littleelegant with a glittery gold tunic over black leggings, making her lo
og andlook even longer. How was it possible that every single member
the Bigfamily was beautiful? She wasn’t the only person to notice. Who w
ve him,cute, auburn-haired woman sitting next to Gerry Ross at the Langes
perfect

reckless She kept eyeing Jack Walker like he was a big slice of Paula Meyer's Italian cream cake and she was starving to death. *Interesting.*

Jenny had also opted for pretty instead of goofy, choosing a shimmering white sweater sewn with pearls and crystal beads over a pair of her dad jeans and black ballet flats. Christmas happened in her jewelry, 't see it colorful gold-green-and-red Christmas trees dangled from her ears and sent to chain with a wreath pendant hung in the V-neck of her sweater. Jazz 3." She sported the same necklace, which had been gifts to them from Grandpa Roy a couple of Christmases ago. It was their nod to being identical triplets since, except at Halloween, they'd outgrown dressing alike years ago.

At the table next to her family, she spotted Claire and Chris and their family, although Gabe was nowhere to be seen. She scanned the large room, Mom hoping, when suddenly a hand on her shoulder startled her.

"How's our elf?" It was Gabe, his dimples out in full force. Jenny's heart beat faster. "Love your sweater." She rubbed a hand over her face, *Dude, The Dude's face.*

"Isn't it great?" He put one arm around her shoulders. "There's more to come. I'll tell you later. You look amazing, like snow and cotton candy and . . . closed his lips as another mom scurried past, and instead he pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Is Luke good to go?"

"Yeah, I just got him back to the dressing area with the other boys. Aidan's running around like a chicken with its head cut off while Biggie and Holly corral all the acts. I was on my way out to find a seat. Is there an empty chair at your table?"

"You aren't sitting with your family?" Gabe's tone was wistful. She linked her arm with his. "I'll be right next to them if I sit with you." The show was delightful, as it was every year, and Gabe's first-time enthusiasm made it even more fun. He laughed uproariously at the silliness, clapped long and loud for the high school madrigal choir's performance, and gawwed along with everyone else at Miss Francie's little ballerina snowflake. Jenny sat close beside him, her fingers laced with his under the brim of the tablecloth in between applause. It was perfect to be sitting with the Duffingtons yet have her own family close by. She glanced around and saw Ryan and Tuffingtons sitting a few tables away with Noah and Dot and Trudy Meyer. Ryan's expression was pensive, maybe even a little melancholy, but v

idows' scaught her eye, he smiled and hitched his chin her way.

Then the sound of "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" filled the room. It was time for the dancing Santas and her little elf. She sat forward and skinnysqueezed her hand and Aidan and Matt, clad in Santa suits, along with Mac Mackenzie, dressed as a very authentic-looking Santa Claus, tap a gold from stage left. As the crowd stomped and clapped, the three Santas and Jolike they were channeling Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and . . . Jenny ran am and her brain for another famous tap dancer . . .

identical "Those three are pretty good—Aidan moves like a pro . . . ears and Gregory Hines used to. Remember him?" Gabe whispered in her ear.

Ah, yes, *Gregory Hines*. Jenny nodded, her pulse speeding up as and her festively dressed elves entered from stage right. It was time for Luke e room, glimpsed Miss Francie urging them onstage with Luke and petite li Flaherty bringing up the rear. The kids raced and tumbled around the c

Santas in what appeared to be complete, unrehearsed chaos until Ma and over Ali by the hand and Aidan grabbed Luke. The two elves fell into line v

Santas and danced a charming soft shoe, the kids staying in perfect st a story the adults. The audience went crazy, rising to their feet and clapping w . . ." He Luke caught her eye and grinned as the routine ended and all five c

kiss to linked their arms and line-kicked before doing a synchronized bow,

with Aiden on one end and ending with Matt on the other. The kid ha r elves, it, and the elation in Luke's expression made her heart sing. Wh

ren and glanced over her shoulder at his dad, she wasn't sure what to exp e empty Ryan and even his parents were out of their chairs and applauding

etched on their faces. The tension in her body passed like a ba dispersing on a breeze. She looked up at Gabe, and that same look c

you." glowed on his handsome face.

st-timer As soon as Aidan ended the show with a rousing audience-partic ly skits, version of "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," her family surround ce, and exclaiming over Luke's talent.

vflakes. Gabe touched her shoulder. "I'll go find Luke."

ght red She nodded as the Langes, Flahertys, and Walkers joined the ch awsons, congratulations and praise for Luke's and Ali's performances.

and the breaking away, she found Gabe standing backstage, out of sigh forrow. chuckling Tuff, who was attempting to follow Luke's soft-shoe directi

when he "No, Dad, like this. Left first." He hummed, demonstrating the l

forward, then a shuffle and forward with the right. “Dubba, dubba, n and itdub.”

is Gabe His dad imitated the move, looking more like a great shambling be with bigFred Astaire, but the delight on Luke’s face kept Jenny from giggling. Jenny stepped ongrasped Gabe’s hand and they walked closer. Tuff frowned when he dancedsight of them, and for a moment, she thought he was going to get na isackedgive it up. Instead, his lips curved up and he waved.

“Get over here, Professor, and join us. You need to learn this stuff sy, like Gabe and Jenny exchanged a glance and then Gabe hustled over to the other side of Luke and began the step, shuffle, step—not quite as awkward as severalas Tuff, but close, though. The two men, focusing intently on the time! Shebetweenthem as, *together*, they attempted the dance, made Jenny ttle Alisting. Any other time she would have pulled out her phone and caught the dancingwhole thing on video, but this was too precious to record anywhere except att tookher own heart. As Luke showed them the last step and stomp, Tuff waved withtheover his son’s head at Gabe and gave him the slightest nod. Tuff stepped up withacknowledged with a nod of his own.

ildly. Tuff stooped down to scoop Luke into a hug. “You were great dancersbuddy. I’m so proud of you.” His voice was gravelly.

starting Luke practically glowed. “Thanks, Dad.”

ad done He brushed Luke’s hair off his forehead. “You keep working with me when sheand Aidan and before you know it, you’ll be dancing like a pro. ect, butexpression sobered. “Listen, you know I’m going to Indianapolis, prideGrammy and Grandad this afternoon, right? Well, after Christmas, I’ll id odor to stay there for a little while.”

of pride “How come?” Luke asked, concern wreathing his face. “How long about the horses?”

icipation Tuff sucked in a deep breath. “Here’s the thing, Lukie. You know I’ve led her,I’m kind of cranky sometimes and sad? I’m tired a lot and don’t always want to do fun stuff with you?” Luke nodded once and his dad continued, “It’s all part of a sickness I have called alcoholism. I need to go to a safe haven orus ofwhere I can be with doctors and therapists who will help me get better. Finallyaway for about six or eight weeks, but when I come home, I’ll be happy it of astronger and ready to ride with you again.”

ons. “What will Miss Trudy do without you? And Jasper and the left foothorses?”

, dubba “Miss Trudy and I talked about it, and she’s got someone who c
her while I’m away. She wants me to get well, too, and so does Mom
ear than Gabe.” He glanced over at Jenny, who was biting the inside of her lip
ng. She it from trembling. She reached behind her and Gabe was there, his
caught wrapping around hers while Tuff went on, “I have to leave my pl
sty and home, but I’ll write you letters, so watch the mailbox. Maybe Mom c
you write me back.”

too.” Jenny nodded. “Sure. You can draw some pictures of Harry t
r to the along.”

wardly He stood, one hand ruffling Luke’s hair. “And maybe Gabe will ta
y Luke out to see the horses while I’m gone.”

’s eyes Gabe’s hold tightened. “You bet. I’d like to meet Jasper.”

ight the Luke looked from one adult to the other and Jenny could almost
cept in wheels rotating in his head as he processed this new turn of events. I
looked his gaze landed on Tuff. “But you’re gonna be okay, Dad, right?”

. Gabe “I’m going to be just fine, son. Better than ever,” he said, his voice
and firm. “Why don’t you go out and say good-bye to Gram
tonight, Grandad?” He offered a pretty convincing smile to Jenny as Luke
him for a few seconds, then hopped down the stage steps. “We’re g
head out.” Ryan came over to Gabe and stuck out his hand. “S
th Matt Professor. Look after him, okay?”

o.” His Gabe released Jenny and shook his hand. “I’ve got him, man, ’til
is with back. Good luck.”

n going Tuff nodded. “Thanks.” He stepped closer to Jenny and hande
card. “Here’s where I’ll be. I’ll be in touch when I can.”

? What Jenny didn’t even try to stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks
pulled him into a warm hug. “You’re doing the right thing, Ryan. I w
ow how well,” she whispered.

ys want He hung onto her for a few seconds before walking away. At the
“That’s the steps, he stopped, half-turned, and raised one hand, palm outward.
ie place Christmas, Jenny.”

. I’ll be

ier and

e other

“Miss Trudy and I talked about it, and she’s got someone who can help her while I’m away. She wants me to get well, too, and so does Mom . . . and Gabe.” He glanced over at Jenny, who was biting the inside of her lip to keep it from trembling. She reached behind her and Gabe was there, his fingers wrapping around hers while Tuff went on, “I have to leave my phone at home, but I’ll write you letters, so watch the mailbox. Maybe Mom can help you write me back.”

Jenny nodded. “Sure. You can draw some pictures of Harry to send along.”

He stood, one hand ruffling Luke’s hair. “And maybe Gabe will take you out to see the horses while I’m gone.”

Gabe’s hold tightened. “You bet. I’d like to meet Jasper.”

Luke looked from one adult to the other and Jenny could almost see the wheels rotating in his head as he processed this new turn of events. Finally, his gaze landed on Tuff. “But you’re gonna be okay, Dad, right?”

“I’m going to be just fine, son. Better than ever,” he said, his voice strong and firm. “Why don’t you go out and say good-bye to Grammy and Grandad?” He offered a pretty convincing smile to Jenny as Luke hugged him for a few seconds, then hopped down the stage steps. “We’re going to head out.” Ryan came over to Gabe and stuck out his hand. “So long, Professor. Look after him, okay?”

Gabe released Jenny and shook his hand. “I’ve got him, man, ’til you get back. Good luck.”

Tuff nodded. “Thanks.” He stepped closer to Jenny and handed her a card. “Here’s where I’ll be. I’ll be in touch when I can.”

Jenny didn’t even try to stop the tears that rolled down her cheeks as she pulled him into a warm hug. “You’re doing the right thing, Ryan. I wish you well,” she whispered.

He hung onto her for a few seconds before walking away. At the top of the steps, he stopped, half-turned, and raised one hand, palm outward. “Merry Christmas, Jenny.”

Chapter Twenty

AH, QUIET AT last. Jenny sighed in perfect contentment as she cuddled Gabe's warm chest, stroking the soft knit of his Christmas sweater. 'I believe you won *most original* in the Ugly Christmas Sweater contest tonight.'

"I know, right? I'd have given it to Joey Walker."

She grinned at the memory of Joey's sweater, which bore the proclamation, UGLY CHRISTMAS SWEATER. "That was pretty clever, but I would have 'The Dude.'"

He tightened his hold on her. "I gave Mom the gift card to Paula's sweater. The sweater was all her."

"You said there was a story. Tell me." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder and slid her arm across his lean belly while he recounted the story. The sweater was supposed to have been Claire's gift to his dad.

"She remembered it at the last minute this afternoon after she got to work at my rather pedestrian plaid flannel," he finished and his fingers tracing the knobs of her spine sent a shiver through her. "Are you cold?"

"No, just"—she pressed a kiss to the scruff of beard on his cheek—"happy."

"And that makes you shiver?" His deep voice caused a surge of joy to wash over her.

"If it's you that's making me happy, yeah, it does." She brought her head down to hers, and his bone-melting kiss wiped all clear thought from her mind. Another wave of desire nearly overwhelmed her. All she wanted to do was to take him upstairs and—

"Mom! Did you know that Savion Glover danced at the White House?" Luke's voice from the top of the stairs pulled them apart.

When she looked up, there he stood in his pj's, waving the new boy from the banister, his hair tousled and Harry Potter at his feet. The dog barked sharply as if to say, *How cool is that?*

Jenny groaned. "Lucas Roy Tuffington, get back in bed. If I hear

again tonight, I'm going to take the book away, and Harry will go back to the kitchen."

"Sorry! Come on, Harry." Luke and the puppy scampered back to the bedroom while Gabe tried to smother a chuckle.

She elbowed him. "What are you laughing at?"

Gabe grinned. "Just happy."

against "This is *your* fault, you know." She fake-pouted. "You gave her the book."
"I can't
contest

He stood. "Can I redeem myself by giving you your Christmas gift?"

"Maybe," she murmured, but inside, she was squeeing. *Finally!* The package had been tempting her for over a week.

As if by tacit agreement, they'd focused on Gabe's gifts to Luke and Luke's to Gabe after they got done with supper, saving their own presents when they were alone. Luke had loved the video games and made plans with Gabe to play them sometime during his school holiday break, but he'd been thrilled at the book about tap dancer Savion Glover. In turn, Gabe had exclaimed over his gift—a mug Luke had picked out himself that read *ARCHAEOLOGIST'S CHECKLIST* printed on it with pictures of a fedora, a gavel, and a whip beneath the words. The kid's eyes had shone as Gabe high-fived him with a very sincere *awesome mug!*

Gabe went to the Christmas tree and picked up the small square box he'd put there the week before Christmas.

"Will you grab the one I hung on the tree?" Jenny pointed to a square box that hung by its green ribbon from a bough near the top of the tree.

Gabe reached for it. "This one?"

"Yup. That's yours."

"Ah." He shook the package, but it didn't rattle. "Good things in these packages?" He held both boxes up side by side.

"I'm a true believer," Jenny agreed, and patted the sofa cushion she'd been sitting on. "Come sit and open yours."

He sat and handed her the box wrapped in silver paper and tied with a white ribbon. "You first."

Her heart knocked in her chest. It wasn't a ring; the box wasn't the right shape or size, but it was jewelry, she was certain. She untied the ribbon and carefully removed the paper, folding and smoothing it before she set it aside. Inside was a navy-blue velvet box, and upon opening it, she caught a glimpse of a diamond ring.

to the breath. There on a lighter-blue velvet background was an elegant silver necklace from which dangled a bee pendant. The golden-amber into his that was the bee's body gleamed in the lamplight. "Gabe, this is gorgeous." Carefully, she removed the necklace from its box and held it up, turning this way and that, letting the bee capture the light.

"It's a citrine. It reminded me of your eyes," Gabe said softly and held it out his hand. "Here, let me . . ."

She handed it to him, took off her wreath pendant, set it on the table, and twisted in her seat, lifting her hair to grant him access.

His breath was warm on her nape as he clasped the chain around her neck, explaining in the professor voice she loved, "Bees, like fairies, have often been considered guardians of the natural world, linked with magic, and romance."

When she turned back to face him, his dimples creased his cheeks and his eyes shone with so much tenderness, she would have collapsed in a pile had she weren't already sitting.

He touched the pendant with one finger, then framed her face with his hands. "This is to remind you that I'll always be with you even when I'm not here. You can count on me, Jenny Weaver. I'll keep you and Luke safe. I'll do my best to bring you magic every day, and I'll always, always love you with my dying breath." He kissed her like he cherished her, like she herself was a precious gift.

Jenny slid her arms around his neck, falling into the promise of the kiss. This was what she'd been missing all these years—that feeling of being tethered to another person, intimate and passionate and . . . happy. Desire pooled in her belly and when she pulled back, she could feel the same hunger in his dark, expressive eyes. It was intoxicating. "I love you too," she whispered. "We are the magic. For so long, I never knew how to be besides suspected, but how amazing to have finally discovered how exactly right we are—is—you and me, together."

He touched his forehead to hers. "I've always known."

"Thank you for never giving up." She blinked away the easy tears that pressed against her eyelids. This was not a time for tears, even the kind that were good and kind. She tapped the box balanced on his thigh. "Open yours now. I'll be right beside you, and you're going to see that we were on the same wavelength this Christmas night." He was much less careful about opening his gift, sliding off the

sterling and tearing the paper away from the light-brown, recycled cardboard box. Gabe's stonebrow furrowed at the logo on the top—a woman with flowing hair and a crown. “Beautiful!” words MOON MAID DESIGNS. He opened it, gazing in obvious surprise. A silver bracelet nestled in a bed of white tissue paper. Lifting it from the box, he turned it in his hand while Jenny held her breath.

He held the bracelet. She'd gone to Tierney Flaherty a couple of weeks earlier with an idea and a drawing, knowing that if anyone could make her vision come to life, the lamp would be Tierney, whose exquisite jewelry was sold in several shops along the river. When she'd picked it up a couple of days ago, she'd gulped and her utterly perfect it had turned out. A narrow, braided black leather bracelet, held onto a locking silver clasp to keep it safely on Gabe's arm. A sterling silver loveplate opposite the clasp had the words AT LAST engraved on the outside. On the inside against his skin, a simple message: J TO G FROM MY HEART. Gabe and his “It's . . . it's incredible.” Gabe's voice was husky with emotion as he pulled the bracelet out of its box. “Here, put it on me.”

She smiled and clasped the bracelet around his wrist. “I got the idea from both Aponi and Clarissa.” After fastening the bracelet securely, she turned to Gabe. “I'm not handing over, pressed a kiss into his warm palm, and closed his fingers around hers. “There. Now no matter where you are, Gabriel Dawson, I'll always be with you, to you. I love you with all my heart.”

That kiss was a



That kiss.

Gabe was being GABE SWIVELED IN his pew as the prerecorded strains of Pachelbel's Canon in D filled the small chapel of St. Agnes church and the doors opened. Outside, the background of a New Year's Day snowfall swirling outside came to life as you and Jo, walking arm in arm up the aisle. They were dressed in matching sage-green, never-sleeved, sage-green flowy dresses that floated around their calves, and each carried a small bouquet of white flowers. Behind them sauntered Lacey in khakis and a white shirt with a sage-green tie, proudly carrying a satin ribbon that had two rings tied to it. Next was Ali Flaherty in a green-and-white flowered dress, tossing white petals from a basket over her arm.

Jenny, wearing her citrine bee necklace, winked at him as she passed. “I think the longing he felt every time he saw her increased tenfold. She was beautiful, her amber-brown eyes shining and her dark hair pulled up in a ribbon.”

ox. His messy bun with tendrils curling next to her rosy cheeks. God, how he and the her.

He'd never been with a woman who had kids before, so the whole box, *to find a good time to be intimate together* thing was new and

disconcerting. There was no carrying her up the stairs à la Rhett and because chances were pretty darn good that a boy and a puppy were

life, it waiting at the top. In the week since Christmas, they'd had only one along and that was by the grace of Alex and Jo, who'd taken Luke

at how Jo's old cottage for an Auntie Jo fun-and-games night after Jenny had let set broadly that Gabe would be heading back to Virginia in only a few days

silver Next down the aisle sauntered Eli, followed by his brother, Jack, a side and buddy, Conor Flaherty. The three men looked comfortable and casual.

sage-green button-downs tucked into khaki pants and white ties he held opposite of Luke's outfit. Gabe liked the whole idea of foregoing formal

for a wedding. Maybe he could suggest it to Jenny when they—He closed his eyes for a second. *Don't get too far ahead of yourself, Dawson.*

The small congregation rose as a unit as the music suddenly switched over it. Train's "Marry Me," and there were Jazz with her parents on either

side with her. Her dress was white lace over a sage-green underdress of some material that reached to just above her knees and moved with her

made their way down the aisle. On her head was a wreath of white and frothy greenery, and she carried a bouquet of white flowers like

and Jo's, only bigger. She didn't look either right or left as they walked in whole attention was on Eli, who stood tall, waiting for her, his hair

Against eyes.

Jenny Gabe felt a stab of envy. *He* wanted to be the one waiting at the end of long-aisle for his Weaver sister, putting a wedding ring on her finger, to

and each honeymoon to Hawaii. He barely paid attention to the short ceremony, in was so focused on Jenny, imagining her in the white dress, smiling up

at pillow her eyes full of love, repeating the old familiar vows, *I, Jennifer, take thee, white Gabriel, to be my husband . . .*

A passionate kiss between Eli and Jazz, and then Natalie Cole's "I Wanna Dance with Somebody" ended his music. The newlyweds danced down the aisle to applause that turned into clapping

into a time to the music. Luke and Ali cavorted their way behind Eli and followed by Conor and Jo and Jack and Jenny.

wanted Conor surprised everyone by handing Jo's arm to Alex as he pas
row and grabbing his wife, Sam, from the third row to spin her arou
e *trying* joyous dance. Jo and Alex joined in, dancing down the short aisle to
d often Jack released Jenny's arm when they reached the fifth row, handing he
Butler, a very willing Gabe, and cracking up the whole chapel by offering h
ould be hand to Claire, who accepted with a huge smile. Jack carefully danc
e nightcane and all, down the aisle in front of Jenny and Gabe, while the fift
over to friends and family clapped and laughed before filing out and down
l hinted fellowship hall.

7s. In Gabe's opinion, the party was as much fun as the Christmas E
nd best on the riverboat. The small group included the entire Walker clan, as
usual in all the Weavers. The Flahertys, the Langes, Mac and Carly, who'd clo
es—the diner for the holiday, and all those folks' assorted children and babies
ial wear attendance too. The older kids had gathered around Holly and
used his teenager, Matt, who was playing DJ for the day. They begged him fo
as they romped and danced on the old wooden stage at the end of the h

ched to After he finished his slice of cake, Gabe extended a hand across
side of of a long banquet table to Jenny. "Hello, gorgeous."
ie silky "Hi." She smiled and squeezed his fingers briefly. "It was
as they wedding, don't you think?"

flowers "Believe it or not, it's only the fourth wedding I've ever been to,
e Jenny admitted, scraping his fork in a little row of icing he'd missed earl
ed. Her popping it into his mouth. "It's by far the best one, though."

t in his Jenny looked astounded. "In thirty-four years of life, you've only
three other weddings?"

d of the "Yup." He set the fork down and wiped a sage-green napkin ac
aking alips. "My sister's, a cousin's in Kentucky, and my friend Peter's.
ony, hethree, only Chris is still married."

at him, "Wow." Jenny sipped her punch. "I'll bet I've been to at least fif
ke you, twenty."

"What was your wedding to Tuff like?"

s voice She rolled her eyes. "Big, expensive, extravagant. His parents wa
g. The go big since he's their only child, so they paid for most of it. The
ping in smelled like a funeral parlor, there were so many flowers. I'd *never*
d Jazz, go through that again."

"How about one like this?" Gabe waved his hand to include all th

used his going on around them.

and in a “Even smaller. I’d be perfectly happy with a trip to city hall and do together. Mac’s.” She gave him a teasing smile. “As long as it was on a T or off to because, you know, truffle butter.”

his own Gabe took a deep breath. “How about *next* Tuesday?”

ed her, She was looking around, probably checking for Luke, but she jer ty or so head back around to face him, bewildered. “*What?*”

to the Heart pounding, Gabe stood, tugged her out of her chair, and ur

into the empty hallway beside the kitchen, where he knelt on one kn ve bas took her hand in his. “Jenny Weaver, will you marry me next Tuesday’

well as “Are you serious?” she breathlessly asked, her eyes huge.

used the “I’ve never been more serious in my life.” He kissed her hand. were in you and I love Luke, and I don’t want to wait some sensible amount Aidan’s for us to be together. And maybe me in Virginia and you here isn’t th r songs way to start a marriage, but we’ll *be* married, and I’ll come back as of all. can until school is out. When I come back for good, we can be toget

the end we should be. Marry me, Jenny. Please say you’ll marry me.” It all ca

in one big breath, so his chest hurt a little after he finally stopped talkin a great “Gabe, I . . .” She put her hand to her heart.

” I promise I’ll always bring the magic, Jenny.” He cupped her che ” Gabewhen he did, she put her hand over his and pressed a kiss into it.

ier and “Yes.” She laughed and gifted him with a sweet smile. “Yes, I’ll you on Tuesday.”

been to Incandescent with happiness, he stood up, pulled her into his arr kissed her slow, sweet, and tender.

ross his “You’re gonna need a ring.” Claire’s voice brought them apart. Sh

Of the in the doorway of the kitchen, a huge smile on her face and tears shim

in her eyes. She pulled her wedding set from her left hand, took teen ordiamond engagement ring, and then replaced the platinum band.

proper, son.”

A lump grew in Gabe’s throat. “Mom . . .”

nted to With one quick nod, she held out the ring. “Here.”

church Eyes stinging, he accepted the gift and a hug from his mother want to turning back to Jenny. “As she said, let’s do this proper.” He took

hand, and slipped the slightly too-big ring on her finger, and then pres hat was slips to it. “Tuesday?”

“I’ll meet you at city hall.” She looped her arms around his neck. inner at the one out front, holding a bouquet. But you better pay attention, Tuesday, there are two others who look exactly like me, and they’ll be there too.

He chuckled and drew her closer, his arms around her waist. “I’m sure I’ll be able to sort you out among the Weaver sisters. But if I asked her confused, I’ll just kiss each and every sister until I get the right one.”

Her lips curved up in a perfect smile of utter joy. “Sounds like a plan.”

ged her Dawson.”
ree and
?”

THE END

“I love
of time
re ideal
ten as I
her like
me out
g.

seek and

I marry

ns, and

e stood
mering
off the
“Do it

before
her left
sed his

“I’ll meet you at city hall.” She looped her arms around his neck. “I’ll be the one out front, holding a bouquet. But you better pay attention, because there are two others who look exactly like me, and they’ll be there too.”

He chuckled and drew her closer, his arms around her waist. “I’m pretty sure I’ll be able to sort you out among the Weaver sisters. But if I get confused, I’ll just kiss each and every sister until I get the right one.”

Her lips curved up in a perfect smile of utter joy. “Sounds like a plan, Dr. Dawson.”

THE END

If you enjoyed *Christmas in River's Edge*, you'll love the next book

The Weaver Sisters series

Book 1: *Home to River's Edge*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 2: *Meet Me in River's Edge*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 3: *Christmas in River's Edge*

[View the series here!](#)

If you enjoyed *Christmas in River's Edge*, you'll love the next book in...

The Weaver Sisters series

Book 1: *Home to River's Edge*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 2: *Meet Me in River's Edge*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 3: *Christmas in River's Edge*

[View the series here!](#)

More Books by Nan Reinhardt

The Lange Brothers series

Book 1: *The Valentine Wager*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 2: *Falling for the Doctor*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 3: *The Fireman's Christmas Wish*

[Buy now!](#)

The Four Irish Brothers Winery series

Book 1: *A Small Town Christmas*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 2: *Meant to Be*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 3: *Christmas with You*

[Buy now!](#)

Book 4: *The Baby Contract*

[Buy now!](#)

Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and tl New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our new [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

*Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks
reader giveaways:*

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



Keep Up with your Favorite Authors and their New Releases

For the latest news from Tule Publishing authors, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

Stay social! For new release updates, behind-the-scenes sneak peeks, and reader giveaways:

[Like us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



[Follow us](#) on



See you online!



About the Author



Nan Reinhardt has been a copy editor and proofreader for over twenty years, and currently works mainly on fiction titles for a variety of clients including Avon Books, St. Martin's Press, Kensington Books, Tu Publishing, and Entangled Publishing, as well as for many indie authors.

Author Nan writes romantic fiction for women in their prime. Yeah, you still fall in love and have sex, even after they turn forty-five! Imagine! She's also a wife, a mom, a mother-in-law, and a grandmother. She's been an antiques dealer, a bank teller, a stay-at-home mom, and a secretary.

She loves her career as a freelance editor, but writing is Nan's first and enduring passion. She can't remember a time in her life when she wasn't writing—she wrote her first romance novel at the age of ten, a love story between the most sophisticated person she knew at the time, her older brother (who was in high school and had a driver's license!), and a member of Herman's Hermits. If you remember who they are, *you* are Nan's audience. She's still writing romance, but now from the viewpoint of a wiser, slumped, post-menopausal woman who believes that love never ages, but only grows more interesting, and everybody needs a little sexy romance.

Visit her website: www.nanreinhardt.com

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authornanreinhardt>

Twitter: [@NanReinhardt](https://twitter.com/NanReinhardt)

Talk to Nan at: nan@nanreinhardt.com



For the latest news from Tule Publishing, sign up for our newsletter [here](#)
check out our website at TulePublishing.com



y-five
ients,
ile
hors.

vomen
She is
n an
y.

d most
asn't
story
r sister
r of
ience!
lightly
women
nce.

Talk to Nan at: nan@nanreinhardt.com



For the latest news from Tule Publishing, sign up for our newsletter [here](#) or check out our website at TulePublishing.com

