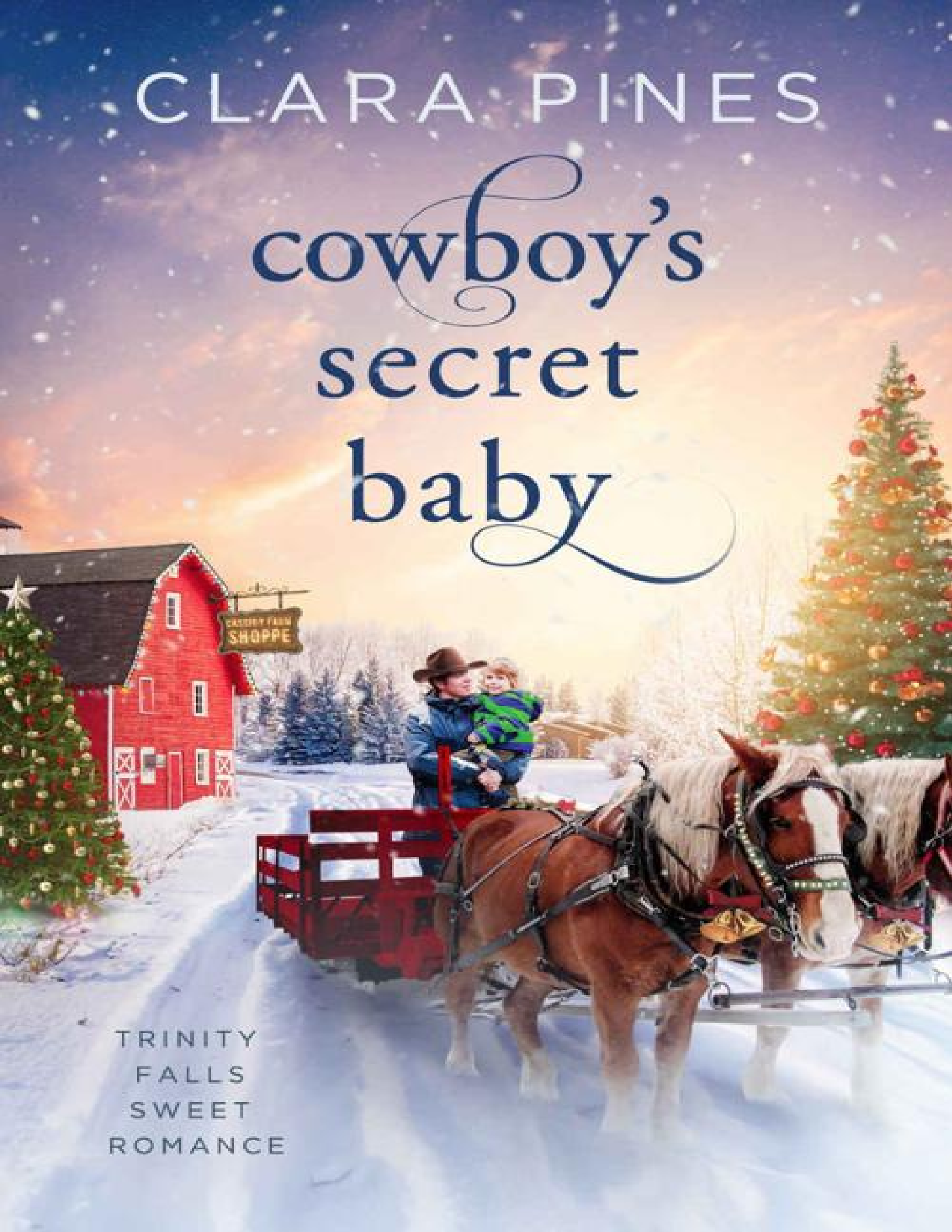


CLARA PINES

cowboy's
secret
baby

TRINITY
FALLS
SWEET
ROMANCE



COWBOY'S SECRET BABY

TRINITY FALLS SWEET ROMANCE - ICICLE CHRISTMAS
- BOOK 1

CLARA PINES

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CONTENTS

About Cowboy's Secret Baby

1. Faith
2. Ian
3. Faith
4. Ian
5. Faith
6. Ian
7. Ian
8. Ian
9. Faith
10. Faith
11. Faith
12. Faith
13. Ian
14. Faith
15. Ian
16. Faith
17. Faith
18. Faith
19. Ian
20. Ian
21. Faith
22. Faith
23. Ian
24. Faith
25. Ian
26. Faith
27. Ian
28. Faith
29. Faith

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One Percent Club

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ABOUT COWBOY'S SECRET BABY

Can a secret son and a second chance at love show this wounded quarterback there's life after football?

Ian Cassidy's chance to play pro football was shattered along with his shoulder in a terrible accident. But his heart was broken before that, when his college sweetheart dropped him and disappeared without a word.

Returning to his hometown with a life-changing injury instead of a seven-figure contract is humiliating for the former star quarterback. But it's missing Faith that keeps him up at night.

So, when she appears at Cassidy Farm just in time for the holidays with an adorable little son, and tells Ian that baby Connor is his, he feels like he's going from the bench to the championships.

After all, how many people get a second chance at true love?

Faith is still madly in love with Ian Cassidy, but she ran from him for a reason, and she's scared that his declarations now are just an attempt to do the right thing. Seeing him every day and participating in all the charming Christmas events happening in his picturesque small town is exquisite torture. But baby Connor is her whole world and she is determined never to do anything that could hurt his chances to be part of the extended Cassidy

family.

Can the tortured cowboy find his way back into Faith's heart? Or will she put their future as a couple on ice before he can find a way to win back her love, and give baby Connor the family he deserves?

FAITH

Faith Andrews drove slowly into the little town. Christmas music playing softly on the radio added to the feeling that she was entering a scene out of an old holiday movie.

Pale, pink twilight cast a rosy glow on the beautiful Victorian houses, with their twinkling holiday displays decorating the porches, and warm light pouring through the windows. Faith could practically picture the families sitting down for their Thanksgiving feasts, listing out all the things they were grateful for this year.

She glanced in the rearview mirror for a quick peek at the baby who was always at the top of her gratitude list. Connor was sleeping peacefully, his chubby cheeks looking as deliciously kissable as always.

“He’s fine,” her sister Felicity whispered from the passenger seat beside her. “And you’re fine, too.”

“It’s funny, now that we’re here, I actually believe you,” Faith told her sister.

“It’s nice here,” Felicity said after a moment. “Almost too nice.”

“No such thing,” Faith laughed. “Not for Connor.”

Her eyes went back to the sleeping boy in the rearview mirror.

For Connor, she would do anything, *had* done everything. She had worked long hours, gone without sleep, and a social life, and all the other things she couldn’t afford now that she was a mom.

She had even done the hardest and most painful thing of all—for Connor, she had managed to hold onto hope, even though the last year-and-a-half had delivered a relentless stream of bad news and dwindling choices.

But the end of this journey just might mean the beginning of something wonderful. After all, plenty of journeys ended that way. So why not theirs?

“No way,” Felicity breathed.

They were coming into the part of the little town that must have been what Ian had always called *the village*.

Sure enough, there was the firehouse, the Co-op Grocer, the little amphitheater, and rows of Tudor-style shops. Every lamppost had a twinkling candy cane decoration hanging from it, and most of the shops were already decked out in holiday lights and garlands.

“Oh wow, are they open?” Felicity asked hopefully.

Faith saw that her sister was looking at a little restaurant with a sign that said *Bowl of Joy*.

“Let’s find out,” she said, pulling over.

“Stay here with Connor,” Felicity offered. “I’ll run in.”

Faith nodded and left the car running against the chill.

On the radio, “Jingle Bells” faded into Elvis singing “I’ll Be Home for Christmas,” and Faith got a lump in her throat.

This town might look like something out of a movie, but it was Thanksgiving, and all she could think about was her own family table back in Pittsburgh. It was only a small apartment above the stationary shop, but for most of her life, it was home.

Her mother always said, *We might not have much, but we have each other. And that’s all that matters.*

Now they didn’t even have that.

Faith had worked her way through college with the help of grants, loans, and whatever her parents could spare. She had dreamed of using the business degree she was earning to help her parents turn their small shop into something really profitable.

Instead, she had gotten herself into what her parents called *trouble* right before Christmas break her senior year. Although she hardly thought of baby Connor as trouble, and it had been with the guy she’d been in love with since the day she had arrived on campus.

She and Ian were serious, so serious that she would have been home with him to meet his family and see this town many times before, if she hadn’t needed to work every minute of every school break just to stay enrolled.

She’d pictured a family with him, even if the timing was a little off.

But then when she’d gone to tell him...

Faith tried not to think about that these days. It was better to keep her focus on Connor.

She had managed to finish her senior year online, but by the time she graduated, there was a *For Sale* sign in front of the shop.

Her parents quietly let her know she was welcome to stay until the place sold, but that after all their years of struggling together, they were divorcing.

Heavily pregnant, with her goal disappearing in front of her eyes, Faith had convinced herself to stay positive. She took a job waiting tables nearby, and worked until the very night Connor was born, trying to put away a little nest egg.

The stationary business her parents had spent a lifetime working on turned out to be pretty much worthless, but the building sold for a decent amount. Which had resulted in the only silver lining of the whole mess—her parents handing each of their daughters a lump of money to get their lives started with.

Though Faith knew it wouldn't get her far, it had lifted her worries about day-to-day expenses for Connor.

Of course by then, she had other worries.

After what she overheard back in the dorms, she had known there was no way she could tell Ian Cassidy she was having his baby. And the thought of lying to him was too much to bear. In the end, she hadn't even bothered to say goodbye.

After that, all her focus had been on transitioning her studies online, graduating, and having Connor. And all the while, the sale of the building and her parents' divorce ate up whatever was left of her heart.

Then suddenly, it was all over.

Connor was here, the building was sold, and her beloved big sister had shown up one night and told her they were in this together. If they pooled their savings and the money Mom and Dad had given them, they would be just fine, and they could care for Connor together.

Faith had wept with relief while her sister laughed and patted her back until she was all cried out.

Then Felicity had asked where she would like to go. Since Felicity worked online, the options were wide open. Teenaged Faith would have chosen someplace exciting. But she wasn't a kid anymore. The moment the weight of worrying about the future was off her chest, it was replaced by a new sense of duty.

All at once, Connor was her everything. His chubby-cheeked smile made her heart sing. And in spite of his tender age, he already had likes and dislikes, and he even hummed along with his favorite music.

It didn't take long for Faith to realize that keeping Ian from knowing him was wrong for both of them. Especially now that all Ian's reasons for not wanting a family were gone.

He had been a star quarterback in high school, but every high school had one of those. When he arrived at college, he was just another promising young hopeful, sitting on the bench. But by their junior year, it was clear he had real prospects. Everyone, including Ian, knew he would end up playing professionally.

That was a lifestyle beyond what Faith ever wanted. But she would have gone anywhere, done anything, to be with Ian Cassidy and have a family with him.

Her own challenges the year she was pregnant, and her not wanting to dwell in the past, had kept her from ever really following his fledgling career. So, she was stunned when she learned from an old friend that Ian had been in a terrible accident that had ended his football career before it could begin.

Of course, after ghosting him for two years, and having his child without bothering to tell him, Faith knew she had no right to even dream of them having a life together now. But she hoped he wouldn't hold her stupidity against Connor.

Which brought her to Trinity Falls. It was time for her to come clean with Ian, for better or for worse. And it was only right to do it in person.

If he took the news reasonably, then she could settle somewhere nearby, find work, and Connor could know both his parents, and his extended family. Ian's stories about the family farm and all the shenanigans he'd gotten up to with his brothers growing up made her ache for Connor to be a part of it, if they would accept him.

"Look," Felicity crowed, opening the car door and lowering herself in with a massive bag of fragrant Chinese food. "The owner said she's getting ready to close up. She said all this was on the house."

"Wow," Faith said, genuinely stunned.

"Let's get to the apartment before it gets cold," Felicity said happily.

Faith smiled and drove on, making a left at the train overpass, just like the real estate agent had told them to do.

Somehow, they had lucked into a third-floor apartment over the music

shop right in the center of town. The real estate agent had literally told them she'd leave a key under the mat, like there was no danger of any kind in this little town.

She pulled into the alley between the buildings and managed to get her car into the spot designated for them. It was lucky she had a tiny hatchback, and she definitely didn't want to think about how hard it would be to back out. That was a problem for tomorrow.

Felicity sprang into action, grabbing their bags and sprinting for the door, then bending down to lift the mat.

Sure enough, she popped up a second later with a key in her hand.

"Unbelievable," Faith murmured to herself as she got out of the car and opened the back door.

"Hey, buddy," she murmured to Connor. "We're going inside. You don't have to wake up."

He snuggled right into her arms and her heart squeezed as it always did when she felt his warm weight against her chest.

She locked the car and followed her sister up the stairs, past a second-floor door with a cute homemade looking wreath on it, until they finally reached their apartment on the third.

Felicity unlocked the door and opened it to reveal a charming space with sloped ceilings and a window seat.

There was a note on the counter:

WELCOME HOME, Felicity and Faith! I left a little housewarming gift in the big bedroom. It belonged to another client, but the sheets are new. I thought it might help you just to start off, you can always donate it if you get a new one. Call me if you need anything at all!

-Sloane Greenfield

THERE WERE SUPPOSED to be two beds and a sofa left in the apartment, and nothing else. The former tenants hadn't wanted to take them, so Faith and Felicity had lucked out there.

But the note made it sound like...

Not wanting to get her hopes up, Faith raced over to the tiny hallway and

looked into the bedroom on the left.

There was a bed there and a crib, too, made up with fresh sheets and looking just right for Connor. It was even a newer model, and she was relieved to see it didn't have the old-fashioned drop sides.

"Sloane Greenfield, you're an angel," she whispered.

"What is it?" Felicity asked, joining her. "Oh, wow."

"Ready to get some rest?" Faith whispered to Connor.

She figured there was no chance he would go down this easily, but everything else seemed to be going her way, so it was worth a try.

Humming softly, she lowered him onto the mattress, making sure to stroke his belly as soon as he hit the sheets.

He gazed up at her with the serious expression that meant he was sleepy, and after a moment, his eyelids began to flutter. Felicity appeared at her side with Connor's favorite lamb blanket, and Faith tucked it around him, continuing to hum.

A minute later, she could sense him relax into sleep.

"I don't believe it," Felicity whispered.

"We'll leave the door open," Faith said. "It was a long day, so he'll nap a while, but he'll definitely be up for a change and a snack before bedtime."

"We'd better eat then," Felicity said. "I'll grab the food. Can you unpack it while I run down for the rest of our stuff?"

"Of course," Faith said. "Thank you."

Moments like this one, having put the baby in his crib, but knowing there was still stuff in the car that needed to come upstairs, were the stuff of nightmares for a single parent. Felicity would never understand what a difference she had made in their lives.

Ten minutes later, all their things were safely in the apartment, and Faith had laid out the feast of Chinese food on a blanket on the floor like a picnic. It smelled so good, and it had been so long since they swung through that rest stop for cheese crackers that it took everything she had not to fall on it before her sister got settled.

"Oh, amazing," Felicity groaned in appreciation as she lowered herself to the floor.

"We don't have any dishes yet," Faith warned her.

"We've got chopsticks, right?" Felicity asked. "We can eat out of the containers. I don't have cooties, do you?"

Faith laughed and handed her sister the crab wontons and dipping sauce,

her favorite.

They both bowed their heads for a moment of silent grace.

“Now are we going to go around the table and say what we’re thankful for?” Felicity asked, with a big smile.

“Sure,” Faith said, happy to continue the family tradition even in their unusual circumstances. “Of course.”

Felicity took her hands, and even though it was just the two of them, it still felt immediately more like Thanksgiving.

“I’m thankful for Mei over at Bowl of Joy for this amazing feast,” Felicity said. “And for my sister and my adorable nephew, and for having a job and a little money in the bank. If it gets any better than this, I don’t need to know about it.”

Faith laughed in spite of herself. Felicity had such a positive outlook.

“I’m thankful for my upbeat, funny sister, who is also my best friend in the world,” Faith said. “And I’m thankful for my sweet Connor, and the chance to start our new lives together.”

“Aw, you said me first,” Felicity said, winking at her.

“Let’s eat,” Faith laughed.

And as they dug in, Faith felt her body and mind both relax and actually started to enjoy herself.

For the first time since her world decided to fall apart, it was beginning to feel like things might just turn out okay after all.

IAN

I an Cassidy released the last of the horses into the field the morning after Thanksgiving.

After a few hours of hard work, he was sweating in spite of the cold, but it felt good. Even the persistent ache in his shoulder couldn't get him down when he was out here with the horses.

The dappled mare he had just released stopped and nuzzled his chest before she cantered out to the others. She was probably just looking for treats, and she wasn't wrong to do it. Ian slipped them apples and sugar lumps now and again. But it felt like affection, and he was finding that he craved that more and more these days.

There were plenty of nieces and nephews roaming around the farm, and his parents still doted on their grown kids as well. Between the siblings, cousins, and the whole extended family, Ian had all the love and attention he could want.

But it wasn't what he needed.

He missed Faith.

It had been two years, but if he closed his eyes, he could still feel her hand in his, her head leaning on his shoulder. He could still smell the faint honey of her shampoo.

Ian's whole life had been about football, but somehow, he found himself missing Faith far more often than he missed playing.

We were supposed to be forever...

It was one thing for a girl to break up with you when you'd been talking about the future and white picket fences. It was another one entirely for her to

ghost you—especially when you were on top of the world.

Ian knew there was no point searching for her now. If she hadn't wanted him when he was about to earn millions doing the thing he loved, she definitely wouldn't want him now that he was mucking stalls and helping out in the farm shops all day, floundering when it came to the question of what he actually wanted to do with the rest of his life.

He'd thought they were serious. He even had a ring for her, and a speech he had painstakingly written. They were still tucked away in his dresser. He'd never had the heart to return the ring. Some dumb part of him probably hoped she would show up one day and want him back.

Sometimes, his heart hurt more than the awful ache in his shoulder ever could.

He turned his attention back to the horses, ashamed at feeling sorry for himself. He had family and a roof over his head and work to occupy him. He was an incredibly lucky person.

The horses were frolicking and grazing, snuffling up the misty morning air as if they were thankful just to stretch their legs and feast on the last of the green grass. Their coats would get thicker now that the weather was changing. He loved the shaggy look of them in wintertime.

His stomach gave a growl and he decided to grab something to eat before he headed back out to do the milking.

Unlike last year, there were plenty of hands on deck now. But they had given a couple of the workers with families an extra day off. And Ian found he enjoyed the solitude of working with the animals on his own.

He walked down the trail, past the hill of Christmas trees, to the big farmhouse where he had grown up.

Taking the steps up to the back porch two at a time, he remembered to be quiet only when it was time to ease open the back door. But when he slipped into the kitchen, he saw his dad had obviously had the same idea he did.

Joe Cassidy stood at the counter, slathering mayo on thick slices of homemade bread. A container of leftover turkey and a dish of cranberry sauce were already out and waiting.

"Thanksgiving sandwiches for breakfast?" Ian asked him, raising an eyebrow.

"Try and tell me you weren't sneaking in here to do the exact same thing," his father laughed, eyes twinkling.

"Oh, I definitely was," Ian admitted.

“Sit, sit,” his dad told him. “I’ll fix one for you.”

Ian would have argued, but he knew his dad was so happy to be up on his feet again, doing things for himself, that he went to the island and sat to watch him.

Last Christmas, Joe Cassidy had been relegated to his recliner after his knee replacement, where he alternately grumbled and shouted instructions. Only Alice, his infinitely patient and lovable wife, could calm him and keep him in that chair long enough to heal up.

“I’m just in for a sandwich, and then I’ll do the milking,” Ian told his dad, settling in.

“Already done,” Joe said with satisfaction.

“Dad, seriously,” Ian said. “You have kids and farmhands.”

“I like working,” Joe said simply. “It keeps me young.”

Ian looked at his father appraisingly and decided he probably wasn’t too far from the truth. The man was still as lean and strong as Ian remembered him from childhood, and he was in constant motion. It was great to see him back on his feet again.

“Now that you don’t have to do the milking,” Joe said, setting down a plate with a mouthwateringly beautiful sandwich in front of Ian, “maybe you can hang out and chew the fat with your old man for a few minutes.”

“Sure,” Ian said.

But they didn’t do any talking while they ate. There was only the sound of the old clock ticking, the whistle of the radiators, and the occasional hum of appreciation from the two men.

When both sandwiches had disappeared, Joe hopped up like his stool was on fire, and poured them each a steaming mug of coffee. Before he could sit down again, there was a squeak on the stairs and Ian’s twin brother, Jacob, appeared on the landing.

“Morning,” he said. “I’m running to the Co-op. You guys need anything?”

“Nah,” their dad replied.

“It smells incredible in here,” Jacob said, coming down the last few steps into the kitchen. “Did you guys eat Thanksgiving sandwiches without me?”

“Early bird gets the worm, son,” their dad teased.

Ian smiled at his brother’s expression of dismay.

“There’ll be plenty for lunch,” his dad said. “This is why your mother always makes two turkeys.”

“Can I borrow your coat?” Jacob asked Ian, grabbing it from the hook before he could answer, and disappearing out the back door.

There was a time when his brother would have looked silly in Ian’s coat, but his time working on the farm had packed some muscle onto Jacob’s frame, and some time off from football had subtracted some from Ian’s. With their hair the same length now, the two brothers were finally looking like twins again for the first time since they were small.

Joe simply met Ian’s eyes and winked.

Jacob had always been high energy and full of mischief, definitely his father’s son. Ian, on the other hand was Jacob’s quieter, more serious counterpart.

When they were children, it was Jacob who always wanted to try and trick their friends and their teachers by switching places and calling each other by the wrong name. As a teenager, when that stopped working, Jacob grew his hair long and learned to play the guitar, probably to impress girls, though he said he just liked to *rock out* now and then.

Meanwhile, Ian spent most of his time off the field working hard to keep his grades up enough to play football. He loved the strategy of the game, and the hard physical work of it. School wasn’t easy for him, but he always understood what the coach wanted from him. Playing just felt natural.

While Jacob went to parties and concerts, and snuck out his window at night to meet girls, Ian focused in on the game, and sitting at the kitchen table fighting through his homework.

Jacob had goofed off enough to earn him the affectionate nickname “hopeless” from his parents and other siblings. To them, he was a good kid, but it was pretty clear he was never going to take anything, or anyone, seriously.

But Ian knew better. His brother had come through for him in a big way after the injury. Jacob Cassidy might have a fun-loving nature, but when it came to family, he took his responsibilities very seriously. Ian was lucky to have a brother like him.

“What are you thinking about, boy?” Joe asked.

Ian shrugged.

“Look,” Joe said, suddenly sounding serious. “This farm was all I ever wanted. But I feel like maybe there’s something else you need to do. You know you don’t have to stick around here, right?”

Ian looked up at him, and for once his dad’s blue eyes were solemn.

“We love having you here,” Joe went on. “Don’t get me wrong. I just don’t want to feel like I’m keeping you from something that matters to you.”

“No, no,” Ian said immediately. “There’s nothing like that.”

“You sure about that, son?” Joe asked. “Seems to me I’m always catching you looking like there’s someplace you’d rather be.”

Guilt twisted Ian’s stomach.

“I miss playing,” he admitted. It was the truth, even if it wasn’t the whole truth.

“You wouldn’t have played forever,” Joe said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. “What were you planning to do after? You never seemed like the type to sit on a beach someplace drinking cocktails for the rest of your life.”

“Definitely not,” Ian laughed. “I always figured I’d find my way back here, maybe work with you or buy a piece of land for myself.”

“Hm,” Joe said, taking a swig of coffee.

“Are you boys getting into those leftovers before eight in the morning,” Alice’s voice carried down the stairs.

She appeared on the landing a moment later, looking as cheerful and put-together as she did every morning.

Her short, stout frame was complemented by a pretty green dress today, and her chestnut hair was in its usual bun, showing off streaks of shimmering silver.

“Morning, Mom,” Ian said, smiling so hard that it made his cheeks hurt.

His mother had that effect on pretty much everyone. You just couldn’t look at her without feeling happy and safe.

“If you don’t want me getting into the turkey, you shouldn’t make it so delicious,” Joe told her, his blue eyes twinkling again.

When she stepped down into the kitchen, Joe hopped up and spun her around in his arms, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

She laughed and flushed, looking very pleased.

“What did I ever do to deserve the prettiest girl in Trinity Falls?” his father wondered out loud.

“Oh, Joe,” she said, extricating herself and shaking her head. “You’re too much.”

But she was smiling.

Ian loved seeing his parents so happy together after the decades they had shared. There had been years of struggle as well as joyful ones, but the love

between them was always the same.

It made him ache even more to find his own soulmate.

But he was pretty sure he already had. And she didn't want anything to do with him.

FAITH

Faith woke up the morning after Thanksgiving feeling light as air.

Warm light streamed in the windows of her bedroom. A shaft of sunshine lit up Connor's pale curls as he sat in the crib, humming to his lamb blanket.

"Mama," he said, his little voice soft and happy when he saw that she was awake.

"Good morning, angel," she said, stretching and sliding out of bed. "What a good job you did sleeping."

It was kind of amazing that he hadn't called for her. But most likely, his soft singing was what had woken her up. She was so attuned to him that sometimes it felt like he was an extension of her.

"Should we get dressed and rustle up some breakfast?" she asked, moving to his crib.

"Yah," he agreed, lifting his arms up to her.

He was heavier these days, but she loved the feel of him in her arms, especially in his snuggly warm sleeper.

She grabbed a fresh diaper and clothes, and laid him on her bed to change him. He chattered while she worked, trying out some pretend words, and then chuckling at them, hardly kicking or wiggling at all.

Connor was such a happy baby. She was incredibly lucky to be his mom.

When he was clean and dressed, she brought him into the living room and was surprised to see that Felicity was already up and working on her laptop.

"Hey, sleepyheads," Felicity laughed.

"La," Connor said happily. That was his name for his aunt.

“I can’t believe you’re awake before we are,” Faith said, walking over with him so he could say hello.

The baby reached out, wiggling his fingers for his aunt.

“Some of us have work to do,” Felicity said, taking him with a big smile. “And want to get it done early so we have time to explore the town later on.”

Connor snuggled into the crook of Felicity’s neck, and she kissed the top of his head with a fond smile.

“Speaking of which, I need to get him fed,” Faith said. “And then I think I’ll take him over to the grocery store to grab a few things.”

“I’ll feed him,” Felicity offered as Connor grabbed two hanks of her hair in his chubby fists and started chuckling at her. “You can go to the store on your own. It will be quicker.”

“What happened to getting your work done early?” Faith teased.

“I’m due for a break,” Felicity said, shrugging and sweeping her nephew off to the kitchen. “Right, Connor?”

“Okay, thanks, sis,” Faith said, grabbing her bag. “I’ll be back in half an hour or so. Need anything?”

“Coffee,” Felicity groaned.

“On it,” Faith assured her.

It was strange to just grab her bag and go.

Back in her parents’ place, Faith hadn’t wanted to ask for help, or be a burden—not when there was so much tension in the little apartment. So, if she wanted to leave the house, she had to get Connor to the sweet spot between meals, diaper changes, and naps, and then carry a big diaper bag and a stroller with her wherever the two of them went.

Already, Felicity was making both their lives better. She would give Connor a wonderful breakfast and talk and play with him instead of rushing to get him ready to pop out to the store.

Faith headed down the stairs, feeling light as a feather for the second time since opening her eyes.

This is the beginning of a good life, she let herself hope. Things are going to be better, even if it’s still hard work.

She headed past the side of the building and onto the sidewalk and looked around. The little town was even more charming during the day than it had been at night, and that was saying something.

A handful of people trailed down the sidewalks—some pushing strollers, others carrying reusable shopping bags and glancing in the shop windows. A

tiny old man walked an enormous collie on the other side of the street.

An older couple smiled at her as they walked past on her side, holding hands.

“Good morning,” Faith heard herself say, like someone out of a storybook.

“Good morning,” the two replied.

She walked on, taking in the offerings in the shops. Last night, she had noticed some garlands and twinkling lights behind the windows, but today she could see each shop had its own holiday display.

She found herself wishing Connor was with her after all. He would love the bright colors, hanging paper snowflakes, and Santa Claus figures.

She paused for a moment in front of the real estate office, which had the most beautiful Victorian dollhouse in the window, resting on a bed of cotton snow. Tiny holiday lights were strung from its eaves, and a Christmas tree was visible through one of the windows.

On a whim, Faith opened the door.

The little office was so warm and cheerful, with pale walls, pumpkin-hued wood floors, and framed photographs of the town over the years.

“Hi, how can we help you?” the pretty lady at the back desk asked.

“Is Sloane Greenfield here?” Faith asked.

“So sorry,” the lady told her. “She’s out showing a house. Would you like to leave her a message?”

“Please let her know that Faith and Felicity said thank you so much,” Faith told her with a smile. “We love the apartment, and her gift was very generous.”

“Oh, are you moving in over the music shop?” the lady asked. “I’m Anya. I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around town.”

“Faith,” she told the woman. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“I’ll be sure to pass the message to Sloane,” Anya said. “Stop in anytime to say hi.”

Faith gave a little wave and headed outside again, feeling happy to have a new acquaintance in town. She crossed the street to the Co-op Grocer and smiled when she saw that they were working on a window display as well.

It was nice to be someplace where people really got into the spirit of things. Back home, it always seemed like everyone was just trying to get by. Sure, there were decorations here and there, but it felt like there was a genuine love for the holidays in Trinity Falls that went beyond just trying to

sell something in a shop window.

There was a spring in her step as Faith jogged up the stairs to the Co-op.

“Hey there, can I grab you a cart?” a young woman asked as she entered.

“That would be great, thanks,” Faith told her, looking around while the girl darted off to comply.

The whole place smelled incredible. There was a café, and a little deli counter where a sign with chalk lettering announced that they were selling fresh apple cider doughnuts from a local farm this morning.

Bins of colorful fresh fruits and vegetables, as well as shelves with locally handmade goods were all practically overflowing with tempting offerings.

An employee laid out boxes of old-fashioned candy canes on a table near the check-out area as shoppers chatted and laughed, filling their carts.

“Here you go,” the girl said, pushing a cart over. “My name is Lucy. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks so much,” Faith told her.

She was just turning to head to the produce aisle when something caught her eye.

It was only a duet of muted colors, humble compared to the brightness of everything else in the store. But the sight of sandy-brown hair and a navy-blue jacket had caught her eye because they looked so familiar.

When she turned, she was amazed to see that it was Ian. For a moment, she was too stunned to think. She hadn’t been expecting to just run into him.

I’m in his hometown, and this is the only grocery store, she reminded herself.

She watched him, still processing. He was smiling and laughing, and there was a lightness to him that she didn’t remember.

Back in college, Ian had been fun, but he’d always had a serious, down-to-earth feeling about him. Maybe it had been because he was always working hard to juggle football and his studies.

Today, Ian seemed to be trying to hold back a smile as he focused all his attention on the woman in front of him.

Her back was to Faith, but she could see that the woman was young, with beautiful, long brown hair. She was wearing blue jeans and a simple sweater, but her height and build made her look like she belonged in a fashion magazine instead of a small-town grocery store.

Faith felt her heart disintegrating in her chest.

At just that moment, he looked up, his gaze landing directly on her. The

overhead lights cast a shadow on his face, so she couldn't really see his eyes, or tell what he might be thinking. But there was no way he hadn't spotted her.

Please, she begged him wordlessly, not even sure what she was begging for.

Then the girl put her hand on his arm.

He turned on his heel immediately, and the two of them headed out the doors together with their bags.

All the sounds and smells in the shop were the same, and an instrumental version of "Jingle Bells" still played softly from the ceiling speakers.

But for Faith, the magic was gone, and she felt like she was listening to a broken music box, the notes jangling. Suddenly, the laughing patrons were all too noisy, and the smells of Christmas were cloying instead of sweet.

She rushed through her shopping trip in a haze, tossing things into the cart without comparing prices like she normally did. She just had to get out of here and get back to Connor and Felicity, back to a sense that she mattered and belonged somewhere. After about ten minutes of grabbing items from shelves, she headed for the check-out.

As well as she hoped she was hiding her distress, the cashier must have felt sorry for her. She gifted Faith two beautiful red holiday-themed reusable shopping bags with the store's logo, since Faith hadn't remembered to bring hers.

"Thank you," Faith managed, grabbing her bags and rushing out the doors.

Outside, the little village that had been so sweet seemed to mock her now.

But it was the perfect setting for Ian and his new girlfriend, a beautiful woman who surely would never shame them both by letting something happen too soon in the relationship, and cause ripples of heartbreak to shiver through their lives.

Why didn't I wait? she asked herself for the millionth time. *We could have had Connor together, and our little house with the white picket fence, and everything we dreamed about.*

But the past was the past, and she couldn't do anything about it.

She marched down the sidewalk as fast as she could, praying she would make it back to the apartment before the tears began to fall.

It seemed to take forever, but finally, she was opening the door to the apartment, panting a little from jogging up three flights of stairs with two big bags of groceries.

“*Mama,*” Connor said happily, looking up from the blocks that he and Felicity were stacking on the living room floor.

His blue eyes twinkled and his chubby cheeks dimpled, and just like that, nothing else in the world mattered but her beautiful boy.

“Hi, baby,” she said happily, dropping the bags on the counter and heading over to sit beside him.

He scrambled right up on her lap, and she held him close, inhaling his sweet, familiar scent, tears of relief prickling her eyes.

“You okay?” Felicity asked quietly.

“Mm-hmm,” Faith agreed, not trusting herself to speak.

Felicity seemed to understand. She went back to stacking up blocks and Connor eventually slid out of Faith’s arms and busied himself knocking them down and then chuckling.

He had his father’s laugh.

“I saw him at the store,” Faith said as calmly as she could. “He was with a woman.”

“Oh, wow,” Felicity said. “Did they see you?”

“He looked at me for a second,” Faith said, nodding. “Then he turned around and left with her.”

“That’s weird,” Felicity said.

“Not really,” Faith said, shrugging. “As far as he’s concerned, I ghosted him. Why would he even care about seeing me?”

“He hasn’t seen you in two years, and then all of a sudden you show up in his tiny town’s only grocery store,” Felicity said. “I would think he’d at least be curious.”

“His expression was so... cold,” Faith said, picturing it. “It was like he’d never seen me before in his life.”

“Wait,” Felicity said, holding up her hand. “Wait, wait, wait. Didn’t you say this guy had a twin brother? Are you sure...?”

“Yes,” Faith agreed. “But Jacob looks totally different. I’ve seen pictures. He’s got long hair, he’s kind of pale, and he’s way thinner. This was definitely Ian. He was even wearing the coat I got for him back in school.”

“Well,” Felicity said crisply, as if she were washing her hands. “You didn’t come here for you. If he’s with someone else, that’s fine, expected even. And if he’s being a little cold with you, it’s understandable, after all, you did ditch him without a word.”

Faith nodded slowly, guilt weighing heavily on her heart. All of that was

true. And she'd tried to prepare herself for it. But seeing him again had knocked down her defenses like a tower of blocks.

"Text him," Felicity said. "Let him know you're in town and you want to set up a meeting."

"He already knows I'm in town," Faith said automatically.

"Let him know officially," Felicity told her.

Faith sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Okay," she said. "You're right."

"La," Connor laughed as he knocked over a particularly tall tower Felicity had managed to stack for him.

"Oh, that was a good one," Felicity told him. "But you won't knock down this next one. I'm going to make it really sturdy."

Connor laughed again. He was definitely going to knock it down. That was the whole game. Some things were made to fall apart.

Faith got up and slipped her phone out of her bag, typing out a message before she could lose her nerve.

This was always the plan, she reminded herself. I just wasn't ready to see him this morning, and he definitely wasn't ready to see me.

hey i'm in Trinity Falls

i'd like to set up a time to meet with you

She was ready to put the phone back in her bag, but dots appeared on the screen immediately, like he was already writing back.

She watched, holding her breath as the dots disappeared and reappeared a couple of times.

IAN

i need to finish up my chores

how about tonight?

Funny that he was talking about chores when she had just seen him in town with his girlfriend. But that wasn't any of her business.

can we go someplace private to talk?

sure we can walk in the orchard

A moment later a link popped up with *Cassidy Farm* marked as the end

location and a suggestion of five o'clock.

She typed in a yes, before she could change her mind and then shoved the phone back in the bag.

"Well?" Felicity asked.

"Tonight at five," Faith said. "I guess I should have asked before, but can you watch Connor?"

"Of course," Felicity said. "Not taking him with you, huh?"

"I think I need to talk to Ian first," Faith said. "I don't want to spring too much on him, you know? And either way, he's bound to be angry. I don't want that for Connor's first time with his dad."

"Smart," Felicity said. "Now did I see pancake mix in one of those bags?"

It was an attempt at distraction, but Faith was grateful for it and decided to grab on with both hands.

"Pancake mix, berries, real maple syrup, and the best coffee they had," Faith agreed, waggling her eyebrows at her sister.

"I think I like this new life of ours," Felicity said decidedly. "Yes, I think I'll stick around, what do you say, Connor? Yes?"

"Ess," Connor agreed, looking over at his mama with a big dimply smile.

Faith found herself laughing.

Things couldn't be so bad when she had the most wonderful son on the planet, and the most cheerful sister.

She started unpacking groceries, determined to hold onto this thread of herself at tonight's meeting.

Ian might still be able to crush her heart in the palm of his hand, but that didn't mean he could break her spirit.

IAN

I an spent the day working feverishly, and trying hard not to think about Faith Andrews.

It was a losing battle.

For years, he had been dying to see her name pop up on his phone every time it buzzed. And now that it had finally happened, he felt completely out of his depth.

Why was she reaching out now?

And why was she in Trinity Falls?

She's probably just on her way somewhere, he told himself. She's probably living in Philly, and she went back to Pittsburgh for Thanksgiving. Trinity Falls is practically on the way.

But it still took an effort to come off the beaten path and find the little town. When the highway came in, things would be different, but for now, you didn't wind up in Trinity Falls unless you wanted to be here.

He closed his eyes and saw her long brown hair and expressive hazel eyes in his mind.

Shaking his head, he tried to apply himself to the task at hand.

They were wrapping things up in the barn with the horses. For some reason, Jacob had put on the Christmas station on the old radio and was humming along with one of Elvis's tunes.

Thinking about Faith hurt, and it never seemed to hurt any less than it had the day Ian had realized she wasn't back on campus after the winter break. He'd panicked then, thinking the worst, that something must have happened. But all he'd been able to learn was that she was fine, but she wasn't coming

back. Which only led to more questions.

Why did you leave?

He'd known her family had money troubles. She was working so much outside of school that he had no idea how she kept up her grades and still found a little time for him.

Among the things he had texted her back then was an offer of help with whatever she needed. He didn't have much of his own yet, but he had known his parents would want to help if they knew she needed it. By that point, he had been singing her praises to them for years. They had even helped him choose the ring he was planning to give her when he proposed.

But Faith hadn't replied to any of his messages. Not even once.

The ache of missing her never left him. But lately, he had made his peace with the idea that he would never see her again.

Or at least he thought he had.

Now he was reeling all over again. Her unexpected message had awoken all the same desperation he felt on the day she disappeared from his life. He had been driving himself out of his own mind since this morning.

When she asked to meet, he had known he needed time to get his head together, so he had told her to come by at five. But this waiting was torture.

What if she changed her mind?

He probably should have told her to stay where she was and that he would come to meet her immediately.

"You okay, brother?" Jacob called to him from the other side of the barn.

"Yeah, man, why?" Ian asked.

"I don't know," Jacob said, shrugging. "You've been standing there holding Peanut Butter's water bucket without hanging it up for like five minutes."

Ian looked down at his hand. Sure enough, there was the bucket.

The horse in the stall in front of him snuffled, as if he were also judging Ian.

"Sorry, Peanut Butter," he told the creature. "Long day."

"Why don't you head out?" Jacob suggested. "We're good here."

Ian wanted to refuse, but if he left now, he'd have time to shower and take a few minutes to try to get his head together.

"Thanks," he told his brother. "Think I will."

"Space cadet," Jacob laughed as Ian passed him.

Ian gave him a friendly shove and Jacob laughed even harder.

“You think you can push me around, huh?” he asked. “You forget, I’m not a rocker geek anymore. I’ve got farm boy muscles now.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d ever let anyone forget about that,” Ian teased.

Jacob was still laughing when he left, and Ian felt the knot of wrongness in his chest ease slightly.

His love life might be cursed, but Ian was unspeakably lucky when it came to his family. He needed to keep that at the front of his mind today.

Back at the farmhouse, the kitchen was mercifully empty, so he was able to jog up the backstairs without bumping into anyone. Once he was in his room, he grabbed some clean jeans and a button-down and headed for the shower.

He didn’t normally think about the fact that he and Jacob were back in the two small adjoining bedrooms they had shared as children.

But today seemed to be a day for reflection.

What if she wants me back? Does she want to be with a man who lives in his childhood bedroom?

He and Jacob were both on salary at the farm. Ian could afford a modest place of his own, if he wanted. But it was easier to be here for the early mornings, and he and Jacob both honestly loved their parents’ company.

Last year, they had helped out a lot around the house as well as the farm, because Dad had been down for the count with his knee replacement. This year, they didn’t have that excuse, but they had fallen into a really nice routine, and he could tell his mom liked to have a little hustle-bustle in the place.

Now that Ian’s big brother Shane and his girlfriend, Natalie, were married, Natalie took care of Wyatt and Rumor most of the time, so Mom didn’t have grandkids over every day after school.

Anyone else would have considered that a relief, but Ian knew how much his energetic mom loved having the kids around. At least with him and his brother home, she had someone to fuss over when she felt like it, even if they weren’t kids anymore.

The hot shower pounded away just a touch of the tension he felt.

I’ll hear her out, he told himself as he pulled on clean clothes. I won’t fall at her feet and beg her to come back to me.

But even as the thought formed, he wasn’t sure it was true.

He still loved her, still thought about her every day and wondered if she was okay. How was he supposed to look at her and not beg her to stay?

But then he remembered the hard truth of it. She hadn't wanted him then, even when it seemed that he was about to be wildly wealthy and successful.

Why would she want him now?

He clenched his jaw, determined not to play the fool again.

Heading downstairs, he glanced at his phone. It was almost five, and she hadn't canceled. He was really going to see her. He pulled on his boots and grabbed his coat off the hook by the back door, then headed outside.

He had chosen the time because it was right after he usually finished up on the farm, but also partly because the light was so beautiful at this time of year. The sun was already sinking, painting the sky with pink flames and casting a romantic glow on everything it touched. Ian had imagined a sunset walk in the orchard with Faith more times than he cared to admit.

A few minutes later, he strode up the gravel parking area, which was full of cars and visitors.

Cassidy Farm was open to tourists and had a big plant nursery as well as a bakery and Christmas-All-Year-Round shop. Kids could ride a pony around the paddock, play on the wooden play sets in the playground, or feed the farm animals and fowl.

Today had been busy, since most children were off school. Ian loved seeing them squealing over the old pony and begging for candied apples. It reminded him of being small and in awe of the life on the farm, even though he lived there.

He continued up the hill to the grassy parking section closest to the orchard and waited.

No one else was up this far. There were no pick-your-own-apples or hayrides today. He and Faith should have the privacy she had asked for.

A light breeze ruffled his hair, and he realized the air tasted just a little bit like snow. Birds cried as they headed off to their nests and he heard the occasional hush of a car out on the main road as well as the happy noises of visitors drifting up from below.

These were the sounds of home. But today they were also... lonely.

He was just wondering if she was going to ghost him again, when he saw a little hatchback pulling in. The whisper of a thought went through his head that he needed to get her into a safer car before the winter snowstorms came.

It was a silly thought. She was just passing through on her way to someplace else. And it certainly wasn't his job to worry about her anymore.

A moment later, the car was parked and the door was opening.

The last of the afternoon light shone in the curtain of Faith's hair that swung over her shoulder as she stood. Her posture was stiff and reserved in a way he had never seen before.

When she turned to him, his plan to play it cool melted away in an instant.

She looked the same as always, those same beautiful hazel eyes taking him in. Though the expression in them was guarded.

He smiled without realizing he was doing it, feeling happier when she was near, as he always had.

And she smiled back, like she couldn't help herself.

All the feelings for her that he had bottled up for two years crashed back into him at once, and his heart thundered in his chest as he moved to her.

He wished more than anything that he had a way with words, like Jacob did. But Ian had never been a big talker, and now he was paying the price.

"Faith," he heard himself say reverently, wishing he could explain how much he cared about her, how badly he wanted things to be the way they were before.

"Hey," she said softly. "We have a lot to talk about."

Her businesslike words hit him like a slap in the face.

He nodded and gestured toward the orchard, wondering what they could possibly have to talk about after all this time.

His eyes slid down to her left hand, but there was no ring.

Relief washed over him.

He had always wondered if she had left him to marry someone else. If she had, she wasn't with that person now.

"So, this is the farm?" she asked, as they cut through the grassy meadow to get to the gnarled forms of the apple trees.

"It is," he told her, realizing that of course she would be curious about it after hearing so many stories over the years. "All the action is down the hill today. The orchard is empty."

"Good," she said simply.

There was something in her voice, relief and tension at the same time. He ached for her, not ever wanting to see her this way.

The dry leaves crunched underfoot as he led her into the orchard.

It instantly felt more intimate the moment they were between the rows of trees. Ian had always loved it out here when he was a small boy. It was peaceful and timeless, the perfect hiding spot for a quiet kid in a big, noisy

family.

He stopped when they reached the middle of the row and turned to her. She looked up at him, her dark hair lifting in the breeze, her hazel eyes so serious.

He could barely resist the urge to pull her close and hold her to his chest, whispering that everything would be okay, that he would *make it* okay for her.

“There’s no point drawing this out,” she said simply. “You should know that I got pregnant.”

Fury burned like a fire in his chest. What kind of man would get a nice girl like Faith in that situation and not put a ring on her finger?

Why is she here? The little voice in the back of his head wondered. *Does she know that I would take her back in a heartbeat and love that baby like it was mine?*

“I didn’t want to saddle you with anything like that,” she went on when he didn’t reply. “Not with a promising career ahead of you.”

“My career is over,” he told her gently, as he tried desperately to understand why she would even mention it. “It’s no burden for me to have a family.”

“I’m not asking for that,” she said quickly, lifting her hands up. “That’s not why I’m here. Obviously, there won’t be anything between the two of us. I just... want you to know him. And... I’m sorry I kept him from you. I was scared, but there is no excuse for me stealing time with your son. And Ian, he’s so amazing. He has your laugh...”

She buttoned her lip as she fought back the tears that sparkled in her serious eyes.

“He’s... he’s *mine*?” Ian realized out loud.

She nodded miserably.

Everything rearranged itself in his mind and he wanted to stagger away from her, fall at her feet, and scream at her all at once.

He had a son. They had a son. That meant he had to hold it together, even if it killed him.

She didn’t leave me for someone else.

He nearly sagged with relief at that one happy thought. That might mean there was hope...

But the next thought in his head nearly broke his heart.

She was pregnant, and she still didn’t want to be with me...

“Ian?” she whispered.

He realized he had to get out of his own head and say something in response to what she had shared.

He longed to ask why she hadn’t told him, why she hadn’t let him make it right. He had a million questions.

But deep down, he knew the answer to all of them.

This is my fault.

Pushing away every other thought but the idea of their son, he managed to prioritize the most important question.

“When can I meet him?” he asked.

FAITH

Faith came back to the apartment feeling cold and hollowed out inside.

She took the steps slowly, trying to center herself before she was with Connor again. He needed her to be a rock, and she was determined to be everything he could ever need.

But she was so distracted by her own feelings that it was hard to focus.

Seeing Ian again had been like coming home.

She couldn't deny that he still had the same effect on her. And his gentle smile when she got out of the car had filled her up with light and had her grinning back at him, like she hadn't wronged him, and like no time had passed at all.

But time *had* passed, whether she wanted to remember it or not. And things were different now. Breaking him with her news was one of the most painful moments of her life, and a piece of her own heart had broken with his.

She would never forget the look on his face.

Don't think about that, she begged herself.

"Hey," Felicity called to her from the little table, where she was feeding Connor bits of cut up fruit at his highchair.

"Hey," Faith said, smiling at her boy as he waved at her. He had a little piece of apple on his cheek, and he looked really, really happy.

She felt her heart soften and the heat start to pour back into her body.

"I'm so glad you're here with us," she said, turning to her sister, and feeling ready to cry.

"Me too," Felicity said happily, then glanced up at Faith. "Hey, hey don't do that. You'll make me cry, too. What happened out there?"

Faith sat beside her and leaned on her shoulder.

It reminded her of being a small child and sneaking into her sister's room on stormy nights for comfort. She never thought she would still be leaning on her sister as a grown woman.

"I told him," Faith said, as calmly as she could as Connor continued intently chasing bits of apple around his tray.

"And?" Felicity asked after a moment.

"I told him I wasn't asking for anything from him," Faith said.

"What did he say to that?" Felicity asked.

"Nothing," Faith said. "But he looked so relieved. It was painfully clear how happy he was about that part of it."

"Good," Felicity said firmly. "If he's happy and at peace with all of this, that's good for Connor. We don't need anything from him."

Faith nodded.

Her sister was right, of course. She always was.

And they really didn't need anything material from Ian. Between them, they could keep Connor in diapers and cardboard books.

But what she *wanted* from Ian, what she had clearly allowed herself to dream of, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, was that he might forgive her.

She longed for him to ask her to come back to him, baby and all, and let them be a family together.

When she closed her eyes, she could see it—Ian walking with Connor through the apple orchard, sunlight dappling their sandy brown hair, as the sound of Connor's laughter rang out.

It felt so real, and so good that it hurt.

So instead, she forced herself to think back to Ian in the grocery store this morning, smiling and laughing with his new girl, and looking right through her.

"We don't need anything from him," she said with certainty, repeating her sister's words. "And he wants to meet Connor, which is great. That's exactly why we came."

"He wants to meet him?" Felicity asked with a hopeful smile.

"He sure does," Faith said. "I told him he could come here tomorrow after work."

"Here?" Felicity asked, looking scandalized. "We hardly have any furniture. You don't want to meet him at a café or something?"

“I thought about that,” Faith said, cutting up a bit of banana to offer Connor. “But a café can be boring for a baby. And if we met at a park or something, he might get fussy if he needs a diaper change.”

“True,” Felicity said. “I guess this baby stuff is still new to me.”

“You’re a natural,” Faith told her. “I’m so impressed. That’s twice now that I’ve left and come back to a happy baby.”

“You only left for like half an hour at a time,” Felicity laughed.

“Oh, just you wait,” Faith teased her. “One of these times, he’ll get a bee in his bonnet about something, and half an hour will feel like an eternity trying to calm him down again.”

“You would *never* do that to your auntie, would you, my little prince?” Felicity cooed to Connor, clearly smitten with him.

Connor crowed out a series of happy nonsense syllables and slammed his chubby little fists on the highchair tray for emphasis.

He clearly loved having two grown-ups around to adore him.

“Anyway, this place is a little sparse,” Faith went on. “But it’s really cute, and Connor will be happy with his toys, and easy access to diaper changes and snacks. I figure Ian will understand that we just moved here and that’s why we don’t have much stuff yet.”

“That makes sense,” Felicity agreed. “I was actually planning to pop out and grab a few things tomorrow. I’ll just run out while he’s here and give you guys a little space. And you can text when you’re ready for me to come home and hear all about it.”

“Should I cook?” Faith asked suddenly.

“One of us had better,” Felicity said. “I’m getting hungry.”

“Obviously we’re cooking dinner tonight,” Faith laughed. “I meant tomorrow. He’s coming straight after work. Doesn’t a nice meal always put a person in a good mood?”

“It puts me in a good mood,” Felicity said.

“Perfect,” Faith told her. “I’ll plan something yummy for dinner then. We’re going to stack the odds in your favor, buddy.”

Connor laughed at her and wiggled his fingers to come out of the highchair.

“I don’t think he needs any stacked odds,” Felicity pointed out, watching as Faith swept her son up in her arms and snuggled him close. “Who could ever resist him?”

“No one,” Faith decided, inhaling his sweet scent and feeling instantly

better.

IAN

I an headed downstairs later that evening, trying not to let himself overthink this.

It was going to be an incredibly hard conversation. His parents' opinion of him was important, and he had to admit his own weakness to them now.

But, as his dad was fond of saying, *the truth has a way of coming to light anyway, so we might as well help it along.*

He could hear their soft conversation in the family room as he arrived on the landing, and smell the freshly steeped peppermint tea his mother loved to sip in the evenings.

The gentle murmur of his parents chatting about their day had been the house's evening soundtrack ever since he was a little boy. He would wander down for an extra hug or a little advice now and then, and the reassuring sound of cozy conversation always greeted him.

"Ian," his dad said from his spot on the love seat. "Did you need an extra hug?"

His eyes were twinkling, and he tightened the arm he had around Alice, who shook her head and smiled at Ian, as if to say, *This silly man.*

"I might," Ian admitted. "But you may not want to give it to me. Can we talk? It's important."

"Of course," his mother said, leaning forward.

His dad nodded and gestured to the chair nearest the love seat.

Ian was grateful to be sitting close. Sooner or later, the whole family would know what was going on, but for now, he'd rather not have his brother

overhear it on his way downstairs for a glass of water.

“So, you remember Faith, my girlfriend at college?” he asked. *The woman I loved with all my being, who crushed my heart.*

“Of course,” his mother said.

His father nodded slowly.

“I planned to marry her,” Ian reminded them. “I loved her.”

I love her still.

“We know,” his mom said with a sad smile, mercifully not mentioning the ring.

“I just wanted to remind you of that before I tell you what I’m going to tell you,” Ian said, taking a deep breath.

His parents gazed at him calmly, with serious expressions. They loved him, and that wasn’t going to change, even if they were furious with him.

“Faith left me, and I didn’t know why,” he told them. “But now I do. She was pregnant.”

“Ian,” his mother breathed.

“I’m ashamed of myself,” he told her. “We were in love, but it was no excuse. I knew she wanted to wait, but we were so close to graduation. I already had the ring...”

His excuses rang hollow.

“I know it was wrong,” he said simply. “But that one night, my resolve broke and she went along with it. It was right before Christmas break. I think we were both feeling a little clingy about the time we were going to spend apart and we got caught up in the moment.”

“You’re not the first young couple to make that mistake,” his father said gruffly. “Is this why she didn’t come back to school after the break?”

Grateful for the chance to move the conversation forward, Ian nodded.

“The poor child,” Alice murmured.

“I tried to reach her,” Ian said. “But after a while, I felt like I was harassing her. If I had known what happened, I wouldn’t have settled for her silence.”

“Of course not,” his father said.

“She’s in Trinity Falls now,” he told them. “I saw her today. She had a baby boy in August of last year.”

He could sense his mother’s delight, as real as the furniture in the room.

“We’ll do whatever we can do help,” his father said immediately. “What does she need?”

“Nothing,” Ian said. “At least that’s what she told me.”

“She had to have a reason to come to you now,” his dad pointed out. “After all this time.”

“That’s true,” Ian realized. “I hadn’t even thought of that. At first I thought she was just passing through and wanted closure. I had no idea what she was going to tell me.”

“Did you see him?” His mother’s voice was tremulous with emotion.

“No, not yet,” he told her. “But I’m going to meet him tomorrow. She and her sister are staying in the village and I’m going to go see him there.”

His dad squeezed his mother’s hand.

“This is a blessing,” he told Ian gently. “Even if it didn’t happen the way you hoped it would. Are you asking for advice, son?”

“I am,” Ian said.

“Then you’d do well to remember that this little boy is the most important person in your world now,” his dad told him. “So even though there’s a ton of history to sort through, you can’t make his mother feel stressed or trapped. Take what she offers you gratefully. If you give her time and space, she may come to trust you enough to tell you what they really need from you.”

“I want to marry her,” Ian said, too loudly.

His mother smiled at him proudly, like it didn’t matter how he said it, she was just glad he had.

“Is that what she wants?” his dad asked carefully.

“When I saw her today, she said that there wouldn’t be anything between the two of us,” he admitted. “But she wanted Connor to know his father.”

“*Connor*,” his mother breathed.

“Then don’t spring something like that on her,” his dad said in his practical way. “You can let her know that you want to be there for her in any capacity she’s comfortable with.”

Ian nodded miserably.

“You’ve kept that ring for two years, son,” his father told him with twinkling eyes, leaning forward to pat his knee. “You can hold onto it another month or two while you try and win her back.”

But she didn’t want me before, Ian thought to himself. *Why would she want what’s left of me?*

He nodded and rubbed his right shoulder, which was throbbing as it sometimes did.

“Lots of changes these last few years,” his dad observed. “Just keep doing

your best. Hopefully, she'll come around. But you need to make good with her even if she doesn't, because I think your mother is going to explode if she doesn't get her hands on that boy soon."

"Joe," his mom scolded, giving him a little smack on the arm.

But when she turned back to Ian he could see the longing in her eyes.

"Don't worry, Ma," he told her. "I'll take it slow and focus on Connor."

She smiled back at him with tears in her eyes, and he felt a surge of love for his parents that was so powerful it almost left him breathless.

It dawned on him again just how lucky he was to have them. And he made a promise to himself.

I will be there for Connor, just like they're here for me...

IAN

The next morning, Ian came down to the kitchen and was surprised to be greeted with delicious smells and the clattering of plates and silverware.

“There he is,” his dad said in a pleased way.

He saw that his mother was up too, flipping buttermilk pancakes in her red nightgown even though it wasn’t yet five in the morning.

“I thought you boys might like a real breakfast before you headed out this morning,” she told Ian with a big smile.

“Thanks, Ma,” he said, heading over to the stove to give her a kiss on the cheek just as his brother galloped down the stairs two at a time.

“What’s all this?” Jacob asked.

His eyes sparkled as he took in the tray of fluffy pancakes and crispy bacon on the counter. He leaned over and switched on the radio, which was playing the Christmas station. It was a little odd that Jacob, who only liked rock music, was so into the Christmas station this year. But Ian had his suspicions about why.

He pushed away the thought, he had too much going on to worry about that today.

“Oh, I thought we could have breakfast together this morning,” Alice said.

“Besides,” Ian added. “I have something kind of important to talk to you about.”

His dad nodded in approval and swiped a piece of bacon.

“*Joseph Cassidy*,” Alice scolded him with a smile.

He winked at her and started carrying things over to the table.

A few minutes later, they were all seated and had each served themselves a plate of pancakes and bacon and a mug of steaming hot coffee.

“So, what’s going on?” Jacob asked.

“Remember Faith?” Ian asked.

“The girl who destroyed your heart?” Jacob asked. “Sure.”

That was tough, but fair. Jacob had definitely helped Ian to pick up the pieces when his heart and body both broke in quick succession.

“I didn’t know it at the time, but she left because she was expecting a baby,” Ian told him. “My baby.”

“Oh,” Jacob said, for once stunned into silence.

“She came to Trinity Falls yesterday and told me,” Ian went on. “I’m going to meet Connor tonight. And if it goes well, I’m thinking about inviting them to come to the farm for the day to meet everyone.”

“What a nice idea,” his mother said happily.

“That’s... that’s intense,” Jacob said, frowning.

“I know,” Ian agreed.

“She’s got a boatload of nerve, having your baby and not even telling you, and then showing up out of the blue now,” Jacob said indignantly. “Why didn’t she tell you?”

“I don’t know,” Ian said.

“What does she want from you?” Jacob asked, narrowing his eyes.

“She didn’t say,” Ian told him. “But whatever it is, I’ll give it to her.”

Jacob buttoned his lips, but his expression said he wasn’t happy.

“The girl has been through a lot,” their mother said gently. “We’re going to welcome them both with open arms. And hopefully she’ll tell Ian more once she can see he only wants to help. I mean, look at your cousin Grace. This isn’t all that different from her situation. It took a lot of guts for her to come back here. And now look how happy she is with Chris and the baby.”

Jacob only nodded once and took a big bite of pancake. He was clearly angry on Ian’s behalf. Jacob had always been protective of his one-minute-younger brother.

“It’s okay to be frustrated,” Ian told him. “I’m upset too. But it’s really important that we stay positive with Faith and Connor when they’re here. Please. I don’t want to lose them.”

Jacob put his fork down and turned to Ian, the anger gone from his face, and only sympathy in his eyes.

“I would never do anything to make this harder for you,” he said solemnly.

“Thanks, brother,” Ian said.

“You need a day off to get ready?” Jacob asked. “Dad and I can handle everything.”

“I might take you up on that if they spend the day here sometime,” Ian said. “But I think I need to stay busy today.”

Jacob nodded and thumped him on the back, making sure not to knock his right shoulder.

Ian smiled and caught his mother’s eye across the table.

She looked pleased as punch.

That was enough to bring his appetite back. Ian attacked his plate with gusto, and hoped that by the end of this evening he could make some progress with Faith.

IAN

The day seemed to crawl, but after what felt like a century of work, Ian was finally finished, showered, and dressed.

Excitement danced through him, and he tried his best to stay calm as he headed out with a few little things on the seat beside him. His mother had given him some of her excellent advice as she pressed the two small packages into his hands.

“At Connor’s age, he’s likely to be afraid of new people,” she told him. “So, if he’s scared, you can’t take it personally. Just try to connect with him on his terms, when he’s ready.”

“Thanks, Ma,” he’d said, grateful for any help he could get.

Ian really didn’t know much at all about babies. He had searched online and seen that babies Connor’s age generally could say just a few words, and they could usually toddle around.

He had been excited to start with, but each detail he learned about little ones filled him with even more anticipation. Toddlers were supposed to be curious and love spending time outside. As far as Ian was concerned, it was a great age to start exploring the farm with his grown-ups.

In no time, he found himself pulling up on Ambler Road and parking his truck. Grabbing his phone to text Faith that he’d arrived, he saw he had a message from her already.

FAITH

the downstairs door will be open when you get here

come on up

That didn't sound super security conscious, but Trinity Falls was a pretty safe place. He couldn't remember ever coming home to a locked door. Ian grabbed the two items from the front seat a little too hard, and half-smushed the loaf of his mother's still-warm, homemade pumpkin bread. He took a long, calming breath and reminded himself that it would still taste delicious.

He headed around the corner of the building and took another deep breath before opening the door. The staircase smelled nice, like someone was cooking dinner - most likely the elderly couple who lived on the second floor. His stomach grumbled appreciatively, and he realized he probably should have grabbed something for them to eat before he headed over. Pumpkin bread wasn't really a great dinner.

He made a note to offer to run out for some pizza. Faith was bound to be hungry soon, too.

If she lets me stay that long...

After passing a door on the second floor with a homemade wreath, he finally headed up the last set of stairs. Somehow, the delicious smell was getting stronger. He was getting hints of something with red sauce and maybe fresh bread, too.

He knocked on the door, and a moment later heard footsteps.

"Hey," an unfamiliar woman said with a bright smile as she opened the door. "You're early, that's great."

"Uh, hi, I'm Ian," he said, caught a little off guard.

"Felicity," she replied, sticking out her hand. "The sister."

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking it.

"Welcome to our castle," she said, stepping back and sweeping her arm dramatically to show off the small but charming open living room and kitchen.

The space was decidedly tight for a big guy like Ian, but it looked very cozy and neat.

Ian's eyes went immediately to Faith, who was sitting on the floor, bending so that her dark hair slid over her shoulder. In front of her, a carbon copy of Ian's baby pictures held a cardboard book upside down in his chubby hands.

"Connor," Ian whispered.

The boy looked up, catching Ian in his blue-eyed glance.

"Hi," Ian said gently.

He longed to rush over, but he remembered his mother's advice and made

no move toward the baby.

“*Bah*,” Connor squeaked, and then laughed uproariously, like he had just told a really good joke.

His plump cheeks dimpled, and he looked so delighted that Ian couldn’t help laughing too.

“Come on over and say hi,” Faith said with an encouraging wave.

Ian felt like he was moving in slow motion.

Somewhere in the background he could hear Faith’s sister saying she had been about to run out and do some errands, but he couldn’t even find the good manners to acknowledge her. His sweet Faith was smiling down at their beautiful son, and Ian’s heart was suddenly so full that he wanted to weep.

The front door closed as he sat, still awkwardly clutching the small gifts he had brought.

“Hi,” he said softly to Connor again.

The boy was eyeing him curiously, but didn’t appear to be afraid.

He’s brave, like his Uncle Jacob, Ian thought to himself.

Connor reached for him, but his hands were still full.

“Are those for us?” Faith asked gently.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Ian told her, feeling like an enormous idiot. He handed her the packet of bread. “That’s homemade pumpkin bread. I squished it a little, but it’s still good. It’s from my mom. She sends her love.”

Faith looked up, her expression surprised, maybe even moved.

“And, um, this is a football for Connor,” he went on, lifting the hastily wrapped gift. “I mean, it’s not regulation or anything. It’s for babies. He can chew on it if he wants. It was mine when I was little.”

Faith laughed happily.

“That’s such a perfect present,” she said. “Do you want to give it to him?”

“Sure,” Ian said. “Can he open it on his own?”

“He’ll probably need help with that part,” she told him. There was no judgement in her voice for how little he knew.

“Okay,” he said. “Hey, Connor, I have something for you. Do you want to see it?”

He held out the present, the shiny blue wrapping paper glittering in the lamplight. Connor stretched out his little hands.

“Should I help you open it?” Ian offered.

“*Ess*,” Connor agreed, nodding hard and scooting closer.

Ian held his breath as his son settled in, one chubby hand resting on Ian's leg to brace himself.

"Okay, let's see here," Ian said, turning the present in his hands until he got to where the ribbon was tied. "I'm going to pull on this one. Can you pull on that one?"

Connor looked up at him.

"Like this," Ian said, making a motion like pulling the ribbon.

Connor laughed.

"Can you do that?" Ian asked.

Connor put his little hand on the present, but he was not going to pull the ribbon, so Ian pulled it for him.

When the ribbon was off, Ian tore at the paper until it was still wrapped around the ball, but not really attached.

"Can you get that paper off?" Ian asked.

Connor grabbed the paper and tugged at it. With the tiniest bit of help, he revealed the little rubber football Alice Cassidy had clearly tucked away for a moment just like this one.

"*Baw*," Connor said.

"Ball," Ian echoed, thrilled that of all the words in the world, this was one of the handful Connor must know. "That's a football."

"*Baw*," Connor agreed, patting the ball with his other hand, like it was a good dog.

"Can you throw it?" Ian asked him, handing the ball over.

It was incredible to watch Connor think. His little mouth pouted, and his cheeks seemed softer and chubbier than ever as his brow furrowed.

"*Baw*," Connor said at last, hugging it close and then banging it on the blanket they were sitting on. "*Baw, baw, baw...*"

"I think he likes it too much to throw it," Faith said.

Her gentle voice sent a shiver of awareness down Ian's spine. He was so hypnotized by their son, that he'd nearly forgotten she was there.

"That's a good way to get sacked," Ian joked weakly.

"Are you hungry?" she asked, smiling. "I made some lasagna and garlic bread."

The way to Ian's heart was definitely through his stomach, especially after a long November day outside working the farm. It was starting to feel like this night had been designed to tempt him into asking her to be his again.

"That sounds amazing," he told her. "You didn't have to do that. I was

planning to see if you wanted me to grab a pizza.”

“Home-cooked food is better,” she told him. “Especially for babies.”

“That makes sense,” he agreed. “Can I help?”

“How about you just sit with Connor for now?” she said. “That way I can grab us some plates. It’s all ready, so there’s not much else to do.”

“Sounds great,” he told her.

A ribbon of guilt wrapped around his insides. She had done everything for Connor on her own so far. Ian knew he should be doing anything he could to make her life easier now. He wished she would let him.

Something tapped his leg, and he looked down to see that Connor was giving him the book he had been trying to read when Ian walked in.

“Should we read this?” Ian asked him.

Connor nodded his head up and down and settled back, leaning against Ian’s side.

It was *Old MacDonald Had a Farm*, and the illustrations showed a bearded farmer going about his day caring for his long list of animals.

Ian began to read, feeling a little self-conscious at first. But the apartment was quiet except for the sounds of plates and silverware clinking as Faith set the table for supper. And Connor was leaning on him, entranced.

Slowly, he relaxed into the rhythm of the story, and began doing real animal noises, which made Connor look up at him with wonder in his baby eyes, and then laugh. By the time he got to the pig at the end, Connor was chuckling in anticipation before he got to the oinks.

“Perfect timing,” Faith said. “Dinner’s ready.”

“Ready to eat?” Ian asked Connor.

But Connor was banging his leg with the book again.

“We can read it again after dinner,” Ian said.

“Oh, you really liked reading that book, didn’t you?” Faith asked, moving over quickly to swoop up the boy in her arms. “You liked that *pig*.”

She proceeded to do her best with a pig noise, and it was so funny that even Ian laughed. Connor smiled up at her like she was the most amazing creature in the world.

Smart boy.

She got him strapped into his highchair easily and then sat beside him and began cutting up green beans and placing them on his tray.

“I can do that,” Ian offered.

“No, no,” she said. “You’ve been working all day. Dig in while it’s still

hot.”

He wanted to argue, but his stomach chose that moment to growl like a tiger. Ian glanced up, hoping she hadn't noticed, but the corners of her mouth were tugging up slightly.

He turned his attention to his plate. A generous portion of lasagna was there, along with what looked like fresh cooked green beans, and a chunk of buttery garlic bread.

“This looks amazing,” he told her.

“Just water to drink,” she told him. “But that's your favorite.”

“That's my favorite,” he said at the same time, then chuckled.

It was easy to forget that Faith knew him better than just about anyone. Had she been thinking about him the whole time, the way he'd been thinking of her? How easy would it be to just pick up where they left off?

He pushed those thoughts away as he took a bite of the lasagna and his eyes closed in ecstasy.

“You like it?” she asked.

“It's so good,” he told her. “Thank you so much for feeding me.”

“I like cooking,” she said. “And I obviously need to find a job as soon as I can, but for once, I have a little time on my hands.”

“If you need help with any—” he began.

“No, no,” she said quickly. “That's not what I meant. I was just saying I had time to cook today, since being with Connor is my only job right now.”

“Well, it's spectacular,” Ian told her. “And so is he.”

They both looked at Connor, who was eating his cut up green beans with gusto, choosing each one as if he were selecting precious gems.

“He really is,” Faith said fondly. “He's learning so much every day. It's really fun.”

“He's fifteen months?” Ian asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “He's been fun at every age, but this is my favorite so far. I love that he can do a pretty good job telling me what he wants now.”

Ian tried not to be crushed that he had missed all the ages before this one. Fifteen months didn't sound like a lot of time, but for Connor it was a lifetime. And Ian had missed it all.

It wasn't fair.

Pushing down the sudden wave of anger, he focused on his plate so she wouldn't see the betrayal in his eyes.

She had her reasons. She must have...

After a minute or two, the fury slid off him, and he went back to enjoying the decadent meal.

But it still didn't feel right to eat when she was feeding the baby.

Connor made an unhappy sound and banged on his tray.

"Oh, are you ready for lasagna?" Faith laughed.

"I'll feed him," Ian said right away. "Just show me how small to make the pieces."

She glanced at him for a moment, and then nodded.

"Okay," she told him. "This is a new meal for Connor, so he might play with it a little before he eats it. Cut up the pieces like this."

Ian watched as she made a few tiny bites of lasagna for Connor and placed them on a plastic plate for him.

Connor made another unhappy sound and reached for his plate.

"Can I fix your food for you, buddy?" Ian asked.

But Connor was too fixated on his meal to pay him any mind. Ian swapped spots with Faith and quickly cut up a few more pieces of lasagna.

"Here you go," he told Connor. "Your mom is the best cook. This is yummy."

He put the plate on the tray and watched Connor grab a piece of noodle.

"It's important to keep an eye on him," Faith said. "We cut everything up small enough that he shouldn't be able to choke, but he's still learning to feed himself."

Connor managed to get a noodle in his mouth, and smacked his lips as he tasted it.

"Good?" Faith asked him.

"Mm," Connor said, smacking his lips again and then chasing after another piece.

"He'll start eating faster now that he knows he likes it," Faith told Ian. "It's best to watch him and cut at the same time, so you're ready for him."

The rest of the meal passed peacefully. Connor enjoyed his food, and by the end of it, Ian felt like he knew what he was doing as far as feeding went.

Being so focused on the baby meant that Ian hadn't had much of a chance to talk with Faith, but maybe that was for the best. If she could see he was good with Connor and not pushing, maybe she would choose to talk with him more in time.

But he was dying to ask her so many things, and the most important one was hard to hold back.

“Okay, sleepy boy,” she half-sang to Connor. “Time for your bath and bedtime routine.”

“Can I help?” Ian asked.

“Sure,” she told him, nodding approvingly.

They moved through Connor’s nighttime routine slowly and peacefully. Faith had a wonderful way with the little boy. She clearly understood all of his particular little sounds and gestures.

Connor enjoyed his warm bath, and he cooperated when Faith put him in a fuzzy sleeper.

“Time for another story,” she told him softly. “And then time for sleeping.”

They stepped into one of the two open doors and Ian saw this must be the bedroom Faith shared with Connor. There was a crib and a bed and not much else.

Faith settled down on the floor.

“We don’t have much yet,” she said apologetically. “I’m planning to get a rocking chair in here at some point, but Connor doesn’t mind the floor, right?”

So, they were planning to stay long enough to buy furniture. Excitement zapped through Ian’s blood, but he did all he could to keep his face calm.

Faith grabbed another board book and began to read to Connor, who was relaxing against her chest. When it was done, she moved to get up. But Connor made unhappy noises and reached for Ian.

“You want me to read you a story too?” Ian asked softly.

“Ess,” Connor agreed.

Faith looked to Ian, her eyes lighting up.

The next thing he knew, Ian was holding a warm, sleepy baby, and reading a story to him. A deep sense of contentment he had never known before warmed his chest and he wished he could freeze the moment and stay in it forever.

Faith sat across from them, still as a statue. He glanced up at her at one point and saw that the expression on her face was full of wonder and longing.

Does she want this as much as I do?

He inhaled Connor’s sweet scent and kept reading, keeping his voice low and calm. By the time the story was over, Connor was completely relaxed in his arms.

“I think he’s half-asleep already,” Faith whispered, crawling up to scoop

him out of Ian's arms.

He stood and watched as she carefully placed the little one in his crib, rubbing his belly and crooning a lullaby until his eyes drifted closed.

Ian longed to grab Faith's hand and watch over their son for a long time. But she slipped out of the room instead, and he had no choice but to follow.

The apartment was still and dim with only the lamplight against the darkness outside. Faith's sister still wasn't home.

That left the two of them alone, in a cozy space that was starting to feel way too romantic for him to resist the temptation to ask her for things that might make her want to run again.

And he couldn't let that happen.

"I need to get on home," Ian forced himself to say. "But I wanted to ask you something first."

She eyed him warily, but nodded.

"I'm glad you're staying a while," he told her. "I want to get to know Connor as much as you'll allow, and... I hope you don't mind, but I told my family about you and him right away, and they're so excited to meet you two. Would you and Connor like to spend a day at the farm? You could meet the whole family, and there are animals, and a playground, and all kinds of things Connor might like."

She smiled warmly and nodded.

"We would love that," she told him. "Thank you for inviting us."

"Come tomorrow, if you want," he offered, feeling pleased.

"We just might do that," she told him.

"There's something else, too," he said carefully, knowing he was laying it all on the line now. "I need you to know that I want to be there for you and for Connor in an active way. I want to be there in *any* capacity you will have me."

His words hung in the air for a moment, the promise of them giving him hope. The sound of someone jogging up the stairs broke the tension, and he turned to see Felicity coming in.

"Hey, guys," she said happily, lifting up what looked like a very heavy canvas bag. "This place has a really well-stocked library. And they let me use a card from back home to check some things out."

"That's great, Felicity," Faith said, a little too cheerfully. "I'll have to bring Connor over there. Come on in, I kept a plate warm for you."

Suddenly there was hustle-bustle in the little apartment, and the moment

was gone, if it had ever really been there in the first place.

“I’ll head out,” Ian said. “Text me if you’re coming to the farm tomorrow. I’ll give you guys a little tour. Felicity, you’re welcome too, of course.”

He turned and headed out, feeling pretty certain that he had messed things up with Faith with his declaration. But when he turned to close the door behind him, Faith was there.

“Thank you,” she told him, her hazel eyes solemn. “This was really nice. He likes you a lot.”

“I’m so glad,” he told her honestly.

“We’ll see you tomorrow at the farm,” she told him with a smile that went to her eyes.

“See you then,” he told her, somehow managing to walk away without touching her.

He headed down the stairs feeling like he could fly.

FAITH

Faith paced the floor of the apartment, willing herself not to get overwhelmed. But no matter what else she tried to focus on, Ian's words still echoed in her head, and her heart felt like it was being torn to shreds.

Felicity was eating her dinner at the counter, the occasional clink of her fork against the plate was the only sound.

"Are you okay?" Felicity asked after a little while, putting her fork down. "How did it go?"

Taking a deep breath, Faith headed to the counter to join her sister.

"It was... good," Faith told her. "He was amazing with Connor. It was really special to see that."

She pictured it in her mind, the vision of the man she loved cradling the boy who was her world in his strong arms. She had imagined it so many times, but seeing it in real life was so much more...

"But?" Felicity prompted her after a moment.

"I don't know," Faith said, shrugging.

"I'm going to put some tea on," Felicity decided, carrying her dishes to the sink.

Somehow, as soon as Felicity was busy filling the kettle and washing up the plates, it was easier to talk.

"He brought a little football for Connor, and homemade pumpkin bread from his mom," Faith said. "And he told me she was excited to meet us, that his whole family is excited."

"That's really nice," Felicity said. "And you're going to visit?"

“Tomorrow,” Faith said, nodding.

Felicity seemed to be waiting for more, but Faith had no idea how to explain her feelings.

“Did you have a chance to talk to him much alone?” Felicity asked.

“We spent the whole time with Connor,” Faith told her. “We didn’t talk too much to each other until we put him to bed just a few minutes before you came in.”

“Oh wow, I’m really sorry,” Felicity said. “You should have texted me to stay out.”

“No, you definitely came at the right time,” Faith told her.

“Was it awkward?” Felicity asked sympathetically.

“No,” Faith said. “I mean, yes, kind of.”

Felicity waited.

“The whole night was really nice,” Faith said. “He was so sweet with Connor, and so patient. It seemed like he really wanted to learn about how to take care of him. He fed him, and helped with his bath and bedtime stuff. And then right before he left, he told me he wanted to be there for us *in any capacity*.”

“And do you think that *any capacity* means rekindling your relationship?” Felicity asked.

“I don’t know,” Faith said. “But it sounded like that.”

“Well, that’s about as good as it gets,” Felicity said. “And I know you still love him. So, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not sure,” Faith admitted. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“This isn’t an everyday situation,” Felicity reminded her. “You’re both figuring things out. But he’s excited about Connor and his family is supportive, too. He wants to help in any way he can. I don’t see a downside here, Faith.”

“Why isn’t he angry?” Faith heard herself ask.

Felicity didn’t answer right away.

“It’s a good question,” she replied after a moment. “And there are a million possible answers, one of which is that he’s just really, really happy to see you and to know Connor.”

“That’s how he’s coming across,” Faith said uncertainly. “But if I found out someone who left me without a word had done it to hide my child...”

“You’d be furious,” Felicity guessed.

“Yeah,” Faith said.

“So, you want him to be mad at you because you feel guilty?” Felicity asked.

“It sounds really silly when you say it that way,” Faith said.

Felicity shrugged.

“I think what I’m afraid of is that he’s not being honest with me,” Faith said after a moment. “He’s being really subdued. His energy isn’t like it used to be. It’s like he’s holding something back. I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“Maybe he’s just a little thrown by all this,” Felicity allowed. “But if you spend more time together, he might feel more comfortable telling you how he really feels.”

“Maybe,” Faith said.

“Or maybe he hasn’t had time to work through his feelings yet,” Felicity offered. “Maybe it hasn’t hit him yet to get angry. You had a long time to prepare for coming here.”

“True,” Faith sighed. “I guess I did spring all of this on him pretty suddenly.”

“But even if he gets angry, he’ll get over it,” Felicity said with a funny little smile.

“Why?” Faith asked.

“Because of the way he was looking at you,” Felicity told her. “He still cares about you.”

Faith’s heart throbbed helplessly.

“You think he does?” she asked.

“He might as well have been wearing a sign,” her sister responded.

“I’m pretty sure he has a girlfriend,” Faith reminded them both.

“Why don’t you ask him all about her when you visit tomorrow?” Felicity suggested lightly.

Faith was horrified until she caught her sister’s eye and saw that she was teasing.

“You’re too much,” she laughed.

“I think you should lighten up,” Felicity told her. “We have a nice place to live, Connor is happy and healthy, and his dad wants to know him. Just take the rest of it day by day.”

“That’s good advice,” Faith told her.

“Good enough to earn myself some dessert?” Felicity asked hopefully. “I thought I saw you put some chocolate-peppermint ice cream in the freezer?”

“What’s mine is yours,” Faith laughed. “I’ll grab some bowls.”

As the two of them prepared their treat, Faith felt herself relaxing again. Things were going to be fine. She just had to give it time, like Felicity said.

“Oh, let’s put on a Christmas movie,” Felicity said, heading for the sofa.

“We don’t even have a TV,” Faith laughed.

“We’ll put it on my laptop,” Felicity decided.

“Great,” Faith said, smiling as she settled in and watched her sister fussing with her computer.

Everything and everyone I need is right here in this apartment, she reminded herself again. The world outside is just icing.

But as they settled in to start their movie, she couldn’t help thinking about the way Ian had held Connor in his arms to read to him, the sleepy baby melting into his father’s chest.

FAITH

Faith turned at the painted wooden sign for Cassidy Farm early the next morning with Connor in the back, chirping happily at what he saw out the window from his car seat.

He had slept well and eaten a good breakfast. He was bundled up now and ready to have a wonderful day in a brand-new place, and to meet more of his family.

Please let him have fun, and let the rest of the family love him...

She parked in the same spot as before, closer to the orchard. Drinking in the rich scent of the fall air, she hopped out and opened the back door. Her heart melted when Connor gave her a big smile.

“Are you ready for an adventure?” she asked him.

“*Mama,*” he said tenderly.

She loved when he said her name.

“Hi, Connor,” she crooned back, unbuckling him.

She carried him on her hip to the back of the car and opened it up to grab his stroller. It was a really good one that she had picked up used, and it had big wheels she hoped would be equal to the gravel parking area.

Faith had just opened it and gotten him strapped in when someone called her name. She looked up to see Ian jogging across the parking lot to greet them.

“I didn’t even text you yet,” she said, smiling.

“I thought you might park up here again,” he said, shrugging.

He looked so handsome, the soft morning sunlight behind him putting a halo in his sandy brown hair and silhouetting the impressive shape of him.

Even if he wasn't playing anymore, he still looked like the star quarterback he had once been—wide shoulders, narrow hips, and something in his posture that made him look unspeakably confident, even when he was relaxed, like now.

"You don't have to work today?" she asked, trying to tear her eyes away.

"My brother is covering for me," he said. "He knew I'd want to spend time with you and Connor. Morning, buddy."

She watched as he crouched by the stroller to greet his son, the expression on his face so gentle that it melted her.

"I thought maybe we'd go visit the animals first, and then the playground?" he suggested. "Or maybe a snack first?"

"He just had his breakfast, so we can definitely see the animals first," Faith said, impressed that Ian had done enough homework to understand the importance of snacks.

"Great," Ian said. "If he needs anything, just let me know. Want me to carry that for you?"

He was gesturing to Connor's diaper bag, which was an enormous, but very feminine quilted backpack, with huge bright tropical flowers.

"Really?" she asked, tempted.

"Give it here," he laughed.

"It's okay. There's a spot for it under the stroller," she said, shaking her head. "I just wanted to call your bluff."

"Wow," he said, shaking his head and watching her slip the bag into the storage area of the stroller. "Testing me, huh?"

"It's good to know you're really ready to be a dad," she said.

Suddenly, she felt incredibly awkward. Should she have said it out like that, or even joked about something so important.

"I'm really glad that was the test and not being timed installing a car seat," he said with a warm smile. "It took me forever to be happy with it, and I ended up going over to the firehouse and getting the chief to check it for me."

"You installed a car seat in your truck?" she asked in disbelief.

"Well, yeah," he said. "I thought maybe we could do some other fun stuff around town. You can't drive every time."

Faith forgot she was trying to hide her feelings, and smiled at him with all the love and amazement she felt.

He wants this. He's all in.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s go see the animals.”

They headed down the parking area toward the shops and attractions of the farm. The stroller proved itself nice and sturdy, bumping along without seeming to be in any danger of breaking a wheel.

The huge sycamores that lined the whole lot were bare, but their wonderful knobby trunks and branches, and the mottled colors of their bark made them beautiful anyway.

As they made their way down, she spotted a few families in the lower part of the lot, unloading strollers and children out of their cars as other couples held hands and admired the beautiful Christmas wreaths and garlands on the nursery and shops.

“This place is incredible,” she said, shaking her head.

“It lives up to my hype?” he teased.

“More than that,” she said honestly. “I feel like I’m in a movie.”

“Well, you haven’t even gone inside yet,” he said. “But my parents will love it that you’re taken with the place. This was their dream—to share the farm with the whole community and encourage people to remember where their food comes from, even if they live in town.”

“I have a feeling I’m going to learn a lot today,” Faith said.

“You might,” he replied. “But mostly this place is just fun. Let’s go this way. That’s where the animals are.”

They passed a huge red barn with a sign for the shop on it. Huge wooden bins of apples and greenery flanked the entry. The breeze carried the delicious scents to anyone walking past.

Along the side of the barn were outdoor check-out lines and shelves of poinsettias on display. Just past that was an open plaza with picnic tables and carts selling candied apples, hot apple cider, and even small paper sacks of roasted chestnuts and candied cashews.

A group of young teens sat at the closest picnic table, laughing and talking, steaming mugs of cider in their hands. Faith had to smile at the sight of the kids up to such a wholesome activity.

“Maybe you’ll be at that table with your friends one day,” she said to Connor.

“Wouldn’t that be great?” Ian said. “I sure was, along with my brothers and all our friends. We used to roam the farm and the woods every day. There’s no better place to grow up.”

“I can definitely imagine that,” Faith said, suddenly feeling a little more

nervous, though she wasn't sure why.

"So, you're planning to be in Trinity Falls for a while?" he asked.

"I'll need to find work at some point," she said. "But yes, I'd like for us to stay here."

Ian nodded with a pleased expression, but didn't reply.

He's glad we're staying. That's good.

They reached a paddock where a young man in a cowboy hat was leading a dapple-gray pony with a little girl on its back. The girl wore a puffy coat and a great big smile. Her mom was waving to her from the split rail fence, looking pleased as punch.

Faith pulled the stroller up to the fence and lifted Connor out so he could see. Connor made a funny noise, his version of a horse's neigh, and Ian's eyebrows shot up, making Faith laugh.

"He's whinnying," Faith explained, through her giggles.

"Oh, wow," Ian said. "Just like in *Old MacDonald*."

"He's very well read," Faith said, raising an eyebrow.

Connor made his noise again, wiggling his fingers in the direction of the pony and trying to scramble out of Faith's arms.

"That's a horse," Faith told him. "The little girl is riding the horse right now, so we can't pat him."

"*Mama*," Connor wailed.

"Hang on," Ian said, jogging over to the fence and waving to the cowboy with the horse.

"Hey, Chris," he said. "Can these two say hello to Merrylegs?"

"Of course," Chris said, leading the pony closer with a smile.

Faith could see that he had some kind of hearing aid, but he seemed to have no trouble talking quietly with Ian, even with all the other sounds outside.

"Did you say the pony's name is Merrylegs?" she asked. "Like the one in *Black Beauty*?"

"That was my mom's favorite book when she was a girl," Ian confirmed. "When we rescued this dappled pony, she was delighted that she had a perfect name reserved for him already."

Connor had gone silent, but his eyes were wide with wonder as he reached for the horse.

"You can pat him, little boy," the girl on the pony's back said encouragingly. "He likes it when you pat him."

Connor lifted his little hand and Merrylegs snuffled it. There was a moment of utter silence, and Faith braced herself for Connor to scream in terror. But instead, he chuckled and made his neighing sound again.

“Brave boy,” Ian said approvingly. “We’ll make a great cowboy out of you. Thanks for letting us borrow Merrylegs.”

Chris led the horse around the paddock, and they watched for a few minutes.

“Want to see the chickens?” Ian asked Connor.

Connor nodded, though Faith wasn’t convinced he fully understood. She grabbed the stroller with the arm that wasn’t supporting Connor and Ian moved closer.

“I want to help,” Ian told Connor. “I can push your stroller, or I can hold you. Should I take the stroller, or should I take Connor?”

Faith expected the boy would bury his face in her neck, like he often did with anyone but his mom at this age.

Instead, he reached for Ian.

She watched in wonder as he happily snuggled into his father’s arms. Ian was big and strong, yet gentle. Faith remembered how safe she used to feel when he wrapped those arms around her.

“Ready?” he asked her, bringing her out of her thoughts.

“Yes, of course,” she said, shaking her head. “Sorry. It’s really nice to see him so happy with you. He’s a little shy these days, but he took to you right away.”

“He’s a good boy,” Ian said, a touch of pride in his voice.

The rest of the morning passed peacefully. They visited with pens of chickens, offered carrots and apples to the horses and goats in the pasture, and even threw dried corn into a small pond for the ducks.

When they had carefully washed their hands, they headed into the shop for cinnamon-apple muffins and cider. Connor sat on his father’s lap like a king, his chubby cheeks flushed from the cold outside, accepting tribute in the form of bits of muffin.

After the snack, Faith could tell he was getting a little sleepy, so they put him in the stroller after checking his diaper.

“We can just walk around to the playground,” Ian suggested. “If he’s asleep by then, we can keep walking and let him nap. If not, he should be happy to play.”

“Perfect,” Faith said. “It’s like you’ve been doing this forever.”

Ian grinned down at her.

“How did you figure it all out?” he asked. “Did you always have your sister with you?”

“Not until now,” she told him. “But I read as much as I could, asked for advice from the pediatrician or a mom’s group online for anything I couldn’t find, and just tried to follow my heart. That’s what his pediatrician told me—to try to pick up on his cues and trust myself.”

“That’s really amazing,” Ian told her.

She could tell that he meant it.

“Not really,” she said. “I mean everyone figures it out, right? And besides, trusting myself was easier said than done. We don’t rely on instincts that much in our regular life. But when the most important person in your world can’t communicate, you start realizing how valuable those gut feelings are.”

“He’s a lucky boy,” Ian said, smiling fondly at the stroller.

When they reached the playground, Faith was glad Connor was still awake. The play equipment in the *Little Kids Only* section was perfect for a baby—charming wooden structures that were easy to climb and didn’t go too high, all set in a thick bed of soft wood chips.

“Ready to play?” she asked him.

“*Out*,” he whined, struggling to free himself from the stroller.

“I’ll help you,” she told him. “Don’t worry.”

She had just gotten him free, and he was toddling toward a wooden train carrying a load of wooden apples, when she felt the first drop of rain.

“Oh, no,” she sighed, glancing up at the sky.

It had been a little overcast all day, but she hadn’t noticed the dark clouds gathering. The air had a sizzle of electricity in it, and it felt like the heavens might be about to unleash a torrent of rain.

“Oh, Connor,” she said, running after him. “It’s going to start raining really hard. Should we sing the rain song while we get packed up?”

He pretended not to hear her, and kept going for the train, grabbing on and trying to hoist himself up.

This was going to be a battle, especially since he was already tired. Faith wished she could just let him play for a bit, but great big raindrops were beginning to fall, and the other families were all dashing out of the playground.

“Hey, buddy,” Connor said. “Do you want to go into the shop and see all

the cool Christmas stuff?”

Connor tried again to hoist himself into the train, and wailed when he couldn't do it by himself.

“Let's stand in the train for five seconds,” Faith suggested. “I'll help you in, and then we'll count to five before we *run* inside away from the rain.”

“*In?*” Connor asked, turning to her.

She lifted him in and couldn't help smiling when he looked so proud in the little wooden train, even though the rain was starting to come down harder.

“One,” she began. “Two--”

But Connor stomped his little foot and clung to the side of the train, like he knew what was coming and he didn't like it.

“Oh my goodness, it's really coming down out here,” a woman called out.

Faith turned to see a stout lady in a pretty blue dress with chestnut and silver hair in a bun on her head. She was smiling warmly and carrying a big umbrella.

“Hey, Ma,” Ian said.

“Well, I'm glad I found you three, and I hope you won't mind me butting in,” she said. “I'm Alice Cassidy, and I'm so delighted that you're here. I know you're coming by for lunch, but I thought you might want to see if the little fellow wants to come to my house and play with toys or take a little nap now, since it's about to start pouring.”

Alice Cassidy was smiling with such warmth and obvious pleasure, her eyes drinking in her grandson and Faith with such approval, that Faith felt lit up from within, and instantly accepted in a way she had never known before.

“Yes,” she said. “Oh yes, that sounds like a wonderful idea. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” Alice said, gazing down at Connor with tears brimming in her eyes.

FAITH

Half an hour after Alice Cassidy collected them from the playground, Faith was enjoying their time at the Cassidy home.

The great big Victorian farmhouse with the wraparound porch stood just beyond the *Private Property* sign on the drive leading back to the families' homes there on the farm. Alice had welcomed them inside, where they met her husband, Joe Cassidy, a man with twinkling eyes who seemed to be overflowing with restless energy.

Alice produced a box of toys that must have belonged to their other grandchildren and played quietly with Connor until he could barely keep his eyes open. Then she put him down for a nap in the crib she kept upstairs, handing a monitor to Faith so she could go to him as soon as he woke.

Faith had been in awe of how quickly Connor relaxed in Alice's presence, even going to sleep for her without a whimper.

By then, Ian was out in the garage with his father, touching up the paint on the wooden manger scene that would soon be displayed on the front lawn for Christmas. Alice explained that her husband had made the set when the Cassidy kids were little, but Ian said it still looked brand new each year, after a little love.

Now, Faith was helping Alice get lunch ready. The radio played the Christmas station on the kitchen counter as Faith cut up fresh vegetables for a salad.

"I hope you don't mind me asking about where you're staying," Alice said carefully, throwing Faith a smile over her shoulder as she gave the potatoes a stir.

“Of course not,” Faith told her. “We’re renting an apartment over the shops in town. It’s really nice.”

“So, you’re planning to stay in Trinity Falls?” Alice asked, hope in her voice.

“We’re hoping to,” Faith told her. “I’ll need to find work, of course.”

Alice nodded, shaking some seasoning into the pot.

“Is your sister just here to help you get settled?” she asked.

“No, she’s planning to stay with us,” Faith said, smiling. “I’m so lucky to have her.”

“And she needs work too?” Alice asked.

“No, Felicity works online, so she can do her job from anywhere and her hours are flexible,” Faith said. “It’s really handy with the baby, too. We’re thinking we can try to stagger our schedules once we find out what mine is.”

“I hope you won’t think this is too forward of me,” Alice said, turning to Faith. “But if you ever need someone to take care of Connor, I would be happy to, anytime. Actually, it would be like a gift to Joe and me to have him here every day. His cousin, Izzy, is almost three now, so Connor would have a playmate from time to time when Izzy’s mom drops her off.”

That idea was so incredibly kind and unexpected that Faith was temporarily speechless.

“I understand that you need to get to know us a little better before you give that offer real consideration,” Alice said with understanding in her eyes. “Trusting someone with your precious son isn’t something to be done lightly. But I want you to know that we’re here when you need us, whether it’s every day, or just from time to time.”

“That’s... so generous of you,” Faith managed. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” Alice laughed. “But do keep it in mind. And meanwhile, brace yourself for today’s lunch. Now that I know you’re in Trinity Falls for the long haul, I realize we could have had you meet the family a few people at a time. But since we weren’t sure if this might be just a visit, the whole crew is coming. They all just can’t wait to meet you and the baby.”

“That’s wonderful,” Faith said. “Ian talked so much about his family back in school. I can’t believe I finally get to meet everyone.”

She kept a smile on her face, but inwardly she was starting to feel like a wild animal in a cage. Somehow, Ian and his parents were showing her

kindness and patience, in spite of how she had run from him instead of telling him they were having a baby.

But would his siblings do the same?

She was an adult. She knew the other shoe had to drop eventually, and she was ready for it. But the idea that she might be yelled at or berated in front of Connor was frightening.

Maybe he'll sleep right through lunch, she told herself.

Connor had been so active and energetic, and he'd gotten so much good, fresh air. It was possible he wouldn't be up until lunch was wrapping up.

Of course, she would have to wake him to meet everyone if he wasn't up by then. No matter what Alice or Ian said, she knew no one was here to see her. This was all about Connor, and that was exactly as it should be.

Before she had a chance to think any more about it, there was a knock at the back door, and then happy voices shouting their hellos as two kids dashed in, followed by a couple.

"Grandma," a little girl with curly hair yelled, latching onto Alice's waist in a hug so strong it looked like it was practically an attack.

"Well, hello there, Rumor," Alice said, hugging her back. "Are you here to help with lunch?"

"Wyatt's here to help with lunch," Rumor said with a mischievous grin. "And I'm here to *eat* it."

Alice laughed and beckoned over the older boy, who was holding back a bit.

"Our Wyatt is a wonderful cook," she said proudly to Faith. "Kids, this is Faith. And your cousin Connor is up having a nap, so we'll try to keep the chaos down at a low roar for now."

Your cousin...

Every time she heard the Cassidy grandkids being called his cousins, it tugged at Faith's heart. Connor had been accepted here instantly.

"Hello," Rumor said, looking up at Faith. "I like your sweater."

"Thank you," Faith said, looking down at her favorite sweater. "My sister made it for me. Isn't that cool?"

"Grandma makes things," Rumor confided. "She made my quilt."

"That's so nice," Faith said. "When someone gives you something they made just for you, it really makes you feel loved, doesn't it?"

Rumor nodded her head so hard that her curls bounced.

"I'm going to find my grandpa," she announced, and promptly bolted out

of the room.

Wyatt had quietly taken over cutting up the cucumbers Faith had been working on, so she turned to the couple who were coming over to sit at the counter.

“I’m Natalie,” the young woman said. “And this is Shane.”

“Nice to meet you,” Faith said, feeling calmer when she saw their genuine smiles.

But before they could exchange pleasantries, the back door was opening again.

Two more couples arrived, one with a boy and the other with a toddler girl, who had to be Izzy, the cousin who stayed with her grandparents from time to time. Everyone greeted each other happily as they filled the kitchen and family room with joyful noise.

Faith tried to memorize their names and put the faces to the stories she had heard from Ian. Grace, Chris, Cal, Angel, and Julian were the adults, the little boy was Justin, and sure enough, the little girl was Izzy.

It was a happy whirlwind, and she felt more at peace when every introduction was warm and welcoming. It would take time to remember all the details of who was married to whom, but the sentiment was clear—they were all glad to know her and eager to meet Connor.

“Should I wake him?” she whispered to Alice.

“Oh no, dear,” Alice said. “Little ones need sleep, and he’s having a big day. He’ll be up when he’s good and ready. No one here is in a hurry.”

Ian and his dad came in from the garage and ran upstairs to wash up. While they did, Alice had everyone carry dishes out to the great big dining room table. By the time Ian and Joe were back downstairs, everyone was ready to start passing dishes around.

Alice was at one end of the table, with Faith to her left and Ian on Faith’s other side. Joe had even placed a highchair nearby so that Connor could join them when he woke up.

Alice smiled encouragingly at Faith as everyone began passing around the dishes. There were mashed potatoes, a green bean casserole, a lovely salad, thick slices of honey ham, and a basket of steaming rolls, just out of the oven.

“This is really amazing,” Faith said.

“You know Wyatt made the rolls at home by himself,” Alice said proudly. “He and his parents live right here on the farm, so we get to see

them lots.”

“They’re wonderful, Wyatt,” Faith told him.

Wyatt grinned and then his eyes went back down to his plate. He was a typical shy teen, but Faith thought it was really nice that he liked helping with meals.

“They see me lots, too,” Justin piped up. “And I like dinosaurs.”

“Me too,” Faith told him. “Which one is your favorite?”

“Right now, it’s the T-Rex,” he said. “And my mom’s favorite is the triceratops.”

“You remembered,” the dark-haired woman called Angel said to him with a fond smile.

The back door slammed open once more, and the thumping of boots announced someone’s arrival.

“Jacob,” Ian called out happily.

Faith blinked at the man in the dining room doorway.

He was the spitting image of Ian.

From the short hair, to the muscular build, to the tanned skin, the two men looked almost identical.

Except that Ian was the picture of kindness and patience, and this man looked almost furious. She could never have mistaken his eyes for Ian’s. It wasn’t the color that set them apart, but the expression.

“That’s your brother?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yes,” Ian said quietly.

“Faith?” Jacob shot her a contemptuous look as he said her name, as if he were implying that it didn’t suit her.

“Hi, yes,” she said. “I’m so sorry, it’s just that you looked so different in the photos I saw of you.”

“Oh heavens,” Alice laughed. “They must have been from his rock ’n roll phase.”

“Quite the rebel, that one,” Joe added. “Long hair, heavy metal t-shirts. *Ha.*”

“Where’s my nephew?” Jacob asked without a smile.

“He-he’s still napping,” Faith said. “I’ll wake him after lunch if he doesn’t get up before then.”

Jacob didn’t respond and instead seated himself in the last remaining chair, opposite Ian.

“Faith and Connor had a lovely morning here at the farm,” Alice said

firmly. “We’re very glad they’re here.”

But Jacob was too busy scooping mashed potatoes onto his plate to reply.

“We sure are,” Natalie said brightly. “It’s going to be really nice having a few more friendly faces around the farm.”

“Unless she decides to run again,” Jacob said, fixing Faith with a fierce look.

Faith froze.

The whole room went silent, and she could hear her own heartbeat crashing in her ears. As much as Faith had told herself she was ready for a reaction like that, it didn’t make it any easier to take.

Connor’s cry on the monitor broke the tense silence at the table.

“I-I’ll just go get him,” she stammered, scrambling out of her seat and dashing off with the monitor.

“Jacob, seriously,” Ian was saying quietly as she sprinted up the stairs. “I told you we can’t talk like that in front of her. You really are hopeless.”

We.

So, it was all of them. They were all just pretending to be kind to her.

That must be why Ian seemed so glum.

Thankfully, she made it up before she heard Jacob’s reply.

The thing of it was, Jacob was *right*. When the going got tough, she ran.

But she’d had good reason.

Flinging open the door to the guest room where Connor was napping, she felt a sense of relief as soon as her eyes were on his sandy brown head.

“Did you have a wonderful nap at Grandma’s house?” she asked him, sweeping him up in her arms and holding him tightly.

He was still waking up, so he snuggled in, his warm weight going limp against her chest.

She allowed herself to just hold him for a minute and breathe him in. She could feel her heart rate slowing and the sense of panic dissipating.

Nothing in this world was more important than her boy. And Connor had a way of helping her let go of things she couldn’t change, because they weren’t as important to her as he was.

It wouldn’t have helped me to stay, she reminded herself. He would have sent me packing, and then he’d have to feel bad about that on top of everything else.

Her mind sent her back to that awful night, and this time she didn’t fight it.

FAITH

Just over two years ago, late January...



FAITH PARKED her car in front of Ian's dorm.

Just thinking about the news she was about to deliver to Ian had her hands shaking so badly that the keys jingled in them like sleigh bells.

We wanted this, eventually. He loves me, she reminded herself. *It's going to be okay.*

But the truth was that she wasn't so sure how Ian would react to hearing about their little Christmas miracle.

Out on the quad, other students were squealing and laughing as they welcomed each other back to campus. Faith imagined them talking about what they had done on holiday break and making plans for parties and study groups in the new year.

But she wouldn't be making any plans like that.

Her hand went automatically to her belly, as it did so often these days when she needed to anchor herself. It was too early to be showing, or even feeling any movement, but just knowing about the life growing inside her put everything into perspective.

What did parties and plans matter compared to having Ian Cassidy's baby? She was going to be doing the most important thing in the world.

And Ian was a good man. He might not be able to be by her side every minute once he got drafted to a professional team, but he would be a

wonderful father.

She let out a sigh just thinking about it.

Faith still couldn't believe sometimes that she was Ian's girlfriend. He had been a handsome athletic boy from the day they met, although a little reserved. But as his star rose at school, all the other girls began to notice him.

And those girls had thrown themselves at him at every turn. At first, Faith had prepared herself for an inevitable break-up. After all, she was just a poor scholarship kid, working as many hours as she could to stay in school. She wasn't elegant and carefree like those other girls, with time on her hands to lavish on her boyfriend.

But the humble quarterback only ever had eyes for Faith.

They had been together practically since the moment she arrived on campus, their eyes meeting at the student center café one morning when Faith was feeling homesick.

Ian had quietly come over and set his mug down across from hers.

"I'm Ian Cassidy," he'd said, his voice melting the icy unhappiness in her chest. "What's your name?"

She'd been so lost in the sea of those deep blue eyes that she was barely able to remember her own name. And now they would be choosing the name of a brand-new little person together.

Steeling herself, she pushed open the lobby door and was getting ready for him to buzz her in when Jed Brady, another player on the team, spotted her and opened the door to the main stairs.

"How was your break?" he asked happily, clearly prepared for her to just say *awesome*.

"It was good," she said with a nervous smile.

"Excellent," Jed said.

She climbed the stairs, her heart beating a mile a minute. She had rehearsed exactly what she was going to say to Ian at least a thousand times.

It had been so hard to wait. But it wasn't the kind of news you delivered in a phone call.

She and Ian had only ever been together that way the one time before he left for home. She still couldn't believe it had been enough to change both their lives forever...

When she was late, she told herself it was just a coincidence.

But she bought a test anyway.

From the moment she saw that second line appear in the window, bright

and merry, like a tiny smile, she had felt a sense of peace in spite of her panic.

She knew that this might throw things for a loop for a little while. But being a mom had always been her dream. She owed it to that little pink line to keep her spirits up and be grateful. Plenty of worthy people never got to be parents at all.

The halls were empty. It was sunny outside, and most people probably just wanted to socialize after such a long break.

Ian's door was open, and she could hear a deep voice speaking energetically to him, and realized at once who it must be.

In her own excitement, she had completely forgotten that Ty Keller, the most famous alumni the school had, was coming to talk with Ian on their first day back after break. Ty had played professionally for years, and had offered to give Ian some advice and encouragement while he was home for the holidays.

Ian was so excited about this meeting, and she knew he would be eagerly soaking up every bit of wisdom Ty was willing to share. Ian worshipped the experienced player, and hoped to emulate him. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for him. There was no way she was going to just barge in on them.

She glanced at her phone and saw that she had plenty of time before she needed to be anywhere else. Maybe she could just wait in the common room down the hall until the meeting was over.

She had waited so long to talk to Ian that it felt like even another ten minutes would be an eternity. Maybe it was better just to go back to her own dorm and text him to let her know when he was done.

As she stood there, wavering, she heard what Ty said next, clear as day.

"I heard from coach that you've got a cute little girlfriend," Ty laughed.

"Sure do," Ian said.

Faith smiled proudly, basking in Ian's love all over again.

"Well, don't get too serious with her," Ty said.

"Why not?" Ian asked.

"These girls," Ty said tiredly. "They cling because they want the money, especially the poor ones, and I hear yours is as broke as they come. It's best if you end it now, don't string her along. You won't have time for a relationship anyway when you're a rookie trying to prove yourself. And like I said, you don't want to be with a girl who only wants a meal ticket, right? And God

forbid she goes and gets herself pregnant. Then you're on the hook for the next eighteen years."

Tears had already sprung from Faith's eyes, so it was hard to make out the hall around her as she ran.

Thank goodness no one was there to see her as she scrambled down the stairs, out of the lobby and into the sunny January afternoon.

Calm down, a little voice in the back of her head instructed. *Think of the baby.*

She dragged cold, fresh air into her lungs and tried to steady herself.

As soon as she could do it without dropping them, she pulled her keys from her pocket and got into her car again, pulling out quickly and heading away from Ian's dorm.

She had no idea where she was going, but she found herself pulling up in front of the admin building.

A beautiful weeping willow shaded the lawn. One day, she and a few friends had brought picnic things and sat there to eat, warm spring air lifting their hair from their shoulders as they dreamed about the future.

"Well, baby," she said softly, placing a hand on her belly. "It looks like we're going to have to go it alone."

No matter what she tried to tell herself, after hearing what Ty had said, she knew to her bones she couldn't tell Ian about the baby now.

Even if he tried to be a good guy and do the right thing, she knew he would always wonder if she had done this on purpose.

Suddenly, she realized she had inadvertently brought herself to exactly where she needed to be.

"I'll finish school online," she told the baby. "And then we'll make the shop so profitable that your grandparents will be over the moon. We don't need anyone else. We'll have each other."

She was still hurting, with a pain like nothing she had ever felt before. And she was angry, too.

She hadn't asked to be poor. And she certainly hadn't been trying to trap Ian. She would have done anything to help him be successful in his career.

But her feelings didn't matter anymore.

There was no time to feel sorry for herself, and soon enough, she wouldn't have a drop of energy to waste on looking backward. The only thing that mattered was the baby in her belly, and it was Faith's only job now to do whatever it took to make things good for her little one.

Climbing out of the car, she headed inside as quickly as she could, wiping the tears from her cheeks as she walked.

The tendrils of the willow whispered in the breeze as she went past, and the sound they made was like a thousand little voices murmuring *yes, yes, yes.*

IAN

I an slipped upstairs to check on Faith as soon as he was finished putting his brother in his place.

He knew logically that she couldn't have run away again. He would have heard her come down the stairs. But he worried that she was all but gone anyway, even if her body was still here.

Would she play nice for now and then disappear forever when she left tonight?

Panic rushed through him like ice water, and he had to force himself to walk slowly and calmly instead of sprinting for her like he wanted to.

As hard as he had worked to put those awful days behind him, he suddenly felt like he was right back in college, bereft and broken, when the person he loved most in the world vanished just when he needed her most.

"Faith," he called out softly as he approached the guest room where Connor had been napping.

"Hey," she said, as he stepped inside.

"I'm sorry about my brother," he said, a little too loudly. "He won't talk to you like that again."

Connor lifted his head and looked at Ian with big eyes.

"It's fine," Faith said lightly. "It's understandable."

He supposed it *was* understandable to resent what she had done.

But Ian couldn't afford feelings like resentment now. He had to focus on Faith and Connor, on being there for them with everything he had, even if he hadn't been able to be there earlier.

He looked her in the eye and was stunned to realize she looked like she

had just seen a ghost.

“Are you okay?” he asked her, forgetting that he had been about to tell her again that his brother’s behavior was unacceptable.

“I’m fine,” she told him. “I’m embarrassed to admit it, but holding him when he’s relaxed like this always makes me feel sleepy. You startled me when you walked in, that’s all.”

His heart started beating again and he smiled down at her helplessly. She smiled back, and in the stillness of the cool, dim bedroom, he felt his heart begin to melt like chocolate in the pan.

“*Mama,*” Connor said suddenly.

“Oh, are you ready to go downstairs and have some lunch?” she asked him. “Grandma wants you to meet some more special people.”

“*Eeeet,*” he agreed, patting her on the shoulder.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said.

Ian had an instinct to stop her and make sure that things were really okay. But he was standing between her and the door, and it felt weird to hold her up, especially if the baby was hungry.

There will be plenty of time to talk, he reminded himself. *As long as we get through this meal without any more nonsense.*



TWO HOURS LATER, Connor had met the whole family, and he was in a fabulous mood after his nap. He chuckled at his cousins, ate his mashed potatoes and diced ham enthusiastically, and even allowed one or two of his aunties and uncles to hold him, while he played with all the toys in the Cassidy farmhouse.

The pride Ian felt was unlike anything he had ever experienced. It was beyond the excitement of a packed stadium, or hearing a crowd screaming his name. Connor was his *son* and the boy’s sweet nature and quick sense of humor filled him up to bursting.

As Ian’s siblings and their kids headed out, Connor’s energy began to flag again.

“He’s worn out from all that attention,” Alice said fondly, tousling the boy’s sandy hair, as he leaned against her. “Now might be a good time for a carriage ride.”

“I think Shane’s got that all set up for you,” Natalie said with a gentle smile.

“No, way,” Faith breathed.

“That’s great, Natalie,” Ian told her.

“It will be such a nice way for you to see the rest of the farm,” Alice said to Faith. “And Connor can rest a bit while he looks around.”

“That sounds amazing,” Faith said.

Natalie gave her a hug and headed out, but Faith stayed close to Alice.

“Thank you for everything you’re doing for us,” she said softly. “It means the world to know that Connor is welcome here.”

“You both are, Faith,” his mother replied warmly. “All those years, we wanted so much to meet you. It’s wonderful to finally be able to spend some time with you.”

Ian inwardly hugged his mom for finding such a nice way to say they had longed to meet Faith, without once referring to the break-up.

Faith smiled at Alice like she hung the stars, and as far as Ian was concerned, she did.

A few minutes later, the two of them and Connor were all bundled up and heading out to the porch. It was far too early for a Pennsylvania snow, so even Ian caught his breath when he saw that the sky was filled with glittering flurries.

“Oh, wow,” Faith breathed. “Look at that, Connor, snow.”

Just then, there was a jingle of sleigh bells as Shane drove the horse drawn carriage up to the front lawn.

Ian watched Faith’s face go soft with wonder as she took it in. There was an expression of longing in her eyes that he couldn’t understand.

All this was hers already, if she wanted it. He had as good as told her so last night.

Maybe you need to tell her more plainly, his inner critic told him. *Ask her in a real way, a romantic way...*

He found himself toying with the ring box he’d impulsively shoved into his pocket this morning.

Maybe this was the perfect time—on a carriage ride, in the snow, with their sleepy boy wrapped snugly in her arms...

“You guys coming?” Shane called from the lawn below.

“Yeah, of course,” Ian said, snapping out of it.

He stepped down and offered his hand to Faith. She took it and they

headed over to the sleigh together.

“I can take him while you climb in,” he offered, holding his arms out for Connor.

“Oh, no I’ve got him,” she said with a smile. “I’ve been training for this for the last fifteen months.”

Sure enough, she scrambled in, baby and all, without incident.

Ian remembered to grab the side of the sleigh with his left hand to swing himself in, since his right shoulder wouldn’t always support his weight anymore. It would be embarrassing for Faith to see how weak he was now, especially in the arm he’d pinned all his hopes on.

Don’t think about it...

“Would you like a blanket for your lap?” he offered Faith.

“Yes, please,” she said, shivering with pleasure when he laid the thick, soft quilt across their laps. “What a great idea.”

“Grandma Cassidy made these when I was little,” Ian told her. “She said the old woolen blankets were fine, but a sleigh ride would be more magical with a soft quilt.”

“She was right,” Faith declared.

Ian smiled down at her and she met his eyes for a moment.

Something passed between them that transcended time and place and he felt a tingling in his heart that told him she still loved him, in spite of everything.

“Have fun, kids,” his mom called to them from the porch.

“Bye, everyone,” Faith called back.

Ian gave them all a nod and wave, then he flicked the reins to tell the horses it was time to begin their adventure.

“This is amazing,” Faith breathed, gazing out at the farm all around them. “You told me about it so many times, but I never could have pictured how peaceful and beautiful it really is. How could you ever bear to leave, even for college?”

“Well, I was planning to leave for a lot longer than that,” Ian said, shaking his head ruefully.

But as he looked around, he was reminded that she was right. There was a magic in this place.

They rode on in silence for a little while. He had decided to take her back down to the tourist farm to see the decorations, so he could save the most private and romantic spot for last.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there after your accident,” Faith said suddenly, her voice soft with regret. “Now you know why, but it doesn’t change the fact that I wasn’t there for you.”

“It’s okay,” he told her, meaning it. “I was kind of a mess, and not very good company.”

She shook her head like she hadn’t meant it that way, and he knew she hadn’t. But it was awkward to whine about his shoulder like a little kid. What had happened, had happened.

“What was the accident like?” she asked.

“I don’t remember it,” he said. “Jed Brady was driving, and a drunk driver didn’t stop at the light. He hit the passenger side head-on, going fast. By the time I woke up in the hospital, they were already whispering about my arm and shoulder.”

“Oh, Ian,” she whispered, placing a hand on his arm.

“They had called my family,” he said. “And they wanted to wait until someone was there before telling me about my arm. But I knew.”

“From the pain?” Faith asked.

“Maybe,” he said. “But it just... didn’t feel like my arm anymore. And I was right. There was a massive tear to my rotator cuff, and I had a couple of fractures in my arm and shoulder. They did a great job putting me back together. But I’ll never be the same.”

“So, no more playing?” Faith asked gently.

“It was bad enough that they had to do open surgery,” he told her. “They did their best, and so did the physical therapists afterward. But I can’t throw like I used to. Never will. That door is closed.”

“It must have been so painful,” she said.

“Most painful thing I’ve ever experienced,” he told her. “The PT was excruciating too, and it hurt like a bear for half a year after the surgery, even though I did everything right.”

He chose not to tell her that it still hurt at times. He didn’t want her feeling sorry for him.

“I meant giving up your dream,” she said. “You love football.”

Losing you was harder, he wanted to say. But he knew making her feel guilty wouldn’t help.

“A pro career was never a guarantee, or anything I should have felt entitled to,” he told her. “I’m glad I got to play as long as I did.”

“So, you came home,” she said, nodding. “And now that I’m here, I can

see why. This place is a dream. What do you do here?"

"Whatever needs doing that a man with a bad arm can handle," he said with a smile. "I used to do it all, but baling hay is a thing of the past now. I've been mainly filling in with the horses, or in the shop or the nursery."

She nodded, looking like it was perfectly normal for a grown man not to have a steady role in his family's business.

"I didn't come straight home though," he went on. "Jacob came for me as soon as I was well enough to travel. He had it all planned out for us to hike the Appalachian trail for a few months, really get off the grid and away from the world, so I could have a little time to get my head on straight before coming back here."

"That sounds amazing," she said. "He really cares about you."

"True," Ian agreed. "His heart is in the right place, even if he does get a little overprotective at times."

They had just reached the barn with the shops inside, overlooking the sycamore-lined lot. The sky was fading to pink, and the snow flurries sparkled in the light from the lampposts that lit the shoppers on their way.

All the Christmas lights had turned on just before sunset, like they always did. A couple of beautifully decorated trees were illuminated now, as well as the twinkle lights in the garlands hung from every window. String lights hung all around the cut Christmas tree section up at the nursery, too.

"Oh, wow," Faith sighed. "This is lovely."

"Thought you might like it," Ian said.

He flicked the reins again and Peanut Butter and Pickles, the beloved carriage horses, headed up the hill on the other side of the barn.

"I'm going to show you one of my favorite spots on the farm," he told her.

She smiled and pressed her lips to Connor's bundled head.

The little one was drifting in and out of sleep, his eyelids sinking and then rising partly before they sank again.

"He's incredible," Ian said. "You've done such an amazing job with him. He's so happy, and so brave about meeting new people."

Faith smiled, and she seemed to radiate joy.

"I'm so proud of him," she said simply. "And I had nothing to do with it, he came into the world just as sweet and open-hearted as he is now. Not to say he doesn't have his moments of being shy or frustrated. But as far as I'm concerned, he's a perfect little boy."

“It couldn’t have been easy, doing this on your own,” Ian said carefully. “And you finished school, too, right? I saw your name on the list for graduation.”

She got an almost guilty look on her face.

“I didn’t want to give up on my education just because I was expecting,” she said. “I knew I’d need to provide for him.”

“You didn’t come to graduation,” Ian said, unable to keep the twinge of resentment from his voice.

“No,” she agreed. “I didn’t. It was an expense I didn’t need to take on, and besides, I was showing by then.”

She was showing, and she didn’t want me to see.

Faith was studying his face, so he pushed down his anger and simply nodded, hoping his expression was neutral. She had enough on her plate. He didn’t need to make her feel any worse.

And he didn’t want her to run again.

“But you got your business degree after all that hard work,” he said. “That’s wonderful. I know you were planning to help your parents with the store.”

“I was,” she agreed, and he saw the pain in her eyes. “But they decided to sell the store and separate instead. They’re divorced now.”

“Oh, Faith,” Ian said, his heart breaking for her.

He’d heard plenty of snarky remarks about her being poor and her scholarship status. But he knew Faith treasured her family above any worldly things. She loved the little store and the apartment above, where she shared so many memories and dreams with her parents and her sister.

“It’s fine,” she said, looking anything but. “It was a shock at first. They ended up selling the building and splitting the proceeds with my sister and me. I was able to pay off my student loans and have a little nest egg, so we could move before I found work.”

So that meant there was no more sweet little family apartment for her to go home to, no more cooking big meals in their tiny kitchen together, no more dining room table where her sister could regale them all with her funny stories she’d told him about.

Ian tried to imagine his parents not being together at night anymore, chatting and laughing quietly over a cup of tea—no more farmhouse to call home, no more farm—and he couldn’t do it.

They arrived at the Christmas tree forest on the hillside beyond the

farmhouse. Snow flurries were still twirling down, twinkling in the twilight as they fell.

There was an intense stillness here, since the hillside sheltered the trees from the wind. Ian often felt as if he were in another world when he came to this part of the farm.

He led the horses into the pines.

“This is so beautiful,” Faith said.

“It’s the Christmas tree farm,” he told her. “We have a cut-your-own section too. But it’s not open tonight, so this is all ours.”

She nodded, her eyes luminous as she took it all in.

She had been through so much, this sweet young woman he loved with all his heart. And despite it all, she hadn’t lost her sense of wonder, or the joy she took in the world.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Ian wished again that he had his brother’s eloquence. But he was what he was. And this wasn’t going to get any easier if he waited any longer.

Please, let me ask her in a way that makes her happy...

“Faith,” he said, clearing his throat and grabbing the little box in his pocket. “I want to ask you something.”

She turned to him, her hazel eyes open and accepting.

It wasn’t easy to go down on one knee in the carriage, especially without leaning on his right arm much, but he did it. He wanted his sweet Faith to have every single romantic gesture she deserved.

He had to fiddle with the box a moment, but he got it open and lifted his eyes to hers in time to say the words.

“Faith Andrews,” he said, his voice deep with emotion. “Will you marry me?”

She blinked at him, not even giving a single glance to the ring he had picked out so carefully.

“Ian...” she murmured. “Ian, I...”

“Just say yes,” he whispered encouragingly.

But she only opened and closed her mouth again, as if she had no words.

What have I done?

After a moment, he struggled back onto the seat, cramming the box back in his pocket.

A flick of the reins had the horses moving, slowly turning the carriage around as they headed back for the house in silence.

FAITH

Faith turned away from Ian in the carriage, so he couldn't see the tears threatening to explode from her eyes.

Her heart was shattering. All her dreams were right there, in the palm of her hand—her sweet Ian, their beloved child, his beautiful family, and the promise that they could bring things back together to the way they should have been if they had only waited.

But all that sweetness turned to ash in her mouth when she remembered that Ian was only asking her to marry him out of obligation, not out of love and longing.

And if she accepted, he might not ever let her see it, but he would resent her for the rest of their lives together, just as much as he would have if she had shown up pregnant the night he talked to Ty Keller about playing pro ball.

Her dream had become a nightmare, and she had no one to blame but herself.

"I'm sorry I pressured you," Ian said suddenly, his voice sounding too loud in the still night.

"You weren't pressuring me," she said softly. "You're a good man, Ian."

"But?" he asked.

"But nothing," she said. "You're a good man. I'm sorry I'm turning your life upside down."

He was quiet then, and stayed that way for the rest of the trip back to the farmhouse. After what felt like a silent lifetime, Ian pulled the carriage up in front of the house, and Faith noticed that it had stopped snowing at some

point, like not even the weather had a reason to be romantic anymore.

“If you’re hungry, we could go in...” Ian offered.

“No, I’m fine,” she told him. “I should get home before my sister wonders what happened to me.”

The words were out of her mouth before she even realized how horrible they must sound. Ian had spent plenty of time wondering where she was. He’d sent her endless worried texts and called again and again.

But all that time she had left him just wondering what happened to her.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I’ll grab your stuff from inside and walk you back to your car, so you don’t have to get wrapped up in more goodbyes with my family.”

“Thanks, Ian,” she said.

He got out of the carriage and tied the reins to the lamppost out front of the farmhouse before jogging up the steps. A moment later he was back with her big diaper bag and Connor’s folded stroller. He placed them in the carriage, untied the reins, and then swung back in.

Too soon, they were at the top of the parking area, beside her car.

He got out and helped her down, and she felt a tingle of that old magic go down her spine at the feel of his big, warm hand wrapped around hers, just like she always had.

Nothing will ever be like what it was, she reminded herself.

They exchanged a few awkward pleasantries about the day, and she managed to get the stroller in the trunk and Connor into his car seat without waking him up.

It wasn’t until she was driving away, with Ian watching after her in the rearview mirror, that his words echoed back to her.

I’ll grab your stuff and walk you back to your car, so you don’t have to get wrapped up in more goodbyes with my family.

There was a finality to those words that she hadn’t taken in at the time. After that sleigh ride, maybe he didn’t even want her to see his family again. And maybe he didn’t want Connor to see them either.

What have I done?

Tears streamed from her eyes, running down her cheeks, and she let them.

For this brief moment, while Connor was asleep, and while she wasn’t with Ian or Felicity, she could let her guard down and just cry.

As she drove past the beautiful farmland and forest, she cried for the young woman she had been and the love she still had for Ian. She cried for

her loss of innocence and the price Connor would pay for her mistake. And she cried for gentle Ian Cassidy, the gifted athlete with a heart of gold, whose dreams had been stolen from him.

As the trees began to thin, signifying that she was drawing closer to home, she wiped away her tears and reminded herself of all that was good in her life.

She had Felicity. Connor was healthy and strong. And though he may not have wanted to, Ian Cassidy had proposed to her, showing that he was still a good man, in spite of all that had happened to him.

There was still goodness in the world. There was still a chance for her to make the best of the choices she had made already, and go forward living in a way that Connor could be proud of one day.

And even though it hurt, she was grateful to have had just enough strength to resist a proposal built on guilt and obligation instead of joy. Ian deserved to marry a woman he truly loved, and not just because it felt like the right thing to do.

Faith was feeling calmer by the time she pulled up in the little space behind the apartment and climbed the stairs with her sleeping son on her chest.

But as soon as she opened the door, Felicity's face sank at the sight of her. Her sister had always been able to read her like a book.

"Faith," Felicity whispered.

Faith nodded to the hallway to indicate that she needed to put Connor down. Felicity hopped up and slipped down the hall, opening the door for her.

Faith laid the little one in his crib, relieved when he didn't wake right away. He'd had a fresh diaper right before they went out for the carriage ride. Hopefully, he would sleep long enough for her to chat with her sister.

She followed Felicity back to the kitchen, and watched her sister put on the kettle.

"Sit," Felicity said, pointing to the counter. "Tell me everything."

And though she had thought she wouldn't be able to talk about it tonight, somehow watching Felicity bustle around for the tea things made it easier.

"It was wonderful," Faith said softly, looking down at her hands.

"Yeah?" Felicity said. "Then why did you come home looking like you just watched *Steel Magnolias* on repeat all day?"

"Gosh, I feel like I did," Faith said, shaking her head. "It was beautiful,

everything I could have dreamed of, everything I *did* dream about. And it broke my heart.”

She tried to describe it all for her sister—how charming the farm was, and the rambling farmhouse filled with a great big, loving family. She told her how much fun Connor had, and how kind everyone had been, even tried to describe each family member.

When she got to Jacob, she paused.

“What’s the matter?” Felicity teased. “Is it too hard to describe the rock and roll rebel twin brother?”

“No,” Faith said thoughtfully. “I was just remembering something you said the other day.”

“I am always saying wise things,” Felicity said with a wink.

“Jacob looks different now,” Faith said. “He’s been home working on the farm. He cut his hair, and he’s strong and tan, much more like Ian.”

“The grocery store,” Felicity murmured.

“Yeah,” Faith said. “Maybe that really *was* Jacob with the girl, and not Ian after all.”

She ran through the events of the last few days in her mind, trying to put the pieces together a little differently.

“Does that change things?” Felicity asked, clearly thinking the same way.

“Maybe?” Faith said. “But it’s probably too late now.”

“What do you mean it’s too late?” Felicity laughed. “Listen, I know all of this is complicated and you’ve got a lot of feelings. But you’re both alive and well and living in the same tiny town. It’s not like the door is closed on your future together.”

“Well...” Faith murmured.

“Well, *what?*” Felicity demanded.

“I might have closed that door tonight,” Faith admitted. “And then locked it.”

“How?” Felicity asked.

“He proposed,” Faith told her miserably. “And I couldn’t say yes.”

“You didn’t say yes?” Felicity asked, her voice soft. “But you’re still in love with him.”

“Yes,” Faith said. “That’s why I couldn’t do it. I love him. I want him to be happy. If he’s found that with someone else, I don’t want to tear him away.”

“And if he isn’t with someone else?” Felicity asked.

“Then things might be even worse,” Faith realized out loud.

“Why?” Felicity asked.

“Because I’ve never seen him like this before,” Faith said, sitting down on the sofa in defeat.

“Like what?” Felicity asked, grabbing their tea and joining her.

“I can tell he’s filled with pride whenever he looks at Connor,” Faith said, taking the tea her sister offered. “But other than that, he’s just... quiet.”

“You always said he was the strong, silent type,” Felicity said.

“He is,” Faith agreed. “But this is different. He wasn’t a big talker, but he was always such a positive person, a born leader. It just feels like... his light is gone.”

Felicity nodded slowly, looking down into her teacup like the answers might be there.

“Losing his football prospects was a big deal,” Faith went on. “And I could see how it would bring him down. But time has passed. I’m sure he’s working through that.”

“Maybe,” Felicity allowed.

“Or maybe he was doing fine on that front, and wasn’t ready for marriage and a child yet,” Faith said.

“Maybe,” Felicity repeated, her eyes going back to her mug.

“Or maybe it wasn’t Jacob at the Co-op after all, and he *does* have a girlfriend,” Faith sighed.

“Maybe,” Felicity said without looking at her, for the third time.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Faith laughed.

“Oh, yeah?” Felicity asked.

“The person I need to talk to about all this is him, right?” Faith said.

Felicity looked up at her with a big grin on her face.

“Now *that* is the kind of thing a mature young woman would come up with,” Felicity said proudly. “After using her wise older sister as a sounding board.”

“Thank you, Felicity,” Faith said, meaning it.

“Drink that tea before it gets cold,” Felicity advised her. “And think about exactly what you’ll say. Then call him before you chicken out.”

“You should have an advice column, you know that?” Faith asked.

Felicity laughed and lifted her mug.

Faith clinked hers against it and they both took a sip.

The warm, sweet tea made her feel better, and so did her plan. She was

going to talk it all over with Ian, and they would figure everything out.

IAN

I an watched after Faith's car long after it disappeared onto the main road. He expected to feel depressed or angry. Instead, he just felt numb.

That had been happening more often lately. He would think about everything that happened, and instead of fighting against the waves of emotion he used to feel, he just felt... nothing.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, his inner critic said. Go make yourself useful.

His feet began carrying him down through the parking lot, past the families packing up to go home, and the barn with its old-fashioned shops. He passed the paddock and the coops and finally made his way beyond the *Private Property* sign to the barn.

Ten minutes later, he was riding his favorite horse down to the big pasture to bring in the ponies for the evening.

It felt good to be back on a horse, even though he had to take his dismounts a little easy. Being outside, moving fast, feeling those muscles moving under him, all made him feel just a little more like his old self. The joy of riding was one thing that hadn't changed.

Adjusting his own rhythm to the big colt's movements made him feel like he was part of something bigger than himself—at one with nature and humanity all at once.

"Hey," Jacob said in a surprised way as Ian approached. His brother was riding Pepper, the high-strung mare he preferred. "I thought you weren't working today."

"It's not day anymore," Ian said drily.

Jacob rolled his eyes and laughed.

They moved toward the ponies, who were blissed out from a day in the field and really quite happy to go back to the barn for some hay and rest.

Between them, herding the sleepy animals was almost effortless.

“I asked her to marry me,” Ian told his brother after a while, without looking him in the eye.

“That so?” Jacob asked tonelessly.

It was just like Jacob to make him spin out his own story.

“She said no,” Ian told him, deciding to skip to the part that mattered.

That got his brother’s attention.

“*Really?*” Jacob asked, turning to him immediately.

“Yeah,” Ian said.

“I guess she really doesn’t want you if you don’t come with a pro football contract,” Jacob said bitterly.

Maybe because it was a little too close to what Ian had been worried about himself, that remark got Ian’s back up.

“Look,” he heard himself say angrily. “I know you don’t like her, and you don’t like what she did. But she’s my son’s mother, and I don’t want you talking about her like that. Not ever.”

“Hey,” Jacob said, all the bitterness gone from his voice. “I’m sorry, man. I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“Well, I think you’re wrong about the money,” Ian said, feeling a little calmer. “What our family has now is still a whole lot more than she’s ever had. I don’t think she wants anything from me. She never did.”

They worked in silence for a little longer.

“You may have a point,” Jacob said, frowning. “I mean, I guess if she did want money, why didn’t she tell you she was pregnant when she thought you were going pro?”

The question left Ian reeling, as it always did.

“I know,” he said. “It’s driving me crazy. Why didn’t she just talk to me back then?”

“She left school, right?” Jacob asked. “Do you think it was her parents?”

“They supported her having the baby,” Ian said, shaking his head. “As far as I know, they welcomed her home.”

“Did you have an argument with her before that?” Jacob asked. “Ignore her texts over the break?”

They had been over all this before, nearly two years ago.

“Nothing like that,” Ian said tiredly. “Nothing at all. I loved her and she loved me. We had plans for the future. That’s how I got us into this mess in the first place.”

“Takes two to tango,” Jacob said, shaking his head.

“I knew she wanted to wait,” Ian said. “I don’t know what got into me that night, asking her to do something I knew she wanted to wait for. I was caught up in the moment. Maybe she couldn’t forgive me for it.”

Maybe she never will.

Jacob opened his mouth to say something to comfort him, but before he could, Ian’s phone rang. There was only one person whose call made a sound on Ian’s phone, even when it was on silent mode.

“It’s her,” he said, sliding the phone out of his pocket. “It’s Faith.”

“See ya later,” Jacob said, wheeling his horse around and whistling to the ponies to hurry them on their way.

Ian took a deep breath and answered.

FAITH

Faith stood beside the wooden fire engine with the colorful slide and steering wheel, while Connor toddled around inside it, exploring.

Living around the corner from the town toddler park was definitely going to come in handy. Connor made a happy chirping sound as he discovered the wheel and began alternately spinning and banging on it.

“That’s fun, huh?” she asked him. “Are you going to be a firefighter when you grow up?”

“*Yah,*” he agreed, chuckling at her before spinning the wheel again.

He didn’t really understand the question, of course, but she loved his enthusiasm. He was a happy little boy, and that knowledge made her feel good to her toes.

They were alone in the little playground now, but when they first arrived, Connor had followed after an older girl and laughed like a waterfall when she got on a swing and Faith pushed him in the swing next to hers, so they could wave to each other.

The girl’s mother had said hello and they had exchanged a few pleasantries. She had even invited Faith to bring Connor to the library reading group activities.

A nanny with a tiny baby who only stayed a few minutes had come over to mention that there was a playgroup at Community Hall, too.

Even after such a short time, Faith was pretty sure that if she wanted to make a whole bunch of friends in Trinity Falls, all she would have to do was hang out at the park with Connor.

The sound of boots on the sidewalk got her attention, and she looked up

from the firetruck to see Ian approaching.

Back in college, he'd been super handsome, but that paled in comparison to now. Ian wore a cowboy hat, pulled low so that his handsome face was half in shadow, highlighting his strong jaw. The late morning sunlight glistened in his sandy brown hair.

His wide shoulders and athletic frame looked even bigger than usual beside the low fence and wooden play sets of the park.

"Faith," he said, his voice low and husky.

She blinked, trying to chase away the romantic thoughts in her mind.

"Thank you for coming," she told him. "I'll have to keep my eye on Connor, but I thought it would be a good idea for us to talk today, maybe clear the air."

"Sounds good," he said.

He was still holding back, waiting to see what she actually wanted. And she couldn't say she blamed him.

After all, she was the one who had run without explanation.

"I think we should start over," she told him. "I mean, I'm glad you've met Connor. But you and I should talk more freely with each other, now that the biggest secret is out in the open."

The biggest secret tried to back up from the wooden steering wheel and sat down hard on his bottom instead. He laughed and let out a string of nonsense syllables.

They both smiled down fondly at him, and Faith felt a zing of pleasure run down her spine.

It was good to have someone to share her pride with, someone else who could experience this joy with her, in the same way she did, as a proud parent.

"What do you want to know?" Ian asked softly.

"Are you seeing someone?" she blurted out, skipping over everything else she had meant to ask.

His eyebrows went up in surprise.

Then he chuckled, his blue eyes filled with warmth.

"No, Faith," he told her. "I'm not."

"Oh," she said. "Because when I first got here, I thought I saw you with a pretty woman at the Co-op."

"I don't think so," he said, frowning.

"Could it have been Jacob?" she asked.

“It could,” he replied, cracking another smile. “He’s not seeing anyone either, but there’s a girl I think he’s sweet on.”

“I see,” Faith said, nodding.

“You thought I had a girlfriend,” Ian said. “That’s why you turned me down?”

“It was one of the reasons,” she said carefully. “You’re a good man, Ian Cassidy, and I don’t want to minimize the gesture you made.”

“It wasn’t a gesture,” he said sharply, then buttoned his lips like he was trying hard to listen instead of speak.

“I don’t want to minimize what you asked me,” she tried again. “But time has passed, and we aren’t the same people we were back in school. Maybe we should try getting to know each other again, and see how it goes.”

He nodded, his jaw still clenched.

“When it comes to Connor, I don’t want to do anything without being very sure,” she told him. “Not even marry you. I couldn’t bear the idea of rushing in if there was even the tiniest chance that something could go wrong.”

“Marriage is forever, as far as I’m concerned,” Ian said firmly.

“Me too,” she told him. “That’s why I want to be sure.”

He nodded slowly.

“So, we’ll get to know each other again?” she asked. “Spend some time together?”

His stern expression broke into a happy smile, like he couldn’t help himself. For a moment, he reminded her of the old Ian, lighthearted and joyful, just as she remembered him. But there was still an aura of sadness around him. It was like he was lost.

He used to be a golden boy, she thought to herself. He was a leader, humble yet confident. And now he seems broken.

If I hadn’t left, would he even have been in that car?

It wasn’t a thought she allowed herself to dwell on very often.

But the drunk driver’s car had hit Ian’s late at night. Had he been out with the boys, trying to forget her? If she had been around, would they have been watching a movie in the Common Room with friends, or playing board games instead?

Why isn’t he angry?

That question kept rising to the surface, whether she was thinking about her decision to keep Connor a secret, or all the way back to her own

departure and the accident Ian had been in.

He had to be angry. Any sane person would be.

And if he was hiding his anger from her, maybe he was hiding other things, too. Maybe he was going through the motions to keep his son close, and to do what he felt was right. Maybe he would never really love her again, and his resentment would only grow.

She pictured her own parents, delirious with happiness at the dining room table, laughing over memories and enjoying home-cooked meals. If that could fall apart, how could Ian Cassidy love her forever, especially after what she had done?

“You okay?” he asked her.

She realized that she had let her mind run away on her.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m fine.”

“Hey,” he said. “I wanted to ask you something. Well, the whole family, really, and especially my mom.”

“What is it?” she asked.

“Well, you mentioned that you would be looking for work,” he said. “We could use someone, no really we *need* someone, with a good head for business at our Christmas-All-Year-Round shop.”

“You do?” she asked, amazed. She would have thought that charming farm would never have an opening.

“The last person was awesome,” Ian said. “He was great with the customers, but not so great with inventory and bookkeeping, or even displays.”

“Oh wow,” Faith said. “So, you need a clean-up, huh?”

“I guess so,” Ian said. “There’s no pressure. This is only if you really want the job, and your hours can be completely flexible. We have sales staff on over there. But it would be helping us out in a big way. And my mom is kind of frantic for you to say yes so that she can have an excuse to watch Connor.”

Faith laughed, feeling light as air.

“That’s exactly the type of work I was hoping to do for my parents,” she told him. “I love the idea of untangling the yarn and weaving it back together. But your mom doesn’t have to babysit.”

“Oh, I think she does,” Ian said. “I mean, she’d put it in the contract, if it was legal.”

“Yes,” Faith said.

“Yes?” he asked, his deep voice hopeful.

“Yes, I’ll do it,” she told him. “And of course she can watch Connor when she’s free and feels like it.”

“*Ma*,” Connor suddenly yelled, pointing to the swings, where another little boy who had just arrived was swinging.

“Do you want to swing, Connor?” she offered.

“*Yah*,” he agreed, an edge of panic in his sweet voice like he was worried the other little one would disappear if he didn’t hurry.

“Okay, let’s go,” she told him, sweeping him up in her arms.

“Is it okay if I stay and hang out with you guys for a bit?” Ian asked.

She looked up at the handsome cowboy who was a broken version of the boy she had loved.

“Yes,” she told him. “It’s more than okay.”

The three of them headed over to the swings together, and she felt a wisp of hope floating in her chest.

FAITH

Faith pulled up in the parking area near the Cassidy farmhouse early the next morning.

Alice Cassidy, wearing a pretty Christmas apron on over her brown dress, was already out on the porch, as if she had been waiting. She smiled and waved to them as they pulled up.

Faith waved back awkwardly, thinking about the fact that Alice must know that she had turned down Ian's proposal. Would the older woman judge her for not doing everything she could to provide Connor with a two-parent family as quickly as possible?

Deciding not to think about that any further, Faith swung Connor's diaper bag over her shoulder. It was heavier than usual, stuffed full of his favorite snacks and toys, as well as several changes of clothes, and about a week's worth of diapers.

But Faith still couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

"Ready to go see your grandma?" she asked him cheerfully as she unbuckled him from his car seat.

He didn't answer, but he snuggled close when she picked him up. He was usually pretty cuddly in the mornings, and he wasn't used to going anywhere.

Her heart ached at the idea of leaving him.

"There he is," Alice said fondly from the porch.

Connor peeked at her, and then smiled sunnily.

"Connor, you have the sweetest smile in all of Pennsylvania," Alice told him warmly. "And I can see you got it from your mama. How are you, Faith?"

“Excited for today, and a little nervous,” Faith said honestly.

“Well, come on in,” Alice said. “There’s no need to be nervous, and no hurry for you to get over there. I think it’s best if we make sure Connor feels comfortable before you go.”

It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from Faith’s shoulders.

“That sounds like a really good idea,” she agreed, allowing Alice to wrap an arm around her and lead her inside.

They headed for the kitchen, which smelled like bacon and fresh bread. As they entered, Joe was just coming up from the cellar with a box.

“Oh, the blocks,” Alice said.

“Don’t know about Connor, but they’re my favorite thing to play with,” Joe said gruffly. “Morning, sweetheart.”

Faith smiled when he squeezed her arm and kissed her on top of the head as he went by, like she was five years old.

“Now, he looks like he just wants to be held right now,” Alice observed, looking at Connor. “Let’s just get some breakfast in you and let him get down and play when he decides he’s ready. Has he eaten?”

“Oh, you don’t have to feed me,” Faith said, hoping Alice couldn’t hear her stomach grumbling. She had been too nervous for breakfast at home.

“It’s a grandma’s privilege to feed everyone,” Alice said with a wink. “Now, will Connor be hungry too?”

“I fed him at home, but he might eat off my plate,” Faith said. “That’s his favorite thing.”

“It was for mine, too,” Alice said fondly.

“Need help with anything?” Faith offered.

“Oh, no, dear,” Alice said. “Everything’s been fixed since before five. I’ll just make you a quick plate.”

Alice went up on her toes to grab mugs and a plate from the cupboard.

In the family room, Joe was sitting on the rug, taking painted wooden blocks out of the box one at a time and placing them on the floor.

Faith turned slowly on her stool so that Connor could watch.

His eyes went straight to Joe and the blocks. He watched intently for a minute or two, then half wiggled around so he could see better.

“Bah,” he yelled after a minute.

“Yes, Grandpa Joe has blocks,” Faith told him. “Do they look fun?”

“Want to come play with me?” Joe asked in a gentle voice.

There was a beat of total silence, in which Faith wasn’t sure if Connor

might get scared and snuggle back in, or try to fling himself out of her arms to go play.

“*Yah,*” Connor said excitedly, wiggling so hard that she was glad she had a good hold on him.

“Okay,” Faith said. “Here we go.”

She put him down on the floor and watched to see what he would do next.

Connor marched toward those colorful blocks as fast as his little legs would carry him. But when he got just out of his grandpa’s reach, he stopped and stood still, eyeing him suspiciously.

To his credit, Joe Cassidy didn’t give the boy a second look. He continued building the little tower he had been assembling, moving slowly and carefully as he chose which block to add next.

Something about his movements were hypnotic to the fascinated toddler. The next thing Faith knew, Connor was heading over and grabbing a block to offer to his grandpa.

“Yes, that’s just right,” Joe said, taking it gently and nodding to himself as he carefully placed it on top.

“*Ohh,*” Connor said excitedly when the block didn’t fall off.

“Should we add another one, do you think?” Joe asked him.

Connor grabbed another block right away. But this one was way too big for Joe’s precarious tower.

“Is it too big?” Joe asked. “Should we put it on there anyway?”

“*On,*” Connor said imperiously.

Joe dutifully put the giant block on top and the tower toppled most of the way down, blocks falling all over Joe’s legs, like rain.

“Oh, *no,*” Joe pretended to wail sadly. “*My tower.*”

Connor crowed with laughter and moved closer to him, leaning his head against his grandpa’s chest, as if to comfort him.

Alice quietly placed a plate and mug on the counter.

Faith turned to her, shaking her head in wonder. “He’s a baby whisperer.”

“Well, he’s had enough experience,” Alice laughed. “We always did love children. Now eat up, while it’s warm.”

Faith looked down at the plate and almost cried. There was crispy bacon and what looked like a freshly baked biscuit with a bit of red peeking out.

“Is that a tomato biscuit?” she asked.

“It is,” Alice told her with a smile.

“My mom used to make these in the summertime,” Faith said. “Thank

you so much.”

“My pleasure,” Alice told her. “Milk and sugar in your coffee, right?”

“Right,” Faith said. “How did you know?”

“Oh, Ian might have put a bug in my ear,” Alice said, winking.

“Did he tell you to feed me?” Faith asked.

“No one has to tell her that,” Joe piped up from the family room, then chuckled.

“More like he knew I would, so he told me how you take your coffee,” Alice said.

“That’s nice,” Faith said.

Alice moved to the sink to tidy up, giving Faith a moment to enjoy her meal.

Everything was delicious. Faith couldn’t help thinking that the Cassidy crew was awfully lucky if they had a breakfast like this every morning. By the time she was finished, Connor was fully on his grandpa’s lap, and they were reading a story together.

“He looks like he’s lived here all his life,” she remarked to Alice as she carried her plate and mug to the sink.

“They’ll probably go out and feed the chickens in a little while if Connor gets restless,” Alice remarked. “And when Joe goes to do his chores, maybe we’ll come see you at the shop.”

Alice had painted such a nice picture of how Connor would be spending his day that it almost brought tears to Faith’s eyes.

“Thank you for this, for the job, for everything,” Faith said softly.

“It’s our pleasure, love. Believe me,” Alice said. “We’re so grateful to you for coming here and letting us be part of his life.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t come sooner,” Faith said.

“Don’t you dare be sorry,” Alice told her. “You had your reasons. I’m sure of that. It doesn’t take one minute to see that you’re a wonderful mother, and your heart is in exactly the right place.”

Faith wanted to thank her, but she was afraid if she opened her mouth she would start sobbing. So instead, she wrapped an arm around Alice’s shoulders and squeezed her.

Alice hugged her right back, then gave her a pat on the back.

“Now there’s no rush for you to leave, but Ian was going to stop in and check on you two about now, and if you want a ride to the shop he’ll take you,” Alice said.

Faith nodded and caught herself running a hand through her hair.

She felt a little embarrassed. It was probably silly to worry about whether her hair looked nice when they had a child together and she was only here to work. But maybe there was more to it than that.

Before she really had time to think about it, the back door was opening, and there was Ian, larger than life.

“Hey,” he said, his warm blue eyes meeting hers.

“Hey,” she said, feeling her cheeks heat.

“Oh wow, look at them,” he said, his eyes moving to where Connor lay against his grandpa’s chest, looking at the book Joe was quietly reading.

“He’s so happy here,” Faith said.

“I’m really glad,” Ian told her, his voice a little rough with emotion.

She nodded. It was good to see Ian showing some feelings.

“You ready to go to work?” he asked her. “I came to give you a ride, if you want.”

“Sure,” she told him. “Thank you.”

“See you later,” he called to his parents.

“Thank you for breakfast,” Faith told Alice on her way to Connor.

“I’m going to go for a little while,” she told him. “Do you want to keep reading with Grandpa?”

Connor frowned but then he nodded.

“Okay,” she told him. “I’ll see you in a little bit.”

She turned and walked away slowly, bracing herself for him to have a fit. But when she reached the door and turned back, she could see he was already deep in the story again.

She smiled, and her heart felt even lighter than before as Ian opened the back door to reveal a horse pulling a hayride cart waiting for them in the brilliant morning sunshine.

“This is the ride?” she asked him, feeling like she had stumbled into a fairytale.

“This is it,” he said. “I have to get Charlie up to the hayride area anyway, since he’s on duty today. I’ll be passing right by the shops.”

“Good morning, Charlie,” Faith said, walking up to the beautiful chestnut horse.

He snuffled at her, and she slid a hand up to scratch behind his ears. His velvety fur was so warm and soft, and his pink tipped muzzle nuzzled into her chest. She laughed and gave his neck a pat before heading over to the

carriage.

“Are you afraid of anything?” Ian asked her, offering her a hand up.

“What do you mean?” she asked, taking it and swinging up onto the bench seat at the front of the cart.

“I mean you haven’t exactly spent a lot of time with horses, have you?” he asked.

“No, but he’s clearly super friendly,” she said.

“He weighs over a thousand pounds,” Ian said. “And he’s got sharp teeth and hooves. And you just walked right up and crooned over him like he was a baby.”

“I don’t think he was offended,” Faith teased. “Do you?”

Ian laughed, and the deep, familiar sound made her feel good inside.

“Let’s get you to work, brave girl,” he said, climbing into the cart beside her.

She looked up at him, unable to help admiring the way the cowboy hat showed off the strong line of his jaw.

He winked at her, and she felt like she was a besotted freshman all over again.

With a flick of the reins, they were off.

It certainly wasn’t the kind of commute to work she had ever pictured. But as they slowly rode off over the bumpy gravel, and under the bare branches of the sycamores, drinking in the fresh cold morning air and listening to the songs of the morning birds, Faith realized it was a commute she could definitely get used to.

FAITH

Faith had spent most of the morning in the tiny office at the back of the Christmas-All-Year-Round shop, trying to make sense of the strange bookkeeping system.

At first, she had been so charmed by the cinnamon scent of the homemade candles in the shop and the pretty view over the farm in the office that it had been hard to focus.

But after a few minutes of settling in, she had applied herself fully to the stack of paper ledgers and folder of bank statements.

And now, a few hours later, she had come up with a list of questions worded in a way that should be easy for the Cassidys to answer. The first among them was whether she could get the business onto some bookkeeping software to make things easier.

Overall, the little shop was more profitable than she would have thought, but there was certainly room for growth. She was glad to find that she would be able to help improve things and make them glad they hired her.

When Ian first offered, she had assumed the job was just a way to help her, even though she had said she didn't need help.

Faith had agreed anyway, since she knew she would need work soon, and since she already loved the farm so much that it was impossible to turn down a chance to spend her days here.

But now that she could see that they did actually need her, she felt a deep sense of satisfaction in her work. After all, she had spent years in school training for exactly this. And now she was putting all that studying and all her professors' wisdom to work in the real world.

She hadn't realized how much she had craved that feeling until now.

"Hey," Melody said happily when Faith finally headed out of the back office and into the shop. "Things okay with the books?"

The young salesgirl had a happy air about her, but there was worry in her eyes, as if she was afraid that Faith would come out of the office and say the whole thing had to be shut down or something.

"The shop is profitable," Faith said right away. "I'll just be trying to get the books a little more organized and brainstorming ways to help us do even better than before."

"It's amazing that you could figure all that out in one morning," Melody said, shaking her head in wonder.

"Well, it will take a little longer to really get things organized, but I could see enough to get the big picture," Faith told her. "How are things going out here?"

"Great," Melody said. "We've had a bunch of customers already today. It's a bit quieter now, but that happens throughout the day."

"So, there's an ebb and flow," Faith said. "What do you think causes it?"

"What do you mean?" Melody asked, looking confused.

"Are there other things going on at the farm that cause people to be more interested in stopping in at some times and less at others?" Faith asked.

"I... don't know," Melody said. "Like what?"

"Well, for starters, the parking," Faith said. "I wonder if parking closer to the shop makes it more likely that folks stop in, even if they came to the farm for some other reason."

"Oh, wow," Melody said. "The closer spots do tend to fill up faster."

"It could even be weather related," Faith said thoughtfully. "It's nice and warm up here. If it's colder out, or windy and raining, maybe people stop in here before doing outdoor things."

"I could actually see that," Melody said, nodding.

"Nothing we can do about it," Faith said, shrugging. "But once we figure out some reasons why people stop in, we can do a better job of encouraging them."

"I never thought about that," Melody admitted.

"Go on and help them," Faith said softly as a lady with two small children came in. "I'll just browse."

Melody gave her a little wave as she headed off.

"Oh, my," the lady said happily. "Doesn't it smell good in here?"

The little ones began sniffing the air and smiling up at her in obvious rapture. Faith guessed that she must be their grandmother.

She began browsing the aisles as Melody asked how she could help.

Things were laid out in a sensible way, as far as Faith could tell—shelves of holiday ornaments, wreaths, and snow globes stretched around the space. In the center were tables with welcome mats, garlands, wrapping paper and ribbons, and boxes of Christmas cards.

The shop itself was a round shape, since the barn was octagonal. The curved walls presented some obstacles for placing the shelves, and the tables in the center gave the space the feeling of a church sale or thrift shop even though the items on the table weren't discounted.

She wondered if there was any other way to arrange the space that would be more conducive to browsing.

A few more customers came in and out as Faith devoted herself to studying the inventory and trying to find ways to improve.

One thing she noticed right away was that the prices weren't really consistent. The garlands and wreaths looked like they were a very good value compared to the tree decorations and other decor.

She wandered over to the two tables flanking the check-out counter that held the handmade candles whose scent Faith had been enjoying all day. She discovered that the red jar candles had a cinnamon scent and the yellow ones were caramel. Baskets of cinnamon and vanilla sachets were also on the little tables, along with a sign noting that all the items were made by a local woman in Trinity Falls.

Those tables were the only place where Faith could see that inventory was missing.

"What about this?" a man asked his wife, pointing to the candles.

"She doesn't really like candles," she said. "At least I don't think."

"Says here they were made locally," he told her, looking at the little sign. "By a Maggie Sullivan?"

"Oh, really?" the wife asked, drifting over. "She was Hannah's second grade teacher. Oh, we'll have to get some, Mom will love that."

Faith moved toward a shelf of ornaments by the wall so as not to distract the couple from their shopping. Sure enough, when they eventually wrapped up, they had grabbed a wreath and two candles. After they left, there were only one or two customers browsing. Faith beckoned Melody over to the candles.

“Do we have more of these?” she asked.

“Oh,” Melody said. “Maggie makes them whenever she can, but she’s also teaching, so it’s usually just over breaks. They sell really well though.”

“Why is that, do you think?” Faith asked.

“I mean they smell amazing,” Melody said. “It’s the first thing people notice about the shop.”

“True,” Faith said. “I think that couple from a minute ago bought some because of who made them.”

“Oh yes,” Melody said. “That’s definitely part of it. Everyone loves Maggie.”

“Interesting,” Faith said. “So, it wouldn’t necessarily make sense for us to just stock more scented candles. These are special because they’re locally made.”

“People do like that part about it,” Melody agreed.

Ideas started hitting Faith a mile a minute, and she grabbed her notepad to write some of them down.

“Hello,” a familiar voice called out from the door.

“Hi, Mrs. Cassidy,” Melody said happily. “And who is this?”

“This is my grandson, Connor,” Alice said proudly.

“Oh my goodness,” Melody said. “I’ve never met this one. How are you, Connor?”

Faith put the pad down on the counter and headed over to greet her son.

“*Mah*,” Connor yelled excitedly as soon as he spotted her.

“Hi, baby,” she said, taking him gratefully from Alice. “Did you have fun today?”

“*Yah*,” he told her, followed by a whinny sound.

“Did you see horses?” she asked.

“*Yah*,” he whispered, his eyes very serious and solemn.

“We saw the ponies giving children rides around the paddock,” Alice said. “And he made lots of new friends while we watched.”

Faith smiled at the idea of her toddler making friends. It might sound far-fetched, but she had seen him do it before.

“Wait, Connor is your son?” Melody asked Faith. “Which of the Cassidy boys is your husband?”

Faith gulped, suddenly feeling uncertain where to begin answering that question.

It was one thing to know she was going to be a single mom, and another

to live in the same town as the baby's dad. How could she even answer without it looking terrible?

"My Ian is Connor's father," Alice said quickly. "And he couldn't be prouder of this little fellow, could he?"

Melody's brow furrowed for a fraction of a second, like she knew Ian was single. But then she smiled.

"Of course he couldn't," she said decisively. "Just look at those dimples. He's the cutest baby in Tarker County."

Connor chuckled at Melody while he patted Faith's shoulder.

And just like that, the danger was past.

Faith was pretty sure Melody was silently judging her for her life choices, but that was just fine, so long as she didn't take it out on Connor.

"Can he have a cookie?" Melody asked, looking hopefully to Faith. "My mom made sugar cookies, and I packed a few in my lunch. I can go grab one."

There was no judgement in her eyes at all.

"Sure," Faith said, feeling like she was going to cry with relief. "Thank you, Melody."

The other young woman scrambled off to grab her lunch bag, and Faith turned back to Alice.

"I know that wasn't easy," Alice told her. "But I'm so glad you came here, and that you're not ashamed for people to know he's Ian's."

"Of course not," Faith said quickly.

"He really wants to marry you, you know," Alice said. "Always did."

"Me too," Faith confided. "But, I just... something doesn't feel right."

Alice looked a little surprised.

"When Connor gets his cookie, do you want to take a little walk?" she offered. "I'd love for you to tell me all about it, if you're comfortable sharing?"

"Yes," Faith told her, surprised to feel relief at that idea. "I'd like that a lot."

"Here you go," Melody crooned, holding out a small star-shaped cookie to Connor. "My mom made cookies, and this one is for you."

Connor snatched it right up and took a bite, his eyes going serious as he munched away.

"Good, huh?" Faith asked him.

"Do you want one too?" Melody offered. "I have three, you can each try

one. We've got plenty at home."

"No, thank you," Faith said. "I was actually going to go on a little walk with him for now."

"That sounds nice," Melody said. "Have fun. I'll be here until close if you need anything."

A few minutes later, Faith was following Alice Cassidy downstairs, with Connor on her hip.

"Let's go walk in the nursery," Alice said. "It's quiet there around now, and warmer than outside."

Faith nodded, and they headed out of the barn together and over to the nursery. Hundreds of cut Christmas trees stood in the yard, with twinkling lights strung on posts adding to the magic. The scent was heavenly.

"This whole place smells so good," Faith said, shaking her head in awe.

"You only say that because you don't clean the coops," Alice laughed.

They stepped inside the glass doors into the warmth of the nursery, and were greeted with more delicious smells. Built-in shelves in the entry were full of teddy bears, nutcrackers, and beautiful pots for indoor plants, and rows of sparkling wind chimes hung from the ceiling.

"You said something doesn't feel right," Alice said quietly, walking among the shelves as slowly as if the two of them were just there to browse.

"I can't put my finger on it," Faith said. "At least, I couldn't until today. I have an idea now."

Alice nodded but allowed her time to arrange her thoughts.

"He seems *down*," Faith said. "And I know he's crushed about his football career. But time has passed, enough that the Ian I know would have his energy back and be getting ready for whatever is next. I mean, I knew him freshman year. He went from being a star here in Trinity Falls to being a nobody on the team at college. There was no guarantee he'd ever get to play, let alone have a chance at going pro."

"That's very true," Alice said thoughtfully.

"But he worked so hard on his classes," Faith went on. "So did I. And now, today, I got to put everything I learned to use. And it was... well, it was more than wonderful. I'm so grateful for this chance you've given me."

"You're doing us a favor, dear," Alice said with a warm smile. "Believe me."

"Well, I think maybe Ian needs to do the same," Faith said. "I wonder if he would feel better if he was able to use his Communications degree."

“We would support any choice Ian makes about where he wants to live and work,” Alice said slowly.

“I think he could put that degree to use right here on the farm,” Faith told her excitedly. “He wouldn’t have to go anywhere at all. He could do marketing and public relations for the shops and the nursery.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Alice said. “And it certainly can’t hurt to talk with him about it.”

“That’s great that you’re open to it,” Faith said, feeling ecstatic. “He’s got to get back on the horse, so to speak, and I’m sure he’ll be happier as soon as he’s doing something that makes him feel confident in his skills, just like football did.”

“You had a good day at the shop, didn’t you, dear?” Alice asked, her eyes crinkling with her knowing smile.

“I did,” Faith sighed. “The shop is really special. The books just need to be organized a little better, but that won’t take me long. And I have so many ideas of fun things we could try.”

“Well, I’m all ears,” Alice told her. “But if you want, we can save everything for suppertime, so you can explain it all to Joe and me at once. Right now, I was wondering if you wanted to join me for an apple cider doughnut and a cup of coffee for lunch. There’s a lovely little cart by the pony paddock and a picnic bench that’s perfect for people watching.”

“That sounds amazing,” Faith told her honestly.

“Come on, then,” Alice told her, wrapping her arm around Faith and giving her quick a squeeze.

IAN

I an came into the house, feeling worn out but satisfied after a day of hard work out in the fresh air.

The kitchen smelled heavenly, and he could hear happy voices out in the dining room. He slipped off his shoes and ran upstairs, opting to clean himself up quickly instead of a full shower, since everyone was already at the table.

A few minutes later, he arrived at the table to the heartwarming sight of Faith sitting with baby Connor in his highchair beside her. She was cutting up food as fast as she could, and he was eating it with obvious enjoyment while Alice looked on with a smile.

The table was all decked out with a delicious meal, and his mother had even lit some Christmas candles.

“Hey,” Ian said softly.

“Hi, Ian,” Faith said, glancing up at him with a sweet smile.

He smiled back slowly, and loved the way her cheeks seemed to darken slightly as she quickly turned her attention back to their boy.

“Hope you’re hungry,” his dad said jovially. “Your mom made her famous meatloaf.”

Ian groaned in appreciation and lowered himself to his usual seat opposite Jacob.

“Jacob,” he said, nodding.

“Ian,” Jacob replied, taking another bite of meatloaf.

“Hope you saved me some, brother,” Ian joked.

“It’s not me you have to worry about,” Jacob said, glancing over at

Connor a little resentfully.

The toddler was putting away tiny cubes of meatloaf at an impressive rate.

“Like father, like son,” Alice laughed. “And I can always make more. How was your day, Ian?”

“Fine,” Ian said, *like father, like son* echoing pleasantly in his mind.

“Excellent,” his father said. “You boys are getting too much done. You barely need me anymore.”

“How was your day, Faith?” Ian asked gently, hoping her first day hadn’t been too bad. The shop was a nice place to spend time, as far as he was concerned, but he had only taken shifts up there once or twice.

“It was amazing,” she told him excitedly. “I have so many ideas.”

“Yeah?” he asked.

“We saved them for you,” Alice told him with a smile. “When Connor is done eating, Faith is going to share her plans.”

“You’re slowing down, huh, Connor?” Faith asked the little one gently.

Connor smiled up at her, his eyes full of love.

“You’ve got mashed potatoes on your chin,” she told him as she wiped his little mouth. “Are you trying to look like Santa Claus?”

He wiggled his fingers at her, and she pulled him out of his highchair and held him close. Ian could practically feel that warm weight in his own arms.

“Do you want to hold him?” Faith asked. “I mean, after you eat. You must be ravenous.”

“No, no,” Ian said. “I’d love to hold him, if he wants.”

The next thing he knew, Faith was handing over the sleepy boy.

“Is this okay?” Ian asked him as softly as he could. He knew his voice was big and booming compared to Faith’s.

But Connor just leaned his head on Ian’s chest and melted into him.

It felt so good that Ian didn’t hear the next few exchanges between the other family members. He was too busy inhaling the scent of his son’s shock of sandy brown hair, and adjusting his arms so that he was cradled as cozily as possible.

After a moment, Connor reached up and curled his chubby hand in a lock of Ian’s hair, snuggling his little nose into his daddy’s neck.

Ian closed his eyes for a moment, just breathing it in.

When he opened them again, Faith was gazing at him almost hungrily, as if she had been longing for this sight. But when she noticed his eyes on her,

she got a guilty look on her face.

Not wanting to wake the baby, he mouthed the words that were in his heart.

Thank you.

Her responding smile made him feel like he was filled with warmth and butterflies all at once.

“So, let’s hear these ideas,” Jacob said crisply.

“Well, first of all, I think the store is wonderful just the way it is,” Faith told them. “I’ll need to spend some time organizing the books, but from a brief look I can already see that it’s profitable. And the customers who come in all have smiles on their faces.”

That earned her an approving look from Alice.

“The salesperson who was there today, Melody, was wonderful,” Faith went on. “She seems to genuinely want to help customers find what they need.”

“No changes then?” Jacob asked.

“Oh, I do have ideas,” Faith said. “But I did want to put things in perspective first. These would be improvements on something that’s already wonderful.”

“I like that,” Alice said thoughtfully. “Where can we improve?”

“I think we have room for improvement when it comes to the display area,” Faith said. “The space itself is unique with its rounded walls, and so it’s a challenge when you need shelf space. I’m playing with some ideas for that, and I’ll share them when they’re ready. Basically, I’m wondering if there is a more fun and efficient way to lay things out besides the usual shelves and tables.”

“Makes sense,” Joe said, frowning, like for the life of him he couldn’t imagine another way.

“The next thing I suspect but can’t guarantee, is that traffic is slowing when the produce shop downstairs puts away the free coffee in the morning,” Faith said. “I’d have to keep an eye on it for a week or so to be sure.”

“Really?” Alice asked, sounding intrigued.

“If you think about it,” Faith said. “There’s nothing in the Christmas All-Year-Round shop that anyone *needs* in the same way that they might need produce or plant supplies.”

“True,” Alice said.

“And it’s upstairs,” Faith went on. “So you don’t see it when you come

in.”

Ian nodded. She was right, of course.

“When they stop at the coffee station though, they can’t help but see that charming sign inviting them upstairs to the shop,” Faith said. “And since people like it up there, more of them go when they’ve stopped for a cup of coffee.”

“That could be,” Joe said, sitting up a little straighter. “You know, it’s a lot to go up all those stairs, but that sign is a good reminder.”

“I wonder if we could swap out the coffee for hot chocolate instead of taking the station down at ten each morning,” Faith said. “We could keep a count of guests and see if it helps.”

“Wonderful,” Alice breathed.

“But I think the best change we could make is to stock more locally made items,” Faith said with a big smile. “I watched customers come in and out all afternoon and the biggest seller you have is those wonderful candles.”

“Well, they’re all you can smell as you come up the stairs,” Joe said. “People notice them—they have an advantage that way.”

“That’s very true,” Faith allowed. “But that wasn’t the main reason I heard why people chose to actually purchase them.”

“What was the main reason?” Jacob asked, leaning forward.

Ian smiled at the idea that his brother was getting into this now.

“It was all versions of the same thing,” Faith said. “Either they noticed the sign that said the candles were made locally, or they knew the candlemaker. I guess she teaches second grade?”

“Maggie Sullivan,” Alice said, smiling and nodding. “She’s a love.”

“Are there any other local folks who enjoy making holiday crafts?” Faith asked excitedly. “I’m sure you could get lots of people in to shop for them.”

“Here’s the thing,” Joe said, leaning in. “Maggie’s one in a million because she supplies us regularly. It’s never as much as we want, mind you. But if she says she’ll have three dozen on Sunday night, sure enough, they’ll be here waiting.”

“And the quality is just lovely,” Alice said. “We can be proud to keep her candles in the shop.”

“I guess it’s hard to know what you’re dealing with until you’ve received the product and tried selling it,” Faith said thoughtfully. “And that brings me to my favorite idea.”

“Oh my,” Alice said.

“I think it would be fun to have an arts and crafts fair in the shop,” Faith said, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

Ian longed to pull her close and kiss the corner of her pretty smile.

“We could put most of the regular inventory away for the day,” she went on. “And we could feature all the things made by locals. If any are popular with customers, up to your standards of quality, and can agree to a regular supply schedule, you might decide to offer them in the shop. You could even do short-term arrangements to try them out, if you’re not sure.”

“Isn’t that lovely?” Alice breathed.

“You probably wouldn’t be able to make decisions based on one day of customers coming in, though,” Joe pointed out.

“That’s where Ian comes in,” Faith said with a fond smile.

“Me?” Ian asked.

“You have a degree in Communications,” she said, turning to him proudly. “You could do all the publicity, making sure everyone in Trinity Falls knows they just *have* to be here for the fair.”

His heart dropped to his stomach at the idea of doing publicity of any kind.

The truth was that he had chosen a degree in Communications because he struggled with schoolwork, and his counselor had advised him that it was among the easier majors. If not for football, Ian probably wouldn’t have gone to college at all. He *liked* working on the farm more than he’d ever liked school.

But Faith was gazing up at him raptly, so excited about her idea that he couldn’t bear to let her down.

“Sure,” he said. “I guess I could give that a try. Would you want to work on it with me, since you’ll know what’s going on with the fair?”

“Of course,” she said, looking very pleased.

He was about to ask her about the timing, but the doorbell rang.

“Oh, there she is,” Faith said. “She gets so lost in that computer sometimes.”

“Who?” Jacob asked.

“My sister,” Faith said happily, hopping up to get the door.

Alice winked at Jacob, and Ian barely stifled a laugh.

Though his brother was trying to hide it, Ian was pretty sure that Jacob was already sweet on the new neighbor girl. But it was clear that their mom hadn’t noticed, and was hoping he might fall for Faith’s sister.

He glanced over at his brother and saw he was scowling.

“Hey, everyone, this is Felicity,” Faith said, bringing her sister into the table.

“Oh wow, hi,” Felicity said, smiling.

As Faith began making introductions and Alice piled food onto a plate for their latest guest, Jacob appeared to sink further and further into his seat, like he wished he could disappear.

Ian tried to hide his smile. It was pretty funny to see his brother be the one to squirm for once. Though with Faith by his side and Connor in his arms, Ian suddenly realized how incredibly lucky he was.

He and Faith had already planned a nice first date together. If everything went well, then things would soon be back to the way they were always meant to be. And he would have this feeling of being complete every single day.

“You okay?” Faith asked quietly, her beautiful hazel eyes filled with concern.

“I’m more than okay,” he told her, his voice deep with emotion.

She smiled and placed a hand on his arm, where it cradled their son, and he felt like his heart might just burst with love.

IAN

A few days later, Ian drove his truck into Trinity Falls village with Faith beside him.

She had been his girl for all of college, and he'd taken her out as often as he could back then, but he was filled with nervous energy tonight. This wasn't their first date, but it was their first after their time apart. And it was important.

It's been a while, that's all, he reminded himself. *It's still Faith, and she's easy to be with.*

Faith was looking out the window at the snow flurries that swirled past the lampposts and melted on the sandstone sidewalks. The slow, lazy flakes caught the light from the Christmas decorations as they fell, giving the illusion of millions of festive, twinkling lights.

"It's magical," she breathed. "I feel like I'm in a storybook."

"Yeah," Ian agreed. "My parents always said there was something special about Trinity Falls, but I never had anything to compare it to. Now that I've been away some, I get it. And it's not just the pretty houses and lights."

"People here are kind," Faith said, nodding.

She had picked up on that already. He was glad. People should be kind to her.

"They are," he agreed. "It's a small town, so we're all in each other's business a lot, and none of us are perfect. But we take care of each other, best we can."

"I was talking with Melody," Faith said. "From the shop?"

"Yes, she's a nice girl," Ian said. Then he frowned, hoping that didn't

make it sound like he liked her too much.

“She is nice,” Faith agreed, her eyes dancing like she had read his mind. “Anyway, we had this awkward moment where she kind of found out in front of me that I’m an unmarried mom.”

Ian nodded, pressing his lips together tightly so as not to spill out everything he wanted to say just then—that the state of her being unmarried was one hundred percent her choice and not up to him even a little bit.

“I saw her put it together right in front of me,” Faith went on. “But she didn’t judge me or treat me differently.”

“None of us are in control of anyone else’s choices,” Ian said carefully. “And we can’t actually walk a mile in their shoes. The best we can do is love and accept each other.”

She didn’t answer right away.

“Ian Cassidy,” Faith said after a moment. “That was really beautiful.”

He shrugged, feeling embarrassed. He wasn’t really sure what had come over him. He normally didn’t have so much to say.

It reminded him of back on game days when he’d say a few words to the boys. Inspiration seemed to strike him back then, and speaking in the locker room didn’t feel intimidating like it did in other places. He knew those guys and trusted them.

They had just about reached The Village Green. It was by far the nicest restaurant in town, and much fancier than Ian would have chosen for any other occasion. But tonight was special.

He pulled into a parking spot and hopped out quickly to open Faith’s door for her.

“Thank you,” she told him, taking the hand he offered.

He half expected her to let go once she was out of the truck, but she held on, and they walked hand in hand through the snow flurries to the lobby.

“Welcome,” an attendant said.

He was a young man, and Ian suspected he must be one of the community college students, since he didn’t recognize him from around town.

“We have a reservation,” Ian told him. “Under Cassidy.”

“Of course, sir,” the attendant said. “Just follow me.”

“Oh wow,” Faith said, as they entered the lobby and walked over plush carpets, past a man playing a baby grand piano, and into the dim restaurant with its dark wood and wall sconces.

The whole place had been tastefully decorated for the season, with deep

green garlands and strings of unblinking, white lights. It was impressive, but Ian had to admit that he preferred the festive feeling of some flashing colors and plastic reindeer.

The attendant handed them off to a hostess while Faith looked around with wide eyes. Ian hid his smile, enjoying how impressed she was with everything. In his mind, she was a city girl, even if it was Pittsburgh, not Manhattan. He had been worried she might be bored in Trinity Falls.

But so far, she seemed happy here.

They had almost reached the table the hostess was leading them to when he spotted an unwelcome sight.

Lex Barone, who had been a vicious linebacker for Springton Valley back in high school, was tucking into a sizzling steak at the table closest to theirs.

Springton Valley was their football rival, and Lex had lived and breathed football. While the Trinity Falls boys had been taught to win and lose with grace, no one seemed to have told the Springton Valley team the same.

Ian remembered some pretty nasty run-ins with Lex and his crew back in the day.

“Do you have anything by the windows?” Ian asked the hostess quietly.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” she said worriedly. “We’re full up tonight and the window reservations are already set.”

“This is fine,” Faith said, giving Ian a look. “It’s really lovely.”

The hostess smiled in relief and waited for Ian to pull out Faith’s chair before handing them leather-bound menus.

“A server will be right over to take your drink orders,” she told them.

Ian was seated facing Lex, which meant at least Faith had her back to him.

You’re being ridiculous, he told himself. *Lex Barone isn’t a high school kid anymore. He probably has a career and a family now. The last thing he’s holding onto is some silly football rivalry.*

But still, he was relieved when Lex didn’t seem to notice him.

“Do you know what you want to drink?” Ian asked Faith, happy to turn all his attention back to her.

“Oh, I’ve got a soft spot for Coca-Cola,” she said with a smile.

“I remember,” he said, unable to hide his grin.

They looked at the menus for a bit, and when Faith put hers down, he did the same.

The waitress floated over a moment later and took their orders and the

menus, leaving them alone at the table with no distractions.

There were so many things he wanted to ask her about that the questions seemed to jam up in his mind.

“Have you talked to your parents?” he heard himself ask.

“Yes,” she said, looking a little surprised. “My mom got an apartment and a job at the diner near our old place. She sounds good. She misses Connor. My dad checked in once or twice, but didn’t share much. I guess they’re both okay, which is... good.”

He nodded, thinking it was nice she was coming to terms with her parents’ decision.

“I’m not in control of their choices,” she said softly, repeating his words from earlier. “I just have to accept and love them.”

“You make me sound smart,” he said, shaking his head.

“You are smart,” she said, looking surprised that he would make a comment like that.

“Not really,” he said, shrugging. “I had a hard time in school. You know that.”

“You worked hard,” she said. “Besides, you can be smart and still struggle in school. Everyone knows that.”

“You didn’t struggle,” he pointed out.

“I got lucky,” she said. “And now I get to use what I learned.”

“You didn’t get lucky,” he said. “You worked your tail off, and everyone knew it.”

She laughed.

“So, you like working at the shop?” he asked. “I mean, I know you’re glad to have a job and all, but wouldn’t you rather be in the city doing something bigger?”

“No,” she said, looking horrified. “First of all, I love the job. It’s really rewarding, and a smaller place gives me more room for creativity.”

He nodded, sensing the truth in her words.

“Besides,” she said. “Can you even imagine how difficult it would be to raise a child in the city? I don’t know how my parents did it. Trinity Falls is the perfect place for Connor to grow up.”

Relief washed over him.

“That means the world to hear you say that,” he told her. “If you wanted to go someplace bigger, I’d go with you, no matter what.”

“Connor has family here,” she said. “And thanks to your parents, I have

work. It's perfect."

"I think my parents are thankful to you," he said, shaking his head. "Mom is still talking about the hot chocolate idea. And the craft fair is going to be really nice."

"It feels good to be doing something with my education," she told him. "It feels fulfilling. Do you have anything like that in your life right now?"

You and Connor, he wanted to scream. But he also didn't want to scare her away.

"I heard the high school team made the play-offs," she said gently. "Have you thought about getting involved in some way?"

"Nah," he said, sitting back. "If I show up it'll just bum everyone out. I was supposed to make a name for the team. Instead, I'm just working horses and mending fences like everyone else in this town."

"Here we go," the waitress said with a big smile. "A Coke and an ice water."

"Thank you," Faith said.

The waitress left and Ian held out his glass to toast her.

"To the future," he said with a smile, hoping he hadn't bummed her out too much talking about football.

"To the future," she agreed, tapping her glass to his.

A little of her drink spilled over the edge onto her sleeve as she pulled her glass back.

"Oh dear," she said. "I'll just run and clean that up really quickly."

He stood as she got up and headed for the ladies' room.

As he was sitting back down, Lex got up from his seat at the next table and strode over.

"Ian Cassidy," he said, not bothering to extend a hand.

"Hey, Lex," Ian said. "Good to see you, man. How's it going?"

"Me?" Lex asked. "I'm doing great. Top salesman of GuardLock Insurance two years running."

"That's great, Lex," Ian said. "Congratulations."

"But you're not doing so great, are you, Cassidy?" Lex asked, his breath letting Ian know that he'd definitely polished off a few drinks with that steak.

"What are you talking about?" Ian asked, figuring this was about his accident.

It was awfully rich for Lex to poke at him about it. Sure, Ian might have gotten hurt, but Lex wasn't exactly playing pro football either.

“You got hit in the head one too many times, eh, Cassidy?” Lex laughed. There was a derisive note to his laughter.

He was probably remembering the many times he’d tried to sack Ian, and sometimes succeeded, even getting himself flagged once or twice for doing it after the whistle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ian asked, willing himself to remain calm.

“Oh, I heard about your accident and all that,” Lex said. “Terrible shame. But then I heard about the girl.”

He shook his head, looking like he was going to laugh again.

“What do you mean?” Ian asked.

“Everyone’s talking about it, man,” Lex said. “She dumps you and then shows up out of nowhere two years later with a baby and you just take her out for steaks? I mean have some pride, dude. The kid’s probably not even yours.”

White hot fury ripped through Ian’s veins, and he was out of his seat before he knew what happened.

FAITH

Faith stepped out of the ladies' room and headed back to the table where Ian was waiting.

She had been strangely nervous about tonight, even though she had loved Ian for years. But it was going well so far, and she couldn't seem to stop her imagination from running wild and showing her pictures of a happy future for their family of three.

Turning the corner, she saw that an enormous, brick wall of a man in an ill-fitting suit was standing at their table, talking with Ian. Before she could even try to figure out who it might be, Ian flew out of his chair and punched the man in the face.

Though Ian was tall and brawny, the other man was absolutely gigantic. But he sprawled to the floor like a rag doll as Ian's fist connected.

Faith gasped in a ragged breath, horrified.

There were more gasps and cries as other diners realized what was happening. Some even stood for a better look.

Ian moved toward the man, like he wanted nothing more than to hit him again, but their tiny waitress somehow slipped between them, stopping Ian in his tracks.

The man on the floor began scrambling up, looking like he didn't care if he hurt the waitress in his hurry to get to Ian.

Luckily, a couple of other guys had made it over by then. One of them grabbed Ian, who didn't put up a fight, and two more had a harder time holding back the other guy.

It all reminded Faith of the kids back in high school, or even wrestlers on

tv, not two grown men in an elegant restaurant.

It wasn't the kind of thing her Ian would have done.

And it wasn't something she wanted in her life.

Heart breaking in her chest, she walked past the table toward the lobby, praying he wouldn't see her, and she could just go home.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she heard Ian saying. "I'm leaving."

She hurried through the lobby, past the piano, and out into the wintry night. Tears were prickling her eyes, and she was grateful that the restaurant was right in the village. At least she could walk home.

"Faith," Ian called out from behind her.

She could hear his footfalls rapidly coming closer and she knew she certainly couldn't outrun him.

So, she turned to face him instead.

He stopped running as soon as he got close. There was a flush on his high cheekbones and his eyes were glittering.

He was as beautiful as always, but there was something tragic in his handsome face now, a pain in his eyes that she couldn't touch.

"I don't want to be with someone who is so unhappy," she said simply. "And I can't have Connor live with someone so filled with darkness."

"Please don't take him away," Ian whispered, broad shoulders slumping.

His desperate words shattered her.

"We're not going anywhere," she told him. "But I think you and I should just focus on being friends and parents. Dating isn't a good idea."

"But, Faith I—" he began.

"What could that man possibly have said that would justify resorting to violence?" she asked, cutting him off. "What could ever be worth it?"

Ian's jaw clenched, but he didn't speak.

"There's no excuse for what just happened," she answered for him. "And the Ian Cassidy I loved would never have used his fists instead of his words. I know you're frustrated about all the changes in your life. But if you want to be a dad, that means working your own stuff out so that you can be there for your child."

He opened his mouth and then closed it again, nodding once.

"I'm going to walk home," she told him. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't walk by yourself," he said, breaking his silence. "Let me drive you."

"I can see my apartment from here," she said, pointing across Ambler

Road.

She could even see that the living room light was on, glowing a warm yellow. She tried to picture Felicity in there with Connor, to remind herself that there were precious people in her heart besides Ian Cassidy.

“Let me walk with you?” he offered.

She nodded and they headed toward the train station overpass, where the clock tower was swathed in beautiful, evergreen garlands. Pretty Christmas lights and decorations were hung from every shop in town.

It should have been a romantic walk.

Instead, it felt like a goodbye.

He stopped just before they reached her door and looked down at her like a lost man.

“You’re going to be okay, Ian,” she heard herself tell him. “You just need to find a way back to yourself.”

He nodded, but his expression was hopeless.

“You know I never cared that you were a quarterback,” she told him. “I loved you because you were kind and strong.”

“You always were an angel,” he said, his voice husky.

“Get some sleep, Ian,” she told him. “We’ll see you tomorrow.”

He nodded, but he didn’t move from the spot as he waited for her to unlock the lower door and go inside.

She climbed the stairs slowly, trying to calm herself before she got to her sister and son.

Ian Cassidy is the only person in charge of his own actions. I’m in charge of mine, and I can’t be with someone who walks around so angry he would hit a man in a restaurant. Especially not when Connor is involved.

But her thoughts brought no comfort, and when she reached her door, she couldn’t wait any longer to be in the comforting presence of her big sister.

“You’re early,” Felicity said cheerfully from the floor, where she and Connor were playing with a wooden train set. “How did it go?”

But when she looked up she must have known something was very wrong from Faith’s expression.

Felicity’s smile slipped away instantly, and her forehead furrowed.

“You know,” Felicity said slowly. “You don’t ever need anyone else in your life. I’ve got your back and you’ve got mine. That’s all that matters.”

Faith nodded, pressing her lips together so as not to sob in front of the baby, and ran to her room to change clothes and pull herself together.

I've got this, she told herself. And it's going to be okay.

FAITH

The days moved slowly for Faith as she dedicated herself wholly to the shop and to Connor, trying not to worry too much about Ian.

She enjoyed her evenings laughing and going for walks with her sister, with Connor taking in the view of the world from his stroller.

Each morning, she would bring Connor to Alice and Joe and eat some breakfast with them. Then she would walk back out to the shop on her own, breathing in the scents and sounds of the farm, and focusing on how lucky she was to be there. There was no need to ride the hayride cart to work when the walk was so luxurious.

At this point, she had the bookkeeping for the shop pretty much squared away, and she and Melody had a plan in place for how they would pack up and temporarily move the existing inventory for the craft fair. Presumably, Ian was working on publicity for them. She was getting calls and emails asking about the requirements for selling items every day, so the word was definitely on the street.

Faith was also getting a big kick out of meeting with the local artists and helping them figure out how to display and price their offerings.

Ian had been spending his lunchtimes with Connor and his parents. She was glad to know they were getting time together, and grateful that she didn't have to be there. Seeing Ian with Connor was unbearably tempting, and made her want to do just about anything in order for them to all be together.

But she knew Ian wasn't himself right now.

She couldn't accept a commitment from a man who was anything less than fully present. And right now, Ian had a lot to figure out.

So, she stopped swinging by the farmhouse for lunch, and instead packed a peanut butter sandwich every day to eat at her desk.

One Friday afternoon, Alice stopped by the shop just before lunchtime with a covered bowl and a foil wrapped packet.

“I made corn bread and chili,” she told Faith. “And I just couldn’t stand to think of you in here eating a cold sandwich.”

“Wow, thank you,” Faith told her.

“You’re welcome, dear,” Alice said with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Want to sit and chat for a few minutes?” Faith offered.

“That sounds lovely,” Alice agreed.

They wandered into the little office and sat at the desk. Faith was glad she was diligent about keeping her work area neat and tidy. It was a perfect spot for a cozy chat.

“Go ahead and eat while it’s hot,” Alice told her. “I’ve been wanting to invite you and Connor to a little family get-together. Is it okay for me to tell you about it?”

“Sure,” Faith said, feeling a little guilty.

She wasn’t certain how much Ian had shared with his family about how their first date had gone, but she was pretty sure everyone knew they weren’t going to have a second one. It wasn’t hard to see that she avoided the house when Ian was there.

Though Faith had offered him friendship, she was leaving it to him to seek her out. She didn’t want to make things worse by hanging around all the time.

Worse than what? her inner critic asked. *You already cry yourself to sleep every night.*

But none of that mattered. Ian hadn’t sought her out. She wasn’t sure if it was because he was ashamed of his behavior the other night at the restaurant, or if he had just given up.

Maybe he never wanted to be with you in the first place, the little voice suggested. *Maybe he was only trying to do the right thing, and you’ve given him an out.*

“The get-together is tomorrow,” Alice said. “We like to gather once in a while with as many kids, grandkids, cousins, and so forth as we can. It’s sort of like a mini family reunion. There will be lots of food, and you can bring your sister, of course. And Ian will be there.”

She stopped there, as if she wanted to make sure that last thing sank in, and that it wouldn't change Faith's mind.

"That's fine," Faith said. "It sounds like a lot of fun. Connor and I would love to come, and maybe Felicity too, if she doesn't have plans. Thank you for inviting us."

"You're very welcome, dear," Alice said, getting up. "Now eat up. I'll show myself out."



THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Faith found herself outside the Cassidy farmhouse with Connor on her hip, chatting away with Natalie, who was Ian's sister-in-law and Shane's wife.

It was cold out, but no one seemed to care. They had all been gathered around the big Christmas tree, eating and singing along to the carols that Jacob played on his acoustic guitar in the toasty warm house all day. And now, the cold air felt good on Faith's cheeks.

A couple of the guys and most of the kids were playing a game of touch football on the lawn, while the others laughed and cheered.

As much as she was enjoying chatting with Natalie about all the holiday celebrations in town coming up, part of her attention was on Ian. He was bent over Wyatt, one of Shane's kids, talking intently and holding the ball and demonstrating something in the air.

"Hey there, Nat," Cal Cassidy said, heading over and wrapping an arm around Natalie.

"Hey, Cal," she said, smiling up at her brother-in-law, who was also the local Sheriff. "Where's Angel?"

"She and Justin are coming separately, since I'm officially on call," he said with a smile. "They'll be here in a minute though. She wants to ask you about something to do with Carla's Place."

Carla's Place was the hang-out spot for Trinity Falls seniors that Natalie and her brother, Chris, had created last year after their Nana Carla passed and left her house to them. Natalie dedicated a lot of time to collecting donations for Carla's Place, and spending time there with the folks who enjoyed it.

"Oh, wow," Natalie said, her eyes moving to the football game.

They all watched as Wyatt sent the ball rocketing through the air.

“Ian just taught him how to throw a spiral,” Cal said, shaking his head. “He makes it look so easy.”

Faith’s eyes moved to Ian, who was clapping and smiling proudly.

Time seemed to slow down.

He looks fulfilled...

This was the Ian she had known in school, the one she had pinned all her dreams on. This was the Ian she longed to share a home and a child with, the one she loved with all her heart.

“You okay?” Natalie asked.

“Yeah,” Faith breathed. “It’s just... he looks so happy coaching.”

“He really does,” Natalie agreed.

“And the high school coach is retiring at the end of the year,” Cal sighed. “But Ian won’t even think about applying.”

“Why not?” Faith asked.

“No idea,” Cal said, shrugging. “But he wouldn’t even hear me out when I brought it up. I was talking to Shane about it the other day, and he said the same thing. Even Jacob can’t get through to him on it. Seems like Ian’s determined to pull football out of his heart by the roots.”

“Maybe it hurts too much, after all he’s lost,” Natalie suggested.

“Makes sense,” Cal agreed. “Just a shame, is all.”

But as Faith watched Ian pull another kid aside and start chatting with him, she wasn’t so sure that it did make sense. Ian’s blue eyes were flashing with excitement, and the kid he was talking to looked like he was about to levitate with joy.

Her own heart throbbed helplessly in response.

“Maybe there’s a way to convince him,” she mused out loud.

“*Dah*,” Connor said firmly, looking at his father.

“You’re going to help Daddy, huh?” she asked the boy, pressing a kiss to his sandy brown hair as she tried to formulate a plan.

IAN

I an strode around the Christmas All-Year-Round shop, impressed at how busy it was.

Friends and neighbors from all over town, and even some people he had never seen before in his life, were all roaming the store, filling the large space so that it felt cozy.

Melody was running the cash register with Alice's help. It was going to be a banner day for the shop, that much was for sure.

When Faith had suggested that he do the artist recruiting and publicity for the event, he hadn't been super excited about it. But lately on the farm, he was getting frustrated with the things he couldn't do physically anymore. Spending an hour or two a day visiting with local artists and putting out the word at the local paper and the radio station had been a welcome break from the dwelling on what he couldn't do anymore.

He had even connected with the arts editor of a magazine in Philadelphia, who had agreed to mention the event in a piece about Christmas craft fairs.

Though he didn't exactly want to go into a career in publicity, it felt good to know he had done something helpful—something that his brothers might not have been able to do.

Especially when Faith was one of the people he had helped.

He looked over to see her chatting happily with several women purchasing flour sack towels with winter scenes of Trinity Falls screened on them. The artist was with her, excitedly answering questions and taking ideas for more printings she could do.

Faith was really in her element here. This was exactly what she had

hoped to do with her life, and he could see the joy in her eyes. It made his heart squeeze with happiness for her.

If only I could make her feel that way...

He had messed up big time on their date. And he wasn't going to get another chance. That much was clear.

The only silver lining was that he didn't think she had heard anything Lex Barone had said that night. It probably wouldn't matter to her that Ian had been defending her honor. He was just glad she hadn't heard that poison.

What Faith had shared with him that night about Melody's acceptance of her in spite of her circumstances told him that she still felt a lot of shame.

Why in the world she would see the shame as hers alone to bear, and not his, he couldn't understand. But he didn't like the idea of her feeling it at all. She had succumbed to temptation that night and so had he, but everything she had done before and since showed her strength of character, and her determination to do the right thing.

"Hey," a soft, familiar voice said.

"Faith," he said, a little surprised that she was coming over to talk with him. It was probably just to ask something about the publicity work.

"This is really amazing, isn't it?" she asked him.

"You're amazing," he told her. "You dreamed this up and made it happen."

"With a ton of help from you, Ian," she said. "How does it feel to use your expertise to help all these people?"

"I like helping people," he said, nodding. "And I liked working with you."

"But publicity isn't what you want to do with your life?" she guessed.

"I'm not sure," he allowed, hoping it wouldn't disappoint her.

From across the room, his mother shook her finger at Faith like she was scolding her, and tapped her watch.

Faith laughed.

"Your mom told me to take a fifteen-minute break," she told him. "Like an hour ago. But I couldn't bear to leave. I guess I need to though. Want to walk with me?"

"Sure," he said.

They headed down the stairs and into the produce shop, then out into the wintry air. The breeze was blowing the pine scent of the cut trees in the nursery their way, and it felt like he was literally breathing in Christmas.

And if there was one thing Ian knew, it was that Christmas was a time for miracles. And he sure could use one with Faith.

“I wanted to talk to you about something, Ian,” Faith said carefully, as they headed toward the animal pens. “I heard the high school football coach is retiring this year.”

“I know,” he told her, his heart sinking a little. “You aren’t the first one to talk to me about it.”

“Are you going to apply for the job?” she asked.

He’d already told everyone else that he wasn’t interested. But looking down into her compassionate hazel eyes, he found himself telling her the truth instead.

“They won’t want me,” he told her. “No one wants a failed player coaching.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked, shaking her head like she couldn’t make heads or tails of it.

“I’m talking about me,” he said flatly. “This town pinned its hopes on me, and I let them all down. I’m a disappointment. No one wants someone like me to remind them of their own failures. Heck, you don’t even want me around.”

Her face went pale, and her lips flattened into a straight line, like she was trying very hard not to say something.

“Ian,” she said after a second. “Are you calling me a liar?”

“No,” he said, utterly confused.

“I told you the other night that I didn’t care if you could play football or not,” she said evenly. “Did you not believe me?”

“You left me,” he said simply. “And you didn’t come back until Connor was over a year old. Even if it had nothing to do with football, you didn’t want me around.”

“And you don’t even care,” she replied, tears forming in her lovely eyes.

“What?” he demanded, fighting to stay calm.

“You don’t even care,” she repeated. “*You weren’t even angry.*”

That last came out on a sob, with tears springing from her eyes.

“*Of course I was angry,*” he heard himself shout.

He took a breath, and tried to start again calmly. If she wanted to know that he was angry with her, fine. But he didn’t have to scream.

“You took something from me,” he told her, unable to keep the resentment from his voice. “You took a lot of things, like my right to marry

you before you had the baby. And then you took the first year of my son's life from me. And most of all you took *you*. I needed you. I was broken, and *you weren't there.*"

He gasped in a breath, hating himself for letting her have it, but unable to help himself.

She stood still, listening, drinking in his words like he was professing his love instead of unleashing his fury.

"And you know what?" he went on, his voice a harsh growl. "You don't know this because you didn't bother to *talk to me*, but losing you was a *way* bigger deal to me than losing football."

Tears were streaking down her cheeks again, but she was listening.

"Losing that year with Connor breaks me in ways football never could," he told her. "You and that little boy are my future, my whole *world*. When I used to think about what I wanted in my life, how I saw my future, that's what it was. That's *all* it was. It had nothing to do with money or fame. I never pictured a big house or a fancy car. But I did picture sitting around the table with you, and driving our kids to school one day."

She was still looking up at him, taking it all in, in spite of the pain in her eyes.

He already knew she was sorry, knew that her parents' situation had dropped the floor out from under her, and that she had been young and scared. But she had bravely brought Connor into the world in spite of all of it, and she had clearly dedicated herself to their baby boy.

He didn't want her to feel bad about any of it. He just wanted her back. That was why he hadn't unleashed his emotions on her before now. He couldn't stand losing her all over again.

Suddenly, he wished he could take it all back.

She was still gazing at him. He realized her expression had passed from guilt to sorrow. Then she nodded slowly, and he saw hope in her eyes, too.

"Thank you for being honest with me," she said. "And I'm so sorry for running. I'll never be able to make that up to you."

"You could make it up to me right now by giving me another chance," he offered before he could stop himself.

"Okay," she said after a moment, swiping at her tears with her sleeve.

"Okay?" he echoed.

"Okay. I'll go on one more date with you," she sniffed. "But only if that date is going to the big playoff game. And you have to promise not to punch

anyone.”

The game was the last place Ian wanted to go. But at that moment, he was so filled with joy that he didn't care. He'd follow Faith anywhere she wanted to go.

FAITH

Faith could hear the sounds of the game revving up from the moment Ian opened her car door and offered her his hand.

She'd had so many errands to run today that they had decided to meet up at the game and then go out again for dinner after she'd picked up Connor from Alice and brought him home to Felicity.

Even though Alice insisted she wanted as much time with the little one as she could get, Faith didn't like to take too much advantage.

As she joined Ian, Faith found herself smiling in anticipation.

Surely, being back here would show him that there was still a place for him in his beloved game.

I would give anything to see him happy again...

"I can't believe this is what you wanted to do for our date," he said, shaking his head.

"It will be fun," she predicted. "Besides, I haven't been to a game in years. And I hear you guys have the best soft pretzels in Tarker County at these games."

He smiled in obvious delight.

"You're right," he said. "And I'm going to buy you so many you won't be able to move."

"Maybe we can start with just one," she laughed. "I want to be able to jump up and cheer."

They headed to the gate, trailing behind dozens of excited fans. A man at a table was selling tickets to anyone without a student ID.

Ian let go of Faith's hand to pull his wallet out of his pocket.

“Ian Cassidy?” the man at the table asked in awe.

“Hey,” Ian said. “Liam Jones?”

“Yes, man, wow,” Liam replied. “It’s great to see you.”

“You too,” Ian said, smiling.

“It’s great for you to come out and support the boys,” Liam said, shaking his head. “What an honor.”

Ian looked stunned, but he recovered, shaking his head.

“We’re just happy to be here to see the big game, like everyone else,” he said. “Can I get tickets for myself and my date?”

“No way, man,” Liam said, waving him away. “Your money’s no good here. Tickets are on the house. Go enjoy.”

Faith could feel the surprise and relief in Ian without him saying a word. The first person to recognize him was glad he was there, and wasn’t a bit disappointed. The night was off to a great start.

They headed into the game together, Faith drinking in the sights and sounds as they went.

Cheerleaders were already on the field getting the crowd warmed up. And unlike at her old high school, these bleachers were packed. The kids were clearly showing their spirit. Near the front, a whole group of boys were shirtless and showing off body paint to support the team.

Parents and grandparents already had phones out, taking pictures of their cheerleaders and band members.

“Was it always like this?” she asked him.

“Football is pretty big here,” he told her. “But playoff games like this one are on another level.”

They made their way up the bleachers to a nice spot near the top. As they moved along, Faith could sense the fans noticing Ian and whispering to each other, until what felt like hundreds of eyes were trained on them.

“Is this good?” he asked her, seemingly not noticing that he had so many people staring at him.

“It’s great,” she said.

“Okay, save my seat,” he told her. “I’m going to grab pretzels and drinks for us.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she told him quickly, imagining him trying to get all the way down and back up with all those curious people watching. “I was just teasing.”

“Nah,” he said. “My girl’s got to have pretzels and a Coke for the big

game. I'll be right back."

He slipped away before she could stop him and she watched people watching him, smiles on their faces as their old champ reclaimed his territory.

This is where he is meant to be...

She grabbed a blanket out of the big bag she'd brought, and settled in with it. The December wind had a bite to it. It was good that Alice was watching Connor. This would have been far too cold for him, no matter how much she bundled him up.

Faith smiled, remembering how happy he had been to see his grandparents.

Connor now ran as fast as his little legs would carry him to his Grandpa Joe and scrambled into his lap to read a story the moment they arrived each day. It warmed her heart to see him so comfortable at the big farmhouse.

A year ago, she had thought he might never get to meet this side of his family. Now they were a major part of his world.

And so was his father.

Please let today open Ian's eyes and his heart, she prayed. Please let him be happy again.

"You're Ian Cassidy's girlfriend," one of the kids on the seats in front turned around and said.

His friends were elbowing him, and he looked almost afraid.

"I'm Faith," she told him with a friendly smile. "Are you excited for the big game?"

The kid's nervous face broke into a big smile, and he began making predictions a mile a minute, all of which basically added up to the Trinity Falls team kicking Springton's butt six ways from Sunday. His enthusiasm spilled over onto Faith, and she couldn't help smiling back.

The other two kids got brave, and one told her that her boyfriend still held the school record for passing yards and the other explained in great detail how he shook off three tackles and threw the game-winning touchdown at the championship game against Farmington his senior year.

"Aren't you too young to have seen that game?" Faith teased.

"No way," he said. "He was the town hero. I was over there, but I saw it all. Everyone did."

He pointed and she noticed a bunch of the littlest kids in big jerseys playing on the hillside next to the bleachers.

"That's great," she told him, meaning it.

It had been a while, so she scanned the bleachers and the concessions for Ian. Her eyes stopped when she hit the fence by the field.

A group of older guys had been leaning on it when they arrived, almost looking like they wanted to get back out there and start playing themselves.

Now they had gathered in a semi-circle around Ian, who must have been regaling them with a great story, judging by how intently they were all following his every word.

He was gesturing with both hands, one of which held a row of Philly soft pretzels, and the other held a bottle of water and a soda that looked like it was in danger of spilling out.

Suddenly, his movements stopped and the guys cracked up, some of them holding their bellies with laughter.

Ian gestured toward the stands and must have seen Faith watching him, because he winked.

The guys waved to him and one of them gave him a good slap on the back. Then he was climbing up to get back to her, smiling and saying hello to the people who called out to him on his way back up. Some shouted his name. Others just held up four fingers on one hand, and three on the other. Seven had always been Ian's number.

"Hey," he said, his voice soft with wonder. "Did you see that?"

"You're a celebrity," she teased lightly, her eyes locked to his to gauge how he felt about it.

"Guess so," he said, looking a little uncomfortable.

She smiled up at him, recognizing that discomfort from back when he was everyone's college hero. He was uncomfortable because he was modest, but not because he didn't enjoy interacting with everyone.

"You deserve this, Ian," she told him softly. "And so do they. Just enjoy it."

"Anyone ever tell you you're a ray of sunshine, Faith Andrews?" he asked her.

The familiar words brought back happy memories.

"Someone used to tell me that all the time," she said with a smile, ripping off a bit of soft pretzel and offering it to him.

"They should tell you every single day," he said, his voice suddenly solemn.

Just then, the crowd exploded into cheers as the band began to play and the cheerleaders ran out on the field, cartwheeling and screaming like their

lives depended on it.

Ian settled in under his half of the big blanket to watch as the team broke through a paper banner and onto the field, a half-smile on his handsome face every time Faith stole a glance at him.

The first half of the game was exciting and very close. Faith had always thought that having Ian out on the field was what had piqued her interest in football. But even with her man beside her, she found herself shouting herself hoarse for the home team.

He murmured his thoughts to her from time to time, always seeming to have an idea of what strategies could come into play.

She wondered if he could hear himself, if he even realized what was clear as day to her.

As the players cleared the field for halftime, the announcer came on and shared a few words about what they could expect coming up.

“And before we get our halftime show underway, we have a special guest with us today,” the announcer shouted. *“Hometown favorite, our number seven, the Cowboy Quarterback himself, Ian Cassidy is in the house!”*

The crowd went wild.

“Stand up, Ian. Let us say hello,” the announcer yelled.

Faith thought she might have to elbow him, but Ian was up on his feet in a heartbeat, smiling shyly.

When they saw his heartfelt smile, the entire crowd was suddenly on their feet, cheering, clapping, and stomping the bleachers. Faith saw Ian’s eyes grow wet with unshed tears as he took in the love and acceptance of his community.

They weren’t disappointed in him at all. They genuinely loved him. Which was exactly what she’d believed all along. After all, how could anyone not love Ian Cassidy?

But the most important part was that now, Ian believed it too.

IAN

After the game, Ian stood with Faith by his side at the gate, shaking hands with one person after another.

The game had ended twenty minutes ago, but they hadn't even been able to make it out of their seats before folks started coming over to talk with him.

It had been a close one, and a very tough loss for Trinity Falls.

But no one seemed broken up enough to be wearing a frown. Down on the field, fans were embracing the players, clearly proud of the fight they had shown.

Seeing that and remembering the joy they had all taken in just playing the game—win or lose—made it a little easier for Ian to understand why everyone was so glad to see him. He had done his best. He'd gone out and tried to do them all proud. And they were clearly all still behind him and proud of him, even though he hadn't wound up playing pro after all.

"You coaching next year?" Reggie Webb asked, shaking his hand and clapping him on the back.

Ian only laughed.

"How many people have asked you that so far?" Reggie asked, leaning in and winking.

"You're not the first," Ian admitted.

Reggie began regaling him with a long story of the first time he himself had predicted that Ian would go far in football, and Ian allowed himself to glance down at Faith.

She smiled at him, and then turned her attention back to Reggie, listening

to him so calmly and patiently. Though she seemed so small and sweet, he had always known that Faith was a force to be reckoned with. And today she had shone as brightly as the sun.

She had done what no one else had been able to do. She'd opened his eyes.

Today, in the fresh air, watching the young players work earnestly on the field, the happy crowd cheering all around him and Faith by his side, Ian realized that he had only been going through the motions for the last two years.

This was home for him, even if his place was in the bleachers instead of on the field.

"I reckon I should let you go be with your girl," Reggie said at last.

That made Faith blush, which made Ian want to wrap his arms around her and kiss her.

"It was great to see you, Mr. Webb," he said, shaking the man's hand again.

Reggie headed out and Ian turned to Faith.

"I don't know how to thank you," he said simply.

"I had fun too," she told him.

"You helped me realize that there were so many things I loved about this sport besides just playing," he told her. "It was never about getting rich and famous for me. It was a sense of being part of something bigger than myself, something that made people feel like a family."

"Football makes you happy," she said simply.

But her smile was a little wistful.

"Faith, what's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing is wrong," she said immediately. "You're happy, and I'm so glad. I knew it would help if you could find a way to open your heart to the game again."

Something about that wasn't quite right. But he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Hey, brother," Jacob called to him.

"I have to pick up Connor," Faith said softly.

"Of course," Ian said. "We'll go now. Jacob, sorry, man. We can talk at home."

"No, no," Faith said. "We didn't come together, so I have to drive back separately anyway. You should stay awhile. So many people want to see you."

We'll meet up later, like we planned.”

“Perfect,” Jacob told her.

“Are you sure?” Ian asked.

“Of course,” she told him. “Have fun.”

He gave her a wave, and watched as she walked away by herself, feeling his stomach sink.

“It's okay,” Jacob said. “She's not going anywhere.”

“I just have this feeling...” Ian said, wishing he could express the foreboding he felt in a way that made sense.

“She left you once,” Jacob said, nodding. “But if you forgive her, then you forgive her. You need to stop focusing on the fact that she left, and start focusing on the fact that she came back.”

Ian nodded, moved by his brother's words.

But something still didn't feel right.

“Ian Cassidy,” a voice boomed.

“Oh no. It's Vargas,” Jacob said, winking. “I'm getting out of here before I wind up in detention again.”

Ian laughed and clapped his brother on the back, then turned to their old high school principal.

“I'm sure I'm not the first one to bring it up,” Principal Vargas said. “But have you given any thought to the coaching position that's opening up next year?”

FAITH

Faith drove slowly back to Cassidy Farm, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Ian was happy. He really seemed like himself again.

And though she felt like her last two years had been full of errors in judgement that had hurt the man she loved, it also felt really good that she'd had a hand in something that was good for Ian.

Football is making him happy, not me...

That part stung a little, but it didn't take away the quiet joy that had settled around her heart. She loved him, plain and simple. And seeing him happy was all that mattered.

Now that he was back in a world that accepted and celebrated him, she might learn the truth about whether or not he really wanted to be with her. But the idea of him dropping his crusade to rekindle their relationship scared her.

He has purpose now, she reminded herself. I wanted that for him. I wanted him to feel fulfilled before he decided he also wanted to be a husband and a father.

But it was hard not to wonder if she had ever brought him the kind of happiness he felt when he was part of the game. And, just as they always did when she was feeling a crisis of confidence, she heard Ty Keller's cruel words in her head.

You don't want to be with a girl who only wants a meal ticket, right? And God forbid she goes and gets herself pregnant. Then you're on the hook for the next eighteen years.

She tried to remind herself of everything Ian had said the day she agreed to tonight's date. How he had told her that marrying her and having a child together was what he had always dreamed of when he thought of the future.

It doesn't matter, she told herself firmly. I have Connor and Felicity and a wonderful job at the farm. And even if they let me go, I'll find another.

The downside to the craft fair was that after crunching all the numbers and looking at the best-selling items, she had realized something disappointing about the direction she had hoped to take the shop in. When she explained it to Alice and Joe she wasn't sure how they would react.

As she pulled into the drive and past the orchard, shops, and nursery, she willed herself to get it together. But too soon, she was passing the animal area and then taking the bumpy gravel drive past the *Private Property* sign to the big farmhouse.

For once, Alice wasn't out on the porch waving to her.

She took advantage of the unexpected moment of privacy to wipe the tears from her face and take a few deep breaths.

Everything was going to be fine, one way or another.

Barely a minute later, she heard another car and turned back to see Jacob's red truck pulling up alongside hers. Of all the people it could be, Jacob was the last one she had hoped to see right now.

She hopped out of the car, hoping to beat him inside.

"You okay?" Jacob asked her as he got out of his truck.

"Sure," she said, jogging up the porch steps and opening the front door.

"Wait," he called to her, catching up.

She stood in the front hall, bracing herself for whatever awful thing he wanted to say to her.

"That was a good thing you did," he told her gruffly, gesturing to the small front parlor with his chin.

She followed him into the little room, wondering what was up.

"He would never have gone to that game if you didn't basically force him to," Jacob said, nodding to her as if to allow her his begrudging respect.

"I love him," she said simply.

"I'm starting to believe you," Jacob said. "But one thing still doesn't make sense."

"What's that?" she asked.

"Why did you run in the first place?" Jacob asked.

"I feel like I've explained that a lot of times," she said, stalling.

“Yeah, and it’s never once made sense,” Jacob said. “You didn’t get pregnant all by yourself. And you knew he loved you. So why did you run? Why didn’t you at least tell him?”

Jacob’s blue eyes were cold and hard as steel. She felt like there was nowhere to hide from that gaze. And he already judged her so harshly. It was a terrible, unflattering story to tell about his twin, but maybe hearing it would make him feel better, or at least help him understand.

“I did come back after winter break to tell him,” she began.

“He never saw you after that night,” Jacob retorted immediately.

“Well, I was there,” she said. “He just didn’t know it. But Jed Brady could confirm. He let me into Ian’s dorm.”

“Go on,” Jacob said.

“I had forgotten that Ty Keller was coming to talk to him that day,” she said. “Which probably makes me the worst girlfriend ever, since it was all Ian could talk about for a month. But I had a lot on my mind at that exact moment.”

Jacob’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t say anything.

“Anyway, I headed for his room, and then I stopped when I heard Ty talking to him,” she went on. “I wasn’t eavesdropping. I was honestly just trying to decide whether to wait in the common room or leave and text him. And that’s when I heard it.”

“Heard what?” Jacob asked sternly.

“Ty was giving him advice,” Faith said, her heart stuttering at the memory. “Just like Ian had been dreaming of him doing. Ty asked him about me, said he heard I was really poor. He told Ian not to get serious with me, and that I might even try to trap him by g-getting pregnant...”

The shame washed over her all over again and she sobbed into her hands like a child.

“That guy was a jerk,” Jacob said with finality.

“I didn’t ask to be born to a family without a lot of money,” she said fiercely. “But we were perfectly happy. And money isn’t what I wanted from Ian. I love him, and that’s all. You can believe what you want.”

“I believe you,” Jacob said, smiling and lifting his hands as if in surrender.

“Anyway, you can see now why I ran,” she told him. “If I had come to Ian five minutes later and explained my situation I would only have been proving Ty right. Ian would have dumped me on the spot. And then, knowing

Ian's kind heart, he would have felt bad about it forever. I was saving him from having to be a bad guy. Or worse, from proposing anyway just to do what's right, and then resenting Connor and me for the rest of his life."

"Wait you left after Ty said that?" Jacob asked, his brow furrowing.

"Yes," she said. "I ran and never looked back."

"Like *right* after he said it?" Jacob asked.

She nodded slowly, wondering what in the world he was trying to say.

"So, you don't know how Ian responded?" Jacob asked.

"Well, no," she said. "I didn't want to hear Ian say it."

"He didn't say anything," Jacob said simply. "Ian punched Ty Keller in the face."

Faith stared at him for a moment, trying to understand.

"*What?*" she asked, at last.

"He gave him a bloody nose and a black eye," Jacob said. "He was lucky the guy didn't press charges, but the coach talked him down. Ian even got a one-week suspension from the team over it. You can't just punch Ty Keller."

"Oh, Ian," Faith sighed.

"He would never just let someone speak that way about you," Jacob went on. "And if you'd told him you were expecting, he would have been happy."

And just like that, the pieces started to fall into place in her mind. Relief washed over her, and she felt like she could breathe again for the first time in two years. But something else occurred to her.

"He can't just go around punching people whenever they say things he doesn't like," she worried out loud.

"Ian has punched exactly two people in his life," Jacob said. "And both times it was to defend your honor."

"Both times?" she echoed.

"I'm not going to repeat what that meathead Barone said about you at the restaurant, because Ian didn't want you to hear it," Jacob said, shaking his head. "But I would have punched him too, and I wasn't even sure I liked you at the time."

She nodded, trying not to think about what the awful man must have said, but having a pretty good idea.

"You know," Jacob said thoughtfully, "you could do the poor guy a favor and marry him if you love him so much."

"He's only proposing out of duty," she said automatically. "I can't do that to him or to Connor. Not after seeing my parents separate."

“He wanted to marry you long before all this,” Jacob said.

“Plenty of young people talk about getting married one day,” she said, shaking her head. “But it’s just an idea to dream about. It’s not the same thing as actually making a lifelong commitment.”

“Hang on,” Jacob said, rolling his eyes. “*Mom.*”

She watched after him in wonder as he headed off to find his mother. A moment later, she heard footsteps.

Alice entered with Connor on her hip, Joe and Jacob trailing behind them.

“Hello, Faith,” she said.

Connor reached for her, and she walked over to take him.

“Hi, buddy,” Faith said, kissing the top of his head. “How was he?”

“Wonderful,” Alice said. “As always.”

“He’s a good boy,” Joe added.

“Okay, can I tell you two why I dragged you in here?” Jacob asked, sounding like he was out of patience.

“Please do,” Alice said.

Joe only nodded his head.

“Can you tell Faith what you did in town with Ian two Christmas Eves ago,” Jacob said.

“That’s not my story to tell,” Alice said right away.

“She needs to hear it, Ma,” Jacob said. “She thinks he only wants to marry her to make things right. That it’s some kind of sacrifice. She’s just going to keep saying no.”

Alice glanced over at Faith and pressed her lips together, then seemed to decide something.

“Christmas Eve before last Ian asked me to come into the village with him,” she told Faith carefully. “We parked outside *Promises, Promises*. That’s our local jeweler.”

Faith froze.

“He went inside and looked at every engagement ring in the place,” Alice said fondly. “Asked poor Valerie Leighton questions until she was probably ready to kick us out. And at last, she showed him the ring that he thought you would love, the one that would belong on your finger forever.”

“He was planning to propose as soon as you came back from winter break,” Jacob said.

“H-he was?” Faith stammered, feeling breathless.

“I was,” a deep voice said from the doorway.

IAN

I an stood in the threshold of the parlor, the smallest room in the whole house, packed full of the people he loved.

And all of them were digging deep in his personal business.

“I’m sorry, Ian,” his mother said in a subdued tone. “But we had to tell her.”

“She was just going to keep saying no,” Jacob added.

“Son, this may be something to keep in mind when you consider whether or not to have a big family,” his dad said with a twinkle in his eye. “The bigger the family, the more people to stick their noses in.”

Ian couldn’t help smiling at that. And he felt the room relax all at once.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” his mom said suddenly. “Cal and Angel are coming over with Justin for supper. I’ve got to check on the roast.”

“I’ll help,” Jacob told her, which earned him a look of surprise from his mother.

“Off we go,” Joe added. “I’ll just take the little fellow with us.”

Faith allowed him to take Connor as she stood there, looking stunned.

Ian waited until he was alone with her before turning to face her at last. Her hazel eyes were locked onto his face, studying him intently.

He paused, knowing exactly what he wanted, but determined to wait until she had connected all the dots, and he was sure that she wanted it as much as he did.

“Is it true?” she asked at last.

“Is what true?”

“Did you punch Ty Keller in the face for saying you should dump me?”

she asked.

“Jacob told you about that?” he asked, feeling ashamed.

He never wanted her to hear about the things Ty had said. And he knew she wouldn't approve of him hitting someone like that. He sure didn't make a habit of it normally.

“I was outside your room that day,” Faith said softly. “I heard what he was saying to you. It's why I left school without talking to you. I didn't want you to think I was trapping you.”

“That's why you ran,” he realized out loud.

“I didn't wait and hear how you reacted,” she said, looking ashamed.

“I would never have thought that,” he told her, meaning it. “I'm a little hurt that you believed I would. I know I talked a lot about Ty and wanting to emulate him, but I'm not blind, Faith.”

“I was a scholarship kid,” she said simply. “It felt like my whole identity.”

“I never once thought of you that way,” he said.

“I did,” she said. “All the time. I hated that I had to work so much and worry about how to pay for my books and living expenses. I hated never having free time to go out with you, or do other stuff kids our age were doing.”

He frowned, hearing the truth in her words.

“I'm so sorry, Faith,” he said. “You hid it so well. I always thought you were proud that you were able to make school happen even though your parents couldn't pay your way.”

“I was,” she said, smiling fondly at him. “Doesn't mean I didn't get tired and wish things were different from time to time. Hearing Ty say that I was latching onto you for the money hit me hard. I felt like it might be easy for you to believe.”

“Never,” Ian told her. “It was easy for me to deck him though.”

“He was a linebacker,” Faith said, a bit of an impressed expression breaking through her disapproving frown.

“So was Lex Barone,” he said, shrugging.

“So, I guess you have a type,” she said, laughing.

He felt himself relax just a tiny bit. If she could laugh, then things weren't going as badly as they could be.

“I promise I don't just go around hitting people,” he told her.

“At least you pick on people your own size,” she said, teasing him again.

“Or bigger.”

“Really,” he told her. “I wouldn’t want you to think I was going to be violent, or teach Connor to use his fists instead of his words. Believe it or not, I’ve only ever hit two people in my whole life.”

“I know,” she said. “Jacob told me. I was only teasing.”

He smiled, glad his brother finally seemed to have his back when it came to Faith. She had won him over like she did everyone, with her hard work and her kind heart.

“Is the other thing true?” she asked.

“The other thing?” he echoed, wanting to hear her say it.

“The... the ring?” she asked softly.

“It is,” he told her.

She closed her eyes and tears began to stream down her cheeks like rain.

“Faith,” he whispered, moving closer and wrapping a hand around her cheek to catch them with his thumb.

“We lost so much time,” she sobbed. “If I had gotten to the dorm a few minutes later, everything would be different. We would have gotten married. You wouldn’t have missed that time with Connor. And... and...”

She pulled away from him, sobbing into her hands.

“Faith, it’s okay,” he told her. “We’re here now.”

“You wouldn’t have been in that accident,” she said softly. “And you would be following your dreams.”

“Oh,” he said. “No, that’s not true.”

“Would you have been out at some party late at night if I’d been back at the dorm ready to pop popcorn and watch a movie in the common room with you?” she sobbed.

“I wasn’t at a party,” he said. “I was coming home from a training weekend, a required one. I would have been in that car no matter what.”

“Really?” she asked, finally meeting his eyes again.

The tears made her eyes burn a beautiful green, and he loved everything about her, right down to her red, swollen nose.

“Really,” he told her. “And I’m already following my dreams. They’re all right here in this house, every one of them.”

He saw it land on her, saw her take it in.

“And maybe out on the high school field, too?” she ventured with the sweetest hopeful look.

“Maybe there, too,” he said. “As long as I can keep working on the farm.”

The principal offered me the coaching job if I want it.”

“What did you tell him?” she asked.

“I told him I had to ask my girl something first,” he told her with a half-smile.

She blushed and he wished he could bottle the heady feeling it gave him.

“What did you need to ask?” she whispered.

“Do you think you could handle *one more* proposal?” he leaned in and whispered back.

She nodded, joy in her eyes.

He sank to his knees, holding up the ring he’d been carrying in his pocket ever since she came back into his life, and asking her the question that had been on his lips for two years.

“Faith, will you make me the luckiest man alive?” he asked. “Will you be my wife?”

“Yes,” she said quickly.

He took her soft little hand and slid his ring onto it, then rose and wrapped his arms around her.

The world could be cruel and complicated. But some things were just right when they happened in their own time.

He pulled back slightly and looked down at her.

Faith smiled up at him, looking like an angel, her chin tilted up slightly, and he bent to claim her lips.

The kiss sent a river of love and memory through him, and he lost track of time as he held her close, telling her with his lips what was in his heart more eloquently than he could with words.

A gentle cough from the hallway had Faith pulling back instantly.

Ian let her go, knowing there would be plenty more kisses in their future.

“Congratulations, my love,” Alice said, pulling Faith into an embrace of her own. “We’re so happy that you’ll be part of the family officially. And if you need help planning the wedding, I’m all yours. Big or small, I love weddings.”

“Do we have to wait for a big wedding?” Faith asked, looking up at Ian.

Satisfaction crashed in his chest, and it took all he had not to pull her in for another kiss.

“We’ve waited long enough,” he reassured her. “My brother Cal can pull some strings at the courthouse. We could probably be married by Christmas, if it’s what you want. But there’s no need. We can take our time, and you can

have the wedding of your dreams instead.”

“The courthouse as soon as possible *is* the wedding of my dreams,” she assured him.

“And then we’ll have a great big party here at the farm when all the family can come,” Alice said excitedly. “If you’re not opposed.”

Ian was having a hard time following the conversation. His emotions were overwhelming, and he only had eyes for his fiancée.

Faith was laughing and nodding and embracing his parents again.

“Ian,” she said after a moment.

He found himself pulled into a family hug.

Closing his eyes, he realized that the disparate and painful parts of his life were all coming together and healing at once, leaving nothing but joy and gratitude behind.

Thank you for saving me, he said silently. *Thank you for bringing me back to life.*

FAITH

For Faith, the two weeks between the big game and Christmas Eve had passed in a series of happy events.

The night of their engagement, they shared the happy news with everyone around the Cassidy table. Ian's brother, Sheriff Cal, insisted that they head down to the courthouse the next day to see how quickly a marriage could occur, and the two of them joyfully agreed.

Though the official timeframe was thirty days, Cal sweet-talked the clerk, who got it down to just three.

"We have to get two years of dating into three days," Ian had announced like it was a challenge.

He'd been as good as his word, taking her on walks all over the farm, for drives with Connor to see Christmas lights, and even bundling them all up for an unforgettable carriage ride.

The brief ceremony at the courthouse had brought tears of gratitude to Faith's eyes. After, they headed home with Alice, Joe, Felicity, and Connor.

And everyone else was waiting at the farmhouse when they got back to surprise them with a potluck wedding feast.

The pastor had been there to say a few words and bless the rings, and plenty of well-wishers who weren't in the family stopped by, too. Melody and her mother brought Connor a beautiful hand knitted romper with matching sweaters for his mom and dad. Even Sloane Greenfield came with a batch of her famous caramel blondies and a great big hug for the bride and groom.

Faith enjoyed herself more than any nervous bride had a right to at her

reception.

But after all, she wasn't really a nervous bride.

"No cold feet?" Ian had whispered to her as they stood on the marble floor at the courthouse, waiting their turn.

"No way," she told him. "I'm the luckiest girl in the world."

He smiled down at her and she felt the same butterflies she always did when Ian Cassidy looked at her like she was his world.

All their worries and troubles had been worked out in advance. If her luck held, being his wife would be the easy part.

Professionally, Ian was already well on his way to signing a contract with the high school. He had long talks with the retiring coach every day about plans for next year.

Faith could see his joy in every call. He was doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing. It was clear from the twinkle that was back in his eyes.

Meanwhile, Faith was loving life at the shop, but anxious to talk with Joe and Alice again about her big plans.

The crafts fair had been a huge hit, and so many local artists had found a new following that day. But when she crunched the numbers and looked at fair pricing and fair pay to the artists, the possible profit that was left was no better than Cassidy Farm had been getting from the goods and decorations they were selling before.

One afternoon she invited them to have hot chocolate in the shop and talk it over.

She sat nervously in the tidy little office, ready to talk about the project. She hoped they would consider it, even if it wasn't going to be more profitable for them.

When they came in, she laid out all the numbers and figures, explaining every aspect of the new inventory she hoped to offer. Then she showed them the bottom line.

Alice looked up at Joe and he smiled down at her with such love it made Faith's heart skip a beat.

"People don't work a family farm to become wealthy," Alice said at last, turning her attention back to Faith. "When Joe and I decided to keep to the Cassidy tradition, we knew we'd have lean times and good times. What was important to us was being part of the community, plus living on the land and caring for it."

"We've done some fun things that have added to our revenue," Joe put in.

“Tourist activities have done well for us.”

“But we didn’t do those things to make money,” Alice said. “We did them because our heart was in it. And because we wanted to invite the community in.”

“This right here,” Joe said, patting Faith’s business plan like it was a treasured child. “This feels like exactly the same thing—a way to bring more of our community in, to help out some local people wanting to make and sell things and others wanting to buy from their neighbors. If you’d told us it would make less than before, we would still be interested.”

“So... you’re interested?” Faith had asked excitedly.

“We’re more than interested,” Alice told her with a warm smile. “Let’s get it started, as soon as you can.”



THE TIME after that seemed to melt past until suddenly it was the day before Christmas.

Ian had insisted they would treat Christmas Eve as their honeymoon, with a fancy dinner back at the Village Green, where their “first date” had gone sideways before they could enjoy their meal.

But the weather reports had begun warning against leaving the house in the afternoon, due to a winter storm. So, their date looked like it was cancelled.

Until Alice had packed up herself, Joe, Jacob, and little Connor and walked right over to Shane and Natalie’s house for supper, giving the newlyweds a private evening at the farmhouse.

Now Ian had a pair of steaks ready to go, and Faith was preparing a beautiful salad while a cake baked in the oven and Christmas music played on the radio.

“Still just sounds like rain,” Ian remarked.

“They said on the radio that it’s not safe,” Faith reminded him. “Besides, we have the rest of our lives to go to some silly restaurant. How often is my husband going to cook for me?”

“He’ll cook for you as often as you want,” he said, arching a brow. “As long as you come to dinner in that dress.”

She blushed to her hairline. She had taken her time choosing just the right

pretty dress at the shop in town, one that was ladylike and just a little flirty.

“That was ‘The First Noel’, sung by our own Tarker County Children’s Choir,” the familiar voice of the deejay said. *“And if you haven’t looked out your window yet, you might want to do that now. There’s a little Christmas magic out there.”*

“No way,” Faith said, placing down the carrot she was about to peel. “Not more snow.”

“Come on,” Ian said, taking her hand. “Let’s go see.”

They made their way down the center hall, past the family photo wall and the small parlor where they had gotten engaged, and out the big wooden front door onto the wraparound porch.

It had been snowing off and on all week, making their whole world look like something out of a holiday movie. Tonight’s rain had made Faith secretly a little sad. After all, who wanted all the snow melting just before Christmas?

But it seemed as though the rain had stopped just as suddenly as it began, leaving the fields still covered in picturesque white drifts.

As she took in the familiar view, she saw that the bare branches of all the trees on the farm were encased in a brilliant coat of ice. They glistened and shone like they were made of diamonds. Icy ribbons hung from the eaves and glittered on the holly and rhododendron bushes. Even the wooden nativity set in the front yard shimmered in the moonlight.

It was as if the whole world were lit up with the precious miracle of the holy night.

“Icicles everywhere,” Faith breathed. “It is like magic.”

“Beautiful,” Ian murmured, his voice low with feeling.

She glanced up to see that he was looking down at her, an expression of fierce love on his handsome face. He took her hands, tracing the rings on her left finger with his thumb, as he so often did.

“Thank you for coming back to me,” he told her. “You brought all the magic with you.”

“It was right here all along,” she told him, sliding one hand from his to place it on his chest, over his heart. “But I’m so glad you let me back in.”

His eyes went upward, to the arch of the doorway they stood beside. She followed them and noticed a sprig of mistletoe hanging in the center.

“Why, Mr. Cassidy,” Faith said as she stepped beneath it.

He followed without a word, and then pulled her close and kissed her like it was the very first time.

“This is the best honeymoon ever,” she murmured as she pulled back slightly for a breath.

Ian laughed, and the sound was so filled with happiness that it sent a joyful shiver down her spine.

“Any honeymoon with you is the best one ever,” he told her gruffly, pulling her close again.

FAITH

A few weeks later, Faith stood with Connor by the big windows of the Trinity Falls Community Center.

Big tables had been set up so that the space could host all the Trinity Falls High School football players, the boosters who had put on the dinner, and of course the coach and Ian and their wives.

Connor was getting closer to one and a half now, and he was talking more each day. His independent streak had his parents crying with laughter as he voiced what he wanted and did not want and climbed and ran all over the farm.

Faith figured she was getting into athletic shape herself, chasing after him.

“Snow,” Connor said, looking wistfully out the window.

“Yes,” she told him, squeezing his chubby hand. “We can play in the snow tomorrow. Tonight, we’re at the party for Daddy.”

“Daddy party,” Connor said, his little voice happy again.

Connor loved parties, especially after the one on Christmas morning at the Cassidy farmhouse, where he had been lavished with attention from all his aunts, uncles, cousins, and especially his grandparents.

While he had enjoyed opening his handful of presents, the best part of the holiday had been sharing it with family. She could still picture him on his grandpa’s lap, leaning back against Joe’s chest to listen while Alice read the story of the very first Christmas from the big family bible, with the crackle of the fireplace in the background, and the whole family gathered around together to listen.

Though he was too little to make lasting memories, Faith believed that Connor would still carry that simple happiness in his heart for the rest of his life.

“Whoa, is that Ian Cassidy’s son?” one of the players asked.

“Sure is,” Faith told the boy. “This is Connor.”

“Hey, buddy,” the boy said. “I’m Josh. Are you going to be a football player one day?”

“*Ball*,” Connor said with authority, looking around like there might be a ball to play with.

“That’s so cool,” Josh crowed, crouching down. “Can you give me a high five?”

Other boys were wandering over now too. To his credit, Connor wasn’t scared. He chuckled and showed off his words for his new friends.

Faith caught Ian looking over from the corner where he was huddled with the coach. He gave her a smile that warmed her insides.

Married life suited them.

Soon, they would have a place of their own. As much as she loved sharing a house with Ian’s family, cooking and chatting with Alice, and laughing at Joe and Jacob’s jokes, she craved her own home, a place Connor could remember as theirs.

With Ian’s blessing, she had invited Felicity to live with them in their new house.

But her sister had laughed and told her she wouldn’t give up the little apartment in town for anything. But she said she was definitely sticking around Trinity Falls, and would be over anytime to babysit or share a meal.

Faith would be forever grateful to her sister for encouraging her to come to Trinity Falls. She hadn’t expected to move out on her so suddenly, and she didn’t want her beloved sister to feel that she was on the back burner. They had coffee a few times each week, and Felicity was a regular now at the Cassidy place, too. Thankfully, Alice was no longer trying to set her up with Jacob, since the truth about his romantic situation had come out in a big way.

Faith smiled at the thought and shook her head.

The Cassidy boys sure knew how to romance a girl.

One of the boosters dimmed the lights and parents began carrying out trays of food. The kids vanished, their teen appetites far more demanding than their desire to play with a toddler.

“Are you ready to eat?” she asked Connor.

“Eat,” Connor demanded.

“Okay, let’s go,” she laughed. “Can I hold you?”

“Hold you,” Connor agreed, lifting his little arms.

She was glad he still liked to be held. Though he was getting bigger, she adored having him in her arms.

They headed through the crowd to the seat beside the head of the biggest table. A moment later, Ian was there, in his place of honor.

“Hey,” he said, his deep voice rich with happiness. “Sorry I got pulled away. Coach had a few more ideas.”

“I’m so glad,” she told him honestly.

Lately, he was spreading out playbooks and notes on the table at home, fiercely scribbling his thoughts as he watched replays of old games. It was heavenly to see him in his element again, happy and hard at work doing something he loved.

“Daddy,” Connor said, suddenly scrambling out of her arms to get to him.

“Hey, buddy,” Ian said, taking him. “Be gentle with Mommy. How are you doing?”

“Kids,” Connor told him happily, patting his father’s cheek. “Kids play me.”

“The boys were really sweet with him,” Faith said. “He loved it.”

Someone clinked a fork against their glass at another table and the chattering in the room stopped.

“Thank you so much for coming,” Charlene Hart called out to the room. “We’re so glad to celebrate the end to an exciting year. And we’re so proud of these young men for their hard work and perseverance on the field and off.”

The whole room broke into applause, and Charlene beamed and waited.

“Coach Hendricks has led our boys with heart for a generation here in Trinity Falls,” she went on after a moment. “Tonight is bittersweet for us, as we congratulate him on his upcoming retirement. We hate to see him go, but no one deserves to put his feet up more than our beloved Coach.”

More applause, shouts of agreement, and even the sound of sneakers pounding on the floor followed that.

“But we also have a guest of honor tonight,” Charlene said. “We’re so honored that our hometown hero, Cowboy Quarterback Ian Cassidy, is going to be leading the team next year. We are so proud to have you here, *Coach Cassidy*.”

The boys went wild for that, and Coach Hendricks lifted his glass of lemonade in salute to Ian from his end of the table.

Faith gazed up at her *hometown hero* of a husband, with pride and joy in her heart. He looked a little uncomfortable. His humble heart never wanted this kind of attention.

But she could also sense his own quiet happiness.

Sooner or later, the fanfare about who he was would die down, and then he could disappear behind his jacket and whistle, concentrating his efforts on the team of boys who already adored him.

Coaching suited him, Felicity knew it in her bones. Maybe it was what he had always been meant to do.

The speech was over a moment later, and the kids were digging in with gusto.

“What are you thinking about?” Ian asked her.

“I think coaching is what you were meant for,” she told him. “I think it’s going to be a dream come true, Ian.”

“My dreams have already come true, Mrs. Cassidy,” he told her meaningfully.

She felt her cheeks heat.

“But I’m grateful you encouraged me to do this,” he said. “You swept into this town apologizing, but all you ever do is make things better.”

That hit her heart and she felt tears prickling in her eyes.

“Don’t you dare cry,” he murmured, taking her hand. “I’ve vowed to punch anyone who makes you do that.”

He was teasing, of course, she could tell by the twinkle in his eyes.

But it did make her laugh.

“Eat,” Connor said frantically, wiggling in his father’s arms.

“Absolutely,” Ian told him. “When they pass the food to us, we’ll put some on our plate, right? It smells so good, doesn’t it? What food do you want to try?”

Connor began listing what he wanted to eat for his daddy, some of which was not actually on the table.

Faith watched the two of them together with a full heart.

Ian was right, loving and being loved by them *was* what he was meant for.

Their future would be bright with shared happiness, and she would never stop counting her blessings. In spite of their missteps and missed moments,

they had landed right here.

And everything they had right here was more than she ever could have dreamed of.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clara Pines is a writer from Pennsylvania. She loves writing sweet romance, sipping peppermint tea with her handsome husband, and baking endless gingerbread cookies with her little helpers. A holiday lover through and through, Clara wishes it could be Christmas every day. You can almost always figure out where she has curled up to write by following the sound of the holiday music on her laptop!

Get all the latest info, and join Clara's mailing list at:

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