

SAGE PARKER

THE
Getaway
CABIN



BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS | BOOK 2

The Getaway Cabin

Blue Ridge Mountain Series



Book Two

SAGE PARKER



Copyright © 2024 by Sage Parker.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without prior written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

The book is a work of fiction. The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Continue the Story!](#)

[More Books by Sage Parker](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter 1

Valerie and Matt exchanged puzzled glances as Becky's words hung in the air. Valerie's mind raced, unable to piece together the logic in her sister's revelation. Their father's clothes and business documents at Sharon's cabin?

“Becks that... that can't be right.”

“You think I wouldn't recognize Dad's stuff?”

“Maybe Sharon had a husband? You said so the other day that we saw her less and less as we got older—maybe she got married!”

Becky rolled her eyes. “Val, it's the ledger from Barlow's. What are the chances she married a guy with the same last name as our dad who also happened to have a small department store called Barlow's in Maine? Don't you think we'd notice something like that?”

Blinking hard, Valerie tried to understand what her sister was implying.

Becky waved the photograph of her father at her so closely it nearly grazed the tip of her nose.

“Stop that,” Valerie said, swatting at the photograph.

“Ugh!” Becky rolled her eyes as she grunted loudly and dismissively, “Will you just come already, please!?”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and took off back down the path that led around the cabin and into the trees.

Valerie felt rooted to the spot. Something in her stomach made her not want to move an inch. Her mind flashed to her girls, scattered across the world right now, so far from her and their father. The thought of Walter triggered a secondary wave of nausea, and she realized her heart was racing. She remembered what she’d tell her girls when they would start to panic. Deep breaths. In for five, hold for two, out for five. In for five, hold for—

“Val?” Matt asked, and she saw him step towards her. “Are you okay?”

Oh lord Matt was seeing this. How had her brain ignored that fact?

“I’m fine, I just...”

“VALERIE!”

Her sister’s voice echoed through the woods.

“Shoot. I’d better go.”

She tried to follow her sister’s footsteps and leave Matt behind but she didn’t go anywhere. The sinking feeling of dread settled deep in her bones. She’d already found out so much bad news recently, she wasn’t prepared for more.

“Hey Val, you alright?”

Matt's voice was calm and low, and there was something under the surface of it. Sadness? Annoyance? Why couldn't she tell?

Giving herself a little shake, she took a deep breath of fresh and cold air, letting it chill her lungs and sting just a little as she held it in.

"I'm fine," she said before quietly adding, "Thank you."

"Let's follow Becky. Or she'll holler again and cause an avalanche or something."

She nodded, focused on taking the first step.

"True," she said quietly, but Matt was already a few steps ahead of her.

Deliberately not thinking about what they might find in Sharon's cabin, Val withdrew her phone and brought up the group chat she had with her daughters and her heart skipped a beat at the bold text that topped the screen.

Surrounded by four emojis, Jordana had picked one to represent each of them. The name of the group message: *Just Us Girls*.

A few years ago, when they had first set up the group chat, the name had seemed sweet and innocent at the time; it was how her own mother had referred to their summer trips to Banner Elk when their father had stayed behind to work. But now she was wondering if her mother had called it that for another reason.

Was her father like Walter?

Had her mother insisted on these Just Us Girls summers to protect her and Becks?

No. No. No.

No.

That couldn't have been it, no way. Their father was supportive and loving and kind... a little physically distant maybe. Not the biggest giver of hugs... but most men in his generation weren't, right?

She glanced at Matt, walking just far enough ahead of her to make any attempt at conversation futile. She remembered his father. There had been no shortage of hugs, pats on the back, and mock serious handshakes there.

Quickly tapping a message to her daughters, Val calculated the time in... where was Jordana now? Germany? She might be up and about. Oh well. They'd agreed that they would talk no matter the time zone. It wasn't an emergency line, after all.

To Just Us Girls: *having a Mom moment, just have to tell you how much I love you all and how proud I am of you. Stay safe my wonderful girls.*

She hit send before she could think about it too much. She tried to control these so-called Mom Moments better in the last few years but since Walter left, all she could do was worry about her girls. Well, coming home to a stripped-out house and a handwritten note demolishing thirty years of marriage will do that to a person. There should be a support group for that. There probably was, she reasoned, but she wondered how many of the women that would go to it would

be able to relate to the feeling of panic thinking that home invaders had kidnapped their husband.

The thought caught her off guard and she stopped in her tracks to think about it.

She really had jumped to the wildest conclusion first, hadn't she? Well... maybe a rich guy in Washington DC getting kidnapped was only a little wilder than him and his presumably much younger supermodel mistress taking everything from her.

“Valerie?”

Matt's voice floated down to her somewhat hazily, like he was far away.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, blinking back to reality.

Stubbing her foot against the wood, she quickly realized she'd run into the front porch stairs of Sharon's cabin. Pain cracked through her shin as it connected hard with the wood, and she found herself toppled over. The palms of her hands hit hard against the top step where she had caught herself.

“Ah!”

“Oh shoot, are you all right?”

His boots were suddenly next to her hands.

Her eyes watered as she scanned her body for pain.

“Yeah,” she said, wincing, “Sorry, I wasn't paying attention.”

“You sure are apologizing a lot for someone who just fell down.”

She wasn't sure what he meant by that. She was being ridiculous just staying there on the steps. A hand appeared in her field of vision. A calloused hand with neatly trimmed fingernails and more than its fair share of scars. Her eyes followed the hand up its flannel clad arm, past the crook of its elbow, and along its broad shoulder to Matt's face.

“Come on, your sister is tearing this place apart.”

He held his hand out a little further; this time, she didn't hesitate to take it and allow him help her up.

Oh boy... now she had to go inside.

Chapter 2

The cabin was even mustier than their own had been when they had first arrived in the town. Had that really only been a week ago? It somehow felt like at least a month had passed.

Looking around the living space that took up most of the first floor, Val could see her sister's progress on the bookshelves and boxes, which consisted entirely of emptying a few of them onto the couch. The kitchen was barely a nook at the far back of the room, a small bathroom leading off to the side.

“Becks?” she called.

“Up here!”

Val eyed the stairs warily. The woodwork in this place seemed to have been abandoned years ago. She picked her way up the stairs carefully, avoiding the spots that looked softer than others, though she had no real way of telling if she was right or not.

As she reached the top of the stairs, she saw an immaculately neat studio-style bedroom. On one side of the second floor was a fully kitted-out bedroom. A large queen-sized bed, impressive vintage wardrobes, and neat nightstands

on either side. Though, everything was coated in a thick layer of sticky dust.

Becky was hunched over a desk on the other side of the room, which was perfectly divided from the bedroom. It even changed from soft rugs on the bedroom side to exposed hardwood floors on the office side.

“Look, more records from the store,” Becky said, not even bothering to look up.

Valerie crossed the room to meet her, “Oh wow, you weren’t kidding, this is a lot.”

The stack of manila folders sat piled up next to the one Becky was examining in detail; there must have been at least ten of them.

“This is the newest one,” Becky said, “it’s from the last year we came up here with Mom.”

She felt like that should mean something to her, but all she could think of was justifications or other possible reasons.

“Do we know what Sharon did for a job? Maybe she was an accountant and that’s why she has all those records?”

The glare from Becky was impressive; her sister’s face rapidly dropping into mock surprise.

“Valerie, if your accountant keeps wardrobes full of your husband’s clothes at her holiday house then you need to have a word with—”

Becky clapped her hands over her own mouth. Val could see Becky’s cheeks turning red where they poked out above her hands.

“Oh my goodness, Val, I didn’t mean it like that!”

“It’s fine,” Valerie cut her off before her sister could continue.

“I’m so sorry.”

“I said it’s fine.” Val said quickly, desperate to change the subject. “So, where are these clothes you think are Dad’s?”

“Here.”

Becky moved silently and awkwardly towards the wardrobe.

Val watched her, and froze when she noticed a looming figure in the corner of the doorway.

Dammit—Matt!

He’d been so quiet that she’d had forgotten he was there. Or maybe she’d just assumed he was downstairs... had he heard that whole conversation?

She risked a glance over her shoulder and saw his keen eyes watching the exchange. He started a little when he noticed her watching him.

“Maybe I should go.”

“Maybe, yeah. Can I call you?”

“No, Matt, don’t go anywhere,” Becky said from in front of the wardrobe, “Have you seen the state of this house? Those stairs? I don’t think Val stands a chance of carrying me out of here if something were to happen.”

Valerie rolled her eyes. Matt didn’t move.

The doors of the wardrobe hung slightly ajar, and Becky lingered in front of them for a few extra moments. Val watched as she braced herself before pulling the doors open.

True enough, half the wardrobe was filled with dresses and billowing blouses she remembered Sharon wearing. The other half was neatly hung khakis, dress shirts in powdery blues and yellows, and a small selection of ties folded over a hanger. Suddenly she was hit by a strange feeling—just like it was thirty years in the past. Frozen in time.

Once again, Val felt unable to move, hesitant to go and confront what was in front of her.

“Val, come on,” Becky said, a note of desperation in her voice.

Frustrated with herself, Val forced her uncooperative feet to move and joined her sister to stare at the clothes that hung there in the closet. The decades they had spent in the wardrobe had obviously included a couple moths who had taken their toll on things. A suit jacket hung limply with the hanger protruding through one shoulder seam and several of the cotton blouses seemed to be barely hanging on.

Her breath caught in her throat as something on the tie rack caught her eye.

“Oh my god. It is his stuff,” she said, making the words loud enough to be heard seemed to strain her voice.

“Well, I was already convinced,” Becky said, “but now do you believe me?”

Val reached her hand out and brushed her fingers along the length of a bright red tie.

“I bought him this,” she said, “...he said it was his favorite.”

Gently, almost reverently, she tugged on the silk tie and withdrew it from the wardrobe. The gleaming red silk was embroidered top to bottom with little white sheep all facing in one direction, except for one in the very center, which had black wool.

“Oh...” Becky was looking at her sadly, like she was regretting being right.

“It was after someone had called you a black sheep in an interview during a council election,” Val explained, “remember?”

“Not really.”

Val swallowed the lump in her throat and willed the tears forming in her eyes to go away. “It was freshman year, and you had just been suspended for punching Ronnie Gilmore when you saw him taking pictures with his dad’s Polaroid through the window into the girls’ change rooms.”

“Oh! You know I *do* remember that!” Becky exclaimed. “They told me that I shouldn’t have hit him. Which, I mean, I guess I agree with as an adult—but they still didn’t punish him anywhere near what they did to me. It was so messed up!”

“Dad responded in his next interview. He said that black sheep were often creatives, dreamers, or people with a strong sense of justice and a total intolerance to unfairness. That while he would never condone violence, he was proud to have a black sheep in his family, and that he’d prefer to have a

daughter unafraid to stand up for herself and others than a perfectly behaved one that swept things under the rug.”

She had pulled out her impression of their dad to quote him. Normally, it made them both laugh, but instead, the story hung in the air around them as Val fell silent. It wasn't often their dad had gotten defensive or angry, but when he had heard what Ronnie had been doing, he'd completely lost his cool.

“He went around there, you know?” Val said, still unable to look away from the tie.

“What!?”

The stricken way her sister said the word catapulted her right back to high school when their mom had announced they'd be chaperoning the sophomore dance. Val smiled at the memory, but elaborated all the same.

“Yeah, that night, he left the house before dinner and only just made it back. I heard him telling Mom after when we were supposed to be asleep. He told Ronnie's dad that if he didn't get his son in line, he'd have them both arrested for indecency. Apparently Mr. Gilmore went very pale at that. I remember the way he said it too; he was so angry that night.”

“Why'd you never tell me?”

Val laughed, “You didn't need any encouragement to be the black sheep. And I didn't want you getting in more trouble. I got him the tie because even though he didn't really want to talk to us about it, I wanted him to know we appreciated his support.”

“We?”

Looking over at her sister, Val smiled. “Yeah, ‘we’. You guys had it rough for a while and I did everything I could to keep the peace.”

Becky extended her elbow and swayed, bumping Val playfully. “You really are a good big sister.”

“Yeah yeah,” Val deflected, “I just... all this being here...”

Matt’s voice broke through their quiet conversation, and both sisters turned to look at him, “Really, I can wait downstairs; since this is a family thing...”

They really needed to stop forgetting about him.

The reality of their situation flooded back in and Val felt nauseous.

“No, it’s okay. I want to go anyway, come on,” she said, tugging on Becky’s elbow, “I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Her sister nodded and closed the wardrobe before they made their way down the stairs. They relocked the cabin door and Becky replaced the key in the hollow stone near the foot of the steps. By this time, Val was brooding.

“He didn’t even keep clothes at our cabin, it’s only ours and Mom’s stuff in there.”

She caught Becky’s eye as she turned towards her and Matt.

“So we’re both thinking the same thing? An affair?” Becky asked.

Val cast her mind back to the memories of their dad asserting himself in business meetings, in the council debates

he spent weeks prepping for during elections, and the way the house was almost perfectly run by their mom the exact way he liked it. She had always said that their father sacrificed more than they knew for their family, so doing everything they could to make him happy and comfortable at home was the least they could do.

“He was pretty used to getting what he wanted,” Val replied, “but they always seemed...”

“Happy,” Becks said.

“Like a team,” Val finished.

“I just don’t know how he could do this to mom... here, of all places! Right under her nose and with her best friend!”

“How would he have even had the time? He was barely here, right?” Val said, turning to look at Matt, whose face dropped as soon as she did.

“Hey don’t look at me. I don’t know anything about any infidelity,” he said, holding his hands up, “I barely knew your dad. He came up for a day or two once a season.”

“Well, yeah, but as someone outside the family, did he ever seem... I don’t know, like he would do something like that?”

Matt shrugged, looking around exasperated.

“People do all sorts of things and no one knows why. It’s been thirty years, I really don’t know,” he said pointedly.

Walters face popped into Val’s mind. Then, unbidden, the questions she had been refusing to think about poured in.

How many warnings signs had she been completely oblivious to? How had Walter met this woman? How long had it been going on? Why wasn't she enough? She'd taken care of herself, she'd taken care of their girls. They'd been a team too.

But if her father, one of the best people she'd ever known, could do this to their mom, then why should she be surprised that Walter had done this to her?

“Come on, I need one of those rum things you make,” Val said.

They smiled and made awkward conversation as they retraced their steps towards the Barlow family cabin.

“Could you at least have a look around and see what needs to be fixed?” Valerie asked, “Please?”

Matt raised an eyebrow, “You saying please? You must be in dire straits.”

Chapter 3

The next morning, Val woke exactly the same way she had every day since they'd arrived—freezing cold and almost as tired as when she went to bed.

Glancing at the time on her phone, she realized it had been barely four hours since she'd gone to bed, so maybe this time it was justified. The sisters had stayed up all night talking, trying to remember details of their father's visits to the cabin, and wondering how much of their lives had been a lie.

“Morning sunshine,” Becky said from the doorway, “coffee?”

Val made a vague agreeing noise and waved her sister away. As she pulled on her favorite yoga leggings and cozy sweatshirt, she continued to mull over the questions she hadn't expressed to Becky the night before.

Well, she had expressed them, but the way she'd expressed them had made them about their father—not Walter.

Where had he even met Sharon? What made him choose to do that to their mom? Had their happiness been a lie?

It seemed too hard to believe that their father would have an affair, especially with Sharon, who they only saw once a year. The photograph Sharon had of their father now sat on

the kitchen table. Next to it was the tie Val hadn't realized she was still holding until they'd gotten back to their own cabin and one of the ledgers from the store.

“Do you think we should ask Mom?”

Surely they had both been thinking about that all night, but neither one of them wanted to bring it up. In the cold light of the morning, though, Val wondered if it would be worth it.

Becky looked quizzical, “I just can't see it going well. She might not even remember. Or get upset about the question. She's had so many bad days lately. Or if she's having a good day and we'll waste it by bringing up an affair from thirty years ago, which will probably upset her and turn it into another bad day.”

Their mom had so few truly good days now; it would not only be a waste, as Becky had said, but maybe even cruel to take one from her.

“Hey, I've got an idea,” Becky said, “it'll make us feel warmer.”

She rounded the kitchen table and pulled her tablet from the tote bag that lay there. In just a few taps on the screen, she propped the tablet up against the bag several moments later and gestured grandly towards it.

“Ta-da! We might not be able to have a real fire until we know that the chimneys won't kill us, but here's the next best thing!”

On the screen crackled a high-definition video of a fireplace; the title along the top left corner read ‘Warm Fire Ambiance.’

“Really, this will make us feel warmer?” Val said.

“Sure. Emotionally at least.”

Val shook her head as her sister continued fussing with breakfast and coffee. It might be entirely ridiculous, Val thought, but it really was kind of relaxing to have the fake fire crackling away in the corner. She leaned back into the hardback of the chair, gazing into the dancing flames, her mind a turbulent storm of emotions. Her eyes turned to Becky, her younger sister, who had always been their family’s black sheep with her free spirit and creative dreams. Now she shuffled around in a dilapidated kitchen, cussing at camp stoves and juggling plates of... snacks? Val had no idea how this constituted breakfast but was glad to see that even in her forties, her sister was just as carefree and wild as she had always been.

Becky finally joined Valerie at the table, handing her a steaming mug of coffee and a stone cold plate with bits of cheese, a few olives, a round white thing with an odd brown tinge to the edges, and a tiny pot of yogurt with honey.

“So, I know we have kind of avoided talking about it but... how’s everything going with the divorce?” she asked, trying to sound casual but unable to hide the concern in her voice or the puppy dog eyes she now flashed across the table.

“What is this?” Val asked, dodging the question by spearing the round white thing with her fork.

“Pickled onion.”

“Pickled onion? Breakfast cocktail minus the gin and vermouth?”

“Hardly,” Becky replied, “it’s tasty! I got a hankering for some nostalgic continental breakfast vibes.”

Blinking hard at her sister, Val repeated her words back to her, “Nostalgic continental breakfast... vibes?”

She nodded, looking at Val like it was totally normal to be lusting after some cold sandwich meat and slices of packaged cheese first thing in the morning, and washing it all down with olives and pickled onions.

“Yeah, you know? Hostel travel, backpacking in our youth, picking out whatever was cheapest at the supermarket?”

Oh... that kind of nostalgia. The kind they didn’t really share because Val’s life had taken a distinctly grown up and serious turn right out of college, whereas Becky’s goal was to see as much of the world as she could.

“Right. I mean, sure, I get it,” Val said, trying to skip past the next part, “I guess you’ll have a lot to talk about with Jordan when she gets home.”

“Oh, she’s making me so jealous with her photos,” Becky said, “now stop stalling. What’s happening with the actual proceedings?”

Val sighed, her breath visible in the chilly air.

“It’s, uh, it’s coming along, I guess,” she mumbled, avoiding Becky’s gaze by turning her attention to her coffee.

Becky narrowed her eyes, clearly planning to ignore Valerie’s discomfort.

“Val, come on. You don’t have to hide anything from me. How about this? You talk to me about it and I promise I

won't get mad and go on an another long rant about how he never deserved you and how he can take a long walk off a short pier if that would so please him?"

Her sister looked very serious about this offer, completely ignoring the fact that by detailing the rant she wouldn't go on, she was, in fact, still on it. Val couldn't help it, though; she smiled at her sister's sincere face.

"Good choice. Now, how are you really doing?"

Val hesitated, then looked into her sister's eyes. As her smile faded, she knew that her vulnerability would be exposed.

"I don't know how to talk about it, Becks. Honestly, it's just so overwhelming. I don't know where to begin, what to do next, or even how to feel. I just... never thought I'd be going through a divorce. Ever. We didn't have a perfect marriage but I thought we at least respected each other."

There was a beat of silence as the women caught each other's eye; ghosts of their conversations about their parents' seemingly happy marriage flitted between them and Val felt a stab of pain in her stomach. No, not pain exactly, more like such a brief spike of nausea and anxiety that it felt like pain.

Becky reached over and squeezed Val's hand. "I know it's tough. But you do know that you don't have to go through it alone, right? We're all here for you... Well, I am and the girls would be too if you'd just—"

Val withdrew her hand from the grip and snapped harsh clipped words at her sister, regretting her tone even as she spoke. "I appreciate that, Becky. Really, I do. But when and how I tell my daughters is up to me."

“I just worry about him telling them first, you know?”

“Ha. He hasn’t spoken to any of them in weeks. When I told him Jordana was still in Prague, he didn’t even know she was out of the country. She canceled her return flight four months ago, Becks. I doubt he’ll be talking to any of them soon. Who knows if they’ll even need to know.”

She wished she could take that back the second she said it and saw her sister’s eyes harden.

“What do you mean by that?”

Val fidgeted with an olive on the plate, chasing it around with her fork and desperately trying to figure out how she would retract that.

“Valerie.”

She looked up, her sister serious for once.

“I just... I wonder if he will see how ridiculous it is to throw away our life together for someone who probably hasn’t been alive as long as we were married...”

“You want him back?!” Becky all but shouted and Val winced.

“No! Well, I mean, not ‘yes’ but I don’t know, okay? We were married for thirty years! Remember what it felt like to be thirty? When you finally started to settle down a bit and feel like a real adult?”

She was ranting now, and she didn’t care. Seeing that her sister was about to say something, she held up her hand to silence her.

“No, seriously. Think back, you’d just started teaching at your first school where you couldn’t bring in any sculpting tools because the kids would steal them to make weapons and attack each other with them. You said that you felt old. Walt and I have been married for as long as that version of you had been breathing! It’s more than half my life... he’s always been there, next to me. He was the only one.”

“And what about me?”

“You? You disappeared! You went to Europe, you traveled, you nearly got married at a full moon party on some island off the coast of Thailand! You were back in the country for two months before you even bothered to tell me!”

Becky paused before shrugging awkwardly. “That’s, um, well,” she stuttered.

“I know because it’s exactly what happened. It’s not that I want him back, it’s just that... what if it was like it never happened at all? If he came to his senses and we just started again?”

She looked over at her sister and wished she hadn’t. Her flighty and happy-go-lucky sister was staring at her with unabashed sadness in her eyes.

“Val... you will always know he’d done this to you. It would never be the same. This isn’t some drunken hookup he tearfully confessed to you, which wouldn’t be all right either, by the way. He ruthlessly waited until you were out to lunch and cleaned out your whole house! He took your appliances. You even said he took the user manuals for them!”

“So, what, one crummy thing negates decades of loyalty?”

Val knew she was clutching at straws, arguing with her sister on principle rather than genuine feeling. Becky looked a little stunned, closing her eyes as if she couldn't find the words, and Val just knew a rant was coming. The worst part was that her sister would probably be right.

“Yes... it absolutely does. Besides, this isn't one thing. It's dozens of things. Hundreds if you want to break it down enough. Drunkenly hooking up with someone is the decision to flirt, to continue that flirtation, to step close to them, to move your face to theirs, to stay in that moment kissing them. Every time you choose not to explain you're married and not available, or back away, or stop kissing them, they are all individual betrayals. This? Months of deceit, every text message, every lie, and every step of every time he was with her is its own world of betrayal. I know I sound intense, but every single time he chose to continue this liaison is him choosing to throw away what he had. You deserve so much better than that.”

The silence around them was only penetrated by the cozy crackling of the fake fire and the very real wind outside.

“I know... I just want it not to be true,” Valerie said finally.

Becky took a deep breath, relaxed in her seat and held Val's hand again.

“I know. Do you have a lawyer, at least? You need someone who can guide you through all of this and make sure that you're protected.”

Val nodded, tears welling in her eyes, “Yeah, I do. The funny thing about our friendship circle is that there were plenty to choose from and several of them offered to do it for free when they found out the circumstances. Or, at least, when their wives found out the circumstances and made their position very clear on the matter. The whole process is just so... I don’t know, surreal.”

Becky studied Val’s face, it was a little disconcerting to see her so serious with concern etched across her features.

“I hate to see you like this. You’re so much stronger than you think you are, you always have been, and you deserve to be happy,” Becky said. She was tracing the pattern of the wood with her finger as she continued, “Have you... thought about what comes next? I mean, after the divorce is finalized.”

Val looked away, knowing she couldn’t hide the mix of emotions bound to be playing across her face.

“I haven’t really allowed myself to think that far ahead. Right now, I just need to get through one day at a time.”

“Well, whenever you’re ready to talk about the future, I’m here.”

She smiled at Becky, popped the olive she had been tormenting on the plate into her mouth, and immediately spat it back out again.

“Oh my god, Becks, are these actually cocktail olives? This tastes like gin!”

Her sister burst into a peel of laughter, “Oh no! Really? The jar does say martini olives but I didn’t think they’d be any

different from regular olives!”

“Why did you give me cocktail olives for breakfast?”

Becky looked sheepish for a minute. “We’re nearly out of food, we really need to go shopping.”

Glad for a way to move past the conversation they’d been having, Valerie sighed and started planning their trip into town for supplies.

“Sure, and why don’t we get lunch at one of the tourist spots? Bit of fun,” she said.

Grinning, Becky stood from the table and started looking through the bags to see what they had left. “Definitely, and maybe we’ll see Matt out and about.”

Chapter 4

Why was she so nervous? Matt coming over was hardly anything new. He'd spent most of the summers up here popping in and out of the Barlow cabin, so why did it feel like her boss was coming to dinner?

He wasn't even coming to dinner. He was coming to do his job!

She straightened her sweater with one hand and patted her messy bun with the other before rolling her eyes at herself. It wasn't as if she cared... or that her smoothing would make a difference anyway. Val glanced at the mirror on the wall near the front door. They'd had to pull it down from their mom's room because throughout their stays here, their mom had made a point of saying that they were on vacation and their reflections could be left at home because no one was looking here.

The mirror sadly reflected what Val was worried about. She looked pale and gaunt and... old.

Internally she flinched away from the word. She didn't feel old. She still felt much like she had in her twenties, just with more joint pain and significantly lower tolerance for wine and dairy.

“It’s just the side-by-side,” she said aloud, “that’s all.”

Since leaving DC she hadn’t put a full face of makeup on, styled her hair, or noticed what clothes she was grabbing from the pile. She was so used to how she looked in full battle paint, ready to face the phalanx of perfectly made-up high-power women in her friendship circle, that this version of her looked almost ill.

She hated that she was succumbing to the media-pushed ideal of never aging, never allowing a wrinkle out of the house unfilled or concealed, shelling out thousands for light treatments and ‘face yoga’... whatever that was.

A loud bang on the door made her jump, literally standing upright from the couch she had sunk into to stew about modern beauty standards. It was followed by two crashing sounds in quick succession, and she suddenly realized how much of a fool she must look.

It was Matt knocking on the door.

“Oh, for the love of Pete,” she muttered as she crossed the room to open the door.

Tall.

That was her only thought as she opened the door and looked up at her childhood best friend.

Tall and scowling, she added as she noticed.

“Did I wake you?” he asked, a little coldly for her taste.

“It’s eleven thirty in the morning!”

He shrugged as she stepped back to let him in.

“Don’t know what you socialite types think of as getting up time.”

Socialite? What was he talking about?

“Well, I mean, at home, I’m usually up around seven but here I’ve been waking up about five.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re on vacation and you’re getting up two hours earlier than normal?”

This time, she shrugged, trying to appear as casual as she could, “Well, it’s cold. I wake up and I need to move around.”

Matt’s eyes narrowed. “It is absolutely freezing in here... why haven’t you lit the fire?”

“Because she didn’t want to burn the house down if it’s not safe,” Becky said as she arrived in the room. “How you doing, Matt?”

“Fine, Becky, you?”

“Freezing my butt off... I know it’s about making the house safe, but do you think we could get it warm first?”

He smiled, not his full happy smile but his normal lopsided one. Her heart flipped over itself. Why could Becky get him to smile and she couldn’t?

“Sure,” he said, moving towards the fireplace, “I’ll start with the chimney and then do a proper inspection, okay?”

*

There was something universally uncomfortable about being at home while someone was working on it. Especially when they were doing something professional like inspecting.

Somehow it was twice as awkward when the person was someone you knew. Especially when his coldness repeatedly took you off guard.

Valerie fumed over the few interactions she and Matt had shared over the last few hours. She'd offered him coffee. No thank you. She'd suggested lunch. No thank you. She'd asked if there was anything he actually would like and the way he'd looked at her told her that what he'd actually like was to be left alone. He hadn't answered so she had just left.

Now, she sat downstairs across the table from Becky and waited for him to come to her.

“What can he possibly have left to inspect?” she burst out after nearly an hour of silence in the kitchen.

Becky looked up from her phone, startled.

“Uh... I don't know? House stuff?”

“I was making sure your roof isn't going to cave in and kill you, actually,” Matt said from the doorway to the kitchen.

Her stomach flipped, of course the first time she had spoken in a hour was something about him and she was immediately overheard by him. Apparently that was the kind of day she was going to have whether she liked it or not.

“Well, I mean, that's what we'd prefer,” she said lamely, trying for a smile but feeling uneasy about it before she had even committed to it.

“Wait, the way you say that,” Becky said quickly, “do you mean, like, in general? Or you did something specific just now because the roof was at risk of falling in?”

Matt smiled, “the first one. I saw something concerning in the back bedroom so I had to get up there and have a closer look. It’s not great, but it’s unlikely to get worse quickly enough to damage you.”

Val knew she should say something, even just acknowledgment, but she couldn’t get her words to come. The back bedroom. Her bedroom. He’d been in her bedroom. She was the biggest fool in the world. Of course he’d been in her bedroom. He was doing a full building inspection! She raced through her memory; had she put the lid on the laundry hamper last night, or were her dirty clothes just sitting there for the world to see?

She felt the heat rising in her cheeks and turned in her chair to face the window that looked out onto the back porch.

“So now you’re done, coffee?”

“Sure.”

He seems so casual and calm, she thought as she arranged the camp stove and Moka Pot. He was never so calm and confident growing up. This version of him was good to see but a little confusing, she had to admit.

“So, do you want the good news, the bad news, or the medium news?” Matt asked.

Settling the coffee into the little basket that sat at the center of the Moka Pot could be messy if she didn’t pay

attention. Their dwindling supply of the good coffee would be wasted on the table.

They really needed to do a proper shop. The bits they'd picked up a few days ago had worked to tide them over but they needed real food or they'd get scurvy. The coffee was a motivating factor too, the mornings were pretty miserable here without coffee.

“Uh, the good news?” Becky said hesitatingly.

“Well, the good news is that it can all be fixed.”

Oh great.

“That’s the good news? Should I get the tissues and ice cream for the bad news?”

“It’s too cold for ice cream, and your freezer is kaput.”

Kaput? Who uses words like kaput?

As she turned to place the prepared coffee contraption on the burner, she caught the look in Matt’s eye. He was teasing her!

“Well it’s cold enough outside, we could stick it in the snow or just leave it on the porch, honestly.”

“How bear safe of you,” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“True,” she replied, “okay, hit us with the medium.”

The coffee pot needed a minute or so to come to temperature so she busied herself with getting mugs, cream, and sugar while he opened his notebook and flipped through a few pages.

“The medium news is that your sealing is pretty terrible. That’s medium and not bad because it’s the easiest to fix in your case. Things like the chimneys and the glass in the window frames. Once that’s done, you will be a lot warmer.”

Throughout the notebook, she noticed, his handwriting was neat and efficient. Jotting down notes, measurements, and sums on one side and following a neatly printed checklist on the other.

“Wow, you really are thorough,” she said, nodding towards the open book.

He glanced down at it and then back up at her, “Well yeah, if I’m not careful, people can die.”

“Right. I didn’t mean anything by it, it’s just, you know, good to know,” she said. Why, oh, why did she have to say everything that came into her head?

“Sure,” he replied before continuing the description of the work that needed to be done on the seals around the place.

Saving her from having to say anything else, the Moka Pot bubbled to the point she recognized as ready, and Val was able to fuss with the coffee mugs instead.

“Just a little sugar, please,” Matt said.

“Lots of milk, no sugar,” Becky added.

She just nodded, filling their orders and trying to ignore the weird feeling in her stomach that she was being excluded. Val wasn’t exactly used to being on the outs with people she liked, or at least with people who she cared about how they thought of her. The women in DC didn’t really count; most of them weren’t really her friends, and the ones that she was

close to were way too open with her to freeze her out of anything.

Matt was still talking about the easy fixes around the cabin that would make the most difference and Becky was taking notes, Val realized in shock. She almost couldn't remember seeing Becky take notes in school, let alone spontaneously.

As he came to a natural pause, Matt sipped his coffee and looked over to her.

“Hey, this is really nice. Where did you get it?”

“Down the mountain,” Val replied, “we're nearly out, I didn't really want to go back down for more but there's not a lot in town.”

She wondered if she'd said something wrong because he was staring at her, a little disconcertingly, over the top of his coffee mug and it was having an electric effect on her heartbeat which she did not like.

Not even a little bit.

“What?” she asked, breaking the silence.

He narrowed his eyes as he lowered the cup and cocked his head to one side.

“I'm trying to decide if I should tell you off for dissing the local store, or tell you where you can get the good coffee locally,” he said thoughtfully, “it's hard because you're not wrong, but I also don't like that you're being snobby about the local fare...”

“I'm not being snobby!” she protested, “I promise.”

A quirk at the corner of his mouth made her realize he was teasing her again. Why was he being so weird today? She wasn't mad about it. In fact, it was nice to be bantering back and forth like they used to but in comparison to how cold and distant he'd been almost constantly since they found him working on the porch that first time, it was weird.

"Hmm," he said, "we'll see. How many days have you got left?"

She mentally divvied up the coffee left in the bag, "About three..."

"Plenty," he said, "now, the bad news."

Val groaned. "Okay shoot."

"There is a lot of structural damage to both porches and the back wall. Your insulation is shot, and I've isolated the upstairs wiring from the mains supply because the wiring was concerning. I think you had something living in there and chewing through things. Not anymore, but previously I'm pretty sure."

At that last bit Becky gave an exaggerated shudder. "You promise? I swear if a raccoon falls out of the ceiling onto me in the night, I'll hunt you down, Matthew."

He laughed again, and Valerie felt jealousy flash across her nervous system. Why was she even jealous? It made no sense and she was being ridiculous.

"Also, there are a few spots on the stairs we should reinforce but that actually falls more into the medium news category along with the drywalling upstairs."

Val sipped at her coffee and totted up the list of things he'd given them, "so, not an inconsiderable amount of work then?"

With a solemn shake of his head, Matt slipped her a sheet of paper with sums on it, "That's inclusive of materials for the most part, but some aspects will depend on availability."

Anything she had been feeling before evaporated as she took in the number circled at the bottom of the page.

"Oh my god..."

"What?" Becky asked, leaning over to see.

Her stomach suddenly felt like she had been drinking concrete instead of coffee and it was setting fast.

"That's, um, a lot of digits for repairs," she said, trying to keep her tone light and failing miserably. "I don't really have that kind of money, you know, laying about the house."

Matt pursed his lips as if to say 'yeah right', but instead actually said, "Sure, okay. What is the budget?"

Before she could stop herself, Val let out a burst of laughter as she tallied up her meager savings.

"Honestly? Nothing!"

She'd meant it as a joke but from the way Matt's eyebrows shot up and hearing Becky take a sharp breath in, they hadn't seen it that way.

"You want me to work for free?"

"What? No! It's just that it's a lot of money. I didn't mean like, nothing *nothing*! Just that I was not expecting a bill

like this for literally anything at all.”

“Okay, so you thought you’d bat your eyelashes and I’d swoon and shell out for the materials myself? Because you know those are the only two choices, right? Free labor or free materials?”

“I didn’t mean that!”

“Sure, you never mean it when someone catches you trying to manipulate them,” he said, putting his coffee mug down hard on the table, “but if they let you get away with it, you’ll take advantage of anyone.”

“Manipulate? That’s not fair? I don’t do that...”

She looked to Becky for support and felt her heart skip a beat as she noticed her sister pointedly looking away.

“So if I offered to do it for free, you wouldn’t let me? You’d force a cheque into my hand or hide it in my wallet when I wasn’t looking? Go find my account details and send me the money against my will?”

He was staring at her. Apparently, he wanted an actual answer.

“I mean, that last one seems a bit invasive but I wouldn’t let you give me fifty grand because essentially that’s what you’d be doing, no.”

“So, what did you mean?” he said coolly.

Suddenly, she felt like she was back in school in front of the teacher holding some incriminating piece of evidence and her mouth went dry.

“I just meant, are there some things we need to do because it’s dangerous if we don’t sort them out? Are there things we can do cheaply to stop things getting worse? Can we do any of it ourselves? I’m not being funny, I really don’t have that kind of money. I’ll get something when the d— proceedings are finalized, but I don’t know when that will be or how much it will amount to.”

Valerie let her sentence trail off. Matt didn’t look convinced but she didn’t know what she could say that wouldn’t get her accused of manipulation again. He leaned across the table and grabbed the slip of paper, running his pen down the list and making marks against a few things.

“Here,” he said when he finally handed it back, “circled are things you shouldn’t screw around with, stars are things you can probably do yourself, and the crossed off ones are nice to have but, for how much they cost, you can live without. The three underlined things are things I’ll do for you off the books. Don’t thank me, they’re lawsuits waiting to happen and I don’t want the town getting bad press because you’re not able to pay. Work out what you can pay for and give me a call.”

He stood from his chair, smiled at Becky, and left.

“Okay. Thanks, I guess,” Val said as she watched his retreating form leave the cabin.

Chapter 5

“I just don’t know what it will achieve,” Becky said, tucking the bottle of red wine under her arm and fumbling with the corkscrew, “leaving the place half finished? I don’t know. It feels wrong.”

They had been having the same conversation for two days.

“I know that’s how you feel, but unless you’ve got a hundred thousand dollars secreted in that monstrosity of a vehicle out there, we just can’t afford it.”

Becky popped the cork out of the bottle with a triumphant grin, “A hundred grand? Where did you get a hundred grand from?”

Letting out a lingering sigh, Val answered, “Probably more like a hundred and fifty. You saw the list, and you saw Sharon’s cabin. If we actually own it... which I’m still not entirely convinced that we do. We’ll have to wait and talk to the lawyers about that. It’s in way worse condition than ours, and we’ll have to fix it up if we’re going to sell it. If ours is about fifty, then that place is at least that and probably way more.”

The large round wine glasses they had found in the cupboards were old-fashioned but nicely made, and the color of the wine as it splashed in looked gorgeous in the warm lights they'd positioned on the back porch.

"Here," Becky said, her voice glum as she handed one of the glasses to Val.

The sisters sat in silence for a while, each lost in their own thoughts. When Val finally broke it, she recoiled at the weakness in her voice.

"Becks... I don't think I can do this," Val said. "This was supposed to be an escape from my temporarily cruddy life, not make it harder and more expensive. I was debating the merits of a one hundred dollar futon off FreeListing versus a two hundred dollar bed frame from a terrible discount store a few weeks ago. I can't sink fifty grand, minimum, into anything at the moment."

Her sister didn't say anything, she just sipped her wine.

"I feel like running away was a good distraction, but I can't be here anymore. I should be home, talking to Walter, or at least his lawyers! I need to find out what actually happened and where I stand," Val paused as her phone vibrated. "Oh, for the love of—look, speak of the devil."

Walter's face filled the screen of Valerie's phone.

"Don't you dare," Becky said, snapping to attention.

"I don't want to... but this is the first time he's tried to call me! I think I have to..."

"You absolutely do not have to. Call him tomorrow. Tell him you missed him. He doesn't get to walk out on you and

then suddenly decide to, what? Unblock you? Didn't you say all your calls went straight to voicemail?"

A prickle of anger edged its way in next to her panic and Val took a long drink of the wine in her glass and flicked the screen away before shoving the phone into the pocket of her hooded sweatshirt.

"Good choice," Becky said, "I swear it's like ex-husbands can smell vulnerability, showing up exactly when they know it will hurt most."

Val's ears pricked up at her sister's mention of ex-husbands like she had one. Becky had never actually stayed with anyone for more than a few months before she got bored or needed to move states for whatever reason.

"Hmm," Val said in favor of any of the questions she had floating around in her mind just then, "I can't believe he'd just call out of the blue like that, after weeks and weeks of silence and lawyers saying stuff like 'I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to discuss the whereabouts or contact information of my client' like he's the one who got screwed over and abandoned."

"He's such a jackass," Becky said. "Honestly, I hope whoever this stupid woman is, bleeds him dry, robs him, and leaves him stranded in whatever country she convinced him to take her on vacation."

Val wasn't quite as vindictive as that, but the thought of Walter standing in a hotel lobby in just a pair of board shorts trying to convince the concierge that if they just call his bank, they'll sort out the bill, did make her want to laugh.

Becky sat upright in her chair. “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“A voice...” Becky said.

Placing her wineglass carefully on the table, Val stared out into the blackness of the woods that surrounded them, straining to hear.

“—lerie! Are you doing this on purpose?”

The voice was coming from her hoodie.

Oh no.

She and Becky realized simultaneously what must have happened and they each snapped to look at the pocket in the front of Val’s sweatshirt.

Swallowing hard, Val withdrew her phone and saw Walter’s face filling the screen again—except this time, he was moving. She hadn’t rejected the call. She had accidentally answered it.

Her camera was off and she was keeping it that way. There was no way in hell he was seeing her like this.

“Oh, hello, sorry, no I didn’t realize my phone was ringing,” she said, knowing as she said it that it made no sense, “what do you want, Walter?”

“Turn your camera on,” he said, “Please.” Bile rose in her throat and Val held her hand up as Becky leaned forward to say something on her behalf.

“No, I’m not doing that,” she said, “what do you want? Why did you call me?”

“I... miss you.”

The sisters leaned in and watched Walter on the screen. He ran a hand over his face in frustration. He was sporting more stubble than she had seen him wear in years, his shirt loosely unbuttoned at the collar and exposing a tanned chest.

“And despite whatever your sister might be saying—Hello Rebecca—I do actually have a heart and feelings, and I want to talk to you.”

“Nice tan,” Becky chimed in. “Mexico? Barbados? Bora bora? Wait, give me a clue, do they have extradition there?”

Val swatted at her sister’s arm. In moments like this, she wished Becky had learned to filter her caustic comments a little more effectively. In private, they were hilarious, but with an audience, they were nothing but embarrassing.

“Extradition?” Walter exclaimed. “What’s extradition got to do with it!?”

“Take your pick,” Becky said, leaning back in her chair, “maybe you get charged with felony theft? Maybe you want to press charges when your girlfriend leaves you penniless and she’s not crossing that border anytime soon.”

“So funny Becky—”

“Ah! You don’t get to call me that anymore. It’s Ms Barlow to you,” Becky said, cutting him off as she snapped back to attention in her seat.

“Ms Barlow? Are you serious? We’ve known each other for three decades.”

“Excellent, the boy can count,” Becky sniped back. “Tell me, has your girlfriend had that many birthdays or is she still keeping track on her fingers and toes?”

Val propped the phone down on the table between herself and Becky. This was by far the least effort argument she had ever had with Walter, she pondered, wondering how long this would continue on for if she just sat there and let them go.

She was too calm, it felt strange and it was actually starting to worry her. Normally, she would be so tense her muscles would ache, or she’d be fighting back tears. But as she closed her eyes and half listened to the way her sister was passionately defending her, she found that she was almost floating outside of herself.

“Valerie?”

Walter’s tone brought her crashing back down to earth.

“Are you just going to let her talk to me like that?”

Val scoffed. “Let her? What makes you think my permission has anything to do with her feelings towards you? You did this, Walt. I’m not going to protect you from the consequences of your own actions.”

Becky stared at her in silent shock... or was that awe?

“Well—I... look. Can we talk without your sister?”

“We can talk,” Val said, ignoring Becky’s eye roll.

The image of Walter pixelated for a moment then froze him in place. Val leaned in to look at him; he looked tired. Tanned. Becky had been right. She recoiled internally as she

felt the familiar pang of concern for her husband in her chest. Why did she care if he looked tired? He was always tired except this time he was probably tired because he was going out all hours with whoever he'd left her for...

“—Can you hear me?”

His image cleared and the connection indicator turned green.

“Sure. Now what do you want?”

She was steeling herself, she realized, she needed to. That feeling in her chest was not going to help her in the long run...

“I just want to talk to you... see how you are.”

“How I am?”

Val had intended for those words to come out harsh and sarcastic like Becky's, but instead, they were almost a whisper, and she hated how weak she sounded.

“Well,” she continued, “you cut off my phone and credit cards without giving me any heads up. Which, by the way, meant that it was declined at lunch with Dolly and the rest of them. Thank you for that particular gift. All the while I was stupid enough to think that it was a problem with the bank, cell tower, your phone.”

She saw him open his mouth to try and respond, but she was on a roll now and the way he raised his index finger like he did with unruly clients only spurred her on.

“I'm not finished speaking, Walter. I get home and it looks like it's been ransacked. You know I nearly called the

police? I thought home invaders had kidnapped you! On what planet is how you went about this in any way excusable?"

"It's not."

His sudden admission of wrongdoing made her pause. After weeks of silence—not a single text, phone call, or letter that wasn't actually from his damned lawyers—this was his first reaction? All the anger in her dropped away, leaving behind the hurt that she had been desperately trying to push down in her mind and ignore.

"So you knew it was wrong and you did it anyway?"

"No... I wasn't thinking clearly, and I'm sorry for how I went about things. It was a horrible way for you to find out and I'm ashamed of how weak I was to resort to that kind of behavior. It should never have happened like that."

"No, it shouldn't have."

Val wanted to keep that sentence going, list all the reasons why it was the worst possible way he could have done any of it—cite their decades together, their kids, the fact that as a fellow human being she deserved at least a baseline of respect. None of it would come, though, because her husband was genuinely sorry. He didn't apologize very often, even when he was very clearly in the wrong, and he certainly didn't expound on how he had messed up.

"I have to go, Val," he said, "but I really do want to talk to you. Properly, no lawyers, no arguing. Just talk. Please?"

The pain in his voice was real! Damn him!

"Okay," she said quietly.

The screen went black as she hung up.

“What, precisely, was that?” Becky said, clearly shocked and maybe even angry.

“Just shut up and top up my glass,” Val said.

Her sister obliged the latter request while completely ignoring the former.

“You can’t believe him, Val. He’s a manipulator! A master, apparently, he can’t do all of this and just be like *oh by the way I’m definitely sorry... can we talk? I miss you,*” Becky said, on a roll now. “What even was that? Does his girlfriend know he’s in their room missing you? He’s disgusting. Sorry, I know you married him, but where does he get off?”

Val shrugged, sipping wine from her glass, which was now full nearly to the brim.

“You’re so much better off without him.”

She knew her sister meant what she was saying but the way her heart leaped at the sight of him, the sincerity in her voice, his immediate and complete acceptance of fault.... Was she really better off without him? Or was this something they could work through? Glancing to her sister, who was still muttering to herself about ungrateful jerks and their reprehensible consciences, Val let herself imagine what reconciliation might look like.

Chapter 6

It had been three days since the call and Val was furious at herself. She had all but waited by the phone to see if he would reach out again. She hadn't been brave enough, of course, to try calling him. Not only because she didn't want to admit that she wanted to talk to him and give the notion of any tangible evidence like a missed call notification or voice mail, but also because she wasn't sure how she would take it if he had re-blocked her number.

What if Becks had been right? What if he was hiding his calls to her from this other woman? Had he hidden phone calls while they had been together? The thought made her stomach knot. How many times had he slipped away from dinner?

A darker thought crossed her mind—if he was hiding his calls to her from this person the same way he used to hide phone calls from his wife...did that kind of make her the other woman in this new situation!?

No, no, no, she thought, not even thinking about it.

To distract herself, Val pulled out her phone and flicked open the first app that caught her eye.

The number of times when she had found herself poised over social media profiles of their friends, just about to dive

into trying to find out who she was, had tripled in the last few days and was back up at the level it had been in the first week after he left.

She couldn't cross that threshold, though. If she found out, she couldn't un-know it. This way, at least, if they did decide to reconcile, she could compartmentalize this woman into an amorphous 'other'. No need for a name or a face.

Ugh!

Val groaned and locked the screen again—this stupid tap dance was the worst!

Had their mom felt like this with their dad? Val knew the decision they had come to about not asking their mom anything was the right thing to do but it was frustrating all the same. Pulling the long cardigan around her tightly, Val moved to the window.

The snow was thick on the ground below her and she could feel the cold radiating from the glass. The thin breeze that blew in between the panes and the window frame made her shiver.

We really need to do something about the sealing in the cabin, she thought, *probably Sharon's too.*

Thinking about the abandoned cabin so close to theirs made her uneasy somehow. It wasn't like she had been thinking about it before, but now that she knew it was there, it seemed almost creepy.

There came a clanging from downstairs and Val realized that it was probably Becky before her panic had a chance to set in proper.

“Becks!?”

“Just me!”

Val shook her head. She and her sister’s odd synchronizations had always irked their mom and it felt odd to slip back into them after all this time. As she headed downstairs to greet her sister, she realized that this was by far the longest she and Becky had spent together in years.

“Hey, good hike?”

Becky was hanging out of the back door and banging her boots together to dislodge the ice that clung to the soles. “Yeah, not too bad. I want to head into town though, we should really get some local socials back.”

“Socials?”

“Yeah, you know... make sure we’re not acting like tourists.”

“We are tourists, Beck.”

Her sister screwed up her face, “Don’t say that... it feels gross.”

Val smiled at the expression, but the attitude wasn’t lost on her. The locals really did their best to work with the tourism that helped their town thrive but, just like anywhere with a major tourism component to their town composition, there were tensions that couldn’t be ignored. The potential to be seen as an ungrateful interloper was higher when you stayed a little further out in cabins you owned or rented rather than staying in the major resorts and their mom had always stressed the importance of integrating locally. The girls had always felt closer to temporary locals than tourists, but their friendship

with Matt was likely a part of that too, especially as teenagers. He was the one who had granted them access to the local kids' parties and secret hangouts.

There was a hint of a memory there and Val smiled as she thought about how she and Matt used to sit around the campfires he and his friends had built, sipping beers as if they actually liked the flavor.

"Let's do the rounds, see what's changed. I really need to get out of the house—it's getting a little feverish in here."

Becky quirked her head as she turned to consider her sister, "feverish?"

"Yeah. Overthinking the call, resisting the urge to comb social media until I find every possible lead on who this woman is, trying to decide if I want to look into Sharon's cabin or pretend it doesn't exist, debating telling the gir—"

"Right, I get it, feverish," Becky said, cutting her off, "let's drive in, do some supply shopping, and see who's still around?"

Val nodded enthusiastically, even as the thought crossed her mind, "And if they are, maybe we could ask them about Sharon."

*

"Thank you, Mrs. Hinkler!" Becky smiled and waved again as she and Val stepped out into the street.

Both sisters were loaded up with various supplies from the general store—everything from cans of soup to a solid shampoo and conditioner that was made locally and apparently all the rage with the more eco-minded tourists.

“Well I’m not sure she actually remembered us,” Val said, “I think she was calling me Veronica half the time.”

“She’s at least ninety-seven,” Becky replied, “she has a free pass on remembering names.”

“I’m just impressed she’s still in the shop,” Val said, nodding in agreement with her sister’s comment, “I’m not sure I could work retail for fifty years and still have the capacity for small talk.”

They reached the car and deposited their goods in the backseat. The main street was wide and lined with cars. There was a small group of people crowded around something about halfway down the road and Val smiled as she remembered a brief stint at a summer job where she was supposed to be assisting a walking tour leader from one of the resorts.

“Fifty? More like seventy—I remember her telling us she started working there the day she and Mr. Hinkler got back from their honeymoon.”

Val paused and tried to recall if she had been told the same thing, but it was too long ago and the memory slipped out of her grasp.

“Shall we pop into Sid’s?”

Becky was gesturing down the road to a little sign indicating a third business tucked between two full sized storefronts. Sid’s was Becky’s favorite place in town, though

Val had always felt a little claustrophobic in the curiosity-come-bookshop.

“Sure,” she said, shutting the door to the car and hitting the lock button on the fob.

“Did you have any luck with Mrs. Hinkler about Sharon?” Becky asked, smiling deviously.

“Uh...” Val glanced at her sister and immediately realized there was no point feigning innocence, “no, she said she’d met approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand Sharon’s in her time in town and if I was going to ask any other silly questions, she wouldn’t sell me the chocolate bar she was scanning at the time.”

“I’m glad you saw sense and stopped asking,” Becky said with a laugh, “that chocolate looks incredible.”

Light flakes began to fall as they crossed a side road off main and took shelter under the porch that protected the three stores. Growing up, Val had always wondered how Sid’s had come about. It was tiny, barely ten feet wide, but running the whole depth of the building. There was a staircase at the back of the room, she remembered, but it was off limits to customers. Or, at least, it was off limits to children and teenage customers. Val seemed to remember that Sid had very strict rules about touching the antique books.

Chapter 7

They paused at the door, a wave of nostalgia seeming to wash over them at the same time. How many times had they stood here together, bickering about something or scheming? The ‘Welcome, Don’t Touch The Merchandise’ sign was still hanging from a suction cup on the other side of the glass and they seemed to notice it together.

“Good to see it hasn’t changed,” Becky said with a smile.

As they entered the store, a brass bell rang and an older man stood from his seat at an old fashioned writing desk at the far end of the room.

“Hello?” he called, “Welcome to Sid’s, if you need anything—ask.”

“Hi!” Becky said, waving, “Sid, it’s so good to see you! You might not remember me, I haven’t been here in a very long time.”

Val shook her head as she watched her sister barrel down the store just like she used to when she was a teenager. The man’s expression changed to one of suspicious confusion as Becky approached.

“I remember everyone,” he said, “so long as they’re interesting enough to remember.”

She couldn’t see Becky’s face, but Val knew that she must be grinning ear to ear. Her little sister had spent at least three afternoons a week in the shop when they were staying here and loved to tell anyone who would listen that she was interesting enough to be allowed to stay. Eventually, when she had been old enough, she actually looked after the shop for two afternoons a week.

“Becky Barlow,” Sid said, “it is you after all—and is that you’re grumpy sister?”

“Grumpy!?” Val said as she joined them at the rear of the store—the layout hadn’t changed in three decades.

“You were always grumpy,” Sid said, “didn’t want to be babysitting, if I recall correctly?”

Well, that had been true, she had to admit.

“You might have a point there,” she said, smiling, “how have you been?”

“In general, over the last—what is it, must be thirty years—I think it’s safe to say I’ve averaged out to generally all right. Yourselves?”

The sparkle of wit in his eyes was just as bright as it had been then, which shouldn’t have been all that surprising. Despite thinking of him as an old man, Sid had probably been no older than thirty or forty when the girls had been kids.

“Oh, you know,” Val said, “college, husband, kids, seven thousand dinners, divorce, and now we’re back in town!”

Becky grinned. “Changed majors a bunch, dropped out, went traveling, taught art, skipped all the stuff she said in the middle there.”

“Ah but the important bit is the same, you’re back in town. How can I help you girls? Coffee?”

Sid gestured to a couch near the desk and moved towards an intricately carved cabinet behind his desk.

“Coffee? In the shop?” Becky asked, feigning horror.

“Yes, yes, how the mighty have fallen,” Sid replied, “cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please,” Becky said, “actually, I do have a question for you.”

“Hmm?”

Sid reached for a latch and released the doors of the cabinet which swung open to reveal a mirrored interior and a myriad of brass railed shelves that framed a compact coffee machine.

“Oh wow!” Val said, “That’s beautiful!”

“Yes it is,” he agreed, “you remember Matt, surely? He put this together for us.”

Val hoped her flinch wasn’t noticeable, and instead, she instinctually asked, “Us?”

Her heart skipped a beat and she wished she had just nodded and changed the subject. She wasn’t sure but she thought she remembered that Sid’s wife had died in a car crash the year before he moved to town.

With a nod, Sid retrieved three sets of cups and their matching saucers.

“Yes, about twenty-five years ago, a woman came over from London to visit her sleepy hometown,” he said, smiling at her through their reflections in the mirrored cabinet, “... wanted to see what the crackpot her father sold the upstairs apartment to had done with the place. As it turns out, she was a rare book dealer and... well I would say she never left but she’s actually barely here. She flies back and forth so often. She’s back in town now, though, and watch out. *If* you’re not careful, you’ll find yourself threading wildflower garlands and gluing sticks to things to make them look like deer.”

Val and Becky glanced at each other before Becky spoke, “Uh... gluing sticks to deer?”

“No, to things in order to make them look like deer, obviously.”

Sid turned and handed them a coffee each.

“Right,” Val said, “obviously.”

“Yeah,” Becky added, “as I was saying, we found a bunch of photographs in our cabin. You remember we used to come up with our mom? Well, she was best friends with a woman here—Sharon? They’d always make sure to vacation here at the same time so they could see each other. We realized, though, that we actually never knew her last name. As you were more our mom’s age, I thought maybe you remembered her?”

Sid nodded.

“Yes, I do remember your mother and her. Very odd it was... took years for her to open up to anyone. Except for your mom. They were like two peas in a pod. They’d walk you up and down Main Street in your stroller.”

Val hadn’t expected a real answer from him, but there it was. She stammered as she thought of what to ask next.

“You knew them, then?”

He shrugged, turned, and made his way over to his desk, where he set his cup and saucer down before carefully lowering himself into the chair.

“I suppose you could say that. When I came here first, I was heartbroken. I had been very lucky to marry my high school sweetheart straight after graduation. We settled down, wanted to start a family, but that never really took.”

His voice wavered and Val wondered why on earth he was telling them this about himself. All her memories of him had been of a grumpy old man telling her not to break anything...

“She died. A guy coming home from a night shift fell asleep at the wheel and knocked her down. She was only nineteen.”

“Oh Sid... I’m so sorry,” Becky said, but he waved her off.

“It was a very long time ago now,” he said, as if that explained everything, “I was a very angry man when I came here, I was off on what I think the kids are calling a ‘gap year’ now, and I found this town and got work on the slopes—eventually buying this place. There were a few people who

made me feel at home, and strangely enough, your mother was one of those folks, even though she wasn't a year-rounder. Sharon was her best friend, but she was never really interested in socializing with anyone other than your mom. She asked me, your mom did, if it was all right for you to hang about it here like you did."

He gestured at Becky, who blushed, "oh, really? Was I that annoying?"

"Yes," he replied without hesitation, "but to tell you the truth, it was one of the things that helped me become less angry. Lisa is big into gratitude and all that nonsense, but I am thankful to you girls and your mother. I think I would still be angry if this town hadn't worked its magic on me."

"Sidney! Are you being a sad sack again?"

A woman's voice cut through the tense air surrounding them, and Val watched as his face brightened and he turned towards the stairs. The woman standing there was easily as tall as Sid, except where he was sinewy and slender, she was comfortably rounded and soft.

"Lisa, come and meet the Barlow girls," he said, ignoring her comment entirely, "you remember their mother, Therese Barlow? Her and her friend Sharon?"

The warm smile on her face flickered, but only for a second, "Therese's daughters? Well now, I don't believe I've ever had the pleasure."

"No," Val said, "probably not. I think Sid said you came home a couple of years after our last trip here. Our mom still vacationed here though, she loved the place."

“Yes, yes she did,” Lisa said, smiling, “it’s a good thing you’re in town. How long are you staying?”

Becky laughed, “Well it was supposed to be a few weeks, but we’ve taken on the task of renovating the cabin. The contractor we hired was a little... well, let’s say, flexible with the truth around how much upkeep he was doing. So it might be a while.”

“Perfect,” Lisa said, “you can dive right back into the town spirit if you’d like?”

“Uh... sure?” Val said.

Lisa’s face broke into a grin, “Excellent, I’m organizing the Spring Festival and we need as many volunteers as possible. There will be three hundred and sixty five deer hidden around the town—some easy to find and some more challenging to spot. It’s a kind of treasure hunt, but the problem is I need to make three hundred and sixty five deer, which, with only two hands, is proving laborious. Why don’t you come around in a few days and I’ll get you started?”

“Oh,” Becky said, “Sure, that sounds—”

“Wonderful!” Lisa said, “Now I’m off to Lynda’s—she’s trying a new perm treatment on my hair.”

“Don’t let her do that!” Sid said, standing suddenly. “Last time she tried something new, it was blue for three months!”

Lisa winked at the girls as she crossed the shop, dropping a kiss on Sid’s cheek as she passed by.

He sighed and watched as she exited the store.

“Well,” he said, “I did warn you. I guess you two will be back here, now, with her and Lynda and three hundred fake deer.”

“Three hundred and sixty five, I think it was,” Becky said with a grin.

Chapter 8

“Why do I let you talk me into this stuff?” Becky asked, her breath coming out in plumes of white as she hefted the wicker basket back onto her hip.

“I didn’t talk you into anything. You agreed all on your own.”

“That was before I knew that the three hundred deer would be literally made of stone,” Becky retorted, pushing her hip out so the basket clipped Val’s.

“Don’t break the deer,” Val replied, “better this than the idea she had for the life-size ones.”

Becky looked down into the basket that held at least a hundred smooth round rocks, all with shiny dark noses and brightly colored eyes painted on the surface. Some had googley eyes, others had antlers, and some were beautifully painted portraits of deer because Lisa’s amateur hairdresser friend happened to be an actual artist.

“That’s true,” Becky said, “is she on her way?”

“Should be, we said ten.”

As they reached the curved stone wall that encircled the statue of an Elk every tourist needed photos of, Val collapsed onto the wall in relief.

“Oh thank goodness,” she said, puffing hard, “I really need to join you for a few hikes, I’m so unfit!”

Becky laughed, “And I’m not?”

She cast her eyes over her sister—Becky was almost as red in the face as she herself was, but she was making exaggerated puffing breaths and Val laughed despite her breathlessness from hauling the rocks from the car.

The crisp mountain air around them carried the distant sound of a group chatting and laughing to the low stone wall where they sat. Valerie shielded her eyes as the sun hung low in the sky, casting a cold winter sunlight over the small mountaintop town. The main street held decades of memories for the two sisters, fewer than the cabin to be sure, but they spent multiple days a week in town and it was odd to see how it had changed.

Becky, a spark of mischief in her eyes, nudged Val with an elbow. “Remember the time we tried to catch fireflies down where they had the pond for one of the festivals? We fell asleep, and when we woke up, it was dark and Mom got so mad when we finally made it back with more mosquito bites than fireflies.”

Val chuckled, the lines on her face deepening with the years. “Yeah... She and Matt’s mom had been out looking for us for hours. She grounded me for three days for not setting a good example. Good times.”

The look on Becky’s face was one of pure surprise and it mirrored the feeling Val had in her chest—how could Becky not have known that?

“Oh, seriously!? Well, at least three days isn’t too long really...”

“Yeah. Three days on vacation, though, felt like a week at home,” Val replied, purposefully smiling at her sister to show her that she wasn’t mad about it. It had been forty years, after all. It shouldn’t surprise her—she had always looked out for her rebellious younger sister where their parents had been concerned, but a part of her wished that Becky knew some of it at least. Maybe then she wouldn’t have spent so many years mad at Val for not caring...

“That’s true. Did she make you do the pine needle thing?”

Val’s mind quirked at the unlocking of a memory and she turned to look at her sister fully. “Oh my god, you know... I think I’d almost forgotten about that. I think I tried it once or twice on the girls...”

Throwing her head back, Becky laughed at the top of her lungs. “Oh... I think I know exactly how that would have gone with each of them. Let me guess. Emmy came back to you in tears because she couldn’t decide what a ‘perfect pine needle’ was and, therefore, could never find one hundred of them. Rose spent three hours sitting in a clearing enjoying herself. And my clone, my little Jordana, the rebel princess, she flat refused and pointed out that punishing someone for wandering off by making them wander off was dumb?”

For someone who had spent so little time with them, Becky knew her nieces pretty well.

“Pretty much, yes,” Val said, “except Jordana also asked me what I’d do if she never came back. That kid knew exactly

which of my buttons to jab with her tiny child fingers from the minute she learned to talk, I think.”

Leaning to one side, Becky fished out her phone and snapped a selfie with Val before she had a chance to smile nicely. As Val started to protest, her pocket buzzed and the notification of a new group chat popped up on her screen before a slew of notifications bombarded her and filled her screen and set off an almost constant stream of buzzing and dings.

Beck Barls Has Added You To A Chat

Beck Barls Has Changed The Chat Name To: Barlow Women Rule.

Beck Barls Has Set Her Nickname To: Weird Aunt Becks.

Beck Barls Has Set Your Nickname To: Fun Sponge.

Beck Barls Has Set Emmy Schuster’s Nickname To: Legal Eagle.

Beck Barls Has Set Rose Hammersmith’s Nickname To: Rose By Any Other Name.

Beck Barls Has Set Jordy Shu’s Nickname To: World Traveler.

“Fun Sponge!? Really!?” Val exclaimed. “I’m not a fun sponge!”

Becky cackled and sent the photo she had just snapped—her wild grinning face took up nearly half the frame and

Val's blank expression was the total opposite. Even Val had to admit, it was quite funny.

Rose Hammersmith Has Changed Your Nickname To: SuperMomExtraordinaire.

Rose By Any Other Name: *Is that seriously a Shakespeare reference?*

Becky giggled, "Oh she's the cutest."

From Weird Aunt Becks: *yes, because you're the sweetest!*

Rose By Any Other Name.: *...right, well I'm glad you two are having fun in the snow.*

From Legal Eagle: *omg 200 notifications later, I thought there was an emergency! I'll catch up later. I have to go back to this meeting <3*

"I should have found a bookie and put some bets down on these replies," Becky said, "we could have won a bundle."

Their laughter was interrupted by the approach of someone who stopped directly in front of them, too close to be unintentional.

Looking up, Val saw a woman who she could swear was their friend Jane's mother. Jane had been a familiar face from their summers in Banner Elk long ago. She started out as a tourist, then when her mom had fallen for a local, had eventually moved them up there full time. The woman's eyes were wide in surprise as she stared down at them.

“Val? Becky? Is that seriously you two? What on earth brings you back here after all these years?”

She might look like a carbon copy of her mom from thirty years ago, but the voice was unmistakably Jane. Val grinned, standing to embrace her.

“Hey! Yes it is! How are you!? We’re just fixing up our old cabin. We weren’t aware that it needed so much serious TLC. We came for a quick visit but when we saw it, we couldn’t leave without doing something about it.”

“That’s great, I mean, yeah it got into some pretty rough shape these last few years.”

“Just the last few?” Becky asked.

Jane nodded, “Yeah, it was fine until about four years ago. Figured you’d sold it and the new owners were, well, you know.”

“Sure,” Becky replied before perking up, “how have you been! I can’t believe how long it’s been!”

Joining them on the stone wall, Jane grinned. “Oh you know, did the same thing to some poor guy that my dad did to my mom. Lured him away from New York to the mountain life, got married, had two boys. Mom still works at the resort, I work online. What’s all this?”

She nodded to the basket full of stones with a quirked eyebrow.

Becky replied with a playful smirk, “Oh, we met Sid’s partner Lisa, she roped us into helping with the festival decorations.”

Laughing along with her, Jane nodded. “That makes total sense—she’s a force to be reckoned with, that woman. It’s great to see you both. After so long, I never thought I’d see you back in this sleepy town.”

“Me neither,” Val admitted, “I always talked about coming back but my husband was never a ‘small town’ kind of guy. It’s great to be back, though... even though it’s sad to see the cabin needing so much repair.”

Jane’s gaze shifted from Val’s face to somewhere over her shoulder, “Oh, speaking of old friends. Is Matt going to be helping you out? He must be thrilled to have you back in town. Is he just falling over himself to fix everything? He always had the biggest crush on you, Val, you know.”

Val felt her expression shift as a mixture of surprise and something else twisted in her stomach, “Matt? No, come off it... that’s ridiculous.”

“You come off it, like you didn’t notice how he followed you around like a love-sick puppy,” Jane said, “and for about a month after you left every year, he was miserable to be around, then he’d go back to talking about you all the time. It was a bit of a mystery to the rest of us, to be honest; you were always so mean to him.”

“He did not! And no, I wasn’t...”

“Well, he’s coming over here right now, and okay, maybe not mean, but you were a bit of a princess. You know what teenage girls can be like, especially when they’re as pretty as you were. He did anything you asked—all you had to do was smile!” she said with a laugh, glancing over Val’s

shoulder again, before continuing in a louder voice, “Hey Matt!”

It was a genuine effort to turn slowly instead of whipping around. Had he been close enough to hear any of what Jane had said!? Her heart pounded as he approached.

“Hey,” he said with a small smile, “did you two get a chance to look at the list?”

The way his eyes shone in the wintry sun made Val catch her breath, he really was a gorgeous man. Realizing that she was kind of staring up at said gorgeous man, Val gave herself a shake that she hoped wasn’t too obvious.

“Yeah, sure have. Do you have time to come over and talk it through?”

Her instinct was to smile and be friendly, but with Jane’s words fresh in her mind, she did her best to keep her expression neutral and polite.

“Yeah. Tomorrow work for you?”

She nodded decisively. Tomorrow wasn’t good for her—she had planned to get a whole bunch of cleaning done and had a list as long as her arm of things that she wanted to sort out—but she didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

As Matt turned and walked back towards his truck, Jane leaned in and whispered, “See?”

Eager to shift the topic to pretty much anything else, Val turned to face Jane and spoke at a normal volume.

“Hey weird question, do you remember Sharon? Our mom’s friend? We’ve been trying to track her down, but we

don't really know enough about her to get started."

Jane frowned and pushed her lips into a pout as she thought, "Sharon, huh? Yeah, I think I do remember her. That's a tough one. She wasn't that close with anyone other than your mom. If anyone knows, it'd be her. She and Sharon were thick as thieves. Why not ask her?"

Her face fell a touch as she saw the look that passed between the sisters.

"Mom has some trouble with her memory these days," Becky supplied, "she's healthy enough, physically, but she gets very upset when she can't remember things."

"Oh, that's so hard," Jane said, clearly embarrassed, "you know my mom was always considered a bit of a gossip. Did you want me to ask her?"

"That would be great, actually," Val said, "If you could?"

"Yeah, no problem. I do have to run now, though. I hope Lisa doesn't keep you waiting too long!"

As Jane wandered off, Val couldn't help but glance over at Matt and watch him for a moment as he fussed with something on his truck. A pang of guilt tugged at her chest. She couldn't recall being mean to him, or intentionally getting him to do stuff for her, but she knew that she had always known he'd say yes when she did ask him for something. Maybe, just maybe, she hadn't been as kind to him as she could have been. Than she should have been, really.

As Becky chatted and fiddled with the decorated stones, Val considered a few of the memories she had of their teenage

years. They were memories that she'd tucked away, but being in town and running into all the familiar faces seemed to be bringing them to the surface.

Chapter 9

Taking the last opportunity she would have to warm herself in the sunshine for the day, Val grabbed her mug of coffee from the counter and stepped out onto the back porch to watch the trees as the sun dipped below the line of mountain peaks. It was several hours until sunset proper, but from the moment the tall peaks around them blocked the direct sun, long shadows grew across the porch of the cabin and the space between trees became almost impenetrable.

She had spent the day on edge; she and Matt hadn't set a time after all, and there was no way she was going to be caught off guard by his arrival. She hadn't actually achieved any of the things on her list, but at least she'd made progress on some of the other decorations and plans for the Spring Festival. The most frustrating was planning the map of where they'd be hiding the deer stones. She had wondered aloud several times during the process if Lisa really understood the amount of deer they'd be using.

Val closed her eyes as she rested her elbows on the arms of the chair and positioned her coffee in front of her. The delicious smell of the coffee combined with the cold mountain air, the stinging heat of the ceramic against her fingers, and the

calming effect of just being in the mountains calmed her breathing.

It really is stunningly beautiful here, she thought.

Her train of thought was interrupted, though, by a rhythmic sound of humming through the quiet mountain air, signaling Matt's approach.

She opened her eyes to look toward the direction of the humming, and sure enough, Matt appeared at the forest line. He raised a hand in a wave which she returned.

"Hey there. How's the festival planning going?"

Val looked at him, a smile playing on her lips. "Slowly but surely. How'd you know we got recruited?"

"Nothing stays quiet for long around here," he said, "Lisa told me you're doing the map?"

"Sure am," she said, wincing, "she really wants a deer stone for every day of the year. I keep telling her that people are never going to find them all."

Matt laughed, a proper laugh that made his face light up and Val once again caught herself staring just a little too long at the effect it had on him.

"Yeah, well, that's Lisa," he said, "very enthusiastic. Anyway, I've brought you a present to get you started. I got you a window sealing kit. It should help keep the cold out if you do it right. I know it can get pretty chilly up here. I also want to properly check the chimneys before I leave today so you can start lighting the fire."

Withdrawing a small cardboard box from his tool bag, he held it out for her to take, but turned his gaze down the valley and away from where she stood.

Reaching out slowly, Val accepted the cardboard box, hoping that her gratitude showed in her eyes. “Thanks, Matt. That’s thoughtful.”

Matt nodded, only looking back at her when the box left his hand.

Glancing around at the empty porch, he cleared his throat, “Sure, no problem. Is Becky around? I wanted to talk to you about the order of repairs. I know you know that the cabin needs a tiny bit more than a fresh coat of paint and a vase of flowers. You’ve gone through the list I gave you?”

Emerging from the kitchen, Becky chimed in, “We sure did and we’re ready to talk details.”

“First things first, though. Some of these repairs are pretty urgent, and I understand from what you told me that you probably can’t manage the invoice all at once. So, I thought we could work out a payment plan for the more significant fixes, spread it out over time, and get started on the critical ones first.”

Becky nodded appreciatively, a huge smile across her face, “That sounds incredible, thank you so much. We really want to make this place beautiful again, not just slap a band-aid over it.”

He looked between them both, lingering on Val just long enough for her throat to constrict but she managed to nod.

“You want something to drink?” Becky asked, “I’ll get another chair out if you want to sit out here or we can go to the kitchen?”

What had her world come to when Becky was being the better host than she was, Val wondered, realizing that she was just standing there like a lemming.

“Of course, let’s—um—let’s sit.”

As they delved into the details of the repairs they needed to tackle first, Val’s eyes flicked to the box of window sealant. Becks had taken over the note taking and she had nothing to do with her hands anymore. She fiddled with the box until the flap came loose and she extracted the directions from the window sealing kit.

Matt, seeming to sense her restlessness, said, “I can help you with that if you want, or at least run through the first one with you. It’s pretty straightforward once you get the hang of it, but sometimes a second pair of hands can make things easier.”

He was smiling at her! Smiling! He hadn’t smiled at her this much in the whole time she’d been back.

Val surprised them all—herself included—when she spoke next, “I think I can manage it. Thanks, though. I’ll let you know if I get stuck.”

Covering his surprise—though she was certain that she had seen it—Matt shrugged and she noticed a playful glint in his eye.

“All right, I like the enthusiasm. Just don’t be disheartened if the first one you do ends up looking like a kid’s

art project.”

She laughed. It was strange to see him in such a good mood and seeming more like the Matt she knew.

“Well, if it does, it’ll be an award-winning level kid’s art project,” she said, “nationally acclaimed.”

“Uh, as the resident artist,” Becky said, interrupting, “I think I’ll be the judge of any artistic merit.”

They came to some decisions about the work and Matt laid out the ground rules for the payment plans. It all seemed to be coming together nicely as they finally stood so Matt could do a proper chimney check and sign off on them lighting a fire.

“Anyway, that’ll get you a long way towards the livability of the place,” he said, “the fact that you’re living here now is... well, I didn’t think you’d tough it out so long.”

“What, you thought we’d run back down the hill at the first sign of trouble?” Becky asked playfully.

Matt grinned, “Not the first, maybe the second, though.”

“You’re in a very good mood today,” Val commented, hoping that she wouldn’t ruin the dynamic with an intrusive question.

She held her breath as Matt looked over to her, but he didn’t sound mad at all when he spoke.

“Oh, well, actually, my daughter is coming to stay with me for a few days. So, I won’t be able to swing by until the weekend to start the structural stuff.”

Val and Becky exchanged glances, and Val could see the curiosity evident in her sister's eyes but knew she would jump in feet first and maybe too hard.

“Oh, that's nice, What's her name? “

Matt smiled at her. The genuine warmth and pride appearing on his face made Val's heart swell.

“Phoebe, she's studying at college down the mountain. We didn't always get a lot of time to hang out when she lived with her mom so it's always great when she visits.”

“So you're divorced?” Becky asked, innocently enough but Val knew it was directed at her.

Becky, ever the inquisitive one, just couldn't resist, could you? Val thought as she watched Matt's guard go back up.

“Is that what my mom said?”

His mom hadn't said anything at all when she had visited them. They had seen Mrs. Dixon a few times in passing since then, but Matt's marital status had certainly never come up.

“No...?” Val answered quickly, but wanted to leave it open for him to expand.

His expression tightened, and a hint of detachment crept into his tone; suddenly, it sounded like he was talking about someone else's life.

“Her mother and I have our own way of handling things. It's a different dynamic, but we make it work.”

Becky, utterly failing to pick up on the very clear ‘back off’ signals he was sending, probed further, “Different. Sure,

but it's like a co-parenting thing? You're not together?"

Matt hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "No, not together. But it's... Well it's complicated. We've had our share of disagreements, but we're not exactly co-parenting. Let's just say we've found a way to coexist for the sake of our daughter."

Becky shot her a look as if to say 'see? His stuff isn't black and white either' but there was no way she was getting into the story of her situation right now. She shouldn't be so self-centered, she knew, but from the way Matt had spoken to her last time, Becky's silence on the topic of Val using her looks to get her way, and Jane's recent accusations, she felt like if she shared anything about herself at all right now she'd be branded as trying to steal the spotlight.

"It's family; it's almost always complicated," she said, trying to back the conversation away from specific into the realm of polite and light-hearted.

"Oh absolutely," Becky said, nodding, "seriously! In some of the schools I've taught at, learning about the family dynamics of some of these kids—I literally needed a flow chart a few times. At one school, there were three kids across four grades who were all half siblings but there was one each from each of their dad's marriages. The flow chart came in when I realized that the two youngest ones were also technically cousins because he divorced his second wife to marry her sister. It was pretty messy at parent-teacher night, let me tell you."

There was a beat of silence when Becky finished her story and Val silently prayed that Matt wouldn't take her story

to mean that she thought his life was that messy....

Thankfully, after a moment, he smiled and nodded, “That does sound complicated. Did the kids cope with it all right?”

“Well, you know there will always be friction in a situation like that, but the kids all liked each other and were generally happy.”

“That’s good,” he said, “now, shall we go through the chimney situation?”

Val stood abruptly, “sure, I’d love to not freeze myself to sleep every night!”

Chapter 10

There were string lights hanging from the beams above their heads, Val noticed as she leaned back in her chair. The warm glow of the rustic lamp lights mounted on the walls bathed Val and Becky in a soft ambiance as they waited for their dinner at the familiar restaurant where they had spent so many evenings out with their mom. It was the same restaurant that Mrs. Dixon had mentioned when they first saw her all those weeks ago. They had decided it was time for them to go in and test the so-called ‘new direction’ the new owners had taken it in.

As it turned out, the ‘new direction’ was actually just adding a significant array of vegan, gluten free, and dairy free options to the previously limited menu of three types of burgers, steak, or spaghetti with meatballs. The restaurant had always been a favorite, but it was a far cry from the big restaurants catering to the resort guests, foodies, and other tourists. They had incredible menus and service, and a few had even won international recognition, but the Barlow’s had always preferred The Hideaway. The cozy atmosphere here and the scent of home-cooked meals had made it their favorite spot back then, and now, the place was filled with patrons, laughter, and significantly better chairs.

“This place looks amazing,” Becky said for the third time, “I can’t believe how fancy it looks.”

“They’ve done a great job, I don’t know what Mrs. Dixon was talking about.”

“Oh she probably just wishes it was frozen in time.”

As Becky spoke, their appetizers arrived on four tiny plates.

“And that the serves were bigger,” Val said, “this is enough for me, but you know what the Dixons were always like—huge servings, huge plates.”

They laughed, remembering their family dinners with the Dixons. The two women fell silent as they savored their appetizers.

Val noticed that Becky glanced at her before awkwardly clearing her throat.

“So, um, Val, there’s a bit of a hiccup in the plan. I need to head back down the mountain for a few days. Work stuff.”

“Um, what!?”

“Sorry for the late notice; it’s just kind of... time-sensitive.”

“You’re leaving me here?”

Val immediately recognized that she was sounding like a toddler, but it had been Becky’s idea to get her up here and Becky’s negligence with the cabin that left it in such a state—and now she was going to leave her to deal with it all!? Alone!?

“Only for a few days! I promise, it’s just an interview.”

“A few days! Wait, an interview? Doesn’t your whole ‘last minute temping’ thing mean you just go where you’re needed?”

Becky shrugged, “yeah, but this one is less last minute and less temp than usual.”

A flicker of hope sparked in Val’s chest. Was she going to have her sister back?

“And it’s close enough to drive to from here? And it’s.... interview worthy?” Becky nodded, “You aren’t mad, right?”

Val rolled her eyes, “Well, I’m not exactly thrilled that you’re abandoning me, but for an interview, you seem nervous enough about to hide from me—I’ll cope.”

“Good, I’m sorry about the timing...”

“It’s fine; maybe it would be good for me to have some quiet, get some stuff started on the cabin—”

Something caught her eye across the room and Val’s gaze drifted away from her sister a moment.

Becky raised an eyebrow, obviously thinking there was more to Val’s response than met the eye. “You seem a bit quiet about it. Something on your mind?”

Before Val could respond, recognition lit up her eyes as she realized the woman who just walked in was Jane’s mom. The woman waved enthusiastically and crossed the dining room to greet them.

“Val! Becky! What a pleasant surprise! Jane said you were in town again but I haven’t had a chance to come by the

cabin,” she exclaimed, taking a seat at the table. “How have you two been? Tell me everything.”

The two sisters exchanged amused glances. They had grown accustomed to Jane’s mom’s penchant for prying and gossiping from their earliest days visiting the town.

“Mrs. Thompson, it’s great to see you,” Val said before offering a few brief, vague stories about both their lives.

She answered like they always had with Mrs. Thompson, truthfully but with care. Their mom had always said that people put too much emphasis on Jane’s mom being a busybody, but all the same Val didn’t want to give her too much information. The barrage of questions about their lives was interspersed with little stories they half remembered.

The women were halfway through their main when Val did a double take.

“Sorry, I missed that last part,” she said, suddenly hyperaware of her rudeness in interrupting.

“Oh, sorry dear, I just said that was the year your mother started throwing the Not Halloween Party, so you girls could have a fun party here before going home—costumes and all that. Sharon was very keen; she liked making things, as I recall.”

“Sharon? So you remember her then?”

Mrs. Thompson’s smile faltered, “well, yes, of course. Anyway, do you remember the second year we had that party? We never did Halloween before your mom, so the first one was a bit of a flop—only about half the people knew to dress

up. Second year though—I had a full witch costume! Painted my face green and everything!”

Becky and Val had both stopped eating. She was talking so quickly now. Her words were slipping into each other and—was Mrs Thompson blushing?

“Have you heard from her lately? Sharon? We thought Mom might like a visit from her old friend, but we haven’t had a lot of luck tracking her down,” Becky said, leaning forward.

Mrs. Thompson was definitely looking uncomfortable now.

“Oh, well, you know,” she said, not saying anything at all really, “you lose track. Did I ever tell you that Jane’s father once snuck us into the ski lift after closing so we could look at the stars? Well no, I probably told your mom but not you two! Too young for stories like that back then! Wouldn’t have wanted to give you teenagers any ideas!”

Val decided it was now or never, Mrs. Thompson clearly hadn’t intended to mention Sharon and it was equally obvious that she knew something more about her than she was supposed to. Hoping Becky would forgive her if it went badly, Val blurted out the first sentence that came to mind.

“We know about Sharon.”

Jane’s mom stopped talking, her eyes darting around the room, “I don’t.... I don’t know what you mean...”

“You obviously do,” Becky said, “or you wouldn’t look so worried.”

With wide eyes, Mrs. Thompson looked between the sisters before setting her hands down on the table. “Oh, my. I

didn't think you knew. This must be incredibly difficult for you both."

Val shot Becky a look when her sister opened her mouth, this was definitely a 'stay quiet and just let them talk' situation.

Mrs. Thomson sighed and her shoulders slumped as she appeared to be choosing her words carefully, "Listen, it was a different time. People made choices that they shouldn't have to make, and none of them were made easy. Your mother, well, she had her reasons. You shouldn't judge her too harshly."

"Why would we judge Mom?" Becky asked, "Did she know?"

A look of shock passed over Mrs. Thomson's face and it looked as though she had suddenly gone pale.

"Girls, I don't think I should be the one talking to you about this. Why don't you ask your mother herself?"

"We can't. Jane must have told you," Val said, hoping their friend had in fact passed it on.

"No, I haven't seen Jane in person for a few days," Mrs. Thompson said, "now, I really should leave you to your dinner. I'm sorry for intruding."

"Wait, just one question," Val said, grabbing Mrs. Thompson's sleeve, "did you know that our father was having an affair with Sharon?"

The older woman's expression cycled rapidly through shock and confusion before finally settling into a mask.

“Your father? Having an affair... With Sharon? No, definitely not,” she said, “if that’s what you’re worried about, don’t be. Really, you shouldn’t listen to me. I’m just a nosy old woman. Ignore me. Have a lovely meal, girls.”

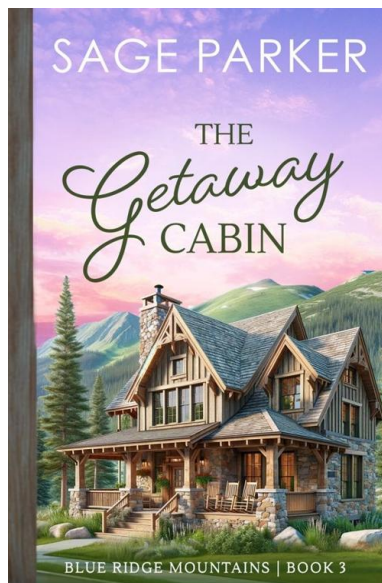
With that, she tugged her sleeve free and turned on Becky and Val, who sat staring at her as she left the bustling restaurant. Finally, after she reached the doors and they’d closed behind her, Val found herself able to turn and look at Becky.

“Becks,” she said, but her sister cut her off.

“If Dad wasn’t the one having an affair... was it Mom!?”

Continue the Story!

Continue the story by clicking the book cover to be taken to
BOOK 3 in the Blue Ridge Mountains Series...



Chapter 1

Val stared down at her meal as if it were going to help her come up with something witty to say. The tension between her and her sister sat at a steady broil just under the surface.

“Becks, we should go.”

Her sister shook her head. “No, sorry, this food is too good—I’m not wasting it.”

“It’s cold...”

“Yep, sure is,” she said, powering through a mouthful of cold mushroom burger. “Wine?”

Now that was an idea.

Val caught the waiter’s attention and ordered a sweet rose that would suit them both and act like dessert. The waiter was obviously worried about the table because Val had never had such fast service outside of the ridiculous functions the firm had thrown a few years back at some incredibly fancy silver service French place. She had always suspected that they’d chosen it because it was the first search engine result for ‘fanciest restaurant in Washington’ rather than any of the partner’s good taste. The food had been phenomenal, to be fair, but the waiter here was giving their silver service crew a run for their money—he’d even brought out a selection of chocolates to accompany the wine as a gift from the chef.

“So, this interview...” Val started, assuming that the easier conversation would be the one about anything other than their father’s... Mother’s... Whoever’s affair.

“We can’t judge her,” Becky said suddenly, “It’s different if it was Mom.”

A twinge of something panicked in her sister’s voice made Val’s ears prick up.

“I see...”

“Do you?”

What? Why was she being so hostile all of a sudden?

“Becks?”

“Sorry, I just... think about the decades we’re talking about here. Mom’s generation? Her parents’ generation? Neither are exactly known for their wide open-armed acceptance of anything outside of white, hetero-normative, and preferably upper-middle class and above. I don’t think it’s our place to judge her.”

She had a point.

“I know,” Val said, “It’s kind of scary actually.”

“Terrifying, yes, that decriminalization is only a teeny tiny bit older than us.”

They sat in silence for a while, each sister sipping their wine, lost in thought.

“While I agree with you on the judgment thing,” Val said, pausing to gauge her sister’s reaction. “If it’s true—you know what a gossip Mrs. Thompson is—it’s still infidelity regardless of the reason, regardless if it was Dad or if it was Mom.”

The frosty glare from the other side of the table gave her pause but she continued all the same, “I’m not saying we disown her and burn our photo albums over it—we weren’t going to if it was Dad! I just think we still need to talk about it and deal with it. Why should it being Mom be different?”

“It just is,” Becky said, sipping her wine, “she deserves compassion and she deserved to be loved. Think about how free and happy she was when we were here. Obviously it was not like she was miserable at home. She and Dad seemed

happy—but her and Sharon? They were like two peas in a pod. I just think having a secret life that you're forced to keep secret because of the hatred of other people, that's different from our father secretly banging our mom's best friend."

"Well when you put it like that..."

Becky made a weird twitching expression that somehow conveyed an eye-roll, a shrug of annoyance, and 'yeah I know', all at once. Val blinked and took in her sister's reaction to the news and a thought flashed through her mind—she was taking this very personally. Obviously it was personal, no matter which of their parents had been having the affair, but she had been so upset by the idea of their father and now so defensive of their mother doing the same thing.

"Becks..."

"I wonder if Dad knew?" Becky asked suddenly, "like.. Think about it—they never seemed worried about him showing up here and catching them. You'd think they would be, right? If you were having an affair—"

"If I was having an affair..." Val repeated, cutting her sister off, "I don't have affairs. My husband has affairs. Or. Well. At least one. Lord I hope it's only one..."

Suddenly sheepish, Becky caught the tip of her tongue between her teeth and winced.

"Sorry," she said, though it came out more like 'thorry', making Val laugh.

"You're not wrong," Val conceded, "It would explain why he pretty much never came up to visit while we were up here. I never remember her being worried or nervous, then

again I'm starting to wonder if I've ever been half as observant as I thought I was. Did I miss obvious signs?"

The waiter arrived at the table and checked in with them yet again, asking if they'd like anything else.

"Sorry, are we keeping you open?" Val looked around.

Realizing they were nearly alone in the dining room, she cringed, worried that they were being 'that table'. Val had learned about people being 'that table' from Rose who had waited tables after school and had been the bane of the other servers' lives because even when there was 'that table' hanging around long after closing, she had to go home because she was a minor while they had to stay. Val also knew that this was not at all industry standard and was forever grateful that the owner of Rose's diner wasn't an exploitative jerk. Well, less of an exploitative jerk than many hospitality bosses anyway.

"No, not at all," the waiter said smiling nervously. "Kitchen is open for at least an hour and we have late seating times, so the shift workers and resort staff have options in town if they want to go out."

"Oh that's great," Becky said. "I remember it was always a problem trying to hang out with anyone who worked at the resorts because they'd get off when everything was closed."

The waiter nodded, smiling. "Yeah, it's a direction the owner is very enthusiastic about."

An awkward pause built between the three of them and Becky caught Val's eye, telegraphing 'What's this guy's deal?'

with a tiny compression of her eyebrows.

“Amazing, but, uh, no we’re all good for food and ... Stuff,” Val said awkwardly.

The young man shifted from foot to foot.

“I... Uh... Have been asked to ask you something,” he said, turning bright pink.

Oh no, Val thought as she spun in her chair and scanned the restaurant for Walter. She wouldn’t put it past him to try something weird, he’d apologized to her once by getting a live string quartet to dedicate a song to her at an event. It had been incredibly embarrassing.

No, wait, the waiter was looking at Becky. That was good, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“My chef, my boss, he would like to know if you’re the First Lady.”

Val stared at the waiter. Was he having some kind of episode?

“W-what!?” Becky asked, standing abruptly.

“Yeah, what she said,” Val added, looking at her sister with surprise.

“He would like to know if you’re the First Lady,” the waiter repeated, looking like he wanted to melt into the ground with embarrassment.

“Where is he?” Becky said with a grin, “Where’s the Prince of Wales?”

The excitement on her sister’s face drew Val’s interest immediately. There wasn’t anyone that her sister liked that

much.

“Who?” Val asked, but the space where Becks had been standing was empty.

Both Val and the waiter turned to watch Becky make her way in a beeline towards the kitchen.

He seemed to snap back to the reality of the situation as she approached the swing door and called after her, “Ma’am, you can’t go in there!”

“I’m the First Lady, I can do what I please!” she called back over her shoulder, drawing stares from the seated guests around her.

She didn’t make it to the door because it swung open, nearly catching her in the face. Becky was immediately swept up in a hug so tight her feet lifted off the floor slightly and the man turned on the spot. Val couldn’t hear what they were saying but it was loud and fast. Was that a British accent?

Val and the waiter exchanged glances, he was clearly as confused as she was but at least he stopped looking so embarrassed. Becky arrived back at the table, dragging the tall, lanky figure behind her by the hand.

“Val, this is the Prince of Wales,” she announced, “he’s an arrogant know-it-all who thinks he can do anything he likes. Just because he’s posh.”

“Nice to meet you?” Val responded, gingerly extending a hand.

The man extended his hand as he dropped Becky’s, “and she’s the First Lady—entitled, brash, and thinks she can do whatever she wants because she’s American.”

The pair burst into a fit of laughter, oblivious to the stares from everyone in the dining room.

“I think I’m going to go,” the waiter whispered and slipped away.

Lucky jerk, Val thought.

“We haven’t seen each other in, what? Fifteen years?” Becky explained.

“More like twenty, Love.”

Definitely British.

“That poor kid was mortified,” Val said, nodding in the direction of the retreating waiter.

“Oh he’s all right, just a bit of fun,” the newcomer said, “anyway, when I saw you, I couldn’t *not* mess with you a little bit. Glad you remembered, be mighty bloody awkward if you hadn’t!”

“Of course I remembered,” Becky said quietly.

“Good,” he replied, “anyway, have another bottle on me and I’ll catch up with you after shift, yeah?”

“Yeah sounds good,” Becky said, smiling.

As they settled back into their seats and Becky watched him retreat to the kitchen, Val topped up their glasses and glared expectantly at her sister.

“Name? Like, real name?”

“That,” Becky said triumphantly, “Is William. He’s the one I met in London and we traveled around for a while after that.”

“Oh,” Val replied, a sadness clenching in her stomach.

The way Becks had said like Val already knew what she was talking about... Did she not realize that she had no idea? He was obviously important to her, but she had never mentioned him to her sister. A serving plate of crudités appeared bearing a selection of cheeses, bread sticks, dips, fresh strawberries, and dark chocolate. Becky grinned at the array in front of them.

“He’s so funny,” she said under her breath.

Becky was laughing quietly, but even as she studied the offering, Val had no idea what about the plate could be even vaguely amusing.

“Did you still want to talk about...”

“Yes,” Becky said, her face falling, “but with significantly more wine.”

[Click here to be taken to “The Getaway Cabin”...](#)

More Books by Sage Parker

[THE SUMMER IN CAPE MAY](#) *Surprise Inheritance Series*

[SUMMER AT THE WILLOW TREE INN](#) *Naples Beach Series*

[CHRISTMAS AT GLACIER GROVE](#) *Holiday Homecoming Series*

[HIDDEN IN THE KEYS](#) *Longboat Key Series*

[LAST SEEN AT LIGHTHOUSE LANE](#) *An Outer Banks Mystery Series*

[THE LIGHTHOUSE SISTERS](#) *Tybee Island Series*

[THE HAMPTON BEACH CAFÉ](#) *Starting Over Series*

[BEYOND THE BEACH HOUSE](#) *Siesta Key Secrets Series*

[THE HOLIDAY REUNION](#) *Pine Lakes Series*

[STARTING OVER IN BOOTHBAY](#) *A Second Chance Romantic Mystery Series*

[SECRETS AT THE OLD HOTEL](#) *A Cozy Mystery Romance Series*

[IN THE SHADOWS OF PARADISE](#) *A Bahamas Mystery*

Series

[NEW IN CLIFFS POINT](#) *Cliffs Point Series*

[LAST RESORT ON THE COAST](#) *Search for Truth Series*

[A COASTLINE RETREAT](#) *Feels Like Home Series*

[THE BEACHSIDE CAFE](#) *Saltwater Secrets Series*

About the Author

A NOTE FROM SAGE PARKER

Hi lovelies.

I love writing sweet and clean contemporary romance novels. I was born and raised in a small town in South Carolina, but you can almost always find me at the beach...usually reading a book. I hope my writing brings joy and inspiration to everyone that uses their precious time to read my stories.

Thanks for stopping by!

Stay safe and happy x

[Sign-up for her newsletter](#) and stay up on all the latest Sage Parker book news, monthly giveaways and more!

Follow on Amazon:

[Sage Parker](#)