

SAGE PARKER

THE
Getaway
CABIN



BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS | BOOK 1

The Getaway Cabin

Blue Ridge Mountains Series



Book One

SAGE PARKER



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Chapter 1

Valerie had to control herself when she witnessed Dolly looking at the waitstaff like they were either something to be destroyed or flirted with. Unfortunately, Dolly was an almost constant companion these days, especially since their husbands started working together.

Valerie smiled sympathetically at the young man who had made the grievous error of delivering a glass of sparkling water with ice to the table instead of simply an ice-cold glass of sparkling water as Dolly had requested.

“—And honestly, if this is the standard of service the country club is hiring, then it’s no wonder my darling Donald doesn’t like coming here anymore,” Dolly finished, clearly pleased with herself.

The poor kid looked like he might cry, Valerie realized, and it made her want to say that the real reason her ‘Darling Donald’ didn’t like coming here anymore was that he had drunkenly fallen down the steps two months ago, making a fool of himself while being asked to leave. Walter had told her about it when he got home from that dinner. He was also growing tired of ‘Darling Donald’ and his ways.

“Well, all is not lost because I’d love a sparkling water with ice, so why don’t you leave that with me,” Valerie smiled, trying to draw the attention away from the boy.

“Of course ma’am,” he said as he placed the glass on the table next to her.

“Don’t make excuses for the boy, Valerie.”

Valerie took in a deep breath while she resisted the urge to put Dolly in her place. She wasn’t about to cause trouble with the wife of her husband’s primary competition at the firm. Instead, Valerie just smiled and hoped her other friends would be able to see through this unbearable woman.

“We actually should get going...” Amber interjected. “Shouldn’t we, Val?”

“Oh, but—” Dolly started, clearly annoyed.

“Yes, we really must be off,” Valerie agreed, “What time is it?”

Amber made an exaggerated gesture of checking her watch—a brand new Cartier Panthere, which everyone knew at the table would have a price tag of at least a few thousand dollars.

“Oh very nice,” Dolly said with a sniff, “I’ve never cared for Cartier but it suits you.”

“Thank you. It does, doesn’t it? Just a little early birthday present. Jonny says something else is coming on the day—I think he’s trying for Husband of the Year,” Amber replied, “It’s half two, and our appointment at Spa De Longue is at three. With this traffic, we should really get on the road.”

Val didn’t need telling twice. Amber was clearly over this lunch and was looking for an out. They didn’t even have an appointment at the spa this week.

She turned and smiled at the waiter, gesturing the universal sign for ‘bill please’ before turning back to the table.

“So, how is Walter going to compete with a Cartier watch?” Dolly’s face was

making a smiling expression, but it was only skin deep.

“Oh, for our anniversary?” Valerie asked, “I’m not sure exactly, but I have a feeling it could be a trip. Walter mentioned wanting to get away. Probably somewhere exotic.”

“So long as you never visit twice,” Dolly quipped, “I refuse to go to Paris anymore. We’ve been at least a dozen times and now all I remember is the rudeness and graffiti.”

Valerie handed her credit card to the waiter, only just managing to avoid rolling her eyes.

“We’re not going to Paris,” Val said, “too cliché for my liking. Maybe somewhere warm, like Aruba or something.”

She actually loved Paris, but there was something titillating about even implying that Dolly's taste was gauche.

“Hmm,” Dolly sniffed, “I'm sure. Is that why you're heading to the spa? Bikini beaches looming in the future?”

Amber scoffed, “Oh, hardly. Val looks as good in a bikini as she did when she was twenty-five! We're having facials and a massage, not lipo!”

Their friends tittered and Dolly must have realized that she was on the downslope because she joined in even though the comment had been at her expense.

“Um... excuse me, ma'am,” the waiter reappeared next to Valerie, looking just as nervous as he had earlier.

“Yes?”

“It seems there is a problem with this card. The bank has flagged an error.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Here you go,” she said as she handed him a new card, refusing to let the wave of embarrassment she felt wash over her.

“So, when do you think you’ll go on this trip?” Dolly said, “If Walter has been working half as many hours as my poor darling Donald has—then it can’t be soon?”

The implication that Walter wasn’t working as hard as Donald prickled Valerie, and she needed to force a smile on her face in order to answer.

“Oh, he has. He has been finishing at all hours and taking weekend calls. I know he’s been putting in the overtime, and I actually found a pamphlet for a resort in Aruba in the car, so my guess is only half a guess really.”

Dolly’s tight smile faltered, and the other women jumped in, crooning about

how lucky Val was to have such a successful husband.

Lucky? Sure, but it was down to a lot of hard work on both their parts. She had never been the fawning housewife but had never quite gotten to the part where she got to pursue her career dreams either.

“Ma’am...”

Valerie turned to take her card from the waiter and froze when she saw his expression. He looked like he might cry again. If he was going to be a successful waiter in this town, he was going to have to toughen up.

“Your card has been rejected,” he said, “I’m sorry. I’ve tried it twice.”

“Oh, how strange,” she replied, her heart beating fast in her chest.

How much cash did she have? Reaching for her purse again, she counted a

few bills, but it wasn't enough to cover her portion of the lunch.

“I'll get this one.” Amber spoke up. “If your bank is on the blip then we're only wasting time trying another one.”

“Sure,” Val said. “I'll get the next one.”

She and Amber gathered their purses as they said goodbye, intentionally crossing paths with the waiter as they left. Valerie paused to slip him a few extra bills.

“I'm sorry about Dolly,” she whispered to him, “don't let her get to you.”

He smiled as he discretely tucked the notes into an unseen pocket in his apron. “Thank you, ma'am. See you again soon. I hope.”

Waiting for a cab to arrive at the valet station, Val pulled out her phone.

“I just want to call Walter and let him know about the issue with the bank.”

Amber nodded. “I’m sure he’s all over it. It might be a fraud thing. You know there was that tax thing with the Joneses in Aruba last year. If he booked a trip there, maybe the bank are being hypervigilant?”

The call went straight to voice mail, meaning that it was off or out of range. He never turned his phone off in case it was a client or a partner. She tried again but still nothing.

“Yeah, that’s probably it,” she said, distractedly putting her phone into her purse as the cab pulled up. “So, what are we doing with our free afternoon?”

“Well we won’t get into De Longue at this short notice so why don’t we go back to mine and I’ll show you the new kitchen?”

Then you can tell me all the things you're going to do on your surprise trip to Aruba.”

Val just nodded as she climbed into the cab after Amber. She was still focused on not being able to reach Walter—what if he'd been hurt? Hit by a car? A heart attack? By the time she had run through almost every possibility, they were pulling up at Amber's driveway.

Chapter 2

Three glasses of wine and two hours of talking about different types of stone countertop later, Valerie was finally on her way home. The cab driver had set the music to low and slow jazz, making her sleepy. It wasn't too far from her house. Maybe she'd take a nap when she got back. She wondered when her husband would be home, though she doubted it would be this early.

She unlocked her phone to call him, and to find out if he had sorted out the issue with the bank so she could stop worrying about it.

Hovering over his name in her contacts, she jumped as the screen flicked to

life with the face of her oldest daughter.

“Emmy!”

“Hi Mom,” Emmy said, sounding exhausted.

“You sound tired, are you all right?”

“Mom, I’m fine! You don’t always need to be worrying about me,” Emmy said.

Val scoffed. “Okay but are you tired?”

With a sigh and what Val knew to be a smile just by the sound of her daughter’s voice, Emmy said, “Yes, I am.”

“See, a mother is always right about these things.”

“Well I’d be more worried if I wasn’t tired. With the move and everything with this new job. Now, before I tell you anything, I need you to know that

everything is fine and I'm dealing with it. Okay?"

Her daughter always did this—act like Val was going to blow up over nothing. But Emmy had always hated conflict so she often pre-empted any kind of news with a similar warning.

“Understood.”

“Okay, well they messed up my start dates,” Emmy said and Val could just see the way she was probably turning a hand through her shiny black hair, “I actually start tomorrow, not next week.”

“Emmy! How are you managing the move!?”

“Mom,” Emmy said in a warning tone.

“Sorry darling, just... did you need me to come out there?”

“No, it should be fine. They looked back at their contract and everything and it definitely states next week, but they’ve assigned me to a case starting tomorrow and don’t have the resources to change it this last minute,” Emmy paused and Val sensed her daughter had something to be proud of but didn’t want to sound like she was boasting.

“And so…” she prompted.

“They added ten percent to my signing bonus and are footing the bill for a top-to-toe end-of-lease clean on the old apartment.”

“Oh wow! They must really know how good you are!”

Emmy laughed. “Maybe, or maybe they just don’t want to get a contract lawyer specializing in employment disputes angry about hiring practices so early on.”

The pride in her daughter's voice was well earned. Emmy had worked so hard for so long to become one of the best in the country. It wasn't glamorous, there were no high profile cases, but Emmy was dedicated to her clients and gave back a huge amount of time in pro bono work. So much so that it had been a hindrance to her early career prospects—no one wanted to hire a part time lawyer.

“I think it's the thing I said,” Valerie joked, “you're worth every penny. So, this new apartment... Any good looking neighbors you might find yourself borrowing a cup of sugar from?”

“Mom!” Emmy said, “I think I'm a little busy!”

“I know darling,” Val said, wishing she hadn't said anything, “you know I'm just... Well, your life is so different from mine and the way your grandmother's was.

At your age I was married and sending you off to high school!”

The cab driver glanced into the rearview mirror and raised an eyebrow. Was he judging her? He had been polite and friendly when he picked her up. Maybe she was being presumptuous. Val raised an eyebrow back at him and the man smiled, hiding a laugh.

“Don’t exaggerate, I was in the fifth grade!”

It was nice to hear Emmy laugh. She worked too hard. And even though this contract mess up had halved her time off, she had spent at least five days relaxing and it had made a world of difference.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, Mom. I just wanted to keep you updated.”

“Thanks sweetie. I just got home, so I’ll call you later. Remember, if you do need me to pop out there...”

“I’ll call and ask, don’t worry, Mom,” Emmy said.

“I’m so proud of you, honey.”

“Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

The cab driver smiled as he passed the card machine back to her for payment. When he spoke, it was with a lilting accent she couldn’t quite place.

“It is good to see daughters calling their mothers,” he said, “my daughter is traveling in England right now. I’m lucky if I get a text message.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I had that phase too,” Val said, “how old is your daughter? Oh, and it’s cash I’m afraid, sorry.”

“Not a problem,” he said as he took the bills, “Nineteen this year.”

“Keep the change,” Val said, resting her hand on the door handle, “and don’t worry, she’ll come around. I’ve got three kids. From fourteen to twenty-two, they know everything and don’t need their parents at all. Then suddenly it’s ‘how do I cook this’, ‘why is my washing machine making that noise’. Especially if they go away for college.”

He smiled and waved as she exited the car. Opening her phone, Val noticed that her phone signal was gone, the bars replaced with a red cross.

So much for full service, she thought to herself. They had only just changed providers and their supposedly amazing coverage was already failing. Luckily they hadn’t moved the WiFi over too, she realized and swiped up to connect.

Talking to Emmy always made her glow with a warm pride, and she basked in that a little now. It wasn't that Emmy was the favorite, but it made Val very happy to see one of her daughters study hard and succeed in her chosen career.

Val's own schooling history had been... spotty at best. She had always wanted to do something but couldn't decide what. Somehow that had landed her in interior design—her father was not happy about that one—but she had triumphed in the end because she had met and married Walter. It was probably why the jokes about her going to college to get her degree stung so much. She hadn't used what she'd learned on anything other than her own home right out of college and a few of her friends over the years. She had wanted to, though, and that was what kept her finger on the trends of interior design, the thought

that maybe one day she could start her own boutique design agency.

Her phone buzzed as it connected to the WiFi, a message from Emmy. Smiling as she opened it, Val saw her daughter's face in a gorgeous sitting room with floor-to-ceiling windows. A yellow circle in the middle of the window surrounded a speck of green. She narrowed her eyes before noticing the caption: *central park views, apparently.*

Val laughed and responded before opening her chat with Walter.

To Walter: *Must be a full moon or something. Bank is having a problem. None of my cards work. And just now my phone is at zero coverage. I think we should complain, they guaranteed coverage across the city! Let me know when you're coming home. I'll make Chicken Cacciatore?*

Chicken Cacciatore was Emmy's favorite, and Val felt particularly sentimental that evening. It was undeniably hard being so far away from her daughters, but each of them was off living their best lives—as they put it. Maybe tomorrow and the night after, she would do Rose and Jordana's favorite meals as well.

She was thinking about which order to do these meals in as she approached the door and noticed something was off.

The front door... it wasn't quite shut.

Her blood ran cold as she slowly and deliberately ran through her last moments in the house that morning. Surely she locked it?

She had to have... hadn't she? Maybe she had forgotten. Or had she been distracted and just thought she heard the lock click into place?

No, she needed to pull herself together. Valerie reached for the handle before stopping herself at the last moment, choosing to use the toe of her boot to push the door open.

Not because she was worried or anything. Just in case. In case there was a burglar. Or home invader. Or...

“Oh my lord,” she breathed, letting the door swing open fully.

If there had been burglars, they were long gone. Along with everything they could carry.

Val knew that she should call the police. She knew that she should stay outside. She knew that she should not, under any circumstances, step into the house.

She knew all this while entering her home and staring dumbly at the mess.

The kitchen draws were open, the television gone, her paintings off the walls. Even one of the couches was gone!

“Who steals one couch and leaves the other?” she exclaimed, louder than she was expecting.

Her sudden vocalization seemed to echo in the unbearably empty space, making her feel strangely self-conscious. She pulled out her phone and hit Walter’s contact.

Straight to voice mail.

“What the hell is happening!?”

Val almost never cursed but all she could think of in the moment was that her husband wasn’t answering, which meant...

Walter must be in trouble! Were we robbed? Was there a home invasion while he was home? What if they’d taken him? Was that why he wasn’t answering the phone?

No, no, maybe there'd been a misunderstanding.

Identity theft. That would trigger the bank's fraud blockers, which would explain the credit cards not working.

But all of their stuff was missing.

Val could feel herself start to hyperventilate as she looked around the kitchen for anything to confirm or dismiss her wild theories.

Suddenly her eyes fell on an envelope in the center of the kitchen counter. The feeling in her stomach instantly turned to nausea.

She'd watched enough true crime documentaries to know she shouldn't touch the note but right then she did not care. She launched herself across the room and tore the end of the envelope open.

Half of her was expecting to see a big red stamp stating FINAL NOTICE and the other half looking for badly cut out letters from magazines forming a ransom demand.

What she saw was somehow more shocking to her than either of those made-for-TV movie plot lines.

Handwritten in beautiful blue ink, probably from the fountain pen she had given him last Christmas, it read:

My dearest Valerie, please know that I am first and foremost very sorry. I would never have dreamed I could do this to you, and I know you'll never forgive me but I also truly believe you'd never deny me my perfect chance at happiness. Please don't look for us, we're long gone by now. Instead, seek your own happiness. You deserve it. Jones will be in touch with divorce papers.

Chapter 3

There was something particularly insulting about Walter leaving their marital bed but having taken the guest frame and mattress.

Val could admit that she would probably be just as angry with him if he had taken it, but this way, she was forced to choose to sleep on the remaining couch. There was no way she was sleeping in the bed they'd shared for thirty years, which was probably why his new woman didn't want them to take it either.

That made her nauseous all over again.

The smell of this furniture store wasn't helping. Did they really think that an

essential oil machine was masking the musty aroma that permeated the whole store?

The girl's rooms were left untouched, so while she could probably sleep in one of their beds, it felt just as wrong. Instead, Valerie had closed the doors tight and she hadn't ventured back in since.

That had been nine days ago.

She didn't know what to do. She wanted to call her daughters but every time she had tried to, the thought of shattering the image they each held of their father turned her stomach.

She had texted them all, asking if their father had been in touch, trying to make it sound casual of course. Emmy had been the only one he'd spoken to. He told her he was away with work and couldn't be

easily called. He hadn't bothered with Rose or Jordana.

To be fair, Jordana probably wouldn't have answered. Her dad was still mad at her for deferring her final year of college to study and travel overseas. Rose, though; that was a blow Val wasn't sure she could take. Walter had always been down on his middle daughter, and told her that her ambition should exceed a house and home. That had never sat right with Valerie, since it was what he had asked her to do all those years ago.

The discount price sticker was peeling from the cheap bed frame. It had been slashed three times apparently—though she doubted any of the prices in here had ever been as high as their alleged 'full price'.

“Can I help you?” A bored drawl came from behind her.

Val turned to see a teenager with thick orange foundation glaring at her like an intruder rather than a customer.

“Uh, no, thanks, just browsing,” she said, trying to smile.

“Sure. Hot tip: don’t bother trying the mattress. They don’t come with the frame and half of them are old hotel stock. Like reaaally old hotel stock.”

“Um... okay. Thanks?”

What did she mean old hotel stock? Surely that didn’t mean... thrown out from a hotel...

Val pinched the corner of the promotional duvet and lifted it ever so slightly.

A brown stain peeked out from under it and Val dropped the duvet like it was a burning coal, rubbing her fingers firmly on her jeans. Whipping out a tiny bottle of

hand sanitizer, she spritzed her hands liberally. Had she touched anything else?

She squinted at the bed frame; it was nicked in several spots and the veneer was starting to peel where the leg met the floor.

Somehow it was still over a hundred dollars.

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she mentally calculated how much remained in her savings account. It wasn't enough to waste on a bed frame, she realized. She'd have to keep sleeping on the couch or get over her aversion to the bed.

The couch sounded most likely.

Maybe she could sell some things, nothing from the girls' rooms obviously, but he had left her everything in her wardrobe and her jewelry box.

In other words, the things she actually owned or this other woman

wouldn't want.

Bile, again with the bile. She swallowed hard.

Her phone rang, and she accidentally swiped up and accepted it before she could screen the call. As the lock screen switched to the call active screen, she saw that it was Becky.

Oh no...

“Happy Anniversary!”

Val burst into tears.

It wasn't the first time she'd cried by a long shot, but it was definitely the most abrupt.

“Vally!? What's wrong!?” Becky sounded mortified.

“I—it's just—I... Walter....”

“Did he forget? That jerk, but come on, Val, it's all right... plus I bet he'll make

up for it double when he realizes.”

Her sister’s insistence on being bright and happy in any situation had never been Val’s favorite thing about her, and yet right now, it was meant so innocently.

“I don’t think so. Not this time,” she said, a bitter laugh creeping up her throat.

“Val, what’s going on?”

“Just give me a sec, okay?”

Turning to find the shop assistant watching her with an awkward stare, Val crossed the room.

“Do you have a bathroom?” she stuttered through her tears.

“Uh, no. No public access. Sorry. Try the gas station.”

“The gas station? Val, what are you doing at a gas station?”

Val winced. She had forgotten to put her sister on hold.

“I’m not,” she said into the phone, “hang on.”

Pushing past a family of at least six children, Val careened into the parking lot and into the fresh air.

“I swear if you don’t tell me what’s going on!”

“He left me, Becks.”

Silence. For once her sister was silent.

“I’m sorry? He did WHAT? I’ll kill him, with my bare hands! What do you mean!? After everything you’ve done for him and his precious career? Three kids, Vally, THREE!”

“Yep,” Val said, knowing exactly how to stoke this fire, “with another woman

and without a word. All he left me was a note and empty bank accounts.”

There was something cathartic in hearing her sister rage through all the emotions she couldn't bring herself to feel. She would, one day, she was sure of it. But right now, she just couldn't deal with it. The rage on the end of the phone, coming from her sweet, bubbly little sister, provided the perfect backdrop for her sobs as she leaned against the wall of the discount furniture store.

She should be upset with her sister for shouting, for the language that was getting more and more colorful as the rant went on, but she just couldn't find it in her.

It was... nice. Nice to hear someone be as upset as she was.

Even if the adjectives of choice would make a lumberjack blush.

She tuned back in for a moment and amended that thought, the verbs too.

As she sensed Becky's anger beginning to ebb, Val turned her attention fully back to her sister and pressed her hand against her cheek, wiping away the tears. The leftover residue from the hand sanitizer made her eyes sting and she winced.

“When did this happen?” Becky asked.

Uh oh.

“Uh... about a week ago. Actually, closer to two.”

“Two weeks?!”

Val cringed. “Yeah. I just... haven't been able to deal with it. Not really.”

She recognized the sound of a deep breath in and out. Calm Becky was back.

“That’s understandable,” she said, “tell me what happened.”

Except for a few interludes, Becky listened while Val spilled the whole story in the parking lot of the hideous store she had found herself in.

“And that’s why I need a new bed frame, but I’m not buying one from here because I think it spent twenty years in a roadside motel.”

“Do not buy that bed,” Becky said, “You need to get away. Get out of that house! You’ve spent nearly a decade in that house, and some of that stuff was given to you for your wedding. It’s thirty years of memories and baggage.”

Just the idea of travel made her a little nauseous. Was Walter traveling with this new woman? Is that why he wasn’t contactable?

“I—No. No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, I think so,” Becky replied, “why not? He’s not here to stop you... all three of your little birds are out of the nest and far away. Wait, have you told them?”

“Um...”

“Oh no. No. No, you need to tell them. What if he tells them first?”

“Maybe he should. Why should I have to break their hearts?”

Silence for a second time in one phone call.

This is a first for Becky, Val thought.

“That’s not entirely unfair,” Becky conceded, “but I stand by the statement that you should get away. Come visit me! Get out of DC.”

“To be fair, the lawyers are driving me mad. I don’t think I should go far. What

if the kids find out and want to come home?
What if—”

“Well, what about the cabin?”

“What cabin?”

“Our cabin!”

“Oh.”

It had been a very long time since she had thought about their family cabin tucked away in the mountains just past Banner Elk.

“Yeah, why not? I know it’s been years. I could meet you there! Surely it’s better than being in that house with all those memories of Walter.”

Suddenly the thought of spending another night alone in her cold and empty house sunk in. Walter had left, why couldn’t she?

“Okay, fine,” she said, surprising herself, “I’ll let the girls know and you let

me know when I need to be at the airport.”

Chapter 4

“Surprise!” Becky’s voice down the phone line was aggressively positive.

“I don’t want any more surprises,” Val replied.

A honking horn drew her attention to the space across from her in the tiny airport parking lot.

When she finally took in what she saw—a frantically waving blond woman—she thought she was seeing things.

Becky hung up the phone and leaped out of the car before rushing over to pull Val’s door open and wrap her in a gigantic hug.

“It’s so good to see you!”

Val could barely breathe, “you too, less hugs please.”

“Sorry,” Becky said laughing, “so I couldn’t find a flight.”

“Yeah I gathered,” Val said, gesturing to the yellow behemoth in front of her, “what is this monstrosity?”

“It’s not a monstrosity! It’s Edgar.”

“Edgar? You did not name your car Edgar.”

“No, Joe did,” Becky replied, “Joe was the old guy who lived across from me at the last residency I did. You know, that fancy hippy school I taught at out west? Well, this was their wilderness exploration vehicle. He sold it to me when I left.”

“Surely it’s against the hippy code to have a huge gas-guzzling truck at their disposal?”

“The flight would have been similar amount of emissions. Anyway it’s worth it! I didn’t want to discourage you from coming.”

She’s right, Val thought. She never would have agreed to keep the commitment if she’d thought her sister would drive three hundred miles.

“And you brought the lemon!” Becky cheered.

“That’s a bit rich, considering that’s what you drive now...”

Both sisters turned to look at the bright yellow truck.

“Yes, well,” Becky laughed, “did you make it here without breaking down?”

Almost.

That little engine blip an hour outside of DC had resolved itself just fine.

“Yes,” Val lied.

“Besides, having two cars to work with will make everything easier for the next month!”

For about the hundredth time since leaving DC, Val winced at the realization she was about to spend a whole

month with her sister in a small cabin in a town where they hadn't spent time at in nearly thirty years.

“And look what I got us!”

Becky dashed back to her truck, scrambled into the front seat, clambered back down, and shoved a bright yellow walkie-talkie into Val's hand.

“Now we can talk to each other!”

“Sure... on an open channel that anyone could be listening to. Lovely.”

“Well, don't get into the details, obviously, but we can still chat,” Becky looked crestfallen, and Val felt a pang of guilt over ruining her little sister's fun.

“Sure we can. Sounds fun.”

Brightening considerably, Becky grinned and gestured behind her. “We should go get supplies. This even has a fridge so we don't have to worry about going vegan for the month.”

“Wouldn't that help with the carbon neutralization?”

She loved hearing Becky laugh, even in her current mood, and watched her sister wink at her through the windscreen.

“I did the math. It's about three trees worth. I think I'd rather have the bacon.”

It would never stop amusing Val that her art teacher, free spirit, eco-warrior of a sister couldn't bring herself to go vegetarian.

Val exited her little hatchback with a sigh and prepared herself for the food shopping adventure that was about to

befall them. The cabin held almost all of her best childhood memories, and Becky seemed excited to recreate some of those moments.

“Climb on in and meet Edgar.”

Becky gave her a tour of the odd truck, but calling it a truck now seemed wrong—it was more like an off-road school bus. It clearly used to have three rows of seats in the back, which Becky had replaced with a small kitchenette, fold-down bed, and place to sit.

“So... Van life, huh?”

Her sister grinned wolfishly, “Exactly! I get plenty of time off from the school. They only want me every other term now, so I might as well.”

The drive to the supermarket was remarkably short and they were climbing out of the truck sooner than expected.

“Why didn’t I just drive down here if it was so close?” she asked, kicking herself for not knowing this.

“Because I wanted to introduce you to Edgar. And besides I didn’t want to take up two parking spots. Ooof.” Becky groaned as she got to the ground.

Her sister was only little, just five foot five, while Val was closer to five-ten.

“You sound like Dad,” she said quietly, the remark slipping out before she could catch herself.

The wave of sadness crashed over her and she braced herself for a reprimand from Becky, but it never came.

“He really was funny about his height,” Becky said, “and you can stop looking so worried. It’s been ten years. I’m fine.”

“Okay... sorry,” she said quietly as they made their way into the store. “You remember he used to stand on a box for the commercials?”

That made Becky laugh properly, “Oh yeah, I sure do. You remember the song?”

“No!” Val replied, even though she definitely remembered the jingle from their family department store back in Maine.

Shimmying her shoulders, Becky leaned in close as they approached the bread aisle and came to a stop at the sourdough loaves.

“You know—you’ll find—” Becky started to half sing, “Whatchu need—”

Tapping her foot now, Val recognized the beat and shook her head, “No! Stop it, shush!”

“School—supplies, or tasty treats.”

Shaking her head again, Val tried to refrain from laughing as her sister wiggled her eyebrows at her.

She gave in.

“The best in town—We take the lead.”

Then together they half sang the final line of the jingle.

“At Barlow’s, it’s satisfaction Gah-runteed.”

The women laughed, drawing a few looks from people around them.

“Yeah the change of tempo to fit in those final syllables was just, so smooth,” Val said, selecting a sourdough loaf from the shelf.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?” Becky grinned.

“Sure did. The store was good for a long time.”

“Do you remember them, Val? All those commercials we had to be in?”

“Oh, it was fun!”

“Because you got all the attention, I just got told off.”

“That’s only because you wouldn’t sit still and pulled faces at the camera!”

It was all fun and games now, but Val could feel it turning into a tense argument if she wasn’t careful.

“Yeah, well it wasn’t my idea of fun,” Becky said, “my idea of fun was getting to run wild up here for the summer with Mom.”

“It was amazing,” Val agreed, “I always hated saying goodbye to Dad for so long though.”

The rest of their shopping went pretty smoothly. Both women seemed to want to move away from the topic of their parents. As they were climbing back into Edgar, an older man approached them.

“Hey, you two!” he called out, making the women glance nervously at each other, “you’re stealing!”

“What?” Becky said, alarmed, “We paid!”

“Liar!”

“Hey!”

Val stepped forward, holding a hand out to gesture to her sister to stand back and she could almost feel the eye roll behind her.

“I’m so sorry, sir, I’m not sure I understand your meaning,” she smiled and tilted her head the way most men seemed to like her doing, “we’d never intentionally steal anything, can you explain it to me?”

The eye roll coming from behind her intensified.

“Well,” the man said, flustered, “this is metered parking, you see? And you didn’t pay.”

Estimating his age at around seventy, Val found it quite amusing that he seemed to be blushing as she smiled at him.

“Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry, we didn’t see the sign! Where is the sign?”

He faltered. “Well, it’s on the wall over there.”

Pointing to the wall of the store, there was a sign about the size of a pocketbook. She could see “25 cents an hour” printed in faded lettering if she squinted.

“Oh, I see! How ridiculous of us not to notice.” Val was careful not to slip into a mocking tone, “let me just pop over there.”

Producing a quarter from her back pocket, the man became flustered all over again.

“Oh no, it’s fine, I’ll do it for you. Just don’t let me see you doing it again.”

“Wow thank you, don’t worry—you won’t!”

A golden smile and a little wave later, they were on their way.

She paid for her behavior on and off for the entire drive to the cabin, with Becky occasionally radioing her impression of Val over the walkie-talkies without warning.

She was midway through a stinging retort as they pulled around the last sweeping bend out of Banner Elk before the driveway to the cabin when Becky’s voice drifted into silence before Val heard her say, “...oh my god that’s... that’s a mess.”

She was just about to ask her what she was talking about when she saw it.

The cabin was... well, Becky had it right. Broken railings, shutters hanging limp from the windows, paint peeling from the door.

It was, truly, a mess.

Chapter 5

With how dark it had been the night before, Val had almost convinced herself overnight that the cabin wasn't in nearly as bad shape as she had thought. That was until the icy cold wind picked up, which unfortunately seemed to be happening every hour or so. At five o'clock, it was simply too much to bear, so she rose from bed, and pulled further coats around herself.

Had it always been this cold here? No, surely not. Then again, they had mostly come in the summer when it was significantly warmer.

Padding down the stairs, she fumbled for the light switch. When she found it, she flicked it at least three times before realizing that it was doing nothing.

Of course, the power, she groaned inwardly and said a small silent thanks that Becky had insisted on buying a little gas stove for 'just in case'.

Just in case they'd need it for coffee, and need it she did.

Opening her chat app as she crossed to the dark kitchen, she noticed Emmy's status was green. At least the dinky phone plan she had bought herself was working. The relief was tinged with rejection and she wrinkled her nose, she'd been

awake for less than forty-five minutes and she had already thought about Walter.

Was that a record at this point? For the first few days, she had woken up thinking about him... maybe it was progress?

To Emmy: *Good morning early bird. Don't tell me, you just got home from a night out clubbing where you got hitched in a mass wedding presided over by a suspiciously charming DJ who just happens to be ordained in a religion he just invented?*

Setting the phone down, Val sought out the electric lantern Becky had also insisted on buying at the store, just in case, and twisted it to the highest setting. It did not do the kitchen any favors, she realized—the hard LED light cast sharp shadows and highlighted the spots on the wall she would rather not think about.

An old cream-colored lampshade on an old ceramic base caught her eye and she gingerly inspected it by the lantern light. No mold, which was her primary concern. Plucking it from where it had sat for probably twenty years, she placed it over the lantern. The effect was exactly what she had been going for. Softening and warming the light meant the room now basked in a much more flattering light.

Her phone pinged.

From Emmy: *...you know, one day, you'll have to tell me about your college days because that's way too specific to have been made up on the spot. No, I'm not married to a hundred people. I just got back from a spin class and am getting ready for work.*

Her eldest daughter's tenacity did make her proud. It also scared her a little bit.

To Emmy: *you're already back from a workout? Are you going to sleep at all, or have you had it removed at the firm's laboratory?*

She clicked the gas stove into its run position and poured a careful amount of coffee grounds into the basket of the Moka pot. Assembling the thing and adding the right amount of water was second nature to her by now and the ritual served to calm her down. For the first time in nearly thirty years, she was thrilled Walter had never liked coffee—this was something that was just hers.

Damn, did that count as thinking about him?

She gave herself a little shake and refocused as a message came in and she leaned over to see what Emmy had said.

From Jordana: *Hey Mom! You're up early. Jase and I just got to the train station in Berlin. It's so beautiful here. We're going for a real traditional Berlin lunch—curry-wurst! Bet you weren't expecting that! Then we're off to Museum Island. I'll send you photos (of the museums, not the curry-wurst). Love you, losing internet soon <3*

Val nearly knocked over the Moka pot in her frantic reach to grab the phone, but she was too late. Jordana's profile popped from green to orange to red in quick succession before she even got her first word typed.

Oh well, she'll just have to read it when she's next in range, Val thought.

Plenty of Val's friends over the years had thought she was naïve or gullible, but Valerie was perfectly aware that Europe had plenty of cheap SIM cards and free WiFi to go around. This was Jordana's way of ensuring she wasn't on the phone every ten minutes with her mom or her sisters, or seeing all her friends finish college and move on to something bigger. Val knew that Jordana was having something of a quarter-life crisis—could you even have one of those at twenty-four?

Her baby girl had delayed going to college by a year, signed up for a myriad of different community college short courses and a dozen so-called MOOCs—Massive Open Online Courses. She had informed Val and Walter when they'd become concerned. It had been good for her, she decided that medicine was where she wanted to be—it made Walter less happy than if a second daughter of his chose to follow in his legal footsteps, but far happier than the 'dropout lay about youngest kid stereotype' that he'd always warned her against becoming.

To Jordana: *How wonderful, an island of museums! Sounds right up my alley. Send pictures of whatever you like, even curry whatever. Hug Jase for me—he better be looking after you <3 Oh BTW, has your father called you? Nothing important, just want to make sure he's doing his bit.*

They'd come to an understanding a long time ago that Jordana's father was forgetful and distracted—which was why Val had to remind him to reach out to their youngest daughter and it had nothing to do with him not caring or not loving her as much as the other two. Though it had always been a sticking point on Val's side of the marriage; he insisted he wasn't playing favorites even though he clearly was.

The Moka pot was bubbling away now and she let herself relax back into the rhythm of her coffee ritual.

From Emmy: *no—sleep removal is a third year partner track perk. I'm just using the building's gym. I'm stoked they subsidize rent here—I'd never be able to afford a place like this on my own. Guess they want all their lawyers to look the slickest—helps the muckity mucks feel like they're on an even footing with the people they're hiring! Anyway, talk to you later, love you, Mom.*

Val loved it when Emmy talked about the ‘muckity mucks’ like she hadn’t grown up in Georgetown and gone to school with at least a dozen kids who had security details. That was growing up in DC for you. Val hadn’t wanted to raise her kids in such a political climate, growing up with her father involved in local Maine politics was bad enough—she and Becky had lived the white picket fence, wholesome family life for their whole childhood. Their father was never ill-tempered, but he was very strict with his rules and almost fanatical about privacy—all while running for local office and being a minor celebrity. That was probably why they had loved coming to the cabin so much as children—they and their mom got to be exactly who they wanted to be with no local news team or city council rivals prying on them.

From Jordana: *Jase loved his Mom-Hug.*

Accompanying the text was an image of her daughter standing on a park bench in order to make her tall enough to stand a head higher than her boyfriend and give him as much of a bear hug as a five-foot-tall, multiple marathon runner

could give to a nearly six-foot-tall ice hockey scholarship winner.

Jason had lost his mom when he was just nine years old and had been pretty solidly in love with Jordana since the day he moved in next door on her sixteenth birthday and she invited him right into the party they were throwing her. With a warm glowy feeling she always got from seeing her youngest daughter gloriously in love with her schoolchild sweetheart, Val sent back a series of different colored love hearts.

The glowy happy feeling persisted as she poured her coffee into the travel mug she had brought with her from home. It was hideous and she genuinely hated it. The crystals Rose had painstakingly adhered to the surface—in what was supposed to resemble pink and gold leopard print but was closer to some kind of psychedelic swirling mass—were starting to come loose. It had been, however, Rose's very first venture into selling custom-designed accessories and she cherished it as such. She was glad, however, when Rose discovered that her true creative calling was in oddly intricate and tiny sculptures for bookshelves that looked like they were little dioramas or scenes. Rose had always been a bookworm, and it seemed there were plenty of people willing to commission 'book portals' as she called them, themed after their favorite series or 'book boyfriend'.

They hadn't told Walter about that particular product line, but it was one of Rose's most popular items in her online store.

The sun was still firmly behind the horizon but in the time it had taken her to make her coffee and talk to two-thirds

of her girls—she should really text Rose—the first hint of light was starting in the sky.

She made her way to the back porch of the cabin, just off the kitchen and with a much nicer view than the road back down to town. Val determinedly ignored the loose railings and expertly avoided thinking too closely about the fact that the back door had not been locked.

The landscape in front of her was beautiful; there was absolutely no denying it.

Snow lay thickly on the ground, giving the whole place a true winter wonderland feel that the dusted evergreen trees and lightly calling birds emphasized. The pre-sunrise light cast the white snow a wonderful shade of blue that looked almost too perfect.

“Good morning sunshine,” Becky’s hoarse and sleepy voice emerged from the house behind her and Val turned to see her sister rugged up against the cold and actively yawning as she spoke.

Chapter 6

“Wow this place has really... honestly I’m going to have a word with the contractor I hired to maintain the place because...”

Becky’s commentary had been going on for nearly an hour and it was starting to grate on Val’s nerves.

“I know, look, it’s not your fault—you’re a teacher. You can’t just pop off to the mountains every few weeks to check on something that should have been being taken care of. It’s not your fault, Becks.”

Well, it kind of was, actually. She really should have checked that the work she was paying this guy for was actually being done, but it was way easier to just smooth it over and make it okay.

“It feels like it might be,” Becky said with a huff, “I feel so guilty. I haven’t been up here in... wow maybe five years? That’s a long time to leave it boarded up.”

“It is,” Val replied, “and if we’re going to stay here, we really need to get on top of some things—power for one thing, cleaning every single surface for the second thing, and possibly getting the steps and railings fixed before we fall

through them and we are on the news being helicoptered to the hospital.”

She kind of wished she had skipped that last example. It reminded her too much of their father telling them to be careful and not to do anything they wouldn't want running as a news headline the next day. It was all right advice; it set Val up for a life in DC with Walter at least, but it had been a constant prickle in her side as a teenager.

“True... when I'm on the news, I like it to be for something fun and scandalous, not depressing and very expensive,” Becky said, flashing her a wolfish smile.

“I was going to send some pictures for Mom, but maybe that should wait until we've cleaned it up a bit.”

What was with her this morning!?! Saying the wrong thing every step of the way. Val panicked and glanced at her sister. The smile was gone but she didn't look mad—she looked sad.

“Yeah, I agree. You can send some of the views though—that's just as gorgeous as it ever was.”

They each snapped a few pictures on their phones and Becks combined them into one email to send to the assisted living community their mom had lived in for going on three years now.

“The nurses will get a kick out of this. Hang on,” Becky said, quickly dashing back into the house and returning with a silver framed photograph.

It was from one of their not-really-Halloween parties from when they were kids, Val realized and laughed.

“Wow... we were so cool,” Val said dryly, running her fingers over the glass.

A ten-year-old Valerie was dressed as a princess—fluorescent pink cone hat included—and Becky stood next to her with sickly green face paint and a plastic headband that made it look like there was a thick bolt through her head.

“Frankenstein’s monster and a fairy princess,” Becky said, “how prophetic.”

“Oh shush, look at Mom,” Val said.

“Exactly my point—it never struck me back then that nurses didn’t wear high heels and short white dresses,” Becky said, snapping a photo and adding it to the email train, “though this is a far cry from the version they sell of this these days—positively modest!”

The sisters laughed as Val remembered their mother’s scandalized expression when she saw what Jordana proposed to wear to her prom—a lime green corset and tulle skirt that puffed out to twice her width but barely made it halfway down her thighs. In Jordana’s defense, her school had decided on a Wacky Carnival theme and she wasn’t out of place.

“Is that Mrs. Dixon?” Becky asked suddenly, pointing to the woman in the middle of the group of adults.

Val squinted, “Wow... uh, yeah I think it is.”

Mrs. Dixon had been their neighbor for as long as they’d been coming here. She was a local, and locals didn’t usually mix well with the tourists who came in and left without a thought—but Mrs. Dixon and their mom had been firm friends. The third woman in their trio was Sharon, who

stood at the end of the line in this photograph. She was dressed up as a mummy, though by this point in the night, her bandages had started to unravel and half her face was showing through the mask.

“This is so cool,” she said quietly, “I hope they show Mom; if she’s having a good day.”

Becky nodded and sent the email. Their mom’s carers kept a stash of photographs at the ready for when their mom was having a particularly good or bad day. For the bad days, it was all the girls under fifteen, which is just about where her mind usually retreated to these days. For the good days, it was pictures of her granddaughters and her own grown up daughters usually on vacation or from holiday gatherings. It was always hard to gauge which days would be good and which would be the bad ones, which was why Val and Becks were happy to let the nursing team at the home ration out the photos when they were needed.

“I wonder if Mrs. Dixon is still around?” Val wondered aloud.

“I hope so,” Becky said, “and you’re not at all interested in knowing if Matt is still around?”

“Matt!? Oh stop it,” Val retorted, feeling an age old annoyance rise in her chest.

It was annoyance, but there was also some tinge of guilty pleasure in remembering her summertime best friend. Back home in Maine, she could never have been best friends with a boy; her school friends would have hounded her. It helped his case that he was always happy to do exactly what Valerie wanted to do.

“He is, you know,” Becky said, stretching her hands above her head, “still around. He’s a contractor. I wanted to hire him to keep this place in good condition but he had a pretty full schedule ... and honestly he was really expensive. I’m going to start breakfast, you in?”

Nodding, Valerie bit back a comment that the guy she had hired was expensive enough. Val knew that Matt’s standards would be far higher than whatever cowboy had been taking their money for years and clearly doing nothing. Val concentrated on this feeling of annoyance with her sister as she did her best to ignore the thrill of happiness that Matt was still around. It wasn’t anything inappropriate... She just missed what it felt like to be sixteen and running around an idyllic mountain town with a local boy on her heels. If he hadn’t been so shy and quiet, he would probably have been the most popular kid in school, but then again, if he hadn’t been so quiet, would he have liked her outgoing personality so much?

Glancing over her shoulder, she could see Becky fussing over the gas stove and talking to herself. Deliberately casual, Val unlocked her phone and opened up as many social media apps as she had profiles on.

Search: Matt Dixon

Sixteen results, none of them looked like what she imagined Matt might look like these days.

Search: Matthew Dixon

Twelve results, again nothing that looked promising.

She shouldn’t be this annoyed.

Flicking to a different app, she tried again but, in her haste, mistyped.

Search: Magg D ixon

Did you Mean Maggy Ixton?

“Ugh, no!” she said under her breath, doubly annoyed at herself for the typo as well as being annoyed in the first place.

She was about to force close all the apps when she caught sight of a result about half way down the page.

Matty D. Ixon

Something about the picture reminded her of him, even though it was a full body shot and from a little way away. She glanced over her shoulder again to make sure Becky was still in the kitchen—she was only being nosy, but if Becks saw her looking for him online, she was guaranteed to resurrect her taunting and teasing from their teenage years.

Careful not to touch any of the ‘add friend’, ‘follow’, or ‘message’ buttons, Val navigated to the profile.

She had been right, it was him. Even though it had been over thirty years since she last saw him, all the decades and hard work that lay between then and now couldn’t conceal that smile. A smile that was shared by the young woman in the photograph with him. She couldn’t be more than twenty-five, and with a matching smile like that, she was probably Matt’s daughter.

“No surprises there,” she muttered.

He was way too good of a catch to be single. Somehow her social media stalking success only made her deflated. The

view was beautiful, sure, and it was nice to see Becky, but this whole thing was ridiculous—she should be at home dealing with the legal nightmare that awaited her.

Her divorce.

She didn't have anything to go back to, not really. Her girls were scattered across the country and the world. The melancholic feeling of being direction-less settled on her shoulders, and she shrugged into it with a familiar pang of disappointment. She had been feeling like this on and off since Jordana headed off for college. Empty nest, nothing to do except look after the house for Walter, cook for Walter, and make friends with Walter's colleague's wives' so she could eavesdrop for Walter.

"Bacon and egg sandwich coming right up!" Becky called from down the hall.

Val joined her sister in the kitchen and sat at the table doing her best to shake off the feeling. Becky had at least wiped it down before setting out the plates. Val's phone pinged as an admittedly delicious-looking breakfast sandwich landed on the plate in front of her.

From Rose: *I'm glad you're taking some time with Auntie Becks. You deserve to do something for you for once. Enjoy the snow, and send pictures for the twins.*

"We should treat this month like a working bee—let's get the old place back in shape," Becky said, "there's plenty we can do to bring it up to snuff without a lot of hard work."

The timing's exactly right, she thought. First, her level-headed and caring daughter makes her not want to leave, and

then her flighty sister gives her a project to manage. Val knew then that she wasn't going back to DC. She was staying and fixing up the cabin.

Chapter 7

Funny how something like breathing new life into a rustic cabin where all your best childhood memories live through elbow grease and a can-do attitude seems like a great idea when you first talk about it. Val and Becky had waxed lyrical over breakfast about how the wooden floors would simply gleam. They could repaint the kitchen, get all new energy-efficient light bulbs in the appropriate color temperatures to suit each room. The planning session was honestly the most enjoyable hour Val had experienced since The Burglary.

She really should stop calling it The Burglary. Nothing was technically stolen. Even if this woman—whose name she still didn't know—had stolen her husband, her life, and her Gestalt New York sofa.

That pleasant hour was now more than four hours ago and Val found herself wincing as her knees clicked every time she stood. Pulling on the fingers of the thick rubber gloves she had insisted upon, she glared at the pruny appearance of her fingertips. How had water gotten in!?

“Becks?” she called. “Lunch?”

“Come up here!”

She didn't want to go up there. She wanted to take a break and have some lunch—even if it was just a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Despite that, she sighed and clomped heavily towards the staircase tucked into the corner of the front room. The cabin itself was, in general, one of the most typical structures in the area, but the spacious second floor set it apart from most of their neighbors.

It felt kind of strange to be heading up the stairs. Even as an adult, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up in anticipation of her mom coming home and telling her off. Their parent's bedroom and office space had been strictly off limits to the girls when they were children. In fact it was one of the only things she or Becky could do to get in proper trouble—and Lord knows Becky had done her best to test that as a teenager.

“Where are you?” she called out as she reached the top of the stairs.

“Study... come look at what I've been doing!”

Val suppressed a groan. That tone in her sister's voice usually meant that she hadn't been doing what she was supposed to have been doing but had in fact been doing something entirely different and generally contrary to their common goal.

As she approached the doorway, she couldn't help but gasp. She had been right, of course. Becky hadn't been scrubbing the floors or tossing the trash—she had been poking about in boxes.

To be fair to her sister, only a small percentage of the mess had been newly added by her rummaging. The office was

full, almost to the ceiling, with boxes.

“Wow... that’s a lot of stuff,” she said, eyeing the stack closest to Becky.

“Right!? And you won’t believe some of the stuff in here,” Becky said, reaching behind herself on the floor and presenting Val with a crushed velvet box, “this—open it—was in the same box as...”

Valerie opened the velvet covered box, realizing that it was a jewelry case the moment she flipped the little brass catch. Brightly colored jewelry sparkled at her despite the dim light of the study. She ran her fingertip over the facet of a large red piece of glass set in a pewter pendant sans chain.

“—as this!”

Triumphantly, Becky pushed a large plushie raccoon towards Val who jumped at the sight before snatching the dusty critter from her sister.

“Brian! I can’t believe Mom and Dad kept him all this time!”

“I still can’t believe you named your stuffed toy Brian.”

With a playful glare at Becky, Val tucked Brian into the crook of her arm, “Find anything else? Disinfectant spray, a mop?”

She knew that she was pushing it a bit with the sarcasm, but if she and Becky were going to work together this whole month, she was going to need to be able to be herself.

“Ha. Ha. No, I got distracted,” she said, “and don’t act like I’ve done nothing. This place is three trash bags of

holiday wrapping paper lighter.”

“Three!?”

“And I didn’t even throw out the nice ones,” Becky replied, “we really need to clean this place up before we ask Matt—or whoever we ask—to do any work on the inside.”

Val had been about to protest them approaching Matt—Becky had correctly assumed that—but it didn’t make her feel any better to think that they would purposely not give him work just because she felt awkward about it.

“I agree. The only thing I’m worried about is the railings along the front of the porch. And the steps... And the porch boards. Anything that could break an ankle. And the mold... if it is mold, I mean.”

She felt her face redden slightly as Becky smirked at her, “Don’t think about mold. Look at this instead. I’d like to point out that this was in a box with three or four pieces of really old vintage clothes, some costume jewelry, and a notebook that just had dates and times.”

A shiny hardback photo album appeared from behind her sister and Val felt a tug on her heartstrings before she had even opened the thing. Val winced at the aching complaints her muscles issued as she lowered herself to the ground. How was she so stiff and out of shape? She went to Pilates and Yoga three times a week and went running with Amber on Saturdays!

Well, she had been until about a month ago when all her memberships had lapsed and she couldn’t face the prospect of

jogging along the path with Amber sending sideways glances in her direction and never once taking ‘I’m fine’ for an answer.

Becky cracked the photo album and both women broke into a fit of laughter at the images on the first page. Val realized then that this was more of a scrapbook than a photo album. The title page had four faded Polaroid pictures glued in with a light blue ribbon wound around them like a frame.

The words ‘Just Us Girls’ across the top of the page was embellished with glitter and even a few rhinestones.

“Oh Mom,” Becky sighed, touching a loose rhinestone.

“Look, it’s our joint birthday,” Val pointed at one of the Polaroid pictures, “that must be... I can’t be more than ten.”

The oversized cowboy hats on each of the sisters’ heads obscured most of their faces, but the smiles on their faces said everything that needed to be.

“I think horses was my choice that year,” Becky said, “eight years old, maybe?”

Val shrugged and turned the page. A collection of pictures from their years in the cabin unfolded. Some wider shots, showing some of the open areas filled with summertime sunbathing—dozens of people crowded around barbecue’s and inflatable pools.

Chapter 8

As they turned the pages, they watched as their mom grew older, the sisters grew taller, and the background faces changed and shifted. Earlier in the album Sharon, a guy with a huge mustache, and a thinner man with a never ending supply of Hawaiian shirts, featured prominently but they disappeared after about ten pages.

The two women that seemed to replace them were older, one of them looked stern while the other smiled nervously. The broad sun hats and huge sunglasses got in the way of easy identification so much so that after ten minutes of trying to figure out if the person in the bright pink shorts and similarly pink button down was their mom or Sharon, they realized once they found a magnifying app on Val's phone that it was actually the guy with the mustache—it hadn't been shadow from the visor at all it had been his mustache all along.

Each page was topped with the same moniker—Just Us Girls.

Val smiled as she tapped the lettering at the top of the page they had landed on, "I loved our Just Us Girls summers."

"Me too," Becky said, "It kinda sucked not seeing Dad for weeks and weeks, but it was so important to spend that time with Mom."

Nodding, Val reflected on it for a moment. “And it’s not like he never came here. He’d come up every couple of weeks when he was able to get someone to watch the store.”

“True, and he always brought us something,” Becky said, “I always wanted him to come to the Halloween weekend though.”

“I know,” she said, turning the page, “but that was a big thing just for us to be able to do—Mom had to go to war with the school every time we did it on actual Halloween.”

She watched her sister shrug like it was nothing, but Val knew that Becky must understand how much effort it was to bring them back here just for a Halloween long weekend barely two months after getting back.

“The biggest benefit was that we got two Halloweens,” Becky said, “one fake one up here to end the summer and one back home. Because Mom and Dad never really wanted to do two, we always got free choice of which friend’s to go to—remember?”

Val did remember, but she hadn’t taken as much glee in it as her sister had. Honestly, she would have been content to sit at home with her parents most years and just hand out candy but they always found a reason for her to go to a friend’s—or worse to go to Becky’s friends’ party and look out for her sister. Nothing made for an average-at-best evening like being the oldest kid by several years at a party.

“Fake Halloween was the best, look,” Val said, pointing at a page full of photos that included a copy of the one they’d found framed. “A Decade of Delight.”

The two page spread had ten hand-drawn frames surrounding ten photos of their mom, Sharon, and the girls. Photograph number one, emblazoned underneath with the caption ‘The Inaugural Not-A-Halloween Celebration’ featured just Val. The infant wore an orange romper suit with what appeared to be a long tail hanging off the back. A tiny headband with orange triangles stuck to it hung from their mom’s hand and Val assumed that she had—in all her infant stubbornness—refused to wear the cat ears. Their mom wore an orange overcoat with a fur hood pulled up over her head, the whiskers drawn on her cheeks implied a lion. The third person in the photograph seemed to be Sharon who was also dressed as a lion, but instead of make up like their mom, she wore a plastic mask that definitely hit creepy more than it did cute.

“Ten years!” Becky exclaimed, “I always knew how much mom loved Halloween but... wow.”

Becky turned the page this time, opening to another double page spread with a similar theme, but instead, this one was titled ‘The Golden Girls’ and featured a dozen or so photos of their mom and Sharon dressed up at Halloween parties—all dressed to the nines and grinning ear-to-ear.

The sheer joy on their mom’s face to be young and free, partying with her best friend, made Val’s heart swell—how she would love to share these memories with their mom.

“They really did go back a ways didn’t they,” Becky said quietly, “Sharon and Mom, I mean, she must be seventeen or something here.”

Val nodded in agreement. “Yeah, at most. She was so nice. You remember? She’d always buy us ice cream if the guy came by when she was around.”

“Really? I never got the impression that she liked kids very much...”

Becky sounded put out and Val wondered why, but her confusion was washed away as she scanned her memories and remembered that as the years went on and the girls got older, Sharon had spent less and less time with their family as a group.

“Maybe she couldn’t have kids? You know, she was up here every year on her own, her best friend with one then two daughters. Maybe it became too much for her as we got older and became more, you know, teenaged.”

The silence stretched out and Valerie realized that she needed to draw Becky back out or she’d be grumpy the rest of the day.

“You know she and Mom used to drink wine on the porch of Sharon’s cabin after we went to sleep? I sneaked out to spy on her once. She was real mad about it.”

Turning to look at her sister, Val saw Becky’s expression turn shocked.

“No way! Mom never drank!”

She raised an eyebrow as she tapped a finger on a photo of her mom and Sharon dressed up in black and white striped prisoner outfits, “Becks, she’s holding a beer can in this photo.”

Her sister spluttered, “Well, I mean, she was young then. I don’t remember her ever having a drink, even with dinner.”

“I do, but only ever with Sharon,” Val reminisced, “at Christmas dinner, and I remember her having champagne at that huge wedding we went to when we were kids. One of Mom and Dad’s friends.”

Becky screwed up her face, trying to remember. “Maybe, I think we even got about a thimble-sized drop in a glass at that wedding. I wonder what Sharon’s doing now... I mean, they were clearly best friends. You think they fell out?”

She found herself shrugging again. “People do just grow apart...”

“Come on, look at this—”

A photo from their mom’s twenties showed her and Sharon, arms around each other and smiling politely. The next photo was obviously from a second later when the two women had looked at each other and burst into a fit of laughter—both were throwing their heads back. The image radiated happiness.

“Well...” Val was about to say that there were lots of photos of her and Walter like that but caught herself as she realized that there weren’t that many...

“Maybe she still comes up here? Wouldn’t it be cool to reach out? Maybe she’d like to visit Mom...”

“Yeah maybe,” Val replied, “but she was only ever around in the summer. She obviously wasn’t from home, and we don’t even have her last name. Mom didn’t mention her in

any of her address books... you remember when we were doing Dad's funeral?"

Becks let out a loud, barking laugh, "I remember trying to. Mom was wildly possessive about every single thing. She wouldn't even let us meet the funeral director, remember?"

"How could I forget," Val said, "I think she just needed to feel in control of anything at all, grounded, you know?"

The silence began again but this time Val wasn't sure how to pull Beck back from her contemplation, so instead settled on bugging her sister to take a break for lunch.

Chapter 9

The front porch really was precarious, but the back porch wasn't anywhere near as bad. At least, that was what Val was telling herself as they dragged two of the comfy chairs from the front room out of the back door to try and recreate some overly cozy scene Becks had favorited on some social media app.

“Becks, I swear, this better be the best fricken hot chocolate I've ever had,” Val said, puffing out a breath with every word. “These suckers are heavy.”

Her sister's voice made her jump. She hadn't expected her to be so close behind her.

“It is the absolute best spiked hot chocolate you'll ever have.”

Wait, spiked?

“Spiked with what, Becks? Marshmallows?”

With a grin, Becky shrugged. “Sure, marshmallows. If those marshmallows are made from sugar cane, fermented, distilled, and left to age for several months.”

“Rum?”

“Rum.”

Becky grinned again as she handed Val a steaming mug that she had to admit smelled absolutely delicious. Val took a deep breath. The smell of the chocolate was sweet and felt almost sticky, while the twang of the rum was spicy and refreshing.

“Okay, fine,” she said, taking it from Becks, “but I want marshmallows too.”

“Right here,” Becky said, fishing a small packet out of her jacket pocket as she scooted past Val.

Neither Valerie or her sister were particularly big drinkers, but Val had been avoiding alcohol on purpose since The Burglary. A deep, exaggerated sigh of satisfaction emerged from Becky as she settled into the chair. She caught Val’s eye and swept a hand at the vista that sat before them.

“See? Worth it.”

Val settled into her own chair and took a sip as she surveyed the landscape. She couldn’t argue with her sister; this was miles better than sitting on the hard wooden steps that led down from their back porch to the open area in the trees.

“Sure,” she said, “so this meets your requirements then?”

Becky pulled out her phone and showed Val the image that had started this whole thing. “It could use some string lights, but other than that, I think we nailed it.”

“And even if we didn’t nail it...” Val replied, “I have to admit that this rum hot chocolate is genuinely delicious—put a five star review on that recipe.”

“Valerie and Rebecca, you girls can’t possibly be old enough to be drinking rum hot chocolate.”

Both women sat up straight in their chairs, snapping their attention to the voice that had interrupted them from just down the hill.

“...Mrs. Dixon?” Becky said in disbelief, “Is that really you?”

“Well obviously, I look exactly the same as I did the last time you saw me.”

Though she now walked with a slight hunch in her shoulders, Mrs. Dixon still stood impressively tall and if it hadn’t been for her broad smile and the warm tone in her voice, she could cut quite an intimidating figure.

Val jumped up, “please, sit here. It’s wonderful to see you!”

Should she go and hug the woman? It had been nearly thirty years since she had seen her properly, and Val wasn’t sure if the woman would welcome a hug from someone who was practically a stranger.

“No, no, dear, I’m on prescription standing,” she said, gesturing at herself. “Doc says if I spend more than an hour sitting down at a time, I need to stand for an extra fifteen minutes at the end of the day—I’m at forty-five minutes for the day.”

She winked and smiled. Val still felt strange about sitting down while this older woman stood.

“You could run and get me one of those, though, if you have any,” she winked at Becky and gestured at the hot

chocolate.

“Sure, of course Mrs. Dixon,” Becky said, standing abruptly, “there’s only about a half a cup left... sorry...”

“Oh that’s fine dear, about as much as I should have at my age.”

While Becky bustled in the kitchen, Val fought the urge to insist that she sat down. Not wanting to come across as rude, she asked, “are you sure you want to stand?”

“Very sure, now Valerie,” Mrs. Dixon said, “how long has it been, really?”

Val counted the decades on her finger, “Well, I’m fifty-three, so...”

“Changed my mind, don’t tell me,” Mrs. Dixon said, “how’s your mother?”

Wincing, Val forced the expression into a smile. “She’s doing much better. We were able to find a place in a residential home that provides all the care she needs without making her feel... you know, trapped or helpless. She was always so independent. Never thought I’d see her in care.”

“In care? She’s barely in her seventies!”

“Yeah,” Becky commented as she rejoined them with a third steaming cup, “early onset dementia. This place specializes in it.”

“Oh girls, I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Dixon said, taking the hot chocolate carefully. “Your mother was one of the fiercest women I’ve ever met. I bet she gives those nurses a run for their money.”

Becky laughed but Val couldn't quite summon it. Talking about her mom to people who knew her was harder than telling strangers—it felt almost disrespectful.

“She can do,” Becky said, “but that’s kind of their whole thing. They have the whole place set up for people in their sixties and seventies. There’s a market set up where they can go and do the errands they think they have, a fully functional library, gardening areas—one of the best in the country. They’re all trained nurses, of course, but they specialize in this type of memory loss and brain injuries and in making sure they feel safe and respected.”

Mrs. Dixon nodded somberly. “The state of aged care... we need more places like that I think. I’ll never go into one, I’ve told Matt to just let me wander off into the woods like a cat.”

“OH my god, Mrs. Dixon, don’t say things like that!” Val said, bursting into awkward laughter.

“What!? At my age, you have to be practical—twenty-five is getting up there, you know.”

The three of them laughed but there was a sad look on Mrs. Dixon’s face. Val quickly launched into hostess mode to try and make their old family friend more comfortable. Luckily, they got her started on how the local’s favorite restaurant had been inherited by a cousin of the person who had opened it twenty years ago. It surprised neither sister that she did not entirely approve of the new direction the person was taking it in, but even she had to admit that the food was good. Val made a mental note that they would have to go and inspect it themselves.

“See that you do,” she said, with a mischievous grin, “maybe one of you’ll get your hands on the husband and whip them into shape. It’s the wife I’m not keen on—shall we run her out of town girls?”

“Oh, uh,” Val said nervously, “I’m, um, not really, husband hunting.”

“And neither am I,” Becky said, and quickly before Mrs. Dixon could prod the subject further, she added, “Maybe you should give it a red hot try—never too old for a second husband, that’s what I say.”

Thankfully, this made the older woman cackle and forget all about asking about Val’s marital status.

Chapter 10

“It really is so wonderful to see you,” Val said, “I’m so sorry we didn’t come over when we got here but we really weren’t sure who was still living around here. So many people seem to have sold up and left.”

“That’s the sad state of it,” Mrs. Dixon said, “about half the people you’d recognize still either live here or come up for a season.”

“Really?” Becky said, “Like our mom’s friends? Sharon? I can’t remember the name of the other two—they were English, right?”

Pursing her lips, Mrs. Dixon took a long sip of her hot chocolate. “Yes, I think they were. One of them was anyway. You know, I heard about your father—I’m so sorry, girls. I lost my Bertie a few years ago—I never wanted to be a widow, that’s why I married a younger man you know, trying to keep him around long enough that I didn’t have to try and find a second husband. Bit me in the behind that one. He lived so long I became too old to snag a new one.”

Val wasn’t entirely sure what to do with that but Becky, agile as ever, seemed to know exactly what to say.

“Really!? How much younger—was it scandalous!?”

With a wink, Mrs. Dixon smiled over her hot chocolate, “Oh yes, a lucky seven years younger than myself. I’d already upset my mother by being a spinster—I was thirty-five when I got married, you know. I know things are different now, but you had to try rather hard to stay unmarried that long back then.”

The sisters glanced at each other. Becky was significantly older than thirty five and had never shown any interest whatsoever in marriage.

“I got twice lucky, you know?” Mrs. Dixon went on, “First, my Bertie was the best of men. Then, second, he taught Matt to be the same way. He’s been looking after me more and more since Bertie. You know, went ahead to scout it out before I arrived.”

For the third time in less than twenty minutes, Val was shocked almost speechless by this woman.

“Scout it out?” she repeated.

“Yes, you know, get the lay of the land and figure out which of the concierges will give us the best table in the dining room,” Mrs. Dixon said, gesturing at the sky.

“Absolutely,” Becky said, raising her mug in cheers.

Val joined their mock toast and watched the elderly woman closely. She seemed to be extremely jovial and irreverent about all things death.

“And how is Matt?” she asked, aiming at casual but the name stuck in her throat.

“He’s looking after me perfectly,” Mrs. Dixon said, “his contracting business is going very well indeed.”

“Is he married?” Becky asked, “still around?”

“He’s around,” Mrs. Dixon said, “and I bet he could help you with this place. You are going to fix it up, aren’t you? It’s a bit of a sore point with the locals.”

A pang of shame hit Valerie hard. She should have known better than to just leave the care of this place to her sister.

“Yes,” she answered quickly, “we are, and—”

“Good, Matt won’t be able to do anything until you have approval though,” Mrs. Dixon said, “you’ll need to go through old Frank. He’s still in charge of all the heritage stuff.”

The shame was quickly replaced with dread.

“What? This place isn’t heritage?” Val said, confused.

Draining what was left in her cup, Mrs. Dixon shrugged, “Over a hundred years old, it’s heritage. If I last much longer, I’ll have to get permission from them to dye my hair. The ruling got brought in a couple of years back. Thought you’ve been at that town meeting, or at least a representative should have let you know.”

The sinking feeling in her stomach deepened. Of course they hadn’t known about it—and now they wouldn’t be able to fix the place up without permissions.

“Frank as in...” she struggled to locate his last name but Mrs. Dixon interrupted anyway.

“Frank the Elder, the Old Bossy Boots himself. Frank Junior is some kind of accountant these days, down in the

city,” she said, holding out her empty cup. “Now, one of you girls walk home with me. It’s icy out here and you two bullied me into having that rum.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Dixon,” Becky said, “Is the path still the same?”

Val leaned back in her chair and watched her sister walk with Mrs. Dixon down the snowy path towards the cabin the elderly woman had called home for, as she said herself, nearly a century.

It’s a bit of an exaggeration, she thought, trying to do the mental arithmetic, and failing. There must be a lot of rum in this hot chocolate.

What would it be like, she wondered, to have roots somewhere that went that deep? She had been born in Maine, sure, but she hadn’t been back there since she left for college. She hadn’t been back here since then either. The closest place she could claim to have those kinds of roots to was DC—but she had been a fully grown woman when she moved there. Not to mention how many times they’d moved house since then.

She took a deep breath and sipped her nearly cold hot chocolate. She had liked her life in DC just fine, but it had never really felt like home. Even when her kids were little, she’d cycled through friends as they moved to the city and then away again. She’d found it... lonely.

Becky emerged at the bottom of the steps. “Wow, that woman is remarkable. We got there and she wasn’t even puffed—look at me!”

Becky gestured to herself; she did look a little flushed from the incline.

“More hot chocolate?” she offered, standing to take a deep breath in.

“I thought there was hardly any left?” Val asked, confused.

Becky laughed. “Oh Val, there is so much rum in this hot chocolate. I didn’t want to send her home drunk as a skunk!”

As her sister took her mug and disappeared to fetch more rum with a dash of hot chocolate in it, Val tried not to let her mind wander back to where it had been moments before. She couldn’t shake the feeling, though, that she had never felt at home anywhere—not since the last time she had visited here with her mom the year she turned eighteen.

Surprised at the total lack of hungover despite the three additional hot chocolates Becky had prepared the night before, Val was still extremely frustrated by her sister’s inability to get the power switched back on. No electricity meant that there was no electric booster for the hot water system.

No electric booster for the hot water system meant that their only source of hot water was the boiler heated by the wood fire stove in the front room.

A boiler fueled by a wood fire stove meant that the wood fire stove in question needed to be lit, in order to have any effect whatsoever.

Unfortunately, also due to Becky's actions, they were unable to light said wood fire stove because they weren't sure the chimney still functioned and didn't want to set fire to the place.

Becky, on the other hand, did seem to have a hungover—which Val was trying very hard not to gloat about either out loud or internally. The karma on that one wasn't worth it.

“So,” Val said, “are we going to be heading into town today, or what?”

Becky was hunched over the gas burner that they'd bought at the stove, the coffee pot bubbling away.

A shoulder shrug and a muffled groan was all Val got from her.

“We need to talk to Frank... see about the heritage classification.”

“Mmm, I agree.”

She narrowed her eyes, “Well sure, but if they make it to the final, how can they handle that quarterback injury?”

“I dunno, sorry... I don't really know much about that.”

Becky was a lot more than a little bit hungover, Val realized.

“Why don't you come and sit down? Let me do that.”

Becky shrugged again and moved away from the gas burner, taking the seat Val had just vacated.

Val turned on some quiet Lo-Fi music on her phone to gently fill the space between them. As soft rain sounds and muffled piano music played, Becky let out a long sigh. Val

wandered to the back door and gazed out at the view for a few minutes.

“Sorry about the rum,” she said, “apparently taking twelve months off drinking entirely makes you vulnerable.”

That tracked. While neither of them drank a lot, it was true that Val had wine with lunch when she met her friends and would often have a glass with Walter in the evenings if he was home early enough. On the other hand, the school her sister had been resident at until a few months ago had a strict tee-total policy for all its teachers.

“Well, tolerance will fade,” she said quietly, pouring a cup of coffee for her sister, “now for the bad news—if we want a shower, ever, we have to get the power turned on, or we have to at least see what we’re restricted to fixing. I can’t imagine they’ll care if we want to clear the chimney though. The problem then is that we’ll need wood. I’ve frozen my butt off for two nights now and I’m not interested in doing it again.”

More groaning from Becky. Her sister’s conversational skills improved the more coffee she consumed.

Maybe some of this is sleep-related, Val thought.

“So, shall I try the power company while you get ready? See if we can’t have it on by the time we get back from town.”

“Sure, sure,” Becky said, “they were really rude though.”

The people from the electrical company had genuinely been very rude to Valerie. Fortunately for her—unfortunately for them—Valerie had been doing battle with various companies in DC for 30 years. Companies in DC that were most accustomed to dealing with politicians, high-powered businessmen, and their various assistants. One would be forgiven for thinking that this would make these companies particularly amendable to the needs of the customer, but what this actually resulted in were companies that were very good at arguing with the customer.

The power would be back on by the time they returned from town.

This was the only thought keeping Valerie positive as she trudged towards the Heritage office where she knew they would find Frank. The thing that everybody knows about Frank was that his family was one of the town's founding families. The reason that everybody knew this about Frank was because it was one of the first things that he told anyone he met. Unfortunately, this was not limited to people that he was meeting for the first time—he would repeatedly tell this to people even after he had known them for years.

Valerie could just about forgive him for this particularly annoying habit considering how many people passed through their town on a yearly basis, which was an inescapable fact of life when you lived in a town that was very popular for about one third of the year and almost empty for the rest. At least he was friendly, their mom always used to say. A lot of the locals weren't friendly to the tourists who only came by for a few

months at a time. The Dixon's were very much not the norm in how they treated Valerie and Becky on their family vacations. Most of the locals treated the tourists with mild disdain just about covered by friendly smiles, and not very much had changed from what Valerie could see.

She had sympathy for that as well. A huge number of people she met over the years in DC who were visiting as tourists treated the town poorly and even before she had lived there for very long, it annoyed her. Then there was the income gap between the people who lived in the small mountaintop town and the people who could afford to take three months away from work to spend with their children in the woods. Even those who preferred to go skiing at the resorts that were relatively close by, when they stayed in town, they always seemed to be complaining or flashing their money around.

Valerie and Becky had grown up comfortable, but not unaware of how life worked or how hard you have to work to earn your keep.

This became especially clear to Val during her early years in DC, when she was still becoming accustomed to Walter's way of life. As his wife, she was given pretty much full access to his credit cards and simply told not to go overboard, but if she did, just let him know. She hadn't known what overboard meant exactly until one day when he told her to just book the holiday she'd been looking at and to stop worrying him with all the details—the flights alone were over five grand.

Becky had been pretty quiet for the entire trip in—from the drive to the short walk to the Heritage Hut, as it was

apparently called.

“You ready for this?” Val looked at her sister.

“Sure, you?”

They shared a small smile before Valerie pushed on the door, making a brass bell ring loudly above them.

Chapter 12

“Welcome to the Heritage Hut,” a hunched man wearing large and thick plastic-rimmed glasses said as he stood from his position at the desk in front of an ancient computer, “what can I help you find out today?”

“Hi, Frank,” Valerie said with a smile.

“I’m sorry, young lady, but you seem to have me at a disadvantage. I’m terribly sorry but I don’t know your name.”

Valerie could almost feel Becky rolling her eyes next to her. She had thought that this phenomenon should have passed since there were no longer teenagers; however considering that this was the second time she had sensed her sister’s disdain—in addition to the fact that she had noticed eyes being rolled at her at least five times since they reunited just a few days ago—it was clearly there to stay.

“Valerie and Becky Barlow. We used to come up here a lot with our mom—probably thirty years ago now.”

“Oh my word, the Barlow girls, of course.”

Frank emerged from behind the counter, his hand extended. He was smiling broadly and staring myopically at both sisters.

After taking his firm handshake with a broad smile, Valerie filled him in on why they were there, their mom's health, and their dad's passing. He made all the right noises, smiling and giving his apologies the way everybody did. In turn, he started to tell them a little bit about how the town had changed in the decades since they last visited.

“And as I'm sure you remember, girls, my family members were some of the first people to come up this mountain. That makes it a great pleasure to serve as the Heritage officer for the whole area. How can I help? Or are you just here for a chat?”

She would make a point once they left to ask Becky if she had heard the same mild disdain for the last question that she had heard. As if popping in for a chat and nothing else was something to be mildly ashamed of.

“While chatting with you is always interesting Frank,” Valerie said with a smile, “we do have a purpose. You may have noticed that our family cabin has become, let's say, less maintained than is ideal, and we would like to change that.”

“Yes, yes. That is one way to put it. Just what are you hoping to achieve with it?”

He looked at the women over the top of his spectacles.

Swallowing hard, Valerie resisted clearing her throat before she spoke again—why wasn't Becky helping? She was just standing there this entire time, smiling and nodding, letting Val do all the hard work.

“Well, we know that there are some structural problems with the front porch especially and we'd like to get those

sorted out as soon as possible. We also need to get the chimney cleaned and maintained so that we don't freeze overnight!"

She smiled and waited for him to return some kind of cheerful line or comment, but he looked very serious about chimney maintenance, so instead she continued speaking.

"We, uh, know that Matt Dixon is still around, and taking on contracting work. We spoke to his mother last night. She says that we need to get the appropriate permits before he can do any work in the place. That's where you come in."

Frank's face lit up, "Yes, yes, yes. Excellent. Yes, you do need permits from me. Wonderful, you'll be getting Matt to do it. He knows his work very well. Good to keep jobs like this local, wouldn't want you to bring in any of your big city architects and builders to come in and cowboy the place."

He retreated behind the counter once again and Valerie tried not to take offense on behalf of those so-called big city architects and builders. It wasn't so much that she was offended on behalf of the professions themselves—more so the implication that she would inherently choose cowboys.

"Do you think we could get some of the more basic ones first?"

"Yes, yes. I think the chimney and the decking needs to be done first... keep you girls warm and your ankles intact. Not to mention pre-nup for the street view. I'm sure Matt will be able to fix you up in no time for both. He got a certification for fire safety about a year ago when he came back."

Finally, Becky spoke up, "When he came back?"

Frank looked as if he'd swallowed a bug.

“Sorry, I shouldn't have said anything. That's not my business. Gossip, I mean. I don't deal with gossip. I deal in history and Heritage obviously. And permits. But only as they relate to Heritage. Sorry.”

Resisting the urge to glance at her sister, Valerie smiled and waved a hand, “Oh no, not looking for gossip. It's just good to know that Matt still around. We were such good friends growing up. Well for the time we were able to spend here anyway. I never wanted to leave.”

“Yes, you girls and your mom were one of the few regulars who really treated us locals like normal people rather than just folk. You could get to do something for you if needed. I suppose you are calling on Matt to get something you need, though, aren't you?”

Valerie panicked for a moment, but it was allayed as Frank chuckled at his joke. She wasn't entirely sure if it had actually been a joke, but she smiled anyway. You couldn't really go wrong with a polite smile.

“Well, yes,” Becky said, “but that's because he's the best.”

Frank smiled warmly at Val's little sister. “That's true, that's true. His family has a history of being some of the best around here. You know his family and my family go way back. They're not quite founders like mine, but settled here very, very early. It's a bit sad that from all the founding families, so few have had children, and the ones who have had children either aren't around or the kids just aren't interested.”

She desperately wanted to ask him if Matt had a daughter, or any kids at all even. Because asking about a daughter specifically would give away the fact that she looked up on social media and found a profile picture with him and what appeared to be a 20-year-old woman whom she could only assume was his daughter.

“I understand that... a lot of young people are moving away from family history. It is sad.” Becky agreed. “Does Matt have kids?”

Catching Becky’s eye, Frank nodded solemnly, “he does, but they live with his ex-wife down the city. Barely come up here.”

Becky was good. Val realized that her little sister would have been a fantastic ally to have with her in DC 20 years ago before she learned how to navigate the city.

While Frank had been very accommodating, surprisingly accommodating, the application for even the most basic permits took the better part of three hours. Valerie was well accustomed to the bother of form filling and red tape—she’d lived in Washington DC for 30 years after all—and even she needed a coffee or maybe even a glass of wine by the time they were finished.

Clutching their precious cargo and about to exit the door—a.k.a. permission to fix and therefore light the fire, the deathtrap front porch stairs, the slightly less deathtrap back porch stairs, and get Matt to inspect the roof—Becky paused and turned back to face Frank.

“Hey Frank, bit of a cheeky question,” Becky said, “since our mom has gone into residential care for her health,

we have been trying to track down some of her old friends. Do you remember her best friend from all those years ago? Sharon something?”

He looked quizzically at the girls and rubbed his chin, “No, no, I don’t think so.”

“Darn,” Becky said, “we can’t remember her name either. She owned the cabin behind us, over the ridge. If ours and the Dixon’s were two points, hers would form a triangle.”

“Hmm,” he said, “not sure I can help you there.”

Becky looked over at Val and she recognized the expression—it was her ‘go on Val, play along’ look she used to give her when she needed help covering the fact that she’d slipped out her window to go to a party.

“Well, could you look up the property records by any chance?” Val said, “It’s public record, surely?”

Frank nodded slowly. “Sure, you just give me a minute—let’s see what the old archival beast has to say.”

He tottered over to the old computer and pressed several buttons before it came back to life with a static hiss. He muttered to himself and the girls tried to make polite conversation, but he was in his own world for now.

“Hey look at this,” Becky said suddenly, pointing to an old black and white photo next to the door. “It’s us.”

“Huh?”

Valerie stepped towards her sister and recognized their cabin. Three children were in front of it on their bikes—Valerie and Matt stood much taller than little Becky.

“Oh wow,” Becky breathed.

“That’s so surreal,” Val agreed.

“Uh, excuse me, ladies,” Frank said, his voice stern, “I hope I don’t seem rude, but I don’t appreciate pranks—is this a prank? Because I don’t really understand pranks, and this in particular seems very unfunny.”

Val turned in surprise. “What prank? No...?”

“You expect me to believe that you two are genuinely unaware,” Frank said in a voice so stiff and stern it became almost sneering, “that your mother and father owned both the cabin you stayed in as well as the one behind it? The one you said was owned by this Sharon woman?”

Chapter 13

It had taken a full thirty minutes to convince Frank that they were not trying to play any kind of joke on him, despite their clear confusion and Becky's obviously building emotions about the situation.

They had left things on reasonable terms. Val thought so, at least. He had apologized for being snappy, explaining that he was often the butt of the joke because he didn't have a sense of humor. The deadpan way he had said this did briefly make Val wonder if he did have one, just a very dry one, but he seemed to be completely serious.

Becky had all but demanded that he show her the property records, and this had gone a long way to convincing Frank that they were actually as confused as they said they were.

The sisters had stayed silent as they walked back to the truck. Val didn't want Becky to be upset and drive but she also knew that her sister stewing in silence was not going to be good for anyone. Valerie had noticed a slight tremor in her hand as she reached for the door handle.

So, as they climbed into the cabin, Val prepared herself to start a conversation.

“Val, oh my god, what the hell was that? What am I going to do? Have we been committing tax fraud this whole time?”

Val had to blink a few times before she decided that she had heard Becky correctly.

“I... what do you mean?”

Her sister let out a long and loud groan, “With Mom’s tax forms! With our tax forms! If we’ve owned another fricken building this whole time, the IRS... well I don’t think they’re gonna be pleased!”

“Oh. Oh dear... I-I don’t know,” Val said, her stomach sinking so suddenly and hitting the metaphorical ground that she almost felt the thump in reality.

“Property tax, inheritance tax, who knows what else tax —”

“Becks, no I think it’s fine... or at least, not a catastrophe,” Val said, pausing to take a deep breath, “we—as in you and I—don’t own this property. None of it got legally signed over, remember? When we did Mom’s entry process into the care home, we took on Power of Attorney. It’s decisions, not actual ownership. I’ll have to call the accountant but... either way we will sort this out.”

She tried not to let the flash of panic show on her face as she realized that she hadn’t checked to see if the accountant was paid up for this financial year or if Walter had withdrawn the consent—how could she have been so stupid!?

Becky did seem calmer though. Val noticed she was breathing in a weird way as she looked over at her sister.

Pressing one nostril closed and breathing in, then closing it and opening the other one to breathe out—she looked mighty strange but she had stopped shaking.

“We should go check the cabin out. If it’s in as bad condition as ours, then we’re going to have to fix it up too—we can’t leave it to rot just because we didn’t know about it,” Becky said as she started the ignition.

Something in her voice sparked panic in Val’s chest as she said it. No, no, no! She didn’t want to go looking and poking around this woman’s cabin... Their cabin... no, it was still Sharon’s cabin whatever the deed says.

“Please don’t... it feels so... wrong,” Val said quietly.

“You’re not even a little bit curious?”

“Of course I am! It’s just... please wait.”

Beck didn’t answer and the rest of the drive home was silent, each of them going over their worries internally with only the occasional comment or question for each other. By the time they approached home, though, they were both calmer and more optimistic.

“Val—look!” Becky’s voice was suddenly loud and teasing.

Snapping to attention, Val looked in the direction her sister had pointed in. A huge red truck sat next to her little hatchback and a pair of legs stuck out from underneath the porch.

“What in the world... who is that!?”

“Use your brain,” Becky said, “that’s the same truck he drove when he was a teenager, he’s the only contractor in town, and we spoke to his mom about fixing the porch just last night.”

“Matt!?” Val said, the alarm loud in her voice as she glanced down at herself.

She hadn’t seen him in over thirty years and now she was going to show up while he was working on her house—uninvited—looking like a disheveled yoga mom.

Wait, why did she even care how she was dressed? The thought wheedled its way into her mind and she tried to swat it away but it lingered at the back of her mind. She shouldn’t care.

She didn’t care.

Becky pulled into the last remaining spot outside their cabin and parked, “Go on! Go talk to him! Tell him we have the permits.”

Before she could comprehend what her sister was doing, Becky was out of the driver’s seat and around to Val’s side, pulling the door open and tugging on her sleeve.

“Hey, is that Matt Dixon?” Becky called, “didn’t mean to sneak up on you!”

A booming voice emerged from under the porch. “Well you kinda did, but that’s okay. My mom mentioned the Old Barlow cabin needed some work—said someone was going to break their neck on these porches and she wasn’t wrong. Hang tight a sec... I’m just about finished with this joist.”

“Sure, no worries!” Becky called before turning to her sister and whispering the words, “Say hi!”

“Uh, hi Matt,” she said in a much quieter voice than intended.

“Oh hey, there’s two of ya! Sorry for the, uh, undignified hello. I’ll only be a sec.”

He moved his toes back and forth and Val stifled a laugh. It was good to see that Matt’s ridiculous sense of humor hadn’t changed. It had always been her favorite thing about her summertime best friend.

“Your mom was right, we really do need a bit done,” Val ventured, straightening her oversized t-shirt, and patting her hair with the other hand—it didn’t help.

“Sure, she usually is,” Matt replied, sounding a bit strained and Val wondered if they should leave him alone until he finished.

Becky gestured to the back of the house and muttered quietly, “I kinda need the ladies. I’m going to sneak in the back instead of, you know.”

She held up her hand and mimed walking with her fingers, motioning them over the porch where Matt lay. A loud banging from him made them both jump.

Nodding, Val searched for something to say.

“Yeah, so, um, do you think you’ve got time to get at least the structural safety stuff done?” Val said as she watched Becky almost tiptoe around the corner, “We have more planned but mostly we don’t want to freeze or break any bones.”

“Sure do,” Matt replied, “there’s a big Barlow Cabin-sized hole in my calendar. I’m always happy to work on places like this. It’s one of the oldest around here you know.”

Something in the way he spoke made Val’s senses twitch. Of course she knew that...

“So, uh, did you know we had the permits or...?”

“Mom said she told you, and I know for a fact old Frank wouldn’t want to stand in the way of this place getting fixed up. The Barlow’s really let it go to ruin. He was pretty annoyed with them, and honestly so were the rest of us. It’s great to see some new owners take it on and try to get it back to its former glory.”

Val’s stomach sank, and she felt her face flush red—he hadn’t recognized her voice. That should not have upset her at all, let alone this much. She wanted to turn and run, get back in the car and drive—oh lord this was going to be so, incredibly awkward.

She did turn, her hand flying to her mouth as she did so but somehow she managed not to leap into the car and run.

“Uh... well, fixing it up is—you know, um, good,” she said awkwardly.

She scolded herself silently in her mind. *You idiot! What’s wrong with you! Just tell him it’s you!!*

Apparently, he was still talking but she couldn’t hear him over her pounding pulse and rushing thoughts. She was running through all the possibilities in her mind; should she just say ‘Yeah, actually we did try to get a maintenance guy but apparently he was a con man,’ or ‘Awkward, we’re

actually not new owners’, or even ‘I’m not a Barlow anymore but I’ll do my best to make up for it’.

No, not any of that—especially not the last one. Moderately funny as it was, she would have to explain that she was married but also kind of not married anymore, considering the guy who gave her that new last name was off with a replacement model.

“So, what are these plans then?”

That wasn’t inside her head. That was Matt’s voice.

Turning slowly, she braced herself for what was coming. He must have climbed out from under the porch while she was freaking out like an idiot. She knew he was still very good looking thanks to that sneaky social media search she’d done but as she took in the sight of him, her breath caught in her throat... holy smokes, he was gorgeous.

“It’s you...”

Gorgeous and angry.

“Yes, um, it is me. Sorry.”

“Sorry that it’s you?”

He was so cold all of a sudden, distant, and glaring.

“No! Well, I mean... we thought you recognized us... you know, our voices, or something.”

Suddenly she felt even more ridiculous than before—his voice had certainly changed in three decades. Why would hers be recognizable!?

They stared at each other for a moment before he spoke again.

“Come to think of it,” he said coldly, “I probably don’t have the capacity to take on something as large as this. I’ve done the critical joists here. It’s safe to walk on. Call it a freebie.”

No, no he had to! He was named on the permits. They couldn’t move forward without him! Besides... why wouldn’t he want to?

He stooped to repack his tool bag and Val stepped closer.

“Matt... have I upset you? I’m sorry. I don’t know what I could have—”

“Don’t,” he said quietly but sternly, “don’t do that.”

“Do what—?”

Suddenly a shout broke the air and threw Valerie into panic mode.

“Val!” Becky shouted, “Val, you have to see this!”

Her sister came sprinting around the corner, nearly slipping on an icy patch.

“What’s wrong!?”

She surged forward to meet her sister, forgetting momentarily about Matt.

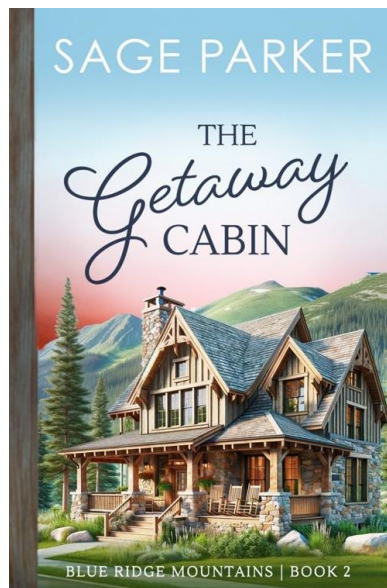
Becky was holding an armful of things—men’s clothes, a ledger, and a photograph of their father.

“I found these,” Becky said between huge breaths. “In Sharon’s cupboard. Just hanging there. The ledger is for the store—OUR store!! There’s more, so much more, all mixed in with her clothes and stuff! It’s like he lived there.”

Valerie's mind crowded with possibilities and questions
—what the hell was their dad's stuff doing in Sharon's cabin?

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Chapter 1

Valerie and Matt stared blankly at Becky as she spoke. Val couldn't make the words her sister was saying make sense. What was she talking about, their Dad's clothes and business papers at Sharon's cabin? That made no logical sense whatsoever.

“Becks that... that can't be right. 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. “You think I wouldn’t recognize Dad’s stuff? 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? Dontcha think we’d have noticed something like that?”

Blinking hard, Val tried to straighten out what her sister was saying and what she herself had meant to say. She hadn’t intended to give specific examples she had no evidence whatsoever for—examples that were immediately deemed ridiculous considering the items Becky held right in front of her face.

Literally, right in front of my face, she realized as Becky waved the photograph of her father at her so closely it nearly grazed the tip of her nose.

“Stop that,” Val said, swatting at the photograph, “I just don’t...”

“Ugh!!” Becky rolled her eyes as she grunted loudly and dismissively, “Will you just come, 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 or something terrible would happen. 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 along with her rapid and shallow breaths. She took a moment and silently ran through the mantra she had worked out with the therapist to remind herself that each of her daughters was almost certainly completely fine.

Clever. Caring. Competent. Emmy. Rosamund. Jordana, she thought. *Clever, caring, competent.*

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

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

“I’m fine,” she snapped, “I just...”

“VALERIE!”

Her sister’s voice echoed through the woods and Val flinched. “Look, I’d better...”

She moved to follow her sister’s footsteps and leave Matt behind but she still couldn’t seem to make herself move. The sinking feeling of dread about her loved ones settled deep in her bones. This was supposed to be a part of her past but it did tend to pop up like this in moments of stress or heightened emotion. She had been so proud of herself since The Burglary—though she really shouldn’t call it that anymore. She had spent the first few days checking the doors and windows, sending a few too many texts to the girls, and making sure all the taps were off in all the sinks in the house before she could settle down to sleep.

“Val... Take a breath.”

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 that 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 her. Or she'll holler again and cause an avalanche or something."

She nodded, focused on taking the first step. Once she broke the spell of hesitation she should be fine. Lifting her foot carefully and placing it back down in the exact same spot—she could just see herself going toe over top if she took a shaky step onto the snow and ice—she let her breath out slowly.

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

Was he actually worried about the whole avalanche thing? Wasn't that a myth? Deliberately not thinking about what Becky thought she'd found 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—was the phrase Just Us Girls.

A few years ago, when they had first set up the group chat, they had originally included Walter and it had been nothing more than a communication tool. Walter had barely used it and had upset Rose quite a bit when he had let slip that Val had bullied him into joining. After abandoning The Family

Schuster—Walter’s begrudging contribution to the endeavor had been the least imaginative chat name in history—Val had created this splinter group. 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. The fact that the photo album she and Becky had recently uncovered that chronicled the years they spent up here had been emblazoned with the same phrase now weighed on her.

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 timezone and just wait for a reply. It wasn’t their emergency line, after all, the one that would ring them all no matter if their phone was on silent or not.

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 The Burglary, she'd had to resist more often than ever. Well, coming home to a stripped-out house and a hand written 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 his family home up to and including the contents of the bathroom draws.

“Valerie?”

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

“Oh, sorry,” she said, blinking back to reality and making a move to keep walking.

Stubbing her foot against the wood, she quickly realized that she was at the steps leading up to the front porch of

Sharon's cabin. Pain cracked through her shin as it connected hard with the wood, and the palms of her hands against the top step where she had caught herself.

“Ah!”

“Oh shoot, are you all right?”

He was there suddenly, his boots 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.

The hand dropped. “Fine, don't take it. Come on, your sister is tearing this place apart.”

“No, sorry, I didn't mean...”

He sighed as he held his hand out again; this time, she didn't hesitate taking it and letting him help her stand.

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

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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!

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