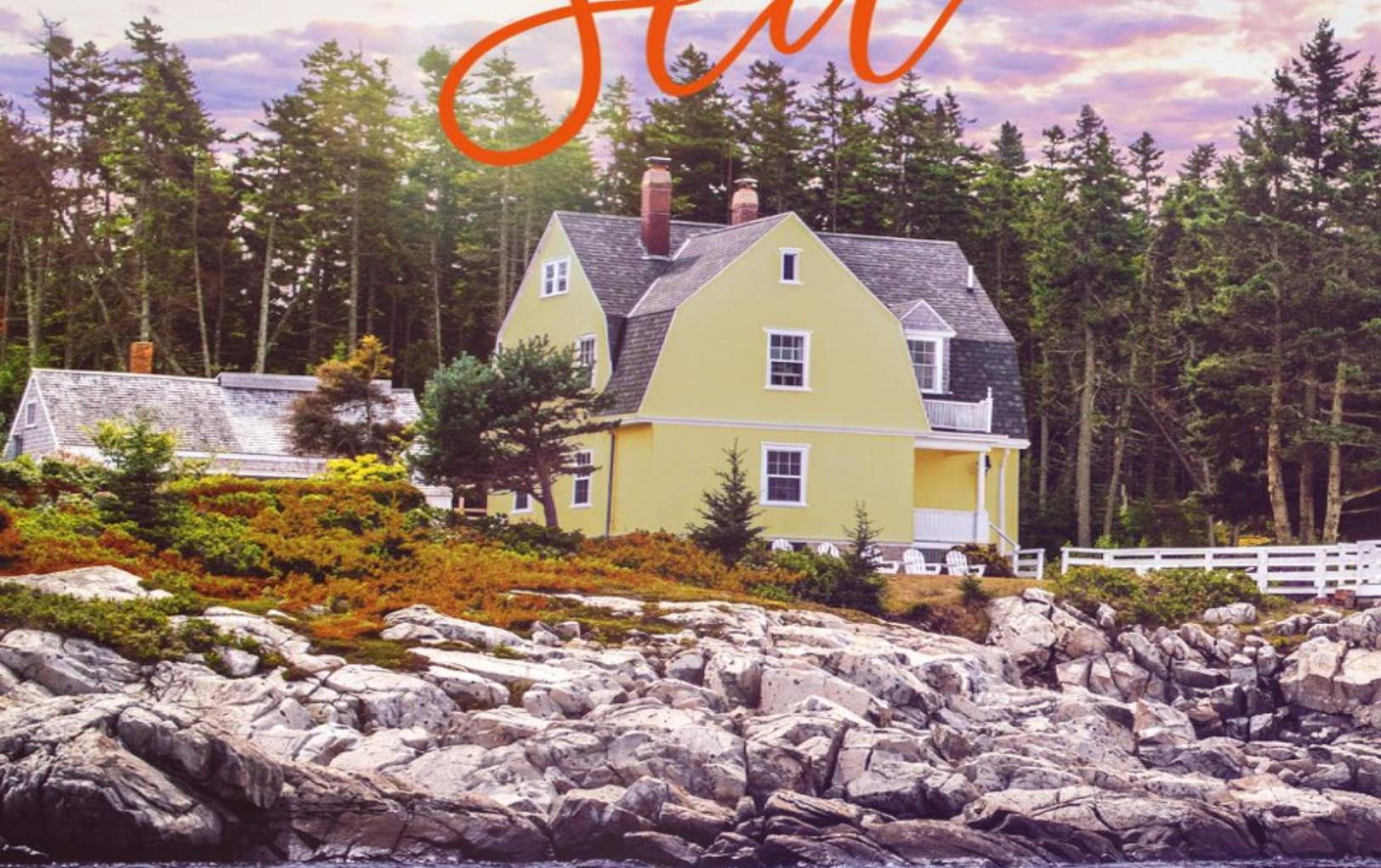


CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

MELISSA TAGG

*Autumn  
by the  
SEA*



— A MUIR HARBOR NOVEL —

ACCLAIM FOR MELISSA TAGG

“An extremely charming tale with a twist and mystery. Tagg is at her best with this one, mining the depths of family and love. A shining novel not to be missed.”

**-Rachel Hauck**, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

“With complex characters, a swoony romance, and a charming seaside town you can't help but fall in love with, Melissa Tagg delivers once again!”

**-Courtney Walsh**, *New York Times* Bestselling Author

“Melissa Tagg is a fantastic writer—each story is better than the next, and this one shines!”

**-Susan May Warren**, *USA Today* bestselling, award-winning author

“This story about finding a place to belong is pure perfection and loveliness from start to finish. Not only is it set in a gorgeous seaside village, but both Neil and Sydney's journeys tugged at my heartstrings and did not let go till the end. Filled with Tagg's signature blend of romance, charming quirk, and emotional depth, *Autumn by the Sea* is definitely one for your keeper shelf.”

**-Lindsay Harrel**, author of *The Inn at Walker Beach*

“In *Autumn by the Sea*, award-winning author Melissa Tagg shows us how a family is held together by love, not by sharing a last name or heritage. The story has everything readers want: an engaging romance, a keep-you-guessing mystery, and intriguing characters. Written with Tagg's trademark humor, book one in the Muir Harbor series made me eager for what comes next.”

**-Beth K. Vogt**, Christy Award-winning author

“Melissa Tagg has done it again! She crafted a swoon-worthy, heart-tugging romance with a meet-cute that beats all meet-cutes. It was full of mystery and surprise and kept me turning pages well into the night. I can't wait for the rest of the series.”

-**Tari Faris**, author of *The Restoring Heritage Series*

## MAPLE VALLEY SERIES

“Powerful. I’ve always loved Melissa Tagg’s stories, but this one is something special. Lyrical, yes. Enchanting, of course. But her story about a broken man meeting an equally broken woman and their journey to healing touched unexpected places in my heart. An absolutely beautiful, compelling read.”

-**Susan May Warren**, *USA Today* bestselling, award-winning author

“This book . . . so many feelings, so much love for this friends-to-more-story. I loved all the emotions these characters brought out while finding their happy ending . . . Truly an inspiring read.”

-**RelzReviewz.com**, for *Some Bright Someday*

“The author creates a compelling inspirational novel filled with her trademark romance and brings the readers to tears as they discover the pain and heartbreak that hero Marshall Hawkins has faced in his life . . . highly recommended for fans of contemporary romance.”

-***Inkell Inspirations***

## WALKER FAMILY SERIES

“Tagg crafts a beautiful romance filled with humor, mystery, and heartfelt emotion . . . Tagg’s moving story beautifully explores themes of redemption and the nature of home.”

**-Publisher’s Weekly**, for *All This Time*

“Bear and Raegan are endearing and intriguing characters, and readers can't help but fall in love with them. Tagg excels at fleshing out the hints we've been given throughout the series and developing them into layered, authentic backstories...A doozy of a first kiss is completely worth the wait, and even a little suspense is skillfully worked into the plot—in case pulses weren't already racing. (They were.)”

**-RT Book Reviews**, 4½ Stars TOP PICK! for *All This Time*

"With her inimitable style, Melissa Tagg has penned a gem of a story, one that will delight longtime fans and entrance new ones. Replete with swoon-worthy moments, unwrapping Bear's complicated history and discovering Raegan's hidden struggles make this a love story that resonates on a deeper level."

**-[RelzReviewz.com](http://RelzReviewz.com)**, for *All This Time*

“With profound truths on one page and laugh-out-loud hilarity on the next, *Like Never Before* quickly becomes one of those novels I didn’t want to end. Melissa Tagg has penned a delightful story that took hold of my heart and didn’t let go. Superbly well done!”

**-Katie Ganshert**, bestselling, award-winning author

“In *Like Never Before*, readers are invited to revisit the much-loved Walker clan that delivers on the promise that even if lost once, love can be found again. In true Melissa Tagg style, the dialogue is smart and the romance is

real and raw in all the right places. This series is witty storytelling at its best.”

**-Kristy Cambron**, bestselling, award-winning author

“Tagg (*Made To Last; Here To Stay*) writes heartfelt and humorous gentle romances with a wisp of faith woven throughout. Fans of her previous two books will want this one. And devotees of Rachel Hauck and Robin Lee Hatcher will embrace a promising new author.”

**-Library Journal**, for *From the Start*

"Tagg excels at creating wholesome romances featuring strong young career women, gentle humor, and an unobtrusive but heartfelt infusion of faith."

**-Booklist**, for *From the Start*

BOOKS BY MELISSA TAGG

MUIR HARBOR SERIES

*Autumn by the Sea*

*A Seaside Wonder* (coming early 2022)

*Wedding at Sea* (coming spring 2022)

MAPLE VALLEY SERIES

*Now and Then and Always*

*Some Bright Someday*

WALKER FAMILY SERIES

*Three Little Words* (prequel e-novella)

*From the Start*

*Like Never Before*

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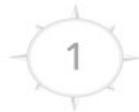
*A Place to Belong*

*One Royal Christmas*

*Someday Soon*

# Autumn by the SEA

A MUIR HARBOR NOVEL



MELISSA TAGG

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*To my sister, Nicole Schwieger, who helped me dream up this new series right when my storyteller's soul needed a creative reset.*

*And to Courtney Walsh, whose understanding, friendship, and encouragement as I juggle my "two lives" (and not always that, ahem, smoothly) mean so much to me.*

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*M*y Dearest Robert,  
Sometimes I think about how no one understands.

*No one else, after all, was there. No one else stood in that place like I did, wrapped—trapped, really—in a twisting acrid fog, the wreckage laid out in front of me. The ruination of at least two lives. Hers and, in some ways, many ways, mine.*

*The mystery of the third life haunts me to this day. And they all think I'm ridiculous, I know this. They think I'm holding on to a shadow.*

*But shadows aren't formed from nothing.*

*Oh, this isn't the letter I meant to write. This isn't the Margaret Muir you knew. And I'm not this morbid Maggie every day. No, on the happier days, I think about you sweeping me off my feet at seventeen and causing my parents no end of consternation when you proposed so quickly.*

*Or I think about how she first came to me—Diana. Bundled and asleep, pudgy-cheeked and tiny, rosebud lips. Only the barest, lightest wisps of hair*

*that would one day redden and confuse folks into thinking I'd birthed her myself.*

*But no, I received Diana. A gift in the midst of my greatest sorrow. I, a widow, at only nineteen. Well, not technically. Mom and Dad did, after all, insist we wait. But in the heady joy of first love, my heart had made the commitment. And thus, the breaking of it was every bit as sharp as any war-time wife's when you went away and didn't return.*

*But then . . . Diana. New to the world and already alone. In need of arms to hold her. And mine, so very empty.*

*In those first moments, the warmth of her slumbering form nestled against my chest, it was as if I could finally hear Hope's whisper once more. "I haven't forgotten you, Maggie Muir. There's still so much more for you."*

*And I'm still so grateful. Even though, in the end, she too was taken from me far too soon.*

*It's for her memory I keep searching, Robert. Searching for Cynthia—little Cindy—my daughter's daughter . . .*

*Because even all these years later, I still hear her cries in my dreams.*

*And because even all these years later, Hope's whisper is still there. "I haven't forgotten you, Maggie Muir."*

*Just as I haven't forgotten her. And will never forget you.*

*With all my love,*

*Maggie*



*October 2018*

*F*or once, Chicago's heady, heavy wind—stubborn and pummeling and rife with autumn cold—came to Sydney's aid, pushing her from behind as if aware her taut lungs and straining legs might give out at any second.

But it was the fear that kept her running.

She clutched her purse to stop its bouncing against her thigh and veered around a corner, past the bakery—the sticky, sweet smell of Nikola's famed caramel rolls doing nothing to comfort her. Not with the stranger's pounding steps growing closer.

Half a block. Just half a block to the ancient three-story brick building she'd called home for nearly twelve years now. Its crumbling exterior and overgrown hedges, the creaking front door with the peeling paint and pointless crooked brass knocker had never looked so welcoming.

Her shoes clacked over the cracked sidewalk, and she resisted the urge to crane her head, twist her gaze to the man she'd first spotted watching her

back at the restaurant. Initially, she'd taken him for a regular old creeper, his stare following her around the labyrinth of tables and booths as she took orders, delivered plates of Italian food, prayed for good tips.

And yet, his dark eyes hadn't leered so much as just . . . studied. Why was that even more unnerving than the ogles of other uncouth men?

Even so, she hadn't thought too much of it. Had simply thanked her lucky stars the man's booth wasn't in her zone of tables and finished out her shift.

But she should've known not to count on luck.

*"Some kids don't get lucky."* Why was it the social worker's raspy voice, tinged with pity, always found the worst times to resurface?

*Yeah, well, some adults don't get lucky, either.*

No. Some adults left their workplace with sore feet and a dogging, too-familiar fatigue, only to feel a niggle of alarm halfway home. Only to slow her steps and turn around and see the same man from that corner booth.

Chilly air scraped her cheeks as she willed her legs to stay in motion. So close.

*Has to be someone Micah knows. He's finally gotten in too deep and I'm about to pay the price and—*

Realization swooped in as she passed the once-auspicious Victorian next door to her building. The thumping steps from behind—they'd quieted. Or maybe stopped altogether. She slowed only the slightest, allowed herself a glance over her shoulder.

Nothing. No one.

Just the swish and rustle of the weeping willow in front of the Victorian and an empty sidewalk. And from somewhere down and across the street, the distant voices and laughter of the kids who were always outside kicking around a soccer ball.

Had the man given up? Decided she wasn't worth the pursuit?

Her pace slackened to a quick walk as she turned onto the narrow cement path that led up to her boxy apartment building. Maybe the man had gotten word from a higher-up who'd called off the chase. Lord knew the kind of people Micah had gotten involved with generally didn't do their own dirty work.

Or perhaps this didn't have anything to do with Micah. Perhaps he'd been serious last time she'd talked to him three, maybe four, weeks ago. Perhaps he'd meant what he'd said about starting fresh and—

“Sydney Rose?”

A deep voice, winded but firm, came from behind her, along with a hand on her arm.

She whirled. *Him*. Where . . . how had he . . . ? He must've cut through the lawn in front of the Victorian, hidden by the willow, the grass quieting his steps.

Why—*why?*—had she stopped running? She should've raced to her building's front door, flung herself inside, and refused to slow down until she'd reached her cramped apartment, turned both locks, and slid the tiny chain into place.

“Get away from me.” She fumbled with her purse. “I've got mace.”

He dropped his hand, one corner of his mouth quirking. “Thanks for the warning, but you won't need it.”

She backed toward the building until her heels knocked into the first of three concrete steps leading to the front door. When she stumbled, the man reached out for her arm again.

With a flinch, she jerked away, heart hammering. “I said get—”

“I'm not here to hurt you. If you just would've stopped the first time I called your name—”

She wrenched away, instinct pulsing through her as she booted her foot toward the man's knee, his *oomph* letting her know the kick had done at

least a little good. She whacked him with her purse, then scrambled up the steps.

“Please, I just want to talk—”

She yanked the door open and raced inside. For possibly the first time since she’d moved into this building, she didn’t wrinkle her nose at the faint, ever-present scent of the cloves her landlord smoked or wince at the thumping bass coming from 1B. She barreled up the carpeted staircase and reached her door in seconds, jutting the key into the lock with shaky hands.

Finally, pulse still skittering, she barricaded herself in her apartment—turned both locks and slipped the chain into place. *Breathe, Syd. Just breathe.*

Should she call the police? Or simply wait and hope the man went away? If only she kept a baseball bat by the front door. *Should’ve kicked him harder.* Or better yet, kneed him in the groin. Francie at the restaurant kept trying to get her to join her for a self-defense class. She really ought to take the chef up on it, especially if Micah couldn’t get his act together—

The knock bellowed, shoving her heart into a tailspin all over again. Her groan was lost in the sound of a second knock and the man’s frustrated voice.

“Sydney, please, I’m not here to harm you. I just need to talk to you for a few minutes. I’m sorry I alarmed you.”

“Would you just go away? I don’t know who you are. If you think I’m going to open my door—”

“My name’s Wilder Monroe. I’m a private investigator. Here, I’ve got my badge and my license. I’m going to slide them under the door, okay?”

A moment later, the items brushed over the faded hardwood floor and appeared at her feet. She ran her clammy palms over the front of her work uniform—white collared shirt, black tie, black pants—and forced an exhale as she bent. The glint of the brass badge drew her focus first, the words *private investigator* in blue above an emblem.

*Could be fake.*

Sure it could. Same with the paper she picked up and skimmed. How was she supposed to know what an official private eye's license looked like? She hadn't even known P.I.s had licenses. Or badges. *Wilder Matthew Monroe. Licensed in the State of Maine.*

Maine? Why in the world—

“I feel like I should reiterate that I'm not here to hurt you in any way.” The door muffled his voice, but not enough to hide his exasperation. “I shouldn't have chased you. I'm a little new at this. I should've just waited until you were home and knocked on your door like a normal person. Or spoken to you at the restaurant.”

Huh, apparently his exasperation was self-directed. “Or better yet, you could've dispensed with the creepy staring act in the first place.”

Was that actually a chuckle? “As I said, I just need a few minutes of your time.”

Hesitation rooted her in place. She glanced at the badge and paperwork again. They *looked* legit. But if Micah's activities had taught her anything, it was that appearances were rarely trustworthy—not much of anything was trustworthy.

She closed her eyes for a long moment, the warmth of her apartment and the lingering aroma of the lavender vanilla candle she'd lit last night wrapping around her and giving her space to breathe, to think. To wish, just for a moment, that this little haven she'd created for herself—four small rooms filled with color and secondhand furniture—was enough to shut out everything else.

That she'd never become this person who expected the worst. The old Sydney would've lit with unbridled curiosity at the thought of a private eye showing up on her doorstep. The old Sydney's imagination would've conjured up all manner of exciting, intriguing tidings.

But the Sydney she'd become—the one with two jobs and never enough income, the one whose future felt almost as blurry as her past—had, somewhere along the way, forgotten how to hope.

With a sigh, she opened her eyes and straightened. She shook her head, her red hair long since limp after a nine-hour shift at the restaurant, and moved closer to the door, took a breath, and twisted first the deadbolt then the lock on the knob. Chain still in place, she inched the door open a sliver—just enough to see the man's eyes peering at her from the hallway.

He was younger than she'd realized. Probably only had a few years on her—maybe mid-thirties at the oldest. His hair, wind-tousled with a slight wave, matched his eyes—a deep, dark brown. She probably shouldn't smile at the faint dusty print on the right leg of his jeans where she'd kicked him, but, well, she smiled.

But she squelched it quickly enough and found her voice. “Is this about Micah?”

He reached down to rub his knee. “Your former foster brother? No.”

“How do you know—?”

“Miss Rose, there's very little I don't know about you—about your current circumstances, anyway. Which, hearing myself say it, likely sounds a little stalker-y.” He held up both palms in a surrender pose. “But like I said, I'm a P.I. Knowing things about people is what I do. Can I come in?”

“You just admitted to sounding like a stalker. You gawked at me for an hour while I was working. You chased me six blocks. So forgive me if I'm not totally up to playing hostess at the moment.”

Another chuckle. “Fair enough. I can talk fine from here. I'll try to sum this up as succinctly as I can. I work for a woman named Margaret Muir.” He took a breath, one lock of dark hair falling over his forehead. “And I think you might be her granddaughter.”



## *Maine*

Neil knew before Mr. Barrett even opened his mouth that all the wishing in the world couldn't turn bad news into good.

Golden late-afternoon sunlight streamed through the barn's double-wide door, a contrast to the biting cold that coiled around him as he awaited the mechanic's diagnosis of his aged equipment. Even this far inland and sharp with an October chill, a tinge of sea salt moisture clung to the air. Neil stuffed his hands in the pockets of his fleece-lined corduroy coat and wondered for the thousandth time why nothing could ever come easy at Muir Farm.

Mr. Barrett gave the old mechanical harvester a pat, its rattling metal an ominous echo, and angled to face Neil. "Sorry to tell you, but you're looking at more than a faulty belt this time, son."

Neil trapped his groan between pressed lips, enough frustration climbing up his throat that he was better off keeping quiet. Wasn't Mr.

Barrett's fault Neil couldn't manage to keep Maggie's farm from the brink of bankruptcy for more than a month or two at a time.

Oh, harvest had gone just fine this year—acre upon acre of lowbush wild blueberries picked and winnowed, cleaned and packed, and sold directly to loyal customers in only five weeks' time. But that was more than a month ago. Yesterday, when he'd finally had time to do some annual maintenance on the machinery, the harvester had barely grumbled to life before giving way to an ominous silence.

Thus the call to Mr. Barrett, Muir Farm's closest neighbor and an expert in all things motorized.

Neil finally found his voice. "So my hopes of an easy, inexpensive fix . . ." At Mr. Barrett's shaking head, his words trailed.

The maze of creases in the older man's face spelled his regret as he stepped up to Neil, tapped his arm the same way he'd patted the harvester. *Almost like a goodbye.* Which it might very well be. Because without working equipment, this wouldn't be a working farm.

And if it wasn't a working farm, there'd be no holding on to the stretch of land that had been in the Muir family for actual centuries, nor the big yellow house by the sea.

Maggie's home. *His* home for twenty years now. Since the day his aunt towed him across the Atlantic and left him on Maggie's doorstep.

"We can look around for some used parts. I can help with the repairs. That'll save you some." Mr. Barrett cocked his head toward the barn door and started walking.

Might as well follow the man. No use standing here staring at a useless giant of rusty steel, fighting the urge to pull off a work boot and chuck it at the thing.

"Look at the bright side." Mr. Barrett stepped into dousing sunlight, his sandy-brown hair nearly aglow. "Least you discovered it now as opposed

to next August. Could've broken down mid-harvest and then where would you be?"

Not somewhere all that different from where he was now, to be honest. Discouraged and helpless, with no idea how to tell Maggie something had to change. He pulled one hand free from his pocket and rubbed his chin. Good grief, he about had a full-on beard these days. Indi would love that, always said he needed "more variety" in his appearance.

*"It's all flannel shirts and faded jeans and hair constantly in need of a trim. Would it hurt you to switch it up now and then? Maybe a nice cashmere sweater and pressed slacks or even a dapper suit."*

He'd stopped milking Melba just long enough to let out a hearty laugh. *"I'm a farmer, Indi. I don't do dapper."*

*"I'm only saying you need a little more variety. Maybe then you'd finally get yourself a lady. You're thirty-four, Neil. Time's ticking away."*

*"I don't need to get myself a lady."* Not when he had three women here at Muir Farm counting on him to keep the place alive. Between Maggie and his sisters, he had all he could handle.

Indi was the youngest, twenty-eight but with an untamed restlessness that made her seem younger at times. Lilian, at thirty, was the middle sibling and the quieter, gentler one. Like the sea on a breezeless day—calm at the surface but with a depth he wasn't sure too many people ever delved.

And Maggie. A mother and grandmother and guardian angel—and the one who'd knit their family together. None of them were biologically related, but that fact didn't change the tight bond twining them to one another.

*"Maybe you don't need a lady, but don't you want one?"* The rest of that conversation with Indi slid in.

*"What I want, Indiana Joy, is for a little help with these chores. Specifically, those blasted hens. Start gathering eggs, will you, lassie?"*

He'd poured on his Scottish burr on that last part—what was left of it, anyway, considering he hadn't seen his homeland since he was fourteen.

But no, this was his homeland now. The farm, the coast, the little town of Muir Harbor only a few miles up the shoreline.

Anyhow, the beard was a change and if it made Indi smile, maybe he'd wait another couple of days before shaving.

“Never took you for a daydreamer, Neil MacKean.”

He blinked under the bright sun, a gust of wind whipping over him, plastering his jeans to his legs at the front and billowing his jacket behind him, carrying the sound of Captain's distant bark. “Sorry. So, what's a new harvester go for these days? In my dream world, I'd retire the old one.”

Or, no, maybe in his dream world, he never would've insisted on taking out a loan ten years ago to buy their current used harvester in the first place. But he'd been so sure back then they'd have it paid off long before now. Instead, they were still making payments while stuck in an endless loop of repairs.

Mr. Barrett ambled to his old Ford truck parked at the edge of the patchy lot in the center of a cluster of buildings—two barns, the machine shed, the cooling room where they stored winnowed berries until customers picked up their orders. A line of pine and birch trees behind the outbuildings hid the main house from view.

“A new one? You don't even want to know. It makes much more sense to fix what you've got. With any luck, you can have it operational again for, oh, ten or fifteen thou.”

Fifteen thousand dollars? Neil would have more luck pushing back the tide than uncovering that kind of extra money from the farm's meager accounts.

'Course, he could always dip into his own savings. Again. *And push back your own plans. Again.*

Mr. Barrett tugged open his truck door and slid in. He pulled out his keys but paused before turning the ignition. “You know, Neil, Carter Farms is always looking—”

“We’re not selling to Tatum Carter.”

“I’m not saying you should. But you wouldn’t be wrong to at least consider it. They’d do right by the land. You could sell the barrens but keep the house. That kind of money would set Maggie up for years to come and you could do, well, whatever you wanted. Whatever’s next.”

Neil gripped the edge of Mr. Barrett’s truck door. “This is my next, sir. This is all I’ve ever wanted.” This farm, this place, his family.

Except that wasn’t the whole truth of it. He had other thoughts—ideas for repurposing and reviving the farm. But Maggie never wanted to hear them. Never mind that he’d been setting aside his own money for years, praying, hoping for the day when she might trust him enough to—

A blur of color and movement in the trees snagged his attention. Indi wouldn’t be home for another day or two and Lilian was keeping longer and longer hours at her law office in town. Which meant that was probably Maggie, picking her way through the grove.

Where was she headed on a chilly day like this? Dusk wasn’t far off.

He turned back to Mr. Barrett. “Thanks for coming out. I really appreciate it.”

The older man’s eyes held kindness and compassion. “You’re a good man, Neil. Probably the hardest worker I’ve ever known. Maggie Muir’s lucky to have you.”

There were times he honestly wondered about that. Wondered if maybe somebody born to this land could’ve taken their farm from barely surviving to thriving in a way he still hadn’t managed to, even after all these years at the helm. Maybe he should’ve involved Lilian or Indi more in the day-to-day operations—after all, unlike him, they were legally Muirs, adopted

years ago by Maggie. Whereas he'd been a gangly teen by the time he'd come to live here.

There was significance in a name—especially that one. Why, it wasn't just this farm but an entire town named after Maggie's ancestors. MacKean just didn't hold the same weight.

Mr. Barrett's chuckle found its way into his attention. "Woolgathering again, son? Or you're just overly tired. You getting enough protein?"

He laughed. "You kidding me? Maggie stuffs me so full most nights, it's ridiculous."

"Listen, I'll make a list of the parts we need. I'll talk to Jake over at the implement store. You've got time to shop around. See ya in church?"

He nodded. "See you in church."

As the wheels of the truck kicked up dust, he glanced to the trees again, following Maggie's movements. Was she headed to the coast?

But anymore she only walked to the shore when . . .

*Oh, Maggie, not again.*

He scraped his fingers through his hair, let out a huff of air that fogged in front of him, then tromped forward. Either the grief that visited her now and then had gotten ahold of her, drawing her to *that* place, or she was once again soaring on wings of futile hope. And if he were a betting man, he'd guess the latter.

*Blast you, Wilder Monroe.*

The man was his best friend but there were times he could throttle the guy. Why could he not just gently let Maggie down, once and for all? To keep looking, investigating, after all these years . . .

Wilder was searching for a ghost, and all the waiting and wondering and wishing was only haunting Maggie. Couldn't he see that?

Couldn't *she* see it?

Captain heard Neil approaching before Maggie did, the collie's ears perking and his bounding changing directions. Maggie turned as well, a

smile spreading her cheeks. “Neil, something told me I might run into you.”

She’d reached the spot where the trees thinned, giving way to a gorgeous view of the craggy shoreline—jagged, water-scraped rocks and stretches of sand interrupted by patches of tall grass. And the sea, wild and wind-tossed, a dozen shades of blue and brushed with foam.

Maggie waited for him to reach her, offer his elbow. She took hold and let him steer her forward. “I take it Ansel Barrett didn’t have the best of news. Your forehead’s got that wrinkled look, like Lilian’s clothing on nights when she stays too late at the office.”

Which was most nights lately. “Harvester’s shot.”

“I see.”

He wasn’t sure she did. Not with that elated smile still in place, the glint of delight in her hazel eyes. He’d seen it before. Watched her whole being light up with whatever fruitless lead Wilder, or the man’s father before him, came up with . . .

Only to snuff out all over again when it led nowhere.

The sea’s briny scent wrapped around him as they slowed, sunlight cascading from a sky nearly as blue as the waves crashing against the rocks. Most days he could get happily lost in a view like this, could feel the damp air erode his worries and carry them out to the ocean. With Captain at his feet, he’d listen to the surf and drink in the sight of whitecaps and gulls—or if it were nighttime, tip his head to count the stars—and feel . . . no, *know* that this was exactly where he belonged.

But today—with Mr. Barrett’s assessment and Maggie’s telling grin—he just couldn’t muster the peace he wished for. “You might as well tell me, Maggie. I know that look.”

The breeze riffled through her ever-whitening hair. It’d been a deep, radiant red when he’d first met her as a kid. Oddly, the change in color hadn’t seemed to age her—not really. Nor the lines in her face or even the age spots on her hands. At sixty-five, she was as spry as ever.

But also, sometimes, as sad and weary as ever. Oh, he knew she thought she hid it. But this was *Maggie*. He knew her. Knew her so well.

Knew her enough to predict her next words.

“I think Wilder found her, Neil. I think it might really be her this time.” Her lemon-yellow cardigan flapped in the wind.

Captain claimed his usual spot at Neil’s side, his tail swishing through the sand. “Maggie—”

“I know you don’t like me getting my hopes up. But I can’t help it.”

Her gaze flitted over his shoulder and he knew without looking where it landed—the grouping of rocks down shore, the spot where it’d happened. The accident that’d cost Maggie her first daughter twenty-eight years ago, long before Neil had ever stepped foot on Muir land.

But Maggie refused to believe that her then-two-year-old granddaughter had been lost too. They’d never found a body. Thus, Maggie had never stopped hoping.

“I just hate seeing you disappointed—”

Her gentle smile returned to her face. “I might not be disappointed this time.”

“I take it you’ve invited her here.” That’s what she’d done every other time. Four visits from four strangers in his twenty years at the farm. Four inevitable letdowns every time the stranger turned out to be just that—a stranger with no actual ties to the Muir family.

It’d been Harry Monroe, Wilder’s father, manning the ongoing investigation back then. Maggie had only roped Wilder in recently after Harry passed on and Wilder took over the agency.

“Wilder’s working on it. He says she has red hair.” Maggie stepped closer to him and reached both hands up to pat his cheeks, having to rise to her tiptoes to do so. “It’s going to be okay, Neil. I can feel it in my bones. Change is coming to Muir Farm and I’m so very ready for it.” She stepped back.

“It’s cold, Maggie. We should head back to the house.” And then he could start Googling equipment wholesalers and brainstorming how to come up with an extra ten or fifteen thousand dollars—or resigning himself to the thought of parting with his own savings just like he’d done last year when the furnace had gone out.

But Maggie’s feet were planted, her gaze fixed on the sea, the hope on her face almost enough to rally his own. Almost.

“Change is coming, Neil MacKean.”

He reached for Maggie’s hand, squeezed, and let the sound of the sea take the place of his reply. *That’s what I’m afraid of.*



“*Y*ou know, you really don’t need to keep carrying around that mace. If I had sinister intentions, I probably would’ve acted on them by now.”

Wilder Monroe perched far too comfortably on the arm of Sydney’s faded navy blue couch. As if he hadn’t just barged into her life and dropped a bombshell.

A bombshell that couldn’t possibly have any truth to it. She shook her head. “Nope, I’ve watched enough episodes of *Dateline* to know the smarter the criminal, the more they’re willing to take their time, wait for the perfect opening or opportunity to carry out whatever dastardly deed is on their agenda for the day.”

Wilder popped the tab on the Diet Coke she’d given him after finally allowing him inside. Considering the way he kept rubbing his knee, she probably should’ve handed him an ice pack.

“Well, I’ll take that as a compliment. You think I’m smart.” He took a swig. “Also, I like your use of the phrase ‘dastardly deed.’ If I ever do become a lawbreaker, I’m going to use that in my job title. Doer of Dastardly Deeds. Sounds fancier than plain old criminal.”

Mace canister still clutched in her right hand, Sydney freed herself of the tie that had been strangling her all day and toed off the clodhoppers that were part of the restaurant’s dress code. She’d never really appreciated them until today’s unwelcome run.

Possibly a very unnecessary run if Wilder Monroe really was who he said he was. And she was getting the discomfiting feeling that might actually be the case.

She dropped onto the blush-colored recliner she’d picked up at the Thrift Mart years ago—the first piece of furniture she’d ever owned. The first thing to make her smile after being forced to drop out of college at the end of her freshman year. “Look, it’s been a long day, Mr. Monroe—”

“Wilder.” Another long gulp of his pop.

“If you could just explain yourself—and the quicker the better—I’d appreciate it.”

“A straight shooter. I like that.” He set his pop can on a coaster on the coffee table and slid onto a couch cushion. “Hey, you put down the mace.”

“Yeah, but it’s still within easy reach.” Next to her cell phone on the end table. She might’ve let the man into her apartment, but if things went awry, she could always mist the guy with one hand and tap out a 9-1-1 call with the other.

“Got it. Listen, this is weird, I know. I approached you all wrong. I get that. I apologize—again. And I probably need to be honest with you and say right up front that this is all conjecture at this point.” He rubbed his cheeks with both palms and sighed. “But I made the mistake of telling Maggie I had a lead, and the next thing I know, she’s begging me to go to Chicago and fetch you.”

Maggie—her supposed grandmother. *Impossible*. “Fetch me?”

Wilder lifted one corner of his mouth in a wry half-grin. “You just can’t say no to Margaret Muir when she gets that hopeful look on her face. She’s the sweetest lady but she’s ruthless with her tactics of manipulation. Anyhow, I have this theory—” He shook his head. “No, let me start from the beginning.”

Sydney reached for her own can of pop, still unopened.

“Maggie had a daughter, Diana. There was a car accident twenty-eight years ago on the coast not far from Maggie’s house. Diana died but her two-year-old daughter, Cynthia—who was believed to have been in the vehicle with her—her body was never found.” He slid his palms over his jeans. “Maggie’s been convinced ever since that her granddaughter’s still alive, still out there somewhere. I’ve been doing my best to investigate with very little to go on.”

Sydney cupped her hands around her cold can. “And somehow your investigation led you to me?”

He nodded. “Diana left Muir Harbor at seventeen and the working theory was always that she’d run off with an out-of-towner she’d met at the local pub. But I have a different notion altogether. Been doing a little digging into Diana’s other connections. Turns out her best friend from childhood dropped out of college right around the same time Diana took off. And strangely, they both returned to Muir Harbor on the same weekend two years later—the weekend of the accident.” He paused, took a breath. “The friend’s name was CarleeAnn Picknell.”

Not until that moment had anything Wilder said truly resonated with her. No sudden prick in her spirit when he spoke of Margaret or Diana or some town in Maine that shared their last name. No whimsical whisper in her soul hushing her doubts or stirring her with possibilities.

But that name and the way Wilder said it, the way he was watching her now . . .

“My birth mom.”

He massaged his knee again. “So you do know—”

“Very little. Only that she brought me to an adoption agency in Illinois when I was a toddler. Begged them to take me.” Then just . . . left. Disappeared. Not that Sydney remembered any of it, but she’d heard the story, whispered from one social worker to another years later.

Not until she was an adult had she known the name that went with the woman.

She stood abruptly, grip tight on her can—enough to send pop dribbling over the edge. She strode to the kitchenette at the far end of the room, plucked a glass from the cupboard, and poured out her Diet Coke.

Most of the time she didn’t mind the small size of this apartment. Micah always called it tiny, but she liked to think of it as snug and inviting. She’d sewn the pretty gray curtains in the main room’s lone window herself. Had shopped discounts and clearance racks to find throw pillows and blankets—all coordinated in navy blues and pale pinks.

It might be small and everything filling it might be cheap, but this apartment was *hers*. And for a girl who’d bounced around in foster homes until she was eighteen, a place like this meant something.

But at the moment, it also meant she couldn’t get away from Wilder Monroe’s stifling presence.

*CarleeAnn Picknell.* After all she’d done in an attempt to scrub the name from her brain, one mere mention shouldn’t be enough to send her stumbling back in time. To that day six years ago when she’d actually met the woman. One visit, one hour, one brief conversation . . .

Enough to make her wish she’d never gone searching. Because all it had done was left her wanting, none of her questions answered. CarleeAnn had been dying, the disease eating away at her body making coherent words all but impossible. Except for those few that had hurt. Oh, how they’d hurt.

*“At least I did the right thing. Leaving you . . . at least I did that.”*

There'd been no exclamation of regret or love or loss. No joyful reunion. No explanations. No, the pain of those words had been the only thing Sydney had taken away from her scant minutes in that sterile hospital room.

Well, and that photo . . .

Three smiling faces, young and carefree, rose in her memory.

"The thing is," Wilder said slowly, cutting into her thoughts, blurring the image in her mind, "I can't find a birth certificate with the right CarleeAnn Picknell listed as mother. I can't find *any* public records that indicate she ever had a child. I'm trying to get a subpoena for her medical records, but I haven't gotten that far yet."

Sydney opened her freezer and riffled around, finally put her hands on a bag of frozen peas. She carried it and her glass back to the living room, handed the peas off to Wilder with a nod toward his knee, then returned to her recliner but didn't sit. "What are you saying?"

He placed the bag of peas over his sore knee. "I'm saying what if CarleeAnn wasn't your mother? What if, in taking you to that agency, she was simply doing a favor for a friend who'd died?"

Too many questions chose the same moment to flood her but she couldn't figure out which one to ask. "There's a pretty obvious solution, isn't there? I can take a DNA test and—"

He interrupted her with a shake of his head. "Maggie was never married. Diana was adopted."

And CarleeAnn wasn't alive anymore, so there was no asking her. Sydney lowered into her chair, mind spinning.

"Look, there's other things. Maggie says Diana called her daughter Cindy for short. Cindy . . . Sydney." He shrugged. "Not all that different. Plus, you've got red hair."

She stared at him. "Millions of people have red hair."

"Actually, less than two percent of the population—"

“You really expect me to believe that based on a friendship from almost three decades ago, some hard-to-find records, and the color of my hair, I’m the long-lost granddaughter of a woman in Maine?”

“Don’t forget the name thing. There’s also the fact that the couple of extended relatives of CarleeAnn’s I’ve managed to track down so far don’t remember anything about a pregnancy.” He let out a long exhale. “But no. I don’t expect you to believe it. I’m not even sure I believe it. I’ve got clues, but not concrete proof. It’s conjecture.”

“And yet, you came here. You scared me half to death. You insisted on telling me this whole thing. What’s the point when it’s not even provable? What am I supposed to do with it?”

Wilder leaned forward, the bag of frozen veggies crinkling. “I never said it wasn’t provable. Only that I haven’t proved it yet. And as for why I came here and why I told you . . .” Another slow sigh. “It’s like I said earlier. I told Maggie my theory and she sent me. She didn’t want to wait for me to do any more digging. Apparently she thinks her grandmotherly instincts will have all the answers. She wants me to fetch you. Bring you home to Muir Farm. Her words.”

“Fetch me. As in . . . you want me to just drop everything and go to Maine with you?”

He lifted one shoulder, his expression turning apologetic. “That’s about the gist of it.”



The engine’s growl should’ve tugged Neil from sleep.

Would’ve—if he hadn’t already been wide awake, mind churning until he was as knotted up inside as his sheets tangled around him. Instead, the rumble from outside merely stilled his restless movements.

*Indi?*

But no, she wasn't due back until Sunday. And Lilian had come home from work around eight, just when he'd been leaving the house, intent on spending the rest of the evening working on the project that just might save Muir Farm.

If he could ever muster up the nerve to tell Maggie about it.

But if it wasn't either of his sisters in the vehicle outside—and certainly wasn't Maggie—then who . . .

With a groan as much from fatigue as frustration, he tossed his comforter aside. He dropped his bare feet to the cold hardwood floor and rose to pad across the room to the window overlooking the front lawn.

There, at the end of the gravel driveway—the shadow of a vehicle.

One of his sisters' friends? Maybe one of them had a boyfriend they hadn't yet spilled the beans about. Indi's last breakup had been a good—what? Five, six months ago? Which meant she was probably about due for another relationship soon. Not that she'd appreciate him making assumptions about her roller coaster of a love life.

But no, Indi was in Augusta. Which meant if there was some sort of little late-night tryst happening, it was Lilian. And she, even more so than Indi, definitely wouldn't love the idea of him standing at the window, playing Nosy Parker.

Except he would've heard her if she'd left the house. Every creaking floorboard in the place would've given her away. Chilled air wafted from the glass of the window.

With a huff, he turned and reached for the zippered hoodie draped over one bedpost, shrugging it over his shoulders as he padded to his bedroom door. *You're being ridiculous. It's probably just a lost tourist.* Muir Harbor's Autumn Market was next week and always drew visitors from up and down the coast. Maybe . . .

He paused only a couple of steps into the hallway, the car's grumble fainter from here, making space for a silence that twined around him. And for one eerie moment, he was fourteen again and flustered, still unused to the house's nighttime quiet. None of the noise of the busy street he'd lived on in Edinburgh—constant traffic and the whine of sirens not unusual.

No, here there was only the occasional rattling of old pipes or the rap of tree branches against windows. And, if he listened hard enough, at times, the lulling whoosh of the nearby sea.

Well, and tonight, a car's muffled idling.

“Remember Diana's ghost?”

He jerked at the startling sound of Lilian's voice, something a little too close to a yelp catching in his throat. “Sheesh, Lil, give a guy some warning before creeping up on him in the middle of the night.”

She snickered, huddled against her bedroom's doorframe. “A little jumpy tonight, are we?”

“Not jumpy.” Still discouraged at yet another setback of the broken-farm-equipment variety—yes. Concerned over another of Maggie's lost-granddaughter “discoveries”—of course. Confused about who in the world was sitting in a car out in their driveway—certainly.

But he'd stopped bristling at ghost stories years ago. “There was never a ghost.”

Lilian brushed her fingers through her cropped blond hair, rolling her eyes. “Obviously.”

Never mind the way he and his sisters used to scare themselves silly at night, ears perked for every little creak and groan of the aged house, telling made-up tales of Diana Muir's spectral presence still roaming its hallways.

Stories, he'd realized when he was a little older, that would've hurt Maggie deeply if she'd ever overheard. Thankfully, her room was down on the first floor, which meant most of their late-night shenanigans went unnoticed. But still.

“What’re you doing up, anyway?” Lilian’s hands disappeared into the long sleeves of her sweatshirt the way they always did when she was cold. Which was probably most nights the closer they drifted to winter, what with the draftiness of this old place. There were times he could swear the wind crept through its walls and tunneled through the hallway. He’d heard it howling in the fireplace often enough.

Guess he couldn’t entirely blame his younger self for indulging in ghost stories. “I heard a car outside. Did Indi mention anything about coming home early this week?”

Their sister owned a couple of antique shops—one in Muir Harbor and another in Maine’s capital. She usually spent half of each week staying in the apartment over her Augusta store. But maybe she’d decided to return earlier than planned this week.

But that didn’t explain stalling at the end of the driveway. And Indi drove an SUV, not the long sedan he’d spotted.

And Lilian was shaking her head. “Nope. Probably just a lost driver. It happens. They’ll turn around.”

So why did it sound as if the engine had just quieted? Not disappeared into the night, but stopped altogether. As if the engine had been cut.

And then—scratching at the front door. Captain? His high-pitched whine a moment later answered that question.

Lilian cocked her head to one side. “Kinda wish I hadn’t just brought up the ghost.”

“There’s no ghost.”

Lilian didn’t roll her eyes this time. “A burglar?”

“Or someone having car trouble.” He started for the stairs, ignoring the prickle of unease weighing his steps. Because there was no reason for it—none at all. It was just the long day getting to him. Or maybe too many long days in a row. Maybe someday he’d actually take a vacation. Take a cue

from Wilder, who never had a problem ditching town and gallivanting off on one adventure or another.

Not that the guy was technically gallivanting now. No, he was off in Chicago tracking down a woman named Sydney Rose. Neil halted at the bottom of the stairs. “Did Maggie talk to you about . . .” He wasn’t even sure how to finish that question without doubt crowding every word.

Turned out he didn’t have to. Lilian nodded. “Gonna guess you’re not any more excited about it than I am.”

No, but what could they do? Maggie was everything good and kind and wonderful. But when it came to her lost granddaughter, there was no getting through to her.

He moved through the dim entryway, the car’s headlights cutting circles of muted light through the dark, Captain still scratching from outside. He reached for the door—

But Lilian’s palm on his arm stopped him. “It’s the middle of the night. I’m not sure wandering out there when we don’t know who it is, is smart.”

“We’re not wandering anywhere. You stay here.”

“But—”

He pulled open the door and Captain bounded in. “Hey, buddy. What’s got you so—”

Before the question was out, the engine growled to life again and the car’s tires spun against the gravel drive. It veered in a sharp angle, headlights swinging away from the house, until it jolted forward and disappeared down the road.

Cold air bustled in from outside and Captain brushed against his leg.

“That was . . .” Lilian whispered. “Weird.”

Very weird.



Sydney never should've let herself look up Muir Farm.

She couldn't tug her gaze from her laptop, open in front of her on the bakery counter, her half-eaten caramel roll pushed aside. The yellow house filling her screen was like something from a storybook—large porch and quaint gingerbread eaves, white shutters and trim. And goodness, it was right on the coast. She'd already read the short description below the image three times. Muir Farm—a blueberry farm, of all things.

“You have to go.”

Sydney sputtered on her coffee—Nikola's signature hazelnut vanilla blend, hot enough to scorch Sydney's throat, her coughing drawing a gape from the teenage girl working the bakery's cash register this busy Saturday morning.

How long had Nikola been staring at Sydney staring at her screen?

Her friend's expression fairly sparkled from the other side of the counter, her thick, black hair braided and coiled around her head and her

dark eyeliner emphasizing her gray eyes. “To Maine, I mean. Obviously, you have to go.”

Sydney lowered her mug. “I’m not sure what’s so obvious about it. The whole thing’s absurd.”

This is what she got for not taking the time to cake on some makeup in an effort to hide the purple-ish circles under her eyes before making her usual weekend trek to the bakery. Nikola had taken one look at her when she’d walked in and had immediately demanded to know what was wrong.

What was wrong was that two cups of coffee in, she was still a frazzled wreck. What was wrong was that she’d tossed and turned last night for what felt like forever, mulling Wilder Monroe’s crazy theory and his befuddling request that she let him drag her off to Maine.

What was wrong was that Micah was supposed to have met her here half an hour ago and still hadn’t shown up.

The sticky-sweet smell of the bakery wafted around her, the buzz of chatter and the light jazz always playing in the background filling the air. Of course, she’d ended up spilling the whole story to her friend—the private investigator, the woman in Maine searching for her missing granddaughter, the possibility . . .

She clamped her laptop closed. No, it *wasn’t* a possibility. She couldn’t go to Maine. She couldn’t hop on a cross-country flight solely on the nonsensical hope that maybe she’d find a . . . a family when she landed.

She’d gone on a treasure hunt like that once before and look what it’d gotten her.

*“At least I did the right thing. Leaving you . . . at least I did that.”*

Nothing more than a broken heart and a wasted day off work, that’s what meeting CarleeAnn had gotten her—and a photo she’d spent hours tearing apart her apartment looking for last night. Never had found it.

Nikola tossed a rag over her shoulder and leaned toward Sydney, arms propped on the counter. “How long have I known you, Sydney Rose?”

Sunlight poured through the generous windows at the front of the small shop, reflected in the long mirror behind Nikola.

“Eight years.” On a whim, Sydney had stopped in the bakery one day after spotting a *Help Wanted* sign in the window. An hour later, she’d had herself an extra part-time income and the makings of her first real adult friendship.

Nikola nodded. “And in all that time, have you ever done anything spontaneous?”

“Yes. We both colored our hair that one time.” The green streaks had looked amazing in Nikola’s dark hair, but Sydney’s had been a complete fail.

“Fine. Not spontaneous. Have you ever done anything . . .” Nikola’s voice trailed as her gaze roved her bakery, until her gray eyes landed on Sydney once more. “Have you ever done anything because deep down, you knew you had to? Because maybe, just maybe, there was a happy ending out there waiting for you if you’d just run for it. Have you ever done anything like that?”

Sydney couldn’t help a small smile. “We’re not all as fanciful and dreamy as you, Nik.” Her grin faltered. “We’re not all . . .” *Brave.*

And anyway, happy endings weren’t for everyone.

Did she sometimes dream about buying that empty old Victorian next to her apartment building and turning it into a bookstore or B&B or maybe both? How much fun would she have designing and decorating and just managing something of her own?

But where did a person come up with that kind of money? And anyway, wasn’t it enough that she’d made a decent life for herself? So maybe waitressing wasn’t a glamorous career, but she hadn’t exactly had a wealth of options when she’d been forced to drop out of college. It was a good job that kept her afloat. She had her apartment, she had Micah, she had Nikola.

Some days, when she wasn't too tired or feeling too alone, she had her faith.

And she'd even managed to indulge her creative side now and then. She'd created websites from scratch for both Nikola and Mezzani's. Lorenzo at the restaurant had even let her make use of her short stint as a graphic design major, allowing her to come up with a new logo and artwork for the menus.

She needed to believe this life was enough. Because she'd seen what wanting too much could do to a person.

"Nik, remember . . . when I went searching for my birth mom?" It hadn't been difficult. Apparently, as she'd discovered when she'd called the adoption agency, whatever papers CarleeAnn Picknell had signed when she'd left Sydney as a toddler had allowed for Sydney to discover her name once she reached legal adulthood. From there, all it had taken was an internet search.

Unfortunately, by the time she'd gone looking, it was nearly too late. CarleeAnn was sick and growing sicker by the day.

"Of course I remember." Nikola's voice was soft. "You weren't in a good place after."

"Exactly." She tore a piece of her caramel roll free.

"You don't know that it'd be the same letdown this time."

She chewed on the bite of her roll, savoring the taste even though it was no longer warm. "Do you remember the photo?"

The one she'd taken from the bedside table in CarleeAnn's hospital room after their short conversation ended due to the morphine drip. For weeks after that fruitless visit, she'd stared at that photo, studying the faces peering back at her. Two teenage girls—probably only sixteen or seventeen—and a young man in between. CarleeAnn had been the girl on the left.

And she knew now, after Wilder had shown her an old picture of Diana on his phone before leaving her apartment the night before, that the one on

the right was Margaret Muir's daughter. If not for that, she might've been able to dismiss the whole thing. Convince herself it was some other CarleeAnn Picknell who'd once lived in Maine.

If not for that, she might've actually slept last night.

Nikola nodded.

"Diana Muir was the other girl in the photo."

Nikola gasped. "Seriously? Way to bury the lede. Then you *know* this whole thing isn't entirely impossible. Syd, that dude might actually be on to something. Did you show him the photo? You've always thought the guy in the picture might be your dad, right? What did Walter say about that?"

"Wilder. And he didn't say anything about it because I didn't show him the photo because I don't know where it is. I looked everywhere I could think of but . . ." She shrugged.

Nikola slapped her rag to the counter. "You can't shrug at a time like this, Syd. You might have a family out there."

"I already have a family. I have Micah." He'd been her family since his first day at the Jacobsens', when he'd walked into their entryway with stooped shoulders, clutching a ratty old teddy bear and a neon green duffel. She'd been eleven—already an expert at sleeping in new places; he, only eight.

By that time, she'd given up on old hopes of finding a forever family. She'd heard her social worker talking about her more than once, saying it didn't make sense. That she should've been easy to place. *Some kids just don't get lucky.*

Micah's case had had its own set of challenges with legal issues surrounding his availability.

Seven years in and out of the same foster homes and she and Micah had formed a bond tight enough that when he'd shown up at her freshman dorm room years later, nowhere else to go, she hadn't even hesitated to welcome him in.

Of course, eventually she'd realized she couldn't keep paying for school and support her teenage foster brother. And he couldn't live in her dorm. So she'd traded community college for a job at Mezzani's and eventually found her apartment where, up until a few years ago, Micah had lived in the second bedroom.

"No, don't be like this." Nikola shook her head. "Don't be passive and . . . and too pragmatic for your own good. Don't refuse to even consider the possibilities that might be waiting for you just because you're scared."

"I'm not scared."

Nikola rounded the counter and slid onto the stool next to Sydney. "I know how much it hurt you when you got all hopeful about meeting your birth mom and it didn't turn out the way you imagined. But there are too many intriguing details here to just ignore this." She draped her arm around Sydney's shoulder. "And it's *Maine*. Who doesn't take the opportunity to go to the coast when it's offered? If that old woman wants you to come badly enough, you probably won't even have to pay for your trip."

Oh, she knew she wouldn't have to. Wilder's business card was in her computer bag even now, taunting her in sync with his parting words in her head. "*I'm flying back tomorrow night. If you want to come, just say the word and I'll get you a ticket.*"

Sydney's gaze lifted to the mirror behind the counter, catching her friend's reflection as a slow grin stretched Nikola's rosy cheeks. "You want to go, Syd. I can see it plain as day, written all over your face."

So maybe she did. Maybe she wanted to pull that card from her bag and call Wilder and tell him she'd meet him at O'Hare. Maybe she wanted to see that big yellow house in person and gaze at the Atlantic Ocean and meet Margaret Muir.

Even if Wilder couldn't prove she was the woman's missing granddaughter, well, now she knew CarleeAnn Picknell was originally from

Muir Harbor too. Maybe she could learn more about her. Discover other relatives.

And as for the young man from that old photograph—JP, according to the scribbled note on the back—what if she could find him? What if he were really her father? Neither CarleeAnn nor Diana were alive anymore, but he might be.

A father . . . She might have a father somewhere out there.

Suddenly, she needed to move. Needed a moment away from the clutter of voices and music and Nikola's loving but prying gaze. "My hands . . . sticky . . . bathroom."

Nikola apparently interpreted that just fine, nodding and waving her off. But by the time Sydney moved past the line of stools and wove through the crowd in front of the cash register, she'd decided to skip washing her hands and head out the bakery's back door instead. Fresh air, that's what she needed.

And maybe enough quiet to make a call to Wilder and—oh goodness, was she actually considering this?

*Oomph.* The restroom door swung open just as she was passing it.

"Syd?"

She whirled. "Micah? When did you get—" Shock stole the rest of her words as she glimpsed his bruised cheek. His black eye. His bloodied lip. "What happened?"

He lifted a wet paper towel to his lip. "Nothing I want to talk about."

No, of course not. He never did. Not when he'd borrowed her car without asking and wrecked it. Not a couple of years back when there'd been that trouble at his workplace, accusations of stealing. Not after the bar brawl only a few months before that, not to mention a night in jail and her late for another shift at Mezzani's after bailing him out.

"If you're in trouble—"

“Don’t look at me like that, Syd.” His stylish camo-print jacket was open to reveal a black tee underneath, his sandy brown hair still gelled into submission despite whatever scuffle he’d been in already this morning.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m fifteen again and standing outside your dorm room begging to come live with you. I feel pathetic enough without your pity.”

“I’m not . . . you’re not . . .” Somehow, despite everything—her fatigue from a sleepless night, her frustration, all the foggy thoughts assailing her since the moment Wilder Monroe had chased her down—compassion found its way to the surface. The same compassion that had gripped her on Micah’s first night at the Jacobsens’, when she’d heard his sobs and slipped off the top bunk, innocently crawled in beside him below and read to him until he fell asleep.

“I love you, Micah. I just . . . I don’t know how to help you anymore.”

He lifted his head, something hard in his eyes. “I didn’t ask for your help this time.” With that, he skulked down the tiny hall and out the door at the back of the bakery.

“That didn’t look good.”

Sydney turned to see Nikola holding her laptop and bag. “How much of that did you hear? And, well, see?”

“Enough.”

“Clearly I can’t go to Maine now.”

“Actually, I think he’s all the more reason to go. You’re stuck, the both of you. Him getting into trouble, you bailing him out over and over again.” Nikola slipped Sydney’s laptop into the bag and handed it to her. “You want to help him? Let him see you choose something different for once. Something new.”

It couldn’t be that simple. Sydney slid her bag over her shoulder. “Nik —”

Her friend interrupted her by holding up a business card. Wilder's. "Just call him."

"You went through my stuff?"

"Yes, because I'm that good of a friend." Nikola leaned in for a hug. "The kind of friend who's not afraid to boss you around. Go, Syd. Go meet your maybe-grandmother. Go look for your father. Let go of all the doubts holding you back and just . . . go."



**Text from Sydney to Micah:** Hey, can we talk?

**Text from Sydney to Nikola:** I can't believe it! Lorenzo gave me two weeks off work!!!!

**Nikola:** Of course he did. You've got all your bosses wrapped around your little finger. ;)

**Sydney:** Wilder flies out tonight . . . I guess maybe I do too?!?!?! This is insane.

**Nikola:** It's an adventure. Enjoy it!

**Text from Wilder to Maggie:** Well, she's coming. Getting her a plane ticket and everything. Hope you've warned Neil and the girls.

**Maggie:** I don't do texts, young man! But also . . . thank you. Sincerely, genuinely, thank you.

**Text from Wilder to Sydney:** Hold up. Guess tonight's flight is overbooked. They rebooked us for tomorrow morning. I'm emailing you the deets.

**Sydney:** People still say deets?

**Wilder:** Ha. Ha. Make sure to pack a warm coat. That seaside chill is nothing to mess with.

**Sydney:** Random question—do you know anyone in Muir Harbor named JP?

**Wilder:** Not that I can think of. Why?

**Sydney:** Fill you in tomorrow.

**Voicemail from Wilder to Maggie:** Okay, I know you don't do texts, but be honest, do you ever actually check your voicemail? I hope so 'cause I need to let you know we won't hit Maine 'til tomorrow. Flight got changed.

**Text from Lilian to Neil:** Why do I keep thinking about that car in the drive last night?

**Neil:** Because we told too many ghost stories as kids. We're susceptible to needless alarm.

**Lilian:** But why was Cap whining? Shouldn't he have been barking?

**Neil:** Why are you texting me from one room away? I'm in the kitchen. Just come talk to me.

**Lilian:** Grump.

**Text from Sydney to Micah:** If you don't want to talk about this morning, that's fine. But I need to let you know I'm taking a trip. To Maine. For two weeks. Long story. I leave tomorrow. If you ever want to hear it . . .

**Micah (two hours later):** Any chance I can crash at the apartment while you're gone?

**Sydney:** Of course. Actually, could you do me a favor while you're there? Remember that old photo of my birth mom? I need to find it but I leave tomorrow morning. If you can think of any genius hiding places, mind looking?

**Micah:** Sure.

**Sydney:** Would still love to talk to you. I'll be up for another hour or two if you wanna call . . .



“*F*irst time seeing the ocean?”

Wilder Monroe finally stopped his constant tapping on the steering wheel long enough to tip his sunglasses up and over his head. Sydney spared him only the briefest glance before returning her gaze to where the sea brawled with the wind outside her car window.

So much blue, as far as she could see, its waves tussling and wild. What little sunlight scooted through burly clouds overhead landed and bobbed at the water’s surface. And the shoreline—it was rugged and rocky and absolutely gorgeous.

So gorgeous she could almost forget yesterday she’d made the most impulsive decision of her life and today she was . . . here.

“Lake Michigan has nothing on this. I can’t believe some people live with this kind of view day in and day out.” Or that she would for the next two weeks. *This is insane.*

Or, according to Nikola, an adventure. Were adventures usually this emotionally confusing? She couldn't decide whether to be excited or nervous or exhilarated or downright terrified. What if this whole thing was merely the chasing of a fairy tale?

On the other side of the road that traced the coast, tall, aged trees dotted the bristled fields that claimed the landscape. They'd passed a sign for Muir Harbor a mile or so back. Apparently their route from the airport in Augusta to the farm didn't take them through town.

"I can tell you've got some nerves going on." Wilder was back to drumming his thumbs on the steering wheel. "But trust me, Maggie's the nicest person you'll ever meet. A little caught up in the past, sure, but she's gracious and caring and even pretty funny at times. The others are nice, too. Indi Muir's a little spitfire, which is entertaining. Lilian's never liked me all that much but that's only because I gave her a bloody nose once in school. Dodgeball—and she's never gotten over it."

"So you go a long way back with the family?"

Wilder nodded. "It was just my dad and me at home growing up. I hung out at the farm quite a bit. Neil's my best friend. Although, now . . ." His voice trailed as he steered onto a gravel lane.

"Now what?"

He nudged his sunglasses over his eyes once more. "Just don't be offended if it takes him a little longer than the others to warm up to you."

Well, that didn't sound promising. But she didn't have time to prod any further, not with the curve of the road and the view unfurling in front of her. Trees burning with color, fiery red and orange and gold, lined the lane on one side, and up ahead, she could just make out the shape of the house. *Muir Farm*. According to Wilder, the farm had been here prior to the nearby town that shared its name, Maggie's Scottish ancestors having settled on the coast in the late 1700s, back before Maine became a state.

The crunch of gravel grew louder as Wilder slowed, the house becoming clearer as they neared, and as it did, Sydney's heart began to sink. This . . . this wasn't the house she'd seen on the internet.

Or, well, it was, but it was older and droopier. The cheery yellow she'd seen in the Google photos was faded and peeling. The quaint shutters and eaves and the porch were there, but it all just seemed . . . tired. No fall mums in the flower boxes under the front windows, and goodness, when was the last time someone had trimmed the hedges?

*Like you're one to talk, Syd. You live in an ugly brown apartment building. You've never even had a porch.* Let alone a sprawling lawn scattered with leaves or the acres of wild blueberry fields that were supposedly around here somewhere. Unless the internet had exaggerated that as well.

Wilder pulled up to the front of the house and cut the engine. "Well, here we are. I just hope Maggie's not too surprised to see us."

"What? She doesn't know we're coming?"

He chuckled and pushed open his door. "Of course she does. But whether she got my voicemail about our new flight time, I don't know."

*Oh God, what am I doing?*

Was that a prayer? If so, it was her first in too long and it felt about as stale as any other she'd offered through the years. Just like her hopes as she stared at the weather-beaten house in front of her. But why should the state of the home's exterior cause so much angst?

Because somehow, the sight of it seemed to confirm her fear—that this was a hunt for a fairy tale. That she'd built this whole, yes, *insane* trek up in her head the same way she had when she'd gone searching for CarleeAnn. When she'd let herself ponder and imagine and even think, for a few happy weeks before that hospital visit, that maybe God had been waiting all along to lead her to her mother. That maybe He hadn't forgotten her.

At some point since Friday night, she'd begun doing the same thing—imagining herself in this house, sitting on its pretty front porch in a quaint rocking chair, gazing at the sea. A grandmother at her side, or maybe even a father. It was as if she was homesick for a life she'd never lived.

But the porch was sagging and there was no rocking chair. And suddenly the thought of walking into the house—

At the knock on her window, she jumped, Wilder's muffled voice reaching in. "Coming? I'd be a gentleman and open your door but—" He held up her suitcase in one hand and, in his other, the oversized coffee he'd picked up at a convenience store on the way here. Had he knocked with his elbow, then?

She opened her door and slid out.

"You okay? You were like a statue sitting there, frozen in your seat."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

A chilly wind tugged at strands of hair she'd attempted to tame earlier with a French braid. But her quick work in the airport bathroom was no match for the seaside's heavy gusts.

Floorboards creaked as they climbed the porch steps and crossed to the front door, a dog's bark sounding somewhere in the distance and the nearby echoes of the ocean reaching over the lawn. Wilder plunked her suitcase onto the welcome mat and rapped on the door.

No answer.

"What if she's not home?"

"Maggie doesn't tend to stray that far from the farm most days." Another knock. Then, with a shrug, he tried the door handle. Unlocked. He grinned again and picked up her suitcase.

"We're barging in?"

"It's not barging in when you're practically family." He glanced over his shoulder at her. "And in your case, maybe legit family." He went inside,

lifting his voice. “Hey, anyone home? Maggie?”

If anyone answered his call, Sydney couldn’t hear it. Not with her heart thudding as she crossed the threshold, her gaze drinking in too many details at once. Polished hardwood floors—cedar, maybe?—and an entryway table that had to be an antique. Off to one side was a living room with gaping windows and an old off-white couch and matching overstuffed chairs. The smell of the house, cinnamon and vanilla, enveloped her.

She caught a glimpse of a dining room past the open staircase that jutted into the entryway. So far the home’s interior seemed as dated as the outside, but there was nothing hollow or neglected about it. Framed photos crammed the wall along the staircase and blankets packed the quilt rack near a rocking chair piled with pillows.

Every detail was a hint at this house’s history and evidence of a lived-in, well-loved home. Of family.

“Okay, now you’re just scaring me.” Wilder leaned against the staircase bannister, still holding her suitcase. “You’re so pale I’m surprised I can’t see through you.”

“I—I shouldn’t be here.” Because this *wasn’t* a fairy tale. It was real life. And there were real people here, and the chances that she belonged to or with them were so very slim and—

“Little too late for that.” Wilder lowered her suitcase.

“No, it’s not. We could return to the car and you could take me back to the airport and—”

“Can’t do that. If you’d heard the hope in Maggie’s voice when I talked to her the other day, you wouldn’t want to do it, either.” He shook his head. “Listen, why don’t you take a minute to freshen up. There’s a bathroom at the top of the stairs. Have a moment to yourself, and I’ll try calling Maggie’s cell—not that she ever remembers to take it with her. She’s probably just out back, but if nothing else, maybe I can get Neil or one of the girls on the phone.”

“Okay.” Her voice came out reedy and cracked. She’d lock herself in a bathroom, maybe splash some water on her face, re-braid her hair. And perhaps when she emerged, a miracle would happen and she’d find herself composed and ready to meet this woman who’d sent a private investigator to fetch her.

She climbed the stairs, the pictures along the wall mere blurs. She barely glanced down the hallway as she reached the second floor—beige walls with a lilac-print wallpaper border at the top—before opening the first door at the top of the stairs.

Humid warmth gushed around her as she hurried in and closed the door behind her, locked it, and leaned over the sink, hanging her head. “What am I doing here?”

“I really have no idea.”

At the sound of the voice behind her, baritone and rich, she shrieked. And then squealed again at the reflection in the mirror over the sink—a head. A head belonging to a man. Poking out from the shower curtain. *Oh my goodness. Oh no, oh no . . .*

The steam in the room. The droplets on the mirror. The pile of clothes on the floor.

*Oh NO.*

She whirled around. “I’m so sorry . . . I didn’t realize anyone. . . the door wasn’t locked.”

The grimace didn’t leave his bearded face, but his eyebrows lowered a good half-centimeter. Dark, wet hair dripped around his face. “Lock doesn’t always work. The knob’s old and fussy.”

“I didn’t hear any water . . .” He must’ve turned off the shower just before she’d barreled in. And she hadn’t noticed the light on. Hadn’t noticed the smell curling around her now—some masculine sort of soap or something. Hadn’t noticed . . .

Anything. She’d been too distraught. “I’ll just, um, leave.”

“Probably a good idea.” The man’s jaw twitched and for all of one second, it seemed like he might be on the brink of smiling. But just as quickly, the lightness seeped from his expression and he nudged his head toward the door.

Right. She spun, but her foot caught on a discarded plaid shirt. And great, there was his face in the mirror again. Another twitch and maybe even a twinkle in eyes that were, whoa, so blue-gray they might even rival that ocean view and—

*Syd, get out.*

She shuffled to the door and yanked on the knob. But it didn’t turn. She twisted it again. Oh, of course, she’d locked it. But didn’t the man in the shower say the lock didn’t work? She turned the lock, tried the knob—

“Told you it’s fussy.”

His voice again, not only deep but tinged with a slight accent. Scottish? And then, wait, was that the rustle of the shower curtain?

She turned in time to see one manly foot landing on the bathmat. She slapped her palm over her eyes. “You’re not getting out, are you? You can’t . . . not with me still . . . and you . . . I don’t want to see—”

Was that a grumble or a laugh? “Relax, you’re not going to see anything.”

Yes, definitely Scottish. Her closed eyes didn’t stop her from hearing his feet slap over the tile floor. Even if she hadn’t heard him approach, she’d feel his warmth as he neared. She opened one eye and peeked through her hand. *Good grief.* She was locked in a bathroom with a man wearing only a towel.

And she still couldn’t tell whether the quirk at the corner of his mouth was a scowl or the start of a grin.

“Scoot over.” He reached one long arm past her, his other hand gripping the towel knotted at his waist.

“What?”

“The knob. You have to jiggle it just right.”

She tried to step out of his way but bumped into the counter. “Why is this bathroom so small?”

“Felt plenty big to me until you waltzed in.” He wiggled the door handle. “People don’t knock where you come from?”

“I—”

He jiggled the knob again, then tapped her elbow to nudge her backward and pulled open the door. “There you go. Your escape route.”

She didn’t even wait for him to move out of the way, simply rushed past him, getting a horrible, wonderful whiff of his soap. But at least she managed not to look at him, catching only the briefest glimpse of bare skin as she brushed by.

“Nice to meet you, Sydney Rose.”

She whirled. He still clasped his towel in one hand, the opposite arm leaned up against the doorframe. And oh, that was definitely a grin. A tragically handsome one. She was going to die. She was going to march down those stairs and demand Wilder give her a ride back to the airport and slowly expire from mortification on the way.

“You know who I am?” Her voice squeaked.

“Red hair gave you away. But maybe if you don’t mind, I’ll go ahead and get dressed before we carry on with the introductions.”

“See that you do, Neil MacKean.”

Another unfamiliar voice. This one belonging to a woman.

Sydney turned—slow and unsure and suddenly somehow more comfortable with the sight of a towel-clad man than this woman who must be Margaret Muir, standing at the top of the staircase. She was several inches shorter than Sydney, with nearly-white hair and such hope and joy shining in her eyes it could almost take a person’s breath away.

“Sydney.”

She didn't know what to say or to do. Didn't know whether to step forward. Certainly couldn't step backward or she'd run into that man's chest. *Neil. His name is Neil.*

So she just stood there, mute and motionless.

Until the woman burst into tears and pulled her into an embrace. "Welcome home."



*Welcome home.*

Neil balled his napkin in his lap, his aggravated gaze darting to the head of the dining room table, where Maggie stood over a pan of steaming lasagna, pulling a knife through its bubbling cheese. Usually the smell of Maggie's cooking set his taste buds to watering, but tonight not even the butter-and-garlic aroma of her homemade bread could do the trick.

*Welcome home.*

*Home.* As if there wasn't a single doubt in Maggie's mind that the redhead who'd barreled into the bathroom, not to mention their lives, belonged here. An hour later and he was still brooding.

Not that he intended to show it. Oh no. He would sit through this Sunday night dinner like a perfect gentleman, employ every one of the polite manners Maggie had instilled in him. He owed her that much.

But with any luck, they'd get through the meal quickly and he could escape to the outdoors. To the west edge of the farthest field and the little grove that sheltered his one and only secret.

That is, if Indi ever showed up.

And Sydney Rose—the imposter. He was still annoyed with himself for joking with her upstairs earlier. He should've taken the opportunity to

politely but firmly suggest she find another farm to invade.

“So, what’s she like?”

Lilian’s whisper cut in from beside him. His sister hadn’t changed out of this morning’s church clothes before heading in to her office this afternoon—she spent too many weekend hours working—and she’d only arrived home minutes ago. Her blue skirt and ruffled shirt made Neil’s usual flannel and denim feel just plain shabby by comparison.

But then, he wasn’t out to impress anyone tonight. *Just get through dinner.* Eventually Sydney Rose would be a distant memory.

Meanwhile, he had a farm to save. Bad enough he couldn’t figure out how to replace the harvester—no matter how long he peered at the numbers on his budget spreadsheet, they just didn’t work out in his favor—but today Tatum Carter had come sniffing around. The man had tried to pass it off as a neighborly Sunday afternoon visit, but Neil hadn’t missed the hungry gleam in his gaze as he’d eyed the landscape.

Enough to make him wonder if maybe it’d been Carter in that idling car the other night. But no, the man drove a truck.

Anyhow, maybe it wasn’t entirely fair to place the full blame for his current mood on the woman who had yet to show her face in the dining room. A good chunk of it, sure, but not the whole of it.

“Well?” Lilian pushed her short, dark blond hair behind both ears, curiosity swirling in her eyes.

Neil lifted a pitcher from the middle of the table. “Don’t know. Didn’t talk to her for more than two minutes.” And he’d been half-naked and soaking wet at the time, so small talk hadn’t really been his first order of business.

He filled his glass with water, ice clinking, and for the first time since that awkward introduction upstairs, almost smiled. Had to admit, for all his frustration at this situation, seeing that woman about melt from

embarrassment, her cheeks flushing redder than her hair, had almost been worth the hassle of her arrival.

Maggie had still been hugging Sydney Rose when he'd escaped into his bedroom at that point, but he'd heard the rest of their short conversation from behind his closed door. They'd exchanged "nice to meet you's" and Maggie had apologized for her tears and impulsive embrace—and the fact that she'd been sweeping the back steps when they'd arrived, thus why she'd failed to answer Wilder's knock. She'd told Sydney to make herself comfortable in the spare room at the end of the hall.

*"I know this must be overwhelming. Take however long you need to settle in and catch your breath. We'll have dinner all together later and we can get to know each other better then. I promise the rest of my brood will be fully dressed."*

Lilian nudged him with her elbow. "But you at least got a look at her, didn't you? Any resemblance to old photos of Diana? Any chance this one's for real?"

"Would you two stop whispering as if I'm not in the room?" Maggie straightened, knife held in midair. "I know this is all a little uncomfortable, but I expect you to be on your best behavior tonight. Lil, stop questioning Neil as if he's on a witness stand. Neil . . ." Her grin turned cheeky. "I'm quite relieved you opted for modesty this evening."

He sputtered on his water. "Very funny. Seems like you might be forgetting I was the innocent bystander in that incident."

Maggie resumed cutting the lasagna. "You could've stayed in the shower."

"She could've stayed out of the bathroom." He plunked his glass to the table.

Lilian folded her arms. "Clearly I missed something."

Wilder picked that moment to saunter into the room. "Hey, folks. Ah, MacKean, glad to see you traded in the towel for actual clothes."

Whatever retort he might've tossed at his friend was lost to Lilian's muttered, "Oh, you're still here."

"Been outside." Wilder peeled off his jacket and draped it over the back of the chair across from Lilian before plopping down. "Maggie told me to stick around. Figured I might as well be useful." He reached toward the basket of bread in the middle of the table.

But Lilian swiped the basket away before he could nab a slice. "By eating our food?"

"No, by replacing the bulbs in the front porch lights."

One of a dozen to-dos Neil hadn't gotten around to this week. He should probably thank the guy, but for once Lilian wasn't the only one on the outs with him. He still didn't fully understand how Wilder had come across Sydney Rose or what made him think she was Maggie's long-lost granddaughter, but to bring her here was downright foolish.

At the soft clearing of a throat, silence rattled through the dining room.

Neil balled his napkin all over again as his gaze flew to the woman standing under the arched opening. She wore dark jeans and a long cream-colored sweater with a wide, sort of scooped neck. He'd noticed the red tint to her hair earlier, but it'd been pulled back then. Now it hung in long, loose waves—darker than he'd realized before. A color that made him think of the blend of spices Maggie used in her legendary cider.

*Stop staring.* He'd told himself he wouldn't be curious about her. Wouldn't be interested. He'd be polite enough to please Maggie and nothing more.

Hadn't counted on her being pretty, though.

Still, no matter. She'd be in and out of Maggie's life in mere days like all the other girls. He'd seen it time and again.

Whereas he'd still be here, fighting for the farm, this land, this house. Wishing he could coax Maggie into a change of heart regarding the future

of Muir Farm. But how probable was that when clearly her whole heart was still wrapped up in the past?

He tore his gaze away from the imposter. Even now, Maggie's eyes shone with moisture. "Sydney." Her voice was soft. "I'm so happy you've joined us. I was a little worried you might be scared off by the size of our crowd."

"You could've sent Wilder home," Lilian mumbled.

Wilder only chuckled.

Maggie continued as if oblivious, moving around the massive oak table to go to Sydney's side. "We're not all here yet. Indi should arrive soon, I hope, but we won't wait on her. She's used to us starting without her. Lord love her, but that girl's never been on time in her life. Anyhow, I hope you like lasagna. Oh dear, for all I know you could be a vegetarian or one of those—oh, who are the folks who don't do eggs and such?"

To her credit, if Sydney was taken aback by Maggie's rush of words, she didn't show it. Only offered a brief smile—one that almost came close to hiding her nervousness.

Almost, but not entirely. Did anyone else notice the slight tremble of her hands as Maggie led her to the table? Wilder jumped up, pulling out the chair across from Neil. Sydney thanked him, casting a furtive glance to Maggie, who was currently reclaiming her spot at the head of the table, then to Lilian and on to him.

And for one unsettling moment, a sudden and stubborn curiosity grabbed hold of him. Whatever he might have expected to see in her brownish-green eyes, it wasn't this. Something like wonder, maybe even awe.

Couldn't be because of her surroundings. There was nothing fancy about this dining room. Though polished and clean, the wood floors were as scratched up as any other room in the house, and too many dishes and figurines crowded the built-in hutch. The brass fixture overhead was

outdated, as was the light lavender wall color and probably the line of canvas prints hanging behind Maggie, not that he was a good judge of home décor.

But he'd never cared that the old house wasn't modern or HGTV-ready. It was comfortable. It was home.

But if it wasn't the house causing the glint of near-astonishment in Sydney's expression, what was it? The spread in front of them? Maybe she was used to freezer food and take-out meals.

"I love it," she surprised him by blurting, her focus darting to Maggie. "Lasagna, I mean. I love it. I, uh—I work in an Italian restaurant back in Chicago. And I'm not a vegetarian. Or a vegan."

Maggie spread her napkin on her lap. "Shoot, you're probably sick of Italian food. I should've gone with a roast."

Sydney shook her head. "No. No, I really do love lasagna. Although I hope you didn't go to any extra work because of me."

"She didn't." There was an edge to Lilian's cool words, and Neil didn't have to look at her to know her expression likely matched it. "Maggie always makes a big Sunday evening dinner so—"

"Yes, because it's family tradition," Maggie interrupted, a hint of censure hovering behind her sweet tone. "Everyone assists with meals throughout the week, but on Sunday, I like the time in the kitchen by myself."

"We help clean up, though."

Sydney's eyes met his once more. She seemed startled that he'd spoken up.

Heck, *he* was startled. He'd planned to leave the chitchat to the rest of the group. Had wanted nothing more than to fill his stomach, dutifully load up the dishwasher, and head outside, spend the waning hours of the day working on the project no one at this table knew anything about.

Maggie touched his arm. “Neil, why don’t you say grace? Then we can dive in and—”

“Hello, hello. I’m here.” Indi’s singsong voice trailed from the front of the house, the sound of the front door thudding and the thump of her footsteps echoing. “I know I’m late, but only by a few minutes, and when you hear my news, you’ll totally forgive me. I know you will.”

Indi blew into the room with her usual energy, tugging off her jean jacket, her mass of tangled curls bouncing around her face. She plopped into the chair on Lilian’s other side and freed a band from around her wrist, reaching up to pull her hair into a messy bun. Only then did she seem to notice Sydney. “Oh. Hi. You’re the latest would-be Cynthia Muir, yeah? Guess you’ll get to hear my news too.”

Maggie’s sigh was barely perceptible. “Glad you could make it, Indi. Neil was just about to—”

“This can’t wait.” Indi practically bounced in her chair. “I’ve met someone and . . .” She paused, playing up the drama. Because that was Indi. Theatrical. Exasperating. Endearing, in her own way. “We’re engaged.”

Neil dropped his napkin as gasps rang out around the table. Lilian’s shrieked, “What?” about split his eardrums, and Maggie looked shocked enough to faint. Wilder was grinning and congratulating her, and poor Sydney was just sitting there.

Wait, not *poor* Sydney. She shouldn’t even be here. This was family business.

Indi, his little sister, was engaged? To a guy none of them had even met?

Maggie was standing now, rounding the table again, pulling Indi into a hug, though her bewildered concern was apparent. Lilian bulleted questions faster than he could think and . . .

And he needed a minute. Just one minute of silence and sanity.

He grabbed the half-empty water pitcher and stood, escaping to the kitchen. He marched into the room, jugged the pitcher under the sink. The windowsill above housed a collection of plants with leafy vines spilling over its edge, always in the way of the faucet. He pushed a tangle of leaves away, turned on the water, then let himself lean over the sink and simply breathe.

The farm. Tatum Carter. Sydney Rose. Maggie. Indi engaged.

“Wilder just asked Indi if he could perform the ceremony.” Lilian’s irritated voice, along with the rap of her steps as she entered the kitchen, punctured his moment of quiet. “He said technically he’s a sea captain, which means he should be able to officiate. As if owning a houseboat makes him a captain. Why is that man always here?”

He turned off the faucet and faced her. “Indi tells us she’s engaged—engaged to someone we’ve never met, the latest in a string of someones we’ve never met—and you’re upset at Wilder?”

“The engagement probably won’t last more than a week or two.” Lilian rolled her eyes. “You know that. You know Indi.”

“How could you . . . why would you . . . that’s really what you think?”

Neil didn’t even bother to cover his groan at the sight of Indi suddenly behind Lilian, the hurt in her voice. Lilian turned slowly. “Indi, I didn’t mean—”

“Yes, you did.”

“Guys—” he started but Indi cut in.

“Bennington Foster is different. You’ll see when you meet him.”

She was engaged to a man named *Bennington*? Neil shook his head, sighed. “Indi—”

“And you.” She pushed past Lilian, glare centered on him. “You didn’t even bother to congratulate me.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right, I . . . I’m happy for you, sis. I am. I’m just distracted tonight. I’m concerned about the farm and Maggie and there’s a

stranger sitting out in the dining room and . . .” He turned away from his sisters, raking his fingers through his hair with another sigh, appetite entirely gone. “I can’t handle Maggie being disappointed again. Last time she hardly came out of her room for weeks and I just . . . I can’t see her like that again.”

Strained silence carved out the air around him, until Lilian moved to his side. “What do you mean you’re concerned about the farm?”

He shook his head. Now wasn’t the time to burden his sisters with that. Although knowing Lilian, if she got a good enough look at him, he wouldn’t be able to hide the depth of his worry. So he let his gaze drift through the window to a sleepy sky filled with pastels. He heard Indi move to his other side and he reached his arm around her back. “Congratulations, Indi. I’m sorry I didn’t say it earlier.”

She offered a small smile as she glanced up at him. “So what’s the plan?”

“Plan?”

“For dealing with the woman. You always have a plan. Do we sabotage her? Stonewall her? Grab some pitchforks from the barn and chase her off?”

That actually managed to pull a laugh from him. “Or we sic Lil on her. She can intimidate her with a slew of lawyerly questions.”

Lilian elbowed his side. “Don’t be ridiculous. As long as Wilder keeps hanging around, none of us will have to do anything. He’ll annoy her into leaving.”

Now all three of them were laughing. “What is your deal with that guy?” Indi asked through her giggles.

Neil couldn’t help the tease. “The real question is, are you seriously going to marry a man named Bennington?”



She shouldn't be here.

Sydney opened her suitcase atop the daybed she might not be sleeping in after all tonight. Before that fiasco of a dinner, she'd mostly emptied her luggage, placing neatly folded shirts and jeans into the walnut dresser across the small room and lining up toiletries and cosmetics atop it while her frazzled nerves gradually uncoiled.

But now they were wound tighter than ever.

They didn't want her here. Not the elegant one with the short blond hair and the nice clothes. Not the bubbly, engaged one. Certainly not the man with the disarmingly blue eyes who'd hardly said a word.

Not five minutes into dinner they'd all disappeared into what she assumed was the kitchen, and no, she hadn't known what their muffled voices were saying back there. But she had a darn good idea what they were talking about. Or rather, who.

Wilder had tried to smooth things over while they were gone, joking about siblings being siblings, but the second Maggie had left the room to check on them, Sydney had taken the opportunity to escape. She lowered to the bed now, the pillow-top mattress too inviting.

*I shouldn't be here.* The only question was whether to repack her suitcase immediately and ask Wilder for a ride back to Augusta tonight or wait until morning.

With a sigh, she tugged her phone from her pocket and tapped out a text to Micah. *I made it to Maine but the truth is, I could use a brotherly pep talk about now. Call me?*

She waited in the silence of the bedroom. Nothing.

Until the muffled creak of the hallway floorboards. Footsteps. They slowed just outside her door and then paused altogether.

Perhaps Wilder had decided to take mercy on her, help her sneak out of the house undetected. A perfect idea, but for one thing—she'd feel awful

for leaving Margaret Muir that way. The older woman seemed so sweet, so kind. So filled with something Sydney recognized.

*Longing.* She'd felt it in the woman's embrace earlier, heard it in her husky voice as she'd said Sydney's name.

Maggie wanted her here. Even if the others didn't.

At the soft rap on her door, she lifted to her feet.

"Sydney?"

Not Wilder. But at least it wasn't Neil or one of his sisters. She moved across the room and opened the door. Maggie stood just outside, holding a covered tray.

"Oh, you didn't have to . . ." Her voice trailed as her stomach betrayed her, growling so loudly it drew a quirk of Maggie's lips.

"Can I come in?"

Sydney opened the door wider and stepped aside. Maggie padded in, pausing in the center of the faded white rug that partially covered the floor. "I have to apologize for the others. If they were young enough to be grounded, I'd sentence them to their rooms for a year, but alas, the best I could do was scold them and forbid them from touching my blueberry cheesecake. Which is just fine—more for you, me, and Wilder."

She set the tray on the sill of the room's lone window—large enough that a person could sit in it. In fact, before supper, Sydney had imagined doing just that. Grabbing a book from the wall of shelves she'd glimpsed in the living room earlier, pulling the quilt off her bed, and curling up in that oversized windowsill.

"I've reheated all the food." Maggie turned back to Sydney. "But could we talk? Just for a minute?"

She couldn't have declined if she'd wanted to, not with that kindness in Maggie's gaze. The woman moved to the daybed, pushed Sydney's luggage toward the brass bars at the back, and sat, patting the spot beside her.

Sydney obeyed, lowering next to Maggie.

“I know this must be all so very bewildering to you. I’m still finding it hard to believe myself that Wilder managed to get you on a plane and bring you here. I’m pretty sure he thought I was batty for insisting he go to Chicago.”

“He said you wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

Maggie let out a low chuckle, one white tress escaping its plait and uncurling over her shoulder. Her gentle nature seemed right at home in this room with all its soft colors and feminine touches—white wallpaper patterned with little sprigs of flowers, lacy curtains, light green comforter and bed skirt and matching pillows.

“This used to be her room, you know.”

Her . . . ? *Oh, of course.* Diana.

“There’s so much I’d do differently if I could go back in time. I was so young when I became her mother. I . . .” Maggie shook her head. “I know you’ve had a bumpy start to your visit, Sydney, but I hope you’ll stay. I’d like to tell you about my Diana.” She reached for Sydney’s free hand and clasped it between both of her own. “Wilder can keep searching for answers, but I think we just might find our own simply by talking, getting to know one another.”

It sounded so . . . lovely. So very inviting. “But what . . . what if I’m not —”

Maggie squeezed her palm before releasing it, then lifted her hand to pat Sydney’s cheek. “We’ll cross that bridge if we come to it. Now, I’d better leave you so you can eat your supper before it gets cold a second time.” She moved to the door but stopped with her hand on the doorknob. “You will stay?”

Wilder was right. There was simply no saying no to Maggie.

But it wasn’t just Maggie. It was this charming bedroom. It was this big, old house. It was the ocean.

Perhaps it was even the others downstairs, the camaraderie she'd sensed between them just in those few minutes in the dining room. And some small, nonsensical hope that maybe she could find her way into their circle.

She nodded, and an unmistakable relief eased the lines in Maggie's face. The older woman turned to leave but halted again. "Oh, Neil. You're heading outside? Wait for a minute, will you?"

Neil was out there? Sydney caught a glimpse of plaid and dark hair past where Maggie stood in the doorway. Shoot. Just when she'd begun to feel better about being here . . .

"Do you need something, Maggie?"

That was a fair degree of reluctance lurking behind his Scottish-tinged words.

"No, but Sydney does. A tour."

Sydney hopped off the bed. "Oh, that's fine. I don't need—"

"Of course you do. If you're going to be here for a while, you need to know your way around. Neil will give you a tour after breakfast tomorrow, won't you, dear? I'd do it myself but I don't usually venture too far from the house. Especially not as far as the barrens."

She could see just enough of Neil's face over Maggie's shoulder to take in the flash of sympathy in his eyes. But in a blink, it was replaced with something else—a forced politeness, if she wasn't mistaken. "A tour. I can do that."

Could, but didn't relish the idea. That was plain enough.

But before she could argue, he spun away and disappeared down the hallway, the sound of his steps thumping on the staircase soon following. Maggie faced her again with a pleased smile on her face. "Well, then, that's settled. Enjoy your supper."

She gave Sydney's cheek another pat, and then she was gone.

Sydney turned with a sigh, plucked her phone from the bed. No reply from Micah. She dropped it and moved to the windowsill, drawn by the

tantalizing scent of Italian spices. She lifted the towel and reached for a piece of garlic bread.

But she paused with the slice halfway to her mouth, gaze drifting out the window.

And landing on the figure crossing the rambling yard out back, a full moon tracing his path toward a bundle of trees and a dog bounding at his side. Neil. He stopped, nearly to the trees, looked over his shoulder.

She inched away from the window, sliding up against the wall. Why had he looked back? Almost as if . . . as if he wanted to make sure no one was watching. She ducked her head forward to peer once more into the dusk.

But he was already gone.

*Where are you off to, Neil MacKean?*



*M*y Dearest Robert,  
I yelled at the children today!

*Well, technically I didn't exactly yell and I suppose I shouldn't call them children—not with two of them over thirty and the third engaged.*

*Yes, Indi is engaged. I would tell you more about it if I knew any more about it. In fact, as soon as I'm done writing this letter, I will go to her room and congratulate her again and subtly dig for more information.*

*But I yelled at them. Or, well, rose my voice. Or maybe I didn't even do that. But I was just so frustrated. Sydney's here, you see, and . . .*

*I haven't told you about her. I suppose there's not much to tell just yet. Except her hair is a beautiful shade of red and she seems nervous and, my word, everything in me wants to believe she's Diana's. I'll confess to having had the wild hope that she'd walk in the house and instantly recognize it. Never mind that Cynthia was barely two years old the one time Diana brought her here. I still hoped . . .*

*Well, anyhow, I don't think she recognized the house. And it's very possible we've already scared her away. Although, she did say she'd stay.*

*Anyhow, the children don't want her here and they haven't made an effort to hide that fact and so I let my displeasure show. They were huddled together in the kitchen, ignoring the fact that they'd left her out in the dining room, and I couldn't help myself. And now all I can think about is how many times I did the same with Diana. How many times we argued when she was a teenager.*

*How I always wished you were there to help me raise her. Maybe then I wouldn't have lost her.*

*I miss you, Robert. I miss you every day.*

*With all my love,*

*Maggie*



She couldn't be *that* bad. Not considering the way she knelt in the dirt and let Captain lick her face.

Captain, after all, was the best judge of character Neil knew. And the collie's tail hadn't stopped swishing since the moment the imposter stepped out the back door.

*No, not an imposter.* Maggie had invited her here. Sydney Rose was a guest. And he . . . well, if he wanted to stay in Maggie's good graces, he had to learn how to live with Sydney's presence here.

Didn't mean he had to like it. The chill of the autumn morning gusted over him, carrying the loamy, intermingling scents of soil and sea.

At least Sydney hadn't kept him waiting. He probably could've been quieter when he'd awoken this morning—at the crack of dawn, like always. His sisters had learned to sleep through his noise, but Sydney likely had heard him tromping to the bathroom, or perhaps it was the sound of the water running through old pipes that had drawn her from her room.

Or maybe she was simply an early bird, too.

Regardless, she'd made it to the kitchen even before him. He'd found her leaning against the counter, nursing a cup of coffee and a sheepish expression. *"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to totally make myself at home. But it just smelled so good."*

It did, at that. He always filled and programmed the pot the night before. Wasn't used to sharing his first cup of the day with company, though. *"Maggie would want you to make yourself at home."*

She hadn't flinched, not exactly. But he'd seen just enough of a shadow flicker through her eyes to know she'd heard the truth behind his words: Maggie might want her to make herself at home, but him? Not so much.

*"There's creamer in the fridge, if you like."* It was as much of an olive branch as he'd been able to muster as he pulled his coat off a hook by the back door and shrugged it on. *"Maggie and the girls should be up soon. Maggie probably has a big breakfast planned."* He moved to the cupboard and found his usual Thermos. *"I can give you that tour after."*

*"You're not having breakfast?"*

*"Chores."* He plucked an apple from a basket on the counter.

*"I could go with you. You could show me around while you do the chores. Two birds and all that. No use interrupting the rest of your morning."*

He'd been the one to hear the truth behind her words then. She wanted the tour over with quickly. Since that'd suited him just fine, he'd shrugged, chomped into his apple, and waited while she'd run upstairs for a pair of tennis shoes.

Now Sydney gave Captain's head one more friendly pat and rose, and for the second time since they'd stepped outside, he was forced to stifle a laugh at the sight of her. Or, rather, the sight of one of his bulky coats on her.

He didn't stop the laugh quickly enough, though. Three thin lines appeared on her forehead as she tossed her ponytail over her shoulder and narrowed her gaze. "Here I thought you were being nice, lending me the coat."

Could she really blame him for being amused? The hunter green coat was like a dress over her jeans, reaching nearly to her knees, its sleeves flopping about her arms. "Wasn't being nice. Just practical. That jacket you were wearing was too thin." And too nice for a barn.

Although if he were being really practical, he would've gone searching for one of Lilian or Indi's old pairs of work boots for Sydney to borrow. The last time he'd given an imposter a tour, she'd stepped in a pile of dung and squealed loud enough to send the hens into a tizzy.

That time, he hadn't even tried to hide his laugh. Greta Turner hadn't lasted more than four days on the farm before calling off her charade.

And hers really *had* been a charade. Turned out, she'd known from the start she wasn't Maggie's granddaughter but had mistakenly assumed there might be an inheritance up for grabs if she could pull off the scam. A few days and one dung incident later, she'd realized the truth—there was no money floating around at Muir Farm.

If there were, he might not have woken up with a crick in his neck and tight muscles this morning. *You sound like an old man.*

Well, there were times he felt like one.

"About those chores . . ."

He blinked. Sydney stood in front of him, the first wedge of morning sunlight brushing her hair with streaks of gold and bringing out the green in her eyes, her face awash with uncertainty. Maybe curiosity too. If her nervousness at being here was an act, she certainly played the part well.

"You okay with a walk? If not, we can hop in the truck."

She nodded. "I can walk."

“Right, then. Let’s go.” He took off toward the trees in long strides, expecting Captain to fall in step beside him like always. But no, a glance over his shoulder revealed the collie loping alongside Sydney as she hurried to catch up. *Traitor.*

Despite himself, he slowed his steps enough to keep Sydney from having to jog to keep up with him. And because he knew Maggie would ask about this blasted tour later, he should probably at least attempt to make conversation.

“One of Maggie’s grandfathers—not really sure how many ‘greats’ ago—planted a lot of these trees as a windbreak between the sea and the barrens. Plus, gives the main house a little privacy during harvest time—that’s when we got a lot more foot traffic on the farm. I hire on a small crew for hand raking anywhere our harvester can’t get to and, of course, there’s all the people coming to pick up their berry orders.” And if one didn’t mind the walk, it was faster to get to the fields by shortcutting through the back grove than taking the gravel road around the long way. “If you follow the trees all the way to the southeast, you’ll come out on a real nice piece of shoreline.”

Sydney’s breath was white in the cool air as she spoke. “The land must curve. Because doesn’t the front of the house face the coast too?”

He nodded. “You can see the ocean from the porch, but if you actually want to walk along the beach, taking the route through the grove gets you to a smoother, sandier spot.”

They walked in silence for a couple of minutes, the cover of the woods trapping the chill around them and allowing only thin beams of sunlight through branches not yet bare.

“I didn’t realize blueberry farms existed.”

He gave Sydney a sidelong glance. “Where did you think berries came from?”

She shrugged, though he barely detected the movement through the bulk of his coat on her shoulders. “I don’t know. Random bushes here and there.” Another shrug. “The store.”

Random bushes. He snorted. “A lot of what you get in stores are highbush. Means they’re cultivated. We grow lowbush wild blueberries.”

“What’s the difference?”

“The taste, for one thing. Wild berries are a brighter blue, a little smaller, and they taste loads sweeter. The bushes are shorter, and because they’re wild, they’re kind of scattered all over the place. They even grow on rocky ground. No neat, tidy rows.” This, he could do—talk about the work he loved. The land that felt a part of his very soul, the tending to it an act of worship to the One who’d created it.

His faith had always been like that—somehow more real and vivid when his hands were dirty, when he labored in the barrens or stood in front of the sea than when he sat in a church pew.

“When’s harvest?”

“Usually starts in late July or early August. Done by Labor Day. We use a machine harvester wherever we can, but we hand rake plenty, too. After raking, we send the berries through a series of blowers for winnowing.”

“Winnowing?”

She almost seemed genuinely interested. “Blowing off all the chaff. We clean them up, pack them into ten-pound crates, then store them in a cooling room until they’re sold. We’re a direct-to-consumer outfit. People call in orders every summer and come pick up their crates in September.”

He steered them to where the trees thinned to the southwest and eventually they emerged into the sunlight. He lifted a finger, pointing toward the circle of outbuildings where he spent the bulk of his days when he wasn’t in the fields. “Machine shed, small barn, henhouse. That big barn houses the air blower and packing equipment. And next to it is the cooling room.” He pointed the opposite direction. “Over that way is Lilian’s garden.

She grows basically any vegetable you can think of, sells them at farmers markets through the summer and fall. Although with the kind of hours she's putting in at the law office these days, I'm not really sure how much longer she can keep it up."

He'd finally convinced Lil to leave the morning chores to him—and Indi, when she was around. But no way could he see to his sister's garden too. Yet, he hated the thought of something she'd put so much heart into being let go.

Which encompassed his feelings about Muir Farm as a whole. No, they weren't the bustling industry Carter Farms was, gulping up tracts of land up and down the state, but they'd never meant to be.

But there'd been too many hard years lately. Too many expensive repairs. And now that Carter's outfit had started selling direct-to-consumer—at a lower price, too—things were only getting tougher.

With a grimace, he started toward the small barn. No time to dwell on worries now. Not when Melba needed milking and all the animals—the cow, Indi's goats, the chickens—were waiting to be fed. There were eggs to be gathered and—

"Neil?" Sydney double-stepped to catch up to him again. "What do you do when harvest is over? In the winter, I mean."

"It's not downtime, that's for sure." He stepped into the dim light of the barn, Melba's mewling letting him know he'd dawdled long enough. "There's mowing and brush-cutting. Equipment maintenance. Rock removal—a bigger, ongoing hassle than you'd think. I take plant and soil samples to check nutrient levels. Scout the fields to monitor plant health. In the spring we rent bees to help with pollination. Plus, we've got the animals to take care of." He nabbed the milk pail from a hook outside Melba's stall.

Paused at the realization that Sydney's steps behind him had stalled.

He turned to find her lingering a good ten feet away, wide eyes glued on Melba's stall. No, on the black-and-white beast herself, innocently

chomping away at a mouthful of straw.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of Melba.” He wouldn’t laugh. He wouldn’t. Not even a chuckle. Not even a hint—

Sydney’s hands, hidden by the long sleeves of his coat, found her waist. “You’re laughing at me again.”

“I am not. And for the record, I didn’t laugh at you earlier, either.”

“You were laughing inside. Just like you are now. Just like I’m pretty sure you were yesterday in the bathroom. Underneath that scowl you were wearing, anyway.”

Just about the only thing he’d been wearing. He could feel a grin attempting to break free. “Huh, I sort of thought maybe we were going to pretend that never happened. Save us both the embarrassment.”

She only glared, wisps of red hair framing her face after having fallen free of her ponytail during the walk. But her stern mask dissolved the moment Melba gave another whine, giving way to sheer alarm.

And for some irrational reason, he found himself taking pity on her. “Milking won’t take me more than ten minutes. Captain can keep you company ’til I’m done.”

With one more distressed glance toward the cow, she nodded. “I’ll just . . . explore.”

Not much to explore in a grouping of old buildings made of weathered wood and rusted metal, but she’d figure that out soon enough on her own. And poor Melba was in dire need of attention—much more than a city girl with a fear of harmless animals.

Not that she looked much like a city girl at the moment—wearing his coat and those faded jeans. He lowered onto an overturned crate beside Melba and settled into the familiar work. *Don’t be offended, old girl. She’ll make friends with you if she sticks around long enough.*

Though, hopefully she wouldn’t. She seemed nice enough. Had offered to help with chores. Hadn’t wrinkled her nose at the smell when they’d

entered the barn. And he'd been strangely satisfied when she'd turned down his offer of creamer this morning. Greta Turner hadn't consumed *her* coffee black.

But the longer Sydney Rose stayed, the more it might hurt Maggie in the long run.

"What's up here?" From elsewhere in the barn, Sydney's muffled voice reached him.

His hands stilled only momentarily. *Up here?* She must mean the loft. "The haymow." Back to the rhythm Maggie had taught him during one of his earliest visits to the farm, back when his biological grandparents had still been alive and he'd accompanied them across the Atlantic to visit Grandma's friend and—

*Wait, the haymow.* That rickety ladder. Worse, that spot where the weathered boards overhead had given way last spring.

He popped to his feet. "Hey, Syd? Don't go up—"

A bark from Captain cut him off. And then, steps creaking above him. Shoot. He lurched out of Melba's stall and hurried to the ladder across the barn. "Be careful up there. The floor's old and rotting. And stay away from —"

Too late. The unmistakable sound of splintering wood cracked through the air, a squeal of surprise . . .

A moment of indecision. Race up the ladder or plant himself below?

A scream and the crunch of breaking boards made his decision for him. He sprang toward the empty stall next to Melba's, neck craning to see falling wood and debris.

And then Sydney herself.

He lunged into the stall just in time to meet the force of Sydney's tumbling form. She crashed into him and they landed in a heap in a mess of straw and dirt, one of her shoulders jabbing into his chest and her hair in his mouth.

He let out a rush of air, lungs heaving as he attempted words. “Are you okay? I’m sorry, I should’ve warned you. I didn’t even think. I—” She was shaking. He could feel it as he attempted to sit up, to help her off of him. “Where are you hurt?”

“I . . . I’m not . . .” She gasped, obviously winded, her hair now fully free of the ponytail and hiding her face. “I’m okay.”

“You’re shaking.”

“No, I’m . . .” She shook her hair away from his face.

And then he saw it—her face. Her smile. Wide and, good grief, ridiculously pretty. She wasn’t trembling; she was laughing. The sound of it—had he ever heard anything like it? Low and bubbling. Nothing like the high-pitched screech of Greta Turner when she’d faked her glee at every little thing during her first pathetic day at the farm.

But now Sydney wasn’t the only one laughing. He’d joined in at some point, his own chuckles growing into full-fledged laughter as they sat in the dirt, hazy, dusty sunlight fingering through the cracks in the wooden wall.

“I really am sorry. I’ve warned Indi and Lil to stay out of the loft. Should’ve thought to warn you too. There’s a hole.”

“I—I f-figured that out.” She swiped a fluttering strand of hair away from her forehead, leaving a streak of dirt. “Guess I stepped too close.”

“For the record, I used to be scared of the chickens.”

Her giggles tapered off. “What?”

“When I was a little boy visiting from Scotland in the summer. The chickens. I hated them.”

Why he said it, he had no idea. None at all.

Nor why the sight of her grin, even wider now, should be enough to still his own laughter, leaving an awkward space of silence in its place. Suddenly stupidly uncomfortable, he jolted to his feet. Jutted one hand down toward her.

Then wished he hadn't when she took hold. Because now it wasn't just her smile or her laughter or the way she looked in his oversized coat doing something altogether unsettling to his insides, but the feel of her hand in his.

He let go the moment she was on her feet. "You're sure you're not hurt?"

She nodded, and he turned away.

Turned back, voice low. "Just don't hurt Maggie. Please."

And then, before she could say another word, he left the stall, left the barn altogether. Gulped in a cloud of cold air, shook his head as if that might shake off whatever had just happened back there . . .

No, nothing had happened. Except that he'd abandoned Melba mid-milking. And hadn't even gotten started on the feeding. And—

His steps slowed as his ears alerted him to something off-kilter. Wasn't so much what he heard as what he didn't. What he should be hearing this close to the cooling room. The generator—why wasn't it humming?

There was no holding back his groan. Great. Just . . . great.



For those few minutes of merriment in the barn, after the shock of her fall had evaporated and before the throb of fresh bruises set in, Sydney had almost forgotten the weight of her cares.

No mystery over her parentage waiting to be solved. No frustration at Micah's continued, long-distance silence. No worry that Neil and his sisters resented her presence here.

Sydney tucked strands of hair, still damp from her shower after returning from the fields, behind both ears as Maggie led her up the staircase to the second floor, halfway through their tour of the house.

If she could just hold on to that feeling she'd had in the barn. It was as if that fall through the loft floor had shaken something loose in her. Freed her from her questions and concerns just long enough to make room for something else—a surprise delight at finding herself here.

And a desire, springing up from somewhere deep, to simply accept and enjoy where she was in this moment. Although, she *did* only have two weeks here.

Which meant she shouldn't put off asking Maggie about JP for too long. She needed to tell her about that photo of CarleeAnn's. Ask who Cynthia Muir's father was. *Cynthia . . . who might be me*. It was too outrageous to think about—that maybe her name wasn't her name. That maybe she hadn't been born in Illinois.

That maybe there'd once been a mother who wanted her. A grandmother, perhaps, who wanted her still.

*Tour first. Questions later.*

Maggie paused now at the top of the staircase, motioning down the corridor. "Bathroom on one end and your room on the other, as you know."

Would she ever be able to look at that bathroom door without burning with humiliation? Guess she couldn't blame Neil for not warming up to her too quickly, not after the way they'd met.

But he'd seemed to ease up some this morning. Although, they never had finished their outdoor excursion. Neil had discovered some problem with a piece of equipment and had promptly left her to fend for herself. Well, not exactly. He'd assured her Captain would keep her from getting turned around in the grove and had apologized for cutting the tour short.

Surprisingly, he'd seemed to mean it.

When she'd returned to the house, she'd found Maggie alone in the kitchen. Lilian was at her office, the older woman had explained, and Indi had gone into town with her. Maggie had insisted on making breakfast for

her, the smell of her pancakes and homemade blueberry syrup wafting upstairs while Sydney hurried through a shower.

They'd shared mostly small talk while they'd eaten. Maggie had told her about the inexpensive update they'd done to the kitchen a few years ago. Neil, apparently, had been the one to sand the old cupboards and paint them white at Maggie's request. The walls were a cheery yellow—Maggie's signature color, as it turned out.

*“Wait until you see my bedroom. Indi calls it the sunshine room because of all the yellow.”*

She'd seen the lower-level master bedroom just minutes ago, along with the rest of the downstairs. They'd lingered in the living room, where Maggie had told her of the hot nights, back before the house had been updated to central air, when she and “the kids” had camped out in sleeping bags on the shag carpet, only a window air conditioner for relief.

Maggie had spoken with pride of the long, expertly crafted table in the dining room, her grandfather's handiwork. Off the dining room was a small, wood-paneled office, tall shelves crammed with crease-spined books. A sunroom at the side of the house was painted the same yellow as Maggie's bedroom, with white wicker furniture and a porcelain tea set serving as a centerpiece on the table in the corner.

A bathroom, laundry room, and a mudroom at the back of the kitchen made up the rest of the first floor.

“We'll just peek in the bedrooms,” Maggie said, stopping in front of the door closest to the bathroom. “I try to remember my kids are adults now and entitled to their privacy.”

“Oh, we really don't have to—”

But Maggie had already inched open the first door, and without the woman even saying, Sydney guessed it must be Indi's. Those few minutes in the dining room last night had revealed enough of the youngest Muir

sister's personality for Sydney to know the bright colors and chaotic array of scarves tied to one bedpost likely belonged to her.

"Indi is our resident artist," Maggie explained. "I used to think she might leave us when she was grown—flit off to Paris or Rome, spend her life in pursuit of her art. But she surprised me. She turned her creative bent toward restoring vintage furniture and clothing and you name it. She owns a little shop in Muir Harbor and another in Augusta, splits her time between both. It's why she's usually gone several days a week. Even though she's the youngest, she's been with me the longest. I adopted her when she was a baby, you see, whereas Neil and Lilian came to me a little older."

She wanted to ask for details but Maggie was already moving to Lilian's door. They didn't spend more than a few seconds there, just long enough for Sydney to take in its earthy tones of cool blues and greens and browns and note its cleanliness. Unlike Indi's room, there wasn't much—not that she'd seen in her quick glimpse, anyway—that revealed anything personal about Lilian.

Then again, perhaps the sparse décor and lack of knickknacks or framed photos were, in and of themselves, a revelation. Lilian had certainly seemed no-nonsense last night. Straightforward but also graceful, almost refined.

When Maggie opened a third door across the hall, Sydney immediately caught a whiff of a scent she recognized—a blending of lumber and peppermint. *Yesterday. The bathroom.*

This, then, was Neil's room, which was only logical considering he was the last sibling left. A dark blue comforter adorned the bed, four mahogany bedposts at the corners, a red-and-black-checkered shirt draped over one of them.

"He must've known I'd give you a look," Maggie said with a light laugh. "He actually made his bed for once."

So many questions crowded in then. Not about Diana or JP or even whether or not she belonged here, but about these three siblings. About how

old Neil and Lilian had been when they'd come to live here. About what kept them living at home this far into adulthood.

And about Maggie—how she'd come to adopt them. Or *had* she adopted all of them? Yesterday after Sydney had walked in on Neil in the bathroom, Maggie had said his full name. *Neil MacKean*. But she was certain she'd heard Wilder refer to one or both of the girls by the last name Muir.

“Hey, Maggie?”

But once again, the older woman had already moved on to the one remaining door between Neil's room and Sydney's. A closet?

Or no . . . stairs. It must lead to the attic, then.

“Normally I wouldn't include this on the tour, but there's a couple things I need from up there. Worrywart that he is, Neil asked me not to climb the attic stairs alone. So if you don't mind . . .”

“I don't mind at all.”

She started up the stairs behind Maggie. If the carpeted staircase below creaked, these narrow, steep steps fairly groaned as they climbed.

Stuffy air wrapped around her as she reached the top, along with the musty scent of mothballs and old wood. She inhaled dust and coughed as she scanned the dimly lit space. Piles of cardboard boxes and plastic tubs. A circle of pale sunlight from a window on the far wall. And then, after Maggie's tug on its string, the yellow glow of a lone bulb hanging from a chain.

Maggie was already picking her way across the attic, obviously having homed in on at least one of the items she'd come up here to retrieve. By the time Sydney reached her, she was already unzipping a long, black garment bag hanging on the back of a wardrobe.

Seconds later, the swish of fabric let loose a plume of dust, and Maggie turned, holding up a wrinkled white dress.

*A wedding dress?*

Maggie spread the fabric in front of her, lining up its puffed shoulders with her own. “What do you think? Dreadfully out of style, of course, but I’m positive with a little of her magic needlework, Indi can turn it into something dazzling. Although, personally, I thought it quite dazzling as it was back when I . . .” She smoothed one hand over the front of the gown.

Surprise garbled Sydney’s voice. “It’s yours?” But she’d thought . . . hadn’t Wilder said Maggie never married?

“Yes, though I never wore it but for a few minutes of tailoring.” Maggie lowered the dress over a ripped wingback chair. “I was engaged as a very young woman. Young and terribly impulsive, I must confess. Robert proposed to me only three weeks after we met. But to this day, I believe it was love—the real thing.” Her gaze took on a dreamy quality. “Sometimes a feeling is just a feeling. Other times it’s truth wrapped in undeniable knowing.” Her faraway look faded. “But he’d already been drafted when we met. Vietnam. He proposed two days before shipping out in 1969. Both our parents insisted we wait to marry until after. I was a month away from turning eighteen, you see. But he . . . didn’t come home.”

“Oh, that’s . . . I’m so . . .” *Words, Sydney.*

But she couldn’t unearth the right ones. Not with the quiet of the attic wrapping around her and the expression on Maggie’s face beckoning her to stillness. There was something hallowed about this moment. As if . . . as if Maggie hadn’t unzipped that garment bag simply to show Sydney a dress.

But to reveal a piece of herself.

“Robert couldn’t have children.” Maggie finally spoke again, her voice soft. “He told me right away, so adorably worried it might send me scurrying away. But I assured him I was okay with that. I promised him we could adopt a houseful of children who needed us.”

And she’d kept that promise. What a bittersweet story. What a picture of devotion. They’d really only known each other for three weeks?

*“Sometimes a feeling is just a feeling. Other times it’s truth wrapped in undeniable knowing.”*

Maggie wiped a lone, stray tear from her cheek. “Anyhow, there’s something else I need to find but, oh, first. Over here, dear.” Maggie waved her toward the window at the back wall. “Come see the view. It’s the best view of the ocean in the whole house.” Maggie seemed somewhat breathless as she said the words. Was the dust getting to her too?

Or maybe the climb up the attic stairs had been too strenuous. Maybe that was why Neil insisted she not come up here alone.

*“Just don’t hurt Maggie. Please.”*

His quiet words from the barn came drifting back. She’d thought them bewildering at the time—almost unfair. It wasn’t as if she’d sought out this connection to their family.

But now, glimpsing the depth of Maggie’s love, her loss, maybe she understood a little.

“Come, Sydney.”

At Maggie’s bidding, she worked her way through the maze of boxes and old furniture, coming to the woman’s side in front of the circle window. Maggie nudged her head to the window—no longer out of breath, it seemed—prompting Sydney closer to the cool glass, and her gaze obeyed. An inhale caught in her throat at the sight awaiting her—the tops of autumn-brushed trees like a quilt of fall colors, giving way to sand and grass and water-edged rock.

And then, the sea—turbulent and yet somehow tranquil, waves of cobalt and azure, frothy white at the edges. “If I lived in this house, I’d clean out this attic and turn it into a bedroom so I could wake up to this view every day.”

Maggie’s laugh drew her gaze. “Neil’s long wanted to do the same thing. I always tell him to feel free, but then he starts going on about old

wiring and insulation and what have you. But if that boy ever manages to take a break long enough, perhaps I'll talk him into going for it yet."

"He's worried I'm going to hurt you." The words slid out without her permission.

But Maggie didn't look at all surprised. "He wouldn't be the Neil MacKean I know and adore if he wasn't. I'm not quite sure when he latched on to the old-fashioned idea that being the man of the family, as they say, means he's solely responsible for everyone's welfare. But I can't help loving him for it." She turned. "Now for the other reason we came up here. Somewhere around here, there's a box of scrapbooks. I thought you might enjoy seeing photos of my Diana as a child."

She moved away from the window, bending to read the scribbled labels of several boxes nearby. "Who knows, perhaps seeing them will spark a memory. Unless—" She glanced to Sydney. "Perhaps the house already has? Or the shore? Or . . . or even me?"

There was hope in Maggie's eyes. So much it almost hurt to see. "Did Diana and, uh, her daughter spend a lot of time here?"

Maggie looked away. "I'm afraid not. Diana and I . . . you see, we . . . when she left Muir Harbor at seventeen, I didn't see her for almost two and a half years. She only called twice. Made me promise not to come looking for her. I didn't keep it, of course. That's when I first hired Harry Monroe. He only got as far as tracking her to Atlanta."

Maggie lowered onto a plastic tub. "I hadn't even known she was pregnant when she left. Not until she finally came home. Just one weekend. That's when I met . . ."

*You*, her eyes said, even if her mouth didn't.

And oh, how Sydney wanted to believe it in that moment. Wanted to believe the answer to every question she'd ever had, the fulfillment of every longing she'd ever harbored, was right here in this house by the sea. With this woman whom she felt inexplicably drawn to.

*“Sometimes a feeling is just a feeling. Other times it’s truth wrapped in undeniable knowing.”*

“Maggie?” She had to ask. She’d waited long enough. “Do you remember anyone named JP?”



Neil didn’t even bother calling Ansel Barrett this time. He knew a busted generator when he saw one.

Hadn’t stopped him from spending all morning and half the afternoon trying to coax the thing back to life in between the rest of the day’s to-dos.

He trudged toward the house, wanting nothing more than to soak his sore muscles in a hot shower. He could only hope he’d taken the brunt of Sydney’s fall through the loft floor this morning, because if she was anywhere near as sore as he was, then she was probably regretting coming here in the first place.

Last night that thought might’ve given him some inkling of satisfaction. But somewhere between leaving the house this morning and returning now, he’d stopped thinking of her as an imposter.

Had mostly stopped thinking of her at all, what with his failed attempts to fix the generator. After he’d finally given up on it, he’d spent another hour setting up a small, battery-operated air-conditioning unit in the cooling room.

Not that there were all that many berry-packed crates still lining the room’s shelves. Most had been sold with the usual September rush. But enough remained that he didn’t want to risk the room getting too warm during the day. Every once in a while, October surprised them with a bout of summer temps.

Anyhow, there'd be no shower at the moment. Not with several hours of daylight left and a list of to-dos as long as his arm. Both arms and then some. He rounded the side of the house, headed toward the front and the hedges Lilian had been calling an eyesore for weeks on end. Now was as good a time as any to do the trimming.

“MacKean.”

He halted mid-step at the corner of the house, work boots heavy on his feet and a frustrated exhale pushing free. He willed his expression to remain neutral as he greeted the man approaching from the gravel drive where a shiny black truck took up Lilian's usual parking spot. “Mr. Carter. You're back.”

Again. Another “neighborly” visit? After just stopping by yesterday?

The older man had a swaggering, self-possessed look to him—more weathered cowboy than farmer. But the devil-may-care manner of his sauntering gait and his easy grin were both at odds with the grit and glint of determination in his eyes.

He'd brought up the possibility of buying Muir land yesterday, his offhand tone doing nothing to fool Neil. Neil had been all politeness in return. Thanked him for the offer, said they weren't looking to sell.

But clearly that wasn't good enough for Carter.

The man shot out his hand, grasped Neil's in a vise grip as they shook. “Looks like you've been toiling hard today.”

If Carter was referring to the dirt on his jeans and his shirt and probably streaking whatever bare skin showed, well, that was fine. A good day's work was a good day's work, even if it did leave a man less than presentable. He'd ditched his coat midmorning—left it at the shed, come to think of it. No matter. He'd retrieve it tonight when he trekked to the far field like every other night.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Carter?”

“No need to be so formal, son. Go ahead and call me Tatum.”

*Son.* Why did that word from this man feel so condescending? But Tatum Carter must be at least four decades Neil's elder. Reason enough to at least attempt to be respectful. "Tatum."

"Thought maybe I'd see if Maggie's around. I'm hoping to chat with her."

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans just to keep them from clenching. "I don't think Maggie was expecting a visitor. Another time, perhaps?"

Tatum rubbed his chin. "Way I hear it, she already has a visitor. What's this—the third, fourth potential granddaughter? I'd stake good money on Cecil Atwater showing up on your doorstep before the day's out, on the hunt for a story."

And the doorstep is exactly how far Cecil Atwater, editor of the *Muir Harbor Gazette*, would get. It was one thing for Neil and his sisters to wish Maggie would give up the hunt for her missing granddaughter. It was another for the people of Muir Harbor to view the whole thing as entertainment.

Of course, no one meant any harm. Townsfolk were bound to be curious. And poor Cecil was usually relegated to writing obits and engagement announcements, reporting on craft fairs and seasonal festivals. Couldn't blame the long-time newspaperman for grasping at the straws of whatever human-interest story he could.

But while Neil might've warmed up to Sydney some this morning, he wasn't anywhere close to thinking Wilder had hit the nail on the head this time. Sydney didn't belong in local headlines. And the Muir name had already appeared in enough of them.

"As I said, I don't think Maggie's expecting visitors. I'm not even sure she's home." Barely the truth.

And Tatum knew it. "Maggie Muir is rarely anywhere else."

Because she still lugged around so much hurt. Because she'd lost too much. Because, with her being a Muir, people had expectations of her . . . and she'd grown weary of meeting them. He'd watched it happen in recent years. Had a front-row seat to her gradual closing-off.

Greta Turner—she'd been the tipping point. Eating away the last of Maggie's easy trust of anyone outside their small family circle.

He tried once more to put off Tatum. "Maybe if you call in advance next time—"

"Look, I know what you're trying to do, son. You've made it quite clear where you stand on the sale of the Muir land. But it struck me last night—my offer isn't yours to reject or accept. This land belongs to Maggie, not you. You're not a Muir."

It shouldn't feel like such a slug to the gut. Tatum's words, the truth they held. He gave up the attempt to keep his hands unclenched. They balled inside his pockets, knuckles tight. Probably white.

Tatum held up both hands in a surrender pose. "But I can understand if now isn't the best time. I'll take your advice and call in advance next time."

*Next time.* There would be one. He didn't doubt it.

Tatum slowed as he approached his truck, angling to face Neil once more. "Did you even ask her about selling after we spoke yesterday? I wonder if that's what you're truly concerned about—that Maggie will want what you don't."

He couldn't find a reply—not a single word. He simply stood there, watching as Tatum hefted himself into the truck and drove away, dust kicking up behind him.



The box Sydney hauled from the attic this morning had been calling her name all day.

But not until now had she had the opportunity to slip away to the privacy of the room she currently called her own.

From somewhere down the hall, the sound of Indi's voice drifted through the walls, until the latch of a door cut off her muffled conversation. Probably on the phone with that fiancé she'd talked about all through dinner.

Sydney cinched the belt of the fluffy pink robe she'd found in her bedroom's closet. Might've been Diana's once upon a time, though it wasn't nearly as faded as she might've expected if it were really that old. The plastic tub of scrapbooks awaited her on her bed.

It had taken her and Maggie more than an hour to locate it in the attic this morning, and by then, Maggie had seemed completely done in. By the search and the dusty air of the attic? Or from their conversation?

*“There’s, um, there’s this photo . . . I guess I sort of stole it from my birth . . . from CarleeAnn Picknell when I met her. We met just the one time. She was dying. She didn’t say much. But there was this photo on her bedside table. I . . . I shouldn’t have taken it.”* Sydney had finally let out a huff of frustration at her own inability to speak in more than stilted starts and stops. *“There were three young people in the photo—CarleeAnn and another girl. I didn’t know until Wilder showed me a picture of Diana that it was her. And there’s a young man in the photo, too, and according to the note on the back his name is JP—or maybe those are his initials. And I can’t help wondering . . .”*

She’d known before she even finished her stuttered explanation that there’d be no easy discovery of JP’s identity in that moment. Maggie’s gaze had clouded.

*“I understand what you’re asking. What you’re wondering. Diana’s teenage years were so difficult. There was so much distance between us. I knew CarleeAnn, of course. They were attached at the hip from the time they were kids. But the name JP . . .”* She shook her head. *“Perhaps if I see the photo.”*

*“That’s the problem. I couldn’t find it before I left. I looked everywhere I could think of. So the father of Diana’s baby . . . you don’t know . . . ?”*

For the first time since Sydney had met the woman, Maggie had seemed to close up, an invisible barrier every bit as effective as the windbreak of trees out back. Sydney had let her questions go, and when they’d finally come down from the attic, Maggie had lain down for a nap.

She’d thought maybe after the nap they’d look through the box of scrapbooks together. Instead, they’d spent the rest of the afternoon baking cookies and sharing them over tea in the sunroom. She’d helped Maggie sweep both the front porch and back, then fold a load of towels. At some point Indi had come home, and eventually Lilian. Neil had straggled in just before dinner.

And that's when she'd realized that eating dinner together as a family was a regular thing in this house, last night apparently no oddity. They'd even prayed before the meal, then passed the food around the table and talked about their days. It was like something out of an old episode of *Leave It to Beaver*

And if she wasn't mistaken, each sibling had made a concentrated effort to include her. Indi had asked if Sydney had met her goats. Lilian had asked her about her employment back in Chicago. Neil had wanted to know if she'd recovered from her fall.

He'd asked the question quietly while the others were distracted by Indi's story of how she'd met her fiancé, leaning over in his chair—close enough she'd been able to see the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. In another instance, they might've hinted at laughter, added a certain charm to his already handsome face.

But this evening those thin lines had told of stress. Fatigue. And probably a fair bit of frustration considering she'd overheard him telling Lilian that generator he'd been concerned about was shot. That was about all he'd said through dinner—one comment to Lilian, one question to Sydney.

Sydney toed on a pair of fuzzy white slippers now—also a closet find—and moved to the bed. But before she got as far as pulling the lid off the tub of scrapbooks, her phone blared.

One look at the screen sent shoots of relief beaming through her. *Micah*. She plucked it from the bedside table and lifted it to her ear. “Forty-eight hours, Micah Terrence Porter. That's the longest you've ever given me the cold shoulder.”

He grunted, probably at her use of his middle name. He hated it. Which obviously contributed to her love of using it. “We didn't talk for three days after I pushed you into the pool that one summer. Only that time, you were the one giving me the silent treatment.”

“Because I’d just gotten a perm.”

“I was doing you a favor, Syd. That perm made you look like Annie.”

She sank onto her bed, one elbow propped on the tub. “So . . . you’re not mad at me anymore.”

“I wasn’t mad.”

Through the phone, she heard the *ding* of his key in a car’s ignition, engine waiting to be started, and the thump of his door closing. Where was he going at this time of night? “Your face—”

“Still don’t want to talk about it.”

Everything in her wanted to argue. Press for answers. Insist that after nineteen years of surrogate older sister status, she deserved to know why he’d shown up at the bakery Saturday morning looking like he’d just stepped out of a boxing ring.

But wisdom, or maybe simply a bone-deep weariness of one too many conversations just like this, bade her to hold her tongue.

Finally, after a stretching silence, he sighed. “I just owe someone some money, okay?”

*Don’t ask.* “How much—”

“So you’re in Maine? You said it was a long story. Can I get the short version? I’m on my way . . .”

Somewhere he was apparently as reluctant to tell her about as the whoever it was he owed or how much or how it could be so serious he’d ended up with a bruised face. What in the world had he gotten mixed up in this time?

And what kind of big sister was she to abandon him?

*The kind who’s trying to do what Nikola said—to show him what it looks like to take a different path, for once.* Her friend wasn’t wrong. They’d been stuck in a cycle for years. Maybe it was time for Micah to stand on his own two feet, figure out his own solution to whatever trouble he’d found himself in now.

But she prickled at the thought. Could hear fifteen-year-old Micah in her head: “*You’re all I have, Syd.*” He’d said the same words so many times since. And, always, she gave the expected response: “*You’re all I have, too.*”

Except now that might not be true. Now she might have a grandmother. Might have a whole family history with roots that tied her to land and sea alike. She spilled the story to Micah as quickly as she could.

“Wow, that’s, uh . . . that’s crazy,” he said when she finished. “I guess I get why you wanted to take the trip and go figure out your heritage or whatever. Just . . .”

He paused and she could hear him cut his car’s engine. “Just what?”

“Don’t forget you’ve got family back here, too, even if it’s not by blood.” There was something vulnerable in his voice.

“I won’t forget.”

Their call ended a few minutes later, with Micah promising to keep his eyes peeled for CarleeAnn’s photo and Sydney promising to eventually come home. She’d laughed as Micah had wrangled the vow from her. As if she could actually stay here. For all she knew, this whole thing was still a wild goose chase.

Or maybe the scrapbooks awaiting her perusal would reveal . . . something. Sydney rose and peeled the lid off the tub, but movement out her window caught her gaze before she lifted out the first scrapbook. She padded to the sill, peering outside just as she had last night.

And just like last night, her attention hooked on the man crossing the backyard. Neil, once again heading . . . somewhere. This time he carried a flashlight, the moon obscured by clouds.

He couldn’t have chores to do at this time of night, could he? Why, it had to be after ten. *Where are you going, Neil MacKean?*

Instinct took over then. Or maybe impulse. Whatever it was, it propelled her to her bedroom door and into the hallway, scrapbooks once again

abandoned. She hurried down the steps and through the dining room, the kitchen, into the mudroom.

She halted. She couldn't run outside in slippers. That would be ridiculous.

*More ridiculous than chasing a man down while wearing a robe and pajamas?*

Well, with any luck, he wouldn't actually see her. All the same, she'd ruin these white slippers if she wore them outside. With a huff, she scanned her surroundings, focus landing on a pair of rubber boots near the door. Perfect.

She tugged off the slippers and pulled on the boots, wiggled her toes. Too big, but she could manage. A second later, she was out the door, just in time to see Neil's form disappearing into the trees.

*You are bananas, Sydney Rose.*

But she was also curious.

*Try nosy.*

Whatever twinge of guilt she might feel was entirely lost in the exhilaration of the moment. Or maybe that was the cold filling her lungs and urging her to keep her muscles moving in a paltry effort to ward it off. She moved her feet as quickly but quietly as she could, reaching the grove and straining to make out Neil's striding form and the bobbing light of his flashlight up ahead.

She kept a healthy distance behind him, praying she didn't step on any snapping twigs or crunching leaves, hoping his own steps were loud enough to drown out hers.

The light veered after a time, leading into a stretching field. Should she keep following? If he turned around, there wouldn't be any trees to shield her.

*But you've come this far . . .*

With a shrug, she stepped from the cover of the grove.

Froze. A third set of steps came scampering through the trees. *Oh no, not good.* Captain—that had to be him. Unless there was some other dog on this property.

A yip, a bark.

And then Neil's light—jerking, swiveling . . .

Landing square on her motionless form just as Captain jumped at her.



If not for Captain's interference, Neil might've let Sydney follow him all the way to the copse at the edge of the far field. Might've risked letting her in on his secret for the sole purpose of seeing just how dedicated she was to this nonsensical pursuit of hers.

Really, did she honestly think he hadn't heard her traipsing after him? And what in heaven's name was she wearing?

He pitched toward her, marching across the sparse field.

"I—I can explain." Captain gave another jump, bumping his nose against her knee, a plea for attention. But she remained immobile.

"Explain what? Why on earth you're following me? Or why the heck you're wearing a bathrobe?" Over pajamas, judging by the baggy pants tucked into . . . were those Lilian's rain boots?

She tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear as he reached her. "It's just . . . you looked . . . suspicious."

"I looked suspicious. Me. The man who lives here on this property. Not the girl in Greta Turner's bathrobe." Now that he got a better look at the thing, he'd recognize it anywhere. Guess the woman had left it here when she'd hightailed it out of town.

"Who's Greta?"

He ignored her question. “Out with it. Why were you following me? What about a late-night walk looks so suspicious?”

She hugged her arms to herself over her front, but even in the dark, he could see the defiant gleam in her eyes. “It’s the way you darted across the yard. Looked behind you. Like you were making sure no one was watching.”

“I don’t remember looking behind me.”

“Not tonight. Last night.” She clamped her lips together.

But she’d already given herself away. “Ah, so this isn’t the first time you’ve spied on me.”

“I wasn’t spying.”

“And tonight you added stalking to the list.” Despite all the frustrations of this day—the dead generator, Tatum Carter, the still-broken air blower, and oh yeah, that hole in the barn loft he really needed to fix one of these days—he couldn’t help the tease in his tone. He crossed his arms and lifted one eyebrow.

Bit his cheeks to keep from laughing when her eyes narrowed.

“Just go ahead and laugh. Laugh all you want. I’m glad of it. Because you might be the grumpiest man I’ve ever met. So I’m glad I can provide some entertainment. I’m glad I could look ridiculous in your coat this morning. And in this getup tonight. And last night, barging into your bathroom.”

“Don’t forget falling through the haymow. Or being scared of Melba.”

“I’m not scared of that old cow.”

“Did you just stomp your foot?”

Her eyes were mere slits now and she mimicked his crossed arms. Then, with a huff, she spun and marched toward the trees. “Goodnight, Neil.”

There was an uncanny charm to the ire in her voice as she said his name. He probably shouldn’t enjoy it so much.

Probably shouldn't let her roam through the woods in the pitch black by herself, either. It'd been one thing when she was following him and his flashlight, but it'd be too easy for a person to get turned around this late at night, especially one who wasn't familiar with the lay of the land.

"Syd, wait."

"No, no. Go on with your secret caper." She flung the words over her shoulder. "I won't *stalk* you anymore."

Wind whistled through the grass, carrying the faint, distant echoes of the waves folding into the shore. *Either walk her back to the house, despite her protests, or . . .*

*No way.* He'd kept the structure under wraps this long. Had exactly zero desire to let anyone else see it until he'd completed the thing.

Then again, what would it hurt to let her tag along? It's not like Sydney Rose would still be around when he finally got up the nerve to let Maggie in on his secret. And he was fairly certain if he asked Sydney to keep the place to herself, she would.

Because he'd seen the way she was with Maggie at dinner tonight. Attentive to every word. Insistent on helping clear the table and rinse off dishes before loading them into the dishwasher. She'd oohed and aahed over dessert—the leftover cheesecake from the night before. Refilled Maggie's mug with decaf coffee. Twice.

Underneath her bewildering decision to let Wilder drag her here and her out-of-place attire now, he got the distinct impression that Sydney Rose was a decent person.

Either that or both his *and* Captain's instincts needed fine-tuning.

"Sydney, stop."

She'd nearly reached the edge of the woods.

"You can come with me."

She halted, finally. Glanced over her shoulder. "Come with you where?"

He whistled for Captain and started across the field once more. “Just come on.” He didn’t wait to see if she followed, but he felt the slight tug of a grin all the same when he heard her rustling steps switch course and hurry toward him.

“You’re really not going to tell me where we’re going?”

He pointed his flashlight toward the grouping of trees at the far end of the west field. “Nope.” Miss Nosy Parker could just hold her horses.

“Then will you tell me who Greta is?”

She sounded out of breath. For the second time that day, he slowed so she could keep up. “The last impost—the last guest to sleep in the room you are currently occupying. Only in her case, she actually claimed to be Maggie’s missing granddaughter. Showed up of her own accord.”

Sydney gasped. “You mean . . . there were others?”

She didn’t know? “You’re the fifth one.”

Apparently that stunned her into silence. Because she didn’t say another word the rest of the walk. Not when they reached the spot where the field turned hilly. Not when he led her under the cover of more trees. Not when he slackened his pace several yards from the oak tree, Captain slowing with him.

Only when they neared *the* tree, his flashlight grazing over the ladder descending from above, did she open her mouth again. “Is this where . . . ?” She tipped her head, following the lead of his light, toward the structure jutting up in the air. “A . . . a treehouse?”

He might chuckle at her incredulity if he hadn’t already been scolded once tonight for laughing. “I’m glad you can tell what it is. There was a point where I’d seriously begun to question my carpentry skills. But it’s not a normal treehouse.”

She stepped back, slanting her neck, obviously trying to take in more of the structure. “I can see that. It’s ten times the size of any treehouse I’ve ever seen.”

“Just put the walls up last week.”

Her gaze was back on him. “*Why?*”

“Why did I give it walls?” He reached down to ruffle Captain’s fur.

“Why are you building it? There aren’t any kids around, and even if there were, this isn’t some small kids’ playhouse. Are you going to live out here or something?”

He allowed a snicker and, remarkably, she didn’t glare at him. “No, I’m not going to live in it. I’m not a hermit. Believe it or not, most people find me pretty personable. Even sociable. I think you might be the only person who’s ever called me grumpy.” Not true. Lil had called him a grump just the other day.

“To your face anyway.”

No more trying not to laugh. He let it belt out and moved to the ladder. Wary as he’d been of bringing her or anyone here, now that they’d reached the treehouse, he was suddenly eager to show it off. “Want to go up?”

“Is its base sturdier than the barn loft?”

Could she see the amusement in his frown? “I built it with my own two hands, Sydney.”

“For all I know, you built the barn, too.”

“Suit yourself.” He tucked his flashlight under one arm and climbed the ladder with practiced ease, emerging into the treehouse and heaving himself over the landing. The familiar, sweet smell of new lumber and sawdust clung to the air, and a flicker of satisfaction pulsed through him as he glanced down to see Sydney making her way up the ladder. “Careful climbing in those boots.”

He reached one hand down to help pull her up and in when she made it to the top, then turned to power on the battery-operated light he kept in here for nights like this.

Light flooded the spacious room—larger, even, than his bedroom back at the house. Sydney turned a slow circle, noticing frames for windows on

each wall, surely. The high ceiling. Had she spotted the opening for a skylight overhead? On a clear night, the stars almost felt within reach.

She turned back to him, mouth gaping. “I just don’t quite get it.”

“It’s a luxury treehouse. Or will be. Once I get it painted and furnished and hooked up to electricity. I know it feels like we’re in the middle of nowhere, but there’s an electrical line not too far away.”

She still looked clueless.

“I want to rent it out. Put it on Airbnb. Give the farm a supplementary income. And once I’m finished with this one, there’s other spots on the farm where I could build—cabins or more treehouses. There’s an abandoned outbuilding I could turn into a small lodge.” Now that he’d started talking, he couldn’t stop the rest from spilling. “There’s other farms in Maine where tourists actually get to rake their own berries. That might be fun for guests who stay during harvest. Agricultural tourism—it’s a thing.”

And he knew—he *knew*—he could make a proper go of it.

If only he could convince Maggie. Twice, he’d brought up the idea, though he’d never gone so far as to mention the treehouse he’d begun constructing. Twice, she’d shaken her head at the idea. “*This is Muir Farm, Neil. Not Muir B&B. We’re a family farm. Not a tourist destination.*”

He couldn’t seem to make her understand that he wasn’t trying to veer them away from being a small family farm. He was trying to make it possible for them to *keep* being a family farm.

“I’m honestly not sure what made me think of it originally, but the truth is, we could really use the extra income.”

“Neil, this . . .” Sydney’s voice drew his focus. “It’s . . .”

Crazy, most likely. About as far-fetched of an idea, probably, as picking up and traveling across the country on the oh-so-slim off-chance that you might be someone’s long-lost relative.

But it was a far-fetched idea he hadn’t been able to let go of.

And so here he found himself, night after night. Putting in an hour of work here, two hours there, wondering when he'd muster up the gumption to show this place to his sisters, to Maggie. Honestly, how they hadn't all already figured out he was up something, he didn't know. But then, Lilian was working so much these days and Indi spent half her time in Augusta.

As for Maggie, she was so often caught up in the past. Guess that made it difficult to notice all the details of the present.

"It's incredible."

His gaze dashed to Sydney's face. What had she just said?

"It's impressive too. You built this treehouse. By yourself. It's just . . . it's incredible. And your vision for the farm—I love it." She paced from one end of the treehouse to the other, ducked her head out a window frame, glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Next door to my apartment building back home, there's this old Victorian house. I walk past it every day on my way to work, and I always think about how much fun it'd be to get my hands on it. It could be so much more than a run-down house. It could be a bed-and-breakfast or an artsy sort of coffeehouse or even a restaurant. If I had money and time and resources, I could *do* something with it. That's what you're doing. That's what you've done. You have a vision and you're making it happen. It's so . . ."

She faced him once more. "I guess I'm being repetitive, but it's incredible. That's all I can think to say."

Her words, the unmistakable awe in her voice—he was rendered mute. There she stood in that silly robe and those silly boots, saying things that just plain dumbfounded him. But there was no denying the way her words burrowed deep under his skin.

*Say something.*

"I, um . . . thank you." The words felt paltry next to the appreciation simmering inside of him.

"So what's on the agenda tonight?"

He blinked. “Sorry?”

“You were coming out here for a reason before I waylaid you, weren’t you?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Painting. I was going to start painting.” He motioned his head toward the unopened cans in the corner.

“Want some help?”

“Well . . . sure.” Why did his head feel so foggy? And his throat—had he inhaled sawdust? “You’re not exactly dressed for it, though. Might get paint on your robe.”

She flashed a grin. “Too bad for Greta.”



They were only footprints. And very soon to be lost in the placid morning rain. No reason to be up in arms.

Still. Neil straightened in the front yard, swiping at the raindrops on his cheeks, Lilian's umbrella not quite the cover she meant it to be. Despite the damp, the morning was warmer than normal for late October, the mellow air creating a misty fog around them.

"They're too small to be your shoes," Lilian said, her usual travel mug tucked in the crook of one arm. "I don't even know what made me notice them. But someone's been snooping around."

Snooping? What caused her to immediately jump to that? "Could be Sydney's prints."

Lilian shook her head. "Too big for hers. Or Indi's. And don't say Wilder—he's got giant feet."

Lilian had found him in the kitchen just as he was about to head out for chores a little later than usual. He'd lingered at the coffeepot longer today,

wondering when their houseguest might appear.

Not that he was waiting for her. Why would he do that? So Sydney knew his secret. So she'd spent two hours last night helping him paint. So he'd actually kind of enjoyed talking to her.

*Really* enjoyed her endless barrage of compliments about all his work on the treehouse.

Didn't mean . . . well, anything. Other than maybe he wouldn't have minded if she'd arrived downstairs as early today as she had yesterday, accompanied him out to the barn again. He could've cajoled her into making nice with Melba.

He shook his head now, as much to brush off the silly thought as to quell whatever concerns were currently playing through Lilian's head. "I just don't think some random footprints are any reason to be upset."

"But that car the other night."

"Someone was lost. Maybe they didn't realize it at first. Maybe they got out of their vehicle before realizing they weren't where they thought they were." He peered at his sister. Her tan trench coat was cinched at the waist and her high heels nearly put her at eye level with him. Why the faint circles under her eyes? The glint of heaviness hanging over her? "This doesn't seem like you, Lil. Are you getting enough sleep?"

She turned away with a sigh, taking the shelter of her umbrella with her. "Don't you start in on me too. Maggie asks me daily how I could possibly have enough work to keep me at the office so late every evening."

"It's a valid question."

"Why there's unidentified footprints in our front yard is a valid question."

Neil peeled off his jacket and held it over his head. "Lil—"

"Whatever in the world are you two doing out in the rain?"

Maggie's voice beckoned from the open front door. One glance from Lilian was enough to know she had the same thought he did—no need to

concern Maggie with questions about footprints and strange vehicles. Both of which were probably nothing anyway, right?

“Just heading in to town. I’ve got that Heritage Society meeting,” Lilian called. “Waiting on—”

“I’m here.” Indi burst past Maggie and down the porch steps. “I’m ready.” She tugged the hood of her bright yellow raincoat over her hair. “No one forget about tonight.”

Right. It was “meet the fiancé” night. He still couldn’t quite wrap his mind around the fact that his little sister was getting married to a guy he’d never met. *Bennington*. The man would probably show up in tails and a bowtie.

“Wait.” Maggie stepped onto the porch. “Take Sydney with you. She hasn’t seen Muir Harbor yet.”

Sydney must be just inside the house, her muffled voice barely reaching through the rain. Arguing, probably. Not wanting to put his sisters out. Lilian obviously wasn’t all that keen on the idea of taking Sydney along. Indi only shrugged as she reached them. “What *are* you two doing out here?”

Lilian motioned toward the footprints. “Trying to solve a mystery.”

“Isn’t that Wilder’s territory?”

Neil’s focus slid back to the porch, where Maggie had coaxed Sydney out. She stood facing Maggie, red hair hanging loose and wavy this morning. He spoke even as he continued taking in her muted conversation with Maggie. “You should take her along to the meeting, guys. Give her a taste of the real Muir Harbor.”

“You sure warmed up to her quickly.”

His gaze snapped back to Lilian. “Just doing what Maggie asked. Anyway, doesn’t hurt to be friendly.” He didn’t like the way Lilian was studying him now, almost as suspiciously as she had those footprints. Which meant this was probably a good time to take his leave. “See ya.”

But instead of rounding the house and heading for the barn, he dodged raindrops as he jogged to the porch and up the steps, bending to kiss Maggie's cheek as soon as he reached her. "Morning." He swiped the back of his hand over his damp cheeks before sliding a glance to Sydney. "Hey. Uh, they'll wait for you if you're not quite ready."

Though she looked ready to him—no hilarious robe or rain boots today, not even his bulky coat. Just a simple green sweater and jeans and tiny gold earrings, visible when she tucked her hair behind both ears, not quite meeting his eyes.

So maybe he wasn't the only one not entirely sure what to make of last night. *There's nothing to make of it.* Why was he making this weird? "I've only ever let them drag me to one Heritage Society meeting in the past. Not really my thing. Though it is technically the closest thing we've got to real entertainment in Muir Harbor—well, other than the seasonal markets. There's four of those each year. The autumn one's this coming weekend. We actually get tourists for those."

Great, now he was rambling.

But she only smiled. Turned to Maggie. "You won't feel like I'm ditching you if I go?"

"Of course not, dear. I'm the one who suggested it. Anyway, I've got a feast to prepare for Indi's fiancé tonight."

"I could stay and help."

Maggie shook her head. "I wouldn't dream of it. Neil's not lying. Those meetings can get downright zany. You need to go."

He knew even before he said the words, they were pointless. But they slipped out anyway. "You could go too, Maggie. It's been a long time. I'm sure everyone misses you."

Just as he knew she would, she shook her head again. Waved a hand. Pasted on a nonchalance he wasn't at all sure she really felt. *Why, Maggie?*

She used to love town events. Used to be so involved in everything that happened in Muir Harbor. But there wasn't any use in arguing.

He felt Sydney's eyes on him then, slid his gaze to her once more, could tell she hadn't missed the change in the air around them. He did his best to cover Maggie's unease with a small smile. "Well, have fun in town. That is, unless you'd rather stay here and come hang out in the barn with me and Melba."

She grimaced. "No thanks."

"One of these days, you'll believe me when I say Melba is the most harmless creature you'll ever meet."

She rolled her eyes before leaning in to kiss Maggie's cheek just as he had moments ago. "See you later, Maggie." She tipped her head to look at him. "Enjoy the company of your cow, Neil."

And then she was hurrying down the porch steps and jogging through the rain to Lilian's Honda.

"She's not like the others, Neil."

Maggie leaned against the doorframe now, her white braid draped over one shoulder, her gaze fixed on Lilian's car as it motored away.

"I like her better than Greta, anyway."

He expected Maggie to laugh. Instead, she touched his arm. "I think she might need us. Whether or not she's Diana's. Whether or not she's Cynthia. I can *feel* it. She needs us."

He stepped to Maggie's side and tucked his arm around her shoulder. He hoped he never forgot to be grateful for this woman who'd given him a home, a family, *everything*. "Well, maybe there's some reason we need her too." He dropped his arm, felt his forehead wrinkle. "Though I have no idea why I just said that."

Now she chuckled. "Because no matter how determined you were not to like her, Neil MacKean, you've got a heart bigger than the sky and deeper than the ocean." She elbowed his side and disappeared into the house.



Though the rain had dissipated by the time they reached town, damp air blustered over Sydney the moment she rose from the back seat of Lilian's car, the gust capturing her hair and sending it fluttering around her face.

One thing she'd learned in almost two days at the farm—there was little point in fussing over style. Not with the seaside wind always at the ready.

Indi, though, didn't seem to follow the same rule. Underneath her unbuttoned raincoat, her fashionable boho dress, a swirl of reds and purples and greens, billowed around her legs, her collection of bracelets clinking in time with the heels of her tall boots. "Hurry, ladies. If we're late, Patti Brighton-Smythe will have our heads."

Lilian closed her driver's-side door, dropped her keys in her purse, voice low and apparently meant only for Sydney. "Ironic, really, Indi being the one to worry about being late."

This was the most dressed-down Sydney had seen Lilian. Both Sunday night and Monday, Lilian had been in slacks and a blazer, but today she'd paired dark jeans with her heels and her top, visible near the open collar of her trench coat, was a soft gray sweater.

Whether either sister actually wanted her along for this outing, she couldn't say. But it'd only made sense to accept the invitation. So far, her time at the farm hadn't yielded any answers about her birth mother or her father. After helping Neil paint last night, she'd stayed up until after one in the morning looking through scrapbooks, willing herself to feel some spark of connection or memory.

But . . . nothing.

And other than a quick text from Wilder this morning saying he was still following up on a couple of leads, she had a feeling he wasn't any closer to proving his theory today than he'd been last week.

So why not venture into Muir Harbor? Maybe she'd meet someone who might remember a JP.

"Come on, slowpokes." Indi tossed her cheery order over her shoulder with a light laugh, already moving down the sidewalk.

Lilian's eyebrows lifted. "I have absolutely no idea why she's so enthusiastic about this meeting. It's more of a gossip-fest than anything."

"Excited to show off her ring, maybe?"

Lilian didn't have a reply to that, just watched her sister hurry onward. Why did the whole family seem so doubtful about Indi's engagement?

"So none of you have met the guy?" She fell into step beside the older sister, drinking in the sight of the small town center as they walked. An undeniable old-world charm hummed from every detail she took in—the cobblestone street, spindly black lampposts, decorative storefront facades. Brick buildings with yawning windows lined both sides of the road, and up ahead the street split into two directions, curving around a large circle lawn, still-green grass puddled with patches of fallen leaves.

"We call it the town square," Lilian explained, following Sydney's line of sight, "even though it's clearly not a square. And no, we haven't met him. Indi's dating history is a little bit of a whirlwind. She's always been the most . . . carefree of all of us."

Something told Sydney *carefree* really meant something more along the lines of *flighty*. But Lilian said it with obvious affection.

"That's her store across the street, by the way." She pointed to a tall, narrow building, brick exterior painted white and windows framed by yellow shutters. A nod to Maggie? An artsy metal sign over the entrance read *Bits & Pieces*. "She was only twenty-four when she opened it. Honestly, I was a little skeptical about the whole thing. Not Neil, though. He loaned her half of what she needed to make the down payment on the building. Pretty sure he's never let her pay him back. She opened her second store in Augusta earlier this year."

It was the most Lilian had spoken to Sydney. Almost felt as much of a victory as when Neil had let her come along to the treehouse last night.

*That treehouse.* Wasn't all that hard to believe the same man who'd envisioned and created such a magical little haven in the middle of nowhere would see the promise in his younger sister's dream.

A small car motored past, and Lilian lifted her hand in a wave at its honk. She gave the same greeting to someone inside a donut shop as they passed, the sweet smell wafting underneath its awning bringing Nikola and her caramel rolls to mind. She owed her friend a text one of these days.

"So is the meeting in the town square?" Er, circle.

Lilian shook her head. "Not today."

Then why was Indi jogging to the center of the lawn? She stopped at a small bulletin board in front of a white gazebo, strings of faux red and orange leaves woven in and out of its lattice. A moment later, Indi reversed course and started their way again. "Earl's Place," she called.

Lilian gave a brisk nod and veered across the street, leaving Sydney, clueless, to follow. Within minutes they were passing underneath a green-and-white-striped awning and pushing their way into a . . .

Sydney paused on the threshold. A hardware store?

And a crowded one, at that. People milled in between shelves and metal bins—standing-room only. She moved farther inside, wedging into a spot near Lilian.

"Weird place for a meeting, I know," the woman said. "We used to hold all our society meetings at Trinna's Teatime."

"Which is actually a coffee shop," Indi added, coming up beside her.

"Right," Lilian confirmed. "Though, to be fair, Trinna does have all these loose-leaf teas on display, but we're all pretty sure they're at least ten years old. She's always complaining no one ever buys anything but coffee and mochas and lattes." Lilian shrugged. "What can we say? We're a coffee town."

Indi gave a breezy laugh. “But the point is, we used to have all our meetings there until Annie and Dale from the café complained that it wasn’t fair. They said Trinna was receiving special favor—”

“—and extra profit—”

“Because of the meetings,” Indi finished. “So now Heritage Society meetings take place at a different business every month. The location is posted on the gazebo bulletin board an hour before the meeting.”

Sydney gaped at the two sisters. “So you never know until the last minute where the meeting will take place?”

Lilian shrugged again. “The downtown is all of four blocks long. Doesn’t take much travel time to get to the right place.”

“But why not have a schedule of locations? Why communicate via a bulletin board? Couldn’t you have, like, a text group or something? An email chain?”

Both sisters only stared at her.

“What an odd little town.”

Indi smirked. “And the meeting hasn’t even started yet.”



Forty-five minutes the committee had been arguing about where to host the Annual Muir Harbor Thanksgiving Dinner next month.

And Sydney was beginning to wonder why she’d thought joining Lilian and Indi at this meeting was a good idea.

Not that it hadn’t been without its entertaining moments. There’d been that second when Patti Brighton-Smythe, the head of the society, according to Lilian, had dipped her head too low, too quickly, and the pile of platinum blond curls on her head had leaned dangerously to the left. A wig, clear as day, and not a stable one.

There'd been Earl, interrupting every few minutes to alert the committee members of current sales. Two-for-one drill sets. Fifty cents off a container of one hundred nails. Rakes, only ten dollars.

And there was the man in glasses over by the front window, furiously scribbling away in a small notebook as if his life depended on capturing every word said. That is, in between peering at Sydney with the intensity of an artist studying a bowl of fruit.

Unnerving, really. And yet that man looked as harmless as a ladybug.

*“One of these days, you’ll believe me when I say Melba is the most harmless creature you’ll ever meet.”*

The memory of Neil’s voice rose above the chatter around her, along with the image of his almost-smile as he’d lingered on the porch this morning, jacket splashed with raindrops. He’d almost seemed . . . teasing wasn’t the right word. Playful, maybe.

As if underneath his reserve and diligence was a lively spirit not all that different from Indi’s. He just tucked it away a little deeper, the cares of the farm and his family taking top priority.

“What about Muir Farm?”

A voice near the front of the store plucked her attention once more—Patti Brighton-Smythe, adjusting her wig as she spoke.

“Yeah,” another woman chimed in. “I remember back when the Muirs hosted the dinner every year. When it was cold, even when it was snowing—they’d set up a huge tent and bring in space heaters.”

Now the man in the glasses with the notebook was staring at Lilian and Indi instead of Sydney. As was pretty much every face in the room.

Indi turned to her sister, a sort of panic in her eyes.

But Lilian was pure calm. “I’m afraid most of those dinners were before my time. It’s not really feasible to expect Maggie to single-handedly host such a large event.”

“Wouldn’t be single-handed,” Patti Brighton-Smythe cut in. “The committee would help. The whole community would. Used to be the Muirs loved taking the helm of this kind of thing. Why, I remember when—”

“Thanksgiving is less than a month away,” Lilian interrupted. “It’s simply not doable. I’m sorry.”

A look passed between the two sisters, one Sydney couldn’t hope to decipher. But there was a weight to it. As if Lilian’s excuses to the committee were just that—mere excuses meant to cover a deeper trepidation.

But what? Did it have something to do with Maggie’s reasons for declining to join them today? When Neil had suggested it, it’d been clear he’d already known what Maggie’s answer would be. Maggie herself had said the other night that she rarely ventured away from home.

Was she as wary of inviting townspeople to the farm as she was of leaving it? Why?

And what would it be like to have a sister with whom she could communicate the way Lilian and Indi just had? Silently—just a look, an expression.

She’d come today thinking maybe she could ask around about JP. But maybe deep down her real reason had been a desire to somehow bond with these two women. Maybe if something wonderful happened in the twelve days she had left in Muir Harbor, if she found out they actually were legally related, if not biologically—

“Ms. Rose, it is, yes?”

The man in the glasses no longer stood by the front window, instead having come up beside Sydney.

“Um, yes. But how did you—?”

The man offered a crinkled smile. “Could we talk outside for a moment?”

Lilian and Indi were whispering back and forth to each other, oblivious to Sydney or the man. So she followed him outside. He nudged his glasses upward with his pencil, offering her a warm, if probing, smile. “Cecil Atwater. Publisher of the *Gazette*. And editor, reporter, photographer, and ad salesman. Very much a one-man operation.”

“Uh, Sydney Rose. Though it seems you already know that.”

“I wish I could credit my prowess as a newspaperman, but I’m afraid that’s simply Muir Harbor for you. News doesn’t so much travel as it gallops. Full-speed.”

But how had anyone known she was here? Had Lilian said something to someone at her office? Or maybe Indi had mentioned her presence to a customer.

“I’d love to talk to you about what brought you to our fair city.”

“Shouldn’t the galloping news have already answered that question for you?”

He chuckled. “Oh, I know the bare facts, certainly. You’re Maggie’s latest hope. But I’d like to hear more. Where do you come from? How many pieces has Wilder Monroe put together? Is it for real this time or—”

“Mr. Atwater—”

“Cecil, please.” He nudged his glasses again. “If you’d rather find a time to talk later, we could meet at Trinna’s. Or the Brunch Barn. Which, just in case no one has filled you in, is not actually a barn and they serve more than brunch.”

“Cecil—”

“Surely you have a few questions of your own. I know pretty much everyone in Muir Harbor. I could be helpful. I can tell you anything you’d like to know about this town, about Muir family lore, about the accident.”

The accident that’d killed Diana?

“Have the siblings told you much of their own history? I’d imagine they’re probably pretty tight-lipped if your identity hasn’t been confirmed

yet. Neil's story, in particular, is an interesting one. You have to admire a man with a background as rocky as his being so committed to keeping the farm going, especially with the way it's gone downhill through the years and—"

"She's not interested."

Lilian. When had she stepped outside?

Cecil's glasses slipped down his nose. "Now, Lil—"

"Haven't we had all our family business spread all over your front page enough? Leave Sydney be. Leave all of us be."

"As you wish." But he reached into his pocket and came up with a business card. "In case you change your mind, Ms. Rose—"

Lilian waved his hand away. "She won't."

With a sigh of resignation, the man stuffed his notebook in his pocket. "Well, then, I'll bid you both good day."

He turned to leave, but before he'd even made it a few steps away, Lilian tugged Sydney to face her. "What were you thinking, talking to Cecil?"

"I . . . I didn't know—"

A fire lit in Lilian's cobalt eyes. "Maggie doesn't need another disappointment splayed in newsprint for everyone to read. It'll be hard enough when . . ."

A disappointment. *Hard enough when . . . when I leave.* Sydney's breath caught in her throat.

"Look, everyone's trying. We're being nice. We're being welcoming. Even Neil." She shook her head. "But if you go around spilling family business to Cecil Atwater, the gloves come off. Got it?"

Sydney hardly had time to nod before Lilian spun on her heels and reentered the store. She let out a tight breath, the exhale doing nothing to relieve the tension gripping her neck and shoulders and all of her.

The harsh assumption embedded in Lilian's words stung. But even more than that, the realization that she'd probably never fully grasp all the family dynamics at play at Muir Farm. Even if she *did* belong, even if her name was supposed to be Cynthia and she was supposed to have grown up here . . . she hadn't.

There was meaning in the look Lilian and Indi had shared minutes ago inside. There was some unspoken reason Lilian reacted so vehemently just now. There was weight she didn't comprehend to Neil's tentative suggestion that Maggie come to town today . . . and her instant refusal. There were secrets and understandings and memories between Maggie and Neil and the sisters she simply wasn't a part of.

Why did that feel like such a wound? She hadn't even been here a full forty-eight hours yet. She shouldn't feel so attached.

*You're just tired. You stayed up too late last night looking at those scrapbooks and—*

Wait. There'd been a reason she'd come with the sisters today. She glanced down the block, caught sight of Cecil's strolling form.

"Mr. Atwater?" She jogged after him. *Please don't let Lilian look out the window. Don't let her see . . .*

"Ah, don't tell me you're defying the formidable Lilian Muir?"

She shook her head as she reached him, huffing to catch her breath. "You said you know almost everyone in town. Do you know anyone named JP?"

He tapped his pencil against his chin. "There was a JP Ewbanks. Used to own the tackle shop, but he passed away last year, just shy of his ninety-third birthday. Why do you ask?"

"Um, I probably shouldn't . . ."

He looked over her shoulder, likely checking to make sure Lilian wasn't lurking. "Off the record?"

"Just . . . someone I'm looking for."

He raised a finger to his glasses at the bridge of his nose, openly studying her, surely piecing together the reason behind her question easily enough. But in a surprise show of discretion, he simply nodded and reached into his pocket. “Won’t give you my card, lest I earn Lilian’s wrath, but here.” He held out his notebook and pen. “Write down your number. I’ll do some mulling and I’ll give you a call if I think of anyone. Could JP possibly be initials?”

“Maybe. I really don’t know.” She scribbled her number on the small card. “But thank you. I appreciate it.”

“And if you change your mind on that exclusive—”

“I’d prefer to stay out of Lilian’s warpath, too.” But from the look in Lilian’s eyes moments ago, she very much feared it was too late for that.

*So much for bonding.*



Tonight wasn't about a hundred unfinished to-dos. It wasn't about the unchecked soil samples or the mowing he'd meant to do yesterday and still hadn't gotten to today. It wasn't about more work on the treehouse or wondering for the dozenth time if maybe he should've heeded Lilian's concern about those footprints in the mud this morning.

Tonight was about Indi. And finally meeting that incognito fiancé of hers with the fancy name.

Neil breathed in the salty air, boots sinking into rocky sand, the picnic basket he carried bumping against his thigh. Maybe if he were honest, he didn't even mind leaving the responsibilities of the farm behind—just for this one night. It was the perfect evening for a seaside picnic.

That is, if he could ignore the frustration rolling off Lilian in waves.

“It's bad enough Patti Brighton-Smythe gets everyone hyped up about Thanksgiving at the farm, but then I find our houseguest hobnobbing with Cecil Atwater.”

His sister had been *generously* sharing her irritation since the moment they'd left the house, probably in an attempt to flush it out before Indi arrived with Bennington.

"Cecil's harmless." And as for those big Thanksgiving dinners, they'd pretty much been a thing of the past by the time he'd joined the family. But he'd heard about them—jovial, boisterous events. He'd seen pictures too—of the marquee tent and long tables, the Rinehart trio on their fiddles, and even a wooden dance floor.

Now the community dinner took place in town each Thanksgiving—sometimes in the square, sometimes in the high school gym. He usually stopped by, but never for longer than an hour or two. Not with Maggie waiting back home.

Up ahead, Sydney was helping Maggie spread a blanket over a stretch of sand and grass, Captain running circles around their feet. They'd spent the whole afternoon together after Indi dropped Sydney off at home after the meeting. No clue what they'd been up to all those hours but they sure looked happy together.

"Only two days and they're already like peas in a pod." Lilian's gaze was glued on the two women, too, concern pinching her brow. "I can't make myself feel good about her being here."

Anymore, Neil didn't know how to feel. He'd been skeptical from the start, but everything had changed with Sydney's reaction to the treehouse. She'd caught his vision so effortlessly, her response to his plans filling him with a confidence he hadn't even realized he needed. A gift, really. Surprising and energizing.

And then there was what Maggie had said this morning. *She needs us.*

And what he'd said. A sentiment that'd slipped free unbidden. *Why would we need her, though?* They were a happy, if non-traditional, family. Complete, he'd always thought.

But clearly Maggie hadn't or she wouldn't have spent all these years searching. When was the last time he'd seen her this lightened and lively?

He reached over to squeeze Lilian's shoulder now as they neared the spot where Sydney and Maggie were setting up. "Maybe just try not to think about all that for the next couple of hours. This is Indi's night. And it's too nice out to spend it chewing on problems we can't solve tonight."

So warm, in fact, that a light jacket sufficed, no sign of this morning's rain save a few wispy clouds lazing in the sky, their underbellies lit by the glowing orange of the sun leaning toward its slumber.

Lilian released a downcast sigh. "Indi's night and yet she's not even here for it."

"She will be." She was waiting back at the house for her fiancé to arrive.

"Do you really think this one's for real, Neil? How many times has she told us she's met someone? Countless. How many times have we actually met said someone?"

"Lil."

"I love her and I would do anything for her, you know that. But she's just so . . . *Indi*."

He gave Lilian's head a pat just as they reached the blanket. "Well, we can't all be as logical and systematic as you, dear sister."

Her teasing glare told him he'd succeeded on at least one count so far tonight—cheering her up. Lot of good that did, though, considering the man currently striding down the shore.

Maggie must've caught sight of Wilder at the same time as he did. "Oh good, he came."

Lilian looked from Wilder, still in the distance, to Maggie. "You invited him?"

Apparently Neil wasn't the only one to find his sister's annoyance toward Wilder amusing. Sydney dipped her head, but not so quickly he

missed her flash of a smile.

Maggie knelt and opened the picnic basket. “The man’s a bachelor. His father’s gone, no siblings. It’s the least we can do. He told me once he eats Pop-Tarts and frozen pizza regularly.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad to me.” Lilian dropped to the blanket, none of her usual refined manner in the movement. “Anyway, he told you that because he knew you’d take pity on him and it’d lead to this—regular invites and mooching off us.”

Maggie waved one hand, pulling a plastic container from the basket with her other. “Oh, come off it, Lil. He’s Neil’s best and only friend.”

Neil crossed his arms. “Hey—”

“Besides, he’s handsome. And you know how much Indi cares about aesthetics.” Maggie laughed at her own words.

“He’s not my *only* friend,” Neil grumbled.

“Not that handsome, either.” Lilian leaned over to help Maggie unload her basket. The smell of fried chicken wafted in the air.

Maggie tsked. “That dark hair, the dimple in his chin? I might have a few decades on you all, but my eyesight’s just fine. You agree with me, don’t you, Syd? Wilder—he’s not exactly unattractive, correct?”

Now why in the world would Maggie put Sydney on the spot like that? What an awkward, inappropriate question to—

“Oh, it’s one of the first things I noticed about him.” Sydney laughed, dropping down beside Maggie. “That is, after outrunning him, kicking him, and eventually deciding I wouldn’t need to mace him.”

Still standing, still with folded arms, Neil grunted. “How did we get on this subject?”

“What subject?” Wilder stole Captain’s attention the moment he reached them, the collie dashing to him. He knelt with a chuckle. “Hey, boy. Happier to see me than Miss Lilian, are you?”

Lilian glared; Maggie and Sydney laughed. No one answered his question.

And Neil, for some inexplicable reason, had to clamp his lips to keep from pointing out that Wilder wasn't the only one with a dimple. Neil had two of them. Not that a person could probably tell at this point. Maybe he'd finally shave tomorrow.

"Where's Indi?" Wilder plopped onto the blanket between Lilian and Neil.

Another question that went unanswered. And remained unanswered throughout the next five minutes. Then ten. After fifteen minutes of waiting, Lil texted her. At twenty minutes, Neil tried calling. Voicemail.

Finally, half an hour after they'd set up for the picnic, Indi texted. *He's running late. Go ahead and eat.*

A full hour into the picnic and Indi still hadn't arrived and what had started off as a merry, carefree evening had devolved into edgy concern and stilted conversation, Wilder doing most of the talking. His way of trying to ease the mood, certainly—surely even Lilian recognized that. Neil was just about to give in and go looking for his sister when Maggie's sudden exhale let him know he wouldn't have to.

He twisted his body to see Indi walking in their direction. Trudging, more like. Slowly. So the guy had stood her up. He stuffed his last bite of blueberry crumble in his mouth, knowing if he wasn't chewing he'd end up wearing a frown that wouldn't make Indi feel any better.

His sister stopped at the edge of the blanket, a heaviness tugging at her every feature. "He couldn't make it."

If there was more to the explanation, she clearly didn't want to give it. Or maybe was too upset to.

"I filled you a plate, dear." Maggie scooted to make room for her.

But Indi only shook her head. "Not really hungry."

Any second now, Lilian would start in on the questions. Like always, needing to know the facts of a problem so she could figure out how to fix it.

But that's not what Indi needed. Not in this moment.

He reeled to his feet. "Well, if you're not eating, and now that we're all here, are we doing this or what?"

Lilian's forehead wrinkled. "Doing what?"

"You know what. Wilder, you're in, aren't you?"

Just as he knew he would, his friend jumped up. "Always."

"Oh, don't tell me you're reviving this old game." Maggie closed a container of pasta salad and replaced it in the basket. "I'm going to be stuck with a houseful of runny noses. You'll all catch colds."

"Old wives' tale, Maggie," Neil said as he peeled off his boot. "Indi?"

For a second, he thought she might refuse. But after a beat, she shook her shoulders, as if dusting off her disappointment. "Let it never be said I backed down from a challenge."

"You're cracked." Lilian folded her arms. "All three of you."

Sydney tipped her head to those of the group standing. "What's going on?"

Maggie tsked. "Oh, nothing more than my fool children—"

"Plus me." Wilder hopped on one foot as he yanked his shoe off the other foot.

"Plus Wilder," Maggie amended, "about to give themselves pneumonia by trouncing into an ice-cold ocean for no other reason than to prove they can."

"Not just to prove we can." Cold sand folded over Neil's bare feet. "But to prove who's got the strongest mettle." He looked down to Sydney. "The one who stays in the longest gets bragging rights. You're welcome to join in."

She looked almost as stricken as when she'd first spotted Melba. "Won't you go numb?"

“That’s kind of the point.” Lilian stood now, shoes already off, shrugging free of her jacket. Always the same with Lilian—she decried the insanity right before joining in. “The faster you go numb, the better chance you have of making it past the first five minutes. Same rules as always?”

Neil nodded. “Waist-deep. No splashing.” Another glance to Sydney. Indi and Wilder were already heading toward the gap between tall rocks, the easiest place to enter the water on this stretch of shore. “Coming? It’ll be cold, but we’ve done this in the dead of winter before. Won’t be nearly as bad as that.”

For the barest moment, with the glowing, orange shades of dusk creating a halo over her hair, he could almost imagine Sydney Rose had always been a part of them. That she fit into their little family as easily as Wilder.

And maybe she wanted to. Because there was something deep and revealing in her sunlit eyes now as she watched the others race toward the water’s edge. A yearning so palpable he could almost hear its pulsing.

And then she smiled. “I’m in.”



Sydney reached the shoreline just as Indi and Lilian and Wilder were slogging in, the girls’ squeals rising above the sound of the water lapping at the edges of the rocky sand.

“Don’t dawdle, MacKean,” Wilder called, his voice trembling from the cold. “We have to keep this fair.”

She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Neil catching up to her. Not once since coming to Muir Farm had she glimpsed such wild abandon on the man’s face. He spared her only a momentary glance before barreling

into the water. “Come on, Syd. The longer you hesitate, the harder it gets to make yourself do it.”

She forced her feet into the ocean. Foam bobbed on the surface of the icy water as it tucked around her ankles, then her calves, her knees. Like a thousand stings all needling her at once and she couldn’t help a shiver.

“Oh my goodness.” She still had to make it in as far as her waist. That is, if she wanted to be a part of this ridiculous family tradition.

And she did. *Oh*, she did. She couldn’t have explained why if someone asked. She’d only been here two days, but she was sold on it—on all of it. The beauty of the sea. The closeness of this family. The earthy magic of Muir Farm.

Neil and Wilder had made it farther into the midnight blue ripples, being taller than the women. Indi had just about made it as far as Lilian.

Neil caught Sydney’s gaze, his carefree expression coaxing her onward.

Not entirely carefree, though. No, it was care for Indi that’d prodded him to his feet back at their picnic spot. She’d sensed exactly what he was doing—maybe all of them had. And for Indi, they’d played along. For Indi, they’d run into bitter-cold water, fully clothed and wholly dedicated to the bit.

By the time she was waist-deep, she could feel bumps raising on her skin and traveling all the way up her torso underneath her shirt. Indi’s lips were already turning blue, and Wilder wasn’t even trying to hide his shaking.

“We’re idiots,” Lilian said. “All of us.”

Sydney couldn’t stop a giggle. “To think, a few days ago, I’d never even seen the ocean. Now I’m standing in it.” And quickly losing the feeling in her legs. “One week I’m innocently waiting tables, no idea that a private eye was about to chase me home from work and t-talk me into flying to Maine.” Her teeth chattered with every word. “T-the next I’m walking into the Atlantic, just asking for a case of hypothermia.”

Neil's eyes were on her again. "Some hosts we are, forcing you into this."

"B-but at least you haven't f-forced me to milk Melba yet."

He chuckled before shooting Wilder a frown. "You really chased her home?"

Wilder shrugged. "She had mace. She was fine."

A minute passed. Two. Maggie shouted from the shore, something about her "preposterous children."

Finally, Indi dropped her arms to the water's surface. "Lil is right. This is insane." She pushed against the rippling water and hurried to the sand.

Sydney broke the next instant. "I honestly think I'd rather face off with Melba than stay here." How could her feet be nearly numb already? With a splash, she twisted toward the shore, pushing against the water as quickly as she could, shivers racing through her and only intensifying as she reached the shore.

"You made it almost five minutes."

At the surprise voice at her side, she stumbled. Neil?

His arm shot out to steady her. "Careful. The rocks are slick, especially when your feet are wet."

"Y-you gave up a-already?"

"Eh, I'd rather be entertained by how long those two stubbornly face off than freeze to death myself." He pointed his finger over his shoulder to where Lilian glared at Wilder in the water. "Though I don't plan to stick around and see it in person."

Up ahead, Indi had already nabbed her shoes and was jogging toward the trees that led to the house. Maggie, too, had started back in that direction, though she'd left the picnic basket and blanket behind.

Neil bent to retrieve his shoes and she did the same. When she straightened, another surprise—the weight of the blanket draping over her shoulders. "Oh, uh . . . thank you."

As quickly as Neil had neared, he backed away, stooping once more to pick up the picnic basket. “Let’s go before the frostbite sets in.”

He took off at his usual resolute pace, bare feet sinking into the sand and long legs quickly widening the gap between them. But she didn’t move. Couldn’t. It was as if the cold had crept under her skin and made ice statues of her limbs.

Except, no, it wasn’t a chill coursing through her now. It was something else, something warmer. Waves of tumbling emotion, too many feelings moving too swiftly to name or differentiate.

Except for the one that bobbed at the surface, like a buoy under the light of a beacon. Longing. It wasn’t a new feeling. As a child, she’d longed for a parent’s affection. As a teenager, she’d craved stability. As a young adult, she’d wished for a career that filled her with purpose.

And she’d longed for family and a place to belong for pretty much her whole life.

But always before, the longing had been like a page from a child’s coloring book—black lines and blank spaces. Now . . . now her yearning had color. She wanted *this* family. She wanted *this* place.

*Two days. You shouldn’t feel this strongly in just two days, Syd. It’s impossible.* Maybe she was just affected by the crazy turn her life had taken. Maybe she was just cold and wet and tired . . .

Distracted by the sight of Neil’s sopping wet shirt clinging to his broad shoulders.

Why had he given her the blanket?

As if sensing her gaze, he slowed and then stopped entirely. *He’s waiting for me.* Captain bounded to her as she hurried to catch up, clutching the blanket around her neck, the ground rough underneath her feet.

“You okay?” he asked as she neared.

She only nodded, somehow certain if she tried to speak, her voice would clog or, worse, her eyes fill with tears. *Bizarre.* Must be the sea salt

air infecting her logical, rational side. Or maybe she'd lost that piece of herself the moment she'd called Wilder Monroe and agreed to fly to Maine.

Neil started walking again, this time keeping his strides shorter, content, it seemed, to let the silence stretch. He'd been like this last night as they painted—unbothered, even comfortable, with quiet. Not that he hadn't talked at all. He'd spoken, at times, about the farm, about how he'd started working the fields full-time following his high school graduation.

Sometimes, when he was speaking freely, the Scottish lilt to his words deepened. What was it that newspaperman had said earlier today? Something about Neil having a rocky background. Had he been born in Scotland? The accent sure suggested it, but how had he ended up here?

“Neil—”

“Hey, Sydney.” Wilder's winded voice rose up behind them, stealing her chance to pry into Neil's past. “Wait.”

“Guess Lil outlasted him. She'll gloat about that for weeks.” Neil reached down to pat Captain as Wilder jogged over uneven ground.

The man reached them in seconds, wet jeans plastered to his legs. “Going home to thaw out,” he sputtered as he came to a halt. “But first, Sydney, I didn't want to mention this in front of everyone, considering Indi and, well . . . anyway.”

“Spit it out.” Neil rubbed his palms together and blew into them.

“No one said you had to stay.” Wilder gave his friend a mock glare before returning his focus to Sydney. “Just wanted to let you know, I finally got ahold of CarleeAnn Picknell's younger brother.”

The blanket slipped from one shoulder. Brother? “I . . . I knew you were searching for relatives. But I was thinking . . . distant ones.”

“Well, distant is about right.” Wilder mimicked Neil, blowing into his hands. “Her brother—stepbrother, actually—was twelve years younger than her. From our one very short conversation, it sounds as if they weren't close at all. He was only six when CarleeAnn dropped out of college. Seven, the

year of the accident. He . . .” Wilder glanced at Neil. “He doesn’t remember anything about his step-sister having a baby.”

It didn’t prove anything. But it didn’t disprove anything, either.

Wilder went on. “He works for a wildlife bureau, which is why I’ve had so much trouble tracking him down. He’s been up in some forest in Canada studying migration patterns or something. But he’s back in the States now and he’s agreed to come to town. This weekend, actually. He’ll be at the Autumn Market on Saturday.”

*Saturday.* Four days from now. By then she’d have been at Muir Farm for nearly a week. How much more attached might she be by then? “So he’s either my uncle or . . .”

“Or just the brother of your birth mom’s childhood best friend,” Wilder finished for her. “Unfortunately, DNA testing still isn’t an option, not with him being a stepsibling. And I don’t know if meeting him will get us any further, but he did say he has a few boxes in storage from his parents’ old house. He’s going to look through them, see if there’s anything that might help us. For now, there’s a hot shower back home calling my name. See you guys later.”

He took off in the other direction, Captain chasing after him for a few seconds before reversing course to return to them. Despite her wet clothes and the cold coiling around her, she bent when Captain neared and buried her fingers in his warm fur, letting him lick her face before standing again and readjusting the blanket around her shoulders.

When she rose, it was to see Neil’s blue-gray eyes pinned on her, his scrutiny tinged with a sort of curious realization.

“You really don’t know.” His voice was soft and low. “This isn’t just a free vacation to you. Or a game.”

“Definitely not a game.” She tugged the blanket tighter. “I just want to know who I am.”

“Well . . . I hope you find out.”

If he'd said those same words Sunday evening, she was certain he wouldn't have meant them. But tonight, with twilight draping the landscape around them in misty shadows, it was different. He was different.

They started walking again, picking their way through the trees, toward splotches of light from the house on the other side.

“Are you going to work on the treehouse tonight?”

Captain raced ahead as Neil shook his head. “Probably not tonight. Not really sure what kind of frame of mind Indi will be in, but in case she wants to talk . . .”

Oh, yes, about the no-show fiancé. She gave Neil a sidelong glance, took in the concern wrinkling his brow. “It was nice—what you did back there. Taking the attention off her, I mean. Getting everyone to go running into the ocean.”

He didn't respond.

“Lilian said you're the reason Indi was able to open her store. And Maggie told me one of the reasons you didn't go to college was because you knew Lilian would eventually want to go to law school. You wanted there to be money for that.”

“When did my family members get so talkative?”

She didn't look at him as she spoke. “I'm trying to say you're obviously a good brother to them. You should give them a chance to be good sisters to you.”

He slowed, the breeze lifting his hair. “What do you mean?”

“Well, Cecil from the newspaper said something today about the farm going downhill.”

His gaze narrowed. “It's not going downhill. What would Cecil know about the farm anyway?”

“When you showed me the treehouse last night, you said the farm could really use the extra income. And I know I've only been here two days, but I've seen how hard you work and . . .” She didn't know why she was saying

any of this. What right did she have to interfere in any of his business? But halting her words seemed as impossible as stopping the chattering of her teeth. “And now you’re considering a side venture, but no one else knows about it. It just seems like you carry the load of this whole place on your shoulders—and yours alone. You don’t have to do everything on your own, Neil. You’ve got this amazing family. Let them help you.”

She thought he might rebuff her. Tell her she didn’t know what she was talking about. He’d be completely within his rights. Instead, he glanced over at her. What did he see when he looked at her?

*Probably a virtual stranger offering advice he never asked for.*

But that wouldn’t explain the slight crinkling at the corners of his eyes or the ghost of a smile playing over his lips. “Maybe you are Maggie’s granddaughter. That’s the kind of thing she’d say.”

“Well, she’d be right.”

“The thing is, sometimes I feel like it’s my fault we’re struggling financially. I’m the one who said we needed a harvester about a decade back. We had to take out a pretty hefty loan and I didn’t realize how hard it’d be to catch up after that. I thought we’d save money, not needing to hire such a big crew for hand raking. We still hire a small crew, but not nearly as many.”

His pace stopped almost entirely as they emerged from the trees, his words trailing. His eyes moved past her, over her shoulder, his mouth widening into an O. She angled to follow his gaze. “Are those . . . ?”

He groaned and nodded. “Indi’s goats. And the chickens.”

All loose and roaming the backyard.

And then his hand was on her shoulder. “You should get to the house. Melba’s probably around here somewhere too.”



*M*y Dearest Robert,  
Today I told Sydney the Legend of Muir Harbor . . . and then later realized that in all the time we spent together in those three weeks before you shipped out, I'd never told you the legend. Well, better late than never, as they say.

*It starts, as so many Gaelic stories do, with two clans and an ageless feud . . . and eventually, a family set adrift at sea. I told you once, surely I did, that Muir is the Gaelic word for sea. As the legend goes, the famed and ferocious Alec Muir said it was only fitting that the sea gift his family their freedom and future.*

*But he didn't leave Scotland empty-handed. Under the veil of night, he took from his enemy a pewter chalice said to have once touched the lips of the Bonnie Prince Charlie himself when he was hiding amongst the Highlander clan after the Rebellion.*

*'Twas simply an act of malice, no doubt. But what Alec Muir discovered weeks later, already tucked in the sea's embrace, was that he'd not only stolen his enemy's most prized possession, but also a bag, hidden inside the chalice, containing enough gold to not only settle in a new land, but to make his mark for lifetimes to come.*

*He bought a farm on a rocky piece of land that reminded him of his Highland home and built a town to bear his name and still there was gold to spare.*

*For years to come, however, he'd watch the harbor with a keen eye—wondering, ever-wary, if his enemy might one day cross the ocean. Come for his chalice and his coin. Come for his revenge. There he'd stand when the ships came in, his cape flapping in the wind, one hand on his scabbard and the other holding his spyglass.*

*Decades later, old and prosperous but of increasingly poor health, he began to think less and less of his enemy and more and more of his own thievery. Hour by hour he wondered if His Maker would speak of it whence they met. And so, though weak and tired, he climbed from his bed one night to retrieve the chalice from its hiding place. Aye, he would wrap it up and send it across the sea, add his own coin to the remaining gold, and thus soothe his stinging conscience.*

*But when he got to the hiding place, the chalice was nowhere to be found. His wife, his children, his grandchildren—every one he set to searching. But the chalice was never found and he died the next day.*

*'Tis said that somewhere on Muir Farm, a chalice filled with gold still rests in its hiding place. And that some nights at the harbor, you can still hear the flapping of Alec Muir's cape in the wind.*

*What do you think of that, Robert?*

*I think before today it'd been too long since I told that story. Diana used to love it so. Used to beg me to tell her over and over when she was a child.*

*And oh, the hours she spent searching this house and the barn and the rocky shore . . .*

*Do you know what Sydney said when I told her? She said, “And just when I thought I couldn’t love this place more, I find out there’s a ghost story connected to it.”*

*Funny, I never thought of it as a ghost story. But then, the real ghosts aren’t men in capes in stories. They’re the people we never stop missing.*

*With all my love,*

*Maggie*

*P.S. It’s never occurred to me until now that Diana asked me to tell her that story again the weekend she came home with little Cynthia in tow. Of all the things to talk about after a two-year absence!*



*A* man could only handle so much in one week.

Neil stopped outside the back door of the house, the wind scraping over his cheeks, knowing the moment he stepped over the threshold, the day's last semblance of peace and quiet would end. Tonight was the Muir Harbor Autumn Market, which meant his usual weekend night rest would have to wait.

He rubbed his palms over both bristled cheeks. He'd finally shaved earlier in the week, but he likely would've sent at least one of the women in this household into shock if he'd come downstairs entirely clean-shaven, so he'd kept his five-o'clock shadow. He wiped the dust from his jeans and dragged his work boots over the rug outside the door.

On a normal Saturday, he'd give himself the gift of an early end to his workday. Especially after a week like this—long days, short nights. He'd spent the past three nights working on the treehouse until after midnight. Usually he liked the alone time, but there was simply too much to worriedly

mull this week. Indi, for one thing. They'd never had the chance to talk after shooing all the farm animals back to the barn. She'd headed up to Augusta first thing Wednesday morning.

And while Ansel Barrett might've located a cheap used generator for him to look at next week, he was nowhere closer to figuring out what to do about the harvester. Then Tatum Carter had called yesterday, though he'd purposely refused to answer and . . .

And then there was their houseguest. Other than evening meals, he'd barely seen Sydney in the past few days. She'd been spending all her time with Maggie and he was clueless as to what to feel about it. He'd accepted that Sydney didn't have any ill intentions in coming to Maine. But that didn't mean there still wasn't a bucketload of potential hurt waiting for Maggie at the end of all of this.

And maybe not only Maggie. More than once, he'd found himself thinking about the look he'd seen in Sydney's eyes out by the shore. Or her soft words later. *"I just want to know who I am."*

He shook his head as he opened the back door. At least there hadn't been any more unknown vehicles idling in the driveway or strange prints in the yard or animals running loose.

"Neil. Those crates of jam. Trunk."

Lilian's barking voice greeted him the moment he stepped into the kitchen, the chaos pulsing through the crowded room tempting him to step right back out. He'd hoped to grab a shower before being pulled into market preparation. If only he'd been smart enough to walk in the front door and slip upstairs before Lilian spotted him.

The heat of the kitchen told him Maggie had been doing plenty of last-minute baking. And she'd had help, by the looks of things. A pie balanced in each hand and a third tucked in the crook of one elbow, Sydney moved across the room as if gliding, her berry-stained apron hanging unknotted and loose. Was that a streak of flour on her forehead?

“I don’t know how she does it,” Maggie said, suddenly at his side. “Earlier I watched her carry five of them at once.”

Sydney must’ve heard the remark. She glanced over at them, grinned. “A thousand years of waitressing, that’s how.”

“The jam, Neil.” Lilian again.

“She’s bossy today.” Maggie lifted a basket filled with Saran-wrapped baked goods. Blueberry scones, muffins, turnovers. The heavenly smells permeating the room made his stomach gurgle.

He picked up the crate filled with jams, mason jars rattling inside. “She’s always bossy on market days.” And frankly, he was thankful for it. Lilian’s organization was the reason Muir Farm had one of the best booths each fall—not to mention at the winter, spring, and summer markets too.

The seasonal Saturday evening events, much bigger affairs than the weekly roadside farmers markets that took place throughout each summer and autumn, were Muir Harbor traditions, coaxing visitors from surrounding counties and even all around the state. Vendors came in by the dozens, selling all manner of homemade wares, hand-crafted jewelry, and art and gift items. The food stands were his favorite—though the chances of Lilian freeing him from their own booth long enough to fill his stomach were slim, especially with Indi busy at the Bits & Pieces stand.

Then again, they had an extra pair of hands helping this year.

Sydney pulled one last pie from the oven, her gaze glimmering with delight as she turned to Maggie. “Will it cool in time to pack it up?” Her gaze tilted to Neil. “My very first pie. That is, the first one Maggie let me make on my own.”

“And she did a fine job. Crimped the crust and everything.” Maggie waved a hand over the pie’s surface. “Probably best not to cover it just yet. Hold it on your lap on the drive into town. Should be fine for boxing up by the time you get there.”

“Or you could keep it here.” Neil lowered his crate to the table once more. “We could all have a midnight snack when we get home tonight.”

Sydney’s rosy cheeks—from the heat?—stretched with her grin. “No way. Maggie told me pies go for sixteen dollars. With the amount of anxiety I put into this thing, I’m getting every penny I can out of it. Even if I have to beg some poor market-goer to buy it.”

“Eighteen dollars,” Lilian interjected from across the room. “We’re upping prices this year.”

“You won’t have to beg.” Neil knew it for a fact. Because the blueberry pie looked delicious. And because she looked . . .

*Never mind how she looks.*

He had no business whatsoever noticing the light dusting of freckles on her cheeks or the way that green sweater she wore under her apron turned her eyes from mossy to almost jade. Certainly shouldn’t be fighting the urge to brush the flour not only from her forehead but also, he noted now that she stood closer, from her hair too.

She turned away, carefully placing the pie on the counter and pulling off her oven mitts. No, she wouldn’t have any trouble at all selling that thing.

“Stop staring at Sydney and carry that box outside, will you?” Lilian elbowed his side. When had she sidled up to him?

“I wasn’t—”

“On second thought, I’ll finish loading the car. Go clean up. You smell like a barn.”

“I don’t . . .” He probably did. He’d spent most of the day repairing the loft. Had the dirt and sawdust clinging to his flannel shirt to prove it.

Lilian hoisted the crate away from him and bustled out the back door. Had Sydney heard her comment about staring?

Suddenly, he couldn’t get out of this hot kitchen fast enough. But when he turned, Maggie blocked his path. She leaned in and up, patted his cheek with one hand as she’d done so many times before. “There’s a Tupperware

container in the fridge with two big slices for you. Make sure to grab it before you leave in case Lilian doesn't give you a break tonight."

He smiled down at her. "You're too good to me, Maggie Muir. Always looking out for me."

"Always, Neil. That's what love does." She patted his cheek once more and stepped back.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us tonight? Everyone would love to see you."

He'd known there wasn't much point in asking. Maggie hadn't come to the market in years. But foolish impulse had pushed the question out.

And foolish anticipation awaited her answer. Maybe this fall would be different. She'd been so lively these past few days. So happy with Sydney here.

But she shook her head. "I don't think so. I've spent almost all day in the kitchen, and I'm beat. You young people have fun and tell me all about it when you get home. Or better yet, at breakfast tomorrow. I'm sure I'll be sound asleep long before you return."

He swallowed his sigh and managed another smile. Turned in a hurry lest she glimpse the disappointment he tried to hide.

But only halfway down the hall, Sydney's voice called after him. "Neil, wait." She caught up to him at the base of the staircase. "Can I show you something real quick?"

"Sure you don't want to wait 'til later? Lilian says I smell like a barn."

She laughed. "I wouldn't know. My whole day has been blueberries—pies and pastries and jams and I don't even know what all. It's literally all I can smell." She tugged on his sleeve. "Come on. This'll only take a minute."

He followed her into the dining room and then the office, his least favorite room of the house. Because it's where the computer was. And the

computer was where his budget spreadsheets were. And his budget spreadsheets never failed to give him a headache.

But Sydney didn't even notice him pausing at the doorframe. She hurried forward, rounding the desk and dropping into the swivel chair behind it. She clicked on the mouse and typed a few words, the light of the monitor dancing over her face. "By the way, why haven't you asked me to come help at the treehouse at all? You always sneak out of the house when I'm not around. Wasn't I a good help with the painting?" She finished typing and hit Enter. "Come look."

He shuffled toward her. "Of course you were a good help. And I don't sneak out."

Her smirk told him she didn't believe that for a moment. Fine, maybe he did sneak. Force of habit, that was all. He'd been keeping his secret from Maggie and the girls for so long it was simply second nature.

*Except that's not the reason and you know it.*

But he wasn't in the mood for that kind of honesty at the moment. Really didn't want to dwell on the fact that it wasn't that he hadn't wanted Sydney's help the past few nights. It was that he feared he wanted it too much.

Might enjoy it too much. Working alongside her. The close quarters . . .

"This is what I wanted to show you." Sydney nudged the monitor so it faced him over her shoulder.

He peered at the screen, seconds ticking by before he understood what he was seeing. A picture of wood crates filled with lush berries, white letters overtop. *Welcome to Muir Farm*. Underneath the heading, three more pictures of the farm and smaller headings. *Reserve Fresh Berries. Join Us for Harvest. Book Your Stay*.

A website?

"What do you think?" Sydney moved her mouse, clicking on the third photo. "Putting the treehouse on Airbnb is smart, but I also think it's a good

idea to have a reservation form on your own site.”

“You made us a website?”

“Maggie was napping yesterday and I was feeling creative. I’ve only got the bare bones in place and, of course, it’s not live yet. But you *need* a website, Neil. All those orders you take over the phone—it’d be so much easier to track them here.” She clicked open another page. “And if you were serious about inviting guests to help with harvest, they can sign up for that here too.”

“But . . . but why would you . . . how . . .” He was speechless again. Just like that night in the treehouse. Was that a logo at the corner of the screen? A graphic of a house, ocean waves behind it, *Muir* in scripted font in front of it.

“I built a site for my friend’s bakery recently, and the restaurant where I work, too. My one year in college was good for something, at least.”

“Syd, I . . . thank you. But you shouldn’t have.”

“I wanted to. You’ve all been so welcoming. This is a small thing I could do to say thank you.”

They *hadn’t* all been welcoming. Not at first. Lilian still hadn’t warmed up to her. “This isn’t a small thing.”

She swiveled in the desk chair and stood. “Well, it’s like I said the other night, you need to let other people help. This is what I could do to help. You know, since I’m still not up to milking Melba.”

He shouldn’t do it. He really shouldn’t do it.

But he couldn’t stop his hand from lifting, his fingers from brushing the flour from her hair.

Until her look of surprise brought him to his senses. “Uh, sorry . . . flour. In your hair.”

“Oh.” She took a step back, gave a nervous laugh.

*Stupid, Neil.* What in the world had possessed him? He needed Lilian in this moment, barking no-nonsense orders and telling him not to stare. *Say*

*something.*

But Sydney came to the rescue first. “By the way, I thought of something else we could add to the website.”

Was there an airiness to her voice or was he only imagining it?

“Maggie told me this old Muir Harbor legend yesterday while we were baking. I think we should offer nighttime hayrides or seaside walks or something and we could tell that story. Make it kind of eerie and fun.”

“That’s what we should do, should we?”

She blinked. “Oh. *Oh*, I mean you, of course. It was just an idea. Just a thought. Anyway, I guess I better clean up before we go, too, since apparently I have flour all over me.” He definitely wasn’t imagining the blush tinting her cheeks.

At least now he wasn’t the only one off-kilter. “I call the bathroom first. Try not to walk in on me.”

“Very funny, Neil MacKean.”



If not for the fact that at some point tonight, Wilder Monroe would be showing up with a man who may or may not be her uncle, Sydney might find herself enchanted by the Muir Harbor Autumn Market.

The air, startlingly warm for the last weekend in October, smelled of cinnamon and popcorn, and the strains of “Goodnight, Ladies” from the trio of fiddlers in the gazebo filled the town center, along with the buzz of a growing crowd.

What had been an empty stretch of grass when she’d been in town earlier this week was now lined with booths and tables, all crowded with people. Paper lanterns hung from the branches of every tree in the circular lawn, promising bubbles of light once the sun finally set.

But as of now, it still lingered in the horizon, the sky a show of pinks and purples that reflected in the glass windows of the buildings surrounding the town center.

She'd spent the past three hours following Lilian's instructions, first organizing and arranging their stand, one of the largest at the center of the market, and then assisting customers as they picked out and paid for items.

A woman she recognized perused the array of jams and jellies and baked goods arranged at the front of their counter. Mason jars filled with dried wildflowers and the last of the season's produce from Lilian's garden—a few pumpkins and a slew of various varieties of squash—festooned their stand with color.

"I think I'll take this pie." The woman's bottle-blond hair peeked out from the burgundy scarf she wore over her head and tied under her chin.

Patti Brighton-Smythe. The wig lady. "Oh, you picked a good one. Maggie just made that one this morning."

"Well, then, I will buy it and not even comment on the price increase."

Lilian's snort sounded behind her.

Patti lifted both penciled brows. "Lilian Muir, you missed the Thanksgiving committee meeting on Thursday."

"Sorry, Mrs. Brighton-Smythe. Work."

"I suppose you haven't given any more thought to hosting the holiday dinner?" Patti Brighton-Smythe—why was it impossible to think of her by anything other than her full name?—handed Sydney a twenty-dollar bill.

Sydney passed the money to Lilian and received a look of vexation in return. Only, for once, she wasn't on the receiving end of Lilian's annoyance. Actually, not once this whole evening had Lilian appeared put out with her. She'd almost seemed grateful for the help.

Neil certainly had been. He'd taken off a few minutes ago to find Indi, see if she needed any assistance at her stand. But he'd thanked her no less

than three times in the past couple of hours, even complimented the way she'd arranged their wares.

"Hey, Syd." Wilder strode up behind Patti Brighton-Smythe. She handed the woman her two dollars in change, then took a deep breath. Lifted her gaze.

Wilder read the question in her eyes. "He's waiting for us. Over by the gazebo."

She turned to Lilian, who nodded and waved them on. "Neil will be back soon."

Okay. *Okay.* Time to do this. She moved out from behind their stand, glanced up at Wilder. "Have you talked to him yet?"

"Other than that phone call the other day and a quick greeting just a minute ago before I came to fetch you, no. I'd like to think I'm good at reading people, but I can't get a pulse on the guy."

Sydney fell in step beside Wilder as he veered around the line extending from a booth with a homemade sign displaying crooked letters. *Lottie's Moon Punch.*

"Did Lil or Neil warn you about the moon punch? Don't try it unless you've got the constitution of a sailor."

"Spiked?"

"Try doused." He steered her behind the gazebo.

"So what exactly are we hoping to get out of this conversation with CarleeAnn's stepbrother?" Who might be her uncle. Who might be no relation at all.

"My hope is that seeing you will jog something in his memory. Or it'll further cement the theory that CarleeAnn never had a child of her own."

"Even if she didn't, that doesn't guarantee I'm Diana Muir's daughter."

She didn't miss the tic in Wilder's jaw. "No, but it's a better lead than we've ever had before. I've followed up on every trail my dad ever tried. I've attempted to put a name and a face to the man Diana was seen with at

the pub before she disappeared. I've tried to pinpoint where Diana was when she was gone—we know she was in Atlanta at one point, but that's all we know. I've tried to puzzle together what drew her back to Muir Harbor the weekend of the accident. All to no avail." He scraped his fingers through his hair. "The connection to CarleeAnn—at least it's a new thread to tug on."

He stopped near a towering tree, its burnt amber leaves lit by the sun, and pointed. "That's him."

She followed his gaze to where a man sat at a picnic table—alone, hunched, wearing a baseball cap and an unzipped hoodie. Fingers curled around a red plastic cup, he stretched one leg to the side, foot wiggling impatiently.

Wilder tapped her elbow. "Shall we?"

She caught a whiff of the homemade pretzels from a stand nearby as they moved.

"Creighton, thanks so much for taking the time to meet with us."

The man stood as Wilder extended his hand, and they shook. Sydney followed suit, offering what was most likely too wan a grin. *He might be family.* She should be filled with anticipation.

But she just couldn't shake it—the unreasonable hope that he wasn't her uncle. That the woman she'd met in that hospital room six years ago, emaciated and raspy-voiced, wasn't her mother.

*"At least I did the right thing. Leaving you . . . at least I did that."*

Would those words lose their sting if she discovered the one who'd uttered them hadn't had any claim on her in the first place?

Creighton zipped up his hoodie before resuming his place, his curious gaze roving over Sydney. "So, you might be . . . my niece." His look said he couldn't quite believe it.

"Weird, I know. We're not actually that far apart in age." Not with him being so much younger than CarleeAnn.

Wilder sat across from Creighton and motioned for Sydney to lower next to him. “As for whether you’re related, we’d hoped you might be able to shed some light.”

“I thought you said my sister gave her up for adoption?” He flicked one hand toward Sydney. “That would seem to indicate . . .” He shrugged. “Look, we weren’t a real close blended family. Even when CarleeAnn was living at home, we didn’t see a whole lot of each other. By the time I was walking and talking, she was a teenager—always out with friends and whatnot. And then she went to college and then . . .” Another shrug.

Sydney peered at the man’s face, looking for anything that hinted at a family connection. But no, even if they were connected through his stepsister, they wouldn’t share physical similarities. “Wilder said your sister dropped out of college during her first semester. Did she come home at all after that?”

Creighton’s nose scrunched. “I don’t think so. If she did, I’m sorry, but I don’t remember.”

Wilder leaned forward, elbows on the table. “But the weekend of Diana Muir’s accident—she was in town then?”

Creighton nodded. “That, I do remember. They’re kind of tied together in my head. Everyone heard about the accident.”

“And what else do you remember about that weekend?” Wilder prodded.

“I remember being sent to bed early. I remember yelling—my mom, my stepdad, and CarleeAnn, downstairs.” He looked away. “Weirdly, I . . . I think I remember CarleeAnn coming into my room later. It’s blurry. I was only seven then. But I’m pretty sure she kissed my forehead and then . . . well, she was gone the next morning.” He rubbed one palm over the back of his neck. “And, um, that was the last time I ever saw her.”

But why? If there was anything at all to Wilder’s theory, if CarleeAnn had somehow been in Diana’s car during the accident—or happened upon it

or had even gone looking for it—and if she'd found Diana's toddler still alive, why wouldn't she have gone straight to Maggie? To her own parents? To the police, if nothing else.

Or if there was nothing to Wilder's theory, if CarleeAnn had had a baby at eighteen or nineteen, why not take her home to her family? What had led her to Illinois?

Why never return to Muir Harbor?

Too many questions and they were decades old. What were the chances of answering any of them so many years later?

"Do you remember if your sister ever had a boyfriend?" Sydney asked. "Maybe someone named JP?"

Another shrug. Another shake of his head. "Sorry, no."

"Did your parents ever say anything about her whereabouts? Talk to you about where she was? Why she didn't come home?"

Creighton studied her again, perhaps looking for a hint of the older stepsister he remembered. "Not really. I heard Mom on the phone with her once—at least, I think it was her. Mom was crying. But mostly, they didn't talk about her. And then Mom got sick and my stepdad had to quit his job so he could care for her. We moved to D.C. to be closer to her specialist."

Had CarleeAnn ever even known that? Or had she been cut off completely?

Wilder laced his fingers on the table. "Creighton, were your parents the kind of people who . . . that is, if they'd found out their daughter had gotten pregnant out of wedlock, would that have been enough for them to become fully estranged from your sister?"

"I mean, I'd like to think not. No, we weren't necessarily close-knit but it's not like they were cruel. I should've asked more questions, I guess. But you know how it is when you're a kid. You just kind of accept things. And then I was a teenager and all I cared about was baseball. Until Mom died

and . . .” His palms drifted open. “I always knew I had a stepsister out there somewhere, but . . .”

Pain inched over his face. Not only pain—guilt. And Sydney could see what this was doing to him—dredging up old confusion, creating new hurt. Making him question his parents’ character, feel culpable for his sister’s absence. “You were only a young boy. It wasn’t your job to have all the answers.”

He nodded. “Just so I understand, you thought my sister was your birth mother but now you’re doubting it?”

Not until a week ago. Not until Wilder Monroe had come crashing into her world. And Maggie had welcomed Sydney into hers.

Wilder answered for her. “Maybe you’re too young to remember, but Diana Muir and your sister were childhood friends—best friends. They both returned to town the weekend of Diana’s accident. It’s a loose connection but—”

“Wait, you’re not saying CarleeAnn had anything to do with that accident, are you?”

Sydney sucked in a breath. That thought had never even entered her mind. But one look at Wilder told her the same wasn’t true of him.

He spoke slowly. “There *was* another car in that accident. That’s never been in question. But the other vehicle wasn’t found.”

Creighton jerked to his feet, yanked his hat off his head. “It’s one thing to intrude in my life asking questions about a sister I barely remember and her baby that may or may not exist. But then to insinuate . . . no.” He stuffed his cap back into place. “I think I’m done with this conversation.”

Wilder stood. “Creighton, I’m sorry but—”

“No, I’ve had enough.” His focus wrenched to Sydney. “If it turns out . . . if you and I are . . . look, I don’t know what exactly you want from this, from me. But I’m probably not cut out to be a doting uncle even if we are related.”

“That’s not what I—”

He twisted before she could finish her sentence and stalked away.

Wilder released a sigh. “Not exactly how I foresaw that going.”

Sydney’s legs were shaky as she stood. “And how exactly did you think it was going to go? You all but accused his sister of being involved in a hit-and-run or . . . or worse. Causing an accident and then running off with Diana’s baby. What, do you think she kidnapped me . . . the baby?”

“I didn’t say anything like that.” Wilder palmed both cheeks. “But I’ve been doing my homework, Syd. I found a couple of women who were in the same residence hall as CarleeAnn during her short time in college. She was big into the party scene. One of them remembers her getting high.”

“That doesn’t mean—”

“Do you know what she died from?”

Of course she did. She’d *found* her. Visited her.

Opened a door she later wished she’d left closed. “Acute kidney failure. She was only forty-three.”

“Acute kidney failure caused by more than two decades of hard drugs and alcohol. If she was already mixed up in a bad scene when she was nineteen, then I don’t think it’s such a stretch to think that if she was there the night of the accident, she could’ve caused or at least been involved in that accident. Might’ve left out of fear of getting in trouble.”

Might’ve taken Diana’s daughter with her.

She could only stare at him, no words, no way to purge her mind of the memories clogging it now. The sight of CarleeAnn in that hospital bed, bruises under her eyes, IVs taped to both hands. The smell of the sterile room. The thumping of her heart when she’d walked in.

Then the splintering. “*At least I did the right thing. Leaving you . . . at least I did that.*”

The trio of fiddlers had moved on to some other upbeat tune now, but it grated against her nerves. And the smell of homemade pretzels no longer

made her stomach gurgle. *So many people . . .*

“I need a minute, Wilder.” More than a minute. She needed space. She needed something, anything, to make sense.

She needed Maggie sitting next to her, assuring her the mess of the past couldn’t reach her now.

But that was the thing. It already had.



There was something satisfying about watching Indi man her store’s booth. Pride, that’s what it was. His youngest sister had made a success of her business.

But there was some relief mixed in, too, with what he was feeling now as he watched her barter with a customer over an antique handheld mirror. He’d been worried about Indi ever since Tuesday night, but tonight she was in her element. She passed the mirror to her customer and turned to Neil, smile wide as she held up her payment. “How about that? A crisp fifty-dollar bill.”

“Impressive.”

She smoothed the bill atop the others in her metal lockbox. “Lilian really needs to get over the idea that haggling is uncouth. She could be raking in more at the farm stand.”

Neil would be happy as long as they took in enough tonight to pay to fill the propane tank this winter. He could almost always count on proceeds from the Autumn Market to cover that, though he felt bad that Maggie had done the bulk of the baking and preserving and canning that made it possible to have a profitable booth. Of course, Lilian’s produce helped, too. And Indi’s pressed wildflowers.

All he'd done was make the wooden Muir Farm sign that hung at the back of the booth.

*"You don't have to do everything on your own, Neil. You've got this amazing family. Let them help you."*

He'd been playing and replaying Sydney's words all week.

But Lil and Indi shouldn't *have* to help him keep the farm afloat. They had their own careers, their own lives. And Maggie had given him so much through the years, imaginably more than most others would for the orphan grandson of a long-ago friend.

Things could've turned out so differently for him. He could still be *there*. Back in Edinburgh. Unwanted by his only remaining family. If not for Maggie, he might be . . .

Like Sydney. Alone.

"Earth to Neil." Indi waved her hand in front of his face. "I should send you back to Lilian. For Sydney's sake, if nothing else. She's not used to our sister's bossiness the way we are."

From what he'd seen so far tonight, Sydney could handle Lilian's demeanor just fine. He might've felt a tingle of pride at that, too.

"Before you go, though—" Indi reached into the lockbox, pulled out a stack of bills, fingered through them. Held them toward him. "My first payment. I owe you, Neil. I've owed for four years."

He held up both palms. "Nope."

"You can't keep refusing to let me repay you."

"Your second store isn't even a year old. I know it hasn't been easygoing since opening day. Use it toward that."

She shook her head, curls bouncing around her face, exasperation written in her frown. "Neil—"

"It wasn't a loan, sis. It was an investment."

"Then you should have a cut of the store's profits."

He placed his palms on her shoulders the way he used to when she was eight and struggling with reading. When she'd get so frazzled trying to study at home that she'd jump up from the living room floor and declare she was giving up. And he'd stand in front of her, hands on her shoulders to still her, and talk her through word after word.

"It wasn't an investment in the business, Indi. It was an investment in you. And the way I see it, it's paid off a hundred times over."

Gratitude filled her green eyes. Tears, too. And then, "Drat you, Neil."

He dropped his hands. "Um, excuse me?"

"I'd completely convinced myself it was the right thing to do—not telling you. I just wanted to save you the extra stress and I figured the guilt of not saying anything was worth it. Then you go and say something so nice and all of a sudden, I feel like a heel."

"What didn't you tell me?"

She whirled away from him, stuffing her wad of cash back in the lockbox. "Tuesday night. When the goats got out."

"Oh, that. You can save the confession. I kind of already assumed you were the one who—"

"But I wasn't. I *know* I latched the gate after feeding them. And even if I hadn't, that wouldn't explain Melba wandering around the grove and the chickens scattered all over the place." She shook her head. "Plus, I think I saw footprints. It was dark, but . . . I'm pretty positive someone was on our land and purposely let the animals out."

Footprints. Again. "And you're just now telling me?"

"I told you—I was trying to save you the stress. I figured it was a bored teen looking for some amusement."

She was probably right. 'Least, he hoped she was. But the last thing they needed was a prankster. What if someone found the treehouse, decided it would be fun to escalate from unlatched gates to vandalism?

“I shouldn’t have told you. Your forehead lines are showing.” Indi let out a puff of air. “But it’s hard not to tell you things.”

If only he didn’t have the opposite problem. For one split second, he almost considered taking Sydney’s advice. Telling Indi about the broken equipment, the farm’s financial struggles. But then she’d probably try to shove every dollar in her lockbox at him.

“Thanks for telling me.” He gave her a quick side-hug. “You’re right—probably just a kid out on a lark.”

But as he left her booth and made his way through the maze of stands toward the center of the square, he couldn’t shake it—the sense that too many things were happening at once. The harvester, the generator, the animals . . . not that any of it was related, but . . .

They *weren’t* related, right? *Of course not.* Old equipment broke. It happened. Just because two vital pieces of machinery bit the dust in one week’s time didn’t mean anything. He paused near the gazebo, squeezed his chin, and looked to the sky. The half-circle sun wasn’t doing much to light the landscape any longer, but the lanterns hanging from tree branches and streetlamps covered the square in a glow.

When he lowered his gaze, it landed on Sydney, as if drawn to where she sat at a table, shoulders slumped. What was she doing there alone? Where was Wilder? Had they already met up with that Creighton guy?

On impulse, he beelined back to the farm booth. Ah, that answered the question of Wilder’s whereabouts. He’d taken Sydney’s spot behind the stand. Bet Lilian was none-too-pleased about that. But he wasn’t sticking around to find out.

He reached for the item he’d tucked behind a basket at the back of the booth and ducked away before Lil or Wilder spotted him.

He reached Sydney in seconds. Wait, was she nursing a red cup? Oh, for Pete’s sake, had none of them remembered to warn her about the moon punch? “Sydney, don’t drink the punch.”

*Oh.* Now he saw what he hadn't from a distance. Red-rimmed eyes. A mark on her bottom lip where she must've bit down. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm fine." She swiped the back of her hand over her eyes. "Why do you have that?"

He held it up. "I paid for it fair and square. Just felt like if it was really the first pie you've ever made, you should at least get to try it."

Tears filled her eyes. "Why in the world are you being so nice to me? You didn't even want me here. And you were right. It's all so much messier than I thought. I've been here almost a whole week and we're nowhere closer to answering anything and the longer I stay, the more it's going to hurt Maggie. It's what everyone's thinking."

Sydney lifted her cup, but he intercepted it before she could take a drink. "Oh no, you don't. That stuff's lethal." At least it didn't look like she'd taken more than a sip or two so far.

He dumped the punch in the grass and tossed the cup in a trash bin, then reached for her hand and towed her to her feet. "Come with me."

"Come where? To do what?"

"To eat this pie, of course."



When had it become second nature to follow Neil with no clue where he was leading her?

Through a veiled grove on a cool morning. Across a pitch-black field at night.

And now, away from the lights of the town square. "Why couldn't we eat the pie back at that picnic table?" Did Neil realize he still held her hand?

And how had he managed to turn up just when she'd needed someone? The moment she'd sent Wilder away after that flop of a conversation with

Creighton, the emotion had slammed into her.

More than that, the unforgiving truth. The possibility that a week from tomorrow, she might go back to Illinois without one single answer about her past.

Neil tugged on her hand. “Got somewhere better in mind.”

What else was she supposed to do other than let him pull her along? The music of the market faded as they crossed the cobblestone street, rounded a corner, and passed the First State Bank, down another block . . .

Her eyes widened as the view unfolded in front of her. The ocean—but not as she’d seen it before. Streetlamps and port lights lit up the harbor, dots of yellow and white rising and falling in the blue-black water. Boats of every shape and size crowded together around a series of docks that lined the waterfront.

“I guess I see where Muir Harbor gets its name.”

“We’re not a huge industrial port like some. Though we get a fair amount of trade boats and fishermen in our waters, and there’s a nice-sized lobster farm about a mile up the shore.” At some point on their walk, Neil had released her hand, but he stood close enough now that his shoulder brushed hers as he pointed. “That’s the dock we want.”

She followed him down the pier and onto a wobbling wooden dock surrounded by smaller boats. He pointed again, this time toward a boat with *The Marilyn* painted in hunter green on its hull.

“It’s Wilder’s.”

Ah. Wilder *Monroe*. “As in Marilyn Monroe. Does he live on that thing?”

Neil nodded. “Most of the time. Now you see why he hangs around the house so often. Sometimes when your room’s empty, he even stays at the house.”

*Her room.*

“He claims he loves living on the water—it’s how he grew up, just him and his dad—but I think every once in a while he appreciates a bed that doesn’t sway at night.”

“We’re going out on it?”

His mischievous grin did something to her insides, sent warmth feathering through her that only intensified when he grabbed her hand again, leading her onto the wobbling deck and over the edge of the boat.

Once on the boat, he handed her the pie and ducked under a small door, returning in seconds holding up two plastic forks. From there, he steered her up the ladder to a deck at the top of the boat.

She paused at the top of the ladder. “I’m still not sure what we’re doing here.”

That grin again. “The pie, lass.” He retrieved it from her hands, then lowered to the deck floor, crossed his legs, looked up at her. “Don’t make me eat the whole thing myself.”

“We’re going to eat straight from the dish?” She dropped down across from him.

He tucked a fork straight into the center of the pie, came up with a bite. Held it toward her. “Too many questions. Not enough eating.”

Well, then. She took the fork. As her mouth closed around the bite, her eyes shuttered too. *Heavenly*. The berry flavor burst on her tongue, the crust buttery and flaky. “Oh my word, I’m an amazing baker.”

At Neil’s laughter, its perfect timbre familiar by now, she opened her eyes. A faint red tinged his cheeks and his nose. He’d shaved yesterday, she’d been startled to notice. Even more startled by the dimples on both sides of his mouth. How was it those twin dimples somehow did him even more favors through his thin five-o’clock shadow tonight?

*Stop staring.* “Fine, Maggie’s the amazing baker. I’m just really good at following her recipe and obeying her instructions.”

“No, credit where credit’s due. You did the work. And this is delicious.” He dug in for another bite before holding the pie plate toward her.

Her hair tangled in the wind, but she made no attempt to catch it and pull it back. Just swallowed another bite and went in for more. “I guess you probably want to know how the conversation with CarleeAnn’s brother went.”

“Only if you want to tell me. Although, fair warning, Indi says it’s hard not to tell me things.”

Those crinkles at the corners of his eyes—maybe even more charming than the dimples. Or how steadily he was shoveling in bites of the pie. *Her* pie. And it just spilled from her—the whole story, every piece of the encounter with Creighton. Every doubt it’d planted in her mind.

“I don’t know, Neil, I was just sitting there thinking no matter which woman is my mother—either way, they’re both dead. And nobody knows any JP, and now Wilder’s talking about drugs and the accident and maybe CarleeAnn actually kidnapped me and . . . I gave myself two weeks to come here and get answers but I’m honestly beginning to think there aren’t any answers to be had.” Oh goodness, she could feel tears again, pricking the backs of her eyes.

But she wouldn’t cry again. Not in front of Neil. Not when she wasn’t the one who would end up hurting the most at the end of this. *Maggie*.

She blinked and lifted her eyes to Neil. “Why’s she doing it, Neil? Why’s Maggie still searching? Why’s she so willing to bring a stranger into her house and invest and give of herself when . . . when there’s no guarantee she’ll ever get anything more than pain and disappointment in return? She already has you and Lilian and Indi.”

Neil looked away. He had stopped eating at some point during her retelling. A quiet moment passed as his gaze wandered into the distance, moonlight tracing his profile. “Because that’s what love does.”

He said it so quietly she wasn't even sure she'd understood him correctly. "Hmm?"

"It's something Maggie said earlier tonight," he murmured. "About pie, actually." He turned back to her, slid the dish in between them out of the way, and scooted an inch closer, their knees almost touching. "I think Maggie would say that's what love does. It keeps hoping even when the answers don't come easily. It invites strangers in. It doesn't give up. Love keeps searching."

The boat's gentle sway gradually stilled her distraught spirits. More, the impact of Neil's words. "Like in the Bible. The story of the shepherd going after the one lost sheep."

"She'd be happy you know your parables." He looked to the sea again. "I don't think I realized until just now how strong Maggie is. She has more love to give than anyone I've ever met."

One quiet moment slipped into the next, stars like diamond studs peeking one after another through the sky's canvas of velvety black.

"How'd you come to live with Maggie? If you don't mind sharing . . ."

"Maggie had a pen pal from Scotland when she was young—my grandma. They stayed friends through the decades, such close friends that my grandparents would visit her in the States every other summer or so. They took me for the first time when I was five." He looked to Sydney. "My parents died when I was a baby—plane accident."

"Oh, Neil, that's . . . awful."

"I know, though I don't have any memories of them. My grandparents raised me and that's how I first knew Maggie, as Grandma's friend from across the Atlantic. But then Grandpa died when I was twelve and Grandma when I was thirteen. My aunt and uncle were named my guardians, but, uh . . . taking in a teenager hadn't really been in either of their life plans."

He said it all in such a detached way, almost indifferent. But it had to have been a painful time in his life.

“Anyway, the summer after I went to live with them in Edinburgh, Maggie emailed my aunt and explained her connection to my grandparents and invited us for the summer. My aunt flew over with me. Then she flew back without me.”

Something—not a frown, but not quite a grin—passed over his face. “The funny thing is, I always got the feeling Maggie knew I’d be staying. To this day, I don’t know how she and Aunt Irene came to the decision. I just know I’m glad they did.”

“But Maggie never formally adopted you. Your last name . . . not Muir like the girls.”

The indifference returned to his face, but this time it seemed forced. Instead of replying, he let out a sharp breath and then surprised her when he stood. “We should probably get back.”

“Oh. Okay.” Had she said something wrong? He leaned to retrieve the pie dish, wrapped both forks in a napkin, kept his gaze away from hers. “Neil, if I—”

“You’re wrong, by the way.”

She rose slowly. “What?”

“You haven’t brought pain and disappointment to Maggie.”

Now she was the one to exhale, more relieved than she should be when his eyes finally connected with hers.

“She spends so much time in that house alone while the girls and I are off doing our thing. But not this week. It’s not pain and disappointment you’ve brought to Maggie. It’s joy. And it’s time the rest of us start helping both of you find your answers.”



*N*ever once had Neil made a promise without every intention of keeping it. Didn't plan on starting now.

"I swear to you, Syd, Melba wouldn't hurt a fly."

One week and one day ago, Sydney Rose had stood in that exact spot in the barn, eyeing Melba with the very same expression she wore now: pure alarm. "The way her tail's whipping, I think she would. She could knock a fly flat with that thing."

Both Indi and Lilian burst out laughing—Lil from her perch atop the stall's gate and Indi from the open barn door, where two of her goats took turns knocking into her knees.

Teaching Sydney to milk Melba wasn't the only promise he was currently in the process of keeping. He'd meant what he'd said Saturday night about it being time he and his sisters help her in her search for answers.

Which was why he'd coaxed Lilian and Indi downstairs extra early Sunday morning before church. Sat them down in the kitchen for a breakfast of Maggie's blueberry waffles and his own bacon omelets. Then he'd had Sydney tell them about the photo she'd told him about the previous night as they'd walked from Wilder's houseboat back to the square.

And then he'd asked his sisters to be a part of his plan.

*"While Wilder's busy chasing down whatever information he can find regarding Diana and CarleeAnn, we could be helping Sydney figure out who JP is. The way I see it, that's a bigger lead than anything else. If we find Sydney's father, he'll be able to tell us which one was her mother."*

Assuming, that is, it really was her father in that photo.

*"But that picture could've been taken anywhere. How do we know the JP in the photo was from Muir Harbor?"* Lilian had asked the question. Though, surprisingly, it hadn't been doubt or skepticism in her voice so much as interest. Maybe even intrigue.

*"We don't. But from what Syd says, all three people in the photo looked to be sixteen or so. And we know Diana and CarleeAnn were both in Muir Harbor at that age. Stands to reason JP was too."*

By the time they'd cleared their plates, both sisters were on board to help solve the mystery and Maggie was beaming and Sydney . . .

She'd blinked away tears. Mouthed a "thank you" to him. And for the life of him, he couldn't have remembered why he'd ever thought her presence here an unwelcome thing.

He'd spent almost the entire rest of his Sunday, save an hour in church and hasty minutes completing chores, with the women. They'd dug through boxes in the attic, looking for Diana's old yearbooks in hopes of finding a classmate of hers who might fit the bill. But there'd been no JP and only one student with those initials—a female.

Lilian had pulled up town and county records online and spent hours culling through them. Indi had made phone calls—so many of them and he didn't even know who to. He'd been too busy helping Sydney parse through old phone books they'd found in a messy desk drawer. They'd found exactly one JP, and plenty of folks with the right initials. But a quick Google search, a glance at a social media profile, or as a last result, a phone call, nixed each one of them.

It was two days later now and they'd made little to no progress.

If only they could figure out where to go from here. It's why they'd all tromped out to the barn together this morning—a second planning session before Lilian needed to head to the office and Indi hit the road for Augusta. She was going earlier than usual this week, something about floor replacements and dinner with Bennington.

Because despite last week, apparently that was still a thing. Maybe one of these days the guy would actually deign to show his face in Muir Harbor so his future family could meet him.

Neil rubbed his hands together, eager for what little warmth he could get. After unseasonably warm temps last week, the second-to-last day in October had blustered in with force this morning. “You're going to have to come a little closer if you have any hope of going through with this, Syd.”

She was wearing his coat again, her red hair knotted in an unruly bun. Looked like someone had found her some work boots that actually fit. They'd gone and made a farm girl of her.

Of course, if she wanted a true taste of life on a blueberry farm, she'd need to experience harvest. Raking the fields under a September sun. The noise of the air blower and the metal hum of the conveyor belt. Cars rumbling down the lane, carrying customers ready to pick up berries by the crateful. Maybe more customers than ever, thanks to that website she'd built.

But no, she'd be long gone by next year.

Or would she? If she found out she truly was Maggie's granddaughter, would she decide to stay? *But she has a life back in Illinois. Jobs.* She'd mentioned a foster brother and a friend who owned a bakery.

Hadn't mentioned a boyfriend.

Sydney approached Melba's stall now, a nervous tilt to her lips. "What kind of name is Melba, anyway?"

Neil propped one palm against Melba's soft skin. "Don't listen to her, girl. She's just a little grouchy this morning."

"I am not grouchy. I'm being appropriately cautious about an unfamiliar experience, that's all."

"She's a scaredy-cat," he said into the cow's ear.

And was rewarded with one of those grins he'd come to enjoy the sight of almost as much as the seaside view from the attic window.

"Afraid you're going to have to take those floppy wool gloves off, Miss Rose, if you want to get the job done."

She yanked off one mitten. "I don't remember ever saying I wanted to get this job done. 'Come out to the barn,' you said. 'We're going to plan the next step in our hunt for JP,' you said. Didn't mention anything about Melba."

He chuckled. "It was implied. Now, if you would, kindly take a seat on that crate, lass."

Indi joined Lilian at the stall door, perching with her feet on the bottom ledge and her arms dangling over the top. "Uh-oh, he's turning on the Scottish charm. Neil always gets what he wants when he goes full Scots."

Sydney plopped down. "It's bad enough you're forcing me to do this, but do I have to have an audience?"

Before he could answer, Maggie's faraway voice drifted into the barn. "Neil, girls!"

Sydney popped up, shooting him a smirk over her shoulder as she raced after Lilian and Indi. Oh, if she thought she was getting out of this that

easily . . . “Don’t worry, Mel. We’ll be back.”

In seconds, he was outside, hurrying after the girls as they caught up to Maggie at the edge of the grove.

Maggie huffed, bending over her knees, holding out her phone. “JP. I think . . .” She gulped for breath and straightened. “I think I might’ve found him.”

“Are you serious?” Lilian came up beside Maggie, placed an arm around her. “And are you all right? You shouldn’t have come running. You could’ve texted and we’d have come back to the house and—”

“Hush, Lil.” Sunlight twirled in Maggie’s eyes as she gazed at Sydney. “I was thinking about that photo, how you said the girls looked like teens. And then I remembered you saying it must’ve been taken in the summer because they were wearing tank tops.” She inhaled again. “And that’s when it hit me. The summer of 1987. Both of them—they were camp counselors at this little camp, only about forty minutes away. I looked at the website on my phone, thinking maybe I could call, ask if they kept any records or lists of counselors from past years.”

She held out her phone. “Look at the name of the current camp director.”

Indi took her phone, peered at the screen. “John Pettinger.”

Maggie’s look was pure triumph. “JP. I already tried calling the camp twice, but no answer. Makes sense considering the season. And there’s no photos of him on their site. Not that I can find anyway.”

Indi started tapping on Maggie’s screen. “But they might have an Instagram account. Or a Facebook page. We can search through photos there, see if Syd recognizes anyone.”

“Or we can drive out. Right away. Today. It looks like the director lives right on site.”

“Maggie—” Lilian began.

But Maggie cut in. “There’s no reason not to. It’s such a short drive. Sydney, we can go together.”

“A road trip sounds more fun to me than milking Melba, that’s for sure.”

Why did he get the feeling if no one else was watching, Sydney would’ve stuck her tongue out at him just then? He narrowed his eyes at her for the briefest moment before returning his attention to Maggie. This was a long shot. That camp director’s name could be pure coincidence.

But wasn’t everything about their quest a long shot?

*Their quest.* Sometime in the past two days, he’d stopped thinking of Sydney’s mission as hers alone. “If you guys wait a couple hours, I could go with you. Lil’s got work and Indi needs to hit the road but—”

“There’s no need, Neil.” Maggie plucked her phone from Indi’s hands. “Sydney and I are quite capable. We’ll take the Buick.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to point out that he couldn’t remember the last time Maggie had driven anywhere. How rarely she left the farm or went into Muir Harbor, let alone hit the highway.

But another glance at Sydney stopped his words in his throat and he could practically hear her voice. *You don’t have to do it all. Let your family help.*

She lifted her brow.

*Okay, fine, Syd. We’ll do this your way.* “Guess I’ll just get back to work, then. Someone has to milk our poor cow.”

Moments later, he watched the women walk away, their chatter drifting behind them—and was glad he had when Sydney turned her head, gave him the briefest smile, a quick wave. Then she tucked her arm through Maggie’s, his too-big coat billowing in the wind behind her.

The sight was enough to keep a smile on his face all the way back to the barn.

Until he saw the truck sitting in front of the machine shed, the Carter Farms logo on its side. *Not Tatum again.*

Only it wasn't Tatum striding across the patchy lot. Not enough swagger in his gait.

And yet, Tate Carter was a spitting image of his sire, save the older man's rugged lines. Sandy hair, brown eyes—determination glinting in his expression. "Morning, MacKean."

Trapping his groan inside, Neil moved forward, forced out a greeting, and held out his hand.

Tate's grip wasn't as bone-crushing as his father's, but it was rigid all the same. Sunlight glinted on the sunglasses hooked to his shirt. "Sorry to show up out of the blue. Figured I'd have a better chance finding you out here than at the house. Unfortunately, I'm not here for a social call, either."

Hadn't figured he was. "If this is about the land—"

The older man gave a stiff shake of his head. "No, it's about a little pranking spree my son and some of his friends got off to the other night. I'm afraid yours is one of the farms they hit."

Oh, the goats in the yard. Melba and the chickens.

"Wanted to offer my personal apology. And I'm going to make sure my boy comes by to do the same soon as he's back from his mom's next week."

"Well . . . thank you. I appreciate that."

Another taut nod and Tate turned. But he stopped at his truck door. "Since you brought up the land, I heard my father paid you a visit. Heard you turned him down flat."

Guess the man's ears worked just fine. "True."

"What I can't figure out is why. I'm sure it's gutting to hear it, but you'll kill yourself trying to keep this place afloat on your own, MacKean."

"I'm not on my own." Except . . . except if he were brutally honest with himself, there were times when he felt like he was. He loved Maggie and

his sisters more than anything, but at the end of the day, he *did* shoulder most of the weight of this place.

*“You don’t have to do everything on your own, Neil.”*

But what was he supposed to do? Ask Lil and Indi to step back from the careers they loved? Burden Maggie with financial woes?

*“Heard you might be out a harvester, too.”*

His focus tore back to Tate, suspicion—possibly illogical, but born out of frustration—forming words before he could stop them. “And you wouldn’t know anything more about that, would you? Any chance your boy’s been doing more around here than unlatching gates?”

Tate took a step back. “What’re you trying to insinuate, son?”

*Son.* Tatum Carter had tossed that word at him too. Tate’s use of it rankled every bit as much. “Two pieces of equipment shot in one week. Can you blame me for wondering?” Not that he’d seen a single sign of tampering. But there had been those footprints last week. That idling car the weekend before.

*“I know my boy. He might be a little wild, but he wouldn’t—”*

*“So maybe it wasn’t him. But he’s not the only Carter who’s been on this land.”* Tatum Carter had been by twice in as many days—and Neil had discovered the broken generator in between. “If your father thinks he can bully us into selling just because all you Carters have some grand scheme to own every berry farm from here to Rhode Island . . .”

He needed to stop. His argument wasn’t with Tate. The man had seemed sincere when he’d apologized for his son’s actions a minute ago.

Unless it was an act. Another excuse for another Carter to come calling.

*“If you’ve got something to say, MacKean, come right out and say it.”*

*“I’m saying no means no. And if you’d pass that message on to your father, I’d appreciate it.”* He turned away, started toward the barn.

*“They have history, you know.”*

He slowed. History? They . . . who?

“Maggie, my dad. Did you know that?”

He didn't want to look back. Didn't want to give the man the satisfaction of his confusion. Or his curiosity. But what in the world was he talking about? He gave in and veered to face Tate once more. “I don't know what you're referring to.”

“Probably because it was forever ago. Before your time *and* mine. But they were sort of . . . together, for a short while. I found out when I was a teenager. Walked in on my mom yelling something about how my dad had never gotten over Margaret Muir.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Tate pulled his sunglasses free and slid them over his face. “So that you'll consider, even if for no longer than a speck of a second, that maybe my father isn't out to cheat Maggie out of her land so much as help her.”



It might be him. Could be. The hair was the right color, the eyes.

Sydney stared at the man they'd found behind a grouping of log cabins, wielding a leaf blower, wearing a puffy cobalt vest and fingerless gloves, his cheeks ruddy from the morning's cold.

It could be him. John Pettinger. JP. Her father.

If this man was an older version of the one in the photo and if the one in the photo really was her father . . .

“Oh, I definitely remember those two. That was my first summer as a counselor. A good experience, obviously. I'm still here.” He stared at the Polaroid Maggie had handed him once they'd explained why they were here, a picture Sydney had retrieved from one of the scrapbooks she'd gone through last week. It showed Diana and CarleeAnn near to the same age as they were in the missing photo she'd taken from CarleeAnn's hospital

room. In this one, the two teenage girls were sitting on Maggie's front porch, skinny arms draped over each other's shoulders.

Mr. Pettinger handed the Polaroid back to Maggie. "I have to admit, after twenty-plus years working with young people, most of the names and faces tend to blur after a while. But there's some you just don't forget."

If the man noticed the way Sydney's gaze hadn't moved from his face, he didn't let on. Were John Pettinger's eyes a little wider set than the teenager in CarleeAnn's photo? And just how much did she trust her memory of that picture? She'd certainly studied it plenty in the days after that hospital visit, but that was years ago.

If only Micah would message or call one of these days to tell her he'd found it. She'd texted him yesterday to check in, but the exchange had been brief. She'd reminded him about the photo, but his response hadn't exactly been a jolt of assurance. *Yeah, I'm keeping an eye out.*

Only when she finally tore her scrutiny away from John Pettinger did she realize Maggie was looking at her, clearly waiting for Sydney to follow up with a question. But how to approach what could potentially be an incredibly awkward subject. *Did you more than know one of these girls? Is there any chance . . .*

"Were you pretty good friends with Diana and CarleeAnn?" A gust of wind sent curled leaves skittering off the pile he'd been forming before they arrived.

"Oh, well, sure. All the counselors tended to hang out together when we weren't with campers, especially on weekends when the camp emptied out."

Okay, apparently she was going to have to get more specific. "Did you keep in touch with either of them after that summer?" Chilled air scuffed her cheeks and she burrowed her chin into the burnt-orange-and-white-striped scarf she'd borrowed from an overflowing basket in Maggie's

entryway closet. Together with Neil's bulky coat, they went far in warding off the morning cold.

But not the nerves grating her in this moment, edgy and muddled. She didn't know what to feel right now. Hopeful? Uncomfortable? Tense?

A cumbersome quiet stretched for too long, impatient breaths trapped in her lungs.

And yet, certainly only a second or two must have passed before the man replied. "No. No, I never saw or talked to either one of them again after that summer."

The exhale hit her hard and quick, scraping up her throat. "You're sure?" she rasped.

"Positive."

She couldn't bring herself to look at Maggie. The poor woman had been so excited this morning, so pleased at remembering the summer camp, finding John Pettinger. What an awful, unfair coincidence.

"Honestly, I'd be surprised if anyone from that summer kept in touch with the two of them," the man added. "They hung out with the rest of us, yes, but they always sort of gave off the vibe that they had each other and that was enough. Attached at the hip—part of why they're so memorable."

"So you never . . . with one of them . . . there's no chance that you're—"

With a soft touch on Sydney's arm, Maggie intervened. "Thank you, Mr. Pettinger. We're grateful you were willing to take a few minutes away from your yardwork, but we won't keep you any longer."

"You're not going to tell me why you came here? Have to admit you've got me curious." The man had a warm, steady smile.

Just not the one from CarleeAnn's photo.

Maggie's tone was all grace, though there was a breathless quality to her voice. "Just trying to fill in a few gaps from the past."

"Well, I hope those two are doing well now. Of course, I only knew them for those couple of months, but it was enough to see they had the kind

of friendship that sticks.”

No, no they weren't doing well. One was killed in a tragic accident. The other, from disease and addiction. And as for their enduring friendship . . .

Hopelessness clawed its way in. Conjecture, that's all any of this was. For all any of them knew, once Diana left Muir Harbor and landed in Atlanta, they never spoke again. *But they returned to Muir Harbor the same weekend. After CarleeAnn dropped out of college, she could've gone to Atlanta, could've met up with Diana . . .*

More guesswork.

Maggie's only reply to Mr. Pettinger was a murmured, “Yes, they were certainly close.” Then a kind, if strained, smile. Another thank-you for his time. And she steered Sydney away.

Only when they'd emerged on the other side of the cabins did Sydney find her voice. “Maybe I should've been more straightforward. He might've slept with one of them that summer.”

“Sydney—”

“We might have the dates off or maybe you're misremembering when Diana was at the camp. Maybe it was after her senior year of high school. That would make complete sense. She sleeps with the guy in the summer, discovers she's pregnant once she's home, takes off in the fall, and by the time she returns two and a half years later—”

“The camp was after her junior year, Syd.” Maggie's pace quickened as they neared her car. “She was home the summer after she graduated, not that she was around the house much. But I remember it clearly. She and CarleeAnn made a point of having all the fun they could before adulthood set in—her words.”

In the distance behind them, the rolling hum of John Pettinger's leaf blower sounded. Not her father. Not the JP from the photo.

Another billowing draft captured the ends of her scarf and set them flapping against her back. “I know we've already talked about this, Maggie,

but are you certain you don't remember anyone else Diana and CarleeAnn might have spent time with that last summer?" *Someone* had known the both of them, taken that photo with them. "Wilder said there was a guy at a pub. Are you sure she never mentioned or—"

Maggie stopped a few feet from the car. "I know you want answers. I do, too. But Diana was my daughter, and it's not easy thinking about her being . . ." Her breathing hitched, her tone firmer than Sydney had heard before. "One minute you're talking about her sleeping with a camp counselor and the next it's a stranger in a bar and . . . she was only a teenager, Sydney. She was my *daughter*. Flippantly talking about who she was or wasn't intimate with is not exactly comfortable for me."

Hot reproach warred with the bitter wind. "I'm sorry."

"I still have nightmares about her accident from time to time. I still wonder if I'd been a better mother . . ."

"Oh, Maggie. I'm sorry—I'm so, so sorry."

Maggie had a palm over her heart, apparently still working to catch her breath—from the walk or her exasperation? "It's all right."

"No, it's not. You just wanted to find your granddaughter, and I've turned it into something else entirely. I've made it about finding my father instead and . . . and it's dredging up so many hard things." She turned around, needing the momentary reprieve from Maggie's gaze, this benevolent, wonderful woman who'd only shown her kindness and unending welcome since the moment Sydney arrived. "I know this has to be so hard for you and I'm only complicating things further. Not only for you, but now everyone else has been drawn into it too. And it's the last thing you all need, especially Neil with all he has going on—trying to save the farm, dig it out from a financial danger zone, and—"

"What?"

*Too far, Syd. Neil didn't want her to worry.*

"Sydney."

Why did she keep making things worse? *Tell her you were exaggerating. The farm is fine.* But lying to her wouldn't make this any better.

“Maggie, I shouldn't have . . . I didn't mean . . .” She finally turned around.

Too late. Maggie was already crumpling to the ground.



*N*eil didn't trust himself to walk into Maggie's bedroom.

Just as he hadn't trusted himself to meet Maggie and Sydney in the driveway when he heard the engine of Maggie's old Buick rumble to a stop. Lilian had come home as soon as she'd heard the news, so he'd let her be the one to hurry out to the car, open Maggie's passenger-side door, slip an arm around her.

*Coward.*

No, he wasn't being a coward. He was stopping himself from descending into a tirade of misplaced frustration and fear. From saying everything he'd thought ever since receiving Sydney's call almost two hours ago.

He'd assumed when he'd seen her name on his phone's screen she was calling to give him an update on the man they'd gone to meet at the summer camp. Instead, she'd scared him half to death by telling him Maggie had fainted.

*“She’s sure it’s just because she had an empty stomach. But after she came to, we drove to a little deli and now we’re on the way home and—”*

He’d hardly heard her next words, instant alarm starting in his lungs and spreading to every limb. Sydney had said something about a goose egg on Maggie’s head, and as the women filed in the house, he’d seen the scratch on her cheek, the grass stains on her coat.

Why hadn’t Sydney called him sooner? She’d taken her to a *deli*? They should’ve gone to the nearest hospital, had Maggie checked over. What if the impact of the fall had left her with a concussion?

*This* was why he’d stayed in the kitchen, setting the teapot to boiling and preparing a cup of Maggie’s favorite orange spice tea instead of following the rest of them to Maggie’s bedroom. A blustering interrogation wouldn’t do Maggie any favors. He hadn’t even talked to any of them save when Maggie walked in the front door. He’d mumbled something then about being glad she was home and thankful she was okay.

But what if she wasn’t? He dropped a teabag in Maggie’s usual yellow mug and poured steaming water over it.

“She requests that you buck up and face her before she lays down for a nap.” Lilian.

He placed the teapot on a cold burner and turned. “How is she?” Besides impatient to see him, apparently. Which meant he needed to get his brittle distress under control.

“Honestly, she seems completely fine. Maybe a little tired, but then, she doesn’t usually take morning road trips.”

Nor should she have needed to. They could’ve tried calling the camp again. Found an email address. Saved themselves the trouble of making a trip that only resulted in disappointment.

That was the other thing Sydney had told him on the phone, not that his focus had been at its best. But he’d heard enough to know John Pettinger wasn’t the JP they sought.

“We should be taking her to a doctor, Lil.”

Lilian shook her head. “She doesn’t want that. Her yearly physical is coming up at the end of November. She insists there’s no point—”

“She’s never fainted before!”

“Maybe not, but she’s a completely competent adult who’s done a dang fine job taking care of herself—not to mention all of us—for decades. It’s not our job to argue with her or haul her to a doctor’s office if that’s not what she wants. If she says this was just a random fluke, that it was nothing, then that’s what it is. Nothing.”

Then why the concern pinching at the corners of Lilian’s mouth? Why the fidgeting hands and the glint of unease in her eyes that contradicted her confident words?

He reached for the mug on the counter and started past Lilian.

“She doesn’t like being coddled, Neil.”

He knew that.

“But if it makes you feel better, you’re not the only one who freaked out a little when you heard.”

He knew that, too. “Here I thought I hid it so well.”

Lilian squeezed his arm as he passed. “I’ll text Indi, give her an update,” she called after him.

He nodded to the empty hallway in front of him, moved past the dining room, into the living room, and across to Maggie’s bedroom. Sydney was just stepping out.

“Oh, good.” She held her wind-ruffled hair bunched to one side in her fist. He assumed she’d left his coat in Maggie’s car, but that striped scarf still hung loose around her neck. “Maggie just sent me to reiterate the message she sent Lilian with.”

Right. He was supposed to buck up and face her.

But first . . . he should say something to Sydney. Tell her he was sorry their trip hadn’t given her any of the answers she longed for. Thank her for

helping Maggie, getting her home.

But words stalled in his throat, pushed down by an annoyance he wished he didn't feel. Of course Lilian was right and they couldn't force Maggie to see a doctor. But maybe if he'd been there when it happened . . .

"Neil—"

"I should bring her this tea before it gets cold."

With a bare nod, she moved to the side so he could pass.

He found Maggie sitting up in her bed, little stray light from the two windows in her room filtering in—to be expected, what with heavy clouds veiling the sky today. Still, there was a brightness to the room—her yellow walls, the white posts of her canopy bed, and the sheer fabric draping overhead. And, of course, the pile of fluffy throw pillows currently on the floor.

Had any woman in the history of humankind ever required more decorative pillows than Maggie? Wasn't only here in her bedroom, but out in the living room, the sunroom. Only two weeks ago, he'd finally stored away the cushioned porch furniture with its overabundance of pillows.

"Let me guess," Maggie said as he crossed to her bed. "You're frustrated that Sydney didn't call you the second I hit the ground. You're convinced she should've dialed 9-1-1 and had me carted off in an ambulance, and even now, you're fighting the urge to contact Dr. Nadir and bribe him to make a house call."

He set her tea on the bedside stand and pulled her rocking chair from the corner, scooting it closer to the bed before sitting down. "Hadn't thought of a bribe. Good idea."

"I'm fine, Neil."

"You've never fainted before."

"Well, at sixty-five, it's kind of nice to know there's still new experiences to be had."

Was he supposed to laugh at that? "Maggie—"

“Nope. I can appreciate that you’ve got concerns, but I’ve got a few of my own. Namely, just how long were you planning to keep Muir Farm’s financial problems from me?”

All his caged worry faded to the background as he took in the set to her jaw, tried to make sense of her words. “What are you . . . I’m not sure I know—”

“You know exactly what I mean, Neil.” She hadn’t even touched her tea. “Now start talking.”



Lemon bars—Maggie had said something on the way home about lemon bars.

And about how long it’d been since she made them and how good they sounded, and, well, Sydney needed to do *something*. So she’d make lemon bars.

Neil had been in Maggie’s room for almost forty minutes now, and Lilian, now that she was sufficiently convinced Maggie was okay, had needed to run back to the office and finish out her workday.

Leaving Sydney to pace through the house, chewing on her worry. About whether Maggie was really all right. About whether she’d done the right thing—bringing her home instead of to the hospital.

About that shuttered look in Neil’s eyes when he’d walked past her into Maggie’s room.

*Lemon bars.*

Right. Not that she’d ever made them before, but she’d found Maggie’s recipe, written in the woman’s now-familiar cursive, the lined card yellowed and faded with age, its edges frayed.

About like Sydney's spirits at the moment. But if nothing else, she could do *this*. And hopefully by the time Maggie awoke from her nap, there'd be a treat awaiting her. She propped the card atop the recipe box and moved to the fridge, knowing she'd find butter on a shelf inside the door. She'd seen a lemon or two on the windowsill over the sink, peeking between the leaves of Maggie's overgrown plants.

As for the rest of the ingredients for the crust—the pantry.

She'd never seen a pantry like the one attached to Maggie's kitchen. More of a cellar, really. A narrow door led down four rickety wooden steps. She'd been down here multiple times on Friday and Saturday last week as she helped Maggie bake for the Autumn Market. Which is how she knew what direction to tiptoe in the dark, where to find the string dangling from the ceiling that would turn on the light.

The click of the pantry door latching shut sounded at the same time as pallid light cast around the small space, and cool air seeped through the sleeves of her cotton shirt.

Shelves lined all three walls of the pantry, packed with canned goods, baking supplies, and other nonperishables. The crust called for flour, and she might as well grab powdered sugar for the filling and topping while she was down here. Had the recipe included white sugar, too? She reached for it just in case.

Canister of flour tucked under one arm and the rest of the supplies cradled in her other, she retraced her steps. With her hands full, she'd have to grab the light later. She'd be lucky to get the door open at the top of the stairs without dropping anything. As it was, it took balancing everything just right to free her hand to grab hold of the knob.

But wait, why wasn't it turning?

She twisted. Harder. Another jiggle.

Bother. She bent to lower her armload to the narrow step behind her and tried the knob again, pushing as she turned this time. "What in the—"

The door flung open just as she pushed against it again, sending her weight flailing forward, and then, as she overcorrected her balance, swaying backward, a gasp flying from her lips.

Two arms shot forward to keep her from tumbling down the stairs, but when her foot hooked on the flour canister, she went toppling forward once more. She heard the *clink* of the flour rolling down the steps just as her head hit a solid chest. *Flannel*.

Neil. Of course. Because if ever she was going to find herself incapable of opening a door, he'd be there to see it.

She jumped away from him. "Sorry, I—" Her foot landed on the bag of powdered sugar, her stability shifting all over again.

And there were Neil's hands again, landing on her shoulders this time as he lowered to the step. "Maybe just don't move for a sec."

Why did he sound irritated with her? Shouldn't he be trying not to laugh at her right now? Isn't that what he usually did? Made a pointless attempt to hide his amusement despite the light in his ridiculously blue eyes?

A light missing now. Didn't stop the flush she could feel crawling up her neck or the frisson of awareness at his closeness.

She whirled away, smart enough this time to grab hold of the thin wood railing and watch where she stepped. She needed to find where the flour had rolled to, retrieve the rest of her ingredients, and get out of this tiny pantry. Neil had been in here all of five seconds and he was already using up all the air in the room.

"What're you doing in here?"

"Lemon bars. Maggie said they sounded good." She hurried down to the floor and crouched to reach her arm under the steps. She felt around for the canister. "What's wrong with all the doors around here?"

"The doors are fine. Maybe it's the person trying to use them who's got the issue."

“I’ve been opening doors just fine for most of my life so—” Her hand connected with the canister. She slid it free and rose.

Just in time to see Neil reaching the bottom of the steps. No barely concealed laughter. Not even a hint of a grin. There was something hard about the tic of his jaw, the way his Adam’s apple bobbed.

Maggie had warned her he wouldn’t be happy she’d refused to see a doctor. That he’d most likely feel guilty for not being there when she fainted, however irrational. But this didn’t look like displeasure or misdirected blame.

It looked like resentment.

Directed at her.

“Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t take her straight to—”

“What in the world possessed you to tell her about the money problems?”

Oh. *Oh*. She pressed her eyes closed for a moment. She’d hoped Maggie hadn’t remembered . . . had assumed when Maggie hadn’t brought it up on the way home . . .

A futile hope and a faulty assumption. “Neil, I’m sorry. I really am. I didn’t mean to say—”

“I told you I didn’t want to burden her. I told you I was taking care of things and there was no point in bothering her with it. You had no reason not to believe me. No right to put that on her.”

Her grip on the canister tightened. “It slipped out. She was upset. I was upset.” She shook her head, trying to remember what exactly she’d even said. Oh goodness. *Financial danger zone*. Those were the words she’d used.

Clearly Neil must’ve just come from being grilled over it.

“Did you . . . did you tell her . . . ?”

“Well, I’m not going to lie to her when she asks me straight up what the finances are, Syd. I told her the basics.”

“How about your plan to—”

“Wasn’t the right time. Not when she’s already upset with me for keeping her in the dark. Last thing she needs is to hear I’ve charged forward and started building—” He broke off. “Wait, you didn’t mention the treehouse to her, too, did you? Great, maybe she was so upset about the rest of it, she didn’t even get around to bringing that up.”

“No, no, of course not. I wouldn’t.” Though why he should believe that when she’d already opened her big mouth about the rest of it, she didn’t know. “I am really sorry. I wish I could go back and keep myself from saying anything.”

Wished she could go back and erase that whole trip to that campground. It was impulse again, getting the better of her. Chasing another fairy tale. She’d really thought, she’d actually thought . . .

*No, now’s not the time to focus on your own disappointment.*

Especially knowing how much her careless words had impacted not only Neil, but Maggie, too. Bringing up the farm’s financial state was thoughtless enough, but then there’d been all her out-loud musing about Diana and her private life.

*“She was only a teenager, Sydney. She was my daughter. Flippantly talking about who she was or wasn’t intimate with is not exactly comfortable for me.”*

She spun away from Neil, faced the back of the pantry, feeling the shame creep through every inch of her.

*Oh, please. Not tears. Not now.*

“Syd—”

“I think I should go.”

“The lemon bars can wait.”

She shook her head, hot, stubborn tears sliding down her cheeks. She’d barely kept them at bay Saturday night after that horrible conversation with Creighton, and they refused to retreat now. “No, I mean I should *go*. I can’t

keep doing this to all of you. Completely upending things.” She sniffed. “I feel pathetic saying it, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to afford the fee to change the plane ticket Wilder got me, but I’m sure I can find a bus or maybe Amtrak or—”

“Wait, what?” Neil came around to the front of her.

“I keep hurting people. Maggie, you. Even Creighton.” She was full-on crying now, her words stuttered and muffled. “This whole thing is unfair to everyone. I came here only thinking about what *I* could get out of it. Answers. A family. Roots. It was completely selfish. A-at one point I even looked up pictures of the farm and it looked s-so pretty that I thought, w-wow, if I do belong there, then maybe my own money troubles are over. Remember that old Victorian I told you about? I actually had the thought that maybe I was an heiress and I could finally buy it. I’m not kidding, I really thought that. I’m no different than Greta Turner.”

She didn’t know what she expected him to do. Give a derisive laugh, maybe, at the thought of Muir family money coming her way. Shake his head and walk away.

Certainly not ease his stance and close the distance between them, reach his arms around her and pull her close.

It took her a moment to absorb what was happening, to loosen enough to process the warmth of being wrapped in Neil’s arms as it replaced the cool of the pantry. The canister of flour was still trapped in the crook of one elbow, but her other hand seemed to lift upward of its own accord, fingers curling over his shirt.

“You’re not Greta Turner, Syd.” He spoke the words into her hair. “And I’m honestly sorry we can’t bestow a surprise inheritance upon you so you can buy that Victorian.”

She allowed herself to turn her head so her cheek rested against his shoulder. “I figured if not Maggie, then maybe if I could find my father, he might—” She clipped her words before a garbled sob could make its way

free. “I thought it might be him. This morning, at the camp, I really thought . . .”

Surely Neil was having trouble making sense of her words. Surely his hand rubbing her back was just an attempt to calm her down—enough so that he wouldn’t feel bad extricating himself from this blubber-fest he’d never asked to be a part of.

“I should—”

“Don’t go, Sydney.” The words rumbled from his chest, stilling her own, stilling her very breath.

She didn’t move. Not until she felt one hand leave her back and fingertips skim under her chin, tipping her head until her eyes met his.

“Don’t go home.”

Somehow she made her lips move. “Th-then what do you want, Neil? A minute ago you were angry with me. If you don’t want me to leave, then what do you want?”

His gaze skimmed lower, mere inches, from her eyes to . . . *oh*. She still gripped his shirt with one hand, but her hold loosened as he dipped his head, her palm flattening and one last breath catching in her throat before—

“Neil!”

Neil jerked away, the moment shattered at the piercing of Wilder’s voice, his thumping footsteps in the kitchen. And the canister of flour dropped from her hold all over again, the lid clanking free this time and sending puffs of white clouding around them.



*N*eil awoke to the patter of rain and a crick in his neck. The muscles in his legs and back objected when he attempted to move, a groan shimmying up his throat.

Why did his bed seem so small this morning? And why was it . . . swaying?

He opened his eyes, realization forming in fragments—raindrops tapping against aluminum instead of shingles, the small couch in place of his bed. Muted voices outside and the thump of boots on the deck.

*Wilder's houseboat.*

Only the smell of coffee was enough to make him unfold his limbs despite the soreness from a night crimped like a pretzel. Why had he thought staying at Wilder's last night was a good idea? What time was it, anyway? The chores—he needed to get home.

“Ah, he rises.” Wilder ducked into the cramped living area of his boat and shook his head, the hood of his raincoat falling and sending droplets

scattering into the air. “I hope you appreciate my hosting abilities. My coffeepot’s broken so I ventured into the rain to bring you this.” He dropped a white paper bag on the couch next to Neil and held out a covered Styrofoam cup with the logo of Trinna’s Teatime on the side.

“Please tell me this is coffee and not one of the loose-leaf blends Trinna’s always trying to pawn off.”

Wilder shrugged out of his coat, then flopped onto the small chair across from the sofa. “You think I’d do that to you?”

Sleepiness clinging to his eyes, he stifled a yawn and lifted the drink. Sputtered two seconds later. “Oh, man, what’d you do to this, Wild? Dump a pound of sugar in? I mean, thanks for going out in the rain but—”

Wilder’s laugh cut him off. “Whoops, gave you mine.”

They swapped cups, and Neil let out a satisfied sigh after his first drink. A thousand times better. “I don’t know how you can drink it the way you do.”

Wilder leaned back in his chair, propped one foot over the opposite knee. “And I don’t know how you can drink it so black and bitter it can give a person an ulcer, but oh well.” He tapped his thumb against his thigh, the grin on his face giving way to a scrutiny Neil knew a little too well.

He’d dealt with it for hours last night, from the moment he’d shown up at the houseboat around suppertime until he’d begged off watching a third *Mission: Impossible* movie and willed himself to sleep.

“So.”

“So, what?” As if he didn’t know. As if he didn’t realize just how much restraint Wilder had displayed last night in not demanding to know why he was at the houseboat.

Or, worse, why he’d come up from the pantry yesterday afternoon probably looking more embarrassed than he had the day he and Wilder had decided to ask the Ellis sisters to prom. Turned down flat, the both of them.

*Except I don’t think Sydney was going to turn me down.*

He felt his neck heat all over again at the thought and then the memory that accompanied it. Had he seriously almost kissed her? Had she seriously almost let him?

Was he seriously insane?

Wilder's propped foot thumped to the floor and he reached across the space for the bakery bag, pulled out a donut. "Look, I know I've got the Columbo thing going on, but I really prefer to save sussing out mysteries for work hours. So if you could spare me the brainpower and just come out with it, I'd be obliged."

"I just needed to get away, okay?" It's why he'd pretty much fled from the house two seconds after greeting Wilder. Found every excuse under the sun not to return until nearly five-thirty, though he'd checked in with Lil periodically to make sure Maggie was doing okay.

And when he finally had returned, he'd avoided the voices he'd heard coming from the kitchen, jogged upstairs to shower and change, and then had been out the front door once more—likely before anyone had even realized he'd come and gone. "Sometimes the house is just a little too crowded."

"More crowded than a houseboat?" Wilder tossed the bakery bag at Neil.

It landed in his lap. "You try being the only man in a house of three—currently, four—women."

"Gonna make the educated guess it's that fourth woman who sent you running away to the comfort of *The Marilyn*." Wilder wiped the powdered sugar from his mouth. "You know, the one who was down in the pantry with you when I got to the house yesterday."

"I didn't run away."

"But about what happened in the pantry—"

He yanked a donut from the bag. "Nothing happened."

“Good grief, you are the most thick-headed . . .” Wilder rolled his eyes. “Fine, you don’t want to tell your best friend what happened—” Neil opened his mouth, but Wilder barreled on before he could get a word in. “And don’t say nothing happened. A man and a woman don’t come tottering red-faced and guilty out of a cellar without *something* having transpired.”

“Tottering? We weren’t *tottering*.”

“If that’s the only part of that sentence you can find to argue with, then my point’s made.” Wilder downed the last of his donut. “But go ahead and be stubborn about it. We can talk about Maggie instead.”

“What about Maggie?”

For the first time since Wilder had blown into the boat’s small living quarters, a look of seriousness entered his friend’s eyes. Or, no, maybe something weightier. Regret. “I don’t know how much longer to keep this up, Neil. This investigation. I’ve gone crazy in the past week and a half, tracking down every tiny lead I can imagine. I thought locating the stepbrother might finally get us somewhere—at least help me know if I was on the right track. But anymore, I’ve got this feeling in my gut.”

Neil’s donut went stale in his throat. He knew about Wilder’s gut instincts. Knew how strangely dependable they were. There were times he could’ve sworn the man had some kind of second sight.

“What’d your gut tell you when you first came up with your theory about CarleeAnn Picknell?” He swallowed. “When Maggie sent you to Chicago?”

“That trip wasn’t about my gut. That was all heart—wanting to please Maggie too much to say no.”

Of course. He could see the tenderness in Wilder’s eyes even now. “And your theory?”

“Probably not my gut, either. More, I don’t know . . . desperation to finally solve this thing. So Maggie can move on with her life.” He looked

down to his folded hands. “So I can.”

Neil set his half-eaten donut on the crinkled bag. “Wild, this case isn’t some destiny you have to fulfill. Just like you didn’t have to take over your dad’s agency. Maggie would understand. Your dad . . .”

Wilder looked away.

But Neil pressed on. “He’d understand too.”

Rainfall clattering on the metal deck above filled the silence between them. Neil took another drink of his coffee, wishing he had the right words for his friend. Wishing he understood just what it was pushing Wilder into a life Neil wasn’t sure he’d ever wanted for himself. The P.I. work, the boat, Maggie’s case . . .

Underneath his constant informality, his carefree manner, something drove Wilder. But for all his joking about Neil being tight-lipped, his exterior was just as solidified.

“I almost kissed her.”

Wilder’s focus lurched back to Neil. “Come again?”

“Before you came barging into the house, I almost kissed Sydney. Now you know.”

A slow, ribbing grin spread over his friend’s face. Neil might not know how to ease whatever unknown burden Wilder carried, but he at least knew how to tow him back to easier waters. Well, easier for Wilder, anyhow.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Neil chugged down the last of his coffee. “And it’s as far as we’re going.” He stood. He really did have to get back to the farm. Wasn’t a day when there weren’t chores waiting. He grabbed the hoodie he’d been wearing last night from the back of the couch, looked around for his shoes.

“That’s really all you’re going to tell me?”

“That’s really all I’m going to tell you.” He tugged on his shoes. “But as for Maggie . . . if the trail has gone dry, you need to tell her.” Though he

didn't want to let himself think what that might mean for Sydney. What it might do to Maggie.

"You ever think Maggie knows more than she's telling us?"

He paused halfway to the door. "What do you mean? Telling us about what?"

"Think about it, Neil. She was the first one on the scene of the accident all those years ago. And before it happened, she'd spent a weekend with her daughter after not seeing her in over two years. And yet, when she was questioned, she couldn't fill in any of the blanks of where Diana had been or who her granddaughter's father was or, really, just about anything."

"Because Diana didn't tell her. Because they'd had a rough patch when Diana was a teenager and—"

"I don't know, I just wonder sometimes. Maybe there's more she knows and she doesn't even realize it."

He didn't know what to say to that. Hadn't ever considered it. Was this another of Wilder's gut feelings or was he only grasping at straws? "I don't know. All I do know is, you need to be honest with her."

*Like you've been honest with her?*

A strangled sigh slipped out. He might've finally admitted to Maggie yesterday that he hadn't yet figured out how to replace their broken equipment or stock up on soil nutrients and fertilizers for next year. But he still hadn't told her about the treehouse, his hopes for building the business in a new direction.

*Soon. When the treehouse is ready.*

He'd do it right. Take her out to the treehouse on a sunny day, have it all decorated, maybe even have something warm to drink waiting for her. The plan swirled in his head as he said goodbye to Wilder and drove the short distance home. While they were at the treehouse, he'd pull up Sydney's website, explain how the addition to their business would work. Make it clear that it wouldn't have to change anything for her; he'd handle all of it.

They could make this work. *He* could make it work.

Maggie would say yes. He'd almost convinced himself of it by the time he pulled into the farmhouse driveway.

Where he saw Tatum Carter's truck parked behind Lilian's car. She hadn't left for the day yet? And where was Tatum?

Not inside, surely. Not bothering Lilian. Not talking to Maggie . . .

The front door opened, and Tatum stepped onto the porch, followed by Maggie.

He fought the urge to hit his steering wheel. Settled instead for jumping from his truck and striding to the porch, never mind the rain slicking over him. "Mr. Carter."

If Tatum had heard Neil's call—how couldn't he have?—he didn't acknowledge it. "Very nice chatting with you, Maggie. Like I said, if you have any questions, I'm just a phone call away. Or a quick drive, of course."

"Of course. Thanks for stopping by."

The man shook her hand, then clambered down the steps, sparing Neil only a brief nod before jogging through the rain to his truck.

Neil hurried up the porch. "Maggie—"

"I guess you were never going to mention the offer from Carter Farms, either, were you?"

Maggie's words gutted him. Truthfully, he hadn't even thought of it when they were talking yesterday. Hadn't a single inkling that she'd take such an offer seriously. "You aren't actually considering—"

"I will consider whatever I think I need to in order to do what's best for this family, Neil." She turned and walked inside.



Sydney had waited long enough.

All day she'd waited for Neil to return to the house after the brief five minutes he'd spent inside this morning once he'd finally returned from Wilder's houseboat. All day she'd waited for Maggie's pensive silence to lift like the rain finally had, or if nothing else, for Lilian or Indi to come home and provide a distraction from the tension hovering over the whole house.

But Lil was working late and Indi was still in Augusta and Sydney had simply had enough.

She knelt in the damp grass out back, patting Captain's fur. "Gonna need you to be my guide tonight, boy." She had to look ridiculous—yoga pants and farm boots, hair tucked up under a pink knit stocking cap she'd found in the entryway closet. Neil's coat again. The man was probably wondering when he'd ever get it back.

She scratched between Captain's ears. "Take me to Neil, will you?" She might be able to find the treehouse on her own, but having only been there once—and at night—she wasn't entirely confident with her own tracking skills.

Wasn't entirely confident she should be setting out to find the man at all.

But Maggie had said she was turning in for the night ten minutes ago, never mind that they'd only finished dinner just an hour ago, just the two of them. So it was either sit in the silent house, wrestling with the frustrating truth that everything that had gone wrong in the past two days was of her own making, or try to set at least one thing right.

So she'd find Neil.

She straightened and set off after Captain's loping form. Yes, she'd find Neil and give him a good talking-to. Insist that if she was the reason he was staying away from the house—sleeping on a houseboat, not showing up for

dinner—then she'd leave. Or at the very least, stay out of his way for the rest of the week until she left on Sunday.

*"Don't go, Sydney."*

No, that was the one thing she *wouldn't* do—let herself replay those hushed, potent seconds in the pantry when he'd almost . . .

She stomped over a trail of gnarled leaves, the light of a full moon filtering through the trees. *No, no, no.* Wasn't it enough that she'd already spent half the previous night lying awake in bed, wondering how in the world they'd found themselves in that moment? Wondering what Neil had been thinking?

Or maybe he hadn't been thinking at all. Maybe, like her, he'd been completely caught off guard by his own desire, lured by a pull that had snuck up on him so quickly there'd have been no resisting even if he wanted to.

She hadn't wanted to resist. She'd known it in the moment when his lips had been only a breath away. She'd known it last night when, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep herself from imagining what might've happened if Wilder hadn't burst in.

Well, she knew what would've happened. But how it would've felt, that was the mystery.

One that probably wouldn't ever be solved. Because Wilder *had* burst in and Neil had disappeared and she wasn't going to let herself think of it again. She absolutely wouldn't.

The wind howled through the trees, the ground beneath her feet still soft from the morning rain. Just a few degrees cooler, Lilian had remarked before leaving for work, and it would've been snowfall coloring the landscape. She might've liked to see that—snow blanketing the lawn and covering tree branches like ribbons. Maybe by Thanksgiving . . .

She'd be home by Thanksgiving. Then life could get back to normal for Maggie and Neil and everyone she'd come to care about here.

*“Don’t go, Sydney.”*

She huffed, her steps landing heavier as Captain led her through the grove and into the open field and down the curve of the land. Not far now. She could see specks of light peeking through the trees up ahead.

He might not be happy to see her.

Well, she wasn’t happy that he was avoiding her. They were grown adults. They could talk this out like the sane, logical people they were.

She followed Captain into the cluster of trees, knowing her steps would alert Neil to her approach. Not that he needed the warning, what with Captain’s yipping as he reached the treehouse first.

The sound of hammering rose over Captain’s barks, piercing the air. When she came into the clearing, she saw why, a light gasp joining the noise. In the week and two days since she’d last been out here, he’d made incredible progress. Now a winding, wide staircase led up to the structure, the landing at the top large enough for a couple of patio chairs, maybe even a small table. There was no door at the top yet, but the frame was in place, rendering the ladder and former entry useless.

The hammering stopped as she neared and Neil appeared from behind the staircase. No coat, flannel shirt sleeves rolled past his wrists, a toolbelt around his waist.

His expression, entirely unreadable.

“Aren’t you cold?” Not the question she’d meant to ask. She’d meant to ask how long he planned to avoid her. Or whether he’d eaten anything for lunch or supper or . . . “I could give you your coat.”

He stuck his hammer through a loop in his toolbelt. “I’m fine, Syd.”

She reached into one gaping pocket. “I brought you an apple. You didn’t come in for supper.” That earned her a first inkling of a grin. *Only* an inkling. But it was something.

“There’s a mini-fridge in the machine shed. I was able to scrounge around for something.”

Oh. “You’ve been working all day. Unless you were able to scrounge up something with plenty of protein, it couldn’t have been good enough.”

He crossed the few yards between them. Still no smile, but he hadn’t sent her away. He held his hand open for the apple. She placed it in his palm.

“Thanks.”

She swallowed. “The treehouse looks amazing. That staircase is . . . amazing.”

“Well, the ladder wouldn’t do long-term. Plus, I’m going to build a little bathroom down at the base—just something simple, but I can’t very well expect people to stay here overnight if there’s not at least some touch of modern appeal.”

It was the most he’d said to her since yesterday in the pantry.

*Don’t think about the pantry.*

But how was she supposed to do that now? With him finally, actually speaking to her and looking at her, and even without a smile, his dimples enough to make her wish for the hundredth or maybe thousandth time that Wilder Monroe had just stayed out on his stupid boat yesterday afternoon instead of—

Good night, she needed someone to shake some sense into her.

“Listen, Sydney—”

“I have to confess something to you.” Also not what she’d intended to say when she’d trekked out here. But dang it, with the moonlight and the rustling of the trees and this man standing in front of her, she just couldn’t get ahold of reason and rational thinking. Or speaking.

He bit into the apple, chewed. “Okay.”

In for a penny . . . “I’m not actually scared of Melba.”

He swallowed. “What?”

“I’ve totally milked a cow before, and I wasn’t even a tiny bit nervous about it.”

“What?”

She stuffed her hands into the warm pockets of his coat. “During my one year in college, my roommate invited me home to her family’s farm at mid-term. Her dad wanted to give me the full dairy farm experience, so he had me try milking one of their cows—even though they have big machinery that takes care of it. And it was weird but fine. So Melba doesn’t bother me at all.” She let out a breath.

“Then why the heck—”

“Because I thought maybe it’d make you like me more. That first morning, you clearly didn’t want me here. You didn’t want to be giving me a tour. And I don’t know, I guess my brain malfunctioned for a second and convinced me that if I convinced you I was some green city girl who went wide-eyed at the sight of a cow, you’d think it was endearing or something. Find a hidden soft spot in your heart.”

He swallowed another bite. “But then yesterday . . .”

“Well, I had to keep up the act.” She shrugged. “Although, if you’ll recall, I did tell you that first night when I followed you here that I wasn’t scared of the cow.” Although she’d looked even more ridiculous then than she did now—that fluffy robe, those oversized boots—so of course he hadn’t taken her seriously.

“You’re a nutcase, Sydney Rose.”

There it was—the smile she’d been waiting on. Hoping for. The whole reason she’d come out here, no matter what she’d told herself as she’d left the house and tromped through the fields.

And she was about to ruin it. “Neil, I am truly, *truly* sorry for spilling information to Maggie that wasn’t mine to give.”

“You don’t have to say this. You already apologized.”

“But then I turned things around and made them about me and dissolved into tears.”

And oh, maybe she wasn't the only one who'd spent more time than she was willing to admit thinking about what had come next. *Almost* come next. Because Neil shifted his weight, took another bite, then tossed the apple core into the trees, fiddled with his rolled sleeves.

A nice feeling—him being the embarrassed one, for once.

But no, she wouldn't get off track with this second apology. "You trusted me and I let you down and I'm sorry. I know it doesn't change the weirdness it's caused between you and Maggie, but if there's anything I can do to help smooth things back out . . . or maybe you'd rather me just stay out of things from here on out, which I completely understand—"

He stopped her rambling with one hand on her arm. "It's *okay*. I mean that every bit as much as you mean your apology." He squeezed her arm and dropped his hand. "Want to try out the staircase?"

He nudged her toward the stairs, then followed her up and into the light of the treehouse. Was that it? She apologized and he just . . . accepted it?

"Hey, it's warm in here."

Neil nodded toward the space heater in the corner and she pulled off her cap and shrugged out of her coat. His coat. Then stood in the center of the room—awkwardly, unsure what to do next. He passed the next minutes showing her the windows he'd put in last week, pointing out the new glass in the skylight. And then he moved to one wall and sat, legs stretched out in front of him.

She lowered next to him. The quiet, the evening air, their aloneness—reminded her of Saturday night on the boat. "Too bad we don't have pie."

His low laugh lifted over the hum of the space heater. But then he stilled. "You know the guy who stopped out to see Maggie today?"

Yes. Lilian had filled Sydney in, none too excitedly. She nodded.

"I think Maggie might actually sell to him."

Sydney gasped. "No. She . . . she wouldn't."

“She told me she’s considering it. Now that she knows how precarious things are financially, I think she might feel like it’s her only choice.” She opened her mouth, but he placed his hand on her knee before she could speak. “Don’t apologize again. The fact is, I should’ve told Maggie how things stood long ago. I should’ve told her about Tatum’s offer when he first made it. I just . . . I didn’t want . . . and apparently there’s history there I don’t even know about—between the two of them.”

He leaned his head against the wall, gaze tipping upward. The clouds from earlier today had rolled on with the wind, leaving behind a sky so clear, the stars awaited admiration.

But after only a moment’s gazing, she returned her attention to Neil’s face, wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers over the bristles that shadowed his cheeks and jaw, trace a fingertip over one dimple and then the other.

*No, Syd. You’ve been over this.*

That was the problem. She’d played another moment like this out in her mind too many times last night. *Chasing fairy tales again.*

“The other night you asked me why my last name isn’t Muir.”

She blinked at the change in the subject. “Yes.”

“Maggie never actually adopted me, not like the girls. I was fourteen when my aunt brought me here. It took them over a year to work things out legally for Maggie to be my guardian. I guess with it being international it was extra complicated. They had to get a visa and, I don’t know, I suppose it just wasn’t feasible to push through an adoption, too. Especially when I’d be eighteen in only a few years.”

Understandable. Still. The way he said it now, the way he’d avoided her question the other night made it clear the situation had bothered him more than he let on—still did.

“I was sixteen when Lilian’s adoption was finalized. She’d been living with Maggie for years by that point, but there were a whole host of

complications. Her story to tell.” He rubbed his palms over his jeans. “But we all went to the courthouse together on the day the judge was set to finalize things. And I remember thinking maybe I’d find out I was being adopted too. That maybe Maggie had decided to keep it a surprise for some reason. We’d get there and she’d finally tell me and it’d be this big celebration. And I’d be Neil Ian Muir.”

Only someone with a heart of stone could’ve heard him tell that story and not reached for his hand. She closed it behind both of her own. “You wanted to be a Muir. Legally.”

“It’s just a piece of paper with legalese. Just a name.”

But it’d left him feeling on the outside, she could see it now. As a young man, he’d *hurt* in that moment.

And he hurt now at the thought that after everything he’d poured of himself into this farm, he might once again find himself on the outside. It made so very much sense. He was tied to this land—but not legally.

He was bound to his family—but not in name.

“Neil, I . . .” She didn’t know what to say. She could remind him that Maggie and his sisters loved him. They adored him, she saw it every day. But he already knew that. Hurt was still hurt and longing was still longing.

She knew about longing. Possibly more than ever before. “Well, you might not have the name or court document to show it, but I don’t think anyone could deny you belong to this land. I knew that my first morning here—when you lectured me on the difference between cultivated and lowbush blueberries.”

Her tease lightened the moment.

“I didn’t lecture you.”

“You did. You lectured a complete stranger. One, I might add, you’d staunchly decided to dislike.”

“Lucky for you, I’m a man who’s willing to change his mind.”

Was it her imagination or had the inches between them disappeared? The warmth of the space heater was nothing compared to the touch of Neil's shoulder next to her or his fingers laced through hers. Any lightness she'd injected into the conversation a moment ago waned now—no, dissolved entirely—as he leaned closer.

“And for the record, it worked.”

“What worked?”

“Your little charade with Melba. It *was* endearing.”

“Well . . . good.” Her tone had gone breathless, and in an instant, every wondering, wonderful *what-if* that had played in her mind since yesterday in the pantry set her heart galloping as he shifted just enough to angle his head toward hers.

*This is insane. You've only known him ten days.*

But he paused a moment later, so close she could feel his breath.

“What . . . why are you . . . pretty sure Wilder's not going to come bursting in.” Honestly, how was her whispered voice even functioning with the way her pulse sped?

“I'm being appropriately cautious about an unfamiliar experience, that's all.”

She didn't even have a chance to laugh at his echoing of her own words from Tuesday. Because he kissed her then—finally—softly enough, at first, that she might've imagined it. But then his hand, callused and rough in a way that bespoke his years of laboring in love, found her cheek and he tilted his head and deepened the kiss.

And she knew Nikola was right. This was an adventure. *Neil* was an adventure—someone with endless depth to be explored and constant goodness—and she didn't want it to end. Not this kiss, not this time in Maine . . .

She broke away with a gasp, gulping for air, for reason. “I'm going home on Sunday.”

Neil's fingers brushed her cheek. "I know but . . ."

"But what?" She pulled away, not because she wanted to, but because she couldn't think with his lips still so close and her heart still pounding. And darn it, she didn't want to think. She pulled herself to her feet. "Please finish the sentence, Neil, because I don't know how to."

He rose slowly, keeping a few feet between them. Then, apparently, thinking better of it and moving close enough she could feel his warmth radiating even though he didn't touch her. "Look, I . . . I won't kiss you again if you don't want me to."

"I definitely did not say that."

He only gave his grin a moment's freedom before going on. "But the way I see it, despite the fact that I was born in Scotland and you were born . . . somewhere else, despite the impossible odds that our paths should ever cross, God got us both here. He brought me across an ocean at fourteen and you across half a country. And this—" He waved one hand between them. "It doesn't come around every day."

"And what exactly is 'this'?"

This time he let his smile stretch as he reached for her. "We've got at least four days to find out."

"I can't argue with that logic." She tucked into his embrace readily and lifted her head.

But before he could kiss her again, his sister's distant voice cut into the night. "Neil, are you . . ." And then a little louder, "What in the world?"

Neil groaned. "Guess Lil knows about the treehouse now."



“*T*his might be the first time I’ve ever not appreciated this house’s thousand windows.” The wind whipped Indi’s ponytail behind her, her burgundy earmuffs coordinated perfectly with her matching scarf and mustard yellow coat.

A far cry from Sydney’s same old getup: Neil’s coat, someone else’s boots, that striped scarf. But no knit hat today—she’d left it at the treehouse last night.

Last night when her world had seemed to tip right over in the very best of ways until she’d realized that no, maybe it’d been tilting off-kilter all along. *Before*. And maybe with one kiss—one heart-stopping and perfect and unforgettable kiss—from a man she’d known all of ten days, it’d found its true axis.

But oh, that was more than one kiss. And ten days might as well have been ten years.

*“Sometimes a feeling is just a feeling. Other times it’s truth wrapped in undeniable knowing.”*

How could she have known a week and a half ago, when Maggie had first said those words, how fully she’d come to experience them in the coming days?

“Earth to Syd.” Indi waved a tube of outdoor window caulk in front of her.

Sydney hadn’t even realized the youngest Muir sister had come home last night. Of course she hadn’t. She’d been . . . distracted. But here Indi was, bundled up with the rest of them on Thursday morning—well, the rest of them with the exception of Neil.

But it was Neil’s handwriting on the note in Lilian’s hand. Something he’d apparently written up for them this morning before heading to the barn for chores.

“Do you guys always help get the house ready for winter?” According to Lilian, that’s what this list of tasks included—to-dos to winterize the home.

“Oh no. This is completely new.” Indi pulled on a pair of gloves that matched her earmuffs and scarf. “What do you think possessed him to actually let us help with something for once?”

Sydney bit back a smile and leaned closer to Lilian, scanning the list a second time.

- 1. Caulk around the windows outside, especially anywhere you see cracks.*
- 2. Weather-strip the doors.*
- 3. Replace the furnace filter.*

Several more items completed the list, but at the rate they were going, they’d be lucky if they completed the caulking before Neil returned from

the barn.

Just the thought was enough to set her nerves spinning. She hadn't seen him since the treehouse last night, had felt like maybe he needed some time alone with his sister when she'd seen what he'd built. But the memory of the regret in his voice when he'd told her goodnight—more, the swirl of desire and delight in his eyes that matched her own—had wooed her to sleep better than any lullaby.

“Maybe brother dear just wants to see if we're capable of figuring out how to do any of this.” Lilian folded the note and stuffed it in her pocket.

“Or he figured if the both of you were taking the morning off work to spend time with me, he might as well put you to work.” Maggie laughed and pulled the cap off her tube of caulk. “Although I feel badly putting you to work, Syd. But I think you've been here so long now, we've stopped thinking of you as a guest.”

It was just about the nicest thing Maggie could've said to her. And how wonderful it was to see Maggie looking happier today, the shadows from yesterday gone, the pallor of the day she'd fainted a thing of the past.

And when Sydney had walked into the kitchen half an hour ago, arriving downstairs later than usual, Lilian had whispered that she'd walked in on Maggie and Neil having a quiet discussion at the table earlier.

*“I think things are better now,”* Lilian had said. *“Or getting there, at least. I wonder if she's made any decision about Tatum Carter. I hope he tells her about the treehouse soon.”*

She'd itched to ask what Lilian thought of the treehouse and Neil's plans. But Indi had walked in then and announced that her fiancé would be driving down from Augusta this evening to join them for dinner. Déjà vu, that.

“I think the most efficient way to get this done is to split up.” Lilian pointed to the porch. “We only have two ladders and three tubes of caulk. I

can start on the windows at the side of the house. Sydney, you want to start in back? Indi hates ladders.”

She nodded. “Sure thing.”

Indi took the third tube of caulk. “Maggie and I will get the windows on the porch and then move on to weather stripping.”

Why did it feel so good to be a part of this? To have a simple job to do and such lovely people to do it with. This was the kind of contentment she’d been trying to find for years at Mezzani’s. Why did it come so much easier here?

Maybe because Neil was right. Maybe she wasn’t only here because Wilder had come up with a theory and Maggie had insisted he act on it. Maybe she wasn’t only here because Nikola had urged her or because she wanted to show Micah what it was like to choose something new.

Maybe she was here because God had led her here. Laid a path for her feet and whispered for her to walk. Maybe He hadn’t forgotten her, after all.

At the back of the house, she propped the ladder against the wall and climbed until she could reach the frame of the first window, then pulled out her phone, watching just enough of a YouTube tutorial to know what to do with the caulk. She squeezed the tube and ran it along the seam between the siding and the window frame.

“You look good up there.”

Neil’s voice drifting on the breeze surprised her enough that she dropped the tube of caulk. “You shouldn’t sneak up on a girl on a ladder.”

“Try not to fall.”

She’d have sent him a mock glare if she were anywhere near capable of it. If her toes weren’t curling inside her boots this very moment. Instead, she twisted on the ladder, hoping against hope her cheeks weren’t as red as they felt. “Already teasing me and you haven’t even said good morning yet.”

“Well, come down and I’ll say it.”

God bless Lilian for suggesting they split up. She clambered down the ladder, sure her eagerness must show in her movements. Not even minding. And then she stood in front of him, wearing what had to be a too-wide smile, convinced he'd somehow become even more handsome overnight.

“Morning, Sydney.”

“Good morn—”

He cut her off, pulling her to him and into a kiss every bit as perfect as last night's. And yet, nothing like it. Because where that had been a tentative, tender touch, this one burned with intensity, his lips claiming hers with so much wanting, there was nothing else she could do but hold on to him and return the kiss. His hands, somehow warm, cupped her cheeks before one moved to her neck, his fingers knotting in her hair.

Finally, surely needing air every bit as much as she did, he broke away. One arm wrapped around her waist, and he leaned in to kiss her cheek.

“Holy cow, Neil, what are we doing?”

Another kiss on her opposite cheek. “If you don't know, lass, I'm doing something terribly wrong.”

*Lass.* “We've only known each other for ten days.”

“I think today makes it eleven.”

“Well, in that case . . .” She was the one to kiss him now, pouring every feeling, every speck of undeniable knowing into it, clinging to his shirt and wishing—desperately—that there wasn't a tiny voice in the back of her head murmuring that she needed to do this while she could.

Because even if God *had* led her here, wouldn't He eventually point her back home? Where her jobs and Micah and her whole life up until now were waiting?

“I don't know how I should feel about you calling me ‘lass.’” Her voice was a whisper. “Not when it's apparently what you call your sisters, too, when you're trying to talk them into mucking out the barn.”

He shook his head, his breath warm against her face and his low chuckle almost as alluring as his grin. “No, I call them ‘lassie.’ World of difference in those two letters.” He touched his forehead to hers. “But speaking of . . .”

“Maybe best not to shock anyone.” So why didn’t she step away?

Why didn’t he? No, he did the opposite, his arm tightening around her and his head dipping once more—

Until the sound of footsteps around the side of the house pushed in. And he released her at once, stepping back, but not so far she missed his panted mumble. “I really wish people would stop interrupting us.”

She would’ve laughed as she turned around, if not for the sight of the person rounding the corner. The look of shock on his face. *Micah?*



Neil’s only hope of keeping his concerned gaze away from Sydney and the man she’d introduced as her former foster brother as they strolled the shore was to go inside.

But he’d been inside for almost thirty minutes now. And still, his ears were perked for any sound that might be footsteps on the porch or the latch of the front door. Never mind the two sisters gabbing from behind the desk in the office—Lilian in the chair and Indi balanced on its arm.

“You’re saying she built this entire website in a day?” Lilian’s eyes reflected the glare of the computer screen as she fiddled with the mouse.

He’d pulled the pair of them away from their outdoor work when Maggie had disappeared into the kitchen, saying something about throwing a batch of cookies in the oven to be ready whenever Sydney and the brother—Micah—returned to the house. The time had felt right to finally tell them

about his hopes for shoring up the farm financially, especially considering Lilian had already seen the treehouse last night.

But he hadn't told her the full scope of his plan then. He'd been too flustered, brain entirely muddled after finally having given his heart what it wanted.

Was it really "finally" though? Sydney had said it herself—they'd only known each other a week and a half. How could that possibly be enough time to . . . to feel the things he'd felt last night when he'd fallen into bed? And this morning when he'd woken up? And every second since?

"Not even a day," he replied at last. "She got it done in an afternoon while Maggie napped."

Indi tugged off the earmuffs that'd been around her neck since they came inside. "Wow, this puts the Bits & Pieces site to shame. Wonder what she'd charge me for a redesign."

Probably nothing, he guessed. But she should charge something. On a whim, the other day he'd looked up the website she'd built for that bakery. Every bit as good as this one. Not that he was any real judge of graphic design or webwork, but even his layman's eyes knew she had talent.

She'd used the same creative skillset to help Lilian set up their market booth last weekend, and he'd begun noticing little touches of hers around the house, too. She'd reorganized the dishes in the hutch so it no longer looked crowded and had completely rearranged all the books on the shelves in the living room, grouping them by colors—some upright, some stacked—so they became as much a part of the décor as Maggie's throw pillows. How Lilian hadn't yet gone crazy from the idea of them no longer being in alphabetical order, he didn't know.

Then again, maybe she'd taken to Sydney's presence here every bit as much as he had.

Well, probably not *as* much.

And it hit him then that it wasn't just that kiss in the treehouse or those too-brief minutes this morning out back or even that almost-kiss the other day in the pantry that had him feeling as if Sydney didn't just belong here with their family, but here with *him*.

It was how gifted and smart and funny she was. How quickly she'd thrown herself into life on the farm, helping Maggie around the house, joining them at the Autumn Market and church and even one of those silly Heritage Society meetings. And, yes, of course, it was her gorgeous hair and gorgeous smile and gorgeous everything.

Mostly it was just . . . her. Only there was no *just* about it. And maybe for the first time since he'd first heard Maggie reminisce about her Robert, he could understand how a man might be willing to put his whole heart on the line in only a matter of days.

"So the treehouse is just the beginning?"

Lilian's question pulled him away from the thoughts that both thrilled and terrified him. Thrilled for obvious reasons. Terrified because for once in his life, he wanted something more in his future. He loved this farm and his people and his simple life by the sea.

But in eleven short days, Sydney Rose had opened his eyes to other possibilities, too. Only he didn't have a clue what to do about it. Maybe they could try dating long-distance for a time. But could he really make that work while keeping up with the farm and beginning a new side business?

"Neil, what is with you this morning? You're almost as spacey as Syd."

Lilian smirked at Indi's remark. Shouldn't surprise him. She might've pretended last night not to have realized what exactly she was interrupting when she showed up in the clearing, but his sister was plenty perceptive.

"Uh, right. The treehouse. Just the beginning, yes—at least, that's my hope. It's all going to depend on what Maggie says."

Because as he'd been reminded in stark detail this week, this land was hers. Going behind her back to build the treehouse was plenty questionable

as it was. At least he'd used his own savings, but if he really wanted to invest in this idea and build two or three more rentals around the property, he'd more than likely need to take out a small business loan. And he'd probably need to do it in Muir Farm's name rather than his own.

Which meant everyone needed to be in on this, Maggie most of all.

"Well, I think it's genius." Indi rose from her perch. "I love the idea. Even if you did show Lil the treehouse first—before me."

"Wasn't the first." Lil gave him that knowing look again. One of these days he was probably in for a full interrogation. But she spared him now. "I love the idea, too. What's more, *you* love the idea. I think that might matter even more than however much money this venture can bring in."

A surprise tenderness had entered Lilian's voice and she went on. "Don't think I don't know you skipped college so Maggie could save more toward my and Indi's education."

"I skipped college because I knew I'd be taking over the farm." Because he'd known he could learn whatever he needed from Maggie and her uncles and a few online classes. And, well, yes, he'd known even back then that Lilian—president of her freshman debate team and star mock-trial competitor—would need and want years with her nose in textbooks more than he ever would.

"I wouldn't have my stores without you, Neil." Indi rounded the desk. "You didn't just support me financially. You helped fix up the place. You helped haul inventory. Most of all, you encouraged me and made me believe it could be a success. So this is me—us—telling you we believe this can be a success, too."

"You really think so? I haven't exactly done a stellar job making a success of the farm."

Lilian rose. "Don't say that. Broken equipment and financial struggles? Farmers from one coast to another would tell you that's completely normal. But you're not in it alone—not the farm, not wherever we go from here."

“Right.” Indi leaned in to hug him. “Come to the store. We can pick out some pieces for the treehouse.”

“And stop spending your savings on farm repairs.” Lilian’s hug was next. “I may not be a big-city lawyer, but I make a good enough salary I can chip in there.”

“Lil, no—”

“Argue with me and I’ll tell Indi what else has been going on out at the treehouse.”

“What else has been going on?”

Great, from the overly innocent look on Indi’s face now and the complete lack of surprise in her question, obviously Lilian had already been talking. Just how much had she said? Or, well, seen? “I don’t know what you think you saw, Lil—”

“Didn’t have to see anything other than the look on your face when you came down those treehouse steps.”

He ruffled her hair. “You and Wilder are two peas in a pod, you know that?”

An instant scowl took over her face. “How could you ever say something so cruel? After I just offered to throw money at you . . . to compare me to *Wilder*? I take back every nice thing I just said about you.”

“Love you, too, sis.” He draped one arm around her and the other around Indi. Sydney had been right about telling these two. She’d been right all along. “Now, how do I tell Maggie?”



Half an hour had passed and Sydney still hadn’t figured out what Micah was doing here.

Crisp sea air folded in and around her as they strolled across patchy grass and sand, the whoosh of the waves, capped with white and fierce against the rocks on this windy day, calming her just enough to keep her from bulleting questions.

*Why didn't you text or call? How long are you planning to stay, or don't you have a plan? How did you afford a plane ticket and car rental?*

And the question looming above them all: Why was he here? There had to be a reason. There was *always* a reason.

Not that she wasn't happy to see him. Nineteen years ago, on the day he walked into the Jacobsens' house, that limp, little bear clutched in his fist, he'd claimed a permanent piece of her heart. She'd taken him under her wing and he'd been there ever since.

"I know it's killing you not to ask, Syd." He combed his fingers through his hair. The same stylish camo jacket he'd been wearing that day at the bakery now flapped in the wind around him. Had that really been not even two weeks ago?

"Well, I know you didn't come here just to bring me that caramel roll from Nikola." Though she'd enjoyed every bit of the thing after they'd hugged and started walking. It was just like Micah to bring a roll from the bakery, cart it in a to-go container through two flights, a layover, and a drive in a rental car.

He was a sweetheart—always had been—despite the trouble that always seemed to follow him around.

Or, well, much of the time she was worried it wasn't so much trouble following him as him seeking it out. And she couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that maybe he'd brought it here with him. Into this idyllic world that had begun to feel a little like a bubble, so far removed from her life back home.

Not that Muir Farm wasn't without its struggles. She'd witnessed Neil's daily stress. She'd seen the ongoing effects of all the loss in Maggie's life.

Lilian and Indi had their woes, too, she was sure—take that absentee fiancé of Indi's, for one. She might've even glimpsed a crack in Wilder's carefree façade once or twice.

But even so, with every day she passed here, she felt more and more rooted to the land, to the sea, to Maggie's yellow house. What would Maggie say if she asked to stay? What would Neil say?

Maybe he wouldn't say anything at all. Maybe—

“So I did see what I thought I did.”

She blinked, realizing she'd stopped walking and Micah now stood a pace or two ahead of her. Staring again. And it wasn't the cold ocean air she felt now, but a warmth in her cheeks that let her know her straying thoughts must show on her face.

“I didn't realize you moved so fast, Syd.”

“Micah—”

He lifted his hands, palms out. “Hey, whatever fun you want to have on your vacation, I'm not judging.”

“I don't appreciate your tone or what you're insinuating.” Or his calling this a vacation. But that's how he would see it, of course. Two weeks off work, a trip to the coast . . . he couldn't know about the bond she'd formed with Maggie or the unlikely friendship with the sisters who hadn't wanted her here in the beginning.

Or that however much he'd seen when he walked around the corner of the house was, in reality, so much more than the fling he obviously assumed.

“Okay, I'll go ahead and ask. Why'd you come, Micah? I told you I'd be home on Sunday.” Just saying the words dug a pit in her stomach but she did her best to keep her voice lighthearted. “Figured you'd get in on the tail end of my trip? Have your own little vacation?”

Oh, that it'd be something that silly and inconsequential. A frivolous whim and nothing more.

But Micah's silence said enough. He tipped his head, as if attempting to harness any warmth to be had from the sun above, and as she watched him now, she saw what she hadn't earlier. The faint purple smudges under his eyes. The downward tilt of his shoulders. His hair, usually so copiously gelled, in disarray.

Of course, that could be from the overnight flights. From the blustering seaside wind. But no.

There were days when twenty-seven-year-old Micah didn't seem all that different from eight-year-old Micah.

He looked away, waited a beat. "I told you before. I owe someone some money."

How she kept herself from pressing her lips together, sharpening her gaze, she didn't know. "Okay. How much?"

That expression—she'd seen it so many times. Sheepish, bordering on agitated. "You'll kill me if I tell you."

She held one hand to her forehead, shielding her eyes from the sun. "How much money, Micah?"

That wasn't just chagrin on his face now. It was pure panic. "It wasn't so much at first but then with interest and stuff . . . twenty-five thousand."

She sputtered. "*What?*"

He paced several feet away, about-faced, and returned. "I thought I was doing something good for once. A friend told me about this investment opportunity—more of a pyramid scheme, I realize now—but I really thought it could turn into something, you know? But I needed some capital to get started and obviously I couldn't ask you for that kind of cash and like a bank is going to loan me anything, so I—"

"Not a loan shark. Please say you didn't."

"Fine. I won't say it."

Her full stomach twisted and churned. *Twenty-five thousand dollars.* In a daze, she wrapped her arms around her torso, not even Neil's coat enough

to keep a chill from shivering through her now. “I don’t have that kind of money, Micah.”

“I know. I know. I didn’t come here expecting you to hand over a check or anything. It’s just . . . I don’t know what to do and these guys aren’t exactly patient.”

“How’d you even have money to get here if you’re in such a tight spot?”

He looked away again. Of course. That, too—borrowed.

She turned away just to keep from letting loose a lecture that wouldn’t help either one of them, her gaze drawn to the house. She supposed there were people out there in the world who wouldn’t blink at an amount like twenty-five thousand dollars. When she’d first Googled Muir Farm and saw all those old photos, before the years had taken their toll on the house, she’d thought the Muirs were some of them.

Oh no . . . Micah hadn’t come here because . . . he didn’t think . . .

Dread welled inside her and she spun back to him. “I don’t know if I can help you this time, Micah. And they can’t, either. If that’s why you’re here—”

“How can you blame me? Isn’t that why you came here? I know how much you regret dropping out of college. I know how much I’ve cost you over the years. I know Mezzani’s was never your dream job. You came here looking for a new life. Maybe it’s not money you want, but you’re looking for something to make all your troubles go away just as much as I am. That’s probably why you were kissing the guy. They figured out you’re not the long-lost daughter or granddaughter or whoever, so you did the next best thing.”

She couldn’t find words—not one single sentence to refute his awful accusation. How could he think that of her?

She turned away, hurt tussling with anger.

“You’re wrong, Micah. Everything you just said—so wrong. These people . . .” She closed her eyes, giving herself a moment to regain her composure. “They’re the best people you’ll ever meet. And because they’re the best, they’ll offer to let you stay. Neil will probably give you his bedroom and Maggie will make a great big meal tonight and they’ll welcome you like one of the family.”

*One of the family.* Pining washed over her, so fierce it could swallow her like the sea.

“But if you so much as ask them for a penny, I’ll march you to the car myself.” Drive him to the airport and sit in the seat next to him the whole way home, if that’s what it took. “I want to help you and if I can think of any way—”

His frustrated expression turned into a sneer. “Save it, Syd. I’ll find a hotel.” He spun and marched away, but only made it a few steps before about-facing. He reached into his pocket and thrust something at her. A small rectangular piece of paper, curled at the edges.

*The photo!* Diana and CarleeAnn and JP.

Micah pivoted once more, steps carrying him away, but his voice reaching her as he yelled over his shoulder. “And it’s JR, not JP.”

Wait . . . what? She flipped the photograph over, stretching and straightening it with both hands, peering at the scribbled handwriting. She moved it closer to her face. *Oh. Oh.* He was right. There, where the paper was a little rougher . . . the tiniest tail of an *R*, cut off by the merest scratch of the surface.

*JR.* Not JP.



“**S**omething’s wrong.”

Maggie’s words hovered in the kitchen, stopping Neil midway through plucking grapes from a bagged bunch. He dropped the few he held into a glass bowl and turned.

Maggie’s cheeks were flushed, several white hairs that had escaped her braid hanging limp around her face. She looked exhausted. He shouldn’t have left that to-do list for the girls this morning, should’ve known Maggie would insist on helping.

He strode to the table and pulled out a chair for her. “You didn’t have to go to all this work for dinner tonight. We could’ve picked something up in town.” For all they knew, Indi’s big-city fiancé, if he actually showed up this time, wouldn’t know a home-cooked meal from a spread supplied by the deli in town.

Or if they’d needed to get fancy, they could’ve ordered catering from Muir Harbor’s one upscale restaurant—Cobalt Pier. Not in the grocery

budget, but they could handle the splurge if it would make Indi happy.

Hmm, maybe one of these nights he should take Syd to Cobalt Pier. She'd love the view overlooking the harbor. Probably the live music and candlelight, too. He'd love the time away from prying eyes. The number of times Lil and Indi had taunted him today was ridiculous.

But he'd get Indi back soon enough, at least. Surely he could find something about Bennington Foster to tease her about. His name, if nothing else.

Maggie waved off the chair and his concern. "I don't mean in here. Something's wrong out there."

Oh, right. But whether she meant the fact that Foster wasn't here yet or the awkward tension of Micah's presence, he didn't know.

He just knew he'd missed Sydney today. He'd seen Micah drop into rental his car and speed away not even an hour after showing up at the house. When he'd gone out to the porch to ask Sydney if everything was okay, she'd evaded the question. And he'd hated that he'd had to leave then, but Ansel Barrett had gone to a lot of trouble finding a used generator for him to look at.

Still, he'd kicked himself the whole way over to the implement store for not calling and canceling.

At the time, he'd been under the impression that Micah might not be returning to the farm. But apparently sometime between this morning and now, Maggie had convinced Sydney to convince Micah to join them for dinner. They were out in the dining room now, setting the table.

"I tried to ask her about him several times while she helped me chop vegetables." Maggie leaned against the kitchen table. "She kept it vague."

As she had with him when he'd called her on the way home an hour ago. He'd resorted to calling her "lass" and flirting with her, playing up his accent just to hear the cheer return to her voice. But something told him whatever cheer he'd heard over the phone had been only surface-deep.

“She’ll tell us what’s going on when she’s ready.” He said it as much for his own sake as Maggie’s.

“I find myself forgetting sometimes that she had a life before she came here.” Maggie reached for the bowl of grapes. “She fit in so quickly. You’re going to think I’m crazy, Neil, but I’ve been starting to think maybe I should just call things off with Wilder. Decide Sydney is Cynthia and let that be that.”

Two weeks ago he might’ve thought it crazy. Tonight? “Sounds like a reasonable plan to me.”

Because then Sydney might stay and they could have that date at Cobalt Pier. Plus, after that conversation with Wilder on his boat, he got the sense the guy could benefit from being let off the hook.

But would Maggie really be content with that? Granted, she hadn’t bonded with any of the other four “Cynthias” who’d come here the way she had with Sydney. But wouldn’t there always be a piece of her that needed to *know*? Always wonder if there was still a lost sheep out there and yearn to search for her?

*Unless Sydney really is Cynthia.* If only they hadn’t hit so many dead ends.

Could there be anything to Wilder’s musings that perhaps Maggie remembered more about Diana’s accident than she let on? Or could there be details trapped somewhere in her brain?

If there were, maybe that explained how closed off she’d become to life outside the farm. Maybe there was some unexplainable fear or lingering anxiety that held her here. But if that were the case, could she really consider selling the farm? *Maybe she doesn’t plan to sell the whole place.* Sell the land, keep the house—isn’t that what Ansel had suggested a couple of weeks ago?

Maggie reached for the bowl of grapes and indicated with a nudge of her head that Neil should get the pan of roasted vegetables. “Perhaps

everything will smooth out over dinner.”

“Maggie, before we go in . . .” Now probably wasn’t the best time. But he had to ask. “Tatum Carter’s offer—have you, um . . . made any decisions?”

*Please say no. No decision other than no sale.*

He knew he couldn’t put off showing her the treehouse much longer, not after knowing how much it’d pained her being left out of the loop on the rest of it. But he was hoping he could at least wait until Saturday, buy himself enough time to get the interior of the house set up and looking nice.

But if she’d made a decision, then he wouldn’t be able to wait. He’d need to show her—tell her everything—as soon as possible in hopes of changing her mind.

“Not yet.”

Maggie’s reply wasn’t as reassuring as he’d hoped. It was that dangling “yet.” The hint of uncertainty in her eyes. “It’s not off the table, is it.” Statement, not a question.

“I don’t want to sell, Neil. But I also don’t want you wearing yourself out year after year trying to make ends meet.”

“I’m not—”

“I realized when I was listening to Tatum give his pitch that no one ever even asked you if you wanted to take over the farm. It just landed in your lap.”

“Of course I wanted it, Maggie. I’ve always wanted it. Since I was a little boy visiting from Scotland. This place is in my blood.” Even if it wasn’t his name attached to it. Even if he’d been born an ocean away. “Listen, what are you doing Saturday evening?”

She squinted at the change in subject. “Well, you know me. Going out on the town. Hitting up the pubs.”

“More like watching Lawrence Welk on public television and falling asleep before nine.”

“Tease me like that, son, and I’ll march right on over to Carter Farms and sign whatever papers he wants.”

*Son.* Maybe a thirty-four-year-old man shouldn’t need to hear that word as much as he did at times. But tonight, especially after the week they’d had, it meant the world. He leaned down to kiss Maggie’s cheek. “I just want to show you something that night. Can you make a little time for me? We could make it late afternoon so you don’t miss Lawrence. Before supper.”

“I can always make time for you, Neil. Now grab the veggies, will you? We’ve been keeping our guests waiting long enough.”

But not all their guests were here, he realized as he carried the tray of vegetables. Sydney and Micah were both seated, and Lilian was in her usual place, but no Indi and her plus-one yet. Maggie told him to sit and returned to the kitchen for her blueberry-glazed pork chops, still in the oven.

Lilian said something about Indi texting earlier, promising that Bennington knew dinner was at six, saying he’d meet her at the store and they’d drive out together.

But Neil could hardly pay attention, not with his gaze drawn repeatedly to Sydney. Was that one of Indi’s dark green scarves in her hair? Red waves spilled from behind it and a few framed her face in front. She wore the same cream-colored sweater as she had her first night here and looked every bit as pretty as he’d tried to pretend he didn’t notice that night.

He just wished she didn’t look so tense. Wished there wasn’t a strain thick enough to stick with a pitchfork clinging to the air in between her and Micah. He’d shared a stiff handshake with the younger man, then a mumbled greeting.

He could feel Micah’s assessment now, Sydney’s foster brother obviously making no attempt to hide his scrutiny as he picked up his glass of water and took a drink. “So, you’re the farmer.”

Lilian snorted beside him. Sydney bit her lip.

Neil chuckled. “Well, technically, we all are. Lilian’s got a vegetable garden bigger than our backyard. Indi’s got goats. But yeah, I guess I’m the only one who’d technically put it on a résumé.” He shrugged.

“It’s a blueberry farm,” Sydney filled in. “Neil mocked me my first morning here when I told him I hadn’t even thought about the fact that berry farms existed. In the Midwest, it’s all corn and soybeans and wheat. Livestock, of course.”

“I didn’t mock you.”

“You all but patted my head and told me to go back to the city I came from.”

He unfolded his napkin and laid it in his lap, knowing if he looked up and if she happened to be smiling, his return grin would give away far too much. More, he got the feeling, than Micah would be okay with. And way too much ammo for Lil. “Well, maybe that was because someone was pretending to be scared of a cow.”

But then he *did* look up. And she *was* smiling. And his pulse skittered.

Okay, Lilian could say whatever she wanted. And Micah, he could just

—

“So, I guess technically or legally or something, Syd might be your niece.”

Neil’s too-warm smile faltered. “Um . . . huh?”

Micah pinned him with a smirk. “If she’s really who that private investigator thinks she is, then you and you”—he pointed to Neil and Lilian—“are Sydney’s aunt and uncle, right?”

Any other time and he’d get a fair bit of amusement out of Sydney’s wide-eyed look. Same look she’d given Melba. Only this time, it wasn’t an act.

“We’re all adopted,” he finally replied. “Well, I’m not even that. And so was Diana. None of us are actually biologically related, not to Maggie or each other.”

Micah shrugged. “Still.”

Still . . . what? He had a pretty good guess what Micah was trying to insinuate, but there was nothing to it, and certainly, the guy knew it. He was just trying to get a rise out of Sydney—and maybe Neil. But why?

*What* had they talked about on the shore this morning? Why was he here?

“Micah, please,” Sydney whispered.

“What?” His look of exaggerated innocence grated. “Just making conversation. Trying to figure out all the relationships around this table.”

All the mirth had fled from Sydney’s expression. She looked ready to wilt. What Neil wouldn’t give to jump from his seat, round the table, and tug her to him. Let that aid Micah in figuring out their relationship. He could draw whatever dang conclusion he wanted.

And he just might’ve done it if not for the sound of the front door opening. The sight of Indi—alone—hurrying in, veering immediately for the stairs. Her racing steps thumped up the stairs.

*Not again.* He started to rise, but Lilian put her hand on his shoulder. “Let me. This might be a job for a sister.”



Sydney had known Neil wouldn’t make it more than a few seconds before bounding up the steps after Lilian. He was probably lingering outside Indi’s door right now, trying to decide whether to knock or eavesdrop or simply wait out his sisters.

If Sydney had her way, she’d be up there with him.

“How could you, Micah? What was that? No one’s been anything but nice to you.” She slapped her napkin to the table just as Maggie appeared

from the kitchen, a glass serving plate piled with what looked like a feast. Smelled heavenly.

Why couldn't Micah see this evening for the treat it was? A delicious meal to be had in a lovely house with even lovelier people. Why couldn't he be the boy who'd grasped her hand that first day at the Jacobsens' and told her he was glad she was there? Or even the rascal who'd brought a caramel roll all the way from Chicago for her?

Why this animosity?

"Where'd Neil and Lilian go?" Maggie set the dish in the middle of the table.

"Indi got home. I don't think her fiancé's coming."

Maggie's face fell. "Oh, the dear girl. I could sock the guy. That is, if I ever actually get to meet him. And if Neil doesn't get to him first. They're all upstairs?"

At Sydney's nod, Maggie gave her a look of apology and left the room, her soft steps sounding on the stairs moments later.

"So . . . what? Do we start eating without them?"

It was all she could do not to scowl at Micah. "No, we don't start eating without them." And just because she needed a minute away from the friction between them, she took a cue from Neil, copied his actions from her first evening here. She stood, reached for the water pitcher, and marched to the kitchen.

Of course, a week and a half ago when he'd used the same excuse to leave the room, the pitcher had at least been half-empty. The glass jug was completely full now. She set it on the kitchen counter hard enough that water sloshed over the edge.

"Syd."

He'd followed her. She let out a raspy sigh as she turned. "As long as I've known you, you've been able to beguile anyone who comes across you. Why couldn't you turn on just an ounce of that charm tonight? Did you

see that meal out there? Do you know how much work Maggie went to?” And now it was growing cold in an empty dining room. “She fainted earlier this week. I watched it happen. Scared me half to death. We’ve all been trying to get her to take it easy ever since, but she refused to take her usual nap today just so she could make that meal for you.”

Well, not only for Micah. The effort had been just as much for Indi’s fiancé.

Why did it cause such a pang—not being up there with the others? Between Lilian and Neil and Maggie, Indi had all the support she needed for the disappointment she was facing now. But she’d begun to feel so much a part of this family. And they were up there with each other and she was down here with . . .

With the person who was supposed to be her family. And he was hurting. Somewhere underneath that stylish and stubborn exterior, he was still the eight-year-old boy with the teddy bear.

“I don’t charm everyone, Syd. You’re forgetting the Jacobsens.”

No, she wasn’t forgetting them. How could she when he looked at her like that? Almost . . . bereft.

*I’m the only one he has.* It’d been the truth since the day the Jacobsens had kicked him out.

Or, well, the reality of it wasn’t that black and white. It’d taken Micah a good two or three weeks to ’fess up to her that he’d left the foster home of his own accord. He’d actually made a deal with the couple. He’d show up at their house for scheduled meetings with his child services case manager and they could keep their government checks if they let him leave without reporting him.

Fifteen. He’d been only fifteen. And he’d said the words that had convinced her that dropping out of college and switching to full-time at the restaurant was the right thing to do. “*You’re the only one I have, Syd.*”

Maybe the real problem now was that he wasn’t the only one *she* had.

“I want to help you, Micah. I don’t know how, but I want to. It just can’t be at the expense of the Muir family. They don’t deserve your sullenness or rude insinuations or—”

“I don’t need a lecture.”

She kept her voice even. “This isn’t a lecture. It’s me, for once, putting my foot down and telling you how it has to be. I think you need to head back home and—”

“I just got here!”

“You can keep staying in the apartment. Stay as long as you need to. I’ll come home on Sunday and we’ll put our heads together and figure this out. Maybe if we sit down and talk to the person you owe—”

“You don’t know who you’re talking about, Syd. You don’t know these people. They’re not the kind of people you sit down and talk to.”

“Then we go to the police.”

He threw up his hands. “An even worse suggestion.”

“Well, I’m sorry, Micah, I’m thinking on the fly here. I just want to make sure none of this lands on the Muirs. They have enough going on. I’d like to keep your problem—our problem—from spilling over to them.”

He stared at her for a moment that stretched with simmering pressure. Shook his head. “No, you had it right the first time. It’s my problem.”

“Micah—”

“Don’t worry, you made it clear where you stand. I won’t trouble your precious Muirs anymore.”

She should follow him as he stalked from the kitchen. Try to stop him from stomping through the hall and into the dining room and on to the front door. But her legs wouldn’t move.

Was she really going to let him go? What if he’d only bought a one-way ticket to get here? Would he even have money for a flight home? Frustration clawed at her, both her heart and her mind torn between

hurrying outside after him or going upstairs instead, making sure Indi was okay.

How had everything changed so quickly again? This morning she'd been an eddy of happy emotion, still dizzy from the night before. So all-consumed by thoughts of Neil that she'd very nearly let go of the idea of unraveling her parentage.

But she'd just told Micah she'd be home on Sunday. And she had to go. She couldn't leave him to grapple his way out of his latest mess alone.

But what was she to do about Maggie? About *Neil*? About the whisper at each beat of her heart: *Stay, stay, stay*.

She pulled out the photo Micah had brought her. She probably should've showed it to Maggie earlier. Told her they'd been looking for the wrong person—or at least searching for a man with the wrong name—for days now. Not JP. JR. Could still be a name or initials . . .

*Or Junior. It could stand for Junior.*

She peered at the photo, taking in the slight tilt to Diana's smile, the hint of amusement or maybe mischief embedded in it. And CarleeAnn—such high cheekbones and large green eyes with specks of brown. *I have the same color of hair as Diana. The same color of eyes as CarleeAnn.* She supposed if she looked hard enough, she could convince herself she took after either one.

And the young man in the middle . . . sandy hair with just a hint of ginger, blue tee. There was a logo on the pocket of the tee. Blurry considering the age of the photo but . . . had she seen it before?

“Sydney?”

Neil's voice was a balm for her blistered heart. She turned, suddenly realizing he'd come up behind her without her hearing because he was already close. Close enough she could smell that soap he used, and all she wanted to do in the moment was bury her face against him and keep smelling it.

Might have if she hadn't looked up and seen the confusion on his face, his attention hooked on the photo in her hand.

"Why do you have a picture of Tate Carter?"

Her breath left her.

"Syd?" He slid the photo from her fingers, his gaze crawling over the three faces and sharpening. "Wait . . . is this . . . it?"

The logo on the young man's shirt. The truck she'd seen in the driveway the other day when Tatum Carter had . . .

"It's JR, not JP." Her heart thudded.

Neil met her eyes. "What?"

"On the back. There's a scratch. Tatum Carter's son . . . is he . . . ?"

Neil released a ragged exhale and nodded. "Tatum Carter, Jr."



*M*y Dearest Robert,

*This afternoon Sydney helped me chop vegetables. There were questions I wanted to ask her. I've realized, suddenly, how little I truly know of her past. There's this young man named Micah, you see, and . . .*

*But that's not why I'm writing this letter. I'm writing because it's the questions Sydney asked me I can't stop thinking about. She asked about Diana. About how I came to adopt her.*

*And Robert, it strikes me that in all these years of writing to you, I've never told you about Tatum Carter.*

*You were new in Muir Harbor when we met so I doubt you ever knew the Carters. They're a prominent family. Tatum was two or maybe three years ahead of me in school. And I don't know—honestly, I've no earthly idea—why he took an interest in a grieving nineteen-year-old that summer in between his college semesters. But he did. I'd see him in church or around town and he'd always have a friendly smile for me.*

*He was volunteering at the hospital that summer. He brought me a flyer one evening—about a volunteer opportunity in the maternity ward. Rocking babies. Literally, that was the whole volunteer role—just rocking babies in the hospital nursery. He said he thought it would be good for me.*

*I listened to him because at that point, I would've listened to anyone who offered any sort of cure at all for my grief. We'd ride together and I'd rock babies and when his shift was over, he'd pick me up at the nursery and drive me home.*

*And one night, in the middle of the summer, I held Diana. And, Robert, something in me knew even then that she was special. I found out later her mother, Olivia, was horrifically sick with cancer, had chosen to forgo treatments in order to deliver a healthy child. We became friends in the coming weeks. There wasn't a father in the picture and she didn't have much more in the way of family.*

*And when it came time for her to enter hospice only a month after delivering Diana, she asked me the question I never could've expected.*

*I brought Diana home to Muir Farm just days later. Tatum drove us. I think, perhaps, that Olivia thought Tatum and I . . .*

*But I was still grieving you. And then Olivia, too. And entering motherhood. And he . . . well, he returned to school.*

*Tatum wants to buy the farm. I know what he's doing, Robert. He's trying to help me again. And I've no idea what to do. It would break Neil's heart if I sold. It might very well break my own.*

*And if I believed in ghosts, I'd fear Alec Muir's eternal haunting.*

*But Neil works so hard and the girls have other careers and . . . I worry sometimes I'm trapped in the past. I've been having the nightmares again, Robert. About the night of Diana's accident. They're so blurry . . .*

*I don't know what to do.*

*With all my love,*

*Maggie*



“**S**ydney, you don’t have to do this alone.”

It shouldn’t feel so much like winter on only the second day of November. Though the usual seaside wind was almost eerily calm, the air was brittle and biting. Heavy clouds captured the sky in a swirl of rolling gray, hiding the sun and hinting at snow.

At least Neil had thought to start his truck ten minutes ago. Might not be as slick, shiny, and new as one of the Carter trucks, but the heater worked and he liked the thought of Sydney driving this more than Maggie’s old Buick.

He just wished she’d let him go with her.

But she was as resolute this morning as she’d been last night. “This is going to be awkward enough. I need Tate Carter to be honest with me, and I think there’s more chance of that if we don’t have an audience.”

She shuffled down the porch steps. She was back to wearing her too-thin coat—and on the coldest day since her arrival. But he supposed he

understood. Showing up wearing an oversized men's coat probably wasn't the impression she wanted to give off to the man who might be her father.

*Tate Carter. Of all the blasted people . . .*

He had to try once more. "I could wait for you in the truck."

She gave him the same smile she had fifteen minutes ago when she'd come downstairs and found him in the kitchen, already filling a travel mug of coffee for her. How he'd known she'd try to sneak out this morning before the rest of them were awake, he didn't know. But she'd been open last night about her need to go see Carter and her desire to do so without telling the rest of the household.

That, too, he could understand. There'd been enough starts and stops in this attempt to find her father. He'd probably want a concrete answer himself, if he were in her shoes—not only about whether Carter was truly her father, but which woman was her mother—before sharing anything with the others.

"You are a sweetheart, Neil MacKean. But I've got my phone and my GPS app to get me there. It's all of fifteen miles away. I've got your nice, warmed-up truck to drive. I've got coffee and one of Maggie's scones." She stopped at the truck. "I've got everything I need, and I'm going to be fine."

"The photo?"

She patted her purse.

"Syd—"

She surprised him then. Leaned into him—no, practically threw herself against him, arms wrapping around his waist. No words, just holding on.

He held her back, encircling her in his arms and kissing the top of her head and wondering how he was supposed to let her leave. Not now, but in a few days. She still hadn't explained what was going on with Micah, but the feeling in his gut told him there were things in her world trying to yank her home.

“When you get back, Syd, can we talk? We haven’t really discussed . . . haven’t really talked since the treehouse. I feel like we need to figure things out.” *Figure things out.* Sounded too businesslike. And there was nothing businesslike about this. It was pure, heady, life-changing emotion.

“What things?”

If he hadn’t heard the thread of a tease in her voice, her question might actually worry him. Instead, he smiled with his chin on her head. “Well, things like chores.”

She lifted her head, her pert nose wrinkled.

“What? If you were serious about not being scared of cows, you could take the milking off my plate.”

She laughed and pulled away. “I should hit the road.”

He tugged her back. “But there’s other things, too. To talk about, I mean. I should probably tell you how I feel about you. And you should tell me how you feel about me. And then”—perhaps after he’d spent a minute or two or more showing her how he felt—“we should talk about where we go from here.”

“That would be the mature thing to do.”

Her eyes were on his lips, which seemed like an invitation to him. So he kissed her—a soft, short kiss for the road. A promise for later. A wish . . . “Whatever you find out today, I’ll be here waiting.”

He let her go, opened the truck door for her, waited as she climbed in.

“I tried calling Micah last night,” she said as she buckled in. “He didn’t answer, of course. So I texted him a little bit ago. Let him know I wouldn’t be here this morning. I don’t think he’ll show up.”

He nodded, tucking the end of her coat against her leg so it wouldn’t catch in the door.

“Two weeks?”

He glanced up. “Hmm?”

“It was only two weeks ago that Wilder found me in Chicago. I never would’ve thought . . .”

He reached in to squeeze her hand. “See you when you get back.”

Seconds later, he watched as she eased his truck down the driveway in reverse, angled and pulled onto the lane leading away from the house. He released a frustrated sigh and turned, retracing his steps up the porch and into the house.

And then let out a yelp when he nearly ran down Maggie.

“Whoa, sorry!” He steadied himself, steadied her, and only then did he glimpse her sly grin. “Maggie Muir, were you spying on me from the window?”

“It’s not spying when it’s your children.”

“I’m hardly a child.”

“Well, you’re blushing like a schoolboy, so forgive me for being momentarily confused.” She laughed and patted his arm. “Come with me, Neil.”

“I’ve got chores—”

“Melba can wait.” Wasn’t she going to ask him where Sydney was going? Or tease him with the same mercilessness as his sisters?

But no, she only hurried down the hallway, leaving him no recourse but to follow. She led him to her bedroom and ordered him to sit the moment he stepped in. He perched on the edge of her pristinely made bed while she walked to the dresser against one wall and opened the top drawer.

And then she moved to stand in front of him, arm outstretched, and in her hand . . . a jewelry box?

“Take it.”

“Uh, Maggie—”

“Take it and open it.”

He obeyed, grasping the velvet box, thumbing it open and then trying to make sense of what he was seeing inside. Or more so, why he was seeing it.

The ring captured sunbeams from Maggie's windows, its simple gold band adorned by a large diamond in the center surrounded by tiny sapphires.

"It was my grandmother's," Maggie explained. "When she realized Robert and I were serious about getting married, my mother had it cleaned and re-set. Quite the family heirloom, yes? That thing could buy you a new harvester—or at least a used one. Though, I'm afraid I can't allow you to sell it."

"You're going to give it to Indi, aren't you? She'll be thrilled, Maggie. I'm not really a judge of jewelry, but I think she'll love it."

Maggie laughed and sat beside him. "Not Indi, silly boy. You."

He snapped it closed. "Uh, you . . . you can't."

"Yes, I can. Because I was spying on you out the window, and what's more, I've been watching you for two weeks now and I know a man who's met his match when I see one."

"Maggie—"

"Don't argue with me, son. There's no use."

He opened the box again, couldn't seem to make any one thought stick long enough to speak. He and Sydney hadn't known each long at all. They hadn't gone on a date. Hadn't talked, really talked, yet. He didn't know how whatever she found out today might affect things . . . what would happen when she left Maine on Sunday . . . what might be going through her head as she drove to Tate Carter's house right now.

Didn't know anything other than this wasn't normal—these feelings, the depth of them. They just weren't . . . normal.

"I didn't know what to make of it either, at first, Neil."

He made himself look at her even though he knew his face must be twisted with confused emotion. "Make of what?"

"How I felt about Robert. How it could've happened so quickly. The whole thing stunned me." She touched his shoulder. "Some loves take

months or years to blossom. But some blow in like a storm over the sea, so fast and furious and wonderful it about bowls you over.”

*Love?* He wasn't ready to admit it out loud, but it wasn't as if the word hadn't flitted through his mind once or maybe twice or a dozen times in the past couple of days. “But, Maggie, even your beloved Robert waited at least three weeks to propose. I haven't even known Sydney a full two weeks.”

Her grin turned impish. “Took him three weeks to propose. Didn't take him nearly that long to see what was right in front of him and do something about it.” She leaned into his side and reached her arm around his back. “I'm not saying go propose to her tonight. I'm just saying, when you're ready for this, it's yours. If it feels like too much right now, I can hold on to it for you.”

He should keep arguing with her. Try to convince her to give it to Indi. She was the one who was getting married. She was legally a Muir—she or Lilian should get the family heirloom.

But he couldn't make himself say it. Because . . .

Because Maggie had done him the greatest favor in the world when she'd sent Wilder to Chicago to bring Sydney here. Only a fool would turn down another one.

Maggie squeezed him, then took the box from his hands and tucked it in her dresser drawer. He stood and crossed the room in two long strides.

Then stopped in surprise.

Micah. Barreling down the hallway. But he must've heard Neil's steps because he paused and looked back. “Uh, sorry. Hi. I . . . I didn't just barge in. I got Syd's text and thought maybe I could catch her before she left. Um, Lily—is it?—she let me in on her way out.”

“Lilian.” Who must've not realized yet that Sydney wasn't here.

“Right. Seemed like she was in a hurry, so she told me where Syd's room was, but I guess I missed her.”

“Oh.” Maggie came up behind him. “I assumed that’s where she was headed—into town to see you. Where’d she go?”

“She . . . had to run an errand. I’m sure she’ll be back by lunchtime.” If Neil had any hope of getting out of further questioning about Sydney’s whereabouts, he’d need to escape to the barn pronto. But he didn’t love the thought of leaving Micah here.

Hmm, guess he could give the guy the same farm tour he had Sydney. Babysitting hadn’t really been on his agenda for the day. But more and more, there was simply no denying the truth burrowing its way into his heart: There was very little he wouldn’t do for Sydney Rose.



Neil had told her to look for the massive house at the top of the hill. *“Four dormer windows and a red front door. A crazy amount of house for two single men—though, I guess there’s three of them when Tate’s son is with him.”*

Tate Carter, Jr., apparently, had moved in with his widowed father when he’d divorced more than a decade ago. She’d seen the scattering of outbuildings dotting the hillside as she drove the winding road to the house, recognized the Carter Farms logo on the side of a bright red barn.

Now here she stood, rooted to the mat just inside the front door, wondering why she’d been so set on doing this *today*. Alone. Without so much as a phone call in advance.

But it was too late to turn back now. Tatum had already seen her pull in the huge circle drive. He’d come ambling over from what looked like a garden shed, hadn’t more than cocked an eyebrow when she’d asked to talk to Tate Carter. He’d let her inside and disappeared down a wide hallway.

This was insane. Coming here with only a yellowed photo and the memory of a vague remark from CarleeAnn Picknell that might or might not mean what she'd always assumed.

“Uh, good morning.”

The shadowed corridor hid the approaching form for a moment both too long and too brief. *He might think this is some crazy joke. He might get angry. He might say it's not even him in the photo.*

But Neil had been positive. Not a doubt in his mind, he'd said. The young man in the photo was Tate Carter.

And now Tate Carter stood in front of her, the light of the half-circle window over the front door, cloud cover and all, confirming Neil's assurance. Same slightly crooked nose as in the photo. Same blondish hair with a hint of red. Goodness, he even wore a shirt with the Carter Farms logo on it. Not blue like in the picture, but—

“My dad said you wanted to see me.” He jutted out his hand. “Sorry if I'm not quite placing you. I don't have some appointment I've completely spaced off, do I?”

Did he notice the clamminess of her hand as they shook? “No. No appointment. In fact, I'm sorry for just showing up like this. I . . . I—”

“Heading into town, son.” Tatum Carter strode into view, pulling the same hat he'd been wearing when she arrived over his head again now. He gave her only a quick nod, and she stepped to the side so he could pass her and open the door.

But he stopped just outside. “Maggie Muir's place. You were there the other morning. Knew your face looked familiar.”

She couldn't help a quick glance at Tate. “Y-yes.”

“She didn't by any chance send you with some good news, did she?”

All she could manage was a shake of her head.

“Well, had to ask.” He moved off, disappearing behind the shed.

She turned back to Tate, throat dry and brain as helpless as sand against the tide. She'd tried rehearsing this on the way over. But it wasn't that long of a drive and with thoughts of Neil and Micah churning . . .

*You have to talk, Syd.*

She wetted her lips. "Like I said, I'm sorry this is out of the blue, but . . ." There was nothing else for it. She pulled the photo from her purse and awkwardly thrust it toward the man. "Is this you?"

His light brows slanted into a V, his attention remaining on her even as he took the photo. He must think her loony. Or maybe . . . maybe he saw something in the shape of her face or the look in her eyes.

But then he turned his focus to the picture. The incline of his brows deepened. He looked up. "Where'd you get this?"

Her voice dipped into a whisper. "C-CarleeAnn Picknell."

His gaze was once again glued to her face, the shift in his brown eyes happening so slowly she hardly realized it for the dawning it was—not until he lifted his hand to rub his dropping jaw and she saw his shaking fingers. "I think I'm going to need another cup of coffee."



Tate Carter, Jr. set a mug in front of her, the smell from it pulling a gurgle from her stomach and reminding her she'd never eaten that scone—and had probably had too much coffee already.

But Sydney was just as fidgety as the man currently stirring half-and-half into his own cup. She needed something to do with her hands. Might as well be this. She lifted it for a sip.

"I guess I've stalled just about as long as I can." Tate had yet to take a drink. Or look at the photo again. Or look at her again.

“I was confused for a little while. I thought it said *JP* on the back. So I was looking for the wrong . . .” Why had she started there? Why would he care about some misunderstood letters when she was pretty sure he’d figured out who she was?

*Whose she was.*

“So then . . . you were looking?” He finally met her eyes again.

If only she could decipher what it was she was seeing in them. Intense discomfort, certainly. But there was something else, too. Almost like . . . no, it couldn’t be yearning. But maybe, at the least, interest. “I wasn’t looking until recently. Actually, it was Maggie Muir who came looking for me.”

His brow scrunched all over again. “Oh.”

“She’s been searching for her missing granddaughter, you see.”

“Oh, of course. I heard Monroe was still working on that.” His fingers cupped his coffee mug. “I have to be honest . . . I never thought I’d . . . that this would . . . or even could be possible. I made a whole heap of mistakes, horrible mistakes, as a teenager. But letting her leave with . . . you—that was, by far, the worst.”

Then he’d known about her. At some point, he’d known.

His words came faster. “I don’t have an excuse. Nothing other than teenage stupidity. I’ve thought about it so many times through the years, but never once considered the possibility that . . .”

She should tell him she hadn’t come here for a guilt trip. Or an apology. Or even an explanation of his younger self’s decisions. She just needed to *know*. And there was something he’d just said . . .

*“Letting her leave with you.”*

“Which her?” The question jolted from her.

“Say again?”

She nodded to the picture on the table between them, her heart sprinting. Was this really happening? She’d just found her father and now,

in the same hour, she was about to know—finally, for certain this time—who her mother was. “Which her?”

“You mean, you don’t know who . . . ?”

She shook her head, every racing thought slowing and then stilling entirely when he pointed.



The waiting was killing him.

Neil paced from one end of the barn to the other. Sydney had been gone for too long. She should’ve been back hours ago.

He’d stayed as busy as he could. He’d taken Micah on that tour, not that the younger man had seemed all that impressed by anything he’d seen. Other than a few clipped sentences here and a monotone answer there, the guy had done little talking. Any hope he’d had for bonding with Sydney’s foster brother had faded by the time they’d reached the closest field.

Micah had begged off quickly, but not so quick the whole thing didn’t leave a pit in Neil’s stomach. He hadn’t wanted to push Sydney about what the man was doing here, especially not after what they’d discovered about Tate Carter. And all that was still left unsaid between them.

But there was *something* off.

He’d gone into town with Indi midmorning and she’d loaded him up with items for the treehouse from her shop. She even had an antique queen-sized bed that would work in the space. He’d picked out a mattress at Muir Harbor’s sole furniture store, then had borrowed Wilder’s truck to get it out to the treehouse.

But now it was a quarter ’til two and he still hadn’t heard from Sydney.

Melba bellowed from her stall.

“I know, girl. I’m concerned too.”

But what could he do? Borrowing Maggie's Buick and tracking Sydney down felt like an overreaction. She was a grown woman who didn't need a man she'd known all of twelve days barreling in and trying to solve her problems.

Who was to say this was a problem at all? Much as he didn't have a plethora of warm feelings for the Carters, Tate was a decent guy. Less arrogant than his dad, at least. If he was who Sydney thought he was, what if he took the news well? Maybe they were having a joyous father-daughter reunion.

And maybe Tate was finally putting to rest the question of who Sydney's mother was. Maybe, even now, she was discovering a new sense of peace.

Anyway, he had better things to do than distress Melba with his aimless stomping around the barn. His phone dinged. His breath released in a whoosh as he plucked it from his pocket. Just one word but the relief of it was instant. *Treehouse*.

Captain scampered at his side across the fields and into the trees. If Sydney was already in the treehouse, then she'd have seen the new bed, the grayish-blue comforter Indi had picked out, the antique bedside table. Indi had said she'd let him choose his own accent items, but he hadn't missed the way she'd steered him to the old picture frames she'd painted and repurposed with wire and dried wildflowers. Eventually he'd given her free rein and stopped arguing when she wouldn't let him pay for a single thing.

But his eagerness to get to Sydney—hear how this morning went, get her reaction to the treehouse's new look—faded as he climbed the wood staircase and realized what he was hearing from inside.

Crying—but not the gentle tears Sydney had freed the other day in the pantry. This was sobbing, unbridled and heart-wrenching.

He pushed in through the new door he'd installed and felt his core constrict at the sight of her curled up in the center of the bed. *Oh, Syd*. Gone

was any thought of holding back or any fear of overreacting. He was at her side in seconds, lowering to the bed, leaning against the headboard, and pulling her against him. He wanted to ask but . . .

“I-I just . . . I don’t know how I’m going to tell Maggie.”

*Oh.* There was his answer. *Her* answer. Diana wasn’t her mother. He closed his eyes and combed his fingers through her hair and let her cry.



**S**ydney awoke in a cocoon of warmth, a thick blanket tucked around her, the weight of someone next to her, and somewhere, a humming fan pulling her from sleep.

Something wet touched her cheek and she opened her eyes. Not *someone* next to her—Captain, his downy fur tickling her cheek. She looked past him to where tiny dots of light cluttered the ceiling above her, twinkling like stars, and the smell of something fruity and sweet skimmed away the last of her hazy confusion.

The treehouse. She was in the treehouse. But since when were there fairy lights strung all across the wooden beams overhead, and shouldn't it smell like lumber and paint, not one of Maggie's desserts? "There's a bed in here."

"Yep, and considering that three-hour nap you just took, you did a nice job breaking it in."

Her gaze flew to the corner as Captain bounded off the bed. Neil stood next to a small bistro table, and oh, the glass dish explained the smell. Even with her eyes still heavy from sleep, she could make out Maggie's blueberry cobbler. "I . . . I've been asleep for three hours?" Then it was still today. But how . . .

Her mind hobbled backward as she sat up. The tears that had hit halfway home from Tate Carter's house. The tug she'd felt to come here. She'd texted Neil, hadn't she? And he'd come and she'd been a wreck and, goodness, had she cried herself to sleep? That was a first.

And nothing less than embarrassing.

"I hope I didn't wake you up. I just got back. I wasn't sure how long . . . that is, I didn't want you to wake up alone out here, and plus, I'd left the space heater on. I was only gone long enough to do the evening chores. Well, and grab some food."

But then, what was he doing earlier while she slept? *Probably hanging those lights*. She didn't think they'd been up before, not that she'd been up to noticing much detail when she arrived. Not like she did now—the simple picture-frame decorations on two walls, the distressed farmhouse headboard, the off-white wool blanket tucked around her and pretty comforter underneath.

Oh, shoot, it was all wrinkled now and she'd climbed atop it with her shoes still on and . . . *please*, let her not have snored. But not even that would have been as humiliating as what was sliding its way into her memory now—the way Neil had found her hours ago, her gut-wrenching sobs. "I'm suddenly intensely mortified."

"Why? I'm going to guess you didn't sleep much last night. You clearly needed the rest."

"No . . . I don't mean . . . well, yes . . . but also . . ."

He rescued her with a smile clearly meant to ease her. "Want some cobbler? It's after six. Did you even have lunch?"

“I did. I ended up going into town with Tate Carter. We ate at the Brunch Barn.” She stood, her legs wobbly. “But yes. I definitely want cobbler.”

He gave a nod that said *Good* and motioned her over to the table. “There’s decaf coffee in the Thermos. Indi says I’ll need to get a Keurig in here. I’m wondering if maybe I should add a little built-in counter over there—for a coffee bar, a small microwave, maybe a mini-fridge underneath.”

She slid onto the chair opposite Neil. “It looks amazing in here. Almost . . .” She searched for the right word, thankful for a moment that the focus was off her. “Enchanting.”

He set a plate in front of her, poured her a mug of coffee, and sat. “That’s the exact word Indi used when she was here earlier today. She picked out most of the stuff. However, I’m proud to say the lights were my idea. On a starry night, the place is better off without them, what with the skylight and all. But on a cloudy evening like this, I think they work.”

They more than worked.

“Indi says the windows need curtains, though. Apparently she’s got the perfect thing back at her store in Augusta. She left this afternoon to go pick them up. She insisted since she knows I’m showing Maggie the place tomorrow.”

“People are going to love this, Neil. Staying in a luxury treehouse sounds magical all on its own, but then you throw in the ocean only a short walk away and the charm of touring a blueberry farm and the cute little town a couple of miles up the road . . . there’s no way this won’t be successful. I bet you’ll get honeymooners.”

His fork clinked against his plate. “Yes. Well.” He cleared his throat. “Syd . . .”

She couldn’t leave him hanging any longer. The poor man had to have been wondering about her time with Tate Carter all day, had probably

worried when she was gone longer than expected, and then to find her the way he had . . .

“It was . . . it was actually good. Talking with Tate.”

He abandoned his next bite, propping his elbows on the table, in full listening mode.

“He’s definitely the guy from the photo,” she went on, “and he’s definitely—at least, we both feel very certain he’s my father.” Amazingly, her tongue didn’t trip over the word. “I would’ve thought after such an intense discovery, he’d need some time and space, but no, he just kept guzzling coffee and asking me questions about my life and then he wanted to give me a tour around the farm and he drove me into town for lunch.”

And at that point, he’d seemed almost . . . happy. Still a little dazed, perhaps, but not as shell-shocked as he’d been earlier.

But then they’d gone back out to the farm so she could pick up Neil’s truck. Tatum was there and Tate had made the mistake of telling him who she was. And that’s when the accusations had started flying.

*“I can’t believe you’d actually believe her with absolutely nothing to go on. A photo isn’t proof. Her word isn’t proof. She’s another Cynthia Muir wannabe. Probably realized there was nothing for her there, found a random snapshot, and figured out how to scam one of the wealthiest families in the state. And you’re falling for it. No, I won’t believe it. Not until a paternity test proves otherwise.”*

Tate had argued, but she hadn’t been able to speak—eventually, hadn’t been able to handle it at all. So she’d walked to the truck. She’d slipped inside and driven away without so much as a goodbye to Tate.

She replayed the scene for Neil now, her cobbler untouched and his frown deepening with every word.

“Halfway home, I just . . . I lost it. Because of Tatum, yes, but mostly because it suddenly hit me that I was going to have to tell Maggie.” Her eyes filled with tears all over again. *No, no more crying.*

But how could she not? Just the thought of saying those words to Maggie—*I'm not your granddaughter*—and the discouragement that would surely fill the older woman's face at realizing her search had once again hit a dead-end . . .

Diana Muir wasn't her mother. Maggie wasn't her grandmother. She blinked but it did no good.

Neil slid something toward her. A box of tissues. His voice was gentle. "I came prepared this time. Not that my shirt didn't work just fine last time."

A laugh caught in her throat. Or maybe a sob. She pulled a tissue free. "I just didn't realize how much I wanted it to be her . . . until I knew it wasn't."

She'd felt the prick of disappointment when Tate had first pointed to CarleeAnn's face in the photo. But not until she'd been alone in Neil's truck had she experienced the full force of it.

She pressed her tissue to her eyes. "I'd been telling myself no matter which one birthed me, it wouldn't really change things. Both are gone. But it does change things. Because if it had been Diana, then I would've known or at least been able to assume that . . . she wanted me."

*"At least I did the right thing. Leaving you . . . at least I did that."*

There was no dam for her tears now. There was only Neil sliding from his seat and moving around the table, pulling her up and against him.

"I-I didn't mean t-to do this again." Her voice trembled through her cries, muffled by Neil's shirt. "But a-at least I'm standing this time. I won't fall asleep on you."

"I didn't mind you falling asleep on me at all. In fact, I might've enjoyed it quite a bit."

She didn't know how, but somehow she laughed. Through her tears, through the heaviness of her day, already hurting at the thought of talking to Maggie . . . she laughed.

And then cried some more. And finally, when he must've felt her still, Neil moved his hands to her face, tipping her head back just slightly, thumbs tracing the tears under her eyes. "Tatum Carter is an idiot."

Another small, strangled laugh.

"Was Tate able to tell you much about CarleeAnn?"

"It was a summer fling before she went off to college. I guess he and CarleeAnn and Diana had become friends as teens, but apparently Tate's mother wasn't a fan of the girls, or maybe Maggie, so they kind of kept it on the down-low. I didn't really understand that part of the story."

But by the look on Neil's face, maybe he did. "Apparently Tatum and Maggie were . . . something. At some point. I don't know much, only what Tate mentioned the other day."

"Well, anyway, Tate and CarleeAnn had a fling but he never knew she got pregnant. Not until that weekend when she came home." The same weekend of Diana's accident. "She showed up at his house out of the blue almost two years later." Much like Sydney had done today. "She was toting a toddler, told him she—I—was his and said she needed a favor. Asked him to watch her while she went home and talked to her parents."

Tate's words replayed through her mind. "*I was pretty much paralyzed. Didn't know what to do. You were cute—I remember that. I guess she thought showing up on her parents' doorstep with their grandchild would be too much of a shock. Apparently wasn't as worried about me.*" There'd been a pained tinge to his wry half-smile. "*I don't know what happened with her folks. Only that she returned later that night—it was a Friday—and took you out of my arms with hardly a word and then she was gone. And I was too dumb to go after her, to ask questions, ask when I'd see you again. When I realized she'd left town entirely, I thought . . . I thought it was for the best. I was only twenty and I had my whole future ahead of me and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.*"

Neil was quiet after she finished the recounting.

“He doesn’t know why she went to Illinois. Or why she ultimately decided to give me up for adoption.”

He caught a lingering tear with the pad of his thumb, then lowered his arms to encircle her.

“At least now we have some new details for Wilder’s investigation. Diana’s accident happened Sunday night. Tate’s pretty sure CarleeAnn was long gone by then. But also, he confirmed that CarleeAnn was living in Atlanta before she came back. She told him that much. And there’s something else—he thinks there was another person traveling with them that weekend. Something CarleeAnn said about needing to ‘leave before they realized.’”

“Couldn’t she have been talking about her parents?”

Sydney shook her head. “He doesn’t think so. He said there were other comments that led him to believe she was talking about Diana and someone else. But who really knows? Regardless, we should call Wilder.” She began to pull away, but his arms tightened.

“We don’t have to call him right now.”

So she stayed there, her head nestled against his chest, letting quiet moments stretch until his low voice finally broke the silence. “Sydney, just because Diana Muir wasn’t your birth mother doesn’t mean you don’t belong here.”

They were almost an echo of words she’d said to him only two nights ago right here in this magical treehouse. And here, with his arms around her, she could believe he was right.

But at some point, she was going to have to leave. His arms, this treehouse . . . the farm.

As if he could hear her thoughts, he spoke again, voice huskier than before. “And while I don’t know what CarleeAnn’s story was back then, you are very much wanted now.” He lowered his head and kissed her lips,

soft and reassuring, then whispered against her. “I just hate that you’re hurting. And I wish I knew what to do about it.”

“You could keep kissing me.”

He chuckled and acquiesced, quiet seconds passing as she let herself forget everything else, just for these few minutes.

But reality refused to let her free. She pulled away. “No, I know what you need to do.”

“I thought I was doing it,” he rasped.

“You need to bring Maggie here.”

“I’m going to. Tomorrow night.”

She shook her head. “No. Tonight.” And though she hated to step free of his embrace, she stepped back.

He ran one hand through his hair. “But . . . why?”

“Because tomorrow I’m going to have to tell her, Neil. I’m scared it’s going to break her heart. So give her this first. Enchant her the way you did me.”

His other brow lifted.

How, after everything that had happened today, did he manage to pull a blush from her? “Okay, not exactly the same way.” She moved to the bed and picked up the blanket Neil must’ve covered her with earlier. She folded it up, straightened the comforter.

“You know, hard as today was for you, there is one good thing—at least Micah won’t worry any more that you’re acting very inappropriately with someone you’re legally related to.”

She nabbed a pillow from the bed and lobbed it at him, earning a laugh. “Will you, though? Bring her out here tonight?”

He nodded and moved to her side, replacing the pillow on the bed then reaching for her hand. “And tomorrow we can tell her the rest. Together.”



For the second time in as many hours, Neil's steps carried him into the clearing, the treehouse he'd put so many weeks of work into coming into view.

He knew the moment Maggie caught sight of his project. She gasped, froze in her tracks.

He'd done more than hang fairy lights inside the treehouse while Sydney slept earlier. He'd also strung outdoor lights all along the staircase and the small landing at the top, and he'd hung an antique lantern—another of Indi's contributions—from a thick branch that curved near the entrance.

And then there was the antique spyglass propped atop the railing, a nod to Alec Muir and the Legend of Muir Harbor. Sydney had declared it a brilliant addition when she'd seen it as they left earlier, said the exterior appearance as a whole was pure perfection, and he'd have been lying if he said her approval hadn't meant everything to him.

Or that his mind hadn't drifted back to what she'd said earlier. About honeymooners. And there was that ring back in Maggie's room . . .

Even now, he felt his pulse sputter as thoughts it was too early to be thinking trailed through his brain.

He'd tried to talk Sydney into coming along for this, but she'd insisted it was something he should do alone. "*It's your dream to share, Neil.*"

Yes, but he was beginning to think he might not have gotten around to sharing it at all if Sydney Rose hadn't swept into his world. Her interest and intrigue that first night he'd showed her the still-unfinished structure, her encouragement that he let his sisters in on the farm's struggles, her push for him to not wait any longer to show Maggie . . .

She'd changed his life. That's all there was to it. She'd changed *him*.

All those weeks that he'd worked on the treehouse before Sydney came along, it'd felt like a desperate last-ditch effort to give Muir Farm a chance at survival. But she'd seen the dream underneath the desperation. She'd seen untapped skills and caged ambition.

And through her encouragement, she'd set his vision free.

"What is this, Neil?"

"Well, you know I've tended to disappear for a couple of hours most nights."

Maggie still stood rooted in place. "I thought you were fixing the barn loft."

She thought it had taken him that long to fit a few two-by-fours into place? "This is what I've been working on." Her confused expression prodded him on. "It's a luxury treehouse."

"There's such a thing?"

"They're becoming more and more popular. I got the idea forever ago and it wouldn't leave me alone, so I finally started working on it. It's not completely done yet. I still need to build a bathroom, but I've been stalling a bit in case I needed to dip into my savings for the new parts for the harvester."

"I don't understand. What's this for? Why would you build it in secret?" Maggie's breathing seemed to quicken in time with her questions.

"I'd like to rent it out. And there's other spots around the farm that I think would be perfect for something similar. I think it could end up being a really nice and much-needed extra income all through the spring, summer, and fall. Heck, maybe we'll even get winter boarders. I'd like to add some opportunities for guests at the farm, too. Let people help with raking during harvest—like apple orchards where you get to pick your own apples. I know I've mentioned something like this before but—"

"Yes, you have."

She wasn't looking at the treehouse anymore. She was looking at him, the hard lines around her mouth surrounding her frown. But why . . . ?

"I said no, Neil. I don't want our property crawling with strangers."

"It wouldn't be crawling. It'd be really controlled. We can set rules about how many guests can stay, what's allowed. And it's a good distance from the house. You wouldn't even ever have to come into contact with any of them, if you don't want. I can coordinate and take care of everything. Lil and Indi said they'd help, too."

She huffed. "So you've already shared this with them. Another secret, only this time everyone's in on it."

"It's not like that." Of all the reactions he'd imagined—and yes, he'd considered that she might not immediately latch on to the idea—he hadn't imagined this. She seemed almost frantic. "I just wanted—"

"You just wanted to do what you wanted regardless of how I felt about it."

"Maggie, please—"

"I don't want strangers wandering around the farm."

Why was she staring at the spyglass? And what was her issue with the notion of strangers? This wasn't the Maggie he knew.

Or . . . or maybe it was. She'd welcomed Sydney to the farm, had asked Indi to invite her fiancé, had opened their doors to Sydney's foster brother—all true. She'd even met with Tatum Carter the other day.

But the Maggie who rarely went into Muir Harbor anymore, the Maggie who avoided town events, the Maggie who, up until earlier this week, hadn't even backed her Buick out of the garage in he didn't know how long . . . that Maggie, he could believe, would balk at the thought of a constant stream of visitors.

But . . . why?

"I don't understand, Maggie. This could get us out of the red. And it could be *fun*. I love being a farmer, and I like the idea of sharing that with

people. Did you know Sydney didn't know anything about blueberry farms? She had no idea our state's practically covered with them. We have something special here and we could be sharing it."

"Why can't you be content, Neil? Why can't *you* understand? If you love being a farmer so much, then it should be enough for you." She was breathing even faster now.

She hadn't even seen the inside yet. Maybe once she caught her breath, he could at least convince her to climb the stairs and see the work he'd done inside. Maybe then she'd feel differently. Wouldn't look at him like this . . . as if . . .

As if in building this treehouse and dreaming this dream, he'd somehow betrayed her. Maggie, who he'd loved longer than anyone.

"I *am* content here. It's because I love this farm and want to spend the rest of my life here that I wanted to pursue this idea even though . . ." Even though she'd made it clear anytime he brought it up that she wasn't keen on the idea of opening up the property to other purposes.

*She's right to be upset. She said no and you went ahead anyway.* Because, like always, he barreled in, thinking he needed to take charge, handle everything on his own. Rescue what she apparently didn't want saved.

"Is that it?" he asked quietly. "Have you decided to sell and that's why —"

She huffed again, a cloud of cold, white air forming. "No. This is Muir Farm. It'll always be Muir land."

Relief slid in, but it was pushed out just as quickly as her words thumped through him. *Muir Farm. Muir land.*

And he was Neil MacKean.

The same Neil MacKean who'd stood in a courthouse at sixteen and been sure, so sure, that when he walked out again he'd be Neil Muir. How could those old bruises still be so tender?

“I guess . . . I guess you don’t want to see the inside, then.”

“Neil—”

“It’s okay. We can go.” His truck, actually, was still nearby from where Sydney had parked outside the cluster of trees this afternoon. He’d drive Maggie back to the house. Probably hadn’t been the best idea to ask her to walk this far on a cold night in the first place. Especially considering how it’d turned out. He strode toward the treehouse. “I need to turn out the lights before we leave.”

Which meant trudging up the stairs he’d spent days building. Walking into the picturesque atmosphere Indi had created with all her decorations and suggestions. An atmosphere made all the more exquisite by memories of time spent with Sydney here.

He paused at the top of the stairs. He’d made a horrible mistake keeping this a secret from Maggie.

But that wasn’t the only thing rooting him in place at the landing outside the treehouse door. It was something else. A feeling—not a good one. Why was the door cracked open? He remembered closing it before he’d left with Sydney more than an hour ago.

He pushed it the rest of the way open and stepped inside, shock surging through him. Someone had been here. In the time between when he’d walked Sydney to the house and returned with Maggie, someone had . . . searched the place? The mattress was at an angle on the box spring, its covers mussed. The drawer of the little bedside table was open, and faint, dusty footprints led to the bistro table.

Someone had been here and hadn’t even tried to hide it. *You need to call someone.* Wilder, he should call Wilder. Or the police. Or—

A sharp cry immobilized him. Until realization pushed him out the door once more.

“Neil.” His name was a moan on Maggie’s lips. His focus flew to the ground. Why was Maggie panting, bending?

He rushed down the steps, reaching her just as her legs gave out.  
“Maggie, what’s happening?” He caught her crumpling form.

“I remember . . . I remem—”

The word died on her lips as her eyes fluttered closed.



*N*eil couldn't make himself move. He just stood there in the doorway of Maggie's hospital room, the jagged edges of too many emotions pressing against him all at once.

But the sharpest, the loudest—nearly drowning out the beeping of a monitor, the noise of a mop bucket's wheels as a janitor pushed it down the corridor behind him—fear.

Lilian was already at the bedside, enfolding Maggie's limp hand in her own, murmuring words of love or maybe a prayer. She was the strong one. She hadn't stopped cold in the door like he did, frozen by the sight of Maggie with her eyes closed, cheeks ashen, a tube in her nose, and hooked to machines.

No, the moment the doctor had strode into the waiting room ten minutes ago and asked for the Muir family, Lilian had been the one to jump to her feet, to surely catch every detail that passed his lips—blocked vessels, emergency angioplasty, stent. Lilian had filed every detail, he knew, so that

she could fill in Indi and probably research each medical term the moment she got the chance.

Whereas he'd tripped on the doctor's first words. *Muir family.*

*"This is Muir Farm. It'll always be Muir land."*

*Oh, Maggie.* Had he done this to her? The long walk across the fields. The cold, evening air. The shock of what he'd shown her. The panic that had set in—a reaction he still didn't understand. But that didn't matter now.

At Lilian's shudder, he finally willed his legs to carry him across the room. She leaned over Maggie now, tears landing on the sheet over Maggie's lower half. The surgical team was readying even now—they likely only had minutes before someone came to wheel Maggie away.

"Dr. Lakeman said he expects a good outcome." His weary brain had latched on to that much. And this operation was so much less invasive than open heart surgery. But it needed to happen quickly. "She's going to pull through this, Lil. She's going to."

"What if Indi doesn't get here in time?"

In time for the emergency surgery, she meant. Not in time for . . . no, he wouldn't let his thoughts go there. He wouldn't think of any of the risks—blood clots or . . . or whatever else the doctor might have said that he hadn't been able to follow in his panic.

"She'll be here any minute." In fact, he should probably go out to the waiting area now. They'd left Sydney out there alone, and when Indi arrived, she'd want to come back. But only two people were allowed at a time and . . .

And he couldn't bear to see Maggie this way. *I'm sorry, Maggie. I'm so sorry. I'll tear the treehouse down board by board if that's what you want whenever you wake up. I won't bring it up again.*

He'd barely given the condition he'd found the treehouse in a second thought. Who cared about an intruder now?

“We should’ve listened to you, Neil,” Lilian whispered. “On Tuesday when she fainted . . . if we’d listened to you, taken her to the doctor . . .”

He squeezed Lilian’s shoulder. “No, don’t think like that.”

She stood and turned, falling into his ready embrace. So maybe she wasn’t as strong as he’d thought. None of them were.

Maggie—she was the strong one. They all needed her. Needed her more than anything. More than some vision for the future. More than the farm. If only he’d told her about the financial struggles sooner. Let her know about Carter’s offer. He should never have argued with her. He should’ve told her if she wanted to sell, he’d support her.

Because it was what she’d always, *always* done for every one of them. How could he have been so thick-headed? Gone behind her back . . . acted as if he knew best . . .

*God, please.*

It was the closest he could come to a prayer.

He held his sister tight for a moment, then released her, wishing he had words to encourage Lil. But he was an empty well, nothing left to dredge up. A better brother wouldn’t be fighting the urge to flee in this moment.

And then giving in. “I’ll go see if Indi’s here, okay?”

Lilian only nodded. He moved to the door.

“Neil?”

He glanced back at her.

“Someone should probably tell Wilder.”

Oh, of course. He should’ve thought of that already. Should’ve called or texted in the ambulance or later, as he paced in the waiting room. “Right. Can you . . .?”

She nodded. On a different day, in a completely different situation, he’d make some lame joke about the irony of Lilian being the one to think of Wilder.

But he couldn’t manage even that.

He emerged into the waiting room seconds later. Sydney still sat in her same chair as before, knees tucked up to her chest and her arms around them. Why weren't his legs quicker to take him to her? He should be hugging her, too, unearthing words he hadn't been able to for Lilian.

But he was too numb.

"Neil!" Indi pushed through a revolving door, her heels clacking on the tile floor, tear tracks staining her cheeks. She flew into him, pulling him into a tight embrace, her purse hitting his back. "She's not in surgery yet, is she? Please tell me I got here in time. They can't take her back without—"

"Lil's in with her now. Room 113. Only two people can be with her at a time." He peeled the visitor's badge from his shirt. Hopefully no one would double-check the name. He doubted Indi would be moving slowly enough to be stopped anyway. "It's just down the hall and to the right. There's a nurses' station on the way if you can't—"

"I'll find it." She slapped his badge on her coat upside down and moved past him. Then stopped. "Oh, Neil. That's . . ."

Neil looked behind her to where a man had paused after exiting the revolving door. The man, tall and clearly uncomfortable, stood awkwardly, his white button-down untucked. Silver tinged his dark hair—premature considering, by the rest of his appearance, he didn't look older than his early thirties.

Oh, of course. Her fiancé.

Neil turned back to Indi, but she was already gone. He let out a breath, his lungs too tight. He should meet the guy. Introduce himself. Or . . . or talk to Sydney. She had to be hurting, hoping for a chance to see Maggie, too, before . . .

He couldn't do this. He lurched toward the door Indi had just come in, ignoring the man who'd trailed in after her, ignoring Sydney calling his name.

The cold slammed into him the moment his feet landed on the sidewalk and he doubled over, hands on his knees. This couldn't be happening. Maggie. A heart attack.

Him. Falling apart.

"Neil." Sydney's soft voice broke through his panic just enough to raise his head.

"I'm fine. I just needed some air."

"You're not fine."

"Maggie's the one who's not fine and I missed it. I didn't realize . . ." Somewhere nearby an ambulance siren pierced the air. "It's been too much for her—all of it. Between you coming to Maine and Wilder's investigation and the search for JP." *No, JR. Tate Carter.*

Maggie didn't even know that part yet. She didn't know about Sydney not being Diana's daughter.

"I should've realized the toll everything was taking on her. No, I couldn't force her to the doctor, but I could've at least kept her from slaving away in the kitchen all afternoon yesterday, making that huge meal. I could've not dragged her across too many acres to see a blasted treehouse in thirty-three-degree weather."

He finally looked at Sydney, lifting his gaze in time to see hers fall and her cheeks blanch.

*Oh, no, he didn't mean . . .* His words replayed in his mind. The part about her coming to Maine, the search for her father. And the treehouse—Syd had been the one to encourage him to bring Maggie out there tonight.

"No, no, I'm not blaming you. The way that sounded, I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't," she whispered.

Did she, though? Because she was backing away, hurt so clear in her eyes it was enough to shatter him entirely.

"She's going to be here awhile. I'll go back to the house." Sydney started to turn. "I'll get some things to make her more comfortable when

she wakes up. I've still got your keys."

Because he'd gone in the ambulance and Lilian had been too upset to drive. "Syd—"

But she was already walking away. He needed to follow, undo the damage he'd just done.

No, he needed to stay. They'd be taking Maggie back for surgery any minute.

*But Sydney . . .*

"Neil." Lilian's voice rose over the whoosh of the revolving door. "Dr. Lakeman needs to talk to us."



The night sky was pitch-black, as was the house in front of her. No lights in the windows. Just silence, stillness, save the rumble of the truck's engine.

Until she turned the key, and then there wasn't even that. She pulled the fob from the ignition and her hand dropped into her lap. Shouldn't her eyes be wet with tears in this moment? Or had she cried all of them earlier today, first on the way home from Tate Carter's and then at the treehouse?

She stared at the house outside the windshield—all shadows at nearly ten o'clock at night. *Home.*

No, not her home. It couldn't be, no matter how deeply she longed for it.

Not just because she wasn't Maggie's granddaughter. Nor only because there'd been a horrible, awful truth behind Neil's words back at the hospital, however much he hadn't meant to cast any blame.

But because once Maggie finally knew the truth—about Tate, about Sydney—it would cause her even more pain. And Sydney's presence would

only make things worse, a constant reminder that Maggie still hadn't found the real Cynthia Muir. That somewhere out there, there was still a lost sheep . . .

And it was the last thing Maggie needed now. When she made it through surgery—because she would, she had to—she'd have a journey of recovery in front of her. That doctor had said it could take longer to recover from an emergency angioplasty than an elective one. She'd be in the hospital for several days, might not feel up to speed again for weeks. No way was Sydney going to let herself make it any harder for her.

So she needed to leave. Before she brought any more hurt to the Muir family.

She forced herself from the car, the biting cold filling her with determination as she marched to the house, not even stopping to pet Captain when he rounded the corner and bounded toward her. Inside, she climbed the stairs and went straight to her room.

She'd pack her suitcase and then she'd gather up a few things for Maggie as she'd promised. She'd call Micah on the way to the hospital to drop them off, find out if he was still in town. Hopefully he could come pick her up. Maybe the airport would let her trade Sunday's ticket in for an earlier flight.

It would be torture not saying goodbye to Maggie in person. But it was better this way.

*And Neil.*

No. No. She couldn't think about that now. She needed to act before she lost her resolve. She wouldn't stop to notice how the house still smelled like Maggie's blueberry cobbler. Wouldn't let herself linger outside Neil's door or again in the bathroom, remembering back to that first night. She would pack now and emotionally crumple later.

It didn't take her more than fifteen minutes to empty the dresser drawers and gather her toiletries. She only had a few items in the closet, her fingers

brushing up against that silly pink robe she'd worn out to the treehouse . . .

*You can reminisce later.*

And she would. She'd remember every minute of these almost-two weeks. She'd probably cry a hundred times when she was home. Maybe someday she'd be able to smile at the memories. But there wasn't time now. Not when every minute that passed was another opportunity to change her mind.

She zipped her suitcase and grabbed her purse and didn't let herself look back when she left the room.

*Thump.*

She stopped halfway down the hallway. What was that? She waited.

Nothing.

*Stop stalling.*

She began moving again, lugging her suitcase down the stairs. Only when she reached the bottom did she realize—*Neil's coat*. She'd grabbed it before racing to the hospital, and she was wearing it still.

Okay, maybe she hadn't cried every tear yet. They stung her eyes now as she lowered her luggage to the floor and shrugged out of his jacket, draped it over the banister.

She supposed she could've worn it to the hospital, left it in the truck. But no, between the smell of it, the sentiment, the memories . . . no, she needed to leave it here. She bent to pick up her suitcase again, then froze.

*Another thump.* The creak of floorboards.

*Those are footsteps.*

But whoever it was hadn't come in the front door. She would've heard, wouldn't she?

And then the whispers reached her.

Her heart thudded. Neil or his sisters wouldn't have reason to whisper. They wouldn't be here at all, wouldn't leave Maggie. Wilder? Maybe

someone had called him and he'd had the same idea she had, had stopped here to pick up a few of Maggie's things.

A thin line of light from under Maggie's bedroom door, casting into the first-floor hallway, confirmed that thought. But why would Wilder be whispering? And to whom?

"I thought you said you knew where it was."

Wait, that wasn't a whisper anymore and it wasn't Wilder's voice.

Without a second thought, she pushed open the bedroom door.

And all the air left her lungs. "Micah?" She tried and failed to make sense of what she was seeing. He stood at Maggie's dresser, one drawer halfway open, clothing spilling out. She stepped farther into the room. "What are you doing he—"

Her last word was lost to a shriek as a heavy arm grabbed her from behind and then a hand clamped over her mouth.

"Easy, that's my sister." Micah's nostrils flared.

A voice, low and menacing, sent a chill coursing through her, each word slow and deliberate. "You said you knew where it was."

She struggled against the man's hold, panic warring with her confusion. And then a burst of anger so hot she bit the man's hand and jerked her head to the side. "What are you doing, Micah? What could you possibly be looking for?"

His movements turned frantic as he returned to digging through the drawer. "There's a ring in here. I heard them talking about it."

"What? Why—" The man's hand found her mouth again.

"You can make this easy or you can make this difficult. Your choice." His slimy voice curdled her insides.

"I'm sorry, Syd. I didn't mean for you to get dragged in—"

"Shut up and find it so we can get out of here before anyone else shows up."

Micah opened a third drawer. “Why don’t you let go of her and help me look? Try the vanity.”

She didn’t so much as feel a muscle twitch from the man behind her. “And give her the chance to call for help?”

“I told you, they all left for the hospital. I watched them leave. I saw the ambulance.”

And so he’d decided to rob the house? Find some ring? *What ring?* How could he? How *could* he?

As if he could hear her question, he ignored his accomplice and spoke up again, yanking on another drawer. “I didn’t want to do it, Syd, but I told you they were impatient. You think they let me leave Chicago alone?”

Understanding finally reached through her alarm. The loan shark or whoever it was he’d gotten mixed up with—the man holding her must be a lackey.

“Harmon said he’ll take the ring as payment if it’s really worth as much as I think. I know it’s bad, but look at it this way, Neil was probably going to give it to you anyway.”

*What?*

“Just stay calm and let me do this and then I’ll leave.”

She’d heard enough. Fury tore through her and she lifted her foot and brought it down on the man’s. His hold slackened only the tiniest bit but it was enough. She twisted and jammed her knee against his groin, his shock freeing her elbow just enough to—

The man wrenched her arm and stopped it before impact, her scream colliding with his growl. No, she was not letting this happen. She struggled, screamed.

“Syd, stop.”

She ignored Micah and tried to kick the man again, but he shook her, yanked—

And then suddenly he jerked away from her. Had Micah—? No, he was over by the window now, trying to lift it open. “Micah, please, no—”

The *pop* of a fist against bone and the sound of a body hitting the floor. The man who’d been holding her landed at her feet.

But who—

*Neil?*

She spun. Not Neil.

Tate Carter rubbed his fist, the barest wince on his face as he eyed Micah. “Give it up, kid.”



Neil raced toward the house. He didn’t stop at the police car in the driveway, lights spinning. Didn’t have a thing to say to Micah, handcuffed and standing with an officer. Didn’t even care who the other man cuffed beside him was.

He burst into the front door, heart hammering every bit as much as when Carter had first called, telling him things that didn’t make sense. Until one sentence drowned out all the rest.

*“Sydney was trying to fight him off when I got there.”*

Sydney. Sydney had gone home. She’d walked into the middle of a robbery. She could’ve been hurt.

His panicked gaze found her immediately, sitting on the living room couch, Carter’s arm around her.

But another officer blocked his path, stepping toward him the moment he spotted him. “Oh, good, Neil. I’ve got Carter’s statement and your houseguest’s, but if you could confirm that she actually *is* your houseguest —”

“Sorry, Tompkins, you’ll have to wait.”

He strode past the police officer and reached Sydney just as she stood. Ignoring Carter, he pulled her to him, smoothing his hands down her back. “Are you all right?”

She nodded against his shoulder. “I’m fine. Tate got here before anything could happen.”

He pulled back, palms on her arms. “Not before anything could happen. Not the way he told it. He said you were trying to fight someone off. Micah?”

She shook her head. “No, the other one. I don’t even know his name. Just that he works for someone named Harmon and . . .” She fell into him again. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know Micah was this desperate. I had no idea . . . He said something about a ring and he owes someone twenty-five thousand dollars . . .”

He stilled her with his hand on the back of her head. “It’s okay. None of that matters as long as you’re okay. I had to come . . . I . . .” He tucked her head against his neck. “Wilder had just gotten to the hospital when Tate called. I took his car.”

She was the one to pull back now. “Maggie?”

“She’s in surgery now. It’ll be a couple of hours before we get an update.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

He did. Of course he did. He looked over her shoulder to Carter. “Any chance we could get a minute?”

The man looked anything but comfortable. But he nodded and moved out of the room, Officer Tompkins leaving with him.

Neil’s gaze returned to Sydney, but she was looking away and he could feel the shakiness of her breathing. “I’m so sorry this happened, Syd.”

“*You* shouldn’t be apologizing. I’m the one whose brother—”

“I shouldn’t have let you leave the hospital like that. Especially after what I said, how it must’ve sounded. If I’m frustrated with anyone, it’s

myself. She didn't take the treehouse well."

"What? Why?"

"It doesn't matter. The point is, you are not the reason she had a heart attack. And believe it or not, somewhere deep under all my fear and every frantic thought I've had since it happened, I know I'm not, either. There's a hundred things I wish I'd done differently, but Maggie wouldn't want either one of us blaming ourselves."

It took effort to say those words, to try to make himself believe them. But giving himself over to guilt, clinging to one regret after another, none of it would help Maggie through surgery.

But instead of easing at Neil's assurance, Sydney stepped away from him. "I need to talk to Micah. And the police. I need to figure out what happens from here. I guess it'll depend on what charges are pressed." She moved toward the entryway. "They'll want to talk to you too."

"One thing I don't get. Tate—what was he doing here?"

"He said the way things came to a head this afternoon had been killing him ever since." There was a ghost of a smile in her voice. "He decided enough was enough, didn't care how late it was. He knocked, heard me scream."

Came to the rescue. He was grateful to the man even as it galled him that he hadn't been the one who was here when Sydney needed him.

"Micah never did find the ring, so it's unharmed," she said, still walking away. "At least there's that."

"Syd—" He broke off, catching sight of what he'd missed when he'd first erupted into the house. In the entryway, by the doorway—a suitcase.

And his coat draped over the staircase banister.

She must've heard his sharp inhale, because she turned back to him, likely following his gaze and realizing what he'd just seen. "Neil—"

He could only shake his head.

"It's for the best."

No. No. “Like when Tate Carter let CarleeAnn walk away?” If the man heard his tumultuous words from the next room, he didn’t care. “I’m supposed to just shrug and watch you leave?”

“It’s not as if I want to. But Maggie’s going to have enough to deal with recovering from surgery.”

*If she recovered. If she made it through . . . Oh God, please. Don’t even let my thoughts take me there.* He couldn’t lose Maggie.

He couldn’t lose Syd. “You can help her recover. You’ve already helped her so much.”

“How? By reminding her every day that I’m not the granddaughter she lost? You all tried to tell me in different ways when I first got here that this would only end up in disappointment. You were right. But there’s more at stake now than emotions. There’s her health and healing. It’s better if I go.”

“No, it’s not.” How could he make her understand? “You belong here, Syd.” *You belong with me.* “You can’t just leave like this. Not without saying goodbye.”

“Can’t you see that’s what I’m trying to do now?”

“I’m not the only one who cares about you.” He closed the distance between them, desperation clouding his voice into a mere hush. “Please. At least, don’t leave before Sunday. Don’t leave before we know Maggie’s going to be okay. Before you’ve seen her.”

He’d backed her into an emotional corner, he knew it. She knew it, too. Her shoulders dropped and she nodded.

And then left him standing there—more bereft than he’d known was possible.

“Neil?”

Officer Tompkins stood in the spot Sydney had just vacated. Why? Couldn’t he have just one minute to think? Just to breathe? Not that his ragged breaths were doing any good, not with his lungs so taut and his heart too close to breaking. *Sydney . . . Maggie . . .*

“This will only take a second,” Tompkins said, opening his notebook.  
“There’s just a few details—”

“I wasn’t even here.”

“I want to make sure accounts are matching up. That nothing is missing.  
That this was a one-time incident—”

He jerked. “The treehouse.”

Tompkins looked up from his notebook. “Say again?”

“There’s a treehouse. Far west field. Someone was in there tonight. I think they were looking for something.” Could it have been Micah? But why would he have looked for the ring there? And why couldn’t he bring himself to care?

“Huh. Neither of the men said anything about that.”

He took Wilder’s car keys from his pocket. He needed to get back to the hospital. He needed . . .

He didn’t know what he needed anymore.



Sydney lowered into the chair beside Maggie’s hospital bed, the quiet of the room, a hovering stillness, tugging on the fatigue that clung to her after a nearly sleepless night.

Maggie wasn’t expected to awaken for another couple of hours, at least. It was why Neil and the girls had finally returned to the house earlier this morning.

It was why Sydney had slipped away. Finally made herself come to the hospital, walk into this room, face the woman who’d come to mean the world to her.

Who was going to be okay. At least, that’s what Neil had said when he’d texted in the middle of the night after Maggie had made it through her emergency surgery. It’s what a nurse had confirmed when she’d spoken to her minutes ago.

*“Dr. Lakeman expects a full recovery. Might be a few weeks before she’s up for a long walk on the beach, but she’s one strong lady.”*

*Strong.* Yes. That was Maggie—even as she lay here, pale and unconscious, white hair billowing behind her head, blending into the bedsheets. Every day that Sydney had spent at Muir Farm, Maggie had shown her what true strength looked like.

It looked like hope that kept searching. It looked like faith that didn't give up. It looked like opening your door to a stranger, letting her in and loving her . . . even when she didn't turn out to be the person you'd hoped.

"I'm not Cynthia." The strained murmur caught in her throat. She'd have to say these words again later, when Maggie was awake to hear them. Because Neil was right—she couldn't leave without having this conversation, hard as it might be. Maggie deserved to hear the truth from her. "Tate Carter is my father and he . . . he said CarleeAnn is . . ."

The tears she'd refused to let herself cry last night when she'd attempted to say goodbye to Neil sprang to her eyes now. She blinked them back.

"The thing is, I'm still so glad I came here. Which is probably selfish of me because I know how much you were hoping to find little Cindy. And the thought of hurting you kills me." She leaned forward, curling her fingers around Maggie's. "But I just can't bring myself to regret coming here. I'll never forget these two weeks."

They'd changed her. Stretched her. Reminded her . . .

That she had more to give. That somewhere down deep, underneath years of hurt and regret and just trying to get by, she was still the Sydney Rose who knew how to dream. How to find the blessings in life as it was while not being afraid to imagine life as it could be.

And maybe the things she'd imagined in these two weeks weren't going to come to pass. Maybe after Sunday, she wouldn't wake up in the yellow house by the sea. Maybe Maggie wasn't her grandmother. Maybe Neil would never be . . . whatever he might've been.

She swallowed and a lone tear slipped free.

But the point was, she'd imagined. She'd *hoped*. And even now, as her heart broke at the thought of saying goodbye to Neil and Maggie and everyone she'd come to care about in Muir Harbor, there was still a hushed whisper breaking through, beckoning her . . .

Assuring her life could be *good* even when it didn't look exactly as she'd imagined. She could return to Chicago and her job and Micah and find joy and purpose and peace. She could seek out new challenges, dream new dreams. She could search for God and find Him in unexpected places.

And on the hard days, she could remember these two weeks and the woman who, in the wake of loss and grief, had created a family and poured herself into it, day after day after day.

"You've given me more than you'll ever know, Maggie Muir."

She leaned closer and kissed Maggie's cheek like she'd seen Neil do so many times before.

"By the way," she whispered, "Neil's treehouse—it's amazing. I know it's not my place but . . . maybe when you're well, could you just let him show it to you again? Please? I know he can make a success of it. Just don't let him try to do everything on his own, okay? And especially don't let him mess up my website. Maybe Lil or Indi can—"

From the hospital room doorway, a clearing of a throat interrupted her. With Maggie's palm still encased in her own, she glanced up.

Tate Carter stood under the shadow of the doorframe, uncertainty written all over his face, two Styrofoam cups in his hand. "Sorry, I didn't mean to . . . I just . . . I got coffee."

He'd been like this since the moment he picked her up at the house this morning, an almost endearing awkwardness in his every move. She stood and rounded Maggie's bed, accepting the cup he held toward her.

"It's from Trinna's. I ran downtown real quick. Thought you might need the extra caffeine as much as me."

“Thanks.” She took a sip. “For this. For the ride here. For last night. Especially for that.”

He waved his hand. “I only did what any person would’ve done. Though, from the little I saw when I first got there, you were doing a fine job of self-defense.” He attempted a smile.

“I don’t just mean jumping in and knocking that guy flat. I mean coming to the house in the first place. And all the time you took to talk yesterday.” Any other person would not necessarily have done *that*.

No, another man might’ve turned her away before she’d had the chance to open her mouth. Refused to see what was right in front of him. Or worse, acknowledged the truth of their situation but rejected her anyway.

But not Tate Carter. And as he stood in front of her now, she realized this was another gift Maggie had given her. Perhaps unintentionally, but in bringing her here, Maggie had opened the door for Sydney to meet her father.

*She wouldn’t take credit, though. She’d say it was God who led me here. Who knew all along what was waiting for me in Maine.*

Just as He knew what was waiting for her in Chicago.

“How is she, by the way?” Tate nodded toward Maggie.

“She’ll be okay. Might be a slow recovery but she’s going to be fine.”

Tate took a drink. “My father was an idiot about things yesterday. I hope you know I know that. He’ll come around eventually. He’s just hard-headed. Anyhow, I don’t really know where we go from here. Especially if you’re still leaving tomorrow.”

She was. She had to. For Maggie. For Micah.

Tate cleared his throat again. “But I don’t want it to be the way it was with CarleeAnn. I don’t want to let you leave and never see you again. Can we maybe . . . stay in touch, at least?”

“I’d like that.” And there was something else she’d like. “Do you think sometimes you could tell me more about CarleeAnn? I haven’t thought the

best of her over the years. But you knew her, you knew who she really was. I guess . . . well, I'd like to know . . . whatever you want to tell me."

"I can do that, Sydney. I'd be happy to." His unease seemed to lighten. "You have a half-brother, too, you know."

Yes, somewhere in the craziness of the past day, that thought had flitted in the back of her mind. "It'd be nice to meet him . . . sometime."

For now, she had another brother waiting to speak with her. She looked back at Maggie once more. *Thank you, Maggie. I'll be back later.* And maybe by then she'd have figured out how to say goodbye.



"What d'ya think is up with that?" Wilder pointed his thumb over his shoulder to where Indi stood with her fiancé on the porch—not arguing, but not looking all that comfortable with each other either.

The midmorning sun failed to provide any warmth, the only benefit to the sharp seaside wind needling Neil being its shock effect, enough to rattle his exhaustion and shake him into alertness.

He hadn't meant to sleep for three hours. Had only come home to change clothes, maybe grab a shower, then return to the hospital.

But he'd made the mistake of lowering onto his bed, thinking he'd simply rest his eyes for a few minutes. The next thing he'd known, he'd awoken to a blaring sun and the sound of Lilian and Wilder having it out in the hallway. Apparently Wilder had come by with muffins and coffee for everyone and Lil had found some reason to bite his head off for it. Not unusual.

What was unusual was the man who'd slept on the couch downstairs—Indi's fiancé. The man currently shaking his head at Indi while the clanging wind chime hanging from the corner of the porch spun.

The guy wasn't what Neil had anticipated. With a name like Bennington Foster, he'd expected slicked-back hair and a sharp suit. Instead, the man still wore last night's wrinkled clothes, he hadn't shaved, and if he'd done anything more than shake his fingers through his hair after waking up, he didn't look it.

"Something's off with those two."

Neil didn't disagree, but he didn't have time to parse out Indi's love life just now. He needed to get back to the hospital, check on Maggie.

Find Sydney. He'd knocked on her bedroom door after waking up, and when she didn't answer, he'd peeked in. Not there.

*At least her suitcase was.* Which meant she hadn't changed her mind overnight. Which meant maybe there was still time to . . . what? Convince her to stay?

But what if she was right? What if Maggie's hurt at learning Sydney wasn't Cynthia proved detrimental to her health? What if—

"I'm telling you, man, it's another gut feeling. Something's weird about that Bennington guy. Lil thinks so, too."

Neil pulled his keys from his pocket and started toward his truck. "When did she say that? Before or after you guys woke me up with your bickering?" Lilian had left ten minutes ago, insisting they drive separately so they'd have multiple vehicles at the hospital and could easily come and go as needed.

Keeping stride with him, Wilder flashed a smile. "She was mad I brought banana nut muffins. Said I should know by now she's allergic to bananas."

"You *do* know she's allergic to bananas."

"I also know she's hilarious when she's mad. And I figured the madder she is at me, the less headspace she has to worry over Maggie."

Neil opened his truck door. "You two have a weird friendship, you know that?"

“Not sure Lil would call it a friendship. But listen . . . before you leave, we need to talk.”

“I’m not blind, Wild. I know something’s off with Indi’s fiancé, too. But she’s smart. We don’t have to interfere—”

Wilder shook his head. “Not that.”

Neil glanced to his friend, took in his rumpled clothing, his mussed hair. Wilder might not have spent the night at the hospital, but he must not have slept any more than the rest of them. “What is it?”

“Whoever was riffling through your treehouse last night—some friend you are, by the way. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about that place earlier and—”

“Wild.”

“It wasn’t Micah Porter.”

Neil closed his truck door. “Just because he denied it to the cops—”

“He denied it to me, too. I went to the jail first thing this morning. He swears it wasn’t him. Went by the treehouse, too, took a look at those prints. They don’t match up with Micah’s shoes or that other guy’s.”

“They could’ve changed shoes.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think so. I think the kid’s telling the truth. Lil told me about the footprints in the yard last week. An unknown car on your property. And now the treehouse.” Wilder rubbed his chin. “I’ve got another gut feeling, man. A strong one. It’s all connected—it has to be. It has something to do with Diana, her accident.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” Neil’s keys jangled as he waved his hand. “The accident was twenty-eight years ago. All the weird stuff at the farm . . . it’s probably just Tate Carter’s kid, and as for the treehouse—”

An image slipped in then—of Maggie staring at the treehouse last night, her eyes going wide, a panic he didn’t understand taking over her expression. The pinch in her voice . . . “*I remember.*”

“What makes you think any of this has to do with the accident?”

Wilder let out a puff of air. “Like I said, it’s a gut feeling. And I know the last time I had one, it was about Sydney and that didn’t pan out but—”

Neil was the one to shake his head now. “No, I think your feeling was right then. Maybe not the facts of it. Not your theory about her identity. But she was supposed to come here.” He could hear the conviction in his own voice. Realized, right in that moment, that even if she left tomorrow, even if he never saw her again—*please, God, don’t let it be like that*—he meant what he’d said.

There was no mistaking the curiosity on Wilder’s face, but to the man’s credit, he let it go. Probably because it wasn’t curiosity at all. Wilder wasn’t any more blind than Neil was. And Neil was too tired this morning to go to the effort of masking his feelings. Still, he was grateful Wilder didn’t push or prod.

“So what do we do now? We’ve had a prowler—or prowlers—and you think they’re somehow connected to Diana. What do we do with that?”

Wilder scratched his chin. “Well, right now, you go to the hospital and I do what I do. Keep digging. And then when Maggie’s doing a little better, maybe we talk to her. See if there’s more she can tell us about Diana or the night of the accident.”

There might be. “*I remember . . .*”

“Meanwhile,” Wilder went on, “we all pray that if I’m wrong and there’s nothing to this, God would knock me over the head or something.”

“If He doesn’t, I’m sure Lilian would be willing to do the job.”

Wilder let out a laugh. “Don’t I know it.” He sobered in the next instant. “I don’t know, Neil. I just can’t shake it. I think . . . I think we’ve only scratched the surface of this thing.”



His friend's words followed him into the truck and down the lane and all the way to the hospital. Along with Maggie's voice from last night and his own dogged fatigue . . .

And thoughts of Sydney—so many of them, all swirling together into one giant knot of desire. He just didn't know what to do about it.

Maybe there was nothing *to do*. Maybe she planned to avoid him until leaving tomorrow. If that's what she wanted . . .

"Neil."

Lilian's voice greeted him the moment he walked into the waiting room that had become their family's campsite last night. She was just emerging from a hallway.

"She's awake." Lilian hurried to him, barreling into a hug. "She's awake and doing well. She wants to see you. And Indi, of course, and she even asked about Bennington. Apparently Sydney's already been here."

He stepped back, gaze immediately searching each corner of the waiting room. "Sydney's here?"

"Was here. About an hour ago, I guess. Before Maggie was fully awake." Lilian looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "She wants to have Thanksgiving at the farm, Neil. It was one of the first things she said to me. She wants to invite everyone like in the old days. I don't know why or what changed her mind but she practically ordered me to organize it and . . ." She leaned in for another hug. "Go talk to her. There's things she wants to say to you, too."

He didn't doubt it. After last night . . . the treehouse . . . all he'd kept from her.

He released his sister, trying to keep his tension from showing on his face as he told her Indi and her fiancé would be arriving soon. Minutes later, he stood outside Maggie's door. *Just go in. Tell her you're sorry about the treehouse. Tell her . . .*

That he loved her. That he needed her. They all did. And whatever it took to get her healthy, they'd do—together. Because they were a family and that's what families did.

“Neil, I wish you'd stop hovering in the hallway and just come in already.”

He stepped into the room, gaze meeting hers in an instant where she lay partially propped up against a pile of pillows. None of last night's anger or fear in her eyes. Just love and light.

He was at her side in seconds, dropping into the chair where he'd kept vigil off and on earlier, praying desperate prayers and wishing he'd done so many things differently. “Maggie, you . . .” He struggled to swallow his emotion. “You have no right to look so perky.”

“If this is perky, I want to know what you're going to say when I'm finally out of this bed.” Her voice was soft and tired, but hearing it was a balm.

“Finally? You just came out of surgery eight hours ago. The fact that you're talking is about enough to make me dance a jig.”

“I think I'd very much like to see that.”

“I won't stay long. You probably need to rest and Lord knows you're going to have plenty of other visitors trailing in and out of here all day.” His head dipped. “But I just need to say—”

“I'm sorry, son.”

His gaze lifted to take in her gentle smile. “What? No, that's what I want to—”

“Last night you showed me something beautiful, Neil. Something you'd poured yourself into. You shared a well-thought-out vision and I rejected it. Just like that.”

Because she had every right. Because it was *her* land. Because he'd waited too long to tell her, forged ahead without even asking for her input.

He covered her hand with his. “I’m the one who should be apologizing. The farm is yours and I had no right to charge forward with plans of my own when—”

She stilled him by squeezing his hand. “About that, actually. I’ve asked Lil to do a favor for me.”

“She told me about Thanksgiving—”

“A different favor. One she’ll need her lawyer hat for. It involves my will—”

He flew from his chair so quickly it toppled behind him. “There’s no need. Dr. Lakeman said he expects a full recovery so there’s no need to talk about anything like that. And there won’t be for a long time.”

She gave a raspy laugh. “Would you please sit down and just listen for a minute?”

He gave a miserable nod and righted his chair, then sat. Her *will*? Did she think she wasn’t going to snap back from this? Did she have some horrible feeling—like one of Wilder’s gut instincts? *Please, God . . . we need her. I need her.*

“The other day Sydney was telling me about her childhood, about how hard it was for her at times seeing other children in the foster care system be adopted and never having that experience herself. At the time, I was sad for her and yet, happy she was opening up to me.” Maggie shifted against her pillows. “But since then, I’ve found myself wondering . . . thinking . . . that I missed an important opportunity years ago. With you.”

Wait, was that what this was about?

“I wanted to adopt you, Neil. I hope you know that. But with all the logistics, I honestly couldn’t afford it. And your aunt and uncle weren’t exactly being helpful from across an ocean and—”

“We don’t need to talk about this. I’m not upset. I’ve always understood.”

“You can understand the facts of something and still hurt over it.” Her eyes roved over his face, as if looking for something, asking a question of him.

Emotion snuck up on him, his voice coming out husky and low. “You’ve never not given me anything I truly needed, Maggie.” But maybe this was something she needed now. Honest, vulnerable words.

Perhaps in his efforts in the past days and months and years to be dependable, to be strong, to prove his place in the family even if he didn’t have the name to show for it, he had somehow, without even realizing it, pushed away the one woman who’d only ever offered him . . . everything. Love and family and a home.

“But I guess . . . I did hurt over it. I did want . . .” He took a breath. “I wanted something that I know now—always knew, really—that I already had. To be your son. To be in your family.”

“Then I say it’s time we make it official. Although there’s a slight complication in that neither I nor Lilian have any idea what the process is to legally adopt a thirty-four-year-old.”

He would laugh if he was at all capable of doing anything other than taking in the love in her voice and her eyes.

“But a legal name change?” She tilted toward him. “It’s just a little money and some paperwork. So I’m just wondering, dear, how attached are you to your current last name?”

He really couldn’t speak now. Not with tears pricking the backs of his eyes. But Maggie waited, and finally he managed to croak, “Not very.”

“Well, good then.”

He rubbed his free hand over his eyes. “But I thought this was about your will?”

“Yes. Once you’re officially Neil Muir, I’ll need to update the will. Specifically, the part where I leave you the land. The house will go to the

girls, but I'm sure by that point your rental business will be booming and you can buy them out."

Emotion clogged his throat all over again. "Maggie—"

"Neil, you *are* Muir Farm. Maybe your name didn't reflect it, but the farm and what you've made of it reflects you. And what you're going to make of it, too."

He didn't know what to say, how to express the gratitude welling inside him. "I love you, Maggie."

"I know you do."

"And I'll only do the treehouse thing if it's truly what you want."

She let out another quiet laugh and closed her eyes. "You've already done the treehouse thing. But yes, move forward with it. Build two or three more and show off Muir Farm to the world. I'm done letting the past steal our future."

Was that why she'd made the sudden decision to host Thanksgiving, too? He wanted to ask—that and so many other questions. Like what it was she'd remembered last night and whether she planned to keep looking for Cynthia. Or did she even know yet about Sydney? Lilian had said Maggie was still asleep when Sydney stopped by, so for all he knew—

"Neil Ian Muir, how can you look so worried after we've just shared such a meaningful moment?"

*Neil Ian Muir.* His heart thumped against his chest. "It's just . . . Sydney . . ."

"I know."

"You know . . . what exactly?"

"Enough. I was in a fog but I heard . . . I know she's not who we'd hoped. But she's still who we loved."

Who they *loved*. Yes, there was no other word for it. "So I guess you're not going to sell the land to Tatum Carter?" That was another thing he

wanted to ask her—what Tate had meant when he'd said Maggie and his father had a past. But that could wait, as could all his other questions.

“Not your smoothest attempt ever at changing the topic.” Maggie sank farther into her pillows, her eyes closing, a peaceful smile on her face.

Someday they'd unravel the mystery of Diana's accident. Perhaps they'd find the real Cynthia Muir. Someday he'd put the pieces of Maggie's past together and have a deeper understanding of the woman who'd changed his life before ever changing his name.

But for today, for right now, this healing moment with Maggie was enough.



Sydney slid from Tate's passenger seat and thanked him for the ride—again. At his nod, she closed the door and turned, squinting against the late-morning sunlight glinting off the metallic sign in front of Muir Harbor's police station.

What in the world was she supposed to say to Micah when she walked through those glass doors? This wasn't like the other times. This hadn't been a bar brawl or a fender bender or some minor instance of being with the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He'd broken into Maggie's house through the back door with the intention of robbing her. Might've been fear and desperation pushing him into it, but they weren't excuses. And even if he somehow got out of this with nothing more than a night in jail as punishment, how would things ever return to normal once they were home?

*Home.* The word had taken on an edge and it scared her to think of how long it may take to sand it away once she was back in the Midwest.

Inside, she stopped at the front desk and gave her name, waited as the woman behind the counter disappeared for a few moments. She returned soon. “He’s already on his way up. Someone else came to see him and they just finished the paperwork for his release.”

His release? And someone else? Who—

“Sydney!”

She heard the voice before she saw Nikola rounding a corner. What in the world? “Nik?”

Nikola hurried across the lobby and pulled her into an easy embrace. Over Nikola’s shoulder, she saw Micah in her friend’s wake, his steps hesitant and heavy.

“I don’t understand what you’re doing here. How did you know . . . when a-and . . . why?”

Nikola released her as Micah reached them. The circles under his eyes had deepened to a dark blue and his clothing was ruffled. “Uh, I was allowed a phone call after they booked me.”

“And you called Nikola? Why would you—”

“Micah,” Nikola interrupted. “Give us a sec, will you?”

Sydney shook her head. “No, we need to talk. We need to figure out . . .”

But Micah was already following Nikola’s instructions, not even looking at Sydney as he moved off to a far corner of the lobby.

She turned to her friend, shock and confusion warring for prominence. “What’s going on? It must’ve been after eleven when he called you. How’d you get here so fast? And why would he—”

“You’ve been gone for almost two weeks, my friend. A lot can happen in that time.” Nikola grinned, two dark braids framing her face, only the slight puffiness of her eyes betraying her tiredness from what had to have been both a late night and an early morning, considering she was here right now.

“I wish I could see the humor in this, but if you knew everything that’s happened in the past few days . . .”

“Then I’ll take pity on you, Syd. And you’re right—Micah’s situation isn’t funny. He’s stopped at the bakery a few times while you’ve been gone. I have to confess, the first time I saw him standing outside the front door before I’d even opened up for the day, I had the urge to go into the back office and avoid him. Got the distinct feeling he’d come only to complain about you leaving town.” Nikola paused. “But then I remembered the way someone else looked standing outside the shop a long time ago, staring at a *Help Wanted* sign. Like she had the whole world on her shoulders.” She nudged her arm. “A little like you look now, come to think of it.”

In an instant, she had the urge to spill everything to her friend. She wanted to tell her about Maggie and CarleeAnn and JR who was really Tate Carter, Jr., who was really her father.

She wanted to tell her about Neil. But knew even if this were the time and place for it, she’d never be able to find words to do any justice at all to how deeply and fully he’d captured her heart in such a short timeframe.

It was uncanny.

It was undeniable.

It was . . . impossible. *Micah. You’re here to talk about Micah.*

“So, I guess you didn’t hide away in the back office, then?”

Nikola chuckled. “No. I let him in and we talked a little. And then he stopped by a couple of days later. Eventually I knew the whole story about the loan shark—kept waiting for him to ask me for money but he never did.”

That surprised her. Surprised her even more that Micah had sought out Nikola in the first place. All these years, she’d told herself she was all Micah had, his sole support system.

*Just like Neil, trying to save a farm singlehandedly.*

“But to fly out here at the drop of a hat, Nik. It’s too much. You didn’t have to come. What did you do? Pay his bail? I’ll pay you back and—?”

“There’s no bail, Syd. He’s been fully released. No charges.”

She slumped against the wall. “I’m . . . I’m so confused.”

“Apparently you’ve done a bit of a number on that family, Syd. The guy called the station hours ago and said they didn’t want to press charges.”

The guy? Did she mean Neil?

“Now, the other man who was involved, apparently he has outstanding charges in two other states. So he’s not going to be roaming the streets for a while. They’re handing him over to an agency in Illinois.”

A small comfort in everything. Still, somewhere back in Chicago was a man named Harmon who wasn’t about to let Micah off the hook. Micah still owed twenty-five thousand dollars. She still . . . didn’t know what to do about that.

“I don’t know how to help him this time. Every time I try to think about it or come up with a plan, I can’t focus. All I can think about is how I don’t want to go home at all, let alone go home and try to figure out how to come up with more money than I’ve ever had at one time in my life.” Tears slid down her cheeks. She’d held them back at the hospital, but she couldn’t escape them now. “I don’t want to go. I love it here. I love the people here. I love . . .”

One face after another floated through her mind, but one lingered in clearer, more colorful detail than all the others.

But what about all the noble things she’d told herself only hours ago at the hospital? About how life in Chicago could be good. About how she’d keep hoping, imagining—

“Oh, Syd, this is just the best.”

“*What?*” She swallowed a garbled sob. “Do you even see me right now? I’m standing in a police station, crying. I probably still have yesterday’s mascara smudging under my eyes.”

Nikola laughed and gripped both her shoulders. “But don’t you see? Don’t you remember two weeks ago, back in the bakery? I asked you if you’d ever done something because you just had to, because it filled you with emotion, because you knew there was a happy ending waiting for you if you could just run for it. You looked at me like you had no idea what I was talking about. You wouldn’t be crying right now if that hadn’t changed.”

“That doesn’t exactly make me feel better.”

“But it’s the truth, isn’t it? You found your something.” Nikola squeezed her shoulders. “Or maybe it’s someone.”

Yes, someone whose dedication to the farm and love for Maggie and his sisters had reeled her in until she’d lost her heart to him. Did she really think she could just walk away? Say goodbye to Neil and his thoughtful ways and his quiet faith, his complete and utter goodness?

But there was *something* too. The sense that she could’ve had a place here. A purpose. When she’d created that website for Neil, when she’d manned the market booth with Lilian, when she’d helped Maggie bake, and even when she’d caulked those windows . . . she’d felt like she belonged.

She lifted her hand to swipe at her tears.

“Listen, if you’re convinced coming back to Chicago and resuming life as normal is what God wants for you, then okay. But if He’s given you a new dream, then how could it be anything but good and noble to chase it?”

“How do I know it’s Him and not just me and my own silly heart?”

“Why couldn’t it be both?” Nikola dropped her arms. “Tell me this: Does staying here and starting a whole new life scare you a little? Because if so, that’s probably a good sign He’s behind it.”

Did it scare her? *Yes*. Yes, because there were so many ways it could go sideways. There was Maggie and her health to consider. And the girls—what would Indi and Lil say when they found out she wasn’t Cynthia Muir? And how could she just . . . just stay when she didn’t truly have a place?

Maybe she could stay with Tate for a while. But his father wasn't her biggest fan just yet . . . his father, her *grandfather*. Oh goodness, that hadn't even gelled in her mind yet. And though Tate said he wanted to get to know her, did that really mean he wanted her lingering in his life after disrupting it so suddenly?

And Neil. Good, kind, caring Neil. He'd come right out and asked her to stay but . . .

But what?

*But what if I've built this up in my head to be more than it is?* Just like when she'd gone looking for CarleeAnn.

That had led to so much hurt.

But it'd also led her to the photo, and the photo had led her to accepting Wilder Monroe's theory, which had led her to Maine in the first place. From her place of deepest hurt, God had brought something amazing. Something she never could've expected.

He'd brought her here.

"But . . . Micah."

"He's going to be okay. I've already been talking to an uncle of mine—he's a cop who's dealt with this kind of thing before. Given the under-the-table shadiness of this whole thing, this Harmon guy might not have a leg to stand on as far as legally demanding repayment. But even if he does—"

"Nikola, no."

"Don't worry, I'm not going to give him twenty-five grand. I'm just saying, he's going to be okay. My uncle has already recommended a lawyer who does pro bono work here and there. We'll work together and figure something out."

"But—"

"You need to listen to her, Syd."

When had Micah walked over? His dark eyes burned with intensity despite the circles underneath them.

“I made a horrible mistake. I know that. When Harmon sent his goon after me, I . . . I should’ve gone to Nikola’s uncle but I didn’t because I thought . . . I don’t know what I thought. I just know it was stupid. But it would be an even worse mistake to watch you give up everything you want for me. You’ve already done that once before.”

“Micah—”

“No, don’t argue.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “If you want to do something for me now, then . . . then let me go. It’s time. We both know it.”

Her tears were back. “You’ll always be my little brother.”

He did her the favor of rolling his eyes when she hugged him, lightening the moment, easing the weight that had settled in her stomach since the moment he turned up in Maine. And making room for something else.

Something warm and hopeful and nerve-wracking and maybe a little terrifying. Something that might be God’s voice or perhaps her own heart . . . or probably both. Because maybe Nikola was right. Maybe there were times when her deepest desires were the echoes of divine whispers.

And maybe it was time she finally listened.



*I*t shouldn't be so hard to find one man.

Sydney burst into the kitchen through the back door, out of breath from jogging to the barn and then to the treehouse and back again. And that was after having stopped at the hospital first.

“Not . . . cut out . . . for this.”

“Uh, Syd? You okay?” Lilian walked in, coat and gloves on. Was she leaving or just arriving? Had she come in the front door just as Sydney had barreled in the back?

And those other voices . . . maybe . . . “I’m fine. Um, is everyone with you?”

“Indi’s here. And Wilder, of course. Because he’s apparently never *not* with us. We just grabbed lunch in town and then stopped here to change. We’re heading back in to the hospital. Have you been to see Maggie yet? I mean, since she’s been awake.”

She shook her head, still trying to catch her breath. Oh, she had to look ridiculous. Her old coat was unbuttoned, her shirt underneath wrinkled from being in her suitcase all night, and somewhere on her run, she'd lost a glove. And she didn't have one single doubt the sea salt air had wreaked havoc on her hair.

"But . . . but Neil's not with you?"

"Oh, he's here. He came back separately. Skipped lunch so he could do chores."

Which meant he'd probably been out at the barn when she'd been here and then . . . why hadn't they crossed paths?

"He's upstairs?"

Lilian nodded and Sydney hurried past her, but the woman's footsteps followed. "Is everything okay? Weren't you picking up Micah this morning?"

"Oh yeah. He—"

"Sydney's here?" Indi came into the hallway from the dining room, Wilder behind her.

"Maggie's been asking about you," Wilder said. "You can ride with Lil and me if you—"

"No." She blurted it louder than she meant to and three pairs of eyes stared at her. "I mean . . . I mean, yes, I definitely want to see Maggie. Again, that is. I did see her this morning but she wasn't awake yet. But you already know that."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Lil asked.

"Y-yes. I just need to talk to your brother. But I'll come to the hospital. Later. Promise." She squeezed past the crowd in the hallway and rushed to the staircase, clambering up. Then stopping halfway.

With a grin, she scrambled back down, reaching for the coat still draped over the banister. Neil's coat, left there the night before when she'd been sure—so sure—she had to leave.

But that'd been before she knew what she knew now.

That there was one thing Nikola hadn't had right. She'd realized it as she'd run all over the farm looking for Neil. It had never been about the happy ending at all. But a new beginning.

She raced up the steps, Neil's coat under her arm, not slowing until she reached the second floor, her gaze swinging from Neil's open bedroom door down the hallway to the closed door in front of her.

This time, she noticed the sliver of light underneath. And heard the patter of water and then the squeal of the faucet and, a second later, the sound of the shower curtain being pushed aside.

In which case, this time, she would not go barreling in. She stopped and forced herself to breathe. She would knock. Like a civilized person.

Anxious energy mingled with anticipation as she lifted her fist and rapped.

"Go without me, Lil. I'll drive to the hospital separately."

"It's not Lilian."

Silence.

And then a rustle of clothing, the sound of the door's latch, and his head poked out, hair still dripping. "Syd? You're here?"

"Well, you told me not to go home until Sunday and it's not Sunday, so . . ."

"Hmm."

Not what he wanted to hear, clearly. Which did her nervous heart a world of good. "Are you dressed?"

He glanced down. "Partially."

"Well, could you get all the way dressed? I need to talk to you."

"Hmm," he said again. "Decided not to just barge in on me this time?" Despite the hint of fatigue in his eyes—had the poor man slept at all last night?—one corner of his mouth lifted.

"I've learned this new skill. It's called knocking."

“Hmm, pity.” He closed the door in her face.

She grinned and knocked again. “You better be getting dressed in there. I don’t have all day.”

“Yeah, Neil. Get dressed,” Indi’s voice called. “We’re getting curious down here.”

Sydney whirled to see all three of them crowded at the base of the staircase. Oh, lovely. She hadn’t counted on having an audience for this.

Before she could say another word—either a polite request or outright demand for privacy—the door behind her opened again and an arm shot out, tugging her into the bathroom, her shriek colliding with the latch of the door.

Hot, humid air curled around her and she caught a glimpse of the still-steam-blurred mirror before Neil turned her to face him. Flannel shirt and jeans—she wouldn’t have expected anything else. But the shirt was still unbuttoned and the bare feet were a change.

“You had something to say?” He started buttoning his shirt.

She swallowed. “Um, well. I mean, I could’ve waited until you were . . . I didn’t really think . . . in here . . .”

His hands stilled near the top of his shirt. “Why do you have my coat?”

“Oh, um.” Another swallow. A deep breath. “I was hoping you wouldn’t mind if I borrowed it for a little longer.”

He dropped his hands. Pushed up his sleeves. Which meant maybe she wasn’t the only one getting overly warm in this small bathroom and that . . . that was a good sign.

“Is that so?”

*So very close to smiling.* “You see, it’s getting colder. And since I fully intend to show you that I am capable of milking a cow, I might need something a little warmer like this.”

“Is *that* so?”

“You’re very repetitive today. Two ‘is that so’s’ and you hmm-ed me three times.” She draped his coat over a towel hook on the back of the door. “Must be what lack of sleep does to you.”

“Some of us fall asleep in treehouses. Some of us get repetitive.” He took a step closer to her. “You said you wanted to talk.”

“Yes, well, it’s just . . . I realized we never had that conversation you said we needed to have. The one where you tell me how you feel about me and I tell you how I feel about you and we figure out where to go from there.” She leaned against the counter, gripping it behind her, as if it could somehow steady her shaking voice. “S-so I thought I’d at least say my part—how I feel about you and where I think we should go from here. Which is nowhere. Because I like it right here. I want to stay right here.”

*Finally.* Finally, he was smiling, dimples and everything. Enough to make her breath catch as he closed the last inches between them, stretching out his arms to lean on the counter, his hands beside hers, trapping her between them.

“I guess I got that backwards, though, because I haven’t told you how I feel about you.”

“I think maybe I get the general idea.” His voice had turned husky.

“But I still want to tell you because I’ve thought really hard about this.” Although how she was supposed to eke the words out with him standing so close, she couldn’t possibly know. “How I feel about you is that you’re just way too busy. And you don’t know a thing about websites. And you could really use my help to get your rental business off the ground. And I could use the job if I’m not going back to Mezzani’s. But mostly, I could really use being around you every day because I think you’re my favorite person I’ve ever met.”

She barely got out her final words before he swept her away in a kiss she’d been imagining since the moment she’d given her heart the freedom to follow its path and carry her here. She wrapped her arms around his neck

and kissed him back—never more certain, never more sure she was right where she'd always wanted to be.

Even if she hadn't known . . . hadn't been brave enough to dream.

She was brave now.

“Just so you know, I do still have to go back to Chicago.”

He shook his head and kissed her again. “You can't. I won't let you. And I don't think Maggie will, either.”

Oh, yes, Maggie. “I still have to tell her . . .”

“She knows. She was more aware than you realized when you were there earlier today. She said it doesn't change how she feels about you.”

She stilled in his arms. “She's not too upset?”

“I'm sure when everything settles down a little and she's out of the hospital and life gets back to normal, some disappointment might set in. Not so much about you not being Cynthia, but just all the still-unanswered questions. But if I know Maggie, she's going to keep looking for answers. And I'm going to do a better job now supporting her in it.”

“You are a ridiculously good man, Neil MacKean.”

“See, you say stuff like that and then you wonder why I don't want you to leave.”

She laughed and kissed his cheek. “I have to. I've got to take care of my apartment, and my boss at Mezzani's has been so good to me over the years that I should really give him two weeks' notice.”

“Nope, too long.”

“Neil.”

“Syd.” He touched his forehead to hers. “As long as you come back . . .”

“Of course. There's Melba to consider. And, after all, you haven't told me how you feel about me.”

His arms tightened around her. “I was thinking I might spend the rest of my life telling you that.”

Oh, how her heart sang at that. No, it thumped. So loudly he could probably hear it through her shirt. So loud his sisters could probably hear it from outside the bathroom door, where they surely stood now.

“But for now . . .” Neil trailed kisses from her ear back to her mouth. “I think I’ll just tell you that I love you. And I don’t even care that it’s only been two weeks. I *love* you.”

“I love you, too.” Her hands moved to his face, his cheeks scratchy, her thumbs tracing his dimples. “I wonder if we’ve beat Maggie and Robert’s record.”

“I wonder if my sisters and Wilder have heard every word we’ve just said.”

Their laughter rang out from the hallway and he kissed her again.

“And I wonder if I’ll ever get tired of that,” she whispered against his lips.

“Don’t count on it, Sydney Rose. And remind me to fill you in on my new last name.” He pulled her closer and dipped his head once more. “Later.”



*M*y Dearest Robert,

*I have so much to tell you and so little time to tell it.*

*Ha! I didn't realize until after writing that sentence how morbid it sounds. Especially considering recent events. No, I'm not dying. Though there was a moment on a cold Friday night a few weeks back . . .*

*As I said, I'm short on time today. (There, a much better way to phrase things.) It's Thanksgiving and already the lawn is beginning to fill. Patti Brighton-Smythe was the first to arrive. OF COURSE. I think she might still be in shock over my decision to host the community dinner.*

*Truthfully, I think the girls are, too. Not Neil, though. Oh no, he exists in a cloud of pure contentment these days. Sydney's back, you see. But I'm getting ahead of myself.*

*Are you wondering why I decided to revive the Muir Farm Thanksgiving Dinner? I've wondered myself plenty often in the past few days. After all, I am still recovering from a major health event. That's how Lil keeps*

*phrasing it—a major health event. Is it just me or is that hilarious wording? I think the dear girl simply can't handle saying the reality of it out loud. I almost died. That's the reality of it.*

*And that's the why of it, too. I almost died, and somehow when I didn't, I knew it was time . . . time to stop hiding from the world. I went to church on Sunday. I've gone to the grocery store, made Trinna smile by stopping at the teashop and buying a bundle of some herbal thing I'll never drink, and I had supper at the Brunch Barn two nights ago.*

*And today, I'll host half of Muir Harbor on a gorgeous autumn day. Indi has decorated the yard to the point that it looks like a fall-ish fairyland—so many lights, so many pumpkins, so many strings of fake leaves hanging all over the place. Lilian has taken charge of the organizing committee. All I had to do was bake pies—although the girls hovered the whole time, worried I'd strain myself, I'm sure.*

*And Neil . . . well, as I said, he walks around in a daze of happiness. I'm certain he's contributed something to this day, but mostly he has eyes only for Sydney. She was gone all of two weeks and two days, and if she'd waited one more day to return to us, I do think he might've keeled over out of sheer lovesick impatience.*

*She's currently staying at the Carters' place. Though, if you ask me, it won't be for long. Neil came to my room last night and asked for the ring. And, of course, I in turn asked him what'd taken him so long.*

*He laughed and then, oh, Robert, you would've loved what he said next. He said, "Maggie, I went on a walk with Syd tonight and we stood for the longest time just looking at the sea. The same sea I've stared at a thousand times on a thousand different days. But it's like tonight it was deeper and wilder and a million times bluer than I've ever seen it before. And that's how everything is now that she's back."*

*I know what you're thinking—that I've paraphrased and prettied up his words. But no, that's what he said. And with a look in his eyes that could*

*make a person cry. Fine, I DID cry.*

*In other words, my Neil is in love and I wouldn't be surprised if Sydney's wearing that ring by the end of today.*

*Speaking of which, I need to get outside. It's not fair to leave the children to deal with Patti Brighton-Smythe on their own. But there's one more thing I need to tell you, Robert.*

*This will be my last letter.*

*Because as it turns out, my sea needs to get deeper and wilder and a million times bluer, too. And yet, I'm afraid with every letter I write to you, with every memory I lose myself in, I'm only wading. Staying at the shore of the past.*

*I've hidden away in this house, Robert. It started with Diana's accident and progressed through the years to the point that I'm not sure you'd even recognize me if a miracle happened and it turned out you were alive and you returned to the farm and . . .*

*This is why I have to stop writing. I need to live in today. I need to get to know my neighbors. For instance, Tatum Carter will be here today. He's accepted Sydney as his granddaughter. He understands why I won't be selling the farm.*

*I'll always love you, Robert. Always. But it's time to swim.*

*Although, I suppose I should note that Wilder hasn't given up on unraveling what happened to Diana and whether Cynthia might still be alive. Something new is driving him. Strange happenings at the farm, for one thing. But also, there are things I've remembered . . . it took a treehouse with a spyglass and a heart attack to jog my dormant memories and I still don't know if they mean anything, but . . . well, Wilder thinks it's all connected. I won't ask him to stop pursuing answers.*

*But nor will I push him as I've done before. Because my life is here and now and it's a good one.*

*And so, my dearest Robert, I must go help with dinner and enjoy my children and my community (I can't wait to see Patti's face when she realizes we're serving blueberry pie instead of pumpkin—perhaps her wig will fall off!) . . . perhaps we'll even celebrate an engagement. (Knowing Neil, he'll most likely steal Syd off to someplace private—the seaside or maybe that treehouse he built—and propose away from prying eyes. And he won't tell the rest of us until every last guest leaves.)*

*Can you tell I'm procrastinating? I don't know how to finish this letter. I suppose I'll simply sign off the same as always . . . one last time . . .*

*With all my love,*

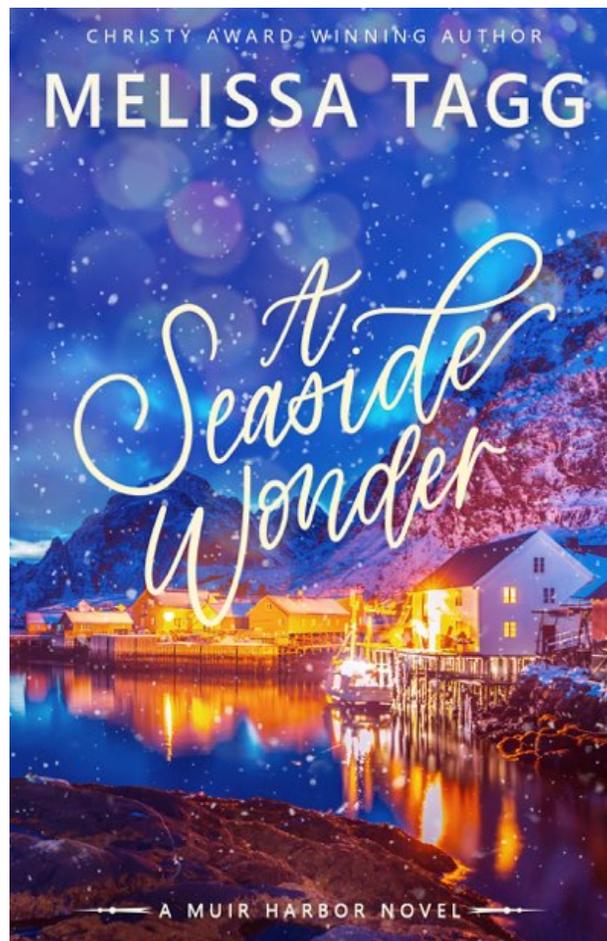
*Maggie*

*P.S. I've met Indi's fiancé, by the way. Only briefly, but it was enough to know there's a story there. But then, isn't there a story everywhere?*

THE END

Thank you so much for spending time in Muir Harbor with Neil, Sydney, Maggie, and the rest of the Muir family. If you like this book, I'd be delighted if you'd leave a review. *Thank you!*

Wondering about Indi and her elusive fiancé? You can get a sneak peek of their story, *A Seaside Wonder*, releasing in early 2022, right here . . .





*Augusta, Maine  
November 2018*

If not for the proprietor's name on the little shop's window, Philip might have let it all go.

His curiosity and confusion at the unfamiliar name he'd seen scribbled in Grandfather's tight handwriting all those weeks ago. The same name that had rasped from white lips, not even a whisper, that summer night in the hospital.

If not for the little shop and the glare of the sun on the storefront glass and the name staring back at him now, he might have forced himself to forget the letter he'd found, faded and crinkled, and the murmurs he'd honestly thought at the time might be a deathbed confession. Perhaps would've been if his grandfather's eyes hadn't closed and that flat line on the monitor not appeared.

A late-autumn breeze came sweeping in, wrapping Philip in a chill that hinted at the coming winter and rooted his feet to the sidewalk outside of—he glanced up, taking in the artsy sign above the windows—Bits & Pieces.

An antique shop, perhaps, considering the assembly of trunks and chairs and what looked like an old shutter, painted and repurposed into a wall shelf, on display behind the glass.

He barely spared the items a second look before his gaze scooted down once more.

*Proprietor: Indi Muir.*

Unusual first name, sure, but it was the last name that set the months-old memories to unspooling. And what else could he do but follow the threads through the little shop's front door? After all, he'd never been able to say no to a mystery.

Philip stopped just inside, the bell overhead trilling as the scents of cedar and stain—and hmm, vanilla?—enveloped him. Good grief, the place was crammed full. Not with people but with things. Just tons and tons of things. More chairs. Accent tables. Vintage lamps. So many knickknacks his eyes didn't know where to land.

And color—it was like a rainbow had fallen from the sky and melted all over everything in the room. Wasn't just an antique store, it seemed, but some sort of restoration shop where old stuff was given new life. Furniture reupholstered or stripped and stained or repainted. He'd watched enough HGTV in the hospital with Mom to know that was shiplap on the walls. Not original, certainly, because a building this old would have plaster walls and

---

His thoughts cut off as the sound of voices drifted from a back room. First, a man, his words too mumbled and low to make out, and then . . .

“You can't possibly be serious, Ben. You just . . . you can't. I don't understand it.”

How could a tone sound so lilting and melodic even as it sagged with distress? Was that Proprietor Indi Muir speaking? He angled around a waist-high bookcase, the male's muffled response lost to him. As it should be because he hadn't come in here to eavesdrop.

But what *had* he come in here to do? Find the owner and—what? Interrogate her about her last name? *I know this is a total longshot, Ms. Muir, but I'm just wondering if you might have a relative named Maggie Muir. Apparently my grandfather knew someone by that name and I have all these questions.*

Right. As if he'd managed even once in his entire thirty-two years to get out a single intelligent word to a pretty woman.

Not that he knew what Indi Muir looked like. The voice *sounded* pretty, that was all. But he didn't even know if it belonged to Indi Muir. Could belong to anyone and he . . .

Well, he'd apparently finally gone off the deep end. Because here he was awkwardly standing around thinking about how he couldn't talk to women when he was supposed to be at the college. And after that, he was destined for a stuffy dinner party with a bunch of faculty members who still saw him as a kid. Never mind his ten years of teaching and writing or his spot at the head of the table at every history department meeting.

Grandpa's spot.

*Grandpa?* Where had *that* come from?

Grandpa had stopped being Grandpa the day of Dad's funeral when he'd presented Philip with his first tie and told him to sit up straight in church. By the time they'd gone down to the basement of St. Mary's for tasteless sandwiches and potato salad after the service, the older man had morphed into Grandfather and he'd been Grandfather ever since.

*Shouldn't be here. Really shouldn't be here.*

And yet, his feet carried him closer to the back of the shop, where a green and white flowered curtain covered a doorway he assumed must lead into a stockroom or breakroom or whatever sort of room a store like this had need of.

"Just hear me out, Indi. I'm not trying to hurt you."

Ah, so it *was* Indi Muir talking to the man. Ben, she'd called him, hadn't she?

"If that's the case, then I'd really hate to see what actually trying to hurt me would look like. Because I can't think of a single thing that could be worse than this."

"I can." The man's voice raised a notch. "Going through with something I know isn't right would be worse. Walking down an aisle when I'm not ready to make those kind of vows would be worse."

"The bride walks down the aisle, Ben, not the groom."

Sudden understanding at what he was hearing thumped through him. He took a step backwards, but the moan of old hardwoods creaked underfoot and he froze. The couple currently on their way to not being a couple would know someone was here now, right? But then, they hadn't heard the bell over the front door when he walked in.

"Can't you see I'm trying to do the honorable thing? I could've dragged this out. I could've kept pretending."

"So you were pretending when you proposed? When you told me you loved me and wanted to spend the rest of your life with me?"

What was *wrong* with Philip? He shouldn't be listening to this. Shouldn't have even come in the store, not when the chances were next to none that this Muir he was eavesdropping on was even slightly connected to his grandfather's Muir. After all, that letter he'd discovered in Grandpa's bedroom, the one addressed to a Maggie Muir in Muir Harbor, Maine, was almost fifty years old.

*Grandpa. Again.*

Well, if the man he'd known as Grandfather had ever sounded anywhere near as soft and affable as the man who'd written that letter the warmer title might've fit.

Affable. Ha! The writer of that note had been downright lovesick.

And he just couldn't square it. Couldn't for the life of him imagine Professor Ray Camden writing anything so wordy and tender. Either Grandfather had changed, hardened through the years, or he wasn't the man Philip had known his whole life. Probably both.

“ . . . deliberately choosing to misunderstand me. It's not that I don't love you. I just don't want to marry you.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” For the first time, a tremble entered the woman's voice.

*Indi, her name is Indi.*

He liked it. Liked the rhythm of it paired with her last name. The kind of name that waltzed off the tongue—or, well, would waltz, he assumed, if he ever had a reason to say it out loud. Or maybe not. If he tried to say it to *her*, if she was anywhere near as pretty as her voice and her name or, most likely, even if she wasn't, he'd stumble over the syllables like a toddler just learning to walk. Er, talk.

But what reason would he ever have to say the woman's full name out loud to her face anyway? How weird would that be?

And why was he still standing here? *You're an idiot, man. Get out.*

“If you're worried about the store, don't be. I'll still help. I can write a check right now. Enough to pay for a billboard—”

“The *store*? Did you actually just say that? Are you actually standing there, having just called off our engagement, offering me money?”

Philip turned on his heel. He'd leave. He'd pretend he'd never seen that name on the front window. Or if his curiosity got the best of him, he'd settle for Googling. Yes, he'd Google Maggie Muir and Muir Harbor and maybe even Indi Muir, just for the heck of it, and—

“Please don't walk away, Indi.”

“You're the one who's walking away. I'm just ending this conversation before it gets any worse.”

Philip bumped into a dresser, heart picking up speed as realization whooshed in. The voices were growing closer and now he could hear steps and—

They were going to rush through that curtain any second, weren't they? And he didn't have a chance of reaching the front door before they saw him, not with a maze of furniture complicating his path, and when they spotted him, they'd know he'd overheard them because his cheeks would turn red. Because they always, *always* did. Because he was Philip West, forever incapable of anything even slightly close to a poker face.

All this flew through his muddled brain in the milliseconds before he made the decision.

A stupid, stupid decision.

Even as he scolded himself, his legs scurried, carrying him around the dresser and toward the oversized wardrobe next to it. He yanked on the ivory knob and flung himself inside.

Dark crowded around him the moment he tugged the door closed, and then, the voices again. And footsteps. More creaking of the floorboards.

An absurd move, maybe, but at least he'd made it inside in the nick of time. They hadn't spotted him. If they had, someone would've yanked the door open by now. And then he'd have no choice but to dig a hole and bury himself alive. Or move to Bolivia, maybe. Certainly never step foot in this shop again.

"I don't want to hear any more. Please, just leave."

He inhaled, the smell of varnish nearly overpowering, a tiny sliver of light slanting in between the wardrobe doors. Hopefully he wouldn't have to stay in here too long. Hopefully after Ben-the-dumper took his leave, Indi Muir would return to the backroom. Hopefully he could sneak out undetected.

Hopefully she'd be okay.

The voices grew muffled again. They must be nearing the front of the shop. Seconds later, he heard the jingle of the bell over the door and clamped his lips to keep his sigh of relief from giving him away.

He strained to listen for her footsteps, for any telltale sound or lack thereof to let him know he was safe to make his escape. *Not long now.* Any minute and he'd be back outside in the cold Maine air and he could pretend he'd never let a wayward whim get him into a scrape like this and—

The wardrobe door pitched open, light flooding in, stealing every last startled thought from his clearly malfunctioning brain save one:

She *was* as pretty as her voice.

And then, exactly as he knew it would, the name tripped instead of waltzed as it slipped nonsensically free.

“I-Indi Muir?”



Wait, the creeper in the closet knew her name?

And what in the world was he doing in there? Why hadn't she heard the bell when he entered Bits & Pieces?

And how—*how?*—in the world was Indi ever going to tell her family about Bennington Foster's graceless exit from her life? Another failed relationship. Another broken engagement. At least she hadn't been the one to call it off this time. But did that make it better or worse?

*Better, please let it be better.* She'd wrecked so much the last time.

The man in front of her cleared his throat, and Indi's focus snapped to attention once more as her grip tightened on the shoe she'd pulled off just before yanking on the wardrobe door. One dumb compliment from Ben a month ago about how much he liked her in heels and she'd felt obligated to wear them more often than she would've otherwise. But for once, those

spiky extra three inches might come in handy—that is, if the stranger wedged into the antique wardrobe proved dangerous.

She huffed to blow a dislodged curl away from her forehead. “You looking for Narnia or something?”

The man lifted one hand and then stared at it as if he didn’t know what to do with it now that it was in the air, eventually settling for running it over the front of his rumpled white oxford. His navy blue tie hung loose, a sign he’d fidgeted with it one too many times.

“Narnia. Ha. That’s, uh, very . . . funny. I-I loved those books as a kid.”

“So did I. Especially the one where—” What was she doing? Her fiancé had just dumped her and a weirdo was hiding in the wardrobe she couldn’t manage to sell, and she was making small talk?

The man’s eyes were trained on her shoe. “Are you, um, going to hit me with that?”

“Maybe. If the situation warrants.” Or she could just throw it at him.

Gosh, why hadn’t she thought to do that to Bennington? She should’ve plucked off her shoe and chucked it at him the moment she’d realized where that backroom conversation was headed.

“I don’t think it will. Warrant it, I mean.”

“You don’t think it will? Or you know it won’t? You’re not a very confident criminal, are you?”

“I’m not a criminal at all.” He straightened and bumped his head on the top of the wardrobe, then winced.

Honestly, any other day and Indi might laugh at the peculiarity of this. But if she let a squeak of laughter out now, there was no guaranteeing it wouldn’t turn into a sob in the next moment. Dumped. Just like that. Before her family had even had a chance to meet her fiancé.

“I’m not a criminal,” he said again. “I-I only hid in this thing. I didn’t attempt to steal it.”

“Well, I wish you would’ve. It takes up way too much floor space.”

The man just stared at her for stilted seconds before finally opening his mouth again. “I suppose I should explain. Not that I have much of an explanation. Nothing that makes any sense, that is. You see . . . I . . . when I heard . . . when I realized . . .” He shook his head, clearly frustrated at his inability to finish the sentence.

“Oh brother, you might as well come out.” She lowered her shoe and stepped backward, the movement uneven considering her one bare foot.

The man cleared his throat. Again. Smoothed down his tie. Again. And finally, he stepped free of the wardrobe.

*Holy buckets.* The man was . . . he was . . . tall, for one thing. But also far more handsome than a nutcase who hid in antique furniture had any right to be. She’d never seen eyes that color of gray—rich and deep and frankly, remarkable. His mussed dark hair had the slightest bit of silver at his temples, which only increased his attractiveness, even though it had to be premature. Because the rest of his appearance told her he couldn’t have more than a few years on her. Even the tiniest gap between his two front teeth was somehow charming, and how was it possible she could tell he had dimples even though he wasn’t smiling?

Definitely not smiling. Oh no, that was pure embarrassment on his face, his cheeks almost as red as the fabric she’d chosen for the tufted chaise nearby. The chaise she probably would’ve dropped onto by now for a good old-fashioned cry if she hadn’t happened to catch a glimpse of this man disappearing into the wardrobe just as she came barreling through the storeroom curtain.

*“It’s not that I don’t love you. I just don’t want to marry you.”*

Goodness, she’d said almost the exact same thing to Bryce seven years ago. Had he, like her, forgotten how to breathe the moment after hearing those words? Had the shock of it made him too go numb?

The numbness probably wouldn’t last, though. At some point, the emotion would crash in and then the panic as she imagined telling Maggie

and Neil and Lilian. *I guess I'm not getting married, after all.*

She couldn't stand the thought. Dreaded the sympathy and the worry and worse, the cementing of her place in the family. She could handle being the youngest, but the flightiest? The wobbliest? The one not quite steady enough to rely on?

Why did her gaze have to pick that moment to land on the mirror with the gilded bronze frame on the opposite wall? The last thing she wanted to see was her own reflection—messy light brown spirals having long since tumbled free from her ponytail, pale skin, and evidence of the paltry tears she'd allowed back in the storeroom in the red rimming her eyes. Lovely.

“For what it's worth, he's obviously a buffoon.”

Her attention darted back to the man. Still here. Somewhere in her cluttered thoughts, she'd assumed he would simply slink away after finally coming out of the wardrobe. But no, he was still standing there watching her. His hair was even more tousled now. He must've run his fingers through it when she wasn't looking. What had he just said?

“I-I didn't mean to overhear. I'm truly sorry that I did. And that I hid like that.”

Oh. *Oh*. Was that why he was blushing? Not because he'd made the zany decision to hide in a wardrobe, but because he'd overheard her complete humiliation?

Something clicked inside her then. Some sort of emotional survival instinct that demanded she lift her chin and straighten her shoulders. But that was hard to do with one shoe on and one shoe off. So she shook off the left heel and squared her posture, tipping her head to look the stranger from the closet right in his ridiculously appealing gray eyes. “What can I help you with today?”

He blinked, cleared his throat for the third time. “Um . . . I-I don't . . . what?”

If there was one bright spot in this awful, horrid day, it was the amusement that managed to wiggle in at his obvious discomfort. “You must’ve come in here for something. Are you looking for a particular piece? Or just browsing?” Maybe he was on the hunt for a gift for someone—a girlfriend or wife, mom or sister. She didn’t get many male customers.

She didn’t get many customers at all. Not here at her Augusta store. At least her original shop back in Muir Harbor was thriving. But replicating that same success here was a hurdle she couldn’t seem to clear. She’d been so sure opening a second store was the right move. But if things didn’t pick up soon, her broken engagement wouldn’t be the only thing she’d have to confess to her family.

A sale. She needed to make a sale today. Just one measly sale and maybe then she could convince herself everything was going to be okay. “I’m running a special this week,” she blurted, pushing a curl behind her ear. “Thirty-five percent off all furniture.”

One corner of the man’s mouth rose at the same time as he lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck. “You really want to get rid of this wardrobe, don’t you?”

A whole sentence without stammering, and darn it, she was right about the dimples. “Got a truck? I can help you load it right now. I’m stronger than I look.”

Those gray eyes peered at her for a moment. “I don’t doubt it, Indi Muir.”

It was the second time he’d said her full name and for the second time, she wondered how in the world he knew it. And seriously, what was he doing here? Who was he? What sort of person eavesdropped on a breakup and hid in a closet and then just . . . stayed? She opened her mouth, ready to bullet one question after another at him, even if it did cost her a sale.

But the blare of her phone stole her opportunity. *Ben?* She whipped it from the pocket of her jeans, gaze immediately connecting with the screen.

Not Ben. Her sister's name and photo lit up the screen. Rude, perhaps, to answer it when she was with a potential customer. But Lilian usually texted, rarely called. Which meant this might be important. Besides, did the man from the wardrobe really count as a customer at this point?

She tucked her phone to her ear. "Hey, Lil."

"You have to come home. Right now. No, not home. The hospital. They're taking her to the hospital. She's already in the ambulance."

Her sister's words tumbled over each other, and Indi's grasp on her phone tightened. "What? Slow down." Was that panic in Lilian's voice? Lilian *never* panicked. *Home. Hospital. Ambulance. She . . . who?*

Her breath left her lungs as the face of the woman who'd raised her rose in her mind.

"It's Maggie," Lilian confirmed. "She collapsed. Neil said . . . he doesn't think she was breathing and . . . you have to come, Indi. *Now.*"

"O-okay. I will. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Lilian was talking again—but she couldn't register the words. Not with the fear coiling inside her, not with the sound of a siren in the background of the call. *Not Maggie. Please, God. You can't take her from us. You can't take her from me.*

"A-are you okay?"

She whirled to face the man from the wardrobe again. When had Lilian ended the call? When had Indi stuffed her phone back in her pocket?

When had she given the tears permission to finally escape? "I . . . I . . . Maggie."

The man's jaw dropped. "Maggie? Maggie Muir?"

She should probably wonder why he was looking at her like that, gray eyes wide. She should wonder why he'd just said Maggie's name in the same peculiar tone he'd said hers earlier. She should wonder all over again who he was and what he was doing here.

She should *move*. Grab her heels, her purse, her car keys. Get to Maggie as soon as she could. Because Maggie could be . . . might already be . . . *no*. She shoved on a shoe even as she scoured the store for her purse. She'd left it behind the cash register counter, hadn't she?

"By the way, you never said which Narnia book was your favorite."

*What?* The man's face was blurry through her onslaught of tears. She struggled to slip on the second shoe, her whole body trembling.

"You started to say earlier, but then you cut off."

He moved closer to her, the concern in his expression breaking through her clouded vision. *He's trying to calm you down. The strange, blushing man from the wardrobe is trying to help.*

She sniffled then took a ragged breath. "*The Magician's Nephew*. That's my favorite."

"Mine too. I've always loved a good origin story." He reached up to pull his tie free and held it out to her. When she didn't take it, he nudged it closer. "I don't have a handkerchief."

Understanding mingled with disbelief. "I can't blow my nose on your tie."

"You really can. I don't like it. I hate wearing the thing."

He was . . . he was . . . she didn't know what he was. She only knew she had to leave. *Now*. Another sob wracked her body as she bolted toward the counter and reached for her purse. She had her keys out in seconds. She needed to lock up before she left. Turn the *Open* sign to *Closed*. And oh, the lights—

"I'm not sure you should be driving."

Still there. "I have to go. I'm sorry. It's a family emergency. If you're really interested in the wardrobe, I can hold it for you." Why was she even taking the time to say this?

"I-it's just . . . you're shaking. You've already had one shock and now . . . I just don't think it's safe."

She slung her purse over her shoulder. “I don’t have a choice. It’s not as if I can walk. Muir Harbor’s almost an hour away.” The words scrambled from her as she wound her way to the front door.

“Muir Harbor.”

There was that tone again. But she didn’t care anymore. And if he wouldn’t leave, fine, he could just stay here. He could make off with every last piece of furniture in the place if he wanted. She had to get to Maggie . . . had to see her before—

“I can drive you.”

She stopped at the front door, streaming tears nowhere close to slowing. “What?”

“I know you must think I’m bananas—hiding in that closet like I did. And I know you have no reason to trust me.” He cleared his throat. Fourth time. “But I’m a safe driver. I can get you to the hospital in one piece.”

He was right. She had no reason to trust him.

But he was also right that she was shaking and crying and probably in no shape to drive. She swiped the back of one hand over her eyes. *Should’ve accepted his tie.* “You’re a complete stranger.”

“My name’s Philip West. I’m thirty-two. I’m a history professor. I teach at Thornhill College here in Augusta. More importantly, I’ve never had so much as a speeding ticket.”

And *The Magician’s Nephew* was his favorite Narnia book. Why that fact should be the one that pushed her over the edge, she didn’t know. And it didn’t matter. All that mattered was getting to Maggie.

Maggie, who’d given her everything.

“Okay, Philip.” She handed him her keys. “But we’re taking my car.”

**Read the rest of Indi and Philip’s story in *A Seaside Wonder*, releasing in early 2022.**

## AUTHOR NOTE & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Years ago, I sat in a hotel ballroom during a writing conference gala, watching a friend win an award . . . and I've never forgotten how, in her acceptance speech, she called her novel "the book of my heart."

As I clapped and teared up in happiness for my friend, I remember thinking, "Hmm, I've loved every book I've written but have I written *the* book of my heart yet?"

Oh, I'm sure every book an author pours herself into is, in some way, a book of her heart because it comes from her heart. And yet, maybe some stories wait there for us a little longer . . .

*Autumn by the Sea*, I think, has been waiting for me, truly, since I was a little girl. It was a whisper in my soul before I could fully hear it. And I didn't realize until I started writing this story that my ears had been straining for it for years—for the music of the sea, for the echoes of intrigue and mystery, for the surprise melodies that can happen when new characters take you to new places . . . and, yep, for a Scottish accent.

*Autumn by the Sea* is the book of my heart.

And I'm so grateful to the loving cheerleaders in my life who helped it come to life:

Mom and Dad—I've run out of creative ways to say this, so I'll say it plainly: Thank you for everything, and I love you.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**MELISSA TAGG** is the *USA Today* bestselling, Christy Award-winning author of swoony and hope-filled small-town contemporary romances. She's also a former reporter, current nonprofit marketing strategist, and total Iowa girl. Melissa has taught at multiple national writing conferences, as well as workshops and women's retreats. When she's not happily lost in someone else's book or plugging away her own, she can be found spoiling her nieces and nephews, watching old movies, and daydreaming about her next fictional hero. Connect with Melissa at [melissatagg.com](http://melissatagg.com).

