

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white wide-brimmed hat and a white, short-sleeved, button-down dress, is seen from the back, looking over her right shoulder. She is standing in a rural setting with green trees and a red barn in the background. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The text 'ENGAGING EMMA' is overlaid in white, serif font, with small floral icons above the 'E's and 'M's.

ENGAGING
EMMA

a novel

ELLE M.
ADAMS

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Covenant Communications, Inc.



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To LJA, for telling me I should,
and EA, for making it possible

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PRAISE FOR ELLE M. ADAMS

“Engaging Emma is a touching romance. Set in rural Missouri, [the story has] characters [who] develop and grow in small-town Americana. Normal, Missouri, is a close-knit town, a place where everyone knows each other’s business. News travels fast. It is difficult to keep a secret, yet there is one lurking in the shadows. This secret nudges the plot action along. The two main characters are shaped by their supporting cast, by their personal life choices due to a broken promise. Once thrust back together, old feelings and memories excite and equally irritate them both. Adams eloquently writes the merger of her characters’ lives after years of separation. Background information is revealed with precision, keeping the novel interesting. As I read, I realized just how perfect the title is. The word ‘engage’ has various meanings and most of them are portrayed in the narrative. Elle M. Adams’s Engaging Emma is a little frustrating at times, yet incredibly heartwarming at others. It is a reminder that life is full of pathways; most of them are not straight, many are bumpy and riddled with potholes, and some twist and turn you with unforeseen detours. However, if you are led by faith and love, you will find your way back home.”

—Readers’ Favorite five-star review

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PROLOGUE

August, twelve years ago

EMMA JANE McALLISTER SWATTED A fly away from her face and blew an errant strand of hair off her forehead. It was early, not that it mattered. The sun was up, the heat of the day just getting started. Already humidity had her cotton shirt sticking to her back, and the few strands of hair that had escaped her ponytail lay damp against her neck.

She'd been here for almost an hour trying to be inconspicuous and failing miserably. She'd already knocked over a display of postcards, sending images of the Gateway Arch and old river boats skittering across the gas station floor. Sid Ficus, the owner, cleared his throat loudly and looked over the top of his glasses at her as she righted the metal rack and replaced the cards.

Sid's gas station was situated two blocks west of Main Street in her little hometown of Normal, Missouri. It also happened to be right across from the train station. She glanced at the clock above the register again and bit her lip. Tucker's train was leaving soon, and she still hadn't caught sight of him.

Just thinking about Tucker Madsen had her heart galloping in her chest. She'd known him forever, since they were kids. His family used to come into town every summer to help his grandmother Miss Lily on her farm. But when his dad died, Tucker's visits had stopped.

This summer he'd been coerced into returning; Miss Lily had waved the promise of tuition money under his nose, an amount so generous he would have been foolish to pass it up.

When Emma had seen him again, she'd barely recognized him. Gone was the skinny boy who used to challenge her to spitting contests. Six foot two with dark hair and blue eyes, Tucker made an impression wherever he went, especially on the female population in town. Emma had played it cool at first, but in the end, she couldn't help herself. She'd been smitten, and over the summer their renewed friendship had deepened into something more. Emma closed her eyes for a moment. Oh, how she was going to miss him. His smile. His easy laugh. The way he called her EJ, like he was savoring her name.

Which was why today stank so bad. After a summer together, Tucker was leaving for home. From there he'd head off to the University of Missouri—Kansas City for college. Emma still had a year left of high school. She

hoped that after graduation next spring she'd be able to wriggle her way out from under her mother's needy thumb and join Tucker.

Emma pressed against the glass doors. Still no Tucker. She twisted a strand of hair, brow furrowed. Had she gotten the time wrong? What if he was already gone? Worry flared into panic.

As goodbyes went, last night had been a bust. Tucker had brought her to their spot, the dock that spread out over the lake behind his grandmother's house. He'd set up a blanket, candles, and a picnic basket filled with all their favorite things: Miss Lily's chocolate chip cookies, a bag of Doritos, a couple of cans of Pringles, and two mason bottles of strawberry soda. They'd lain back on the blanket, hands clasped, looking at the stars. A perfect night . . . until Tucker had gotten up on one knee and proposed.

She could still see his startled expression when she'd yelled, "Are you crazy?" when he'd presented her with a ring—a pretty silver band, daisies etched around it, each flower sporting a diamond-chip center. The confusion in his eyes had turned to horror when she'd burst into tears and had run back down the dock, disappearing into the woods. Tucker had caught up with her and listened patiently to her tear-filled lecture containing phrases like "only seventeen" and "what were you thinking?" She'd sworn she wouldn't be at the station this morning to see him off. It was just too hard.

It looked like she was a big fat liar.

After a night of no sleep, she'd changed her mind.

Up before dawn, she'd rummaged through her sock drawer and retrieved the envelope she'd hidden there last week. She'd dressed in a hurry, then scribbled a note to her mother, lying about an early shift at the diner, and stuck it to the fridge. She'd hopped onto her bike and peddled for all she was worth, making it to the front porch of the Big House, Miss Lily's home, before the sun had made it over the horizon. She'd scrawled Tucker's name across the front of the envelope, then kissed it before dropping it through the mail slot in the front door.

She wrung her hands now, thinking about it, hoping he'd gotten it.

Inside the envelope was a picture of the two of them at the Fourth of July dance—Emma's smiling face turned toward the camera as Tucker kissed her solidly on the cheek. The mayor's wife had gone around that night taking snapshots of folks enjoying the festivities. Early Jackson had retrieved the photo from the bulletin board at the courthouse before anyone

else could see it. Good thing too. If Emma's mama had gotten wind of Tucker being anything more than a friend, she would have gone through the roof.

Emma was so caught up in her thoughts that she almost didn't notice the deep rumbling of Shep's truck as it pulled up to the depot. She pushed the gas station door open. The train was already here.

She watched as Shep retrieved a duffel bag from the back of the truck, then pulled Tucker in for an awkward hug. The older man said something that made Tucker smile. Too soon, Shep pulled away with a final wave, and Emma watched as Tucker took a step toward the train. He hesitated, his foot on the bottom step. For a minute she thought maybe he'd spotted her, but no. He just took a quick look around before he grabbed his bag and boarded.

The train shuddered to life. Realizing this was it, Emma raced across the street and down the platform, straining on tippy-toes, trying to catch a glimpse of Tucker through the high windows. Tears gathered. She'd just about given up when she saw him.

He was looking right at her, and a slow grin spread across his face. He tapped against the glass and pointed to something pressed against the window. The picture.

Relief rushed through her as she smiled and nodded, running to keep up as the train started to move, her eyes never leaving his. She blew him a kiss, and he pretended to catch it, then put his hand over his heart. Standing at the end of the platform, she waved until the train disappeared from view.

It's going to be all right, she told herself.

It had to be.

CHAPTER ONE

November, present day

TUCKER MADSEN WAS EXHAUSTED. HE stretched and leaned against the wall, looking at the clock over the nurse's station: seven a.m. He wasn't supposed to be here. Family practitioners rarely came into the ER, but last night the after-hours service called to let him know one of his patients was being taken to the hospital. The kid's mother had requested that Tucker come. Her son, Tate Dawson, was epileptic and had had the genius idea to try ecstasy at a party last night. He'd had three clonic seizures in the ambulance on his way to the ER and another when he got here. He was lucky to be alive.

Tucker had consulted with the ER doc last night, but there wasn't a lot he could do. He didn't have hospital privileges here, but he decided to stay until the kid was out of the woods.

"Dr. Madsen, right?" The charge nurse approached him. He was surprised she knew who he was. Her ID badge said her name was Charlotte. "Yes."

She handed him a black cordless phone. "Your mother is on line two. She's been holding awhile."

"My mother?" She'd called earlier, but he hadn't had time to talk to her. He didn't really have time now, but if she'd managed to track him down to call him here, something must be wrong.

Tucker took the phone. "Who's dead?" he asked his mother after the nurse walked away.

"Couldn't you start our conversation with a simple 'hello'?"

"Not when the charge nurse tells me you were on hold for twenty minutes. How did you find out I was here?"

"I woke your fiancée." She paused. "Why are you at the hospital?"

Tucker pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's a long story. Why'd you call? Is everything okay?"

"Are you somewhere you can talk?"

"Who's dead?" he asked again.

"No one is dead! I needed to talk to you, and you weren't answering your cell. So are you?"

"Am I what?"

His mother exhaled loudly. "Somewhere you can talk?" she enunciated. He turned down the corridor. "I'm moving."

He found a small lounge area outside the psych care unit. There was a nurse in the corner having a Coke, but Tucker could hear the beat of rap music, and the guy's head was bent over his phone, earbuds plugged in. This was as alone as he'd been all night. "What's going on?" he asked.

"You need to get out here and see your grandmother. Soon."

"Is she all right?"

"Of course. Busy as ever, but she was wondering if you could be out here next week."

"What for?" he asked carefully. The last time he'd been summoned to his grandmother's house in Missouri, he'd ended up shoveling manure all summer.

"She's selling Stony Creek."

"Come again?"

"Gran is selling the farm."

Tucker sat down. Stony Creek had been in the family since before the Civil War; the house was on the National Register of Historic Places. It had been his grandfather's pride and joy. No way would his grandmother sell, not while she had breath in her body.

Tucker wasn't great about keeping in touch with the family. What he did know came secondhand, usually from his mother. He did know that Shep, Gran's foreman, had retired a few years ago. Maybe the farm was too much for his grandmother now.

Still, he couldn't help but ask, "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," his mom said.

"What does Gran want me to do?"

"She wants you to help negotiate the terms of the sale. Evidently someone is already interested in the property. I think she'd like another set of eyes looking over the contracts."

"I'm not sure how much help I'd be. I didn't go to law school."

"But you're family. She's got a healthy distrust of lawyers. It's a compliment, Tucker."

Maybe so, but he was still reluctant. "Why don't you go? You're a lot closer if it's family she's after."

"She asked for you."

"Meet me down there, then. Next week is Thanksgiving. Maybe we could—"

"I'm heading to Texas to be with your sister."

“Since when?”

“There are issues,” his mother said tersely. Tucker knew all about Whippet’s disastrous marriage.

His mother paused a moment and then pulled out all the stops. “Your grandmother is ninety-one, Tucker. It might be the last time you see her.”

He felt a familiar punch of guilt. Since his dad’s death nearly eighteen years ago, his mother hadn’t set foot in Normal, and he hadn’t done much better.

Suddenly, like scenes played on a screen, Tucker could see all the ways he’d let his family down. He’d gone away for college; after graduation from med school, he had done his residency in Chicago instead of sticking closer to home; and then, over the loud objections of his sister and mother, he’d taken a job halfway across the country. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been home, preferring to fly his mom out to California. He’d been an absentee brother too, not stepping in when it looked like Whippet was going off the rails in high school. And his grandmother had had to bear the weight of the farm alone.

Tucker had time off coming. The contract with his current practice was almost over, and he had until the first of the year before he started working with Palisades Medical Group. His fiancée, Meredith, had their social calendar packed, but he could bow out of a couple of dinners and gallery openings if he wanted to.

He couldn’t believe the words were coming out of his mouth, but before he could think too hard, he said, “Yeah, I’ll go.”

CHAPTER TWO

TUCKER COULDN'T BELIEVE HE WAS back. Up to this point, he hadn't seen a reason to return. Frankly, there was nothing "Normal" about this town that, if he remembered correctly, was home to a collection of oddballs and old-timers. Normal owed its relative prosperity to agriculture and its proximity to Branson, where bands popular circa 1975 went to die. As a teenager, Tucker had always figured the people who willingly stayed in this place were either stuck or buried in the cemetery west of town. His drive down Main Street a few minutes ago had done little to change his opinion. The town was so small, he'd passed through it in minutes on his way to his grandmother's house.

The turnoff to Gran's property was still flanked by two ancient maple trees and a stacked-stone wall broken only by the property entrance. It was so dark he would have missed his turn if it weren't for that wall.

He turned up the drive. The headlights showed that the road was paved now. "Huh," Tucker said aloud. He remembered going up this stretch of road at a snail's pace twelve years ago, gravel popping around him as he tried to avoid ruining the paint job on Gran's pristine Cadillac. A large sign set off to the side of the road announced The Barn in bold letters, and underneath, written in elegant script, were the words at Stony Creek Farm. That was new. He wondered what it was for.

The road curved down past The Barn, but Tucker pulled in front of the garage. For some reason, he was pleased to see that the driveway was still gravel.

Gran had left the porch lights on for him.

He sat in the car for a moment. After two delays and one layover, he was glad to finally be here. He rubbed his eyes, then glanced at his phone, considering a call to his fiancée, but Meredith wasn't thrilled that he was here.

"Hon, you aren't taking this trip to get out of Thanksgiving with my parents, are you?" she had asked.

Tucker had dodged that bullet when Meredith's cell phone rang and she'd excused herself to take the call. For once he'd been grateful to have their evening interrupted by another PR emergency.

Maybe I'll call her later, he thought now as he pocketed his phone. He got out of the rental car and retrieved his bag from the trunk.

Tucker looked up at the beautiful old house. It was called the Big House, not for any penitentiary resemblance but because it was roughly twice the size of the other structure found on the property. The original farmhouse was down the road and had been built by his great-great-grandfather Seamus Madsen before his family had outgrown it.

Seamus had set his sights higher when he built the Big House. The three-story Queen Anne with a steeply pitched roof, wide wraparound porch, and turret off to the west side looked great in the evening light. Gran now owned both homes but lived in the Big House. She rented out the smaller farmhouse, usually to whomever she employed to help out on the farm. Tucker was relieved to see it was in good shape. No sagging roofline, no feathering paint, no broken shutters.

He felt a surge of affection for the old place. He'd been gone too long—a fact that his grandmother would, no doubt, remind him of the second he was inside. Yep, he was long overdue for one of her legendary lectures. Better to get it over with. He went up the brick walkway.

The front door was locked.

It was past ten. Maybe Gran was asleep. Tucker backed up a few steps and brought his heel down on the third plank from the door. It popped up, and he retrieved the hidden spare key. Tromping into the front hall, he set down his luggage and slipped off his shoes, the habits of childhood returning.

Upstairs was dark, but flickering blue light spilled from the family room down the hall. He followed the dancing light and found his grandmother asleep in an overstuffed chair.

Her hands were folded over the open book in her lap, low noise coming from the TV. Her white hair was long and loose around her shoulders. Narrow lines fanned down her face, growing deeper around her mouth and eyes.

In the eyes of her grandchildren, Liliane Madsen was a force of nature. A wiry little woman, her fierceness was matched by equal parts stubbornness and determination. Experience taught that if Grandma Lil wanted something done, well, it was best to get out of her way. She could, and had, outrun anything life threw her way. She hadn't outrun time, though, and in the dim light, she looked old. It wasn't surprising—she was nearly ninety-two—but somehow Tucker had expected her to be exempt from something so mortal as aging.

She must have sensed he was there, because she stirred, her eyes fluttering open. When she saw him, a smile ghosted across her face, and she reached up to touch his cheek.

Abruptly, her expression changed, and she dropped her hand and made a noise of disgust. “Wrong Madsen,” she muttered, pulling her hair over one shoulder and sitting up.

“What?” Tucker asked.

“Doggone it, Tucker. I thought you were your granddaddy. You look so much like him it isn’t right. I thought maybe he’d finally decided to get his act together and come get me.”

“I called you from the airport. You knew I was on my way.”

“I know it, but I fell asleep, and my wires got crossed. These days, when I drift off, I figure I’ve got a fifty-fifty chance of waking up again. Frankly, I’m disappointed.”

“Sorry to let you down, Gran,” Tucker said, amused.

“Well, if that man I married weren’t so stubborn,” she said, addressing her sharp comments to the ceiling, “I’d have joined him years ago. Don’t see much sense in hanging around here anymore. Nothing works the way it used to.” She gestured down her body. “And do you know—it’s the darndest thing—when I look in the mirror, I don’t see myself. I actually have to touch my face to believe the reflection is mine! I look like a peeled apple left out too long.”

“Well, you look good to me,” he said.

“Great. You’re back in the will,” she said, and Tucker gave a short laugh. Gran started to rise but shook off Tucker’s supporting hand. “I can still get up on my own steam,” she scolded. “My balance is pretty good. Me and the girls do yoga twice a week at the Elks Lodge.”

He was glad to hear she was staying active. He followed her to the kitchen.

“My mind is sharp too.” She tapped her head with a bony finger. “I do Sudoku and crossword puzzles when I get the chance of it. What time is it? You’re probably tired after a day of travel.”

“About ten. I can find my way around if you tell me where you want me.”

“Remember the old place, do you?” she said, squeezing his arm. “Things have changed quite a bit around here, Tucker. Good changes. I think you’ll be pleased.”

“I’m sure I will.” They went through the kitchen and took the back stairs.

Gran stopped in front of his old bedroom. At the turn of the twentieth century, it had been the maid’s quarters. He’d always liked this room. It had great views of the outbuildings and the lake beyond. There was an awesome climbing tree right outside the window, an ancient maple with wide branches that, to his grandmother’s horror, he’d used as an alternate exit when he was a kid.

As if reading his mind, she shook a finger at him and said, “No climbing!”

Tucker set his bag on the bed. “You don’t have to worry about that, Gran. Those days are long over.”

“I hope you don’t mind too much, sweetheart, but I’m going to turn in. The body tires quickly these days. We can get caught up in the morning.”

Tucker put an arm around her shoulder and walked her back to the door.

“I’d like you to run some errands for me tomorrow, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble,” she said.

“Sure. I’m here to help.”

“Mm-hmm. And it only took twelve years to get you back here,” she said.

Tucker smiled and ignored the jab, instead pulling her in for a hug. She reached up and gave his cheek a sharp pat.

“Yes sir, you surely do look like my Jack. Madsen men have always been a good-looking lot. ‘Night, sweetheart.”

“‘Night, Gran.” He closed the door after her and turned on the bedside lamp. He was still on California time, and despite the long day, he wouldn’t be tired for a while.

Not much had changed in this room. The paint was maybe a shade darker, and the bed was against a different wall. There were sepia-toned photos of the property above the dresser. Those were new. They added an air of nostalgia to the room.

Tucker unpacked, putting a few things in the dresser and hanging the rest of his clothes in the closet that still smelled like cedar. When he was done, he sank down on the bed and retrieved the paperback he’d been reading on the plane. He wedged a feather pillow behind his head and opened the book, but before long his mind wandered.

He stared up at the ceiling. As a kid, he’d shared this room with his sister. On those long-ago summer nights, they’d lie here, windows open, listening

to the katydids sing. One summer they'd collected lightning bugs in Mason jars, then let them loose in this room, a harebrained scheme he'd come up with so his sister wouldn't be afraid of the dark. His mother had not been pleased by that stunt, and she'd spent the better part of an hour trying to change the insects' flight trajectory, coaxing them out the window with a broom.

He'd learned how to work on this farm. Real work. Hard work. He'd put in long days alongside his dad and Shep as they made repairs to the outbuildings and mended broken fence lines, necessary to keep Gran's neighbor Harlan Beaufort from setting his cattle to graze on her land. Tucker would come in at dusk, covered head to toe in dirt and manure, greeted by the smell of baking bread and Gran's pot roast. Those were good days. Exhausting but good.

And then they weren't. Their visits had come to an abrupt halt when he was twelve years old, the year his dad died in a car accident on his way home from work. After that, his mother had preferred to stay in Kansas City, a world away from the memories here. He hadn't returned until the summer following his senior year of high school.

Tucker rolled over and switched off the lamp. He hadn't thought about that last summer in years.

With good reason. That was the summer he'd gotten his heart broken.

CHAPTER THREE

TUCKER MADSEN HAD EMMA AT a disadvantage.

Was it really him? Maybe he was a hallucination brought on by too much cold medicine and not enough sleep. If she squinted, maybe he'd evaporate.

Nope. Still there.

She ducked behind a rack of romance novels at the end of the aisle, trying to camouflage herself.

She hadn't seen him in over—what was it? Yeah, right. Like she didn't know exactly how many years it had been. Twelve. Twelve years since Tucker Madsen had jettisoned from this small town and taken her heart right along with him. Not that it mattered now because she was totally over him. But still.

She crouched down and angled her head around the wire rack to get a better look. Just then he glanced up from the box he'd been examining, and holy smokes, no doubt about it, it was him. Same dark hair, same unfairly blue eyes. He looked good, she admitted begrudgingly. Still had that trim, athletic build, darn it all. Couldn't he have gained a few pounds or maybe lost a little hair? His face had lost the softness of youth, but that had only sharpened his features, making him even better-looking. Ugh. Forget camouflage. She wished she could disappear completely. With fumbling fingers, she grabbed one of the novels and opened it, hiding behind its rather salacious cover. She slid all the way to the floor and proceeded to scoot over to the next aisle.

For years she'd fantasized about a moment like this, running into him again. She just hadn't envisioned it being in the cold and flu aisle of Grimm's Market while she was wearing sweatpants and a ratty old Pixies concert T-shirt and holding a crumpled box of Kleenex to her chest like a cherished pet.

She'd always pictured herself running into him (which was an improvement on the fantasies in which she ran over him) while being on the arm of someone handsome, preferably rich, and maybe just a little famous. Above all, she would look fantastic. So not happening today. Today she was a mess. Her nose was chapped and wouldn't stop running, no matter what her cold medicine had promised. Her eyes were red rimmed and bloodshot. She kind of had the whole zombie thing going on. Come to think of it, she probably didn't look all that different from the last time she'd seen him, when she stood sobbing at the end of the platform as she watched his train

disappear.

She had to get out of here.

“Hey, Miz McAllister. Can I help you find something down there?” Josh Daughtry, the well-meaning stock boy, asked. He looked a bit concerned.

“Not so loud!” she scolded, shoving the open novel into the boy’s hands before crawling to the end of the aisle and then out of the store.

“Emma?”

She came face-to-foot with a very nice pair of loafers and looked up.

Great. It was the other guy she really didn’t want to run into today. “Hey, Hopper.” She sniffed.

“What are you doing?”

“Humiliating myself on every front,” she muttered.

“What?”

“Nothing. Help me up.” He took her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“How have you been?” he asked, dropping her hand like it was made of kryptonite.

This was still so awkward. They’d broken up months ago, but every time she ran into him, he got a pained look on his face.

“I have a cold,” she said. Through the window Emma saw Tucker in the checkout line. She turned her back to the window so he wouldn’t see her.

“Sorry to hear it,” Hopper said. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and nodded. “Well, you take care.”

Emma gave him a weak smile, hurried to her car, then drove away as fast as she could.

Tucker Madsen! What was he doing here? It must be for the holiday, she reasoned, although he’d never come back for Thanksgiving before. Why hadn’t Miss Lily given her a heads-up? Now that her heart rate was returning to normal, she felt a little betrayed. Miss Lily should have warned her, especially since it had been Lily she’d turned to all those years ago. She’d been the only one who really understood how much Emma had loved Tucker. Her own mother hadn’t offered any sympathy. No, her mom had rejoiced at Tucker’s departure. Miss Lily had been the one with the soft shoulder and kind words.

Emma pulled into her driveway and fumbled with the keys. She let herself into the kitchen and tossed her purse onto the counter and fished out her cell phone.

“Hiya,” her best friend, Nina, said when she picked up.

“Hey.” Emma sniffed. “Do you have any cold medicine? The stuff that won’t make you sleepy?”

“Were they out at Grimm’s?”

“Uh . . . yeah,” she lied, picturing Tucker standing in the medicine aisle.

“Em, you’ve been sick for almost a week. Don’t you think you should make an appointment with Doc Braithwaite?”

Emma blew her nose. “I’m much better. Mornings are just a little rough, that’s all. And Doc Braithwaite is out of town.”

“Again? Well, I guess he’d just tell you to drink lots of water and get some rest.”

“Uh-huh. Do you have any?”

“Any what?”

“Cold. Medicine.”

“Oh, right. Yeah, I do. Want me to bring it over now?” Nina asked.

Emma closed her eyes and laid her head on the table.

“Emma? Are you there?”

“Um, yes.” Emma sat up. “Are you still planning on our meeting this morning?”

Nina handled most of the PR for the venue and also helped with daily operations. There was a bridal shower at The Barn this afternoon. “I am,” she answered. “I heard about the discount you gave Holly, by the way.”

Uh-oh.

“Emma, how do you expect to stay in business if you keep booking at reduced rates? Twenty-five percent. That’s more than the friends and family discount.”

“Holly’s a friend,” Emma insisted.

“Everyone is your friend.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“It is a bad thing if you can’t make payroll!”

“You’re right. I know you’re right. But the date was open, and when she told me her budget . . . I thought we could help out a little. We’ll still make money today, I promise. And at this point, business is business.”

“Whatever.” Nina paused. “You’ve been working a lot lately. Between subbing and The Barn . . . might be why you’re sick.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll be sicker if I have to sell my house to cover the loan payment. Just meet me there in a half hour with whatever legal substance you have in your medicine cabinet.”

“Fine. See you soon.”

Thank heaven for Nina. Emma felt a little bad about not mentioning Tucker. Nina had been her best friend since third grade and had lived through the Tucker debacle their senior year in high school. But Nina could also be a little overprotective sometimes. The second she found out Tucker was in town, there would be questions. Right now, all Emma wanted to do was get today out of the way. Besides, he might not be here long. No need to raise an alarm.

For the time being, the less her friend knew, the better.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TUCKER HAD SPENT A PLEASANT day helping out and reacquainting himself with the farm. There was something fundamentally satisfying about working with his hands. He'd repaired the weather stripping around the back door, changed a few light bulbs, and fixed a leaky sink upstairs. He'd gone to the post office, grocery store, and what passed for a hardware store. When he couldn't find what he needed to winterize Gran's house, he'd convinced her to go with him to Springfield. At Home Depot they'd gotten into an argument when he'd tried to convince her she needed a snowblower.

Gran was as stubborn as ever, but she was getting absentminded. He'd just closed the door of his room when he noticed lights on in one of the out-buildings. Looked like The Barn. Gran had retired to her room an hour ago, so Tucker decided to take care of it himself.

Tucker breathed into his fisted hands. He probably should have packed gloves. Actually, he wasn't sure he owned a pair of gloves. Following the foot-path behind the house, he slipped on some black ice and nearly fell. He grabbed on to a low-lying branch to right himself and was rewarded when a raft of snow fell onto his head and slid down his neck. Man, he missed the California weather. Five minutes ago he'd been both warm and dry.

Soon The Barn loomed. The red boards gleamed in the reflected light of the snow. The roofline was strung with unlit C9 bulbs, the big ones he remembered from childhood. The interior was aglow, yellow light peeking out from the windows.

Windows. He didn't remember The Barn having windows before, but there they were, small-paned rectangles just under the eaves.

Earlier he thought he'd heard music coming from back here, thought Gran might have turned The Barn into an art studio for painting or pottery, something like that. It was quiet now.

Tucker slid the door open, light spilling like milk across the paved walkway. The door opened easily, another surprise. Years ago the thing had bucked and jumped on a rusty track. He remembered using his whole body as leverage, pushing against the wood, trying to jimmy it open.

Then he caught sight of the interior.

This was not a barn. Not in the conventional sense anyway. There wasn't a trace of hay or spilled feed on the wide-planked floor. The pungent smell of livestock had been replaced by cedar and cinnamon. Gone were the stalls where Dottie the cow had made her home. The goat pen wasn't there either.

The rickety tack room with its barely-there walls had been torn down, leaving a wide-open space.

The Barn was lit from above by three wrought-iron chandeliers, the center one the grandest. Each hung from the sturdy beam that ran the length of the ceiling.

In the middle, a massive banquet table sat balanced on solid legs, the dark wood polished to perfection. A large glass tureen filled with a spilling array of orange and yellow flowers sat in the center of the table, flanked by smaller arrangements of small pumpkins and vines.

Shifting light came from what looked like a small annex attached to the back of The Barn, and a woman, phone pressed against her ear, came out from behind one of the support posts. Her back was to him as she walked to a large sideboard to retrieve a stack of linens, wedging the phone between her ear and shoulder as she worked.

“I’m here,” she said.

Tucker watched her. There was something familiar about the way she moved.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said. “Sal, I placed that order a month ago. I needed delivery today.”

Tucker froze. That voice. He knew that voice. The air left the room as the woman pushed back a strand of hair, revealing a familiar profile.

Emma.

Seeing her again was like being sideswiped. He stood there, dumbstruck. He should say something, alert her to his presence. He assumed seeing him would be just as big of a shock for her, but he couldn’t get his mouth moving. Instead, he stepped into the shadows to study her as she laid the linens around the table.

She looked good. Beautiful. He was having trouble processing the fact that she was here. When he’d booked his flight, the coward in him had hoped she’d be long gone, moved on from Normal. There’d been no reason to believe she would be here. Gran hadn’t mentioned her once in all the years since he’d left, which he’d considered a mercy. But, at this moment, the teenager in him, the adolescent who’d never gotten over his first real love, was ecstatic.

He strained to get a look at her left hand.

No ring.

“Sal, you do a good job for us. I’d hate to sever a relationship over a couple of smoked turkeys.” She paused. “I understand that, but I’ve got a party of thirty coming Monday night, and they ordered smoked turkey.”

Tucker heard the frustration in her sigh. “No . . . no! No ham. One of our clients has a definite aversion to anything in the pork family. Sal. Three. Smoked. Turkeys.”

He tore his eyes away from her as she continued haggling. She was hosting a dinner party here, in The Barn. Seeing the place as it was now, he could well imagine it. At the opposite end of the space, an undecorated balsam fir reached up into the rafters. Tuck’s eyes followed the branches up to the ceiling.

The loft had been cut back. It no longer dripped hay and rope lines. The old ladder, which had been missing a rung or two, if memory served, had been replaced by sturdy-looking stairs. Heat lamps lined the walls. Under the windows stood rough-hewn sideboards topped with unlit lanterns, and more pumpkins were stacked at the base. Meredith would have called the decor “rustic elegance.” Remembering the way The Barn used to look, Tucker called it a miracle. His attention snapped back to the table when Emma’s phone clattered to the floor.

“Tucker!” she exclaimed.

A smile hitched his mouth. “Hey, EJ,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. They regarded each other in silence.

“What are you doing here?” she blurted, not moving.

“I saw lights. I—”

“No. Sorry. Not in The Barn. I mean what are you doing here in Missouri?”

“Oh, right.” Tucker cleared his throat and took a step forward. “Gran asked me to come. She’s decided to sell the farm.” He wondered if he was saying more than he should. Emma had practically grown up here, and the news might not be welcome. “She has a buyer interested, and she wanted me to look over the offer, take part in the negotiations.”

“Really? Well that’s . . . that’s just—”

“Yeah.” Tucker shrugged. “Doesn’t make much sense to me either.”

“I’m sure she’s happy you’re here,” she said, her smile a little thin. She laced a hand through her hair, then lifted a strand and began twisting it around her finger. “Well, it’s . . . uh, good to see you.” She coughed, like maybe it wasn’t.

“It’s great to see you, EJ.” He looked down and kicked at some imaginary dust.

“You look the same,” she said in a rush. “I mean older, obviously, but good.” Color was high on her cheeks.

“You look beautiful. As always.”

Her blush deepened. “But older.”

“Better.”

This awkwardness was new. He thought back to the hours they’d spent that last summer together, conversation flowing between them like water over rocks. Even their silences had been comfortable. This? This felt forced.

“What are you doing here, EJ?” he asked.

“Emma,” she said.

“Huh?”

“I go by Emma now. I outgrew EJ a long time ago,” she explained. “I live here. Well . . . not here, in The Barn.” She stopped. The hair-twisting grew faster. “I mean I still live in town.”

Tucker nodded again. “It’s been a long time. What kept you in Normal?”

Emma shot him a questioning look. “Miss Lily didn’t tell you? I own The Barn.”

“You own it?”

“The Barn at Stony Creek is an events venue.” She gestured to the table. “Things have changed a lot in the past decade, Tuck.” He wasn’t sure, but it seemed like there might be a rebuke in there. “We had to change,” she said, “to survive.”

No question about it; he’d been chastised. “We?”

Emma opened her mouth as if to speak, then closed it and looked away.

“Emma?”

She twirled her hair around her finger once more before dropping both hands to her sides. “Tucker, you should probably know . . . I’m the one buying out Miss Lily.”

* * *

Tucker took the stairs two at a time. Striding into his room, he closed the door quietly behind him, went to the bedside table, and grabbed his phone. Dead.

He reached into his bag and pulled out his laptop. He turned it on and entered the Wi-Fi password Gran had given him the night before.

Connected, he did a quick search for The Barn at Stony Creek Farm, wondering why he hadn't thought of it before.

The main page showcased The Barn in all its rustic glory, the red structure competing with the bursting color of the maple trees. The door was propped open by a couple of hay bales and stacked pumpkins. A chalkboard greeted potential clients with a cheery Welcome. The table was set for a feast, cake stands piled high and baskets overflowing with homemade bread and rolls. All very inviting.

He clicked on the thumbnail photos at the bottom of the page. One showed the property in springtime, daffodils waving in the breeze and peach trees brimming with blossoms. Another showed a bride on the arm of her father, walking down a garden path toward her clearly besotted groom. He clicked again, and it was winter, the bare trees and tall pines covered in heavy snow. In the foreground, a horse-drawn sleigh glided over the valley floor.

These pictures were marketing genius. They made the farm look like a pastoral nirvana. He kept clicking. A drop-down menu offered a property description featuring a brief history of the farm and the Madsen family. Old sepia-toned photographs were thrown in for effect.

He scrolled through information about rentals, services, and pricing. Looked like The Barn offered a fairly inclusive experience.

Then Tucker clicked on a tab at the bottom of the screen that read, Coming Soon.

His stomach fell when he saw a picture of the Big House, all lit up at dusk, and read, Coming Soon: Stony Creek Farm Bed and Breakfast.

Great.

EJ was turning his grandmother's home into an inn.

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN TUCKER FIRST MET EMMA Jane, he was ten years old, and he'd thought she was a boy. You could hardly blame him. He'd come across her hanging upside down like a monkey from a branch of Gran's weeping willow, her ribs poking out from where her shirt had slid down, her short hair red and feathery. When he'd asked her what she was doing, she'd replied, "Seeing how long I can hang here before I pass out." A total boy thing to do.

Tuck didn't find out she was a girl until the next day, when they met to go swimming at the lake behind Gran's house. EJ showed up in a one-piece suit instead of swimming trunks. Tucker was stunned but figured anyone who could skip rocks the way EJ McAllister did (four skips from a single toss!) was all right by him.

Back then, his family spent every summer in Normal. Tucker's father, Bill Madsen, was a schoolteacher, and he returned often to help Gran with the farm during his breaks. In the spring he helped with the planting, and he returned in the fall to bring in the harvest. During the summer he worked alongside Gran's foreman, Shep, from sunup to sundown. Sometimes they dragged Tucker along. His father believed in the value of hard work, and Tucker and his sister both had chores around the farm. Tucker gathered eggs and fed the livestock. His dad taught him how to fix fences, paint the outbuildings, and put up chicken wire. It wasn't awful, but the second he was done with his jobs, Tucker was off like a shot.

EJ was pretty much the only kid Tucker had to hang out with during those summer visits. Hopper Spickett was a couple of years older than he was, but Gran was full of cautionary tales concerning what "that Spickett boy" got up to in his spare time, so Mom warned Tucker to steer clear. EJ was a year younger, but she liked to fish and bike the same as him. She might have been a girl, but she didn't act like one. With her straggly hair flying and skinned knees poking out from under ragged cut-offs, she was the furthest thing from feminine he could imagine. The ultimate tomboy, she was soon Tucker's best friend, and every day after his chores were done, his father would drive him into town so he could hang out with her.

EJ had lived in Normal since she was little. Her father, Dr. McAllister, was well respected and had a dental practice in town. Mrs. McAllister was Grandma Lily's cleaning lady. EJ was their only child, but Mrs. McAllister said that was okay because EJ had so much energy that most days it seemed

like she was three kids compacted into one. It was what Tucker liked most about his new friend.

They did everything together. She even got permission from her mom to go to church with Tucker and his family. Every Sunday they'd round the corner of EJ's street and find her outside, legs dangling over the stone retaining wall at the base of her yard. She used to squirm during Sunday School, wriggling in her metal folding chair as she tugged on the sleeves of the only dress she owned because it "itched like crazy." Then the two of them would laugh until Mrs. Haggart, their teacher, would put a finger to her lips and tell them to hush.

EJ was a huge improvement over the jerks at Tucker's school. As soon as he turned ten, he'd been enrolled at the exclusive prep school where his father taught science and math. It was one of the perks of the job, his mom said. For Tucker, it was agony. The uniform of starched white shirt, a plaid tie, and khaki pants was bad enough, but the boys at school made his life a misery. The student body was made up of the sons of doctors, lawyers, and the occasional sports star. There was an economic divide in the halls of Pennington Prep, one Tucker could never quite bridge. With his too-short pants and worn shoes, it wasn't hard to figure out where he fit in: with the scholarship kids bussed in from "lesser" neighborhoods and the geek squad. Tucker was regularly tripped, teased, and taunted. He learned to keep his head down and work quietly, doing what he could to survive until summer vacation.

As soon as the school year ended, Tucker would excitedly help his dad pack up the old Ford Bronco, all the while feeling the knot in his gut loosening. In those days, Normal, Missouri, was heaven.

He was twelve when their visits abruptly stopped. He wished he could forget the day his dad died. It was the worst day of his life. He'd spent that morning pestering his dad, begging over breakfast to be able to hang out with friends after last period. His parents had a strict 'no fun until jobs and homework are done' policy, something Tucker had protested hotly that day. His dad, frustrated with Tucker's persistence, had given in. Tucker had thought nothing of it. He'd spent the afternoon playing video games with his friends until his mother called, telling him to come home right away. Tucker still remembered the dread he felt when he opened the front door to find two cops in the living room. The police officers stood, silent witnesses, as his mother told him between sobs that his father was dead.

Somehow things had gotten twisted in his twelve-year-old mind. Tucker had been convinced that if he'd been in the car with his dad, there wouldn't have been an accident. Then Whippet wouldn't have had to cry herself to sleep every night. His mom wouldn't have had to go back to work. Guilt made him pull away from his family. He'd let them down.

They'd visited Normal for the last time that winter to bury his father. After that there didn't seem to be a reason to go back. His mother could never be talked into it—too many memories, she said. His grandmother came to them on holidays. Over time, Tucker lost track of EJ.

After his dad died, Tucker was pulled from prep school and put into a school in his hometown of Lee's Summit. He got a paper route and began to buy his own clothes. He discovered he had a gift for academics, and his mother seemed to breathe a little easier. He started playing football with kids in the neighborhood, pickup games with a group of boys who became his friends and eventually made up the high school football team. Leading them as quarterback was Tucker Madsen. At last, Tucker found his stride.

School and football became his top priorities, and he spent less and less time with his family. His sister, who used to jump up and run to him whenever he came home, now kind of kept to herself. He kept going to church, mostly out of guilt and to keep his mom off his back, but there was a part of him that was mad at God for taking his father, leaving him without a dad and his mom with such a heavy burden.

With little more than a small insurance policy to see them through that first year, Tucker's mother went to work as a receptionist at a doctor's office. The pay was decent and offered benefits, but she was gone a lot. Tucker hated how hard she had to work just to make ends meet. He pitched in, watching his little sister after school, sometimes making dinner, but he also started to plan. A few colleges had shown interest in recruiting him, but he had loftier goals. He wanted to get a scholarship and go to medical school. If he became a doctor, then maybe someday he'd be able to give his mom back the life she'd had before his dad died. Things had seemed to be going according to plan until three days before graduation, when over breakfast, his mom announced he'd be spending the summer in Normal, helping out on the family farm.

Tucker smelled a setup. The week before, his best friend and center on the football team had been cited for underage drinking. Tucker hadn't been anywhere near Chance when he'd gotten in trouble, but somehow Tucker

was guilty by association. He could tell his mom was worried.

“Mom . . . no,” he said firmly as he sat at the kitchen table while his mom folded laundry.

“It’s a great way to put aside money for next year.”

“I can earn what I need lifeguarding,” Tucker insisted.

His mom put a hand on her hip and said, “What your grandmother is offering to pay will cover next year’s tuition.”

The pool didn’t pay that well.

“Ever heard of free will?” Tucker said as his mom hitched the laundry basket under one arm and carried it down the hall.

“Ever heard of your college fund?” she shot back over her shoulder.

So, two weeks after he graduated high school, Tucker found himself on a southbound train. When it lumbered into the station, he grabbed his bag and muttered, “Here goes nothing,” resigning himself to a summer of indentured servitude.

Once he and his duffel were loaded into Shep’s rusty truck, Tucker sat trying to make himself comfortable in the ancient Chevy. The beast moved at a snail’s pace, spitting gravel and backfiring all the way up the dusty road to the Big House. The windows were down, the AC having expired with Shep’s youth. The smell of exhaust mingled with an odor that belonged exclusively to Shep, a weird marriage of livestock and Brut cologne.

The two of them didn’t talk much, and when Tuck did think of a question, Shep answered with monosyllabic responses, a curt “Yep,” or “Nope.”

He’d been there only a half hour, but he knew if he stayed the summer, he’d go crazy, so he started to think of an escape plan as they lumbered along. Then, glancing up the road, all thought left his head, like air out of a leaky tire.

Walking toward them was the prettiest girl Tucker’d ever seen. Her long auburn hair fell down her back, shining bright like polished pennies. She moved barefoot down the road in a white lace sundress, one hand holding a bottle of soda, the other an open book. She didn’t look up at them, not even as Shep’s rumbling truck approached, but kept her head down, raising the bottle in greeting when Shep tapped the horn. As they passed, Tuck whipped around so fast his head gave a solid thwack as it hit the truck’s rear window. He turned back around, rubbing his forehead, as Shep’s laugh turned into a phlegmy cough.

“Who was that?” Tucker asked.

Shep looked at him out of the corner of his eye. “Emma Jane McAllister.”

Tucker whipped around again, this time avoiding the head injury. There was no way that goddess was EJ McAllister.

Disbelief must have shown on his face because Shep shrugged and said, “She grew up good.”

Good was an understatement.

They made it to the house and unloaded the truck. Tucker followed Shep through the back door into the kitchen, where his grandmother stood at the sink putting cut tulips into a vase. She turned when she heard them, wiping her hands on her apron.

“There he is! My favorite grandson!” He was her only grandson, but Tucker let her pull him in for a hug anyway. He’d just seen her at graduation, but he liked his grandmother. She always seemed happy, and being around her made him happy too. She was a little thing—only came up to his shoulder. Her long gray hair was in a braid, looped over one shoulder.

“Like it?” She pulled on her Beatles T-shirt, and Tucker smiled. He’d sent it to her for her last birthday.

“Cool,” he replied.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, shaking her head. “You sure look like your granddaddy.” She gave him a long look, then slapped her hand against the counter. “Well, let’s get you settled,” she said and showed him to his room.

The Big House boasted two staircases. The grand staircase in the entryway wound upward toward the main rooms. The other staircase, just off the kitchen, led to a small room at the back of the house. That room had been his since he was a kid.

After he’d changed and eaten, Tucker was surprised when Shep put him to work right away helping him repair the fence that had been destroyed when a tornado touched down a few days before. It was an inglorious beginning to what was to become the best summer of his life.

As a farmer, he was a disaster. Shep often ended up fixing Tucker’s mistakes. He had to reattach all the fence rails to the line posts Tucker had set the day before because they’d toppled when the horses had rubbed up against them. Then there was the time Tucker couldn’t get the darn cow out of The Barn no matter how hard he tugged, coaxed, and begged. Shep came

up behind him and led the beast out to pasture with nothing more than a handful of orange peel and a few marshmallows. But Tucker felt the worst about the chickens. He fell into bed one night after closing up the coop. The next morning Shep was waiting for him, holding what was left of a hen, and gave him a blistering look as he announced, "A racoon got to her. Did you count the chickens before you shut the door?" No, he hadn't.

Tucker worked with Shep during the week, but Saturday mornings belonged to his grandmother. On those days they saddled the horses and rode to the highest point of Stony Creek, the summit of Belcher's Hill, dodging the shortleaf pines and red maples. Pastures and newly plowed fields rose and fell in a tangle of rich color. On these rides Gran peppered him with stories about the past. "A couple of Confederate soldiers camped here while retreating from Union forces after Zagonyi's Charge," "Your grandpa Jack proposed to me under that white oak," or "Your daddy learned to swim in that creek over there." She pointed out the copse of dogwood trees descended from the original planted by the first Madsen, a great-grandmother who had kept a start in a whiskey bottle when she crossed the plains.

Gran recruited him to help in her flower garden, leading awkward conversations in which words like "stewardship" and "heritage" were thrown around while he worked compost into the ground around her rosebushes. Tucker nodded, pretending he understood what she was saying, but mostly it flew over his head like the bluebirds arching through the bright sky.

As summer wore on, something strange happened. In spite of the grinding work, the heat and humidity pounding down on him, and the biting flies and relentless chiggers, Tucker began to love the farm. It kind of sneaked up on him, and that plan of hightailing it out of there was forgotten.

And then there was Emma Jane.

She worked at the farm some afternoons, cleaning the Big House for his grandmother, and their friendship was renewed almost instantly when, after his first full day of work, she pulled him off the front porch and walked him through the forest to the lake. There they pulled off their shoes, dangled their feet in the water, and talked as if they'd never been apart. Tucker found himself hanging on her every word, and soon enough he was in the throes of an enormous crush.

That's all it was. A crush. Had to be. He'd be out of here in a few months. But every spare minute away from work was spent with EJ.

She was different from the girls back home, the cheerleaders who fawned over him, telling him how strong he was, how smart, how funny. EJ didn't say any of those things, and soon Tucker found himself opening up to her. He told her about his acceptance to UMKC, his plans to get out of Normal as fast as he could; he even confided the guilt he felt about not having been there for his mom and sister since his dad died. She listened to it all without judgment.

EJ didn't have it so easy. Her parents were divorcing, and while Margie McAllister sat at home, attached to the couch, watching daytime TV and bathing in denial, it fell on EJ to take care of everything else. Working for Gran helped supplement the money she made from waitressing at Meacham's Diner.

She was the prettiest girl in town. Prettier even than the Meachams' daughter, Luna. EJ worked alongside Luna, who with her shiny blonde hair and too-white smile, flirted with Tucker every chance she got. But EJ's beauty was natural, and that was her appeal. She was real.

Before long, Tucker was deeply attached to Normal, the farm, and EJ. As time ticked on he could feel himself falling harder, and he stopped counting the days.

Tucker kissed EJ for the first time on the Fourth of July.

Every year the Elks Club sponsored a festival and dance in the park, the culmination of a day of celebration that included a parade down Main Street and a pancake breakfast where the local spark queen would be crowned. That night Tucker met EJ in the park. He'd wanted to call for her at her house, but she'd insisted her mother would freak out if he showed up on her doorstep like a real date. Tucker didn't like it, but he waited patiently under the clock outside the courthouse. EJ showed up just as Luna Meacham, that year's spark queen, tugged on his hand, trying to lure him over to the park for a dance.

"Move along, Luna. He's with me," EJ said, sliding her arm through his.

Luna looked down her nose at EJ's cutoff jeans, said, "What a pity," and floated away with two other guys.

As the last light of day leaked from the sky, Tucker pulled his girl toward the dance floor on the middle of the green. Under a canopy of lights strung between an alley of oak trees, Tuck held EJ close, loving the way her head

rested against his shoulder.

He looked over at his grandmother, seated with a circle of friends. She grinned and gave him a double thumbs up. He rolled his eyes, then moved away from his grandmother's watchful gaze. He didn't want to share this moment with anyone.

"Tucker," EJ said sleepily.

"Yeah?"

"I really like you."

He smiled against her hair and whispered, "I like you back."

The moment was kind of perfect. He'd just gathered her closer when EJ's head popped up. "What time is it?"

"I don't know. After nine."

"C'mon," she said, pulling him from the dance floor.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," she said, smiling at him over her shoulder, leading him out of the crowd.

Ten minutes later they crossed the railroad tracks, heading for the water tower standing cold and gray in the dim light. At the base a sign in bold letters read, No Trespassing, but EJ already had her foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, hoisting herself up.

Tucker swallowed hard. He was afraid of heights. But as he watched EJ moving like a cat up the side of the tower, he decided it was time to man up. He pulled himself onto the first rung and followed her to the top, careful to keep his eyes on her and not the ground below. They made it to the platform just as the first firework bloomed red in the sky. EJ looked so pretty, her face illuminated by bright light. Tucker couldn't help himself. He leaned over and pressed his lips to hers. Then she wound her arms around his neck and returned the kiss, and he felt a little lost.

After that, everything changed. He worked harder and faster, motivated to finish his jobs as soon as possible so he could get to EJ. She was like sunshine in sandals. They spent every spare moment together, riding horses, swimming in the lake, walking in the woods. Everything was perfect.

So of course he messed it all up the night before he left for home.

It had started out all right. He'd surprised her with a picnic by the lake, leading her there blindfolded.

"I know where we are, Tucker," she said. "I can hear the dock creaking on the water."

He'd ignored her and whipped off the blindfold. She'd been impressed with the food, the candles. After they'd eaten, they laid back on the blanket, looking up at the stars. Then Tucker took her hand.

"You gonna write me, EJ?" he asked. Closing his eyes, he rubbed his thumb across her palm, concentrating on the feel of her skin.

"Of course. Will you write back?"

"Yep." Mrs. McAllister wouldn't let EJ have an email account or a cell phone. She called them "tools of deception." It was how Mr. McAllister had been able to keep his girlfriend a secret for so long. But EJ didn't mind her mother's restrictions. She'd said there was something romantic about sending letters through the mail.

They were quiet for a while, the whirring of cicadas echoing between the trees.

"I think you're like Icarus," EJ said, eyes still on the night sky.

Tuck opened one eye and looked at her. "Ica-who?"

"Greek mythology. Don't you know the story?"

Tucker shook his head, propping himself up on one elbow. "Tell me."

She told him about a boy who, wanting desperately to get out of Crete, put on wings made of feathers and wax. "His father warned him not to fly near the sun, wanted Icarus to follow right behind him. But did Icarus listen? No. He ignored his father and flew too close to the sun. The heat melted the wax, and he fell into the sea and drowned. His ambition was his undoing."

"What are you saying?" Tucker sat up. "That I'll go to medical school and drown?"

EJ rolled her eyes and sat up too, facing him. "No. But I think your plan will take you away from your family." She played with the edge of the blanket for a minute before adding, "And from me."

It seemed like the perfect moment, a great time to convince her just how serious he was about her. Tucker pulled her to her feet, then got down on one knee.

"Nothing is going to take me away from you, EJ."

He fished the ring out of his pocket, the silver band they'd seen in the jewelry store window the week before. But his proposal didn't have the effect he'd hoped for. Nope. Instead of throwing her arms around his neck and saying yes, she slapped a hand over her mouth, burst into tears, and ran back up the dock. When he caught up to her, he recanted the proposal, but it

was too late. Emma wouldn't be comforted, and she said her goodbye.

As Tucker climbed onto the train the next morning, clutching the picture she'd left for him, he was relieved to see her through the grimy window. All the feelings of the summer rushed back, and as the train pulled away, he was sure they'd make it.

But they didn't. After thirteen letters had gone unanswered, Tucker had done his best to put the summer behind him and forget about Emma Jane McAllister.

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CHAPTER SIX

THE SMELL OF BACON COOKING wafted up the back stairs, invading Tucker's room and coaxing him out of a deep sleep. Meredith was a hardcore vegetarian. He'd half-heartedly adopted the same practices, but when the cat's away . . .

He pushed back the covers, his feet recoiling when they hit frigid floorboards. There wasn't cold like this in LA.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He'd stayed up way too late, surfing the web and growing more annoyed by Emma's plans for the property. He couldn't believe she wanted to convert this beautiful home into an inn. He didn't like it. Not one bit. Close to midnight he'd finally called Meredith, hoping for a sympathetic ear. Instead, she'd been irritatingly pragmatic. She'd listened to his outrage, then said, "Babe, it's your grandmother's property. I'm sure she knows what she's doing."

Tucker shook off a fresh wave of aggravation. Bacon was calling. He dressed, pulling on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. He glanced at the clock. It was only seven thirty, plenty of time before church.

He heard someone moving in the kitchen below. The night before, Gran had told him a girl came in on the weekends to cook for her. The stairs creaked under his weight. It was just as well. He didn't want to startle the girl.

Except it wasn't a girl at all. It was Emma.

He shuffled into the room, grunting out a barely intelligible, "Morning."

"Hey," Emma said. "Miss Lily should be down soon. You can sit over there." She waved a spatula at the chair near the end of the table, far away from her.

Fine by him.

Emma set a plate in front of him. Buttermilk biscuits, bacon, and eggs. Real food. He muttered his thanks and picked up a fork.

"So," he started slowly. "I went online last night. I checked out your website."

Emma seated herself at the other end of the table.

"And?"

"Impressive."

Her shoulders seemed to relax, and she said, "Thanks." She looked up at him. Then she bowed her head, her hands clasped in her lap. Was she praying?

Tucker waited a second, then said, “I do have one question for you though.”

Emma opened one eye. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Does my grandmother know you intend to turn her home into a hotel?”

“Of course I do.” Gran’s voice came from behind him as she entered the kitchen. “And it won’t be a hotel, Tucker. More of a high-end bed and breakfast. Great use for this beautiful old home, if you ask me.” She sat next to him and reached for the orange juice.

Tucker cleared his throat. “Really? The idea of strangers tromping through the house doesn’t bother you?”

“No. I’ll be dead soon enough,” she said frankly. “It seems to bother you though.” His grandmother flashed him a grin.

“Won’t some structural changes have to be made to accommodate guests? More bathrooms, that kind of thing?” he asked. He layered jam onto his biscuit. “I’d hate to see the historical integrity of the house compromised.”

Emma and Gran looked across the table at each other.

Emma’s mouth twisted to one side. “Historical integrity?” she said. “Tucker, you sound about a hundred years old.”

“I do not,” he said defensively.

“Well, I am a hundred years old—give or take a few,” Gran chimed in. “And she’s right. To my ears, you do sound a bit stuffy.”

Tucker pushed back his plate. “Pardon me for taking an interest in my family’s heritage.” He huffed, shooting Emma a pointed look.

“Uh-huh,” she said, raising a brow at him.

“It’s the weekend. Let’s not talk business today,” Gran insisted. “Tucker is here for a while. There’s plenty of time for that later.”

Emma’s fork froze on its way to her mouth. “How long?” she muttered.

“As long as it takes,” Tucker said.

“Isn’t it great?” Gran said, leaning across the table and taking his hand.

“Yep, just so . . . great.” Emma’s eyes narrowed on him, and suddenly Tucker felt like he was dining in an enemy camp.

He quickly finished eating so he could excuse himself from the women’s company as soon as possible and slipped upstairs to finish getting ready for church.

He looked in the mirror and tightened his tie before slipping into his suit jacket. At breakfast he had practically heard the gears cranking in his

grandmother's head. He'd have to make sure she understood this was just a visit. Once he figured out how to handle the sale of the property, he was out of here.

He checked his reflection and tugged on his shirt collar. He hadn't been to church in years. His schedule kept him busy most Sundays. When he had a free day, the last thing he wanted to do was put on a suit and tie.

He found Gran waiting for him in the kitchen, looking stylish in a gray wool skirt and black sweater set. "All set?" she asked as she retrieved her purse from the counter.

"Yes. Gran, we need to talk about—"

She held up a hand. "Not today, Tucker," she said and shooed him out the back door. "Did your mother tell you we added an annex to the church last fall?"

"Really?" he said, feigning interest.

"Yes, our numbers have greatly increased in the last few years."

An old pickup truck rumbled to a stop, and Emma hopped out.

"I don't believe it. You're still driving that thing?" Tucker recognized the Chevy Emma's dad had given her when she turned sixteen.

She gave him a scowl. "Talk nice about Lucy, or she won't start," she said, moving toward the truck.

"What are you doing here?" Tucker asked, not particularly happy to see her again so soon.

"I always drive Miss Lily to church," Emma replied.

He helped Gran up, and they all rode together in silence, his grandmother seated in the middle, looking straight ahead, seemingly oblivious, while he and Emma exchanged irritated glances.

They wound through town, the silence in the cab broken only by the pattering of Emma's truck. It stalled once at the stoplight. Emma, flustered, cranked on the ignition and muttered, "C'mon, baby, c'mon." He was about to suggest a prayer to St. Jude, the patron saint of lost causes, when it coughed to life.

They turned down Pine Street, and Tucker was reminded how seriously these Midwesterners took their religion. Pine Street was nicknamed Church Street because every denomination could be found along its length. The Methodist church was across the street from the Presbyterians. Behind them the Episcopalians set up shop. The Lutherans worshipped in a squat little building next door, and kitty-corner from them were the Central Baptists.

The First Baptists were west of here, but the Pentecostals were across the street from St. Matthew's Catholic Church. The Madsen family had been First Christians for generations, worshipping in a little white church tucked into an alcove of trees at the end of the street. The tall oaks kept the clapboard structure cool in the summer, a feat the insulation couldn't manage on its own. The church had pokey halls and enormous stained glass windows that seemed entirely out of place in the tiny structure.

The truck shuddered as they pulled into the parking lot. Emma got out, swinging a bag over her shoulder, and started for the door.

They were a little late coming in, and the usher gave Tucker a disapproving look. As they took their seats, his presence rippled through the congregation. He watched as the congregants pointed and murmured quietly behind raised hands. He inhaled, recognizing the scent of lemon cleaner. Too bad it didn't quite overcome the musty smell of the nave.

He looked around, curious to see if he'd recognize anyone. "Who's that?" he whispered to his grandmother when a familiar-looking man stood at the pulpit.

"Beau Wilson, Mel Wilson's son."

That explained the walleyed look about him.

After the meeting, Tucker was ready to leave, figuring maybe he'd just get his feet wet today. But Emma waved on her way back down the aisle toward the new annex.

"Where's she going?" he asked, alarmed.

"Emma teaches the leapfrogs," Gran said.

Tucker raised an eyebrow. "The leapfrogs?"

"Five-year-old Sunday School class," she explained. Looked like he was stuck.

He hooked a finger in his collar. His shirt was beginning to chafe. As much as he wanted to slip out the door and get home, they instead headed toward the annex, and he endured another hour of scrutiny.

After the final amen, he was out the door, but as soon as he set foot in the lobby, he was surrounded by a solid bank of people, all grinning as they pumped his hand.

Emma stood at the periphery of the group, arms crossed, not so subtly looking at her watch. Now she wanted to leave. But Tucker was cornered. Everyone seemed to want to say hello. He went along with it, smiling and nodding, pretending he knew who they were.

* * *

Emma got Miss Lily safely inside the truck. It had taken forever to get out of the church. Honestly, it turned her stomach the way Tucker had sweet-talked everyone. So charming. So personable. She'd bet good money he had no idea who half those people were.

She shut the door firmly, crossing behind the truck to get to the driver's side, and found Tucker leaning against the tailgate.

"What?" she asked, pausing beside him.

"There were a lot of people in there," he said, sounding a bit bemused.

"Recognize any of them?" she asked.

Tucker's mouth hitched to one side. "A few. I remember half the pews were always empty when I was a kid."

"Oh, that. Miss Lily helped up the numbers."

"How'd she do that?" Tucker looked at Emma.

"Well, first she organized a book club—first one in Normal—which she held at the church. Then she sponsored a bake sale for the public library, which she held at the church. After that she started a quilting club, which —"

"Let me guess. She held it at the church."

"Exactly. You know Miss Lily. Friend to all. People are drawn to her like bees to a lavender bush."

Tucker laughed. He looked cute standing there, his breath misting out in front of him, cheeks ruddy with cold. Okay, time to stop looking at Tucker. Been there. Done that. Had the scars to prove it.

"We should get going," she said. "A storm is blowing in." She nodded toward a band of sinister clouds looming on the horizon.

Tucker looked at the sky and muttered, "It was clear this morning."

"Well, that's Missouri for you. Don't like the weather? Wait a minute. Let's go."

"About time you two got in here," Miss Lily said when Emma slammed her truck door shut.

She had to slam it, or the darn thing wouldn't stay closed. "Sorry about that," she said.

The drive home wasn't comfortable. Not for Emma, at least. She was all pins and needles sitting there, trying to ignore the fact that she still found Tucker Madsen annoyingly attractive. How was she supposed to maneuver around that, huh? She gripped the steering wheel tighter. By keeping her

head down and doing what needed to be done, that's how. She'd take extra subbing jobs. She'd stay in her office at The Barn and avoid him at all costs. She'd wait patiently for Tucker and Miss Lily to finalize the details on the sales contract. And once that contract was signed, Tucker Madsen would go back to the Golden State and once again be relegated to the land of distant memory.

She hoped.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, TUCKER ROLLED over on the couch, and the book he'd been reading slid to the floor and woke him up. He tried to make himself comfortable again when a noise came from the front of the house. He raised his head and listened. Someone was knocking at the front door.

"Gran?" he called, his voice rough with sleep. He waited a beat before he got up and shuffled to the door.

Tucker peeked through the lead glass door and saw a man and a woman standing there with a taller man behind them. They were huddled against the wind that was gaining power with each passing moment. In the woman's hands was a pie. Tucker was no dummy. The pie was a ruse. He turned the knob.

"Tucker Madsen," the shorter man said, extending his hand. "Good to have you home, son." It was on the tip of Tucker's tongue to tell the man that California was home, but then he realized he knew this guy.

"Mr. Bricknell?"

"The same," the man said, smiling. Hal Bricknell had been a friend of his father's, and he'd been one of Tucker's scout leaders that last summer before his dad's death.

"It's good to see you again, sir." Tucker shook his hand. "You still teaching at the high school?"

"Sure am," Hal said. "Go Tigers! You remember my wife, Dolly? She's the mayor now." He slid an arm around her shoulders.

"He works that into every conversation," the woman said, laughing. She was small, a full foot shorter than her husband, but her straight posture and easy laugh made her seem taller. "We spied you in church today and thought we'd come by and say hello."

"And this is—"

"Hopper Spickett?" Tucker interrupted. Hopper was old man Spickett's youngest boy. He'd been a couple of years ahead of Tuck in school, but stories about him were legend.

"You know Hopper?" Hal asked.

"Do I? The last time I saw you, you were in the alley behind the library tying a firecracker to a—"

"Okay, okay." Hopper held up a hand in self-defense. "Not in front of the mayor, all right?"

Dolly laid a consoling hand on Hopper's arm. "It's all right, Hop. We expunged your juvenile record years ago," she said with a wink.

"Never figured you to be the church-going type." Tucker couldn't help his surprise. Hopper had spent the better part of his youth on the wrong side of the law. There was nothing malicious about him, but he'd always loved a good prank. Tucker remembered him being a good time, but a good time to be enjoyed from a few feet away in case the authorities showed up.

Tucker showed them to the living room and glanced up to see Gran slowly making her way down the staircase. He was sorry her nap had been interrupted.

"We have company?" she asked.

"The Bricknells stopped by," Tucker said, waiting for her at the base of the stairs. He offered his arm, but she waved him off.

"I can get there on my own," she scolded. "Hal, Dolly, always a pleasure. You too, Marius," Gran said as she came into the room.

Tucker raised an eyebrow at Hopper, who shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"My mom was a big fan of Les Mis," he explained.

Tucker stifled a laugh and took a seat on the old Claremore sofa, his arm resting casually across the back.

"Miss Lily, I brought pie." Dolly sat holding the pastry in her lap. "It's your caramel-apple recipe. I want you to try it and tell me how I did."

"It looks fantastic," Miss Lily said.

"Here, hon, I'll take that," Hal said, taking the pie from his wife's hands. "You've got other things to do." He gave her a meaningful look, and she nodded as Miss Lily pulled him through the swinging door that led through the dining room to the kitchen.

"So, Hopper, what are you up to these days?" Tucker asked to break the silence.

Hopper nodded. "I'm the city attorney."

"Wow. That's great."

"We're lucky to have him," Dolly said, hands knotted in her lap. "I have to confess, Tucker. We sort of have an agenda here today."

"Oh yeah?" Tucker propped his elbows on his knees, only mildly curious.

"Hopper was good enough to come along because he's on the city council. So is your grandmother. Did you know that?" Dolly kept pushing

her hair behind her ears, not looking directly at him.

“No, I didn’t. Good for Gran.”

Dolly nodded. “She’s wonderful. And, actually, she’s the one who gave us the idea.”

“What idea?” Tucker looked to Hopper, who was busy studying the back of his left hand.

“Well, we’ve got ourselves a little situation.” Dolly cleared her throat. “It’s like this—I was wondering if you would be interested in staying in Normal a bit longer.”

Not sure what they were after, Tucker asked, “Uh, how much longer?”

“Well . . .” Dolly laughed nervously. “I was thinking . . . permanently.”

Tuck’s elbow slipped. “I’m sorry. Did you say ‘permanently’?”

“Yes. Doc Braithwaite is retiring. Actually, he’s semiretired now. Spends most of his time up north in Liberty, where his daughter and her family live. Doc hired a recruiter to find someone to replace him, but he hasn’t found the right fit yet.”

“What’s ‘the right fit’? Anyone with a pulse?” Tucker immediately regretted his joke because the look on the mayor’s face was serious.

“The city is kicking in with some incentives. Did I mention there’s a signing bonus?” she said hopefully. Then her face fell. “We’re getting desperate. Things hit the fan in September when Ollie Clements had a heart attack. Doc was on a fishing trip in Arkansas, and Ollie tried to drive himself to the hospital in Branson.”

Hopper scrubbed a hand down his face, leaned forward, and said, “He didn’t make it.”

Dolly leaned forward. “Look, it’s probably not appropriate to talk about this now, but—”

“Dolly—can I call you Dolly?—even if I wanted to work here, I’m not licensed to practice in Missouri.”

“I’m sure that’s easily overcome.”

“Maybe so, but I just signed with a clinic in Santa Monica. And, from what I remember, Doc Braithwaite ran a clinic out of the lean-to attached to the back of his house. There’s not a proper medical office in town.”

“The mercantile would be perfect.” Gran’s voice came from behind him. She strode in, followed by Hal, each carrying a slice of pie. “I have an in with the owner. I know for a fact she’ll make whatever renovations necessary.”

“I bet she would,” Tucker muttered. Gran regarded him with unblinking eyes. He knew that look and went on the defensive. He turned to the mayor. “I’m only in town until Gran sells her property,” he said for his grandmother’s benefit. “As soon as the ink is dry on those contracts, I’ll be leaving. My home is in California now.”

“A condominium is not a home,” Gran insisted. “Not compared to this.” She gestured wide.

Tucker stood and faced his grandmother. “Tell me the truth. Is this why I’m here? Was this all some elaborate tactic to get me back to the farm?”

The mood shifted. Hal and Dolly looked at each other. “Doll, we’d better go,” Hal said, setting down his plate. He motioned for Hopper to follow. Tucker left Gran to walk them out.

At the door, Hal pumped Tucker’s hand. “Sure is good to see you again.”

“I hope you’ll give some consideration to our idea,” Dolly said. “I know it’s a long shot, but if it’s even the tiniest bit of an option, give me a call.”

It wasn’t, but he took her hand anyway. “Will do.”

“See you later, Miss Lily,” Dolly called as they went out the front door. Hopper gave him a short nod and followed.

Back in the front room, Tucker found his grandmother shuffling around, gathering plates, muttering as she went. “You didn’t have to be so difficult,” she huffed.

“I was difficult? I just told them the truth. I already have a job.”

“Yes, I heard that the first time,” she said. “We didn’t even try the pie.” She tsked at the shame of it.

Tucker raised an eyebrow at her. “Level with me, Gran. Did you want me out here to help you sell the property, or are there darker forces at work here?”

The plates clattered as she dropped them on the sideboard. “Tucker Madsen, get over yourself! I asked you here to sell the farm. Dolly casually mentioned the situation with Doc Braithwaite, and I casually mentioned you were coming for a visit.” She parked her fists on her hips. “Would it kill you to consider it? That big empty warehouse is the perfect location for a medical office. Our town needs a doctor. You happen to be a doctor. Your history, your family, are here—”

“Here we go,” he said.

“Don’t you patronize me.” She shook a bony finger at him. “If you had any sense at all, you would have settled here years ago. I offered you the

farm—”

“I was eighteen!”

“Didn’t matter how old you were. You were too pigheaded to see an opportunity when it was dressed up and waving a flag!”

Tucker didn’t answer. He really should have known better than to take on Liliane Madsen on her own turf. If this was her real agenda, he’d have to fast-track the contract negotiations. He made a mental note to text Emma and set up a meeting before he went to bed tonight.

“Are you done?” he asked.

His grandmother’s eyes narrowed, and her smile slanted sideways. “Oh, darlin’, I’m just getting started.”

That was what he was afraid of.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

EMMA STEPPED INTO MEACHAM'S DINER a few minutes early, hoping to grab a table before the lunch rush. After avoiding Tucker's calls for two days, she'd finally put on her big-girl pants and agreed to meet him. The diner was the only reputable eating establishment in Normal, but she hadn't been here in years. Certainly not since Luna had returned to town to take over for her dad. Hard to believe she and Luna had worked here together almost every afternoon during high school.

The quintessential mean girl, Luna Meacham had always made sure Emma knew her place on the hierarchy of Normal High School's popularity scale: rock bottom. To her credit, Luna hadn't made Emma's life entirely miserable, just mildly uncomfortable. Back in the day, Luna had been her manager at the diner and had gleefully tasked Emma with all the disgusting jobs she hadn't wanted to do herself.

Luna had made some changes since she'd taken over. The display cases at the front no longer held Mr. Meacham's taxidermy collection, having been replaced by a homage to his daughter's glory days. Instead of coyotes and nine-banded armadillos frozen in unnatural poses, Luna's collection of prom dresses stood draped over dressmaker dummies. The pink mermaid dress she'd worn to their senior prom, complete with rhinestone tiara and satin sash declaring her prom queen, was front and center. And looky there—it was the firecracker-red ball gown she'd worn when she was named spark queen at the Elks' annual pancake breakfast the summer before their senior year. Emma remembered that dress well. Luna had worn it in the Fourth of July parade. She'd sat perched high on an old horse-drawn hay rake, her voluminous skirts dripping over the sides of the rusty seat. She had been pulled down Main Street behind a John Deere tractor, waving and smiling at her inferiors. The heat and humidity of the day had combined against the poor girl, ruining her carefully applied makeup and sending it streaking down her face in a black ribbon of sweat. By the time the parade was over, Luna had looked like a melted crayon. Emma smiled at the memory. Good times.

"Oh, hey, Emma." Luna came up beside her, her eyes glancing off the display cases before resting on Emma with the "You're so not worth my time" look Emma remembered from high school. Luna looked good, Emma admitted begrudgingly. She'd left town over ten years ago but still had that popular-girl air about her: still skinny, still sporting those perfect blonde

highlights.

“Hey, Luna,” Emma said, just as impersonally. She noticed Luna wore the same polyester uniform they’d both worn when she’d worked there and wondered if it still chafed under the arms. One could only hope.

“I heard you were still around,” Luna said. “I’ve seen you at Grimm’s a couple of times.”

Emma nodded. Yep, she’d seen her. Seen her and ignored her. But, you know, whatever.

“So you want a booth or a table?” Luna asked.

“Could I get the table next to the window over there?”

“Sure. Seat yourself, and I’ll grab a menu.”

“Two,” she said, and Luna nodded.

The chair scraped against the black-and-white tile floor as Emma took a seat. For some reason it made her happy that Luna had kept the original tile. She pulled out the bound business plan she’d stashed in her purse earlier and smoothed a hand down the cover. This was her baby. Her ideas were good; she had confidence in that. She just needed Tucker to buy into her vision. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, praying he’d at least have an open mind.

“You okay?” Luna asked, sliding the menus onto the table.

Emma looked up. “I’m great.”

“You meeting someone?” Luna asked.

“Yep. My . . . friend should be here soon.”

“Okay. I’ll be back to take your order,” Luna said and walked away.

Emma smiled and waved at Mrs. Lockhart, her fifth-grade teacher seated at the counter. Her neighbors, the Quinns, were in the booth across from her, both of them on their phones, ignoring each other.

Maybe meeting Tucker at the diner wasn’t the best idea. Everyone in town knew they’d been a thing once upon a time. Everyone also knew he’d dumped her. Luna had rubbed it in Emma’s face every chance she got their senior year. The fact that Tucker had chosen Emma over Luna never had sat too well with the prom queen.

Emma had just opened her menu when she noticed Tucker pull up to the curb. He got out of the car and pocketed his keys, then paused to take a call. Emma glanced at the clock on the wall. He was already ten minutes late. The longer she sat here alone, the longer she had to endure Luna’s scrutiny and everyone else’s curiosity.

Finally, he pushed through the door, sending the bell overhead ringing. She caught his eye and waved him over.

“Hey,” he said absently as he shrugged out of his coat and flung it over the back of the chair across from her. He stood next to the table, eyes glued to his phone. “How are you, Em?” he asked without looking up.

Technology. The international excuse to be rude. She shook her head and looked at her menu. Maybe no one would notice who her lunch partner was. Except, the second Luna saw Tucker, her jaw dropped.

Tucker continued to text.

“Oh, ya know, same old, same old. Got a raging case of hantavirus.”

“Is that so?” he asked, thumbs tapping away.

“Yep. Caught it kissing Mike Treemontton’s pig, Effie. I’ve been sick for days. Doc Braithwaite says I only have hours to live. Says I should live my last moments to the fullest. I’m thinking maybe after lunch, I’ll hop on a plane to Rome.”

“Cool,” he muttered, still texting.

She’d had enough. She started gathering her things, wishing she’d already ordered so she could stick him with the check. Just as she grabbed her keys, she felt a warm hand on her shoulder. Tucker was looking down at her, smiling as he slipped his phone onto the table.

“You look pretty good for a girl at death’s door. Wouldn’t recommend kissing pigs again though.” His grin widened, and she felt a corresponding flutter in her stomach.

Okay, so he had been listening. He wasn’t a total jerk.

“Sorry about that,” he said. “I was texting my new boss. How have you really been, Emma?” He sat down across from her.

“You mean since I saw you a few days ago?”

“Just making polite conversation. We haven’t really caught up. How’s your dad? Is he still around here?”

Emma’s eyes narrowed. “No. He lives in Overland Park with his much younger wife and new daughter. Any other intrusive questions?”

Luna picked that moment to swoop in. “Hey, Tucker. I heard you were back.” She poured water into their glasses, then hovered, notepad in hand.

“Luna! Are you still in town?” Tucker exclaimed. Emma buried her face in the menu, waiting out the touching reunion.

“Not still. Again. I moved away when I got married—”

“Twice,” Emma interjected helpfully. Tucker and Luna both looked at her for a moment, and she went back to studying the menu.

“I moved back when I got divorced—”

“Twice,” Emma volunteered again. This time Luna’s brows came together. Emma didn’t look away. “What? You did get divorced, right?”

“Right.” Luna nodded, having altogether too much tact to say anything else, darn her. She returned her attention to Tucker. “I took over the diner last summer when my folks retired.”

“Well, it’s good to see you. Lovely as ever.” Tucker smiled. Luna blushed. Emma glowered. The two chatted amiably for another minute, and Emma gritted her teeth until Luna finally snapped her notepad shut and walked away with their order.

“So,” Tucker said, “shall we get started?” He already had his hand on the portfolio, but Emma was reluctant to let go. Tucker looked at her, then pulled on it. She tugged back.

“Do I get to see it, EJ?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Don’t call you what?”

“EJ. I told you I go by Emma now. I’m a grown-up.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “You sound very grown up right now. Could we stop playing tug-of-war?”

“Tucker, will you level with me? Are you here because Miss Lily doesn’t trust me?”

He looked taken aback. “Why would you think that?”

“Because she’s seen my business plan. She’s been in on every detail. But she still saw the need to bring in her golden-boy grandson to help with negotiations.”

“You’re being paranoid. I’m just here to help.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Relax,” he coaxed, and she finally let go of the prospectus.

Tucker read quietly, going over each page so slowly that their food arrived before he’d turned the second page.

Emma watched him carefully, trying to read his facial expressions. Did he like it? He was scratching his chin. What did that mean? What if he hated it? Ugh. There was too much riding on his stupid opinion. He finally turned the page, and she tried pointing to a detail she was particularly proud of, but he raised a finger without looking at her, so she sat back and chewed

on her thumb.

Being in the diner with Tucker again had her feeling a bit wistful. Years ago she'd loved it when he would show up during her shift. He'd come in, lean over the counter, and kiss her the second Luna's back was turned, then sit at the counter and order piles of food, happy to eat until she got off work. No doubt about it, Tucker Madsen had been crazy about her.

Right now, he didn't seem so fond of her. His face had a pinched look, his brows climbing his forehead as he turned yet another page. Then they came crashing together as he frowned. He set the papers on the table, still reading, and pushed his half-eaten sandwich out of the way.

"So you own The Barn outright?" he asked, eyes still on the page.

"Well, the bank owns it. I'm making payments, but yeah, it's mine."

He still didn't look up. "And you hold a lease option on the land east of there. That's what? A hundred acres or so?"

"Something like that, I guess."

He nodded and continued to read, pausing occasionally to take a bite. At this rate they'd be here until she was forty.

Tucker looked up. "Seriously? A golf course? Does Gran know about this?"

"Of course. I promised her she'd know every possible outcome from this deal." She took a breath. "I was approached by a developer—"

"A developer!" Tucker spat the word.

"Who is interested in putting in a golf course around here. They've hired a course architect and have analyzed the land. They're ready to move forward. They'd split the course across Madsen and Beaufort land so it doesn't eat up all the acreage. The proposal for the golf course has to make it past the planning commission and then the city council. That will take months. But I think it will pass."

"It says here it'd be an eighteen-hole executive course." He paused to take a drink. "Huh, par threes and fours—that's going to eat up a lot of land. Isn't the farm zoned for agriculture?"

"I had it changed to mixed use."

"Of course you did." He kept reading. "What are you planning for the rest of the land?"

"The city is actually working with the developer. They're talking about putting in a park and community pool out there too. Maybe a tennis court. But right now, that's all it is. Talk."

Tucker turned the page, muttering something about fishing nine irons out of the pond. Emma twisted a paper napkin around her finger.

He flipped to the next page, and his expression turned thunderous. “This is the part I don’t like,” he said, jabbing the page. “I do not want Gran’s house being turned into an inn.”

The napkin was in shreds.

“Golf course, inn—you’re turning the farm into a resort.” He finally looked at her. “There are only two and a half bathrooms in the house. You’d have to make some major structural changes for this to work,” he said, closing the prospectus and pushing it away. People were starting to stare.

“Take it easy, Tucker,” she muttered.

“How can you do this, EJ?”

“What am I doing?” She folded her arms across her chest, chin jutting out.

“Destroying my family’s legacy.”

“Oh, please!” Emma hissed, leaning forward. “Don’t you think you’re being a tad overdramatic?” she said. When he didn’t answer, she continued. “The farm isn’t supporting itself anymore, Tucker. It’s too much for your grandmother to handle alone. Change is necessary if any part of Stony Creek is going to survive. At least this way some of the things we both love about the farm will continue. Please try to keep an open mind.”

Tucker rubbed his neck. “My grandmother said the same thing.”

Emma shrugged and sat back. “Maybe you should listen to her.”

He was quiet for a minute. “Are you going to evict her?”

“What? No! The house will be mine, but none of the changes will be made until she . . . you know.” Emma lowered her voice. “Passes.”

“I still hate it.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that. But I think this will be easier on everyone if we can figure out a way to work together.”

“You’re probably right. Can I see the contracts?”

“They aren’t finished yet. Hopper has the preliminary draft. I can tell him to get you a copy.”

“Did you hire an architect to make the changes to the house?”

“I did. Nothing on the exterior of the house, I promise. The changes are all inside.”

“Can I see the blueprints?”

“Miss Lily has a copy of them at the house. See how agreeable I am?”

“Yeah,” he said, his mouth twisting sideways. “You’re a peach.” He shook his head and looked at his phone. “I should get going. I promised Gran I’d clean out the garage today. Can we meet about this again later?”

“Of course.”

Tucker stood and gathered his coat, then threw a twenty onto the table. “Lunch is on me.” Then he paused—just stood there, looking at her. “Emma,” he finally said, “I don’t want to be adversaries.”

“Well, good. I don’t want that either.”

He nodded, then grinned. “Always good to see you . . . Emma,” he said, tipping an imaginary hat at her before he swept out of the diner.

Emma couldn’t say the same. She may not want to be enemies with Tucker, but she certainly didn’t want to have to see him everywhere either. And the man was everywhere. Tucker Madsen’s presence rippled through Normal like a wave through still water.

She ran into him at the post office one day while he was mailing a package for Miss Lily. He’d grinned and held the door for her on his way out. Later that same day she’d spied him at Grimm’s helping Early Jackson put groceries into her car. This morning she’d seen him talking to Sam Beaufort, the chief of police, outside the courthouse before he’d climbed into the basket of a crane, where, suspended high above the road, he’d helped string Christmas lights across Main Street. If the mayor asked him to flip the switch at the lighting ceremony the day after Thanksgiving, Emma might have to move.

The worst of it was the way people like Eden Turner were suddenly coming up to her, offering their sympathy, treating her like she was made of spun sugar and might break at any moment. When Emma ran into Eden at the grocery store, the woman had patted her hand and asked, “Are you okay, Emma? Having him back in town?” Emma had uttered quick reassurances that she was fine and hurried to the checkout line. But that evening, Eden had knocked on her door with a half dozen sugar cookies and a look of concern.

“We’re in your corner, Emma,” Eden had said, “no matter how happy Miss Lily is to have the prodigal grandson back. We remember how that boy broke your heart! But it sure was nice, the way he shoveled Max Perkins’s walk this morning.”

Honestly, it just about drove Emma nuts. Most days she loved living in a small town, loved that she knew everything about everyone, but right about

now she could do with some good old-fashioned anonymity. As long as Tucker remained in town, weaseling his way back into everyone's good graces, that wasn't happening.

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CHAPTER NINE

“THAT CAN’T BE RIGHT,” EMMA said, looking at the little printout in her hand.

“’Fraid so,” Liddy Brewster said from behind the bank counter, a look of pity on her face.

Emma lowered her voice. “Can you just look and see if the check for my utilities has gone through?”

“Emma Jane, most people do their bankin’ online these days. Or you could download our mobile bankin’ app right onto your phone. You can see things like your bank balance and what checks have cleared.” Liddy leaned closer and whispered, “That way you can avoid those nasty service fees.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Thanks for the tip.”

She pushed through the door of the bank and trudged to her truck. She unlocked the door, got in, and rested her head against the seat back. Things were worse than she’d thought. She looked down at the receipt balled up in her hand.

Her phone dinged, a text from Rose Arnell, Emma’s caterer, asking about their weekly huddle this afternoon. She tapped a quick reply and started the truck.

“Siri,” she said into her phone as she pulled away from the curb one-handed, “call Nina.” Her call went straight to voicemail.

Emma hit the steering wheel. If ever she needed her best friend’s advice, it was right now. But she hadn’t heard from Nina since yesterday morning. A communication blackout was unusual for Nina, who called if she broke a nail. Emma looked at the clock on the dash. Their meeting was in an hour. She’d catch up with her then.

Nina was sort of a Jill of all trades. Aside from running PR for The Barn, she also helped out with their website and made sure all their social media platforms were updated, and she still worked full-time as a business teacher at the high school.

Emma pulled into the parking lot, the first to arrive. A few minutes to herself might be a good thing; maybe she could untangle her bank account. She opened the door and let herself in. She switched on the lights and, more importantly, the heat. She started to walk away from the thermostat, then turned back to bump it down a couple of degrees. Considering her anemic bank balance, a little prudence might be wise.

She put her purse in the office and retrieved her laptop, setting it on the banquet table where they usually had their meetings, then pulled back a chair and sat down, looking up at the beautiful wrought-iron chandeliers. They'd cost a fortune.

Money. Everything was about money.

She chewed on her lip and twisted her hair around her finger.

Her thoughts kept rolling back to Tucker and their meeting yesterday. Being dependent on one man's opinion was frustrating. He'd been so stubborn, refusing to even listen so she could explain her vision for the Big House. She needed him to sign off on that business plan. The one investor she'd found had made it clear she wouldn't back Emma unless Emma's enterprise expanded. The longer things dragged on, the less likely she was to get her funding. And if things didn't turn around soon . . .

"This could be a complete disaster," she muttered aloud.

"Who are you talking to?"

She jumped. When had Nina sneaked in?

"No one," Emma muttered.

Nina threw her purse and notebook onto the table. She stood there, mouth tight, arms crossed. "You have something you want to tell me, Em?" she asked, eyebrow raised.

Uh-oh. She knew.

Emma jerked to her feet. "How did you find out?"

"Mrs. Lockhart called me yesterday afternoon. She said you had lunch at the diner."

Emma's shoulders sagged. "I was going to tell you."

"He'd better not be messing with your mind." Nina jabbed a finger at her.

"He's not messing with anything . . . except my future."

"What does that mean?"

Emma sat down again. "Miss Lily brought him in to give the okay on my business plan. We can't move forward without it. And so far, he hates it."

"Everything?"

"Pretty much. Hates the idea of the golf course. Really hates that I want to turn the Big House into an inn."

"I don't like it. You need to stay away from him." Nina had a way of speaking in absolutes.

"You can't think . . . Nina, he broke my heart. I'm not—"

“That’s right, you’re not! I remember everything. Senior year? All the crying and the reading. You tore through the Brontë sisters in—what was it?—a month? And then you started on Austen, and I thought I’d have to stage an intervention. Sniveling over that Darcy—”

“Darcy,” Emma corrected.

“Whatever. It was ridiculous.”

Nina was not a fan of classic literature. “I did get an A in English that year,” Emma pointed out.

“Yeah, but you were a wreck.”

Emma folded her arms across her chest. “What’s your point?”

“My point is we have a business to run. We don’t have time for Tucker, the sequel.” Nina sat in the chair next to hers and asked, “How long is he here for?”

Emma shrugged. “Undetermined,” she said, and Nina’s expression turned to a scowl.

The door rattled on its tracks, and Rose breezed in, balancing a covered tray in one hand and a baker’s box in the other.

Rose was a forty-five-year-old housewife with a passion for all things food and a figure to match. She’d honed her culinary skills over the years by cooking for a houseful of boys. She routinely shrugged off catering challenges by saying, “Have you seen my boys eat?” Not much scared Rose, and she had a grounding effect on their team. She spoke matter-of-factly, and when she promised she could do something, Emma believed her.

“Hope y’all are hungry!” Rose said in a singsong voice. She set everything down and scooted the box across the table. “I just got done with the tasting menu for the Andreases’ reveal party next month. They want it all! Well, Evie wants it all. Her mother-in-law wants to do things on the cheap, she says, because the venue is so expensive.” Rose and Nina looked at Emma.

“I gave Charlotte a discount!” Emma insisted. A steep discount. That’s what came of doing business with friends. Emma had charged her mother’s old friend half the usual fee for using The Barn.

Charlotte and her husband were hosting a party the first week in December for their son and daughter-in-law. Most everyone in town had been invited to find out the gender of the first Andreas grandbaby.

“Well, it doesn’t matter what she says because Russ loved everything and said he didn’t care how much it costs.” Rose took the lid off the box.

“Beignets! Lemon-glazed blueberry and strawberry blush. Take a couple of those macarons. They want fruit skewers and platters of crudités too.”

Nina looked into the open box. “Rose, you’re killing me. You know how much weight I’ve gained since you started working here?”

“It looks good on you,” Rose said.

“Okay,” Emma said, in her all-business voice. “Let’s get started.”

“We’ve got nothing this week, right?” Rose asked as she plated some pretty little petit fours.

“I got a text from someone last night and set up a consult for the day after Thanksgiving,” Emma said. “I can handle the intake by myself though.”

“Who’s the appointment with?” Nina asked.

“I don’t know,” Emma said, picking up her phone. “It just says she wants a consultation for her upcoming wedding. She just gave her initials: KL. I’ll be ticked if she doesn’t show.”

“KL. Who could that be?” Nina asked.

“Katherine Lawrence?” Rose offered.

“Katherine Lawrence is eighty-seven years old. Her kids just moved her into an assisted living facility in Branson. What would she want with a wedding consult?” Emma asked.

“Maybe she met someone.” Rose shrugged.

“Kira Landry,” Nina said, and Emma’s head swung around. “What?” Nina said around a cookie. “It could be.”

“Not likely.” Rose snorted.

The Landrys were an old St. Louis family that had made their fortune a century ago in beer, hotels, and real estate. Lately the Landry name had been in the news because the latest generation liked to misbehave publicly in the way children with too much money and no real responsibilities were wont to do. Kira, a society darling who was only famous for her beauty and good orthodontics, had recently become engaged to a Wall Street investment banker with a talent for making money. Lots and lots of money. Kira had a talent for spending it, so theirs seemed like a good match.

“Probably not her,” Emma said. “Nice thought though.” Man, would it be nice. All that publicity. Emma sighed just thinking about it. But why would someone who could afford the Plaza Hotel in New York City choose to get married in a barn?

“Anyway, we should see business pick up next month,” she continued.

“We’ve got a few corporate holiday parties early in the month, and the

article in *Midwestern Magazine* might still generate some business.” She shoved one of the little cakes into her mouth.

“The issue has been out for almost a month. Any calls?” Rose asked.

Emma shrugged. “No one has mentioned it specifically. The photos were amazing, though, don’t you think?”

They all nodded silently, probably thinking the same thing. They’d pinned their hopes on that article, and so far, nothing.

“I’ll update the website for winter soon. The day after Thanksgiving all hints of hay bales and pumpkins will be gone. I’m going to use the picture of that couple who got married here last winter, the shot with the horse-drawn sleigh. It’ll be on the main page.”

“Oh, I loved that picture!” Rose said.

Nina clicked on her computer. “Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are all updated too. Um, I got a text from Ernie Colfax last night, wondering if The Barn is available New Year’s Eve for the Elks’ annual party.”

“Oh, well maybe—”

“No!” Rose and Nina cried at the same time.

“Money is money, girls,” Emma said.

“No, it’s not. Look at this.” Nina shoved her phone at Emma. “He wants a ‘steep, steep, steep’—how many times does he say steep?—discount. He wants a senior citizen discount, a friends and family discount, and he wants a ‘locals only’ discount, which he just made up. If he gets what he wants, you’ll probably end up owing him money. Besides, you don’t want a bunch of half-naked old people running around Miss Lily’s property on New Year’s Eve.”

“Why would they be half naked?” Emma asked, horrified.

“The Elks do the Polar Bear Plunge every New Year’s Eve. They usually head over to Spickett’s Pond, but if they’re here, they’re gonna be practically skinny-dipping right outside—”

“Got it! No Elks on New Year’s Eve. Are there any other inquiries?” Emma asked hopefully.

“Nope,” Nina replied.

“What’s going on with the golf course?” Rose asked.

“The proposal still needs to make it through the planning commission,” Emma said. “Dolly Bricknell thinks it’ll sail through the city council, but I’ve, uh, hit a little bit of a snag.”

“Yeah,” Nina muttered. “A six-foot-two tall, dark, and idiotic snag.”

“What?” Rose looked confused.

“I’m working on it. I hope by the end of next week all complications will have . . . disappeared.” Emma directed her comment to Nina.

They firmed up the details for the Andreases’ party and then fawned over the food. Rose really was a master.

“That’s it, then, right?” Rose said, getting up.

“Not quite. I’ve gone over the month-end statements—” Emma started.

“Let me guess,” Rose said and sat down again. “Another bust?”

Emma sat up straighter. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“What would you say?” Nina said.

“Let’s just make sure we turn out the lights when we leave and look for any opportunities to save money.”

“That means you didn’t get paid again.” Nina arched an eyebrow at her.

Emma sighed. “A little bit, yeah.”

Rose shook her head. “I don’t know how you do it. I love you, kid, but I won’t work for free.”

“I haven’t asked you to.”

“Not yet.” Rose gathered her things and patted Emma on the back, giving her a worried smile before she left.

Nina and Emma watched her go.

“Tucker Madsen could really mess things up around here,” Nina said.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve got it under control.”

“Want me to beat him up for you?” Nina asked, probably only half-joking. Back in the day Nina had liked Tucker just fine, but when he’d dumped Emma for medical school, she’d taken to calling him “the idiot.”

“Nah, just don’t be mad at me anymore. I’m going to need you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you he was back in town.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry he’s making things difficult.”

“Me too.” Anxious for a change of subject, Emma asked, “What are you bringing to dinner on Thursday?” The two of them always did Thanksgiving with Miss Lily. Nina’s mom had moved to Arizona years ago and only made the trip out for Christmas.

“Apple-walnut stuffing.” Nina paused. “Is Tucker going to be there?”

Emma took a deep breath. “I imagine.”

“Well,” Nina said, standing to go. “I’d better poison the apples first.”

CHAPTER TEN

TUCKER DROPPED THE KEYS INTO the dish on the counter and swung the gallon of paint he'd just purchased onto the kitchen table.

"Morning oatmeal," he said of its color.

Gran looked at the can skeptically. "You sure it's not eiderdown beige? Bob keeps trying to get me to switch things up around here, but I like what I like."

Bob owned the hardware store and had indeed tried to sell Tucker on a different color, but Tucker had stuck to his guns. "I'm sure, Gran. I checked and double-checked. See?" He pointed. "The label says Morning Oatmeal, just like you wanted."

"Great! You can get started on the dining room right away."

"Hang on a sec. You said I could see the blueprints after I picked up the paint."

"Did I?" Gran said. "You must have misunderstood me. I meant after you painted the dining room."

"Gran, in the last forty-eight hours, I've done your grocery shopping, changed the oil in your car, mailed your packages, and cleaned out the P trap under your sink. I've changed every light bulb in the house, even the ones that weren't burned out yet—"

"And I appreciate it, sweetheart. Darn nuisance when a light bulb burns out and I can't reach it myself."

"Glad to be helpful. Let me see the blueprints."

"No."

"Gran." His voice was a warning.

"You'll overreact. Trust me. They're fine. You're a little unreasonable when it comes to the house, though I can't imagine why. You haven't set foot on the property in over a decade."

Her shot hit the mark and Tucker felt a quick stab of guilt. Still, he couldn't let her get an edge on him that easily.

"I'm trying to make up for it now. Let me see the plans."

"Fine. While you're painting the dining room, I'll get them."

"Get them? Where are they?"

"In a safe place. Get to work."

Tucker picked up the painting supplies. "I'm going, but it's a sin to lie, you know."

“Well, if we’re going to talk about each other’s sins, remember the time ___”

“I can’t hear you!” Tucker called over his shoulder as he walked down the hall.

* * *

Twenty-four hours later, and the dining room looked no different than it had before. Maybe a little fresher, but it was the same color. Tucker set another plate on the table. The room did look nice. The table was set with the family china that had come across the sea from the old country, an Irish Belleek that made the watery trip wrapped in one of Tucker’s ancestor’s petticoats. Gran had flower arrangements of orange roses tucked inside antique pewter vases evenly spaced down the center of the table. The linens were crisp and clean. He ought to know. He’d spent yesterday afternoon washing and ironing them. He’d been tasked with it all. “Stall tactics,” he insisted. “Being helpful,” Gran countered. He’d worn her down though. Last night he’d finally gotten his hands on the blueprints.

Tucker felt a gust of cold November wind, carrying the distinct sound of female chatter as the front door opened and closed again. Emma and Nina breezed past carrying bowls and baskets, their contributions to dinner, no doubt. Emma nodded when she saw him. Nina scowled.

Good old Nina. They used to like each other. Well, he’d liked her. Nina had tolerated him because back then he and Emma had been a package deal.

They continued on through the swinging door to deposit their items in the kitchen, and a second later Emma came back through carrying a wooden box. She lifted the lid to reveal Gran’s silver service. “Miss Lily wants you to put these around the table.”

Tucker took the box from her, looking up when her hand brushed against his. He moved away from her and laid down the first fork.

“Seriously?” Emma said, and he looked up again.

“What?”

“That’s not right,” she said. “Salad and dinner forks on the left. Knife and spoon on the right. No, Tucker. The spoon is on the other side of the knife, like this.” She showed him how it was done, standing so close Tucker picked up the faint scent of oranges. Very nice.

He took a step back and cleared his throat. “Knife, then spoon. Got it.”

He watched as she adjusted the linen cloth, tidying everything into right angles. She moved the crystal stemware into place, her quick, efficient

movements like a dance as she circled the table.

No doubt about it, Emma McAllister was beautiful. She'd lost that little-girl prettiness and had become a stunning woman. And here she was, working beside him, smiling, and humming an indistinct little tune. It made him smile too. Maybe now was a good time to . . .

"I finally got a chance to look over the blueprints."

She froze.

"Oh yeah?" she said cautiously.

"Yeah. I made some notes. Maybe we could go over them later."

"Today? It's Thanksgiving."

"So?"

"So I'm thinking you and me going over the blueprints after dinner might give everyone indigestion," she muttered.

"Not true," he said, but she didn't look at him. He walked up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder to turn her around. She glanced up at him with those amazing green eyes, a little bit of sass shining through, and suddenly it seemed like maybe he was standing too close. What had he been saying?

She angled her head and said, "Tucker?"

"Uh, I think my grandmother is calling me," he said and got out of there.

* * *

"He wants to look at the blueprints? That's it? That's all he said? Is he leaving? Has he seen the contract yet?"

"Nina! For crying out loud," Emma whispered, glancing at the swinging door toward the dining room. "He's in the next room, not the next state. Keep your voice down. And the answer to all your questions is I don't know."

Emma had excused herself from the rest of the dinner guests to step into the kitchen with Nina to retrieve the basket of rolls she'd brought, which she now ferried quickly into the dining room, stopping short as the door hit the back of Tucker's chair. He shot her that crooked grin of his, and Emma felt her cheeks heat.

Tucker was seated next to Mini Jones, a friend of Miss Lily's since Prohibition, she liked to say. The poor dear had lost her hearing sometime during the Obama administration. Consequently, she spoke at near deafening levels because she figured if she couldn't hear you, then you certainly couldn't hear her.

Emma could feel Tucker's eyes on her as she deposited the rolls, then backed out of the room, returning again to the kitchen, where Nina had just pulled the turkey from the oven. In one hand her friend held a fork, in the other a sinister-looking carving knife.

"Doggone thing is going to be the death of me," Nina complained. "Where does Miss Lily keep the Band-Aids?" She held up a bleeding hand.

"Oh, gross!" Emma said, taking a step back.

"It's just a scratch, you nerd. Still, it might be better if someone else took over. I seem to be all thumbs here."

Emma peeked into the dining room. "Anyone up for carving the turkey? Turns out Nina shouldn't be allowed near sharp objects." Tucker was up before the words were fully out of her mouth, pulling her back through the door with him.

"Thanks for rescuing me," he muttered. "Is there something wrong with Mini? I asked her if she still lived on Market Lane, and she said, 'I heard that's a really good book, Tucker.' Is she deaf?"

He was talking to her. She saw his lips moving, but her mind was on his hand still touching her arm. He was so close; his eyes were so blue. A deep indigo—

"Emma?" Tucker said.

"Hmm?" she said. "What book are you talking about?"

Tucker gave her an odd look and said, "Never mind. Hello, Nina. Nice to see you again."

"Wish I could say the same." Nina perched one hand on her hip and waved the carving knife at him. "Don't go getting any big ideas, Tucker."

"What 'big ideas' are you talking about, Nina?" Tucker asked, nimbly taking the knife from her fingers before she could use it on him. Smart guy.

"Ideas of messing with my friend, here. She's not seventeen anymore, and I—"

"Nina works with me at The Barn," Emma interjected before her friend could completely humiliate her. "She's just being protective of the business."

"Got it. Nina, I have no intention of messing with anyone. I'm here to help my grandmother. That's it." Tucker turned and got to work on the turkey.

The doorbell rang, and Emma looked at the clock on the range hood. "Did Miss Lily invite someone else to dinner?" she asked.

“Maybe it’s Hopper Spickett,” Nina volunteered. “You remember Hopper, don’t you Tucker? Six-foot-three, blond hair, kind of looks like a younger, clean-cut Thor? He’s an attorney. A really smart man. And local . . . as in, he lives here.”

Tucker’s gaze bounced between the two of them before settling on Nina. “Fascinating. I do know him. But thanks for the 4-1-1. Did you skip some kind of medication this morning, Nina?”

Miss Lily called for Tucker, and he set down the knife and left.

“He doesn’t know about Hopper, Nina.”

Nina picked up the carving knife. “I thought you guys had lunch this week.”

“We weren’t there to catch up on our personal lives. It was business. You need to calm down.”

“I’m just making sure he understands he can’t play fast and free with your emotions this time.”

“What emotions? How many times do I have to tell you? He’s here on business.”

“Uh-huh. I saw the way you were looking at him.” She pointed the knife at her this time and huffed. “You aren’t doing this again.”

“You’re right. I’m not. I’ve barely seen him since he’s been back. And he’s leaving, Neens. I don’t know when, but he is leaving.”

Nina set down the knife and pulled the mashed potatoes from the warming drawer. “I don’t know why you didn’t stick with Hopper. How did you let him get away? He’s gorgeous, dependable, and funny. You obviously don’t know a good thing when it stands in front of you holding flowers.”

Emma threw her hands into the air. “When are you going to admit to the raging crush you have on Hopper Spickett?”

“I think Hopper is great. Amazing. But I’m a realist.” Nina dipped a spoon into the potatoes and tasted them, then reached for more butter.

“Hopper would never go for me.”

“Why not?” Emma asked.

Nina lifted an eyebrow. “I’m not you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WHAT WAS SHE DOING HERE?

Tucker blinked. Once, twice, three times.

No. She was still there.

Weird. Meredith stood in the entryway, chatting with his grandmother. He'd talked to her briefly last night, and as far as he'd known, she'd been all set to fly up to see her parents in Atherton this morning. So, yeah. Kind of weird.

"Tucker?" she said, a bit uncertain.

Right. He was acting like a twit. He crossed to her and wrapped her in a loose hug.

"I wanted to surprise you," she said into his shoulder.

"Mission accomplished. I bet your parents are furious."

"We probably shouldn't talk about that," she whispered in his ear. She eased out of his arms and turned to Miss Lily. "Your home is beautiful."

Gran murmured her thanks. The dining room door swished open, and Tucker looked back to see Nina and Emma poke their heads around the corner. Emma's gaze was coolly assessing, shifting from Tucker to Meredith and back to Tucker, but her face gave nothing away. Nina whispered something in her ear, Emma nodded, and they both disappeared. Tucker shifted uncomfortably on his feet, feeling guilty for some reason. He pressed his lips to Meredith's forehead. He had no reason to feel guilty.

Meredith always presented herself well. She smelled of Chanel and new leather, her glossy blonde hair pulled over one shoulder. She smiled at his grandmother, clearly on a charm offensive. She wasn't in PR for nothing.

"Tucker, when you said 'farmhouse,' I envisioned something a little more rustic. This is amazing." Meredith's gaze traveled up the spiral staircase and landed on the antique bronze pendant chandelier overhead. "Ma'am, would you mind if I took a few pictures?" she asked Gran politely, already pulling the phone from her bag.

"What on earth for?" his grandmother asked.

"I'd love to pass them along to a friend of mine. He's a location scout for the studio I work for. Have you ever been approached about location work? Oh, wow, is that leaded glass original? I think this place would be perfect for the show I work on."

Gran wore a puzzled look, and Tucker grabbed Meredith's hand after she'd taken a couple of shots of the ceiling. "Maybe save that for later, hon.

We were just sitting down to dinner.” Meredith pocketed her phone, and Tucker asked, “Gran, do we have room for one more?”

His grandmother smiled a bit stiffly, but she was too well-mannered to be ungracious. “Of course. Emma,” Gran called, and Emma popped her head through the door again. “Could you set another place for dinner?”

“Emma. What a pretty name!” Meredith exclaimed. “So old-fashioned.”

Emma’s smile was all teeth. “Thanks,” she said before stalking back to the kitchen.

They shuffled the chairs and made room for their unexpected guest.

Tucker stood at the head of the table, sliding an arm around Meredith’s waist. “Everyone, this is Meredith.” He cleared his throat. “My, uh, fiancée.” He glanced at Emma. She sat stick straight, not looking at him, her face suffused in color.

“Lovely to meet you all,” Meredith said, taking a seat next to him.

“Tucker, would you bless the food?” Gran asked.

He looked up at her. “Me?”

Gran didn’t answer, just arched an eyebrow and folded her arms.

Tucker cleared his throat and bent his head. He then said the quickest prayer ever uttered over a Thanksgiving turkey.

Gran plated the turkey, and conversation began to flow.

“Tucker, pass those potatoes,” Nina said heartily. Her mood seemed to have lifted upon his fiancée’s appearance.

“Oh my,” Meredith said as she surveyed the table. “Look at all these carbs. I actually ate in LA. Is there a green salad somewhere? Hopefully with a clean dressing? You know, maybe just a little vinegar and extra-virgin olive oil?”

Gran looked at Meredith, and Tucker closed his eyes.

Mini Jones leaned over and whispered (shouted) in Emma’s ear, “What’s a carb?”

“I’m not sure,” Emma answered just loud enough for Tucker to hear. “But I think they’re illegal in California.”

An hour later the little party moved lethargically into the family room to watch TV. Tucker soon surrendered the remote, totally outvoted, so no football. Instead, the ladies settled on a sappy romantic comedy on the Hallmark channel, but he was too exhausted to care, looking at the scores on his phone. Meredith snuggled up next to him on the couch, scrolling through her texts, occasionally taking a call.

“It’s a holiday,” he muttered. “Can’t you stop working just for the day?”

“It’s not a holiday in England.” One of her cast members was making a red-carpet appearance at some benefit in London tonight. She continued to text.

“Who wants pie?” Gran asked, moving to the sideboard, where dessert was laid out.

“Not me, thank you,” Meredith said. “Refined sugar is an opiate to the human brain.”

Gran blinked a couple of times before saying politely, “Oh, well. Good for you.”

“I’ll be back in a minute,” Tucker muttered before extricating himself from the couch and walking into the kitchen. He retrieved the blueprints from the pantry, where he’d stuffed them before dinner, and texted Emma. Two seconds later she pushed through the door.

“A text? Really? You couldn’t have walked the three feet to the door and called me in? You people from California are a breed unto yourselves.”

He paused. “I wanted to explain about Meredith.”

Emma shrugged. “What’s there to explain? Miss Lily told me you had a girlfriend.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “But you didn’t know I was engaged?”

Emma gave a short jerk of her head.

“I proposed to Meredith a couple of months ago. It’s all kind of new.”

“Congratulations,” she said in a flat tone. “Is that all you called me in here for?”

“No.” He walked to the island, motioning for her to join him. He unrolled the house plans as she sidled up next to him, arms folded. Tucker gestured toward the island and stepped back with a satisfied grin. Emma looked down.

“You drew on the plans,” she said.

“Gran said I could.”

“What are you? Five years old with a new box of crayons?”

“Gran said I could,” he said again.

She bent over the table. “You scrapped everything I did to your grandmother’s room. You want it kept intact?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not practical for a bed and breakfast. It’s a waste of space.”

“You were going to board up the sunroom.”

“I was just taking out the French doors and putting in a single. I need more wall space for the extra bedroom.”

“This is better,” he insisted. “Look, I kept the attic just the way you had it. Which, by the way, three bedrooms and a bath in the attic? Seems like a lot.” He waited for her to comment, but she just raised an eyebrow.

“Anyway, this only cuts down your plan by one bedroom. This way Gran’s room stays the same, and you can advertise it as the bridal suite or the paradise palace or whatever cheesy name you want to slap on it.” He’d fully embraced the idea of compromise, so why did Emma seem annoyed?

“Tucker, I had an architect draw up these plans. You can’t just arbitrarily change things around like this, and so help me, if you say, ‘Gran said I could,’ I’m going to bite you!”

“No offense, but maybe you’re a little too wrapped up in your ambition to see what’s best for the property.”

“I hate it when people do that,” she muttered.

“Do what?” he asked.

“Say ‘No offense’ like it’s an open invitation to be offensive! I worked hard on these plans.”

“I’m not trying to insult you. I’m trying to help you see things in a different way.”

“The wrong way,” she said. “You made the kitchen smaller too.”

“You seriously wanted to knock through into the family room?”

“Yes, because I’m expanding the kitchen so there will be a larger eat-in area too. This will be a business. Not a private residence.”

He ignored her. “But I kept everything else the same. I even let you make the other bedrooms upstairs smaller so you could fit in that extra bathroom.”

“You let me? You let me!” Emma’s face flushed with anger. “Tucker, let me tell you something. This is my project. You have nothing to do with it. Did you step in when most of the farming operation shut down and we had to come up with something else to bring in revenue? No.”

“I wa—” he started, but Emma talked over him.

“Were you here when Shep retired and suddenly two women had to figure out what to do with four hundred acres of land? No!”

He seemed to have unleashed the kraken.

“You’ve been home for, like, two seconds, and all you’ve done so far is stand around and say, ‘I don’t like it,’” she whined, mimicking him. “Not

helpful!”

“Well, I don’t like it!” And now he was yelling. “Frankly, I’m surprised by your plans, especially for the house! We grew up here, EJ. All those summers, it was you and me. You share those memories! Or have you erased them the way you plan to erase the house? You, more than anyone, should know what the farm means to me. It’s the last happy place I remember being with my dad! It’s the last place I remember being with you!” Emma jerked back as if he’d struck her. He was saying too much, but the horse was out of the barn. “The pond, the fields, the house.” He jabbed a finger at the plans. “We used to make out in that arbor! And you want to change it all and put in a golf course.” He hissed the last two words like they were swear words.

“It could be a lot worse,” Emma countered, hands on her hips. “I could sell the whole thing for scrap and start over. A couple of salvage companies are really interested in this place. Then you’d see changes, buddy. They’d strip the house down in days. Porcelain doorknobs, leaded glass windows, plaster ceiling medallions . . . all gone! They would erase this place, Tucker. But that’s not what I want to do. I want to preserve everything that gives this old place its charm and character, what makes it unique. And I want to share that with others. I want people to walk through that front door and fall in love with this house the way I did when I was a kid.”

Tucker pulled back a barstool and sat down. This hadn’t gone quite the way he’d thought it would. Emma sighed and walked over to him.

“I understand your concern, Tucker”—a lie—“but you’re going to have to trust me. I’m not trying to pull something on Miss Lily, or you either. And I do care about what happens to Stony Creek. Very much.” She was standing next to him now, looking at him with those sincere green eyes of hers. He felt some of his frustration ebb away.

“Could we try to come to some sort of compromise?” he asked. “Whether I deserve to be a part of the negotiations or not, I’m here and I have an opinion.” His eyes met hers, and for a second, he thought he saw some warmth there. To her credit, she didn’t look away.

She took a deep breath and said, “We can try.”

* * *

When Emma walked back into the family room, it became pretty clear that everyone had heard them arguing. Nina, Miss Lily, and Meredith sat bolt upright staring at the TV, which was muted. Only Mini Jones, slouched

and snoring in an overstuffed chair in the corner, seemed oblivious to the altercation that had just occurred in the kitchen.

Miss Lily took a direct approach to the situation. Seeing Emma, she rose from the couch, stroked Emma's cheek, and said, "I'd better go see if my grandson is bleeding." If she hadn't smiled at her, Emma would have felt awful. Okay, maybe she felt just the teensiest bit awful anyway because the fiancée was looking pale. Emma opened her mouth to say something, but Nina shot up.

"We should go, don't you think? I think that's a good idea. Yeah, we should go."

She already had Emma by the arm.

"O-okay," Emma said. "Let me just go grab—"

"Nope. Now. We should go now." Nina practically shoved her into the car and slammed the door. As they pulled away, she looked at Emma and said, "Well, that was . . ."

"It certainly was." Emma was quiet for a minute. She didn't want to talk about it. Talking about the past brought up memories, and those memories were tied to feelings . . . strong ones.

"So why the conniption?" Nina asked.

"His or mine?"

Nina shrugged. "Both were impressive."

"Tucker made some changes to the blueprints for the Big House, and I may have . . . overreacted."

"Yeah, maybe. But what was with all the talk about shared memories? Sheesh." Nina actually shuddered.

"You heard that too?"

"You guys were yelling. We heard everything."

"Was Miss Lily mad?"

"I don't know if she was mad, but she did look concerned," Nina said.

She should be mad. Emma had kind of torpedoed Thanksgiving. She looked out the window as they turned down her street. She should apologize. She'd go see Miss Lily tomorrow. But what if Tucker and his fiancée were still around? Maybe she'd call instead. No. Tuck might answer. A text. She could safely text Miss Lily.

Funny how her ex-boyfriend had turned her into a raging coward.

"Maybe you and Tucker shouldn't be working so closely on this deal," Nina said. "Obviously, there's still something there." She pulled up in front

of Emma's house and killed the engine. "Hopper can handle the details. Maybe you should sit this out."

"I'm good. It's fine. It'll be fine," Emma said, but she couldn't look her friend in the eye.

"The fiancée thinks Tucker still has feelings for you," Nina said.

Emma's heart pounded in her chest. "How do you know that?"

"Because I was sitting right next to her when she said he wouldn't react so—and I quote—'passionately' if he didn't still feel something for you."

"Well, she's wrong. I mean . . . that's ridiculous." But if it was ridiculous, why had a little flame of hope just ignited in her chest?

"I don't want you to get hurt, Emma."

"I get that. I promise I'm not stupid enough to make the same mistake twice." Having reassured her friend, Emma got out of the car and waved as Nina pulled away, but the closer she got to her front door, the more she recognized the truth.

She was in a whole lot of trouble.

CHAPTER TWELVE

EMMA DECIDED TO SEND FLOWERS with her apology and ordered an elegant arrangement of white china mums and greenery from Betty Hensley's little flower shop just off Main Street. She had them delivered with a properly penitent note:

Miss Lily,

I hope you can forgive me for ruining the holiday. It really was a lovely meal.

Love,

Emma

Miss Lily responded with a text:

Beautiful flowers, but I'm not the one who needs the apology.

The message was followed by Tucker's cell phone number.

Yeah . . . Emma would take care of that later. Right now, she was trying to forget that fight, even though it seemed to play on a reel in her head. Great strategy: fighting with the guy you need to win over. Brilliant.

She walked into The Barn and sat at the table, chin in hand. She'd fallen into bed last night, totally exhausted, and was feeling a little bleary-eyed today. Rest was another casualty of all this stress. She knew worrying was a waste of time, but when her head hit the pillow, it seemed like her mind flooded with anxiety. Having Tucker around made things so much worse. She needed a miracle, and she needed it now.

She yawned and her eyes drifted shut. If she sat here long enough, maybe she could get caught up on her sleep.

The door rattled, and Emma opened her eyes and stood, smiling.

"It's only me. You can save your game-show-host smile for the client." Nina walked in, shedding her coat, gloves, and bag and hanging them on the hooks next to the door.

"What are you doing here?" Emma asked. "I thought you had a lunch date."

"It wasn't lunch; it was brunch. We met at the kitschy place in Springfield you and I went to last spring."

"And?"

Nina lifted a brow. "No go. He was four inches shorter than me and referred to his car as the Millennium Falcon. Halfway through his muesli he suggested we take our relationship to warp speed and go back to his place."

"Oh, ick. What did you do?"

“Snuck out through the back door.”

“Sorry it didn’t work out, but I’ve got it handled here. It’s just a first meeting. You can go enjoy the rest of your day off if you want to.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I feel guilty about the way I reacted to the whole Tucker thing.” Nina was acting weird. She drummed her fingers against the back of Emma’s chair, very distracted.

“Are you all right?” Emma asked.

Nina pulled back the chair next to her and sat. “So . . . I stopped by the diner to grab a bite before I headed over here.”

“Okay.”

“I sat at the counter next to Mrs. Kerr.”

Carol Kerr was the librarian. “That’s nice,” Emma said.

“She told me Tucker and the fiancée had just left ten minutes before. Evidently they were there having a ‘discussion.’ Well, Carol said it was more of a civilized fight than a discussion, but whatever. She moved to the counter right behind their table so she could hear better.”

Of course she did. Carol Kerr was a notorious eavesdropper.

“She took notes,” Nina said.

“She did what?”

“She hasn’t forgotten the way you drowned your sorrows in books that last year in high school after the idiot left. She said you practically wore the barcode off your library card, and she gave me these.” Nina held up a wad of napkins.

“What are those?”

“Her notes.” Nina spread them across the table.

“I love living in a small town,” Emma said fervently, moving the centerpiece out of the way. Together they studied the napkins. “I can barely read any of this,” she said. “What’s that?”

Nina touched the paper. “I think that’s ketchup. What does this say?”

“Do you think it’s a flight time? It says Delta, then New York, but the time is soaked in ketchup. Maybe eight something?” Emma flipped to the next napkin.

“This one says, Dempsey and GMA. Is that an abbreviation for grandma?”

Emma knew exactly what it meant. “Meredith works in PR for a television studio in Burbank. She represents Dempsey Malone, the star of that show about teenage witches. You know, the one Rose won’t let her kids

watch.”

“Did Tucker tell you that?”

She should go with that. “Uh, sure.” She was a horrible liar, and her face went up in flames.

“Em?”

“I, uh, might have googled the fiancée just a little bit last night.” A little bit was an understatement. She wasn’t proud of it, but she’d lost a couple of hours of sleep last night surfing the web, stalking Tucker’s fiancée.

“That’s my girl!”

They were quiet for a minute.

“Hey, Emma. Look at this.” Nina pointed to a patch of barely legible script.

“Does that say beat up?” Emma turned flashing eyes on her friend. “Do you think she got mad and smacked Tucker?”

“That doesn’t say beat up. It says break up. Do you think—”

They looked at each other, and the barn door bucked on its rails.

Emma and Nina stood, wide-eyed, as their two o’clock appointment stalked toward them trailing expensive perfume and cashmere.

“Hi,” the woman said brightly, extending her hand, “I’m—”

“We know who you are,” Emma blurted in shock.

Kira Landry. Here. At The Barn. Emma recovered a little and shook her hand. Stuttering, she introduced Nina, and the three of them sat down—Kira elegantly, and Nina and Emma fumbling for their chairs.

“I’ll just get to it. I’d like to get married here,” the socialite said simply.

Dead silence. So quiet Emma heard the furnace turn over.

“Are you sure?” She said the first thing that came into her head, earning a kick under the table from Nina. Emma was having a hard time processing. How in the world had Kira Landry heard about The Barn?

“I mean, I—uh, thought you’d . . . I mean I read somewhere that you were planning a summer wedding at the Ritz-Carlton in St. Louis.”

“My mother booked the Ritz for June. My fiancé and I want a smaller venue. And I want to get married in May, when everything is in bloom.”

“Tornado season,” Nina offered helpfully. Emma and Kira both looked at her. “Sorry,” she muttered.

Emma’s head was spinning. If they somehow managed to get the Landry wedding . . . well, it would be huge.

“How did you hear about us?” Nina asked.

“Kind of a funny story, actually. I went to get the mail a couple of weeks ago, and *Midwestern Magazine* fell out of the mailbox. When I bent to pick it up, the magazine was open to the article about *The Barn*. I didn’t think too much about it, but I dropped the magazine again, twice, on the way up to the house. Both times it opened to that article. I got inside and read the whole thing. By the time I finished, I was in love. The pictures were so pretty, and I love the tradition and history of the farm. I showed my fiancé, Ethan, and he agreed with me.”

To Emma, the only thing funny about that story was the idea of Kira Landry getting the mail.

She thought for a minute. “And you aren’t interested in a venue that would be, well . . . a little grander?” She winced as Nina kicked her again.

“I know. I know what you must think of me. It’s what everyone thinks. I’m a spoiled little rich girl whose life is all nightclubs and movie premiers. But honestly, the press only prints what will sell. It’s not the truth. I have a degree in biochem, and I’m working on developing a line of organic skin care. My fiancé might be a venture capitalist, but he started out an Ohio farm boy who happened to get into Harvard because he’s brilliant. And he’s lovely. He really is. We’d like to buy a little farm of our own someday.”

“You should know,” Emma said, all business, “we can only accommodate one hundred twenty guests. I’m guessing you’re in the market for something much larger.” She managed to dodge Nina’s foot this time.

“Ethan and I saw your website. We know all that. We wanted to keep the guest list small. Fewer numbers means exclusivity.”

Emma looked at Nina with a pleased smile and then turned back to Kira.

“Okay, then. Would you like a tour?”

They walked through the back entrance that opened onto a bricked courtyard.

“We can fit more guests out here,” Emma said. “Where do you see you and your fiancé getting married?”

“Right there,” Kira said, pointing to the natural arbor formed by the meeting branches of a pair of redbud trees. “Just like in the magazine. Those will be blooming in the spring, right?”

“They peak in April, but the lilac bushes will be bursting in June. This is a beautiful spot. The bellflowers on the hill should be in bloom then too.”

Kira clapped her hands. “This is going to be amazing.”

It really was beautiful out here. Even in winter when the trees stood bare against the sky. They'd put a pergola in, and the patio was surrounded on either side by a stone half wall. In the spring they crisscrossed globe lights under the beams, and large planters came out of storage, dripping colorful impatiens and creeping Jenny. The blooming trees and daffodils offered shots of color in the border gardens.

Emma guided Kira and Nina toward the high iron gates and the path that led behind The Barn.

As they walked, Emma launched into her spiel about the history of the property. She unlocked the old groundskeeper's cabin, which had been restored and converted into an elegant dressing room. "It's kind of chilly in here, but I wanted you to see it. This is where you'll get ready on your wedding day."

Kira walked inside. "Oh, this is lovely," she said, fingering the brocade curtains, glancing at the tufted ottoman and the crystal chandelier. Emma watched her run a finger over the painted mantel. The fireplace was stacked with candles that, when lit, gave the room a warm glow.

They moved on to the shed, conveniently located behind The Barn. Shep used to store tools out here, everything from paintbrushes to pry bars. Emma had gutted the structure, run power and propane to it, then turned it into the service kitchen.

She closed the shed door and locked up, pointing out the parking area surrounded by a river-rock wall and stone flower boxes. In the spring they would come alive with color as the perennials started to bloom.

"This is perfect," Kira said again, taking pictures with her phone as she went. "I'll send these to Ethan, but I know he'll love it too. This place is a nod to his roots, you know what I mean?" Emma and Nina bobbed their heads in agreement.

When they went back into The Barn, Nina pulled out a portfolio of information, but Kira shook her head.

"I don't need to see anymore. I'm sold. You can handle everything, can't you? Food, floral arrangements, all that stuff? It would make things simpler for me. I know five months isn't a lot of time, but can you do it?"

Emma smiled, but her mind was humming. This was it. Her miracle. The break she'd been praying for. There would be write-ups in all the major fashion and bridal magazines, not to mention social media outlets and blogs. If she was going to do this, she'd have to nail it. Emma looked Kira

in the eye and said, “Yes.”

Nina grabbed her hand and squeezed.

They walked to the table and took a seat.

“We don’t want a media circus, so we’re hoping to keep everything low-key,” Kira said. “InStyle magazine has exclusive rights to the wedding. Oh, I’ll need you to sign a confidentiality agreement today too. And I don’t want to leave here without an airtight contract. Make sure you write in a huge cancellation fee. As soon as my mother finds out about this, she’ll be down here pressuring you to bow out. But the contract is between you and me. She won’t be able to do a thing,” Kira said smugly.

Ever prepared, Nina slid a contract across the table. “We can work out the dates later if you’d like. We just need you to sign this and leave a deposit today.”

“Sounds good.” Kira signed and then slid a cashier’s check across the table. “I came prepared,” she said.

Emma glanced down. “Um, this is triple the normal deposit amount.”

“I know, but believe me, when this is all over, you will have earned every penny. I’m swamped trying to get my business off the ground, so this is where I step out of the process. Oh, I’ll check in once in a while, but you’ll mostly be working with my mother,” she said, gathering her coat. “Good luck. She never had a wedding herself, so she’s been planning mine since I was born.” She paused and then said, almost sympathetically, “You should probably prepare yourselves. Mother can be very . . . formidable. She’s used to getting her way.”

Great.

“Well, I’m off. Mother and I are flying to New York tomorrow. We’ve got an appointment at Kleinfeld’s for the dress. She’s still upset that Vera Wang is booked.” She grinned and waved, closing the door behind her.

Emma and Nina waited a beat before they turned to each other and screamed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS HAD been aggravating. Just been really, really annoying.

Tucker lounged on his bed, throwing a tennis ball against the wall. It was something he used to do when he was a kid and needed to think, and boy, did he have a lot to think about.

Meredith had barely spoken to him after Emma left on Thanksgiving Day. He could tell she was upset; that locked jaw of hers was a dead giveaway. She'd refused to look at him, just stiffly informed him she'd like to go to bed . . . at eight p.m.

Mystified, he'd knocked on his grandmother's door. She had always been a good one for advice, but she hadn't answered.

This morning the doorbell had rung at eight thirty, and Tucker had hopped downstairs, surprised to find Early Jackson standing on the front porch, dressed in a sharkskin suit and pillbox hat, looking like she'd just stepped off the pages of a 1950s Vogue magazine. Early was a Normal native. Tucker remembered her from the summer before he'd left for college. She'd waltzed around the night of the Fourth of July festival in a red, white, and blue satin skirt, taking pictures and singing patriotic songs off-key. She had to be at least thirty years younger than Gran, but it looked like they were pretty good friends. And while Early was a bit odd—her wardrobe appeared to be stuck in a time warp—she seemed like a nice person.

Tucker had let her in. She'd extended her hand, and when he took it, she pulled him in for a hug that had the breath wheezing from his lungs.

"Mm-hmm, you sure look like your daddy," she'd said, stepping back to give him the once-over. He gave her an uneasy smile.

His grandmother had appeared seconds later, suitcase in hand.

"Where are you going?" he'd asked. She'd said nothing about a trip.

"Early and I are heading to St. Louis for a little Christmas shopping."

"Really? And you need a suitcase to go Christmas shopping?"

"Mind your own business."

"You'll miss the tree lighting ceremony tonight," he'd said. "I'm flipping the switch."

"It can't be helped," she'd said.

"It's shopping. Yes, it can."

"Tucker, the world doesn't revolve around you. See you later, dear."

Ten minutes later Meredith had called and asked him to meet her at the diner in an hour.

Last night Gran had driven Meredith to the only B & B in town. Miss Tolliver's place was booked for the holiday, but as a favor to Gran she'd opened up her daughter's room since she was backpacking through Europe with friends. It was probably for the best. If Meredith had stayed at the house, Gran would have slept in the hall between their rooms.

Luna had arched an eyebrow when he and Meredith walked into the diner. Right. He'd been there with two women in one week. Truth be told, Tucker was glad to be out in public with his fiancée. Things couldn't get too heated with this many witnesses.

"I think we should take a break," Meredith said before he'd even looked at the menu.

Tucker froze. "Mer—"

"She's the one, isn't she? The girl who broke your heart. The one you wrote to. The girl who never answered your letters."

Tucker looked around before giving a slight nod.

"You still care about her," Meredith said.

"What? No, you've got it all wrong!" Tucker protested, but she wasn't listening.

"I came here thinking maybe you missed me—"

"I did miss you."

"But you're fine. Better than fine. It seems like you're in your element in this dinky little town. So now I'm wondering if you really know what you want."

"C'mon, Mere—"

"You're still very drawn to that ex-girlfriend of yours."

He sat up straighter, rearranged the silverware, moved his drink. "Not true."

"Then, how else do you explain that . . . explosion between the two of you yesterday?"

He sensed he'd better choose his next words very carefully. "Personality conflict?"

Meredith leaned in, her voice quieting. "We've been together for almost two years, and in all that time, we've never had a fight like that. What do you think that says about us?"

Tucker blinked. "Uh, that we're compatible?"

“And then there’s the way you look at her.”

He swallowed thickly. Felt a little sick.

“What? You didn’t think I’d notice?”

Tucker sat back and did what any red-blooded male would do in his circumstance. He lied. “There was nothing to notice. Emma and I don’t agree on her plans for the property. What you were noticing was tension, not attraction.” At least, not on Emma’s part, he was sure.

“Oh, please,” she said.

Luna still hadn’t come to take their order. He looked for her now, hoping she’d swoop in and interrupt. Unfortunately, she was walking into the back with a tray full of dishes.

“Meredith,” he whispered, “I think you’re overreacting. We don’t have a problem.”

“Which might be part of the problem,” she said, sliding out of her seat. “I’m heading to the airport. I’ve got to be in New York by tomorrow. Dempsey has a spot on Good Morning America, not that you care.” She swung her bag over her shoulder.

“Of course I care.” Tucker had stood. “Let me drive you. I can return your car—”

“No,” she’d said, holding up a hand. “I need some time. I think you do too. Call me when you figure out what you want.”

“Meredith—”

But he’d been talking to air because she was gone.

Tucker threw the tennis ball extra hard. It ricocheted, glanced off his head, and landed in a pile of dirty laundry.

He swung his feet to the floor. He needed to shake this off. No more brooding. It was time to make his way downtown for the tree lighting anyway. He checked his reflection in the mirror above the dresser, shrugged into his coat, and grabbed his keys. The cold air would do him some good.

It looked like the entire population had turned out for the festivities. Tucker fought his way through the crowd, hundreds of people crammed onto the green next to the courthouse in anticipation of the tree lighting. He passed a man who had a toddler parked on each shoulder, both children squealing in delight as the guy bounced them in time to Christmas music being blasted from the speakers on the platform.

“Glad you could make it, son,” Hal Bricknell said as he climbed onto the dais, taking his place next to Reverend Carter, who was leading the masses

in a rousing chorus of “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” The mayor was busy behind them, talking to Jared Brewster and making sure the circuit breaker could handle the amperage of the downtown display.

“Here.” Hal thrust a thermos at Tucker. “Hold on to this. It’ll keep your hands warm just in case the wife goes long.” Spoken like a man who knew what he was talking about.

The song ended, and Dolly Bricknell took the microphone.

“Thank you, Frank. Folks, let’s give Reverend Carter a hand!” The crowd roared, and the good reverend leaned in and whispered something in Dolly’s ear. “Right. Folks, Frank wants me to remind y’all not to forget the reason for the season and that Sunday worship begins at 11:00 a.m. at the First Baptist Church.

“All right!” the mayor continued. “Without further ado, let’s give Miss Lily’s very own doctor grandson a warm Normal welcome!” More cheering. A loud whoop came from a large man standing off to the side. “Tucker, will you do the honors?”

Tucker stepped forward and waved as the throng began the countdown. Five, four, three, two, one—everyone went wild as he flipped the switch, igniting the tree and all of Main Street. Tucker got caught up in the moment, cheering and singing along, until he looked out at the jubilant throng and right into the narrowed eyes of Nina Prentiss. He turned and shook hands with the mayor and Reverend Carter, but when he climbed down from the platform, Nina was waiting for him.

“You need to leave Emma alone,” she said.

Tucker gave Hal a good-natured slap on the back before he wandered over to the tent on the green that was set up with donuts and hot chocolate. “Nina, this isn’t a good time,” he said as he walked away from her.

“I’ll only take a minute of your precious time. Emma has a lot going on.”

For a guy who tried to steer clear of drama, the past twenty-four hours had been jam-packed with it. Tucker walked down the block heading toward his car, Nina still at his heels. “I don’t think there’s a problem,” he said.

“You forget I was there yesterday.”

He unlocked his door, but Nina grabbed it. Tucker sighed. “What do you want, Nina?”

“To tap my heels together three times and wish you back to California. I’m serious, Tucker. Emma has a lot riding on this deal. You could really

mess things up if you wanted to.”

“Well, I don’t.” He looked at Nina and paused. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Is Emma okay?”

Nina tugged on her purse strap. It kind of seemed like she wanted to say something else. Instead, she let go of his car door and said, “She’s great. Just get out of her way, will you?”

“I’m not standing in the way of anything.”

“I’m talking about the house, Tucker. Maybe it’s time to let go. Emma will take care of it. She loves that place, and she loves your grandmother. It’ll make a perfect country inn. Besides, it’s not like she has another alternative.”

Tucker froze at her words, the tiniest seed of an idea springing into his head. “What did you say?”

“When?”

Why hadn’t he thought of it before? “Nina.” He grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her forehead. “You’re brilliant. I’ve got to go.”

“Hey! Don’t forget what I said,” she called after him. He stuck his hand out the window and waved as he drove away.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TUCKER WAS UP TO SOMETHING.

Emma watched him as she drove by. He was trudging down the hill in a pair of old work boots and a barn coat, a six-foot ladder slung over one shoulder, toolbox in hand. He smiled and lifted his chin when he saw her.

After finishing her subbing gig today, she'd hurried over to Stony Creek to bring Miss Lily dinner, hoping to avoid Tucker. Just as well that he was busy.

Emma found Miss Lily bundled in bed with a scarf around her neck. Poor thing had returned from her trip to St. Louis feeling a bit under the weather.

"What's Tucker up to?" she asked, laying a tray across Miss Lily's lap.

"Who knows?" Miss Lily yawned. "He's being mysterious all of a sudden."

"I saw him Saturday afternoon with Hal Bricknell outside of Shep's old place. They were unloading some equipment from Hal's truck."

Miss Lily shrugged. "Maybe they're helping Chuck with something."

Chuck Higby lived in Shep's old house with his little family. He looked after the livestock and oversaw what little farming was still done on the property. There was the pumpkin patch and the orchards, and he and his wife ran Strawberry Lane, the u-pick venture that was so popular in the summer.

"Maybe," Emma said slowly. Or maybe not. She was suspicious.

There was no sign of the girlfriend, so maybe the rumors that they'd broken up were true. Not that she cared.

"I missed you at church yesterday," Emma said, tucking the blanket around Miss Lily's legs. "It was lonely on the pew all by myself."

"I tried to get Tucker to go," Miss Lily said, "but he insisted on staying here with me. I think he was just looking for an excuse to sleep in." She moved the salad around with her fork.

"Aren't you hungry?"

Miss Lily sighed. "Not really. More tired than anything else. Do you mind, dear?"

"Of course not." Emma lifted the tray and pulled the covers up over Miss Lily's shoulders. "I'll take this to the kitchen," she said. "You rest. Text me if you need anything."

But Miss Lily was already out.

Emma crept down the back stairs and put the tray on the island. The sink was full of dishes. Well, if she couldn't get Miss Lily to eat, maybe she could help around here. She pushed up her sleeves and turned on the water.

She'd never seen Miss Lily so exhausted. Lying upstairs under the covers, she'd looked small and frail. Emma didn't like thinking it, but maybe Miss Lily was finally slowing down.

Emma heard shuffling behind her and turned to see Tucker leaning against the counter, helping himself to Miss Lily's dinner.

"How did you get in here without me hearing you?"

"I'm a ninja," he said around the sandwich.

"That was for your grandmother," she said.

He looked at the tray. "She can have the salad. Nice of you to bring it."

She turned back to the dishes. "She seems pretty sick." Emma looked at Tucker out of the corner of her eye. He didn't look depressed. Maybe all the gossip was wrong, and he and Malibu Barbie hadn't broken up after all. Emma scrubbed the pan harder.

Tucker finished the sandwich and put his plate in the sink. "I know. I'm a little worried. I've never seen her so lethargic. If she isn't better in a couple of days, I'm taking her to a doctor."

"A doctor?" Emma cocked an eyebrow at him. "You're a doctor."

"I mean a specialist. It's not a good idea for me to treat family members."

Emma looked closer. His eyes weren't bloodshot, but Tucker probably wasn't the type to cry over a breakup.

"What?" he asked.

She looked down at the plate. "Uh, nothing. Did you get Hopper's text?" she deflected. Talk about the contracts. Good idea. Funny how that had suddenly become neutral ground in her mind.

"I did. I'm glad the preliminary contracts are finally done. Guess I'll be seeing you Wednesday afternoon. I don't know if Gran will be well enough to make it to the meeting though."

"That should be okay. You can fill her in later." She looked up at him, and darn it all, her heart started thumping in her chest. Tucker made her nervous, and she didn't like it. Not one bit. "The sooner we're done, the sooner you can get out of here," she said.

Tucker looked at her for a second and then nodded. "Nice of you to stop by." He wiped his hands on a dish towel.

“Oh, well, I have an event at The Barn tonight. I was coming out here anyway.”

Tucker nodded. “Have a good evening,” he said before heading out the back door. “See you later.”

Yeah, she thought. That was the problem.

* * *

Emma opened the door to a scene of utter chaos. Nineties dance music blared from the overhead speakers, dishes were stacked haphazardly on the table, and linens sagged over a chair. Her wait staff was busy singing along to the Pixies as they set chairs up around the table.

“‘Here Comes Your Man?’ I love this song,” Emma said, plugging in the iron for Sara Markland.

“I know!” Sara squealed. “It’s, like, so old.”

Emma rolled her eyes. She had a Pixies concert T-shirt in her pajama drawer.

“Katie and Jess, would you set up the small table at the back?” Emma called. “Nina and Rose will be here any minute with the cake.”

“Yep,” Katie said. Like the rest of the girls Emma had hired for the night, Katie was just seventeen, but she was by far the most dependable of the group.

“Thanks,” Emma said, smoothing a runner over the table.

The Andreases’ reveal party was tonight. They’d invited a lot of family from out of town, and Emma hoped their little get-together might generate some new business.

“Did Betty deliver the flower arrangements?” she asked.

“They’re in the fridge,” Jess said.

“Great.”

The door opened, and Nina and Rose trundled in a three-layer cake, balancing it between them.

“Go straight back,” Rose instructed.

“I am,” Nina said.

“No, you’re not. You’re going in at an angle. There’s a raised floorboard over that way, remember? You want to wear this cake?”

“Fine,” Nina grumbled before bellowing, “Seriously? Ricky Martin? I hate this song! Someone turn down the music! Rose, are we almost there? Who knew flour and sugar weighed so much?”

“Ahem.” A placid voice penetrated the din, and all eyes swung toward the open door. There stood a woman wearing a red wool swing coat, gloves in hand. Her gray hair was tucked into a flawless French twist, showing off her fine bone structure and amazingly smooth face. Emma took one look at the woman’s rigid bearing and sagged. Delia Landry. It had to be. She looked down at her own wool sweater, skinny jeans, and boots. Not what she’d imagined she’d be wearing for a meeting with the grand dame of St. Louis society. Well, there was nothing to be done. She stalked toward the door, hand extended.

“Hi. I’m Emma McAllister. You must be Mrs. Landry.”

The woman was slow to take her hand. “Is this—are you . . . ? There must be some mistake. I’m looking for”—Mrs. Landry looked at her phone—“The Barn at Stony Creek.”

“You’re in the right place,” Emma said, and Mrs. Landry clicked her tongue, stepping over strands of lights.

“No,” she said. “No, no, no. This won’t work. What is she thinking?” she said more to herself but definitely for Emma’s benefit. Mrs. Landry stepped around the ironing board.

“Where does she plan for the ceremony to take place?”

Emma strode to the back of The Barn to the set of wide double doors. “Here.” She flung them open.

“Lovely,” Mrs. Landry muttered. “I suppose she’ll be married under a trellis twined with plastic flowers.”

Now she was just being rude. Emma smiled anyway. “Actually,” she said with a sweep of her arm, “in the spring the garden and hillside will be in bloom. It will be . . . lovely, as you said.”

“Hmm.”

“Did you have any specific questions for me today, Mrs. Landry?”

“Yes,” the woman said, turning to her, her hands tight on her purse strap. “How much?”

“How much what?” Emma asked, aware that someone had killed the music. Glancing back, she saw that the girls had disappeared, but she could see Nina peeking through a crack in her office door.

“How much to break the contract my daughter signed? Oh, she told me all about it. Thinks she pulled one over on me. But she knows this”—Mrs. Landry gestured wide—“will not do. Not at all. So how much?”

“As you said, the contract is with your daughter. She’s the only one who can break it.”

“Surely we can come to an agreement. Kira’s wedding will be attended by some of the most influential people in the country, and I will not have them sitting on hay bales while my daughter gets married under a chandelier made of old horseshoes.”

“We have chairs, Mrs. Landry. And look around. Not a horseshoe in sight.”

Mrs. Landry took a purposeful step forward, eyes pegged on Emma’s. “Listen,” she said lifting one perfectly shaped eyebrow. “I know this wedding would be quite the coup for you. Break the contract and I’ll throw what business I can your way to make up for it. There are other ways to get noticed without my daughter being humiliated. Cancel the contract. I can be very difficult when I want to be.”

Emma believed her. Instead, she took a deep breath and smiled again. “Well then . . .” Mrs. Landry’s shoulders started to relax until Emma said, “It looks like we’ll have to find some middle ground. Unless your daughter tells me otherwise, the wedding will be here. If you’d like to make an appointment to discuss the details”—she pulled a business card from her pocket—“you can reach me at that number. I’m not available at the moment. As you can see, we’re getting ready for an event this evening. Have a nice day.”

Delia Landry straightened her scarf and stalked out of The Barn, leaving the door wide open behind her. Emma walked over and shut it, sagging against the door. A cheer erupted in the back.

Nina and the girls emerged from her office, eyes wide, hands over their mouths. “Emma,” Sara said, “that was lit!”

“Totally lit,” Katie agreed.

“Thank you . . . I think.”

Nina walked toward her. “What do we do now?” she asked. The girls spilled back out into The Barn, giggling as they got back to work.

Emma rubbed her forehead and gave the only answer she had. “Pray.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“CLAWSON, GET OFF THE DESK.” Emma gave the seven-year-old a pointed look. The kid grinned and lowered his knee. It was her last day of subbing, but she was used to this. The kids couldn’t help themselves. They had to see how far they could push the newbie.

“Sorry, Miz McAl’ster,” the little boy said with an impish grin that would have melted her heart if she weren’t so stressed out.

She hadn’t slept too well last night. She kept checking her phone, expecting Kira to call at any moment and yank the contract out from under her. It was the stuff of nightmares, with Delia Landry cast as the wicked witch. Having to wake and face thirty first graders before the sun was properly up hadn’t helped either.

She looked down at the stack of spelling worksheets she’d collected and grabbed a red pen. In ten minutes, the kids would go out for morning recess and she’d take a break, maybe try to get her head in the game.

Instead, her mind refused to focus. She and Tucker were meeting at Hopper’s office tomorrow afternoon, and the thought of seeing him again gave her pinpricks of anxiety. Ernie Colfax had left three messages last night wondering if she’d decided to let the Elks have The Barn on New Year’s Eve. She hadn’t. And she still hadn’t heard from Miss Lily. She must still be under the weather, or maybe she wasn’t checking her messages. Emma would have to stop by and see her later.

She flipped over another spelling worksheet, and her phone vibrated on the desk. She glanced at it. A text. From Kira Landry. Her stomach dropped, and she looked at the clock. Five minutes until recess.

“Okay, everyone, put your things away, get your coats on, and line up. Almost time for recess!” The children hopped up and stampeded to the cubby room. When the bell rang and the door was closed, Emma grabbed her phone. She hesitated.

“Please don’t let it be bad news,” she muttered. She slid her finger across the screen.

Heard you gave my mother a hard time. Well done! Don’t worry about her. She’ll come around. Will email you a link to my wedding board. Thanks! Talk soon.

Emma relaxed in her chair, and the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding left her in a whoosh.

Later that afternoon she walked into The Barn to see Nina at the table, feet propped up on the chair next to her. She was looking at her laptop, brow furrowed.

“Hey! Good news!” Nina said when she saw her. “We just booked the Caldwell Group for a Christmas party.”

“Who?” Emma asked, hanging up her coat.

“A property management company out of Springfield.”

“How many?”

“Seventy-five.”

“Not bad. Deposit?”

“Already in the bank.”

Emma took a seat beside her friend. “Excellent. Anything else?”

“A few inquiries but no other bookings. But the Powells’ second payment came through this morning. Has she called you yet?”

“She’s coming in later this week to finalize the menu and floral arrangements.”

Rose came in through the service door, carrying a tray of cake and cutlery.

“What’s this?” Nina asked as Rose slid a plate in front of her.

“Cake. Does it not look like cake?” Rose asked and slid a plate in front of Emma too.

“Of course it looks like cake. Where did it come from?”

“It’s leftover from the Andreases’ reveal party. They’re having a girl, by the way, since neither of you bothered to show up.”

“It was on Facebook.” Nina shrugged.

Emma swung her feet up onto the chair beside her and tucked in. Rose’s cake was definitely one of the perks of the job.

Nina took a bite. “Oh my gosh,” she muttered, closing her eyes. “Is this your princess cake? Why are you giving this to me? Rose, you know I love this stuff!” Nina’s tone was accusatory.

“Why are you complaining?” Rose asked, walking in purposeful strides around the table.

“Because I’ve gained five pounds since you started working here.” Nina watched Rose circle the table again. “What are you doing?”

“Poor you. I’ve gained ten! And what does it look like? I’m walking around the table. Gotta get my steps in today, or that ten pounds will turn into twenty.”

For some reason, they both turned angry eyes on Emma.

“What?” she asked and took another bite.

“Why aren’t you fat?” Nina asked.

“What kind of question is that?”

“An honest one.”

“How do you know I haven’t gained weight?” Emma asked.

“You don’t look like it, but you should; you eat like a linebacker for the Chiefs.”

“Preach it, sister!” Rose exclaimed, still walking.

“Nina, that’s just rude,” Emma said.

“No, it’s the truth. If stress eating were an Olympic sport, you’d medal.”

Emma took an even bigger bite.

“When we were remodeling this place, you lived on nachos and ice cream.”

“Those calories practically burned themselves,” Emma insisted.

“And after every breakup, you cleaned out the ice cream aisle at Grimm’s. You Hoover burnt-almond fudge—whole cartons of it—and then walk around in those skinny jeans like it didn’t happen. But I’m a witness! It happened!”

Emma shrugged. “People stress-eat when they break up.”

“No. People stress-eat when they get dumped. You’re always the one doing the dumping.”

“That’s not true. Hopper broke up with me.”

“He could tell you weren’t into him. I think he did it to try to keep you.”

Emma pointed her fork at Nina. “That makes no sense.”

“Yeah, well, next time you get engaged, give me a heads-up, and I’ll buy stock in Dreyer’s,” Rose said as she took one more lap around the table.

Someone cleared their throat, and all three of them turned to see Tucker standing in the doorway.

* * *

Tucker didn’t trust himself to speak, so he was quiet for a moment. The punch of jealousy he felt at the mention of Emma’s exes had hit him right in the solar plexus.

Emma’s face went pink, color spreading up her neck to the tips of her ears.

“So,” Tucker said, leaning against the door and trying to appear unaffected. “How many times have you been engaged, Em?” he asked.

Emma visibly shrank in her chair. “None of your business,” she muttered.

“She does a brisk business on eBay!” an older lady Tucker didn’t know chimed in. “The ring from fiancé number two helped finance The Barn.”

“Okay, enough!” Emma barked, her face nuclear. “Nina, I emailed you the updates for the social media outlets; Rose, I’m gonna need you here Thursday afternoon with the tasting menu we talked about. We good for now?”

Nina shot Tucker a death stare. “We’re good,” she mumbled.

Emma walked over to him. “What do you need, Tucker?” she asked, arms folded across her chest.

“Do you have a second? I’d like to show you something,” he said.

“I don’t know—”

“Go ahead. We’ve got this,” the older woman called, giving him a wink. He liked her already.

“Thanks, Rose,” Emma said tersely. “Fine. Neens, will you lock up?” Nina nodded, and Emma grabbed her coat. Tucker put his hand on her back as they left, then dropped it when she glared at him over her shoulder.

“Sorry,” he muttered.

“Where are we going?” she asked, walking to the parking lot.

“Not far.”

“I’ll follow you.”

“I can give you—” but she was already in that ancient truck of hers. He heard the engine fire, then die. Emma tried again, pumping on the gas and twisting the key in the ignition. Tucker watched, arms folded as she tried again. He rapped his knuckles gently against the window.

“I can give you a ride,” he said through the glass.

Emma looked straight forward, not acknowledging him. She tried it again, then hit the steering wheel when it still didn’t start. After a minute, she got out of the truck. “I don’t know what’s wrong with it,” she huffed.

“Might have something to do with the fact that it’s a hundred years old.” Tucker’s tone was light. He didn’t like this dynamic between them. It felt combative. Especially since most days he was happy to see her. He unlocked his car door and held it for her.

“Whatever,” she said. “I hope this is quick. I have a million things to do.”

He ducked in and started the car. “It won’t take long, but I’m asking for an open mind, Em. Can you manage that much?”

She grunted her response to the window, still not looking at him.

“What was that?”

“Fine!” she said. “Let’s just get this over with, whatever this is.”

They drove in silence behind The Barn, circling around to the dirt road that led past the Big House.

“So how long are you here?” she asked, and Tucker glanced over at her.

“Why? Want me gone?”

“What? No.” But she meant yes. “Nina said you turned on the Christmas lights downtown last week. Seems like you’re making yourself comfortable, that’s all.”

“Well, the mayor asked me a few days before Thanksgiving. Didn’t feel right to turn her down.”

Emma grunted. “Weird.”

“Not so weird when you consider she’s trying to recruit me.”

“Recruit you for what?”

“Doc Braithwaite is retiring. She wants me to take over his practice.”

Emma jerked in her seat, her elbow giving a thwack against the car door.

“Take it easy on the interior, EJ. It’s a rental.”

“Don’t call me that,” she said angrily, rubbing her elbow. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m a good doctor,” Tucker said, feeling a little defensive.

“I’m sure you are. I bet they love you out there in the land of body dysmorphia. Dolly can’t seriously think you’d consider it. I mean . . . you’re not, right?”

Tucker grinned, looking at the iron grip she had on the armrest. “Wow. Does the idea that I might stay make you that nervous?”

“I am not nervous. It’s just ridiculous. You’d never be content here.”

“Why not?” He pulled up the gravel drive to Shep’s old place—Chuck’s place now—and put the car in park.

“Because twelve years ago all you wanted was to be gone. Gone from Normal, gone from your family, gone from—” She stopped.

“Gone from you?” The car was quiet.

“What are we doing here?” she asked, peering up at the house.

Message received. Subject closed.

They got out of the car, and Emma turned questioning eyes on him.

Tucker threw his arms wide and boomed, “Ta-da!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

EMMA HAD ALWAYS LOVED THIS place. It wasn't as grand as the Victorian splendor of the Big House, but this little gem of a home had a quaintness, a charm. It was a beautiful Greek revival farmhouse tucked between the trees, just visible on the drive into town. Whitewashed with tall black shutters, the delicate scrollwork on the front porch made it look like it had sprung from the pages of a fairy story.

“‘Ta-da’ what?”

“Okay, that was a little premature. All the good stuff is inside.” Tucker grabbed her hand and pulled her up the front steps. “C’mon. You’re going to love this.”

She doubted it, but it was hard to focus with his hand wrapped so firmly around hers. He needed to stop touching her. It was . . . confusing.

He pushed through the front door, dragging her behind him. “Look at this!”

“Look at what?”

Tucker’s face fell. “Can’t you see the difference? Come in here.” He motioned for her to follow him into the front room just off the entry.

Emma looked around. “The floors look really nice. Did you help Chuck refinish them? Hey, the walls aren’t that horrible powder blue anymore.”

“I painted them,” Tuck said proudly. The room showed well. The pewter-colored walls made the trim pop. Even the leaded glass above the windows seemed brighter.

“It’s a nice room.”

“Nice? I spend three days painting and all I get is ‘nice’?” Tucker sighed. “Look, Emma, I think this house would make an ideal B & B, or if you wanted, you could turn it into a vacation rental property. Four bedrooms and a couple of bathrooms. It’d be great for a family vacationing in the area.”

“Except a family already lives here.”

“Not anymore. Chuck and his wife are buying a place in town. He’s moving out next week, so the house will be available.”

“I didn’t ask you to do this.”

“No, but this is the compromise I was talking about. You gotta admit it’s not a bad idea.”

She walked out into the hall and considered what he was saying.

“The location is ideal, right off the highway on the way to Branson,” Tucker continued. “The Big House is all the way up the hill. This is closer.”

“Two seconds closer. That’s not an issue. People can see the Big House all lit up at night. It looks romantic.”

“So turn the lights out. It’s a private residence.”

They walked back toward the entryway, and Emma could see that Tucker had painted here too. The staircase gleamed, polished to perfection. It wouldn’t take too much work to get this place back to its former glory.

She wandered over to the library with its built-in bookcases and wide-arched opening.

“I haven’t done anything in here,” he said.

That explained the dust. The woodwork was chipped, and the floors needed some attention.

“There’s a hole,” Emma said, scuffing her shoe against the floor.

Tucker came up beside her. “Where?”

“Right there.” She pointed with her toe. “A hole in the floor.”

“It’s not that big. I’m sure you can fix that, easy.”

“I can fix it?”

Tucker shrugged. “Why not?”

They walked back down the hall and through the door. The kitchen needed a lot of work. Right now, it was a homage to 1985: beige linoleum, Formica countertops, and painted roosters on the backsplash tile. Kinda ugly.

“Take a look at this,” Tucker said, putting a hand on her shoulder and turning her.

“At the hole in the wall? Lovely.”

“Emma, look.” He pulled back the drywall. There was brick underneath. “This must have been the back of the house before the kitchen was added. It goes all the way up. Think how cool the exposed brick would be.”

She picked at the mess. “Did Chuck let you do this?” she asked, noticing the pockmarks peppering the wall.

“I told you Chuck’s leaving. Gran let him live here rent free while he saved for a down payment. He took care of the place, but he’s not attached.”

Emma folded her arms across her chest and looked out the back windows. The porch looked like it was in good shape.

As if he were reading her mind, Tucker said, “If you needed to, you could enclose the back porch and turn it into a suite of rooms for the

manager.”

It wasn't a bad idea. The plumbing was already there, so—wait. Was she actually considering this?

The Big House was . . . well, bigger. Grander. But this place had its charms too.

Through the windows she could see the paddock where the livestock grazed in the summer. The barn, not much bigger than a shed really, looked pretty covered in snow. A tire swing hung from a huge maple tree.

Emma remembered lazy summer afternoons sitting out here on Shep's weather-beaten rocking chair, the screened-in porch filtering the bugs from the warm, humid air while she read her books, waiting for Tucker to finish his chores. She remembered Shep's kindness, how one evening he'd insisted on giving her a ride home after dark, lecturing her the whole way for thinking she could ride her bike along the highway after dark. For a few years, Shep had been a surrogate father, offering a hand up or a pat on the back when needed. She missed him. Maybe she'd email him tonight and tell him what Tucker had done to his old place.

“It's not a bad idea,” she conceded.

That sideways grin appeared on Tucker's face, the one that used to make her knees a bit wobbly. He held the door for her, and they went back down the hall.

“I haven't done anything upstairs. The bathrooms need some work, but the claw-foot tub is in great condition. And don't forget there's a good-sized attic here too. You might be able to add a couple more rooms up there. A little paint and some furniture and I think you'd have yourself a nice little bed and breakfast.”

They walked onto the front porch. Tucker locked the door, and Emma ran an assessing eye over the landscape, some of the prettiest scenery in the county.

They went down the front steps. “I hope you'll consider it,” Tucker said over the roof of the car. “I, uh . . . well, I told Gran last night what I was doing down here. She seemed to like the idea.”

Emma didn't say anything. She just nodded and got in the car. Tucker pulled away from the house and drove down the hill toward the road.

She was going to have to consider Tucker's ideas. If his grandmother was on board, she might not have a choice. Better to adjust her expectations now rather than nurse frustration later. She chewed on her thumb, wondering if

Tucker's concern over the Big House was because he actually was considering the mayor's offer.

He turned into the parking lot at The Barn and pulled up next to her truck. When she started to get out of the car, he put a hand on her arm. Again with the touching.

He opened his mouth but then hesitated.

"What is it?" she asked.

His expression shifted, and he said, "Never mind."

"You want me to talk to the mayor?" Emma asked. "Tell her she's wasting her time?"

Tucker raised an eyebrow. "I don't need you to run interference for me, Emma Jane. I can handle it."

"Yeah, I guess you can," she said and got out of the car.

* * *

"Gran!" Tucker bellowed as he walked in the front door.

"No need to yell. I'm right here." Her voice came from the front room. She sat propped up on the sofa, book in hand. She adjusted the scarf around her neck when she saw him.

Tucker stalked toward her. "How many times has Emma Jane been engaged?"

His grandmother blinked at him a few times, then bit down on a smile. "My, my, my," she muttered, returning her attention to the book.

"Well?"

She turned a page. "Three."

"Three!"

"Mm-hmm. The first boy was—actually, I don't know anything about him, but she met fiancé number two in a study group while she was at Vanderbilt getting her MBA. Old Tennessee family. Broke his heart. Don't think she's allowed back in the state after the way she broke things off the day before the wedding. Her third fiancé was . . ." She looked at him over the top of her glasses.

"Hopper Spickett," Tucker finished for her.

"She told you."

"No, she didn't. I overheard her talking to Nina."

"You saw Emma? How is she? I hear she's been subbing at the elementary school this week."

"She's fine. Except she never seems too happy to see me."

“Now, I wonder why that is.” Gran turned another page.

“Right. I broke her heart. Not sure how I did that considering she’s the one who never wrote me back. Thirteen letters over three months and not one response, but it’s all over town that I played fast and free with sweet little Emma Jane McAllister’s heart.”

“That’s not what’s all over town,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Word is you broke up with your fiancée the day after Thanksgiving. Care to comment?”

He needed to get out of here. He’d been in town too long if he was the subject of gossip. Tucker sat down and rubbed his eyes. “We’re on . . . hold. Meredith thinks I need to figure some things out.” He and Meredith had had another talk last night when she’d called him on a break from a photo shoot in Palm Springs.

His grandmother leaned forward. “What things?”

“Darned if I know. Women are a mystery,” Tucker said, dodging the issue. “Emma and I meet with Hopper tomorrow afternoon. I showed her what I’ve done with Shep’s old place.”

“And?”

Tucker shrugged. “She didn’t run out of the house screaming. She says she’ll consider it. I guess that’s all I can ask for.”

Gran nodded and went back to her book.

“You look better today,” he said. “You’ve got some color in your cheeks. That’s good.”

“Yep, ready to go back to my Zumba class,” she said, not looking up from the page.

Every time he looked at her, he was a little taken aback by how old she’d gotten. He regretted not being more a part of her life. It was clear he’d stayed away too long.

“Gran, I’m glad you’re still around.”

“As opposed to what? Dead?”

Tucker grinned. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“Lovely sentiment, dear.” She looked at him. “Is she getting to you?”

“Who?” Tucker said.

“Emma.”

“What? No.”

“Then, why are you so mopey this afternoon?”

Tucker got up, wandered to the window, and rubbed his neck. “Gran, what do you think of Emma’s plan for the Big House?”

Gran took off her glasses, closed her book, and put it on the coffee table. “I have mixed feelings. Common sense tells me this is probably one of two ways for the property to survive. But I’m a little sad. She’s going to divide my room in two and add another bath upstairs. I think if he weren’t already dead, this would kill your granddaddy.”

“I know. I feel the same way, even though Emma insists I have no right to.”

“Have you prayed about it?”

Tucker looked at her. “It’s your property. Shouldn’t you be the one to pray about it?”

“I did.”

“What was your answer?”

“You were my answer.” She folded her hands across her lap.

“What?”

“As soon as I said amen the thought came to me that I should get you out here to help.”

“No pressure, right?” Tuck smiled ruefully. Glancing out the window, he saw a tow truck labeled Buckman Auto drive by, dragging Emma’s ancient truck behind it. “You said this was one of two ways for the property to survive. What’s the other way?” He sat down next to her.

She paused for a second. “For you to come back here and live in the house yourself.”

“Gran—”

“I know, I know. You have a job in California.”

“More than a job; I have a whole life out there.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that. You have to make your own choices, Tucker. But, to be honest, I sometimes wish those choices hadn’t taken you so far away.” There was that tug of guilt in his chest again.

Gran patted his hand and got up. “It’ll all work out. Whatever that means.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“IT’S THE ALTERNATOR,” CAM BUCKMAN said, elbow deep in the innards of Emma’s beloved pickup truck. She saw a lot of the Buckman boys these days.

“How much?” Emma sighed.

“You’re lookin’ at about four Benjamins here, Emma.”

“Four hundred dollars! Is the part gold-plated?”

Cam grinned at her. “You ever think of putting this old lady out to pasture? She costs more than she’s worth, you know.”

“I do, but if I can barely afford to keep her, I certainly can’t afford to replace her. Fix her up, Cam.”

Great. She was without transportation for the next twenty-four hours.

She’d paid fifty dollars to have the heap of metal towed to the garage, hoping for a (fingers crossed) inexpensive fix. Nope.

Sometimes, looking for those elusive silver linings was exhausting. It looked like things might turn around soon with the Landry wedding, but for now she was broke. Her budget was stretched to the max, and life seemed intent on nickel-and-diming her into an early grave.

She waved as Nina pulled up to the curb.

“What’s the damage?” her friend asked while Emma buckled into her Prius.

“More than I’ve got.”

“I could always—”

“No, Neens.” Nina knew more about Emma’s financial situation than anyone else. Consequently, she was always trying to loan Emma money. “Besides, I’m not paying for the repairs. My emergency Visa card is.”

“Rumor has it you’ll have to pay that back.”

“Let’s ignore that little fact for the moment, shall we?”

“Okay, but you might not want to ignore the run in your hose.”

“What?” Emma asked, looking down. This really wasn’t her day. She looked at the clock on the dash. “I’ve got time. Will you stop at Grimm’s so I can pick up a new pair?”

“I can’t believe you actually wear pantyhose. They’re so nineteen ninety.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, try being a redhead with skin the color of chalk. Just drive.”

Nina pulled into the parking lot.

“Be right back.” Emma got out of the car and hurried toward the store. She’d just gone through the front door when her phone pinged with a text. Ugh. Delia Landry. Again. In the last twenty-four hours, Emma had received a fistful of texts from the disapproving matriarch, each one a missile.

Your venue isn’t large or elegant enough to handle the number or caliber of guests that will be attending the wedding.

Can people find your location on the google? Not sure if GPS can locate your address.

The Google?

And now this little gem:

Is there a room available for my daughter to get ready before the ceremony? Or will she have to make do with the potting shed?

The lady was just too much. Emma slipped her phone into her purse without responding and walked right into a shopping cart.

“I’m so sorry . . . oh, hi, Jenny.” Emma gave her an awkward smile. Jennifer Barrows was a recent transplant to the area. She and her husband had moved here from Chicago a year ago after passing through and falling in love with their little town.

“Hey, Emma! How are you?”

“Fine, fine,” Emma said, twisting her hair.

“Given any more thought to selling?” Last October Jenny had jogged past Emma’s house, stopped to gush over the beautiful Craftsman, and told her she’d never seen one in such good condition. By the end of the conversation, Jenny had asked if Emma would ever consider selling her home. Turned out Jenny sold real estate.

“Didn’t you guys move into the old Perry place on Broad Street?”

“We did. Just renting though. If you ever change your mind . . .”

“I’ll call you first. I still have your card,” Emma reassured her.

“Guess that’s all I can hope for. Have a great day.” Jenny walked off, and Emma sighed.

Emma hadn’t lied. She did still have the business card, and from time to time she thought about selling the only home she could remember, the place of a thousand memories, both good and bad. There had been nights when she’d looked at her bank balance, then glanced over to Jenny’s card stuck to the fridge door. She didn’t want to do it, but sometimes circumstance dictated outcome. She couldn’t completely rule it out.

She bought the pantyhose and wrestled into them in the ladies' room stall.

Feeling a little better, she got back into Nina's car, and her friend drove her down the block to the courthouse.

"You ready for this?" Nina asked, keeping the engine running.

"I hope so," she muttered.

"Should be interesting."

"Why do you say that?"

"Two exes in the same room. Hopper is still hung up on you, and newsflash, Tucker's not far behind."

"Tucker is not hung up on me," Emma denied.

"Oh yeah? You should see the way he looks at you. Kind of nauseating."

"Not funny."

"But true. Get out of my car. I'm double-parked."

"Wish me luck," Emma said.

"It's been wished. I lit a candle at St. Matthew's, too, just in case your God isn't listening."

"He's listening," Emma insisted. "I'm just not sure what He's thinking."

* * *

"Is that what you're gonna wear?" Gran asked, pausing over her sandwich.

Tucker looked down. Khaki pants, a nice button-down shirt Meredith had picked out for him, loafers. He looked fine. "Yes. Is something wrong?"

"You're underdressed," she said.

"No, I'm not. This is business casual. I wear stuff like this to work all the time. Besides, it's Normal. Aren't things a little down-home around here anyway?"

"Down home, huh? Even my grandfather, a sharecropper so poor every item of clothing he owned had holes in them, knew to wear a suit when he met with a lawyer."

"Then, I hope Hopper will forgive my lapse in judgment. I don't have time to change. Gonna be late as it is."

"What about Emma?"

"What about her?" Tucker asked.

"Don't you care what she thinks?"

"And I'll be going now," he said, grabbing the keys from a dish on the counter. He paused before heading out the back door. "You feel okay? You

look better, but you haven't been out of the house in days."

"Right as rain," his grandmother replied with a wink.

He gave her a look. "You'd tell me if you weren't . . . right?"

"I don't need a babysitter. You'd better get going. You don't want to be late for your appointment."

In Santa Monica, Tucker lived 15.8 miles from his practice. On most days those miles were smog-filled with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Sometimes it took him an hour to get to work, the freeway clotted with commuters. Gran lived five miles from town, and it took him that many minutes to drive, park, and get out of the car. He could get used to this.

Hopper's offices were in the courthouse, a two-story brick building with Georgian columns and a crooked clock tower. Tucker pushed through the old wood doors and was immediately engulfed by the dank smell of age.

Behind the reception desk, Early Jackson stood on a stepladder, busily wrapping white twinkle lights around a column, swishing around in a teal satin dress (complete with crinoline) and a white fur stole. When she moved, the jingle bells she wore around her neck jangled in time.

"Well, if it isn't Liliane Madsen's doctor grandson," she said, stepping down and brushing the dust from her skirt.

"Hey, Early. Good to see you again."

"How's Miss Lily doing?" A note of concern entered her voice.

"She's feeling better."

"That's good. I—well . . ." Early paused like she wanted to say something, but instead, she asked, "How can I help you today?"

"I'm meeting with Hopper this afternoon. Can you tell me where his office is?"

"Oh, that's right. The sale of Stony Creek Farm. Pity, really. That place has been in the Madsen family for over a century."

Finally, someone who understood.

"Here, hold these," she said, foisting a tangle of lights into his hands. She leaned over her desk and picked up the phone. "Hopper," she said into the handset, "Tucker Madsen is here for you." She didn't wait for a response, just hung up. "He's expecting you." She took the lights from his hands. "You know, if you were living back here, I don't think Miss Lily would consider selling at all. She'd probably leave the whole thing to you."

Not so understanding after all.

"Can you tell me where Hopper's office is?" he asked politely again.

“Suite 201. Northeast corner. You’ll have to take the stairs. The elevator hasn’t worked for five years. Have a good day now,” she said, winking.

He nodded and went up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He could feel Early’s eyes on him the whole way.

When Tucker walked through the heavy oak door, Hopper, in a suit and tie, stood to shake his hand and gestured to the vacant wingback chair in front of his desk. Emma was already seated. She looked very elegant in a silk shirt, slim skirt, and heels, and she gave him a small wave. Tucker smoothed a hand down his shirt front. Maybe he should have changed after all.

“Hopper, Emma. Good to see you both,” Tucker said, taking his seat. He noticed the way Hopper’s eyes kept glancing off Emma before darting away. Poor guy obviously still had a thing for her.

Emma’s purse began to vibrate. She reached inside to silence her phone before putting the purse on the floor. “Sorry about that.”

Hopper spoke to Tucker first. “Miss Lily called me last night. Said she’s a bit under the weather and she couldn’t make it today.”

“That’s right.”

“This is a preliminary meeting. I’d like to go over the proposed plans for the property and review the sales contract. Tucker, you can take your copy with you and show it to Miss Lily. Any changes she wants can be incorporated later. Have her call or text me if she has any questions.”

“Will do.”

“Feel free to make notes in the margins. Let’s get started, shall we?”

For the next half hour they combed over the contract. Tucker raised questions and took notes but mostly listened. Hopper seemed to know his stuff, spouting legalese. Emma didn’t say much.

“The golf course,” Tucker said. “Is that a done deal?”

“Emma holds the lease option on the land, and I don’t think she’ll have a problem getting the zoning changed for a golf course.”

“It’s already been changed,” Emma volunteered.

Hopper nodded. “The planning commission is all for it. It’s a win for the community.”

“And more importantly,” Emma said, “Miss Lily is okay with it.”

“Right,” Tucker mumbled, and Emma gave him a stern look.

Hopper’s next agenda item was the Big House.

“We need to table this discussion,” Tucker insisted. “Em and I are still trying to work out a compromise.”

Hopper looked to Emma, who shrugged a shoulder.

Tucker’s eyes went farther down the page. “Wait a minute.” He paused, reading near the end of the contract, a section that contained the name of Gran’s neighbor. “What’s this?” He pushed the contract across the desk toward Hopper.

“Oh, right. Harlan wants right of first refusal on purchasing the northeast pastures if Emma ever decides to sell.”

“Harlan Beaufort is still alive?” Tucker asked.

“Yeah,” Hopper said.

Tucker turned to Emma. “You know she hates him.”

“You’re exaggerating,” she said.

“No, I’m not. They’ve been feuding for decades. She’d never sell to him.”

Gran had a repertoire of stories about the audacity of her neighbor to the east. To hear her tell it, he’d been a thorn in her side for half a century. When she refused to sell some of her acreage thirty years ago, Harlan had removed a small section of fencing, letting his cattle wander over to graze on Madsen land. When one of his cows made its way all the way up to the Big House, Gran threatened to shoot the thing and have it trussed up and delivered to Harlan’s front door. Instead, Shep had herded the cows into Stony Creek’s corrals and had it noised about that Miss Lily was selling beef on the cheap. The fence was mended, and Harlan had come calling for his livestock, mystified by their migration.

“Well, she told me she doesn’t care what I do with the land once she’s gone,” Emma said. “Something you seem to keep forgetting. It’s in the contract. None of these changes happen until she—you know.”

Tucker shot her a look.

“You can show her the contract like Hopper said,” Emma continued. “Or, if you don’t like it, you can always hang up your stethoscope, lower your precious standards, move back here, and take up—” Emma’s phone vibrated again. She leaned down and pulled it from her bag. “I need to take this.” She got up but turned before leaving, her eyes shifting from Hopper to Tucker. “Don’t talk about anything until I get back,” she instructed.

“Okay, I’m here,” she said into her phone as she walked out the door.

Hopper sat tapping a pen against the desk, looking out the window.

“When did you say you moved back here?” Tucker asked conversationally.

“A few years ago.”

Okay. Looked like small talk wasn’t his thing. Probably for the best.

Hopper’s office was nice. The mildew smell was less noticeable up here. The old pine floors creaked, but the walls were light with tasteful black-and-white nature photos carefully arranged.

“Cool pictures,” Tucker said.

“Thanks. It’s a hobby of mine.”

“You took them?”

“My folks have a cabin in Bennett Springs. Took most of those while I was up there fishing one summer.”

Tucker nodded, and the room fell silent again. He could hear the clock ticking on the bookcase behind Hopper’s desk, the occasional passing of a car on the street below, Emma’s low murmuring voice in the hallway.

Hopper cleared his throat. “So how long are you here for?”

“I don’t know. Another week or so? Until the contracts are signed, I suppose.”

Hopper nodded. “You and Emma—are you a thing again?”

“What? No.” Tucker shook his head. “I, uh . . . you may not have heard. I’m engaged.”

“I heard. Also heard you broke up.”

“Why does everybody—we didn’t break up. More of a step back, that’s all.”

“Uh-huh. I get it. Sometimes the guy’s the last to know.”

“No, really. I was on the phone with her just last night. We’re—” Why was he explaining himself to Emma’s ex-fiancé? “You know what? Never mind.” He sat back in his chair just as Emma burst through the door.

“I’ve gotta go,” she said, grabbing the file folder she’d left on the desk. “I’ve got a lettuce situation at The Barn.” She paused. “We good for now?”

“Yep,” Hopper answered for both of them, and Emma was gone.

Tucker moved to follow her, but before he got to the door, Hopper clapped him on the shoulder and held firm.

“Good to see you again, Madsen,” he said with a smile that didn’t quite make it to his eyes. “Leave Emma alone.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WHEN EMMA WOKE THE NEXT morning, she had a clutch of text messages from Miss Lily, each one of them irate. Looked like Tucker—the tattletale—had told her about the clause in the contract about Harlan Beaufort. Emma had been summoned to the Big House, an order that had her scrambling to get ready. She jerked on her clothes and ran a brush through her hair before heading out the door.

“Miss Lily,” Emma called as she let herself in. No answer. She went upstairs to find a ladder reaching into the attic, climbed up, and found Miss Lily rummaging through an old box.

Miss Lily looked relieved to see her. “You can take over,” she said, sitting down.

Emma didn’t argue. She pushed up her sleeves and got to work. “What are we looking for?”

“The plat map. It should have the legal description and show the boundaries of the property lines. Hopper says that what he got from the county courthouse is fine, but I don’t trust that Harlan Beaufort. The courthouse has a copy, but I want the original. If they match, then I’ll know Harlan hasn’t somehow finagled his way into claiming part of Madsen land as his own. He’s a crafty old goat, that one.”

Emma suppressed a grin. She doubted Harlan had that kind of influence, but she started looking anyway.

“Try that one.” Miss Lily waggled her finger at a box next to an old steamer trunk.

“We already looked through that one,” Emma said, sniffing. Dust in the attic was as thick as jam. If she stayed up here much longer, she’d go into anaphylactic shock.

“No, we didn’t.”

Emma opened the box and pulled out a couple of Jack Madsen’s old fedoras. “See? Not here.”

Miss Lily made a sound of disgust. “I don’t think it’s up here,” she said, taking one of the hats and running her thumb over the velvet band. Emma hoped that meant she was giving up the hunt, but she said, “I’ve got a lot of old family papers stored at the mercantile. Maybe it’s there.”

The mercantile. Five years ago a microburst storm had blown part of the roof off the old building. It had been vacant when it happened, and Miss Lily hadn’t seen the sense in making repairs right away. When she’d finally

had the roof patched, the walls were water stained and the woodwork warped. The original tin ceiling had fallen to the floor. These days it was used as a storage unit, a dusty mess of broken furniture and discarded equipment. Finding a single piece of paper would be roughly on par with finding a needle in a haystack.

But Emma knew Miss Lily wasn't going to give up. She sighed. "I'll go."

* * *

The bakery on Main, the previous establishment to inhabit the mercantile, had gone out of business eight years ago when the owner, Shirlene Parsons, had decided she was sick of getting up at four in the morning to make everyone else's breakfast.

It was true. Most of Normal had lined up in the wee hours to be served those mouthwatering raspberry rolls she was so famous for, served with a healthy side of Shirlene's acrimony. The bakery was missed; Shirlene's attitude not so much.

Miss Lily had said Shirlene never turned in her key, so Emma was stuck trying to work an ancient skeleton key into the back lock. She prodded, twisted, and yanked, trying to get the darn thing to turn, gasping and sucking her finger when she broke a nail. That's when she got serious. She shoved the key in as far as it would go and braced herself against the doorjamb. It worked. The rusty lock turned, and she stumbled inside, sending streamers of dust into the air.

Inside was worse than she'd imagined. Stacks of old chairs, overturned furniture, sagging boxes, and junk were piled high. Seemed like everything Miss Lily didn't want ended up here. Emma stepped over a broken chair to get to a tower of boxes in the corner.

An hour passed, and she still hadn't found anything remotely helpful. One of the boxes sagged with paperwork, but it had absorbed a lot of moisture from the leaking roof and nothing inside was legible. Emma hoped the plat map wasn't in there. Looking up, she could see another stack of boxes up in the loft.

The half-walled overhang was built on support posts; it had been Seamus Madsen's office a hundred years ago and was dubbed the Crow's Nest. There, Seamus had been able to keep an eye on his staff and customers alike as he did his accounting from above. The rail to the spiral staircase wobbled as Emma put her foot on the bottom step, and the structure groaned under her weight. The staircase swayed like a suspension bridge,

and she scrambled to the top. “Please don’t let me die. Please don’t let me die,” she muttered as the last tread crumbled beneath her feet.

She stood still for a minute as everything shifted. Holding her breath, she moved forward, setting her purse and phone on the low wall before slinking toward the three boxes that sat atop an old rolltop desk. The desk gave her courage. Surely if the Crow’s Nest could support the weight of that behemoth, it would hold her. She took another step and felt the floor shift again. Not worth it. She’d get those blasted boxes downstairs as quickly as possible and get out of here.

On her second trip up, she stumbled on a raised timber, and the staircase gasped. The handrail fell away, taking several more treads with it.

Emma looked over the wall. She was stuck.

She reached for her purse only to find it had fallen over the side, the contents now scattered on the floor below. Her phone seemed to have disappeared too.

“Okay, don’t panic,” she said out loud, sliding down to sit on the floor and drawing up her knees. “Miss Lily knows you’re here. She’ll send someone eventually.” Emma wrapped her arms around her legs, trying to think of something other than the loft collapsing onto the floor below and taking her with it.

She was going crazy within minutes. She couldn’t just sit here and do nothing. She got up onto her knees and looked over the side of the wall at the floor. She couldn’t see her phone, so maybe it was still up here. She slowly got to her feet and scanned the area. She’d managed to clear a lot of the junk that had been up here. There was one box left on the desk, but it held nothing but old sewing patterns. Maybe Miss Lily was out of luck. Emma had seen nothing that remotely resembled the paperwork she was looking for. She moved to look behind the old rolltop. There between the wall and the solid desk leg was her phone. Thank goodness!

Emma got down on all fours, moving gingerly until she reached her phone, which was resting next to a black enamel box with a wire handle. Curious, she picked up the box. The latch was broken, and it swung open, spilling papers and a few old coins across the floor. The word Deed in tall script caught her eye. The yellowed parchment was folded around another packet of papers, brittle with age. Emma’s heart raced as she carefully unfolded them. The plat map, the legal description of the property, and at the bottom of the deed, Seamus Madsen’s rolling signature in faded ink.

Finally.

* * *

Tucker shoved his hands into his coat pockets, bracing against a gust of wind. Was this trip to the mercantile really necessary? He'd gotten a good start on Shep's old place. He'd been hoping to work on the front room today. He'd even rented a sander from the hardware store, thinking he'd tackle the scuffed floors. But Gran had insisted Emma was in trouble. Stranded at the mercantile. How one got stranded on solid ground he couldn't imagine, but here he was, trudging through town, a little irked because he'd had to park four blocks away. Evidently everyone in town was out for a little holiday shopping this afternoon.

Heading down the sidewalk, he dodged shoppers and sightseers but paused to look at the electric train displayed in the windows of the Five and Dime. He used to help his dad set up a train set just like it every Christmas. He smiled and turned, almost running into an older woman in a turquoise muumuu and boiled wool coat stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said, trying to pass her. But when he moved, so did she.

"Tucker Madsen, I hear you're practicing medicine up here now."

His eyebrows shot up. "I'm sorry. But who—"

"The name's Neely. I'm a friend of your grandma's."

"I'm not—" he tried again.

"The thing is, I think I have leprosy."

Tucker froze. "What?"

"I read an article on the internet this morning that said you can catch leprosy from an armadillo. I had dinner with my cousin Phil yesterday."

Tucker wondered if a knock on the head would help this conversation make sense. "And is your cousin Phil an . . . armadillo?" Tucker asked carefully.

"Of course not! Phil, an armadillo," she scoffed. "That's a good one. No, Lucius is an armadillo. Phil's pet. I might have been infected last night."

"Skin lesions are the main symptom of leprosy. You have lovely skin, ma'am."

"Maybe the symptoms don't show up right away," she insisted. This woman wasn't going anywhere until she got some free medical advice.

"Well then, I'd avoid the armadillo. Maybe have Phil over to your place next time and ask him to leave Lucius at home. In the meantime, get plenty

of rest and push fluids for the next couple of days.” Always good advice.

“All right.” She nodded. “I suppose I can do that. But if I start breaking out in those lesions—”

“Lesions,” Tucker corrected.

“D’ya promise to see me as soon as possible?”

“You bet,” he said and walked around her.

He made it halfway down the block before a man about his age approached, already rolling up his shirtsleeve. “Hey, Doc. Jeremiah Donovan,” the man said. “I was wondering if you could take a look at this for me.”

Before Tucker could say a word, the guy’s inflamed elbow was in his face.

“It’s a mess, right?” Jeremiah asked with a note of pride.

The skin around the man’s joint was swollen, a bright Christmas red. Very seasonal.

“When I do this”—Jeremiah pushed against the mass—“it really hurts.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do that,” Tucker suggested.

“It’s stiff and achy, especially when I move it.” The guy cranked his elbow. “That just kills. And right here it’s, like, on fire. Want to touch it?”

“Yeah, no. That’s okay.” Tucker took a step back as the offending elbow was once more thrust into his face. “It looks like bursitis.”

“Hey! That’s what Doc Braithwaite said.” Jeremiah looked pleased as he rolled down his shirtsleeve.

Tucker nodded. “Glad you’ve seen your doctor. I’m guessing you know how to take care of it, then.”

“Yeah, but it sure is good to have a second opinion. Thanks a lot, man.” He gave Tucker a slap on the back and lumbered happily away.

Tucker made it to the mercantile without any other stops. He unlocked the front door and had to push against a stack of boxes to get inside.

“Where did you get that key?” Emma’s voice held a note of irritation. He could hear her, but he couldn’t see her.

“From my grandmother. Where are you?”

“Look up.”

“Holy cow!” There she sat, legs swinging. A twisted rail hung loose from the loft, dangling by a single nail. That’s when he noticed the crumbled lumber scattered beneath her.

“You know, you really ought to clean up after yourself,” he said, looking back up.

“Ha ha.”

“Lookin’ good up there, Em. Wanna do the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet?”

“I’ll pass, thanks, but that ladder sure would be nice.” She nodded toward the item in question propped against the wall.

“Ladder? You want me to use a ladder?” He grinned up at her, maybe enjoying this a little too much.

“No, I thought maybe you could use the Force to get me down. Yes, you moron! I want you to use the ladder!”

“Should you be insulting your rescuer?”

“I should have called Miles Brewster,” she muttered.

“Who’s that?”

“Head of the volunteer fire department. He would have had that ladder up to me by now!”

“A bit testy, aren’t you?”

“I called Miss Lily an hour ago! What took you so long?”

“I’ve been doing a little sidewalk consulting.”

“Huh?”

Tucker cleared debris from the ladder and hoisted it. “Jeremiah Donovan wanted to chat about his bursitis. And before that a woman named Neely stopped me.”

“Oh. ‘I think I have leprosy’ Neely?”

“Please don’t tell me there’s another one.”

“Nope. Only one. And she’s an original.”

He dragged the ladder closer.

“Here,” Emma said, chucking a folded piece of paper at Tucker’s head. “That’s the plat map. Keep it safe. If I die now, at least it won’t be in vain.”

“So dramatic,” he said as he bent to pick up the paper and stuff it into his pocket, the ladder balanced under his other arm.

When he straightened, he braced the ladder against the base of the loft and held it steady as she climbed down and asked, “So that’s what held you up? Neely? Does she have leprosy?”

“More like a mild case of hypochondria.”

Emma’s foot slipped on the next to the last rung, and she dropped the box she was carrying.

Tucker wrapped an arm around her. “Whoa! You okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said. She finished her descent and turned around, but Tucker didn’t let go.

Emma bit her lip, her gaze moving from his eyes to his mouth.

Almost without thinking, he lowered his head until his mouth was a hair’s breadth away from hers. He would have kissed her—he really would have—if she hadn’t slapped her hand against his chest and pushed hard.

“W-we better get going, don’t you think?” she whispered.

“Uh, sure,” he said, taking a step back. “So what happened here?” He motioned to the disaster.

“I was making my last trip to the Crow’s Nest when the handrail came off and took the stairs with it.” She dusted her hands and winced.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Splinters. I think I got them when I was crawling across the floor up there.”

“Let me see.” Tucker took her hands and turned them over. There were a few ugly splinters in the heel of her left hand. “I can get those out for you when we get back to Gran’s,” he offered, rubbing his thumb over her palm.

Her cheeks bloomed. “That would be good. You have the plat map?”

He dropped her hands, took the paper from his pocket, and waved it at her.

She nodded. “I’ve got the original deed too.” She lifted a black enamel box from the floor and shoved it into his hands. “Hold on to this. I figure the more information we have, the better. Um, my car’s in the shop and Nina dropped me off. Could you give me a ride back to the farm?”

“Of course,” Tucker said, suddenly not so annoyed that he was parked four blocks away.

After a minute or two of walking in silence, a voice called from behind them. “Hey! Doctor Madsen, hold up!”

“This is getting ridiculous,” Tucker muttered, turning around. A young man rushed forward, hand wrapped in a towel.

“It’s lucky you happened along.” The kid swallowed hard, his face pale. “I just cut my hand.”

He extended his arm and moved the towel.

Tucker handed Emma the enamel box and took the boy’s hand. Blood oozed from a slash on his palm. Emma inhaled sharply and looked away.

Tucker smiled. “Not a fan of blood?”

“No, I like it just fine,” she breathed, “as long as it stays inside the body.”

“Looks pretty deep,” Tucker told the kid. “You need stitches. How did it happen?”

“Box cutter. We were setting up the light display in the window. I sliced open a box and kept going, I guess. Can you do it?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I’ll have to drive to Branson otherwise.”

“There isn’t some sort of urgent care facility around here?”

“Nah. And old Doc Braithwaite is still out of town.”

“I’m not supposed to do stuff like that,” Tucker said. “I’m not licensed—what is that look, Emma?”

“Didn’t you take an oath to help people?” she asked. “The hypocritical oath?”

“Hippocratic.”

“Right. That’s what I said.” That grin of hers meant she knew exactly what she’d said.

He sighed. “Okay. His stitches and your splinters, but that’s it. Keep pressure on that cut and keep your hand elevated. C’mon. We’re gonna break into Braithwaite’s office.”

No breaking and entering was necessary. Emma walked up to the door of the lean-to behind Doc Braithwaite’s house and kicked over a pot of dead flowers, revealing a key.

“Aren’t you handy,” Tucker said, retrieving it and opening the door.

He flipped on the lights. The office smelled a little musty. Two filing cabinets flanked an old wooden desk. On the other side of the small room was an examination table and what he hoped was a supply cabinet. He started rummaging through Doc Braithwaite’s desk.

“What are you doing?” Emma asked.

“Trying to find a key for that.” He glanced over his shoulder at the metal cabinet.

“Well, how about . . . ?” Emma walked over and opened it up.

“Huh,” Tucker said. “This guy isn’t big on security, is he?” Tucker found what he needed for Chris’s stitches, then looked at Emma. “Is it okay if Chris goes first?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said and sat down.

Chris scooted onto the table. Tucker took his hand and cleaned it, causing a fresh stream of blood to flow.

“On second thought . . .” Emma stood abruptly, nearly knocking over the chair, and walked right out the door.

Fifteen stitches later and Tucker was done. “Keep it dry for the first day,” he said as he bandaged Chris’s hand. “After that, wash around the wound with clean water. Keep it covered with this”—he gave Chris a small tube of antibiotic cream he’d found inside the cabinet—“and a nonstick bandage. You’re all set.”

“Awesome, man. Glad I ran into you.”

“Yeah, about that. Did someone tell you I was taking over for Doc Braithwaite?”

The kid shrugged. “I dunno. My mom, maybe? Hey, I gotta get back to work. Thanks a lot.”

Tucker followed him to the door and found Emma outside leaning against the wall. “You’re up,” he said. He waved at Chris and closed the door behind Emma.

She sat down on the exam table, her expression wary as he walked over to her, antiseptic spray in one hand, a pair of tweezers in the other. “You look worried,” he said.

“Should I be?”

“Let’s see it,” he said. After a moment, she hesitantly offered her hand, but before he could touch her, she yanked it away.

Tucker sighed. “I need the hand if I’m going to get the splinters out, Em.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, are you?”

“Me? No. But I can’t promise that digging out those splinters will be comfortable. Some of them looked pretty deep.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept up a steady stare. Tucker felt a smile threaten, and a second later Emma wordlessly gave him her hand.

He took it—soft skin—and gently turned it toward the light. “Sorry,” he said when she winced. He sterilized her hand, then glanced up. “Here we go,” he warned.

Emma kept her eyes closed the whole time, biting her lip when he got to the deepest splinter, lodged at the base of her thumb. When he was finished, he smoothed antibiotic cream over the wound and found a Band-Aid.

“You were very brave,” he said, still holding her wrist. “And it was really nice of you to let Chris go first.”

Emma tilted her head. “Well, he was bleeding. Besides, this didn’t hurt that bad”—she held up her hand—“until you started poking around.”

Tucker gave a short laugh. It was nice being here, just the two of them. He’d stay with her all day if he could. “Well, thanks for a very interesting afternoon,” he said. He looked down to see that he was absently stroking her wrist. Emma noticed it too and slowly pulled her hand into her lap.

She looked around the small space. “Could you ever see yourself working in an office like this?” She said it with a smirk.

Tucker grinned at her. His office in Santa Monica was twice the size of this room, and it certainly didn’t include an exam table. But just to be difficult he said, “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe.”

And his jest was worth it, just to see the look on Emma’s face.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

TUCKER SHOULD CALL MEREDITH. IT was his first thought when he woke up a couple of days later. Then he saw that he had a text from Emma. She'd agreed to meet him at Shep's house sometime to see the new improvements.

Emma. Being around Emma was . . . confusing.

The time spent with her at Doc Braithwaite's had been nice. No arguing, no heated discussions about the contract. Just sharing a few laughs. It had felt like before, when even in their silent moments together they felt connected. A vast improvement over the guarded negotiator he'd been dealing with lately. But he knew she had another side.

Yesterday he'd been called over to Normal Elementary. The principal had asked him to stop by and look at a kid who'd possibly broken her hand when she fell from the monkey bars (he really needed to find out who was telling everyone he was taking over for Doc Braithwaite). Little Hayley Atwater seemed fine, but since he wasn't licensed in Missouri, Tucker had wrapped her hand in an ace bandage and told Hayley's mother to take her to get an X-ray, just in case.

As he walked down the lower-grade hall toward the school's front door, he'd heard a familiar voice coming from one of the classrooms. He'd peeked inside, and sure enough, there was Emma, down on the floor, surrounded by a circle of boys and girls. She was reading a book out loud, making funny faces and doing goofy voices. The kids were giggling so hard Tucker had to cover his mouth to stop from laughing too. He loved watching the way she smiled at her audience, spreading her attention around so no one was left out. The woman had a gift.

"She's our most requested substitute," a voice had said from behind him. The principal. "Very talented, that one," she said, then continued down the hall.

After a minute, Tucker had taken a step back, hesitated, then walked away. He hadn't wanted Emma to see him because if she did, her smile would drop. She stubbornly refused to give an inch where he was concerned.

His phone pinged now with another text, this time from Meredith. He sighed and leaned against the headboard. He'd met Meredith on a commuter flight out of Las Vegas, on an aircraft so small he'd had to hunch over to move down the aisle toward his seat. When he'd gotten to his row, a cute blonde had been sitting in his seat next to the window. He remembered

how nervous she'd looked, biting her nails, her eyes trained on the tarmac. Clearly, flying wasn't her thing. Tucker had tried to distract her, keeping up a steady stream of conversation, and by the time they'd landed she was relaxed and he had her phone number. He'd been smitten and had called her before he left the airport that day.

Tucker smiled at the memory. Things had been so clear back then. Right now, not so much. Right now, he couldn't figure out what to say to her.

He swung his feet to the ground, rubbed a hand through his hair, picked up the phone, and then paused. He'd almost kissed Emma the other day at the mercantile. That was . . . stupid. It hadn't felt stupid at the moment, but in retrospect, yeah, it had been stupid.

He scrolled through his contacts, his finger hovering over Meredith's picture. Then he heard something crash in the kitchen and tossed his phone onto the bed.

He hurried down the back stairs, pulling a plaid flannel shirt over his gray T-shirt. Meredith would have told him it clashed with his striped pajama bottoms.

Voices were raised in the kitchen, and he paused just outside the door.

"—glad we have the plat map, but that provision needs to be removed from the contract," Gran said. Tucker peeked around the corner. Gran was shooting daggers at Emma, who rolled her eyes but continued putting on a pair of boots that would have been very stylish . . . in combat.

"Don't you roll your eyes at me, young lady! Harlan Beaufort." Gran spat the name. "That old snake. Do you know he tried to swoop in here and take the place from me before my Jack was cold in the ground? He came sniffing around looking for a deal—probably figured a grieving widow made an easy mark."

"His mistake," Tucker said ruefully and smiled at Emma as he entered the kitchen, leaned against the counter, and took a bite of a piece of toast smothered in jam.

"Hey! That was mine." Emma gave him a hard look.

"Finder's keepers," he said.

"Yes, indeed!" Gran continued as if Tucker weren't there. "That man showed up here, hat in hand, not one week after the funeral. He brought me flowers picked from my own garden. My own garden! I was watching him through the front window. He rang the doorbell, then disappeared around the side of the house. Next thing I know he's got a bunch of my prize

peonies in his grubby hands. The nerve of some people! But I set him straight fast enough.”

“I’m sure you did,” Emma murmured.

“He never misses a trick. One year he stole the tax notice right out of my mailbox. Darn fool didn’t realize the taxes go with the mortgage. Don’t get me started about the time he—”

“Okay, okay! I get it. Harlan is the devil.” Emma held up her hands in surrender. “I’ll make sure Hopper takes Harlan’s name out of the contract. I only put the provision in because he stopped me on the street one day—”

“I’d rather my land be used for a parking garage than fall into his hands,” Gran said. “If you sell that man so much as a stick off my property, so help me, Emma Jane, I’ll rise from the grave and haunt you!”

“Got it,” Emma said with a nod.

“Good.”

Emma pushed away from the table and moved into the utility room just off the kitchen, where she pulled on a heavy coat and a beanie.

“Where are you going?” Tucker called after her.

She stepped back into the kitchen and held up a bow saw. “Christmas tree,” she said.

“You’re kidding, right?” Tucker nodded at the kitchen window. “There must have been a foot of snow last night, and it’s, like, thirty degrees out there.”

“Nah,” she replied, opening the back door and letting in an arctic blast. “It’s not that warm.”

“Em, you can’t use that saw to cut down a tree.”

“Sure I can. Besides, I blew out the motor on the chain saw. It won’t be fixed until next week.” She nodded at them and shut the door behind her.

Muttering to himself, Tucker moved into the utility room. Scrounging around, he found an old barn coat and pulled it on. He stuffed his feet into a pair of dirty work boots. No socks. Found a pair of mismatched gloves.

From the kitchen, Gran regarded him over the rim of her mug. “Just what are you planning to do, Tucker?”

He adjusted a knit cap over his ears. “Well, I can’t let her go out there and freeze to death, can I?” he asked, irritated.

His grandmother chuckled. “No, I don’t suppose you can.”

He scowled at her, opened the door, and slammed it behind him.

* * *

Emma trudged through the snow, sinking up to her calves with every step. Tucker was following her. She could hear him.

That was fine. It kept her moving at a brisk pace. The cold bit at her cheeks and made her eyes water. Everywhere else she was warm. Too warm. She blamed Tucker for that. He was several paces behind her, but she figured if she just kept moving, eventually he'd—

“Em, knock it off. You know I'm right behind you,” he called.

“Why are you right behind me? I don't recall asking for help.”

“No, of course not. You never ask for help, do you?” She stopped, and he finally caught up with her. She was happy to note he was winded.

Taking in his pajama bottoms stuffed into boots that obviously didn't fit him, she said, “You look ridiculous.”

“I'm not here to impress you. What do you need another tree for? Gran's is up and decorated, and there's one in The Barn. I saw you stringing lights on Monday.”

Why did it please her that he'd noticed her working on the tree? “It's for me,” she said and kept moving.

Ever since Tucker had been back, Emma had felt a combination of irritation and, if she were honest, attraction . . . which made her more irritated. She didn't begrudge Miss Lily the right to have another set of eyes look over the contract, but did that set of eyes have to belong to Tucker Madsen? The boy whose name she'd scribbled all over the inside cover of her English notebook?

Oh, how crazy in love she'd been with Tucker. After he left, she used to run to the mailbox every day hoping to find a letter from him. Even just a postcard with a hastily scribbled note would have eased the hollow pressure that had built every time she'd found the mailbox empty. It seemed stupid now, but back then a letter from Tucker would have saved her.

In those dark days, her mom had disappeared into a hole, and since her father had moved away, Emma was suddenly the adult in the house.

Two months into Emma's senior year, Miss Lily had shown up on her doorstep with a loaf of homemade bread, and Emma's hope had soared. Maybe Miss Lily had brought word of Tucker. But no. Instead, the old woman had come in, eyes not missing a thing. The piles of laundry on the couch. The incessant hum of the daytime TV her mother couldn't do without. Emma's frazzled appearance. Miss Lily had bundled her out of the house and, over the protests of her mother, had taken Emma home with her.

Emma had curled up on the bed in Tucker's room and slept for two days. Miss Lily hadn't asked questions, hadn't tried to make small talk. She'd just let her rest.

Turned out while Emma was resting, Miss Lily had had a chat with her mother. Emma still didn't know what she'd said, but somehow Miss Lily had gotten her mother off the couch. A miracle! By Christmas both Emma and her mother were enrolled in college. Emma would start at the University of Missouri the next year, but her mother had started right away, taking online courses and attending in-person classes to become a medical transcriptionist.

Emma was proud of her mom. They didn't need her dad—or Tucker—to survive.

Things were fine for a while. Emma went off to college and got engaged. Fiancé number one was a rebound from Tucker (if a person could have a rebound two years after a relationship ended). She broke their engagement a couple of weeks after Jake proposed. She didn't feel too bad because when she did it, Jake shrugged and said, "It's cool." So no broken hearts there.

After graduation she was accepted into the MBA program at Vanderbilt University. Living so far away from her mom was hard, but they talked on the phone all the time, and Emma knew her mother was proud of what she'd accomplished.

When her mom came down to Tennessee for her convocation, Emma could tell something was wrong. Her mom tired easily and was so, so pale. She seemed preoccupied, distracted. She showed little interest in meeting fiancé number two, a lovely man from an old Tennessee family. It wasn't until Emma returned home for a visit that her mom finally admitted she was sick. Really sick. Cancer.

Her mother's illness turned her life upside down. Emma called off her wedding and turned down a job in Atlanta to move home and take care of her mom. It kind of felt like her senior year all over again until Miss Lily offered her a job.

"Work for me," Miss Lily said. "I need someone to manage my properties and unscramble my finances."

Emma took her up on it and was soon sifting through a drawer of thick file folders detailing the Madsen holdings.

Miss Lily's trust was flattering, but Emma soon found she'd inherited a world of worry. Shep was getting older and slowing down. Emma tried not

to panic when he decided to retire and move closer to family. She kept busy taking care of her mother, gathering rent, managing investments, and negotiating the sale of a plot of land downtown to the Holmes brothers, who were looking to expand their hardware and plumbing store. The revenue from the sale helped offset some of the drain from the farm, but it wasn't enough.

As her mother continued to decline, work became a lifeline. Unlike her mother's illness, work was something Emma could control. She could put in a hard day and see results. When her mother passed, Miss Lily forced Emma to take time off, and it felt like a punishment. Somehow her mother's death made Emma feel more connected to the legacy of the farm, and that connection made her protective—someday Miss Lily would be gone, and what would happen to Stony Creek then?

Then one day a local photographer came rambling up the road, asking if he could take some pictures of The Barn. Sure, no big deal. Weeks later she received a letter requesting permission for the images to be published in *Midwestern Magazine*. Emma was even more stunned when a young couple from Branson asked if they could get married under a bower of trees behind The Barn. They'd seen the pictures and fallen in love.

A tiny seed of an idea began to bloom in Emma's mind.

After a lot of research, Emma went to Miss Lily and asked if she could buy The Barn and the pastures beyond. She'd spent the next year making plans and converting The Barn into what it was today, a fledgling events venue with a lot of potential. Emma saw it as more though. It was a way to preserve Stony Creek, to make sure Miss Lily's legacy lived on.

Then Tucker had come along and threatened it all.

* * *

Tucker's feet kept sliding in his boots, unwanted snow seeping in with every step. Emma was surprisingly agile, moving easily through the drifts of snow.

Stubborn. Pure and simple, the girl was stubborn. Had been for as long as he'd known her.

"You know, you really haven't changed that much," Tucker said, catching up to her again.

"Whatever," she said. "I'm totally different. I'm much more nuanced now."

“Yeah . . . no. But points for working the word nuanced into the conversation.”

Emma made an indignant noise. “Tucker Madsen, you are driving me out of my mind.”

“Okay, so you have to admit that hasn’t changed.”

Emma gave him a reluctant smile. “Probably not.”

That smile had him feeling warm all over, and a warning bell clanged in his head.

“How about this one?” He stopped next to a robust balsam fir.

“Looks great. Maybe you could help me cut a hole in my roof so it will fit. Tucker, my place is small.”

This was how Tucker remembered it, being with Emma—the good-natured banter, the conversation coming easier than breathing.

They waded through the snow until Emma stopped by a squat little tree that barely made it to his shoulder. “This one will work,” she said.

“This thing? Great. I won’t even have to use the saw.” With branches jutting out at odd angles, Tucker had a hard time imagining it as anything other than kindling.

“It’s perfect. Or it will be after I’m done with it. You’d be surprised what a strand of lights can do.”

“Emma McAllister, patron saint of lost causes,” he said as he took the bow saw from her hands.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Cutting down the tree.”

“I can do it—”

But he was already on the ground, angling the saw inward.

“You did notice the snow pants, right?” she said. “I’m dressed for this. You aren’t.”

No, he wasn’t. Already his body heat had melted a layer of fresh powder, which his pajama bottoms obligingly absorbed. He made quick work of the tree and jumped up. “There you go.”

Emma took the saw from his stiff fingers and turned the tree upside down. She evened out the cut and sawed off the bottom branches.

“You’re making it worse!” he objected.

“It’s fine.”

“I’ll carry that twig back for you,” he offered, but she shook her head.

“I’ve got it, thanks.”

He'd annoyed her again. At a loss, he trailed after her like a puppy.
"What did I do?" he asked.

"I didn't need help. I didn't ask for help. You just used this as an excuse to flex your macho."

"Flex my macho'? What does that mean?" They were getting closer to the house.

"It means I'm a very capable person!"

Tucker stopped and watched as Emma stalked ahead, dragging that pitiful tree behind her.

"Muleheaded," he muttered and bent to pack a loose snowball in his already frigid hands, willing to risk frostbite to bring the princess down a peg. Ready, aim, fire. He heard her gasp. She chucked the saw into a snowdrift and turned, her expression thunderous. Suddenly this didn't seem like such a good idea, and he raised his hands in self-defense.

"You hit me in the head—"

"I was aiming for your back. I swear." Tucker started to laugh.

"—with a snowball, which is now melting down my back underneath my coat, a cable-knit sweater, and long underwear . . . essentially making all those layers useless!" She advanced on him, bending to pack her own snowball. Within seconds she'd hit Tucker right between the eyes.

War. All-out war. They lobbed hastily packed snowballs at each other, the snow so loose the ammunition exploded on impact. The closer Emma and Tucker got to each other, the sloppier their snowballs were. Tucker swooped his arm against the ground, sending an arc of powder through the air and into Emma's face. She gave a surprised cry and then dove for him, tackling him to the ground and shoveling snow into his laughing mouth.

Tucker rolled and trapped Emma beneath him, crowing in victory. Raising his arm, ready to drop a handful of snow onto her face, he stopped. Emma's eyes were bright and smiling, her cheeks pink with cold, and that glossy auburn hair of hers fanned out in warm waves beside her. She was so beautiful his smile slipped a little. It hadn't taken her long, just a few days really, to make him feel like that eighteen-year-old boy again. She challenged him, but it was more than that; it was something he couldn't explain. There was no one like her.

Don't think about it, a little voice warned.

"Tucker!" His grandmother's voice cut through the moment like an icicle.

He didn't answer her, didn't move at all.

"Tucker Madsen! Phone for you!" she called again, louder this time.

"You'd better go," Emma whispered. "It might be Hopper."

"And why would I jump up to take Hopper's call?" he asked.

"No reason," she replied. Her tone turned teasing. "Except maybe he's calling you to let you know I've decided to turn the Big House into a duplex." She pushed him off and hopped up.

"Not funny." He scowled.

"No? Well, I think I'm hilarious. C'mon." She winked at him. "I'll let you carry the tree to prove your manhood."

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CHAPTER TWENTY

EMMA LOOKED OUT THE WINDOWS of her office, absently tapping a pen against her desk.

It was official. She hated the internet. She also hated The Barn's excellent Wi-Fi connection and her cell phone's expansive coverage. Emma hated any and all modes of communication that kept her in constant, relentless contact with Delia Landry, or as she'd come to think of her, the Dragon Lady. The woman wouldn't leave her alone. She'd called first thing in the morning and texted all day long, volleying suggestions and links to websites with ideas for the wedding. Emma had even had nightmares that featured Mrs. Landry emerging from the medicine cabinet, flinging cake at her, shouting, "This is French buttercream! I wanted Swiss!"

Emma's phone vibrated again, but this time it was Kira. She took a deep cleansing breath and answered. Moments later she sat at her desk while mother and daughter used the wedding as an excuse to go at each other. Why it was necessary for Emma to be conferenced into this call was a mystery.

"Kira, sweetheart. Linen napkins? Don't you think they're a little . . . rustic?"

"What would you prefer, Mother? Douppioni silk? They're just going to get dirty anyway. Who cares about napkins?"

It went on like this for an hour, the two of them back and forth, disagreeing over every little detail from color scheme to music selection. Mind-numbing, really. At least Delia hadn't made any rude comments about The Barn.

"What about centerpieces?" Delia asked.

"Oh! Emma," Kira said. "I sent you links to that website; did you get them?"

"I did," Emma said, the only two words she'd uttered in a half hour. "I passed your ideas on to Betty Hensley. She said it'd be no problem."

"What ideas?" the Dragon Lady snapped. "What won't be a problem? Kira, does this have something to do with the flowers?"

"I'm thinking wildflowers, Mother."

"Wildflowers!" Mrs. Landry exploded. "Kira, this is not a do-it-yourself wedding. We've hired a professional to handle these details." She injected the word professional with a healthy dose of sarcasm.

“Mother, don’t be so dramatic. I’ve seen pictures of other barn weddings —”

“Please don’t call it a barn wedding,” the mother moaned.

“What should I call it? We are getting married in a barn. Adjust.”

Emma sat tapping her pen against the desk as they hashed it out.

“Anyway,” Kira continued, “I’d love arrangements of yellow and purple flowers in mismatched glass vases.”

Mrs. Landry gave a long-suffering sigh, then said, “Madison Lee is doing the cake.”

“Mother, that’s ridiculous!” Kira blurted. “I’ve met the caterer at The Barn. She does beautiful work. I have a tasting set up for next month. She can handle it.”

“Kira, you can’t cut me out of the planning! Madison Lee is an artist. Does amazing things with sugar flowers. And it’s the cake. It sets the tone for the whole event.”

Still silent, Emma wondered how flour, sugar, and gum-paste flowers could set the tone for the whole wedding.

“I’ll go out to the venue next week to take some pictures and forward them to Ms. Lee so she knows what she’s dealing with at the shed.”

Ah, there we go.

Delia Landry had all kinds of euphemisms for The Barn. The hayloft, the little cabin in the woods, toolshed.

“Fine,” Kira conceded. “But something simple.”

Nina waved at Emma through the glass sidelight before letting herself in. She began mouthing words and gesturing, and Emma muted her phone.

“What’s up?”

“Leann, from the mayor’s office, called me. She’s been trying to get ahold of you.”

“Oh. I blocked incoming calls. I’m on with the dueling Landrys.” She gestured to her phone. “Do you know what she wants?”

“Yes,” Nina said.

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Are you going to tell me?”

Nina had just opened her mouth to respond when Kira said, “Do you know anything about him, Emma?”

Emma shooed her friend out of her office and unmuted her phone.

“Sorry, you were breaking up a bit there,” she fibbed. “What did you say?”

“I’ve heard of this guy over in Benton who makes lovely raw-wood benches. I thought maybe I’d commission him to make the seating for the wedding. They’d look amazing lined up on the portico. What do you think? Have you heard of him?”

“Logs!” Delia Landry interjected. “You want people sitting on logs during the ceremony? Have you lost your mind, Kira? Senator Buchanan is not sitting on raw wood!”

The conversation devolved from there, mother and daughter bickering while Emma retrieved her texts. She had several, all from the mayor. Normal’s annual Christmas bazaar was always held in the old town hall next to the park on Broad Street, but last night when a maintenance worker had gone over to turn on the heat . . . nothing. The wiring was shot, and it wouldn’t be fixed in time for the event. The mayor wanted to know if they could have the bazaar at The Barn.

“Yes!” Emma whispered, giving a fist pump.

The phone went silent for a second before Delia Landry’s imperious voice came over the line. “Did you say something, Ms. McAllister?”

“No, nothing.” She looked up at the clock. “But I need to go. It’s almost noon, and I have another appointment soon. Kira, if you’ll email me more information about the woodsmith in Benton, I’ll find out what I can. Lovely talking to you both.” This wedding was turning her into a practiced liar.

“We’re not done here,” Mrs. Landry insisted.

“Mother, we’ve been on the phone long enough. We are done.”

“Kira, I—”

Emma hung up and, with a few keystrokes, opened the calendar on her laptop. The Christmas bazaar was in three days. The Barn wasn’t booked that night. Pulling a party together that fast would be a bit hectic, but she could do it.

“Emma, are you still there?” Kira’s voice startled Emma.

“Oh, sorry! I guess I didn’t hang up.” She rolled her eyes, so glad this wasn’t a video call.

“No, it’s fine. I was hoping you were still there. Listen, I know it’s a lot. My mother, I mean.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not, but I just wanted to say—well, don’t give up on us. I’m very excited about the wedding. No matter what she says.”

“I’m glad. I think it’ll be beautiful. I just hope it lives up to your mother’s . . . standards.”

“Standards? Oh, please. Mom was a Vegas showgirl. She got married in front of a justice of the peace two months pregnant with my older brother. She never had a wedding. That’s why she’s so obsessed with mine.”

“Wow. That’s—”

“I know. My point is don’t worry about her. She’ll come around. Oops. Gotta run. Ethan is calling me. Talk soon.”

Kira hung up, and Emma felt better than she had in weeks.

* * *

Tucker set the roller in the paint pan and took a step back. It had taken him two days to get rid of that hideous floral wallpaper. He’d painted only one wall when he realized it wouldn’t be enough. The kitchen needed a remodel.

Realistically, he knew an architect would have to be brought in to turn this place into a functioning bed and breakfast. And, like Emma had said, she had already done that for the Big House.

He was going to have to concede. Emma was supposed to have joined him today, but she’d texted and said she’d gotten a last-minute booking and wouldn’t be able to make it. Ah, well. Time to clean up.

Tucker rinsed out a paintbrush and set it next to the sink to dry. He walked back into the front room, put the lid back on the paint can, and wadded up the drop cloth he’d brought. His phone vibrated across the mantel, but he ignored it and pulled back the painter’s tape, pleased with the clean line. The phone didn’t stop.

It was Meredith. He swiped his finger across the screen. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“I’m back in LA. Jim Putney left me a message last night. He says you haven’t returned his calls. Everything all right out there?”

Dr. Putney was the managing partner at Palisades Medical Group, the prestigious practice Tucker would join at the beginning of the year. Prestige was nice and the group was one of the highest-ranked in the state, but the money was even nicer. And after a two-year trial run, Tucker would have the opportunity to buy into the lucrative practice. So not the best idea, avoiding his boss’s calls.

“Everything’s fine,” he said. “Just busy. I’ll give him a call this week.”

“This week? Tucker”—Meredith paused—“when are you coming back?”

“I don’t know.” Tucker abandoned his project and sat on the floor. “Another week or so? We’re still hammering out contract disputes.”

“In other words, you’re spending a lot of time with Emma.” Tucker didn’t get a chance to respond to that little barb. “Tucker, are you going to be home in time for Christmas? We have plans with my parents.” Meredith’s tone was sharp.

He froze. “I thought you put all that on hold. Did I miss something? Are we . . . okay now?”

“No. We’re definitely on a break. But I think it’d be easier to figure out what happens next in our relationship if you were here.”

True enough. “Yeah,” he said.

Meredith was quiet. He should say something, try to make her feel better. She deserved more than this. And even though a certain redheaded entrepreneur with green eyes and a sharp tongue was slowly working her way back into his heart, he cared about Meredith.

“I’ll be back next week.” The words came out slow and reluctant, but they seemed to do the trick. He and Meredith hung up after an inane conversation about her work schedule.

He got off the floor. A week would give him enough time to finish patching the kitchen wall and maybe get the cabinets down. He wanted to do as much to the house as he could. If Emma wouldn’t use it, then maybe Gran could sell it.

Tucker got into his rental and drove up the hill to the Big House. Gran’s car was still gone. She’d left him a note this morning saying she had errands to run, but that had been hours ago. It was dark now. How many errands could you run in a town the size of Normal? Without thinking, he drove down the hill and took the turnoff to The Barn.

Going to see Emma wasn’t the best idea. He found himself thinking about her more and more these days, hoping to run into her when he was in town, looking out his window to see if he could catch a glimpse of her at The Barn. Yesterday, when Martin Swenson had stopped him outside the hardware store, Tucker had seen Emma walk into the diner with Hopper. Martin’s concern about his wife’s insomnia had faded into white noise as Tucker had felt a sharp jab of jealousy. Not a good sign.

He pulled up next to her old truck and sat drumming his thumbs against the steering wheel for a minute. He should go. That would be the smart thing to do. And yet seconds later he was on the stone walk and, before he

knew it, through the door. Emma was alone, standing in the middle of the room, tapping a finger against her chin.

“Hey, Emma. Have you seen Gran? I—”

“Oh, thank goodness! I need your help. Right now.”

“Sure. What’s going on?”

“I need to clear a space for dancing. The tables need to be moved to the side, and I want that wall free for a bandstand.”

“Bandstand? You sure there’s enough room?”

“I guess we’ll find out. Here, help me move this table.” She gestured to the biggest, heaviest table ever constructed in the history of mankind.

“So,” he grunted, lifting his end, “I actually have something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Okay,” she said. “Wait, scoot it out from the wall a bit. I still need to be able to fit chairs behind it.”

He helped her adjust the table. “So about the Big House—”

“Tucker, I’m so stressed out right now. Can we talk about that some other time?”

“It’s good news. I need to talk to Gran about this first, but I’m gonna stop fighting you on the changes you want to make to the house.”

“Oh.” She stopped and looked at him, cocking her head to the side.

“Really?”

“It’s all yours. I hope you’ll take care of it.”

“You know I will.”

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Emma moved toward the stacked chairs, pulling them off a few at a time and shoving them under the table. “Why the change of heart? I mean, I’m grateful, but it seems a little sudden,” she said.

“I’ve been here two weeks. It’s time for me to get back to my life.”

Emma nodded silently.

“I start at a new practice at the first of the year.” Tucker scooted some chairs under the table on his side of the table. “I’ve been in my condo for two years, but I’m still living out of boxes. It might be time to put a few things away, you know?” He was talking too much and saying absolutely nothing. He avoided mentioning Meredith.

“I’ll let Hopper know,” she said.

“No need,” he said too quickly. “Gran wants to talk to him anyway.”

“About Harlan?” Emma gave a short laugh.

“Yep. But I’ll have her mention the house to him as well.” They seemed to be back to awkward again. He wondered if they’d ever get past this. There was so much he’d like to ask her.

Why didn’t you write?

How long did it take you to replace me?

Was any of it real?

He wondered if it even mattered.

“All right,” Emma said. “Well . . . the contract should be done by the first of next week. You can sign it and be on your way.”

“Yeah. Emma—” he started, but the door slid open, and two guys walked in.

“We’ve got the bandstand, Emma,” the big one said. “Shame to put it in here though. It’s kinda ratty, and this place is so nice. Where do you want it?”

“I’m thinking over there.” She pointed to the spot they’d cleared.

“Tucker, can you stay? I could really use an extra pair of hands right now.”

She asked so prettily. How could he refuse?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

AFTER TUCKER HELPED EMMA SET up the bandstand (which, once covered with a red carpet the mayor had dug out of storage, didn't look half bad), they finished with the tables and chairs. There was plenty of room for dancing. A mammoth tree was coaxed into position next to the platform. The thing weighed a ton, but with both of them pulling, they finally got it to where Emma wanted it. Between moving Christmas trees, refinishing floors, and painting Shep's house, Tucker was exhausted.

"I'm getting old," he said after collapsing into a chair.

"No, you're not," Emma said, plopping down next to him, "because if you are, then I am too. And I refuse." Her head lolled against the chair back.

They sat looking at each other. She smiled at him, and Tucker felt something shift in his chest. Emma must have felt it too because suddenly her smile dropped and she got up.

"I'd better get going," she said, pulling her coat from the rack next to the door.

"I'll walk you out." They walked in silence toward Emma's old truck.

Tucker held the door as she climbed in, a little disappointed when she turned the key and it fired right up. "I was kinda hoping she wouldn't start," he confessed.

Emma bit her lip. "Thanks for your help today. It went faster with you there."

"I had a good time."

She nodded, her smile a little shy. Tucker closed her door good and tight and waved as she pulled away. He watched until she disappeared down the hill.

That night he was in bed by nine o'clock. He was so exhausted that he forgot to check in with his grandmother, instead falling quickly and deeply asleep.

The house was unusually still the next morning as he made his way downstairs.

"Gran?" he called. His grandmother was an early riser, but she didn't answer. "Gran?" he called again.

No answer. Tucker searched the house. Gran's bed was still made. It was only seven thirty. Where could she be?

Tucker went into the kitchen, searching for his phone to call her. He'd been so tired when he came in last night, he could have left it anywhere. Then he heard it ringing. In the pantry. He'd grabbed a bag of chips on his way up to his room last night, he must have—yep. There it was on the shelf next to a jar of Skippy. He didn't recognize the number on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Tucker? Tucker Madsen? You'd better get over here right away.”

“I'm sorry. Who is this?”

The caller, a woman, made an impatient noise. “It's Earlene Jackson. Miss Lily isn't doing so great—”

“I'm fine!” Hearing his grandmother's voice in the background made Tucker relax a little.

“Oh no, you're not! Just sit down, and—” He heard bits of muffled conversation as he grabbed his keys from the counter.

“Text me the address,” he said, already on his way out the door.

Five minutes later Tucker pulled up in front of a charming cottage-style home three blocks east of Main Street. It was a pretty little house painted pale yellow with gray trim, dormer windows, and a stone chimney peeking over the roof. The brick walkway led to an arched entry where a smiling plastic Santa was tacked to the front door. He'd just raised his hand to knock when the door swung open and Early Jackson pulled him inside. She was dressed in a yellow satin robe covered in black cranes, her head wrapped in a towel.

“She's asleep again,” she whispered. “On the couch in there. Stubborn old mule. She wouldn't let me call you last night. Go on in. I'm just going to run upstairs and change.”

Tucker took a hesitant step into the room. Early's house was . . . lovely. When he stepped inside, he wasn't sure what he'd find. Maybe a lot of cats because Early was a little out there. So yeah. This was unexpected. Beautiful crown molding and built-in bookcases. An arched window reached floor to ceiling, framing Early's Christmas tree, which was decorated with glass snowflakes and silver tinsel. Gran was dozing on an overstuffed couch flanked by coordinating armchairs. There was a baby grand tucked into the corner, its closed lid covered with dozens of photos.

“You look surprised.” Early's quiet voice came from behind him. “What did you expect? A house full of birds? Or, worse, cats?”

He gave a short laugh and walked over to the piano, a photo in a simple black frame catching his eye. He recognized a very young Early with feathered hair and tanned skin. She was standing in front of a young man in a tux who had his arms wrapped around her from behind. Tucker blinked. The young man was his dad.

“He was my date to the prom that year,” Early said.

Tucker picked up the picture to take a closer look.

“Kinda shook things up around here. I was two years older than your dad. He was a football player; I lettered in art. We were an unlikely couple, but what can I say? He was a babe.”

“You dated my dad?”

“You didn’t know?”

This was weird.

“I had no idea. Wow.” He turned to Early, who was now dressed in a collared dress and crinoline that swished as she sat on the piano bench.

“I figured as much. We women tend to be more sentimental about first love than men are,” she said.

Tucker had to ask. “So is that the reason you dress like this?” He didn’t mean to be rude but gestured toward the crinoline anyway. “Is it because my dad broke your heart?”

“What? Oh my heavens, no! Don’t misunderstand me. I loved your daddy with all the fervor of an eighteen-year-old girl. We were together for almost two years. It broke my heart when I left for college—thought I’d never love another man. But I did.” She took another picture from the piano and handed it to him. In this photo Early, wearing a loose-fitting white dress and a wreath of flowers in her hair, stood next to a guy in a tux. Her wedding picture, he guessed. “I was married to Michael for nearly twenty years.” A faraway look came into her eyes. She was silent until Tucker cleared his throat. “Hmm?” she said. “Oh yes. I dress this way because it makes me happy. Shakes things up a bit too.” She leaned in conspiratorially. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but not much happens around here.”

Tucker felt the start of a smile.

“You two done?” Gran flung back the afghan that covered her and sat up on the couch.

“Am I done with Early? Yes. With you? Not even close. Want to explain why you’re sleeping so much again?” Tucker crossed the room to his grandmother and laid a hand on her forehead. No fever, but she looked

exhausted.

“I’m old! Old people sleep. Not that big a mystery. Help me up.” She grabbed his hands.

Tucker looked back at Early, who stood with her arms folded across her chest, her arched eyebrow aimed at Gran. “Lily, I think you should—”

“Early,” Gran interrupted, “thanks for the bed and the company. Hope I didn’t put you out,” she said.

Early just stared, and Tucker looked between the two women.

Early was the first to break. “Fine,” she said, looking up at Tucker. “I mean, it’s all fine. Fine and dandy. Nothing to worry about. Happy to help.” She gave a stiff smile and followed them to the door. “If there’s anything I can do . . .”

“Thanks again, dear.” His grandmother leaned over and kissed Early on the cheek before heading out to the car, leaving Tucker to follow.

“Good luck with her,” Early whispered to him.

“Thanks, I’ll need it.”

When Tucker got in the car and closed his door, he asked, “Are you trying to kill me?” as he started the engine.

Gran rubbed her forehead, eyes closed. “Not lately. Why?”

He backed out of Early’s driveway. “I was scared when I saw you hadn’t come home last night. Why didn’t you call?”

“Just trying to keep you on your toes,” she replied sleepily.

They rode in silence back to the Big House. Tucker helped his grandmother into a chair and turned on the TV. He pulled out his phone and googled area doctors as he went into the kitchen.

He stopped short at a scene of perfect domesticity—if you didn’t take into account the flour spilled across the counter, the overturned container of salt, and the haphazard stack of cake pans in the sink.

In the middle of this mess stood Emma, hair piled high on her head, one rebellious strand falling like a ribbon across her face. She kept swatting it away as she finished frosting an enormous chocolate cake. He’d never seen a cake stacked so high. Just looking at it had his mouth watering.

She hadn’t noticed him yet; she was too busy turning the cake on a pedestal, trying to even out the frosting until the sides were smooth. The room was warm with the scent of chocolate and sugar. He took a step closer, and Emma looked up.

“Did you know Early was married to Michael Jackson?” he asked.

Emma paused, spatula poised midair. “Was that before or after he married Priscilla Presley?”

“Elvis was married to Priscilla. Michael Jackson was married to their daughter, Lisa Marie.”

“I’m a little scared that you know that. So is that where you’ve been all day? With Early?” She glanced at him over the top of the cake as she continued to smooth the frosting.

“Yeah. I was picking up Gran. Long story. Guess what else?”

“Early was abducted by aliens as a child, then dropped off in Roswell, New Mexico?”

“Close. She dated my dad in high school.”

“Ah. You saw the picture.”

“You knew!”

“He looks just like you, or I guess you look just like him.”

“They were together for almost two years until she left for college. Dad never said a word. Neither did Gran.”

“Maybe she didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“Early was two years older than my dad. It was high school. There’s no way Gran approved of their relationship.”

Emma shrugged and gave the cake a final spin. “Maybe she didn’t. But it’s been—what?—forty plus years since they were together? I’m sure Miss Lily is over it by now.” She set down the spatula and wiped a hand across her forehead, leaving a fresh trail of cocoa powder.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he watched her carefully lift the cake from the stand and slide it into a white baker’s box.

“The bazaar is tomorrow night. These cakes are for the silent auction.”

Tucker smiled. Emma Jane McAllister had a good heart. He moved closer to her. “Am I going to that?” he asked, touching her cheek where a streak of cocoa was smeared.

His grandmother walked in, and Tucker took a step back. “You most certainly are. You’re my date,” Gran said.

“Did you know about Dad and Early?”

“Of course I knew. I took the picture. I wasn’t worried.”

“Yeah, but Early said—”

“First love always seems to leave a mark, doesn’t it?” She shot him a look, nodding toward Emma. “Early got over it, and so did your father. If it had been meant to be, they would have found each other again.” Another

look, this time leveled at Emma, who quickly ducked her head and started on the next cake.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TUCKER WAS ALMOST READY FOR the bazaar. He'd just buttoned his shirt when his phone rang.

"Guess where I am," Meredith whispered before he had a chance to say hello. "Never mind. You'll never guess. I'm at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn."

So she was in New York again. Tucker looked outside. It was dark here, and New York was an hour ahead. "Why are you in a cemetery at night? Did you kill someone?"

"We're doing the Vanity Fair shoot here. The photographer is doing something with the lighting right now." Given the supernatural bent of Meredith's show, a cemetery now seemed a little prosaic.

The photo spread was the cherry on top of the sundae of Meredith's year. Her client, Dempsey Malone, had been featured in the young Hollywood issue of Vanity Fair magazine several months back. Meredith had been stalking people at the publication ever since, lobbying hard for a feature article for Dempsey.

"It looks like she might get the cover!" He could hear the excitement in her voice.

"That's great, Mere. Congratulations!"

"I know! So how are things out there?"

"Fine. There's a benefit at The Barn tonight, raising money for a local park or something. I'm taking my grandmother," he said.

After their discussion a couple of days ago, Tucker and Meredith had talked a bit more yesterday evening, carefully avoiding the subject of their relationship. Meredith seemed happy with their two-dimensional conversations and didn't press for any deep discussion about where things stood between them. Maybe he wasn't the only one who was uneasy about that topic.

"Tell me about the shoot," he said.

She didn't have to be asked twice. It turned out Meredith's contact at Vanity Fair was a huge fan of the show, but the photographer had never heard of Dempsey. Meredith didn't feel the man was properly deferential toward such a huge talent. Tucker walked the room while she detailed the clothes, makeup, and lighting, his silence punctuated by the occasional, "Uh-huh."

He happened by the window and saw Emma heading toward her truck, arms stacked with two of the cake boxes. He watched her sidle closer and make a grab for the door handle. She missed. She tried to see around the boxes, feeling for the handle again. Maybe he should go down and—

“Isn’t that amazing?” Meredith asked.

“Sorry. What was that?”

“Leonard Bernstein is buried here. Did you know that?”

“Uh, no.” Tucker tugged the shutters open as Emma finally got the door open.

“All kinds of famous people are, and . . .” Meredith launched into a monologue on New York history. Tucker grinned as he watched Emma struggle, wedging her body against the truck door and jamming her foot against the runner. She was parked on a slight incline, and it looked like gravity was giving her a hard time. She finally got the cakes loaded into the cab of the truck when she suddenly glanced up at his window.

Busted. Tucker felt a flash of adrenaline. Might as well own up to it. He waved. Emma shook her head, smiled, and waved back before getting into her truck and driving away.

“Tucker,” Meredith’s voice interrupted. “Are you tired? You sound like you’re miles away.”

“Yeah,” he said, clearing his throat. “It’s been a crazy week. I’ll let you go. I know you’re busy.”

“Okay. I should get back to Dempsey.” She paused, then said, “I’ll call you sometime. We should talk about . . . things.”

Tucker paused. “We should.”

“I miss you,” Meredith said.

“Oh yeah,” Tucker said. “You too.”

* * *

They drove the long way around to The Barn because Gran didn’t think she could make the walk down the hill no matter how clear the path was. When they pulled into the parking lot, it was packed. People streamed toward the open door of The Barn, music and laughter inviting them inside, where it was light and warm.

“This will be good for business,” Gran said. The eaves glowed bright with Christmas lights. Tucker helped her out of the car, and she put her arm through his. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered as they stepped inside.

Swags of white lights and pine boughs hung between the rafters, wreaths were tacked to the high windows, and red ribbon twirled down wooden support posts. The serving tables were piled high with every kind of treat imaginable: cakes, cookies, pies. A kid stood on tiptoe and reached into a tall glass jar filled with peppermint candy while the band played Christmas songs over shouts of laughter and friends calling to each other.

Tucker waded through the crowd. His hand was shaken and his back slapped more times than he could count. He craned his neck above the crowd and looked for Emma. He finally spied her over by the bandstand in deep conversation with Hopper Spickett. Felt another ping of jealousy. He had no right to, but it was there just the same. He started that way when his grandmother tugged on his arm.

“What’s wrong?” he asked when he saw the look on her face.

“Steer me the other way,” she muttered. “Here comes Myrna Hudson. She always talks to me as if I’m deaf and dumb.”

“Why would she do that?” Tucker asked, moving her toward the tables.

Gran’s grin tilted sideways. “Poor dear’s about as entertaining as a stack of phone books. My mind tends to wander when she starts going on and on about that granddaughter of hers over in Bolivar. One day I ran into her at Grimm’s, and she got her motor running, and I honestly thought the ice cream would melt before she stopped yakking. I was off in the ether when she asked me a question. When I didn’t answer, she assumed I hadn’t heard her, so she asked again, only ten times louder than before. Snapped me right back to the frozen-food aisle. Ever since then she comes at me like she’s speaking through a bullhorn.”

Tucker was holding a chair for his grandmother when a bony finger jabbed his shoulder. He turned and looked down into the pinched face of an honest-to-goodness blue-haired woman. Gran gave his foot a swift kick.

“You must be Miss Lily’s grandson. Everyone is talking about you! Dolly Bricknell says you’re taking over for Doc Braithwaite. What great news! I’m Myrna Hudson. I’m on the library board with Miss Lily,” she said with a nod.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Hudson.”

The woman leaned across him and shouted, “So good to see you tonight, Miss Lily! You look fine!” His grandmother’s eyes went as wide as quarters.

Tucker stepped between them. “We’re glad to be here,” he said.

The blue-haired lady patted his arm. “You know, my granddaughter over in Bolivar has the worst case of impetigo you’ve ever seen. Darling girl. Just imagine what a handsome doctor like you could do with a challenge like that!”

“Hey, Myrna.” Emma appeared out of nowhere. “Come over to the auction table. I want to show you how we displayed your pies.” Like an angel sent from above, she dragged the old woman away with flattering words about the lightness of her pastry.

“Thank heaven for Emma Jane,” his grandmother said, watching them go.

The band eased into a bluesy version of “White Christmas,” and Tucker held out his hand to Gran. “Wanna dance?”

* * *

Emma left Myrna rearranging the display of her baked goods, shaking her head, and saying, “Oh, this is all wrong. I’ll take care of it. You’ve obviously got your hands full.”

Emma was grateful for the exit. She wandered over to the children’s Christmas tree, a sparkly aluminum contraption Early Jackson had donated for the party. Kids swarmed a low table, busily coloring paper ornaments to hang on the silver branches. Nancy Welles grabbed Emma’s arm and told her how pretty everything looked. The mayor flashed a smile at her from across the room and gave her a thumbs-up. Hopper caught her eye and raised a glass, and she smiled and nodded. He’d stopped her earlier, asking her to save him a dance.

Everything was going well. She’d locked the check from the mayor in her desk just as the band had arrived to set up. She would tuck that money away for part of that looming mortgage payment—a minor miracle, but she’d take it.

She watched Tucker lead his grandmother out onto the dance floor. It was cute, the way Miss Lily looked at him. He leaned down and said something that made her laugh, and Emma smiled. She grabbed a strand of her hair and twisted it.

“Uh-oh.” Nina materialized at her side.

Emma glanced at her friend. “Uh-oh what?” she asked.

“That look on your face. I haven’t seen it since . . .”

“Since?” Emma prodded, and Nina raised an eyebrow.

“Since the last time Tucker Madsen turned everything in your life upside down.”

Emma averted her gaze. “It’s not the same look.”

“Oh, it is. Hard to forget. Halfway between bemused and . . . sappy. I think the word we’re looking for is smitten, or maybe it’s stupid. In this case, it would mean the same thing.”

Emma’s smile flattened. “You’re wrong.”

“And you’re twisting your hair. You only do that when you’re nervous.”

Emma dropped her hands to her sides.

The song ended, and Nina bent her head to whisper, “Definitely smitten,” as Tucker and Miss Lily walked toward them, arm in arm.

“The place looks lovely, Emma,” Miss Lily said.

“Thank you.”

“I wonder why we didn’t think to have the party here last year.” Miss Lily looked around, nodding her approval.

“Well, this time last year we’d only been open a month,” Nina said.

“Gran is right, Em. Great job tonight,” Tucker said.

Emma smiled under his praise.

“We’re going to raise a pile of money tonight! Everything is lovely,” the mayor said as she and her husband approached from the dance floor.

“Thanks, Dolly,” Emma said.

“No, thank you. Nina gave me the key, so you don’t have to worry about locking up. I’ll handle it. The cleaning committee is all set to take everything down tonight.”

“That sounds great,” Emma admitted, glad to be free of that task.

“Good to see you again, son.” Hal Bricknell clapped Tucker on the back.

“Thank you,” Tucker said, grinning at the older man.

Dolly put a hand on Tucker’s arm. “You’ve been here a while now. What’s it been? Three weeks? That job I offered is still available.” The mayor winked, and Emma momentarily stopped breathing.

Nina elbowed her in the ribs.

“Oh,” the mayor continued, standing on tiptoe. “There’s Rick Barkus. I need to talk to him. Come on, Hal. He’s the only one on the city council who’s not on board with the golf course.” She patted Emma’s arm as Tucker bristled at the mention of the development, and then she said, “I’m going to get this thing through the planning commission before the end of the year. I promise.”

“Great.” Emma smiled.

Miss Lily looked between her and Tucker. “Why don’t you two dance,” she suggested. “For old times’ sake.”

“Oh, I don’t think—” Emma started.

“Great idea,” Tucker said at the same time.

Nina rolled her eyes. “Miss Lily,” she said, taking the old woman by the arm and leading her toward the dessert table, “did you know the word smitten comes from the word smite, meaning to ‘inflict a heavy blow’?” Nina looked over her shoulder at Emma and stuck out her tongue.

“What was that about?” Tucker asked.

“Oh, you know. Just Nina being . . . Nina.”

He was looking at her with that smile again. She couldn’t help it; she reached up to wrap a strand of hair around her finger and twisted.

“So would you like to dance?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tucker said, pulling her out onto the dance floor.

“I don’t know what it’s like in the big city, Tucker, but here, rude and charming are not the same thing.”

His fingers twined through hers, and a jolt traveled up her arm. Evidently, the shock of it registered on her face because Tucker stopped.

“What?” he asked.

She recovered quickly, tightening her grip on his hand.

“Hey,” he winced. “Take it easy.”

“We gonna do this thing?” she asked.

“Depends on what you have in mind. We dancing or wrestling?”

She looked down at their hands and let go. “Sorry,” she muttered, holding her breath as his arm slid around her waist.

She saw Miss Lily wander over to the bandstand and slip the guitarist a folded bill. She caught Emma staring and winked. The band slowed the tempo way down and played “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Great.

“You having a good time?”

“Huh?” Emma looked up at Tucker.

“I asked if you’re having a good time. Polite conversation. It’s what civilized people do while dancing.”

“We’re civilized?”

“We can try to be.” He pulled her closer and Emma flushed. Could he feel how fast her heart was beating?

“This really is nice,” he said. “You’re very good at what you do, Em. I’m impressed.”

Her cheeks grew even hotter. “Thank you.”

They circled the dance floor in silence. After a while, Emma found herself relaxing in his arms.

“Can I ask you a question?” he murmured.

“Hmm?” she said against his shoulder.

He hesitated. “Maybe I shouldn’t.”

She looked up at him. “What?”

“I don’t want to ruin the mood.”

“What mood? There is no ‘mood.’ Ask your question.”

“Well, since I’ve been back, I’ve been wondering . . .” He trailed off.

“What?” she prodded.

“Em, what happened?”

“What do you mean?”

He shrugged as they shuffled in a slow circle. “With us. What happened to us?”

She broke eye contact, and her back went rod straight. “You left. That’s what happened to us.”

“Yeah, I did. But I thought we had a plan.”

“Why are you bringing this up?” she asked.

He gathered her closer again, and she felt him shake his head. “I don’t know. Closure? Being back here . . . lots of memories, you know?”

The band eased into the next set. Another slow song.

She tried to stop the flood of emotion that surfaced, tried to think of something else; she concentrated on the dance, singing along with the band in her head. It didn’t work. Her mind went cascading back to that pathetic mess of a girl she’d been twelve years ago, running to the mailbox after school every day, pressing the button on the answering machine even when it wasn’t blinking, watching out the window on weekends just in case he decided to drive down and surprise her.

So hopeful. So stupid. She remembered the way she’d shielded her face during English class, trying to hide the fact that she was sobbing through the credits of Romeo and Juliet as the video ended in a crescendo of tragic orchestration. So. Stinking. Ridiculous.

She stopped dancing, and Tucker stepped on her foot.

“Sorry! Hey, are you okay?” he asked, brows meeting.

“You dumped me.” She drew the words out into the indictment they were. “Without a word, I might add. You just . . . vanished. And yet you stand here and wonder what happened?”

Tucker’s eyebrows climbed higher with every word. “I what?” He made a noise of disgust and pulled her from the dance floor, dragging her to the back of The Barn and right out the door.

“Tucker, where are we going?”

“Too many people,” he muttered, stumbling into a group of teenagers. He turned to her without letting go of her hand. “Where can we go for some privacy?”

“We don’t need privacy. The last thing we need is privacy!”

“Emma, we’re having this conversation. I don’t care if it’s twelve years too late. It’s happening.”

“I can’t leave! I’m in charge of—”

“The mayor said she would lock up tonight.”

“Fine!” Emma jerked her hand away. “My truck.”

They charged down the hill, circling to the front of The Barn and into the parking lot. She unlocked her truck, climbed inside, and slammed the door. Tucker walked around to the passenger side and tried the door. Locked. A small childish part of her wanted it to stay that way.

He tapped lightly on the window. “Let me in, EJ.”

“Stop calling me that,” she insisted.

He gave her that sideways smile, the one that turned her dopey. “Please? It’s cold out here.”

“This is so stupid,” she said, then leaned across the bench seat and unlocked the door.

Emma turned the key in the ignition and hit defrost, turning up the radio for good measure. Tucker climbed in and turned it off.

“I like that song!” she said.

He tossed his phone onto the dash. “Emma . . . that’s not what happened.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Well, that’s how I remember it.”

“Em—”

“Hey!” She jabbed a finger at him as he inched closer. “Stay on your side of the truck.”

He didn't move. "Why would I lie to you? I swear I wrote to you for months. Long ridiculously embarrassing letters. You never answered."

"What are you talking about? I got nothing from you. No notes, no letters, nada." They sat in silence for a moment. Well, near silence. It wasn't exactly quiet in the cab of the truck with the engine chugging away. "And anyway," Emma said, turning toward him. "If you wanted to get ahold of me so badly, why didn't you just call me?"

"I did!" he insisted. She could tell he was agitated. He inched closer again. "I left messages for months. I know we'd agreed I wouldn't call, but by Halloween I was so mad that I sat by the phone and called your house every hour on the hour until midnight. No one ever picked up, not even the answering machine. I even called Gran and asked her to deliver a message, but I never heard from you." He looked out the window and mumbled, "I thought you'd found someone else."

Emma looked straight ahead, pulling nervously at the hem of her sweater. Light from The Barn hit the snow at odd angles. Her heart was jumping around so hard in her chest that she was half afraid he'd be able to see it. Was he telling the truth? Had their separation just been one colossal misunderstanding?

She closed her eyes, trying to calm her racing mind. She wasn't proud of it, but since he'd been back, Emma had occasionally found herself drifting into daydream scenarios in which Tucker confessed he hadn't come back to broker the deal for his grandmother. He'd come back for her. And sometimes she caught herself doing absurd things like trying to catch a glimpse of him as she drove up to The Barn or standing on tiptoe in her office to see if his room light was on. There was no doubt about it: Tucker Madsen was taking up too much space in her head.

She turned to find Tucker staring at her, his expression serious, and this time she didn't look away. Music and laughter edged down the hill from The Barn. Tucker reached up and pushed a strand of hair behind her ear, and her breath caught. "You make me crazy," he said.

"Good," she said softly. "That's been the plan all along."

He shook his head and smiled. "Honestly, Emma, most days I don't know if I should wrestle you or . . ."

"Or what?" she said.

"Kiss you."

Emma inhaled sharply. "Tucker, if you kiss me, I'll—"

Too late. Before she knew what was happening, his fingers were in her hair, his mouth a gentle pressure on hers.

It took her all of two seconds to get on board with the kiss, three to wrap her arms around his neck and start kissing him back. She tightened her arms and deepened the kiss.

He pulled away for a moment, looking a little shaken before he leaned in again. Their lips barely brushed when his phone began to vibrate on the dash. Out of the corner of her eye, Emma saw a picture of Tucker's pretty fiancée flash across the screen.

She abruptly pushed Tucker away. She felt awful. "We shouldn't have done this," she said. "It's not right."

Tucker didn't touch his phone, and eventually the screen went black. "I know," he said quietly.

"You're engaged, Tucker."

He sat back and let out a steady sigh. "I don't think I am. According to Meredith, we're on a break."

"Well, you can't start something with me until you know for sure." Emma realized what she'd said and tried to backtrack. "Not that you're, um, trying to start something with me. I didn't mean to make it sound like—"

"I have feelings for you, Emma," he insisted, and something warm expanded in her chest.

This was getting confusing. He needed to stop talking. "I'm not seventeen anymore, Tucker. I think—"

He kissed her again, but she pushed him away more forcefully. "Will you stop doing that?"

"Sorry," he said.

He didn't look sorry.

"I like you, Emma. I really, really like you. There's something about you, about us—"

"Leftovers from twelve years ago." She shook her head.

"I don't think so. Being with you is the first thing that has felt right about this trip."

"Look, Tucker, I'm not a naive girl anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"It means when you waltz out of here after the contracts are signed . . ."

Tucker started to protest. She held up a hand. "I won't waste time believing you'll be back."

Tucker's phone dinged with a text.

"You're very popular tonight," Emma said.

Tucker picked up his phone this time. "It's Gran. She got a ride home. Says she's not feeling well. Maybe I should go check on her."

"You should."

"Could you give me a ride up the hill?"

Emma nodded and took Tucker home.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE HOUSE WAS DARK WHEN they let themselves in, and Tucker instinctively reached back to grab Emma's hand. When she tried to pull away, he just held on tighter.

"Turn a light on," Emma whispered.

"She might be asleep," Tucker whispered back.

"In the entryway?"

He fumbled in the dark and found the light switch, squinting when the room bloomed in the light.

"Okay, well, you're here," Emma said, tugging her hand free. "I should go."

"What's your hurry?"

Emma looked at him like he'd just sprouted horns. "You're kidding, right?" She was a tough customer, but Tucker saw a smile pushing at the corners of her mouth. She liked him; he could tell.

"Emma," he pulled her close again, his voice still low. "I meant what I said earlier. I have feelings for you."

She rolled her eyes, but she didn't move. He leaned down to kiss her again, his lips barely brushing hers, when he heard the shower of shattering glass.

"Hmm," he mused, "some people hear choirs of angels when they kiss. We get breaking glass."

"Sign from above, don't you think?" Emma said, cocking an eyebrow. He grabbed her hand and pulled her down the hall into the kitchen, where they found Gran on her hands and knees, trying to clean up a broken cup. Tucker hurried over to her.

"What happened?" he asked, helping her into a chair.

Emma bent and picked up the larger pieces of glass. "I'll go find a broom," she said.

"Don't ever get old, Tucker. There are very few advantages. I was reaching for a cup, and it slipped out of my hands."

Tucker turned her hands over in his. "Did you get cut?"

"No." Her hands were shaking. "I'm fine." Tucker shook his head. She was too pale to be fine.

"Lil, I forgot my glasses," a voice said from the staircase behind them. "I can't read the bottles, so I brought them both. If you'd just—oh." Early Jackson swished into the kitchen wearing an elf costume but froze when she

saw them. Her eyes glanced off the glass on the floor, then landed on Gran. Her fists came to her hips. “You need to tell them,” she huffed.

Gran grumbled something that sounded an awful lot like “Mind your own business” just as Emma showed up, dustpan in hand. “Tell us what?” she asked.

“It’s nothing,” Gran said. “Early is making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“I mean it, Lily. I’ve had enough of this skulking around. He deserves to know.”

“What exactly do I deserve—”

“Now, there’s a loaded question!” Gran interrupted.

“Tell them,” Early said tightly.

“Fine. Tucker, you are not allowed to fuss. I’m not saying anything until you give me your solemn word that you’ll hold your tongue until I tell you absolutely everything.”

Tucker’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t like the sound of this. He pulled out a chair to face her. “Spill it, Gran.”

“Promise first.”

He sighed. “All right, I promise. Now, tell me.”

His grandmother fidgeted in her chair, wouldn’t look him in the eye. “I might have—and Early’s making this seem much more serious than it is—just a little bit of . . . cancer.”

Tucker heard Emma’s sharp inhale, but he was paralyzed by the word. “Cancer,” he repeated.

Gran nodded. “Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Caught early. Stage one. One little lymph node in my neck. That’s why I’ve been wearing these scarves. The radiation therapy seems to be working; it’s just left me with red patches. I’m not usually so vain, mind you, but I didn’t want anyone asking questions. Fat lot of good that did me.” She shot Early a scathing look.

“Cancer,” Tucker said again.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m taking medication. Besides, everyone my age gets cancer. It’s like getting chicken pox when you’re a kid.”

“It’s not like the chicken pox!” he roared. It was hitting him now. Cancer. “Who else knows? My mom?”

“I didn’t want to burden Sophie. She’s so busy.”

“Whippet?” He knew Gran and his sister carried on a regular correspondence over email.

“As if she needs something else to concern herself about with that little girl she’s trying to raise practically on her own. You know that worthless husband of hers—”

“Don’t try to change the subject! So you didn’t tell anyone? You just kept it to yourself? Did you—” He swung his gaze to Emma, but she looked just as shocked as he felt.

She gave a short jerk of her head. No, she hadn’t known.

“My oncologist is watching me closely. Says she thinks they caught it in time. And lots of people live for years after their diagnosis. Maybe with all that extra time, you could provide me with a couple of great-grandchildren.” She patted his hand.

Cancer. And here she sat, making jokes.

“This changes things,” Tucker muttered.

“No, it doesn’t,” Gran insisted.

But it did. This trip had been about Tucker helping Gran sell her house and getting back to LA. Funny how one little word could turn everything inside out.

“I can’t just leave you here to fend for yourself,” he said.

“What are you talking about? I’m not by myself.”

Tucker looked at Emma, and she nodded. “I can help out,” she said.

“And I know her book club would be willing to—”

“Here we go,” Gran muttered under her breath.

Emma’s face changed. “We want to take care of you.”

“No!” Gran cried, slapping her hand against the table. “No, no, no. That’s exactly what I don’t want. You tell the book-club girls I have cancer, and before you know it, people will be buzzing around me like flies, the freezer will be jammed with casseroles, and my room will be so full of flowers it’ll look like a funeral parlor. No flowers! No casseroles!”

“Okay,” Emma said slowly, “no casseroles. Could I stop by and cook dinner for you once in a while? I’d like to help.”

“Well,” Gran said, “that might be all right.”

“We’re standing here talking about food . . . Gran! You have cancer. Why didn’t you tell me? I’ve been here for weeks. Not a single word.” He grabbed the cordless phone from the counter and handed it to her. “Call your oncologist.”

“What for?”

“I’d like to talk to him.”

“Her.”

“Whatever! Make the call, Gran, or I will.”

“Darlin’, it’s Saturday night. No one is going to answer.”

“Call and leave a message. I want a face-to-face appointment first thing Monday,” Tucker demanded, and Gran’s eyes narrowed.

Early coughed and nodded toward Emma. “Uh, this is a family issue, Emma. Maybe we should go.”

This wasn’t how Tucker had seen the night going. He’d been on the verge of . . . something with Emma, and now this. Emma looked pale as she followed Early out of the kitchen. A moment later he heard the front door close.

“See what you did?” Gran said, yanking the lid off one of her medications. “You and Emma were finally making some progress—you could cut the tension between you with a knife—and you ruined it!”

“I ruined it?”

“Make yourself useful, would you? Get me something to drink,” she demanded, shaking the pill bottle at him.

“What are you so mad about? I’m not the one who’s been lying,” Tucker said as he walked to the fridge and got her a bottle of water.

“All this fuss over nothing,” she said and swallowed her pill.

“Cancer is not ‘nothing.’”

“Quit saying that word. I know what I’ve got. Look, by the time a girl gets to be ninety-one years old, she gains some perspective.”

“Meaning?”

Gran shrugged. “I’ve had a good life. When I die, I die.”

Tucker leaned against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. “That’s just great,” he said.

“Listen, sweetheart, I’ve been without your grandfather for over thirty years. Your daddy’s been gone nearly twenty.”

“What about me, Mom, and Whip? Did you think about how this would affect us?”

“Tucker, I’m not dying right now, so stop the theatrics.”

He sat down next to her and scrubbed a hand down his face. “I’m not leaving until we figure this out. Someone needs to be here to help you.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t use my illness for an excuse to stay. There are plenty of other reasons for you to stick around. More compelling reasons.”

“Like what?” Tucker slumped back in his chair.

“Emma Jane. I’m not blind.”

He could have lied, but his grandmother seemed to be clairvoyant.

“Maybe.” He drummed his fingers against the table, then admitted, “I’m in over my head here, Gran. I, uh . . . kissed her tonight.”

Gran didn’t say anything immediately. She just raised an eyebrow at him like she used to when he was a kid and she found him elbow-deep in the cookie jar. “Don’t mess it up this time,” she finally said.

“Thanks for that.” Tucker stood to leave.

“Oh, sit down.”

He grumbled but obeyed.

“Will you take some advice from an old woman? Think about your decision long and hard. There’s no shame in having second thoughts. I was engaged to someone else before I met your grandfather. Caused a bit of a stink when I broke things off, but I never regretted my decision. Make sure you feel the same way about your choice as I did about mine.”

“You were engaged to someone before Grandpa Jack?”

“You’re missing the point, Tucker.”

He was quiet for a moment. “I thought I had it all figured out; I really did—Meredith is wonderful—but then I came back here, and Emma . . .”

“Understandable. She’s an amazing woman. You’d be lucky to have her.”

“You’re right, but you’re also forgetting something. I have a potentially ex-fiancée that I really need to talk to. I also have a new job waiting for me. A condo. A life.”

“Yes, you have a life in California. But, Tucker, is it the life you want?”

Tucker was quiet again, and Gran was too gracious to say anything else. Instead, she patted his shoulder and went upstairs.

* * *

Normal went to bed early. As he drove down Main Street, Tucker saw that all the businesses were closed, dim light from shop windows spilling across snowy sidewalks. Even the diner was dim, the flashing Open sign switched off. Darn. He’d been hoping for a late-night slice of pie. Instead, almost by rote, he took a right at the roundabout and drove a few blocks east until he found himself outside a pretty little Craftsman.

“Tucker Madsen, what are you doing here?” he muttered to himself.

This was a bad idea, but he threw the car into park, turned off the engine, and started up the sidewalk anyway. He took the front steps two at a time and rapped his knuckles against the door before he could talk himself out of

it.

Emma was slow to answer, eventually peeking out from behind the door.

“Tucker.” She sniffed, her eyes red-rimmed.

“Are you okay?” he asked, leaning against the frame.

She didn’t answer, just opened the door wider and let him in.

She trailed into the living room and leaned against the couch back, and Tucker stood underneath the cased opening with his hands in his pockets.

The place looked different from the last time he’d seen it. Emma’s mom had been pretty depressed that summer. The curtains had always been drawn, the couch piled high with laundry, daytime TV droning in the background. Now the room was clean. The ratty floral couch had been replaced by a comfortable-looking sofa, a soft blanket tangled in one corner. A steaming mug sat on the coffee table. In the low light the room looked cozy and inviting.

“Sorry about earlier. I should have seen you to the door,” Tucker said.

“No, it’s fine. I thought it was better to leave. Like Early said, it was a family moment.”

“You are family, Em.”

She looked up sharply. “Really? Then, why didn’t she tell me?”

“She didn’t tell any of us. The only person she took into her confidence was Early.” Emma walked around the couch and flopped down. He followed her, sitting on the arm of an overstuffed chair.

“Is she okay?” Emma asked into a tissue.

“I don’t know. She says she is. I’ll know more on Monday,” he said, and Emma nodded.

They fell into a long silence, the house quiet except for the ticking of the clock on the mantel. He remembered that clock. It was an old wind-up job that chimed on the hour. As a kid Tucker had accidentally knocked it over when he’d thrown a pillow at Emma and missed. He’d sweat bullets when he picked it up, afraid he’d broken the antique. He’d nearly dropped it again when it chimed in his hands, sending Emma into fits of laughter.

“I feel . . . mad,” Emma said, hugging a throw pillow to her chest. “Is that awful?”

Tucker shrugged.

“The thing is,” Emma continued, “I’m here. I see her almost every day, and when I don’t, I give her a call. We’re close, Tucker. And she never said a word.” Fresh tears started in her eyes.

Tucker didn't like seeing her cry. It made him feel like kicking something.

Emma swiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I'm being selfish. You'll let me know what her doctor says?"

"Of course," he said.

"Tucker . . ." Emma started, shifting on the couch.

"Yeah?"

"This isn't the time to talk about it, but I've been thinking. Maybe I should consider your compromise."

He was quiet.

"The house. I don't want Miss Lily to have all this business hanging over her head, you know? I think the sooner we settle this, the better it will be for everyone. And your ideas for Shep's old house aren't . . . horrible."

He gave a short laugh.

"You think Miss Lily would consider selling it to me?" Emma asked.

"I think she'd do anything for you." His eyes stayed on hers a beat too long. He should get out of here before he did something stupid . . . again. "I should probably go. Gran's asleep, but I don't want to leave her alone for too long."

"Right." She walked him to the door. He pulled his coat tighter and stood in the doorway, reluctant to leave. Emma cocked her head at him.

"Why did you stop by?" she asked, leaning against the door.

He reached out and touched her cheek. "I wanted to check on you. Make sure you were okay. You were kind of pale when you left the house."

Emma nodded. "Thanks. I'll be fine. I just need to . . . adjust. It brought back some memories, that's all."

Tucker felt a little pang of sympathy. "Your mom?" he asked gently.

"Yes" was all she said, and Tucker didn't say more. Gran had told him a long time ago that Mrs. McAllister had died of lung cancer. This couldn't be easy for Emma.

She looked up at him with wide, expectant eyes. It was too much. Suddenly everything felt wrong somehow. He took a step back.

"I shouldn't have—I think I . . ." He glanced at her. "I'm sorry," he said, then turned and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

MONDAY MORNING EVERYTHING CRASHED AROUND Emma. That stupid kiss. Her abysmal bank balance. Miss Lily's illness. So she did what any girl would do in her shoes. She went looking for chocolate.

She walked into Grimm's on the hunt for a half gallon of burnt-almond-fudge ice cream, her go-to flavor when life tanked. She grabbed a can of whipped cream and a king-sized candy bar for good measure and stood patiently in the checkout line.

Tried not to think about Tucker.

Yeah, he'd kissed her, but it sure looked like he regretted that now. How else could you explain the way he'd looked so deeply into her eyes Saturday night and then run away like a scared preschooler? Now he was avoiding her.

Miss Lily had been a no-show at church yesterday. Not surprising, Emma supposed. Tucker had sneaked in one of the side doors after the first hymn and then beat a hasty retreat before the last amen. He hadn't even glanced her way. Maybe he hadn't seen her . . . or looked for her. Why was she making excuses for him? She sat in the same pew every week. Kind of hard to miss.

He was going to leave. She could feel it. Like an oncoming migraine, she just knew.

Her items advanced on the belt, and she chewed her thumb, staring off into space. The thing was, after their conversation in her truck, she'd felt a tiny flicker of hope that maybe . . .

Was she stupid? What was the old saying? Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice . . . What kind of an idiot got fooled twice? Really, it was embarrassing. She needed to push Tucker out of her mind and focus on—

“Declined,” Ruth Ann Maddox said from behind the check stand.

“What?”

“Your credit card. It was declined.”

“No. No, it couldn't be.” She felt a flare of panic. “Will you run it again, Ruthie?” She used to babysit Ruthie when her parents went gambling over on the riverboat in St. Louis. She wasn't going to suffer this kind of humiliation in front of someone she used to tuck in at night, for crying out loud.

Ruthie ran the credit card again. “Sorry, Emma. Declined,” she said, shaking her head.

And she wasn't going to cry in front of Ruthie Maddox either.

"Hang on a sec," Emma said, sending an apologetic smile to the people standing behind her. She dug deep, deep, deep into the recesses of her wallet, behind the expired coupons, behind the faded picture of her mother, behind the bent business card of an investment banker she'd had a date with two years ago. She retrieved her high-interest, use-only-in-case-of-Armageddon credit card—the one she normally kept in the freezer under the ice cube trays. With funds dwindling in her checking account, she'd thawed it out and stuck it in her wallet weeks ago.

She blushed furiously as Ruthie boomed, "Yay! It went through!" then gathered her chocolate therapy in a bag and scuttled out of the market as fast as she could.

Unfortunately, her haste made her careless, and as she hurried through the sliding door, she ran smack into Jenny Barrows and her three-year-old son.

"Excuse m—oh. Hi, Jenny," she said.

"Hi, there. Wow, I keep running into you. The universe must be bringing us together," Jenny said with that sunny smile of hers, but Emma froze at the words.

It's time. The thought came unbidden.

She ignored the thought. "Seems to be," she said quickly. "Nice to see you." She'd just reached the curb of the parking lot when she stopped. Suddenly she knew what she had to do. Yes, something kept putting her in Jenny's path. Maybe it was the universe or destiny or God. No matter what she called it, it wasn't the solution she wanted, but it was the one that made the most sense. She turned around. "Hey, Jen," she called. "Hang on a second."

* * *

That evening Emma sat in her office at The Barn, shutters open in front of her desk. She couldn't see the Big House very well, but she would be able to catch the reflection of headlights as they bounced off the garage.

She should be embarrassed, reduced to spying on Tucker like this, but there was no way she was going to call him. Nope. He had enough to deal with without her bothering him too.

He and Miss Lily had been gone all day. They must have gotten an appointment with Lily's oncologist after all. He hadn't called. No texts either. She'd been waiting patiently—okay, not so patiently—all day.

After her conversation with Jenny Barrows this morning, she felt calm, calmer than she'd felt in months. She hoped it was because her decision to sell the house was the right one. Even though the promise of cash was welcome, she'd still hopped onto the sub-finder app as soon as she got home and taken a couple of jobs this week. Her schedule was clear at The Barn until Thursday, and the extra money would put gas in her truck—and more ice cream in the freezer.

She glanced at the clock on her desk and rubbed a spot of dust off the face. It was getting late. Maybe they'd decided to spend the night in St. Louis. She hadn't considered that possibility. She picked up her cell phone, fingers hovering over the dial pad before sliding it back onto her desk. Tucker had promised he'd let her know what he found out. She could wait.

She opened her laptop and looked at the checklist she'd made for the Landry wedding. Things were right on track. It had been oddly quiet on that front lately. No acerbic texts from Mama Landry, no crazy requests from the bride. She knocked on her desk a couple of times, hoping it would stay that way. She clicked over to the boards she'd created for the wedding, giving them the once-over. She and Kira had mapped out a plan for the big day. Their ideas were coming together, and no doubt about it, the wedding would be stunning. The money was nice, but a feature article in InStyle magazine . . . well, that would be huge. Fingers crossed—because until The Barn got more publicity, that was all she could do.

She'd just closed her laptop when she saw the telltale flash of light come from up the hill. She went to the window and stood on tiptoe, but she couldn't see much. The car lights went out, and a moment later the kitchen light flipped on.

So they were home. That was good. She'd left every light on in The Barn—a giant homing signal—hoping Tucker would know she was here and at least call her . . . maybe stop by.

She sat at her desk and started tidying the already-neat surface, then flipped up her laptop again and got online. Maybe some late-night Christmas shopping or Netflix would calm her jitters. Her cell phone buzzed, and she fumbled to pick it up. A text from Tucker.

Hey, you have a second?

Sure, she replied.

I'll come to you.

Emma thought for a second before replying. That's fine. I'm actually at The Barn, she texted, going for subtlety.

I know, he responded. I'll be there in a few.

So much for subtlety.

Emma drummed her pen against the desk, adjusted the angle of her laptop, then retrieved a tissue and dusted the screen. She tossed the tissue into the waste basket, arranged the pens and pencils in the caddy by height, separated the binder clips from the paper clips, and straightened her stack of Post-it notes into an ombre pattern, darkest to light. She heard the door scrape open and floorboards creak. She took a deep breath, willing her heart into a regular beat.

"Em?" Tucker called.

"In here," she answered, running her fingers through her hair before hitting Send on a completely unnecessary email to Nina. At least she looked busy. "Just finishing up a little work," she lied before standing.

Tucker nodded and looked around her office. "I think this is the first time I've been back here since it was the tack room."

"What do you think?" she asked, clasping her hands behind her back.

"It's nice." He nodded.

"Have a seat." This was where Emma held most of her consultations. A low coffee table with a couple of books sat in front of a settee, which was flanked by two wingback chairs. The furniture was tasteful but comfortable. Tucker sat and picked up a leather-bound volume, a lookbook Emma had made at ridiculous expense to show the property at its finest in winter, spring, summer, and fall. She sat across from Tucker and watched him flip through the glossy pictures, so pastoral and perfect they sometimes convinced brides to book on the spot.

"So how is she?" Emma blurted.

Tucker ran a hand down his face and then rubbed his eyes, obviously tired. "Gran started radiation a couple of weeks before I got here. When she found out I was coming, she cancelled a bunch of appointments. The week after Thanksgiving, Dr. Printari called because she was concerned, and Gran promised to start up again, so Early has been driving her to the hospital in Springfield since Gran's doctor comes down once a week from St. Louis.

"Gran lied," he said after a pause. "The cancer's at stage two. It's treatable, but she's not done with radiation. I'll be driving her to her

appointments this week. She's on medication to help with side effects and will be under a doctor's care for the rest of her life, and Dr. Printari is optimistic, but only time will tell." Tucker leaned forward, resting elbows on his knees. "Gran told me she considered forgoing treatment, thought maybe it was her time. Her oncologist convinced her to try."

"That bothers you," Emma observed.

"I should have been here." Tucker shook his head. "I've put myself first all these years. I haven't ever considered how that's affected my family."

Emma was quiet, mostly because she didn't want to be rude. She agreed with him, but maybe he was being a little hard on himself. "We all make mistakes, Tucker," she finally said, putting her hand over his. "The important thing is you're here for her now. I'm so glad she's getting treatment."

Tucker turned his hand under hers and gave a gentle squeeze. "Me too. She made me pay for my interference though—lectured me all the way home—but she seems fine. It was the radiation that made her so tired."

"But she's going to be okay?"

"As okay as she can be. She's stubborn, a little meddlesome, and a lot opinionated, but she says she's not ready to go just yet." Tucker grinned. "She told me she hasn't gotten her money's worth on this ride. She's not going anywhere just yet."

Emma sat back in her chair and exhaled. "I'm so relieved."

"Emma . . ." Tucker looked down at his hands. "I wanted to be sure . . . did you mean what you said the other night?"

Emma's eyes widened. What had she said the other night? She filed back through their conversation in her mind. Holy cow. She hadn't made some harebrained declaration of love, had she?

"About the house," Tucker clarified. "I mentioned it to Gran on the drive back today. She thinks converting Shep's old house into a bed and breakfast is a great idea, but she's concerned that I bullied you into a compromise you're not comfortable with. I didn't, did I?"

"Oh no. I mean, it's not what I planned on, but I can make it work."

"Would you talk to Gran? Tell her I didn't threaten you with bodily harm?" He smiled a little.

"Of course."

"It'd be nice to have all that settled before—"

"Right," she said, nodding. Before he went back to California.

Tucker was looking at her with those blue eyes and that sideways grin of his. A warm pressure built in her chest.

“I—” he started, and Emma tamped down her expectation, tried not to hope too much. Tried not to hope at all. It was a good thing because all he ended up saying was, “I guess I should get back.”

She stood and walked him to the door.

“I’ve got some calls to make,” he added. “Gran gave me permission to tell my mom and Whip about the cancer.”

“That’s good,” she said, holding the door. Tucker turned to leave. “Tell Miss Lily I love her,” Emma said in a rush. “Tell her if she needs anything at all, I’m here. Tell her—I don’t know—would you mind texting me to let me know when I can drop by? I don’t want to tire her out, but I think I’d feel better if I could see her.”

Tucker pulled her in for a hug, and Emma sank into his warmth. It was the best she’d felt in days.

“You’re good people, Emma Jane McAllister,” he whispered, then leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. It was over before she could figure out what to do with her hands. “I’m lucky to know you,” he said before he closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“MOM, WHY ARE YOU YELLING at me?” Tucker sighed into the phone, holding it a few inches from his ear.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner? What if it’d been too late? What if she’d died?” Her voice broke with emotion.

Tucker loved his mother, but sometimes the drama was a bit much. “I couldn’t tell you sooner,” he explained again. “I just found out.”

His mother muttered something about excuses, then said, “I’m coming down there. Tomorrow, if I can arrange it. I was hoping to get there before you went back to California anyway.” She paused. “Why have you been there so long?”

Good question. One that Jim Putney had asked last night when Tucker had called to ask about delaying his start date. He hadn’t bothered calling Meredith. Didn’t want her reading anything into it.

He dodged the question. “Don’t rush out here.” Please don’t rush out here, he thought. “I’ve got everything under control. I’m driving Gran to her appointments and staying with her at night. Why don’t you come down this weekend,” he suggested.

“Are you sure?” Tucker noted the skepticism in his mother’s voice. His sister had sounded the same way when he’d told her he thought Gran would be fine.

“I told you the doctor is very optimistic.” He felt like a broken record between this conversation with his mother and Early Jackson’s intervention. She had mentioned Gran’s illness to a mutual friend at book club, and someone had been eavesdropping—the dam had broken, and Tucker had been fielding calls and visits ever since. Gran, too tired from her treatments, had done little more than sleep or pretend to sleep, and it had fallen to Tucker to answer everyone’s too-pointed questions.

“All right. If you’re sure,” his mother said, then changed subjects. “Back to my other question.” She was like a dog with a bone. “Why have you been there so long? Doesn’t Mary miss you?”

Still getting his fiancée’s name wrong. Right. She didn’t approve. It made him want to push up the wedding date . . . if they had one.

“Meredith is fine with it. She’s been in New York most of the time anyway.”

He heard his mother cluck. “You two and your high-powered careers. When will you have time for each other? Holidays and weekends?”

Okay, time to get off the phone. “So if you decide to come down, Friday evening would be great,” he said.

His mother heaved a sigh, and Tucker looked at the clock. “Hey, Mom, I’ve got to get Gran’s lunch up to her. Don’t be mad, okay? Waste of time. Love you. See you soon.” He hung up and went to the kitchen to prepare a small tray of food.

Gran only ate at his insistence. Soup seemed to be the one thing she would tolerate. While he worked, he made mental lists of what needed to happen before his mom arrived. He hoped his grandmother would be feeling better by then. Sophie Madsen could be overwhelming when in worried mode.

Actually, his mother could prove the perfect solution. Maybe she could arrange to come down more frequently. If she could spend weekends here, he would be able to finish what he’d come to do and get back to California. Because he would be leaving . . . eventually.

He climbed the stairs to Gran’s room and bumped the door open with his foot. She was propped up on her pillows, eyes closed. At Tucker’s approach she opened one eye and quickly shut it again. Uh-huh. “I saw that,” he said. “C’mon, Gran. Nothing heavy today—just a little tomato soup and half a slice of sourdough.”

“Sounds lovely. Put it next to the bed,” she said, not opening her eyes.

“Nope.” He laid the tray across her lap.

“Tyrant,” she said, adjusting her pillow.

“Thank you. Now, eat,” he cajoled. “What’s the sense of having radiation if you’re just going to starve yourself to death?”

“So dramatic,” she muttered as she opened her eyes and reached for the spoon. “I’m almost out of my nausea medication. Can you run to the pharmacy for me?”

Tucker nodded toward the tray. “After you finish that.” He grabbed an old cane-back chair and sat down next to the bed. He scrolled through the messages on his phone, looking up every once in a while to make sure Gran was eating.

“Who was on the phone?” she asked conversationally, pressing a napkin to her mouth.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “I bet you know exactly who was on the phone.”

“Your mother?”

Tucker nodded. "You know what they say about eavesdroppers."

"They hear all the best stuff?" Gran countered.

"Not exactly."

"How else am I supposed to know what's going on?"

"You could ask." He smiled, feeling a rush of affection for his spirited grandmother.

"Okay, I will. Is your mother coming down?"

"Yes."

Gran's mouth quirked to one side.

"What?" Tucker asked.

"Glad to know all I had to do was get cancer for my family to show up."

Tucker's head jerked back. "Ouch. Gran—"

"What I want to know is why? Why haven't y'all been back? Is it really because of the memories?" she asked. "And . . . so what? Aren't they happy memories?"

"They are," Tucker said quietly. "Look, I can't answer for my mom. She's been busy making a living, and you were always so good about coming to us."

"What about you? Why did you stay away so long?"

Tucker rubbed his forehead but didn't answer right away.

"Tucker?"

"Short answer? Guilt."

That seemed to surprise her. "What do you have to feel guilty about?"

He paused, put his phone on her nightstand, and leaned forward. "Did I ever tell you I was supposed to be in the car with Dad that day?"

"No," she said quietly.

"I used to ride home with him all the time. I hated it. All my friends left right after school, but I had to stay until he was done with work." Tucker sat back in the chair. "That day, I had permission to go home with a friend. I left school right after the last bell rang." He shrugged. "If I'd been with him, maybe he'd still be alive. I took him from everyone," he finished, miserable at the thought.

"Oh, Tucker."

"If I'd waited for him to take me to my friend's house, maybe we would have gone a different way, been on a different street, and there wouldn't have been an accident."

Gran put a hand to her chest. “Tucker, you were twelve. You were in no way responsible for what happened that day. You have to know that.”

Tucker tried to smile but couldn't quite manage it. “Logically, I know you're right.”

“That's why you stayed away?” she asked.

“Dad wasn't here to take over the farm because of me,” he said. “I know I let you down because I didn't want it. That had to make things difficult for you. And it was hard, watching Mom struggle, having to pick up the slack around the house. Then all that stuff with Whippet happened.”

His sister had made spectacular use of her high school years, filling them with petty acts of rebellion like underage drinking and had ended up pregnant and married (in that order) after graduation. It had been a rough time for his mom, and he hadn't done anything to help.

He looked at his grandmother. “Shutting myself off was easier than trying to fix it. When I got to medical school, well, being busy was the distraction I needed.” He paused. “It's not a great excuse. I know I could have done more. I let Dad down. I let you all down.”

“Tucker, you never let me down,” Gran said.

“Not true. You wanted me to take over the farm.”

“I shouldn't have put so much pressure on you. You had your own life to live. And you're a good man, Tucker. Your dad would be proud. I know I am.” She squeezed his hand. “But I am glad you're here now.”

“Me too.”

Gran nodded. “Now, shoo,” she said. “I'm going to take a nap, and you're going to the pharmacy for me.”

It looked like the sentimental part of the afternoon was over. “Yes, ma'am,” Tucker said.

* * *

Emma had just stepped off the curb in front of Blessed Blooms when someone called her name. She looked over her shoulder and saw Hopper wave at her from across the street by the courthouse.

“Em!” he yelled again. Dang it. Would it be too obvious if she turned and walked the other way?

She'd been avoiding him. Over the past week he'd sent too many texts, left too many messages. He was nothing if not persistent. But if Tucker left today, she still wouldn't want a relationship with Hopper. It was too bad because Nina was right. The guy was nearly perfect. But he and Emma had zero chemistry. She waved back and steeled herself as he ran across the street. She crossed to the landscaped roundabout, meeting him halfway, her arms full of the daisies she'd just purchased for Miss Lily.

“Hey,” he breathed, standing in front of her as cars zipped by on either side. “Want to sit down?” He motioned to the bench nestled between the twigs that in the summer would be vibrant pink roses.

“No, thank you. I want to get these to Miss Lily,” she said, lifting the bouquet.

“Right. I heard about that. How is she?” Hopper shoved his hands into his pockets.

“She’s okay. What can I help you with, Hop?” she asked.

“Oh, I . . . well, we didn’t get that dance last week.”

No, they hadn’t had a chance to dance. She’d been too busy kissing Tucker.

“I was wondering where you went, that’s all,” Hopper added when she didn’t say anything.

Emma would bet five bucks he knew exactly where she had gone.

Hopper looked down at the ground. “You, uh, disappeared at about the same time Madsen did that night.”

And there it was.

“I’m just gonna come straight out and ask, Em. Are you two a thing . . . again?”

She took a deep breath. “Hopper, I—”

“Because I think that would be a mistake.”

It looked like he wanted to do all the talking.

“Em, I know we broke up months ago, but I can’t help thinking we made a mistake. Maybe I pushed you too much. I shouldn’t have proposed when I did. I know that now.”

“Hopper, you broke up with me,” she reminded him, grateful again that he’d saved her the trouble.

“Yeah, well, that was a preemptive strike. I knew you were going to do it if I didn’t.”

Emma hated rehashing the past. She didn’t like hurting people’s feelings. Hopper was a good guy, and the breakup hadn’t been his fault. She just couldn’t picture herself married to him.

“Hopper, there is nothing between me and Tucker,” she said. “We’re trying to reach an agreement about the property, that’s all.” My, what an accomplished liar she’d become.

“Well,” he said, “if that’s true . . .”

And with that, Hopper grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her soundly.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE NEXT DAY EMMA STEPPED into the diner for lunch. Nina and Rose waved her over to their table next to the bank of booths that lined the wall. She flung her purse over the chair and stopped. Both of her friends were staring at her.

“What?”

“You kissed Hopper Spickett!” Rose blurted a little too loudly.

Emma shushed her and slid into her chair. “I did not kiss him,” she said, pulling out her iPhone.

“That’s not what people are saying,” Nina grumbled.

“What people?”

“Mrs. Lockhart saw you and pretty much telegraphed it around town,” Nina said.

Rose’s expression turned wistful. “You two made such a cute couple. I don’t know why you broke up,” she said. “Are you getting back together?”

Emma snorted. “No.”

“Then, why’d you kiss him?” Rose asked.

“I didn’t kiss him. He kissed me. It wasn’t a big deal. I felt nothing.”

“How unfortunate,” Nina said helpfully.

“Subject closed, ladies. I was on the website last night. New Year’s Eve and January twentieth aren’t blocked off.” She handed her phone to Nina, whose brows came together.

“Are you talking about the Powell reunion? That’s been booked for months.” She scrolled down and said, “Huh. That’s weird. I’ll have to go into the calendar and do a manual override. The twentieth is the reunion, but what’s scheduled for New Year’s Eve?”

“Oh, um . . . something I put in,” Emma muttered.

“What?”

“I’m letting the Elks have it,” Emma said and braced herself.

“Are you kidding me!” Rose said.

“Some income is better than no income, and if another group wanted The Barn for that night, they would have booked it by now.” Emma folded her arms.

“Yeah, but . . . the Elks!” Nina said. “Bernie Chastain goes into A-fib every year after he dives into the lake. The only reason he didn’t die last time was because Willie Abrams was there.” Willie Abrams was a retired EMT, and the Elks were lucky to have him. Most of their members were

over sixty-five, and not all of them were in the best of health. “You’re asking for trouble.”

“No, I’m asking for a deposit. Email the contract today.”

“You’ll regret it,” Nina muttered, but she pulled out her phone and sent the contract.

“I got a text from Kira this morning,” Emma said as she opened her menu. “She said her mother will be back in the country this week and may stop by for a surprise visit, except . . . she didn’t phrase it that way.”

“How did she phrase it?” Rose asked.

“Um, she said, ‘surprise attack,’ but I’m sure she doesn’t mean it like that.”

“Bet she does. It must take that woman hours to brush her fangs in the morning,” Nina said.

The bell over the door jangled, and Emma’s eyes widened as Tucker stalked through the door. He marched over to the table and dropped a pile of papers in front of her. “Here you go.”

“What’s this?” she asked, looking up at him.

“The revised contract. Hopper got it to me last night.”

Was it her imagination, or had he spat the word Hopper?

“Um, that was fast,” she said, bewildered.

“Fast?” he said. “I’ve been here three weeks. I just want this done.”

“What crawled up your pant leg and bit you, Madsen?” Nina asked.

Tucker shifted his gaze. “Another charming southern colloquialism, Nina?”

“Midwestern,” she clarified, eyebrow raised. “The Mason-Dixon line is east of here.”

“Look it over, Emma. Sign it if you’re satisfied. If not, take it up with your boyfriend over at city hall.” He turned on his heel and was gone.

Nina spun on her. “You’ve got to be more careful about where you make out.”

“Oh, c’mon. He couldn’t know about the kiss.” Emma blushed.

“Emma,” Mike Treemonton said from the booth behind them, “everyone has heard about that kiss.”

* * *

Tucker closed the front door with a little more force than necessary, tossed his keys onto the entry table, and strode down the hall to the kitchen. He opened the fridge and stared at nothing because he couldn’t think of a

single thing he wanted. Except maybe a good brain scrub. Anything to erase the image of Emma kissing Hopper Spickett. It played in his mind on a reel, that moment when he'd come around the bend of the roundabout and seen Hopper grab Emma and lay one on her. Granted, Emma's arms had been straight as boards, but that kiss had been a slap upside the head because, frankly, it wasn't his business who Emma kissed.

One thing was certain: he'd made an idiot of himself at the diner. He could still see Emma's startled look as he'd dropped the contract in front of her.

He was so caught up in his thoughts he almost didn't hear the thumping coming from Gran's room. He took the back stairs two at a time and burst into her room to find her—just fine.

"About time you made it up here," she said. "You left your phone in your room when you went out and it hasn't stopped ringing! For Pete's sake, go answer it." She rolled over to one side and closed her eyes.

It wasn't like him to forget things like that. Then again, when he'd left this morning the memory of that stupid kiss had had him highly irritated.

Tucker followed the sound of his ringer, but just as he made it to his room it stopped. It took him a minute to find his phone buried in the covers. He had twenty-one missed calls, all from a number he didn't recognize. He hit redial, and the caller picked up almost immediately.

"Tucker, finally!" It was Meredith's mother.

* * *

His heart hammered in his chest as he shoved a T-shirt into his bag. Meredith had been in a car accident. She was in the hospital, in surgery. Her mother had no more details than that. She'd just delivered the news with a healthy dose of disapproval, like maybe he should have anticipated this disaster.

Tucker spent the next hour worrying about Meredith and trying to find a flight out of Springfield back to Los Angeles. He'd called his mom to see if she could come earlier after all and thrown his clothes into his suitcase. He zipped his garment bag and walked to the window, almost ready to go. There was just one more thing he had to do.

He had to tell Emma.

Five minutes later he opened door to The Barn and stepped inside just as a girl in a black apron ran past him with an extension cord. Long tables were laid out in rows, and Emma's staff busily laid white plates and

silverware with rhythmic efficiency.

“Can I help you?” a girl with long braids asked, not stopping as she moved around one of the tables, laying linen napkins ahead of the girl with the silverware.

Tucker cleared his throat. “I’m looking for Emma.”

The girl nodded over her shoulder toward Emma’s office.

“Thanks,” Tucker said. He walked to the back, slowing when he got to the door.

She was standing at her desk, poking a branch of greenery into a ceramic container, hands moving quickly as she arranged flowers around the vine. Tucker paused for a moment, watching her.

Man, she was pretty. And smart and capable and . . . light. The word described her perfectly. Tucker felt lighter just being around her, even with all the arguing they’d done since his arrival. He knocked on the doorframe, and she looked up.

“Got a sec?” he said.

She nodded, and he walked in, quietly closing the door behind him. Best to just get to it.

“There’s been an accident.”

“Accident?” Her hands froze.

“Meredith. She was on her way to work. She’s in the hospital, and I, uh, I have to—”

“Go.” She nodded. “You’ve got to go.”

“Early is up at the house now, but my mom is driving down from Independence. She’ll stay with Gran.”

Emma resumed working, wrapping a ribbon around the vase and jerking it into place. “Well, it sounds like you’ve got everything taken care of,” she said, smile tight.

He scratched his head. “I guess. Em, I—”

“Really, you should go.” She shoved an evergreen branch into the vase, and the whole desk rattled. “I imagine your flight leaves soon.”

“Yeah,” he said. She kept working, head down. It bugged him. He walked toward her. “I suppose . . . I guess I have some thinking to do.”

A blush worked its way up Emma’s neck. “Why do you say that? What’s there to think about?” she said nonchalantly.

“Not the contract,” he said. “Don’t worry about that. I signed it. I mean . . . well, I hope you don’t feel that I took advantage of you.” There,

he'd said it.

"Why would I think that?" She glared back at the vase, her jaw set.

"I—uh, I probably shouldn't have . . ." He cleared his throat. "I shouldn't have kissed you." She looked at him then, expression thunderous. He tried to backtrack. "It wasn't fair to start something with you, not when I'm—"

"Involved. On a break . . . whatever. But don't worry. You didn't start anything with me. It was a mistake. Happens all the time." She picked up a pair of scissors and looked right at him as she snipped off a branch.

Tucker's brows met in a scowl. "Really?" he said, his voice terse. "You kiss random men all the time? Is that why you kissed Hopper yesterday? Just felt like kissing someone, so you grabbed the first guy you saw?" Even to his own ears he sounded ridiculous.

Emma's hands stilled. "No," she said slowly. "I meant people make mistakes all the time. Isn't that what you're saying? Kissing me was a mistake?"

"I'm not sure what I'm saying," Tucker said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He was making a mess of this.

She went back to her arranging. "You're not random, not to me. And I didn't kiss Hopper. He kissed me. There's a difference."

Well, that was a relief, anyway. "I'm not random?" he asked, wishing she'd just tell him how she felt.

She gave a little laugh and worked a ribbon around her arrangement. "No, Tucker. That's the last word I would use to describe you."

"I care about you," he insisted.

"Thank you," she said, giving him a brief and completely insincere smile. "I care about you too," she said, and Tucker shook his head. It felt like he was talking to a wooden doll, programmed to give polite answers when necessary.

"I'll be back," he said before he knew what was coming out of his mouth. And, really, what was he saying? He couldn't promise that, and Emma knew it; she was already shaking her head.

"I'm not seventeen anymore, Tucker," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm not going to sit around and wait for you. You have everything you ever wanted in California. You've worked hard for it, and you deserve to be happy. Why would you come back?"

He didn't like what she was saying, didn't like the way it made him feel. "I guess I don't know."

“Exactly. So let’s just say goodbye. Nice seeing you again.” She made for the door, but Tucker caught her arm.

“Is this really what you want?” he asked.

Emma looked at him, eyes flashing. “It’s not what I want that matters here, is it?” When he didn’t answer, she shook him off and brushed past him.

This was all wrong. “Emma, wait.”

She stalked out of The Barn just as Nina opened the door. Tucker tried to follow, but Nina stepped between them and put a restraining hand on his chest. “Madsen,” she said, “it’s been fun seeing you again. When are you leaving?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

EDIE RAMSEY'S HAND SHOT UP in the front row.

"Yes, Edie?" Emma asked. The girl was squirming in her seat.

"Miss M'calster, can I please use the bathroom?"

Emma gave the girl a stern look; the class had just returned from lunch recess. There had been plenty of time for bathroom breaks, but she'd learned to take these potty pleas seriously. Jeffrey Lin had had an accident in the lunch line last week.

"Fine, but make it quick. Everyone else get out your math notebooks and do the pages I wrote on the board."

Emma was in her second week of substituting for Evelyn Grey, who was on an Adriatic cruise, strolling around the Greek isles, while Emma distributed tissues and graded spelling tests. The second-grade class was adorable but exhausting.

Tucker had been gone for thirty-two days. Thirty-two days of nothing new. Thirty-two days of relative peace and quiet. Thirty-two days of putting one foot in front of the other and trying to forget him all over again. She hadn't heard from him. Then again, they weren't together, so why would she?

A crayon went sailing through the air and hit Mimi Barkley in the head, and she promptly started to wail. A classroom full of eight-year-olds was an excellent distraction.

Emma was becoming a master at filling her days with distraction. She'd taken Miss Lily to a couple of her appointments in Springfield. Miss Lily had filled the ride up and back with mindless chatter, carefully avoiding any mention of Tucker.

Christmas had come and gone. Emma had slept in that morning and then spent the afternoon with Miss Lily and Tucker's mother, watching old holiday movies.

Sophie Madsen had been just as nice as Emma remembered. By the end of Christmas Day she'd agreed to run the B & B for Emma once the remodel of Shep's old house was done. Sophie was excited, telling Emma she'd been looking for a job. "Really?" Emma had said with a stiff smile. If Sophie Madsen stayed in Normal, Tucker wasn't coming back.

New Year's Eve had come and gone too. Emma had been at The Barn all that night, trying to ride herd on the Elks. It hadn't done much good, and she'd spent the next two days fishing various pieces of clothing out of the

landscape leading to the pond: Chuck Vidalia's trousers from the skeletal branches of a lilac bush, Tom Treemont's socks off a rock retaining wall, and most disturbing of all, an unclaimed pair of reindeer boxer shorts she'd found dangling from the lower branches of the old oak beside the lake, all evidence of the Elks' midnight dash to the pond. Weird way to see in the New Year, if you asked her.

The Barn wasn't exactly humming now that the holidays were over. Thus and hence the subbing gig. The Powell reunion was in two days. The staff was setting up tonight, and Emma had a final meeting with Rose later today about the menu and one with Marcy Powell to finalize the preparations. A singles event was booked for Valentine's Day, hosted by a dating website based out of Branson, but that was a month off. And she was still waiting for Delia Landry to stop by. After the holidays Emma had changed The Barn's hours of operation on the website, hoping to narrow the window of opportunity for a surprise attack.

When her phone vibrated, she looked at it after casting a cursory glance over the class, who were, for the most part, working quietly. Missed call.

The Barrows had just moved into Emma's house. She and Nina had spent the weekend boxing up her life and scrubbing down the place. Amazing how much dirt and stuff a person could accumulate over a lifetime. All her worldly goods now resided in a storage unit south of town. She and Nina had been roomies for three whole days. They'd worked together last night in their pajamas, putting together a bid for a couple who wanted to get married at The Barn next fall.

Emma looked up at the clock. "Okay, friends," she said to get the class's attention. "Put those math notebooks away and head over to the carpet. It's time for partner reading."

Only one more hour to go. Hallelujah.

That evening she stopped by The Barn to oversee setup and meet with Marcy Powell, who would be stopping by to drop off pictures for the banquet table.

Emma wanted the Powell reunion to be perfect. She wanted all events held at The Barn to be perfect. That's why she and the crew were setting up a couple of days early. That and, really, there wasn't anything else to do with her evenings.

She had a skeletal staff tonight. Just a couple of the girls, climbing ladders and stringing clear globe lights from the beams. The Christmas tree

was still up, but it had been flocked and flanked by two smaller artificial trees. That had been Marcy Powell's call. She'd decided on a winter theme with white lights and small white picture-frame ornaments filled with family photos of past reunions.

When Marcy arrived, Emma wanted to give her an idea of what the place would look like all lit up. They hadn't turned on the lanterns or lit the candles, but the tree glowed bright, and the swags of lights and white tulle hanging from the beams turned the place into a fairyland.

"Jess," Emma said, standing at the base of a ladder, "will you see if we have any replacement bulbs in the supply closet? A couple on this strand have burned out."

The girl returned with the bulbs, and Emma climbed the ladder. She'd just finished replacing the lights when she heard the door open. She looked at her watch. Darn it all, Marcy was early. She hurried down the ladder and smoothed her skirt, but when she turned, her smile fell.

Delia Landry stalked into The Barn, file folder in hand. "Kira insisted I deliver this to you before the end of the week. I don't know why she's in such a rush." The woman walked toward Emma, heels clacking on the wood floor. "Most couples take at least a year to plan their wedding, but my daughter . . ." Her confident stride faltered, and she stopped as she looked up into the rafters. Emma watched the hard lines of the woman's face soften.

"Can I help you with something, Mrs. Landry?"

The woman didn't respond, didn't move. She just looked around, mouth open.

"This is . . . I'm . . . how unexpected."

Emma glanced around too. If Delia Landry was impressed with what they'd done here tonight, then Marcy was sure to be as well.

"Mrs. Landry, I don't remember an appointment—"

"I don't have an appointment." Mrs. Landry spoke over her. She handed Emma the folder in her hand. "This is my addition to the guest list."

"You could have emailed this to me," Emma pointed out, but the Dragon Lady just lifted a shoulder. Emma looked over page after page of names and addresses. The governor was first on the list, followed by a local newscaster, a congressman, and a couple of sports stars.

"George Brett? Is he still alive?" Emma was joking, but Mrs. Landry's imperious eyebrow rose. Emma cleared her throat. "There have to be at

least two hundred names here.”

“One hundred and sixty-seven,” Mrs. Landry corrected.

Emma thrust the folder back at her. “The fire marshal will only allow us to seat one hundred twenty inside. You’ll need to talk with your daughter and get your numbers down.”

She braced for a blistering lecture on the inadequacy of the venue when something strange happened. Delia Landry, who never passed up an opportunity to express her displeasure, took the folder and nodded. “I’ll . . . uh . . . see what I can do. Would you mind terribly if I took a couple of pictures? It might be nice for Kira to see what you’ve done here.”

“S-sure. Um, that would be fine.”

Mrs. Landry pulled a phone from her purse. “Is this decor typical?” she asked as she moved closer to the tree.

“Yes,” she said. “We work closely with our clients to help them achieve their vision.” Emma winced. She sounded like copy from a brochure, but the senior Landry had that effect on her. “Your daughter picked a lovely time of year to be married. Everything will be in bloom.”

“Mm-hmm, I’ve seen your website.”

Mrs. Landry pocketed her phone and turned. “It’s lovely. I like the way you’ve arranged the tables. The linens are a little shabby. We’ll need something with a tighter weave so the drape is more structured, but I could put you in touch with a supplier.”

Emma didn’t say a word, just nodded.

The Dragon Lady gathered her purse. She’d almost made it to the door when she stopped and turned. “Just out of curiosity, how many weddings have you hosted here?”

“Oh, well, we haven’t been open very long, and wedding season is only —”

“How many?” Mrs. Landry interrupted.

Emma’s chin came up. “Three.”

Mrs. Landry nodded. “This is beautiful,” she said, gesturing toward the ceiling. “I know you think I’m difficult, Ms. McAllister”—Emma didn’t deny it—“but you have to understand I only have one daughter. Regardless of family status or whom she has chosen to marry, as a mother, I want Kira’s wedding day to be extraordinary. Surely, you can understand that.”

“I do. And it will be.”

Mrs. Landry nodded. "I'm starting to believe you," she said and slid the door closed behind her, leaving Emma standing there, stunned.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

EMMA WAS BONE TIRED BY the time she pulled up to the curb in front of Nina's cute little bungalow that night. She gathered her things and walked to the front porch, careful of the patches of ice. The front door always stuck a little, and she pushed at it with her shoulder once, twice. The third time did it. A note fluttered on the newel post as she walked in.

I actually have a second date, if you can believe it. He was too cheap to drive over and get me (strike number one!). I'm in Springfield. Tell that to the cops if I go missing!!

Nina wasn't a glowing advertisement for online dating. Her horror stories made being single seem pretty darn good. Emma walked into the kitchen and flipped on the light.

"Mi casa and all that," Nina had said when Emma had moved in, but they hadn't figured out how they were going to do food yet. Hopefully, Nina wouldn't mind a kitchen raid.

Emma put her stuff on the table and walked to the fridge. Nothing. Unless she counted an expired carton of cottage cheese and a couple of Styrofoam takeout containers from the diner. Nina wasn't big on cooking. Emma opened the cabinet next to the fridge. "Bingo," she said, retrieving a package of popcorn. She'd just started the microwave when she heard a knock at the front door.

She yanked on the stubborn thing, and when it finally opened, there stood Jenny Barrows huddled inside the storm door, a small brown box held tightly against her chest.

"Jenny! Come in. Have you been out there long? The doorbell doesn't work."

"Took me a minute to figure that out. I'm so glad you're here. I tried calling earlier, but I guess you didn't get my message."

"I'm so sorry! I haven't been paying attention to my phone."

"It's okay. I just wanted to get this to you." Jenny lifted the box in her hands.

"What is it?" It looked like an old shoebox wrapped in brown paper. The paper was creased and stained, peeling back in places to reveal a pink lid.

"Ben found it in the attic when he was showing the architect around. We're thinking of turning the space into a playroom for the kids and an office for me."

The improvements the couple were making sounded lovely. “I’m sorry,” she said again. “I thought I got everything.”

“Oh, that’s all right. Besides, this was tucked back behind the chimney and covered in dust. Ben wouldn’t have seen it either if they weren’t making sure everything is still solid up there. We’re keeping the fireplaces, by the way. Love all the exposed brick. And we’re so glad you didn’t put in gas inserts. Your house really is a treasure.”

“Oh, well, I guess it’s your treasure now.”

Jenny bit her lip. “You’re welcome to stop by anytime. I’d love your opinion on what we have planned.” Her tone was vaguely apologetic.

It was a nice gesture, but Emma wouldn’t be taking her up on it. Not for a while. “Thanks!” was all she said.

“Well, I left Ben at home with the kids. It’s getting close to bedtime, so I’d better get going.”

“Thanks so much for bringing this by. It was very kind of you.”

Jenny smiled, then unexpectedly threw her arms around Emma for an awkward hug. “I can’t thank you enough. It’s the first house we’ve lived in that actually feels like a home. It’s perfect.”

Emma smiled back at her. “I’m happy it’s in such good hands,” she said and meant it.

Jenny waved as she pulled away, and Emma went back inside to put the box on the kitchen table. She emptied her popcorn into a bowl and opened a bottle of water, eyeing the box until curiosity got the best of her. She carefully ripped the paper, sending a decades’ worth of dust into the air. She sneezed twice and slowly removed the lid.

Her breath caught. On top was her parents’ wedding picture. She hadn’t seen it in years. One of the first things her mother had done after the divorce was purge the house of all evidence of her father. Any reminders of what their family used to be had disappeared overnight. At the time Emma hadn’t objected, but since then she’d wondered what her mother had done with their old photo albums. Looked like she had her answer.

She took a seat and started filing through the photographs. She lifted a picture of her dad pressing a kiss to her plump toddler cheek. Another had him grinning while Emma covered her mouth, one hand up to ward off the camera. She remembered that day. She’d just gotten braces and had nearly cried when her mom insisted they record the moment for posterity. She pulled picture after picture from the box, each one a bittersweet memory of

how happy their family had been . . . until they weren't.

She was abruptly grateful that she hadn't found the box herself. Looking through these pictures, she might have second-guessed her decision to sell.

She spied a stack of what looked like old letters at the bottom of the box. She reached in, thinking maybe they were love notes her parents had written to each other back in the day. But as she pulled them free, she recognized the handwriting. It wasn't her father's. It was Tucker's.

Her heart stopped beating in her chest. She pulled off the rubber band and quickly riffled through them: one, two, three . . . thirteen letters in all and a postcard of UMKC's campus in the fall. They were arranged in order by postmarked date. None of the letters had been opened.

Emma sat back in her chair. "Oh, Mom," she whispered. "What did you do?"

* * *

The next afternoon Emma tucked a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream into her purse and headed over to the Big House. Sophie Madsen was a darling woman but a bit of a stickler when it came to Miss Lily's health. Emma cared about her health too, but when she'd visited a couple of days ago, Miss Lily had grabbed her hand and whispered, "Chocolate! Bring me chocolate! She won't let me have any," nodding toward Sophie, who'd been busy straightening a stack of magazines on the coffee table.

Emma let herself in, checking to make sure the contraband was still well hidden in her purse. "Hello?" she called.

"Back here!" Miss Lily's voice came from the family room, and Emma walked down the hall to see her snuggled in an afghan, glasses on, watching HGTV while lounging in the recliner Tucker had ordered for her before he left. She muted the TV when she saw Emma and said, "Ugly as sin but very comfortable." Looked like the chair had been money well spent.

Emma slowly drew the ice cream out of her purse, and Miss Lily clapped. "Perfect timing. Sophie is at the store buying lemongrass and brussels sprouts."

"Does Grimm's carry lemongrass?"

"Who cares! Go get me a spoon. I've got maybe thirty minutes before she gets back."

Emma procured the spoon, then scooted the ottoman closer so she could sit next to her old friend.

“Mmm.” Miss Lily’s eyes fell shut at first taste. “I love Sophie to death—so glad she’s here—but the woman feeds me nothing but vegetables. I miss sugar. Emma, you’re an angel.”

“Glad I’m good for something. How are you feeling?”

“Much better. My skin is healing.” She pulled back the neck of her sweatshirt to show Emma. “And I’ve got a little more energy this week.”

“That’s great!”

“Mm-hmm.” Miss Lily unabashedly ignored Emma as she dipped into the carton of ice cream. She took small bites, to make it last, she said.

“So,” Miss Lily said, taking another bite, “I heard a rumor.”

Emma wrapped her arms around her legs. “How have you heard any gossip? You haven’t left the house in a week!” It was true. The radiation had made Miss Lily tired.

“Sweetheart, I don’t have to leave the house to hear the good stuff. It comes to me.”

“Okay.” Emma lowered her voice conspiratorially. “What’s the scoop?”

“Maggie Carmichael said she saw a moving truck outside of your place last weekend. She was curious, so she brought cookies over on Monday and knocked on your front door, and low and behold, there’s a new family living in your house. Care to explain?”

“Nope.” Emma made to get up, but Miss Lily caught her arm.

“Not so fast, young lady.”

Emma sighed and sat down again. “It’s not a big deal. I sold my house.”

“Why?”

“Too much upkeep?” Emma said, but Miss Lily leveled her with a look.

“Fine,” she huffed. “Business has been a little . . . sluggish. I had a payment due at the first of the year. I could have made it, but it would have been uncomfortable. My power and water would have been turned off.”

“You can eat here anytime. My door is always open.”

“You’re very kind, but it’s okay. I’ve been thinking about selling for years. And this way I was able to come up with the down payment for Shep’s old house too.”

“If I had known you were going to pull something like this, I would have given it to you.”

“Oh, please. It’s business. I bought some real estate. Traded one house for another.”

Miss Lily looked at her long and hard. “I don’t like it. Makes me feel guilty. I should have just given you the land and The Barn. You made all the improve-ments.”

“Don’t feel guilty. I’m not paying you; I’m paying the bank. Besides, now I’m a little ahead on my payment schedule. Things are slow right now, but I’ve got something big coming up that could change—” Emma stopped. There was a lot riding on the Landry wedding. What if it didn’t generate the publicity she was hoping for? It could spell disaster for her and her fledgling business. Up to this moment she’d been so sure about her decisions. For the first time since she’d sold her house, she was nervous.

Miss Lily’s hand settled warm over hers. “What is it, sweetheart?”

Emma wound her fingers through Miss Lily’s. “I’m not . . . it’s just—” She took a breath. “A lot is riding on The Barn. Maybe you could just pray for me.”

The old woman squeezed her hand. “Of course I will.” Miss Lily looked down at their entwined fingers, rubbing her thumb over the back of Emma’s hand. “Where did you move to?”

“I’m staying with Nina for now.”

“Well, you’re always welcome here. I’ve got plenty of space.”

“Right. What are you gonna do? Stick me in Tucker’s old room?”

Uh-oh. She’d said the T-word.

They hadn’t talked about Tucker once in the weeks since he’d been gone, and while Emma was anxious for the day when this dull ache would lift off her heart, she was grateful that his grandmother didn’t aggravate the situation by peppering her with questions, because right now, hearing his name would feel like a skewer to the—

“About Tucker.” Well, darn. “I just want you to know . . . I’m sorry.”

Emma pretended indifference. “Sorry for what?”

“You know what. He told me he kissed you.”

“Oh.” Emma felt her face heat.

Miss Lily nodded. “I think that boy is confused. It’s a pity about the situation with his fiancée.”

“She was in a car accident, Miss Lily.”

“Bad timing. I think he was wavering. Another week or two, and maybe things would have gone the other way. As it is . . .” She shrugged.

Emma gave a short laugh. “You little matchmaker! You were trying to set us up, weren’t you?”

“A little bit,” Miss Lily confessed. “You were so young all those years ago. Too young. But now, with you here and Tucker done with school and establishing himself, it seemed like a great opportunity—”

“For you to stick your nose where it didn’t belong. He’s engaged.”

“But she’s not right for him. Oh, don’t get me wrong. I see the appeal. She is a lovely girl. But not for my grandson.”

“She’s very pretty, and she seemed nice enough.” Emma didn’t know why she was defending Tucker’s fiancée. “And didn’t you tell me your family didn’t approve of Jack when you started dating? That turned out all right, didn’t it?”

“That was different.”

“Oh, of course it was.”

“Tucker is on the fence. He needs a good woman to knock him off.”

“Sounds violent. He gets to choose, Miss Lily. I won’t deny that I felt . . . feel something for him, but I don’t know if it’s enough for him to uproot his whole life and move back here.”

“Seemed like more than just ‘something.’ Every time he walked into a room, he looked for you. Did you know that?”

There was no hiding the blush that crept up her neck. “I’m sure you’re mistaken.”

“No, I’m not. You’re just too stubborn to admit that you’re perfect for each other. Instead, Tucker is engaged to the wrong woman, and you’re kissing Hopper Spickett in the town square.” Miss Lily took another bite of ice cream.

“Speaking of Tucker . . .,” Emma said, reaching up and pulling on a lock of hair.

Miss Lily leaned in. “Yes?”

“Jenny Barrows stopped by last night. She brought me an old shoebox she found in the attic.” Emma paused. “Tucker’s letters were inside.”

“What?” Miss Lily’s spoon stopped midair.

“It looks like my mother hid them from me. The letters were under a pile of old family photos.”

“Oh, Emma.”

“I know. I read all of them last night. Didn’t get much sleep.”

Miss Lily’s expression clouded with concern.

“You know what I don’t get?” Emma looked out the window, twisting her hair.

“What?”

“If he was so crazy about me—and if what he wrote in those letters is true, he was—why didn’t he try harder? Why didn’t he just come and tell me himself?” She turned back toward Miss Lily. “Don’t you think he would have—”

“He did try,” Miss Lily said and put down her ice cream. “Oh dear. I guess my sins are coming home to roost,” she muttered and looked down. “He did care. He was sick about leaving you.” She played with the edge of a throw pillow.

“What is it?” Emma asked.

Miss Lily took a deep breath. “Tucker called me that fall. He was upset. He said he had written but hadn’t heard from you. He’d called your house a handful of times, but no one answered. He asked me to get a message to you.”

Emma froze.

“That was why I went to your house that day, Emma. When I got there and saw how bad things were . . . your mother—she wasn’t herself. I asked her about the letters, and she told me she didn’t want Tucker contacting you anymore. She wasn’t just insistent; she was hysterical.”

“And you listened to her? Miss Lily, my mother sat on that couch every day for over a year eating boxes of cookies and watching TV. And that’s the woman you thought should be making decisions about my future?”

“She wasn’t crazy, Emma. She was afraid you would end up like her. Married too young, all your choices taken away. That’s how she saw it, anyway. So she didn’t give you the letters. I told her I’d keep her secret if she’d let you come stay with me for a while. Eventually, I got her to see that by holding on so tight, she was the one taking away your choices. That’s how I convinced her to let you go off to college.”

“What did you tell Tucker?”

“About what?”

“You said he wanted you to talk to me. What did you tell him?”

“Your mother wanted me to tell him that you were seeing someone else, that you’d moved on. I told him you were busy with work and school. He drew his own conclusions, I’m sure,” Miss Lily said, unsmiling.

Emma felt the sting of betrayal—her mother’s and Miss Lily’s. “All these years—why didn’t you tell me?” she asked tersely.

“At first it was out of respect for your mother’s wishes. But after a while, there didn’t seem to be a reason to tell you. Tucker never came back, and you got engaged a couple of years later. I thought you were over him.” Miss Lily shook her head. “No, that’s not right. I should have told you. I didn’t feel good about my role in keeping you apart. I was ashamed. I’m sorry. I should have owned up to what I did years ago.”

Emma blinked slowly. “I need to think about this.”

Miss Lily nodded. “I’ll understand if you need some time. I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Emma didn’t get a chance to respond. The back door rattled open, and Sophie whistled her way into the kitchen.

Miss Lily shoved the lid back onto the carton of ice cream and thrust it into Emma’s hands, spoon and all. She wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve and settled into her chair just as Sophie came into the room, looking from Miss Lily to Emma to the ice cream. Her smile dropped.

“Emma!” Sophie scolded. “Are you eating that in front of her?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

TUCKER SETTLED INTO THE SOFA next to the desk in Meredith's front room and picked up a book. I'm a lucky man, he thought. Beautiful fiancée, condo with an ocean view, a cushy job taking care of the offspring of the very wealthy.

So why was he so itchy?

The thing was . . . the job? The hours were great, but the patients were a bit entitled. Last week he'd seen a teenage girl he was pretty sure had an eating disorder. When he'd pointed out the girl's weight to her au pair (because evidently the parents were at a PETA demonstration and couldn't be bothered), the au pair had eyed her charge, said, "She looks good to me," and gone back to checking her phone. The patient in question had subtly flipped him the bird on the way out of the exam room.

The condo was great. He'd mortgaged his left lung to get it. You could see the Pacific on the days when smog didn't muddy the view with nitrous oxide. But he'd been in the two-bedroom, one-and-a-half bath unit for over two years and still hadn't unpacked. Meredith liked to point out that cardboard box was not a recognized design style. The only artwork was the splay of takeout menus stuck to the refrigerator door.

Lately, though, he'd been missing the Big House with its tall ceilings and comfortably furnished rooms. He missed the smell of wood smoke that came from the fireplace on the nights when the temperatures dropped. The ocean was nice, but it was vastly different from the sweeping views from his room at Gran's, the fields spreading out behind the property, ending where Earth crashed into the sky.

Then there was Meredith. Beautiful, talented, driven Meredith. She was

"This is impossible!" The woman in question threw a pen across the room, where it glanced off her living room window and rolled underneath the couch. She slapped her uninjured hand against the table in frustration. Tucker looked up from his book. She was trying to answer emails with her left hand. Her right hand was wrapped up tight, her fingers barely peeking out of the cast.

"You gotta be careful, babe," he said. "Don't overdo it. You don't want to get carpal tunnel in the other hand."

"I know that!" she snapped. "You don't have to keep reminding me, Tucker!"

Reminding her? This was the first he'd mentioned it. It'd been like this for weeks now. His feet were raw from walking on eggshells.

Meredith braced her forehead against her hand. Tucker took in her defeated posture and counted to ten before walking over and leaning against the table. "How can I help you?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she muttered. "I'm being difficult, aren't I?"

"Not at all." A big fat lie. "I just want your recovery to go well."

She covered his hand with hers. "You're the best." She sighed. "I just wish I'd broken my left arm, you know?"

He did. She mentioned it frequently.

When his flight had touched down at the Burbank Airport, the first thing he'd done was call her mother. He'd arrived at the hospital to find Meredith out of surgery and resting comfortably. An hour after he got there, she woke briefly, flashed him a peace sign, and fell back into a post-anesthetic siesta. He'd kissed her cheek and settled into a very uncomfortable chair for the night.

Her arm had broken on impact when she'd braced it against the steering wheel. She'd cracked her ulna. The good news was her surgery had gone well. The bad news was she didn't like feeling helpless. She'd be in the cast for several more weeks and in physical therapy after that.

As for the two of them, well, things felt a bit stilted. They'd had exactly zero conversations since he'd returned about where they stood, her injury taking on the significance of another person in their relationship. Tucker was doing his best to be supportive. He kept busy, maybe working more than he needed to, taking extra on-call time.

Wondered if Emma was back with Hopper.

It shouldn't bother him, but it did. Last week he'd worked up the nerve to call and ask his grandmother about it. It hadn't done him any good. She'd given a short laugh and said, "Good question! Why don't you call and ask her." So no help from that quarter.

For the first time in his life, he was zealously keeping up on social media, following The Barn on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. He visited the website almost every day. Nina had switched out Christmas for a more generic winter theme. The website featured close-up shots of snow-covered fences, kids sledding on Belcher's Hill, and Tucker's favorite, a forgotten apple jacketed in frost hanging from an icy tree branch. Sometimes he toggled over to the About Us section just to see Emma's picture pop up.

He'd tried texting her a few times. One evening, in a moment of weakness, he'd called. It had gone directly to voicemail.

"Tucker, can you finish this one for me? They need to hear back from me by five. After that I think I'll call it day."

Tucker traded places with Meredith while she dictated a message to her contact at People magazine. He'd just hit Send when his phone vibrated with a reminder.

"Hey, Mere. I gotta go."

"You're leaving?" Meredith sagged in her chair.

This was new too. Every time he had plans that took him away from her, she wilted.

"I've got the holiday party, remember?"

Meredith had declined when he'd asked her if she wanted to go, insisting all anyone would see was her cast.

"That's tonight?" she asked, her bottom lip making another appearance.

"I'm new at the practice, Mere. I have to go." Truth be told, he wanted to go. It was dinner at Perch. The restaurant had live music and amazing views of the city.

"Right," she muttered.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Sometimes I wonder . . . do you still . . . think about her? I know it's been over a month, but—"

"Mer," he interrupted. "I'm here." She nodded, and it struck him that maybe he'd made his choice without realizing it. He cleared his throat. "Do you want me to bring you something?"

"No." She sniffed.

"Will you be okay by yourself?"

"I'll be fine. Dinner here tomorrow?"

"Sure." He leaned down to kiss her forehead before heading out into the mild California winter.

The evening was . . . nice. He spent his time socializing, getting to know the office staff a little better. And, as promised, the views of Los Angeles were spectacular. But, as he stood there overlooking the bright lights of the city, he found himself longing once again for a different landscape entirely.

He was back at his condo before nine. He shuffled into the kitchen, feeling restless. He wasn't hungry, so he sat on the barstool and flipped through his mail before tossing it all into the recycling bin. He drummed his

fingers against the counter and acknowledged that he wasn't restless; he was homesick . . . for Normal.

He glanced at his phone. It was probably too late to call his grandmother to see how she was doing. Besides, he knew. She was fine. Every time he called it sounded like he was interrupting a party, people laughing and chatting in the background. It kind of irked him how easily she'd adapted to his absence.

He could call his mom. To his surprise, she'd put her house in Independence on the market and moved into the Big House, permanently it seemed. Change was good, he supposed, but he felt he'd become irrelevant.

He'd felt horrible the day he left Normal. So horrible, in fact, that on his way to the airport he'd pulled off the highway and given serious thought to turning around. He'd known he had to get to Meredith, but he was confused. He'd sat there for a while, hoping for a sign, anything that would tell him what to do. Instead, a snowplow had blown past him, rocking his rental car and spraying it with salt, sand, and slush, and he'd continued on to the airport in time to catch his flight.

He picked up his phone now and moved to the living room. Maybe he'd call Meredith and head back over to her place. Just then his cell vibrated with a new text.

Emma. Tucker fumbled with his phone and sat on the edge of the couch, eyes moving rapidly over the screen. She'd sent him a picture.

Look what I found, she texted. Guess I have to believe you now.

Tucker clicked the image and sat back. It was a picture of the letters he'd written to Emma twelve years ago.

His fingers flew over the keypad, adrenaline making them clumsy. Where were they? He stared at the phone. Nothing. "Come on, Em," he muttered.

Finally, a new message popped up. In the attic. They were in a box of family photos. Looks like my mom hid them from me.

His eyebrows rose. "Wow," he murmured aloud, feeling a flash of anger toward Emma's mother. Mystery solved I guess, he replied.

Emma didn't respond.

He remembered the way her mother had looked at him with narrowed eyes from behind the screen door that summer, like he walked on hooves or something. He tried to hold on to his anger because surely it was justified, but it slipped away as quickly as it had come. Mrs. McAllister had been heartbroken, and Tucker knew what that felt like. She had just been trying

to protect her daughter.

Suddenly tired, he went into his bedroom. He'd forgotten about his laundry—he hadn't been great with it since he'd been back. An enormous pile of clean clothes sat in the middle of his bed. Sighing, he got busy, shoving shirts and jeans into his dresser before kicking open his closet door to retrieve some hangers. He gave a grunt of frustration as his foot knocked over a pair of skis. Not sure why he was holding on to those. The falling skis dislodged a box on the closet shelf, and it hit him on the head on the way down.

“Ow!” He rubbed his forehead, then scowled at the box.

A piece of paper floated through the air, glancing off his face before landing on his foot. Bending down, he picked it up and turned it over.

His heart pounded in his chest. It was the picture. The one Emma had left for him on Gran's porch twelve years ago, the one of the two of them, arms around each other at the Fourth of July dance. The color had faded, the corners were a bit dog-eared, and there was a crease down the middle because Tucker had carried it in his wallet all through med school.

It was just a picture. That was all. But Tucker saw it for what it really was.

A sign.

Twenty minutes later he knocked on Meredith's door.

“Hey.” She smiled at him. “I didn't expect to see you again tonight.”

Tucker leaned against the door and said, “We need to talk.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

EMMA'S HEAD SNAPPED TOWARD THE back door as one of the girls brought in another plate of hors d'oeuvres. Katie smiled at her before placing the platter on the table, and Emma relaxed in her seat again.

Rumor had it that Tucker was back in town, and the idea of it had her nerves at DEFCON 1. She hadn't seen him yet, but last night at the hardware store Eden Turner had quizzed her by an endcap of ice melt.

"Have you seen him?" her old piano teacher had asked. "Grace Roberts says she heard from Howie Taft that he's back for good. What does Miss Lily say?"

Emma had said she didn't know and scooted over to a display of circular saws.

Was he back? Emma had texted Miss Lily as soon as Eden retreated but hadn't gotten a response. Things between the two of them were mended. It sort of seemed ridiculous to hold a grudge over something that happened twelve years ago. But it would be nice if Miss Lily would let her know if Tucker was in town. Emma knew she had called him and told him about her deception. "No more secrets," she'd said. Kind of seemed like she was keeping another secret from Emma now though.

So, yeah. She was a bit jumpy. It had to be a rumor. Why would Tucker come back here? Was something wrong with Miss Lily? Stop it! her brain barked at her. She had other things to think about. Lots and lots of things . . .

The proverbial shrinking violet, Emma sat in a chair next to the wall, chin propped in the palm of her hand. The Valentine's Day dance was finally in full swing. It had taken a while for people to begin trickling in. Not even the event's sponsor had been on time, and Emma, Nina, and the DJ had passed a happy hour playing Name That Tune with his library of industrial hits.

Nina was still here, so if Emma wanted to, she could leave. Her friend seemed to have joined the party, bouncing up and down like a flailing fish to an old song by Usher that had Emma wishing she'd brought Tylenol and earplugs. Finally, the song ended, and her friend slid into the chair next to hers.

"I met a guy," she said, slightly out of breath.

"Of course you did." Emma raised an eyebrow.

“No, I mean the right kind of guy. Slightly nerdy, works in IT for a property management company out of Branson. Nice, steady guy.”

“The kind you hate,” Emma joked, and Nina stuck out her tongue.

Rose burst through the back door, twisting her hands in her apron. “I’m out of prosciutto!” she exclaimed.

Nina and Emma looked at each other.

“Girls! Food run. I’m out of prosciutto. I messed up. I have plenty of shrimp and chicken bites, but there’s nothing left to wrap them in. This crowd hasn’t stopped eating since they showed up. Chop, chop!” Rose looked at her watch. “Grimm’s closes in fifteen minutes.”

“Grimm’s has prosciutto?” Nina asked.

“No, but they have bacon, and that’s gonna have to do. C’mon, girls. A little help?” Rose snapped.

“I’m up,” Emma said, standing and stretching.

“I’ll come too,” Nina said.

“You sure you want to leave your IT guy?”

“I’m making him work for it,” she said and walked out.

There were quite a few people in the checkout line when they pulled up to the store, so Emma didn’t feel too guilty about making them stay open a few minutes longer. Besides, Bick Grimm was a long-time member of the Elks and owed her one. She’d returned his long underwear to him on New Year’s Day.

She and Nina walked to the meat department at the back of the store. The butcher’s display case was locked up for the night, but there was plenty of bacon in the open fridge down the aisle.

“How many did she say?” Emma asked.

“At least twelve, more if possible,” Nina replied.

The two of them started loading the cart. Emma had just reached in to get more bacon when she heard a familiar voice.

“Hello, Emma.”

She froze.

Tucker Madsen had her at a disadvantage once again. She was leaning over the open fridge with her fingers wrapped around a package of bacon, and this was when he decided to materialize? Dang it. With as much dignity as possible, she straightened, held the bacon to her chest, and turned.

“Tucker.” She nodded.

“Hey, Madsen. How’d you find us?” Nina asked.

“Rose told me where you were,” he said, then turned to Emma. “Your schedule is posted on the website. Is that safe? I mean, anyone can log on and see where you’ll be. If some guy were stalking you—”

“Like you?” Nina snorted.

“I’m not stalking her,” Tucker said tightly, then dismissed Nina with a wave of his hand. “Look, I just want to talk to you.” He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Em, you sold your house.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I went there first, and the nice lady who answered the door wasn’t you. She told me where you moved. I stopped by Nina’s last night. Didn’t she tell you?”

Emma jerked back. “You did?” She turned to Nina. “He did?”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to talk to him anyway. I did you a favor,” Nina said.

Emma shook her head, then bent to retrieve more bacon. “Nina’s right. Why do you want to talk to me? We said everything we needed to say before you left.”

“Not everything,” Tucker muttered.

“Besides”—more bacon hit the shopping cart—“you’ve been gone two months. You didn’t call.”

“Yes, I did! You blocked my number,” Tucker said.

“My idea.” Nina raised a hand.

Tucker eyed Nina. “Thanks for that.”

“Tuck, it doesn’t matter,” Emma said. “We’re all good. I’m not angry. It is what it is.”

“What does that mean? Look, I just want to talk to you. Alone.” He shot Nina a pointed look. “One conversation. Is that too much to ask? I’ve been in town two . . . Emma,” Tucker said, looking down, “how much bacon do you need?”

She had three packages clutched to her chest. She dumped them into the cart. “We have a bacon situation at The Barn, so if you’ll excuse us—”

Tucker blocked her. “I’ve been trying to track you down for days.”

“Okay, well . . . here I am. Now what?”

She’d given him an opening, but he didn’t seem to know what to do with it.

“Okay, then. Nice chat.” She made to move around him, but he caught her arm, which, darn it all, started tingling. “No touching!” she said,

yanking her arm out of his hand.

“I’m taking the job,” Tucker blurted.

“What job?”

He pulled a wrinkled piece of paper from his back pocket and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Proof that I’ve started the process of getting licensed to practice medicine in Missouri.” He jabbed a finger at the paper. “I should be good to go by the end of March.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Is this for real?”

“I also sold my condo in Santa Monica. I’m back, Emma. I’m taking an enormous pay cut. I moved in with my grandmother and donated all my surfing gear to—”

“Why? Why would you give all that up to practice medicine in a town that pays in rib roasts and eggs?”

“It feels right.”

Not the answer she was expecting.

“Well, congratulations,” she said, shoving the paper at him. She turned her cart around. She had to get out of here. There were too many feelings churning around inside her chest. Uncomfortable feelings.

“The only thing that doesn’t feel right is how I left things with you,” Tucker called after her.

That stopped her.

“I messed up, Emma. I know that. I don’t expect an open invitation into your life. I mean . . . I’m not asking you to marry me . . .” She turned around. Now, why would he bring up the m-word? “But I’d like to date you. Maybe sit next to you in church. Hold your hand once in a while. Until you’re ready to, I don’t know, take it to the next level.”

The next level?

“I’m back, Emma. And I’m back for you.”

A collective sigh went up, and Emma realized they’d drawn a bit of a crowd.

“Very romantic. Well played, Madsen,” Nina said from behind her.

“Thanks, Nina,” he said, not looking away from Emma. “What do you say, McAllister?”

Emma looked around, feeling color scorch its way up her neck. Her heart thundered in her chest, and suddenly she was annoyed. What did he think?

He could show up spouting romantic platitudes, and all would be well? He was putting her on the spot, and she didn't like it. "I don't think so, Tucker," she said.

You could have heard a pin drop.

"Well," Tucker said, rubbing his chin. "I guess I really can't blame you." He was being entirely too gracious about this. "But you need to know I'm back for good. I'm taking the job, Emma. So at the very least you'll be running into me." He paused a second, then pointed at her. "I am not giving up," he said and walked away.

Emma's stomach was roiling; every nerve in her body felt starved. She turned to Nina, expecting to see approval in her friend's eyes. Instead, there was something else entirely.

"Are you crazy?" Nina snapped.

Emma started to panic. "Wait, you're the one who—"

"He crossed the continent to see you!" Nina flung her arms into the air.

"Nina, Missouri's in the middle of—"

"Shut it, Emma. Go after him!"

Emma felt all mixed up. Why was her friend suddenly pro-Tucker?

And then it was all too clear. She'd made a mistake. Heart thudding, Emma left the cart and ran to the front of the store. Tucker was nowhere to be seen.

* * *

Well, that had gone well. Not. At least she'd talked to him. That was promising, he supposed.

He'd gone straight to her place as soon as he'd hit city limits two days ago. It had been a punch in the gut to hear she'd sold her house, and for a minute he'd panicked. Thankfully, the woman who'd answered the door had directed him to Nina's house. Emma's best friend had been no help, standing in the door like a human shield, answering his questions with perfunctory replies. Hardly surprising. Nina had the protective instincts of a pit bull, and she was twice as loyal. But then again, even his own grandmother had been doubtful of his success where Emma was concerned.

"Your track record isn't great. If you were a horse, I wouldn't back you," she'd said, pointing her fork at him last night over dinner after he'd reported no luck in his quest to find Emma. It had been on the tip of his tongue to tell her he wouldn't be in this mess if she hadn't interfered all those years ago, but he'd thought better of it and kept quiet. His mother had

been more encouraging.

“Emma’s a lovely girl, Tucker. Don’t you give up.” He could tell she approved because she’d gotten Emma’s name right.

He thought he’d get more help from the locals, but the usually beneficent citizens of Normal had gone taciturn in his absence. That was fine. He’d wait it out.

Once he’d made his decision to come back, it was amazing how everything had fallen into place. Sort of. He’d burned a couple of bridges on his way out of L.A. Jim Putney wasn’t happy, breathing out warnings about career suicide. The condo had sold two days after he’d listed it, but then again, he’d undercut most of the comps in the area. None of that mattered once he boarded the plane. The closer he got to Normal, the more sure he’d become. He’d made the right decision. It was a good feeling.

That feeling was gone now. Tucker unlocked the car, prepared to go home, lick his wounds, and regroup.

“Are you really back?” Emma’s voice came from behind him, and his fingers froze on the door handle. He closed his eyes and whispered, “Please don’t let me blow this now.”

He turned around. Emma stood shivering on the curb, hands jammed into her coat pockets.

He leaned against the car. “Yes.”

“So this isn’t just a visit to make sure Miss Lily is okay?”

“No.”

Emma’s shoulders relaxed a little. “Why?”

“I told you. I came back for you.”

“You’re sure? Because twelve years ago—”

“If you get to bring up the past, then I get to bring up the letters and how your mother basically kept us apart by—”

“Okay, okay, okay.” She held up both hands. “Forget I mentioned it. I guess I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of you trading in your perfect California life for”—she glanced around and then threw her arms wide—“this. Little ole Normal, Missouri, population eleven thousand six hundred and fifty-seven. Fifty-eight when Doc Braithwaite comes back to fish in the spring. Sure you won’t be bored?”

“Want to volunteer as entertainment committee?”

She shook her head. “No, thanks. Too much pressure. I’m not sure it’s a great idea, your future hinging on me. There should be more, don’t you

think?”

“Like I said, you’re enough.”

Emma liked that. He could tell. She looked away, but not before he saw the way she bit down on a smile.

“I don’t know,” she said, biting her lip, then looking back up at him. “Are you sure about this?”

“Are you kidding? Besides, I’m already building a patient base. Edna Neely stopped by the house this morning.”

Emma rocked back and forth on the heels of her boots. Something was still bothering her. “What about the fiancée?” she said, drawing the last word out.

He arched an eyebrow and took a step closer. “You mean Meredith?”

“Is there more than one?”

“No. But she’s my ex-fiancée. We broke up.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders gave an apathetic shrug. “Sorry to hear it.”

Tucker rolled his eyes and tramped over to Emma. With her standing on the curb, they were pretty much eye to eye now. “Are you yanking my chain?” he asked.

“I might be. If I am, you deserve it.”

“Agreed.” He nodded. “Are you going to give me another shot?”

“Shot? Don’t tempt me.” She chewed on her bottom lip again, and suddenly he wanted to kiss her. “This is a bad idea. We’ll argue all the time,” she said.

“No, we won’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll just let you have your way.” He was lying, but he could see the beginnings of a smile. “I heard you gave my mom a job. That was nice of you.”

“I’m a very nice person. Why’d you break up?”

“Huh? Oh. Uh—”

Meredith. When he talked to her after his work party, Meredith had admitted she’d hoped that her accident would bring them closer together. Instead, as she was recovering, they both seemed to figure out that they weren’t right for each other. “I understand, sort of,” Meredith had said. “Go back to your little town. It’s where you belong. But if it’s okay with you, I’m going to tell everyone that I broke up with you.” He’d laughed at that and given her a hug. As breakups went, theirs hadn’t been too bad. In fact,

Meredith had texted him just last night. She was already dating an entertainment lawyer in Brentwood.

“We wanted different things,” he told Emma. “Besides . . .” He leaned in closer and whispered, “I decided I prefer redheads.”

Emma’s eyes lost their teasing glint. “How do you know this is right? I know I’m not allowed to talk about it, but before, all you wanted was to be gone. I remember, Tucker. Your ambition was huge. How do you know you’ll be happy in this tiny little—”

“I’m crazy about you,” he said, and Emma’s mouth shut. “Your strength. Your persistence. The way you challenge me to be better. I know I’m no bargain. I’ve wasted a lot of time going after something that didn’t make me happy. But I’m back now. I feel pretty good about it too.” He inched a little closer. “I’m going to take over for Doc Braithwaite no matter what you decide, but . . .” He took one of her hands and stroked his thumb over her palm. “If you’d like to take a chance on a stubborn, slightly clueless, arguably underemployed doctor, I’d be very, very grateful.”

Emma’s mouth twisted sideways. “I must be crazy,” she said with a little laugh.

Oh, he liked the sound of that.

“If we do this,” she said, “we go slow. Glacier slow. Molasses-in-January slow.”

“Got it.”

She took a deep breath and let it out. “Okay.”

“Okay? Okay, you’ll let me date you?” He put his hand on her waist. “You’ll let me hold your hand and sit next to you at church? Maybe let me ___”

She kissed him, looping her arms around his neck to pull him closer, and it seemed they were done talking. Hallelujah.

He pulled back, only for a second, and said, “I’ll take that as a yes.” And then Tucker Madsen applied himself to the task at hand.

EPILOGUE

May

TUCKER WASN'T PROPOSING UNTIL THE Landry wedding was over. No way. Every time the Landry name came up, Emma's face twisted into a scowl, and smoke practically billowed from her ears.

The whole taking-it-slow thing? Yeah, that lasted a week. Tucker had played the part. He'd called when he said he'd call. Showed up on time. He was the perfect gentleman. But by the beginning of his second week back, Emma had plopped herself down next to him at church and held his hand all the way through to the last amen. Might as well have posted it on Instagram because the next day everyone he saw either slapped him on the back or grinned and said, "Way to go, Madsen." Whatever that meant. If it meant he seemed pretty darn happy, well then, they were right.

His grandmother had made good on her promise to turn the old mercantile into a medical office. They were about three weeks from opening their doors. Until then, he saw patients in Doc Braithwaite's old lean-to. Officially retired now, Doc had given Tucker the keys right before heading down to South America for a little angling in the Andes. Tucker had inherited a cabinet full of medical records and a stuffed swordfish.

From Burt Turner's tennis elbow to Clara Jackson's tinnitus, Tucker spent most evenings familiarizing himself with the aches and pains of the good citizens of Normal. "A cure for insomnia," Emma had asserted. "Good for business," Tucker had countered. But it was more than that. He'd turned his back on a lucrative medical practice to be here. He wanted it to be for something. He wanted to make a difference. Besides, he had time on his hands when Emma was busy at The Barn.

He regretted nothing. Being around family again was nice. Gran was done with radiation and holding her own. She'd retaken her seat on the town council in spite of the family's objections. Said she liked feeling needed. First thing she'd done was push the proposal for that blasted golf course through.

Tucker had helped his mom pack up her house when it sold so she could move into the little apartment that had been built onto the back of Shep's old place. She seemed happy running the newly opened B and B, which had recently been occupied by the Landry family in preparation for the wedding.

He missed Emma. She'd been busy every night this week, obsessing over wedding preparations—she wanted everything to be perfect—and he was having withdrawals.

Just thinking about her made him grin. It felt like they'd picked up right where they'd left off twelve years ago, except things were better. They spent every spare minute together. Did corny things like walk down the street hand in hand, kiss under the clock by the courthouse, and finish each other's sentences, all in view of the general population. That also meant everyone in town felt entitled to weigh in with relationship advice and suggestions on how he should propose.

Last week Carol Kerr had tapped him on the shoulder in the checkout line at Grimm's and asked, "When you gonna propose, Tucker? Y'all have been sweet on each other since the fourth grade."

"Make a grand gesture," Hal Bricknell suggested while Tucker removed a walleye casting lure from his neck. "Women love that stuff. I proposed to my wife over an ice hole on Shabbona Lake."

"Skywrite Marry me, Emma over Busch Stadium," Rose had suggested yesterday.

"Nah," Nina had countered. "Emma's a Royals fan."

But Tucker didn't need any help. He had a plan. Which brought him to today.

He stood against a post at The Barn, watching Emma run the Landry reception with the precision of a field sergeant. Except she looked way hotter. She stood next to the rear entrance of The Barn in her black pencil skirt and silk blouse, hair piled on top of her head, iPad in hand, Bluetooth earpiece in place. The night had gone seamlessly, and Tucker felt sure it was time to make his move. But just as he started toward Emma, Nina grabbed his arm and said, "Hang on a sec. Incoming."

He settled back against the post as Mrs. Landry made her way over to talk to his girlfriend.

He had to hand it to Emma. The Barn was transformed. White flowers spilled over cut-glass vases and hung in swags from the chandeliers. White lights and lit candles gave the whole place an otherworldly look. The scent of lilac was carried in on the breeze. Elegant. That was the word he was searching for. Tucker watched the photographer from InStyle magazine race around trying to capture every moment.

The ceremony had ended hours ago, and the bride had since changed into her second wedding dress (the dress she got married in had made Tucker wince; it had looked tighter than a blood-pressure cuff at full inflation). Emma had explained that the second dress was for dancing, which the bride was now doing. She was shuffling around the portico, her arms looped around the groom's neck, their eyes locked in that first flush of marital bliss.

Kira Landry and her new husband seemed like decent people. The mother, on the other hand, had followed Emma around all night, asking questions, directing traffic, and barking that there wasn't enough champagne. Of course, there was enough champagne, and Emma had maintained an almost inhuman level of patience. He watched now as the Dragon Lady (Emma's nickname for her) pointed to the ridiculously ostentatious cake, rising six layers into the stratosphere. Emma had told Tucker it was the one point the bride had conceded to her mother, and he admired the confection more for its structural stability than anything else.

Tucker was getting impatient. He watched Emma nod, looking Mrs. Landry straight in the eye. Then something strange happened. The Dragon Lady pulled Emma in for a hug. Emma brought awkward arms up to pat her on the back, and her bemused eyes met his across the room. She rolled her eyes, and he grinned at her. When they pulled apart, Delia Landry pressed an envelope into Emma's hand, squeezed her shoulder, and walked away.

Emma stepped into the shadows to open the envelope, pressed against her earpiece, and said something. Seconds later Nina appeared at her side, and Emma showed her the envelope. Nina did a fist pump and flung her arms around Emma, then glanced his way and gave Tucker a thumbs-up, their signal that things were a go.

He wound his way back through the crowd, going out the front of The Barn and jumping into the golf cart waiting there. He doubled around the back until he caught sight of Nina dragging Emma toward the walled garden.

"I can't leave now," Emma protested as Tucker pulled up behind them. "They're cutting the cake."

"I can handle it. Tucker needs you now."

Emma spun around. "Hey," she said, and her whole body seemed to relax at the sight of him.

Nina pushed Emma toward the golf cart, and Tucker hopped out.

“What are you doing?” Emma asked.

“You’ll see,” he said, turning her around and producing a bandanna. “Blindfold,” he explained.

“Seriously?”

“Play along, will you?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said, a suspicious note in her voice.

He secured the blindfold, helped her into the cart, and pulled away, giving Nina a salute.

“You did a great job tonight, EJ. Everything looked spectacular.”

“I know!” No false modesty there. “What’s even better, Mrs. Landry loved it. Ha! I knew she would. She called the night a triumph. A triumph! I can hardly wait to see the pictures in InStyle next month. This is going to make The Barn.”

“What was in the envelope she handed you?” he asked.

“A bonus! I about swallowed my tongue when I saw the amount. The Barn will be in the black for the next couple of months. Tucker, this blindfold is itchy,” she said, tugging at it.

“Leave it alone. That’s great. About The Barn, I mean.”

“Can you believe it? Almost makes Delia’s henpecking worth it.”

“Almost,” he agreed.

Emma was happy to gab away. “Thank heaven the weather held out. Delia would have blamed me for any natural disasters. And weren’t the daffodils gorgeous? The sun coming through the trees just as the minister pronounced them man and wife? That was amazing. Delia—she actually said I could call her that—she said she was glad Kira found us. She even said she’d recommend us to—Tucker, why are we at the lake?”

“What makes you think we’re at the lake?”

“Because I can smell it.”

“You can smell the lake?”

“Yes. And I can hear the water lapping against the dock.”

“Wait! What are you doing?”

“Taking off the blindfold, you goof. You only blindfold someone so they won’t guess where you’re taking them.”

“Keep that blindfold on! You don’t know everything.” He wrestled her hands away from the blindfold.

“Tucker . . .”

“Just do it, woman.” He parked beside the oak tree. It looked like Mother Nature had run interference with his plans. The cloth he’d spread out on the dock had blown up over itself. The strand of globe lights he’d looped through the lower branches of the tree hung loose.

“Uh, sit tight for a second.”

“You planning on throwing me into the lake?” she called after him.

“Don’t tempt me!” he said, pulling the lights back into place and turning on the battery pack. He straightened the cloth, pulled a lighter from his pocket, and lit all the candles. “Okay, Cinderella,” he said, taking Emma’s hand, “out of your carriage.”

He led her down to the dock, their weight making it bob gently on the water. “Hey! I was joking about going into the lake,” she warned.

He ignored her. “Ready?” He drew the blindfold from her eyes and watched her face brighten.

“Tucker,” she breathed. “It’s beautiful.” Nina had helped him line the dock with the wide-mouth Mason jars that now glowed with lit candles. The tree limbs spread out bright above them, and fireflies danced near the water’s edge. He couldn’t take credit for that, but it was a nice touch.

Emma moved forward. “It’s like that last night before you left for college.”

Tucker put his arms around her from behind. “Uh-huh.”

She relaxed against him. “I love it,” she whispered.

“What about me? You love me too?” he asked.

She turned in his arms, pretending to think about it. “I might. A little,” she said, standing on tiptoe to kiss him. She wound her arms around his neck. “Or a lot,” she murmured. She kissed him again, and he pulled back to look at her.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?”

Emma didn’t let go. “Try what again? I think what we were doing was perfect.”

He kissed her nose. “Things didn’t end so well for me out here twelve years ago. I hope to can change that tonight.” He pulled a box from his pocket and slowly opened it.

Emma gasped. Instead of going for the three-quarter carat cushion-cut engagement ring, she pulled out the wedding band. It was a sterling-silver ring with daisies winding all around, a diamond chip in the center of each flower.

“It’s my ring,” she said, her voice full of wonder. “You saved it?”

“Of course I did,” he murmured. He took the ring from her and slid it onto her finger. “Twelve years ago we were too young, but it feels like everything between that moment and today has been leading up to this. I know what I want. And it’s you. Forever. Will you marry me?”

She looked from the ring to him, and yep, there were tears. She nodded before throwing her arms around his neck. “You were worth the wait,” she said before her mouth found his again.

It felt right. Emma in his arms, this time for good. It had taken them a while to get here. Maybe their paths back to each other had been a little crooked, but one thing was certain. Tucker Madsen was glad he’d come back to Normal.

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