



The Light of Day

Lynne Norris

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by

Lynne Norris

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by Regal Crest

Tennessee

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Dedication

To Catherine and Zach because life has a way of throwing curve balls when you least expect it.

Chapter One

EMMA CHAMBERLAIN STOOD in her fortieth floor office on State Street at the Southern tip of the borough of Manhattan gazing out the window. She looked out at Battery Park and the magnificent waterfront views of the Hudson River. Ferries filled with tourists crossed the water bringing them to the Statue of Liberty. The ships' passage created wake lines in the shape of rippled V's. Sunlight cast an orange glow across the feathery wavelets.

She always marveled at the copper statue and found it awe-inspiring even from this distance. Emma didn't want to turn away from it. If she didn't, she could pretend for another minute that she would see this view tomorrow and the next day, everything would remain the same, just like it had for the past fifteen years. The power lunches, leveraged market bets that paid out high rewards and legendary Wall Street bonuses would still be the privileged world she lived and traveled in.

Emma recalled graduating from Brown University when she was twenty-two. Her senior year, she landed an internship with SMB Capital and they hired her before she received her diploma, with a double major in economics and business management. Early on it wasn't lost on her in the overheard snatches of conversation that took place in copy rooms and water coolers that she'd been hired because of her good looks. She was a blend of her father's Nordic heritage and her mother's southern Mediterranean looks. She was tall and slender with chestnut hair and hazel eyes. Chameleon eyes her mother called them because the color of her irises changed with her moods.

An occasional voice from the hallway drew her attention away from the water below. She struggled to ignore them wanting only to bask in the sense of peace she found looking out at the scenery. People were leaving and saying goodbye to co-workers. Some were tearful, others defiant and angry at the inexplicable and unexpected turn of events. She didn't want to take part in any of the farewells. There was nothing good about them at all. Only bad because every one of her colleagues would be competing against the other to find a job, any job to keep their homes, dreams and families intact.

Emma ignored the white cardboard box with the brown lid sitting in the middle of her desk. All of the employees were leaving with one. Today, the box was her scarlet letter. She felt ashamed, yet she'd done nothing wrong.

Fifteen years of her life working at SMB Capital reduced to one cardboard box containing a few personal belongings. The market collapse she witnessed was stunning in its breadth and scope. It made the 2008 market downdraft look like a walk in the park.

The first shot across the bow came on January seventeenth with the Swiss National Bank's decision to unpeg the franc from the euro. The immediate and volatile strengthening of the Swiss currency had tremendous repercussions, crushing every single hedge fund with a short position against the franc. In April, Greece defaulted on its debt exposing Europe's massively undercapitalized banks to counter-party risk.

The next domino to fall was BF International. The brokerage house had massive exposure to European sovereign junk debt and was unable to meet its collateral calls when its leveraged bet moved against them. As BFI imploded they made a bad situation worse by freezing customer accounts while the market continued to trade against them. People panicked when they couldn't access their money. The bull market equity bubble had found its pin.

Still, the overbought and overvalued stock market continued to surge higher. It was driven by speculators and the Fed printing money to sustain the artificially propped up markets. There was a frenzied carnival like atmosphere leading to the market top.

Emma wished she trusted her instincts and pulled her clients' money out of the markets. As a junior partner, her opinions didn't carry the weight of her senior counterparts and the word passed down through the ranks was to keep SMB's clients fully invested. At her own peril she believed Wall Streets', "this time is different," hype. Her colleagues laughed at her pessimism telling her it was "preposterous" when in a meeting she questioned whether the market resembled those preceding the 1929 market crash. She allowed herself to be talked out of her convictions and ended up watching the full-blown market collapse, helpless to get her clients' money out. It was a rapid and brutal descent into financial hell.

Brokerages were laying off employees in droves and some like Emma's firm had simply lost too much and were closing their doors altogether. The fragile economy, financial and social systems already under stress were cracking under the strain. The biggest transfer of wealth was underway and with it the dreams and aspirations of middle class America were going up in smoke.

"I'm sorry Ms. Chamberlain. I can't give you more time," Andrew said from the doorway of her office. Andrew was lean with freckles and curly red hair. A recent hire into the human resources department, Emma couldn't help but wonder if he was hired specifically to manage the layoffs that were in process today. Full of impotent anger, Emma whirled around. "Did you know this was coming?"

Andrew's face blanched. "What? No, I'm just a temp."

"Right. Sorry. I just want to look out at the scenery one last time. Don't know if I'll ever get the opportunity to see it like this again." Emma turned away from the window fighting back tears. She wanted to pick up something heavy, preferably glass and smash it.

Emma's computer screen was nothing but a sea of red. It made her nauseous to look at it. She logged out and shut it down for the very last time. Part of her wanted desperately to stay, but there was nothing here for her to do anymore. Nothing she was allowed to do. All her access codes had been deactivated. Only the senior partners would stay on to help wind down the company as it went through the bankruptcy proceedings.

Emma picked up her cardboard box and, with one last backward glance at the picturesque scene outside the window, left her office. Her stomach did flips as she walked down the hallway acutely aware of Andrew's presence beside her. She passed by empty offices, some littered with papers. She wished she would wake up from this nightmare. At the elevator she jabbed the button for the lobby.

A tumult of emotions hammered away inside her. The pendulum swung from extremes of shock, anger, and self-recrimination to panic and back again. She'd seen the signs, but somehow managed to convince herself she'd be safe, that this chaos would miraculously pass her by and leave her and her clients unscathed. How arrogant she'd been. She punched the elevator button again wanting nothing more than to escape unseen.

"I'm good from here, Andrew. You don't have to come with me."

“It’s company policy, Ms. Chamberlain. I have to.”

“Of course you do.” Emma shook her head at the indignity. “This morning I was a valued employee and this afternoon I’m not trusted to walk out alone.”

“Emma. Wait for me.” Balding, with a paunch at his midriff and wearing round spectacles, Tom Elliot looked older than his thirty-seven years as he approached from down the hall.

Emma’s heart clenched when she saw him. Tom was a junior partner with a wife and two kids. He frequently worked eighty hours a week like Emma and if he was lucky saw his kids on the weekends. He lived across the river in New Jersey. She forgot which town, but knew it was one close to the railroad. Tom took the Midtown direct to Penn Station and hopped on the subway to get to the financial district every day.

“You heading out?” he asked looking disheveled and pale.

Emma wondered if she looked as shell-shocked as he did. She knew in her gut there were layoffs coming. None of them guessed when their CFO called an emergency meeting two o’clock Monday afternoon it was to tell them the company was closing its doors.

“No reason left to stay,” Emma said shifting the box in her arms. “What is taking this elevator so long? I just want to get the hell out of here.”

“The entire commodity index is cratering,” Tom said, his voice sounding panicked. “People are selling everything to get their hands on cash.”

“The brokerage firms have to raise money to make their margin calls. That’s what happened to us. The company couldn’t raise the collateral when the tide turned and they got wiped out.” Emma was aware of Andrew standing off to her left listening intently to their conversation.

“I thought that’s what the circuit breakers were supposed to prevent,” Tom said.

“Ha! When you’re leveraged thirty-to-one on your balance sheets and the only direction the market is moving is down it doesn’t matter how many times the exchanges stopped trading. It’s just like 2008 all over again, only worse.”

“Jesus. I can’t bring myself to tell Cheryl how much we lost in our account.” His hand trembled as he adjusted his glasses.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. Cheryl’s frantic. She’s texted me half a dozen times since I called her. One minute she’s talking about putting the house on the market and the next she’s ordering some shit from Amazon for the kids. What about you?”

Emma shrugged. “I’d send out resumes, but I wouldn’t know who the hell to send them to. Everyone’s laying off or closing their doors.”

“Do you have family around?” Tom asked.

Emma always kept her personal and professional life separate. She’d worked hard to keep it that way, but now, as she walked onto the elevator with Tom, those efforts left her feeling isolated and lonely.

“My family is originally from western Massachusetts.”

“No one here?”

“A few friends.” Which was true. Emma’s parents divorced when she was in high school. They’d both gone on with their lives becoming absentee parents through her college days. When her father died a few years ago he left her the small cottage the family vacationed at in western Massachusetts. She had a realtor rent it out for her and had seldom visited the place since his funeral. Until recently it had been a passive stream of income for her. One she’d taken for granted until now.

“It might not be a bad time for you to get out of the city for awhile. Things aren’t likely to get any better soon.”

Ripe with resentment, Emma joked, “It’s not like I have to worry about showing up for work tomorrow.” She tried to sound like everything was all right when it was the farthest thing from the truth.

“This can’t last forever, right?” Tom said as he stepped off the elevator into the lobby on the ground floor. There was an awkward silence between them as the only thing that bound them together, their work, had disintegrated around them in a few short chaotic hours.

“It’ll blow over,” Emma assured him, trying to sound confident even though her world felt like it had fallen off its axis. Emma set her box on the ground and dug her phone out of her shoulder bag. “Put your number in my phone.” Tom obliged and handed it back to her.

Emma typed his name in and rang his number. “There. Now you have mine. Keep in touch with me. Let me know what’s going on.” She had no idea if he would, but the action made her feel connected to him nonetheless.

“I will.” Tom shifted his box over to his left arm and shook Emma’s hand. “Good luck.”

“You too, Tom.” Emma watched him walk toward the subway and wondered briefly if their paths would cross again. Unexpectedly, a well of loneliness and loss opened up inside her. It threatened to swallow her whole. Emma sucked in a ragged breath and fought back tears before she stepped out into the cauldron of bodies barreling past on the sidewalk. Normally immune to the sights and smells of the city, Emma found the scene jarring to her senses.

The smell of burnt pretzels mingled with dirty water dogs from the rat carts and cigarette smoke assaulted her. There was an endless chatter of voices. The cacophony of horns, engines accelerating when the lights changed and deliverymen pedaling by at reckless speeds, overwhelmed her normally hardened impervious attitude.

She ducked and weaved around the throngs of people, got bumped once and jostled aside a second time. Ordinarily, Emma would have made the sixteen-minute walk north on Broadway to her luxury apartment on Ann Street. Today carrying her cardboard box she was clearly off her game and didn’t have the energy or the inclination to make the trek.

Emma staked her claim at the edge of the sidewalk and jammed her arm into the air making eye contact with the first yellow cab that veered in her direction. She jerked open the door and scrambled into the back seat. Her nerves felt on fire like they were dancing on her skin. She barked out the address, leaned back against the vinyl seat and closed her eyes, grateful for the silence and to be heading home. Her phone trilled in her pocket and she pulled it out.

“Oh no, I can’t talk to you now, Mom,” she said when she saw her mother’s name on the display. Emma declined the call and slid the phone back into her pocket and closed her eyes. Right now she wanted nothing other than to be home in the quiet solitude of her apartment.

Chapter Two

EMMA SHARED HER home with Kate McCrory, her partner for the last nine years. Emma met Kate at the Black Hound Bar during one of her client lunches. There was an immediate attraction between the two women and Emma could still remember being captured by those emerald green eyes and the overriding impulse of wanting to know Kate better.

She had no idea what she was going to do now that she lost her job, along with thousands of other employees in the financial industry. Much of her money was tied up in SMB Capital or her 401k, which meant it was essentially gone. Kate wasn't in any better of a position. She tended bar at one of the upscale restaurants along South Street Seaport. It helped to supplement the proceeds she made from selling her paintings in one of the gallery's across town. Business at the restaurant would tail off and with it a substantial amount of Kate's income would too.

Before Emma knew it, the cab driver pulled over in front of her apartment building and stopped the meter. She handed him a ten.

"Change?"

"No," Emma said as she climbed out and pulled her box with her. She walked toward the front entrance and saw Ralph move to open the door for her.

Ralph was dressed in black tails with gold trim. He said, "Oh Miss Emma, not you too. I've lost count of how many people walked into this building today carrying a box like yours." Emma wasn't surprised. Her building was filled with young professionals who worked in the financial district.

Ralph was a kindly older gentleman. He was known for checking on people's pets when they were running late from work, watering plants and even holding packages at the desk for them. He knew everyone by name and always had a smile for Emma when he saw her.

"Hi, Ralph," Emma said as she stepped into the white and black art deco tiled lobby. "I got my walking papers today."

"I am sorry, Miss Emma. It's bad all over. Nothing but bad news everywhere," Ralph said, following her to the elevator.

"Yes it is, Ralph. Yes...it...is." And about to get worse, she thought as she punched the button for the elevator. Fighting back tears, Emma resolved to do whatever she had to do to survive the fallout of the market crash.

"Can I carry that up for you?" he asked.

Emma glanced down. Aside from a few personal knickknacks and a couple of pictures, her box was pathetically empty. "I can manage. Thank you, Ralph."

"You take care of yourself, Miss Emma."

"You too, Ralph."

Emma entered the brightly lit apartment. Sunlight was streaming in through sliding glass doors that led to a small balcony. "Kate?" Emma called as she set her carton of belongings onto the white granite countertop. The apartment was too quiet and after a quick check of the rooms she confirmed what she already sensed, Kate wasn't there.

Emma walked out, locked the door behind her and took the elevator to the rooftop deck. The roof garden and bar was open Memorial Day through late fall for the tenants. It was one of Emma's favorite spots to spend an evening and relax with a drink after a hectic day. Strategically placed planters filled with palm trees and blooming ornamental plants gave the appearance of a tropical paradise during the summer months.

Kate was sitting on a chaise lounge talking on her cell phone with her back to Emma. Her thick auburn hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a white collared shirt and black pants, her attire for bartending later tonight. The shirt pulled tight across her shoulders accentuating her athletic build. When she caught Emma walking toward her out of the corner of her eye, Kate said a quick goodbye to whoever she was talking to and ended the call.

"Hey, babe." Kate swung her legs over the edge of the lounge chair. Her black tie tucked under the collar of her shirt was untied and hung down in front, the tails lifting in the breeze. Kate looked hot enough to take right there, but the feeling left Emma as quickly as it came, harsh reality nudging it aside. "You look beat."

"I am." Emma sat down next to her, resting her forearms on her thighs.

"You've been crying." Kate ran her fingers through Emma's hair. "What's the matter?"

"I'm out of a job as of today."

"Fuck! What the hell happened?"

"We got called into a meeting at two o'clock today. They told us, 'due to extreme market forces SMB suffered grave losses and is not able to continue serving our clients.'"

"Oh, man."

"People freaked out. It was awful. Security was there to escort us out in groups to our offices. We had ten minutes to pack our stuff and get out. They handed out folders with our unemployment information as we left the conference room."

"I'm sorry." Kate wrapped an arm around Emma's shoulder and squeezed her tight. "What are you going to do?"

Emma gave a harsh laugh and shook her head, her hair falling forward over her face. "I have no idea. What's the appropriate response to having your world so rudely upended?"

"A strong drink or two?" Kate suggested, brushing the chestnut locks back behind Emma's ear.

"Maybe."

"Come to the bar with me. I'll mix you a couple of house specials and you can hang out for a while and people watch. It'll take your mind off of this for awhile."

"I don't think I'd be great company tonight." Emma sighed and leaned back on her hands. Her mind raced in a hundred directions at once. She looked at the blue sky watching the wispy clouds race past carried by the winds aloft. "We're going to have to get a smaller apartment."

"Don't think about that right now. You said yourself a few months ago that this was a possibility."

"I know, but I didn't expect it to be—to happen in one day. I thought we'd have more time."

"Don't we always?" Kate asked.

"If we find a place that costs less than two thousand a month I've got enough to carry us through for six months."

"Where are you planning on living? A shack on Brighton Beach. You can't find a monthly lease in Manhattan for that price."

"We could move to Brooklyn or the Bronx." Emma could tell from Kate's disdainful expression she didn't like either option.

“My mother called me this afternoon.” Kate changed the subject.

“Was that who you were talking to?” Emma knew Kate’s mother wanted her to move to Florida. Cynthia McCrory was an influential real estate developer. Money was never an issue and if Kate ever needed something her mother made sure she got it. Cynthia was able to live off the trust her husband left her when he died ten years ago.

“She’s been keeping up on what’s been happening in the financial sector and wanted to know if you had a plan if things went south.”

“If I had a plan. How about us having a plan?” Emma cast Kate an incredulous glance. Somehow, Cynthia never saw their relationship as a partnership. Whoever was with her daughter needed to keep her in the lifestyle that she was accustomed to living.

“You know what I mean.” Kate laid a hand on Emma’s thigh. “Look how long it took for the market to come back after 2008.”

“It took over a year to hit the bottom.”

“Listen, I have something to tell you.”

“What is it?” Emma asked.

“I know this is really bad timing, but I got an offer for one of my paintings.”

“Why is that bad timing?” Emma hugged Kate and sat back studying her with a smile. “That’s great.”

“An art dealer in Florida contacted me about the pieces I posted on my webpage. They’re flying me down on Friday. They have some buyers that are interested in my work.”

“That’s fantastic. I’m really happy for you.”

“Thanks,” Kate said, her eyes darting away from Emma’s.

“So, Friday. Wow, that’s fast. How are you getting your paintings down there?”

“They sent a truck to pick up the ones they’re interested in.”

“This is serious then. How long are you going to be down in Florida for?”

“Well, that’s the thing. Part of the deal would be for me to relocate to Florida so I can build a presence there.”

Speechless, Emma stared at Kate. Her brain felt like the power went out, fuzzing out everything around her and then surged back on. She had a millisecond of brilliant clarity and then the sensation left her trying to figure out what all this meant. “Relocate? That means this is permanent. H...How long have you known about this?”

“The art dealer contacted me in April after I posted pictures on my Facebook page,” Kate said.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“Nothing was really finalized until this week. There was nothing to tell you.”

Emma’s mind reeled and she wondered if what Kate said were true. Angry with herself for doubting Kate, Emma shoved the thought away. No, Emma thought. It was her reaction to the day and not fair to Kate to accuse her unfairly. What’s wrong with me? I should feel happy for her. “What does this mean for us?”

Kate wrung her hands together. “I guess that’s up to you.”

“Up to me? How? You just told me you’re leaving. How is that up to me?” Emma asked.

“You can move down with me.”

“Where in Florida are you planning on moving?”

“Boca Raton. I thought we could find a place down there for half the price of something here.”

“Kate, I have to stay around here. There are no jobs in Boca for me.”

“There are no jobs anywhere right now. Come take a vacation for a few months. You’ve got the money to do it.”

Emma had her bank account for paying bills and daily expenses, but the rest was tied up. Maybe it had never been hers to begin with, an illusion of wealth and security like this fantasy of a tropical paradise on a rooftop in New York City. “It’s tempting, but I can’t just take a vacation in the middle of a market crash.”

“Why not? Did you forget you don’t have to go to work tomorrow?”

“No, of course I didn’t forget.”

“What’s stopping you then?”

“I’ve got to stay and take care of getting out of the lease and selling what’s in this place. I have to look for some kind of work so I can pay the bills. I have to be here when the market comes back or I’ll miss the opportunities.”

Kate stood abruptly and walked to edge of the roof. Emma could sense Kate’s agitation by the stiff set of her shoulders.

“All I know is we can’t stay here. We’ll have to sell some of the furniture. Wherever we go it will be smaller.”

“Babe, don’t you think you’re over reacting?” Kate implored turning back around.

“How do you think we’re going to cover the rent let alone all the other expenses we have? Do you think you’re going to bring home the kind of tips you’ve gotten in the past? All your high rolling clients will be gone in a month.”

“That’s exactly why I went after this opportunity. We can get more for our money down there. I think it’s a great idea. Besides, you could use a break and I could have my art on exhibit in a totally different environment. There are lots of foreign buyers in Florida right now. Opportunities like this don’t come around everyday.”

“I understand that,” Emma said standing. “I’m hurt. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this was a possibility and you knew since April.” She wanted to go to Kate but suddenly felt like there was a wall erected between them.

“When was I supposed to tell you? Somewhere in between your endless client meetings, important telephone calls or at ten o’clock at night when you’re dragging yourself through the door exhausted?”

Emma couldn’t help the swell of anger. “With something as important as this I would think you’d find the time to tell me no matter when it was.”

With an exasperated sigh Kate said, “I don’t want to fight with you.”

“Who’s fighting?” Emma implored. “I’m just trying to understand what’s happening.”

“I have to get to work. My flight leaves from LaGuardia at 7:10 Friday morning.”

“You’ve already made your decision. Haven’t you?” Stung and defeated, Emma folded her arms over her chest.

“When a door closes another one opens. You just have to step through.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one who lost their job today! Why do I feel like you’re leaving me?” Emma asked.

“I didn’t say that I was. You said that.”

Emma felt her pulse pounding in her throat. “What about the life we have here?”

“There’s not much holding us here now, is there. Come down to Florida with me.”

“And if I don’t?”

“That’s your decision to make.” Kate pushed off the wall. “I guess we’ll have to see how things go.” She approached Emma, but was careful not to touch her. “I have to go or I’ll be late for my shift. We don’t have to decide anything tonight.”

“Sure.” Emma couldn’t meet Kate’s eyes. Anger coursed through her. This news on top of everything else pushed her to the breaking point. She didn’t want Kate to see her crying so she turned away. The sound of Kate’s heels clicking on the concrete faded and disappeared as she walked towards the elevator.

Emma stayed on the rooftop long after Kate left watching the stars appear in the darkening sky. This had to take the cake for being close to one of the worst days of her life. The intense feelings reminded her of the betrayal and sense of loss she felt when her parents divorced. When she’d gotten past the raw emotions enough to examine what she knew of her parents’ relationship she suspected their love for each other had died years ago. They had been going through the motions until it just wasn’t acceptable to do so anymore.

Emma wondered if the same thing was happening or maybe already had happened to her and Kate. They’d been living in a comfortable relationship for years. Maybe it had become convenient and easy to stay in it until it wasn’t anymore. Why else would Kate decide to leave like this? Essentially, she’d given Emma an ultimatum. Move to Florida or see what happens. The words echoed in Emma’s mind. Emma had a pretty good idea how it might turn out.

There would be a few obligatory phone calls, a visit or two, and then things would cool until there was little left to keep them together. As far as Emma was concerned, long distance relationships seldom worked.

Emma retreated to her apartment. It already felt like Kate was gone, her absence overwhelming.

Emma paced in front of the large sliding glass window, occasionally stopping and staring out at the skyline. Hot tears coursed down Emma’s cheeks and she slumped onto the couch clutching a pillow against her chest. After a few minutes, she gulped in some air and settled her breathing. She stood and wiped the tears from her eyes.

She dug into her shoulder bag and retrieved her cell phone. Emma’s thumbprint unlocked the phone and she stared at the screen debating whom she wanted to tell her news to.

Unlike her sister, Lindsey, Emma chose to live with her father until she left for Brown University. Her mother resented her choice and made no effort to hide it whenever she saw her. Emma was quick to remind her that their divorce forced her to make a choice she never wanted to make. It wasn’t until after her father died that the two of them started down the rocky road of reconciliation. Their relationship was far from normal, and tonight Emma didn’t feel up to the verbal sparring that characterized many of their conversations. She was grateful her sister picked up the phone rather than her brother-in-law, Brent.

“Hello?”

“Lindsey, it’s Emma.”

“Hi.”

“This isn’t a bad time is it?”

“No the kids already had their baths and are in bed. Thank God. They exhaust me.”

“Good, not good that you’re exhausted, that they’re in bed.”

“I know what you mean. What’s going on? You usually don’t call at this time of night.”

“I..I lost my job today,” Emma said fighting back tears.

“Oh my God! Why?”

“SMB declared bankruptcy. They closed their doors today.”

“Just like that? What happened?”

“It’s complicated and really it doesn’t matter.” Outside her window, Emma could see the city skyline illuminated by the myriad of lights against the black sky. She wondered how many other people were sitting in their apartments wondering what the hell they were going to do with their lives starting tomorrow.

“Brent just walked in. He said he saw something about it on the six o’clock news. Everyone lost their jobs?”

“All but the senior partners. They’ll stay on to deal with all the legal issues while they wind the company down.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t have any idea yet. My head is spinning.”

“If I were there I’d offer you an Ativan.”

“The hell with the Ativan,” Emma said. “Just mainline the scotch.”

Lindsey erupted in laughter and said, “I wish I were there with you. Is Kate there?”

“No she’s at work.”

“Work? You mean you haven’t told her yet?”

“She knows. I told her when I got home. She’s...flying down to Florida on Friday to look at apartments.”

“Florida?” Lindsey asked. “When did you decide you were going to move down there?”

“I didn’t decide anything. Kate sprung the news on me tonight.”

“What news? I’m confused,” Lindsey said.

“She got an offer from an art dealer. Apparently whoever it is really sees potential in her work. They’re sending a truck to pick up the pieces they want.”

“She actually has a buyer?” Lindsey asked.

“I don’t know. She didn’t give me all the details.”

“You didn’t know she was thinking about making this kind of a move?”

Emma could sense Lindsey assessing and judging her. How could she not have known? Kate and Emma. They said they’d be together forever, hadn’t they? She flinched as something inside tightened like a vice around her heart. It seemed like one more thing she was going to fail at. “No...she didn’t say anything before today. Life has been crazy. I’ve been working insane hours and we haven’t seen each other much.” Then again her life always seemed to be like that.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. It feels like she’s leaving. It’s a great opportunity. I understand she has to take a shot at this, but it means she moves down to Florida.”

“That doesn’t sound like Kate. She was never the impulsive type.”

“If I don’t go with her...she said we’ll see how it goes.”

“Oh honey, that doesn’t sound good. Do you want me to come down for a few days? I don’t think you should be all alone there.”

“No. I’ll be fine. Honest. I have a lot to get done and I’ll be incredibly lousy company.” Emma hoped she sounded more convincing than she felt.

“If that’s what you want.” Lindsey sounded doubtful, but Emma absolutely did not want anyone there with her. “Have you told Mom yet?”

“No. She called me earlier. I may need a drink in me before I can deal with her reaction.” Emma could handle her mother in small doses. Their lives were worlds apart. Where Emma worked seventy to eighty hours a week her mother spent her days socializing with her lady

friends, shopping and going out to eat at trendy restaurants. In between her social calendar she fit in yoga workouts and weekly massages.

“Don’t wait too long. You know how she always seems to know when something is wrong with either of us. It’s like she’s got this sixth sense.”

“Mom and her vibes.” Emma felt a twinge of irritation. When her parents were going through their divorce her mother was so mired in her anger that she left Lindsey and Emma to their own devices. When she did bother to step into her role as mother it was typically to point out how well Lindsey was doing and how much Emma seemed to be struggling. Lindsey was prettier, made high honor roll every quarter and was attracted to boys. It was a miracle the two sister’s survived the fallout from their parent’s divorce and managed to remain friends.

“After I get things settled here and I figure out what I’m doing I’ll drive up and visit you,” Emma said.

“I’d like that. We haven’t seen each other since we got together on Mother’s day.”

“I know. I’ve been crazy busy.”

“Well it certainly sounds like you’ll have some free time for awhile at least. You should take advantage of it. Live a little.”

“That’s kind of hard to do right now.”

“Are you going to be okay without a salary for a while?”

“I’ll be fine. I have unemployment and my savings,” Emma said refusing to get into the details about the state of her personal finances with Lindsey.

Lindsey’s voice faded and Emma heard her ask, “Can you take care of it for me? Okay, fine. I’ll be right there.” Then Lindsey’s exasperated voice was clear in the phone again. “Brent said one of the boy’s is calling for me. I have to go. Hang in there. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too,” Emma said.

Chapter Three

ALMOST TWO MONTHS had passed since Kate moved to Florida. Emma called Kate several times a week. Their conversations centered mostly on Kate's new life and how busy she was. Since Kate left, Emma sold most of the furniture in their Manhattan apartment. Kate told her she didn't want to pay for moving anything and most of it Emma bought over the years. Emma's search for another apartment yielded nothing but a series of frustrating dead ends.

After pinning Kate down on a week that she could visit, Emma flew down to Boca Raton feeling obligated to at least make some attempt to salvage what was left of their relationship. Emma arrived on a Wednesday and spent the first two days meeting all of Kate's newest friends. They were all nice and polite to her. The only one who gave Emma strange vibes was Stephanie. She was a tall blonde with angular features and was overly solicitous towards Kate, who made no objections to Stephanie's advances. Emma felt like a conspicuous interloper the entire time she was there.

It was early in the morning on her last day in Florida. Fresh coffee brewing in the kitchen tantalized the olfactory centers of her brain conjuring up a fleeting memory of better times between her and Kate. Irritated with herself for feeling anything toward Kate, Emma threw the last of her clothes into her suitcase.

When Emma walked into the kitchen, Kate was standing by the sink holding a mug with steam wafting up from it.

"Yours is on the counter," Kate said barely meeting Emma's eyes.

"Thanks," Emma lifted the mug to her lips and sipped her coffee.

"It looks like it's going to be a nice day to go to the beach. Stephanie is going to pick us up in an hour."

Like hell she is. "I changed my flight to an earlier one."

"Why?" Kate frowned. "You didn't have to do that."

"It's time for me to go. I want to get home." Emma lifted the mug to her lips and sipped. "I was able to get the leasing company to let me go to a month to month lease."

"You didn't tell me you were planning on changing the lease," Kate said.

"I lost half of the deposit, but at least I can get out of the lease when I find a new place to live."

"So you're not moving down here."

"I'm not sure there is a reason for me to move down here. You and Stephanie seem quite comfortable together."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you out with the deposit." Kate set the mug down and folded her arms across her chest.

"I had your name taken off the lease when you moved out. I wasn't asking you to help out. It was my decision." The coffee was turning to acid in Emma's stomach. "I hope everything works out for you the way you want it to."

“Thanks,” Kate said her voice cracking with emotion. “You made things really easy for me this week. I appreciate that.”

“Really, I—Wow.” Emma walked to the sink and dumped her coffee down the drain.

“My friends really liked you,” Kate touched the back of Emma’s hand.

Emma jerked away from Kate’s touch. As if I care, Emma thought. “Let’s not...do this. I think we both knew this wasn’t going to work out when you moved down here. I think you knew the day you told me that we were done, but you just kept the charade going so *you* could feel okay about it.”

Kate gasped and tears welled up in her eyes. “That’s not true.”

Emma was beyond caring. “You should make plans to pick up the rest of your things from the apartment soon.”

“I won’t be able to get up there in the next couple of weeks.” Kate wiped tears from her eyes.

“I don’t think I’ll find something that quick, but you should plan to come to New York sooner rather than later.”

Emma was relieved to get on a plane and return to New York even though the mood in the city was somber and grim. The whole flight back Emma thought about Kate and what she said about making things easy for her.

What was she supposed to do? Make a scene and scream at her? Part of her wished she had. Kate surrounded herself with friends and avoided any attempts by Emma to talk about their relationship. Not that there was anything for them to talk about anyway.

As Emma walked through her almost empty apartment later that day she came to a decision. The absurdity of not having come to the decision earlier had Emma shaking her head at her own foolishness. She called the realtor who was renting her father’s cottage in Massachusetts.

“Hi Sandra. It’s Emma Chamberlain.”

“Oh, Emma, I was meaning to call you.”

“Why’s that?”

“Your tenants moved out.”

“Well, that makes perfect sense because I realized I never got the check for last month’s rent.”

“With a little cleaning and some fresh paint I’m sure we can rent the cottage out again.”

“No. That won’t be necessary. I want you to take it off the market,” Emma said.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Emma could hear the surprise and disappointment in the woman’s voice. She was losing a commission. “I’m sure we could find someone else to rent it if we lower the price.”

“That won’t be necessary. I want to take it off the market. Immediately.”

“I see. Well, when you’re ready to put it on the market again please call me. I’ll be happy to list it for you.”

“I will,” Emma assured her.

What Emma didn’t tell Sandra was she had no place else to live and didn’t want to spend the remaining money she had left on rent in the city. There was no mortgage on the cottage and she had paid the taxes for the year in advance with one of her bonuses. It was the only place she had left to go.

In the meantime, she would continue to apply for jobs, expanding her search into Boston and Chicago while she was living in Massachusetts. With her mind made up, Emma packed everything that she wanted from the apartment. She filled her trunk and backseat with as much as she could stuff in. At some point, she would return and pick up the rest of her belongings.

As Emma drove North out of the city in her C350 Mercedes Benz, she felt a sense of freedom. Picking up and leaving was unlike anything she'd ever done before in her life.

The town she grew up in now had a population of sixteen thousand and was located west of the Connecticut River. Most of it was rural farmland when Emma was growing up. As the land values increased and the value of farming collapsed many families sold their acreage to developers. Once lush farmland was now dotted with sprawling suburban developments.

Emma pulled her Mercedes into a parking space in the center of downtown Northampton. Most of the buildings in the area were historically preserved storefronts with apartments above them. Many of the stores bore different names than the ones she remembered from her last visit. A few stood empty with faded "for rent" signs posted in the windows.

Emma felt a pang of nostalgia when she saw Moretti's Deli still open for business. The Moretti's owned a large farm outside of town. Emma went to school with all of the kids. Michael was the oldest and graduated three years ahead of Emma. Tony was one year behind her and had the reputation for being a hustler. Grace, their only daughter graduated the same year as Emma. She received three varsity letters her senior year and went to college on a full scholarship for soccer.

Emma walked across the street and pulled open the door. Bells jingled softly as it closed behind her. It was mid-afternoon and the lunch hour rush was over. Two businessmen stood at the counter talking in quiet tones. She didn't recognize the teenage boy working behind the counter. He finished wrapping a large sandwich in white wax paper and placed it on the counter beside another.

"Anything else?" he asked before he rang the order up on the register.

The men each held up a bottled water and bag of chips. "Put it together," the older gentleman said. He handed a credit card across and in less than a minute the transaction was complete. Still talking, the two men walked past Emma with barely a glance in her direction.

Finished with the customers ahead of her the boy asked, "Can I help you, ma'am?" The cheerful freckled face boy stared back at her expectantly.

When had she crossed that milestone? "Yes. I want a number three with everything on it and a large coffee light and sweet to go."

"You got it."

Emma gazed around the oak paneled shop. It still looked the same with photos of the family farm decorating the walls. She wondered if Michael took over working the farm for their father. She seemed to remember that was the plan—at least that's what the rumors were years ago.

The door leading to the back storeroom swung open and Lucy Moretti walked behind the counter. Emma would recognize Mrs. Moretti anywhere with her sun-drenched face, the shock of curly silver and black hair cut short in an easy to manage style. She straightened and gazed across the counter at Emma. She had marvelous green eyes, so bright they burned with a glance giving the impression of seeing right into the deepest and most secret places.

"Emily Chamberlain! Come over here and let me look at you."

Emma flushed and dutifully moved to the end of the counter. "Hi, Mrs. Moretti."

"Sweetheart, it's so good to see you." Lucy pulled her into a hug. "What brings you home?" Emma hesitated, feeling embarrassed, but decided she might as well tell Mrs. Moretti the truth. "I got laid off."

"Oh dear, you got caught up in this horrible mess of an economy." Emma nodded and to her horror tears stung her eyes.

"Are you here to stay?"

“For now, until I figure out what I’m going to do,” Emma said.

“I’m glad you came home.”

Emma dipped her head. “I still have my dad’s house by the lake so I decided to live here for the time being. How is everyone?”

Lucy’s eyes clouded and she looked away as grief twisted her face for a second. “We almost lost Peter this past winter.”

Emma’s heart lurched in her chest. Peter was Lucy’s longtime husband. He had the bluest eyes and his enthusiasm for life was infectious. “Oh no. What happened...was he sick?”

“No it was... he had an accident riding the tractor.”

Emma laid a hand on Mrs. Moretti’s arm. “How is he doing?”

“He’s walking without a cane most days now, but it took a lot out of him. Grace came home to help out after the accident happened.”

“How are Mike and Tony?”

“Tony’s been living in Boston since he graduated school. I think he’ll always be married to his work. Michael moved back home a year and a half ago.”

“Ma’am your sandwich is ready.”

“Thanks,” Emma said digging in her wallet to pay.

“Put your money away,” Mrs. Moretti said.

“But Mrs. Moretti,” Emma protested.

“It’s on the house. Now don’t be a stranger. Come visit us on the farm. I’m sure Grace would love to see you.”

“I will.” Emma wondered how true that would be. Grace was the popular all-American girl in high school and Emma was the quiet kid who didn’t quite fit in with any of the cliques. She floated on the periphery, often feeling like an outsider looking in during her time there. In many ways she was glad to be moving on when her senior year came to a close. She gave Mrs. Moretti a parting hug goodbye and walked out of the store.

Emma felt sad and lonely when she pulled into the driveway of her father’s lake house. After all these years she still considered it his house. There were too many memories from her childhood tied up here.

She stepped from her car and strolled around to the back of the cottage. The cheerful yellow siding showed signs of mildew. She made a mental note to have it power washed when she was able. The windows needed washing and some of the screens repaired.

The lakefront cottage sat on two acres of land and was surrounded by tall trees at the borders of the property. Down the hill a bit, three wooden Adirondack chairs faced the lake. Emma sat in one of the chairs and ate her sandwich. She could hear the gentle sound of the water lapping against the underside of the dock. The sound was soothing, a balm on her wounded soul.

When she was a child, the cottage was an escape from the endless drudgery of school. It was a promise of carefree long summer days filled with laughter and play. Kids from all around the neighborhood converged at the waterfront and spent hours swimming, jumping off the rope swing tied to an old willow tree and sunbathing on the dock moored to the center of the lake. Random games of soccer and variations of tag left them all exhausted at the end of each day.

A soft breeze rustled the leaves in the branches of the trees above. Birds sang and trilled around her. A memory of her father sitting next to her on a late summer evening popped into her mind. She was drinking a Coke and he had a tumbler filled with two fingers of scotch. His voice echoed in her mind and she heard him say, “You have to be able to take care of yourself first.

Stand on your own, then worry about being in a relationship with someone.” He was always giving her advice as she was growing up. Emma wondered what he would tell her now.

With her coffee and half her sandwich left for later, Emma stood and walked to the front of the house. She unlocked the front door and let herself in.

“Oh my God.” Her heart sank as she absorbed the damage in front of her. Her hands shook as she set her coffee down on the kitchen counter and she dug out her cell phone. She walked through the rooms as she dialed Sandra. It went straight to voice mail and Emma said, “Sandra, this is Emma Chamberlain. I need you to call me as soon as you get this message.”

The walls had garish stains like someone had thrown gallons of red wine on them and let it dry. Jagged holes were punched through the dry wall in the living room and kitchen. Two chairs lay broken on their sides. She could only imagine what had transpired to cause someone to wreak so much damage to someone else’s home.

She walked through the kitchen and thankfully found the appliances in working order. The hallway that led to the two bedrooms was littered with empty beer cans, greasy pizza boxes and other debris. The bedrooms were dirty, but there were no obvious signs of damage. The bathroom was in working order. Mold and mildew crept up the walls and Emma cringed at the thought of taking a shower in it.

Still shaking, Emma punched in Lindsey’s number.

Her sister answered on the second ring. “Hey! Where are you?”

“I’m at Dad’s.”

“The cottage?”

“Yeah.”

“You sound strange. Are you okay?”

“No.”

Lindsey’s voice faded and Emma heard her shout, “Austin! Stop hitting your brother.” She came back clear and calm now. “Sorry, the boys have been a handful today and I’m trying to give Brent a break from watching them.”

“Is this a bad time?” Emma asked.

“No, no. What’s up?” Lindsey replied.

Emma ran a hand through her hair and bit her bottom lip. “The tenants wrecked Dad’s cottage.”

“What do you mean they wrecked it?”

“It’s awful.” Emma fought back tears as she stared at the destruction around her. “I can’t believe someone would do this.”

“What did they do?”

“They punched holes in the walls.” Emma’s voice pitched higher.

“Emma!”

“There are stains and garbage everywhere.”

“Emma! Stop. Before you do anything else take pictures and call the insurance company.”

“The insurance! Oh...my...god.”

“What’s wrong?” Lindsey asked.

“I...I can’t remember if I paid it.”

“I’m sure you did, honey. Take pictures anyway and call the insurance company.”

“Great idea, Lindsey. Listen I didn’t mean to dump this on you. I just needed to talk to someone.”

“It’s all right. I’m glad you did. You’ve had a rough time of it lately,” Lindsey said.

“I don’t think I can take anymore right now,” Emma replied.

“They say all bad things come in threes.”

“Yeah? Who’s they?”

“I don’t know,” Lindsey said.

“Good because I might have to hurt them if you did,” Emma said.

Lindsey laughed and said, “Remember it’s just a house— wood, plaster and pipes. It can all be fixed.”

“I know it can. On top of everything that’s happened it’s just too much for me to handle right now.”

“Have you talked to Mom?”

“Not since I left to go to Florida. Why?”

“She’ll probably call you in a day or two.”

“She can’t possibly come here,” Emma groaned. “She’ll have a stroke if she sees this place.”

“I don’t think she’s concerned about what the place looks like,” Lindsey replied. “She just wants to see you.”

“Please, this is our mother you’re talking about.”

“True.”

“She probably still wishes she hadn’t given him the cottage in the divorce settlement. She would have already sold the place.” Emma could still hear her mother complaining about how much work it was to maintain the cottage.

“She just wants to make sure you’re okay.”

“Right, that’s why every time I call her all she does is talk about how incredibly busy her social calendar is. She doesn’t even ask how I’m doing.”

“We both know she can be difficult.”

“Difficult? How about damn near intolerable.” Emma heard Lindsey sigh through the phone and knew she was pushing too far.

“Let’s stop and just agree she’s worried about you. Listen, I have to go before the boys get into another scuffle. I love you, Em.”

“Love you, too,” Emma said and ended the call.

The homecoming was not at all what she had hoped for and her anger flared when she thought of her conversation with the realtor who had shared none of this with her on the phone.

Emma worked late into the night cleaning the bedroom she was going to sleep in. Between washing the walls and vacuuming the carpet she made multiple trips out to her car and carried in her belongings. At two o’clock in the morning she collapsed exhausted onto the bed, still in her clothes, and slept.

The next day, Emma drove to the local hardware store and purchased some cleaning supplies and contractor bags. She spent two days collecting and throwing out trash that the tenants had left behind. She scrubbed the bathrooms and left all the windows open during the day despite the hot and humid August weather to air the house out. By the fourth day she started to work on repairing the holes in the walls. Although she wasn’t great at spackling she gave it her best effort trying to remember what the man at the store had told her about feathering out the edges. Her arms ached and she couldn’t stand to look at another black contractor bag.

There was nothing else to do while she waited for the spackle to dry. Emma needed a break and took the opportunity to drive back to Manhattan. Being back in the city was bittersweet. She spent time lingering in some shops in the financial district. In the past she would buy what she

wanted without a thought as to what the item cost. Now, her eyes went to the price tags first and she mentally shook her head wondering how she could have been so naïve and foolish.

She stayed overnight in the apartment, ate Chinese food out of a takeout container for dinner and had the leftovers for breakfast while she walked through the rooms for one last time. After she packed her belongings in the car, Emma called Kate. She wasn't surprised when she didn't answer her phone and assumed she was screening her calls.

"Hi Kate. I won't need the apartment past the end of this month. If there's anything else you want you'll need to make plans to come get it. I'll be turning in the keys to the leasing company on the thirty-first."

Kate called her back in fifteen minutes and Emma knew immediately by the tone of her voice she was pissed. "That's not enough time for me to get up there, Emma."

"You've been gone two and half months. I told you I had a monthly lease when I was in Florida and was looking to move out."

"Where are you moving to?" Kate asked.

Ah, the real reason emerges Emma thought. She hesitated and then answered. "I decided to move to my father's lake house in Massachusetts."

"So you aren't staying in the city after all." Emma heard the accusation in Kate's voice and bristled.

"It's a better option for me. The house is paid for so I might as well take advantage of the free rent."

"I need more time to move my things out." Kate's voice reminded her of earlier times in their relationship when they would fight over trivial things.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not paying another month's rent for your convenience. Why don't you ask one of your friends to come with you?" Emma couldn't help herself when she added, "I'm sure Stephanie would jump at the opportunity to come to New York with you."

Kate sounded unruffled and asked without skipping a beat, "What if I gave you a list of things to ship down? Would you do that for me?" Kate's voice turned husky when she asked, the one she always used when she wanted something from Emma.

Emma found herself almost answering yes, but stopped. "No Kate, I won't. You have until the end of the month to get your things out. Ralph will be happy to let you in until then."

"What happens if I can't get there?"

"Why don't you call the management company and find out what they can do. Maybe you can work something out with them," Emma offered.

"That's not very nice of you."

"Nice has nothing to do with it, Kate. You're the one who left. You made it perfectly clear when I was down there that we were over and probably for much longer than I even realized."

"You were the one who didn't want to move."

"Oh, so it's my fault?"

"What was I supposed to do?"

"No." Emma raised her voice. "Don't even try and make this about me not moving down there with you. I can't believe that after everything—all the time we've been together—you could just pick up and leave. This wasn't about the money or me not moving down there with you. Was it? Tell me. When did you decide to leave?"

"I don't want to do this, Emma."

"Why, because it makes you uncomfortable? Too bad! I want to know." Emma was shaking she was so angry and hurt. "You at least owe me the truth."

“I never wanted to hurt you.”

“A little late for that. When did you decide to leave?” Emma demanded.

There was a long silence then Kate said, “Six months ago.”

“Is it because of Stephanie?”

“Emma,” Kate implored.

“Just tell me, dammit. At least allow me to move on knowing the real reason and not this bullshit story about an art dealer and not wanting to start over.”

“Yes. I met her at the Black Hound on one of her business trips.”

“Jesus.” Emma felt ice cold slither down her spine and she could hear the thudding of her pulse in her ears. That was about the time that Kate started picking up extra shifts or at least that’s what she told Emma. She didn’t want to imagine Kate flirting with Stephanie like she’d done with Emma all those years ago. She didn’t want to see them together in her mind, but her brain went there anyway.

It was over.

Done.

Finished.

Emma wanted to sink down and cry, but she sure as hell wasn’t going to do it on the phone with Kate listening to her.

“I guess there’s nothing else for us to say,” Kate said.

“No, there isn’t. Just goodbye.” Emma ended the call before Kate could say anything else. She didn’t want to hear her empty platitudes about the good times they had. She started to throw her phone, but held back. An angry shriek ripped through her turning into a mournful wail as she sank to her knees and wept.

She cried for the loss of her lover.

Cried for the loss of her future.

Cried for the certainty she had believed in all these years.

EMMA RETURNED TO Massachusetts and spent the next few days filling out online applications and sending her resume to brokerages throughout the Northeast and as far west as Chicago. It was a tedious and time-consuming task. By the end of her marathon she felt completely disillusioned. She was proud of the work she did at the brokerage. She spent the better part of her adult life dedicating her time and efforts to making money for the firm and its clients. Never in her wildest dreams had she considered she would be unemployed and so disconnected from her life.

She was still in shock that SMB Capital had suffered such catastrophic losses that it shut its doors and let all their employees go. There were moments when she thought she might wake up from this nightmare and find her life restored to what it was before. Her rational mind reminded her that wasn’t possible and that wish meant Kate would be back in her life. When she thought about Kate simply leaving, Emma decided that she was better off regardless of whatever else happened going forward.

With a sigh, Emma closed her laptop and slid it into its canvas case. Filled with frustration and anxiety she grabbed her keys and locked the door behind her on her way out. She drove ten minutes into the downtown area to buy groceries. She’d been living on take out and that needed to come to an immediate stop if she was going to make her money last longer.

Thirty minutes later, Emma walked out of the grocery store with two bags of food, enough to last her for at least a week. The parking lot was half full of cars, but few people were around, most lingering in the air-conditioned stores.

Heat rose off the macadam in shimmery waves. Leaves on the trees hung limp and still with not even a scant breeze to offer relief. Intrinsic to the month of August was the unique and loud sound of cicadas belting out their high-pitched mating song.

Off to Emma's right, a man sidled in her direction. Scraggly, limp, oily hair and an unkempt patchy beard stuck out from underneath the brim of his floppy sweat stained hat. A drab olive shirt clung to his slender frame.

He muttered to himself, but Emma couldn't make out what he was saying. All she knew was that he was headed in her direction and his presence was already making her uncomfortable. The man reminded her of the panhandlers that gathered at choke points in New York City and tried to wash the windows of cars while their hapless drivers were stuck at a light.

"Wipe your windows for a dollar," the man rasped as he approached.

Crap, Emma thought. She didn't want to be rude, but there was simply no graceful way out of this. "No thanks," Emma said firmly as she unlocked her car door and set her bags on the floor behind the driver's seat. When she looked again he was standing on the opposite side of her car. "Shit," she muttered under her breath.

"I'll clean your window for a dollar." He pulled crumpled newspaper out of his pocket and leaned across the trunk to wipe the window.

"Look, just take this." Emma's hands shook as she dug into her pocket wondering what he could possibly buy for a dollar. She heard an engine with a high-pitched squeal pull up next to them. A horn blared and Emma nearly jumped out of her skin. "Great!" Emma said. "Now we can be even more of a spectacle."

"Robert!" A woman hung out the window of a black Ford F-150. "Leave the lady alone." When he didn't respond, Emma heard the engine shut off and a muffled curse. "Robert. I said leave her car alone."

"I ain't doing anybody no harm," he shot back and for a brief moment Emma saw fury.

"Except that you're scaring the hell out of her." The door opened and the woman stepped down from the truck. Almost the same height as Emma, she was sturdy with graceful curves and shoulder-length dark brown hair pulled back into a ponytail beneath her baseball cap. Her bare arms showed the definition of someone who spent more than a little time working out. By the bronze tint to her skin, Emma was certain that most of the woman's time was spent outside doing physical labor. Threadbare jeans hugged the curves of her hips and stretched across her muscular thighs. Emma still couldn't place the woman, but had the sense that she knew her from somewhere.

"I just want to buy a cup of coffee," Robert said as he continued to wipe Emma's rear window.

"You can get coffee downtown."

"I don't want to go downtown. I want to buy my own coffee," Robert insisted.

"Here," Emma said holding out a five dollar bill. "Take this and go buy what you want."

"No. Put your money away. Robert you've got one last chance before I call Officer Cierello."

"I haven't done anything wrong."

"You're harassing the lady and you've gotten in trouble for being a public nuisance three times in the past month. Go down to the kitchen and get your coffee there."

Emma waited, unsure of what to do. From the back of the pick up truck two German Shepherds peered out at her. Tongues hung out of the sides of their mouths as they panted in unison. Emma swore they looked like they were laughing at her. One circled and ducked his head disappearing from view. When the dog reappeared its snout was wet and water dripped from its jowls. He, at least Emma thought it looked like a male, with his broad snout, whined and let out a high-pitched attention seeking bark.

“Max, quiet!” the woman snapped. Emma couldn’t help but smile when Max grumbled a deep-chested protest at the verbal correction, but sat on his haunches nonetheless.

“Go on. Mike and I will be down later and you can help us unload the truck.”

That information seemed to draw the man’s attention. “Don’t let any of the others help. They don’t unpack the boxes right.”

“We’ll be there around one. Don’t go wandering off or you’ll miss the delivery.”

“All right.” He shoved the wrinkled newspaper into his pants pocket and ambled away. With each step the sole of his right sneaker flapped loosely, threatening to fall completely off.

Emma watched him limp across the parking lot. His worn blue jeans hung precariously low around his hips, threatening to slip down completely if not for the worn leather belt cinched tightly around them. She still held the crumpled, now sweat dampened, five-dollar bill in her hand. Self-consciously, she tucked it into the pocket of her shorts.

“Sorry about that.”

“Thanks for stopping. I wasn’t sure how I was going to get him to stop. Who is he anyway?” Emma asked trying to see the face hidden behind the mirrored sunglasses and the shadow of the baseball cap.

“He used to work for a local company until they shipped all their jobs overseas. He lost his job, his house and drank himself half stupid in the process. He’s relatively harmless unless he goes off his meds.”

“What happens when he goes off his medications?” Emma asked, wondering if she really wanted to know at all.

“Last year he stole a car and took it for a joy ride. He broke into a house about thirty minutes from here. He ransacked the place, drank himself into a stupor before the family came home and found him passed out in one of the bedrooms.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.” A reckless grin lit up the woman’s features. “The police arrested him and threw him in jail. The judge sent him to a psych facility. He was out in less than thirty days.”

“That’s it?” Emma shook her head in disbelief.

“He’s never hurt anyone.”

“He just roams around during the day?”

“Pretty much. There’s a shelter that he goes to sleep at night, but that’s all there is.”

“There’s no place else for him to go?” Emma asked incredulous that someone could just be simply wandering the streets when they were so desperately in need of help.

“No. Some of us look out for him, but nobody can watch him twenty-four hours a day. He picked you out because of your fancy car and out of state plates.”

“Lucky me.” She stuck her hand out. “I’m Emma.”

“I know who you are.” A crooked smile played across the woman’s face as she lifted the glasses away. Glacial blue eyes glinted with a hint of amusement and Emma realized she was staring into them.

Suddenly, it struck Emma and she was mortified. “Grace? Oh my God! I feel like an idiot.”

“Don’t,” Grace said, “I wear these because the sun bothers my eyes. It’s been a long time since we saw each other. The last time I saw you was the August after our graduation.” Grace pushed the brim of her cap back. “Mom mentioned she talked to you last week.”

“She was working when I stopped by the store.” Emma wondered if Mrs. Moretti told Grace she was laid off from work.

Grace looked just like Emma remembered her, strong and vibrant. Pretty was not a word she would use to describe Grace. Her strong cheekbones, full lips and high-bridged nose made her striking to look at. Emma’s mind seemed to get muddled and she found herself struggling for something to say. “I heard about your father. God, I’m so sorry.”

Grace’s whole demeanor changed as if a weight settled on her shoulders and Emma immediately wanted to smack herself for bringing the subject up. “It was touch and go for the first couple of months.”

“She said he had an accident with the tractor.”

“He doesn’t remember what happened. He was driving up the same hill he’s driven for the past fifty-five years. I don’t know how he lost control, but he ended up driving into a ditch and the tractor tipped. His leg got caught under the side of it when he fell off. The doctor’s said he may have passed out right before it happened. They were able to save his leg, but it took a lot out of him.”

After a moment’s awkward hesitation Emma said, “I heard you came back to help run the farm.”

Grace shifted and her eyes took on a far away look. “Something along those lines. Mom couldn’t run the farm all by herself and take care of Dad.”

“They’re lucky to have you,” Emma said.

Grace straightened, watching as a blue Dodge Charger rolled past them. “I should get going—don’t want to block traffic.”

“Thanks for helping get rid of that guy.”

“No problem. I have to bring water to the guys running the booth at the farmer’s market today. Good to see you, Emma.”

Reluctant to end their conversation, Emma blurted out as Grace turned away, “You mentioned a kitchen and a delivery. What were you referring to?”

“There’s a soup kitchen down on the corner of Hatfield and May. My brother and I bring food by once or twice a week depending, on what we have left over from the farmer’s market.”

Chapter Four

THE MORETTI'S FOUR hundred and fifty acre farm in Massachusetts was nestled between the Berkshire Mountains to the West and the Connecticut River Valley to the East. The farm had been in Grace's family for generations. Her great-great-grandfather built the big frame house her family lived in now, in 1863. The barn, with its fieldstone foundation, was built the same year.

When Grace returned to the farm, Michael helped her convert what used to be extra storage above the barn into a one-room efficiency apartment with a separate entrance. It was Spartan, but the space served its purpose. It gave her a space to sleep, shower, cook a simple meal and store her belongings.

The land itself was mixed. Part of it was wood forest offering well-managed hard woods for timber use. The rest was rolling hills and gently sloping pastures with streams and creeks that traversed the land.

In the winter months they tapped the maple trees in the forest for syrup. Out in the fields they raised cattle, pigs and poultry for meat using a rotational grazing paddock system. This kept their external grain requirements to a minimum.

Grapevines appeared bare and grey in the wintertime, but each spring green shoots appeared heralding the longer days and the promise of cascading grapes throughout the summer. The orchards were filled with apple, pear, cherry and peach trees. The peaches were short-lived this far north, but were delectable when they came into season. The rest of the land was used to grow a variety of vegetables four seasons of the year, with the aid of two forty-foot long greenhouses.

Grace's father, Peter, came from a long line of farmers. When they were growing up, she and her brothers would feed the livestock every morning before breakfast. In the winter they would trudge through the snow and frigid darkness to the barn where the inside was warm and humid from the bodies of the cattle. They cut open bales of sweet-smelling hay and pitched them into troughs or piles on the dry floor. In the summer, the cows roamed the pasture or woods grazing on more exotic vegetation.

Her father gave up the dairy cows when he could no longer compete with the mechanized dairy conglomerates that took over the industry. Back then he raised fifteen head a year for meat, slaughtering, dressing and selling them to neighbors in the valley. Each cow weighed about five hundred pounds and the cuts of meat sold for an average of two dollars a pound when she was a child. Now it averaged seven dollars a pound. Her father would keep a cow to feed the family for the year. They grew enough hay to cut and bail for the cattle to eat through the winter. The rest they sold, bringing in about twenty thousand dollars a year.

They raised an average of seventy chickens that were used as roasters or fryers. They were sold when they were eight weeks old for ten dollars a head. In addition they kept sixty chickens as layers. They produced four-dozen eggs a day. It was their job when they were kids to collect the eggs and place them in cardboard cartons. They were set out on the shaded front porch and neighbors came and helped themselves, paying three dollars a dozen. All of their meat was pastured raised and although they didn't slaughter their animals on the farm anymore, Grace and

Michael found a local butcher who was willing to do it for them and was USDA certified. Grace had been to his operation on many occasions and was impressed with the cleanliness and humane methods he used.

She'd been to other slaughterhouses with her father when she was a child and remembered crying at the horrible conditions the animals were kept in until they were ready to be killed.

Through the spring and summer vegetable fields produced beans, carrots, onions, broccoli, lettuce, tomatoes—anything that could be brought to the local markets to sell. The family used the rest of the harvest to supply their needs. The greenhouses supplied them with fresh lettuce and greens year round and extended the growing season for a variety of other vegetables as well.

Her father kept two pigs, one to slaughter in the spring and one in the fall. They had ham, pork chops and bacon the year round. What they didn't keep they sold. She remembered him saying to her, "Feed a pig for a year and it feeds you for a year."

There was something to do all year and the tasks differed depending on the season. Within reason, her father let them choose the work they wanted to do in the fields, the woods or the barn. Grace learned that if any crop failed or livestock took ill there were other things to fall back on. There was depth and security to his management plan. Far better than the large mono-crop industrial farms or the people who worked one job and were one disaster away from bankruptcy.

Her father taught them how to clean and cut the fallen trees from winter storms with chainsaws. They would pull them down the hill with a tractor where they cut and split the wood. They would stack eight cords to dry to heat their home and the remainder they sold by the cord to people in the valley.

After delivering water, Grace steered the black Ford F-150 up the dirt drive to the barn. Hers was an unusual upbringing from the rest of the kids she grew up with. How many times she was made fun of at school because of what her parents did for work? She threw herself into sports and made a name for herself. Her achievements hid the hurt of being seen as a farmer's daughter.

Sadie and Max whined and bristled with anticipation when Grace climbed out and walked to the tailgate. When Grace opened it, both dogs sat while she unclipped their safety harnesses. She ruffled the fur at the base of their necks.

Max and Sadie gazed into her eyes with a look of eager anticipation.

"Did you have a good ride around town? Did you?"

Both dogs pressed against her. "Yeah it was a good ride. Wasn't it? Except for the stupid fan belt that needs to be fixed. Everyone within a quarter mile can hear us coming."

She hugged the dogs close to her and then let them go. They were both from a pet rescue organization. She wasn't sure who rescued who, but she was glad for their company. Constant loyal companions, they were never far from her side. Sadie hopped out first followed by Max. Noses to the ground they sniffed intently and trotted around the yard in overlapping circles. One of the barn cats lying in the heat of the sun stretched and yawned. When Max wandered too close the cat sprang to its feet, hissed in feline defiance and trotted away. A quick glance around told her the tractor was gone which meant Michael was trolling around in the upper fields with the farm hands harvesting vegetables for the next farmer's market.

Grace hadn't slept enough last night and barely felt like she was operating on all cylinders. Out of habit, she checked on the pigs and the chickens before walking towards the pastures closest to the barn to check in on the cows. They were contentedly munching on the tall grasses, their tails switching away at the flies that pestered them.

Grace leaned on the fence rails letting her thoughts roam. Emma Chamberlain was the last person she expected to run into today. Grace didn't recognize Emma at first, but the New York

license plate clinched it. Dressed casually in khaki shorts and a Brown University t-shirt Emma looked more petite and vulnerable than Grace remembered her from high school.

Nothing about Emma had Grace's gaydar up. Almost two decades had passed since high school and Grace wasn't about to pretend she knew anything important about Emma. Grace did know a couple of things about Emma Chamberlain though. She drove a Mercedes, wore no rings and according to her mother was recently laid off from her job in New York City. Leave it to her mother to find out the details.

Getting sidetracked in her thoughts, Grace stopped in the barn and busied herself with small chores feeling slightly irritated that the image of Emma kept working its way into her consciousness.

Maybe her lack of sleep explained her unexpected reaction to Emma, she thought, as a yawn overtook her. She felt ridiculous having almost allowed herself to turn into an emotional mess in front of someone she hardly knew.

"Well, look at this. This is one of the nicest views I've had all day."

Grace jerked up from her bent over position and let go of the heavy stall mat she was repositioning. "You're not working today. What are you doing here, Paula?"

"I didn't see you at the farmer's market," Paula said and slid into the stall beside Grace. Paula wore a form fitting turquoise cut-off tank top with her impressive breasts straining against the too tight fabric. Her blonde hair pulled up in a tight bun with wisps trailing about her ears. A diamond stud twinkled at Grace from Paula's pierced navel. Paula was a recent addition to their paid employee roster. She had responded to an ad Mike placed to fill a vacant position.

"We must've just missed each other."

"So..." Paula angled her body so her breast brushed Grace's arm. "You didn't answer my question yesterday."

"What question was that?" Grace couldn't squeeze past her without brushing up against some part of Paula's body.

"If you like to ride bareback." Paula dipped her head and smiled. "I bet you do. You have the muscles in your legs to hold on tight. I can see that."

"Paula. I..." Paula's hand slid up Grace's thigh and cupped her through the fabric of her jeans. "Jesus." Grace grabbed her hand and pulled it away as her clit throbbed and went hot. "Let's just hold on a minute."

"Oh, sweetheart, I plan on taking way longer than a minute with you."

"You're funny." If Paula kept rubbing against Grace reminding her how long she'd been celibate for, she wouldn't last sixty seconds. "Paula, you work for us. I don't think it'd be a good idea for us to get involved."

"I'm not looking for a commitment here. I just need someone to satisfy my needs," Paula breathed in Grace's ear and nipped the soft flesh of her ear lobe. "You let me know if you change your mind."

Paula dragged her fingers suggestively across Grace's thigh before she turned and strode out of the stall, her hips wiggling in her skintight jeans as she crossed the barn. "You know where to find me."

She waited until Paula disappeared through the doors and then said, "Sweet Jesus." Grace tilted her head back against the wall and let the tension she felt between her legs fade away. "Michael, I'm going to kill you for hiring that woman. I don't know what the hell you were thinking." With a sigh, she headed back down toward the farmhouse deciding she would make a pot of coffee to help her get through the rest of the day.

Grace was surprised to see Tony's black Porsche parked next to the farmhouse. Still feeling churned up and edgy, Grace climbed onto the porch and removed her dirty work boots. From the kitchen she heard her brother's voice. He was on one of his harangues about getting their father to sell the farm. Her chest tightened with anxiety and Grace wished he would stop harassing them about selling the farm.

The kitchen was a splendid mix of old and new, traditional and modern. It was an L-shaped room. At one end was the open fireplace built by her grandfather and was still used to grill meat and bake bread. Along one adjacent wall was an industrial size stove, across from it was a double sink and the refrigerator.

The other side of the kitchen held a large rectangular table where her mother was sitting and Tony was leaning against the counter deep in a monologue.

"Didn't know you were stopping by today," Grace commented catching her mother's troubled eyes on her way to the sink. She turned on the faucet and scrubbed her hands with soap and water.

"I was out this way for a client. My afternoon meeting cancelled so I decided to stop by."

"This far west of Boston?" Grace asked.

"Hey, you know kids drive into the city to score some drugs or raise some cash from stolen—allegedly stolen—property at the pawn shops."

Grace took a brush to her nails, her preference for a quiet conversation with her mother fading. It was no secret that Tony was an aggressive defense attorney with a reputation for winning cases that the prosecution would often tout as slam dunks.

"Did you eat anything, Grace?" her mother asked.

"I will," Grace replied offhandedly still hoping for calm and civil.

"I found a builder who's interested in the property," Tony announced with his arms folded over his chest.

Grace snorted, imagining Michael's reaction to this.

"What is this the second one this month? We've been through this before Tony. We're not selling the farm." Grace dried her hands on one of the dishtowels trying to keep her voice neutral.

"As I recall, that's not your decision."

"It's not yours either." Grace tried to keep her voice even "I think Mom and Dad have been pretty clear about their intentions." The last thing she wanted was a repeat of the argument they'd gotten into three months ago. Her mother ended up in tears and was hospitalized for three days from the stress it caused her.

"They'd sell it for the right price and you know it. Maybe you're worried you'll lose your place to live since you're not working anymore."

The words stung and Grace seethed.

"I do an honest day's work everyday." Grace removed a can of coffee grounds from the refrigerator and set about making a pot of coffee. "Do you remember what Dad told you about selling the farm?"

"Why don't you listen to your sister, Tony?" Lucy said.

"The minute we sell part of this land and some developer builds on it we're going to have all the runoff from the construction site polluting the soil. It'll never be the same."

Tony furrowed his thick eyebrows and sarcasm oozed out of his mouth. "Do you actually believe you're going to keep running this farm profitably?"

"We have been. We've got a growing CSA membership and..."

“Don’t give me that crap about community supported agriculture. We’re talking about millions of dollars if we sell this albatross,” Tony said.

“Albatross?” Lucy asked, her voice lifted an octave higher and Grace feared she might cry. “How dare you say that to me. The home I raised my three children in is a nothing more than an albatross to you?”

“Mom, no...I didn’t mean it like that,” Tony said trying to walk back his thoughtless remark.

“Way to go, Tony.” Grace clutched the edge of the counter with her hands until her knuckles turned white. “I can’t believe you. The only thing you’re thinking of is how you’re going to get your hands on the equity in this place. It’s Mom and Dad’s house and they’ll stay here on this land for however long they choose to.”

“You just want them to keep it because you and Mike are living here now.”

“Living and working here,” Grace snapped.

“Tony, stop it. Just stop all this talk about selling the farm,” her mother pleaded.

“I’m telling you if you subdivide it you’ll make millions. You and Dad would be set. You wouldn’t have to worry about what you’re going to do when you can’t take care of the farm anymore. If you wait the market could turn and you’ll never get the money out of it you would today.”

“Tony you talk like your father and I have one foot in the grave. Your father inherited this land from your grandfather. Farming is in your father’s blood. It’s what keeps that man alive. The plan is to keep it in the family and pass it on when we’re gone.”

Undeterred Tony plowed on. “There’s no money in farming. The money is tied up in the equity of the land and buildings on it. What are you going to live on when you can’t do this anymore?” Tony folded his arms and leaned back against the counter assuming a bored expression on his face. “Look what happened when Pop got hurt. Grace gave up her job to help out. Now you’ve got two of your kids back home.”

Furious, Grace wheeled on him and said, “Hey! Don’t you dare say it like you’re upset about my decision to come back here to lay a guilt trip on Mom. I came back because I wanted to.”

“Right.”

Temper whipped up inside of Grace and her voice turned icy. “Don’t start with me, Tony. You know damn well I’ve been coming back to work here on weekends and school breaks for years.”

“It was always your failsafe.”

It took every ounce of Grace’s self-control not to respond to Tony’s barb.

Lucy stood between them. “Both of you stop fighting. Your father and I are not in any hurry to give up this farm. It’s more than just the money. We have a large extended family in the community. They depend on us.”

“You’re getting older and soon this farm is going to be—is already too much for both of you to handle.”

“We have good employees. Grace and Michael are doing a fine job managing the operations.”

Tony snorted. “Michael doesn’t know his ass from his elbow around here. What happens when these two get their lives back on track and decide they don’t want to run it anymore? Talk to Dad about the buyer Mom. I don’t know how long this guy will be interested,” Tony insisted, refusing to let the topic go.

“I have no intention of telling him. He doesn’t need this added to what he’s already dealing with physically.”

“Here’s the guy’s business card. Call him.” Tony pulled the card out of his wallet and laid it on the table in front of Lucy. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I have to go. Bye, Mom.”

Grace watched her brother walk out the house. “He’s such an ass,” she said when his footsteps faded.

“Grace, he’s your brother. Don’t talk about him like that.”

“Mom, please. How can you defend him?”

“He’s my son.”

“He’s been an expert in how to manipulate people since he was old enough to figure out how to talk. It’s just typical of him to blow in like the wind, create chaos and then leave once he’s gotten everyone agitated.”

Lucy reached out and held Grace’s arm. “Perhaps that happened because he was the youngest and your father and I allowed him more latitude than we did you and Michael. I won’t deny that there were times he got away with more than the two of you did.”

“If he got away with more it’s not because you turned a blind eye. He was good at covering his tracks and quick talking his way out of situations.”

“I’m not sure I like what you’re saying, Grace.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I suppose,” Lucy replied. “I’m afraid Tony got this idea that we would sell the farm and divide the money up between us now because that’s what one of your father’s friends did.”

“The O’Dells. I remember them.”

“I don’t know what possessed Frank to give the money to his kids before he died.”

“Last I heard they’d spent it all.”

“Yes I heard that too. It’s turned into an ugly situation.” Lucy rubbed her temple. “Your father’s not going to sell the farm.”

“I know he doesn’t want to sell it.”

“Maybe it’s Tony’s way of dealing with what happened to Peter. If we sell the farm and move, all this goes away and he doesn’t have to be reminded of what happened or worry about what might happen.”

“You still have to live somewhere. It might as well be here.”

“I know you and Michael feel that way and I appreciate that.”

Grace laid a hand on her mother’s shoulder. “I’m going out to check on Pop. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Lucy reached up and squeezed Grace’s hand. “Go make sure Tony doesn’t upset your father and don’t you pay him any more mind today. He knows he can get under your skin and he takes any opportunity he can to do so.”

“Do you mind if I take this card?” Grace fingered the edge of it reading the list of projects he purported to be an expert in.

“No, I’m not going to do anything with it.”

“I’m going to call this developer and tell him to forget anything that Tony has told him.”

Grace shoved the card into her pocket.

Her temper still simmering at her brother and the coffee forgotten, Grace stalked out of the kitchen. When she got out to the porch she jammed her stocking feet into her work boots. A hot breeze rustled the branches of the trees that shaded the west side of the house from the scorching afternoon sun.

Tony stood by his Porsche jiggling his keys impatiently. “Grace,” he called out to her as she descended the steps.

“What?” she snapped.

“I know you don’t agree with me, but this place is going to suck the life out of both of you.”

“Why are you so against the idea of them keeping the farm?”

“They can’t run it anymore. It’s too much. How long are you going to put your life on hold? For Chrissakes you were living your dream as a Division I soccer coach.”

A dream that turned into a nightmare, Grace thought. “As if you really care, Tony. I had my reasons for leaving.”

Tony walked around to the driver’s side of the car and opened the door. “You should go back. It hasn’t been that long. You’re wasting your talents here.

Grace didn’t have any other response and it didn’t matter. When she came back home she wanted routine and shelter from the world. She didn’t want to have to think about what happened. She could handle the daily chores, manage the farm hands, run the farmers’ markets, repeating the same tasks day in and day out. She wanted to get lost in the rhythm of the seasons and let time pass her by so she could forget.

Chapter Five

“POP?” GRACE CALLED out when she entered what looked like an oversized garage. One of her father’s passions was growing grapes for wine. The summer was unusually hot and dry so the grape harvest came early. Grace worked in the fields alongside the volunteers and the paid farm hands for days plucking the grapes when they were perfectly ripe. Everyday was a race to harvest the fruit as the afternoons galloped into night.

“I’m here, Grace,” Peter called from the other side of the hand operated fruit grinder. It was situated atop a wooden barrel that sat on stacked four by fours. He hoisted a crate of the harvested grapes into the top of it.

“Pop!” Grace rushed forward. “You shouldn’t be lifting that much weight.”

“I’m fine. Besides the doctor told me I should start exercising more.” Peter Moretti had a round handsome face and black hair streaked with grey. He was still ten pounds lighter on his five-eleven frame than he should be and it made him look skinny. Grace remembered how he looked in the hospital. Tired, gaunt and wounded.

“I think he meant something more organized than lifting crates of fruit onto a barrel.”

He ignored her gentle chastisement and said, “You have perfect timing. Come turn the crank for me. We’ll get through the crates faster.”

Grace loved mashing the grapes. They went in whole into the hopper with the stalks and the mashed fruit cascaded out in a waterfall of skin, seeds, stalks and flesh into the oak barrel below it. She remembered how proud she felt the first time her father let her turn the crank to crush a batch of grapes for wine as a child. She would never forget the heavy, sweet, savory smell of the grapes as they fermented.

“Was that Tony who was at the house?”

Grace cringed at the hurt in her father’s voice. “Yes.”

“He didn’t stay long.”

“I guess he was in a hurry. You know how Tony is. He’s always wheeling and dealing.”

Peter grunted as he lifted another crate up and dumped the grapes into the top of the mill. She didn’t need to tell him what the reason for Tony’s visit was. Her father had witnessed the ugly sibling battle that erupted between them over the farm three weeks after he’d gotten home from rehab.

They worked side by side, the only sound the noise of the crushed grapes falling into the fifty-five gallon oak barrel until it was full.

“I don’t think I told you before, but I’m glad to have you back home. I know things didn’t work out the way you planned with your job, but Mom and I are both happy to have you here.”

Grace avoided his gaze and nodded. “I bet you never thought you’d have your two oldest kids back under the same roof again.”

“No, but it’s worked out well so far.”

“It’s been good for the twins to be here with you and Mom. They need the stability and routine in their lives,” Grace said.

“I’m not talking about Michael and the kids. You’ve been a big help these past few months. We couldn’t have kept the farm going as well as we did without your help. What happened at that college wasn’t your doing. The right choices often seem to be the hardest ones to make.”

“Don’t remind me,” Grace stopped turning the crank waiting for the burning she felt in her shoulder muscles to subside.

“You know I never wanted the farm to hold any of you back from what you wanted to do.”

“I don’t think it did. We worked hard, but when we had the chance we all went off and did our own thing.” Grace put her shoulders into turning the handle again.

“You will again when this chapter is over,” her father said.

“What do you mean?” Grace looked at her father over the barrel.

“Nothing lasts forever, Grace.”

“Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“Your mother and I have talked about it. More seriously since I got hurt.”

“I imagine you have.” Grace knew it wasn’t her place to pry for information. She wished she knew for sure what her father’s plans were for the farm.

“We haven’t made any decisions yet, but once we do we’ll have to sit down and talk about it soon with the three of you. We’ve made a good living farming. I think someone could do the same if they had the mind and the desire to continue to do so. I’d hate to see all this get turned into block after block of townhomes. That’s what will happen if we sell it.”

GRACE CLOSED HER laptop and let her head fall back against the cushion on the well-worn leather couch. She’d spent the afternoon harvesting tomatoes, summer squash and peppers for the farmers’ markets later in the week and then helped transplant greens for the fall harvest. It was close to midnight and she’d been working on the latest numbers for the last month so she could close out the quarter on the books.

She’d known weariness the first few weeks of her father’s stay in the intensive care unit. The constant level of stress gnawed at her relentlessly until he finally was out of the woods. But the exhaustion she felt now, knowing her decisions impacted the success or failure of the family farm, their home and their livelihood, morphed into a completely different level.

In the weeks and months since Grace’s father was released from the hospital he relied on Michael and her to run the farm. Michael being busy with twins was happy dealing with the day-to-day work and chores. He deferred most of the decisions to Grace and by default the big picture decisions driving the operation became hers to make.

Her eyes burned. She could barely see straight. Her brain hurt and her body was so full of aches she wasn’t sure she was going to make it off the couch tonight. Lord knows it wouldn’t be the first time she slept all night on the couch.

Behind her, Grace heard the floorboard creak and she registered her mother’s voice saying, “You should go to bed. You’ve been up since four thirty.”

Grace regarded her mother as she walked around the end of the couch and sat down. She held a cup of tea in her hands, Chamomile, no doubt. “I was just finishing up and you should talk. Did you talk to Dr. Evans when you were at her office the other day?”

“No. I’m not taking any drugs to help me sleep.”

“I wasn’t suggesting you needed any. Sometimes it just helps to talk to someone besides family.” Grace met her mother’s pointed stare and sighed knowing this discussion was a losing battle.

“This family has been through tough times before. This is no different and we’ll get through it again. I just wish your father would stop pushing himself so hard. I’m afraid he’ll make himself sick.”

“He doesn’t know how not to work hard,” Grace said.

“Up ‘til now he missed one day of work in forty years.”

“Is that all?”

Lucy cleared her throat and ran her fingers idly over the rim of the teacup. “I was talking to Hank in the hardware store today.”

“Mmm,” Grace said half listening.

“Sounds like the people renting the Chamberlain’s lake house did a number on it before they left.”

“Who? Oh, you mean Emma Chamberlain. What happened?” Grace asked.

“Holes in the walls, stains everywhere. They tore up the carpeting. The place sounded like it was completely trashed,” Lucy said.

“That’s awful.”

Michael walked in carrying two glasses of wine. He nudged one into Grace’s hand and sat down across from her. “Who’s place are you talking about?”

“Emma Chamberlain.”

Michael tilted his head and Grace could see him trying to recall who she was. “She graduated first in your class. Didn’t she? Wasn’t she the blonde nerdy kid with glasses?”

“She was not a nerd,” Grace said bristling unexpectedly at her brother’s description of Emma.

“Okay. How about quiet and shy? Never said much, but she had a nice body.” He sat back in the chair with a self-satisfied smile and stared at Grace over his glass while he sipped his wine.

“Isn’t it a little late to be drinking wine?” Lucy asked.

“It’s how I relax before I go to bed,” Michael said.

Grace ignored her mother’s question and asked, “How did Hank find all this out?”

“Emma’s been in and out of the store buying contractor bags, spackle, primer and other supplies.”

“Maybe she’s just doing some minor renovations.”

“You know Hank. He has a knack for getting anyone to talk to him. The realtor who rented the place apparently knew about the damage and didn’t tell Emma before she got there.”

Grace felt a surge of anger. “Isn’t that against some realtor code of ethics they have to practice?”

“I’m sure it is, but really the only thing Emma could do is go through the insurance to pay for the damages,” Lucy said and drained the rest of her mug.

“If it wasn’t significant enough it’s not even worth filing a claim. The insurance company will just turn around and raise her rates,” Michael added.

“Grace, maybe you could drive over there and see if she needs any help. She’s here alone and just got laid off from work. I’m sure Emma could use a friend.”

“I’ve got a lot going on this week,” Grace said hoping to skate around the topic.

“You could ask her over to dinner. The weekend we do the cookout for the staff would be fine.”

“She might run for the hills with this crazy bunch,” Michael said.

“It would be an opportunity for her to meet people in the community.”

Grace eyed her mother with irritation. “Mother, stop.”

“I’m simply making a suggestion. There’s nothing wrong with being neighborly and making someone feel welcome.”

Grace sipped her wine and pointedly ignored her.

“It’s the polite thing to do,” her mother persisted. “Really, I raised you better than that.”

“Fine. I heard you.”

“Grace,” her mother said in a tone that said she didn’t like her attitude.

Grace rolled her eyes heavenward. “I’ll ask her. Okay?” Exasperation crept into her voice.

“Good. I’ll see you two in the morning. G’night.”

“Night,” they both said as Lucy left the room.

Grace peered over her glass at Michael, watching the smirk play across his lips. “Stop it.”

“I didn’t say a word.”

“You don’t have to.”

“What would it hurt?”

“Jesus Christ. What is it with you and Mom? I don’t even know the woman,” Grace said.

“You graduated in the same class. You have at least one thing in common.”

“We hardly knew each other at all.”

“What have you got to lose?” Michael countered.

“I have enough work to do here.”

“Maybe it won’t be all work. Be adventurous for once.”

“Let me spell it out for you, Romeo. She’s from New York, drives a Mercedes and probably has a taste for the expensive things in life.”

“You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?” Michael asked.

“Listen, I know her type. Once she’s back on her feet this little trip home will be nothing more than a distant, unwelcome memory for her. I’m not interested in being a part of her respite stay here. I’m doing quite fine all by myself.”

“Yup. You and the dogs.”

“Shut up. Besides, they were going to be put down if someone didn’t rescue them.”

“Get back to what we were talking about.” Michael stood and walked into the kitchen returning with the open bottle of wine.

“Since when are you so damn interested in my love life or lack thereof?” Grace lifted her glass as he motioned to her with the bottle.

“Because mine is pathetically nonexistent. At least allow me to live vicariously through you.”

Grace groaned and rubbed her tired eyes. “You need a night out.”

“Talk to me, baby,” Michael said eagerly leaning forward in his chair. “What Friday night will you take the twins so Papa can go out on the town.”

“Now you’re scaring me. There will be no pub-crawls followed by a two-day recovery period. Got me? I’m not doing your damn share of the work around here on top of mine while you nurse a hangover.”

“I swear on a stack of bibles no hangover. Come on, please. Don’t make me beg.”

“Fine, but I get to pick the Friday and it’s not until Mom’s Sunday cookout is over with.”

“Deal. How about the Friday after the cookout?”

Grace glared at him. "It's as good as any. I wish Mom would stop trying to play matchmaker."

"Too late. She already is," Michael said. "She'd just like to see one of us be happy in a relationship."

"Yeah well neither one of us has a great track record in the relationship department."

"At least you're not divorced."

Grace snorted and said, "It wasn't your fault she cheated and left you and the kids. What kind of woman has an affair and leaves her two beautiful children so she can party?"

"Don't know and frankly I don't give a damn about the bitch anymore," Michael said, and Grace wondered who he was trying to convince more, her or himself.

"Here's to not looking back and new adventures," Grace said raising her glass to her brother's. The glasses clinked and they finished the last of their wine.

Grace knew what her brother said was only partly true. Tricia had broken Michael's heart when she left. She hated her for doing that to him. "Did you get the boy's to bed all right?"

"They were exhausted. I only had to read Goodnight Moon to them twice tonight."

"Tony was here today," she said.

"When did he come by? I didn't see him."

"I think he timed his arrival to when he knew you would be out in the fields. He was hoping to get Mom alone." Grace dug into her pocket and handed him the business card he left on the table.

"He's starting this crap again?"

"I don't think he ever gave up trying to convince Mom and Dad to sell this place."

Michael ran a hand through his curly black hair brushing it back off his forehead. His dark eyes swirling depths of obsidian. "When God gave out tact and sensitivity Tony must have skipped those two lines."

"Ya think?" Grace leaned forward watching her brother's face. "Do you know something I don't?"

Michael fiddled with his glass and after a moment of consideration nodded. "Tony came to me during the spring of last year. I remember because we were out in the fields planting lettuce. He asked me to loan him some money."

"How much money did he ask you for?" Grace asked her stomach tightening into knots. "Twenty thousand."

"Holy Crap! Who the hell has that kind of money sitting around?" Grace asked.

"Not me."

"Did he tell you what he needed it for?"

"He wanted to invest it in some idea this guy had for a startup venture in Boston. I told him it was a crazy idea. He tried to convince me to take out a line of credit against the farm," Michael said.

"A line of credit? Please tell me you didn't lend him anything."

"Hell no. Pop would have killed me if I opened a line of credit against the farm."

"How could he even ask? After all the years we listened to Grandpa talk about the Great Depression." Grace leaned forward and stared at her brother. "Does Pop know about any of this?"

Michael shook his head. "Hell no. I never told him."

"Please don't."

"Believe me, I don't plan on breathing a word of it to either him or Mom."

“Was this business venture legitimate?” Grace asked.

“I have no idea. I didn’t want anything to do with it. The less I know about what Tony’s up to the better.”

“Do you think Tony’s in trouble?”

Michael slipped off his shoes and propped his feet up on the ottoman in front of him. “It wouldn’t be the first time he’s been into something shady. I try not to ask any questions.”

Grace sat back and sipped her wine. “Remember when he was running poker games and sports betting in high school?”

“Who could forget? He was raking in a few hundred dollars a week when we were working here for minimum wage,” Mike said.

“What are we going to do if he’s in trouble?” Grace asked.

“Nothing. It’s not our problem. He’s always looking for the next get rich fast scheme. He’ll find out the hard way that never works.”

“Do you think that’s why he’s been pushing so hard to get them to sell the farm?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know. Even if they did sell, the money doesn’t go to any of us until they’ve both passed.”

“I can’t believe we’re even talking about this,” Grace said and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Tony’s out of his mind.”

“Enough then. Like I said, it’s Tony’s problem, not ours.”

Chapter Six

EMMA STRUGGLED TO claw her way from the depths of helpless despair threatening to overwhelm her. She woke with a strangled gasp. Through the slit in the curtains she could tell it was still dark outside. Her heart hammered in her chest and her pulse thrummed in her ears.

“Just a bad dream,” she said, trying to grasp at the fleeing tendrils of a nightmare.

She had a recollection of being out on a ship in the ocean. In her dream it was the middle of the night. A primordial fear propelled her forward and she remembered running out onto the deck. Salt spray stung her face as it blew across the bow. The moon was full and stars punched through the inky blackness of the night sky. The light illuminated the waves crashing against rocks, growing darker and massing in ominous jagged clusters.

Frantic, Emma climbed the stairs to the bridge and tried to convince the crew members on watch about the rocks they were headed directly toward. They laughed and told her there were no rocks. When she insisted, one of the crew brought her over to the map. It showed there were no rocks where she had seen them just minutes ago. No amount of arguing would convince them of the danger she knew was approaching. When she rushed back out on deck she could see the pale gleam of the spray as the waves continued to crash against the rocks.

As the panicked feeling Emma woke up with ebbed, she perceived the throb of a dull headache. Too much wine last night, she thought. Way too much wine, she decided when she sat over the edge of the bed and pressed her palm against her forehead in an effort to control the dull ache. Even the sound of the bottles scraping over the glass shelves of the medicine cabinet as she searched for ibuprofen was too much noise for her to bear.

Too wound up to go back to sleep, Emma dressed in jeans and navy blue long sleeve pullover, made a pot of coffee and toasted a bagel for breakfast. Maybe the dream was her subconscious chastising her denial at what was so clear to her in hindsight.

If she was brutally honest with herself Emma knew she got caught up wringing every last bit of profits out of her trades. Instead of getting herself and her clients the hell out of the markets, she followed the herd and paid dearly.

Still, Emma couldn't shake the sense of foreboding the dream had left her with. She paced restlessly around the cottage stopping at a window to look outside while she waited for her coffee to brew. She cupped her hands against the glass, and ghostly silhouettes of trees took shape as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. The glare of headlights splintered the darkness as a car sped past on the road.

When the coffee was done Emma walked outside, the first hints of dawn visible as wisps of faint light painted the horizon. Emma wiped the dew off one of the Adirondack chairs with a terrycloth towel. She held the mug of coffee in her hands, enjoying the rich aroma the steam carried on its vapors when she sipped it.

How ironic it felt that her life had been turned upside down, but out here nature went on unfazed by the generational depression gripping the nation. Tiny birds flitted among the branches of the trees and trilled softly as the brightening sky heralded a new day. Squirrels darted here and

there stopping to dig frantically in the soil, burying their treasures at the base of the large oaks that dotted the property.

From the hill above the lake, Emma watched the sun slip above the trees, the light dancing with the fog that was suspended above the surface of the placid water. A faint breeze ruffled her hair as it blew in across the lake. Emma shivered, pulled her arms tight around her and settled deeper into the chair. Her thoughts mulled over the first few weeks of her forced sabbatical.

She tried to adhere to a schedule. Rising early, she would shower, make herself breakfast and then power up her laptop and go online to pour over the job opportunities.

It was a joke.

She lost count of how many online applications she filled out over the weeks. The only responses she got back were the empty, hollow automatic replies thanking her for her interest in the position. Once she got an e-mail telling her she was over qualified.

As much as she tried to believe that she was in control of her life she wasn't. Her entire narrative had changed overnight. How she saw herself in the world was altered and she wondered if her life would ever go back to the way it was.

Ever since she graduated college she'd been chasing financial security. She was so sure she found it pursuing her career at SMB Capital. Everything she was told since she was a kid, "go to college, get a degree so you can find a good paying job," came undone in June. Fifteen years of trading stocks, leveraging capital and brokering deals with legends of Wall Street left her prepared to do precisely nothing when everything came unhinged. It was as close as she'd come to feeling like a complete failure. Her eyes brimmed with tears and the tranquil scene in front of her blurred.

GRACE WALKED INTO her father's store at seven thirty. She'd been up since well before dawn taking care of chores on the farm and wanted another cup of coffee before her next stop. The line of customers was almost the length of the counter. Fresh coffee sat in glass carafes on hotplates. The deli was the local stop for commuters and business owners passing through the center of town. The police were frequently in and out during the day to buy lunch or another cup of coffee to get them through their shift.

David Cierello, the Deputy Chief of police, stood in the back of the line. He was tall and lean with the build of a runner. His hair was clipped close to the skin along the sides and back of his head and was only slightly longer on top. He looked haggard with a five o'clock shadow covering his jaw and upper lip.

"Hi, Grace," he said.

"Looks like it's been a long night for you." His radio squawked and she heard the dispatch ask one of the units for their 10-7.

"It's been a busy few weeks."

"Every time I read the police log in the weekly paper it's longer."

He grunted his acknowledgment of that fact. "How's your father doing?" He moved up to the counter and ordered two coffees and a bagel.

"He's walking better. I wish he would listen to what the doctor tells him. I caught him lifting crates of fruit up into the truck the other day."

"Did you expect him to listen?" David asked.

"No."

“Your father has to be one of the most stubborn men I know.”

“That stubborn streak is what got him through the past six months,” Grace acknowledged.

“I’m sure of that.”

Officer Cierello turned down the volume on his radio as the officer in question responded with his location. “We had reports of six cars broken into last night. Don’t know why people leave important things out in plain sight.” He leaned in speaking in low tones close to her ear. “One of the cars had the owner’s briefcase and his wife’s pearl necklace was inside it. He was bringing it to be fixed and forgot he left the briefcase on the passenger seat.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

“That wasn’t the worst of it.”

“What else happened?”

“Three houses out by the lake community got burglarized too.”

Grace was about to walk around the counter when she stopped and asked, “The lake community on the west end of town?”

“That is the only one we have.” David frowned at her expression. “What’s the matter?”

“Ah, someone I know just moved back into her father’s house there a few weeks back.”

“Does she live there alone?”

“I...I’m pretty sure she does.” Grace had no idea and hadn’t even considered whether Emma did or not.

“The houses that were hit all had families with kids. Whoever it was obviously cased the houses, knew the routines of when everybody was out and when they would be back.”

“That doesn’t sound like something a bunch of amateurs would pull off.”

“No it doesn’t. Give your friend a head’s up. Tell her to keep her doors and windows locked when she’s out. My advice is to get a big dog or have an alarm system installed.”

AFTER CHECKING ON things in the back storeroom and pouring two cups of coffee, Grace walked out and climbed into her truck. Her mother not so subtly reminded her to check on Emma and invite her over as she was walking out the door. The invitation from her mother now was to come for the day and stay for dinner. If nothing else her mother was dogged and persistent. Grace adjusted the volume on the radio higher as Daughtry’s voice sang about going home to the place where he belonged.

Grace really wasn’t sure why she was reluctant to talk to Emma except that she was simply comfortable with the order of her world as it was and what to expect from it. She’d had enough turmoil in her life over the last two years. Emma was outside her inner circle of the people closest to her and she was hesitant to allow anyone inside her life that might disrupt her routine.

She put the unsettling thoughts aside as she turned right onto the main road that circled the lake. There were thirty cottages that ringed the lake and each of them had a view of the water. A wooden dock moored to the bottom of the lake floated in the center. Grace’s mother remembered what Emma’s address was because she sent a card after the memorial service for Emma’s father. In her usual organized fashion she’d written the address into her little black book she kept in the kitchen drawer.

Grace recognized Emma’s Mercedes parked in the driveway and pulled in behind it. With a sigh, she stepped out and climbed the two steps to the front door, carrying the two cups of coffee

in a recycled beverage tray. She knocked on the front door and waited. When there was no answer she knocked a little louder causing the screen door to rattle against its frame.

“Emma? It’s Grace.” Frowning, Grace opened the screen to knock on the inside door and realized it was ajar. David’s report about the burglaries flashed through her mind and her heart rate ticked up. “All right, calm down. She probably just went for a walk.”

Grace placed the coffees on the railing and peered in through the windows on either side of the door and gawked at the damage. “Well crap, those are some ugly ass holes in the wall. She couldn’t have gone far.” Grace looked out across the property and saw the Adirondack chairs sitting in the back yard facing the lake. She thought she could see the silhouette of someone through the slats in one of the chairs.

“Emma,” Grace called out and picked up the coffees before she climbed down the steps.

Emma stood and looked directly at her. Emma’s chestnut collar length hair was windblown and her cheeks were a healthy pink from the morning breeze. Behind her the lake took on a ghostly appearance with the fog lifting gently in the breeze.

“Grace?” Confusion plainly evident on Emma’s face she asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I…” Grace hesitated searching for the answer. “Good question,” she said under her breath. Grace silently cursed her mother’s suggestion to invite Emma to the annual cookout for the farm staff. Her plan to simply offer the invitation seemed to fly out the window. “I was at the store this morning. Thought I’d drop by and bring you some coffee,” she said, walking closer. Emma looked like she’d been sleeping or crying. Maybe both. “Are you okay?”

“I couldn’t sleep. I came out here to watch the sunrise and fell back to sleep,” Emma said and hugged her arms around her trunk.

“I guess you already had your morning coffee,” Grace said indicating the mug sitting in the grass next to the chair.

“I could use another one. Truthfully, I fell into the bottom of a bottle of wine last night.”

“You did what?” In spite of herself, Grace laughed and held the cup out to Emma. “You have my condolences. I’ve stared into the bottom of a few over the years and wondered how I ended up there.”

“Thanks for the coffee,” Emma removed the lid and carefully sipped the drink.

“You left your front door open.”

“I did?”

Grace shifted, aware of Emma watching her intently. Something about the look Emma was giving her threw her completely off guard. She’d spent the last year licking her wounds and recalibrating her sense of who she was. The undisguised curiosity in Emma’s eyes left her feeling vulnerable and exposed. “When I knocked, I saw the door was open.”

“I must not have pulled it closed behind me.”

“You can’t do that Emma. You’re off the main road, tucked away out here. Nobody would know if something happened.” Grace watched Emma’s eyes widen in alarm.

“It’s so quiet. I guess I figured nothing could happen out here.”

“I…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound all bitchy about it.” Grace held her hand up against the sun that shone in her eyes as it broke out from behind some clouds. She felt off balance and edgy, part of her wanting to turn and run. “Three homes got broken into in this neighborhood last night.”

“Three! But how did you find out about them if they just happened?” Emma asked.

“The police come into the deli all the time so we hear about what’s going on in town.”

“That’s certainly handy to have that relationship with the police. Did they say which houses?”

“No. I didn’t ask.”

“They could have been on the other side of the lake,” Emma said conversationally.

“Maybe,” Grace said.

“So is that the reason you came out here?” Emma took a sip as she eyed Grace curiously. “To tell me about the break-ins?”

“No. I...are you free next Sunday?” Grace managed to get out.

Emma burst into laughter and in the middle of laughing started to cry. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m crazy,” she said when she was able to talk again.

“Just wasn’t exactly the response I was expecting,” Grace said feeling foolish and completely out of her depth at the same time. “What was so funny?”

“You asking me if I was free on Sunday.”

“Why is that funny?” Grace watched Emma wipe the tears from her cheeks. She jammed her free hand into her pocket resisting the idiotic urge to reach out and wipe them away herself.

“I’m unemployed.” Emma started to laugh again. “Apparently, I’m free every day. Look at me.” Emma turned around, her arms spread out away from her sides. “I’ve been sitting out here listening to the birds and staring at the lake since before the sun came up.”

“Not a bad way to pass the time.” Grace acknowledged while she sipped her coffee and avoided Emma’s gaze. “I’m sorry you lost your job.”

“Me too,” Emma said quietly. “I thought when I left it would be on my terms. Instead it was like watching a slow motion train wreck for months, knowing something bad was coming but not sure when—and then one day it was all over.”

“Why didn’t you leave if you knew things were falling apart?”

Emma looked away, her lips pursing into a thin line before she answered. “A month ago I might have taken anyone’s head off who asked me that question.”

“And now?” Grace asked.

“I didn’t trust what my gut was telling me. Denial, normalcy bias, call it what you want. Besides that there was nowhere safe to run to.”

Grace could see the hurt and pain in Emma’s eyes. “Listen, I didn’t mean to barge in on you. If you’d rather be alone I understand.” Part of her hoped Emma would say yes. The brief visit she envisioned in her mind wasn’t going as she planned. Grace felt herself teetering dangerously close to letting well-constructed walls come down.

“No, no. I’m sorry. I’ve been holed up here alone for a couple of weeks and apparently I’ve managed to lose my manners in the process. Please, sit down.” Emma grabbed the towel she’d dropped into the chair next to hers and wiped off the dew.

Ordinarily, Grace would have declined the invitation to sit for a while. She had a long list of things to take care of on the farm as she did everyday but something about Emma’s unguarded expression made her want to stay. Grace settled into the chair and gazed out at the lake. If nothing else, listening to other people took her mind off her own problems. Whatever it was, Grace sensed that Emma just needed someone to be there with her.

They sat in silence, both looking out at the water with the early morning fog curling up from its surface. Out of the corner of her eye, Grace studied Emma, noting the sheen of clear polish on her neatly manicured nails. Fleeting, she imagined Emma dressed in power suit and heels walking through one of the vaunted hallways of a Wall Street firm. She wondered if she wore

skirts or pants suits, then just as quickly shoved the unbidden thought aside. “Did you find someone to repair the damage inside?” It was lame but it was all Grace could think of asking.

“How did you know about that?” Emma asked.

“Small town, people talk. My mother’s known the hardware store owner for years.” She cleared her throat and added quietly, “I saw the holes when I looked in the window.”

“Those are just the ones in the living room. The smaller ones I can handle. I don’t know how to fix the big ones properly. Aside from that all I have to do is paint—everything.”

“What about insurance? It should cover the damages.”

“Ordinarily yes.”

“Why do you say ordinarily?” Grace asked turning in her chair to face Emma.

Emma slid down in her chair and hunched her shoulders. “I forgot to pay the bill.”

“Oh shit,” Grace said.

“Yeah, thankfully the insurance company let me reinstate it, but it won’t cover any of the damages.”

“How big are the holes in the other rooms?”

“About the size of a double hung window, but they’re all jagged and uneven. I think they took a hammer to the wallboard.”

“Doesn’t matter what they used. The fact that they did it was bad enough,” Grace said.

“I don’t understand why someone would do that to something that’s not even theirs. It’s just outrageous.”

“It is and you probably won’t ever know why they did it,” Grace said. “The best thing you can do is to get the damage repaired as quickly as you can so you can move on.”

“I guess so,” Emma said.

“If you cut out the uneven parts and make it square you can size a new piece of drywall and fit it to the hole. You may need to add a two by four behind it to provide support.”

“You make it sound so easy. How do you know how to do that?”

“When I moved back home we converted the space over the barn into an apartment. Michael and I did all the finishing work.” Grace said, fiddling with her coffee cup. “If you want I can help you.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Why not?” Grace asked wondering what possessed her to make the offer to help.

“I’m sure you have your hands full working on the farm.”

“It’s busy, but I could find some time to help you out.”

Changing the subject, Emma said, “Tell me about the farm.”

“Why are you interested?” Grace asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe because living and working on a farm is so different from anything I’ve ever done.”

“Tell me about Wall Street first,” Grace countered.

“What’s to tell? It’s been taken over by high frequency trading done by supercomputers. Companies pay thousands of dollars to secure the largest bandwidth so they can shave microseconds off of how fast they can get a trade executed. The average investor doesn’t stand a chance. It’s all about greed and power. Money isn’t lost. It’s just transferred to the company or person who’s sitting on the right side of a trade.”

“It sounds a bit like smoke and mirrors,” Grace said.

“Not just a bit. It is. People think they’re wealthy but it’s just on paper. It’s ones and zeros on a computer. If you can’t stand in front of it and defend it it’s not yours. It literally takes a key stroke and billions can evaporate out of people’s accounts.”

“Why did you go into it?”

“I studied finance in college and did my internship with SMB Capital, the company I worked for. It seemed exciting and I felt like I was part of something important.”

“Was it...important?” Grace asked.

“It felt like it was. People looked up to me. They came to me for advice. I managed multi-million dollar accounts. After the market crash in 2008, I started to lose faith in what I was doing.” Emma fell silent and Grace took a sip of her coffee waiting for her to continue. “You’re probably wondering why I was still there seven years later.”

“No. I remember the layoffs that happened on Wall Street that year. People hunkered down and were more than happy to hang onto the jobs they had,” Grace said.

“So you got me to tell you about Wall Street, but you haven’t told me anything about the farm yet.”

“I asked and you offered,” Grace said with an easy smile.

“So I did. Now it’s your turn. Tell me what you do on the farm.”

A smile lifted the corner of Grace’s mouth. She gazed out across the lake and sighed. “First thing in the morning the animals have to be fed and watered.”

Emma threw her head back and laughed. Grace settled back in her chair enjoying the sound. “I have this image of you watering the animals like flowers,” Emma said her eyes twinkling.

Grace found herself drawn into those magnificent eyes. The mysterious hues seemed to change in the sunlight. Not wanting to stare, she looked away. “Not quite like that, but there is a hose involved. We have a tractor that we use to pull an industrial size water tank out into the fields so we can fill the drinking troughs.”

“I was joking.”

“I know,” Grace said and shocked herself by saying, “Why don’t you come out to the farm and I’ll show you around instead?”

“Really? When?”

“How about tomorrow?” Grace asked, watching Emma tilt her head and furrow her brow as if deep in thought.

“Seeing as my calendar is wide open and I don’t have any pressing engagements,” Emma said with a wry smile. “I’d love to.”

“Is seven too early for you?”

“Not at all. I’m trying to keep myself on some semblance of a schedule. I can’t fall completely off the wagon or I’ll really go to hell with myself.”

“I’ll be finished feeding all the animals by then.”

“Will I still be able to see them?”

“Of course.” Grace said realizing how little Emma knew about farms and the work that went with them. “They’ll be out in the fields grazing.”

“So what’s special about Sunday?” Emma asked.

“Sunday. Oh right. Mike and I catch up on chores for part of the day then we break for an early dinner at the house. This happens to be the Sunday Mom invites the people who volunteer on the farm to come over for dinner. They cook, put some food away for the winter and drink wine.”

“I like the sound of that.” A genuine smile broke over Emma’s face and her dimples flashed.

“Which part, the wine, the cooking or the physical labor?” Grace asked.

“Definitely the part about drinking wine.”

“So I shouldn’t count on you to help muck out the barn?” Grace teased.

“I’ll spread the clean hay,” Emma offered.

“Oh sure that’s the easy part of the job.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to shovel manure out of the barn just yet.”

“Chicken.” Grace laughed at the incredulous expression on Emma’s face.

“I am not,” Emma protested.

“Prove it then,” Grace challenged.

“Oh no, you invited me. I get a tour first.”

“All right. Tomorrow. Seven a.m.”

“Does your father still make wine? I remember my father used to buy it from him.”

“We have a couple of batches fermenting right now.” Grace fell quiet and stared across the lake.

“What are you thinking?” Emma asked.

Grace pulled her gaze away from the lake and met Emma’s eyes. “I should be getting back. I’ve got a list of things to take care of today.”

“Of course,” Emma said standing up as Grace did. “Thanks for the coffee...and the visit. I’ve been spending too much time in my head. It’s nice to have a conversation with someone for a change.”

Their eyes met and held for a beat. Suddenly uncertain, Grace looked away and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” and started to walk up the hill.

“I’ll be there.” Emma said catching up to Grace.

Grace climbed up into her truck and turned the key. She leaned out the window as Emma climbed up on the porch. “Keep your doors locked,” she called out.

Emma gave her a mock salute and said, “I will.”

Chapter Seven

GRACE AND MICHAEL started their day before sunrise, packing the crates with fresh produce for the farmer's markets. There was a fresh smell to the air and a gentle breeze rustled the tops of the trees. Red wing black birds trilled from somewhere in a tree. Over coffee and scrambled eggs they talked about what projects they had in store for the day.

When they were done cleaning up the kitchen, Grace walked outside. She hitched the wagon with the five hundred gallon tank full of well water to the 4x4 tractor. She drove it over the pasture lane that ran through the center of the meadows where the animals grazed. Michael was content to ride shotgun and survey the land as they rolled and jostled across the uneven terrain. Sadie and Max trotted alongside the tractor fully intent on being included in all the day's activities. When Grace crested the hill the chickens came running to greet them.

"Crazy birds. I'll never understand why they come running every time they see us," Michael said.

"They're social creatures." Grace turned off the engine. "And we feed them. It's Pavlov's Law."

"Whatever that is." Michael hopped out and said, "I'll check the egg mobiles and make sure all the nesting boxes are open."

Grace hooked up the two-inch water hose, fired up the water pump secured to the floor of the wagon and filled the first of three tanks. By the time she was hooking up the last one, Michael was finished and lent her a hand.

"Do you think about what you want to do?" Michael asked.

"What do you mean? I'm doing what I want to right now."

"You really want to keep working here?" Michael directed the hose into the water tank. "Forever?"

"I don't remember ever thinking that I didn't want to do this. Even when I was coaching I always looked forward to coming back to the farm. What about you?" Grace asked.

"Not me. I never thought I would end up back here. Besides, I'm a graphic designer. Put me in front of a computer screen and let me work my magic."

"There's nothing wrong with that. You're good at it."

"Thanks," Michael said. "It's nice to hear that from someone in my family."

"I think Mom and Dad are proud of you."

"Maybe."

"Something's bothering you. What's wrong?"

"I didn't plan on getting divorced and ending up back here. It's just not where I expected to be at this point in my life."

"It's not all bad, is it?"

"No, the boys have a great place to grow up." Michael mustered up a smile and said. "Don't pay too much attention to me griping—just wallowing in it today."

“You’re allowed to have a pity party once in awhile.” Grace tapped him on the shoulder. “Are we about topped off in there?”

“We’re done. Turn the motor off.” Michael pulled the hose from the water tank after Grace killed the switch on the motor. “You should be the one Pop asks to manage the farm.”

“Why do you say that? Did he say something to you?”

“No. I just overheard him and Mom talking the other morning.”

“What were they saying?”

“Nothing specific. Just that they had to make a decision soon so Tony would stop harassing them.”

“Would you stay if they asked me to manage the farm?”

“It depends on what’s on the table.”

She had no answer for that. Grace cast an eye skyward and estimated it was close to seven from the position of the sun. “Can you take over from here?” Grace asked.

“Sure.” Michael studied her quietly. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Just something I have to take care of.”

“And just what is it you need to take care of?” Michael raised a questioning eyebrow his tone gently teasing.

“Nothing you need to worry about. I promised I’d show someone around the farm.”

His eyes sharpened and he said, “You’re not entertaining one of Tony’s prospective buyers. Are you?”

“What?” Grace whipped around and pinned him with an icy glare. “Hell no. Why would you even think I would?”

“I think if you told Mom and Dad it was the best thing to do they might listen to you.”

Tears stung Grace’s eyes at the thought and she blinked to clear her vision. “I don’t think it’s the best thing at all. It would kill both of them to leave all this. This is their life. Without the farm what would they do?”

“Sit around all day and watch television,” Michael said.

“What television?” Grace asked.

“I’m sure wherever they ended up would have one.”

“That’s a depressing thought.” Sadie, who had been lying a few feet away, stood and whined, her tail wagging. Farther out in the field came an excited bark and an explosion of indignant squawking as Max galloped through a flock of chickens. “That’s my cue to go,” Grace said and followed after the dogs.

“Hey, you didn’t tell me what you were doing,” Michael called after her.

Grace ignored him and continued walking.

IT WAS A beautiful sunny day with thin, wispy cirrus clouds in the sky. The cloud formations reminded Emma of horsetails. Emma wasn’t sure why she agreed to visit the farm. It was a spur of the moment decision and one she hoped she wouldn’t regret. She barely remembered where Grace lived and ended up using Google to bring it up on a map. Vague recollections of when she was a child of her father driving out to the Moretti’s farm to pick up eggs on a Sunday for the week ahead flashed in her memory. Sometimes her mother and father would bring her to pick berries or in the fall they came to pick pumpkins and take a ride on one of the horse drawn wagons.

She never remembered seeing Grace on the farm during those visits. Even though they grew up in a small town, were in the same grade and graduated high school together, Emma felt she hardly knew Grace at all. So many years passed, but Emma had to admit something about Grace intrigued her. She had this calm, self-possessed way about her. When they sat together on the Adirondack chairs yesterday, Grace left her alone with her thoughts. There wasn't this incessant need to fill up the quiet spaces with idle conversation and Emma appreciated that.

Lost in her thoughts, Emma missed the turn off for the farm and drove a quarter mile down the road before she could find a spot wide enough where she could turn around.

At five minutes after seven she was driving slowly up the gravel drive listening to the stones rattling off the bottom of her Mercedes. How ridiculous she thought, to be driving onto Grace's farm in a Mercedes Benz. For a moment she felt self-conscious and out of place like she had no business being here. Emma shook off the intruding thought and focused on the fact that Grace had invited her.

Off to the right a couple hundred feet from the driveway, she observed the pale blue farmhouse with its wraparound porch. Two wooden rockers sat side by side at one end and she envisioned the elder Moretti's sitting in them at the end of a long, hard day. Emma slowed and steered the car off to the side by the grass.

The sound of raucous deep chested barking grew closer and Emma caught her breath as two large dogs barreled towards her. They plowed to a stop in front of her car, both quivering with anticipation. She fervently prayed they were friendly with strangers.

Emma pulled the key from the ignition and hesitated. No one was in sight and she wondered if it was unwise for even considering stepping out of the car. On the other hand, if she waited until someone arrived she'd look foolish and afraid. Irritated with herself for worrying what anyone would think of her, Emma shoved the door open and stepped out saying a silent prayer that they were as least as friendly as they seemed when she saw them in the truck the other day.

"And what are your names, huh?" she said, keeping the door between her and the two intimidating German Shepherds. With one leg still inside the car she was ready to dive back in if the need arose.

She heard a shrill whistle and watched in fascination as they crashed down on their haunches, muscles tensed and ears at attention. Both dogs were black and tan with red highlights blending the color contrasts. Two pairs of deep-set intelligent brown eyes stared back at her.

Beyond them Emma caught sight of Grace trotting around the corner of the barn. "They heard the sound of your car and took off like lightning."

"Sorry, I'm late. I drove right past the driveway. Can I pet them?" Emma asked stepping out from behind the door of her car.

"Sadie. Max. Friend."

In that instant they broke from their seated position and wove themselves around Emma's legs. "You two are magnificent," Emma said crouching down and ruffling their thick coats. "I was really hoping they weren't going to take a chunk out of me."

"Most people would choose to stay in the car when they see the two of them loose. You've got balls stepping out like that."

"Either that or I'm just plain crazy." Emma laughed when the smaller of the two dogs snuggled close and licked her face. "Who's Sadie?"

"She's the bigger one. Max is still a puppy. He's eleven months old."

"His paws are almost as big as the palm of my hand. He's going to be huge," Emma marveled.

“Yeah he’s going to be a big boy when he grows up.” On cue, Max wriggled closer and tipped Emma onto her backside.

“Oh!” Emma braced her hands behind her to keep from toppling all the way over.

“Max, sit.” He planted himself neatly between the crotch in Emma’s legs, his head back and tongue lolling out of his mouth in a big toothy grin.

Emma laughed and said, “What nice white teeth you have, Max.”

“Sorry.” Grace pulled Emma to her feet. “He’s a bit of a flirt.”

“Is he now?” Emma teased. “I would have never known.”

“We need to work on your manners, Max,” Grace said and ruffled the fur on his head. “Come on. I’ll show you around.”

Sadie and Max ran ahead, jostling and bumping against each other in spirited play. In that instant, a gray streak exploded from the top of a bale of hay and raced between the two dogs. “What was that?”

“One of the barn cats,” Grace replied on her way across the yard. “The dogs think the cats exist to give them something to chase.”

“The cats must think the dogs are evil.” Emma lost sight of the cat as the dogs galloped around the barn.

“The cats think it’s their pre-ordained status to demonstrate they’re the superior intellect.” Grace stopped at the entry to the barn, waiting a beat before the gray tabby dashed in front of her and leapt back onto the bail of hay.

Emma laughed as the cat neatly curled its tail around its front paws. With a look of supreme contentment the feline began to vigorously clean its tail. “This is a regular occurrence?”

“At least once a day she leads them on a small animal chase.”

Emma followed Grace inside. “I didn’t know you had horses.” The sweet smell of hay, leather and horses filled her nostrils.

“They’re a new addition. Michael invested in them after Pop’s accident. He got it into his head that he would actually ride them.” She gave Emma a rueful glance. “Pop’s yet to get on them. Have you ridden before?”

“No,” Emma said in awe of the magnificent creature that stood in front of her. A chestnut mare with a splash of white across her chest eyed her coolly from the other side of the stall.

“That’s Bella.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“My mother named her. This is Honey.”

Emma raised an eyebrow and Grace shook her head. “Michael’s boy’s insisted on that name. Bella’s the one the twins ride.”

“Wait. Michael has twins?”

“Yeah. Tyler and Jonah. You’ll want to wear these.” Grace handed Emma a pair of black over-the-shoe rubber boots.

Emma slid her foot in down to the heel of the boot then stomped her foot in the rest of the way. Once they were both on she experimented clomping around the barn. “I feel like big foot.”

“You’ll be happy you’re wearing them once we get out to the fields.” Grace settled the bridle over Bella’s head. She situated the pad and saddle on the horse’s back. She did the same for Honey while Emma rubbed Bella’s cheek affectionately.

“I don’t know how to ride a horse,” Emma reminded Grace.

“Don’t worry I’ll teach you.” Grace walked over to a metal cabinet and unlocked the door with a key she dug out of her pocket. To Emma’s surprise she pulled out a rifle.

“You’re bringing a gun with us?” Emma asked feeling an unease twist in her gut.

Grace eyed her calmly as she loaded two shells into the chamber and slid four extras into a sleeve attached to the stock of the firearm. “I always do,” she said without hesitation. “I take it you’ve never shot a gun before.”

“I’ve never even seen one up close,” Emma stammered almost taking a step back.

“Here’s a quick lesson.” Grace held the rifle out so Emma could see what she was talking about. “This is the safety. As long as it’s on you can’t fire the rifle. When you slide the button back the safety is off and it’s ready to fire. You don’t put your finger into the trigger unless you intend to shoot whatever it is you’re aiming at.”

“Have you ever fired it?” Emma asked.

“Just for target practice. My father taught me how to handle a firearm when I turned ten years old. My mother knows how to handle one too.”

“Really? Your mother knows how to shoot a gun?”

“Sure. She was home alone with three young children at night when my father was out working. Back then you could call the police, but it might take them thirty minutes to get to you if they were busy on another call.”

“Maybe this is a stupid question, but why do you need to bring a rifle with us?” Emma asked.

“There’s four hundred and fifty acres of land, a good part of it is woods.”

Emma tilted her head and arched an eyebrow. “I’ve been in the woods before without one.”

“We have black bear, coyote and bobcats that roam through here. Most likely they’ll be more scared of us if we run across them, but if something does happen no one’s coming to help me.” Unruffled, Grace walked over to Honey and slid the firearm into a holster that hung down from the horse’s saddle. “Once in awhile we get someone who tries to hunt illegally on our land. Most times they just need some gentle redirecting.”

“And the others?”

Grace cinched the strap tight around the butt of the stock. “I never had to do anything else other than ask if they knew they were on private property. That question and this,” she said indicating the rifle, “Are enough for most reasonable people to leave. Are you still comfortable going?”

“I don’t scare off that easily.” Emma half wondered if Grace was trying to do just that. Emma looked up at Bella who seemed to be regarding her with an amused expression. “On the other hand, it’s a long way down to fall.”

“You’re not going to fall.” Grace assured her and led the two horses from the barn. Holding onto Bella she said, “Step into the stirrup and grab hold of the saddle. Push up with your other leg and use your momentum to swing your right leg over the saddle. Go ahead. I’ve got her,” she said when Emma situated her foot in the stirrup.

Emma felt her heart beat a little faster and her mouth go dry as she did what Grace told her. She was grateful she managed to get into the saddle without completely humiliating herself. Once situated Emma glanced to either side. “It’s a lot higher than I thought it would be.”

Grace adjusted the length of the stirrups for her and Emma stilled, acutely aware of the brief contact from Grace’s hands.

“All set,” Grace flashed her a smile. “Hold the saddle horn in your right hand and the reins in your left.” Grace adjusted the reins in Emma’s hands so there was slack in them. “You don’t want to hold them tight all the time. Nudge her in the ribs to walk. Tug left to get her to turn left. Right to go right. Pull back if you want her to stop.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

Grace stepped into the stirrup and swung her leg over Honey's back. "You ready?"

Emma's heart ticked faster. "Grace, I don't know how to ride a horse."

"So you said. This'll be your first lesson then. I'll be right here." Grace nudged Honey in the flank and started forward at a slow walk.

Emma tapped Bella in her flank. Bella's ears twitched as if to say, "Are you talking to me?" She tried again, but Bella only shifted underneath her. Great, just great, Emma thought. She gave her a third tap with her heels and Bella snorted and shook her head. Emma leaned forward and spoke into the horse's ear, "You're doing this to make me look bad. Aren't you?" The horse snorted and stepped sideways.

Up ahead, Grace turned in her saddle. "What's wrong?"

"She won't move."

"She's a big girl. Do it again, harder so she knows what you want her to do."

Grace turned Honey around. "She's stubborn enough to be half mule."

"And you gave her to me to ride?" Emma asked.

"Stubborn, but she's our gentle giant."

Emma squeezed her heels into Bella's side. Bella took a couple of steps forward stopped and shook her head.

Grace leaned forward in her saddle. "Hey! Stop messing around."

Bella flicked her ears and stomped a hoof. Grace simply stared at the mare until she grudgingly started to walk.

The sway of the horse's back beneath Emma was disconcerting and she clutched the horn tightly in her right hand while holding onto the reins. Bella slowed as she drew even with Honey. The chestnut mare snorted and shook her head.

"I don't think she likes me very much," Emma declared holding on for dear life.

"You're nervous and she senses it. Sit up straight and let your body move with the horse," Grace encouraged as the horses walked up the path. "Relax. That's better."

"What's that on the left in the distance?" Emma asked trying to distract herself from how high up she was sitting.

"That's one of the egg mobiles." The structure Grace pointed to boasted a single axle. It was constructed with rough-cut lumber, sheet metal for sides and roof and chicken wire on the ends. "When we get past these bushes you'll see the chickens."

"How many do you have?"

"We have two hundred layers. Most of them are Barred Rocks and Australorps." Grace pulled Honey to a stop, kicked out of the stirrups and swung herself to the ground. "Come on." She grabbed Bella's reins and helped Emma climb off the horse. "You're going to help me move the egg mobile."

"Oh, I am?"

Grace turned innocent eyes to Emma and said, "You wanted to see what I do. No better way than hands on training."

"Just so we're clear," Emma said with her hands firmly planted on her hips, "I am not cleaning out any animal stalls."

"I'll go easy on you today," Grace walked backwards a couple of paces with an amused glint in her eyes.

"Not today or any day," Emma said under her breath and followed Grace through a metal gate that squealed as it swung shut. She felt awkward in the oversized boots and stumbled twice marching through the thick grasses trying to keep up with Grace's longer stride.

As they approached the egg-mobile Emma realized the ramshackle trailer was surrounded by a mass of roving chickens. Emma had the sudden urge to grab onto Grace's arm for protection against the winged beasts. She decided to hang onto some shred of her dignity instead since the birds seemed to be completely ignoring Grace as she walked among them.

The birds looked alike until Emma got closer to them. Some had a glossy black plumage with a greenish-purple sheen with bright red combs. She realized others had an odd greyish barred pattern on their feathers. To her dismay they darted around her legs. A particular few were too busy pecking at the ground to move and Emma had to step around them. Once she got over her nervousness, Emma heard a variety of sounds coming from the chickens. There were peeps, soft warbling and an occasional startled squawk.

"They're talking," Emma exclaimed.

"They're content and right now they don't sense any danger." Grace scooped up one of the birds in her arms and held it out for Emma to look at.

"What happens if they do?"

"You'll hear a high pitched cackle. It's sounds like a distress call."

"I don't think I like the way that chicken is looking at me." Emma stepped back.

"She's just trying to get a good look at you." Grace set the bird down. "Don't worry she won't hurt you. It's the roosters you have to watch out for."

"Why?"

"Nature intended the rooster to protect the flock at all costs. They'll fight to the death to do so."

Emma stared down at the mass of birds milling about around her feet and fought for composure. "And you choose now to tell me while we're standing in the middle of the flock."

"Don't worry we don't keep the mean ones around."

"What do you do with them?"

Grace made a motion across her neck with her finger. "Into the soup pot they go."

Taken with the soft peeps and coos, Emma asked, "Does that happen often?"

"Not with this group. These two breeds are pretty docile birds. Some other breeds are more aggressive."

"I didn't know there were different kinds of chickens."

"There are hundreds of varieties around the world. Some are hardier in winter climates like these two breeds. They lay eggs reliably and like to forage for their food so it cuts down on the feed we have to buy for them." Grace strode to the front of the egg mobile and lifted a metal T-bar that was attached to the axle with wing nuts. "Come on this side of me," she said indicating her left. "Hold the bar up about chest high and lean into it. Ready?" She glanced over at Emma who nodded. "Push!"

"Oh my God." Emma felt her legs quiver with the strain of pushing her full body weight against the tractor. "Can we actually move this thing?"

"Sure. Push, Emma. We almost have it moving."

"Do we?" Emma pushed until she thought she couldn't push any harder. When she hardly had any strength left to give she felt the mobile start to slowly roll forward.

"Don't stop."

"Where are we going with it?" Emma asked through gritted teeth.

"Straight ahead," Grace said.

"Do you do this everyday?" Emma asked between breaths

"No. Every three days we move them. You're doing great. Keep going," Grace said.

“Who needs a gym membership doing this kind of work?” Emma gasped.

“Okay we’re there.” Grace stopped pushing after they traipsed about thirty yards and lowered the T-bar to the ground. “You did great.”

“Thanks. I think,” Emma said, rubbing her wrist then shook it up and down to work out the stiffness.

“Are you okay?”

“Just not used to that kind of work.”

“Let me see.” Grace slipped both hands around Emma’s wrist, gently prodding and massaging the tissue.

Emma was quite aware of the gentle touch of Grace’s fingers and the sensation of her belly tightening and her pulse quickening.

“Anything hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.” Emma managed to find her voice. Grace’s head was bent over her while she examined her hand; their bodies close, but not touching. “Honestly there’s nothing wrong.” Except it’s been too long since I’ve gotten laid. Emma watched Grace lift her head and meet her gaze. Those blue eyes burned into hers and then as quickly as the intensity was there Grace’s eyes shuttered. Uncertain, Emma fumbled for a way out of the awkward moment. “How many eggs do they lay?”

“What?” Grace asked letting go Emma’s hand.

“How many eggs do the chickens lay?” Emma repeated, wondering if she misread what she’d seen in Grace’s eyes. Emma hoped for an instant Grace felt what she did and then the more rational and objective side of her brain took over and she dismissed the thought.

“Depends on the time of year and how old they are.” Grace cleared her throat and continued on as if nothing happened. “Come on we’re done here. Let’s get back to the horses.”

Emma felt disconnected and oddly hollow as she followed Grace back to the two mares and climbed back atop Bella. She wanted that brief moment when Grace was holding her hand back again.

Grace led the horses to the right and fields with neat rows of plants came into view. “This is the beginning of our market garden.”

“What do you grow?” Emma spotted a half-dozen men and women in the fields. Dressed in white t-shirts and jeans, they were busy harvesting crops.

“Tomatoes, peppers, herbs, onions, leeks, lettuce, beets, carrots, kale. You name it, pretty much anything you see at a farmer’s market, we grow.”

“They’re out early,” Emma indicated the people out in the fields.

“Better to harvest in the morning before it gets too hot in the fields. We’ll spend the afternoon washing and getting everything ready to bring to the farmer’s markets this week.”

“How many farmer’s markets do you attend?”

“We do three a week. We have pickup days on Saturdays throughout the month for people who can’t make it to the markets.”

“You sound like you do quite well.”

“We’ve gotten better at marketing ourselves, but there are still some things we can improve on,” Grace said, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her shoulders.

Chapter Eight

GRACE AND EMMA followed a tractor path up a gently rising slope. The horses meandered past the lush gardens to the south and looped around to orchards and vineyards planted to the west side of the farm. In the distance, a cluster of cows nibbled grass where they had been herded for the day.

They crossed over into a glen where the pasture merged with the shadowy forest. A herd of black and brown pigs snuffled and snorted as they rooted around the ground.

Disturbed by the horses passing by, a small flock of birds erupted from the tall grass growing along the edge of the path and launched themselves into the air. Emma ducked when she felt the air stir violently around her as they flew past.

Grace reached over and tugged on Bella's reins to keep her from lurching ahead. "Sorry about that."

"Not your fault," Emma said sitting up straighter in the saddle. She reached for the reins her hand brushing over Grace's quite by accident. "How much land do you grow food on?"

"Close to a hundred and fifty acres, but that's not all vegetables. We have blackberries, blueberries and fruit trees on that acreage."

"What's the rest for?" Emma asked.

"We're bordered on three sides by a forest that's mostly hardwoods. We grow our own hay and sell what we don't use. The rest is for the cows to graze on."

"Don't the dogs damage what you grow?"

"Occasionally they dig up a juicy carrot. Mostly they run and hunt small animals, play, sleep and play some more."

"What a life," Emma said.

"Yeah it is a good life for them and us," Grace replied easily.

"How many people work for you?"

"It depends on the time of year. In the spring, summer and fall we might have twenty to twenty-five people who work full time. During the winter we're down to five or six depending on how much work needs to be done."

"I thought you would have more people."

"Food doesn't cost enough to pay for a larger crew."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"We plant and harvest everything by hand. Most of our costs are labor. That's why we recruit and train interns. We have a five-month summer program and then we have a yearlong apprenticeship."

"People actually apprentice on the farm?"

"Sure. Most are high school and college graduates. They want to learn how to grow their own food. Some are interested in learning how to manage the animals. Others don't have a clue what they want to do in life and this is just a waypoint for them on their journey," Grace said. "The interns work five days a week except every third week is seven days. Saturday is minimal and

Sunday is chore day. We provide them room and board. They can eat from our larder, within reason. The interns are responsible for cooking breakfast and lunch for themselves. Dinner is a communal affair with us Monday through Friday.”

“Can I sign up?”

Grace cast a glance over to Emma that indicated she wasn’t sure she heard right the first time. “All our slots are filled for the year.”

“Too bad. It sounds like it would be quite an experience.”

“I can guarantee that you would ache, be dead tired and sick at least three of the first fourteen days. After you got through that, you’d be on your way to being in the best physical condition of your life. It’s just no fun getting there.”

“If I didn’t know better I’d think you were trying to scare me off.”

“No, just telling you like it is.”

Emma waited for Grace to say something else. When it was obvious that Grace wasn’t going to Emma pointed out across the fields. “Tell me why you have the cows, pigs and chickens separated by fences out in the fields.”

“We use a multi-species rotational grazing model.”

“Come again? You need to tell me what that means in layman’s terms. You’re talking to a city girl,” Emma said laughing.

“You can’t graze one kind of animal on a pasture over and over again. They’ll graze and re-graze until they kill the roots and the plants die,” Grace replied. “We move the cows once a day.”

Emma stared out at the pasture where several of the large beasts were leisurely reclined resting in the middle of the field. “How do you move them? I mean, honestly, the ones lying down look like you’d need a crane to get them up.”

“We have a permanent fence that gives the framework of the pastures and then we use a portable fence.” Grace pointed to a post with a reel of wire hung over it. “Those are step in posts and the wire gets let out or taken up on the reel.”

“What do the cows eat?” Emma asked.

“Like grandfather used to say, all that’s green that grows on the land.”

“I thought cows just ate grass.”

“That’s a common misconception. If it’s green and leafy and they can reach it they’ll eat it. They’ll kill off their favorite plants if you leave them in the same pasture. The cows won’t graze by their own manure so you really limit the acreage they forage on unless you rotate them. We bring sheep in next because they won’t contract the cows’ parasites.”

“I had no idea there was so much to grazing animals.”

“The sheep will eat blackberry brambles, thistle and honeysuckle that grow wild in the pastures.”

“So whose turn is it after the sheep?”

“In our model it’s the chickens. Some people will use goats and chickens. We pull a mobile hen house on a tractor a couple of days behind the grazers. The hens scratch through the manure and harvest the larvae.”

“That’s gross.” Emma screwed up her face in distaste.

“To you it is, but the chickens get free protein and reduce the fly larvae population. They’re the sanitation crew and for their efforts we get a steady supply of eggs.”

“I may never eat eggs again.”

“Sure you will.”

“Where do the pigs come in?”

“Pigs prefer to root around. We keep them out by the woodlots. They’ll plow through downed trees looking for grubs. They’ll eat roots, acorns and anything else they find. They break up and clear a lot of the debris on the floor of the forest. It actually cuts down on the how much debris we have to clear out each year to decrease the risk of a fire.”

“I’m amazed how every animal has such a significant role to play.”

“That’s how my grandfather worked the farm. It’s a cycle and everything has its role to create the rich soil to grow the crops, the grass to feed the cows and develop the insect ecosystem.”

“It sounds like a lot of work to move the animals through the pastures.”

“The rotations are just part of what we do. We use portable electric fencing to hold them in a single paddock. It cuts down on the external inputs we have to buy and allows the grazed paddocks to recover and grow again.” Grace hesitated and then said, “Tell me if I’m going on too much about this stuff and I’ll stop.”

“No, no. It’s interesting. I’ve never spent any significant time on a farm except to stop at a roadside stand or buy food from a farmer’s market. I never gave much thought about the food industry until one of my sister’s boy’s was diagnosed with autism.”

“It’s easy not to when all people have to do is walk into a grocery store and put what they want into a basket and pay for it. I can tell you we’ve had people drive a hundred miles to buy our meat because they know it’s clean and we use local butchers.”

“I’m impressed. I had no idea your family did all this.”

“How are your legs holding up?”

“I could use a break from the saddle.”

“Let’s get down and walk for a while,” Grace suggested tugging on Honey’s reins to bring her to a halt. “There’s a creek up ahead where the horses can get a drink. We can give our legs a rest before we ride back down.”

“What else do you do?”

Grace laughed. “I ride this route almost every day to check on the animals and make sure there are no broken perimeter fences that need mending. Some days I spend time in the orchard inspecting the trees and pruning away dead branches. We plant spring, summer and fall and start the seeds in late winter. Right now, we’re out harvesting everyday rain or shine to get everything ready to bring to the market. In the fall we’ll move hundreds of pumpkins to get ready for Halloween and Thanksgiving.”

“You make me tired just thinking about all that.”

“There’s always something different to do,” Grace said.

The sound of water running over rocks reached Emma’s ears and the air became cooler when they passed under the branches of a pair of Maple trees. Grace let the horses go and they ambled toward the water lowering their heads to drink. Emma watched Grace pull the rifle out of the holster and carry it back with her.

“It’s beautiful out here.”

“I was hoping you’d like it.” Grace rested the rifle on the ground beside her and tucked one of her knees up close to her as she gazed out across the fields.

Emma sat down next to Grace and looked up into the canopy of the trees. Sunlight cascaded through the sun-dappled leaves. Squirrels chattered and chased each other among the branches, their claws scrabbling over the bark. “It feels like we escaped to somewhere far away. It’s so quiet and peaceful here.”

“I remember when my father brought me up here when I was old enough to ride on the tractor with him. It was our secret spot to hang out and fish. I used to sneak up here every chance I got.”

“Do you still?” Emma asked.

“When I need to be alone or work a problem out.”

Lulled by the soothing tones of the water babbling through the creek, Emma couldn't help but allow her body to relax. She closed her eyes, drifting pleasantly close to sleeping. Birds chirped and flew back and forth between the tree limbs. Emma wasn't sure if she dozed off, but she was suddenly aware of a change in the breeze. The wind carried with it the intoxicating sweet scent of honeysuckle.

She looked over at Grace who appeared to be dozing with both legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. Grace wore scuffed brown work boots beneath a pair of threadbare jeans and her hands were lying folded in her lap. The rise and fall of Grace's chest was captivating. Emma had an urge to reach out and slide her hand over the soft, supple skin. She imagined what it would be like to touch those hands and feel the strength of them on her body.

Grace opened her eyes and looked directly at her. Emma flushed and looked away feeling like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Her heart pounded wildly. She thought Grace might be able to hear it. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“Just a cat nap.” Grace's eyes twinkled and Emma had the irrational thought that Grace could read exactly what she was thinking.

Grace shifted to face Emma and asked, “What brought you back here?”

“I couldn't afford to stay in New York after I got laid off. I was going to, but Kate told me she was leaving and moving to Florida.”

“Who's Kate?”

“My ex.” Emma said her eyes fixed on the green clover growing mixed in among the blades of grass. Never before had a trefoil with its dense spikes of white flowers been so interesting.

“Were you together long?”

“Nine years,” Emma replied, her heart sinking and her eyes filling with tears. “Shit.”

“What's wrong?”

“I can't help it. I cry when I'm happy. I cry when I'm sad and I cry when I'm pissed.”

“I'm a pretty good listener if you want to talk about it.”

“Oh my God,” Emma groaned wiping away tears. “I didn't come out to here to dump my sad story on you.”

“It's okay. I don't mind.”

“I just keep going over everything in my head.”

Grace reached across and squeezed Emma's hand. “It might help. I promise I won't tell anyone. Honey and Bella are pretty good at keeping secrets too.”

Laughing now, Emma wiped her eyes with her other hand and took a steadying breath.

“When I look back on what happened I think we both checked out a long time ago. I worked long hours and Kate bar-tended. Our schedules were crazy. My job didn't leave me with much free time.” Emma didn't smile, her gaze distant. She felt disturbed acknowledging what she just had said. “I wondered if Kate just got tired of being alone.”

“Were you doing the same kind of work when you met her?”

Emma nodded and swallowed the lump in her throat. “I had just started at the firm. Back then I was working six, sometimes seven days a week.”

“That sounds more like a jail sentence than work.”

“Isn’t that what you do though?” Emma asked.

Grace rocked her head back and forth. “There are few days off, but it’s different. I’m outside almost every day—all day. We’re planting, harvesting, doing maintenance or tending to the animals. The farmer’s markets are social events. In the winter, we take three weeks off and completely close down.”

“As a woman it was the only way I could get ahead in a brokerage of that size. We always had to work harder, faster and God forbid don’t screw up because everyone in the office would know if you did.”

“Seems to me Kate knew what the score was going in,” Grace said.

“I guess. I think she expected that the hours wouldn’t always be so demanding,” Emma said.

“Maybe, but she benefitted from your work, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, we took trips but—”

“But what? It wasn’t enough?” Grace asked.

“No, that was only once or twice a year.”

“Only,” Grace scoffed. “That’s more than what most people I know are able to afford these days or did she not read the newspapers or look online at the stories to see how lucky she was to have that lifestyle?”

“I don’t know.” Thrown back to her days as a child when life was easy and carefree, Emma twirled grass blades between her fingers pretending they were helicopter blades. “I think it’s easier for people, including myself, not to look at what’s going on around us.”

“Denial is a powerful drug,” Grace said.

Emma laughed in spite of herself. “Indeed.”

“She cheated on you, didn’t she?”

Emma’s head snapped up. “What?”

“Kate, she cheated on you.”

Emma felt Grace studying her and when she glanced her way those blue eyes revealed nothing of what lay in the depths behind them. “How do you know she cheated on me?”

“Because I’m looking at you and you’re wearing the hurt on your sleeve. Am I wrong?”

“No. I had to pull it out of her, but Kate finally admitted she met this woman six months before she left for Florida.” Emma was silent for a moment. “It’s not all her fault you know.”

“Every relationship has its problems, but if someone breaks that trust it almost doesn’t matter whose fault it is.”

Emma stared down at her hands and dropped the blades of grass she was playing with. “Kate told me she was leaving the day I got laid off.”

“Wow, way to kick somebody when they’re already down on their luck. What did you do?” asked Grace.

“I went into survival mode. I sold all my stuff. Looked for a cheaper apartment and finally decided to move into my dad’s old lake house. The end.”

“Oh I doubt that.”

“Why?”

“You’re a survivor. You already said you were.”

“I still manage to crawl into some pretty dark places in my mind.”

“You seem to be handling what happened pretty well.”

Emma gave a self-deprecating laugh. “I’m glad you think so.”

Grace nudged Emma with her shoulder. “Well if the worst you’ve done is fall into the bottom of a bottle of wine that’s handling your losses pretty well in my book.”

“Thanks,” Emma said, wondering how it was that Grace seemed to be able to get her to talk about herself and yet Emma knew practically nothing about her. Curious, she asked, “What about you? What’s your story?”

Grace’s jaw twitched and her shoulders stiffened. “Does there have to be a story?”

“No, there doesn’t have to be.” From the cool tone in Grace’s voice, Emma knew she had touched upon a sore subject. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business,” she said, but the rebuff stung.

“What made you think there was a story?” Grace asked.

“Life is messy. At this stage of it we all have our stories,” Emma said watching a cloud of emotion fill Grace’s eyes.

Grace stood, carried the rifle over to Honey and secured it into the holster. “There’s nothing much to tell. Coaching and recruiting new soccer talent at the high school level took up most of my time.”

“No one special?” Emma asked.

“Not in a long time,” Grace said quietly.

Emma studied her face now, frowning. “Listen, I didn’t mean to pry. I just was curious to know something about you.”

Grace ran her hands absently over Honey’s neck in a soothing motion. She paused then said, “You do know something about me. I come up here to think and work my problems out. I don’t think my family even realizes I still come up here to do that anymore.”

Emma looked away self-consciously. She took in the lush green vegetation and the surface of the pond reflecting the blue sky and clouds overhead. Grace’s admission was unexpected. There was more to what Grace was telling her, Emma felt that for sure. Today wasn’t going to be the day to find out.

Out of sorts and feeling a sense of disquiet, Emma stood and said, “Thanks for sharing this place with me. It’s really beautiful.”

Grace blinked, seeming to come back from wherever she was in her mind. She brushed the dirt from the seat of her pants. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Emma walked over to Bella. She ran her hands over the horse’s muscular shoulders and patted her broad neck. “Thanks for letting me ride you today and not tossing me onto my ass.”

Grace laughed and gathered Bella’s reins. “Next time I’ll teach you how to ride her while she’s trotting.”

“Next time?” Emma asked.

“Why not? You can’t just have one riding lesson. Besides you’re still going to come on Sunday aren’t you?” Grace asked.

“Is the invitation still open?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t it be?” Grace’s brow furrowed and she stuck her hands into her pockets.

Emma stood on her tippy toes and spoke into one of Honey’s ears. “Tell your Mom I don’t think I’m ready to learn how to trot just yet.”

Grace climbed up into the saddle. “We’ll see about that. You might be surprised at what you can do with a little practice.”

Chapter Nine

EMMA DROVE TOWARD home beneath a canopy of Maples. Across the landscape the leaves were beginning to fade from a vibrant green of summer to shades of yellow. It made her sad to think that summer was coming to a close and fall was right around the corner. Autumn portended winter and for Emma the long nights and short days left her feeling melancholy.

Ten minutes later, when she pulled into her driveway, Emma saw a white Audi parked in front of her.

Irritation pricked at her as she shoved the door open. “Who in the heck is here? Oh it better not be that damn realtor. I’ll kick her sorry butt.” Emma stepped out of her car her eyes searching until she saw her sister, Lindsey, walk around the corner of the house.

“Oh my God! What are you doing here?” Emma exclaimed throwing her arms around her in a fierce hug.

“Visiting you. You never called back and I got worried. You sounded depressed the last time I talked to you,” Lindsey said returning the embrace. She wrinkled her nose when she pulled away. “Where have you been? You smell like...horses.”

“I was horseback riding this morning.”

Lindsey placed a hand to Emma’s forehead. “Okay. No fever. What gives? My sister does not ride horses. What have you done with her?”

“Hey.” Emma pushed Lindsey’s hand away. “Knock it off! I decided to learn something new.” Emma walked past her and unlocked the door, realizing as she did that she was looking forward to another riding lesson with Grace. “Do you want coffee?”

“If you’re offering sure. Whoa!” Lindsey stopped in the living room and gawked at the holes in the wall. “Holy crap! You weren’t kidding.”

“What would make you think I was? My lovely tenants left me quite a welcome home present.”

“Oh my,” Lindsey said with her hand fluttering over her chest in that “oh you poor thing” kind of a way.

“You should have seen this place. It took me weeks to get it clean.”

“The insurance would have paid for it. Why didn’t you just hire somebody to do all the work?” Lindsey’s phone pinged and she pulled it from her bag to check it. Her fingers quickly typed a response to whoever sent her a text and she tucked the phone back away.

“This is where you’re going to think I’m an ass.” Emma walked into the kitchen, opened a cabinet and retrieved two mugs.

“No I won’t.”

Emma turned and faced Lindsey her cheeks flaming. “I forgot to pay the damn home owner’s insurance.”

“You did not.” Lindsey’s eyes popped open wide. “You never forget things like that.”

“Oh yes I did.”

“Well, we’ve all made some bonehead moves in our lives.”

“I don’t know about you, but this certainly ranks at the top of my list.” Emma hugged herself. “I was hoping that at this point in my life I would be past making those kinds of mistakes. Apparently I’m not.” She felt like Alice in Wonderland falling down the rabbit hole, except every time she thought she was close to hitting the bottom she just kept falling farther.

Lindsey threw her head back and laughed. “Don’t you know perfection is over rated? I guess it could always be worse. They could have stripped the copper pipes out of the house. That happened to one of my friends’ summerhouse last year. They tore every scrap of copper out from the basement all the way up to the second floor bathrooms. Everywhere the pipes ran was gutted down to the studs.”

Emma’s mouth dropped open. “That’s awful.”

“Marley was so distraught they had the insurance cover the repairs and then sold the house.”

“I still can’t believe I forgot to pay the insurance. What an idiot I am.” Emma ran cold water into the glass pot and poured it into the coffee maker.

Lindsey moved closed and clasped her sister’s shoulder. “It’s done. Don’t beat yourself up over it.”

“Easier said than done with the mess I have to clean up.” Emma squeezed her sister’s hand grateful for the support. “Mom called me. She’s coming up next week. She’s going to have a fit when she sees these damn holes.”

Lindsey’s expression changed to one of amusement. “You might want to put more water in that and make it three mugs.”

Emma eyed her suspiciously. “What are you talking about?”

“Mom’s on her way here right now.”

“This isn’t a visit. It’s an ambush!” Emma cried. She felt a tightening in her chest that came whenever her sister and mother were together in the same room with her. “Tell her she can’t come. I...I have the flu or something else that’s contagious.”

“It’s too late,” Lindsey said.

“Oh my God! She’s going to freak out.”

“So what?”

“How much time do we have before she descends on us?”

“Thirty minutes tops.”

Emma shoulders dropped in defeat. “I can’t believe you two schemed this up. Seriously? This is not fair.”

“You make it sound nefarious. When you didn’t call me back I got worried and called Mom. I suggested coming out for a visit and she invited herself along. What was I supposed to say?”

Emma filled the carafe with water and poured more into the coffee maker. “I can’t believe I’m making coffee. I need a shot of Tequila to get through this.”

“I could get you some.”

Emma screwed up her nose in distaste. “The last time I did shots of Tequila I ended up in the shower with my clothes on. Don’t ask,” she added catching the questioning look from Lindsey.

“I won’t then.”

“How did you manage to escape without the boys?”

“Brent is working from home this week. I told him I was going to come visit you for a day or two.”

“Ah, so he’s got the kids then. That’s a change.”

“Yeah, we’ll see how he does picking them up from school and managing homework. I precooked all the dinners and froze them so all he has to do is heat them in the oven.”

“Wow, I wish someone would make my dinners for me. You make it so easy for him.” Emma had a sudden flash of insight. “Maybe that’s our problem. We make things too easy for whoever we’re with because we’re afraid they’ll leave us. What do you think?”

“If that’s the case, I’ve made things too easy for Brent all these years.”

Something in Lindsey’s expression made Emma stop and look more closely at her. “Is everything all right? What’s going on that you’re not telling me?”

“Brent and I got into this huge fight about me going away and him having to take care of the kids.”

“I don’t understand. What’s the big deal? You take care of the boys all the time.”

“The only other time I’ve been away since the boys were born was to come to Dad’s funeral. Do you know how many business trips Brent’s been on and I’ve had the kids alone?”

“He goes away at least twice a month.” Emma recalled from prior discussions with Lindsey.

“Yeah, and it’s not like it’s for a night or two. He’s gone for a week at a time at least.”

“So what’s his problem?”

“He thinks I shouldn’t be going anywhere unless I bring the kids with me. They’re my job, as he put it.”

“You’re kidding me,” Emma said. “Does he realize what year this is?”

“I told him it would be a good chance for him to spend time to bond with his sons.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. He went back into his office and slammed the door. He pops out of the office for meals and crawls back in until the kids go to bed. He’s always on that computer.”

Emma jumped at the ferocity of Lindsey’s tone. “Linds, I had no idea things were like that.”

“Brent feels he’s fulfilled his parenting duties by showing up for meals and asking a few questions about the boys’ day.” With tears in her eyes, Lindsey balled her hand into a fist and banged it against her thigh. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dump my problems on you.”

“Have you said anything to him, I mean, before you had this fight?”

“I’ve tried. Brent just doesn’t get it. Somehow, I’m supposed to be able to do it all—work, make all the meals, take care of the kids and keep a clean house. Frankly, I feel like a single parent. What the hell do I need him around for?”

“You don’t mean that,” Emma said.

“I’m not so sure I don’t anymore,” Lindsey said. “This isn’t supposed to be about me.”

“It’s okay. Listening to you takes my mind off my own problems for awhile,” Emma admitted.

“Glad to be of assistance,” Lindsey said ruefully.

“How *are* Austin and Miles?” Emma asked.

“Miles loves fifth grade. Austin, not so much. He just doesn’t get the social aspect of school.”

“Is he still getting therapy?” Austin was diagnosed with autism when he was three years old.

“Yeah, we finally got the school to agree to continue the services. They gave us such a hassle this year,” Lindsey said.

“I’ve heard special services are one of the first things the districts try and cut from the budgets,” Emma said.

“You’ve heard right. Ever since the government said the schools had to use the least restrictive environment to teach in, it opened up a myriad of ways to water down what services the schools provide. I know parents who’ve become special education consultants because of their experience getting services for their child.”

“You’d be great at doing that. With as much as you’ve done to advocate for Austin you’d be a pro at it.”

“Thanks. If I were my own boss it would be a different story.”

“Have you talked to anyone else about you and Brent?”

Lindsey appeared uncomfortable at this question. “What do you mean?”

“A counselor?” Emma prompted.

“I actually started talking to someone two months ago. I couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Take what?”

“Brent. He’s indifferent. Sometimes I think he just doesn’t care about me or the boys anymore.”

“I’m glad to hear you’re talking to someone. Do you think it’s helping you?” Emma asked.

“It’s given me more clarity. I know I have to talk to Brent and tell him how I honestly feel.”

“Have you asked him to go with you?” Emma pulled out a kitchen chair and motioned to Lindsey to sit.

“I mentioned that I was going to talk to someone, but I didn’t ask him to go yet.”

“Why not?”

“I chickened out. I feel like I’m admitting defeat by going to talk to someone,” Lindsey said.

“I’d say just the opposite. Admitting that you need help and actually doing something about it is nothing but courageous in my book. You have to talk to him. If Brent knew how you really felt I’m sure he would go.”

Lindsey clasped Emma’s arm and said, “I can’t believe we waited so long to get together. Enough talk about my problems. I can’t believe you got laid off.”

“Neither can I.”

“How are you doing?” Lindsey asked.

Emma leaned her hip against the counter. “It depends on the day.”

“Really?”

“Mostly I’m just numb. I keep thinking I’m going to wake up from this nightmare, but I’m not because this is my life now.”

“I’m so pissed at Kate for leaving you,” Lindsey said. “What the hell happened? I thought you two were solid.”

“I guess I was deluding myself thinking that we were. I was working ridiculous hours and she was bartending at night. How could I possibly think that everything was okay between us?”

“That doesn’t make it okay for her to just walk away. She could have at least talked to you.”

“Maybe she tried and I wasn’t listening,” Emma said quietly and tears blurred her vision.

“Do you think that’s what really happened or are you just taking all the responsibility on your shoulders? Because I know you and that’s what you do when someone hurts you,” Lindsey asked softly.

Emma folded her arms and regarded her sister. “I don’t know. I keep going over everything that happened.”

“Mom’s worried sick about you.”

“Well tell her there’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be fine.”

“You can tell her yourself when she gets here.”

“Fabulous.”

Lindsey picked up the saltshaker sitting on the table and examined it before she spoke again. “But you’re living out here alone in Dad’s lake house of all places. You know what she said to me?”

“I can only imagine.” Emma wiped the counter where she had dripped water.

“There’s nothing there. She needs to be somewhere she can get a real job,” Lindsey said pitching her voice higher to mimic their mother’s.

“Sounds just like something Mom would say,” Emma said. “She could simply call herself.”

“You know how she is. She wanted me to try and convince you to come to Boston.”

“Glad to hear that part of her hasn’t changed. Yes, she does like to direct everyone’s lives from the sidelines.”

“You could stay with us if you wanted to check Boston out before making a decision to move there,” Lindsey offered.

“I am not going to Boston. I left the city to get away from all the noise and chaos for a while. I can stay right here and fill out job applications online.”

“That’s what I told her.”

“Besides, I wanted some time to myself. What’s wrong with that?” Emma removed the pot from the hot plate and poured two cups of coffee. She handed one to Lindsey.

“Nothing’s wrong with it.”

“But…” Emma prodded.

“But nothing. How long are you planning on staying here?”

“I have no idea. I’ve got time to make a decision and figure out what I’m going to do.”

“There’s nothing to do out here.”

“Now you sound like Mom. Who says I need anything to do?”

I’ve spent fifteen years of my life working sixty to seventy hours a week. I got my ass kicked to the curb. If I want to do nothing for a couple of months who cares? It’s my life,” Emma said.

“This isn’t like you, Emma. You’re always so intense and driven. This self-imposed solitude must be driving you insane.”

“Actually, it’s not. Do you know I sat outside the other morning and watched the sunrise for the first time in years?”

“That’s great, but how many sunrises do you need to see?”

“As many as I choose to.”

“What’s going on with you?” Lindsey asked.

“Nothing. I’m just enjoying what it feels like not to be tied to an office for fifteen hours a day. I spent so much of my time chasing paper profits I barely had time to have a life outside of work.”

“I thought you loved your work.”

“Maybe I loved it because at the time the life it allowed me to live was important to me. I didn’t realize how much I was sacrificing to do the work that I did. And for what? To get my ass kicked to the curb because management got greedy and wanted even more profits.” Emma heard her voice getting louder and saw the wide-eyed look in her sister’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I just get so angry when I think about how degrading the whole ordeal was.”

“Don’t apologize.” Lindsey’s eyes twinkled and she asked mischievously, “So where did you take riding lessons? I didn’t know there were any stables around here.”

“I didn’t go to a stable,” Emma said and immediately wished she hadn’t shared the information.

“Really? Where did you go?” Lindsey asked.

“A friend.”

Exasperation colored Lindsey’s voice. “What is this on a need to know basis only? Does this friend have a name?”

“Do you remember the Moretti’s?” Emma watched as Lindsey furrowed her brow sorting through the list of their high school friends.

“Oh, I remember that hot, hunk of a man—what was his name? Michael. Those blue eyes and that gorgeous mane of jet black hair. I bet he’s probably bald now.”

“Lindsey you’re awful. I haven’t seen him. So I don’t know.” Emma poured herself more coffee trying desperately to stifle a grin as Lindsey came to the only logical conclusion.

“But that’s not...oh my God.” Lindsey set her cup down and bounced to her feet. “What is his sister’s name?”

“Grace,” Emma supplied.

“When did this happen?” Lindsey grabbed Emma’s arm and shook her.

“Stop it. Nothing has happened.”

“But something could happen.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Emma insisted.

“The hell there isn’t. You have this dreamy look in your eyes.”

“I do not. Maybe it’s...it’s the light coming in the window,” Emma stammered.

“I want details.”

“We talked a couple of times, that’s all.”

Lindsey eyed her dubiously. “You went to her farm and she took you horseback riding. Sweetheart that’s a date in my book.”

“It was not a date!” Emma said immediately and frowned, uncertain now whether it was or not. Was it a date? “Grace just showed me around. It was something interesting to do to pass the time.”

Lindsey asked, “Is she still as hot as she was in high school?”

Blushing furiously now, Emma said, “Jesus, Lindsey, that was a long time ago. We’ve all put on a few pounds since then.”

“I wasn’t blind. The guys were always sniffing around trying to figure out if she was available. There were a few girls who would have given anything to crawl into her pants.”

“All right now that’s just crude,” Emma said.

“Maybe, but it’s true. Tell me you didn’t notice her.”

“We didn’t run in the same circles.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Lindsey pressed.

“She was a jock and I was a nerd.”

“You were not a nerd.”

“I was a nerd,” Emma replied.

“Well, maybe a little, but I bet you still noticed her.” Lindsey looked up as gravel crunched outside and a car pulled in behind Emma’s. “Looks like Mom’s here.”

Emma’s stomach churned as she watched through the front window as their mother got out of the car and walked toward the house.

“Are you going to let her in or should I?” Lindsey asked.

Emma hesitated, then marched over and opened the door just as her mom was about to press the doorbell. “Hi, Mom.” A conflict of emotions roiled in her gut and she caught her mother’s appraising glance as her eyes swept up and down and then glued to the wall behind Emma.

“What happened here?” Lillian asked, brushing past Emma into the cottage.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking, Mom.” Emma shut the door and leaned against it as her mother swept into the room.

“Look at the holes in these walls.” Lillian strode into the kitchen and set her bag down on the table. “Now you find out being a landlord isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

Emma watched as her mother reached a hand out to open a cabinet door and at the last second restrained the impulse. “I can’t believe you kept this place and even worse you’re living here. It’s a dump. It always was.”

“Mom! Don’t say that,” Lindsey exclaimed and stepped toward Emma.

“Your father had this silly, nostalgic love affair with this cottage. It was and is a money pit. Something was always breaking and whatever it was you could count on it being expensive.”

“I have fond memories of the summers we spent here,” Emma said feeling like she’d been sucker punched.

“You’re going to be uncomfortable here in the winter. It’s drafty and...”

“There’s coffee. Do you want some?” Lindsey asked darting across the kitchen. She retrieved a mug and poured the brew into it. “Here.” She handed it to Lillian and said, “I like the cottage. After the repairs are made it will be as good as new. When it’s fixed, I’d love to bring the boys here, Emma. They would love exploring it.”

Emma walked to the kitchen window. She glanced towards the lake and a smile broke over her face. “Remember the winter we were here on school break?”

“Yes! It was so cold the lake froze thick enough for us to be able to skate on it,” Lindsey said. “Wasn’t there a blizzard and we missed an entire week of school?”

“We went sledding down the hill onto the lake.”

“I haven’t thought of that in years. That was some of the best sledding I’ve ever done in my life.”

Lillian heaped two scoops of sugar into the coffee and clanked the spoon against the edges as she stirred it. “You should get this place fixed and sell it as fast as you can. Then you can cut your losses and move on.”

“Mom, I know you hate this place because it reminds you of Dad, but I happen to like it. I’m not selling it. Besides this is where I’m living.”

Her mother made a face of disapproval and said, “Come down and live with me while the repairs are being made. At least it’s clean and safe. You have no idea who’s living around here anymore. I drove past houses that look empty. The front yards haven’t been kept up and the lots are overgrown with weeds. One has a notice on the front door. I bet the owner was foreclosed on.”

“I just got settled here. I’m not going to pick up and move again.”

“You’d be so much closer to the city. You could easily take the train in for interviews.”

There was her mother’s motive laid out for her, Emma thought. “No thanks, Mom. I’m staying here.”

“It would be better than living out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“That’s your opinion, but this is where I want to be,” Emma said.

“Who did you hire to fix the damage?” Lillian left her coffee cup on the counter and walked down the hall. She peaked into each bedroom and then disappeared into the bathroom.

Emma glanced at Lindsey and rolled her eyes. “No one.”

“What did you say?” Lillian stepped out of the bathroom.

“I said, no one.” Emma fought to keep her voice even.

“I don’t understand why haven’t you hired anyone?”

“I’m trying to do as much as I can myself.”

“Since when? You don’t know anything about construction or repairs,” Lillian said scrutinizing Emma with an expression that told her she wasn’t buying a word of it.

“Since I’m here and I have the time,” Emma said hoping her mother would back off on the Spanish inquisition.

“I just don’t understand why you would want to stay here. You don’t even know anyone.”

Emma and Lindsey exchanged a glance. Lindsey sucked her lips in stifling a grin. “That’s not exactly true,” Lindsey coughed as Emma smartly elbowed her in the ribs.

“Thanks,” Emma hissed. “Just remember paybacks are a bitch.”

Lillian strolled back down the hallway her eyes darting between her two daughters. “Or do you?”

“You remember the Moretti’s,” Emma said.

“Yes, I remember the family. There are two boys and a girl. All grown up now I suppose. That land is certainly worth a small fortune now. I’m surprised they haven’t sold it and retired.”

“Michael and Grace help out on the farm,” Emma said.

“They both went to college. Why would they want to be back on the farm doing that kind of back breaking work?”

“There’s more than just the physical labor. Someone has to manage when they plant and harvest the produce and then there’s all the animals they raise.”

“Oh. Sounds like you know quite a bit about their operation,” Lillian said raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t think you knew the family that well.”

“Grace took Emma around the farm on horseback this morning,” Lindsey said.

“Horseback? Since when do you ride horseback?” Lillian asked.

“Since Grace taught me.”

With a displeased expression on her face Lillian shook her head.

“What’s the matter?” Emma asked.

“There were always stories about the Moretti’s. Wild parties and there’s plenty of other stories I heard over the years.”

“They’re just rumors,” Emma snapped. “You don’t know any of what you just told me is true.”

“True or not, people listen to rumors. It’s human nature.”

“It’s gossip, Mother,” Lindsey said coming to Emma’s defense. “Even if it’s true what does it matter now?”

“You should be careful who you choose to spend your time with Emma. You’re trying to rebuild a career. Don’t get dragged down by choosing the wrong people to keep company with.”

AFTER BRUSHING DOWN the horses and giving them fresh water, Grace let them out into one of the pastures to roam for the day. She strolled past the cows while walking down the hill, her eyes studying the growth in the meadows. They mooed hello in between munching on weeds and grass.

Friends might think she was crazy. A couple had told her just that when they came home for the holidays. Grace held her tongue while they lectured her on the finer points of the life she was supposedly missing by living on the farm. She nodded and pretended she was listening, counting the minutes until they needed to catch their flight back to the city. It didn’t matter what they thought. She felt alive participating in the daily rituals of farm life.

Above her she heard a deep gurgling croak rising in pitch and the repeated shrill calls. Two ravens, perched atop of an evergreen on the same branch they shared for the past few weeks, were creating the ruckus. Grace glanced skyward searching for the source of their agitation.

She found it sitting on top of the silo. A magnificent eagle balanced on the ridgeline, keenly observing its domain. Grace wondered what captured the eagle's attention. Perhaps an unlucky squirrel or rabbit drew the predator's interest. Whatever it was the site of the avian was breathtaking.

Grace could feel the pulse of the farm while she walked over the hills and rolling pastures. It was times like these, when she was alone, that she considered the path she'd taken in life. She had few regrets about the decisions she made over the years and the one she least regretted was coming back here to help her parents manage the farm.

Her life was far from glamorous. Splitting wood, mending fences, herding cows from one pasture to another was a far cry from coaching women's soccer and winning championships, but it made her feel alive. At the end of each day, when she returned to the farmhouse, there was a meal made of farm grown food and family to share it with.

Over the years of growing up and working on the farm, Grace became a jack-of-all-trades. Plumber, electrician, vet, midwife and mechanic—today's specialty. When an equipment dealer was going out of business a few years back, Grace dragged Michael with her to negotiate a deal for a cat. Not the real four-legged furry meow making kind. They had enough of those mousers running around the farm already.

No, this beauty was a bulldozer with a rear winch. It was a trade-in and Grace managed to get it for forty percent off what the dealer paid for it. She was proud of herself—it was seventy-five percent off retail and hey, her mother had always taught her to never buy anything at full price. Of course, her mother hadn't had heavy machinery in mind when she taught Grace that valuable lesson all those years ago.

The winch developed a bad seal and wouldn't shut off the last time she used it to skid out firewood logs in the woods. She spent a couple of hours taking the drum apart, figured out what the problem was and ordered a twenty-five dollar part from an online supplier. It arrived two days ago and today she was intent on fixing it so they could get back to logging. Her efforts would save them close to a thousand dollars in what was an uncomplicated repair job.

There were a couple of hours of work ahead of her and Grace was glad for the distraction since she couldn't seem to stop thinking about Emma, which was ridiculous. Lord knows they had nothing in common. Although, she did seem genuinely interested in how they ran the farm, Grace doubted it was anything more than Emma politely engaging in conversation.

Footsteps behind her drew Grace's attention. Michael stood in the doorway with his arms folded watching her. "You didn't waste any time getting started."

Grace spared him an irritated glance as she secured the cables around the drum. "We've got a half dozen downed trees to pull out of the woods."

She activated the switch on the pulleys and guided the drum out of its mount and over to the worktable. Her father had designed the mechanical lift with reinforced ceiling tracks that allowed the load to be maneuvered to one of two work areas in the garage bay.

"I'm not talking about the winch you're hauling out of the cat."

"What are you talking about then?" Grace threaded out the bolts one by one and removed the housing.

"Emma Chamberlain."

"I was showing her around the farm."

“On horseback,” Michael added.

“Careful, someone might think you’re honing your observation skills,” Grace said while she used a nut driver to remove the drum support housing from the motor and disassembled it.

“And you’re a smart ass.”

“There you are.” Grace located the worn gasket and after a few minutes of fighting with it, pried the offending rubber loose. The new gasket was easy to install and she was finished with the repair quickly. “Are you planning on helping out or are you just on a fact finding mission for Mom?”

“You are no fun at all.” Michael pushed off the wall with an exaggerated sigh and walked towards her. “I thought you weren’t going to get involved with her.”

“I’m not. I’m just being neighborly.”

“Uh huh.”

“Hand me those gloves.” Grace pointed to a box on a shelf. “Thanks.”

Grace rubbed marine grade grease on all the gears, examining each mechanism as she went. Satisfied with her work, she reassembled the motor and housing then mounted the winch back onto the cat with the pulley system.

“By the way, what ever possessed you to hire Paula?”

“Why?”

Grace shot Michael a death look. “She’s not a good fit with the rest of the team.”

“I heard she’s looking to take a big juicy bite out of you.” Michael said with a big goofy grin on his face.

“Oh you think that’s funny. Do you?”

“Hey! Dammit that hurt.” Michael ducked away holding his arm where Grace had slugged him.

“How the hell do you know that?”

“One of the guys came back to the barn to get something and found you two in a clinch.”

“It was not a clinch,” Grace protested. “Jesus, the woman practically crawled on top of me.”

“And you’re complaining. I should have such problems,” Michael protested still rubbing his bicep. “Son of a bitch. That’s going to leave a bruise.”

“Stop whining,” Grace said.

“You punched me.”

“You deserved it. Why did you hire her?”

“She had a degree in animal husbandry from Michigan State and she knows her way around the farm.”

“I thought we agreed to hire the interns together.” Grace narrowed her eyes peering closely at him. “You’ve got that look on your face that tells me you’re guilty as hell about something.”

Michael looked away. “Tony asked me to hire her.”

“Come again? How does Tony know a girl from MSU? Better yet, why would you listen to him about hiring someone to work here?”

“It was a favor.” Michael stepped back as Grace brushed past him.

“A favor for what?”

“He said I owed him for when I wouldn’t loan him the money.”

“You’re telling me you let him guilt you into hiring someone?” Grace packed the tools away into her father’s heavy-duty red storage chest. “Now I really don’t like her.”

“Why?”

Grace closed the drawer of the chest banging it louder than she needed to. "I know Tony is family, but I don't trust his motives."

"Wow."

Grace turned and braced her hands on top of the chest. "Do you?"

"Not really."

"He must have really worked on you to hire her," Grace said.

"So that's it? You're not telling me anything else about you and Emma?" Michael asked.

"You're nosier than a girl." Grace climbed up into the bulldozer.

"Come on."

"Nope. I'm going to take the cat out for a test run. Want to come for a ride?"

Chapter Ten

EMMA SAT ALONE in her father's cottage watching the second-hand tick by on the clock. She'd been reading a book, something she hadn't done in ages, when she felt a wave of depression sweep over her. There was no warning. One minute light, the next dark, like she was drowning and the surface of the water was too far away to reach in time. She was acutely aware of how alone she felt.

Emma stared at the hole in the living room wall and slumped down into a chair. She didn't know how to fix it, just like she didn't know how to fix the gaping wound in her soul. There was something wrong with so much of her identity being wrapped up in what she did for work.

Lost.

She felt lost like a ship without a rudder drifting aimlessly at sea. It shouldn't be this way to have worked so hard for so long to have everything she accomplished ripped away. Everything she believed in and thought to be true was not. Loyalty and fidelity, words so easily bantered around the financial industry meant little when the trust they evoked was so callously broken.

It was time to be getting ready to drive over to the Moretti's. She imagined what the celebration would be like at the farm. There would be food, laughter and life. Part of her wasn't sure she wanted to be around any festivity.

God, she felt hollow, dead inside. She wanted to cry, but the tears wouldn't come anymore. It was an enormous effort to get up and think about getting dressed. Emptiness swallowed her and she struggled not to let it suck her into its all-consuming black void.

If she didn't go, would anyone miss her?

She wondered what Grace would think if she didn't show up. Maybe she'd be angry or indifferent. She didn't know why she cared what Grace thought. They were so different and their lives had taken completely different paths since high school. Chances are it wasn't Grace, but Mrs. Moretti who invited her. Did any of it matter? Emma shook her head in disgust for indulging in yet another jag of self-pity. It seemed to be something she was good at lately.

Except for her visit with Lindsey and her mother, Emma had spent most of the week holed up in the house. Her mother was aghast at the damage and wanted to hire someone immediately to fix everything. Emma said no, more out of stubborn pride and not wanting to be beholden to her mother for anything.

What the hell was she doing here? She should be out pounding the pavement looking for a job. Instead here she was hiding out in her hometown licking her wounds.

Pathetic.

Emma had no idea what she was trying to accomplish by being here at her father's cottage. She was living off her unemployment checks for now. She had time she told herself. Time for what she still hadn't figured out. Maybe divine intervention would strike.

Her job search had turned up exactly nothing. What if she didn't find anything? What then? She had no idea and that alone was terrifying her. She was supposed to be working. Maybe she should go back to New York City and take a job doing anything just so she could be close to

where Wall Street was. That was where she was supposed to be, but Wall Street had kicked her to the curb and didn't want its discards back.

Emma cursed at the effort it took to walk to the bathroom. She took a quick shower trying to wash away the fatigue that walked hand-in-hand with the depression. After she brushed some blush on her cheeks she studied herself in the mirror. Her cheeks were a little hollow. It was hard to cook for one person and her appetite had fled with her enthusiasm for everyday life. She forced a smile, flicked off the light and grabbed her purse on the way out the door.

When she arrived at the Moretti's farm she was surprised to see the number of cars that made a line up the driveway. Thankful for having the common sense to dress casually and wear walking shoes, she parked behind the last vehicle, picked up the pot of brightly colored Gerber daisies she bought on her way over and walked toward the farmhouse.

A green net suspended between tree branches created a shady roof from the heat of the afternoon sun. Beneath it, three long trestle tables were set up in a row surrounded by chairs for thirty people. Citronella candles dotted the top of each table.

One of the trucks the Moretti's used to bring food to the farmer's markets was parked in front of one of the outbuildings and two men unloaded empty crates and boxes from the back.

Laughter and happy voices floated from one of the open windows in the house. Heaviness settled in Emma's gut and she struggled to put a smile on her face before she walked up onto the porch. She barely took a step when the screen door banged open and two curly haired boys burst through the opening laughing and squealing on their way past her. Intent on their mission, they barely noticed her as they raced up the driveway and out of sight, their young exuberant voices carried away on the breeze.

Emma climbed the steps and knocked on the door. Lucy Moretti appeared in the hallway wearing an apron around her waist with a towel hanging from one of the pockets.

"Emma! Don't stand out there. Come in. Come in." She welcomed her kissing her once on each cheek. "I'm so glad you came."

"Thanks for having me. These are for you, Mrs. Moretti." She handed the pot to her.

"They're beautiful, so bright and cheerful—pinks, reds and yellows." She lifted the pot and turned it in her hands. "I love them. We'll put them out on one of the tables. Put your bag in the closet. One more thing Emma."

"Yes?"

"Call me Lucy from now on."

"I'll try."

Lucy opened the door to a closet. "Put your bag on the shelf. It'll be fine there. Now let me introduce you," Lucy said as she welcomed Emma into the kitchen where she was met with an even warmer blast of air. The rich smell of basil, oregano, tomatoes and garlic filled the air. Two enormous pots were bubbling away on the stove.

"Everyone this is Emma. She and Grace know each other from high school." A half dozen people looked up from their work around the kitchen, smiled and said hello.

"That's Rose by the sink. Arturo and Nate are at the end of the table and Jessica by the stove. That's Paula," Lucy said indicating a red-haired green-eyed beauty dressed in cut-off shorts with fringe barely covering the generous curve of her ass. A blue button down shirt was tied below her breasts exposing her bare mid-drift. The woman walked over to the counter carrying a crate of red tomatoes the size of softballs.

"Hi," green eyes said and Emma was very aware of the cool, appraising look she was on the receiving end of.

“Nice to meet you.” Emma went with the kill her with kindness routine.

Her attempt at being nice fell flat as Paula cut her eyes away from Emma in nothing less than a curt dismissal. “Where do you want me to put these crates, Lucy?”

“Set them on the table by the window.”

“I’ll be back. There’s more to bring.”

“You have an assembly line going,” Emma said watching as they filled quart-sized containers with peppers stuffed with ground meat and sauce.

“It’s that time of year. We have a glut of tomatoes, peppers and eggplants.”

The back door opened and a man with metal-framed glasses walked in bringing with him the rich aroma of roasted meat. “That’s Ed. He’s in charge of the grill today.”

“Hi.” Ed waved as he walked to the counter and retrieved two large metal pans.

“Ed works down at the soup kitchen. Although he wouldn’t tell you himself he’s an amazing chef.”

The door opened again and the two boys she’d seen race off the porch appeared inside the door. Twins, she realized.

“And those two rascals,” Lucy said, “Are Michael’s boys.”

“Jonah and Tyler. Not that you’ll be able to tell them apart mind you. Some days I just want to write J and T on their arms.” Big brown eyes, dark curly hair and angelic faces smudged with dirt peered back at Emma. Both wore shorts, one dressed in a green t-shirt and the other in black with Sponge Bob plastered proudly across his chest. “You two need to clean up before we eat.”

One of them reached out and tugged at Lucy’s apron. “What Jonah?” Lucy asked leaning down toward him.

He held his hand up cupping it around her ear and whispered something to her.

Lucy listened with a serious expression on her face then straightened when Jonah finished whispering in her ear. “I see. Did you ask your father?” She cast a knowing glance at Emma and folded her arms.

Emma bit back a smile, realizing she was probably watching a scene that played out with some regularity.

Jonah shook his head.

“Do you need it or want it?” Lucy asked.

“Nana, don’t ask me that question,” Jonah protested.

“Why not?”

“Cause it’s not fair,” Jonah pouted.

Lucy set her hands on her hips and regarded him with a cool expression. “Really? What’s not fair about it?”

“I don’t want to have to think about it.”

“Ah and there in lies the truth. So, which is it?”

Jonah furrowed his brow in concentration. “Need.”

“You do? Since when did wants become needs in this house?”

“Nana,” he cried in exasperation.

The screen door opened and Mr. Moretti ambled through. “Figures I’d find you two trouble makers hanging around the kitchen. What happened to helping your father move the chicken tractor into the next field?”

“We already helped him,” Tyler piped in.

“Oh you did. Did you? Jonah.”

“Yes, Pop?”

“Stop pestering Nana. She’s busy. G’wan, the both of you go help your father, now.”

“Okay, Pop,” they both said and scampered away.

Mr. Moretti regarded Emma and smiled. “It’s good to see you, Emma.”

“Thanks, Mr. Moretti.”

“It’s been a long time since we saw you last.”

“It’s good to be here,” Emma said.

“Make yourself at home. Mike and Grace are finishing up. They’ll be here shortly.” He moved closer to his wife and kissed her on the cheek. “God that smells good, Lucy.”

“Don’t go sticking your fingers in to taste anything,” Lucy chided as she glanced over at Emma. “I have to keep an eye on all of them. They’re famous for snatching a taste of whatever’s cooking right out of the pot.”

Emma watched Lucy laugh and look into her husband’s eyes. She saw the warmth of love and family between them. Yet, surrounded by all these people, Emma felt alone.

She thought briefly about Kate. Emma realized that even early in their relationship Kate had never looked at her with that carefree expression of love.

Emma looked away, gathering herself before she asked, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Arturo, how many more peppers do you need prepped?” Lucy asked.

Arturo was a lean man with a wiry build. His curly, shoulder length hair was pulled back off his face into a ponytail. “At least thirty.”

“You’ve got an extra set of hands now so it will go quickly. Give Emma a knife to use.”

“Here’s another crate of tomatoes,” Paula announced when she walked back into the kitchen.

“Put them on the bench. I think we may just send people home with these. It’s too much to get done today.”

“I’ll go help Grace,” Paula announced loudly enough for everyone to hear and Emma couldn’t help wonder if it was for her benefit as well.

Emma walked over and watched as Arturo neatly sliced the top off a red bell pepper, deseeded it and cut out the ribs.

He set it in a large silver bowl, twirled the knife in his hand and offered her the handle. “Here Ms. Emma,” he said with a wink.

Emma set to work. It was simple and uncomplicated standing in the Moretti’s kitchen amid the friendly banter. She sensed the connection among the group and wished for the same sense of belonging in her life.

She’d cut ten of the juicy sweet smelling peppers when Lucy said, “Emma can you go into the pantry. I need some more garlic.”

“Sure,” Emma said wiping her hands on a damp dishtowel. “How many do you need?”

“Three should do.”

Emma stepped into the pantry, never guessing what she’d find behind the heavy oak paneled door. The light that spilled through behind her sparkled off of rows of jewel toned fruit made into jams. Jars of tomato sauce preserved from the summer’s harvest lined the shelves. There were baskets of potatoes, squash and garlic lined up on the floor where the air was cooler. Emma retrieved several heads of garlic and brought them to Lucy.

“Thanks, dear,” Lucy said when Emma handed her the heads of bulbs.

It wasn’t long before she heard children laughing and Michael outside calling for Jonah and Tyler. “Boys it’s time to wash up.”

Michael held the door open as Jonah and Tyler barreled into the kitchen and were immediately corralled by their grandmother. “Away from the stove both of you. I put clean

towels in the bathroom upstairs,” she said looking disapprovingly at Michael. “What did you do? Roll with the pigs?”

“Thanks, Mom,” he said with a deadpan look in her direction.

“Michael Moretti, don’t you dare. You’re all sweaty and full of God knows what.” Lucy said holding up her hands to ward off his advance.

Michael leaned over with a roguish grin and gave her a kiss on the cheek spotting Emma across the room as he did. “Hi, Emma. Grace mentioned you were coming. How are you settling in at the lake house?”

“It’s quiet, but it suits me.”

“Nice.”

“The three of you go and take a shower,” Lucy said, hustling the boys toward their father.

Jonah and Tyler grabbed hold of Michael’s arms attempting to climb up him like a tree.

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go.”

Their boisterous voices receded down the hallway. Arturo leaned closer to Emma and said, “You know how to handle a knife very well. Do you cook?”

“I know my way around the kitchen,” Emma replied aware that she was being silently assessed from across the kitchen by Rose.

The woman had a wavy mass of shoulder length brunette hair sun kissed with copper highlights. Her face boasted round almond colored eyes and generous lips that pursed now as she watched with the possessive nature of a woman who thought her territory was being threatened.

“Arturo, can you help me move this pot to other side of the stove?” Rose asked in a throaty voice.

Arturo spared barely a glance in her direction before he answered. “It’s fine where it is.”

“It’s not and I need you to help me move it, now.”

Emma caught Lucy rolling her eyes toward heaven. After the pot was moved, Rose said, “We’ll be right back, Lucy,” as she directed a bewildered Arturo towards the door.

“Take your time, Rose,” Lucy called over her shoulder.

“Did I miss something?” Emma asked.

“Arturo’s got a perpetual case of roving eyes,” Mr. Moretti chimed in from his seat at the table.

“Peter!” Lucy exclaimed.

“It’s true,” he said with a mischievous laugh.

“But I…”

“Don’t worry, Emma. It’s nothing you did,” Lucy assured

her. Through the doorway Emma could hear Arturo’s insulted voice. “What’s the matter with you. I’m just being friendly.”

“There’s friendly and then there’s your kind of friendly. One day you’ll figure the difference out.”

The screen door opened and Grace entered with quick, competent strides. “Ah, at least one of my children had the good sense not to play in the mud today,” Lucy exclaimed.

“I cleaned up first,” Grace said a look of confusion playing across her face.

Lucy looked up from peeling the garlic. “Maybe you could teach Michael that trick.”

“Sorry, it wasn’t my turn to watch him today. We need to work on the fence in the second pasture tomorrow,” Grace said to her father.

“We’ll do it first thing tomorrow since the cows rotate there next.”

Emma stopped cleaning the peppers long enough to get caught in Grace's quiet regard. Her dark hair damp from the shower hung down above her shoulders. She wore a light blue Henley with the sleeves pushed up to her elbows and dark jeans that showed off her athletic body. Her blue eyes were vivid against her tanned skin.

"I see you got put to work," Grace said, walking behind Emma and peering into the bowl. The subtle perfume Grace wore swirled pleasantly in the air around Emma and she found herself holding still. A thrill rushed up her spine when Grace spoke again, her warm voice close by her ear. "Leave this for Arturo. Where is he anyway?" she asked glancing around the kitchen.

Lucy stirred the sauce in the pot and said, "Outside with Rose."

"What'd he do now?"

"Don't ask," Peter replied. "He's getting scolded again."

"Come outside with me." Grace tugged at Emma's arm.

"I haven't finished yet."

"You're here to relax today. Not work."

"You mean I don't have to muck out the barn with you?" Emma teased.

"Grace Marie you did not tell her she had to help you with that chore." Lucy waved a spoon threateningly at her daughter.

Grace winked at Emma. "Done—early this morning."

Lucy waved them both away. "Go. There's not much else to do here. Did Tony tell you what time he was coming, Grace?"

A silence settled on the room at the mention of Tony's name and Emma wondered what that was about.

"No. I haven't heard from him." Grace moved past her mother and added, "Not that I expected to."

"Let me wash my hands." Emma moved to the sink and ran the water while she pumped soap into her palm. The door closed and she realized Grace slipped out just as the door on the other side of the kitchen opened and Paula walked in looking madder than a hornet's nest.

She didn't know what had caused the woman's annoyance, but she was certain she didn't want to stick around to find out.

"Can you set these on the tables outside?" Lucy handed Emma a basket of utensils.

"Of course," Emma said carrying the basket with her.

On her way out, Emma witnessed Lucy intercept Paula and say, "Let's get started on these tomatoes." This only added to the level of irritation that radiated from Paula.

A warm breeze kissed Emma's face and carried with it a hint of honeysuckle and the smell of freshly cut grass. A strong sense of déjà vu overwhelmed her and Emma stopped on her way to the tables trying to sort out the cause of the emotions roiling inside.

"I thought you might enjoy some time away from all the craziness inside." Emma spun around to see Grace leaning casually against the rail of the porch observing her.

"I didn't see you standing there," Emma said, wondering how she missed her.

"You looked lost in thought when you came outside." A smile crossed Grace's lips as she climbed down the steps, lifted the basket from Emma's hands and set it on the table. "When everyone gets together it can be a bit overwhelming."

"I don't mind it."

"You're a good sport," Grace said with a lopsided smile. "I've got something I think you'll like."

"What's that?" Emma asked.

“Come with me and you’ll see.” Grace strode toward the brick red building with oversized garage doors. Emma joined her inside. The walls were painted beige and the floor was concrete. The pungent smell of fermenting grapes hung heavy in the air and filled her nose. Grace pointed at two large stainless steel casks lying on their sides.

“Those are two batches of wine from last years grapes. The one on the right is sweeter and the other cask has a drier finish to it. Do you have a preference?”

“I have to confess I like the sweeter wines.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” Grace said as she walked behind a bar height counter.

“What’s this made of?” Emma asked running her fingertips along the grain of the wood.

Grace leaned across the worktop and peered down at the wood. “Reclaimed lumber.” She reached under the bar and pulled out a bottle. “My father came across these wood doors awhile back. Someone was renovating an old house and threw them away.”

“I bet they had no idea what they were throwing out. They’re beautiful pieces of wood.”

“He came home with them in the back of the truck one night. He spent a couple of weeks stripping off the paint and re-stained them. When he was done, he designed and built the bar, with Michaels’ help.”

Emma looked down feeling a pressure against her leg. “Oh, who’s this?”

Grace stepped around the bar and peered down. “That’s barn cat.”

“Wait, you mean he doesn’t have a real name?” Emma scratched between the tabby’s ears and was rewarded with a deep throated purring. A second later, the feline flopped over onto its side and batted her hand. “I guess you don’t want me to pet you anymore.”

“A typical cat,” Grace said. “It’s always on their terms.”

Emma found herself studying the long, tapered fingers of Grace’s hands, mesmerized by the corded muscles contracting in her wrist as she twisted the corkscrew and pulled the cork out. She pushed back the attraction that caught her unaware and seemed to be obliterating her common sense. Emma forced her attention to an oak barrel with a press on top and inanely asked. “Your father still makes his wine by hand?”

“Yeah. He loves to hand crank the grapes through the press.”

“What’s funny?” Emma asked watching the smile play at the corners of Grace’s mouth.

“I’m just thinking how much I love to do it, too. There’s something about making the wine by hand. Here.” Grace poured the wine into two glasses and handed one across to Emma. “We do a wine tasting in the fall for the CSA members.”

“You have a busy calendar with all these different events going on.”

“It just becomes part of the routine. Today my mom cooks, but the people inside are helping to preserve some of the harvest for winter. They get to take a portion home and Mom gets to keep alive the traditions she likes without it consuming her whole life. It’s too much for one person to do.”

Emma lifted the glass to her nose and inhaled the fragrant vapors. “Mmm. I taste berries in here.”

“Straight from our blackberry bushes.”

“You grow almost everything that you make,” Emma said.

“Just about.”

“Does your mom charge for her time?” Emma asked still thinking about Grace’s mom.

“No. Most of the people who are here work on the farm so she uses it as a way to barter with them.”

“If she wanted to she could invite a limited number of people from the public for a fee. She could teach them a skill and they get to take home something from the efforts.” Emma gave a half smile at Grace’s curious look. “Sorry. It’s an old Wall Street habit. How can we repackage something and sell it to make money.”

“It’s not a bad idea. In fact it’s a very good one. I’m so wrapped up in the day-to-day operations on the farm that I don’t even think about things like that in terms of being a source of income.”

“It could be. You find a reasonable price point and promote it.”

Grace smiled and motioned with her glass. “Well then, cheers.”

“What are we toasting?” Emma leaned on the tabletop and swirled the ruby colored wine in her glass.

Grace tilted her head as if in thought. “Life.”

Emma dipped her head. “It’s been a bitch lately.”

“My father always says there has to be bad days so you appreciate the good days.”

“I always knew your father was a wise man.”

Grace sipped from her glass and walked around the counter. She worked the cork back into the bottle and left it sitting on the counter. “We’ve got some time before we’re expected back for dinner. Let’s walk.”

Emma fell into step alongside Grace as they ambled past the barn and supply sheds on their way up the hill. They walked for a while in silence and Emma took in the sounds around her. Bees and insects buzzed around them landing on wild flowers and flying off to the next with saddlebags of pollen stuck to their feet. In the meadow off to the right, a herd of cows grazed contentedly on the sweet grass.

Emma realized she hadn’t felt the darkness sucking her energy away since she’d gotten here. Maybe it was the sunshine or the fresh air. Or maybe it was this altered state she felt being around Grace.

Grace stopped at the fence and draped her arms over the top rail. Her gaze drifted out across the fields and she seemed miles away for a moment.

“They’re beautiful creatures. They have such soulful eyes.” Emma reached out and touched one of the cows that wandered over. The young looking heifer moved closer and made snuffling noises as it sniffed at Emma curiously through the fence.

“They are beautiful animals,” Grace agreed.

“Do you get attached to them?”

“Attached? When I was younger sure. I cried whenever it was time for them to go to the butcher. It still makes me sad.”

“I couldn’t do it.”

“They live a good life here, Emma. They’re out free-ranging on green pastures in the sunshine until the first snows and then they graze on the hay that we harvest.”

“Until it’s time to slaughter them.”

“Yes, until then they live a good life.”

“Some people find that offensive.”

“Do you?” Grace regarded her quietly.

“No, I eat meat but, honestly, I never thought about what I ate as being a living, breathing creature before it gets to my plate.”

“Most people don’t. They’re too far removed from what it takes to raise and grow their food. I know what we do for our animals is a hundred times more humane than what they do on the industrial farms. Bottom line is people need to eat. What we produce is good clean meat.”

“You sound passionate about it.”

“I am. People should have access to good clean food.”

“Is that why you donate food to the soup kitchen?” Emma pulled her hand away when the cow tried to lick her hand.

“It’s part of it. The reality is that those people could be you or I on any given day.” Grace rubbed the back of her neck with her hand. “Sorry. That just came out.”

“It’s all right. It’s true and there’s nothing wrong with saying it.” Iridescent dragonflies darting here and there between the tall grasses caught Emma’s attention. A purple one touched down on her hand. It rested only a second or two before lifting off in agile flight. “Are you glad you came back to the farm?”

“Yeah, I am. I always came back on weekends and holidays to work. That’s different than being here the entire year and managing things from start to finish. Now that I’ve been here it’s hard to think about going back to what I was doing.”

“It must have been difficult to leave something that you loved so much.” Emma said leaning against the fence.

“At the time it was the easiest decision in the world to make,” Grace said, without looking at Emma.

“Because of your father?”

“Partly. There were other things already in play. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do...then my father got hurt so I took a leave of absence.” Grace sipped her wine.

Emma held Grace’s gaze and said, “You haven’t told me what happened.”

Grace pressed her lips together and tapped a fingertip on her glass. “I found out one of my players was taking drugs. The rules were plain and simple enough. I got her into counseling and she was suspended from the team. There was a lot of pressure from the family. Apparently, Daddy was an alumni with money and a history of donating handsomely to the school.”

Emma was quiet as she looked out at the cows. “That couldn’t have been easy to deal with.”

“It wasn’t. The father called the dean or me almost everyday and demanded his kid be put back on the team. The man’s level of arrogance and entitlement was not to be believed.”

“Did it end there?”

“No.” Grace tipped her glass and finished her wine. “I wasn’t planning on getting into this now.”

“You don’t have to.”

Grace closed her eyes and sighed. “No time like the present I suppose. This whole mess took about six months to play out. Megan completed her counseling and passed two required drug tests so she was re-instated on the team at the beginning of the next season. We were two weeks into competition when I caught her in the locker room before practice snorting a white substance.”

“Cocaine?”

“I never found out. Part of me wanted to turn away and pretend I hadn’t seen what she was doing. That wasn’t a road I wanted to go down. I suspended her on the spot, wrote a report and went to the dean the next day. I knew something was wrong the minute I walked into his office.”

“Oh no.”

“She accused me of sexual harassment. It was her word against mine.”

“Oh, Jesus, Grace. Didn’t the dean know she was doing it to divert attention away from what she’d done?”

Grace shrugged her shoulders. “It didn’t matter what he thought. When a student brings a charge against a teacher or a coach the dean has no choice but to investigate the charges.”

“That could ruin someone’s career.”

“Believe me it’s not the first time false charges have been brought against a teacher or a coach because the student doesn’t want to take responsibility for their actions.”

“What did they do?”

“They put me on administrative leave while they looked into what happened.”

“It’s so obvious she accused you to cover up what she was doing. What about the team? Did the other players know what was going on?”

“I have no idea if they were told anything at all. They allowed me back into my office to gather up some personal things one evening when no one was there. That was the last time I was back there. Two days later my father was in the hospital. I went to the Dean and requested a leave of absence.”

“Did you get a chance to defend yourself?”

“Oh, yeah, I met with the school’s attorney to tell my side of the story.”

“Did they ever tell you what the outcome of the investigation was?”

“I got a letter last month clearing me of any wrongdoing. Doesn’t matter much anymore.”

“Why? Don’t you think you’ll ever go back to coaching?”

Grace faced Emma and took a careful breath. “I don’t think about coaching much anymore. My priorities have changed since I’ve been home. I want to be here. I know what it takes to run this farm successfully. I’ve been involved in every facet of the operations here.”

“Will your father let you take over?”

“Michael’s the oldest. It would go to him. Tony wants my parents to sell it and move into an adult community. It’s complicated.”

“I can’t imagine your mother and father ever doing that.”

“Neither can Michael and I. It would kill both of them to leave here, but that decision isn’t up to Michael or me.”

“How is Michael?”

“He’s managing all right. His wife walked out a year and a half ago and left him with the two boys.”

“That’s awful.”

“Some people aren’t cut out for marriage and kids. Tricia never grew up. She always wanted to be out at a party, even after the boys were born.”

“That’s why Michael came back home?”

“Between work, trying to raise Tyler and Jonah and paying alimony he was drowning. My parents offered to help him. So far it’s worked out pretty well for all involved.”

“Jesus. Where does this bitch live?”

Grace laughed. “Pick a number and get in line. I’ve got first dibs on her for what she did to him.”

“Your family is lucky to have the both you and Michael here.”

“My mother might dispute that fact on certain days. What about you?” Grace asked.

“What about me?”

“Will you go back to the city once everything turns around?”

“I guess that depends on whether a job opens up at some point. I’ve sent my resumes and filled out more applications than I can count. Nobody’s hiring. Right now I have no idea what I’m going to do.”

“You always struck me as the kind of person who knew exactly what she wanted.”

Emma snorted. “I thought I knew what I wanted. The financial world is all I know. Moving paper meant making money and money meant food, clothes, security and status. A lot of good that did me.”

“Were you happy doing what you did?” Grace asked.

“I thought I was,” Emma said and she wondered now when she traded happiness for the illusion of wealth. She glanced at Grace’s profile in the afternoon sun. The breeze tugged at the wayward strands of loose hair that slipped from Grace’s ponytail and ruffled them across her cheek.

“And now?”

Emma felt her ears heat up when she realized Grace was smiling at her. “I still feel like I’m trying to find my equilibrium. I don’t recognize my life anymore.”

“You will eventually,” Grace said.

“Will you stay on the farm long-term?” Emma asked.

“I like the work and the rhythm of the farm. It’s different now that I’m the one making decisions that drive the business.”

“Different how?” Emma asked.

“The success or failure of the farm is on me.”

“What about Michael?”

“He’s got a lot of responsibility raising the boys. He works hard, but managing the day-to-day details was never his thing.”

“There’s so much to know. How do you keep it all straight?”

“I have my grandfather’s journals. He kept meticulous notes. I learned a lot by reading them over the years. My father taught me the rest.” Grace fell silent as she gazed across the rolling fields then let out a sigh. “We should head back.”

Emma wasn’t sure why, but an uneasy feeling settled in her gut as they neared the farmhouse. If Emma needed any clarification it came in the way of Paula walking out onto the porch with a look of disapproval as she and Grace approached. Emma was conscious of Paula observing her jeans, her hair, and her smug smile never wavering.

“There you are. I was looking for you. Your brother is here,” Paula said nodding in the direction of a black Porsche parked in front of the garage.

Behind her Tyler and Jonah screeched when they saw Grace and scrambled off the porch in her direction.

“Hey guys. Slow down.” Grace knelt and corralled them one in each arm. “Where’s Dad?”

“Inside.”

“Would you mind keeping an eye on Tyler and Jonah for a couple of minutes?” Grace asked turning to Emma.

“No problem,” Emma said. “My sister has two boys about their age. I’m used to a little chaos once in a while.”

Grace cocked her head and smiled. “I promise I’ll send Michael out as soon as I find him.”

Emma didn’t miss the sidelong dismissive glance cast in her direction. She was sure the possessive sweep of Paula’s hand across the small of Grace’s back as she walked past Paula was for her benefit.

Chapter Eleven

BARELY INSIDE THE door, Paula turned and enveloped Grace in a fierce embrace that she didn't have time to evade. Warm lips, slid over Grace's and a hint of tongue slipped inside her mouth. Paula nipped Grace's bottom lip and squeezed her ass.

"That's because I didn't get to say hello to you properly before you ran off before. You've been avoiding me," Paula accused.

Grace blushed furiously and could barely form a word. The only thing that could possibly make this situation any worse would be for her mother or Emma to walk in.

"For God's sakes Paula you're in my parent's house. Back off." Grace said finally finding her voice.

"Where were you hiding all this time?"

"I had things to do."

"That's all you do is work. You should come play with me tonight." Paula clung like a vine twisting and curling around Grace possessively.

"I need to find Michael."

"No you don't."

"I really need to find Michael." Grace put her hands on Paula's hips and pushed, moving the woman back out of her intimate space.

"Somebody call me?" Grace's gaze lifted and locked with Michael's. His eyes twinkled with amusement.

He gave Grace a slow two-step smile, lifted his can of beer in a mock toast and winked.

"Emma is outside with the twins. You need to go get them."

"I'm sure she's doing just fine handling them. Besides Sadie and Max are patrolling the yard. You know they never let the boys out of their sight. But...seeing as you asked and Emma is your guest...I'll oblige."

"Emma. Is that her name?" Paula asked once Michael made his way past them. Grace didn't miss the acid in her voice. "Where is she from?"

"She's an old friend."

"Mmm. I think you like her."

"Whether I do or not isn't any of your business."

"Paula." Somewhere in her mind Grace knew she might regret what she was about to do next but in reality she didn't give a damn.

"Mmm." Paula tried slipping her arms around Grace's neck and let an indignant squawk when her arms were pushed firmly away. "What was that for?"

"Stop it."

"Why?" Paula's mouth twisted in anger and hurt.

"Because this isn't going to happen."

"What do you think is going to happen? I'm just looking for some incredibly hot sex with you, nothing more." She traced a finger up the outside of Grace's arm.

“I am not going to have sex with you.”

“Just tonight?” Paula asked hopefully.

“No, not just tonight.”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.” A pout formed on Paula’s lips and she stepped away reluctantly. “If you change your mind you know where to find me—if not, I have fresh batteries,” she threw back over her shoulder as she sauntered away.

Grace stood in the hallway waiting for her heartbeat to settle down before she dared to walk into the kitchen. Just as she guessed, Tony was seated at the kitchen table with a glass of wine and a platter of food in front of him.

“Nice of you to show up early and lend a hand, bro.” Grace clapped him on the shoulder on her way to the sink.

“Ow. Do you have to be so damn rough?”

“What did you do to your hand?” Grace asked noticing the gauze wrapped around the palm of his left hand.

“I sliced it cutting a bagel.”

“Seems an odd place to cut your hand if you were slicing a bagel on the counter.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony asked.

Grace pointed at Tony’s bandaged hand. “You cut your palm.”

“So. I was holding the bagel in my hand.”

“Well that was stupid,” Grace said low enough for only Tony to hear.

“I taught you to handle a knife better than that,” Lucy chided from across the kitchen.

“I know you did. I told you I was talking on the phone while I was cutting it.”

“You’re always in a rush,” Lucy said.

“Working in the city isn’t like living on the farm.”

“It’s called an honest days work,” Michael said as he entered the kitchen.

“Mine is too. Somebody has to defend the rights of citizens that stand accused of a crime they may or may not have committed.”

“Excuse me.” Lucy stepped between her children eyeing each of them sternly. “Today is supposed to be a celebration. I expect each of you to set aside your differences and act accordingly.”

After a fierce glance at each of her brothers, Grace said, “We will.”

“I relieved Emma and took the boys upstairs. They’re with Pop.” Michael speared a couple of olives with a toothpick.

“I’ll go up and check on them in a few minutes.” Lucy finished seasoning the sauce on the stove and turned the burner down. “Stop sampling the food on the tray.”

Grace lifted the wine glass in front of Tony and drained half of it in one swallow.

“What the hell? Go get your own.” Tony reached for the glass, but Grace slipped out of reach

“Don’t mind if I do. After you’re done having your snack move your car so people can enjoy their meal without having to sit next to your Porsche,” Grace snapped.

“You know how to drive a stick. Why don’t you move it?” he said pulling a set of keys from his pocket. He stopped in mid-motion as Grace reached for the keys. “On second thought, no. I’ll do it. You might run it off the road.”

“Ha, ha.”

“If you two are done bickering you can start bringing the food out.” Lucy untied her apron and hung it over the back of a chair.

“Sure. We’ll take these,” Grace said to her mother, indicating the trays of antipasti and roasted vegetables.

Tony wiped his mouth on the napkin and poured himself another glass of wine before he stood and strode across the kitchen. “Fine. I’ll get the door.”

As Grace was about to pick up a tray he caught her eye. “Nice to see you too, sis. Who’s the hottie?” He nodded out the door in the direction where Emma was sitting.

“Emma Chamberlain. She went to high school with us.”

“Huh.” He tilted his head. “Don’t remember her.”

“That’s because you only remember the ones you slept with,” Grace said walking toward him with the tray.

“Only if they were worth it.”

“If I didn’t have a tray in my hands I’d hit you.”

“Never stopped you before.” Tony plucked an olive from the tray and popped into his mouth.

“Emma wasn’t like that.”

“How would you know?” Tony asked.

“She didn’t run with the party crowd.”

“Too bad. She’s nice to look at though.”

“Are you going to open the door?” Grace asked and started to squeeze past him when he ignored her.

“Oh I get it now. You’re interested in her.”

“And you’re checking her out because you think I am.” Grace nudged the door with her hip. “Glad to know some things never change.”

“Here let me take that.” Tony relieved Grace of the tray and stepped through the doorway before her. “I’ll go introduce myself.”

“Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime,” Tony called back as he sauntered down the steps.

“YOU’RE A GOOD boy. Aren’t you Max?” The shepherd tilted his head and perked his ears. Intelligent brown eyes studied Emma and she wondered if Max recognized what she was saying. Somewhere she’d read that dogs understood up to three hundred words. She rubbed him around his shoulders and neck and he inched closer to her. A few feet away, two hens clucked indignantly and kept just out of range of the dogs as they hunted and pecked for insects in the soil.

“That dog has the best seat in the house.”

Emma jerked her head up in surprise.

“Hello, Emma,” Tony said walking right up to where she was sitting on the bench and took a seat beside her. “I’m Tony, Grace’s younger brother.”

Wariness crept into her eyes as he blatantly violated her personal space. “Hi, Tony. I remember you.” Max grumbled his discontent and nudged Emma’s hand with his snout.

“Well, that’s a good start considering it’s been a long time since I last saw you. Mind if I join you?”

“No,” she said, thinking since you’ve already sat down next to me. “This is nice what your mother does for the people who work here.”

“She’s been doing it for years. People are always willing to show up for a free meal.”

Emma wasn't sure, but she thought she caught the edge of resentment in Tony's voice.

Tony reached out brushing Emma's arm as he did and gave Max a shove back. "Go away ya mangy beast."

"He's not bothering me." Emma said, holding her hand out to Max and inviting him to come closer.

"What have you been up to?" Tony asked.

"Taking some time off of work to fix up my dad's house out by the lake," Emma said.

"Are you planning on selling it? I have a friend in real estate who'll take care good care of you."

"I'm not interested in selling it. I'm living there for the time being." She registered the expression on his face that told her he was looking for more information, but remained silent reluctant to tell him more. "Your mother said you live in Boston now."

"Been there for a few years," Tony said offhandedly.

"What do you do there?"

"I'm a defense attorney."

"Do you like it?"

He waggled his hand. "It pays the bills."

He turned and straddled the bench so one of his knees was touching her thigh.

Emma glanced down at his leg and then stared back up at him. "You could move back a bit."

Tony smiled back at her and continued without moving away. "Maybe you and I could get together. We never knew each other well back in school. See what happens."

For good reason, Emma was completely put off by his intrusive behavior. "That's quite an offer, Tony. But I don't think it would be a good idea for us to...uh see what happens." She was certain she was blushing and was furious at herself for doing so. She dealt with much worse than this kind of behavior in the brokerage she had worked at.

Not to be deterred, Tony said, "Listen, I have to move my car. After I come back, if you're interested, I'll show you around the farm. My father makes wonderful wine. I'm sure he won't mind if I open a bottle for you."

"Thanks, but I already had some earlier," Emma said watching Grace carry a tray of antipasto down the steps. She saw something flicker in Grace's eyes when they swept past her and Tony. She wasn't sure what it was, a wounded look perhaps, and she found herself desperately wanting to see it replaced with the carefree smile she'd seen earlier when they'd been alone.

"Ah well, maybe later." Tony said with a wink and walked over to his Porsche. "Want to take a ride?"

"No, I'm good here," Emma said, wishing he would leave her alone. The sound of the Porsche's engine roaring as Tony drove down the hill interrupted the peaceful afternoon.

Emma guessed the men and women arriving now were the volunteers who helped out on the farm. She watched Grace and Michael mingle among the crowd coming together to celebrate the fruits of their labor. The trestle tables were laid with white picnic plates, cutlery and plastic cups.

Above her, lights woven into the netting winked on creating a cozy, intimate atmosphere beneath the canopy. Lucy and Peter appeared on the front steps with Tyler and Jonah in tow. Lucy traded her work clothes for a jean skirt and simple herringbone topiary green button down blouse. Peter stood beside her dressed in jeans and a sandstone twill shirt. He leaned on his cane and limped noticeably now as he descended the stairs next to his wife.

Everyone was talking. Emma could make out snippets of conversation going on around her. People were chatting about families, kids and about this year's harvest. She felt a swell of loneliness and doubt creep in as she wondered why she came as she stood on the outskirts.

"Tony trying to work his charms on you?" Grace carried two glasses of wine and held one out for Emma to take.

"Thanks," Emma said gratefully. "Is he always so forward?"

"Tony's used to getting what he wants. You need to be blunt with him if you're not interested."

"Oh, I'm definitely not interested."

"Good. Sit over here with me." Grace took Emma gently by the arm and guided her to the end of the table where her parents were sitting with Michael and the two boys. Tony arrived a few minutes later and sat across from Emma.

Platters heavy with sausage and steaks marinated in rosemary and garlic were passed along the tables. Laughter filled the air and toasts were made. Everyone ate until they had their fill and gradually the talk at the tables subsided briefly only to be replaced with music.

The area between the barn and the trestle tables filled with couples as they paired off. Emma could feel Tony's eyes on her and she pointedly ignored him while she sat next to Grace, praying he would find someone else to interest him. To her relief one of the women who had been sitting a couple of seats down from her stood and invited Tony out to the impromptu dance floor.

Emma laughed at the string of protests that erupted from Michael when his mother left the dance floor and dragged him from his seat at the table. After a couple of turns, she took mercy and let him go. He didn't make it two steps away before a pretty blonde intercepted him.

"Don't laugh," Grace leaned closer and said, "you'll be next if you don't get out there with someone soon. Tony's had his eye on you all night."

"I'm not interested in Tony. I don't...besides...I haven't danced in ages," Emma stammered.

"You? I don't believe it," Grace said with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Really. I'm not very good," Emma protested her heart pounding furiously in her chest. "I find that hard to believe." Grace stood and held out her hand.

"I suppose there's no getting out of this gracefully. Is there?"

"Don't worry, I'll lead."

Emma dipped her head as she felt the heat from her skin and knew she must be blushing. "Good because I don't know how to do what they're doing." She grasped Grace's outstretched hand and stood, managing to look directly into her eyes. Emma felt a rush of excitement along her spine.

As soon as they reached the dance floor the music slowed. Emma felt her heart beat unevenly. Grace slipped an arm around Emma's waist drawing her closer.

"Is this alright?" Grace asked.

It was hard to breathe and Emma felt heat everywhere their bodies touched. "Y...yes," Emma said hearing her voice falter.

"My mother insisted that Michael take dancing lessons before his wedding. That meant I was lucky enough to take the lessons with him."

"I bet you loved that," Emma said.

"After we got over the initial discomfort it was quite a lot of fun."

"No wonder you both dance so well," Emma said watching over Grace's shoulder as Michael twirled the blonde he'd been dancing with around with ease.

"The woman Michael's dancing with is Delaney."

“Do you like her?” Emma asked and rushed on when she realized what it sounded like. “I mean do you like her for Michael?”

Grace didn't seem to mind and simply replied, “She's been a good friend to him since he came back home.”

“Cheryl is the woman who asked Tony to dance. You can thank her later. They've been on again off again for a couple of years.”

“Oh God was she here earlier?” Emma asked remembering Tony's bold advance on her.

“No, she got here just a little while ago so you're safe,” Grace said with a soft chuckle.

All Emma could think about was the warm touch of Grace's arm around her waist and the tender touch of their hands clasped together. She was dizzy and she could hardly breathe as she moved with Grace, barely aware of anyone around them.

“You're a quick learner,” Grace said close to her ear.

“Or maybe you're simply a good teacher,” Emma replied feeling a shiver run up her spine when Grace moved her hand on her back. A smile lit up Grace's eyes and Emma knew she wanted to see more of that.

“You doing okay?” Grace asked.

Emma nodded feeling like her brain was close to shorting out. Grace pulled her closer as she turned them around. It only partly registered that Tony tried to cut in, but Grace spun them deftly away from him.

“Perfect,” Emma said, grateful that she still had the skill to form a coherent thought since her body seemed to be on fire.

“Do you remember the bonfires that they used to have down at the beach by the lake houses?”

Emma tilted her head to look at Grace. “What made you think of that? I hadn't thought about the bonfire in years.”

“It was always in mid August before the seniors left to go to college,” Grace mused.

“That brings back memories.” The bonfire was a rite of passage for each graduating class in town.

“Mmm. I remember ours.”

“Really?” Emma's mind flashed back to the raucous party. Like a scrapbook of pictures, the night came back in snippets. The crackling sound of wood burning from the fire, loud music blaring out of the back of a pickup truck, dancing in the sand. Emma remembered dancing with a group of seniors when one of the hot dance hits of the summer came on. She felt a thrill of emotion and accepted the hand that reached down to haul her up into the back of pickup truck.

“I remember the plywood dance floor in the back of that truck.” Emma stopped as a puzzle piece clicked into place and she stared at Grace in shocked silence. “That was your truck and you pulled me up there.”

A slow two-step smile crossed Grace's features. “Correction it was my father's truck. I'd been watching you dance. It took me most of the night to work up the courage to get you up there with me.” Grace's fingers continued to graze the small of her back and it was all Emma could do not to pass out. “When that song came on—I just followed my impulse.”

“I think we turned a few heads,” Emma said tightening her hold around Grace's waist wondering if she was imagining the blush on Grace's features beneath the twinkling lights.

“Oh I'm pretty sure we did,” Grace said.

As the music ended, Grace led Emma back to the table. Shoulders touching and their hands still loosely clasped together, Emma wished the night wasn't coming to a close. She heard her name and when she turned Michael was taking a picture with his phone.

"You don't need to help clean up," Michael said as Emma helped collect trash from the tables.

"I want to. I had a great time. It's the least I can do," Emma said, knowing it was her attempt to forestall saying goodbye. Now that Grace reminded her about that night all those years ago she felt a different connection between them.

For days after the bonfire, Emma recalled playing those moments of the two of them dancing over in her mind. She never believed that it was anything more than the two of them celebrating the crossroads of their life that night.

"Here let me get that." Grace lifted the stack of paper plates from her hands and dumped them into a nearby garbage bag. When the tables were cleared and there was nothing left to do, Grace retrieved Emma's bag from inside the house.

"Thanks, Mrs. Moretti, um, Lucy. Everything was wonderful," Emma said.

Lucy gave her hug. "I'm glad you could come. You're welcome back any time."

Emma turned and found Grace standing a few feet away, her eyes focused off somewhere else in the distance with a sorrowful look haunting them. When their eyes met the sadness lifted. Emma had seen that happen a few times now. When they rode horses together the other day and when they danced earlier tonight.

As she stood under the twinkling white lights hanging from the canopy Emma realized she wanted to see that smile again. She had an idea of how to make it happen, but she wasn't sure she could summon the courage tonight.

"I'll walk you down to your car," Grace offered.

"Thanks," Emma said trying to get a handle on the wild sense of anticipation running through her.

Grace held a flashlight in her hand and a cone of white light illuminated their path. They were silent as they strolled and Emma wasn't sure what to say. She hadn't expected Grace to ask her to dance, nor had she expected to feel the intense rush of emotions. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so off balance around another woman.

"It was a better night than I thought it was going to be."

"Yeah it did turn out to be a good night," Grace said stopping when Emma got to her car. "I'm glad you came."

I wish you'd make me. Emma's cheeks heated at the unbidden thought. "I am too."

The moon was playing hide and seek from behind the clouds and only a sliver was visible now. The sound of crickets chirping filled the air around them. Emma opened her door and tossed her bag onto the passenger seat.

As she turned back around, Emma glanced up at the night sky with the stars punching bright holes through inky blackness. "It's beautiful out here."

"I love this time of year." Headlights passed and horns honked as people left the party. Grace waved at a couple of passing cars.

"I haven't been around a crowd of people having a party like this in years."

"Don't tell me you didn't have parties on Wall Street."

"Oh, there were parties, but none like this. They were all stuffed shirts trying to rub elbows with the bigger fish in the pond. I managed to miss most of them unless my boss told me they were mandatory." Emma watched the muscles of Grace's jaw flex as their eyes met.

“Stick around. My mother throws a summer solstice party that gets talked about all year long.”

“That’s a long ways off.”

“You can always come back to visit,” Grace said.

“I might just do that.” The implication of not being here jarred Emma to her core. She didn’t want to think that far into the future. Hell, on a bad day she could barely handle the present.

“I can take the whole group of them in small doses. It’s fun for a while but then the crowd wears on me after a few hours,” Grace said.

“I’m not one for crowds either.”

“But you lived in the city,” Grace said incredulously.

“I had plenty of places I could go to be alone when I wanted to.”

“Maybe you could show me one day.”

Emma shifted and looked straight into Grace’s eyes. “If you mean it, that might make for an interesting date.”

“Why wouldn’t I mean it?”

“Now that’s a question. Maybe you’ll start by telling me where you go off to when you get that sad look in your eyes,” Emma said surprised at her own boldness.

“Let’s not spoil this with anymore sad stories tonight.”

“We won’t then.”

They stood in silence, their bodies almost touching at the edge of the driveway. Far away the occasional voice lifted and carried on the air.

“Thanks for the dance.” And for the first time since she could remember Emma felt shy.

“Pleasure’s mine,” Grace said, and Emma hoped she meant it.

Emma only meant to brush Grace’s cheek with a goodbye kiss. Grace’s hand stilled her, their eyes meeting, a ghost of a smile evident in Grace’s eyes. For a brief moment Emma saw the vulnerability and the beauty that lay in the depths of Grace’s eyes. It was a perfect blend of sexy and adorable. Emma’s heart fluttered and her lips trembled in anticipation of what was happening.

Grace guided Emma’s mouth to hers. Soft warm lips brushed against Emma’s. Sweet, achingly gentle. Emma leaned into Grace, settled a hand on her waist, and felt the indentation where taut muscles lay beneath soft skin. Emma deepened the kiss probing thoroughly with her tongue. She heard a moan and the clatter of the flashlight as it fell from Grace’s hand and hit the ground. Grace pulled her close.

She licked her way between Emma’s lips to find her tongue. The two swirled and tangled exploring so deep Emma felt her thoughts evaporate. Emma wanted to feel the strong, curvy body beneath her hands. Their bodies fit together perfectly and desire swirled in Emma’s belly spreading out between her legs. Emma got lost in the taste and scent of Grace, her body greedily demanding more.

Then the sounds of fireworks exploding had Emma jerking away. Crackling lights followed by several high-pitched screeches and booms sent her heart racing.

“That’s Tony. He sets them off every year,” Grace said tilting her head back to look in the direction of the cracks and whistles.

Emma laughed and kept her arms wrapped loosely around Grace’s waist. “He has impeccable timing.”

“Who?”

Still feeling little electric shocks running through her body, Emma ran a finger over Grace's lower lip. "Never mind who. Come back here so I can kiss you again."

Grace obliged and Emma wrapped her arms around Grace. Warm lips, strong and demanding this time pried her lips open. They kissed so hard Emma felt like she was spinning. After several heavenly moments of basking in a warm sensual haze they parted.

"Don't go anywhere."

"Don't worry. I think my legs forgot how to walk." Grace leaned against Emma's car.

Her head still buzzing, Emma reached into her car and retrieved her cell phone. She handed it to Grace and said, "Put your number in my phone." After she did Emma pressed the button to dial Grace's number, smiling. "Now you have mine. Call me."

"I will." Grace traced her fingers over Emma's cheek. "You know how to get out of here in the dark?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine." Emma wanted desperately to stay, but it seemed wiser to leave. She drove toward home while the evening replayed in her mind. Emma knew Grace was going to be trouble because she couldn't stop thinking about her.

GRACED WAITED FOR Emma's taillights to fade into the distance before she started back toward the farmhouse. If she concentrated enough she could still feel the sweet sensation of Emma's lips on hers. Emma was a good kisser and Grace found herself replaying the moment again as she walked along the drive. She leaned into the incline, her boots crunching over the loose gravel with each step.

Light filtered from the windows of the house as she neared the front porch. She was still lost in her thoughts, daydreaming about the evening that she didn't register the screen door bang open. Grace grunted at the unexpected impact and grabbed hold of the body that surged into her.

"What the hell?" Grace held on to avoid losing her balance. "Look where you're going."

"Let go of me," Tony growled as he shrugged her loose.

"What's your problem?" Grace stepped back regarding him in the light filtering down from the porch. His face was contorted in anger and for an instant she barely recognized her brother.

"Get out of my way, Grace."

She stepped back, her arms out to the side. "I am, Tony. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I need to get the hell out of here. I knew it was a bad idea coming here tonight."

Tony jammed his hands into his pocket and pulled out his keys.

"If you're this upset it's not a good idea to drive."

Tony waved her away and stormed to his car. "I'll be fine. Don't you worry about me, big sister." His car alarm chirped and he opened the door, disappearing inside.

The engine rumbled to life a second later. Back up lights winked on and Grace moved out of the way as Tony rolled back. The thumping bass of music pulsated against the windows. The engine roared as he gunned it and the car rocked. The tires kicked up stones as he fishtailed down the hill.

Grace rubbed her shoulder, feeling the sting from where she collided with Tony. Confused and irritated, she climbed the porch steps and walked into the house.

"What's with Tony?" Grace asked when she walked into the kitchen. Her father was standing at the window, arms folded across his chest looking out into the darkness.

"Good, you're here," her father said without turning around.

“What’s up?” Grace asked trying to understand what currents she was sensing in the room. The pantry door opened and her mother stepped into the kitchen. Her eyes looked red like she was recently crying.

“Sit down, Grace,” her father said.

“Where’s Michael?”

“He’s taking a walk.”

With a sick feeling in her gut, she pulled out a chair and sat. “Tony just flew out of here in a rage. Will somebody tell me what’s going on?”

“Tony won’t be coming back for awhile.” Her mother cleared her throat and said with a slight tremor in her voice, “Your father and I discussed what we’re going to do with the farm.”

His face drawn and pale, Peter walked behind Lucy’s chair and rested a hand on her shoulder. “I told Tony we’re not selling the farm under any circumstances. He took the news badly. I took offense to his behavior and told him to leave.”

Grace rested her hands on the table to hide the trembling in them.

Lucy reached back and squeezed her husband’s arm. “Let’s get on with it.”

Grace’s father sat beside Lucy and said, “The farm was originally set up as an LLC. It’s going to remain that way. The five of us will share the profits from the farm. I’m stepping down from the manager’s position after we hire someone new for the position. The new manager will make the day-to-day decisions that go into running the farm just as I did. You’ll only have a vote on large capital expense purchases and projects.”

Bewildered, Grace asked, “You’re going to outsource the manager’s position? Why not Michael?”

“Michael’s not our first choice, but if things don’t work out the way we would like then yes, we will outsource the position.” Lucy traced a finger over the grain of the wooden table.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” her father continued. “I want you to take over the manager’s position.”

One breath, two and Grace still felt like she couldn’t get enough in her lungs. Her head buzzed and she was aware of her mother leaving the kitchen. “Why is Mom crying? What’s going on?”

Her father looked like he aged ten years since this morning. “It’s been a long day Grace. We all need to get some rest.”

Chapter Twelve

GRACE USED A fence stretcher to pull a broken segment of barbed wire together in one of the pastures. She found the damage two days ago while she was checking the various cattle enclosures. Once she had enough wire pulled through to make the fence taught she crimped the metal sleeve with a pair of pliers. From there it took a few minutes to twist the broken ends around the sleeve to secure the wire and repair the section.

A figure approached from the lower fields. She could tell by the walk it wasn't Michael. Arturo drew his straw hat off and beat it against his work pants as he strode up the hill.

"Morning, Arturo." She raised a hand and waved.

He drew a bandana from out of a pocket and wiped the sweat and grime from his face. "Morning, Grace. I moved the chicken tractors."

Grace checked her work on the fence tugging at the mended section. "The cows are in the southern most pasture."

"I topped their water off after I finished with the chickens," Arturo said.

"I checked the calendar and the bred heifer is at day two seventy." Grace slipped the pliers into her back pocket. "She'll go into labor in the next two to three weeks. Keep an eye on her. It's her first calf."

"I will." Arturo set his hat back on his head. "Is there anything else you need me to do?"

"No. I'm just about finished here. Thanks for your help today."

"I'll be back tomorrow. I haven't seen Michael. Is he alright?"

"He's had a lot to do with the boys."

Arturo nodded and looked across the fields, his eyes troubled. "I'll be back tomorrow. Tell him we miss him in the fields."

"I will. Thanks, Arturo." Grace stared out across the fields wondering briefly if Arturo believed her. Michael was avoiding her ever since their father decided to make her the manager of the farm. At some point they were going to have to clear the air. She needed his help and he needed to get over being pissed at her.

With a sigh, Grace turned to the next segment of fence that needed repairing. While she continued to work, Grace's thoughts strayed to Emma. Grace couldn't remember the last time a woman had a hold on her like this. Not since her last serious girlfriend—but that was even different.

Since her father's accident Grace threw herself into work around the farm. The chores and the cycles that came with planting and caring for animals kept her sane after she left her coaching job.

There was little room for relationships and frankly, until last week, she hadn't given it much of a thought. Occasionally Grace would find herself wishing to have someone to talk to other than her family or the dogs at the end of the day.

For the most part, Grace never gave dating much thought. She wasn't even sure how to go about finding someone again. The thought of going to a bar made her break out in a cold sweat.

She hadn't been cruising in a bar since her college days and those kinds of superficial interactions left her feeling empty and hollow. Worse yet was figuring out if a woman she met and was interested in was lesbian. It's not like people wore a sign and Grace never felt she had reliable instincts into who was and wasn't gay.

Paula was certainly ready and willing, but what she was offering wasn't Grace's style. The fact that Paula worked for them made the idea of a relationship even less appealing.

Then when she wasn't really looking, Emma arrived in town. Grace had been distracted since the cookout wondering what it would be like to get to know Emma better. Grace thought about what it would be like to touch Emma, to kiss her...everywhere.

Her insecurities convinced Grace it wouldn't amount to anything. They had little in common. Emma was busy hunting for another job. Where Emma's future employment led her to geographically was anybody's guess and Grace certainly didn't want to get involved with someone who wasn't staying around.

Grace recalled the time she spent with Emma at the cookout the other night—what it felt like to dance with her and kiss her. She got this warm wash of tender emotion when she thought about that night. Grace wondered if just maybe there was a way to make this work. She picked up her tools thinking that she was probably reading too much into the time they spent together. Emma was on the rebound and this was simply a way to forget the painful memories if even for a few hours.

Grace climbed into the 4x4 and drove along the tractor path back to the barn. The earth was dry and dust billowed out behind the wheels. They had day after day of impossible heat since the cookout. It wasn't unusual to see waves of heat hovering above the fields in the mid-afternoon.

The last storm was a gully washer. Oceans of rain poured onto the land and ran off just as quickly. What she wouldn't give for a few days of gentle drizzle to soak the life giving water into the soil and provide much needed relief from the relentless summer sun.

Grace slalomed down the hills, left then right around the corner that brought her to the beginning of their hay fields. She cut the motor and stopped. Standing atop the seat she gazed out at the fields of alfalfa, red clover, Bermuda grass and tall fescue. A gentle breeze rustled the tips of the grasses. It was an illusion, she knew, but the fields swayed and looked like infinite waves.

Soon, she thought. It was time to watch the weather and be ready to choose the days when they would be able to cut the fields and let the hay dry before rolling it into large bails that would feed the cows and horses through the winter months. Satisfied for now she started the 4x4 and returned to the barn,

The sun was setting noticeably earlier now and the shadows were longer. Even though it was still summer there was coolness evident in the evening air that wasn't present a few short weeks ago.

With the sun sliding behind the tall trees, Grace cleaned and put away the tools. She straightened up inside her apartment and took a shower before dinner. As she stepped inside the spray she wondered what Emma was doing and thought she might give her a call later. The thought made her heart race and her head buzz. For a moment she wondered what in the world was wrong with her then discarded the thought as she pumped soap into her hand.

EMMA SLIPPED OFF her sneakers and crossed her legs underneath her as she settled onto the burgundy leather couch in her sister's living room. She could already feel herself unwinding

into the end of the day. It felt good to lounge in comfortable sweat pants and let her worries slip away at least for the evening.

Brent and Lindsey's home was a classic New England style Cape Cod nestled in a suburb west of Boston. It was neat and nostalgic sitting behind a white picket fence. The house was clapboarded and shuttered, painted a smoky blue, with an open floor plan inside. The picture it created was the perfect emulation of the American Dream.

The boys' room was upstairs. Lindsey had fed them dinner earlier and now they were both tucked in bed sleeping.

"I'm glad I thought to give you a call. Brent had one of his last minute business trips he had to go on," Lindsey called from the kitchen.

"How long is he gone for?" Emma flipped through the channels on the television and settled on one about home renovations.

"Three days," Lindsey opened the refrigerator and removed a bottle of wine she'd been chilling.

"He's doing a lot more traveling this year." Emma lowered the volume so she could hear her sister.

"The company has taken on four more contracts in the past six months. Who am I to complain? At least he still has a job." Lindsey stopped midway as she opened the cabinet door and looked at Emma. "Sorry, that just came out."

"What's to be sorry for? You have two kids and a mortgage to pay. I'm glad Brent has a job too."

Lindsey offered her a relieved grin and asked, "Will you uncork the wine for me?"

Emma rose from the sofa and held her hand out for the bottle as she approached. "You don't usually drink Pinot Grigio."

"I decided to broaden my horizons and try something new." Lindsey set two glasses on the counter.

"Where's your cork screw?"

Lindsey pointed at the middle drawer. "It should be on the left side."

With cork screw in hand Emma efficiently removed the cork from the bottle and set it back on the counter. "I'll let you pour."

"How are things between you and Grace? Have you seen each other since you went horseback riding?" Lindsey asked while Emma returned to the couch.

"We've seen each other a couple of times." Emma tried to act nonchalant but she could tell by her sister's reaction she wasn't buying it.

Lindsey poured the wine into the glasses. "Your ears are turning red so you might as well spill it." She handed Emma a glass and settled onto the couch beside her.

Emma couldn't help the smile that tugged at the corner of her mouth. She stuck her nose in the glass stalling for time as she inhaled the crisp bouquet. "Mmm I smell citrus in here..."

"Come on don't leave me hanging here. I hardly ever see you. This is the first time in years we have something exciting to talk about."

"Wow, I'm not quite sure how to take that," Emma replied.

"You know what I mean."

Emma glowered at Lindsey from beneath furrowed eyebrows. "Do I?"

"Yes, you do. Since when has either of our relationships been something we talked about because they were new and exciting?"

“You do have a point about me,” Emma agreed thinking of her relationship with Kate. “But what about you and Brent?”

“No, no, no. You are not deflecting this away from you. Tell me about you and Grace. Did you sleep with her yet?”

“No!”

“I thought by the way your face lit up when I said her name that maybe you had.”

“We hardly know each other,” Emma protested.

“Okay, I’m just giving you a hard time. Tell me about her.”

“Grace invited me to a cookout that her family does for the people who work on the farm.”

Lindsey stopped mid-sip and lowered her wine glass to the table. “Wait. You got to the meet the family? Isn’t that awfully premature?”

Emma didn’t answer immediately as she thought about the implication of what her sister said. “Oh, well...no. I didn’t think of it that way. It was kind of an introduction to their community.”

“I guess that’s one way to look at it.” Lindsey sounded doubtful. “Meeting the family is always a crapshoot. A cookout is good though. Not too serious like being invited to Sunday dinner.”

“It was like a raucous back yard party,” Emma said remembering the festive atmosphere. “They cook for the people who volunteer and work on the farm. It’s actually quite amazing. They grow most of their own food. They raise cows, pigs and chickens for meat.”

“A real life farmer.” Lindsey tapped her glass with her fingers. “I want details. Did she kiss you? If I had to guess from the color of your cheeks, I would say yes. So, is she a good kisser?”

“You’re awful.” Emma buried her face in her hands. “You know that?”

“Ah but the question is am I right?” Lindsey crowed and clapped her hands together when Emma gave her a wry sidelong glance. “I am! Good for you. So you’re going to see each other again?”

“We didn’t really make plans,” Emma said.

“What do you mean you didn’t make plans?”

“She said she would call me.”

“Do you think she will?” Lindsey asked. “Some people just say that and then they never do.”

“I don’t think Grace is like that.”

“So what do you think this is between you and her?” Lindsey picked her wine glass up and settled back against the cushions.

“I...we just met. I have no idea what it is.”

“What would you like it to be?” Lindsey pressed her.

“It’s a little early to be thinking about what I want this to be. Don’t you think?” Emma picked her glass up and sipped from it.

“Why?”

“I have no idea what I’m going to be doing or where I’m going to end up in the next six months. I’ve just been taking life a day at a time.”

“So this is just a good time fling? Maybe you’re rebounding from Kate and you both go your separate ways in a few months. No harm. No foul.” Lindsey nodded reflectively. “That might work, but I never took you for the kind of person who could do that.”

Emma frowned at Lindsey and sunk lower in the couch. “You sure know how to be a buzz kill.”

“Tell me you haven’t thought about it, even for a minute, what this might be between you and Grace,” Lindsey insisted.

Emma tilted her head back and sighed. “I like her...a lot. She’s a good listener. She’s kind and strong. Not just physically strong, but inside she’s strong. She knows how to do things that I have no clue about. I just know I want to get to know her better.”

“How much better?” Lindsey teased.

“I’m afraid to let myself think about it that way.”

“Emma we don’t get unlimited chances at love. If you think this has a chance then go for it. What have you got to lose?” Lindsey gave Emma a brief searching look. “Sorry, I’m pushing you. I was—”

“What’s going on?”

“We both know how hard relationships are and neither one of us is getting any younger. I know Mom was giving you a hard time and I don’t want you to think I am too.”

“Thanks,” Emma said.

“If you think there’s a chance between you and Grace you should go for it.”

“Okay, I get it.” Emma held up her hand. “How are things going between you and Brent? Lindsey drained the rest of her wine. “He asked for space.”

“Space? What does that mean?”

“He wants to spend time with his buddies. There’s a group of guys who play poker on Thursday nights.”

“How many times a month do they get together?”

“Every other week.” Lindsey rose and retrieved the wine bottle. “He can’t say I’m one of those wives who won’t let him hang out.”

“That’s not what I expected to hear.”

“Neither did I. I feel like all we’re doing is staying out of each other’s way. It’s not much different than before. Only now he’s makes a point of avoiding me.” Lindsey refilled their glasses. She sat cross-legged next to Emma and took a sip from her glass.

“He sounds like he’s being a selfish jerk. Has he talked to the counselor?” Emma asked.

“He went by himself two weeks ago and then we went together Tuesday night. I think he’s been pissed ever since. Christina suggested he try and listen more about what’s happening with the kids since that’s one of my big issues.”

“Christina’s your counselor?”

“Yeah, I really like her, but I think because she’s a woman Brent feels like he’s being ganged up on.”

“Is he really that insecure?”

“I don’t think so. He’s just angry that I made him go at all.” Lindsey took a long swallow of her wine.

“Doesn’t he get that your marriage is falling apart?” Emma asked.

“If he does he acts like he doesn’t care.”

“Do you think he’s cheating?” Emma asked.

Lindsey stared at Emma from over her wine glass then quietly set it down. “You ask what I’ve been afraid to ask for six months. What if he is? Then what? Do I want him back after he’s been unfaithful? If he’s been unfaithful.”

“Have you looked at anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“Bank or credit card statements. His email?”

Lindsey's face colored and she shook her head. "I think I'm afraid of what I'll find out."

"I can't tell you what to do, but you need to stand up for yourself. If you think something's going on ask him." Emma took the bottle from her sister and set it on the table in front of them.

"If I'm wrong he'll be so pissed off at me."

"Don't you have a right to know? Obviously, something is wrong. This is tearing you up inside and I'm sure the boys sense something is off between the two of you. We always knew something wasn't right with Mom and Dad we just didn't know what it was. We were too young to even have a vocabulary for what was happening."

With a forlorn expression on her face, Lindsey wiped tears from the corners of her eyes. "How about this? I'll look, but not tonight. I don't want you to be here if I find something out that's bad."

"Why not? We could get drunk together."

"I've never snooped around in his email before. I've emptied receipts out of pockets when I do laundry, but that's it."

"Do you think I care?" Emma demanded.

"No, but I do. I don't want you to get hurt."

"How would I get hurt?"

"I don't want him to think for even a second that you had anything to do with my decision to snoop."

"Wait a minute? Why are you worried about that? Has he ever hurt you?"

Lindsey bit her bottom lip and stared down into her lap. "He got angry with me a month ago. I don't even remember what we were arguing about but he shoved me. I lost my balance and fell down."

"Brent's lucky he's not here right now. I'd hit him over the head with this wine bottle for doing that to you."

"Please, Emma. You'll see him tomorrow. Please don't say anything to him."

Emma stared at her sister and then pulled her into a hug. "I won't. Have you told the counselor that he did that?"

"No," Lindsey said still hanging onto Emma.

"Why not?"

"I was ashamed."

"Brent's the one who should be ashamed of himself." Emma pushed Lindsey back and held out her right hand. "Pinky swear right now."

"What am I swearing to?" Lindsey asked as she wrapped her pinky around Emma's.

"If he lays a finger on you, you take the kids and you come by me. You don't even have to call, just show up. I don't care what time of day or night it is. Promise me, you'll do that."

Lindsey tightened her grip on Emma. "I promise."

Emma wasn't sure how long the two of them sat quietly. Lindsey picked her head up off Emma's shoulder. "Thank you."

"For what?" Emma studied Lindsey's profile wondering how long her sister had been keeping this a secret.

"Being here and having my back," Lindsey said.

"Haven't we always done that for each other?"

"Mostly."

The truth stung, but Lindsey was right. It hadn't always been that way. Emma's cell phone rang. She leaned from the couch and picked it off the coffee table. "Ooh." Emma recognized Grace's number and hopped from the couch to answer it.

"Hey! Where are you going?" Lindsey asked.

"It's Grace." Emma pointed to the phone. "See, I told you she would call."

EMMA DROVE ONTO the farm, feeling a flutter of butterflies in her stomach. She drove slowly, watching for Sadie and Max. She spotted them lying on the porch with their front paws draped over the first step.

Max rose first stretching with his hindquarters in the air. Sadie followed and then both dogs trotted toward her car. Lights were on in the farmhouse casting a warm yellow glow throughout.

Emma knelt and gave them a friendly rub as the dogs leaned against her. She looked up to find Grace walking towards her smiling. "This is some greeting party you have."

"They obviously like you." Grace met Emma's gaze. "It's good to see you again."

Emma tilted her head watching the warmth in Grace's eyes. She laid a hand on Grace's forearm, leaned in and kissed her gently on the mouth. "I'm glad you called."

Grace's chest rose and she blinked. "Tonight was the only night I had the house to myself."

"Really? How did you manage that?" Emma linked her arm with Grace's as they strolled toward the front porch. The dogs ambled along beside them, tails in the air.

"Michael took the boys to a minor league baseball game. He corralled Mom and Dad as backup."

"I guess he needs an extra pair of eyes to keep an eye on the two of them."

"When they're out in crowds it's all hands on deck."

"My sister's boys can be a handful too. Something smells good in here," Emma said when they entered the kitchen.

"It's the sauce for the pizza."

"Pizza?" Emma left Grace's side and lifted a white cloth covering two mounds on the counter. "You made pizza dough?"

"We make it all the time."

"I'm officially impressed. What's in the sauce?"

"Tomatoes, garlic and basil. I picked it this afternoon." Grace turned the burner off underneath the pot and stirred the sauce.

"Did your mother teach you how to cook?"

"My grandmother taught me early on. She loved to cook and spent hours preparing meals." Grace picked up the dough and sprinkled flour on the counter. She flattened it out with her hands working from the center out making it larger. "Do you like to cook?"

"I can cook, but I can't say I enjoy cooking just for myself."

Grace drizzled olive oil on the dough followed by a liberal ladle full of sauce that she swirled around. "Do you have any special requests for toppings?"

"I like just about anything but anchovies."

Grace cracked a smile. "No anchovies. Check. Mozzarella and Pepperoni okay?"

"Sounds perfect." Emma watched Grace sprinkle the sauce liberally with cheese.

"How was your visit with your sister?"

“It was nice to see her. Her husband was on a business trip and the boys were in bed early so we got to hang out and talk. We used to do that when we were away at college and came home on breaks. It was nice to be away, but it was always good to be back together. We got each other through some crazy stuff.”

“Sounds like you two are close.”

“We are now. There was a time after my parents got divorced when we hardly spoke to each other.”

“Your parents split up during high school. Right?”

“My freshman year. How do you remember?”

A sheepish expression colored Grace’s face as she glanced at Emma and replied, “Small town gossip. There wasn’t much that didn’t get noticed or talked about. Nothing much has changed about that.”

“I’ve been away so long I forgot what it was like to grow up in a small town.”

“What happened between you and your sister?”

“My mother got custody of both of us and we got to see my Dad every other weekend. I couldn’t stand her always talking badly about him. It was so obvious she was trying to pit us against him. I got into a huge fight with her one night. We said some terrible things to each other and I walked out.”

“It must have been awful.”

“It was. I went to live with my dad after that. I liked being there, but it was weird because by then he had a new girlfriend. After I moved out, my mom tried to turn Lindsey against me. For a while it worked until Lindsey got wise to the fact that Mom was manipulating her too.”

“That’s harsh.”

“It was a pretty acrimonious divorce. My parents were always fighting, mostly about money. My mother ran up the credit card balances and my father would have a fit. I think my father just got fed up with her spending more than he was earning and acting like it wasn’t her problem. He packed up his bags and left one afternoon.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was probably the best thing he did for himself. He was drowning in that marriage. At the time, I didn’t know it or understand everything that was going on between him and my mom.”

“Do you get along with your mom now?”

“She mellowed after our dad died. I think she realized carrying all that anger around with her was going to cost her what was left of her family. I guess you could say we tolerate each other in small doses.”

Grace slid a pizza peel under the dough and lifted it off the counter. “Can you get the door for me?”

“Where are you going?”

“Outside to the grill.”

“Grilled pizza? Now this I have to see,” Emma said following Grace out the door.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of turning the oven on tonight.” Grace slid the pizza onto a square stone atop the grill grates. “We can eat out here if you like.”

“Let’s stay out here. I love late summer nights. There’s something special about them.”

“I like to listen to the Katydids. They’ll start singing as soon as the sun goes down,” Grace said looking out at the tree line.

“What sound do they make?”

“Ch-Ch-Ch. You hear the rhythm and it starts to sound like ka-ty-did.”

Grace walked over to the wooden picnic table and lit several candles. “This should keep the mosquitoes away. If not I have some spray if you need it.”

“I’ve never had anybody make me pizza from scratch before—except at a pizzeria.”

“No? A new experience then.” Grace lifted one side of the crust testing it. She spun the crust around on the stone. “I could have done it directly on the grill, but I didn’t want to push my luck.”

“Can I do anything?” Emma asked feeling helpless as she watched Grace.

“Nothing to do at the moment. Relax. One of our cows is close to calving. She’ll probably go into labor in the next couple of weeks.”

“Have you delivered a calf before?”

“About a dozen over the years.”

“That must be amazing to watch.”

“It is pretty awesome. Most times it’s just the cow and nature doing their thing. Other times it can be pretty hairy.”

“Meaning?”

“The calf can be in breach or there can be a problem with the placenta. Same things that happen with a human birth.”

“Do you have a vet that comes out?”

“We let them know when the cow is due. The cow can calve two weeks on either side of her due date. We check her twice every day for signs that she’s going into labor.”

“I’d love to be able to see the birth.”

“I can text you when we’re getting close. When it’s imminent I check her every two hours. You sure you want to be here? It could be at three in the morning.”

“I’ll take my chances.”

“All right then.” Grace removed the pizza from the grill and carried it to the table on the peel. “Do you want beer or wine with this?”

“An ice-cold beer sounds really good.”

“I’ll be right back.” Grace disappeared inside the house.

While she was gone, Emma tried to make sense of what she was feeling. There was an undeniable attraction, but her sister was right. What was this going to be and where was it going? Was it fair to either of them to pursue a relationship?

“Everything okay?” Grace walked over and handed Emma a bottle.

“Yeah, fine.” The beer was ice cold. It tasted light and crisp when Emma swallowed.

“You looked a thousand miles away just now,” Grace said.

“Did I?” Emma walked over to the table and picked up the pizza cutter. “You should do the honors.”

Grace set her bottle on the table and took the instrument from Emma. A shiver ran through Emma when Grace’s fingers grazed over her skin.

“Are you cold? I can get you a jacket if you need one.”

“No, I’m fine.” Emma thought she caught a twinkle of mischief in Grace’s eye when she looked at her.

Grace sliced the pizza into six pieces. She pulled two slices off and set them on a plate for each of them. “Dig in.”

“This is delicious,” Emma said after she bit into the slice. “Yours beats some of the pizza I’ve had from some of the most famous pizzerias in the city.”

“Thanks. Speaking of New York, do you miss it?”

“Not nearly as much as I thought I would,” Emma replied between bites.

“What do you miss the most?”

Emma was quiet for a moment while she thought. “To be truthful aside from having a job I don’t miss anything about it.”

“Nothing?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I loved living in the city but the only reason I lived there was because of my job. I thought it was so exciting but the more money we made the more the brokerage wanted us to make. It was never enough. No matter what, the goal was to keep clients invested one hundred percent of the time regardless of what the market was doing.”

“Doesn’t sound like that keeps the clients best interest at heart.”

“Wall Street is like a casino. The house always wins. The longer I was there the more I felt the whole thing was a rigged game.”

“My grandfather lived through the Great Depression. It shaped who he was. He always had the mindset that it could happen again and he wanted to be prepared. He never trusted the banks. The farm was tangible and everything that he grew and raised supported the family in some way.”

“And it still does to this day. It’s really quite amazing when you think about it. You provide jobs. The land produces food that you sell. This farm provides a consistent return on an investment.”

“It is pretty amazing when I think about it. We learned practical skills from the time we were old enough to be out in the fields helping.”

“Some of those guys on Wall Street worked ridiculous hours. When they were supposed to be away with their families they were checking in and monitoring trades. They were the ones who made it to the top, but for what? They’re out of a job just like I am. I look back now and I don’t know how I tolerated working in that environment for so long.”

“I take it the small town atmosphere isn’t scaring you away.”

“No not yet.”

“That’s good to hear.” Grace tipped her bottle up and took a swallow of beer.

“So, have you thought about what you want to do going forward?”

“Sure, I’ve sent out applications to dozens of brokerages. When I lost my job I realized that college trained me to do precisely one thing and that was to make money. Sure there are other parts of the business I could get into, but it all seems so pointless.”

“What about doing something completely different?” Grace pulled a piece of crust off from her pizza and nibbled it.

“That seems so daunting. I’m not even sure I would know where to start.” Emma shook her head and laughed at the thought. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay. What were you thinking about when I came out of the house before?” Grace asked.

Emma brought her beer bottle to her lips and took a long sip. “No beating around the bush. You get right to the point.”

“You looked like something was bothering you.” Grace leaned forward and pulled another slice of pizza from the pie.

“Do you want another?”

“Yes.” Emma held her plate out to receive the slice from Grace. “Just something my sister said to me.”

“When you were there?”

Emma nodded. "We were talking and she asked about you and me."

"How did she know?"

"She came out to see me the day you and I went horseback riding. She made this big deal about it because she knows I've never ridden a horse before. She wanted to know if we'd seen each other since then."

"Why does she want to know?" Grace lifted her bottle to her lips.

"She's dying of curiosity."

Grace choked on her beer and coughed. "That's what I get for asking."

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. You still didn't answer my question. What were you thinking when I came out of the house?"

Emma picked at the corner of the label on her beer bottle peeling it away. Her sister's words echoed in her mind. "I was wondering what this might be between us and where it might be going."

Grace stood from the table and walked around to the other side. She straddled the bench, her knees lightly touching Emma's leg. "I know neither one of us has a crystal ball. The reality is no one knows how anything will turn out."

Emma ducked her head and smiled. "I'm not sure I'd want to know the future even if we did have a crystal ball."

"Are you afraid?" Grace asked.

"I'd be lying if I said no," Emma said.

"I would be too," Grace admitted.

"Why?" Emma tossed the label onto the table.

"You might get a job half way across the country," Grace said.

"I guess that's always a possibility."

"What about you?" Grace prodded.

"I came here meaning to hide and lick my wounds. I wasn't expecting anything good to come of it and then I met you."

Emma looked at Grace and realized by the faint smile on her face that she understood. "I don't want to let whatever this might be pass us by. One thing I've learned in the past few months is we only get one shot at this life." A warm breeze fluttered the flames of the candles and brushed against them. Emma didn't mind sitting quietly in the dark with the candlelight flickering and dancing. She heard the jingling of the dogs' tags as they trotted over and settled down around them.

"You've got city girl written all over you and I'm a farm girl at heart..." Grace shook her head and laughed, "I don't know how it'll be or if it will turn out right."

"How about we agree to see how it plays out?" Emma asked.

"Meaning?"

Emma slipped her hand into Grace's and squeezed gently. "We'll just have to find out as we go along." Emma leaned forward and brushed her lips against Grace's. "It might be fun," she teased, moving her lips along Grace's jaw until she found her earlobe. Emma drew the soft flesh in between her lips and sucked gently. She felt Grace shiver beneath her touch and heard her breath hitch. She felt Grace's arms come around her and pull her close. Emma took her time exploring Grace's mouth.

With a soft moan, Grace pulled away and rested her forehead against Emma's. "You, Ms. Chamberlain, are trouble."

“Trouble? Mmm.” Emma nuzzled Grace’s neck and grazed her teeth along her skin. “Is that good or bad?”

“I’ll guess we’ll just have to see.” Grace pulled away and held onto Emma’s shoulder as she stood.

“Where are you going?” Emma asked wondering if she’d upset Grace with her teasing.

“I’m going to put the rest of this inside.”

“I’ll help.”

WHEN EVERYTHING WAS put away, Grace grabbed a fleece from the coat rack inside the hallway and handed it to Emma.

“What’s this for?”

“I want to show you something.”

“What is it?”

“If I tell you it won’t be a surprise. Would it?”

“You’re a tease.” Emma tugged on the pullover, breathing in the scent of Grace’s perfume and felt her heart start to pound. This is crazy. I really need to get a grip here.

“Just don’t want to spoil it for you.” Grace grabbed a flashlight from a drawer and ushered Emma out the door.

In the growing darkness, Grace clasped Emma’s hand in hers. They walked along a well-worn footpath that meandered through the woods. The beam of light danced in front of them illuminating the forest floor and the enormous trees around them. The ground was spongy beneath their feet from centuries of branches and leaves falling and composting on the forest floor. A complex woody, green smell wafted from the ground as their steps disturbed the soil.

Somehow holding hands felt significant. Not that the kisses they shared weren’t, Emma thought. They were full of passion, heady with the anticipation of what might come after, but this simple gesture made her feel the warmth and tenderness growing between them.

An owl hooted above them and Grace stopped a moment to sweep the light through the branches that towered above them in a futile search for the winged predator. Emma had a fleeting thought she should feel afraid out in the woods at night, but she felt relaxed and surprisingly at ease. An occasional animal scurried around in the undergrowth not far from where they were walking.

“It’s not far.” Grace’s voice was low as if she was reluctant to break the nighttime spell.

“It’s so dark. I can’t see anything beyond your light.”

“Listen.” Grace slowed and after a few more feet halted holding Emma alongside her.

It was faint at first and Emma strained with every ounce of her senses to hear what Grace was tuned into. A gurgling noise of water cascading over rocks reached her ears. “I hear it.”

“There’s a spring that feeds into a stream just ahead. Go slow here,” Grace said close to Emma’s ear. “The ground slopes down.”

Emma edged forward, holding onto Grace’s hand. The ground fell away sharply into a dell. Grace swept her flashlight in a slow arc. Emma could make out shapes of massive fallen trees below them.

Grace flicked the light off and Emma gasped as the darkness swallowed them.

“No. Turn it back on.”

“It’s all right. Trust me and watch.”

Emma felt Grace step behind and wrap her arms around her middle. The contact of Grace's breast and hips against her back was erotic. Emma forced herself to breathe and tamp down on the terrible ache she felt inside.

"I've got you," Grace said close to her ear.

Emma leaned back into Grace's sturdy frame, grateful for her support as she stood at the edge of what felt like hallowed ground, as if they were standing in an ancient cathedral.

One by one, hundreds of yellow and green lights twinkled on and off in the darkness as if they had stumbled upon some earthly galaxy of stars. The fireflies flitted up, down and around, darting and dancing in a magical woodland display that felt like an enchanted forest. The fireflies' tapestry of light was breathtakingly beautiful and Emma felt tears sting her eyes.

"They're beautiful."

"I wanted you to see it." Grace hugged her tighter.

"Do you ever get tired of watching?" Emma wrapped her hands over Grace's.

"No. I miss them when the summer's over." Grace buried her face in the curve of Emma's neck. "I come out here some nights when nobody's out, just to look. It's quiet and for a few moments I feel like they belong to me. Silly, isn't it?"

"I don't think so. This is one of those moments I wouldn't want to ever forget." Emma intertwined her fingers in Grace's hands. "This is perfect."

"As close as it gets." Grace kissed the skin beneath Emma's ear then snapped her head up when she heard a cacophony of frenzied barking followed by a high-pitched crack that echoed through the air.

"What was that?" Emma clutched Grace's arm.

"Gunshot. Someone's at the house," Grace hissed through clenched teeth.

"I don't have my cell phone on me," Emma said as she felt her back pocket of her jeans.

"Not going to do us any good," Grace said already moving back along the path. Emma sensed Grace's tension as she picked her way through the trail, stopping every few steps to listen. "We're not going back the way we came."

"I'm going to the barn."

"Why?" Grace didn't answer and Emma's stomach churned. She pulled Grace to a stop. "What are you doing?"

"I'd prefer it if you came with me rather than stay out here in the woods alone. I don't know who's out there, but they're armed and we're not. I need to get back to the barn."

"You don't want to just wait and let them go?"

"Mike and the twins will be back with my parents soon—and my dogs are out there. I'm not waiting."

"Okay," Emma relented not having a better argument.

Grace kept them in the shadows as they came out of the woods and crept to the barn. "Stay with me," Grace hissed as she crouched down at the corner of the barn and waited.

Not too far off in the distance Emma could hear Sadie and Max. Maybe they chased off whoever was snooping around. Still staying in a crouch Grace moved to the front of the barn and slipped inside with Emma behind her.

The smell of sweet hay and horses filled her nose. Bella and Honey neighed softly at the intrusion.

Emma's heart hammered in her chest as Grace moved to the cabinet and unlocked it. She heard her remove the rifle and chamber rounds.

"What are you doing?" Emma asked when Grace stood inside the doorway.

“Listening for the dogs.”

Minutes passed and Emma could make out the silhouette of her car, the steps leading up to the farmhouse and the rail at the top of the steps. Out of the shadows, a shape emerged moving towards the barn. The shape turned into two distinct bodies as Sadie and Max trotted towards Grace. Tongues hung out of their mouths, their panting audible from a couple feet away.

“What did you two go after?” Grace dropped to her knees and held her hand out to Max.

“He’s limping,” Emma said kneeling down beside her.

“Come here boy.” Grace ran her hands over his legs and flank. Max whined when she touched his back hip.

“Is he hurt?”

“I need to get him inside and look. He’s bleeding from somewhere.”

“What about whoever’s out there?” Emma asked.

“These two ran them off for now.”

“How can you be sure?”

“They wouldn’t be back and acting like this if there was still someone here.” Grace shouldered the rifle and lifted Max into her arms. Sadie trotted across the yard towards the farmhouse.

Emma opened the door to the kitchen watching with a look of worry on her face as Grace carried Max inside and set him on the floor. Beneath the light, Grace examined him. “There it is. It’s just a flesh wound.”

“Can I do anything?” Emma asked her stomach churning.

“In the cabinet over the sink is a first aid kit.”

“Aren’t you going to call the police?” Emma watched as Grace set the rifle on the floor within arm’s reach.

“What are they going to do? Whoever was out there is gone.” Grace’s voice was calm and matter-of-fact.

“They shot your dog.” Emma retrieved the blue bag and handed it to Grace.

“You’re right and now I’m going to take care of him. It’s all right,” Grace crooned as she dug out cleaner and applied it to the gash. Sadie lay next to Max watching intently as Grace worked on him. “It’s not too deep, but he’s going to need stitches.” Grace filled a syringe from a vial. “This is going to sting, baby. Hold his head for me?”

Emma knelt down and stroked Max. She pressed her hands into his fur to hide their trembling. The dog rolled his eyes up at Emma and thumped his tail. Emma watched as Grace injected the fluid around the gash in Max’s left hip.

“Just a minute for this to numb everything then I can fix you up. Who did you chase out there? Huh?” Grace shaved the fur from around the edges of the wound. She flushed the gash with cleaner again and then threaded a needle.

“How did you learn how to put stitches in?” Emma watched Grace’s practiced hand suture the wound closed.

“I’ve had to do it before on livestock. Out here you learn to do these things yourself. I can’t run to a vet or a doctor for every little thing that happens.”

“I suppose not.” Emma watched as Grace finished with Max and covered the dog with a blanket. Sadie lay down next to him and licked his ear.

“He’ll be all right. Just need to keep him quiet for few days.” Grace packed up her kit and washed her hands in the sink.

Headlights flashed in the window. “The troops are back.” Grace picked up the rifle and set it on the counter.

Her father entered first, carrying Jonah, followed by Michael with Tyler in his arms. Lucy entered and lit up when she saw Emma in the kitchen. “I thought I recognized your car. What happened to Max?” she asked her eyes quickly darting from the dog to the gun on the counter. “Grace?”

“We’re fine. Someone was here prowling around earlier and the dogs went after whoever it was.”

“What happened?” Peter asked.

“Take the boys to bed first,” Lucy said directing him and Michael out of the kitchen.

“Where were the two of you?”

“Out back in the woods walking,” Grace said.

“You didn’t see whoever it was did you?” Lucy asked and Grace shook her head.

Peter entered the kitchen. “Want to fill me in?”

“Somebody was prowling around and Max got shot. A flesh wound is all.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” Lucy snapped kneeling down to look at Max under the blanket.

“Probably some damn fool kids out looking for trouble,” Peter said.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” Lucy asked.

Peter shrugged. “So they can come and take a report for an hour. There’s nothing they can do.”

Lucy stood and walked over to Emma and rubbed her arms. “You’re shaking sweet heart. Sit for a minute.”

“You didn’t need to get the rifle out, Grace.”

“I didn’t know what the situation was. You guys were coming home soon and someone was out there armed. I know you don’t like it, but it’s what I chose to do.”

“Everyone settle down. You did the right thing, Grace,” Peter said. “No harm done, except for poor Max here.”

“We all need to go to bed. Tomorrow’s another busy day,” Lucy said. “Grace you should follow Emma home.”

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“I insist,” Lucy said. “Grace make sure you put that gun away.”

“I will.”

“I’ll take it.” Peter lifted it from the counter. “I’m going to take a look around after you two leave.”

Grace watched her parents leave the kitchen and then sat down beside Emma. “Sorry the night ended like this.”

“It’s not your fault.” Emma squeezed Grace’s forearm. “Are you in trouble?”

“I don’t think so. My father will tell me tomorrow I should have taken it with me when I left the house tonight.”

“Really?”

“Doesn’t do you any good if you don’t have it with you when you need it.” Grace stood feeling out of sorts and more than a little convinced that she’d done permanent damage with Emma tonight. “I’ll follow you home”

“Let me give you your fleece back,” Emma said starting to remove it.

“Keep it for the ride home. The temperature is dropping.”

EMMA CLOSED THE door behind her and locked the dead-bolt. She watched through the window as Grace's taillights disappeared in the distance. The night was a whirlwind of emotions and if she closed her eyes she wondered if much of what happened was real. She was so far out of her depth living here. Maybe her mother was right about the Moretti's.

She was annoyed with herself that she couldn't decipher the look in Grace's eyes before she stepped down off the porch tonight. She couldn't tell what the coolness in her eyes meant and that unsettled her more than the events that happened earlier. Was Grace angry with her? Was she embarrassed because her parents showed up and her mother questioned her actions in front of Emma?

Emma had no idea and decided sleep was the best way to put the night behind her. If Grace was in a mood, it wasn't her problem.

Chapter Thirteen

THREE DAYS LATER, Emma walked into the Saint Ambrose soup kitchen, her nose picking up an odor that reminded her vaguely of the cafeteria in high school. The pungent smell of body odor mixed with some kind of mystery soup wafted through the air.

A man with wavy, salt and pepper hair and a sun-weathered face wiped down the empty tables with a soapy dishrag. He wore black pants with a maroon polo shirt and stained white apron tied around his skinny hips.

“Hi,” Emma said walking up to him. She thought he was ignoring her until she saw the hearing aide in his ear. She stepped into his line of sight and said, “Hello.”

He glanced up after a moment and studied her with a quizzical expression. “Hi there.”

“My name’s Emma.”

“Nice to meet you, Emma” He nodded and moved onto another table as the last occupant rose. Dressed in a worn gray t-shirt and jeans that were too baggy, the woman bent and hefted a blue duffel bag, a guitar and a backpack over her shoulders. She ambled to the door leaving her tray of unfinished food where she’d been sitting. “Name’s Whitley. James Whitley. You missed the main meal of the day. Got nothing left today, but you can come back tomorrow. We open at nine.”

“Oh, no I’m not here for food.” Emma followed him as he moved around the table. “I wanted to talk to the manager.”

“What for?” he asked looking confused. “There aren’t any paying jobs here.” James continued to wipe soapy swirls on the table. He pulled a worn dry towel from his back pocket and ran it over the suds to wipe the surface dry, splattering droplets of soap onto the floor in the process.

“I want to volunteer.”

“Volunteer?” His eyes went up and down her in a quick appraisal. “Why do you want to volunteer here? You’d be better off at the hospital.”

“Why the hospital?” Emma asked.

“The crowd is a bit more docile there.” James picked up the recycled tray and tossed it into a trashcan that was already overflowing with garbage.

“I can handle myself,” Emma said trying to tamp down the sense of irritation she felt at being dismissed so easily. “Can I speak to whoever’s in charge?”

“Well now, that would be Ed. He’s in the back doing inventory,” James said and went back to wiping tables.

“Can I just walk back?”

“Well how else are you going to get back there?”

Her sneakers squeaked with each step over the black and white linoleum tile floor. Down the narrow corridor, yellow light spilled out into the hall from a doorway and she heard someone opening boxes.

Emma tapped on the frame of the door. “Excuse me.”

A white haired man with a ruddy complexion straightened up from the box he was unloading. “How’d you get in here?”

“Mr. Whitley said I could come back and talk to you.”

“We don’t have any paying jobs here.”

“I know. I’d like to volunteer,” Emma said.

“Volunteer? Why?”

Why, she thought. Good question. Because I need something to do or I’m going to lose my mind. Grace comes here and maybe I’ll get a chance to see her. Surely, lurking at the farmer’s market is just weird. She settled on, “I’m in between jobs. I wanted to be able to do something that matters.”

This seemed to interest him and he asked, “What kind of work were you doing?”

“I was in finance.”

He nodded slowly, a serious expression crossing his features. “I suppose you got laid off.”

Shame slithered through her and she said, “I was.”

“Sorry that happened. You seem like a nice kid. Those bastards on Wall Street deserve to get knocked down more than a few pegs. They get rich and the rest of us barely scrape by.”

Emma flushed knowing she fell squarely into the category of people he described. She’d enjoyed the perks of her job for many years never thinking of the consequences outside the hallowed buildings she worked in.

“We need someone to help serve the mid-day meal, but there’s some rules you need to know.”

“Okay.” She didn’t know if this meant he was offering her the job or not.

Ed wiped his hands off on a dishtowel that was hanging from one of the racks. “Everyone gets served the same amount. There’s no seconds. They’ll be watching to see what you put on each plate. Don’t let them touch you.” He looked straight into her eyes. “And I don’t just say that to the women.”

He walked out of the storeroom towards the front of the soup kitchen and stopped at the window, staring out across the street. “Now I remember. I thought you looked familiar. You were at the Moretti’s cookout a couple weeks back.”

“Yes. Grace and I went to high school together.”

“Is that your car parked out there?” He jutted his chin at the silver BMW parked across the street.

“Yes,” she said self-consciously and the emotion made her feel bad. She’d worked hard to buy that car. She saved and bought it as a gift to herself after her second year with the brokerage. It was one the last possessions she was holding onto from her former life.

“Do yourself a favor and don’t invite trouble by bringing it here again. Walk or take public transportation. The bus lets off at the corner two blocks down to the east. Do not bring that car here again.”

“This area doesn’t look so bad,” Emma said peering out the window.

“Sweetheart, looks are deceiving. To you it may be just a car, but for someone down on their luck it’s a reminder of everything they lost or never had. If you’re still interested in volunteering fill out an application. They’re online. Come back tomorrow at eight. You can help serve the mid-day meal. We’ll see how you get on with the rest of the staff and our guests.”

THE NEXT DAY Emma walked the three miles into town. She dressed casually and carried an umbrella since the weather report called for rain later in the day. A block from the converted warehouse Emma spotted a line of people snaking along the street for as far as her eyes could see. As promised, Ed met her at the back door at eight o'clock sharp and let her in.

"You figured out the bus schedule," Ed said closing and locking the door behind him.

"I walked," Emma said secretly proud at the surprised look in his eyes.

"It's going to be a busy service. James handed out over two hundred tickets this morning."

"When did they start lining up?" Emma asked glancing toward the glass doors at the front of the building where shadowy figures stood just beyond them.

"Some of them are here before the sun comes up. Let's get you set up so you know what to do," Ed said.

Her job going forward was to help set up the dining room with everything people would need to eat and help serve. Ed assigned her to handing out rolls from a basket using tongs. A far cry from handling multi-million dollar accounts but still it was something. Next to her station a woman with brassy red hair pulled back in a loose ponytail wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt, faded jeans and pink sandals on her feet uncovered a pan of steaming vegetables.

"Well, ain't it a small world," the woman said when she noticed Emma. It was green eyes from the Moretti's.

"Isn't it," Emma replied.

"Paula, if you don't remember," she said.

"Of course," and Emma immediately remembered Paula's possessive attitude toward Grace. Suddenly the quaint small town feeling wasn't so quaint anymore and Emma felt as if she'd been placed under a microscope.

"Well, get ready. Here comes the crowd now," Paula announced as the doors were unlocked and a line of people immediately filed into the dining hall. They tugged rolling suitcases, many carried a duffel bag or two. One woman wore a Disney backpack. "I'll tell you who you need to look out for," Paula said.

Young and old, women with children, shuffled through the doors and made a line to be served food. Some of the younger adults urged an elderly couple to go ahead of them.

"Charlie and Ruth have been coming here for a couple of years," Paula leaned closer and whispered harshly in Emma's ear. "He worked in construction and she raised their kids. I imagine they never expected to end up here after working all their lives." Her face brightened when they got to her station. "Hi Ruth. Hi Charlie. How are you today?"

"Doing fine, Paula," Charlie said and guided Ruth, who looked frail and unsteady, along by her elbow. She limped when she walked and Emma was afraid she would fall if someone bumped into her.

Emma smiled politely and gave them each a roll. The line continued to move along. Every now and then Paula would lean over and fill Emma in on someone further down the line that she deemed interesting or peculiar enough to share information about. It seemed Paula knew a little bit about everyone and it was obvious she kept the information she found out neatly tucked away. The number of guests arriving ebbed and flowed and two hours passed quickly.

"Now there's one to look out for." Paula announced leaning closer. "That fella in the blue jeans that look like they're about to fall off his scrawny ass is a character."

Emma immediately recognized Robert with his scraggly beard and disheveled clothes. She wondered if he would recognize her. By the blank expression in his eyes it was obvious that he

didn't. Stale smoke permeated his clothes and she wondered when he last took a shower. A combination of relief and sadness swept through her when he passed by.

Paula waited until he was out of earshot. She dropped her voice and said, "He's schizophrenic you know."

"No I don't and frankly it's none of my business. How do you know that's even true?" Emma asked remembering what Grace had told her that day in the parking lot.

"I have my sources," Paula said.

Irritated now, Emma said, "Sources or not that's not your business to be sharing."

Paula didn't miss a beat and said, "Everyone knows he's crazy like in that movie—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. I love Jack Nicholson. Besides, wouldn't you like to know who to look out for seeing as you're new here?"

Emma conceded the point. "Yes. I just don't need to know all the details."

"Suit yourself," Paula said obviously miffed that her professional talents at gossiping were not fully appreciated. It didn't take long for Paula to recover and start anew as the line of people advanced.

"I haven't seen you around town before. Did you just move here?"

"No," Emma said.

"Whereabouts?"

"I live about three miles from here in a little cottage," Emma said, pleased with herself that she skirted around exactly where she lived.

"What did you do before you came here?"

"I worked in New York."

"Ooh the city that never sleeps. What brings a city girl like you to our little hamlet?" Paula's tone was conversational, but Emma sensed something lurking beneath the surface.

"I wanted a change. A fresh start."

"This is a pretty dramatic change. What on earth brought you here?" Paula asked.

"I grew up in this town," Emma said.

"Are you married?" Paula's volleys continued.

"No. Call it separated—permanently."

"Ah well, it happens to the best of us. How do you know Grace?"

"I went to high school with the Moretti's."

"Oh, so you know Michael, Grace and Tony," Paula said their names with a familiarity of someone who seemed to know them well.

Emma sensed something in Paula's voice, an edge of jealousy, she thought. "Grace and I were in the same grade together, but we hardly knew each other then."

"Oh, and what would you say you are now?" Paula asked her face set and eyes flat as she studied Emma.

Emma served the last few guests, waited for them to pass by and turned to Paula. "We're friends." Emma untied her apron and started to clean up around her station.

"I saw you at the party Saturday night. I was standing on the porch when you and Grace walked back to the house," Paula said.

"She was showing me around."

"You and Grace looked cozy dancing together. Getting reacquainted?" and her voice oozed condescension.

Emma felt heat as her ears flushed red. She didn't remember seeing Paula later in the evening, but obviously she'd been there. "There's no law against having fun together."

“Maybe not but just remember I had eyes on her first.”

“Excuse me?” Emma almost laughed until she saw the dead serious look in Paula’s eyes.

“I saw her first.”

Temper flared up inside and Emma’s voice turned icy. “Maybe it’s more a matter of who Grace sees.”

With a defiant look in her eyes, Paula edged away and moistened her lips several times.

“We’ll see about who she has eyes for.”

“If there’s a point to this conversation other than you mining for information why don’t you get to it?”

“Go ahead and make your play. I’ll wager that you’re nothing but a distant memory for her in a few months.”

Paula sauntered away leaving Emma to stare after her in disbelief. *I had eyes on her first*, echoed in her mind. Emma had no idea what to think and a painful mixture of confusion and fear swirled inside.

“Did you and Paula get acquainted?”

Emma opened her mouth to say something nasty then thought better of it. “She was filling me in on the guests.”

Ed glanced over at Paula who was busy chatting with one of the other workers. “Don’t pay her too much mind. Her bark is worse than her bite.”

“Good to know,” Emma said wondering if he overheard any of their conversation.

“How did the service go?”

Emma blinked and looked over her shoulder at Ed. “It was fine.”

“If you’re interested the job is yours. Strictly volunteer.” Did she really want to subject herself to dealing with Paula on a regular basis? “I understand. How many days a week?”

“Three if you’re able to.”

“You have a deal.”

Chapter Fourteen

EMMA WALKED HOME in a slow steady drizzle. She strolled up the hill watching the fog roll and swirl among the trees. The street was virtually empty of pedestrians, save an older woman bent forward at the waist pulling a two-wheeled cart half filled with shopping bags. She was dressed in a black rain slicker, her hair covered with a clear plastic rain hat. It reminded Emma of the one her grandmother used to wear. Emma guessed everyone else was hunkered down at home or busy at work.

The fog made the landscape look blurred—surreal almost. The leaves dangled from their branches heavy with moisture. Sporadically a gust of wind would buffet them sending showers of droplets to the ground making the gentle rain sound like a sudden downpour.

Every few minutes, a car driving past interrupted the peaceful quiet surrounding her. The high-pitched sound of tires rolling over wet pavement and the smell of exhaust seemed to disturb even the animals. Industrious squirrels darted and leapt onto the trunks of nearby trees, chattering indignantly at the interruption. A pair of morning doves flew into the air their wings making a sharp whistling noise as they took flight. Emma watched the fog, displaced by the air currents swirl in the wake of the car and slowly settle down in a soothing blanket that blurred the landscape.

Her footsteps were the only thing she heard aside from the steady patter of rain on her umbrella. She walked carefully, avoiding the cracks and upheaved chunks of sidewalk dislodged by the roots of trees growing beneath the concrete.

As Emma made her way through town she mulled over Paula's warning. She had no idea what the future held for her or Grace. She really hadn't been looking for anything and suddenly Grace seemed to be there like a magnet pulling her in.

Emma felt a little crazy. Inside her chest her heart thumped wildly. It seemed every time she turned around her mind hijacked her thoughts to Grace. Where she was, what she might be doing. Emma imagined what it would be like to touch her, to feel Grace's hands on her. She wanted to touch Grace so badly it hurt.

Still feeling the prickle of anger towards Paula, Emma was surprised by the sound of an engine rumbling slowly behind her.

The truck slowed down enough to roll along at her pace and the passenger side window slid down. She had a quick retort ready on her tongue.

"Emma." Grace leaned over and called out.

Emma stopped and said, "I didn't recognize the truck without the squealing noise."

A smile crept across Grace's face and Emma swore she saw her blush. "I fixed the fan belt yesterday. Do you want a ride?"

The uncertainty Emma felt seemed to evaporate when Grace smiled and Emma realized it was meant only for her. Grace's smile warmed Emma in ways she probably didn't intend. In fact the curve of Grace's mouth set Emma's brain down a road that was dangerous. Grace's dark red lips were smooth. Her lower lip was full and sensuous. Emma wanted to lick and suck those very

kissable lips as much as she wanted to feel them on her. Lord, I am in serious trouble, Emma thought.

“Sure,” Emma said. “Where are you going?”

“I’m heading back to the farm, but I can drop you off at the lake. What are you doing out in this weather anyway?”

“I volunteered at the soup kitchen today.” Emma climbed up into the cab and pulled the door closed. “I thought it was a better idea to walk than to drive there with my car.” Dressed in cargo shorts and work boots, Grace’s toned thighs flexed as she worked the gas pedal and Emma restrained herself from reaching over and stroking the smooth skin.

“Probably a good idea, but I don’t know if I like the idea of you walking all this way by yourself.” Emma bristled. “I managed walking the streets of New York for fifteen years alone. I think I can handle myself here.” Grace was quiet for a moment then said, “I wasn’t implying that you couldn’t take care of yourself.”

“I’m not helpless you know.”

“I know you’re not, but I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

“Sorry,” Emma said fighting the urge not to hunker down in her seat and fold her arms like a petulant child. “I’m being bitchy.”

“Why?”

Emma stared out the window avoiding Grace’s gaze. “People tell you things sometimes and you don’t know what to believe— what their motivations are for saying it in the first place.”

“What’s your gut telling you?”

Emma turned back and gazed into innocent blue eyes. “I don’t know yet. How’s Max?”

“On the mend,” Grace said and then turned to Emma. “Listen, I’m sorry if what I did Saturday night upset you.”

Emma met Grace’s inscrutable gaze. “I’m not upset with you. It’s...our lives are very different.”

“I guess they are.” Grace checked her mirror and pulled away from the curb. “Have you volunteered at a soup kitchen before?”

“No, this is the first time.”

“What did you think?”

“Different. Sad and a little surprising.” Emma stayed silent about Paula because she had no idea what the woman’s game was or what history with Grace she was talking about.

“How so?”

“There are people you’d see on the street and never suspect they go to a soup kitchen to eat.”

“Will you go back?” Grace asked, her voice uncharacteristically quiet.

“I’m going to volunteer there a few days a week.”

“You must have liked something about it then.”

“I miss having something to do that matters,” Emma said. “If I can make someone’s day a little better, bring some joy, then I’ve accomplished that one thing.”

“I was going to stop by later today to see you,” Grace told her.

“Why?” Emma asked surprised and felt her heart pumping faster in her chest.

“When I was organizing one side of the garage earlier today I found some scraps of drywall. If you’d like I could measure the holes and cut the drywall to fit it. It wouldn’t take long to do.”

“That would be wonderful,” Emma said, relieved because she had no idea when or how she was going to fix the damage herself.

“Good. When I drop you off, I can square the edges off then measure it if that’s okay with you. Today’s not a good day to bring the drywall by, because of the rain.”

“Of course it’s fine.” Emma searched for something else to say feeling suddenly awkward and out of her element. She had no idea what this attraction was between her and Grace. Should she dare pursue it or just let it go? Her plan when she arrived here was to simply spend time alone and put her life back together. There was no plan for a relationship. After Kate, Emma didn’t trust herself or her instincts in the arena of relationships.

Emma’s own upbringing left her with no roadmap for love. Her mother never re-married claiming once was more than enough. She didn’t want someone telling her when or what to do anymore. She’d spent most of her young adult life raising her two daughters, running the household, working from home and attending to a marriage that rotted from the inside out. This was her time and she planned to do exactly as she pleased when she wanted to. “Beholden to no one,” was her mother’s motto.

Apparently, Emma’s relationship with Kate had suffered the same unhappy fate and she hadn’t realized the signs until it was too late. The last thing Emma needed was another complication in her life. Simple, just keep it simple for now, she told herself.

WHEN THEY ARRIVED at Emma’s cabin, Grace pulled a canvas tool bag out of the back of the cab and carried it with her. Emma left her umbrella on the porch and unlocked the front door.

“Come on in.”

Grace followed and shut the door behind her. Rain pelleted the glass and the windows creaked as a gust of wind buffeted the house. “We got in just before they said the storms were coming.”

“Storms?”

“A cold front is pushing through. We might get a thunderstorm or two this afternoon.”

“Where are Sadie and Max?” Emma asked a look of concern coming over her face at imagining them outside and exposed to the weather.

“Don’t worry they’re tucked in nice and warm with Mom and the twins.”

“You make it sound cozy.”

“They’re probably curled up with the twins using them as oversized pillows. So yeah cozy is about right.”

Grace was surprised to see boxes stacked in a corner and to their left a stack of framed paintings rested against a wall. Two chairs and a slipcovered loveseat with striped pillows were pushed to the center of the room. A small round wooden table with two chairs sat in the kitchen. A laptop was open on the table.

“You’ll have to forgive the mess. I’ve been cleaning up and haven’t gotten around to putting much in its place yet,” Emma said from the kitchen. “Have you eaten anything?”

“Earlier. I’m fine. Thanks.” Grace pointed over to the wall. “Is it okay if I start on this?”

“Of course. You sure you don’t want a sandwich? I’m going to make one for myself. I’m starving.”

“I’m good. Go right ahead. I don’t mind.”

GRACE SET THE tool bag down and removed a utility saw. White dust cascaded onto the hardwood floor as she worked to even the edges. It took all but a few minutes to neaten the sides and measure the size of the hole. She scribbled her measurements on a scrap piece of cardboard she fished out of the bottom of her bag. She glanced around the living room noticing the stains on the walls.

“Do you have something I can sweep the dust with?” Grace climbed to her feet after she finished writing down the last measurement. “Oh, what’s this?” she asked when she came face to face with Emma holding a plate in front of her.

“A snack,” Emma replied with an impish smile. “I figured earlier might mean breakfast and knowing you that was well before the sunrise this morning. Am I wrong?”

“Guilty as charged,” Grace said feeling heat on her cheeks as she flushed with embarrassment. “I...need to wash my hands first.”

“Here.” Emma cocked an eyebrow as she lifted the bread and held it out to Grace.

“Oh.” Grace shifted her gaze from Emma’s eyes to the sandwich and carefully leaned in to take a bite, her lip grazing Emma’s thumb as she did.

“What’s on there?” Grace asked after she finished chewing.

“Provolone cheese, avocado and ham.”

“It tastes great,” Grace said.

“I’m glad you like it. Finish it. I made one for each of us.” Emma’s eyes twinkled as she pushed the plate into Grace’s hands and returned to the kitchen to retrieve her sandwich.

Grace shook her head, a smile touching her lips as she followed Emma across the room. She’d seen the look in Emma’s eyes and it got her pulse going. All it took was a look. “Do you have a towel so I can dry my hands?” Grace asked while she washed hers in the sink.

“Right here.” Emma reached into a drawer and pulled one out, handing it across to Grace. “The kitchen’s the only room I finished unpacking.”

After drying her hands, Grace leaned against the counter while she finished eating the sandwich. “I can bring the drywall over tomorrow and install it if that works for you.”

“As long as it’s after one. I should be back from the soup kitchen by then,” Emma replied.

“That’s fine. Did you happen to buy an oil based primer for the walls?” Grace studied Emma’s profile while she pretended to examine the walls. Grace wanted to feel what it was like to run her fingers through Emma’s hair. She imagined tracing the planes of her face down along her neck to where her pulse pumped beneath her skin. She wondered what it would be like to wake up with Emma and see those hazel eyes looking back at her.

“No. Do you think I need one?” Emma asked.

“Probably. Those stains will bleed right through a latex primer.” Grace tilted her head in question at Emma’s amused expression.

“What? Did I get something on me?” Grace spread her arms and looked down at her shirt.

“Not there, here.” Emma moved closer and brushed her thumb over the corner of Grace’s mouth.

“Oh.” Grace watched the playful smile take over Emma’s face as Emma held her thumb up to Grace’s mouth and press softly against her lower lip. Grace felt her touch like an electric impulse through every cell of her body and wondered if Emma knew what affect she was having on her.

“Take it,” Emma whispered and slid an arm around Grace’s waist pulling her close.

The contact was exquisite and she felt Emma’s hips press against hers. Slowly, Grace complied and took Emma’s thumb into her mouth and sucked the offending crumb from the pad of her finger. She could feel the roughness of Emma’s thumb rub against her tongue. Captivated by Emma’s eyes, Grace sucked, swirling her tongue around Emma’s digit, grazing the tip with her teeth as she let go. She pulled away watching Emma’s mouth open and her hazel eyes darken with desire. A wave of heat passed through her and Grace had to look away.

“God, you’re so sexy it isn’t fair,” Emma moaned.

Grace drew in a shuddering breath and asked, “Has anybody ever told you you’re dangerous?”

“Me? No,” Emma murmured pressing full length against Grace.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Doing what?” Emma tugged Grace’s shirt out of her cargo shorts and brushed her fingers underneath, lightly grazing her fingernails up and down the muscles of Grace’s back. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about kissing you.”

Grace nipped lightly at Emma’s jaw working her way up to the sensitive flesh beneath her ear. She bit down until Emma moaned and then ran her tongue over the same bit of flesh. “There should be a warning label on you.”

“Why?” Emma continued her tortuous exploration. Her fingers grazed the skin over Grace’s stomach. A sharp intake of breath and a quiver of muscles emboldened Emma. She took hold of Grace’s shirt and pulled it over her head brushing against her breasts with her fingertips as she did. She flung the shirt onto a chair.

“May cause dizziness or lightheadedness.” Grace leaned in brushing her tongue over the rim of Emma’s ear. Grace’s hand splayed over Emma’s neck, her thumb caressing the line of her jaw, feeling Emma’s pulse jump beneath her fingers.

“I love the way you taste,” Grace groaned working her way lower and nipping at the skin beneath Emma’s jaw.

Emma’s breath came in gasps and her hips undulated against Grace’s pelvis. “Oh God.”

Grace took her time exploring. Her tongue lightly teased between Emma’s lips. Emma had to rise up onto her toes to keep up with the playful probing dance that left them both breathless and trembling. Grace pulled away and said, “Don’t operate heavy machinery after taking. You know the warnings they put on medication labels.”

“Stop it.” Emma laughed and cupped Grace’s ass pulling her flush against her. “I want to see you naked.”

“Can we take this into your bedroom? I can’t take much more of this standing up.”

“I thought you would never ask.” Emma grabbed Grace’s hand and led her down the hall. Inside the room Emma pulled her shirt over her head and tossed it aside. “Kiss me again. I didn’t get enough of your mouth on me—.”

Grace obliged, silencing her words when she planted her lips on Emma’s. She stroked and sucked Emma’s tongue, pulling her closer when she felt Emma’s hips rock rhythmically against her pelvis. When she pulled back Emma’s eyes were hazy with desire, her throat flushed, her breaths fast and shallow—just how Grace imagined she would look when she was aroused.

Emma ran her palms over the flat of Grace’s chest, tracing a path across her collarbone. “I was telling myself to keep things simple...but you seem to have this supernatural ability to obliterate all logical and rational thought from every single one of my brain cells.”

“I do?” Grace swallowed and tried to reign in her thoughts. They were focused on the thrilling sensation of Emma’s touch. Her fingertips stroked and teased their way up and down Grace’s front. “I can’t think straight with you touching me.”

“Okay.” Emma stopped her stroking and dropped her hands to Grace’s midriff. “Better?” Her thumbs massaged the indentation of Grace’s stomach muscles where they dipped below her shorts.

“No. Not better at all.” Grace squirmed away from the touch that was threatening to disassemble her control.

A smile flitted across Emma’s face. She pressed closer to Grace and slid her hands into back pockets and rubbed her pelvis against her. “How’s this?” It was exhilarating knowing she was having this kind of affect on Grace.

“Ah, Jesus woman,” Grace stepped back and the bed buckled her knees. She sat and Emma climbed onto her, straddling her lap.

Emma clasped a hand behind Grace’s neck and kissed her. “You get me so crazy. I can’t stop touching you.” Emma rocked against her and Grace had to lean back supporting herself with her hands to keep them from falling over. Emma caressed Grace’s neck, her shoulders, skimmed her palms over Grace’s hard nipples straining through a white tank top. She pressed her lips against one breast blowing and heating up one side before she focused her attention on the other nipple.

Grace bit her bottom lip at the contact and moaned. A fire stirred inside her belly and she struggled not to rock her hips against Emma. “You’re killing me here.” Grace could feel the fire between Emma’s legs where she rocked against her.

“I want to make love to you. Will you let me make love to you?”

Grace’s pupils darkened as Emma stood and stripped off the rest of her clothes. “You need to lose those shorts, Moretti. Or would you like me to do the honors?” Emma fingered the button on Grace’s shorts and popped it open. Her fingers lingered against Grace’s skin, teasing as she dipped just below the waistband to the triangle of hair below.

“I think I can manage.” Grace fumbled with the zipper of her shorts, then divested herself of the rest of her clothes.

Almost shy, Grace reached out and stroked her fingers over Emma’s jaw, over the elegant contours of her neck and across sleek muscles to her shoulders.

When she pulled Emma against her, Grace trembled at the exquisite contact of their naked bodies as they held each other. “Are you sure about this?”

“If you don’t put your hands on me soon I’m going to lose my mind,” Emma breathed out.

Grace tugged Emma down onto the bed and lay beside her. She trailed her fingers over Emma’s chest drawing them down between her breasts and over the softness of her abdomen. Her fingers stopped over a scar just above her right hip. She lowered her lips and kissed it before looking back up at Emma. She pressed up onto her arms and kissed Emma’s mouth, enjoying the heat and the taste of her. Grace trailed her lips over her collarbone and breasts while her hand curled around her hip stroking her skin.

“Oh!” Emma trembled and she reached up to cup the back of Grace’s neck desperately wanting more.

Grace kissed her way lower, her hand stroking the soft flesh of Emma’s inner thighs.

“Oh my God if you come any closer to my clit I’m going to explode.” Emma arched her back and twisted away.

“Too much?” Grace stilled her hands and pressed her cheek against Emma’s stomach.

“Too fast. I want to go slow.”

“Sorry.” Grace closed her eyes, listening to the pulse beating beneath her ear, breathing in her scent until Emma settled and she could start again.

“Don’t be. You drive me crazy.” Emma said running her hands through Grace’s hair and caressing the back of her neck. She pulled Grace up and slid a thigh tight between Grace’s legs. “Oh my God you’re so wet,” Emma cried and arched against Grace.

Grace’s control almost shattered as Emma’s skin slid across her hot and swollen flesh. “Oh no. Oh God.” Her arms trembled and her stomach tightened as heat and need swirled up from her center.

“I feel how close you are. Let it go, Grace. I’ve got you,” Emma whispered nuzzling the soft skin of Grace’s neck. She pressed her hands against Grace’s back urging on. “I want you to come.”

“You keep doing that and I will,” Grace gasped unable to stop her hips from rocking against Emma’s thigh.

Emma cupped her hips, guiding her, pushing her higher until Grace cried out in mindless pleasure. Grace buried her face in Emma’s neck letting Emma hold her until the spasms faded.

Grace collapsed onto Emma, her clit still throbbing and twitching from her release. “That’s not how I planned this to go.”

“No?” Emma kneaded the muscles over Grace’s back and hips. She spread her thighs and arched, seeking contact for the urgent need that built inside her. “I want you to make me come.”

With a low growl, Grace’s warm lips descended on Emma’s mouth. Strong hands roamed up her sides and across the flat of her chest, tracing a delicate teasing line down to her belly button. Emma gasped when Grace took a nipple into her mouth alternating between licking and sucking until it was stiff and engorged.

“Tell me what you want,” Grace whispered in her ear. She nipped at her jaw, licked her neck and sucked at her earlobe until Emma squirmed against her.

“I want to feel you everywhere,” Emma begged.

The weight of Grace’s body as she settled herself onto Emma was exquisite. Emma’s eyes closed and her mouth fell open when Grace brushed her breasts over hers. The rhythmic rocking of Grace’s pelvis, the sensation of hot skin against skin was so intense Emma thought she would melt. A jolt of hunger exploded inside her and Emma wrapped her legs around Grace’s hips greedy for more contact.

Emma reached out to stroke Grace’s back, but found her hand captured and her arm stretched over her head. It only served to tilt her breasts up and Grace teased the already sensitive nub with her tongue. Emma ached to touch Grace as she kissed her deeply. She gasped and moaned as Grace’s mouth moved over her throat and down to her belly button. Each bite, each touch leaving a trail of fire driving Emma higher.

Emma couldn’t get enough. She twisted and lifted her hips against the delicious torment. Her thighs trembled and she could feel an incredible pressure building in her belly.

Grace caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she sat back on her heels and teased Emma with her fingers. “Mmm, I love how you feel.” Grace’s fingers glided over Emma’s swollen lips. Emma cried out, drowning in her intense need. She bucked desperately as the first waves of her orgasm crashed through her. The gentle stroking motion over, around, dipping slowly in and pulling away only to start again drove her wild.

Emma heard herself pleading and begging for more while Grace relentlessly pushed her to the peak and then pulled back holding her on the razor’s edge of losing control. When Emma could bear it no more, Grace left a searing trail of kisses down the center of her abdomen. Warm

breath between her thighs and a feather light touch of lips had Emma crying out in mindless pleasure. Grace took her in her mouth sucking gently until Emma was thrashing and twisting in desperate need beneath Grace. Her hips bucked and her breath came in gasps and moans as she crested one peak and was driven higher to yet another. Grace thrust her fingers inside, filling her and driving her into oblivion.

Emma couldn't remember the last time her body felt this languid and replete. Her mind buzzed with the powerful rush of her orgasm. She opened her eyes to crystal blue orbs studying her. She could still hear thunder rumbling in the distance. It came through the haze as her brain started working again.

Emma could feel Grace on top of her—soft, yet strong, curving against her damp with sweat. “I don't think I can move,” Grace said after a moment.

Emma smiled and shifted beneath her to take a deep breath and said, “That was incredible.” Grace rolled to her side and curled her hand around Emma's waist. “Mmm.”

Curious, Emma sat up and trailed her fingers over Grace's thigh where a scar ran down the inside of her thigh. “What happened here?”

Grace lifted her head, a rueful grin touching her lips. “I had to make a hasty retreat out of a pasture.”

“Why?”

“We had a bull that we bottle fed from the time he was born. He was never aggressive before, but this one day he just came after me so I jumped the fence. I hooked a wire on the way down and it tore me up pretty good.”

“When did that happen?”

“A couple of years ago,” Grace said.

“You needed stitches.”

“I had a few.”

“More than a few I'd guess.” Emma traced the length of the scar with her fingertip.

Grace tilted her head to find Emma's gaze. Unsuccessful, she reached out and lifted her chin. “Are you okay with this?”

“Hey, did you forget who seduced who here?” Emma sprawled out on top of Grace. She rested the palm of her hand on Grace's chest and studied her face. “You wouldn't have kissed me today. Would you?”

“I...probably not.”

“Why?”

“I don't have great track record with relationships.”

“As if mine is any better. No, there's something else holding you back.”

Grace was quiet for a moment. “It's been awhile for me.”

Emma chewed her lip considering what she knew about Grace. “Been awhile for...sex?”

“That and anything resembling a relationship,” Grace said and looked away. “There was someone I was with when I was coaching. I was faithful. She wasn't. The last year we fought more than we did anything else. When I got accused...she walked, but not before she detailed all my shortcomings—in and out of the bedroom.”

“No, Grace. None of that is true.” Emma kissed Grace in the center of her chest then rested her cheek there. “Do you want to know how I know that?”

“How?” Grace rasped.

“Saturday night. You're incredibly romantic and you have a need to protect what's yours. Even though I was scared, I trusted you.”

“Until you came along I convinced myself I was better off being alone.” Grace stroked her fingers through Emma’s hair.

“I get that. Sex is the easy part. It’s everything else about a relationship that’s complicated.” Emma found Grace’s hand and laced their fingers together. “I’m not that girl. Maybe it’s time to let go of those memories and make some new ones.”

“Long past time.” Grace pressed her lips against Emma’s hand. “I’ll be honest. I worry...you’re just getting over a break up,” Grace said.

“True and that scares you. Doesn’t it?”

Grace stared down at their linked hands. “Yeah.”

“I’d be a cheap date,” Emma joked.

Grace’s eyes snapped up to Emma’s and she said, “Don’t say that. I wouldn’t want anything about this to be cheap.”

“Oh, Lord, not only are you incredibly good looking, but you know how to say the kindest things too. That’s a dangerous combination, Grace Moretti.”

“I meant what I said.” Grace traced her thumb across Emma’s cheekbone.

“I believe you.” Emma brought Grace’s hand to her lips and kissed her palm.

“I don’t want this to be the end between us.”

“Then we’ll have to see how we feel after the next time.”

Grace turned to her head to look at Emma. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were sleepy.

“You must have to get back to farm,” Emma said.

“Are you kicking me out?” Grace said half in jest and half seriously.

“Tell me you don’t have a list of things to do.” Emma walked her fingers up Grace’s chest, traced her jawline and ran her fingers through the hair at Grace’s temple.

Grace captured her hand and kissed her palm. “I do have to get back.”

Emma stood from the bed and slipped her shirt over her head. “I know you do.”

Grace propped up on her elbow and studied Emma’s profile. Her nipples strained against the fabric that reached to just above the triangle of hair between her thighs. “You’re beautiful.” Grace reached out pulling Emma back down on the bed. “I wish I could stay.”

“We both know you can’t, so let’s not dwell on it.” Emma gave her a quirky grin. “Thanks for the ride home.”

“Anytime.” Grace slipped her hand around Emma’s neck pulling her closer. She kissed her deeply, exploring with her tongue until Emma gasped and pulled away.

“Stop it. Go now before I tie you to this bed.”

“When can I see you again?” Grace asked sitting up on the bed.

“You could pick me up from the soup kitchen tomorrow if you like. I’ll give you a really good tip.”

Chapter Fifteen

THE FIRST THING Emma noticed when she arrived at the soup kitchen the next day was the heat. She was looking forward to cool conditioned air after walking there.

“This is worse than outside,” Emma announced to Ed when she found him in the kitchen. “What happened to the air conditioner?”

“Gave out. Are you the one who ordered up this Indian summer?” He handed her a stack of plates to carry to the front of the line.

“Not me. Is someone coming to fix it?”

“What?”

“The air conditioner,” Emma said giving him her best “you’re kidding me,” look as Ed tipped his head back and laughed.

“I don’t see anything funny about this at all.”

“Believe me I don’t either.” Ed stirred the pot of soup on the stove. “If I have time at the end of the day I’ll look at it.”

Sweat trickled down Emma’s back as she lifted a stack of bowls over to the counter.

“Don’t you have someone who you can call to repair it?” she called back to him.

“That costs money. We spend our budget on a repair and we have less food to serve to the people who depend on us.”

The temperature grew increasingly oppressive as the cafeteria filled to capacity. Even in the heat people still needed to eat. Tempers were short and it wasn’t long before a scuffle broke out among the patrons.

“Hey! There’s no fighting in here,” Paula shouted from her station and banged her spoon in the edge of the table.

“She cut the line,” several people shouted.

“Ed! We need you out here!” Emma called out as an older woman got pushed to the ground.

“What’s the matter? Oh, for Chrissakes’.” He bulled his way through the crowd maneuvering people out of his way. He hoisted the stunned woman to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“No.”

“Go sit down. Emma bring her a tray of food so she doesn’t have to stand here.” Furious, Ed blocked the rest of the line from advancing. “One more outburst like that and you’re all out of here. I don’t care who started it.”

The rest of the meal was uneventful and Emma was grateful when it was over. Her phone pinged alerting her that a text had landed in her phone. She finished wiping down her workstation and carried a tray of dirty utensils back to the kitchen. Through the open window she had an unobstructed view into the dining area. Many of the tables were still full as people lingered over their food. Volunteers milled about engaged in idle chatter. Paula was surrounded by her harem—the ladies who thrived on gossip hanging on her every word.

Emma pulled her phone out of her pants pocket and blinked her eyes trying to make sense of the text message on her screen. Her heart rate shot up when she realized it was Tom who had

texted her. She read his message again to be sure she understood the words correctly. Her fingers flew over the keyboard as she texted him back.

Yes! I can come on Friday. I can be there by one. I'm honored that you thought of me.

Emma allowed herself a fist pump to celebrate the small victory. She looked up when she heard the rear door bang closed. From her vantage point she watched Paula's bored expression turn to one of keen interest. A second later, Emma understood why.

Dressed in a t-shirt that sported Moretti's Farm and CSA on the back, Emma recognized Grace immediately when she strode into view. Paula wasted no time moving in and striking up a conversation with her. She looked like a cat in heat the way she unabashedly tried to rub up against Grace. Emma tore her eyes away, embarrassed at watching the spectacle that Paula was creating in front of a room full of people. She gathered her shoulder bag, and walked up to Ed, who was standing at the other end of the room.

"I'm going to take off," Emma told him. "Everything's stacked by the sink in the kitchen."

"Great." Ed folded his arms and furrowed his brow. "Looks like Paula's set on taking a juicy bite out of Grace."

"Hmph." Emma glared across the room at Paula, watching as Grace deftly stepped out of reach. "Excuse me while I extract Grace from her clutches."

"Be careful. She'll be sore if she thinks you're moving in on her territory," Ed quipped, his lips set in a line as he tried to suppress a smile.

Emma straightened her shoulders and strode over to where Grace was standing. "Fancy meeting you here."

At the sound of Emma's voice, Grace turned away from Paula. Her lips curled into a smile and for a moment Emma felt like the rest of the room faded away. "Hi there. You ready to go?"

"More than ready," Emma said not missing the room falling eerily silent when Grace placed her hand on the small of Emma's back. Three men dressed in camouflage t-shirts and jeans gaped at them in the same way the women flanking Paula were. All of them, including Paula, were trying to figure out what was going on between Grace and Emma.

Outside, Grace opened the back of the box truck and climbed inside. "I've got a dozen or so boxes to bring into the store room. It won't take me but a few minutes."

"I'll help." Emma tossed her jacket over her handbag in the front seat. The boxes were heavy. She was pleased she could keep up with Grace carrying them from the truck to the kitchen.

When they were done, Grace walked with Emma back to the truck. "I really don't want you to spend the afternoon repairing the walls at my place."

"About that. I asked two of the guys who helped me finish my apartment if they would be willing to do the work. All I have to do is call them."

"You'd have to pay them," Emma protested.

"We barter our time. It's no big deal. They owe me some time for work I did in their fields this past spring."

"That's time they owe to you, not me. Are you sure?"

Grace moved closer and settled a hand on Emma's waist. She kissed Emma slow and tender keeping her eyes open. Emma moved against her and Grace pulled back. "Damn sure."

A few minutes later, after Grace called in her favor, they were heading north for a quick bite to eat before Grace had to get back to the farm. Emma fiddled with the radio and cranked up the

volume. When the song finished and commercials filled the airwaves Grace changed the station and lowered the volume. Grace's phone chirped on her belt.

"Can you answer it for me?" Grace handed Emma her phone.

Emma listened for a moment. "It's Michael. He said the cow is in labor."

"What? I checked her before I left." Grace gave Emma an apologetic look. "Sorry. This is going to interrupt our plans, but I have to go back."

Fighting back a surge of disappointment Emma said, "It's no problem."

"I can drop you off at your place if you like." Grace maneuvered over to the right-hand lane to get off at the next exit.

"No. I want to come with you."

"It might be a long haul depending on where she's at."

"I've never seen a birth before. I'd like to be there," Emma insisted.

"Ok, but don't say I didn't warn you."

When Grace pulled into the drive by the barn. Michael was loping toward her waving his hat. "I think we may need to call the vet."

"What's wrong?" Grace climbed out of the cab.

"I see the amniotic sac but no calf."

"Crap." Grace exchanged a worried glance with Emma.

"That's bad?" Emma asked.

"Very. You have Nick's number on your phone?" Grace asked Michael as she started toward the barn.

"Got it."

"Call him now. Bring the calf jack and the obs chain so we have them for when he gets here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Emma said trotting after Grace.

"You'll want these," Grace said handing Emma a pair of rubber boots to pull on over her shoes. Grace skipped her boots and hurried out to the paddock.

Emma had no idea what was going on, but from the grim expression on Grace's face when she caught up to her she was sure it wasn't good news. Michael met them out in the field carrying a device that looked like a medieval torture contraption.

"He said he'd be here ASAP."

"That means thirty minutes if he lead foots it," Grace lamented.

"Thirty minutes?" Emma exclaimed.

"He lives that far away and then there's traffic even on the back roads here."

"Does she have a name?" Emma asked.

Grace scratched her head and nodded sheepishly. "Annabelle." She held an arm out and nudged Emma back as the cow climbed to her feet. The water bag began to leak and Annabelle started to look for her calf.

"I take it this isn't normal," Emma said.

Grace shook her head. "It would be normal if there was a calf being born with it. Do you see those spots on the sac? That's where the placenta attaches to the sac."

Emma was heartsick knowing that the calf that should have been coming out with the amniotic sac was most likely dead.

"She seemed fine when I checked her before I left today," Grace said.

"Nothing looked out of the ordinary to me," Michael concurred.

There was a collective sigh of relief when the vet arrived thirty minutes later. Stress warped Emma's perception of time making it seem like it took hours and seconds all at the same time.

Nick was a broad-shouldered man with a mass of blond curls that were pulled back into a ponytail. He reminded Emma of Samson from the Old Testament.

"Let's see what we have here," Nick said as he started his exam. "I feel a calf in the proper position, but she's not moving away from my touch."

Grace hung her head. "Dead."

"That explains the amniotic fluid presenting before the calf," Michael added.

"Let's get the calf pulled out and make sure mom is okay." Nick secured the obs chain and the calf jack. Over the course of the next ten minutes he proceeded to pull the calf out.

Emma stood back watching with a lump in her throat. She fought back tears when Grace knelt and tried to revive the calf pumping on its chest. No amount of reviving did any good and Grace stopped when Nick touched her shoulder.

"Let Annabelle tend to her, Grace. I'm concerned about how lopsided she still is. It could be a ruptured tendon or she could be carrying another calf."

"You think she could have twins?"

Nick's hunch proved right. "Mom's carrying a second calf. I feel the sac and the placenta. It's intact but she presenting back feet first."

"Not good," Grace steadied Annabelle while Nick attached the ob chains to the second calf and positioned the calf jack.

Grace let go while Nick pulled in case Annabelle lost her balance and fell. "How's the calf?" Grace asked anxiously.

Emma thought she saw a slight movement like a blink of an eye. She wondered if she were just wishing for it to be true. Grace came around Annabelle. "He's trying to breathe but his lungs are filled with the amniotic fluid."

Nick handed the jack to Michael. He pulled the sac away and wiped as much of the fluid from the calf's nostrils as he could. "Let him hang upside down awhile to drain more fluid."

A few minutes later the calf was lying on its side with its front legs curled up beneath it looking like a drowned rat. Annabelle hovered over her baby licking and nudging it to stand up.

Grace settled up with Nick and got the instructions for aftercare. "You know the routine," Nick said. "Make sure the calf gets colostrum, keep an eye on the umbilical and watch for milk fever and uterine fever. If you notice anything out of the ordinary call me."

"You know I will." Grace shook his hand.

Mike and Nick collected the dead baby calf in a wagon and wheeled it off to Nick's truck.

"You doing okay over there?" Grace looked up at Emma as she tended to the area where the umbilical cord used to be attached to the calf's belly.

"What do we do now?"

"First we try to get this little guy to nurse. If he's too weak I'll milk Annabelle and bottle feed him."

The little calf ended up being too weak. He tried to get his hind legs to cooperate, but every time he tried to stand he wobbled and fell back down. Annabelle hovered over her babe, oblivious to Grace milking her.

"Want to try?" Grace motioned Emma over and traded places with her. With her hand over Emma's she squeezed the teat and milk squirted into the bucket.

“I can’t believe I’m milking a cow,” Emma said as Grace stepped back keeping a close eye on Annabelle. When they emptied each teat into the bucket, Grace poured the milk into an oversized bottle.

“Let’s see if we can get some of this milk into him before the skies open on us. Hold this.” Grace gave Emma a quart size bottle and poured milk into it. “I’ll try and get him to stand and you can give him the bottle.”

Grace lifted the newborn calf from around his chest and hindquarters onto his wobbly legs.

“Do I just put it in his mouth?” Emma asked holding the bottle in front of her.

“Just like feeding a baby. Go ahead. He’ll do the rest.”

“Oh,” Emma said widening her stance when the calf took the nipple and started sucking. “He’s strong.”

“I’d guess he’s close to sixty-five pounds,” Grace said.

“At birth? And the mom was carrying two.”

“It’s unusual for a cow to have more than one calf. That’s probably why only one survived,” Grace said.

The slurping continued until the calf drained the bottle.

“Should we give him more now?” Emma asked scratching between the animal’s ears as she extracted the empty bottle from his mouth.

“No that will hold him for about an hour. We’ll give him what’s left in the bucket once we get him settled in the barn.” About this time fat raindrops started to fall. “Let’s get him on the towel,” Grace said.

Grace and Emma dragged him to the barn. It was all they could do to get him inside. “Nothing like dragging live deadweight a few hundred feet.” Grace braced her hands on her back and bent backwards a few times to stretch out.

“If you want I can have someone drive you back home,” Grace offered as she towel dried the calf.

“No. I’d like to stay.” Emma swept a hand through her rain-dampened hair brushing it back out of her face.

“Sure. You can lend me a hand cleaning out a stall for him.” Grace gave the calf one last rub down with a clean towel and stood to retrieve a shovel and a pitchfork from a rack on the opposite wall.

In short order they had the stall cleaned out and fresh bedding spread for the calf to lie on. Annabelle continued to get acquainted with her new charge, sniffing, nudging, and licking him in an effort to get him up.

Each time the calf tried valiantly to stand he would end up spread-eagled on his front legs or doing the splits on his back legs. Emma and Grace took turns bottle-feeding him every two hours.

Emma tilted the bottle up for the calf to drain the last of the milk. “Nobody can say you don’t have a good appetite.” She couldn’t help herself as she scratched affectionately under the calf’s chin. Chocolate brown eyes blinked up at her and he snorted in apparent satisfaction before he lowered his head onto Emma’s lap and closed his eyes. “Grace?”

“What’s the matter?” She poked her head over the top of the stall and peaked in at Emma.

“I think he’s falling asleep.”

“I really appreciate you sticking around to help out.” Grace walked over and knelt down beside Emma. She rubbed in between the calf’s ears.

“I’m surprised Michael didn’t come back.”

“Michael’s kind of pissed off at me.”

“Why?” Emma extricated herself from underneath the sleeping calf.

Grace climbed to her feet and offered Emma a hand. “It’s been brewing for a couple of weeks. My father asked me to be the manager of the farm.”

“Grace that’s fantastic!” Emma grabbed hold of her arms and shook her.

“I wish I could feel that way. Tony’s pissed because selling the farm is officially off the table and Michael’s ticked off because my father didn’t ask him to be the manager. It hasn’t been real pleasant around here lately.”

“I’m sorry.”

Grace shrugged and closed the gate to the stall. Mom and baby calf were both resting comfortably now. “It’ll pass eventually. We have to talk to each other about the big things, but Mike was my best friend. I feel like that got screwed up and I don’t know how to fix it.”

Emma grabbed Grace’s hand and squeezed it reassuringly. “I’m sure you two will work things out.”

“I hope you’re right.”

At that moment, Emma’s phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket and looked at her screen. “I should take this.”

“Go ahead. I have a few things to take care of here.”

Emma walked out of the barn as she answered the phone. “Hi, Tom.”

“Emma, how are you?”

“I’m doing great. I just finished watching a calf being born.”

“Did you say you saw a calf being born?”

“He’s the cutest thing. We bottle fed him because he’s too weak to stand.”

“That’s amazing. So Friday is okay for you?”

“Yes, Friday’s fine.”

“I know it’s short notice, but I have a list of clients that are very interested in us investing their money for them. It’s all hands on deck to get this off the ground as fast as we can. I made a reservation at Trinity’s for one o’clock. Does that give you enough time to get here?”

“I’ll leave early. If traffic’s not bad it should take less than three hours to get there.”

“All right then, I’ll see you Friday.”

Emma said goodbye and tucked her phone into her back pocket. She felt exhilarated and nervous all at once. When she turned around Grace was walking toward her. “What’s up?”

Emma fought back a swell of conflicting emotion. “A colleague of mine called. He’s gathering a group of us who used to work together to form our own brokerage. He asked me to come down and talk about being a founding principal.”

“That’s great. You must be excited.”

Emma looked over at the tree line and blinked back tears. “Yes and no.”

“Why?”

The word echoed inside her head and she felt her heart breaking. “What happens to us if I go and he offers me the position?”

Grace shifted her weight and tucked her hands into her pockets. “I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

“We’ll have to figure something out.”

“Just like that?” Emma’s voice quaked.

“We’re not the first couple who’s had this problem,” Grace said.

“You don’t understand! I’d have to go back to New York.”

“I don’t know what to say. All I know is what I feel.”

“What do you feel?” Emma asked, afraid to look into Grace’s eyes for fear of seeing too much. There was too much emotion churning inside of her threatening to break down the walls she erected to protect herself.

“Like I’m falling in love with you.”

“Damn it.”

Grace threw back her head and laughed. “It is lousy timing. Isn’t it?”

“How can you laugh?”

“If I don’t laugh, I’ll cry,” Grace admitted.

Emma gathered her courage and looked at Grace. She was solid. There was strength in that body that Emma felt when they made love, but the strength ran deeper than that. She wished she had Grace’s strength. Grace’s hair looked wild and sexy as the breeze lifted it from her shoulders. And those eyes, calm and patient, looked right into hers.

“It should be simple, right? When someone falls in love with you that should be all we need. I built my life around being successful. I made something of myself and I was proud of that. It’s who I was, who I am, who I want to be.”

“You are still who you are,” Grace said. “Losing your job didn’t take that away from you.”

“Then why do I feel this gaping hole inside?”

“What were we told since we were kids? Go to school. Study hard. Get a good job.

Everything about our adult life is focused around being successful by the standards that society dictates. Success can be whatever we want it to be. Not what society tells us it should be.”

“Oh my God. You’re killing me. You know that?”

“Are you worried that I don’t want you to have that again?” Grace asked.

“No. I’m worried about if I can have both.”

“Why can’t you?”

Emma held her hands out to Grace. “Tell me what falling in love feels like.”

“Like something warm is bubbling up inside. It’s like spring when everything smells fresh and new. There’s a rhythm, a beat that feels lighter. It feels good and a little bit scary,” Grace said, crossing to Emma.

“I don’t know if I have it in me to do this again,” Emma said blinking back tears.

“I don’t know if I can either. But I am so tired of being tired. I’ve been going through the motions here like treading water and fighting to stay up just a little bit longer. I don’t feel like that when I’m with you, Emma. Part of it scares me and that hurts. But I’ll take the risk just the same.”

Grace cupped Emma’s face in her hands. “Maybe you can, too.”

Emma clasped her hands over Grace’s wrists, holding on and wanting desperately to believe. “Maybe.”

Chapter Sixteen

“YOU LOOK LIKE you lost your best friend.”

Startled, Grace looked up from her coffee mug. Her mother was standing in the doorway, arms folded studying her.

“How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to know you’re stewing about something. You’re just like your father.”

“Just have a lot on my mind.” Uneager to discuss what was really bothering her, Grace pushed her chair back and stood. If she could she would have bolted from the room. But no one did that to Lucy Moretti.

“Exactly like your father.” Lucy crossed the kitchen to the table.

“Is there more coffee in that pot?”

“I made enough for a few cups,” Grace said.

“Would you mind pouring me some?”

Grace pulled another mug out of the cabinet, filled it with the coffee and walked it over to her mother.

“Have a seat.” Her mother tapped the table with a finger indicating the chair Grace had just vacated.

“I have to get out to the fields.”

“I know you do, but you can sit and talk to me for few minutes.”

Grace held back an exasperated sigh and sat across from her mother. She leaned back in the chair waiting. There was no point in trying to rush her. Over the years, Grace learned it never did her any good to push her mother when she was intent on making a point. She did it in her own good time.

“Have you talked to Michael?” Lucy scooped a rounded spoonful of sugar into her mug and stirred it.

“Can’t say I’ve seen him much to talk to since the cookout.”

Her mother eyed her over the rim of her coffee cup. “Nothing much changes from middle school on up to adulthood.”

“What do you mean?”

Lucy sipped her coffee. “When you and Michael argued as kids you would avoid each other like the plague afterwards. Still do as far as I can tell.”

“I’m not avoiding him,” Grace protested.

Her mother pressed her lips together. “You’re not going out of your way to talk to him either. Are you?”

With exasperation coloring her voice, Grace asked, “Why should I? I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I never said you did, but you should be taking the high road here.”

“Mom.” Grace tilted her head back and wishing briefly for heavenly intervention. “You need to stay out of this.”

“Don’t tell me what to stay out of. One thing you both won’t acknowledge is no matter how old you are you are still my kids and this is my farm—your father’s farm too.”

“I wish you wouldn’t get involved. This is between me and Michael.”

“Too late. I already am and you’re going to listen me.”

She should have left before she got caught up daydreaming, Grace thought. She just needed to get out and clear her head. With a sigh she surrendered. “Alright. I’m listening.”

“Michael never wanted the responsibility of running the farm. Right now he’s got his nose out of joint.”

“I can’t help that he’s upset about Pop’s decision. Hell, he even told me he thought I should be the one to run the farm.”

“It’s easy to say things like that before it becomes a reality. His pride is hurt.”

“Not my problem,” Grace said.

“And that is where you could learn to take the high road. When Michael came back with the kids after his divorce the deal was he could live here as long as he worked on the farm and helped to keep it running. In return, he doesn’t pay rent and he and his two boys get fed. I reminded him that the agreement hasn’t changed just because you’re managing the farm now.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“There was no reason for you to know until now. It’s up to Michael to decide what he wants to do. He can stay and continue with the same agreement or he can find another place to live.”

“You told Michael he could find another place to live?”

“I most certainly did,” Lucy said.

Grace felt her chest tighten. “Jonah and Tyler would be heartbroken if they had to leave here.”

“It would be heartbreaking for all of us, but the farm is our livelihood and he can’t hold it hostage because he’s upset. He needs to move forward. I told him the time frame for him to make a decision is up to you.”

“Does Pop know you told Michael this?”

“Of course he does. We talked about it last night. How’s the calf?”

Grace almost laughed at the abrupt change in conversation. “He’s getting stronger. I don’t think we’ll have to bottle feed much past the weekend.”

“Good to hear. How’s Emma?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her.”

“I heard she was invited back to New York for an interview.”

Grace’s eyes popped open wide. “How did you know?”

A wry smile crossed her mother’s lips. “Grace, when you have a conversation out in the middle of the yard someone is bound to hear.”

“It was Rose, wasn’t it? She’s as nosy as they come.”

“Actually no. It wasn’t Rose. Paula happened to be around.”

“Paula?”

“She came over to let me know that she’ll be leaving. Apparently, she found another job closer to home.”

Grace frowned. One problem solved, but now she needed to find a replacement. “I didn’t know she was thinking of leaving.”

“I got the impression it was a last minute decision. If I had to guess it had something to do with you.”

“Me?”

“Grace, I would have to be deaf, dumb and blind to have missed all the goings on the day of the cookout.”

Mortified, heat flushed Grace’s face and she looked away unable to meet her mother’s gaze.

“Michael filled me in on what was going on between Paula and you.”

“Nothing was going on!” Grace protested.

A gleam crept into her mother’s eyes. “Something was, but I gather it was rather one sided.”

Grace leapt to her feet and stormed across the kitchen. “I’m going to hurt him.”

“You will not. Anyway, I rather like Emma.”

“It doesn’t seem to matter one way or the other. Emma was offered a position with a brokerage in New York.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I imagine she’ll be going back to the city once the offer is finalized,” Grace said.

“How can you be so sure that’ll be her decision?”

“She said herself she wouldn’t know what else to do.”

“How do you feel about her?”

Grace shook her head and stared out the window. “What difference does it make how I feel? If she’s in New York and I’m here, then what chance for us is there?”

“That’s a question, but you’re the only one who can answer it.” Lucy walked over to Grace. She settled her hands onto her daughter’s shoulders. “We always have choices, Grace.”

Grace slipped away from her mother to hide her tears. “Right now it doesn’t feel like there are any.”

“Even if you decide to do nothing you will have made a choice.”

“Mom, I fell in love with her.”

“Well, that is something now. Did you tell her?”

“Before she left,” Grace said.

“So why are you sad?”

“She’s in New York. I’m here. It just seems impossible.”

“How long is she in New York for?”

“The interview is today. I didn’t ask when she was coming back.”

“Would it be so terrible to call her?” Lucy pulled a tissue from a box on the counter and handed it to Grace.

Grace wiped away tears. “I’ve started and stopped a half dozen times already today.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“She hasn’t been gone twenty-four hours. I’m not even sure what to say that wouldn’t sound like some ridiculous lovesick teenager.”

“You could start by asking her how the interview went. That seems like it would be a good place to start. Don’t you think?”

THE AUGUST SKY was overcast and threatening rain. The sidewalk was damp from an earlier rainstorm, but the rain had done nothing to relieve the oppressive heat. Emma had done her best to tame her unruly hair, but the humidity was winning the battle today. Emma was glad she chose a business casual pantsuit with modest heels to wear to her lunch meeting.

The restaurant that Tom had picked was built inside the famous Trinity building and housed in its old bank vault on Broadway. Emma pulled open the heavy mahogany door and stepped inside. The cool air conditioning was a welcome relief.

Down three steps and to the right an enormous ornately decorated mirror adorned the wall. The glass reflected a brass chandelier hanging from the ceiling and one of the famous vault doors. Through the arched opening she saw patrons sitting at the bar sipping cocktails.

“Hi, Emma.”

She recognized Tom’s voice behind her and turned. He was dressed in a grey business suit and carrying a leather briefcase. She noted it was new, not the old distressed briefcase he hauled around on his shoulder at SMB Capital.

“Hi! This place is impressive.”

“How was the drive down?”

“Not bad. I missed most of rush hour. I was able to reserve a parking spot online at a garage a block from here.”

“Excellent. Have you checked out the vault door?”

“How could I miss it? It’s tremendous.”

“Each door is five inches thick and weighs thirty-five tons. I’m told all the mechanics still work,” Tom said leading Emma toward the maître d’.

The clean-shaven man greeted them at the desk. “Two?”

“Yes.” Tom motioned for Emma to go ahead of him.

“Follow me.” The maître d’ led them past what Emma estimated was close to a thirty-foot-long bar filled with top shelf liquor. A couple of people were engaged in quiet conversation, but the rest seemed to be content to be hunkered over their drinks in quiet contemplation. Emma counted at least seven beers on tap as she walked past, catching a reflection of herself in the mirror behind the bar. The maître d’ stopped at a corner booth in the back of the room and laid two menus on the table.

Tom pulled the chair out at their table for Emma and waited for her to sit. The restaurant walls were decorated with old-style black and white photos of New York City. Emma found antiques tucked away in nooks and crannies everywhere she looked.

“You look rested,” Tom said as he handed a menu across to Emma.

“Thanks.”

“Have you eaten here before?” Tom glanced over his menu at Emma.

“No. I haven’t been here before. Have you?”

Tom nodded. “If you’re interested, they have an excellent antipasti platter we can start with.”

“That sounds decadent.” Emma perused the menu, torn between a Cuban pork sandwich on ciabatta bread or the pan roasted salmon. “How’s your family doing?”

“They’re doing fine. The boys have been at a sleep away camp in North Carolina. They come home in two weeks. Cheryl took a part-time job at their school. They don’t know their mom is going to be working there yet, but it’ll help to ease the transition while I get this new venture off the ground.”

Their waiter, a tall, thin young man with deep brown eyes arrived at their table. After a brief discussion about drinks and appetizers he suggested a cabernet sauvignon, which went nicely with the antipasti platter. Emma settled on the Cuban pork sandwich and the waiter left with their order.

Tom leaned closer and said, “I’ll get right to the point. I have a friend who works in real estate. He has some contacts and they’re looking for a place to be able to park their money in

between jobs for some short-term gains. They have plenty of cash and want to move it. They're not happy with the service they're getting at the brokerage where they are now. If they leave, they have other players who'll come with them. I've convinced them to sit tight for another couple of quarters in cash. You and I both know 'the time to buy is when there's blood in the streets' and I've told them we're not there yet."

Emma could imagine how many people were doing the same thing after seeing this bear market savage their portfolios.

"I see a brokerage with at least fifteen associates to start." Tom sat back and regarded Emma. "I'm offering you a job, Emma."

For a split second, Emma wished Tom had simply sent this in an email. Then they could have bantered back and forth about the details before having a face to face like this. "First off, thank you for considering me." She toyed with her fork while she considered what to say next. "I have to say I'm a little shocked by the offer."

"I can understand why. Who would have thought an opportunity like this would present itself so soon after we..."

Tom didn't finish the sentence and Emma thought that saying the words might be as painful for him as they were for her to say. "I don't know what I expected to happen in the three months since we got laid off. I certainly haven't done anything as spectacular as you. I started volunteering in a soup kitchen."

"I think that's a really wonderful thing to do. It must help you feel connected to the community," Tom said.

"In some ways, yes, but in others no. There's a segment of the community you would never even know exists except for the soup kitchen. They're the unseen. I'm sure they all have their stories and families, but who really sees them as they go through their life. I don't know." Emma watched as Tom's eyes looked past her and she sensed his discomfort talking about the homeless. "Other than that, I've been spending time with a friend of mine whose family owns a farm."

"Ah, hence the opportunity to watch a calf being born. I was wondering about that. Do you have any pictures?"

"I do." Emma pulled out her phone and brought up the pictures on her screen.

Tom peered at the images and nodded. "Scrawny looking thing." He sat back and regarded Emma briefly. "Maybe you have a future in cattle futures and you just don't know it yet."

The comment caught Emma off guard. She wasn't sure if he was being sincere or not. "This offer came out of the blue."

Tom sat back as the waiter arrived and opened the bottle of wine. He sampled the vintage and nodded his approval. After the waiter left he continued, "I wasn't expecting it either. I was talking to my buddy and the conversation went sideways and ended up with him setting up a meeting with his real estate partners."

The antipasti platter arrived and it was as decadent as Emma imagined. A glass of wine later, Emma said, "I need specifics."

"Fire away." Tom glanced up as the waiter arrived with their lunches.

"Who else are you thinking of bringing on? Where are you setting up shop? Who else besides the real estate guys will be the clients?"

"Mark and Sam are both in," Tom said.

"Meaning?"

"They've accepted my offer."

The waiter came and refilled their wine glasses. When he left, Emma said, “Okay, Mark was two doors down from you on the left.”

“The man is a true competitor. He races in two triathlons a year,” Tom enthused.

“I remember him. Nice guy. Knew his regulatory stuff.”

“Sam was in the emerging markets ETF group,” Tom offered.

“Samantha Ailes. I didn’t know her well but she had a good reputation from what I heard. Who else?”

“Nobody else is firm yet. Pretty much in the stage you’re at.”

Emma chose to believe him. “Where are you planning on setting up shop?”

“There’s an office space three blocks from here. It doesn’t have the fancy views we had. It’s clean and it’s safe. The rent is at a discount because of the recession and the guy is willing to work with us.”

“Who else besides these real estate guys do you have to bring on as clients?”

“Sam and Mark are working their client lists. Since the firm closed it’s doors there’s not a non-compete that we’re held to. I’d ask you to do the same. What do you think?” Tom spread his hands and sat back in his chair waiting for Emma’s answer.

Inwardly, Emma cringed wondering what was wrong with her. She should be salivating at the opportunity, but his presentation seemed to be falling flat around her.

Emma sipped her wine and set the glass down on the white linen tablecloth. “Clearly, the, ‘buy and hold,’ model is broken. The risk is too much for the average investor to bear.”

“I think we both agree that the factors that led to this crash are still very much in play—unsustainable debt, declining production and supply of natural resources and central banks who want to stimulate the economy back to sustainable growth.”

“I agree on all counts. What’s your plan to protect your clients’ assets?” Emma asked.

“Our goal is to minimize risks while we preserve or increase the buying power of our clients’ assets. We’ll diversify among equities, precious metals, commodities, currencies, fixed income and cash.”

“You’ll actively manage the accounts.”

“Of course.”

“You’ll focus on what the market is telling us now using statistical trading bands, relative strength and momentum indicators.”

“Yes!” He slapped his hands down on the table jarring the silverware and the customers at the next table. “See, this is why I want you on board. I need you to be on the team.”

Emma felt the swell of pride inside at her expertise and skills being needed and not just as an employee, but a full partner. Still something held back her enthusiasm. “I need some time to consider what we’ve talked about so far. Do you have a package in mind?”

“I’ve worked on some preliminary numbers. I can email the details to you tomorrow. I only ask that you don’t share the information with anyone else. I’d prefer not to have people comparing notes if you get what I mean.”

“Not a problem,” Emma agreed.

BY THE TIME they were done with lunch Emma was relieved to be back on the road out of the city. This time she hit rush hour traffic and the route back took twice as long as the commute into the city.

Emma was exhausted by the time she got back to cottage. She took a cool shower and changed into sweat pants and a t-shirt. She had a bottle of sauvignon blanc in the refrigerator. She uncorked the bottle, poured herself a glass and walked out onto the porch to watch the sunset.

Part of her wanted to call Grace. Yet there was another part of her that was terrified of what Grace shared with her before she left.

What would she say to her anyway? The interview went well? She didn't have any of the details about the job offer and telling Grace what she was leaning towards would only hurt her.

Emma didn't contact Grace. It wasn't that she didn't intend to talk to Grace at all. She couldn't bring herself to talk to her tonight. She felt guilty thinking that Grace would probably worry. Maybe making Grace mad at her would make the impending separation easier.

Why? Why, why, why did Grace have to tell me she fell in love?

She knew it was true. Emma saw the softness in her eyes when Grace looked at her the day before she left for New York. Worse was what Emma felt when Grace told her what it felt like being in love. Emma hadn't come looking for love, but it had found her.

The more Emma thought about her sister's question the more she questioned whether no harm, no foul was something she was even capable of doing. They had fun together and even had good sex. Well, better than good, it was great. Could she actually walk away from how she felt and go back to New York hoping to regain some sense of what she lost?

Chapter Seventeen

THE FOLLOWING DAY Tom's email came as promised. In it were all the details for her package if she were to join the brokerage. She stared at the email for several minutes then closed the laptop. Questions swirled in her mind. Was he only offering a salary to a select few and everyone else was working off of commissions until he grew the brokerage? That didn't even seem feasible. Her mind went back to the day they stood at the elevator and talked in worried voices about the immediate future and how uncertain everything was.

How Tom's wife vacillated wildly between selling their house and trying desperately to hang onto what was normal for the kids. Had he refinanced his home and taken money out to start this new venture? He had brass ones if that's what he had done, but Emma couldn't imagine Tom risking his family's home for a new business with no guaranteed outcome.

Emma hunted through her list of contacts. She found Samantha Ailes' email and composed a note to her. She read it through several times made adjustments and deleted one sentence altogether. Satisfied she said what she intended to Emma hit the send button and closed her laptop.

Now all she could do was wait for a reply.

Emma glanced out at the sky. Clouds mixed with blue sky but she didn't think it was going to rain. She grabbed a hoodie, locked up the house and started walking around the lake.

If the offer was legitimate there seemed no reason not to accept it. She could put off returning to work for a few weeks more. What would she do with herself if she wasn't working? The cottage was a nice diversion from the reality of what she'd run from. A broken relationship and job loss; together they nearly destroyed her spirit.

Now that all the work was done in the cottage she felt pressure to make a decision. Maybe returning to her old life was a simple decision away. She could rent the cottage and get back to work. She missed the interaction she had with her colleagues. If nothing else work was its own community. Not that she was close to the people she worked with in the past, but they could carry on pleasant conversations throughout the course of their day.

Emma walked with a purposeful stride. A determination she hadn't felt in weeks seemed to rise from within. She felt closer to a decision as she rounded the lake and headed back to the cottage. Her thighs burned and she relished the feeling. It reminded her of the day she was out in the fields relocating the chicken tractor with Grace.

The mere thought of Grace brought an ache in Emma's heart so intense she hugged herself as her breath caught in her throat. When the cottage came into view Emma stopped and blinked to clear her eyes of tears.

GRACE ROSE AND descended the steps walking towards Emma. "Hey."
Emma fell into Grace's arms. "When did you get here?"

“Not too long ago.” Grace wrapped her arms around Emma and held onto her. “You okay? You looked upset when you came around the corner.”

Emma nodded holding onto Grace a moment longer than necessary. “I’m fine.”

Grace leaned back to peer at Emma’s face wondering why she saw pain her eyes. “How’d the interview go?”

“It went really well...”

“You don’t sound as enthusiastic as I thought you would.”

“Let’s go inside.” Emma found Grace’s hand and intertwined their fingers. “Have you eaten?”

“I ate.”

“Well, you can help me cook anyway. With the kind of work you do you can use the extra calories.” Emma led Grace up the front steps and into the kitchen.

Emma gathered two potatoes and a bunch of carrots. “Can you peel the carrots?”

“Where’s your peeler?”

Emma pointed to a drawer. “In there.”

“I wanted to call you last night, but I figured you would be tired from all the driving.” Grace said.

“I was. The traffic wasn’t bad until I got to Hartford. Getting through ninety-one is a nightmare with all the construction going on.”

“I can’t remember a time when they haven’t been doing construction there. Don’t keep me in suspense. What did he have to say?”

Emma filled two pots with water and set them on the stove to boil. She recounted her meeting with Tom while she peeled the potatoes and cut them into smaller pieces.

“He offered you a job?”

“Yes. I mean we still have to work the details out.”

“But you’re thinking about taking it,” Grace offered.

“If we can come together on the numbers I think it would be irresponsible of me not to take it.”

“Will you move back to the city?” Grace finished peeling the carrots. She lined them up in a row; picked up the knife Emma used and sliced them quickly on a bias.

“Thanks.” Emma scraped the carrots into a steamer basket and lowered it into the pot of water. “I could use some wine? How about you?”

“I’ll have some.”

Emma retrieved a bottle of Pinot Grigio from the refrigerator. She poured two glasses and handed one to Grace. “I know this is terribly awkward.”

Grace took a long drink from her glass and set it on the counter. “Why?”

“We’ve had a wonderful time together. I didn’t expect that there was going to be an offer this soon.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“What was it?”

“Will you move back to the city?”

“I’ll have to. Are you having second thoughts about making this work?”

“Not second thoughts,” Grace said. “I’m trying to figure out how this will work.”

“It hasn’t even happened yet. If it does then I’ll guess we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“It’s easy to say that now. What happens when you’re in New York and I’m here?”

Emma started to walk past her, but Grace put a hand on Emma's arm to stop her.

"Tell me what happens," Grace said turning to face Emma.

"I don't know what happens!" Emma's voice was distressed and Grace felt Emma pull away.

"Emma wait." Grace turned off the burners on the stove and followed her into the front room.

"We see each other a couple weekends a month? How long is that going to work out for either one of us?"

Emma hugged herself and stared out the window. "You were the one who said we would figure something out."

"You are the best part of my life and I don't want to lose you."

"Why are you backing away from this now?"

"I...I'm not," Grace insisted. "I'm standing right here."

"I feel it. You are."

"I came to you. Would you have come to me and told me what you were thinking?" Grace asked.

"That's not fair." Emma sank down on the couch her shoulders hunched and her head bowed.

"Fair or not I'm asking it. When we came in just now you said this was awkward and that we'd had a wonderful time. In your mind you're backing away too." Grace sat beside her and tilted her head against the back of the couch. Why couldn't life be simple? Why did things always have to be so damned complicated?

"WHY DON'T YOU get angry and yell. Tell me I'm a bitch for doing this." Emma lifted her head and looked at Grace. Emma didn't need to see Grace's eyes to know she would see heart-wrenching sadness in them and it killed her to know she was the cause of it.

"You're not and I can't. I'm not angry at you...at the situation, yes. It sucks! Hurts yes. I wish this would work for us, but I have the farm. I can't just walk away from it."

Emma's eyes brimmed with tears. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"It seems letting things go this far has ended up hurting us both. Maybe it's best if we stop here and don't go any farther."

"Are you saying we should break up? Cut our losses?"

"You need to figure out what you're going to do. I guess we were wrong time, wrong place."

"How can you be so cut and dry about it? Don't you care about us?" Emma cried.

"Of course I care. That's why I'm telling you to go figure out if this is really what you want. I can't help you make the decision." Grace started to stand, but Emma pulled her back. "I should go."

"Wait." Emma ran her fingers through the hair at Grace's temple.

Grace sat like a statue with her eyes closed.

"God, I'm going to miss you." Emma touched Grace's chin and turned her head. She brushed her lips against Grace's. She felt the hesitation before Grace relented and gave herself over to her kiss.

When they broke apart Emma kept her eyes closed and rested her forehead against Grace's. "I do love you. Please know that."

Grace only nodded.

Emma felt the cushion shift as Grace rose. A second later, Emma heard the screen door open and close quietly.

Grace was gone.

“Oh, what have I done?” Emma clutched her arms around herself and rocked as sobs tore through her.

Chapter Eighteen

EMMA HEARD THE murmur of voices approaching from down the hallway. The hum from the ventilation system obscured the words. She refocused on her computer screen for what seemed like the fifteenth time in as many minutes.

A second later she felt a presence at the doorway and looked up. Tom poked his head in and said, “We’re going to grab something to eat at the lunch cart out front. Do you want anything?”

“No thanks. I brought something with me from home.” Emma leaned back in her chair. “After I finish this application I’m going to leave.”

“Trying to beat the weather?”

“Hoping to.” Her phone pinged and Emma glanced at the screen as a message appeared on it.

“I won’t hold you up then,” Tom said with a smile, tapping the door frame on his way out. “Get home safe.”

“Thanks.”

Emma had to give Tom credit for the amount of work he accomplished in such a short time. He completed a lengthy application process with FINRA and managed to expedite an interview with the regulatory agency. The last month was an exercise in marathon days and nights but the excitement of being part of something from the ground up helped fuel everyone’s efforts.

Emma lowered her face into her hands and closed her eyes, giving herself a few moments of respite from her work. She picked up her phone and swiped the screen to read her text message. She typed a response to let Lindsey know she would be leaving in an hour.

As usual the media was talking non-stop about the impending Nor’easter that was bearing down on the tri-state area. By all accounts it was a monster of a storm and was predicted to bring flooding rains and tropical storm force winds.

It was the first time Emma would be returning to the cottage after she accepted Tom’s job offer. She had no contact with Grace since she made the decision to leave. She told herself a clean break was the only way for her to walk away. Emma thought returning to work would fill the void.

It hadn’t.

Her heart didn’t believe the rational musing of her mind. She fought with herself each passing week about whether to go back and see if there was anything left to salvage between her and Grace. They hadn’t argued or shouted when they parted. It was a quiet, heartbreaking goodbye.

She’d given up hope that she would be forgiven when only last week Grace texted Emma a picture of the calf she witnessed being born. Apparently from the caption beneath the image, his name was Brax. Emma figured it was a suitable name for a steer, but it was the fact that Grace even thought to send her the picture that gave Emma hope there might still be a chance for them.

There was nothing else included in the message. No words to indicate how Grace was doing. She wanted to call or text, but she didn’t know what to say. Everything she came up with felt superficial.

Lindsey had chastised Emma more than once for leaving. “Love only comes once around once in awhile. You could work anywhere. What are you trying to prove to yourself?”

Quite frankly, Emma wasn’t even sure anymore. All she knew was that she’d spent the last month working long hours and coming home exhausted and bleary-eyed to an empty apartment.

She was renting a furnished efficiency apartment in a fourth floor walk up. It was a far cry from her luxury apartment on Ann Street.

Emma glanced out the window. Ominous grey clouds raced past the tops of the buildings. She gathered her coat and bag, glad to be getting out of the city before rush hour started in earnest. If she didn’t hit traffic through Hartford she would be home by five.

A SUDDEN GUST of wind bent the tops of the trees as Grace walked across the yard between the house and barn. Branches rubbed and creaked. Leaves clung desperately to their branches while the weaker ones were ripped from their moorings and tumbled helplessly through the air.

The dogs trotted along flanking her sides. They seemed to sense the approach of the low pressure system as neither seemed to be in the mood to frolic and play as was their usual habit when they were outside. The horses and cattle were settled in their stalls with fresh water and hay.

There were a few more things to take care of before it was time to hunker down and ride out Mother Nature’s wrath.

Arturo moved the cows into the lower paddock earlier in the day in preparation for sheltering them from the impending storm. The worst of the Nor’easter wasn’t supposed to hit until the overnight hours. Usually a storm like this would mean a lot of rain and some wind. The problem was this particular storm was predicted to merge with another low pressure that was moving off the coast and then stall.

Michael emerged from the barn, stopped when he saw Grace and hurried to walk away.

“Michael,” Grace called and jogged after him. His face was set with a terse expression as she caught up to him.

“I’ve got to fix the fencing in the north pasture. Brax broke through it when Arturo was moving the cows earlier.”

“Where’s Brax now?”

Michael stopped in his tracks and stared at Grace. “Outside the wire. We’re trying to get him back in.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me he broke out?”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Arturo moved the cows three hours ago.” Disbelief and anger colored Grace’s expression.

“He’s been trying to move the steer back onto our property.”

“Alone? One of you should have gotten me as soon as he got loose. I’m the one who’s been working with Brax.”

“Arturo didn’t want you to know.”

“You’ve both lost your minds.” Grace ran into the barn and pulled on a rain slicker. She filled a saddlebag with apples and slung it over her shoulder. “What can I do?” Michael asked when he appeared inside the doorway. “Get Honey saddled up and meet me in the upper pasture. I’m taking the 4x4.”

Grace started to shoulder past Michael, then stopped. They'd both been so angry and her continuing the pattern wasn't going to help the situation. "Listen. I know Pop's decision about the farm upset you. I'm sorry about that. We can't keep sidestepping this. I need you to be on the same page as me or this isn't going to work out."

"We don't need to talk about it now."

"The hell we don't. This decision is tearing us apart and it's the last thing I want to happen."

"It's not tearing us apart."

"How can you say that? You've hardly talked to me since Pop broke the news to us."

"I know but it's not for the reason you think," Michael said.

"Then what is it?" Grace demanded.

Michael walked past Grace and lifted the deep blue saddle blanket off Honey's stall door.

"Tony called me two nights after the cookout."

"He was so angry when he left the party," Grace recalled. "I'm surprised he's spoken to anyone."

"He was drunk and in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

Michael looked back at Grace shamefaced and disappeared inside Honey's stall. "Remember Paula, the girl I told you he convinced me to hire?"

"How can I forget?"

"Tony knew her."

Grace made a face. "Knew her...as in what capacity?"

Michael laid the saddle on Honey's back. "She was a client of his."

"You mean he represented her because..."

"Paula's a thief. She got busted a year ago. She was part of a ring that would scope out houses and then when the owners weren't home, break in and grab what they could."

"I don't understand. What does this have to do with Tony or us?"

"Tony got her charges reduced and she ended up with a light sentence and was out with time served. The problem was she couldn't pay him."

"Oh man, I don't like where this is going."

"She convinced him she could pay him back doing the very same thing she got caught doing in the first place. We were her cover."

"We were what?" Grace covered her face with her hands and leaned against a wall. "You've got to be kidding me."

"When she was out on deliveries, it seems she was scoping out houses. Then later she'd go back and break in."

"That explains the robberies around the lake."

"Things were going well for a while."

"You're telling me Tony knew about this?"

"I don't know to what extent. He tells me she brought him jewelry that he sold at a pawnshop in Boston. This went on for months. Problem was she got greedy and made some mistakes. The police figured out who was stealing the jewelry about a week ago. That's why she took off. Anyway, they started talking to pawn shop owners and eventually found the one in Boston that Tony was selling the jewelry to."

"Oh my God. How could he have been so stupid? Didn't he think this stuff she was bringing to him might be stolen?"

"He was in debt enough not to care," Michael said.

“How? What did he do that he’s in so much debt? It’s not like he doesn’t earn a decent living.”

“Gambling. He owed some people money and they leaned hard enough on him that he was willing to do just about anything to get out of debt.”

“I can’t believe he was selling stolen goods to a pawn shop.”

Michael finished adjusting Honey’s saddle and turned to Grace. “He could get up to ten years.”

“So why did he call you?” Grace asked.

“He wanted me to help him post bail.”

“Did you?”

“I helped him cash out of his IRA.”

“This is worse than I ever imagined. I don’t even know what to say.” Grace paced the length of the stall.

“You don’t have to say anything. It wasn’t you I was angry with. I was so pissed at Tony and then having to spend all this time away from the farm to help him. I couldn’t tell you until it was all finished.”

“What happens now?”

“I guess he finds himself a lawyer and hopes he gets a lenient judge.”

“I can’t believe Tony did this.”

“Neither can I. That’s what’s been going on the past few weeks. I’m sorry you thought I was upset about Pop’s decision. I mean, I was initially, but I know I can’t do what you do.”

“I couldn’t bear the thought of the farm coming between us.” Grace stepped through the stall door and rubbed Honey’s soft muzzle.

“It isn’t and it won’t,” Michael said.

“Do Mom and Dad know about Tony?”

“He called them yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Called them? He didn’t even have the guts to come here in person?”

“Grace, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. Nothing about this is okay.”

“You’re right. It’s not okay, but they’ll handle this. This is Tony’s problem. He’s a big boy and now he has to face what he did. Come on, we have a job to do.” Michael squeezed her shoulder. “Let’s go get this steer back inside the wire.”

Before she left the barn Grace picked up a coiled length of rope. Still reeling from the news she climbed into the jeep and started the engine. Grace was relieved Michael told her what was going on, but she was sick about Tony and what it would do to her parents. The 4x4 fishtailed slightly as she gunned the engine and sent dirt flying out behind her.

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, Grace stood three feet away from Brax. She fashioned a loop with rope and finished it with a slipknot. Slipping the coil over her shoulder she approached the steer. At one hundred pounds and four weeks old he stood placidly with his head down eating grass. Since his birth Brax exhibited a gentle demeanor but Grace didn’t take his behavior for granted. She spent hours studying his behavior and training him for human contact. She spoke softly to him as she approached. His ears twitched as she neared and he snorted softly.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Grace,” Arturo said. “I thought I could get him by myself.”

“Next time just call me. You shouldn’t be trying to move him by yourself. It’s dangerous.” She took an apple from her bag. Behind her she heard the familiar sound of hooves on the ground. With a pocketknife she cut the apple in half.

“Be careful,” Michael said keeping back a healthy distance from the steer.

“Thanks.” Grace cast him a sideways glance tucking the knife away in her coat pocket. She rubbed her hand over Brax’s shoulder. She avoided his head knowing he would interpret the downward pressure as a threat and react to it.

“Good boy,” she crooned and lowered the apple in line with his peripheral vision. Brax lifted his head from grazing and Grace opened her hand as he reached for the fruit. She lifted the coil of rope from her body and dangled the loop just below his head. While Brax chewed the apple Grace slipped the loop over his head and around his neck.

The steer nudged her as he sniffed at the bag. “Don’t be greedy.” Grace reached into the bag letting him get used to the rope. She held another piece of fruit out to him. Bits of apple fell to the ground as Brax crushed the red globe with his teeth.

“I hope you brought enough of those apples to entice him back to the barn.” Michael said.

“Me too.” With a smooth motion, Grace pulled the loop snug and walked ahead of the steer.

“Come on, Brax.” Grace tugged on the rope urging the young steer to follow her.

Michael climbed down from Honey and handed Grace the reins. Brax would be more likely to follow Grace if he had another animal leading the way. Grace let the coil out, giving Brax more length and tethered the rope to Honey’s saddle.

“Do you want us to follow behind?” Michael asked.

“No. The keys are in the 4x4. Wait for me to get down the hill. Take the long way back to the barn so you don’t spook Brax.”

“We’ll meet you back at the house after we finish repairing the wire,” Michael called after her.

Grace acknowledged Michael with a wave of her hand. She ducked her head as wind buffeted her, lashing her slicker against her body.

An hour and forty-five minutes later, Grace was grateful to be out of the howling wind and the rain. A shiver coursed through her while she brushed Honey down. She soothed the mare with the gentle tones of her voice. Brax was settled in his stall and the horses were quietly eating hay. Honey nickered as the timbers creaked against the gusts of wind buffeting the barn walls.

“It’s all right girl. I couldn’t have done this without you today.” Grace patted the mare’s flank. Honey simply plodded along down the hill leading the young bull patiently along the path while the storm intensified around them. It was touch and go a few times. Brax panicked and tried to break away from Grace when lightening flashed. Honey stood her ground and refused to give into Brax’s tantrum. She waited him out as if to say, “Listen up. There’s only one way to get out of this. We can do it the easy way or the hard way.”

A wave of exhaustion hit Grace and she leaned against Honey soaking in her solid warmth. “You’re safe and dry in here, girl.” Grace dug in her pocket and fished out another apple that Honey eagerly consumed.

A loud crack like a gunshot had Grace jumping across the stall. She retrieved a flashlight from a shelf by the door and slipped outside. The beam cut through the darkness illuminating the wind driven rain. For a moment, Grace’s brain refused to let her make sense of what she was seeing. A massive limb from one of the oak trees snapped close to the trunk and lay shattered on the ground. Beneath the leaves something grey flashed as it reflected the light from the beam.

With her heart pounding she started toward it. “No, no, no!”

“Grace!”

Grace skidded to a stop, uncertain if she heard her name or just imagined it. She stepped a quarter turn towards the house and blinked at the figure standing on the front porch leaning over the rail.

“Emma? What are you doing here?” Grace barely had time to get the words out before Emma raced down off the porch, splashed through the puddles and was in her arms.

“I came to see you.” Emma leaned back to look at Grace.

“That’s your car.” Grace nodded toward the mass of broken and twisted branches hiding the vehicle beneath it. “Isn’t it?”

“I just got out and took a few steps when I heard this awful creaking. The next thing I knew I was standing on the steps.”

Grace closed her eyes willing her heart to stop racing in her chest. She couldn’t help but hold Emma tight to her. Her breath was ragged and she waited to speak until she trusted her voice. “You could have been killed.”

“I’m okay.”

Afraid that she would disappear like a mirage in the desert, Grace kissed Emma’s forehead and tugged her toward the house. “Come on. Let’s get out of the rain. We’re both going to get sick standing out here.”

Grace opened the front door and led the way into the kitchen.

“Grace Marie you’re soaking wet and tracking mud into this house.” Lucy scolded from her seat at the kitchen table. “What was that awful noise I heard?”

“A branch from one of the oaks gave way.”

“Did it hit anything?”

“It hit Emma’s car.”

“Emma’s car? I don’t understand.” Lucy’s eyes widened when Emma stepped through the doorway behind Grace. Lucy met her half way across the room and hugged her. “When did you get here?” Lucy asked holding Emma at arms length to look at her.

“Just a few minutes ago.” Max and Sadie rose from their spots by the fireplace and greeted Emma.

“You drove from the city in this weather?”

“It wasn’t too bad until I got into Hartford,” Emma said. She knelt and wrapped her arms around both dogs. They squirmed and slathered her with wet kisses.

“You’re cold and wet.” Lucy waved Emma over to her. “Come sit over by the fire.”

“I have some sweats you can borrow. I’ll be right back.” Grace disappeared before either of the women could protest her leaving.

“HERE COME TAKE the chill off.” Lucy pushed a chair out and patted the seat. “I’ll boil some water for tea. That’ll help you warm up while Grace gets you some dry clothes. Do you want something to eat?”

“No, I’m fine.” Emma sat huddled close to the fire, grateful for the heat that chased away the damp chill on her skin. In the hearth, the wood coals glowed orange and tantalized her nose with hints of rosemary and garlic.

Sadie and Max parked themselves on either side of Emma and lay at her feet. “I can barely tell that Max was hurt.”

“He was a lucky pup it was only a .22 round that grazed him.”

“How did you find that out?” Emma asked.

“Peter went out after Grace followed you home that night and searched the yard for hours. He found blood by the front porch and kept looking until he found the casing. Then he called the police.”

“I’m surprised he did.”

“Once he realized someone meant to do harm to his family that changed his mind in a heartbeat. The police traced the shell and found it came from a stolen gun. Turns out it was stolen from a house by the lake. The prints on it were in a database. They were Paula’s.”

Emma met Lucy’s steady gaze from across the room and tilted her head. “Paula? Was she the one who was here that night?”

“It seems so.” Lucy nodded and tears welled up in her eyes.

“Why?”

“Grace rejected her.”

The conversation she had with Paula in the soup kitchen came flooding back.

“It’s been a difficult month for all of us. Grace will fill you in on the details I’m sure, but Tony’s involved in this too. It’s all over the papers.”

“I’m so sorry.” Emma reached out and embraced Lucy.

Lucy wiped her eyes as she pulled away. “Grace tells me you have a new job in the city.”

“I do. A colleague of mine is starting a new brokerage.”

“That’s quite a challenge even in good times.”

“It is.” Emma said her eyes drawn to the fire. The warmth and hypnotic sound of the wood crackling dulled her senses.

“You must be tired from the drive.”

“I am. I feel like I could sleep for a week,” Emma admitted.

“Do you like your job?” Lucy asked.

“It’s not that I don’t like it.” Emma tore her eyes away from the fire. “My heart isn’t in it the way I thought it would be.”

“Our hearts are fickle. We think we know what we want and then we prove ourselves wrong.” Lucy stood when Grace appeared in the doorway. “There’s hot water on the stove for tea. I’ll leave you two alone. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about.”

Chapter Nineteen

GRACE WATCHED HER mother leave the kitchen. Relief and nervousness crept through her all at once. Afraid she would say something clumsy and foolish, Grace used the excuse to get clothes for Emma to give herself time to think and compose herself. She reminded herself how it felt when Emma told her she was returning to New York. She'd broken everyone of the rules she'd told Michael she wouldn't. She was a fool to fall in love and yet here she was again.

Emma looked tired and pale like the very first time Grace brought coffee to the cottage and found her sitting by the lake. Her eyes were weary and Emma was thinner than Grace remembered.

Grace held the bundle of clothes out to Emma. "They might be a bit loose but they'll keep you warm. The bathroom is off to the right."

"Thanks." Emma smiled, taking the bundle of clothes Grace offered.

Grace busied herself pouring hot water into mugs and setting tea bags into them to steep. When Emma returned she draped her wet clothes over the back of a chair and turned it so they would dry by the fireplace.

"Are you okay?" Grace set the tea mugs on the table. She kept her distance, standing on the other side.

"Not really," Emma said. "I was going to call, but I was afraid you might not want to talk to me."

"Why?" Grace tucked her hands into her pockets and leaned back against the counter trying for an air of nonchalance.

"I thought I could throw myself into work and..." Emma looked up from toying with her tea bag. "I haven't been sleeping well."

Grace tore her eyes away from Emma's. They looked precariously close to tears and that would surely undo Grace's demeanor. "That's the good thing about the farm. I can work until I exhaust myself and sleep just comes at the end of the day." What Grace left unsaid was that even sleep couldn't drive Emma from her mind.

"Is that what you've been doing?" Emma asked.

"It's an easy thing to get in the habit of doing."

"I got the picture you sent. How's Brax?"

This brought an instant smile to Grace's face. "He broke out of the paddock earlier today. It took us a couple of hours to bring him in, but he's comfortably settled in the barn now."

"He's a trouble maker then."

"No. Brax has a calm disposition. He's going to be a fine addition to our breeding program," Grace said.

Silence hung between them until the front door hinges creaked and Michael stomped into the kitchen shaking rain from his coat. "We lost part of the oak tree."

"I know. I was in the barn when it came down," Grace said.

"Emma, I didn't know you were here." Michael shrugged out of his coat.

"I drove up after work today."

“You’re lucky you got here before the worst of the storm hit,” Michael said glancing between the two women.

“It took you longer than I expected to get back,” Grace said, wishing Michael would make himself scarce.

“I drove Arturo home. I had to turn around three times on the way back because of downed trees or wires.”

Grace pushed off the counter. “By the way, those branches are sitting on top of Emma’s car.”

“You’re kidding.” Michael looked horrified.

“Nope,” Grace said and it dawned on her for the first time since Emma arrived she would have to drive her home—if that was even going to be possible. “We’ll have to break out the chain-saws tomorrow.”

“That sure was a nice car,” Michael said. “Sorry about that.”

“*Was* being the operative word. I was thinking of selling it. I guess I won’t be doing that now,” Emma said.

“If we’re lucky and this storm clears out earlier we’ll be able to clear the tree away tomorrow. Maybe it’s not as bad as you think.” Michael retrieved a bowl of left overs from the refrigerator. “I’ll go check on the boys. You don’t mind if I finish the stew?” he asked holding the bowl out as he walked past Grace.

“No, but you better ask Mom. I think she made that...for dinner tomorrow.” Grace shook her head as Michael ignored her and disappeared from view, already shoveling the stew into his mouth. “Or not.”

Emma wrung her hands. “I hope this wasn’t a bad idea. I’m afraid I’ve just complicated things for you.”

Grace glanced back at Emma. “Too late for that now. But really, I’m glad you’re here.”

“You are?” Emma asked with a hint of hopefulness in her voice.

Grace blew out a breath. “I’ve missed you.”

Emma’s lower lip quivered and she looked away. “I’m sorry I left the way I did.”

“We all have to make choices.” Grace kept her distance refusing to believe that this was anything but Emma coming back for a weekend. “You needed to get back to work and I need to focus on the farm. It’s that simple.”

“But it’s not,” Emma said as she stood and took a step toward Grace. “Grace, I was wrong. I’ve been miserable without you.”

“You knew it was going to be difficult going back to the city. Maybe you just need more time to adjust to life there.”

“No, I don’t.” Emma clasped Grace’s hands in hers. “More time isn’t going to change how I feel...unless you’re telling me there’s no chance for us.”

“I can’t do this part-time. If we’re going to be together it can’t just be on the weekend when you’re home from work. I won’t settle for a part-time relationship.” Grace pulled away to put distance between her and Emma.

Emma pulled out her phone and started tapping out a message. “I don’t know when Tom’s going to get this message. The cellular network has been screwed up since this afternoon.”

“What are you talking about?” Grace asked.

“I’m asking Tom if there’s a way I can work from home. I don’t know if it’s possible, but I’m asking anyway.”

Exhausted and not at all sure she had the emotional fortitude to go through this again Grace pulled out a chair and slumped into it. “And if he says no, what then? That brings us right back to where we were before you left.”

Emma set her phone down on the table and knelt down on one knee in front of Grace. “I’ll quit.”

“You’ll quit?” Grace looked at Emma’s hands resting on her knees. “I thought having the chance to start a brokerage from the ground up was what you wanted.”

“Not if it means we can’t be together,” Emma said.

“What will you do?” Grace reached down and intertwined their fingers.

“I don’t know. I’ll find something else.”

“But you said yourself that you wanted to go back.”

“I know I did.” Emma’s voice broke.

“I don’t understand what’s changed for you.”

“I’ve been thinking about that for the past month. I sit in an office with a window that looks out across an alley at a brick wall. Don’t get me wrong this isn’t about the view. I spend countless hours filling out papers and staring at a computer screen. I feel like I’m in jail. It’s suffocating and yes, I admit, I willingly went back to it.” Emma shook her head and looked at Grace. “I asked myself yesterday, ‘What kind of a person would do this to themselves?’ I didn’t like the answer that I came up with. There’s more to life than chasing after a definition of success that leaves me feeling alone and empty at the end of the day. I don’t want to be that person. I can’t be that person anymore—not after what you and I shared here these past several months.”

Grace dipped her head before she met Emma’s eyes. “I guess we need to talk about what this means.” She pulled a chair around and motioned Emma to sit.

“All I have to think about is the night you took me out to the woods to watch the lightning bugs. Who else in my life would share that with me?” Emma sat close to Grace their knees touching when she continued. “I miss you. I miss the rhythm of the farm. When I got here tonight I felt...peace.” Emma squeezed Grace’s hands. “I’m sorry I left you. Please forgive me?”

“Emma,” Grace whispered with tears in her eyes. “I do.”

“I’m back now and I intend to stay—if you’ll still have me.”

“Yes. I’ll have you even if tonight there’s no choice in the matter.”

“My car,” Emma groaned. “How ironic I decided on the way up here I was going to sell it.”

“Why sell it?”

“It’s an expensive car which means expensive repairs. It’s just a chassis with a fancy dress. Right?”

“True.”

“How stupid to park under the tree.”

“The canopy from the oak is large. There’s nowhere to park in the yard where you aren’t covered by it.”

“Thanks for trying to make me feel better.” Emma tangled her fingers in Grace’s, lifting her hand to her mouth and kissing it.

“You weren’t in the car. That’s the only thing that matters.” Grace reached out and brushed an errant lock of hair behind Emma’s ear.

“I missed you.” Emma held Grace’s hand against her face.

Grace stood up from the chair pulling Emma with her into a fierce embrace. When she pulled back Grace placed her hands on either side of Emma’s face and kissed her. Grace took her time

enjoying the sweet softness of Emma's mouth on hers. She broke away, breathless, and said, "I missed you too."

Emma grinned and linked her hands low on Grace's back. "I wasn't sure what you would say when I got here."

"It hurt when you left but...I knew I had to let you go. You needed to figure this out for yourself."

"I barely lasted a month," Emma said, resting her head on Grace's shoulder.

"I didn't want to pressure you. Brax's picture was a gentle nudge." Emma squeezed Grace.

"I'm glad you sent Brax's picture. It gave me hope there was still a chance for us."

"I never stopped hoping there would be a chance for us," Grace admitted holding Emma's gaze.

"I want to be with you. Whatever it takes."

Someone coughed and they both looked up. "Sorry to interrupt." Michael stood in the doorway with Jonah and Tyler at his side. "I think the boys will feel safer if they sleep downstairs tonight."

"We can hear stuff hitting the windows." Jonah rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"They can camp out on the couches." Grace offered Emma a wry grin. "Looks like we're going to have a sleepover tonight."

"I don't mind," Emma said taking Grace's hand.

"Maybe I do," Grace growled so only Emma could hear.

"Yeah!" The boys danced around cheering.

"All right. That's enough. Both of you bring your pillows and get settled on the couch. I'll be there in a minute." Michael waited until the boys disappeared then caught Grace's eyes and asked, "Are we good?"

"Yeah. We're good," Grace answered.

Michael held her gaze for a moment longer. "Okay. I'll uh get the boys settled," he said and stepped out of the kitchen.

"Things are better between you and Michael?" Emma asked.

"There was a lot going on I didn't know about until today. Most of it had nothing to do with me or the farm."

"That must make you feel better," Emma said.

"Not really. Tony got himself into big trouble. Michael's been trying to help him sort his affairs out."

"Legal trouble."

"Unfortunately, it is. Mom and Dad are devastated."

"I'm so sorry."

Grace took Emma's hand and led her to the entry of the living room. "There's not much else to do but hunker down and wait this storm out." The boys were sprawled out on the couch and Michael was stretched out in a chair with his feet propped up on the ottoman snoring softly. Grace paused in the doorway. "Feel like braving the weather?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"You and me alone."

GRACE STUMBLED UP the steps in the dark and fumbled with the doorknob to her apartment.

“That last bolt of lightning made the hair on my arms stand up,” Emma exclaimed still shaking from the adrenalin.

“I wasn’t expecting it to be that close.” Grace felt along the wall and flicked the switch for the light. “Damn. Electricity’s out.”

“Do you have candles?”

“Something better.” Grace opened the door and led Emma inside. “Stay here.”

“What are you doing?”

“I have a couple of lamps. Hold on.” A lighter clicked and a flame flickered in the darkness and grew brighter. Grace adjusted the height of the flame and set the glass cover back on.

Shadows flickered on the wall and Emma studied her surroundings.

“So, this is your apartment.” A galley kitchen off to the right held an apartment size refrigerator, stove, and sink.

“It’s small but functional.” Grace lit a second lamp and carried it into the bathroom. She set it on the back corner of the sink.

Emma squeezed past Grace into the bathroom. “Why didn’t you tell me I look like a drowned rat?”

Grace moved behind Emma and smiled at her in the mirror. Their reflections looked ghostly in the flickering lamplight. “I think you look sexy.”

“Do you now?” Emma said smiling back at Grace.

“Mhmm.” Grace slipped her arms around Emma’s waist and snuggled close against her length. She pressed her lips to the base of Emma’s neck and sucked on the soft skin. She tasted rain and a hint of Emma’s perfume. “I love the way you smell.”

Emma tilted her neck back pressing her cheek against Grace’s and moaned. “You make me crazy.” Emma reached behind her and pulled Grace closer to her.

It took all Grace’s will power not to grind her hips against Emma’s buttocks as her stomach tightened and she felt a pulsing between her thighs. She tugged Emma’s shirt free from her jeans and slipped her hands beneath the soft fabric. “You feel so good. I want to feel you all over.”

“It seems to me the last time we were together our plans got interrupted.” Emma turned in Grace’s arms. She splayed her fingers across the flat of Grace’s chest and traced the curve of her collarbone.

“There are no pregnant cows tonight.”

“Good thing.” Emma grazed her teeth along Grace’s jawline to the soft flesh at the base of her neck.

“You’ll make me come if you keep doing that.”

“Mmm, I’d like to try that.”

“I bet you would.” Grace pressed her lips to Emma’s mouth and kissed her.

Emma cupped her hand behind Grace’s neck and deepened the kiss until they were both dizzy and desperate with need. She pulled away panting. “Bed. Now.”

They fumbled with buttons and zippers, frantic to shed their clothes. Emma kicked off her sneakers and struggled to pull off her wet sweatpants. Grace caught her when she stumbled. “Have I told you I hate peeling wet clothes of my body?”

“No, but it’s pretty sexy to watch,” Grace said.

“Now it’s your turn.” Impatient, Emma tugged Grace’s jeans over her hips and urged her to step out of them.

Grace wrapped her arms around Emma and spun her around to the bed, tumbling on top of her. She supported herself on one arm and pinned Emma to the bed.

“Hey, no fair.” Emma pouted tapping her finger against Grace’s bottom lip.

“You’ll get your chance,” Grace teased and slid her fingers beneath Emma’s panties gliding her fingers over Emma’s wet and swollen sex. “I love how wet you are.”

“Grace.” Emma arched her back, pleading as Grace circled the base of her clitoris. Her hips rocked and bucked as Grace slid over, around and dipped inside driving Emma closer to the edge. Over and over she drove her right up to the peak then slowed down when she saw Emma about to come.

“Oh my God. Please, Grace. I feel like I’m going to explode.” Emma’s fingers clenched Grace’s forearm.

Grace leaned over and kissed Emma, moving her fingers in long, slow, teasing strokes. “Soon.” Grace forgot to breathe listening only to Emma’s soft whimpers and pleas as her hips thrust harder and faster.

“Please, I want to feel you inside me, now.”

“Like this?” Grace cupped her fingers hesitating with her fingertips just inside until Emma met her gaze. Pupils dilated, her mouth open and her chest flushed, she was a study of desire. Grace slipped inside guiding the rhythm of Emma’s hips.

“Oh I don’t think I’m going to last.” Emma wrapped her legs around Grace’s back tilting her hips so she could take Grace deeper. Her body throbbed with arousal and Emma cried out as the first waves of her orgasm crashed through her.

“I love you,” Grace said over and over as she held Emma in her arms.

EMMA AWOKESOME time later with her head resting on Grace’s shoulder. It was still dark and light from the lamp cast dancing shadows on the wall. The walls of the apartment creaked as the storm raged outside. She lay for a few minutes listening to the sounds around her, snuggled closer and listened to Grace’s heartbeat. Her hand lay over Grace’s hip and she smiled when Grace shifted closer in her sleep.

Emma kissed the corner of Grace’s mouth, teasing her lips with her tongue.

“Hey, sleepy head,” Emma teased.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to doze off.”

“I think we both needed a nap.” Emma leaned over and kissed the side of Grace’s breast, sucking softly until she found her nipple and pulled the nub into her mouth.

Grace shifted her hips and sighed while Emma swirled her tongue around her nipple. “That feels good.”

Emma rose up and straddled Grace’s hips watching as her eyes fluttered open. She caressed Grace’s stomach sliding lower until her hands massaged the tops of her thighs. Her thumbs worked closer to her center until she parted her lips. Grace lifted her head off the pillow and moaned. “Was this you plan? To wear me out then ambush me?”

“I believe you were the one that wore me out before. I’m just returning the favor.” Emma lowered her face and blew softly against Grace’s clitoris. A smile crossed her lips as Grace’s hips lifted, beckoning her.

At the first gentle stroke of her tongue Grace’s body tightened, she arched her back and cried out. “Emma...”

“Not yet.” Emma rubbed her face against the softness of Grace’s inner thigh while her fingertips trailed close to her center.

“Please,” Grace begged lifting her hips to ease the impossible ache inside.

Emma brushed a kiss over Grace’s clitoris.

“Oh.” Grace’s body trembled. “I’m coming.”

“Hold onto it.” Emma waited a beat, stroking Grace’s thighs as the tremors passed. She leaned down and kissed her again.

Grace clutched at her shoulder and bit her lower lip. “I can’t.”

“A little longer then.” Emma held her thighs firmly and licked Grace again.

“Oh God,” Grace cried out her hips trembling. “Please, Emma.”

Emma relented and pressed her mouth around Grace’s clitoris. She sucked gently and Grace tried to twist away.

“Easy, I’ve got you.” Emma held her thighs still, pressed her lips to Grace’s hard length and drew her in slowly.

“Yes, yes,” Grace cried out and thrashed on the bed.

Emma held on as Grace cried out with mindless pleasure. She rolled and bucked, desperate for more, crying for release. Emma wanted to drive Grace higher but hands reached down and clutched her shoulders.

“Lay on top of me.”

“I’m here.” Emma did and Grace wrapped her arms around her with her leg resting against her center.

“Oh that’s good.”

Emma kissed Grace, rocking her hips against her. Grace skimmed her fingertips up Emma’s sides to her breasts. Emma moaned and together they found a rhythm thrusting harder and faster. Emma couldn’t get enough of her mouth, her throat and her breasts.

Grace rolled with Emma, digging her nails into her back, nipping with her teeth.

Emma shuddered her own orgasm, following swiftly after Grace’s. She could hear a slight buzzing in her head and she felt like she was floating, buoyed by Grace’s body. She could feel her soft curves contrasting with the lean tightness of her muscles. Their bodies were damp with sweat.

“I don’t think I can move,” Emma said after a moment.

“Yes you can.” Grace rolled her onto her side and curled up against Emma. “That was amazing.”

“I love the way you make me feel.”

Grace nuzzled Emma’s neck. “I’m glad you came back.”

Emma heard the wistfulness in Grace’s voice. She looked at Grace in the flickering light. “I am too. What’s on your mind?”

“Nothing.”

“Bull. I can hear your wheels turning.”

“I’m just wondering about you and the farm. If you’ll like it here.”

“Here?” The word rolled off Emma’s tongue as she considered what Grace meant. “You mean me living here on the farm with you?”

“What did you think I meant?”

“Nothing else. I just hadn’t considered it at all before.” Emma said.

Grace was quiet, waiting for Emma’s answer.

“You’d have to teach me how to do things around here. I’m not just going to be some farm wife that waits for you to come home at the end of the day.”

Grace burst out laughing. “Whoa. Don’t let my mother hear you say that. She’ll tan your hide.”

“I...oh...I didn’t mean...that just came out awful. I want to be useful if I’m going to be here.”

“Of course.”

“I want you to teach me how to do everything that you do.”

A lazy smile broke over Grace’s lips. “I can do that, but first this storm isn’t going anywhere for awhile yet. Come back down here with me.”

THE STORM BLEW itself out in the early morning hours, leaving the farm without electricity and heat. Emma awoke to the high-pitched whine of chainsaws biting through wood. It took most of the morning for Michael and Grace to cut away the limbs that had crashed down onto her car. The limbs lay in several foot long lengths in a neat pile next to her Mercedes. The roof was dented and the front windshield was broken. Miraculously, there wasn’t more damage.

The day was clear and bright with a stiff wind blowing from the northwest. Emma walked across the yard, dressed in jeans a sweatshirt and a down vest, carrying an armful of split firewood. She was well on her way to filling the wood rack on the corner of the porch. The fireplace was the only source of heat in the house and until the electricity came back on they would be using wood to heat the downstairs for the foreseeable future.

Emma finished stacking the wood on the rack and turned around to gather more. “Oh!” she raised her hands, startled to find Grace standing a couple of feet away. “I didn’t even hear you coming.”

“You hauled a lot of wood up to the house.”

“It felt good to be out here doing something physical.” Emma sized up the pile of wood by her car and said, “I want you to teach me how to use the chainsaw and drive the cat.”

“You have a list going already.” Grace smiled and Emma clasped her outstretched hand.

“Yes and it’s a long one.” She followed Grace down off the porch watching as two of the barn cats strode out into the sunlight. One was an orange tabby and the other was a calico. Both of them leapt up onto a hay bale and proceeded to bathe each other. Birds sang and the sound of the cows mooing out in the fields filled the air.

“Is it now?” Grace turned and pulled Emma against her. “What else is on this list of yours?”

“I want to drive the tractor and bail hay.”

“You might be sorry about that one.”

“Why?” Emma pouted.

“You’ll be picking hay off your clothes for days. I have a list going, too, you know,” Grace said.

“Oh, I bet you do.” Emma kissed Grace’s mouth smiling when Grace tried to capture her lower lip as she pulled away. “And what might your list include?”

A smile tugged at the corner of Grace’s mouth as she wrapped her arms around Emma and lifted her off her feet. “Never letting you go for one.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?”

Emma pressed her lips to Grace mouth. “I promise.”

“They’ll be lots of work to do.” Grace lowered Emma back to her feet.

“Teach me and we’ll do it together.”

“I will.” Grace wrapped her arms around Emma and drew her close.

Emma rested her head on Grace’s shoulder. The dogs galloped up to them and Grace paused to give them each a pat on the head. “Would you like to take a walk with me?”

“I would,” Emma said.

“Are you scared?”

“No. Not when I stand here and know that we have each other.”

Grace kissed Emma’s head and they walked up the tractor trail. “I love you.” The dogs frolicked running to and fro. The sun broke out from behind the last few clouds lingering from the storm.

“I love you, too.”

Emma thought back to her life in the city where everything was driven by a frenzied momentum of chasing success. So much of her prior life was dictated by patterns and trends she couldn’t predict.

Here on the farm she learned a different rhythm one that formed the melodies of their lives—new life, joy, grief and pain. She learned during the past year that each had its place and that everything passed in its due time.

She understood, as fledgling as that understanding was, that there were truths and certainties that have existed for centuries. Truths that made farmers like Grace sow the fields, raise the animals and harvest what was supplied by nature to survive the lean times because they were as expected as the bountiful ones. Everything had its moment. And here, Emma knew, her moment was now.

About the Author

Lynne Norris is the author of *Second Chances*, *Sanctuary* and *One Promise*. She has worked in health care for over twenty-five years. Lynne lives in New Jersey with her partner of twenty-four years, Catherine, and their son. They share their home with a spirited Golden Retriever, an attitudinal cat, a frog and six chickens.

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Driven by her recent failures, Alex struggles to put her troubled past behind her. With the annual influx of new residents to the hospital, she meets one of her new charges, Regina Kingston, a bright, young, promising doctor. Before long, Regina finds herself irresistibly drawn to the enigmatic physician despite the woman's fiery personality and maligned reputation.

As professional differences come to light and personalities clash, Alex and Regina both struggle to overcome their own demons. It is within each other that they will find the strength to overcome their darkest moments, surviving to live and love again.

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