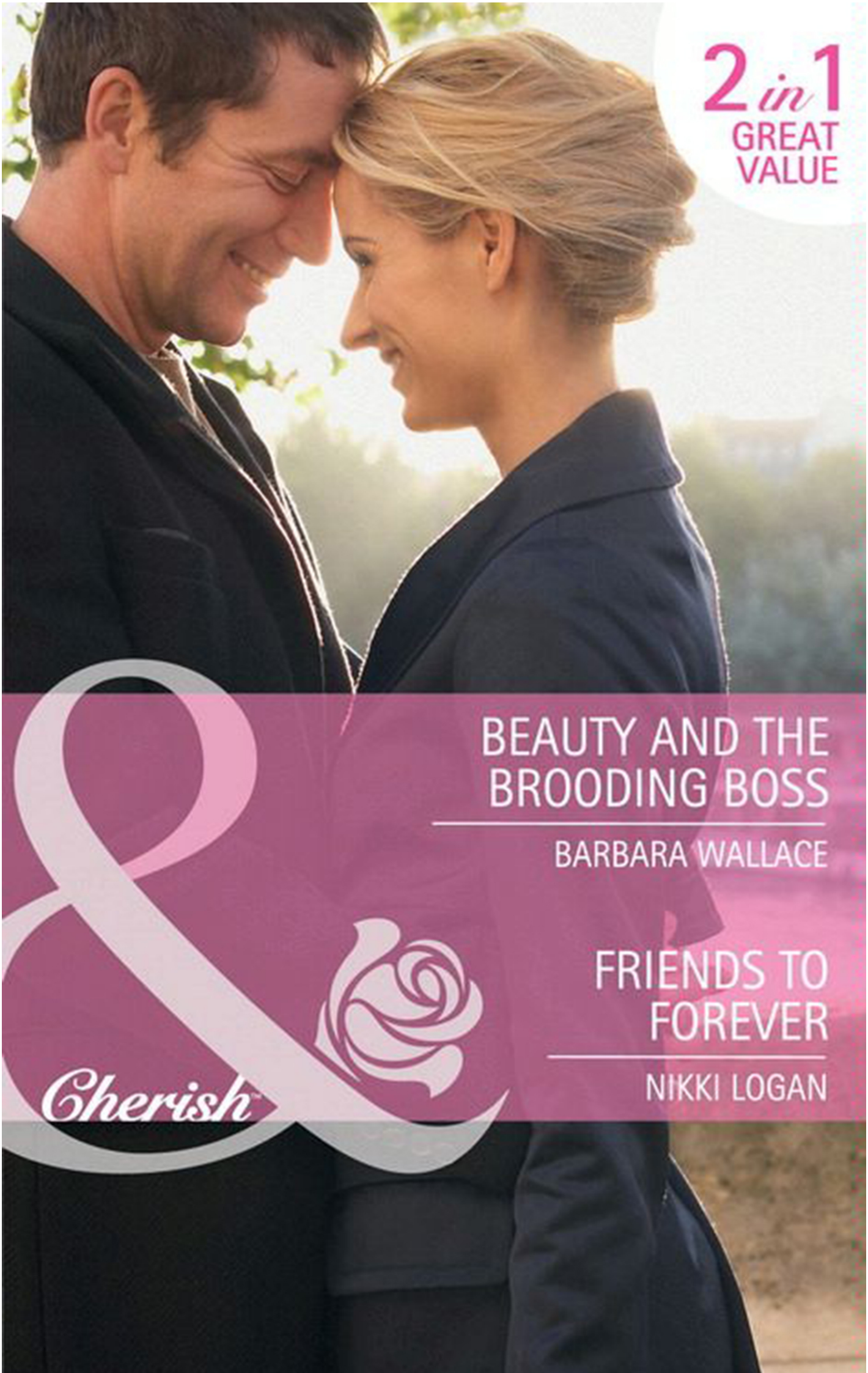

2 in 1
GREAT VALUE
BEAUTY AND THE BROODING BOSS
BARBARA WALLACE
FRIENDS TO FOREVER
NIKKI LOGAN
Cherish

Nikki Logan

# Beauty and the Brooding Boss / Friends to Forever: Beauty and the Brooding Boss / Friends to Forever

«HarperCollins»

**Logan N.**

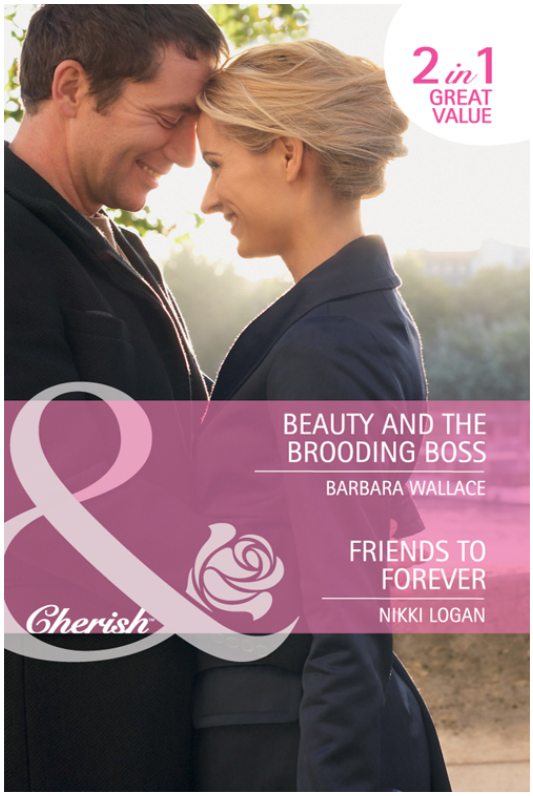
Beauty and the Brooding Boss / Friends to Forever: Beauty and the Brooding Boss / Friends to Forever / N. Logan — «HarperCollins»,

Beauty and the Brooding BossWorking for reclusive author Alex sounds like Kelsey's dream job, until she meets her new boss. He might be devastatingly handsome, but he's certainly not welcoming! Yet, beneath his gruff exterior, could guarded Alex be Kelsey's Prince Charming after all?Friends to ForeverMarc and Beth were best friends – until a heated kiss exposed secrets and ruined everything. Ten years later their reunion leads to an unexpected rescue mission. Stranded on an Australian beach, they need to learn to face the sins of the past together.

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**BEAUTY AND THE BROODING BOSS**
BARBARA WALLACE

**FRIENDS TO FOREVER**
NIKKI LOGAN

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**BEAUTY AND THE BROODING BOSS**
BARBARA WALLACE

Dear Reader,

There's this fantastic old movie called *The Enchanted Cottage.* In it, two wounded people hide from the world in a country cottage. While there, they discover their scars mysteriously disappear. At first they credit the cottage for weaving a magic spell, but in the end come to realise the real magic is the love they find with each other.

I couldn't help thinking of this movie when writing *Beauty and the Brooding Boss.* Like the characters in the movie, Alex Markoff has withdrawn to a country cottage to hide from a world that has let him down. In her own way Kelsey Albertelli is hiding too—she's protecting herself from life's bumps and bruises. When these two loners suddenly find themselves spending the summer together in the romantic countryside, their self-protective walls are chipped away. But the question is, will their relationship survive the outside world? Will their love be strong enough to weave a magic spell for them?

This book has a special spot in my heart because it's based in the Berkshire Mountains, where I grew up. I took a few liberties in creating the locations. Many of the settings, like Alex's woods, the Leafy Bean and the Music Centre, are loosely based on real locations. It was a lot of fun finding romance in my hometown.

I hope you enjoy Alex's and Kelsey's journey to happily-ever-after as much as I enjoyed writing it. Your comments are always welcome at my Web site, www.barbarawallace.com

Best wishes and happy reading,

*Barbara*

# About the Author

**BARBARA WALLACE** has been a lifelong romantic and daydreamer, so it's not surprising she decided to become a writer at age eight. However, it wasn't until a co-worker handed her a romance novel that she knew where her stories belonged. For years she limited her dreams to nights, weekends and commuter train trips, while working as a communications specialist, PR freelancer and full-time mum. At the urging of her family she finally chucked the day job, pursued writing full-time and couldn't be happier.

Barbara lives in Massachusetts with her husband, their teenage son, and two very spoiled self-centred cats (as if there could be any other kind). Readers can visit her at www.barbarawallace.com and find her on Facebook. she'd love to hear from you.

For Peter — I couldn't do this without you.

And for the Moody Muses — the best support group a gal could ask for.

# CHAPTER ONE

ALEX Markoff WASN'T *really ugly.*

Nor was he scarred, horribly disfigured, or any of the other things Kelsey imagined a recluse to be. In fact, the man standing before her couldn't be described as anything less than stunning. He was tall, at least a half a foot taller than her, with a lanky athletic build that took up most of the door frame. Faded jeans hung low on narrow hips while a black golf shirt molded to expansive shoulders. With his right arm engulfed from biceps to fingers in a plaster cast, she wondered how he managed to put on such a well-fitting garment.

Storm-cloud-colored eyes bore down on her from above finely-honed cheekbones.

Nope, not ugly. But definitely unhappy to see her on his doorstep.

Other doorsteps and other unwelcome expressions threatened on the edge of her memory and she shook them away. This wasn't the same. Not at all. Still, she couldn't stop that all-too-familiar uncertainty from creeping into her voice as she offered up a polite smile. "Hi. I'm Kelsey Albertelli."

When he didn't respond, she added, "Your new assistant."

Silence.

"From New York. Mr. Lefkowitz hired me to—"

"I know who you are."

His voice matched his physical stature. Kelsey nearly stepped back from its impact. *Or was it the barely veiled hostility?*

Driving up the Taconic Parkway with the windows rolled down had blown her topknot loose, and strands of brown hair were falling into her line of sight. She tucked a few of them behind her ear. "Good. For a moment, I thought maybe Mr. Lefkowitz's office forgot to close the loop."

"No, he closed it. Several times."

Kelsey nodded as an awkward silence settled between them. More strands of hair fell in her face. She tucked them back and waited to see what Markoff would say next.

The answer was nothing. He simply turned around and retreated into the house leaving her standing alone on the threshold.

*Can't say you weren't warned.* "Doubt you'll get much of a warm welcome," his editor had said. Clearly an understatement. "Just remember, he doesn't have a choice. You work for me, not him."

"Don't worry," she'd assured him. "I'm sure I'll be fine. Nothing I can't handle." *For the right price.* Thanks to Grandma Rosie, she was all about the paycheck these days. She'd have to work three or four jobs to earn what Mr. Lefkowitz offered. Besides, it wasn't as if she hadn't shown up unwanted on a doorstep before.

Coincidentally, that was thanks to Grandma Rosie too.

Since Markoff left the door open, she assumed he intended her to follow. By the time she realized and crossed the threshold, he was several paces ahead, and she had to rush to catch up.

"You're certainly tucked away up here," she said, reaching his shoulder. "You don't get too many sets of directions saying 'turn right at the big pine tree' in New York City. I think I turned right three times at three different trees."

"It's the one at the fork," he replied.

"I know that *now."* She emphasized the word. "Still, in most places when they give you a landmark, it's a building or a sign or something. Not a pine tree. I missed your driveway the first time driving by too. You can barely see your mailbox behind the bushes. But then, I imagine that's the point …."

Her sentence faded off. She was rambling. She hated rambling. Nervous chatter to fill up silence. Drove her insane. She'd had enough of it as a kid to last a lifetime. Got to the point, in fact, where she wanted to scream at the social workers to shut up. Yet here she was doing the same exact

thing. Anxiously trying to break the ice with a man whose resentment at her presence poured off him in waves.

Still, she refused to feel intimidated. “Mr. Lefkowitz said you write all your drafts longhand. I assume that’s what I’ll be typing—your longhand draft, that is.” Her gaze flickered to his plasterencased arm. “I hope breaking your arm hasn’t affected your progress.”

No sooner did the words leave her mouth than he stopped short, turning his gray eyes on her. Kelsey found herself rooted to the spot by their intensity. “Did Stuart tell you to ask that?”

“I—I—” Kelsey honestly didn’t know how to reply.

“You tell Stuart Lefkowitz he’ll get his manuscript when he gets it. Bad enough he’s foisted a damn typist on me—I don’t need a babysitter too.”

“I wasn’t—that is, I’m not—” Scrambling to catch up once again, Kelsey found herself wishing she’d asked a few more questions during her job *interview. That’s what you get for being motivated by money.*

When she first learned she’d be typing manuscript pages for Alex Markoff—the Alex Markoff—she thought the assignment sounded exotic. She’d been in high school when *Chase the Moon* debuted, but she remembered the book sitting on teachers’ desks, and she remembered reading excerpts from it in literature class. Alex Markoff was The Author of the Decade. The one writer everyone clamored to read.

She stole another look at her new boss. Maybe she should have looked at a book jacket before arriving. His looks might not have caught her so off guard. It wasn’t that he was stereotypically handsome—in profile some might consider the nose a tad long or his jaw too angular—but the strong features suited him. Hard to believe she imagined him disfigured. Then again, how else was she supposed to picture a man who went from bestselling author to hermit?

She really should have asked more questions during the interview.

Looking to her surroundings for answers, she could only see that Nuttingwood was as dark and masculine as its owner. It reminded her of an English cottage from some old black-and-white movie, all stone and ivy. The front room was similar in appearance, small with antique furniture and hunter green furnishings.

Turning the corner, however, Kelsey suddenly found herself thrust into a large space dominated by windows and French doors. Outside lay a sprawling garden awash with color so vivid it made both the dark wood interior and the green Berkshire mountains pale in comparison. Through the glass she could see birds darting back and forth amid the flowers, many of which she didn’t recognize.

“Wow,” she said under her breath. It was like standing in the New York Botanical Garden.

Footsteps pulled her from her reverie. Markoff had headed across the open space to a door on the opposite side. Following, Kelsey found herself in a room similar to the one she left, though smaller and with fewer windows. It was no less spectacular, however, thanks to a pair of French doors that opened onto a terraced rose garden. Adirondack chairs encouraged visitors outside, while inside a pair of plaid overstuffed rockers battled back with a comfortable invitation of their own. Clutter—mostly magazines, books and papers—littered the end tables and bookcases. A few crumpled balls of paper lay on the floor. For some strange reason, they seemed more like decorations than mess, complements to the room’s lived-in atmosphere.

“Great office.” In her mind, she could imagine him scribbling away by the window.

Markoff simply pointed to a large wooden desk tucked in the corner. “You can work here.”

“No computer?” The desk was barren of electronics.

“You can use your own and save to a flash drive.”

“Okay.” Good thing she had brought a laptop. Wonder what else she’d need. “Do you get Internet up here on the mountain?”

"Why?" That laserlike intensity had returned to his eyes, and they now bore into her suspiciously, as if she'd asked him for the National Defense codes. "Why would you need Internet access?"

"So I can keep in contact with New York. Mr. Lefkowitz will want updates."

He made a noise in the back of his throat, a sort of quiet, guttural growl. Kelsey immediately recalled his babysitter comment. Just her luck to step into some sort of bad blood between editor and writer. "If you don't, I can find a place in town—"

"There's Internet."

"Great." She'd worry about access another time when he was in a better mood. *If he had a better mood.*

A stack of yellow notepads lay on the desk so she turned her attention to them. "This is what I'm typing, I presume."

"Type exactly what's written," he replied. "Don't change a thing. Not a single word. If you can't read something, leave it blank. I'll fill in the word later."

Kelsey picked up the top notebook. Lines of gray masculine scrawl filled the page. Great. He wrote in pencil. And changed his mind a lot too. With all the arrows and slashes, the paper looked more like a sports play than a story. Looked like there would be a lot of blanks.

"Anything else?" she asked. One thing she learned as a temp was to learn an employer's quirks and rules upfront. Knowledge made adjusting to that much easier, and she figured Markoff's typing guidelines were merely the tip of the iceberg.

She was right. "I don't like loud noise," he continued. "No music, no loud voices. If you need to call your boyfriend or whoever—"

"I won't be calling anyone." Her quick answer must have caught him by surprise, because his stormy eyes blinked. "No boyfriend, no family." Why she felt the need to supply the information, she didn't know.

A shadow flickered across his face, momentarily quieting the turbulence in his eyes. The change threw her off balance. Without the glare, his face went from intense to downright arresting. It was most unsettling. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she looked away to the ground.

"Well, if you do need to make a call," she heard him say, "please go outside. Or better yet, wait until after work hours."

"Speaking of which, what hours did you have in mind? I mean, do you have a preference? So I don't disturb you?"

"Doesn't matter."

Because he didn't care or because she would disturb him no matter what? "Then if it's all right with you, I'm a morning person. I like to get an early start on the day."

"Fine."

Silence engulfed them once more, awkward and uneasy. Kelsey adjusted her appearance: her satchel, the hem of her T-shirt, anything rather than let Markoff's obvious displeasure get under her skin.

"Well then," she said, forcing a cheery note, "since we've covered where I'm working, what I'm working on and when, all that's left to settle is where you'd like me to sleep." Again, she found herself prodding his non-response. "Mr. Lefkowitz said you agreed to let me stay here." Amazingly.

"Upstairs," he replied. "The bedrooms are upstairs."

"Is there a particular room …?"

"I don't care."

"As long as I don't steal yours, right?"

Her attempt at levity fell flat. More than flat, based on how his expression darkened.

"I appreciate you being so accommodating. The Berkshires are a popular spot apparently, because summer rooms are at a premium." She was babbling again. "Mr. Lefkowitz had his office call every hotel first."

"I'm sure he did."

Was that skepticism in his voice? What on earth? Did he think she chose to stay up here in the middle of nowhere? She took a deep breath and smoothed back her hair. "Look, Mr. Markoff, I know this arrangement wasn't your idea." She kept her voice as level and calm as possible. "And I'll be the first to admit the arrangements are less than ideal …"

"Or necessary."

"Be that as it may, I'm here for the summer. I promise I'll do my best to stay out of your way as much as possible."

"Good."

The blunt answer stung more than Kelsey expected. She tightened her smile, hiding the reaction. "It might help if we set some ground rules right now. For example, as far as meals go…"

"The kitchen's in the back. You're on your own for food."

Now why didn't that surprise her? "And the bathrooms?"

"The main one's upstairs, across from the guest rooms. You'll find towels and a tub. There's limited hot water."

"Guess that means I should catch the first shower."

He wasn't amused. Again, the reaction hurt. She chalked it up to a new location and old ghosts. *It's only for a summer,* she told herself. Any situation could be endured as long as it was short-term and she kept her personal distance.

"Don't worry," she amended. "I'm not one for lingering under the spray." Or anywhere she wasn't wanted, for that matter. Since he nodded in response, she assumed he approved the answer.

Meanwhile, she could tell Markoff was eager to end their meeting. So he could stomp off and rue her presence, no doubt. "My laptop is in the car. Why don't I go get it and start working. I'll print out the finished pages and leave them for your review."

As she spoke, she moved toward the door. Unfortunately, Markoff moved toward the desk at the same time and they inadvertently ended up in each other's personal space. The scent of wood and cloves drifted toward Kelsey. A warm earthy aroma that made her want to close her eyes and inhale deeply. Instead, she looked up to meet eyes that were stormier than ever.

Awareness, strong and instinctive, spread through her. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were …" For some reason her brain wiring had suddenly gone haywire, and she was having trouble putting words together. "I mean, I was heading …"

She slipped past him, into the vacant doorway. "Why don't I go get my laptop?"

Alex didn't respond. Good thing, since it took till she reached her car and some deep breaths of fresh air before the weird flustered sensation left her brain.

"Get a grip on yourself," she muttered to herself, unlocking the door. "You're going to be here all summer." Surely she wasn't going to spend the next three months rattled by her boss, was she?

When she returned a few minutes later she heard a voice coming from the office.

"For crying out loud, we're talking a couple extra months. Three tops. You can't wait an extra ninety days?"

Who couldn't wait? Markoff's voice was razorsharp, cutting through not just the air, but her as well. "And I suppose I broke my arm on purpose too," she heard him say. "That why you sent the babysitter? To make sure I didn't hurl myself down another hill?"

*Babysitter.* He meant her. That meant he was talking to Stuart Lefkowitz. Trying to get rid of her perhaps?

Crossing the main space toward the doorway, she stopped shy of the entrance and peered through the crack. Markoff had his back to her. She could see his shoulder muscles rippling with tension beneath his shirt. When he turned, she saw a similar tautness playing across his profile.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said, "that I can't write with someone breathing down my neck twenty-four seven?"

Alex's jaw twitched while he listened to the voice on the other end. Suddenly, his eyes grew disbelieving. "What did you say? Yes, I know what 'breach of contract' means. You wouldn't …"

There was silence, followed by a slow controlled intake of breath. Incredulity had changed to outright fury. "Fine. You'll get your damn book."

Kelsey jumped as he slammed the cell phone on his desk. Breach of contract? They were threatening legal action? No wonder Mr. Lefkowitz had been so adamant about her staying. And no wonder Markoff resented her. He was right. She *was* a babysitter.

On the other side of the door, Alex let out a frustrated groan, and she heard footsteps. Fearing discovery, she instinctively drew back, scrambling mentally for an explanation should she be confronted for eavesdropping. A second later, the banging of a door told her she was safe; that he'd left through the garden. Sure enough, looking outside, she could see him stomping off toward the woods.

With the angry conversation she heard fresh in her mind, she finally let out the sigh she'd been holding since her arrival.

This was going to be a long summer.

That night Kelsey unpacked, settling into the room that would be her home for the next three months. Since Alex never mentioned which bedroom would be hers, she selected one that looked like a guest room. Like the front of the house, the room she picked was dark and woodsy, draped in hunter green and brown. The only thing missing was a deer head hanging on the wall.

The aroma of cedar wafted from the closet, adding to the rustic appeal. As she unpacked her clothes, she tried to count the number of times she'd gone through this routine. And it was a routine. First came the bureau, taking up as little drawer space as possible—a throwback to sharing a room with multiple people—then the closet. The entire process seldom took more than fifteen minutes. She'd learned early to travel light and not get too settled, so all her worldly possessions fit into two large suitcases. This summer it was the most she'd ever packed, she noted. Then again, the two years she just spent subletting was the longest she'd ever spent in one place. Guess in sticking around, she'd acquired a few more things.

Closet done, she reached for her satchel, the final part of her ritual. Immediately, her fingers found her most prized possession. The ceramic mug was cool to the touch despite sitting in her bag all day long. Hard to believe that once upon a time, brightly painted flowers had circled its surface. They were nothing more than faded speckles of paint now. There was a crack along the top of the handle from too many washings. Smiling, Kelsey cradled the mug in her palm. She could picture the same mug, colors still bright, resting on a countertop, a female hand pouring coffee into it. If she tried really hard, she could picture her mother bringing the cup to her lips, though as time passed, that memory got harder and harder to conjure up.

All of a sudden she felt overwhelmingly small and alone, as if the simple act of remembering transported her back in time. For a moment, she wasn't a grown woman controlling her own destiny, but a little girl back in the system, gripping the last talisman she had from her old life. Living with her mother hadn't been great, but at least she'd been wanted. At least that's how she chose to remember those years.

She leaned against the headboard, knees drawn close, the mug pressed to her breast. This was part of the routine too, this momentary lapse into loneliness. She'd get over it soon enough. She always did. Soon as she familiarized herself with the surroundings. Although this time the feelings were stronger than usual. Hardly surprising given Alex's animosity.

She gave herself five more minutes of self-pity, then put the emotion back on the shelf and walked to the window. Her bedroom overlooked a less landscaped part of the garden, closer to the trees, increasing the feeling of isolation. Outside, through the tree line, she noticed the sky still bore traces of daylight even though it felt far later. “Country living,” she mused, raising the sash. The greeting quiet was unsettling. Nothing but the rustle of leaves and a few intermittent high-pitched trills. How on earth would she sleep without the undercurrent of traffic? Or streetlights? Didn’t Markoff believe in outdoor lighting?

Of course not, she answered with a roll of her eyes. Lights would ruin the whole “darkness” theme he had going.

To her right, a branch snapped. She leaned over the sill, half expecting—or maybe fully expecting—to see a wild animal dashing out from the trees. What she saw instead surprised her more. It was the silhouette of a man.

Markoff.

He was walking the perimeter of the property, just inside the tree line. Head down, he picked his way carefully, as if counting his steps. Kelsey watched him approach with a catch in her throat. He looked so alone. Not at all like the hostile man who had greeted her this afternoon. This man reminded her of a specter. That was the only word she could think to describe him. There but not there.

He came closer, and Kelsey drew back, not wanting to get caught watching. No sooner did she pull into the shadows than she noticed he’d stopped. His face slanted upward to her window. Kelsey stifled a gasp. What light remained hit his eyes just right, turning them to shining silver. Even from two stories up, she could see the emotion churning behind them, bright and unguarded. She couldn’t name what emotion she saw, but whatever it was, it struck a familiar chord, pulling her in and making her insides twist. It felt like he was looking straight at her. Or rather, *inside* her. Which was silly, since he couldn’t see her from where she stood.

Eventually he moved on, leaving the night air charged with his presence. Quietly, Kelsey lowered the shade. A few moments later, she heard footsteps on the stairs, followed by a bedroom door clicking shut.

His room was next to hers. She hadn’t realized. Through the wall, she heard the scraping of a chair and she swore what sounded like a long, desolate sigh followed by another and another, each sounding more frustrated than the next. Suddenly there was the rattling rush of glass and paper punctuated by a groan. The door opened and footsteps, heavy, angry footsteps, sounded in the hall. Kelsey knew the front door would slam before she heard it.

Okay, so maybe she was wrong about the nighttime quiet. But she was right about it being a long summer. Maybe she should have stayed in New York and worked those three jobs after all.

And be tied to Grandma Rosie’s debt for even longer.

Letting out a long breath, she collapsed backwards on the bed. “Thanks a lot, Grandma,” she muttered. Looked like Markoff wasn’t the only one who didn’t have a choice.

# CHAPTER TWO

"ALL I can say is thank God for coffee. Especially—" Kelsey took a long sip "—fresh-ground Italian roast. I swear this stuff might be the only thing keeping me upright today."

Her companion, a large orange tabby, said nothing. Kelsey had found the furry critter dozing on the terrace when she arrived at dawn, and he'd been keeping her company ever since. She suspected the animal was a stray. Unless Alex had a hidden soft spot, she didn't see him as the pet-owning type.

Then again, those eyes she saw last night definitely hid something….

Forget it. He didn't deserve sympathetic thoughts. Not after the way he kept her up last night with his continual pacing and sighing.

"I thought writing was a sitting profession, not one that required moving across the floor all night long." She took another drink and waited for the caffeine to kick in. She was going to need to be alert if she was going to spend the day deciphering his handwriting. "I'll tell you one thing, Puddin'- cat, I don't care how brilliant a writer he is, the man definitely needs to improve his social skills. He acts like my being here is some kind of plague. How much you want to bet he's annoyed that I helped myself to the coffee this morning?"

The cat pulled a paw over its eyes in response.

"Exactly," Kelsey replied. "Though seems to me, if you're going to leave a fresh pot brewing at the crack of dawn, you shouldn't be surprised when people help themselves." The smell alone had been nirvana after a sleepless night. "Fair's fair, right?"

"Who are you talking to?"

Kelsey nearly jumped out of her skin. Standing at the edge of the terrace was a very dark and bothered Alex Markoff.

Immediately, her insides somersaulted. How was it he could look so intimidatingly perfect at this hour? He wore a navy blue T-shirt the same shade as his sling, the hem of which skimmed the waistband of his jeans. Jeans, she noted, that looked made to hug his hips. He'd been up and about from the looks of it. His skin glistened with perspiration, the moisture darkening the collar of his shirt. Dark curls peeked out from the back of his neck with the unruliness that only came from damp hair. Though it shouldn't, seeing them made her wonder what he might look like stepping from the shower.

"Good morning," she said once she caught her breath.

He stared at her with unreadable eyes. "You didn't answer my question. Who are you talking to?"

"Just the—" She pointed to the sunny spot on a terrace that was now deserted. "Myself."

"Do you always do that?"

"When there's no one else to talk with. What's that they say, 'You're your own best company'?"

"So I've always believed."

As she tucked her hair behind her ear, Kelsey swore he checked for an earpiece. Really, did he think she was lying? "Looks like I'm not the only morning person after all. I helped myself to the coffee, by the way."

"I heard."

Along with how much else? Quickly, she raised her mug, hoping he wouldn't notice her skin flushing. "Have you been up long?" she asked over the rim. "I would think after such a long night, you'd be sleeping in."

"Why do you think I had a long night?"

Why did he seem to scrutinize everything she said as though she had a hidden meaning? Along with staring at her with those probing gray eyes?

"I heard you," she explained, resisting the urge to duck her head like a nervous teenager. "Kind of hard not to, actually. Old house, thin rooms. You sigh loudly."

"Oh."

Oh, indeed.

"I take it writing didn't go well last night?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I don't know, to make conversation?" She shrugged. "Do I have to have a reason?"

"There's always a reason."

"Well, in this case, my reason was to be friendly. After all, we're going to spend the summer working together, we might as well be civil to one another, right?"

He gave her a long look. Gauging her sincerity? While she waited, the part of her not insulted used the standoff to study his face, catching the details she'd been too overwhelmed to notice before. Things like the tanned complexion, the faint scar on the bridge of his nose, the curve of his Cupid's bow.

And, of course, the emotion behind his eyes. Yet again it struck her that there was something sad and painful behind their turbulence. A kind of longing, perhaps.

Or loneliness.

What was his story? She really should have done some research before taking this job.

Her curiosity would have to go unexamined as the sound of crunching gravel on the other side of the house interrupted the standoff. Soon as he heard the noise, Alex's expression changed. Again. His shoulders straightened and a soft curse escaped his lips.

"What?" Kelsey was having trouble keeping up with his collection of abrupt moods. Naturally he didn't answer. Like yesterday, he simply turned and walked off leaving her to follow. She turned the corner in time to see a burly tree-trunk of a man step out of a green pickup with the words *Leafy Bean, Farley Grangerfield Prop.* painted on the side. The man looked from Alex to her with interest, but said nothing. Not surprising given the dark warning plastered all over Alex's face.

Continuing in silence, both men reached over the side of the truck bed and each grabbed two canvas bags laden with groceries. Alex, she noted, carried both with his good arm. As the stranger passed, he shot her another look. "Last two bags won't unload themselves."

Taking the hint, Kelsey hustled to the truck to see they'd, fortunately, left her what looked like the two lightest bags. She brought them into the kitchen where she found the two men wordlessly unpacking groceries and arranging them on the kitchen table. The door swung shut behind her, causing them to both look up.

"Where should I put these?" she asked.

"Counter," Alex replied. "That's not necessary," he added when she started unpacking.

"I don't mind." What else was she going to do, stand there and watch them? "You'll have to tell me where the stuff goes though. At least the first time. I'm pretty good at remembering where things go. Plus this way I'll see where there's space for my groceries."

Dammit, she was babbling again. It was quickly becoming a bad habit. But the quiet … It filled the room so completely. And those looks she kept feeling the grocer give her. Curious and full of implied innuendo. She had to say something just to hear something besides her own thoughts. Although the subsequent look Alex shot her made her wish she'd reconsidered.

"Bigger order'll cost you extra," commented the grocer shortly.

"Kelsey will be buying her groceries separately."

"Right," she said. After all, she was on her own for meals. Why would they do something as simple as combine grocery orders? "I'm Kelsey Albertelli, by the way. Mr. Markoff's new assistant. I'm here to help while his arm's broken. Are you Farley?"

The lack of denial suggested he was. "Need three days' notice for delivery. You want your food sooner, you have to pick up your order yourself. Special orders take longer. And if I don't have the brand, I'll substitute. No complaining."

Was everyone in Berkshire County this brusque? At least Farley's silence felt different. Gruff though he was, he lacked the anger and wary defensiveness that surrounded her new boss. "Got order forms in the truck," he said when the last grocery item had been put away. They were the first words anyone had said in a few minutes. "You want some, follow me."

She did, feeling Alex's stare on her all the way to the drive. "Normal delivery's every ten days," the old man was telling her. "First four bags are free, after that you pay."

"I'll bear that in mind." Kelsey took the stack of tri-colored forms he handed her. "You been delivering to Nuttingwood long?" she asked.

"Long enough"

"And that's been …?"

"Three, four, five years. I don't keep a calendar."

She would have liked to have been surprised by the vague answer, but deep down she suspected that's all she'd get. Still, it was worth a shot. "Thanks again for the forms," she said, waving them in the air. "I'll see you soon."

Farley muttered something about having nothing better to do than drive around all day and shut the door. Kelsey stifled a smile. The answer was so grumpy and so over the top, she actually found it funny.

She waited until the truck disappeared round the tree-covered bend, then returned to the house. Where, she discovered, Alex hadn't moved. He stood flush against the kitchen sink, his eyes glued to the space beyond the window.

"Interesting character," she said, shutting the door. "Is that grumpy old man act for real?" *As opposed to yours, which I can't for the life of me understand?*

"I wouldn't know."

"Ever been to his store? The, uh," she looked at the forms in her hand, "Leafy Bean?"

"Once or twice."

"It as colorful as him?"

"The pastries are decent."

Coming from him, that was nothing short of a glowing recommendation. She made her way to the kitchen table where a few grocery items, mostly fresh produce, remained. Maybe she was imagining things, but Alex seemed pretty annoyed she'd crossed paths with Farley. Then again, surely he didn't expect, because he was apparently an antisocial hermit, that she avoid human contact too? Did he think she'd spend all summer alone with no one but him and a stray cat for company?

A strange, warm shiver ran down her spine at the notion.

Alex had switched his attention from outside the window to her. Eyes dark and murky, the scrutiny ignited another set of shivers. Aw, hell. Why not come right out and ask the question? "You don't like him knowing I'm here, do you?"

"I don't like people knowing my business."

"I hardly think you having a temporary assistant will be big news in town. If they even find out. Farley doesn't seem like the kind of guy who talks about anything let alone gossip."

"Everybody talks eventually, Miss Albertelli. I don't have to help them out." He pushed himself away from the counter. "And neither do you."

*Everyone talks eventually.*

She didn't know it at the time, but Alex's parting remark was the last she heard from him for two days. He disappeared Lord knows where shortly after, leaving her to wander Nuttingwood alone.

"I see you more often," she said to Puddin' the cat when he made his daily appearance on the terrace. "He's like a ghost, only showing up at night." She knew he showed up then because she could hear him pacing the floor. Pacing and pacing.

"Maybe if he wrote something upbeat he'd be able to sleep." What pages she'd deciphered so far were darker than the man himself. Bitter too. Brilliant but bitter. About as far removed from

*Chase the Moon* as you could get. “Like they were written by two different people,” she told Puddin’. Maybe in a way they were.

With each passing hour she kicked herself a little harder for her lack of due diligence before taking this job. Instead of asking questions, she had let herself get distracted by the size of her impending paycheck. Sure the money was a priority, but why didn’t she think to get a little more information about her boss? She’d really like to know what his story was. Why he seemed so angry at the world.

“I know, I know,” she said to Puddin’, “keep your head low and mind your business.” That was the rule. “But if I knew why, then maybe I’d know if this disappearing act was going to play all summer.”

It still wasn’t too late to find out. Wasn’t that what the Internet was for? Without giving it another thought, she rose from her seat, moving so fast Puddin’ jumped too. Farley said he’d been delivering groceries between three and five years. *Chase the Moon* came out about six years ago. Surely in six years there would have been some kind of news article written about Alex Markoff, right?

A dozen keystrokes later, she had her answer. The Actress and the Author: It’s Love! screamed the tabloid headline.

Alex Markoff, in love with a movie star? Seemed incongruous if you asked her. But there was proof. A photo of Alex and a familiar blonde cozying up to each other over a cup of coffee. An odd kind of irritation settled over her as she read about their courtship. Apparently the starlet, Alyssa Davenport, met Alex at a book signing. A whirlwind romance followed and much to everyone’s surprise the couple married and settled in Los Angeles where one of Alex’s short stories was being made into a film. Alex’s fame and her looks made them a favorite for the camera. A click of the mouse found dozens of photos. At fund-raisers. At movie premieres. On a producer’s yacht. Of Alyssa’s platinum-blond hair and perfectly formed features. In every photo Mrs. Markoff appeared lovingly perched on her husband’s arm, her smile a glowing complement to Alex’s somber, almost reluctant expression. Even living a fairy tale, he didn’t smile.

Another click and the story changed. “What Went Wrong?” asked the headline superimposed over Alyssa’s face. Other stories promised to reveal “Markoff’s Dark Secrets.”

*Everyone talks eventually.* And talk they did. Friends, acquaintances, even employees offered lurid “insider” details of the marriage, the breakup and the couple’s intimate life.

“Did everyone who knew him give an interview?” she asked aloud.

“Short answer, yes.”

Kelsey’s stomach dropped. Slowly, she raised her eyes from the screen, coming face to face with Alex. Fury darkened his features. “What the hell are you doing?”

She tried to answer but the words stuck in her throat. Instead she ended up opening and closing her mouth like a fish gasping for air.

Meanwhile, Alex turned the laptop around and glared at the screen. Kelsey could feel the rage boiling up inside him. Which made his tightly controlled voice doubly scary.

“I’ll ask again. What do you think you’re doing?”

“I—I—” Tucking the hair behind her ear, she took a deep breath and steadied herself. A difficult task, what with the death stare Alex was throwing her way. “I’m sorry. I thought maybe if I knew more about you I could—”

“Could what, Miss Albertelli?”

The glare got worse, forcing her to look away. All of a sudden, her answer didn’t sound so adequate. “Understand you better,” she replied softly.

Apparently Alex didn’t find the answer adequate either. His jaw muscle twitched as he looked from her to the screen and back. “You want to understand me better?” he asked finally, his voice even more maddeningly controlled than before. “Then understand this. My private life is that—*private.* You do not have the right to root around in my past, no matter what your reasons are.”

I wouldn't have had to if you weren't such a mystery, Kelsey muttered inside her head. Still, she knew Alex was right. She dropped her gaze to her hands, feeling like a kid caught breaking house rules. It was a feeling she detested, although never so much as this particular moment, since she had no one to blame for her predicament but herself. "It won't happen again."

"Damn right it won't. Because you're leaving. Today."

Leaving? As in fired?

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why didn't she listen to her own rules and mind her own business? No, she had to go poking around in Markoff's past and get herself fired. Fired as in out on the street with no reference. Who knows how long it would take her to find a new position? Images of collection notices flashed before her eyes. She was so screwed.

"Mr. Markoff, wait!"

Having issued his order, Alex had turned and marched out. Kelsey scrambled after him, catching him by the shoulder. "You need to reconsider."

He whirled around, lightning flashing in his stormy eyes. "I don't *need* to reconsider anything. I'm not the one who invaded my privacy."

"Please. I need this job." Lord, but she hated the pleading note in her voice. Another insult courtesy of Grandma Rosie.

"You should have thought of that before you went on Google."

"But—"

"Today, Miss Albertelli. Go pack your things."

Idiot. What was she going to do now? Maybe she could get Stuart Lefkowitz to intervene….

She didn't relish playing this gambit, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and if she had any hope of paying off Grandma Rosie's debt in a reasonable amount of time, she didn't have a choice. Alex was almost to the garden door. If he left, who knew how long he'd be gone.

"What about Mr. Lefkowitz? He's not going to be happy with another delay."

That stopped him. "Stuart's happiness isn't my concern." He still sounded haughty, but a hint of wariness had crept in.

"I'm sure that's true," she replied, "but …"

His lips became a tight line. "But what?"

Now or never. Slowly, deliberately, she crossed the room, making sure her eyes stayed locked with his. It wasn't easy, what with the fluttering in her stomach that accompanied each step. "But you and I both know he doesn't want more delays."

He tried to disguise the hitch in his breath, but she heard it nonetheless. The cards were on the table. He knew that she knew about the breach of contract. For several seconds, the only sound in the entire house was the ticking of the hallway clock. Kelsey waited, holding both her ground and her breath.

Finally, he let out what sounded like a strangled groan. She recognized the noise as defeat. "Why won't the world just leave me alone," he muttered, jamming his fingers through his hair. "Is that so much to ask?"

The pain in his growl did little to ease her conscience as Kelsey watched him stomp away. Although he didn't say so, she knew she'd won the challenge. He wouldn't throw her out. This time anyway. She waited until she heard the front door slam before sinking to the sofa in relief. Relief accompanied by a hefty dose of guilt. Cursing, she smacked a nearby cushion.

So much for her getting on Alex Markoff's good side.

# CHAPTER THREE

THAT night, Kelsey went out to eat. After the day's debacle, she wanted to put as much distance between her and Alex as possible. She ended up in town at the local inn. The two-hundred-year-old building featured a pub in the basement, so she tried drowning her guilt with a cheeseburger and Irish music. No such luck though. Her conscience still felt lousy. She could kick herself for being so nosy. Alex was right; his past was none of her business. After all, how would she feel if someone poked around in her life?

And yet, thanks to those shocking Web sites, here she was obsessing more than ever. There was something about the man she simply couldn't let go of. Something in the way he expressed his anger. In the way he begged the world to leave him alone. There was despair in those gray eyes of his that told her there was far more to Alex Markoff than some angry, mournful hermit.

What was he like before his divorce, she wondered. Carefree? Happy? She tried to picture him laughing and came up short.

How sad. Even she found occasion to laugh once in a while.

It was well past midnight when she returned to Nuttingwood. She might have arrived back earlier, but no sooner did she leave the restaurant than the sky erupted in a monstrous thunderstorm. Thanks to the torrential rain, the wind and the lack of streetlights, she couldn't see more than five feet in front of her on the drive home. As a result, she missed the fork with the pine tree and had to retrace her path.

Happily, Nuttingwood was dark when she pulled into the drive. Alex was, no doubt, avoiding her as well. She dashed to the front door, bumping her hip against the marble entranceway table the second she crossed the threshold. Cursing for not leaving a light on, she felt along the wall until she found the switch and flipped it upward.

Nothing happened.

She flipped the switch again. And again.

"You're wasting your time."

Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the room and she caught sight of a dark silhouette at the great room window. "You're wasting your time," Alex repeated. "Lights went out thirty minutes ago."

Kelsey drew closer. Now that her eyes had adjusted, she could see Alex was doing more than simply standing at the window. He was kneading the muscles on the back on his neck. He wore a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants with no shirt. His hair was messed too. He must have been lying down when the storm hit. Seeing him so exposed felt queerly intimate, almost voyeuristic. For the first time since she moved in, Kelsey realized she shared a house in the woods with a flesh-and-blood man. A very handsome, very desirable man. The sudden awareness made part of her grow shaky while other parts became painfully awake.

"This happen often?" she asked. "Power outages, I mean." Nice to know how frequently they'd find themselves together in the dark. Because of a storm, that is.

"If the wind blows hard enough."

"And how often is that?" she asked, reaching his shoulder. He didn't turn around upon her approach, seemingly intent on studying the shadows in the garden. Lightning flashed, and she caught his reflection. His expression was much farther away than this room.

"Often enough. There's an emergency generator in the basement."

"You haven't turned it on yet?"

"I like the darkness."

*Why am I not surprised?*

"Did you say something?"

"Nothing important." She didn't realize she'd spoken aloud. Covering, she changed topics. "Lightning's putting on quite a show."

"Suppose."

"When I was little one of the other fost—other kids told me thunder and lightning were caused by alien attacks. Scared me so much I would hide under the covers." She could still remember cowering under the blanket, clutching her mother's cup to her chest like a talisman. "The stupid things kids fall for, huh?"

"Not only kids."

"What?" His voice was so soft, she missed part of his sentence, making it her turn to ask, "Did you say something?"

"Nothing important."

Intuition said otherwise, but she didn't press. He wouldn't admit the truth if she did. So instead, she stole what had to be the hundredth look at his profile. In the dark, she could only see the outline of his features. His expression was impossible to read. Even so, his magnetism was stronger than ever. Maybe because they were alone, or because the dark made everything that much more intimate, but she felt surrounded by him. There seemed no escaping his scent or the heat emanating from his body. She could even feel the rise and fall of his chest, his breathing strained as it filled his lungs. His desolation was palpable, so much so she hurt for him. She found herself wanting to reach out and soothe his pain.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," she said softly. "I had no right to snoop behind your back."

"No, you didn't."

The corner of her mouth twitched upward with guilty amusement. "You don't believe in cutting people slack, do you?"

"If I cut slack to everyone who betrayed my privacy, I'd need a much larger supply of scissors."

She thought of the gossip articles and Web sites, and she understood. No one deserved to have their life splashed on the front page. "I'm sorry too, about your marriage."

"It was a long time ago."

"Still, you—"

"I don't want to talk about Alyssa, Miss Albertelli. Our marriage failed. End of story."

The myriad of emotions in his voice—anger, frustration, hurt—said otherwise, but seeing as how she was already treading on thin ice, Kelsey didn't push. "Did you say the generator was in the basement?"

"At the foot of the stairs." He sounded grateful for the change of subject.

"Mind if I turn it on? You can keep the lights out in this room, but I'd like to find my way upstairs without incident." Not to mention, shedding light might diminish the intimacy of their situation. Maybe, if she could see his usual stormy expression, she wouldn't feel his pull so intensely.

"Knock yourself out."

Finding her way to the kitchen in the dark was easier said than done. Nuttingwood was one of those houses that had been added onto over the years, leading to an abundance of twists and turns and unexpected corners. During the day, the eclectic layout gave the house character, but at night, in the pitch black, the layout became a pedestrian nightmare. Kelsey was certain she'd fall and break an arm too. Worse, she'd break some piece of furniture or irreplaceable family heirloom.

Eventually she reached the double-swing door leading to the kitchen, just in time to hear footsteps approach from behind.

"You'll need a flashlight," Alex said, giving the door a push. Kelsey followed in silence, trying not to think about how his body brushed against hers when he passed.

He moved around the dark kitchen with a grace to be admired. At least she assumed he moved with grace since she didn't hear any of the bumps or knocks that accompanied her own clumsy

movements. The basement door was to the side, behind the farmer's table. She was walking cautiously in that direction when she heard the scraping of a chair being dragged across the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"The flashlight's in the back of the cupboard. With my cast, I can't reach it flatfooted."

"Then let me." Making her way back toward his silhouette, she took the chair from his grip. "It's pitch black in here. Break your other arm and I'll be here till Christmas."

"By all means then, be my guest. We wouldn't want that."

Even though he couldn't see her, Kelsey smirked in his direction and stepped up. A warm sturdy hand pressed to her back. "I'm steadying you," Alex said from behind.

Steadying, huh? Then why did her legs feel shaky? Why did her spine feel like it had an electrical current running up and down it?

"There a problem?"

"No problem." It was the dark, she decided. It heightened everything. Turning something innocent, like a simple touch or Alex's low-pitched voice, into something sensual. Once the lights came on, the illusion would disappear.

All of a sudden, a pitiful wail sounded in the kitchen.

"What on earth was that?" Alex asked.

"I'm not—" The wail sounded again and recognition dawned.

"Puddin'!" She'd wondered what kind of shelter the cat had found to ride out the storm. He must have heard her drive up and was crying to come in the house. "Poor thing must be drenched to the skin."

"Who's Puddin'?"

Jumping down from the chair, she hurried to the back door only to have a jet-propelled streak of water rush past her legs when she opened it. Loud meows filled the kitchen. There was a click, and Alex, who'd apparently retrieved the flashlight, focused the beam on the sopping orange mass shivering under the kitchen table.

"That," Kelsey said, "is Puddin'."

"It's a cat."

An extremely sarcastic retort jumped to the tip of her tongue, but Kelsey managed to bite it off. "A very wet one at that. Would you hand me the dish towel?"

"For what?"

"To dry him off, of course. Or would you rather he drip water all over the floor?" Alex sighed, but she heard him move toward the kitchen sink. All the while keeping the light shining on Puddin's waterlogged form.

"Poor baby, he's trembling." She reached out her hand, letting the scared animal sniff her fingers. "You're okay now. I think he's been living in your garden. He showed up on the terrace the other morning and has been keeping me company since."

"You mean you've been encouraging him?"

Don't tell her, she broke another rule. Taking the towel Alex draped over her shoulder, she gently wrapped the stray up. The cat barely protested, an indication of how wet and miserable his state was. A low rumble sounded deep in his chest. "See, he's happier already," she said.

"Bully for him," Alex grumbled. "Now that he's happy, what are you going to do?"

"I—" Good question. She hadn't thought much further than rescuing the little guy. "Well, we can't very well put him back outdoors," she said.

"We can't?"

"Look outside. It's raining cats and dogs."

"Then he'll be right at home."

"Very funny. Why can't he stay the night in the house? He's not causing any trouble." She lifted Puddin' a little closer. The cat immediately curled into her, seeking warmth and attention. "See?"

Alex flashed the light at her. “He doesn’t belong here.”

His words pushed a button inside her. How many times had she heard that same disinterested tone? “Says who?”

“Says me, the owner of the house.”

Didn’t matter. She looked at Puddin’ who was flexing his front paws, oblivious to the debate around him, and felt frustrated anger swelling in her chest. Suddenly this wasn’t about keeping a cat dry; it was about being wanted. About having someone want you. “I’m not putting him outside in this weather. He’ll catch cold.”

“He’s a cat, not a child.”

“So what? He still has feelings. Don’t you?” Looking up, she found herself staring directly into the flashlight beam. “Surely you don’t hate the world so much you’d send a defenseless animal out to drown.”

She could hear his exasperation, and while she couldn’t see his face, she could picture the irritation clouding his expression. Okay, maybe that last remark crossed the line.

“The way I feel about the world, you’re lucky I don’t make both of you sleep in the rain.”

Kelsey was pretty sure he meant what he said. She clutched Puddin’ a little tighter.

Alex turned around, taking the light with him. As she blinked the spots from her eyes, she heard the sound of a door opening and for a wild second, she wondered if he planned on carrying out his threat. That is, until she heard him heading downstairs.

“Just make sure he’s gone by morning,” he grumbled. “And if he leaves any kind of thank-you present on my doorstep, I’m holding you responsible.”

A smile tugged the corner of her lips as she savored the moment of victory. A small victory, but a victory nonetheless. Maybe Alex Markoff wasn’t as hardhearted as he’d like the world to believe.

While she may have won this particular battle for Puddin’s rights, there were only so many times she could push her luck before Alex tossed her out, Stuart Lefkowitz’s threats be damned. By her count, she’d already pushed twice. Three times if she counted using the breach of contract threat as leverage. Therefore, Kelsey made a point of bringing Puddin’ to her room for the night, making sure the cat stayed out of Alex’s way.

“The less he sees of you, my friend, the better,” she told him. Puddin’, naturally, didn’t mind. He simply sprawled across her comforter and started bathing.

Next morning, she woke at the crack of dawn and deposited the now indignant Puddin’ on the doorstep before heading into town. The latest Grandma Rosie payment was due and she wanted to make sure the check went out registered mail. The storm had ended a few hours earlier, leaving only a few downed branches and puddles as evidence it existed. Pulling onto the main road, she saw a power truck restringing the line and was surprised at the small stab of disappointment. Surely she didn’t want to spend another night in the dark with Alex, with its odd mixture of intimacy and mystery. Did she?

She pulled onto Main Street, grateful the early hour meant an abundance of parking. Stockbridge was one of those sleepy towns that exploded in summer. Once a Gilded Age playground, the area had reinvented itself as an arts center featuring everything from symphony orchestras to offbeat art galleries. City dwellers flocked to the region, eager to soak up the pastoral atmosphere even as they disturbed it. For the residents, she imagined the crowds were a double-edged sword, simultaneously welcome and disdained.

Except for Alex. He simply disdained.

A sign on the post office window told her she had another fifteen minutes so she made her way down the street to the Leafy Bean. Farley’s grocery store captured the area’s atmosphere in one eclectic building. Part grocery, part café, part gourmet haven, the place featured everything from imported almond oil to homemade pastries served with a healthy dose of local color. And, as Kelsey discovered when picking up her grocery order, the store boasted an amazing selection of brewed coffee.

A brass bell announced her arrival. Farley was behind the counter, a large green apron covering his burly frame. His gloves and wrists were covered with flour.

"Morning, Farley," she greeted him, getting a grunt in return. "Some storm last night, huh? Nuttingwood lost power."

"Whaddya expect, up there in the middle of nowhere."

Alone, where no one could find him. "That's what Mr. Markoff likes about the place. It's private."

"Private like a hermit," Farley muttered back.

*The Hermit of Nuttingwood.* The moniker fit. It was sad and enigmatic. Now that she knew his story, or part of it, she couldn't blame him for wanting a little privacy, although retiring to the side of a mountain for five years still seemed a bit extreme. After all, she knew as well as anyone that life was seldom fair. The letter tucked in her satchel proved that. People used other people all the time. You learned to adapt.

Not to mention keep your distance. Mind your own business. Don't get too attached and think too far into the future. For people who didn't have the luxury of hiding on a mountainside, those rules were the key to survival. She knew because she'd been following them since she was four years old.

Except for this week. What was it about Alex Markoff that made her forget the rules?

"Better get your coffee while you can," Farley said, coming around to pour himself a cup as well. "Once the tourists wake up, they'll clean the place out."

She took it as a supreme compliment that he didn't lump her in with that group. "Isn't business a good thing?"

"Pain in the neck is what it is," Farley replied. "Always looking for some fancy flavor or asking if my beans are 'fair trade'. Says right there on the sign clear as day. Can't they read?"

Kelsey smiled over the rim of her coffee. "Guess not."

The older man was about to add more when the doorbell jingled. A group of two men and three women, clearly tourists, entered. The men wore pastel island shirts and khaki shorts—an outfit that was nearly uniform among visitors—while the women wore various forms of linen. All of them wore some kind of hat—either straw or baseball—perched on their heads.

"Do you have cappuccinos?" one of the women asked as they approached the counter.

"Everything we've got is on the counter," Farley replied, shooting Kelsey a look as if to say "see what I mean?"

"Who needs lattes, just give me a straight shot of joe," one of the men said. He was tall and athletic looking with sandy brown hair. Smiling at Kelsey, he added, "Too bad you can't hook up an intravenous line."

"Then how would you add sugar?" Kelsey asked.

"Who cares as long as it's going straight into my veins." The stranger grinned, then after a pause, pointed a finger at her.

"Nels Bïrdgarten's gallery showing, right? I was trying to think where we met. You look familiar."

If she had a nickel for every time a stranger tried that come-on, she wouldn't have to worry about paying off her debt. "Maybe our paths crossed somewhere in the city," she suggested.

"Could be. Or it was a cheap excuse to introduce myself. Tom Forbes."

At least he admitted the line was cheesy. Kelsey shook the hand he offered and introduced herself.

"So you're from New York," he continued. "Come to the Berkshires often?"

"First time. I'm here for the summer for a work assignment. You?"

"Every summer since I was eight. My parents have a place on the lake. Not a bad locale if you don't mind quiet."

You don't know quiet, Kelsey thought to herself. "I don't. Besides, you can't beat the coffee."

"Not New York standards, but it'll do, I suppose." Over at the register, Farley coughed. Oblivious, Tom raised the cup to his lips.

"Tom!" the female ringleader called over. "We're heading to the arts and crafts store."

"You go ahead, Moira. I'm going to finish my coffee, unless—" he flashed a bright smile "—I can talk you into breakfast at the Inn."

Kelsey chewed her lower lip. She should head back to Nuttingwood. On the other hand, it felt good to have someone want her company for a change. What she wouldn't give to have Alex toss even a hint of a smile in her direction.

She reached for a plastic to-go lid. "Why not?" she said, smiling back. "Breakfast sounds nice."

She got back to Nuttingwood far later than planned. Tom turned out to be pleasant company: charming, talkative, entertaining. A tad pompous but nice enough. He described himself as a social gadfly, doing a little bit of everything. "You know," he'd said when she asked, "a freelance project here, a blog article there."

In other words, he was rich enough that he didn't need to work.

When they parted company, he insisted on taking her cell phone number and made no bones about wanting to see her again. Had she been in New York, maybe she'd consider the offer, but here, under the circumstances, she wasn't so sure.

And her reluctance had nothing to do with her antisocial boss, she insisted to herself. Even if she did spend a good portion of the meal wondering what sharing breakfast with Alex would be like.

True to form, Alex was nowhere to be found when she returned, but Puddin' was. Someone had left the garden door unlatched and the cat had ensconced himself quite comfortably on her desk chair.

"And I thought I was pushing my luck," she said. "You know that nine lives thing is a myth, right?"

Puddin' rolled onto his back, exposing his belly.

"Easy for you to say. You're not the one with a negative checking balance." She'd made an extra large payment this month. It drained her account, leaving her barely enough to cover expenses. And Grandma Rosie's debt still loomed as mountainous as ever.

So while Puddin' might be willing to risk Alex's wrath, Kelsey wasn't. She needed this job.

"Sorry, pal, but I used up my defiance last night." Since Puddin' didn't care to cooperate by moving on his own, she gathered him in her arms. "Now," she said, walking outside and setting him gently on the stone terrace, "why don't you go find a nice bush to sleep under before the boss sees you."

"Too late." Alex appeared out of nowhere, brandishing a walking stick.

How on earth did he manage to sneak up on her like that? It was like he really was some kind of ghost. He glowered at Puddin', who appeared unimpressed.

"That thing's still here, I see."

"Good morning to you too," she replied. In addition to his specter-like approach, he managed to look uncommonly good this morning. Those khaki shorts and hiking shirt suited him way more than Tom. Probably, she stole a glance at his toned calves, because he actually hiked. "And this 'thing' has a name. Puddin'."

"You named a stray cat?"

"Even strays deserve an identity." She knelt down to scratch Puddin's head. "Everyone wants to know they matter a little bit."

"As long as you don't mislead them or make them think they mean more than they do."

"Because they might get too comfortable."

"Or burned."

Were they still talking about the cat? No longer sure, Kelsey fell silent, letting the sound of Puddin's purring fill the void.

"Where did you go this morning?"

"Are you keeping tabs on me?"

"I saw you drive away."

Kelsey wasn't sure if she should resent or be flattered by the close attention. "I had some errands to run in town," she replied.

"Errands."

"Yes." She did know she resented the skeptical way he repeated the word. "You know, post office, grocery store … Farley had fresh baked apricot turnovers. I brought back some if you're interested."

Alex appeared to be only half listening, too busy was he rubbing the back of his neck. His eyes were half-closed, and he twisted his head back and forth like it needed loosening.

"Stiff neck?" Kelsey asked.

Naturally he gave her a suspicious look. "Why do you ask?"

"You're rubbing your neck same as you were last night. I made the assumption."

"You shouldn't make assumptions."

"And you shouldn't rub your neck so hard if you don't want people to make them."

Her comment earned a grimace. "I have a headache. Nothing I can't manage."

"Are you sure?" Upon closer inspection, she could see dark circles under his eyes and that his normally ruddy skin had a slight pallor. The sight kicked her maternal instincts into gear. Without realizing, she reached out to feel his forehead. His skin was cool and smooth. Touching it made the pads of her fingers tingle. "Did you take anything?"

"I'm fine." His expression remained guarded, but a note of tightness managed to creep into his voice. It was that note that drew her closer.

And closer. Until she'd practically eliminated the space between them. Her hand was still brushing his forehead. "You look pale," she murmured.

"You don't need to be concerned."

"I know I don't *have* to. Maybe I—"

The low sound of jazz music interrupted. Her phone. As expected, the moment the song rang out, Alex backed away leaving her hand hovering in the air. Balling her still tingling fingers into a fist, she reached into her skirt pocket with the other and fished out the phone.

"Frutti de Mar."

Between the static and the non sequitur, it took her a moment before she recognized the voice. "Tom?"

"Looks like I made as good an impression as I thought."

"We parted company less than an hour ago. Kind of hard not to remember."

She turned her back. Feeling Alex's probing stare burning holes in her spine, she tried her best to sound casual. "What can I do for you?"

"I told you. Frutti de Mar. Best gourmet seafood around, at least for this area. I find myself with a table for two and only one chair filled. I was hoping you could fill the other."

"You want to have dinner? Tonight?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw Alex walk away, their moment from before a distant memory.

If there had even been a moment. She could have imagined the whole thing. Just like last night's spark in the dark.

Or the way she was imagining the air cooling with his departure.

"Seven o'clock okay?"

"What?" Her attention had been on the man disappearing into the trees.

"For dinner. Does seven o'clock work for you?"

"I, uh …" It's not like she had any other plans. Tom was a nice guy. A pleasant guy who wanted to take her out to a fancy restaurant for dinner. But for some reason, she couldn't work up the interest.

Her eyes drifted back to the tree line. "Can I take a rain check?"

She'd give him credit. The rejection barely fazed him. "Sure. But so you know, I have every intention of holding you to it. We will have dinner one of these nights."

"If you say so." But she already knew she'd turn down the next invitation as well.

They talked for a few more minutes, basically polite chatter so her refusal didn't feel too unfriendly, before Kelsey went to work. For the next few hours she immersed herself in transcription until her brain couldn't take the dark subject matter any longer and screamed for a break. Then, unable to look at the screen another second, she saved her document, grabbed her coffee cup and headed into the great room.

What she saw stopped her in her tracks.

# CHAPTER FOUR

ALEX sat by the French doors.

Actually slumped was a better description. Kelsey rushed towards him.

"Are you all right?" she asked, already knowing the answer. Eyes closed, face paler than before, he was leaning forward with a hand cradling his forehead. His walking stick lay discarded by his feet. "It's your head, isn't it?"

"Go away," he groaned through motionless lips. "I'm fine."

"Liar. You look like you're ready to pass out." He looked up at her with glazed eyes, proving her point. "I'm calling your doctor. What's his name?"

"No doctor."

"Are you crazy? This could be a complication from your injury." Like a blood clot or something. Her insides froze at the thought he could be seriously hurt and she hadn't realized.

"It's not a complication, it's a migraine." His eyes closed again. "I just need to sit for a while. Regain my equilibrium."

From the looks of him, that might take a while. Kelsey didn't think a person could look more miserable if they tried. She remembered when Rochelle, her second foster mother, would get migraines. She'd kick all the kids outside for the day, no matter the weather. "And no making noise either," she'd order.

At her worst, Rochelle had never looked as miserable as Alex.

Remembering Rochelle made her think of something else. "Do you take anything? Some kind of prescription?"

Alex made a rumble deep in his throat. "Upstairs. In the bathroom." He continued speaking that stiffjawed manner, as if the mere act of talking hurt.

"Do you want me to help you upstairs," she asked, reaching for his elbow, "so you can take—"

"No!" He said the word forcefully, so much so he winced immediately, and dropped to a whisper. "I just need to sit. Alone. Please leave."

"And let you suffer? I don't think so. Where upstairs do you keep your prescription?"

"My bathroom medicine cabinet."

"Don't move. I'll be right back."

She dashed upstairs, making her way to the bedroom next to hers. Alex's room was exactly as she expected, chic and dark and very masculine. Rust, beige and brown, like a fall landscape. Magazines and books covered what looked like an expensive, king-size bed.

She walked into the bathroom, momentarily envious of the airy modern style. The scent of wood and clove hung in the air telling her Alex had been there recently. A plastic sleeve, presumably worn to keep his cast dry, hung from the shower rod and the mat in front of the shower stall was still damp. Suddenly she was assaulted by the image of Alex standing under the stream, water cascading down his body …

Blushing from the inappropriateness, she shoved the image away. Now was not the time to start some kind of weird, useless fantasy. She found the prescription bottle in the medicine cabinet. Grabbing it and a glass of water, she headed back downstairs.

Alex hadn't moved. If he hadn't shifted uncomfortably when she walked back into the room, she'd have thought him asleep. "Probably a little late for this to kill the pain completely, but it might help a little. Hold out your hand."

He grumbled, but did what she asked.

Kelsey smiled at her victory. "Now, how about you lie down? Do you think you can make it to the sofa?"

"I've got a headache—I'm not paralyzed."

Good to see the headache didn't spoil his charming demeanor. She watched as he eased himself into an upright position. Body bent, shoulders and head stiff, he shuffled across the floor like an arthritic old man. It was all she could do not to wrap her arm around his waist and help him. In fact, if she wasn't certain he'd bite her head off, she would have.

Instead, she followed quietly while he made his way across the room and eased himself onto the sofa.

"Are you sure you don't want to go to your room? You'd be more comfortable in a bed."

"Too many stairs," he mumbled. "I'll be fine here."

The couch was too small and too pillow-laden to accommodate his lanky frame, so he'd ended up with one leg propped on the floor. His cast rested on his chest, while his good arm lay slung across his eyes. The helplessness of his position tugged at her heartstrings.

"You can leave now," he said.

She could. But she didn't. Drawing closer, Kelsey noticed his skin was covered with gooseflesh. In spite of the fact the afternoon sun poured through the windows heating the room, he was shivering.

"You're still here," he said in a low voice.

"And you're cold," she replied back. "Would you like a blanket?"

"No."

God, he was stubborn. What was he going to do, lie there and shiver? Did he know how pathetic that looked? She looked around for something she could use as a blanket. A dozen pillows and no throw. Remembering the extra blanket in her room, she ran up and got that, tucking it gently around his torso, being careful not to jar him too much.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

"Because you're shivering."

"I mean, why are you sticking around?"

"Oh, that." Why indeed? Truth be told, she couldn't explain, other than it hurt her to see him suffering. "What can I say? I have a rescue complex."

"In other words, I'm another cat."

The medicine was starting to kick in. Still, even thick with sleep, there was no mistaking the resignation in his voice as if he didn't believe someone could sincerely care. It made Kelsey think of the other night, when he was watching the rain.

Her heart ached a little more.

"Do you need anything else?" she asked. "Water? A phone?"

"I'll be fine. You can leave with a clear conscience."

"Thanks for the permission."

He didn't respond. Sleep had claimed him. Kelsey watched as his breathing slowly evened out.

Two hours later, she was still sitting in the living room, watching. She'd told herself she was only going to stay a few extra minutes. To make sure he was truly asleep before heading up to her room. But the longer she sat, the more she couldn't tear herself away. Couldn't stop studying his face. The way his brow smoothed in sleep or how his lips parted ever so slightly. Nestled among the pillows, he had a gentle serenity about him that, when awake, he hid from the world.

Unable to help herself, she tucked the blanket around him a little tighter. He smelled of clove and woods and sleep, and she had the overwhelming urge to lean closer and bury herself in the scent. Her fingers longed to stroke his cheek. Dear Lord, he was beautiful. She couldn't deny her attraction if she tried. But beneath the attraction, she sensed something else. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. The sensation stirred inside her, faintly, tentatively, afraid to make itself fully known. She was afraid too. Because she wasn't sure if she wanted the sensation to go away.

Alex slept through the rest of the afternoon and into the evening. At some point, Kelsey considered waking him so he could go to his room, but she didn't. He looked too exhausted to disturb. Plus downstairs she could keep an eye on him.

At least that's what she told herself.

She'd been joking about the rescue complex. Truth was, she didn't know where this maternal streak of hers was coming from. As a kid, she sometimes helped the younger children with homework and stuff, but that was expected in a large household. But since moving out on her own, she'd focused solely on taking care of herself. Clearly something about Nuttingwood brought out her nesting instinct.

Something or *someone?*

After dinner, which she was pretty sure didn't come close to Frutti de Mar standards, she returned to the great room to find Alex beginning to stir. "Hey," she said softly, as his eyelids fluttered open, "you're awake." And feeling better, judging by the clarity in his gaze.

"You're still here," he greeted back, his voice still a little thick. "I thought you had dinner plans."

That's right, he walked away before the end of her and Tom's conversation. "I took a rain check."

"Oh."

His response had a queer-sounding note she couldn't pinpoint. "Good thing too," she told him.

"Why's that?"

Slowly, he shifted himself into a sitting position. With his hair matted on one side and a crease on his cheek, he looked perfectly and adorably tussled. Kelsey's stomach twittered. "Well, for one thing, you'd have woken to a dark and empty house."

"News flash—I've done that for years. Goes hand in hand with the hermit thing."

The medicine still had a hold; his words were slurred and punchier than normal. Try as she might, Kelsey couldn't help a smile. "Funny, that's what Farley called you."

Sleepy cuteness turned sullen. "I'm sure they call me lots of things."

"What makes you think they talk about you much at all?"

"Try four hundred thousand, ninety-four search engine hits," he replied. "Or have you forgotten already?"

"No, I haven't forgotten," she snapped. When Alex sat up, the blanket she'd tucked over him slid toward the floor. Instinctively she picked it up. "But not everyone is as—"

"Nosy?"

"Curious," she shot back, "as I am." Her cheeks warmed remembering the whole exchange. Was he right? That once a victim of gossip, always a victim of gossip? She draped the blanket back over his legs. "Though if you ask me, moving up to a castle in the middle of nowhere, you're kind of inviting speculation."

"I'm here because I like my privacy," he replied in a clipped tone that said the conversation was over.

Kelsey noticed him rubbing his eyes. "Head still hurt?" She remembered Rochelle's migraines sometimes lasted for days, once getting so bad she ended up in the hospital on a morphine drip.

Alex grabbed the change of topic. "Some, but it's definitely better. The medicine helped. Along with the sleep. A few more hours and I should be fine."

Meaning she should take her cue and leave? "Are you heading upstairs?"

He shook his head, while at the same time closing his eyes and burrowing into the throw pillow. "Not yet. I'm comfortable right where I am."

"Very well then, I'll see you in the morning."

"Kelsey?"

He reached out and caught her wrist, an unnecessary gesture since she stopped as soon as he called out. "Yes?" she asked.

"Thank you."

That was it. Two words and nothing more, but Alex's expression was soft and sincere, and his eyes turned from metal to dove-gray, making the sentence sound like volumes. His grip stayed on her arm, simultaneously gentle yet firm. Kelsey could feel the pulse of each individual finger beating

against her skin. Their cadence echoed the heart in her chest. A slow honey-coated sensation began twisting deep inside her, and she smiled.

"You're welcome." Reluctantly, she slipped her wrist free and headed upstairs.

"Did I really expect anything to change?" she asked Puddin' the next morning. "I mean, so I helped him with a headache. Big deal." One second of gratitude hardly changed anything.

"It was just for that one moment—" her skin tingled, remembering how his fingers encircled her wrist "—I felt like we understood each other, you know? That we connected.

"I should have realized it was my imagination." For starters, she didn't make connections. Not that kind anyway. And second, this morning Alex was still the dark, aloof man he'd been since her arrival. Worse, if that was possible.

"The guy's been through the wringer, that's for sure," she said, hitting the save button. "I'd probably do the same thing if I'd been ripped apart like that. Makes you wonder what he'll do when this book comes out."

*If the book comes out.* Her gaze traveled back to the dwindling stack of yellow pads. This morning Mr. Lefkowitz sent an e-mail requesting a progress report which she was avoiding answering. With all the cross-outs and redirection, she'd transcribed maybe a third of the book. Certainly not a complete novel by any means. The editor wouldn't be happy.

"If Alex doesn't start producing soon, I'll be stuck here till Christmas," she said to Puddin'.

Did Alex even celebrate Christmas anymore? The image of a somber, undecorated Nuttingwood popped into her head, breaking her heart. Didn't seem right he should spend the holidays isolated and lonely.

"Will you listen to yourself?" she said aloud. "What do you care how Alex Markoff spends his holidays?" This was a perfect example of why she didn't do connections. Connections started you down the road toward foolish, elusive concepts like home and family and holidays …

And kindred spirits with stormy gray eyes.

"That's it. Time for a break." Her thoughts were getting way too out of control.

On the terrace, Puddin' stretched and started to get up. Grabbing her empty mug, Kelsey sent a mock glare at the feline through the open French doors. "Don't even think about coming inside while I'm getting coffee," she told him, knowing full well he wouldn't listen.

Coffee was the one area where she and Alex had an automatic accord. Apparently they were both caffeine addicts so by unspoken agreement the pot remained full and fresh all day. Usually Alex made the first pot, then midmorning it was her turn.

There was only one problem. Alex had put the coffee grinder on the top shelf. He had been leaving the machine on the counter, but today he must have forgotten. Too much on his mind, perhaps?

She set her mug on the counter, then dragged a chair from the table, making a mental note to remind him he promised to keep the machine within her arm's reach. Not everyone loomed over six feet.

"You're standing on my counter," Alex said from behind her.

"What the—"

She nearly dropped the grinder. Worse, she nearly knocked her cup off the edge.

"One of these days I'm going to buy you a bell," she grumbled.

"I didn't realize my comings and goings were so important to you."

"They are when you insist on scaring the bejesus out of me every time you show up."

Coffee grinder in hand, she hopped off the chair, bringing Alex closer than she expected. Cloves and wood and awkwardness packed the kitchen. For what felt like minutes, neither of them moved, their bodies and gazes stuck in place. Kelsey found herself suddenly painstakingly aware of the stubble on Alex's cheeks and the way his lips were dry but soft-looking. Eyes traveling upwards, she realized he was studying her too. Or so it appeared. His eyes had an expression she'd never seen before.

"I'm—I'm making fresh coffee," she finally managed to stammer. What was it about his proximity that made her brain short-circuit? "How's your head?"

His hand touched his temple as if remembering what she meant. She had the crazy urge to do the same. "Better. Nothing left but a dull ache."

"Have you had anything to eat? An empty stomach doesn't help."

He broke the moment, moving away. "Are you always this concerned about other people's welfare?" he asked, opening the fridge, "or just mine?"

"Are you always this suspicious of people's motives? Never mind. Pretend I didn't ask," she added as he glanced over his shoulder.

With the atmosphere less charged, she returned to the task at hand, carefully measuring the beans into the grinder. A flick of a button filled the kitchen with a loud whir.

"Clearly you have no idea how awful you looked yesterday," she continued over the noise.

"I've been having migraines my whole life. Last time I checked, I survived them all. Besides, I didn't ask you to stay."

"Silly me, putting your health first." She turned off the grinder. "Next time I'll leave you to suffer all by your lonesome."

"Thank you."

"You're wel—watch out!"

Everything happened in slow motion. Alex had moved to her section of the kitchen and was reaching up to retrieve a cup from the cabinet. As he turned toward her, the outer edge of his cast smacked her coffee mug. The faded floral cup wobbled back and forth, then tumbled over the edge. Kelsey reached out to catch it, but moved too late. With a crack, the mug hit the floor and separated into three large pieces.

"No!" Her stomach churning, Kelsey dropped to her knees. Not her mother's cup. She blinked, hoping when her eyes opened, the cup would somehow reassemble.

No such luck.

Alex's legs appeared at her side. "I didn't realize the cup was so close to the edge."

"It's ruined." She looked up. His face was too blurry for her to read his reaction.

But she could read his voice. "It's just a coffee cup."

*Just a coffee cup?* Of course, that's how he saw it. As just another old piece of kitchenware.

"I'm sure you can find a replacement—"

"How? Go back in time?" If she paused a second to think rationally, she'd realize Alex had no idea what the cup represented. How could he know that the last tangible piece of her childhood—her real childhood with her real mother—lay in pieces on his kitchen floor? Moisture burned her eyes. She was going to cry, and she didn't care.

"Don't you understand?" she snapped, swiping at her cheeks. Of course he didn't understand. Living up here as a hermit, not caring if anyone cared about him or not. Why would he understand losing something precious? "It can't be replaced. It's gone. Ruined." A tear escaped down her cheek. Angrily, she wiped it away. Dropping the pieces on the floor, she stormed from the room before she crashed completely.

"Kelsey!"

She ignored him. Nothing Alex could say would make a difference. All she could hear in her head were his words from before. "Just a cup, just a cup." They echoed with each step on the stairway.

Once inside the sanctuary of the guest room, she slammed shut the door, pressing her back against it. *Just a coffee cup.* Alex was right. What was a faded, chipped-up piece of stoneware anyway? So what if she'd carried the stupid thing from foster home to foster home? So what if …

The floodgates opened as everything hit her at once—her solitude, her past, her grandmother's crimes. Why didn't anyone want her? Was she that unlovable?

Out of answers, she sank to the ground and gave in to self-pity.

How long she stayed there crying, she wasn't sure. Thirty minutes. An hour. Eventually she stopped sniffling. What was done was done, she told herself. No amount of wallowing would change anything. There was nothing else to do but pick up the pieces and move on. She done so her entire life; she would do so again.

Swiping the moisture from her cheeks, she sniffed back the last tear and pushed herself to her feet.

The house was unusually quiet when she came down the next morning which, given its usual silence, said a lot. Perhaps yesterday's outburst scared Alex out of hibernation, and he was, at that moment, in town looking for men in white coats to carry her off. A fresh night's sleep made her realize how disproportionate her reaction must have looked to him. Of all her missteps, this might be the one that finally helped him get rid of her.

Puddin' was in his regular spot when she entered the office. She gave the napping cat a quick glance, sat at her desk, and while she waited for the computer to boot, drank coffee from a substitute mug, telling herself the change in flavor was all in her head. As usual, Alex's writing sucked her in, chasing away other thoughts. She welcomed the distraction, losing herself in today's words. It wasn't long before her absorption made her oblivious to anything but the story.

She didn't hear the door push open or the footsteps approach the desk. In fact, she didn't notice a thing until she heard a thump on the wood in front of her. Pulling herself out of her typist's trance, she looked toward the desk and blinked. There, in the middle of her papers, sat her coffee mug. Chipped and cracked, but whole again nonetheless.

"I doubt it'll hold liquid," Alex said. "But you can put it on a shelf or something."

She ran her finger along the rim, feeling the gaps where the pieces were unevenly glued together. If the thing looked like a battered piece of junk before, it looked like a pre-schooler's craft project now. A lump stuck in Kelsey's throat. Unable to trust herself with words, she settled for raising her gaze.

Alex's face was soft, reminding her of the day before. In the entranceway. "The cup means a lot to you."

Throat constricted, she nodded.

"I thought so. Consider it payback for the migraine."

"It was my mother's," Kelsey called out. She found her voice as he reached the door. Though he hadn't asked for an explanation, she wanted to give one. Wanted to explain why she'd reacted so poorly. "She died when I was four. This mug is the only thing I have that belonged to her."

Kelsey imagined him wondering what kind of family left a child nothing but a battered coffee cup, but he said nothing. He simply nodded in a way that told her he understood. At least the gratitude filling her insides made her feel like he understood. "Then good thing I had glue."

"Yes," she said, smiling up at him. "A very good thing."

# CHAPTER FIVE

*STOP being a coward.*

Kelsey stood outside Alex's bedroom door for five minutes with her hand poised to knock. Much as she didn't want to, she couldn't put off this conversation any longer. Mr. Lefkowitz wanted a status report. After days of dodging his e-mail requests, she got a phone call. A very testy phone call. "I hope the reason I haven't heard from you is because you're too busy typing," he said as soon as she answered. That had been the high point of the conversation.

She knocked.

Alex's answer came back deep and distracted. "Yeah?"

Pushing open the door, she poked her head into the room and saw him seated at his desk near the window. Dozens of crumpled yellow balls littered the floor around his feet. He was working. A good sign. "Sorry to bother you."

"But you're going to anyway. What is it?"

"Mr. Lefkowitz called. He wants to know how the book was coming."

Alex didn't look up. "I'm sure you filled him in on all the details."

"Actually I told him you were making great progress and were almost finished."

That got his attention. He turned sideways to look at her. "Did you now? And why would you say something like that?"

Kelsey shrugged. Why indeed? She wasn't quite sure except as soon as she heard Mr. Lefkowitz's irritated voice, she felt the overwhelming urge to take Alex's side. True or not.

"Are you making progress?"

"Depends on how you define progress."

"Moving forward." Having pages to type. The last notebook was nearly transcribed and still no new ones had appeared. Which wouldn't be so terrible, if he was busy editing what had already been written, but as far as she could tell that wasn't happening either.

"Interesting definition." Tearing the top sheet from the pad, he added it to the collection of yellow wads on the floor.

Kelsey watched it arc and drop. "So I lied to Stuart."

"If you say so. Why would you tell him something you didn't know for certain?"

"I thought I was doing you a favor."

"A favor?"

"By keeping your editor off your back." His suspicious tone made her bristle. "You sound like I have some ulterior motive."

He shrugged. "Maybe you do."

Jeez. And she thought relations between them had thawed over the last couple days. Ever since he'd repaired her coffee mug, albeit poorly, she'd felt closer. So much for that illusion. "What could I possibly be after?"

"You tell me."

"Oh, brother." Shooting him a dramatic eye roll, she leaned against the door frame. "You caught me. Getting your medicine, lying to Stuart—they're part of a grand ploy to soften you up. Really, you should hear yourself sometimes."

"Do you blame me?"

The truth? Not really. But they needed to get past this issue. "You're not the first person to get burned by the people around him," she replied in a gentler voice.

"What's that mean?"

"Nothing." She wasn't about to get into a contest over who had suffered a bigger betrayal. "Look, I thought I was helping. Next time I'll tell Mr. Lefkowitz the truth. That better?"

"Better would be not telling Stuart anything at all."

"I have to tell him something."

"Why?"

"Because it's my job, and he needs to know." She let out a long, calming breath. "Not everyone is out to get you, Alex, or get something from you."

"Could have fooled me."

"Wow." She understood his bitterness; she really did. But why couldn't he see she wasn't the enemy? Hadn't they made any headway over the past few weeks? "I'm beginning to see why he's paying me extra to work here."

Not wanting to wait to hear his response, which wasn't going to be something she wanted to hear anyway, she went to her room. Sometimes she wanted to kick Alex Markoff for his obstinacy. All she wanted was to be his friend.

*Really, that's what you want? His friendship?*

Yes, that was all. Sure, she was attracted to Alex. Incredibly attracted. But hit and run affairs weren't really her style. Affairs weren't her style, period. And neither was acting on her attraction—assuming Alex was remotely interested. Which, seeing as how he trusted no one, wasn't likely.

Screw it. She peeled off her cotton tank top and threw it on the bed. If he didn't care about his manuscript getting done, why should she?

A knock sounded on her door. "Kelsey?"

What now? Grabbing her tank, she thrust it back on and opened the door. "What?"

A pair of very contrite eyes met hers, killing every ounce of her earlier acrimony. "Is Stuart really paying you extra to work here?"

"If I say yes, will you use it against me?"

His mouth had come dangerously close to curving into a smile. "I'll try not to." He looked around at the bare bones bedroom, checking out the setting like it was the first time he'd been there. "You're very neat," he said all of a sudden.

"Makes packing easier." As well as moving on.

Alex nodded, and in her mind she wondered if he wasn't agreeing with both points.

The coffee mug he had repaired sat crookedly on top of the bureau. He walked over and picked it up. "Not my best repair job in the world, that's for sure. I notice you don't use it, so I was right—it doesn't hold liquid."

"I didn't try." She'd been afraid to find out lest it fall apart again. After seeing it smashed to bits, she wasn't about to take any chances. Even now she was fighting the urge to slip the mug from Alex's grasp. "Why are you here? Did you knock on my door merely to confirm my pay rate?"

"Ah, so he is paying extra." Setting down the mug, he continued his tour, stopping at the window. His broad shoulders filled the frame. "How much?"

The appropriate answer would be "none of your business," but the truth came out without second thought. "Triple."

"Triple." He took a moment to let the answer sink in. "Says it all, doesn't it. That why you took the job? For the money?"

"Yes."

The look crossing his face as he turned was a mixture of surprise and admiration. "I appreciate the honesty. Though I have to say, you don't strike me as the mercenary type." He cocked his head to study her better. "What's your story, Kelsey Albertelli?"

Now was the time to tell him to bug off, same as he did whenever she asked a personal question. "It's complicated."

"How so?"

"Now who's prying into whose private business?"

"Point taken," he replied with a nod. Sincerity marked every feature and Kelsey realized, with more than a little admiration, that he wouldn't press her for more. He was respecting her privacy.

Her chest swelled. She wasn't used to respect. The notion that someone would honor her privacy made her feel … well, special, she supposed. She stared into Alex's eyes, feeling herself being drawn in.

The two of them were a lot alike, weren't they? Both keeping the world at arm's length, rather than offering or asking more than necessary. Her chest went from being tight to feeling warm and full. The feeling grew bigger and started inching its way outward, down her limbs and to her toes. A nebulous longing to be closer gripped her. Suddenly sharing her story didn't sound all that horrible.

"My grandmother, she—"

"No need to explain." He held up a palm. "You're right. I was prying."

Kelsey smiled. Again she appreciated the respect, despite the fact it restored their distance to arm's length.

"And thank you," he continued, "for covering with Stuart. I'm not used to—well, it's been a long time since someone did me a favor for no reason."

"I understand."

"I know." His long assessing look reached deep inside her, stirring emotions she couldn't identify.

And wasn't really sure she wanted to.

A week later, Alex had a doctor's appointment to check out his arm. Since he couldn't drive his stick shift, Kelsey drew chauffeur duties. Normally she wouldn't mind, but she'd failed to factor in what it would be like sharing an enclosed space with Alex. His long frame mere inches from hers. His body heat mingling with hers the entire trip, filling the air with his scent. His hand rested on the armrest, close enough to her that when she touched the gearshift, the underside of her forearm would brush across his knuckles. Thank goodness, she chose to take her car rather than Alex's sports car. Driving a standard, with the distraction of continually touching him—no matter how lightly—would result in them ending up in a ditch somewhere.

Since silence only exacerbated the situation, she forced conversation. Fortunately, Alex was in a talkative mood. At least, talkative for him. After exhausting the weather and road conditions, she decided to take a risk and ask something she'd been dying to know since her arrival. "May I ask you a personal question?"

Of course, the moment she said *personal,* wariness crept into his expression. "What do you want to know?"

"How did you break your arm?"

"Oh, that." Relief returned to his face. "Stuart didn't tell you?"

She shook her head. "He only said you broke it."

"Well, score one for discretion." He sounded surprised. "I tripped over a root and fell while walking in the woods."

"You were by yourself?" Obviously. "How did you get help?"

"I broke my arm, not my leg. I made my way back to the house and called an ambulance."

Somehow Kelsey doubted the scenario went quite as smoothly as he described it. Navigating a wooded path with a broken arm … Poor man must have been in tremendous pain. "And you had no one to help you."

"You're assuming I wanted help."

She thought of the other day. "No, I'm assuming you could have used help."

"Didn't we cover the problems with assumption the other afternoon?"

"Was this before or after you were lying incapacitated on the sofa?"

"I would debate your use of the word *incapacitated,* but in this case I got myself to the hospital just fine."

And came home by himself to an empty house. She knew Alex chose to live that way, but the idea of Alex alone and in pain made her sad. “What about painkillers and medication and all that?”

“I managed.”

“I’m sure you did.” Managed. It sounded so … lacking. Like he was getting by with the bare minimum.

*You should know, Kelsey.* Manage had been the story of her life. Manage and adapt.

Why then, did *manage* suddenly feel inadequate?

“So is that when you started writing longhand?” she asked, pulling herself back to the conversation.

“No, I’ve always written by pencil. Started when I was teaching and would scribble notes between—”

“You were a teacher?” She nearly hit the brakes.

“High school English.”

“Unbelievable.” She shook her head.

“What, you can’t picture me as a teacher?”

“In a word, no.” She couldn’t picture him interacting with people, let alone teaching teenagers.

“It didn’t last long. I was far more interested in my own work than *A Tale of Two Cities.* But writing longhand stuck. You never know when some detail or passage will spring to mind.” His mouth came dangerously close to curving into a smile. At least Kelsey thought she caught a glimmer before it disappeared. “I once wrote an entire short story during a dinner party.”

“Really?” Now that was an Alex she could picture, hiding out from the crowd, lost in his work. “I finished your last notebook yesterday,” she told him.

“Is that a not so subtle way of reminding me Stuart wants his book?”

“Yup.” She smiled.

“Spoken like a true babysitter.”

“Speaking of not-so-subtle reminders,” she murmured.

“Hey.” A hand touched her forearm. A rush ran up her arm and she had to squeeze the steering wheel to keep it from traveling further. “As babysitters go, you aren’t that bad. Stuart could have foisted far worse on me.”

“Wow.” A sideways glance showed Alex’s expression was sincere. “A girl could get a big head from that kind of sweet talk.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Meanwhile the memory of his touch remained on her skin, a warm, firm pressure far more reassuring than it should be.

She cleared her throat, hoping to clear away the sensation too. “Since we’ve established that I’m the official whip cracker, will I be seeing more pages soon?”

Alex turned his face to the scenery. “Eventually.”

There was little enthusiasm to his answer. In fact, if she didn’t know better she’d say he actually sounded sad. Now she wanted to give him the reassuring touch.

Something inside made her refrain, settling instead for a smile and a change of subject. “Just planning my schedule. If I don’t have anything to type, the more time Puddin’ and I have to work on our tans.”

“Puddin’, huh?” There was a satisfying note of relief in his voice. “That mangy cat of yours still around?”

“Whoa, he’s not my cat. Puddin’ is strictly a free agent.”

“Says the woman who named him.”

“I told you, everyone deserves an identity. The world has enough faceless orphans.”

“Orphan?”

"Stray, orphan. Same thing, right?" Kelsey brushed her hair behind her ear. She could feel Alex studying her, wondering about the slip. He wouldn't ask though. He'd leave it up to her to explain or not, respecting her right to privacy. It was one of the traits she loved—

Check that. Admired. It was one of the traits she admired about him.

Love was nowhere in the picture.

Kelsey thought forty-five minutes flipping through gossip and consumer magazines would clear the queer thoughts from her head, but no such luck. The second Alex appeared in the doctor's reception area doorway, her pulse quickened. He was gorgeous no matter the setting, but the contrast between the institutional décor and his dark virility was awe-inspiring. She wasn't the only one to notice either. The nurses and receptionist all perked up upon his appearance too. Kelsey wasn't sure, but she swore one woman actually licked her lower lip.

Oblivious, Alex's eyes sought her out. "Dr. Cohen got tied up with another patient so I had to wait," he said in the flat, semi-annoyed voice she'd come to expect.

"No harm, no foul," she replied. "Gave me time to catch upon the latest gossip. Oh, and how to evaluate flat-screen TVs," she added quickly when she saw the disdain crop into his expression. "Are you ready to go?"

"Don't forget your appointment card," the receptionist called out.

Kelsey bit back her smile at Alex's rolled eyes. The receptionist was painstakingly scheduling his appointment, leaning forward a little more than necessary in her opinion. The woman shot her a jealous glare when she joined Alex at the check-in desk. Again, she controlled her urge to grin. Did her hermit have any idea how many heads he was turning?

Whoa. Her hermit? Where did that come from?

"Did Dr. Cohen say when the cast would come off?" she asked, shaking off the thought.

"End of summer. Same answer he gave me last time. I'm beginning to think he's incapable of giving an exact date."

"Probably because you'd hold him to it."

"That's a bad thing?"

"It is if your arm hasn't healed by then. Or maybe Dr. Cohen simply wants to string you along because he enjoys your company."

Alex made a noise deep in his throat and took the appointment card. This time Kelsey not only smiled, she giggled. Lately she'd been finding Alex's grumpy demeanor more amusing. Guess because he'd slipped enough times for her to know he actually had a heart underneath.

"While we're out, are there any other errands you need to run?" she asked while they made their way through the parking lot. "Bank? Library? Groceries? We were low on coffee this morning."

*We?* Again with the possessiveness. What was with her today?

Thankfully Alex either didn't notice or care about the slip. "Coffee would be good. Milk too. And maybe," he paused, as if unsure about his next words, "maybe some of those apricot turnovers."

Was that pink coloring his cheeks? Kelsey couldn't believe it. Dear Lord, he couldn't look cuter if he tried. Insides fluttering, Kelsey grinned. "All right then, we'll stop at Farley's."

# CHAPTER SIX

SHE hadn't given it much thought but being lunchtime, the Leafy Bean was filled with customers. To a person, heads turned the second the doorbell announced their arrival. Turning not, she was certain, because they recognized the famous author, but because Alex commanded attention.

"Would you rather come back another time?" she asked.

"I thought you said we needed coffee."

"We do, but I forgot about the noontime crowd."

"I like privacy, Kelsey, I'm not sociophobic."

"I only meant …"

"I know what you meant, and," the corner of his mouth quirked ever so slightly, "I appreciate the gesture."

It felt like he'd verbally squeezed her hand. A blush warmed her cheeks. She gave him a half smile of her own. "You must really want those apricot turnovers."

"Hey, never underestimate the lure of coffee and pastry. Where does Farley stock the beans?"

"There's an entire display at the back of the store. You grab a couple bags and I'll get your baked goods."

He gave her a nod and headed off while she made her way to the crowded bakery counter, trying to shake off the weird domestic sensation surrounding the task.

"It's only coffee and turnovers," she reminded herself.

Farley was running around behind the counter, grumpy as ever as he accommodated orders and questions. When he saw Kelsey, he gave her a quick wave followed by a dramatic roll of his eyes when a customer asked if he used organic flour. Kelsey waved back. "Popular today," she commented.

"Big fund-raiser's kicking off at the Music Center this weekend. Everyone and his second cousin's in for it. And every one of 'em's got special orders," he added, slapping the cutting board with a loud, overly enthusiastic whack of his knife.

Kelsey shared a smile with the young girl at the counter. "I'll take a half-dozen turnovers," she said.

"Kelsey, is that you?"

She was taking her bag from the clerk when she spotted Tom Forbes coming towards her, charming smile firmly in place. "What a pleasant coincidence. I was going to call you this afternoon."

"You were?"

"I'm here for the concert this weekend. I thought maybe you'd like to join me." The smile got a little wider. "You still owe me that rain check."

"Right, rain check." She thought that had been a way to save face, she didn't really think he would follow up.

"So what do you say? Think you can get away?"

"Well, I …"

"Please don't say no." He flashed her an exaggerated pout. "My poor heart won't take a second rejection."

Kelsey laughed. Somehow she doubted that was the case. "Are you trying to make me feel guilty?"

"Whatever it takes," he replied. "Do we have a date?"

One dinner wouldn't hurt, right?

She was about to say yes when suddenly she caught sight of Alex at the other end of store. Dark and serious, he was studying a bag of coffee beans like it contained the secret to life incarnate. A small piece of her insides tumbled.

Dragging her attention back to Tom, she gave him a polite smile. “Flattering as the guilt trip is, I’m going to have to pass.”

“Even if it means breaking my heart?”

“Fraid so.”

Tom shook his head, and shook off the rejection like she expected he would. “Guess I’ll simply have to drown my sorrows alone.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s going to happen,” she replied with a smile.

A shiver of awareness passed over her. Looking up, she saw that Alex was looking in their direction. “My boss looks ready to go,” she said. “I better catch up.”

Tom glanced over his shoulder. “Alex Markoff? That’s your boss?”

“Yes.” His instant recognition took her aback.

“You said you worked for a writer, but I had no idea….” Tom drifted off in thought for a second, before adding, “I thought he was holed up somewhere like a hermit.”

“Never underestimate the lure of coffee and turnovers.”

“He doesn’t look happy that we’re talking. In fact,” Tom said, pursing his lips, “if I didn’t know better, I’d say he looked jealous.”

As if. More likely it was his suspicious nature coming home to roost. “Impatient,” Kelsey answered. “I told you, he’s ready to go.”

“Is he the reason you can’t have dinner?”

Although asked with a smile, the question had a pointedness to it that she didn’t like. “I have to go,” she said. “Enjoy your concert.”

Alex was lost in thought on the drive back to Nuttingwood. So lost, Kelsey wanted to squirm from the uncomfortable silence. If it weren’t so Alex-like, she’d think Tom was right and he was jealous.

The silence was deafening. A hundred and eighty degrees from the rest of their day. Do not chatter, she chided. Just go with the silence.

“Turnovers smell good. The clerk said they were fresh out of the oven and still warm. Maybe I should have gotten more than a half-dozen.”

So much for going with the silence.

“That guy from the store a friend of yours?” Alex asked.

“Acquaintance.” She could hear the suspicion in his voice.

“Your rain check from the other night.”

“Yes. He wanted to know if I would attend the concert at the Music Center with him.”

They reached the large pine tree. Kelsey turned to the right, pleased she was finally recognizing landmarks.

Too bad she didn’t feel as confident regarding the man beside her. “Would that be a problem?” she asked.

“What you do on your spare time is your business,” he replied with a shrug.

Her insides tumbled again, only this time the fall was heavy and hard. Of course he didn’t care. Why would he? Tom’s comment simply put thoughts in her head. “Thank you for respecting my privacy.”

“No problem.”

They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Kelsey assumed Alex would disappear as soon as she put the car into Park. To her surprise, he didn’t. He stayed in the passenger seat, his long fingers tracing the hem on his hiking shorts. “You going straight to work?” he asked suddenly.

What work? She still hadn’t gotten any new notebooks. “Why? You need me to do something?”

"No." Some kind of conflict seemed to play across his profile, as if he were having an internal war. She figured he was debating asking a favor. Never in a million years did she expect his next question. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

"A walk?" she repeated. With him?

"It's a hot day. The woods are cooler and you're right about the turnovers smelling good and since it is lunchtime."

"Wait." She had to make sure she wasn't hearing things. "You want me to go on a picnic with you?"

"I thought I might eat the turnovers in a cooler location and figured, since you did all the driving today, I'd ask you to join me. But," he shrugged, "if you've got other things to do, or get ready for …" He reached across his body for the door handle.

"No, I'll go," Kelsey said, stopping him. "Give me a minute to change first though." She flicked the edge of her peasant skirt. "This isn't the best outfit for walking in the woods."

As he looked her up and down, she told herself the flutter of excitement in her stomach was unnecessary. "Fine. I'll meet you at the edge of the garden in five minutes."

With more enthusiasm than she should have, Kelsey raced upstairs to her room. Since she preferred skirts and sundresses, she didn't have a lot of clothes suitable for walking in the woods. She settled for a pair of royal blue track shorts and a bright pink tank top. Her hair, she fished in a ponytail through an old baseball cap she wore when running. Hardly the most stylish of outfits.

Then again, like Alex said, it was simply turnovers in a cooler location. He wouldn't even notice. That is, if he was still waiting. She'd taken longer than five minutes. Snagging two bottles of water on her way through the kitchen, she headed toward the garden.

Alex was leaning against the garden shed when she arrived, looking like a slinged sentry. He looked so comfortable standing there she had to, yet again, quell her insides. Especially when she imagined his eyes scanning her appearance.

"Lead the way," she said with a smile. "I'm starving."

While she'd known there was a path leading up the mountain, she didn't anticipate how picturesque or how well traveled the path would be. Pine tree branches formed a canopy that shielded them from the sun while brown needles formed a soft carpet beneath their feet. Occasionally light would break through a gap and a white shaft would beam down on the ferns and underbrush that littered the ground. It was an otherworld of coolness, lush and green.

Kelsey had never seen anything like it, not Central Park, not even the view from her window, though that came close. No wonder Alex disappeared into here every morning.

"Is this where you fell?" She was afraid to speak too loud lest she disturb the tranquility.

Alex pointed to a bend in the path. "Up there. I was watching a red squirrel jumping around the branches and caught the toe of my shoe."

The idea of somber Alex Markoff distracted by a squirrel made Kelsey giggle, earning her a questioning look. "Do you think the squirrel realized he nearly derailed the year's biggest literary comeback?"

"Is that what Stuart's calling it?"

"Among other things. A lot of people have been waiting for a follow-up to *Chase the Moon."*

"Good old *Chase the Moon."* Reaching up with his good arm, he pulled back a pine branch blocking their path. "My prize-winning albatross."

Kelsey ducked beneath the needles. "I'm sure there are a lot of writers in the world who wouldn't mind bearing that kind of burden."

"They can be my guest." Alex let go of the branch. It whipped into place with a loud thwap. "Sometimes I wish I'd never written the book. Life would be a lot easier, that's for sure."

The last sentence wasn't directed at her, but to the trees. Kelsey thought of the notepads that weren't appearing on her desk and of the dark, pain-riddled pages that had. "You don't want to write this book, do you?"

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