

PAMELA
TOTH

HER SISTER'S
SECRET LIFE



Cherish

Pamela Toth

Her Sister's Secret Life

Аннотация

Seeing the woman who'd left him without a backward glance was painful enough for Steve Lindstrom—but Lily Mayfield hadn't returned to their hometown alone. Just the sight of the heartbreakingly lovely single mother and her son awoke bittersweet yearning for what might have been. Walking away from the only man she'd ever loved had left Lily with enough regrets for two lifetimes. Now, after years of harboring her unhappy secret, the time had come to tell the truth. If Steve could give her a second chance, she'd have every intention of showing him where her heart had always been...with him.

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Her Sister's Secret Life

Pamela Toth



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To everyone who waits for a loved one to return home safely, from a date, from a trip or from a war.
To my husband, Frank. Priceless.

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Chapter One

Steve Lindstrom liked getting to the job site before the rest of his crew. This first, solitary half hour gave him a chance to look around without someone bugging him with a question about building specs or material deliveries. He could savor the progress of something born of his vision, his investment and—in large part—by his own sweat.

He stood by his truck, sipping his coffee as he watched the streaky pink-and-gold sunrise fade quickly above the jagged ridge of the Cascade Mountains far to the east. Construction was always a gamble, but a hot market and his own growing reputation had enabled him to buy this piece of choice view property. On it rose a sprawling wooden skeleton that was slowly becoming his fanciest house yet, as well as his largest financial gamble to date. Nearby stood another house, nearly as grand and almost completed.

Since Steve had first begun working as a framer during summer vacations, the work had always given him a sense of accomplishment that was nearly as sweet as throwing a football into his receiver's waiting hands or acing a tough exam. Now he was the boss. The control, the decisions and the headaches connected with Lindstrom Construction were his responsibility.

From Admiralty Inlet, where sailboats dotted the choppy water, came a light breeze scented with salt and sunshine. Above

a nearby stand of arrow-straight Douglas fir trees, an eagle soared. Its white head was easy to identify against the blue sky, its wingspan a sight to behold. For the moment, a sense of peace settled on the clearing with its ribbon of road and two new buildings.

Setting aside his empty mug, Steve grabbed a clipboard and scowled at his notes on material shipments and subcontractors' schedules. Juggling two projects was taking its toll. One late delivery, one installation problem, and his time frame would collapse like a row of dominoes.

Since he'd heard that Lily Mayfield was back in town, his concentration had been shot to hell when he needed it the most. The possibility of running into her nagged him like the dull throb of a bad tooth. Over the years, his memories of Lily had begun to fade, but the possibility of turning a corner and running into her again, of drowning in her sky blue eyes and getting drunk on her scent, made him think of little else.

He kicked aside a fist-sized rock so that no one would trip on it, wishing he had an excuse to swing a sledgehammer and demolish something instead of making nice with his designer and soothing his nervous banker's nerves.

As Steve checked out the three-car garage that had been framed in yesterday, the sound of a truck engine cut into his concentration. He looked up to see his friend Wade Garrett's pickup coming down the long dirt driveway. Slowly, it bounced over the ruts to avoid raising dust. Wade had been bunking at

Steve's house, but he hadn't found his way home last night.

Steve watched Wade park his rig and walk up the driveway. He was as tall as Steve, but leaner in his T-shirt and faded jeans. A baseball cap covered his cropped black hair. The grin on his angular face was that of a man who had recently rolled out of someone else's bed after a night of memorable sex.

Steve felt a twinge of envy. When was the last time he'd had terrific sex—or any sex at all? He could barely remember.

“I didn't expect you to be here today,” Steve said as Wade joined him.

Wade worked for him part-time, but lately he'd been talking about returning to his former profession of investment broker.

“I'm not working today, old buddy. I'm celebrating.” Wade slapped Steve's back enthusiastically. “If it wasn't so damned early, I'd buy you a beer.”

Steve eyed his scruffy-jawed friend warily. “You just win the lottery or get laid by a high-priced hooker?” he drawled.

In the few months he'd known Wade, Steve couldn't remember ever seeing him so fired up. In fact, he'd been moping around since a recent breakup with his girlfriend, Pauline Mayfield, who just happened to be Lily's older sister.

“Hey, pal, what I'm high on is better than money,” Wade replied with a laugh. “Way better.”

“You've hooked up with someone,” Steve guessed, propping his shoulder against a corner post. “Who's the lucky lady?”

Wade shook his head. “It's not what you think, but I did want

you to be the first to hear my news.”

“The guys will be here any minute now and you look ready to bust a gut, so you’d better spill,” Steve replied. “What’s up with you?”

Wade’s cheeks were flushed and he practically twitched with excitement. “Pauline and I are back together.” With a wild whoop that startled a crow off a nearby branch, he tossed his cap high into the air. “We’re getting married.”

“Congratulations, man!” Steve exclaimed, happy for them both. He grasped Wade’s outstretched hand and pulled him into a bear hug, slapping his back before releasing him.

No wonder Wade was acting like a crazy man. He had been nuts about Pauline since he first rented the apartment above her converted carriage house.

It would have been selfish of Steve to wish Wade could have fallen for someone else, just because of Steve and Lily’s history. Just because she was back in town with a twelve-year-old son he knew nothing about, a boy who everyone said looked just like Steve.

“My God,” he exclaimed after he’d let go of Wade, “no wonder you’re grinning like a damned idiot. You’re marrying up in the world, that’s for sure.”

“True enough,” Wade agreed as the throaty whine of a motorcycle signaled the imminent arrival of Steve’s crew.

“Time for me to get to work,” he told Wade, “but I’ll buy the first round at the Crab Pot tonight. Bring Pauline so I can tell her

what a poor choice she's made."

"I'll see what she says," Wade replied, sounding married already.

Carlos roared up on his Harley, followed by George in his faded red pickup.

"I've got a favor to ask," Wade told Steve as the men began unloading their gear. "Would you stand up with me at the wedding? It'll be toward the end of September and we're keeping it small."

Wade cleared his throat. "I know it's a lot to ask—" he added. So he'd noticed Steve's reaction to Lily's voice on the answering machine when she had left a message for Wade. Steve had been caught off guard, that was all, but Wade had obviously drawn his own conclusion.

Here's the opportunity to prove she's just a bad memory, whispered a voice in Steve's head. Now that Pauline and Lily had patched up their differences, his ex-girlfriend would no doubt be part of her sister's wedding and her life, but he wasn't about to let Lily's presence scare him away.

"Don't talk stupid," Steve said gruffly, ignoring the sudden tightness in his gut. "I'm honored that you asked me, okay?"

Wade's frown cleared. "Thanks, man."

"Hey, Frisco, you working today?" Carlos shouted, using the nickname he'd given Wade. "That means I can goof off, right, boss?"

"Wrong," Steve replied, slapping Wade's back.

“He’s got better things to do than pound nails.” He turned back to his friend. “Nice work. You’ve landed yourself a fantastic woman.”

The rest of it, Steve wouldn’t let it be a problem. He would deal. Lily was part of his past and that’s where she was going to stay.

Lily Mayfield and her sister stood on the sidewalk in front of Pauline’s cross-stitch shop, Uncommon Threads. It took up part of the ground floor of an old building in the historic business district in Crescent Cove.

“I still can’t get over how much everything grew while I was gone.” Lily looked down the busy street at the flower baskets and banners hanging from the ornate antique light poles. Half of the storefronts had been empty thirteen years ago.

“You’ve been home long enough to adjust to the changes,” Pauline replied as she studied the display in her front window. “Did you think everything was going to stay frozen in time until you decided to come back?”

“No, of course not.” Lily glanced at her watch. It was nearly time to pick up her son, Jordan, from his friend’s house.

“What do you think?” Pauline frowned at the window display. “Too busy? Too cutesy?”

Lily considered the plain clay pots that were arranged in front of a white picket fence. A round hoop framing an embroidered flower picture was stuck into each pot like a lollypop.

“It’s clever,” she decided. “If I wasn’t all thumbs, I’d be tempted to buy a kit myself.”

Pauline didn’t appear convinced as she fiddled with a strand of streaky blond hair that was several shades darker than Lily’s. “I hope you’re right,” she murmured. “With all the tour buses coming from Seattle and down from Canada, I’m really hoping to attract some new customers.”

“I’ve got to get Jordan,” Lily told her. “Don’t forget to make some time in your schedule to plan your wedding. September will be here before we know it.” On this bright July day, fall was hard to imagine.

Pauline gave a helpless shrug. “I thought a small backyard ceremony would be simple. If it rains, we’ll move it inside.”

Lily wanted to roll her eyes at her sister’s naiveté. The living room of the old Victorian was huge, but the furnishings were getting shabby.

“Simple and yet elegant,” Lily said with a grin. “Don’t worry. I’ll help you.” Planning Pauline’s wedding together was something Lily wouldn’t have dreamed possible two months ago, but now she was looking forward to it.

“Congratulations again, Paulie.” She gave her sister a hug. “Wade’s a lucky man.”

Pauline shook her head. “I’m the lucky one. Thanks for the ride. He’s picking me up, so I’ll see you at home.”

With a flip of her hand, Lily hurried around her car, which was parked at the curb, and slid behind the wheel. In her opinion,

they were both lucky. Wade was a great guy, but Pauline was a wonderful sister.

Lily thanked the stars that she was also a forgiving one. Taking advantage of a break in the line of slow-moving traffic, Lily pulled out. She glanced back in time to see that Pauline was still standing on the sidewalk. She waved at someone coming up the street.

As the big white pickup drew parallel to Lily's car, she looked up curiously. The driver's face was partially hidden by sunglasses and a baseball cap topped his shaggy, sun-bleached hair, but his smile was instantly recognizable.

Even after all this time.

For an instant, his gaze seemed to meet hers despite his dark lenses. Her hands choked the wheel and she looked away, right at the black lettering on the door of his truck.

Lindstrom Construction.

She jerked her gaze back upward for another look, but she was too late. He had driven on by as though nothing earthshaking had just occurred.

Lily had known that she couldn't live in Crescent Cove for long without running into Steve. Despite the new growth and the tourists, this was still basically the same small town where they had grown up together. She'd thought she was prepared for the first sight of him, the boy who'd captured her heart, but she'd been fooling herself. Shame and regret for the way she had treated him still rose up to choke her whenever she thought about

facing him again.

And face him she would need to do someday soon. She owed him that much, but she just wasn't ready.

Had he recognized her? She was probably nothing more to him now than an unpleasant memory. The idea made her sad as she stared at his departing truck in her rearview mirror.

"Lily, watch out!" Pauline cried out in warning.

Lily jerked her attention back to where it belonged just in time to see that the car in front of her had stopped to parallel park. Lily jammed on her brakes, barely avoiding a collision.

"Damn it," she exclaimed, hoping Steve hadn't glanced back and noticed what she had nearly done.

"Are you okay?" Pauline gazed at Lily through the open passenger window. "Did you see...?"

"I'm fine!" Lily snapped, irritation and embarrassment sharpening her tone. It wasn't her sister's fault that she had acted like an idiot.

The driver in front of her changed his mind about the parking spot, giving her an escape. With a sheepish smile and a quick wave, Lily drove away with a sigh of relief. If she was lucky, Pauline would have forgotten about the incident by the time she got home.

Too bad Lily couldn't do the same. Feeling like the same coward she had been at eighteen, she went to pick up the boy who made everything she had gone through worthwhile—and the reason she owed Steve an explanation.

Good God Almighty! When Steve had noticed the attractive blonde and seen her shocked expression, the jolt of recognition nearly spun his head around. Two blocks down Harbor Avenue he turned abruptly into a parking lot, scaring two pedestrians who were about to step in front of his truck. Before he could hit the log barrier that prevented vehicles from driving into the bay, he braked hard and killed the engine.

A brief glimpse hadn't been enough to indicate how much thirteen years had changed Lily. Had time tarnished her beauty, stamping her face with the same coldness that had chilled her uncaring heart? Furious with himself for giving two hoots, he slapped the steering wheel with the flat of his hand and swore again, earning himself a startled glance from an approaching fisherman. The man veered away as he walked by Steve, making him feel even more stupid.

He glanced at the cell phone next to him on the seat, tempted to call Wade, but he wasn't going to let one little Lily sighting turn him into a hysterical wimp. He'd do the manly thing, suck it up and go straight to the Crab Pot, a local tavern. After he'd downed a few brewskies to take off the edge, he would ask Wade to drive him home.

The only hitch in his plan was that it was too damned early to execute it. When he'd spotted Lily, he'd been on his way to the builders' supply store. Resigned to postponing his meltdown, he fired up the truck and swung around so he could pull back out

onto the street. As he did so, a redhead in a yellow convertible honked and waved. Her smile was a welcome reminder that the world was full of friendly women. There was no point in wasting time—or beer—over one old fish who had gotten away.

Just as he reached his destination with his equilibrium restored, he got a call from Carlos at the job site.

Now what? Steve thought as he answered his cell. “Yeah,” he replied brusquely.

“Hey, boss, can you bring us some burgers from the Shack?” Carlos asked. “We’re starving out here.”

Steve climbed out of his truck, phone at his ear. “Depends,” he drawled, nodding at a guy coming out the front door. “You got the kitchen framed in yet?”

Lily drove slowly through the old part of town on the bluff above the waterfront, listening to her son’s chatter as she headed to the family home on Cedar Street where they had been staying with Pauline.

“Cory’s got an Xbox,” Jordan exclaimed. He’d hardly taken a breath since Lily had picked him up at the house of one of his new friends. “We played his new skateboarding game.”

Their move to Crescent Cove had been dicey at first because he’d been homesick for L.A. and he was still grieving for their longtime friend and Lily’s guardian angel, Francis Yost. After growing up on Francis’s spacious estate, Jordan had made it clear to Lily that he wanted nothing to do with Crescent Cove.

Lucky for her, Pauline's fiancé had stepped in to help, spending time with Jordan until he met a few boys his own age. Wade's friendship with Lily had initially given Pauline the wrong impression when she'd walked in on him with Lily in his arms, comforting her after an argument with her son. Fortunately that had been resolved and they had all moved on.

"So you had a good time?" she asked Jordan now. "You remembered to thank Cory's mother for putting up with you?"

He lifted his ball cap to run one hand through his thick blond hair. It needed a trim, she noted silently.

"Aw, Mom," he drawled on a long-suffering sigh, "I always remember that stuff. You've drilled it into me since I was born." He repositioned the cap and tugged down the bill. "I bet you even used to tell me when I was growing in your belly."

She turned onto Cedar, a narrow, tree-lined street of historical Victorian homes in various stages of disrepair. "It's my mission in life to tame you and turn you into a cultured individual," she teased.

Instead of making a comeback, he turned to look at her intently. "Is it true that my real dad lives around here?" he asked. "And that I look just like him?"

The question shouldn't have come as so much of a surprise. Did she think kids didn't overhear things?

"Where did you hear that?" she asked, shamelessly stalling for time as she turned into their driveway and drove past the house that had been named Mayfield Manor by one of her ancestors.

Braking in front of the detached garage, she was startled to see that her hand was shaking when she reached for the gearshift.

She glanced at Jordan to see if he had noticed.

“Ryan MacPherson was teasing me when he came over to Cory’s, but then Cory’s mom sent him home.”

“Good for Michelle,” Lily replied fervently. Back in the day, Lily had been chosen over Ryan’s mother for the lead in a high school play. The former Heather Rolfe had probably never forgiven Lily. It sounded as though Heather was still a witch.

Lily’s first impulse was to go over and confront the other mother for gossiping in front of Ryan, but she couldn’t very well blame Heather for saying aloud what half the town was at least thinking.

“Is it true?” Jordan persisted. “Does my dad live here in this stupid town?”

Lily was saved from answering by the sight of Wade approaching her car.

“We’ll have to talk later,” she told Jordan as Wade leaned down and grinned at them through the open passenger window.

“Okay with you if I kidnap your kid for a couple of hours?” he asked Lily. “Hey, sport! Want to go shoot some hoops?”

Lord, yes, she thought gratefully. “He’s got to eat first,” she replied.

“I ate at Cory’s.” Jordan got out of the car and returned Wade’s high five. “Can I go? Please, Mom?”

Obviously he didn’t mind postponing the subject of his

paternity. Silently, Lily vowed to deal with it soon, just as soon as she figured out how much to tell him before she went and talked to Steve.

What a mess.

She emerged behind the wheel, realizing that both males were still waiting for her to say something. “Sure, you can go. Take some water with you and don’t forget to actually drink it.”

Wade rested a paternal hand on Jordan’s bony shoulder, winking at her over the boy’s head. “I’ll take good care of him, ma’am.”

“I know you will,” she replied, returning his smile. “Thanks.”

“I gotta change shoes,” Jordan said. “Be right back.”

“Is everything okay?” Wade asked Lily as soon as her son was out of earshot. “Did I interrupt something?”

Next to her sister, Wade was probably the last person Lily dared confide in. Regretfully, she shook her head. “Nothing that won’t wait, and it’s good for him to spend time with you.”

“Makes a nice break for me, too,” Wade replied as he followed her through the gate in the picket fence enclosing Pauline’s backyard.

“A respite from wedding plans?” Lily teased over her shoulder. Even a perfect male—Pauline’s assessment of her fiancé—would have a breaking point when it came to deciding the myriad details necessary for even a simple wedding: guests, invitations, clothing, music, food. The list went on.

He flashed his heart-stopping grin. “Please, please don’t tell

Pauline. She's already having so much fun with this."

"I won't breathe a word," Lily promised, crossing her heart solemnly before she went up the back steps. Before she could open the screen door that Jordan had let slam behind him, Wade reached up and touched her arm.

"Lily, wait a second."

She figured that he must need help with something to do with the nuptials, but his expression was one of concern.

"I wanted you to know that I've asked Steve to be my best man," he said quietly. "Given the history between you two, I hope it's not going to be a problem for you, but he's become a good friend since I came here."

Everyone knew that Steve had been her steady boyfriend for two years before she had suddenly left town. Wade was aware that she hadn't told Steve her plans or spoken to him since.

Deliberately, she plastered on a wide smile. "I'm fine with it," she exclaimed, seeing his shoulders slump in relief. "He and I are ancient history."

She was surprised when Wade's frown didn't lessen. "Have you talked to him yet?" he probed.

She lifted her brows, feigning ignorance. "About what?"

Wade's glance flicked toward the house and then back to her face. "I know it's none of my business—" he began.

"But I appreciate your concern," Lily cut in as she opened the screen door. She didn't want Jordan to overhear them. "I'm parched," she continued. "Want some lemonade?"

Wade reached for a sports bag hanging on a hook in the laundry room. “No, thanks, but if you want to talk...” His voice trailed off when Jordan pounded down the staircase.

The knot in Lily’s stomach tightened when he appeared in the kitchen seconds later wearing his old Lakers tank top and baggy shorts. More than anything, she wanted to protect him from ever being hurt or disappointed, even though she knew it was an unrealistic goal.

“Hey, buddy, grab me one, too,” Wade said as Jordan opened the door to the refrigerator and removed a bottled water.

Tucking his basketball under his arm, he complied. “See ya, Mom,” he said as he walked past Lily.

She was stunned to realize how much he’d shot up in the past few months. Before she knew it, he would be all grown-up. Without a shred of remorse, she refused to think of the years his father had already missed.

Before Wade followed Jordan out the door, he gave her a hard look. “The boy deserves the truth.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Lily whispered after Wade had closed the door behind him.

Could Jordan handle the truth? Could any of them?

Chapter Two

“I thought we were going to the park,” Jordan said, frowning out the window of Wade’s truck as they went down an unfamiliar street.

Would Jordan ever learn his way around this stupid burg? Back in L.A., he knew which buses to take to all the important places when his mom didn’t have time to drive him: the skateboard park, the closest mall, the library and a couple of his buddies’ houses. Crescent Cove didn’t even have buses except for the Greyhound that stopped out on the highway once a day. When he’d asked his mom if he could ride the ferry to Seattle by himself, she’d practically freaked.

The street they were on was narrow and curvy with patches all over the pavement. Tree branches dipped low, making Jordan feel as though they were going down a green tunnel.

“I have to run an errand first,” Wade replied. “A friend of mine forgot some papers he needs, so we’re going to drop them off at his building site.”

Wade stared straight ahead, looking like he wasn’t happy about it.

“Are you and your friend in a fight?” Jordan asked. “You look mad.”

He didn’t like it when people argued. Francis, his and Mom’s friend back in California, always spoke softly except when he got

mad at his partner, Augustine, for charging too many clothes on his credit card. Then Jordan could hear their angry voices clear over in the guest house where he and his mom lived.

Had lived until Francis dropped dead right in his fancy kitchen. After that, Mom said she guessed it was time to come home, he reminded himself. Except this totally lame and boring town would never feel like home to Jordan. It didn't have a skateboard park or a cinema, except for one tiny old theater that showed art films, whatever they were.

His question must have surprised Wade, because when he finally turned his head, his dark brows had climbed up his forehead, making wrinkles.

“No, I'm not fighting with him,” Wade replied. “Why would you think that? He's my buddy, same as you.”

Jordan shrugged, feeling self-conscious. He would never understand grown-ups, not even when he became one himself. “Wow. He's building a house?” he asked. “Can I see it?”

Wade grinned and Jordan was able to relax again.

“He's building two houses, but one is nearly done. We'll have to wear hard hats around the other one,” Wade cautioned. “I'll even show you the framing I did.”

“Cool,” Jordan exclaimed eagerly, even though he wasn't sure what framing had to do with anything. Back in California, he had driven by houses that were only partly finished, of course, but not to stop and walk through them. This might be nearly as much fun as shooting hoops.

“Steve’s a neat guy,” Wade added in the same casual tone that adults used when they said the shot won’t hurt or your new school will be great. “You’ll like him.”

Jordan wasn’t fooled for a minute. He’d heard about Steve from Cory’s pal, Ryan, when he’d said that Steve was Jordan’s real dad. Sure, Jordan was curious about him, but he wasn’t sure that he was ready to actually meet the guy face-to-face. What if Steve acted disappointed?

Suddenly he wished he’d worn his new Sonics shirt instead of his old tank top, and that he hadn’t argued when Mom said he needed a haircut.

“Maybe you could go later, after you dropped me off at Aunt Pauline’s,” he suggested uncertainly as he wet the tip of his finger and rubbed a chocolate stain on the leg of his shorts.

“What’s the matter?” Wade asked as he slowed to make another turn. The houses were farther apart here, with pastures and stables mixed in between them. There were more fir trees, too. “A minute ago you were excited about it.”

“Nothing,” Jordan denied automatically. “I just remembered that Mom wants me home early today.” He hated the way his voice squeaked, but he felt as though someone had hold of his neck, choking off his air.

Wade reached over and patted his knee. “It’s okay,” he said, his calm tone reminding Jordan of the way Francis spoke when he wanted him to try something new, like jumping off the diving board into the pool, which turned out to be pretty fun, or tasting

sushi for the first time. Gross.

“Just say hi, all right? It won’t be anything heavy, I promise.” Wade grinned. “Besides, aren’t you a little bit curious?”

Jordan looked at him sharply, but he was watching the road ahead where a truck pulling a huge boat was going really slow. It was almost as though he and Jordan were talking in a secret code, discussing one thing while they really meant something else.

Again Jordan shrugged, even though Wade wasn’t watching him. “I guess.” He wondered if his mom knew where they were going. Maybe she had even asked Wade to do it, so she wouldn’t have to deal with it herself.

If Steve really was Jordan’s dad, wouldn’t she have said something a long time ago? Jordan had never heard of Steve before they moved to Crescent Cove.

He and his mom talked about all kinds of stuff, like not telling people that they didn’t actually live in the big house with Francis or letting on that Augustine wasn’t really the gardener. She had even told Jordan that the reason they had never visited Aunt Paulie before now was because Mom had done something that had really, really hurt her feelings. Something that made Mom cry when she talked about it. She said she had just gotten something in her eye, but he knew better. He was really curious because he couldn’t imagine her ever doing anything that bad, but he’d been afraid to ask and make her cry again.

When they had first come here, Aunt Paulie hadn’t acted happy to see them at all, even though she tried to pretend. She

had been nice to Jordan right from the beginning, though, and he thought it would be okay. Then something happened to make her mad at his mom again. Wade moved out of the apartment over the garage and went to stay with Steve for a while, but that was way before Ryan had blabbed about him being Jordan's biological father.

Now Aunt Paulie was engaged to Wade and everybody was going nuts about their wedding. Wade had even teased Jordan about walking up the aisle with a basket of rose petals, as if all the powers in the universe could make him do anything that embarrassing.

Jordan was really, really relieved that Wade had been joking. It was bad enough that Mom insisted that he would have to wear a tie.

Jordan avoided thinking about mushy stuff as much as he could, but sometimes he noticed Wade put his arm around Aunt Paulie and once he had seen them kissing, just like actors in a steamy music video. Except they were way too old for that.

Gross!

Finally Wade turned the truck onto a gravel road that seemed to go straight into the woods. Jordan looked around curiously, but he didn't see any buildings.

"Are there any wild animals around here?" he asked as they bumped over the deep ruts. Maybe they would see a bear or a mountain lion! He had seen a herd of elk once on the way to Sequim.

“There are probably lots of rabbits and a few deer,” Wade replied, disappointing him. “One day I spotted a coyote when I was eating my lunch, but they’re pretty skittish. And there’s an eagle’s nest in the top of an old dead tree called a spar. You can see it from the site.”

Just then, the woods got thinner and Jordan could see the houses. One of them looked normal, but the other reminded him of a skeleton made out of wood. On the roof, a guy wearing a hard hat was on his hands and knees. He was making a bang, bang, bang noise.

“Wow.” Jordan sat up straighter as he nearly forgot about the man he was going to meet. “They’re right on the beach.” A kid who lived here could have a tree house in the woods and a little sailboat for the water, too. There was even room for a horse if you fenced some of the flat, open part.

Wade pulled up next to two other trucks and a black Harley. Nearby stood a skinny little building made of plastic. Harold’s Honey Buckets was printed on the door with a phone number under it. He knew it was like a portable bathroom, so the workers didn’t have to run into the woods to take a leak.

“These places are going to be terrific when Steve’s done,” Wade said as he cut the engine. “His houses are pretty fancy.”

Steve. Jordan swallowed hard at the reminder, but then a funny thing happened. His nervousness was replaced by curiosity. Ben, his best friend back home, had the same brown eyes and hooked nose as his dad. This would be Jordan’s chance to find out if he

looked like Steve. Even though his blond hair and blue eyes were a lot like his mom's, the idea that he could also resemble someone he'd never met was kind of weird.

Wade didn't immediately open his door. Instead he released his seat belt and shifted so that he was facing Jordan.

"You okay?" Wade asked.

Jordan had an idea of what the question really meant, even though he didn't have the nerve to ask right out if Wade knew whether or not Steve was his father. "You aren't going to say anything to him about, about—" he stammered, not ready to discuss it yet.

Wade shook his head. "Don't worry." He reached behind the seat and pulled out a file folder. "The only thing we're going to talk about today is houses, I promise."

Jordan felt a wave of relief, like after he had cleared a jump on his board without falling. It was pretty cool how Wade could almost read what he was thinking without him having to explain.

"Okay," Jordan agreed, unlocking his belt. "I'm ready."

"Looks like we won't need you to do the rough-in until the end of next week." As Steve talked to the electrician on his cell phone, he paced back and forth across the floor of the future kitchen. He barely heard the steady thunk of Carlos's nail gun overhead or the whine of George's saw.

"I'll get back to you on Monday," Steve promised the electrician as he noticed Wade's truck coming slowly down the

drive. "Thanks."

After Steve had ended the call and stuffed the phone into his shirt pocket, he jotted a reminder to himself on his clipboard. The next two items on his punch list, calls to the cable outfit and the roofing supplier, could wait until after he took a break.

Steve flipped up the page and added another item to the second list he was writing: plan bachelor party. He didn't see Wade as the type who wanted a stripper, so he figured that something including bars and booze would work.

As soon as he saw the boy get out of Wade's truck with the sun shining down on his blond hair like some kind of spotlight, Steve froze. He knew instantly who the kid must be, so what the hell was Wade thinking to bring him here? Didn't Steve have enough to deal with?

Wade rested one hand on the boy's shoulder as they approached and gestured with the folder in his other hand at a red-tailed hawk making lazy circles overhead as it hunted for field mice in the tall grass.

As the boy made some comment, Steve studied him reluctantly. Lily's child. Except for the hair, sun-streaked like Steve's own, he looked like any other kid. He was a boy-man with gangly limbs and a self-conscious gait, stumbling awkwardly over a tuft of grass. His grin was destined to send pre-adolescent girls into fits of giggles. He was still too far away for Steve to be able to tell his eye color, but the resemblance to his mother was unmistakable.

Steve's chest ached as he watched the living reminder of his old fantasy, raising a family with Lily. From what he'd heard, she hadn't succeeded in finding the stardom she'd craved. Instead, she had ended up working as some kind of bookkeeper. Not very glamorous for someone with her talent and her dreams.

Not for the first time, he wondered just how she had managed, alone and pregnant at eighteen in such a tough town, no city for angels who were sweet and naive as she. Her beauty had been dazzling even then, so had she found an angel of her own to watch over her? To share her bed and pave her way?

The image of her as arm candy for some old fart made Steve's stomach pitch. Deliberately he blocked out the silent questions. She had made her choice—and forced it on him, as well. Except for the boy who gazed up at him now, the whole sad story was ancient history.

“Hey, amigo,” Carlos called down to Wade from his perch on the roof truss.

“Howdy, slackers.” Wade's reply included George in his greeting. “Brought you some papers,” he told Steve, holding out the folder.

“Oh?” Steve had no idea what it was about, unless it had something to do with Wade's wedding. Surely Steve wouldn't be expected to help with any decisions. He knew nothing about flowers or hymns. Reluctantly he stepped down to the ground and took the folder.

“This is my buddy, Jordan,” Wade added in a breezy tone.

“Lily’s boy,” he tacked on unnecessarily, if Steve was too dumb to see the resemblance—especially when he looked into eyes of the same blue that he saw in the mirror each morning.

Jordan’s face turned pink. “Pleased to meet you,” he mumbled, sticking out his hand despite his obvious embarrassment.

Steve pulled off his work glove and did the same. “Uh, you, too.” He felt as awkward as a hooker in church as Jordan stuck his hands into the pockets of his baggy shorts and looked around.

“We’re on our way to shoot some hoops,” Wade drawled, breaking the silence. “Jordan wanted to see what a half-finished house looks like.”

“Is that so?” Steve’s doubt must have been evident, because Jordan’s gaze darted from him to Wade.

Hell, none of this was the boy’s fault. The least Steve could do was be civil.

“Well, come on, then,” he said, ignoring Wade and the churning in his own gut. “I might as well give you the ten-cent tour. Ever use a nail gun?”

When Lily heard the familiar rumble of Wade’s truck coming down the driveway alongside the big old house that she and Pauline had inherited from their parents, she slid a casserole dish into the oven and set the timer.

After “the guys” had left earlier, she had tried to search the Internet for office space to lease, but she had been unable to

concentrate. Finally, she had given up in self-disgust. Cooking normally relaxed her, but not today. The entire time she'd been chopping onions, browning ground beef and boiling egg noodles, her thoughts had bounced back and forth between Pauline's recipe and her own brief glimpse of her first love.

Seeing Steve drive by had opened a floodgate of questions—uppermost being, what kind of man had he become and did he carry a grudge against her for the way she had left him?

When Jordan came into the kitchen moments later with Wade on his heels, she was in the act of transferring cooled brownies from a baking pan into a plastic container.

“Oh, wow!” Jordan exclaimed, reaching for one without bothering with a greeting. “My favorite.”

Lily snatched them out of his reach. “You can say hello first, and then go wash your hands,” she scolded.

Wade inhaled deeply. “But, Ma, we're starving.”

“No exceptions,” she said with a firm stare.

“Might as well do it,” Jordan muttered, crossing to the sink. “She never gives in.”

Lily set two of the fragrant brownies on paper napkins as they took turns with the kitchen towel. “Just one each so you don't spoil your appetites for dinner.”

Lily and Jordan had been staying here with Pauline, but on the first of the month they'd be moving into a small furnished house that Lily had sublet. Even though this grand old Victorian had more than enough room for all of them plus Pauline's boarder,

Lily felt as though she and Jordan were imposing on the engaged couple's privacy. Besides, Lily wanted to be settled into a place of their own before school began in the fall and she opened her accounting office.

"Mom, guess where we went?" Jordan asked around a mouthful of brownie.

She glanced from him to Wade, who suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I thought you were going to shoot baskets at the park."

"We did," Wade replied, concentrating on his snack.

"I saw two houses being built right near the beach," Jordan continued. "Maybe we can buy one of them when it's done instead of renting that other little house."

"Oh?" Realization dawned on Lily, as clear and cold as a winter sunrise. She stared hard at Wade.

"I doubt we'll be able to afford a house on the water," she muttered, a ball of anger and disbelief forming in her chest.

She wanted to yell at Wade, to demand to know what the hell gave him the right to make decisions for her son. To reach over and shake him by his broad shoulders until his shiny white teeth snapped together.

"How did you happen to go there?" she asked, keeping her voice calm with an effort that singed her throat.

Wade stared at the knife in her hand, the one she'd used to cut the brownies. "Jordan was curious," he said. "I didn't think it would be a big deal."

“Ah.” Carefully Lily laid down the knife. “Jordan, since you’re through eating, why don’t you go up and change before dinner?” she suggested. “Maybe you should take a shower, too.”

“Are you going to yell at Wade?” he asked.

“No,” she replied truthfully, “I’m not going to yell at him.” Maybe rip out his tongue with her bare hands or beat him silly with the wooden spoon she had used earlier.

Jordan hesitated. “Steve showed me how he and his crew were framing each room,” he said defiantly, “and he told me I could come back again to see how it’s going.” His Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed. “As long as it’s okay with you.”

Lily felt like a pot that might boil over at any second. “You and I will talk later,” she told him firmly. “For now, please go ahead and do what I asked.”

He ducked his head and left the room. “I liked him,” he grumbled as he went through the dining room on his way to the foyer.

“What were you thinking?” Lily demanded of Wade through clenched teeth as soon as she heard her son’s tread on the stairs. “You had no right to take him out there without discussing it with me first!”

Wade wiped his mouth with the napkin. “Good brownie,” he murmured. “The kid’s not deaf,” he went on when she didn’t respond. “He’s heard all the speculation about Steve, so he was curious, that’s all.”

“And Jordan told you that?” she demanded, hurt that her own

son would choose to confide in Wade instead of her.

A muscle jumped in Wade's cheek. "Well, not exactly, but I knew it had to bother him."

Wade's expression was defensive as he leaned his hip against the counter and folded his arms across his chest. "It was just a casual meeting, not a parent-child reunion," he added. "Nobody's making any big deal out of it except you."

When Lily continued to glare, he straightened again and threw his hands into the air in a gesture of defeat. "Look, if I overstepped, I'm sorry, okay?"

As an apology, it wasn't much, but she knew he genuinely cared about Jordan. Biting her lip, she stared out the kitchen window at the hollyhocks blooming along the fence in her sister's carefully tended backyard.

"I know you thought you were doing the right thing," she said softly, "and I appreciate that, but you don't understand the situation. It's complicated."

Wade rubbed a hand over his short black hair, his frustration obvious. The last thing she wanted was to alienate him, but neither could she allow her son to be hurt.

"No more visits to Steve without my permission," she added firmly. "Agreed?"

Wade started to argue, but then he must have thought better of it. "Okay," he replied with a solemn expression. "Still friends?"

Lily felt a wave of relief wash over her. "Of course."

After Wade went upstairs, she threw together a green salad to

go with the casserole. When he came back downstairs and left to pick Pauline up from work, she went in search of Jordan.

Pauline's elderly boarder, Dolly Langley, would be back from her cruise this evening, so Lily intended to take advantage of the temporary privacy.

She found Jordan curled up on the living-room couch with a library book, his hair still wet from his shower. He looked up when she sat down across from him.

"So you had a good day?" she asked hesitantly, wondering just how much to tell him.

He nodded, closing the library book, and looked at her with a wary expression. "Yeah."

"Want to tell me about it?" She felt as though she were walking through a mine field.

"I met Steve," he said, with an edge of defiance in his tone. "He showed me both the houses that he's building."

Steve must have been stunned when Wade presented Jordan to him. The conversation she owed him was one that she dreaded with a deep ache of regret. If she could only go back, but then she wouldn't have Jordan.

"Did Steve know about me?" he asked in a small voice. "I mean, before we came."

"No," she said truthfully. "I swear to you that he had no idea. Not even an inkling."

The tension drained out of his thin shoulders, making her realize he'd probably come to the conclusion that his father had

ignored his existence for the past dozen years.

“Can I go see him again if he asks?” His expression was a mixture of longing and curiosity that nearly broke Lily’s heart. At a total loss for words, she relied on the stock reply of parents everywhere for questions that had no answer.

“We’ll see,” she said, knowing she couldn’t stall her son forever—and figuring it was one request that Steve would most likely never make. “We’ll see.”

Chapter Three

When Steve's doorbell rang on Saturday afternoon, the last person he expected to see standing on his front porch was Lily's son.

"Jordan!" Steve opened the door wider as his two dogs stood eagerly behind him. "What are you doing here?" Steve's house was a couple of miles outside of town on a narrow country road with very little traffic.

Jordan shifted from one foot to the other, obviously nervous. "I used my birthday money for a ride." He ducked his head, shoulders hunched.

Behind him Steve saw the local taxi leaving his driveway. At least the kid hadn't hitched his way out here.

"I probably shouldn't have come," Jordan mumbled, cheeks flushed, "but I need to talk to you about something."

Steve had a pretty good idea what he meant. "Since you're here, you might as well come on in." Realizing how unfriendly he must sound, he cleared his throat and tried again. "Uh, want something to eat? I was just about to make a couple of sandwiches."

The boy's face brightened immediately. "Yeah, that would be great." As soon as he crossed the threshold, the dogs approached him with their tails wagging.

Cautiously Jordan extended his hand. "What are their names?"

“The bigger one is Seahawk and that’s Sonic,” Steve said after he had shut the carved wood door.

“Are they watchdogs?” Jordan asked as they sniffed his fingers.

The idea of either of them going after a burglar made Steve smile. “Nah, they’re golden retrievers. They love everybody.”

He led the way past the living room with its massive rock fireplace and vaulted ceiling, down the hall through the family room where he’d been watching TV, and into the gourmet kitchen.

“Wow,” Jordan exclaimed, head swiveling. “This place is way cool. Did you build it, too?”

“Yeah,” Steve replied, pleased by the compliment. “I designed it and did most of the work.”

After Jordan had wrapped his gangly legs around a bar stool at the granite center island and the dogs thumped down on the floor, Steve began pulling sandwich fixings from the stainless-steel double-door refrigerator.

“Does your mom know where you are?” he asked casually. Was she the kind of single parent who let her kid run wild while she was busy doing her own thing? He couldn’t imagine her giving permission for him to come here.

Steve knew nothing about her, so he shouldn’t jump to conclusions.

“Not really,” Jordan replied.

Steve held up a container of mustard with a questioning

glance. When Jordan nodded, he squirted it onto the bread. “Won’t she be worried?” He doled out slices of ham and cheese as though he were dealing cards at a blackjack table, topped the stacks with lettuce and slapped on more bread.

Jordan looked longingly at the sandwiches, reminding Steve of the voraciousness of a growing boy’s appetite. “She’s looking at an office to rent and Dolly thinks that I walked over to the library,” he said. “Mom lets me walk there by myself.”

Steve put the sandwiches on plates and passed one over, impressed that Jordan didn’t immediately dig in. After Steve had set out two cans of soda and torn open a bag of chips, he sat down, too. Only then did the kid finally begin to eat.

Steve debated calling Pauline’s house, then decided to hold off. It sounded as though Jordan had done a good job of covering his tracks. While they ate, Steve waited for him to start talking.

“Can I go out on the deck?” Jordan asked after he’d wolfed down the sandwich and taken a long swallow of soda.

“Sure,” Steve replied. “Don’t fall over the railing.”

The house sat on a low bluff above the water with wooden steps leading down to the beach. On a clear day, he could see all way to Whidbey Island.

Letting the dogs outside, he joined Jordan at the rail. The deck hugged the back and one end of the house, so that part of it was shaded in the afternoon and the rest remained in the sun.

“See those dark things in the water?” Steve asked, pointing. “They’re probably a pod of killer whales.”

Jordan stared with his face scrunched up as the breeze off the water ruffled his thick hair. “Oh, yeah. I’ve seen pictures.”

“So, what’s on your mind?” Steve finally asked when the silence had lengthened between them.

Jordan looked up at him through eyes that stirred up long-buried memories of his mother. “One of the other kids told me that you’re my dad,” he said. “Is it true?”

Although he’d known the question was coming, Steve had no idea how to respond. “And what does your mom say?” he asked, stalling in case inspiration decided to visit him.

Jordan turned to stare out at the water. “All she’s ever said was that you—uh, he, couldn’t be with us. I figured she meant my dad was dead, like my friend’s father who was a marine. I didn’t want to make her feel sad, so I never asked anything more.”

Silently Steve digested the information. No wonder Jordan had been willing to spend his money for a taxi to come all the way out here and confront him. The kid was filled with curiosity and he had no one to talk to about it. What the hell was Lily thinking? Even if the donor had been a one-night stand, she owed the kid some kind of explanation.

Steve rested his hand on one thin shoulder. “Tell you what,” he said, hoping he was doing the right thing, “I’m going to take you home now, because your mom is the one who really needs to explain everything to you.”

This mess was Lily’s problem, but from what Steve could tell, she must have done a decent job of raising the boy. Somewhere

along the way, she must have acquired the necessary parental instincts to handle difficult subjects like this. He, on the other hand, was clueless.

“She’s going to be pissed at me,” Jordan protested as Steve herded him back inside.

Steve let the word slide. “I think she’ll understand.” As he grabbed the keys to his pickup from a bowl by the front door, he tried to sound reassuring. “Besides, you’re old enough to know the truth.”

Lily hurried through the back door into Mayfield Manor, looking for someone to tell her exciting news to. After a week of fruitless searching, she’d met Wade and their real estate agent at a small house that had just recently been rezoned for commercial use. The one-story structure sat on a large corner lot near the courthouse in an older, well-maintained section of town. With some remodeling, it would be perfect for their offices: her CPA business and his investment firm.

As soon as Lily entered the large, updated kitchen in the old Victorian where she’d grown up, she became aware of the silence. Pauline was still at the shop, but Jordan should be here with Dolly, the boarder.

Frowning, Lily glanced at the small blackboard above the counter where messages had been left for as long as she could remember. Sure enough, something was written there in Dolly’s spidery handwriting.

Jordan gone to library. Dolly taking nap.

Hands on her hips, Lily blew a lock of hair out of her eyes. She wished Dolly had indicated when he'd left.

Lily glanced at the clock above the stove, tempted to call Pauline. On Saturday afternoon the historic downtown shops and galleries would be full of tourists, so her news would have to wait. Meanwhile, Lily could start a list of all the things that would need to be done to the property if the seller accepted their offer.

At least financing her share wasn't one of them. Francis had provided generously for her and Jordan in his will. She blessed the day she'd met him at an open audition right after she first arrived in L.A.

She divided the sheet of paper into columns: Exterior, Interior, Furniture and Equipment, she wrote across the top. They would need to order a sign, too. Maybe a native craftsman could carve one out of cedar, with classy gold lettering.

She hardly noticed the sound of an approaching truck until it slowed in front of the house. Glancing distractedly through the bay window, she expected Wade. What she saw instead made her leap to her feet as the notepad slid to the floor and the pen fell from her suddenly nerveless fingers.

Steve Lindstrom had parked his white pickup in the driveway. At first she assumed that he was looking for Wade, but as she watched from behind the swagged satin drapery, the passenger door opened and her son climbed out. Steve must have given him a ride home from the library.

Jordan started to dash across the front yard, only to skid to a halt when Steve called out to him. Lily was torn between staring at the tall, muscular man striding toward the front door and dashing to the gilt-framed wall mirror to check on her own appearance. Before she could decide, Jordan reached the porch.

Lily's feet refused to move. As she smoothed down her khaki skirt where it tended to wrinkle around her hips, the front door burst open. Her heart thumped with expectation as Jordan walked in, followed by the man she hadn't faced for thirteen years. The man she had loved with all her heart, even when she had walked out of his life without saying goodbye.

"Hello, Lily."

His voice was deeper than she remembered, and his smooth young face had matured and weathered into one that would turn any female's head. His sun-streaked hair was longer than she remembered as it fell across his forehead and brushed his collar. His intense blue eyes were more guarded. Below a mustache that added a rakish touch to his appearance, his mouth was curved into a smile that held neither warmth nor humor.

For the first time in her life, Lily forgot about her son until the sound of his voice reminded her of his presence.

"Steve brought me home," he said unnecessarily. There was a touch of belligerence in his tone that surprised her.

"I can see that," she replied, her gaze still on the man who seemed to fill the foyer with his presence. "It's been a long time."

His only response was to nod in agreement.

He had bulked up, she realized. His shoulders and arms looked even more powerful than during his days on the football team. If he experienced the slightest reaction to seeing her again, his expression hid it well. She, on the other hand, felt as though she might fly apart as emotions she'd thought long dead sizzled through her, threatening to choke off her air.

"It was nice of you to give my son a ride." She was grateful that her voice was rock steady as she glanced from one male to the other. "Didn't you find any books that you liked?" she asked when she finally noticed Jordan's empty arms. Usually he would check out anything he could find on dinosaurs or astronomy.

Sensing that her hands were shaking, she tucked them into her skirt pockets. To her surprise, Steve touched Jordan's shoulder in an obvious gesture of encouragement.

"I didn't run into Jordan at the library. He showed up at my house."

Lily couldn't have been more surprised if Steve had said they had run into each other at a quilting bee. "You hitched?" she demanded, horrified that he would break one of her biggest rules.

Jordan shook his head. "I took a taxi."

She didn't have to ask why. "And what did you tell him?" she demanded of Steve, hoping he hadn't been too callous. It wasn't as though he owed her the slightest atom of consideration, but Jordan was an innocent victim in this mess. One who had deserved to hear the truth from his mother a long time ago.

"He wouldn't tell me anything," Jordan replied before Steve

could. “He said to ask you.” His voice was accusing, as though he was fed up with being jerked around.

Lily’s cheeks flamed with embarrassment. She had no one to blame but herself that this awkward conversation wasn’t taking place in private. Before she could tell Steve how sorry she was that he had been drawn into it, he ruffled Jordan’s hair.

“I’ll see you, kid,” Steve said. “Obviously you two have a lot to discuss, so I’d better go.”

“Thanks for the sandwich,” Jordan replied. “Your house is really cool, and so are your dogs.”

The wistful note in her son’s voice sent fresh guilt surging through Lily. All of this was her fault.

“Yes, thank you,” she echoed as Steve walked out the front door. “It was, um, good to see you again.”

He glanced back at her, one golden brow arched mockingly. “Right. You, too.” His tone was dry. “Talk to your son,” he added with a last glance at Jordan. “Take care.”

“Bye,” Jordan replied.

Refusing to stare at Steve’s retreating form, Lily shut the front door firmly while her mind spun in search of inspiration.

“Was that Steve?” Dolly asked from the landing at the top of the stairs. “He’s such a nice young man, isn’t he? A real hunk.”

Dolly hadn’t been living in Crescent Cove when Lily left, but no doubt she’d heard the story of Pauline’s broken engagement to Carter Black more than a decade ago, and the part Lily had played.

“He gave Jordan a ride,” she said. “How was your nap?” She was tempted to use Dolly’s appearance as an excuse to postpone the conversation she needed to have with her son, but she refused to take the coward’s way out.

“I feel like a new woman,” Dolly replied as she descended the stairs slowly with one gnarled hand on the carved wood banister. “I think I’ll have a cup of tea and sit in the garden. Would either of you care to join me?”

“No, thanks,” Jordan replied politely.

“Me, neither,” Lily said. “There’s something that my son and I need to discuss, so if you’ll excuse us...” Her voice trailed off as she realized there was no going back now. After she answered Jordan’s question about his paternity, she would need to talk to Pauline, as well. Lily could only hope that their recent reconciliation would be strong enough to handle the truth.

“We’ll be in my room if you need anything,” she added.

“Go ahead and have your chat.” Dolly gave them a smile and a dismissing wave. “I’ve got a new mystery that I’m eager to read.”

Steve drove straight from seeing Lily to his favorite watering hole down by the docks. The Crab Pot was a tavern with a big-screen TV, a couple of pool tables, decent food and a postage-size dance floor. This afternoon, the only thing that interested him was the cold beer on tap and the chance to sort out his reactions in familiar surroundings.

He pulled into the gravel parking lot, bouncing across the

potholes, and parked near the worn steps leading past a row of weathered wood pilings to the peeling front door. Colorful neon beer signs lit up the window with a fishing net hanging across the top. He barely noticed any of it as he went inside.

He was greeted with the odors of deep-fried seafood and yeasty beer, the buzz of voices from the bar, music from the jukebox and the occasional snick of pool balls colliding with one another on a nearby table. Riley, the oversize member of the local Suquamish tribe who served as a bouncer, sat at the bar where he was deep in conversation with one of the waitresses.

Pausing in the doorway, Steve noticed Wade seated alone at a table. He glanced up from his newspaper and waved Steve over.

“Need a menu, honey?” asked the waitress, whose helmet of red hair was as familiar to Steve as the moose head mounted over the bar.

“No, thanks, Char,” he replied. “Just bring us a fresh pitcher and another glass.”

“What are you doing here in the middle of the day?” Wade asked as he put aside the paper. On the table sat a plastic basket holding a couple of lonely fries and an empty tartar sauce container.

Steve pulled out the chair opposite him and sat down. “I got thirsty. What’s your story?”

Wade shrugged. “Pauline’s at the shop and I found a new office, so I’m celebrating.”

“Good for you. Where’s it at?” Glad for the distraction, Steve

listened carefully while Wade described the old house and his plans to renovate it. “Call me if you need any help,” Steve offered when Wade had finally run down.

“Thanks,” Wade replied. “What’s new with you?”

Steve slouched down in the chair and stretched out his legs to the side. “Guess who showed up on my doorstep a while ago?”

Wade’s forehead pleated into a puzzled frown. “I dunno. Who?”

Steve hesitated while Char brought over a pitcher of pale amber liquid. After filling his glass and topping off Wade’s, she collected the lunch trash.

“Anything else I can bring you all right now?” She worked her gum, one hand parked on her hip. A pencil was stuck through the swirl of hair above her ear and a plastic name tag was pinned to the front of her red-and-black uniform shirt. “The mussel stew is real good today.”

“No, thanks,” Steve replied. If he tried to eat with his stomach churning like a concrete mixer, he would probably regret it.

“You were about to reveal the identity of your visitor,” Wade prompted as soon as Char sauntered off with her tray tucked under one arm. “I hope it wasn’t a process server slapping you with a lawsuit.”

“Nothing like that,” Steve replied after he’d wet his throat. “I’d almost prefer that it had been.”

Wade’s eyes widened. “Lily came to see you?” he guessed.

“Close enough.” Steve wiped the foam from his mustache with

a paper napkin. “Her son.”

Wade muttered an expletive. “What did he want?”

“What do you think?” Wade didn’t interrupt as Steve described the visit, right down to seeing Lily when he took Jordan home.

“She must have been as sweet as cotton candy back in high school,” Wade commented with a shake of his head. “I’ll deny it if you quote me, but she’s sure as hell strike-me-blind gorgeous now.”

“I suppose.” Steve concentrated on making a row of wet rings on the tabletop with his glass. “Yeah, she was the prettiest girl in school, but she was really nice, too, you know? Not at all stuck-up, even though her folks treated her like a future Miss Universe.”

“That’s pretty much what Pauline told me,” Wade replied. “That she was the brain and Lily the princess.”

The girls’ parents had been killed in a boating accident while Pauline was in college and Lily was a high-school student. Damn, but Steve didn’t feel like discussing ancient history.

He drained his glass. “I was hoping Lily had changed, gotten hard-looking, I guess.” He gave Wade a rueful grin. “With a couple of missing teeth, thinning hair, maybe a scar or a couple hundred pounds of added weight, you know?”

Wade laughed. “Didn’t happen, man. She’s hot.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed reluctantly. If she had been the least bit affected by the sight of him, she’d hidden it well.

“Big reunion?” Wade teased after he’d swallowed some of his beer. “Hugs and kisses all around?”

“Yeah, right.” Steve rolled his eyes as the tension binding his chest like steel bands began to ease up. “More like ‘cool as you please and what have you been doing with my kid?’”

“Her kid?” Wade echoed, expression questioning. “Are you so sure that’s all?”

For a moment, Steve was silent as regret, relief and a decades’ old feeling of loss twisted together inside him like razor wire. “Positive,” he said finally.

Wade’s eyebrows spiked. Doubt flashed across his face, followed immediately by dawning understanding. “You never slept together.”

Steve pointed his finger like a cocked pistol. “Give the man a prize.” At this rate, he would have no secrets left.

“If he’s not your son, then whose is he?” Wade asked, leaning across the table.

“Damned if I know,” Steve admitted past the sudden tightness gripping his throat. “Some guy she met down south, I guess, but she didn’t tell me.”

“That’s not what everyone in town seems to have concluded,” Wade said after Char had checked on them and left again. “You’ve got to admit the evidence is pretty compelling.”

Steve snorted. “What, that he’s got my coloring? Big deal.”

“There’s more to the argument than that.” Wade shrugged. “Jordan’s not deaf, obviously. So what did you tell him?”

“What could I say? I said for him to ask his mother.” Steve poured another beer. He could always ask Wade to drive him home later.

“I’d like to be a fly on the wall during that conversation,” Wade muttered as he raised his glass. “Here’s to negative paternity test results.”

If you only knew, Steve thought, touching his schooner to Wade’s. “And to moving on.”

Lily paced restlessly back and forth in her bedroom as she waited for Pauline to get home from work. Finding out that a cool guy—in her son’s opinion—wasn’t his father after all was going to be disappointing for a boy with a blooming case of hero worship.

She wanted to blame Wade for starting it, but she knew that wouldn’t be fair. The wheels had been set into motion long before he’d decided to meddle. She should have talked to Jordan before they came back to Crescent Cove, but she hadn’t wanted to add to his anger and grief. Nor had she realized how much gossip there would be—hadn’t wanted to think their arrival would be such a reminder of her reason for fleeing in the first place.

As though it were yesterday, Lily could picture the shock on her sister’s face when she walked into the library at the manor during the graduation party she’d thrown for Lily and seen Carter trying to kiss her. Pauline’s fiancé and her sister. The betrayal had to hurt even more after Pauline had quit college to come home

after their parents' accident so that Lily could finish high school here instead of being shipped off to some aunt she barely knew.

Lily knew now that Pauline had figured out that Carter had kissed her against her will. After Pauline had thrown her engagement ring in his face and the story got around, Lily had taken the coward's way out. At the time, she had truly believed it would spare both Pauline and Steve any more pain.

Seeing Lily again a few weeks ago had obviously reopened old wounds for Pauline, but because of her generosity and willingness to put the past behind them, she and Lily had found the way back to each other. Being close again was a dream come true for Lily.

Now she sat down on the edge of her bed with her hands covering her face. She hated the idea of bringing Pauline fresh pain, but she had no choice. It was time for the truth to come out. The whole truth.

If she was going to finally level with Jordan, she would also have to rip out her sister's heart.

Chapter Four

When Lily heard Pauline's SUV in the driveway, followed by the sounds of the back door opening and shutting, she stopped pacing restlessly in her bedroom. Heart thudding, Lily prayed silently for words that would minimize the fresh pain she was about to inflict on her sister.

No excuses, Lily reminded herself as she went downstairs. No more secrets. She had known this day would come, this conversation, and there was no one to blame for the reasons behind it except herself.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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