

Sweet Magnolias

CATCHING FIREFLIES



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ORIGINAL SERIES

Sherryl Woods

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Catching Fireflies

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Coming to Netflix Summer 2020 New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling author Sherryl Woods captures a community's heartfelt fight to preserve the innocence of childhood. When bullying threatens to destroy a teen's life, painful memories resurface for dedicated high school teacher Laura Reed and pediatrician J.C. Fullerton. With the support of the Sweet Magnolias, they bring the town together to assure that a promising student's future isn't ruined. And to establish once and for all that bullying has no place in Serenity, South Carolina. Both J.C.'s and Laura's passion for the cause is deeply personal, and their growing feelings for each other are just as strong. But with so many secret hurts to overcome, can these two vulnerable lovers find the strength to believe in happily ever after? "Woods always thrills with her wonderful characters, witty dialogue and warm and loving family interactions."—RT Book Reviews

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Praise for the novels of Sherryl Woods

"Sherryl Woods always delights her readers—including me!"

—#1 New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber

"Sherryl Woods gives her characters depth, intensity and the right amount of humor."

—RT Book Reviews

"Charming characters combine to create the interfering, yet lovable O'Brien family...a satisfying, heartwarming conclusion to the Chesapeake Shores series."

—RT Book Reviews on The Summer Garden

"The story is engaging and deftly accentuated by a sweet secondary romance.... If you have time to join the O'Briens in Dublin, I recommend that you do."

—USA TODAY Happy Ever After blog on An O'Brien Family Christmas

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—Chicago Tribune on A Chesapeake Shores Christmas

"A whimsical, sweet scenario...the digressions have their own charm, and Woods never fails to come back to the romantic point."

—Publishers Weekly on Sweet Tea at Sunrise

"Redolent with Southern small-town atmosphere, this emotionally rich story deals with some serious issues and delivers on a number of levels."

—Library Journal on A Slice of Heaven

New York Times Bestselling Author

Catching Fireflies

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Woods



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Dear Friends,

Unfortunately these days, hardly a day goes by without news of an incident of childhood bullying. Some of these are so horrific or tragic that they defy understanding. Those really grab our attention. Others are all too easily dismissed as some sort of rite of passage, an acceptable part of growing up.

The truth, though, is that bullying of any kind has the power to change who a child is, the kind of person he or she grows up to be. When ignored, the victim can be scarred for life, emotionally, if not physically. The perpetrator grows up with a skewed value system that suggests it's perfectly okay to make another person's life miserable, to feel powerful, even for a moment, at the expense of someone weaker.

It's up to adults—parents, teachers, entire communities—to take a stand, to say bullying is not okay, not ever, not by anyone! And that's exactly what happens in *Serenity* when schoolteacher Laura Reed and pediatrician J. C. Fullerton realize a student is being bullied. Both Laura and J.C. have experienced the damaging effects of bullying, so what's happening to Misty Dawson is personal and unacceptable.

While there are often subtle messages tucked away in my stories, I hope the message in *Catching Fireflies* is loud and clear. There is nothing cute or normal or acceptable about bullying, whether it's a toddler on the playground or a teenager using the internet to torment a classmate. Pay attention to what may be happening to your children, no matter how young or how old. Pay even closer attention to how they're treating others. Bullying is wrong. It needs to stop. And alert parents and teachers and a united community can make that happen.

I hope you'll enjoy spending time with all the Sweet Magnolias once more, and that you'll take their message—and mine—to heart.

All best,

Sherryl

For all the young people who feel as if no one's paying attention, I wish you at least one person who will listen and make your life better.

[Contents](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Questions for Discussion](#)

[Excerpt](#)

It was little more than six weeks into the new school year, and already Serenity High School English teacher Laura Reed was seeing signs of a potential problem with one of her juniors. Misty Dawson had been skipping class for the past week. Attendance records showed she was in school, but when it came time for English, she disappeared off the radar.

“Was Misty in your class today?” she asked Nancy Logan, who taught history and current affairs.

“Front and center,” Nancy confirmed. “I wish I had a dozen students like her. She’s smart and she’s always prepared. Why? Don’t tell me she skipped English again?”

Laura nodded. “Afraid so, and I just don’t get it. All of her class records suggest that she’s one of the brightest English students in the school. She belongs in my advanced placement class. The first papers she turned in were excellent. She’s definitely not having trouble with the material. That’s what makes this so frustrating. It’s as if she simply vanishes during third period every day.”

Physical education teacher and longtime coach Cal Maddox, who’d come in to grab some bottled water from the refrigerator, joined them at the conference table set up in the teachers’ lounge.

“Sorry to eavesdrop, but have you mentioned this to Betty?” he asked, referring to their principal. “She needs to know if a kid’s not showing up for class.”

Just the thought of going to Betty Donovan with this made Laura shudder. A problem with a potentially simple solution would wind up being blown out of all proportion. Cal, of all people, should know that. Betty had gone after him for a violation of the morals clause in the teacher contract and created a whole hoopla that had required school board intervention before being resolved in Cal’s favor.

She looked him in the eye and shook her head. “Not yet,” she confessed. “Which means I’m breaking all sorts of rules myself, but frankly, I’m less concerned about Misty skipping than I am about why she’s doing it, and why just my class.”

Cal frowned. “Are you sure it’s only your class?”

“You heard Nancy. Misty’s been in her class every day. I’ve checked with Misty’s other teachers, and most of them say she’s had perfect attendance all year. She started out okay in my class, too. Then she missed a day here or there, but a week ago she simply stopped coming. That tells me something’s going on in my class that upsets her. Or maybe she’s having a problem with another student who’s in there. I can’t figure it out.”

“But aren’t most of the juniors taking the same courses?” Nancy asked. “If Misty’s got a problem with another student, English wouldn’t be the only class where they’d cross paths.”

That wasn’t as true now as it had once been, Laura thought. Serenity High School wasn’t exactly huge. In fact, until the past few years, when developments had begun popping up on the fringes of town, the school had barely had five hundred students in grades nine through twelve.

Over the ten years that Laura had been working here, though, that number had started to climb. Classrooms were more crowded, and most core courses had to be taught multiple times during the day to accommodate the growth. Last year they’d had to add portable classrooms for the first time to accommodate the overflow until money could be allocated for new construction. However, there were comparatively few advanced placement students, and they did wind up in many of the same classrooms.

“You know I’m not a big fan of Betty’s,” Cal said, drawing her back to the problem at hand.

“An understatement, I’m sure,” Laura replied, not allowing herself even a tiny smile over Betty’s futile attempt to get Cal fired several years earlier for dating the older, divorced mother of one of the baseball players he coached. Most of the community and the school board had rallied behind Cal. He and Maddie were now happily married and the parents of two kids of their own. The son who’d brought them together was a star pitcher for Atlanta.

“Definitely an understatement,” he agreed. “My point is that she needs to know when there’s a problem like this. As I know all too well, she’s a stickler for the rules, including a few that are more

in her head than on the books. Despite our issues, I do know she cares about the kids. If Misty's in some kind of trouble, she'd want to help, not just rush to judgment."

"I suppose I know that, too," Laura admitted grudgingly. "And if I can't sit down with Misty and straighten this out, I'll go to Betty. Bottom line, though, I'd rather not involve her if I can avoid it. I don't want this girl suspended because Betty's intent on making an example of her." She gave Cal a wry look. "You know firsthand that's her style. Isn't that what she did to your stepdaughter?"

Cal winced. "Oh, yeah. She came down on Katie like a ton of bricks right after the school year started. Believe me, it was not fun around our house when Maddie found out. She grounded Katie, too. It'll be a while before Katie pulls another stunt like that."

"Then you know what I mean," Laura said, pleading for understanding.

"I also know Katie deserved the punishment she got," he said.

Laura sighed. "On some level I know you're right, but something makes me believe there's more to this, and that I need to understand what that is." She knew firsthand what a rush to judgment could do to damage an already fragile teen. If she hadn't had a teacher on her side years ago, she'd have been a high school dropout herself. That teacher's mentoring and faith in her had driven Laura into teaching herself.

She met Cal's gaze. "I swear to you, though, I won't wait much longer before talking to Betty."

"Fair enough," Cal agreed. "I'll talk to Katie when I get home tonight. Maybe she'll have some ideas. She's in that same AP class, right?"

"She is," Laura confirmed. "And doing very well, by the way."

Cal hesitated, his expression thoughtful. "You know, I can't help wondering if it's just some weird coincidence that Katie was caught skipping and suspended. At the time she flatly refused to say why she was doing it, but she must know if there's some sort of dare the girls are taking to see if they can skip without getting caught."

"I remember being shocked about Katie's behavior, but I hadn't put it together with what's going on with Misty," Laura said, intrigued by the possibility. "Do you really think it could be a game to them, even with suspension as a consequence?"

Cal shrugged. "Kids that age don't always look ahead to the consequences. I doubt that Katie did. I can think of a few times over the years when the seniors have dared the younger students to do some pretty crazy stuff. Usually, though, it happens at the end of the year, when they figure the rules are more relaxed and graduation's just around the corner. Still, I wouldn't rule out some kind of informal hazing activity."

Laura shook her head. "I'd expect this kind of behavior from the usual troublemakers, but kids like Katie and Misty? It's a shock."

"I'll do what I can to help you get to the bottom of it," Cal offered. "Kids tend to see and hear things we miss. If Katie's picked up on something, I'll let you know. The guys in the locker room occasionally let something slip, too, so if there are rumors around here, I eventually hear most of them."

Laura nodded. "Thanks, Cal. I'd appreciate it."

"I'll keep my eyes and ears open, too," Nancy promised.

"Any insights would definitely be welcome. I know I can't put off talking to Betty forever," Laura said. "I think I'll scout around right now and see if I can find Misty. She's the one with all the answers. If I have to, first thing next week I'll have her called out of one of the classes she is attending."

She really hoped to solve this before a very bright student landed in the kind of trouble that could wind up hurting her very promising future, just the way Vicki Kincaid had kept her from making the second biggest mistake of her life.

* * *

Misty Dawson had waited until after the bell, then taken refuge in the stairwell for the second time that day. She'd been there only a few minutes when Katie Townsend opened the door, heaved a sigh at the sight of her, then came and sat shoulder to shoulder beside her.

"You're going to get thrown out of school if you don't stop this," Katie warned her, giving her a nudge.

"What about you?" Misty responded. "You're here, too. And you've already been suspended for skipping class once because of me. They'll probably expel you next time."

"I knew you'd be hiding out again. You have math this period and I know you haven't been going. I only have study hall right now and I told the teacher I needed to use the restroom," she said, holding up her hall pass. She gave Misty a worried look. "You can't keep skipping classes just because Annabelle's a total jerk. Don't you think Ms. Reed and Mr. Jamison are going to notice?"

"Mr. Jamison never takes attendance," Misty replied. "And I don't think he can see past the end of his nose, so he has no idea whether I'm in class or not. As long as you let me know when the tests are coming up and I show up to take those, he won't have a clue."

"We're not in the same AP math class, though," Katie protested. "They had to divide us into two groups, remember? One of these days he'll give the tests on different days, and then what?"

"I'll deal with that if it happens," Misty insisted.

"Well, Ms. Reed is neither blind nor dumb," Katie told her. "She's bound to notice. Just tell her what's going on, Misty. She's pretty cool. I think she'd get it. Maybe she could even help."

Misty shook her head. "I can't take the chance, Katie. Who knows what Ms. Reed would do? Whatever it is, it will just make things worse with Annabelle. They're bad enough already."

She gave Katie a pleading look. "You know I'm right. You know how mean Annabelle can be. And that mother of hers is this overprotective grizzly bear who's counting on her little darlin' to propel them into the entertainment big time one of these days. Mrs. Litchfield will tell everyone it's my fault, that I must have done something just awful to her precious darlin' for her to do these horrible things."

"I still say Ms. Reed would believe you," Katie countered, not relenting. "Or why don't you tell your mom and dad and let them handle it?"

Katie made it sound so simple, as if the whole world would be ready to leap to Misty's defense. Misty knew, though, that nothing in her life these days was simple.

"Come on, Katie. I can't do that," she replied wearily. "My parents are barely speaking to each other. Mom's so mad at Dad, she doesn't care about anything else that's going on. She just wants me and my brother to be invisible. She seems to have this crazy idea that if the house is perfect and Jake and I are little angels, Dad will change his mind about wanting a divorce."

Katie nodded, her expression filled with understanding. "I remember what that was like. I was only six when my mom and dad got divorced, and I didn't totally get what was going on, but there was way too much fighting that made my mom cry all the time. Even though I hated it when my dad moved out, things got so much better after that. And once my mom started seeing Coach Maddox and they got married, everything's, like, a thousand times better at home."

Misty sighed. "I wish someone like that would come along and sweep my mom off her feet. I don't think it's going to happen, though. She's going to hang on to my dad for dear life, even though it's so over for the two of them. I don't even think she loves him anymore. I think she's just scared to let go."

They sat side by side in silence for a few minutes. Then Katie glanced at her. "What if I said something to my stepdad? I know he'd help."

Misty's eyes widened with alarm. "Coach Maddox? No way. Leave it alone, Katie. It's my problem. I'll figure something out."

"You need to do it soon, Misty. You're gonna get caught. Look what happened to me. Mom and Cal came down on me even harder than Mrs. Donovan did. I've never seen my mom so furious."

She even made me scrub the whole locker room at The Corner Spa, and believe me, that was gross. Women are really messy, even in a classy place like that.”

“Suspension actually sounds good to me,” Misty admitted, unable to keep a wistful note out of her voice. It was almost hard to remember what it had been like when she’d loved coming to school, loved learning and books and hanging with her friends. These days the only time she even saw her friends was if she hooked up with them after school at Wharton’s, and even that was tense because Annabelle showed up every now and then and set out to make her life miserable.

Katie looked shocked. “You don’t mean that. You love school! You’re on track to get a scholarship, Misty. It’ll be on your transcript if you’re suspended. Believe me, I heard all about how it was going to ruin my future.”

“I know. I’m just saying, it sounds better than being here and hiding in the stairwell during English and math. I can’t even go to the cafeteria for lunch anymore. That’s the one good thing about this daze my mom is in. She hasn’t noticed I’m bringing my lunch to school all of a sudden, instead of buying it here.”

She gave her friend a weary look. “I just wish I could figure out why Annabelle hates me so much. She’s beautiful. She’s got this incredible voice that will get her onto American Idol someday, just the way Travis McDonald said on the radio on the Fourth of July. And she’s dating the most popular boy in school.”

Katie regarded her incredulously. “Come on. I know you can’t be that clueless, Misty. This is because super jock Greg Bennett, the most popular guy in school, is crazy about you. He’d dump Annabelle in a minute if he thought you’d go out with him. And worst of all, she knows it.”

“But I won’t go out with him,” Misty said with frustration. “I’ve turned him down. Annabelle knows that, too. It’s not my fault if he can’t take no for an answer. It ought to show her what a sleaze he is for being with her and asking me out at the same time.”

“The most popular boy in school,” Katie repeated with emphasis. “Annabelle feels she’s entitled to the best. And since she can’t blame him without losing him, she blames you.”

“I guess,” Misty said with a shrug. “I sure don’t get it, though. I’d have kicked him to the curb the second I found out he was hitting on another girl.”

“Because you’re smart and have it together,” Katie said loyally.

Misty sighed heavily. “If only that were true.”

The truth was that every single day she felt more and more as if her life were falling completely apart and Annabelle Litchfield was at the controls.

* * *

After fending off his nurse’s latest attempt to fix him up, pediatrician J. C. Fullerton was pondering the tendency of Serenity residents to meddle in other people’s lives when the door to his office opened a crack.

“Is it okay if I come in?” Misty Dawson asked hesitantly. “Everyone’s gone out front, but the lights were still on and the door was open. I thought you might still be here.”

“Sure. Come on in,” he said, regarding the teen worriedly. This kind of after-hours visit usually spelled trouble. With a sixteen-year-old girl, an unplanned pregnancy came immediately to mind.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Misty sat gingerly on the edge of the chair across from him, her schoolbooks in her lap. “Not really.” She sucked in a deep breath, then blurted, “Could you write me some kind of note to get out of school?”

Over the years, J.C. had worked hard not to react visibly to anything patients said to him. Teens, especially, had tender feelings and could easily be scared into silence if their physician said the wrong thing. It usually worked best to listen and ask questions very, very carefully.

He studied Misty closely. Other than looking nervous and maybe a little pale, she appeared to be as healthy as she had been when she'd had her annual physical before the school year started. Her straight blond hair was shiny, her bright blue eyes clear. Looks, though, could be deceiving.

"Aren't you feeling well?" he asked, treading carefully.

"Not really."

He took the response at face value. "What seems to be the problem? Is something going on at school?"

"I just can't go anymore, okay?" she said, instantly defensive. "And I know they'll need some kind of an excuse if I stop showing up. I figured a note from you would work. You could tell 'em I have something really, really contagious, right?"

He held her gaze. "Do you have something really, really contagious?"

"No, but—"

"Then you know I can't do it," he said, his tone gentle but firm. "Talk to me, Misty. What's really going on?"

"I'm not going back, that's all," she said stubbornly.

J.C.'s antennae went on full alert. He had seen this kind of thing before, kids who were good students who suddenly didn't want to go to school. He'd seen it in a way that was up close and way too personal. He was instantly determined to get to the bottom of whatever was on this young girl's mind.

"Is there a specific reason you don't want to be in school, Misty?" he prodded gently. "The way I heard it from your mom, you're an outstanding student, taking all sorts of advanced placement classes."

She shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I don't want to be there anymore."

"What will you do if you don't go?" he asked reasonably. "I thought when we did your physical you mentioned something about wanting to be a broadcast journalist someday. You'll need a high school diploma and college for that. You were all excited about the possibility of a scholarship."

"Like you said, I'm smart. I'll take the GED and ace it, then get into college someplace far away from Serenity. It might not be a fancy Ivy League school like I was hoping, but that's okay. It's a trade-off, but it'll be worth it. I can do it," she said earnestly. "Please, Dr. Fullerton. You've got to help me out."

He leveled a look into her troubled eyes. "You know I can't do that, Misty. Now, why don't you tell me what's really going on? Maybe I can help with that."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, but she stood up, squared her shoulders and headed for the door, her disappointment unmistakable. "Sorry I bothered you."

"Misty, wait. Let's talk about this," he pleaded, not wanting to be one more adult who let her down. She might not be physically ill, but she was clearly deeply disturbed about something. The fact that she'd come to him gave him a responsibility to help in any way he could.

"It's okay. I knew it was a long shot." She held his gaze, her expression pleading. "You won't tell my mom about this, will you? I mean you didn't really treat me, so it's not like you'd have to tell her, right?"

J.C. was torn. It was true that there'd been no medical issues discussed, but he wasn't sure he should promise to keep silent when she was obviously in some kind of distress.

"How about we make a deal?" he said eventually.

Her gaze narrowed suspiciously. "What kind of deal?"

"You pick an adult—preferably your mom or dad, but any adult you trust will do—talk to them about what's going on, and I won't say anything about this visit."

She immediately shook her head. "It's not something I can talk about," she insisted.

He shrugged off the excuse. "That's the deal. Take it or leave it," he replied, his gaze unrelenting. "And I want this person to let me know you've talked. I don't need to know what you said. That can be totally confidential, but I want to know you've confided in someone who can help."

To his surprise, the corners of her mouth lifted ever so slightly.

“What ever made me think you were going to be easy?” she asked ruefully.

“It’s all the lollipops and teddy bears around here,” he said. “A lot of people mistake me for a softie.”

“Boy, do you have them fooled,” she said, though there was a note of admiration in her tone. “How long do I have before you rat me out?”

He thought it over, weighing the risks of waiting against the value of allowing her to get the help she needed on her own. “Twenty-four hours seems reasonable to me. This time tomorrow.”

“And if you don’t hear from someone by then? What happens? Will alarms go off all over town? Is Chief Rollins going to hunt me down and drag me off to jail?”

He smiled at her. “Nothing that dramatic. Just expect me to drop by your house around dinnertime to have that talk with your folks.” He held her gaze. “So, do we have a deal?”

“I’d rather have that note for school,” she said regretfully, “but, yeah, I guess we have a deal.”

J.C. watched her leave his office and prayed he’d done the right thing. If she’d seemed even a tiny bit depressed, he wouldn’t have given her the leeway to work this out for herself. He’d have been all over it. Misty struck him as a kid who just needed a bit of a shove to solve this problem for herself. And, in his experience, the sense of empowerment that came from that could go a long way toward healing whatever issues a teen might be facing.

He’d just spend the next twenty-four hours praying his instincts in this instance had been right.

2

Since he’d sworn off dating, J.C. tended to spend a portion of most evenings at Fit for Anything, the new gym for men that had just opened in town. An hour-long workout before he headed home for dinner constituted what passed for his sorry social life most of the time.

It was a lot easier to pretend working out was a good substitute for dating in this environment than it had been at Dexter’s. Nobody had wanted to spend a minute longer than necessary in that dump. Here, he could even grab a bite to eat before heading home, and since the healthy food selections were supplied by Sullivan’s, one of the region’s best restaurants, they weren’t half bad.

Though it had taken a while because of his working partnership with Bill Townsend—a pariah with some people since his very messy divorce from Maddie a number of years ago—J.C. had eventually become friendly with Cal Maddox, Ronnie Sullivan and a few of the other men involved with the gym. As long as he left Bill out of the conversation, they seemed to get along just fine.

Tonight he found Cal here, just finishing up his own workout.

“You’re late,” Cal noted. “Don’t tell me you finally asked some woman out for coffee and broke the hearts of all the matchmakers in Serenity.”

J.C. chuckled. “Sadly, no. I had an unexpected after-hours visit from a patient.”

Cal immediately looked concerned. “An emergency? Was it a kid I might know?”

Though he wasn’t about to violate Misty’s confidence, he wondered if Cal would have any insights about what might be going on to make her dislike school so much she wanted to quit. “Do you know Misty Dawson?” he asked.

The look on Cal’s face was answer enough.

“You do,” J.C. concluded. “Any idea what’s going on with her?”

“No, but you’re the second person today who’s expressed real concern about her. What did she tell you?” Cal asked, then instantly waved off the question. “Sorry, I know you can’t say anything. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s okay. Actually, knowing that I’m not the only one who’s worried is reassuring. If enough adults are paying attention, hopefully we’ll figure this out and get things back on track. From everything I know, she’s a bright girl with great potential.”

“Laura Reed, Misty’s English teacher, is all over it,” Cal assured him. “I’m looking into a couple of things myself.”

“Good to know,” J.C. said, relieved. “Has anyone spoken to her parents?”

Cal shook his head. “Laura’s trying to dig a little deeper and figure out what’s going on before she stirs things up by going to either her parents or the principal. Want me to have her give you a call, let you know if she finds out anything?”

“Absolutely,” J.C. said. “And I’ll get back to you or to her, if I come up with any answers.”

Cal nodded. “I know living in a small town can have its drawbacks, but in situations like this, I see all the advantages. People genuinely care. They get involved. It’s a great environment for raising kids.”

J.C. grinned. “So there is a positive side to all that meddling, after all.”

Cal laughed. “That’s the way I see it, anyway.” He glanced at his watch. “I’d better get home. Maddie’s probably hit a wall and is ready for backup with handling the little kids’ baths by now, and then I have some sleuthing to do with my stepdaughter.”

“Good luck with that,” J.C. said sincerely. He knew better than most what it was like trying to get information from a teenager. From what he’d observed, they were better at protecting their sources than any experienced journalist had ever been.

* * *

Laura had been feeling restless ever since her talk with Cal and Nancy and her failure to track down Misty before school let out. Over time she’d found that the two best solutions for this kind of mood were ice cream or what she liked to think of as shopping therapy. And she had a coupon in her purse for Raylene Rollins’s boutique on Main Street that might satisfy at least one urge. If a shopping splurge didn’t pan out, Wharton’s was just across the town green and had the best hot-fudge sundaes around.

Inside the store, which was known for its smart fashions, she headed straight for the sale rack. On a teacher’s salary, full price was out of the question.

“Looking for something special?” Adelia Hernandez asked her as Laura checked out what was available in a size eight. “Or are you just browsing, hoping for a great deal?”

Laura grinned. “You know me too well, Adelia. I can’t resist a bargain, and I have a coupon from the paper burning a hole in my purse.”

“Then let’s find something to spend it on,” Adelia said eagerly. “A pretty date dress, maybe?”

Laura rolled her eyes. “I can’t even remember the last time I had a date that required anything fancier than jeans.”

Even though she’d been drawn to teaching in a small town much like the one she’d grown up in halfway across the country, she’d suspected the lack of social life would be one of the disadvantages. At the time, fresh out of college and still deeply scarred by her first great love back in high school and its disastrous outcome, having a social life hadn’t really mattered to her. These days, though, she was coming to regret the serious lack of available professional men. The men who asked her out, while perfectly nice, were, for the most part, not intellectually stimulating.

“You’re obviously looking in all the wrong places,” Adelia said, though even as she spoke, her expression turned rueful. “Not that I’d know. I only have one toe into the divorce process. Dating is way, way down the road, somewhere past never, for me.”

“I was sorry to hear about your marriage breaking up,” Laura said carefully, eager to change the subject but not sure if she was being too personal with a woman she knew only casually.

Adelia gave her a wry look. “But not surprised? I know everyone in town was aware that Ernesto was cheating on me, but they were all too polite to say anything.”

“I’m not sure there’s a good way to broach that particular subject,” Laura told her. “What do you say, ‘Hi, how are you? By the way I spotted your husband out with someone else last night.’”

Adelia chuckled. “You’re right. I doubt Emily Post covered anything quite like that in her etiquette books.”

“At least you can laugh about it now,” Laura said approvingly. “That has to be progress.”

“Yeah, on the days when I’m not furious, bitter and resentful, I’m a barrel of laughs,” Adelia said, tempering the remark with a smile. “But the truth is, every day is better than the day before. I can thank my kids and this job for keeping me focused on the future, rather than the past. And my attorney has been a godsend. Helen’s not letting Ernesto and his dirtbag lawyer pull anything.”

Laura nodded. “I’ve heard Helen is an amazing ally in a situation like this.”

“The best,” Adelia confirmed as she plucked a dress out of the size-twelve section of the rack. “This is an eight, and it would look fantastic on you. This soft sage-green would be perfect with your coloring. It’ll bring out the green in your eyes and the blond highlights in your hair.”

Laura studied the simple, A-line design of the linen dress. On the hanger it didn’t look like anything special, and she’d never before worn any shade of green. She’d always thought it would make her skin look sallow. “Are you sure?” she asked doubtfully.

“Trust me,” Adelia said. “You’ll thank me the minute you see yourself in the mirror. Go. I’ll keep looking, in case there are more size eights that have been misplaced on the rack.”

Two minutes later, Laura was gazing at herself in the dressing room mirror with astonishment. The dress skimmed over her curves, slimming her hips, caressing her breasts and showing off just the right amount of cleavage with the V-neckline. The sage-green did, indeed, turn her eyes emerald. Her cheeks bloomed with unexpected color.

“Holy cow,” she murmured, just as Adelia arrived with the perfect flowered silk scarf to add a splash of extra sophistication and style.

“Told you so,” Adelia said with a satisfied grin as she adjusted the scarf in various ways to demonstrate the possibilities.

“Could you come to my house and dress me all the time?” Laura asked, only half kidding. She never put outfits together with the pizzazz Adelia had accomplished in minutes. It seemed every time she complimented one of her friends on a new look, the credit always went to Adelia. No wonder Raylene’s store was doing a booming business these days.

“Find yourself a hot date and I’m there,” Adelia promised with a chuckle. “I yearn to live vicariously.”

“I haven’t even looked at the price tag,” Laura lamented. “I’m going to cry if this is beyond my budget.”

“It’s on sale and you have a coupon,” Adelia reminded her. “And who can put a price on looking as smashing as you do?”

“You’re really good,” Laura complimented her as she changed back into her clothes and then followed her to the register. Though she winced at the total, she handed over her credit card with barely a whimper.

She consoled herself with the thought that the shopping excursion had been so successful, she no longer needed that hot fudge sundae. Good thing, since to pay for this, she’d be dining on cereal or peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches for dinner for the next month.

* * *

After years of coaching and teaching at Serenity High School and a good long while being married to Maddie and dealing with stepchildren and their own two little ones, Cal thought he had some pretty finely tuned instincts when it came to those children lying to him as Katie was doing right now. He’d asked her to hang out with him in the kitchen after the dinner dishes had been put into the dishwasher. She’d reluctantly stayed behind.

They were sitting at the kitchen table now, and she was doing her best to avoid looking him in the eye as she skirted every question he’d asked so far.

“You’re being very careful to sidestep what was a direct question,” he told his stepdaughter eventually. “Let me try again. Do you have any idea why Misty is skipping Ms. Reed’s English class?”

“Shouldn’t Ms. Reed be asking Misty that?”

“Believe me, she will. I was just hoping you could fill me in before this whole thing blows up and Misty winds up being suspended. Ms. Reed doesn’t want that. She’s trying to help before Betty Donovan gets involved. You know for a fact that Mrs. Donovan has a zero-tolerance policy for skipping. Didn’t you learn that the hard way all too recently?”

Katie squirmed uncomfortably. “Misty shouldn’t get suspended,” she protested weakly. “Not when there are, what do they call ‘em, extenuating circumstances.”

“Oh, why is that?” he asked, wondering at her logic and even more interested in those extenuating circumstances.

Katie looked as if she realized she’d already veered onto dangerous turf. “Come on,” she said with a hint of belligerence clearly meant to cover her mistake. “She’s only missing a class or two, not a whole day or anything.”

Cal regarded her impatiently. “Don’t play dumb, Katie. You know suspension is mandatory for a repeat offense, and apparently Misty has been skipping regularly.”

“But...” she began, then fell silent.

“But what? If there’s a good reason for her skipping class, fill me in.”

Katie’s chin set stubbornly. “I can’t say anything.”

“Because you don’t know or because you’ve been sworn to secrecy?” he pressed.

“Because it’s confidential,” Katie said heatedly. “What kind of friend would I be if I blabbed someone else’s secrets?”

“Maybe the kind who could keep a friend from getting in more trouble than she can handle,” Cal told her. “I admire your loyalty. I really do.”

“Then stop asking me all these questions,” she pleaded, her eyes bright with unshed tears.

Cal held firm. “Sorry, I can’t do that. Sometimes there are things that kids need adults to resolve. I suspect this is one of those times.”

She regarded him thoughtfully. “You mean like when Sarah and Raylene kept quiet about Annie not eating back when I was little,” she said, proving that she wasn’t as naive as she’d been pretending to be. “They should have told.”

Cal nodded. “Exactly like that.”

Though Annie had survived her nearly fatal anorexia and was now happily married to Ty, Katie’s older brother, what had happened to her back then had made an impression on all of them. It was a lesson Cal thought bore repeating now.

“There’s nothing like that going on with Misty, is there?” he asked.

Katie’s immediate shake of her head was reassuring.

“I’d never keep quiet about that, Cal. I promise. Every time I turn around either Mom or Annie or Ty is all over me about that kind of stuff. I probably know more warning signs of anorexia than any kid in school.”

“Is this potentially as serious?” he asked, now that he had her full attention. “Is there some kind of situation that’s getting out of hand?”

Again, Katie squirmed uncomfortably. “It’s not like that,” she said carefully. “If it were, I’d tell you, no matter what promise I made. I swear it.”

“Okay, then,” he said, relenting. “Just promise you’ll come to me or your mom, if you think Misty’s in any kind of danger, okay?”

Katie regarded him earnestly. “I already asked her to come talk to you herself, but she wouldn’t,” she said with unmistakable frustration. “It’s not like I don’t know there should be an adult involved.”

Cal frowned at her tone. Clearly she was upset about whatever was going on. “Okay, what am I missing?” he asked more gently. “Isn’t there something you’d feel comfortable sharing with me?”

“It’s complicated,” she told him, again looking near tears.

“But you believe with everything in you that Misty will ask for help if she needs it and you promise me if she doesn’t, you’ll come to me or your mom before this gets any worse?” Cal pressed.

She nodded. "Promise," she said, then all but ran from the room before he could try one last time for more information.

Sighing, Cal went into the living room to join Maddie on the sofa. She immediately snuggled in close.

"What was that about?" she asked. "Why did you want to speak to Katie? I figured it had something to do with school, so I left the two of you alone."

"Katie's friend Misty is in some kind of trouble. I'm trying to help one of her teachers put the pieces together. I thought maybe I could convince Katie to open up about whatever she knows. Those two kids spend a lot of time together. I'm sure Katie knows something."

"But she's not talking," Maddie concluded. "Want me to give it a try?"

He shook his head. "Maybe later. Hopefully I planted enough seeds that Katie will start to worry about whether keeping silent is doing Misty any favors."

"Do you have ideas about what might be going on?"

"I don't think she's anorexic or bulimic, which were my first concerns. From what Katie just said, she doesn't think so, either. I think she would say something about that after Annie wound up hospitalized. That made a real impression on her, even if she was so young when it happened. And she saw it happening again with Carrie Rollins just a few months ago, before Carter and Raylene got married."

"I agree. Katie would never let something like that slide. Annie's near miss scared all of us," Maddie said. "Which leaves what?"

"An unexpected bad grade, problems at home, boy troubles. It's hard to say. At that age, everything turns into high drama, doesn't it?" He sighed. "Remember when the toughest thing in a kid's life was catching fireflies on a summer night?"

"Those were the sweetly innocent days," Maddie confirmed, then added, "There are problems at home, by the way. I know because Misty's mom dropped her spa membership the other day. She said she couldn't afford any unnecessary expenses right now. Word around town is that her husband wants a divorce and she's fighting it. I don't know if that means money's at the root of their problems, or whether she's trying to sock away money in case of an eventual divorce or she needs it to pay an attorney."

"I suppose that could explain it," Cal said. He shook his head. "Somehow it doesn't feel right, though. Most of the time when things like that are happening at home, school becomes a refuge. It's the opposite with Misty."

Maddie nodded. "That makes sense."

"Besides," Cal said, sorting through his thoughts, trying to get a handle on what might be happening, "a lot of people go through divorces. Would Katie feel a need to keep quiet about that, especially if the news is all over town already anyway?"

"Good point," Maddie said. "That's one of the reasons I love you. You're so sensitive." She kissed his cheek. "And smart." The next kiss landed on his forehead. "And insightful." The final, lingering kiss was on his lips.

Cal grinned, then gave her a slow once-over that brought a blush to her cheeks. "Why do I get the feeling you're trying to seduce me, Mrs. Maddox?"

She gave him an innocent look. "And I thought I was being so subtle." Her expression turned hopeful. "The little ones are down for the night. Katie's locked in her room, either on the phone or hopefully doing homework and listening to her iPod. The timing seems excellent for a little alone time for you and me."

Cal grinned. "Well, why didn't you say so the minute you walked in here? We've already wasted a good fifteen minutes."

"Talking to you is never a waste of time," she replied. "It counts as foreplay."

Cal laughed. "And that is why I love you."

Marrying this woman, despite all the controversy it had stirred up all over town, was the smartest thing he'd ever done.

* * *

Misty had just finished her homework—all of it, even English and math—when Katie called.

"I just got the third degree from Cal," Katie announced. "I think he was only minutes away from using torture to get the truth out of me."

Misty's breath caught in her throat. "The truth about what?"

"You skipping class," Katie said impatiently. "What else? I told you it wasn't going to stay a secret for long."

"Who'd he hear it from?"

"Ms. Reed, of course. Like you said, Mr. Jamison is clueless. At least Cal never mentioned him."

Panic immediately set in. "What am I going to do now?"

"Go to class, for starters," Katie said as if it would be a breeze to walk in and face down Annabelle after all the nasty innuendoes she'd posted online and the sly little threats she'd muttered whenever she and Misty crossed paths. "I'll be there, too. If Annabelle so much as looks at you cross-eyed, we can punch her lights out."

Despite her dismay, Misty managed a faint chuckle. "Yeah, like that's gonna happen."

"I'm telling you, we could do it," Katie said. "Ty's taught me a couple of self-defense moves. He said I might need 'em if some guy gets out of line when I'm on a date. Taking Annabelle down would be a piece of cake. I've seen her in gym class. She's a wuss."

"I'm not sure getting kicked out of school for fighting would be much better than getting kicked out for skipping class," Misty told her. "And you can't afford to get suspended again at all."

"If we told the truth about why we did it, I'll bet it would be okay," Katie said.

"But then even more people would find out what Annabelle is saying about me," Misty protested.

"The kids at school already know," Katie reminded her. "It's online, Misty, remember? Everyone who knows you knows not a word of it is true."

Misty heaved a sigh. "I know, but there are plenty of kids who believe her filthy lies. I hear them whispering behind my back when they see me. Why do you think I stay out of the cafeteria? Walking in there just gives them a chance to spout all that stuff right to my face. At least in my classes there's a teacher around. That usually shuts them up, except for Annabelle, anyway. She doesn't care who's around. I wish just once Ms. Reed or Mr. Jamison had heard what she said to me."

"I've heard her," Katie said. "So have some other kids. We'd all back you up if you told someone."

Misty thought about it. Heck, she'd thought about little else since the school year had started and Greg had asked her out that first time. That's when the online posts had started, as well. It hadn't been a coincidence. Katie was right about that.

But even though she knew she needed help, she couldn't bring herself to ask for it. It would be humiliating if her teachers, especially the ones she really admired, like Ms. Reed, found out what Annabelle was saying about her. They'd think she was some degenerate sex maniac or something. If she'd done even a tenth of the things Annabelle had posted online about her, she'd have probably been knocked up by now. It was disgusting.

And then there was no question her mom and dad would find out. Things were bad enough between them as it was. She didn't want them fighting over her and maybe even believing those awful lies. She could hear her dad blaming her mother for allowing her to become some trashy kid with no morals. God, it was a nightmare. Her whole life was a nightmare.

"I gotta go," she told Katie. "I think my mom's calling me."

"No, she's not," Katie said knowingly. "You just don't want to talk about this anymore."

“No, I don’t,” Misty said candidly.

“Then we’ll talk about something else,” Katie said at once. “Want to see a movie this weekend?”

“I don’t think so.” The last time she’d gone to the movies, she’d run into Greg and Annabelle. Greg had looked at her with that knowing sneer that made her blood run cold and Annabelle had looked smug. She’d wanted to leave even before the opening credits rolled.

“I know there’s no point in asking you to go to tomorrow night’s football game,” Katie said with regret.

“Not a chance,” Misty said with feeling.

“How about this? We could go to Wharton’s for a burger while the game’s going on. There won’t be any chance Annabelle will be there as long as Greg is playing. In fact, half the town will be at the game.”

“But you shouldn’t have to miss out on the game because of me,” Misty protested, though she was touched by Katie’s offer.

“Believe me, I’ll hear every detail over breakfast,” Katie assured her. “Kyle’s coming home for the weekend. My big brother and Cal will do the entire play-by-play. It’ll be like being there, but not as boring.”

Misty chuckled. “With a baseball jock like Ty for a big brother and Coach Maddox as a stepdad, how did you wind up with such an aversion to sports? Even Kyle, who never played anything, at least goes nuts over the games.”

Katie laughed. “Just lucky, I guess. But at least I know enough sports trivia to fake it with a date. No guy will ever believe I am totally clueless. So, are we on for tomorrow night?”

“If you’re sure you don’t care about going to the game, going to Wharton’s would be great.”

“Then it’s a plan. And keep thinking about talking to Ms. Reed, okay?”

“Sure,” Misty said, her mood sinking again. With Dr. Fullerton’s ultimatum hanging over her head, too, she might not have much choice.

3

Most days J.C. had someone in the office pick up lunch for him while they were out, but his concern for Misty made him restless today. He decided a walk to Wharton’s would relieve his stress and give him a much-needed change of scenery.

He’d just settled into a booth when he looked up and saw his nurse standing there with a statuesque, red-haired stranger beside her. She was attractive in a way that would have once appealed to him, but today he felt not a single spark. He congratulated himself on finally building up sufficient immunity to all women. It was something he’d worked hard to do ever since the disastrous and sadly predictable end of his marriage. He should have known before ever walking down the aisle that he, too, would fall victim to what he thought of as the Fullerton curse, an inability to choose women who wouldn’t betray them.

“Isn’t this a wonderful coincidence?” Debra said, beaming at him. “May we join you?”

Even though he saw this for exactly what it was—yet another of her very sneaky attempts to set him up—J.C. couldn’t think of a single gracious way to say no. “Of course,” he said grudgingly, standing. “Have a seat.”

As soon as they’d slid into the booth opposite him, Debra said, “J.C., this is my friend Linda’s daughter, Janice Walker. She’s visiting from California. Remember? I told you all about her yesterday. It’s her first time in Serenity.”

J.C. managed a smile. “And how are you liking it so far?”

“It’s a lovely town,” she said at once. “Call me Jan, please.”

She gave him a commiserating look that suggested she understood his discomfort and shared it. That, at least, helped him relax.

“How long will you be here?”

“Only a few days,” she said.

“Unless I can persuade her to stay longer,” Debra chimed in. “Did I mention that Jan is a pediatric nurse practitioner? I’ve been talking to Bill for ages about adding to the staff. With the town growing so fast and all these young families, the two of you can barely keep up anymore, isn’t that right?”

Though she had a point, J.C. was not about to encourage her scheme. “Bill makes the staffing decisions. It’s up to him.”

“But he’d listen to you,” Debra pressed.

Jan chuckled. “You’ve made your point, Debra. Leave the poor man alone. I did not come here looking for a job.”

“Maybe not, but you’d be the perfect addition to our team. I, for one, do not intend to let you get away.”

Fortunately Grace Wharton bustled over just then to take their orders. “Sorry, Doc Fullerton. We’ve been swamped. Apparently nobody in town decided to brown bag it today. They’re all in here, and not a one of them can make a decision.”

“Well, I don’t have that problem,” he assured her. “I’ll take the chef’s salad, Italian dressing on the side.”

Grace rolled her eyes as she always did. “Big surprise. One of these days I’m going to convince you to eat a burger like a normal customer.”

He laughed. “Someone besides me must eat the salad, or you wouldn’t have it on the menu.”

“How about a chocolate shake to go with it? Milk’s good for you, right?” she taunted.

“Not with the amount of ice cream you add to it,” he told her. “I’ve heard about those impossibly thick shakes you make. As delicious as they sound, I’ll pass.”

“You are so boring,” she accused, turning to Debra and Jan. “I hope the two of you are a little more adventurous.” She regarded Jan curiously. “You’re new in town. I never forget a face.”

“She’s visiting me from California,” Debra said. “Janice is the daughter of an old friend. I’m hoping to persuade her to move here.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Grace said. “Now, what can I get you?”

“Cheeseburger for me,” Debra said at once.

“And I’ll have the same,” Jan said, a twinkle in her eyes. “I’ll just run an extra mile this afternoon.”

J.C. gave her another look. “You’re a runner?”

“Not a marathoner, if that’s what you mean,” she said with a chuckle. “But I usually get in a few miles on a regular basis so I can justify all the terrible things I enjoy eating.”

“Maybe the two of you could go for a run together,” Debra suggested, clearly not giving up on her matchmaking scheme. “Jan mentioned just this morning that the track at the high school is starting to get boring. You could show her the route around the lake.”

“It’s not necessary,” Jan said, clearly embarrassed by Debra’s persistence.

“I’m going for a run first thing tomorrow morning,” J.C. found himself saying. “I’d be happy to pick you up and take you along. The lake is a lovely setting, especially just after dawn.”

Jan nodded. “Then I’d love it, if you’re sure you don’t mind.”

“Is seven too early? Much later and it starts getting crowded.”

“Absolutely not.”

He noticed that Debra finally sat back looking like the very sated cat that had swallowed the canary. A part of him hoped she’d choke on it.

* * *

Five minutes after he returned to the office, J.C. called his nurse in.

“You ready for your first patient?” Debra inquired cheerfully.

“Not just yet,” he said, trying to keep his expression stern. It was hard to do when she was so clearly pleased with herself. “Debra, have I not told you repeatedly that I’m not interested in dating?”

"You have," she said readily.

"And which part of that didn't you understand?"

"Oh, I heard all the words," she said. She beamed at him. "I just don't accept them."

"Debra," he began in frustration, then faltered. What could he say that he hadn't already said, especially if he had no intention of revealing all the sordid details about his divorce years ago? He heaved a sigh. "Never mind. Just put Mrs. Carson and Tommy in room two and tell them I'll be right there."

"Already done," she said, proving once more the sort of efficiency that would make her nearly impossible to replace. If she turned that same skill to his social life, he was probably doomed. The only way to beat her at that game would be to take charge of it himself.

"Have you spoken to Dr. Townsend about Jan?" he asked as she started to leave.

"Not just yet," she said. "I thought it would be more effective if you mentioned it."

He frowned at that. "The way I heard it straight from her lips, she's not really interested in moving here."

"Oh, I think she would if the right opportunity came along," she responded confidently.

"And you think working in a small town medical practice would be the right opportunity?"

She shrugged. "Maybe not, but I know working with you would be."

"Debra!"

She laughed at his discomfort. "I'm just saying, you could both do worse." Then she gave him a look that was all too knowing. "Something tells me you already have."

And that, J.C. thought, was the sad truth of things.

* * *

Laura was thoroughly frustrated by her inability to figure out what was going on with Misty. She'd been AWOL from class again today, and Cal had had nothing to report that might give her any insight beyond mentioning that Misty's pediatrician shared her concern. Time was running out. If she couldn't solve the mystery and get Misty back into class by Monday morning, she'd have no choice but to bring it to the principal's attention. Then it would be out of her hands. She'd take enough heat for having been silent for this long.

She'd just finished recording the grades from the last assignment when she looked up and saw Misty standing in the doorway to the classroom. She looked as if she might bolt at any second.

"There you are," Laura said, unable to keep a note of relief out of her voice. "I've missed you in class. I've asked your other teachers to let you know I wanted to see you, but you've been ignoring my messages."

"I'm sorry," Misty said, making her way into the room with unmistakable reluctance.

The poor child looked as if the weight of the world were on her shoulders.

"Do you have a minute now?" Misty asked hesitantly. "Or some other time?"

"Now's good," Laura assured her.

Misty sat down and looked everywhere but directly at her.

"Want to tell me what's been going on?" Laura asked eventually.

Misty shook her head. "Not really."

Laura bit back a smile. "Then why are you here?"

"I made a promise to somebody and I have to keep it or I'll be in big trouble."

"You're already in big trouble," Laura reminded her. "Skipping class is grounds for suspension."

Misty sighed, her expression oddly resigned. "Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad thing. I could just study at home and turn in my assignments."

Laura frowned at her. "What's wrong with school, Misty? You've always been an excellent student. The first papers you turned in for me were A-plus tests and essays, so I know you're not struggling with the material. Now you're skipping my class."

"And Mr. Jamison's," the teen admitted.

Laura wasn't all that surprised that he hadn't noticed. Dave knew his subjects—algebra and geometry—but beyond that he wasn't exactly a teacher who stayed on top of things. She wondered, though, what the common denominator was between those two classes.

"So it's not just my teaching style you don't like," she said, hoping to lighten the mood a little.

Misty looked appalled by the suggestion. "No, you're great! I love English. Math, too, for that matter. I just can't come to class."

"You need to explain that to me," Laura said firmly. "I can't help unless you do."

Misty shook her head. "It'll only get worse if I talk about it. Please, you've got to believe me. It's better if I'm not in class." Her expression brightened. "Maybe I could transfer back into the regular English and math classes or at least to the other section of AP math, the one Katie Townsend's in. That would be okay, wouldn't it?"

Laura immediately shook her head. "Not a good idea. Of course, it would be up to Mr. Jamison if he allowed you to change to his other AP class, but this English class is the only choice and you need to stay in it. I could understand you wanting to do that if you were having a hard time with the material, but you're not. These classes will be important on your transcripts for college, Misty. I thought you were determined to try for a scholarship to an Ivy League school."

"That's probably just a pipe dream, anyway," Misty said, though there was an unmistakable hint of regret in her voice. "I'll ace the other classes, and it'll be okay if I only get into a state school or even community college."

"That doesn't sound like you," Laura said, more worried than ever by the regretful, defeated tone in the girl's voice. Years ago, she'd probably sounded much the same way to Vicki Kincaid. She'd been lost and overwhelmed by a situation that had gotten out of control. Only Mrs. Kincaid's kindness and guidance had gotten her through that terrible time. She prayed she could provide the same for Misty.

"I'm just facing reality," Misty told her earnestly. "Please, Ms. Reed, let me transfer back. It's not such a big deal, really."

Laura was not about to authorize a transfer without a better reason than Misty was providing. Once more, she shook her head. "Sorry, no. You might see it as a quick and easy solution to whatever's going on, but there are more important things at stake. This could change your entire future."

Misty looked totally deflated. "If you won't okay that, will you at least do one other thing for me?"

"What's that?"

"I went to see someone yesterday to try to get an excuse to get out of school. He said he wouldn't tell my mom, but only if I talked to another adult. That's you. All you'd need to do is call him and tell him I made good on my promise." She regarded Laura hopefully. "Can you do that?"

Laura suddenly had some inkling who had extracted such a promise from her. It had been rather cleverly done, though she doubted that she was one bit more enlightened about what was really going on with Misty than J. C. Fullerton had apparently been.

"Give me the name and phone number," she said just to be sure she had it right.

Misty handed her a business card for the pediatrician. Laura had seen J.C. around town, of course, but they'd never met, despite several well-meaning friends who'd offered to fix them up a couple of years ago. Apparently he hadn't been interested.

"I'll talk to him," Laura said, resolving to stop by his office, rather than phoning. She might learn more if they were face-to-face. In the meantime, she held Misty's gaze and said, "But you and I are going to keep talking about this, and I expect you in class next week. Understood? No more second chances."

Misty ignored her edict and said only, "Can you call him right now? He kind of gave me a deadline, and it's only an hour from now."

"A deadline? And then what?"

“He said he’d have to stop by the house to see my mom.”

Laura’s respect for the doctor climbed a notch. Clever and responsible. It was a good combination.

“I’ll make the deadline,” she promised Misty. “And I’ll see you in here on Monday.”

“Whatever,” Misty said, which wasn’t especially reassuring.

At least she’d finally made contact, Laura thought. And that was due to J. C. Fullerton. For that alone, she owed the man a debt of gratitude.

* * *

J.C.’s gaze kept straying to the clock on the wall in his office. If his phone didn’t ring in the next fifteen minutes, then he had an uncomfortable visit to pay to Misty Dawson’s parents. When his phone buzzed, though, the medical records clerk who’d stayed to finish updating patient files advised him that Laura Reed was here to see him. It took him a second to recall that she was the teacher Cal had mentioned to him the night before.

“Great. Send her back.”

“Will do, and then I’m gone for the weekend. I’ll lock the door when I go.”

“Thanks. Have a good weekend,” he said, even as the door to his office swung open to reveal a pretty woman, probably in her early thirties, with soft clouds of highlighted brown curls framing her face. She was wearing one of those filmy skirts that seemed to be in style these days and a ruffled sweater. It all had the effect of softening her appearance. The effect was spoiled, though, by the no-nonsense glint in her eyes. He couldn’t quite imagine Misty choosing her to speak to about her problems.

“Dr. Fullerton,” she said briskly. “I’m Laura Reed, Misty Dawson’s English teacher.”

He stood and held out his hand. “Call me J.C. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Really? You didn’t seem so enthusiastic when Maybelle Hawkins at the Serenity Inn wanted to fix us up.”

He was about to sputter an embarrassed response when he caught the glint of real amusement in her eyes and realized she was actually teasing him, though he didn’t doubt for a second that Maybelle had tried to set them up. Until he’d moved out of the inn, the innkeeper had been second only to Debra in her determination to find him a wife.

“Actually, Maybelle tried to fix me up with at least a dozen women while I was staying at the inn. Her choices ranged from wildly inappropriate to downright weird. Excuse me for being skeptical about her taste.”

Laura laughed, and the tension in her face vanished. “But she does have the heart of a romantic,” she said. “Must be all those trysts I hear were held at the inn over the years.”

“That would definitely explain it,” he agreed, thinking how much prettier she was with a smile on her face. “So you’re here about Misty. Cal Maddox mentioned to me last night that you’d been concerned about her. Did she open up to you today about whatever’s going on?”

“Not really,” Laura admitted. “She did come to see me, though, and tried to convince me to let her transfer out of my advanced placement English class.”

J.C. frowned. “Is she failing?”

“Far from it.”

“Then why would she want to drop the class?”

“I have no idea. I was hoping, if you have the time, we could compare notes on what she said to each of us and see if we can figure this out. I’m worried she’s in some kind of trouble. What was your perception?”

“The same thing,” he admitted. Though it went against his gut instincts, he impulsively found himself asking, “Are you free for dinner? We could go to Rosalina’s or Sullivan’s and see if we can come up with any answers. Or did Maybelle find someone else who’s now waiting impatiently at home for you?”

"Maybelle's matchmaking on my behalf was no more successful than hers was with you. And truthfully I'm starved, so dinner sounds great."

"Any preference?"

"Either place works for me."

"It'll be quieter at Sullivan's, and the service is fast. There's a game at the high school tonight. I assume you're going?"

"I usually meet a couple of other teachers there," she confirmed.

"Good, then we're both on a timetable. I'll tell the waitress. If we're lucky, the Friday-night special will be catfish. No one does it quite like Dana Sue."

"So I hear," she said.

He regarded her with surprise. "You haven't been there?"

"Just a few times, and I've never had the catfish. Sullivan's is a little beyond a teacher's salary except for rare special occasions. Once in a while several of the teachers get together there to celebrate a birthday, but we usually opt for the Sunday brunch."

"Then Sullivan's it is, and it's my treat."

Her green eyes sparkled with more of that unexpected mirth. "Wouldn't that almost constitute a date? I thought you were opposed to dating. That's what Maybelle said."

He chuckled. "Maybelle has a big mouth, but to be honest, in this case, she wasn't far off the mark. Not that she or any of the other people I've tried to head off have paid a bit of attention to me. I must not sound as convincing as I've meant to."

Laura held his gaze. "Something else to discuss over dinner."

J.C. frowned. The last thing he wanted to do was give Laura Reed the wrong idea. She seemed like a lovely, thoughtful woman, but she needed to understand that this dinner was strictly business. They had a mystery to solve about a troubled teen, nothing more. He'd found that laying out the ground rules usually kept expectations in check and avoided unpleasantness later.

"Maybe we should stick to talking about Misty's problem." Even to his ears the comment sounded stuffy, but at least he'd made himself clear. He waited for her reaction. Her smile died along with the warmth in her eyes, but she merely shrugged.

"Whatever makes you comfortable, doctor," she said, suddenly sounding as distant and cool as he had. "Misty's my first priority, as well."

The relief he should have felt at her response didn't come. In fact, what he did feel was the faintest twinge of regret and disappointment. The sparks that had been missing during his lunch with Janice Walker reared up in I-told-you-so fashion, proving that his immunity sucked, after all.

That wasn't good, he thought, as he ushered her to the parking lot. It wasn't good at all.

He hoped he was just looking for a handy alternative who might get Debra to back off with her candidate, but he knew all too well that would be playing a dangerous and pretty selfish game. Tonight when he was home in his lonely bed, he'd have to examine his motives for inviting Laura Reed to dinner a little more closely...and then pray that the answers weren't too disturbing.

* * *

Laura saw the speculative looks when she walked into Sullivan's with J. C. Fullerton. Not only was she rarely seen around town with a date, but if he could be believed, neither was he. For a town that loved its gossip, their arrival together was bound to be big news.

"Are you sure this was a good idea?" she murmured as they were shown to a table.

J.C. frowned. "I thought you wanted to come here."

"I did until I realized that we were going to be on tonight's menu right along with the specials."

He glanced around, then sighed. "So we are. Too late to hide now, Laura. The cat's out of the bag."

She regarded him with surprise. "You think this is amusing? By tomorrow morning everyone in town will think we're dating."

“Anybody in your life going to be furious about that?” he inquired.

“Well, no, but...” She frowned. “It’s not a good idea. I don’t want to answer a million questions. Do you?”

“Hey, you’re my second unplanned date of the day,” he admitted with a rueful expression. “If anyone’s going to be a hot topic over breakfast, it’ll be me. They’ll probably just feel sorry for you getting mixed up with an obvious scoundrel.”

She stared at him incredulously. “What on earth are you talking about?”

He explained about his nurse and her apparent mission to set him up. “End result? First thing tomorrow I have a date to go for a run. I’m not a hundred percent sure how it happened. The words just came out of my mouth, and there I was with a date.”

Laura couldn’t help chuckling. “You’re really bad at not dating, aren’t you? Or is it that you’re easily manipulated?”

“Not until recently. Debra’s sneaky. And then you showed up in my office and before I knew it an innocent invitation came out of my mouth and here we are. Two dates today and one more in the morning. My extended track record as a total stick-in-the-mud has taken a real hit.”

“You don’t sound half as distressed as you should for a man who claims he doesn’t want to date,” she accused lightly.

He shrugged. “Maybe I’m tired of my own company, after all. And we’re here to talk about Misty, so it’s not as if this is a real date.”

“Tell that to everyone in this room currently on their cell phones reporting the news far and wide,” she said.

She could certainly understand why everyone in town would be fascinated with J.C. and consider him a hot prospect. Though he wore his light brown hair in a crew cut, it was evident that it would curl out of control if it grew longer. His compassionate brown eyes were exactly the sort to inspire young patients to confide in him, as Misty almost had. At least she’d sought him out as a trustworthy adult. That had to say a lot about his character.

When Laura glanced across the table, he was studying her, rather than the menu. The intensity of his gaze was disconcerting. She swallowed hard, then gestured toward the list of specials.

“No catfish, so what are you having?”

“The meatloaf’s another favorite of mine,” he said.

She nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll have that,” she said and set the menu aside. “Now tell me what Misty said to you.”

He winced. “I can’t. Doctor-patient confidentiality. I can tell you it was enough to worry me. How about you?”

“She’s been skipping my class and one other.”

He frowned. “But not all of them?”

She shook her head. “No, it seems her math class and mine are the only ones.”

“What’s the connection?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. My gut’s telling me she has a problem with another student, and those are the only two classes they’re both in. I’ll compare notes with Dave Jamison to see if there’s a student who’s a common denominator, but I’d be very surprised if there aren’t several. Small school, and only one AP English class, though there are two of the AP math classes. Not all advanced placement kids excel at both, but many of them do.”

“So that’s not going to narrow it down by much, is it?” he said. “And you haven’t heard rumors about a problem with another student?”

“Cal’s more likely to hear the school gossip than I am,” she admitted. “But he hasn’t heard a word.”

“That’s not good,” J.C. said, his expression filled with unmistakable concern. “For Misty to reach out to me and want a note to get out of school, she’s on edge. I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” Laura admitted. “I insisted that she be in class on Monday morning. We’ll see. Something tells me she won’t be. If so, I’ll have no choice but to go to the principal.”

“And then?”

“She’ll be suspended,” Laura said, dismayed. “I was so hoping to avoid that. It’s one thing when a kid breaks the rules for no good reason, but I don’t think that’s true in this instance. I think there’s a real problem.”

“My gut’s telling me the same thing,” J.C. said. “I could speak to the principal with you, even be there if Misty’s called in. Maybe together we could convince the principal to hold off on suspension, try to find some other solution.”

“Have you met Betty Donovan?” Laura inquired. “She doesn’t bend the rules for anyone. I even have to say, I can’t blame her. The next thing you know, every student and parent would be coming up with excuses that they think justify missing classes, that their little darling deserves an exception.”

He smiled. “Definitely a slippery slope,” he agreed. “But right now, I’m only concerned about Misty. She has to be my top priority.”

When she looked into his eyes, she saw real worry there. The depth of his caring surprised—and impressed—her. Maybe a little too much. He was shattering all sorts of first impressions—mostly bad ones. If he wasn’t careful, he was going to start sounding almost human.

4

Going online was a little like being unable to look away from some awful accident you drove past on the highway, Misty thought as she clicked on the social-networking site that Annabelle used to post her latest slurs against Misty. Sure enough, there were more, and they were just as ugly as the ones she’d posted two nights ago and a week before that. Tears stung Misty’s eyes as she read them.

How on earth was she supposed to show her face at school at all? She knew that’s exactly what Annabelle was hoping, that she’d be so humiliated she’d drop out. She also wanted to tarnish Misty’s reputation so badly that it would make Greg look like an idiot if he kept asking her out.

What Annabelle didn’t get was that Greg apparently got turned on by the idea of dating the school’s biggest slut. These posts just made him more determined. He’d left half a dozen messages on her cell phone in the past week. She’d stopped answering and stopped listening to the messages. She just deleted them. She didn’t even tell Katie about Greg’s calls because she was afraid Katie would insist she keep them as some kind of evidence in case things got even nastier.

When she got to Wharton’s Friday night, she could tell from the sympathetic expression on Katie’s face that she’d seen the online posts.

“You looked, didn’t you?” Katie asked.

“So did you,” Misty accused, slipping into the booth.

She glanced around Wharton’s and breathed a sigh of relief. There was no one in here except a couple of older ladies—Frances Wingate, a retired teacher, and Liz Johnson, who was practically a legend in town—eating ice cream. She doubted they paid any attention to the social-networking sites online.

“What did your mom say when you told her you weren’t going to the game?” Misty asked Katie after they’d given their order for burgers and fries to the waitress.

“She was fine with it. I told her I was meeting you here and that I’d be home way before curfew.” She rolled her eyes. “These days that’s nine o’clock, if you can believe it. She probably would have made me leave the stupid game at halftime. She’s still punishing me for skipping school. The grounding ended last week, but I’m pretty sure I’m going to have a curfew till I leave for college.” She gave Misty a warning look. “Let that be a lesson to you.”

“You don’t get it,” Misty responded. “I’d love to be grounded. Suspension would be great, too.”

“You don’t mean that,” Katie protested. “Did you talk to Ms. Reed?”

Misty nodded. “It didn’t help. She just asked a bunch of questions I wouldn’t answer. If I’m not in class Monday morning, it’s all over. She made that pretty clear. She’ll tell Mrs. Donovan.”

“So, you’re coming to class, right?” Katie pressed.

Misty felt tears welling up in her eyes. “How can I?”

Katie looked alarmed. “Misty, you don’t have a choice. You’re probably out of second chances.”

“You saw those new posts online. I don’t want to show my face at school ever again. Maybe I should just drop out, maybe even run away.”

“No!” Katie said, looking shocked. “You can’t do that. You’d be letting Annabelle win.”

“She’s already won. She’s making my life miserable, which is exactly what she wants to do.”

“You could fight back,” Katie suggested. “She’s not the only one who can post online. Turn the tables on her.”

“A part of me would love to do that,” Misty admitted. “Payback sounds great, but you know I’d be the one who’d wind up in trouble. Annabelle would claim I started it.”

“But there’s proof that she did,” Katie insisted. “The posts are dated.”

Misty shook her head. “I can’t do it,” she repeated. “It would all come out. It would kill my mom and dad. I don’t want them to ever have to read that filth.”

Silence fell as the waitress returned with their food and their diet colas. Thankfully, Grace Wharton, who seemed to be everywhere at once and heard everything, was at the game tonight. This waitress was fairly new to town and barely said two words to the customers.

“Thanks for meeting me here tonight,” Misty said eventually. “I don’t know what I’d do if I didn’t have at least one friend I could talk to about this.”

“You have plenty of friends,” Katie reminded her. “They’re all just waiting for a signal from you that you want them around.”

“I guess,” Misty said. She couldn’t help wondering, though, if real friends would have been waiting for some sign from her. Katie hadn’t. She’d been in her face, outraged on her behalf, from the moment the first post had gone up online. If anyone else had reached out, maybe she wouldn’t be feeling so isolated and alone. She had a hunch even the people who claimed to be on her side were wondering if what Annabelle was posting was true.

“What are you going to do this weekend?” Katie asked.

“Hang out at home, do my homework, nothing special,” Misty said with a shrug.

“There’s a fall festival close by. We could go to that. We probably wouldn’t see anyone from here.”

“How would we get there? Neither of us has a car.”

“But Kyle’s home and he does. I’ll bet I could talk him into taking us.”

Misty shook her head. She’d always had a secret crush on Kyle. She knew he wasn’t half as hot as Katie’s other brother, the sports superstar, but he was cute and smart and sweet. She was terrified someone in town would blab to him about the posts online, and he’d be totally disgusted with her. “No way,” she told Katie.

“Okay, then you could come to my house for a sleepover tomorrow night,” Katie suggested. “Mom wouldn’t mind.”

“Thanks, but I don’t think so,” Misty said. “Your stepdad knows about me skipping class. You said so yourself. I don’t want him to start asking questions.”

“Well, you can’t spend the whole weekend stuck at home all alone,” Katie protested. “How about I come over to your house? We could make popcorn and watch a bunch of romantic comedies.”

“Absolutely not,” Misty said, then blushed. “I didn’t mean that like it sounded, like I don’t want you there. It’s just my mom and dad. If they’re in the same room, they fight. You don’t want to be in the middle of that. Heck, I don’t want to be in the middle of that.”

“We could take our books and go study by the lake,” Katie suggested, clearly determined to be Misty’s social director. “That could be fun.”

Misty shook her head. “We might run into other kids from school.” She gave Katie a look filled with regret. “I’m sorry I’m such a downer. I know it’s no fun being around me right now.”

“You’re my friend, no matter what kind of mood you’re in,” Katie said loyally. “I learned all about what it means to be a good friend by watching my mom, Dana Sue and Helen. They were way younger than us when they first got to be friends, and they were our age when they started calling themselves the Sweet Magnolias. To this day nobody hurts one of them without answering to the others. I figure you and I are going to be just like that our whole lives.”

Katie held up a hand, and after a few seconds, Misty actually managed a watery smile and gave her the expected high five. Maybe her life didn’t totally suck, after all.

* * *

“Where’s Katie tonight?” Dana Sue Sullivan asked as she and Ronnie joined Maddie, Cal and the kids in bleachers at the high school.

“She met her friend Misty at Wharton’s for a burger,” Maddie replied.

Dana Sue regarded her with surprise. “I thought family football nights were a command performance, especially these days.”

Maddie shrugged. “Cal has me convinced that Misty needs a friend right now, and Katie’s apparently appointed herself to that role.”

“Leave it alone,” Cal murmured from beside Maddie.

Dana Sue studied her two friends, who rarely showed any signs of dissension, at least in public. “What am I missing?” she asked.

Ronnie gave her a warning look. “Did you not just hear Cal indicate we all need to stay out of this?”

Dana Sue cast a dismissive look at both men. “When a teenage girl is in some kind of trouble, I’m sorry if my antennae go up. Since we almost lost Annie to anorexia, you’ll have to pardon me if I’m concerned.”

Cal leaned across his wife and lowered his voice. “Not the place or the time, okay? This doesn’t involve an eating disorder, I can tell you that much.”

Just then the play-by-play announcer introduced Annabelle Litchfield, who was going to sing the national anthem.

“Now, there’s a girl who looks as if she has an eating disorder,” Dana Sue murmured. “I hope Mariah is paying close attention to her.”

Maddie smiled. “I think you can count on that. Mariah is counting on Annabelle taking them to the top of the country charts in Nashville with that voice of hers. She still hasn’t stopped talking about the American Idol judges who didn’t give her a pass for Hollywood. She complains to everyone who’ll listen that they must be tone-deaf. That won’t stop her from pushing Annabelle front and center for the next auditions.”

“I almost feel sorry for Annabelle,” Dana Sue said. “That’s a lot of pressure for a kid. And you know why Mariah’s doing it, don’t you? It’s all because she lost her own big shot at stardom when she got pregnant with Annabelle and had to get married. Now she’s living vicariously through her daughter.”

Cal gave her a wry look. “Maybe Mariah is pushing her for her own selfish reasons, but I don’t think you need to feel bad for Annabelle. She has more than her share of self-confidence. It’s a little unnerving, actually, to watch all the kids at school circle around her like she’s some diva with an entourage. I worry sometimes what will happen to her if that big break never materializes.”

“Oh, it will materialize,” Ronnie said. “Mariah’s the kind of woman for whom failure’s not an option. Not for her little girl. I’m not sure how Don Litchfield puts up with her.”

Dana Sue shuddered. “I still say that’s way too much pressure.”

“I’m with you,” Maddie said. “I saw my share of that kind of early adulation with Ty, when he was pitching right here at Serenity High and the pro scouts were hanging around.”

“Not the same at all,” Cal said. “Not only was Ty the real deal, but you raised him to be a grounded kid. The proof of that is how well he’s done as a pro.”

“Not without his share of mistakes,” Dana Sue commented, thinking of the way he’d nearly lost Annie by cheating on her before they were married. She squeezed Maddie’s hand. “All in the past, though. He couldn’t be a better husband and father now. My daughter’s a lucky young woman.”

“How on earth did we get so far off track, when there’s a game already started on the field?” Maddie said. “Aren’t we here for the football?”

Kyle leaned past Cal. “Since when, Mom? You know you’re going to hear about every play again at breakfast. You could sleep through the actual game.”

Maddie regarded him indignantly. “As if,” she huffed. “I’m a fan.”

Kyle’s grin only spread. “Any idea what an I-formation is? Or where the tailback plays?”

As the others chuckled, Maddie regarded her son with a dismayed expression. “Did I raise you to have such a smart mouth?”

“You did,” Kyle confirmed. “You always told me I was hilarious.”

Maddie sighed. “Well, I was mistaken. You’re just annoying.”

Dana Sue grinned. So did Cal, though he tried really hard to hide it. Maddie caught him and scowled. “You, too?”

Cal held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Time for hot dogs. Who wants one?”

A chorus greeted the question, and he and Ronnie took off for the relative safety of the refreshment stands.

Dana Sue leaned closer to her friend. “Now you can tell me the real scoop about what’s going on with Misty and Katie.”

Maddie just gave her a weary look. “I wish I knew. I just know Cal’s worried, and that’s never good.”

“Anything we should try to do to help?” Dana Sue asked.

Maddie shook her head. “If I think of anything, I’ll let you know. From what I know, Misty’s the one in real trouble. I just don’t want it rubbing off on Katie. She’s already had enough problems at school this year.”

“Hey, we survived all the mistakes we made at that age,” Dana Sue consoled her. “Katie will, too.”

Maddie still looked unconvinced. “I hope you’re right. I really do.”

Dana Sue grinned. “Since we have no solutions for that, how about some hot gossip to chew on? You’ll never guess who was having dinner at Sullivan’s just now when I left.”

“Who?”

“J. C. Fullerton and Laura Reed, the self-professed bachelor and the introvert teacher. Want to know the best part? They were actually laughing.”

“Holy mackerel,” Maddie said, obviously impressed. “J.C. is cute as can be, but this is the first I’ve heard of him going out with anyone in town. Even Bill’s mentioned what a hermit he’s been since he moved here. And Laura? She’s absolutely lovely, but awfully quiet. Who would have imagined the two of them hitting it off?”

“All I know is what I saw with my own eyes,” Dana Sue said. “They had their heads together and looked to me as if they were deep in conversation. I imagine it’ll be tomorrow’s headline at Wharton’s. Everyone in the place was grabbing for a cell phone to make a call.”

Maddie chuckled. “You gotta love the Serenity grapevine.”

“At least as long as you’re not the hot topic on it,” Dana Sue agreed. “We’ve both been there, done that.”

“Amen, sister!” Maddie said, just as the men returned with food and drinks.

Cal regarded them suspiciously. “Do we even want to know what you two had your heads together about?”

“I doubt it,” Dana Sue said breezily. “You macho men never give two hoots about girl talk.”

"I can always fill you in," Kyle said, giving them a wicked grin. "They forgot all about me being right here. They were never that careless when I was a kid. All Katie, Ty and I ever heard around the house when the Sweet Magnolias got together was 'little pitchers have big ears.' We missed all the good stuff."

"What's it going to cost for you to pretend you didn't hear any of this?" Dana Sue inquired.

Kyle's smile spread. "I could use a coupon for dinner at Sullivan's. I have a hot date tomorrow night."

"Don't you dare!" Maddie said to Dana Sue. "I will not have one of my children blackmailing you." She whirled on Kyle. "As for you, you're not too old for me to ground you."

"Mom, I don't live at home anymore," he reminded her patiently. "I can always head back to college."

Maddie buried her face in her hands. "What ever made me think that parenting would get easier with experience?"

Cal draped a comforting arm over her shoulders. "You were delusional, all right."

She turned an accusing look on him. "And just when I had three almost grown and out of the house, thanks to you I have two more little ones."

Cal laughed. "How can you complain when creating them was so much fun?"

Maddie shook her head. "Let's have this conversation again when they hit their teens."

"The teens," Ronnie said, nodding knowingly.

"Oh, don't even try to sound like you suffered through those years," Dana Sue said. "We were divorced most of the time when Annie was a teenager and you weren't even living here in Serenity."

Ronnie winced. "Probably best not to revisit that time right now. Sorry."

She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "It's okay. I've forgiven you. Mostly, anyway."

But an occasional reminder of that awful time did wonders to keep their marriage on track these days. Just like Maddie and Helen, she found herself counting her blessings when it came to love. Who could have imagined it would take the drastic step of a divorce to get her and Ronnie to such an incredible place?

* * *

J.C. glanced surreptitiously at his watch and realized that the football game at the high school would already be well under way. He enjoyed stopping by the games. The whole community usually attended, and he liked feeling a part of things. He should have noticed the time when Sullivan's had started emptying out a half hour ago.

"Am I keeping you from something?" Laura asked, studying him with concern. "I'm so sorry. It never occurred to me that you might have other plans. It's a Friday night. Of course you do."

He smiled, enjoying the flustered rise of color in her cheeks. "I mentioned before we came that I'd planned to stop by the game. You said you were planning on going, as well. I lost track of the time and just now realized it's probably started."

She looked even more nonplussed. "Oh, my gosh, we did talk about that. I need to make a call. The other teachers will wonder what on earth has happened to me."

"Why don't we drive over together? It'll be faster than going back to my office for your car."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not."

He quickly paid the check, then led the way to his car, which he'd wisely parked on the street, rather than in the crowded lot. Now that lot was almost empty.

Ten minutes later he found a parking space a block from the field. As soon as they got out, he could hear the shouts of the crowd and smell the aroma of popcorn.

"Sounds to me as if we just missed a great play," he said, as he helped Laura out of the car.

"Are you a big football fan?"

“Big enough,” he said. “I played a couple of years in college, but it was tough to do that and keep my grades high enough in premed. Since I knew I’d never go pro, I dropped off the team. Let me tell you, it put a crimp in my social life.”

She studied him curiously. “Then you weren’t always averse to dating?”

“Not always,” he said, leaving it at that.

“There’s a story there,” she said, holding his gaze. “Maybe you’ll tell me sometime.”

“Maybe,” he said, evasively. Surprisingly, though, the thought of revealing that time of his life didn’t seem as depressing as it usually did. The best thing about moving to Serenity had been the fact that not a soul in town knew a thing about his marriage to his childhood sweetheart or how it had blown up in his face.

When he’d paid for his ticket and Laura had shown her pass, they walked into the stadium just in time for the Serenity team to score a touchdown on a pass from quarterback Greg Bennett.

“That kid has an incredible arm,” he commented.

Laura nodded, but there was something in her expression that suggested she wasn’t half as impressed with him as J.C. was.

“You don’t like him,” he said intuitively.

“He’s a good player,” she said carefully.

“But you don’t like him,” he repeated. “Why?”

She hesitated, then said, “If you really want the truth, he has a massive ego and I’ve seen the careless way he treats the girls at school. It’s a bad combination.”

J.C. nodded. “I don’t really know him personally. He’s Bill’s patient. All I know is what I see on the field.”

“Lucky you,” she said, then winced. “What is wrong with me? I’m not usually so indiscreet when it comes to students.”

“I think we’re past worrying about being careful with each other. If we’re going to get to the bottom of what’s happening with Misty, we need to trust each other enough to speak frankly.”

“But one thing has nothing to do with the other,” she said.

J.C. hesitated. It was a shot in the dark, but it was something worth considering. “You sure about that? You just said Greg’s careless with the girls he dates. Could Misty be one of them?”

She shook her head at once. “I’d say she has better sense, but at that age, who knows? The problem with your theory, though, is that he’s not in either of the classes she’s been skipping. And the word around school is that he’s seeing Annabelle Litchfield.”

“Oh, well, it was a thought.”

“And not a bad one,” she said, then caught sight of her friends who were waving from the stands. “I see the other teachers. I should join them. If you’re not meeting anyone, you could come along.”

“And stir up even more talk?” he asked, grinning at her.

She smiled back at him. “That ship sailed long ago. First Sullivan’s and then we walked in here together. Haven’t you noticed that since the touchdown more eyes are on us than on the field? I can’t imagine having you sit in the bleachers with a bunch of women would make anything worse.”

“All women? Where are the men?”

“Sitting with their wives,” she said. “There’s not a bachelor on the faculty. Trust me, you’ll feel like a king.”

He laughed. “How can I possibly resist that? Lead the way.”

They climbed up to the top row, where three women moved over to make room for them. He already knew all of them, at least by sight.

“You sly girl,” Nancy Logan said in what was meant to be a whisper but was easily overheard. “How’d you snag the hottie?”

Laura blushed furiously. “I haven’t snagged anyone. J.C. and I were just having a quick bite to eat and realized it had gotten late and we both had plans to be at the game.”

“So you had dinner and then you came to the game together,” Nancy said, her grin spreading. “In my world that sounds a lot like a date.”

“Mine, too,” the others echoed.

J.C. saw that their teasing had Laura even more flustered. He leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Don’t panic. I can handle the talk, if you can.”

She turned to him wide-eyed. “But there shouldn’t be any talk, not about dating. You don’t date at all. I don’t date you. I just explained what happened.”

“And they’re obviously not buying it,” he said, impulsively taking her hand snugly in his. “Let’s just go with it.”

“Go with it,” she repeated, her eyes widening with alarm. “What does that mean, go with it?”

“It means tonight you and I are on a date. We’ll think of it as an experiment. Maybe I’ll discover that I’ve been wrong to forego a social life since moving to Serenity,” he added, though he suspected the opposite was more likely. All the talk might very well reinforce his conviction that he was better off alone.

Laura already looked uneasy. She swallowed hard at his assertion. “This is a bad idea, J.C.”

“Not to worry,” he consoled her. “Tomorrow we can break up. Happens all the time.”

“Not to me. Not in this town.”

He winked at her. “Then I’ll be your first.”

Something in the way she blanched at his choice of words set off alarm bells. No way, he thought. It wasn’t possible, was it? Could Laura Reed possibly be as innocent as all that? It should have terrified him, but suddenly he found himself more intrigued than ever.

5

Laura had spent most of the night wrestling with the covers and her confusing thoughts after spending the evening with J.C. To her surprise he’d fit right in with her friends from school. Once the teasing remarks had quieted down, they’d all cheered themselves hoarse as Serenity had managed to prevent a tying touchdown in the final seconds of the game.

Outside the stadium, he’d offered her a ride back to her car, but she’d insisted that Nancy could drop her off. He’d looked vaguely disappointed, which had surprised her after his insistence earlier in the evening that she wasn’t to construe his dinner invitation as anything other than a chance to discuss Misty and the problems she was having at school.

On the way to the parking lot by the medical practice, Nancy had had a million questions, which Laura had managed to sidestep fairly deftly, she thought.

“The man just offered to bring you over here himself. What is wrong with you?” Nancy had asked, regarding her with dismay. “I know his company has to be far more scintillating than mine.”

Laura had laughed. “Despite what he said at the game, we were never on a date, Nancy. Scintillating doesn’t enter into it.”

“Well, it should,” Nancy told her. “He’s the most available bachelor in the entire town, a doctor, no less. The competition has been fierce for years, and you’re the first woman I know of, at least locally, that he’s been out with.”

“Well, I happen to know for a fact that he has a date with a nurse practitioner in the morning,” she said, hoping to silence any more uncomfortable speculation about the two of them. J.C. might be a mystery she wouldn’t mind unraveling, but it simply wasn’t in the cards. One bit of wisdom she’d taken from past experience was an understanding of when to cut her losses.

“He told you he has a date tomorrow?” Linda asked. “What kind of man brags about a date when he’s out with someone else?”

“The kind of man who wants to make it clear he isn’t on a date with me,” she told her. “Do you get it yet?”

Nancy shook her head mournfully. “Well, I say it’s just sad. You looked cute together, and there were sparks. I could feel them.”

“Because you have a vivid imagination. It’s all those romance novels you read.”

“True, I want sparks like that,” Nancy admitted wistfully. “I have this sinking feeling, though, that I’ll never find them in Serenity. You know what slim pickings there are in this town. There are a few decent guys our age, but finding the whole package—intelligence, a sense of humor, good looks and a solid career—that’s all but impossible. Those guys get snapped up the minute they cross into the city limits. And now you already have the last man standing in your clutches.”

“Will you quit saying that?” Laura begged, though she couldn’t argue with Nancy’s premise that exciting, stimulating men were hard to find in Serenity.

“Only if I never see the two of you together again, which, if you want my opinion, would be a crying shame.”

“Thanks for the input, and for the ride,” Laura told her, quickly climbing out of the car. “See you on Monday.”

Unfortunately, even though she thought she’d managed to curb Nancy’s wild imagination for the moment, once she was curled up in bed, she couldn’t seem to stop herself from daydreaming about all sorts of scenarios that could play out between her and an intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate man like J.C. He was everything Rob Jefferson hadn’t been. Of course, Rob hadn’t really been a grown man when Laura had fallen for him. He’d been an irresponsible bad boy, which had been the allure for the quietest girl in school.

Don’t go there, she warned herself. Thinking about the disaster that relationship had become and the repercussions that haunted her still would keep her awake the rest of the night.

After banishing thoughts of both J.C. and her past, she’d finally fallen into a restless sleep around three in the morning, only to be awakened at six by the ringing of the phone.

“Yes, what?” she murmured sleepily.

“Not a morning person, are you?” a man’s voice inquired with a hint of laughter.

“Who is this?”

“It’s J.C.”

“At six o’clock in the freaking morning on a Saturday?” she grumbled, all of the kindly thoughts she’d had about him fleeing.

This time there was no attempt to hide his laughter. “Definitely not a morning person. Good to know. I was hoping to persuade you to go for that run with me.”

Sufficient blood finally reached her brain for her to comprehend what he was asking. “You woke me up to ask me to go for a run?”

“That’s the invitation,” he confirmed. “Breakfast after.”

“Was there absolutely anything in our very brief acquaintance to suggest that I run?”

“Nope, but I don’t mind if you’re a beginner.”

It suddenly dawned on her what he really wanted. “You’re looking for a buffer to warn off that other woman.”

“Congratulations! For that you get a giant mug of coffee to chase away the rest of those cobwebs.”

“You’re certifiable, you know that, don’t you?” She felt totally within her rights to declare that. No sane man made the sort of request he’d just made.

“But you’re considering this, right?” he pressed. “What’ll it take to push you over the edge? Danish? Croissants? An omelet?”

Since she was awake by now and surprisingly hungry, she gave up the fight. “I’ll take the omelet,” she said decisively. “With hash browns. And I need an hour to get ready.”

“Nobody needs an hour to get ready for a run,” he said. “I’ll give you fifteen minutes, twenty if you insist on me stopping to pick up that coffee.”

“I insist,” she said fervently. “I’m going to need a lot of coffee.”

She hung up without waiting for a response or offering him her address. If he couldn't figure out where she lived, so much the better, but something told her he wasn't the sort of man to leave a detail like that to chance.

* * *

J.C. pulled to a stop in the alley behind Sullivan's. Half the town knew that sous-chef Erik Whitney was there at the crack of dawn and that he always had a pot of the best coffee in town brewing. Thanks to the occasions when they'd hung out at the gym and the frequency of late-night calls when Erik and Helen's little girl had earaches, he allowed J.C. to take advantage of that from time to time.

"Sarah Beth's next appointment is free if you'll give me three cups of coffee to go," he told Erik.

Erik grinned. "You sound like a desperate man. Late night with the pretty schoolteacher? And exactly how does that third cup of coffee fit in? Sounds mysterious."

"It wasn't that late a night," J.C. admitted, figuring there was little point in denying that Laura was involved. "But apparently by her standards, it's an early morning. I convinced her to go for a run by promising her coffee. Yours is far more likely to impress her than Wharton's."

"Interesting," Erik said grinning. "So, the two of you really are an item? That was the hot topic in here last night, anyway, after your cozy meal together. I suspect there's already a pool going at Wharton's. Grace loves a romance."

J.C. winced. "Whoa! We're just acquaintances," he insisted. "I asked her to bail me out of a jam this morning, and she's gone along with it. I need to hurry, though, before she changes her mind."

"You're in a jam that involves going for a run?" Erik asked with unmistakable confusion. "Do I even want to know? And you still haven't explained the extra cup."

"If you're like everyone else in this town, of course you want to know," J.C. said, amused. "But I don't have the time or the inclination to fill you in. Coffees, please."

Erik handed over the cups. "Okay, but you owe me more than a free office visit for Sarah Beth. My wife's not going to be happy if I come home without details. Then, again, she's getting together with Maddie and Dana Sue this morning. If anything's going on, they'll already know about it."

Sadly, J.C. thought, they probably would.

* * *

Laura was waiting outside on the front steps of her apartment building when J.C. rolled to a stop on the street. She walked in his direction, regarding him with suspicion.

"There had better be coffee," she said before even touching the handle of the passenger door. He held up a cup. "Freshly brewed, as promised."

"Gimme," she said, getting into the car. She took a deep sniff. "I don't recognize this aroma. It smells amazing."

"Sullivan's."

"They're not open this early," she said, regarding him with amazement. "Who'd you bribe?"

"Erik. I promised him his daughter's next office visit on the house."

"Given what doctors charge these days, this is one pricey cup of coffee," she said as she took her first sip. "Oh, my God, it's worth every penny."

He laughed. "That's what I think every time I take advantage of Erik's good nature by sneaking in there before work. I think he considers the coffee to be his version of community service."

"I really do need to get to know him better," Laura said. "Do you think Helen would mind if I start hanging out with her husband?"

"She'd probably string you up a tree," he said with conviction as he pulled up in front of an unfamiliar house.

"Why are we here?" she asked, then remembered. "Ah, the date. Would you like me to escort you to the door?"

"No, I think I'll be safe enough from there to here. Just don't drink her coffee."

“If she’s a real runner, she probably doesn’t touch the stuff,” Laura said. “I’m actually surprised you do.”

“Some men have sex to start the day. Since there’s none of that in my life at the moment, I drink coffee. Seems to work,” he said right before he headed up the walk.

Just as he reached the door, it opened and a woman came out with her red hair pulled high in a sassy ponytail. She was wearing running shorts and a tight-fitting sports top, both meant to display an awful lot of well-toned flesh. Laura glanced down at her sweat pants and ancient T-shirt and sighed. There wasn’t a woman in the world who’d buy that she was serious competition for the woman walking her way, talking animatedly with J.C. as if it weren’t practically the middle of the night. She might be up at dawn on weekdays, but most Saturdays she indulged herself by sleeping as late as she wanted. Today’s was the first Saturday sunrise she’d seen in ages.

In the car, J.C. made the introductions, then headed for the park. As Laura had anticipated, Jan turned down the coffee and stuck to bottled water. J.C. practically gulped down a long swallow of the rejected coffee, then gave Laura an apologetic look. “Did you want this?”

She grinned at his guilty expression. “Not to worry, I’m still savoring the first cup.”

“Good,” he said and took another long slug of the coffee.

“Careful there,” she said, lowering her voice. “You don’t want to choke in front of your date.”

He glanced at her with a frown. “Was inviting you along a mistake?”

She beamed at him. “More than likely. So far, though, I’m fascinated to see what’ll happen next.”

Jan turned out to be a perfectly pleasant, intelligent woman who took her running seriously. When J.C. dutifully insisted on staying back with the lagging Laura, she ran on ahead, clearly determined to make it a real workout.

“You could go with her,” Laura told him. “I’m not going to catch up. In fact, I’m thinking I wouldn’t mind sitting in the shade of that old pin oak over there for a while and enjoying the rest of my coffee. It’s a beautiful morning. It finally feels like fall.”

He regarded her with amusement. “You really are out of your comfort zone, aren’t you?”

“So far, you probably can’t even imagine it,” she admitted. “I don’t sweat. I don’t glow. A brisk evening walk is about my limit.”

“Then I’m all the more grateful that you made an exception and came along this morning.”

“I don’t think you really needed my protection. I hope it won’t destroy your ego, but I’m not getting the sense that Jan’s any more into you than you’re into her.”

He looked surprised but not displeased by the assessment. “That’s what I thought, too, but Debra seemed so determined, it rattled me.”

“I suppose you wouldn’t be the first couple to be pushed together by an overly zealous matchmaker, but something tells me you’re both made of tougher stuff than that.”

He met her gaze, his curiosity apparent. “So, just for the record, why aren’t you married?”

Laura shrugged off what had been an increasingly touchy subject with her parents the past couple of years. Even though they lived in the Midwest and would probably rarely see her children if and when she had them, they seemed infatuated with the idea of grandchildren. Or maybe they were just eager to make up for the child they’d insisted she give up for adoption when she was barely seventeen, Rob’s child. None of that was something she intended to discuss with a man she barely knew. That shameful mistake—the pregnancy—wasn’t something she liked thinking about. Nor was relinquishing her child to strangers, even though she’d known in her heart it was for the best. Her mentor back then, Vicki Kincaid, had helped her not only to see that, but to bolster her spirits when she’d been the target of her classmates’ cruel remarks.

Instead of going into any of that, she explained, “I work with a lot of women. I don’t hang out in bars. Serenity’s a small town. There aren’t many opportunities for finding someone and falling madly in love.”

“Have you ever considered moving to a town where there might be more prospects?”

“Nope. I fell in love with this town the first time I came here for a job interview right out of college. Nothing’s changed my mind about wanting to stay here.”

“And you’re not lonely?”

She leveled a look into his eyes. “Mostly I’m content with my own company. How about you?”

For a moment, he looked disconcerted by the question, then confessed, “From time to time.”

“Then let me turn the tables. Why haven’t you married? You’ve admitted people are constantly throwing candidates in your direction.”

“None of them stuck,” he said. “And I learned a long time ago that marriage isn’t for me.”

“Trial and error?” she asked, suddenly getting it.

He smiled. “You could say that.”

“It must have been a pretty awful breakup.”

“You have no idea.” He waved her off. “Enough of that. It’s depressing.” He stood up. “And enough lollygagging, Ms. Reed. We’re going to finish this run, even if we have to do it at a snail’s pace.”

“I can run faster than a snail,” she protested, reluctantly getting to her feet and tossing her empty coffee cup into the trash.

“You’ll need to prove that before I’ll buy it,” he said. “Go. You set the pace.”

She forced herself to jog along, pushing herself to go much faster than she wanted to but mindful that she’d never break any speed records.

“Okay, you’ve matched a turtle,” J.C. admitted when they’d finally made their way around the lake and back to the car.

“I appreciate the recognition,” she commented wryly. “Where do you suppose Jan is?”

“Making her third loop, I imagine,” he said. “I know she passed us twice. Didn’t you see her wave?”

“You mean through my blinding tears?” she asked, only half kidding.

He nudged her in the ribs as he gave her a bottle of cool water. “Come on. It wasn’t that bad. You did it. Accomplishing something new should be giving you a huge adrenaline rush.”

She gave him a sour look as she sipped the water. “I’ll be sure to let you know when that kicks in.”

* * *

J.C. was barely behind his desk on Monday morning when Debra came stalking into his office, her expression radiating indignation.

“What were you thinking?” she demanded. “You invite Jan to go for a run, then bring another woman along. Who does that?”

“A man making it clear that he’s not interested in anything more than going for a run.” He gave her a hard look. “Was she offended?”

“Well, no, but that’s not the point. I’m offended.”

“I can’t imagine why. I took your houseguest out for a run, as promised. We even had a nice breakfast afterward. I paid. She and Laura Reed hit it off. If Jan stays in town, I imagine they’ll be friends.”

“If I wanted her to make a bunch of friends here, I’d have thrown a party,” she retorted. “Believe me, I can do Southern hospitality with the best of them.”

J.C. worked hard to stifle a grin. “Jan’s a very nice woman, Debra. She’s smart, levelheaded and practical. I mentioned to Bill that we ought to look into adding a nurse practitioner. He said he’d be happy to interview her, if she’s interested in staying.”

“Well, why would she stay now, with you all but declaring yourself off-limits?”

“Because she’d love the job and the town?” he suggested lightly. “Those would be the wise reasons to make such a drastic move clear across the country.”

She frowned at him. "You are very annoying."

"Only because you didn't get your way," he said. "Get Laine Tillis into room two, okay?"

"Already done," she said with a sniff. "Just because I'm mad at you doesn't mean I'm not going to do my job."

"Much appreciated," he told her with total sincerity.

That, he hoped, would be the end of her matchmaking...if he was lucky.

* * *

The starting bell for third period rang. Laura looked around the classroom and sighed. To her regret, there was no sign of Misty. Just as she was about to finish taking attendance, the door opened and Misty slipped in, hurrying to the very back of the room.

Laura heard a few whispered comments as she passed, but she couldn't make out what was said. Whatever it was, though, put dull red patches of color onto Misty's cheeks. Even from the front of the room, Laura couldn't mistake the sheen of tears in the girl's eyes.

Though she very badly wanted to get to the bottom of those comments, she decided to let it pass for now. She had a hunch one word would send Misty fleeing right back out the door.

Fortunately there was a test scheduled, which guaranteed absolute silence. There was a rustling of papers, a shuffling of feet, but no further whispering.

For the next forty-five minutes, Laura walked up and down the aisles, monitoring as the students wrote their essay responses. In the back of the room, she paused and gave Misty's shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

Misty glanced up at her, her expression filled with such misery that it nearly broke Laura's heart.

"I've finished the test. Could I please leave now?" Misty begged.

Though she wanted to insist that she stay right here until the class ended in another ten minutes, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I'll give you a pass for the library," she said quietly.

Misty gave her a grateful look, followed her to the front of the room, then all but ran out the door, leaving Laura to wonder what on earth she was supposed to do to fix this, whatever this was.

When the bell rang, she glanced at the students who'd been whispering earlier and picked one at random. "Trish, could I see you for a minute? The rest of you are dismissed. Leave your papers on my desk."

Trish Peterson shifted nervously from foot to foot while her classmates left. Only after the last of them had gone, did Laura meet her gaze.

"I need to go," Trish said. "I have P.E. next period and Miss Wilcox gets really mad if we're late."

"I'll write an excuse for you," Laura said. "Have a seat."

"Did I do something wrong?" Trish asked. "I wasn't cheating, Ms. Reed. I wouldn't do that."

"I know," Laura assured her. "But at the beginning of class, when Misty came in, there seemed to be a bit of a stir. I was hoping you could fill me in on what that was about."

Trish's eyes widened with alarm. "I don't know what you mean," she insisted, though it was obvious to Laura that she was lying. She'd been as chatty as her friends.

"You said something to Annabelle," Laura reminded her. "A couple of the boys made comments, as well. Do you all have a problem of some kind with Misty?"

"Not me," Trish said at once.

"Then who does?"

"No one, I swear it," she said, her gaze darting around.

"I hope that's the case," Laura told her emphatically, hoping to get her point across that whatever they were up to wasn't going to be tolerated. "Because I'd hate to find out you're not being truthful."

“Look, it’s got nothing to do with me, okay?” Trish insisted, her expression pleading. “Could I have that note now? I have to go. I’m the captain of one of the volleyball teams. I really need to be there.”

Though she wanted to pursue the subject some more, Laura reluctantly jotted out a note to Pam Wilcox, then waved Trish off. Though the girl had given away nothing, Laura was more convinced than ever that someone in her class was deliberately tormenting Misty and that others were going along with it. She just needed to figure out who, and how bad it had gotten.

* * *

Misty sat in the library with her head down on her books trying to keep herself from crying. No matter how hard she’d tried, she couldn’t stop thinking about the rude comments the other kids had made as she’d hurried to her seat in Ms. Reed’s class. Worse, she knew Ms. Reed had heard them, maybe not the words, but the whispering. What if she started asking a lot of questions? She was already determined to figure out what was going on. If she’d called Annabelle or any of the others on the carpet after class, Misty was probably doomed.

When the bell rang, she was tempted to stay right here. Mrs. Martin, the librarian, wouldn’t care if she stayed. She could just show her the pass again and explain she was doing an extra credit project for English.

She was still debating whether or not to risk it, when a shadow fell across the table. She looked up to find Annabelle scowling down at her.

“You need to watch it, slut,” Annabelle said.

She spoke in a sneering way that made Misty wonder how half the town could think Annabelle was some sweet little Southern belle. Of course, most people had never seen this mean side of her.

“What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” Annabelle prodded when Misty remained determinedly silent. “You are such a loser.”

Enough, Misty thought, squaring her shoulders. “If I’m such a loser, why are you so obsessed with me?” she retorted, feeling a certain amount of pride in having finally spoken up to her tormentor.

“Obsessed? Are you kidding me? You’re just an annoyance.”

“Is that because your boyfriend wants to go out with me?” Misty asked, knowing she was pushing her luck but suddenly beyond caring.

Color rose in Annabelle’s cheeks. Her eyes glittered with fury. “You stay away from Greg, you hear me?”

“I’m not the one making the passes,” Misty reminded her. “If you’ve got a problem keeping him in line, tell him. Leave me out of it.”

Annabelle stared at her with momentary shock, then looked for all the world as if she was about to start tearing Misty’s hair out. She’d just reached toward her, when Mrs. Martin appeared.

“Girls, you need to keep your voices down,” she said, then frowned at Annabelle. “Do you have a pass to be in here?”

Annabelle flushed guiltily. “No, ma’am.”

“Then I suggest you get to whatever class you’re due to attend before they count you as tardy.”

“What about her?” Annabelle asked.

Misty held up her pass. “All nice and legal,” she said with a sense of triumph.

Mrs. Martin smiled at Misty, then waved off Annabelle. “Run along.”

Only after Annabelle had gone did Mrs. Martin turn back to Misty. “I know perfectly well that pass was for last period, young lady, but it was obvious to me the two of you were having some kind of spat. Knowing how Annabelle can be, I assume she started it.”

Misty stared at her wide-eyed. “You’re blaming Annabelle?”

Mrs. Martin regarded her with a steady gaze. “Am I wrong?”

For the first time in weeks, Misty felt a tiny shred of hope. Still, confirming Mrs. Martin's guess could lead to the kind of showdown she'd been hoping to avoid. Better just to be grateful for the support and keep silent.

"It was no big deal, Mrs. Martin. Really."

The librarian didn't look convinced. "I'm not sure I believe that, but I'll let it pass. Just promise me that if there is more to it, you'll speak to me or one of your teachers and get it straightened out. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," Misty said. "Do I have to go to my next class?"

"Just this once I'll pretend that pass really is for an extra credit English project, just the way you told me when you came in." She gave her a stern look. "Just don't make a habit of this kind of thing, okay?"

"No way," Misty promised readily. "Thank you."

Mrs. Martin smiled at her. "I wish more of the students loved spending time in here the way you do and showed the same respect for the books. You're going to make something of yourself one day, Misty. Don't let anyone steer you off the path you're on to do that."

She walked away and left Misty in tears for the second time in the past hour, but these tears didn't feel nearly the same. They felt good.

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