

A romantic couple is shown from behind, standing in a field of tall grass. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white short-sleeved top. The man has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt. They are embracing, with the man's arm around the woman's shoulder. The background is a soft, golden sunset sky with light clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and intimate.

All This Time

A
WALKER FAMILY
NOVEL

Melissa Tagg

CHAPTER I

A single, strained scan of the church's hollowed interior was all it took for the whispers of Bear McKinley's past to turn to bellows.

The shards of glass from broken windows. The Portuguese slurs in scribbled neon graffiti on the walls. The scuffs on the pastel clay tile floor where missing furniture must have been dragged away.

Worse, the look on John's face. The one that told Bear, even this many years later, he'd never leave behind the label—*criminal*.

"You can't seriously think I had anything to do with this." Bear forced down the last dregs of the lukewarm coffee John's wife, Elizabeth, had handed him before leaving their shared, cramped apartment this morning. Another failed attempt to fit in with the people here in Brazil—he could never quite hide his distaste for the stuff.

And yet, he kept trying. Maybe that was his problem.

"Of course I don't think you did this." John's eyes, gray as his hair, were weary and worn, revealing so much more than mere disappointment with this latest round of vandalism.

It was the fourth incident since Bear had landed in South America ten months ago. More than one person had pointed out that the fledgling church had never encountered so much as a speck of resistance within the community before Bear's arrival. John—the well-respected missionary who'd helped start the

church—had always stood beside him, waved off the veiled remarks. But now . . .

Resignation weighed heavy in John's slumped shoulders.

"I know about the rumors, John. I know what people are saying about me."

That helping build a church was one thing, but what was a guy with no training, no seminary degree, and a decidedly lacking Portuguese vocabulary going to do once the new building was finished? Worse, that maybe he was only here because those felony convictions made it too hard to get a job in the States.

The faint call of an illegal street vendor, offering his key-cutting services from the bustling sidewalk outside, jarred his already taut nerves. He kicked at a Brahma beer can, probably left by the vandals, sending it clanking across the vacant room that should've been filled with new teakwood chairs. Who stole *chairs*?

And here he'd thought the unopened letter in his pocket would turn out to be the worst part of this day.

John dabbed a handkerchief over his forehead. The morning had already turned sweltering, Amazon humidity clawing through gaping windows, unusual for fall in Sao Paulo. It was still hard to think of May as autumn. Back in Iowa, spring showers and mild temperatures likely still held summer at bay.

Iowa. Such a far away place—another hemisphere, another lifetime—but it lingered at the borders of his heart. Happy memories for a soul that wasn't supposed to be this parched. He'd only lived there for five years—waiting out his probation until he could join John and Elizabeth in South America—but it'd become more of a home than his birthplace, Atlanta, had ever been.

More than, it seemed, Brazil might ever be.

"Bear—"

"They want me to leave, don't they?" He wasn't even sure which *they* he meant. Church members who'd learned one too many details about Bear's background? Leaders with the international outreach mission John represented? They'd only reluctantly allowed Bear to help with the church construction in the first place.

He'd been hopeful his temporary position might grow into something permanent. The new building included an attached community center where they planned to host an afterschool program for kids and a free clinic a couple days a week. He'd counted on being the one to run the place. Might even allow him to finally make use of his paramedic background and—

But no. He could see reality etched into every crease in John's face. "I've had two calls from the mission board already this morning," he admitted.

Bear paced to a broken window. The cloud-veiled Jaragua Peak, Sao Paulo's highest mountain, rose in the distance. So much beauty overlooking so much disparity. From its glass-gilded sky rises to the sprawling favelas—slums, they'd have called them in the States—this city had beckoned to him once upon a time. He'd thought the things so far out of reach for so long—purpose, passion, belonging—might catch up to him here. Had been so certain that serving alongside John and Elizabeth was his answer, the fulfillment of the promise he'd made in that dank prison cell:

I'll go. I'll finish what Annie started. I'll do what she couldn't.

Brazil was supposed to be his fresh start, his second chance. Instead, this now-sullied cement structure seemed to stand as a monument to his own huddled childhood memories—the litter, the glass, the loud street outside.

And the writing was, quite literally, on the wall: *Vaza! Go Away.*

Some people simply didn't get second chances.

"Bear, you have to know how much Elizabeth and I have loved having you here."

John's past-tense wording was enough to eradicate any lingering remnant of hope. Bear toed a jagged piece of glass away and dropped to perch on an overturned bucket.

"We look at you and we think of our Annie."

Her name squeezed the air from his lungs. "Please don't—"

John strode to his side and clamped one palm on his shoulder. "We love you like our own. You know that."

He should return the sentiment. Tell John all that his and Elizabeth's support had meant to him over the years. Even from afar, they'd gotten him through the darkest days of his life back in Atlanta and then continued to buoy him through those in-between years in small-town Iowa. By inviting Bear to join them in Brazil, Annie's parents had given his life meaning, made it possible to believe maybe a man really could erase all that was behind him.

He should tell John that the man's constant belief in him meant the world. But he couldn't get past the anger, or maybe hurt, tightening his throat now. "Go ahead and say the *but*."

"The *but*?"

Bear stood, his movement so swift the bucket knocked over behind him. "But even you are starting to wonder if there's something to the accusations."

John blinked, the lines in his face deepening under sunburned blotches.

“You, more than anyone, know where I come from.” He hated the hard bite in his own tone, hated his inability to turn it off. “You, more than anyone, have reason to doubt.”

“I don’t doubt *you*, Bear, but you once used the term ‘far-reaching’ to describe your family’s . . . activities. The thought has crossed my mind—”

“Far-reaching as in Atlanta’s outskirts, not another continent.”

“You told me how much they resented you leaving.”

Resented wasn’t nearly strong enough a word. “This has nothing to do with them.” He wouldn’t even entertain the thought. It was too ridiculous. “I left Georgia six, almost seven years ago.” Mere hours after the last prison cell buzz he ever hoped to hear. “I haven’t even talked to any of them since.”

John righted a tipped-over garbage can and started picking up the trash strewn about the empty space. “That’s not quite true, though. What about those letters from your sister-in-law?”

Bear swiped a can from the floor, crunched it with one palm and chucked it into the bin. He’d rather not talk about Rosa. Or her repeated letters—including the one in his pocket now. The one that probably said the same thing as all the rest: *Rio’s in trouble again. I don’t know what to do. The kids . . .*

“You can’t just keep ignoring it, Bear.”

He tossed another can. It hit the rim and clanged against the floor. “Ignoring what?” His family? He’d been doing that just fine for years now. He sent Rosa money when he could, but that was it.

“The fact that this isn’t solely about the vandalism or the rumors or the accusations of a few misguided people.”

“That’s exactly what it’s about.”

John stepped around the garbage bin to face Bear. “You forget how well I know you. You were torn up inside even before the vandalism began. Between your family, Annie, those letters . . . you’re hiding.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” The words ripped from him, harsh and punishing, echoing in the cavernous building. “I came here to help people—to help *you*.” Because he owed John and Elizabeth. Owed them more than he could ever possibly hope to repay. And because of that promise. “I’m not hiding.”

The storm inside him hit a fever pitch, too many thundering emotions all clambering for precedence. It wasn’t supposed to be

like this. The shambles of his past were never supposed to have a place here.

He was supposed to build a church. He was supposed to serve people in need. He was supposed to change lives the way John and Elizabeth—and yes, their Annie—had changed his so many years ago.

Instead, here he was once again—living with the shame of a branding he didn't deserve.

"The mission board has decided to take applications for the community center position."

The news dropped with a thud.

"You're welcome to apply, of course, but the board won't be hiring until later in the year. In the meantime . . ." John's posture drooped. "They feel you should return to the States for now." A ripped piece of tarp waved in the breeze from the doorless opening behind him. He waited one labored beat. "It's not only the mission board that's asking you to leave."

Bear forced himself to meet John's eyes. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I care too much about you to see you like this—so tightly wound. This doesn't have to be forever. But for now . . . I think you need to go back. You need to go home."

Bear lowered his head into his hands, his fingers rubbing his temples before scraping down his cheeks. With his back against the cement wall behind him—somehow cold despite the day's heat—he slid down to sit on the floor, knees bent, Rosa's letter crinkling in his pocket.

Home? He didn't even know where that was anymore.

CHAPTER 2

Raegan Walker's siblings were unbelievable. All of them—the two sitting across from her in the rattan chairs and the one whose pixelated face watched her from the computer screen. Darn technology.

“An *intervention*?” The porch swing creaked as she shifted to cross her arms in front of her denim overalls. At least her gardening gloves hid the fact that her hands had balled into fists. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

A late May breeze hummed through the wind chimes dangling above, and sunshine gushed over the rambling lawn in front of Dad’s house.

Rural Iowa outdid itself today—rested and revived after a long winter, hints of summer present in fully clad trees and so much vibrant green. The cobalt, cloudless sky, the tingle of warmth, the damp, earthy scent in the air—it had all seemed so promising an hour ago. She’d pulled on the faded overalls she found at the back of her closet and tucked her hair under one of Mom’s old straw hats, intent on a peaceful Sunday afternoon of yard work.

But then Kate and Beckett had rolled down the gravel lane in Beckett’s classic convertible, toting along Logan all the way from Chicago thanks to a laptop and the Internet. *Unbelievable!*

“It’s not an intervention, Rae.” Even fuzzy from straining wi-fi, Logan’s eyes radiated concern. Up until today, she might’ve considered it impossible to ever get all that annoyed at her oldest brother. He was the quiet one, the gentle one.

Turned out it didn’t matter how gently a person told you your life was a wreck. It stung all the same.

“You all showed up here out of the blue. You insisted I sit down and then proceeded to take turns telling me all the things I’m doing wrong in my life.” She pulled off Mom’s hat and plunked it on the seat beside her. “Sounds like an intervention to me.”

“Raegan, you’re not listening.” This from Kate. Kate the newlywed with the handsome husband and the flourishing writing career. Easy for her to talk about the importance of “having direction in life.”

“Oh, I’m listening. So far, we’ve covered my lack of college degree. How I can’t possibly be satisfied working multiple part-time jobs. How I’m too old to still be sleeping in my daybed.” Because apparently being a couple months from twenty-seven and still living in her childhood bedroom spelled *pathetic*.

Kate leaned forward, elbows on her knees. “We did not say those things.”

Raegan’s feet flattened on the porch floor. The swing stilled. “You implied. I inferred.”

“We just want you to be happy.” Logan again. “College was only a suggestion. I thought maybe you might want to take some art classes. But we couldn’t care less if you have a degree.”

Kate jumped in again. “And there’s nothing wrong with living at Dad’s. It’s just that you’ve never had a chance to experience life outside Maple Valley. We want to make sure there’s nothing holding you back. If it’s Dad’s health you’re worried about—”

Raegan jerked to her feet, yanked off both garden gloves. “Has it ever occurred to you guys that maybe I *like* living in Maple Valley? That big cities and big careers have never held the allure for me they do you all?” She chucked one glove at Kate, then the other at Beckett. “If I had a third it’d be hitting the computer screen right now, Logan.”

His chuckle only added to her exasperation. This wasn’t funny. It was an ambush.

Couldn’t they see she was doing just fine? She enjoyed her life. She cycled through jobs often enough to give her variety, and she had plenty of friends and outside activities to keep her busy.

And then there was the apartment. The one where she stored her secrets. A treasured hideaway right in the midst of a town where most people knew most things about most everyone. Her own private joy.

Maybe she should just tell Logan and Kate and Beck about the apartment, the makeshift art studio she’d set up there. But then she’d have to tell them *whose* apartment it really was and that’d set off a whole new round of uncomfortable indictments. But it might

be worth it if it convinced them she wasn't just wasting away here at Dad's, that she was . . . happy.

She was, wasn't she?

I am. Of course, I am.

As long as she didn't think too long about Mom. Or too hard about Bear.

She budged past her siblings before either image—the mother she'd lost or the man she missed—could take root in her mind. She marched down the porch steps, squinting in the bright sun. She heard Kate say her name, then Beckett's calm, "Let me."

By the time Beckett caught up to her, she'd already rounded the house to where she'd balanced her ladder earlier. It made sense that he'd be the one to follow her. They were the closest in age and most of the time, in temperament. They understood each other.

At least, she'd thought they did. But someone who understood her wouldn't bombard her like this. She stared at her shadow against the rustic wood exterior of Dad's house. Did Dad agree with his three oldest offspring? Did *he* wonder when or if she'd ever move out?

She'd ask him if he wasn't on his way to Chicago right now to see Logan and his family. He'd left right after church. It was his first solo trip since the brain tumor last year, the subsequent surgery and long recovery over the winter.

"Can you at least appreciate that I brought Twizzlers?"

Raegan whirled. "A bribe's not going to work, Beck."

She expected a smirk, but received instead a consoling chuckle. "Not a bribe. A peace offering."

Hard to believe, sometimes, that this settled, bearded man in the plaid flannel shirt and grass-stained jeans had still been a corporate lawyer back in Boston this time last year. He looked thoroughly the part of the orchard co-manager he'd become.

"Hasn't Kit tired of all that hair on your face yet?" She yanked the bag of licorice from his hands and tore it open.

"She likes the beard. She says I look like a lumberjack."

"She's blinded by love."

Beckett practically beamed. One of these days he'd up and marry Kit Danby, his childhood best friend turned girlfriend, and then it'd be just Raegan and Dad once again, living in this house with too many empty bedrooms.

Which is why she hadn't been able to use Beckett as an excuse when her siblings brought up her own living situation. He might be sleeping in his old bedroom just like her, but they all knew he wouldn't be here long. He already spent more time at Kit's orchard than he did here.

In other words, Beckett had direction. Plans. A trajectory for his life.

All the things it seemed a person was supposed to have if they wished to avoid interventions from well-meaning, but pushy siblings. She'd known she was slower than the others at figuring out what came next after young adulthood. She just hadn't realized there was deadline.

"You know what my first thought was when Kate and I pulled into Dad's driveway and saw you up on this ladder?"

She chomped on a Twizzler. "That this was a horrible idea and you should let your little sister live her life the way she wants?"

Beckett's lone dimple appeared. "No. I thought, 'Man, she looks like Mom.'"

Raegan swallowed, tension easing just the slightest, just enough to let in a wistful longing. "I was wearing her hat."

"Wasn't just that. You look like her. Always have. The blue eyes, the blonde hair, especially now that it's grown out a little."

She was the only one of her siblings to have inherited their mom's lighter coloring. The rest all had Dad's chestnut eyes and dark hair. She'd felt so much more like she fit in back when Mom was alive.

Ten years, and sometimes it still hurt as if it were yesterday.

"Of course, Mom never had pink streaks in hers," Beckett added.

The pale pink strands threading through Raegan's hair were a far cry from the bold blues and purples she'd experimented with in the past. But she liked the softer look. It felt somehow fitting for the relatively subdued feel of this year so far. She welcomed the change, the calm. Last year had been hard—Dad's illness. Bear's leaving.

Maybe, too, watching her siblings settle so fully into lives that suited them so wholly. Both Kate and Beckett had moved back to Maple Valley, entering new stages in their careers—or in Beckett's case, finding a new career altogether. Logan had discovered a fresh joy after the pain of his first wife's death. And in the past couple of years, all three had fallen deeply in love. She was happy for each of them, she really was. But it was hard not to feel . . . behind. No matter how much she said otherwise.

"We didn't mean to offend you, you know. If you tell me you're perfectly content with life as it is, living here and working as a librarian and lifeguard and dogwalker—"

She rolled her eyes and shoved the licorice bag at Beckett. "I haven't walked a dog in two years."

“Well, I forget what gigs you’ve got going at the moment.”

She stepped onto the ladder’s first rung. “Library, community center pool, and I’m helping Dad at the depot.” Although after going stir-crazy all winter, Dad was taking on more and more hours at their town’s little tourist stop—the Maple Valley Scenic Railway and Museum. He probably wouldn’t need her help much longer.

“Okay. You tell me that your life looks the way you want it to look, and I won’t say another word.”

She twisted to face Beckett. “You’ll call off the others, too?”

“Yes. As long as you can honestly say you’re happy just as you are, that you aren’t hiding any hurt or regret, that I’m just imagining the fact that you might still be pining—”

“Don’t even say it, Beck. You’re so far off base.”

“Am I?”

“I’ll prove it.” She hopped off the ladder, her purple canvas shoes thudding in the grass. She reached into the pocket of her overalls and produced the paper she’d been meaning to give back to Beckett for weeks. Months, really. She kept carrying it around with her, waiting for the perfect time.

A swift glance was enough to make Beckett’s jaw tighten. “The airline voucher. Rae, I gave you this for a reason.”

Oh, she knew why he’d given it to her. He’d presented it to her the day of Kate’s wedding, way back in December. He’d expected her to go running down to South America, chase stupid Bear McKinley across the equator.

Bear McKinley with the handsome face and the mesmerizing eyes and the noble need to go play missionary thousands of miles away. He might’ve spent five years living in Maple Valley, but he’d always been clear about his eventual move—a move that had finally happened last summer. And Beckett had been around to witness the aftermath. He called it pining. She called it adjusting.

“I just don’t want my little sister hurting over a situation that could change—change for the better—if she was only brave enough to do something about it.”

That’s what he’d said when he’d given her the airline voucher. They were the words of a brother who cared.

But one who simply had no idea what he’d asked of her. Travel down to Brazil? It was impossible . . . for reasons that had nothing to do with Bear.

“It was never going to work, Beck. We were only ever friends.” Though she was pretty sure she’d worn her hopeless

crush on her sleeve since the day she'd met him. Embarrassing, really, but this was *Bear* they were talking about. Who could blame her?

Beckett let out a sigh and reached for the voucher. "I guess, considering how long it's been, I kinda knew you weren't going to use it. Suppose I can take Kit somewhere fun before it expires. I just thought—"

"I know what you thought and it was incredibly sweet of you. I only held on to it this long because I hated the thought of disappointing you." She met her brother's eyes. "But I'm fine, Beckett."

His quick blink couldn't hide his doubt. "You want some help cleaning the rain gutters?"

She shook her head and moved to the ladder once more. "No, but thanks, anyway."

"I'm leaving the Twizzlers." By the look on Beckett's face, there was more he wanted to say, but he had the grace to leave it at that. Seconds later, he angled out of sight and within minutes, she heard his car pulling out of the driveway.

Well, that was that. She could finally get to work. The ladder jostled under her moving hands and feet, each step like a climb to freedom. Freedom from the tension, the strain of her siblings' visit.

From the lie she might've just told Beckett.

I'm fine.

No, not a lie. She *was* fine. She enjoyed her jobs. She was over *Bear*. She was delving back into her art.

And it'd been exactly one year, seven months and thirteen days since her last attack.

At the top of the ladder now, Raegan pulled a crumpled garbage bag from her pocket, shook it free and then reached into the hunter green gutters. She wrinkled her nose at the damp mess—soggy leaves, twigs. She should've held on to her garden gloves.

She went to work clearing the gutter as far as she could reach, only pausing when her fingers closed around something hard. A baseball? She pulled it free from a tangle of dead foliage. One of Beckett's?

She readied to toss the ball over her shoulder at the same instance as an unexpected voice came from behind. "Ah, Raegan Walker." She jerked in surprise, lobbing the ball.

And then nearly fell off the ladder at the sound of a thump, followed immediately by a man's moan. *Oh no . . .*

She rotated to see the bent over form—bushy white hair, sweater vest, both hands now covering one eye.

Oh brother. She'd just clocked the mayor.

She scurried down her ladder. "Mayor Milt, I am so, so, *soooo* sorry."

He peered at her from his one good eye. "And here I came to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime." He spoke in his usual dramatic fashion. "But you'd better get me an ice pack first."

This couldn't be where Bear's brother and sister-in-law and their kids lived—this dilapidated apartment complex with the dingy brick and the rows of rusted metal doors.

Then again, why was he surprised? He and Rio had spent the bulk of their childhood only a few blocks away, living in a pit just like this right down to the thrumming base coming from one of the units, the yelling from another.

"You just had to come back, didn't you?" His whispered words were carried away on a sticky breeze. That was Atlanta for you—hot and suffocating, even on the brink of twilight.

Who was he speaking to, anyway? The younger brother who'd apparently decided to return to the squalor of his youth? Or himself?

Well, he wouldn't be here long. John had insisted it was time for Bear to face his past. But what did that even mean? No, what was done was done. It was time to think about his future—which is what he'd been doing for the past five days as he packed his belongings, booked his plane ticket back to the States, and said his goodbyes.

He'd hoped the mission board would simply hand him the community center position. But if that wasn't to be, fine. He'd pour his efforts into proving himself the best man for the job. Though his paramedic certification had lapsed years ago, he'd re-train as an EMT—that should be useful in running the free clinic. He'd get letters of recommendation from former employers. He'd study Portuguese.

And if he wasn't invited back to Brazil, he'd find some other nonprofit or church organization or mission group that wanted him. He could dig wells in Africa or build homes or roads in a developing country somewhere.

Because he'd made a promise. And he intended to keep it. He just had to do this one thing first.

Bear closed the door of the rental car he'd picked up at the airport. He hadn't slept a wink on the nine-hour flight from Brazil. Instead, he'd spent the entire, wearying ride ping-ponging between pained replays of his last hours in Sao Paulo—the tears in Elizabeth's eyes, the regret in John's—and rereads of Rosa's letter.

Bear,

I'm writing you one more time, but only because I'm desperate. Not because I think you actually care. If you did, you'd have come by now. You'd at least have given me a phone number to call.

It's been three weeks since I've seen Rio. This isn't normal, even for him. There have been threats. You know the world we live in.

I can't hide this from the kids much longer. I don't know what to do.

Come home. Please.

Rosa

He'd read it so many times it'd engrained itself in his brain. *Come home.* Didn't Rosa realize this city and all it represented to him had stopped being *home* long ago?

He rubbed his palms on his unshaven cheeks, trying to massage away his exhaustion, as he walked the uneven sidewalk toward Building B. Identical buildings rose up on either side against the backdrop of a burning dusk. So familiar, this hemmed-in, caged feeling.

Everything in him had wanted to ignore Rosa's plea. Send money like every time before and let that be enough. He'd walked away from this world—twice. He had exactly zero desire to return.

And he wouldn't have except for one thing. Well, two. The nephew he'd seen but once and the niece he'd never met.

Rio and Rosa might've chosen to stay in this place—with its unbending family loyalties and crime of the drug-cooking variety—but those two kids hadn't. And thirty-two wasn't so old an age he didn't remember what it was like, wishing he'd been born to any other family on any other street.

He'd stay a few days, a week at most. Make sure the refrigerator was full; the kids, healthy. He'd play uncle for a bit—maybe take them out for ice cream or catch a ballgame. Maybe that would be enough to convince John he wasn't *hiding*.

As for Rio's alleged disappearance, more than likely his brother was sitting in a jail cell or off on a drug run. He couldn't

help Rosa there. He'd tried that already. And it'd cost him—cost Annie—too much.

No. There'd be no playing hero this time. He'd check in on Rosa and the kids, do what little he could to improve their situation. But then he had to find some way to press a restart button on his own life.

Bear climbed clanging metal stairs to reach the second floor, then trekked the walkway until he reached Unit 232. He could feel the beads of sweat on his forehead, his too-long, black hair damp at the tips where it brushed over his ears. He knocked, waited. The smell of rotten fruit wafted in from somewhere, probably that overflowing dumpster he'd seen near the bottom of the stairs. Another knock.

The door inched open, its sliding chain lock in place.

"Rosa?"

The shadowed eyes visible in the darkened sliver of space blinked. "Bear?"

"Yeah. You gonna let me in?"

The door swung open, and the next thing he knew, the slight woman was tugging him through the doorway. He tumbled over the threshold and she slammed the door behind him, hastily sliding the chain lock back into place. She whirled. "I thought you'd never come."

"Nice to see you, too. Why's it so dark in here?" Only the reddish light of sunset squeezed through the angled blinds, painting garish stripes on the opposite wall. He sidestepped a doll missing an arm to turn on a lamp on an end table. Nothing. No electricity?

He expelled a sigh rife with all the angst and frustration of the past week.

Past week? Try the past decade.

"How long, Rosa?"

"Electricity was turned off yesterday. We've still got water."

His brother's wife was even shorter than he remembered, barely coming up to his chest. But she seemed to be pulling herself to her full height now, such as it was, shoulders stiffening under a dress that hung from her gaunt frame. The smell of stale, fried food permeated the living room, if it could be called that, with its bare furnishings that even in the dark he could tell were on their last legs.

"I'm doing the best I can. No thanks to you."

"Rosa—"

“Over and over I wrote to you. I begged you.” Her faint Puerto Rican accent was so similar to his mother’s. Did Mom ever think of him now? Wonder what had become of him? For all he knew, she and his step-dad still lived only a mile or two from here.

“I’m here now. If Rio still isn’t home—”

“He isn’t. He’s in jail. I found out after I’d already sent you my last letter. Good old Atlanta P.D.”

Well, at least it was the safer of the two options Bear had pictured. “All right, then we just need a plan to get your electricity back on and—”

Rosa thumped one finger into his chest. “I *have* a plan. You will make it easier for me to follow through. Come.” She started down a dim hallway.

“Follow through with what?”

She ignored him as she entered the kitchen. This room was lighter at least, thanks to the window over the sink and a flickering streetlamp outside. But that meant it was easier to see the disarray of this space—the empty takeout containers littering the counter, the stained tile on the floor, the pile of dishes in the sink.

And the duffel bag on the table, bulging and unzipped. Rosa immediately went to work, stuffing in a pile of clothes. “Rosa, talk to me. What is this?”

“This is everything you need to take the kids. We’re being evicted. I just received a 30-day notice today. So I’d appreciate it if you’d take the kids for two or three weeks while I sort everything out. Perhaps a month. Get them out of Atlanta. Out of the state, if you can.”

Shock froze his thoughts, his words. She wanted him to do *what?*

“Even if we weren’t being evicted, it’s too dangerous for them here. Someone threw a brick in their bedroom window two days ago. There was a note tied to it—only one word: Rio. My husband may be in jail, but his *activities* still affect us.”

Bear’s mind spun. She’d mentioned threats in her letter. He hadn’t realized— “Rosa, if things are that bad, we need to go to the police.”

“The police don’t help people like us.”

How many times had he heard that exact sentiment? From his father, his mother, his step-dad. From the relatives and friends who made up the tight-knit world he’d grown up in where there was always something to hide and someone else to blame.

“They’ll help if we go to them. We’ll give them all the facts we can. You’ll have to be honest about anything you know of Rio’s actions. Drugs, stealing, whatever he’s been up to.” Had Rio

gotten in the middle of a turf war? Sold on someone else's beat?
Cheated a buyer?

Rosa yanked on the bag's zipper. It caught and snagged. "I'm not going to the police. I'm going to work extra hours and find a new place to live. And maybe I can find out what Rio has done, try to fix it. But I can't do that when I'm constantly concerned about the kids."

His aggravation finally spilled over, and he yanked the bag from Rosa's grasp. "You've got to listen to reason. I know you're worried about Rio—"

"Aren't you? Do you even care about him?" Anger flashed in her eyes.

And he simply couldn't help it—the crack in his voice, the bitter pain in his words. "That's not fair, Rosa. You know all I gave up for him. And for you. You *know*."

An eerie calm settled over her. "I'm thankful for the price you paid, Bear, but it is no good to me now if you walk away again."

How could she say that? "I'm trying to help you. If you'd only listen—"

"There's no more time for that. Come see Jamie and Erin."

Jamie and Erin. Why did hearing their names make this all worse somehow? *How could you do it, Rio? Endanger your kids, send your wife into a crazed panic?*

But Rosa didn't seem panicked now. She walked evenly, albeit briskly, across the congested apartment to an open door. Muted lamplight blurred through the blanket taped over the room's broken window. In a quilt-less twin bed, the kids lay together, spindly limbs sprawling. They both had Rio's thick, black hair—well, and Bear's.

"Jamie and Erin." An unexpected sheen of regret tinted his whisper. His nephew and his niece. *Family.* He tasted the word, and for once, it wasn't sour.

"Rio has tried to be a good father, Bear," Rosa said softly. "He's had a good job as a truck driver for almost three years. We don't see him much—the kids hardly know him—but he's done his best to provide."

Oh, Rosa. She knew as well as anyone that in their circles, *truck driver* generally translated to *drug runner*.

"It's only been in the past six months that something has changed again. I don't know what he's doing, but it's different this time. I need to find out why we're receiving these threats. My father will help."

“Your father is this neighborhood’s equivalent of a mob boss.” And last Bear knew, the man hated Rio. Hated Bear, too.

“Which is why I need his help. He knows everything that goes on. But I will not risk Jamie and Erin’s safety. Whatever Rio has done—or is somehow doing still—it’s hitting too close to home.” A churlish gust of wind blew against the window, loosening one corner of the blanket. Rosa crossed the room. “I was going to take them to a friend, but this is better. You’re family.”

“I just got back to the states, Rosa. I don’t even know where I’m going to live.” Although instinct kept suggesting he return to Iowa. To Maple Valley, where everyone seemed to think the best of him. For a time, he’d made a life for himself in that quaint little town, made friends. Seth Walker, who’d become his best friend. Seth’s cousin, Raegan, who . . .

Who probably could have been more than a friend if the timing hadn’t been so off. If he hadn’t been . . . well, who he was.

But the point was, no matter what the future held, he needed a job for now. And he’d never been short on employment while living in Maple Valley. Plus, he still had his apartment there. He’d had it on the market a full year before moving away without a single bite.

Rosa’s sharp inhale sliced into the room, cutting off his thoughts.

“What is it?”

He covered the room in two long strides to stand beside her at the window. Black sedan in the back parking lot, two figures emerging.

Rosa rushed past him. “Jamie, wake up.” She rustled the larger of the two figures in the bed.

Bear turned from the window. “What’s happening? Do you know those men?”

Jamie rose groggily from under a stained sheet. Rosa reached for the girl, thrusting her at Bear. “Take Erin.”

The child—was Erin four or five by now?—nestled immediately against his chest. “Who are they, Rosa?”

But she was already hustling from the room, pulling Jamie with her. “You need to go, Bear. Out the front.”

“Mama?” Erin stirred in his arms.

Rosa swiped the duffel bag from the floor in the kitchen, and shoved that, too, at Bear. “Please do not go to the police.” She practically dragged Jamie through the living room, her every movement frenzied. “Just leave Atlanta. They’ll find my kids if you stay here. If they could find you in South America—”

Every muscle tightened from so much more than the weight in his arms. “Wait, what? They found me? Who—?” He forced himself to breathe as he stepped outside the door Rosa now held open. “Come with us.”

She shook her head. “I’ll call you when I know more. You need to go. *Now.*”

She slammed the door in his face. And for a moment, he couldn’t move. Couldn’t think. What was happening?

And then he felt the tug on his shirtsleeve. He met the frightened eyes of his nephew, Rosa’s *now* still ringing in his ears. If there was even an ounce of validity to her fear . . .

He grabbed Jamie’s hand. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 3

How could you say no?” Raegan froze at the sound of the voice that belonged to the man she’d done her best to avoid for nearly ten years now. If she just stayed down here, crouched behind the circulation desk in the public library, would Mr. Hill go away?

“The mayor offered you a wonderful chance to put your talent on display and you turned him down flat.” Mr. Hill actually tsked. He tsked! Wasn’t that kind of thing supposed to be reserved for little old ladies with knitting needles?

Maybe she deserved it, though. She *had* given the mayor a black eye, after all. And yes, she’d turned him down flat. He’d asked for a favor, framed it as “the opportunity of a lifetime,” and had seemed more upset about her “no” than his bruising eye.

“You can stay down there as long as you want, Raegan Walker. I’m not going away.”

Raegan suppressed a sigh and forced herself to her feet, pasting on a smile for her former high school art teacher. “Hi, Mr. Hill.”

Thin, wire-rimmed glasses sat low on the man’s nose. His face was a maze of lines, all tugging downward as he looked at her now. All because she’d dared to politely refuse Mayor Milt’s request for a painting—an original piece of artwork, meant to be the centerpiece in Maple Valley’s upcoming art show.

But it wasn’t just any art show. The Heritage Arts Council sponsored a regionally-renowned event once a year in cities throughout the Midwest. It drew critics from around the country and at least three or four of its Best-in-Show winners had gone on to earn national acclaim over the years. Scoring the show had been a feat never accomplished by Maple Valley. And, in fact, Maple

Valley hadn't technically been chosen to host this year's show—not originally. That honor had gone to Dixon, a larger city to the north.

But just a week back, a major sewer line had burst along Dixon's Main Street. It flooded downtown businesses, tore up sidewalks and wreaked such havoc that the town had been forced to pull out, even though the show was still two months away.

Mayor Milt had tried so hard to hide his delight when relaying the whole thing to Raegan. But he was beside himself with excitement. And he couldn't understand why Raegan wasn't.

"It's tradition, Raegan. A local artist from the hosting city always produces an original piece to be revealed during the show. Something grand that captures the spirit of the community. It could be a painting, a sculpture, a mural, you name it. You are the first and only name on my list. You have to say yes."

Except that she didn't. Couldn't.

"Why in the world would you say no?" Mr. Hill's glasses slid lower on his nose. He nudged them up with his shoulder, something she'd seen him do a dozen times every art period in high school.

Wasn't the better question why in the world had Mayor Milt approached Raegan in the first place? Yes, she'd been something of a standout amateur artist in her teenage years, but that was forever ago.

And yet, Mr. Hill looked at her now as if it was only yesterday he'd spent numerous hours after class working with her, nurturing her love of oils and canvas, teaching her advanced techniques. He'd entered her paintings in area shows, had written letters of recommendations to art programs around the country.

Two of which had offered Raegan full-ride scholarships. And she was pretty sure Mr. Hill had never stopped being disappointed in her for turning them down.

"Mr. Hill—"

"You're not my student anymore, Raegan. I think you can call me Darrell now."

"Darrell—" Whoa, that felt weird. "I'm honored that Mayor Milt asked me. Really, I am. But I haven't kept up with my art and—"

"Oh, come now. I know you ordered a new set of brushes at the craft store a few months ago. And Sunny Klassen saw you load an easel into your car awhile back."

This town—one big merry-go-round of spinning gossip. She loved the place, but a girl didn't have a hope of keeping a secret around here. Although why she'd felt the need to hide the fact that

she was dabbling in painting again, she had no idea. It just felt . . . personal. Somehow significant in a way she didn't quite understand. Private.

But apparently not that private if people in town had picked up on it. So wait, did that mean everyone in Maple Valley knew about the apartment? Surely not. They would've asked. They would've pried. And somehow word would've reached Bear . . .

Her neck warmed just thinking about it.

"I'm really sorry, but the library closes in fifteen minutes and I've still got books to shelve. Maybe we could talk about this another time?" Or not at all.

She turned to the loaded cart full of alphabetized books. Since the library had nearly emptied of patrons, she might have time to get them all put away before closing up. She veered the cart around the circulation desk and started for the Mystery section.

"We're not finished here, my girl."

My girl. He'd called her that back in high school, as if she were his granddaughter and not his student. She'd eaten it up, the attention he'd shown her, his belief in her art. Which was probably why it pained her to see him now. He must feel so let down.

"I can't commit to a painting," she said as she wedged the cart into the narrow aisle between shelves. "I know this whole event is a huge honor for Maple Valley. It'll be great for all the businesses in town with all the extra foot traffic. But trust me, I'm not the artist who should be representing the community."

Mostly because she was pretty sure she didn't have the right to call herself an artist in the first place. She'd gone almost an entire decade without picking up a brush.

Until this past New Year's Day, when sentiment or curiosity or yearning or *something* had caught her in its grip long enough to send her to the hobby store for supplies. But she'd barely been able to bring herself to do anything with said supplies. She'd swirled colors over a couple canvases, but she didn't have a single finished piece to show for these past five months.

No, she wasn't an artist. She was just a twenty-six-year-old adult wondering if there was anything left to a long-dormant talent. Who snuck away to paint in someone else's apartment.

"I know it's a tight timeframe. Two months doesn't give your creative muse much space to percolate." Mr. Hill gripped the opposite end of the book cart. "But you love this town. I know you do. Unlike so many young people who can't wait to get away from their hometown, you've chosen to stay."

Raegan pulled a book from her cart, letting her hair fall over her eyes, an attempt to hide all the doubt Mr. Hill might see residing there.

Or rather, the truth. She hadn't chosen to stay in Maple Valley. Not really.

She *had* to stay. There was a difference.

"It would mean so much to so many people here," he went on. "It'd mean so much to *me*. And I think, perhaps, it'd mean more to you than anyone."

She stared at the line of Agatha Christie spines on the shelf. There'd been a time when she would've jumped at a chance like this. When Mr. Hill's words of praise had filled her mind with ambitious hopes, when those scholarship offers had lured her into imagining a life beyond the borders of this quaint Iowa town.

But then Mom had gotten sick for the final time. Life had turned inside out. And the attacks had begun in earnest, squeezing Raegan's lungs and stealing her breath, inescapable and . . .

She shoved a book into place, closed her eyes, inhaled.

One year. Seven months. Seventeen days.

"Raegan, are you all right?"

She nodded too quickly. "I'm fine."

"You put *The Mystery on the Blue Train* before *Murder on the Orient Express*."

She swapped the books, then slid a piece of hair behind her ear.

"You have a gift, my girl. I wish I knew why you were so scared to use it."

Silence hung thick in the air around her—air that smelled of books and lemon Pine-sol, the same mingling scent that greeted her every time she walked into the library. She loved this place, she did. So why, tonight, did it feel so confining?

"Mr. Hill—" she began, but when she looked up, he no longer stood in the aisle with her.

"Miss Walker?"

Raegan turned the opposite direction to see her favorite library patron—Elise Linder, with her mother standing close by. She shook her hair out of her face and Mr. Hill's visit from her mind—tried to, at least. "Hey, I was hoping you'd get here before closing."

The nine-year-old's hazel-eyed gaze was fixed on a spot over Raegan's shoulder. Ever unseeing, this adorable bookworm. And yet, somehow, Elise was one of the most observant people Raegan had ever met.

Raegan reached into the bottom shelf of her cart. She came up with a stack of books. “As requested: one Percy Jackson, one Harry Potter and two Nancy Drew mysteries.” She bent in front of the girl. “Brand new, unabridged, in braille—just like you like them.”

Elise’s bobbed hair bounced around her pert chin as she inclined her head toward the sound of Raegan’s voice. Raegan placed the books in Elise’s outstretched hands, then watched as she roved her fingers over the cover of the top one. “*The Mystery of Crocodile Island*.”

“It’s a good one. Nancy, Bess and George go to Florida. Ned Nickerson shows up, of course. There’s a dangerous submarine, snakes—”

“Don’t give it all away,” Elise said with a laugh. Propping the books under one arm, she reached with her other for an embrace—finding first Raegan’s cheek and then winding her arm around Raegan’s neck. “You’re my favorite library lady.”

Raegan grinned up at Elise’s mom as she hugged the girl. “I like the sound of library lady so much more than librarian’s assistant.”

A mother’s love gleamed in Mrs. Linder’s eyes. “I’m pretty sure Elise would live here if she could.”

Raegan just wished Elise could see the beauty of the library she loved so much—the domed ceiling, the marble stairway, the rich cherry wood archways and pillars. One of Maple Valley’s most eccentric and wealthiest residents had donated the mansion to the community back in the 70s. It’d housed the public library ever since.

Raegan pulled back and donned her best librarian’s tone. “Now you just make sure you return those books by the time they’re due.”

“As if she won’t have all four finished by the end of this week.” Mrs. Linder patted her daughter’s back. “Elise, can you go sit on the bench and get your books loaded into your backpack? I want to talk to Miss Walker for a second.”

Raegan straightened as she watched Elise make her way to the bench a few feet away. The child knew exactly how many steps to take, when to stop, feel, sit.

She turned to Mrs. Linder. “Does she have another surgery coming up?”

“Mid-July.” The woman’s eyes were on her daughter, a mix of pain and hope and caution swirled together. “We’ve decided it’s to be the last one. We can’t get her hopes up any longer.”

Three failed surgeries in the past five years. And somehow Elise continued to thrive in the midst of it all. “Well, if there’s anything I can do to help—in addition to making sure our braille selection continues to grow, of course—just say the word.”

Mrs. Linder’s gaze moved to Raegan. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I know what you’ve been doing—buying the books with your own money, donating them to the library. That is beyond sweet of you. And far too generous.”

Shoot, had the head librarian said something? “You weren’t supposed to know that.”

“Well, I do, and I’m more grateful than I can say.”

“I just know how much Elise prefers braille to audio. She can race through them faster that way. A bookworm after my own heart.”

Mrs. Linder leaned in for a hug. “You’re just like your mother.”

Just like your mother. Raegan had been hearing it her whole life—could never quite bring herself to believe it. Mom had traveled the world, started a foundation that to this day still changed lives. And that wasn’t the only dream she’d chased. She’d poured just as much of her heart into her marriage and her kids as her career.

And when the cancer had invaded—not once, not twice, but three times—Mom had planted her feet in the soil of her faith, rooted and strong.

No. If Mom was the sun, then Raegan was the moon—merely reflecting another’s brilliance.

Raegan stepped back from Mrs. Linder’s embrace. “I’ll see you at the Spring Carnival?” The town had been gearing up for its annual late May festival all week.

Mrs. Linder nodded. “Wouldn’t dare miss it.”

Minutes later, Raegan watched as Elise’s mom led her down the marble stairs and out the front entrance, then glanced at the clock. Just enough time to finish her shelving.

Soon, she had all the library lights off, the doors locked. She found her bike resting where she’d left it on the rack in the parking lot and then began the ride across town, Mr. Hill’s voice plying her the whole way.

“You have a gift, my girl. I wish I knew why you were so scared to use it.”

She wished she knew, too. But how could she agree to the mayor’s request when she couldn’t manage to finish any one of the half-begun pieces currently cluttering the apartment she rode toward now?

It took her nearly twenty minutes to arrive at her destination—the second floor apartment above Coffee Coffee, Maple Valley’s lone coffee shop overlooking the riverfront. She perched her bike against the building and then climbed the wooden stairway at the side of the building. Raegan let herself in with a key and traipsed through the kitchen, into the living room.

Her easel, canvas, paints, brushes . . . all of it awaited her. Maybe tonight she’d do more than underpainting. Maybe . . . maybe she’d settle on an image—a landscape or portrait or a bowl of fruit if nothing else—and bring it alive in color.

But first, a shower. She was sweaty from the ride across town and her hair still smelled like chlorine from her shift at the pool earlier today. She’d have to put her same jeans back on, but at least she had a clean shirt here—one big enough to pull double-duty as a painting smock.

Her hair was still dripping, the bathroom still fogged with steam, when she heard the first thump. And then a door closing. Raegan froze.

Footsteps. A soft voice.

Her heartbeat skipped. *Who . . . ?*

The bathroom door swung open and her shriek collided with a gasp. A man’s gasp.

“What the—Raegan?”

And now her heart just plain stopped, she was sure of it. Bear McKinley stared at her in shocked silence, wide-eyed and so broad chested he nearly filled the whole doorway. Even more ruggedly handsome than she remembered. Ridiculously, annoyingly so.

And then, in one deft move, he invaded her space, butting into the room and closing the door behind him. She took a step back, nearly tripped over the towel behind her. Had Bear always been this big? A person shouldn’t be so tall. It was intimidating and overwhelming and . . .

He was supposed to be in South America!

“What in the world are you doing here?” He spoke slowly, his gaze sliding down her frame and up again. “And why are you wearing my shirt?”

Clearly the turmoil of the past week had finally gone to Bear’s brain. That was the only possible explanation for what he was seeing now—Raegan Walker, wet hair straggling over her

shoulders and matted to her cheeks, in *his* bathroom in *his* apartment.

Wearing *his* t-shirt. One that hadn't been nearly as paint-splattered the last time he'd seen it.

Raegan backed into the sink, her *oomph* followed immediately by a panicked, "Why'd you close the door?"

He took a step closer to her, not that all that much space had separated them anyway. He'd forgotten how tiny this apartment really was, especially the closet-sized bathroom. Did he honestly think Jamie and Erin would be more comfortable here than a hotel suite somewhere?

Might not be big, but it's free. It's away from Atlanta, which is what Rosa wanted.

And it'd been the only place he could think to go.

"I asked a question first, Rae. Two, I believe, and I've got plenty more where they came from. Like, why does my living room look like an art studio? And since when do you take showers in *my* bathroom?" And was it so much to ask that he get just a moment's peace after the insanity of the past week?

Somehow in the span of days, he'd gone from wannabe missionary to caretaker of two kids who were probably even more bewildered about their situation than he was.

Raegan gripped the counter behind her, those sky blue eyes of hers clouded with confusion. Maybe, too, embarrassment. "You're supposed to be in Brazil."

She moved as if to flea the room, but he was too quick for her. He planted both palms on the counter on either side of her. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now. In the meantime, he'd choose to ignore the fact that she smelled like a dang tropical island. And looked . . . even better than he recalled. Which was as far as he'd let that thought go.

"Glare at me all you want, Raegan, but I think you're forgetting a wee conversation we had, you and I, before I left. The one where I said I wished I could've found someone to buy or at least rent this place and you said, and I quote"—his voice notched to a falsetto—"“Oh, Bear, let me work on it. I've never played real estate agent before. I'll email you when I find a buyer.”"

"I do not talk that high-pitched."

"I catch you trespassing and that's all you have to say?" His gaze wandered over her face, eventually landing on the faintest scar peeking from her eyebrow. "Where's your eyebrow ring?"

She folded her arms, elbows jutting into his chest. "You ask too many questions, Bear McKinley."

He'd forgotten the way Raegan had of saying his full name. Too, how much he'd once liked it. He'd probably grin right now and keep goading her if he wasn't entirely baffled and light years past bushed.

Two full days behind the wheel after mostly sleepless nights in a series of hotels would do that to a person. And poor Jamie and Erin were more worn-out than him. Erin hadn't even awakened when he'd carried her up the stairs to the apartment he thought he'd find empty. Jamie had crashed on the couch almost immediately, oblivious to Bear's puzzlement over the state of the place or the light peeking from under the bathroom door.

At least he'd heard from Rosa. Whatever she'd feared when she'd seen those two men outside her apartment hadn't materialized—not yet, anyway. But she was still insistent on Bear keeping charge of the kids for the next few weeks. *"This will be good for them. They should get to know their uncle."*

So far, there hadn't been much getting to know each other, though. The kids were clearly and understandably uncomfortable, having been whisked away from their home. Erin had finally started loosening up during today's drive, but Jamie had yet to speak in more than monosyllables.

Bear pushed away from the counter, scrutiny straying to the mirror behind Raegan. Man, he looked as tattered as he felt—circles under his eyes, days worth of whiskers shadowing his cheeks. Even his skin, however bronzed by the beady South American sun, seemed pallid. "Fine. I'll go first. I closed the door because I've got two exhausted kids out in the living room, and they've been through enough this week. If they're sleeping soundly out there, then I don't want to disturb them."

"Kids?"

"And I haven't heard a word from you since last fall—nothing about any buyers or renters—so I assumed I'd find this place empty."

She just stared at him, so many questions flickering through her eyes. The same eyes that had taunted him night after night his first few weeks in Brazil. Always begging the same question: Had he made a mistake, never giving things a chance to develop with Raegan Walker?

He'd met Raegan not long after moving to Maple Valley five and a half years ago. They'd formed an easy, nearly instant friendship. But he'd always been careful to make sure that's where it stopped. No dinners or movies, just the two of them. Nothing that could be mistaken for a date.

Because that's the way it had to be. Because he knew he'd leave eventually and, more importantly, because never again would he put himself in the position of having to choose . . .

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding, and said the first thing that came to mind solely to escape any thought of Annie, of Rio, of the one choice he regretted above all. "You know for being about three sizes too large, my shirt's an okay look on you."

He shouldn't have said it. But it was true. Sometimes Raegan Walker was too cute for her own good. Or his good. But he'd managed to skirt around his attraction to her before. He could do it again. Not as if he'd be in Maple Valley nearly as long this time.

"It's a versatile piece of clothing." Raegan reached for the extra fabric that gaped below her waist. "Sometimes I wear it like this." She pulled at the bottom of the shirt and tied a knot at the side. "See?"

"That's very 90s of you."

"Well, someone once told me there's nothing boring about my fashion sense."

Pretty sure he'd been that someone. Not that he was one to put a lot of thought into most people's choice of attire, but Raegan wasn't most people. Between the streaks in her hair, the dozen bracelets that usually crowded both wrists, the eyebrow ring, the clothes that always seemed to pop with color . . . she tended to stand out.

The undeniable truth washed over him now as heady as the steamy warmth of the bathroom. He'd missed Raegan more than he'd thought possible. Plain and simple and jarring as that. His sudden desire to hug her was drowned out only by his need to back away from her.

Raegan seemed to read his warring thoughts. She moved in for the barest of hugs—so slight and quick it could hardly be called an embrace—and then she immediately opened the door and padded from the room.

He took his first full breath since catching her here, and followed her into the living room. Raegan had stopped a few feet from the couch, gaze on the cuddled forms of Jamie and Erin nestled into the couch he'd bought years ago.

"My eleven-year-old nephew and five-year-old niece," he whispered.

"I didn't realize . . ."

What? That he had family? Unsurprising considering he'd made a concentrated effort *not* to mention them when he first

arrived here in Maple Valley. And then, after a few months, a year, it'd been easy to forget they even existed—other than the occasional check sent to Rosa. For a short while, he'd been almost as happy in Maple Valley as he had back when Annie and her parents had taken him under their wing.

The thought caused a prickled inhale, enough to draw Raegan's gaze. He nudged his head toward the kitchen. "Please tell me there's food here. I'm starved." Maybe if he ate, the headache lingering around the edges of his brain might dissolve.

She nodded and they crossed the small space to the kitchen right off the apartment's entrance. "I keep a few snacks around."

And yet, it didn't seem like she'd moved in. The only furnishings were those he'd left behind. There were no pictures on the fridge, no dishes in the sink. Other than art supplies, he hadn't seen anything to indicate she actually lived here.

Raegan opened a cupboard and when she turned around, she held a bag of licorice in one hand and a granola bar in the other. "Take your pick."

He reached for the bar. "Still addicted to Twizzlers, I see." He downed the granola bar in three oversized bites. Raegan held out a second before he'd even finished. "And you still remember my appetite, too."

"Nobody could forget your appetite, Bear. Seth still kicks himself for not getting a picture of you to hang on the wall of his restaurant in honor of eating the most burgers in one sitting."

Man, it'd be good to see Seth again. Raegan's cousin owned The Red Door, Maple Valley's most popular restaurant. He'd spent a few Friday nights playing live music there before he'd moved to Brazil. Seth had been as close as a brother.

Closer.

A smattering of guilt prowled around the edges of his mind—for the excitement he felt at seeing Seth again compared to the concern he couldn't seem to make himself feel for Rio.

Rio who was in jail. Rio who had turned his back on the second chance Bear had tried so hard to give him.

"Not sure my eating habits are what I want to be remembered by," he said around another bite.

"Trust me, you're remembered for more than that. Everyone will be happy you're back. Speaking of which, how long are you back for, anyway?"

"I don't know."

"How long are your niece and nephew staying with you?"

"I don't know." *Please. Not now, Rae.* Not now when his nerves were shot and his energy gone.

“Well, you should bring them to the Spring Carnival this weekend. Are their parents—”

“Rae.” He choked her name out, swallowing his last bite with a painful gulp. “I can’t do this now.”

She stared at him for a moment that stretched until he thought it might snap. Or *he* might snap. Maybe he already had by the look in Raegan’s eyes. Had he yelled just now or only whispered? He didn’t even know. He dropped to a chair, fingers moving to his temples.

“I’m sorry. I’m just . . . I’m so tired. I can’t even tell you all I’ve been through this week. Between the flying and the driving, Brazil and Atlanta and . . . I need to sleep. Is there still a bed in the bedroom?”

She only nodded.

“Good. I’ll put the kids in there and take the couch. That is, assuming you’re not—”

She shook her head quickly. “I’m not living here. I’ve only been hiding out here to paint. That’s all. I planned to pay you rent all along. I’ll write you a check—”

He held up his hand. “Not tonight, all right? Would you mind, um, leaving?”

She gave a resigned shrug and turned to the door. Hand on the knob, she cast him one more look of concern. “Are you okay, Bear?”

He couldn’t answer that, either. Not without lying. “Goodnight, Rae.”



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