

CHAPTER ONE

“So we actually *are* looking for our mystery hunter?”

We’re on a narrow path about twenty minutes from Haven’s Rock. Dalton walks in front of Storm and me, and when I speak, he stops and turns, his frown clearly asking why else we’d have left before seven in the morning. Yes, a local hunter *did* pass within a mile of Haven’s Rock, which is alarming, but that was ten days ago, with a single campsite spotted and no sign that the person even realized there was a town nearby.

So why else would I think my husband brought me out here? Because we have a toddler at home.

At three, our daughter is a delight, her personality in full bloom, her brain devouring the world in greedy gulps. Her father and I are feeding that hunger as fast as we can. But it’s also an age where setting boundaries—like not coming in to Mommy and Daddy’s room at night—doesn’t always work. We recently moved her to a “big kid’s bed,” a choice I regret on a near-nightly basis.

The real problem isn’t Rory. It’s adding her into a life where we play Mom and Dad to an entire town. At least we’ve reached the point where no one comes to our chalet unless it’s an emergency. But our daughter *lives* in the chalet so finding private time is a challenge.

When Dalton gives me that confused look, I resist the urge to sigh. Wasn't he the guy who grumbled about our lack of alone time only yesterday? After we snuck home at midday only to have a new resident bang on our door with the "emergency" of a clogged community toilet?

"Just the two of us alone in the woods?" I prompt. "Saying we're checking on a guy we know is long gone?"

Dalton winces and then pulls me in, kissing the top of my head.

"So it wasn't an excuse," I say with a dramatic sigh.

"I dreamed that the guy attacked a logging party, so I wanted to take another look." A brief pause. "And to spend time with you, of course."

"Nice save."

"Does it help if I hint that I've been planning a longer search? One that'll take us a couple of days?"

I eye him suspiciously.

He puts his hands on my shoulders. "I'm serious. It was going to be a surprise. I've already talked to everyone. Rory would be with Megan for day care, with Yolanda and Will taking her for dinner, and then April and Kenny on the night shift."

Megan is relatively new to Haven's Rock, and I'd call her a godsend if that didn't feel like giving thanks for someone else's misfortune.

Except for the staff, everyone in Haven's Rock is here because they need a place to hide. Something in their life has gone wrong—something that isn't their fault—and we're giving them sanctuary. Megan and her husband, Jamie, arrived last year. Megan is an early childhood educator who'd jumped at the chance to care for Rory as her local job. So our daughter is getting private professional-level day care, which is wonderful, even if it's *not* wonderful that Megan needs to be here.

Dalton pulls me into a hug. "We're getting an overnight away. I promise. I just want to be sure that guy is long gone, so we can relax and enjoy our trip. Okay?"

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While I'm sure the guy *is* long gone, Dalton needs to be even more certain. It's been over two years since our last threat, which also involved strangers passing through. So I understand his concern.

I also understand that he wants to double-check before we go on that "extended search." I definitely don't want him distracted by every twig crackle on a rare getaway-for-two.

"Okay?" he prompts.

"Okay," I say with another deep sigh.

He leans down, as if we aren't the only people within a mile. "I'll make it up to you tonight. We have a guaranteed thirty-minute gap between Rory falling asleep and Rory waking up and coming into our room. I've been timing it. Also . . ." He leans until his lips tickle my ear. "On our next trip to Dawson, I am buying those doorknob covers Megan suggested."

"Yes, please. If we put one on Rory's bedroom door, she's going to squawk, but at least it'll warn us that she's trying to escape. I also want to get one of those toddler clocks Megan mentioned."

"Toddler clocks?"

"The ones with stoplight colors. Red means go back to sleep, green means she can get up, yellow means she can get up but needs to play in her room. Megan said it'll take a while to learn the lights, but it's good to get her started, for our sake." I clear my throat. "I mean, for Rory's sake. For safety. So she doesn't wander about the chalet at night."

He chuckles. "Safety first. Door covers and toddler alarm clocks are on the necessity list." His hands fall to my hips, and he nuzzles my ear. "And now that we're out here, I think I've been overreacting. He's long gone, isn't he."

"He is," I say. "We only found that one camping site. He didn't get within a kilometer of town, and there's no evidence he knew Haven's Rock was there. His trail indicated that he made camp and then continued on, with no detours. We've been doing rounds for a week now—while the town is on lockdown—and we've found zero evidence that he lingered or returned."

Dalton exhales. Obviously, he knows all this, but it helps to hear me lay it out.

“This is the first hint of trouble in over two years,” I say. “We’ve finally fixed all the problems, and we’re okay.” I move my lips to *his* ear now. “But I know it’s going to take a while for us to accept that.”

He pulls me into a tight hug, and then his lips are on mine, his kiss hungry. Soon he has me off the trail and against a pine tree, as our poor dog thumps down with a sigh, and we both laugh. We don’t stop, though. Storm is used to this, and she’ll stand guard.

We’re still kissing, Dalton’s hands sliding under my sweater, his fingers cool against my sides, when a noise in the forest has us both jumping.

Dalton pauses, glancing over his shoulder. Then he gently sets me down as his gaze swings across the forest. It’s quiet again. Storm had looked up from where she’s resting, but she hasn’t bothered to get to her feet.

“Must have been an animal.” Dalton runs a hand over his face. “Guess I’m still jumpy.”

I take his hand and kiss his knuckles. “It’s okay. We’ll have two days away. Plenty of time to relax and enjoy ourselves. For now, let’s keep patrolling.”

“No, that was just a critter. We can—”

“Eric?” I squeeze his hand. “As much as I really like where we were going, I like having your full attention even more. I’d rather wait for that.”

“*Fuck*. I—”

“Eric? Stop. Please. It’s fine.”

He glares, but I know that glare isn’t for me. It’s for himself. He wants to be the hard-ass sheriff who doesn’t jump at every twig crack. But he’s not jumping because he’s scared. He’s jumping because he’s been conditioned to be hyperalert to danger, first as sheriff in Rockton and now here in Haven’s Rock. All those years where he had to be constantly vigilant, because that was his job, an entire town counting on him to keep them safe.

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It's more than just conditioning. It's living your adult life braced for trouble, and when that's finally gone, you discover that you don't really know how to relax. You're afraid that if you do, for even a second, someone will pay the price.

I think it's only after Haven's Rock calmed down that I really understood the extent of the trauma Dalton has endured . . . and accepted that he's not the only one dealing with a little PTSD. A few months ago, Isabel finally got tired of joke-hinting about group counseling sessions and started holding them. While Dalton attends, he doesn't talk, but he also sees Mathias for private sessions.

Dalton kisses me again, and it's light and tender and a little apologetic, even if I don't need that. Afterward, I take both his hands in mine.

"Can I ask you a favor?" I say.

"Always."

"Can we keep walking for another hour or two? It's a gorgeous morning, and I adore our daughter but . . ."

He laughs and pulls me in for a quick hug. "Yeah, we should keep searching. We told Will we'd be gone all morning and it isn't even ten. We're overdue for some private time, even if we're just taking a long walk."

It really is a gorgeous morning, the spring sunshine lifting the bitter chill of a Yukon night. I inhale the rich smell of earth and pine, the smell of home.

We head over to Storm, and I realize she's still looking in the direction we'd heard the noise. I bend and scratch behind her ears.

"All good, girl," I say. "We're ready to go."

When she doesn't respond, my breath catches.

"Storm?"

She glances up, giving me a teenager's "What?" look at being disturbed. Only she's no longer a teenager, and that's why my heart did a little thud when she didn't seem to hear me. In another breed, Storm would be middle-aged, but for a Newfoundland, she's considered a senior dog. I'd named her Storm because she

was an all-black puppy with a white streak on one ear. That streak isn't the only white in her fur these days.

I know she's very healthy—and probably getting tired of me testing her vision and hearing—but I can't help bracing against this, too, my beloved dog getting older.

Like a teenager, though, she heard me; she just chose not to respond. And she's not responding because something in the forest holds her attention. The fact that she's still lying down means she's decided there's no cause for alarm, but her attention is riveted to whatever is out there.

Dalton takes a few steps in the direction she's looking, which gets her lumbering to her feet. His gaze goes from her to the forest, assessing. Storm's still watching in that direction, but her posture is relaxed. Not a predator then. Not a stranger, either.

It could be a moose or caribou. As a pup, she'd been injured by a kick, which had made her wary of all ungulates for years, but she's past that. These days, only grizzlies make her truly nervous, after a near-fatal attack a couple of years ago. Get over one trauma only to acquire another. That's how life goes, isn't it? But we do overcome them, and in the meantime, we learn to live with the fear.

As Dalton continues forward, his hand drops to the holstered gun. That's reflex. He doesn't see any reason to take out the weapon, but he does let his hand rest on it.

I do tug out my sidearm. That's progress, meaning I've overcome the part of my past that made me fear shooting when I shouldn't. I'm no longer that person. No longer that girl, because she really was just a girl, and I've finally forgiven her for her mistake.

I stay a few steps behind Dalton. That's not just for a wider view but because he's a lot quieter in the forest than I'll ever be. And he's a lot quieter than Storm, which is why, at a hand signal, she falls in with me. The fact that she doesn't grumble about it only reinforces the near certainty that we aren't walking into danger, but we continue along, both me and Dalton braced, if only

for the crashing of undergrowth as a moose gallops off. At least it's spring and months from rutting season.

The undergrowth crackles as something bolts in the other direction. Something that sounds a whole lot like it's running on two legs.

Dalton's gun comes out then as he breaks into a run. Storm and I don't try to keep up. We aren't built for speed. She's too big, and I have old muscle damage in my leg. We can both move fast, though, and we stay close enough to keep an eye on Dalton.

When he veers left, I kick up the speed, my gaze focused on the back of his head, his hair light enough that I can easily track him.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," he snarls, and then shouts, "I can see you, Nelson. If you make me chase you, then you might as well keep going because when you get back to town, you'll be on bathroom duty for a month."

A skid and a thump, as if Nelson is stopping fast. As well he should, because the only thing worse than bathroom duty is bathroom duty plus incurring the wrath of Sheriff Eric Dalton.

Nelson is a resident of Haven's Rock. I'd say he's new, but the older I get, the more it feels as if everyone except staff is new. Nelson has been here just under a year, and as Storm and I draw nearer, we can see him—a guy in his mid-twenties, with dark hair, dark skin, and short braids. He has both hands raised, even though Dalton is already holstering his gun.

"I didn't know it was you," Nelson says. "I just saw someone chasing me. I figured it was that guy."

"The one whose camp we found in the forest?" Dalton draws. "The reason the town has been on lockdown for a week? The reason no one is supposed to be out here?"

"I, uh, right, so . . ." Nelson clears his throat and straightens. "I apologize. I was going stir-crazy. I just wanted to take a walk."

Dalton's gaze drops to Nelson's feet. "Nice hiking wear."

I look down to Nelson's rubber boots.

"I, uh, thought it might get muddy. It is spring, after all."

“It hasn’t rained in over a week.” Dalton lifts a hand. “Where’s Jamie?”

Nelson practically convulses. “Wh-what?”

“I asked where your fishing buddy is. Because you’re wearing the boots you wear when you two go fishing.”

“I—”

“Casey?” Dalton calls. “Was Jamie at home when you dropped off Rory?”

Jamie and Megan live in one of the couples’ residences. “He was,” I say. “He asked what you and I were up to so early. I just said we had work to do in town.”

“Because we didn’t want to spook residents by admitting we were still searching for that hunter,” Dalton says to Nelson. “Seems Jamie was planning a little early-morning fishing and making sure we weren’t going to be in the forest.”

“I—I don’t know,” Nelson says. “He never mentioned fishing to me. I swear I just came out for a walk.”

My husband turns to me. “Where’s Jamie’s favorite spot?”

Dalton knows the answer, since he’s the one who showed it to the younger men. He’s playing this up to make Nelson sweat.

When I first arrived in Rockton, I’d seen Dalton do things like this and decided he was an asshole, even a bully. I’ve come to understand it better. He needs the residents, especially the men, to fear him a little because sometimes, that’s the only thing that keeps them safe.

Nelson is a good guy—he’s in Haven’s Rock after being targeted for his anti-gang efforts at home. But he still went for a walk while the town is under lockdown, which means he didn’t take that lockdown seriously. He didn’t take *us* seriously.

So I go along with Dalton’s game, pointing to the southwest. “It’s that way. Maybe five hundred feet.”

“Jamie isn’t there,” Nelson blurts. “Yes, I wanted to go fishing. I couldn’t find him in town, so I thought he was at his spot. He’s not, and I was heading back when I heard you guys. I went quiet until

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you passed, except you, uh, weren't passing and then you saw me, and I took off, hoping I could get to town."

"Before we saw you."

"I'm sorry. I really am. I understand there's a penalty, and I accept it. I have today off, so I can take over bathroom duty right away."

"Nelson," I say. "What's wrong?"

He startles at the question, and then tries for a wide-eyed look of confusion, but he can't meet our gazes. "Nothing. I'm just freaked out. And embarrassed. I shouldn't have run. You can escort me back to town."

"After we check that fishing spot," I say.

His whole body twitches, his eyes going wide, mouth opening as if to protest, as if he's frantically thinking up a reason why we need to go to town immediately. Then he stops, swallows, and says four words.

"I didn't do it."

And my heart goes into free fall.

CHAPTER TWO

We're standing at the fishing spot. Nelson has been babbling the whole way, saying the same things over and over.

"I found him like this. I swear it. I thought he just fell—passed out or something—and I pulled him up. When I saw his eyes were open, I dropped him. Then I realized my fingerprints were on him, and I'm the only one who knew where he was, so I took off. I panicked. I'm sorry."

Jamie's body lies facedown in the water.

We gaze at it, Dalton and I, side by side, saying nothing, just looking and feeling the crash of that free fall.

A resident is dead.

We were so sure everything was fine, and now . . .

Dalton wades out to check for signs of life, though it's obvious he won't find any, and he doesn't. I crouch to examine footprints in the damp edge.

"Those are mine," Nelson says. "Some of them, at least. And my fingerprints are on him. I can show you how I lifted him up." He starts to step forward but halts midstep when my hand flies up.

"Stop talking," Dalton says.

"But I—"

I rise and turn to face him. "You want us to know this wasn't

you. I get that. But you've given your story, and I will get a full account from you later."

"I really didn't—"

"No one said you did."

"It—it's an accident, right? He slipped and hit his head and drowned?"

"Those are questions we will answer," I say calmly. "Between Dr. Butler and myself, we will figure out what happened. As the person who found him, yes, you will be a suspect if there are signs of foul play. I'm not going to lie and pretend otherwise. But *Rory* could have found him, and I'd still need to wonder whether she . . . I don't know, bopped into him and he tripped and drowned? This isn't about you."

He swallows hard. "Okay."

"This isn't about you," I repeat slowly. "I know what happened down south. You were framed for a crime, and we understand why you would have run when you found Jamie."

He only nods, his face tight, eyes still bright with panic.

"Pulling Jamie out will destroy the scene," I say. "So I'm processing what I can before we do that."

Another nod.

I continue, "I'll need help. Probably Will with the ATV. I understand that you won't want him publicly escorting you into town after this happened, and we'll do our best to take you back quietly. All right?"

"All right," he says, his voice barely audible.

"You can sit down if you like," I say. "I just need you to stay back and to move around as little as possible until I'm done."

I HATE LEAVING Jamie's body in the water. It feels disrespectful. But with the soft ground, pulling him out will destroy any prints on the shore.

I hope that it's an accident, but even from here I can see a faint

line on one side of his throat, and I don't think that's a trick of the light.

While the ground is soft, it's not muddy. Like Dalton said, it hasn't rained in a while. That means the prints are only faint impressions. I take photos and measurements, but the prints I see match the tread on our standard rubber boot, which each resident gets. Jamie wears a pair and so does Nelson. That doesn't mean no one else was here—just that they didn't step anyplace that left an impression.

The fishing spot is on a lake, and while Jamie was learning fly-fishing from Sebastian—our resident expert—today he was just doing regular casting. There are stump pieces for him and Nelson to sit on while they fish. One is knocked over, and there's a scuffle of footprints in front of it.

The stump has fallen partway into the water, and it's not far from Jamie's feet, which still rest in the shallows.

Jamie's fishing rod is half in the water, and his tackle box is on the shore.

I turn to Nelson. "Where's your rod?"

He points to the woods. "We keep everything over there. Saves carting it all to and from town. Not like anyone's going to steal it."

I have him direct me to the spot. The guys built a little lean-to, and I can see another fishing rod under it.

"Did you put your rod back after you found him?" I ask as I return to Nelson.

"No, I hadn't gotten it out yet. I went to talk to him first, see how the fishing was. At first, I thought he'd left—I didn't see anyone. And then . . ." He swallows as his gaze falls to Jamie.

"Do you share a tackle box?" I ask.

Nelson frowns. "No, mine should be there."

He starts to come toward me, but I motion for him to stay where he is. Then I retreat to the lean-to and shine my flashlight into the shadows. There's no sign of a second box.

"Is there any chance yours is the one over there?" I point to near the stumps.

“No, that’s definitely Jamie’s.”

I start to look around. Dalton and Storm stay where they are. Neither has moved since I began, and Dalton hasn’t said a word. He knows to leave this to me unless I ask for help. I’ve been speaking into my phone, recording my observations. I continue with that.

“We’re missing a second tackle box,” I record. “I see no sign of it here, but I’ll do a wider search after we retrieve the body. I think it’s time to do that.”

I stop the voice memo and look at Dalton. “You and I can manage this, right? No need to call Will yet?”

“I can help,” Nelson says.

“Better if you don’t,” I say. “Let’s minimize your prints near the—near Jamie.”

He nods, and I help Dalton pull the body out. That’s tricky, which is another reason I wouldn’t want Nelson doing it.

The fishing spot is on the edge of a small lake that isn’t much more than a pond. The stream passing through connects Haven’s Rock’s lake to a larger one, but here, a long-ago beaver dam created a body of water, which makes a prime fishing hole.

Dalton and Anders found it a few years ago, and they pass on the “secret” to residents particularly keen on the sport—and residents they recognize as needing it. Jamie is one of those. Same as Nelson. Two young men who’d gone through hell and were in need of a quiet place where they could be alone with their thoughts. Or where they could be with each other, which is sometimes even better.

The pond-like nature of this particular body of water means the edges are shallow, with a deep channel running through the middle. Perfect for fish. Not so perfect for pulling out a body.

Jamie’s boots are just past the water’s edge, his legs firmly in the shallows, but his head is near the channel, where the water is a few feet deep. That makes it tricky to remove him without dragging him through the shallows and dislodging any evidence caught on his upper body. It does, however, make me glad Nelson

found him, because that strong current would soon have overcome the suction of the mud and carried him off to the large lake.

We decide that the best way to handle this is to flip Jamie over, minimizing damage to his face. At that point, I need to observe what I can while standing in water to my thighs, fighting against the current as Dalton holds Jamie steady.

My attention goes straight to that mark I saw on Jamie's neck. It's very clear now—both that I wasn't imagining the line and what it's from. Garroting. Something very thin was pulled through his throat, the mark bloodless only because he'd been facedown in the water.

I run a quick scan for other injuries, but mostly I take photos to be examined later, while hoping I don't lose my footing and my phone. I don't immediately see any other injuries. Nelson was right that Jamie's eyes are open, and I gently close them. Whatever happened, it happened fast.

As for "what" happened, I can certainly speculate. Someone came up behind Jamie while he was sitting on his stump, got a wire around his neck and pulled. Jamie struggled to his feet, knocking over his log seat, but it happened too fast, and before he could fight, he was facedown in the water.

That's a theory, one that—as always—needs to be proved. That mark does mean one thing, though.

This wasn't an accident. It was murder.

CHAPTER THREE

After I've done what initial assessments I can, I guide Jamie's body while Dalton gently tugs him onto the shore. We've almost got him there when the roar of an engine signals our deputy's imminent arrival. Anders appears moments later, and we fill him in.

Between the three of us, we decide to bring April on-site. My sister might not like doing medical examinations under less-than-ideal conditions, but she hates people "tampering" with her subjects even more. Either way she'll grumble, so I opt for the choice that better helps the investigation.

In the meantime, Anders will take Nelson back to Haven's Rock. He's also taking me, because I do not want to risk Megan walking around town with Rory and seeing us pull up to the clinic with her husband's body.

Dalton stays with Storm. We *do* debate that—should Anders remain with Dalton or come with me—but Dalton is armed and he has the dog, and we can't imagine Jamie's killer returning to the scene.

We drop Nelson off outside town, as promised. There's no need for anyone to know he found the body. I will, of course, fully investigate him as a suspect, but we know from experience to keep the residents as far from that investigation as possible. This is a tiny

town—just over a hundred people—and most of them are in hiding, already on edge. Bad enough that they’ll need to hear a resident was murdered. We are *not* delivering them a suspect.

I accompany Anders to April’s clinic. Not to run interference—they both lived in Rockton and they get along great. But she would wonder why I sent him when I’m the detective, and she’ll ask questions about the body that he can’t answer. Better if I handle it, even if that means I hold off on notifying Megan.

I’m not sure how April will react to the news of another murder. She’s on the autism spectrum, only diagnosed a few years ago. Maybe her sister should know her best, but that late diagnosis means I’ve spent these last few years dismantling a lifetime of preconceptions about April, namely that she was a distant older sister with nothing but contempt for her “screwup” younger sibling.

I’ll note that “screwup” mostly means that I became a cop instead of following my parents into medicine, but their disapproval had always been a lead weight around my shoulders, made worse because April had seemed to agree with their assessment. I just didn’t measure up. I know better now—at least where April is concerned. Our parents are both gone, and the pain of that rejection is never going away, but building this new relationship with April helps.

Both in Rockton and in the early years of Haven’s Rock, I found more than my share of dead bodies. The situation had been worse in Rockton, where the investors let in actual criminals. Still, early issues in Haven’s Rock meant the problem didn’t go away, and April took to “jokingly” chastising me for finding so many corpses. Except with April, it hadn’t been clear it was joking and, considering how deeply I felt each of those deaths, it hadn’t been funny.

So I brace for that today, but when I find her in the clinic and tell her, she only nods abruptly and begins packing a bag. At one time, I would have said her reaction was cold. Detached. Emotionless. It’s not. It’s shock.

When she asks “Are you sure?” the old Casey would have bris-

tled, as if April was questioning my ability to recognize a dead body. Now I know it's still that shock, teetering on disbelief.

"It's been . . ." She pauses, hand reaching for her probes.

"Two and a half years," I say.

"Yes."

She stays frozen in place, and then slowly pivots toward me. "I'm sorry."

The lump in my throat cuts off my air, and my eyes prickle. I blink back tears as hard as I can.

"Guess it couldn't last forever," I say, and I try for a wry smile. "I need to tell Megan. Will is taking you to the scene. Do you want my observations before I go?"

"No." She pauses, and I can see her regrouping, because I'm not the only one who's had to change how she reacts to her sister. "It's best if I form my own opinions, and then we can talk. Are you coming back to the scene?"

"If I can find someone to take Rory."

"Ask Kenny. He's working in the shop today."

"I'll do that. Thanks."

AT THE DOOR to Megan and Jamie's apartment, I pause and take deep breaths. When I'd been a police officer, I'd had to make more than my share of these calls. I was a female officer, and "clearly" women are better at the emotional stuff. Which only proved that those sending me on those calls didn't know me very well.

My sister might be the one on the spectrum, but she *isn't* the only one who has been called cold and distant. Is there some neurodiversity in my own brain? Or is this just the result of growing up with parents who'd never been warm and loving? What matters is that both April and I are moving beyond our labels, and as hard as it is for me to stand on this porch, I know I can be what Megan needs right now because I *do* care.

Two more deep breaths, and then I straighten and fix on a

neutral expression. I knock, and it only takes a moment for the door to swing open. There stands a young woman with light brown hair pulled back in a ponytail and a purple smear of either finger paint or jelly on one cheek.

“Hey,” she says. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.” She checks her watch. “Or are you just popping in before heading out again?” Without waiting for an answer she turns. “I’ll go get—”

“I need to speak to you first.”

“Me? Oh. Sure.” She peers at my expression. “Everything okay?”

“Where’s Rory?”

She blinks fast enough that I realize that sounds like an accusation, and I quickly say, “I need to speak to you before she sees me.”

“She’s in the bedroom, reading.” A quick smile. “Well, turning the pages of a book and making up a story to go with the pictures. I thought with her getting up so early she might need a nap, but she’s not having it.”

I glance through and see the bedroom door is ajar. Damn it, I should have grabbed Kenny to come get her. Proof that I wasn’t thinking clearly. As soon as Rory hears my voice, she’s going to come running.

I motion for Megan to wait, and I walk to the edge of the building, scanning faces. Then I exhale in relief.

“Gunnar!” I call.

He turns, and I beckon him over. Gunnar is one of the staff. A hammer swings from one hand, meaning he was doing odd-job work.

“I need you to take Rory for a few minutes,” I say.

He lifts the hammer. “Can I teach her to use this?” He walks close enough to see my expression and sober. “What’s wrong?”

“Just take Rory for fifteen minutes, and do not teach her to use a real hammer. Please.”

Megan has gone into the bedroom to get Rory and she comes running, latching on to my legs with “Mommy!”

I pick her up and give her a hug. “Hey, baby. How are you doing?”

“I had chocolate milk!”

“A little bit,” Megan corrects.

“Two bits!”

Megan shakes her head. “Two sips, she means.”

I hold her on my hip, which is still easy enough—she turned three a few weeks ago, but she takes after me in size.

“Mommy and Daddy are still working,” I say. “I’m going to come and see you in a few minutes, and we’ll visit the café before I leave again. For now, can you go with Gunnar?”

She looks at him, as if considering. Then she launches off me hard enough that I nearly drop her.

“We go up?” she asks Gunnar.

“Better ask your mom.”

“If you’re careful and listen to Gunnar,” I say.

“Up” means going to his perch in the loft of a storage shed, where the open end lets her see the whole town. She promises to listen to him, and I watch them leave, her little hand upstretched to hold his.

Once they’re gone, I take a deep breath. I know how this is supposed to go. By now, I should have already told Megan. The moment that door opened, the words should have been on my lips, ready to come out once we had privacy.

I’ve been trained in all the ways to break this news to a loved one. And none of it applies here, because I know Megan. I know her husband. They aren’t just residents in our town. She is my daughter’s caregiver.

“It’s about Jamie,” I begin. “I don’t know whether you were aware he went fishing.”

She winces and rocks back. “He said he was starting work early, and I—” Her shoulders slump. “I’d be lying if I said I didn’t silently question that. I know how hard the lockdown has been on him. I’m sorry he broke the rules.”

“This isn’t about—” I begin, and then stop. “Something

happened at the fishing spot. Jamie . . .” I reach to squeeze her forearm. “He’s dead.”

More blinking, like when I asked about Rory, and she thought I was demanding to know where my daughter was. That confusion, as if she must be hearing wrong.

“Let’s sit down,” I say.

“No.” She backs out of my grip. “What did you say?”

“Something happened at the fishing hole. We’re still figuring out what exactly, but Jamie is dead.”

She continues backing up until she hits the love seat. I guide her onto it. Silence follows. Horrible, endless silence.

“Megan?” I pull over the ottoman and perch in front of her. “Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I—I—” Her gaze slowly lifts to mine. “Did he . . . do something?”

“Do something?”

“He’s been better. So much better. But I worried he was just hiding it. Was this . . .?” She swallows hard. “Did he do this?”

“You mean did he die by suicide? No.”

“Are you sure?”

“We are.”

She rises and looks around, as if trying to get her bearings. “I need to . . . Rory. Rory is in the bedroom, and I need to—”

I stand and tentatively touch her arm again. “Rory is with Gunnar.”

“Right. Yes. That’s good. She likes Gunnar. So I . . . I . . .” Megan looks at me, her eyes struggling to focus. “You said Jamie . . . Jamie . . .”

“He’s gone, Megan.”

She stares at me for at least three seconds, and then she collapses, sobbing, and I gather her up and hold her, because that’s the only thing I can do, the only comfort I can offer. I hold her.