

VIRGINIA BLACK

BIG



CITY
BLUES



BIG CITY BLUES

By Virginia Black

Chapter 1

After the third time she'd driven the entire length of Main Street and back, Allison Levy pulled the rental car over and considered sleeping in it until morning.

This was supposed to be a rejuvenating week away from the grind and complications of home. It had taken months for her to convince herself that this time away from L.A. was a good idea, and for weeks now, she'd envisioned small town diners and country hikes, idyllic sunsets and star-filled nights.

What she actually got, however, was lost.

Allison had arrived here in Joseph, Oregon six hours after she'd originally planned, and town had rolled up its sidewalks hours ago. No dinner at the diner because it was closed. No sunset since it was now twilight. The directions – the last time she'd checked them – had said the cabin rental was on a side street right off the main drag, but she couldn't find Ganton Lane to save her life, and she could no longer check her phone. Its battery had died after hours searching for a cell signal on the long drive to this small town in eastern Oregon.

And she had forgotten a car adapter for the phone charger.

This trip was supposed to make things better. To give her a break and relieve the stress of the last few months, with the new job at the hospital, and the new house, and...she felt the urge to cry.

No. Don't give in to that again. You've cried enough.

After a few deep breaths, she leaned back on the headrest and turned off the car. The air became stifling without the steady flow of air conditioning, so she turned the ignition to allow rolling down the windows, then turned the car off again.

Local air filled her lungs, fresh and clean and nothing like the city air she was used to. She tasted barbecue smoke and sage on her tongue from the warm summer breeze now flowing through the car. And except for the clicking of the cooling engine, it was quiet and still.

The imminent crisis of emotional breakdown abated, she thought again about how to get to where she wanted to be.

While all the lights were off in the local businesses, the few street lamps hadn't come on yet. Maybe she could walk around a bit, see if she ran into a local who could help her with directions?

Allison started to turn the car back on so she could close the windows and lock the car, but remembered that she was now in a small town. Who was going to steal a rental here? With the exception of the dead phone, all of her belongings were safely locked away in the trunk.

For once, she had nothing to worry about.

She climbed out of the car, pocketed the keys and phone and stretched her legs a bit, then looked around hoping to spot a pedestrian. Even a talking animal would do at this point.

Her gaze was pulled to the mountains on the west side of town. Rolling hills a mile or so away grew to a mountain range a few more miles outside of town. The last of the day's sunlight washed the higher peaks that were still covered with snow, and Allison felt something tight in her shoulders start to relax.

Twilight revealed a few stars already, and the sky seemed large enough to hold every last one of her worries. Another deep calming breath filled her lungs, and Allison decided that being lost in what looked to her like paradise wasn't exactly the end of the world. She had come to the right place – the place to ease back and heal a little.

It would be nice, however, to not have to sleep in the car.

And then she realized that the beautiful landscape had a soundtrack that didn't quite match. Music played nearby - a classic country song that echoed off a few buildings but was still almost recognizable.

Loud music means people.

Allison began to walk in that direction.

She followed the sounds up Main Street for a block and a half, then came to the corner of a cross-street. The echoes of the song cleared up a bit, and she found their source.

On the other side of the vacant corner lot on Main sat a garage. "Jane's Auto Repair" was painted in letters three feet tall above the bay doors – one open, one shut – and the music flowed from the open door.

As Allison drew closer, she could hear a woman's voice singing along to a country western song Allison hadn't heard in years but knew well. Allison leaned in the open bay door to cast her eyes around the garage inside, trying to find the source of the voice.

The garage was surprisingly clean and well maintained – no tools lying about, or empty cans of oil or old tires heaped in the corners. Even the standing toolboxes looked polished to a shine. Someone clearly loved her work.

There was no one in sight – until Allison followed the sound of the voice and her eyes fell on a pair of well-worn, grease stained jeans and square cut black biker boots sticking out from under a stripped down, dented and multi-hued old car. Allison looked at the car itself, trying to figure out its make and model.

Whoa. 1965 Lincoln Continental. Suicide doors.

She looked back at the form under the car, curious about the person tucked into those boots and jeans. Allison already knew the woman had good taste in music and cars – and it had to be her car. Who would spend a summer Sunday evening working on someone else's old ride?

Although, truth be told, Allison thought, *she can't carry a tune in a bucket*. Allison smiled as the voice rose with gusto, and when it then morphed into an off-pitch yodel, she couldn't help but laugh.

The singing stopped immediately. The woman rolled out from under the car so fast, Allison thought she might land on her ass, but instead, the mechanic's creeper stopped on a dime as the woman quickly sat up.

Allison's laughter faded back to a nervous smile as the woman stared at her. The mechanic's long, dark hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, and her eyes looked black in the cheap fluorescent light from the garage's tool bench. Allison had to swallow against a suddenly dry throat.

The woman was slack jawed, still staring at Allison.

Allison shifted her weight from one foot to another, and tried not to shove her hands in her pockets.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but you're the only place open at this hour," Allison said. She shrugged her shoulders. "And I bet you're not really open, are you?"

The woman closed her mouth, but then spoke in a hushed voice. "Oh my god, you're real."

Allison frowned. *What?* "Um, yes," she said. "Yes, I'm real."

The woman leapt to her feet, pulling a rag out of one back pocket as she tucked a wrench in the other, then wiped the grease from her hands.

"Right," she said, walking toward Allison. "Of course, you are." She stretched a hand out. "I'm Jane."

"Um, hi," Allison said, clasping the extended hand in her own. "Allison."

Jane smiled, and when Allison saw the dimples revealed by that smile, she lost track of her next words.

Jane's handshake was firm and sure, and her shoulders showed a confidence that Allison liked. Up close, Allison could see that Jane's hair was thick, as were her lashes, and her lips were now smiling even wider. She had an honest-to-god perfectly formed beauty mark above her equally perfectly formed lips.

Even the smudge of dark engine grease on her chin looked sexy.

"So how can I help you?" Jane asked, the smile turning into a bit of a chuckle.

Allison realized that she hadn't let go of Jane's hand.

"Oh!" She let go, flustered. "I'm, uh..." Allison fell back into those dark eyes. "I'm lost."

"Well, it's a small town," Jane said. "Shouldn't take long to get you back on track." She turned to walk towards the street. "Assuming you're in the right small town."

Allison followed her. "Well, since the road pretty much ends here in Joseph, I'm fairly sure I'm in the right town."

"Well, you're right about the road ending here," Jane laughed, and the sound of it drew Allison closer. She took a couple of extra steps until she was walking beside Jane down the bay lane to the street.

"So where you trying to get to?"

Allison recalled the address from memory. "241 Ganton Lane. My directions say it's right off Main, but I can't find it."

"Ah, the Caulfield place. Yeah, it's tricky." She nodded as she explained. "Main actually takes an 87 degree turn to the left and then another hard right before going on to the lake. Ganton's past that left turn." She bumped an elbow against Allison's arm. "C'mon - I'll show you." Jane started walking up the street in the direction she'd described.

"Eighty-seven degrees, huh?" Allison couldn't help but smile.

"Yeah. I'm a bit of a math nerd. Geometry was my favorite." She looked sheepish. "I got bored one summer and measured it since it wasn't a precise right angle."

*Oh my god. She fixes cars **and** loves math.*

They walked a bit, not saying anything until they'd walked almost a block. Allison looked at the houses on the street, trying not to stare at Jane. All the houses had large, unfenced yards. In one, an old mixed breed dog stood up at their approach, eyeing them warily, but didn't make a sound.

"Where are you from?" Jane asked. "And what brings you here?"

Allison glanced at her feet for a moment. "Los Angeles. And the tram on the side of Mt. Howard." She looked up at Jane as they walked. "A friend of mine said it was worth the trip – and it better be after what I went through to get here."

"Oh? Bad flight?"

Normally, Allison wouldn't want to share details with a stranger, but the open air of the small town made her feel safer somehow. "My flight to Seattle was late, and then the flight to Pasco got rescheduled. I barely made it to the rental car kiosk before it closed, and then I took a wrong turn on the highway, so it took four hours to get here instead of three."

Jane laughed as she shook her head. "That's terrible luck, Allison. Hope it changes while you're here."

Allison got distracted by the smile in Jane's eyes, and didn't know what to say.

"Well," Jane said. "Your friend was right about the tram. It's an amazing view up there." Jane tucked her hands in her jeans pockets as if she were chilly, but Allison thought the light breeze was still warm. "Go early in the day though, before lunch."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Otherwise no amount of sunscreen can protect you from high desert sunshine."

Allison smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

They'd come to the end of the road where Allison had turned around three times, but walked left instead. Jane raised her arm to point.

"There's Ganton. The Caulfield place is a couple of houses down on the right after you turn."

"Caulfield place?"

"The only rental on that street is theirs. They bought it a few years back, but most city folks usually don't stick around. The Caulfields pop into town a few times a year but rent the place out the rest of the time."

"Lucky me."

Jane smiled. "See? Your luck's changing already."

They stared at each other while Allison found herself again searching for words.

"So where's your car?" Jane asked.

"Oh! Right over there." Allison pointed up Main to where her car sat parked next to an empty motel parking lot.

"Think you can make it back ok?" Jane's grin took the sting from her teasing words.

Allison felt herself blush. "Yeah. I'm good."

They turned around to walk back the way they'd come, not speaking until they'd reached the corner near Jane's garage.

Jane stretched out a hand. Allison reached up to grasp it before Jane had said a word.

"Well, if you need anything else while you're in town, give me a shout. I'm at the garage most days."

"Thanks, Jane." Allison said quietly as Jane released her hand.

"Nice meeting you, Allison. "

Jane walked towards her garage, turning once to wave goodbye. Allison stood staring, watching Jane walk away.

What in the hell are you doing? Snap out of it. Allison abruptly turned and headed in the direction of the car she'd left behind, wondering about the woman she'd just met.

As Allison strolled the sidewalk in the fading light of the day, she felt lighter than she had since she'd left home - in fact, lighter than she had in weeks.

Chapter 2

The morning sun woke Jane when it crested the low hills behind her bedroom. She blinked against the brightness, not exactly hung over despite the late-night drinking with friends at the pub, but annoyed that she'd forgotten to pull the curtains closed before she had gone to bed.

She rolled over onto her back, stretching beneath the covers. Jane knew it wasn't yet eight – this time of year, the sun would shine directly into her bedroom a bit after seven. The garage wasn't scheduled to open until 10am, so she'd planned to sleep late today.

She rolled over again and burrowed into her pillow, hoping to fall back to sleep before she fully woke up and started thinking too hard. Her back was to the window this time, the sun warming it instantly.

In another minute, though, it was *too* warm and she flipped once more onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Maybe she'd get up, and make some breakfast - except then she remembered that her refrigerator was empty. Maybe she could go to the diner and eat – but then she realized she might run into the very people she was trying to avoid.

So much for that idea.

Jane's stomach rumbled, and she wondered if she could make do with something in her pantry. She hadn't gone shopping yesterday, opting instead to work late on the Lincoln and promising herself that she'd go the grocery store in town today.

Then she thought of the beautiful stranger who'd appeared out of nowhere last night.

How often had she imagined a moment like that? When the perfect woman walked into town and swept her off her feet? She had fantasized about that so many times – Jane tinkering in the garage some sunny afternoon until a beautiful woman pulled in to her garage with car trouble.

At that point, the fantasy usually turned into straight up porn.

Real life had been much better than her fantasies. Jane had been wrestling with the bolts holding in a seal on the Lincoln when Allison's light laugh had shocked her frozen, and when Jane had rolled out from under the car, she got her first look at a woman who looked like she'd walked out of Jane's dreams.

Tall, lean but athletic, light brown hair with sun bleached golden strands...Jane thought for a moment that she'd fallen asleep under the car and was dreaming. And then the vision had spoken – her voice low and melodic, and Jane had realized that she was real.

Don't get too excited, Jane thought. City folks don't stick around.

She sighed, but pushed such sad thoughts from her mind. There was no harm in wondering about the beautiful stranger.

Since Allison was staying at the Caulfield place, she was only a few blocks away. Allison seemed the active, early-rising type. Jane wondered if she was up already, practicing yoga like it seemed all big city women did, or maybe running. Maybe she was still asleep, since she was on vacation.

Or maybe she was at the diner having an early breakfast.

Jane leapt from the bed, immediately searching for clean clothes.

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Allison had risen with the sun and watched it wash over everything in view from the back deck of her rental cabin. It wasn't a cabin, really – just an old, well-built house set right in town.

The house was stocked with coffee, but no cream, so she'd decided to walk the few blocks over to the diner and get coffee and breakfast there.

Town was still quiet and mostly deserted at this hour, so the few cars parked near the diner when she arrived made it seem like a metropolitan hub. Allison pushed the door open, hearing the telltale jingle of bells on its backside, and cast her eyes around the small room.

There were about half a dozen tables covered with the expected red and white checker pattern tablecloths. Most of the tables were already occupied.

"Have a seat wherever you like!"

Allison looked up to see a tall, curvy brown-skinned woman behind the small counter, cashing out a man in a tan sheriff's uniform. "Be right with you," the woman said.

Allison saw a two-top table in a corner next to the window. She walked around a table full of four men who greeted her amiably as she passed. She smiled and said good morning, and then claimed the desired corner, her back to the window.

The diner was sparsely decorated, but brightly lit and homey. Directly opposite Allison was a wall full of framed photographs, several years of smiling children showing off their Little League uniforms with the diner's name in big letters across their chests.

A shadow crossed her vision, and a menu appeared out of nowhere in front of her.

"You need more than cereal, yeh?" The proprietor spoke with a thick Hawaiian accent that should have seemed out of place in this remote part of Oregon. She looked at Allison over the glasses resting on the edge of her nose as she set down a coffee mug and filled it with a pot in her other hand. "Eggs straight from the hen house this morning and delicious bacon. Put some meat on your bones," she said with an easy smile.

Allison laughed, and decided that this first full day of vacation, she would go with the flow. "Sounds great. Two over easy, bacon, hash browns, and a side of grits." She handed the menu back.

"Good!" The woman turned and headed to kitchen in back, calling to the cook as she did.

Allison took a sip of her coffee, surprised to find that it was way better than she was expecting from a small diner. This definitely wasn't a franchise breakfast joint.

In minutes, the ordered meal was in front of her. She settled in and took her first bite.

Perfect.

Ten minutes later, she'd done some serious damage to the bacon and grits, and had a plan in place to conquer the potatoes when she heard the bells at the door jingle.

Allison looked up and almost dropped her fork.

Sweet Jesus.

Jane, the mechanic from the night before, walked in and swept her eyes around the room with what looked like nervousness as she closed the door behind her. In the light of day, Jane was absolutely gorgeous. Her hair was down today, and thick waves brushed her shoulders and fell down her back. Her jeans fit her so well, they looked tailored, and no one should look that good in a simple t-shirt. It clung to her shoulders and chest, defining deltoids and breasts in a way that was beyond flattering. She had a denim jacket tucked under one arm, and her sunglasses hung loosely from her fingers.

Despite her completely casual attire, she looked stunning.

Jane's eyes met Allison's, a light of recognition that led to a small smile.

"Hey, Janie!" The proprietor said. "Bout time you showed up. I was wondering if you thought you were too good for Mike's cooking."

Jane walked over to hug the woman behind the counter with obvious affection and kissed her cheek. "I wouldn't insult Mike like that, Nani. I know better."

"The usual?"

"Yes, please."

Allison watched Jane's eyes sweep the room again, lingering a second longer on Allison than the rest of the patrons. Much to Allison's surprise, Jane walked the short distance to Allison's table.

Jane stopped behind the chair across from Allison. "Mind some company? Or want some time to yourself?"

Allison didn't know what to say. She didn't know this woman, but she didn't want to be rude, and part of her wanted to learn more about her, but...

Why do things always feel so complicated?

Up close, Jane's eyes were brown – not the black they'd seemed the night before, but dark, like chocolate. And as she looked into them, Allison realized that there was no pressure in the question Jane had asked. Jane would sit with her, or Jane would leave her alone, but it was Allison's choice, and Jane made it easy for her choose.

Allison waved a hand at the empty seat. "Please."

Jane pulled the chair out and sat down. Nani returned with another mug and the ever-present coffeepot, but was too involved in a conversation with another patron to pay Jane and Allison much attention, and walked over to another table.

"So, you've found my favorite diner," Jane said, stirring cream and sugar into her mug as she glanced at Allison.

"How many are there to choose from?" Allison asked.

"Just the one." Jane smiled as she raised her coffee mug, revealing dimples that quickly disappeared as took her first sip.

Wow, Allison thought, a bit unnerved by Jane's attractiveness. She'd thought Jane was nearly perfect when they met the night before, but now, in broad daylight...

Jane set down her mug after a small sigh of satisfaction. "Got any adventures planned for the day?"

Allison pulled her eyes from Jane's and moved potatoes around her plate with her fork. "I'm going to take your advice and take the tram up the mountain this morning."

"Good call. When you get up there, take the tour. It's a short hike, but it's worth it."

"I'll do that." Allison said. "Sounds right up my alley."

"You do a lot of hiking back home?"

Allison tensed and looked down at her plate. She didn't want to talk about home. She didn't want to *think* about home.

"Yeah, sometimes," she said, hoping to end that line of discussion. "Tell me what else I should check out while I'm here." Allison took another bite of potatoes and looked back at Jane.

Jane was watching her closely, her eyes seeming to measure Allison, and for a moment, Allison feared that Jane would ask more questions. Then Jane smiled again – though it didn't quite reach those intelligent eyes.

"Well," she said brightly. "You have to check out the lake." Jane went on to describe all the water activities available - who to rent gear from, what time to go, and which locations were the best.

Allison relaxed, surprised but relieved that Jane hadn't dug deeper. She listened, making note of what things sounded fun, and started mentally drafting a schedule.

Her musings were interrupted as Nani returned with several plates in hand. Jane sat up straighter in her chair to give Nani more room as the table filled with plates of eggs, potatoes, fruit, grits, sausage and pancakes.

"Holler if you want seconds, Janie," Nani said as she left their table.

"Sure thing, Nani," Jane said. "Thanks."

Allison stared at all the food on the table, then stared at Jane.

Jane glanced at her before looking back at her breakfast. "I know what you're thinking," she said as she spread a napkin across her lap.

"You do?" Allison asked, wondering how Jane could possibly eat what looked like enough food for three people, much less ask for seconds.

"Yeah," Jane said with a grin. "And the answer is no."

"No?" Now Allison was confused.

"Yeah. No." Jane picked up her knife and fork. "If you want seconds, get your own. This is all mine."

Allison couldn't help but laugh, her earlier tension forgotten.

Chapter 3

Two days later, Jane was sitting on a bench outside the barbershop, sipping an iced coffee and enjoying the shade from the mid-day sun, when she noticed a familiar long-legged form a block away.

Allison walked slowly up Main Street, occasionally stopping to look more closely in a shop window. She didn't look to be in any particular hurry as she moved.

Allison was an enigma Jane was trying to solve. During their brief breakfast, Jane had seen something in Allison's eyes – something unhappy and serious – that made the woman look haunted. Jane's suspicions had been confirmed when Allison deflected Jane's attempt to learn more about her life.

The thought of digging deeper, though, didn't sit well with Jane. Allison looked like she was tired and hurting, and Jane didn't want to do anything to make her hurt any more than she already was. For all Jane knew, this vacation was Allison's way of healing.

Jane had decided there and then to do what she could to get that haunted look out of Allison's eyes.

Now, she watched Allison follow the flow of a small crowd and stop right across the street from where Jane sat.

There was a small farmers market in the parking lot of the VFW on Wednesday afternoons. A dozen pop-up tables sat under box store canopies, offering the best of local fruits, vegetables, honey and flowers to locals and wanderers alike.

Jane's place was already fully stocked after her trip to the grocery store earlier in the week, so she'd planned to give this week's market a miss. She took a deep slurping sip of the last of her iced coffee as she stood up, and tossed the cup into a nearby trashcan.

Plans change, she thought as she waited for a pickup truck to pass so she could cross the street.

Unseen by her beautiful prey, Jane looked Allison up and down as she moved closer, appreciating the fit of well-worn jeans as Allison eyed a table covered in green cardboard pints of freshly picked strawberries. Allison wore cheap flip-flops on her feet, and a faded short-sleeved button down that had worn thin, but the aviators that pushed her blonde highlights off her face and then rested atop her head looked designer and top dollar.

An interesting mix of casual elegance, this woman.

Jane walked over to her, and leaned in to speak conspiratorially into one delicate ear. "You don't want to buy any of those," she said in a voice not much louder than a whisper, tugging on Allison's sleeve to pull her away. Jane kept her glee quietly to herself when Allison followed her.

"I don't?"

"No," Jane said as she navigated the small crowd, heading farther away from the street to the few sparse booths tucked into the back of the parking lot.

"Why not?" Allison asked, a small smile on her face.

"Esther's strawberries are ok, but they were better a month ago. And she lets her grandson pack the pints. Peter's a good kid, but he wouldn't know warm water and soap if he was drowning in it."

Allison laughed, and Jane loved the sound of it. "Good to know. Thanks for the rescue."

Jane had to force her gaze away before she tripped or bumped into someone like a fool. Sunshine sure looked good on Allison - that was for certain.

"Besides," Jane said, as they stopped at a lone table tucked under an awning at the far side of the lot. "Here's the good stuff."

Allison looked dubious, but with good reason. There was nothing on the table but a cashbox. Jane turned to the attendant of the table - an older Native woman who sat in a camp chair reading a romance novel.

"Hey, Billie," Jane said.

"Hey, Jane," the woman replied, tucking a bookmark to mark her page. Long black hair streaked with silver was brushed back into a ponytail, and her reading glasses had an old-fashioned chain to hang from her neck. "How's your grandpa doin'?"

"He's fine," Jane said, rolling her eyes a bit. *You should just ask him out already.* "Like always."

"True that," Billie said with a good-natured smile. "Who's your friend?"

Jane turned a bit to smile at Allison, who smiled back. "This is Allison. She's renting the Caulfield place for the week." Jane gestured to Billie. "This is Billie. She teaches at the grade school."

Allison and Billie exchanged polite pleasantries, while Jane reached for her wallet.

"You want the usual?" Billie asked, setting the book down and reaching under the table.

"Two, please," Jane said, wiggling her eyebrows at Allison.

Allison smiled back, even though she clearly had no idea what was going on.

Moments later, the mystery was solved. Two red plastic bowls were heaped high with freshly baked shortcake, healthy dollops of homemade vanilla ice cream, and warm strawberry compote. Billie topped them both with cream she said she'd whipped herself.

"Oh my god," Allison said, in clear surprise.

"Yeah," Jane said. "Wait 'til you taste it."

Allison dipped her spoon, trying to get all four ingredients in one reasonably sized bite. The moment she tasted it, she moaned and closed her eyes.

Jane was so stunned by her body's visceral response to that sound, she almost dropped her own sundae on the asphalt. She watched Allison savor the bite and dive in for more.

Billie chuckled, and Jane caught her wide smile. She'd been busted checking Allison out by a woman Jane considered to be a favorite aunt, even though they weren't related.

Oh, man, she's gonna give me a grief. C'mon, Billie, don't blow it for me.

"Wow, Billie," Allison said. "This is amazing." She was so focused on her next bite that she didn't see Billie's expression.

"We've got a lot of tasty delights in this town, Allison," Billie said with a smile, winking right at Jane. "Don't miss out on anything."

Jane blushed and hoped that Allison had missed the exchange.

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"Last call!"

Allison looked up with surprise. The tall and lanky bartender, a fair-skinned man with dyed jet-black hair and small matching silver hoops in his ears, wiped down one end of the bar as he called out to the few remaining patrons.

Allison had run into Jane at the general store across the street earlier in the evening. Allison had been looking for a car adapter for her phone before she left in the morning, and Jane had purchased some waterproofing for some outdoor gear. They'd chatted briefly as the store closed for the day, and then Jane had suggested that Allison join her and a friend for a pint, and that a few other friends of hers had a band that was playing at the pub.

The friend had begged off via text to Jane – something about succumbing to a summer cold - but by then, the band had started playing, and Allison had decided to stick around for another pint.

Jane rolled her eyes and called out towards the bar. "Harry, c'mon! It's Saturday night and it's not even midnight yet."

The bartender walked over to place two fresh pints on their table, and picked up the empty glasses from their previous round. "Yeah, well," he said as he leaned over their table and spoke in a low voice, thick with a Welsh accent. "I've got a date and I want you louts out of here."

Allison couldn't remember the last time she'd shut down a pub. Maybe back when she was an undergrad? Still, they'd been talking for hours, and now that she thought about it, she couldn't believe how much she'd shared with Jane. Allison wasn't one for talking about herself much, and surely didn't want to talk about the life she had back home, but Jane hadn't asked about any of that.

Jane would smile at her and ask a question about books she'd read, or movies she'd seen, or places she'd visited, but not work or home or anything too sensitive, and it was disarming. Allison would be halfway through a story before she realized that she'd never told it to anyone.

Now that she thought about it, Jane probably knew more about her than Allison's own best friend did.

"A date?" Jane laughed at the bartender. "This late? I don't think that's a date, Harry. I think that's a straight up booty call."

Harry winked as he turned to walk away, and then looked over one shoulder at them. "Nothing straight about it, love."

Jane laughed harder, and Allison smiled but then turned thoughtful.

"That can't be easy," Allison said softly.

"What do you mean?" Jane took a sip from her glass.

"Being gay in a town this size."

Jane sighed. "Well, it ain't easy, but not as hard as I thought it would be."

"Really?" Allison realized she'd received the answer to a question she hadn't known she'd wanted to ask.

"Yeah." Jane drew small designs in the condensation on her glass. "We've got a few hell and damnation types, but mostly people treat you the way they want to be treated, and stay out of each other's business." She laughed again. "Except for the gossips, of course, but you've got those everywhere."

Allison had to agree with the truth of that.

"So how is it not easy?"

Jane looked at Allison for a long moment, as if weighing her answer. "That's a long story for another time, I think."

Allison thought Jane was dodging the question, but let it pass. It seemed they both had things they didn't want to talk about.

Then Jane asked Allison what she'd been like in high school, and just like that, Allison was back to talking about her own life, and surprised that she was sharing it with Jane.

They finished their pints as Harry hollered for everyone to get out. Allison went to pay their bill, but Harry waved them off. Allison thanked him with a smile and then she and Jane walked out the pub and into the warm night air.

Allison stood for a moment on the sidewalk and took a few head-clearing deep breaths. She looked up and couldn't help but gasp. Much of Main Street was dark, but even though there were a few streetlights, the view of the stars was impressive.

The sheer density of stars here was like nothing she'd ever seen.

"I've lived here most of my life, and I never get tired of it," Jane said quietly, standing beside her.

"It's so beautiful," Allison said with wonder. She could see so much more of the sky here, more than when she looked at the night sky in the city.

They stood looking at the stars until the silence was broken by the sound of a closing door behind them. Allison turned to see Harry lock the pub's front entrance. A moment later, the sound of his car seemed loud in the silent night as he pulled out of the parking lot and drove off.

"Time to crash, then," Allison said.

"I'll walk you," Jane said as she strolled alongside Allison.

"After a week here, I think I can make it back okay, Jane," Allison said with a grin, a ghostly feeling in her guts making her feel slightly nervous. Was she drunk? She'd had a few beers, sure, but she'd also had a cheeseburger and fries. At most, she might be more relaxed than usual but certainly not tipsy.

"I'm sure you can," Jane said. "But I'm making sure. Wouldn't want you to get lost again."

They walked slowly, the only ones on the street at this end of town.

"It's so quiet here," Allison said. "I can actually hear myself think."

"Yeah?" Jane asked. "So what do you think about?"

"About how I'm leaving in the morning, and how nice it would be to stay." Allison wished she had more time. Why wasn't there ever enough time?

Jane smiled, her eyes bright, but she didn't say anything.

They turned onto Ganton, and Allison suddenly recognized the feeling in her guts. This felt like the end of a date – and her heart rate picked up as she realized what was happening. Dates that went well ended in kisses goodnight. This hadn't been a date – had it? She didn't want it to be a date – did she?

Oh, god.

They reached the house where Allison was staying and Jane stopped at the end of the gravel driveway. Allison turned to look at Jane and her stomach dropped. Jane had moved to stand inside arms reach.

Allison saw it on Jane's face – the urge to kiss her, looking at Allison for a sign, and Allison felt a strange pressure squeezing her. She shouldn't – because it would only complicate matters in her already complicated life – but Jane was here, and...should she? Allison didn't know what to choose.

"Well," Jane said, taking a step back, making the decision for Allison and ending the moment. "I better go make sure I locked up the shop."

It sounded contrived to Allison, but she appreciated the gesture. "Ok." Allison thought she had enough challenges in her life, but this woman could lead to disaster. "Good night, Jane."

"Good night. Have a safe trip home." Jane said in a near whisper, and offered one last smile, though Allison saw something sad in her eyes. "Sure was nice meeting you, Allison."

Jane turned and walked away. Allison watched her for a few minutes, but Jane never looked back.

xxx

The three-hour drive from town to the airport had gone relatively quickly, but Allison's two flights home felt as if they took forever. By the time she made her way out of the concourse maze and fetched a cab, the city traffic was a mess.

Fatigue settled in quickly, and Allison realized it wasn't only from the long day of travel. She wasn't looking forward to going back to work, and didn't even want to think about all the other things she had to deal with now that she was back in the city.

What she wanted more than anything was a shower to wash off the feeling of recycled air on her skin, and a glass of wine to help ease the knot between her shoulder blades.

Or to maybe go back a few days in time, and spend a little more time with...well, back in Joseph, anyway.

After what seemed like hours but had been only forty-five minutes, the cab stopped in the middle of her narrow street. She paid the fare, grabbed her messenger bag and her rolling carry-on, and made her way to the curb, across the sidewalk, and up the stairs to her door.

Allison stopped and realized she'd need to dig her keys out of her bag before she could get inside the house. To her surprise, though, the door opened to reveal a pale face framed by stylishly short, dark hair.

A face she hadn't been expecting and that wasn't supposed to be here.

"Hey, love!" Nicole smiled brightly, her green eyes warm in greeting as she pushed the door wide and backed inside to invite Allison to pass.

"Nicole." Allison didn't move. "What are you doing here?"

"I came over to welcome you home. Perfect timing, by the way. Dinner is ready, if you're hungry."

Nicole continued to chat at her as Allison gave in and came inside. Allison was too tired to throw Nicole out, even though they were supposed to be taking a break and giving each other some space. Hell, that was half the reason she'd gone on the trip.

There was no point in getting angry at her – Nicole would say she was only trying to help, and Allison would end up feeling like the bad guy, and thinking about it all made her shoulders tense even more.

"So," Nicole said, setting napkins and wine glasses on the dining room table. "How was the trip?"

Allison thought immediately of Jane, and didn't know how to answer.

Chapter 4

On a cold winter morning six months later, Jane was once again beneath a car in her garage. She put too much pressure on the handle of the wrench and it slipped out of her hand. She winced with a hiss as a knuckle bashed into the engine block.

Great.

It was already bleeding. She ignored the grease on her hand and put the knuckle in her mouth, sucking at it to stop the bleeding, wincing again at the pain.

Stupid import.

Jane was cranky today, though she'd only admit it to herself. Her erstwhile apprentice hadn't shown up and had actually had his mother call in sick for him an hour after he was supposed to show up. Her satellite feed was down thanks to an early winter storm the night before, and her favorite radio station only broadcast conservative talking heads at this hour. It was already shaping up to be one bitch of day, and then she heard a sound she didn't want to hear.

Damned near every grown man over thirty owned a pickup truck in these parts, but only one had a Dodge dually with the best diesel engine money could buy.

Well, only one that would pull into *her* garage yard.

Shit.

She checked her knuckle again, and saw that it wasn't bleeding too badly. Jane picked up her wrench and tried again – a little more gently this time.

She counted six breaths before she heard the bell on the office door, followed by the telltale sound of boots on cement, coming closer before they stopped close by.

"Mornin', kiddo," a deep, warm baritone called.

She sighed, but there was no point in being rude.

"Heya, Pops," Jane said. After months of avoiding him, she knew her time was up, and her grandfather had come to say his piece.

"You had breakfast yet?"

She turned the wrench again and it finally gave in. "Not hungry, Pops."

He laughed the way he always did. "You gotta eat, Jane-Ellen."

She rolled her eyes. It was never good when he used her full name. It meant he was pulling rank.

"Yes, sir," she said. Jane closed her eyes, and sighed again. She might as well cave and get it over with. She'd put it off long enough.

Jane rolled her creeper out from under the car. She met his eyes, dark brown like her own, and wanted to cry. As always, he looked at her with compassion and understanding. She wanted neither, but couldn't deny that it meant a lot that he always gave her both.

He offered her an unnecessary hand up, which she took, and once on her feet, he gave her a warm hug. His salt-and-pepper beard scratched her cheek as he pulled away with a smile that never waned, even when she didn't return it.

Gary made idle small talk as they walked the three blocks to the diner, their gloved hands tucked into pockets. Bleak winter sunshine touched the high desert Pacific Northwest landscape, but didn't warm it, and air steamed from their mouths as they walked. Jane was surprised to see him this time of year. Gary ran a microbrewery and pub one town over in Enterprise, Oregon, and while winter wasn't great for the pub business, he made a holiday brew that sold well regionally. It was busy work keeping up with the shipments between the holidays.

Gary waited until after they'd had coffee and ordered before he started in with the talk that Jane knew was the reason why he'd come. She had avoided him for the most part for months, and on the few occasions when they'd seen each other, she'd changed the subject when he started asking questions.

"How long are you planning on hiding out in that garage?" His gaze was direct and demanded an answer.

"I'm not hiding."

"Bullshit, Jane," he said. He rarely cursed, so Jane knew he wasn't going to take the usual dodging. "You've been back for almost a year, and haven't so much as interviewed for one new job."

How does he know that?

"You always put me down as a reference, and I haven't heard a peep."

Jane dropped her eyes. He was right. She listened to him as he told her yet again that she needed to "get back on the horse".

"Everyone's got a tough row to hoe," Gary said. "I'm not saying it's easy, but you're strong. This isn't like you. This isn't the woman who worked her way through school and got not one, but three engineering degrees."

Jane wished she hadn't ordered her usual breakfast. She didn't have much of an appetite.

"Jane, I can remember when you couldn't *wait* to get out of here. What happened?"

It was true. She'd figured out that she was gay early senior year in high school and didn't exactly keep it a secret. She'd known it was just a matter of time before word got back to Gary.

Jane had worried about how he might respond. Gary Walker was well respected in this town and several others nearby for being fair but conservative and stubborn. He had kept a strict house when Jane and her brother were growing up. He'd raised them while their mother had served in the Army, and Jane's brother hadn't been too much of a handful but Jane had always been rebellious. He'd been rarely lenient with his headstrong and passionate granddaughter.

Soon after her personal discovery, she'd found the courage to tell Gary. He told her he already knew and that it didn't change a damned thing as far as he was concerned. She'd burst into tears from relief – and from the proof that he really did love her as much as he'd always said he did.

Still, there weren't many others in town her age that she'd consider dating. Her dream of finding a good woman and settling down here at home – which is what she wanted – well, it was a little tricky when she knew everyone. Loneliness finally drove her to the city.

She'd hated it there.

"You're meant to be more than just a small-town grease monkey, Jane." He frowned at her. "Stop wallowing in the mistakes of the past and get on with it."

Yet Jane knew her dreams had changed, and big city plans no longer fit. She'd also given up on finding a woman to share her life with – she had her cars, her friends, and when the loneliness got to be too much, she'd backpack in the mountains until the ache eased.

"I'll think about it," she said, hoping it would make him stop pressing, and it did. He gave her hand a pat and offered her the smile that meant he thought she'd do as he asked.

This time, she'd already done plenty of thinking. Jane had tried a big city career and failed, but that wasn't the worst of it, though she'd never tell him.

The worst had been the isolation, the loneliness, the daily uphill battle to prove herself when no one cared whether or not she succeeded – and some actively set her up to fail. And then there had been the desolation she'd felt after the heartbreak that no one knew about – when she'd fallen in love with someone who couldn't love her back.

She pushed that line of thought from her mind. The wound had healed over already - though it left one hell of an emotional scar.

No, Gary was wrong.

She was never going back to the city.

xxx

Months later, and in a racquetball court hundreds of miles away from Jane's small-town garage, Allison lurched to her right and swung her racket, but missed the ball by inches. Momentum drove her flat against the wall, pushing air from her lungs as she blinked sweat from her eyes.

"Jesus, Levy," Gabriela taunted. "You're playing for shit today. Or you're taking pity on me. Which is it?"

Allison knew it was the former, but pretended it was the latter. "Look, I can't help it if you suck."

"Screw you."

Allison's eyebrows rose and fell as she moved back into position to receive the next serve. "Yeah, well, that's on vacation for the foreseeable future."

She waited for the snide comeback, but Gabriela bounced the ball twice, and then turned to face Allison with understanding in her blue eyes as she flipped her long black ponytail over one shoulder. Allison's best friend knew her too well.

"Yeah? You guys call it quits again?"

Allison stood from her crouch. "Not again." This time was for good. "I'm done, Gabriela. I can't keep doing this dance with her. It doesn't change anything." She wasn't in love with Nicole, and hadn't been for quite some time.

"I still can't believe you got back together with her after your 'break'. God, Al, nobody does that." Gabriela served, and this time Allison returned the point well enough that Gabriela couldn't follow the ball.

Allison caught the bounce back with her free hand and moved to the serving line.

"I thought I owed it to her after all we'd been through." Allison had met Nicole while she was an undergrad, and though challenging, they'd kept their relationship alive while Allison went through medical school and residency, and spent years together afterward.

Almost a decade. So much time. Thinking about it made Allison's chest ache.

"You don't owe her shit, Al, besides common decency. You certainly don't owe her your life."

"I wasn't giving up my life-"

"Yes, you were." Gabriela put a hand on her hip and pointed at Allison with her racket. "You gave her six more months of your life, when you *knew* you weren't in love with her."

Allison looked down, blinking back sudden tears.

Gabriela's face melted into compassion. "I'm sorry, Al," she said. "I know this hasn't been easy for you."

"Thanks, Gabi," Allison said, but looked away as she pushed her feelings down. She was tired of hurting, and didn't want to give in again.

"Nic's a good woman, she's just not a good fit for you," Gabriela said. Allison served, and Gabriela took a fierce swing to drive the ball at the wall.

It bounced back, right in Allison's range. She returned it and dropped to the back of the court. "Yeah, I don't think there is a good fit for me."

They played a few more points without comment.

Gabriela aimed her next swing at the front left corner, hoping to put Allison on the run. "Can I ask you a question?"

Allison didn't answer, focused on her return, and managed to hit the tricky shot back into play.

Gabriela tried again, this time hitting the ball hard enough to bounce off three walls before reaching Allison.

"You ever tell her about Jane?"

Allison stood up with a start, missing the ball entirely. "What are you talking about? There's nothing to tell."

Gabriela laughed, and chased down the ball. "So, no."

Allison persisted. "Nothing happened."

"Right. Nothing happened," Gabriela said with a smile, not looking at Allison at all as she walked back to the serve line. "Just a date that wasn't a date with a woman you can't stop talking about, even though you haven't seen her in nearly a year."

"I don't talk about her *that* much." *At least I hope I don't.* Allison had told Gabriela all about her trip – and may have mentioned a particular mechanic more than once. Still, it didn't mean anything.

"I mean it, Gabi," Allison said. "Nothing happened." She looked at the front wall, readying herself for the next serve.

"Ok, ok," Gabriela relented, and bounced the ball on the floor a couple of times with the racket. "But I bet you wouldn't mind if something happened now."

Allison snapped her eyes to Gabriela again, but this time, she couldn't disagree.

Chapter 5

Jesus, what a disaster.

Jane took another sip of beer and wondered how hard she was going to try to make this date work.

Gary had gone on a much-needed vacation, and Jane had closed up the garage in Joseph for the week and come over to Enterprise to keep an eye on things. He'd returned yesterday, and she was supposed to head back home today, but one of his new servers had asked Jane out for a drink.

Jane hadn't been on a date since...well, in a long time, so she'd said yes. Now, though, she regretted it, and wished she'd gone home.

Heather was pretty. Heather was hard-working. Heather was outgoing and made friends easily. Heather was new to Enterprise; she'd moved here recently from a town even smaller than Jane's, and considering the size of Jane's hometown, that was saying something. Jane wasn't sure it was saying something good.

None of that, however, was the issue that was giving Jane trouble tonight.

Heather was boring.

She'd never been more than forty miles from home. She said Enterprise was the biggest "city" she'd ever been to, and it had a population of barely two thousand people. She thought that Jane's "big city college" degrees were impressive, and said they made her nervous. She spent a lot of time partying with friends – drinking straight from the keg until someone did something stupid. She already regaled Jane with several tales of idiots falling in firepits, or idiots ending up in the creek, or idiots who fell asleep first at house party ragers.

Heather also smiled in a way that Jane thought was supposed to be seductive, but instead made her look girlish.

Still, a date was a date, and Jane couldn't remember the last time she'd gotten laid, so...

Jane tried again. "So," she said with false brightness. "Read anything good lately?" Jane was voracious in her appetite for new books. Maybe Heather would suggest something Jane hadn't read yet.

Heather laughed. "No way!" She actually snorted, and then – embarrassed – tried to cover it up. "Oh, I swore when I graduated that I'd never read another book again." She sounded proud of her declaration. "So far so good."

You have got to be kidding me.

"Really? Not a single one? Not even a novel? Some bodice ripping fiction?" Jane thought that even terrible taste in books would be better than not reading at all.

Heather picked up her pint and took a deliberately demure sip. "You mean that stuff in the check-out aisle at the market? Nah. Looks boring. Why read about somebody else's life when I can live my own?"

Jane was flabbergasted, and quickly slammed the rest of her beer. She excused herself from the table, rushed to the bathroom, and while she was there, texted her old high school accomplice, Summer.

-Dude. Exit protocol. -

By the time Jane got back to the table, her phone was already blowing up. She and Summer had devised this method to get out of bad dates years ago – once executed, one would relentlessly text the other some imaginary emergency until the plug had been pulled on the bad date.

"Everything ok?" Heather asked, as Jane's phone vibrated on the high-top table for the third time.

"Alarm notification from my garage. It's probably nothing."

Four more buzzing interruptions over the next five minutes had Heather looking nervous. "Gosh, Jane. That's seems important."

"Yeah," Jane said sadly. "You're probably right."

Soon enough, Jane had escaped. She texted Summer the promise of a future pint of beer in thanks, and finally headed home.

As Jane drove the ten miles from Enterprise back to Joseph, she noticed that there were few folks on the road. The speed limit was fifty-five miles per hour, but since there was no one behind her, Jane slowed the perfectly tuned and newly painted Lincoln down to half that, and rolled the windows down completely to enjoy the ride.

Drives like this one buoyed her soul but broke her heart. She loved early summer twilight and the smell of the high desert sage on the breeze, but she wanted to have someone beside her, humming along with her to outlaw country songs. She wanted someone holding her hand across the bench seat.

Someone who was absolutely *not* Heather.

She thought for a moment about the woman she'd met almost a year ago. Truth be told, she thought about Allison often – the way her long hair fell across her shoulders. The way her eyes had shined when Jane told a joke.

The way her lips had curved when she smiled.

She wondered if Allison had found some peace – if the sadness was out of her eyes. Jane hoped so. Wherever she was in the world, Allison should be happy.

And as she had for years, Jane wondered if she'd ever find someone like Allison for herself.

Jane sighed and shook her head with a short laugh. *Not gonna find anyone like that around here*, she thought. And since here was where she was planning to stay, that was that. One of these days, she'd learn to live with it and she would settle down with someone like Heather.

But not today, she thought wryly.

Without looking away from the road, she reached for the volume knob on the restored stereo and turned up the high lonesome blues that – in direct opposition to the lyrics – made her feel light and as if she could do anything.

xxx

Allison leaned back against the wall inside Joseph's only pub, and took a healthy sip from her second lager. The band was pretty good – a woman with an acoustic guitar and a man with a mandolin sang tight harmonies against a near perfect backdrop of drums and stand-up bass, and Allison listened to their wistful songs of longing and heartbreak.

It suited her mood, and eased the melancholic ache that felt bone deep.

She told herself that she'd come back to Joseph because she loved the scenery. It *was* a beautiful town – set in the base of the Wallowa Mountains, small yet wide open, Joseph was quaint, but she loved the feel of it. No one ever seemed to be in a hurry here. Everyone knew each other – hell, some people she'd met the last time she'd visited over a year ago remembered *her*.

The relaxed pace of it all was soothing to Allison – as if it didn't matter how quickly she moved. So different from Los Angeles, where everything felt like it was moving too quickly even if it was standing still.

Allison loved it here. Everything about this town made her feel like she'd already had half a beer.

Then again, she *had* just finished a beer.

She listened to the plaintive wail of the woman onstage, and wondered if she wasn't already slightly tipsy since the woman's voice made tears form in the corners of her eyes.

Knock it off, Levy, she thought, and blinked them away. It was silly – she wasn't as sad as she used to be, though she wasn't exactly happy either.

She felt freer overall since she and Nicole had finally called it quits, but her life still didn't quite feel right. Her work at the hospital was busy but solid, and she enjoyed her co-workers and patients, though she felt as if she couldn't make the kind of connection with them that she wanted. A big hospital and a big HMO meant a lot of turnover and not much time with her patients.

Between the hectic job, the rat race of the big city, and a new loneliness that had moved into her house, Allison thought another trip to Joseph would be good for her. This time, she was here for two weeks, and hoped to spend more of this trip outdoors, since it was so beautiful here.

Yes, she loved Joseph, but the landscape wasn't the only reason she'd come, even if she could only admit it to herself. And that other reason was why she was currently feeling melancholy.

You got your hopes up, but she isn't here.

She'd been in town for three days already, and hadn't seen hide nor hair of the mechanic she'd met on her last visit. Not at the diner. Not at the pub. And not even at the garage, when Allison had briefly swallowed her nervousness and gone straight to the source.

Allison wouldn't go so far as to say that she'd *only* come all this way to see Jane, but Jane was certainly the best part of the whole package. Not only was she beautiful, Jane was smart, and funny, and had drawn Allison out of her carefully constructed emotional fortress.

Jane hadn't pushed, except for that last tense moment when Allison felt the pressure for – well, *more*.

When Allison felt dissatisfied or lonely, she often looked back on that time with Jane, when things had seemed...better – if only for a few short days. Allison hadn't been able to act on anything then, not with all of the complications of her life with Nicole, but now...well, part of her was secretly hoping that Jane might look at her now the way she had then.

If Allison could find her.

Allison sighed. *Probably just as well*. What was she going to do? Have a short fling with the woman and then blow out of town again? How mature was that? Allison wasn't the screw-'em-and-leave-'em type, so she wasn't likely to fall into bed with anyone. She was only here for two weeks, and then it was back to her life back home.

Though the thought of that life wasn't as fulfilling as it used to be.

The band had taken a short break, but was once again taking to the stage. Allison pushed the heavier thoughts from her mind, and fell once again into the music.

Two songs later, an oh-so-familiar and much welcomed form walked into the room and grabbed a corner table. Allison sat up straighter in her chair and watched the newcomer closely. Jane Walker took a sip of her hefty stein as she sat down, licking her lips.

She looks the same, Allison thought, then realized Jane actually looked a little different. Leaner, maybe, and her hair was longer, for sure – it cascaded over her shoulders and down her back.

So beautiful – she looks almost regal.

Allison watched Jane's eyes move casually around the room, pass her, then immediately move back to stare.

Allison smiled, but didn't move. Jane didn't smile back.

Allison looked down, embarrassed. She'd made too much of this. Perhaps Jane didn't remember Allison as fondly as Allison remembered her. Perhaps she'd been disappointed with their last exchange. Maybe she didn't want to talk to Allison at all – or ever.

Allison was surprised by how much that disappointed her.

A moment later, a shadow blocked the lights from the stage.

"Allison?"

Allison looked up to see Jane smiling nervously at her. Allison smiled back, hoping to set Jane at ease.

"Hi, Jane."

Jane rolled her eyes but relaxed. "I wasn't sure it was you and thought I was imagining things." She set her beer down on Allison's small table. "When did you get into town? Are you staying at the same place? And how have you been? You look great!" Jane couldn't seem to stop talking long enough to catch a breath, but finally sat down, and looked embarrassed enough to cut off the chatter with a hefty draw from her ridiculously large beer stein.

Allison was so happy to see her, and so relieved that Jane was clearly interested in talking with her, she decided to let Jane off the hook. "Three days ago, no, I'm not, not as great as I am right now, and thanks." She took a sip of her own beer to cover up the grin that was threatening to take over her face. "How are you and what have you been up to?"

"I'm great, now," Jane said, and then looked briefly chagrined. Then she launched into the tale of where she'd been for the last week. Allison listened closely, her previous mood forgotten.

Allison was suddenly so happy, she could barely sit still.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Jane made a bet with herself. If she was wrong, she was only out five bucks.

Last night's fiasco of a date with Heather was almost forgotten. Jane was riding an emotional high from her happenstance meeting with Allison at the pub. Allison had left soon after, but said she hoped they'd run into each other soon.

Allison. The woman of her dreams had come back to town. Jane couldn't believe it.

This morning, there were four two-top outside tables at Cassie's Café on Main Street, and though it wasn't yet 9am, three were already occupied. Jane sat down in one of the two metal chairs tucked into the last table, and set her bet down on the tabletop.

I hope she's not one of those skinny soy no foam types.

Allison was built like a runner. Jane was hoping that if she was, she'd run early to beat the heat. There was a chance Allison would stop by the café after, like all the other runners in town.

Fifteen minutes later, Jane was halfway through her own coffee, a plain hot drip with sugar and cream, when she saw Allison running against the flow of non-existent traffic a few blocks away. Jane covered her exultant grin with another sip of coffee as Allison slowed to a walk a block away.

When Allison got closer, Jane waved and caught her eye. Allison waved back.

"You stalking me?" Allison said with a smile as she walked up and pulled out the other chair. She was still breathing quickly as she sat down, though she didn't look as if she'd pushed herself too hard.

"Now, is that any way to treat the welcoming committee?" Jane replied, hoping she wasn't coming on too strongly. "I guessed an iced coffee would be a safe bet."

"Wow, thanks," Allison said. "That's a pretty good guess." She took a sip from the fat straw poking through the lid. "Mmmm. That's perfect."

Jane took another sip of her coffee, wishing she'd chosen iced herself. Now that Allison was here, Jane was definitely over-warm. And the light sheen of perspiration on Allison's arms – *and god, those long, delicious legs* – wasn't helping to cool Jane off.

"Cassie's specialty," Jane said, trying to keep herself from ogling too much. "Some kind of salted caramel something or other. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"Tastes pretty decadent."

"Ha! That's Cassie for you," Jane said with a chuckle. "How was the run?"

"Pretty damned good. Open, empty flat roads – can't complain."

"Wouldn't do you any good, anyway," Jane said.

Allison laughed, then took another sip of her coffee.

When their eyes met again, Jane found herself briefly speechless. They stared at each other, neither saying a word, until Jane finally asked the question that was really on her mind.

"So, I'm going on a hike this afternoon with my brother and some friends. Want to come along?"

Allison looked unsure. "They won't mind?"

Jane shook her head to set her at ease. "Not at all. We head up to the ridge at least once a week this time of year. The view is amazing and the hike isn't too tricky." She looked again into Allison's honey brown eyes.

"Besides, you should go with someone on your first trip on some of these trails. Consider us your trustworthy guides."

Allison laughed. "Well, when you put it like that, how could I refuse?"

Jane decided right then that she would do whatever it took to hear Allison laugh like that again. Allison was out of Jane's league – she would be gone in less than two weeks, so there was no chance for any kind of romance or happily ever after. Jane wasn't kidding herself. But until then, Jane was going to take as much as she could get, even if it broke her heart.

Allison took another sip of her coffee and smiled at Jane until they both blushed and looked away.

Jane was thrilled.

xxx

When Allison drove her rental into the small parking lot off the two-lane highway, Jane was the only person waiting at the trailhead. Allison smiled at Jane in greeting, parked the car and turned off the ignition after rolling up the windows. Jane waved at her with a smile of her own.

"Am I early or late?" Allison called out as she climbed out the car. She slung a lightly loaded day-pack over one shoulder.

"Early," Jane said as she walked over. "We're the first ones here." She looked to the highway as another car pulled in. "Though it looks like my brother and his friends are present and accounted for."

The other car was an SUV that was only a couple years old but was covered in road dust. A grinning bearded man with light brown hair waved from the driver's seat. He drove around the lot in a circle and then parked on the far side, nose toward the highway. Two doors quickly opened.

"Or not," Jane amended. "My brother isn't with them. Hey, Brian!" Jane called out across the gravel parking lot. "Where's your partner in crime?"

Brian yelled back as he and a lithe black woman walked closer while holding hands, both of them dressed in casual outdoor active wear. "Gary called him in." He lowered his voice as he moved closer. "Said the daytime bartender had bailed. Guess it's just me and you and your friend." He smiled at Allison in greeting.

Karina smiled, her eyes hidden by sunglasses. "His loss – it's gonna be a gorgeous day up on the ridge."

"Well, better him working today than me." Jane chuckled.

"True that," Brian said, and led them all toward the trailhead while Jane made the introductions.

Soon, Allison was happily lost in the forest as the trail grew more wooded. The smell of sunshine-warmed pine filled her nose and the buzz of insects was low music to her ears. The hikers spread out on the trail, with more distance between them as they walked.

Forty-five minutes later, Karina was in the lead with Allison not far behind her. Allison could hear Jane and Brian chatting, but they were far enough away that she couldn't actually make out words. She could hear water rushing somewhere nearby but didn't smell it yet. The incline grew, the trail widened a bit, the woods gave way to shorter trees and higher grasses.

Allison watched butterflies dance in and out of rays of sun and shadow beneath one of the oaks, and smiled to herself. It was so quiet and tranquil here. Even the heavy heat of midday felt good – perhaps because Allison herself was out in the wild, and felt part of it.

Right at this moment, she didn't even feel like she was on the same planet as her life in Los Angeles. Briefly, her spirit soared.

She felt the tight pull of a shoelace and looked down to see that one had come loose and become trapped underfoot. Allison walked over to the side of the trail and sat down on a fallen tree to fix it.

Brian's good-natured laughter caught up to Allison, as did Jane's annoyed voice.

"Tell Perry to mind his own business," Jane threw back at Brian as she huffed up the trail, passed Allison and caught up to Karina.

Allison finished tying her shoe and stood up as Brian reached her.

"All set?" Brian asked, a wide smile on his face.

"Yeah," Allison answered and turned to follow the others with Brian at her side.

"So what brings you to our fair town?"

"I wanted a chance of pace, and a friend told me a couple years ago about the tram above the lake." Allison's stride matched the easy pace of the pair ahead of her and Brian. "She said it was beautiful here." Allison's eyes took in the wide vista not far off the trail. "She wasn't kidding. This is my second trip here."

"Hey, it's a great place to be from, that's for sure."

"You don't live here?"

"Not anymore," he said. "I'm here visiting my folks, but I live about four hours north of town, where you can actually find work. Not everyone can open up shop like Late Start up there." He nodded his head toward Jane.

Allison frowned. "Late Start?" She hoped he wasn't about to say something disparaging about Jane. She was starting to like him, but that would change quickly if he said anything against her new friend.

He laughed. "Yeah. We graduated high school the same year, but Jane didn't start college until I was halfway through my junior year at the university. Perry and I call her Late Start when we want to get her goat."

Allison felt herself bristle at the dig at Jane. Jane didn't seem like she had any impairments, but if she did and this guy was making fun of her –

"Then again, she doesn't have any student loan debt, either. Jane's been busting her ass since we were kids, saving up for college. She started late because she wanted to pay cash as she worked her way through school, and damned if she didn't do that. Still managed to graduate a semester early, too, then went on to get a second bachelors and a masters." He shook his head but smiled with affection. "That woman is a force of nature."

Now Allison wondered if he harbored some sort of feelings for Jane. It must have shown on her face, because Brian laughed again.

"We dated when we were kids, but that is so far behind us. Besides, she is – by her own definition, mind you – 'queer as fuck'." He laughed out loud, and relieved for some reason, Allison couldn't help but laugh with him.

Their laughter made Jane turn around to look at them. She looked annoyed at first, but when she saw Allison smiling at her, she smiled back.

"Jane is probably the best person I know," Brian said. "It's been good to have her back."

Allison was confused. "Was she gone?"

Brian continued as they navigated a spot in the path that grew briefly narrow between some overgrowth. "Jane went away for a couple of years. Came back last year after that time away."

"Oh." Allison wasn't sure what to say to that.

"I was surprised she was away so long. She loves this town. She only left because she couldn't find what she wanted here."

Allison's curiosity got the best of her. "What was that?"

Brian smirked, and it seemed like he was holding back a secret. "You'll have to ask her that." He picked up the pace to catch up with the others, calling to Karina as he drew closer.

Jane dropped back to walk with Allison. They hiked up the steep incline without speaking for a while until Allison stopped for a moment to catch her breath.

Allison closed her eyes as she stood in the warm sun, breathing deeply as her heart raced.

This must be heaven, she thought.

She could feel Jane standing nearby – could feel Jane's eyes on her – but kept her own eyes closed, the red light behind her eyelids making her blink.

"You okay there, Allison?" Jane asked softly.

Allison smiled. "Digging on the local air, Jane."

"Glad to hear it." Allison could hear the smile in Jane's voice.

A sharp cry made Allison open her eyes. She looked up the trail to see Brian crouched down next to Karina, who was clutching an ankle and grimacing in pain.

"Shit," Jane muttered. "What happened, Ree?" Jane rushed to her friend, scouting the terrain for whatever had felled Karina. Allison followed.

"Rolled on that rock right there," Karina said tightly, nodding with her head at a loose rock in the trail behind them.

"Luckily there's a doctor in the house," Allison said. "Let me take a look."

A thorough inspection led to a field diagnosis. "Looks like a solid sprain, though there might be a small break." She looked at Brian. "Think you can piggyback her down the trail? If she puts any weight on it by trying to limp down, it might make it worse."

"Absolutely," Brian replied. He seemed calm, but his hand clasped Karina's tightly and demonstrated his worry.

Jane took Karina's pack and Allison took Brian's while Brian hefted his girlfriend on his back.

"Guess you're gonna have to let me be the badass for once," he said with some affection.

"Don't let it go to your head," Karina said playfully, though it was clear that she was still in pain.

They walked with caution back down the trail, letting Brian take the lead.

"Well," Jane said. "Do we know how to show you a good time or what?"

Allison shook her head at Jane's wry humor, but couldn't help but smile.

xxx

The next day, Jane locked the office door of the garage and pulled her sunglasses from atop her head down over her eyes. Though it was almost noon, it wasn't hot yet – the heat of the day didn't peak until later in the afternoon.

Jane pocketed her keys and headed towards Main Street. She probably didn't need to lock the office doors – nobody local would dare to break into her place – but she did have enough customer information and cash on hand that it was smart to be cautious.

Today, Jane's restlessness had eased, but her mind when left unoccupied kept thinking of Allison.

Crazy. She's from out of town and leaving soon. Shouldn't even think about asking her out.

But that's exactly what had been on her mind. All she could think of was Allison – the sun on her smiling face, her laughter yesterday on the trail. Jane was going crazy thinking about this woman and needed to find some way to occupy herself.

Her usual hobbies weren't cutting it – tuning up the Lincoln only made her think of the first time she'd ever seen Allison.

Snap out of it, Walker.

She'd decided to track down something new to read since she'd worked through the latest stack of books at her house. Jane glanced again at her watch. Hannah was bringing her Land Cruiser by the garage in less than an hour, but Jane had time to walk over to the bookstore and back before then.

Jane turned on Main Street and headed towards the end of town six blocks away. There was a large house on the edge of town that had been converted to a bookstore. It didn't have a huge selection and carried mostly used titles, but it was the only bookstore for a fifty-mile radius, so the inventory turnover was frequent.

The wide porch stairs led to broad double doors with inset windows. Jane pushed one door open, jingling the bells on the inside knob as she walked in.

She tipped her shades back on top of her head, and smiled at the man behind the counter. "How's business, Gunther?"

Gunther was pushing eighty but looked twenty years younger. "Not bad, considering how beautiful the weather is and how much it keeps people outside." His broad grin had long ago built creases in his face. "How about you?"

"Enough to keep me in books," she said and glanced around looking at the displays and stacks in the main room.

"Got some new stuff in sci-fi and thrillers upstairs." Gunther had been selling books to Jane since grade school – the only things besides car parts that she'd ever purchased with her hard-earned money.

"Thanks." Jane walked through what would have been the living room and headed for the stairs in the middle of the house.

A short while later, she'd collected half a dozen books, and was reading the summary on the back of a new techno-thriller when she heard the bells on the front door jingle.

"Hey, there!" She heard Gunther's greeting, even though she was on the second floor.

"Good afternoon." Allison's clear voice reached Jane's ears.

Jane's heart beat faster. Before she could stop herself, she added the book in her hand to the existing pile and headed back downstairs.

The sound of her arrival drew Allison's eyes to hers.

Play it cool, Walker.

"You stalking me?" Jane smiled.

Allison smiled back. "You've figured me out." She looked around the room. There was a lot to see – every wall was covered by floor to ceiling bookshelves, and several tables were stacked high with a wide variety of subjects.

"Looking for something in particular?" Jane asked before Gunther could get a word in.

"Not sure. I've finished the three books I brought, so I guess I'm browsing, looking for something new."

"Well, you've seen my favorite diner, my favorite market pop-up, my favorite trail, and now you've found my favorite bookstore."

"Well, when you put it like that, I guess I am stalking you." Allison's smile grew wider.

Jane stared. Allison's brown eyes were delightful to see – and the ghostly strain of sadness was all gone.

Then she remembered Gunther was there. She looked at him quickly, embarrassed to see that he was grinning right at her.

Damn it. He's worse than Billie. I've got to get out of here before he says something...

"You ever been on horseback?" Jane said suddenly, as she moved forward quickly to set her books before Gunther. He silently rang them up on a simple calculator while she fumbled in her pocket for her wallet.

Allison drew her eyebrows together. "No, I never have. Why?"

"I'm going on a ride tomorrow," Jane said as she handed Gunther a twenty. She'd already calculated how much it was going to cost. "Got a friend who takes folks on trail rides on the other side of the lake, over by the campgrounds. Want to join me?"

Allison stared without speaking, as if she was still processing what Jane had asked.

Or perhaps considering whether or not Jane was asking her on a date.

Say yes, Jane thought, because I am absolutely asking you out on a date.

Allison looked down at her feet for a moment before glancing up at Jane. "Sure. Sounds fun. What time?"

Jane took the change Gunther offered with a nod then picked up her books and stepped closer to Allison. "I'll pick you up at two?"

Jane watched with near glee as Allison's smile grew more bashful.

"It's a date," Allison said.

Jane couldn't hold in the smile. "See you then." She felt as if she'd won the lottery. There was no way this would end well since Allison was only here for another week at most, but she didn't care and wanted to spend time with her anyway. And if the outdoors made Allison happy, Jane was going to get her outside every chance she got.

She didn't even mind that Gunther winked at her and gave her a thumbs-up when she waved goodbye and walked outside.

Shit. Better call Summer.

Jane picked up her pace when she realized she'd left her phone at the office. She hadn't planned to ride tomorrow and needed to see if her friend was even working.

Chapter 7

Several days later, Allison weaved her way through the small crowd at the county beach at the end of the lake, wondering how soon the fireworks would begin.

It was late afternoon – a half hour past sunset – on Friday, the fourth of July, and it looked like everyone in town was here. Allison stopped to chat with the doctor and nurse she'd met when she, Jane and Brian had brought Karina in for care after the mishap on the trail. The doctor and nurse were married, and sat playing with their small child on a blanket in the sand. Allison smiled at their antics. A short while later, she ran into

Gunther from the bookstore, and told him she'd finished the books she'd purchased. He, of course, had a few recommendations for her next read.

Considering she didn't live here, she certainly knew enough of the people to have to stop every thirty feet to talk to someone. Allison couldn't complain – it was nice to feel welcome.

An old-fashioned jug and washboard band playing Americana on a small stage finished their last song and the overture for the fireworks display began.

Guess it won't be long now, Allison thought, looking forward to seeing the fireworks over the lake.

The lake itself was over three miles long and about a mile across. It was a quarter mile walk from town to the county, and then the road continued down one side of the lake before it ended near the resort and several campgrounds at the far end.

Low hills rose on either side of the lake, parallel to the road, and Allison's cabin sat low on the hill to the west. It was a summer lake house with several bedrooms and a large front room with a huge picture window looking out over the lake. Allison loved it.

I wonder if Jane's seen that house.

Then the ache started again.

She hadn't seen Jane in days. Allison hadn't gone out of her way to avoid her, but she hadn't gone looking for her either. In the five days since their date on horseback, she'd spent most of her time checking out the things in town she'd missed on her last visit.

Allison had met a few of the daily runners that congregated at Cassie's every morning for after-run coffees, and had ventured out on a couple of hikes with them during the week. She'd visited the resort and had gone kayaking with some locals who invited her to join them.

She hadn't called Jane, though they'd exchanged a few texts. And Jane hadn't come looking for her, either.

Allison wasn't sure how she felt about that.

It wasn't that Allison regretted the date or hadn't enjoyed it. On the contrary, the date had gone well, Allison thought.

In fact, the date had gone *too* well.

Jane's friend Summer was cheerful and quirky. Her dyed black hair with blood red highlights and painted black fingernails were more goth than Allison expected to see in a town this small, but she clearly loved her work. Allison didn't think she'd ever heard anyone refer to horses as "dude" and "bro", but as Summer had run through the final check of all the riding gear, she'd talked to them as if they were people.

Summer also didn't tease Allison too much for being an inexperienced "city slicker".

Soon enough, the ride had begun, with a short jaunt up the county road into the low hills below the greater mountain range. After about a quarter mile on blacktop, Summer led them onto a gravel trail that soon gave way to mulch, and finally dirt as the path wove its way up into the woods.

They were far enough apart that Allison would have to raise her voice to be heard, but close enough that a simple glance spoke volumes.

Jane's glances had a lot to say.

Allison enjoyed the slow sway of the ride, the freedom of not having to watch where the horse was going since he knew the trail better than she did. She watched the birds flit from tree to tree, saw squirrels snagging bounty from branches too high for Allison to reach, listened to the low murmur of the numerous brooks they passed.

She was sure that her muscles would scream later, but for now, she relaxed and enjoyed the beauty of her surroundings. Including the woman on the horse in front of her.

Jane was a natural rider, swaying gently in the saddle, mumbling to her horse with words that Allison couldn't make out, but in an encouraging tone that Allison could recognize. Clad once again in a form-fitting t-shirt, jeans and square cut boots, bathed in the afternoon sunshine, Jane looked like she'd been born in these woods. Like this was home for her.

When they stopped for a break halfway through their ride, Allison watched as Jane stared at the panoramic mountain view, which was spectacular on this clear, summer day. Jane looked like she was an integral part of it, healthy, vibrant, alive and part of the land.

Jane belonged here. In that moment, Allison realized that Jane Walker was one hell of a woman, and that Allison had never met anyone like her. Jane was the kind of woman she could fall for, the kind of woman a person might settle down and build a life with.

It was like a cold glass of ice water had been poured down Allison's spine, because then she realized that Jane wasn't just any date. Jane wasn't a woman she could flirt with and then leave behind. Jane was...well, Jane was something more than that. So this couldn't be a real date anymore, could it? Not the kind that ended with a possibility of something between them, because there couldn't be.

Because Allison was leaving.

When the ride ended, Allison had politely told Jane that she'd had a great time – and it was true that she had – but that she had to get back to the house for a call she didn't want to miss. It was a poor excuse, and she could see the disappointment in Jane's eyes, but Allison didn't let it sway her. She told Jane that she'd be in touch.

She hadn't seen or spoken to Jane since.

Allison had managed to put some distance between them since their date, which had been her plan, but she didn't feel that good about it. It felt dishonest, because she *did* feel something, but Allison didn't think anything could be done about it.

Yet the thought of leaving town on Sunday without seeing Jane again made something inside Allison hurt.

What if I never see her again?

A sadness washed over her that felt unlike anything she'd experienced before. When her relationship with Nicole finally ended, she'd felt sadness at its demise, but it felt like the regret of hurting a much-loved friend. On the rare occasion that this feeling had happened at work, she'd felt sadness when a patient didn't recover, but that was the ache of compassion.

This – *this* felt like the burn of disappointment, of not getting something she wanted...just for herself.

Stop it, Levy. She's not the one for you.

Once again, for the latest time in more times than she could count, she pushed Jane from her mind.

Many people on the beach were sitting on their blankets, and because Allison was standing, she moved to the back of the crowd so she didn't block anyone's view.

The fireworks began from a small platform out in the middle of the lake, but they were overshadowed by a private show coming from one of the houses across the road behind her. The crowd up there looked less kid-friendly, with much whooping and hollering when one of the mortars was launched. She could hear loud country music blaring from one of the half dozen pickups parked in the driveway and on the lawn, and a few folks were even up on the roof of the house.

Still, Allison thought everyone seemed pleasant enough. Even the rowdy ones were laughing and having a good time. Another huge boom sounded from the lake platform, and Allison looked up in time to see the fireworks explode and display their wonder across a couple hundred feet of sky.

She listened to the *oohs* and *ahhs* of the crowd. With so much of the town here, she was surprised she hadn't seen Jane.

Damn it. Stop it. It was getting to be impossible to keep Jane out of her mind.

A few kids ran in front of her, racing each other with sparklers in hand. She found them worrisome – too many big city horror stories started with those things – so Allison decided to move back towards the road where it was less crowded.

As she did, another mortar sounded from the rowdy house, with more shouts from the spectators. Allison heard a familiar voice, and looked up to see Brian laughing and shoving another man away from their tiny launch pallet. They were having a good time, and it made Allison smile, but she had no intention of joining them.

Until she happened to notice that one of the people on the roof was a certain mechanic.

Jane was looking right at her.

Allison froze, and considered escape, but her feet wouldn't move.

Jane waved, handed her beer to another spectator next to her, and launched herself off the roof onto the ground below.

Allison was certain her heart had skipped a few beats watching that maneuver.

"Hey, Allison!" Jane called as she walked across the lawn toward the road. "Come on over!"

Allison thought that she shouldn't. She should wave off, and go about her evening, head back to the cabin after the festivities ended, and go to bed early. Get plenty of rest and get packed tomorrow so she could leave on Sunday.

She should not, for any reason, spend any more time with Jane Walker.

Jane stood across the road from her, and her smile and hopeful eyes sealed the deal. Allison couldn't turn her back on her – not right now.

As Allison walked across the road, Jane called over one shoulder at a friend nearby who stood manning the large washtub cooler full of longneck beers. He pulled two and ran them over to Jane before running back to his post.

By the time Allison arrived, Jane had pulled both tops off. She offered a bottle to Allison.

"Still ice cold," Jane said in welcome, took a sip from her own, and then turned to stand at Allison's side. "Best view in town," she said, and with a tug on Allison's sleeve, encouraged her to watch the display.

As the show went on, Jane didn't say another word.

The sound of the fireworks echoing off the mountains behind the lake sounded like thunder to Allison. As twilight grew darker, and the visuals of the fireworks grew more complex and beautiful, she hoped that this moment – this brief moment in time and in her life, beside a beautiful, intelligent and capable woman, in a small town far off the beaten path, beneath a clear and heart-stopping and spectacular sky – would live in her memory for as long as she breathed air.

She thought it might be one of the most profound moments in her life.

Behind them, Brian's crew launched another mortar. Its explosion – and the resulting whopping and hollering – ended the moment.

Jane turned to her. "So, you're leaving us on Sunday?"

"Yeah," Allison said wistfully. "I guess I've got to get back to the real world."

Jane gave her shoulder a nudge with her own. "This is the real world, too, you know."

"I know," Allison said, nudging her back and taking a sip of beer to cover up her faux pas – and how good it felt to be close to Jane.

The music rose in crescendo as several explosions at once filled the sky until the final notes and crackle of the finale were complete. The crowd cheered as the display came to an end. Within minutes, people on the beach packed up their things, and started the walk back into town.

A few dozen people walked by as Allison and Jane stood awkwardly at the edge of the road.

Finally, Allison turned to Jane. "Guess I should follow the crowd into town."

"Oh?" Jane said. "What's going on in town?"

"Nothing. I'm headed back to the cabin."

"Why aren't you taking the trail?"

Allison was confused. "What trail?" On her way here, she'd walked the back road into town and then followed Main Street out to the lake.

Jane took her the empty beer bottle from Allison's hand, and tossed both of their empties in a box near the makeshift cooler. "There's a trail from the beach to Lake Shore Drive. Come on. I'll show you."

Jane took off, expecting Allison to follow. And with only a brief moment to consider whether or not it was a good idea, Allison went after her.

She caught up to Jane on the beach, which had thinned out a lot considering how little time had passed since the end of the show. By the time they reached what Allison recognized as a trail on the far side of the beach, they were side-by-side and alone. Allison had a feel for how much further they needed to walk to reach the cabin, but couldn't see much beyond what was right below her feet and directly in front of her in the dark. The few trees on this side of the lake provided a great deal of cover.

The darkness and the hush of the trail made it seem as if they were in their own little world. As they walked, Jane said nothing and Allison wondered if she was angry or hurt or even completely unfazed by the lack of communication since their ride last week.

Soon, though, Allison realized that she was obsessing over what Jane might be thinking in order to cover up what she herself was feeling.

Jane was right next to her. They walked slowly in the dark, careful enough not to trip over any loose branch or rock, but Allison could feel every movement Jane made. The air was heavy and still, and she could hear every breath.

She hadn't even kissed Jane. Allison had thought about it more than once, and now, she couldn't get the possibility out of her mind. She could hear Jane breathing, and the whisper of her jeans as her legs moved, and the soft crunch of the trail beneath Jane's boots...

It's a bad idea. Nothing can come of it.

Allison stopped caring.

She couldn't keep it inside any longer. Allison felt like it was the most daring and courageous thing she'd ever done as she stretched her hand across the incredibly short and impossibly wide distance between them, and gently took Jane's hand in hers.

Something clicked in place inside her. She felt terrified and relieved and excited and so many things all at once...

The warmth of Jane's hand, the contrast of soft skin and rough calluses, made her feel like she was flying. Allison kept her eyes on the ground in front of her, barely visible in the dark, nervous again about what Jane was thinking, until the wondering got the best of her and she glanced to the side.

Jane was watching her as they walked, with a soft smile on her face.

Allison squeezed the hand in hers, felt Jane squeeze back, and she took a deep breath of sweet high summer air.

Allison knew that the instant she had touched Jane's hand, this encounter between them had become a foregone conclusion.

And she was tired of fighting how much she wanted Jane.

Chapter 8

Jane didn't say a word as Allison led her by the hand around the front room of the cabin. She didn't want to break the spell.

Last Sunday, after their date, Jane had tried to figure out what she'd done wrong and why Allison had pulled away. Allison had seemed like she'd been enjoying herself, had shared soft smiles with Jane all afternoon, but when the ride was over, an invisible chasm had opened between them, and Jane had no idea what had caused it.

Before Jane knew what had happened, Allison was gone.

Jane had given up, then. Allison didn't want anything more to happen between them, and it wouldn't do any good to keep trying. Allison would be gone in a matter of days, and that would be that.

It hurt, but Jane had lived through hurt before. She tried to put it all behind her.

Yet today, as she sat up on the roof with a couple of the guys from the lumber mill, all those unresolved feelings had come back when she saw Allison. Jane had easily picked Allison out in the beach crowd across the road. Jane watched her for the better part of an hour – saw that she'd made some friends and knew quite a few people in town. Jane was happy about that, though the sight of Allison was bittersweet.

She thought about going over to say hello but decided against it. Allison had made it clear that she wasn't interested.

And then their eyes had met, and all of Jane's willpower went up in smoke.

Without planning it or thinking it through, she'd offered to show Allison the way home. As they walked on the trail, she realized that perhaps it had been the wrong thing to do, and that it had forced Allison into yet another interaction between them that she probably didn't want.

Then Jane's heart had soared when Allison reached over to take her hand.

Allison hadn't let go – not when she fumbled with the key to the door, not when she turned on the porch light, not when she'd closed the door behind them. Allison leaned over to turn on a lamp that topped a hand-hewn wooden end table, then turned to face Jane, standing awkwardly as her hand trembled in Jane's.

Allison cleared her throat, her eyes nervous as she looked at Jane.

"I don't know what happens now," Allison said.

Jane didn't much care what happened next as long as Allison kept touching her, but was so afraid that Allison would bolt again.

"What do you want?" Jane asked.

"You," Allison answered, then looked somewhat shocked that she'd said that aloud.

Jane let that one word sink into her bones, then summoned courage she didn't know she possessed to reply. Jane took a deep breath as she stepped closer – close enough that she breathed in the scent of Allison's skin.

"Then have me," Jane whispered.

Allison stared at her and for a moment, Jane was afraid that she'd gone too far.

To her surprise, Allison lurched forward, crashing her lips to Jane's. Allison's hands grabbed her waist and pulled her closer, and Jane couldn't help but moan in welcome.

Allison's scent surrounded her as Jane's hands moved to the nape of Allison's neck, fingers sinking into the fine strands of Allison's hair, clenching to match the intensity of Allison's kiss.

The first touch of Allison's tongue against her lips emptied Jane's mind of thought, and she parted her lips to draw her in. All Jane was now was sensation - zero to sixty in seconds, nothing but drive and acceleration and power. Her passion equaled Allison's, its potency taking on a life of its own.

Then, Jane felt the change.

The kiss had started as something wild, almost uncontrolled, as if Allison couldn't help herself. Allison pulled away for a split second for a breath and then returned, and when their lips met again, the intensity was less chaotic, but the passion was deeper. Jane felt Allison's kiss call to something inside her. Jane wasn't sure what the question was, but she *knew* – all the way to the bone - that Allison was the answer.

The call and response of the kiss made her ache – not only in her body, but somewhere deeper that Jane wasn't ready to look at too closely right now.

Allison's fingers released their tense grasp of Jane's hips, wove their way inside the open button-down Jane had worn against the evening breeze at the lake, then moved beneath Jane's tank top and towards her spine. Allison's hands were so warm they were almost hot, and the feel of those fingers on her back started a low, heavy thrumming in parts of Jane's body that hadn't been alive in what seemed like forever.

Jane felt intoxicated. Being this close to Allison, feeling her and being touched in return, was heady stuff, and it was hard to catch her breath. The air around them felt weighted somehow, and the clothes that Jane had been wearing comfortably all day suddenly felt hot and restrictive.

She pulled the button-down off her shoulders and tossed it blindly in the direction of what she hoped was the couch. Jane had every intention of stopping there, but to her surprise and amazement, Allison lifted Jane's tank from her body and over her head.

"You," Allison whispered. "Naked. Right now. I want to see you."

Oh, sweet Christ.

All thought of *slow* and *patient* flew out the window. If it were anyone else, Jane might think that going from first kiss to lovers in a matter of minutes was too soon, too fast – but this was *Allison...*

Jane quickly kicked off her boots. "Ma'am, yes, ma'am," Jane said. Her eyes didn't leave Allison's as Jane unbuckled her belt, ditched her jeans and panties and socks, and ripped her bra from her own chest – evoking a moan from Allison that made Jane's diaphragm seize.

Allison's hot gaze openly appreciated Jane standing nude in the lamplight. She took Jane once more by the hand, and led her to a darker part of the cabin.

Jane had only a moment to consider what was about to happen. She thought that this would be her only chance, knowing full well that Allison would soon be gone, and that Jane would probably never see her again.

Jane would give everything she had – everything she was – to Allison tonight. She would hold nothing back.

xxx

Allison didn't come to her senses until after they'd both peaked the first time. She was completely consumed by the want to touch and be touched, to be full, to be whole. She almost felt like someone else entirely when she touched Jane – as if someone bold and skilled and fearless had taken over her body.

Jane.

For a brief moment, the impossibility of what was happening gave her pause, but then it was gone.

She stopped thinking of consequences, and in the silence, heard nothing but the whisper of Jane's breath as their kisses grew once again stronger, deeper, more fervent.

Jane smelled like sage and lavender, like high summer and the soap she kept at the garage. It was heady and delicious – Allison reached out to pull Jane back into her arms, so she could bury her nose in the enticing valley of neck and shoulder, and breathe that sweet scent deeper into her lungs.

The second time, she found that her inhibitions didn't appear though she was more thoughtfully aware than she'd been at first. She wasn't worried about where to touch when and didn't fear making a mistake. Allison pushed all her limits and boundaries aside, letting every touch of Jane's fingers and lips and body satisfy the rapidly rising spiral of her own need.

Allison felt the calluses on Jane's fingers and palm roughly brush against her skin in all the right ways in all the right places. Every kiss made her want to give more, every whisper and moan from Jane's lips called Allison to surrender more of herself. For what felt like hours, Allison kissed and licked and pressed herself against every spot she could reach, desperate to hear what Jane sounded like, to feel what Jane felt like.

Jane was soft and warm and wet and eager and Allison felt hungry yet satisfied, all at once. Jane was responsive, yes, but she was also provocatively communicative.

Jane brushed the tips of her thumbs across Allison's breasts, and Allison tried to hold in yet another moan that wanted to escape.

"Please don't keep it in," Jane whispered. "I want to hear you." She settled herself between Allison's legs, then with a whip of her head, she tossed her hair from her own face. "I want to see and hear and feel *everything* with you."

Later, Allison had lost count – and had never cared about keeping score – of how many times and ways they'd touched. She was once again lost, eyes closed, gasping at the incredible feeling of Jane inside her. She opened her eyes to look at her lover, and what she saw nearly made the orgasm building inside her erupt.

Jane was moaning, whispering words of joy, her forehead pressed against Allison's solar plexus, her fingers thrusting in slow, deep rhythm. Allison saw Jane's hair across her back, across Allison's hip, and splayed against the bed sheets, but Allison's eyes were drawn to Jane's back. Watching the play of muscle and bone as Jane worked inside her was enough to make the swelling tide within her crest. She couldn't hold it back anymore.

"Oh, god, Jane," Allison cried out. "I'm-"

Jane turned her head to watch as Allison came, and now their eyes met as Allison's orgasm climbed to a new height. Allison had never come this hard in her life, and it went on *forever* as Jane thrust deeper inside her, twisted against one spot that Allison didn't even know existed, and it drove her mad. She cried out again, almost screamed as Jane's expressive eyes told Allison that this was more than sex. This was something new, something different, and something Allison had never felt before – not like this.

Allison knew what it was, and though she wasn't yet capable of speaking it, tears of joy filled her eyes, as she came over and over again.

This was what love felt like. This was what she had been missing and she hadn't even known it.

In an instant, Jane was over her, kissing her deeply and soundly, endlessly as Allison's body seized and pulsed in the aftermath. Allison couldn't stop the orgasm that still rocked her body, and it seemed that Jane couldn't stop kissing her.

"So, so good," Jane whispered against her lips. "I don't want to stop –"

"Then don't," Allison said, her hand searching between Jane's thighs. What she found made them both moan out loud, and Allison flipped them both over as she pressed her palm against the pulsing wet heat.

"God, inside me, please," Jane moaned, and Allison complied. She would deny Jane nothing, not now.

Soon Allison's fingers weren't enough, and she pushed herself lower. Her cheek pressed against Jane's belly, then her lips brushed through wiry curls, until finally her tongue found sweetness she hadn't even let herself imagine before now. Jane's cries set something inside Allison free.

Afterward, they lay tangled in sheets that had become a ruffled mess. Allison nestled herself deeper into Jane's arms.

This was something worth trading the rest of her world for. Damn the job, damn the city, damn the life she had painstakingly built that no longer made her happy.

She closed her eyes, exhausted but elated. This...was worth everything.

Too tired to speak, she wondered what it would be like to always feel this way. She'd talk to Jane about it when they woke up.

In the morning, she would tell Jane what she was willing to trade to make it real.

xxx

Jane listened to time passing as cricket song faded and birdsong began outside. She hadn't slept yet, and had been listening to the soft sound of Allison's gentle snores.

They made her smile, and she replayed the images of loving Allison in her mind. They'd made love half a dozen times, each connection fusing them together in some new way. Now, Jane knew when tensing muscle and shallow breath meant that Allison was close to unspeakable joy, and thinking about it made parts of Jane tighten, and other parts swell.

She'd wanted to see and feel and hear it all, and have one perfect night, and she had.

Soon, though, the smile faded.

Allison would leave on Sunday. Her vacation was almost over, and she'd go back again to her place in a distant city. Leaving here, and leaving Jane behind. People like Allison didn't stay.

Jane didn't think she could take it. Not after what they'd shared.

I'm an idiot, she thought as the tears came.

Once again, she'd dreamt of the impossible and it was going to slip away.

This woman – this one, perfect woman – was the answer to the prayer she'd sent out into the universe for years, but Jane couldn't keep her. Jane had done what she had set out to do – she had given everything she had of herself. Jane had been completely invested, knowing that it would end when Allison left and had decided that it was worth the risk even though she would be left alone. And now that time was coming.

That time was here.

She eased out of Allison's bed slowly, but wasn't sure why – Allison was dead to the world and wouldn't notice any movement. Jane tiptoed out to the front room where she'd left her clothes, dressed quietly in the dark, picking up her boots and carried them with her to the front door.

She stopped.

Jane went back to look at Allison sleeping in the low light of early morning, and blinked away the tears so she could see. Jane wanted to kiss her one last time, but didn't think she'd have the courage to say goodbye if Allison woke up.

She'd fallen in love with someone she couldn't have. Jane thought it best to rip off the bandage now. It was going to hurt like hell no matter what she did.

Hell, it already did.

Jane slipped out the front door of the cabin without making a sound.

xxx

After waking up alone, Allison lasted until almost noon before she gave in and drove the half mile from the cabin to Jane's garage. Allison could have called, but had a feeling that Jane wouldn't answer. Jane had left without waking her, and Allison wasn't sure how she knew, but something was wrong.

The garage was close enough that it would have taken only a few minutes to walk there, but Allison was afraid that if she didn't drive, she'd chicken out. She felt strung out – her heart naked and exposed, but the one person who could make it better wasn't with her.

There must have been a reason why Jane hadn't said goodbye.

She knew that what they'd shared last night meant something to Jane – she'd seen the look in Jane's eyes, and Allison knew that it had been real. So fear must have driven Jane away.

But fear of what?

The heat beat down on the road and Allison could feel its reflective burn through the open windows of the rental. Today was going to be a scorcher. The garage bay doors were wide open when Allison arrived, but the Lincoln was nowhere in sight. Allison parked in one of the spaces near the office door, climbed out and headed toward the sounds of movement in the garage.

She stopped short when she saw a young black man instead of Jane. He was whistling as he moved a crate of parts from the workbench across the room, but froze when he saw Allison.

"Hey, there!" His wide smile greeted her. "We're not actually open, but maybe I can help you anyway." He set the crate down right where he stood, and wiped his hands on his faded jeans. "What can I do for you?"

Allison hadn't moved a step. "I'm looking for Jane."

"Jane's out of town," he said, fanning himself lightly against the heat by tugging his drab olive t-shirt away from his skin in short bursts of movement.

What?

"She is?" *She was just here – she didn't say anything about leaving town.*

"Yeah," he said. "Took off this morning. Might be gone for a few weeks, she said. "

"Weeks?" *Oh, no. Is this because we –*

"That's what she said," He looked nervous when Allison didn't say anything more. "Said something urgent came up in Boise and she had to leave right away. She asked me to take care of things here at the shop, but I hadn't planned on opening up again until Monday." He smiled again, but cautiously, as if he couldn't figure out what to make of Allison. "I'm her brother, Perry."

"Brother?" Allison was confused. Jane had left her alone in bed without a word, and now had left town, and had never mentioned her brother was –

"Yeah," he said. "Same mother. Different dads." He laughed, answering a question she hadn't asked, but evidently one he was used to answering a lot.

Not that Allison gave a damn about Jane's family tree. Not as much as she cared about the fact that Jane was gone.

"So, can I help you?"

"What?" Allison realized that she was staring at him, and had done nothing but ask one word questions. "No, thanks. I guess I'll – "

You'll what? Talk to her later? She obviously doesn't want to talk to you.

"Thanks, Perry, but no." Allison smiled sadly so her words didn't sound too harsh to him, but they tasted gritty in her mouth. "You can't help me."

Chapter 9

Three weeks later, Allison took another forkful of her Caesar salad and watched people walk through the inner-city park across the street.

"So then I had to explain to her – yet again, mind you – that there was no way she could get a mural that size for \$500." Nicole recounted the challenges of her morning between bites of her own salad.

For months after the final breakup the year before, Allison and Nicole hadn't spoken to each other except when necessary. After the holidays, though, Nicole had asked Allison out for a simple friendly lunch. Allison had balked, but ultimately gave in out of respect for their history together. It was, after all, only lunch.

It hadn't been as painful as she'd feared.

Several weeks later, they'd met again, and managed this time to share a few laughs about old friends and shared experiences. It went well enough that they'd hung out several times since, and when Nicole called last week to schedule today's lunch, Allison had agreed.

Summer flourished in the city, some late blossoms still gracing some of the trees. It was warm but not stifling, so they sat at an outside table at a chic bistro in the heart of West Hollywood. The sun felt good on her skin, but filtered somehow – as if the light changed into something different when it hit city air.

While Nicole talked on, uninterrupted, Allison watched the mid-day traffic stop and start, her eyes drawn more than once to the trees across the street. A flock of birds took flight from one of the taller maples. Allison realized sadly that with all the traffic, she couldn't even hear the birds singing, no matter how beautiful and close they were.

She missed Joseph, but thinking about Joseph made her heart ache, so she once again pushed the longing from her mind.

"Why are you here?" Nicole said.

Allison looked back with a start. "What?"

Nicole set her fork down, and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a cloth napkin.

"Why are you here?" Nicole said again.

Allison was confused. "Because you asked me to meet you here –"

"No," Nicole interrupted. "I mean, here in the city at all."

What the hell is she talking about?

Allison was confused, and it must have shown on her face because Nicole leaned forward and her voiced dropped to its lowest, most serious register.

"You're not happy."

"That's not true," Allison started, but Nicole held up a hand.

"Ok, let me say that differently," Nicole amended. "You're not *satisfied*. You've had this faraway look in your eyes every time I've seen you for the last year, and it makes me wonder." She looked sad for a moment. "Where do you go when you look that way?"

Unbidden, Jane's face flashed across Allison's mind, and she looked down, ashamed.

"After that first trip, when we were taking a break," Nicole said. "You came back with that look, and I knew something had changed." She leaned back against her chair with an air of finality. "I knew then that it was over."

Allison looked up, surprised. They had tried again soon after that trip, though they'd broken up for good three months later.

"If you knew it was over, then why did you –" Allison couldn't find the words to continue – at least, no words that didn't sound hurtful.

"I loved you, Allison. And I hoped that we'd find a way to make it work."

Allison didn't have anything to say to that.

"Look, I'm not bitter, and I'm long past angry," Nicole said softly. "Only sad. You wanted something that I couldn't give you, and what I wanted from you, you weren't even aware that it was possible to give me."

Her eyes misted a bit, though she smiled. "We weren't right for each other."

Allison wanted to ease that pain she could see, but not at the price that Nicole might ask.

"I tried, Nicole," Allison began.

"Oh, stop," Nicole said, trying to sound flippant as she wiped the tears from her cheek. "God knows I don't want to hash all that out again. And that's not what I meant to say anyway. "

Nicole took a deep breath and started over. "There's something you're missing that's not here, something, or –" She paused, but seemed to draw strength from deep within. "Or someone, so I have to ask, because I love you, Allison, and want you happy and I always will. Why are you here if what you truly want is somewhere else?"

Allison didn't have an answer, caught off guard by Nicole's honesty and depth of perception. Nicole could always see her. At times, the scrutiny was stifling. Now, Nicole's insight brought tears to Allison's eyes.

"I don't know," Allison answered. "I have a life here, work and family –"

"You can doctor anywhere, you barely see your sister, and your parents are gone so often, it doesn't matter."

"I have unfinished business here."

"Then finish it," Nicole said. "Because the part of you that matters, Allison? The best of you?" She pinned Allison with her gaze, direct and uncompromising. "She's already gone."

xxx

"Damn, Jane." Perry's voice interrupted Jane's thoughts. "Snap out of it already."

She looked away from the window in the garage's small office that provided a view of Main Street – a view she hadn't seen even though she'd been staring out the window for who knew how long.

"How's the truck doing?" Jane dodged, hoping Perry wouldn't ask her what was going on with her.

Perry leaned against the doorjamb as he crossed his arms against his broad, muscular chest. "What's going on with you?"

Jane rededicated her attention to the stack of invoices she was supposed to be sorting. "What are you talking about? I'm fine."

He laughed. "Nice try, but...I call bullshit."

Jane rolled her eyes. "Seriously, Perry. I'm fine."

He walked into her office and sat down in the lone chair across from her desk.

"That pretty face might work on Mom and Gary, but I ain't fallin' for it." He rocked back in his chair, half leaning on the wall behind him.

"Perry," Jane said sternly. "I'm not in the mood for a heartfelt chat right now. I've got a lot on my mind, yes, but I'm fine."

"Look, Jane." Perry let his chair fall forward, all four legs now touching the floor. "I got your back no matter what, forever and ever, amen." He tilted his head forward and looked at her from behind long lashes. "But you've been working here in this garage for over a year and that's gotta be a record."

"I'm good." Jane knew he could tell she was lying, but she didn't want to bare her soul to him right now. "You know me. I love it here." She offered a smile and hoped he'd drop it. "Who else can keep Hannah's truck running?"

"Jane, tinkering around in this garage for the rest of your life is a hobby, something for you to mess around with on weekends or vacations. It's always made you happy, but it's not what you're supposed to be doing."

"Perry –"

"No, listen." His voice turned softer, as if he was afraid she'd stop him, or worse, shut him out and run away. "I'm not trying to piss you off, Jane. But I want you to hear me out."

Jane leaned back in her chair, crossed her own arms, but made it clear that she wasn't going anywhere.

Yet.

"Ok, but after you're done, we're not talking about this again."

"Fair enough." He looked out the window. "For as long as I've known you, you've been fearless. Never backed down from a challenge. Never gave up, never gave in. Until this."

She felt tears coming on, but blinked them away before he could see.

"I don't know what happened on that last job, but I know it wasn't good. And I'd bet that part of what's going on with you has to do with that woman who came looking for you the day you turned tail and skedaddled out of town."

Skedaddled?

"I have watched you work your ass off to get what you wanted. No matter what it took, you did it. Above and beyond, every time. Even when no one else could see what you could see. Even when no one else thought you could. Fearless."

It was harder for Jane to blink the tears back now.

"I'm not going to ask what happened, Jane. If you wanted me to know, you'd have told me already. But I will say this – don't let it break you. Don't let it define you. Don't let it change who you are. Because who you are is a fighter. And I've always looked up to that – looked up to you."

He waved his hands at her. "Don't get me wrong. You don't owe anybody anything, least of all, me. Nobody but yourself. So don't give up on yourself."

He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

"Take a step, Jane. Any step in any direction. Maybe it'll be the wrong one, but then take a better step, and then another, and before you know it, you'll be on the right path and you'll build your life back. Because this hiding in the garage isn't you. It's killing you, and I'm tired of watching the sister I love die before my own eyes."

Jane raised her eyebrows at him. "Seriously?" Jane said. "That's a little over the top, Perry."

"Ok," he said, with chagrin. "That's a bit melodramatic, but I *do* know that I don't want to see you here in town, closing down the pub every night with those guys who have given up and take what they can get. You have never, ever settled for the default world, Jane. Don't start now."

He stood up, stretched his lower back with a groan, and walked toward the door. "Leave the invoices until tomorrow, Jane. They're not going anywhere."

He turned to look at her one last time before leaving. "But you should be."

xxx

Allison held a pen between her teeth, a journal tucked under one arm, a corkscrew and a bottle of wine in one hand, and opened the patio screen with the hand holding a wine glass. She stepped onto her deck and closed the screen behind her.

She'd put this off long enough, and it was time to decide.

The evening air was still warm, though it was much cooler than it had been earlier in the day. She opened the bottle of wine and poured a glass, and then pulled out her chair and sat down to make herself comfortable. Allison opened the journal to the next blank page, wrote down the date, and stopped to consider where to begin.

Twenty minutes later, she hadn't written another word. Why was this so hard?

In the week since the last time they'd seen each other, she'd pondered over Nicole's words.

Allison wasn't happy. She wasn't satisfied any longer with just the job, and the only moments that gave her joy were hanging around with Gabriela, but their friendship wasn't enough to make her feel like her life meant something. She was tired all the time, sleeping poorly, yet somehow restless no matter what she did.

Allison could admit, if only for a moment, that she was lonely. And she spent a hell of a lot of time thinking about a woman hundreds of miles away who wasn't hers.

Suddenly frustrated, she wrote a flurry of words across the page – a list of questions for which she had no answer.

Why couldn't she be happy here with what she had? Why wasn't she satisfied? Why wouldn't the yearning go away? Why couldn't she find someone here in the city? Though if she were honest with herself, the thought of letting someone other than Jane touch her was wrong somehow. She didn't want to look into that too deeply, because it hurt, but it was the truth.

Her hand flew across the page, purging all the questions that kept her up nights, admitting the truth in ink on paper until the words slowed down, and finally stopped.

Maybe her life was meant to be like this. Not everyone got some sort of happily ever after. Some people lived good, meaningful, helpful lives. No one was owed joy.

Her heart broke a little more at the thought, and tears – her constant companions it seemed - started again.

After two glasses of wine, she gave up on writing anything else down. It was all endless unhappy questions with no answers, and Allison didn't want to be the kind of person who complained endlessly but never acted. That wasn't how she'd gotten as far as she had in her life.

Finally, she found the words to ask herself the penultimate question. What was the worst thing that could happen?

I could take a leave of absence, move to Joseph, get completely ignored by Jane, discover that it was all a pipedream, come back here and find that I don't have a job waiting for me.

Could she survive that? If that was the very worst that it could get, was it any worse than what she was living with now? Right now, she was completely stilted by indecision and lack of action, and nothing was changing. At least if she tried, she would quit fantasizing about some idyllic life up in the mountains, because she'd finally know the truth.

Yes, she could take a leave of absence. Yes, she could probably lend her skills to the doctor's office in Joseph – and it wasn't too arrogant of her to think that they'd be glad to have her.

And yes, if she failed and had to start over from scratch, she had the skills and credentials to start over anywhere.

So that left only the real question – the one that mattered, and that had haunted her but she had never spoken aloud.

Did she love the town – enough to move her life there - or did she only want to be there because she loved Jane?

Could she live there even though Jane didn't want her?

xxx

Jane put the empty beer bottle in the cardboard holder nearby and pulled out a second, quickly twisting and pocketing the cap. The sun crawled inexorably toward the horizon while Jane sat on the ridge behind her house, thinking and drinking while waiting for the sun to set.

The conversation she'd had with Perry – *more like the lecture I got* – had played repeatedly in her mind over the last few days. She wanted to shrug it off and say that he didn't know what he was talking about, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. He'd been right, and every day since had felt like living a lie.

Something had to change.

For over a year, she'd been hiding here in this town, waiting for the world to bring her the solutions to her problems. She knew better – knew how things in the universe worked. Jane could wish all damned day but nothing would change until she rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

She'd decided long ago that while she loved this town, it didn't hold all of the answers for her. Why did she think that would change now?

Ok, she'd blown it with Allison, who was long gone – back to her life in the city. It still hurt like a bitch, and Jane had made a mistake, but it was done. It was over, and Jane needed to let it go. She couldn't let it break her.

Jane thought of Allison's smile, her kind eyes, her touch – the ache came back, a physical sensation of injury every time she thought of Allison.

Stop it. Stop reliving it. It's done.

What was she really worried about?

So, the big city job had kicked her in the teeth, but how long was she going to sit here and lick her wounds? Perry was right – yes, she was a small town girl and always would be if she had her way, but she wasn't meant to be one of those fools closing down the pub every night while living a mediocre life.

Was she only afraid of failing? Because she'd done that plenty of times and lived to tell the tale. It was no reason to give up for good.

Jane conjured up the answers, and accepted the truth. She needed to get off her ass. She could be a grease monkey, yes, but she was also a damned good engineer, and there had to be a way to do the kind of work that gave her a challenge without giving up the life she wanted for herself.

She couldn't get the girl – no, she'd let that one slip right through her fingers, but that wasn't all there was to her life. What kind of universe would it be if all possibility of happiness was behind her?

Jane stood up and poured the rest of her beer out onto the dry dirt. She grabbed the cardboard carrier and headed back down the hill, ready to fire up her laptop and do some digging.

Recess was over. No more waiting for things to change.

Nothing comes to those who stand still, she thought.

It was time to make things happen.

Chapter 10

The stack of empty, flattened boxes on the porch was nearly as high as the railing. Allison realized she'd have to find out where in town she could take those since she couldn't exactly stack them curbside out here by the lake.

The cabin she'd previously visited had come up for sale two months ago. Allison had taken it as a sign. Within six weeks, she'd listed the house in L.A., quit her job, bought this place, packed up all her belongings and moved here, right on the lake she'd dreamt about almost every night since she'd left.

Now, it was home.

Her new office was less than a five-minute drive from her house and right on Main Street in town. She'd only set up a shop the week before, but word was starting to get around and she'd already picked up a couple of new patients.

Allison had gone to the diner a few times for breakfast, and had dinner at the pub twice since her arrival, so the locals knew there was a new doctor in town, and this time for good.

She hadn't seen Jane. She hadn't gone looking for her, and hadn't asked around town, either. Certainly Nani would know – and would be happy to share any information if Allison asked her.

Allison hadn't asked.

Allison wondered if it was rejection or anger she feared, or if she was just afraid of finally getting answers. Assuming Jane even wanted to speak to her.

Really stupid, Allison. You should have tracked her down. It's been months. She's probably seeing someone else. She could be married by now and you wouldn't know.

She hoped Jane wasn't married. The mere thought of Jane with someone else tied Allison up in knots.

Allison finished unpacking another box of books in the living room, flattened the cardboard and tossed it toward the front door, which was open despite the cooler late fall air. *On to the next one*, she thought, then moved on to the next box to be emptied. It was labeled "Kitchen", so she picked it up and walked over to the kitchen counter, but heard an unexpected sound and froze.

Gravel shifting right outside the cabin. A low, perfectly purring engine idled for a moment before shutting off. A car door slammed shut.

Allison hadn't had a single visitor at the cabin since she'd moved to town. It could be anyone, but she knew exactly who it was.

The sound of footsteps on gravel turned into bootheels on her porch stairs, before they stopped right outside the front screen door.

Allison's heart raced when her hopes were confirmed and she saw Jane Walker darkening her doorway.

Allison didn't say anything as they stared at each other, and at first, Jane didn't either.

Jane wore her signature t-shirt, jeans and boots, with a wool sweater over the shirt and under a black leather jacket that fell to mid-thigh. Sunglasses held her hair off her face, the rest falling freely down her back.

As always, Allison thought she looked stunning.

"Hi, Allison," Jane said finally.

Allison swallowed against a suddenly dry throat.

"Hi, Jane." Allison set the box she'd been holding down on the counter, and wiped her hands on her jeans.

What do I say to her?

Jane cleared her throat. "May I come in?"

"Sure," Allison said, but didn't take a single step towards the door. She felt as if her legs wouldn't move.

Jane opened the creaky screen door and walked in, stopping inside the door. Her eyes wandered around the newly furnished cabin, then landed on Allison.

They stared at each other. Allison had no idea what to say to even begin to bridge the divide between them.

"How do you like your new place?" Jane offered.

Allison didn't take the bait. "You know I love it here."

Jane winced and looked down. "I guess I do."

Allison took the opportunity to look Jane over from head to toe. Jane looked tanner than Allison remembered, even this late in the year, and despite the current tension, she looked more relaxed. Part of Allison was glad to see that, but the rest of her feared why.

God, please don't let her be with someone else.

The silence grew long between them, and Allison got tired of it first.

"Why, Jane?" Allison didn't want to sound heartbroken, but she was. "Why did you leave?"

Jane took a deep breath and looked out the window for a moment before she sighed and looked back.

"I was scared," she admitted. "I realized that night that I'd already fallen for you, even though we hadn't spent much time together." She straightened her shoulders, looking Allison directly in the eye. "I didn't think you'd want to take things any further so I left before you could tell me that a big city doctor like you didn't want anything more than a summer fling with a small-town grease monkey like me."

Hearing those words angered Allison. "I couldn't care less – not if you were digging ditches or shoveling cow shit. That's not why I fell in love with you."

Jane gasped.

Allison went on, picking up steam as she went. "And why wouldn't I, Jane? Stop selling yourself short." Her righteous indignation on Jane's behalf made her words more passionate. "And you *love* working on cars and fixing things with your own hands. It's one of the things I love about you."

Allison stepped closer. "I was going to tell you. The *minute* we woke up, I was going to tell that I was willing to quit my job in the city and come be with you. Here. " She watched the tears well in Jane's eyes. "But when I woke up, you were gone. When you left, you took the choice away from me, Jane. And I chose *you*." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I wanted you."

Jane looked as if it was hard to get words out around her tears. "Wanted?" Jane asked. "What about now?" She moved nearer to Allison, stopping just out of arms reach "We're both here now." Her voice dropped to a whisper, her tone pleading. "Can – can we start over?"

Allison looked out the window, and one hand rubbed at a tightness in her chest as if it were a muscle ache and not the emotions she was trying to hold in. Her vision blurred for a moment until she blinked the tears away and looked back at Jane

"I wish we could..." She faltered and choked back a small sob. "I don't want to start over..." She didn't want to push Jane away, and feared being misunderstood but couldn't get the words out. *I want to go back to that night...to the next morning, to wake up all over again but have you next to me.*

Jane stared at her without speaking, but her eyes seemed to take Allison's measure, and in the next breath, she brazenly stepped across the distance between them to take Allison's face in her hands. "Can we start here?" Her callused thumb gently stroked Allison's cheek. "Please? Because I'm sorry I left. I didn't know that - that it was more to you." She blinked her own tears away. "Please say yes because I love you and I can't lose you again and I'm so, so sorry."

Jane tilted her forehead against Allison's. "Please?"

Allison didn't push her away.

Jane closed the distance, pressing her lips against Allison's lightly. Allison wrapped her arms around Jane, pulling her even closer.

When Jane pulled away, Allison clenched her tighter, kissing Jane again. She didn't want it to end, this sudden closeness after so long alone – she didn't want to let Jane go.

They paused only to breathe. "God, yes," Allison said.

xxx

SIX MONTHS LATER

Allison lifted the canvas grocery bag from the back seat of the Jeep, then nudged the door shut with her hip. Lugging her overfull messenger bag in her other hand, she maneuvered her way to the front porch.

The front door was open, and the screen door could be toed ajar with one foot, so she let herself in without calling for help. Still, she knew Jane had to be here somewhere – her latest project car was in the driveway, and hip hop music played on the cabin's sound system. Allison smiled – Jane played dirty south only when she was in a ridiculously good mood.

"Babe?" Allison called as she unloaded her bounty on the kitchen counter.

Seconds later, the woman she sought moved into her peripheral vision. Allison looked up to see Jane leaning out her home office door, giving Allison a quick wink as she pointed to her headset.

"Well, Charles, I hate to say I told you so," Jane said, rolling her eyes at Allison. "But I told you so. You didn't have to waste a set of parts by testing the config. I told you it wasn't going to work." Jane held up five fingers of one hand with a smile, then ducked back into her office.

Allison smiled to herself. Jane had landed a job working remotely for an engineering firm out of Boise. She had impressed her co-workers and their clients, but her team lead was an old-fashioned good ol' boy who still had trouble accepting that a woman knew her way around the gears.

Allison was half convinced that Jane would have his job inside a year. Jane was that good, and even with the challenges of proving herself repeatedly, she was thriving.

And so was Allison. Being a small town doctor had its perks – she set her own hours and found the bureaucracy much easier to deal with on a small scale. She traded on-call rotations with the doctor's office one town over, and was enjoying the simple challenge of remembering everyone's name.

She loved every bit of it. The tension that used to live in her shoulders was long gone, and the dissatisfaction with her old life seemed a distant memory.

"Hey, lover." Jane was so energetic, she nearly bounced into the room. "I got caught up with Charles and haven't had a chance to start dinner yet. You hungry?" She plucked a few apples from the canvas bag and put them in a nearby bowl on the counter.

"Not yet," Allison said. "I found a bottle of that pinot you like." She phrased her next question in a tone that suggested she didn't know what answer she'd receive – even though she damned well did. "Want to walk up the ridge and catch the sunset with me?"

Jane stashed the last of the groceries in the refrigerator and opened a cabinet to pull down two wine glasses. "You know it."

xxx

It was cool enough outside that an evening stroll – even one with a short bracing hike half up a canyon wall – required a light jacket. Jane held the glasses, and Allison carried the wine, so they could still hold hands as they walked up the well-worn path to the low summit.

Allison talked amiably as they walked, and told Jane about her patients that day – she didn't name any names or break any confidences, but Jane had a good idea who some of the folks might be based on Allison's recount of their interactions.

Jane laughed at Allison's tale about the nine-year-old girl who had already self-diagnosed her own skin condition by the time Allison got to the examining room. Which brought on another thought that had crossed her mind more than once.

"I've been thinking..." Jane began, and then tried to cover up her nervousness with a healthy sip of red wine. "Oh, that's good."

"You're dodging, Walker," Allison teased. "What have you been thinking about in that beautifully brilliant mind of yours?" She smiled as the blush grew across Jane's cheeks.

"Just wondering something I've never asked you," Jane said, hedging a bit.

"So," Allison reached out to take Jane's hand again, and squeezed it gently. "Ask. I'm an open book to you."

Another sip, this time for courage. "The house is a pretty good size, yeah?" Jane asked. She'd moved into the cabin after the holiday season.

Allison's brows knit in confusion. "I think so." She paused, her eyes searching Jane's. "Don't you like it? Do you want something different? Something bigger?" She wasn't letting Jane get a word in edgewise. "Maybe you want something with a garage?"

"No, no," Jane said, shaking her head. She loved the cabin almost as much as Allison did. "It's great. It's perfect, really. I just..."

Jane lowered her eyes.

Allison set her glass down on a flat patch of dirt in the dry grass, and moved to kneel closer to Jane. "What is it? Baby, tell me whatever it is you want, and we'll get it. I love you, Jane. I want you happy."

Jane smiled, a light shining from within her eyes as she looked at Allison. "I love you, too. And I *am* happy. Deliriously, actually." She tilted her empty glass flat on the ground, and took both Allison's hands in her own. "I was wondering if..."

Jane squeezed Allison's fingers in hers to stave off another interruption, and looked right into Allison's brown eyes. "You think that house could be big enough for three?"

Jane's heart raced as she waited for Allison's answer to the real question. She didn't have to wait long.

Allison's eyes misted as she smiled, then leaned forward to kiss Jane soundly. When she pulled her lips away, she rested her forehead on Jane's. "Let's find out."

THE END

Thank you for reading. If you enjoyed BIG CITY BLUES, please consider leaving a review at <http://www.amazon.com>.

About The Author

Virginia Black lives in the Pacific Northwest. She likes her suits and boots as dark as her name, her whiskey straight, and her steaks medium rare. She is already working on her next book.

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