

ZOE ANN WOOD

LOVING HER NEMESIS

[HIDDEN HOLLOWS]

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HIDDEN HOLLOWS BOOK 6

ZOE ANN WOOD



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Jade

Jade picked up her cat from the counter and placed him on the floor.

"You know you're not allowed up here," she muttered at Felix, watching his black butt sashay into the living room.

She poured hot water over the tea leaves in her teapot and glanced out the window at the darkening sky. After a long day at school, she'd spent her afternoon preparing the materials she'd need for the band practice next week. She was ready to stretch out her legs in front of the TV and put on a romantic comedy to relax.

A light appeared at the window of the Williams house, winking out again a second later. Jade set the kettle down with a clack and narrowed her eyes.

Her first thought, of course, was *ghosts*.

The Williams house was haunted, or so the townspeople liked to say to discourage children from breaking inside. As a kid, she'd been afraid of going into the neighboring yard after dark, and even now, a shiver ran down her spine at the memory.

She stood still, watching the looming shape of the old Victorian. For a moment, she thought she'd imagined it, but then it blinked again, the beam of a flashlight in the night.

Quickly, she drew the curtains on her kitchen window and dimmed the lights. Living in her grandparents' old house at the edge of the town meant she usually had all the privacy she needed, and she'd gotten used to having her curtains wide open. But now, standing in an illuminated room, she suddenly felt exposed. Anyone could be looking in, while she'd be unaware of them.

She tapped her fingers on the counter, debating what to do. Then she grabbed her phone and found the police station's number in her contacts. This situation didn't warrant a 911 call, but whoever was in the neighboring house was trespassing. In a small town like Hidden Hollows, the crime rate was low. Still, she refused to become a cautionary tale about single women living alone in a remote location.

As the phone rang, a trickle of doubt formed in her mind. Maybe it was just someone who needed a dry place to sleep? It was still warm during the days, but September nights got pretty cold this close to the Smoky Mountains. So what if someone spent a night or two out there? They weren't bothering anyone.

"Hidden Hollows police station, this is Gordon speaking. How may I help you?"

"Um." Jade peered through a gap in the curtains. "This is Jade Marshall. I live down Oak Lane?" She squeezed her eyes shut. Why did she make that sound like a question? *Pull it together.* "I saw lights in the Williams house. My house is right next to it, and I thought someone might have broken in. They've got a flashlight."

"Mm-hm," the deputy replied. "When was this?"

"Just now," she said. "I mean, maybe it's nothing. But if it's kids, they might hurt themselves exploring. The house is so run down, and I'm not sure it's safe for them to be in there."

"I know, ma'am, we get complaints about it all the time. The mayor thinks it should be torn down, but the owners refuse to do anything about it."

Jade stifled her smile even though the policeman couldn't see her. The mayor was a force to be reckoned with, and from his voice, she understood that this was a pressure point for the police department.

"Okay, I just thought I'd let you know," she said.

The officer hummed again. "I'll tell the sheriff to take a look."

Jade thanked him, relieved. At least he took her call seriously and didn't brush it off. Maybe they were having a slow night, or perhaps this was just how the police department ran. Jade didn't know—she tended to keep her head down and avoid most town business.

So why was she reporting on some unimportant incident in a house that wasn't even her own?

Maybe I'm turning into my mother.

The thought was enough to propel her into motion. She poured herself a cup of tea and took it into the living room, curling up on the couch. If there was one thing she hated, it was gossip, and she refused to fuel the Hidden Hollows rumor mill. Her mother had always avidly disseminated any news she'd heard, and Jade had promised herself she wouldn't become like her.

She regretted calling the police station already. Maybe she should go to the Williams house and warn whoever it was? She didn't want them to get into trouble.

But minutes later, a car engine driving up the street announced the sheriff's arrival. *That was fast.* Jade pursed her lips, trying to curb her curiosity. She didn't need to know who the trespasser was. She was just a concerned citizen. Being responsible wasn't a crime.

Why did she feel so guilty then? Was this the adult equivalent of being a tattletale?

Her curiosity won in the end. She crept to the window of the living room and tugged the curtains aside an inch to peek out.

No blue lights flashed for a casual sweep of the neighborhood—the shiny police cruiser parked under a streetlight. Luke St. Clair, the sheriff, stepped out of the vehicle and put his ever-present cowboy hat on his head. Jade smirked. How very Wild West of him.

She liked the gruff sheriff, though. He'd always been a fair man, but ever since Millie Thornton rolled into town earlier that year, his once-grumpy demeanor had improved exponentially. And since Millie was one of the few people in town who didn't know Jade from when she was little, it was easier to chat with her when she visited her bakery for a weekly red velvet cupcake.

In this town, everyone knew their neighbors. The fact that she currently didn't have any was just about the only thing that allowed

her to keep her sanity. This was why she hadn't sold her grandparents' old house when she'd returned to her hometown, licking her wounds. This little nook at the edge of town was as far away from the usual watering places of the worst gossips as possible.

Jade shook herself out of her thoughts and followed the sheriff's progress toward the Williams house. The estate was large, the overgrown front garden cut in half by a gravel path. Jade knew the backyard was huge and had both an orchard and a water lily pond and a beautiful swing on an oak tree where she'd sometimes played as a kid. Her grandparents scolded her every time she'd gone into that yard, though, so she'd stopped. She'd always been a rule follower.

The sheriff arrived at the porch and ascended the steps slowly. They were rotted through, so he was likely just being careful. Jade sighed and glanced down at the chipped countertop in her kitchen. She was so behind on her renovation plan—it wasn't even funny. When she turned back, the sheriff was at the front door of the hold house, knocking, his cowboy hat tucked beneath one arm.

She held her breath, peering into the night. It was too dark to see well at such a distance, and the porch of the old house was obscured by an ancient oak that hadn't lost its leaves yet.

The door opened, and a man appeared in front of the sheriff. His flashlight was on, hiding his face in shadow. Jade moved closer to the window, straining her eyes. Who was he? He was as tall as the sheriff, but that was all she could make out.

The two men spoke for a minute, and then the sheriff shook the stranger's hand.

What?

Jade leaned so close to the window that her nose touched the glass. The owners of the house, an elderly couple from Knoxville, never bothered to visit their run-down property. And besides, Mr. Williams was a stooped, wizened old man, not this tall person standing in the doorway.

Yet the sheriff put on his hat again and left, raising his hand in farewell. He got in his car and drove away, his car's tail-lights flashing red in the darkness.

Jade glanced back toward the house. The man remained in the doorway, one hand on the screen door to hold it open. And he was looking at her.

She ducked, letting the curtain fall into place, and banged her knee on her grandmother's decorative end table.

"Ow," she yelped, then covered her mouth with her hand.

She slid to the floor, her back to the wall, and closed her eyes. *Ugh.* Now the man, whoever he was, likely knew she'd been the one to call the cops on him. It was something her mother would have done, and she now regretted placing the call. Especially since the sheriff had obviously concluded the man had every right to be at the house, which could only mean one thing: this was her new neighbor.

Jade crawled to the opposite side of the room and flicked the light switch to plunge the room into darkness. Whatever plans she had of watching television, they would have to wait. She wouldn't be comfortable knowing that a stranger was staring at her sheer living room curtains—at night, he could likely see everything she was doing.

She'd have to get thicker curtains. And maybe plant a hedge to make a barrier between the two yards. Jade paused, thinking. Would the town council throw a fit if she put up an eight-foot fence all around her property?

Not that she had the money for such an investment. She was slowly renovating the house, and her to-do list didn't include building fences or planting hedges.

She squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. Whoever her new neighbor was, she'd have to deal with him like an adult. She was no longer the timid girl she'd been in her childhood. She wouldn't allow this newcomer to disrupt the quiet life she'd built for herself since returning to Hidden Hollows. So what if he moved into the house next door? That didn't concern her. She would be civil and polite, and he would soon see that she preferred to keep to herself.

She had her hand on the light switch to turn the lights back on. Then she looked at Felix, who was lazily licking his hind leg. He didn't seem to mind the darkness.

"Let's just call it a night, okay?" she muttered.

She would be brave tomorrow, but for today, she shortened her evening routine, brushed her teeth, and retreated to her bedroom. The window there looked to the other side, where a long meadow stretched on from her yard to meet the forest that hugged the town.

Tomorrow, she might even go over and apologize for assuming the worst of her new neighbor. She nudged Felix off her bed with her foot. He meowed in protest before curling up on the armchair in the corner of the room. Jade burrowed under the covers with her historical romance and allowed herself to pretend the outside world didn't exist.

Ben

Morning dew clung to Ben's work boots as he made his way from his trailer to the wreck of a house, at seven in the morning. He'd bought his little home on wheels several years ago, and it had been the best investment he'd ever made. It allowed him the freedom of going where he pleased, and it held everything a man could need, apart from a shower.

The grass under his feet was still green, though that wouldn't last for long. It was overgrown and rustled under his feet, and he hoped it was too cold for snakes. He hated those slithering buggers. All sorts of wild animals tended to make old houses and neglected yards their homes. He'd once had to re-home an entire family of raccoons from a house in Georgia. He'd take furry vermin over scaly any day, though. He stepped over what looked like a small gooseberry bush and stopped to assess the house in front of him.

Years had not been kind to the large Victorian. She was still a beauty, with a turret in the back and a porch that wrapped around the side. The gabled windows were broken, but in Ben's mind, it had unlimited potential.

If his father saw it, he'd call him crazy. Yet Ben had taken houses in worse condition and flipped them successfully. This one would be a challenge, but that was exactly what he needed to take his mind off the fact that he was back in Hidden Hollows, the town he'd escaped as soon as he'd received his high school diploma.

Hands in his pockets, he trudged around the property, seeing it in broad daylight for the first time in years. When he'd been a teenager, he'd been aware of the boarded-up house at the edge of town. The rumor was that it was haunted by the ghost of a sad widow, who'd lost her husband in some long-finished war. Others said it was a man who'd murdered his mistress.

Ben didn't put much stock in such tales, but he did appreciate them for a simple reason: when he'd put in a bid for the house, the owners didn't even try to bargain with him. They'd accepted the offer on the spot when they likely could have gotten a lot more for it. Hidden Hollows was a little gem of a town that lay close enough to the Smoky Mountains that tourists often passed through. If his instincts were correct, the area would develop rapidly in the coming years. Buying property now would make him a nice pile of money in the future.

The knowledge that this was a sound business investment was *almost* enough to make him forget why he'd returned to the town in the first place. He glanced at his phone. He had time to assess the inside of the Victorian before his father's doctor's appointment.

With a grumble, he climbed the steps leading to the back door of the house, careful not to put his foot through the rotten wood. Most of the boards would need replacing because they hadn't been taken care of, but the house was structurally sound. He always had an architect inspect any old home he was considering—if a house was destroyed to its core, eaten through by termites or suffering from water damage, no amount of fresh paint and lacquer would fix it.

This one had "great bones that were hidden beneath layers of bad wallpaper and bird droppings," as Austin Hayes, the architect, had eloquently put it. The back door creaked as Ben opened it. The kitchen had probably been re-done two decades before his birth, and the tap didn't even drip when he tried it. Peering under the sink and

into the bathroom, he concluded he'd need to have the water turned off to lay new pipes. The state of the old ones was...not good.

To most people, the state of the house would be a turn-off, too horrible to be worth the effort. To Ben, however, it was a challenge. It had so much untapped potential. New houses rarely had such charm, and modern architects didn't often allow themselves the whimsy that resulted in sweeping staircases and white gingerbread trim on the porch.

No, this house wasn't going to be forgotten and neglected any longer. Ben ran his hand over the banister, ascending the stairs to the first floor. Something fluttered overhead, and he ducked instinctively as a sparrow came darting out of a broken cupboard. It flitted through a broken windowpane and was gone an instant later, disappearing into the sky. Ben studied the cupboard. It was empty, so who knew what the sparrow was doing there. It was too late in the year for eggs or fledglings. But he could deal with birds.

The hardwood floors were covered by a layer of wind-blown leaves, twigs, and other debris, liberally mixed with... Ben looked down at his shoes. Architect Austin hadn't been wrong about the bird droppings. He'd need to change before going into town anyway, so a little filth didn't bother him. What did bother him was the awful wallpaper lining the walls. He supposed the color might once have been salmon or coral, but it was now a faded orange with little flamingos printed on it. He ran his fingers over it and chuckled. It might work for a kids' room, but his tastes ran more to neutral colors.

A flash of movement caught his eye, and he lowered his head again, anticipating another sparrow fly-by. But he realized the room was empty—something had moved outside. Ben stepped closer to the broken window and looked out.

A tall brunette exited the house next door and headed toward the small foreign car parked in the driveway. Ben narrowed his eyes. So this was the nosy neighbor who'd called the cops on him. He'd explained his situation to Luke St. Clair, who luckily remembered him from high school. The other man was nothing but polite as he told him that they'd had some trespassers over the years and wished Ben

luck with the renovation. The sheriff hadn't mentioned who had placed the call, but Ben had caught his neighbor peeking through the curtains.

He'd expected an elderly lady, though. Or a crotchety old man with nothing better to do than sticking his nose in other people's business.

This woman, however, was far from elderly. Jury was still out on whether she was crotchety or not.

Her long hair was swept up in a neat bun, and knee-high brown boots completed her peacoat-and-jeans outfit. She carried a brown satchel slung over her shoulder and opened the back door of the silver car to drop it on the backseat. Then she turned toward his house, and Ben's breath lodged in his throat.

Jade Marshall.

His neighbor, who'd called the cops on him the first night he was in town, was none other than the girl who'd once stood him up during their senior year.

Jade

She usually stopped at the bakery on Mondays and Fridays for fresh bread and a treat. But going home would mean potentially seeing her mysterious new neighbor. Jade didn't want that confrontation just yet, so here she was, on a Wednesday, staring at the beautifully glazed maple bacon donuts in the glass display at Born and Bread.

Maybe I can have two of these if I add an extra half-mile to my run tomorrow morning.

Jade chewed on her cuticle absent-mindedly, then snapped to attention, shoving her hand in her pocket. She'd bitten her nails as a child until a patient violin teacher had worked with her to quit the habit. Frowning, she focused back on the baked goods in front of her. There was no need to upset her routine because someone bought the house next door.

Millie, the owner of the bakery and fiancée to the town's sheriff, handed the customer in front of Jade his change and beamed as she said goodbye. She was one of those perpetually sunny people that Jade secretly wanted to hate—no one was *that* happy all the time—but since Millie had only ever been kind to her, she'd grown to like her.

"Hi," Millie greeted her. "You're off schedule!"

Jade paused, shocked. "Uh..." *This* was why she hated living in a small town. Even the baker commented on her life.

"I don't have red velvet cupcakes on Wednesdays. I only make them on Friday mornings," Millie explained, her smile slipping slightly.

Jade clenched her fingers around the shoulder strap of her purse. "I didn't come in for the cupcakes."

She hated how curt her voice became, but this was precisely why she usually avoided interactions with people. They made every change in behavior *mean* something, as though her choice of cupcakes told them who she was.

"Oh." Millie cocked her head to the side. "Okay. I didn't mean..." She trailed off, then regrouped and smiled again, though her eyes didn't sparkle quite as much as before. "What can I get for you today, then?"

Jade bit her tongue to stop an automatic apology from flying out. She hated how awkward she was with people, but couldn't they just leave her alone? All she wanted was to live a private life. Why was that so hard for Hidden Hollows residents to understand?

When she'd first moved back to her grandparents' house, some of the neighbors had tried to make friends with her. One brought her a pie, another a crate filled with apples from her orchard—and all the while, Jade couldn't shake the feeling that they were just trying to gain information about her so they'd be the first with fresh gossip.

Their questions seemed friendly, but a touch too personal: "So, you're living all alone, are you?" and "What's it like, teaching at the school? I hear the principal can be tough to work with," followed by a conspiratorial eyebrow waggle. As though that would make her bad-mouth her boss to a complete stranger.

She'd politely fielded every one of those questions, but she never encouraged further contact. So, people eventually got the hint and stopped asking until they were content to simply nod at her if they passed each other in the street. That was how she liked it. It reminded her of living in a bigger city, where anonymity was the expected norm.

Jade realized Millie was still staring at her expectantly. "I'd like two whole-wheat bagels and half of the rye sourdough loaf, please," she blurted out, relieved that she remembered her order.

Millie wrapped up the bread and passed Jade the paper bag. "Sorry if I offended you somehow. I like knowing my customers' orders."

Jade sighed as she dug through her purse for loose change. Then she looked the pretty baker in the eyes. "And I'm sorry for being weird about it. It's just that I got used to being anonymous and forgettable when I lived in Nashville."

Millie regarded her curiously. "You lived in Nashville? But you're originally from here?"

Jade found her first smile. "Yeah. I went to music school there. One of the best in the country."

"Wow," Millie said. "So how come you moved back here?"

Jade collected her bag and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Long story."

Millie opened her mouth like she wanted to pry some more, then shut it and gave her a rueful grin. "I'm being nosy again, aren't I? Small town life is getting to me."

For some reason, Jade didn't mind so much anymore. Maybe it was Millie's disarming smile, or perhaps enough time had finally passed that the events of the past years weren't so painful anymore. "Maybe I'll tell you one day," she threw over her shoulder as she pushed open the bakery door.

"I'd like that!" Millie called after her.

With one foot out the door, Jade stopped and turned back. "Listen, you know the sheriff?"

Millie raised her eyebrows. "Er, yes. I'm dating him."

Jade rolled her eyes and grinned. "Okay, okay. I was just wondering—did he say anything about the old Williams house? Or about who moved in there?"

"Oh! Yeah, someone bought it and will be renovating it. So cool, right? It's such a beautiful house." Millie tapped her fingers on the counter. "He told me who it was, but I don't remember the name. Maybe Brent? Bill?"

"That's fine," Jade said. "I was just curious. I live next door."

At that moment, it hit her that she was fishing for gossip. *Ugh.*

But Millie didn't seem to find it strange. "Ooh, you do?" she asked as another customer passed Jade at the door. "You *have* to come for drinks with Haley and me," she declared.

Jade gave her a non-committal nod and backed out of the shop. How easily she'd slipped and done just what she'd vowed never to do in her life. Her new neighbor was bringing out the worst in her, and she hadn't even met the man. Maybe she should bake him something and take it over as an apology gift. But then he might think she was trying to be friendly—which she *wasn't*. She was just trying to live her life as she had for the past year and a half, peaceful and alone.



TWO HOURS LATER, she was certain that she would be baking no apology gifts for her neighbor. The impossible man was making so much noise she couldn't hear herself practicing her violin.

Jade placed the instrument in its velvet-lined case and rested the bow beside it. She'd been trying—and failing—to play for the past half hour, but a violent crash every minute or so interrupted her exercises. She needed to practice often, or her fingers would go stiff and useless. Her physical therapist had urged her to play, even though it sometimes took everything she had to pick up the violin and run through her scales. If she ever wanted to play on a stage again, practicing was non-negotiable.

Since she spent her mornings at her day job at the Hidden Hollows high school, her afternoon sessions had become routine. She had no intention of breaking it because some rude man insisted on dismantling his house next door.

Jade put on her jacket and stepped into the knee-high rubber boots she kept at the back door for garden work. Then she stomped down the porch steps and marched across the yard toward the Williams house.

"Hello?" she yelled over the sound of hammering.

Nothing.

She passed through a gap in the fence—she *really* needed to fix that—and stopped beside a pile of old boards, her hands at her hips.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"

Of course, *someone* was there. He was still hammering loudly. Then the noise stopped. Jade opened her mouth to call out again, but a board flew out the window, falling three feet from her with an ear-splitting crash.

Jade shrieked and jumped back, stumbling over a knot of weeds. She landed on her backside in the grass and stared at the cloud of dust rising from the boards.

"Are you crazy?" someone shouted from above. "What do you think you're doing?"

Jade looked up and froze. A man was leaning out the pane-less window, glowering down at her. She wanted to yell right back at him, but he disappeared from view, appearing at the front door just seconds later.

Jade scrambled upright and dusted off her leggings. She had no wish to have a conversation with her neighbor while sprawled on his lawn. She drew herself upright and held onto her anger: Who was he to call her crazy? He could have killed her with that board.

Then the man came closer. The breath whooshed out of her at the sight of him. Tall, with broad shoulders and muscular arms displayed by a long-sleeved cotton t-shirt, he towered over her even though she wasn't short for a woman. His slightly curly wheat-blond hair was dirty from dust, and there was a brown smudge on his cheek, which was covered by just the right amount of stubble. But it was his gray eyes that sparked recognition inside her.

The past ten years had done Benjamin Charles good.

The boy she'd known in high school was a boy no longer. A man stood in front of her. His thick, straight eyebrows pulled down in a frown.

"Are you okay?" he asked, his voice calmer now.

Jade blinked at him. "What?"

"Are you hurt?" He looked her up and down. "Did I hit you with the board?"

"Oh!" Jade glanced past him to the pile of boards. "No, I'm fine. You just surprised me." She rubbed the small of her back with one hand. She might have a bruise tomorrow, but it was her pride that suffered the most. Briefly, she wondered if he remembered her, then decided it was better if he didn't. "I didn't expect you to be throwing things out the window. But I know now what all the noise has been about."

He stared down at her. "You don't just wander into a construction site. You could get injured."

Jade pressed her lips together for a moment and took a deep, calming breath. "I did try to announce myself. But you didn't hear me over all the hammering." She looked pointedly at the boards. "How long is this going to take?"

Ben shrugged. "This? I should finish by tomorrow. All the windows are boarded up, and I need to pull the planks down."

Jade relaxed slightly. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. "Okay, so you'll stop making noise after tomorrow?"

He laughed, then sobered, apparently realizing she was serious. "Am I going to stop making noise? I'm renovating a *house*."

"Yes, so?" Jade narrowed her eyes at him.

"So, I can't do that quietly. It'll take weeks, maybe even months."

Her mouth fell open. "Months? But— You're—" She searched for the right words. "You're disturbing the peace!"

"At five p.m.?" Ben put his hands to his hips now. "You want to call the cops on me again?"

Heat flooded her cheeks, and she took a half-step back, trying to find a good retort. "I thought you were a trespasser! And there must be some law against making that much noise, no matter what time of the day it is. I can't hear myself practicing."

He stared at her for a beat. Then he asked, "You still play?"

Jade's anger cooled instantly. She gazed at him, her eyes round, her heart hammering.

His lips curved into a smirk. "Hi, Jade."

"Hi," she said, hating how breathy her voice sounded.

He put a hand to his chest. "Ben. Remember? Ben Charles?"

"Yeah, I remember." She tucked her hair behind her ears to cover her embarrassment.

It was unfair, she thought, that he looked great in the warm September sunshine, even though he was covered in filth and had clearly been working since that morning. She, on the other hand, wished she'd put on something other than old leggings and wellington boots. It wasn't every day you met your old high school crush.

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, I need to practice."

He sighed. "Look, I don't know what to tell you. It's going to take me a while to do the rough stuff, and all of it is loud." He paused and rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm trying to finish up as fast as possible, so I'll be working long hours, too."

Jade spread her arms. "What am I supposed to do?"

He winced, clearly uncomfortable. "Can you find a different place to practice?"

Oh, that was rich. She would *not* be finding a new place to practice. She had every right to live a peaceful life in her own home, and she would find a solution to keep it that way.

"Fine," she snapped. "Just—try to keep it down."

With that, she turned on her heels and marched back to her house without looking back. She got to her front door before remembering that she'd left by the back entrance, so she had to circle around the house. Hoping Ben had returned to his work and didn't witness this, she let herself in and leaned against the door.

Ben Charles was living next door. Was he moving in for good? If she'd thought that having random neighbors was going to be a problem, she now knew that would have been much, much better. Her past was coming to haunt her, and she had no wish to deal with it at all.

Ben

Someone was dying.

Ben sat bolt upright in his bed and blinked in the darkness. The night air had turned cold, and he shivered as the blankets fell from his shoulders. In the small trailer he'd parked behind the Williams house, he hadn't turned on the heater yet, but he would soon have to in order to counter the chill coming off the Smoky Mountains.

What had woken him up?

A moment later, a high-pitched squeal broke the silence, and Ben's skin broke out in goosebumps. *What the...?*

The squeal turned into a clear note, followed by a quick cascade of tones.

"Oh, man." He let himself flop back down against the pillow and drew the covers back up.

Jade Marshall was practicing her violin.

Ben pawed through the dark until his fingers found his phone. The screen lit up, and he squinted at it. 5:05 a.m. He groaned and shut off the screen, listening to the fast scales coming from the house next door.

He should have known she wouldn't give up without a fight. For several days after their tense conversation in his yard, Ben had waited for the cops to show up. But nothing had happened, and he'd surmised that Jade had taken his advice and gone to practice elsewhere.

But no, the woman had just declared war. Five a.m. was too early, even for him, especially after he'd been up late going over his renovation plans for the house.

Now that he'd removed the boards from the windows and thrown out the awful kitchen, the rooms were lighter. He saw the potential in each space, could see how it would turn out once he finished. He had a lot of work to do if he wanted to have the house closed up before the winter. Early September weather was mild and pleasant to work in, but soon, there'd be rain, and the temperatures would drop. He'd bring in subcontractors to renovate the roof, help with the plumbing, and maybe more, and he needed to get on that, soon.

He couldn't do that work if he didn't get enough sleep, though. He turned in bed and put the pillow over his head, trying to drown out the angry notes coming from Jade's house.

The drills stopped abruptly. He breathed a sigh of relief—he hated sleeping with his head under the pillow. But a moment later, the music started up again, only this time, Jade wasn't practicing scales. This was a mournful melody, a beautiful, lilting song that had him listening instead of trying to fall asleep.

It transported him back to high school, to the first time he'd ever heard Jade play. He'd never been much of a classical music enthusiast; his taste ran more to hard rock. But at eighteen, in their senior year of high school, he and a couple of his football buddies went to the high school talent show. He even remembered why they made a point of going: the cheerleading squad was presenting a new routine, and, young idiots that they were, they went to wolf-whistle at the girls. It had all been a part of their football culture, and as the team's wide receiver, he followed the rest of the guys.

Then, in the dim auditorium, he noticed Jade for the first time. She stepped onto the stage to a smattering of applause—the cheerleaders had finished their dance—the energy of the audience had

fallen palpably. His friends were whispering beside him, joking, and he nudged the quarterback with his elbow to get him to shut up.

The girl on the stage stood ramrod-straight, her violin clutched in one hand, her bow in the other, and blinked in the glare of the stage lights. He remembered her from class, a quiet, bookish student who kept to herself rather than participating in the various school events. She perched on the end of a chair a stagehand had placed there for her, lifting the violin to her chin.

The moment her bow touched the strings, Ben was bewitched. A song burst from her, passionate and uplifting, and he stared at her with his mouth open. It wasn't until the song was over, and one of his friends laughed, that Ben snapped out of it. Jade bowed and left the stage, and Ben clapped along with the rest of the audience, still shaken.

He asked her to prom a month later, after weeks of trying and failing to gather his courage and just *talk* to her. She seemed so put together, so much more serious and mature than the rest of the kids in class. Her answers to teachers' questions were eloquent, and even though his academic records weren't bad, he felt way out of his league. Every time he tried to speak to her, he chickened out. Until one day, he just blurted out the question, his stomach churning as he waited for her response.

To his surprise, she said yes, gifting him a rare, shy smile that hit him straight in the chest. He thought for sure he had a shot with her, that this was the beginning of an unlikely friendship—or even a relationship.

But on the night before the dance, she texted him to say she was feeling unwell and wouldn't be going to the prom at all. He texted back, called, and even tried visiting her the next morning to determine what was wrong with her, but she didn't answer any of his texts or calls.

So he went to that prom alone and ended up kissing a different girl, who then became his girlfriend for a couple of short months before they all left for college in the fall. He didn't speak to Jade again, barely saw her around town, and every time their eyes happened to meet, she quickly turned away and left.

Now Ben lay in bed, unable to fall back asleep, and wondered what had happened to the ambitious, smart girl who had headed to one of the best music schools in the country. Why wasn't she performing on a grand stage somewhere? Her music was still as beautiful as ever, and yet here she was, back in Hidden Hollows.

He wanted to know more about her. When she'd come over to his yard to complain about the noise, he'd been struck by how gorgeous she was, a grown woman with luscious dark hair and deep brown eyes. But they'd started off on the wrong foot, and if the current morning practice session was any indication, she wasn't ready to be friends just yet.

It was a pity. Jade had been intriguing as a teen, and Ben was drawn to her even more now. He wished he could ask her why she'd ditched him all those years ago, but he suspected she didn't want to rehash the past. And maybe it was better to keep it buried. He wasn't moving here—he'd be leaving again as soon as this house was finished, and he was confident his father was in good hands.

Jade finished the piece, then launched into rhythmic exercises again. Ben sighed and reached for a pair of noise-canceling headphones he used whenever the hammering or drilling got to be too much for him. He popped them on and tried to get comfortable, but they were too bulky for sleep. Maybe he needed to invest in earplugs.

Groaning, he finally got up and started the coffee in the tiny kitchenette. It *was* too early to start making noise in the house, but that didn't mean he couldn't get some work done before his meeting with his father's nurse at nine.

As it was, he was half asleep by the time he needed to leave. He'd ended up doing his accounting, and the task always numbed his brain. For a brief, hopeless moment, he indulged the thought of canceling the meeting and crawling back under the covers. But he and nurse Sawyer had been playing phone tag for days, so this was his one chance to catch the man currently responsible for his father's well-being.

Ben dragged on a sweater and downed the rest of his cold coffee. He was halfway to his car when the front door of Jade's house

opened, and the woman herself appeared on the porch.

"Morning," she called out, her voice bright.

He narrowed his eyes. Did she know her music woke him up before dawn? Ben didn't want to accuse her of it yet, even though he was probably within rights to call the cops himself—five in the morning *was* extreme. But if they were going to coexist peacefully during the time he needed to spend here, it wouldn't be prudent to antagonize her further.

He did need to talk to her, though, so he strode over to the wobbly fence and raised a hand in greeting.

"Hey, I've wanted to talk to you."

She came closer, with her messenger bag slung on one shoulder. "What's up?"

Ben just looked at her for a moment. How was she this put-together and fresh-looking after waking up that early? He didn't mind hard work, but he'd never been an early bird.

"Er, yeah." He rubbed his chin, realizing he needed a shave. "I'll need access to the pipes."

Jade cocked her head to the side. "The pipes?"

Ben pointed at a large rosebush at the very end of the fence, right by the road. "The plans say the hatch is underneath all that."

She glanced over. "That's my grandma's rosebush."

"Right." He swallowed, wondering how to phrase what he needed to say. In the end, he decided the unvarnished truth would be best. "I need to cut at least some of it away to access the main water pipe. It's where the main valves are for both houses."

Her eyebrows creased in a frown. "But it's on *my* property."

"Yes, but I received a note from the previous owners. Your grandfather agreed with them to share the hatch. It's an old system, and since our two houses are the last on this road..." He trailed off, letting her come to her own conclusion.

He didn't *want* to chop away that rosebush. Only a couple of pale-yellow blooms remained now, the petals decaying and browning at the edges, but he could imagine what it would look like in May. A six-foot-tall, glorious cascade of fragrant roses. But there was

no other way to shut off the water completely, and he'd need to do that before re-doing the pipes.

She was glaring at him now. "You're doing this on purpose, aren't you?"

"What?" Ben gaped at her.

"With all the noise! And now you want to destroy my grandma's roses!" She flung an arm out in the direction of the Victorian. "You're just getting back at me for calling the cops on you."

Of all the crazy things... "I'm not 'getting back at you,'" he snapped. "This is what construction looks like."

"Oh, okay," she retorted. "So, you're not the least bit angry that I did that?"

Ben took a deep, calming breath. "I'm not. Luke St. Clair knew me on sight, and it wasn't a big deal. I just..." He stared at the rosebush, trying to think of a solution. "I need to access that hatch. I'd rather we just come to an agreement, because going to the town records and pulling out the official documents will take time."

Jade's shoulders slumped. "You're sure there's no other way? I mean... Why did my grandma plant roses there if it's so important?"

Ben couldn't help but grin. "Because the hatch is an ugly old thing, and she wanted to hide it from view?"

Jade's lips turned up just slightly at the corners, and he counted it a win. That smile had struck him like lightning back when he was a teenager, and it did strange things to his insides now. She used to be shy and quiet, though—no trace of that girl remained in the woman standing in front of him. She was a fighter, and he enjoyed this conversation far more than he should.

"Look," he said quickly. "I'll try to do minimal damage. I could even replant the bush for you if you'd like?"

Jade hummed thoughtfully. "That might be a good idea. I don't want to see it butchered every time our pipes need fixing." She pointed at a spot on the other side of her front yard. "There. Could we put it over by the oak tree?"

"Aah... Sure?" Ben nodded, keeping his face impassive, even though the place she picked wasn't ideal. Too much shade from the oak and the ground was probably all wrong for the bush. But he

didn't want to argue with her, and with careful fertilizing and watering, the plant might just survive.

Jade studied him for a moment. "What's wrong?"

He blinked. "Hmm?"

"You look like you swallowed a lemon."

Ben wanted to protest, but she wasn't wrong. What threw him was the fact that she seemed to be attuned to his expressions. He'd perfected his poker face while dealing with difficult clients whose aesthetics differed wildly from his. Yet Jade saw right through him.

"The rose needs more sunlight," he explained, "and good drainage."

She considered him for a moment, then inclined her head. "Where would you put it, then?"

He studied her property and finally pointed at the front of her driveway. "There."

"Okay."

Ben raised his eyebrows. "Okay? Just like that?"

She didn't smile, but her eyes lit up, the deep coffee-brown color radiating warmth. "My grandma would never have forgiven me if I was the reason her beloved roses died."

He glanced past her toward the porch. "Is she...?"

He didn't finish the thought, but Jade shook her head.

"She passed away three years ago, four months after my grandfather," she told him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He didn't know her grandparents at all, but the way she spoke about them told him she'd loved them.

"Thanks," she said, offering him a grateful look. "They left the house to me, which was really nice of them."

Ben wanted to ask her about them, about her parents, and her life since high school. But she gripped the strap of the messenger bag more tightly and took a half step back.

"I need to run," she said. "Or I'll get a late slip."

He grinned. "Do teachers get those too?"

As soon as he said that, he wanted to smack himself. He'd asked his father about her over the phone and had learned that she worked

as a music teacher. But now he sounded like a crazy stalker. However, Jade didn't seem to notice his slip—maybe she was more used to small-town life and the fact that people knew each other here.

"We should," she said. "Mrs. Lyons is still late to class every single day, you know."

Ben let out a startled laugh. "Mrs. Lyons? She's still teaching there?"

Their history teacher had been old even when they'd been students at the high school and had been notorious for running late. It had been during one of those late-start periods that he'd asked Jade to prom, and he wanted to know more than anything whether Jade was thinking of that day right now.

But she just nodded, gave him a little wave, and hurried to her car. She drove off without looking back at him. Ben stood, watching her disappear around the corner. He'd be her neighbor for just a couple of months, yet their interactions were already more involved than he preferred. He kept his work contacts separate from his private life. Not that he had much of that these days.

With a sigh, he turned back to his own car. If he wasn't careful, he'd get too caught up in her. He never got caught up. His entire work revolved around being able to move fast from one project to another, switch cities, switch acquaintances. And he liked it that way.

Ben

Ben dragged himself up the garden path to his father's two-bedroom house and entered without ringing the doorbell. From the moment they'd moved to Hidden Hollows, his father had adopted the mentality that only good people lived in small towns, and he refused to lock his front door during the day.

It used to annoy Ben to no end. He'd watched too many horror movies as a teenager to share his father's rosy view of small communities. Now, he was aware that his father was more likely to be killed by cholesterol than a crazed serial killer. He supposed the unlocked front door didn't matter so much anymore when his old man refused to care about his health.

"Hello?" he called from the hallway. "Dad?"

"In here," his father's gruff voice sounded from around the corner.

Ben strode into the kitchen, where he found his father at the table, finishing up a breakfast that consisted of eggs and bacon. His blood pressure went up a notch, and he glanced at the frying pan still on the stove. He took in the cup of coffee sitting next to his fa-

ther's plate—enough creamer stirred into it that the liquid had turned a pale brown.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" Ben growled. "Because I know of faster ways to commit suicide."

His father's broad face went ruddy at his words. He pushed himself back, picked up the newspaper from the table, and shuffled into the living room. Ben noticed how unsteady his gait was, and worry gripped his heart.

"Dad, I'm serious, you can't go on like this." He followed his father into the room, watching as the older man lowered himself into his favorite, creaky armchair. "Your doctor said—"

"I know what he said," his father grumbled. "And I don't need *you* to rub my face in it. You're no doctor."

Ben threw his arms up. "I don't have to be a doctor to know that you're not supposed to eat *bacon* if you're minutes away from having another heart attack!"

He didn't mean to raise his voice, but his father's blatant disregard for his own health exasperated him. This was why he'd come to Hidden Hollows. His father's physician had contacted him, concerned that his father was no longer capable of taking care of himself following a light heart attack. *A heart attack!* Ben hadn't even known that his dad had had heart problems, yet here they were.

The doorbell rang, interrupting their argument. Ben blew out a breath and stalked to the door. The man standing on the front step was young, in his early twenties, a lanky guy with dark brown skin and a wide smile.

"Hello, you must be the younger Mr. Charles," he said, extending a hand. "I'm Dylan Sawyer."

"Nice to meet you," Ben replied, stepping aside to let the man enter.

The nurse greeted Ben's father, who merely grumbled in response. That didn't seem to bother him. Instead, he put on disposable booties over his shoes and marched right into the kitchen, obviously familiar with the layout of the house. Ben had hired him on the doctor's recommendation and now wondered whether he was pay-

ing the younger man enough to deal with an ornery grump such as his father.

Ben stuck his head into the living room. "Nurse Sawyer and I are going to discuss your health plan," he announced. "I'd like for you to join us."

His father didn't reply. Ben considered repeating his words on the off chance that his dad hadn't heard him, then decided it wasn't worth the effort. The man's hearing was excellent. It was his temper that needed fixing.

With a dull feeling settling in his stomach, he followed the nurse into the kitchen.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?" he asked, pouring himself a cup.

"Thanks," nurse Sawyer said. "I just had some."

Ben shrugged and sat on the chair opposite. "What can you tell me about my father's health?"

The younger man withdrew a folder from his messenger bag and flipped it open on the table. "Your father's cholesterol levels are dangerous. His blood pressure is also too high, so the doctor prescribed him medication for both." He tapped the spreadsheet on the paper. "What he needs to do is take his pills regularly, of course, but his chances of getting better are slim if he doesn't improve his lifestyle."

Ben winced. The nurse sure had a way of cutting through to the issue. "Okay. So—you'll convince him to stick to a healthy meal plan?"

The man lifted one eyebrow. "I've been here four times now, and your father has informed me—and I quote—'a little glass of bourbon a day didn't kill his daddy, and he sure won't be giving up the one thing that makes his days bearable.'" Dylan Sawyer put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. "That little glass of bourbon a day *will* kill your father, especially since I doubt he ever stops at just a glass. So will the bacon, the frozen dinners, and all the sugar he consumes."

"Yeah." Ben put his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes. "What do you suggest?"

"He needs someone to take care of him. He's recovering from a heart attack, so he won't be able to do the chores around the house

or go shopping or anything. I'll help with the medical stuff, physical therapy, and so on."

"But you can't tidy and cook for him—I get it."

Ben stared out the kitchen window at the overgrown back yard. He'd seen how neglected it was when he'd first arrived earlier that week and now wondered how long his father had been feeling sick before succumbing to that heart attack. Why hadn't he called Ben to let him know he wasn't coping anymore?

They'd never had a very close relationship, but Ben made a point of calling him often, to talk about football if nothing more, and yet his father had never complained about his health. Ben thought about his last visit—wow, had it really been seven months ago?

Back in February, he'd passed through Hidden Hollows, making a short detour on his way to a job in Knoxville. His father had seemed okay then, but Ben had a sneaking suspicion he'd known even then that his health was deteriorating.

"Could you move into the house?" the nurse asked. "At least until he's back on his feet?"

Ben considered it. He'd been considering it ever since he received that call from the hospital three weeks ago—the one that had nearly stopped *his* heart. He was listed as his father's emergency contact, and he'd raced to finish his previous project in Atlanta in order to move to Hidden Hollows and stay near his father. But move in with him?

Was he selfish for wanting to keep his independence? Maybe. Yet the thought of returning under his father's roof put his back up. He'd rather stay in his little trailer, showering with cold water in the crappy, ancient bathroom in the run-down house. He'd need to rip that out sooner rather than later.

His father had never made it a secret that he didn't like Ben's career, and Ben was in no mood to listen to his father's criticism. His decision not to go pro with football had disappointed his dad, especially after he'd gone to college on a football scholarship. But as much as he'd enjoyed the sport, Ben had found a different passion when he'd started working at a small construction company in college. At first, the job was a means to pay for Friday nights out, but

then he wanted to learn as much as he could about the trade while still getting his business degree.

There was also the fact that his father couldn't afford nurse Sawyer on his own. His dad's pension and savings had covered his hospital bills, but as a retired school janitor, he wasn't exactly rolling in money. Neither was Ben—his investments were doing great, but they weren't of the kind that he could easily cash out. He'd have one less thing to worry about if he could get the Williams house on the market soon.

"It's not an option, currently," he told the younger man. "If I'm here, making sure he doesn't eat his body weight in saturated fat, I can't be working on my project."

Dylan Sawyer didn't seem to judge him. "Then I'd suggest hiring a housekeeper to get his groceries and cook for him."

Ben had been thinking along the same lines. "Any recommendations?" He didn't relish the idea of interviewing a long list of prospective candidates. "I could call the doc. He might have someone in mind."

Whoever it was, they'd have to be immune to rude remarks. He didn't wish the job on anyone.

The nurse thought for a moment. "Maybe my momma's neighbor, Betty Smith. She lives down past the town library." He grimaced, scribbled the address on a piece of paper and pushed it toward Ben. "I know she does housekeeping sometimes, though I don't know if she has a regular gig at the moment. Might be worth talking to her."

Ben pocketed the note. "Thanks. I'll stop by her house later."

"Mm. Just..." Nurse Sawyer paused for a second as though searching for the right words. "Don't be put off by her, uh, temper. She's an okay lady once you get past all the..." He made a vague waving gesture but didn't finish his sentence.

"Right." Ben laughed suddenly. "Maybe her temper will match my father's."

The nurse grinned. "It might at that."

Ben said goodbye to his father, who didn't reply, and left to find this formidable Betty Smith. The sooner he hired someone, the soon-

er his father would recover.

It didn't take long to drive to the other side of town. He rolled past rows of houses that radiated wholesomeness and family cheer. There was even a beautiful home with a For Sale sign stuck in the front lawn—exactly the kind of house he'd want for himself one day if he ever decided to settle down.

But the neighborhood Betty Smith lived in wasn't as affluent as the one his father lived in—even though his dad's house wasn't fancy by any standards. Here, yards were narrow, and the houses were small, run-down, and old.

The Smiths' lawn was well-kept, though. Even if the house itself could use a good coat of paint, it seemed tidy at first glance. Ben parked at the curb and marched up to the front door, ringing the doorbell. A lawnmower rattled nearby, disturbing the quiet of the morning.

"No, thank you!" a shrill voice yelled from inside. "We don't need whatever you're selling."

Ben's eyebrows went up. He knocked and replied, "Mrs. Smith? My name's Ben Charles. Dylan Sawyer mentioned you might be willing to take on a housekeeping job. I'm sorry for visiting unannounced, but he didn't have your phone number."

There was silence from the other side of the door, and then footsteps neared. The security chain rattled, and the door opened a crack revealing a woman's face peering at him from behind the screen door.

"What kind of housekeeping?"

Ben had hoped to hold this conversation inside, but he supposed the woman was smart for not letting a stranger into her house. "My father, Robert Charles, suffered a heart attack three weeks ago. He's sixty-seven years old and needs someone to clean and cook for him. Get his groceries, that kind of thing." He told her how much she'd be making per hour and added, "It's not a full-time position, though."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek, her blue eyes shrewd. "Don't you want my references?"

Ben thought about this. "No. Nurse Sawyer recommended you, so that should be enough for now."

"I'm allergic to dogs," she said.

"That's fine," Ben replied. "My father doesn't have any pets."

Good thing, too, or the house would be in much worse shape now. Betty Smith made a non-committal, humming sound.

"So you'll take the job?" he asked, hopeful.

She rolled her eyes and closed the door in his face. Ben stared at it, shocked, then heard the rattle of the chain again. She unlatched the door and pushed the mesh screen wide.

"You'd better come in and tell me all the details."

Ben sighed in relief and followed the woman down the short hallway and into a bright, clean kitchen. The cabinets were old, the countertop chipped at the edges, but the surfaces gleamed, not a crumb in sight. A cat meowed and wound his way around Ben's ankles before disappearing out the back door, which stood open a crack. Through the window, Ben saw a small lawn, on which a young man was pushing around an ancient lawnmower. The scent of freshly mown grass hung in the air, fresh and vibrant.

"My son, Oliver," Mrs. Smith explained, then set a cup of coffee in front of Ben and offered him a carton of milk.

Ben shook his head and wrapped his hands around the hot cup. "So, the details."

Mrs. Smith poured herself a cup of coffee and sat opposite him. Ben was struck by how similar this situation was to the one he'd experienced earlier at his father's house, though his current companion couldn't be more different from Dylan Sawyer.

Betty Smith's white-blond hair was curly and fizzy, giving the impression that she'd stuck her fingers into an electrical socket. Her skin was pale, with deep lines around her mouth and between her eyebrows as though she spent her days frowning. Ben guessed she was in her late forties, but life hadn't been kind to her. A brief glance around the room told him why: a photo of a soldier with dark brown hair hung on the wall, a black ribbon in one corner.

He looked back at her and found her watching him, her chin lifted proudly. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he said.

She nodded once, her bright blue eyes shining. Then she blinked and glanced out the window. "It hasn't been easy. Especially on

Oliver. He's been getting into trouble. He's a good boy, but losing his dad..." She trailed off and shook her head. "You're not here to listen to me, though," she said, her voice snapping again.

"Er, yeah." Ben took a sip of the coffee, which was so hot it scalded the roof of his mouth. "My father. He's resisting the doctor's orders that he change his lifestyle. He's supposed to be eating healthy, but all he seems capable of making is eggs with bacon and things he can stick in the microwave."

Mrs. Smith's lips twitched up at the corners. "And you need someone to whip his butt into shape?"

Ben laughed. "Something like that. I was hoping you could help me out."

She nodded, and they went over the dietary restrictions and the chores Ben hoped she'd be able to do at his father's house. She was brusque, and her words had an edge to them that would likely rub people the wrong way, but Ben was glad she wasn't a shy, quiet woman. To manage his father, she'd need her temper and a good dose of patience, too.

The back door opened, and Oliver, her son, appeared, stomping grass clippings off before he crossed into the room. He washed his hands at the sink and poured himself a glass of sweet tea from the fridge.

Inspiration struck Ben.

"Hi," he greeted the boy, who looked to be just past high school years. "Can you do more than just mow a lawn?"

The young man regarded him coolly. "Depends. What did you have in mind?"

Ben grinned at this show of attitude. "Your mom agreed to take care of my father's house for a while. Would you be willing to get his backyard ready for the winter?"

Oliver Smith shrugged. "Yeah, I can do that."

"Great." Ben stood and shook hands with Betty Smith. "Thank you both."

On his drive back to his house, he realized a weight had rolled off his shoulders. He hoped the Smiths wouldn't be scared off by his father, but he suspected they were both tough enough to handle one

old man. And some company would do his father good—maybe Mrs. Smith could even convince him to get out of his house once in a while.

He was looking forward to hard work this afternoon while tackling the horrible lean-to garage that some genius had built from corrugated iron several decades ago. The ugly storage space needed to be torn down; he'd be adding a covered parking space a little way off once the yard was cleared. There was no need to mar the beautiful structure of the house.

As he put on his protective gear—his tetanus shot was up-to-date, but he had no wish to stab himself with rusted iron anyway—he decided to have an early night. Jade Marshall would likely be up before dawn again, waking him with another practice session.

He grinned. Maybe there was something wrong with him, but he couldn't wait to hear what piece of music she would choose to torture him with in the morning.

Jade

This was *impossible*. Jade threw down her pen and pushed her chair away from the window. She was trying to get through the note sheets for the jazz band practice the next morning—she had two saxophone players this year, as well as a junior drummer and trumpet player who'd been in her class last year—but Ben-freaking-Charles was apparently tearing down his entire house. There was so much noise, Jade's head rang with it, despite the fact that all her windows were closed.

At this point, it was a toss-up between going mad or suffocating first.

She could have gone to the library after school or stayed in the music classroom to do the work, but it had seemed cowardly to be chased from her own home by one handsome renovator. Besides, he'd indicated that the work would take months, and she couldn't camp out at the school for that long. This was her home.

Jade put on a pair of jeans and sneakers because she wasn't eager to repeat the leggings-and-rubber-boots fiasco from the other day, but she stopped short of fixing her hair to see a man who would be dirty and sweaty anyway.

And, oh my, why did her heartbeat speed up at the thought of that?

To take her mind off that image, she hurried over her lawn and past the fence.

"He's obnoxious," she muttered to herself. "He's making enough noise to wake the dead, and you hate it."

She rounded the house to find Ben on the roof of the hideous metal garage, pulling up a sheet off the roof. His broad back was bent, his work pants tight across his...

Jade looked away, blushing. She did not come here to ogle the man. She couldn't help it, though, with the way he was leaning down. Resisting the urge to cover her eyes with her palm, she stepped closer.

"Hey," she called.

The man reached behind his back for a tool, and more hammering followed.

"Hey, Ben!"

She put more force into the words, but still, he didn't turn around.

Jade stepped to the side and rounded the garage, trying to put herself in his field of vision. The moment she caught sight of his head, she realized why he was ignoring her: a pair of heavy-duty ear muffs covered his ears, likely cutting off all sound. She hopped up and waved.

Ben stilled and looked over at her. A grin spread across his face, crinkling the skin around his eyes, and Jade's breath lodged in her throat. How was she supposed to yell at him if his smiles turned her brain to mush?

With a graceful leap, he swung himself over the edge of the roof and landed in front of her with a thump. Straightening, he pulled the headphones from his ears and rubbed the sides of his head where the ear protectors had flattened his hair.

"Hi," he said, tugging off his work gloves. "What brings you around?"

Jade stared at him. How could he not know? Or was he being deliberately insulting, playing clueless to mess with her?

"You're ripping apart metal. It's making an awful lot of noise." There, she said it in a calm voice. She was proud of herself, actually: she didn't even grit her teeth.

Ben rubbed the back of his neck. "I thought we were over this. I mean..." He turned to look at the sagging garage. "This has to go. And there will be more. Hammering, sawing, grinding. I can't help it, Jade, that's just how construction works."

She *knew* that. She did. But that didn't mean she was happy that it was going on in her neighbor's yard. Loud noises and messy environments destroyed her inner equilibrium, and if she had to endure months of this...

"It's just the noise." She swallowed, unsure of how to convey this to Ben.

He studied her. "You used to play in the school marching band. If you dislike noise, how'd you handle that?"

She glanced at him sharply. It bothered her that he seemed to remember so much about her. He'd been a popular football player, and she'd been the brainy kid no one ever talked to. And then he'd asked her to prom with almost no preamble, shocking her into saying yes. It had been her most secret dream, going to prom with the handsome wide receiver, wearing a princess dress and dancing in his arms.

Jade pulled herself back to the present, focusing on Ben's curious expression. "That was a long time ago. Before—"

She stopped herself just in time. He didn't need to hear her entire life story, and she absolutely wasn't going to share her issues with him.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice low.

He stepped closer, into her personal space, and Jade smelled the sharp scent of rusted iron coming off him. It mixed with the smell of him, a softer, more enticing whiff of fabric softener and man.

She retreated a step, and his face closed off. Jade regretted it because something had her wishing she could blurt out all her troubles to him, but that didn't make sense. He'd never *really* been interested in her. It had all been for show, a stupid teenage prank, and she didn't want to get tangled up with him.

With a shuddering breath, she turned away, suddenly eager to leave. Okay, so she'd occupy the local library for the foreseeable future. Maybe she could convince Sara, the head librarian, to save her a good seat every afternoon. She didn't need to work from home, even though she'd miss Felix, who liked to curl up on her lap, purring.

A warm hand closed around her upper arm.

"Jade, wait."

Ben's voice was low and gruff, and she faced him again, pressing her lips together to keep herself from saying something she'd regret.

He let go of her arm, then offered her his ear muffs. "These might help."

She stared down at the protective gear, stunned by the kind gesture. It wouldn't solve the problem, but it might just tide her over until this monster of a project was over.

On second thought, though, Jade shook her head. "I can't take those. You need them—you'll hurt your ears without protection."

Ben's smile was a little crooked and a lot endearing. "I have a second pair in my trailer."

"Trailer?" Jade repeated the word after him without thinking.

Ben pointed at something behind her. "That's me."

She swiveled around to see a small, compact trailer parked in the shade of a beautiful oak tree, steps descended from it, and a folding chair sat in front of it. She wondered why she hadn't seen it from her kitchen window, then realized it was hidden from view by the wild bushes on this side of the fence. Did Ben live there?

"I like to stay on-site when working on a project," he explained as though reading her mind. "It helps discourage people from running away with my power tools while the house is still open."

"Oh," she said. "Yeah, that makes sense."

He closed the distance between them again; she felt him near even though her back was still turned to him.

"Does that mean your five a.m. practice sessions weren't payback for me making noise?"

His words were low, but she'd swear she heard a hint of a smile in there.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she replied, unable to fight a grin of her own. She thought he might be staying at the house itself, and the idea of waking him up had filled her with a grim sort of satisfaction. "I'll play even louder now I know that's the added bonus."

He chuckled, and the small hairs on the back of her neck lifted in awareness. She wished he'd step even closer, wrap those strong arms around her and...

What? No! This wasn't what she'd come here to do. There would be no wishing, no pining, and certainly no more daydreaming about this man.

She schooled her features in a neutral expression and faced him again. "I'll take the headphones, then, if you don't mind."

"What?" He appeared confused for a second, then blinked and looked down at the earmuffs. "Oh, right. Here."

She took them, careful not to touch Ben's fingers. At least she'd be able to do her work if she wore them.

"Thanks," she said, already wishing she was back in her house, away from Ben's piercing gaze.

"Listen," he said, "I'll try to do most of the heavy-duty stuff in the mornings when you're at work. Maybe I can..." He half-turned toward the house and studied it. A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I have other things to do that aren't as noisy, like ripping off all the wallpaper. I can do that in the afternoons."

Jade was speechless for a beat. Then she swallowed and said, "Thank you. That's really kind of you."

He nodded, and just like that, the conversation was over. She stammered a goodbye, and he went to his trailer, likely in search of a second pair of headphones. Jade left, confused, and more than a little angry at herself for feeling that way.

This man was completely different from the boy she'd known—or rather, *not* known—in high school. He was considerate and gruff, and she had no idea how to interact with him. The only thing that hadn't changed in the last decade was how handsome he was.

Sure, his frame had filled out, strong muscle replacing the lean stature of an eighteen-year-old. But his gray eyes were just as mes-

merizing, and his hair, long enough to hold a bit of a curl, tempted her to run her fingers through it.

Jade stopped her thoughts and stuffed the image of Ben's grin deep down, locking it into an imaginary chest where it wouldn't bother her. So what if he was handsome? He'd been cute as a boy, and he'd still managed to hurt her. She'd do well to remember that.

Jade

The next day, she was putting away the note stands from choir practice when the principal, Meera Chandra, knocked on the half-open door.

"Hello, Jade," she said, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure." Jade put down the last metal stand in the corner and perched on the edge of her desk. "What's up?"

"I was hoping you'd drop by my office this morning," the principal said, "like you usually do."

Jade shook her head ruefully. Normally she did say hi to the principal since her office was right off the staff room. She liked Mrs. Chandra, who'd been a teaching assistant at the school when Jade herself had been a student here.

"Sorry," she replied, "I was running late this morning. I barely had time to grab my things before I had to rush to class."

The principal smiled. "No problem. But I did want to talk to you."

"Oh?" Jade fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan. "What's wrong?"

The older woman opened her mouth as though to assure her that nothing was wrong, then closed it again. She sighed and came over to sit on the table right next to Jade. She was shorter, and as she hopped up, her feet didn't reach the floor.

"I just got news that they're preparing to cut the budget for arts programs again." Her voice was quiet but held an edge of anger. "Not by a lot, and the changes won't happen until the following school year, but it's enough to make it impossible for us to keep all the classes intact."

Jade's chest constricted. "But—"

She thought furiously, mentally going through all the art classes the school offered. Dance, theatre group, musical group, marching band, painting class, pottery class. Her jazz band.

"I'm sorry," the principal said.

Jade didn't want to cry, but she hadn't slept well, and her brain was functioning at sub-optimal levels as it was. Her throat tightened, and she looked up, blinking to keep the tears away. "My jazz band?"

Mrs. Chandra blew out a breath. "Your jazz band."

"I could..." She clenched her hands together. "I'll keep teaching them. Without being paid."

This wasn't what she'd had in mind when she applied for this position—job security was what had attracted her in the first place. She'd thought it would be a nice change from her days with the orchestra, where she'd often stumble home late at night after a long performance, too tired to do anything more than feed Felix. Now, she had time for reading *and* her practice, and if the teaching was less exciting than playing for an audience, at least she was helping kids realize their full musical potential.

The principal offered her a ghost of a smile. "I thought you might say that."

"They're too good," Jade said. "It would be such a shame not to have them continue. Julie is quite talented—I think she might go on to study music."

She thought of the sixteen-year-old saxophonist, and grim determination replaced her initial sadness. She would do this, no matter what. But losing a class would mean a cut back on her hours, and

her teaching position at the school would no longer be full-time. With that came a reduced paycheck, and given the extensive renovation she needed to do on her grandparents' house, she'd need another part-time job to cope.

The idea was unappealing, to say the least.

Mrs. Chandra watched her sadly. "I wish I could do more for you, Jade. But all I have is this."

She handed Jade a slip of paper with a name and a phone number on it.

"Who's Martin Horowitz?" Jade asked.

"A friend of mine from Asheville," the principal replied. "He's the artistic director at the City Theater. I've been calling around for you, and he said one of their violinists is going on maternity leave soon. It's not a permanent position, but they'd like you to audition for them if you're interested."

Jade folded the paper and tucked it into her skirt pocket. Asheville, a town just forty miles from Hidden Hollows, had a thriving music scene. She'd gone to a couple of concerts there in the past year, and they'd been great. To play there would be amazing, but she wasn't sure she was ready for it.

Her throat was tight again. That the principal had done this for her meant a lot. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that." She cleared her throat. "I mean, I'm grateful. But I can find something on my own."

Mrs. Chandra gave her a hard stare, her dark brown eyes stern and serious. "Don't thank me. But maybe this is an opportunity for you, hmm? When you came to me two years ago, asking for a job, you said this was a temporary thing. But now it looks like you intend to stay in Hidden Hollows. What happened, Jade? Not that it's not a great town, but I thought by now you'd be on your way to one of the big cities to play for a serious orchestra. Instead, you're leading marching band practice."

Jade wanted to protest that marching band practice was important work, but she knew what the principal meant. It sucked that this woman knew her well enough to know that she was hiding here. Hidden Hollows, with all its flaws, was a haven that had allowed

her to pick herself up, but it was true: she never meant to stay. So what was she still doing here?

"I have a lot to think about," she said instead of answering, cringing at the sad expression on the older woman's face.

She *would* think about auditioning in Asheville. Her fingers had healed, and with constant practice, she was as good as she'd ever been. Better, maybe, because her music now flowed with an urgency that she'd lacked before. After her injury, she knew what it was to lose her ability to play, and she was grateful every day that the damage hadn't been permanent. The months she'd spent in physical therapy, performing the same awful stretches day after day, feeling her fingers tremble and fail at the most basic of tasks, had been the darkest of her life.

But she'd recovered. She'd pushed through, and when she picked up her violin now, her fingers flew over the strings with graceful ease again. The first time she'd finished a piece without pain, without having to pause, she'd cried in relief. Now she practiced every day to keep her fingers nimble, even if she was the only one who ever heard her music.

Well, Ben heard it as well.

The thought warmed her, and for the first time in ages, she allowed herself to remember how it felt to perform in front of a full theatre. Hidden in the orchestra pit or sitting on the stage in full view of the spectators, there was nothing that could compare. The palpable energy of the eager audience, the determination of her fellow musicians to give the best performance of their lives, every single time... It was magic.

Goose bumps rose on her skin, and she rubbed her arms. She gave the principal a small smile. "I'll call them," she promised.

The older woman nodded, apparently satisfied for the moment. She patted Jade's shoulder. "I'd love to hear you perform again, one day."

She left Jade to sit in the empty classroom. Jade took out the folded piece of paper and stared at the number. Was it really a good opportunity for her? Or was the principal simply trying to make her feel better because Jade's position had her feeling guilty?

In the end, it didn't matter. She needed another job, and she might as well audition for the orchestra. It wouldn't be a permanent position, either, so she wouldn't get her hopes up. And maybe they wouldn't want her anyway.

Jade tried to stamp down her anxiety, but it bloomed inside her like an insidious, poisonous weed. The safety she'd found in this small town was about to be pulled from under her, and she had no idea whether she'd land on her feet.

Her life was changing, whether she wanted it to or not.

Ben

"Are these all the papers your doctor gave you?" Ben asked, spreading the sheets over the kitchen table.

His father lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I think so."

Ben leveled him with a stare. "You think so?"

"I might have more in my coat."

Ben inhaled and slowly let out his breath. He counted to ten, then to twenty in an effort to cool his temper. "Do you think you could grab them for me?" he squeezed out through gritted teeth.

His father stood with a groan and shuffled out of the kitchen. Ben put his head in his hands and tried not to let his blood pressure rise. The only thing keeping him sane was the fact that the house was spotless and the fridge was stocked with healthy food. Betty Smith had clearly taken over his father's life, and it was everything Ben could do to keep himself from asking the woman to move in permanently.

She was in the laundry room now, folding towels, humming softly to herself. Ben wouldn't have thought she was a person who'd sing while working, but that just showed he knew nothing about women.

"Here."

A thick envelope landed on the table in front of Ben. His father stepped over to the fridge, opened it, growled in disgust, and closed it again. Then he opened a different cabinet and pulled out a bottle of bourbon and a crystal glass, which Ben knew had been a wedding gift his parents had received more than three decades ago.

His father had been in his late thirties when he'd married Ben's mom, who'd been a decade his junior. But it had been Pam Charles who'd passed first, succumbing to a malicious skin cancer that had taken her away from Ben and Robert when Ben had been sixteen years old. Now Ben feared he was about to lose his other remaining parent, and he wasn't ready for that. He wasn't sure he'd ever be *ready*, but his father's health had deteriorated quickly since he'd retired and had now reached a critical point.

Ben refrained from commenting on the fact that it was four p.m. and that drinking hard liquor wasn't smart for a person with elevated blood pressure. Instead, he pried open the envelope and scanned the first sheet of paper.

"Dad—" He choked on the word, cleared his throat, and stared at the words on the page. "This says you've got type 2 diabetes."

His father's exhale was the only answer he got. Ben turned to stare at him, his stomach dropping.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

His dad lowered himself into the chair opposite him. "It's not a big deal."

Ben's temper blew, and he slammed the papers on the table. "Stop pretending! You're killing yourself, and if you don't do something, you *will* die."

"What do you care?" his father exploded. "You left this town as soon as you could and can barely return for the holidays."

Ben gaped at him. "Are you kidding? I dropped everything to move here as soon as I heard—"

"Yeah, it took me having one foot in the grave for you to come running, didn't it?" His father's face turned a deep, mottled red. "And now you take over everything like you own this place."

Ben had no words. What could he say to this? Releasing the papers, he pushed his chair back from the table and stood.

"You know what? Fine." He put on his jacket, though his hands shook from anger. "I'm done."

He left the room, but instead of turning to the front door, some instinct pulled him toward the other end of the house. He pushed through the back door and stepped out into the yard, breathing in the damp afternoon air. It had rained earlier, and the scent of earth and fallen leaves was heavy, almost stifling. He let the door shut behind him and dropped onto the steps, his elbows on his knees. A minute was all he needed, a minute to calm down enough so he wouldn't be a danger driving on the streets.

He rubbed his chest, where a now-familiar sensation gripped his heart. Fear. He was afraid his father would suffer another heart attack, leaving him all alone in the world.

When his mother died, his father accepted a janitorial position halfway across the state, moving them from hot, humid Wilson to this quaint town. It had been an attempt to start over, but Ben had to change schools in the middle of his junior year, and after just eighteen months, he went off to college again. This small house, with its plain backyard, had never been his home. The last time he'd had a home was when his mother had still been alive.

Raised voices broke through his thoughts, and he strained to hear what was going on.

"... such a man, you'd see what was right in front of you!"

That was Betty, her voice shrill and sharp. Ben stood and opened the back door again, ready to step in if the argument turned nasty. He'd protect Betty from his father's temper.

"I don't need his help." That was his dad, gruff and defensive.

"Yes, you do. There's no shame in admitting it."

A glass slammed on the table, so hard Ben was surprised the crystal didn't shatter.

"It's supposed to be the other way around," his father growled. "I'm the parent. I'm the one who should be taking care of *him*. But he never let me."

Betty's voice was low now, unintelligible from where Ben was standing. He disliked eavesdropping, but there was no way he was missing out on this conversation. Silently, he padded down the corridor, the old carpet muffling his footsteps.

"He left," his father was saying. "The moment he got that acceptance letter, I knew he was going to leave, and he did. Without ever looking back."

"They're supposed to leave," Betty replied. "I wish my Ollie had a chance to go to college. He's doing better now, and I hope he gets a regular job and moves out. It's natural."

His dad was silent for so long Ben thought he might not continue.

"It's just... I never knew how to get through to him. Pam was the one he confided in, and once she was gone, it was like he shut down completely. He wouldn't let anyone in." His father's voice rasped as though he had trouble speaking. "He's so successful, his company is doing great, but he's all alone. I don't want him to end up like me."

Ben stared at the wall opposite him. His father's words hit like a blow to the chest, heavy with truth. He never knew his father worried about him. Every week, they spoke on the phone, and Ben had nothing but good things to report: his projects were progressing well, his sub-contractors were professional, his testimonials were positive. He and his father never talked about his personal life—because Ben barely had one. Moving around the state, and often traveling farther out if an interesting renovation project popped up on his radar, didn't leave a lot of room for friendships. Or romantic relationships. And he liked it like that. In college, he never tried to pledge for a fraternity, and as soon as he could, he requested a single room. He didn't like being around people, which was why his job working with empty old houses was so perfect.

"Is that why you're acting like a toddler about your health?" Betty asked. "So he'll stay?"

"No," his father replied, but his tone was defensive. "I'm just..."

Ben didn't wait to hear more. He knew Betty had guessed the truth. His father was acting out, so Ben would remain here—that

was why he was refusing to follow his doctor's orders. He was literally killing himself to bring his son home.

His throat tight, Ben escaped through the front door, closing it quietly so as not to alert them of his presence. He drove to the Williams house in a mental fog, his mind replaying every conversation he'd had with his father over the past couple of years.

Are you coming home for Memorial Day?

Nah, I have a sweet house to work on in Raleigh. The new owners are offering me a bonus if I finish within the month.

You sure? You could take a break, and we could go fishing—

Dad, I'm just not in a place where that's feasible. Maybe in July?

They'd had variations of this debate month after month, and Ben had been planning on blowing off Columbus Day this year as well. He would have visited for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and that would have been plenty. Then he'd received that phone call from the hospital, and his life had ground to a halt. He'd canceled the project planned for October that would have taken him to Louisiana and put a bid on the decrepit house in Hidden Hollows.

Guilt settled in his stomach, a sickening feeling that squeezed his insides. He parked next to his trailer and jumped out of his truck, heading for his power tools. He had so much to do. A thought niggled at the back of his head, telling him that he was escaping into work again, but he pushed it away. There was nothing wrong with distracting himself until he could figure out how to confront his father.

Ben

Four hours later, Ben was sweaty, covered in plaster dust, and still feeling like the worst son in the world. Back-breaking labor hadn't done a thing to ease his thoughts, and he was forced to stop the work because light was fading fast. He'd been pulling off the wallpaper in all four bedrooms on the second floor, and it was even worse than he'd anticipated. The awful pink flamingo paper was just the top layer, and he'd had to scrape off four more to get to the walls underneath.

In doing this, he also uncovered a nest of mice, some old cigarette butts someone had stuffed into a crack in the wall—people were disgusting—and a place where a family had measured their children's heights. The sight of that made him surprisingly melancholy, and he remembered that their old house in Wilson had similar markings where his dad had measured his growth. A doorjamb in the kitchen had been marked from age two until sixteen, when they'd moved out of that house.

His dad was under the impression that Ben had never connected to him. He had, primarily through sports, but the moment Ben stopped playing football after college, that common interest had

dried up. It was true that they'd grown apart after Ben's mother's death, but wasn't that to be expected?

Like Betty had said, kids were *supposed* to leave.

But were they supposed to avoid their parents?

A fresh wave of guilt swamped him, and he shoved another armful of torn-down wallpaper through the window. He'd hire a larger truck to take it to the dump once it was all out of the house, but for now, the yard was fast becoming even more of a wreck. Things always looked worse before they became better, at least in the renovation business.

Did that also hold true for relationships? Was it necessary for him and his father to hit rock bottom before their relationship improved?

And was this rock bottom? Or would it get even worse?

Stomping down the stairs and out onto the overgrown lawn, Ben dusted himself off. He craved a hot shower more than he could express. Maybe he could have one at his father's house the next day.

Perhaps he should just move in with his dad.

Ben eyed the trailer that barely had enough room for a single bed, a folding table, and a tiny kitchenette. He'd need to find somewhere permanent to stay for the winter, a short-term lease for as long as he would remain in Hidden Hollows. Maybe he could stay until January. This house would be long finished by then, but maybe he could take December off work for once and spend more time with his father.

That might lessen some of the strain between them. And if that was what it took for his father to treat himself better, Ben would do it, even if the possibility of a new project enticed him.

But moving in with the man, taking up residence in his small bedroom with the single bed and the Star Wars posters his dad had never changed? The mere thought of it had him itching to move, to escape. No, it wasn't a good idea. He was trying to fix his relationship with his father, not break it irreparably.

Movement in his peripheral vision caught his eye, and he focused on a runner coming up the road. It was a woman in a pale blue windbreaker, her long legs eating the distance between them.

Jade.

His body recognized her on an instinctual level before his mind made the connection. She was slowing down, clearly returning from a long run, and as she neared his house, he noticed things about her he had no business thinking about. Her long brown hair was swept back in a ponytail, exposing the delicate features of her face, and her cheeks were flushed a deep pink. Wispy tendrils of hair stuck to her sweaty forehead, and she was breathing hard, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Ben snapped his gaze back to her face, then waved to cover his embarrassment. "Hey."

She stopped ten feet from him and put her hands to her knees. "Hi," she panted. "Give me a sec."

Ben found himself grinning at her. "How long was your run?"

She dragged her palm over her forehead and wiped it on her leggings. "Four miles. I'm rusty. I used to run seven, but there's no way I can manage that now."

"Four is good," he said. "Want a drink?"

Jade looked tempted for a moment, then shook her head. "I have to go stretch. And I'm a sweaty mess. I'd stink up your trailer."

Ben laughed. "You can't smell any worse than me." He pointed at his chest.

Then he cringed. Was he really having a stinking contest with a woman? He was way off his game. Not that he wanted to play games with Jade Marshall. No, sir, he'd learned his lesson with this one.

Or he should have. She dropped him like a hot potato a day before their senior prom, yet here he was, trying to charm her for some unknown reason.

Ok, *fine*, he knew what the reason was. She was beautiful, interesting, and somehow endearingly lost. He wanted to know why she'd returned to Hidden Hollows when she'd been on a fast track to freedom all those years ago. He wanted to invite her over for a drink and just talk to her, see where she was in life, catch up...and maybe find out what had happened their senior year. It wasn't as though the thought of her had kept him up at night, but it was an unfinished

chapter, an unresolved problem from his teenage years. Now that he'd seen her again, he wanted to put his old feelings for her to rest.

But she was slowly edging toward the broken fence between their yards. And he wasn't enough of a fool to insist on the invitation. Instead, he looked past her.

"Hey, is that fence on your side of the property line or mine?" he asked.

It was an eyesore, and whoever the new owners were, they'd want it fixed. Or maybe he could plant some shrubs there to hide it.

She studied the faded posts. "It's mine. I keep meaning to fix it, but since it's not essential, it keeps getting pushed down my list."

"Your list?"

She pointed a thumb toward her home. "This is an old house. As much as I love it, things need replacing." Her expression fell. "But I'll take care of the fence, don't worry."

Ben nodded, keeping his thoughts to himself. The house was a single-story bungalow built in the sixties, and it was as ugly and generic as most of the suburban homes built in that era. The windows were small, the house boxy and uninspired, and he thought tearing it down and replacing it with a more modern home would be a much better course of action. It was a money sink, and she wouldn't be able to fix the underlying issues with small patch-up jobs.

Of course, Jade likely didn't have the funds for such a decision, and she wouldn't appreciate his radical opinion on it. Still, if there was something he could do to help, he might as well do it.

"I'll fix it for you," he said without thinking it through.

Jade's eyes went wide. "What? No, you can't do that. I'll, um, hire someone. Or..." She half-turned to glare at the fence. "I might get the materials and do it myself. It can't be that hard."

Ben cringed at the thought of her tackling the project. It wasn't a big one, but without proper tools and know-how, she'd do a terrible job and possibly hurt herself in the process.

"Then hire me," he suggested. "I'm a contractor. I have all the tools you'd need to buy or borrow, and I'm right here."

She tugged on her sleeves, hiding her hands inside them. "Why?"

"Hm?" Ben cocked his head to the side, unsure of what she meant.

"Why are you offering your help? You have so much to do." She waved her hand at the house. "I can take care of the fence."

"I can do it faster." *And better.* He knew not to add that, though it was true.

Jade's forehead creased in adorable wrinkles. "Okay," she said at last. "What do you charge per hour? And how much do you think the materials will cost?"

He thought fast. With some luck, he could score the right kind of timber cheap, and he could use the white paint he'd be buying to paint the porch railing of the house anyway. That would be a bulk purchase, making it a lot more affordable.

Jade lived alone, and he knew that covering her living expenses in a house like that had to be hard on a single income. She might have inherited some money as well as the house. The thought had occurred to him, but she'd said that she was only fixing essential issues. If she had money to burn, she would have overhauled the entire house at once.

"I'd have to do some calculations on the materials," he hedged so she wouldn't think he was taking this on as a charity case.

In truth, that was exactly what he was doing, but he didn't want to explore his reasons for it too deeply. He was in a position to help her, so he would.

"As for my per-hour rate..." He considered her house. "I'll do it for one hot shower a day for as long as it takes me to get the fence up."

"What?" She gaped at him. Her cheeks were already red from her run, but now her blush spread down her neck as well.

Ben put his hands up. "I'm not trying to be creepy. But the plumber isn't coming until next week, and it'll be another week after that before I can get a water heater installed in there. I'll tidy up after myself, but I'd kill for some hot water." At her shocked expression,

he added, “Not *literally*. I mean—a hot shower is worth more to me right now than money.”

He shut his mouth to keep himself from blurting out anything more. Jade was already watching him as though he was a wild, unpredictable animal. He wanted to smack himself in the face—and would have if it didn’t mean Jade’s opinion of him would sink even lower. What on earth had he been thinking? Letting a stranger into her house, into her bathroom, was too intimate.

“Fine,” she said.

Ben blinked. “Fine?”

Jade’s color returned to normal. “You fix the fence, and you can have all the showers you want.” She paused, then said, “Just text me before you want to come over.”

“Okay.” Ben’s shock slowly subsided, and he thought of a problem. “I don’t have your number.”

Jade fiddled with her sleeves again as she rattled off her number, too quickly for him to catch, so he had to ask her to repeat it. Man, this was worse than high school—and he wasn’t even asking her out on a date, just arranging things so he could clean himself off. Not that he was ever going to ask Jade out. That would complicate this business exchange, and he didn’t need more complications in his life.

“Thanks,” he said finally. “If it’s all right with you, can I come by in an hour?”

He wanted to give her time before barging in on her private space. A niggle of guilt—the emotion of the day, it seemed—wormed its way into his head over this arrangement, but he really did need hot water to wash off. This also meant he’d be able to avoid another visit to his father’s house.

Until his dad was ready to change his lifestyle, Ben didn’t think he could talk to him again without blowing up. That a man would rather slowly kill himself than change his habits was incomprehensible to him. It seemed even more unfair that his father was using his illness to tie Ben to Hidden Hollows. If he’d had just explained to Ben that he missed him...

“Are you okay?”

Jade put a hand on his arm, her touch gentle. Ben looked down at her fingers resting on his sleeve, then up at her big brown eyes.

"What?"

"I told you that you're welcome to come shower tonight," she replied, concern coloring her voice. "But you sort of blanked out for a moment."

She let go of his arm, and he felt the absence of her keenly. How long had it been since someone had been worried for him, cared about him? The sensation sparked a need in him, a hole he hadn't been aware of until then.

"I'm fine," Ben said, his voice gruff.

He retreated a step to keep himself from doing anything stupid, like pulling her in for a hug because he was starved of human contact.

Maybe he should get a dog to keep him company.

Jade left, glancing over her shoulder as she walked away. Ben thought she looked a little hurt—she'd reached out to him, and he pushed her away. He stared after her, wishing for once that he was different. That he knew how to interact with people without coming across as a complete weirdo.

That change wasn't going to happen anytime soon. But at least he'd be getting a hot shower tonight.

Jade

Ben Charles was about to have a shower at her house.

Jade had managed to walk home instead of sprinting, but now, she skipped her stretches in favor of tidying up. She wasn't a slob by any measure—she'd vacuumed just the day before—but the everyday clutter lying on various surfaces betrayed that she lived alone and rarely had visitors.

She showered in record time, wiped down the bath, and checked that no dirty towels were lying around. Hurrying through the rooms, she tucked away her bra that she had left out to dry, put the papers strewn across her dining table in a neat pile, and tidied up Felix's litter box. Not that she expected Ben to snoop through her house, but it was somehow important that she put her best foot forward. She didn't want him to think poorly of her, no matter their history.

Her kitchen counter was clear at last, and she closed all the cabinet doors, then looked around to see if anything else was out of place. The open-plan dining room extended into the living area, and she studied it, trying to imagine what it looked like to a stranger. She was so used to it, had spent afternoons and weekends here as a

child, then lived here alone for the past two years. Now, she barely noticed how worn-down some of the pieces were, how faded the curtains, how scuffed the rug beneath the coffee table. She kept all the furniture clean, but it was old.

Her chest tightened at the sight of it all. How much money would she sink into this house? Was it even worth it if she wasn't going to stay in Hidden Hollows long-term?

It didn't make sense to do repairs on this place if she was eventually going to sell it and move to a bigger city. But Jade wasn't sure she wanted to leave. Her situation here wasn't perfect, but in this house, she'd found peace. She'd found safety after leaving Nashville a frightened, injured woman.

And she was just beginning to make friends. She could ask Millie to have coffee with her, see if their recent chat at the bakery could serve as a basis for a stronger relationship. She'd never had many friends, and Leah Yin, her bestie from high school, had gone to Stanford and remained in California, where she had a thriving career as a bioengineer. In college, Jade had roomed with several different girls, and she'd had some casual friends who were happy enough to have drinks with her or visit a concert, but after she'd left Nashville, none had kept in touch.

Neither had she, for that matter. Now, shame tightened her throat at the memory. Her injury had changed her life so much. She'd closed herself off from the world and refused to let anyone in. If people spoke to her, trying to find out more about her, she rebuffed them, believing they only wanted juicy news about her injury to spread her misfortune.

Maybe she'd gone too far in trying to avoid becoming like her mother. Her parents, happily retired in Florida, had been thrilled to have a successful daughter. With her job at the opera house in Nashville, she'd been the perfect child—her mother boasted endlessly to her friends how the director herself had invited Jade to audition for the orchestra after hearing her play in a college production.

But then Jade's career had been cut short by one mindless incident, and she'd returned to Hidden Hollows. Suddenly, her mother had nothing to brag about, at least not regarding Jade. It had been a

slow process, but their weekly phone calls had tapered off, and Jade now spoke to her parents once a month, if that.

It hurt. It hurt horribly that her worth as a daughter was tied to her success as a musician, at least in her mother's eyes. Her father had never had much interest in Jade's music, but then he hadn't been a very present father in general. It had been Jade's mom who'd driven her to music practice several times a week. She'd come to every recital and show, and Jade had tried extra hard to make her mom proud, however, now that she was a high school teacher, her mother felt all her hard work and sacrifice was being wasted.

And maybe it was. Maybe her mom was right.

Jade pulled the piece of paper with the telephone number out of her pocket. Her mother would be so happy to hear that Jade was considering the job. She fought the impulse to call her. She hadn't gotten the position yet, so there was no use in getting her hopes up. But she'd call the director the next morning to arrange a meeting in Asheville.

She glanced out the kitchen window toward the Williams house. Ben strode over the lawn, a rolled-up towel under one arm. He passed the spot where he'd dug out the rosebush from beside the metal hatch that hid the main water pipe. She'd noticed that the rosebush was now planted exactly where they agreed, neatly trimmed for the winter.

Jade stared at him, confusion rising inside her. The fact was, her attraction to him hadn't dimmed over the years. He was still as handsome as he'd been as an eighteen-year-old, and every time he spoke to her, she felt that tug in her belly pulling her to him. She supposed the feeling was butterflies, but it was worse than that. Butterflies implied pleasant anticipation, a sense of possibility. Her own sensation went deeper than that, a visceral twist to her gut that left her grasping for words.

She jumped when Ben knocked at the back door. Mustering all her self-control, Jade straightened her shoulders and opened the door for him.

"Hi," she said, her voice a touch too bright.

"Hey," he replied, stepping past her into the kitchen.

He'd cleaned off his boots on the back porch and now stood in front of her, looking slightly awkward.

"Um, the bathroom is through here," Jade blurted finally. "You didn't need to bring your own towel."

"Yeah." Ben cleared his throat. "I didn't want to bother you any more than necessary."

"Okay."

They stared at each other, the tension rising in the air between them. Jade felt locked into place and couldn't look away from his gray eyes. He had such beautiful eyes, almost silvery with the tiniest hint of green around the pupil.

He glanced away from her first, and Jade blinked, then flushed in embarrassment. What was she doing? This was worse than she'd anticipated. Having him inside her home was horrible—especially since she wanted nothing more than to have him stay.

"Jade," he said, "if this is too uncomfortable for you, I don't have to..."

She looked at him again, found him frowning at her. She *was* uncomfortable, but not because she was afraid of him or anything like that. It was her own reservations, her own past issues, that bothered her, and Ben wasn't to blame.

"No, it's okay," she replied. "I'm just—I don't get many visitors."

She closed her eyes for a beat and stifled a groan. Could she sound any more uncool? Ben's low chuckle had her glowering at him. He got under her skin in the worst way, and she needed to get herself under control.

"So, I'll just..." Ben pointed down the hall.

"Oh, yeah." Jade jumped to the side to let him pass. "I'll be, uh, here."

With another smile, Ben disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door behind him. Jade sagged against the wall, clutching at her chest. How was she going to survive him showering here *every day*?

Then she straightened and gave herself a stern talking-to. She'd just have to get over it. He was kind enough to have offered to fix her fence, and this was the least she could do.

The water turned on in the shower.

Jade groaned out loud and flopped down on the couch. Then she turned on the TV and found a news channel to drown out the sounds coming from the bathroom, because this was just too much. Maybe she should stick her head under the kitchen tap to cool off.

Ben was just behind that door, without a stitch of clothing on, and Jade simultaneously wanted him to stay and also to teleport herself to the Moon.

Excruciating minutes later, the shower turned off, and Jade sunk lower into the couch, keeping her gaze firmly on the TV host, even though she didn't process a word of what the woman was saying.

Then the door to the bathroom opened a crack, and a billow of steam escaped, carrying with it the amazing scent of Ben's shower gel—something masculine that she'd noticed before on an instinctual level. Now it was permeating through her living room, and she knew she was in trouble.

"Hey, want me to fix this tap for you?" Ben called from the bathroom. "It's dripping."

She was the worst human *ever*. She was lusting over him while he was trying to repair her house. *Ugh*.

"Yeah, that'd be great," she called back, trying to keep her voice normal.

"Okay, cool." He stuck his head out of the bathroom and asked, "Can I use your hairdryer?"

Jade nodded mutely, too busy trying not to stare to form words. Ben disappeared again, the hairdryer turned on, and Jade sprung to her feet. She couldn't stay here. It was painfully clear that she was about to do something stupid if she remained in this close proximity while he smelled good enough to eat and looked so hot with his damp hair in curls.

She picked up her purse from the counter and threw in her phone.

"So, I have to run out," she called, edging toward the front door. "I have a..."

Argh. Why didn't she think this through? She could have at least come up with a decent cover story. The hairdryer turned off, and

suddenly, Ben was right there, at the bathroom door, while she was trying to sneak past him.

"A hair appointment at the salon," she finished lamely. "Right now."

"Okay."

Ben crossed his arms over his chest. Jade tried not to stare at how his t-shirt hugged his shoulders and biceps. Did he believe her, or did she just make this even more awkward than before?

"I'll leave the key in the door. Just lock up after you're done and put it under the doormat," she instructed him.

For a moment, Ben looked as though he wanted to say something but thought better of it. Instead, he dipped his head in a quick nod, and Jade escaped, leaving him alone in the house. If he thought that was weird, so be it. It was better in the long run. Ben didn't even hint that he thought of her as anything more than an old acquaintance, and neither of them would be staying in Hidden Hollows if things went according to plan. He'd renovate the house and move on, and she would take that job in Asheville and sell her grandparents' house.

Running out to her car, Jade was off and driving down the road before she realized that she had no idea where she was heading. But she'd told Ben she was going to the hair salon, so he might notice that her hair looked exactly the same as before. Then he'd know she'd been lying to him.

It might not be a bad idea to have a quick trim—since she was going in for that meeting with the theater director soon.

With a sigh, Jade turned in the direction of the town center and parked across the street from Hailey's Hair Hut, the only salon in town. It had recently been renovated by the owner, Hailey Rhodes, who'd modernized the look and offer of the old establishment. Jade had been a customer here since she'd moved to Hidden Hollows.

Now, she was hoping Hailey had time to squeeze her in at this hour. The sky was already glowing bright orange with a late September sunset, bathing the town square and all the buildings in that perfect golden light. It was a pretty sight, and Jade thought for the first time that she might miss the little town when she moved away.

The bell above the door tinkled merrily, announcing her presence as Jade entered the salon. Hailey looked up from where she was blow-drying an older woman's hair. Jade knew the lady by sight—she was a member of the quilting club and a notorious meddler.

"Jade," Hailey yelled over the noise of the dryer. "Hi, what can I do for you today?"

Jade fiddled with the strap of her purse, trying to ignore the older woman's curious glance. "I was wondering if you had time to squeeze me in tonight. Just a wash and trim," she said. "I know I usually call, but..." She shrugged, unwilling to explain why exactly she'd ended up there.

"Sure." Hailey imperiously pointed at an armchair with a round hairbrush. "Sit tight, and I'll be right with you."

Jade was both relieved and uncomfortable: now her lie to Ben was a lie no longer, but she'd have to sit through a session with Hailey. It wasn't that she didn't like the woman. The opposite was true. Hailey was such a sunny, uncomplicated person, and Jade felt like a Grinch every time she visited the salon. This was gossip central, she knew, a place where the ladies getting their perms done exchanged the juiciest news.

Okay, maybe that was stereotypical and harsh. And she'd never actually heard Hailey gossip—she simply chatted with her customers who were often happy to monologue while the hairstylist merely nodded and murmured along, encouraging them to spill whatever was in their hearts. Jade supposed it was part of Hailey's job to give these women a new look and sometimes even serve as a therapist of sorts, listening to their confessions.

Perhaps she could confess her own sins and troubles. It would be nice to have someone to talk to. But that would mean opening up, letting Hailey in. Jade didn't know if she had it in her to trust a stranger.

"There we go."

Hailey's voice brought Jade from her thoughts. She watched as the hairstylist charged her client, her good cheer prompting the woman to smile right back. Hailey was good at her job, and her customers loved her for it.

Finally, she turned to Jade. "All right! What did you have in mind for today? Your usual?"

Jade almost nodded, but the question was such a close echo of her conversation with Millie the other day, the words froze in her throat. Had she really become so predictable that everyone knew her choices? When had she allowed that to happen?

Instead, she said, "I think it's time for a change. But I haven't really thought this through, so I didn't look at any specific hairstyles or anything."

Hailey's eyes twinkled at her words. "I have an idea or two."

Jade hesitated, then added, "Nothing too radical, though, okay? I mean..." She fingered her long ponytail. "I like it like this."

Hailey gently guided her toward the sink. "Do you trust me?"

Jade looked at her, feeling oddly vulnerable. She knew that Hailey was asking her about the haircut, but there was something more implied. "Yes," she said finally, and the word came out solemn, like a promise.

"Good." Hailey's gaze was nothing but kind. "Thank you."

They didn't speak again as Hailey washed Jade's hair, massaging her scalp so that she could barely hold back a happy moan. She relaxed under Hailey's skilled hands, letting her eyes drift shut. After the stress of Ben's presence in her house and the news the principal had brought her, she'd needed this badly.

Hailey must have sensed that Jade preferred a quiet session because she didn't speak to her, apart from telling her that she had beautiful hair. Jade watched anxiously as the stylist snipped off an inch here and there, combing her hair back, pinning it up and letting it down again. It curled slightly as it dried, just as it always did, and she wondered what Hailey was doing to it. It was hard to tell at this point.

The moment Hailey turned on the dryer, Jade closed her eyes. She preferred not to watch as her hairdo took shape around her face, and since she'd told Hailey that she trusted her, she didn't feel so awkward with her eyes shut. Soft tendrils of hair teased her face, and she rubbed her nose to keep from sneezing.

At last, the noise from the dryer stopped, and Hailey said, "Wow."

Jade opened her eyes and blinked in the sudden glare of the lights that surrounded the mirror. Then her gaze focused on her reflection, and she stared at herself.

She was the same—but different. Hailey hadn't straightened her hair but instead worked with its natural texture so that soft curls framed her face, accentuating her features. The differences were minimal: Hailey had created layers and brought her part more to the side, but her hair was still long enough that the change didn't cause her anxiety. The effect was fantastic.

"Thank you," Jade breathed, tugging at one long curl. "I'm not sure I'll be able to reproduce this at home, but at least I'll look great for another day or two."

Hailey laughed. "It's not difficult to maintain, I promise." She paused and studied Jade in the mirror. "Listen, what are your plans for tonight?"

Jade pursed her lips. The honest answer would be that she was going to watch Netflix alone and avoid Ben, but she couldn't say that out loud. The second part was especially mortifying.

"I don't have plans," she said instead. It was true to an extent, though she had a sudden urge to tell Hailey all about her troubles.

"Millie and I are going out." Hailey put away her tools, cleaning the combs and brushes. "We'd both be super happy if you joined us."

She moved on to sweeping the floor, then vacuumed it quickly with practiced, efficient moves.

Jade wanted to say yes. She did. But she looked down at herself and realized she'd escaped from the house in her I'm-staying-at-home-all-evening clothes. She'd put them on after showering earlier in an effort to appear as normal as possible for Ben. She didn't want him to think she'd put any special thought to her looks. Then she'd ruined it anyway because she ran out of the house like it was on fire.

"I can't," she replied, real regret flowing through her. She swiveled around in her chair to face the stylist. "I'm wearing leggings."

Hailey undid her apron and pointed at her legs. "So am I!" She chucked the apron into the towel bin and added, "We're only going to Miller's. It's not fancy, and you won't stand out at all."

Jade bit her lip, debating with herself. This was an opportunity to change up her life a little, and Hailey and Millie had been so kind to her these past months.

Finally, she nodded. "Okay."

Jade

"Yay!" Hailey did a happy little jig, then grabbed her purse and keys. "I'll follow you home so you can leave your car there. I can drive you home again later. That way, you can have a drink or two without worrying about driving."

Jade grinned at her. "That's nice of you," she said as Hailey locked up the front door. "But won't you be drinking, too?"

At that, Hailey paused. A soft smile lit up her face. "Actually, we're trying to get pregnant. I'm staying off alcohol for the time being."

Jade touched her arm. "That's wonderful!"

Hailey lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I'm excited about it. But we're not telling people yet, so..."

"I won't tell anyone," Jade assured her, very serious. "I don't gossip."

It seemed for a moment that Hailey would ask her about her statement, but she pointed at a bulky SUV. "This is me," she said. "I'll follow you, okay?"

Jade hurried to her car and drove home with Hailey tailing her. She'd been gone from home for more than an hour, so it was safe to

assume that Ben had already left. Her insides still flipped at the thought of him in her house, in her bathroom, but she stamped those feelings down hard. Their agreement—exchanging showers for a fence—was a business transaction, and emotions had no place in it.

She refused to even look at Ben's trailer to see if he was there. The Williams house was dark and empty, a looming presence at the end of the road. Jade jumped out of her car and hurried to Hailey's, slamming the door a little too hard.

"Let's go," she said, feeling as though she was a participant in a money heist.

If Hailey thought her behavior was weird, she didn't comment on it. Instead, she chatted about her work, Millie and the bakery, and told Jade all about her husband's work at the high school. Jade knew Rhett from work and cooperated with him whenever the marching band was needed for games and other sporting events.

It was nice, just chatting with someone. She'd missed having girlfriends, meeting them for coffee or drinks, and being able to unload her problems on someone else. It wasn't that she expected help or advice from Hailey, but talking had her feeling as though she wasn't all alone in this world.

They met Millie at the tavern, and the hostess showed them to an empty booth in the back of the room. The place was crowded enough for a weeknight, with locals having dinner and talking loudly to make themselves heard. Millie greeted an older woman with frizzy white-blond hair sitting in the next booth, and the woman glared at them all in response.

Jade's stomach rumbled. She hadn't eaten since before her run, and now the mouth-watering aroma of burgers and fries convinced her to follow along with Millie and Hailey's evening plans.

They ordered cheesy fries to share, and Millie assured Jade that the special was worth trying at least once. That decision resulted in a massive burger that Jade couldn't finish on her own. She and Millie ordered beer to go with the burgers while Hailey stuck to sparkling water.

The best part of the evening was that Jade didn't feel pressure to be anyone other than herself. Millie and Hailey didn't pry into her

personal life, they sympathized with her news on the budget cuts for the arts departments, and offered her a little glimpse inside their own lives that she appreciated so much.

I can do this. It was a powerful realization that her fear of gossiping and small-town busybodies didn't prevent her from enjoying human interaction. Why she'd kept herself from it was an issue for a different day, but right now, she was here, doing her best to make friends. And she was so grateful to these two lovely women for doing *their* best to include her in their small circle.

She looked up then, to the long oak bar and the row of tall chairs along it. At first, she didn't focus on anything in particular, but she had the strangest sensation of being watched. Then her gaze collided with Ben's, and he lifted his beer glass in a silent salute. Thirty feet of space separated them, so she wouldn't have been able to hear him even if he'd spoken, but his expression was so closed, she had no idea what he was thinking.

Jade gave him a curt nod in return, then looked down at her plate. Her appetite was gone in a blink—and a wave of embarrassment washed over her. She'd behaved like a complete lunatic back at her house, running away from a man who'd been nothing but kind to her in the past weeks. He'd lent her his protective earmuffs and made every effort to keep the noise from disrupting her life. And she'd repaid him by running away.

"Jade?"

She lifted her head to find Millie and Hailey watching her from the other side of the table.

"Sorry?" she said, aware that she'd missed a part of their conversation.

"What were you looking at?" Hailey asked, turning on the vinyl seat to glance behind her.

Jade grabbed her hand, nearly knocking over the ketchup bottle. "No, don't look now."

If she could duck under the table and disappear, she would have. How was she going to explain Ben to these two women?

Millie's blue eyes went round. "What's going on? Who are we avoiding?"

Jade groaned and dropped Hailey's hand to cover her own face. "It's a long story."

Her words met with silence, and she lowered her hands to see both women grinning at her with expectant expressions.

"Come on," Millie said. "You have to share."

For once, this demand didn't put Jade's back up. It wasn't malicious greed for gossip but rather a friendly request to share an interesting part of her life.

With a sigh, she leaned closer. "If you look now, I'm leaving, okay?"

Millie and Hailey both nodded.

"Fine." Jade took a deep breath and said, "That guy, the one in a green sweater, is Ben Charles. He bought the old Williams house recently and is renovating it."

Millie's expression went blank—Jade remembered she'd moved to Hidden Hollows only recently—but Hailey lifted her eyebrows. "Isn't that place haunted?"

Jade snorted. "Not anymore. He's ripping it apart, so even the ghosts don't stand a chance."

Millie laughed at that. "How do you know this?"

"I live next door," Jade said.

"Ooh, I get it now," Hailey whispered. "You're hot for your new neighbor!"

"No," Jade shot back, too quickly.

The two women both sent her equally unimpressed looks. Jade half wished she had her phone handy to snap a photo of them.

"Okay, fine, he's attractive." They'd see for themselves the moment they came face to face with him anyway, so there was no point in denying it. "But that's not the issue."

"Oh?" Millie put her elbows on the table and leaned in. "There's more?"

Jade paused, gathering her courage. This was a story she hadn't shared with anyone. Not with friends in high school, not with her mom, and certainly not with the few boyfriends she'd had in college and the years since. It had been too humiliating.

"We went to school together," she blurted out. "He transferred from another school in the middle of our junior year. He became a wide receiver for the football team our senior year, and everyone liked him."

Completely disregarding Jade's orders, Hailey turned around and squinted at Ben. Then she faced Jade again. Luckily, Ben was now working through a burger of his own, so he didn't notice this.

"I think I remember him," Hailey said. "He was cute."

"Yeah," Jade said. "We were two years ahead of you, right?"

"I think so," Hailey agreed. "But honestly, I had a massive crush on Rhett back then, so I didn't even notice other boys."

"Aw," Millie said, patting her friend's arm. "How cute!"

"Trust me," Hailey grumbled. "There was nothing *cute* about having an unrequited crush in high school."

"Exactly," Jade exclaimed. "It was horrible."

Every time she would see Ben in the hallway, her stomach did a double backflip. In history class, she sat one row behind him, wishing he'd turn around and ask for a pencil or something equally silly. She'd been lucky that her grades hadn't suffered from it.

"So I take it he didn't return your feelings?" Millie asked sympathetically.

Jade dropped her voice even further. "That's just it. I was sure it was all one-sided, but one day, he asked me to prom."

Hailey gasped. "This is getting better and better."

Jade grinned at her. "I'm glad you find my emotional pain entertaining."

The other woman nudged her hand playfully. "Go on."

"Okay, so it was a month until our senior prom, and I was sitting in our history classroom, waiting for the professor to arrive. Ben sat in front of me, like always, but this time, he turned around to face me, and just asked point-blank, 'Want to go to prom with me, Marshall?'"

Jade's face flamed at the memory. She'd blushed back then as well, shocked and elated at the same time.

"How romantic. Did you say yes?" Millie prompted her.

Jade nodded. "Yeah, but it was super confusing. We'd barely spoken to each other up until then. He'd asked me for my notes once because he'd missed a couple of days, and one time, he commented on something I'd said in class."

She remembered those instances precisely because they'd been the highlights of her senior year up until the point when he'd asked her to go to prom with him. In hindsight, it was pretty pathetic, but her life had revolved around school and music so much that each interaction with a boy was supremely notable.

"I take it you didn't actually go to prom together," Hailey said. "Or you'd have just said so."

Jade grimaced. "Nope. That's where the issue lies." She swallowed, reliving the crushing disappointment of the following weeks. Bracing herself, she continued, "A week before prom night, my best friend overheard a bunch of girls talking in the locker room. One of them said she couldn't believe Ben was going to prom with me, and another replied that he was doing it to humiliate me. Because a football player would never go to prom with a loser."

She clenched her hands in her lap and stamped down on the feelings resurfacing from the past. "They had a plan," she added, "to film it. One of the girls said she'd bring her dad's camera. That was before smartphones."

It was all in the past, so the memory shouldn't have been enough to hurt her, except she knew how nasty kids could still be to each other. Not much had changed in high schools with the arrival of new technology. Even worse, cyberbullying was now a thing.

Millie brought her hand to her mouth. "How awful."

"What did you do?" Hailey asked, her eyebrows knit together in a frown.

"At first, I didn't want to believe it," Jade said. The news had shocked her, but Ben had never been nasty to her—or anyone else, for that matter—so she couldn't fathom it. She'd even defended him to Leah and nearly lost her best friend in the process. Leah had been mortally offended that Jade didn't believe her, and it had taken them weeks to get over it.

"But then I met him at Flap Jack Joe's a couple of days later," she went on. "And he didn't even say hi to me. It was like he was embarrassed to be seen in public with me because his football buddies were there with him. He ignored me completely."

It had been humiliating and painful. But it had stripped her of any illusions she'd fabricated about him.

Now, the two women were watching her with twin expressions of worry mixed with anger. It felt so good to get this off her chest finally.

Jade clasped her hands together in her lap. "In the end, I canceled on him the day before prom."

"Wow," Millie said. "How did he take it?"

"I don't know," Jade admitted. "I was a coward, and I didn't want to face him because I was afraid he'd laugh at me. So I texted him that I got the stomach flu and didn't go to school for the rest of the week."

It had taken everything she had to convince her mother to let her stay home that close to the end of the year. She'd even made fake puking noises in the bathroom. It wasn't her proudest moment, but she didn't want to see Ben—or anyone else.

Her mother had been furious with her because she'd already announced to her posse of friends that her daughter was going out with the star football player. It had been the first blow to their relationship when her mother had taken a stand against her. Jade never really forgave her for not being on her side.

"But you saw him at school at some point, right?" Hailey said.

Jade shrugged. "He was dating Katherine Dahl by the next Monday, so I don't think he was too crushed."

It had been Katherine and her friend who Leah had overheard in the locker room, so the news had stung even more.

"So you never talked to him about it?" Hailey asked.

"Nope." Jade glanced at Ben, who was now eating his fries. "We both left for college at the end of that summer, and I hadn't seen him since. He remembered me when we met a couple of weeks ago, but he didn't mention anything about the prom."

Hailey made a contemplative face and pursed her lips. "Hmm."

"What does 'Hmm' mean?" Millie asked.

The hairstylist shifted in her seat. "Well, you don't know for sure that he meant to humiliate you," she said. "All you had to go on was what those girls said."

Jade straightened her spine, affronted. "And the fact that he ignored me in public. Besides, we weren't even friends!"

"Yeah," Hailey replied, "but teenage boys are weird. And stupid. That doesn't necessarily mean Ben was evil." She glanced over her shoulder again. "I mean, look at him. He seems so...lonely."

All three of them looked at Ben, who did seem kind of isolated, dining alone at the bar.

"You don't know what it's like," Jade said. "Being the uncool person, I mean."

"Actually, I do," Hailey said. "It's a story for another day, but Rhett humiliated me when I was a teenager, and it took me a decade to get over it. He changed so much, though. He's the best man I know."

Her eyes shone with her love for the man, and Jade wished she could bottle some of that happiness and keep it for herself. But Hailey's confession unlocked something inside her. She hadn't held a grudge against Ben all these years, exactly, but she had judged the man he was now by the actions he'd committed as a teen. In their recent interactions, he'd been so helpful to her.

Jade blew out a long breath. "Okay." She got to her feet and glanced down at her companions. "I'm going to fix this."

"Oh, wow."

Millie's exclamation followed her as she marched along the bar toward Ben. She stopped two feet from him and waited for him to notice her.

"Hi," she said, her mind going temporarily blank.

She noticed the clean scent of him, even from her distance. He'd shaved at her place, and his delicious scruff was gone. He wore the clean-shaven look well, though, his sharp-edged jaw smooth and lickable.

Ugh. No, she wouldn't be licking Ben's jaw anytime soon.

"Um, would you like to join us?" She forced out the words. "I'm here with two...friends." The word came naturally, though she hesitated slightly over it.

He was still staring at her, his gaze intent. "I like what you've done with your hair."

"Oh." Jade tucked the wavy strands behind her ears. "Thanks. It was all Hailey. She's the hair master. Or mistress."

She flushed, wishing the ground would swallow her up. But no, she was still standing in the middle of a crowded small-town bar, unsuccessfully trying to get her former crush to join her at the table. She knew for a fact that Millie and Hailey were witnessing this train wreck as well. Maybe others were staring at her, too.

"Anyway, I didn't want to bother you," she hurried to say. "I just thought I'd say hi and ask you... Well, never mind. Enjoy your dinner."

She was about to flee when Ben slid from his barstool and stood in front of her, suddenly taller than her by several inches. The move brought him closer to her. She would only need to take one step forward to be flush with him.

"I'd be happy to join you."

His voice was quiet and intimate, and Jade barely heard him over the nervous buzzing in her ears. She stared up at his mesmerizing eyes, then dipped her gaze to his lips. Man, he had such great lips. They were sensuous without being too full...and he was smirking at her.

Jade snapped her gaze back up and caught the flash of heat in his eyes. For a brief second, she thought he might lower his head and kiss her. The idea thrilled her. She could almost feel how his thick, curly hair would slide through her fingers when she gripped the nape of his neck, and those strong arms would pull her in...

Ben turned to the bar and signaled the waitress that he was moving to another table. Jade blinked, crashing back to reality. Had she imagined the moment between them? She'd been so sure they shared *something*.

Instead of waiting to find out the truth, she spun on her heels and hurried back to the table where Millie and Hailey waited for her.

"Act natural," she hissed.

The two women nodded in unison, and Jade instinctively trusted them not to say anything incriminating about her. She'd shared her story with them, and they would protect her. How she knew this, she couldn't say, but it was a lifeline, an anchor in the emotional storm that Ben brought into her life.

"Hello," he rumbled from beside the table. "Jade invited me to join you if you don't mind?"

"Not at all," Millie said.

"Nope," Hailey replied, giving him a big smile.

Jade made the introductions, and Ben slid onto the bench beside her. She froze. Oh man, she hadn't thought this through at all. But since Millie and Hailey occupied one side of the booth, there was nowhere else for Ben to sit but next to her. Their legs touched briefly before she had a chance to pull away. She breathed in, trying to calm her nerves, and watched him like a hawk for any sudden movements, keeping a steady distance between them.

Millie and Hailey took pity on her and carried the entire conversation without much participation from Jade. Ben was friendly and answered all their questions about the renovation with good humor, denying the presence of any ghosts in the old house.

"So what brings you back to Hidden Hollows?" Hailey asked. "I don't know many people who return once they've escaped."

Jade fidgeted in her seat, unsure whether the question, though aimed at Ben, was meant for her as well. She hadn't told the two women about her injury yet.

"My father had a health scare," Ben said, "and I thought it would be good to stay here for a while to see if he's recovering."

Jade was about to ask him for details when Millie's face lit up, and she waved at someone behind Jade's back. A moment later, the sheriff, Luke St. Clair, approached the table and leaned down to kiss Millie on the lips.

Hailey watched them with unabashed interest and clapped as he straightened. "Very romantic, Luke. Are you joining us?"

But Millie stood instead and picked up her purse. "No, we have to get going. Thanks for joining us tonight, Jade." She pointed at her.

"We're doing this again. Soon."

Jade laughed and agreed, and Millie was whisked away by her fiancé.

Hailey lifted her eyebrows. "You want to get another drink, or should we head out as well?"

Jade checked her phone. "I have class in the morning, so we better go. Thanks for inviting me here."

Ben watched them with a curious expression, silent beside her. They flagged down the waitress and paid, and Jade tried to avoid nudging Ben as they slid out of the booth. Ben said good-night to the woman Millie had greeted earlier, and got a nod in reply. He held the door open for Jade and Hailey, and stopped outside the tavern with them.

"Where's your car?" he asked suddenly, looking around the parking lot.

Jade buttoned up her jacket; the late September evening had grown cold, heralding the first frost of the year. The scent of leaves and mulch was thick in the air, and she breathed in deeply, enjoying it. Fall was her favorite season of the year, and this night had been wonderful. She was full of good food accompanied by a beer, so she was feeling mellow and happy.

She wasn't even tense anymore now that Ben was a safe distance away from her.

"Hailey gave me a ride," she told him.

"Oh." Ben was silent for a moment, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. "I can drive you home."

Jade glanced at Hailey, and the other woman winked at her.

"It's no problem," she said. "I can drive Jade. It's not a long detour for me."

At that moment, Jade decided that Hailey was the best person in the world. She could have easily thrown Jade under the bus and left her with Ben. But she'd stuck with her. That was what real friends did. Even though they'd only just started to get to know each other, Jade was sure this was the first link in an unbreakable bond that would grow in the future.

But Hailey was also tired, and it didn't make sense for her to drive across town if Ben lived right next door to Jade.

"I'll go with Ben," she announced, proud that her voice didn't waver one bit.

Hailey lifted her eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

"Yep," Jade said. "It's fine."

She hugged Hailey and thanked her again for the lovely evening, then followed Ben to his big truck. He held the door open for her as she climbed up into the cabin and closed it carefully behind her. The truck was clean, with no clutter on the seats or the floor, and it smelled of sawdust and paint. Jade supposed this was a typical scent for someone who renovated houses, but it surprised her how pleasant it was. She could get used to smelling this.

No. That wasn't why she was in Ben's truck. He was giving her a ride home because he was a decent person and her neighbor, which was how things were done in small towns. Everyone knew their neighbors, and they helped each other out.

The truck dipped as Ben got in on the other side and started the engine. Jade clenched her hands in her lap, frantically thinking of something to say so the silence between them wouldn't get awkward. She wanted to apologize for skipping out on him earlier, but then maybe he wasn't really worried about that, and her mentioning it would only make it weirder.

Finally, she settled on a different tactic. "Is your dad doing better now?"

Ben kept his gaze on the road. "Yeah. But he's being difficult too." He drew in a breath, then added, "He had a heart attack a month ago, and he's refusing to follow his diet plan. His blood pressure is through the roof, and we just learned that he's got type 2 diabetes. I don't really know how to fix him."

She blew out a breath. "Oh. I'm so sorry to hear that."

She didn't know his father personally because he'd retired from his janitorial position just weeks after she'd arrived at the high school.

"Thanks," Ben said. "It's, uh, nice to tell someone who's not involved in the whole mess. And I'm sorry if I've been curt with you at

any point. I'm not the best company these days."

She shook her head. "No, you haven't. I get it, really."

He offered her a brief, tired smile, then focused back on the road to take a turn onto the long street leading to their neighborhood. Jade studied his profile. He had a small mole on one cheekbone, and it made her like him even more. It somehow humanized him, showed that his handsome face was imperfect in this small way. The more she looked at him, the more she noticed little details that she wanted to explore and memorize: the straight line of his nose, the proud slant of his eyebrows, the tiny web of laugh lines at the corner of his eye.

Aware that she was staring, she turned her gaze out the window at the houses and trees passing by. The people of Hidden Hollows were turning in for the night. Windows glowed yellow with welcoming light, and Jade wished, not for the first time, that she had someone to come home to. Someone to watch TV with. Someone to chat with at the end of a difficult day.

She swallowed down the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her and focused on Ben. "So you're staying in town for a while?" she asked.

She didn't mean for it to sound hopeful—or worse, needy—but she wanted to know. If Ben was leaving in a couple of weeks, there was no use getting attached to him. No use exploring that spark of attraction she'd felt in the bar earlier.

He grimaced. "I'm not sure yet. There's work for sure, and my dad's made it clear he wants me to be here, but... I don't know, returning here brings back so many memories."

Jade clenched her jaw, then forced herself to relax. Surely he wasn't talking about her and their brief high school drama. "Oh?" she said.

Ben shot her a look, then faced the road again. "Yeah. My father's house, the diner—nothing's changed, you know?"

She did know, so she nodded. But she hoped that she'd changed, for the better, in the past decade. "Some people have changed, though," she remarked. "I didn't know Hailey and Millie before."

“Why did you return, Jade?” Ben asked suddenly. His voice had acquired an edge of urgency, and when he looked at her again, he was frowning. “You were on a fast track out of here.”

Jade thought of giving him a brief, non-committal answer. *I like it here. I grew tired of the big city. I just love teaching high school students how to play an instrument their parents picked out for them.* They would be half-truths, shallow replies that she could give a neighbor who got a little too nosy.

But something held her back. Ben deserved better, and she wanted to offer him more. He’d shared his problems with her, and she was grateful for his trust. She wanted more of it, more of him.

“I had an accident,” she said, keeping her voice level. “In Nashville.”

Ben

Ben stopped the car, wishing the drive to Jade's house was longer. He cut the engine and shifted in his seat to face her. Would she escape without telling him the story? He'd shared something of his own in the hopes of getting her to open up, but now that they were here, she had a way out.

He waited patiently, watching her. For a long moment, she studied him, then a determined expression came over her face, and she clenched her hands tight in her lap.

"I was returning home from a concert," she began, "when I was mugged."

Ben's eyebrows snapped together in a scowl. "What?"

She lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug. "There were two men wearing masks. I couldn't identify them later, and I only saw that one of them had blue eyes. They were after my purse. I don't think they were targeting me, specifically, I just happened to walk past."

"That's terrible." Ben ached to reach out to her, but she held herself so stiffly, he was afraid she'd bolt if he touched her arm.

She gave him a small smile. "Yeah. That's not the worst part, though. One of them took my purse, but the other went for my vio-

lin case.” Her voice trembled slightly. “I don’t know why, but the only thing I could think of was, ‘Not my violin. This is my life.’ And I held on to it so hard the man broke two fingers on my left hand as he tried to pull it away from me.”

She laughed, the sound harsh and shaky. “Of course, if I’d let go, it would have been better. The instrument was replaceable. It turns out my fingers were more valuable. One of the fractures was complicated, and they had to put a screw in.”

Holding out her left hand, she stretched the fingers out. Without thinking, Ben took her hand and turned it over between his palms. A small scar marred the knuckle of her index finger, but there were no other markings to show what had happened.

Jade’s palm was so warm and soft in his, only the tips of her fingers were callused over from violin strings. Ben studied them, thumbing one after another. These were the real proof of her hard work.

At her gasp, he looked up. Jade was staring down at their hands, her lush mouth parted slightly, and he wanted to kiss her so badly, his heartbeat sped up in anticipation. But he couldn’t—he couldn’t ruin this moment. She was finally opening up to him, and there was no way he was going to wreck it by giving in to his instinct.

“How long did it take you to heal?” he asked instead, still keeping a hold on her.

Jade’s fingers clenched around his hand. “Almost a full year. I was functional pretty fast, but for violin playing, fine motor skills are crucial. I was on leave from the orchestra, so they’d had to find someone to replace me. My mobility was just not perfect enough.” Her throat worked as she swallowed. “And I was scared of going out at night,” she whispered.

Ben moved slowly, giving her plenty of time to retreat if she wanted to. He shuffled closer to her on the wide seat of his truck and leaned over the center console to pull her into a hug. She went with it and slid her arms around him, under his jacket, fisting his sweater tight. He brought her to his chest and held on, his chin resting on top of her head. She smelled great, and he felt almost guilty for noticing

how soft her body was against his; this was supposed to be a comforting hug.

The moment she released him, he let her move back, missing the feel of her already.

"Thanks," she croaked, then cleared her throat. "I needed that."

Ben grinned. "Anytime."

Silence stretched between them, sort of awkward but not entirely unpleasant.

"So, is this why you returned to Hidden Hollows?" he asked at last. "Because you lost your job and wanted a safer town to live in?"

"Wow, thanks for putting it bluntly," she retorted, though she didn't really seem affronted. "No, actually, I quit. My mobility is back now, and I could have returned to Nashville if I wanted to."

"But you don't?" Ben pushed.

She glanced out the window toward her dark house. "I don't know. This place kind of grows on you." Then she rubbed her forehead. "Of course, now I might have to leave it for another reason. My position at the high school is being cut back, so I'll have to find another job. And there aren't many job opportunities for a concert violinist in Hidden Hollows."

"Yeah." Ben's mind worked furiously. "So, you're leaving soon?"

Why did the thought of that fill him with panic if *he* was the one who was planning on leaving in just a couple of months?

"I have no idea," Jade said. "There's a chance I'll get to audition for an orchestra in Asheville. It's not a permanent position, and it certainly wouldn't be full-time. So I'm not sure how it'll all turn out."

She was on the cusp of a change, just like him. She'd have to decide whether she wished to remain in Hidden Hollows or not, and for some reason, Ben had to hold back his urge to convince her to stay. Before he blurted out anything crazy, he needed to decide on a course for himself. And make sure that Jade was actually interested in pursuing whatever *this* was between them.

And was he interested in pursuing it?

Ben stared at Jade, suddenly certain of the answer. Yes, he wanted to see whether the old attraction between them was still there.

The crush he'd had on her in high school was morphing into something more mature, more defined, and he thought Jade felt the same. She might not be on the same page as him—she'd bolted from her house like a startled deer earlier that day—but she returned his hug just now, so maybe she was just slow getting there. In any case, Ben wanted to find out.

As though Jade heard his thoughts, she put her hand on the door handle. "Okay, thanks for the ride," she said and pushed the door open. Then she paused and sent a shy look his way. "And, you know, for the talk and the hug."

Ben grinned. "Like I said, you're welcome anytime. See you, Jade."

She hopped down from the truck and gave him a little wave. Ben waited until she was safe behind the door before leaving—not that anything preyed on her in this small town. Then he parked the car beside his trailer and sat in his folding chair in the dark, looking up at the crescent moon that was half-hidden by the clouds.

Stars peeked through the gaps, and Ben thought that this wasn't the worst view in the world. It wouldn't be hard to see himself settling here, buying a nice house and renovating it, or maybe starting from scratch for once. Or maybe he could keep *this* house and fill it with a big family.

He stared at the looming Victorian, imagining small kids sitting on the porch steps, licking popsicles. There'd be at least one dog, too. And a certain dark-haired beauty who played the violin so well, his soul wept every time he heard her.

Ben dragged a palm over his face. He was getting ahead of himself. He should ask Jade out on a date first, see if she was even interested. The dogs and the kids would come much later.

If he had her by his side, he wouldn't mind settling down at all. And wouldn't that make his father happy? The itinerant lifestyle Ben had led until then was fun, but he'd come to realize that he was missing friends. And family, not that he had many family members left. Remaining here would be good for him, but he was worried that he'd miss the road, the challenge of starting over in a new place every couple of months.

He sighed and pushed himself up from the chair. He had a lot of work to complete tomorrow, including sourcing the timber for Jade's fence. And she'd likely wake him up at the crack of dawn with another heart-rending piece of music.

Ben grinned. He was already looking forward to it.

Jade

By five p.m. the following day, Jade's nerves were severely frayed, so she was making pumpkin bread. It was the ultimate comfort bake, filling her house with a delicious aroma and easy enough to make that she didn't *really* have to pay attention to it. Which was great, because her mind was a thousand miles away.

She'd just received a call from her mother, and it hadn't gone well. When her parents had moved to Florida, they'd settled in their neighborhood, making friends with all the locals and participating in various events. That meant more gossiping opportunities for her mother and new chess buddies for her father, so they were both happy as clams.

It also meant that Jade had to listen to her mother's litany of facts on their neighbor's daughter, Clarissa, who was making six figures as a lifestyle blogger in Miami. Why couldn't Jade find a profitable career where she was invited to fancy influencer conferences? Why did she leave Nashville in the first place? And why did she have to teach music at a small high school instead of playing on stage like she used to?

It had taken all of Jade's patience to get through that whiny conversation without snapping at her mother. She was happy for Clarissa, who seemed to have her life all figured out, but Jade would rather claw her eyes out than bare her intimate life to strangers on the internet. And she didn't even think of telling her mother that her job was in jeopardy. She'd keep that close to her chest until she was sure of her next step.

The call had come on top of her difficult conversation with her jazz band kids—she'd had to tell them that the funding was being cut and that she'd do her best to keep teaching them. Julie, her favorite student, burst into tears, claiming that she would never get into the New England Conservatory, the school she'd set her sights on, without Jade's guidance. It had taken Jade the better part of an hour to calm down the sensitive teenager, and she promised her private lessons if that was what it took.

Then she called the artistic director from Asheville during her lunch break and arranged for an audition the following week. All in all, she was a nervous wreck, and pumpkin bread was the perfect way to self-medicate.

When the loaf was cooling on the rack, however, Jade realized it was too large for her to eat alone. She could freeze half for another rainy day...or she could take some to Ben.

She discarded the idea at first—it was too obvious, too cliché, to go over to his trailer, bearing baked goods. This was the twenty-first century, after all. But the longer the loaf sat there, spreading its mouth-watering aroma around her kitchen, the more Jade wanted to share it with him.

He'd been so nice to her the previous evening. That hug had been excellent. She should have known he'd be a great hugger with that broad chest and strong arms. He'd comforted her in a moment when she'd desperately needed it and listened to her with great attention. He'd even gone out of his way to disturb her as little as possible, and had used her shower while she was at work. He was a good person, and she wanted to do something nice for him.

That decided it. Grabbing a plastic container, she cut the still-warm loaf in half and covered it with a clean kitchen towel. Then she

shoved her feet into the rubber boots waiting by the back door and strode toward his property before she changed her mind.

But when she arrived at the fence, she found she couldn't squeeze through the gap between the posts anymore. There weren't any gaps to be seen. She stared at the fixed section of the fence in wonder. Ben must have worked through the entire morning to get so much done. Jade turned to the road and did a detour around the fence, entering his yard via the driveway. She didn't hear any noise coming from the house, so she headed for the trailer instead. If Ben wasn't home, she'd leave the pumpkin bread there for him to find, hoping some enterprising animal wouldn't get to it first.

The grass was wet from last night's rain, and she was glad she put on her boots. She rounded the house and found Ben sitting on the steps of his trailer with a cup of coffee clutched between his hands. He seemed tired but content to be enjoying the autumn sunshine.

"Hey," he greeted her, straightening.

"Hi," Jade replied. "I saw the fence. You work fast."

His crooked grin suddenly turned playful. "I thought of stretching out the task so I'd get more showers out of our deal," he said. "But I got the feeling you didn't want me in your house yesterday, so I thought I'd hurry up and be done with it."

He said it without any real rancor in his voice—he was teasing her. But Jade still cringed at his words.

"I'm so sorry about that," she said honestly. "Look, an apology gift."

She thrust the pumpkin bread at him. Ben set down his cup and took it from her, then lifted the edge of the tea towel and sniffed.

"Wow, pumpkin." His gray eyes glittered. "Thank you."

Jade tugged at the hem of her sweater. "It's no big deal." She didn't know where to look, but she needed to get the real apology out. "I didn't mean to run out on you. It's just... You made me nervous."

Ben studied her in that infuriatingly calm way he had about him. "I make you nervous?"

A flush started at Jade's neck, working its way up to her cheeks. Ben's intense gaze warmed her entire body, and though she was anxious, the sensation wasn't altogether unpleasant. No, she wished she knew what she was doing, but she liked this. She was enjoying Ben's company, and she wanted *more*.

"Yeah," she said at last, lifting her chin. "You do."

Maybe honesty was the best policy. Or maybe Ben would see right through her and reject her. The possibility was terrifying—it had been a long time since she'd put herself out there in such a blatant way.

He stared at her a moment longer, then asked, "Would you like a tour of the house?"

Jade hadn't expected this, but she agreed anyway. She'd been curious about his renovation work, and as he led her to the front porch, she walked close enough to him that their hands brushed accidentally. A current of anticipation shot through her, and judging by Ben's heated look, he felt it as well.

Still, he took her through the house, showed her the bedrooms, and explained how he'd envisioned the kitchen. The work he'd already completed was amazing, all neat lines and fresh materials, and she could see the new image of the house slowly taking shape around them.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

Ben grinned at her, his eyes shining with pride. It was clear how much he loved his work, and he was good at it. The sheer competence needed to completely redo a house like this was inspiring.

They returned to his trailer, where they'd left the pumpkin bread cooling on his small countertop in the kitchenette. Jade reluctantly took a step back—she'd intruded enough on his time, and it hadn't been her intention to take up half his afternoon. She'd only wanted to drop off the pumpkin bread for him.

"Do you want some coffee and a slice of this?" Ben asked.

The invitation was simple, and he could have meant it in an entirely friendly way. If Ben wasn't her former crush, if her heart didn't speed up every time he was near, this would have been a completely different situation. Now, however, Jade could only nod because

words escaped her. Ben's expression went from intense to something more intimate, and she felt heat rising in her cheeks again.

She glanced at the two lawn chairs in front of the trailer, but Ben's words stopped her.

"They're wet," he said. "I forgot to bring them inside yesterday. You can sit here."

He pointed at the steps of the trailer, then left her to fetch her a cup of coffee. Jade perched on the edge of the step, hugging her knees as she waited for him. A minute later, he appeared behind her and lowered himself next to her. Their sides were flush with each other, and the warmth of him was sheer torture. Jade wanted to lean into him, absorb that heat through her skin, and just get as close as possible...

"This is delicious," Ben said around a mouthful of pumpkin bread.

Jade realized he was holding out her cup and plate, so she took them quickly to cover her embarrassment. He wasn't freaking out like her, which probably meant she'd misinterpreted his cues. He was her *neighbor*, for crying out loud. There was no need to make a fool of herself over him.

Ben worked his way through the slice of pumpkin bread, then set down the empty plate. Jade wordlessly offered him her piece—she was too worked up to eat—and he finished that too. Then he turned to her, and Jade's breath caught in her throat.

"This was amazing," Ben said, his voice a quiet rumble. "Thank you."

Jade nodded, staring up at him with no idea what to say. She was caught by his silvery gaze, and she couldn't have moved away if she wanted to. But she didn't want that. Her entire being ached to be closer to Ben, to feel those lips on hers, to feel his strong arms close around her.

Ben searched her eyes for a moment, then slowly dipped his head and kissed her. Jade kept her eyes wide open, unwilling to miss this, uncertain whether it was really happening. Or was it a product of her overactive imagination? But no, Ben grinned at her, slanted his

head to the side, and pressed his lips to hers again, and this time, her eyelids fluttered closed on their own.

Oh man, he knew how to kiss. His lips tasted of coffee and sugar, and he cupped her cheek with one rough, warm palm, lifting her chin to change the angle of their kiss. Jade pressed her hands to his chest first, then slid them back to clutch at the nape of his neck, where she speared her fingers into his hair. It was soft and thick, and when she pulled lightly, trying to get closer to him, Ben made a tortured sound in his throat that spurred her on.

Ben broke the kiss, and Jade stared at him, elation and shock mixing inside her. This was *fantastic*, and she regretted that they hadn't worked out as teenagers: she could have been enjoying his kisses for the past decade. Or maybe he would have ruined her for all boys to come, and she would never have found anyone like him.

She wanted more of his kisses now, again and again. Ben must have sensed something about her intent from her expression because he laughed and traced her lips with the pad of his thumb before pressing a hard, quick kiss to her mouth.

"I want to take you out on a date," he said.

His voice was a little rough, and Jade felt his heartbeat through his shirt, where her palm was still pressed to his chest.

"Okay," she whispered. "I'd like that."

"Yeah?"

Ben's smile was so happy she couldn't help but grin right back. This man. He was amazing, and whatever happened between them in the past didn't even matter.

"Yes," she replied. "When?"

"I'll make a reservation and let you know." He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "I'm really looking forward to it."

They remained on the steps of his trailer until the sun disappeared behind the trees, and the evening turned too cold for sitting outside in just their sweaters.

"Thank you for the pumpkin bread," he said as he hugged her goodbye.

She squeezed him tight, then looked up at him. "I promise I won't run away again if you come to shower while I'm at home."

Something hot and wicked lit up his eyes, and Jade's heartbeat kicked up a notch at the way he looked at her. He kissed her again, his arm a steel band at her back, his other hand cupping her chin in that absolutely perfect way that she loved.

They broke apart, breathing hard, and Jade walked away on unsteady feet. She couldn't wait for their date. For the first time that day, she was grinning so hard, her cheeks hurt. This was the beginning of something wonderful, and she was so, so happy that she'd opened up to Ben. Now she knew that it had been worth it.

Jade

The days following their kiss passed in a blur of work. Jade barely had time to say hello to Ben, who had a full team of workers doing dangerous work on the roof. She waved to him from her front stoop before rushing out for afternoon rehearsals for one of the bands she mentored. The kids were beginning to prepare for the school's annual Christmas show, even though it was more than two months until the event.

Then Ben texted her to let her know that he'd made dinner reservations for Wednesday at Chez Villiers, the only fancy restaurant in town, and Jade's happiness expanded like a helium balloon until she felt as though she was floating through her days. Nothing could touch her joy, not even the thought of her audition coming up on Friday.

When she visited Millie's bakery for some bagels and cookies, the baker narrowed her eyes at her and came out from around the counter to talk.

"Something's changed since the last time I saw you," she whispered.

The bakery was full of people, and Millie's employee was busy filling paper bags with fragrant buns and loaves of crusty bread.

Jade appreciated her friend's discretion, and she answered quietly, even though she wanted to shout her feelings from the rooftops. "Ben asked me out."

Millie grabbed her hands. "Ah! I'm so happy for you!"

Jade grinned at her. "And we may or may not have kissed."

Millie gasped. "Hailey and I demand details. We can meet on Friday, and you can tell us all about it."

"I'll be in Asheville on Friday for an audition," Jade said. "But I could do Saturday if you're free."

She was happy to have someone to share the news with. She trusted that Millie and Hailey wouldn't tell anyone until she and Ben were ready to announce their relationship. On some level, Jade was aware that it was too soon to talk about a relationship of any sort. They'd only shared a couple of kisses and had never even been out on a date, but she felt this was *it*. Ben was amazing, and she had such a great feeling about this.

"I'll talk to Hailey and let you know," Millie promised her.

On Wednesday afternoon, Jade showered and washed her hair way before it was time to meet Ben. He'd offered to pick her up, and she'd said yes—it was exactly how she wanted their first date to go.

She picked out an outfit that was special enough for dinner at a nice restaurant but didn't scream *too much* in any way: a deep violet dress with long lacy sleeves and a pair of black stilettos that made her legs look extra long. The dress hit at the knee, showing just the right amount of skin, and she paired it with a cute jacket and long silver earrings. She even managed to replicate Hailey's magic hairdo to some extent, and put on just a touch of makeup—without using lipstick, because she was hoping for another kiss tonight.

An hour before Ben was supposed to pick her up, however, her phone lit up with a text from him.

I'm so sorry. Work came up. Running late. Meet you there?

Jade's excitement deflated a notch, but it wasn't a big deal. She could drive herself, no problem. She didn't intend to drink much,

anyway, and she could change her driving shoes for her pumps in the car when she arrived at the restaurant.

Then she had a fabulous idea. Checking the time, she grabbed her clutch and hurried out the door. She rushed to the car, glancing back toward the Williams house, but Ben was nowhere to be seen. It was just as well. She didn't want him to see her and discover her plan.

Jade drove to Born and Bread and stopped at the curb. She hoped the sheriff or one of his officers wouldn't fine her for her terrible parking, but she didn't think even a ticket could dampen her mood. Hurrying inside, she ordered an assortment of cute, colorful petit fours from Millie's assistant.

She and Ben could skip dessert at the restaurant and return to her house after dinner. Even though she was very much looking forward to their meal, she worried that their conversation might not be completely relaxed in a public setting. She didn't intend for Ben to spend the night after their first date, but some pastries and cup of tea sounded just perfect. Jade placed the cake box on the seat next to her and sighed happily. This night was going to be amazing.

She entered Chez Villiers a couple of minutes early and was seated at a table near the window that overlooked the back garden of the restaurant. She imagined the terrace would be beautiful in the summer, but she was glad their table was inside tonight. The waiter brought her water and a menu, but she told him she'd rather wait for her date.

Minutes ticked by, and Jade resisted the urge to check her phone. The owner of the restaurant, Louis, stopped by to chat with her. It turned out he was Julie's uncle, and he brought her a complimentary appetizer plate because she was his niece's favorite teacher.

This was nice, and it helped her pass the time, but Ben was nowhere to be seen. With every glance toward the front door, more doubt trickled in, even though Jade tried very hard not to think the worst of him.

When he was running ten minutes late, Jade sent him a text that went unanswered. At twenty minutes past the hour, she tried calling him but only got his voicemail. Worry gnawed at her—maybe some-

thing happened to his dad? After mulling the issue over for another ten minutes, she picked up her phone again and found the number for the Hidden Hollows ER online. The kind nurse who answered the phone told her no one by the name of Charles had been admitted to the hospital that night.

Jade thanked her quietly and hung up, relieved, but also angry. If it wasn't a medical emergency, the least he could have done was call her and reschedule. Once more, she tried to call him but couldn't get a hold of him. She didn't leave a message. Instead, she left two ten-dollar bills on the table as a tip, even though she hadn't actually ordered anything, and left with her head held high.

She felt the weight of the other patrons' stares on her and knew it was painfully clear to everyone that she'd been stood up. Her throat was tight, and it hurt by the time she reached her car, but she didn't burst into tears.

She should have known. This was exactly what would have happened if she'd gone through with senior prom. She would have arrived there, and Ben would have left her waiting. Ten years later, she'd fallen for the same trick.

Maybe something did come up with work. The voice of reason in her head had a point, but that was no excuse. He should have called her, even if something happened. And he shouldn't have chosen work over her in the first place. She deserved better.

Men didn't change, not really. Maybe Hailey's husband was the exception to the rule, but Ben wasn't.

Jade drove home through the dusk, feeling empty and eerily calm. The Williams house was dark, a hulking black shape against the indigo evening sky. Jade turned her back on it and rushed to her house, where she threw away the box of pastries she'd bought earlier, pulled down her small suitcase, and threw in a haphazard collection of clothing and toiletry items. Then she phoned the hotel in Asheville where she'd booked for the following night and asked whether they had a room available for her a night early. She changed into jeans and a t-shirt, coaxed Felix into a cat carrier, sent an email to the principal's office that she was taking a personal day to audition, and left Hidden Hollows behind.

Ben

Ben glanced at the clock on his truck's dashboard and cursed. He was almost two hours late meeting Jade, and the chances that she'd waited for him were getting slimmer by the minute. As it was, he was still dressed in his damp work clothes, his old-jeans-and-henley look complete with heavy-duty steel-capped boots and enough dirt to clog a washing machine.

And blood. Ben couldn't forget the blood. It added a certain dangerous vibe to the ensemble.

The entire thing would have been funny if it wasn't for the fact that he'd missed his date with Jade. The blood wasn't his—the plumber who'd come to the Williams house to redo the plumbing had bled on him. Now Ben was going to barge into the fanciest restaurant in Hidden Hollows looking like he'd come off a horror show set.

He'd been working with the plumber most of the day, laying down new pipes for the kitchen and three bathrooms. The plumber had arrived late without an apology, which would have been enough for Ben to dismiss him under normal circumstances. But he wanted

to have the house ready for the market before the ground froze and prevented him from doing the pipework.

Still, the man was friendly and kept up a steady stream of chatter without needing much input from Ben. This was good because Ben was too distracted by the thought of dinner with Jade to be much use in a conversation. But it was nice having someone work alongside him, and Ben thought he might find a permanent crew member if he decided to remain in Hidden Hollows.

The thought stopped him dead in his tracks. He hadn't given any conscious thought to his plans for the future, but at some point, they'd all started to involve Jade. And since she was here, it made sense that he would make his home here as well. The added bonus was that he could stay close to his father, see him recover. Maybe they could go fishing in the spring, and Ben could fix up his dad's house on the weekends.

He had to drag his thoughts to the work at hand over and over, but ultimately it wasn't his lack of focus that caused the accident. He and the plumber had gone to open up the main water pipe on Jade's side of the fence to test it, and Ben had insisted on them both putting on safety goggles. That had been when he'd texted Jade, and it was supposed to be the last task on their to-do list for the day. He'd hated putting her off like that, but he still needed to clean up and change into something presentable before their date.

The second the plumber turned the valve, the water tore through the rusted metal, and chunks of pipe flew out, along with a heavy stream of water. It had taken them the best part of an hour to get the water shut down, and by that time, the lawn around them was nothing but churned-up mud. Then Ben took one look at the man beside him and saw blood trickling down his face. Not a small, manageable amount of blood, either. All head wounds bled a lot, but Ben knew instantly that this one needed stitches.

He tried calling Jade. He took the phone from his pocket—and learned that it was dead, damaged by the water. The gushing from the pipe had soaked him through, and Ben had no hope of turning on the phone anytime soon. Jade's windows were dark, so she wasn't at home, and besides, the plumber needed medical attention.

So he drove the man to the small ER on the other side of town and left him in the tender care of the nurses. Then he raced to Chez Villiers, hoping against hope to catch Jade there.

But he knew it was a lost cause. Scanning the parking lot for her small car, he tripped over his feet and nearly face-planted on the front stoop of the restaurant. He pulled the door open and found himself in front of a short, plump man with an impressive mustache.

"I'm here for the Charles reservation," he babbled, running a hand through his hair in a hopeless effort to get the damp, sticky strands to look presentable. "I'm, uh, late."

At his words, the older man drew himself up. "So you're the fool who stood up Miss Marshall."

Ben opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. The man wasn't wrong.

"Yes," he admitted finally. "I'm sorry, but is she still here?"

The man snorted. "You think you're worth waiting for?"

Again, Ben was left wordless. Was he worth waiting for? He certainly hoped so, but the fact was that he was almost two hours late, and no woman would have waited for him that long, alone in a restaurant.

"I'm sorry," he said, even though he didn't owe this man an apology. "I tried to make it."

"You should have tried harder." The man's blue eyes were ice-cold and implacable.

"You know what?" Ben's temper exploded. "You don't know me. You have no right to judge me. Now, will you please tell me when she left?"

The man's mustache quivered. "I know she was hurt, and that's enough for me. She's a good woman. She waited for almost an hour, and if you ask me, that's sixty minutes too long."

An hour. Ben's guts twisted painfully at the idea of her sitting alone in a restaurant, checking her phone to see whether he'd texted. Shame rose inside him in a sickening wave. No house, no plumbing was worth putting her through this, and he should have dismissed the plumber and asked him to return the next day instead of pushing on with the work.

"I'm going to try and make it right," he vowed to this stranger. "And then I'm going to bring her here again so she can tell you all about it herself, okay?"

The man looked slightly mollified, but he still glowered at Ben and said, "I'll believe it when I see it."

"Right." Ben tapped the counter. "Thanks."

He ran outside and started his car. Where would Jade have gone after she'd left Chez Villiers? *Home, for sure*, he thought. It was her safe space, and she would have wanted to be alone.

Ben stepped on the gas and sped toward their little corner of Hidden Hollows. He tried to think of an apology, of words to say for her to forgive him, but nothing came to mind. In the end, he figured he'd just beg her to give him another chance.

The boxy house she'd inherited from her grandparents was dark, however. No lights shone in the darkness, and when Ben rang the doorbell, Jade didn't answer. He tried the back door as well, but it was no use. It wasn't late enough for her to be asleep. She simply wasn't home. Ben peered through the back door window and didn't even see her cat. Now he thought about it, her car was missing as well.

Where had she gone?

He pulled his phone from his pocket, then remembered it was broken. Swallowing a curse, he returned to his trailer to change from his stained clothes. It was too late now to grab a new phone—all the shops were closed.

It was no use. He wouldn't be able to get to her tonight, but he'd turn over every stone in Hidden Hollows tomorrow to find her and apologize.

Still, as he lay in his narrow bed, staring at the ceiling, he couldn't shake the feeling of guilt. He hoped he didn't blow things with Jade. But surely she'd give him another chance?

Rest didn't come easily that night, and he woke up after only a couple of hours of fitful sleep the next morning. Groggy and tired, he boiled water for coffee, scalded the roof of his mouth with the hot brew, and was out of the trailer ten minutes later, heading straight for the supermarket.

They didn't have iPhones, but he bought a cheap prepaid phone anyway and stuck in his SIM card. The crappy device loaded for ages, and he sat in his car, watching the little circling icon with building impatience. The moment his contacts loaded, he found Jade's number and called her.

She didn't pick up. Ben tried again, and her voicemail answered after what seemed like endless ringing.

"Jade, I'm sorry about yesterday. I should have quit working earlier. We had a date, and I made the wrong decision. But then a pipe burst, and I needed to take the plumber to the hospital." Ben closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Not that this is a good excuse for not being on time. I just wanted to apologize and maybe ask you out for coffee? I'd like to make it up to you."

For a moment, he paused, unsure how to finish his message. Then he added, "Anyway, please call me when you get this. Bye."

He wanted to blurt out something more, tell her that he missed her already, but it didn't seem right saying it over the phone without telling her face-to-face first. So he returned to the house and threw himself into work, waiting for her call. There was so much to do, and not just with the plumbing. Already, nights were getting colder, and he knew he needed to hurry if he wanted to have the house ready before winter.

Still, he kept checking his phone throughout the day. Jade didn't call him back, and when he caved around noon and sent her a text, she didn't reply either. By four o'clock, he was too agitated to even work—he didn't want to cause another accident. So he cleaned up, got in his car, and drove to Hailey's Hair Hut to speak with Jade's friend.

The hairstylist gave him a friendly smile when she saw him walk in. "Hi! Did you come in for a trim?" She glanced at his hair. "You'll have to come back in an hour, though."

Ben shook his head. "No, I'm looking for Jade, actually."

Hailey's smile dimmed a little. "Why would you be looking for her here?"

He palmed his neck, wondering how much to tell her. Had Jade confided in her friends, told them she was going on a date with him?

Hailey solved the issue for him by asking, "Didn't you go out with her last night?"

"Ah." Ben stepped closer, unwilling to let the woman with her hair in curlers listen in on their conversation. "Yeah. I mean. Something came up, so I couldn't..."

Jade's friend narrowed her eyes at him. "You mean you canceled?"

"It's complicated," Ben said impatiently. "But I can't get a hold of Jade, and I'm worried. She hasn't been home since last night, either."

That got Hailey's attention. "I'll give her a call. Wait here."

She disappeared into the back room of her salon, and Ben was left alone with Hailey's assistant and two female customers, all of whom watched him with unabashed interest. With his luck, the news of his visit would be all over the town by tomorrow.

Minutes later, Hailey reappeared. Her expression was so dark that Ben took an instinctual step back.

"Jade is fine," she announced. "But she won't be home tonight."

"Where is she?" he asked. "Why won't she talk to me?"

"I can't answer that," Hailey said, then motioned to the door. "If that's all...?"

She was throwing him out. What had Jade said to her?

Ben swallowed his pride and begged. "Look, if you'd just let me talk to her, I'll explain everything."

Hailey was short and had seemed friendly when he'd met her, but now she drew up to her full height and put her hands to her hips. "Jade is my friend, so I'm going to respect her wishes."

Ben straightened his shoulders and gave her a curt nod. "Fine. Thanks for your help."

He left the shop, acutely aware of the women's stares at his back. This was bad. Whatever Jade had told Hailey must have been awful for Hailey to react that way. Why wouldn't she even listen to him? It wasn't like he'd purposefully blown the pipe to make himself late for their date.

But you didn't put off work, either.

The snide voice inside his head was right, though. He should have paid more attention to Jade. Now, she was staying away from

her *home* to avoid him, it seemed, and if Ben thought his guilt was bad before, it ratcheted up to a whole new level now.

Finally, he drove to his father's house because he needed a distraction. Staying at home, cooped up in his trailer alone, didn't sound remotely inviting. Besides, it had been several days since he'd checked in with his father, and he'd decided he was going to make more of an effort.

His father was on the couch, eating cantaloupe chunks, while Betty was ironing his shirts. They were watching TV together, and the scene was so domestic, something in Ben's chest tightened at the sight. He was glad his father hadn't managed to chase the housekeeper away, and that she was strict enough with him. Nurse Dylan had also reported that his father was regularly taking his medicine and that they'd been on several walks together.

"Hey, Dad," Ben greeted. "Betty."

He flopped on the couch next to his father and covered his face with his hands. He'd get up in a minute and put some work in on the back porch, but he needed a moment to just unwind after the day he'd had.

The television sound cut off, and Ben lowered his hands to find Betty and his father staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"How was your date yesterday?" his father asked.

Ben snapped his head up. "How did you—" He stopped himself. "Of course. I should have known."

This was Hidden Hollows, and the gossip ran rampant, just like in any other small town.

"Well?" his dad prompted. "We heard..."

"That you left that poor woman sitting alone at Louis' place," Betty interjected. "Mrs. O'Dell heard it from Mr. Ricardi."

"Yeah." Ben had never been one to blush, but heat spread up his neck and to his face. "I couldn't make it, and my phone died, so..."

His father sat up on the couch. "You really just left her there? Ben, that's not how..." He paused, his face incredulous. "I admit I wasn't a great role model when it came to the ladies, but you don't treat a woman like that."

Coming here had been the worst idea of his life.

"I didn't *want* to stand her up. The pipe burst, and the plumber was injured, and my phone got soaked, so I couldn't even let her know."

"You could have called the restaurant from the hospital." Betty's pinched expression was accusing and disappointed.

Ben groaned and got up to pace. "I know. I realize that now. And I tried to apologize, to make it up to her, but she won't even speak to me. She's left home, and she's gone who knows where..."

Rationally, he knew only one day had passed, and that Jade would have to return home at some point. But he felt an urgency to make things right, to fix this. If he didn't, she might never know what he felt for her.

"Hmph," said Betty. "I don't blame her. Given your history, I'm surprised she even gave you a second chance."

Ben stopped and stared at her. "What?"

But the housekeeper clamped her lips together and focused back on her work. The shirt she was ironing was the last in the pile, so she hung it and put away the ironing board.

"Betty, please," Ben said. "What are you talking about? Help me out here."

She paused with the iron in her hand and stared at him for a long minute. Ben gazed back, unsure of the crimes for which he was judged. Was Betty referring to the time he'd asked Jade to prom? But she'd been the one to turn him down, not the other way around. He was aware of his father watching their exchange silently, and wished again he hadn't come here. Though if Betty knew something he didn't, this might not have been the worst decision.

The housekeeper finally seemed to reach a decision. "I don't think it's my story to tell," she said. "And it's not that I don't gossip. I do. I just try to keep it to..." She shook her head from side to side. "You know, the surface-level stuff. I'd never betray someone's secrets. I heard Miss Marshall tell her friends something that night when you saw me at Miller's. She was trusting her friends, and I'd be betraying that trust if I told you. Or that's how it seems to me, at least. Do you understand?"

Surprisingly, Ben did. He blew out a long breath. "Yeah. But what do I do? If she won't talk to me..."

Betty lifted one shoulder and looked at him sadly. "If you like her enough, you'll keep trying. And if she likes you enough, she might eventually give you a chance to explain."

With that, she turned and left the room. Ben turned to his father, who shrugged.

"I don't have better advice for you, Benji."

It was a nickname Ben hadn't heard in twenty years, and it brought home the fact that he'd managed to alienate every single person in his life. His throat tight, he sat beside his father on the couch and clenched his hands together.

"I'm sorry for being so hard on you, Dad," he murmured. "And for taking charge of your life. I treated you like a kid."

His father bumped his shoulder lightly. "Eh, I behaved like a kid, so you were well within your rights. But I've been talking with Nurse Dylan, and he gave me some good pointers for a healthier life that won't mean eating celery and nuts for the rest of my existence."

Ben chuckled. "That's good."

"Yeah. And I went to—" His father's words cut off, and his gray eyes filled with tears. "I, uh, went to my first AA meeting on Monday. They have them every week. I didn't have to speak or anything, I just listened to other folks talk about how drinking ruined their lives, and how they're better now that they're sober. And I thought, maybe, I could do this thing as well."

Ben put an arm around his dad's shoulders and squeezed. "For sure, Dad. And if you want me to go with you, just tell me. I'm here if you need me."

His father patted Ben's knee, and they sat together in silence for a long while. It was good, that human connection, and Ben found the pressure on his chest releasing, his breath coming easier.

"I'm going to be in Hidden Hollows for a while," he said, trying to keep his voice casual. "I'm thinking of keeping the old Victorian."

"Really?" His father's smile lit up his face. "Bit big for a single guy, don't you think?"

Ben got to his feet. "With any luck, I won't be single for long."

He needed to talk to Jade, now. And whatever their issues were, they could work through them. He would never prioritize work over her again, and he'd spend a lifetime convincing her that she was his number one.

"Good luck, then," his father said. "And if she takes you back, bring her round for dinner someday soon, okay?"

Ben left feeling lighter than he had for the past twenty-four hours. All he needed now was to locate the woman so he could apologize and let her know how he felt about her. Then everything would work itself out.

Jade

Jade's audition for the Asheville City Theater went great. She'd done so well, in fact, that she received a call from Martin Horowitz, the artistic director, a scant half-hour after she left him and the rest of the orchestra members who'd participated at her presentation. He offered her a part-time position starting in November that would mean rehearsals three times a week and a concert at least every weekend, with more shows scheduled during festivals and the holiday season.

Jade accepted.

Of course she did—the energy of the orchestra had been amazing, and she was looking forward to playing for an audience again. This was what she'd trained for, what her life's dreams had all been.

She spent the rest of Thursday exploring Asheville, had lunch at a lovely bistro downtown, then took a tour of Biltmore, America's largest home, which featured a fantastic mansion and beautiful grounds. She wandered through the vast gardens while golden autumn sun warmed her skin, and marveled at the exotic plants in the Conservatory greenhouse.

All the while, her enjoyment was dimmed because her thoughts kept returning to Ben, and by the end of the day, she was even angrier at him than she was before. Hailey had called her out of the blue, concerned about her, and Jade told her the bare minimum of what had happened.

I had a date with Ben planned. He didn't show. I'm a fool for giving him a second chance.

Hailey had assured her that she wasn't a fool, and that Ben was a jerk for letting her down. She assured Jade that she wouldn't be giving him any information on her whereabouts, and Jade was beyond thankful for that. She and Hailey agreed on a girls' night out for the following week, and that was the thought that kept her going. Life would go on even though she was heartbroken.

And she was. Her heart was severely bruised, though she hadn't even noticed when the silly organ had gotten involved in the entire affair. It would have been so much easier if Ben had been just another guy she'd agreed to date. But no—everything about him reminded her of her first crush and her first heartbreak.

So she tried her best to fall in love with Asheville instead. The city was a forty-minute drive from Hidden Hollows, but that didn't mean she had to commute to work. She could move here, find another part-time job in music that would supplement her orchestra salary, and leave that cursed small town behind.

And Asheville was a beautiful city. It wasn't large by any standards, which appealed to her. It had all the amenities of a big community, the culture, the anonymity, the shops. But it also wasn't as large as Nashville or other big, crowded cities, and it didn't seem to have the dark underbelly she was so afraid of, even two years after the Nashville incident. She could envision herself living here. In a city this size, she might even feel safe.

But she'd be alone all over again.

Of course, she wouldn't have Ben even if she remained in Hidden Hollows. But she'd finally made some friends, and she liked most of her coworkers at the school. The principal was a wonderful boss, and Jade would miss her students. Yet perhaps most of all, she would miss the quaint little town that had—in its own strange way

—helped her get back on her feet when she'd reached the lowest point of her life.

She realized, with a bone-deep certainty, that she would be making a colossal mistake if she moved away just to escape Ben. He wouldn't even be her neighbor for long. The nature of his work was such that he would finish the Williams house, sell it, and move on. He'd told her himself that he didn't intend on staying in Hidden Hollows. She really shouldn't have pinned any hopes on the man.

She spent the night at the hotel in Asheville, then had breakfast at a lovely coffee shop not far from the theater. Making a note of the place, she decided to return there on her rehearsal days. Their red velvet cupcakes rivaled Millie's, and that was saying something.

She drove home with pop music blasting through her car speakers. Jade loved her classical music, of course, but heartbreak and anger called for some good old Kelly Clarkson. The drive was gorgeous, with russet-colored trees lining both sides of the freeway. Fall had truly arrived, and Jade thought it might be time to visit a pumpkin patch to decorate the house. And bake more pumpkin bread.

The thought of pumpkin bread immediately reminded her of Ben, however, and a fresh wave of pain swamped her, tears threatening to cloud her vision. She dashed them away with the back of her hand and sniffled. It would take her a while to get over him. That was okay, but she wished she had a magic wand to undo the damage she'd caused herself by letting him into her heart again. Because it *was* her fault. She'd known exactly what she was getting into, and she plunged head-first anyway.

And all she'd gotten out of it was a magical first kiss. The fact was that she would measure all men against Benjamin Charles for the foreseeable future, and she wasn't at all sure any of them would ever come close to being better than him.

A Mariah Carey song came on next, so Jade jabbed at the radio buttons until a fast indie song came on. She wasn't going to mope. She'd go out with her friends, work hard, and live her life just like she had before Ben rolled into town. And she'd get over him, somehow. She had to.



WHAT JADE DIDN'T COUNT on was that the object of her worries lived right next door. She barely rolled to a stop in front of her house when he appeared from behind the Victorian. She took one look at him, put the car in reverse, and did an about-turn. Then she drove to Flap Jack Joe's, where the diner owner, Doris, didn't mind Felix sitting at the table in his cat carrier. The woman took one look at Jade and brought her a steaming bowl of soup and some cut-up chicken for Felix.

"This'll make you feel better," Doris rasped in her smoker's voice.

Jade hadn't even been sure she wanted soup, but one spoonful of the warm, starchy goodness settled her right down. "Thanks," she called after the woman's retreating back.

Doris merely lifted a hand in acknowledgment and returned ten minutes later with a teetering stack of pancakes. "Now, eat this."

Jade didn't protest. She dried her tears on a napkin and scowled at the mascara stains. She probably looked frightening, but given Doris' unflappable calm, she likely wasn't the first heartbroken woman to arrive at this diner craving comfort food. The pancakes were good, the syrup warm in the tiny cup, and even Felix didn't seem to be too annoyed by his situation.

Over the next couple of days, Jade did her best to avoid Ben. She wasn't proud of it, but she did what she had to in order to protect herself. She was just too raw, too hurt to deal with him, to listen to whatever reason he had to excuse himself. There would be time for that later when she didn't feel like her chest was gaping open.

So she worked at the library, staying there until closing time. She left her house early and returned late. She practiced her violin in the empty music classroom in the mornings and drove to Asheville for her very first rehearsal with the full orchestra. The experience was exhilarating, and she floated on that high for hours after.

Millie and Hailey took her out for drinks at Miller's, keeping an active watch on the tavern's door so Jade could relax in peace and

drink her margarita without having to look over her shoulder in case Ben walked in. He didn't. In fact, judging by the progress she saw daily on the house next door, he'd thrown himself into work. He likely wanted to escape Hidden Hollows and was doing his best to finish the project as soon as possible.

Almost two weeks had passed since their non-date when Jade jogged up the street to her house and found Ben sitting on her front steps. His head was lowered, his elbows on his knees, and something moved inside her chest at the sight of him. She slowed down and pulled out her earbuds, debating whether she should turn and run away. But Ben lifted his head, and their gazes collided. He got up, and from the determined expression on his face, she suspected he might chase her if she tried to escape again.

With a sigh, she forced herself to move forward. Step by reluctant step, she neared him, then stopped at a safe distance. She didn't want to smell that fresh-laundry-and-sawdust scent of him, nor did she want him to touch her. She wasn't sure she wouldn't crumble to pieces if he laid his hands on her.

"Jade," he said, his voice tight. "Can we talk?"

She lifted one shoulder. "Sure."

His face flushed with color. "I've been trying to get a hold of you," he began.

"I've been busy."

Jade knew she was being petty, but he'd *hurt* her, and she wasn't going to make this any easier for him. Why should she be the only one to suffer?

Ben blew out a long breath. "I'm sorry for being late last Wednesday."

Jade narrowed her eyes at him. "You weren't just late, Ben. You never showed up."

"Okay, fair," he said. "I had a work—"

"Yeah, a work issue. You texted to let me know, remember?" Jade pulled her phone from its armband and waved it at Ben. "I just didn't think it would be more important to you than our date. But I guess I learned that lesson."

He ran a hand through his hair. It was getting too long, and he looked tired, with dark circles under his eyes. Was he not sleeping? What was wrong with him?

No. Jade stamped down that line of thought. He wasn't her concern, and if he wasn't sleeping, that was his problem.

She shuffled to the side, and Ben turned with her so they remained face-to-face. With every small step, she got closer to her front door, waiting for her chance to escape.

"Jade, please."

The earnest expression in his eyes nearly broke her resolve. She clamped her teeth together and prayed her lip wouldn't wobble.

"All I'm asking is for another chance to make it up to you." He stepped forward, his hand extended to her. "We're good together."

A strangled sob escaped her. Curse him—they *were* good together. So good, it would take her months to forget him again. She retreated up the porch steps, and Ben lowered his hand.

"This was your second chance, Ben. And just like in our senior year, you blew it. I can't go through this again. I'm sorry."

She turned and stumbled to her door, fumbling with the key to get inside. He didn't follow her, but she still locked the door behind her and leaned against it as though it would help keep out the big bad wolf. The awful truth was, she didn't really want to keep him out. She wanted Ben to be the man she thought him to be. The disappointment that came with the realization that she'd made him into something he wasn't hurt so much.

Jade slid down to the hallway floor, pulled her knees in, and cried.

Ben

He stared at Jade's front door. He'd made her cry, and he suspected it wasn't the first time. But her words—*and just like in our senior year, you blew it*—stuck in his mind, their hooked claws tearing at his memories.

He hadn't been the one to cancel their prom date. She'd texted him a day before the event, claiming she'd caught a stomach bug. To this day, Ben wasn't sure she'd been telling the truth. He'd gone round to her parents' house that evening and had heard her playing her violin, a heart-wrenching piece so sad, he'd almost swallowed his pride and knocked on her bedroom window.

Instead, he'd gone to prom alone and danced with Katherine Dahl, a cheerleader who'd made no secret she wanted to date a football player. So he'd done what his team-mates had expected of him. He'd kissed her, taken her out on a couple of dates, made out with her at the bonfire.

But at the end of the summer, he'd left her just as easily as she'd left him. They'd both gone to their separate colleges, and he hadn't heard a word from her since.

Jade, however, had stuck with him far more than any girlfriend—and they hadn't even kissed back then. Now she was acting as though he'd been to blame. Judging by Betty Smith's reaction to him the other day, this was something she'd told her friends as well.

Ben's temper rose, and he marched up the stairs to pound on Jade's door. "Jade? I still need to talk to you. I need to understand."

A small voice from behind the door—a stifled sob?—tore through his insides.

"Jade? Please, I just..." He rested his forehead against the cool wood. "I don't know why you called off our prom date. I've been asking myself about it for a decade, and I'm still coming up empty. I know you didn't have a stomach bug."

That was a shot in the dark, but her silence from the other side of the door was all the confirmation he needed.

"Why did you cancel, Jade? I'm sorry about last week. If I could go back and change how I handled things, I would, but at the time, I really thought I'd make it."

There was a shuffling sound, and the door swung open. Ben looked down at Jade, at her reddened eyes, and felt a painful tug in his gut. She was crying because of him. He'd never wanted to hurt her, and he stepped forward now to cup her face, to fold her into his arms and hold her until she was better.

But Jade leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. "You want to know why I called off our prom date?" she asked. "My friend heard Katherine Dahl tell Tracy Spinner that you meant to humiliate me at the dance. That a cool football player like you would never go out with a loser like me."

"What?" Ben gaped. "And you believed that?"

Anger flashed through him, hot and spiky. Did she really think so poorly of him?

"What was I supposed to believe, Ben?" Jade cried. "I've seen *Carrie*. And our situation was exactly the same. Well..." She cocked her head to the side. "Minus the crazy mother. But we didn't even know each other!"

"And whose fault is that? I tried to talk to you, and you wouldn't let me!" Ben spread his arms out. "You ran from me every chance

you had. It looks like not much has changed.”

“And your solution was to ask me out to prom?” she returned. “Ben, you spoke to me *twice*. Ask me how I know this.”

Ben raised his eyebrows at her, unwilling to play her game.

Jade answered the unspoken question anyway. “I had a crush on you all through our senior year. Every time the marching band played for your team, I watched you play. I sat behind you all year in History, and you never even said hi to me.”

His anger deflated, and he tried to remember whether she was telling the truth. He’d asked her to prom in History class, so it must have been—but he’d only noticed her after her performance at the school talent show.

“Jade...” he began, but she wasn’t finished.

“I didn’t want to believe the rumors, you know,” she said sadly. “But that afternoon, right before I sent you that text, I met you and your football friends at Flap Jack Joe’s, and you completely ignored me. You walked right past my table, and when I caught your eye and said hi, you looked away.”

Jade’s voice broke over those last words, and Ben felt like the worst scum of the earth. He’d forgotten about that day, about that incident. He hadn’t spoken to Jade because he’d been hanging out with his team, and those guys hadn’t exactly been friendly to anyone who seemed different from their idea of normal. He hadn’t wanted them to mock Jade—and he hadn’t wanted for her to associate him with their childish behavior.

In doing that, he’d hurt her worse than he’d imagined.

“Jade, I never meant to ignore you at the diner. I didn’t want my friends to make fun of you—of us. And I’m sorry for that, but they weren’t the brightest bunch. I wanted to take you to prom for real, and I wouldn’t have humiliated you. I liked you. A lot.” He rubbed his chest, where a tension built, squeezing. “You could have asked me about it, you know?”

Her mouth pulled into a grimace. “Yeah, because teenagers are so good at being brave.” She sniffled and patted her pockets for a tissue.

"We're not teenagers anymore, though," Ben remarked. "This should come easier to us."

Jade shook her head sadly. "But how can it? How can I trust that you won't repeat the same pattern over and over? You ignored me, and you prioritized others above me."

The words were true but still unfair. He hadn't meant for any of it to happen—he'd even tried to protect her in his own way.

"If you can't trust me," Ben said slowly, "what are we even doing here? Why did you say yes when I asked you out? Why did you kiss me?"

She looked away, and it hurt. He'd thought they were building something together—but Jade seemed ready to throw it all away over the first hiccup they encountered.

"Right, okay." Ben stuck his hands in his pockets. "I guess that's how it is, then." He took a step back, though it physically hurt to distance himself from her. "I fell for you, Jade. I'm sorry for how things turned out, but I wanted you to know that."

He couldn't stay there. Facing the street, he clattered down the steps of her porch and marched away without looking back. If he did, if he saw a hint of hesitation on Jade's face, he'd rush right back to her and beg her for another chance, his pride be damned. But she'd put it plainly: this *had* been his second chance, and she wasn't interested in giving him any more.

The moment the Victorian hid him from view of Jade's front door, Ben stopped and put his hands to his knees, hanging his head down. *Ouch*. The conversation hurt, but walking away from her was even worse. He straightened and stared at the hulking mammoth of the house. It was too big, like his father had said, for a single guy. It would take him another three or four weeks of hard work to finish it, but it was time to put out feelers on the market. He was going to sell this house and get out of Jade's way.

Ben grabbed his safety goggles, his gloves, and his machete. He should be painting the trim on the porch, but that sort of dainty work wouldn't allow him to release the tension building inside him. Instead, he strode to the far side of the property where he'd already put a dent in the massive shrubbery that had taken over the yard.

If it would make Jade happy to have him gone, that was exactly what he would do. Keep away from her, even though every particle in his body craved to return to her front porch and comfort her.

This was better in the long run, Ben told himself as he hacked into the thorny undergrowth. This was what she wanted, and he would respect her wishes, even if it killed him.

Jade

She stood under the shower until she ran out of hot water. Her muscles ached because she'd failed to stretch after her run, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the clawing agony that her conversation with Ben had caused. She got out of the shower and stared at the fogged-up mirror in the bathroom. She thought of wiping it clean but decided she didn't need to know what she looked like at that moment.

Then she put on her comfiest pajama set and got out her baking supplies. Stress-baking was absolutely therapeutic, and she needed it more now than she had in a long time. Heartbreak was invisible—no broken bones, no physical therapy required—but Jade thought it would haunt her just as long as the injury to her fingers had.

The worst part was that she felt guilty over what had happened. So Ben hadn't meant to humiliate her on prom night? That confused her more than ever, especially since he didn't deny ignoring her in the diner that day. But she was becoming more and more aware of the fact that she shouldn't have judged the man for the actions of an eighteen-year-old boy.

Was his more recent mishap with their date enough to cut him out of her life completely? How would she have reacted if they didn't have that history? Jade had no real answer to the questions. Instead, she measured flour, butter, and sugar, mashed bananas, and filled a loaf pan with nutmeg-scented banana bread batter. Her kitchen soon smelled amazing, and she took comfort in sitting on the couch and diving into one of her historical romances while the bread baked.

She took the loaf out of the oven and let it cool, even though she was now hungry enough for her stomach to rumble. If it weren't so late in the evening, she would have driven down to Flap Jack Joe's for another bowl of Doris' soup. Instead, she cut off a thick slab of the banana bread, smeared more butter on top, and dug in.

A healthy meal, it was not. But she didn't think a salad would help her bruised heart to heal as quickly.

Still, she eyed the rest of the loaf and decided she couldn't eat all of it herself. With her previous bake, she'd taken half of the loaf to Ben—but she couldn't do that now. Tears pooled in her eyes as she cut up the banana bread in individual slices and tucked it into her freezer. Then she scooped up Felix, who meowed in protest, and carried him to her bedroom. He picked a spot on the bed while she brushed her teeth, and she found his presence comforting. As though he knew she was feeling low, he curled up on her lap as soon as she returned to sit in the bed.

Jade tried to sleep. She did everything she could think of: read to make herself sleepy, counted sheep, went to the kitchen for a glass of warm milk, and tried meditating. But no matter how much effort she put into it, she couldn't let go of the fact that she'd hurt Ben too.

He'd genuinely wanted to take her to prom, and he'd tried to protect her from his silly friends. And she'd essentially told him she didn't trust him—which was true, or it had been, to some extent. It was more that she was wary of opening up her heart to him again. But her decision a decade ago had been based on gossip, and she couldn't forgive herself for that. She'd been trying *so hard* to avoid rumors and town busybodies, but she'd fallen into that same trap herself.

At two a.m., Jade threw off her covers and sat up in her bed. With a groan, she realized sleep would not come, so she strode into her kitchen with a purpose. She pulled out butter and eggs, a can of pumpkin puree and some baking powder, and went to work.

An hour and a half later, she had a beautiful brown pumpkin bread loaf on her cooling rack. It still steamed, and she was hungry again, but she refrained from cutting off a slice to taste her creation. Instead, she pulled a cake carrier from the top shelf of her pantry and gently transferred the bread into it. It was too hot to be closed completely, so she covered it with a clean tea towel and left a crack for the steam to escape. Then she put her jacket over her pajamas, stepped into her rubber boots, and crept out the back door.

The night sky was overcast, so she had to turn on her phone's flashlight, and she carefully avoided the shrubs in her yard as she made her way around the fence Ben had built. She stumbled once and dropped her phone—it was either that or drop the bread. The device landed in the grass, and Jade had to stoop and get it. Something fluttered past her as she straightened, and her heartbeat kicked up a notch.

"It's just an owl," she told herself, but she still sped up, almost running down the Williams house driveway toward Ben's trailer.

She didn't want to wake him, so she tiptoed to his steps and left the cake carrier there for him to find. It was a peace offering, and she put it there with zero expectations beyond mending some of the hurt she'd caused him. For a long minute, she stood still in front of his door, debating whether she should knock, but he'd looked so tired earlier. He deserved his rest.

Instead, she hurried home, glad when she locked the back door and snuggled down in her bed. Felix opened one eye and gave her a contemptuous glare for having been woken, and she stroked the silky fur on his head.

"I have no idea what I'm doing, buddy," she whispered. "But I hope Ben will like the bread."

The moment her head hit the pillow, Jade slept, finally peaceful and too exhausted to worry anymore.

Ben

Jade was practicing the violin at home.

Ben sat up in his bed and narrowly avoided smacking his head on the compartment he'd fitted above the bunk for extra storage. The sheets slipped from his shoulders, and he shivered in the cold morning air. He would soon need to find a house or an apartment to rent for the winter.

An agitated, fast melody filtered in through the closed windows, barely audible but calling him like a siren song. During the past week, he'd missed her scales and arpeggios. He knew she'd been avoiding him, but her practicing now meant she was returning to her usual schedule.

Ben pulled on a pair of jeans and a thick sweater, then added his jacket and a knit hat on second thought. His water kettle sputtered, sending up a plume of steam, and he made himself a cup of instant coffee. He microwaved a breakfast burrito, then opened the door. Sitting on his steps, drinking coffee, and listening to Jade's practice while the first light colored the eastern sky seemed like an excellent idea. Of course, it would be better if she was here with him, sharing

Ben realized mid-step that something was on his front stoop. Trying to avoid smashing it, he overcorrected and stumbled down. His burrito went flying and disappeared in the tall, matted grass, and he spilled coffee all over himself, trying to regain his balance.

He bit out a curse and shook coffee off his fingers. It was hot enough that it scalded his skin, so he returned to the kitchenette and ran his hand under cold water until it stopped stinging.

Over his shoulder, he eyed the offending parcel sitting on the stair. It was round, and there seemed to be a cloth sticking out of it, but he couldn't make out anything more in the dim light. He changed his jacket and sweater, flinging the coffee-scented dirty ones in his laundry hamper, then returned to the door to see what was going on.

It was a cake carrier. Ben picked it up and lifted the lid—it wasn't clamped on tight, so it came easily. Underneath was a tea towel covering...a whole loaf of pumpkin bread. His throat tight, Ben carried the cake to his kitchen and sliced off a piece. It was fresh, still slightly warm on the inside, which meant Jade must have left it there in the middle of the night.

He was lucky raccoons or some other beasties hadn't gotten to it while he snored inside.

Ben chewed on the bread and tried very hard to clear his thoughts of any remaining sleepiness. Adrenaline coursed through him, a hundred times more potent than caffeine. He swiped his hat off his head and tried to finger-comb his hair. Then he brushed his teeth—he wasn't sure what the pumpkin bread meant, but if there was the slightest chance he'd be kissing Jade, he didn't want to have morning breath.

All the while, his heart pounded frantically, and by the time he rinsed his mouth, his rational thoughts were blown away by the pressing need to see Jade *now*.

He ran down the steps and across the vast lawn of the nearly-finished Victorian. He vaulted over the fence between the two properties, landed in a molehill, and cursed. Shaking wet dirt off at the porch, he finally kicked his muddy shoes off on the doormat and pounded on Jade's back door.

“Jade?”

The music stopped. Ben peered through the frosted glass in the small window set in the door, but he couldn't see anything past vague, immobile shapes.

“Jade, please, open up!”

If they had other neighbors, someone would be shouting at him to shut up by now. But their two houses at the end of the street were isolated, offering them the privacy they both cherished. It was early morning, dew still clung to the grass, and a slow fog crept up the street, giving the morning a properly witchy feeling. Halloween was just around the corner, and the trees were already shedding leaves.

Something meowed, and Ben looked down to see Jade's cat, Felix, emerge through the flap in the door.

“Hey, there,” Ben muttered, crouching to pet him. “Is Jade going to let me in? What do you think?”

Without warning, the door swung open, and Jade stood in front of him. From his position, Ben saw her long legs first. She was wearing leggings, and he kept his expression firmly in check as his gaze traveled up her body to her face.

She seemed tired. Her face was pale, her hair pulled back in a bun, and she was shivering in the chill morning air. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, and he wanted to be with her so badly, all manners left him in a rush.

He stood, straightening to his full height, and stared down at her. “Can I come in?”

Jade's dark eyes were wide, her full lips pressed in a thin line. A moment passed, then another, but finally, she dipped her chin in a curt nod and took a step back to let him pass. As the door closed behind them, Ben turned to her.

“I found your pumpkin bread,” he said, not knowing how to begin.

Well, no, he knew exactly how he wanted to begin: by telling her he'd fallen for her completely, and that he wanted to make sure she was the happiest woman on Earth. But he had no idea what she meant by her gesture, so he waited for her to speak.

Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. She was wringing her hands, mauling the sleeves of her tunic, so Ben threw caution to the wind and stepped closer. He caught her hands in his and held on. Her fingers were cold, more delicate than his. A shiver ran through her body, and Ben glanced around for a sweater or a shawl for her to put on. Seeing nothing appropriate, he shrugged out of his own jacket and draped it around her shoulders.

Then he reclaimed her hands, unwilling to let go of this small step forward she'd conceded to him.

"Did you bake in the middle of the night?" he murmured.

Jade looked up at him, and her lips parted. "Yeah. After our... um, our fight, I couldn't sleep."

Ben lifted a hand and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. At the first contact, she closed her eyes and leaned into his palm as though she couldn't help herself. Ben wasn't sure if he was breathing, but he ran his thumb down her jaw, tracing her cute chin.

"Why didn't you wake me?" he asked.

Jade's eyes opened, and she gazed straight at him. "You seemed tired last night. I know you've been working hard..."

He shook his head. "It's not work that's been keeping me awake." He stepped closer to her, into her personal space. "Jade, I need to know. Why did you bring me the bread?"

Her lip wobbled, but she seemed to steel herself. When she spoke, her voice was hesitant, yet strong. "I wanted to apologize for how I treated you. I shouldn't have listened to rumors."

Ben huffed out a soft laugh. "No, but that's all past now. I want to know what you feel *now*."

Jade's eyebrows came together in a fierce frown. "I—I really like you."

Ben's heart soared at her words, but she wasn't done.

"It hurt, being left at that restaurant. I was humiliated, and I felt like everyone was laughing at me, sitting there in a pretty dress, all alone."

"You put on a pretty dress for me?" Ben asked.

Jade poked him in the shoulder, glowering.

"Ow, okay," he said, catching her fingers in his hand. "I'm really sorry. But for the record, they weren't laughing at you at all. When I came there two hours late, the guy with the scary mustache chewed me out good."

The corners of Jade's mouth turned up in a small smile. "Louis? But he's so kind."

"He wasn't kind to me," Ben assured her. Then he went all in and asked, "Do you think you could let me make it up to you? Take you on another date, I mean."

Her eyes glittered with some emotion he *thought* was affection, but he wasn't sure. Ben decided it was absolutely time to play dirty, so he lifted her fingers to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

"Please," he said.

Jade cocked her head to the side. "You're a wicked man, Ben Charles."

He grinned. "Is my strategy working?" Then, before she could either agree or disagree with him, he pushed on. "Look, I never wanted to hurt you. I was a stupid teenager, but I'm not that kid anymore. I know what I want now."

Jade smiled up at him. "And what's that?"

"You."

That was the truth, plain and simple. He wanted her in his life, in his house, in his bed, and he'd work for it, too. He didn't expect her to magically trust him, but if she was willing to let him show her the man he was...

"I'm in love with you, Jade. I want to take you out on dates and fix this house of yours, and eventually, one day, I'd really like to marry you, if you'll have me."

Ben closed his eyes. He hadn't meant to blurt all that, but it was out now, for better or for worse.

A soft palm touched his cheek, and he opened his eyes to find Jade grinning at him, her eyes liquid with tears.

"Yes," she said.

"Yes?" Ben asked, just to clarify.

"Yes, I'll marry you," Jade said. "Eventually, one day."

Ben pulled her in for a kiss, and her warm lips parted for him. He angled his head to the side and wrapped his arms around her, bringing her close, until they melded together in a rush of lips and hands and skin. She responded so well to him, tugging at his hair to bring his face to where she wanted it.

He grinned against her mouth, dizzy with happiness. She hummed and hugged him tight, her head on his chest.

"I don't want to wait long, you know," she muttered against his sweater. "For the wedding. I feel like we've lost a decade already."

Ben put his chin on top of her head and sighed, content. "Not lost. We both needed to grow up."

"Psh." Jade grinned up at him. "I was very mature and serious for my age."

He kissed her again, unable to stop himself.



MUCH LATER, they sat on the couch together. It was a Saturday morning, and they'd enjoyed a quiet breakfast, followed by more kissing. Jade's legs lay across his lap, and she was toying absent-mindedly with the hair at the nape of his neck. The sensation was both foreign and so comforting, Ben didn't want to move a muscle so she wouldn't stop.

"Ben?" Jade said suddenly.

"Hmm?" He was too cozy to open his eyes, and he wanted to remain on her couch forever.

"You know, we don't have to fix this house," she said.

That caught his attention. He lifted his head and looked at her. "How come?"

She lifted one eyebrow at him. "You hate it."

Ben thought about denying it, but asked instead, "How do you know?"

"You cringe every time you look at it." Jade's lips twitched as though she was trying to keep herself from laughing at him. "I think it offends your professional sensibilities."

Ben snorted. She wasn't wrong, and it pleased him that she knew him well enough to know that. "Well..." He caught her hand and squeezed it. "There's this house I like. It's big, with a huge garden. It doesn't look like much right now, but in a couple of months, it'll be pretty great."

The vision he'd had of the big Victorian, filled with joy and laughter, was not an illusion anymore. Jade leaned into him, and her warm body felt so right in his arms. Ben held her close and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair.

"I'd love that," she murmured. "We can even rename it. The Charles house."

He lifted her chin and pressed a kiss to her lips. It felt like a promise for the future, and he knew they'd make it work, no matter how much effort it took.

"Deal," he whispered against her mouth. "It'll be our perfect home."

EPILOGUE

Jade

Eight months later

JADE DABBED at her eyes with a tissue, hoping her waterproof mascara would stay put at least until after the wedding photos were done. She wouldn't be starring in any close-ups, but she didn't want to look like a raccoon anyway.

It was hot in the church, and she was glad she picked a light summer dress for Millie and Luke's wedding. Ben, who sat next to her on the pew, had to be boiling in his suit jacket. The wedding guests shuffled and fanned themselves as the kind reverend droned through the service. Jade glanced to her right, across the aisle, and smiled at Sara, the librarian, who winked back at her. She was accompanied by her very handsome husband, Grant, and her son, who was fidgeting beside her.

"There are so many people here," Ben whispered in her ear suddenly.

His warm breath tickled her skin, and she shivered.

"Do you regret not having a big wedding?" he asked.

Jade looked at him. Her husband of four months was staring at her with a serious, intent expression, so she found his hand and squeezed it.

"No regrets," she whispered back. "I only needed you there."

He smiled and ran the pad of his thumb over her wedding and engagement rings. He'd proposed in January, and they got married in a small, private ceremony in February after deciding they didn't want to wait any longer. They'd invited Millie and Hailey with their partners, Jade's parents, Ben's dad, and Betty Smith and her son, who had become a permanent part of their lives since. It had been a rare sunny winter day, and Jade's memories of it were filled with so much happiness, her heart nearly burst at the mere thought of it.

Ben had joined her in her house for the winter, and he'd completed all the major renovations on the newly christened Charles house only days before the first big snowfall. They'd moved into the big Victorian in May, and the house was nearly finished. Jade picked out the kitchen, and Ben built her a nook in the living room for practicing her violin.

As for her grandparents' house, it was no more. They'd debated selling it, but it was old and would have needed extensive renovations. Instead, they razed it to the ground and Ben was working with Austin, the architect, to build a new home on the property, their first project together. They intended to sell it and use the money to buy more land for similar jobs.

The reverend asked them all to stand, and they said the final prayer together. They sat, and the older man turned to Millie and Luke who stood in front of him. Hailey stood on Millie's left, and Gordon, Luke's coworker from the police station, stood on his right. Hailey's round belly was perfectly accentuated by her periwinkle matron-of-honor dress, but it was Millie who stole the show, of course.

She'd chosen a mermaid wedding dress with a sweetheart neckline that suited her so well, that Jade didn't even blame Luke for staring at her throughout the service. Her red hair cascaded down her back in perfect curls, but it was her radiant expression that made her more beautiful than ever.

When the reverend announced them to be man and wife, the otherwise reticent sheriff pulled Millie close and kissed her passionately while the guests hollered and clapped. After a moment, Luke lifted his head, scowling at them as though he'd only then realized he and the newly-minted Mrs. St. Clair weren't alone in the church.

The wedding reception somehow turned into a massive picnic. Millie and Luke had planned for a band and a country-style dinner served on long trestle tables, but as the news of their wedding got out, the good people of Hidden Hollows decided they wanted to send their sheriff and favorite baker off in style. The fire department provided benches for everyone, and people brought food of their own, enough pies and casseroles and ice-cream to feed every citizen who wandered into the town park that Saturday afternoon. Music played, local bands taking up the stage, and people danced under long strings of fairy lights hanging in the trees.

Jade and Ben spoke and laughed with their new friends, and watched kids run around the tables as they invented new games to play. Austin sat at their table with his wife, Everly, and daughter, Jessica, who stared at Millie's dress in awe. Catalina and Westley, who'd recently gotten engaged, slow-danced to a soulful country tune.

Ben tucked Jade into his side and bent down to kiss her neck. "Hey," he said. "I've been thinking."

"Mm?" Jade leaned her head to the side, wishing for more of the sensation. She was relaxed and warm, and thinking it might be time to sneak off home with Ben.

He lowered his voice. "Do you think that after the house is finished ..."

He stumbled over his words, which was so uncharacteristic, Jade sat straight and looked at him more closely.

"What?" she prompted when he just sat there, staring at her.

"Do you think we could start thinking about kids?"

Jade's breath caught in her throat. They'd talked about children, of course, back before the wedding, so they knew they were both interested in having them someday. But the work on their house

would be completed by the end of the summer, if things went well, which meant Ben was getting serious about having kiddos.

"Yes," she breathed. "I'd like that very much."

His smile was so handsome and joyful, and she couldn't believe her luck.

"Fantastic," he said. "I love you."

Jade leaned her head against Ben's shoulder and sighed. "I love you, too. And I'm really happy right now, even though I ate too much of Betty's peach crumble."

Ben kissed the top of her head. "You can never have too much crumble."

She looked up at him, then pressed a smacking kiss on his cheek. "I knew I married you for a reason. You're a very smart man."

He snorted, then pulled her in for a deep kiss. "And you're a very smart woman for marrying me."

"You two are so cute," a voice squeaked from beside them.

Jade lifted her head to find Hailey standing there, holding hands with her husband Rhett. She pointed at Jade.

"Come on," she said. "We're taking friend photos."

"Can I come?" Rhett asked, smiling down at her.

But Hailey shook her head. "Ladies only. You can keep Ben company."

Ben winked at Jade, and she pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "I'll be right back."

She let Hailey drag her over to the bonfire, where she took her place beside Millie and Hailey, Everly, Catalina, and Sara. She didn't know all of them well, but they were fast becoming her favorite people: strong, loving women who fought for the ones they cared about.

She put her arm around Hailey's shoulders and smiled into the camera. She'd made the best decision of her life when she moved to Hidden Hollows, and she was looking forward to making it her permanent home with Ben.

The End



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe Ann Wood is a writer of clean contemporary romance. With her books, you'll always get an evening of sweet escape.

When she's not writing, Zoe Ann loves spending time with her husband and two boys, hiking, and baking. Her obsessions include peanut butter, notebooks, and planning.

She's always super happy to hear from fellow bookworms, so don't hesitate to get in touch! Her [newsletter](#) is an especially great way to stay up-to-date with all the latest news (and get exclusive freebies).

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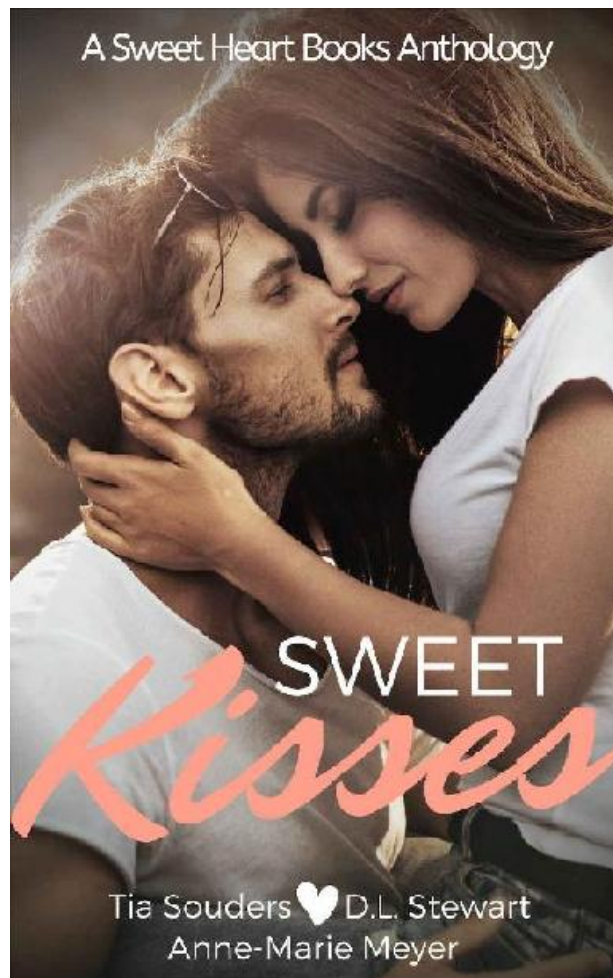
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