

WISHING
on
Willows

A Novel

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AUTHOR OF *Wildflowers from Winter*

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WATERBROOK
P R E S S

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PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-0-307-73040-4

ISBN 978-0-307-73041-1 (electronic)

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Cover design by Kelly L. Howard; cover photography by Jacques Loic, Photononstop; author photo by Kinsey Christin Photography

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ganshert, Katie.

Wishing on willows : a novel / Katie Ganshert. — First edition.

pages cm

ISBN 978-0-307-73040-4 — ISBN 978-0-307-73041-1 (electronic)

1. Widows—Fiction. 2. Single mothers—Fiction. 3. Real estate developers—Fiction. 4. Right of property—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3607.A56W57 2013

813'.6—dc23

Printed in the United States of America

2013—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Brogan, my dinosaur-loving, adventure-seeking,
laughter-inducing little man.*

*When your dad and I saw those two lines in New York City, we had no idea
they'd become our entire world. You make life so much fun.*



D'APERTURA

The first time I lost my husband, we were in Italy on our honeymoon. For the briefest of moments, as he walked toward me with our train tickets tucked in the back pocket of his jeans, the sunlight swallowed him. Even though he came back into view not more than a second later, my breath caught. I had this terrifying thought that something could happen. That moments were fleeting, and with the snap of a finger, he could be gone.

Before the idea could settle, Micah wrapped his arm around my waist and we boarded a train that took us up the coast to Cinque Terra—a cluster of five towns precariously built atop cliffs rising from the sea. With Micah's warmth beside me and our train window framing a fire-burning sunset over the Mediterranean, life felt so intensely beautiful and limitless and vibrant that my heart ached. I understood why my mother had never wanted to vacation anywhere else.

We stayed at a bed-and-breakfast in the town of Riomaggiore. The next morning, instead of joining the tourists walking the main road, Micah and I went exploring, holding hands while a gentle breeze carried the scent of baking bread through the streets and church bells chimed in the distance and multicolored clothes danced on lines outside opened windows.

That's when we discovered Caffe di Luca.

It was small and squat, and not nearly sturdy enough to support the jumble of buildings stacked on top. But happy chatter lured us inside and we ordered in broken Italian. Then we sat by the window and drank the world's best coffee, wondering out loud how anyone could tend and harvest vineyards that grew on vertical hills. We stayed through another two cups

until we were giddy with caffeine.

Discovering Caffè di Luca was like finding a pearl in the belly of a clamshell—wonderful and unexpected. Like dedicated pearl divers, we spent the rest of our honeymoon searching for more, making a game of who could order in the best Italian, and later, French. Sipping café au laits. Eating pasticcotti and macarons. Taking silly pictures and dreaming about the children we would have and the memories we would collect with each passing year.

Ending such a magical time in Paris felt too cliché. Too American. So instead, Micah picked the second largest city in France. Which is how we wound up in Marseille at Café de Petit, an inconsequential establishment hidden behind a pair of olive trees.

In what I still claim to have been impeccable French, I ordered coffee—black for me, a double shot of espresso for Micah, and chocolate brioche to share. We took our treat outside and sat beneath one of the trees.

Even now, eleven years later, I can still taste the flaky brioche melting over my tongue. I can hear the canopy of leaves rustling with the warm breeze. I can still feel Micah's arms around me as I rest my head against his shoulder.

“We should do this.” His chest vibrated with the words.

“Do what?”

“This.” He motioned toward the doors behind us, his arms tightening around my body. “A café.”

I laughed. “You're nuts.”

“No, seriously.” His lips brushed my temple. “I've seen you fall in love with every single one we've gone to. Your eyes light up. I'll miss seeing that when we go home.” He turned me around and kissed my nose, ran his knuckles across my jaw. “I want you to have a café, Robin.”

I melted into his touch.

“Plus, you'd be the world's sexiest café owner.”

He kissed my lips then. Long. Slow. Delicious. One of a thousand delicious kisses he'd given me over the last three weeks. And this magical, light,

tantalizing feeling captured me—that even though we would soon be leaving, even though our honeymoon was drawing to a close, this was just the beginning. Micah and I had the rest of our lives to plan. To have children. To open a café. To come back here when we were old and gray, to Marseille and Cinque Terra and every other town we stopped at along the way. To celebrate the life we would build. The life we would share together.

ONE

Amidst a pile of discarded tops, inside a closet she used to share with her husband, Robin Price deliberated between high heels and flats, but her mind was on her house, a disaster zone of plastic dinosaurs, old maid cards, and Thomas the Tank Engines littering a path from Caleb's room to her own. Unfazed by the chaos, or perhaps just accustomed to it, Robin's sister-in-law held pendant earrings by one ear, gold hoops by the other. She seemed more her old self each day.

"These would look great with your black top," Amanda said, jiggling the hoops by her left ear. "But these really match the blue one." She held the pendant earrings up to her right.

Behind her, clomping around in a pair of high-heeled brown boots, his beloved John Deere toy combine clutched in his fist, Caleb looked so much like Micah with his flyaway cowlick and those big hazel eyes that it stole a little of Robin's breath. "Look, Mommy," he said. "I'm a cowboy! And I'm gonna get those bad guys with my shooter." He raced down the hallway as fast as the too-big shoes allowed.

Amanda held the earrings up higher. "So what do you think?"

"I think we're overthinking this." Robin plopped onto the bed and brushed wisps of hair from her eyes.

"Your first date in over four years? Impossible."

"You have to stop calling it that." Robin's palms were clammy enough at it was. Not to mention her stomach hurt and her nerves were messier than the house. "It's not a date."

"A single man asked you to dinner. I hate to break it to you, but that's a date."

With a groan, Robin fell back onto the mattress. “I’m an awful, horrible woman. Somebody should lock me up and throw away the key.”

“Wanting to get back out there does not make you awful.”

“But that’s just it. I don’t *want* to get back out there.” In fact, the only living male Robin had any interest in spending time with was currently wearing her high-heeled brown boots—and those dates usually entailed her flannel pajama bottoms, heavily buttered popcorn, and the umpteenth viewing of *Pete’s Dragon*. She flung her arm over her eyes and shook her head. “This whole thing was one giant misunderstanding.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Kyle mistook my suggestion. He probably thinks I was fishing for a date, but I honestly just wanted to chat about the meet and greet on Sunday.” Kyle was the new director for One Life, a beloved storefront ministry attached to Sybil’s Antique Shoppe. They did everything, from delivering meals to equipping the unemployed to offering free after-school programs to hosting a support group for people battling addictions. It was located next door to Robin’s café, which meant she could bake to her heart’s content, because whatever she didn’t sell for the day, she’d bring over to One Life, where the food never went to waste. Yesterday, when she dropped off some apple fritters and mentioned they should find a time to discuss the event, he’d said, “How about tomorrow night over dinner?” and in the midst of her shock, she said yes. She said yes! “Oh my goodness, I’m leading him on. I am a leader-on-er.”

“You are not,” Amanda said, digging through an opened jewelry box on the dresser. “For all you know, you could totally hit it off.”

Robin blinked at the textured ceiling and the layer of dust on the wooden fan blades. Two of the three light bulbs in the fixture were burnt out. She would wait for the entire room to go black before she took the time to change them. It had been one of Micah’s pet peeves. Robin could picture him standing on their bed, faded blue jeans slung low around his hips, twisting in a fresh bulb. “*What would you do without me?*” he’d always ask. “*Go blind from squinting.*” she’d say. As it turned out, she did not go blind, but the house was dimmer. She frowned and sat up.

Amanda pulled something black from the pile of clothes in the closet. “Caleb’s just getting over his cold.”

“Your son will be fine. That’s one of the perks of having me as your roommate.” Amanda set the gold hoops on Robin’s knee. “Black top. Gold hoops. It’s too late to cancel now.”

As if on cue, the doorbell rang.

The sound made Robin jump up from the bed, her nerves swooping and twisting—not the excited kind of nerves she’d had on her first date with Micah either, but the nauseous ones. She pulled the black top over her camisole, put the gold hoops in her ears, slipped her feet into a pair of black flats, and hurried down the steps, Caleb chasing behind her with an empty water gun.

She placed her hand over the doorknob and took a deep breath. *Inhale*—this was not a date. *Exhale*—this was not a date. Amanda was making a bigger deal out of this than it was. Forcing her lips into a smile, she pulled open the door.

Kyle stood on her front stoop with neatly trimmed hair, a navy-blue polo, and a single red rose.

This was totally a date.

“Wow,” he said, holding out the flower. “You look great.”

Her stomach didn’t swoop. Her heartbeat didn’t quicken. But she thanked him and took the gift. “Come on in.”

As soon as he stepped inside, he crouched down to toddler height and stuck out his hand. “You must be Mr. Caleb, the man of the house. My name’s Kyle.”

Caleb pressed his face against Robin’s hip and made a sound that was half whine, half huff. A wordless “I don’t wanna.” Her boy wasn’t shy and he certainly was not a brat. So why did he choose now to act like it? “Caleb, when somebody says hi, the polite thing to do is say hi back.”

He made the sound again and wrapped both arms around her thigh. *Oh, good grief.* She was not going to have a power struggle with her child in front of this man before her first accidental date in four and a half years.

Kyle straightened to his full, lanky height and waved his hand, a gesture

that said not to worry, he wasn't offended. Robin moved to get her purse but Caleb wouldn't let go of her leg. She looked at Amanda. "Don't forget to give him his medicine. It's the pink bottle in the fridge. Dr. Dotts was very clear that he needed to take it for the full ten days, even if all the symptoms are gone."

"I know. I know. Stop worrying and have a good time."

"I want to come with you," Caleb said.

Handing the rose over to her sister-in-law, Robin peeled away Caleb's arms. "Honey, you're going to stay and play with Aunt Mandy."

"But I wanna come with you." He stuck out his bottom lip and grabbed onto her leg again, but Amanda grasped his shoulders and pulled him away. Caleb was having none of it. He dug his feet into the carpet and began to cry.

"We can watch the dragon movie," Amanda said.

"I want to go with you!" His cry turned into a full-fledged wail.

Heat rushed into Robin's ears. Caleb—her wonderful, kindhearted, happy-go-lucky, almost four-year-old boy—was throwing a temper tantrum that would rival the most terrible of two-year-olds. She stared, completely mortified, until Amanda wrapped her arms around her traumatized son and mouthed the word *go*.

So Robin did. With the sound of Caleb screaming behind her, she stepped outside and closed the door and smiled at Kyle, feeling lonelier than she had in a long, long time.



Her favorite canvas hung slightly off kilter, tilting to the left, as if trying to slip away from the chaos in the café. Despite a broken appliance and an employee who had called in sick, Robin breathed in the steam rising from her coffee and smiled, because it was *her* chaos. And nothing could ruin Saturday mornings. Not even the empty table next to the counter where Mayor Ford usually read the newspaper while enjoying a white chocolate caramel latte and homemade cinnamon roll.

A loud sound, like a hammer on pipes, clanged from the kitchen.

The chatter of her three table mates paused, then resumed.

Robin needed to open with a word of prayer and corral the grief support group's conversation toward more productive things, like who would visit Jed Johnson and take him meals throughout the month. Instead, she twirled her wedding ring, relishing each of the ladies' smiles—especially Linda's. A year and a half ago, the woman hadn't wanted to take another breath, let alone go out in public. Now here she sat, appetite back, ready to support those whose grief was a little more fresh.

Robin took a sip of her coffee, contentment resting in her chest. She was so proud of everyone's progress.

"So..." Cecile Arton's face lit like a Christmas tree. She wore a loose-fitting pink track suit embossed with rhinestones and her gray roots gave way to teased, bottle-blond hair. "How was your date last night?"

Robin's attention snapped into place. "My date? How did you hear about that?"

"Richard saw you at Shorney's Terrace with a certain someone."

"Sorry to disappoint, but that certain someone is only a friend."

Cecile folded her hands beneath her chin. "Shorney's isn't exactly the kind of place you bring a friend."

Robin was well aware of that fact, especially after spending an entire meal surrounded by smitten high school couples bedecked in prom clothes. Nevertheless, she had cast aside the awkwardness and used the opportunity to get to know the new director of One Life. Robin loved his passion for the ministry, but even in her unguarded moments, when she made herself consider the possibility of something more, she only missed Micah. "We were discussing the meet and greet on Sunday. That's all."

The kitchen door swung open and out came Lenny, her trusty repairman, a tool belt slung around his waist. Caleb trailed close behind on his tiptoes, arms folded up to his chest like a T. rex. When he woke up this morning, the fiasco from last night had been completely forgotten.

"Just need to grab something from the van," Lenny said, saluting Robin and the ladies with her. Caleb mimicked the salute.

“Hey, Wild Man, why don’t you come over here and color for a few minutes while Lenny fixes the oven?” Robin said.

He let out his best dinosaur protest—something between a growl and a roar. Linda chuckled and took a sip of her herbal tea. She’d watched Caleb since he was old enough to crawl, which meant she knew better. The kid had no interest in coloring. Or anything that involved sitting still. Not when there were dragons to slay and monsters to chase and bad guys to capture.

“That’s okay, Robin. He’s a good helper.” Lenny scuffed Caleb’s dark hair and opened the front door wide. Shafts of early-morning sun poured across marbled flooring. “We should have your oven up and running in no time.”

As soon as the pair disappeared outside, Cecile took a sip of her mocha, lipstick staining the mug rim. “That Lenny’s a nice-looking fellow.”

“I don’t care if he’s cute or covered in warts,” Bernie said, “as long as he fixes that oven so I can have my cinnamon roll.” She poked at the day-old rhubarb muffin in front of her. Exactly like the rhubarb muffins Cecile and Linda had eaten without any complaint. “It’s the only thing I look forward to eating anymore.”

“A nicer guy you couldn’t find. Strong shoulders. A decent head of hair.” Cecile took another drink and peered at Robin over the top of whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. “What do you think about Lenny?”

“I think he’s an excellent repairman. I also think we should get started.”

“You’re avoiding,” Cecile said.

“Avoiding what?”

“The question.” She dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin, leaving her lips paler. “Just because sparks didn’t fly last night with Kyle doesn’t mean they won’t with Lenny. You have to keep trying until you find the right guy.”

Robin had found the right guy. Losing him didn’t mean she should go looking for a backup.

“Caleb sure seems to have taken a liking to him.”

“Caleb takes a liking to anyone who lets him hit things with a hammer.”

Cecile placed each of her ringed fingers against her chest, dimpling the skin above her zippered top in four different places. “All I’m saying is you could do a lot worse than Lenny.”

Bernie muttered something about doing a lot better too and massaged the tops of her knees.

Robin chuckled. “How about this? If I’m ever in want of a matchmaker, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Speaking of matchmaking”—Cecile turned her attention to Linda—“how did *your* date go last night? Was he as charming as I promised he’d be? Did he take you to Val’s Diner? I told him to spring for something nicer than Val’s.”

A slow blush crept into Linda’s cheeks.

Robin looked at Cecile. “You set her up?”

“With that handsome fellow who runs the Laundromat.”

Linda’s blush deepened. “It’s okay, Robin. Really. We had a nice time.”

Cecile’s eyes glittered. “I knew you would.”

“He’s taking me line dancing next week.”

A puff of air escaped Robin’s lips. She leaned back in her chair and studied Linda, trying to ignore the odd sensation of being lapped.

“Can I have that?” Cecile pointed to Bernie’s uneaten muffin. The old woman scooted her plate over and scrunched her nose, like Robin had served them rotten fish. “I’m so glad you’re letting go, Linda. Moving on. Living your life again.”

Robin’s muscles tightened in her chest. Then in her arms and legs. *Letting go. Moving on.* Why should dating be the proof for either of those things? And how could Cecile make it sound so easy when she didn’t have a clue? Cecile had lost a sister and Robin had lost a husband. While both devastating, they were not the same.

The front door swung open. Lenny and Caleb marched inside, gave them another salute, and made their way into the kitchen. The sight of her son loosened Robin’s muscles. If Linda wanted to get back out there again,

good for her. Robin didn't need to feel left behind, not when it was a race she had no desire to run. Her attention wandered toward her only customers—a middle-aged couple finishing coffee and conversation.

The woman stood and hitched her purse over her shoulder while the man brought both cups to the counter. "I'll be right back, ladies," Robin said.

She processed the couple's payment and watched them walk toward the door. Their clasped hands and matching gait stretched something inside her—the same stretchy feeling that came whenever she caught a couple kissing or laughing. Pushing the sensation away, Robin pinned her gaze on the mayor's vacant spot.

"Does anybody know where Mayor Ford is?" she asked, coming around the counter.

"He won't be here today." Cecile swallowed a mouthful of muffin and paused, long enough to make Linda lean forward in her seat. "Richard says the mayor's working. We all know that man can't read the comics when he's in work mode."

"Working on a Saturday?"

"I guess he's preparing for a lunch meeting with a developer. Something about building condominiums in Peaks."

Bernie laughed. "Why in the world would a town the size of ours need condominiums?"

"Didn't you hear? That software company—Fixtel? They confirmed last week that they're going to build outside of town. Mayor Ford is ecstatic. He's hoping for a population boom."

"Population boom?" Robin sat down, a little too hard. "In Peaks?"

Cecile's bobbing head made her earrings jiggle. "Richard's been swamped lately. Town council's been working on a development plan. Something about revamping parts of the business district. Heaven knows the place could use a facelift."

Robin frowned.

"It's supposed to be the topic of our next town meeting. Condominiums will be great for business. At least for those still around."

Something about Cecile's ominous tone made Robin sit up straighter. "Your jewelry store's doing all right, isn't it?"

"If you consider all right ending each day in the red, then sure. We're doing just fine." The woman rested her chin in her palm and sighed. "Richard put a For Sale sign in the window this morning."

"What?" Arton's Jewelers was one of the oldest businesses in Peaks. If they closed their doors, it would leave Willow Tree Café sandwiched between an abandoned jewelry store and a run-down antique shop. Not exactly good for business. "Why haven't you said anything?"

"We're ready to retire, especially now that he's so busy with council. And since none of our children are jumping in to take over, we thought it was time. We made the decision last night."

"I know things have been slow." Robin looked around her empty café. The problem was not unique to the jewelry store. "But are you sure you're not jumping into this too quickly?"

"Honey, you're our only regular customer. And all you ever do is polish that ring." Cecile examined Robin beneath overly plucked eyebrows.

Robin checked her watch. The big hand crept past eight and they hadn't accomplished any of the things they normally covered during their meetings. "We should probably discuss Jed Johnson before I leave."

Bernie fixed her steel-gray eyes on Robin. "What about him?"

"He's not doing well. I visited him yesterday and he looked terribly thin. I thought we could arrange some more meals for him this month. And if somebody could go check on him today, that would be great." More clanking sounded from the kitchen, followed by a round of Caleb's giggles. If only Robin could bottle that sound and sell it on eBay, she'd be able to fix the entire town's financial woes. "I'd be happy to do it, but I promised I'd help set up for my brother-in-law's birthday. Caleb can't wait to get out to the farm."

"Jed's wife passed away four months ago," Bernie said.

"Yes." Robin drew out the word. What was Bernie getting at?

"How do we know he's not playing this out to get free meals?"

Robin blinked at the old woman. "Playing it out? Bernie, there's no

timeline on grief. If anyone should understand that, it should be us.” Four months after Micah died, Robin was a complete wreck. If she hadn’t had her friend Bethany urging her to eat, who knows what would have happened? Especially to Caleb, who had been growing in her womb and depended on her for nourishment.

Linda patted Robin’s hand. “I’d be happy to visit him today.”

The kitchen door swung open and Lenny came out with Caleb. “The oven’s fixed.”

Robin exhaled. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“Now before you go getting too happy on me, the prognosis isn’t good. You need a new oven. Either that or update the electrical. Perhaps you oughta do both. Because those two together will keep short-circuiting and if you don’t do something about it soon, I swear this place is going to catch fire.”

“Just as long as it doesn’t catch fire tomorrow.”

The front door chimed. Amanda breezed inside, her hair swept up in its usual perky ponytail. Robin met her halfway and wrapped her in a hug. “You’re a Lenny. Or a Linda. Either one works.”

“What?”

“You’re a lifesaver.”

“And you’re lucky I love you so much.”

“I’m so sorry to ask you to do this. It’s just that Joe called in sick this morning and you know Caleb will be unbearably cranky if I stay and work.” She looked over at her son, who was talking with great animation to a very attentive Lenny. “Molly should be here by eleven to take over. I really need to get to the farmhouse and make sure Bethany isn’t concocting any unholy mixtures with her cake baking.”

“Please hurry.”

Robin grabbed the empty plates from the table. “I’m sorry I have to cut this short today, ladies. I’ll go put those cinnamon rolls in right now. Bernie, you make sure and take two before you leave.”

She made her way toward the kitchen, stopping twice. Once to straighten the crooked canvas—a picture Micah took outside Café de Petit

eleven years ago. Again to remove the newspaper she had laid out on Mayor Ford's table.

She wasn't eager to see her town lose any of its small-town charm, but perhaps the new residents would bring more customers to her café. Sharing the place she loved with more people could only be a good thing. Robin dusted her hands and pushed through the door into her kitchen.

Condominiums in Peaks.

She wondered where they would build them.

TWO

Ian McKay found himself in the real-life version of Andy Griffith's Mayberry, with paint-chipped streetlamps and mulberry trees forming a crooked line on either side of Main Street. A bike path meandered through a riverfront park, and well-worn businesses boasted faded awnings and an assortment of window displays. He half expected all color to fade to black and white and Barney Fife to make an appearance.

He welcomed the change of scenery. Something about being out of Peoria in this small Iowa town, away from the mess of his past, bolstered his spirits and filled him with optimism. He speed dialed his father and stuck his free hand in his pocket.

To his right, a For Sale sign hung in the door of a jewelry store fresh out of the nineteenth century, and to his left, an eyesore disguised as an antique shop bookended the business district like a pathetic caboose ready to collapse on top of itself. Sandwiched between the two, Willow Tree Café possessed a charm the other places lacked. But the lone Honda Civic in the otherwise deserted parking lot told him all he needed to know.

"That was quick." Dad's voice lost none of its vibrato through the phone line.

"Traffic was light."

Dad chuckled. "What do you think about the location?"

Ian peered at the sign hanging in the window of Arton's Jewelers. One of the businesses was already closing shop. Judging by the looks of things, the other two weren't far behind. "Mayor Ford was right. The area could definitely use some improvements."

"We have a lot hinging on this."

Ian plucked the cuffs of his sleeves and pictured his father, dressed in his Saturday khakis, poised behind the mahogany desk in the study while he drummed a pen against his knee and examined the framed picture taken last Christmas, the one of Ian and his mother. He could almost see the stubborn set of Dad's jaw, as if enough determined belief in his son would restore what had been lost.

"I believe in you, Ian. I wouldn't have given you the deal if I didn't."

The bloated words sat on Ian's shoulders. Dad had made it clear—this would be the biggest deal of the year. Big enough to chase away the threat of downsizing that hovered over all of their spirits, Dad's most especially. He was a good boss. He cared about each of his employees and didn't want to lay off anyone. With everything going on, after all that had happened, sparing him from the burden was the least Ian could do.

"Can we expect you for dinner tomorrow evening?"

"I think I'll stick around Peaks for a while."

A drawn-out pause lingered over the phone line. He scuffed his shoe against the ground and connected with a small rock. It skittered across the cement and landed in a flower bed. "Is that a problem?"

"Your mother—"

"Will be fine." He rubbed the back of his neck and eyed the ramshackle shutters hanging on either side of the antique shop windows. "Look, I'll be back for the meeting on Wednesday, so it's not like I'm going to be gone very long."

"Will you be ready to present your plans?"

"Of course."

"I'll see you on Wednesday, then."

They said their good-byes and Ian pocketed his phone. Mom would be fine. Dad would make sure of it, just like he made sure of it last time. And while his father took care of his mother, Ian would take care of the family business. He might not share Dad's passion, but he was good at what he did. He'd earn back the respect he'd lost. Prove to himself and everybody else that he deserved to wear the last name McKay.

A breeze ruffled his hair, and a rusted-out pickup with a faulty muffler

grumbled down the two-lane road. He peeled his gaze away from the For Sale sign and strode through the front doors of Willow Tree Café.

“Oomph!”

Hot liquid splashed against his chest and soaked through his button-down shirt. He yanked the fabric away from his skin and reached out to steady the woman he’d smashed into.

She tottered before him, her hand wet with spilled coffee, light brown hair swept into a loose ponytail. Her eyelids fluttered like two hazel strobe lights. She captured her bottom lip between her teeth, her attention stalling on his chest.

“Are you okay?” Ian asked. “I didn’t mean to run into you.”

She pointed to the mess down his front—lavender fabric turned rotten plum. “Please tell me that’s not a new shirt.”

“Define new.”

She slapped her palm over her eyes and groaned.

Ian smiled. “The good news is I own more than one shirt.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Really, it’s not a big deal.”

Her hand slid down her face and stopped over her mouth. “Let me go get you a towel.” Her palm muffled the words as she took two careful steps out of the puddle. “And something to clean up this mess.”

Ian watched her go, wiping at his ruined shirt. Classic jazz music and the smell of cinnamon and fresh coffee grounds floated in the air as he walked toward a row of marble-topped tables and studied the canvases hanging between the windows—black-and-white photographs of what looked like European cafés. The photographer had toyed with the focus and the zoom to give each picture an artsy look. His attention roamed up the tightly spiraled metal staircase to a small loft overhead, then returned to the main floor and landed on a shadowed instrument in the front corner of the room, flanking one side of the counter.

A baby grand piano.

The squeaking wheels of a mop bucket interrupted his inspection. The young woman handed him a wet towel and got to work mopping the brown

puddle off the floor. “Did you decide what you wanted? We’ve got cinnamon rolls. Iced coffee cake. The best espresso in the Midwest. Anything you want. On the house.”

How about a blueberry scone and the café to go?

He bit the inside of his cheek and followed her and her squeaky mop bucket to the counter. “I’ll take a chai tea and I insist on paying.”

“I’m not taking your money.” She eyed his shirt and reclaimed the towel. “Trust me, Robin would kill me if I made you pay.”

“Robin?”

“The owner.”

“You’re not the owner?”

“Are you kidding? I’m not even an employee. Not technically. I’m Robin’s sister-in-law. Or roommate.” A frown flickered across her brow. “I only help when she’s desperate.”

He removed his billfold from the back pocket of his slacks and handed over a crisp five-dollar bill.

She ignored it and pushed some numbers on the cash register. “One chai tea, courtesy of Willow Tree Café. Can I get you anything else?”

The owner. In a good mood. Preferably open to a career change. “I think I’m good for now, thanks.”

She plucked a to-go cup from a stack. “If you don’t mind me asking, what brings you to Peaks? It’s not every day we get a stranger in town.” Her eyes roved over his apparel. “And I mean this in the most flattering way, but you sort of stick out.”

“I do?”

She traced circles along the countertop with the pad of her thumb. “You’re very fancy.”

A low chuckle rumbled in his throat. “Is the owner by any chance coming in today?”

“You’re not going to complain about the service, are you?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then you can catch her this evening. She comes in on Saturdays before close and plays a few songs. It’s the only night the café’s open.”

“Plays?”

The woman wiggled her fingers in front of her, as if playing an imaginary keyboard.

Ian reexamined the instrument, a hint of uncertainty stirring in his gut. “I’ve never seen a piano inside such a small café before. Jazz clubs maybe, but not this.”

“That’s because you’ve never seen this café. Music is ingrained in Robin’s soul. She loves it. Almost as much as she loves this place.”

His uncertainty grew, sticking to his insides like a heavy meal of pancakes and syrup. “Can I take a rain check on that tea?”

“Sure. Just tell whoever’s working that Amanda spilled coffee all over you and she promised you a free drink.” She cupped one hand to the side of her mouth and whispered, “I don’t think anybody will be surprised.”

His chuckle returned. “Great, thanks.” He gave the counter a knock and walked toward the door. Hopefully this Robin would be as eager to help as Amanda.



Forty-five minutes inside Sybil’s Antique Shoppe and Caleb finally found the perfect birthday present for Uncle Evan—a model John Deere tractor with a missing front wheel. As they stepped away from the cash register, Caleb held it over his head. “Can we get dinosaur paper?”

“I’m sure Aunt Bethy has wrapping paper we can use at the farm.”

“Did Daddy love dinosaurs like me?”

The thick cloud of incense Sybil insisted on burning made Robin’s eyes itch and her brain fuzzy. She hurried her son toward the exit, eager for fresh air and sunlight. They couldn’t have ordered more perfect weather for Evan’s birthday, and the promise of an entire day spent with family sounded glorious. “Grandma says they were his favorite toy when he was your age.”

“And tractors too?”

“Tractors and dinosaurs. Just like you.” Threading her fingers with his, she batted aside the strings of beads that hung like cobwebs in the entrance, ushered Caleb outside, and almost plowed into a wall. Scratch that. A

person. She stepped back and shielded her eyes from the low-hanging sun silhouetting the man in front of her.

He was a stranger. With dark blond hair and light brown eyes and a giant stain on his shirtfront. Fresh, by the looks of it.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come barreling out of the door like that.”

“No worries.” He stepped out of the way and motioned to his shirt. “I’m starting to suspect I’m the problem.”

“I’m not used to anyone coming into Sybil’s.” Her cheeks flushed. Hopefully the combination of distance and age would keep Sybil from hearing the thoughtless words. “Not that there’s anything wrong with the store. It’s just...out of the way. I guess.”

The man’s smile crinkled his eyes and showcased teeth that were white and straight—a walking advertisement for orthodontia.

It was the kind of smile that made her stomach dip, like she accidentally skipped that final stair leading down to her basement. The silly feeling left her flustered. “She’ll be glad you’re here. There’s, um, lots of great stuff.”

“I’m sure there is.” He removed one of his hands from his pocket and stuck it out. The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled up to his elbows, revealing tan forearms and a nice-looking watch. “I’m Ian.”

She hesitated long enough for Caleb to tug on her arm. “C’mon, Mommy. Let’s go.”

Quite often her son made carrying on a conversation impossible. At times, his impatience crawled under her skin. Today was not one of those times. She let herself be tugged away from the man’s outstretched hand. “He’s right. We’re late. It was nice meeting you.”

“Don’t I get to know your name? Or will I forever have to refer to you as the woman who almost knocked me over outside the pawn shop?”

“Antique.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s an antique shop.” She pointed to the sign.

“Oh, right.” He stood with his hands in the front pockets of his slacks, thumbs out, completely at ease, his eyes still crinkled as Caleb pulled her farther away. “So do you have a name?”

Robin batted away her discomfort. There was no harm in sharing her name with a stranger. So why did she have the silly urge to lie? Maybe it was the way the man's attention kept flitting to her son. "My name's...Janet."

Caleb stopped tugging, his forehead scrunching in massive confusion. She squeezed his hand and stepped toward the car before he could blow her cover.

"Nice meeting you, Janet."

"You too." She gave him a halfhearted wave and turned around. "Take a deep breath before you go inside," she muttered.

"What did you say, Mommy?"

"Oh, nothing. It was nothing." She ushered Caleb toward her car and resisted the urge to look over her shoulder.



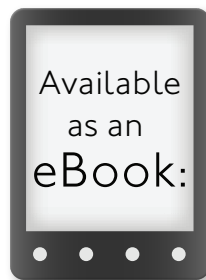
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