



*The
Fountain
of Truth*

R. A. LEE

The Fountain of Truth: A Novel

By R. A. Lee

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Second Cover Art

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Dedicated to my mother, the love of my life, and my family.

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“My Vegas Valentine: A Novella”

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Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee

"Love Again, Love for Them: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

"I am married to you now, Jake, no strings attached... I was holding on to my first marriage so tightly. As long as we had that agreement, I could still feel I wasn't betraying my first vows, the vows I meant."

Brooke Sandstrom has just been laid off and her house is in foreclosure. With no husband to support her, Brooke must make a decision for the financial security of her young son, who has special education needs, and her ailing mother living in a care facility. When her friend offers her the option of remarrying for security, Brooke jumps at the opportunity when she cannot find another job and the care facility is threatening to kick her mother out.

Jake Parker needs a wife. Tired of being nagged by his mother to settle down, Jake decides to give her what she wants so that he can continue to see his beautiful girlfriend in the city, who is married to a Count. Proposing to Brooke, Jake comes up with an arrangement that will solve both of their problems. He will have a wife for appearance sake and a companion for his mother, and Brooke will have security without having to perform the most basic marital duties.

It's an arrangement that works well for both of them until Jake is forced to make a decision. But his indecision may cost him not only his family on paper, but also a chance for meaningful love.

"The Beauty at the Bus Stop: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

Slinking toward them in the heavy, congested traffic was a city bus, and Evan was filled with a sense of urgency.

What could he say to make her not get on that bus?

Laid off from his bank job, Mountain Wood, Colorado, native Evan Hillaway takes a risk and accepts an offer from his cousin to work for a friend in Los Angeles. Within days of arriving, Evan sees a woman at a bus stop and instantly falls in love.

Ashley Cooper is also a small-town girl who has been laid off and looking for a way to meet her financial needs. The only difference is that her "small town" is the Westside of Los Angeles.

Through a series of fortunate events, Evan meets the woman but soon learns she's looking for someone with more financial security than Evan can provide.

With love on the line, Evan risks everything just to prove to her that they belong together. Now it's up to Ashley to decide if love is enough to take their relationship to the end of the line. (Adult contemporary romance)

“My Vegas Valentine” A Novella By R. A. Lee

There is a code between sisters: Thou shall not be intimate with a guy your sister dumps, not without her permission. Faith lives in the shadow of her more glamorous twin, but on a trip to Vegas she bumps into a man she takes for her sister's ex-lover and debates breaking that code when she inadvertently spends Valentine's Day with him after dumping her cheating boyfriend.

Arriving on a commercial flight, Faith's adventure takes her on a local's tour of Vegas and a stay in a private Villa before she boards a private jet home to get away from her Vegas experience and back to her normal small town life.

When co-workers learn of her exploits from her ex-boyfriend, a co-worker who trashes her reputation, they refer to the stranger as Faith's "Vegas Valentine."

Realizing that she's been settling, Faith begins an adventure that takes her from the comfort of her carefully planned life and into the arms of a stranger who may break her small town heart, but for whom her heart beats. "My Vegas Valentine"

“DESERT TOWN ANGELS” TRILOGY

“Desert Town Angels”

PART ONE “The Last Will and Testament of Howard Thornbon”

(Free on Obooko.com)

The patriarch of Golden Peaks is dead. The fate of the desert town is in jeopardy as the residents fear Howard Thornbon’s daughter will sell the dying town and displace them.

But when Howard’s Last Will and Testament is read, everyone is distressed when a stranger is announced as the person chosen to carry out his final wishes.

As drastic changes are made in the town, the full fury of Sheri, Howard’s daughter, is unleashed.

When the mysterious stranger is introduced, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden realizes Sheri has met her match in the person Howard has chosen to inherit Golden Peaks.

As Sheri and the stranger clash over who is the rightful owner of the desolate desert town, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden attempts to keep them from destroying Golden Peaks and each other.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART TWO “The Kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell”

“No!” Sheri shouted as the table shook with her pounding fist. “This is my place!”

“Are you so sure?” Van taunted. “Are you sure you are his daughter?”

“She is,” Nelson snapped and they both sat back. “She is. Sheri is legally Howard’s daughter.”

“Legally?” the lawyer said, sensing the meaning of the descriptive word.

The will of Howard Thornbon has been read and the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell, a woman named Van, has taken over the town of Golden Peaks.

Moving into the old hotel, the mysterious Van invites the residents to dinner to introduce herself. Then, Ryan learns that the fate of the town is still in limbo.

Time is ticking. Howard has stipulated Van must remain in the town thirty days before taking full ownership, otherwise the property reverts to his daughter, who will do everything in her power to take back her birthright.

Thirty days to decide the fate of Golden Peaks. Thirty days to learn why Howard left Golden Peaks to the kin of Ms. Honey Hallowell.

Thirty days before a secret is revealed changing all of their lives forever.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART THREE “The Final Showdown in Golden Peaks”

“They want to discuss some DNA results with us,” Ryan said as he hung up the phone later that night.

“They already gave them to us,” Van whispered horrified.

“The lawyer says he’ll meet us in Hamptonville,” Ryan said as he hugged her tight.

The only thought holding her together was, “Please, don’t let this all be a lie.”

The secrets have been revealed. With the fate of Golden Peaks no longer in limbo, Van and Ryan are free to engage in their own pursuits beyond the desert town.

Van attempts to come to terms with her role in Golden Peaks, and Ryan is ready to reconcile with his past and his parents.

As more strangers reveal the ongoing saga involving the residents of Golden Peaks, Van has learned to adapt to everything about her new life except her feelings for Ryan.

A visitor looking for Nelson unleashes the memory of how the octogenarian ended up in Golden Peaks. Grace’s condition worsens and Van turns to an unlikely adversary to find the dying woman’s grandson.

Before her first year in Golden Peaks has passed, Van makes a decision with Ryan that goes against her core beliefs.

The struggle for control of Golden Peaks continues.

Van prepares for one last showdown with Sheri.

But in the second year, it may be something under the soil that will decide Van’s future in Golden Peaks.

Saving the town she inherited becomes a mission that may cost Van more than the desolate town is worth.

Prologue

Everyone has a tale. A story that defines them. A legacy to pass on to future generations.

The fountain in the town of Trader Fountain had a tale. It couldn't feel or touch or smell, but for more than a hundred years, generations of the Jaskin family had brought the memory of its tale to life.

On the other side of a worn wooden fence facing the main road to the newest part of town, Fountain Way, the reputed origin of the town of Trader Fountain, had been neglected for decades.

In the moonlight, inside the wooden fence, Gran-T looked around the plaza where the story of the Jaskin family in America began.

Every holiday, every birthday, every opportunity she had, Gran-T took on the tradition of telling the tale.

Every member of the Jaskin family knew it by heart and they repeated the chorus with her.

"Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back to marry you."

Echoing through the generations, the words of the two people who met and formed the legacy that was her family grew from this point.

The fountain where they met, where Victor and Row fell in love, was now crumbling. The town they built left behind when the Interstate dissected the community. The church in which they married now sagging in despair, filled with the memories of funerals and no longer bursting with hope and salvation. The house they built, and in which they built their family, their life, was nothing more than just a wall holding back the wind.

This wasn't the story Gran-T told. This wasn't the tale that was passed on to her when she married the oldest son of the oldest son back to the man who founded the town.

Hers was a tale of love. Fountain Way deserved better. From this point, generations of family branched out and embraced their tradition.

Only one member had his doubts. The heir.

As oldest son of the oldest son back to Victor, her grandson Tim was responsible for the legacy now. But Tim didn't believe the tale. Didn't understand the enormity of his responsibility to the family.

His complacency no longer mattered to anyone but Gran-T.

In her hand she held the letter that would decide the fate of their tale, their legacy.

This is where the story ended. One last time, Gran-T would gather her family and tell the tale.

This would be the last time.

It would be the last time anyone heard her version of the tale.

A new tale would be told, but she wouldn't be telling it.

Her time was coming to an end. It was time for another member of the family to keep the tradition alive for future generations.

Gran-T only hoped there was something left worth telling, worth keeping the legacy alive.

Chapter 1

Boarding up her family home, Cherish Tiswell felt as if she were putting the final nail in the coffin containing her life up to that moment.

As part of the agreement with the bank, Cherish would make sure the house was cleaned and the windows boarded up to protect it from vandals. Standing on the porch with hammer in hand, she waited as the bank officer pulled up to inspect her work. Placing the hammer on the railing, she waited as he got out of his car and walked the path to the porch.

Inspecting the house, the bank officer had her sign off on their agreement and Cherish gave him the keys.

As he walked down the steps, Cherish felt a part of her go with him. It was refreshing to know she wouldn't have any debt, but she had just given up her family home. Purchased by her parents when they got married 35 years earlier, the house had been her home for her entire 28 years of life.

Cherish sighed.

The houses on the street looked like rows of tombstones in an overgrown cemetery. The once vibrant street used to be where she said "good morning" to neighbors, met friends for bike rides and where they held annual block parties. Now, she didn't know anyone. Across the street, the Parkers, long-time friends of the family, had moved out six months earlier. They were the last family Cherish knew from the days when her parents were alive and healthy.

As he drove away, Cherish watched as that part of her life turned the corner and was gone. She wasn't alone though. More than half the houses on her block were boarded up. The bank would not be able to sell her house as long as most of the block was vacant.

Once her home, her shelter, the house was now just a hollow shell of memories and in the past few years she couldn't think of any good ones to make her want to stay.

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"In Loving Memory of Gordon Tiswell"

Everywhere she looked there were photos and friends gathered at the wake for her father. Inconsolable, her mother sat on the couch while everyone took turns embracing her and reassuring her everything would be alright.

Watching her mother grieve, Cherish was numb. They had cried together for days after the sudden announcement from the office that he had collapsed. Rushing to the hospital, it was too late for anything. Her father had died before he arrived at the hospital.

"He was such a good man," Harold said as the senior staff members came up to console Cherish.

"Thank you," she whispered and clenched her jaw so that the tears would hold until a later time. Harold, Nancy, Jerrold and Martha had been part of her family since Cherish could remember. In the last few years, since business had started to slow down, they were the only ones left as her parents had to layoff staff one by one. Each time her father had to let someone go, he and her mother would call to let Cherish know they had lost another member of the family.

Then Nancy started crying. Embracing Cherish tightly, Nancy cried on her shoulder. Safe in Nancy's strong arms, Cherish trembled and soon let the hot tears drain from her as they held each other, comforted one another.

Helping her mother to her room as their friends parted, Cherish thanked Nancy and Jerrold who had insisted on clearing away all traces of the wake before they left. Looking around the room as she ascended the steps with her mother, limp from grieving, Cherish was grateful that the next time she descended the stairs the living room would look normal again, before "In Loving Memory of Gordon Tiswell."

In a few days, all their tears had dried up except for the occasional unexpected breakdown like a sudden downpour that comes from nowhere and moves on.

"You have to get back to work," her mother insisted as they sat at the kitchen table looking at their mugs filled with coffee. This was their ritual, but it had no meaning anymore.

"It's an internship," Cherish corrected her. "I was thinking I would stay here and see if I can offer any help with the business. For a little while."

There was so much her mother had wanted to say. Cherish could see that in her mother's eyes. It was a mix of relief and disdain. Those eyes told Cherish she would have to learn from her own mistakes.

"I know you think you can help," her mother said, "but I don't want you to stay because you think you need to take care of me."

It had crossed Cherish's mind, but her main goal was to get the family business back on track.

"Three months," Cherish said.

"Three months," her mother agreed.

Two months later, Cherish realized it didn't matter how much education and experience she had because there was nothing anyone could do to make the business profitable again. Her parents had taken the necessary steps to keep it going, to keep their friends employed, and Cherish felt useless.

When Goring & Manather called regarding a paid internship, Cherish accepted without thinking.

"You did your best," her mother said as they hugged good-bye. "Now go and start your life. I'll be fine."

Before she had graduated, Cherish had been so excited about starting her life. Starting a career, buying a new car, a condo, getting married, having kids, retiring to an exotic island. That had been the future she had seen for herself. Cringing at the grief and despair in her mother's eyes, Cherish no longer felt excited about anything. There were no jobs. Paid internships were all that were available. The car her parents had given her was still running and, until she had a real job, Cherish couldn't even think about buying a new car.

It wasn't until her mother got sick that Cherish realized having good health was the most important goal for the future. Being sick cost money, lots of money. More money than her mother had and more money than the business was worth.

Eventually, Cherish moved into her old bedroom at home. She told her mother it was to save money, but they both knew that was a lie.

Stress. Stress and grief. No matter how much Cherish tried to alleviate her mother's financial stress, Cherish couldn't bring back her father.

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"In Loving Memory of Trudy Tiswell"

Surrounded by the last four members of her extended family, Cherish didn't hear anything, didn't feel anything. Her boyfriend understood. When Cherish needed time alone, George gave her the space she needed. Alone in the house, Cherish tiptoed around the memories.

For two years, Cherish worked part-time freelancing for Dustin & Meyers while sorting through 30 years of her parents' financial records.

There were two decisions. Sell the house or declare bankruptcy. Cherish put the house up for sale.

Then Cherish had to close the family business.

Solemn but strong, Harold, Nancy, Jerrold and Martha comforted Cherish.

"It's not your fault," Jerrold reassured her as Nancy and Martha cried.

"We'll probably be heading out west with you," Harold joked as he embraced her one last time. After more than 30 years with her family, both as friends and loyal employees, there was no animosity as the doors were shut for the last time. Another coffin closed. Another life let go.

Her boyfriend decided it was time to put their life plan in motion. There was a job in the Midwest George couldn't pass up.

"It's the perfect opportunity to get back on track," he said. "There's nothing holding us here now. I know that sounds callous, but it's time we started our life together. Build our careers, buy a house, have two kids. By the time we're in our 40's, we'll be set and on our way to a good retirement."

It sounded like a good plan to Cherish. Stability. Deep down Cherish knew there was no guarantee, but she craved stability to keep her going, keep her getting up every day.

There was an engagement ring. There was a promise. There was a plan.

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Still standing on the porch of the house that no longer belonged to her family, Cherish realized that at the same time the next day she would be a few hundred miles from the only life she had known.

Now, she had to move on to her new family. Accepting George's proposal, Cherish was on her way to join her fiancé. The trip by herself would be a transition from her old life to her new one.

Car packed and map on the passenger seat, Cherish placed flowers at her parents' shared tombstone and headed out of town.

Sitting on the edge of a motel bed three hundred miles outside of her old life, Cherish watched television but saw nothing.

It was late at night when something piqued her interest. A late night talk-show host was interviewing a historian of all people.

"So tell us about your latest book," the host said, holding up the book to the camera.

"The City Built on Lies,' is a compilation of stories about cities and the myths people believe are real stories about their city's founding fathers. I researched these cities and found out the truth about the founding of the cities, and more often than not, the stories are just myths. But these myths have shaped the cities."

"I bet they just love you in..." the talk-show host joked, mouthing the name of a city. The audience applauded.

"I think it's important for historical reasons to know the truth," he explained. Cherish hadn't gotten his name. For a historian, he wasn't what Cherish expected. Well, arrogant and dispassionate, that's what she expected, but he was charming as well.

"Thank you for coming, and we look forward to your next book," the talk-show host said.

Cherish turned off the television and went to bed. She had a long drive ahead.

Using the crack in the motel curtain as her alarm clock, Cherish got up, picked up breakfast at a fast-food restaurant, and was back on the Interstate listening to her radio.

A song came on that reminded her of her parents and she switched it off.

That's when she realized her car was suddenly low on gas. A gift from her parents when she went off to college, old Bubble, as she had named her car, was about to burst. All the meters were old and lazily kept her up to date with the diagnostics of her car.

Pulling over at the first gas icon turnoff, Cherish found herself on a one-lane road and cheered when she finally found the gas station promised.

A small two-pump station, which hadn't been updated since the Interstate diverted business away, stood weary in the middle of a deserted town.

The boarded up businesses were a familiar sight to Cherish. Filling up, Cherish bought some snacks, paid the lonely, quiet man behind the counter, and left.

Where did he live? she wondered as she pulled out of the station.

Deciding to catch up with the Interstate up the road, it was getting late before Cherish realized her mistake. The road did not lead directly back to the Interstate. She felt some hope when she saw a town in the distance, a cross on a church spire.

One of her meters woke from its slumber and soon she was praying she would be able to make it within walking distance of the town.

Chapter 2

Tim thanked the host and left the studio after signing a few copies of his book for the staff. Helena would be at the bar, so he hopped in his sports car to meet her.

Traffic in the city was bad, but Tim was patient and got to the bar only 15 minutes late. Hugging her from behind, Tim surprised Helena, then she hugged and kissed Tim in return.

Eyes the color of blue skies looked at him in wonder.

"How did it go?" she asked seductively. Tim nuzzled her neck. He loved the smell of her perfume, the feel of her straight blonde hair on his cheek. Hand on her well-toned thigh, Tim sighed, wanted to be alone with her naked in his bed.

"It was great, as usual," he said. Helena brought his attention to her face. Studying his face, she smiled seductively.

"Later," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "Now we have to discuss your next appearance after the holiday," she said, pulling out her planner.

Tim ordered a soda water and sighed. Book tours were tiring. Researching was what he enjoyed. Getting lost in records departments, that was a good time. That didn't sell books, especially non-fiction books about history subjects that could be boring. Tim loved his subject matter so much, though, that he had been able to make the boring interesting.

When Helena's publicity company took him on as a client, she made it her mission to promote Tim. She found him equally marketable, and Tim was uncomfortable with selling himself at first. When he realized the writer was as important as the subject matter, the desire to distribute his knowledge surpassed any discomfort he felt at being the young and charming historian for whom women lined up at book signings.

Every book was more successful than the last, for non-fiction works dispelling myths people held as the truth.

"Come with me for the holiday," he said softly into her hair.

"I've got too much to do for the tour," she groaned, leaning into his caress.

"Don't make me go alone," he pleaded, placing a kiss on the edge of her ear.

"I would love to, but I must really work on your next appearance," she sighed and he relented.

"Now, let's talk schedule," she said and Tim agreed to all the dates. Helena's phone rang and Tim sighed.

"I've got to go," she said, gathering her remote office and putting it back into her designer leather bag. Tim pulled her in for a kiss and she hugged him tightly for a moment before parting.

"I'll see you when you get back," she said and Tim nodded as he watched her hurry out of the bar. The moment Helena was out the door, a beautiful young woman in a tight black dress appeared on the vacant stool and leaned seductively on the bar.

"Where do I know you from?" she asked, playing with his tie. Nick wondered if there was a sign on him that stated it was acceptable to assume he was available. His male friends had mocked Tim for this observation. While they were trying to get a woman's attention, the woman would have already made her way to Tim.

Although he had many options, like the one standing before him, Tim wasn't really interested. It took someone special to take him away from his research, someone assertive who could take him or leave him. With Helena, Tim had a business partner and lover, and he had all the time he needed to work on his projects. It was the perfect relationship. The woman before him was a distraction.

"You'll figure it out," Tim said sarcastically as he stood and left the woman behind.

Checking his watch, Tim realized he had to get to the airport.

Two hours after getting off the flight, Tim was at his family home.

Quietly closing the kitchen door, Tim headed for his room. He was tired and everyone would be at the house the next afternoon for his grandmother's 80th birthday.

Sleeping soundly, Tim woke to the smell of bacon and the sounds of family heading to the kitchen. Taking a long, hot shower, Tim was ready to join them.

Standing in the kitchen, his cousin Carl was pouring coffee.

"It's the prodigal son," he joked and Tim smiled weakly. He hadn't been to the family house for a very long time.

"We saw you on TV last night," his grandmother said, turning from the stove and placing bacon on a plate. Eggs and muffins were also on the table.

"Carl, go get Uncle Victor," she commanded.

"Need any help?" Tim asked, but his grandmother never asked for help in the kitchen. It was her domain.

"Have a seat," she commanded. His grandmother was the strongest elderly woman he had ever met. When his parents passed, Gran-T, as she was affectionately referred, moved in from the back house and became his guardian and Tim never got away with anything. She had been old since he could remember, but she was not weak. Hair pulled back, dress neatly ironed, eyes always ready to reprimand, Gran-T was respected by everyone in their family.

"It's nice of you to show up," she said as she peeled a hard-boiled egg.

"I wouldn't miss your 80th," Tim said.

"You missed my 79th, and 78th," she said. "Why is this any different?"

Tim sighed.

"I've been busy," he said, remembering he was an adult and shouldn't whine like a petulant teenager.

"I can see that," she muttered. "Not too busy for TV and writing your books."

Grateful that Carl had arrived with Uncle Victor, Tim stood and held out a chair for his uncle. At 95, Uncle Victor was almost a petrified mummy. Old, wrinkled and barely able to walk upright, Uncle Victor did not speak. Tim couldn't remember a time when his uncle ever spoke. If Uncle Victor said anything, his entire family would have found that a million times more fascinating than Tim appearing to promote his latest book on TV.

"Hello, Uncle Victor," Tim said and didn't expect a greeting in return. Carl peeled an egg for Uncle Victor. Tim waited to say grace, and when his grandmother said, "Amen," Tim put bacon and eggs on his plate and answered their questions about the tour.

"So how long are you with us this time?" his grandmother asked.

"A few days," he shrugged.

"That's nice," she sighed. "The family's coming at 2, I'm going to need you to help Carl with setting up the tables outside."

"Sounds good," he said. Carl stood and took his plate to the sink and Tim followed. Washing their plates, the two left and Carl collapsed into a bench. Tim followed. Two years older, Carl was the opposite of Tim.

If he weren't like a brother, Tim would not have much in common with Carl, a man who preferred hanging out with buddies at the local bar.

The only thing they shared in common, besides family, was their love of horses. The family house used to be a ranch where his great-grandparents trained horses, but as family interests changed, so did the definition of the land.

Officially, the house and all the land belonged to Tim. That included the old part of town known as Fountain Way. For years he had been in a battle between his grandmother and other members of his family, and the town council. His family wanted to preserve their heritage and the council wanted to eradicate the eyesore. Over time, the town moved closer to the Interstate and Tim wasn't sure the fate of Fountain Way. He didn't come home to worry about that, though. He had come to celebrate his grandmother's birthday and take a few days off to regroup.

"Got a new mare," Carl said as they sat and Tim was suddenly interested. Mabel had passed three years earlier and Tim had been unable to replace her.

"She's a workhorse," he said. "But I thought you'd like to take her out for a ride while you're here."

"Thanks," Tim said in appreciation. It had been a long time since he had felt the strong muscles of the graceful beast as she galloped at full stride across the meadow. Mabel had been the most beautiful creature and Tim wanted to recapture the freedom of riding away from everything for a while.

Setting up quickly, Carl took Tim to the stable and introduced him to Gladys. Walking him through the routine of saddling up for a ride, Carl stepped back when he realized Tim hadn't forgotten. He watched as his cousin rode off confidently, back in the saddle again.

Exhilarated by the ride across the meadow, Tim was ready to put the book and the city behind him for a few days.

Driving into town, Tim was surprised by all the boarded up businesses.

The town had extended from Fountain Way, which was now fenced off, and moved gradually north as the Interstate opened. As Tim drove up the old route, he didn't find any open businesses until he got to the intersection with direct access to the Interstate.

All the businesses he had grown up with had either closed or moved to State Street. The old grocery store had relocated and Tim walked in to see if Michael, the owner, was still around.

Although the store was in a new location, it still felt old and musty. It was almost as Tim had remembered it, back when his parents had walked up the old route from the house to take him in for ice cream or a soda. The old grocery wasn't in walking distance anymore.

"Tim!" a familiar voice called from behind the counter.

"Michael," Tim exclaimed and shook the old man's strong hand. Michael had always seemed old to Tim, but now he just seemed old and frail, still strong like his grandmother, but there was a faltering tone in his voice.

"Back in town?" he asked, looking eager to talk to anyone. The store was empty.

"It's Gran-T's 80th," Tim explained.

"I know," Michael said. "Closing the store early just to be there."

There weren't any customers, but Tim didn't want to bring that up to the old man who was probably struggling to keep the store open.

"I came in for some baking soda and ice cream," Tim said, looking around.

"Coming right up," Michael said eagerly as he went to get the items for Tim. It was customer service from another era and Tim didn't deny the man his tradition.

"I noticed all the boarded up businesses on my way over," Tim said. "Don't recognize the town anymore," he said as Michael put the items on the counter. A look of regret and despair swirled and diminished in the old man's eyes.

"For a while it seemed like another business was going under every week," Michael said as he bagged the groceries. "It's bad, but it's been bad before," Michael said as he rang up the items. Swallowing, Tim accepted his response.

"Everybody's proud about your new book," Michael said. "I didn't get to see you on the television, but they say you did well. Your grandmother's got to be real proud."

"Thanks," Tim said as he pulled out some bills and waited for change. Behind the counter, on the wall, hung an old photo from Fountain Way. There were similar photos at his house, but Tim felt compelled to purchase more than just the two items.

"That photo," Tim said, pointing to the large, framed black and white photo, "if it's still available I'd like it, for my collection." It was more like the family photo wall, but every photo was a part of history.

"That old thing," Michael scoffed. "I'll just give it to you."

"Then I can't write it off," Tim joked, thinking quickly. Michael looked up at the photo gathering dust in its new location.

"That was taken when I was a boy," he said as he lifted the frame. Tim tossed more bills on the counter and helped Michael. Gripping the frame securely, Tim looked at the photo. There was nothing in the photo Tim hadn't already seen in the photos at the house.

"How long have you had it hanging here?" Tim asked. "I mean in the store, before you moved?"

Sighing, Michael leaned against the counter and thought about it and stood cheerfully when he saw the date on the bottom of the photo.

"That photo was taken in '45 and I think it's been in the store since I took it over from my father in '68," Michael explained.

"This is a good piece of history for my collection," Tim said as he nodded to the old man. Michael looked happy to contribute.

When Michael saw the money, Tim knew the old man was going to protest so Tim grabbed the bag from the counter.

"I'll see you at the party," Tim said as he walked out, struggling with his purchases. There were still no other customers. Walking up the street to his car, Tim noticed the thrift store was busier than the grocery store and the mechanic shop was open. It was getting late, so Tim put the frame in his trunk and headed back to the house.

The busiest place in town was the Interstate. Cars rolled by and passed the town. Up the road there were bigger grocery stores, nicer hotels, more populated towns. Soon, the town would be a memory, like walking to the store for ice cream with his parents. Tim was living a history he would probably soon write about. A story about a town in which his family had lived for generations, like everything, would fade and evolve into something the next generation would embrace, and the old generation would try to remember in tales.

Soaking up the facts, Tim went back to the house and wrote what he saw and the dates in his journal. When he told the story, it would not be a tale. It would be a historical account. It would be remembered and it would be true.

Chapter 3

Every family member in a 50-mile radius showed up for Gran-T's birthday party.

Tim fielded questions about his latest book, signed copies for relatives, and ducked questions about the council's desire to demolish the town reputedly established by his great-great-great-great-grandparents. There was no documentation, but it was part of the family tale, their pride, their heritage. Its future officially rested in Tim's hands as the oldest son of the oldest son all the way back to his great-great-great-great-grandfather.

"Isn't it ironic," his cousin Tess said as they were eating lunch, "that you write about myths surrounding other towns and could care less about researching your own town?"

There was applause. Tim remembered why he didn't want to come home.

"You're on the council," Tim said in disbelief. "Why can't you stop them?"

"There's only two of us," Tess said. "The other three don't keep us informed on everything they're doing."

"We've been through this," he explained. "I have researched it. There is no evidence that the story is accurate. The records were burned. The country they came from doesn't exist anymore. It's just a story handed down for generations."

Tim sensed his grandmother's discontent. They had stopped talking about the fate of the town years ago. Instead, she just told the tale passed down from generations.

The birthday cake was brought out and Tim was grateful. Singing "Happy Birthday," the family applauded the long life of his beloved grandmother.

Presents were opened and his grandmother had one request.

"I know many of you have to get back home," she said, standing before the dozens of family members celebrating her birthday.

"I am going to be telling the story of our family heritage for the last time this year," she said and Tim heard a collective gasp. Weak. For the first time Tim saw weakness in his grandmother and he cringed. *Why would this be the last time?* he wondered.

"Join me in the family room," she said and turned to walk away. His cousin Richard stood and helped her to the house. Tim sat unable to move. He had been gone a very long time. Lowering his head, he sighed. His relatives headed to the house, but some had to get back home. Patting him on the back, his cousins, and aunts and uncles, and everyone else related to him walked by and Tim waited until he was alone.

This would be the last time he would hear the tale he could almost recite by heart. It was a story told for more than a hundred years, but it was just a story. It had become as much a part of him as breathing, and until she said it would be the last time she told it to the family, Tim didn't realize the very life he lived would be forever changed if the story were never told again.

Walking slowly to the house, Tim started the story in his head.

In the year 1850, young Victor Jaskin left his village in Hibverna and came to America with nothing but money he had saved from working in his family's business. Buying a piece of land out West, Victor traveled and explored the country with no desire to settle down or marry the woman his parents had arranged for him to marry.

"Victor built a shelter no better than a shack and a fountain for his animals to drink from while he was away. One day, after coming back from a journey exploring the wilderness, Victor saw a beautiful woman sunning herself on the fountain."

His grandmother took a deep breath and her audience was captivated. Tim stood against the wall by the door. Relatives young and old, those hearing the story for the first time and those who could recite it themselves, listened to the last telling of the favorite tale of their kin, who established the town of Trader Fountain.

"Falling instantly in love, Victor was surprised that she too had come from his country seeking a new life. But sadly, she was going to marry another and Victor tried everything to convince her to stay, but he did not want to get married. One night, as they lay under the stars, she gave Victor three things he needed to do to change her mind."

Gran-T raised her hands for everyone to join in.

"Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family, and I will come back and marry you." Tim found himself whispering the chorus. Gran-T gasped and tears rolled down her cheeks. Taking a deep breath, she finished the story.

"So Victor built a trading post that turned into a town," she said while her voice cracked. "He built a church where they were to marry, and he built a house where they would build a life."

Pausing, everyone knew the ending, but they waited for Gran-T to finish.

"A year later, she returned, and they got married," she said. There was a collective sigh.

"And now it's in your hands," Gran-T said motioning toward Tim and he was startled. Standing straight, he was puzzled as everyone looked at him. "All this passes to you," Gran-T said. "It passed from Victor to his oldest son all the way to your father and now you. This is your heritage, all of ours, Tim. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Gran-T could no longer hold her sorrow. She picked up a letter on the side table and stood. Walking away, Gran-T dropped the letter. A few cousins got up to help her, and someone grabbed the letter as Gran-T was helped up the stairs to her room.

Looking at the letter, a cousin gasped and passed it to another relative who also gasped and passed it to another relative until they were glaring at Tim and getting up to leave. As they filed by, Tim wondered what was in the letter and avoided their contempt.

As the last one left, the letter was handed to Tim and he was alone.

It was a letter from the head of the town council.

They were preparing to designate eminent domain over Fountain Way.

Tim dropped the letter.

Unable to comprehend the news, he walked briskly to the stable, saddled up Gladys and rode away to get away from his confusion.

Riding away from the relatives leaving the party, Tim let the rhythm of Gladys galloping across the meadow hypnotize him. Realizing a storm was coming in, Tim started back to the stable. As he turned, he looked over at Fountain Way. The wooden fence set up to protect residents from trespassing into the deteriorating part of town was falling apart. Tim saw a car going by and then watched as it slowed at the edge of the old town. It was smoking and leaving a trail in its wake.

A few seconds later, the driver jumped out and lifted the hood. Black smoke rose and the driver jumped back. From his distance, Tim saw the person pull out a cell phone to call for assistance. Believing the person was getting help, Tim didn't see the need to assist. He had too much on his mind.

When the person walked through an opening in the fence, Tim realized he should help.

Steering clear of the smoking car, Tim looked in through the opening in the fence off the main road and saw a woman lying on the fountain.

The rain fell and Gladys was not happy.

The woman was not either. Reclining on the fountain, she held out her arms and he heard her yell, but he didn't hear what.

The woman heard Gladys and was startled. Sitting up, she pulled her legs up and held them close to her chest with her arms.

Hair streaked and stuck to her head, the woman waved him away.

"Tow truck is coming," she yelled. Tim was puzzled. *Why did she sit in the rain?*

Shrugging, Tim gently nudged Gladys away and saw a truck approach. Realizing she would be taken care of, Tim headed back home.

Seeing the woman at the fountain, soaking wet and cursing the rain, Tim was reminded of the last story his grandmother would ever tell of the fountain. If the head of the council had her way, it would be the last they ever saw of Fountain Way as well.

Chapter 4

Drenched, but way past defeated, Cherish met the tow truck operator. The rain had ceased, leaving a light mist.

Looking into the smoking beast that was her engine, the tow truck man, "Joseph" according to his nametag, shook his head.

"Your radiator is gone," he said, pointing at the part. "Your hoses are just about shredded."

"Can you fix her?" she fretted. The Bubble had been there through good times and bad, and Cherish wasn't ready to part with her.

"I can, but it's going to take time," he said.

"Do you think you can take me into town?" Cherish asked, resigned to the fact she would have to be there a while. "I need to find a hotel."

"On the Fourth?" he asked incredulously. Looking around, he had another solution.

"Down that road, see that intersection," he said, and she nodded. "That's where Gran-T lives, the family that founded this town. You're more likely to find a room with her there at the house."

That was not a possibility.

Cherish got on her phone and called every hotel in a 20-mile radius. They were all full, and only a few scoffed at her. It was another 100 miles before her next scheduled stop where she had a reservation.

Hooking up the car, the tow truck driver got a call.

Flipping his phone open as her car was connected to his truck, Joseph snapped it closed after a moment.

"Wife's in labor!" he said. Cherish stood there. She would have been happy for the man, but she was stranded in a strange town with nowhere to sleep for the night. Joseph jumped in the tow truck and Cherish raced to his passenger window.

"I need to get my suitcase," she implored him.

"Hurry, I gotta get to the hospital," he said cheerfully, eyes toward the future.

Cherish opened the back door of her car, pulled out her suitcase, leaned into the front seat and grabbed her purse. The other items she had packed would have to wait.

"Will my stuff be safe?" she asked. "Wait, do you have a card?"

Joseph grabbed a card from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Gran-T will know how to find me," he said and started to pull away. Cherish backed up and watched him race down the road, water flying in his wake. The Bubble was taken away in critical condition.

Standing in front of the broken wooden fence, Cherish saw the sun break through the clouds. To her left, there was a turn off and she could see a line of trees where Joseph said this Granty lived.

This is how horror movies begin, she told herself.

Her mother's every fear come true. Car broken down, forced to seek refuge with strangers. Alone. Nobody to rescue her. Nobody knowing where she was.

It would have been easy to call Nancy or Martha, even Harold or Jerrold, but Cherish could still see the despair in their eyes and she didn't want to burden them further, not until it was necessary.

There's one person I must call, Cherish thought as she rolled the engagement ring on her finger. Making a call, Cherish got George's voicemail, but it was full.

Swallowing, Cherish headed to the intersection and the blacktop turned to stone as she made a right toward the unknown. The wheels on her suitcase did not like the terrain, so she had to hold it in her arms. Struggling with the canvas case, she made it to the tree-lined driveway and around a corner to a two-story large country house with three cars parked in the driveway.

There was a truck, a sedan and a sports car. There was a light on in one of the downstairs rooms, and a set of stairs leading up to a door. It looked like a back entrance, and since she was soaking wet, she decided to announce herself where she wouldn't mess up Granty's house.

Walking up to the stairs, Cherish heard the sound of a horse approaching and turned. The speckled golden horse she saw in the rain was a few feet from her and still coming forward.

Cherish backed up, she wasn't sure if it would trample her.

Backing up, Cherish realized the horse was the least of her problems. Tripping on something large under her feet, the suitcase flew out of her hands and she landed in a puddle with a great "whoop."

This was not a day she ever wanted to remember.

A man held out his hand and Cherish grabbed it. Pulling her up, he let go and went to retrieve her suitcase.

"That was so embarrassing," Cherish declared, wiping earth from her clothes, wringing water from her shirt and hair.

Looking up for a moment, she forgot about her fall.

Staring into the most intense blue eyes, Cherish remembered her night in shining armor from the fountain. Turning, the man led the golden horse away from her.

The man who helped her up introduced himself.

"I'm Carl," he said, holding out his hand. Cherish put her cold, wet hand in his and shook it professionally.

"I'm Cherish," she said.

"What brings you out here?" he asked as if it were normal to meet a drenched stranger who wandered to the house.

"My car broke down," she said, pointing toward the direction where her car broke down. "The tow truck driver said I should see Granty."

Shivering, Cherish was more than cold.

"Come inside," Carl said, holding her suitcase and walking up the steps.

Looking up the steps, Cherish wondered if that was a good idea.

"Where am I," she asked. "What's the name of the town?"

"Trader Fountain," he said, opening the door at the top of the steps.

Cherish nodded.

"I'll be right there," she said and he went into the house.

Clutching her cell phone to her chest, Cherish sent a quick text message to her fiancé.

"In a place called Tradr Fountin," she misspelled as she typed quickly. "Staying with Granty."

With that, she climbed the steps and walked into an uncertain future.

Chapter 5

Looking down from her window, Gran-T saw a woman approach with a suitcase. The sun had appeared for a moment and she was looking at the last rays of sun on her 80th birthday thinking about the last tale she would ever tell about her family's heritage.

Years and years of telling that tale brought her joy, but the decision had been made. Tim hadn't cared enough to save his heritage for future generations. He needed proof; the tales didn't count as evidence that his family had settled the area generations ago.

If the council demolished Fountain Way, Gran-T knew it would symbolize the end of the pride her family shared. This was their home. That would never change. But the tradition would be forgotten, that's what Gran-T feared.

Living in the city, Tim didn't understand what he would be losing. Since he went off to college, he wanted nothing more than to find a home elsewhere. Researching other cities, other peoples' legacies, was his mission. While her family desperately implored him to reconsider, Tim was not satisfied with the symbolic stature Fountain Way bestowed on his family.

Gran-T could no longer hold on to the hope that Tim would realize what he was losing, the treasure he was throwing away. What tales would he tell future generations? Did he not care just because he couldn't have children of his own?

Spoiled. Gran-T knew Tim was a good grandson, but Tim was surrounded by family and didn't know how lucky he was to have family. Maybe if his parents hadn't been killed in the car accident. Maybe Tim couldn't handle being reminded about it every time he was home.

There was so much more than the memory of their deaths to come home to and Gran-T didn't know if Tim realized how lucky he was. The Jaskin family in Trader Fountain alone included dozens and dozens of family members. Every Christmas, every Thanksgiving, every Easter, every birthday, Tim was never alone. Cousins had lived with them from time to time like brothers and sisters.

Tim didn't know what it was like to be without family. The tale was just a story he had heard again and again, but it didn't mean anything to him.

Family was everything to Gran-T, but Tim had no idea what he had. That was what saddened Gran-T the most. Tim would have the house, and she didn't even know if he

would keep that. He might sell it to another family member, but he didn't seem to want to be a part of the heritage anymore.

Gran-T closed her eyes and made a birthday wish.

If proof was what Tim needed, she prayed and wished he would get what he needed. The council hadn't made its final decision yet. There was still time.

Opening her eyes, Gran-T saw the woman, suitcase clutched to her chest, back away from Gladys and before Gran-T could shout, not that the woman would have heard her from behind the closed second-story window, the woman tripped over a log.

Gran-T gasped.

But that wasn't the most fascinating thing that happened. Carl came to help the woman. Behind him, grabbing Gladys' reins, Tim led the horse away. As Carl helped the woman up, Tim looked back. Tim looked back for a long time before turning the corner.

Gran-T would have to get to know this woman better. If something interested her grandson, it would help her understand him and his motives. Maybe what she needed had arrived. Maybe what she needed was some outside influence.

Chapter 6

Cherish stood in the mudroom of Gran-T's house while Carl went to find his grandmother. Shivering, Cherish wasn't as much cold as she was humiliated and nervous because she had to ask this person she didn't know if she could have a place to stay for the night.

Hair still dripping, Cherish waited, arms clutched around her chest.

An elderly woman, tall and elegant, came through the kitchen door and out to the mudroom.

"You're soaking wet!" she exclaimed. Cherish started to talk, but her teeth were chattering.

"Let's get you into a hot shower," she said, motioning for Cherish to join her.

"I don't want to get your house wet," Cherish said.

"Carl here will clean it up," she scoffed and Cherish realized the woman was sincere in wanting to help her. Cherish wasn't sure how to bring up the fact that she needed a place to stay.

"My car broke down and the tow truck guy said there were no hotel rooms and I checked and he was right then he said you might have a room I can stay for the night then he had to go because his wife was having a baby," she rambled off.

"I'll have to call them later," Gran-T said. "Now let's get you warmed up."

Slipping off her wet shoes, Cherish followed the woman through the kitchen while Carl looked amused.

There were two sets of doors and the woman led her through the door to the left side of the room where she had entered.

"Everybody calls me Gran-T," the woman said. Cherish shivered and nodded.

"My name is Cherish," she said.

"How pretty," Gran-T said and led Cherish to a bedroom.

"This is my grandson's room, but you can lock the door," she said. "He's got his own bathroom. You can take a shower and change. I'll have Carl show you the guesthouse later. Are you hungry?"

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking into the room filled with books and papers, the desk cluttered, the bed unmade.

"I'll have Carl bring your suitcase," she said. "Do you like leftovers?"

Cherish nodded. *Guesthouse?*

"I'll put together something for you," she said, walking away. Cherish stood by the door. *Was this Carl's room?*

Carl showed up through the kitchen door, holding her suitcase.

"Here you go," he said, putting it down at her feet.

"Is this your room?" she whispered.

"No, it's Tim's," he whispered back.

"You sure he won't mind if I shower in there?" she asked.

"Maybe," he joked and Cherish smiled.

"Thank you," she said.

Carl went back to the kitchen and Cherish gingerly stepped through the door with her suitcase rolling behind her. Once inside, she closed the door and turned the lock.

Grabbing some clothes from her suitcase, she didn't disturb Tim's books and papers as she headed to the bathroom. There was a large framed photo propped up against the bookcase. Only looking long enough to see the fountain, Cherish went to the bathroom and closed and locked the door.

Pulling her wet pants off, they hit the floor with a "swat" then she peeled her shirt off, took off her underwear and wrapped it all neatly in a bundle.

Steaming up the room, she washed her hair and lathered with his man-scented soap. Breathing in the scent, Cherish realized it had been a long time since she had enjoyed the scent of a man up close.

Realizing Granty would be waiting for her, Cherish sighed and turned off the water. Grabbing a towel that didn't look used, Cherish dried off and started to put on her clothes when she realized she hadn't grabbed her underwear. Swearing, she looked around the room. There was a robe hanging on the back of the door. She didn't want to go out into the room naked even if the door was locked.

Opening the door, she turned to grab her clothes from falling off the sink and her robe came undone.

Turning, she was startled.

Standing on the other side was a tall man looking at her with eyes the color of the sky on the brightest, most perfect day. For a moment, Cherish looked at him because he looked familiar and not because she recognized him from the fountain and the backyard where she had tripped over the log. When she saw his eyes wander lower, then up again, she realized what he was looking at. Gasping, she grabbed the robe, slammed the door in his face and leaned against it.

Hand covering the horror escaping from her mouth, Cherish waited a long time. There was some rustling then nothing. She heard the other door close.

Peeking out, she saw the suitcase outside the bathroom door.

Shaking her head, Cherish pulled it inside and locked the bathroom door and made sure it was locked.

Wiping the steam from the mirror, Cherish took off the robe and put it on the hook.

Standing in front of the mirror, she admonished herself. A stranger had seen her naked, and she was wondering how she had looked. *Damned double standard*, she cursed under her breath.

Had the man on the other side been threatening or not as attractive, she knew she would be screaming for help. Women could be taken off guard by a good-looking man, and Cherish scolded herself for being concerned about what he thought about seeing her naked.

Since he was Granty's grandson, Cherish was somewhat confident he didn't have nefarious lustful intentions toward her. But how did he get through the locked door? It was his room. Did he have a key? Didn't Granty tell him she was using his bathroom?

Quickly dressing, Cherish grabbed her wet clothes, made sure the bathroom was as she found it, and pulled her suitcase out to the bedroom. Locking the door again, Cherish tested the bedroom door. Turning the handle, the door was locked, but when she turned and pulled harder, it opened.

Faulty lock. *Did Granty know the lock didn't work?*

Pulling her suitcase behind her, Cherish walked down the hallway to the kitchen, enticed by the smell of home-cooked food.

A place was set and she didn't want to bring up the subject of the faulty door with the woman who seemed happy making her guest leftovers.

"Good, you look happy," Gran-T said, putting food on a plate and taking it over to the place she had set at the end of the table where Cherish stood, holding her wet clothes.

"Let me take those," Gran-T said, holding out her hands. Cherish gave the wet clothes to her.

"Sit, eat," Gran-T commanded and walked away.

Starving, Cherish swallowed the food without chewing. They were the most incredible leftovers she had ever tasted.

"That was incredible," she said when Gran-T came back. Taking off her apron, Gran-T thanked her.

"Do you want some pie?" she asked.

"Only if it's not a problem," Cherish said, hoping she wasn't wearing out her welcome.

Gran-T uncovered a pie sitting on the counter, cut a large slice and put it on a plate. Opening the refrigerator, she pulled out a tub of whipped cream and then put a huge dollop on the top. Proud, Gran-T presented it to Cherish.

"Cherry," Cherish said in wonder. "That's my favorite," she said, accepting the plate.

"I'm glad," Gran-T said and watched as Cherish enjoyed a few bites.

"You must be tired," Gran-T said. "I'm going to get one of my grandsons to show you the guesthouse. It's just a room with a bed and bath."

"That's more than I can hope for tonight," Cherish said, swallowing the sweet, tart dessert.

"I'll see you in the morning," Gran-T said and left. Cherish was alone.

Alone, she ate the pie. Each bite was so incredible, she moaned as she slid the fork out of her mouth. Closing her eyes, Cherish savored every bite. Opening her eyes, she almost choked. Watching her, the tall man with the blue eyes stood inside the kitchen.

Swallowing, Cherish wanted to say something, but she didn't know what. The man, most likely Tim, shook his head and headed out to the mudroom, and Cherish watched as the door closed behind him.

Picking up her plate, she was no longer in the mood for pie. Scraping it in the trash, Cherish washed her plate and Carl came in the room.

"Ready?" he asked, holding a set of keys.

Cherish nodded.

"I'll get my suitcase," she said then followed Carl out the door where Tim had just left.

Leading her around the corner, Carl asked her where she was going to on the Fourth of July weekend.

"I'm going to join my fiancé," she explained. Carl nodded.

"Too bad about your car," he said.

As they went farther away from the house, Cherish looked back wondering where they were going. Turning into some trees, Cherish was concerned because she couldn't see the house in the moonlight anymore.

About to stop, Cherish saw a small white house and realized he wasn't leading her into the woods for nefarious purposes.

"It's a house for relatives who come into town," he explained. "We have three. Mine is down the path," he said, pointing off into the dark where the path led.

Showing her the keys, he held them up for Cherish, who took them and opened the door. The light from the room lit up the night.

"I don't usually lock my door, but I thought you might want to," he said.

"Thank you," she said gratefully. "Thank you for everything."

"If you need anything," he said. "I'm at the end of the path," he said and smiled.

"I have one question," she said.

Carl nodded.

"Is your grandmother's name Granty or is that an affectionate name you call her?" she asked, still not knowing what she was calling her kind hostess.

"It's Gran then the letter T," he explained. "Her name is Tess and since there are so many relatives and grandparents and cousins and nieces and nephews, she became Gran-T."

"Makes sense," Cherish agreed. "Gran-T," she said, making sure she would be able to say it right next time she saw his grandmother. Carl stood and waited to see if she needed anything else.

When Cherish first saw Tim, she didn't feel threatened by him when he saw her in his robe. Carl was unthreatening in a different way. She knew he would be open for

anything. He seemed like a casual outdoorsman who relaxed at the local bar with friends drinking beer until late into the night. This was not her type.

"Thank you," she said and walked into the house. Waving, Carl smiled and walked off. Cherish shut the door and leaned against it with a sigh. Locking the door, and making sure it was not going to open, Cherish walked down the three steps into the room.

Gran-T was right. It was a room. There was a bed to her right, a couch facing the bed on her left and a door leading to the bathroom ahead. It was perfect. There was even a fireplace for colder weather.

A layer of sweat was starting to form on her skin in the humid night so the fireplace did not look very inviting at the moment.

I wonder what it looks like in the firelight? Cherish knew she would never know.

Tired, Cherish stripped to her underwear and pulled out an old nightgown.

Falling asleep quickly, Cherish wanted to put the day as far from her as she could.

Waking late in the morning, Cherish was embarrassed. Before she realized where she was, she had a warm dream where the man with the blue eyes was doing more than just looking at her nude, wet body.

Chapter 7

Waking early, Tim grabbed some breakfast before his grandmother got up and he headed out to the stable for a long ride with Gladys.

Ever since the letter, his grandmother had not spoken to him. Tim wasn't sure why he stayed. He could have gone back to the city, but it was Independence Day weekend.

The intent for declaring eminent domain was not a surprise for Tim. The majority members of the council had been trying to tear down Fountain Way for years. Declaring it dangerous, they voted to make Tim put up the fence. Obeying, Tim put up a fence.

Tess had apologized. As only one of two family members on the five-person council, she was outvoted. She didn't even know the council was considering eminent domain.

But she wasn't the one everyone blamed.

Heartless. Tim knew his grandmother and other family members thought he was heartless about the whole issue.

Truth was, he wasn't. Embarking on his own research in college, Tim could find no proof, no historical evidence that the town was founded as told in the tale that had been passed down for generations.

It was part of his heritage, but now it was a decaying remnant of a past that lived in their memories. Maybe the council was right. Maybe it was time to move on and maybe sell to a developer when the economy got better.

It was sentimental to his family, but other than preserving it, nobody had any other ideas for Fountain Way. No stores could be sustained there at the time. Tim just thought it would always be there. But now the council had made a decision for them.

Tim knew it would take time. The council couldn't just come in and demolish Fountain Way. He knew the procedures. Until then, his family would implore him to try and save their link to the past and future.

As first son of the first son, all the way to Victor's first son, Tim was the heir to the family legacy. He didn't ask for the responsibility. It was too much pressure for one person to endure. If he could have a son, he would amend the line of succession.

As he rounded the corner of the house, Tim saw the familiar sight of his Uncle Victor sitting on a bench on the side of the house. Sitting on the bench with him, a woman was visiting and talking to his uncle. Tim stopped. Uncle Victor didn't have visitors.

Sitting on the bench, the woman he had seen in his bathroom, the woman at the fountain was having a conversation with Uncle Victor.

Riveted, Tim walked closer and stood off to the side.

Coming back from a walk the night before, he had found his door locked. Thinking it was just stuck, he had turned it hard and it opened. It was odd that his bathroom door was closed, and when he heard something or someone inside he had gone to see who was in his bathroom.

Before he could knock, the door opened and he had been mesmerized. Hair slicked back wet, cheeks red and flush from a hot shower, standing in his robe, steam framing her softly, the woman from the fountain was in his bathroom. Looking down, he saw the soft curves of her breast and body through the open robe. Green eyes surprised and startled stared right at him confused for a moment before she rightly slammed the door in his face.

The pie. Listening to her enjoy the pie. He had just wanted to grab a glass of water when he was curious as to who was moaning in the kitchen. Once inside, he couldn't take his eyes off her. She was just eating Gran-T's cherry pie, and although it was very good, he had never heard anyone enjoy it the way she did.

In his dreams he saw her gasp when he saw her naked, heard her moans, and he still didn't know who she was or even her name.

She was just some woman whose car broke down and was probably unable to find a hotel because of the holiday weekend.

As she talked to Uncle Victor about pie, Tim heard his uncle's voice for the first time in his life.

"Pie," his uncle repeated. It was the only word he said. It was the first conversation he had ever heard his uncle participate in with more than a nod or shake of his head.

"It's been nice talking to you," he heard her say, and Tim quickly turned and walked away. Turning the corner of the house, Tim didn't want to bump into the woman so he hopped in his car and took a long drive.

He wasn't sure why, but the woman mesmerized him and he wasn't easily distracted. It was just the fact he had seen her in the shower. Startled, he was stunned there was a naked woman in his room.

The look in her eyes, Tim couldn't get that look out of his mind.

As he got to the intersection, he saw Fountain Way to his left. Turning right, he headed away from that which he could not comprehend, the woman and his responsibilities.

Chapter 8

Walking around the grounds, Cherish found the stable, saw the other two guesthouses and then took a nap in her room. It was very hot. The scent of wet grass from an afternoon rain shower and flower blossoms and the sound of humming cicadas lulled her.

In the early afternoon, there was a knock at her door. It was Carl.

"Lunchtime," he announced and Cherish didn't want to bother the family, but she followed Carl because she didn't want to be rude either. She was their unexpected guest, but a guest nonetheless.

In the yard on the side of the house, tables had been set up and there were a dozen women of all ages sitting, talking, laughing, serving food and having a good time. Cherish wasn't sure if she was supposed to join them. Gran-T came around the corner with two glasses of tea.

"Have a seat," she commanded and two of the older women urged her to join them. The younger women were waiting to dissect this new rival.

"Time for grace," Gran-T said and everyone lowered their head and when she was done they said, "Amen."

Grabbing food and talking and laughing again, the women ate.

A latecomer arrived, a woman about her own age with an edgy look, black hair cut in choppy layers, black eye makeup and many earrings. Cherish didn't think anything about her, until the woman decided she wanted to know more about the one person at the table who did not belong.

"Who's she?" she commanded as she sat down near Gran-T.

"You're late, Row," Gran-T scolded her.

Grabbing chicken from the basket with her hands, Row glared at Cherish.

"Eminent domain?" she asked. "That arrogant ..."

"Watch it," Gran-T warned the woman.

"How does he not understand?" she asked.

"Let's just eat," Gran-T said.

As they finished and the older women helped Gran-T take leftovers back to the kitchen, the younger women started talking amongst themselves. Row turned her attention to Cherish.

"You," she said, pointing at Cherish when Gran-T left. "Who are you? Cousin, niece, aunt?"

Stammering, Cherish didn't have an answer.

"My car broke down and your grandmother offered me a place to stay," she said. For some reason, the other women probably already knew this. Maybe Gran-T informed them when they got there before Cherish arrived.

Satisfied, Row turned her attention to the other women.

"Did you see that arrogant jerk on that talk-show," she said loudly and the other women nodded.

"Those cities he cares about," another woman said.

"I don't understand why it's only up to him," another said.

"How fair is it that it's only passed down to the men," Row said.

"It just worked out that way," another said. "There have only been first born sons."

"Tim can't have any kids," Row said. "What will we do now?" she said sarcastically.

"Let's stop picking on Tim," another said and Cherish put together where she saw Tim before.

Unfortunately, her mouth reacted before her brain thought it would be better to keep it to herself.

"Something interesting?" Row asked sarcastically.

"Nothing," Cherish shrugged. "I just remembered where I saw Tim before."

All the women looked at her for an explanation.

"When I saw him," she said, leaving out the embarrassing bathroom moment. "I thought I saw him before. He was on this talk-show."

"You a groupie?" Row asked sarcastically teasing Cherish. Shaking her head, Cherish made the mistake of showing her engagement ring.

"I'm engaged," she said, but the women heard something else entirely.

"You're engaged to Tim?" one of them stated, standing in excitement. Shaking her head vigorously, Cherish realized her mistake. All the women were talking at her, asking questions, when Cherish stood and backed up.

"I am not engaged to him," she said loudly and the women looked at her as if she were crazy. Taking a deep breath, Cherish explained.

"I am engaged to another man, I am not a groupie," she said, directing her point to Row, who was pleased at the commotion. "My car broke down, I am on my way to see my fiancé."

Gran-T turned the corner with the older women. Holding baskets of cookies, and cookie decorating materials, Gran-T saw the commotion. Cherish sighed.

"What's going on here," Gran-T commanded. "What did you do, Row?"

"Nothing, grandma," she said sweetly while glaring at Cherish.

"You guys are going to finish decorating these for the picnic," Gran-T commanded. "I have to go to town. Let's go, Cherish," she said.

"I'll go get my purse," Cherish said quietly, grateful to be away from the women.

Heading back, she quickly walked by the other women as she met Gran-T at the driveway. Waiting by the sedan, Gran-T called for Tim.

Gasping, Cherish was not expecting to be going with the man who saw her naked. Did he know he was going with her?

The mudroom door opened and Tim was down the stairs before he realized there was a guest going to town with them.

Cherish did not say anything. It was hang out with Row and the women, or ride with Gran-T and Tim.

"Cherish, have you met my grandson Tim?" Gran-T proudly introduced them.

"Were you the guy on the horse at the fountain?" Cherish asked. Gran-T was startled.

"You've met before, *at the fountain?*" she asked with a whisper of amazement at the last part. Cherish didn't know. It was raining. She wanted to forget about the other times they met.

Tim nodded. His grandmother was oddly excited.

"We should get going," Gran-T said and Cherish waited for Gran-T to decide where she was sitting. Tim took the driver's seat and his grandmother took the passenger seat, and Cherish was offered the seat behind Gran-T.

They did not speak during the 15-minute ride to town. Up the road from the main street, Cherish saw the Interstate.

"Do you know where the shop is where Joseph works?" she asked as they got out of the car and stood on the street. Banners of red, white and blue hung from the streetlights and swayed in the wind. Gran-T said "hi" to people who greeted her.

"Good to see you back, Tim," an older man said and Tim nodded.

"Tim will show you," Gran-T said. "We'll meet back here in an hour." Walking off, Gran-T left Cherish standing with Tim.

"If you just point, I'll find it myself," she suggested.

Tim nodded and pointed across the street and up the road from where they stood.

"Thank you," she said and quickly headed to the shop. Excited she would know more about her car, Cherish walked with determination. Cherish noticed the boarded up stores and realized it was not just her city that was facing hard economic times.

Concentrating on something else helped her to not think about Tim's eyes. They were so intense they melted her brain. She hated men who were able to scramble her brain with just their looks. She didn't know him, but she knew Tim was the type of man who knew women were attracted to him for no other reason than he was tall and handsome.

Cherish preferred a man with substance, a stable man who didn't melt her brain.

At the end of the block, a worn sign hung from the top of a brick building. AUTO SHOP.

The garage door was closed and there was a sign on the glass door.

"Closed for the Fourth of July. Open Tuesday."

Horror crept up her arms in painful prickles. It was Friday. Wiping dust from the garage door, Cherish groaned as she peeked inside. The Bubble was tucked safely in the garage.

Turning, she pounded on the metal and slid to the sidewalk. Holding her head in her hands, she realized she didn't have many options.

Pulling out her cell phone, she went through the list of hotels and expanded to a 50-mile radius.

Nothing. The weekend was booked. She could have a room Monday night. Making a reservation at the local hotel for Monday night, Cherish wandered the streets of the small town.

In the drug store, she bought toiletries and some snacks. Walking back to the meeting spot, she saw a thrift shop. A pretty dress caught her attention. Entering the musky shop, she wandered through the vintage clothing and then asked about the dress in the window. The lady was excited to have a buyer. Putting some bills on the counter, Cherish thanked the lady and walked out with the dress folded in a wrinkled plastic grocery bag. Tim was sitting on a bench looking at his phone when she got back to the car.

Checking her phone, Cherish saw that it was a little over an hour since they parted and she didn't see Gran-T anywhere. Standing against a wall near the car, she waited.

When Gran-T came back, Tim opened the trunk and helped her put her brown shopping bags inside. Cherish bit her lip. *How do I tell her I have no place to stay?*

"Ready?" Gran-T said and Cherish hesitated.

"The shop's closed until Tuesday," she said, still standing on the sidewalk.

"We'll come back then," Gran-T said.

"All the hotels are booked until Monday night," Cherish said, trying to make them understand she was stranded.

"That's fine," she said, then realized Cherish was concerned about being an unwelcome guest. "You're still welcome to stay at the guesthouse," Gran-T said.

"Are you sure?" she fretted. "That's an awful long time ..."

"I insist," Gran-T said.

Sighing, Cherish got into the backseat and Tim pulled away. There was a cooler and throw blanket folded by her side. There was silence until Gran-T asked Tim to pull over. Tim pulled onto the side of the road and looked at his grandmother.

She got out. Tim put the car in park and turned it off. Gran-T went to the front of the car and stood in the street, staring at the fence around the fountain where Cherish had sought refuge when her car broke down.

"What's she doing?" Cherish whispered. Tim sighed.

"It's a long story," Tim said.

Gran-T walked over to the driver's side and Tim opened his window.

"I want you guys to come out here," she said. "Grab the cooler and blanket."

Sighing again, Tim obeyed. Cherish followed.

Standing in front of the car at the side of the road, they stared at the worn wooden fence.

"Tim's great-great-great-great-grandfather Victor Jaskin built this town," she said wistfully.

"That's interesting," Cherish said, thinking she had to acknowledge Gran-T.

"The council's going to demolish it," she explained. Cherish did not acknowledge.

"Before it's gone, I thought you'd like to know the story behind it," Gran-T said. Cherish was confused. *Why did it matter for a stranger to know about their family history?* It was interesting, but not necessary. If Gran-T wanted to tell the tale, though, she would listen. The woman had been nothing but a kind and gracious hostess to a strange woman.

They started to walk to the opening when Gran-T decided she needed to do something else.

"You two go," she said, heading back to the car. "I'll be back. Tim, you know the tale. You tell it this time."

Nodding, Tim turned and headed toward the opening. Gran-T drove away. Cherish stood alone in the middle of the road. A car was coming, so she followed Tim through the opening.

It looked different in the sunlight. The overgrown trees and shrubs shaded the plaza. To her left was a row of boarded up buildings connected by a sidewalk, like something from an old Western town renovated for visitors. The fountain was in the middle. It was where she had sought refuge.

The church to her right was small and the stairs were gone. It was old and falling apart. There was another building farther up the way, but she didn't know for what it was used.

Tim put down the cooler and unfolded the blanket. Shaking it, he put it on the ground in an opening in the sunlight.

Opening the cooler, he pulled out pie and two bottles of water. Cherish didn't want to join him. She just wandered the perimeter wondering what was so special about the town.

"If I don't tell you the story of this town," Tim said loud enough for her to hear, "she'll never forgive me."

Cherish considered his grandmother's request. For letting her stay at the guesthouse, this was probably the only thing she would request from Cherish.

Joining Tim on the edge of the blanket, Cherish knelt down. Tim pulled the tinfoil off the top of the pie and Cherish was grateful it was apple.

Cutting two slices, Tim put them on the paper plates that had been inside the cooler, placed a fork on one of the plates then handed it to Cherish.

Nodding, she took it from him. Quietly eating the pie, they were lost in their own thoughts. When they were done, Tim handed her a water bottle.

"Do you know why my grandmother got excited when you mentioned you saw me when you were at the fountain?" he asked, not looking at Cherish.

"No," she shrugged.

Tim looked directly in her eyes and she tried to hold his gaze, but she looked down at her water. Cherish wondered if she would ever be mature enough to be able to look into the eyes of an incredibly attractive man without looking away.

"That's where the story begins," he explained. Cherish was puzzled and met his gaze.

Standing, Tim motioned for her to follow.

In front of the fountain, Tim began his tale.

Chapter 9

Tim knew the tale. His entire life, his grandmother told him the story not only of the town, but how he got to be where he was. It was the story of his life. It was her version she had learned when she married Tim's grandfather.

This was not the story Tim wanted to tell. His grandmother's story was a love story. Tim wanted to be as factual as he could, considering he only had the spoken word and a few facts from extensive, fruitless research.

"About 150 years ago, we don't know for sure, my great-great-great-great-grandfather came here from a country in Eastern Europe that no longer exists. Hibverna. Saving up his money, he came to America and bought this land and all the land where the house sits now."

"Many versions of the story say he was leaving because a marriage had been arranged for him by his parents," Tim said. "He could have just been seeking his fortune."

Cherish interrupted.

"This is not the official family version, is it?" she asked rhetorically.

"This is my version," he said.

"One day, he supposedly saw a woman sunning herself on the ledge of the fountain, once again, that's part of the tale."

"That's where the story begins," she said. "I understand."

Tim noticed she was irritated. She would have most likely loved his grandmother's version.

It was hot, so he sat on the ledge of the fountain facing the deteriorating town to tell the rest of the story. Cherish sat nearby and they were grateful for the shade of the tree. Cherish drank from her water bottle and stared ahead to absorb his words.

"I understand it's a tale, so you don't have to say supposedly," she said and he nodded.

"I deal in facts, that's what I do," he explained. Cherish shrugged.

"He sees this woman and they most likely start a conversation and as the tale goes she mentions that she came from Hibverna as well. They get to know each other and he learns that she must go back because her family has arranged a marriage for her. Distraught, as the tale goes, he begs her to stay."

Tim took a drink of his water.

"She says that she will come back if he does three things," he said. Tim could hear his family repeating the chorus in his head. "Build us a town where we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back to marry you. There is no evidence she ever said this. It is part of the tale."

Cherish lowered her head. Tim wondered what she was thinking. Closing her eyes, she sighed and drank her water.

"So he is said to have built a trading post, which turned into a town. He is said to have built this church. He most likely built the house, that used to be over there," he said, pointing to the far end of the plaza, "but it burned down in 1908. Only the one wall remains."

Cherish sighed.

"She came back. They got married, we believe," he said. Cherish glared at him.

"There's no record of it," he explained.

Shaking her head, she looked to the plaza again.

"This is the part of the tale my grandmother likes to leave out," Tim said.

"Maybe there's a reason," she reprimanded him.

"His wife gives birth to a son, then two other children," Tim said ignoring her. This was his tale.

"His parents arrive and they greet his wife as if they know her," he said. "Turns out she's the woman they had arranged for him to marry. She had come out to seek him out and got him to marry her. He probably resented her for this."

Cherish glared at him. Standing, she walked away from him.

"Anything else you'd like to add," she said sarcastically.

Tim felt relief. He had told his version.

Closing the cooler, Cherish picked up the blanket and started to leave. Walking toward Tim, she glared at him again. Tim was confused.

Following her to the street, Tim watched as she continued walking toward the house.

"I think my grandmother will be back to pick us up," he said, waiting.

"That's nice," she said, but continued walking. Tim realized his tale had upset her for some reason.

Jogging up to her, he walked with her for a moment.

"That's really how you see it? Isn't it?" she asked, scrutinizing his face.

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"Some woman tricked your great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather into marrying him?" she asked, adding too many generations. Tim did not correct her.

"Nobody will know for sure," he explained.

Cherish stopped and looked at him as if he were slow-witted.

Shaking her head, she walked off.

"I need to think," she said. Allowing her 50 paces of distance, Tim followed Cherish back to the house. The sedan was still in the driveway.

Walking into the kitchen, he saw the cooler sitting on the table. Cherish was not in the room. Tim went to his room to be alone.

What had upset her?

There was a knock at the door.

"Are you back?" Gran-T called through the door.

"We're back," he said and she opened the door.

"Did you tell her the story?" she asked.

"I did," he said.

"Good," she said pleased. "Let her know dinner's in an hour."

Tim wanted to object, but that would mean explaining that he had upset Cherish, who didn't like his side of the story.

"I will," he agreed, knowing he would ask Carl to tell her when dinner was ready.

Checking emails and voicemails, there was a cute note from Helena wishing a Happy Fourth of July and he winked her back.

"Dinner's ready," his grandmother declared an hour later and Tim went to find Carl. Outside, he saw Carl.

"Dinner's ready, would you mind getting Cherish?" he asked and Carl nodded with a smile.

Thanking him, Tim went to get his Uncle Victor. Turning the corner, he saw Uncle Victor sitting quietly with Cherish. Backing away, Tim went to find Carl, realized he was being ridiculous and turned to get both of them at the bench.

"Dinner's ready," he said and Cherish nodded. Tim helped his uncle up and walked behind Cherish to the kitchen.

Helping his grandmother set the table, Cherish talked with her about the tale.

"I wish I had a story like that," she said while placing the silverware.

"Every family has a tale," his grandmother said, stirring and testing the food on the stove.

"I don't," Cherish said loud enough for only herself to hear, but Tim caught it.

"Sure you do," Gran-T insisted. She had great hearing. "What about how your parents met, or how their parents met?"

Sitting, Cherish thought about it.

Carl entered exhausted, saw Cherish and relaxed.

"Sit, everyone," Gran-T commanded and they sat, said grace and ate dinner in silence.

A light flickered and Tim noticed something on Cherish's finger. She was engaged. Tim understood why she was upset at the story. Tim had just denigrated the institution of marriage. He had made cynical a beloved love story.

Lowering his head, he felt sorry she felt that way. It was just a story. There was nothing true or false about it. No one would ever know.

Chapter 10

In bed, Cherish thought about the story Tim had told her. Here was a man surrounded by family, and he was callous about how important it was.

The only story Cherish had was how her parents met. They were both in college and her father asked her mother out, then they got married, got pregnant and bought a house. It was love at first sight her mother said. Cherish did not believe in that concept. For a short while, during her lifetime, her parents had loved one another. Now Cherish had nothing. She was heading for something, but at the moment she had nothing.

The family house, the family business, the family, the family friends were all gone.

His family surrounded Tim. He lived in a house his family probably built and he was raised in a town his family supposedly founded, and he really didn't think it was important.

The women were right. Tim didn't seem to care.

Sighing, Cherish twisted the ring on her finger.

Three more days. She had to wait three days before she could go to a hotel, to find out if her car was ready so she could continue her trip.

Closing her eyes, she fell asleep. The sun streaming through the curtains woke her and there was a knock at the door.

"Breakfast," she heard Carl call.

"I'll be there," she called. Groaning, Cherish got up and got ready for a new day.

Tim wasn't at breakfast and Gran-T wanted to know if Cherish wanted to help package cookies.

"We're trying to get signatures on a petition, so we're handing out cookies at the picnic," Gran-T said.

"I would love to," Cherish agreed.

For hours, they bagged single cookies and attached a ribbon with a note – Please Save Fountain Way.

As they bagged cookies, Gran-T asked Cherish about her fiancé and her family.

Cherish sighed.

"Both my parents passed a few years ago," she confided. "I had to sell the family business, the house I grew up in. Had to say good-bye to friends and employees who were like family. Now I'm going to make a new family with George."

A story like that needed to end on a positive note.

"What about the rest of your family," Gran-T asked. Cherish was puzzled.

"It was just me and my parents," she said.

"What do you mean?" Gran-T asked incredulously.

"My parents were only children, I was an only child," she shrugged, not able to explain it any better.

"I can't imagine that," Gran-T said, shaking her head.

Hours later, they had a sandwich for lunch and Carl came in and got bagged lunches for him and Tim and Uncle Victor. The table was filled with bags of cookies.

They made more bags until they were through. There were about two hundred bagged fountain-shaped cookies on the table.

"Thank you for your help," Gran-T said gratefully. "We're going to give these out at the Fourth of July picnic tomorrow."

"Sounds like fun," Cherish said, but she was tired.

"I'll have them get you for dinner," Gran-T said and Cherish headed back to the guesthouse.

Napping, Cherish woke when Carl knocked on the door, and when Cherish got to the kitchen, the cookies were in boxes and the table set. Sitting next to Carl and across from Uncle Victor, they said grace and began eating the pot roast and vegetables. *How did Gran-T have time to make cookies and pot roast?*

Enjoying the meal, Carl asked if she was excited about the picnic. Cherish hadn't thought about it, didn't know she was going.

"I don't know much about it," she shrugged.

"She's going to help us get signatures," Gran-T informed Carl and Cherish realized she was going.

Everyone looked at her.

"Yes," she said.

"Just remember, church is at 9 a.m., everybody be at the car by 8:30," Gran-T commanded and they all nodded.

Cherish wondered what she would wear.

Helping with the dishes, Cherish remembered the dress she had bought in town.

"Ask," Gran-T said as they dried the dishes.

"I just wanted to know if I could wash this dress I bought, it's the only thing I have to wear for church," she said.

"Of course," Gran-T said. "That means you should also pick up the clothes I washed for you when you got here."

Cherish nodded.

"I'll be right back," she said and raced to the guesthouse, took the dress out of the bag, realized she should wash her other clothes, and raced back with a handful of clothes.

Showing her the washing machine and dryer, Gran-T let Cherish wash the clothes while she went upstairs to bed.

Wishing her a "good-night," Gran-T left and Cherish sat in the kitchen until the clothes were dry, took them out, folded them, and turned off the lights before locking the door and leaving.

As she headed back to the guesthouse, warm clothes in her arms, Cherish saw someone head to the stable on Gladys. Slowing, she waited and then quickly headed back to the guesthouse.

Hanging the dress from the bathroom door, Cherish admired the floral design. It wasn't the newest dress, but it was perfect for church and a picnic.

Excited, she went to sleep and met the family at the driveway in the morning for church.

The men admired her dress and for the first time in a long time, Cherish felt attractive. It had been a while since she had felt that and it made her realize how much she needed it.

Chapter 11

The church outside of town was a large, white, traditional, sloped-roof structure with a wooden cross on the front and one atop the spire.

It had been a while since Cherish had been in church. Not since her mother's funeral. Cherish was doing it for Gran-T because it seemed so important.

Somehow, she ended up between Gran-T and Tim. Instead of concentrating on the sermon, she was distracted by Tim's cologne, by the masculine strength of his thighs and arms pressed against her in the pew. It was blasphemous, but she couldn't not smell his cologne, not feel his muscles, the only thing she could do was not think beyond that.

Thinking about George, Cherish was able to compose herself. Being near George did not make her think obscene thoughts in church, or anywhere.

As they left, a woman approached Tim and they went to talk alone.

"Old girlfriend," Carl said and Cherish looked away. It was none of her business. They waited by the car and got in once Tim joined them.

"Betty is looking well," Gran-T said, hoping Tim would tell her what they had talked about for 15 minutes.

"Yes," he said and concentrated on driving.

"I need to get out of this suit," Carl complained.

"Drop us off at the park and you guys can go get on more casual clothes," Gran-T stated. Tim followed other cars into the dirt lot, let Cherish and Gran-T out then drove back to the house.

Greeting all her friends and family, Gran-T introduced Cherish as her guest then led her to the area where the family had set up picnic tables and a booth. A petition flipped in the warm wind and the boxes of cookies were under a canopy.

Sipping tea and eating chicken, they got to work.

As they passed out cookies, hundreds of people signed the petition in the first few hours.

"Bribing people are you, Gran-T," a woman said with disdain.

"We're going to do everything we can to save Fountain Way," Gran-T asserted. A dozen female family members gathered around her with their arms crossed over their chests.

"It's a hazard," the woman said.

"It's our heritage," Gran-T asserted and the women backed her up. Cherish stood to the side saying nothing.

"Good luck, but I think the council's stacked against you," the other woman said with a sniff. "There's not much you can do now."

"We'll see about that," Gran-T said and glared at the woman. The woman sneered and left.

"Good job, Gran-T," her family said and went back to passing out cookies.

"Who was that?" Cherish asked.

"That was the head of the town council Barbara," Gran-T explained. Tired, Gran-T sat on the picnic bench. "Would you mind getting me some tea?"

Cherish reprimanded herself for not thinking to offer her a drink. Pouring a glass of cold tea, she held it for Gran-T who thanked her and drank almost the whole glass in one gulp.

"You should go wander," Gran-T suggested.

"Sure," Cherish said. Refilling Gran-T's glass, she put some tea in a plastic cup for herself and wandered the park.

It was a real old-fashioned family picnic. Setting up makeshift tables, sitting on blankets or just hanging out on chairs, people talked and laughed while their children played and ran around with their friends.

There were some carnival games and some food booths. A dance floor was set up and older couples were swaying to a live band. Sitting among the families, Cherish felt very alone.

"Hello," a woman said and Cherish recognized her from church. It was Tim's former girlfriend Betty.

"Betty is it?" Cherish asked and waited for confirmation.

"Yes!" the woman proclaimed. "How did you know?"

Cherish looked at the pretty woman a few years older than herself and smiled. She seemed very pleasant.

"Gran-T saw you talking with Tim," she explained. "I guess she remembers when you were going out."

"That was so long ago," Betty laughed gently, touching Cherish's shoulder. She had assumed Tim's taste in woman ran more for the sophisticated, sexy, world-traveled woman, but Betty was a pretty and down-to-earth woman. Maybe she didn't know his type.

"So the talk is Tim saw you at the fountain and now people believe you're fated to be together," Betty laughed. Cherish smiled.

"I've been told," Cherish said. "I've got other plans," she explained, holding up her engagement ring. "I'm on my way to meet my fiancé."

Betty held Cherish's hand and looked at the ring.

"That kind of spoils plans doesn't it," Betty laughed. "I've got to get back to my fiancé," Betty said. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"It was a pleasure meeting you," Cherish said. Somewhere inside, Cherish felt relief but she wasn't sure why. The feeling quickly faded when Row sat down next to her.

"I thought maybe you and my cousin snuck away," Row teased. "At least that's what I might tell Gran-T."

Cherish shook her head and sighed.

"Which cousin?" Cherish smirked. A smile of approval spread across Row's mischievous face.

"You'll fit right in," Row said as she stood and left.

Another sigh of relief. This was not her home, this was not her family. Cherish wondered if Row knew how lucky she was to have such a close family that loved her, put up with her sarcasm and dark moods.

Carl came up and wanted to dance, but Cherish declined.

"I don't know how," she explained.

"You don't have to," he said. Cherish smiled, but she didn't want to look like an idiot in front of strangers. Carl stood there with his hand out, and Cherish relented. Dressed in jeans and an open shirt, he pulled her close and she stepped back. Carl looked at her mischievously. He had to try.

Applauding the band, Carl wanted another dance, but Cherish was tired. Carl was a good dancer, but she didn't want to dance with him. As she walked away, another woman came up and Carl was happy to have a partner.

Wandering to a less crowded part of the park, Cherish saw Tim. Tim and the council member who was rude to Gran-T. They seemed friendly and Cherish walked away. It was none of her business.

Heading back to the Jaskin family picnic, which was about two-thirds of the crowd, Cherish found Gran-T and all the cookies had been distributed.

"How many signatures?" she asked.

"We got more than a thousand," Gran-T announced proudly. There was applause.

"Congratulations," she said and they sat under the canopy in the heat of the waning day. Drinking tea, Gran-T pulled out her pies and they all devoured them until not even crumbs were left in the tins.

As twilight descended, the containers were packed up and put in the cars that brought them, and trash was disposed and bagged.

"Fireworks in an hour," Gran-T said and Cherish went to wander again. The dance floor was packed. The women from Gran-T's lunch pulled Cherish into their circle and they danced to fast music until Cherish needed air. Dizzy, she headed to open space and let the cool night air caress her sweaty body. Thinking she was alone, Cherish started spinning to get more cool air and nearly bumped into Tim. She hadn't seen anyone and was surprised he was alone as well.

Catching her before she knocked him over, Tim grasped her arms gently and Cherish caught her breath.

"I thought I was alone," she explained. He released her, but she started to wobble and he grasped her arms again.

"You seem to do a lot of crazy things when you think you're alone," he joked. Gaining her balance, Cherish nodded and he let go. Collapsing, Cherish lay on the ground, staring at the stars. Tim sat beside her, his arms resting on his knees.

"Fireworks show should start soon," she said.

She looked over and Tim nodded.

"Your grandmother got more than a thousand signatures," Cherish mentioned.

"I don't want her to get too hopeful," Tim said.

Cherish wanted to ask Tim why he was speaking to the council member. Wanted to know if he was conspiring or trying to work out a deal.

Cherish didn't. It was none of her business.

A loud pop went off and they watched the fireworks display in silence.

After it was over, Tim stood and walked away. Cherish got up and headed back to Gran-T.

"Did you see the fireworks?" Gran-T asked as people started to leave.

"I did," she said and helped them take blankets back to the car. Waiting for Tim, they all got in the car once he arrived and rode back to the house in silence. Everyone was tired.

"Did you enjoy the picnic?" Gran-T asked as they got out of the car.

"I had a great time," she said. A thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Help me to my room," Gran-T said and Cherish took her arm as they headed into the house. Walking her up the stairs to her room, Cherish helped Gran-T take her shoes off. Sitting on her chair, Gran-T asked for a photo sitting on her table.

"That's Tim's mother and father," she said. "My son." Gran-T sighed. "If it weren't for Tim, I think I would have died that day."

Cherish nodded.

Gran-T handed her the frame and Cherish looked at the family. She wondered how Tim dealt with such an incredible loss as a young teen. It was hard enough for Cherish and she was a grown woman. Her mother had time to say good-bye.

Cherish put the frame back on the table.

Rain hit the window.

"Have some pie until the rain passes," Gran-T insisted and Cherish went downstairs. Tim was sitting in the kitchen eating a piece of pie.

"May I join you," she said, grabbing a plate.

"Sure," he said.

Taking the whipped cream from the refrigerator, she put a dollop on the piece of apple pie, reconsidered and put another dollop on it.

Satisfied, she was about to put it away, when Tim saw it and asked for some. Scooping the cold cream on his pie, she put the whipped cream away and sat on the opposite end of the table.

Eating the pie quietly, she did not moan. That was reserved for the sweet tartiness of cherry pie.

The rain poured down relentlessly.

Finishing her pie, Cherish sighed, pushed the plate away and placed her head in her hands.

"You can watch TV in the living room until it passes," Tim suggested. Cherish looked at him.

"That's a good idea," she said. Taking her plate to the sink, Cherish washed it and Tim came behind her and waited. Cherish stepped away and he washed his plate.

"Would you show me where it is?" she asked.

Tim nodded and she followed him to the living room. The large room had three leather couches in a U shape and the room was filled with bookcases. There was a flat-screen TV above the fireplace. There were photos and tchotchkes among the books. Cherish sat on the couch facing the TV while Tim turned it on and flipped around the channels.

An old movie came on and he stopped.

"Looks good," she said. Cherish just wanted to pass time, she really didn't want to watch anything in particular. Pulling a throw blanket over her, Cherish kicked off her shoes and curled up on the couch.

She was surprised when Tim sat down on the other couch nearest the TV.

It was a classic old movie, and Cherish hadn't seen it. She never would either. The power went out.

She heard Tim get up, but Cherish stayed on the couch as the thunder rumbled and the rain pelted the windows. A few moments later, Tim arrived with a flashlight. Blinding her, he turned the flashlight away.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Fine," she said. Flashing the beam around the room, he found some matches and started lighting candles that Cherish didn't realize were all over the place.

"Does the power go out a lot?" she asked. The room was soon as bright as when the lights were on.

"I'm not here that often, but I guess it does," he answered.

Tim sat down and Cherish didn't have anything with which to start a conversation.

Snuggling in the throw, Cherish decided it was best to keep to herself.

Surprised that he asked a question, Cherish looked at him in disbelief.

"What part of my story didn't you like?" he asked as if he had been thinking about her reaction since the day he told the tale.

Cherish sat up.

"Have you been thinking about that since the other day?" she asked.

Tim didn't answer.

Cherish laughed and leaned back into the couch.

"You write about this stuff for a living," Cherish answered. "What does it matter what I think?"

"It matters," he said. "I have to sell what I write."

"Don't you sell well?" she asked, realizing that sounded weird.

"Yes," he said. "But I think that has to do more with marketing."

"Marketing?" she asked.

"My publicist is very good at what she does," he said.

"You don't believe in what you write?" she asked, noticing that Tim wasn't arrogant.

He was more reserved and introspective than she originally thought.

"I believe every word," he said, looking straight at her.

"I haven't read any of your books," she shrugged. "I don't think I can criticize you."

There was a long silence.

"I don't understand why you're so fascinated with other towns and other stories, but when it comes to your own, you act as if it's just a silly story." Cherish knew it was harsh, but that is what she thought about him.

"Don't hold back," he joked.

"I am just a stranger passing through," she said. "If my kids were to tell my story like you did, or if my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandchildren said supposedly, I would be mortified. At least play up the love story."

"Even if it's not true?" he asked. "What if you told one story about how you met your fiancé and then he tells another then your family generations from now tells another."

Cherish was startled by his passion over being called dispassionate.

"I wouldn't care," she shrugged. "The fact I have great-great-great-great-great-great-grandkids would be satisfying enough. Everyone hopes their love story is the most incredible one in the world."

Tim thought about that for a moment.

"So what's your story?" he asked. "How did you meet your fiancé?"

"In college," she shrugged.

"That's your entire story?" he asked.

"It's personal," she said.

"So nobody's gonna know the real story?" he asked.

"You're so caught up with the real story and facts," she said. "Do you want to know what I think happened between your great ..."

"It's just four 'greats,'" Tim corrected her.

Cherish glared at him.

"I would like to hear this," he said as he turned and slid down the couch, his hands under his head as he reclined and waited for Cherish to tell her version of the story.

"So it's the 1800's, right?" she said and Tim nodded. "This young woman from another country is betrothed to a man she never met. She doesn't have many options. She can't go to work, or find another man without bringing shame to her family. By the way, I have no facts for this, but it's just as good a theory. So, she jumps on a ship and gets off in some port and somehow, probably by being beautiful and pretending to be helpless, makes her way here. From across the ocean. She wants to meet the man who jilted her. Wants to meet the man that was supposed to be her husband."

Tim didn't say anything.

"She arrives and he's off finding himself or hunting, we don't know. He comes back and she wants to make her best impression. He's young. He's a guy. She probably took off just enough clothes to be sexy, but not slutty for her day. She posed seductively on the ledge of the fountain, and he comes and is instantly in love. It's all she's got. Vindicated, she gets to know him better. Turns out, she likes him as well. Once she knows he truly loves her, she gives him an ultimatum. This is the kind of guy who probably doesn't think he needs to get married."

Cherish took a deep breath. Closing her eyes, she finished her version of the tale.

"She needs to know if he can commit to her," she said, imagining Row and Victor together in love. "She asks him for three things to prove he is willing to settle down with her. She leaves to test his love. Once she's married, back then, that was pretty much it. With her reputation at stake, she comes back. She has people looking in on his progress. When she returns they marry."

Cherish sat up, her story was gaining momentum.

"This is where your story is cynical," she said no longer really talking to Tim. She was trying to convince herself. "When his parents arrive, he feels trapped for like 10 seconds. For a moment he thinks he's been trapped. But I bet you, once he thinks that through, he looks at his beautiful wife, his beautiful baby, his children and realizes to himself, 'I could have missed all of this,'" she said, her version of the story coming to an end.

"Then they had the most incredible makeup sex in the history of the world, the kind that only comes along once in a lifetime, and lived happily ever after," she said and leaned back triumphant. "Until a spoiled great-great-great-great-grandson thinks he knows better."

Cherish sighed.

Waiting for Tim to laugh at her theory, she was surprised only one thing caught his attention.

"Have you ever had that kind of makeup sex?" he asked mischievously. Cherish blushed. She should have known only a guy would pick up on that part of the story.

"That's what you took from my version of the story?" she asked. Tim looked very comfortable stretched out on the couch, golden candlelight flickering on his face and long body.

"Have you?" she asked sarcastically and realized she shouldn't have asked a guy such a silly question.

"I asked you first," he said, his voice low, his thoughts raw.

Gritting her teeth, Cherish resented Tim. She didn't know him well enough to hate him, but Cherish hated his type. Tim was the kind of man that was attractive for no other reason than the fact that he was attractive. The worst part was that men like Tim knew

this and used it against women. Cherish had no other desire than to show him she could resist his charm.

"You want to know if I've had that kind of once in a lifetime makeup sex," she teased him. Cherish leaned forward and threw the blanket to the side. Standing, she walked up to the couch where he was reclining and put her left knee between his legs, and he parted them as she moved up to his thighs. With her other knee supporting her on the couch, she leaned forward and caressed his chest up to his neck then unbuttoned his shirt slowly.

Tim did not dissuade her.

Bold, Cherish did something she'd never done before. She kept his hungry gaze as she moved closer. Eyes dipping, she leaned down and kissed his chest and moved up to his neck. His heart beat faster under her palm.

If he could be mischievous, so could she.

Cherish barely grazed her mouth along his neck up to his ear. With a flick of her tongue, she felt him gasp and stiffen beneath her. Trailing along his cheek, she reached his mouth, but she did not kiss him. His breath was hot and ragged and Cherish smiled.

Flicking her tongue on his lower lip, he gasped and moaned then she trailed her tongue along his lip. Tim did not kiss her back. Cherish knew he was waiting to see what she had to offer.

Gently, she lowered her mouth onto his and barely kissed him, the sensation of her lips against his was exhilarating. Tim moaned again, his warm hand on the back of her neck urging her for more. Cherish kissed him, the teasing becoming serious. Breathing turned heavy, her whole body warm, together they were exploring, insisting, urging and grasping. His kiss was both tantalizing and mesmerizing.

Unexpectedly tender and passionate, Tim held her against him. As he gently pressed up toward her, Cherish felt him rock hard against her pelvis.

Cherish remembered she was just making a point.

Reaching her hand down, she grabbed his crotch, his clothes a thin separation between them, and pulled away to see the look in his eyes. Cherish knew she had him in her grasp. His full attention was hers. He was hungry for more.

"Not yet," she said in answer to his question. Releasing him, she stood and smiled for a job well done.

"What?" he asked, breathless and confused.

"You'll understand in a moment," she said, putting on her shoes as she headed to the door. The rain was now a light sprinkle. Grabbing an umbrella from the foyer, Cherish opened the door and let the cool air caress her. Closing the door behind her, she didn't bother opening the umbrella as she ran across the slick grass to the guesthouse. Inside, she closed the door and collapsed on her couch, dropping the umbrella to the floor.

Touching her lips, she could still feel the sensation of his hot lips against hers, his breath on her cheeks. What started as a tease almost ended as much more. She was not entirely impervious. Not yet.

Cherish had never felt such intense passion from just one kiss. Looking at her ring, she wanted to take that back, but it was true. But it didn't mean she questioned her relationship. The only thing she ever got out of men who melted her brain and could make her moan with a kiss was heartbreak.

Tim was being cocky, so she thought she'd teach him a lesson. But it backfired because she almost gave into the temptation of their desire. He seemed pretty stunned. That part of her plan worked out well.

Maybe she would never learn that what she felt was pure lust and nothing more.

Cherish slid on the couch and curled up.

It was true, though, the answer to his question. It was a sad truth.

She had never had sex so incredible it was something she remembered the rest of her life. But was that really important?

Cherish fell asleep. In her dreams, and only in her dreams, Cherish did not leave Tim's embrace.

Chapter 12

Tim woke up the next morning still on the couch.

The candles had burned out and he could hear his grandmother in the kitchen making breakfast.

Sitting up quickly, he remembered the kiss Cherish had given him.

What started as a tease, quickly morphed into the most erotic kiss he had ever had in his life. This was pretty startling to him, because he thought he had mastered that part of foreplay.

Mischievous. That's what Cherish was that night. After taking the time to explain why she didn't like his version of the family tale, the only thing he had commented on was the makeup sex.

As she talked about his great-great-great-great-grandparents Tim didn't really remember much after she talked passionately about how they must have made up after Victor realized he had not been tricked.

Cherish answered his question, but she knew how to get his attention.

Thinking about her story over and over, trying to fight the urge to go after her, Tim thought about his great-great-great-great-grandparents as real people for the first time.

In the tale, they were always old and dead to him. It was something that had happened a long time ago.

As Cherish described Row as a hot young woman and Victor a young horny man who would fall for a beautiful woman, it was hard for Tim to understand at first. These were people he had always imagined as his own grandparents.

At one point, Victor and Row were two young people most likely in love, at least very attracted to one another.

Kissing and loving and living, Tim never really thought about them that way. Never imagined his parents or grandparents that way. When he asked Cherish if she had ever experienced such a feeling, he was just teasing. Cherish knew that and decided to answer him the only way he would listen.

Tim still hadn't been able to shake the image of Cherish standing wet, semi-nude in the steamy bathroom. Without any makeup, she was glowing and radiant and beautiful.

When she came up to the car in that flowing, floral dress he realized that she could be pretty as well as extremely sexy. But not the same way he found Helena sexy.

When he first met Helena, Tim knew where their relationship was headed. Helena did not waste any time getting to know Tim. By the second date, they were in his bed.

Cherish was more complex. Sitting in the rain, falling over the log, she didn't look like much, but he knew she got up again, brushed herself off and found a solution to her problem. Car broken down, no hotel, holiday weekend in a strange town, no problem, she had found a place to stay for the night.

Tim was intrigued, but she was a guest. A guest on whom his grandmother had placed too much symbolic pressure. Tim had seen her at the fountain. It was like a fairy tale come true for Gran-T. Tim did not feel that way. He had no interest in a fictional happily ever after.

Groaning as he pushed himself off the couch, Tim headed to the kitchen. He didn't want to meet Cherish until he had thought about what they would say to each other.

Kissing his grandmother cooking at the stove, he grabbed an apple and said he had business. Driving away, from his rearview mirror he saw Cherish turn the corner. In jeans and a shirt, she didn't look like the type of woman who could tease him with a prelude to nothing.

Driving nowhere, Tim ended up at a diner the next town over, read the newspaper and headed back after checking his emails. Tuesday, everything would be back to normal. In a few days he would be back in the city and off on the last part of his book tour then back to research for his next book. He hadn't decided the topic, but he had a few ideas he would be able to pursue.

It was late afternoon when he pulled back into the driveway. Tim was going to ride Gladys across the meadow before dinner. As he was walking to the stable, he saw Cherish saying "good-bye" to Uncle Victor. Tim wanted to turn but he was ready to discuss the kiss now.

Walking quickly, he said, "good-bye," to Uncle Victor as well and took her hand and she turned startled. Leading her into the trees along the path to the guesthouses, he gently pushed her up against an old Maple and she looked at him defiant, her green eyes both startled and curious.

It was just a kiss. Tim didn't understand why he was so captivated by Cherish. He had been kissed many times before. This kiss was different. He didn't know why, but it was.

"You didn't wait for my answer," he said, keeping a distance between their bodies, his hands gripping the hard bark of the tree for support and to keep him grounded.

Lowering her eyes, she sighed and made two tight fists with her hands that rested on his stomach.

"I was just teasing," she explained. "I shouldn't have done that. It backfired. In the middle I realized I had lost track of why I was doing it. I find you extremely attractive and that was really stupid of me to tease you."

Before Tim could grasp her confession, Cherish slid down and under his arms and was heading for the guesthouse before he could react.

Following, he found her door closed. He was going to knock, but he turned the handle instead and pushed open the door until it banged against the wall.

Startled, she stood from the couch and looked puzzled.

"Just tell me your answer," she said exasperated. "I shouldn't even be having this conversation with you. I'm engaged," she said, showing Tim her ring.

He already knew that. Not sure what he wanted or why he needed to pursue her, Tim relented and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Fine," he said. "It doesn't matter. But I don't know how or why a woman who is about to get married kisses a man like that. What possessed you? And your answer. If you've never had that experience before, why are you getting married? What makes you think that kind of experience is even possible?"

Cherish lowered her eyes, and when she looked at him again, he could feel the full impact of her words.

"You do," she whispered. Tim almost collapsed from the confession that struck him, passed through him. At some point in her teasing, Cherish had an epiphany. Tim wasn't sure how he should proceed. This interaction was no longer just two people pursuing a pleasurable diversion; this was no longer a tease.

Turning, Tim realized he needed to drop this, whatever it was. In a few days he would be back to his life and Helena. Cherish would be somewhere else getting married to

another man. She was attracted to him, he was attracted to her, but he wasn't interested in anything long-term with any woman at this time.

There was no way he was asking a woman to break her engagement.

Walking away, Tim didn't expect her to follow him or pursue him either.

There was something incomplete, though, and that stopped him.

Turning back, the door was still open and he entered and closed it behind him.

Cherish didn't stand this time. She just looked up at him from the couch.

"I just thought you'd like to hear my answer," he choked, cleared his throat and repeated. Tim walked up to her slowly and she leaned back as he nudged his knee between her legs and held onto the back of the couch for support. Looking up at him, Cherish did not dissuade Tim and in her eyes he saw curiosity mixed with unabashed lust and only a bit of hesitation.

Leaning down, he caressed her flushed cheek with his mouth and she gently placed her hands on his chest.

Hovering over her lips, just taking in her essence, Tim felt a soft moan escape from her mouth and he captured it with a kiss. For a moment, he just held his mouth to hers as he felt his blood turn hot. Caressing her neck, he felt her heart beat fast and quick on his fingers. Lingering in the moment, he finally relented and kissed her deep and hard.

Hugging him close to her, Cherish pulled herself up to him. Tim pulled her up and in one swift movement, she was under him, his leg still between hers as Cherish wrapped herself around him.

Groping and grasping, Cherish matched him kiss for kiss, hug for hug and moan for moan until they were breathless. Tenderness replaced intense passion as they settled into a more even pace.

Exploring, Tim gently nudged her moist lips with his tongue and she met him curiously with the tip of her own and after a mutual greeting, he was allowed to explore deeper until they were connected in one long expedition of a deeper pleasure.

A knock on the door startled them both and he pulled away like a teen being caught in the act.

"Dinner's ready," Carl called and walked away. Breathless, and feeling foolish, Tim rested his forehead on hers and saw that she was smiling.

"That scared the heck out of me," she whispered and they both chuckled. Tim started to lift himself up, when she pulled him back. She had a question in her eyes.

"You still didn't answer," she whispered, trying to catch her breath. Tim didn't realize it mattered anymore.

Brushing the wild hair from her eyes, Tim answered her.

"I thought I did," he whispered in a low deep voice as he looked into her eyes. Cherish closed her eyes. He didn't know what she was thinking.

"We should get ready for dinner," she said, turning away.

Tim wasn't sure why his answer made her react the way she did. Tim lifted himself up and stood. Offering his hand, Cherish took it and he pulled her up and held her close. Resting her head on his shoulder, he felt her warm breath on his neck.

"I'll meet you there," she whispered. Tim held her for a moment.

"Is everything alright?" he asked, looking into her eyes now a jumble of a million of emotions with no one emotion gaining dominance over the other.

"When I know I'll tell you," she said, looking away. Tim didn't know what that meant.

Releasing his grasp, Cherish turned and went to the bathroom closing the door behind her. All the passion in his blood was replaced by confusion and he stumbled to the door. Resting against it for a moment, Tim wondered what she meant.

Dinner was waiting, so Tim headed to the house. He didn't want a search team sent out for him.

Sitting at the table, they waited a few minutes for Cherish, and when she came in, she didn't acknowledge Tim or anyone specifically. Glancing at her while they ate, Tim tried not to stare. He wanted to know what she meant, but she didn't look like she knew what she was feeling either.

"I was wondering if someone could take me to town tomorrow," Cherish asked as she helped his grandmother clear the table.

"Tim can do it," his grandmother offered before Cherish finished her sentence.

Tim looked up at Cherish who was just grabbing his plate. They both looked puzzled.

"Alright," she said.

"I think it's time to put Uncle Victor to bed," Carl said. "Tim, would you mind joining us?" Tim nodded while still looking at Cherish. Helping Carl take Uncle Victor to his

room in the back house connected to the living room, they didn't say anything. When Uncle Victor waved them away, they left.

"I got a new saddle for Gladys," Carl said and motioned for Tim to join him as they walked toward the stable.

It was a warm night, and the familiar sound of crickets buzzing and the odd call of a lonely bird somewhere deep within the woods hypnotized Tim.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Carl said, offering no context to his statement.

"I don't know what you mean," he said shrugging.

"Gran-T thinks you two are fated to be together," Carl explained. "Running off into the woods, alone in her room, I just hope you know what you're doing."

Tim understood what Carl was trying to say.

"I hear you, Carl," he said. "Listen, don't mention ..."

Carl punched him in the arm like they were kids again.

"We're like brothers, man," he said, disappointed Tim would think he'd tattle on him.

"Thanks," Tim said. "I'll be more careful." Nodding, Carl walked off.

Tim sighed. Walking nowhere in particular, Tim stopped and stared at the woods on the other side of the meadow.

Sounds of nature comforted him, soothed him, calmed him. He was home. Tim had spent his entire life up until he went off to college on this land. Carl was almost a brother to Tim. Only two years difference in age, they had camped in the woods, fished in the lake, fought imaginary battles in the meadow.

This was their world. But now Tim was in the real world. A world that didn't care for sentimentality when money was involved and the council had a developer lined up to revitalize Fountain Way.

The councilwoman informed Tim at the picnic that progress was more important than the old plaza that represented his heritage. It did not concern her that it was the place where his family believed the seeds for the town were planted, where the flowers of the county came to fruition. A developer wanted the property and the town council had offered to buy it from Tim, but he had refused.

He wasn't callous to his family's concern. The fence was a concession to the council. Tim had run out of resources to find the proof the historical society needed to declare Fountain Way a treasure to the town.

There was no proof that Fountain Way was the epicenter of everything that sprung up around it, that his great-great-great-great-grandmother was the impetus for everything his family held dear.

It was just a family tale, a source of pride.

The councilwoman said he could sell the land, or take the fountain and anything else if the council invoked eminent domain. Tim was being forced into a decision. Either way he would lose. Either way the family would think he gave away their source of pride, their heritage.

Sighing, Tim turned and headed back to the house. It was too late for a ride. It wasn't the same anymore, not without Mabel steady beneath him.

The house was dark when he got back, so he made his way to his room, took a shower and lay in bed thinking about everything.

Tim couldn't stop thinking about that young couple, the couple Cherish described. What would they have thought about their future generations and their struggles? Did that ever cross their minds or did they just live in the moment like Tim was doing?

When they first saw each other, did they know their love would extend into the future, or did they just think about the life they were living?

Tim couldn't think that far, never considered the future generations. For him there would be no future generations. He was living his life, working and exploring the world.

Unlike his grandmother, he didn't see fate in fairy tales. Cherish and he portrayed nothing more than just two people physically attracted to one another. In a few days, she would go to her fiancé and Tim would be back in the city.

Carl's warning resonated in his brain and Tim still didn't know what he was doing, didn't know how he felt about Cherish. She seemed more confused than he did and had a lot more at stake.

He would be more careful. Before it got too deep, Tim would make sure he didn't get too involved.

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On his 21st birthday, Tim received two presents. One was a night out at the bar getting drunk stupid for the first time with Carl, the other was a visit from his family's lawyer explaining that the family legacy, the house, the land and Fountain Way, were now his sole responsibility.

Before he went back to college, Gran-T sat him down and explained that she would be responsible for the house and the property taxes until Tim was ready to take on the financial responsibility.

Since he could remember, Tim knew one day he would inherit the family legacy. In the beginning, the tale had fascinated him, but as time went on, Tim found nothing to substantiate the story. While he was doing research on Fountain Way, Tim stumbled on other records and found an interest in dispelling the myths of other towns because he had wanted so desperately to find some truth in the tale his grandmother told.

As a grad student at the university, Tim wrote his first book. Sales were acceptable for a debut non-fiction work. At his first book signing, there were a dozen people, but as he read from the book, Tim saw the dozen turn into dozens and soon he was signing copies for a long line of women who happened to be shopping in the store. Business cards and scraps of plain paper with phone numbers were left as they picked up their autographed copies.

There were other book signings and Tim realized the women were not there for his book. Tim could put all the notes and cards in a pile and when he needed company, all he had to do was make one call. There was no hesitation from the other end of the line. At a moment's notice, Tim could have a date for any occasion.

There was a limit to how far he would take the date. There was never a time that Tim ever slept with these women. No matter how much it was suggested, no matter how much they flirted, Tim couldn't have sex with a woman he had only known a few hours.

At dinner one night with a woman whose card was drawn from the pile randomly, Tim realized he was never going to find someone other than a companion for one date.

Sitting across from a beautiful and intelligent woman, Tim listened as she thanked him for choosing her, wanted to know what was so special about her that he called her out of all the women he had met.

I was lonely. I picked your card from a pile. These were the answers that were true. These were not the answers she wanted to hear.

There was a long silence and Tim saw her eager eyes look away, but he could not find an answer that would be kind. It had never been his intention to use anyone, but that was what he was doing, whether he intended it or not.

When he got home, the cards went in the garbage.

A year later, his publisher realized the potential of gaining more sales by marketing Tim and he met Helena.

"You are a heartbreaker," Helena said as they met for the first time. Shaking her soft hand, Tim noticed her strong grip as she held his hand and admired him, and his body, with her eyes.

"I'm not comfortable with this type of promotion," Tim said as he pulled his hand away.

Sitting in her executive office chair, Helena laughed and motioned for him to sit across from her desk in a leather armchair.

"Women have put up with that for years," Helena explained. "Close the door on your way out, Serge," she said and waited for the door to close before continuing her explanation. Leaning forward on her glass desk, Helena sighed. "Attractive people have it a little easier than everyone else," she said. "It's a fact. It's not right. It's not fair, but it's a fact. You want to be known for your books, for your intelligence, but the truth is that your books are somewhat boring to the general audience but you are interesting and so they want to know more about you and your books. It's as simple as that."

Cringing, Tim did not accept her explanation even if it was a fact. His books were somewhat boring because they dealt with obscure subject matter. They were interesting to him because he was passionate about his subject and wanted others to find his research fascinating as well. Selling his books by selling his looks did not seem like a positive step for gaining more readers. Then a thought slipped into his brain. *Were the women who bought my books even reading them?*

"I want readers who are interested in what I write," Tim said.

"Then write what readers are interested in reading," Helena suggested. "Go see what's selling, go see what it takes to get noticed even if you're writing what others are reading."

The truth is that your genre may produce a best-seller but even then the author has to go out and promote their credentials."

"I have credentials," Tim insisted. There was no winning the argument with Helena. Tim was under contract and he wanted to keep researching and writing books.

"I know you do, love," Helena said. "We can talk about them over dinner."

It was an arrangement Tim felt comfortable with, dating a woman who asked nothing of him, who needed nothing from him except a dinner or a night of pleasure. There was no talk about their relationship, how they felt, where it was going.

Sometimes Tim wondered about Betty. They were young and they both had dreams that didn't include settling down in Trader Fountain. Lately, though, Tim thought about his favorite spot on the hill overlooking the valley. It would be a great place to write, a quiet place to go through his research, train another horse, ride across the meadow.

In the haze of his daydream, though, he wasn't alone.

Chapter 13

In town, Cherish was relieved the shop was open. Tim followed her to the counter of the old grease-covered office and waited for an attendant to assist them. The Bubble was being looked over carefully.

Hoping someone else would take her into town, Cherish didn't know what to say when his grandmother nearly jumped at the opportunity to offer that she go with Tim. It had to do with the fact Tim saw her at the fountain. It was like an omen to her, but Cherish didn't feel that way. She was attracted to Tim, but he was an attractive man and was used to women wanting to get closer, to feel his essence, his warmth, his strength up close.

Berating herself for succumbing to her basest desires, Cherish wanted to distance herself from Tim. She had a fiancé she was heading toward. Tim was a step backwards. Cherish knew Tim wouldn't pass up the chance to explore her statement further, but Cherish had no desire to get involved with Tim. That was until she brought up the subject and kissed him.

It sounded like a line, something he said to make her think she was that special woman capable of offering that experience, but she knew Tim was not an inexperienced man and it would only be her walking away with the knowledge of one night of the most inexplicable pleasure at the expense of her relationship with George.

Reprimanding herself, Cherish knew there was more to a relationship than sex. George had been there through all the pain, comforted her during her darkest hour and offered her a life, a new family, a future. The only thing she could not say was that she found sex exciting with George. In the beginning, she was attracted to something, but she couldn't remember anymore.

Leaving her to set up a new life, George was too busy to even talk to Cherish. She was supposed to be with him already in their new home, but she just got his voicemail and he hadn't returned her calls. It wasn't uncommon, but she understood. Without his job, they had nothing.

The attendant greeted them and Cherish snapped back to the moment.

"May I help you?" a young man with a wrench asked, his face covered in grease that flowed seamlessly onto his overalls, a veteran of the auto shop and he didn't even have a wrinkle on his face.

"That's my car," she said, pointing to the Bubble. "Joseph towed it for me last Thursday."

"Yeah, he's at home with his new baby girl," the man said cheerfully. Cherish smiled. She would have to tell Gran-T.

"Tell him congratulations," Tim said from behind her and she realized they all knew each other, probably went to school together.

"Do you know when the Bubble," Cherish hissed, it wasn't something people understood, naming her car, "I mean my car will be ready."

The man looked amused.

"We have to replace the radiator and about a dozen hoses," he explained. "We may have to order parts."

"Do you have any estimation?" she asked. "Do you know how long it will take?"

"Maybe three to five days," he shrugged.

Mouth dropping open, Cherish closed it and contained her disappointment.

"Please, I don't care about the cost, if you need to overnight parts, I will pay for it," she pleaded. "I've got to get home."

"Sure," the man said. Cherish felt bad she hadn't asked his name. The first letter or letters were covered and "an" on his nametag could have been anything.

Pulling out a work order, the man waited while Cherish wrote her first name and number.

"Call me for anything," she insisted. The man nodded.

"See you later, Dan," Tim said and Cherish was grateful.

"Good luck on your next book," Dan said as they walked out.

"Three to five days," Cherish groaned as they walked back to the car. Walking past the hotel, Cherish suddenly remembered she had made a reservation.

"I'll be back," she said and ran up the stairs. Greeting her, the lady at reception, "Gloria" on her nametag, remembered Cherish.

"How are you," Gloria said. "I saw you helping Gran-T at the picnic."

"Fine, thank you," Cherish said. It was a very friendly town. It reminded her of home, where she knew everyone as well, until the economy turned. Maybe it was the same in Tim's town, she hadn't been there long enough to know.

"Hi, Tim, congratulations on your book," Gloria said cheerfully and Tim nodded then sat on the old worn sofa waiting for Cherish.

"Thank you, Gloria," he said humbly and let Cherish finish her business.

"I know I had a reservation for last night, but I forgot," she confided. "I was hoping to transfer it to tonight."

"Not a problem," Gloria said still cheerful. "Anything else?"

"Yes, it will probably be for at least three nights," Cherish informed her.

"No problem," Gloria said and Cherish waited for her to write something down, but there wasn't even a computer.

"I'll be back later," Cherish said, wondering if she was supposed to do anything else.

"We'll see you then," Gloria said and Cherish thanked her and backed up.

Leaving, Cherish knew Tim was behind her as they headed to the car.

They drove back to the house in silence.

Gran-T was waiting on the backdoor steps when they arrived and invited them in for lunch. Cherish wanted to get her things and go to the hotel, but she knew Gran-T had been too polite for her to refuse.

Sitting to sandwiches and tea, Cherish mentioned her business in town.

"The car will be ready in three to five days," she told Gran-T. "I was able to get a room in town ..." Cherish could almost hear Gran-T's heart break.

"You don't like it here?" Gran-T asked.

"It's not that," Cherish stammered. Gran-T had been nothing but an incredible hostess. "I just don't want to impose on you ..."

"Did I say you were imposing?" Gran-T asked. Cherish remembered the looks on her employees' faces when she told them she had to close the business. The oldest employees, men and women she had known for years, had that same expression. At least this time Cherish would be able to change the course of events.

"I feel bad sleeping in your guesthouse, eating your food, all the wonderful things you've done, treated me like family," she explained. "It's just that I feel like I'm overstaying my welcome."

"That's it then," Gran-T said. She had a solution. "If it would make you feel better to pay to stay here or do some work, then that's what we'll do."

Not knowing what to say, Cherish looked to Tim for assistance. Tim did not come to her aid. What could he say to his grandmother? *Cherish wants to leave because she's confused about her feelings for me?* Did she really expect him to tell his grandmother they had made out like horny teens, twice?

Cherish accepted his grandmother's offer.

Relieved, Gran-T got up and hugged Cherish who was still sitting in her chair. For a moment, closing her eyes, Cherish remembered the hugs her mother had given her and soaked in the memory of her embrace. Releasing her, Gran-T made the first of her commands.

"I'll call the hotel, tell them you're staying with me," she declared. "You two go help Carl at the stable." When Gran-T headed to the living room, Cherish gasped. She had no desire to go to the stable.

"Couldn't I just write a check?" she whispered to Tim.

"You could have insisted," Tim shrugged.

"Did you see her face?" she whispered low, leaning in. "Her heart was going to break."

Tim laughed.

"You're not immune to Grandma Guilt," he said.

"And you are," she said defiantly.

"I think we have work to do," he said, standing with his plate. Cherish took her plate to the sink and washed both while Tim dried. Heading out, Cherish walked behind, dreading being around Gladys.

When they got to the stable, Tim greeted Carl and explained the situation.

"It's about time I got some help," Carl joked. "You can go brush and feed Gladys."

Tim nodded, but Cherish did not move.

"I have other work for her," Carl said and Tim nodded then went into the stable. Carl motioned for her to join him.

"I sense you don't like horses," Carl said as they headed down the path to an old shed. Cherish nodded.

"That's alright," he said. "I've wanted to paint this old shed for years. There's a sander and paint and brushes. Do you think you can handle that?" Cherish was very grateful.

"I would love to paint the shed," she said. Then she realized she didn't have clothes in which to paint.

"I've got overalls," Carl said. "You know, you can just leave, I won't say anything," Carl joked. Cherish smiled. His charm was endearing.

"You didn't see her face," Cherish confided.

"Grandma Guilt," Carl sighed. "None of us can resist."

Cherish nodded. Carl left and returned with an old pair of overalls. Dirty but not intolerable, the overalls fit over her clothes, but Cherish had to roll up the sleeves and cuff the pant legs that covered her shoes. Cherish was grateful for a job that didn't involve working with Gladys.

Hours later, lost in her work, Cherish had sanded the peeling paint and finished applying the first coat when Carl came back.

"That looks great," Carl said, admiring her work.

"I think it needs one more coat," Cherish said, scrutinizing her work, her hands and face streaked with white paint.

"Maybe," he said. "Dinner's ready, you might want to wash up."

Cherish laughed.

"I don't think that will be enough," she countered. "I'm going to put things away and I'll be there."

Carl nodded and left. After putting away the supplies, Cherish walked up the path just as Tim was coming back with Gladys. Walking briskly, she was almost out of his way when Tim asked her to meet Gladys.

"I gotta get ready for dinner," she said and ran back to the guesthouse. Catching her breath, Cherish took off her clothes and showered while trying to rub the paint off her

face and hands. Looking in the mirror, she was happy she got most of it, dressed and joined everyone for dinner.

"You didn't work them too hard did you, Carl?" Gran-T asked after saying grace. Carl stuffed a forkful of meat in his mouth and shrugged. Cherish was exhausted and she noticed Tim looked tired as well.

Eating heartily, Cherish helped Gran-T clear the table when they were done.

"You don't have to do anything around here if you don't want," Gran-T confided. "I'm just happy having you as a guest."

"I love working," Cherish proclaimed cheerfully. Sleep would come quickly, she wouldn't have to lay and think all night about things that confounded her.

"It's up to you," she insisted.

"Thank you," Cherish said. When they were done, Gran-T hugged her and wished her "good-night."

"Do you mind if I do a load of clothes?" Cherish asked.

"Go ahead," she said.

Cherish hugged her back and watched her leave. Turning off the kitchen light, Cherish closed the door behind her and went back to the guesthouse.

Grandma Guilt.

Cherish smiled. She was able to make at least one person happy.

Chapter 14

Sitting at the kitchen table, sipping on hot tea, Cherish waited for her clothes to finish washing so she could put them in the dryer.

Walking in from the far door, Tim stopped when he saw Cherish.

"Washing clothes," she explained.

Nodding, Tim entered and got a glass of water. He was about to leave when he turned and spoke to her.

"I'm watching some footage my publicist sent me from the last few book tours," he said as an offer.

"Cool," Cherish said, not knowing what he meant by his offer.

"If you want you can come watch them with me," he said. "While you're waiting for your clothes."

"Maybe," she shrugged. Cherish would have loved to, but she knew what happened when she got too close to Tim.

The washing machine finally stopped spinning. Cherish put her clothes in the dryer, turned it on, and heard them flop around the machine.

As she headed back to the table, Cherish heard the sounds of Tim's book tour video playing and she walked quietly down the hall to see him at work. Standing in the hall beside his door, she watched a compilation of clips from Tim's book tours. Cherish thought it was funny that such a shy and reserved man was comfortable with attention from admiring women.

Scenes of Tim signing books and women's shirts amused her. She was right. Women were constantly throwing themselves at the charming and arrogant, but somehow humble man. Standing in the hallway, Cherish realized she was no different than those women vying for his attention. Tim had that effect on women. He had that effect on Cherish.

"Come in," she heard him call from the room. "You don't have to stand by the door."

Taking a deep breath, Cherish entered Tim's sanctuary. It looked more like a chaotic professor's office than a bedroom.

"My clothes will be done soon," she explained as she stood by the door looking at Tim sitting on his bed, reading glasses too big for his face as he looked up at her from a folder of papers on his lap.

"It's almost over," he said. Looking around, Cherish just stood surveying his personal life not knowing where she was supposed to sit. There was a computer chair, but that seemed awkward so she just stood.

Cherish noticed a book on his desk that the talk-show host presented the night Cherish first saw Tim on TV. Gravitating toward it, she sat on the computer chair and picked up the book.

Flipping through it, she listened as more women thanked Tim on the screen as he signed books. There was a clip of him reading from his book.

"Women love you," Cherish observed candidly to gauge his reaction.

Looking over at Tim, she wasn't surprised by his humility. Even still, he was capable of melting her brain and that was enough to keep Cherish at a distance.

"It sells books," he said, not meeting her eyes.

"But it's about history and towns I've never even heard of," she joked, flipping through the book in her hands.

"If you've never read it," he said, looking over at her, "how do you know if it's good or not. How do you know those women don't just appreciate me for my mind?"

Cherish smiled. She enjoyed talking to Tim. But she couldn't let it go beyond talking. Maybe talking, but definitely not beyond kissing. Too much was at stake for her to give into desires when she was building a life with another man.

"My clothes are almost done," she said. "Can I take this with me?"

Tim nodded and she stood with the book still in her hand.

"If you come back, I'll read you a chapter," he said. "Just so you don't get bored with all the history."

Cherish smiled.

"I think I'm capable of grasping the facts," she retorted and left. Her clothes were damp so she sat down and started reading. The machine stopped and Cherish folded her clothes and a deep desire filled her as she was tempted by his request.

Putting the clothes in a bag by the door, Cherish picked up the book on the table and walked quietly down the hall. The TV was off.

With nerve she didn't know she had and never should have used, Cherish walked into his room.

"I would like to hear a chapter as you envisioned it," she said. Looking up at her, Tim nodded. Putting away his folder on the nightstand, Cherish crawled across the bed and handed the book to Tim. Crawling back to the other side of his queen-sized bed, Cherish made herself comfortable. On her side, on the very edge of the bed near the door, she placed her hands under her head, ready to hear a story.

"The year was 1722," he said and those were the only words she heard. Tim read page after page in a soothing voice and Cherish found herself lulled in peaceful warmth. Flipping to another page, Tim moved a little closer and Cherish didn't mind. The door was open, the lights were on.

A few more pages and Tim was close by, she could feel the heat from his body through his night shorts and shirt. Breathing steady, Cherish concentrated on his voice and tried not to moan when she felt his hand gently rest on her head as he stroked her hair splayed out on the bed.

Hypnotized, Cherish hadn't felt so calm and peaceful in a very long time. Page after page Tim read and Cherish found pleasure in the way Tim tenderly caressed her while he read. She had never felt this feeling before. It was confusing because she didn't expect to feel tenderness from Tim, and because George read his books to himself while he massaged her head, but Cherish never remembered feeling a peace that spread throughout her being. She had been lulled, but never calmed and protected.

Was that a good thing?

Was it good that she also felt protected? Felt as if she were safe in his hands?

How stupid can I be?

Didn't George make her feel safe? Yes. But not in the same way. There was a time she felt safe and secure, then she had been betrayed.

Remember what came from trusting him?

Cherish could not explain why it was different with Tim, she just knew that it was.

Taking a deep breath, Cherish felt herself drifting and she floated away. The next thing she knew, she was awakened suddenly, as she often was when napping, and realized she must have looked like a gecko being poked when she popped up from her slumber startled and briefly disoriented.

On his back next to her, Tim was resting with his hands on his chest. He looked over when she jolted awake. Rubbing her eyes, she laid her head back down on the edge of the pillow and they just looked at each other for a while.

"Do you always wake like that?" he asked softly.

"Only when I'm napping," she explained in the same soft tone. An emotion passed through his eyes and Cherish realized it was time to go. Her mind urged her to get up, get her clothes and go back to the guesthouse. Other parts of her were not ready to leave. Those parts won out. Turning and slipping a hand under his head, Tim looked over at her.

They didn't speak. Slipping his hand out from under his head he held it between them. Cherish slowly slipped her hand from under her head as well and touched his hand and intertwined their fingers. Draping his other arm over her waist, Tim slid closer.

Holding his hand, Cherish felt her heart beat fast and her blood flow warm as she looked into his eyes. Without saying a word, she felt as if this moment was too intimate. Like something a couple did after making love. She felt a connection, but that deep nagging part in her knew it was just lust.

Slipping his hand away, he caressed her cheek.

"Did you like the story?" he whispered, his eyes intense and she could feel them caress her face as well.

"I liked the way you tell it," she answered. Moving closer and pulling her closer with his arm until they were almost body-to-body, Tim nuzzled her cheek with his nose and his mouth found hers. Waves of pleasure rippled through her and she was breathless when he pulled away. Looking into his eyes, his head lazily resting on his pillow, Cherish felt the need to tell him how she felt.

"Your eyes," she whispered, running her fingers through his wavy hair. "They're so bright I feel like you can read my thoughts. Sometimes it's hard for me to look into them, at you."

A weight lifted from her waist as he gently cradled her head in his hand.

"When I look in your eyes," he whispered. "I see a determination that I don't possess. It's intoxicating."

It was the best compliment a man had ever given her. Ever.

That part deep down in her that warned her she was getting too involved exploded with the deep hurt she had experienced that last time she thought she was falling in love.

Closing her eyes, Cherish knew she had to go.

"I don't wanna get hurt again," she said, rolled away and stumbled disoriented out of the room. Grabbing her bag of clothes by the kitchen door and slipping on her shoes, Cherish was refreshed by the cool night mist as she raced across the lawn and collapsed on her bed in the guesthouse.

Under the covers in the darkness, the warmth and peace were fading and Cherish was cold and at war with herself once again.

This wasn't her destination. If she wasn't careful, she would have nowhere to call home once her journey got back on track.

Cherish was fooling herself.

In bed in the guesthouse that night, Cherish berated herself for not learning her lesson.

Closing her eyes, Cherish remembered everything from the night when she walked out onto the bar patio and saw Joshua with another woman.

Joshua. That was his name. It was such a sexy, masculine name. Now she couldn't say his name without hatred and anger in her thoughts. It was love at first sight, or so she thought at the time. But there was no such thing as love at first sight.

...

It was her last semester. Cherish was very excited to get an internship at the first firm to which she had applied. In the two months working under the marketing director, Cherish felt as if she had learned more than she had in all her years at the university.

Sitting at her desk, Cherish was working on a memo for Mrs. Terrington when a tall, sandy haired man turned the corner and headed for her cubicle. Unable to look away, Cherish admonished herself for being unprofessional. Then, with the flash of a very bright smile, the man melted every ounce of intelligence from her brain. She was in love, like every dopey romantic movie heroine meeting the love of her life for the first time.

"You're new," he said. "I'm Joshua Jones. I'm here to pick up files from Mrs. Terrington."

Fortunately for Cherish, a manila package marked "Joshua Jones" sat on top of her inbox. Words tried to come out, but Cherish just ended up handing the package to the man.

"Thank you," he said. "What was your name again." Panic-stricken, Cherish only remembered her name when she saw her I.D. badge on the desk. The woman in the picture looked professional.

"Cherish," she said, trying to maintain some dignity.

"Nice to meet you, Cherish," he said and held out his hand. His warm, strong hand shook her sweaty, weak hand and it was all a blur. As he turned the corner, Cherish felt herself able to think again. Face hot, Cherish gritted her teeth and muttered at herself for being so stupid, so immature.

"Was that Mr. Jones?" Mrs. Terrington called from her office.

"Yes," Cherish called back. "He picked up the package."

"Thank you," she called back.

In the lunchroom, several of the other interns had noticed Joshua as well.

"I'd like a piece of that," one commented and they all laughed.

The next time Joshua showed up, Cherish was more in control of her senses, but she still couldn't have an intelligent conversation.

Two drinks at the office party, though, and Cherish was pretty mellow.

"We're taking this party to Marty's," a male intern declared and they all walked down the block and were soon joined by senior staff members and eventually Joshua, the consultant.

Slightly inebriated, Cherish laughed and joked with the other interns while watching Joshua at the bar the whole time. Several women approached, talked for a while then Joshua left alone. As he walked by, Cherish looked him directly in the eyes, something she had been unable to do before, then turned away.

The next day Joshua called.

"It's Joshua Jones," he announced.

"Mrs. Terrington isn't in at this time," Cherish said in her most professional voice. As long as she didn't have to look him in the eyes, Cherish could hold a decent conversation with Joshua.

Then one day Joshua asked her out for drinks. Nuzzling her neck, caressing her shoulder, Joshua made Cherish feel like the only woman in the world.

The change in her behavior did not escape Mrs. Terrington.

"I know that look," Mrs. Terrington said wistfully. "It doesn't last for long, though." It didn't.

"Let's have drinks at your place," turned into their ritual. At a moment's notice, Cherish was available wherever and whenever Joshua wanted. A few kisses and a hug and Cherish would forget about all the promises he had made and broken.

Resting in bed after Joshua stopped by for a "drink," Cherish felt comfortable enough to make a request.

"There's a wine festival in the park next weekend," Cherish said in the darkness as she rested her cheek on his chest. There was a noncommittal "mmm," but no response.

"I've got an early day tomorrow," Joshua said and flipped on the lamp by the bed. Every thought that came to her head was stifled by the realization that she would sound needy, like she was suffocating him, and Cherish would not be that woman.

As the weeks passed, so did the smile on her face, the exuberance upon waking, the thought that each day was better than the last. When Joshua turned the corner to pick up a package, Cherish brightened, but it was a momentary ember of excitement leftover from the passion that was slowly starting to smolder.

Nobody at the office knew, not officially, that Cherish was seeing Joshua. Sometimes, when she went into the lunchroom, the other interns would look at her and Cherish would leave feeling uncomfortable with the knowledge her affair with Joshua was not entirely between the two of them.

When Joshua arrived on her birthday, Cherish was trembling with joy.

"Just got off a flight from Denver," Joshua said as he came in and took off his tie. It was late, but that didn't matter to Cherish.

Sitting on the couch, Joshua saw the cards sent by Cherish's parents.

"Happy Birthday," he said, surprised by the realization it was her birthday. "I didn't get you anything."

"You're here," Cherish said as she straddled Joshua and started unbuttoning his shirt. There was a tinge of disappointment, but he was in her apartment on her birthday and that was all that mattered.

"We can go out tomorrow night and celebrate," Cherish suggested.

"I have a better idea," Joshua said as he took her hands. Cherish was excited to hear his suggestion. "I'll bring over take-out and we'll watch that movie you love."

It was not the romantic birthday dinner she had in mind, but she would be spending an evening with Joshua.

"Sounds great," Cherish said. As he held her close in his strong arms, her chest pressed up against his hard body, any disappointment was suppressed by the surge of pleasure Cherish felt when they were together.

Two hours later, his phone rang. Rolling toward the nightstand, Joshua attended to his phone. There was a conversation and Cherish sighed.

"I've got to get a contract to Hanover by the afternoon," Joshua announced as he got out of bed. Turning on the bathroom light, Joshua closed the door and Cherish could hear the shower running.

Thinking in the dark, Cherish realized Joshua had never been in her apartment during the daylight. It was dark in her room except for the beam of light from under the bathroom door that cut like a sword through the darkness.

"Are we still doing take-out and a movie?" she asked, as Joshua was eager to get to his assignment.

"What?" he asked. "Yeah, I'll come by tonight." With that, he left and Cherish heard the front door close. There was a part of her that wanted him to stay, but Cherish suppressed that desire. She was not one of those needy women and she was proud for being an independent woman.

They were both busy professionals.

No we're not. Sitting up in bed, Cherish realized in a few weeks the internship would end.

All day at work, Cherish wondered what would become of their relationship once she graduated and started on her career.

When Joshua came over with sushi and a bottle of wine, they watched a movie that was good, but it wasn't her favorite. It didn't matter because they weren't really watching it that closely.

"My internship ends in a few weeks," Cherish informed Joshua between breathtaking kisses. There was another long, deep kiss before Cherish brought up another subject.

"Stay the night," Cherish whispered. It seemed like such a simple request. Breathless, Joshua pushed himself off Cherish and leaned back against the couch. Running his fingers through his wavy hair, Joshua thought about her request. He was such a beautiful man, strong and sexy, and Cherish didn't like the look of frustration her request had put on his handsome face.

"I would love to," Joshua finally said, "but I've got to take Bruno to the vet in the morning." When Cherish looked puzzled he explained. "Bruno is my lab and he gets anxious when I'm away too long."

"I didn't know you had a dog," Cherish said.

"Yeah," Joshua explained. "It's hard when I leave him alone when I go out of town." An old flame reignited in Cherish's gut.

"You can leave him with me," she suggested eagerly. "I would love to meet Bruno." There was hesitation in Joshua's voice.

"He doesn't get along with many people," Joshua explained.

"Why don't I come over to your place and get to know him," Cherish suggested. Joshua sighed.

"Maybe sometime," Joshua said. There was a long silence. The movie was over, the take-out cold. "I think I should get going." Panic-stricken, Cherish rolled off the couch as Joshua stood to leave.

"How about next time we have dinner at your place," she said and realized it sounded desperate, almost pleading.

"We'll see," Joshua said as he put on his suit coat. "It's getting late."

Everything Cherish wanted to say seemed needy and desperate so she didn't say anything at all. They just stood at the door and Joshua finally grabbed the handle, turned it and opened the door.

"Good-night," Cherish whispered. With a nod, Joshua stepped out into the night. Letting out a deep, tense breath she was holding inside, Cherish found support on the back of the couch and wondered what the look on his face as he left meant.

A week later, she knew. Joshua hadn't called or stopped by the apartment. Every day Cherish stared at the hallway waiting for Joshua to come around the corner. At first she had left him a few messages, but then she stopped.

A week before the end of her internship, Joshua came around the corner. Suppressing the urge to get up and run to him, Cherish just watched as he nodded to a few of the other employees and interns, then walked up to her cubicle. Standing by Mrs. Terrington's door, Joshua did not make conversation with Cherish. Pretending to work, Cherish listened to a meaningless contract conversation between her supervisor and Joshua while waiting anxiously to make eye contact with her lover.

Nodding to her on the way out, Joshua left. An explosion went off in Cherish's gut. She stood when her practical side told her to sit down, let him go for now and call him later. Walking briskly, Cherish met him at the elevator and they stood silently waiting for the car to arrive. The elevator binged and the doors whooshed open. They both got in.

"Is everything alright?" she asked. A scorching blaze had erupted and was filling her body with the burning desire to get close to Joshua again.

"Everything's fine," he said, looking at the numbers as the car descended. "I've been busy."

"That's good," Cherish said as the elevator binged. "Would you like to come over tonight? I can make us dinner."

Sighing deeply, Joshua thought about her request. The doors whooshed open and Joshua started to head out.

"I'll call you if I can," he said as he left. The lobby was busy and the elevator filled quickly. Cherish just stood and rode back up to her floor.

Numb, Cherish walked back to her cubicle. In the lunchroom, the female interns no longer stopped whispering when Cherish entered the room.

"I guess he got tired of her," Maggie said and most of the women laughed. Maggie turned and glared at Cherish. Putting down her cup, Maggie walked up to Cherish and

stood looking her up and down with disdain. "At least that's what he told me," Maggie sneered, low enough for only Cherish to hear.

It was as if Maggie had slapped her in the face. Humiliated, Cherish wanted to rip Maggie's vicious face with her fingernails, but she just stood there while the other women looked away. With a vile laugh, Maggie left and the other women didn't look at Cherish as they followed their leader out of the lunchroom.

Collapsing on a plastic chair, Cherish wasn't sure what to believe. The rest of the day was a blur and she was still staring at the same document when the day was over.

Joshua did not call, did not come over that night. Maggie was very competitive and Cherish didn't believe anything she said.

At the end of her internship, Cherish joined all the interns for one last drink at Marty's. Since Maggie sat in her group, Cherish ignored her sly, vicious glances. When the first round of interns left, Cherish joined them. Walking back to the office parking lot, Cherish realized she had left her purse at the lounge.

"Go on," she urged the buoyant group. Walking back to the bar, Cherish felt a rush of pleasure as she saw Joshua entering and she raced up to the door as it closed. Taking a deep breath, Cherish grabbed the spiral handle and got ready to take back her dignity, to show Maggie that her vicious lies meant nothing to Cherish.

Inside, Cherish saw the other interns still drinking and talking at the lounge. Joshua wasn't at the bar. Maggie wasn't with the group. It was time to turn around and leave, but Cherish had an explanation. They could both be in the restroom.

Now that she was back in the bar, Cherish remembered her purse. Walking up to the group, Cherish interrupted and a male intern picked up her purse and handed it to her.

"Thank you," Cherish said and glanced at Maggie's group. The same vicious grins were on all their faces. Boiling acid rolled in her gut. Leaving the group, Cherish walked slowly to the restroom and glanced in the booths as she walked by. Relief almost brought tears as booth after booth showed no signs of Joshua and Maggie together.

In the restroom, Cherish took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror. The woman in the mirror looked professional and mature. This was not a woman who worried about another woman taking her man. This was not a woman who relied on gossip to rule her emotions. Joshua was a man and they had a mature relationship.

You have to ask him for yourself, the woman in the mirror urged. The woman in the mirror couldn't feel the acid burning through her gut at the thought of Joshua with another woman, a woman just as intelligent and educated and attractive as Cherish. Taking a deep breath to suppress the urge to confront Joshua like a betrayed girlfriend, Cherish left the restroom and looked for him again. That's when she realized there was a patio connected to the bar. Through the tinted windows, Cherish saw two people leaning against a column. Opening the door, Cherish stood and watched as Joshua and Maggie stood embraced, lost to the world in a deep intimate kiss.

Numb. Whenever Cherish went into shock she got very numb and very calm. It lasted long enough for her to get through the situation and make it home before falling apart. Rage was suppressed long enough for her to make it to safety.

There were two thoughts that went through Cherish's head as she watched. The first was to scream and punch Maggie for stealing her boyfriend. Since she was numb, Cherish was calm and was able to think clearly, and her mother's wise words were very loud in her head. Words that always seemed useless at the time. Useless because her mother was happily married and had never been cheated on by the man she loved.

Those words kept Cherish from losing her sanity and dignity as she watched the man she loved intimate with another woman. If a man loves you, another woman cannot steal him from you unless he wants to leave. Watching them kiss, Cherish realized he was not in love with her and there was no use making a scene. Turning, Cherish left the patio and headed to her car. She made it back to her apartment before vomiting all the vicious memories.

It was at that moment Cherish made a vow to herself. The next time she entered a relationship, she would get to know the man first, find out if they were exclusive, if he had a pet. The next time she entered a relationship, a handsome smile would be the last consideration on her list. No man would ever humiliate her like Joshua had and the best way to protect herself was to care up to the point of love, then hold back something to give her the strength to walk away. As long as she had an out, Cherish knew she could never be hurt again.

Chapter 15

Cherish decided the shed needed another coat of paint.

While Carl and Tim were working on other tasks, Cherish was happy putting a second coat of paint on the shed.

Two hours later, just before lunch, she had finished and stepped back to admire her work when she heard Gladys whinny behind her. Cherish did not move. Tim's feet hit the ground.

"Good job," he said. Cherish felt Gladys behind her and she wanted to run, but she was unable to move. Tim stood next to his horse.

Gladys snorted right behind Cherish and nudged her with her nose. Unable to contain her terror, Cherish ran to the shed and flattened herself against the newly painted wall.

"Carl wasn't joking," he said amused.

Cherish didn't care, she just wanted Tim to take Gladys away.

"Is it all horses, or just Gladys here?" Tim asked while petting the horse.

"All horses," she confessed. "Would you mind please taking it away?"

"I thought all women loved horses," Tim said. "By the way, her name is Gladys," he said comforting Gladys.

"I don't," she assured him dispelling the myth he held as truth. "You should check your facts."

"Do I want to know why?" he asked.

"That's my business," she said.

"Were you trampled as a child?" he asked, coming up with his own conclusions.

"Maybe you were bitten? Thrown off a pony?"

Tired of holding herself against the wall, Cherish glared at Tim.

"Not even close," she retorted.

"I can guess all day," he said cheerfully. As he patted Gladys, the horse whinnied and snorted.

Exhausted from standing straight against the wall after painting for two days, Cherish rested her hands on her knees but kept close to the wall.

"Do I press you to reveal your deepest fears?" she asked sarcastically.

"Fear?" he asked incredulously. "You fear Gladys here?"

Realizing she had said too much, Cherish rose and crossed her arms over her chest.

"I fear being trampled," she confessed. "It's as simple as that. Spook a horse, and it could trample you."

"Have you ever actually been near a horse before?" he asked.

Cherish thought about that.

"I grew up in the city," she said. "There were no horses."

"I thought so," he said as if he knew she didn't have any experience with horses.

"Come here," he insisted. "I want to show you Gladys is not going to trample you."

"You cannot guarantee that," she corrected him.

"You're right," he agreed. "But you could still get head butted standing there," he noted. Cherish gasped.

Sliding around to the front of the shed, she slipped inside the open door. It was dark, filled with rusty equipment, but it was horse free.

Tim wasn't going to cure her of a lifelong conviction in one day.

"You come out and meet Gladys, and I'll tell you my deepest fear," Tim said loud enough for her to hear.

Intrigued, Cherish peeked out of the shed.

"What makes you think I want to know?" she asked.

"It's not what you think," he said, trying to coax her out of the shed.

"What do I think?" she asked, stepping out of the shed but still staying close to the wall.

"I don't know what you think," he confessed. "I just didn't like talking to a shed."

Cherish felt the desire to smile. There was something very sweet about his attempt to cure her of her horse phobia. There was probably a word for it, but she didn't know what it was.

Both Carl and Tim had a good sense of humor, both were charming, but there was something special about Tim. As he stood in the early afternoon sun, sweat lightly glowing on his tan face, shirtsleeves rolled up to reveal his strong masculine arms, Cherish remembered how tender and passionate he could be.

"Tell me your fear first," she insisted.

"Meet Gladys and then I'll tell you," he said. Cherish thought about it.

"You come over here," she asserted. "I want to be close to the wall."

"In case Gladys decides to trample you?" he joked.

"Do you really want me to make fun of your fear?" she asked, challenging him.

"Fine," he conceded. Taking Gladys by the reins, Tim pulled an apple from a pouch hanging off the saddle.

Walking toward her slowly, Tim watched as Cherish pressed herself against the wall hoping she would fall through.

Stopping a few feet away, the golden horse and Cherish stared at each other and Cherish could hear her heartbeat thumping in her ears. Tim motioned for her to join him. Holding out his hand, Tim waited as Cherish extended hers and grabbed his hand as she slowly came up behind him. Flipping himself around, Tim was behind her and Cherish pressed into him to get away from Gladys.

"Hold your hand out flat," Tim whispered in her ear. Holding her hand close to her body, Cherish waited and Tim put the apple in her hand.

"Now, hold it out for Gladys," he said. Cherish could not do it. Tim gently grasped her wrist and pulled her hand away from her body. The apple wobbled in her hand, but she held her hand steady. Like getting a shot, Cherish closed her eyes and turned her head. Gladys snorted and Cherish heard her hoofs heavy on the ground as the horse walked toward her.

Standing steady, Cherish would have never been so brave, but Tim held onto her as she pressed against his hard body and she was able to drift off and find comfort in the memory of their kiss.

Whispering encouragement in her ear, Tim held her close, his arm around her waist, his other hand massaging her wrist. Gladys ate the apple while it was in Cherish's hand, the sticky juice and apple chunks falling on her fingers. Cherish did not move. A jolt of fear pierced her gut, but it quickly dissipated.

"Open your eyes," Tim whispered, knowing Cherish couldn't watch. Peeking through slits, she saw Gladys finishing the apple. A shiver went through her body and she opened her eyes. Tim moved her forward and used his hand to control hers as he had her pat Gladys on the spot between her eyes and snout.

Gladys nodded her head and Cherish relaxed.

"Are you satisfied," she choked. Releasing her hand, Tim backed up and Cherish quickly pulled her trembling hand toward her and was startled when Tim turned her around and held her tight as he kissed her deeply. Filled with adrenaline, overloaded with tension, Tim counteracted the surge of emotions with something that was more pleasurable.

Cherish didn't know how he did it, but soon she was straddled on the back of Gladys, arms tight around Tim's chest as Gladys galloped across the meadow. Cherish was both terrified and fascinated by the power and freedom of riding high and hard.

It wasn't Tim's greatest fear, but she understood why it was one of his greatest joys.

Chapter 16

Tim patted Gladys as she ate her hay.

"Good girl," he said soothingly. Cherish was waiting outside. Tim had pushed her to her limit and she had impressed him by not backing down. Only hoping to get her to acknowledge her fear and maybe get her close enough to pat Gladys on her golden coat, Cherish had taken a ride and Tim enjoyed her clutching onto his chest, her head and body pressed hard against his back. Getting her down had been something he was only able to accomplish with Carl's help.

With Gladys tucked in for the day, Tim was exhausted and ready for something to eat.

Joining her, they went to her guesthouse and relaxed on the couch while waiting for lunch.

Still thinking about that night he read to her, Tim couldn't shake the memory of her statement. She didn't want to get hurt again. That wasn't Tim's intention. But something kept him coming back, wanting to know more, needing to get close to her.

"Don't you want to know my fear?" he asked. Cherish leaned back and closed her eyes. Tim leaned back as well.

"You don't have to," she disclosed. "It's not something you want people to know, your weakness."

"It's only fair," he said.

"It is," she agreed. "But I will use it against you," she joked.

"I'll save it for another time then," he said. Cherish agreed.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked and waited. Tim was slow to respond, they were both coming close to falling asleep.

"Go ahead," he said.

"What kind of proof do you need?" she asked. Tim was confused and turned toward her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"For the fountain cause," she said. "You said that you don't know if that tale is true, what do you look for? What do you need?"

Tim sighed. He had already been on that journey. It was exhausting explaining it to everyone.

"I've exhausted all my resources," he said. "Records and historical documents. I've looked through it all. I just couldn't find enough."

"What about other things?" she asked.

"Like what?" he wondered.

"I don't know," she said. "I just see how much your grandmother frets over losing a part of her tradition."

"Don't you think I know that as well?" he asked irritated. Cherish opened one eye and assessed his level of agitation.

"That's your greatest fear, isn't it?" she asked rhetorically, catching Tim off guard.

"What do you mean?" he whispered as if she had read his mind. Tim didn't realize he was so transparent.

"That you're going to lose it, the family tradition, not for you, but for her," she shrugged. Tim felt naked in her candid assessment. Prickles painfully crept up his arms to his neck and faded on his cheeks.

"Maybe," he whispered.

"It wouldn't be your fault," she said softly. Cherish moved closer and leaned her head on his arm and shuddered. Tim was startled when she held her face in her hands and started crying. Putting his arm around her shoulder he wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know what had made her so sad. It had to be more than the struggle he and his grandmother had about Fountain Way.

Waiting for her to get whatever sadness she felt out of her system, Tim just held her close. Sniffing and wiping her tears away, Cherish apologized.

"The day I gave the keys to the bank guy," she explained between sniffles and catching her breath, "I walked away from the only life I knew. You should have seen the faces of my friends, people I had known for years, like family, when I told them we'd have to close the business. The only consolation I have is that my parents didn't have to see it, their business gone, their house given to the bank. But then they're not here either."

The tears came again, but it was silent pain and she tried wiping the never-ending stream as she caught her breath.

"I didn't know," he whispered. Cherish got up quickly and headed to the bathroom. For the longest time, he just heard the shower and he waited. He knew she needed to be alone, but he wanted to be there when she got out.

The door opened and Cherish emerged refreshed in a satin floral robe. Tying the robe tight around her waist, she sighed and sat on the couch again.

"Feel better?" he asked, feeling the soft cloth of her robe.

"I didn't mean to break down in front of you," she confided, staring at nothing in front of her.

Tim felt as if he knew just as much about her in those few moments than he knew about anyone else he had known for a lifetime.

"My fear is that I missed something," Tim confessed. "That I missed something critical and the town council takes it away. That I will be the one that loses something generations had preserved."

Tim had never told that to anyone. Not even Carl. But Carl probably already knew because he was the closest person to Tim.

"I didn't mean to press you," she said, squeezing his hand still holding her robe.

Cherish had another question.

"I would like to ask you something very personal and you don't have to answer," she said.

Tim had no idea what she wanted to ask.

"You promise," he joked.

"When I was with your cousins, who by the way aren't very nice sometimes, they mentioned in conversation indirectly that you can't have kids," she said.

Tim thought that was very personal and was not surprised Cherish learned that hanging around one cousin in particular.

"Row?" he asked.

"Yes," Cherish admitted.

"Yes, that's very personal," he said.

Cherish nodded.

"It's none of my business, but they were wondering who inherits everything after you pass, and since I now know the tale I was curious as well," she said embarrassed.

"They're already waiting for me to die to inherit this house, this land and the responsibility of preserving the family legacy," he joked.

"I know, it's too personal," she said.

Tim didn't mind telling her for some reason. She had basically told him her whole life story.

"Childhood infection," he explained.

Jolted from their moment, Cherish grabbed her ringing cell phone startled.

"Yes?" she asked. There was a response Tim could not hear. "Yes, go ahead, do what you have to do. Thank you."

With that she hung up.

"The shop had to put more work into the car," she explained.

For a long time they just sat on the couch each contemplating their own regrets and possible futures.

"Do you ever wonder where your own story begins?" she finally asked rhetorically. "Did it already begin or do you think it has but it hasn't?"

Tim understood her meaning.

"That's for history to decide," he said.

"What if you're not important enough?" she asked, turning to him. Tim met her gaze and saw Cherish was very tired. It was more than exhaustion, life had pushed her to a point where she had reached her limit and she would go on, but she was very tired.

"Good question," he said.

There was a knock on the door.

"Lunch is ready," Carl said.

Tim wasn't hungry.

"Tell my grandmother I had to go for a ride," he said to Cherish as he released her hand and got up to leave.

Turning to her he had an observation.

"You can make your own story," he said.

"No you can't," she disagreed. "You think you can, but you can't."

Tim sighed. He didn't know if either one of them was right.

It was hot in the late afternoon sun, and Tim walked slowly to the stable.

Thinking he was alone in his struggle, in one single moment, Tim realized others lived the fears he only fretted about. He still had everything. Cherish had lost everything.

Still moving ahead, Cherish had many regrets. Tim wondered what his regrets would be. But another thought had now become forefront among the many he juggled.

What would my story be? Most of all, who would tell my story? How would they tell it?

Tim had never considered that before. He kept a journal but that didn't matter if nobody cared. Not scholars or fans, but loved ones, those were the people who mattered. Where would their story begin?

It was so much easier telling someone else's story. Tim did it all the time. He looked at the facts, the records, and he told their story.

What other source could he use besides that which was signed, stamped and certified? Anything else was just opinion. Tim didn't specialize in opinion. He staked his reputation on facts.

What did facts amount to? It was a fact that Cherish was engaged, but they still shared their deepest fears and wildest passions.

It was a fact she was leaving in a few days. Why was he investing so much time in getting to know her, helping her through her fears if she would be out of his life most likely never to speak to her again?

Putting away his thoughts, Tim realized he had taken a long walk when he had meant to go for a ride and came back to the stable to take a nap. In his dreams, he was still thinking about Cherish's comment about who would tell their stories when they were gone.

Chapter 17

Helping Gran-T with the dishes after lunch, Cherish was about to head back to the guesthouse when Gran-T handed her a bagged lunch for Tim.

"Sometimes he forgets to eat," Gran-T said. Cherish nodded and headed to the stable. Although she heard Gladys whinny in the distance, Cherish knew she had to give Tim his lunch. Peeking inside, Cherish was immediately struck by the smell of urine and wet hay, and scrunched up her nose against the odor.

Taking a deep breath of fresh air, she walked inside and was stopped by the sight of Tim resting on a bale of hay, his shirt off and tan chest rising and falling, his arm tucked under his head. Cherish did not want to disturb him. Walking quietly on the hay, she carefully placed the lunch bag on a wooden shelf and quietly turned to leave.

"Is this a secret mission?" Tim asked amused from where he reclined on the hay. Cherish turned.

"I didn't want to disturb you," she explained. "Your grandmother was worried you sometimes forget to eat."

"It's not going to do me any good over there," he said.

There was a standoff. His mischievous eyes against hers.

Cherish gave in. Bringing the bag to him, she held it out and Tim took it.

"Thank you," he said. Cherish shook her head.

Resisting him was not easy, but she could do it. She needed practice. Pressing the cold metal and hard rock of her ring into her palm did the trick.

Turning toward the stalls, Cherish stopped again. Gladys was standing on the outside of her stall eating hay. Taking a deep breath, Cherish was going to run, but only got a step before Tim made a clicking sound and Gladys started toward her.

Backing up, Cherish bumped into the bale of hay Tim was sitting on and stumbled. Tim caught her and Cherish scrambled away onto the bale next to him still in his arms. It always took her breath away being close to Tim.

Looking down at her, Tim was amused.

"I guess you're not cured," he joked, his blue eyes darting around her face.

"You did that on purpose," she scolded him, wiping hay out of her face. Tim helped her and she almost gasped each time his hand touched her skin.

Slowly, Tim leaned in closer, leaving Cherish hypnotized by the flicker of mischief in his eyes. If she just remembered they were having fun, it was lust she felt and not love, she would not get hurt.

"We still have to work on this," he said softly, his lips so close to hers she could feel his warm breath on her cheeks.

"Your lunch is getting cold," she whispered, her breath quick. A soothing warmth spread through her body making it inconceivable for her to move.

"It's a sandwich," he whispered as he touched his lips to hers and pulled back teasing her.

"You should eat," she whispered, entirely captivated and starting to fall under his spell.

"I will," he whispered and his mouth touched hers again and she almost moaned.

"You should," she said quietly. Tim put his mouth on hers and just hovered before kissing her lightly, lips barely touching. Cherish was still hypnotized by his warm mouth, his hand caressing her neck, his chest pressed up against hers.

Feeling Tim gingerly press his warm, moist tongue against her lips, she accepted his greeting with her own. Reaching the height of serenity, Cherish floated, her blood warm like calm waters in a lake under a languid sun in a peaceful blue sky.

Cherish felt tranquil, placid, blissfully serene. This feeling was new to her, somewhere between lust and something more, much more than caring deeply for another person as she felt for George. No kiss had ever rendered her so spellbound and enthralled. She was lulled by his caresses, mesmerized by his tender manner.

Nothing was on her mind. Time had no meaning.

"Gladys, what are you doing out," Carl called from the other end of the stable. Tim pulled away and looked down at her breathlessly. Cherish had not been released from her spell. She had heard Carl, but she was only slowly regaining her senses.

Gladys snorted and walked toward Carl.

Shaking her head, Cherish finally caught her breath. Tim let go, but he kept his gaze on her face.

Without a word, Cherish sat up, rolled over Tim and left the stable.

Walking to her guesthouse, Cherish didn't go inside. Walking and walking, she found herself out on the road and still walking. About a quarter mile later, she came to her senses and placed her hands on her knees as she leaned and caught her breath.

It was just lust. There was nothing else to it. *I'm about to be married*, she reprimanded herself.

What am I doing?

If it was so easy to give in to her desires, she wondered if it was because she was attracted to Tim or if she was not attracted to George.

Throwing away a relationship for a moment of pleasure still didn't make sense to her. Sighing, she headed back to the guesthouse and thought about her actions.

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Five years earlier

Mother and daughter sat at the kitchen table contemplating their morning coffee ritual. It seemed as if they were always waiting for one more person to arrive before beginning.

"I see you and George are getting serious," her mother said and Cherish knew it was going to be one of those mother-daughter conversations. She didn't not like them, but somehow Cherish would never be able to understand her mother's wisdom. It never seemed relevant to her.

"I don't know about that," Cherish said. Older women always wanted to know when she was getting married. Cherish didn't want to get married. There was too much she had to achieve first.

"Do you love him," her mother asked and Cherish winced. This was a serious conversation. This was a "where are you going with your life" conversation. It didn't matter if Cherish was planning a successful career or not, what mattered to her mother was whether or not she was going to be happy and happily married with a family. That was not Cherish's definition of a full life.

"We have a great time together," she explained. "We care deeply for one another."

"So you don't love him," she said.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "It's too soon for that."

"When I met your father," her mother said wistfully, "I knew he was the man I would be with forever. It was love at first sight. He played it cool at first. But on our first date we just kept saying 'bye' for hours and we didn't leave each other's side."

Cherish lowered her head. She couldn't watch her mother both happy and mournful at the same time, her anguish still palpable. Until last year, her parents were inseparable.

Tears formed as if the emotions were new. Passing away suddenly of a heart attack, her beloved father left the world too soon and they were still both in disbelief even a year later.

"You were lucky," Cherish said, taking a deep breath to stifle her sobs, muffle her moans, stabilize her emotions.

Defiant, Cherish explained her position.

"I don't believe in love at first sight, I believe in lust at first sight," she said. "I believe you can look across a room and see another person and fall instantly in lust. I don't believe you can look at a person, have passion and know immediately you're going to spend the rest of your lives together. I think you need to establish a foundation, a friendship. I've had lust, now I'm looking for a man who will be there for me when I need him. I want to build a life and you can't do that with some guy who just makes you feel like a groupie."

"Have you felt that before?" she asked.

"My first internship in college," she said. "There was this really good-looking older man who was a consultant. He was an incredible kisser and I was extremely attracted to him. When I thought we had something, I caught him with another woman. I made the mistake of falling for his looks and didn't get to know him or us as friends. I don't believe you can love without friendship first."

"I don't think just being friends means you're going to fall in love," her mother reprimanded her. "How can you just dismiss that people fall in love and get married all the time. You want a loveless marriage."

"I want a strong marriage, a stable marriage," she said. "I don't want to wonder if he's with someone else."

"We had a strong marriage," her mother asserted.

"You got lucky," Cherish insisted.

There was a knock at the kitchen door. The conversation was over. Cherish was exhausted.

Opening the kitchen door, Cherish was still seething when she greeted George.

"Come on in," she said as he entered and stood in the kitchen.

"Hello, Mrs. Tiswell," George said and her mother nodded.

"Have a seat, George," her mother said, drawing him into the conversation.

"Cherish tells me you guys are getting along well," her mother said as if talking about the weather. Cherish glared at her mother as she took a seat next to George at the table.

"What my mother means is that we seem to spend a lot of time together," Cherish warned her mother as she spoke to George soothingly. The undercurrent of their conversation was covert and George spoke as if it were an innocuous get together.

Her mother was gauging his words, his actions and his reactions.

"I like to think we have a great time together," he said, looking at Cherish, who smiled.

"When I met Cherish's father," her mother said, impervious to Cherish's glare, "we fell in love instantly. We knew immediately we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. What are your plans for the future, George"

George looked puzzled.

"After my internship," he said, "I plan to apply to several larger firms. I would like to make partner before I'm 40."

"I mean, what about starting a family?" her mother coaxed. George was beginning to feel the pull of a deeper undertow.

Clearing his throat, George looked to Cherish who sighed.

"We're just dating, mom," Cherish said like a petulant teen.

"Just dating," George whispered hoarsely.

Her mother took a long drink of her coffee.

"I have to ... I'll be back," George said and went outside for a moment.

"Are you happy?" Cherish asked sarcastically.

Her mother was not happy. She looked forlorn and sorrowful. She was worried about her daughter's future and happiness.

"You may think it's not important," her mother said heavyhearted, looking at some distant past and an uncertain future for Cherish. "You won't realize it now, but someday you're going to realize what you're missing, you're going to fall in love. I only hope you don't throw away your chance for true happiness just for stability."

Cherish shook her head. They would never agree on this.

Walking outside, she took George's arm and felt secure in her decision.

Chapter 18

Tim greeted everyone at the dinner table and they waited a few minutes for Cherish. When she arrived, his grandmother said grace and they ate in peace.

Glancing occasionally at Cherish, Tim thought about their kiss in the stable. Cherish had just walked away. Sitting across the table, Cherish ate and had a conversation with his grandmother about the fountain. Carl looked at Cherish then glared at Tim as the women talked about their day.

Cooking consumed his grandmother's day, kissing in the stable didn't even make Cherish's list. Tim didn't expect it to, but when he held her in his arms and kissed her deeply he knew nothing else was on her mind in the stable.

Every kiss, every caress, Tim found himself wondering why it seemed new to him. Sensations he only thought he had experienced before seemed more intense and he didn't know why.

As they were clearing the table, a phone rang and Cherish apologized.

Hitting a button, she walked out to the mudroom.

"Hello, George," Tim heard as she made her way out the door and down the steps outside of hearing range.

Tim noticed that he wasn't the only one startled by the realization Cherish really was leaving shortly. Up until then, they had all gotten so used to her presence.

When she came back up the steps, Tim and everyone resumed what they were doing.

Cherish didn't mention the call. Helping them wash dishes, Cherish seemed distant.

Gran-T tried to hide her disappointment, but Tim knew she had hoped for some sort of relationship between Cherish and Tim. Carl took Uncle Victor to his room.

Tim was alone with Cherish and helped her dry the dishes.

"He offered to buy me a plane ticket," she confided in Tim. "Told me to just get on a plane."

Tim didn't say anything.

"He knows how important that car is to me," she said. Throwing down the dishrag, Cherish left and slammed the back door on her way out.

Tim finished drying the dishes. Standing at the sink, he caught his breath.

When Cherish showed him her engagement ring, it deterred him, but he still felt the need to pursue what she started. Listening to her complaining about her fiancé, Tim was struck with the reality that Cherish was with another man.

Why am I surprised? he wondered.

Tim was with Helena. Cherish was with George. In a few days they would both be back to their lives. Two people passing, sharing a moment and moving on. That was what this was.

His brain knew that, but something else inside him could not accept that reality.

Tim was compelled once again to go to the guesthouse. Knocking on her door, Tim waited. Cherish opened it and looked puzzled.

"You can tell your own story," he said. This just made her more puzzled.

"You get a diary or a journal and you write it all down," he explained. "Nobody can refute your own words. It's better than any seal or stamp."

Cherish smiled.

"You put way too much into what I say," she said.

"I know," he whispered. Tim turned and Cherish closed the door.

Heading back to the house, Tim heard her words echo in his head.

You put way too much into what I say.

Why did he care what she said? Why did it matter?

Turning that thought over and over in his head, Tim lay on his bed struggling to sleep, to get peace from his thoughts.

Getting up, Tim grabbed a notebook. Writing until the words were blurry on the page, Tim fell into bed as if a burden had been lifted from his mind. Putting pen to paper, he had alleviated the thoughts that held him down and now he was light. Peaceful dreams were all that were left.

Chapter 19

Waking up slightly tired, Cherish realized she had been in the guesthouse a week. A week earlier her car had broken down, she was without a room and Gran-T took her in.

A week was a lifetime.

Before she arrived, she had walked away from her old life and was headed to her new life when she was sidetracked.

Sure of her next steps, Cherish wasn't prepared for the feelings that made her question where she was going.

What had started as a tease ignited into a blaze over which Cherish had lost control.

She had only known Tim a few days and she already felt more passion for him than she ever felt with George.

The thought of throwing away a relationship for some really great erotic kisses, though, seemed absurd. For all Cherish knew, she was just some fling, a woman of convenience, a holiday romance.

When he had knocked on her door, she was surprised that he was once again still obsessing over something she had said. Somewhere between passion and friendship, Cherish couldn't decide what Tim wanted from her. The auto shop could call any day, any hour and Gran-T would be another person on her Christmas list. An annual "hello" and "happy holidays."

Cherish was confused because George hadn't called in almost a week. She knew he was busy, but she was on a road trip and was not at their new home as anticipated.

Venting in front of Tim was reckless, but she couldn't believe that after everything they had been through, George didn't understand why she couldn't leave the Bubble, have someone else take care of it. It was her link to her parents, to a better time.

The car had to get better. Something had to get better. Too much had died in her hands and this she could fix.

George would just have to wait a few days. Then they would have a lifetime together. That's where their story would start. That's where her new life would start. This time with Tim and Gran-T would be a special memory. The grandkids would not tell this part of her story.

Starting her day, Cherish was free to wander. Carl didn't have any work.

Heading down the driveway, Cherish found herself on her way to the old town where her car had broken down.

Carefully entering through the opening in the old wooden fence, Cherish wondered what the place looked like when Victor and his wife Row first got there.

A large tree hovered over the church and fountain as if it were about to fall over from the weight of its twisted branches.

There was nothing impressive about the fountain.

It was old and parts were crumbling. Rainwater lay stagnant and a green film had formed on the bottom. Cursing the rain, that's what Cherish remembered. She thought it was funny she had asked for someone to help her and a man rode up on a golden horse. It was a tow truck she wanted, not a knight in shining armor.

Sitting on the edge of the fountain, looking into the plaza, Cherish wondered what it had looked like and closed her eyes to see Fountain Way as Tim's great-great-great-great-grandparents saw it.

Requesting a town to live in, Row inspired Victor to establish a trading center. It was just a few boarded up buildings connected by a wooden sidewalk. Cherish saw traders in fur doing business with Victor.

Requesting a church in which to marry, Row inspired Victor to build a small church. Opening her eyes, Cherish saw a building that could have been a church. There was a small wooden cross on a sagging spire, and the stairs to the double doors were long gone, with no way to get into the building. Closing her eyes, she imagined the day the Jaskins got married. She could see them racing down the steps to share their lives together.

Requesting a house in which to build their lives, Row inspired the mud house that was now nothing more than a wall holding back the wind. With her eyes closed, Cherish saw the family happy in their home, Victor and his wife Row stronger in their dedication and commitment to each other after they reconciled what he thought was a betrayal.

That was Tim's version. A story of betrayal and resentment. Victor loved his wife, but she had come all the way across an ocean and the wilderness plains of America to find him and trick him into the marriage arranged for them in their native country.

Cherish opened her eyes and sighed.

How could the man who seemed so sensitive and passionate be so cynical? Is that what he thought about love? Is that what he thought about women? Conniving?

Did he not have a loving family? Could he not accept the fact that someone could make a mistake and the other could forgive and still love?

Victor was probably resentful, but Row probably didn't have many options. That was Cherish's version. That was her vision.

Standing, Cherish knew none of it mattered. There was an official version but it had been blown away with the wind, worn down by the weather, bleached out by the sun.

Walking back to the house, Cherish started for the guesthouse when she saw Uncle Victor sitting on his bench like a shriveled flower dried up from the sun, but still comforted by its warmth.

Nodding to him, Cherish saw that Uncle Victor had something in his lap and was very excited to see Cherish. Uncle Victor did not speak very often and when he did it was just a word here or there, often just a repeat of the last word or idea she had just talked about.

The silence didn't bother Cherish. She knew some people just liked company. Some people liked to listen but not talk. Cherish was the type of person who liked to talk about the random thoughts in her head. Once she heard them out loud, she realized how ridiculous they seemed and that thought was cleared from her brain and another stepped forward.

Uncle Victor liked to listen and Cherish knew this because he did not seem to look like her constant rambling irritated him. A slight nod or mumble and Cherish knew he was listening.

Mostly she liked to talk about mundane things like how good Gran-T's cherry pie was or the warm rain showers. Now that she knew the tale, Cherish just let all her thoughts flow. She told Uncle Victor her version, and how Tim was cynical when he told his version, and how he needed proof.

Tim wanted a first-hand account of the tale. Without that, his great-great-great-great-grandparents lived a resentful loveless marriage in his mind.

Sitting, Cherish told Uncle Victor about her visit to Fountain Way.

"I can't imagine what it looked like," she said. "It just seems old and barren and I wouldn't want to live there."

Mumbling, Uncle Victor patted the leather-bound book in his hand.

"Proof," he said beaming.

Amused, Cherish shrugged.

"Proof of what?" she asked.

Uncle Victor pushed the book off his bony lap and onto the wooden bench.

"For you," he said. Cherish looked at him puzzled, but she picked it up.

"Time to go, Uncle Victor," Carl called walking toward them from the path to the guesthouses. "Truck's over here."

"Hi, Carl," Cherish said, shielding her eyes from the sunlight with her hands.

"Cherish," he said cheerfully. "Uncle Victor and I have an appointment with the doctor."

Grumbling, Uncle Victor got ready and held out his thin arm for Carl.

"Routine?" she asked, hoping it wasn't anything serious.

"The usual," Carl said, lifting Uncle Victor by his hands.

"See you later," Cherish said as they walked slowly toward the truck in the back driveway.

Cherish picked up the leather-bound book. The edges were worn but it was in good shape. The pages inside looked very old, like parchment. Opening it, Cherish realized it wasn't a book, but a journal of sorts. There were dates but she couldn't read anything. It looked like gibberish.

"Cherish," Carl called from the pathway and she stood wondering what was wrong. Holding the leather-bound journal to her chest, she ran to the path.

"What?" she asked. Uncle Victor looked fine.

"I forgot his sweater," Carl said. "It's on the chair in the kitchen."

"Don't scare me like that!" she said and ran to the kitchen to grab his sweater.

When she got back, she handed the sweater to Carl through the driver's window.

"See you later," he said beaming.

"Be safe," Cherish said as Carl backed out of the driveway and Uncle Victor smiled.

Cherish watched as they left and held the journal to her chest.

She had no idea what Victor had handed her. Rambling on and on, Cherish didn't know what Uncle Victor got out of her random thoughts. For all she knew it could be a log businessmen or sea captains kept.

Holding it tight to her chest, Cherish was comforted by one observation.

The men in the Jaskin family were always listening. When Cherish didn't think what she was saying mattered, they cared enough to help her resolve her issues even when she thought her issues were trivial.

It wasn't possible that Tim was cynical. Not in his heart. Not where it mattered.

Chapter 20

Friday afternoon, as Cherish was taking a nap, there was a knock at the door.

Rolling off the couch, Cherish answered the door. There was no one there. A couple seconds later, Gladys turned the corner and Tim extended his hand to her from atop his saddle. Without thinking, Cherish grabbed his hand, slid her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself up behind him. Holding on tight, they were off across the meadow, through the woods and up an incline.

At the top, Tim stopped. Cherish held onto him while she slipped off Gladys and touched solid ground again. Turning, she saw a picnic set up under a large tree offering protection from the hot sun. Cherish waited while Tim led Gladys to a large concrete tub of water almost like a fountain, without the fancy part spiraling up from the middle.

Tim motioned for her to join him in the middle of the flat hilltop. Pulling her to him, he rested his arm over her shoulder as they looked over the valley, the new part of town and Interstate in the distance. It was a nice spot.

Looking where Fountain Way and the house were, Cherish only saw trees.

"Is this where you come to be alone?" she asked.

Tim sighed.

"I'm going to build a house here someday," he confided. Cherish nodded. It wasn't information she could comment on.

"What do you think?" he asked and Cherish glared at him.

"What do you want me to say?" she asked cautiously. "If I say something slightly critical I think you'll reconsider. I have no opinion."

"I don't think I'm that sensitive," he insisted. Cherish sighed.

"I love the view," she said. "I love the fact you can see the city, but you can't hear it. You can see it, but you still have your privacy. I love the fact you can see the Interstate. It always makes me happy to see people moving forward. I'm always wondering where they're going."

"I thought it was an eyesore," he shrugged.

"It's your house," she said. "Don't put any windows facing it," she suggested. "What about your grandmother's house?" she asked, realizing Tim had inherited it after his parents passed.

"I hadn't thought about that," he said. "This is where I want to build."

"Someday," she reminded him.

"You don't think I'll do it?" he asked.

"As long as you say someday, no," she shrugged. "I always said someday I'd bring my kids to visit my childhood home. But it's not there anymore. I waited too long."

"You're probably not even 30," he said. "Besides, it's still there."

Cherish sighed.

"And how old are you, Tim?" she asked. "When do you think your someday will begin."

Tim lowered his head and sighed.

"I told you not to ask my opinion," she stated. "Wouldn't you rather enjoy that nice picnic over there where there would be no talking."

"Starting someday just because you think you need to start isn't the answer either," he said.

"Here we go," she sighed.

"Think about it," he said, squeezing her shoulder as they looked out over the valley.

"What if I build this house, but it turns out this isn't where I'm supposed to be," he said.

Cherish glared at him.

"You have a fear of commitment, don't you?" she asked rhetorically.

"I don't," he said, unsure of himself.

"Build, don't build, build somewhere else," she said. "I'm out of here in a few days. I will never know if you did or did not build."

Standing there, Cherish tried to imagine what his house would be like. Closing her eyes, she could see his dream. Opening them, she saw reality.

"Let's eat," he said.

Sitting down to a picnic of sandwiches and potato salad and coleslaw, Cherish concentrated on the tinfoil covering a pie pan and wondered if it was cherry or apple. One would be more pleasurable than the other, but either one would be a good dessert.

After finishing, Cherish was excited as Tim unveiled the pie. It was cherry. Cherish applauded. It was the simple pleasures.

Cutting a slice, Tim put a large piece on the plate Cherish eagerly held out for him. Sighing, she forked huge scoops of the sweet tartiness in her mouth and savored every bite. Smirking at Tim, she moaned as she swallowed. He was not interested in his pie.

"I'm just going to close my eyes and listen to you eat the whole thing," he said and he did.

Cherish didn't eat the whole pie. Just three quarters. She was just as surprised as Tim. Wiping her mouth, she declared she couldn't eat anymore.

"Not right now," she stated. "In an hour, I will finish it off."

"Do you love him?" Tim asked out of nowhere. Cherish was puzzled.

"Love whom?" she asked.

"Your fiancé," he said puzzled. Cherish sighed. Her response pretty much summed it up. She cared deeply for George, but she didn't think he was the love of her life. There was no such thing.

Lowering her head, Cherish wasn't sure what she should confide in Tim. Just because she didn't love George like she believed Tim's great-great-great-great-grandparents loved each other, that didn't mean she didn't care for her fiancé. They were going to build a life together.

"That's personal," she said.

Tim tugged at her outer shirttail and she rested her head on his chest.

"What about you?" she asked. "Do you have a special person in your life, or are you too busy working?"

Tim gently caressed her hair and Cherish wondered if Tim was like this with every woman he met on a holiday.

"I'm seeing my publicist," he confided. "She's very beautiful and very direct. She knows what she wants and she gets it."

"Do you love her?" she asked.

"We're just dating," he said.

"Have you ever been in love?" she insisted.

"Have you?" he retorted. Cherish sighed.

"Does it matter?" she asked, turning toward him. His warm hand rested on her cheek as she found a new position facing him.

"I can't have this conversation with you," she said. Tim looked puzzled.

"Because it's too personal?" he asked.

"No," she said.

Cherish explained.

"I told you I don't want to get hurt again," she whispered.

"How am I going to hurt you?" he asked, caressing her head and stroking her hair.

This always rendered Cherish blissfully serene.

"You're the kind of guy that, you're like a hot woman," she explained.

Tim blinked in confusion.

"The kind of woman where you want to say 'hi' but when you speak to her nothing but nonsense comes out because you're distracted by her beauty," she explained, needing him to understand in his terms. "You're like that."

Tim still looked puzzled.

"I am wearing another man's ring, but I find myself here talking to you. I know it's nothing more than a fling. It's just lust. It makes a good memory, but commitment is much more important."

"What do you want me to say," he whispered.

"Nothing," she said.

Without speaking, Cherish rose to meet Tim as they both decided at the same time they needed to stop talking and just feel something instead.

Sitting under the tree, they groped and grasped at each other, moaning as if it were their last time together. Nonsense filled her brain.

If she never saw him again, Cherish wanted this memory forever. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and soon a drop of rain brought a shower. Parting and gasping, they looked at each other both soaking wet, hair plastered on their heads, raindrops dripping from their faces, and laughed.

Gladys walked toward them and in moments, Cherish was clinging to Tim's chest as rain pelted them on the way back to the stable.

Arriving at the stable, Cherish helped Tim as he brushed Gladys. Standing behind her, he held her hand as they brushed together. Pressing against him, Cherish tried not to moan, but she just ended up breathing heavy and stifling the occasional gasp.

Breathless, she turned and they kissed again while Gladys was content eating. When they were done, Cherish stood by the entrance to the stable and Tim stood across from her as they just looked at one another while the rain flowed from the sky like a faucet had broken.

With his shirt clinging to his chest, his jeans wet and sagging, Tim pushed himself away from the post he was leaning on and approached. Cherish had many thoughts she should never have been thinking about a man who was not her fiancé.

Tim walked slowly toward her never breaking eye contact. Cherish saw the hunger in his eyes and waited for the pleasure only he could provide.

Caressing her cheeks, Tim watched as Cherish closed her eyes and tilted her head back. Tim covered her mouth with his and the sensation of his lips on hers sent a jolt through her gut that dissipated into hot fire throughout her body.

Holding onto his arms, she wanted to be kissed like that always. The rain passed until only a light mist filtered in from the open stable door.

Cherish could have kissed Tim all day, but they were interrupted.

"Your car's ready," Carl said, running in from the mist. "The shop guy's waiting for a check." Turning quickly, he left them alone again.

Tim rested his forehead on hers and they both caught their breath.

"I have to go deal with this," she whispered. Pressing close to him, she knew it would be a few moments before Tim would be able to walk straight. Leaving him by the post, Cherish ran to the guesthouse, the mist cooling her skin.

Waiting by his truck in the back driveway near the guesthouses, Dan presented the Bubble to Cherish. It looked brand new.

"It looks incredible!" she exclaimed, looking at her old car transformed. She was afraid to ask the final estimate.

"What do I owe you?" she asked.

When he told her the final tally, Cherish was confused. It was much lower than she had imagined.

"Are you sure?" she asked. Dan nodded.

Cherish invited him inside her guesthouse, wrote a check for ten percent above what she owed and thanked Dan. He handed her the keys.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," he said, nodding as he left.

"It was a pleasure meeting you," she said and closed the door. Still thinking about the kiss, Cherish decided she needed to go. She needed to say her "good-byes" quickly.

Gathering all her clothes, she shoved them in the suitcase. She stuffed everything else in her purse and tote.

Opening the trunk, she loaded the suitcase and her purse and tote. Going back inside, she started writing a note. The door flew open.

Tim stood at the entrance and looked puzzled.

The blood drained from her body. Cherish didn't know how to say good-bye. Once she did, this time, this moment in her life would be nothing but a memory. Her new life was waiting for her and it was time she headed for her intended destination.

Chapter 21

Tim stood in the doorway of the guesthouse. The open trunk set off an alarm in his brain he didn't know had been set. Tim hadn't considered that Cherish might leave without saying good-bye.

Sitting on the floor, pen in hand, Cherish looked up at him with guilt in her eyes.

"I was just writing a letter, ..." she said.

Tim closed the door behind him and kept her gaze as he walked down the three steps and stood before her.

Cherish stood.

"I think I deserve a better good-bye," he said. Tim quickly pulled her close and kissed her as he held her tight in his arms. There was something about knowing she was leaving that made Tim need to give her everything he could. He didn't know why, he had never felt that need before.

Cherish felt the same way. Pushing him away, she held his gaze with an intensity Tim had never seen before. They both had the same thought. Ripping off their shirts, Tim pulled off his belt and let his wet jeans slide down. He kicked off his shoes and stomped out of his jeans. In his boxers, he watched as Cherish tried to take off her own jeans, but they were stuck to her wet skin.

Almost tripping, Cherish looked up at him with determination against all odds and held onto him for support as she tried getting the wet jeans to slide off. Tim felt the cold metal of her engagement ring and sharp jab of the diamond on his arm. Holding onto her shoulder, Tim steadied her and kissed her again while he massaged the ring off her finger and tossed it on the couch.

Before he could see her reaction, Tim leaned down then threw her over his shoulder.

Taking her into the shower, he turned on the hot water and poured shampoo over her waist and slid the jeans off her body. They stood in their underwear under the hot water breathing hard.

Tim knew what was beneath her underwear, he had already had a glimpse, but he never thought he'd be standing in a shower with her about to take them both as close as they could to the mythical sexual experience only achieved once in a lifetime.

Stepping up until he was right up against her, their chests touching, Cherish let him take the lead. Reaching behind her, Tim unclasped her bra and slid it off her arms and dropped it to the shower floor.

Tim slid his hands down to her underwear as she did the same to his and they both stepped out of them until they stood naked before each other. Pulling her close, Tim felt her soft warm body, her breasts soft on his chest as he held her close to him and kissed her tenderly. The warm water cascaded down them.

Tim already felt as if they had achieved a level of pleasure he had never felt before and they were just kissing. He could only imagine what it would be like when they finally came together.

Chapter 22

Somewhere between kissing naked in the shower and coming together in ecstasy on her bed, Cherish had an epiphany.

The two of them together weren't doing anything she hadn't done before. But somewhere in the experience, Cherish realized what was different.

While accepting his insistent, urgent thrusts, Cherish sensed a familiar tenderness that wasn't exclusive to the bedroom. Holding her arms above her head, Tim gently grasped her wrists and, while he concentrated on other pleasurable endeavors, gently massaged them. Closing her eyes, Cherish concentrated on the warm, gentle, tender caresses.

That was where the epiphany was born, in his hands.

The ultimate, once in a lifetime experience wasn't some magical moment separate from all other moments. It was the culmination, an extension, the crest of every other moment shared.

This moment of ecstasy flowed from passionate kisses, which flowed from holding hands, which flowed from sharing intimate fears and dreams, which flowed from an initial attraction. The same warm grasp she felt at the height of orgasmic pleasure was the same hand that consoled her while they just sat and talked. Sex was separate from all other interactions. Making love, pleasure in shared ecstasy, it was just an extension of every other way of showing another person they were loved.

In her moment of epiphany, Cherish also felt a great sadness. This was the ultimate expression of her love, but for Tim, was it love or just another fling, really great sex without a deeper connection?

Exhausted, they finally parted. On their backs, staring at the ceiling while trying to catch their breath, neither one of them spoke.

He had removed her ring. When he came to her, he looked almost hurt at the idea she would leave without saying good-bye. Cherish didn't have that intention. She was the only one who would get hurt if they got too involved, if they went too far, and they had.

Wanting to leave, Cherish knew she couldn't. Sharing this experience was a pleasurable anticipation, but Cherish knew it would be bittersweet. Knowing what she was missing only confused her more. Not knowing what Tim really felt, if their experience even mattered on a deeper level, left her in despair.

If this was nothing more than a good-bye, a really great once in a lifetime last fling before she got married experience, she could accept it, but that didn't mean it hadn't changed her on some level.

At any moment, she expected to hear Tim slip into a peaceful slumber as his breathing became regular and steady again. After sex, Cherish was always energized, and after this experience, her mind was electrified. Even if she could sleep, she would still be thinking about what she had just experienced.

It did not disturb her she had slept with a man not her fiancé. Had she been married, the guilt would have consumed her. This was the time to figure out if she could really commit to forever.

What she needed before she left was confirmation from Tim that this experience was nothing more than a fling. There was no way love or commitment was on his mind. Whereas Cherish was inexperienced in terms of being with other men, she knew Tim, a few years older than she was, had been in this position before with many other women.

If she were no more than one of those other women, Cherish would be glad for the experience and could move on. She just needed to hear him say it.

Reaching for her hand, Tim intertwined their fingers and Cherish felt a jolt in her gut that painfully spread throughout her body. If it was over, she wanted it to be over. By holding her hand, Tim just extended the experience and Cherish was overloaded. Cars were moving on the Interstate and she had to join them as they moved on to their destinations.

Cherish just cut through the silence, the echo of their lovemaking now fading into memory.

"Well, I can check that off my list," she joked quietly with her head turned away so she couldn't see his reaction. Tim didn't speak for a long time. For a while, she thought he had fallen asleep if it weren't for his fingers still caressing hers in contemplation.

Bracing herself for, "that was fun," or "it was a pleasure meeting you," Cherish found each breath unbearable as her chest rose and fell marking the excruciating seconds until he spoke.

Squeezing her hand, Tim let go and Cherish turned onto her side. Moving closer, Tim brushed her hair off her neck as he cradled her back against his chest, their legs intertwined once again.

"I want to say, 'stay,'" he said. "But ..."

Adrenaline exploded and her heart beat faster than she had ever felt it beat before. The image of Row and Victor in bed at that crucial moment when she issued her ultimatum was forefront in Cherish's thoughts. This was how Tim's great-great-great-great-grandmother felt when she traveled across the ocean to track down the man who wasn't willing to commit to anything. It was up to Tim to decide. Even if he asked, she would not stay. There had to be something more than just the promise of something more.

Cherish laughed at her epiphany.

"I finally understand," she whispered, interrupting Tim. It didn't matter what he said. It only mattered what he would do.

"Understand what?" he asked, sounding very confused.

"Words are meaningless," she explained, finally understanding.

In the lightest voice, barely a whisper, it was more like a wish to the universe and not a request as she repeated the chorus. Cherish finally understood what Row meant when she made her ultimatum to Victor.

"Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back to marry you."

Sighing, Cherish closed her eyes. Tim sighed as well. She felt comfort when he tucked his forehead on her shoulder in frustration. That was all they needed to say. Nothing else mattered.

Drifting into peaceful sleep, Cherish knew she had to say one more good-bye before she left and merged onto the Interstate going away from this experience.

Chapter 23

Tim woke to the glow of sunlight in the guesthouse and was disoriented. As the memories of the previous evening flowed back like water in a dry spring, Tim reached over and realized Cherish was not in the bed. Turning to the couch, she wasn't there either and the bathroom door was open. There was no one else in the guesthouse. Tim was alone.

The only thing that caught his attention was the sparkle of something on the couch. Tim remembered. Realizing she might leave without saying good-bye, Tim had been distraught. For some reason he knew Cherish had to leave but he had to show her how he felt before she left. Taking off her ring, Tim didn't want that distraction to come between them.

Rubbing his eyes, Tim adjusted to the light of day. Since the moment he saw her in the bathroom, the robe barely revealing her soft curves, face beautiful and radiant from a long, hot, steamy shower, Tim had wanted to get close to Cherish.

At the time, he wanted nothing more than the pleasure he believed they would both share. What happened in reality was something more than a casual sexual experience and Tim berated himself for being unable to explain what he felt before she left.

Tim sat up in bed suddenly. *She might still be here. She might be at the house. She might be saying her good-byes to Gran-T and the rest of the family.*

Eyeing his jeans crumpled on the floor, Tim was about to jump out of bed when he felt something hard under his palm.

Looking down, he saw a leather-bound book. There was a white piece of paper sticking out of the book. Leaning against the carved wooden headboard, Tim picked up the book. Opening it to the bookmark, Tim saw the ink soaked worn pages and looked at the note on the crisp white paper.

"T, I hope this contains all the proof you need. C"

Tim pulled out the handwritten note and flipped through the thick parchment pages. Tim couldn't make out the words. It seemed to be written in a foreign language.

It was the dates that caught his attention.

September 15, 1851, July 10, 1851. Flipping to the front of the book, Tim read the first date. *May 4, 1850.*

On the opposite side of the inside cover of the leather-bound book, there was a chart. Starting with two names he had never heard before, Tim followed the tree. Leading from the first two names, there were two other names. Tim didn't recognize any of the names. From there, the tree started over again. At the top of the new tree, Victor and Row. Tim finally knew the official name of his great-great-great-great-grandmother. It was Rovenika. Under them, the three names of their children. There was no more room on the page.

It was a diary. A journal. A first-hand version of events. Better than any seal or stamp. Clutching it to his chest, Tim rolled out of bed, tugged on his jeans, leaped up over the three steps, pulled open the front door and let it slam against the wall as he raced to the house.

Looking to his left down the path, Cherish's car was no longer in the back road driveway. Leaping up the stairs to the kitchen, Tim didn't see her car in the main driveway either.

Gran-T was sitting at the table facing the door holding a steaming cup of coffee when Tim entered breathlessly. Hand on his knee, the other still clutching the journal to his chest, Tim expected his grandmother to reprimand him for not wearing a shirt in the house so he was startled by the words that she said.

"You found it," she said.

Looking up he only saw calmness in her demeanor. She knew about the important document he held in his hand.

"How did you know?" he asked, catching his breath.

"Go put on a shirt and we'll talk," she said. Tim knew it was best to just do as she commanded. Still holding the book, afraid it would disappear like the memory of a hazy dream if it left his grip, he pulled on a button-down shirt and buttoned the middle three buttons as he walked briskly down the hallway from his room to the kitchen. A cup of coffee waited for him across from where his grandmother sat.

"How?" he asked, pushing away the cup. Setting the book on the table, he covered it with his hands to protect the antique document.

Sighing, his grandmother put down her cup and held onto the sides gently as she answered Tim.

"I didn't know it existed," Gran-T confessed. "I had heard that it might exist, but nobody ever said they knew where it was. It was just one of those family stories. When she showed it to me, I was just as surprised as you are now."

"When did she show it to you?" he asked. "Where did she get it? Why didn't she bring it to me?"

Tim remembered Cherish had asked him what other proof he needed. He remembered how irritated he had gotten because Cherish didn't understand he thought he had exhausted all research in looking for proof in the tale his grandmother told.

"Today, before she left," she said. Tim put his head in his hands and groaned. Thoughts jumbled and knocked into each other in his brain. He was still thinking about their last conversation, still wondering how he felt. Now he was presented with something he had been searching for since he was interested in proving the facts in the tale.

There it was. Just dropped from the heavens for him to pick up and finish his quest.

"I have to talk to her," he said. Tim had nothing. He realized he didn't even know her last name, where she was from, and he barely knew where she was going. Tim had never felt closer to another person and he didn't even know her name. It hadn't seemed to matter.

Tim knew his grandmother had to know. She had spent so much time with Cherish. They probably exchanged all their information.

His grandmother could tell Tim where Cherish lived, but he knew what Cherish feared, what made her laugh, what made her cry.

The only other place he knew he could get the information was from the auto shop. They had her number.

"What was the last thing she said to you," his grandmother asked, interrupting his plans.

Looking up, he was confused.

"Why?" he asked.

"What did she say?" she asked again.

Tim thought about their last conversation. Remembering her remark about the experience, Tim didn't think his grandmother needed to know that. Tim also remembered

the long pause where he was unable to verbalize what he felt. When he finally fumbled for some words, some meaning, she had interrupted him.

"She said she finally understood," he said. "Understood what Row meant when she told Victor she would be back when he built the town and the church and the house."

Tim thought it was odd, but deep down he knew she was trying to tell him something he didn't want to acknowledge. Groaning, Tim dropped his head into his hands again and rubbed his face hard.

Cherish was telling him that she was in love and if he was as well, he would have to show it, not say it. If he wasn't, then at least they had an incredible experience together.

"What did that mean to you?" Gran-T asked. "How did it make you feel?"

Tim shook his head and fought for his breath as a groan escaped from deep down in his gut.

"I don't know, I have to talk to her," he pleaded with his grandmother.

Shaking her head, Gran-T consoled her grandson.

"I love you, Tim," she said. "I know you can just call her, but you didn't hear her. She doesn't want your words. She wants your action. If what you had was nothing more than just a good time, she doesn't want to hear from you. If you want more, you have to show her. That's what she meant. She understood what you still can't or won't comprehend. She found you proof, Tim. Went out of her way to help you find what you needed."

Gran-T looked for a way to console and reprimand her grandson.

"Don't call her," Gran-T implored him. "Don't try to find her."

"Not even to thank her?" he asked.

"She knows," Gran-T said. Tim clenched his jaw. Trampling horses no longer her concern, Cherish had returned the favor.

"Where did she find it?" he asked.

"Uncle Victor," Gran-T said. She looked impressed.

"Uncle Victor?" he repeated. Tim remembered how Cherish had gotten Uncle Victor to say the only word Tim had ever heard him speak. Tim stood suddenly, the journal fused to his hands, and headed to the backyard.

"Promise me you'll listen to what she said," Gran-T begged as he opened the mudroom door.

"I promise," he said and ran to see Uncle Victor. Tim knew he would find Uncle Victor sitting on a bench in the sun on the side of the house. Turning the corner, he realized he must have missed him when he raced to see if Cherish was still at the house.

Approaching like a shy child, Tim realized he hadn't sat with Uncle Victor since he was a kid.

Uncle Victor was his great uncle. He was older than Gran-T, had been since Tim could remember. In his whole life, until he saw Cherish having a conversation with Uncle Victor, Tim had never heard him speak. Uncle Victor was the oldest member of the family and revered by all, but he never spoke. No one could remember if he was always quiet or if there was a reason he stopped speaking.

Sitting gently on the edge of the bench, Tim just sat for a while wondering what Uncle Victor saw, what he felt when he sat in the sun, what he knew.

Tim said "hello." Uncle Victor nodded weakly without turning his head. Taking a deep breath, Tim choked out his words.

"I wanted to thank you for this," he said. There were no words to express his gratitude. Uncle Victor may have nodded, but Tim couldn't tell. For a long time, they sat in the sun listening to the cicadas humming, birds calling to one another, furry creatures rustling in the trees.

"Why didn't you mention it before," Tim asked. For years he had looked everywhere for documents to prove the tale that was born before Uncle Victor was conceived.

Tim did not expect an answer. About to leave, Tim sat back on the bench when he heard noise coming from Uncle Victor. At first, Tim heard a hum, like he was trying to speak. Listening carefully, Tim heard the three most important words in the world, the three wisest words and the only words he would probably hear from Uncle Victor again.

"You ... didn't ... ask," Uncle Victor muttered. Tim gasped and clenched his jaw.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Victor," he said, fighting for his words. "Thank you," Tim whispered and left his Uncle Victor sitting in the sun.

Still clutching the journal, Tim realized it was time to get back to the city.

Gran-T was still sitting at the kitchen table. Tim nodded as he headed to his room. Only placing the book on the bed so he could pack, Tim filled a suitcase then wrapped

the book in leftover bubble wrap and placed it in his briefcase. Grabbing his keys, Tim lugged his suitcase into the kitchen and placed the briefcase on the table.

"I have to get back, Gran-T," he said.

"We'll miss you," she said, but she didn't get up to hug him. Tim pulled something from his pocket and placed it on the table. It was the ring he had taken off Cherish.

"She might want this," he said as he let go of the cold metal.

"She might," Gran-T agreed. "You should know."

Tim lowered his eyes. He did not.

"I have to go," he said then grabbed his luggage, put it in the backseat of his sports car and drove off to the airport. Getting on the Interstate, Tim thought about all the places all the cars could be going.

Pressing the hands-free device, Tim dialed Helena.

"*Hello, baby,*" she said before he could say "hi."

"Hello, Helena," he said in a professional voice.

"*You ready for the last phase of the tour?*" she asked while doing a million other tasks he imagined when he heard her whispering instructions to her assistant and typing on her keyboard in her office.

"Yes, but I also need your help on another project," he said.

"*Another book?*" she asked, excited at the prospect of another tour, more time with Tim on the road.

"It's personal," he said. "I need you to find me an expert in Eastern European languages, preferably a specialist in older languages."

"*Sounds intriguing,*" she said seductively. "*When will I see you?*"

"I'll be in town tonight," he said, pulling off the Interstate and heading to the airport. "I'll talk to you later."

"*Bye, baby,*" she said and the phone clicked off.

Two hours later, Tim was embarking on the journey of several lifetimes.

...

Throughout the rest of the book tour, Tim was on edge waiting for the transcribers to send him pages from the journal. Entrusting his family heirloom to the transcribers, they assured Tim they would be able to translate the journal.

It was in the words of his great-great-great-great-grandmother. Tim couldn't have hoped for anything better than a first-hand account of events from the woman who inspired his family legacy.

Gorman, the main translator, laughed as he read some of the passages to Tim to show they would be able to take on the task of bringing his great-great-great-great-grandmother's words to life again.

His family story was coming to life for Tim in a way he never imagined.

Tim gathered the passages they sent and arranged them in chronological order. When they sent the document on disc as well, Tim searched for the word "fountain" and "church" and "house." Finding what he needed, he made a few calls.

The waiting period for certification of historical status from most of the organizations he called was too long and the town council would have Fountain Way an empty lot by then.

Calling a friend whom he had worked with before, Tim prayed for more time.

Chapter 24

Gran-T was distressed when Cherish came to her to say "good-bye."

For a week she had watched as her grandson and the woman got closer.

Furtive glances across the table, secret kisses in his bedroom, stolen moments behind closed doors of the guesthouse. At 80, Gran-T wasn't oblivious to the signs of love. She could see these emotions sharper than any person 50 years younger than herself.

Watching them ride across the meadow, Cherish holding on as Tim took the reins, Gran-T was reminded of her younger days at the house before she had her first son.

When Cherish came to her, showed her the journal, Gran-T sent her back to give it to Tim. She had wanted them to work it out. Not for the sake of Fountain Way or the family legacy, but for their own future happiness.

Anguish. Despair. That's what Gran-T saw in Cherish's eyes. Between arriving at the house and getting ready to leave, Cherish had fallen in love.

Unable to admit it, Cherish wanted to move on and start a life with her fiancé because that was more certain than a passionate week with a man she had just met.

Understanding, Gran-T consoled Cherish.

"Love can wait," Gran-T told Cherish.

"What if he doesn't feel the same?" she fretted. "I can't give up what I have for the possibility he may someday feel about me the way I feel about him."

"What do you feel?" Gran-T had asked.

"I've never felt for any man the way I feel for Tim," she confided. "I'm sure it's just attraction. You can't fall in love in a week."

"You can fall in love in a second," Gran-T said. "You can fall in love at any time. There's no timeline."

Cherish had caught her breath.

"That's what my mother said," Cherish confessed. "I don't know the difference. I have felt passion but no friendship. I have had friendship but no passion. I don't know what it means to fall in love."

Gran-T had placed a consoling hand on Cherish's arm.

"I didn't either," Gran-T had confessed. Cherish had seemed surprised at that revelation.

"I cared for Tim's grandfather very deeply," she explained. "I didn't realize how strong I felt until years later. Every day I felt our love couldn't get any stronger, but it kept growing and growing."

"He has a girlfriend, Gran-T," Cherish said. "We both have lives separate from what we have experienced here. I'm heading off to George, to my new life."

It was true; Gran-T knew her intentions, knew Cherish needed more than just feelings and words to be convinced she was in love or that Tim loved her in return.

"You have to follow your heart," Gran-T assured Cherish.

"My heart has gotten me where I am today," she agonized. "Do I go for passion and what could be love or do I go for stability? I've had passion and that didn't work out. I have stability and it's worked for years."

Patting her arm, Gran-T couldn't convince Cherish what she was feeling was truly love. Cherish would need a grand gesture. It would have to be written out for her.

"My grandson has feelings for you, Cherish, that go beyond passion," Gran-T had confessed. "I raised him since he was a teenager. It may take him time to realize it. Go and do what you need to do. When the time is right, you will know. You will both know."

Tears had dropped on her hand from Cherish's cheek. Hugging her, Gran-T knew Cherish would have to decide for herself, make her own decision. All she could do was facilitate an understanding between the two of them.

Leaving, Cherish had thanked Gran-T for everything.

"I will never forget everything you have done for me," she said between sobs and sniffles. When she left, Gran-T had cried.

The woman who had come to her soaking wet and cold was now leaving without realizing what she had done for the family, for her grandson, for Gran-T.

Wandering aimlessly, Tim had finally met someone very special. The fact he had seen Cherish at the fountain was a bonus. Gran-T believed in love stories, but she believed more in what she watched develop over the past week.

Placing Cherish between her and Tim at church had just been part of her efforts to get them to see what she already knew was happening between them. Leaving them at the fountain to spend some time alone and discuss the tale, Gran-T knew Cherish would change Tim's mind about his cynical version.

It was between them now and Gran-T could not help them make that leap to love. Like Row in the tale, she could only advise them and pray they would come to their own conclusions based on what she knew was already in each of their hearts.

Chapter 25

Gran-T stood in the plaza of Fountain Way and thought about the tale in her head. Surrounded by most of the family, they were taking one last look around. Dozens of family and friends stood in silence realizing it might be the last time they would ever see Fountain Way again.

There was a "Do Not Trespass" notice on the wooden fence and a new metal gate with a lock, but Carl ripped down the sign and broke the lock off the fence. The town council was steadfast in its conviction to tear down what their family had built. The only thing they offered was the fountain. The two family members on the council lobbied what they could, but they were outnumbered. If the Jaskin family could haul it away, the fountain was theirs. Gran-T hoped they could save more than the symbolic first meeting of the family she had married into, and gave life to its future generations.

Everything she did, she did for her family. Tim didn't understand how important his family was, but he might once there was nothing symbolic to represent their pride and heritage. It was a legacy more valuable than any treasure and just as strong as family.

They would always be a family, always united, but Fountain Way was their story, their beginning.

Bowing their collective heads in silence, a prayer was issued to the heavens.

"Amen," Gran-T said and they all slowly filed out of the narrow opening, got into their cars and headed to town hall.

The council was making their decision on declaring eminent domain.

Silently, they walked into the building and filled the room to standing room only capacity. The five council members had anticipated this and said nothing as the Jaskin family quietly took their seats or stood at attention waiting for the council's decision.

The developer spoke first.

"Looks like a good turnout," the tall, well-dressed, 40-something man from the development company said. There was silence. Clearing his throat, he explained the plan.

"I understand the Jaskin family is an institution in this county," the man from the development company said. "We're not here to destroy that institution, we're here to improve Fountain Way. We want to help take it into the future. We will preserve some of the history while moving it into the future. This development will attract new industries

into the county and with that more opportunities for the people of Trader Fountain. It will strengthen your community."

Not one member of the Jaskin family or audience offered more than the occasional cough.

"Thank you, Mr. Hurley," Barbara said.

Turning to the audience, the councilwoman proceeded.

"As a council, it is our responsibility to take in the consideration of the community," she said. "Is there a representative for the Jaskin family?"

Everyone turned to Gran-T.

Standing slowly with the help of Carl and Row, Gran-T had the huge responsibility of representing the entire family. Taking her place at the lectern, Gran-T supported herself on the wooden stand and sighed. Looking at the council members, she made her case for saving her family legacy.

"The story of the Jaskin family is not just my story," Gran-T said. She did not write a speech. "Harold, Tess," she said, nodding to two of the five members on the council.

"This is the story of our family. This is the story of one man and one woman who came from another country and established a life here in America. Would there be a town here today if they didn't settle here? Yes," Gran-T said. "There would have been some sort of settlement that would have turned into a town or a city. But that is not what happened. It was our family that settled here. If it weren't for Row deciding to come to a new land, we wouldn't be here right now. But she did. From oldest son, to oldest son and down the line, Fountain Way has been passed on from one generation to the next. In the past few years it has seen neglect. We take responsibility for that, but it is not the council's decision to call it a blight, to take it from us in the name of progress as they say. This is our legacy, all of ours, and we're not going to just let you demolish our heritage, our beginning, our tale."

Voice cracking, tears blurring her vision, Gran-T took a deep breath. Shaking, she turned her head and nodded at Carl. Standing, Carl escorted Gran-T back to her seat. There was slow applause at first then the entire chamber, even the two Jaskin family council members, stood and applauded Gran-T.

Knocking her gavel on the council table, Barbara called the assembly to order.

"We're now going to vote whether or not to declare eminent domain on Fountain Way ..." the councilwoman said and was interrupted. Applause started in the lobby and got louder, and soon there was cheering and applause in the council chamber.

Stooped and unsure of all the attention, a short man clutching a folder stepped into the chamber. Behind him, walking tall and resolute, Tim followed, dressed in a suit and ready for battle. When they approached the lectern, everyone sat down.

"We're voting on a matter," Barbara said.

"If it's about declaring eminent domain on Fountain Way," Tim said. "I think it's out of your hands now."

Standing beside Tim, the short man stammered, but he held up a finger to address the council.

"I'm from the Heritage Council Founding Town Fathers Federation," the man said and held up his folder. "Fountain Way has been issued a certificate as an official location by the HCFTFF and will receive foundation matching dollars funds to restore the plaza as part of a national preservation project."

"In other words," Tim explained. "Fountain Way is not your responsibility anymore."

Barbara was incensed at his bold maneuver.

"Tim, you can't just walk into an official council meeting and just have some random agency declare historic status for your own self interest," she reprimanded him.

The entire Jaskin family booed and Barbara hit her gavel until they quieted down.

The short man pulled out a certificate and walked up to the council table confidently, then placed a certificate and his business card in front of Barbara.

"I assure you," the man from the HCFTFF said, "we are not some 'random agency.' If you make any move to change Fountain Way in any way, we have the authority to sue the town council for damages."

Barbara looked to the developer. Standing, the developer got up and walked out of the chamber.

Gaspings, but waiting quietly for the verdict, the Jaskin family was ready to react with boos or applause either way.

Taking the certificate and card, Tess looked at the paperwork and agreed with the developer.

"I don't think there's going to be a vote here tonight," she declared. The Jaskin family rose and applauded. Grabbing her gavel, Barbara thought twice about her decision and put it down.

"This council is adjourned," she declared. Everybody stood and applauded. Exiting into an inner office, Barbara left the chamber. Holding her head in her hands, Gran-T cried. Celebration broke out all around her, but she was neither happy nor sad, neither jubilant nor vindicated.

Gran-T cried for the future generations. She cried for Tim. After all this time, he understood the importance of what he needed to do and he did it. More than anything, Gran-T just needed to know he cared, that he would continue the tradition. This was a victory for them all, but mostly for Tim. Even if he couldn't have children of his own, she knew this would be the new tale, Tim would always be remembered and revered, his story would live on.

Sitting next to Gran-T and consoling her, Tim whispered in her ear.

"It's alright, Gran-T," he said. "It's safe now. You never have to worry about Fountain Way again."

Gran-T wiped her tears and looked at her grandson. To her, Tim would always be the child she raised as her own, stubborn and charming, but loving and conscientious when he realized the importance of a situation.

"I love you, Tim," she said, leaning on him.

"I love you too, grandma," he said, kissing her forehead.

The heritage and legacy now preserved, Gran-T knew she didn't have to worry about Tim anymore. She could now concentrate on establishing new family traditions.

Chapter 26

In his apartment in the city, Tim held the document that contained the story of his family through the eyes of his great-great-great-great-grandmother.

Racing to get Fountain Way certified, Tim had not read the entire document. Researching several passages, he found the information he needed for certification. Presenting documents and pages from the journal as proof, now Tim had signed, sealed and certified confirmation of the origin of Fountain Way and his family's role in its creation.

Satisfied, Tim set out on his next project. He was going to finally read the journal as transcribed into modern language. Promising his family copies when he was done reading the journal, Tim had headed back to the city to begin a new journey.

As he sat holding the document, Tim felt a great weight lifted but another quickly settled in its place.

None of this would have been possible without Cherish's help. Tim had spent years chasing leads and finding nothing, and Cherish sat down with his Uncle Victor and asked a simple question. Of course, Tim didn't know that for sure. He did know that Uncle Victor handed her the book or told her where to find it. She had asked and it was given to her. Tim never thought to ask the oldest member of the family if they had any treasured family heirlooms.

Tim assumed if the family had any treasured family heirlooms they would be available to all the family members. But for more than 100 years, the journal went unnoticed through the generations.

As soon as he could, Tim would distribute copies of both the original journal as well as the transcribed version to all family members.

Still holding the document, Tim had no idea what story would prevail.

He knew the version his Gran-T told by heart. He knew his version. There was the official version and there was the version told to him one rain soaked Fourth of July with such passion, he finally saw his great-great-great-great-grandparents as real people, not old people who never lived and loved.

Closing his eyes, he remembered everything from the night he said his "good-bye" to Cherish. In post-coital reverie, she said she finally "understood" what his great-great-

great-great-grandmother felt that night. Repeating the chorus Tim had heard a thousand times, Cherish said it in such a way it brought the tale to life.

It was too intense a revelation for Tim at the time. It still was.

According to his grandmother's tale, Victor was in love and he did what his lover asked of him. Tim felt a strong connection to Cherish, but he couldn't say it was love. Whatever he felt, he had never felt before. Not wanting her to leave, he couldn't ask her to stay either.

There was a knock on the door. Putting the document on the coffee table, Tim stood and opened the door.

Helena stood at the entrance with a bottle of wine. When she opened her long coat for him, Tim got a glimpse of her very sexy underwear.

"May I come in?" she asked as she placed her palm on his chest and gently pushed him back into his apartment.

Tim did not resist.

Closing the door behind her, Helena put the bottle down on the foyer table and dropped her long coat to the ground. Posing, Helena turned and Tim admired her from the stiletto heels all the way to her radiant blonde hair.

Helena was one of the sexiest women he had ever known, but tonight he wanted to be alone.

"You've been so busy lately," she pouted as she moved forward. Tim stepped back, hitting the couch. Helena pressed her body against his and Tim breathed in her incredibly fragrant perfume. Helena kissed him and he gave in. Grabbing her around the waist, Tim stumbled to the couch and he fell on her as they groped and grasped and moaned.

The image of Cherish opening the bathroom door, her robe slightly opened, the look on her radiant face, made Tim stop for a moment.

"What's the matter," she whispered while caressing his cheek and back with her soft hands.

"I'm just tired," he said. Finding her lips again, Tim wanted to know if he had been aroused by the way Cherish had kissed him just because it seemed so erotic in the candlelit room of his family home.

Returning his kiss, Helena moaned and reached for his crotch, just as Cherish had that night. Helena wasn't teasing though, not entirely. There was just something missing he hadn't noticed before until he had kissed Cherish. While it was pleasurable, Tim didn't feel any connection to Helena. Pulling away, Tim sat up mystified. Helena was a willing partner, but it was another woman who held his attention. A woman he knew intimately, but whom he didn't know how to find.

"What's on your mind, baby," she asked, sitting next to him and caressing his back. Helena was single. Helena didn't have a fiancé, a new life to embark upon. Helena didn't have the need to create a new family to replace everything she had lost.

"Personal question," Tim said, catching his breath.

"Sure," she said.

"Have you ever been in love?" he asked, knowing she could interpret it in many ways.

"Love?" she asked. "I'm not sure, why? What about you?"

"I don't know," he said. "Is that a terrible thing to say?"

Helena shrugged.

"No," she answered. "Why do you ask?"

Tim sighed. The document waited for him. All the answers to his questions waited for him and he didn't know if he wanted to know the truths that would be revealed, not only about the tale, but for his life as well.

It would just be simpler to go back to the way life was before he went back to his family home. It was just one week out of his life. He had spent years in an on-again off-again relationship with Helena. He knew her name, he had her number, but he had no idea what her biggest fear was or even if she had one.

"I met someone when I went back home," he confessed.

"I'm going to need a drink," she said and went to get the wine she brought. Several minutes later, she returned with two glasses filled with wine and handed one to Tim.

Clinking them together, Helena took a very long drink then sat next to Tim.

Tim took a very long drink as well. Wincing as the alcohol burned his throat, Tim put the glass down on the coffee table, sighed and explained.

"This woman, her car broke down," he said. "We got to know one another, and she left to be with her fiancé."

"There's more isn't there?" Helena asked. Tim hung his head. *There was so much more.*

"You're still thinking about her aren't you?" she asked, neither angry nor judgmental.

"I don't know if I'm thinking about her or the situation or the fact that she found me proof that helped me preserve my family's legacy," he said, trying to determine the source of his obsession.

"Maybe it's all of them," she suggested, rubbing his back.

"Maybe it's nothing," he admitted. "I shouldn't even be talking to you about this. Why aren't you angry or upset."

"Would you be if I were seeing someone else or slept with some stranger while you were away?" she asked. Tim looked at her. That had never crossed his mind. When Helena wasn't around, he always thought she was working.

"I haven't thought about it," he said, now starting to think about it.

"You and I," she explained, "we never said we were exclusive."

Tim was startled by her confession. It was true, but he was still startled.

"Are you?" he asked.

"You asked if I've ever been in love," she said and drank the rest of her wine before finishing her thought. "I don't know. I was married for two years and I thought I was, but he wasn't. Now, I'm not so sure. Whatever we have, Tim, I don't know what it is."

"I had never thought about it," he confided. Pulling him toward her, Helena kissed Tim deeply and he could taste the wine on her warm mouth and it should have been very satisfying. It was pleasurable, but not satisfying.

"I think I should have the opportunity to help you decide," she whispered seductively and Tim gasped. "If you're in love with her, then you'll know the difference. If you're not, we start over again."

Tim groaned as Helena massaged his inner thigh. Closing his eyes, Tim had wondered that himself as he made love to Cherish. He had done nothing different that night. He hadn't magically come up with some special position that made their experience more pleasurable. He was confused because he didn't know if it was the fact he'd never

see her again that made the night so special or if it was something deeper, something he had never experienced before.

"We owe it to each other," she said, nuzzling his neck.

"Let's go," she whispered. Standing, Helena took Tim's hand and pulled him up then led them to his bedroom.

Slightly inebriated, but still functioning and fully aware of what he was doing, Tim found Helena's embrace, her kiss, her caress familiar, but it was just that, familiar.

Pulling away, Tim realized he couldn't reproduce that night. There was one key factor missing. Helena wasn't Cherish. Staring at the ceiling, he took her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers and caught his breath. There was no connection. Tim had experienced the most incredibly pleasurable experience in his life and hadn't realized the importance of the moment. Cherish knew it as well, but she knew the importance. Sensing he did not, she had left. She had left with a message.

Getting up, Tim put on a pair of sweatpants and left Helena to go to the living room. Sitting on the couch, Tim was ready to learn what Cherish already understood.

Chapter 27

May 4, 1850

Today should have been my wedding day. It would have been a beautiful wedding day. I can see the flowers in the meadow and the snow is gone from the mountaintops. There is not one cloud in the sky.

Mother can't stop crying. The family is humiliated. I am not.

Victor's family was very sad as well. They came over and apologized. They did not know why he left. I know why. I knew he was leaving for America.

He didn't want to get married to a woman he never met. Cousin Reta spoke to him before he left. He told me that Victor was leaving. Reta helped me escape that night so I could see the man I was supposed to marry before he left. At the train station, Reta showed me Victor. Tall and young. I was surprised he was my age. When he looked back because Reta got his attention, I saw eyes the color of the sky on the clearest, warmest day seem to look right at me. I turned and waited for Reta to return.

Reta said Victor wanted to find his fortune in America, he wanted to ride horses across the great lands and he never wanted to be married.

I didn't want to be married. Not until I saw his eyes, the sense of adventure in his soul, the determined manner in which he left for his months-long journey. I wanted to go with him. Every day I look out my window I think about that night and I want to get on the train to a boat and follow him to America, to join him on his adventure.

April 2, 1851

Reta did it. He found me passage on a ship going to the Americas. Reta had a plan. I am excited, but I know this will hurt my mother and father. They still haven't decided what to do with me. I hear them talking about finding me another husband. This one wealthier and more important than Victor and his family are.

I do not have a lot of time to choose. In two weeks the ship leaves. After that, Reta doesn't know if he can get me on another ship. The winter is coming and I will have to wait another year.

I am not sure if I want to make the journey alone. I will try to see if my father is going to be doing any more business in America. Maybe then I can beg them to take me with

them. I can only ask. I have two weeks before the ship leaves. Two months at sea. I have never traveled alone. I will pray for an answer.

July 10, 1851

I have been off the boat for a week now. I couldn't write the whole time. I spent the first few weeks vomiting and the rest of the time remembering I was supposed to be a boy. It didn't matter though. The ship was taking on water. The ship pulled into a port a hundred miles from the city for repairs. I got off because I was one hundred miles closer to Victor. I caught a wagon train going to the plains. I still have to pretend I'm a boy, but I'm going to start letting my hair grow again.

I'm not worried. My hair grows fast. But I do have to continue pretending to be a boy. Reta showed me where Victor was going on a map. If all goes well we shall arrive 50 miles from where Reta says Victor may be by mid-October, before the snow falls. All the money I have has to last the winter. The other day I woke up in a terrible sweat. What am I doing? With the sun warm in the sky during the day, I can sleep under the stars at night. I have never slept under the stars. It is the most beautiful sight in the world. No one noticed when I woke up under the night sky so scared. What will happen when the snow comes?

What will I do when I see Victor? But there is no turning back now.

I had only thought up to getting to where Victor is and I never thought what I would do once I got there. I have to put my journal away. People don't understand people who write for no reason.

August 17, 1851

I have arrived in the city where Victor told Reta he would be going. I have found a room. I ask people every day about Victor. I say he is my cousin. Nobody knows. My English is not very good. I have learned a few phrases. Some days my heart beats so fast. I came all this way for a man whom I never met. I can't go back. Not yet.

Tomorrow I will ask again.

September 15, 1851

I saw Victor today. I was mending pants in Mrs. Armstrong's shop when he came in. I was in the backroom. I went to go ask a question. He was busy with Mrs. Armstrong. For a moment his eyes shined as bright as the blue sky on the sunniest day and I quickly hid behind the wall. When Mrs. Armstrong went to the backroom I said I had to attend to a personal matter and I followed Victor. I saw him get on his horse and I followed him to the far end of town. I knew what direction he was headed.

September 20, 1851

Today I met Victor. As I write this, my hands are trembling. I had taken a horse out in the direction where Victor had headed that day. I came across a shelter, I guess you could call it, and a fountain. I saw his horse. Before I could be spotted I turned and rode away. I did not know what I was going to do.

Today I knew. The winter would be coming soon and I knew it would be a long time before I would have a chance to roam the wilderness without freezing. I have been told the winters are as cold as back home. I think about going back but I can't. I have to see Victor. I can never explain in words what it felt like to be engaged to a stranger for years resigned to my fate and then I am free. If he were old and ugly I would be happy. But he is not. Today I went and it was very hot. Riding out to his dwelling I found that he was not at home. I was going to say I was lost. That was my plan. But I got hot. I let my horse drink from the fountain and while he was resting I lay down on the edge of the fountain. I didn't hear him coming. My dress was above my knees. I had poured cool water over them and was drying them when I heard his horse approach. Shivers coursed through my body. I turned my head and stared at him. High atop his horse he stared down at me with his eyes and I forgot why I came. Victor said hello. I tried but I had to try again because I could not speak. I finally said hi and he got off his horse and I sat up to greet him. As he came closer, my heart was pounding so loud I could hear it in my ears. He asked me if I was lost and I nodded. He spoke in English. I understood what he was saying. He offered me water and when I handed him back his cup, without any notice, then he kissed me. I have to put my pen down now.

September 21, 1851

I told Victor I was staying at the nearby town. He came to visit me today. We took a ride. He asked me all sorts of questions. He was very interested when he heard my accent. We spoke in our native tongue.

Sitting in a meadow, he brought a picnic and we talked. I asked him what brought him to America. I knew, but I wanted to hear the story from him. He said he didn't want to get married. He wanted to explore America. I told him I was going to be married to a man I did not know and I came to America to explore as well. It was not the truth, but it wasn't false either.

He said he was supposed to get married as well. I asked him if he regretted his decision. He did not. We rode home. He wanted to visit again. I said maybe.

I know I came all this way to find out from him why he left, but now I don't want to lie anymore. I don't want to tell him who I am, but I do not want to lie either. I will decide tomorrow. It is too late to go home until the spring. I have enough money to make it through the spring. If I write to Reta, maybe he will get me passage on a ship home. I came to see what I needed to see. I heard what I needed to hear.

September 28, 1851

I told Victor I could not see him anymore. I told him I had to go home. He was not happy. I didn't see him for days and today he came to the shop. I went on another picnic. I wanted to know his intentions. He did not want to marry. He wanted to be free. I told him I did not want to marry as well. But I would have to go home in the spring. I would have to go home and obey my parents' wishes. I do not know if my parents will accept me. There is no future here with Victor. I could stay and explore with him, but I do want to get married and have children someday. Here in America, out in the wilderness, I do not have to worry about society and what they think. But if I stay too long, no respectable man will want me.

October 15, 1851

I write this as the coach takes a break to rest the horses. I am going out west for a while. I did something with Victor that should only have been reserved for my wedding night. I do not regret what we did, but I could not stay. I love Victor. I love his eyes. The way he

smiles. I love everything about him. He is not interested in marrying me. He wants to explore and be free. I will give him his freedom. Before I left though, I told him I would only come back under three conditions.

He did not agree, but I had to leave him knowing what I needed. I need Victor to be ready to have a family. I told him to set up a trading post, something where he wouldn't have to go out all the time, where he could trade and stay at home. It could be anything, but I couldn't live with a man gone for months at a time.

I told him he needed to build a church where we would be with a community of like-minded people. A church like the one in Hibverna. Then we wouldn't have to miss home. I told him I needed a house. A house to raise a family.

He said nothing. That morning, while he was sleeping, I left. I gathered my belongings and got on the next coach. I headed anywhere. When I got to the next town I decided to go out west. It would be warmer in the winter. From there I will wait out the winter. I will find work. I will wait until late spring or whenever the last boat back to Hibverna is leaving before I pass by Victor's place again. If he has done nothing, I will know his answer. If he has changed his mind, I will reconsider. Until then, I will explore. I will be free.

September 15, 1852

I write in this journal for the first time in a long time. There was no time to write. I worked very hard. I don't know if I can return home anymore. I never knew independence was what I yearned for. But now I am heading back to Hibverna. My father has passed and I am distraught. Reta said it was an illness. I hope it was not because of me. Reta said mother and father prayed for my safety every day. They suffered humiliation at my leaving. I have decided to stop by Victor's on my way to the port.

October 10, 1852

Victor and I are going to marry tomorrow. When I returned to his place, I did not recognize what I saw. Victor had taken my advice. Working day and night, he had built his plot of land into a trading post. A replica of the church in Hibverna, the main one in the capital city, stood in the middle of the wilderness of America. And he had built a

house. It wasn't a grand house, but it had enough rooms for us and maybe for some children in the future.

When I went to go see him, I was no longer interested in marriage. I wanted to go home and visit my family. But when I saw his eyes and he hugged me like he thought he'd never see me again, I fell in love all over again. He proposed right there, in the middle of the plaza by the fountain.

I wanted to have our families attend, but the winter is coming. I want to be married and living in our house before the cold settles in. I miss the mild winters in the west, but this reminds me of home. Victor still wants to explore and I don't mind. I am marrying the man I love tomorrow. I still can't bring myself to tell him I was the woman he did not want to marry. I don't know why. This is our new life. We chose to be married.

Tomorrow I will marry him and he will marry me because we chose to be married. That is all that matters.

July 29, 1855

This is the last time I will write in this journal. This part of my journey is over. As I write this I am still trembling. Victor's parents arrived a few days ago. I had been fretting for weeks. They had met me before when Victor left without saying good-bye. They knew I was the woman he was supposed to marry. Victor only told them he had married. They wanted to meet his new wife and children. For three blissful years we have been married. Not once in all that time did we ever fight. But that day, when his mother and father said hello and were happy Victor and I were finally together, Victor couldn't believe what he had heard. He left. Left me with our three babies and his parents. I couldn't stop crying. I explained everything to his parents and they consoled me, but Victor did not come home for three days. For three days I waited and his father went out to find him. On the third day he came home and he was so angry and didn't look like he had slept in days.

I told his mother I had to talk to him. She took care of the babies and we went for a walk. For the longest time we did not speak to one another. I waited for him to speak. I wanted to cry, but I did not. I spent three days crying. I wanted to beg his forgiveness.

Finally, Victor stopped and looked at me with those eyes once so blue now sad.

He asked me why I didn't tell him. I told him the truth. I just wanted to see why he left. The other reason was because I wanted to know the man with the blue eyes and adventurous spirit. The man I was supposed to marry. When I got to know him I fell in love even though he still didn't want to get married. I told him I couldn't stay with him without a commitment. I told him I didn't tell him before we got married because we were no longer in Hibverna. We were free to choose whom we loved. He had chosen me and I had chosen him. We did it of our own free will. I fell to my knees. I didn't expect to love a man the way I loved Victor. I told him that I loved him from the moment I saw his eyes. I told him I wanted to get on the ship with him. That I snuck out to see the man I was supposed to marry and needed to follow him across the ocean just to hear from him why he didn't want to marry me. I told him I never expected to fall in love with him. I expected him to be angry. He wasn't angry. He fell to his knees as well. I can still feel his body holding onto mine, his strong body shuddering against mine. I held on tightly and the tears would not stop flowing. It was the only time I had ever seen him cry. I never want to see him cry again.

Right there in the meadow we made love. It was the first night all over again, but it was different because we both thought we had lost the other. There under the stars in the warm evening breeze, he held me tight. He told me he was so angry. He thought I had tricked him. We had been arranged to get married to make our family fortunes greater, and he thought I had been sent to make sure the arrangement was kept. But after three days it didn't matter to him anymore.

After three days he realized he loved me. He loved our family. He said he couldn't live without us. He said he thought he would be in a loveless marriage, but he didn't feel that way married to me. It was more than I could ever hope for.

I came to America to follow my heart. It is in America on this land I found my love and the beginning of our lives together. Trading has brought more business and we are thinking of expanding to maybe have an extra room to rent someday. His mother and father say there are families in Hibverna interested in coming out to America. Business was not going well and his family is thinking about joining us. Victor wants me to put out the light now. I will say good-night. God bless us and our future. Amen

Chapter 28

Holding the last page in his hand, Tim saw a drop of water running down the page. Another drop fell and he felt his cheek. It was wet. Dropping the page, he wiped his eyes and took a deep breath.

Slipping her long coat back on and tightening the belt around her waist, Helena stood by the door.

Standing, Tim waited for her to say something.

"I guess we both know the answer to your question," she said.

"I'm sorry," Tim said, shaking his head. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

Helena looked amused.

"Why would you be sorry," she asked, holding onto the door handle. "It's what we all hope for. Not everyone finds it."

Helena opened the door and started to leave.

"I look forward to your next book," she said. Tim was too emotionally exhausted to move. Helena sighed and pulled the door closed as she left. Tim stood staring at the door then collapsed on the couch.

Falling asleep, Tim slept deeply and soundly. There was not one thought on his mind. While he dreamt, all the questions, all the things he could not figure out on his own, they all came together and formed a coherent vision. He was in bed, his fingers intertwined with only one person. Cherish.

How did she know?

Stretching out on the couch, Tim realized all of their versions were correct.

At every family gathering, every holiday, every opportunity, Gran-T told the tale passed down generation to generation. It was a well-told tale Tim had heard so many times since he could remember that it was just a story, a fairy tale with a happy ending. The people weren't real, just characters who lived a very long time ago.

Tim didn't believe in happily ever after. He was right. Upon realizing he had married the woman he thought he left behind in his home country, Victor was angry. For three days. Tim assumed it had been a festering anger and he had resented Rovenika for the rest of his life.

Not knowing anything about his family, Cherish heard the story once and she understood. Victor and Rovenika were real people. Victor was a young man at one time. A man who didn't want to fall in love and be married and settle down. One look and Rovenika knew she was in love.

Tim could no longer distinguish between the tale and reality anymore. At one point it had all mingled and he wasn't sure whose feelings he was feeling anymore.

Strongly held convictions evaporated when he read the words his great-great-great-great-grandmother wrote. That night, as he lay with Cherish, he didn't know how he felt. It didn't matter though. When she recited the chorus, finally understood the meaning, it had only confused Tim more than he already had been, still was.

His life was not the tale. His life was his own. His story was his own.

The source of his confusion had to do with the fact that his time with Cherish mirrored the tale and Tim always thought it was just a story.

Nobody made grand gestures anymore. Nobody built towns, churches and houses to prove their love anymore. Except for kings and fairy tale characters. Nobody except his great-great-great-great-grandfather.

Groaning, Tim needed more time to think. But how much time did he have?

Cherish may have left her ring, but she did not indicate that she had changed her mind.

Before she left, she had spoken to Gran-T. Advising him to do what Cherish told him to do, Gran-T confused Tim. Cherish had only repeated an antiquated idea. She understood the need for a grand gesture.

Leaving him with the one thing he had been looking for since his quest to prove the accuracy of the tale, Cherish had left.

Tim knew what he needed to do now. If the woman who feared being trampled by a horse could ride free across the meadow holding onto him as she embraced her fear, Tim could ensure the preservation of his family legacy. Obtaining certification was the first step, but Tim had to complete his task.

Until then, he would never be able to distinguish between his feelings about being responsible for the family legacy and his feelings for Cherish.

Unable to comprehend the enormity of her request, Tim did the only thing that he definitely knew how to do. He was going to present his research.

Getting up, Tim called Gran-T.

"Gather the family," Tim insisted and Gran-T knew what to do.

Dressing, he stuffed the document in his briefcase and headed back to Trader Fountain.

Chapter 29

When Tim pulled up to the house, he couldn't get into the driveway. Cars were lined up along the road leading up to the house. Cutting through the row of trees and over the grass, Tim pulled into the back driveway near the guesthouses.

Carl was walking by.

"Tim!" he greeted him.

Getting out of the car, Tim opened the trunk and then pulled a box out of the backseat.

"Would you mind grabbing a box," Tim asked. Carl looked down at his clean, white button-down shirt and shrugged. Tim smiled. Carl didn't dress up very often and he seemed to think this was one of those occasions.

Grabbing a box, Carl followed Tim. Walking out of the woods and into the backyard, Tim saw dozens of family members getting ready for their picnic.

Running and chasing each other around the yard, a bunch of his younger relatives ran up and danced around the two of them.

"Kids," he heard Jeremy call as he came over to help Tim and Carl with the boxes.

"Good to see you, Tim," he said as Tim handed him a box.

"I'm glad you came," Tim said.

"I wouldn't have missed this for anything," he admitted.

"We've got more boxes," Tim said. "See if you can get more help."

Jeremy nodded and called a few other cousins, nephews and nieces as Tim headed back to the car with Carl.

Surrounded by family, Tim supervised as a dozen people grabbed the last of the boxes from Tim's car and they followed him up the path to the backyard. Stacking the boxes on a picnic table, Tim greeted and hugged family members.

"Tess," he said, hugging his cousin.

"That was the most exciting council meeting ever," she joked. "Barbara still hasn't spoken to me since you made your dramatic entrance."

"It was close," Tim said.

"Too close," Tess agreed. "One more family member on the council and it would never have been an issue."

"Maybe it's good we don't have too much power," Tim joked as he greeted more cousins and aunts and uncles. They were all excited to see what Tim had discovered from the family heirloom.

After lunch, the entire family grabbed benches and chairs and assembled in front of the picnic table where the boxes had been stacked.

Tim addressed his family.

"I want to thank you all for coming," he said as he looked at them anticipating his presentation. Family had always surrounded Tim. He never knew what it was like to be alone. He had been lonely, but he was never alone. When his parents passed, not one day went by when one of his relatives didn't visit, try to make up for what he had lost. He knew no other life.

Sitting on the couch with Cherish while she poured out her distress over losing her entire family, he had realized not everyone had the love and support system he had built into his life.

Searching for that connection, Cherish knew how important it was to have family. Otherwise, no one cared when your car broke down and you were stranded with only a prayer the strangers who helped you didn't intend you harm.

A surge of adrenaline fueled Tim and he caught his breath. It was as if he realized he had been pulled away before walking off a cliff. It had been too close. It took a stranger to make him see all the treasures he had taken for granted.

"As you all know, I have been researching the origins of the tale Gran-T has been telling since probably before most of us were born," he said. There was applause. Tim took a deep breath. "I found nothing. Then a stranger came to us and did the simplest thing. She sat down with the oldest member of our family. Right among us was the answer. It was always with us. I just never asked," he said and took another breath. Aunt Rebecca got him a glass of water. Tim thanked her and quenched the emotion he couldn't share until he understood it better himself.

"I think I was the only one among us who needed proof," he said. "In these boxes is that proof," he said, patting a cardboard box containing everything he had ever wanted to know about his family heritage. There was a gasp among the family members and Tim sighed. "It's all here. It's the raw version of Gran-T's well-told tale. It is in the words of

my great-great-great-great-grandmother Row, as we know her. Rovenika. That was her name. But it's the same story. She came from another country because she wanted to follow the man she loved. When he hesitated, she issued an ultimatum, a test. And here we are now. There are copies for everyone."

Applause and scattered conversations gave Tim a moment to think about his next speech.

"I have a proposal," he declared and he had everyone's attention.

"This is our story," he said, motioning to the boxes with copies of the transcribed journal. "But it's bigger than that. It's a love story. It's the story of a dream," Tim said and he heard several of his female family members say "awww" and he smiled. "I propose we publish this. We can use the proceeds to continue the preservation of our family heritage. We would need to vote on it ..." there was applause and almost everyone stood. Tim waited until they sat down again.

"But that leads me to the second part of the proposal," Tim said and then he took a long drink. "Everyone knows the direct line from Victor ends with me," he said. "We all know it will continue with Carl, the oldest son of the next oldest son."

There were some murmurs. "Carl, do you want to explain this next part?" Tim asked.

"I think you're doing a great job, Tim," he joked and there was laughter.

"Alright," Tim said. "Carl and I discussed this and we think it is too much responsibility for just one member of the family to carry. We propose a family trust. We form a family council to make decisions. We are all in this together and we should all make the decisions together."

"It's about time," Row yelled out and everyone laughed. Tim laughed as well.

"For the first item, a show of hands," Tim said and every member of his family each raised their hand. The book would be published. "And for establishing a family council," he said and the hands did not drop. It was unanimous. The responsibility of carrying on the family legacy was no longer in any one person's hands.

Even if he did have a son, Tim would not want him to feel the lonely burden of preserving his family's happiness. He needed the support of everyone.

"Copies for everyone," he said, barely containing his emotion. As they rose to get their copies, Tim quickly turned and headed to the house. His throat was tight and he

needed to be alone for a moment. He had presented them with proof and given away his sole right to everything, and he was exhausted.

Resting on his bed, he closed his eyes and caught his breath. He felt the bed move and a familiar hand rested on his own.

"That was very good what you did back there," Gran-T said softly.

"I can't do it anymore," Tim confessed. "I can't be alone in this anymore."

Gran-T patted his hand.

"You were never alone, Tim," she said. Tim sighed.

"I don't know what to think anymore," he confided.

Gran-T had another tale.

"When I met your grandfather," she said, beginning her tale, "I was intimidated by his responsibility. I loved him, but I didn't want the responsibility. He wanted to live here near his family. I wanted to live near mine. Then one day his mother told me the tale I used to tell you. It was a beautiful story. But it wasn't my story. Then I had a son, your father, Tim. We were living at my parents' at the time. This was now his story. Your grandfather did not ask me to move back here. It was just a one-story house his parents were living in at the time. Instead, he went off for a while and when we returned for Thanksgiving with his family, we drove up and I saw this house. He didn't have to ask, I knew. He wanted this to be our story. Wanted his son to grow up knowing his family and embracing his heritage. He didn't ask me, he showed me and I chose. Your mother," she said and Tim winced, "she loved the family, but she wanted her own home. I understood. It's not easy living with in-laws. We built the extension on the house, back where Uncle Victor lives. We were going to build another house, before the accident."

Tim felt hot tears ready to escape and he closed his eyes.

"What I'm trying to say, Tim," she said, squeezing his hand, "is that once you decide you know what you need to do you have to show it."

Tim sighed.

"She went off to be with her fiancé," he asserted. "I couldn't give her what she needed."

Sighing, Gran-T stood.

"This only comes around once, Tim," she reprimanded him. "It's never too late if it's love. No amount of words is going to do it. You just have to show what's in your heart."

"What if I don't know if it's love?" he retorted, turning away.

"For some people it's instant, Tim," she said. "They know. But for others, people like you, you need confirmation. What proof do you need now, Tim?"

Gran-T sighed.

"It wasn't just the fountain, Tim," Gran-T explained. "I saw how you looked at Cherish when she came to the house. She was soaked and she tripped over that log into a puddle. I saw you take Gladys away and then I saw as you looked back at Cherish as you turned the corner. For a long time you looked and I knew you liked her. The first time I saw her up close she was soaking wet, shivering in the mudroom. But she was determined. She's not the type to hang around with uncertainty."

"I need to talk to her," he insisted.

"You need to show her, Tim," Gran-T asserted. "Make the biggest gesture in your heart. I saw Cherish before she left. Do you know how it feels to love someone and not have them love you back? That girl needs more than your words, Tim. If you love her, you have to show her."

Tim sighed. He heard the door close and he threw his pillow across the room. Riding Gladys across the meadow was what he needed, a long hard ride to arrange the thoughts that collided in his brain. But the yard was filled with family and he would have to wait.

Rising, he did the next best thing. Turning on his computer, Tim decided to write the foreword to his next book.

Chapter 30

Sitting on the sofa on the set of the very popular morning show, Tim waited to be interviewed. Bright lights over his head, a camera in front of him, Tim was nervous even though he had promoted his last book to a national audience. He was nervous because this was personal.

Tim expected the book to sell well, but he did not expect it to become a national best-seller in the first week. There was no book tour this time around. Every talk show requested he interview with them. They wanted to know more about Tim's story.

The tale of Rovenika was just as interesting as how Tim came to publish it.

Preparing for the interview, Tim thought about that week in July. It had changed him and he was still trying to comprehend the impact it had on his life. He had a story. Cherish had given him a story and he wasn't sure where it ended. There was a beginning to the tale and Tim was still trying to comprehend if he was still living the tale or if it had already found its proper conclusion.

Sales allowed the family to start work on Fountain Way. Tim had hired experts and they worked tirelessly to map out a plan that preserved the family origin story. There was still no word from Cherish. Gran-T just told him he needed to complete his journey.

"Today we have a very special guest," the male host said, introducing Tim as they went live. "The author of three non-fiction books, he has just published his latest, a personal tale about the origins of his family history." The host held up the book, a picture of the fountain was the cover with the title, "The Fountain of Truth."

"Tell the audience a little about your back story," the host said.

Tim cleared his throat.

"I first started researching the origins of our family story because I wanted to know the facts," he said, trying to be concise. "We had this family tale, but no one could verify anything. Through extensive research I didn't find any documentation that was useful. Then the majority of the council decided Fountain Way, where the origin of our town and family supposedly began, was a blight and was going to declare eminent domain."

"Now, this book is the actual journal of your great-great-great-great-grandmother who came over from another country to follow a man she only saw once," he said. "It's a very

interesting love story. But there's another story in there as well. Tell us about how you came about the journal."

Tim laughed. That was another story within itself.

"There was this stranger whose car broke down and she came to my grandmother for a room for the night," he began. "We shared our family tale and she did what I never thought to do. She talked to the oldest member of our family, my Uncle Victor, and somehow she was able to obtain the journal."

"That's a very personal part of the story for you," the host said. Tim shifted in his chair. It was the most personal, most momentous, most important moment in his life, after the passing of his parents.

"She left before I could thank her," Tim said.

"I know you write about this in the book," the host said, "but she said something before she left."

Tim swallowed. It was one thing to write it, it was another to explain on national television.

"In my family tale, they have this chorus to the tale," he explained. "In her journal, Rovenika asks for three things and those three things are what we all recite when we hear the tale. 'Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back to marry you.' Before she left, the woman said she understood exactly what Rovenika was feeling and thinking when she made that request."

"Now, you don't reveal that person's name," the host said. "Did you ever see her again?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "But I dedicate this to our family and to her. I needed proof and she gave it to me, to my family. We are forever grateful she cared enough about people she didn't know, a family that wasn't hers and I hope to thank her in person someday."

"We hope so as well," the host said. "Come back and tell us what happens then," the host said. Tim nodded.

"The book is 'The Fountain of Truth,'" the host said, holding it up again. "We'll be right back." Someone yelled, "Clear!" and the host offered his hand. Tim shook it. The host had one last question before Tim stood to leave.

"Did you write this hoping she'd come back?" he asked low so that only they could hear.

Tim swallowed.

"I think part of me did," he admitted. The host nodded. Tim stood and left.

Walking out, the staff thanked him for coming. Tim signed a few books and left. He wasn't ready for what he found outside.

At the gate as he left, women were waiting for him to sign their copies of the book.

Tim pulled over because he couldn't drive through them. It was a warm day and he had the top to his sports car down. The women rushed up with copies of the book and pens in hand. Without leaving his car, Tim signed their books until security came out to clear the way.

Tim was used to the crowds. They all seemed to have the same comment.

It's so sweet you fell in love with a woman the same way Victor did.

No matter how many times Tim heard it, he was stunned. He thought the most compelling part of the story was the journey Rovenika made, her love story, not the time he spent with Cherish. What he didn't realize was that was why the book was so popular.

Just like his grandmother, everyone found significance in the fact he had met a stranger at the fountain and she had told him just what Rovenika had told Victor. It was the reason Tim still couldn't understand his feelings for Cherish. It didn't seem like his story, his feelings.

Everyone assumed he was living a great love story. He hadn't heard from Cherish in more than a year. For all he knew, she was married and was pregnant or already had a child and a new family. She probably only looked back on their experience with the revelation she had experienced something incredible once and she could now settle down.

Restoration of Fountain Way was about to begin and that's where Tim would focus his attention.

It was his equivalent to feeding an apple to a horse.

He would rebuild a town. Rebuild the church. He would build a house.

Chapter 31

Rising at 2 a.m. for her son's bottle, Cherish turned on the morning show episode she had been waiting to see all week.

It had been a long year. A long and exhausting year.

Surprised by the pregnancy, she didn't have time to think about anything except preparing for the arrival of her son.

Soon he would sleep through the night. Once he did, she could decide if she wanted to go back to work. Working had always been a part of her life, but raising a child was work as well.

There was no pressure. She didn't have to work. Cherish had support from her family.

She thought she had lost her family, but a new one embraced her and she didn't feel alone anymore.

A friend had informed her that Tim would be promoting his latest book and they urged her to watch it.

As her son sucked peacefully on the nipple of the bottle she held, Cherish felt her entire body tighten and her blood warm as she saw Tim sitting on the sofa being interviewed by the host on TV. It had been more than a year and a lifetime since she had seen him.

Leaving before he had woken that morning, Cherish finished the note she had started writing and slipped it into the journal.

Placing it in the spot still warm from her body, Cherish left it for Tim to find. She had wanted to show him earlier, but he had come by and just whisked her away. When he started telling her about his plans, Cherish realized they were getting too involved.

Slipping away and leaving him with everything he ever needed, she got on the Interstate and didn't look back.

Gran-T knew there was more between Tim and her than Cherish wanted to admit. Before she left, Cherish confided in his grandmother. Cherish had to leave. Tim didn't feel for her what she was just beginning to feel for him. They had an experience she would never forget, never thought she would feel and needed to leave before she got hurt.

Gran-T understood. Gran-T would be there for Cherish and she would be there for Gran-T if she ever needed anything.

The host was asking Tim about his new book. It was the journal of Rovenika. Tim finally knew her real name. Cherish was happy for him. Things like that, facts, were important to Tim.

Cherish was not surprised Tim had published her journal. What surprised her was the revelation that he had dedicated the book in part to her. Without revealing the intimate details about their weeklong fling, he got very personal.

Candid as he could be, Tim explained how grateful he was and Cherish choked back a gasp, tried to stop the tears from flowing. Cherish had left not knowing how he felt, and now she knew. That night meant a lot to him as well. By the way he chose his words, Cherish knew he was revealing very personal memories.

When the interview was over, Cherish paused the recording. Wiping away the tears, she burped her son and just held him close.

It was only 2:45 in the morning, but Cherish needed to get a copy of that book. She needed to read the foreword. After putting her son back into his crib, Cherish turned on the computer and looked for a digital copy online. Realizing she didn't have the technology to accomplish such a task, she fell asleep on the couch, but the moment the morning sun woke her up, Cherish got dressed just as she heard her son cry.

Hearing the typical morning chaos, George walked into the living room and stretched.

"Let's go have breakfast," she said. "There's something I have to show you."

Nodding, George took her to a diner next to the bookstore and they ate while waiting for it to open.

While George watched the baby, she went into the bookstore. There were copies all over the store and she took two copies from the fountain-shaped display. Giving the cashier some bills, she headed back to the restaurant, gave one to George and eagerly cracked open her own copy.

Chapter 32

FOREWORD - The story you are about to read is the story of my family origins. I embarked on this journey trying to find out the facts in my family's tale.

This is the story my entire family can tell you by heart.

In the year 1850, young Victor Jaskin left his village in Hibverna and came to America with nothing but money he had saved from working in his family's business. Buying a piece of land out West, Victor traveled the country with no desire to settle down or marry the woman his parents had chosen for his wife.

Victor built a shelter no better than a shack and a fountain for his animals to drink from while he was away. One day, after coming back from a journey exploring the wilderness, Victor saw a beautiful woman sunning herself on the fountain.

Falling instantly in love, Victor was surprised that she too had come from his country seeking a new life. But sadly, she was going to marry another and Victor tried everything to convince her to stay, but he did not want to get married. One night, as they lay under the stars, she gave Victor three things he needed to do to change her mind.

At this point in our story, everyone in my family would join in the chorus.

Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family and I will come back and marry you.

So Victor built a trading post that turned into a town. He built a church where they were to marry, and he built a house where they would build a life.

A year later, she returned, and they got married.

On my grandmother's 80th birthday she announced she would never tell that tale again. The town council was declaring eminent domain to remove the blight where the origin of our family story in America had supposedly sprouted.

The only problem was, we had no proof, no documentation that Fountain Way, where my great-great-great-great-grandparents met, was not just a myth, a family tale.

Embarking on a personal journey, I found no proof, no documentation to prove our case to the town council.

On the Fourth of July of my grandmother's 80th birthday, I ran into a stranger at the fountain. Her car had broken down and she sought refuge with my grandmother. Insisting I tell the tale, Gran-T sent us to Fountain Way. The woman said my tale was cynical.

I always considered my grandmother's version of the story a fairy tale with a happy ending. My grandmother's tale, told for more than 50 years, left out some parts from other versions of the story.

Victor left his country because he did not want to marry a woman his family had arranged with another family of similar power and wealth. Following him, Rovenika tricks him into marrying and he is forever resentful. That was my version. I had no proof, but it seemed like a good theory.

The stranger heard my version and was disappointed. She knew nothing about the tale, but knew Victor was not resentful.

You have to understand. I had heard that tale so often the people in it were not real. They had been dead a very long time and they were always old in my mind. I never imagined them as young and still trying to figure out where they were going in their lives. They didn't worry about future generations and their tale. Just as most young people today don't think about future generations. We only see up to where we are now. We do not know if our story has begun or is beginning or that it will even begin.

This stranger said I was cynical. Maybe Victor felt tricked, but there was a reason Rovenika, or Row as we knew her in the tale, did what she did.

In her version, Rovenika didn't have many options. With only beauty as her power, she got his attention, but then she fell in love with him. Victor resented her, but he forgave her. They loved one another. It was a love story.

During her stay, the stranger asked what kind of proof I needed. I told her we couldn't find any documentation and that if we just had the story in their own words that would be satisfactory.

Before she left, she found that proof. She did something I never thought to do. She didn't consult historians or dig through dusty records. She sat and talked to my Uncle Victor, the oldest member of our family. Uncle Victor does not speak. When I thanked him for his help and asked why he didn't let me know he had the journal, he said the three

most important words I would ever hear and three of only four words I had ever heard him utter in my life – "You didn't ask."

When the journal was translated from Rovenika's native language, we finally had proof.

It was her version of the story. It was a confirmation of all of our tales. There was a little bit of truth in every story we told.

Proceeds from this book will go to the preservation of Fountain Way and the memory of Victor and Rovenika.

I dedicate this book to my family and the stranger who led us to this proof. Family is the people born into your life and family is the special people who come into your life.

Before she left, the stranger understood more about my family than I ever had. Speaking the chorus, she said she finally understood how Rovenika felt when she asked for those three things.

Build us a town in which we can live, build us a church in which we can marry, build us a house in which we can raise a family, and I will come back and marry you.

Up until that moment it was just a story. Hearing those words as they were meant to be spoken I realized I had my proof. The tale was a love story. It could be my love story.

I dedicate this to my family, wherever they are, whoever they are.

Tim Jaskin

Chapter 33

No longer able to see through tears that burned and spilled down her cheeks, Cherish closed the book.

Grabbing table napkins, she got out of the booth and went to the bathroom. Leaning on the sink counter to catch her breath, she looked at her swollen red eyes and let out a long low groan.

That night, he had been listening. Tim always listened. He didn't always have an answer right away, but he would think about what she said and then he would have an incredibly well thought out answer.

Cherish had forgotten that about Tim. She could only remember how he started to say he couldn't ask her to stay. Before he could continue, she had cut him off.

At that moment she realized how Row, Rovenika, felt. Falling in love with Victor who was not ready to settle down, she needed a grand gesture, a show of commitment.

It wasn't meant for Tim. They hadn't known each other long enough for that type of commitment. With a fiancé waiting for her, Cherish had been satisfied with the knowledge that whatever Victor and Rovenika experienced when they made up, Cherish had known that level of passion. Never before and never again did she expect that experience. That's what made it special.

That night, she couldn't bear to hear Tim say anything at all even though deep down, she would never have left if he had said he felt what she felt. He didn't. She had no message for him that night.

Providing him with what he needed to resolve his fear of losing the family legacy, Cherish was satisfied she was able to return the favor. Trampling horses had been replaced by the memory of long hard rides with her arms wrapped tightly around Tim's chest as they rose up and down against one another.

The gold band clinked against the tile and Cherish moaned.

Taking a deep breath, she went back to the table. Holding the book in his hand, George looked at her and sighed.

"I think it's time," she said now that George understood what was at stake.

Nodding, he sighed.

While George picked up a rental car, Cherish packed a suitcase and everything her son would need for the trip.

It was time to visit her other family.

Chapter 34

Before the restoration was complete, when the council declared the plaza safe for visitors while minor renovations were being completed, the Jaskin family cut the ribbon and let the crowds share in celebrating the origin of their family history.

When the book was first published, people from all over came to Trader Fountain to see the fountain from the book, "The Fountain of Truth." Business in Trader Fountain was doing so well that all the boarded up businesses were open again. But the roads were crowded and parking was scarce. Tim had the empty lot across from Fountain Way leveled and they put in a parking lot. Donations were requested, but not required, for the continued preservation of Fountain Way and the family house.

Tim had moved into the guesthouse where Cherish had stayed. The family would decide what to do with the house once Gran-T passed. It was her house until then. Tim had other plans.

For now he worked on restoring Fountain Way. As the book became a best-seller, the crowds grew until the town gave them approval to open early. The council enjoyed the positive press, and Barbara and Tess were speaking once again. The development would never have brought the positive exposure and employment opportunities that came with the publication and preservation of his great-great-great-great-grandmother's journal.

Tim didn't know how long the fascination would last, but while it lasted he hoped there would be enough money brought in to preserve Fountain Way and his family's legacy for generations to come.

There was comfort in that for Tim. There would be no generations from him. His story ended with him.

Setting up a small shop, the family manned the sale of the book to visitors. Tim devoted a few hours a day to signing copies and taking pictures, but then he focused on his other projects. Working day and night, he was close to finishing the one project he always saw in the future and decided to turn into reality.

Tim had to leave for another talk-show interview, but was relieved they were able to put him on an earlier show. Arriving home a few days early, Tim went to Fountain way.

"You're back early," Row said when Tim stopped by the shop for his tools.

"I got put on earlier," he explained, looking around hoping to see Cherish. "I see you found a home for that photo," Tim noted. It had just been gathering dust in his room and he knew Michael would be happy to see they hadn't forgotten about his own family's history. "We need to get a plaque for it," Tim said. "Get someone to call Michael at the grocery for the information."

"I'll pass it on," Row said. A woman walked by the store and for a moment Tim thought it was Cherish. Every muscle was set to chase after the woman before he realized it wasn't her.

"She'll come back," Row consoled him as he was leaving the shop. Tim was startled. Row had been sincere.

"Thank you," he said and went to the church. It had almost been completely restored. A historian, familiar with the region where Hibverna had been located, assisted them with the fine details. When he got to the church, Tim realized he had left some tools at the shop and went to get them when he apologized to a visitor into whom he had bumped.

Stunned, Tim stopped and turned. Prickles crawled up his arms to his cheeks and he shivered.

"*Cherish?*" he whispered. He hadn't recognized her. Hat on her head to shelter her face from the sun, Cherish looked as if she had gained a few pounds and she wore a loose fitting dress to compensate.

"Tim," she said, just as startled. Frozen, Tim couldn't move. He had waited for this moment for more than a year.

"I just wanted to see the church," she said, still startled to see him.

A flash of gold caught his eye. Cherish was now wearing a wedding band.

Feeling as if he had been punched, Tim did something he didn't want to do. Walking up to her, he took her hand and led her into the church. Every instinct told him to walk away, but he couldn't.

She had asked him to build a church and he was going to show her his accomplishment.

Taking her inside, he let her marvel at the restored stained glass windows, and newly sanded and stained pews. The mosaic dove flying to the heavens had just been restored, and Cherish took off her hat and congratulated Tim.

"You did it," she whispered. Tim released her hand and looked at her.

A crowd was now gathering. His family members had seen Tim and Cherish enter the church and visitors came to see the stranger Tim had mentioned in his foreword. Tim pulled Cherish further into the church.

"Why'd you leave without saying good-bye," he whispered. Her face was fuller, but her eyes were the same. Cherish sighed and she looked very tired, exhausted, world-weary.

"I thought we did," she said. Tim gasped and turned away.

More and more people entered the church. Gran-T came in and Tim wondered whose baby she was holding. Holding out his hands, the boy was calling "mamamama" and Cherish turned.

"Cherish, Tim came back early," Gran-T said before she saw Tim. "I'm too late," she said and handed the boy into Cherish's waiting arms. Tim stumbled back and found support on the grand lectern.

"Could you tell Row we need a moment alone," Cherish said, looking at the crowds now filling the pews. "But please come back, Gran-T, Martha, Nancy," she called. Taking charge, Row and some other family members requested the church be cleared for a private family matter. Two older women Tim had never seen before sat with his grandmother on the front pew. Rocking the boy in her arms, Cherish waited until it was just the three women sitting in the pews before she turned to Tim.

"Tim," Cherish said. "I'd like you to meet Nancy, Martha, close family friends." The women nodded at Tim.

"You weren't supposed to find out this way, Tim," Cherish said. "I thought you were out of town."

"So you weren't going to say 'hi?'" he asked.

"When I left that night, Tim," Cherish explained while trying to wipe away her tears with one hand. "I went to Gran-T to say 'good-bye.' I told her that you would never feel what I felt for you. I had to go. I had gotten too involved."

Holding up the boy against her chest, Cherish took a deep breath and moaned.

"I didn't expect this," she said. "Mamamamamama," the boy started babbling and Tim started babbling himself.

"I don't understand," he said. "You got married, you got pregnant, right?"

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"There's a baby and there's a wedding band," he said, still unable to comprehend what she was showing him. "What am I missing?"

Cherish had gone off, married and had a baby. This is what Tim saw. That alone was painful to comprehend. He was prepared for that reality, but when he saw Cherish, he still felt the same way he did that week they had spent together. Everything had changed for her in the time since and Tim thought he had changed as well. Realizing every day how much more he missed her than the last, Tim only imagined Cherish had moved on, but hoped she had been waiting for a grand gesture. Tim didn't make it in time and now here she was, a married woman with a child.

But she wasn't. Tim could not comprehend that.

"I would like you to meet Nicholas Gordon Jaskin," she said and Tim collapsed. Sinking to the altar steps, Tim had been dealt a blow that ripped the ground from under him.

"I can't have kids," he babbled. Cherish smiled.

"What kind of proof do you need?" she asked amused. Cherish had more than a year to deal with the fact. This was new to Tim.

"How do you know?" he whispered. Cherish walked up to him and held out the boy who reached for Tim.

"Hold him, he's your son," Gran-T yelled frustrated from the pew. Tim reached out as Cherish gently lowered Nicholas into his lap.

"Gordon was my father's name," she explained.

Tim just stared into the boy's blue eyes. The boy turned and reached for Cherish, who took him back and rocked him.

"Gran-T knew?" he said becoming angry, glaring at his grandmother.

Cherish looked at him defiantly.

"I trust your Gran-T," she said. "I didn't think it was the right time to tell you."

"Now is?" he asked, unable to stand. Adrenaline flowed like lava in his blood.

Each step taking his breath, Tim made it to the pew. Tim heard the anguish in her breathing.

"You ever been pregnant, Tim?" she asked while trying to catch her breath. "Ever been pregnant and alone?"

"You didn't have to be alone," he retorted interrupting her.

"What would you have said, Tim?" she asked angrily, but in a soothing tone as they argued in front of her son. Her son. His son. Tim couldn't comprehend it. "If I came to you and said I was pregnant? What would you have said?"

Tim sighed.

"I don't know," he said.

"Just like that night I left," she said. "You didn't know then either. I turned to my friend George and he let me stay with him. He wasn't angry or bitter. When he read your book, he understood. Urged me to go and see you."

"I never thought it was possible," he whispered. "I need time to think about this," he whispered hoarsely.

Adrenaline surged and Tim got up and left quickly. Pushing his way through the crowd, he made it to the road and walked briskly to nowhere. Running, he found himself back at the house. Taking deep breaths, Tim was angry and confused. He needed time to think.

Walking out to the guesthouse, he saw Carl and leaned down, putting his hands on his knees.

"Can you take me somewhere," he said through gritted teeth.

"What happened?" he asked.

Tim stood and faced his cousin.

"She had a baby, my baby," Tim explained. "Told Gran-T, didn't tell me."

"Where is she now," Carl asked, understanding every word.

"Left her at the church," he said. "I just need to get away," Tim implored his cousin.

"I'll take you anywhere," Carl said, heading to his truck, "but you should go back."

"Can't," Tim said.

Getting in the truck, Carl shook his head after reconsidering changing Tim's mind, and they drove off.

Angry, one thought came to mind. It took Victor three days to make his decision. Tim wondered how long before his anger subsided.

Chapter 35

Cherish left that day after placing the journal on the bed where she had been cradled in Tim's uncertain arms.

Watching him as he slept, Cherish knew she had to leave because if Tim just said one positive word, she might not be able to go back to George.

With her destination in mind, Cherish was ready to get on the Interstate. Looking around the room, she didn't see anything she might have forgotten. Listening to Tim breathe, his arms stretched out for her, Cherish wanted to jump back in bed, have him hold her in his arms and never let her go.

It was irrational this desire.

What would she do once Tim decided this was a really great fling and nothing more? Did she give up an established relationship, a committed partner, to take that chance? It didn't seem worth it to Cherish.

Getting in her car in the cool, misty morning, Cherish knew she couldn't risk her engagement for one really incredible night that seemed like more than it probably was. She had been here before. This time she would get out before she got hurt.

Pinning her hopes on how Joshua made her feel when they were together, Cherish didn't recognize the signs that should have tipped her off that he wasn't feeling the same way about her.

Always working, never available after a certain time, never available when she called, Cherish thought he was busy so she was respectful of his wishes. When they were together, she had his full attention. When they made love, she thought no one had ever felt what they shared.

Cherish had been wrong about so many things. The first time she made love to George, she didn't feel what she had felt with Joshua, but she knew their relationship was exclusive.

When she needed him, George was there for her. When he proposed, she had accepted because she needed that stability.

Looking at her ring finger as she drove down the Interstate, Cherish realized she had forgotten something very important.

Her engagement ring was still at the guesthouse. Horror filled her core. Going back was not an option. Pulling over, Cherish thought about acceptable options.

She could call Gran-T later and have her send the ring. In the meantime she could either tell George she misplaced it or tell him the truth. While she was heading toward him, she got sidetracked, thought she was falling for another man but realized it was just lust, then would pray George would take her back.

Shuddering, Cherish knew it was the right thing to do. Pulling back onto the Interstate, Cherish remembered how the ring ended up misplaced at the guesthouse.

The look in Tim's eyes was startling. Cherish didn't understand how her leaving could produce such intensity if they were both just having a momentary lapse in judgment.

His eyes confused her. Cherish wasn't surprised Tim wanted to have sex; she was surprised by the hurt in his eyes that she might leave without saying good-bye. In all the years she had known George, slept with George, said good-bye to George, Cherish had never seen that look in his eyes. Never seen that look in any of her lovers' eyes.

He couldn't ask me to stay. With those words in her brain, Cherish charged onward to her destination.

Pulling up to the condo, Cherish looked at her new home then went and knocked on the door. There was no answer. Pulling out the key George had sent her, Cherish let herself in. She wanted to settle in and take a shower.

Finding his room, their room, she looked in the walk-in closet and saw his things hanging neatly on wooden hangers.

Something didn't seem right to her as she looked at the bar waiting to be filled with her own clothes. Sitting on the bed, with a comforter she had picked out, Cherish realized she was just tired. This was her home.

On top of the comforter in her clothes, Cherish waited for George.

This was her bed. George would come home and they would sleep in this bed together.

A sudden realization came over Cherish. Somewhere between handing over the keys to her family home and getting back on the Interstate, Cherish realized she wasn't making her way to a new home. She had been making her way to a shelter.

"*Welcome home*," she heard George call from the foyer. Getting up with a groan, Cherish met him and George gave her a hug.

I've missed you, didn't seem right.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I did something really shameful," she said, not wanting to lie to him. If their relationship was going to last, she had to be honest. If it broke them apart, that was what would have to happen. Cherish thought she left her experience back with Tim and Grant, but she wasn't the same anymore.

Between giving the bank officer the keys to her family home and hugging George, Cherish had changed. It was a slow progression, but she only just realized its impact on her life and her plans.

George stopped stroking her hair and released his embrace. Cherish knew he was hurt.

Pulling away, she looked at him. There was that hurt she had never seen before.

"I met a really attractive man and, forgive me, George, but I, we, gave in," Cherish confessed.

"I have to sit down," he said and stumbled to the couch. Moans and anguish escaped in little bursts as she sat across from him and waited for his reaction.

"Do you love him?" he asked. "Was it just a one-night stand?"

"Yes," Cherish whispered. "It was a one-night stand." She still couldn't answer the first question.

"I need time to think about this," he said.

"I'll leave you alone," Cherish said and got up to leave.

As she grabbed the door handle, George asked her another question.

"What does this mean?" he asked frustrated.

"I don't know," she said as she opened the door and closed it behind her before she started sobbing uncontrollably.

Sitting in her car, banging her head against the steering wheel, Cherish didn't know why she couldn't answer that question.

Sighing and wiping away her tears, Cherish drove away. Stopping at the first hotel, she checked in, took a long shower and lay under the covers, staring at the ceiling.

Many thoughts filled her head and she only had herself to figure them out.

Chapter 36

A few days into her hotel stay, Cherish realized she was going to have to find a job immediately.

George hadn't called. Cherish wasn't sure if he was still thinking or busy working.

Getting up to shower, the phone rang.

It was George. Gripping the phone, Cherish held her breath.

"I can't really talk right now," George said and Cherish couldn't tell if he was busy or angry. *"If you get to the office by 2 p.m. and ask for Sarah on the 12th floor they have an opening that might interest you."*

Before Cherish could say anything, George hung up. Still gripping the phone, Cherish gasped.

No matter what happened between her and George, she needed a job. If there was a chance and George didn't want to reconcile, would she be able to work in the same building with him every day?

As part of his work, George traveled to Asia and it wasn't uncommon for him to be gone for weeks or even a month at a time.

Money. Cherish was running out of it fast. Supporting herself was now her main concern.

Sifting through her clothes, she found a wrinkled business suit and skirt and ironed them, complements of the hotel's room amenities. Showering, she dressed and looked at herself in the mirror.

Professional. That's how she looked. Distracted, distraught, confused, baffled. That's how she felt.

Angry. Simmering below all those emotions was anger.

Why did I throw it all away?

Regret. The emotion that should have followed anger at herself for giving into temptation was not there. There was not one moment she regretted, not one kiss she would return, not one incredible night she wished she could take back.

Cultivating their relationship for years, Cherish had dismantled it in exchange for an attraction she did not want to resist. It was irresponsible, but not reckless.

Part of her wished she hadn't met Tim, but most of her was grateful for the opportunity to feel something she hadn't known existed.

What am I left with?

Alone in a hotel room, no job, running out of money. That was all she had.

Was it worth it?

Deep inside of her gut there was an explosion of affirmation. *Yes. It was worth it.*

It was worth it to experience something that almost felt like love. Even if Tim never felt the same way, Cherish had felt what it must be like to love someone. It wasn't the same feeling as with Joshua, that was an immature sense of love.

It could have been lust, but it was different from her previous lustful experience.

Where do I go from here?

Reconciliation with George was still a possibility. On her part at least. They were compatible and that was necessary for a long-term relationship. This was a setback, not a dissolution of her desire to build a family.

Smiling and practicing her greeting, Cherish was ready for her interview.

Nervous but composed, she met with Sarah, they had a great interview and Cherish shook her hand before leaving.

When she got back to the hotel room, Sarah called with an offer.

Containing her excitement, Cherish accepted.

Waiting until later, Cherish called George to thank him.

"I accepted their offer," she said when he picked up his phone.

"*Come over, we'll talk,*" George said and Cherish couldn't decipher his emotion.

Shivering, Cherish agreed and drove over to the condo. George welcomed her in and offered her a drink as they sat on the couch.

Holding her glass of water tight, Cherish looked at George sitting across from her in his sweatpants and alumni shirt.

They had been friends for years. When Cherish looked at George she saw a friend, a person she could trust, a stable companion. Lust never crossed her mind. Love was an emotion she didn't understand and wouldn't be able to comprehend if she felt it.

"Tell me what happened," George said after taking a sip of his exotic water.

Puzzled, Cherish didn't know if he wanted to know about the interview, the offer or Tim.

"With the man you met," he said somewhat irritated. Clenching her jaw, Cherish wondered where to start, what to confide in her fiancé.

"My car broke down," she said, beginning her tale. Leaving out intimate details, Cherish explained how she was tempted by an attraction she could not resist, tried to resist, but gave into because she didn't want to resist it.

"What were you thinking?" he asked in disbelief.

Lowering her head, Cherish didn't want to show her grief to George.

"I've never felt that way before," she said, composing herself and meeting his gaze. "I knew I made a promise to you, but there was something I had to explore."

Shaking his head, George sighed.

"How could you just throw it away?" he asked, more irritated than angry. "We had goals, we had a plan, we were going to build a life together."

It was all past tense to George.

"Do you think I wanted this?" she asked irritated. "I shared our goals, our plans. I wanted to build a life, a family."

"Then why do it?" he asked, leaning forward as his eyes sought for an answer in hers.

Lowering her head, Cherish sighed. Meeting his gaze, she answered.

"I fell in love, George," she confessed not just to George, but herself.

Gasping, George turned away.

"Then why did you come back?" he asked in a whisper that was more like a request.

"He didn't love me," she shrugged and a moan escaped as she tried to stop the tears, but they came hot and steady as Cherish tried to catch her breath.

Without a word, George came over and sat next to her with a consoling arm around her shoulder. Sitting together for a long time, Cherish and George sat quietly contemplating where they were. *Was it a setback or separation?*

Confessing to George had felt natural. It was like confiding in a friend, not a fiancé.

"What are you thinking, George?" she asked, wiping away her tears and taking deep breaths.

"We should separate for a while," he suggested.

Nodding, Cherish agreed.

Standing, Cherish walked to the door and opened it.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, George," she said. "I didn't mean to dismantle everything we built."

Without waiting for his response, Cherish left and made it back to her hotel room before she collapsed on her bed.

Motionless in bed for three days, Cherish finally got up to go shopping for work and showed up on time for her first day. Refreshed and ready to bury herself in work, she didn't stop working until she came home exhausted every night. Then she went for a run and fell asleep every night without having time to think about thoughts she could not answer, emotions she could not comprehend.

A month into her new job, Cherish considered looking for an apartment and started with the classifieds.

Sitting in her room one night, there was a knock at the door and she was relieved it was George, but distraught as well.

"George," she said, uncertain what he wanted.

"Can I come in?" he asked. Dressed in his work clothes, his long-sleeved, button-down shirtsleeves rolled up, he had a brown paper grocery bag in his hand.

"Come in," she said, opening the door. George placed the bag on the table and sat on one of the two table chairs.

"Sit," he offered and Cherish sat down on the edge of the matching chair.

"I brought dinner," he said and unpacked the bag. Pulling out two warm entrees in plastic containers, two bottles of his favorite exotic water and two mystery desserts wrapped in tinfoil, he opened his dinner and Cherish followed his lead.

Finishing, George pulled a disc from the bag.

"Our favorite," he said, holding it up. Cherish smiled. While George put it in the player, Cherish readied herself on the bed. George joined her.

There was pleasure with the familiar. Sitting next to George on the bed, Cherish remembered all the times they shared, how this would end with them making love before falling asleep.

Needing to know how she felt next to George, if how she felt with Tim was just pleasure and nothing more, Cherish slowly moved toward George. In an awkward movement, she put her head on his chest, feeling it rise and fall as they pretended to watch the movie.

Linking her fingers with his, Cherish had a new epiphany. When she held George's hand she didn't feel anything. It was warm, but there was no connection. There was no flow.

From eating, to watching their favorite movie, to sitting together, to cuddling, to holding hands, there was no flow. They were all separate events. It was something Cherish hadn't noticed before.

Closing her eyes, Cherish realized that all the times she thought she and George were making love, they weren't. They were having sex. It was part of a daily function that went with taking a shower or cleaning the house.

Trying to recapture what they had, Cherish could no longer go back to what they were as a couple.

"You're still thinking about him, aren't you," he whispered. Sighing, Cherish didn't realize she was but she was always comparing George with Tim. Comparing the man she knew with a man she barely knew. Comparing the man she promised to marry with the man who didn't know how he felt about her.

"Do you love me, George?" she asked. "Did you ever love me?" she asked, turning toward him.

Sighing, George looked at her and answered.

"I care for you deeply," he said and Cherish winced. "You said yourself you don't believe in love at first sight, that stability and commitment and partnership were the most important things in a relationship."

"I don't," she agreed. "That's why I don't understand why I feel so different. My brain tells me I made a mistake, but my heart doesn't care. I don't like uncertainty. I want stability, I want a goal, a path to follow."

"I know," he agreed. "That's what I want as well."

"If my car didn't break down," she whispered. "If I didn't meet him."

"Do you want to go back," he whispered as the movie came to an end.

Sighing, Cherish didn't know.

"What do we do now, George?" she asked rhetorically.

"I think this is the part where you give me my ring back," he said. "I notice you haven't worn it since you got back."

Cringing, Cherish realized she didn't even have it.

"I don't have it," she explained. "I'll get it back to you."

"I don't care about the ring," George said. "I don't know how to feel, what to do."

Lifting herself up onto her elbows, Cherish looked at her friend.

"Is it going to be awkward," she asked. "Working in the same office?"

Brushing the hair from her face, George shook his head.

"I need to know I have a friend," he whispered. Tears rolled down her cheeks at his confession. As a couple, they were through. As friends, they would always have each other.

"I have to go," George said, taking a deep breath and groaning as he left. Alone in bed, Cherish cried herself to sleep.

Waking the next morning, she felt better emotionally, but physically, she was a wreck. Calling in sick, she lay in bed wanting to just vomit whatever was poisoning her sore stomach. The feeling soon passed, but over the weekend she didn't get any better. Monday morning, she found a doctor from an online referral service and made an appointment.

Describing her symptoms, Cherish thought of her answers as the woman setting the appointment asked her questions from a list.

"Is there a possibility you're pregnant?" the woman asked, reading from her list of possible causes.

"No," Cherish said without thinking, but that question fueled an explosion of contemplation Cherish had never anticipated.

"We can get you in here Wednesday at 3 p.m., will that be alright?" the woman asked.

Nodding, Cherish realized the woman couldn't see her and agreed.

"Wednesday at 3 p.m.," she said almost in a whisper. "I'll be there."

The woman explained what Cherish would need to bring. Cherish made muffled noises in agreement, but her mind was rethinking the night she had spent with Tim.

Hanging up, Cherish sat there frozen, terrified, and deep down, way, way deep down, hopeful. Shaking her head, Cherish knew it wasn't possible and it would be devastating, but deep down something anticipated a miracle.

Leaving her room, Cherish walked quickly to the drugstore on the corner, bought two boxes of pregnancy tests and took them back to her room.

Reading the instructions carefully and shaking, Cherish flubbed the first test. Getting urine in a steady stream while holding a stick under her, while sitting on a toilet, was an acrobatic feat.

Taking a deep breath, Cherish took a long drink from her bottled water and sat on the bed waiting for the urge to pee again. Throughout the day, she tested and drank water until she had five sticks sitting on the bathroom counter stating the same thing. Without doubt, Cherish was pregnant.

Numb. For two days she was numb and the days passed slowly. Until the doctor verified it, the results were not true, they were just speculation.

Wednesday afternoon, she was sitting on a white paper cover on the examining room table fretting as she waited a lifetime for the doctor to come back.

Knocking on the door, the doctor entered while looking at a folder. Cherish shivered so hard her teeth chattered loudly.

"Our test results show you are positive for pregnancy," the woman said. Shivering, Cherish shook her head.

"It's not possible," she disagreed. "The man I slept with is sterile."

"Either he was lying or he's not sterile, maybe infertile," the doctor explained. "It only takes one."

There was a long pause. A very long pause.

"Is this what you want?" the doctor asked quietly. Without thinking, Cherish answered.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Alright, then," the doctor said, writing down information on her pad and handing it to Cherish.

"This is the name of a good ob-gyn," the doctor said. "Is there anything else you have questions about?"

Shaking her head, Cherish knew she didn't have questions. She had a quandary.

Slipping off the table, Cherish thanked the doctor and the doctor left. Standing in the cold, sterile room, Cherish could not think, didn't believe what was happening.

Without thinking that night, without protection, she had slept with a man she barely knew and now she was pregnant. Pregnant by a man who couldn't decide how he felt.

This is what she wanted?

It wasn't. It was what she got.

Leaving before she started crying, Cherish made it back to her room and lay in bed stunned. Curled up under the covers, she felt so alone.

Getting pregnant was not part of her plan. She wanted to wait until George and she were established. They had decided they would have two kids. That was the plan.

Shivering, Cherish was petrified. This was not in her plan. Pregnant and alone.

Deep down, way deep in the darkest desires of her heart, a fire had been ignited. Warming her, the fire slowly blazed over the next few weeks as Cherish came to terms with her decision.

Love had created the unborn child she was carrying. Whether or not it was mutual didn't matter.

This would be a love she would comprehend, understand, grasp.

Cherish had decided an uncertain future with love was finally more tolerable than a future only containing stability and shared goals.

Falling asleep, she held her stomach and prayed she had the strength to maintain her convictions when faced with the reality she would have to travel this path alone.

Chapter 37

In George's downstairs second bedroom, Cherish settled in and sighed. She had planned on getting her own place, but when he heard the news, George insisted she stay at his condo until she felt ready to be on her own.

"We're still friends," George asserted. "I still care for you."

Hugging him, Cherish had accepted. With George away in Asia most of the time, Cherish was alone, but knew she could call George for any emergency.

Calling Tim, that was not even an option. Six months pregnant and showing every bit of it, Cherish had no desire to hear his reaction. The last thing she wanted from Tim was disbelief or the desire to be with her out of an obligation.

Peace and calm. That's what Cherish needed and that's what she could give herself.

Promising he would try to be there to take her to the hospital, George also insisted she have an alternate plan in the event he couldn't make it back.

There was no one else, no family she could call. Berating herself, Cherish realized she did have family.

"Nancy," Cherish said when she called, and then she started to cry. Nancy understood every word.

"I'll call Martha," Nancy consoled Cherish. "We'll be there soon. Don't worry about anything. We're so happy for you."

In a few weeks, the women came down and lavished Cherish with support. There was shopping for baby clothes and furniture, and ob-gyn office visits.

"Now all you have to think of is a name," Nancy said.

Cherish was in anguish over what to name her child, their child.

Looking over old photos, Cherish remembered the good times she had shared with her own family. They weren't there to see their grandchild. Cherish cried as she looked at the happy faces of her parents at various holidays and birthday parties.

Flipping through the years of her life, Cherish wiped away her tears, laughing and smiling at the memories. Every day, her parents showed her that they loved her. Struggle and health issues took them away, but while they were on the planet, they loved each other and they loved their daughter.

Closing the book, Cherish sighed. The sonogram said she was having a boy. Cherish knew either the first name or the middle name of her baby was going to be Gordon, for her father.

The tale. Only half of this baby's story would be hers. Rubbing her extended belly, waiting for the tiny kicks, Cherish knew this baby had another family history, a legacy.

Smiling and crying, Cherish was so happy. No matter what happened between Tim and her, this baby would have a family, a legacy. He would be part of a bigger life and would never be alone.

Wiping away her tears, Cherish knew this child would have a name that came from that legacy.

When the day finally arrived, Nancy and Martha took Cherish to the hospital. Opting for a natural birth, with lots of pharmaceuticals, Cherish gasped in wonder as a baby was placed on her chest eighteen hours later.

Exhausted, Cherish watched as the nurse took the baby away and brought him back for Cherish to hold. Looking at the squinty face, the little fists angry at being pulled from its warm home, Cherish was filled with an emotion she had never felt before and knew it was love.

The nurse placed her baby in a bassinet next to the bed.

There was just one other person who needed to know a new member of the family had been brought into the world, and Cherish picked up the hospital phone.

"Gran-T," Cherish said, comforted to hear the woman's voice after so long. Cherish was relieved Gran-T answered the phone and not another member of the family. She didn't know what she would have done if she had heard Tim's voice while looking at their child to whom she had just given birth.

"*Cherish?*" she asked in disbelief.

"I need to know the name of Tim's father, your son," she said, catching her breath.

Gran-T paused then answered.

"*Nicholas,*" she whispered. "*Why?*"

"I need you to sit down, Gran-T," Cherish said, holding the phone and trembling.

"*I'm ready,*" Gran-T said softly.

"I wanted you to know you have a great-grandson," she said breaking down, choking back tears to finish her statement. "Nicholas Gordon Jaskin." Cherish had one final thing to say. "I don't want anyone else to know right now," she whispered. "I'm not prepared to tell anyone else right now."

"I understand," Gran-T said breathlessly. *"You have to send me pictures, for myself."*

"I will," Cherish agreed.

"You can come home, Cherish," Gran-T whispered.

"I know," she said, "but I can't just yet."

"I understand," she said. *"Take care of yourself and my great-grandchild,"* Gran-T said, but the last word was swallowed in a sob and they both started crying.

"Bye," Cherish managed to blurt out and hung up the phone.

Nicholas Gordon Jaskin.

Her son had a name, a legacy.

Home. Cherish knew she would always have a home with Gran-T. She just wasn't ready to go home until she was able to accept the reality Tim would not be as accepting of this news.

A few weeks later, Cherish sent pictures of her great-grandson to Gran-T.

Soon after, a package arrived for them. In addition to a pair of homemade booties, there was a golden wedding band and a letter.

Gran-T wanted Cherish to wear her ring, to show everyone she was not alone. A source of shame in her day, Gran-T did not want Cherish to feel humiliated for making the decision to have a child without a father. In the letter, Gran-T was overjoyed Cherish had made the decision to keep Tim's child.

Cherish didn't wear the ring for any antiquated notion of propriety.

The ring represented that she was part of a bigger life, a legacy. The ring represented she had a home. She was not alone, not entirely.

When George got back, he saw Nicholas and urged Cherish to tell Tim he had a son.

"I would want to know," he insisted.

"I'm not ready," she said. "He's not ready."

It wasn't until he read the foreword that George understood.

Preparing to meet Tim, Cherish had called Gran-T who told her Tim was out of town. Cherish could settle in and Gran-T could meet Nicholas before Cherish announced the news to Tim.

She wasn't prepared for an unexpected meeting with the father of her child.

Chapter 38

Cherish sat on the pew with Nicholas while Nancy, Martha and Gran-T consoled her. This wasn't how Cherish imagined or prepared for her meeting with Tim.

"He'll be back," Gran-T said.

"I know," Cherish said. "But what then?"

"You can always come back home with us," Nancy said as she hugged Cherish.

"Let's go back to the house," Gran-T urged her. Cherish tilted her head to keep the tears from falling.

"Please, take Nicholas," she said, handing her son to his great-grandmother.

"Alright," Gran-T said, lifting Nicholas into her arms. "Let's go home," she cooed as she carried him out of the church.

Nancy and Martha embraced Cherish, held her, tried to be her shield.

"Your parents would never want to see you in this much pain," Martha said. "Come with us."

Taking a deep breath, Cherish clenched her jaw.

"I just need to be alone for a moment," she whispered between sobs. "Then we'll go."

With one last squeeze, Nancy and Martha looked back as they left to make sure Cherish was alright. The doors to the church closed and Cherish was alone with her thoughts.

Leaning forward, Cherish dropped her head into her hands.

This wasn't unexpected. Tim didn't think he could reproduce. It took her a long time to reconcile that herself.

Terrified when the doctor had told her she was pregnant, Cherish knew she was going to keep Tim's baby. Even if he wasn't in love, she was and her child, their child, would be loved.

The ring on her finger had confused Tim.

She wore the ring because it made her realize she was part of the family story. Even if she wasn't with Tim, she had his heir. Her son would know his family's legacy.

In her prayers, though, Cherish hoped for more.

Falling to her knees, she sought an answer to her deepest need. She needed Tim to love her, love them. She didn't want him to love her because she had given birth to his

child. She wanted Tim to love her from his heart. Nicholas would always have a father, a family, but Cherish hoped they could be a family.

If she had a choice, Cherish would never have chosen to start a family this way. She thought she knew where her life was headed. She didn't expect to get sidetracked. Even when she did, she knew she was headed to George. Her relationship with George was based on trust and a mutual understanding. Cherish thought it was love as well. He was there when she needed him, and he had supported her in her darkest hours. But a few days with Tim, and she realized she didn't know what love was.

At first it was just attraction. Tim was charming and handsome. Cherish always felt a bolt of desire in her gut when he was near. That was not love. It was lust.

That had all changed the day he took her for a ride up to the hilltop. When he explained his plans, she had tried to be aloof, tried to distance herself, but they ended up giving into their desire. Cherish had wanted to leave quickly, before she succumbed to her attraction, but she needed to say good-bye as desperately as he had.

Having a baby without a father was never what she would have chosen, but she found it a blessing. It made her realize she definitely should not marry unless she was in love.

It would have been much easier to never see Tim again, to put her time with Tim behind her when she left.

Cherish knew that was not true. Tim had basically sent her a love letter in his book. Whether or not he knew it, it was the grand gesture she could only dream of from the man she loved.

When he wrote it, he didn't know she was pregnant and hiding that fact from him. There was no way she could have told him. That night, as they lay there, she sensed his confusion. Cherish didn't want to come back until she knew for sure he cared for her and could love her.

The book was confirmation he hadn't forgotten that night. That maybe now they could talk. Maybe now he was ready to consider taking whatever they had to the next level. If he felt obligated, Cherish would not accept that. She knew what she wanted, what she needed from a relationship.

Cherish heard Nicholas and wondered what Gran-T had forgotten. Standing, she turned and gasped as her hands flew to her face.

Walking toward her, holding Nicholas in his arms, Tim looked peaceful. Gone were the panic and anguish and shock upon seeing Cherish holding their son. Tim had come to terms with reality.

He didn't need three days.

"I need you to finish your story," Tim said while rocking Nicholas and standing in the aisle. Cherish needed to finish her story for him.

"After I got pregnant," she began. "I was stunned. I hadn't slept with George in months. You told me you were sterile. I was pregnant. It was six weeks after I left. You have no idea how terrified I was. I've never had a one-night stand. It was irresponsible. I was pregnant by a man who didn't feel for me what I felt for him. Before that, I pretty much had called it off with George. You don't have a night like that and just go back to what you had when you know there's more. That night I felt despair. I felt what Row felt. I was falling in love with you and I couldn't wait around for you to make a decision. I didn't expect you to make a decision. I didn't know people could actually fall in love that quickly. I never believed it. Then I was pregnant and I chose to raise this child on my own. I couldn't come back. I didn't want you to feel obligated. My biggest fear was that you wouldn't care. That was worse. It was better to remember what we had," she said before breaking down, her head finding solace in her hands.

Taking a deep breath, Cherish looked up again and braced herself for the rest of her story. "Your grandmother sent me her wedding band as a gift when I called to tell her she had a great-grandson. She said she didn't want people to humiliate me because I chose to have a baby without a father. It was old-fashioned, but it was a comfort. She didn't care. She never thought she would see a great-grandson from you."

That was her tale.

"You were right," he said and tears flowed freely down his cheeks. "I wasn't ready. I never felt that way I felt that night before in my entire life. It took me a while to understand that. When I read Rovenika's story I was confused because I couldn't tell the difference what I felt reading her story and what we had together. The more and more I thought about it, I realized how similar our stories were. I thought I loved you," he confessed, coming closer.

Something dropped in her stomach. Cherish didn't know what he meant. *He thought he loved me?*

Tim walked closer, rocking Nicholas in his arms. They looked so natural together and Cherish could feel the shiver of anguish overtake her. Standing in front of her, Tim caressed her cheek.

"Now I know I do," he said.

Cherish moaned as he pulled her to him, and she held her head against his shoulder.

"More than I could say, I love you, Cherish." Cherish started shaking. Feeling the vibrations of her shaking, Tim held her tight. Cherish put her arms around Tim and around the child he was carrying.

Tim held on as they let the waves of emotions roll away until she was calm. Wiping her tears, Cherish took a deep breath and looked up at him.

"I don't understand," he said, looking at Nicholas sleeping on his chest.

"One got through," she said. "That's all it takes." Turning up her nose she realized something else. "I think something else got through as well."

"I have something else to show you," he said. Taking her hand, Tim led her out of the church and she followed him. Nobody was in the plaza.

"I had Row shut down for the day," he explained.

"Do we need to drive to get there?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"We should take my car," she said and pointed to a SUV in the new parking lot. Handing him the keys, Cherish placed Nicholas in the car seat then she got in the passenger seat. Tim drove away.

Driving up to the intersection, Tim passed the entrance to the driveway of the house. Cherish hoped they weren't going far. She needed to change Nicholas.

A quarter mile up the road, he turned. They went up a paved incline and Cherish knew instantly where they were. Parked in front of a replica of the fountain, Cherish saw the house that Tim was going to build "someday."

"I built you a house," he said. "With a window facing the Interstate so you could see people going and wonder where they're headed."

Cherish smiled a world-weary smile.

"And I came back to marry you," she confessed. Tim closed his eyes and laughed. Soon they were both laughing. Tim intertwined his fingers with hers. Nicholas woke up. Their tale was only just beginning.

Chapter 39

Running from room to room, Cherish couldn't believe she was around to see Tim's "someday" promise to himself. When he showed her his vision, as she looked out over the valley, the only thing she could think about was getting on the Interstate and never returning again.

As he explained his plans that day, Cherish knew it wasn't something he confided in many people. Planning for the future, for a future home, a place to settle down was not what you divulged to some woman whom you never expected to see again.

Once her car was repaired, Cherish had wanted to leave without saying good-bye. Her feelings for Tim at the time were growing stronger, but she knew he probably didn't feel the same way and she had already promised herself to another man.

Now, here she was, in the house he built for them even though he didn't know if she was coming back, and he was rocking their son to sleep.

Tim wanted to be a part of his son's life because he had missed everything. The everyday routine was a wonder to Tim. Trying to give Nicholas his bottle amused Tim, changing the diaper did not, but he did it anyway. Cherish stood back and watched as Tim held his son in wonder at the miracle that he never imagined for "someday."

Grabbing the monitor, Cherish watched as Tim took one last look at the sleeping baby and joined her in the hallway.

There was no need to ask him how he felt. The look in his eyes said everything. Tim was in love. It was the same look she hoped to see before she left that night, but he wasn't ready.

Sitting on the couch, resting against his side, fireplace crackling even though it was warm outside, Cherish shuddered.

"What's the matter?" he asked, putting his arm around her and hugging her close to him.

"I was never supposed to come back," she confessed. "After that night, I was going to go back to my life with a really great memory."

Chest moving up and down steadily, rhythmically, hypnotically, Tim made a confession of his own.

"That was my fear," he whispered. "I didn't know how much that night meant at first. I knew I had never felt that way before, but I didn't know what it meant. I wanted to go after you, but Gran-T said you needed something more than just hollow words."

Closing her eyes, Cherish was grateful for Gran-T. She was a very wise woman.

"I have another confession," she whispered.

"Don't you always?" he joked and she smiled.

"Yes," she admitted. "But it's hard for me to voice this one. It might be insulting."

"I can't wait to hear where this is going," he said.

"It's about your family legacy," she explained. "Now that Nicholas is your first born son, I don't want him to have the same pressure you do, to be the sole decision-maker for the family."

Tim interrupted her.

"I already resolved that," he said. Sitting up and facing him, Cherish was puzzled.

"How?" she asked. How could he have already resolved an issue she had about Nicholas' inheritance when he had only just found out he had a son?

"Carl was the next in line," Tim explained. "If I didn't have a son, it went to the oldest son of the next oldest son."

"Very sexist by the way," Cherish interrupted.

"I'm aware," he said.

"Row?" she said.

"Of course," he said. "I had a discussion with Carl and he agreed that this responsibility should not be with one member of the family. We're going to form a family council to make decisions."

"What if you had known you were going to have a son?" she asked. "Would that have made a difference?"

"Have you changed your mind?" he asked, testing her resolve.

"No," she said, settling into his embrace again.

"You're right," he confided. "I didn't ever think I would have anyone to pass anything on to. I have felt so alone in this my entire life. I would never want anyone, especially my son, to be the only one making the decisions that affect everyone else. He will always have the entire family to back him up."

"I see a future family feud," she admitted. "Somewhere in the future. That's the only drawback. With no one person making a decision, there will probably be a feud at some point."

"You think it's better for one person to have that burden?" he asked.

Cherish sighed. She didn't have an answer. She just didn't want Nicholas to be alone in his own family.

"I only want him to be happy and surrounded by family who love him," she confessed.

The crackling fire filled the silence as they both contemplated how to handle this new part of their lives.

"Everything has changed so drastically in our lives in the past year, Tim," she said softly, staring at the raging fire. "It's one thing to come back as two people and figure things out, but that's not the case."

Tim sighed.

"What more do I have to do?" he asked almost in anguish. Cherish was stunned. This time Tim was ready and she was still uncertain.

"I'm not the same anymore," she whispered. "What if that night was the best it was going to get? What if we try it again and it's not the same? What if you realize that?"

Exasperated, Tim interrupted her.

"What if a random horse tramples you?" he asked.

"This is serious," she said facing him. Tim looked serious.

"Get up," he said. Cherish was puzzled. "Get up and stand in front of me," he insisted, pushing her up. Slowly, Cherish lifted herself off the couch and stood in front of him. Momentarily startled by static from the monitor, Tim turned his attention back to Cherish. In the firelight, she could see he was determined to prove his point.

"Now, take off your clothes," he whispered and she shivered. Cherish didn't shiver because she feared what he would think of the extra weight she had put on and the stretch marks she tried to minimize with cocoa butter as her belly grew, that was still a concern, but that's not why she shivered. There was a hunger in his voice, a serious look on his face, a desire in his eyes that she hadn't seen since that night.

This was a test. Cherish needed to know if this experience lived up to the last, if this would change anything for them. That one night had linked them forever before they even knew if they wanted to spend forever together.

Holding his gaze to steady herself, Cherish unbuttoned her dress to her waist. Slipping the oversized cloth from her shoulders, she let it slowly drop down her chubby shoulders, over the muffin-top she was desperately trying to work off, past her fleshy thighs, before dropping like a feather to the floor. Tim watched as the dress slid down her body. There was no change in his eyes. It was the same look when he saw her in his robe the first night she arrived at the house. Tim had first seen her when she was lean, muscled, toned.

Cherish took in a deep breath and shuddered. His eyes urged her to continue. Knowing at some point he would have to see her naked, Cherish unclasped her nursing bra, just thinking about that phrase made her feel unsexy, and slid it off her swollen, lactating breasts. She let the bra slide off her shoulders and shivered again. Swallowing, Cherish looked down, slipped off her underwear, avoiding eye contact with Tim as she stood before him naked.

Breathing steady, Cherish heard Tim lift himself off the couch and she saw his sock-covered feet. The sound of his belt being pulled off sent another shiver through her body as she clenched her fists.

Closing her eyes, she heard Tim unbutton his shirt and slip it off, the sound of the zipper on his jeans, the cloth hitting the ground, the sound of Tim kicking them off. When Cherish opened her eyes again, there were no socks on Tim's feet.

Watching as he stepped forward, Cherish felt cold and naked. Tim gently placed his palms on her cheeks and the warmth from his hand flowed through her body as she moaned at the familiar caress. Looking up at him, Cherish was somehow angry he still had desire in his eyes. Lean and tan, Tim was even sexier than she had remembered. The heat from his body pulled her in; the tenderness of his touch hypnotized her. There was no way he could still have desire for her.

Defiant, Cherish challenged Tim.

"I'm not that same woman anymore," she whispered hoarsely. "You're exactly the same, but I'm not."

Despair in his eyes replaced the lust and desire and Cherish swallowed.

"I'm not the same man," he said, catching his breath. "Do you think I spent the last year just thinking about how you looked that night?"

Cherish shrugged.

"Do you know what I remember most of all?" he asked, searching her eyes, caressing her neck. Cherish shook her head.

"I held your hand," he explained. "I was there with you. I wanted to be with you."

Cherish released her clenched fists and gingerly touched his chest.

"Let's see if you still want to be with me," she said, fighting for her words as her throat tightened in anguish.

Accepting her challenge, Tim kissed her long and hard as he pulled her to their room.

"Hold it," Cherish mumbled as she grabbed the antenna to the baby monitor and flipped the switch off the fireplace, still embracing and kissing as they stumbled through the living room.

When they got to the room, they crawled on the bed, groping and grasping. Tim pinned her down and Cherish breathlessly looked up at him. The pressure of his chest against hers, his strong body holding her against the soft bed brought back everything she had felt that night. Anticipating him stiff and hard, thrusting inside her warm center, Cherish moaned.

But that wasn't the height of her pleasure. Sliding rhythmically together, holding her arms over her head, Tim gently caressed her wrists.

Closing her eyes, the sensation of his warm hands gentle and tender, at the same time other parts of his body were strong and passionate, reminded Cherish that the first night was not an anomaly.

Deriving pleasure was only one part of their lovemaking. Being together, whether holding hands or just talking or sharing the most incredible pleasure imaginable, that was what love was about.

As they parted, Tim pulled her close.

"What other proof do you need?" he whispered exhausted.

Cherish laughed. Soon they were both laughing.

It was all part of the lovemaking. It didn't begin and end in the bedroom. It was a continuous flow through their lives.

He had built them a house. They would make it their home.

Epilogue

With some work and a lot of luck, Tim was able to get a pump working on the fountain. The sound of trickling, bubbling water was the perfect backdrop for the day's celebration.

Looking up at Tim as he gave the family speech at the official dedication of Fountain Way, Cherish wondered when her fascination would fade. It had been more than five years since they met and every time she was with him, every moment they spent together, she still felt the same as the day they first met.

On their wedding day, saying their vows, she had meant every word. The whole time, she kept thinking what would have happened if she had married George, didn't follow her heart, just settled with the more stable man instead of building a life with the one she loved?

There was applause among guests and family as Tim took his place beside her in the first row of folding chairs at the ceremony. As Tess, the new head of the council, spoke, Tim intertwined his fingers with Cherish's as they both looked down at their hands and shared a moment oblivious to their surroundings. Tim looked at the fountain, the newly restored town, the house rebuilt from the ashes, the church regal once again.

Shuddering as he often did when he thought of the day he saw a woman whose car had broken down, Tim didn't want to think what would have become of Fountain Way, where he would have been in his life, if she had made it to the Interstate, to another town. *What if her car hadn't broken down? What if she had just driven through town, merged onto the Interstate, and made it to her destination without being sidetracked?*

Cherish caressed his arm. Tim sighed.

Falling in love with Cherish, with any woman, was not something Tim had expected. From the moment he saw her, Tim was drawn to Cherish and he had tried to understand why, but it wasn't something that could be proved, authenticated, certified.

"You don't try to understand love," Gran-T had told him. "You just love and be loved."

It had been two years since Gran-T had passed, but she had seen the town preserved, had seen the great-grandson she never expected, had seen Tim and Cherish happily

married. Just before she passed, she told Tim she was happy, she loved him and Tim had cried. It had taken him so long to see what his grandmother spent a lifetime trying to show him.

Tim now understood love. Understood the complete happiness that resulted from giving his heart to another person and knowing it would be safe. He knew the responsibility and honor of caring for another's heart as well.

Looking over at his son, he understood a love he had only heard other fathers explain he wouldn't be able to comprehend until he had a kid of his own. It was true. That love, the need to provide, protect and procure his son's happiness was not a chore. It simply inspired his every action, even if he had initially run away from it.

Lowering his head, Tim remembered how he had run out of the church the day Cherish showed up with Nicholas. Before they got a quarter of a mile up the road, he told Carl to turn around. He didn't need three days to think about how he felt. His only desire was to be there for the woman he loved and their son.

Looking over at Nicholas, twisting and turning in his chair showing them his disdain for the ceremony and his desire to be off playing with the other kids, Tim admonished him with a glare. Nicholas sat in the chair with his arms crossed. Tim smiled to himself. Had he been Nicholas' age, he would have done the same. Would have thought his father was strict. Would never have known how his father would have gone to the ends of the earth to make sure he was safe and happy. Tim knew. His son would know someday.

When the last speech was over, the audience rose and there was hugging and laughing and reminiscing. Martha and Nancy congratulated Cherish as well. Business in Trader Fountain was booming. They had decided to join Cherish and her new family in a new family business.

"You're still coming tonight, right, Row?" Tim said as he was leaving with Cherish and Nicholas.

"Anything to get out of another ceremony," she said sarcastically.

"Bye, Row!" Nicholas said cheerfully and Tim called him back when he tried to race off with a few of his cousins.

"Time to go home," Tim said and they headed back to their home on the hill.

After taking a nap, Tim and Cherish lay in bed cradled together while they contemplated the day's events.

Holding his hand against her breast, Cherish felt his breath on her neck, his chest rise and fall against her back. They were making love just by relaxing side-by-side, holding each other. Everything flowed together, from holding hands to kissing to sex. There was no separation and that was what Cherish realized her mother had been trying to explain.

Cherish always thought it was separate, love and lust. What started as an attraction turned into something Cherish hadn't experienced and she had wanted to settle for something more stable, understandable.

Closing her eyes, she was grateful her mother put that doubt in her head when Cherish thought she was immune to her mother's words. Words of wisdom had been just annoying nags. Her mother was right and had loved her enough to make Cherish angry, make her think, even if Cherish rebuked her reasoning.

"We have to get ready," she said, but they just lay there until Nicholas came in and jumped on the bed.

"We're getting up," Tim conceded and Nicholas ran out of the room yelling and screaming victoriously.

"Is it sick to say I wish we could have another one," Cherish asked as she got up. Tim had been tested and he was infertile, but not sterile, as assumed. The doctors said it wasn't impossible, but improbable for them to get pregnant again.

Tim reached over and squeezed her hand. It was unspoken reassurance he understood what she was feeling. Nights spent in bed talking about it made it unnecessary for them to bring it up again.

Showering, they let the water cascade over them as their lovemaking flowed from resting together and sharing their deepest desires, to more pleasurable interaction, every time hoping it would lead to another miracle, but not relying on it for their mutual happiness. They knew they had already been blessed more than they even knew was possible.

Dressing, Tim left when the doorbell rang.

"Row," he greeted his acerbic cousin. She was in a good mood. She actually greeted him as well.

"Hello, Tim," she said. "You're looking mighty nice this evening."

"Thank you, Row," Tim said and Nicholas was ecstatic.

"I got a new video game!" he exclaimed when he saw Row and dragged her into the family room.

"Still better than going to some dinner," she asserted as she was pulled away.

Sitting on the couch, Row loved blowing away zombies with Nicholas.

"We'll be back in a few hours," Tim called from the foyer. "No scary stories."

"We're blowing away zombies," Row yelled back. "That's acceptable?"

"Bye," he called. She heard the door close.

Two hours later, Nicholas was bored.

"Tell me a scary story," Nicholas said making a zombie face.

A scary story would have been easy for Row to tell. The only tale she knew that wasn't scary was the one Gran-T told and Row knew it by heart. It was a fairy tale, a love story and she never enjoyed it, didn't believe in that kind of love, but it reminded her of the most loving woman who could also command her family's attention. In the tradition of Gran-T, Row decided she had a tale that would be acceptable.

It was weird for Row, telling a story to Tim's offspring. Nobody ever expected to see Tim have an heir of his own.

Would he have been so generous to give up his line of succession that would have gone to his son if he knew he could have a son?

Row knew the answer to that question.

The responsibility Tim had held for the entire family was more of a burden than anyone had ever imagined. The family had thought he was callous and uncaring, but Tim was only trying his best. Only when he gave up his rightful inheritance did everyone realize how lucky they were to not have that responsibility.

When he held Nicholas in his arms, Tim never changed his mind about his decision. The responsibility for the family legacy would be with the family, not with the next in line. Row had nothing but respect for her cousin for his decision.

What would have happened if Cherish's car hadn't broken down, if Tim hadn't decided to come home for their grandmother's 80th birthday?

At family functions, this was on everyone's mind. When someone brought it up, everyone, even the person who asked the question, contemplated that possibility and said a little prayer that it happened the way it happened.

There was no denying everyone's fascination over the fact that Tim met Cherish at the very same fountain where his great-great-great-great-grandparents had met.

Row had never cared for the tale, a cheesy love story, but now she knew it was possible. Two people could meet and make miracles happen.

It might never happen for her, but luckily for the family, it had happened for Tim and Cherish.

"I can tell you a story about how your parents met," she offered. Sighing, Nicholas shrugged as he made his dinosaurs eat each other.

"Once upon a time," Row said sarcastically. This was her version of the story.

This was the beginning of a new family tale.

THE END

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Aspiring novelist and published news and feature writer living in the western part of the United States.

Other eBook Titles by R. A. Lee

The "Desert Town Angels" Trilogy

"Desert Town Angels"

PART ONE “The Last Will and Testament of Howard Thornbon”

The patriarch of Golden Peaks is dead. The fate of the desert town is in jeopardy as the residents fear Howard Thornbon’s daughter will sell the dying town and displace them.

But when Howard’s Last Will and Testament is read, everyone is distressed when a stranger is announced as the person chosen to carry out his final wishes.

As drastic changes are made in the town, the full fury of Sheri, Howard’s daughter, is unleashed.

When the mysterious stranger is introduced, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden realizes Sheri has met her match in the person Howard has chosen to inherit Golden Peaks.

As Sheri and the stranger clash over who is the rightful owner of the desolate desert town, Golden Peaks Property Manager Ryan Camden attempts to keep them from destroying Golden Peaks and each other.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART TWO “The Kin of Ms. Honey Hollowell”

“No!” Sheri shouted as the table shook with her pounding fist. “This is my place!”

“Are you so sure?” Van taunted. “Are you sure you are his daughter?”

“She is,” Nelson snapped and they both sat back. “She is. Sheri is legally Howard’s daughter.”

“Legally?” the lawyer said, sensing the meaning of the descriptive word.

The will of Howard Thornbon has been read and the kin of Ms. Honey Hollowell, a woman named Van, has taken over the town of Golden Peaks.

Moving into the old hotel, the mysterious Van invites the residents to dinner to introduce herself. Then, Ryan learns that the fate of the town is still in limbo.

Time is ticking. Howard has stipulated Van must remain in the town thirty days before taking full ownership, otherwise the property reverts to his daughter, who will do everything in her power to take back her birthright.

Thirty days to decide the fate of Golden Peaks. Thirty days to learn why Howard left Golden Peaks to the kin of Ms. Honey Hollowell.

Thirty days before a secret is revealed changing all of their lives forever.

“Desert Town Angels”

PART THREE “The Final Showdown in Golden Peaks”

“They want to discuss some DNA results with us,” Ryan said as he hung up the phone later that night.

“They already gave them to us,” Van whispered horrified.

“The lawyer says he’ll meet us in Hamptonville,” Ryan said as he hugged her tight.

The only thought holding her together was, “Please, don’t let this all be a lie.”

The secrets have been revealed. With the fate of Golden Peaks no longer in limbo, Van and Ryan are free to engage in their own pursuits beyond the desert town.

Van attempts to come to terms with her role in Golden Peaks, and Ryan is ready to reconcile with his past and his parents.

As more strangers reveal the ongoing saga involving the residents of Golden Peaks, Van has learned to adapt to everything about her new life except her feelings for Ryan.

A visitor looking for Nelson unleashes the memory of how the octogenarian ended up in Golden Peaks. Grace’s condition worsens and Van turns to an unlikely adversary to find the dying woman’s grandson.

Before her first year in Golden Peaks has passed, Van makes a decision with Ryan that goes against her core beliefs.

The struggle for control of Golden Peaks continues.

Van prepares for one last showdown with Sheri.

But in the second year, it may be something under the soil that will decide Van’s future in Golden Peaks.

Saving the town she inherited becomes a mission that may cost Van more than the desolate town is worth.

Other eBooks by R. A. Lee

"Love Again, Love for Them: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

“I am married to you now, Jake, no strings attached... I was holding on to my first marriage so tightly. As long as we had that agreement, I could still feel I wasn't betraying my first vows, the vows I meant.”

Brooke Sandstrom has just been laid off and her house is in foreclosure. With no husband to support her, Brooke must make a decision for the financial security of her young son, who has special education needs, and her ailing mother living in a care facility. When her friend offers her the option of remarrying for security, Brooke jumps at the opportunity when she cannot find another job and the care facility is threatening to kick her mother out.

Jake Parker needs a wife. Tired of being nagged by his mother to settle down, Jake decides to give her what she wants so that he can continue to see his beautiful girlfriend in the city, who is married to a Count. Proposing to Brooke, Jake comes up with an arrangement that will solve both of their problems. He will have a wife for appearance sake and a companion for his mother, and Brooke will have security without having to perform the most basic marital duties.

It's an arrangement that works well for both of them until Jake is forced to make a decision. But his indecision may cost him not only his family on paper, but also a chance for meaningful love.

SMASHWORDS REVIEW

Review by: Eve Atedogs on Dec. 04, 2011 This review is going to be so unlike me so hang on for the ride...If you are looking for a fun upbeat romance story you are sniffing around the wrong tree. WAIT, that doesn't mean that this isn't worth reading this is by far the best book I ever read. The author has such insight when it comes to emotions, thoughts and feelings for those who have suffered lose. I was so touched at moments (by the way I never cried more during a book) I literally stayed up til 6am to finish this book I just couldn't put it down without possibly losing the trance I was in while consuming it. Were there parts I hated....you betcha lots of them but that didn't mean the book was poorly written what it meant was that the skill in writing to bring such emotion out of me was superior that my friends takes great writing ability. The story was such a strong, personal journey and at times I hated the so called hero and detested the mistress. I saw

myself in the wife's position handling situations so differently she was strong, very very strong it made me proud to be female. I am going to keep this book for a very long time and read it in the future when I need a good cry or forget what great writing is all about. Should the author read this review I am on bended knee asking that you continue please to write. You do great things with your mind when you put it on paper. For those of you considering reading it...support this author and you won't be sorry. I am overwhelmed by it all. Thank you for the opportunity to share this experience happy reading, enjoy.

"The Beauty at the Bus Stop: A Novel" By R. A. Lee

Slinking toward them in the heavy, congested traffic was a city bus, and Evan was filled with a sense of urgency.

What could he say to make her not get on that bus?

Laid off from his bank job, Mountain Wood, Colorado, native Evan Hillaway takes a risk and accepts an offer from his cousin to work for a friend in Los Angeles. Within days of arriving, Evan sees a woman at a bus stop and instantly falls in love.

Ashley Cooper is also a small-town girl who has been laid off and looking for a way to meet her financial needs. The only difference is that her "small town" is the Westside of Los Angeles.

Through a series of fortunate events, Evan meets the woman but soon learns she's looking for someone with more financial security than Evan can provide.

With love on the line, Evan risks everything just to prove to her that they belong together. Now it's up to Ashley to decide if love is enough to take their relationship to the end of the line. (Adult contemporary romance)

"My Vegas Valentine" A Novella By R. A. Lee

There is a code between sisters: Thou shall not be intimate with a guy your sister dumps, not without her permission. Faith lives in the shadow of her more glamorous twin, but on a trip to Vegas she bumps into a man she takes for her sister's ex-lover and debates breaking that code when she inadvertently spends Valentine's Day with him after dumping her cheating boyfriend.

Arriving on a commercial flight, Faith's adventure takes her on a local's tour of Vegas and a stay in a private Villa before she boards a private jet home to get away from her Vegas experience and back to her normal small town life.

When co-workers learn of her exploits from her ex-boyfriend, a co-worker who trashes her reputation, they refer to the stranger as Faith's "Vegas Valentine."

Realizing that she's been settling, Faith begins an adventure that takes her from the comfort of her carefully planned life and into the arms of a stranger who may break her small town heart, but for whom her heart beats. "My Vegas Valentine"

For details, www.TalesByRALee.com



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