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AUTHOR OF *THIRSTY*



tandem

a novel



TANDEM

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

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ISBN 978-0-307-45717-2

ISBN 978-0-307-45718-9 (electronic)

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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

[to come]

Printed in the United States of America

2010—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Part One

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

—Wordsworth

Prologue

I've always despised smoke. Avoided the acrid smell, the burning eyes, stolen breath. The way it catches hold of fabric and hangs on with long, pungent claws.

And yet in my dream—my recurring, is someone trying to tell me something? dream—I float blissfully through a wall of gray, wafting, vaporous smoke, blind to what lies beneath the dark expanse of haze. In this dream that so often robs me of sleep, I'm aware that I'm falling, falling far, and yet I'm not afraid. But then I awaken, sweat soaked, heart pounding, afraid to die alone.

Chapter One

She awoke to the creaking of hinges and boots falling heavily on stone steps. Sitting up straight, she pushed back her hair. Maybe if she looked nicer, he'd come more often.

At one time she'd been beautiful. So beautiful, men had fought duels over her. But now she bore the scars of a terrifying night of agony. She would never be beautiful again.

As the door fell shut, the breeze carried the rusty scent of blood. Hunger clawed violently at her stomach. She strained forward to see through the dark as his legs came into view, as greedy for the sight of him as for the nourishment he brought.

I fought for breath, gasping, choking on fear. Rushing toward the security desk, searching for anyone with a uniform, reality sliced through my last thread of denial. Nothing would ever be normal again, and my dad's well-being depended on me never, ever forgetting that.

Dad often became agitated and confused when too many people pressed in around him. But he'd always loved the holiday season at the mall. Every year we went to look at the decorations, eat roasted cashews, and sample fudge. I didn't have the heart to stop the tradition we had both treasured since I was a little girl. Even before everything changed.

As far back as I could remember, Dad would count down the days from Halloween until Thanksgiving night when he felt it appropriate to hang the Christmas lights and put up the tree. He was like a child, waiting and thrilling to the moment. His excitement was infectious and I loved those moments too.

I hadn't taken my eyes off of him. Not for one minute, until Starbucks beckoned. I left my dad at one of the tables next to the kiosk. Kept my eye on him as much as possible. But sometime between finding him a seat and walking back with my chai mocha latte (with an extra shot of espresso), he had disappeared.

Dad had been worse lately. He'd gone from talking to photographs and forgetting my name to calling me by my mother's name or whomever I happened to be in the moment.

He was also beginning to suffer panic attacks as his mind convinced him of things that weren't true. Hallucinations. But that morning, he was lucid. He was excited about looking at the decorations, and because I had needed a day of normalcy, one day, I had let down my guard and left him alone. For just a few minutes.

What had I done?

My jacket was heavy over a thick hoodie and by the time I reached the security booth sweat slicked my forehead and dripped down my spine.

"My dad," I gulped around a throat full of fear and guilt, "wandered away. He has Alzheimer's and if he finds an exit..." My mind shut down at the possible outcome of this disaster.

"Calm down, ma'am." The mall cop was a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and a beer gut. "We'll find him." He put in a mall-wide call describing my dad from the photograph I handed him. Then he paused and looked at me. "What's he wearing?"

I couldn't picture his outfit. What kind of daughter was I? I had just seen him a few minutes before I...well...lost him. I pressed my fingers to my brow and closed my eyes, trying to picture what I'd laid out for him that morning. "A brown corduroy jacket, jeans, and a Cardinals ball cap."

The security guy nodded and something in his eyes gave me the confidence I needed to believe he would find my dad.

Almost immediately I heard over the radio that Dad had been spotted walking into the Hallmark store.

My head swam with relief as I pictured him drawn to the festive décor.

“Okay,” the officer said, his voice full of authority. “Don’t approach him, but be sure he stays confined to the store until his daughter arrives.”

“Thank you!”

“No problem, hon. That’s why we’re here.”

I tossed a backward wave as I rushed out of the office.

At the Hallmark store, I found my dad browsing through Christmas ornaments.

I rushed forward, breathless from my sprint back through the mall. “Dad, I was worried sick about you.”

He turned to me, his eyes bright, full of conspiracy. “Let’s get one of these for your mother.” He held up an ornament of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler.

My mom was a huge *Gone with the Wind* fan, and in a guest room at home, there was an entire display dedicated to the famed romance. It was filled with knickknacks, music boxes, and more than a few copies of the book. But all those had been purchased when she was still alive.

I watched my dad, relief that he was okay sinking over me like a fresh-from-the-dryer bed sheet. Light and peaceful. Some experts say don’t go along with the patient’s fantasies. Set them straight when they lose track of their time line. But this wasn’t a patient; this was my dad and I didn’t want to crush his Christmas spirit.

I’d tried to be honest with him once during a blip in his memory, and the sadness in his eyes when he remembered was more than I could bear.

“You’re right, Dad. Mom would love that.”

His eyes lit with pride. When Mom was alive, she would have been happy with a paper airplane if given by his hand. He had no idea how little it would have taken to make her happy. If he had, it might have made a difference in the end.

I pulled out my debit card, and my bank account dropped another twenty-eight dollars.

He dozed during the forty-five-minute drive home, and I had plenty of time alone with my thoughts. I glanced over at him. He was hugging my mother’s gift tight to his chest, his head resting against the cold window glass. The sight of him tugged at my heart. My dad was disappearing before my eyes and leaving behind an imposter.

And there wasn’t a thing I could do about it.

I settled him in for a nap and hid the gift with all the others, deep down in my hope chest. There were sparkly earrings, sweaters, books, bracelets, perfume, all the things he’d thought she would love.

My mother died when I was seven in a head-on collision with an oak tree. She swerved to miss a cat. The cat lived. The tree died.

No little girl ever loved her mama the way I loved mine. She was white teeth and cookie dough and warm arms. She was my run-to person. Kiss-my-skinned-knee person. Disney-cartoons-and-caramel-popcorn person. My every person.

At the funeral home, I stood next to the closed casket. My soul howled with rage and sorrow, but the pain was too deep for human expression so I remained dry-eyed and silent. Reverend Fuller

squatted down and looked at me with gentle, sympathetic eyes. He told me she wasn't really in there. "You'll see her again, honey. God just took her home, that's all."

I jerked away and blinked at him, furious that no one had bothered to tell me. I threaded my way through friends—almost all my mother's exclusively—and left the funeral home. I ran all the way home, calling her name as I burst through the door. "Mommy!"

I checked every room twice. But she wasn't there. Wherever God took her, it wasn't home. I slipped her nightgown over my clothes, crawled up into the bed she shared with my dad, and laid my head on her pillow. The scent of Ralph Lauren Blue clung to the cotton pillowcase and knotted my chest so tightly I couldn't breathe. I cried from a place so deep no sound escaped.

White-faced and trembling, my dad showed up an hour later. He grabbed me, held me, made me promise to never, ever, ever leave him again. He'd lost my mother; he couldn't bear to lose me too.

Amede Dastillion sat in her garden surrounded by her plants and 150-year-old statues. Virgin Mary and the saints who had once brought her mother such peace. She sipped her tea and indulged in a few moments of e-mail and surfing the Web.

Despite her insistence that she would never allow a computer in her home, she had succumbed to progress. Not only had she reluctantly agreed to the technology, but she had also found she quite enjoyed the immediacy of online shopping and e-mail.

The french doors opened and Roma stepped onto the patio carrying the day's mail and a fresh cup of tea. Amede smiled at her friend and servant of thirty years. "Thank you, Roma."

"You're welcome." She hesitated as she set the tray down. "There's a large envelope from Missouri. Who do you know in Missouri?"

Amede lifted the envelope and checked the return address. Abbey Hills. "No one."

"Well, someone seems to know you."

Amede turned the envelope over, frowning. "It appears so." Roma waited until Amede stared up at her. "Do you need anything else?"

"Fine, you can open it in private and tell me later. I have to leave early today anyway. Gerald's appointment is in an hour."

"How is he doing?"

A shrug lifted Roma's plump shoulders. "The chemo is hard on him."

Amede took Roma's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Tell him I'm thinking about him, and if there's anything I can do, don't hesitate to ask."

"I will. Thank you. And don't forget Juliette will be filling in for me tomorrow and Friday. Gerald needs me to take care of him after chemo."

Amede pressed her lips together.

"Now, Amede. She's trying. It would give me a lot more peace while I'm taking care of my dying husband if you could refrain from scaring my granddaughter half to death. She's next in line so you'd best learn to get along with her."

Amede fingered the envelope. "Never underestimate the power of the guilt trip."

Roma smiled. "Mission accomplished, then. All right. Do you need anything else before I go?"

Amede sipped her warm tea and shook her head. "I'll be fine. You go before you're late."

When Roma walked away, Amede lifted the large envelope. She pulled from it a stack of letters held together by a red ribbon. A frown puckered her brow and her stomach tightened as she read the familiar names, written in her own hand. Her heart raced.

She opened the top letter and fingered the creases in the yellowed paper with her index finger, remembering the nights she stayed awake, penning heartsick words of longing, never knowing if they had been received or read. Memories washed over her. Not many of them good. But she glanced down at the note in her hand and couldn't help but appreciate the kindness of this stranger who had taken time to send the letters.

To whom it may concern,

These beautiful letters were part of the estate of the late Markus Chisom. Incredibly, the dates are from the 1870s through just sixty years ago. I researched the Dastillion name and was delighted to find your New Orleans home still belonging to the same family. I realize the writer of these letters must be long deceased but felt they belonged with the Dastillion descendants and should not be auctioned.

Sincerely,
Lauryn McBride
McBride Auctions, Abbey Hills, Missouri

Amede read the note again, her hands trembling as she realized none of her other letters must have reached their destination after World War II. The last address she'd had was in St. Louis, where these letters were originally sent.

She glanced back at the big envelope. Abbey Hills, Missouri. She typed the name of the town into her search engine. Scrolling through the real estate opportunities, the Wikipedia paragraph, and restaurants in Abbey Hills, she clicked on one that seemed interesting.

The link led her to a page with dark, eerie graphics. The banner over the top of the page read, "Welcome to Things That Go Bump in the Night."

Amede was about to click out of the Web site when she noticed the word *vampires*. It was always an amusing distraction to read what humans thought about vampires. She gave in to a minute of indulgence.

Vampires in Abbey Hills?
July 2009

The *Abbey Hills Chronicle* reported that several animal slayings had occurred just before the so-called murders of Amanda Rollings, wife and mother, and, subsequently, student Carrie Grayson, daughter of principal Grayson, days later. According to sources, throats were slashed and blood drained ritualistically.

But we've seen this before. Jergin, Illinois, two years ago ring a bell? Dallas, Texas, as recent as six months ago. If the police can't figure out how the murders fit together, perhaps it's time they admit something otherworldly is at play.

What sorts of creatures drink blood?

Think about it, folks.

There are vampires among us.

Perhaps we should welcome them into society and offer an alternative to murder.

Leave a comment. Tell me what you think.

If you've heard of similar killings, send me an e-mail and I'll check it out.

mirandaK@gmail.com

Amede stared at the page for a minute before clicking out of it.

The girl had no idea how close she was to the truth. She smiled at the naive thought that vampires and humans could coexist peacefully. Although, the thought was definitely interesting. Her life might have been much easier if she'd had the option of living in the open.

One thing Amede knew for certain. If Eden's letters were found in Abbey Hills and there were blood-draining killings in Abbey Hills, Eden was there.

Or at least she had been.

She lifted the phone and pressed 1 on her speed dial.

Roma answered. "Amede? Everything okay?"

"Yes. I need to go to Missouri for a few days."

Hesitation on the end of the line. "Another lead?"

"Yes. And this time it's a good one. When can you go?"

"You know I can't leave Gerry."

Amede clenched her fist, digging her nails into her palms. How would she ever make a trip like this without Roma?

"I don't understand why you can't just heal him. What good is practicing voodoo if it doesn't heal your own family? That's not much of a religion."

Roma released a breath. "I'm not dignifying that with a response. Do you want Juliette to come with you? I can call her for you. She'll have to take days off school."

"Will she be able to?"

"She knows her duty, Amede."

Amede nodded. "All right. Tell her we'll leave for Abbey Hills as soon as arrangements are made."

She disconnected the call a minute later and stared out over her garden. Amede hated to leave New Orleans in the late fall, after hurricane season all but loosened its stormy grip and the rains gentled. Regardless, she knew she must leave her sanctuary and venture among the living. A place of torture, loneliness in the midst of a crowd.

Chapter Two

In Abbey Hills, sports and band were all we had. Unfortunately, I had never been musically inclined and didn't have time for sports. Absent those two extracurriculars, "Loser" was pretty much tattooed on my forehead during my thirteen years in the public school system. I might have liked to play sports, but Dad didn't have time to drive me to practices and go to games. Occasionally, though, I skipped a day of school, if he was between auctions, and we'd drive to St. Louis and watch the Cardinals play. Those were the best days ever. Just the two of us. Hot dogs, the Arch, and a four-hour conversation each way.

Her own screams woke her. She had dreamed she was alone in the dark, captive of a madman. When she opened her eyes and realized the nightmare was real, she couldn't stop screaming.

For the first time since I had hired her the year before, Cokie, Dad's home health care worker, was late. She rushed through the door, flustered and without lipstick, which was also a first.

"Sorry I'm late, Lauryn." Her lungs hauled air as she set her purse on the counter and pulled a pan from the cabinet to begin cooking Dad's breakfast.

"It's okay. I'm working at the house by myself today." I smiled. "No one to answer to." I frowned at the shadows under her eyes. "You sick? I can stay home if you need to—"

Cokie shook her head. "I'm okay. Just tired."

I was unconvinced but in a hurry, so I hugged her and went to find my dad.

When I'd first hired Cokie, my Dad fought me like a twelve-year-old, insisting he was too old for a baby-sitter. My heart broke. It was just as hard for me to give up even a little space between Dad and me. It had been just the two of us for so long. I resented even the idea of someone else in the house, cooking, helping Dad with the things I'd been helping him do since his decline. All my life, really. But after he wandered away from the house for the second time and the sheriff's department called me to pick him up, his doctor recommended Cokie.

I accepted her as quickly as I could. Dad not so much.

But Cokie, two hundred pounds, fifty years old, and deceptively soft-spoken, was a godsend. She entered our lives tough as nails—and she needed to be—when it came to making sure my dad stayed put. Later when things got worse, she made certain he didn't "do his business anywhere but the bathroom." She made sure his clothes were on properly, hair combed, teeth brushed, and shoes on the right feet.

Plus, I could almost always count on walking into a clean house after work and smelling something yummy for supper. She was just what we needed, and she knew she was indispensable.

I kissed Dad on the head. "Cokie's here, so I'm going to work. See you later." He patted me absently but stayed glued to the History Channel, one of the only stations Cokie allowed him to watch. He wasn't allowed cooking shows because of the knives and the ovens. The Weather Channel sent him running for the basement.

Ten minutes later I downshifted and inched my Jeep along the red bricks of Jackson Street until I braked in front of the Chisom house. I knew every brick, every tree and bush, every house on this street by heart. As far back as I could remember I dreamed of living in one of the Victorians in this neighborhood, made even more beautiful in the fall of the year.

I took a moment to enjoy the view. Overnight, it seemed color had burst over Abbey Hills. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat. In my mind's eye the images floated around me. The crisp leaves whispered in the breeze, and for a moment I allowed myself to rest.

My cell phone rang, drawing me from my mental sabbatical. I released a sigh before I answered.

I had missed my appointment to get my Jeep serviced.

As I exited the Jeep, phone held tight to my ear, I apologized to the receptionist, then turned down the offer to reschedule. I apologized again, disconnected the call, and shoved the phone into my bag.

Fallen maple and oak leaves formed a thick blanket across the yard. I kicked through them, loving the swishing noise they made. Such a shame to rake them up. But I knew it had to be done before the auction.

Looking at the Chisom home always gave me a thrill. Even when I was a child, before Markus Chisom bought the house, it was my favorite home in Abbey Hills. It always seemed a little lonely to me, a little angry even, and I identified.

Markus had restored the home to its original design. Buttery yellow clapboard siding, authentic for the era, and white trim gave the home the look and feel of an elegant farmhouse. It was the perfect home for small-town middle America. But I thought it lost something in the sunny brightness.

Reclusive as he was most of his time in Abbey Hills, Markus Chisom respected the treasures that filled his house. I hated the idea of selling to someone who might not continue to care for them. But that was always the risk one took when dealing with antiques and vintage homes. Today a lovely Victorian, tomorrow an ugly quadplex. I'd seen it happen before.

I shoved aside the nostalgia and considered the practical possibility of auctioning off this gorgeous old dame. Commission from the house alone would keep McBride Auctions alive for another six months. And that's what was most important.

The key felt cool in my hand as I walked toward the steps. I loved the cased-in feeling that always came over me from being among the wrought-iron works and the vines that crawled and climbed among them, flowery in spring and summer and creepy in fall and winter.

This summer, overgrowth had taken a toll on the yard. Walking through it felt like a scene from *Hansel and Gretel* or another Grimms' fairy tale. Deliciously scary, conjuring up all sorts of images of witches and wizards and princesses in a castle.

There was a downside to the overgrowth, and I considered, not for the first time, whether I should ask the sheriff to provide security for the home. Once word got out about the valuables inside—and there really was no way to stop gossip from spreading like a plague in a town the size of Abbey Hills—the place could easily be burglarized.

My mind rushed to the killings Abbey Hills had experienced a few months before. Slayings, blood draining, ritual sacrifice markings. No one knew exactly what happened to resolve the crimes, except for the highway patrol's assurance that the house fire outside of town had taken care of everything. This was the same fire that killed Mr. Chisom, although the sheriff insisted he was a hero, not a killer.

For all of the sheriff's and the highway patrol's efforts, news of the ritualistic killings had leaked to news media, and almost overnight Abbey Hills had been overrun with newspaper and TV reporters and one very annoying Internet reporter who ran a paranormal Web site and insisted evil lurked in the one-hundred-year-old town. She'd never moved on.

I was about to reach for the doorknob but saw the curtain rise and fluff down. My stomach tightened and my heart sped up. Slowly, deliberately, I reached into my bag for the phone. But the door swung open before I could punch in any numbers. A man stood in the frame, barely fitting, he was so tall.

“Boo,” he said.

Recognition connected me to reality just in time to avoid a humiliating scream. “Charley! You about gave me heart failure.”

The deputy laughed, enjoying his trick. “I couldn’t resist.”

I shoved past him, shaking my head. “You’re such a juvenile.” I tried to be mad, but he seemed to be experiencing such pleasure from putting one over on me that I had to laugh it off.

“Hey, you would have done the same thing.”

I wouldn’t have, but I liked Charley. I was one of the few who did. There weren’t many in Abbey Hills who could tolerate him. I was definitely the only person he liked in town. At least since his sister Amanda was killed months earlier in the killings.

I rolled my eyes. “Whatever. What are you doing here?”

He shrugged, following me through the foyer into the living room, where I set up my workspace for cataloging the auction items. “I have a few hours before I have to go to work. Thought you might need some help.”

Sliding my laptop bag from my shoulder and setting it on the desk, I cut a glance at him. “Really? Because I could use some muscles to bring up some of the crates and trunks from the basement.”

“Where do you want them?”

“Right in here, but not up against the walls. I don’t want them scratched.” I had already laid tarp to protect the wood floor, so I was all set.

“Okay, do you want all of them brought up?”

I shook my head. “I color-coded the crates according to content. Could you bring up two that are marked with red marker?”

“Sure.” He flexed and kissed his bicep. “These guns are glad to be of service, little lady.”

“Gross.” I shook my head and turned to the desk I’d brought from one of the vacant offices at the auction house. I slipped the laptop from my bag and set it on the desk next to the printer.

While I opened the program and got my workspace ready, Charley lugged the crates up from the basement. He barely broke a sweat. “Looks like all that working out is paying off,” I said.

“Noticing the bod, are you?” He grinned. “Anytime you say, I’m all yours, pretty lady.”

“Good Lord, Charley. Like yourself much?”

He leaned back against the desk, facing me. I rolled the chair away just a little so I didn’t feel so closed in by his hovering. Charley was lonely. He had no family with his sister gone and had latched on to me. Mostly I guessed because his brother-in-law, Pete, had taken the two kids and moved to California, where his parents lived.

But it worked both ways with Charley. I had never been a social dove, and since my dad had begun exhibiting signs of Alzheimer’s, my social circle had shrunk even further. Impromptu meetings with Charley provided me with someone to talk to.

But I was itching to be alone so I could get some work done.

“So, how are things with Janine?” I asked, more to try to get rid of him than anything. But Charley was in a reflective mood, so my question brought out his talkative personality instead of the one that usually surfaced when Janine’s name came up.

“Sometimes I think I should just go back to her.” He crossed his feet and arms. His forearms bulged under the strain.

“Do you miss her?” They had dated all through high school, and Janine was there during his days of mourning after his sister’s murder. Then for no apparent reason—he didn’t even know why himself—Charley just broke up with her.

“Sometimes.” He grinned a lecherous grin. “Especially in bed.”

“You’re such a pig.”

He shrugged. “At least I’m honest.”

“Well, she doesn’t need you going back to her just for sex. Leave the poor girl alone and let her move on. I heard she had a date with some guy who works security at Silver Dollar City last week.”

Charley nodded, trying to be nonchalant, but I could tell by the look in his eyes he wasn’t happy. “I knew about it.”

“Is that why you are thinking about getting back together?”

“Oh, probably.” He sucked in a long breath and exhaled. “Let’s talk about you. How’s your dad?”

“I lost him in the mall Saturday, but otherwise, about the same.”

“How’d you lose him? Were you sidetracked by the Victoria’s Secret models in the window...oh, wait, that’s me.”

Charley did have his moments. I rolled my eyes. “I got sidetracked by the very sexy smell of coffee.”

I told him what happened. “I don’t know what I was thinking. He could have walked right out through an exit and gotten lost for good or hit by a car. I’m so not fit to be a caregiver.”

Charley crouched beside me and put his hands on my knees. Any other time I might have questioned his motives, but I could tell by the sincerity in his eyes that he truly wanted to comfort me. “Don’t beat yourself up. That could have happened to anyone. You’ve been great with your dad so far.”

“So far.” I snorted. “That means I have plenty of room to screw up later on.”

“Have you thought about putting him in a home?”

I frowned and shoved him away. “No way. He’d hate that.”

He steadied himself and stood up. “I’m sorry. It was just a thought.” He shook his head. “Never mind. You’re so wound up. When was the last time you got to go out and have a good time?”

“Who knows?”

“Anise’s party is coming up in a couple of weeks.”

“You mean the ‘un-reunion?’”

He gave a snort. “You thought that was dumb too?”

“Who wouldn’t, except the person dumb enough to come up with it?”

“Anise,” we said at the same time and laughed.

Charley stepped over to the desk and resumed his earlier pose. “Remember, she tried to have a five-year reunion two years ago but no one cared enough to come back, so she figured she’d market it this way.”

I raised my eyebrows. “She’s quite the thinker, isn’t she?”

Anise Devort married the high school English teacher and stayed in Abbey Hills after graduation just like Charley and I did. She came up with the brilliant idea of throwing a bash over the Thanksgiving holiday when our high school friends would be making the obligatory return home for a few days.

“Are you going?” Charley asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t filled out the RSVP. I guess it depends on finding someone to stay with Dad.”

“Get a teenager from the church youth group. They’re always looking for baby-sitting jobs.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t hire baby-sitters for my *father*, Charley.” Charley could be so clueless. “He has to have someone from an agency. A professional.”

“Oh.”

Which meant big bucks.

An e-mail came in on the computer and I clicked it open. A thank you from the woman I’d sent the letters to down in New Orleans. Sent from her iPhone. I wondered for a second how she got my e-mail address, then remembered I’d attached my business card.

Charley continued on without appearing to notice my attention wandering. “Well, Anise might not be having the party anyway.”

I glanced up. “Why’s that?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. A leak or something flooded their basement, which is where all the booze is. Just ask Mr. Devort.”

“Oh well. I guess that solves that little dilemma.”

Scrubbing at his ever-present two-day growth, Charley raised his eyebrow. “Actually, Anise asked me if she could use the Inn for the party.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Maybe she is a thinker after all. What’d you tell her?”

“You know Anise. I tried to tell her no, but she made me promise to think about it and get back to her.”

Charley’s family had owned the Baylor Inn for a couple of generations, and it had passed to him after his mom died three years ago. He kept it open because it was the only place for out-of-towners to stay the night. I knew he’d rather shut it down and live there in peace, but the town needed an inn, and Charley felt the weight of that responsibility.

I suspected if he’d dared to close it anyway, he would have been run out of town.

“You really think I should do it? What about my customers at the Inn?”

“Tell Anise to invite them too.” I turned my attention to my computer, hoping he’d take the hint. “If she really wants to have the party there, she’ll agree.”

He gave me one of his thoughtful looks.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ll say yes if you’ll go too.”

That wasn’t a hard decision. It might be funny to see Charley scowling at former schoolmates for an evening. “If I can get someone for Dad.”

He handed me his cell. “Call the agency.”

“I have my own phone.” I grabbed my phone and wiggled it in front of him. Then I punched in the buttons and made arrangements for the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

Amazed at how relieved I felt, I stood up and gave Charley a hug. “Thanks. I’m looking forward to it.” He pulled me tight. Awkwardly so.

There I was, pressed against Charley, when someone opened the door across the foyer and came in. I stared, certain I was imagining things as a face from the past entered my line of sight.

Those familiar gray eyes clouded. “Oh, hey. Sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“Billy?” I pushed away from Charley, wishing for all I was worth that I had a paper bag to breathe into.

Charley gave a short laugh. “Oh! That’s the other reason I came by.” He slung his ape arm over my shoulder and it was all I could do to keep from jamming my elbow into his side. “Billy Fuller’s back in town. I told him to stop by and say hi.”

“Hi, Billy,” I said, feeling utterly foolish.

“Hi yourself.” His eyes never left mine. Like something out of a Lifetime movie.

“I better go,” Charley-the-traitor said. “I have some Inn stuff to do.”

He left, and neither Billy nor I said anything for a minute. Finally, he broke the silence. “So, you’re running your dad’s auction house.”

“I am.”

“I heard about your dad’s condition. I’m truly sorry.”

I hadn’t seen Billy since graduation. Right after he’d kissed me for the first and last time and then left town the next day without saying a word. I’d had a major secret crush on the preacher’s kid my entire life, but he didn’t seem to notice until that night.

I walked behind my chair and stood, feeling better with a barrier between us. Billy leaned against the frame that separated the living room from the foyer. He looked way too good in a pinstriped button-down shirt and a pair of semifaded jeans and flip-flops, which really were inappropriate for autumn in the Ozarks.

“So,” he said, shoving his thumb through the air toward the direction of the door. “You and Baylor?”

“Friends.” I took a deep breath. “You home for a visit or to stay?”

“For a while.” He shifted between feet. “My plans are tentative.”

I nodded.

“Well,” he said, “I’ll let you get back to work. It was nice seeing you. We’ll have to have coffee sometime and catch up.”

“Sure. Maybe sometime. I’m pretty busy.”

He smiled and looked into my soul. “Maybe when you’re not too busy.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

He turned to leave and then turned back, and I thought he might say something else. Instead, he stared for a long second, gave me a sort-of-smile, and lifted his hand. “Good to see you, Lars.”

My heart leaped into my throat, disabling my ability to respond. I stood clutching my chair until I heard the front door click shut.