

Wildflowers
from
WINTER

A Novel

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For Ryan, my cute delivery guy turned husband.

*Who knew what God had in store for us
when you delivered that first package?*



PROLOGUE

The summer I turned twelve, I tried to kill myself. At least that's what the lifeguard told the paramedics and the paramedics told the doctors and the doctors told my mother. I don't deny I swam to the bottom of the public swimming pool. I don't even deny I decided to stay there. I only defend my motives. My decision was much less about escaping this world and much more about joining another.

I think that should count for something.

When I regained consciousness, I opened my eyes to a pair of blurry faces. My mother with her perpetually pinched eyebrows, raking her teeth over swollen lips. And Grandpa Dan—with my father's face, but twenty years older. His callused grip pressed through the shoulder of my hospital gown, anchoring my body to a reality I didn't want to face, awakening my senses until I noticed stiff sheets rubbing against my toes, beeping monitors, the smell of antiseptic, and a man I didn't recognize.

He studied me over a pair of bifocals and clicked his pen against a clipboard, jotting mysterious notes whenever I talked or sighed or breathed funny. His name was Dr. Nowels, and he had a mustache the exact same shade as the dead mouse I found behind our trailer home the previous Easter.

After I was released from the hospital, my mom insisted I sit with him for an hour every Tuesday after school. I tried to convince her that I didn't

need to see a shrink. That she was wasting her money. Or actually, Uncle Phil's money. But I sort of lost all credibility after the swimming pool fiasco.

At the start of each session, Dr. Nowels would lean back in his chair, cross one lanky leg over the other, and tap his pen against the bottom of his chin. "How do you feel today, Bethany?"

I would search for something creative to say. Something that might make his pen scratch in a frenzy across his paper. But nothing ever came. So instead, I stared at the same spot I always stared at. His hair. Not for a single minute did I believe it was real. Throughout the entire sixty minutes, while he asked questions, I pictured walking over, grabbing a fistful, and giving it a yank. I was dying to see what Dr. Nowels looked like bald.

Every time I told my mom this she'd bite her lip and ask me not to use that word—*dying*. Ten minutes before our time was up, Dr. Nowels would ask the same question he always asked. "Are you ready to talk about why you did it, Bethany?" It drove me nuts, the way he finished all his questions with my name.

"I don't know why, Dr. Nowels," I'd say, trying my best to imitate the annoying cadence of his voice. Sometimes he would look at me as if I'd said something profound and start scribbling while I narrowed my eyes one last time at his hairline. If it really was his hairline.

And so our sessions went. For an entire year.

Never once did I get to see Dr. Nowels without his toupee. Never once did he share what he wrote about me during all those hours. And never once did I explain why I did it.

ONE

Maybe it was the angle or the proximity, but Bethany Quinn had never felt so tempted to give Jeff McKinley's hairpiece a good nudge. At the very least, an innocuous brush with her elbow. It didn't help that he was waving a powdered doughnut over the sketches she had worked on for the past week, leaving a sugary dust behind. She gripped the back of his chair and looked over his shoulder. "What don't you like about them?"

He gestured with the doughnut, sliding his free fingers across her drawing of the floating ceiling tray. "It's a little elaborate."

She let go of his chair and straightened. "So?"

"I was under the impression this particular client was looking for something more...practical."

"They never said *practical*. They said *cheap*."

"Same thing."

"It's not a warehouse, Jeff. We're renovating one of downtown Chicago's most popular ballrooms. Fancy doesn't have to be expensive."

"If you want it to look good, it does." He set down the rest of the doughnut and folded his hands behind his neck. His hairline shifted higher up his forehead. "How much time before we meet with them?"

Bethany's back pocket buzzed. "We scheduled the meeting for three," she said, pulling out her cell phone. Her mother's number lit up the screen.

She furrowed her brow. Why in the world would her mother be calling at ten o'clock on a Monday? Mom knew better than to bother her at work. Bethany sent the call to voice mail, her mind rabbit-trailing to her brother, David.

“Let’s see what else we can come up with before then. It’d be best to give them several options to choose from, don’t you think?”

Jeff’s words floated in her ear, but thoughts of her brother bounced around inside her head and made it impossible to concentrate. David left for Afghanistan three weeks ago. And now her mother was calling.

“We’re in no position to lose clients right now. With all this talk about downsizing, that wouldn’t bode well for any of us.”

Bethany nodded.

“Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. I just... I have to take this call.” Her knees wobbled as she grabbed the sketches and made the short trek to her work station. She set them on her desk and spotted the flashing red blinker of her office phone. When the caller ID showed her mother’s number, Bethany shut her eyes and sent a hopeful thought into the cosmos.

Please don’t let this be about David...

She didn’t believe in a loving God who listened to prayer, but sometimes she caught herself bargaining with the Universe—sort of like a bribe, only she didn’t have anything to offer. She dialed voice mail and waited until Mom’s worried voice filled her ear. “Bethany, it’s your mother. Call me, please.”

She pulled the phone away from her ear and glared at the receiver. That was it? No details? No hint of why she called? No *Hey, Bethany, don’t worry; this isn’t about your brother?*

The ambiguity of the message tightened the muscles in Bethany’s shoulders. Her mother’s brevity left her with no other option but to call back. She picked up the office phone, dialed Mom’s number, and fiddled

with the lid on her half-empty Starbucks macchiato. The cup tipped, spilling lukewarm liquid over the mahogany desktop and soaking her sketches.

Sucking in a sharp breath, she righted the cup and swiped up her work. She tore a clump of tissues from the box near her computer and dabbed at the sheets. It was no use. The spilled coffee had turned the pristine white pages into a mottled stack of brown sogginess.

“Bethany? Is that you?”

Bethany grabbed the phone with both hands. “Mom? Why’d you call? Is it David?”

“Are you at work?”

“Where else would I be?”

“It’s just that it’s Monday, and I didn’t think—”

“Mom, tell me what’s wrong. Is it David?”

A brief pause. “Oh no. Your brother’s fine.”

Bethany’s tension deflated. She sank onto her chair and pinched the bridge of her nose. She hated this. Worrying about her brother. Freaking out every time her phone rang. How was she supposed to cope with it for an entire year?

“It’s not David. It’s Robin.”

Pieces of memory stirred at the sound of that name, rousing from a ten-year hibernation. Why in the world was Mom calling her at work about Robin?

“Did you hear what I said?”

“I heard you.”

“Don’t you want to know what’s wrong?”

The question poked her stomach. Say yes, and spend the next thirty minutes listening to Mom’s hysterics. Say no, and sound like a royal jerk. She didn’t have time for the first or energy for the second, so she picked up a pen and toyed with the bloated puddle creeping toward her pencil cup, the short-lived relief over David melting into a dull ache in the center of her forehead.

Silence stretched along the phone lines.

She gazed at the blueprints on her drafting board. Her boss needed specs for the River Oaks project on his desk by four o'clock, fake-haired Jeff McKinley wanted to brainstorm "practical" ideas for the downtown ballroom, and Mom wouldn't give up until Bethany let her spill whatever news she had about Robin

"She was your best friend."

Was. Past tense.

"Every time I see her, she asks about you. If you like Chicago. How your job is going. If you're happy..."

"Of course I'm happy." The words came out too fast. Almost defensive. Bethany rubbed circles on her throbbing temples and let a drawn-out sigh escort the inescapable question. "What's the matter with Robin?"

A throat cleared loudly behind her. She swiveled around and found her boss, his mouth curved in a frown. She hung up the phone and stood, heat creeping into her ears. Mom's news would have to wait. "Is everything okay?"

"Brainstorming session for First State at ten. Did you forget?"

Her stomach twisted. Mom's cryptic phone call had jarred her out of focus. "No, of course not. I was just on the phone with..." She fingered the blueprints on her drafting board. "Marketing about River Oaks."

Martin grunted, eyeing the mess on her desk.

An uncomfortable laugh bubbled past Bethany's lips. She stepped in front of him and fished a file from one of her desk drawers. "I drew up some ideas last week," she said, motioning toward the hallway. "I'm right behind you."

When she stepped into the conference room, she smoothed the front of her skirt and pushed the phone call from her conscience. Whatever problems Robin faced, she'd have to face them alone. Bethany didn't see how she could help. Robin's troubles didn't concern her. Not anymore.



Her hands shook as she unwrapped a stick of Bubblemint gum and shoved it in her mouth. She crumpled the wrapper and leaned against the hood of her Audi, ruminating over her mother's second phone call. For once Mom hadn't been exaggerating. Bethany exhaled and watched her frozen breath escape like mist into the night sky.

Cold pricked her ears as she tapped her foot against the blacktop of the Walgreens parking lot and traced the outline of the sympathy card tucked inside the small paper bag. "Thinking of You" emblazoned the cover in a large, looping font. Stark white painted the inside. A symbol of what her friendship with Robin had become. What had she been thinking, buying it? What could she possibly write that might take up so much space when there was nothing to say?

She pulled her keys from her purse and climbed into her car. Maybe she would go to Dominic's, and when he came home from work, she could unleash her guilt. Maybe she could purge the thoughts rolling through her head and regain some equilibrium. She started the engine, pulled onto the street, and forced herself to focus on the news analyst discussing the struggling economy on her XM radio.

Thirty minutes later, Bethany walked in the door of Dominic's apartment to lights and the aroma of Chinese takeout. After slipping off her heels, she found him hunched over the dining table in pajama pants and glasses, surrounded by a pile of papers, a half-eaten carton of General Tso's next to one arm and a box of tissue next to the other.

She set her purse on the table by the door. "Are you sick?"

He started to answer but coughed instead. When the fit released him, he plucked a tissue from the box and blew his nose. "No, but Patrick sent me home anyway." Dominic peered at her across the living room. "You're done with work already?"

She glanced at the wall clock. It was half past seven. “I had a productive day.” This, of course, was a lie. But how would Dominic understand her obliterated concentration when she couldn’t explain it to herself?

She shuffled to the dining room, eased into one of the chairs, and reached for the white carton while he slid a thick manila folder from his briefcase and added it to the overflowing pile on the table.

“I wouldn’t eat that.” He stifled two sharp coughs in the crook of his elbow and, without looking up from his papers, jerked his head toward the refrigerator. “I got you lo mein. Chopsticks are on the counter.”

Her stomach rumbled in gratitude. She heated her dinner in the microwave, returned to the dining room, and started eating while Dominic shuffled through the stack of papers in front of him. Around the fifth or sixth bite, Bethany dropped her chopsticks and opened the fortune cookie.

Something you lost will soon turn up.

She rolled up the white slip and huffed.

Dominic ignored her.

“What are you working on?” she asked.

“Contracts.”

“What kind of contracts?” She picked several cookie crumbs off the place mat and folded them in her napkin. When he didn’t answer, she fidgeted in her seat. “Dom?”

“What?” The single syllable snapped across the table.

Bethany raised her eyebrows and pressed her lips together.

He took off his glasses and ran his hand down the stubble on his chin. “C’mon, Bethany, I’m up to my ears.”

So much for unburdening her soul.

She snatched up his carton and pushed away from the table, the legs of her chair scraping against the hardwood floor.

Dominic groaned.

She stalked to the kitchen and dumped all the leftovers. Maybe she

should go home. Sleep in her own bed for once and reconsider the long talk she and Dominic had over Thanksgiving—about moving in together once her lease expired at the end of the year. Why would she move in with him when he treated her like nothing more than a nuisance?

She closed the trash compactor and rinsed off a plate in the sink. If only memories could be as easily erased. If only a little water could wash them down the drain. If only she could send the stupid card and let this Robin thing go. She reached for a towel just as a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist.

She stiffened.

He let go. “C’mon, Bethy, don’t be mad.”

The way he said her name loosened some of the tightness in her chest.

“I’m swamped at work, and I feel horrible. I hate being sick.”

She rolled her eyes. “I thought you weren’t.”

“I don’t want to be.” He took the plate from her and put it in the dishwasher. “You know how it is.”

She bunched the towel in her hand. Maybe now, with his work in another room, he would listen. “You know Robin Price?”

His forehead knotted.

“Robin from Peaks? She sends Christmas cards every year? Birthday and Easter cards too?” Something uncomfortable fidgeted inside her. Why hadn’t she ever responded? Sure, things had changed—Robin had changed—but was it really that hard to send a card?

“You know I’m no good at keeping track of that stuff.”

“She was my best friend growing up. We were practically inseparable.”

He grabbed a tissue from the box on the counter and blew his nose.

“I guess her husband had some sort of aneurism and now he’s in a coma.” She waited for a response, but the glassed-over look in his eyes told her she waited in vain. She crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at him.

“I don’t remember you talking about her.”

“We haven’t been close for a long time.”

He grabbed a wineglass from the counter and nudged her away from the sink. “So why are you so upset?”

“I don’t know.” She picked at the corner of the marbled countertop. “I sort of feel like I should go see her. Maybe take some time off work and go back to Peaks for a few days.”

Dominic’s hands stopped moving beneath the water. “Go back to Peaks?” He turned and looked at her. “I thought you hated Peaks.”

She laughed at the understatement.

“Why don’t you just send her a card or something?”

“I was going to. But all the cards are just . . . I don’t know. None of them were right.”

“So let me get this straight.” He shut off the water and flicked the glass. Droplets sprayed the side of the sink. “You’re going to take an entire week off work, go back to a place you hate, just to spend some time with a woman who’s no longer your friend?” He took the towel and dried his hands. “I’m sorry, Beth. I don’t get it.”

Frustration stirred. She needed him to understand. Because until he understood the magnitude of her childhood friendship with Robin, his attempts to dissuade her from returning to Peaks wouldn’t cut it. And she needed to be dissuaded. “What if you heard Shawn was going through a hard time? Wouldn’t you feel compelled to do a little more than send a card?”

Dominic dipped his chin and looked at her from the tops of his eyes. “Shawn’s my brother.”

“I know. And Robin was like my sister. That’s how close we were.”

“If you were that close, then why don’t you keep in touch?”

“It’s complicated.”

He stared for a moment, his nose as red as Rudolph’s, then lifted his shoulder. “I mean, hey, if it’s something you think you need to do, don’t let me stop you. You can go to Peaks if you want.”

She blinked. Is that what Dominic thought this was about? Getting *permission*?

“So listen, I need to get this work done before I call it a night. You should stay though.” He kissed her cheek and escaped to the dining room.

She stared after him, one hand on the countertop, the other dangling by her side until her ringing phone interrupted the thoughts swirling through her mind. She padded to the front door and reached inside her purse. For the third time in one day her mother’s number lit the screen. Bethany groaned. What more could Mom possibly have to say about Robin?

The screen went black.

She passed her phone from palm to palm, wondering if it would actually be about David this time, until her phone chirped and she dialed voice mail. If it was another ambiguous message, she might pull her hair and scream.

“Bethany, I know we just talked. And I hate to bother you. But I heard something this evening and thought I should tell you.”

The usual stain of worry in Mom’s voice had lifted, as if she’d doused her words in Clorox and scrubbed them clean. Bethany’s heart quieted. This couldn’t be about David.

“Dan was admitted to the hospital the other night. I guess he had a heart attack. He’s apparently doing fine. He’s going home in a couple days, so there’s really nothing to worry about. I just thought you’d want to know.”

Grandpa Dan? When was the last time she’d talked to Grandpa Dan? She rewound time, thinking back several months, when she called to wish him a happy birthday. Hearing his voice always brought back a slew of memories. Feeding the calves, watching him and his cousin Ray pitch hay in the barn, listening while he taught her how to groom, saddle, and ride a horse. Every time she talked to him on the phone, an inexplicable feeling of homesickness would sweep over her—like a cloud passing in front of the sun. Now he was in the hospital, and that same unfamiliar feeling stole

through her body. It didn't make any sense. How could she be homesick for a place she hated?

She plopped onto the leather sofa and rested her elbows on her knees. She had her reasons for avoiding Mom and Robin. She had her reasons for shunning Peaks. But Grandpa Dan? She couldn't shut him out of her life.

Bethany powered her phone off and rested back on the cushions, desperate to leave behind this headache of a day. But as hard as she tried, her brain would not rest. The idea of going to Peaks returned, stronger this time. She couldn't ignore it. Just like she couldn't ignore Robin or her grandfather. For whatever reason, Peaks wanted her back.

Three questions scrolled through her mind like sleep-repellent ticker tape, keeping her awake well past midnight. Should she go back? Could she live with herself if she didn't?

Could she live with herself if she did?

TWO

*P*lowed fields, once rich with hay and corn, lay covered in patches of white, nodding off for a long winter's nap. The beginning of December always brought a sense of lethargy to the countryside. Bethany yawned as the two-lane highway undulated before her, an occasional barn or silo breaking up the monotony in brief but consistent intervals. Whenever she passed one of those solitary structures, with nothing but a pair of leafless oaks to keep it company, a lonesome feeling would nudge up against her. A feeling she had known well as a child.

She shook away the encroaching memories, steered her car through a sharp bend in the road, and spotted a paint-chipped barn where three Shetlands had their heads bent low over a trough. It was the Masons' old farm. And although the horses had changed, the milestone hadn't. She was five minutes from Peaks.

She took a long, slow breath. One week. She could handle one week. Seven days to fulfill her obligations and get back to life in Chicago. Embracing the pep talk, she bent her head toward one shoulder, then the other, a poor attempt to release the stiffness that had accumulated during her three-hour drive into farm country.

Peaks's water tower emerged over the top of an abandoned barn. Her right foot shifted from the gas to the brake as she approached a familiar four-way stop—the one with Jorner's General Store on the corner. The sight

of that old store sitting behind Peaks's unchanged population sign stroked pieces of her soul that had lain dormant over the past ten years. The fatherless, trailer-park Bethany of her past threatened to resurface. She tightened her grip on the steering wheel and pushed that girl back down. That wasn't who she was anymore.

Bethany turned off the main road. Gravel pinged against the belly of her car as Dan's farmhouse peeked from behind a large machine shed. A glance in her rearview mirror showed two unfamiliar Border collies trotting alongside her rear tires. She shifted in her seat. The place was like an unaged photograph. She hadn't laid eyes on it in ten years, yet it looked so much the same. Black shutters against white siding, floral curtains visible through second-story windows, the rocking chair sitting vigil on a wraparound porch. Even the tire swing Dan put up for her and David still hung from a bough of the elm tree out front. While time had its way with everything else, this farm had somehow escaped its snare.

She pulled up next to a black Ford Ranger, which sat in the spot where Dan's rusted-out pickup used to be, and got out of her car. Beside her, a dirty Bronco decked with a bug-splattered grill hummed and hissed as though the owner had turned it off only a moment ago.

Unease settled in her stomach. When she'd called Dan yesterday, he hadn't mentioned anything about visitors. She'd hoped it would be just her and Dan at the farmhouse while she stayed in Peaks. She had no desire to catch up with old acquaintances.

The dogs followed as she rolled her suitcase over the uneven ground. She stepped onto the porch, wiped her hands on her jeans one at a time, and raised her fist. Before she could knock, the door flew open and a man filled the doorway, looking over his shoulder toward something inside.

Bethany's muscles jerked like a giant hiccup. Her hands flew out in case he lunged outside without seeing her.

The man turned his head and took a quick step back.

“Who are you?” They spoke at the same time, the deepness of his voice drowning out the surprise in hers.

He glanced down at her luggage, then back at her. Scruff covered the entirety of his chin and darkness circled beneath his eyes. The man looked like he could use three weeks of solid sleep followed by a long nap, and he still might not escape the exhaustion haunting his face. Blinking away her distraction, she stuck out her hand. “I’m Bethany. Dan’s granddaughter.”

His eyes flickered, then cleared. “So you really exist. How about that.”

She straightened her spine and moved to take back her hand, but he swaddled her palm with a callused grip. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Evan. I run the farm.”

The name sounded familiar. Dan must have mentioned him in one of their conversations, but she couldn’t remember.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame. “Dan talks a lot about you and your brother. But ever since I started working here, I’ve never seen a trace of either of you.”

“David’s in Afghanistan.”

“And you’re in Chicago. Making it big as an architect.”

She leaned back on her heels to put some distance between them. She didn’t like this stranger knowing things about her when she knew nothing about him. She didn’t like his tone either.

“What brings you back to Peaks?” he asked.

“Dan had a heart attack.”

He scratched his chin and studied her, like he wasn’t sure he believed her.

“It’s cold out, you know.”

He swept his hand toward the foyer. “By all means, come on in.”

“Thanks for your permission,” she mumbled, tugging at her suitcase.

“It’s killing him.”

She stopped. “His heart?”

“No.” He reached out to help her, but she didn’t relinquish her hold. She hadn’t asked for his help. Despite her refusal to let go, he moved the suitcase over the threshold with one easy lift. “Resting. He doesn’t like the doctor’s orders. Yesterday I caught him trying to carry the cattle corn buckets, and those things aren’t light.”

“Do the doctors think he’ll make a full recovery?”

“He’s seventy-five. He has high blood pressure and even higher cholesterol.”

“The farm’s kept him active, hasn’t it?”

“The farm’s also fed him meat and potatoes every day of his life since he was a kid. Not so great for a person’s arteries.” Evan must have sensed she was going to jump in and say something, because before she could get the words out, he held up his hands. “Don’t get worried. Dan just has to rest and cut back on the bacon, that’s all. The doctors say he might live twenty more years.”

He also might not. But Bethany swallowed the words.

“And he’s well taken care of here. So if this”—he twirled his hand in the air—“newfound sense of obligation you’re feeling is throwing a kink in your plans, you can go back to Chicago guilt free.”

Her mouth dropped open, but before she could bring shape to her thoughts, Evan stepped out onto the porch and tipped his head. “It’s been a pleasure.”

He gave a sharp whistle. The two Border collies emerged from behind the house and joined him as he walked down the driveway. He didn’t get in either of the vehicles. Instead, he headed toward the paddock, and on his way, thumped the hood of her Audi.

“Nice wheels,” he called over his shoulder.

She didn’t miss the laughter in his voice.



The stairs creaked beneath Bethany's feet. Whenever she crept up that twisted stairwell as a child, she imagined walking to a secret lair, where something magical awaited. She and David would climb the stairs and hide in a cubbyhole in her grandpa's closet. They'd crouch in the corner and decorate the cobwebbed walls with bright, dancing circles from their flashlights. As an adult, she felt that same sense of anticipation. Only this time she knew nothing magical awaited her on the second story.

Just Grandpa Dan.

Her throat closed tight as she tiptoed down the narrow hallway, past the peeling, rose-patterned wallpaper, and peeked through the crack in his doorway. Dan lay in bed, leaning on some pillows, flipping through muted television channels. Silver had crept up his temples and painted his once-brown hair a shiny gray. Weak sunlight outlined his profile, revealing the same prominent nose, the same cleft chin, the same wide forehead she remembered as a kid. It was the sight of his arm that made her suck in a silent breath. Once strong and tanned, it now hung deflated and pale, lax instead of taut.

She rapped her knuckle against the door frame. The sound must have caught his attention because he turned away from the TV. His eyes flickered, cleared, then blinked several times. He gave his head a shake, as if she were nothing more than an apparition. Then his face crinkled into a grin—one that reached all the way up to his hairline.

"Bethany."

It was just her name. Nothing more. But a flood of unspoken emotion rested behind those three syllables. Joy. Love. Relief. Invitation. All the anxiety swirling inside her chest—fears that ten years of neglect would sour their reunion—morphed into the overwhelming urgency to sit next to him, to place her hand over the steady thrumming of his heartbeat. Assurance that he was alive and well. She hurried to his side, took his hand, and inhaled the familiar scent of tobacco and mint.

Home.

He squeezed her hand. "It's really you."

"It's really me," she said.

She admired him for an extended moment, taking in all the things changed and unchanged. Although new wrinkles adorned his pale features, he was still her Grandpa Dan.

"How's Chicago treating you?"

"Wonderful." The automatic response stuck in her throat. Was it really wonderful? She had become an architect to design museums and hotels and skyscrapers. She hadn't become one to make run-down facilities less run-down. She shook away the pessimism. She was only twenty-eight. With more time and hard work, she'd get there. "How are you feeling? Do the doctors—"

Dan waved his hand. "I'm fine. Healthy as a horse. If it weren't for Evan, I'd be out there right now, fixing my tractor."

"Grandpa." She dipped her chin. "You had a heart attack."

He brought the palm of his hand to rest over his chest. "This heart's just fine. God was getting my attention is all. Wanted to remind me not to take things for granted."

"I'm not sure I agree with His method of attention-getting."

Dan chuckled. "So is that why you came back? To check up on me?"

"I wanted to see you. Take care of you for a few days."

"I love you for that, Bethany. I really do. But I don't need taking care of." He patted her hand. "You can stay as long as you like. As a guest, though. Not as my nurse."

"I didn't take a week off work to sit around and be a burden. I can clean. Or keep you company while you're cooped up in this bed." She almost laughed at the concerned lines rippling across his forehead—as if she were the one who had a heart attack instead of him. "Plus, it'll give me an excuse to slow down." And figure out how to approach Robin.

“I won’t argue with you there. But the last thing I need is another person around here mollycoddling me. Evan does enough of it.”

“Well, Evan won’t have to worry about that anymore. He can leave it up to me. It’ll give him more time to spend at home. With his family.”

Dan frowned. “Bethany, this *is* his home.”

“What do you mean?”

“Evan’s lived here for the past five years.”