

An Exploration of the Axiom “Show, Don’t Tell” in Fiction Writing

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*For Mom. You would have loved this.*

### Abstract

This thesis is about one person's journey from the stringent, fact-based world of technical writing to a creative place known as fiction writing. The Artist Statement explores the author's journey into the world of creative writing and choice of genre. The critical paper is a sample of the process the author undertook to learn how to "show" a story. Instructional technical writers provide readers with a set of instructions or steps from information that already exists. Nothing is made up, and any visual provided is accompanied by pictures. The reader doesn't have to imagine anything. Fiction writers must help a reader visualize an entire world filled with characters with distinct personalities, scenery, and dialogue that does more than simply share a conversation. Fiction writers must help a reader imagine. The critical paper explores the importance of showing those ingredients to a reader rather than telling a set of facts. Finally, the beginning of the manuscript, *Finding My Father*, shares this author's attempt at "showing" and not "telling" a story.

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## Artist Statement

I want to write novels that help women grow in their relationship with God and others by creating vividly crafted, realistic stories that readers can step inside of as they join the characters during a moment in time. I want to create real characters who are flawed – as we all are – so that the reader can identify with the story. I want my readers to be able to relate to the characters' struggles as they work them out and maybe find a way through their own struggles as a result. While I hope my stories are entertaining, I want them to be much more than that. This artist statement is my story, the literary context for my writing, and my vision.

## MY WRITING JOURNEY

I often hear authors say that they've been writing stories their whole lives. Not me. I made stories up and acted them out in the privacy of my mind. Everyday occurrences, images, and conversations often sparked something that would become a rather elaborate fictional scene, but I never wrote anything down. Not even in a journal. I was not too fond of creative writing classes or assignments, but I loved stories.

My favorite classes in school always involved writing, those that required essays or papers. I have always preferred to write a research paper on a subject I didn't particularly care for rather than take a test for a subject I excelled in. My electives never involved the sciences, technology, or numbers; instead, I chose classes that required me to read and write. My favorite pastime has always been reading. I devour books, and it is not uncommon for me to read or listen to over one hundred books yearly. I prefer to read the news rather than watch a news program. If

I'm curious about something, I go to the Internet and begin to read. I can spend hours in libraries and bookstores or perusing Kindle or Audible for my next great read (or listen).

My entire professional career has involved writing. Whether newsletters, curriculum design, or technical writing, I have spent most of my professional life writing something. If a job didn't include writing in obvious ways, I found a way to incorporate a writing responsibility to continue doing what I loved. However, I didn't write creatively and never put any of the stories in my head on paper. I was intimidated. I didn't believe I had the ability or the time to write books as good as my favorite authors or even the mediocre ones. Occasionally, I would mention that I'd love to write a novel, but that confession always followed a question such as, "*If you could have any career you wanted, what would it be?*" Writing a novel was a dream I never expected because I didn't believe I was talented enough to make it come true.

Award-winning author Jody Hedlund recently wrote a blog titled, *How Important Is Talent in Reaching Writing Success?* She notes that it takes more than talent to become a *New York Times* best-selling author and shares how she wasn't published until her fifth novel was accepted. That post was encouraging because I know I have some talent, but enough to make a bestseller list? Not so sure about that. Hedlund's post gave me the courage to try and fail and then try again, knowing that one failure doesn't mean I'll never succeed. Sharing my stories is intimidating. The characters, settings, and circumstances didn't exist until I created them. To hear someone say a story isn't good enough can feel like hearing them say that I'm not good enough. So, to know that even successful authors face rejection means that maybe the rest of us have a chance.

Even though I've only begun working on a novel in the last couple of years, my creative writing journey has been long. My best friend called and asked me to write a book for her then

twelve-year-old daughter about ten years ago. Rebecca loved to read, but they struggled to find appropriate reading material as she got older. The Young Adult fiction category was gaining momentum, but it seemed like all the books centered around vampires and teenage sex. Could I write a clean novel that Rebecca would enjoy? I worked with teenagers, so I was familiar with their world. I tried it but quickly realized that if I ever did write a novel, it wouldn't be YA. I can't state an exact reason, but I knew it wasn't the genre for me.

I tinkered around with story ideas for years but never wrote more than a chapter. I couldn't seem to get past an initial thought and threw the story in the trash after writing one or two chapters. About three years ago, I came up with the idea pulled from real-life events several years prior and thinking through "what if" scenarios. In 2005, I was living in Billings, Montana. At the encouragement of a friend, I ventured into online dating. I hated it, but while my profile was active, a guy reached out to me from Butte, Montana, where he worked as a nurse at the only hospital in the small town. A few weeks after I stopped corresponding with him, my parents were in a terrible car accident near Butte, and my dad spent several weeks in the hospital there. A friend repeatedly tried to get me to reach out to the guy from the dating site, but I never did. I wondered over the years what might have happened if I had. My current novel's original basis was exploring that "What if?" At last, I had a plot that went beyond Chapter One; this idea also had a middle and end.

Even though I had a good idea, I didn't know how to develop it into a novel. My technical writing and curriculum design background is different from creative writing. Even some of the grammar rules are different. Technical writing and curriculum design are fact-based; the writer does not create the information she is writing about. I needed to learn how to write creatively if my idea was ever to become a novel; I needed to go back to school. I enrolled in the

Professional Writing graduate program at Liberty University but quickly became frustrated. Some of the classes were for types of writing I already knew, such as technical, and the others weren't what I was looking for. But I kept going because I was still learning about writing and knew it could help me in the career I was already in. I'd completed almost half my credits when Liberty announced the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program. Even though it would add another year to my schooling, I couldn't switch my major fast enough.

The Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing has significantly impacted my writing life. My classes, textbooks, conversations with professors and classmates, and research into the fiction-writing world have helped me learn techniques, expanded my creativity, and helped me develop processes for writing. Because I am a learner at heart, I enjoy being taught. I believe that learning makes me better. I would not know the things I now know about fiction writing if I had tried to learn them on my own. This degree has provided the structure that I need to learn. I've learned that it takes more than just a good idea. Your story must be interesting at every point, and, in my chosen genre, it has to be believable. The original plot involved two people coming together under tragic circumstances whose only previous interaction had been through an online dating profile. One character would rely heavily on the other. This wasn't believable because there was no foundation for such an instant and deep connection between the two. I've learned the importance of showing the relationships among fictional characters so that they seem real. My story is quite different from my original vision because of the techniques I've learned and the feedback I've received, but it's better.

## MY WRITING PROCESS

I don't like to use outlines mainly because I dislike writing them. Story direction changes throughout the writing process, so they feel like a waste of time, even though they can be revised

repeatedly. But I wrote an outline for my current novel because it was an assignment. I've had to continuously update that outline as the story shows me where it wants to go, and I get to know the characters. Yet I've learned that even a high-level outline can be helpful. Writing down several plot points helps create a vision for the story. That outline can guide me, but it doesn't have to dictate what I write each day. Outlines can be fluid; not every plot point has to be written down beforehand.

There are two styles of crafting stories: pantsers and plotters. The pantsers just writes whatever comes that day, without outlines, letting the characters determine where the story will go. The plotters outline the entire story before writing anything. Once the writer begins, the writing is more or less filling in the blanks. I lean toward a pantsers writing style; however, I see the value in being a plotter, so I've tried to combine elements from both methods. I create a brief outline, but I do listen to my characters. As they develop throughout the story, they often change the direction I originally had in mind (MasterClass Staff).

In his book, *Plot & Structure*, James Scott Bell writes that if you want to keep readers reading, "it will help enormously if you think about two principles all the time: (1) stretching the tension and (2) raising the stakes" (85). With this in mind, I've developed a four-part process that is helping me craft my story:

1. Create a high-level outline and character grid.
2. Write whatever comes into my head without worrying about structure, grammar, or whether or not it's good.
3. Re-write, focusing on whether or not the story has tension throughout and asking myself two questions:
  - a. am I telling or showing, and

b. can I raise the stakes?

This process is helping me to improve my story as I work through the steps repeatedly throughout the writing process. Update the plot. Write down new things that I learn about my characters. Sit at my computer and write, getting the story out as it develops inside my head. Re-write for better tension, ensuring that I'm showing my story to the reader instead of telling it and that the stakes are high enough to keep the reader turning the page.

Creating that tension and high stakes ensures that the characters have the proper motivation for their actions. Master editor Sol Stein considers the lack of motivation for actions “the worst mistake a writer can make” (*Stein On Writing* 54). So, as I'm working through my four-step process, I'm constantly thinking about motivation. I've stopped reading books because I wondered why the characters did something that made no sense. My original draft held no motivation for my characters' actions. I had to give them reasons for the state of their relationship and their actions. Instead of being two people whose only interaction was a brief exchange from an online dating profile, they have a history as close high school friends.

I also read as part of my writing process. Mary Oliver says, “to write well it is entirely necessary to read widely and deeply” (*A Poetry Handbook* 11). If writing is learned by imitation (*Zinser, On Writing Well* 34), then any good writer should spend much time reading. Reading gives one a greater sense of the world than one could gain on one's own. There is no way I could experience everything in person that I can read about in a book. But it also teaches a writer how to write. Ecclesiastes 1:9 tells us that there is nothing new under the sun (*The Bible, New American Standard Version*), so no writer develops a plot and characters that are purely “new.” Even though a writer forms an idea, someone has written a similar story before; same house, different décor. So, if I want to be a successful writer, it makes sense that I must also be an avid

reader. The same way an interior designer studies the work of designers she hopes to emulate, I must do the same.

Not only do I read books from the genre I want to write for, but I also read authors from other genres. Many successful chefs travel the world exploring various types of cuisine and cooking methods, then come home and open a restaurant that centers around a cuisine they already knew. Learning about other cultures, foods, and cooking styles improves that chef. The same is true for writers. Reading only in my chosen genre will give me a narrow view of writing, but exploring multiple genres and how those stories are written will make me a better writer overall. When I read, I'm hoping to enjoy a good book, but I'm also reading to study how the author writes. I want to learn how authors show a story rather than tell it, how they create three-dimensional characters and scenes on a one-dimensional page, and when and why they begin to tell rather than show.

## LITERARY ANALYSIS

My favorite genre is Christian Fiction in the Contemporary category. *Goodreads* defines a Christian novel as “any novel that expounds and illustrates a Christian worldview in its plot, characters, or both.” The popular website uses the term “Christian” as an adjective to describe “anything associated with Christianity” (Goodreads). Books do not have to be specifically Biblical, such as a fictional story about a Biblical character by authors such as Mesu Andrews and Angela Hunt. It is difficult to fully define the genre of Christian fiction because it is as diverse as the term “Christian,” which our culture uses to describe anyone who believes in God or anything associated with God or the Bible. Publishers may consider books with direct Biblical themes as Christian, but that can mean a protestant, Catholic, Mormon, or even alternative religious point of view. Some consider *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant a “Christian” book

(Nelson 2), but evangelicals would disagree because the book distorts the Bible and takes Scripture out of context.

In the publishing world, Christian fiction includes mainstream fiction categories Sci-Fi, Romance, Suspense, Historical, Contemporary, etc., as sub-genres, meaning each genre is written with Christian themes (e.g., Christian Historical Fiction, Christian Contemporary Fiction). In each of these categories, the narrowest definition is that Christian Fiction should “advance Christian doctrine and reflect Christian values and worldview” (Simmons and Anglin). Since the term “Christian” might imply anything to do with church or God rather than its true meaning of “Christ-like,” there are a lot of novels tagged as Christian that I would not categorize as such. I prefer the narrow definition shared by Simmons. Not only will I not include sex or profanity, but at least one or more characters in the story will have a dynamic relationship with Jesus that comes through in the storyline. Former Loyola Press Executive Editor Kent Wilson said, “people want story and analogy as a way of understanding the world, and fiction is the perfect vehicle” (Nelson 11). I wholeheartedly agree. My characters will struggle with things like sexual temptation, curbing their tongues, volatile relationships, and other themes that are not Christian-like because no one lives in a bubble. We also struggle somewhere, but someone who has an abiding relationship with Jesus will eventually ask Him to show the way out. Those are the kind of stories I write; stories that have hope and show the reader that she doesn’t have to be stuck in the place she’s in.

## MY VISION

Christian fiction teaches me much about myself, God, and my relationship with Him. I’ve taught Bible studies at church for years and always used stories to illustrate a point. I want to do that through novels, just as many of my favorite authors have done for me. I want to write stories

that my readers can picture themselves (realistically) in the midst of. I want my readers to feel like I wrote the story just for them because there is something that occurs – circumstances, emotions, dialogue – that makes them feel heard and understood even though we are not having a direct conversation.

I love reading stories where I feel like I know the characters by the end of the book. I want my books to transport the reader into the characters' lives, sit in a room with them as they drink their morning coffee, eavesdrop on quiet conversations, and laugh and cry with them. But most of all, I want my readers to hear God speaking to them through each story. My novel strives to do that as the main character, Jane Taylor, learns what it means to rely on God as her father. She will grapple with figuring out who she is after everything that gave her identity falls away. She will realize that her most important identity, her true identity, is as a child of God.

The working title of my story was *Being Loved*. It addresses the age-old question, *Who am I?* Early in the story, Jane loses everything she believes identifies who and what she is within weeks: successful career woman, daughter, and sister. While writing this thesis, I changed the title to *Finding My Father* because it better captures the gist of the plot. Jane will find unconditional love and identity in God, the Father.

One of Jane's most significant losses is tragically learning that her biological father was not the man she'd grown up calling "dad." She has no way of knowing who her birth father was. The man she thought was her father, Ed and now deceased, treated her horribly. She'll wonder if her "real" father would have been better and wrestle with the revelation that she is fatherless. Growing up, Ed treated Jane's little sister, Grace, much better, making Jane's hurt even greater. The sisters, now barely speaking, will discover the lengths Ed went to drive the girls apart due to an indiscretion neither daughter had anything to do with. A painful history between the sisters

results from Ed's scheming and resentment of Jane and their mother, leaving Grace caught in the middle. By the end of the story, Jane will reconcile her painful past and find contentment in her relationship with God. Her love interest, Sean' (a close childhood friend), and his mom, Angela, help Jane come to grips with her past. But Grace will continue to struggle, setting up the sequel that will focus on her story, *Finding a Friend*, and learning to see Jesus as our best friend. Life is hard. Following Jesus is hard. Relationships, especially those with the people we love most, are. But what often makes them so tricky is misunderstandings, lack of the "whole story" as in the relationship between Jane and Grace, and ill-conceived perceptions and expectations of others. This story explores that messiness.

I explained my story to someone the other day, and she told me she couldn't wait to read my novel when it's finished because she could relate to the plot. She told me that she has a similar situation with her mother, who has been hostile toward my friend her whole life but loving toward her brother for reasons only the mother knows. My friend confessed that maybe Jane's story could help her. I thought, *God, I want my stories to help people like my friend, even if only to help them feel like they're not alone.* I want my stories to meet my readers wherever they're at and help them move closer to or toward the God who loves them as no one else can. If a picture is worth a thousand words, why can't a story be worth two? If a story is vividly shown to the reader, she can learn how to reconcile the difficulty of her own life, turn to God, and find hope when all seems hopeless because she has just watched those things play out in a vividly crafted story.

Jane's story is just the beginning. I envision this book being the first in a four-book series, where a different character first introduced in Jane's story will wrestle with issues that impact their relationship with God and those around them. As previously stated, the second book

will focus on Grace, Jane's younger sister, and her struggle to develop meaningful relationships with others. The following two books focus on Sean's younger siblings, Micah and Paige.

I believe that stories are a great way to learn. Jesus, the original storyteller, taught in stories throughout the Gospels. We know much about God's character, redemption, and His expectations for us as Christians through these stories, or parables as they're called. Those of us who grew up in church learned about God through the stories of the Old Testament. Children learn vocabulary and how to read in part by listening to stories. I've heard that reading to a child as young as infancy can help develop intelligence and better vocabulary. Reading can be a source of education or pleasure, sometimes in combination. Regardless of a story's subject matter, or even if we don't like a particular book, every story provides something to be learned.

I want to show real characters with real struggles. I want them to ask hard questions that don't always have perfect answers. I want them to find strength and peace and security in their relationship with God, His Word, and relationships with friends that love them enough to tell the brutal truth when necessary. I want to create stories where everything isn't wrapped up in a pretty package because everything works out perfectly in the end, but where each story ends with hope. I don't want my stories to be an escape from reality for my readers; I want my readers to learn that God is with them, whether their existence is perfectly packaged or it better reflects tattered wrapping paper after it's been torn away.

My story comes from things God has shown me and those close to me. I have a fantastic family, great friends, and a loving community. We are not perfect. We struggle and argue, laugh, and love. We all have times when we feel like we're drowning. But we've also learned that God is always good.

If I could pick one overarching truth I want to convey in all of my stories, it is that “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (*The Bible*, Rom. 8:28). God cares for his children often in ways that we don’t understand. Even when we don’t see it, he protects and provides for us when we walk with him. If I can help others discover that God loves them, cares for them, hears them, and knows them, I will have done what He has called me to do through stories. I have concluded that – for me – writing stories is a calling. God has gifted me with several types of writing and allowed me to spend years making money doing something I love. But all that time, stories have been stirring inside me. I think he’s been calling me to write fiction since my early twenties. I’ve finally found the courage to try.

## An Exploration of the Axiom “Show, Don’t Tell” in Fiction Writing

In any class on writing fiction, one will hear about the importance of “showing” versus “telling.” It is crucial to writing a good story because it keeps the reader turning pages. But this concept is not always easy to grasp. Pages in a book are one-dimensional objects covered with words. It can be challenging to learn how to write words that become visions in the reader’s mind, words that enable her to picture herself in the story. If an author shows too much, a book might become so long that readers won’t even begin the story. An author who tells too much will bore her reader. A good author knows how much to show, when telling helps, and how to balance the two. This paper explores the showing and telling axiom in plot, scene, and character. It also looks at how reading can help writers develop this craft.

### AN EXPLANATION OF SHOWING AND TELLING

Part of what makes showing and telling so difficult for new writers to grasp is that its definition is not clear-cut. Whenever a concept involves a degree of subjectivity, there is room for interpretation regarding how and when it’s applied. So it is with showing and telling in fiction. Once an author understands the axiom, it can seem obvious, but this is not always true for a novice author. What one person says is showing another might define as telling and vice versa.

Showing and telling can be subjective because it can “take a particular type of imagining on the reader’s part to lie at the heart of the telling vs. showing distinction.” When reading fiction, “the object of the reader’s imagination can be something that is perceptually accessible, or it can be something that is not perceptually inaccessible” (Klauk and Klöppe). Any reader must have a context from which to create that “visual” world within her mind, no matter how descriptive a writer may be. For example, one might read a book set in a small seaside town in

Maine, where lobster fishing is the career of choice, and dinner is the catch of the day. If the reader has never been outside her small desert hometown where the only fresh meat comes from rattlesnakes and any job is hard to come by, she can imagine the story based on the author's words, but her imagination can only take her so far (Percy, 12). Still, this is no excuse for the writer. It should be the goal of any good writer to help her reader's imagination go further by crafting a story so rich that it's almost as if the reader was looking at a photograph of a place she'd never been. Readers don't want to read fiction they cannot "see."

Editor Sol Stein says that telling a story instead of showing it is one of the main reasons novels get rejected (*Stein on Writing* 123). This means that authors must understand the difference between the two and how to use each if they hope to get published and be successful. Even if an author has a great plot idea, readers won't stay engaged if they can't "see" the story. Knowing how to write is not enough. Successful authors show the reader what was in their head as they put the story on the page; the reader gets to "see" the author's vision.

Feedback in a fiction class or workshop telling a writer she needs to show more only tells her she's not writing correctly. If the author isn't given examples or explanations of what wasn't shown or how to show, she will struggle to fix her errors. A study of screenwriting can help clarify showing versus telling. In screenwriting, the author must only write what can be shown on the screen. So, if the art of showing means that the reader should be able to visualize the story as if watching it play out like a movie, then the fiction writer must also figure out how to incorporate this concept into writing a novel. How does an author go from telling the reader that a character was tired to showing the reader that she was tired through the character's actions? A movie doesn't tell the audience that a character is tired; instead, it shows the action (i.e., the character drops into a chair and closes her eyes). Similarly, the movie script wouldn't say *Jane is*

*tired*; it would include a description such as *Jane's eyelids drift closed and her fork falls to the floor.*

Since writers need to learn this axiom, writing exercises can also serve as a way to learn how to show and make a story better for writers trying to grasp this axiom. Stein gives an “evolution from telling to showing” (126) that can serve as a guided exercise for any fiction author. An author can tell, show, or show vividly by reworking a sentence. Stein presents several examples of the same sentence as he moves an idea from showing to telling:

**He took a walk** tells.

**He walked four blocks** begins to show.

**He walked the four blocks slowly** shows more clearly.

**He walked the four blocks as if it were the last mile** shows more by giving the reader a sense of the character's feelings, which the previous version did not.

**He walked as if against an unseen wind, hoping someone would stop him** shows most of all because it gives the reader a sense of what the character desperately wants. (126)

When an author shows well, the story translates easily into imagery in the reader's mind. When a writer does not show a story, the reader is left with nothing more than words on a page.

Jerry Jenkins says he hears from writers worldwide who want to know the difference between showing and telling and why showing is so important. He acknowledges that understanding it can be one of the most frustrating parts of the writing process. Still, writers must grasp this concept because whether or not a writer shows can make or break an agent or acquisitions editor noticing their work. Jenkins explains the axiom as giving readers a role in the experience by allowing them to deduce things for themselves rather than spoon-feeding them. Writing that “Jim was tall” leaves nothing for the reader to deduce; there is no room for active participation on the part of the reader. Writing that Jim's girlfriend had to crane her neck to look up at him or that he had to bend his knees to fit into a group picture makes readers active

participants in the story by allowing them to deduce that Jim was tall. He advises not to draw attention to the writing itself or you as a writer. “Get out of the way of your content” and allow readers to join the story (*Show Don't Tell*).

## SHOWING AND TELLING IN PLOT

James Scott Bell has written several books on the craft of writing. He states that the axiom of “show, don't tell” is “ironclad for fiction writers” but one of the most misunderstood by beginning writers (*Just Write* 8). In *Plot & Structure*, Bell says that a good plot needs an intensity factor to keep readers turning pages, but the scenes you want to be the most intense should also be the most vivid (124-125).

A good example of showing vividly is John Grisham's novel *The Broker*. Grisham diverts from the courtroom drama his readers have come to expect. In this book, the protagonist Joel Backman was a D.C. lobbying superstar known for brokering the most important deals. Now he's withering away in federal prison after being convicted when a deal goes terribly wrong. So when the outgoing President suddenly pardons him, everyone wants to know why, including Joel Backman. The CIA whisks Backman to Italy, where he is to assume a new identity and never revisit his old life. The CIA submerges Backman into the Italian language and culture so that he can successfully “hide” until they follow through on their plan to release Backman's new identity and whereabouts and see which country kills him, thus gaining intelligence about that deal that landed Joel in prison.

*Goodreads* reviews on *The Broker* are mixed, but several readers agree that it seemed more like an Italian lesson than a Grisham novel. Throughout the story, the reader is repeatedly subjected to Backman's Italian lessons. It would seem that Grisham does a great deal of telling in

this story. There is no action even though many of Backman's lessons take place while exploring the streets, cafes, and sights of Italy. The story feels mundane at times, the lessons unnecessary. But readers finish the story, and this is the brilliance of Grisham because he shows the reader exactly how Backman feels about the lessons. This story also shows that the axiom is subjective. Readers are critical because it's not typical Grisham, and they don't understand why they're subjected to Italian lessons, but it is a brilliant example of showing, not telling.

This style of plotting doesn't always work, however. Author Dee Henderson wrote the hugely successful *O'Malley Series* in the 1990s. Those books are arguably her best to date, but her later stuff is hit or miss. One example of a miss is her novella, *Betrayed*, in which Henderson spends the first forty-five pages doing nothing but telling. *Betrayed* is a story about a former detective that discovers a female convict might be innocent of the crime for which she was imprisoned. Henderson attempts a style similar to Grisham's *The Broker* by trying to let the reader experience the story as the protagonist does. Whereas Grisham was successful, Henderson was not.

Anne Falcon, a former detective, purchases a small mystery box of items at an auction for seventeen dollars. When she rummages through the box at home, she discovers a pink pocket knife inscribed with the name Janelle Roberts. Her curious quest to find the owner leads to discovering a woman whom Anne believes has been wrongly imprisoned for murder. During those first pages, Anne poses various theories of what might have happened and who the actual killer might be to her husband, Paul. There is no action, no imagery, no emotion. Anne does nothing but describes possible scenarios with the occasional interruption from Paul as he poses a question. The reader is subjected to the shop talk of two law enforcement officers as they drink coffee and look at a crime from every possible angle.

Perhaps Henderson used this approach to portray Anne as a hero who followed her instincts and came to Janelle's rescue, finding the truth everyone else missed. But in reality, Henderson wrote a very dull story. It's too bad because the plot idea is interesting; however, the one-dimensional writing leaves readers with uninteresting characters and flat scenes.

Later in the story, Janelle is pardoned, and Anne flies her in a private plane to spend time on an island with Anne's dear friend Greg, who just happens to be a psychologist who houses and counsels individuals who have been involved in some type of trauma. Greg spends twenty-four pages telling Janelle about the island, amenities, and schedules. These pages are descriptive rather than visual and serve no point in the plot. Janelle is told about the DVD collection, kitchen utensils, sunscreen, lighting, and Greg's 24/7 availability without any "showing" involved. The section reads like a lengthy brochure that a hotel guest would merely skim. Just as it seems like this section of telling is about to end, Greg asks for three hours of Janelle's time so that he can go through all of the ins and outs of life on the island. At the end of another ten telling pages, the reader feels like she's just given up three literal hours of her own time for a bunch of useless information that serves no purpose in the plot. Here is an excerpt of details from *Betrayed* that neither Janelle nor the reader needs:

The only dogs permitted on the island are owned by residents. There are twenty-three total with a yearly fee of two hundred dollars each – an amount decided by those who don't own a dog. The dogs can be off-leash and are allowed on the beaches so long as they're with somebody. Your dog gets a bad reputation, you get a talking-to by the mayor and have to keep your dog on a leash. So public peer pressure keeps all our dogs and their owners law-abiding. (87)

Bell says that telling is lazy (*Plot & Structure* 90), which is how Henderson's writing comes across. So much unnecessary information feels like Henderson was just trying to hit a specific word count without developing the plot.

*Betrayed* is a novella in the three-book collection, *The Cost of Betrayal*. A random sampling of reviews on *Goodreads* reveals that many readers were disappointed in Henderson's contribution. Out of 30 sampled reviews, 23 said they disliked Henderson's story or liked it the least. Reasons ranged from "she told the entire story" to "it read like a police procedural instead of a novel." There is a reason that police dramas on television solve crimes in a matter of hours. The actual investigation and hours spent reviewing every piece of information and scenario are boring. The book is hard to read. About halfway through, Henderson began to show for a few pages, and the story starts to feel like the storytelling that Henderson is known for. Then she goes right back to telling. By the novella's end, the reader hasn't read a story; she's read 150 pages of narration. "What readers want from writing is to experience it. Receiving information from the author doesn't give us an experience." (Stein 127). This is true of Henderson's novella; there is no experience. What could have been a strong plot with intriguing characters was something to be endured.

#### "SHOWING" IN CHARACTER

When you know someone well, you know their personality, mannerisms, facial expressions, and how they might react in a given situation. You know their emotional makeup, their likes, and dislikes. "Showing" in character is about more than physical descriptions. It helps the reader visualize that person's body language, thought process, and emotions. Showing character allows the reader experiences the character's senses – sight, smell, taste, and touch (e.g., Grand Valley State University). Remember that the reader must be invited to do much

more than read words on a page. The writer must create a picture in which the reader can experience the nuances of each character. As readers, we feel great satisfaction when we grasp what is shown (Zwicky 899). Readers are looking for an experience with people whom they feel like they know. Readers will not know the characters if a writer doesn't show "character."

Christy Award-winning author Becky Wade does a great job of developing the characters of three sisters in her *Bradford Sisters* series. The series begins with the book, *True to You*, about the middle sister, Nora Bradford. Even though the first book is Nora's story, readers meet her older sister Willow and younger sister Britt. Wade wastes no time letting readers get to know the distinctive personalities of each:

[Nora] could still remember the moment that had crystallized her role in her family in her mind. She'd been thirteen and sandwiched between her sisters, sharing the same bathroom mirror as they prepared to leave for a stage production of *The Lion King*. She'd peeked to one side and watched fifteen-year-old Willow lean forward to apply mascara. In the light from the wall-mounted bathroom fixture, Willow's face looked breathtakingly lovely. She had almond-shaped eyes and amazing cheekbones. Perfect bone structure, really. Willow was the beautiful one.

Nora peeked to the other side and watched Britt brush her thick, long hair. At the age of nine, Britt had already been recognized by her parents as a creative genius. For months, she'd been churning out dessert masterpieces that seemed better suited to magazine covers than to their family's table. Britt was the talented one.

Nora then turned her attention to her own reflection. Mouse-brown hair, because she hadn't started dyeing it red until midway through college. Ordinary face and body. Braces.

Okay, she thought pragmatically. The reality of her sisters hadn't snuck up on her, after all. She'd been living with the truth of their extraordinary qualities all her life. But in that one moment, the truth demanded a decision from her.

*Your sisters will always be prettier and more naturally talented than you are. How are you going to respond, Nora?* She firmed her lips and lifted her chin. *I'm the smart one. That's how.* (38-40)

Wade makes each sister unique. Not only does she distinguish the sisters by their style of dress, but she also gives each one different mannerisms, tastes, and styles of speech. The reader meets three very different women whose lives are lovingly intertwined. *Publisher's Weekly* declared that "Wade successfully develops each character... with particularly distinct personalities and voice" (Review). Wade doesn't tell the reader about the sisters' differences; she shows them. Of course, each sister has a different career, but Wade gives the reader a view into why each sister chose that particular career. She shows readers their differences of opinions through conversation and group text messages between the sisters. Wade even shows the differences between the sisters through the décor they choose to decorate their homes with.

On the other hand, Irene Hannon has written an eight-book *Hope Harbor* series set in a fictional seaside town in Oregon. Each of these sweet stories focuses on a man and woman and a challenge they face that could hinder their blossoming romance. The main characters' names, careers, and obstacles are different in each book. The rest of the story is the same. Every

character uses the same clichés over and over again. Every story involves near-identical conversations between the main characters and wise taco truck owner and the same word-for-word bantering between two town clerics. When reading each book as they were released approximately a year apart, a reader might not notice how striking the similarities are. But if the books are read one after the other, one can't help but miss them. The books are so similar that it's as if Hannon created a fill-in-the-blank template that she used to write each one. Hannon writes the same characters over and over again.

#### “SHOWING” IN SCENE

Stein says that one way to know if a scene is showing is whether or not it's visual (126). Reading certainly involves imagination on the reader's part, even when a writer is showing. The reader still has to imagine the fictional world portrayed in the book. But a good writer can imagine for the reader by creating a scene so vibrant that the reader “sees” a world she knows nothing about. Take *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis or *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* by J.R.R. Tolkien. These authors wrote about an unknown world that no reader had ever experienced. There was no foundation from which one could imagine (Klauk and Klöppe). Yet these stories are loved by generations because the authors showed us what those worlds looked like instead of telling us about them. Looking at these examples, one might reason that writing is different in contemporary or even historical fiction, where the reader is likelier to have some point of reference. But the reader has never seen the particulars of any story – that particular town, street, person. Even if a reader is familiar with the particulars of a story (e.g., the town), she hasn't seen it in the way the author is writing about it. Writing well enables the reader to see the scene.

Showing isn't just about the words on a page; instead, it involves the reader by engaging the reader's senses. Setting a scene involves more than just time and place. What does the scene sound like? What are the smells? How does it feel? In *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, Lewis engages all of the reader's senses in a few short paragraphs:

Slowly, and with several rests, he reached the ridge. Here he had expected to have a view into the heart of the island, but the clouds had now come lower and nearer and a sea of fog was rolling out to meet him. He sat down and looked back. He was now so high that the bay looked small beneath him and miles of sea were visible. Then the fog from the mountains closed in all round him, thick but not cold, and he lay down and turned this way and that to find the most comfortable position to enjoy himself.

But he didn't enjoy himself, or not for very long. He began, almost for the first time in his life, to feel lonely. And then he began to worry about the time. There was not the slightest sound. Suddenly it occurred to him that he might have been lying there for hours. Perhaps they were gone! Perhaps they had let him wander away on purpose simply in order to leave him behind! He leaped up in a panic and began the descent.

(82-83)

Lewis could have written, "He climbed the ridge to see the island, but the building fog blocked his view. Tired, he laid down. After a while, he started to feel lonely. Then he wondered if everyone else had left, so he hurried back down." The two versions give the reader the same information. But Lewis's version does so much more. Not only does the reader know the climb was long and arduous, but she can also feel Eustace's exhaustion as he reaches the top. The reader can see the fog-obstructed view and feel the dampness on her skin. He was perhaps in awe of what he could see, even though he didn't get the view of the island he'd sought. Maybe he

was able to see farther than he'd ever seen before. Perhaps he laughed a bit at the way everything below appeared so tiny. The reader is given the opportunity to experience these things too. The balmy air made him aware of his exhaustion when the fog closed in and surrounded him. He laid down, but it took a moment to find a comfortable position. And for a moment, he was peaceful, and the reader can feel the quiet so intensely that she wants to lay down too. Then the peace is broken, first by a feeling of loneliness, then by escalating feelings of fear, until he panics and hurries back down the mountain, and a time comes to the reader's mind when she felt the same way. The reader experiences Eustace's exhaustion. Perhaps she closes her eyes as she imagines the tiny town below. Her body feels the momentary discomfort as Eustace struggles for comfort, and she shifts in her own chair. The reader feels Eustace's relief as he finds just the right spot, and she stops moving too. Then her own chest tightens as Eustace is overcome with loneliness, and she reaches out to tell him not to panic but realizes he isn't real.

Another way to grasp "showing" in scene is through screenwriting. Showing is about the concrete and conceptual imagery the writer brings to life through the written word. In screenwriting, the writer only writes what can be shown on the screen. Details that are not visual are left out of the script, but the setting becomes apparent when the script is visualized on the screen. This same technique can be applied to fiction writing. If the reader can't "see" what the author writes, then the author is telling and not showing because "the right details arrest our attention; they make an impression" (Zwicky 1).

Showing is essential because it creates images in a reader's mind as if the writer is "projecting images onto the reader's mental movie screen." A good writer is specific, illustrative, and taps the senses. The writer can't just mention that a scene occurs in a dormitory room with a desk, a closet, and a bed. The room must be illustrated to enable the reader to enter the room and

have a seat. The writer can't just say a woman is sick. That's too general. The reader wants to know how sick. What are her symptoms? How is the illness impacting her at that moment?

(Vanderbilt University).

#### WHEN TELLING IS NECESSARY

If all a writer needs to know is how to show, then why isn't the axiom "a good writer always shows?" In addition to stating that too much telling is lazy, Bell says to do nothing but telling would make a book way too long (*Just Write* 90) and exhaust the reader, especially if there is no break after an intense scene (*Plot & Structure* 124-127). Jerry Jenkins says that "show don't tell" is a good rule and should be followed "almost always." An example of when telling (narrative summary) works better than showing is when a character needs to get to another location, such as from Pittsburgh to San Diego. Nothing happens on the way; it's just a journey from one place to another. Absolutists of the show don't tell rule would force the writer to spend several pages on every detail of getting from point A to B. Boring. In narrative summary, a writer can tell the reader that the character spent the day traveling from his home in Pittsburgh to San Diego for a meeting. Then because that's where crucial stuff happens for the plot, the writer shows what happened in San Diego. When that scene ends, the writer can revert to telling for the trip home to Pittsburgh (Jenkins).

Another acceptable use of telling is when an author needs to move a story along. International best-selling author Francine Rivers has written novels considered classics in Christian fiction. Rivers' latest book, *The Lady's Mine*, does not disappoint. The reader can feel cobwebs swept away in the tunnels of an abandoned mine and hear the music as it belts from saloon windows at all hours of the night and cheer for the good guys and loathe the bad guys.

In *The Lady's Mine*, Rivers uses telling to show the passage of time. Bell says that a story should always be in motion (58), and Rivers demonstrates this by employing telling to move the story forward in several places. One example is when a fire rages through the town. Rivers describes the fire through several paragraphs. Had Rivers shown what she told, this part of the book could have been 20 pages or more. She wraps up the scene by using a combination of telling, yet it's still descriptive enough that the reader can imagine as

the fire swept up the mountainside toward the Keewetoss Mine. Because trees had been cut down and used for shoring up the underground tunnels, enough underbrush and smaller trees had been cleared so that the fire died down. Men formed a line and threw shovels of dirt, making a firebreak between the office building and the cabins on Amos Stearns, Wyn Reese, and several others. When the first shifted again, the cabins were spared. The fire raged through the brush, coming against a rocky incline. Finally, it died down, leaving a blackened landscape behind.

Miraculously, no one in Calvada died. People started asking how the fire got started.

There hadn't been any lightning storms. Some thought it had started in Slag Hollow.

Barrera's Fandango Hall, Fiona Hawthorne's Dollhouse, and Walker's General Store survived, along with two saloons and most of the big houses on Riverview, including Morgan Sanders's house, which was quickly turned into a shelter for the dispossessed.

Though Matthias and Kathryn were offered the master suite, an honor felt due the mayor, she refused to go inside. (410)

Rivers summarizes (another word for telling) how the fire ended, how the town was impacted, and what the townsfolk did next. But because she is such a skilled writer, she was

able to show as she's telling. We can picture the mountainside as the fire climbed to the top and what it looked like when the flames died out. We know what's left standing and what's not, and we applaud Kathryn for not entering the makeshift shelter because we know what happened before this scene. Rivers provides the reader with essential information without creating such a long book that many readers would never finish.

*The Broker* also provides an excellent example of when telling is necessary. In one scene, Backman is in the middle of an Italian lesson with his tutor, Francesca. They are walking through the city of Bologna and come upon Le Due Torri, two towers of significant historical importance in Italy. Francesca begins telling Marco about the towers. It is a history lesson not only for Marco but also for the reader. Marco and Francesca start a long climb to the top of one of the towers. It's interesting, but the reader didn't buy a non-fiction book on the history and language of Italy; she bought a novel. Just when the telling was becoming dull, Grisham switched to show us that:

He paced himself and soon she was out of sight. About halfway up, he stopped at a large window so the wind could cool his face. He caught his breath, then took off again, even slower now. A few minutes later, he stopped again, his heart pounding away, his lungs working overtime, his mind wondering if he could make it. After 498 steps he finally emerged from the boxlike attic and stepped onto the top of the tower. Francesca was smoking a cigarette, gazing upon her beautiful city, no sign of sweat anywhere on her face.

The view from the top was panoramic. The red tile roofs of the city were covered with two inches of snow. The pale green dome of San Bartolomeo was directly under them, refusing any accumulation. "On a clear day, you can see the Adriatic Sea to the east,

and the Alps to the north,” she said, still in English. “It’s just beautiful, even in the snow. (177-178)

Now the reader can appreciate the telling that preceded the showing. Learning about the towers before this scene makes this one realistic, enabling the reader to visualize the scene even if she’s never been to this part of Italy. Even though she may not have real-life experience in which to imagine the setting, she knows what a tower looks like; she can picture the “boxlike attic.” She knows what it feels like to climb stairs. Not only can she feel Backman’s struggle, but she knows that either he is very out of shape or Francesca is quite fit. She knows what a view looks like from a high vantage point, so that she can picture this view from the top of 498 steps. So, she can forgive Grisham for telling a history lesson because he made it worthwhile by bringing her into the scene. The telling was necessary to show the rest.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF READING

Writers should be readers, but there are many reasons why fiction authors do or do not read, especially while crafting their own stories. Author Carla Laureano says that she’s a sponge and has to be careful so that she doesn’t take on the voice of other authors when writing her own stories. She still reads, but when writing a novel, she reads books entirely different from her contemporary Christian fiction genre (*Francine and Friends*). Writers may not read because life gets in the way. Writing takes time, so there may be no time left to read between home and work responsibilities. For writers who are also students, school interferes with reading. There is so much required reading in any discipline that often, there is no time left for reading for pleasure. The student may become so weary of required reading that reading for enjoyment ceases to be enjoyable.

The premise of the book *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them* by Francine Prose is the importance of reading as a writer. Prose states that in doing this, she began looking at style, diction, sentence formation and how information was conveyed, how plots were structured, character creation, and the use of detail and dialogue. Prose says that she reads “closely, word for word, sentence by sentence” as she tries to decipher each writer’s decision (3-4). Just as any artist learns her craft by studying the masters, so should writers study other writers. It’s about more than just learning how to devise a plot or create a good character; studying writing helps writers learn sentence structure, word choice, and “constant clues about the look of sentences” because even sentence length can impact how a reader views a story (Kittle 36).

Stephen King believes that writing can be learned but not taught and that writers learn to write through self-teaching as they explore the craft, eventually developing their style. He says “the best writers are voracious readers,” and you learn to write well by “copying the style of writers that really knock you out” (*Outstanding Screen Plays*). This is good advice for writers at any stage of their career, but especially for new authors looking to understand how to “show” and not “tell” or when to do one or the other. A great deal can be learned about showing and telling from studying the novels of authors that one seeks to emulate (without copying). Re-reading favorite books through an analytical lens sheds a whole new light on the story. When reading a book to understand why or what made it a good read, you begin to pick up on how the author tells the story. How does the author draw you in? What scenes or dialogue stood out to you and why? When learning how to show, paying attention to the images the story invokes in your mind is helpful. Are you seeing the character’s story, picturing expressions and emotions

depicted through dialogue, envisioning the setting in detail, or are you just garnering facts that tell you about the plot?

Francine Rivers says she once heard that writers should read the garbage out there analytically to learn what not to do and the good stuff as a way to hone their craft (*Francine and Friends*). Jeff Anderson, writing teacher and author of *10 Things Every Writer Should Know*, describes writers as “writing scientists” who must “observe and dissect” different models – authors, genres – and then experiment with the writing. He suggests that writers not just read a story but experiment with it and rewrite sentences, settings, and plots in their own words (699). Don’t just seek out other authors for advice or instruction; learn from them by studying their work (706).

## CONCLUSION

Showing vs. telling is about knowing when to use both. A book that does too much telling is dull; a book that does too much showing is exhausting. Even a novice writer can study a best-seller and think there is too much telling in one scene and too much showing in another because there is a certain amount of subjectivity. Reviews of any published novel reveal that some liked it and others did not. That said, a good writer must be able to show much more than she tells – and even as she tells - because readers want to immerse themselves in the story. They want to feel like they know the characters personally and can identify with someone in the story. They want to feel like the scenes are familiar places they know well. They want to be disappointed when the book is done rather than feeling like it will never end, or worse, it was so bad they didn’t finish at all. This is accomplished when a writer has written well enough to engage the reader through her imagination, senses, and emotions. She wants to “see” the story she reads.

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**Finding My Father**

by

Tina Matras

## Prologue

*July 1998, Billings, Montana*

Seventeen-year-old Jane Taylor shoved the last box into the backseat of the 1987 Ford Bronco she'd purchased yesterday. She'd been so proud when she pulled up to the curb and parked beneath the giant oak tree in front of her house. The car was in decent condition, with just a few dings and scratches and a quarter-sized mustard stain on the back seat. It was owned by an elderly couple that just used it to drive their grandkids to and from school and go to the grocery store and church. With only 50,000 miles on the odometer, she prayed it would last her through undergrad at least.

Her father, Ed, had been manicuring the shrubs that created a border around the yard in front of their house. He'd stopped trimming and stared at the Bronco for a full thirty seconds before asking Jane why she was parking that "hunk of junk" in front of *his* house. Jane reminded him that she would be leaving for college in the morning, and the Bronco would be gone.

Jane was headed to the University of Washington on an academic scholarship that would cover seventy-five percent of her tuition and room and board. She'd secured a position in the dean's office for the School of Communications that would cover the rest, but she needed to leave a month early to begin working.

When she'd proudly announced the achievement and her plans to her family, her mother, Marie, nodded her head, and Jane chose to assume that meant approval since Marie rarely voiced her opinion. Her little sister Grace cried. Her father commented that, of course, Jane wasn't smart enough to get into an Ivy League school. He'd gone to Princeton; he reminded her for the umpteenth time. Then he asked Jane who she'd slept with to get such a generous scholarship.

Jane's head jerked back, and her hand flew to her cheek as if her father had physically slapped her. She'd never do something like that, nor did she need to. She'd worked hard in school and graduated with a GPA of 3.9. Her father threw out a couple of rude comments until a barely audible "Daddy" escaped her Grace's lips. Her sister sat at the table, her big, brown watery eyes wide as they darted back and forth between Ed, Marie, and Jane. Finally, Jane had excused herself, gone into her bedroom, and cried.

She'd asked God repeatedly why her father hated her so much, but the answer never came. She must have done something because he behaved the complete opposite with Grace. He wasn't a kind man by any means, but he never yelled at Grace, never ridiculed her, the way he did Jane or their mother. But he was the harshest with Jane. She was glad his venom never spilled over to Grace, but in some ways, that made it hurt even more when he did so with Jane. But that night's insult had been the worst he'd ever thrown.

Snapping herself out of the unpleasant memories, Jane closed the back door of the Bronco just as Grace threw herself against Jane. Jane turned around and rested her hands on Grace's shoulders.

"Do you really have to leave today?"

"I do. I have to get to the school because I start my new job in two days." The position allowed her early entry into the dorm, and Jane wanted to have time to shop and buy things she would need for the coming year. She was only taking her clothes, pillow, Bible, and a few pictures – none of which contained her parents – to school.

Jane's one regret in going so far from Billings would be leaving her sister Grace. Grace was ten years younger than Jane. Now seven, she followed Jane everywhere she could. Just that morning, Jane had opened her eyes to find Grace curled up beside her.

Jane practically raised Grace. Their mother seemed to have missed out on the maternal gene completely. She spent most of her time tucked away in her office, where she ran a successful rare book business. But Jane had to leave. She couldn't take her father's ridicule and meanness any longer. If their father only wanted to love one of his daughters, Jane was glad he'd chosen Grace. He'd never treat Grace the way he treated her.

"Janie, don't go." Grace wrapped her arms around Jane's waist and squeezed as tight as possible, almost as if her hold would keep Jane there. "Please, please, pleeeease."

"It will be okay, Gracie." She bent down and kissed the top of Grace's head. "Do you want to come with me while I say goodbye to Lucy?" Grace nodded her head vigorously.

Lucy Glenn and Jane had been best friends since the summer between fourth and fifth grade when Lucy and her family had moved in next door. Jane took Grace's hand, and they started across the yard.

"Grace, come inside." Jane's shoulders immediately tightened at the authoritative sound of their father's voice. He stood just inside the open garage door, hands on hips, watching her and Grace.

Grace turned. "Janie said I could go with her to Lucy's." Her voice sounded small. Jane fought the urge to argue but knew it wouldn't do any good.

"I want you inside. Now."

Jane squeezed Grace's shoulder. There was no reason for him to call Grace inside. He was doing it to spite Jane but was hurting Grace.

Jane leaned down and whispered in Grace's ear. "I'll come and see you before I leave."

"Promise?" Grace looked up at Jane with a sheen of moisture in her eyes.

Jane hugged her little sister. "I promise." She held out her pinky, and Grace immediately hooked her little finger around Jane's. It was a favorite ritual that solidified their promises to each other.

"I love you, Janie."

"I love you, Gracie."

Jane let go, and Grace turned and walked to the garage, her head hung low. As soon as Grace was in reach, their dad picked her up and walked deeper into the garage, effectively removing Jane from Grace's view.

Jane knocked on the front door of Lucy's house. Her mother answered. "Hi, Mrs. Glenn."

Mrs. Glenn stretched out her arms and pulled Jane into a hug. If it weren't for Lucy's mom, Jane wouldn't know the comfort and security of a mother's hug.

Mrs. Kim pulled back from Jane but kept her hands on Jane's shoulders. "We're going to miss you around here."

"I'm going to miss being here." Mrs. Glenn knew that Jane meant she would miss being at the Glenn home, not that she would miss Billings.

“Lucy is in the backyard with Chase and Sean.” Chase was Lucy’s boyfriend, and Sean was his cousin. Sean lived in Missoula, but he always came to visit for several weeks each summer. He’d arrived yesterday, but Jane had been busy packing and hadn’t seen him. The foursome had spent a lot of time in this backyard. She considered Sean one of her closest friends next to Lucy.

The gang sat on the back deck. Lucy jumped up when Jane walked through the sliding glass door off the kitchen.

“Please tell me you’ve changed your mind, and you’re not leaving.” Lucy looked at Jane with her trademark pout. Lucy could pull off a very convincing pout with her long straight black hair, petite figure, and wide almost black eyes. That look often got her whatever she wanted, but not today. Jane had definitely not changed her mind.

“Ready to leave?” Chase moved to stand next to Lucy, but Sean remained seated on one of the deck chairs. He made no move to acknowledge her, which wasn’t like him at all. Usually, the first time he saw her each visit, he lifted her several inches off the ground in a tight hug. When Jane gave Sean a curious look, he turned his face away. Jane turned back to Lucy, but not before noticing the death glare that Chase gave Sean. Something was up, but she had no idea what.

“Yeah, I have to get going if I want to get to Spokane by sunset.” Jane decided not to try and drive the whole way to Seattle in one day. That decision had allowed her a little bit more time with Grace this morning. Plus, she’d never driven so far on her own.

Lucy pulled Jane into a hug. “I’m going to miss you so much.” Lucy was staying home and getting a job. She had no interest in college. Chase and Sean were both going into the Army. Their little foursome was breaking up.

“I’ll miss you too, but we can talk on the phone, and I’ll come back.” Jane grimaced. “Once in a while.”

Lucy laughed as she pulled away from Jane. “When? Once every six years? You can’t wait to get away from here.”

“True. But that doesn’t mean I want to be away from you. Or Grace.”

“You’re going to love Seattle. I’ll come visit the first chance I get.”

“I sure hope so.”

Chase reached for Jane and pulled her into a hug. “You be good, okay?”

Jane hugged him back. “I will if you will.”

“You know it.”

As Chase released Jane for the hug, she stood awkwardly on the deck for a few minutes waiting for Sean to come and say goodbye. He still didn’t move. Jane glanced at her watch. She couldn’t wait any longer if she were going to get a few more minutes with Grace. Finally, she took a step toward him.

“Bye, Sean.” His only acknowledgment was a nod.

*That's it?* Jane turned back to Lucy, the hurt at Sean's brush-off written all over her face. Jane gave a questioning look toward Lucy and Chase. Lucy just shrugged, and Chase looked the other way. *What was going on?*

"I'd better get going."

Lucy took Jane's hand. "I'll walk you to the gate." Jane turned her head to look at Sean one more time, hoping he would at least say something to her. She didn't realize how close they were to the two steps that would take them off the deck, and down she went. Lucy and Chase joined Jane's laughter. As Chase came forward to help Jane stand up, Lucy asked if she was okay. Jane nodded but couldn't find words as she watched Sean get up and walk into the house. He usually was the one to rescue her from her clumsiness. He'd often told her he loved how she could laugh at herself instead of getting angry. But today, he was acting like a stranger.

Lucy unhooked the latch of the backyard gate and pulled it open. She turned back toward Jane as tears pooled in their eyes.

"Don't start, or you'll make me cry, and I don't want to cry today." Jane rubbed her eyes.

They hugged one last time, and then Jane walked back to her house.

"Love you," Lucy called.

"Love you back."

Jane walked through her home's front door and called for Grace. There was no answer. She went to Grace's room, expecting to see Grace curled up on her bed hugging her favorite purple teddy bear, but Grace wasn't there. She wasn't in Jane's room either.

Jane knocked on the door of her mother's office. She'd already told Marie goodbye, but maybe she knew where Grace was. Jane quietly opened the door. Her mother sat at her desk cataloging books. As Jane suspected, Marie hadn't even heard Jane's knock.

Jane walked over to the desk and positioned herself so Marie could see her. "Do you know where Grace is?"

Marie looked up. "I haven't seen her today." Jane had to fight the urge to roll her eyes. At 11:00 am, Marie should have seen her youngest child at least once. But she answered the question as if she were talking about a co-worker instead of her daughter.

Marie seemed to realize that Jane wasn't supposed to be there. "I thought you left."

"I'm getting ready to. I just wanted to say goodbye to Grace."

Marie didn't respond.

"Okay, well, I guess I'll be going."

"Drive safe."

"Bye, Mom."

"Mhmm."

Jane closed her mom's door and then went to check the backyard. Empty. She went to the garage and noticed her father's truck was gone. And Jane realized what he'd done. He'd called Grace back so that he could take her while Jane was at Lucy's. Jane knew he'd keep Grace out long enough so that Jane wouldn't have any choice but to get on the road. She had a reservation at a hotel in Spokane tonight and was supposed to check in with her supervisor on campus tomorrow afternoon. She couldn't wait. She should have known he'd do something like this.

Hands on hips, Jane stood next to the oil spot that belonged to Ed's truck and closed her eyes.

Thank God she'd told Gracie she loved her.

*Chapter One*

*March 2018, Seattle, Washington*

Jane struggled to open her eyes as her body and mind swung back and forth in that space between dreaming and waking. She didn't want to leave the dream world that allowed her to escape from the reality that had become her existence. But the incessant ringing of her cell phone pushed the dream world away until she could no longer reach it, and she was forced back to reality. She yanked a pillow from behind her head and smashed it against her face, shoving the sides down over her ears. Nope. She could still hear the ringing.

Propping herself up on a stack of king-sized pillows, she reached for the lamp on her bedside table and turned it on. Squinting at the sudden assault of light, she fumbled for her phone. Of course, it fell off the table. She leaned over and managed to grab the phone but fell off the bed, landing right beside the phone. She silently scolded herself before checking the caller ID. Addison James. Her boss. No one else would call her at 5:37 am on a Sunday morning. The screen showed she'd already missed two calls. Addison just kept calling until Jane answered.

"Hello." Jane's attempt to keep the grogginess from her voice failed.

"I'm on my way to the office. Meet me there in thirty minutes." There was no greeting. No question as to whether or not Jane was awake or available. Addison did not partake in small talk and never asked when she wanted something. She commanded. She never said goodbye. She just hung up when she decided the conversation was over, as indicated by the sudden dial tone echoing in Jane's ear.

Sighing, Jane tossed back the covers and shivered. She walked to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the bedroom of her 17<sup>th</sup>-floor condo that overlooked Seattle's Elliot Bay and

coughed. Trees struggled to remain upright as the wind howled and raindrops pelted the glass. Jane had a love-hate relationship with Seattle's weather. One of her favorite things to do was sit in her condo and watch the rain. The stormier, the better. But walking to and from work was another matter entirely and something she refused to give up – most days – because she had no time to go to the gym. Plus, she had killer calves to show for it. And then were mornings like this one when she woke up feeling sick. The sinus pressure and coughing often broke later in the day, but she was often left with a migraine. Although she was sure if those were the result of the weather or working for Addison.

Jane rubbed her eyes as she shuffled to the bathroom, turned on the shower, and cranked up the hot water. Twenty minutes later, her hair and makeup were perfect, and she was dressed in a black Vera Wang pantsuit and Reebok walking shoes. She tucked a pair of red Jimmy Choo slingbacks into her red Kate Spade bag. Another one of Addison's commands: anyone who worked for her would present an impeccable appearance, inside and outside the office. As the most in-demand and highest-paid consultant at *James Public Relations*, Addison's expectations for Jane were even higher, and the fact that it was Sunday did not matter when it came to appearances.

Jane went to the kitchen and found some cold medicine in the cupboard. She grabbed a water bottle from the fridge and quickly swallowed two pills. She tossed the remainder of the water bottle and the medicine box into her bag, picked up her keys and cell from the kitchen counter, and headed out the door. She made a quick stop at *Just Beans*, the small coffee kiosk in the lobby of her building. She thanked God that it opened at 6:00 am because she would need her Venti triple-shot mocha today. She smiled at the barista as he placed the hot cup in her hand and

nodded her thanks. Then she stepped onto the sidewalk, opened her umbrella, and began the four-block, mostly uphill trek to her office.

~

“It’s about time.”

Jane looked at her watch as she entered Addison’s office and sat in one of the sleek metal and white leather chairs facing Addison’s desk. It had been 51 minutes since Addison had woken her up. Jane considered her arrival fast for a day that was not supposed to include work. Technically anyway.

“Good morning to you too, Addison.”

“I’m not in the mood for an attitude.” Addison gave Jane her best disapproving look. But Jane knew Addison needed her, and Addison knew Jane knew Addison needed her. So she ignored the warning behind the look.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this early morning chat?”

“What’s wrong with your eyes? They’re watery.”

“I think I’m coming down with something.”

Addison waved her hand, signaling that she could not care less. This made Jane wonder why Addison had asked in the first place.

“I want to talk about the senator’s re-election campaign. This latest issue with Christopher is going to be a challenge.”

Senator Garland Harding III was a career politician and a Washington celebrity. He was the Senate Minority Leader during his sixth term in office. Christopher was his twenty-two-year-old, Abercrombie-loving son and a playboy if ever there was one. His latest scandal involved a high school cheerleader, numerous bottles of alcohol, and a pricey hotel room.

Addison swiveled her chair and pulled several sheets of paper from the printer on a credenza behind her desk. For reasons Jane would never understand, Addison insisted on printing hard copies of every news article she could find about whatever story she was trying to spin. She handed the stack to Jane.

“We need to dig into this cheerleader. The best angle is to sink her and make Christopher the victim.” Addison began pecking away at her keyboard, her way of declaring the matter settled. Jane had been dismissed, but she made no move to stand.

Jane glanced at the articles. One showed a picture of a pretty petite blond wearing a cheerleading outfit from one of the area’s most exclusive high schools. She had one hand on her hip and the other sporting a pompom high in the air. A wide smile lit up her pretty face. Jane picked up the picture and studied it. Addison was talking about ruining this girl’s life. This sixteen-year-old girl, according to the article. The story would get buried for Christopher, but it would never go away for this girl.

Addison stared at Jane over the screen of her open laptop. She gave a look that sent interns running for cover, but Jane had become immune to Addison’s intimidation long ago.

“What are you waiting for? The Senator needs this to disappear.” Addison made a shooing motion toward the door. When Jane remained seated, Addison rolled her eyes.

“See if there is any scandal with anyone else that we can use to distract from the Senator’s story, but I still want you going after the girl.”

“I’m not in favor of ruining the life of a sixteen-year-old who hasn’t even graduated from high school for a low life like Christopher Harding.”

Addison stood and crossed her arms. She peered down at Jane. Jane rose and put herself on equal footing with the boss she no longer admired. Addison leaned forward, placing her palms flat on her desk, and spoke quietly.

“I don’t care what you’re in favor of. This is my firm. You will do what I am in favor of.”

Jane turned and walked out of Addison’s office without saying another word. Let Addison think she’d won.

Jane walked into her own office and slumped on the leather sofa that sat in one corner. She tossed the article with the cheerleader picture aside and then exchanged her walking shoes for the heels. Then she rubbed her temples in an attempt to mitigate the migraine that insisted on making an unwelcome appearance.

When Addison first brought Jane into the company as a twenty-year-old college intern, Jane couldn’t believe her good fortune. Addison James was public relations royalty. Jane became a sponge, absorbing every word spoken by Ms. James, as Jane had called her back then. When Ms. James offered Jane a full-time job upon graduation, Jane was ecstatic and celebrated by pulling out her credit card and purchasing her first designer outfit, a black sleeveless, knee-length Marc Jacobs dress, similar to the one Ms. James had worn that very day.

Somewhere along the line, Ms. James had become Addison, and Jane had become Addison's right hand, even turning over some of the firm's most well-known clients solely to Jane's care.

As Jane rested her head on the back of the sofa, she realized that she'd become more like Addison than she'd realized. Addison lived and breathed her firm. She did nothing that didn't somehow relate to the firm or boost her professional image. Even her gym was chosen because of the people who exercised in the see-and-be-seen workout environment. Conversations weren't about friendship; they were about building relationships so those people would turn to her in their time of need. And every single one would eventually need Addison. And so had Jane become too. She no longer had friends; she had business acquaintances. She'd stopped attending church because she was too often pulled away for work. It had become embarrassing to leave so often in the middle of a service or Bible Study. Addison had no time for things like church, so neither did Jane. Eventually, she'd stopped reading her Bible and praying altogether.

Jane was very good at her job. Addison knew Jane was good, and she knew that Jane knew it too. And Jane knew that made Addison crazy. Over the last couple of years, clients had begun to request Jane specifically, including Senator Harding. Addison hated that the Senator preferred working with Jane. Addison's early morning invasion of Jane's sleep was her attempt to keep control over Senator Harding's business with her firm and remind Jane who was in charge.

Jane picked up the article and studied the picture of Olivia Messinger, also known as "the cheerleader." She knew Addison would never use the girl's name. Personalizing her would not be in their best interest. But Jane felt a migraine coming on as she contemplated what Addison was pushing her to do. Christopher Harding did not deserve to be let off the hook. He was a

miserable human being, living off his daddy's name and money. Over the last two years, most of Jane's time had been spent getting Christopher out of trouble.

Jane sat down at her desk and swallowed two aspirin while waiting for her laptop to fire up. Then she leaned back in the chair and massaged her temples as she tried to work up the motivation to do her job.

Three hours later, Jane hadn't made much progress. She'd spent most of that time pondering her life choices. She would be thirty-eight in two weeks. She had a very successful career with an annual income in the mid-six figure range, thanks to a silent partnership in the firm and a savvy financial planner. Another firm tried to poach Jane three years ago, and Addison had offered the silent partnership to get her to stay. Jane's decision to accept had been great professionally and financially, but maybe not personally.

Jane stretched her shoulders. Realizing her coffee cup was empty, she started making her way to the office espresso machine. She stepped out of her office and saw Senator Harding walking toward her.

"Jane, good to see you."

Senator Harding held out his hand, and Jane extended hers. Senator Harding sandwiched her hand between both of his as he offered his warmest smile, politician written all over him.

"Hello, Senator Harding. Please come in." She extended her free hand toward her office since he hadn't yet let go of the other. Jane took a seat at her desk as Senator Harding unbuttoned his suit coat and sat in one of the pale green club chairs in front of Jane's desk.

Jane sat and waited. She always let the client begin the conversation, even when she knew what they would say. She wanted them to feel in control – that she was simply doing what they asked of her and that every word they said was of the utmost importance. Only about ten percent of it actually was, and she was the one in control.

“I have some information that will help you deal with the situation my son has found himself in.” Senator Harding reached into the inner pocket of his suit coat and pulled out several folded sheets of paper.

“No one knows I’m providing you with this information. I gathered all of it myself.”

The senator smiled, clearly proud that he managed to do something on his own rather than having his chief of staff or one of the many aides that skittered around his office gather it for him. But Jane knew that the secrecy meant she wouldn’t like whatever those papers showed, and she highly doubted he really did find it himself. That statement was meant to endear Jane to him since her expected reaction would be to practically swoon over the fact he’d chosen to share this news with only her.

Jane reached across her desk. “May I take a look?” Her voice conveyed controlled curiosity.

“I expect this information will remain between you and me.”

“Of course, Senator Harding.” Jane dipped her head slightly, signaling her submission to his request.

Senator Harding placed the papers in Jane’s hand as if he was handing her the key to the Oval Office. She leaned back in her chair as she unfolded the papers and looked them over—five

pieces of paper. The first two showed more than two million dollars had been “donated” to the elite private high school Olivia Messinger attended. All donations were made by a non-profit with ties to Olivia’s grandfather. The third was a copy of Olivia’s transcripts from the public high school she attended as a freshman. The failing grades in three subjects should have kept her from the private institution she now attended. The fourth paper was a printed picture of Olivia, with a football player on either side of her. The trio appeared happy. One of the players had his arm around her waist, and the other was kissing her neck. She had her arms around both players. The fifth paper was a picture of a man and woman kissing. Jane looked up at the senator with a questioning look.

“Olivia’s father, Brock Messinger, and Vivian O’Connor.” Senator Harding paused for dramatic effect and smiled. “Olivia’s chemistry teacher.” He’d just revealed what he considered the bullseye, the thing he believed would be most helpful in getting his son out of his latest mess.

Jane took a moment to look at the papers again, now spread across her desk. Jane played coy, assuming nothing about the senator’s intentions. At least not to his face.

“And what would you like me to do with this information?” She looked up at Senator Harding and waited for his response. He laid his hand on his heart and gave her a practiced look that combined sincerity and sympathy.

“Look, I’m not asking you to destroy this girl.” Senator Harding stood and walked to the window and continued. “That’s why I brought you the information about the family. Use that to put out a story that will pull attention away from Christopher. You don’t even have to mention this cheerleader.”

“Her name is Olivia.”

“Whatever.” Addison dismissively waved her hand. “Just take care of this, Jane.” Senator Harding moved away from the window and leaned on the back of one of the club chairs. He lowered his voice, “I can’t have this distraction during a campaign.” Ahh... Jane realized her suspicions had been correct. Senator Harding was going to run for governor.

Jane studied Senator Harding for a moment. Addison would have used this information to destroy the family, and Olivia and Senator Harding knew it. Jane believed that was why he always asked for her specifically. He thought he was being honorable by not going directly after Olivia, but Jane knew that wasn’t possible. There was no way Olivia would come out of this unscathed. Either Senator Harding was fooling himself, or he was just as ruthless as Addison, which was probably true. He was just better at hiding it.

“I’ll look over this information and devise a course of action.” Jane gave the senator her warmest smile.

Senator Harding walked toward the door. Putting his hand on the frame, he turned toward Jane. “I’ll expect to hear from you no later than 7:00 am tomorrow.”

Senator Harding left. Jane had more information than she’d had ten minutes ago, but she was not closer to a plan. She gathered the papers into a neat stack, clipped them together, and then woke up her laptop. Addison stomped in and took a seat before she could begin typing notes of their conversation.

“Did I just see Senator Harding leaving? Why didn’t you let me know he was here?” Even Addison’s questions sounded like commands.

Jane started typing without looking up. She knew it was a power play, but she’d learned from the best. She could play games too.

“He didn’t ask for you.”

Addison leaned over the desk and pushed Jane’s laptop closed. Jane sighed. Score one for Addison.

“Anytime there is such a high-profile client in this office, I am part of the conversation. Period.”

“Addison, we’ve been over this. Senator Harding has asked to work directly with me. We will call you in if we need your expertise.”

Addison used a perfectly manicured hand to smooth the hair across her hairline as she worked to control her temper. The silky blond strands remained in the perfectly coiffed French knot that Addison had styled today. Jane couldn’t remember ever seeing one single strand of hair out of place on Addison.

“See that you do.”

*Yes, ma’am.* Jane sat silently and waited out Addison.

“So, what’s the plan?”

“Still working it out. Senator Harding and I will talk first thing tomorrow morning.”

Addison stood and walked out of the office. Addison’s abrupt exit meant she knew that there was nothing she could do to take control of this story. Senator Harding didn’t like Addison. He did like Jane. Plain and simple. But the fact of the matter was, Jane couldn’t care less. Addison could take over as far as she was concerned. But that’s not what “The Senator” wanted.

Jane unplugged her laptop and placed it in her bag, along with the papers that Senator Harding had left with her. The antique clock on her desk told her it was just past noon. No

wonder she was hungry. She was going to grab takeout, go home, put on yoga pants, and then try and figure out what to do about Christopher and Olivia before tomorrow morning.

~

Jane opened her eyes and looked around as disorientation cleared. She'd fallen asleep in the corner of her sofa. She often worked from this spot on weekends. The plush grey cushions helped relax some of the tension in her body. She liked to stretch out her legs, put several pillows behind her back and under her knees, and rest her laptop on a tray across her mid-section. That's the position she found herself in now. She picked up the phone lying next to her and looked at that time. It was 7:00 pm. That meant she'd only been asleep for about 30 minutes since she'd read Addison's ninth text of the afternoon asking for an update. She finally replied that she would have something for Senator Harding in the morning. *Like he and I discussed and I relayed to you.* Then Jane switched her ringer off, something that she never, never did. Her evasiveness would infuriate Addison, but she was in that kind of mood.

Jane's stomach growled, reminding her that all she'd eaten today was a pint of takeout chicken noodle soup. Setting aside her laptop, she got up and headed to the kitchen. She opened her fridge and pulled out a container holding last night's leftovers. She spooned the Pad Thai onto a plate, placed it in the microwave to warm, then pulled a glass off one of the open shelves and held it under the water dispenser on the front of the fridge. She swallowed another allergy pill with a long drink. The microwave dinged, and Jane took the plate and set it on the breakfast bar. She inhaled a whiff of the spicy scent before retrieving her laptop from the sofa and placing it beside her plate. She ate two bites and started working again.

Jane planned to focus on the grandparent's generosity to the school and somehow connect Olivia to that, never mentioning her academic record, Olivia's father, or Christopher. Spin the story in only a positive light by making Olivia someone the public would rally behind, making them forget about Christopher Harding. Sort of change the entire focus. She wasn't sure if it would work, but she had to try. Her personal goal was to help Olivia, not Christopher. She was tired of helping Christopher. She made a note to see if the grandparents might offer the teacher photographed with Olivia's father a financial sum if she quietly resigned from the school after signing an iron-clad non-disclosure agreement. Jane took another bite of the spicy noodles. Her plan just might work, and she might actually get a decent night's sleep.

An hour later, she'd finished eating, cleaned up the kitchen, and finished writing out a formal plan to present to Senator Harding in the morning. She made a cup of chamomile tea and sat on one of the two chairs facing the floor-to-ceiling windows in her living room. She propped her feet on an ottoman as she took a sip and looked out at the nighttime lights of Seattle's downtown area. This was her happy place. Maybe if she sat her for a while, the relaxing scene of boats lit up on the bay and the Ferris wheel making its slow rotation would settle her mind, and she'd be able to fall asleep.

## Chapter Two

It didn't work. After a night of tossing and turning with a bit of dozing mixed in, Jane finally untangled herself from the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. It was a few minutes before 4:00 am. She decided to give up on sleep and try waking herself up instead. She needed coffee.

Jane felt like someone had put her head in the spin cycle of a washing machine with her thoughts flung haphazardly about, and the drum rotated. Addison, Senator Harding, Christopher, Olivia, her family, and her life choices tumbled around. Jane massaged her temples as she waited for the strong coffee to brew. She didn't feel the sinus pressure that had plagued her yesterday. This was just a good old-fashioned stress headache. And if she didn't get that caffeine quickly, it would become a migraine. As soon as the last drop fell into the mug, she grabbed it and took a swallow. Wincing as the hot liquid hit her tongue, she grabbed cream from the fridge and added a generous amount. She didn't have the patience to wait for it to cool today.

Mug in hand, Jane shuffled her way to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror. She didn't look much different physically than when she left Billings almost twenty years ago. Yes, there were strands of gray hair sprinkled throughout her dark locks, but that was easily concealed. And faint lines were beginning to form at the corner of her eyes but could also be easily fixed. But she was a different person inside. And those changes were the ones that bothered her most.

Sighing, she turned on the shower and gulped down the rest of the coffee while waiting for the water to warm. Time for another day of a life she was beginning to think she no longer wanted.

Forty-five minutes later, Jane straightened her dress, added earrings and lipstick, ran a brush through her hair one more time, put on socks and tennis shoes, stuffed a pair of four-inch heels into her bag, added her laptop, swung the bag, and her purse over her shoulder, walked out of her condo, locked the door, stopped at the coffee kiosk on the ground floor of her building and bought a triple shot extra-large latte, then walked the six blocks – mostly uphill – to her office.

She had followed the same routine almost every morning since she'd bought this condo ten years ago.

~

Jane wasn't surprised to find Addison at the office even though it was barely six. She rarely made it there first. Jane wondered why Addison didn't just turn one of the offices into a personal suite and give up her house. Save the mortgage expense. But then that would mean giving up the prestigious address that Addison liked to throw around at cocktail parties. Or the fact that she employed a car service to chauffeur her back and forth from home to office every day even though she lived closer than Jane.

Jane sat down at her desk, opened her laptop, and waited. Five, four, three, two, one. Addison appeared in the doorway, right on queue.

“Well, let's have it.”

“Let's have what?”

“Don't get smart with me, Jane.” Addison crossed her arms. “What is your proposal for the Senator?” Jane stared at Addison as she pondered why Addison never referred to Senator Harding by name. It was always *The Senator*.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Addison uncrossed her arms and took a few steps forward to exert authority. “Show me your plan.”

Jane leaned back in her chair, making sure she appeared casual and unfazed by Addison’s posturing. This was her client. Her plan. In reality, she was trying to keep her head steady against the back of her chair. The caffeine hadn’t helped.

“My plan will address all parties involved in the situation while providing the best outcome for everyone.”

“Everyone,” Addison said with air quotes, “is not your concern. Your concern – your only concern – is Christopher Harding.”

“I disagree.” Jane looked at her watch and scooted closer to her desk. She’d promised Senator Harding that she would contact him before 7:00 am. Reaching for the phone, she said, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to call Senator Harding.”

Addison’s head jerked back as if Jane had physically slapped her, but she quickly recovered from the stunned look that crossed her face. Jane had never dismissed her boss so abruptly.

Jane wiggled the phone in her hand to indicate that she was waiting for Addison to leave. Addison silently took a seat in one of the chairs in front of Jane’s desk, refusing to let Jane win what had become a catfight between the two women.

Jane let out an exaggerated sigh. Fine. But this wasn’t over. She’d had about all she could take of Addison James, her career, just about everything.

Senator Harding answered before the first ring was complete. “Good morning, Jane. I hope you have a good plan prepared.” His voice boomed over the phone. Jane had not placed the phone on speaker, but she was sure Addison could still hear most of what he said.

“Good morning, Senator Harding. I have a plan that will address all parties involved. Would you like me to go through it now? Or I could meet you somewhere and discuss it in person.”

Jane said that last sentence more like a statement than a question, hoping Senator Harding would bite and she could get out of the office. If Jane was lucky, Addison had other appointments scheduled, so she wouldn't be able to tag along.

“Give me a one-sentence summary of your plan, and then I'll swing by the office this afternoon to go over the details.”

“Pull the focus off of Christopher by changing the story to focus on the generosity of Olivia's family instead.” Jane was disappointed that he hadn't taken the bait, but she didn't let it spill into her tone of voice.

“Not sure I get that, but I am intrigued. You haven't let me down yet, so I will trust your judgment. For now.”

“Thank you, Sir. That's fair. Should I expect you at a certain time, or will you be squeezing me in whenever you can?”

“A little bit of both. I'll squeeze you in, but I can safely say it will be sometime between two and five.”

“I'll be here.”

Senator Harding disconnected the call, and Jane set her phone down. She looked at Addison and gave a half-smile. Time to make up. Slowly, she turned her laptop to face Addison. Jane came around her desk, sat in the other chair, and then explained the plan to her boss.

As Jane expected, Addison did not like the plan. But Jane felt that Senator Harding would. He was a cutthroat politician, but she'd learned that he could be reasonable. If a plan made sense – and this one did – he'd be willing to try it. Jane just had to convince him that this plan would make him look better in the long run. And she believed that was why Senator Harding had chosen to work with Jane over Addison, even if he didn't know it. Addison would have immediately gone into full-on attack mode on Olivia. But Jane knew that attacking a vulnerable female, especially one so young, in today's climate would be a very bad move. Especially during an election year.

Addison left for her next appointment, and Jane went back to work. She was ready for her conversation with Senator Harding this afternoon, and she did have other clients that needed her attention. She opened another client's file just as her phone vibrated.

The caller ID showed it was Grace. Her sister rarely called her and never in the middle of the day.

“Hi, Grace. How are you?”

“Mom's sick. Cancer. The doctor said she only has a few weeks to live. She's at home with Hospice. I went to see her this weekend, but I have to get back to school. She wanted me to let you know.” Grace now lived in Missoula, Montana, where she was working on her Ph.D. in Native American Studies.

Jane was too shocked to reply. For one thing, Grace had rattled off the information as if she were telling Jane about a trip to the grocery store. No greeting. Not a trace of emotion.

“Are you still there?” Grace’s tone had gone from indifference to impatience.

“I’m sorry. What did you say?” Jane’s weariness must have caused her to misunderstand what Grace said.

“You heard me. Are you going to see her or not? I told her you wouldn’t take time away from your job so not to get her hopes up.”

Grace seemed to get more hostile toward Jane with each passing year, and Jane had no idea why. She knew she didn’t contact Grace as often as she should, but the phone did ring both ways.

“I’ll talk to my boss in the morning. I’ll get some time off to go see Mom.”

“Well, you’d better hurry if you want to see her before she dies.”

All Jane could think was, *wow*. This was a whole new level of coldness for Grace. Not just toward her but toward their mother too. Marie Taylor had never been Mother of the Year. Not even close. But no one deserved such animosity on their deathbed. Not even their mother. Before Jane could think of what else to say, Grace spoke again.

“I have to go.” Grace ended the call without saying goodbye.

Jane sat there, staring at the phone. She wasn’t sure how long she’d been sitting there when a tap at her door pulled Jane away from her thoughts. Her assistant, Morgan, stood in the doorway holding a notepad and pen.

“Just letting you know I’m here. Anything pressing for today?”

Morgan Stapley had only been Jane's assistant for a few months. She was a recent graduate with a master's degree in communications from USC, and so far, she'd been great. Jane knew Morgan's goal was to be in Jane's chair one day. Maybe she would get her chance sooner rather than later.

"Let's have a seat at the table." Jane picked up her laptop, and the two women sat at the four-person table in Jane's office. Jane filled Morgan in on high-level details for Senator Harding and asked the assistant to clear her schedule for the afternoon so that she'd be available whenever he arrived.

"Got it. Anything else?"

Jane hesitated, not sure what to say. For someone who made a living out of always having a response, Jane was unsettled by her lack of control over this new situation.

Sensing her discomfort, Morgan laid a hand gently on Jane's arm. "Are you okay?"

"I am. But I do need you to do something else."

"Sure. What do you need?" Jane could tell that she'd piqued Morgan's curiosity. She turned the chair slightly so she could face Morgan directly.

"It's more of a personal nature." Jane was not one of those big shots that had their assistants pick up their dry cleaning and make dinner reservations. She preferred to keep her relationship with her assistants strictly professional. Her last assistant, Carlie, had been somewhat of an exception. After eight years together, they couldn't help but know a little about each other. Carlie was the best assistant Jane ever had, but she'd left when her husband was transferred to Pennsylvania for work, and Morgan stepped into the role.

Morgan waited.

“I need you to book a flight for me to Billings, Montana. Preferably for tomorrow.”

“Any particular airline?”

“I usually fly Delta.”

“And when will you be returning?”

“I’m not sure. Make it open-ended or one-way. I don’t care which.”

As she scribbled notes on the pad, Morgan looked down, but that statement brought her head up.

“Are you leaving?” A bit of worry tinged her voice.

“No, my mother is sick. Terminal, actually. I’m not sure how long I’ll be gone.”

“Oh, Jane, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Thank you.” Jane gave Morgan a slight smile. “I just need to get there.” She stood up and walked to the window. “I didn’t know she was sick. I just found out this morning.” Her words were almost a whisper.

Standing, Morgan said, “I’ll get your flight booked right away.”

Jane turned to face Morgan. “Thank you.”

Morgan nodded and walked out of the office. Jane walked back to the table and picked up her laptop. She leaned out the office door and said, “Can you see if Addison is available? I need to let her know.”

Morgan glanced over her shoulder. “Of course.”

Jane fell into her chair. It was only mid-morning, but she was already exhausted. She needed to make a plan for her time away. Addison wouldn’t understand and would probably lecture Jane about her responsibility to Senator Harding. Jane would remind Addison that this meant she could take over “The Senator’s” account while Jane was gone, which would secretly thrill Addison even though she’d never admit it to anyone.

Jane hadn’t taken a day off in five years. Six years ago, she used seven vacation days, but only because she’d had a severe case of strep throat and lost her voice for a week. Before that, she’d only taken off a few days scattered here and there. She was due some time off. And even though she only talked briefly to her mother three times a year when Jane called on Marie’s birthday, Mother’s Day, and Christmas morning, she loved her mother and truly wanted to be there for Marie.

A part of Jane knew that she was using Marie as an excuse to get away from work for a while, but a tiny part of her hoped maybe they could bond in a way they never had before. People became reminiscent and sentimental on their death beds, didn’t they? And Jane planned to be with Marie when she passed away.

Morgan’s voice came over the intercom on Jane’s desk.

“Addison is free now.”

Jane pressed the button to respond. “Thanks.”

Jane stopped at Morgan’s desk on her way to Addison’s office.

“Did you purchase the tickets yet?”

Morgan looked up. “Almost there. I can definitely get you on a flight tomorrow. Just don’t have all the details yet.”

“Ok. Well, that’s fine. At least I know it will be tomorrow.”

Jane turned to leave, unsure if she was ready for all that was to come. Tomorrow wasn’t very far away.

“Umm, Jane?”

Jane turned back and looked at Morgan, her expression encouraging Morgan to continue.

“How did you want to pay for this?”

Jane moved forward until she was standing right in front of Morgan’s desk.

“Right. I’m so used to traveling for business.” Jane pulled a credit card from one of her cell phone case pockets and slid it across Morgan’s desk. “You can use this.”

Morgan nodded and began typing again as Jane headed for Addison’s office. The door was closed, so she knocked lightly.

“Enter.” Jane rolled her eyes, then paused to arrange a more appropriate expression on her face before opening the door.

“I wondered if I might talk with you for a minute.”

Addison stopped shuffling through the papers on her desk and looked directly at Jane.

“Did something happen with Senator Harding?”

“No.” Jane drew out the word. True, nothing new had happened, but Jane was about to tell Addison she was leaving in the middle of the highly concerning scandal involving the senator’s son. Addison sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“Spit it out, Jane. It’s not like you to flounder.”

Jane wouldn’t call her response a “flounder,” but whatever.

“I received a call from my sister about an hour ago. My mother has been diagnosed with a terminal illness and isn’t expected to live more than a few weeks. I’ve booked a flight to Montana tomorrow to be with her while ... well ... you know. To be with her at the end.”

Jane tried to sound as matter-of-fact as possible, but this news had unsettled her more than expected. She always thought she’d get a call someday informing her that her mom had already died. Marie Taylor rarely left her house. She’d always been a homebody, but Marie had become a recluse since their dad passed away when Grace was in middle school. Jane expected to get a call one day from Irena, Marie’s part-time housekeeper, letting Jane know that she’d come to work and found her mother dead. Instead, she got a call from Grace letting her know when – approximately – their mom would die.

Addison went back to looking through the papers on her desk as if Jane had told her something of no importance.

“You can’t go now. The Senator is expecting you to deal with Christopher.” Addison glanced up. “Maybe next week. After this scandal has been put to bed.”

Addison's response made Jane so mad she thought about quitting right then and there. She knew that she had no business lecturing anyone on the importance of family, but Addison was something else entirely.

Addison had an identical twin brother, Carter. He was a successful corporate attorney at one of Seattle's top law firms, accomplishing the unheard-of feat of making partner at twenty-six. Neither Addison nor Carter have ever married, in love with their careers. Their mother died from heart disease when the twins were in college. Neither twin had attended the funeral because it occurred during finals week of their senior year. They visited the grave and laid flowers once the semester ended. Their father, Magnus James, had been an engineer at Boeing who developed several patents. When he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's two years ago, the siblings had stowed him away in a memory care facility – the best in Seattle, of course – and never looked back.

The difference between Jane and Addison was that Addison had no concept that family should be important. Jane knew it should be but had no idea how to make that a reality. But she knew enough to know that you responded when family needed you. And her mother needed her now. Or maybe Jane needed her. Either way, Jane would be on that plane tomorrow.

“Addison, I'm leaving tomorrow. You can join me for my conversation with Senator Harding this afternoon, and I'll let him know that you will be taking over his account while I'm gone.”

Jane saw a flash of excitement in Addison's eyes before she replaced it with her most disapproving look for Jane's poor career and life choices.

“Can't you call in Hospice or something?”

“Hospice has already been engaged. But they're not family. I am.”

“You don’t even like your mother.”

Jane took a slow deep breath before answering. She regretted ever sharing any details about her personal life with Addison.

“I never said I didn’t like her; I said we weren’t close. But that doesn’t mean I don’t want to be with her while she’s dying.” Jane leaned forward and raised her voice slightly as she said the word, “dying.”

“The Senator has requested you personally, as you so often remind me.”

Addison sounded like they were sixth-graders fighting over the popular boy at lunchtime.

“Fine. Go see her and be back in a couple of days.” Addison stook and put her hands on her hips. Jane found Addison’s weak attempt at intimidation amusing. *Is the queen losing her touch, or am I getting stronger?*

“My ticket is open-ended. I’ll be there until after the funeral and however long it takes to wrap up her affairs.” Jane turned to go.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” Jane said, turning back to face Addison. Jane mirrored Addison’s stance.

“I said, No. I can’t spare you that long. No more than a few days.”

Jane took a step toward her boss.

“Addison, I haven’t taken a day off in five years. I work seven days a week. I have enough PTO banked to take a year off. I’m going to Billings and staying as long as it takes. And if you challenge me on that, I will file for FMLA.”

The Family Medical Leave Act allowed employees to take protected, unpaid leave to care for ailing or injured family members. Jane knew Addison wouldn't force her to go that route because she wouldn't want to deal with the paperwork.

Jane walked back to the door and paused. And just because she couldn't help it said, "Besides, you're getting what you really want. The Senator – Jane threw up air quotes – is all yours."

Jane walked back to Morgan's desk.

"Can you order in some lunch for the two of us? Whatever you want, I don't care. When it gets here, we can eat in my office while we discuss my workload and how to disperse it best while I'm gone."

"I'm on it." Morgan pulled a stack of take-out menus from a desk drawer and started perusing them.

Forty-five minutes later, Jane and Morgan huddled around Jane's conference table as Morgan laid out an assortment of pasta, salad, cheesy garlic bread, and chocolate cake.

"I thought you could use comfort food today." Morgan smiled at Jane. "I only included the salad, so we don't have to feel completely guilty. But it has those big buttery homemade croutons that Mama Lu's is famous for." The Italian restaurant occupied one corner on the ground floor of their building and was a local favorite.

"This is perfect. Let's fill out plates and get to work." Jane took a generous portion of fettuccine, a not-so-generous portion of salad, and two pieces of cheesy garlic bread. She needed carbs.

The garlic bread was the only thing she'd finished two hours later, but they'd made significant progress on her workload, and Jane had handed most of it off to Morgan.

Morgan reached for the chocolate cake and cut small pieces for herself and Jane. She slid Jane's plate over and reached for a fork.

"I can't believe you're giving me so many of your accounts." She reached over and put her hand on Jane's arm. "Thank you for having faith in me. I'm well aware that it's your reputation on the line if I fail."

Jane liked Morgan. She was ambitious but had a humility that Jane hoped she never lost. This business could squeeze the good traits out of a person, like water that fell from a sponge.

"I'm sure you'll do a great job." Jane took one more bite of cake and pushed her plate away. "But if I eat anymore, someone will have to roll me onto that plane tomorrow."

~

By the time Jane was ready to leave the office, it was almost 11:00 pm. She'd even outlasted Addison. The conversation with Senator Harding had gone as expected. He liked her proposal and agreed to work with Addison simply because he had no other choice. Jane just hoped Addison would stick with the plan and not create one of her own. Olivia Messinger's life was over at seventeen if she did that, which she probably would. Jane shook her head as she stuffed her laptop into her bag. She called a car service because she wasn't going to walk at this time of night. So much for trying to burn some of those pasta and bread calories she'd consumed

throughout the day. She glanced at the conference table. All that remained was one slice of chocolate cake. Jane grabbed some napkins and wrapped it to go.

Morgan had stayed until well after 8:00 pm to help Jane tie up any loose ends. She had been a godsend today. Jane made a mental note to do something special for her. Maybe a gift certificate for a spa day? Her phone chimed signally that her car had arrived. She gathered her things, turned off the lights, and shut her office door.

When Jane got home, she dumped her things on the counter, then went straight to her closet to change into comfortable clothes. She settled on purple and white striped flannel pajama bottoms and her favorite long-sleeved lavender t-shirt from her alma mater. She grabbed a hair tie off the nightstand in her bedroom and wandered into the bathroom to remove all of her makeup and answer her skin's demand for moisturizer. Then she grabbed a bottle of apple juice from the fridge and the cake and settled into her favorite chair to watch the light from ferry boats reflecting off the water as she ate.

Jane opened the local Christian radio station app on her phone and tapped the *Play* button. She hadn't been to church in several years except for the occasional Easter or Christmas Eve service, and she rarely read her Bible anymore. She prayed when she thought of it, which wasn't nearly as often as she should. But she'd never stopped listening to Praise and Worship music. The lyrics comforted her even when she wasn't exactly paying attention to them. After finishing her cake, she sat for another few minutes and watched the rain fall, then set the plate and empty juice bottle aside. She had a lot to do. She needed to tidy up her apartment, throw out any food that would spoil, and pack. She had to leave for the airport at 7:00 am. It was already after midnight, but she'd rather get everything done now than have to do it in the morning.

Jane dragged a suitcase out of the hall closet and laid it open on her bed. Then she stood in her closet, hands on hips, and stared at her clothes and shoes. She had no idea what to pack. It was May which meant the weather could go either way in Montana. She started pulling sweatshirts and t-shirts off of hangers. She grabbed four pairs of shoes, all comfortable and flat, including a pair of flip-flops. She grabbed several pairs of yoga pants and two pairs of jeans from a shelf. She tossed everything on her bed and started to fold. Pajamas. She needed something to sleep in. She reached into the dresser behind where she was standing and grabbed several items. Then she went through more drawers: underwear, shorts, socks. By the time she got done shoving things into her suitcase, she was prepared for Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter.

Jane set the suitcase on a chair and then pulled back the covers on her bed. She looked around the room, then walked into her closet, trying to think of anything else she might have forgotten. Her eyes landed on a simple black dress. Frowning, she slid it off the hanger and reached down to take a pair of black heels from the rack. At some point over the next few weeks, she'd be attending her mother's funeral. She added the items to the suitcase.

She opened the drawer of her nightstand and withdrew her Bible and a mystery novel she'd purchased about a year ago on a whim at the grocery store but never read. She put both into a carry-on bag she pulled from the top shelf in her closet. Then she got into bed and fell asleep listening to the voice that told her God loved her.

The next morning, Jane was surprised when she was awakened by her alarm. She'd expected to toss and turn all night, but she'd slept pretty well once she'd finally gone to bed. It only took a few seconds for her to remember that this would not be a normal day. Today she was going to Billings, Montana. She exhaled a deep breath and got out of bed.

An hour later, Jane was standing at the curb of her building with her carry-on bag, computer bag, suitcase, and a steaming hot cup of coffee when the car service pulled up. Being dressed in jeans and flat shoes on a weekday felt strange. As Jane slid into the backseat, the driver added her things to the trunk and got into the driver's seat. In less than sixty seconds from the time he braked at the curb, they were headed to Sea-Tac International Airport.

## Chapter Three

*April 2018, in route to Billings, Montana*

Jane peered through the tiny window as the plane lifted off and slowly rose above the clouds. She always loved this part of flying – looking down on the clouds – but today, butterflies flitted about Jane’s insides, hindering her enjoyment. In a couple of hours, she would be in Billings, Montana. The thought had her stomach all aflutter.

Jane had only been home three times since she’d left for college. The first was when she’d returned for her father’s funeral after suddenly dying of a massive heart attack. She’d just started her position at James Public Relations and had only stayed a few days. Grace was thirteen then. Jane had also come home for Grace’s high school graduation, but Grace had spent most of that weekend locked in her room. Grace had been an academic, introverted student, and Jane thought maybe Grace was a bit embarrassed that she didn’t have a lot of friends to celebrate with. Jane wasn’t what one would call popular, but she did have a large group of friends in high school. But now, she wondered if that was the reason.

The last time was for Chase and Lucy’s wedding. Somehow, they managed to stay together through Chase’s military career and four deployments. They’d gotten married seven years ago, more in love than ever. Jane had stayed with Lucy that weekend and only saw her mother at the wedding. At that time, Marie still left the house occasionally. Jane had talked to her briefly during the reception and then used her responsibilities as maid of honor as an excuse to end the awkward conversation. If Marie had been upset, it hadn’t shown. She’d left the reception right after the conversation ended. Now, it had likely been years since Marie had stepped foot off her property.

Shivering, Jane reached up and turned down the small fan above her seat, grateful no one was sitting next to her. She tucked her feet beneath her and reached for the blanket the flight attendant left in the adjacent empty seat. Cozying herself into the first-class seat, she closed her eyes and let her thoughts return to the wedding. That was the only time she'd seen Sean since the day she left for college. The weekend of the wedding hadn't been much better. He'd done his best to avoid her, which was nearly impossible since he was the best man and she was the maid of honor. He'd been engaged to a leggy blond named Mallory. Lucy and Chase had no idea what he saw in her, and after five minutes in her presence, Jane wondered the same thing. Mallory's glares in Jane's direction all weekend could have cut through a glacier.

Sean and Mallory were supposed to get married the following year. But two weeks before the scheduled date, Sean had come home early to surprise her and caught Mallory cheating on him with her ex-boyfriend. Sean called it off right then and there and caught the next flight back to his base. He'd re-enlisted two months later and took every subsequent tour he could get. He'd finally retired a couple of years ago and came home to Missoula, probably because A) he missed his family, and B) Mallory and husband number four had moved to California.

If Jane allowed herself a moment of complete honesty, she'd had a crush on Sean in high school. Probably would still if she saw him again, which was inevitable the longer she remained in Billings. He and Chase still visited each other often. Even though things between them had gone south for reasons unknown to her, she still cared about him. They'd been a foursome when they'd hung out in high school. She and Sean paired up by default since Lucy and Chase had been a couple – so to speak – since second grade. Jane considered Sean to be one of her best friends back then. She sighed as she shifted positions and opened her eyes. She was getting hungry. Needing to turn her mind away from Sean Garrison, Jane pushed the attendant button so

she could order breakfast and retrieved the newspaper she'd purchased on her way through the airport that morning.

Ninety minutes later, Jane made her way through the Billings airport with a brief stop at Baggage Claim. The whole excursion took fifteen minutes. Logan International Airport was much different than Sea-Tac. She walked through the sliding doors to the curb and quickly found Lucy. It was hard to miss the petite, dark-haired Asian woman flailing her arms about and jumping up and down. Lucy spotted Jane and sprinted forward, almost knocking Jane over as Lucy through her arms around her friend.

"I know it's a terrible reason that brought you back, but I'm so glad you're here."

Jane smiled despite herself. Lucy's bubbly personality had always been contagious. "It's good to see you too."

Lucy grabbed Jane's suitcase, pulled it toward her Civic, and popped the trunk. After stowing the suitcase and Jane's laptop bag, she closed the trunk, and they got in the car. Lucy began chattering before she'd even pulled away from the curb.

"I haven't seen your mom since you told me about her cancer. I can't believe we didn't know. Chase and I have been watching for her ever since because we learned a long time ago that she wouldn't answer the door. So we'd see her occasionally if she went into the front yard. But it's been months." Lucy turned her head to check traffic as she merged the car onto the road that would take them out of the airport. "We didn't think much of it, you know, since she rarely leaves the house, but I still feel like we should have known."

"I didn't even know, and I'm her daughter. What does that say about me?"

Lucy glanced toward Jane. “Oh, Jane, I didn’t mean to imply”

Jane cut Lucy off. “You didn’t imply anything. I just can’t believe she didn’t tell me. I don’t even know how Grace found out.”

“She didn’t tell you?”

“No.” Jane rolled her eyes. “She only stayed on the call long enough to tell me mom was terminal with a few weeks to live and let me know that she knew I wouldn’t come home.” Jane swiped the corner of one eye that had suddenly started to water. “I texted her when I landed to let her know I was here, but she hasn’t responded.”

Lucy took the zigzagging Zimmerman Trail that would take them for the rims that ran across Billings down to the lower West End toward home. Well, Lucy’s home. And Marie’s. Not Jane’s. When Lucy’s parents moved to Arizona a few years ago to escape the snow, Lucy and Chase bought Lucy’s childhood home. That meant Jane would see a lot of Lucy while she was here, which was a very good thing. She would need Lucy’s support.

As Lucy pulled into the driveway of her home, Jane felt her stomach begin to tie itself into very tight knots. She took several deep breaths, in through the nose, out through the mouth. She could do this. She had to do this. It was the right thing to do. Maybe if she kept telling herself that she’d have the strength to see this through.

Sensing Jane’s hesitation, Lucy reached over and squeezed Jane’s arm. “Chase and I are right next door if you need us.”

Jane nodded, her throat tight.

“I’m serious, day or night. You call us or come knock on the door.”

“It does help to know you’re so close.” Jane opened the car door, and Lucy did the same. Once they’d retrieved the luggage, they walked to the front porch of Marie’s house.

“Did you tell your mom you were coming?”

Jane nodded. “I didn’t think it would be a good idea to surprise her. I don’t know if she’s glad I’m coming or not.”

Jane pulled out her keychain, which still contained the housekey. She hadn’t considered this her home for years, but every time she thought about removing the key from the ring, she hadn’t been able to do it. She put the door in the lock. It opened.

Lucy gave Jane one more hug. Before letting go, she said, “Let’s meet back here on the porch after sundown. I have a feeling you’ll need to talk.”

“Okay. I’ll text you when I’m ready. I don’t know my mom’s schedule, but I imagine she sleeps a lot.” Jane pulled her suitcase into the house, and Lucy cut through the grass to her own home.

Jane closed the door. “Mom. It’s Jane.”

~

By the end of the first week, Jane had settled into a routine. She ventured into the backyard each morning to enjoy the cool air and a hot cup of coffee. According to Irena, Marie didn’t leave her house except to go into the backyard. She loved the backyard. It was an expertly manicured oasis with a kaleidoscope of colorful flowers, a rather extensive vegetable garden, strawberry bushes, two fountains with running water – except in the winter– and a hummingbird feeder. And then there was the back fence lined with lilac bushes. Jane could only imagine how

good that smelled in Spring. The yard was not the one Jane had grown up with. Then it only contained grass and one tree that was no longer there. She didn't know when Marie added everything, but it was beautiful. It seemed in stark contrast to a woman that never smiled or laughed.

After her coffee was finished, Jane spent the rest of the morning in Marie's room, where she did crossword puzzles and read. She'd already finished the novel she'd brought and bought an eBook that she read on her tablet. Marie was awake for short periods in the morning but hard as Jane tried, she couldn't engage her mom in a real conversation.

Around noon, Jane ate some lunch. She'd met one of the Hospice nurses on her first night there. They seemed to come three or four times a day and told Jane how to reach them if she needed anything. The first nurse, Heather, stressed the importance of nutrition and told Jane to try and get Marie to drink a protein shake twice a day, but Jane had been successful so far. Marie barely finished one a day. The only thing she seemed remotely interested in consuming was ginger ale.

The afternoon was a bit more unpredictable, depending on how Marie felt that day and whether or not a nurse was around when she inevitably got sick. Jane estimated Marie weighed about ninety pounds at this point, much too thin for her five-foot, five-inch frame. Her face was so shallow that it looked like a meteor had landed below each cheekbone and created a crater on either side of her face. Jane's heart hurt. It hurt for Marie. It hurt for herself, for the definite loss of the relationship they'd never have. Her mother was dying.

Every night after sundown, Lucy and Jane sat on the front porch of Marie's house and talked. Sometimes Chase joined them. It was familiar and comfortable, like pulling your favorite sweater off the shelf after a long, hot summer, putting it on, and discovering it still fit perfectly.

It took less than twenty-four hours for Addison to text Jane and ask when she'd be back. Jane ignored the text and everyone that followed along with seven phone calls for three days. When she finally did respond, it was with a text that said, *Mom's still hanging on. No return date yet.* She wondered if Addison realized how pathetic all those calls and texts made her look, then realized the answer was No. Addison thought she was exerting her authority, reminding Jane who was in charge. But it didn't work because Jane didn't care. When she got back to Seattle, she'd have to give a long hard look at her career and decide if it was worth it to remain with Addison James Public Relations.

Irena, her mom's weekly housekeeper and cook was the one bright spot in the house. Irena came on Mondays, cleaned, ran errands, did Marie's grocery shopping, and then cooked dinners for the week. The plump, utterly huggable Polish grandmother changed the entire atmosphere in the house with her presence. She'd been stopping by several times a week to check in. Jane was pretty sure she'd been doing that since she figured out how sick Marie was, or Marie confided in her – Jane wasn't sure which – and was making the extra visits without a raise in pay. Jane was going to make sure she was compensated at some point.

## Chapter Four

The twenty-seventh day of Jane's visit with her mother started like every other day since Jane arrived. She drank coffee in the backyard and spent the morning in her mother's room while Marie slept. No one could believe that Marie Taylor was still alive. Her pain had intensified due to cancer's continued destruction of her body, and the hospice nurses taught Marie how to give her mother morphine. Irena came by that day, and they spent an hour in the kitchen together while Irena fixed Jane a chicken salad sandwich. Irena's chicken salad quickly became one of Jane's favorite meals, but she hadn't had much appetite the last couple of days. Her mother could die at any moment, and Jane struggled with her emotions.

Irena left after lunch with a promise to stop by in the morning on her way to another job. Jane returned to her mother's room and settled into the recliner that was now permanently indented with the print of Jane's backside. She'd just finished her ninth crossword puzzle book when Marie began to stir, and the day quickly became one that would be forever etched into Jane's memory.

Marie awakened, and her eyes opened more than they had since Jane arrived.

"It's my fault, you know." Marie had lost so much weight even her voice sounded thin, yet her words were clear.

Jane had read that people with a terminal illness can have moments of clarity right before death draws near. Stifling the dreadful thought, Jane turned in her chair to face Marie. Maybe this would be one of those conversations Jane had hoped for.

"What's your fault, Mom?"

“The way your father treated you.”

Of all the things Jane thought they might talk about, her father wasn't one of them. Her mother had never mentioned the awful way Jane had been treated by her father while growing up. Not while it was happening. Not later. Marie confronted Ed. Never stood up for Jane. Never protected her.

“What do you mean?” Jane leaned forward, now entirely focused on the conversation.

“He wasn't your father.”

Jane jerked backed as if Marie had slapped her. Before Jane could form a reply, Marie continued.

“I had an affair.” Marie gave a slight shake of her head and winced. “No, that's not right. It wasn't an affair.” She seemed to be searching for the right words. “It was just one time.”

Jane sat there motionless. This woman she had known her entire life, who barely left the house and could go a whole day without speaking one single word, was telling Jane that she had slept with a man who was not Jane's father and that Jane was the result of that encounter. Jane couldn't even begin to comprehend what she'd just heard.

“I never saw him again.” Marie's hands clutched the fuzzy pink blanket Lucy had brought her last week. “I was at a book dealer's convention in Boise. I met him in the hotel lounge.” She shook her head again and winced again. “I never saw him after that night.” Marie smiled wistfully, and Jane couldn't tell if it was from embarrassment or longing. Marie shrugged slightly. “Nine months later, you were born.”

Jane watched her mother's eyes drift closed.

“Mom, don’t you fall asleep.” She gently tapped Marie’s shoulder. “Mom, what was his name?”

Marie opened her eyes and blinked. “Hmmm?”

“What was his name?” If Ed wasn’t her real father, Jane wanted to know who was.

“He was very charming.” Marie stared off into space as if she saw him all over again. Jane could tell her question hadn’t even registered. Then Marie closed her eyes a second time.

Jane felt like she would throw up all over Marie’s pink blanket. She gently shook Marie’s shoulder again.

“Please wake up. Mom?” Marie stirred but didn’t open her eyes. “Mom, please.” Finally, Marie’s eyes fluttered open.

“How do you know Dad wasn’t my father?” It took her mother so long to answer that Jane didn’t think she would.

“Your father and I were rarely... well, we...” Marie’s pale gray cheeks turned the lightest shade of pink that Jane had ever seen. “Well, you know.”

This woman who could not say the word “sex” was telling Jane that she was conceived from a one-night stand?

“What about Grace?”

“Grace is Ed’s daughter. I didn’t think I could get pregnant. She was a surprise too, although not for the same reason.” That explained why Ed treated them so differently.

Marie reached for Jane's hand. Jane forced herself to reach out to her mother. It was so rare for Marie to show affection that the connection was utterly unfamiliar to Jane. Yet, for some reason, she held on.

"I'm sorry, Jane. I really am." Marie sounded sincere, but Jane wasn't sure how to respond.

"Why are you telling me this now?"

Speaking more clearly and powerfully than she had since this conversation began, Marie said, "Because I want you to know that your father's treatment of you wasn't your fault. It was mine. He was punishing me. It was never about you."

Marie attempted to squeeze Jane's hand before letting go. Her grasp was so weak that Jane would have missed it if she hadn't been looking at the clasped hands at that exact moment.

"Can I have some more medicine?"

"Of course." Jane stood and retrieved a syringe from the rolling cart beside Marie's hospital-style bed. Marie opened her mouth, and Jane slowly emptied the medicine against Marie's inner cheek.

Then Marie closed her eyes. In no time, she was sleeping soundly, and Jane knew the conversation was over. Jane stood, walked to the bathroom, and emptied her stomach into the toilet.

That evening, Jane sat sandwiched between Chase and Lucy on Marie's porch. It was now the last day of April, and this night was frigid. The friends were bundled in winter coats and scarves; their hands warmed by steaming mugs of hot chocolate, compliments of Lucy.

“Jane, I don’t know what to say.” Lucy was a force to be reckoned with, but she was also the most compassionate person Jane had ever known. Tears had fallen one at a time down each cheek as Jane recounted her conversation with Marie earlier that day.

Chase bumped Jane’s shoulder as he asked, “What are you going to do now?”

Jane shook her head. “I have no idea.”

“And she never gave you his name?”

Jane shook her head again.

Lucy squeezed Jane’s knee. “It’s going to take you some time to process this. Why don’t you try and get some rest.” Jane gave her a look that said *yeah, right*. “I know it won’t be easy, but you need to try. Even just closing your eyes might help. You have to be exhausted.”

Lucy was right. Jane was exhausted mentally and emotionally, if not physically. And she didn’t feel like talking right now anyway. She stood, and Lucy and Chase followed. They hugged her before Chase grabbed Lucy’s hand and led her across the yards to their front door. Jane watched them walk inside but didn’t immediately enter Marie’s home.

“God, I know I haven’t put you first in my life in a long time, but I need some help here. I don’t know whether to be mad I was lied to for so long or glad that I am not the daughter of Ed Taylor. Please help.” Then she turned and walked into the house.

Jane went to check on her mom. She turned on the dim lamp that sat on a dresser, took one look at Marie, and knew. Her mom was gone. Jane dropped to her knees beside Marie’s bed and cried. She cried for all she’d lost and all she’d never had. When finally, the tears no longer flowed. Jane reached into her pocket and texted Lucy.

Jane: She's gone.

Lucy: We'll be right there.

Minutes later, Lucy and Chase walked inside. "I brought Chase along in case you had any questions. He can also run interference for you with the people about to descend on this house." As a paramedic, Chase knew how things would go over the next few hours.

"Did you call Hospice yet?" Chase asked.

"Ah, no. I didn't even think of it." Jane turned to get the number from the information stuck on the refrigerator with a magnet clip. Chase touched her arm.

"I'll get it. You sit here with Lucy."

Lucy guided Jane to the sofa in the living room, and they sat down. Chase detoured to Marie's room on his way to the kitchen just to make sure she was really gone. She was.

"What can I do for you? Do you need anything? Maybe a glass of water?"

Jane leaned back against the sofa and folded her arms tightly across her chest. "I'm okay."

Unable to just sit there, Lucy retrieved a brown and orange crocheted blanket from a chair across the room and laid it over Jane's lap. Jane gave Lucy a slight smile.

"The Hospice nurse is on her way. She'll just confirm what you already know." Chase sat down on the other side of Jane. "I'm sorry I have to ask you this, but the nurse will ask you anyway." He paused momentarily. "Have you made any arrangements for the body? If not, we can call 9-1-1."

“There should have been a paper with the Hospice information.” Jane cleared her throat, which was thick with unexpected emotion. “Marie made all the necessary arrangements when she found out how sick she was and made sure Irena knew where to find it.” Jane’s eyes widened as a thought occurred. She looked at Lucy. “I don’t think she was going to tell Grace and me.”

“Oh, honey.” Lucy put her arm around Jane’s shoulders and pulled her close. Jane gave in for a moment and then straightened back up. She turned to Chase.

“The funeral home is on those papers. They have a 24-hour number. They’ll come to get her and take care of everything.”

Chase nodded and made his way back to the kitchen.

~

It was almost 4:00 am before Jane was finally alone in the house. It felt strange being there without Marie. Jane hadn’t thought of this place as her home in years. Maybe never. Lucy’s house had been more of a home to Jane than this one ever had. After her dad – or Ed – had passed away, she’d started thinking of this as Marie’s house. It still felt that way, and she suddenly felt like an intruder. Sighing, she shuffled to the bedroom that no longer looked like the one she grew up in, crawled into bed, and fell asleep.

## Chapter Five

As the sun began to set, bringing shadows to the already cloud-darkened day, Jane stood beside the mound of freshly turned earth and stared at the place that now held her mother's body. The funeral was over, and the few attendees had gone home. She should go too, but her legs seemed glued to this spot.

Jane struggled with guilt the past several days as she waited for the funeral. Being here intensified that feeling. She felt guilty because she didn't think she would miss her mom. She hadn't come back to Billings because they were close. She'd come back because Marie Taylor was all alone. And Jane didn't think anyone deserved to die alone. But now... now she wished she'd stayed in Seattle.

The bombshell Marie Taylor dropped on her eldest daughter hours before she died left Jane reeling. Ten days later, she was still feeling completely off-kilter. Granted, she did not look back fondly on most family memories, but her memories were of a family with a mother and father and two daughters. Now the family pictures in her mind were altering. No longer did she see Ed's face in the father's position. She saw a face that was blank because while she knew Ed didn't belong, she had no one to replace him with. She no longer saw two sisters who adored each other, smiling and holding hands. Now she saw the same two sisters, smiles gone and standing apart from each other, no longer holding hands.

Jane was furious with Marie for not taking this secret to her grave. She was furious with Ed for never having told her. If he had, at least Jane would have grown up knowing why her father hated her. And she wondered if she should be furious with Grace. Had she found out somehow? Is that why she'd grown so hostile toward Jane? Or was she somehow a victim too?

Lucy approached and put her arm around Jane's shoulders. "Are you about ready?"

"I guess so."

"What do you want to do with the flowers?" Marie didn't have friends. Both her parents had passed away when Jane was young, and her only sibling, an older brother, had died from some kind of illness when Marie was a child. As a result, there were only four arrangements. One from Marie's attorney, one from her accountant, one from Irena, and one from Sean. Jane pointed to the colorful array of spring flowers. "I'll take that one." Lucy smiled and picked it up.

"That was thoughtful of Sean." Lucy reached down and picked up the flowers.

"It was." The card was imprinted with the phrase "Thinking of you." It had been signed simply *Sean*.

Jane looked around the now quiet cemetery. "Where's Grace?"

Graced had arrived in Billings late last night and gone straight to bed. This morning she'd done her best to avoid Jane. Grace's behavior compounded Jane's sadness, but she didn't know what to do.

"There she is." Lucy pointed toward the parking lot where Grace was walking to her SUV. Jane hurried to catch Grace before she drove away, calling out as she got closer.

"Grace, wait up." Grace either didn't hear Jane or ignored her, but Jane was pretty sure it was the latter. She finally caught up with her sister as Grace stuck her key in the car door.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jane kept her tone calm and gentle to avoid sounding like she was scolding Grace.

"Back to Missoula." Grace didn't even glance at Jane.

“I thought we could go back to the house and spend some time together. She shrugged.

“Catch up.”

“I have to go.” Grace got in the car, but Jane grabbed the door to keep it from closing.

“Grace, what’s going on?”

“Can you move your hand so I can close my door?” Grace still hadn’t looked at Jane; instead, she stared straight ahead, her mouth pressed into a thin line.

“Grace.” Jane’s voice had grown quieter.

“I have to go. Do whatever you want with Mom’s house. I don’t care.” She jerked the door out of Jane’s hand, closed it, started the engine, and drove away.

Lucy came up beside Jane. “What happened?”

Jane shook her head as tears appeared on her lower lashes. “I have no idea.”

~

That evening, Jane sat on a seventies-style white metal chair on her mother’s backyard deck. Jane had discovered that Marie’s accountant paid landscapers to come every Thursday and tend the yard, keeping it in pristine condition. A gentle carried the fragrance of lilac and jasmine across the yard. The bright green grass was lush and surrounded by ribbons of at least a dozen different kinds of flowers currently in bloom. It really was a lovely space. Jane sipped a mug of chamomile and enjoyed the cool night air. She pulled her knees up to her chest. The gray sweatpants, UW hoodie, and fuzzy orange socks that she’d changed into the moment she returned from the funeral provided comfort and warmth. She listened to a symphony of crickets and watched fireflies sparkle and dance. For a moment, all was peaceful. But only for a moment.

Just as had happened so often over the last couple of weeks, that final conversation between Jane and her mom burst into her thoughts uninvited.

“Why, Mom? Why didn’t you take this to your grave?” Jane spoke quietly into the night air. Did you think it would help? Or did you just want to hurt me for some reason?” Jane thought it was the former, but her gut twisted as she realized she wasn’t sure. She’d done nothing except be born into a family that seemingly hated her. She used the sleeve of her sweatshirt to try and stop the flood of tears that fell from her eyes. She was so tired of crying.

Jane and Marie never shared much as mother and daughter. Jane hadn’t confided in Marie, never asked her for advice. Her mother was quiet and reserved, preferring to spend time with books instead of people. That’s what made her mother’s confession so shocking. It was so entirely out of character that a part of Jane wondered if it was even true. But if it wasn’t true, what would have been Marie’s purpose for telling the tale to Jane? If it was true, it explained a lot about Ed Taylor.

*“He wasn’t your father.”*

*“I had an affair.”*

*“I never saw him again.” “Nine months later, you were born.”*

*“Please wake up. Mom? Please.” Marie’s eyes fluttered open once again.*

*He was punishing me. It was never about you.”*

Jane wiped away more tears and sniffled, wishing she had brought tissues outside. She was angry, sad, and exhausted. She was lonely. She was confused. Her mom said she wanted Jane to know that her father’s treatment wasn’t Jane’s fault. That it wasn’t about her. Of course,

it was about her! How could it not be about her? She, Jane Taylor, was the one who had been the punching bag for her father's anger at his wife. Marie's actions had impacted every day of Jane's life because even though Ed had been alive for years and even though she'd been away from him for longer, she still remembered how he'd treated her every single day.

Jane sighed, wondering again about her sister. Did Grace know about their mother's – What should she call it? Indiscretion? Mistake?

*How am I supposed to feel about you, Mom? And what in the world do I do now?*

~

The following day, Jane opened her eyes to sunlight pouring through the lace curtains from the window behind the bed. She covered her eyes with the back of her arm, wishing she could sleep the day away. A buzzing sound alerted her to an incoming call on her cell phone. Addison. Her boss was the very last person she wanted to talk to today. Jane had texted Addison to let her know when the funeral would be and supposed she should be grateful that Addison had been quiet over the last few days. Stifling a groan, she answered the phone.

“Hi, Addison.”

“Jane. When can I expect you back here? The senator wants to announce his candidacy for governor next week and is counting on you to be there.”

Jane couldn't help the smile that crossed her lips. Addison hadn't just given her information; she had given an admission. Jane now knew that Addison hadn't handled the Christopher incident in a way that pleased Senator Harding. If she had, he wouldn't be asking for Jane to return. He'd just go with Addison. But he wanted her. Jane had purposefully avoided

looking at any news from Seattle while in Billings. But now, she wanted to read everything the Seattle Times had written about Senator Harding and his son in the month.

“Jane, I asked you a question.”

“Well, since I just buried my mother less than twenty-four hours, it will be a while before I get back. I don’t know yet how long.”

“Did you hear what I said about the senator?” Jane could tell that Addison was struggling not to let her anger get the best of her. At this point, she was screaming, mad at her inability to intimidate Jane into action, and even madder that there was nothing she could do about it. Losing Jane could mean losing Senator Harding’s account.

“It will take at least a few weeks to wrap up my mother’s affairs.”

“Let her attorney do that. You have more important things to do. Here.”

Jane rolled her eyes at the dramatic sigh that came over the line when she didn’t respond immediately. She’d never realized how much Addison hated silence in a conversation.

“Jane, I’m not trying to sound harsh.” *Yes, you are.* “But you need to get back here. The senator is asking for you. Personally. He’s not going to keep waiting.”

“I’ll do my best to be back in a few weeks.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?” Jane didn’t even attempt to steady her tone this time. She felt the beginning of a migraine and tightly pinched the bridge of her nose. Yep. Addison was the source of her migraines.

“You will be back in this office on Wednesday. It’s not up for negotiation.” Today was Sunday. There was no way Jane could make it back by Wednesday. Nor did she want to.

Jane took a moment before replying. She rarely lost her temper, but Addison could bring out the worst in her.

“Addison, my mother just died. There are things that need to be done. I’ll be back when everything is taken care of here. You can take care of Senator Harding in the meantime.”

Addison’s next sentence carried a hardness that Jane hadn’t heard before.

“If you’re not back here on Wednesday, don’t bother coming back at all.”

Jane could picture her boss standing in her office, Vera Wang dress, Louboutin stilettos, and blond hair immaculately styled. She was probably wearing red lipstick and red nail polish and standing with her arms crossed as she waited for Jane’s reply over speakerphone.

“Jane, did you hear me?”

“I did.”

“Great. Then I’ll see you Wednesday. I’ll tell Senator Harding that you’ll meet him at 7:00 am.”

And suddenly Jane knew what she needed to do, probably what she should have done years ago. “Addison, I quit.”

There were 30 seconds of complete silence before Addison said, “You’re not serious.”

“I email my formal resignation this afternoon.”

Jane disconnected the call and turned off her phone. She tossed it on the bed and ran her hands through her hair as she slowly turned in a circle. Her whole body shook. She just quit her job! She had just killed her career. Addison would make sure no one in Seattle would hire Jane ever again. *Lord, what have I just done?*

She dropped to the floor and sat cross-legged, her head in her hands. In the span of fourteen days, she'd lost her mother, lost her father all over again, maybe lost her sister, and now she'd just quit her job. She had nothing left.

## Chapter Six

*Seattle, Washington, late May*

Jane was back in Seattle three weeks later, but Addison didn't know. She'd spent a lot of time over the past weeks discussing options with Lucy and listening to Lucy pray for her because, after all, Lucy had a much stronger relationship with God than Jane. Jane had finally concluded that she needed to wrap things up in Seattle and move back to Billings – at least temporarily – while she figured out what to do next.

So, she and Lucy had flown to Seattle yesterday. Now, Jane stared out of the floor-to-ceiling windows and soaked in the view of Elliot Bay from her favorite chair.

“I don't know if I could leave this view,” Lucy said from the chair beside Jane.

“I think this might be the only thing I'll miss about Seattle. Well, the view and the coffee.” Jane smiled, something that started coming more quickly once she decided to leave Seattle.

They'd spent the day hiring movers and arranging for her things to be taken to a storage facility in Billings and ordering boxes online that should arrive in the morning. Jane would live in Marie's house for now. She wasn't crazy about that but did like the idea of living next door to Lucy and Chase.

They'd discussed whether it was best for Jane to sell her condo or rent it on the plane ride. She could make a fair amount of money by keeping it as a rental, but she'd decided to sell in the end. She didn't want to keep any ties to Seattle. It represented a stage in her life that she felt certain she needed to leave. She contacted a realtor who'd swung by this afternoon to take a

look. After completing the walk-through, the agent, Marlene, had assured Jane that the condo would sell in no time due to the prestigious address. She'd almost choked when Marlene had quoted an asking price and said it could likely result in a bidding war, driving it even higher. Jane figured she'd make a profit, but the amount Marlene quoted was almost triple what she'd paid for it. Jane could almost afford to retire with the money she'd make on the condo, her savings account, and a hefty portfolio due to her income and a savvy financial advisor.

“Jane, did you hear me?”

“I'm sorry, did you say something?” Jane ran her fingers through her hair as she brought her mind back into focus.

“I was just saying I'm starving. It's way past dinner time.”

Noticing how dark it had gotten, Jane agreed with Lucy. This day had flown by. Her stomach rumbled, and they both laughed.

“I guess I am too.” Jane stood. “Take out or eat out? There are several places within walking distance if you want to stretch your legs, or we can look through my huge stack of takeout menus if you want to stay in.” She gestured toward Lucy. “You pick.”

“I say we eat in. Then let's have breakfast out.”

“Great idea.” They walked to the counter, where Jane took a hefty stack of takeout menus from a basket. They settled on Thai food from Jane's favorite restaurant and ordered an assortment of food that amounted to way more than they could eat. But leftovers were usually the best part of ordering takeout. And they'd have lots of leftovers to fill the empty refrigerator that'd they cleaned out earlier in the day.

~

Two days later, Jane and Lucy sorted through clothing, trying to decide what to keep and what to donate. Jane tossed several items on the king-size bed of her master bedroom.

“Have I thanked you for coming with me?”

Lucy laughed. “Only about a million times.” She sat on the floor and started folding sweaters tossed into the “Keep” pile. “That’s one of the best things about not having to work. I’m not tied down.”

Jane didn’t miss the wistfulness in her friend’s eyes. Lucy hadn’t gone to college. She’d done well in school but didn’t like school. After graduation, she’d taken a job in a medical office and worked her way up to office manager while Chase was in the military. Three months after they’d been married, Lucy had gotten pregnant, and she’d quit immediately, intending to be a stay-at-home mom. But Lucy had miscarried toward the end of her first trimester. Four more miscarriages followed. She and Chase had stopped trying at that point, but Lucy never went back to work. Such loss would have driven some people away from God. But not Lucy and Chase. It had strengthened their faith in God and each other, and they shared a three-way bond that Lucy envied.

“Well, I’m forever grateful that I don’t have to go through this alone.” Jane taped a box shut and added it to the corner where a stack of boxes sat waiting to be taken to storage. “I haven’t laughed as much in the past five years as I’ve laughed hanging out with you this week.”

“You’re getting your happy back.” Lucy folded another sweater.

“You really think I’m doing the right thing?”

“I really do.”

Lucy stood and moved to the closet. She started pulling dresses off of hangers and laying them on the bed. “What are you going to do with all of these?”

Jane held up a red designer cocktail dress. This one was one of her favorites. Do I need \$800.00 dresses in Montana?”

Lucy laughed. “Probably not, although I wouldn’t get rid of all of them.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “We do have the occasional swanky event.”

Jane smiled as she added the dress to the garment bag that hung from a knob on the dresser behind her. She’d keep this one.

“Honestly, I’m much more comfortable in yoga pants with my hair in a ponytail than in all this designer stuff. I only bought most of it because of my job.” Jane stood with her hands on her hips and stared at the pile before her. “I’m realizing I spent a ridiculous amount of money on stuff I didn’t even wear.” She held up a pair of jeans. “Half this stuff still has the tags on it.” Jane flicked a tag dangling from the jeans to prove her point.

“You could sell the clothes online and get some of your money back through one of those consignment sites.”

Jane began sorting through the dresses as Lucy continued to add to the original pile. “I thought about that, but I don’t want to bother with it. I was thinking about donating the stuff I don’t want.”

“That’s a better idea. Do you have a place in mind?”

“There’s a local children’s home that runs a thrift store. I’ll call them when we’re done here and see if they can come to pick everything up. I thought I could donate a bunch of stuff. Even furniture.”

Lucy set the last of the dresses on the bed. “Give me the name, and I’ll make the call while you finish up here.”

~

That evening, Jane and Lucy walked down to the waterfront after eating the remainder of their leftover Thai food. It was a very productive day, and they celebrated with lattes and fresh air. They sat on a bench and discussed plans for the next few days.

“I talked to Chase while you were heating our dinner. He wanted me to ask you about something.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Do you think we can be home by next Saturday?”

“Today’s Monday. That’s only a week away.” Jane shook her head. “I don’t see how. I haven’t even finalized the plans for the movers yet.”

“I told Chase I thought that was pushing it.” Jane caught the disappointment in Lucy’s voice.

“If you need to go, I can finish everything here.” Jane took another sip of her latte.

“No, that’s not it. It’s just that Sean is coming for a visit next weekend. It’s not often that he has a whole weekend off. We were thinking how much fun it would be to have the four of us together again.” Lucy’s tone was a tad too bubbly.

“Lucy...”

“What?” Lucy gave Jane a look she was famous for. Wide eyes, lips slightly pouty. As a child, it had worked wonders on whomever Lucy chose to exert her powers. But it stopped working on Jane a long time ago.

“Stop playing matchmaker.” Lucy feigned shock, and Jane laughed despite herself.

“I just thought it would be great to have our little group of friends together again.”

“It would be, but there is no hurry, and I’m not rushing back just so I can see Sean. If he still comes to Billings as much as he used to, I’ll see him soon enough.”

Lucy’s sighed. “I know. I just worry about him. I think he’s lonely.”

Curiosity got the best of Jane. “Has he dated much since he broke up with Mallory?” Lucy had mentioned Sean off and on over the years, so Jane knew the basics of what Lucy referred to as “The Mallory Disaster.”

“Do not even mention that woman’s name,” Lucy said with rare anger in her tone. She never spoke badly about others, but Jane knew that if she were to say a bad word about anyone, it would be Mallory. “She broke his heart. He’s been pretty guarded since. A few dates here and there but nothing serious.”

Jane fidgeted. “What makes you think Sean would even want to see me?” Jane thought of the flowers he sent to Marie’s funeral. They’d only been addressed to her, not her and Grace. Still...

Lucy stood and tossed her empty cup into a garbage can. “What are you talking about.”

“Sean made his feelings about me clear when I left for college. He couldn’t wait for me to go.” Another person who Jane had managed to make angry for reasons only they knew.

“Are you really that dense?” Lucy’s question caught Jane off guard.

“What are *you* talking about?”

“Sean was in love with you. How did you not know that?”

Jane’s jaw dropped. She had no idea.

“He thought you’d be around that whole summer. He was going to ask you out on a date. Just the two of you.”

“Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“It didn’t matter. You were determined to leave Billings as soon as possible.”

Jane didn’t know what to say. She got up and tossed her empty cup, and they started the walk back to her condo. Jane thought about her relationship with Sean when they were younger. Yes, they’d started pairing off more as they got older, but Jane figured it was a natural occurrence since Chase and Lucy’s pairing always left her and Sean together. But thinking back, something had shifted between them during the Christmas of their senior year. Sean had been in Billings for the entire break, and the foursome had spent every day together. And Sean had started looking at her differently, had become much more attentive. And she’d like it. She would have said yes if he’d asked her out. But Lucy was right. What would have been the point? She was leaving Billings, and their lives took very different directions.

It took nine days for Jane to accept an offer on her condo. There had been a bidding war, just like Marlene predicted, and the final price was almost \$100,000.00 over the asking price. After her mortgage was paid off, she'd bank a hefty profit. A truck came from the children's home the day before, and Jane's donations had just about filled it. They could practically set up an entire apartment with what she'd given. The moving van was scheduled to come in a couple of days, and then she and Lucy would drive her Infinity back to Billings. Jane was starting to look forward to living there again.

## Chapter Seven

*Missoula, Montana*

Sean pulled his truck into the driveway of his townhouse on Missoula's far west side. His first weekend off in over a month was coming to a close. He enjoyed his time in Billings visiting Chase, but it was good to be home. He just wanted to go inside, flop down on the couch, and watch a game while he ate the steak and cheddar sub he picked up at a drive-through.

The house was chilly when he entered through the front door. If the damp night air was any indication, snow was just around the corner. He set his duffle bag on the bottom of the staircase and then dropped the sub on the coffee table before grabbing a cold bottle of water from the fridge. He took a long swig before going to the backyard for firewood. Ten minutes later, with wood crackling and popping in the fireplace, he settled into the brown leather sofa that took up two whole walls of the small living room.

Sean picked up the remote and turned on the television with one hand as he took a rather generous bite out of the sub from the other. He flipped through channels until he found a college football game. It was probably a re-run, but he didn't care.

When the game went into half-time, Sean went to the kitchen and began unloading the dishwasher he'd started right before he left on Friday as he thought back over the weekend. He knew Jane decided to move back to Billings after her mom died. He'd hoped to see her during this visit, but Chase informed him that she and Lucy were still in Seattle when he arrived.

Sean closed the dishwasher and walked to the shelves in his living room that held books and various items. He picked up a framed photo and carried it to the sofa. He swiped his thumb

across the glass and removed a thin layer of dust. He needed to spend a few hours cleaning. Or bribe his sister Paige into doing it.

The picture was taken at Lucy's house during his visit over Christmas break during their senior year of high school. Chase, Lucy, Jane, and Sean sat on a bench next to the Christmas tree in Lucy's living room. Lucy sat on Chase's lap. The couple smiled, their arms wrapped around each other. Jane sat in between Sean and Lucy. Just as Lucy's dad snapped the picture, Jane had laid her head on Sean's shoulder. He liked how that felt, liked that they looked like a couple too. He'd hope to make that picture come true, but then Jane left before he had the chance.

Sean's teenage heart had been crushed the summer Jane left for Washington. He'd arrived in Billings, and he and Chase first went to Lucy's house, where Jane was sure to be. He'd worked up his courage on the drive over. When she wasn't there, he asked Lucy where she was and found out that not only was she packing, but she would be leaving in a few short hours. He'd known she was going to college in Washington. He hadn't known she got a job and had to get there a month early. His teenage heart had been crushed, and he hadn't handled it well. He was pretty sure he'd hurt Jane when he'd given her the brush-off when she came to say goodbye. But he'd been more focused on protecting himself at the time.

A knock at the door brought Sean out of his reverie. Sighing, he stood and set the picture back on the shelf. Sean opened the door to find his brother standing on the porch. Micah was two years older than Sean, but Sean was an inch taller at six-foot-two. People often mistook them for twins growing up. They shared the same dark hair and green eyes. Even favored the same style of dress: jeans, open flannel shirts with t-shirts, and Merrill boots.

Sean stepped aside so Micah could enter, then closed the door. He had to force the door closed. The wind had picked up since he'd come inside.

"I was driving by and saw your truck in the driveway. How'd the weekend go?" Micah and Sean only lived a couple of blocks apart and often passed each other's houses.

"Good."

Micah made himself comfortable on the other end of the sofa. Then he grabbed the uneaten half of Sean's sub from the coffee table and took a giant bite.

"I was going to take that for lunch tomorrow."

"Oh well." Micah shrugged as he took another bite. "Got anything to drink?"

Sean chucked a pillow at Micah, who just smiled as he went to the fridge, sub still in hand. He came back seconds later with a bottle of iced tea.

"How are Chase and Lucy?"

"I only saw Chase. Lucy was in Seattle helping Jane move back home."

Micah stopped chewing. "Jane's moving back?"

Sean nodded. "She quit her job after her mom died. I guess she's going to live in her mom's house while she figures out what she wants to do next. Chase made it sound like the resignation was sudden."

"That doesn't sound like Jane."

"Nope." But Sean didn't know any of the details. "Chase said that Lucy told him to invite all of us for Thanksgiving."

Micah swallowed the last bite of sub and grabbed a napkin out of the bag to wipe his hands. “What did you tell them?”

“That I’d talk it over with everyone and let him know. I’m not sure I can get time off.”

Micah leaned back on the sofa and rested his foot on the opposite knee. “I have it off since I have to work Christmas this year. I sure Mom and Paige could swing it.” Their dad had died in a skiing accident when they were younger.

“Sounds like it depends on me then.”

Micah nodded and turned his attention to the game before saying, “It would give you a chance to see Jane. Apologize for being such a moron the last couple of times you saw her.”

Sean had told Micah all about that last day in Billings, and Micah had witnessed Sean’s lousy behavior at Chase and Lucy’s wedding firsthand. Even called him out on it twice that day.

“She probably doesn’t want to see me.” Sean attempted to sound casual as he tossed out the comment. He did not feel casual. What would it be like to see her after all these years?

“She still single, isn’t she?”

“She is.”

“Great. Then let’s go to Billings for Thanksgiving.”

Without giving Sean a chance to respond, Micah walked to the door, tossed a quick “Bye” over his shoulder, and left.

Sean turned off the television. He did want to see Jane again, but people changed a lot in twenty years. What if they couldn't stand each other now? But somehow, he knew that wouldn't be the case. And that scared him.

## Chapter Eight

*Billings, Montana*

Jane had been back in Billings for almost a month. She and Lucy had spent much of that time scouring Marie's house, searching for some clue as to who Jane's father was. Not only had they not found any indication, but Jane had discovered how little Marie thought about her daughters. They hadn't found one picture or memento, nothing to indicate Jane and Grace existed.

Jane was still mad at Marie over their last conversation. What kind of mother left her daughter with such a devastating detail and no way to follow up? Today, they were going through the last room in the house – Marie's walk-in closet.

Jane stepped out of the closet just as Irena entered the master bedroom. Irena yelped and clutched her apron in her hands.

"Oh, Miss Jane. You startle me." Irena began laughing as her chubby cheeks turned pink from embarrassment.

Jane moved forward and placed a stack of clothes across the blue and white gingham quilt that adorned the bed.

"I not think you are here. Where is your car?"

"I'm sorry, Irena. Lucy has it. She just ran out to get us some lunch."

Jane moved forward and took Irena's hands in hers. Irena was a few inches shy of five feet. Jane was only five foot three, but Irena's short stature made Jane feel tall. The older woman's chubby frame begged to be hugged. Her dark eyes were perpetually crinkled at the

edges as if they were in a constant state of smiling. In the short time Jane had known Irena, she'd grown very fond of the bubbly housekeeper whose personality seemed so at odds with her mother's. Jane felt protective toward this treasure of a woman who spoke with broken, heavily accented English.

Irena frowned and shook her head. "No. I make good lunch for you and Miss Lucy."

"I know you would. I also know it would be delicious." Jane took a slight step back and planted her hands on her hips. "But we hadn't planned to do this today, so I didn't want to burden you with a last-minute meal.

"No, Miss Jane. You not burden." Irena shook her head emphatically. "No. I have pleasure to cook for you."

Jane got to know Irena more each week as the two women talked in the kitchen while Irena cleaned and cooked. Jane recently learned that Irena had followed her daughter from Krakow, Poland. Her daughter, Katherine, had come to California for college and married a man from Billings. When her first grandchild was born, Irena came to live with her daughter and started working for Marie almost immediately.

"Well, I wouldn't want to keep you from pleasure." Jane smiled. "Why don't you plan to make lunch for Lucy and me when you come next week?"

"Yes. Yes, this is good. I make *golumpki*." Jane had become hooked on the stuffed cabbage dish from the moment she took her first bite.

"With the mushroom sauce?"

“Yes, you like most.” Irena clapped her hands together. “I make for you.” She looked around the room and sighed. Jane couldn’t tell how Irena felt about Marie’s passing, and she wasn’t sure if she should ask or not. But she did have questions.

“I’ll tell you what you can do.”

Irena looked at Jane expectantly.

“I’d love a cup of coffee. I’ll even come out to the kitchen with you while you make it.”

Irena looped her arm through Jane’s and tugged Jane toward the hallway. “Yes. This is good.” She squeezed Jane’s hand. “I make latte, yes?” She gave Jane an expectant look.

“A latte sounds wonderful.”

When they entered the kitchen, Irena reached up and took Jane by the shoulders, guiding Jane onto a wooden stool at the kitchen counter. Irena moved around the counter and gathered her ingredients for a cinnamon hazelnut latte.

“Irena, can I ask you something?”

Irena measured the coffee as she glanced at Jane. “Yes, Miss Jane.”

Jane was unsure how to begin the conversation. “Did you like working for my mother?”

Irena didn’t answer right away, and Jane feared she’d asked the wrong question. Irena sprinkled cinnamon into the coffee grounds and then pushed the button to start the coffeemaker. She opened a cupboard and pulled out an oversized coffee mug.

“I like job. I not know mother.” Irena’s answer confused Jane. How could Irena not know Marie after eight years?

Irena opened the milk and poured some into the stainless-steel pitcher that came with the latte machine. “Miss Marie not talk to me. She leave note.”

Jane’s brown furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I come in. Clean. Do my work. If Miss Marie need something, she leave note.” Irena tapped the counter where Jane was sitting. “Miss Marie leave list. I do shopping.” Irena pulled a pad and paper from a kitchen drawer and set it on the counter as if to prove her statement. Irena shrugged. “She not talk to me.” Sadness shown in Irena’s eyes. Jane reached over and squeezed Irena’s hand. Jane felt for her. She understood the pain that Marie’s reclusiveness caused.

“Didn’t you see her while you were cleaning?”

Irena shrugged again. “Well.... I see her. No talk. Miss Marie stay there.” Irena pointed to the office door visible from their spot in the kitchen.

“You didn’t clean her office?”

“Yes, I clean. I knock on door, and Miss Marie nod. No talk. She go to bedroom and close door.” Irena used her hands to demonstrate each thing she said. “She take nap. I clean office. When finish, I go to bedroom. I say, “Wake up Miss Marie.” She go back to office.” Irena wiped her hands on her apron.

Jane picked up the pen and began to doodle on the notepad.

“You told me that you cooked for her.”

Irena nodded. “I cook dinners.”

“How did you know what to cook?”

“When Miss Marie write list for store, she write five dinner. I cook five dinner. Put here.”

She pointed to the fridge. “She do rest with the food on list. But she not eat good.” Irena shook her head disapprovingly. “List very short.”

Irena pulled a mug down from the cupboard and filled it with the steaming latte. She set the mug in front of Jane, who immediately took a sip.

“Mmmm. This is wonderful. I might have to hire you to work more than one day a week so that I can have one of these every day.”

Irena giggled and waved her hand in the air. “Oh, Miss Jane.”

~

### *Missoula, Montana*

Grace Taylor drove along the winding highway on her way back to Missoula. She kept the heat up and the windows down so she could feel the cool air on her face, and she watched the wind play in the trees and caught the occasional glimpse of the Bitterroot River. It was a perfect symphony of sights and sounds and one that could only be heard in Montana. She reached toward the dash and turned up the heater. She'd turn it up as high as necessary to avoid closing her windows. She loved this drive.

The high winds signaled the changing of the seasons. It had snowed last night, but the balmy afternoon weather had melted most of it away.

Grace noticed an incoming call on her cell phone as it sat mounted to the base on her dashboard. At least she'd left the sound off today, so the ringer didn't interrupt the lull of the trees. Silent or not, the call ruined her peace.

Jane.

Definitely an interruption.

“Why are you calling me again?” Grace yelled at the phone as if Jane could somehow hear the reprimanding question. “Not today.” Grace tapped Decline.

She’d told Jane several times that she didn’t care what Jane did with their mom’s house, but Jane wouldn’t let it go. It only held bad memories. Marie was never affectionate or talkative, but she’d checked out altogether the day her dad died. Grace had been thirteen.

When Grace first came to Missoula for college, she’d gone home on breaks. But Marie always locked herself in her office, barely even saying hello or goodbye. Grace finally got the hint and stopped going home. She’d lived in Missoula full-time for the last nine years and put herself through school for two degrees so far.

If Jane decided to sell the house, Grace could use the money, but she didn’t want it. She wanted nothing from Marie or Jane because they hadn’t wanted her.

Frustrated, Grace grabbed the phone and tossed it in the backseat. She didn’t want to know if Jane called again. She was only five miles from the outskirts of town and wanted to enjoy what remained of this drive.

Grace tried to stay in touch with Jane when Jane left for college. She’d idolized her big sister until that point. But Jane had taken off without even saying goodbye. Grace had written Jane every week for a year. Jane hadn’t answered one single letter.

“Just leave me alone. Please.”

Grace shook her head. She'd been trying to break her habit of talking to herself. So far, her attempts had been futile. Her research partner, Dylan, thought it was cute. Grace would have been insulted if the observation had come from anyone other than Dylan.

Grace guided her SUV around another bend and felt her tires begin to slide. Black ice. The SUV started to spin. She tried to turn the wheel into the spin, but she must have turned too fast. She was in a complete spin. The back tires slid over the edge on the right side, sending Grace rolling. Glass shattered. Tires flattened. Metal crunched. Her body jerked and banged and bounced. When the Cherokee stopped rolling, it was upside down, its back end in the river. The last thing she remembered was wishing she hadn't thrown her phone.

~

When he heard the trauma notice, Sean had just finished explaining discharge instructions to a cardiac patient and his wife. A twenty-eight-year-old female MVA victim was inbound via Life Flight. That meant the accident was bad. He quickly made his way to the elevator and down to the ER. As a trauma ICU nurse, Sean never had more than two patients at a time. Since his only patient had been discharged, the incoming patient would be his.

Sean entered the trauma bay and found the rest of the team already assembled and awaiting the patient's arrival. Trauma bays ran like an orchestra in perfect harmony. Each person knew their role and their spot. Unlike emergency rooms on television, they didn't shout at each other, constantly juggling for space as they treated the patient. In reality, each person had a specific job and went about doing it as soon as the patient arrived.

Sean was glad to see that Dr. Amelia Laskey would be running this trauma. She was one of the best trauma surgeons in the state and the doctor he'd request if anyone he cared about ever came into Missoula Memorial.

The doors to the ER slid open, and Life Flight nurse Adam Holloway entered, pulling a stretcher behind him. The flight paramedic pushed the other end with one hand and squeezed the bag that was temporarily breathing for the patient with the other. Adam immediately began rattling off the patient report.

“Female patient, approximately thirty years old. Single occupant MVA going at a high rate of speed but was restrained. Appears to have lost control on black ice and rolled down an embankment. The vehicle came to rest against a train that was stopped on the tracks. A passerby called 911. Multiple lacerations and abrasions. Facial burns likely from the airbag. Unconscious when we arrived on scene. She flatlined in route. We recovered a pulse which is now weak and thready. Pupils are round and reactive to light. Glasgow scale of three.”

Dr. Laskey stood on one side of the hospital gurney and reached for the sheet beneath the patient on the stretcher.

“Let's move her on my count.”

Sean stood next to Dr. Laskey and reached for the sheet. Adam and the flight paramedic grabbed the sheet on their side.

“One, two, three.”

They slid the patient onto the gurney in one fluid motion. The flight crew removed the stretcher from the trauma bay. They'd come in and out in less than thirty seconds, and the trauma

team took over the patient's care. Her bruised and swollen face was covered in blood from a deep gash along her hairline.

Dr. Laskey began rubbing their patient's sternum. "Wake up. Honey? Can you tell me your name?" Dr. Laskey rubbed a little harder. "Do you know where you are?" Nothing. "She's still unresponsive."

The team worked together to complete multiple tasks at once. Her clothes were cut off, she was intubated, IVs were inserted, and x-rays were taken showing multiple broken ribs, a fractured collarbone, and a fractured elbow on her left side, where most of the impact probably occurred. Adam's report of the patient and the accident details gave the seasoned trauma team a good idea of the type of injuries the patient would have. They treated her accordingly, knowing they had no time to spend on a thorough examination right now. That's what CT scans and surgeries were for.

Sean hung a bag that would pump blood into her body while another nurse hung bags containing fluids and medications. Blood was drawn, orders were submitted for labs and CT scans, and a call to the OR. It was quite possible that their patient had a brain hemorrhage of some kind and internal bleeding from the seatbelt during impact. In less than five minutes, the patient was wheeled off to CT. She'd go straight to the OR from there.

Sean tore his gloves off and noticed the medical student standing outside the room. The poor girl had gone completely white.

"Is that lady going to die?"

"Hope not."

The student, whose tag read Bailey, looked like she would puke.

“First day?” Sean knew that a new group of students was rotating through this week.

Bailey just nodded.

“You’ll get used to it.”

Sean loved to talk with the medical students, but he didn’t have time today. It would take a few hours before his new patient would arrive in the trauma ICU, but he needed to prepare. He had read through any notes already entered into the chart that the charge nurse started in the ER, examining the x-rays, CT scans, and lab results as they came in. He’d also look for any information that was charted from the OR. This information would tell him how to care for his patient when she arrived in the ICU and what he might expect over the next twelve hours. Sean was only ninety minutes into the first of three twelve-hour shifts in a row, so he’d be spending a lot of time with her.

As Sean made his way to the elevator, he heard someone call his name. Turning around, he saw Micah. “What are you doing here?” Micah was a firefighter with the Missoula Fire Department.

Micah held out a purse. “We found this about ten feet away from the car of that accident victim that was just choppered in.”

Sean took the purse. “Thanks.” He started rummaging through it, looking for a wallet or ID.

“Why did they call you guys?” Maybe this accident had been even worse than they thought.

“Yes, but my truck got called because the car crashed into a parked train. It could have been a little dicey. Wasn’t too bad, though. We got her out pretty quickly.” Michah’s truck specialized in search and rescue and got called into all sorts of situations.

“I tossed the cell phone in the pocket, but it probably won’t help. Looks like it got smashed in the accident.” Micah waited for Sean to find the ID. Sean’s face paled as he saw the picture and read the name on the card.

“It’s who I think it is, isn’t it?” Micah asked. “That’s why I brought the purse to you instead of giving it to one of the officers.”

“We registered her as a Jane Doe.” Sean leaned back against the wall, still staring at the photo on the license. “There was no identification on her, and her face was so beat up and swollen that I didn’t recognize her.”

Even though he hadn’t seen Grace since she was seven, there was no mistaking it was her. Same delicate features, auburn hair with freckles splashed across her cheeks.

“I need to call Jane.” Sean wasn’t typically the one that informed the family when a patient was admitted to the hospital, but he would be this time. There was no way he was letting a stranger tell Jane that her sister was in critical condition. From what he’d seen, it was possible she might not even make it.

“I need to get back to the truck.”

Sean finally looked up. “Okay.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Sean walked back to the nurse's station in the ICU and took a seat before pulling out his cell. He no longer had Jane's number, but he knew Chase would. Chase answered quickly.

"Hey. What's up?"

"I need Jane's phone number."

"It's about time. You've been pining over her since you were fourteen."

"Chase, listen."

"Are you coming to Billings? I know she'd like to see you."

"Chase! This isn't a social call. I need Jane's number. It's an emergency."

There was a pause, then Chase asked, "What happened?"

"I can't tell you, but I'll call her if you give me her number. I'm sure she'll call Lucy, and Lucy will tell you everything."

"They're together."

"Perfect. What's her number?"

## Chapter Nine

*Billings, Montana*

Jane laid down on what must have been the twentieth mattress of the day. She and Lucy had spent the afternoon furniture shopping. If she was going to stay in her mom's house, she didn't want to sleep on a mattress that was quite possibly, older than she was. Most of the furniture was the same furniture that had been in the house when Jane left. She'd considered getting some of her things out of storage, but that seemed too much trouble. Better to just pick out a few things and then have the store deliver and set everything up. So far, they'd bought a new sofa and matching chairs with ottomans, a kitchen table because there wasn't one, and a new chair for the bedroom. The mattress was the last item on Jane's list.

"I think I like this one." Jane flopped from side to side a few times and then rolled to her stomach. Then her back. Then her stomach again. Lucy landed hard on the bed beside Jane.

Jane laughed. "What are you, ten?"

Lucy continued to bounce. "Don't you know that the best test of a mattress is how bouncy it is?" She winked. "No matter how old you are."

"I think this is the one." They sat up at the same time. "Firm, but not too firm."

"And bouncy."

"Exactly. I'll take this one." The salesman nodded his approval. Jane figured the smile was more about the fact that they had finally made a decision than any excitement for the sale's commission. He was probably thrilled he'd be getting rid of them soon.

"Will you want delivery with that?"

Jane nodded as she pulled out her credit card. "I will."

He nodded once again and began writing up the sale. He grabbed Jane's card. "I'll be right back."

Ten minutes later, Jane and Lucy walked out of the store with a delivery receipt in Jane's hand for the furniture that would be delivered in a few days.

Lucy squinted from the bright sun. "Where to now?"

Jane pointed to a small bakery next to the furniture store. "There."

"You read my mind." Lucy linked arms with Jane as they made their way over.

They ordered a giant cinnamon roll and two coffees and found a table by the window. Just as their order was called, Jane's cell phone vibrated.

Lucy stood. "Get that. I'll go get our order."

The caller ID said it was Missoula Memorial Hospital. Jane tried not to panic, but there was no reason for anyone to call her from a Missoula hospital unless something happened to Grace.

"Hello?"

"Jane. Hi. This is Sean Garrison." He paused slightly. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Jane stilled. The voice on the other end of the line was oddly strange and familiar at the same time. Much deeper than she remembered. She was talking to Sean Garrison, which should have made her happy, except he said he had bad news.

“Sean. Hi. That’s an interesting way to start a conversation after so many years.” Jane attempted to lighten the tension that ping-ponged over the line. It didn’t work.

“I know, and I’m sorry about that. I wish this were a social call, but it’s not.”

“Then why are you calling.” Lucy returned with their order and immediately noticed that something was wrong. Jane held up a finger.

“I think you know that I work at Missoula Memorial Hospital now.”

“Yes, Lucy told me.”

“Well, I’m a trauma ICU nurse, and I’m calling to let you know that Grace was brought in earlier today. She was in a car accident.”

Jane stood up so abruptly that she knocked her chair over. Lucy bent down to pick it up and move it out of Jane’s way. Jane covered the phone and whispered to Lucy, “It’s Sean. Grace is in the hospital.”

Turning her attention back to Sean, she asked, “Is she okay? Was she hurt?”

“She’s critical. She’s in surgery right now but should be out shortly. She’ll be on my floor, and I’ll be taking care of her for the next few days.”

Jane’s face paled as she rubbed her forehead. Without thinking, she started walking out of the bakery. Lucy handed the untouched cinnamon roll to the couple at the next table with a quick “Enjoy this,” then gathered their things, including Jane’s purse, and followed her outside.

“Okay. I’ll leave as soon as I can.” Jane looked at her watch. It was a little after 2:00 pm. It was a five-hour drive to Missoula. “I should be there by 9:00 pm at the latest.”

“I’ll be off work by then, but I’ll hang around to meet you.”

“You don’t have to do that.” *Please stay.*

“Yes, I do. I can explain everything to you when you get here. Take you to see Grace and answer any questions you have.” Sean continued when Jane didn’t respond. “You have my number on your caller ID. Text me when you get here, and I’ll come down to meet you.”

Jane nodded.

“Jane, are you still there?” Right. She needed to respond verbally.

“Yes, I’m still here.”

Sean gentled his voice. “Did you catch what I said?”

“Text you when I get there.”

“Okay. Drive safe, and I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.” Jane ended the call and turned to Lucy.

“That was Sean.”

Lucy handed Jane her purse and coffee. “What did he say?”

“Grace was in an accident, and it’s bad. He’ll tell me everything when I get there.”

Lucy took hold of Jane’s arm. “Let’s go. I’ll drive you to your house, and you can pack some things. It sounds like you might be there awhile.” Jane hadn’t even thought of that or remembered that Lucy had driven them to the store today.

Minutes later, Lucy pulled up to the curb in front of Jane's house. Jane didn't even remember getting into the car. She followed Lucy to the front door in a daze. Was she about to lose her last remaining family member?

Lucy squeezed Jane's shoulder, concern in her expression. "Maybe I should go with you. I don't think you should be driving right now."

Jane shook her head hard. "No... I'll be fine." She made eye contact with Lucy in an attempt to assure her friend that she'd be okay. "Besides, like you said, I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"Hey, what happened?" Chase appeared in the doorway dressed in his paramedic uniform. He looked at Jane. "Sean called me for your number. Said it was an emergency."

"Grace was in a car accident. Sean called to tell me she's in the hospital."

"Ah, Jane." Chase pulled her into his brotherly embrace. "What did he say about her condition?"

"I'll go pack a bag for you." Lucy disappeared down the hallway as Jane filled Chase in on her conversation with Sean.

"Do you think you should be driving? Lucy can go with you."

Jane shook her head. "No, I don't know how long I'll be gone. I'm fine." Chase gave her a skeptical look. "Really. I'll be okay." Jane didn't want company. Not even Lucy.

Lucy reappeared, pulling a small rolling suitcase behind her. She handed Jane her phone charger from the bedroom and her tablet from the kitchen counter. "I filled your suitcase with yoga pants and sweatshirts. It's a bit cooler in Missoula than in Billings this time of year."

Jane thanked Lucy and stuffed the charger and tablet into her purse. Chase took Jane's suitcase and put it in the backseat of her car.

Lucy and Jane followed him to the car. Chase put his hand on the door to halt Jane from opening it. "You be careful. You know the weather is unpredictable this time of year. You could encounter rain or snow or a combination of the two. And you'll be getting there in the dark, so if the roads are wet, they'll freeze."

Jane nodded, and Chase opened her door. Once Jane was seated and buckled into the driver's side, Chase and Lucy held her hand tightly as Chase said a quick prayer asking God to keep Jane safe and heal Grace.

"If the roads get too bad or you get too tired, pull over and call Lucy or me. We'll come get you and take you to Missoula."

Then Jane nodded then backed out of the driveway. She pressed down on the accelerator as soon as she was out of sight.

~

It was almost midnight when Jane pulled into the parking lot of Missoula Memorial Hospital. She'd been stuck on I-90 about 60 miles outside Missoula for nearly three hours due to a multi-car pileup around a jackknifed semi-truck. Chase had been right. The roads got slick once the sun went down. She'd made great time up to that point.

Jane texted Sean while sitting on the highway waiting for the truck to get towed. He'd insisted on waiting for her, and she was glad if she were being honest with herself. It would be

good to have someone with her when she saw Grace, especially someone who could help her understand what was happening.

As it got closer to 9:00 pm and Jane was still sitting on the highway, Chase texted that she would need to come to the Emergency entrance since all the other doors would be locked until morning. Now she followed the signs around to the side of the hospital and parked in the ER parking lot. Due to the late hour, she was able to park right near the door.

She texted Sean as soon as she shut off her car and then hurried inside. She'd barely made it through the revolving door when an elevator opened to her right, and there he was. The sight of him shook loose something inside her. She'd kept calm throughout the long drive, praying and begging God not to take her entire family from her. Besides, she wanted a chance to restore her relationship with Grace. She'd given herself a pep talk as she sat on the highway, telling herself that Grace would need her to be strong. That there was no reason to cry. Everything would be okay. And then she saw Sean and the floodgates opened, and tears spilled from her eyes. She stood motionless and buried her face in her hands.

Within seconds she was enveloped in the strong arms of Sean Garrison. "Hey now, it's going to be okay. This is a great hospital." He stepped back and rested his hands on Jane's shoulders, waiting until she looked at him. "We'll take care of her."

Jane's only response was to nod and sniffle. Sean walked a few short steps to the reception desk and pulled a few tissues from the box. He handed them to Jane. She wiped her eyes and nose before speaking.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't planning to do that."

“No problem. Do you want me to take you right to Grace, or would you like me to explain what’s going on first?”

Jane didn’t hesitate. “I want to go to Grace.”

“Let’s go.” Sean wanted to take her hand, but he didn’t think that would be a good idea. He could tell she was a bit embarrassed at the breakdown and didn’t know how she felt about the hug. He didn’t want to overstep, but he couldn’t get to her fast enough when he saw the tears start. He was still hung up on Jane. But now was not the time to talk about that, so he guided her to the elevator and pushed the number four to take them to the Trauma ICU. But as they stepped out of the elevator, his hand went to the small of her back as if it had a mind of his own.

“Grace’s bed is right over her.” They walked down a short hallway on the right and stopped at the third bay. A curtain was drawn, blocking Jane’s view of what she assumed was Grace. Sean stepped in front of her and turned.

“You might not recognize her. Her face is badly swollen and bruised, and her head is bandaged. She’s in a medically induced coma to help her body get the rest it needs.” Jane just stood there, eyes wide, face pale.

Sean took hold of her elbow. “Are you ready?” Jane nodded, and Sean turned around and pulled back the curtain. Jane gasped. She leaned against the wall and stared at the nurse’s station in the opposite direction of Grace. She’d only caught a glimpse of the puffy, black, and purple face wrapped in a crown of white gauze, but that couldn’t be her little sister.

“Jane, why don’t we go to the waiting room and sit for a minute?” He took hold of Jane’s elbow, and the fact that she didn’t protest at all when he led her away was concerning. He watched her carefully as she sat in one of the dozen look-alike blue chairs spread in clusters

around the ICU waiting area. She held her hands between her knees and nervously rubbed them together, but her eyes were clear.

“I expected tubes and machines, but I didn’t expect her to look like someone else.” Jane’s voice was barely above a whisper.

“The car rolled, and it seems that her left side took the brunt of the impact multiple times. That’s the side you saw. The right side is injured, but it’s not as severe.”

Jane looked up at Sean. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Do you want me to give you the clinical speech that I usually give my patient’s family, or do you want me to go into detail?”

Jane thought for a moment. She appreciated that Sean wasn’t treating her like any other family member. But she wasn’t sure if she was ready for every detail.

“Just give me the overview for now. Then maybe more details tomorrow?”

Sean nodded. “Okay. She has several broken facial bones. There is swelling in her brain. That’s why you saw the bandage. She had surgery to relieve the pressure. Her left lung collapsed, and she had a chest tube put in to relieve fluid that had built up around her lungs. She had internal bleeding that was caused by a tear in her liver. She had surgery for that too. Her left collarbone was broken. She has tears in the ligaments of her right ankle. She has twenty-seven stitches on her forehead for a gash and another seventeen for a gash on her right thigh. She has several broken ribs, and her left elbow is fractured. We might find more injuries or change part of her diagnosis over the next few days. That’s not uncommon.”

Jane continued rubbing her hands together. When she didn't respond, Sean asked, "Do you have any questions?"

Jane looked up at him with watery eyes. "Is she going to die?"

Sean's gut squeezed. He couldn't tell her that wouldn't happen. Grace was very ill.

"I don't know." A lone tear trailed down Jane's cheek. Sean leaned forward and folded his hands to keep from wiping it away. "Grace's condition isn't good. The next 72 hours will be touch and go. If she makes it through that, then she has a chance."

"She can't die. She... We..." Jane started rubbing her hands together again. "Something's wrong between us, and I don't know what. I need time to fix it."

Jane leaned back and covered her mouth. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Sean got up and ran around the corner, coming back in seconds with a blue barf bag. He handed it to Jane. No sooner had she taken hold of it than she lost what little was in her stomach. She hadn't eaten all day, only stopping once for coffee and gas on the road.

Jane hadn't noticed that Sean had left again until he reappeared with a warm, wet cloth. He held it out to her.

"Thanks."

Sean retook the chair next to Jane.

"I can't believe I'm such a mess." She was embarrassed. In less than an hour, she'd cried all over the front of Sean's shirt, wiped snot from her nose, and thrown up. Great first impression after so many years. It almost made her laugh. Not quite. But almost.

“You have nothing to apologize for. The puking was from adrenaline. You’d be surprised at the array of reactions I see from family members.” He smiled. “At least you didn’t pass out and hit your head on the floor, giving yourself a concussion.”

“Does that really happen?”

“It really does.”

“Can I go see Grace now?”

“Yes. Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I think so.”

Sean walked Jane back to the room. Jane slowly walked toward Grace’s bed.

“Can I touch her?”

“You can. You can talk to her too. She won’t respond, but she can probably hear you.”

Jane gently took hold of Grace’s hand. “I don’t know if she wants to hear my voice.”

Jane looked at Sean. “She’s really mad at me?”

“What happened?”

Jane shrugged. “I wish I knew.” For some crazy reason, Jane wanted to tell Sean everything that had happened over the last several months. And that made no sense. They hadn’t been close in twenty years. But he was so familiar, like the Sean she remembered but better. He was confident, in control. He’d grown up.

“Hi, Sean.” A female voice broke into her thoughts. She turned to see a thirty-something woman with striking green eyes and red hair parted into two pigtailed and twisted into knots on either side of her head. She was dressed in navy blue scrubs similar to Sean’s.

“You must be Jane.” The woman extended her hand to Jane.

“Jane, this is Amanda. She’ll be Grace’s nurse until I’m back on shift in the morning.”

Jane shook Amanda’s hand, then looked nervously at Sean. He seemed to understand her unspoken question.

“Amanda’s a great nurse. Grace is in good hands.”

Amanda gave Jane a conspiratorial look. “He has to say that. He trained me. So if I’m not a good nurse, it’s Sean’s fault.” She winked at Jane.

Amanda walked around to the other side of Grace’s bed and looked over the machines. “Everything looks good right now. I’ll leave you two to talk. Jane, let me know if you need anything.”

After Amanda left, Sean turned back to Jane. He pointed to the chair in the corner of the tiny space. That chair is a recliner if you want to stay here. I can get you a blanket and pillow. Or I can take you to my mom’s house. I told her what happened, and she said you’re more than welcome to stay with her while you’re here. She’s only about ten minutes away.”

“I’d like to stay here if that’s okay.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Jane took hold of Grace’s hand again. “Please don’t go. Whatever I did, I’ll make it right. You just need to give me more time.”

Sean re-entered the room. “Here you go.” Sean set a pillow and blanket on the chair. “For whenever you want to sit down. It will get chilly in here.”

Sean fidgeted as if he was unsure what to do next. “I need to get some sleep before I’m back on shift again.”

Jane glanced at the clock. It was almost 2:00 am. “I’m sorry. I didn’t even think – “

“You don’t need to apologize. I wanted to be here. And I’m used to going on much less sleep than this. I’ll be back in the morning. But you call me or text if you need anything. I’m keeping my ringer on.”

Jane leaned against the rail on Grace’s bed.

“Thank you, Sean. For being here.”

“I’ll always be here for you.”

Sean quickly left the room before Jane could respond. She settled into the chair and wrapped herself in the blanket, intending to watch over Grace. But her eyes drifted shut within seconds.

Sean walked to the nurse’s station, where Amanda sat at a computer. “I’m going to sleep in the nurse’s lounge. Come get me if anything happens with Grace. Or Jane.”

“You got it.”

To be continued...