

The
Nature *of* Cacti
and Satellites
•••
KAITLIN CRANOR



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For Evan.

You are the reason this book finally happened.

I love you so much.

Chapter 1

[August 1996]

Civil disobedience looked so much cooler in movies.

As Rosalee sat between the looming bulldozer and the magnificent cottonwood in front of Picket General Hospital, she listened to the sputter of the idling engine and realized that her initial burst of adrenaline had long since dissipated. The lingering emotion was hard to identify, but it didn't feel like fear.

The only things that truly worried her in this situation were that (a) she might not be able to stop the bulldozer from destroying the tree, and (b) her frail arms might pop out of their sockets like a mistreated Barbie doll, should the operator attempt to drag her away by her ankles. Otherwise, she was a little ... bored.

At least it was a beautiful day. The intermittent wind throughout the morning had left the sky virtually cloudless and the shade of cerulean often featured in vacation brochures for cruises to the Caribbean. The indigo mountain range that trimmed the horizon was more crisp and clear in the blazing sunlight.

As Rosalee contemplated her surroundings, the stocky bulldozer operator ambled back into view, gesticulating angrily and shouting into his cellular phone. Rosalee redoubled her backward grip on the tree trunk and pressed her spine further into the rough bark. The

operator stopped pacing for a moment, listening hard to the voice on the other end as the scowl on his face deepened.

“I know, but this goddamn *hippie*—” He shot a nasty look at Rosalee. “—won’t get out of my goddamn way. I don’t know, some chick with ratty hair. I don’t think—I already—great, thanks.”

The operator snapped his phone shut as Rosalee inspected the end of the naturally red braid that hung nearly to her waist. Had she brushed her hair that morning? Actually, she was pretty sure she had slept in the braid.

Meanwhile, the operator stomped over to stand in front of her. Rosalee raised her eyebrows, then caught hold of a tall stalk of wild grass growing close to her calf. She yanked it up and stuck the end between her teeth before snaking her arm backward around the tree trunk.

The operator’s phone rang and he turned his back on Rosalee again. “What?” he snarled into the mouthpiece. “No, I didn’t ask her yet.” He turned back to Rosalee. “You want money or somethin’?” The voice on the other end of the phone buzzed like a hornet. “Well, how the hell was I supposed to say it, then? *What do you want?*” he barked at Rosalee.

“It’s pretty simple ... *Stan*,” said Rosalee, speaking around the stalk. “I don’t want you to doze this tree.”

The operator glanced down at his name embroidered on his sweaty work shirt. “She doesn’t want me to ‘doze’ the tree.” He rolled his eyes. “I don’t know why. Why?” he said, jutting his chin in Rosalee’s direction.

“Is that your supervisor?”

“Yup.”

“Can I talk to him?”

“Nope.”

Rosalee crossed her legs in front of her and sat back again, chewing on the end of the grass. She had no place to be.

Stan listened to his supervisor for several moments, frowning. “No, just—I’ll hold.” He sighed. “You want money or somethin’?” he said to Rosalee.

“You already asked me that.”

“You didn’t answer me.”

“No, I don’t want money. Can I talk to your supervisor, *please*?”

“No … *thank you*,” Stan said mockingly.

“*Rose!*”

Rosalee turned a little too sharply and felt bark scrape through the thin material of her worn-out polo shirt. The air shimmered above the asphalt and blurred the outline of her younger sister, Ellie, in a flowered sundress, marching up the hill from the parking lot with a small duffle bag in tow. Rosalee leapt to her feet, then laid her palms quickly back against the tree as Stan dared to look momentarily hopeful.

As soon as she reached her, Rosalee shaded her eyes with one hand to try to read her sister’s expression. “Hi. Everything okay?”

Ellie nodded, wiping stray strawberry blonde hairs off her forehead as she handed Rosalee the duffle bag. “Brought you some stuff for your protest. Jeez, it’s hot.”

“Thanks. How did you know I was here?”

“Aunt Lola. She said after you guys dropped off the chairs, you decided to sit out here and fry instead of coming home.”

Rosalee sat down again with the bag. “Well, it shouldn’t be long now. I’ve got this guy right where I want him.”

Ellie eyed Stan dubiously. He was still glued to his phone and, presumably, on hold. Hesitantly, she sat next to Rosalee, tucking the skirt of her sundress neatly beneath her. “You’re gonna ruin your teeth.”

Rosalee ignored her and repositioned the grass so that it stuck out between her front ones, then wiggled it up and down with her tongue. “Remember that tree in Pete’s backyard we used to climb and hang upside down in?”

“And then we had splinters stuck in our legs for the rest of the summer?” Ellie smiled. “This one looks a lot like it. Why are they knocking it down, anyway?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t paying attention. I was too busy watching the icky, sweaty man freak out.”

As if on cue, Stan snapped his phone shut and headed their way, looking more disgruntled than ever. Rosalee saw Ellie stiffen out of the corner of her eye.

“You don’t have to stay if you don’t want to. No reason for you to get in trouble, too,” said Rosalee.

“It’s okay. I don’t want him to knock over this tree, either.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you don’t.”

Rosalee glanced at her sister, who smiled tentatively back.

“Okay ladies, time’s up. Move it.” Stan planted his feet squarely beneath him and glowered down at them.

“What did your supervisor say?” said Rosalee, squinting into the sun to look at him.

Stan slapped a fly away from his shiny neck.

“He said that I can ask you kindly, again, to move, or I can call the Sheriff and let him do the honors.”

Beside her, Ellie fidgeted nervously, but Rosalee remained unfazed.

“Did you ever think that telling me why you need this tree down might save you some trouble?” she said.

The operator motioned irritably behind him before digging his phone out of his pocket again. “Like I told you, it’s blocking that there sign. Now, you’ve got about ten seconds to move, or it’s cuffs for you.”

“*Handcuffs*,” Rosalee muttered. “That’s what I should have brought.”

“*What?*” Ellie said sharply.

“Well, then I could have chained myself to the—never mind,” said Rosalee quickly, catching sight of her sister’s expression.

Ellie sighed.

“Thinking about Aunties?” said Rosalee.

“Thinking about your bail. Everybody at the bank should be back from lunch now.”

“There’s money in my sock drawer from that stenciling job last week. But I don’t think the Sheriff is going to bother arresting me.” Rosalee raised her voice a few decibels for Stan’s benefit. “See, we’re on pretty good terms with the Sheriff, aren’t we, El? What with him coming around to dinner sometimes?”

Stan appeared not to have heard her, although she did notice a particularly juicy vein pulsating in his neck as he punched in a number at the bottom of his phone.

“What’s with the accent?” Ellie said quietly as she got to her feet.

“I don’t know, it just came out.”

Ellie nodded in approval. “Very ‘small-town-Southern-y.’ Although ... we’re in Colorado, so ... You sure you don’t want me to wait with you?”

“Go on. *Git.*” Rosalee shooed her sister away. “Thanks for the care package.”

She watched Ellie walk back toward the parking lot, then pulled the duffle bag into her lap to investigate the contents while Stan grumbled

into his phone. He turned at the sound of the zipper and ended the call. “Hold on a second, young lady. What’ve ya got there?”

Rosalee opened the bag wider and dumped several items onto the grass in front of her. “Well, let’s see. Sunscreen, sunglasses ...” She paused to put them on. “Mmm, homemade corn muffins, *Vogue* ... good grief.” Ellie was relentless. Stan only glared and wiped his forehead with the back of a gritty arm while Rosalee continued through the pack. “Walkman, and—” She stopped to unscrew the top of a plastic water bottle and sniff. “—iced tea. You want some?”

Stan scoffed. “What, so you can poison me?”

Rosalee finally removed the grass from her mouth, tossing it away behind her before taking a long drink from the bottle. She smacked her lips appreciatively. “Just bein’ polite,” she drawled, unable to stop her charade now that she’d started.

Stan harrumphed and turned back toward his bulldozer. “The long arm of the law’ll be here any minute. If you was a sensible girl, you’d stay outta reach of it. Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

He stumped away to wait in the cab while Rosalee unwound the headphone cord wrapped around her tape player. She pressed PLAY and was immediately engulfed in pop music so bright and shiny that she halfway expected something pink and glittery to ooze out of the auxiliary port. She stopped the cassette and popped the tape deck to find Madonna’s *Bedtime Stories*—not the tape she had left in there. Ellie was no longer allowed to borrow her Walkman. She would have to put her foot down.



By the time the Sheriff’s two-tone brown and tan Ford pulled up, Rosalee was pretending to read an article about pairing your jean jacket

with the quintessential clutch while actually wondering how in the world she was going to manage to save this tree. She waved as he parked, then stuffed the magazine and her Walkman back into the duffle bag.

The Sheriff got out of his truck, shaking his head. Rosalee had known him most of her life and never ceased to be amazed by the calming presence that emanated from his person. In his mid-forties, he was undoubtedly handsome, with smooth bronze skin and shiny black hair that always reminded her of crow feathers. If anyone could turn this fiasco around, it was the Sheriff.

“Ms. Andrews.” He touched the brim of his hat in acknowledgment as he made his way toward the bulldozer.

“Hi, Sheriff.”

Stan hopped out of the cab, hitching up his waistband as he approached. “You’re the sheriff?” he said gruffly. “Martino or some-thin’?”

“Martinez, that’s right.” The Sheriff extended his hand. “You must be Mr. Gallagher. Pleased to meet you.”

Stan grasped his hand, looking him up and down skeptically. Compared to Sheriff Martinez, who was sturdy but slender, Stan’s ungainly bulk made Rosalee think of a boulder next to a sycamore.

“Ms. Andrews?” The Sheriff turned back to her and the tree. “Would you come over here, please?”

“Sheriff, sir, with all due respect, I can’t leave this tree or he’ll knock it over.”

“Please,” he said again.

Slowly, as slowly as was physically possible, Rosalee pushed herself up from the ground and meandered toward the men. Meanwhile, Stan’s phone rang and he struggled to retrieve it from the depths of his pocket. He pointed to it unnecessarily. “I gotta take this.”

The Sheriff nodded, then waited until Stan was out of hearing range to turn back to Rosalee. “What’s with the accent?”

“It just came out.” She waved a hand dismissively.

“Rosalee, there’s nothing I can do here. This is private property and the hospital has every right to see to its landscaping.”

The unexpected tenderness behind his aviator sunglasses caused Rosalee’s eyes to well up. She blinked rapidly to clear them. “Because of a sign, though? Because this beautiful sculpture of nature is in front of their stupid sign? How is that okay? You know, we need these things for oxygen—they’re not just for decoration.”

Sheriff Martinez raised his eyebrows, although Rosalee detected a hint of amusement beneath them.

“Sorry,” she said anyway.

“Look, I don’t want you to get in trouble, but the hospital called me about potential trespassing charges even before this ... fine gentleman.”

Rosalee shot a dark look toward the large windows of the hospital, where several patients and employees were staring unabashedly through its windows as though this situation were some sort of zoo exhibit. Several other people sat outside by the entrance on benches and concrete ledges, consuming their lunches with their faces also pointed toward the spectacle. Further around the corner of the building, a man in a button-down shirt and tie and a woman in scrubs puffed on cigarettes, flicking the cherries into a large, concrete ashtray.

“Hey, Sheriff,” Stan called, holding his phone away from his mouth, “My supervisor’d like a word.”

As the Sheriff walked over to Stan and the bulldozer, Rosalee turned her attention back to the main entrance of the hospital and saw Gwen, one of the HR employees, heading out with a stack of paperwork and a travel mug of coffee balanced precariously on top. Rosalee waved half-heartedly and Gwen made her way toward her, before the fancy

smoker in the shirt and tie intercepted her course. Rosalee watched as they chatted and Gwen shifted the stack of papers in her arms to awkwardly shake the man's hand.

Of all of the people she knew from the hospital (and that was only a few so far) Gwen was her favorite. She was short and petite, with wavy, dark brown hair that was almost always tied back in a practical ponytail. Rosalee figured she was probably in her late thirties, but the spattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks would likely keep her looking much younger for years to come.

At long last, she made it to Rosalee. "Hey, honey. I'm heading out. You want a ride?"

"I'm alright. Thanks, though."

Gwen furrowed her brow and leaned closer. "Is everything okay? You're not going to get arrested, are you?"

Rosalee shrugged. "I doubt it. Who was that guy you were talking to back there?"

"Oh, we interviewed him about a construction job on some of the new wings. Nice young man." Gwen glanced behind her, then turned back to Rosalee, not to be deterred from her motherly instincts. "Anything you want me to relay to your aunts? I'm headed over to Lola's class in a few."

"No, thanks, I have a feeling this will be over soon anyway." Rosalee nodded toward the Sheriff, who was finally off of Stan's phone.

"Okay, well, I'm gonna get going, then. Afternoon, Sheriff," she called as she went.

Sheriff Martinez tipped his hat toward Gwen as he walked back to Rosalee. Stan was bobbing along in his wake, looking sickeningly smug.

“Ms. Andrews, Stan’s company is going to bill the hospital whether or not this tree comes down today. I’d hate for you to have to pay the invoice, so I’m afraid we’ll need to move you.”

“You can’t *physically* move me, though,” said Rosalee.

The Sheriff looked pointedly at Stan, who was practically salivating over his shoulder. “Give us another minute, will you please?”

Stan’s mouth worked heatedly before he spat in the dirt and lumbered away again, muttering under his breath.

“Rosalee,” said Sheriff Martinez, quietly enough that he wouldn’t be overheard. “I know you’re going through a lot right now, what with Evelyn and ... everything.”

Evelyn.

Rosalee wrapped her arms around her body protectively as though it might help to shield her from the sudden wave of emotions threatening to crush her. She struggled to keep her breathing calm and even.

“My hands are tied here, hun,” said the Sheriff. “I’m so sorry.”

But Rosalee couldn’t let it go yet, even if it meant grasping wildly at any straw that might provide a tether to this rapidly unraveling state of affairs. “What if it turns out that this hospital was built on, like ... a Native American burial ground or something?”

The Sheriff gave a half-smile. “I’m afraid the historical society would have documented such an occurrence before the structure was even built.”

Rosalee slumped in on herself and felt the dreaded tickle in the back of her eyes again. She tilted her head back and blinked against the gathering moisture. “There has to be something we can do. This tree has been here forever. I mean, what if I, like ... bought it off of them?”

“What if you ‘bought it off of them?’”

“Yeah, like, maybe I could pay to replant it somewhere else, or I could pay for a new, bigger sign so they didn’t have to move the tree at all.”

There was no way that Rosalee’s painting money could pay for bail, landscaping services, *and* a giant tree, but she had to try. Meanwhile, Sheriff Martinez was looking at her with something that looked suspiciously like pity, which made her feel even more pathetic.

She turned away from him to see the fancy smoker approaching them (minus his cloud of smoke), straightening his tie importantly as he came. This close, Rosalee realized that he must be near her age, with dark blonde hair and darker eyes, one of which winked at her so quickly she thought she might have imagined it.

Stan reapproached the little gathering, the vein in his neck throbbing dangerously again.

“Afternoon, Ms. Andrews. Gentlemen,” said the newcomer, nodding at Rosalee, the Sheriff, and Stan in turn.

Rosalee stiffened. How did he know her name?

“I’m Alex Conway, Ms. Andrews’ attorney, and I’d like to ask you a few questions before you knock down this tree,” he said to Stan, pulling a pen and legal pad out of his messenger bag.

Rosalee blinked as a tiny bubble of hope blossomed deep in her chest. Could this possibly be real? On the one hand, she knew she couldn’t afford an attorney, but on the other, wasn’t it worth a shot? She quickly arranged her features to look as though the introduction and concept were not brand-new information. Out of her peripheral vision, she saw Sheriff Martinez shake his head at the ground.

Stan looked back and forth between everyone as though waiting for a punchline. When none came, he became steadily more purple in the face until finally, he began to shout so loudly that spittle appeared at the corners of his mouth. “NOW LISTEN HERE, YOU ALL, I’VE

HAD ABOUT ENOUGH OF THIS TODAY!" he bellowed, "I'VE ALREADY MISSED AN HOUR AND A HALF OF WORK, IT'S HOTTER THAN SATAN'S GONADS OUT HERE, AND I'M LONG OVERDUE FOR A PISS!"

"I understand, sir," Sheriff Martinez began in a pacifying tone, but Stan had already spun on his heel and was moving faster than Rosalee had seen him go yet. The Sheriff hastened to follow him.

Rosalee turned frantically to Alex Conway, alleged attorney. "What do we do now?"

Before he could answer her, the bulldozer roared to life, making them both jump. He and Rosalee watched in horror as the heavy machine swung around sharply and rumbled toward the cottonwood.

"*No!*" Rosalee screamed, launching herself back toward the tree.

She could hear Sheriff Martinez shouting at Stan from the side of the bulldozer and braced herself for the impact of the first blow with her heart pounding in her ears—the engine hadn't slowed in the slightest. But before she could relinquish her grip, her legs were swept clean out from under her.

Rosalee struggled in Alex's arms with all of her strength as he heaved her out of the way, shouting herself hoarse until a tumultuous crash rendered her momentarily breathless. Only then did she succeed in elbowing out of his arms, but he caught her again around the middle before she could get the ground properly under her feet.

A resounding crash rent the air and Rosalee sagged, sinking with Alex to her knees, where he finally released her. Then she was sobbing and there was nothing to do but let her sorrow consume and immobilize her. Her body shuddered with the marrow-deep sadness that she knew had very little to do with the tree because truthfully, she had expected to fail from the beginning.

"Shit, shit, *shiiit!*" she yelled into her knees.

She couldn't bear to look at the broken remains of what seconds ago was life and grace and beauty, nor could she pick herself up from where she knelt on the ground, feeling little pieces of herself breaking, too. Eventually, she felt a warm and tentative hand on her back. She threw it off and wiped her eyes furiously on the collar of her shirt before glaring up at the attorney.

"I'm *so* sorry," he said, panting. He was still next to her on the ground, trying to catch his breath.

"Are you *even* an attorney?" said Rosalee. "How the hell did you know who I was?"

Alex nodded back toward the hospital. "I asked Gwen. And no, I'm not."

At least he had the decency to look ashamed of himself.

"I—thought you were trying to help me." Rosalee tilted her head back to stem the flow of tears that leaked out of the corners of her eyes and ran down her cheeks anyway.

Alex wiped the sweat off of his forehead with the sleeve of his dress shirt and gestured toward Stan, who had a manic glint in his eyes as he surveyed the destruction he had rendered. "I was trying to help you not get murdered."

Rosalee shook her head in exasperation and looked over at Sheriff Martinez, who was still yelling at him. "He wouldn't have killed me. He's kind of a dick, but I doubt he's willing to go to prison."

Alex raised his eyebrows skeptically. They watched as Stan threw the bulldozer into reverse.

"Stop!" Rosalee shouted.

She hauled herself up from the ground again and ran back to the tree, then tugged at the duffle bag, which was caught underneath the bulldozer's track. One final heave and the bag ripped free, tearing along the seam. She rummaged inside and was relieved to find that she had

at least escaped this odious incident with an intact cassette player. The corn muffins and sunglasses (which had apparently fallen off during her tussle with Alex), had seen better days.

She tried very hard not to look at the mangled pile of sticks and splinters next to her as she shoved everything down to the undamaged portion of the bag. She wiped the last of her tears away surreptitiously before turning to face Stan and Sheriff Martinez.

“Well, I should go. Thanks for trying, Sheriff. And you, *Stan*,” she said, infusing as much hostility as possible into the last word.

Stan’s answering self-satisfied expression nearly activated her up-chuck reflex. “Ma’am,” he said, tipping an imaginary hat.

Rosalee ignored Alex completely as she walked past him toward the road, her Walkman wedged under one arm as she gathered the torn edges of the duffle bag and bound them together with a thick hair tie from her wrist.

“Hold on a minute, Ms. Andrews,” Sheriff Martinez called after her. “I still have to take you in.”

Rosalee stopped walking as a hearty guffaw erupted from the bulldozer cabin. She turned back miserably. “You do?”

Sheriff Martinez nodded as he waved the bulldozer away. “And bring your ... attorney.”

Chapter 2

Sheriff Martinez insisted on driving Rosalee home, but she was relieved when he didn't have time to come inside. She waved goodbye at the end of the long, dirt driveway until he rounded the corner, then made her way up to the house. He hadn't actually taken her or Alex into the station, although he treated them to a short lecture about the more misguided aspects of their tree-saving attempt.

As she trudged up the front porch steps, her combat boots weighing her down even more in the heat, she lingered by the marigolds soaking up the late summer sunshine. Her Aunt Robin had planted them along the porch railing in every shade of yellow, orange, and red she could find—for Evelyn.

And again, the ever-present lump in Rosalee's throat distended into her airway. Her eyes strayed to the large bay window and the dining room beyond it, and she backed herself up against the railing, hoping the small assembly at the table hadn't seen her yet. As much as she hated crying in front of strangers, she especially hated crying in front of her family. She leaned forward again, enough to catch a glimpse of her Aunt Lola, still in her workout clothes with her thick, blonde hair swept up off of her neck with a scrunchy, and Ellie, sitting across from her. They appeared to be focused on something on the table between them and, thankfully, hadn't noticed Rosalee grappling with her feelings on the porch.

The woman who had practically raised Rosalee and Ellie—who had been more of a mother than their actual mother—was gone from this world, and Rosalee could hardly understand how it kept right on spinning anyway. She wondered if Evelyn could see the flowers that her sister, Robin, had so lovingly sown for her, wherever she was.

It was several more minutes before Rosalee was calm enough to push the front door open and walk into the dining room.

“Well, speak of the devil, there’s the felon herself,” said Lola.

“Hey.” Rosalee flopped down into the chair next to her, then pulled the bottle of iced tea out of her ruined duffle bag and shoved the rest under her seat. She took a long, deep draft. “God, it’s hot.”

“It’s not too bad in here,” said Ellie.

She barely looked up, as she was busy picking beads out of a mixing bowl and sorting them into a plastic container with many compartments—like a tackle box, only this one was full to bursting with beads of every size and color imaginable.

“New shipment?” Rosalee asked Lola, who was likewise occupied.

Lola nodded. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I couldn’t resist. Just *look* at them.”

Rosalee held out a hand and Lola dropped several glass beads the size of peas into it. She tilted her palm to examine the effect of a black and white marbled bead next to a deep, bottle green one and a smooth onyx. “Wow. These are kind of amazing.”

Robin emerged from the kitchen, running a hand through her short-cropped, salt and pepper hair, damp with sweat. The dirt stains on the knees of her jeans suggested that she must have been gardening in the backyard. She nodded at Rosalee. “How’d it go?”

“Not good. They tore it down.”

“They tore it down?” Ellie yelped, scattering her pile of beads and then throwing herself on top of them in her scramble to keep them from rolling off the edges of the table.

Rosalee nodded and bit her lower lip as it began to tremble.

“Oh, honey.” Lola reached a hand toward Rosalee’s, but stopped just shy of it.

“Why’d they knock it over?” said Robin, leaning against the doorframe.

“Blocking a sign, wasn’t it?” said Ellie. “I thought that’s what the icky, sweaty man said.”

“Stan,” said Rosalee. Ellie made a face. “But no one pressed charges this time.”

Robin nodded and the lines around her mouth softened perceptibly.

Lola scoffed. “Well, I should think not, after you painted those gorgeous chairs for the hospital for practically nothing.”

Rosalee shrugged. She was starting to feel self-conscious with everyone’s eyes trained on her.

“How are you feeling?” said Robin.

“Fine.”

Although, as Rosalee turned her thoughts inward for the first time since the tree went down, she realized that “exhausted” would have been a more accurate description.

Robin seemed to gather that from her face. “You look like hell. I think you oughta lie down for a bit.”

Rosalee was too drained to argue, especially since now that she realized she was tired, it was only getting worse. She took the bottle of watered-down iced tea with her as she nearly crawled up the stairs to her bedroom and fell onto the blue cotton comforter, fully clothed. She didn’t wake for several hours.

When Rosalee finally came to, Ellie was sitting at the wooden desk next to her bed, flipping pages in a magazine and chewing noisily on a piece of gum.

“Hey,” said Rosalee, feeling groggy.

“Hey. Aunties told me to tell you dinner’s almost ready, but I can bring it to you in here if you want.”

Rosalee felt herself nodding off again and heaved herself into an upright position, stuffing two pillows behind her to stop the temptation of a much longer nap. “No, I’ll eat with you guys.” She barely stifled a yawn.

Ellie glanced sideways at her. “Are you sure? You’re still pretty flushed.”

“Could it be a sunburn?”

“Yeah, maybe.” Ellie went back to her page turning.

Rosalee swung her feet over the edge of the bed. “I slept too long as it is. I’ll never get to sleep tonight.”

“It’s not ready, like, right now,” said Ellie, turning another page. “We still have a little time. *Ugh* ...” She stared down at an advertisement in her lap for a moment, rolling her lips inward before taking the gum out of her mouth, sticking it resolutely in the middle of the ad, then ripping the whole page out of the magazine.

“Which one?” said Rosalee.

“Premarin.”

“Wastebasket is by your feet.”

Ellie wadded up the page with uncharacteristic aggression, then sighed, her shoulders drooping. “I forgot what I was saying.”

“Okay, well if I keep sitting here, I’m gonna fall asleep again.”

Ellie closed the magazine and set it back on the desk. “Well then let’s talk about stuff.”

“What stuff?” Rosalee said warily.

“Sheriff called.”

“What? When? Why?”

Rosalee wondered which party had changed their mind about pressing charges. She really did have other plans for her painting money.

“He called when you were asleep,” said Ellie. “To make sure you were okay and everything.”

“Oh.”

Rosalee felt her shoulders relax, but Ellie’s eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“What?” said Rosalee.

“What actually happened after I left?”

“What do you mean? I told you the tree got knocked down.”

Ellie nodded, raising her eyebrows so high they nearly disappeared into her bangs.

“What?” Rosalee said again. “You don’t believe me?”

“It’s just that Sheriff said something that made it sound a *teensy* bit like maybe you were hiding something from the people that love and care about you and I couldn’t help but wonder—”

“*What*, Ellie?” Rosalee watched her sister tap her nails on the magazine cover and suddenly remembered the contents of the duffle bag. “Also, where did you put my tape?”

“What tape?”

“The one you took out of my Walkman so I had to listen to your sticky ‘Tootsie Roll pop.’”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “You mean ‘bubble gum pop’?”

“Yes, that.”

Ellie smiled.

“*What?*” said Rosalee.

“Nothing. You seem ...”

Rosalee waited, but Ellie just smiled again. “I think it’s in my room, hang on.”

She returned a moment later with Rosalee’s tape. “Are you sure you don’t want to borrow the Madonna one? She’s not just ‘bubble gum,’ you know—she’s kind of edgy.”

Rosalee shrugged. “Sure.”

Ellie set both tapes on Rosalee’s desk, then plopped down in the desk chair again.

“So, what was your question?” said Rosalee.

Ellie pressed the tips of her fingers together into a tent under her chin. Rosalee was suddenly very aware of her breathing—not because she had anything to hide, but because her sister looked so solemn.

“Okay, I’m just gonna ask it,” she said.

“Great.”

“Since when do you have an attorney?”

Chapter 3

“C ’mon, we’re gonna be late!”

Ellie’s face peered around the door frame and frowned at Rosalee lounging on her bed, perusing paint samples, then withdrew again in a flurry of curls.

“El, it’s a picnic,” Rosalee called after her. “There is no ‘late’ unless all the food’s gone.”

Ellie’s voice came through the wall. “I have pies to enter, remember?”

Rosalee sighed, putting down the samples and slipping her feet into the worn-out flip-flops at the end of her bed. “Have you seen my sunglasses?”

“Bulldozed, remember? You can borrow mine.” Ellie reappeared and gave her sister’s worn-out jeans and paint-spattered T-shirt a disappointed look. “But you’re not dressed.”

“What’s wrong with this?” Rosalee turned toward the full-length mirror, then quickly away.

“You’re in your paint clothes.”

They looked at each other for a few seconds before Rosalee caved, slouching over to her chest of drawers for a pair of shorts, assuming she had any. She had spontaneously dumped most of her wardrobe at a Goodwill several months ago out of spite. After all, she was never

going to be able to go back to who she was before Evelyn—before everything—and it was no good having constant reminders of her former shiny self.

She dug around for a bit, then unearthed some old cutoffs and held them up for Ellie's approval. Ellie studied them for a moment before giving a stiff nod. Rosalee quickly exchanged her jeans for the shorts.

“Huh,” she said, moving into the mirror's reflection once more. “Hey, El?”

Ellie was looking properly abashed. “What? I just fixed 'em a little.” She moved quickly to Rosalee's closet to search for a top. “My sewing machine was sitting there gathering dust.”

“Yes ...” Rosalee nodded sarcastically as she ran her fingertips along the seams that were now much closer to her thighs, “I'm sure that with your sundress-a-week habit, the dust must have been an inch thick.”

Ellie stuck her nose in the air and re-immersed herself in Rosalee's closet. “Oooh, what about this?”

Rosalee stared blankly at the floaty green material shoved in her direction. “That's a dress.”

“Uh *bubhh* ...”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Rosalee turned her back on her sister and resumed ravaging her shirt drawer until she found a *Laurie's Café* touristy T-shirt from the Lauries themselves—a gift for watching their dog once. She threw it on the bed.

“Oh, stop being so dramatic, Rosalee. Not everything you wear needs to be black.”

Rosalee looked down at her navy blue shirt. “This isn't black.”

“It's still dark. What about this one?”

Rosalee wrinkled her nose at the offending lacy top dangling off of Ellie's finger. It must have been Lola's doing, though she had no idea how it had escaped her thrift store reaping. "El, this is a town event. I'm not dressing for a wedding."

"Yes, but it's a 'Welcome Picnic.' You're supposed to look welcoming."

"Yeah, 'welcome to Rabbitbrush,' not 'welcome to my cleavage.'"

Ellie and Rosalee exchanged a long and stubborn look until Ellie broke eye contact to glance at the clock. Then she sighed and sat down on the edge of Rosalee's bed, gesturing resignedly toward the *Laurie's Cafe* shirt.

Rosalee smiled triumphantly and pulled her painting T-shirt over her head, then reached for the touristy top when she felt a sharp tug at the back of her head. Ellie was attempting to unravel the long braid that hung down her back.

"*Why?*" Rosalee demanded.

"It looks pretty down."

"Who's gonna look?" Rosalee fought her sister off long enough to yank the new shirt on.

Ellie wiggled her eyebrows. "Your *attorney* might."

Rosalee turned to glare at her. "Is *that* what all this is about?"

She wished fervently that she had never opened her mouth about that traitor. She could have lied. Made him disappear. He could have never existed.

Ellie gave a little shrug and continued undoing Rosalee's braid.

Rosalee rolled her eyes. "He may not have even gotten the job and why would he come to this thing, even if he did?"

"Upside down," Ellie ordered, pointing at the carpet.

She waited with one foot stuck out in front of her, leaning on her hip the way Evelyn used to. Rosalee was tempted to laugh, but instead,

let her upper body go so that her arms dangled and her fingers grazed the carpet.

“*Ooh ooh*,” she grunted. Like an orangutan.

“Ha, ha,” Ellie answered sarcastically, ruffling her sister’s hair.

A moment later, Robin shuffled in, looking as forlorn about the evening’s activities as Rosalee. However, Rosalee’s spirits lifted marginally as she took in her aunt’s outfit—an old, black, Joe’s Crab Shack T-shirt and a pair of boxy jean shorts.

“Ha!” she said, grinning triumphantly, “We match!”

Ellie frowned. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Aunt Robin.”

Rosalee gleefully pushed Robin out the door and skipped with her ahead of Lola and Ellie, before either of them had another chance to argue.

Like most outdoor town events, the “Welcome Picnic” was held in a clearing next to an old, red barn that had been a fixture since Rabbitbrush’s establishment. The space was surrounded by aspens and ponderosa pines and lay at the foot of one of the best sledding hills in Rabbitbrush. At the top of that very hill, Rosalee, Robin, Lola, and Ellie stopped to marvel at the festivities.

Rosalee’s initial thought was that someone had scattered rainbow confetti all over the picnic area. Multi-colored pennant banners adorned the buffet tables like buttercream frosting on the world’s longest sheet cake, and bright bunches of balloons stood sentinel by picnic tables and the half-dozen benches surrounding an enormous lighted Ferris wheel.

Ellie immediately spotted the pie table, and Rosalee and Robin shuffled half-heartedly after her and Lola as they led the procession.

Rosalee paused next to the wooden fence running along the clearing's perimeter, struggling to balance the enormous bowl of fruit salad she carried on her hip. She swiped at a long blade of grass growing next to the fence with one hand, then promptly lost her balance as fruit juice flowed from under the Saran wrap and soaked into her shirt. She managed to steady the bowl before any of the fruit spilled out.

"For crying out loud, Rosalee," Robin muttered.

She bent down to pick the piece of grass herself and handed it to Rosalee, who held it between her teeth, farmer-like. "Fanks."

"You're gonna ruin your teeth."

Rosalee continued to chew the grass, cow-like.

Rabbitbrush celebrations were almost worth attending for the food alone. Rosalee and Robin struggled to find places for the fruit salad and giant pan of yeast rolls amid the dishes and dishes of homemade breads, casseroles, and salads. Then there were pans of grilled and fried chicken, succulent slices of spiral-cut ham, and paper-thin shavings of roast beef.

Rosalee attempted to fit some of everything on her plate, being sure to leave room for her favorite dessert. Frog Eye salad was traditionally made with *acini di pepe* pasta, from-scratch custard, halved red grapes, maraschino cherries, and marshmallows. However, Rosalee had done such a thorough job of convincing her sister that it was made of real frogs' eyes when they were little that Ellie still wouldn't touch it. Rosalee suppressed a grin as she watched her spoon a portion of Waldorf salad onto her plate, instead.

Once everyone's paper plates were under significant strain, Rosalee, Ellie, Robin, and Lola managed to find four places near the end of one of the many brightly colored picnic tables. The other end of the table was occupied by two unfamiliar men in business suits, who smiled politely before turning back to their conversation. Robin and Lola sat

on one side of the table and Ellie had barely set her plate down next to Rosalee's on the other side before announcing that she was going to find Pete.

Rosalee, Ellie, and Pete had grown up together and remained good friends to that day, although Rosalee had to admit that she hadn't been very good at maintaining the relationship in the past several months.

"I'm sure he'll find us when he's- aaand she's gone." Rosalee watched Ellie vanish into the crowd of people moseying around the buffet table and lingering between tables to chat.

Rosalee looked down at her plate, trying to decide what to try first and finally settling on a golden-brown crescent roll. She pulled the tender dough apart and inhaled the buttery inside before popping a savory morsel into her mouth.

"Rosalee Andrews? Is that *you*?"

An all-too-perky and familiar voice made Rosalee stop chewing at once, closing her eyes momentarily to summon her strength. Robin's sudden fascination with her napkin and Lola's over-bright smile across the table confirmed her suspicions. Rosalee rolled her eyes heavenward before assuming the expression she usually reserved for difficult customers and turning to face her misery.

"Angela, how are you?"

Angela Marsh was the epitome of a Southern belle transplant, with dance team captain and student body president under her belt from their high school days, teeth so white they could blind you, and probably "Mattel" stamped on her fanny. To Rosalee, however, she was the two-faced, Circus Peanut kind of fake sweet that was likely to make you sick. Also, she had lived in Alabama for exactly one year between sixth and eighth grade and had come back with an accent so thick you could rip your toast trying to spread it.

“Oh, it *is* you!” Angela clapped her hands and swooped down to hug Rosalee, who sucked in a sharp breath, tensing her muscles until she was released.

Angela didn’t seem to notice her discomfort and plopped down into Ellie’s vacant seat. “Oh, and Robin and Lola as well? Well, this is quite the reunion, isn’t it?”

Rosalee was amazed by Angela’s ability to show off all her pearly whites at once, although it tended to lend a psychopathic quality to an already alarmingly pleased expression.

“And how was your ... *art internship?*” said Angela.

Rosalee glanced apprehensively at her aunts. “Oh, great. It was great, thanks.”

“Well, you certainly look different. So *free*.”

Ellie had said something similar to describe this new and shabby version of Rosalee, although what others deemed “shabby,” Rosalee considered “practical.”

“Oh, but where’s dear Ellie tonight?” said Angela, looking around theatrically. “I don’t think I saw her come in with y’all.”

“She said she was going to find Pete,” said Rosalee. “They’ll probably be back any minute.”

Rosalee thought she noticed Angela’s eye twitch at this information, but after another round of formal farewells and reminders to cast their votes at the pie table, she finally sashayed away in spotless yellow heels.

“You know, she wears those to my classes, too,” said Lola conversationally.

“What, the dresses or the shoes?” said Robin.

“Good lord,” Rosalee muttered, turning back to her food and impaling a pea that had escaped from her vegetable casserole.

Just then, Ellie and Pete slid onto the bench next to Rosalee. Pete's plate was half empty, so Ellie had likely dragged him away from another table.

"Well, your timing couldn't be better—you just missed Angela," said Rosalee. "By the way, Pete, if you were planning on dating her at all, you'd better do it soon, before she has a conniption."

Pete's cheeks colored slightly while Ellie looked mildly nauseated. "She used to be okay, right?" said Rosalee. "Like, we used to like her? Granted, it's easier to like someone before their initiation into the Stepford Wives."

Ellie giggled, then immediately looked contrite. "That's mean, Rosalee. She's not that bad."

Pete's expression seemed almost apologetic. "She's not, Rose." Rosalee looked between them, waiting for someone to laugh. When no one did, she glowered at both of them and stuffed the rest of her crescent roll into her mouth without bothering to savor it.

Chapter 4

Over the next hour, friends and neighbors stopped by to make small talk, offer their condolences about Evelyn, and inquire about Rosalee's internship. Eventually, Rosalee escaped to the pie table to give her face a rest from the constant fake smiling.

When the coast was mostly clear again, she wandered back to the table with her assortment of pie slivers and a voting slip. All of the entrants had baked two pies each (both the same flavor), under the theory that there would be enough samples for everyone. Rosalee somehow doubted that the results were very accurate that way, but no one seemed to mind very much.

Halfway through a tangy, crumbly bite of strawberry rhubarb, Lola gasped in a way that made Rosalee nearly choke on it.

"What?!" she sputtered, attempting to clear her windpipe.

"We only have an hour before they shut down the Ferris wheel!" Lola gathered her empty plate and cup and tried to grab Robin's away midbite.

"Dud gib be a sebken," Robin said thickly through a mouthful of tapioca pudding.

Rosalee watched in amusement as Lola bounced in her seat and Robin attempted to inhale her remaining pie samples.

"Jeez, Lola, don't kill her. An hour's a long time," said Ellie.

“Ib’s oday. I’b dub.” Robin’s cheeks were still bulging as she tossed her trash into the wastebasket and stood, wiping her hands on her shorts.

“Go ahead, we’ll catch up.” Rosalee waved them away with her fork, then scooted around the end of the table to claim the empty bench across from Ellie and Pete.

Ellie glanced over her shoulder at the slowly rotating wheel. “We should ride it, too. All of us.”

The Ferris wheel had been Rosalee’s favorite ride when she was younger, but now it made her a little nervous—she wasn’t sure she liked all of the adrenaline. Still, something about the late summer air tonight made her itch for some sort of adventure.

“We’ll have to take turns,” she said. “Those look like they’re only two-seaters.”

“Remember when all three of us used to fit in one seat?” said Ellie. “We were so *little*.”

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid,” said Pete, lowering his voice by at least an octave. “What with all my manly … beefiness.”

For a moment, no one said anything. Rosalee shared an astonished look with Ellie. *Did Pete just make a joke?* Then Ellie snorted, which made Rosalee and Pete laugh as she covered her burning face with her napkin.

Pete had always been the approximate build of a string bean, but now that Rosalee was really looking, she noticed with a pang how far he’d come from the little boy that had asked her and Ellie to play on the jungle gym, a lifetime ago. His light brown hair was the same, and he had always been very put together, like he should work at a bank (which he did). But now, she noticed the slight hollow in his cheeks, the strong line of his jaw, and the way his grey eyes looked less like the

boy with whom she had gone to school nearly her whole life and more like a ... *man*? When had that happened?

She realized she was staring and went back to her plate. "So, Pete, how's the new roommate?"

Pete swallowed his bite of apple pie before answering. "He's great so far. He works a lot, but when he's home, he's nice to have around."

"When do we get to meet him?" said Ellie.

"Well, he said he would be a little late since he's at work." Pete glanced at his watch. "But actually, he should be here pretty soon."

"Is it weird being, like, an adult?" said Rosalee. "All moved out and grown up and cooler than us?"

Pete laughed, shaking his head. "You could move out too, you know. Although I'm not sure why you'd want to."

"Me and Rose started looking for places a while ago," said Ellie, chasing a dark, gooey cherry around the edge of her plate with her plastic fork. "But then, with everything ..."

The atmosphere grew suddenly serious and Rosalee wondered if she could excuse herself quickly without being suspicious before Pete cleared his throat.

"It's weird," he said. "I never realized how expensive it would be to live on my own. Did you guys know that apartments don't come with irons, or staplers, or can openers? I think our parents had to *buy* them."

"See, I never would have thought of a can opener," said Rosalee. "Me and Ellie were fixin' to get you a riding lawnmower for your housewarming party."

Ellie giggled and then became very interested in something over Rosalee's shoulder. She nudged Pete. "Is that him? The blonde guy walking over here?"

Pete followed her gaze and then nodded, waving, as Rosalee turned too quickly and cricked her neck.

She turned back to Pete and Ellie slowly. “*Is this a joke?*” she demanded.

Ellie was becoming a wonderful actress, Rosalee decided, because she looked thoroughly confused.

“Hey, man,” said Pete, as Alex Conway approached the table with his plate.

“Hi.” Alex raised a hand in greeting. His eyes lingered on Rosalee and he smiled tentatively, but she could only stare back.

“Alex, these are two of my best friends, Rosalee and Ellie,” said Pete. “And this is my roommate, Alex.”

“Nice to meet you, Alex,” said Ellie. She flashed her brightest smile and Rosalee knew her sister was overcompensating for Rosalee’s gloomy demeanor.

“Thanks. You, too.” Alex hesitated to sit down since the only open seat was next to Rosalee. “Hey, Rosalee. Nice to see you again.”

Rosalee attempted a smile, but her face felt stiff. “You, too.”

Pete looked curiously between them and Rosalee watched the dawning realization on Ellie’s face, which was transitioning rapidly into something unabashedly smug and gleeful.

“Have you guys already met?” said Pete.

“Um. Yes.” Alex sat cautiously on Rosalee’s bench, though at least a foot away from her. “That was the whole bulldozer, lawyer, tree fiasco. The ‘BLT,’ if you will.”

Pete and Ellie laughed, but Ellie stopped quickly at Rosalee’s expression. “It’s awful that they tore down that tree,” she said.

Alex nodded. “I agree. Totally unnecessary.”

Rosalee glanced at his face, then quickly away before he could meet her gaze.

“This is your first town event, right?” said Ellie.

Alex speared a cube of watermelon on his fork. “How did you guess?”

“You look a little too happy,” said Pete. “Once you have a couple more under your belt, your eyes will kinda glaze over a little more.”

Ellie laughed. “That’s not true. Rosalee and I still love them, don’t we?”

Rosalee raised her eyebrows and Ellie frowned at her.

“Fine, well, I do.” She sighed, looking around her. “All the amazing smells, all the floral prints, the fireflies.”

If Rosalee was being honest, she liked these town events for the same reasons as Ellie, although she wasn’t quite as emphatic about the floral prints.

“So, Rosalee,” said Alex, with the air of addressing someone in a loosely fastened straitjacket, “Have you heard anything more about the tree?”

Rosalee stared blankly at him.

“I mean, are they going to plant a new one, or ...?”

“Oh.” Rosalee stabbed at her pie crust as though it was a deserving bit of convicted murderer, “I don’t really know.”

Alex nodded and struggled to cut a piece of grilled chicken with his plastic knife. After a few moments of awkward silence, Ellie laughed at something over Rosalee’s shoulder.

“What’s so funny?” said Pete.

“The sign next to the Ferris Wheel says that it will be closed *for* one hour for pie judging and the Welcome Speech. Lola doesn’t read things very thoroughly when she’s panicking.”

“What’s a ‘welcome speech?’” said Alex.

“To thank everyone who’s working on the hospital. Kind of a support thing,” said Ellie.

“... Wow. That’s really nice.”

“Well, it’s also nice having a hospital in the next town, instead of fifty miles away,” said Pete.

“The next town?” said Alex. “This isn’t Picket?”

“This is Rabbitbrush,” said Rosalee. “Didn’t you figure that out when you changed your address?”

Ellie kicked her under the table. Rosalee scowled.

“Guess I haven’t done that yet,” said Alex, looking sheepish.

“Let’s go ride the Ferris wheel, Pete,” Ellie said suddenly, pulling him up from the table by his elbow.

Panic expanded in Rosalee’s chest like a balloon at the idea of forced small talk alone with Alex. “Wait, what? We were gonna ride it together.”

“Well, then hurry up.” Ellie wiggled her eyebrows as she steered Pete away. Rosalee glared after them.

Alex appeared to have finally cut his chicken into manageable bites. “I’m sorry about the other day,” he said.

Rosalee stood to clear her plate. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m almost done. I mean, I can eat fast and ride the Ferris Wheel with you if you want.”

Rosalee sighed.

“Or ... not,” said Alex.

Rosalee felt a pang of guilt as he went back to his plate. She turned away from him, determined to ignore it. And yet, the pang persisted. Why was she being so mean?

She turned back to Alex. “Um, actually, why don’t I meet you there?” She needed a few minutes alone to collect her thoughts.

Alex nodded as he chewed, then raised a hand against the setting sun to look at her. “Deal.”

It was kind of peaceful watching the Ferris wheel lights weave a stationary firework in the quickly darkening sky. Lola was clearly having the time of her life, whooping every time the wheel arched downward and completely oblivious to poor Robin, who had the dazed, almost saggy look of someone about to be sick.

After a few minutes, the Ferris wheel slowed and couples climbed out of their seats. Ellie motioned frantically for Rosalee to take the seat in front of her and Pete, but Rosalee pointed at her iced tea and shrugged sadly, feigning disappointment at her dilemma. Meanwhile, Robin clambered over the side of the railing and hurried to the nearest bench, where she sat with her head between her knees.

“You can put the drink *down* Rosalee,” Ellie called, her eyes narrowed.

Rosalee smiled, shrugged, and took another sip of tea as the operator prepared to start the ride again.

“*Hold on!*”

Rosalee turned to see Alex running toward the ride, his hair ruffling in the breeze.

“Gettin’ on?” said the operator.

“Yeah, just—if you could hold on *one* second.”

Alex jogged back to where Rosalee was sitting and jabbed his hand into the space between them. “C’mon. You’re gonna miss it.”

Rosalee winced away from his hand. “I changed my mind. I think I just wanna watch it this time.”

“Something persuasive,” said Alex.

“What?”

“Sometimes when I’m not sure what I want the next line in my screenplay to be but I have the basic idea, that’s the kind of thing I’ll write. So, ‘something persuasive.’”

Rosalee hesitated.

“Rosalee, get your scrawny behind up here!” Lola shouted, provoking several chuckles from surrounding passengers.

Now, both of Alex’s hands were extended—one toward Rosalee’s hand and one toward her cup. She ignored both of them but set her drink down under the bench and followed him to the ride like a prisoner toward the gallows. She climbed into the open seat in front of Ellie and Pete and scooted as close to the edge as she could to avoid any unnecessary contact with Alex.

A lurch signaled the start of the ride and Rosalee could hear Lola shouting from her seat. “Wait, wait, Robin’s not on!”

Rosalee looked around to see Robin shaking her head resolutely from her sideways position on the bench.

“Oh, go ahead, then,” said Lola, disappointed.

Rosalee heard Alex laughing softly next to her before something made sharp contact with the back of her head.

“Ow, what the hell?” she demanded, turning to see Ellie lacing her skinny belt back into her dress. She widened her eyes at Rosalee in what she probably thought was an encouraging gesture.

Rosalee rubbed the spot on her head where the buckle had struck and threw her and Pete a dirty look before turning her back on them. She could feel Alex watching her.

“Still mad at me, huh?” he said.

“I don’t know why I would be.”

“But you are.”

Rosalee sighed. “Yeah.”

“I’m really sorry.”

Alex reached for Rosalee’s hand, but she sucked in a breath and yanked it away as they crested the top of the ride and began the sharp descent.

She clutched the bar in front of her. “Yikes.”

“Yikes?” said Alex, “You don’t like the Ferris wheel, do you?”

Rosalee pushed her hair away from her face as their seat moved backward and up again. “No, I love it.” She realized as she said it that it was still true.

“You said ‘yikes.’”

“It was a good ‘yikes.’”

Alex laughed again. It was a nice laugh—sort of quiet and to himself.

As they began another downward arc, Rosalee could hear Lola whooping above her. She smiled and couldn’t help silently whooping with her as the warm evening air rushed past.

“Do you know her?” said Alex.

“She’s my aunt.” Rosalee gathered her airborne tresses into a low ponytail and held it firmly over her shoulder “My other aunt is the one dry heaving on that bench.”

“And you live with them?”

“For now.”

“So, two sets of sisters. That’s fun.”

Rosalee shook her head. “Lola and Robin aren’t sisters. Robin is our biological aunt. She found Lola a long time ago, brought her home to live in our garage, and that was it.”

Alex cocked his head.

“Converted garage,” Rosalee clarified. “We’re not hillbillies.”

Alex laughed again and Rosalee became absorbed in a stray thread on her shorts. She had already shared more than she meant to.

“You guys seem close,” said Alex.

“We are.” *Or were, anyway.*

“So, who’s older—you or Ellie?”

“Me.”

Alex raised his eyebrows. “Huh.”

“Why?”

“Ellie seems pretty protective of you,” he said, then faltered under Rosalee’s suddenly accusatory stare. “Just—from—”

“Did you feel sorry for me?” said Rosalee. “Is that why ...” she motioned to the seat, the ride, the universe in general.

“What? *No*. I mean, I was sorry about the other day with your tree and I wanted you to ride with me because you were—”

“Alone? Isolated?” Rosalee felt her skin heat up as Alex scanned her face like an X-ray.

He nodded slowly. “Unprotected. Vulnerable. Easy prey, really.” He raised his eyebrows at the look of repulsion crinkling Rosalee’s nose. “Different,” he said, rolling his eyes.

They looked at each other.

“*Different*,” Rosalee repeated.

“I think it’s cool that you push down all the bumps on your soda lid. I do that, too. I can’t leave them alone.”

Rosalee clicked her tongue. “Everyone does that.”

“Alright fine, you caught me.” Alex held his hands up in mock surrender. “I hate ‘different.’ Conformity all the way.”

What was *with* this guy?

“What do you want from me?” said Rosalee.

“Pure, unrefined hatred. Radiating from your every pore until I’m cooked like a rotisserie chicken.”

Rosalee felt the corner of her mouth twitch upward and quickly forced it back down. “What about the other day? Why were you lurking around your ashtray pretending to be my attorney?”

Their eyes met again and Rosalee looked away first, then stared at the seat in front of them. “Are you stalking me?”

Alex glanced between her and the seat, seemingly unsure about which of them she was addressing.

“No,” he said slowly, “I told you—I was there for a job interview.”

“Oh.” *Right.* “So you got it, then?”

“I did. Do I scare you?”

Suddenly, Alex’s eyes seemed to take on a different kind of concern than his apparent remorse about Rosalee’s lingering anger. One of the lights above them shone on his face and Rosalee realized that his eyes were a warmer shade of brown than she had noticed before. They reminded her of the fancy, mahogany coffee table in Angela’s sitting room, ages ago. They were also full of something all too familiar to her, although she couldn’t quite identify what it was.

Did he scare her?

Rosalee tuned in to the little voice inside her and finally shook her head.

“Good,” Alex said softly.

He sat back, studying her from under a piece of hair that fell just above his eyelashes and she was suddenly very aware of herself. She turned away from him and prepared to get out of her seat.

“*One more time!*” someone yelled above them.

Before Rosalee had a chance to escape, the ride lurched into motion and she was hurled backward into her seat. “A little warning would have been nice!” she complained to no one in particular.

She tilted her head back and glared at the seat above her. Then several things happened at once: First, a gust of wind came out of nowhere, once more blowing her hair all around her. Then, a sharp pain zinged through her skull as one of the loose strands caught in something next to their car and began to pull.

That was about the time she started screaming.

She struggled to rip her hair loose, but was jerked sideways against her seat. She could feel little fiery pops as her hair follicles disconnected themselves from her scalp at the roots.

“Stop the ride!” Alex shouted.

Rosalee heard the command echoed several times around her. Then the gondola lurched as Alex lunged across her. His fingers combed quickly through her hair to find the section that was ensnared. Then, with one swift movement, she was free and gasping into her knees.

She stayed that way for several long moments, desperate to keep herself from sobbing in front of a mostly complete stranger.

“Hey.” Alex nudged her gently with his shoulder. “Time to get off.”

Rosalee jerked, then straightened slowly, readying herself for the piteous looks from fellow passengers. “Hey,” she said, orienting herself. “We’re still at the top. We’re not even moving.”

“I know. I thought you might want a minute. You know, to—”

“Right.” Rosalee wiped under her eyes with her thumbs, then swept her hair over her shoulder again.

“We’re good!” Alex yelled down to the operator.

Rosalee inspected her handful of hair, expecting a giant, knotted mess. Instead, a long, half-inch wide chunk seemed to have been sliced clean off.

Alex opened his hand, revealing a Swiss Army knife. “It was caught in the, uh ... trunnion. I figured quick was better. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” Rosalee thought she might be in shock. “Thank you.”

“No sweat. Are you okay?”

Rosalee shrugged as her lungs stopped a full breath. “How many people saw that, do you think?”

She glanced at Alex, who was looking distinctly put on the spot, as though she had asked him to please recite the Pledge of Allegiance in Mandarin. Then there it was—unbidden laughter making its way up Rosalee’s throat. Alex paused, confused.

“I—don’t—know,” Rosalee gasped, helpless against the mirth that had her bent double.

Alex chuckled. “Adrenaline, I guess.”

Rosalee laughed all the way down.

Chapter 5

“Breakfaast,” Ellie sang, flouncing into Rosalee’s room and hopping onto the end of her bed.

Rosalee squinted against the bright sunlight streaming through her window.

“You made breakfast?” she croaked.

“No, Laurie’s made breakfast. C’mon.”

Rosalee groaned and rolled onto her stomach, burying her face in her pillow. She was vaguely aware of Ellie’s weight disappearing from the mattress as she drifted off again, before the unmistakable sound of her sister digging through her closet startled her awake once more.

“Time’s a-wastin’!” Ellie dropped a top on Rosalee’s bed, then moved over to her dresser. “Where are those shorts from last night?”

Rosalee snuggled deeper into her pillow without answering and felt another piece of clothing add itself to her covers. Then it was quiet.

“Up!”

“Argh,” Rosalee grumbled, rolling onto her side, seriously misjudging the edge of her bed, and toppling onto the floor.

“Thank you.” Ellie came around to where Rosalee lay tangled in her sheets. She held up her newly altered cutoffs (even though Rosalee had stuffed them behind her hamper the night before) and a lacy top.

Rosalee stumbled into a semi-standing position. “No.”

Ellie pursed her lips. “Why not? I thought you liked the shorts.”

Rosalee dodged her sister, kicking her sheets from around her ankles as she went. She shuffled quickly into Robin and Lola's room and crawled between them on their bed, shoving her head under one of the pillows. She didn't care if it was childish. Sleep was sleep and she loved it.

"Save me," she muttered. "Save me from The Ellie."

Robin chuckled and rolled onto her back, eyes still closed. Lola patted Rosalee's arm sympathetically. "What time is it?"

"I don't know," said Rosalee, her voice muffled by the mattress.

Ellie appeared in the doorway with an armful of Rosalee's T-shirts. "We're throwing these away. I don't even think a thrift store would take them."

Rosalee emerged from the pillow to glare at her. "I was going to wear that one to breakfast."

"Which one?"

"... All of them."

"Aunt Robin, this is *your* doing," said Ellie, sweeping out of the room again.

Robin yawned and stretched, planting her bare feet on the wood floor and rubbing the sleep out of her eyes as Lola wandered into the master bath closet.

Several moments later, Lola threw an unfamiliar piece of clothing at Rosalee. "Get a move on, girlie. If we don't leave in the next half hour, Robin and I won't be able to drop you off on the way."

Rosalee sat up. "On the way to what?"

"That loan officer at First Federal agreed to see us at nine o'clock about the B&B," said Robin.

"Oh, good." Rosalee unfolded the garment Lola had thrown at her and was pleasantly surprised to find a T-shirt. Not any of *her*

T-shirts—this one was teal and a v-neck—but not bad. “Where did this come from?”

“It’s mine,” said Lola. “I think it even fit me once. Yours if you want it.”

Rosalee and Ellie waved as their aunts departed for their meeting, then made their way up the long driveway leading to Laurie’s Cafe and Lakeside Restaurant.

About three-quarters of the way up, Rosalee stopped. Suddenly, the thought of being surrounded by people and their questions, in an enclosed space, seemed unendurable. At least at the picnic, they had been outside.

“You okay?” Ellie called, having reached the top of the drive without her.

“Yeah.” Rosalee thought her voice sounded far away, even inside her head.

Ellie walked back down the drive to meet her, flip-flops slapping against the asphalt. “Do you wanna sit on the bench for a few minutes? Or the dock?”

Rosalee nodded toward the latter and they walked to the end of the pier, then sat with their toes dangling in the cool water. Rosalee watched the reflections of boats bobbing up and down in the glassy surface of the lake, surrounded by the fluttering yellow-green leaves of aspen trees.

Ellie followed her gaze. “Pete and I were gonna come back here and hang out on the shore later today. It’s supposed to get up to eighty-two degrees.”

“Jeez, already? I mean, about the temperature.”

Ellie nodded. “Do you want to come with us?”

Rosalee hesitated.

“You don’t have to,” Ellie said quickly, tucking a stray curl behind her ear and looking back across the lake.

“No, I want to. But ... why are you being so nice to me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just ... all the crappy things I said to you before I left? I thought maybe you would still be mad.”

“Oh. Well, did you mean them?”

“Of course not. I was just ... *so* angry.”

Ellie shrugged. “I knew that.”

Was it really that simple?

“I’m still sorry.”

“I know that, too.”

Ellie offered a tiny smile, but something palpable still hung in the air between them.

“But?” Rosalee prompted.

Ellie glanced sideways at her. “I just ... wish I had known everything.”

“Everything?”

“Like what you were thinking, what you were feeling ... what you were taking.”

Rosalee stiffened. “What do you mean?”

Ellie stared straight ahead, kicking at the water and sending the spray arcing over the surface of the lake. “Where did you even get those pills?”

So she knew. Now there was no way around it.

“Um ... Connor Mitchell.”

Ellie finally abandoned her tunnel vision and looked at Rosalee with an expression of overt revulsion. “What, from high school? Connor