

A QUESTION OF COURAGE



MEGAN MAGILL

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by

Megan Magill

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Dedication

For Jo

Chapter One

"WOULD IT BE too much of a problem if I lived with you for a while?"

Jess stared at her brother, then glanced at Grace seated on the opposite end of the sofa from her.

"Only if I have to," Nick hastened to add.

"If you need to, then of course. But don't you get accommodation with the camp job?" Jess asked, puzzled at her brother's request.

Nick fidgeted for a moment. "Yes, but things aren't quite working out."

"Is it girl trouble?" With Nick, that was usually the source of his anxiety. Her younger brother was a kind-hearted charmer and rarely single. His relationships lasted until the girlfriend brought up long-term commitment and scared him into running. Something else dawned on her. "I'm not about to be an aunt, am I?"

"No!"

Jess hid her relief. "Okay. Then what?" She looked over at Grace again, but her housemate's expression was nonchalant.

"I, uh, it's complicated." He lapsed into silence and studied the tabletop.

"Hey, what's going on?" Jess knew his moods, and this one broadcasted something more serious than a fling that ended badly.

Grace frowned. "It's all right, it's only us. Is it woman trouble?"

Jess relaxed at the sound of Grace's calm voice, tinged with just the right amount of concern and care. It was the perfect voice for a vet.

"No...well, sort of." Nick picked at the piping on the arm of his chair.

"Ah, ha." Jess sat back, triumphant. "It *is* a woman." She looked at Grace again and caught her

breath. Her own woman trouble was bittersweet. The object of her affection was within reach, but limited to the role of housemate. Ironical, really. She jerked her attention back to Nick, internally kicking herself. Now was not the time to wander off on reveries like that.

"That's part of it," he said, "but not for the reasons you think."

"Nick, we can't help you if we don't know what the issue is." Jess adjusted her position, focusing on him.

"I know. It's just that—it sounds stupid, now, but..." He shrugged. "Something weird is going on at the camp, and I don't think I'm going to have my job there much longer. The rent I'm getting on my house covers the mortgage but I'm going to end up homeless and jobless until the lease expires. That's four months away."

That got Jess's attention. Four months of Nick sleeping on her sofa was going to result in some raw nerves.

Grace leaned forward. "What exactly is going on?"

Nick rubbed his hand against the stubble on his chin. "Well, for starters, this girl I was seeing just up and left. Without saying anything to me. One day we were fine, flirting and palling about, and the next morning, she was gone. Not even a phone call since."

"Maybe she had an emergency at home," Jess offered.

"She won't take my calls."

"Okay, but how does that fit in with you maybe losing your job?" Grace asked.

"Chrissy—that's the woman I was seeing who left—finally sent me a text back. Here, I'll show you." He pulled his mobile from his pocket, pressed a couple of buttons, and handed it to Jess, who read it aloud.

“ ‘Please stop calling. Need a clean break. Nothing you did. Tread carefully and job hunt’.” Jess raised an eyebrow. “So that’s why you think you could be fired?” She handed his phone back.

“Yeah. I think my boss, the camp manager, has it in for me, but there’s something else going on. Chrissy told me a couple weeks ago that something wasn’t right with some of the kids at the camp. She said that she’d noticed that a couple of the foreign children left suddenly. That they’d been marked in the register as checked out overnight. She also said she had a run-in with Barton—the boss—but she wouldn’t tell me what about.”

“Maybe their parents came and got them. What’s so strange about that? It is a kids’ summer camp, after all.”

“I thought so, too, but it happened again, last week. One of the foreign boys who doesn’t speak English disappeared in the middle of the night. I noticed it because this kid was interested in engines, so he’d spend afternoons watching me work. I got that his name was Alexander, though I’m not sure how he spelled it in his language. I’d show him things with the tools and the motors. He’d help out, carrying my stuff around for me.” Nick smiled at the memory. “It was a routine. Then one day last week, he didn’t show up. I went looking for him, thinking he may have been injured or was sick. But he was gone. All of his things in his cabin, gone. The other boys said Barton came late the night before and took Alexander.”

“Did the boys say anything to this Barton?” It *was* strange, Jess thought, that three children had left the camp in the middle of the night.

“They didn’t want to talk much about it. They said Barton came in and told them to help pack Alexander’s things, since he didn’t speak English. One asked where he was going, and Barton told them

that Alexander had to go home right away."

"Maybe it was a family emergency?"

"Three emergencies in two weeks?" Nick scoffed. "And all children who don't speak English? C'mon, Jessie. Just because you got fired doesn't mean you've lost that analytical brain of yours. I know we're talking about kids here and not business reports, but surely you can see it stinks."

"That does sound rather strange," Grace offered noncommittally. "Back to Chrissy for a moment, and why she thinks you should be careful. What did she do at the camp?"

"Administrative. She was in the office, doing reception and office stuff." Nick eyed the plate of biscuits on the coffee table then selected a custard cream. He bit into it, sending crumbs cascading down his shirt. He brushed absently at himself, sending the crumbs tumbling onto the flagstone floor instead. Jess stifled a smile at Nick's habitual sloppiness. But she envied him his ability to eat without worrying about the consequences. *Stop that. Focus on the matter at hand.*

"Perhaps she discovered something? Maybe there're redundancies or something planned?" Grace suggested.

"Yeah, that's a possibility," Jess concurred.

"Maybe." He looked doubtful. "But I think the business is doing all right. There are still plenty of kids coming to stay and they are talking about building a second go-kart track. It's not just Chrissy's text. The higher-ups seem to be watching me really closely. And somebody's been through my stuff in the garage and my cabin."

Jess frowned. "Are you sure? The garage is one thing, but the cabin is an invasion of your privacy."

"Positive." He took another bite of the custard cream.

"Could it have been another member of staff

trying to borrow something?" Grace asked.

He shook his head and swallowed before answering. "I don't have to share my cabin so the only other key is in the office. Whoever it was must've used that key to get in so it must be something Barton knew about. He wouldn't let someone have the key for borrowing something or whatever he was doing."

"Is there any reason why they'd want to search your cabin? Are they worried about tools going missing or something?" Jess glanced at the crumbs on the floor then back at him.

Nick shrugged. "Not to my knowledge. I do regular inventories and everything is there. I have to be really careful about locking everything away with the kids around."

"What about your work? Are you getting everything done okay?"

"Yes. I mean, I think so. I keep everything maintained so there's only been minimal repair work. I got those jobs done promptly and I made sure to get a good price for the parts, too."

Jess put her empty coffee mug on the table in front of her and settled deeper into the sofa. "Well, it sounds like they have no reason to want to get rid of you," she pronounced. "You know it's illegal for them to get rid of you just because your face doesn't fit. If you're doing a good job and behaving in a professional way, then they have no justifiable reason to get rid of you. Apart from redundancy."

Nick looked at Grace then back at Jess before replying. "I know that's true in theory, but it doesn't really work like that in practise, does it? I mean, look at you. If they can get rid of someone like you for being gay, then they'll have no trouble with me."

Jess flinched inwardly. Her own termination had been less than two months ago and she was still raw. For the hundredth time she regretted the lapse in

judgement that allowed her to embark on an affair with a co-worker. Her subsequent outing and firing had ended her flawless record in the world of business analysis. "What they did to me was illegal, too," she said, without conviction. She still couldn't shake the part of her that believed she deserved it.

"Yeah, but they got away with it," Nick pressed. "What does it matter if it's legal or not? The end result is the same."

"It shouldn't be." Grace's tone was resolute and she eyed Jess pointedly.

"Okay," Jess said, trying to move the conversation back to Nick. "Grace is right. It shouldn't be. Let's put that to one side, though. Have you talked to your boss at all? Mentioned that you're feeling this way?"

Nick shook his head again and brushed more crumbs off his jeans. "No. I figured I'd talk to you first, since I need other perspectives on this. I don't want to do the wrong thing and cause myself more trouble." He reached for a jammy dodger this time and Jess hoped the jam would minimise crumbs. "I did have one idea, though."

"Yes?" Jess looked past him, out the window, instead of at his hand as he raised the biscuit to his mouth. Why was food so easy for him and so hard for her? She cleared her throat and forced her gaze back to his face.

"Well," he said between chews and making Jess feel rather repulsed, "they're looking for a temporary archery instructor at the moment." He swallowed. "The usual one is on compassionate leave, something to do with family trouble. I thought maybe you could come and do it." He looked at her, hopeful. "It would feel better if you were there to back me up. And maybe we could figure out what's going on with these kids. That bothers me, too. Maybe that's why they got rid of Chrissy."

Jess shook her head, emphatic. "No. I'm sorry,

Nick, that just wouldn't work. I know nothing about working with children, and even if I did, I'm supposed to be job hunting in the business sector. How could I explain this away on my CV?" She looked over at Grace and for once was pleased to see a frown on her face. "Besides, I've spent enough time away from home over the last few years. I'm enjoying the chance to just be settled here for a while."

Nick tried another tack. "Can't you put it down as voluntary work or something? That would make your CV look even better, wouldn't it?"

"Volunteer paid work?" Jess shook her head even more emphatically. "No, I don't think I could get away with that."

"Please, Jessie? It'll only be a couple of weeks. I really like working there. I think it's where I'm supposed to be. I just need some help figuring out what their agenda is and making sure I'm on the right side of it." He was wearing his hopeful puppy-dog expression. "And I need some help figuring out who's going through my cabin and why. If I know that, then maybe I can deal with whatever the issue is directly. And maybe I can figure out what happened with Chrissy. If it has something to do with the camp, then I think I should know about it. Don't you?"

Jess sighed. "I'll think about it."

"Think of it this way," he said, his expression returning to its usual good humour. "A couple of weeks of virtually paid holiday at a children's camp or several months with me messing up your kitchen and playing gooseberry."

Jess glared at him with as much evil as she could muster. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Grace smile into her coffee cup.

JESS PULLED OUT the bottom drawer and retrieved her nemesis. The blue jeans looked innocent

enough, but in truth, they were a torture device. Their judgement meant the difference between hunger and satiation, cautious peace or self-loathing. Jess draped them on the edge of the bed in preparation for her ritual. Unbuttoning her current jeans, she slid the warm material down her legs, stepping out to leave two denim circles.

Picking up the judgement jeans, she pulled them over her feet, feeling the stiffer material against her calves. Spreading her legs, she pulled them higher, nervousness clasp at her throat as they tightened above the knee. She persevered, higher still, hugging her thighs. Over her backside. They stopped, stubbornly refusing to go farther. Jess forced her panic down, knowing she hadn't taken every step yet.

Smoothing the fabric of her boxers down, she eased the denim a little higher. Now she made the hula-hoop motion, coordinating her swings with mighty heaves on the waistband and forcing a little more flesh in. Satisfied she could get the jeans no higher, Jess pulled the button toward the hole. Several inches laughed in response. She took a deep breath, folding the flesh of her midriff in on itself. Still the button resisted.

Jess walked stiffly to the bed, the denim and her body fighting the strain. She eased herself into a sitting position, careful not to undo her earlier progress. Lying back, she grabbed the waistband once again. Using enough force to make her fingers hurt, Jess forced the zip up. With one last effort, the button lined up and hooked into place.

Unable to bend at the knees, Jess rose from the bed like some horror movie monster. She looked at herself in the mirror. The comparison was accurate, she thought. The large white mass of her midriff and hips overflowed the waistband, reminding her of a muffin. As she realised this, Jess was overwhelmed with a desire for cake. She curled her lip with disdain.

Muffins and cakes were the problem, along with every other morsel she shoved relentlessly into her mouth. If she weren't such a gluttonous pig she wouldn't be in this situation. Her hip bones started to ache with the pressure. Simultaneously gratified and horrified, she released the button. The judgement jeans had done their job. She was not yet deserving of Grace.

Pulling the constricting denim off with guilty relief, she folded the jeans and put them reverently back in the drawer. She dressed mechanically, her mind desperately looking for a radical new solution. Padding downstairs, she decided to search the Internet for some hope.

A couple of hours of desperate hunting resulted in nothing. As always, it boiled down to diet and exercise. Diet and exercise she already knew. Diet and exercise she had failed at countless times. Somehow, though, she needed to find a way to make it work. If not, her shame threatened to overwhelm her.

Jess gazed out the small cottage window, seeking distraction. The view was familiar but, as always, different. Today the leaves had begun to turn, the dry green of summer fading to the yellow of early autumn. A flock of sheep occupied a field on the opposite hillside, their distant white dots scattered on the green surface. She speculated on the stress level of a sheep, deciding it looked a peaceful, simple life.

Sheep didn't have to worry about being sacked for homosexuality or about falling for dark-haired housemates with gentle eyes. They didn't have to fight with themselves every time they wanted to eat something. Still, sheep dip and shearing couldn't be much fun.

Pushing her chair back round to the desk, Jess retrieved her coffee mug and took a swig of the now cold liquid. Unpleasant and bitter, it suited her mood. Thankfully, the melodic ring of the telephone

distracted her.

"Hello?" She answered, simultaneously retrieving paper and pen in preparation for a message.

"Hi, Jessie, it's me."

"Hey, Nick." Jess felt her mood lighten just a little. Next to a job offer, a call from her brother was a good second choice. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"I'm with my boss. We're just talking about the archery instructor position." Nick sounded uncharacteristically formal as he spoke, which meant that Barton must be in earshot. "He's going to have to advertise, but I just wanted to double-check with you first. Any thoughts?"

Jess clenched her jaw at the sudden pressure for a decision. She had not given the opportunity much thought since he raised it two days ago. It had been easier to relegate it to the "too complicated" file. She imagined herself spending the next six months sitting at her desk, waiting for Grace to come home. Then again, maybe the change in routine could get some weight off. "Okay," she said, before better judgement could dissuade her. "I'll do it."

"Fantastic. Thanks, Jessie. I'll let Mr. Barton know." Nick's voice was jubilant. "Well, I'd best go. I'll call you again soon."

"Okay, talk to you later." Jess waited until she heard the line disconnect before pressing the button to hang up. Replacing the handset gently in its cradle, she let her head fall back against the smooth leather of her chair. "Well, Jess," she said aloud, "bad action is better than no action, hey old girl?"

SUBTLY, GRACE LIFTED her eyes from the page and allowed her gaze to fall on her friend. Jess's expression was one of concentration, the same one she always wore when reading. Her forehead was

furrowed slightly, whilst her green eyes quickly scanned the page. As Grace watched, a slight smile showed at the corner of Jess's mouth and she raised her hand to tuck an errant lock of dark blond hair behind her ear. Grace let her eyes drop back to her veterinary journal, unsure of whether her friend's smile was caused by the story she was immersed in or because she knew she was being watched.

When she realised that she had read the same paragraph at least three times, Grace gave up and indulged in thoughts that roamed freely. Unsurprisingly, she found herself thinking about Jess. Their initial meeting had been unusual, to say the least, and involved Jess bursting into her home to rescue her from a knife-brandishing, hired thug. She still found it hard to accept that her ex-employer was responsible, and just because she spoke up about the harmful pet food they made. That had been two months ago and she still had nightmares. It had been a frightening situation, one that had left her so afraid in her own home that she had made the choice to move away. Much to her surprise, Jess had invited her to live with her as long as she needed to.

Looking back, it seemed so sudden that Grace had moved in with Jess but then, it had all evolved so naturally that it just felt right. Grace had needed company after the attack and Jess had been struggling with the betrayal of her previous lover. Some kind, gentle friendship was exactly what each of them needed to help heal. They had got on well from the first moment, relaxing into a friendship that seemed to take no effort at all.

Grace wasn't sure when exactly it was that her feelings for Jess had become more than just platonic. That is, assuming they were merely platonic at any point. When she realised that she would no longer be relaxed in her home, the decision to sell had been relatively clear-cut. Getting a vet placement near

Jess's house made sharing an obvious solution but it wasn't a topic she felt comfortable to raise. When Jess suggested it herself, Grace was euphoric. She recalled trying not to appear as excited as she had been, not wanting Jess to think she had ulterior motives.

"Grace?"

"Mmm?" Startled out of her reverie, she looked up.

Jess's expression was curious. "Good read?" The twist of a smile gave away her sarcasm.

Fingering her neglected journal, Grace floundered for an excuse. "I was just thinking."

"With an expression like that, it must have been something good." Jess raised an eyebrow.

Grace laughed. "Better than good, actually, but if you keep fishing like that, one of these days you're going to get more than you bargained for." She attempted to look stern.

"Okay, okay. I'll let you off the hook this time." Jess grinned. After a pause, her expression sobered and she spoke again. "Nick called today."

"About the archery job?"

Jess nodded. She seemed hesitant to continue. "I've told him I'll do it."

"That's good," Grace lied, disappointment threatening to overwhelm her. There had been moments in the last couple of months when she'd hoped Jess might feel the same way about her. They were just little things, a look here or a joke there, but Grace hoarded them all. Treating them like precious gems, she brought them out to admire whenever she was alone. *Maybe it was all in my imagination.* Grace summoned a supportive smile. "When do you start?"

"As soon as I can." Jess said.

Grace watched as Jess's expression transitioned through a variety of emotions and hope skipped within her. There was more to this than the obvious, that much was clear. Rising to her feet, she crossed

the distance to the sofa and sat down next to Jess, pulling her friend into her arms. "C'mere," she said softly. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too." Jess leant into the hug. "It's going to be weird going away. I need to do something or I'll just sit around obsessing about how I don't have a job and other stuff."

What's the other stuff? Grace wanted to ask the question aloud but knew she couldn't. Jess would share if and when she was ready. "Well, whether you're here or away you know where I am, right?"

"Yes. Thanks."

Grace dropped her arms as she felt Jess pull away from the hug. Jess had been increasingly distracted recently. She had been eating less and Grace had heard her go downstairs in the middle of the night several times. Maybe a change of scenery would help. Either way, it looked like she was about to find out.

Chapter Two

JESS SWITCHED THE radio off when she saw the entrance for Camp Condor. A huge wooden arch marked the gateway, reminding her of the American children's camps she had seen in films. This was probably modelled on a similar premise. Turning carefully under the arch, she proceeded up the smooth tarmac drive. The camp was isolated, situated in countryside as far as she could see. There was an expanse of woods off to the right, but mainly the land was divided into grassy fields.

The driveway led to several large buildings, which Jess assumed contained the offices and canteen amongst other administrative things. Large log cabin-type structures radiated out behind the bigger buildings, presumably providing the accommodation for staff and guests. According to Nick, the camp could cater to over two hundred children. Thankfully, it was now the low season, so Jess should have a lot fewer kids to worry about.

She reached the car park, and pulled into an unoccupied slot then turned off the engine. Ignoring her luggage for the time being, she locked the car and headed toward the door marked "Reception".

"Hi," a young man in a red Camp Condor T-shirt greeted her. "Can I help you?"

"Hi," Jess responded. "I'm Jess Maddocks, the temporary archery instructor."

"Fantastic." He grabbed her hand and shook it vigorously. "I'm Mickey. You're Nick's sister, right?"

"That's right," she said. It suddenly occurred to her that she would be guilty by association. *I hope Nick's been behaving.*

"Fab." Mickey grinned. "Nick's a good laugh, so you must be cool, too."

Jess smiled. She was twenty-seven but suddenly

felt more like fifty-seven. "Thanks, but Nick's humour is one of a kind."

"So, anyway, let me give you the grand tour." Mickey checked his watch. "We have less than half an hour before the blighters turn up for lunch."

"Okay," Jess said, unsure how to take his terminology.

"Kidding, just kidding." Mickey laughed. "The kids are great, really. Best fried and served with ketchup." He winked.

Uncertain whether to laugh or cry at her first impression of her new temporary home, Jess followed Mickey, who led her through a doorway to her left then down a short corridor with blue carpet tiles. The smell reminded her of school. *Crayons and institution.*

"That's Barton's office," Mickey said. "He's not in at the moment, but you'll meet him soon enough." He continued on, pointing out sickbay, a store room, and toilets before stopping at another door. "This is the staff rec room."

Jess followed him into a large room dominated by a pool table and a mismatched collection of armchairs. An old television stood on a wheeled stand and a table was splattered with magazines while a Coke machine hummed in the corner.

"It's the best place on the whole site," he said, "because it's adult only. The pool table can get booked up, though. If you like to play you should come here as soon as you can after supper. I'll give you a game some time?" he asked, looking at her questioningly.

"That'd be good." She played adequately, and it would be a useful icebreaker to help her get to know the other staff. If she was going to find out anything about why Chrissy left so suddenly and why somebody was keeping an eye on Nick, this might be a good place to pick up some information. He turned and led her along the last bit of the corridor, holding

the heavy outside door open for her. They crossed a corner of the car park before entering another building.

"This is the canteen block," he said, voice echoing in the cavernous room. "The kitchens are behind the serving counter there, but you shouldn't need to worry about that."

"When are the meal times?" she asked, thinking that she ought to be helping with the conversation.

"Breakfast is at eight, lunch at twelve, and supper at six." Mickey strode through the hall, his trainers squeaking rhythmically on the polished floor. "There is also tea at four, which is just biscuits and squash for the kids."

Back in the open air, they followed a gravel path that took them past another large building. "That's the indoor hall," Mickey said, gesturing toward it. "That's where we have evening ents and activities in the bad weather. There are a couple of smaller rooms at the back that are the kids' common room and quiet room. We don't need to go in there much."

Jess opted not to comment. She made a mental note to investigate, though. Any place she wasn't supposed to go was probably someplace she should check out.

"This is the equipment store." He retrieved a bulky bunch of keys from his pocket and went through them.

"You look like a jailer with that lot. Am I right in thinking you're the man to speak to if I lock myself out?"

He smiled. "Yep, most of the time, anyway. When I'm not on duty it'll be whoever is manning reception." He twisted the key in the lock then pushed open the large wooden door. "Most of the equipment is in use at the moment, so it looks empty. By the end of the day, though, we'll be fighting to fit everything in. You've got one of the worst jobs for

that, too." He gave her a sympathetic grin.

Jess peered into the semi-darkness, noting the cobwebs in the corners with a shiver. A couple of worn archery butts leant against the far wall. A sudden pang of anxiety gripped her chest. *How did I get myself into this?*

"C'mon," Mickey said. "I'll show you the accommodation. That's probably what you're most interested in, anyway."

"How long have you worked here?" Jess asked as he led her down another path.

"Seems like forever. My friend got me into it. He said there were loads of girls looking for some fun before they start uni."

Jess didn't pursue that angle. "Do you teach any activities?"

Mickey shook his head. "I used to do ball games, but then we had a bit of a staffing crisis a couple of weeks ago. They needed someone to step in and cover reception and some admin stuff and I volunteered. I've ended up a bit of a trouble-shooter. I fill in wherever they need me. I like to be indispensable." He shot a glance over his shoulder and for a moment, Jess thought he might be flirting with her. But that was impossible. The judgement jeans proved that.

"Oh. Well, it sounds like you've been having a hard time with staff, what with the receptionist and the archery instructor leaving."

He shrugged. "Just the way it goes. Mandy will be back as soon as she gets her family thing sorted out, but Chrissy always was a funny one. Crying and stuff. I never knew what Nick saw in her." He scowled and lapsed into silence.

They had looped back to behind the administration building and were entering the residential section. Mickey walked to the nearest cabin and held open the door. "These big cabins are for the guests," he announced, falling back into the

light tone he had used earlier.

Jess peered inside, her eyes adjusting to the darker space. It was silent and empty because the children were still out on their morning activities. Her imagination flooded with images of the room in use, children hanging off the bunk beds and feasting on tuck shop treasure. Even as a child she'd have missed out on that. Eating with anyone else was not something she was comfortable with. "How many children sleep in here?"

"There are twelve bunks to a cabin and twenty of these cabins total. Only a few of them are in use this time of year, but in the summer, it gets full to capacity. The boys and girls are kept separate, of course." Mickey grinned at her as though they shared a secret.

Backing out of the room, Jess noticed two long, brick buildings nestled between the large cabins. "What're they?" she asked, pointing.

"Oh, those are the washrooms and toilets. Girls on the far side, boys here. The boys keep trying to sneak into the girls' block, armed with soggy wads of toilet paper they throw in like grenades. Wicked." He grinned and Jess decided Mickey had probably done it himself in the past.

Leading Jess away from the bigger accommodation buildings, he gestured to some smaller log cabins, almost hidden in the trees on the outskirts of the camp. "Those are the staff cabins," he explained. "And again, boys and girls kept separately. More's the pity." He winked at her.

Jess considered a multitude of retorts to bring him back to size, but decided against it. He was just a child himself really, irritating perhaps, but still harmless. "Where's Nick's?"

Mickey pointed to a far cabin in the corner. It was smaller than most of the others. "Lucky sod gets one to himself. I'm there—" he pointed again, "sharing

with Gus, the watersports instructor. Nice enough bloke, but a bit boring. He's only interested in stuff to do with water."

"At least he's in the right job." Jess always envied people with such clear-cut job interests. Nick had been the same way. He loved anything to do with mechanical workings. Engines, no matter what size. How something worked had always fascinated him and he ended up sticking with that all his life.

"Yeah, I s'pose." Mickey was already walking in another direction as he replied.

Jess followed, her interest switching to the cabin they were approaching. It was a homey place, compared to the others. Pretty blue gingham curtains hung in the windows and several potted plants had been arranged neatly on the small porch area. The building had a pleasant aspect, shielded on three sides by trees and shrubs whilst the front benefited from the evening sun.

"This is your new pad." Mickey said. "You're sharing with Caitlin. Has Nick mentioned her? She's American."

Jess shook her head. Nick hadn't said anything about a roommate. This could prove difficult.

"She's a good laugh," Mickey continued. "You should get on fine. She teaches riding mainly, but she sometimes covers other things. She's introduced softball, too. The kids seem to like the whole American thing." He took a single key from another pocket. He used it to unlock the cabin door then handed it to Jess. "Try not to lose it. Or you'll have to rely on me to help you out." He grinned wickedly.

"Thanks," she said, ignoring his jibe, though she was pleased he'd evidently taken her questioning about the keys at face value.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," Mickey said. "I want to go and be first in the lunch queue. It takes hours if you get stuck behind the kids. I'll catch you later."

With a quick wave and a grin he jogged away, leaving Jess alone to explore.

She stood in the doorway of the cabin for a moment, allowing her senses to adjust to the tranquillity. What struck her first was the friendliness of the interior. Much like the outside, it had been decorated with a care more consistent with someone's home than a temporary accommodation. The cabin was primarily open-plan, with a kitchenette and living area on one side and twin beds against the opposite wall. The only internal door led to the bathroom, which contained toilet, sink and shower. Everything about the cabin was small, but it was clean and well cared for, which left Jess feeling optimistic about her new roommate, though she still wasn't happy about having one.

While she was alone, Jess took some time to see what she could learn about Caitlin. A large flag was pinned to the wall above the obviously occupied bed. It was divided into three segments, two horizontal, white above and red below, bordered on the left by one vertical blue stripe. On the blue stripe was a single white star. Even if Mickey hadn't mentioned it, Jess would have assumed Caitlin was American, but she wasn't sure which state the flag represented.

Continuing her investigation, Jess noted a huge bra hanging from the bedpost. Unable to stifle her grin, she decided she liked the display of down-to-earth femininity and realised she was looking forward to meeting Caitlin. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad with a roommate after all. On the nightstand, a picture of a horse took pride of place whilst a well-thumbed thriller rested next to it. Opening cupboards, Jess saw that all of Caitlin's belongings were carefully stored in only half of the space available. Although it was only a small thing, Jess felt more welcome because of it.

"Hi!" A loud voice filled the room, making Jess

jump.

Turning, Jess found herself staring at one of the most splendid busts she had ever seen. Forcing her gaze upward she met a pair of blue eyes that seemed to twinkle with amusement. The stranger was a titan of a woman, exuding strength and energy even standing still. Her muscular frame was softened by generous feminine curves and her skin was tanned a deep brown. A mane of curly, dark red hair was her crowning glory.

"We grow 'em big in Texas," she drawled with a wink.

Jess grinned sheepishly at the transparency of her reaction. "Bigger than we English country bumpkins are used to, for sure."

"I'm Caitlin." She stretched out her hand affably.

"Jess. I'm your new roommate." Shaking the proffered hand, she was surprised by the firm but gentle grasp, having prepared herself for a more painful grip.

Caitlin looked around the room briefly. "Where's all your stuff? Or do you travel really light?"

Jess smiled. She liked Caitlin's energy and what seemed a kind nature. "Nope, it's all in the car still. I didn't want to drag it 'round with me on the tour."

"Figures." Caitlin nodded. "How about we go grab some lunch then I'll give you a hand bringing your stuff back here?"

"Sounds great," Jess agreed readily. It was early days but her first impressions were good.

THE DINING HALL was almost overwhelming. In every direction, children fidgeted and chattered, accompanied by the cacophony of a hundred forks, plates, and cups. The groups of adults dotted about at tables were eating with the same gusto as the guests. Jess saw Nick sitting at a table with Mickey, their

heads bent in earnest discussion of something. Knowing Nick, it would probably be either girl or engine-related. The familiarity calmed her.

"It's your standard cafeteria line-up," Caitlin said. "The food's good. Not always that exciting, but there's plenty of it."

Jess smiled when Caitlin spoke, her Texan drawl sounding so friendly it was practically infectious. Still smiling, she filed into line and grabbed a tray and cutlery. She looked ahead at the containers of food with nervous excitement. Today marked the start of her new life. Today the diet began, and this time, she was determined. She would keep the weight off. Bypassing the cheesy pasta she'd normally lust after, Jess picked up a small salad. She knew it wouldn't satisfy her, but hunger was something she was used to. It was a comforting feeling that told her she was winning the fight. The stakes were certainly high. If she could lose this weight, maybe, just maybe, she'd have a chance with Grace.

"Soda?" Caitlin asked as they reached the drink section.

"Good plan," Jess grabbed a diet cola and added it to her meagre tray.

"Jessie!" The loud voice resounded across the hall causing a brief and eerie silence. Nick stood up and waved at her. "Come and join us," he boomed again.

Feeling herself flush with embarrassment, Jess nodded.

As the hubbub in the room rose back to normal, Caitlin gave Jess a friendly elbow in the ribs. "Gotta love brothers, eh?"

Jess shook her head grimly. "They have their moments."

"Hey, guys!" Nick greeted them enthusiastically as they weaved their way toward his table.

"Hi." Jess placed her tray down opposite him. "Did you have to bring the whole room to a standstill

just then? We were on our way to sit with you already."

Nick looked sheepish. "Sorry. I was just pleased to see you."

Any residual embarrassment melted at his admission. "Well, I'm pleased to see you, too. Hi again, Mickey."

Mickey waved his fork in greeting. "So you've met Caitlin then," he said around a mouthful of food. "One day she's going to give in to my charms, you know." He smirked confidently before taking another forkful of food.

Caitlin smiled good-naturedly. "Not any time soon, I'm not. You know you're just not my type."

"Yeah, did you know Caitlin's a lesbian too?" Nick announced with excitement. "Seems like you lot are taking over the world, huh?"

"Nick!" Jess glared at him. "Jeez."

"What?" Nick's eyebrows rose in innocence. "You are, aren't you, Caitlin?"

With a grin Caitlin nodded. "Sure. That's the only thing standing between me and Mickey's unquestionable charms, I'm sure."

Mickey puffed up with pride. "Never say never. I could always distract you for a while, make sure everything is still ticking over nicely?"

"Charming offer, but I'll pass, thanks." Caitlin rolled her eyes. She glanced at Jess before changing the subject. "So, Mickey, what's new in the gossip world today?"

Jess let the conversation fade out and instead tried to persuade herself that the salad tasted as good as cheesy pasta. So far, so good. She could stay here for a month or so, sort Nick out, lose weight, give Grace a chance to miss her then go home slim and ready for an emotional reunion. Everything was lining up nicely.

Chapter Three

"HEY, LET ME give you a hand." Nick grabbed the other side of the flapping tarpaulin and pulled it down over the target boss. They angled it out so it cleared the paper on the front.

"Thanks." Jess said. "This is tough when the wind gets up but it really beats having to bring the frames and bosses in each day."

"You could load it all up on the trailer. The tractor would make short work of getting it back to the store."

"True, but there doesn't seem much point. Not when there are at least two archery sessions every day. Protected from the weather, the kit will probably be better off out here than shoved in the store with a load of junk piled on top."

They worked in silence for a moment, pulling the waterproof cover over the next target and positioning it so they could pin it down with tent pegs.

"How are you settling in?" Nick asked after a few moments.

Jess used her foot to push the peg down into the soil, pleased at how the peg slid into the earth. "Okay, I think. The children take some getting used to. I find the younger ones a bit easier to deal with. Some of the older boys are too boisterous and impatient with the safety stuff."

"Sounds about right." Nick offered a half-smile and returned to his task.

Jess waited, recognising his pensive expression as the one that indicated he was about to say something he didn't want to.

"I, uh, I think someone's been hanging around outside my cabin. At night." He looked up. "The first time was after I'd come to see you last week. Then I'm sure they were there again last night. It's kind of

freaky."

Jess studied his face. "Some of the kids, maybe?"

He toyed with a tent peg. "I don't think so. The first time, I was on the phone and I saw something move by the window. I went to look and I'm sure I saw a figure disappearing into the trees. It was too big to be a kid."

"What time was this?"

"About eleven. I've started shutting my curtains now. I didn't used to bother before."

"What about last night?" Jess didn't like the idea that someone was watching her brother. Maybe there *was* something going on here that needed looking into.

"I couldn't see anything because of the curtains. I was chatting to Marie but then I thought I heard something. I said I'd call her back and went to check outside, but I couldn't see or hear anyone."

Jess unrolled the tarpaulin for the last boss and they wrestled it into place. She liked the way Nick stayed friends with his exes. Forcing her mind back from its tangent she imagined him in the cabin with someone outside. "Do you lock your door?"

"Yeah."

"What about reporting it?" She pegged a corner of the tarp.

"To Barton? No way. I don't want to give him an excuse. What if they're trying to scare me into quitting or something?"

"Well, I don't see there's much more we can do for now but leave it with me, maybe I can think of something." What, she didn't know. Why anyone would want to spy on Nick was beyond her. All he'd done was date a woman who'd quit her job, after all. Hopefully, all of this was just a big mix-up which she could sort out with some rational thought. "Thanks, Jessie." Nick pulled up the five ground quivers from their position on the shooting line. "Anything else to

come in?" He asked, looking around.

"No, that's it." She straightened. "I've been wanting to ask you something, though. Mickey said that Chrissy was always crying. Is that true?"

Nick frowned. "Mickey can be a prat. But yes, I suppose it's true. She wasn't very happy here in the couple of weeks before she left. Something happened with Barton. I don't know what, but after that she just hated it. I expected her to go sooner, but she said she couldn't afford to. That's one of the reasons it was odd when she went so suddenly."

"Maybe she had another run-in with Barton?"

"Possibly. It sounded like he was making her life miserable after the time she told me about. She wasn't specific about that, though."

Jess thought for a moment. Maybe Barton was one of those kinds of men who couldn't keep his hands off young women. That would certainly create some tension. "Do you think Barton might have made inappropriate suggestions to Chrissy?"

"I thought about that, too," Nick admitted. "And I asked her if Barton was doing or saying things that made her uncomfortable and she said no, nothing like that. It was something else entirely."

"You're sure? Maybe she didn't want to admit that."

"I asked around," Nick said vaguely. "And none of the other women on staff have mentioned anything like that. Caitlin seems perceptive. Maybe ask her about it."

Jess nodded. That was an angle to check out, but her rumbling stomach distracted her as they trudged across the field. Supper was imminent and though she was only going to allow herself a plain baked potato, she was ravenous enough to want it. "I don't know, Nick. It all seems a bit vague, if you ask me. I reckon the best thing you can do is just concentrate on your job and be as amenable and professional as you can. If

whatever is going on involved Chrissy, then there is a good chance it will pass now she's gone."

"I hope so. But that still doesn't explain the kids who left so suddenly. That's bothering me, too."

Jess grunted noncommittally. That was too complicated to think about on an empty stomach.

GRACE UNDID THE popper of her overall bib and enjoyed the sensation as the material relaxed away from her throat. It had been a long day of surgery but thankfully, nothing serious. Ordinarily she'd be rushing to get the admin of the day over with so she could get home to Jess. Tonight though, only an empty house waited. Turning to the computer, she began the process of checking over the records she had updated that day. It gave her the opportunity to spot any typing errors or expand on a report if necessary. She was just keying in the code for the three o'clock patient when a knock on the door disturbed her.

"Come in."

"Grace." The greying head of Jim Fenshaw, the senior partner of the veterinary practice, appeared around the door.

"Hi, Jim. I was just finishing up my patient records for the day."

"Do it while it's fresh in your mind, a good practise I say. However, I am nonetheless going to disturb you for a few moments."

"Of course, what can I do for you?" She turned to face him as he closed the door and seated himself in the chair opposite her. Although she was confident in her abilities, she did feel a little apprehension at this unexpected conversation. It was only a temporary placement at this surgery but she was very much enjoying it and valued the opportunity to work for a man who had such evident skills in the profession.

"I won't beat about the bush," Jim said. "I've been going through your professional history and something has come up that concerns me."

Grace felt a rush of worry and her sense of apprehension tripled. Before she could formulate a sensible question, he spoke again.

"I gather that you left your last full time veterinary position under a cloud. Perhaps you could tell me about that?"

Grace took a steadying breath and indulged in a moment to compose herself. The event Jim was referring to was contentious and signified a distressing time in her life. In fact, it was that event that led to her decision to give up actively practising veterinary medicine and instead move to PetZone in a research capacity. Although Jim had surprised her by raising the subject now, the shadow was never far from her mind and she felt almost a sense of relief that the time had come to discuss it.

"I was employed as a permanent vet at a practice about ten miles from Marlborough." Grace looked up and found a measure of reassurance in his face. "I had worked there for about six months, I suppose. It was mainly a farming practice though we did have a few small animal patients. One day I was called out to attend a sheep by one of the local farmers. The poor creature had got itself mangled in some barbed wire." Grace found herself back with that sheep, reliving the events.

"The animal was suffering and the injuries extensive. I took the decision to euthanise as the only humane option. Given the situation, I did not give the farmer much opportunity for discussion and as soon as I had obtained his permission, I did what was necessary."

Jim nodded briefly to confirm his understanding.

"By the time I returned to the practice that evening, the farmer had called in and lodged a formal

complaint against me. He said that I forced him to make that decision and did not give him reasonable opportunity to consider it. He had subsequently called another vet out from a competing practice who had performed a post mortem and claimed the animal could have been saved."

Grace paused and wondered for perhaps the hundredth time if her original assessment had been correct. She had replayed the events so many times, distraught at the idea she had terminated a life unnecessarily, she no longer knew reality from her fears.

"The farmer threatened to sue for damages but the practice relented and reimbursed him for the cost of the sheep as well as a goodwill payment. I left the practice shortly later." Grace concluded her story as unemotionally as she could manage.

"Were you asked to leave?"

"I was encouraged, but to be honest, I already felt the inclination myself, so it was a mutual decision."

"I see. Why did you wish to leave?"

Grace looked directly at him as she answered, knowing her emotions were still raw on this subject. "I do not wish to work at a practice where the animal's welfare is secondary to the profitability of the business. I honestly believe that prolonging my decision to euthanise would only have resulted in more suffering to the animal. If I have to question my actions in order to consider potential business ramifications, then I believe that compromises my effectiveness as a vet."

Jim nodded slowly. "One last question. Do you believe with hindsight that the animal could have been saved?"

"No." Grace's response was definite. "In my opinion, the competing vet allowed himself to be played by the farmer in the hopes of securing the business for that farm. I think things turned out

exactly as the farmer hoped. He lost his sheep through misfortune but was able to recover its value and an extra sum by some canny persuasion."

After a brief silence, Jim spoke, surprising Grace with a change of subject. "Are you enjoying your work here, now you are a practising vet again?"

"Yes. Ultimately I love working with animals. To me, there is little that equals the satisfaction of healing a patient. I do enjoy working at this practice too, as you know I have discovered some useful new techniques from working with you and the other vets." Grace decided to avoid mentioning the one vet she found herself questioning, since he had been at the practice for several years and was the son of one of Jim's friends.

Jim nodded slowly as was his habit when absorbing information. "Grace, I would like to offer you a permanent position here. The practice is expanding and I need a permanent vet of your calibre." Holding up his hand to pre-empt Grace's response, Jim smiled for the first time. "Please consider the matter and let me know in due course. In the meantime, I hope you have an enjoyable day off tomorrow." Rising stiffly, Jim nodded at her once again and left the room.

Leaning back in her chair, Grace exhaled loudly. The unexpected conversation had proved to be a rollercoaster of emotions. Apparently, she had said whatever Jim needed to hear and now she had the chance of a permanent position. Part of her wanted to bounce around the room with joy. Unbidden, her mind conjured a picture of Jess's face grinning with the good news. Returning to the computer screen, she got back to work, still smiling.

JESS PICKED AT some tree bark whilst listening to the ringing tone on her phone. It had only been

three days since she had last seen Grace, but for some reason, she felt nervous. Three days was long enough to wait. She had forced herself to wait this long out of a sense of propriety. Obviously, the text to say she had arrived safely didn't count.

"Hello?" A smooth, deep, feminine voice answered.

The fluttering in Jess's stomach got worse. "Hi, it's me, just calling to say hi and, er, check on the house and everything." As soon as the words had tumbled out of her mouth, Jess was chastising herself for babbling like a hapless teenager.

"Jess! I'm so glad you called. I wasn't sure if you'd have a chance to."

"Yeah," Jess scuffed her boot in the earth. "I'm outside on my mobile. The payphone is monopolised by the kids as they aren't allowed to bring phones themselves."

"So how's it going? Have you done any lessons yet?"

"Yeah, I started the sessions on my first morning here. I was pretty nervous about teaching the children but it went well. I think I'm lucky with archery because it isn't the sort of thing they do at home. It has novelty value."

"Sounds like an advantage. How about the accommodation? Is it pretty basic?"

Jess grinned, able to imagine the expression Grace would have at that moment, with her nose wrinkled. "Actually, it's surprisingly nice. I share a cabin with Caitlin, a Texan who's also a lesbian, as Nick decided to announce in the middle of lunch on the first day. Sometimes he makes it hard for people to want to help him." She laughed and tried not to pay attention to the part of her that meant it.

"Was he playing matchmaker?" Grace asked, and Jess thought she sounded worried.

"No, thankfully. I think she's going to be a great

roommate but I, um," Jess paused, unsure of how best to phrase what she needed to say. "I guess I just have no interest in looking right now."

"That's good. I had to share a house with some bitchy girls for a year while I was at uni. I almost dropped out because I was so miserable."

"No, thankfully I don't think I'll be in that situation here." She imagined, for a moment, it was Grace she was sharing the cabin with. The two of them, alone in a cabin, in the woods...

"Jess?"

"Oh, uh, sorry. The signal must have gone or something. Did you say something?" She bit her lip in embarrassment.

"I just asked if you'd found out anything about Nick's concerns."

"Not really. From the sound of it, there was some falling out between Chrissy and the boss, Barton. I don't know what it was about but that's when the trouble started. I'm guessing if there is something then it's just guilt by association. But it seems to me it was probably just some personal issue between the two of them. So hopefully I'll finish up here and be able to come home."

"Good. As long as she didn't get herself into big trouble."

"Except for one thing that's worrying me a bit. Today, Nick told me he thought somebody had been loitering outside his cabin at night. There's probably some innocent explanation, but he seems quite worried."

"Is he locking himself in?"

"Yeah, he is now. I said I'd try and come up with something to help but I don't know what to do."

"He always looks to you to come up with the solution doesn't he?" Grace's tone was neutral.

"I suppose, but he is my brother. I help him if I can."

"It's okay, I wasn't criticising. Just observing. Why don't you take a look later when it gets dark? Check how much you can see and hear from outside. If nothing else, you can tell him you've done something."

"Yeah, that's a good idea." The following silence was long enough for Jess to scramble for subjects. She wasn't ready to end the conversation yet.

Grace pre-empted her. "How are you feeling?"

"What? Fine."

"I mean...everything's okay? You're taking care of yourself?"

"Of course." Jess frowned. What was Grace talking about?

"They're feeding you all right?"

Jess hesitated, guilty. "Nothing close to as good as your cooking, but it's fine," she hedged.

"I just want to make sure that you're all right. You're important to me, Jess, and I worry that you're not taking care of yourself."

Stunned, Jess stared at the ground. *Really? Of course, she must just mean as a friend and a housemate. No sense getting your hopes up. You don't deserve her.* "I'm fine. Honestly."

"Good. I have a surprise for you, by the way."

"What is it?" Jess asked, relieved at the change of subject.

"I can't tell you, can I? It wouldn't be a surprise, then."

"That's not fair. You can't just say something like that and then leave me hanging. At least give me a clue." Jess leaned against the tree, smiling.

"Okay, okay. How about if I tell you that it's made me happy?"

"That's not a clue, that's a statement. Try something else."

"Nope, you'll just have to wait till I next see you. I'll tell you then."

"Have you got a tattoo, or had something pierced?" She imagined Grace with an eyebrow ring. It didn't look right in her mind's eye. A tattoo could be interesting...

"Nope. Mind you, now you mention it, I have been thinking about getting a piercing. Somewhere unusual, maybe tongue or nipple or something."

A pulse of arousal passed through her body. Jess was ambivalent about piercings, but the unexpected arrival of Grace's nipple in the conversation was a whole different matter. "I, uh, yeah. That could be fun."

"Well," Grace said, sounding smug, "I'd better be off now, but it's been really good to talk to you. Call me again when you get a chance, okay?"

"Will do. Look after yourself."

"You too. Good night."

"Night." Jess pressed the button to disconnect and relaxed against the sturdy tree trunk. She spent a few minutes allowing the energy and body heat that had welled up to filter harmlessly away into the cool evening air.

THE TEMPERATURE HAD dropped considerably over the course of the evening, making Jess very glad for her fleecy sweater. It was around eleven, late enough for the general hubbub of the camp to have quieted, though there were still lights on in some of the staff cabins. Making her excuses to Caitlin by mumbling something about visiting the Coke machine, Jess had escaped outside. As soon as she was out of sight, she doubled back and proceeded to creep through the woods toward Nick's cabin. She was currently squatting in the cover of some large shrubs, surprised at how much visibility there was into the cabin from her vantage point.

Nick had drawn the curtains, but the material was

thin, so it was easy to watch him, albeit in silhouette. At the moment, he was sitting in a chair either reading or, knowing her brother, playing with his handheld games console. She wrestled with her conscience for a few moments before caving in. Groping around on the ground, she picked up a small rock and threw it near the edge of the cabin wall. The resulting thud was effective and Jess had to try not to giggle when Nick moved to the window, drew back the curtain and peered out.

Remaining as still as possible, Jess held her breath, fearful he would spot her. After what seemed like an inordinately long time, Nick let the curtain fall and returned to his chair. It was harder to tell because of a different fold in the curtain, but this time it looked like he was more alert than before.

Jess shuffled, stretching her left leg to ward off the cramp that threatened her calf. Her stomach rumbled, sounding out of place in the otherwise quiet woods. She started looking for her next missile but this time the discovery of a cigarette butt distracted her. Her attention diverted, Jess scoured the ground, finding several more. She inspected them by the light of her mobile phone display. They were quite recent, not yet stained by the earth and rain. As she searched more to her left, she found another one, this time captured in the impression of a large boot.

All sense of fun about her prank left Jess in a sudden, sobering rush. She was no longer playing a harmless joke on her brother, nor had she simply stumbled across the preferred smoking haunt of one of the guests. None of the children would have feet this size, even the older boys. The realisation was a disturbing one. Someone really had been watching Nick and furthermore, Jess had inadvertently placed herself in that person's spot.

Her imagination kick-started and she could almost hear the approach of a large, malignant villain about

to find her. *Calm down. Think rationally.* Rising slowly, she fought her temptation to run. She moved as gently as possible, fearful that the sounds of movement might give her away. Her stomach rumbled again, this time sounding thunderous. Suddenly, just as she was just about to turn, a large, heavy hand grabbed her shoulder while another one clamped tightly across her mouth, preventing any call for help.

"Shh," said a voice in her ear.

Jess struggled against the hands that gripped her, squirming in every direction to try to get free. Raising a foot, she kicked backward with all the force she could muster and was rewarded with the feeling of her boot connecting solidly with her assailant's shin.

"Goddam it! Jess, stop wriggling. I'm not going to hurt you."

Jess took a moment to register the content of the message delivered in a female Texas drawl. "Caitlin?" At the same time, she felt pressure against her shoulder blades and registered the cause as Caitlin's breasts. She blushed and was glad for the dark because Caitlin couldn't see it.

"Yeah," Caitlin said as she released Jess. She reached down and rubbed her shin. "You pack a meaner kick than a mule."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't know it was you." Myriad thoughts went through her mind, the uppermost mortification that she'd injured her roommate. "We have to go, though. Are you okay to get back to the cabin?"

"Sure. It takes more than that to slow me down."

They made their way back to the cabin in silence. Once inside, Jess took care to make sure the door was locked and all the curtains fully drawn.

"Is everything okay? You seem kinda edgy." Caitlin said, flopping down into a chair.

Jess sat down next to her. "Are you sure your leg is all right? I feel really awful."

Caitlin waved her concern away. "If you think that's bad, you sure haven't worked with horses have you?" she laughed. "Anyway, is it some strange English custom to spy on your brother?"

Jess grinned, relaxing now she was back in the safety of her own cabin. "It's a long story, but let's just say I don't make a habit of it. How about you? Do Texans often sneak up and grab women in woods?"

"Depends on the women," Caitlin teased. "And I've had my moments, but that's another story. So, what were you doing or is it one of those 'if I tell you I may have to kill you' things?"

Jess considered for a moment. She didn't know Caitlin or the politics of the camp that well yet and she didn't want to cause Nick more problems by talking to the wrong person. In the lengthening silence, it was clear she needed to say something. "Okay. Nick thinks he's been hearing someone outside his cabin at night," Jess explained, watching Caitlin closely. "I decided I'd wind him up a little. You know, get him back for my introduction in the canteen the other day."

Caitlin smiled but remained silent.

"Anyway, I ended up finding several cigarette butts where I was standing and a footprint way too big to belong to any of the children. I guess I ended up winding myself up, and I was thinking that perhaps Nick was right and there was a bogeyman when you turned up. I thought you were him."

Caitlin grinned. "You have a pretty active imagination, don't you? It could be any one of the staff who smoke. Or one of the older kids, doing what they're not supposed to do."

"That's true."

"Still," she said thoughtfully, "it's unlikely. The fines for staff smoking outside the designated areas are pretty steep. And come to think of it, I did see someone around Nick's cabin a few nights ago."

Caitlin's brow furrowed. "Yes, it was when I was on my way back from the laundry room. At the time, I just figured it was Mickey or someone on his way to visit."

"So there could be something going on," Jess said. "Maybe I should have taken it more seriously in the first place."

"I don't know. How about tomorrow, when it's light, we go out and arrange some twigs and things then keep an eye on when and if the pattern gets messed up?"

"That's a great idea," Jess said, relieved that Caitlin didn't think she was crazy. "We'll have to make sure no one sees us, though."

"If they do, we can just pretend we're making out."

"Uh..."

Caitlin looked at Jess and her grin became a laugh. "Relax. I'm just kidding."

Still unsure of how to react, Jess opted for a noncommittal smile and a change of subject. "I've been meaning to ask you, how did you end up working here?"

Caitlin settled back into her chair, stretching her long legs out in front of her. "Do you want the long or the short version?"

"Long," Jess replied without hesitation. She switched position and curled one leg up under her. The events of the evening had chased away any hint of sleepiness and she was genuinely interested in the subject. Besides, maybe she'd be able to get some more insight into Caitlin, and clues to how much she could reveal to her.

"My family owns a ranch." She grinned again. "How stereotypical could you get, right? A Texan from a ranch. Anyway, we've owned it for generations. It's a very traditional sort of place and, as you might have noticed, I'm not a very traditional

sort of person. Back to that in a minute. My folks are getting older and it's the unspoken rule that my brother, Johnny, will take over the spread. I get along with Johnny. He's an okay guy. We've talked, you know, and we both know the ranch isn't profitable as it currently stands. It's hard work and there are tough choices when money's tight. The ranches that are doing well are the ones diversifying. They're still working cattle, but they take in tourists who want to do the whole cowboy experience thing."

Jess nodded with enthusiasm. "I'd love to do that one day."

"I'm sure you will, then." Caitlin adjusted her position so she could massage her shin and Jess grimaced, hoping she hadn't seriously injured her. "Sadly," Caitlin continued, "my folks are against the idea, as old-fashioned as they are. Still, I think it's out of their hands. In the meantime, I figured I'd get some useful experience. And that's why I'm here."

"Wouldn't another ranch have been more relevant?"

"Yeah, but I want to be able to offer something a bit different. We won't stand out if we just do what the other ranches are doing."

"So is it worth it? Are you learning useful stuff here?"

"I'm learning that I don't like riding English style." Caitlin shook her head. "That's weird, when you're used to riding Western. But it's been great, really. I've helped out all over the camp doing different things, and it's given me a lot to think about. A lot of ideas."

Jess briefly imagined Caitlin riding across a prairie somewhere. She wondered if she could throw a lasso. "So how much longer are you staying? Don't you miss your home and family?"

"Hold on, there. Second question first. Yes, I miss them but things are kind of complicated. I can't really

be myself at home. My folks are from a strict religious background and they were taught to believe I'll burn in hell for being gay. They feel that the sin reflects on them, too. So as you can imagine, there are some things I can't do or say when I'm around them." She shrugged, but her expression was sad. "And the first question—at least a few more months."

Jess stared at her, floored by such a judgemental approach to life. She wanted to argue against it but forced herself not to. It wasn't her business, and religion was a personal thing. Caitlin obviously had been dealing with it for a while. "I'm sorry," she said. "That must be really hard for all of you." It seemed a feeble offer of comfort.

"It's okay." Caitlin sighed. "It'll work out with time. Enough about me. What about you? How come you're here?"

"Long story or short?"

"Long. I love a good story."

"Okay. Well, there's this girl, Grace."

Caitlin laughed. "Ah, the best stories start this way." She leaned back, making herself comfortable.

"I met her a couple of months ago, when I, uh, helped her out of a predicament. She had a concussion but didn't want to go to hospital. I invited her to come and stay with me."

Caitlin raised her eyebrows. "That's a pretty nice thing to do considering you didn't know her."

"Maybe. But you know with some people you just *know*? I just knew Grace was a good person and I really wanted to help her. Anyway, she stayed with me for about a week and we just hit it off. It felt like we'd been friends for ages, I suppose it helped that she had my jeans off on the first night." Jess grinned.

"Wow. Seriously? You don't waste time do you?"

"I'm kidding. Well, misleading you, anyway. I had a cut on my leg and I had to let her take a look because she's a vet."

Caitlin looked nonplussed. "So you just couldn't find a doctor, huh? Here's this good-looking woman, who happens to be a vet, and you figure 'why not'? And you took your pants off." She laughed again.

"No, not like that. It wasn't that serious a cut and the paramedic had already stitched it up." Jess ran her hand along her thigh absently, remembering how it had hurt, and the circumstances that had led her to Grace's farmhouse that fateful day. Just in time to stop the thug from hurting her worse.

"Um, I feel like I'm missing a big part of the story here."

"You are, but that would be part of the extra long story version and we don't have time for it unless you want to forgo all sleep tonight. I'll tell you that one another time."

"I'll hold you to it."

"Right. So everything was great until it was time for Grace to go back to her home. Of course, it was inevitable, but I guess I'd been avoiding thinking about it. Like watching a good film you just don't want to end."

"Yup, I know how that feels," Caitlin said, a hint of wistfulness in her voice.

"Once she left, the house was really quiet, and I was frightened by how much I missed her. Then I lost my job and everything seemed to come crashing down. Stuff happened and she ended up coming back to return the favour and help me out. And that's the gist of it."

"So where is she now?"

"At home—my house," Jess said, making a concerted effort not to start daydreaming about what Grace would be doing at that moment. "She got a job nearby and I offered to house share for convenience. Luckily, she agreed."

"All right, hold up. The woman you're crazy about is living in your house and you've just accepted

a job someplace else. I don't get it."

Jess looked at the floor, wishing she hadn't said so much already. Too late, though. She looked up again. "Things aren't so straightforward."

"Why not?"

"You haven't met Grace." Jess smiled, thinking about Grace and how she could make Jess feel with just a look. "She's intelligent, warm, funny... I could list a load of qualities but still not do her justice. She deserves someone special." *Not this fat, unemployed loser.*

Caitlin stared at her. "What the hell are you saying? That is about the most pitiful statement I've heard in years. We live in a world filled with the wonder that each of us as an individual brings to the table and here I am with you, determined not to see it."

Jess reeled at the unexpected criticism. "Look, you asked. That's the answer. I didn't say you have to agree with it." She stood. "It's late. I really need to get to bed now."

"Suit yourself. You can run away if you want, but it's your own issues that are bothering you. They'll keep poking you until you find the guts to face them."

"Yes, well, good night." Jess needed to get away from there, away from Caitlin's scrutiny but instead Caitlin stood up and pulled her into an unexpected hug.

"Good night to you, too." She released her and Jess rushed through her preparations for bed as quickly as possible. She avoided looking at Caitlin. Once in bed, however, she couldn't sleep. She lay on her back and watched moonlight creep across the ceiling. Confused and feeling very alone, she blinked against the tears that threatened, but they came anyway.

Chapter Four

"OKAY EVERYONE, LINE up here and collect a bow. That's it. Here you are." Jess handed out the light training bows to eager hands. "Careful, hold it horizontally like this—that's right. Oh, hello again," she smiled at a young boy who had attended at least four of her lessons already. He was European but she wasn't sure which country he was from, as he couldn't speak any English. He had an endearing, cheeky grin and seemed to take great pleasure in learning her chosen hobby.

Smiling, the little boy nodded at her in return, a deep, almost bow-like head movement that communicated greeting and respect without the need for words.

"Come on, everyone," Jess called, collecting the containers of training arrows. "Let's head to the field. Those who have been before can lead the way."

With much excited chatter, the children began moving toward the archery area with Jess bringing up the rear. She preferred to be at the back so she could make sure that nobody was lagging behind or likely to get lost. The children ranged in age from six to twelve, so she had to keep a careful watch on them.

The European boy fell into step next to her, choosing to walk at the back though he knew the way. Looking down at him, Jess felt a pang of sympathy. His inability to speak English prevented him from bonding with any of his peers, which in such an environment must have left him feeling isolated. "You really like archery then?" Jess addressed him with a smile, wanting to make contact somehow.

The boy looked up at her with intelligent eyes, though his face registered no comprehension of her words. He smiled and gave a little shrug before looking away.

Jess wondered what had made his parents think it was a good idea to send him here. He seemed so young, and though she didn't have much experience with children, Jess would have guessed he was around seven. Quite often European children came to England to study and improve their English, but they usually had a basic command of the language beforehand.

She tried again. "I'm Jess." She patted her chest and, feeling like a character in a Tarzan film, said again, "Jess."

The boy looked at her quizzically. "Yess?" He pronounced it in a thick accent that converted the "J" of her name to a "Y." Beaming with sudden understanding, he patted his own chest. "Sergey."

"Sergey," Jess repeated, trying valiantly to imitate the unusual sound of the name. It came out "sir-jhay."

He nodded once, indicating the attempt was close enough.

"Hey, guys," she called, her attention drawn to the front of the line. "Hold those bows like I showed you. They're not toys." The boys in question complied, and Jess relaxed again. When misused, even the gentle training bows could cause serious harm.

After a moment, Jess felt a small, warm hand reach out and encompass her fingers. Looking down she saw Sergey was smiling, though his eyes were determinedly facing forward. Her chest clenched at this unexpected but moving sign of trust, and she gave his hand an approving squeeze in answer.

Fifteen children were here for Jess's archery lesson, the number that had been accepted prior to her arrival. It worked well, so she had chosen to maintain it. Five targets were set up with the same number of shooting points. At the start of each lesson, Jess arranged the children into three sets of five and the groups would rotate, taking turns to shoot.

Allowing for set-up, training, and wind-down, it meant that each child stepped up to the range about four times, shooting a total of twenty-four arrows. It wasn't as many as she and Nick would shoot in their practise sessions, but it was about right, given the shorter concentration spans of the young children.

After Jess had been through the initial safety instructions, she allowed the children who had shot before to start whilst she advised the novices on the basics. Throughout the session, she would move around, advising participants on how they could improve and congratulating them on their progress. There were times when the waiting children would get bored, but usually they socialised between themselves, their earnest conversations often proving quite entertaining for Jess.

Sergey was in the current group of archers who had just approached the range. She watched as he drew back the string, a look of concentration on his face. He released the arrow smoothly and with a satisfying thud, it landed in the red section of the target.

"Very nice," Jess complimented as she knelt down next to him. She positioned herself on his outside so she could maintain a watchful eye on the rest of the children as she spoke to him.

Sergey grinned at her, evidently recognising her approval and pleased to receive it.

"Here, let me show you something new." Jess handed him an arrow and indicated for him to settle the nock snugly against the bowstring. "Wait," she interrupted him after he had raised the bow but before he could shoot. Using her hands to guide him, Jess adjusted his finger arrangement on the string. "There," she said with satisfaction. "That should give you more control." She had moved his fingers so that instead of having three below the nock of the arrow as she taught all the beginners, he now had his index

finger above and his second and third fingers below.

Nodding, Sergey drew back the string and lined up the arrow's trajectory with care. Before he could release the shot, the arrow shifted out of place. He released the tension from the string and lowered the bow before looking at Jess questioningly.

Reaching for an unused arrow, Jess demonstrated how the archer's fingers must not make contact with the nock. With some charade-like creativity, she showed how if she touched it, the arrow would be hindered upon release and its flight path affected.

Nodding in understanding, Sergey adjusted his fingers and prepared to shoot again. He looked at Jess questioningly and she nodded. Jess turned to the boss and focused out of habit. She moved from the outside in, honing her focus tighter. White circles, then black, blue, red and gold. Though she couldn't see it she knew the tiny black dot was right in the centre. To her left she heard the release of Sergey's arrow then, a split second later, it rested in the outskirts of gold. Sergey turned to her, beaming in gratitude.

Jess grinned, patted his arm, and moved on to see who else would benefit from her attention. The other three boys and one girl were doing well and looked to be enjoying themselves. Jess had reminded herself when she first started that for most of the children this was simply an opportunity to try something they didn't have access to at home. They would hopefully enjoy it but the vast majority would take it no further. As long as everyone involved was safe, she tended to let the children enjoy themselves unhindered.

Jess checked her watch, noting it was almost time to bring the session to a close. The waiting children were becoming fractious, a sure sign that they needed their morning break. Looking across the field to the camp buildings, Jess noticed two men watching her class. It was hard to tell because of the distance, but she thought one was Barton, the manager of the camp.

Both men were dressed more smartly than the usual staff and she speculated on their presence. Probably just checking up on her to make sure she knew what she was doing. She jerked her attention back to the children again but continued to monitor the men in her peripheral vision. At one point, Barton raised his arm and pointed, and it looked like he was pointing directly at her. *Weird.*

"Miss, we've finished." One of the boys was looking at her expectantly.

Jess's attention returned fully to the lesson. Looking across to the arrow-studded bosses, she congratulated the group. "Good job. You can go and collect your arrows, now."

As the children moved off to do as she requested, Jess glanced toward Barton and the other man, and she was relieved to see they had disappeared.

"MAN, WHAT A day," Caitlin exclaimed, dropping into a nearby chair and pulling her boots off. "Poor old Maggie got bitten by something and took off with the kid still on her back. She's the gentlest soul normally, but today, that horse was mad. How about you? Good day?"

Jess had been dreading Caitlin's return to the cabin after the tension the previous evening. Caitlin had obviously chosen to ignore it, so Jess decided she would, as well. "Not bad, but I'm not sure I'd volunteer to work with children again. You need so much energy."

"Ain't that the truth?"

"Every now and then, they surprise you, though. There's this cute little foreign boy – European, I'd say, but I'm not sure where he's from. He doesn't speak a word of English but he's such a trooper. He took my hand when we were walking up to the field." Jess smiled at the memory.

"Oh, yeah, I think I know the one you mean. Blond, big brown eyes, about seven. Is that him?"

"Yes. His name is Sergey. He seems to really like archery. Maybe he'll be able to join a club or something when he goes back home."

Caitlin rose from her chair and began stripping for her shower. "He goes to the stables a lot, just to pet the horses. I don't think he's ridden, though."

Jess turned away as Caitlin pulled her T-shirt over her head. Caitlin's ability to strip without reservation had caught her by surprise the first time. Now it just left her feeling envious. She couldn't imagine ever feeling that comfortable with her body.

"I think he must be lonely," Jess said, still keeping her eyes averted. "I mean, he can't make any friends when he can't even talk to them. Why would his parents send him here? He doesn't speak any English and he's so young."

"Beats me. I think he's been here for at least three weeks, though. Poor little guy."

"Three weeks? That's a long time." Jess understood that most of the guests stayed one week, though some of the older children sometimes managed two.

"Sure is," Caitlin called back as she disappeared into the bathroom. "I'll be right out."

Jess spent the next fifteen minutes pottering around the cabin, randomly tidying and straightening while she thought about Sergey. When billows of steam surrounded the kettle she'd put on, she prepared two coffees, deferring to Caitlin's penchant for post-shower caffeine. She had just placed the two mugs by their preferred chairs and returned to her seat when Caitlin emerged. Again, Jess averted her eyes, giving Caitlin privacy to change. Part of Jess wanted to stare. Not in a sexual way, but just because it was so alien to see a big woman nearly naked. It was as though the world was reserved for the thin.

Jess wanted to see what a big woman would look like when unclothed. No camouflaging, voluminous folds of clothing. No stooping and slouching and pretending not to be there. Not that Caitlin did that anyway. Jess picked up her cup.

"You know," Caitlin said, leaning her head on one side while she towel-dried her hair, "maybe we should try and spend some time with him. If you know his name, then you've already started the ball rolling."

Jess started, trying to catch up with Caitlin. Ah, yes. Sergey. "Yeah, that's a good plan. I'll check the stables after supper in case he's around."

"I'm pretty sure I've seen him in the activity room in the evenings, too. We could look there." Caitlin lifted the mug of coffee and sniffed appreciatively. "Thanks."

The pair sat in silence for a few minutes, absorbed in their own thoughts when a loud knock at the cabin door made them both start. "Come on in," Caitlin called.

Nick stuck his head around the door. "Is everyone decent?"

"Define 'decent'," Caitlin said with a laugh. "I may be dressed, but that doesn't mean I'm decent."

Nick blushed.

"Yes," Jess said, "come in."

Nick entered and shut the door. "Mmm, coffee. Can I grab one?"

"Sure," Caitlin said. "Help yourself. There're cookies if you're hungry."

"Excellent, thanks." He moved to the kitchenette. "Jess, I need to talk to you about that thing."

Jess looked at him, confused. "What thing?"

"You know, that thing I mentioned when we were packing up the archery stuff the other day." He raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Maybe I'll go take a walk and give you guys

some privacy," Caitlin said, taking a last swig of her half-drunk coffee. "Don't want to hear about things and all." She set her cup down and started to get up.

"Stay there," Jess ordered. "This is your cabin, too. Nick, are you on about the person hanging around outside your cabin?"

Nick's eyes widened and he jerked his head toward Caitlin.

"It's okay. I asked Caitlin if she'd seen anything." She gave Caitlin a look that was supposed to say 'play along'.

"Anything I can do to help," Caitlin said.

Nick shrugged then pulled up a dining chair, turned it to face away from them, and sat on it backward. "I have new developments," he announced, sounding mysterious.

"Let me guess," Jess responded. "You had another visit last night."

"How did you know?" He looked at her, surprised.

"Because it was me."

"What? What were you doing?"

"I went out to have a look what someone would be able to see in the dark then I chucked a stone to mess with you a bit."

He glared at her. "That's mean. You know I've been worried about this." He looked at Caitlin for support.

"Don't worry," she said. "I got her back for you. I snuck up and grabbed her from behind. You should've seen her squirm." She laughed. "She'd have bellowed like a mad heifer, too, if I hadn't covered her mouth."

"Like you wouldn't be scared to be accosted in the middle of the night," Jess half-growled as she lifted her cup to her lips.

"Depends on the situation," Caitlin shot back, grinning. Jess stared at the floor again.

"Thanks," Nick said. "I've been worried about it for a while, now." He shot a sibling glare at Jess.

"Fine. I'm sorry. Anyway, I did find something," Jess said. "You were right. Someone has spent quite some time behind your cabin. Whoever it is has big feet and smokes."

"We have a plan, though." Caitlin picked up the conversation. "We're going to arrange some twigs and stuff and monitor if and when they get disturbed."

"I'll take a picture of them on my phone so we can see exactly how they've changed." Jess added this extra touch to the idea, pleased with her ingenuity.

"That's great," Nick said. "A good plan. I should've thought of that."

"Might not be a good idea, to have you poking around outside your cabin. If you're being watched, maybe you don't want whoever it is finding out. That way, you have one up on them." Caitlin finished with a decisive nod.

"True." Jess set her cup down. "So we'll do it tonight, once it gets fully dark. Two on watch, one to make the pattern and take the photo. We'll need a torch."

"Torch?" Caitlin looked puzzled.

"Flashlight." Jess translated. "I don't have one, do either of you?"

"Oh, right. Yeah, I do." Caitlin nodded.

"I had another thought, too," Nick said. "The day Chrissy had the big trouble with Barton, there was another man here. I don't know who he was, but we saw him when we were headed to supper. He gave Chrissy an icy look as he was getting into his car. I saw the car back again today, so I assume he's around. I don't know who he is, but he gives me the creeps."

"I saw a stranger with Barton today," Jess said. "They were watching me during one of my lessons."

"What did he look like?" Caitlin asked.

"Was he maybe Mediterranean-looking, kind of beefy, with heavy eyebrows?" Nick asked.

Jess thought for a moment, trying to remember. "I don't know. He was too far away to see properly. I don't even know for sure it was a man, but whoever it was seemed to be wearing a man's suit. He did have short dark hair."

"I reckon it's the same bloke," Nick said, slapping his hand on his thigh. "I mean, how many people do you see around here in a suit?"

"I've seen him occasionally," Caitlin broke in. "I figured he was the big cheese. Barton's just the manager."

"Could be." Jess thought back to the lesson. "They spent quite a while watching me. Maybe they were doing a safety inspection or something like that. Making sure I wasn't messing about."

"If he is the big boss, he could've just been checking out the new staffmember." Caitlin suggested.

"Perhaps." But Jess wasn't so sure. Something in the way they'd stood watching her, made her uneasy. And when Barton had pointed, it was as if he was definitively making sure the newcomer knew her identity. Something about it didn't feel right.

Nick checked his watch. "C'mon, let's go to supper then as soon as it gets dark we can set the twig trap."

As they were getting up, Jess's mobile chimed. "Go ahead, I'll catch up." She retrieved her phone from the table and flipped it open as Nick and Caitlin left the cabin. The text message notification filled the lower half of the screen.

It was from Grace. *Hope everything is going well. I can't believe you've only been away for a week. Feels longer.*

Jess knew a goofy smile spread across her face. She stared at the phone, trying to think of a good

response, then started entering letters. *Same here. I've almost forgotten what you look like.* She pressed send, and immediately worried it was a stupid thing to say. How could she possibly forget what Grace looked like? Her image was burned into Jess's brain. After several minutes had passed, she feared she wouldn't get a response. Then, the mobile chirped.

There weren't any words this time, just a picture of Grace's face, smiling a little self-consciously.

That's better, thanks, Jess typed back. She slid her mobile into her pocket and left the cabin but she headed toward the woods for a walk. Her diet wasn't working fast enough, but this gave her the motivation she needed to skip supper. Some extra exercise wouldn't go amiss, either. To keep her distracted from her hunger, she daydreamed that one day, hopefully soon, she might be able to approach Grace as an equal. The thought thrilled her.

Chapter Five

THREE DAYS PASSED before Jess found Sergey alone in the activity room. She hadn't wanted to approach him with others around, fearful she might alienate him even more to them. "Hi, Sergey."

"Yess," he said, seemingly pleased to see her. He was sitting at a table, the surface covered with paper and crayons.

Jess made her way across the room, dodging multicoloured beanbags and discarded toys. Folding her ungainly body up in deference to the children's furniture, she attempted to squeeze herself into the small, plastic chair. Her buttocks splayed out on either side and her stomach sagged forward. Her breathing tightened and the feeling of self-hatred threatened to take over. *I can't do this.*

Sergey pushed his paper toward her and smiled expectantly.

Jeez, Jess, stop being so bloody self-absorbed. She pulled the chair out of the way then sat cross-legged on the floor. "Wow, that's good," she said, forcing a light tone as she admired the drawing. "It's a zoo, isn't it? Yes, there's the lion, the giraffe, and the monkey." She pointed at each as she said the word.

"Lin?"

"Yes." She said the words slowly, pronouncing them clearly: ly-un, gee-rafe, and mun-key. She pointed at each in turn.

Sergey grinned, apparently pleased with his new knowledge. He grabbed another piece of paper and thrust it in front of her before moving the crayons to a mutually convenient point between them. He nodded hopefully at her, his eyebrows raised.

"Okay." It was a long time since she had drawn a picture but she was willing to try her hand. Picking up a yellow crayon she began by drawing the sun, as

good a place to start as any.

Sergey went back to his own drawing, muttering incomprehensible words every now and then.

As Jess's picture progressed, she realized she was drawing her own cottage, or a rough approximation of it. She had the tree in the front garden, the red brick chimney, and the patches of green where the ivy climbed the stone. She drew a few shallow "V's" in the sky to represent birds and she added some clouds outlined in blue.

Sergey looked over at her effort. "Yess?" he questioned, pointing to a blank section of her page.

Jess nodded. It made sense to have herself outside her own home. She searched the crayon selection and was disappointed to see that the manufacturers still hadn't managed to make a plausible skin colour. She picked up the pink-peach crayon and drew an oval body, round head and sausage shaped arms and legs. She coloured in blue jeans and a green top before adding some curly yellow locks that were far too garish. Grabbing the light brown, she toned it down with some lowlights. Noticing Sergey was engrossed in a new picture, Jess decided to indulge a whim. She added another girl next to her, taking care to emulate Grace's brown hair and eyes. She added a big crayon smile to both faces.

Pushing his own paper aside, Sergey pulled Jess's picture toward him a little. "Yess," he said, pointing at Jess's facsimile. Then he prodded the other character and looked up questioningly.

"Grace. My friend." She made a hugging motion and smiled.

"Friend?" His pronunciation of the word was unusual but intelligible.

"Friend," she repeated, this time motioning between herself and Sergey. Picking up a new piece of paper she quickly drew a little stick person. "Sergey," she pointed.

He nodded.

Drawing two more stick people, she tried to give them male and female characteristics, the woman with long curly hair and the man with a beard. She ringed them and drew an arrow to the little boy. "Parents."

Sergey shook his head.

Jess wondered if she should try two women or two men. Or maybe he only had one parent? She was trying to think of a way to ask when he took the crayon from her.

He drew a typical childlike house. It was a rectangular shape with a roof, chimney, and irregular windows. Then he drew lots of small stick figures and one large one. He gave the large one curly hair as Jess had done. "Sergey," he said, pointing at one of the small figures.

Jess understood that he lived with other children and a guardian of some sort. "School?" she asked, drawing a book and writing out a simple sum.

Sergey shook his head again. He pointed to the representation of himself then crossed out the two parents Jess had drawn. Moving on, he repeated the action for enough of the other small stick characters for Jess to get the point.

"An orphanage." She said, clenching her jaw muscles. Her mind flooded with the worst images she had seen on the news about European orphanages. The thought of Sergey as the child with sad eyes sitting alone was tragic. The last thing he needed, however, was for her to get all sentimental and upset on his behalf. Taking the red and blue crayons and making use of the white background of the paper, she drew an approximation of the Union Jack, the flag of the United Kingdom. Then she handed the crayons to Sergey, raising her eyebrows in the recognised signal that she wanted something from him.

He nodded and drew a medium sized rectangle.

He filled it with a simple, two-band design, a horizontal blue stripe above with a horizontal yellow stripe below.

Jess didn't recognise the flag but she was determined not to stop now that they were making real communication progress. With a flash of inspiration, she rose and checked the bookshelves for an atlas. Sure enough, there was a children's atlas that she retrieved and brought back to the table. Spreading it out between them, she looked through the European countries until she found a match. "Ukraine," she announced triumphantly. "You're from Ukraine."

Sergey grinned at her and nodded, apparently enjoying the communication as much as she was.

Overcome with questions, Jess tried to figure out how she could get answers. Pointing to the stick-figure Sergey, then to the Union Jack, she shrugged and looked at him questioningly. Would he understand she was asking him how he got here? She waited.

He picked up a crayon and started drawing, telling a story through pictures. First, he pointed at the Ukraine flag and the picture of the orphanage. Then he jabbed the crayon at the bearded stick man. The explanation paused briefly while he drew a new picture, this time of an aeroplane. Once completed, he pointed at his own figure and the man's figure and motioned at Jess's picture of the Union Jack.

Jess nodded, encouraging him. She thought aloud. "So a man took you from the orphanage to the UK. Was the man—" she pointed at the stick figure, "from Ukraine or UK?" She pointed at the man's figure then at the two flags in turn.

Sergey rested his finger on the Union Jack. When Jess nodded, he continued his story. He pointed to stick Sergey and the man, then at Jess's earlier drawings of the book and sum.

"School? He brought you to a school here?" she asked, almost forgetting that he didn't speak English. She raised her eyebrows in another question and pointed at the book and sum.

Sergey shrugged. He drew a simple design of stick children sitting at desks facing a simplistic adult.

Jess nodded. "School."

"School," Sergey repeated, struggling slightly with the word.

"Yes. School." Jess shifted her numbing legs while she continued to ponder. It must either be a very bad school or a new situation. His English would be better otherwise. It was odd he came from an orphanage, though. That is, if she had interpreted his drawing correctly. Who was paying for his education? Maybe it was a charity thing, one of those outreach programmes to help underprivileged children? She frowned. If that was the case, why was he here, at an activity camp, and not in school? He clearly wasn't getting any English lessons here. Jess wanted to ask more questions but they were increasingly complex and Sergey looked a little tired. "I understand," she said instead, deciding that for the time being, the most important thing was that he felt that someone had listened to him.

Replacing his black crayon with a brown one, Sergey drew a stick horse in the corner of the paper before turning to smile hopefully at Jess.

"Yes, good idea. Let's go see the horses." Gathering up the drawings so she could take them, she tidied the table and tucked the chairs back underneath. Sergey took her hand, happily holding it as she led him out of the building and toward the stables.

JESS STOOD ON her own doorstep, two weeks to the day since she had left for Camp Condor. This was

her first opportunity to get back and she'd leapt at it. She reached up with her free hand and rang the doorbell. Her pulse thumped through her body in anticipation as she heard footsteps approaching the door. The wrought iron handle twisted and the door swung open to reveal a slightly bemused Grace, dressed in an old jumper and faded jeans with grass stains on the knees. Her hands were stained brownish-green and she had a smudge of earth by her right eyebrow. A droplet of sweat glistened on her temple and she appeared slightly breathless.

Wow. It's good to see her.

"Jess! You're earlier than I expected." Grace smoothed loose hair away from her flushed face. "Well, don't stand on the doorstep. It's your house, after all."

Jess followed her back through to the living room. "I got you these," she said, bringing the posy of flowers out from behind her back. "Um, well, for the house, I suppose, to brighten it. I know how much you like the garden and everything and at this time of year, everything is winding down for winter. It's nice to have something pretty in the house. I hope they're okay." She was rambling and she stopped herself. Grace probably thought her an idiot, going on about flowers like that.

"Thank you, they're lovely." Grace accepted the flowers and laid them on a nearby surface. "You are so thoughtful." She pulled Jess into a hug. "It's been too quiet without you."

A pleasurable little flutter raced through her chest. Jess liked the thought that Grace had missed her. It made her feel wanted, but Grace's murmuring and physical contact were having quite a different effect. She tried to ignore it. "I'm glad to be back, though it's only for a visit. It's good to get home and see everything is okay." *To see that you're okay, really.*

Withdrawing from the hug, Grace eyed her with a

serious expression. "Yes, because a two-bedroom cottage is so much work." She smiled and flapped the back of her hand against Jess's arm. "Come on. You can get the kettle boiling while I put these in water."

Jess followed her to the kitchen, breathing in the scent of her own home with contentment. She lifted the kettle from the back of the Aga and filled it with fresh water. Knowing it would take a while to boil, she leant back against the stove and watched Grace. "So," she said, "tell me what your big surprise is. I've been on tenterhooks for days now."

Grace laughed, not turning from her task of trimming and arranging each individual flower stalk. "I piqued your curiosity did I?"

"Grace, if you don't tell me right now I may be forced to come over there and tickle you."

"You'd better not." Grace glanced over her shoulder. "I'm a banshee when I'm tickled and I'm armed with a pair of scissors."

Jess grinned and took one deliberate step closer, daring her into action.

Squealing with delight, Grace dropped the scissors and ran to the living room, putting the sofa between them. Each time Jess moved one way, she moved farther out of reach. They giggled like children as they each tried to stay one step ahead of the other. With a surge of frustrated effort, Jess launched herself in a flying rugby tackle, grabbing Grace around the waist and flopping them both back onto the sofa. The resounding crack marked the end of the furniture's useful life, but they were too busy laughing to care.

"Oops," Grace said after she had calmed down. "I hope you weren't too attached to this sofa."

"No. But come on," Jess said, her arms still wrapped snugly around Grace. "What's your news?"

"Okay." Grace smoothed her hair with one hand. "I've been offered a full time position at the surgery."

Jess grinned. "That *is* good news. I mean, if you

have had enough of temporary placements, that is." She could only hope that Grace would want to remain her housemate.

Grace wriggled but showed no sign of wanting to get up. "I have. I'm really enjoying being a full-time vet again, and this practice really suits me. I get to make a difference, but I'm learning, too."

"Sounds perfect, then." Jess bit back her next question and waited for Grace to continue.

"Yeah. It also means that I can stay in the area long-term like I want to." She fidgeted for a moment. "So it looks like you're stuck with me as your housemate indefinitely. If that's okay with you, of course." She caught Jess's eye.

Jess tried to contain her excitement to an appropriate level. "Absolutely. That's great. It really is. We should celebrate." Jess released her and worked herself into a sitting position. Her right buttock was considerably lower than her left. "Perhaps by buying a new sofa."

AS SOON AS she could, Jess made her excuses and went upstairs to the bathroom. She was more nervous about this than she had been about seeing Grace. After she had locked the door and let the blind down, she began undressing. She made sure she stayed at the door end of the room so she didn't have to catch sight of herself in the mirror. Finally, when she was ready, she pulled the scales out into the middle of the room and settled them, testing they were on a level surface. After making use of the toilet to shed any extra weight she could, she was ready.

She stepped forward, right foot then left, taking care each was placed centrally. As soon as she put her first foot on, she had started jiggling her body. This made sure that the measurement wasn't taken before she was ready. Head up, eyes forward. Breathe out.

Stomach in. She still hadn't decided if tightening her buttocks helped. This time she opted not to. Freeze. She gave the electronic scales a moment to record judgement then stepped down. The red LED number displayed the result with neither fuss nor subtlety. Just a scientifically proven, undisputable fact. Failure.

The diet was working, but not well enough. The target weight she had set for herself was still a long way off. She was still fat, still undeserving. Jess was tempted to do best of three but she knew that the scales would not alter the result significantly, if at all. Despite her hunger, the food censorship, and the skipped meals, she was still unacceptable.

She slid the scales back into the cupboard. It would be another couple of weeks before she could weigh herself again. When she went back to the camp, she'd take the judgement jeans with her. That would be a way to monitor her size. She stared at the cupboard, toying with whether she could take the scales too. She needed their judgement on a daily basis. The not knowing was the worst part. Still, there were more cuts she could make. At breakfast, she could skip the cereal and just have some fruit. A jog could substitute for lunch. *Ugh, I hate running.* But she'd have to do it, to get the weight off. Supper, however, would be harder. It was worse being in the canteen, surrounded by food and only being able to have salad. It was like offering an alcoholic a sip of liquor. Maybe she could try skipping supper on alternate days? *I said I'd do it this time. I just have to do what it takes.* Resolutely, she left the bathroom.

JESS FLUNG HER leg over the wooden bar of the stile and stepped carefully onto the plank on the other side. After a small jump back to the ground, she turned around and offered Grace her hand.

Grace took it. "Thanks," she said, joining Jess on the ground.

"No problem." They carried on walking in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the autumnal afternoon. This path would loop around the woods at the base of the valley then bring them along a bridleway that bordered farmland all the way to the village.

"So, how are things going with Nick?" Grace asked.

"Frustratingly," Jess said with a sigh. Sometimes the pressure of his expectations made her want to rebel. How was she supposed to fix something she couldn't even see clearly?

"That doesn't sound good. What's the problem?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just adding two and two and getting five. And maybe Nick is just reading things into a situation where there's nothing to be read into. After I told you that Nick thought someone was watching him, I found a load of cigarette butts in the woods just outside his cabin. One was still stuck in a big footprint, so it can't be the kids. Whoever it is, it looks like they'd spent a lot of time there. It just happens to be the spot that gives you a straight line of sight into his living area."

"There was someone after all?"

"Apparently so, but I don't know if it's anything serious or just someone messing about. It might just be a smoker who wants some privacy. Staff are supposed to smoke in certain areas, and maybe someone got tired of doing that and likes that area. Nick would probably be fine under normal circumstances, but at the moment, he's seeing shadows in every corner. Maybe there's something he isn't telling me." She kicked at a small stone on the path. "But he's really on edge."

"Does he know about you finding the cigarette butts?"

"Yeah, we told him. I'd thrown a stone at his cabin

to tease him before I realised that there had been someone there. I had to tell him that the stone-thrower was me."

Grace stopped. "Who's 'we'?"

Jess halted as well. "Caitlin and me. She caught me in the woods just after I found the cigarette butts. She frightened the living daylights out of me." Jess shook her head, still remembering the panic as the strong arms caught her from behind.

"So she knows about what's going on, then?" Grace sounded worried.

"Yeah—with her finding me loitering outside Nick's cabin, I had to say something. I told her about Nick thinking there was someone hanging around. I didn't tell her anything about him feeling like they're trying to oust him. She doesn't seem that pally with Barton, but you never know."

Grace pulled at a long stalk of grass on the edge of the track. "I hope you're right," she said, but she sounded unconvinced.

"You don't think I am?" Jess stole a glance at her.

"I don't know. I've never met her." Grace stripped the grass stem of its seeds. "Didn't you say she was tall?"

Jess studied Grace's profile, not sure where Grace was going with the conversation. "Yes."

"She'd have big feet, then. The footprint could have been hers." Grace looked up to catch Jess's eye.

Jess struggled for a minute with the unexpected thought. "Yes, it could have been...but Caitlin doesn't smoke. I'm pretty sure of that."

"Don't worry. I'm probably just being paranoid. All that stuff Nick's been saying. Maybe his paranoia is rubbing off on me. But just be careful about who you trust when you don't know anyone." She flung the limp grass stalk to the ground. "Has anything happened since?" She started walking again and Jess followed.

"We did make a trap to see if the person comes back. It was an arrangement of twigs and leaves in a certain pattern. You wouldn't notice it, but we've been keeping a check to see if it gets disturbed. So far, it hasn't." An uncomfortable thought occurred to her. Caitlin knew about the trap. If she were the person hanging about Nick's cabin, she wouldn't disturb it. Or maybe she would on purpose, to throw them off the trail. She shook her head, trying to dispel the idea.

"That's a good sign," Grace was saying. "Maybe whoever it was hasn't been back and it was all a misunderstanding."

"Hopefully." Her thought about Caitlin hadn't dispersed after all. "If it was Caitlin, though, she'd know to work around it."

The conversation faltered when Grace didn't answer and Jess toyed with the idea of Caitlin as the lurker. "What if that was why Caitlin found me?" she voiced aloud. "Maybe she was on her way there and ran into me, and had to pretend she chanced upon me. I mean, it was odd she found me there when I told her I was going to the Coke machine."

Grace made a noncommittal noise. "Perhaps, but to be honest, I'm more concerned about the why than the who. Let's assume for a moment that it isn't just some misunderstanding, that someone is specifically targeting Nick's cabin. What would they stand to gain?"

Jess walked a few paces before answering, as if her steps could order her thoughts. "They could be waiting for him to go out so they can get in and search."

"Unlikely. Nick said that they'd already searched it. Even ignoring that, it would still make more sense to do it in the day when he'd be busy in the garage than to wait till late at night."

Jess had to agree. "Well, maybe they want to see

him doing something he could get in trouble for. Maybe they're trying to set him up that way so they can terminate him."

"I'd say that was more likely," Grace concurred. "How much could you hear from outside his cabin? Maybe they wanted to see if someone came to visit and they could eavesdrop. Or maybe they want to listen to his phone calls."

"That's a point. Nick did mention being on the phone the couple of times he heard someone up close."

Grace smiled. "Now we're getting somewhere. So they want to listen in on a conversation he has with someone off camp. Chrissy is the most likely person for that, don't you think?"

"Yes, and the more we talk this through, the more I feel Nick is keeping something back. I'll corner him when I get back to camp." Jess imagined what she'd do to him if he was. All this upheaval was one thing but if there was some key to it he wasn't telling her then she was going to be seriously miffed.

"That sounds like a good idea. If he does know more, he should tell you," Grace said sternly. "You've gone in there to help him, after all."

Jess felt the usual need to defend her brother, but she remained silent. Grace had seen one of their sibling arguments a couple of months ago, and Jess did not want to repeat how uncomfortable that had been. It suddenly occurred to her that Grace was looking out for Jess's best interests. It was an unexpected but welcome thought.

Grace moved closer and linked her arm through Jess's, sending a little wave of pleasure through Jess's chest. "Hey, Nick's a good guy and a great brother. He loves you to death. I'm sure he wouldn't be on edge if something wasn't putting him there. So whatever is or isn't going on, just make sure you tread carefully. This Chrissy business sounds messier

than we first thought, and you've told me how things can get between Nick and the women in his life. You've got enough going on without having to fight someone else's battles." She tightened her hold on Jess's arm, much to Jess's delight. "Speaking of battles, have you thought any more about going to see a lawyer?"

Jess tensed. "No, not really. I know I should, I just—" she faltered. "I don't know. What if Kingston and Lewknor have something they could use against me?"

Grace stopped walking and turned Jess to face her. "What could they have against you besides your sexual orientation? You worked hard, were good at your job and got sacked because you're gay. None of that is anything you've done wrong."

Jess shifted uncomfortably. "I just can't help wondering. What if one of the women I worked with thought I was trying to make a move when I just meant to be friendly? Or what if a job I thought I did well backfired and nobody told me? Sometimes it's best to leave things alone."

Grace shook her head and resumed walking. "You know those things aren't true. It's one thing to seek legal justice with this, but don't undermine your own conscience. You are not to blame. The homophobic decision makers are. That's all there is to it, okay?" She said it emphatically, and Jess enjoyed that Grace was defending her.

"You're pretty feisty today," Jess said, trying to alleviate the tension that had invaded her day off. "But yes, I'll try and remember that. C'mon, let's get back. I don't want to spend my whole day off trudging around fields."

"All right. How about I finish weeding the side border and you can do some sword practise? You haven't had a chance over the last couple of weeks and you're probably missing it."

“Are you trying to exhaust me even more than the children already do?” Jess’s protest was half-hearted. She remembered very clearly the expression on Grace’s face when she last watched her practise. It was almost as if, for a moment, Grace had found her attractive, in the way that Jess felt about Grace. *Yep, I wouldn’t mind at all.*

Chapter Six

JESS AND NICK were sitting on the edge of the porch together, watching the children play during their free time between tea and supper. "I don't know how they still have the energy," Jess said. "I'm exhausted after the day of activities."

"That's because you're not eating much."

Jess glared at him. "Yes, I am." But she heard the defensive note in her voice. It irritated her as much as his unexpected intrusion.

"Really?" he said, disbelieving. "Why don't I see you at lunch anymore, then?"

"I don't know. Maybe we're going at different times." She picked at her jeans, willing him to change the subject.

"Yeah. That must be it," he responded, almost sarcastic.

"Are you saying I'm lying?"

Nick held up his hands in a surrender pose. "I'm not saying anything. Just forget I mentioned it."

The silence between them was awkward but thankfully, Caitlin's arrival ended the stalemate.

"Hey, y'all. What's up?"

"Just watching the kids." Nick still sounded sullen.

Caitlin sat down next to them. "Has anyone checked on the trap recently?"

"I checked this morning," Jess said. "Nothing." She shot a glance at Nick, angry that he would bring up her eating habits, but also guilty that he had noticed.

"I haven't seen or heard anything around my cabin since Jess that night," Nick confirmed, avoiding her gaze.

"Hmm. It was just a test, though," Caitlin said. "Maybe there's nothing creepy going on after all."

"Yeah. I probably imagined that too," Nick muttered. Caitlin looked at him, puzzled.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Jess said to her, "Sergey hasn't been to an archery session since before my day off and I haven't seen him at the activity room either. Has he been to the stables?"

Caitlin frowned. "The last time I had any contact with him, he helped me clean some tack. But that was probably about four or five days ago."

Nick sat up from his partially reclining pose, concern in his eyes. He looked over at Jess. "Is Sergey that little foreign kid you've talked about before?"

"Yes. He's done at least one archery session every day since I've been here. He also loves horses, so he usually spends a lot of time around the stables."

"He must've gone home," Caitlin said. "Wherever that is."

"He might have gone back to school," Jess said, "but I don't think so. He would have said goodbye, I'm sure."

"Yeah, he was a polite little thing," Caitlin agreed.

Jess thought about the strange man she'd seen with Barton that day watching her give the archery lesson. "Do you think something's happened to him? An accident or something?" The thought that Sergey could be in trouble sent her mind racing to worst-case scenarios.

Nick patted her knee. "No, we'd have heard about it. This place isn't that big. Come on, let's see if we can find him. He might've caught a bit of flu or something."

Caitlin nodded. "Nick's right. Someone will know where he is."

"Okay." Jess stood, brushing the dirt off the back of her jeans. She felt better at the prospect of taking action. "I'll check his cabin and speak to some of the other children."

"I'll do sickbay and double-check his usual

haunts," Caitlin said.

Nick nodded in the direction of the canteen. "I'll find Mickey. He should know from the register if Sergey's still here or not."

"Be subtle, Nick," Jess said with a little dread. Nick was as subtle as she was a supermodel.

"Got it," he said brusquely. "Meet back here when we're done."

Jess followed him as far as the children's accommodation then stopped outside Owl cabin, remembering Sergey's picture of an owl. He had drawn it for her before she visited Grace on her day off. It had been more like a jelly baby with a beak. All of his drawings were stashed carefully under her mattress, wedged between some cardboard she'd taken from an old paper box. She went up to the door of the cabin and knocked tentatively on the wood. "Hi, guys," she called. "Anyone at home?" Proceeding into the room, she found three boys playing with some kind of trading cards.

"Hello, Miss," one said. "Would you like to play?" he asked politely.

"That's very kind, but I'm actually looking for someone. Do you know Sergey, the foreign boy?"

Two of the boys shook their heads and looked blankly at her. The third fidgeted slightly and shuffled his cards.

Sensing he knew something, Jess sought to reassure him. "Don't worry, he's not in any trouble. I just wanted to show him something I'd promised."

"He left," the fidgety boy said. "I didn't know him much, but he was nice."

"Left?" Jess's heart sank. "Are you sure?" Where would he go?

"Uh-huh. All his stuff went, too. Even his bear."

"When was this?"

The boy glanced at his companions, who were looking with interest from him to Jess. He fiddled

with his cards, obviously uncomfortable with this line of questioning.

"It's okay," Jess said, trying to reassure him. "I just wondered why he hasn't been in archery lessons."

"About three days ago," the boy said, staring at his cards.

Jess backed off, not wanting to create more stress. "Thank you. You've been very helpful." She summoned a reassuring smile, despite her inner fears. "I'll let you get back to your game now. Thanks again." And she left the cabin, shutting the door quietly behind her. She paused for a moment, to see if she could hear any follow-up conversation from the boys through the open window that fronted the porch. She could, but it was about the cards. She returned to the cabin, more worried than ever.

It was some time before Nick and Caitlin arrived. During their absence, Jess's concerns had multiplied.

"No luck," Caitlin announced. "Nobody at the yard has seen him for a few days and there's no sign of him in the activity room, cafeteria, common room, or in sickbay."

"I spoke to one of his roommates." Jess looked at her then at Nick. "Apparently, he left three days ago and took all his belongings with him."

"That sounds about right," Nick said. "I checked the register and he's definitely left." He fished in his pocket for a twisted-up piece of paper. "He left on Tuesday evening at about eight o'clock. A Mr. Williams collected him."

"Three days and I didn't do anything till now." Jess balled her fists until her nails dug into her palms. *I let him down. Just like I let everyone down.*

"Did the register have any other information?" Caitlin asked. "A forwarding address or anything?"

"No, but I couldn't look at it for long. Mickey was getting antsy. Something about some legal privacy

thing."

"So, what do we do now? Surely we can't just assume everything is okay and forget about it?" Jess looked from one to the other, helpless.

"We still don't know that there's anything wrong," Caitlin said. "He could have just left at the end of vacation, and forgot to say goodbye."

"Do you really think that?" Jess challenged her.

She sighed. "No."

"I don't, either. And I, for one, have to do something." *And it's going to start now.*

"HEY, HELEN," JESS called to her fellow staff member.

Helen turned and smiled when she recognized Jess. "Hi. How are you getting on?"

They fell into step as they walked the short distance from the cabins to the staff common room. "Good, thanks. I've not worked with children before, but I think I'm getting the hang of it. Today it was actually quite fun."

"I'm glad. It has its good moments. Enough to have me hooked, anyway. I'm doing this for a year before I head to teacher training college."

"Wow. What age children do you want to work with?"

"I'm not sure yet. Probably primary school but maybe the younger secondary school classes."

Jess nodded. "Good for you. You always remember the name of good teachers, don't you? It must be incredible to be able to make a difference like that."

"That's what I'm hoping."

Jess smiled. She liked the idea of Helen as a teacher. She seemed calm but curious about the world around her, qualities that children gravitated toward. "I wanted to ask, weren't you the teacher for a little

foreign boy here named Sergey?"

Helen looked at her questioningly. "Yes. Why?"

"No particular reason," Jess said with a shrug. "He used to come to archery a lot and I realised I haven't seen him for a while. I guess he must've gone without saying goodbye."

Helen smiled. "He was a real sweetie wasn't he? Such a cute grin. Yeah, he left quite suddenly. His parents called because apparently there was some family problem and he had to go straight away."

"Oh, dear," Jess said, going along with Helen's explanation. "I hope everything's all right."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. It's probably just some poor holiday planning or something."

They were almost at the building, but Jess wanted more information. "Do you fancy a game of pool?" she asked. She wasn't sure if Helen would know any more about Sergey or not, but it couldn't hurt to try.

"Sure, I like a game every now and then. Watch out for Mickey, though. He tries to look down your top when you bend over." She sighed and rolled her eyes.

"I suspected as much," Jess said conspiratorially. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to wear my shirts buttoned to the neck around him in the future."

Helen laughed and held the door for her.

"It's a pity not everyone is here because they like working with children."

Helen nodded. "It is. But there are Mickey's all over the place."

The pool game proved fun but uneventful. They chatted about careers and camp gossip, but nothing that had any significance to Sergey. Jess found Helen easy company and had it not been for negative thoughts about her own body as she draped it over the table, she'd have probably enjoyed herself.

"Hello, ladies." Nick entered the room, letting the door slam behind him. He made a beeline for the

drinks machine. "Who's winning?"

"We just finished," Jess said, "and Helen won."

"Never believe it," Nick said to Helen. "She's trying to hustle you."

Helen laughed. "Not today, she can't. We have a teamers' meeting in here soon. I'm not sure where all the others are, though."

"Oh, that's my cue to run for it." Nick bent down and removed his drink from the slot. "A group of teamers has far too much matronly authority for me."

"Come on, then," Jess said. "You can make yourself useful and help me fix some arrows."

"Do I get any choice in the matter?" He opened his drink.

"Nope."

"That's what I thought." He sighed as if he'd just been scolded.

They said goodbye to Helen and made their way to the equipment shed. Jess flicked the light switch then picked her way to the shelving at the back. "How about you find us some seating near the light?" She reached to a high shelf and retrieved the old biscuit tin of tools and the collection of broken arrows that had built up. "There're quite a few here but with two, we'll get through it in no time." Plus, she could see if she could find out what Nick wasn't telling her.

Nick shuffled a big box into place next to a dusty footstool. "It's all right," he said at her expression. "I've already checked it for spiders."

"You're such a gentleman."

"I try."

Jess placed the tin and arrows on the floor between them then sat down. She reached for the first arrow, not surprised to see it needed a new fletching. "You need to level with me, Nick," she said, keeping her eyes on the arrow.

"What about?"

"About whatever it is you aren't telling me."

Maybe something to do with Chrissy."

He frowned. "I've told you everything."

"Tell me again, then. Take it from the beginning. First off, what happened with Marie? I thought you two were getting along well."

Nick picked up an arrow and inspected it before he reached for a tool. "Yeah, we do. We're still friends and everything. It just didn't work out as anything more with me living here. They aren't exactly generous with the time off, either. In case you hadn't noticed."

"I have. Believe me."

He started working on the arrow as he spoke. Jess had learnt some time ago that he volunteered information more readily when he was distracted. "Then there was Chrissy. We got on well from the start. She wasn't wanting anything serious, either, so we just flirted and had a laugh. She used to joke about Barton being uptight but she seemed happy enough till this one day."

"When?"

"Um...a couple of weeks before she left. Maybe three weeks before I came to see you and Grace. I honestly don't know what happened. She wouldn't tell me. I tried to be there for her but she just went really withdrawn. And as you know, I don't know what to do with that."

Jess did know. Most likely, he had asked Chrissy a couple of times then left her alone, assuming she'd tell him if she wanted to. But sometimes, that wasn't the best approach.

He searched the tin for a few moments until he pulled out a new nock. Using a knife, he forced the broken nock off the end of the arrow then sanded the area down. When he'd put glue on the new nock he held it in place while it dried. "She cried quite a bit after that, but it's not surprising with what they were saying."

"Who? What were they saying?"

Nick frowned again. "Staff. Nothing important. Just nasty gossip stuff."

"Tell me. Maybe it will help me work some of this out. I won't repeat it." She reached for another arrow.

He was obviously torn. "Okay, I guess. Some staffmembers said that the police had to talk to her about the children. What with her leaving so quickly, they reckon she was doing things she shouldn't." He glanced at Jess.

"You mean she was accused of behaving inappropriately with them?" The thought horrified her.

"That's what the rumours were." He gripped the arrow tightly, staring at it. "She wasn't, though. No way. Chrissy wasn't that kind of person. I'd seen her with the kids. They really liked her. She was like a schoolteacher with them, not some sicko giving them the eye or something." He looked at her, his eyes pleading for understanding.

"I believe you. It was just evil gossip, as you say. Any idea who started it?"

He ran his fingers along the shaft of the arrow. "No. If I did, I'd have a few words to say to them."

Jess had her suspicions but she left them unvoiced. "Do you think Barton had any belief in those rumours? If he did, it might explain why he's been watching *you* so closely."

Nick stared at her. "I hadn't thought of that." He tapped the blade of the knife against the arrow, nodding. "Yeah, that could be it. Maybe they went through my stuff looking for evidence, photos or something." His face bunched up with disgust. "It also makes sense with them trying to get rid of me. If that's the sort of person they think I am, no wonder they've been keeping an eye on me."

"We don't know that's what they think," Jess offered, trying to reassure him. "It would fit in with

what's been going on, but if that is what they seriously believed, then they should be getting the police involved, not just watching you."

"I haven't done anything, so the police can't do anything can they? Maybe I *should* just leave." He looked dejectedly at the floor.

"It's up to you, but if you're happy here, then stay. You haven't done anything wrong, so the police have nothing against you. This should all just peter out. At least now we have a good theory as to what's been going on."

Nick started picking flatching glue off his fingers. "I knew asking you for help would be a good plan. I guess maybe I don't pay enough attention to things besides engines. Thanks, Jessie."

"No problem. I just wish I could work out what happened to Sergey. He told me he was an orphan, but Helen said his parents called and that's why he had to go early."

"Helen's all right. I don't think she'd lie."

"I don't either, but she might repeat a lie if she didn't know any better."

"Good point." He was silent a moment. "So somebody spread it around that Sergey's parents came to get him, even though he doesn't have any. Does that strike you as odd?"

"Very. Maybe the same person or people who started spreading rumours about Chrissy." Jess finished up an arrow and set it aside. Why would someone spread rumours about two different matters? A woman who quit suddenly and a young foreign boy who left unexpectedly. Unless the two aren't different matters and they're related somehow. A chill shot down Jess's back. "Do you think Chrissy may have found something out that's going on here that's crooked?"

He shrugged. "Sure. It's possible, isn't it? And she left pretty suddenly."

"What do you think it could be?"

"I don't know. But while she was here, a couple foreign kids left with no warning and that kind of upset her. Maybe there's something to the kid angle." He glanced at her for confirmation.

"Maybe. I need some more information to work with and I think I'm going to have to be a bit more creative in getting it."

JESS PRESSED HER back against the wall and listened. A whirring noise. Maybe a cooling fan for a computer? The distant squeal and laugh of a child having fun. Nothing to indicate anyone nearby. She walked down the corridor assuming an air of nonchalance in case she was wrong. When she reached Barton's office, she stopped. The door was shut but she didn't hear any noise inside. She knocked. No response. She hadn't expected one as she had deliberately waited until she'd seen him leave. Turning the handle, she was relieved to find the door unlocked. With a last check of the corridor, she crossed the threshold.

A prickle of tension crossed the back of her neck. She was trapped now and no smooth answer would be able to explain her presence if she were discovered. *Let's get this over with.* She started with the cabinet in the corner, disappointed but not surprised when the drawers did not immediately yield to her. She risked a quick search and found the key, hidden in the tray of the nearby potted plant. *So obvious.*

The filing cabinet was filled with standard green hanging files, each neatly labelled and organised alphabetically. She pulled out Nick's personnel file. There was only time for a quick check. *Pity.* On the front sheet was a photograph of Nick and standard details regarding his personal information and employment. A single handwritten word appeared.

"Nosy" had been added next to his name. That was interesting. Nick wasn't necessarily nosy unless he felt something wasn't right. He certainly wasn't nosy with regard to his personal issues with girlfriends. She checked both her file and Caitlin's but found nothing obvious in either.

A sudden bang made Jess's stomach lurch in panic. She froze, trying to extend all her senses to maximum. The seconds passed in silence. Her hands shaking slightly, Jess returned to the files. In the drawer below the personnel files was a thick folder marked "Invoices". Recognising the logo on one sheet of paper, she pulled out an itemised telephone bill. She checked the corridor then loaded the invoice into the fax machine. Pressing the copy button, the machine whirred to life. It copied the three sheets quickly. The fan remained on, however, revealing the fact that the machine had been used. *Just a little longer... I'm nearly done.*

Jess slotted the invoice back into the correct place and closed the drawer. After locking the cabinet, she replaced the key in its hiding place. She turned her attention to Barton's desk. There were a few heaps of paper on the surface but a quick search found nothing incriminating. She'd been investigating businesses long enough to know what to look for. The two desk drawers were unlocked but only housed stationery, cables, and other miscellaneous items. Frustrated, Jess eyed the laptop. She was tempted to try to get access, as he was bound to have the important stuff in there. Common sense stepped in. She had neither the time nor the expertise to try hacking into someone's laptop. As a consolation, she ripped the top sheet off the telephone pad for later examination.

Given the state of her nerves at that moment, she wouldn't have considered it possible that she could get any more tense, but she was. *Just one last thing.* According to Nick, the register was housed on top of

the bookshelf in the office. She found it and flipped to the most recent page. She pulled her camera from her back pocket and within moments she had taken close-up photographs of each page of the book, going back about ten pages. She'd have liked the whole thing but this would have to do.

The sound of children shouting confirmed it was almost tea time. After closing the register, she folded the papers she had collected and tucked them in the waistband of her jeans against the small of her back. The jeans were loose but she tightened her belt an extra notch and hoped it would work. She slipped the camera back into her pocket and pulled her jumper down to cover it all. *It'll have to do.* Returning to the corridor, she closed the door gently behind her.

"Can I help you?" Barton had just rounded the corner and Jess froze. She smiled innocently.

"Yes, actually. I was just looking for you. I wanted to ask about some new netting." Did she sound convincing? Was her voice shaking?

"Netting?" He approached, dark brows knitted. He made her think of a politician. Medium height, average looks, and nondescript short grey hair. There was nothing to dislike, but something about him made her nervous.

"For archery. We put it behind the butts so if an arrow misses the target, it's contained. The current nets have a lot of holes and we're losing arrows." She forced herself to relax a little. "Actually, we should get some metal tape and a detector, too. You wouldn't believe how hard arrows are to find and the last thing we want is a child tripping over one. I take safety very seriously," she said with a solemn nod. "It's particularly hard when the arrows go in at a shallow trajectory—"

"Yes, I see," he interrupted. "Just write up a list with cost information and leave it for me at reception. I'll take a look."

"Excellent. Thank you." She turned and began walking away, the corners of the paper tickling her back. She fought the temptation to turn around and see if he was watching. Her heart was pounding so loud she was sure he could hear it.

"Ms. Maddocks?"

Uh-oh. She stopped and turned. "Yes?"

"We don't have money to burn."

She exhaled with relief. "Understood. Thank you for looking into it, though." She smiled gamely and continued down the corridor, practically holding her breath. It wasn't until she was halfway to her cabin that she completely relaxed.

BACK AT THE cabin, Jess settled down to examine her booty. Considering she didn't know what she was looking for, she had come away with a good haul. Hopefully, something would give her a clue about Sergey's whereabouts. The first item she looked at was the blank paper from the phone message pad. Her rational side did not expect to find anything, but the technique to check had appeared in enough books and films that she felt it was worth a try. Holding the sheet up to the light, she looked for any indentations on the paper that might indicate writing. She turned it in different directions and held it at different angles but found nothing. As a last resort, she tried a technique she had read about somewhere. She used the edge of a pencil and shaded the paper before smoothing out the lead with her finger. It worked. Jess grinned and peered at the paper as she tried to read the markings. "Renew car insurance." With a shake of her head, she tossed the paper into the bin.

Undiscouraged, she pulled the telephone bill toward her. This document would need more work. She scanned the report, noting the numbers that appeared more frequently than others. She also

marked calls that had occurred at unusual hours. Using these two criteria, she compiled a list of twelve numbers she wanted to check.

Once she had done that, she established an Internet connection on her handheld PC via her mobile. It was a slow process, but she was able to run each telephone number through a search engine. She matched ten of the twelve numbers to businesses that included a recruitment agency, stationer, school, and marketing solutions business. The last two numbers yielded no results. Well, she'd have to find out who was on the other end the old-fashioned way. Jess cancelled the data connection and dialled the first number.

It rang five times before a well-spoken, female voice answered. "Harriet Barton."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, I have the wrong number. Goodbye." She pressed the button to disconnect the line before writing the name and "Barton's wife?" on her notes.

Jess dialled the last remaining number.

"Hi, there. Thanks for calling Adult Friend. Which of our companions would you like to talk to today?" a feminine voice, low and sultry, said.

"I, uh, sorry, wrong number." She hung up quickly, more than a little surprised that such a call had been made from a children's camp. The sound of a key in the lock made her jump. She swept the papers into a heap and turned them face down.

"Hey," Caitlin said as she entered. "How's it going?"

"Fine." Jess knew her guilt would be plain on her face. She never had been any good at masking her emotions. "I was just doing some paperwork."

"Paperwork?" Caitlin put her hands on her hips and cocked her head. "For what? Instructors here don't have to do any. What are you really doing?"

"It's probably better you don't know."

"Are you trying to find Sergey? If you are, then let me help. I've been trying to come up with a place to start with that."

Jess searched Caitlin's eyes for truth. Her gut instinct said she could trust her, but Grace's suggestion to be careful echoed in her mind.

"Hmm. From the way you look, maybe you're regretting telling me about Nick's stalker." Caitlin's hands were still on her hips and she eyed Jess steadily.

"No." But Jess knew she didn't sound certain. The sheaf of papers gave away her biggest secret. The only places she would have got paper would be in the post or from the office. Caitlin would see it sooner or later. "I took a look around Barton's office," she admitted.

"You what?" Caitlin sat down. "Girl, you could get in hot water for that. I don't know about here, but where I come from, that's illegal."

"I'll be fine as long as long as nobody finds out." Jess looked at her pointedly.

"They won't from me."

For some reason, the statement reassured Jess. Whatever Caitlin was, Jess didn't think it was a liar. "I didn't think so. I'm just worried about Sergey and I'm trying to find out what happened. I asked Helen—she was his teamer—but she said he left because his parents called. But Sergey told me he was an orphan, which I really do believe."

Caitlin shrugged. "He's just a kid, though. Sometimes kids get caught up in stories. Maybe Sergey has problems at home with his parents so he pretends he doesn't have any."

"Yes, I know. There is always that chance. But if it was his parents who came to get him, why weren't they called Mr. and Mrs. something-foreign-sounding? The register definitely says Williams." *And that most certainly is not a typical Ukrainian name.*

"Okay, I'll bite. Maybe his folks are rich and a

nanny came to get him."

"I know." Jess's voice raised in frustration. "There are plausible possibilities in all of these things, but there is also sufficient reason for concern. I can't just forget about this because everything *might* be all right. There's something strange going on." She stopped then, wondering if perhaps she'd said too much.

Caitlin smiled. "Actually, I agree. I think it's great that you care so much and I mean it that I want to help. Did you ever ask him how long he was staying?"

"I tried but he just shrugged. I tried asking the question in different ways but I was never sure if he didn't understand the question or didn't know the answer."

"Okay. So we're not sure how long he was supposed to stay, but the way he left makes it seem that his leaving was sudden. What did you find in Barton's office? Anything we can work with?"

Jess chewed her lip for a moment. She could use some help with this, and Nick probably wasn't the one to do it, since he was already under suspicion. She showed Caitlin the telephone bill. "I've just identified the top twelve numbers. The only dodgy one is an adult telephone service."

Caitlin's eyes widened and she sniggered. "Seriously? Barton? I thought he was as straight-laced as they come."

"Me, too, but it's one of the most frequently called numbers on the list. Somebody's calling that number quite a bit. If not Barton, then someone on staff has a bad habit. I also took some photos of the register but I haven't gone through those yet."

"Photos?"

"Of the content of the pages."

"Oh, yeah. Smart. Let's have a look." She pulled a spare chair up next to Jess, leaning forward to see the

image on the small screen on the back of the camera.

Jess manipulated the buttons until she had the most recent page of the register displayed on full zoom. "Look. There's Sergey's departure to Mr. Williams, just as Nick said."

"But it doesn't say anything else. I'd hoped he missed something."

"I also managed to get a look at our employee files while I was there. I was looking at Nick's and saw —"

"Did you see mine?"

Jess hesitated, but wanted to be honest. "Yes. I looked at all three of ours."

Caitlin's jaw muscles flexed.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy. I just thought if whoever's doing whatever it is we're trying to figure out—or knew how much time Sergey spent with archery and horses, there might be some clue in our files. A notation or something like that."

"What was in mine? Anything I should know about?"

"I just scanned it. Normal stuff including a fetching picture of you in a cowboy hat." Jess hoped her comment would ease Caitlin's mind.

Caitlin's tension seemed to decrease. "That was a great hat. But I don't know what happened to it. I think one of the kids might have taken it not long after I started working here. Never did get it back."

"Look, I'm sorry. I should have thought this through better."

"Forget it," Caitlin said with a wave of her hand. "What were you going to say about Nick?"

"Just that he had a handwritten note on the front page of his file. It said he was nosy."

"That's kind of strange to put in a personnel file. Was there anything else in it?"

"No. Not that I could tell. I didn't really go through in any great detail."

Caitlin sat back in her chair and sighed. "It doesn't look like we're any closer to finding out what happened to Sergey."

"Are you aware of any other children leaving unexpectedly?" Jess asked, wondering if Caitlin had been in contact with Chrissy or had heard anything.

"No. You get to recognising faces, but at a place like this, they're always changing."

"Yeah, I suppose." Jess switched the camera off and gathered the papers. "I just hate feeling so useless. I can't help but imagine he's sick or something and isn't able to communicate."

"Come with me."

"Where?" Jess looked at her, confused.

"Just come." Caitlin held her hand out.

With an exaggerated sigh, Jess stood and followed her out of the cabin. A few minutes later, Jess realised their destination. "Horses?"

"Yup."

"Why are you taking me to see horses?"

"Quit yer yapping, woman."

Jess grinned in spite of her mood. "You really are quite the charmer. I'll bet that line wins 'em over every time."

Caitlin only smiled and led her into the yard area where a grey pony stood peacefully dozing. "This is Flossy. You can stroke her."

Jess looked at her. "You frog-marched me up here to stroke a horse?"

"Yup."

When it was evident Caitlin had nothing more to add, Jess stepped forward and patted the pony on the neck the way she had seen others do. "Happy now?"

"Flossy likes her nose stroked."

Jess was about to object but Caitlin's expression was firm. *What the heck*. She moved around to the pony's face and spoke to her quietly. "Hey, there. I'm Jess." As she talked, she reached out and stroked the

soft fur. Flossy swivelled her ears slightly but maintained her dozy state.

"She likes it if you talk to her."

"Does she like foot massages and facials too?"

"Feel free to try. I'm just going to check something I meant to do earlier." Caitlin walked away before Jess had a chance to object.

"Huh, I guess it's just you and me then, girl," Jess said, smoothing her hand over the pony's muzzle. "So, whatcha been up to today? It looks like you're inundated."

Flossy sighed gently, her warm breath making her whiskers twitch.

"Such a pretty girl," Jess said, continuing her monologue in the same soothing voice. She stroked Flossy's nose rhythmically, whispering endearments as the seconds, then minutes passed.

"How're you guys doing?"

Jess was startled out of her trance, unaware that Caitlin had come back. "Okay. She's a cutie isn't she?"

"Good job, Floss, you won her over."

"I already liked horses."

"Sure, but you've hardly been up here since you started. It never hurts to make the acquaintance. Plus, there aren't many sorrows that a good horse can't ease."

Jess realised she hadn't worried about Sergey for the last ten minutes. She felt more relaxed and able to think clearly. "Thanks, I needed that."

Caitlin put her arm around Jess's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Any time."

DIET DAY TWENTY and Jess was alone for breakfast. It was probably a good thing, since she'd noticed the persistent hunger had been getting to her. She was edgy and easily tired and her concentration

was off. It was working, though. She was losing weight. The queue snaked forward, the children clamouring for the first feed of the day. It was colder today than it had been and the hot meals were getting more attention. Jess wanted bacon and eggs. She could smell them from here and her mouth was salivating in response.

She shuffled forward a bit and the queue paused. The bacon was right next to her now. She could see the crispy brown edges and imagined it crunching between her teeth. The salty, meaty treat would be perfectly complemented with soft, bland scrambled eggs. She could imagine the weight of it in her stomach, filling and warming. It seemed like forever since she'd last felt that way. These days her stomach felt like it was folding in on itself, shrivelling up with lack of use.

A little girl was taking bacon for her plate. She already had some bread. Maybe she was going to make a bacon sandwich. *Food of the gods*. Jess was a person behind her. The girl's chubby arms caught her attention and she looked more closely. She had a double chin and her midriff protruded. Jess hated the word 'belly'. It was bad enough with its negative connotations, and she wouldn't apply it to a child. The girl looked happy but Jess knew it was just a matter of time. Soon she'd discover she was a monster. She'd find out that she'd have to go hungry if she wanted to fit in. It would be a few years, at least, before she realised that was what she could expect the rest of her life to be like.

Jess caught herself. Why should that little girl have to go through this? She's an innocent. Is this cycle going to just carry on down the generations? Daughter after daughter after daughter? There was a reason not to have children. She wouldn't inflict this on anyone, these feelings. Constant fight against her body or immediate failure. Either way, it was a lonely

struggle fuelled by self-hatred. She shut her eyes against the thought.

She forced an image of hope into her mind. Herself at her target weight, walking in the woods near her home. Grace was holding her hand. They were a couple. Grace wanted to be with the successful Jess, the one who had overcome her weight challenge. She could respect her and their relationship would be long-term. Jess had a job, too. Employers had headhunted her, seeing her skills, and reassured by her professional, vigorous physique. It was a simple picture, but the layers of meaning underneath were what she was striving for. Jess pushed her tray forward. Just an apple today.

Chapter Seven

GRINNING INDULGENTLY, GRACE watched Jess sink into the luxurious new sofa. "Lovely, isn't it?"

Jess leaned her head back against the cushions and closed her eyes. "Fantastic."

Grace took in the smooth, creamy skin of Jess's throat.

"I could stay here forever."

"Mmm." Grace agreed whole-heartedly.

"Nope, it's no good." Jess sat up suddenly and got to her feet. "I need coffee first."

Grace followed her into the kitchen. "It's a pity you've only got one day off."

"I know. There's a lot going on and I could really use some time with a decent Internet connection. Not to mention the opportunity to talk things through with someone with a fresh mind." She looked at Grace meaningfully.

"I'm happy to oblige."

After a few moments they returned to the living room. "Let's test the sofa with two," Jess said, patting the empty cushion next to her.

Grace complied, the ever-present chemistry she felt around Jess leaving her helpless to do otherwise. She spent a few minutes thinking about how it seemed to be growing. As did the list of reasons why she hadn't acted on it. The compulsion to talk about it bubbled over. "Why did you take this job?"

Jess looked at her intently and the small space between them seemed even more charged than usual. She took a sip of coffee and stared at the floor for a few moments. "There were lots of reasons, I suppose. You know how much Nick begged me and how I don't have a job at the moment."

"Yes, but I think there's more to it." *Like trying to*

focus on things other than yourself. Maybe Jess was like Nick in that respect, and ran away from things like relationships. Grace hated to think that, but something was going on with Jess. There was an attraction between them. So why wouldn't Jess admit it and do something about it? Why wasn't she open to it?

Jess nodded slowly. "It's a big mix of things. I was starting to get despondent about the job hunting. I don't even know if I want to stay working in the business sector. The idea of a break from the frustration and indecision was pretty appealing, I decided. Though at first, I didn't think it was a good idea."

"That makes sense. Good decision, too, to give yourself a different perspective for a while. Maybe you want to become an archery instructor full-time?" Grace grinned when Jess looked up.

"At least that's a decision I don't have to struggle with." Jess laughed but then her expression became pensive again. "I guess...I guess that I was also running away."

Grace almost held her breath. "Mmm? How so?"

"Have you had many girlfriends?"

"Um, not really. Two serious and a few less so."

Jess nodded. "I've had a few, but nothing that serious. Mostly they were people I met through work. Rosalind most recently, and you know about that. They all fell by the wayside as soon as they realised I wouldn't compromise the integrity of my work because of my personal life. They were just trying to use me."

"Some might have been. But maybe you don't want people in your personal life." Grace wished she hadn't said the words, but it was too late. She waited for Jess's reaction.

"Possibly," Jess said slowly, unsure. "I know Rosalind was using me, though."

"That's rough." Grace deflated a bit. Jess didn't want to go much deeper into the subject of her personal life.

"Yeah. It showed me that the only appealing thing about me was the power of my job. I don't even have that now."

Grace stared at her. Was she serious? Did she really think that? "Jess, that's not true. Anyone worth their salt can see that it's not true."

"That's kind of you to say. But it's how I feel. I'm trying to change things, to have something about myself that I can take pride in. At the moment, I struggle to respect, let alone like, myself."

"Jess, I had no idea you had feelings like that." Grace reached out and took her hand. "I know you aren't that confident sometimes, but you are so amazing. How can you not see that?"

Jess shrugged. "Recently, I found something important. Too important to squander."

Grace tightened her grip on Jess's hand, willing her to continue.

Jess fiddled with the hem of her jumper with her free hand. "Imagine you'd just been given a fantastic plot of land and a truckload of money to build your ideal house."

"Okay."

"What I'm trying to do is stop myself rushing ahead and putting up a house that will fall down in the first rain shower. I want to give that house every chance to stand in all weather."

"And you need time to get that right? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yeah." For the first time, Jess looked up and made eye contact.

Grace nodded, hoping that despite the obscured topic they were both having the same conversation. If she was right and this was about their developing friendship then Jess seemed to be looking to her for

reassurance. "Then you should take that time. After all, the land isn't going anywhere."

"I hope not."

"Trust me." Grace patted Jess's thigh and smiled. "C'mon, let's go get another coffee." She tugged Jess up and pulled her toward the kitchen.

JESS AND GRACE were sitting in the office, both focussed on the computer screen. Jess had transferred the photographs she'd taken of the register from her camera to her laptop and now she was able to look at them properly.

"There's Sergey's entry," Grace said. "Everything looks fine."

Jess sighed. "I can't see anything in here that helps. I was really hoping that if I looked hard enough, I'd find something. Lots of Williamses or something."

"Let's see the other pages."

Jess worked efficiently and soon had each relevant image open. "Have a browse through."

Grace leant forward, focussing her attention on the screen. Jess studied her, thinking how pleasant it would be to pull the hair away from her neck and cover the area with light kisses. "That's interesting." Grace said. She was frowning with concentration and flicking between the pictures.

"What've you found?"

"Look. Several of the foreign children were collected by people with English surnames. The most common English surnames, too. Brown, Smith, Green, Cooper, Williams. That's odd, don't you think?"

"Yes, I thought that for Sergey, but I didn't think to check the others. Caitlin thought Sergey could have been collected by a nanny."

Grace flashed her an inscrutable glance then looked back at the screen. "They all could have had

something like that, but I think it's statistically unlikely. They're young children. Are all these parents really going to choose to leave their children in the care of some English guardian?"

"What if the English guardians are their full-time nannies? Wouldn't that make it all right?"

"Yes," Grace agreed, "but do you really think that many foreign children would have full-time English nannies? Sergey couldn't have, otherwise he would have been able to speak some English."

Jess grinned. "I can't believe you just made more progress with this in half an hour than I have staring at it for days."

Grace smiled. "Fresh eyes. Did you find anything else useful?"

"I saw a note on Nick's file saying he was nosy and I managed to get a copy of a recent phone bill." Jess rummaged in her bag and handed over the bill and her notes. "I've done a bit of digging but it's hard there. I keep thinking someone's going to walk in on me."

"This is what you've found out so far? An adult line?"

"Yeah, I was pretty embarrassed to discover that one."

"I really hope that has nothing to do with it." Grace's tone was serious.

"Surely it can't. Not that. This service is telephone-based and the children can't speak any English."

"Good point. I guess Barton's calling, but we can't know for sure. It could have something to do with Chrissy, too, I suppose."

"What, you think she was calling the number?" Jess looked at the number then back at Grace.

"I doubt it. But if it was Barton, maybe she caught him at it. That could account for why things went so wrong so quickly. And also why she wouldn't tell

anyone. You can imagine Barton would threaten her with a bad reference or something if word got out."

Jess filed that away for further thought. "Either way, it doesn't help us with where Sergey is."

"No." Grace exhaled and ran both her hands through her hair. Jess imagined the silky strands between her own fingers. "So what about the others?"

"Um—" Jess left her reverie about Grace and returned to the discussion. "The others all seem reasonable enough. Harriet Barton sounded posh, but I thought she's probably his wife or sister or something."

"Why is there a school so frequently called?" Grace asked. "What relationship would an adventure camp have with a school?"

"Maybe the school children use the additional facilities sometimes." School. Something about that tugged at her memory.

"Perhaps. Let's look it up."

Jess navigated to her preferred search engine and typed in the phone number from the bill. As it had the first time, the site returned multiple hits regarding Oakham Hill School. Selecting the link that took them to the school's own website, Jess maximised the screen.

"They must have their address somewhere on here," Grace muttered, looking at the screen.

Jess tried to ignore how close Grace's head was to hers and clicked on the contact tab, bringing the information up. Copying the postcode, she opened another window and accessed an online route-planning tool. Pasting the postcode into the destination box, she used the Camp Condor postcode for the departure point. "It's not that close," she said. "About sixty miles away."

"That's too far for regular use, then. The school might go to the camp for some things but nothing like use on a weekly basis. So, we're back to square one.

Still, even with some infrequent use, this contact seems strange." Grace patted her finger on the telephone bill pensively. "What's the link here?" Suddenly, her frown cleared and she looked at Jess with excitement. "Hey, here's an idea, why don't I go to the school, posing as a prospective parent? I could ask about activities and see if it leads anywhere."

"I don't know." Jess looked at her, dubious. "What if you said the wrong thing to the wrong person and ended up in trouble? We don't know what's happening or whether you'd be safe."

Grace waved away Jess's concerns with her hand. "It's a school and would be broad daylight. What trouble could there be?"

Jess winced. "If this was a horror film you'd be chopped up and shoved in a bin bag after saying that."

"Jess Maddocks," Grace said as she wagged her finger at her. "You've been watching too much television." She ruined her scolding by smiling until her dimples showed. "Most likely scenario is that it would be a waste of time, but then it's my time to waste. It's too quiet around here with only the chickens for company. I could use some action."

Jess bit down on a flirtatious comment, knowing Grace could run rings around her in that department. "It's up to you," she said instead. "Maybe I should try searching the office again now I have something specific to look for."

"I'm not sure that's a great idea. Besides, I don't want you getting caught. That could put Nick in jeopardy, as well as you."

Grace was right. "I just don't know what else to do. There must be more records somewhere. If I know Sergey is all right, then I can relax, but it just seems to be that the more I dig, the more worried I get."

Grace was silent for a moment then asked, "How's Caitlin?"

Jess looked at her, unnerved by the change in subject. She suspected Grace didn't trust Caitlin and that, too, concerned her. "Okay, I guess."

"Does she know about you rifling through the office?"

"Yes. She came back to the cabin early and found me looking at the papers afterward."

Grace nodded, thoughtful. "Be careful."

"I will." She checked her watch. "I need to make a move soon but I must go and pack a suit. I've arranged a meeting with a solicitor."

"Really? About losing your job?"

"Yes." Jess sighed, still uncomfortable about talking to someone about being sacked for being gay.

"I'm so pleased. That's great news. If nothing else, it needs to be brought out in the open. What's the point of making discrimination for sexuality illegal if employers still get away with it?"

Jess smiled. Grace was always forthright in her sense of justice and she found it endearing. She thought back to when Grace had to testify about her research into the pet food, and how calm she had been, reciting her findings and sticking to them throughout. Jess wished she could be like that. "Well, we'll see. Finding a new job is a lot harder than I thought. It would be better to have to admit to being sacked illegally than just sacked."

"When's the appointment?"

"A week on Monday. I'm pretty nervous."

"You'll be fine." Grace patted her leg and gave her an encouraging smile. "Tell you what—why don't you go get your suit and I'll make us some dinner. I'm worried you're looking a bit thin these days."

Thin? Was Grace serious? "I'd love that, but I can't. I need to get back."

"Are you sure? I could make something quick. I treated myself to some new spices the other day. How about a homemade curry?"

Jess floundered between frustration, guilt, and loneliness. She would do anything to make Grace happy but here she was unknowingly asking for the hardest thing in the world. Jess was having so much trouble keeping her grip on her eating that caving in now could be disastrous.

"Please?" Grace pressed. "I've missed having company for dinner."

Jess's reservations fell away at the prospect of Grace's unhappiness. "Okay, a quick one." *I'll just have to find some way to counter it later.*

FIVE DAYS AFTER breaking into Barton's office, Jess was back in it, this time under legitimate circumstances. She knocked on the partially open door.

Barton looked up. "Ms. Maddocks – good, come in and take a seat."

Jess walked forward and sat down in the visitor's chair. She glanced around, attempting to show an interest in the room as though it were the first time she'd seen it.

Mr Barton studied her for a moment, his expression unfathomable. "Thank you for coming to see me. I just wanted to touch base with you as you've been with us for –" he checked a piece of paper on his desk, "three weeks now. As you'll have noticed, I have to spend too much time entrenched in here, so I don't have the opportunity to see people as often as I'd like."

"There must be lots to do," Jess said, trying to sound sympathetic. Something about him, however, didn't agree with her.

"Yes, and sometimes it seems never-ending. Anyway, I'll get straight to the point. This morning I had a call from Ms. Timpson, the permanent archery instructor. Apparently, her family difficulties are still

ongoing and she believes it could be up to another month before she can return. Would you be able to extend your employment with us for that long?"

Jess wasn't surprised. The lack of news had made her think Ms. Timpson would be away longer. She was torn. A big part of her wanted to say no. She wanted to go home, back to Grace, and get on with her life. Although Nick's troubles seemed to have passed, there was the question of Sergey. After what Nick had said about Alexander, there was a chance Sergey wasn't the only one to have left under strange circumstances. She couldn't ignore that. "I believe so, yes."

"Excellent and thank you. Your flexibility is much appreciated. So, how are you enjoying your time at Camp Condor?" he asked, wheeling back from the desk and crossing his legs.

His calculated use of body language did little to dispel the underlying tension between them. Jess ignored it. "Very much. I haven't worked with children before and I find their enthusiasm refreshing."

"Do you have any favourites amongst the children? I know one shouldn't, but sometimes it's hard to avoid."

You're about as subtle as a Klingon singing barbershop. Again, she pretended not to notice. "I enjoy working with them all, but I do find myself drawn to the underdogs, the ones who seem to be isolated for whatever reason."

"True. Like any community, there are always those who don't fit in as easily. I did notice you'd been spending quite some time with the foreign children. Do you speak any other languages?"

"Sadly, no. I wish I could talk to them because some seem so lonely. I just do what I can. It seems a smile and some hand-holding goes a long way."

"Well, it's very rewarding to see someone making

such good contact with the children. The relationships here are brief due to the short residence of the guests, but needless to say, they're very important."

"We just want to create some happy memories," she said, surprising herself with her saccharin sentimentality. "And I'm glad to have the opportunity to help."

"Good. Well, unless you have anything for me I'll let you get on with your day."

"Oh, I do have the materials list you requested." Jess handed over a piece of paper. In her experience, continuity was paramount in a successful cover story.

"Excellent. Thank you." He took the list and looked at it briefly before adding it to a heap of papers on his desk.

"Let me know if you need me to do anything else." Jess looked at him expectantly, waiting for her dismissal.

"I will. Have a good day."

"Thanks. Goodbye." Jess rose and left the room. With relief, she strode down the corridor and out into the fresh air.

GRACE TYPED IN the name of her next client and opened the resulting file. She would be seeing Willow, an eight-year-old female collie. The records showed that she had been spayed and her vaccinations kept current. Other than that, there were few entries and certainly no long-running healthcare issues. Satisfied with her preparation, she opened the door to the waiting room. "Willow Dickson," she called.

A man stood up from among the few people seated in the waiting area. His weathered appearance and choice of clothing suggested farming as his occupation. At his heel was Willow, a beautiful, sleek border collie with intelligent brown eyes.

"Come in, please," Grace said with a smile. She loved animals in all forms, but was particularly drawn to dogs and horses.

The man led Willow into the small room and lifted her onto the table.

"What can I do for you today?" Grace asked, looking the dog over for clues about her general health. Willow was impeccably well-behaved and friendly. When Grace slid her hands into the mantle of fur around the dog's neck and chest, Willow panted happily, appreciating the gentle attention. Continuing her inspection, Grace ran her hands over Willow's body, including down each leg. There was no evidence of pain or discomfort.

"I want her put down," the man said in a gruff voice.

Grace looked up, shocked. "Is she injured?"

"No. I've given up farming to emigrate. A man can't make an honest living in this country anymore. I'm tying up all my affairs before I go."

Farmers were more dispassionate about their animals than the average pet owner, but this shocked her. Putting a healthy, intelligent creature down simply because it wasn't convenient crossed the line into callousness. Keeping her temper in check, she tried to reason with him. "Have you sought alternative options? I know of charities in the area that would almost certainly take her from you. They would house her while they seek a long-term rehoming opportunity."

"I have enough to do already. I don't have the time to go chasing around the county. Please just do your job."

Grace found herself in one of those moments where she knew that whatever decision she made would have a profound effect on her life, as well as the person she could claim to be. It was a situation she had been in before and one that had nearly ended

her career.

Willow looked steadily at Grace with trusting brown eyes, rapidly weaving a bond between them.

"Will you do this or not?"

Grace took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. "Mr. Dickson, I'm not comfortable with that request. I'm afraid I won't. She's a healthy, happy animal and certainly doesn't need to die."

The man scowled at her refusal.

"However, I'll gladly take her from you so you're free to get on with your arrangements."

"I see your plan." He wagged a finger accusingly at her. "You'll put her out the back there then charge me for some fabricated illness."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Grace retrieved a scrap of paper and wrote, dictating as she did so. "I, Grace Willoughby, veterinarian, take full responsibility for Willow, eight-year-old female collie. Ownership has been permanently transferred at no cost. Mr Dickson has no further obligation regarding this animal." After signing it, she passed it to him. "Is that acceptable?"

"It doesn't look like you are prepared to do your job, so I don't think I have a choice."

"If that's how you'd like to interpret this exchange, then that's correct."

His expression was hard. "I've been a customer of this surgery for over twenty years. I don't find your attitude acceptable."

"I'm sorry that's the case, but I cannot justify the destruction of a healthy animal. I have given you an alternative that requires no money or obligation from you and I recommend you accept it."

"I shall make a formal complaint."

"That's your choice."

He thrust Willow's lead at her. "It is." With a last glare he flung open the door and strode out of the practice.

Grace closed the door behind him, regaining her privacy from the curious inhabitants of the waiting room. Moving back to the table she leant against it, indulging in a few deep breaths. The altercation had left her shaking with anger.

Willow whined and lifted her paw.

"Hey, there," Grace said, smiling. "Looks like you're my dog now."

Later that evening, Grace was sitting on the sofa, sipping a fruity red wine. She had intended to watch a documentary on television about primate evolution but instead found herself just sitting, enjoying her home. Willow was curled up on the sofa next to her. Grace smiled at how quickly her good intentions had failed. "You managed to break the 'no dogs on the furniture' rule pretty quickly, didn't you?"

Willow adjusted her position and exhaled happily.

"I bet that old git didn't let you sleep on the furniture." She curled her fingers into Willow's soft fur. "I live here with Jess. I'd like to keep you, but really, it's her house. If she says no dogs, then I'll have to take you to the charity centre. I know that they'll find a nice home for you very quickly if it comes to that. Who wouldn't fall in love with you straight away?" She paused in her monologue and speculated on Jess's reaction. "Don't worry, I don't think that'll happen, I'll speak for you and I know Jess likes dogs." Grace took another sip of wine and positioned her body so her legs were stretched out along the sofa.

Willow lifted her head and put it on Grace's leg, the limb providing a comfortable pillow-height rest. She sighed and closed her eyes.

"You'll like Jess," Grace continued, happy to indulge in her favourite topic to a new audience. "She's gentle and kind. At first I thought she was quite serious, but when you get to know her she

actually has quite a playful side." She grinned, remembering the recent horseplay that had led to the need for a new sofa. "She has a very good heart and if you turn those eyes on her the way you did to me, I don't think she'll stand a chance." She chuckled. "Jess is working away from home for a while, but hopefully not for much longer." Grace snuggled deeper into the sofa, indulging in daydreams of the three of them living happily together. She sobered when she thought about Jess's eating issues. "Maybe having you around will help. Pets are supposed to be very relaxing, you know." And Jess really needed to relax.

Grace had been watching Jess around food since Nick accused her of having an eating disorder a couple of months ago. The more Grace watched, the more worried she became. Jess skipped more meals than she ate and when she did have a meal, she tended to push food around the plate rather than eating it. Then she binged. Grace heard her go downstairs at night more and more often. It had puzzled her for a long time as there was a bathroom upstairs and in the morning there was never any sign of the kitchen being used. Then, one morning she'd found the neatly bagged rubbish in the wheelie-bin, hidden under the last bag she'd put in. Her concern had driven her to open it and she'd been surprised to find packets and wrappers for sweet food she'd never seen Jess eat. She ached with pity for her friend but was at a loss about how to help. The pity welled in her again in the present and now her concern was even greater. Jess had lost a significant amount of weight in a short space of time. Her skin was pale and she had dark smudges under her eyes. She seemed completely washed out.

Grace sighed and pulled her thoughts away from their increasingly depressing spiral. "We'll be her happy, okay Willow? We'll be here for her, solid and non-judgemental. Hopefully she'll talk about it when

she's ready, right?" Willow opened one eye and peered at her. "I'll take that as your agreement." She raised her glass in a toast motion then drained the last of her wine.

"Tomorrow we'll go to the pet shop after work and get you some stuff. I only borrowed what we've been using tonight from the surgery." Deciding it was time for bed, Grace continued her one-sided conversation as she went into the kitchen. "I'm glad Jim was so supportive. He's going to let you stay out back until we get a better plan." She rinsed her glass and swapped it for one filled with water. Then she checked that both the front and back doors were locked and bolted.

Willow pattered around the house at her heels, yawning pointedly.

Turning off the downstairs lights, Grace climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She couldn't help but smile as Willow loyally followed her. "On your bed," she commanded, pointing at a folded blanket she had already arranged for the purpose.

Obediently, Willow crossed the room to the blanket, circled a few times then lay down. She watched silently as Grace performed her nightly ablutions.

As Grace settled herself into bed, she turned out the last lamp. "Oh, best not mention to Jess that I've been borrowing this," Grace said with a guilty grin, her hand resting on one of her friend's T-shirts. "Good night, Willow."

Chapter Eight

"IT'S TIME TO collect your bows," Jess called to the milling children surrounding her. "Steady now, there're plenty for everyone." She laughed as the youngsters stampeded to secure themselves a "good" bow. Although a new holiday week had begun and these were once again unknown faces, the children behaved much the same as their predecessors. It was as though they followed a universal code of children's rules.

Soon everyone held a bow and the band of archers was snaking steadily toward the targets in the field. As usual, Jess carried the arrows and lagged at the back to keep a watchful eye on the children. As she walked, she became aware of a boy walking with her rather than rushing ahead with his peers. "Hi," Jess said, "have you done any archery before?"

The boy returned the smile but did not answer.

Jess appraised him unobtrusively, deciding that he was probably about eleven. He had dark blond hair, fair skin, and the gangliness of a youth who had recently survived a growth spurt. "Are you from this area?"

Looking up, the boy shrugged before replying in a foreign language.

"I'll take that as a no. I'm Jess," she said, saying her name slightly louder and patting her chest simultaneously. "You?" She tilted her voice upward and raised her eyebrows to emphasise the question.

The boy seemed to understand this universal approach. "Piotr," he replied, repeating the chest patting motion.

"Pleased to meet you, Piotr," Jess said, grinning self-consciously at her pronunciation. "I had a friend called Sergey who was staying here recently. He couldn't speak any English, either. We got on very

well, though." She spoke freely to him, hoping that although he wouldn't understand the words, her tone and demeanour would help him feel welcome.

Piotr responded with a rapid ramble of his mother tongue. As he concluded, he hefted his bow and grinned.

Jess smiled again although she was unsure of the message. The main thing was that he seemed to be looking forward to the session ahead.

"Okay, everyone," she called as they arrived at the targets. "I'm going to pat you on the head and give you a letter, A, B or C. Make sure you remember what letter I give you." She moved through the group, patting and lettering as described. "Now, all the As stand here," she indicated a spot. "Bs here." She pointed again. "And Cs here." She smiled every time she did this, remembering before she'd switched to letters how the children had giggled when she'd said "number twos".

"Well done, everybody. Now, if you all want to sit down on the grass I'll tell you a bit about archery and how we can be safe while we do it." As she turned to retrieve an arrow for use in the demonstration, she noticed a solitary figure standing at the edge of the field. Squinting, she recognised Barton watching her. "Look guys, there's the nice man who looks after this camp. Let's all give him a big wave."

Dutifully, the children waved, as did Jess. Barton turned on his heel and strode back toward the administration building. Interesting. Maybe he hadn't wanted her to notice him. That thought didn't sit well with her. "I don't think he's very happy today, but I'm sure our waving would have helped to cheer him up. Right, let's get on with some archery shall we?" And she held up an arrow and a bow and started the lesson.

"THAT'S IT, STAY relaxed and keep your body fluid," Caitlin called across the school to Jess. "Flossy's a sweetie. She won't run off with you."

Jess couldn't spare any concentration to reply. The oddity of balancing on a moving creature, and the effort of trying to tell it where to go, was plenty to think about. Still, she was thoroughly enjoying herself. She marvelled that a sentient being so much bigger than herself would willingly carry her simply because she asked. She felt honoured.

"How are you doing? Feel like you've got the hang of her gait?" Caitlin asked.

"Her what?"

"Gait. The way she moves," Caitlin explained.

"Getting there, I suppose. It makes my hips roll." Jess laughed. "I feel like a cowboy."

"Cowgirl. You up for a short trail ride?"

"Well, that depends on what it is," Jess said, not taking her eyes from the furry grey ears in front of her.

"It's just another word for a walk. You guys call it a hack over here. We can go through the woods a little then cut back by the meadow."

Jess frowned. "That sounds a bit advanced."

"Not really. Flossy will just follow my horse. It's exactly like what you're doing now but with better scenery."

"Oh, okay. I'll give it a shot."

"That's the spirit. Now squeeze with your right leg and pull a little on the left rein to bring her back over here."

Jess followed the instructions, pleased when Flossy started plodding in the direction of the gate. She risked a look up and saw Caitlin mounting a big, dark brown horse.

"Ready?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes." *I hope.*

Caitlin leant down and unlatched the gate,

pushing it wide so Jess had plenty of room to ride through. "Just follow on behind me. Tell me if you need to stop."

Jess focussed on her breathing as Caitlin had told her to. Apparently, Flossy would be able to pick up on any nervousness Jess may feel. That wouldn't be good. They made their way across the yard, the slow hoof beats echoing off the low stable walls. Caitlin was right. Flossy seemed happy to follow. Her slow stride was so calm and rhythmic Jess even dared to look at her surroundings.

"How are you doing?" Caitlin called back over her shoulder.

"Good." Flossy's ears swivelled backward. Jess switched to a murmur. "Hey, girl, this is nice, isn't it? I guess you guys must be used to having all sorts of children on your backs, huh?" She thought of some of the characters who came to her archery sessions. "I bet the high energy ones are tough."

"You're falling behind," Caitlin said. "Give her a squeeze with your heels."

Jess did so but there was no response. "Come on girl, walk on." She squeezed again. This time Flossy made a bit more of an effort. She had speeded up and seemed to have a longer stride, too.

Caitlin led them off the lane they had been using and into some light woodland. The branches were cut high and the path was wide, much to Jess's relief.

Flossy seemed to know where she was going and followed on happily. They had continued at the pace of an animated walk and Jess was enjoying it immensely. The horses were wading through fallen leaves but seemed totally relaxed about the scrunching noise. The air was cooler and a little damp under the cover of the trees, making Jess realise autumn had really taken hold. Only a couple of months and it would be Christmas. *This Christmas will have Grace in it.* The thought sent a thrill of excitement

down her spine.

"You a convert yet?"

Jess's attention returned to the present. "I think so." She was enjoying a sense of well-being that surprised her. Flossy acted as though the weight on her back was irrelevant. Like a ladybird on the back of a dog. "It's very liberating."

"Do you want to try a trot?"

"Uh, okay." Jess took a deep breath, watching as Caitlin gave her horse a command and it immediately started to trot. Flossy did the same, not waiting for any instruction.

"Whoa." Jess was caught by surprise but stayed in the saddle. She was bobbing up and down with no coordination at all. She started to giggle. Flossy didn't seem to mind.

Caitlin slowed to a walk and turned around to look. "You okay?"

Flossy slowed to a walk too, and puffed out a sigh. Jess grinned. "Yeah. That was odd but fun. It looks a lot easier than it is."

Caitlin nodded then turned around again. "The rising trot is an English thing. If you're riding in Western gear, you sit all the time."

"Is it hard to change? I guess you must have been riding Western for a long time."

"I'm looking at it as a challenge," Caitlin said with a laugh. "These horses have all been trained English style and the tack is all English, so there wasn't a choice. I have to admit, I prefer Western."

The trees were beginning to thin out and Jess realised they were approaching the field and they'd be back at the yard soon. The thought saddened her. "I'll come back, Flossy," she promised her mount. "We'll go for a ride another day." She sat back into the saddle and relaxed into the last part of the journey.

"Stay in the saddle," Caitlin said as they stopped

outside the stables. "I'll come and help you in a second."

"Thanks. I'm a bit nervous about this bit."

"You'll be fine. Just kick your foot out of the stirrup that side, bring your leg over her back, and step down gently."

Jess managed the first part but didn't have enough momentum to get her leg over Flossy's back. She pushed off against the saddle and sent herself slipping down toward the ground.

Caitlin reached out and steadied her, her arm anchoring around Jess's midriff. "You okay?"

"Yes," Jess said, feeling the heat of her blush warm her face. Caitlin would be able to feel the rolls of fat through her clothes.

"Good." Caitlin stepped back and patted Flossy on the neck. "That's a good girl."

"Thank you, Flossy," Jess said. "I really enjoyed that."

Caitlin smiled. "Come on, I'll show you how to take all her tack off. Then we'd better scrub up and head in for supper."

Within half an hour they were both back at the cabin, showered, and changing into fresh clothes. Jess was sitting on her bed putting clean socks on. "No, you go ahead. I'm not hungry."

Caitlin looked at her, brow furrowed. "Come on. You must be hungry after your riding. I know it always gives me an appetite."

"No, I'm not. Really." Jess was glad her stomach had got past the rumbling stage. "You go ahead. I think I'll stay here and read."

Caitlin sat down on her bed opposite Jess. "We need to talk."

Jess tried to maintain a relaxed expression. "What about?"

"Your eating."

"What about it?" Jess asked, immediately

defensive. What business was it of Caitlin's?

"You aren't doing much."

"I'm just not that hungry," Jess insisted. "It's no big deal."

Caitlin sighed. "Jess, I've been watching you for a week now. You skip more meals than you go to and when you do eat, it's nowhere near compensating for the amount of energy you're using. Your body isn't designed to deal with that kind of neglect."

"Look, I appreciate your concern, but I'm fine." Jess finished with her socks and reached for her shoes.

Caitlin eyed her. "You know you're not."

"Okay, I'll rephrase," she said, maybe a little sarcastically. "Thanks for your concern, but I'd really rather not discuss this."

"You're trying to lose weight, aren't you? Well, it's working. And in a scary way. Are you feeling light-headed yet? Irritable? No concentration?"

"Caitlin, I don't want—"

"Tough. You need to hear this. Next, you'll stop getting your period. Then you'll get really hairy as your body tries to do something to keep you warm."

"Stop!" Jess banged her fist down on the mattress. "Just leave it. It's none of your business."

Caitlin stood. "That's where you're wrong. I've been where you are. It led to anorexia. Coming out of that then led to compulsive overeating. I will not sit here and watch a friend go down the same path."

Jess stared at her, too shocked to respond.

"You're a fine-looking woman, Jess. I'm not just saying that, either. You're a hell of a sexy lady, and if I had a chance with you, I'd go for it. Don't let anyone, including yourself, tell you otherwise." She strode to the door, leaving Jess staring after her.

She was still sitting in the same position on the bed a while later when the melodic ring of her mobile jarred her from her thoughts. Retrieving the handset,

she saw the caller's name and felt overwhelmed with relief. "Hi, Grace."

"Hi. Is it a good time for a chat?"

Any time is a good time for you, Jess thought. "Absolutely. It's really good to hear a friendly voice, to be honest."

"Is everything all right?"

Jess lay back onto the bed, using the pillows to prop her into a sitting position. "Yeah, I'm just a bit homesick, I guess."

"That's understandable. Will you be able to come home soon?"

"No, Barton's asked me to stay on longer. Apparently the regular instructor needs to be off longer."

"Oh," Grace said, and there was disappointment in her voice. "It's kind of you to stay, though."

"Stupid, more like." Jess sighed, thinking about what Caitlin had said. How could she face her now? The shame had been bad enough when it was a secret.

"Jess, what's wrong? You sound really down."

She made an effort to lighten her tone. "Just a rough day with the kids. Nothing a good night's sleep won't fix."

"Make sure you look after yourself, or I'll have to come up there and keep an eye on you. I don't want you being so stressed you don't eat right or get enough rest."

Jess flinched at Grace's comment. Did she know, as well? No, she couldn't. She'd never mentioned it to her, anyway. "I wish you could come up here. I need a friendly face. But enough about me. Tell me what's new with you. How's work?"

"Interesting as ever. Today I had a budgie with a nasty cough. His owner was also concerned because he'd stopped chattering to the credits of his favourite soap opera."

Jess smiled at the thought of a budgie doing that.

"Poor little thing. Is he going to be okay?"

"Yes. He just needs a bit of time to heal like we would."

"That's good." Jess had always liked the idea of having a talking bird. It must be nice if you lived on your own. "Oh, I went up and spent some time at the stables today. I really enjoyed being with the horses."

"Lucky you," Grace said wistfully. "I wish I was still riding, I miss horse companionship."

"Grace, you've been holding out on me. I didn't know you rode." *Why did I not know that?*

"Yes, I've been riding since my twenties but Hampton, my horse, died just over a year ago. I couldn't bring myself to get another one at first and now I just don't have the space. I don't think your garden is big enough for one." She laughed.

"I'm so sorry about Hampton. But maybe we could find a riding school when I get back. I'd like to keep going with it for a while at least."

"That'd be fun. I already know of a few stables in the area. I'll make some enquiries. I'd love to go riding with you."

"That would be great." The thought of doing something like that with Grace sent little sparks through Jess's chest, but the growing noise levels from outside the cabin warned her supper was over and Caitlin would be back soon. She didn't feel like dealing with that at the moment. "As much as I don't want to, I had best be going. I'll call you when I know my next day off."

"Okay. I'm working the night shift tomorrow as I'm going to the school in the daytime but I'll be on my mobile if you need me, okay? Keep your chin up."

"I will but honestly, you don't have to go tomorrow. It's a lot of time and hassle."

"It's fine, stop worrying. I'm glad to have the chance to help you with something and besides, I'm interested myself."

"Okay, thanks and good luck tomorrow."

"I'll let you know how it goes. Bye for now."

Jess put the phone back on her bedside table and it occurred to her how much she wanted a Chinese meal. Plain chow mein with deep fried chilli beef. Or egg fried rice and sweet and sour chicken Cantonese style. Or all of it with some prawn crackers on the side. She had her car here... she could go and get some. Nobody would know.

The image of herself hiding away in a dark corner came into her mind. She was hunched over troughs of food, shovelling it into her mouth with both hands until it ran down her chin. "You're disgusting," she admonished herself. She left the cabin and broke into a run. *I hate this*. The loop she started on would see her exhausted by the end. With any luck, exhausted enough to throw up.

GRACE'S FIRST OVERWHELMING impression when she entered Oakham Hill School was of wood. Dark wood floor, vertical sections of panelling on the walls, and a stately staircase with a wide banister smooth from use. The building smelt of age and polish. She straightened her back against the imposingness of it and walked resolutely in the direction given by the brass sign. *Let's just see what I can discover*.

"Can I help you?"

"Good morning. I've an appointment to see the headmaster. My name's Grace Wilkinson." It was the standard alternative surname she used for sales enquiries. She didn't want to be Googled.

The assistant checked a large, gilt-edged diary then stood. "One moment please." She walked silently across the thick carpet and knocked on a large wooden door. Grace heard a muffled response and the receptionist opened the door a little and leant in. "Mr.

Denham, Ms. Wilkinson is here to see you."

"Send her in."

The woman smiled and guided Grace through the door before closing it silently behind her.

"Good morning, Ms. Wilkinson, and welcome to Oakham Hill School," Mr. Denham said. He stood from behind his desk, a distinguished-looking and trim grey-haired gentleman in a dark suit.

Grace walked forward and shook his hand. "Good morning and thank you."

"Please, take a seat. Would you like a tea? Coffee?"

"I'll take a coffee, thank you," Grace said as she seated herself.

He lifted the phone handset and spoke into it before returning his attention to her. "It will be here in a few moments. So, to business, then. May I ask how you first heard of Oakham Hill?"

Grace smiled. "As you know, I'm helping my sister as she tries to find the best school for her son, Peter. Oakham Hill performs well in the league tables and having done some research on the Internet, it seems to be fondly remembered by old pupils."

He nodded, pleased. "I would have to agree. I myself spent a good few years of my youth here and was glad to return to teach twenty-eight years ago. There is a great sense of pride among pupils and staff alike, as I'm sure you'll see on our tour."

A light knock on the door preceded the return of the assistant, this time bearing a tray with coffee and accompaniments.

"Thank you." He waited until she had placed the tray down on the desk between them then proceeded to pour. "Milk? Sugar?"

"Yes. White with one, please."

He followed her instructions while he talked. "So, Peter would be ready to join us next September, is that correct?"

"That's right. We have a few schools to consider but we need to make sure we have his application processed in time. I'm aware that the better the school, the longer the waiting list."

He handed her the coffee. "I'm sure you will find Oakham Hill a strong contender. We very much believe in an all-around education for the children. Our educational results speak for themselves, as do our sporting achievements, all of which are detailed in our prospectus. We also think it is crucial to educate our children socially, giving them the skills and values to operate as responsible citizens in all areas of life."

"That's excellent." Grace took a small sip of coffee to judge its heat. Just right. "I do think that whilst qualifications are clearly vital, they are only part of what a good education should give."

"I see we are similarly minded. Now, I'd like to highlight some of the information in the prospectus before we tour the facilities. I can answer any questions you may have as we go along."

Grace opened the prospectus he handed her and prepared to follow along, looking for a cue that would allow her to probe a bit about foreign students.

The review he gave lasted for about three quarters of an hour. It was exactly what she'd expected and probably would have been interesting had she actually had a nephew. Unsurprisingly, Mr. Denham didn't mention foreign children or Camp Condor. Grace would have to work it into the conversation herself.

The tour was a little more interesting, if nothing else because she was out of his office and seeing different things. The school facilities were incredible, and Grace spent much of the time trying to imagine what it would've been like to have so many opportunities growing up. She wasn't surprised to find all their activities took place on site so the Camp

Condor link seemed even more tenuous. The science labs brought back pleasant memories but nothing relevant to her investigation. Her interest mounted as they approached the accommodation area.

"This boarding house is for boys aged six to nine," Mr. Denham said as he held open the door for her to go through first. "The rooms sleep four to six children and the staff ratio is one to five."

Grace looked around with interest. Theoretically, Peter was six, so this was the accommodation she would be looking at for him. She had deliberately chosen the age they believed Sergey to be, hoping that it might offer some advantage. "Looks pleasant enough," she remarked.

"The boys are all out at lessons at the moment, but I should be able to introduce you to the head housemaster."

She followed him up a wide staircase, noting the well-polished brass bars used to secure the carpet. Parents with lots of money sent their children here.

At the top, he paused at an open door. "Mr. Hendred, good morning. I'd like to introduce Ms. Wilkinson. She has a nephew who is thinking of enrolling at Oakham Hill."

"Ms. Wilkinson." Mr. Hendred stood and inclined his head slightly. He was middle-aged with olive skin and short dark hair. His suit was immaculate and his eyes unfriendly. Grace wondered if the children dared to ridicule his heavy eyebrows. Probably not, given his demeanour. "Good morning," he said, but he didn't seem to mean it.

"A pleasure to meet you," Grace said, rather enjoying playing the character of a refined, wealthy person, or at least fleshing out the caricature she'd created. "Perhaps we could take a look at the accommodation, then?"

"Of course." Mr Hendred stepped out into the corridor. "Follow me." He guided them to a nearby

door and pushed it open. He was definitely not the type for small talk, Grace thought as she looked past him into the room. The second thought that struck her was "military". The beds were so carefully made that the bedding was taut. She hoped the children weren't responsible for this. Childhood wasn't about taut sheets. A few of the bedside tables had photographs on them, but otherwise, the dormitory seemed devoid of personality, like an institution or a hospital ward. She'd expected posters, football boots, and soft toys all tangled up in a mess. Instead, there was just a trunk at the foot of each bed, marked with the surname of the owner. One in particular caught her attention and she used it as an opportunity.

"Are there many international students?" She indicated the trunk marked with a name she guessed could be Polish.

"Yes," Mr. Denham answered. "We actively encourage international applications. It teaches the children to learn about other cultures. In fact, Mr. Hendred is responsible for a special scholarship program for European children. It offers them the opportunity to come to England for a term to improve their English and benefit from some new experiences."

"What a good idea. You must be overwhelmed with applications. How do you decide between them?"

The headmaster looked at Mr. Hendred to respond, which he did. "I have contacts at schools in several countries and they recommend students they think would get the most benefit."

"Ah. Based on academic achievement?"

"Not always, but often, yes."

"That sounds wonderful. I've been telling my sister that Peter really should have more contact with international students to expand his horizons at an early age. How many places are there per term?"

Would he be able to have contact, or is there a limited number?"

Mr. Hendred shrugged, a gesture that almost made him seem human. "It depends on the number of available boarding spaces. On average, we can offer up to three places per term."

"Hmm. Well, three is better than nothing, I suppose," Grace said, pretending to ponder his words. "A term seems very short. Do the children have enough time to adapt to such rapid changes?"

Mr. Hendred frowned. "It's a challenge we support them in. You must remember that the educational systems these children come from are very different from our own. We cannot transplant them and expect our curriculum to dovetail with theirs. If we take them out of their own institutions for too long, then we would be disadvantaging them."

"We've found it to be a very worthwhile program for all involved." Mr. Denham picked up the conversation. "There is plenty of support for all boarders with a dedicated team of housemasters assigned to each boarding house. There is also a school counsellor who works with the children and the staff to ensure the transition from living at home is made smoothly."

Grace nodded, her expression serious. "Six is a young age to be leaving home."

"They tend to adapt better the younger they are," Mr Hendred said.

"Yes, well, unless you have any further questions, let's continue our tour." The headmaster smiled politely and gestured toward the door.

"Certainly. Thank you for your time, Mr. Hendred."

He didn't respond, only stood watching her as she followed Mr. Denham out the door. Quite odd, she thought. Something about the way the dormitory looked amidst the plush surroundings bothered her a

bit, and certainly Mr. Hendred wasn't the most approachable man she'd ever met. She'd text Jess once she was done here and let her know what she'd found out.

Chapter Nine

JESS WAS LYING on her bed reading when Caitlin came in. They had mainly avoided each other in the twenty-four hours since their argument, which wasn't a good solution to the problem. "Hi," Jess said, trying to make conversation. "Can I get you a coffee?"

Caitlin offered a weary smile. "Thanks. I was going to hit the shower, but coffee would be great after."

"Sure." Jess put her bookmark into place, set her book aside, and walked into the kitchen area, flicking the switch on the kettle. She had just prepared the mugs with coffee and milk when she heard a light tap on the door. She crossed the room and opened the door, surprised to see Piotr standing outside. "Hi. Are you okay?"

"May I come in?" he asked softly.

"Of course," Jess stepped aside and closed the door behind him and then it dawned on her. "Hey, you speak English."

"Yes. I'm sorry that I misled you yesterday." He had a pronounced accent but spoke with precision.

Jess stood looking at him, not sure what to do. The camp guidelines were very clear that children should never enter staff cabins. Then again, he probably wouldn't have come if something wasn't bothering him. "Come on in," Jess said.

"Thank you."

"I believe we may be friends of the same Sergey," he announced.

"Really?" Jess studied him for a moment. "Okay, take a seat. Would you like a drink? Tea, coffee, hot chocolate?"

He smiled. "Hot chocolate, please."

Jess went to the bathroom door and knocked. "Caitlin?" She called, hoping Caitlin would hear her

over the noise of the shower.

"Yeah?"

"We've got company for coffee." She opened the door a little and posted Caitlin's clothes through, looking intently at the floor as she did so.

"Sure, thanks."

Jess flashed Piotr a smile as she crossed to the kitchen area. The kettle had boiled, steaming up the nearby window. Jess poured water into the mugs for her and Caitlin then added a new one for Piotr. "It's only instant, I'm afraid," she said over her shoulder. He smiled again and nodded.

"Oh, hello." Caitlin appeared from the bathroom and smiled at Piotr.

"Here you are," Jess placed the mug of hot chocolate on the table in front of him then sat down.

"Is she Sergey's friend too?" he asked, looking a little worried.

"Yes. This's Caitlin. She teaches riding and Sergey spent quite a lot of time at the stables with the horses." Jess turned to address Caitlin. "Piotr thinks we may all be friends with the same Sergey."

He nodded. "We were together at home in Ukraine and then again at school in England but only for three weeks. He left about two months ago. I was sad when I didn't find him here but then you said you had a friend called Sergey. I hope it is the same one. Where is he?"

"Our Sergey left just over a week ago. He was here for about seven weeks." Jess looked across for Caitlin's nod of confirmation. "He really liked archery and horses. He was younger than you with light blond hair."

"It sounds like him. Did you see him drawing? My Sergey loved to draw."

Jess crossed the room and pulled the bundle of papers out from under her mattress. She spread the pictures out on the table in front of him. "Do these

look familiar?"

Piotr looked at them. "Yes! That is Sergey, I have seen his animals before. Where is he?"

"Sorry, but we don't know." Caitlin said and Piotr's expression went from hopeful to crestfallen.

"We're still trying to find out, though," Jess interjected. "Which school were you at together?"

"It was called Oakham Hill. We were in the car for about an hour coming here."

Now that's interesting. Two different boys, same school, same camp. "We've heard of it," Jess said blandly. "And before that you were in Ukraine together?"

He nodded his confirmation. "We met at the orphanage."

Sergey had indeed conveyed his biography effectively. He had no parents, which meant he probably didn't have a nanny, either. "Did you come here together, then?"

"No. Sergey came first, about four weeks before me. We were both so happy that we were at the same school for our scholarships." Piotr stared into his cup. "But then he went away."

"You sound like you weren't expecting it," Caitlin said. "Didn't he know he was coming here?"

"No. We thought we were on scholarship and would go back home after three months. That is what they told us at the orphanage before we left."

"Didn't they talk to you when the plans changed?" This was becoming stranger by the minute.

Piotr shook his head. "They didn't talk to us at all. They only wanted children who couldn't speak English for the scholarships. That is why I pretend. I wanted to leave the orphanage."

"Students who can't speak English? That's dumb," Caitlin scoffed. "Kind of a strange scholarship, then."

"That is pretty weird," Jess agreed. "Did they teach you English at the school?"

"No, they put us in the lessons with the other children. It was difficult and I wanted to learn, but I didn't understand. I couldn't ask questions because I had to keep pretending."

What kind of scholarship program was this? "How did Sergey manage? Or is he pretending, too?"

"He's not pretending. He has no English. He was very bored at the school, but he liked to draw. At first the teachers were angry, but then they let him."

Angry? Why? The poor kid didn't speak any English. "So who brought you here?"

"The housemaster, Mr. Hendred. He met us at home and brought us to England. We had to go to him if we had any problems because he was the only person who speaks our language."

"What about this guy? Was he nice?" Caitlin asked.

Piotr pursed his lips and lowered his eyes.

"It's all right," Jess said, trying to encourage him. "We won't tell anyone if you don't like him."

"He was cross a lot. And he watched us." Piotr shook his head, remembering. "All the time, he was there watching. And he would listen when Sergey and I wanted to talk. I didn't like him."

Something occurred to Jess. "And he brought you here to camp?"

"Yes." Piotr tilted the mug to his mouth then licked the moustache of hot chocolate from his top lip.

"What does he look like?" Jess asked.

"He has black hair and black eyebrows. Maybe he is Greek." Piotr shrugged. "He never smiles."

Greek. Mediterranean-looking? Was this Mr. Hendred the man she had seen with Barton? And the man Nick mentioned he didn't care much for? She sipped her coffee, thinking.

"Will I go where Sergey has gone next? Maybe he went home."

"He might have," Jess said. "Is that what you'd like, to go home?"

"Yes. I'm lonely here. Only Sergey was my friend and he has gone." Piotr sighed and Jess felt a stab of sympathy for him. The other children probably didn't try to make friends because of the language barrier, and that would have left him feeling very isolated. "Don't worry. We're your friends and we'll get you back home."

"Really?" He grinned, hopeful.

"We'll do everything we can," Caitlin agreed.

"You just try and enjoy yourself here and we'll sort it out."

He put his mug down on the table, dashed toward Jess, and threw his arms around her neck. "Thank you."

She laughed. "It's okay. We'll see what we can figure out."

"Oh..." he let go and took a step back, his expression troubled. "There is someone coming here to see me."

"What?" Who would come to visit an orphaned boy in a strange country? "Who?"

"I don't know. I heard them talking when I got here."

"Wait," Jess said. "Who's 'them'?"

"Mr. Hendred and a man here. I don't know his name, but I think he is important. He doesn't wear a T-shirt."

Jess looked at Caitlin. "That has to be Barton, surely. Everyone else has to wear camp kit don't they?"

"Yeah, except for the caterers."

Jess turned back to Piotr. "Do you know when these visitors are coming?"

"No. It won't be bad, will it?"

Jess wished she could reassure him honestly. "I don't think so. And whatever it is, we'll be nearby."

You can come to us any time. My brother works here, too. I'll introduce you tomorrow and he will always help you, as well."

Piotr looked at her, worried. "Do you think people came to see Sergey too?"

"I don't know, but this might be a good way for us to find him," Jess said.

"Okay. I'd like that."

"Hey, kiddo. It's getting late," Caitlin said. "You go and get some sleep. We'll talk again soon when we've got a plan."

Piotr moved to the door. "Okay. Thank you."

Jess opened the door and slipped outside. After a quick check, she signalled to him. "Goodbye for now." He smiled at her and ran down the path. Jess watched him for a minute then leaned back against the cabin. Somehow, her attempts to escape her demons had backfired. All she'd managed to do was to add a new place and some new problems to the mix. She just didn't have the energy to deal with the tension in her cabin. Well, at least she could give herself a reprieve with that one. Leaning around the door she called to Caitlin. "I'm going to go see if I can find Nick. Talk to you later."

"HEY, IT'S ME."

"Jess!" Grace sounded pleased. "This is an unexpected pleasure. How are you?"

Jess smiled down at her shoes, glad nobody was around to see her. "Fine. I just wanted to give you an update because something exciting just happened."

"Great. I've been dying to tell you about my visit to Oakham Hill but I guessed you'd call me as soon as you could talk freely."

"Yeah, you're right. I'm outside but I have to be careful what I say, just in case someone is listening." She paused, trying to think of a way to phrase things.

"Let me first tell you what happened and then we'll see how it matches up with what you found out."

"Okay. Go on."

"I have a new lead. The school definitely has something to do with this mess. I think it's like a holding area."

"Really? How do you know?"

"I have a new friend who knew my old friend." Jess scanned the trees around her. At least being outside, she could see if anyone was approaching.

"Do you have a plan?"

"No, not yet. I need to think about what's the best thing to do. Obviously, looking after our new friend is at the top of the list."

"Okay, now me. I had the grand tour and everything at the school. There's a lot of money there, but the dormitory looked like a military camp. Not very child-friendly. And the housemaster was a bit scary, a Mr. Hendred."

"Hendred?" Jess repeated. "Our new friend says that's who brought him here."

"Ah-ha!" Grace crowed. "Well, he was pretty cagey when I asked about foreign students. He talked a little bit about some scholarship program they have in which they bring maybe three foreign students in for one term. I thought that was odd. One term. But now with what you've found out, it makes sense. So what do you suppose is going on with these kids?"

"I don't know. But it's not on the up-and-up."

"What do you think we should do next?"

"Our new friend is supposed to get some visitors. I'm going to try to find out who they are. Maybe that'll tell us something."

"Jess, please be careful."

"I might ask the same of you, Miss Marple."

"Oh, so I'm a dowdy spinster tracking down clues?" Grace's voice held hints of laughter and little butterflies flitted through Jess's chest.

"No, of course not! You're definitely not dowdy."

"So I'm a spinster?" she teased.

"No, that's not what I meant," Jess backpedalled, realizing she'd walked right into this one. "You're not a spinster at all. Or dowdy. Or even remotely like Miss Marple."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence. When are you next coming home?"

Jess paused, trying to remember the rota. "Not for nearly two weeks. Saturday the twenty-fifth, I think it is."

"Oh." She sounded disappointed. "That's not for a while. Maybe I could come to you? I could treat you to dinner out or something. You must be fed up of canteen food by now."

Jess forced a light laugh. "I'd love to, but we're strongly discouraged from having visitors." Lying to Grace felt awful but it was for the greater good. The diet was finally getting decent results and she couldn't squander it on a restaurant meal, even if it was with Grace. A little white lie and she was another step closer to being a worthy person.

"They can't stop you having visitors. That's just wrong." Grace sounded indignant.

"It's not an official ban," Jess elaborated on her lie, "just something they frown on. With everything going on here I don't want to draw negative attention to myself." Grace was silent. "Look at it this way, if I'm not under suspicion I can sort this out sooner, then I can come home for good. I'd rather be your full-time housemate than occasional restaurant buddy."

"Even if it was a date?"

Jess's breath caught in her throat. Was that a note of seriousness in her voice? *Don't go there, Jess, this is you, remember?* "Well...no. But yes—I mean..." She took a breath and forced herself to speak coherently. "I'm not very good at dating." She thought of her first

date with Rosalind and the moment her diet-induced dizziness nearly sent her off the edge of the cliff. Those ever present demons. Grace's continued silence forced her mind back on track. "Someone would have to be clueless not to want to go on a date with you but I'm lucky enough to see you every day. Tough call."

Grace laughed. "Okay, I'll let you off the hook, though it was a nice recovery at the end there." She sounded amused. "All right, how about I e-mail you with more information about Oakham Hill?"

"Please do. I want to compare notes." *And I love getting e-mail from you.* Jess leant back against the nearest tree and let her head rest against the trunk. Grace was one of the few happy things in her life at the moment.

"I'll start typing as soon as we're finished."

"Thanks, that'd be great." Jess pushed the phone tighter against her ear in an attempt to hear more clearly. "Grace? Are you...um... *panting*?"

"No. Not me. You can probably hear the washing machine."

"Strange, it's never sounded like that before. Anyway, how're things with you? Everything okay?"

"Yes, I had an awful client the other day but I managed to do what I think was the right thing."

"I know it would be. You have a good heart."

"Aw, thanks, Jess. You're quite the charmer, you know."

"You bring out my best side."

Grace laughed. "How are you getting on with the archery?"

"I'm bored stiff. Okay, not really, but it is a bit repetitive. I'm quite sure I don't want to be an archery instructor for the rest of my working days."

"Do you get much chance to practise yourself?"

"Not really. The children use such light training bows they are almost incomparable, so I'd have to go down one evening. I think Nick has a day off soon,

and I'll suggest he brings his bow in."

"Could be a good antidote for stress."

"Yeah, good idea. I'll give it a try. There's not much else going on. I guess I should let you get back you your washing."

"Washing?" Grace sounded confused.

"Yes, the panting washing machine, remember? Or were you just trying to distract me from the fact you have a harem of ladies there?"

Grace laughed again. "Nah, who wants a harem when the star feature is missing?"

Jess felt a thrill of excitement. *Does she mean me?*

"Are you still there?"

"Sorry. I was just trying to think of something witty to say back."

"Okay, I'll give you a few days to come up with something."

"Are you saying I'm slow?"

"You, slow? Never. You're a trigger-reaction type of girl. Leaping in there without fear of the consequences and leaving a trail of heartbroken women across the country."

"Now you're just taking the mick," Jess said, smiling.

"Maybe." Grace's tone was playful.

"Well, maybe I should come over there and show you just how decisive I can be, eh?"

"Is that a threat or a promise?"

Jess paused, stunned. "I see I lost that battle of words too, didn't I?"

Grace laughed again. "Maybe not, but you may want to quit while you're ahead."

"Thank you. I do love our chats."

"Me, too."

"Bye for now."

"Bye."

Jess pressed the button to disconnect and stared at the phone until the energy saver made the screen

fade. *Back to the real world now.* She had started to feel like she was living a double life. There were these fun, freeing, flirty conversations with Grace, times when she could almost forget who she was. But she'd always have to return to the disappointment of being Jess, to the reality of her situation. As she was walking back to the cabin she relived her walking with Grace fantasy, and decided that it was getting closer, as she was losing weight.

"Jess, there you are. I've been looking for you." Caitlin was on the porch, watering the plants.

"I've just been on the phone. Is everything okay?" Jess watched her, dreading another stressful conversation.

"Sure. I, um, just wanted to apologise. For the other night."

"It's okay. Forget it." Jess waved her hand as if she was waving the matter away.

"No, I came on way too strong on both subjects. I hope you know it's only because I care."

Jess smiled. "I know. I'm sorry if anything I'm doing is dredging up bad memories for you. I'd hate that."

Caitlin shrugged. "I just want to help if I can. I'm not trying to say I know what you're thinking or feeling. I'm just saying if you want to talk about anything, I'm here."

"Thanks." Jess wiped the screen of her mobile on her sweatshirt. "How about finishing off that story from the other night? Remember? You were in the back of the pickup with the two girls from the rodeo? I'd surely like to hear what happened to y'all."

Caitlin grinned. "That accent really needs some work. Maybe you should come to Texas for a while."

Jess was about to respond when Nick called out as he jogged toward them. "Hey, guys—uh, *ladies*. Mickey and I are just heading off for a game of pool. Wanna play doubles? We could do boys versus girls."

"I'm up for it," Jess said. The more time she spent doing things the less she focussed on her hunger.

"Sure. Could be fun." Caitlin emptied the last of her water on a small evergreen shrub. "We'll meet you up there."

"Great. See you in a minute." Nick gave them a thumbs-up sign before heading back in the direction of the common room.

"Did you mean it?" Jess asked. "That other bit you said?"

"Which bit?"

I just had to ask, didn't I? "Uh, the bit about finding me sexy." She dropped her gaze, embarrassed.

"Hell, yeah. I can see that feisty spirit in there just begging to get out. It's like you're two people and I don't think you'll be able to hold the other one back much longer. I hope I'm around to see her break out." She put the watering can down on the porch.

"Thanks. I think."

"C'mon, let's go and show those boys who's boss."

Jess nodded, mentally filing away Caitlin's comments. She'd felt a spike of truth in there, something that needed some thought.

Chapter Ten

"YOU KNOW, I think I've got bow envy," Caitlin said. The pool game had fired her and Nick into a competitive frenzy and they'd spent the last four days trying to outstrip each other. Caitlin had beaten him at the horse-riding and lassoing while he'd won on the quad bikes. He was expecting to win the archery bout too but Caitlin seemed happy to rise to the challenge. Jess was just enjoying taking part and laughing at them.

Nick grinned. "Don't worry, we all had to start somewhere."

"Stop grouching and line up your shot. Do you remember what I told you about the smooth point of release?"

"Sort of. I got distracted." Caitlin grinned suggestively.

"And I take *your* hobby so seriously." Jess shook her head, the theatrical gesture making the others laugh.

Caitlin fitted an arrow and spent a moment aiming. She released the string smoothly this time, moving just her fingers and keeping the rest of her arm still. The arrow landed in the blue section of the target, a little above and to the right of centre.

"Good," Jess said with a smile. "That's much better. Now you just have to make minor adjustments to get you into the gold."

"Sounds simple enough. But it's a lot harder than it looks," Caitlin grumbled good-naturedly.

Jess moved to her place opposite the third target, stumbling a little as her foot caught in the grass. She caught herself, but with an effort. She was so tired these days. "Did you have a good day off?" she asked Nick, trying to get back on track.

"Yeah, I did. It was great to see Marie. We went

for a pub lunch and did a little reconnaissance. Stuff like that."

She looked at him, eyes narrowed. "Reconnaissance?"

Nick didn't answer until he had taken his shot. "We went for a drive by Oakham Hill School."

"That's the school where Piotr was, isn't it?" Caitlin asked.

"And the one from the phone bill." Jess hadn't mentioned to Nick or Caitlin that Grace had visited and she wasn't going to until she had more information. "Did you see anything interesting?"

"Yeah. That car I told you about was there, the Murphy Triton."

"That belongs to the man we've seen here with the heavy eyebrows. He must be the link between the two." She released her shot, unsurprised when it landed in the red. *That's what you get for not concentrating.*

"Sounds like it. What's the school like?" Caitlin asked.

"Big and posh. Expensive cars in the car park and the kids wear blazers."

"It doesn't sound like the sort of place that would be involved with anything dodgy," Jess said, acting as if she hadn't already put a few things together already.

"Maybe that's the cover," Caitlin said. "After all, it's the place both boys went when they came to this country. But Sergey didn't go back there after he left or Piotr would've seen him."

Jess frowned. "So he went somewhere new. We don't know why, but we don't think he was expecting it." *When did it all get so complicated?* "We must make sure the same thing doesn't happen to Piotr. I wish I knew who it was who was coming to see him." She glanced from Nick to Caitlin. "Maybe we ought to go to the police."

"No," Nick said. "We haven't solved it yet. And what are we going to tell them? That a couple of kids from camp who were students at the same school were picked up by adults? C'mon, Jess, they'll think we're nuts."

Jess frowned at him. "But if there is something going on then it means these boys are at risk. There's more than just the two, after all. What if Alexander was part of the same thing? Either way, they're a lot more important than you playing detective."

Nick fiddled with an arrow fletching. "Fair enough. But what have we really got? A bunch of suspicions and nothing certain. That's not enough for the police."

Jess sighed. "True. I have reservations myself," she said, deliberately softening her tone. "We don't know for sure what's going on or who's involved. We have no real evidence and only the testimony of one child to support us. Let's face it, everyone knows how children like to fantasize."

"Wait. I thought we're all agreed that something is going on," Nick said.

"We are," Jess concurred, squashing down her irritability. "But we have to consider how the police would look at things. Like you say, I don't want to be labelled as a lunatic and ignored just because we go to them too early. But we have to do *something*."

"So we're going to the cops?" Caitlin asked, looking from one to the other.

Jess nodded. "I'm going to say yes. I'm out on Tuesday at a meeting. I'll call in and talk to them then. I think it would be better done face-to-face as the information is so sketchy." She checked to ensure they had all shot their last arrows of the round then began walking toward the bosses. "In the meantime, our main priority has to be to make sure Piotr is safe."

"All right," Nick said. "And I've thought of an idea for that."

"Which is?"

"I thought we could get a cheap mobile—you know, one of those pay as you go ones. He would have to keep it secret, but Piotr could carry that and contact us if and when he got in any trouble. We could program our numbers in and everything."

"Wow. That's a great idea." Jess smiled at him gratefully as she slotted her arrows back into her quiver. "They're only about twenty quid and the peace of mind would make it well worth it."

"For sure," Caitlin agreed. "Who's going to be near a store next?"

"I need to go in first thing Monday for some supplies for the garage. I should have chance to drop into a phone shop."

"That's settled, then," Jess said. "I've got some cash you can have. Remind me when we're back at the cabins."

"I'll toss in some, too. Any other bright ideas where that one came from?" Caitlin asked, smiling.

"I'm afraid not." He shrugged, a goofy expression on his face. "I think that's my quota for a while."

"Then I've got one. Nick, do you have any contact with Chrissy still?"

"Not really. I've sent her a few texts but she hasn't replied."

"I don't suppose you know where she lives?"

"Somewhere in Cirencester, I think. Why?"

Jess balanced the tip of her bow on her shoe and swivelled it. "I was just wondering whether that rumour about her and the police and the children could've been true."

"No way. I already told you that." He scowled at her.

"No, not about *that*," Jess said. "But what if she had concerns about the children like we do? What if she went to the police to ask for help?"

"I suppose," he replied, looking decidedly

uncomfortable.

Jess continued to argue her case. "Think about it. She worked in the office, so she had access to information that might've tipped her off. If she wasn't able to prove anything, then maybe that is why she went so quickly and why she hasn't said anything since. Maybe she was threatened."

Caitlin spoke up. "Jess has a point. It was weird how fast she left. If she went to the police but nothing happened, maybe everything's okay. On the other hand, maybe they laughed her off."

Jess shrugged. "It'd be good to find out for sure. I was hoping to visit her, but I'll have to make do with a phone call."

"I don't think I like that idea. She doesn't want to talk."

"I know, but I'm hoping I can persuade her. If she did have concerns, then her conscience won't be quiet. I'll trade her information for peace of mind. Will you give me her number?"

Nick completed his shot before answering. "Yeah, I guess it's worth a try," but he didn't sound convinced.

"Great. Thanks. I'll call her this afternoon." Jess turned back to face the boss and prepared her next shot. Her movements were clumsy and she cursed silently. She'd been having trouble sleeping for a while now, and she felt completely exhausted. Hopefully, now that they had some plans in place, she could relax a bit.

"Jessie?" Nick looked at her, concern on his features. "Are you okay? You look pale."

"Yeah, I'm fine. I've just been a bit worried about this stuff."

"Don't worry. We're not going to let anything happen to Piotr unless we know about it and agree with the idea." He reached to his hip and retrieved the last arrow from his quiver.

Caitlin whooped. "Hey, check it out! I got my first gold."

"You're looking good," Nick said. "If you practise, I think you could do really well."

"Maybe," she said noncommittally. "But I'm not sure it'll ever replace horses as my first love."

"Marie is horse-crazy, too, but I've never seen the appeal myself. A motorbike gives you the same energy rush but doesn't have a mind of its own."

"But then again, you can't really blame bad riding on a motorbike like you can on a horse..." Caitlin grinned and winked at him.

He laughed. "I'm pretty sure I remember you giving that quad a few choice curses."

"All in your imagination," she bantered. "So is this Marie your latest squeeze?"

"No, no. We're just friends. We did have a thing going on but it sort of fizzled out. Just goes to show, some of us can have a whole relationship while others just pussyfoot around." Nick flashed Jess a grin.

"My love life is no concern of yours," Jess said huffily.

Caitlin laughed. "All right, then, how long have you and Grace not been together?"

Jess rolled her eyes. "You're as bad as Nick. Grace and I met about three months ago."

"And were living together pretty much straightaway." Nick said, innocent.

"That's just standard lesbian behaviour." Caitlin gave Jess a wink. "But it's usually combined with, you know, some action. We fall head over heels, move in together, and it all ends with a load of drama." She laughed. "A friend of mine says that if a lesbian plays her cards right, she can pretty much avoid paying any rent."

Nick looked at Jess with a serious expression. "I don't think you're typical."

"Thank you, Nick. We can agree on that. Now,

how about we stop dissecting my relationship or lack thereof and go get our arrows?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Jess blinked a couple of times as she walked toward her target. The colours blurred and made it hard to see where her arrows were. *None in the gold this time. I must be losing my touch.* A wave of light-headedness made the field tilt. She ignored it. Reaching the boss, she began pulling out the arrows and funnelling them back into her quiver. The last one was quite low on the target, so she had to bend over to pull it out straight. She'd only had to ruin one arrow in the past to learn the importance of pulling them out straight. Standing, she was overcome with another wave of dizziness. She reached out to the boss to steady herself but missed and fell backward, meeting the ground with a dull thump.

"Jess?" Caitlin appeared, her mane of hair framed by the cloudy sky.

"I'm okay." Jess shut her eyes against the dizziness. *It'll pass in a minute. It always does.*

"What happened?" Nick asked. "Jessie, what's going on?"

"I just got a bit light-headed. Just give me a minute."

"When did you last eat something?" Caitlin asked, her voice soft but urgent.

"Oh, no. Are you messing about with your food again?"

"Leave me alone," Jess snapped. "I'm not a child."

"No, you're not." Caitlin gave her a stern look. "A child would have the sense to eat when she was hungry. Nick, let's get her back to the cabin."

Jess sat up, trying to cover the dizziness with will. It was no business but hers what she chose to do. "I'm fine," she said brusquely as she stood. It felt as though her blood had become magnetised to the ground. All of it seemed to be rushing down her body,

pulling her downward with the weight.

"I've got you," Nick said, and he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Come on, let's get back in."

Jess remained silent, focussing on each step. She felt queasy and overly conscious of her weight pressing down on Nick. It seemed miles to the cabin, but eventually it came into view. Caitlin had been walking next to them, carrying all three bows. "I'll open it up." She jogged ahead and unlocked the door.

"Gently up the step." Nick tried to take more of her weight, but Jess resisted.

"Thanks," she said as she sat down in the nearest chair. She was too ashamed to make eye contact with either of them. *Stupid weak body*. She couldn't even lose weight without failing.

"You should lie down," Caitlin said. "It might be better."

"I'm all right here." Jess refused to show any more weakness than she already had.

"Goddamn it, woman, you're as stubborn as a mule."

Nick sniggered. "She's got you there, Jess."

Jess managed a weak smile. "It's one of my most appealing characteristics. Right, Nick?"

"If it was about anything other than your health, sure." He looked at her, concerned and she dropped her gaze, embarrassed at her weakness again.

"I can have my moments, too." Caitlin did not sound amused. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to the canteen to find something for you to eat. When I get back, I'm going to watch you eat it. Nick, you make sure she doesn't run off in the meantime."

"Caitlin, that's not necessary—" Jess started, but the look Caitlin gave her silenced her. She clenched her teeth and stared at the floor as Caitlin left.

She and Nick were silent for a few moments after Caitlin had gone. Thankfully, Jess's balance was stabilising. "Sorry, Nick." *I know I've failed you.*

He sat down heavily in the chair next to her and ran his hand through his hair. "You scared me, Jess. Really scared me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

He looked at her, almost pleading. "Are you starving yourself again?"

Jess looked at her hands. Even her fingers were fat. She sighed. "I was just trying to get in better shape."

"Lose weight, you mean?"

She flinched and avoided his eyes. "Yeah."

"I thought you were doing better with all that after Grace came to stay with you." His tone was flat, almost accusing.

"No, you two were doing better with it. I was just getting fatter."

He sighed, then, and it sounded heavy with worry. They spent a few minutes in silence before he spoke again. "You know I love you and that I'm honest with you. You don't need to lose weight, and I don't know what caused you to think that you do, but it's to the point where it's all you think about. It's affecting your health, mental and physical. You're a wonderful sister and a wonderful person, and it kills me to see you like this. It hurts people around you, Jess, because we care about you and we love you for who you are. You need to find some peace with this subject. Maybe there's someone who can help you."

Jess's vision blurred again, this time from tears. "I'm so tired of it, Nick." She wiped her cheek. "I just want to be okay, but everything I do seems to take me further away from that. I feel so trapped." She gasped for air as her throat tightened with grief.

"Oh, Jessie, I'm so sorry." He moved to perch on the arm of her chair and pulled her tight to his torso. "I'm here for you."

Jess sobbed. She rested her head against his side, letting the warm scent of him soothe her. He had

always been there, always wanting to help, but she was never able to reach his outstretched hand. This thing had her gripped too tightly.

"There's so much more to you than your body. You're like this invincible person who sees something and just tackles it till she wins. I've seen you do it so many times and I'm just, like, whoa." He rubbed her back with his thumb where he held her. "I know you can beat this."

She shook her head. "I can't. I don't know how. Exercise, dieting, starving, even...nothing works. Not long-term, anyway." Her tears had eased but she felt swamped in desolation.

He unwrapped one arm but left the other around her shoulders. "Let's say you're a knight and you have to protect the villagers from a dragon that is charging around, burning all their crops."

Jess smiled in spite of herself. The unlikely turn in conversation was so typical of him.

"You go up the hillside and find the cave where he's hanging out. He comes charging out, preparing to barbeque you. So the question is, would you fight the fire or the dragon?"

"The dragon," she said, humouring him.

"Exactly. So why are you busy running around trying to fight the thought that you're fat when the real source of the problem is stuck in here somewhere?" He tapped her forehead.

"Because that problem doesn't exist. I've looked. Anorexics don't binge and I know I'm not bulimic. It's a nice thought, to be able to shift responsibility onto some mental disorder, but it isn't true. Fat and binging boils down to a lack of willpower, greed, and laziness."

Nick shifted back to his own chair and shook his head. "Listen to what you are saying. How much willpower must it take to not allow yourself to eat when you're hungry? Not just once, but repeatedly.

And laziness? This is *you* we're talking about. When you're not working, you're sword-fighting or doing archery or in the garden. You're not a lazy person. Anyway, I bet there are plenty of lazy skinny people out there that break that rule."

Jess sighed. She couldn't disagree with the points he made but they didn't change her situation. "I don't know."

"Honestly, you have a dragon and you need to tackle it now. Who cares if you don't fit into some neatly defined box?"

The door opened and Caitlin walked in. "Macaroni and cheese," she said as she undid the cling-film from the plate. Jess knew they were both expecting her to eat and she would face a fight if she didn't. Still, the thought of a backward step in her weight loss terrified her. *What if this opens the floodgates to more?*

"You need to eat," Nick said, voice soft and encouraging.

She felt the pressure of both their expectations and she wanted to run.

"I know this is hard," Caitlin said. "Nick's right. Your body needs the fuel."

Jess looked at the plate on the table in front of her. When had this become such a big issue? *It's just pasta. I love pasta. So why do I feel like they're trying to get me to stroke a tarantula?*

"Here you are." Caitlin picked up the fork and handed it to her.

Jess took it out of reflex. With a deep breath, she leant forward and speared a piece of macaroni from the edge. *No big deal. I can do this.* She lifted it to her mouth and pushed it past her lips. It felt unnatural. She forced herself to chew and swallow. Her tongue was fighting against her mind, trying to keep the food away from her throat. It reminded her of forcing down the disgusting chewy vitamins they'd had to

take as kids.

Caitlin sat down on the other side of Nick. "I'm not likely to see you in the saddle again any time soon, am I?"

Nick smiled. "I'd say that was a safe bet."

Jess took another forkful, this time with three pieces of pasta. She felt humiliated with them sitting there making small talk.

"I'd like to give archery another go," Caitlin said. "I think I was just hitting my stride. Those last few shots were fun."

Jess concentrated on the food and let the conversation fade to background noise. Her movements were robotic, the same sequence repeated. Lower fork. Get three tubes, one on each prong of the fork. Put in mouth. Chew. Swallow. It had a rhythm that was vaguely comforting. Sometimes she had to pause for a rest and try and think about something else. The first time, she thought about Grace, but that made it harder to eat, since she was trying to lose weight so Grace would find her attractive. After that, every forkful made Grace seem even more distant. Now she thought about riding. Flossy's fluffy ears. Flossy's saggy bottom lip and how she munched carrots. When her plate was half-empty, she lay the fork down. Enough.

Caitlin must have been watching because she came and took the plate away, resting her hand briefly on Jess's shoulder as she did so.

"Hey, where are you taking that?" Nick asked.

"I'll toss it. I think Jess is done."

Nick stood. "I'll take it off your hands."

Caitlin handed the plate to him. "Okay, but I think Jess has probably seen enough of it for now."

"Right. I'll come and check on you later, Jessie, okay?"

"Sure. Enjoy."

"Just make sure you get the plate back to the

canteen when you're done," Caitlin said.

"Will do." Nick closed the door behind him.

Caitlin looked at Jess with a sympathetic expression. "How are you doing?"

"Okay, I guess. That was harder than I expected." The sensation of food in her stomach was making her feel queasy. It intertwined with the sense of failure that nagged at her.

Caitlin stood and brought both their books from their respective bedside tables. "Here you go," she said, handing Jess's to her. "Try not to think too much right now."

"Thanks." Jess opened the book at the marker. Some distraction was probably a good idea.

JESS JUGGLED A pad and pen as she leant against the telephone tree. Her earlier dizzy spell and stodgy lunch had left her feeling bloated and out of sorts. She tried not to think about the new fat cells being created in her body right now and instead concentrated on her next task. She had plugged Chrissy's number into her phonebook memory in Nick's cabin, but she wanted to make the call outside. She'd see anyone who came near enough to hear her. Holding her breath, she pressed the dial button. The receiving tone sounded in the earpiece.

"Hello?" a female voice answered.

"Hi, Chrissy?"

"Yes."

"This is Jess. I'm Nick's sister. I'm sorry to bother you, but..." But what? What was she going to say? "Um, you two worked at camp together."

"I told him not to call," Chrissy said, sounding nervous. "I have nothing to do with that place anymore."

"I know. I wouldn't have called if it wasn't really important." Jess acted on a hunch. "I know children

are in trouble here, and I'm hoping you might be able to help me."

"I'm sorry." The line disconnected.

Jess looked at her handset and noted the good signal. She tried dialling again. This time it went through to answer machine after a few rings. Jess started typing a text. *Talk to me once and I'll leave you in peace. Until then I'll keep trying.* She waited for about two minutes then dialled again. This time it rang longer before disconnecting. She tried twice more before taking a break. As she walked back toward the cabin she decided to try every half hour. That should get Chrissy's attention.

Chapter Eleven

JESS MADE HER first call of the day to Chrissy's phone. After three days she was a little concerned she'd be in trouble for harassment. Or, more likely, Chrissy had blocked her number or something so Jess was just wasting her own time. The call was free, though, and Jess was desperate enough to keep trying. She jumped as the mobile started ringing in her hand. Grace's name was on the caller display. "Hey," Jess smiled into the handset. Even on her worst days, hearing Grace always made her feel better.

"Hi, how are you doing?"

"Good," she fibbed. "You?"

"I'm okay. I just wanted to wish you luck for your meeting today."

Jess checked her watch again, knowing before she looked at it that there was still plenty of time. "I'll be glad to get on with it, to be honest. At the moment, though, I'm wondering if it's such a great idea."

"It'll be fine, I promise. Have you thought about what you're going to say?"

"Yes. I know lawyers are really into taking things in consecutive order, so I've made myself some notes. You know, about the placement, each step that led to the next, until the meeting where Lewknor told me I no longer had a job. I wrote dates, too. I can't seem to forget those." *As much as I'd like to, sometimes.*

"I wish I could give you a hug right now. You keep your head high, okay? You did nothing wrong. Remember that."

"I will." Jess's response sounded unsure, even to herself.

"Hey, I've got something I can distract you with. You know how much you like surprises? Well, I've got a corker for you."

"Oh no, you nearly drove me nuts with this last time," Jess said with a half-hearted laugh.

"This trumps last time. I was going to keep it a complete secret, but I couldn't wait to share. Now at least you know there's something to think about."

"Do I get any hints?"

"No, and last time you complained they weren't good enough. I'm not making that mistake again."

"Okay, when do I get to find out?"

"When you next come home. You won't be able to miss it."

"Uh-oh, have you painted the house pink or something?"

"No, but that's not a bad idea..."

"Grace!"

"I'm kidding. But if you guess this, you can win a special mystery prize."

"You're being very secretive these days." She speculated on the prize, imagining thin Jess winning a kiss. It was odd how she could hate and love a dream at the same time.

Grace laughed. "I guess I am. I miss our banter, so I save up things to tease you with."

"I'm glad. Chatting to you on the phone is the highlight of this job. That and the horse-riding."

"You're not going to try and guess my surprise? Damn, I so much wanted to give you the mystery prize." Her voice took on a sultry tone and a shot of arousal rocketed through Jess's body.

Better start guessing. "Okay, I'll try. You found a riding school."

"Actually yes, but that isn't the surprise."

"You've taken up sword-fighting and you're going to challenge me to a duel when I get home."

Grace laughed. "Nope, guess again."

"You've been appointed head vet in consultation to the Queen."

"No, wrong again. See, I said you wouldn't get it.

I'll give you the mystery commiseration prize, though."

"Hurrah, what is it?"

"You'll have to wait and see." Grace giggled.

"God, woman, you're driving me nuts."

"That was the plan." She sounded smug. "I like to know you're thinking about me even if it's with frustration."

"Actually, that happens quite a lot." Jess voiced the comment then flushed at her audacity. There was a momentary pause.

"Good." Grace sounded even more smug. "On that note, I'll say goodbye."

Jess laughed. "You're a minx."

"Good luck with the meeting."

"Thanks. Bye." Jess listened as the line went dead then pressed the button to hang up. She took a deep breath. It was time to get booted and spurred, as Caitlin said.

JESS FIDGETED, FEELING odd to be dressed in a business suit after months of wearing jeans. It felt alien. *When did that happen?* It used to be a source of comfort. Putting on a business suit would morph her into Jess, the impervious businesswoman. Smart, confident, and capable. Now she was just the same old day-to-day fat Jess in a suit. Her thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a tall, sandy-haired man who appraised her with a smile.

"Ms. Maddocks?"

"Yes." She stood and grasped his outstretched hand.

"I'm Bill Welch. If you'll come with me?"

Jess followed him into his office. It was not as luxurious as she had expected, though there were plenty of books and publications. Ultimately, it was a practical room that did not undermine itself with

presumption. She liked that.

"Please, take a seat." He took his own advice and set a notepad on the desk. "I understand you telephoned regarding a possible case for unfair dismissal." As he spoke, he turned to an empty page on his notepad. "Perhaps you could tell me what happened, and we'll go on from there."

Jess took a deep breath to calm herself. She hated thinking about this. "Yes, well, I worked for Kingston and Lewknor for six years in the role of business analyst." She unfolded her timeline notes and checked them. "On the twenty-third of May of this year, I was assigned to work on a new case." She paused, gathering her thoughts. "Whilst assigned to the case, I...I pursued a personal relationship with a female employee of the company under investigation." *Don't get bogged down with regrets, just keep talking.* "This fact was exaggerated and misreported to my boss. On the twenty-fourth of July, I was dismissed for homosexuality." She stopped, waiting to see what his reaction would be.

"So this was just under three months ago?" He asked, still writing.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you seek legal advice straight away? Or did you?"

"No, this is the first time I've approached a solicitor about it. At the time, I was very shocked and embarrassed. Then, five days after the dismissal, the man I had been investigating for my company actually attacked me in my home. Between the two events, I was quite shaken and not at all inclined to invite more conflict into my life by pursuing legal action. And I suppose I was humiliated to have been dismissed for something as personal as my adult relationships."

He nodded, his expression sympathetic. "I understand it must be a distressing subject, but may I

ask you to clarify the circumstances of this attack?"

"Okay." She took another steadying breath, thinking back to the events that had sent her life spiralling. "Marcus Gibson was the CEO of the company I had been assigned to investigate. I was able to provide evidence that he was guilty of blackmail and fraud. He was arrested, but released on bail at which time he found out where I lived and attacked me." Jess spoke calmly, but a pang of fear clenched in her stomach as she relived the memory.

"Were the police notified?"

"Yes. Mr. Gibson was arrested at my house and faces additional charges. I was taken to hospital."

"What injuries did you suffer?"

"Concussion, cracked ribs, and bruising."

"And psychological trauma, I should imagine?"

"Yes." Jess forced herself to focus on the present.

"Was your employer aware of the situation with this man? That he was of questionable integrity?" he asked, writing rapidly.

"I believe so. It's my understanding that my company and the client notified the police together upon receipt of my final report. That was the document that secured his arrest." Even in the wake of the attack and her dismissal, she was at least glad she'd been able to make Gibson accountable.

"Did your employer provide you with any warning of the police involvement or support during that time?"

"No, they had sacked me by then."

"Tell me more about that," he said.

Jess cleared her throat, forcing herself to calm down. "I received an e-mail on the twenty-third of July informing me that Mr. Lewknor, my boss, wanted to see me as soon as possible. It was a private meeting, in his office and where he reported allegations that I had behaved in an inappropriate way toward the client's female customers and

employees. It was alleged that I had caused one of the client's customers to terminate their contract and one employee to resign." Jess had practiced this statement, as hard as it was, because she was fearful she would become inarticulate under pressure. Even though the allegations were false, she still felt ashamed to admit them.

"Is there any truth to any of this?" He looked up at her.

"I did have a relationship with a female employee of the company I was assigned to investigate, as I mentioned at the beginning. It was a private matter between two consenting adults that did not impinge on the company's operations or my investigation. The employee in question was the employee my boss claimed resigned because of me. She claims, however, that she was sacked by Gibson as a scapegoat for his blackmail. The customer of the company took their business away because Gibson had been caught preparing to blackmail them." And that was a whole other story, which included Grace, but it wasn't part of what had happened to her.

"If the situation is as you report, why did your employer react so strongly?" His pen was poised, ready to note the answer she gave.

"I'm not sure, but Mr. Lewknor said in the private meeting that he'd questioned my sexuality for some time, but when the speculation had been confirmed, it was untenable for me to continue working for them."

"So you were sacked because you were having a relationship with a woman?" Mr. Welch rephrased, and Jess knew that as a lawyer, he was aware of the importance of confirming this key point.

"Yes."

"Was there any other aspect of your work that could have been a contributing cause? Performance, reliability, that sort of thing?" He held up a hand politely. "Just a word of caution, Ms. Maddocks. It's

crucial to be as impartial as you can at this stage whilst we establish what, if any, grounds for your claim exist."

Jess collected her thoughts for a moment. "With hindsight, I know I shouldn't have allowed myself to get involved with the employee of a client. It's not a breach of my terms of employment, but it wasn't a prudent thing to do. Other than that, no. My attendance levels were optimum and my performance frequently rewarded with bonuses and internal awards. I have copies of my appraisals which will testify to the sustained positive attitude of my supervisors."

"I see," Mr. Welch said as he noted the additional points on his pad. He put his pen down and looked up at her. "Well, based on what you have told me today, I believe you do have a case for unfair dismissal. As you will probably be aware, sacking someone on the basis of sexual orientation is illegal. It's a particularly high-focus subject at the moment, as the government has been investing heavily to promote diversity in the workplace. Furthermore, I believe there could be an argument that your employer failed in a duty of care regarding your safety. I understand you weren't an employee at the time of the attack—however, your involvement arose because of your employment there, and as such, consideration should have been extended to you."

Jess studied her hands, trying to make sense of her jumbled reaction. Part of her was overjoyed that the expert's reaction was so favourable. Another part felt small and insecure, unsure of the way forward. The rules of being a "good girl" dictated that she not make a fuss or upset a balance. Jess had been trapped in that mentality for so many years, it had become immeasurably hard to move away from it. "What happens now?"

"I suggest that you take some time to think this

through and give me a call in a couple of days. If you would like to take matters further, I'd like to see copies of your performance appraisals—most recent first. I then suggest you engage me to write a letter to your ex-employer. In the letter, I will raise your grievances with the corresponding legal evidence supporting your position. I will then suggest that either an appropriate settlement is reached or advise that we will pursue matters through the court."

Jess shifted nervously in her chair. "Do you think it's likely they'll respond to the letter or will it have to go to court?"

"It's impossible to say, I'm afraid," he admitted with a smile. "It depends on the company. They'll know whether they can provide any evidence suggesting that you were dismissed for other reasons and if they believe they can wriggle out of it, they may take the chance and force it through the courts. Alternatively, they may opt for a settlement with a confidentiality clause to prevent any poor publicity."

Jess thought of Lewknor, smug in his office, believing he had the right to exact moral judgement based on his own unlawful prejudices. At that moment, she didn't care if it went to court. She knew what he had told her in his office that awful day almost three months ago. After watching Grace face down a review board with regard to her findings about the pet food, Jess felt that maybe she could do it, as well. "Thank you. I don't need time to consider. I would like to engage you. I'll try to get copies of my appraisals sent to you straight away. It's a bit difficult at the moment, as I'm working part-time away from home."

"Excellent." He smiled. "In that case, I'll draft a letter and send it to you for approval shortly. Do you have e-mail access?"

"Yes." Jess took the paper he passed her and wrote down her address.

He checked it before replying. "Looks clear. Thank you. I will e-mail you our standard terms of engagement and I would appreciate if you would confirm your acceptance in due course."

"No problem. Thank you for your time and I look forward to hearing from you shortly."

Mr. Welch stood and shook her hand warmly. "Good day, Ms. Maddocks."

Jess left the building and returned to her car with a lightness in her step that she hadn't realised she'd been missing. Evidently, seeking justice was a cathartic exercise.

JESS TURNED THE key in the cabin door and let herself in, relieved to find it empty. She really liked Caitlin, but the last couple of days had been exhausting. Caitlin and Nick seemed to be shadowing her at meal times in a not so subtle attempt to make sure she ate. At first, she had tried to cut them some slack. She had worried them, she knew, and they were only acting in what they thought were her best interests. She had been distracted as she prepared for the lawyer meeting, but now she had to come up with a plan. If they carried on like this, she would gain all the weight she had lost and have to start from scratch. The thought was gutting.

Crossing the room to the wardrobe, she pulled the judgement jeans from the bottom of her pile. This time she was nervous but excited. It was like holding a lottery ticket when the first number had been called and you had it. She changed out of the suit, hanging the garments neatly back in the wardrobe. Her anticipation was almost painful. She pulled the stiff denim over one foot, then the other. Up a bit higher to the knees. Tightening around the thighs, she screwed her face in fear. *Keep going, you can do this.* They stretched over her bottom, forcing her flesh into the

denim cast. *Now for the button.* She took a hold of each side and tugged. Close, but they didn't meet. Using her abdominal muscles she pulled her stomach back on itself, imagining it touching her spine through her middle. *Pull.* The button reached the hole, settling into place when Jess gave it nowhere else to go. She relaxed her arms and peered downward.

The flesh of her midriff stuck out above the top so she couldn't see her waistband without leaning forward. Still, she was in the judgement jeans without having to lie on the bed. That was a major success. She squatted gingerly, feeling the denim cut in behind her knees. After a few moments, her calves started to prickle with blood loss so she stood again. "I'm not sure if it's a good thing there's no mirror." She spoke aloud, as if talking to the jeans. They did feel looser than last time, but still not wearable. Her feeling of progress began to ebb. She needed to lose stones, not single pounds. If this outdoor lifestyle, exercise, fasting, and salad approach didn't make the weight come off, she was left with an unappealing thought. What would?

She began to panic, the tight jeans symbolising the closing trap she seemed to be in. She unbuttoned the trousers and shoved them down over her legs and kicked her feet free. She imagined herself having liposuction. Or a stomach band. Or part of her stomach removed. What else could they do? Medication. Yes, there were always drugs. Maybe she should try them. Or laxatives... they could work. Cheaper, too, and she wouldn't have to bother with a doctor. Nick and Caitlin wouldn't even have to know.

Jess grabbed fresh clothes and dressed again, keen to get her fat hidden away under layers of fabric. She folded the judgement jeans and put them away. One of her sweaters had somehow migrated to Caitlin's side, so she grabbed it and shoved it back onto her own shelf. In the kitchen, she grabbed a diet cola and

went to sit in a lazy chair. Her mind was stuffed full at the moment with all the different things going on and she just seemed unable to get anywhere with anything. The lawyer was progress in one aspect, but whether or not it would be good she didn't yet know.

Taking a sip from her can, Jess noticed Caitlin's horse photograph was lying on its side. *That's odd.* She crossed the room to right it. Caitlin treasured the memento and Jess was unable to think of a circumstance where she wouldn't have corrected it herself at the time of knocking it over. Equally, Jess would never have left it like that if she'd been the one to hit it. Having righted the picture, Jess took a moment to look around the rest of the cabin and it dawned on her. *Someone's been here.*

The indications were minor, and she probably wouldn't have noticed them if she hadn't been alerted to look. The tea canister was in front of the coffee on the sideboard and the biscuit packet was left undone and open to the air. The clothes in the drawers were not folded as neatly as they usually were, and the cables for her gadgetry were jumbled untidily.

At that moment, Jess heard heavy footsteps approaching the cabin. Caught off-guard she positioned herself behind one of the sturdy kitchen chairs. She grasped it firmly at either side ready to defend herself if necessary.

"Hey," Caitlin called as she came in. As she looked at Jess, her expression changed to concern. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," Jess said with relief. "I'm just glad it's you."

"Who else would it be?" Caitlin asked. "You seem to have a habit of expecting me to be a bad guy."

Jess smiled weakly. "I know. It's one of the downsides to having a powerful imagination. However, this time I was expecting you to be the person who has been in here going through our

stuff."

"What?" Caitlin said, her gaze sweeping the cabin for evidence.

"When I got in, I noticed your horse photo had been knocked over. I put it right, but then I thought how strange it was. That was when I noticed a few other little things that weren't right."

"Hold up and I'll help you have a look." Caitlin took off her riding boots then continued searching. She made a loud exclamation when she held up the biscuit packet. "Only a man would leave a package out like this. Or someone who likes stale cookies."

"I know," Jess said, laughing out of stress and relief at Caitlin's humour. "Whoever it was has been in the wardrobe as well, and all the drawers."

"Is anything missing?" Caitlin asked as she proceeded to check the contents of her cupboard.

"Not that I can tell. Luckily, I had my phone and handheld with me. My bow is still in the wardrobe, but it's been moved." She went through a mental inventory of any other valuables she had in the cabin. It was a short list, given her temporary stay and limited free time.

Caitlin checked the bathroom then reappeared a few minutes later. "It looks like they were in there, too. Nothing's missing, but things aren't quite right, as you said."

Something occurred to Jess. "Oh, no," she said as she rushed to her bed and heaved the mattress up. As she feared, she saw only the wood of the bed frame. "They've taken Sergey's pictures."

"We're not dealing with a run-of-the-mill thief, then. Was the door locked when you got here?"

Jess tried to recall coming in but couldn't be sure either way. She made a frustrated noise. "I don't remember."

"Then it was. You'd remember if the lock didn't work or the door was open. I'm betting whoever it

was had a key. And given what he took, I'm also betting it's someone on staff here."

Anxiety settled in Jess's stomach. Caitlin was right. Sergey's pictures had been deliberately targeted and the door hadn't been kicked open.

"Hey ladies," a cheerful voice called from outside. "Is everyone decent?"

"As we'll ever be," Caitlin hollered back.

"Come in Nick," Jess responded, ignoring Caitlin's comment. She was reassured to have some additional support.

"I just checked Piotr back from his softball session and he's now playing a quick game of footie with the other boys." He grabbed a can of orangeade while he reported. He snapped it open, took a swig then looked at each of them in turn. "Hey, are you guys okay? You look kinda tense."

"Someone seems to have made themselves at home while we were gone today. They went through our stuff and took Sergey's pictures," Caitlin said, sounding frustrated.

"No! Do you know who it was?"

Jess shook her head as she finished remaking her bed. "I'd put money on it being done on Barton's orders, though it probably wasn't him. Whoever it was has a key, so they must have access to his office, at least."

"Did you have anything else with the pictures, Jess?" Caitlin asked. "I know you picked some other things up from his office when you went snooping."

"No, fortunately. I left the other papers at home with Grace and the pictures are on my camera, which I had with me."

"You don't suppose they've bugged the cabin, do you?" Nick asked, looking around as though any devices might suddenly jump out at him.

Jess and Caitlin did the same. Would Barton do that? Jess wondered. Did he have the capability?

"Let's hope not," Caitlin said. "But there's no way to tell for sure without some equipment. From what I've seen on the 'Net, they're making bugs so small we could search for days and still not find anything." Her brow furrowed. "What I want to know is why someone's all interested now. It's been a few weeks since Sergey left. So why are they suddenly interested in our cabin now?"

"Maybe someone noticed how closely we're watching Piotr." Jess suggested.

"Possibly, but it isn't that different than it was with Sergey. I'm thinking that for them to do this shows that somebody's feeling threatened about something."

"Surely Chrissy wouldn't have called Barton and said that I've been trying to contact her?" That thought sobered Jess. But Chrissy was scared. Why would she risk getting more involved?

Nick cleared his throat and raised his hand partially. "I, uh, I think it could have been me." He slumped down into a chair. "I was talking with Mickey the other day, you know, just about stuff. I might have mentioned about us having a little mystery to keep us busy."

"Nick!" Jess glared at him. "How could you be so stupid? This isn't an episode of *Scooby-Doo*. There are real people mixed up in this and we don't know who we can trust and who we can't."

"Hey, I know. I didn't think." Nick hung his head. "I'm sorry Jessie. I just didn't think."

"That's bloody obvious." Jess scowled at him.

"Okay guys, time out," Caitlin broke in. "No sense crying about it now. It's done, but at least we have a lead. I'm guessing either Mickey mentioned something to someone and it got back to Barton or—" here she stopped and looked at them in turn. "Or he reported back to Barton and between the two of them, they searched the place. Mickey might just talk too

much or he's in it up to his neck. Either way, we can't trust him. All they have is pictures, though. And how much of a giveaway is that?" She looked at Jess expectantly.

Jess took a deep breath, trying to calm herself enough to think clearly. "There were about six pictures in all," she said, seeing the images in her memory. "A couple were just nice drawings, nothing incriminating. "The others had the pictures we used to trace his journey. There was the Ukraine flag and the Union Jack, and pictures representing an orphanage with lots of stick children and an aeroplane. There were some bigger stick people and lots of scribbling as we developed the story."

"It doesn't sound too bad," Nick said hopefully.

"They'll still probably be suspicious," Caitlin said, dubious. "But the drawings sound general enough that maybe Barton will think they're just a kid's pictures. Still, I'll bet they'll be watching us from now on. You too, Nick. From here on out, we'll have to be even more careful."

He shook his head, mortified. "I really am sorry. I never meant for this to happen."

Jess relented. Nick was often frustrating, but always genuine. "It's okay. As Caitlin says, it's done now. We just need to be more alert."

"Yeah." He nodded and his expression changed from sheepish to hopeful. "I don't suppose you have anything to eat?"

"Sure," Caitlin said, gesturing toward the kitchen. "Help yourself to a cookie before they get stale."

"Thanks. I will." Nick went to get the package of biscuits and Jess stared after him, shaking her head. I just hope that the worst of the fall-out is over with, she thought.

THE NEXT DAY, on day four of her calling plan,

Jess finally reached Chrissy.

"I could report you for harassment, you know," Chrissy said, somewhat belligerently.

Despite the threat, Jess was thrilled. She'd been calling Chrissy once an hour and it had become tedious very quickly. "I promise to leave you alone if you just talk to me for five minutes." She was already walking outside to find a private spot for the phone call.

"Fine. I have a feeling I know what you're calling about and I can't tell you anything because there are bigger things at stake. If you already know something, though, I'll try to help. After that, I need you to leave me alone. Please. I don't want any more trouble."

"Thank you. So was it your decision to stop working here?"

"No."

"What happened?"

"I don't want to answer that."

"Okay." *Too direct.* "Were you concerned about the welfare of any of the children when you worked here?"

"Yes. They were all in our care. It was my job to be concerned." She sounded defensive.

"Did you have reason to be particularly concerned about some?"

"Maybe."

"Were they foreign?"

"Yes."

"Had they all come from the same place?"

"Yes."

"And was it their sudden departures that worried you?"

"That was part of it, yes." Chrissy now sounded like she was in a hurry for the conversation to be over.

"Were you concerned for them during their stay

here?"

"No."

"Did you approach the police at any time about this?"

Chrissy hesitated before responding in the affirmative. "Yes."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

"Was anyone else aware you had contacted the police?"

She hesitated again. "It turned out that way."

"How did they find out?"

"I don't know."

"Which staff are involved?"

"I can't answer that."

Frustrating, but at least Chrissy was talking to her. "Do they still have some sort of influence over you to prevent you talking about this?"

"Yes."

The conversation paused as Jess thought about this. She tried not to speculate and instead considered what to ask next. "Okay, so do you know why they've been giving Nick a hard time?"

"Have they?" Surprise coloured her tone. "No, but I'd guess through association with me. People knew we had a thing going."

"Did you tell any of this to Nick?"

"No way. I didn't want him involved. That obviously didn't work, though, as here you are, calling and asking me these questions."

Jess ignored Chrissy's jibe and ploughed ahead. She might not get this chance again. "Is it more than just a good reference they're holding against you?"

"Yes."

Jess felt a rush of sympathy for her. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Not really." For the first time Chrissy sounded a little less tense. "I'm sorry I can't help you more. There really is too much at stake for me to get involved. I hope you keep going, though. The kids need you. And watch your back."

A little chill shot down Jess's back. "Okay. Thanks, Chrissy. I know this was hard and I greatly appreciate it."

"I have to go."

"All right. Thanks for your help."

Jess pressed the button to end the call and began walking back to the cabin. There had been little in the way of new information, but her existing anxiety increased as she thought over each of Chrissy's answers. She had more questions than ever, the most pressing of which related to the police and their lack of response. With her own visit to the police fast approaching, she might get some answers first-hand.

Chapter Twelve

JESS SAT DOWN on the plastic chair as she glanced around the small interview room. It was sparsely furnished and all the surfaces seemed hard. Tiled floor, metal desk, and a solid door painted in dark blue gloss. She didn't feel inclined to chat in a room like this, it was a place for confessions, not support.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Maddocks?"

She looked up and smiled in what she hoped was a confident way. "Thank you for seeing me. I have some concerns that I think the police ought to be aware of."

"All right," Officer Lowe said as he turned to a fresh page of his spiral notepad and looked expectant.

"Okay." She took a deep breath, and felt her pulse pounding in her neck. She hoped it wasn't obvious. "I work at a children's activity camp near here and there's something a little suspect going on. Some of the children are leaving under strange circumstances. I mean, at the end of their stays, they're leaving, but they aren't going back home." She frowned. It wasn't coming out as she wanted.

"Have you talked to the manager of the camp about your concerns?" He looked sceptical and given her explanation, she could hardly blame him.

"No, because I have reason to believe that the management is aware of and even involved with their disappearances."

"Why is that?"

"Well, he watches them really closely." Jess cringed. She sounded like a busybody with unsubstantiated theories. "Then there was an employee—" She stopped again, not wanting to mention Chrissy's name. Her position seemed precarious enough. "Anyway, the children leave

suddenly without any notice."

"All right..." he said, looking even more sceptical.

"The names of the people who have collected them are always different than the children's surnames. And it's only the foreign children, most of whom don't speak any English. I think they might be orphans. One of them was, anyway." Jess wiped her palms on her jeans.

"So this has led you to believe they are disappearing? As in kidnapped?" He tapped his pen on his notepad and Jess could tell he wasn't following her. This was a bad idea.

Listening to herself, it did sound ludicrous. "No. I mean, I don't know. Maybe there is some plausible reason for these foreign kids leaving so strangely and so suddenly, but I know that some of the children are frightened."

"It sounds like you need to talk with the camp manager. The children probably want to stay on holiday longer. They're having adventures, making new friends, away from school. I'd bet they want to put off going home as long as they can. The foreign ones even moreso, with the holiday overseas aspect."

"But someone searched my room, and my brother's, too."

"At your house?"

"No, the cabin I share with another member of staff at the camp."

"I see." His expression was one of patience that was wearing thin. "Was anything taken?"

"Just some drawings by one of the children."

"They were probably mistaken as rubbish. It sounds like it could have been a routine inspection or something."

Jess sifted through her memories of the last few weeks, seeking any more evidence she could offer. Nothing was significant enough. The whole thing built up from a series of things that looked inconsequential

on their own. She looked up at the policeman. He looked disinterested and his paper was blank.

"Yes, you're probably right. Maybe I should have talked to the camp manager first."

"I think that would be a good idea."

"I'm sorry, I guess I've wasted your time."

He stood. "Not to worry. It's good to be a concerned citizen, but most of the time, you'll find the police have things under control."

"Yes, of course." Jess turned the door handle and let herself back out into reception. "Thanks for your time."

"Good bye." He had disappeared back toward the offices before she'd closed the door and Jess left the station, feeling like a complete fool.

JESS SHIFTED HER position, trying to reduce the number of branches that were poking her. She was supposed to be patching the archery nets, but Piotr hadn't turned up for his rifle-shooting session. She'd been on her way to check his cabin when she'd seen Barton talking to strangers in the car park. Not wishing to be seen, she'd ducked quickly behind the nearest group of shrubs to watch.

After some handshakes, Barton led the way into the building. Jess repositioned herself behind a large rhododendron where she could see into Barton's office through a window, which was a bit farther away than she would have liked, but the only alternative cover was too close. It was only a few moments before Barton entered the office, gesticulating for his guests to sit down. Jess tried to memorise their faces, grateful that Barton's chair faced away from the window.

The visitors looked like a typical, middle-class couple, probably in their mid-thirties. They were dressed in smart clothes and looked at each other frequently, trading small smiles. Barton seemed to be

doing all the talking as they nodded or smiled at random intervals.

Jess moved again, trying to ward off pins and needles in her calves. At that moment, the couple turned toward the door and Piotr was ushered in. He stood and looked at them blankly until Barton installed him in a third seat. The couple beamed at him before returning their attention to their host. Barton appeared to talk for a while longer than with some comment that made the other adults laugh, he left the room.

Piotr was sitting still in his chair, gazing calmly at the strangers. Although she couldn't be sure, Jess was fairly certain he was pretending not to understand a word they said. He had the blank expression he'd used on her the first day they met. The man was talking to him now, leaning toward him and smiling widely. Piotr smiled back and gave a little shrug, but didn't speak. The woman tried next, reaching out and touching his arm as she talked. Piotr leant away from her slightly, his body language making it clear that he was not comfortable with such familiarity.

After several minutes, Barton returned. Before he sat down, he motioned toward Piotr, holding the door while the child left. Once they were alone again, the couple were more talkative, punctuating their sentences with excited gestures. They were both nodding a lot while Barton seemed to pepper them with questions. After a few moments, Jess saw Piotr heading in the direction of the rifle-shooting range, presumably released to return to his original activities. She watched the inhabitants of the office for a few more minutes, but knew she had seen as much as she needed to see. With another of her concerns justified, she retreated from the bushes and returned to the sanctuary of the equipment shed.

"HEY, JESSIE." NICK jogged up behind her. "On the way back to your cabin?"

"Yeah. I need to soak my hands, but I'm not sure this fletching glue is ever going to come off."

"How'd the police go this morning?" He asked, his voice low.

"Dreadful." Jess cringed again as she thought about it. "I couldn't give them a coherent argument so they just palmed me off. I'm not sure who I'm more cross with, them for not taking it seriously or me for putting it so badly."

"That's rough." Nick kicked a pebble farther along their path. "Chrissy texted me yesterday after you talked."

"Oh?"

"Nothing much but I'm glad she said hi." They reached the pebble and he kicked it again. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure."

"Between us?"

She looked up. He seemed really bothered about something. "Of course."

"It's about your cabin being searched," he said nervously. "I really hate to think it was Mickey. I thought he and I were friends. I mean, I know I shouldn't have said anything, but I've been wondering, what if it wasn't him?"

"Did you talk to anyone else about it?"

"No."

They stopped talking for a moment as a group of children ran past. "Well, I haven't told anyone. Who else could it be?"

"Caitlin."

Jess frowned. "Have you got any reason to suspect her?"

"No. I just think we've each told one friend. Why should we assume it's *my* friend that blabbed?"

"I thought you liked Caitlin."

"I do. I just don't think we've thought about this properly. What if she's on the other side? What if she feeds information back to them? We don't know her that well. She could be playing us both as mugs."

They stopped. The cabin was within sight but the conversation was unfinished. "That's true," Jess said reluctantly. "I like her and my gut instinct says we can trust her. Still, as you say, we would be foolish to assume it was Mickey and not Caitlin. At least one person who we thought is a friend has let us down. Potentially, it could be both of them."

"That's a depressing thought."

"All right, assuming it's one or both of them, what can we actually do? Be more cautious in what we say around them, obviously. I guess we could also make sure that if there are any new developments, you and I discuss them first. Part of me wishes she hadn't been there when you mentioned getting a mobile for Piotr."

"Too late to think like that," Nick said, shrugging. "It'll all work out. I'm just glad you're here. I know things have moved on from them watching me, but there is still stuff happening. With the two of us, we can solve it and make sure everyone is okay."

Jess smiled. *How different my life could have been if I was born with even a third of his faith.* "Hopefully. Then I'll go home and get myself a proper job."

"And maybe a girlfriend?"

They started walking again. "Stranger things have happened." She enjoyed the look on his face. "See you later."

He grinned and waved, already forking off toward his cabin.

Jess was still chuckling as she opened the door. Piotr was sitting in one of the lazy chairs, sipping a hot chocolate with evident enjoyment. Caitlin was sitting next to him, showing him what looked like a card trick.

"Hey," Caitlin said. "Look who I found."

Jess smiled. "Hi, Piotr. It's good to see you." She watched as Caitlin finished the trick, surprising him by identifying what must have been his card from an apparently random deck. Caitlin looked so happy and kind, she found it hard to imagine she could work in any way against the best interests of a child. Still, Nick was right. The situation was getting worse and they had to be able to trust their allies.

"How did you do that?" he asked, his eyes wide.

"If I told you, it'd be no fun next time, would it?" Caitlin looked up at Jess. "Piotr came to tell us about a meeting he had today."

"Who with?" Jess feigned ignorance, not wanting to let Caitlin know she'd been watching the whole time.

"A man and a woman," he said.

"What was it about?" Jess asked, hoping it was something other than the obvious.

Piotr looked worried. "They did not speak a lot while I was there. They asked me questions about school, but I pretended I could not understand them. Just before Mr. Barton came back in, the lady said that I was 'perfect'."

Jess checked in time to see Caitlin's grim expression.

"I think they might want me to go and live with them," Piotr said, staring at the table.

He came from the orphanage in Ukraine, like Sergey did. Was this about illegal adoptions? "It's possible," Jess said, trying to put his mind at ease. "But you mustn't worry. We'll make sure everything is all right." Her mind was churning with possibilities for action but for the time being, her main priority was to reassure him.

"Maybe that is where Sergey went. Maybe he went to live with new parents."

Jess didn't say anything, unable to think of a

suitably positive response. It seemed a likely conclusion, and it also meant that tracing him would be almost impossible. If Sergey was happy, that was one thing, but Jess had grave reservations about the sort of people would want to adopt a child out of the system. She had no belief that Barton would go through lengthy suitability checks before handing over a child.

Caitlin broke the silence. "Maybe, but we're not done looking for him. There are lots of things we can do to help, and he won't have to stay anywhere he doesn't want to."

"I didn't like those people," Piotr said softly.

"That's okay. You don't have to go with them." Jess patted his hand. "Now tell me, how are you getting on with the mobile?" She changed the subject to something more positive. "Are you able to keep it hidden?"

"Yes." He grinned almost as widely as when they'd first given him the phone. "I keep it on silent and charge it at night when the others are asleep."

"Good. And you remember how to call us if you need anything?"

He nodded.

"Don't worry about that meeting today," Caitlin said. "We'll think of something."

"Thank you," he said, standing to leave. "I will go now. Nick gave me some money for the tuck shop."

Jess grinned. "Sounds like Nick. Okay. Thanks for dropping in and letting us know what happened." She went to the door and checked that there was nobody around before letting him out. The last thing they needed was to be seen with children in their cabin. Especially foreign children, if Barton was indeed involved in some kind of adoption scheme. When she walked back into the room her troubled thoughts manifested in a large sigh. She sat down on the edge of her bed and contemplated

changing her clothes.

"Hang in there," Caitlin said as she came and sat down next to her. She wrapped her arms around Jess's shoulders and hugged her.

"They're importing children for adoption, aren't they?" Jess asked, needing the support, even if it was from someone she and Nick suspected might be in on it.

"I don't know, but it looks that way."

"I don't know what I'm going to do. How on earth am I supposed to find Sergey now? Or stop the same thing from happening to Piotr? The sort of people who would do this—they scare me. The children could be going anywhere. To paedophiles, for all we know." That thought horrified her and she tried to banish it from her mind.

Caitlin patted her arm. "If Barton's running some kind of child adoption agency under the radar, then yes, we have to consider all possibilities. We're in this together, though, and as soon as we can, we'll get in touch with the cops. I think we might be in over our heads."

"I went this morning."

"To the cops?"

"Yeah."

"How'd it go?"

"They weren't interested and I felt like a fool sitting there with wild stories and nothing to back me up."

"We'll try again and make them listen. Children need their help. We've got what Piotr said, after all."

"Yeah, I guess so." Jess felt a spike of guilt. Hadn't she just remonstrated Nick for talking to Mickey? And hadn't she and Nick just spoken about keeping more tight-lipped about this? She glanced at Caitlin. *Surely she couldn't be one of them. Surely not.*

"C'mon. Take some downtime before dinner."

Dinner. Oh good. Something else to look forward to.

Jess hid her dread and started unlacing her shoes to change.

JESS CROSSED HER arms and legs in an attempt to keep warm. She could feel the cold from the ground seeping through the fleece blanket and her clothes, chilling her skin. The only warm part of her body was where it rested against Caitlin. "I'm still not sure how you persuaded me out here. It's freezing. I can't see any stars through the icicles on my eyelashes."

Caitlin released one of her Texan "I don't care who hears me" guffaws. Jess envied her that attitude. "You can go in if you want, but you'll be missing out. You'll get used to the cold and then you'll really enjoy the night."

Jess wasn't convinced, but pulled her arms more tightly around herself and tried not to think about the cold. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her other senses. They were near the stables so she could hear an occasional nicker and the sounds of hooves in straw. They were natural, comforting noises that made her think of an existence less complicated than her own.

She breathed in through her nose and the cold air stung her sinuses. She tried to concentrate on identifying scents. Caitlin's washing powder came first. Presumably, she must be able to smell her own too, but was so used to it that it wasn't registering. Then she picked up the general mix of the stables, horses, manure, leather, and feed. She took another breath. A hint of food now, presumably from the extractor fans of the canteen. It smelled like the Thai green curry that had been the special that night.

Thinking about supper made Jess pine for hunger. It had been too long since she'd felt it. The way Caitlin and Nick were interfering with her schedule, hunger wouldn't be something she'd feel for a while.

She remembered her determination for this to be the one, the diet that actually worked. *Was that only five weeks ago?* She exhaled in a cross between a laugh and a sigh.

"What was that for?"

"Just thinking." Jess hadn't meant for Caitlin to hear. Her thoughts switched to Caitlin and the eating disorders she seemed to have overcome. If she hadn't told Jess of her past, she would never have realised. Caitlin seemed so comfortable in her body. "Do you think it really is possible to be fat and happy?" She asked the question before thinking and instantly regretted it.

Caitlin rolled over to face her and propped her head on her hand. "It's not easy but yes, I do. Most people would call *me* fat, but I've reached a place where I don't care what they think and I'm at peace with my body."

"I don't think you're fat." Jess rolled over as well and mirrored Caitlin's pose. "You're big, but you're tall. You wouldn't look right if you were skinny." Maybe she needed to talk about this after all.

Caitlin laughed. "When I was younger, I wanted to look really buff. I wanted to be this butch, cowboy-type like all those movie heroes."

"But it didn't work out that way?"

"No. I just don't have the genes for it. It took me years before I admitted that. And it didn't help that my concept of 'butch cowboy' didn't involve boobs like mine." She laughed again.

Jess grinned and eyed Caitlin's chest. "I think it's a definite asset."

Caitlin snorted with laughter and rolled onto her back again. "I'm glad you think so."

Jess looked at her, allowing herself to appraise another woman's body openly. "Doesn't it bother you that people think you're fat?" she asked shyly.

"It used to a lot. It still does sometimes, but not as

much. I began to realise that people are always going to think something negative if they want to. They might pick on my weight, or my height, or my sexual orientation, or whatever they don't like. It took a while and it's a long process, but I finally stopped listening to those people. After all, I can't control what they think. My bottom line now is how I feel about myself."

"I've heard lots of people say that type of thing before, but they still try to change themselves to become more acceptable."

"Yeah, that's true. But no matter what happens, trying to fit what others think is a very hard thing to do and you end up living for them, and not you."

Jess tried to imagine a future version of herself that was self-accepting and could finally give up her increasingly desperate quest for an ideal weight. She couldn't, but when she depersonalised it, she made some progress. It must be a very peaceful life without the constant monitoring and measuring, and using one's energy in relationships or hobbies rather than the exhaustive task of trying to craft one's body into some version of perfection. "I wish I had your courage," Jess said sadly, rolling onto her back again and looking at the stars. "I wish weight just wasn't an issue. That I could just become the person I want to be. I can't imagine what it must be like not to hate yourself. It hurts to think that way, and I just feel like more of a failure."

Caitlin turned back to face Jess. "You're not a failure. It's a question of perspective. You just need to find a way to see yourself as others see you." Reaching out, she cupped Jess's face in her hand. "You're beautiful, inside and out."

Startled by both the compliment and the contact, Jess met Caitlin's eyes with her own. The intensity in her gaze was acute and she was suddenly aware of the close proximity of their bodies. Solid warmth pressed

against her, temptingly reassuring. Jess felt herself drawn to seek comfort against the darkness of her self-hatred. "Caitlin," she managed.

"Shh," Caitlin stroked Jess's cheek gently with her thumb. "It's okay."

"I feel so alone."

"I know. I feel that, too."

"How do you manage?" Jess asked, forcing back tears.

"Day by day. Look for the joy in the small things. Enjoy your friends." She smiled, the warmth reaching up to the wrinkles around her eyes. "And you're lucky, because you can fix your loneliness as soon as you're brave enough to try."

"What do you mean?"

"Grace. I've seen you smile whenever you talk about her. I'm guessing she must feel the same way by the amount of time you two talk on the phone."

Jess felt a flutter in her chest. "That would be amazing."

"As someone who isn't lucky enough to have what you do with someone like her, please don't let it slip away. Don't let those voices inside tell you that you're not good enough and you don't deserve it. You have to grab on and give it your best, if not for yourself, then for all the other people who wish they had half of what you do."

Jess sighed, frustrated that Caitlin couldn't see the problem. "How am I supposed to do that when I feel this way about myself? I am so far from the person I want to be. How can I expect her to want me like this?"

Caitlin moved to put a bit of distance between them but maintained eye contact. "I know you don't feel that great about yourself. I've been there, and I understand how it feels when you think you're a broken-down excuse for a human being. It's not true, but the problem is, if you think stuff like that long

enough, you risk making it true."

Jess fiddled with a tassel of the blanket. She didn't know how to answer that.

"Do you think that in six months or two years or even ten years, you will have reached the pinnacle of all you want to be?"

"No, of course not."

"Then when will be a good time to do anything? When you're on your deathbed? You're gonna miss out on a hell of a lot if that's the way you live."

"You can be quite scary, you know."

Caitlin smiled. "Maybe. But I couldn't call myself your friend if I didn't tell you this stuff. I sure don't want to be on my deathbed wishing I'd said something or done something."

"No, I know." Jess reached out and gave Caitlin's hand a squeeze. "Thanks."

"So, what are you going to do?"

Jess knew what Caitlin wanted to hear but she wasn't able to say it. "I'll work on it." *That'll have to do for now.*

Chapter Thirteen

JESS WAS THE most cheerful she'd been in weeks. It was Saturday, her day off, and she was seconds from seeing the person she most wanted to see. "Grace?" she called as she let herself through the front door. Just the familiarity of her own home made the trip worthwhile. She walked down the small hallway and entered the living room, smiling when she saw the new sofa and remembered the demise of the old one.

"Hey," Grace came out of the kitchen and shut the door quickly behind her. "I've missed you," she said, as she crossed the room to pull Jess into a hug.

Jess reciprocated, loving the experience of wrapping her arms around Grace's body. She breathed deeply, enjoying Grace's wonderfully familiar scent. The simple act allowed Jess to relax a little. "It's good to be home. It's been getting worse at the camp. I think there's a storm coming."

Grace's fingers rubbed soothing circles on the base of Jess's back. "You're here now and we'll do today's job together. In the meantime, how do you feel about a little distraction?" She stepped back and grinned at Jess mischievously.

"Are you propositioning me?"

Grace raised an eyebrow. "Would you accept if I was?"

"Maybe." Jess grinned back, her tone equally coy.

"Oh, you're a hard nut to crack, Jess Maddocks." Grace backhanded Jess's midriff lightly. "Just for that, I'm going to unleash my surprise." She walked toward the kitchen and opened the door wide. "Jess, meet Willow."

Jess sucked in her breath as she saw the dog. "Aw, come here," she cooed, squatting down and holding out her hands.

After a quick look at Grace, Willow approached Jess. Extending her muzzle tentatively, she sniffed at her outstretched hands before moving a little closer. Reassured that the newcomer was a friend, she sat down and raised her paw whilst looking at Jess expectantly.

"Oh Grace, she's beautiful," Jess said. "Is it a she?"

"Yes."

"Hello, Willow, aren't you lovely?" Jess buried her fingers into the soft fur around the dog's neck and massaged her gently. "Where did she come from?"

"Work. Would you believe a farmer brought her in to be destroyed? I just couldn't let him do it."

"Is she ill?" Jess kept petting Willow, but she looked her over, as well, for signs of health problems.

Grace squatted down next to them. "No, thankfully not. Just inconvenient when he wanted to emigrate."

Jess was shocked. "How could anyone do that? I'm glad it was you he saw."

"I've been keeping her at the practice while I'm working and here when I'm not, but we need to decide if we can keep her long-term. I know of some charities who would take her if that's what we had to do."

Jess looked up and met Grace's eyes. She could see the tempered hope and knew the expression would be echoed in her own face. She also had the sudden realisation that she would never be able to refuse Grace anything. "You don't need to do that. Of course Willow can live with us. Won't you, girl?" She scratched Willow's ears.

"Oh Jess, thank you." Grace leant in and pressed her lips against Jess's cheek in a chaste kiss.

Jess twisted her head slightly, her face just millimetres from Grace's. She dared not breathe for fear of shattering the moment. The world seemed to

fall away, leaving just Grace's face and then her lips. The source of her smile, her jokes, her reassurances. Jess glanced up to meet Grace's eyes and the expression of desire therein urged her on. She leant in, closing her eyes, preparing to leap.

A sudden weight on her arm pulled her back and the emotional charge of the moment vanished. Willow's paw rested on her arm. "Hey, now, if you're going to do things like that, I might have to reconsider my invitation." Her laugh came out nervously. *Maybe fate's trying to tell me something.* She moved back, putting some space between them.

"It's okay." Grace reached out and joined her hand with Jess's on Willow's chest.

Jess dared to look, relieved when she saw Grace's smile. It was a proper smile that reached her eyes, too. Willow whined lightly and Jess petted her with her other hand. "It's all right. I didn't really mean it. You can stay." She laughed again, this time with more humour. "What is it with me? A pair of brown eyes seems to be all it takes for me to turn into a sloppy pile of mush."

"ARE YOU NERVOUS?" Grace asked.

"A little, but I was actually just reflecting on how roads can feel homey." She was driving slowly, prepared for a tractor or horse around any corner. "I'm not enjoying the camp job, but it's doing wonders as a reality check. Before, I thought my job was all I had, but now I realise I've got a lot more."

"Good. I'm glad you feel that way."

"Actually, I'm glad I didn't get a couple of the jobs I applied for. They would have involved a lot of travelling and I'm not sure I want that anymore."

"Have you applied for any jobs while you've been at camp?"

"No, I wanted to give myself a break from it. I

should, really, but I guess I'm still lacking direction. I have no clue what I want to do next."

"How did your meeting with the solicitor go? We haven't had time to talk too much about that."

Jess flicked her indicator on and paused at the junction. "Okay, actually. He reckons that there's a good enough case to warrant trying. I had to explain about the attack and he said that my employer should have taken greater care regarding my safety." She paused a moment as she watched the road, waiting for a break in traffic. "I'll admit, talking about that brought some things up."

"I'll bet, but I agree with him. So what happens next?"

"I've already sent back his terms of engagement. I have to make some copies of my most recent performance evaluations and send those along, as well," she said, still watching for a break in the traffic. "Soon he should start working on a letter to send to them offering terms for a settlement or the option of court."

Grace was watching the traffic, too. "After the red car," she said. "Did he say which way he thinks it'll go?"

Jess accelerated and filed in behind the procession of cars. "No. He said it depends on them. I hope they settle, but I'll go to court if I have to. The main thing is that I don't just roll over and let them get away with it. I think I'm tired of people getting away with things."

Grace squeezed Jess's leg. "I'm really glad. And I'm proud of you, for having the courage to do this. Nobody should be treated that way. Do you know how long it will be before you hear something?"

"I guess it'll be at least a week before he gets the letter out what with waiting to get my appraisal notes and getting the draft approved. Then he said they might take up to a month for them to respond so—"

she squinted as she thought, "early December I suppose."

Jess slowed down as they entered the town centre. Despite the season, there still seemed to be some brave tourists kitted out with their cameras and rucksacks. Turning up a narrow side road, she navigated to a small car park and searched for a space. Their arrival made it seem more real. "I'm nervous," she said, as she cut the engine. "But I'm really glad to have you here."

"Me, too. Come on. The police station is just around the corner, so let's get it over with."

Jess pulled the keys from the ignition and released her seatbelt. "Okay."

Within ten minutes they were seated in the police station waiting area. Jess looked over the various posters warning her about car thefts, drug abuse, and how to find out who your local bobby was. The latter was good information. She hoped she wouldn't have to deal with any of the former.

"Ms. Maddocks, Dr. Willoughby, it's a pleasure to see you again." Police Constable Johnson greeted them from behind the chest-height counter. "Please, come through and follow me. I have arranged for a meeting room just down the hall."

Jess walked through the door he'd opened for them out of the public domain. They followed him down a utilitarian corridor to a door marked "Interview Room 3". Again, he held open the door for them, this time gesturing for them to sit down at the table. "I feel guilty already," Jess said, semi-serious.

"It's a hazard of the business, I'm afraid," he responded with a smile. "The innocent feel guilty in here and the guilty don't talk fast enough." He seated himself on the opposite side of the table. "So, what can I do for you two ladies?"

"I appreciate you taking the time to see us," Jess said. "I have a rather unusual situation which I think

the police should be aware of. I already spoke to someone at another station, but he didn't take me seriously. I thought I'd ask to speak to you specifically because you're the only police person I know."

"I'm honoured. Have you rescued any more damsels in distress?" He grinned at Grace. "Or perhaps she's taught you a thing or two with that sword of hers so you won't need rescuing."

Grace laughed and Jess was relieved by his banter. "No," Jess said, "I think once was quite enough for me."

"And me."

"Anyway," Jess continued, "I wanted to talk to someone who knows I'm not some crazy person wandering in off the street with some tall tale." *Though sometimes I wonder about that myself.*

"Okay, I'm listening. What's on your mind?"

"All right. I'm currently working in a temporary position at Camp Condor. Do you know it? It's a children's activity camp not too far from here."

"I've seen the signs for it, but I haven't been there, since it's not in our area."

"Okay." She took a preparatory breath. She'd been practising her story since the last disastrous effort with the police. "Well, my brother started working there as a mechanic a couple of months ago. He told me he thought there was something strange going on with some of the foreign kids, but to be honest I didn't put much stock in it. To cut a long story short, I've changed my mind. I'm not sure how, but I'm pretty sure the camp is involved in sourcing children from orphanages on the continent and bringing them over here for adoption. And I don't think they're doing it legally." She watched his face for a reaction. *Please take this seriously.*

"I see," he said, rubbing his fingers against the greying bristles on his chin. "That's quite a situation.

What's led you to that conclusion?"

Jess pulled a piece of paper from the back pocket of her jeans. On it she'd prepared the key points in chronological order to make sure she didn't forget anything. She scanned the list quickly before answering. "I have quite a few little things which don't seem like much alone, but when you put them all together, there are some patterns. The main reason is because of the conversations I've had with two foreign boys. They were both in the same orphanage in Ukraine, then brought to a local English school—Oakham Hill—under the guise of being selected for a scholarship. They only stayed at the school for a few weeks each before they were brought to Camp Condor.

"Sergey, the first boy, disappeared suddenly without saying goodbye. It worried me at the time because he has no family and wasn't expecting to leave. Since I've spoken to Piotr, the second boy, I've been even more worried. Piotr speaks English although he has been pretending not to."

"Why?"

"He heard about the scholarships that non-English-speaking boys were getting at the orphanage and was new enough to pretend."

"Okay, carry on."

"Two days ago a couple came to the camp and met with the manager. Piotr was introduced to them and the three were left alone for about five minutes. I was watching though the window."

P.C. Johnson raised an eyebrow.

"Well, what with all the terrible things that could happen to children today, I just wanted to make sure that he wasn't in danger. We've been keeping tabs on Piotr, especially, since Sergey disappeared."

"Wait a moment—what do you mean by 'disappeared'?"

"Sergey, who didn't speak any English, left the

camp suddenly. He and I had formed a bond of sorts, and I saw him every day. Then suddenly, he was gone. The boys who shared a cabin with him said that the camp's manager came to collect him late one night, gathered all of Sergey's things, and took him. The camp registry said he was checked out by someone with the last name 'Williams'. Sergey didn't have any family. So I hardly think a family emergency was the reason for his leaving. My brother says that a couple of other foreign children also left this way, and I've confirmed that those children were checked out by people with common-sounding surnames like 'Williams' and 'Brown'."

"Hmm," P.C. Johnson said. "What else?"

Jess continued, relieved that he seemed to be taking her more seriously than the police at the other station. "Apparently, although nothing was said directly, Piotr heard a comment describing him as 'perfect' and is frightened that he was being viewed for adoption or something similar. From what I have seen, I'm concerned he's right."

"Do you have any other evidence of anything else going on?"

"My brother's cabin has been searched at least once and mine has, as well. I had several of Sergey's drawings, from which I was able to figure out where he came from and that he had no family. Those were taken."

"I see. And you're certain you didn't just misplace these drawings?"

"Oh, yes. I kept them under my mattress, between that and the bed frame. Whoever came into my cabin used a key, because the lock and the door were intact, as were the windows."

P. C. Johnson nodded solemnly. "That does sound a bit suspicious. Would you mind pausing for a moment? I want to ask one of my colleagues to sit in. You'll have to repeat this."

"Of course. No problem." Jess unclasped her hands as she watched him leave.

"Hey, you're doing great," Grace said after he had left. She treated her to a reassuring smile. "He's definitely taking this seriously."

"I'm relieved. I wouldn't have known what to do if he didn't."

Grace shrugged. "We'd have worked something out."

Jess smiled back at her. *I'm so lucky to have you.*

P.C. Johnson appeared at the door, followed by a woman dressed in plain clothes. Jess estimated her at mid-forties though her short bobbed hair-style and subtle make-up were pretty ageless. "This is Detective Inspector Knight," he said.

She smiled at them before sitting down next to him, placing a notepad and pen on the desktop in front of her. She had short, functional nails on her left hand but longer, maintained nails on her right. Guitarist, Jess decided. "Please would you repeat what you've already said to P.C. Johnson? I like to hear it first hand."

It only took a few minutes to recap and Jess found it easier to talk knowing that they were taking her seriously. When she started to tell them new information, Jess checked her notes, more for reassurance than need. "Oh, here are some more details about the break-in. My cabin was searched a couple of days before the meeting between Piotr and the couple. There was no sign of forced entry so whoever did it must have had a key. At first, I assumed it was an opportunist thief but then we noticed nothing was missing other than some pictures Sergey had drawn."

"We?" D.I. Knight eyed her expectantly.

"Caitlin, my friend and roommate. She has known about this situation since I started working there about a month and a half ago. Nick, my brother, is the

other person. He works there, as well and he has a cabin to himself not far from us."

"I see." She scribbled some notes on her pad. "Were the pictures significant?"

"I suppose so, but in any other situation, they probably wouldn't be considered significant. Sergey doesn't speak any English, so we ended up communicating through a mixture of gestures and drawings. I had kept a couple of drawings for sentimental reasons, but the others were the ones we did as he told me his story. The pictures represented things like him in an orphanage in Ukraine, followed by his transfer to an English school."

"How did you know he was from Ukraine?" D.I. Knight looked at Jess expectantly.

"I drew a picture of the Union Jack and pointed at myself, then I asked him to do the same. I had to look up the flag he drew because I didn't recognise it."

"Good ingenuity. Most people probably wouldn't have taken the time to find these things out." D.I. Knight looked at her notes. "Did you report the break-in to your cabin to the camp manager?"

"Um, no."

"Why not?"

"We've come to the conclusion that the manager is the one who arranged it. The spare keys are kept in his office under restricted access. We thought it was better to just pretend we hadn't noticed. It was left with minimal disturbance, so it would have been plausible for us not to realise."

"Can you tell us the names of the people you suspect to be involved?"

Jess paused, imagining the horror of falsely accusing someone. "I'm not one hundred per cent positive about any one person, you understand. There are lots of things that combine to lead me to the conclusions I've told you, but I cannot say someone is without doubt, guilty."

"Don't worry," P.C. Johnson said. "All we'll do at this stage is background checks."

"It's fine, Jess," Grace said. "Your reasoning's sound."

"Okay. The first person is Paul Barton, the camp manager. We've seen him talking to another man who we know works as a housemaster at Oakham Hill, where the children were initially taken to. That man is called Mr. Hendred, but we don't know his first name."

"How do you know his job?" D.I. Knight asked.

Grace answered before Jess could speak. "Jess got hold of a copy of the telephone bill for the camp and we did some research on the most frequently called numbers. One of them was Oakham Hill School, and I arranged to visit posing as the aunt of a prospective pupil. I was introduced to him by the headmaster and I suspected it was him from Jess's description of a gentleman who visits the camp and often spends time with Mr. Barton. We know what car he drives from his visits to the camp and I waited to see him get into it to make sure."

"We've seen his car at both places," Jess added.

"Do you have the number plate details?"

"Not fully," Jess said. "Its letters are CRP and it's a Murphy Triton."

"That's enough to start with." P.C. Johnson said. "You two are certainly a resourceful pair."

"At first, I was looking for something to trace Sergey, but now I'm worried about Piotr. I know I've only been able to give you minimal facts and nothing in the way of evidence, but after that couple came to visit with Piotr, I feel like he could disappear at any moment."

"You did give him a mobile," Grace prompted. "So if anything happens, he can call you."

Jess felt the contact as Grace's knee moved to rest against her. The reassurance was welcome. She

looked at P.C. Johnson. "We try and check on him as often as we can, but we've given him a mobile for emergencies. I programmed our numbers in so hopefully, if anything does happen, he can let us know where he is."

"That's a good idea." D.I. Knight said. "Don't worry, we're taking this very seriously and will do everything in our power to ensure the safety of all involved. Obviously, we also wish to bring anyone guilty of criminal activities to justice and make sure they can do no more harm."

Jess sat back in her chair, relieved now her burden had been shared. "I'm really glad to hear you say that."

"I'll be candid. Please keep this information confidential." D.I. Knight paused while both Jess and Grace nodded. "We are aware that there's a smuggling ring in the area, bringing children from the Continent for adoption, but so far have only managed to identify the individuals on the outskirts of it. From what you've said, I strongly believe that the two situations are linked and with the information you've given us, we'll be able to progress our enquiries much more effectively."

"What I'd like to do is to ask you to carry on as you have been. You are ideally placed to monitor the children at risk and give us the information that will help us get closer to the key players. That way, we can make a much bigger impact than just arresting the lackeys. If anything significant happens, then obviously, we will take whatever action is necessary. Would you be willing to do this?"

"Absolutely," Jess said.

"Excellent." D.I. Knight smiled. "Let me give you this." She took a business card from her pocket before writing a number on the back. "These are my contact numbers. This one on the back will get me at any time of the day or night so you can use it in an

emergency."

"Thank you," Jess said. The fact she now had a direct line to some back-up was incredibly reassuring. "Would you like these in case they would be useful in your enquiries?" She pulled some papers and a computer disk from her bag. "This is a copy of the telephone bill we mentioned plus some photographs I took of the most recent pages of the camp register. I'm not totally sure, but there are quite a few European-sounding first names with English surnames. I've wondering if those are the children to worry about."

D.I. Knight pulled the papers toward her and glanced at them. "This could prove very useful. With a bit of luck we'll have this ring broken up in no time."

The lull in conversation marked the end of the meeting. "Thanks for taking this seriously," Jess said.

P.C. Johnson stood and opened the door. "I'm very glad we did." They walked back to reception and through the heavy door back to the public side. "Now, make sure you look after yourselves. No dangerous stunts, please. And if you ever want a job in the force just let me know. I'll be happy to put in a good word for you."

Jess laughed. "Thanks, but I think I'll leave this stuff to you." She waved at him and followed Grace back to the car.

WALKING WAS EVEN nicer with a dog, Jess decided. After the excitement of the morning's trip to the police, she and Grace had selected a longer walk that would circle the village and give them ample chance to clear their heads. Willow was evidently happy with the choice, enjoying the time off the lead. Jess was impressed by her speed and agility as she rushed around checking rabbit holes, scents, and whatever was coming around the next corner.

"I can't believe it's almost November," Grace said. "The weather's been so kind, but this week the temperature's suddenly dropped. How do the children get on when it's so cold?"

"We have quite a lot of space for indoor activities. We have to change the options a bit. You know, football or judo rather than archery and canoeing."

"What do you do then?"

"Actually, I've started running a craft session."

Grace stared at her, surprised. "Really? I didn't know you're creative like that."

Jess laughed. "I'm not. Luckily, I just have some ideas. I make sure the kids have materials and then wander around supervising."

"What sort of ideas?"

"Nothing technical. Masks, crackers, that kind of thing. I had an idea about an advent calendar nearer Christmas, but it'll depend on the age group. There aren't that many sets of safety scissors."

"That sounds fun. I'll bet it's good to have a change from archery, too."

"It is. I like being outside, but when it's cold, my fingers go numb." It was probably the outside job, but Jess was suffering with the cold far more this year than she had before." The rumble of machinery distracted her and they watched as the tractor that had been working in the field to their right came closer. Grace surprised Jess by waving at the driver. "Do you know him?"

"Sort of," Grace said, smiling as she saw the wave returned. "I've seen him a lot over the last couple of months working in the bordering fields while I've been in the garden. One day I waved out of good-neighbourliness and it sort of stuck."

Jess watched the retreating tractor and recognised her pang of irrational jealousy for what it was. She had her emotions so tightly trussed up that they were bursting out at any weak point they could find. Jess

took a breath and concentrated on placing her feet on the ground. *Just walk.*

Willow rushed up to them with a stick in her mouth. "Hey, girl," Grace said with a grin. "You want me to throw it?" She took the stick then threw it a good distance ahead of them. Willow darted after it, her tail held high.

Jess watched as they played, wishing her relationship with Grace was as easy. Instead, things were getting more complicated and she teetered on the edge of messing things up at any moment. Rather than slowing her feelings, the distance of her job seemed only to make the time she spent with Grace feel more precious. Each time she visited, she left feeling closer to Grace and the dam she'd put up to limit their flirtations seemed at risk of bursting at any moment. She remembered their near-kiss that morning. *I could have ruined everything.*

If only Caitlin hadn't interfered with her diet. Nick wouldn't have noticed on his own. She knew the weight was going back on and with each ounce, she was forced back a step. Away from weight loss, from peace, from self-respect, and from Grace. How could she be in a relationship when her mind was as it had been recently? It seemed to be getting worse, not better. Instead of the slim, happy, confident Jess she'd been aiming for, she'd cultivated some paranoid, irritable, devious monster. *I will not unleash that on Grace.*

"What're you thinking?"

She pulled her thoughts back and groped for a suitable answer. "I was just thinking about wanting something very much and having to fight to get it." She watched as Willow retrieved the stick. "Have you had to fight for anything?"

Grace was silent for a few moments. "That PetZone case is probably the biggest one. I knew it was dangerous and I had to fight to get them to listen

to me.”

“Do you ever regret it? I mean, it would have been easier to walk away after the first few times they ignored you.”

“It would have been easier, yes, but animals are really important to me. I couldn’t have just ignored it. I had to do what I thought was the right thing, whether it was the harder path or not.”

Jess watched her feet as they trudged along the tractor track. “Yeah, you’re right.” *Time to get a grip on this thing.*

IT HAD BEEN dark for several hours by the time Jess arrived back at camp. She had meant to leave earlier but it was getting harder to go each time. Whether it was saying goodbye to Grace, leaving home, or returning to camp she wasn’t sure. A mixture of all three, probably. “Hey, I’m back,” she called as she opened the door of the cabin.

“Hey, Jess.” Caitlin said in greeting and Jess stared at the man next to her.

Barton nodded at her from his chair next to Caitlin. “Hello,” he said, but his body language made him look guilty of something. “Well, I think we’ve finished here. Ms. Maddocks, there’s a next-of-kin form here for you. We’re just updating the records. Please complete it and drop it in to me in the morning.”

She continued staring at him but nodded.

“Right. Well, I’ll leave you to it. Good night.” And then he rushed out the door before either of them could respond.

Jess stared now at Caitlin. “What was he doing here? Surely he didn’t need to deliver the form by hand at night?”

“He wanted to talk to me about something else. Nothing major.” She shrugged. “He had the forms

with him. Guess he figured he'd kill two birds with one stone."

"Why didn't he ask you to come to his office?"

Caitlin's brow furrowed. "I don't know. I was making some coffee and he knocked at the door. Should I have told him that I only talk to people in their offices after hours?" she asked, half-joking, half-defensive.

"What was so important that he needed to come here in person?" Jess pressed. Maybe Nick was right. Maybe Caitlin knew what was going on and she was helping Barton. The thought galled her.

Caitlin regarded her coolly. "Updating my personnel file. Why he was wandering around at this hour in this area, I don't know. Maybe it was an excuse to come in here and search again. I can't read the man's mind. And is there a reason that you seem to be accusing me of something?"

Jess set her bag on her bed. "No. Sorry. I'm just tired. This business has me edgy, that's all."

"Apology accepted. How was your day off?"

"Fine. Good." No way was Jess going to tell Caitlin about her visit to the police. Not after finding her chatting up Barton in their cabin. That was quite suspicious, no matter what Caitlin said.

"I'm glad." Caitlin picked up the two empty mugs and took them through to the kitchen area.

"He was here for a while then, if you had coffee?"

"Yeah, I guess." Caitlin began running water into the sink, but didn't contribute anything further about the matter and Jess was too upset to carry on their pretence of a conversation.

"I'm heading for a shower." Jess went into the bathroom, eager for the privacy. How could Caitlin have done this? How could she have believed her? Trusted her? She turned on the water, fighting an urge to cry.

Chapter Fourteen

"OKAY, I KNOW something's bothering you and I think it has to do with me." Caitlin pulled Jess's book down and made her look up. "I don't know what I've done, but I want to make things right."

Jess shrugged. "Everything's fine."

"You know that's not true. It's been a few days now and things haven't been right since you came back from your day off. Did something happen with Grace?"

Jess regarded her. She had the temerity to look worried. "No, Grace is fine."

"Well, what's the matter?"

"Honestly, forget it. I'm probably just tired or something." Jess raised her book, hoping that would end the conversation.

"Will you come to the stables with me?"

Jess lowered the book. "What for?"

"To see Flossy. She hasn't seen you for a few days."

The thought made Jess feel even worse. Flossy conjured memories of learning to ride with Caitlin coaching her patiently from the gate. It made her think of their hacks out together and the gossip and laughter they'd shared over tack cleaning. *It was probably all fake for her.* A depressing feeling of déjà vu swept over her. Rosalind had done the same thing a few months ago. Made her believe that she genuinely liked Jess, but it was all an act to get information. That seemed to be what Caitlin was about, too. *What is wrong with me that people like this are drawn to me?*

"Please? I'm not going to stop bugging you until you say yes." There was a warmth in Caitlin's voice that Jess found it hard to ignore.

She smiled despite herself. She so desperately wanted Caitlin to be genuine. Perhaps there was some

other reason Barton had been there and that reason extended to why Caitlin seemed so cagey and guilty about the whole thing, which made Jess feel she couldn't ask about it. Either way, it didn't look like she'd get any peace until she agreed to Caitlin's suggestion. "Oh, okay."

"Great. Do you want to ride? I know it's not as nice in the dark with the floodlights, but I'll be glad to help you, if that's what you want to do."

"No, I'll just go see her and give her a carrot."

Caitlin looked disappointed. "Okay. Your call."

They locked the cabin and headed off toward the stables. Jess would have walked in silence but Caitlin seemed determined to be chatty. "What do you think of this place with fewer kids? Pretty quiet, huh?"

"Yeah. There're not many residential at the moment. I do like the smaller groups, though, because it means they get more shooting time."

"And it gives us a chance to get to know a few of them a bit better. Piotr's been riding a few times now. I think he's taken a liking to it."

Jess nodded but didn't reply. She didn't feel comfortable discussing Piotr with her any longer. As they approached the yard, she was relieved to see there wasn't anyone else around. This felt forced enough without having to make more small talk.

"Heya, Flossy!" Caitlin called.

Jess grinned as the grey head popped out over the stable door. She walked over and held her hand out, letting Flossy smell her. "Hey, girl, how're you doing?" She reached under her mane and stroked her neck. "It's good to see you." And strangely, it was good to see her. Being around Flossy was quite relaxing.

Caitlin walked away but returned a few moments later carrying several carrots. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Jess took a carrot and held it out on her palm. Flossy sniffed it then gathered it into her mouth

with her lips.

"I've missed you at mealtimes the last few days."

"Yeah. I've been a bit random," Jess responded. In truth, she only went to breakfast to pick up an apple and banana to last her the day. Luckily, she'd managed to avoid both Caitlin and Nick since she'd started this new regime.

"Are you doing okay with your eating?"

"Yes, fine." She wished she'd never talked about it.

Thankfully, Caitlin let the subject drop. "I had a letter from Johnny this morning."

"Yeah? Is everything okay?"

"Fine. He said he misses me and wants to know when I'm coming home. My folks sound the same as always. Mom's health isn't so good, but she refuses to take things easy. I want to go back and help, but I don't know. My turning up might stress her out more than any help I can offer." She scraped some of the peeling paint off the stable door with the toe of her boot.

Jess watched and tried to work out what to say. She just didn't know who she was talking to, anymore. "I'm sorry."

Caitlin shrugged. "It's just the way things are."

Flossy had eaten the last carrot and was butting her muzzle into Jess's hand looking for more. "That's it, girl, all gone."

"C'mon. I'll let you go back now."

Caitlin seemed to lack her usual vivacity and they walked back to the accommodation area in silence. Jess almost spoke several times, but her reservations held her back. As they neared their cabin, Jess noticed movement near the lighted kitchen window. "Did you see that?" She stopped walking.

"What?"

"I think there's someone looking in the kitchen window."

They both watched for a minute. Everything seemed normal until a shadow crossed one of the front windows.

"You're right," Caitlin said.

Jess stared at the spot where she'd last seen movement. Her vision was distorted by staring so intently into the darkness. "Let's get closer."

They moved forward, both treading quietly. The form moved again. They sped up. Twenty metres now. For an instant, Jess saw the person illuminated by the light from inside. Whoever it was, he or she was dressed in dark clothes with the hood pulled up on the sweatshirt, covering their face. Almost there. Jess's foot scuffed in the gravel. The figure turned their way, its face a gaping black hole in the shadow of the hood. For a split second they regarded one another. Then it ran.

"Stop!" Caitlin shouted.

Jess sprinted after it. She could hear Caitlin running behind her. The hooded person ran quickly with long strides that increased the distance between them. Jess forced energy into her legs, propelling herself onward. They ran through the warren of cabins, the figure racing randomly on a winding path, trying to lose her. Jess kept going, just seeing the flash of movement in time to know where to go. She was breathing hard and feeling light-headed, but she ignored it.

They ran past the cabins and were now on more open ground. Jess could see the figure clearly, but it had gained a bigger distance and was heading out toward the woods that bordered the main field. *Come on, don't lose him.* She pushed her body even harder, nearly falling a couple of times as her torso overshot her legs. The sound of Caitlin's steps were still behind her, but not as close now.

Jess had always hated sprinting. She just wasn't built for it and her body was starting to rebel. Her

legs felt heavy and no matter how much her mind urged them on, they started to slow. *No, come on.* Every breath burned as her lungs desperately sought oxygen. Her head was throbbing now and her eyes blurring. Still she ran. If she didn't catch him before he reached the woods, she would lose him.

Suddenly, the field tilted and she crashed onto the grass. She landed on her shoulder and rolled over with the momentum. When she stopped, the field was still tilting, turning over on itself until she should have dropped down to the sky with gravity. Her head fizzed oddly and she heard the rush of blood in her ears.

"Are you okay?" Caitlin gasped between breaths.

"Yes, keep going."

"No." Caitlin knelt down next to her. "I need to make sure you're all right."

"Go on, he's getting away."

Caitlin shook her head. "I'll never catch him. He's in the woods now."

Jess shut her eyes against the disappointment. Her breathing was still painful and she felt queasy as the ground continued to undulate.

"What happened?"

"I stumbled, I think."

"Jess, have you been fasting again?"

"No." The lie came so easily, but a twinge of guilt accompanied it.

Caitlin didn't look convinced, but at least decided not to argue. They sat without speaking for several minutes until their breathing had settled back down. "Did you see who it was?" Caitlin asked.

"No. Whoever it was had a hoody on. I couldn't even tell if it was male or female."

"Same here. Maybe Nick, playing a prank?"

"He would have stopped running. Plus, I'd recognise his run, and it wasn't him."

"You're probably right." Caitlin waited a few

more moments before speaking again. "Are you okay to walk back now?"

Jess stood up slowly, giving her balance a chance to adjust. She didn't feel great, but she knew she wouldn't fall again. "Yes."

When they got back to the cabin, Jess went straight inside to change into her pyjamas. She wanted to look around outside with Caitlin, but she knew she wasn't up to it. Her body had definitely rebelled tonight and all she needed was to get into bed. The sensation of rest was wonderful and she barely managed to stay awake long enough for Caitlin to come back in.

"How are you doing?"

"Better now, thanks. Did you find anything?"

"No. The grass is trampled but it doesn't tell us anything more than we already knew. I couldn't see any footprints or anything useful." She flopped down onto her bed. "We might be able to see something more in the morning, but I doubt it."

Jess wondered if Caitlin was telling the truth. What if she had found something, but covered it up? Or maybe her role was to get Jess out of the way while someone came and went through her stuff again. Was that why Caitlin had stopped the chase? Because she already knew who it was?

"You get some sleep," Caitlin said. "There'll be time enough to think about this tomorrow."

"Okay. 'Night." Jess rolled over to face the wall and listened to the sounds of Caitlin getting ready for bed. She tried to stay awake and find some way to disprove her concerns, but the need for sleep overwhelmed her.

THANKS TO HER early night, Jess woke before Caitlin the next morning. Her mobile was flashing the low battery signal so she padded around the cabin

trying to find the charger. Ten minutes later her search was still fruitless and Caitlin sounded like she was waking up. Jess headed for the shower. The realisation that she was avoiding Caitlin was a depressing one. There seemed to be no safe topics to discuss anymore and it made her want to crawl into bed and hide. Either that, or to run and run until she couldn't remember anything. Instead, she plodded on dutifully, just as she always did.

When she emerged from the bathroom, Caitlin was leaning against the kitchen counter, a mug in her hand. "Morning."

"Morning." Jess could feel the unsaid statements backing up already. It exhausted her.

"I've got good news for you."

"Yeah?"

"I'm not going to bug you about food anymore." Caitlin sipped the contents of her mug. "I shouldn't have gotten involved in the first place. It's your body, do what you want with it."

Jess nodded, trying to work out why she felt like she'd been dumped. She should be happy now, shouldn't she? She had the freedom to do what she needed to.

"I'll go take a shower." Caitlin rinsed the mug then disappeared into the bathroom.

Still stunned, Jess walked across the room to sit on her bed. She hadn't realised until now, but part of her wanted help. She wanted an alternative to the torture she put herself through, and whether she had liked it or not, Caitlin's interference had kept her from feeling so alone. Now that Caitlin had given up the fight, Jess felt more alone than ever.

What's wrong with me? She clenched her fist as tightly as she could. *Why is whatever I try always wrong?* Her muscles tensed all the way up her arm. She pushed her feet harder on to the floor and her thigh muscles hardened. *I'm so frustrated.* She

slammed her fist into her thigh. It didn't hurt enough. She did it again and again. *What's wrong with me?* The tears came now, born of frustration more than anything.

Her mobile phone rang and flashed Grace's name. *I can't do this.* She left the phone behind, tugged the cabin door open, and lurched toward the solitude of the woods, desperate to escape.

FOUR HOURS LATER, Jess was nearing the end of the first activity session of the day. It had dragged. They were stuck inside again, this time making rocket ships out of toilet roll centres. The chipper personality she had developed for working with children was proving invaluable. Without it, she didn't think she'd be able to hold herself together. This morning she'd really had to fight against breakfast, the temptation to eat herself into a rebellious oblivion was huge.

"That's a very red rocket," she said, smiling at a little girl who often came to the craft sessions. "Is red your favourite colour?"

"Yes." She girl continued colouring without looking up.

Jess walked on to another desk. "Oh wow, I can see the astronaut in that one." This girl was a little older and had drawn a window with a person inside. She smiled shyly.

The door opened and Claire, the rifle-shooting instructor came in. Jess walked to meet her. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, but Barton wants to see you. He asked me to take over here." She shrugged and smiled.

"Okay," Jess said, suddenly unnerved. She looked across to where Piotr sat and gave him a subtle nod. "Thanks."

It felt odd to leave a class halfway through. The

camp was eerily silent as she headed toward Barton's office. The rain had lightened to drizzle, but the ground was waterlogged. When she stepped on the grass, water pooled around her foot. It made her feel even heavier.

"Hey." Caitlin was approaching the admin building too. She was still wearing her chaps and riding boots.

Jess walked at an angle so their paths met. "Hi. Everything okay?" It was unusual for Caitlin to be away from the stables in the day. Normally she only came back for lunch.

"Yeah. I've been summoned to see Barton. I don't know why."

"Same here."

"Interesting. Is Piotr all right?"

"As far as I know. He was doing crafts with me. Claire's come in to take over. I wonder what it is that couldn't wait till break time?"

Caitlin didn't reply, but she looked tense. She pulled open the door of reception and let Jess go through first. They both wiped their feet on the mat, Caitlin leaving streaks of dirt. "I hope that's mud."

Jess laughed. She almost made a comment about manure suiting Barton better but stopped herself. If Caitlin was in with Barton, things like that wouldn't make life any easier. They walked to Barton's office and Jess knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Jess opened the door. Barton was sitting at his desk and he seemed tense, from his posture. "You asked to see both Caitlin and I? Who would you like first?"

"I want to see you both together. Come and sit down."

They both walked in and sat down in the chairs opposite him. Jess was glad Caitlin was there too. Whatever her role in this was, it was good to have

another person to share his glares.

"I'll make this brief. I've had several reports that last night you two were rampaging around the camp frightening the children."

"That's not true—" Jess started.

"No—" Caitlin tried to break in.

"This is not up for debate. Your behaviour is completely unacceptable."

"But there was someone trying to get into our cabin," Jess said in a rush. "He was the one we chased." Jess was determined to explain.

"Ms. Maddocks." Barton snapped her name. "Insubordination will only harm you further."

Jess clenched her teeth together. She wanted to tell him exactly what he could do with his job but she couldn't. Piotr needed her.

Caitlin tried next. "Mr Barton, I do think there has been some misunderstanding. Jess was just trying—"

"Will you be quiet!" He glared at them, the ensuing silence reinforcing his power. "I am not interested in your excuses. Ms. Gilmore, you would do well to remember our earlier discussions."

Jess looked across, but Caitlin didn't respond, and she kept her eyes on Barton.

"You should both know that the children are the heart of this camp. You are supposed to be helping them make the very best of their stay here." He was calmer now he wasn't facing opposition. "Your actions last night put that enjoyment as well as the children's safety in jeopardy. I am therefore left with no choice but to discipline you."

Jess kept her face impassive and stared at the knot of his tie.

"I am issuing you both with a final warning which will be added to your employment records. If either of you do anything to endanger the health or happiness of the children again, it will result in immediate dismissal. Do you understand?"

"Yes," they both said.

"Good. You may go."

They stood simultaneously and Jess followed Caitlin out into the corridor. Neither of them spoke until they were back outside. "He's crazy." Caitlin kicked at the gravel sending a shower of stones spraying out. "It's lies and he knows it."

Jess thrust her hands in her pockets. She was livid, but unlike Caitlin, her anger didn't manifest physically. It was inside her, pulsing around her body like molten lava. She could feel it cooling already, solidifying into the desire for vengeance.

"Neither of us would do anything to hurt the kids. How can he say that when he's doing his stuff?"

"He knows he's lying," Jess said. "It's not about whether his allegations are true, it's about whether he has the power to act on them. And he does."

"It sucks."

"Yes, it does." What sucked more though, Jess thought, was not knowing whether Caitlin was an innocent victim or just playing along.

FIVE HOURS LATER found Jess driving to the nearest petrol station. She had done her duty, the children had all enjoyed their activity sessions with her, and it was Nick's turn on Piotr-watch. Bypassing the pumps, she parked outside the shop. As she walked through the double automatic doors, she noticed the CCTV camera pointing directly at her. *Is this how soon-to-be robbers feel?* The sense of anticipation must be the same. And the pre-meditated intention to cause harm. She picked up a basket from the stack and started at the bakery section. One bag of jam doughnuts. Three – no, four – chocolate bars. One jumbo pack of honey-roast cashew nuts. A bottle of chocolate milk. She looked at her basket. Something was missing. She found it in the freezer section. A box

of ice cream bars. *That'll do for now.*

Jess strode to the checkout. She didn't want anyone to see her with her basket of sin.

"This looks good." The cashier smiled at her. "Having a party?"

"Yeah, just a few friends."

With her bulging carrier bag, Jess walked back to her car. She stowed the food carefully on the passenger seat and pulled away. After several miles of heading into the wilderness, she found a lay-by that would serve her purpose. The small road should see minimal traffic, particularly as it was now into the early evening. The lack of street lights meant that she could enjoy her seclusion in darkness. Some things were best done in the dark.

She started with the ice cream bars, out of practicality more than anything else. They didn't taste as good as she'd hoped so when they'd gone she tried the doughnuts. After two, she wanted the sensation of crunching the nuts between her teeth. The thought of it was better than the reality. Frustrated, she quenched her thirst with the chocolate milk. It slipped down her throat smoothly until she was sucking at an empty bottle. She opted for the chocolate next, chomping her way through all the bars in sequence. None of them satisfied the need that was nagging at her. She returned to the doughnuts and ate the last three. Still not quite right. She reached into the bag for the next thing, but found only wrappers. She'd eaten it all.

The realisation shocked her and brought her back to the awareness of her body. Desperately hot, she switched the ignition on and opened the window. The cool air flooded in. She gasped, trying to get the fresh air to her lungs, but she still felt stifled. The food felt like it was backed up to her throat. All that food. Her body was stuffed but her soul felt hollow.

Her mobile phone lit up and Grace's name

flashed. Jess stared at it. The ringing filled the car, intruding into the sickening act she'd just committed. She was still staring when the answerphone cut it off. *What have I done?*

Chapter Fifteen

GRACE LISTENED TO the repetitive ring with an increasing feeling of apprehension. As it had before, the line cut through to the answerphone. She listened to Jess's voice and the message she knew by heart. After the beep she spoke. "Hi, it's me. I just wanted to catch up and see how things are going. Call me when you get chance. I've missed chatting to you over the last few days." She put the phone back in its cradle on the sideboard and looked around, trying to decide what to do next. Willow was watching her from the floor, her muzzle resting on her front paws and her ears low with concern. "Yeah," Grace blew out a breath. "That's how I feel."

She walked through to the office, motioning for Willow to follow. The laptop was already running as she'd been checking her e-mails through the day. She checked again, disappointed but not surprised when there was nothing new. "She's probably fine," Grace said to Willow. She thought about the last time Jess had ignored her calls. It had been symptomatic of a depression that had overcome Jess and Grace couldn't help but fear the same thing was happening now. The last time she'd spoken to her was five days ago when she came home to go to the police. Grace had almost exclaimed at how dreadful Jess looked, but she caught herself in time. Jess's clothes had started to hang oddly and her body was losing its soft curves. When she hugged Jess she felt bone and fragility. Jess's face was gaunt and her eyes hollow in their sockets. Grace would have guessed at drug abuse if she didn't already know about Jess's eating issues.

The biggest and most harrowing change to see was in Jess's behaviour. She was jumpy, tense, and irritable. Her humour and warmth seemed to have disappeared with her curves. It was as though she

was losing herself with the weight she seemed so determined to shed. Jess had refused to eat anything for that day and all she'd drank was water. She had been constantly pulling at her clothes as though she was trying to cover up the places where some softness still existed. Her demeanour and language told Grace that she was dealing with depression in the mix. She was quick to criticise and put herself down and though the chemistry between them was still there, it was getting harder and harder for Grace to reach her with the flirty banter.

"What should I do?" She asked Willow as her eyes misted with tears. "I kept hoping she'd talk to me, but she just seems to be getting farther away. I can't bear to just sit and watch." Grace gave in to the thought she'd been trying to ignore for weeks. *What if it's me?* Was she doing something that made Jess so unhappy she was stuck in this spiral? Or was it just having the pressure of having someone living with her? Before Jess could eat what she wanted when she wanted without have to creep around in the night. The lengths she now went to in buying, storing, eating, and dealing with the rubbish from her binges couldn't be good for her psyche. So much guilt and shame. Maybe the biggest kindness she could do for Jess was to move out. If she couldn't help her, then not hindering would be the next best thing.

The chime of a new e-mail sent a thrill of hope through Grace's chest. Seconds later it faded. "Spam," she reported to Willow as she berated herself for getting excited. If Jess wasn't going to answer her calls then she was hardly likely to e-mail. The flare of irritation at herself sparked into a smouldering anger at the situation. Jess shouldn't have to go through this. Nobody should. Grace cursed her own inactivity. She'd got too bogged down with trying not to judge or challenge, but that evidently wasn't helping Jess. "Time for a change of tactics." She opened the

Internet browser and keyed in "Eating disorders". Grace wanted her Jess back and she was ready to fight for her.

TODAY, IT WAS Mickey who came for her. He watched the end of her afternoon archery group then approached her as soon as they'd finished. "Barton wants to see you." His tone was not reassuring. "I'll take these guys in for tea."

Jess plodded across the field. *What did he want this time?* The wet weather contributed to her dark mood. It had dried out a little in the last twenty-four hours, most likely because of the wind. She suspected this time Barton intended to get rid of her with whatever fictitious crime he'd created. She debated whether she wanted to go and find out. Maybe she should just leave.

"Jessie." This time it was Nick who called her.

She waited while he caught up. "You're not going to see Barton too, are you?"

"Yeah. Do you know what it's about?"

"No, but I'm sure it isn't good. He had me and Caitlin in his office yesterday and gave us a final warning."

"No way. What for?"

"Frightening the children, as he put it."

"As if. How are you supposed to have done that?"

"I haven't had a chance to talk to you, but someone was lurking outside our cabin and we chased whoever it was." They were almost at reception now.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was upset. And I just haven't had a chance."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know. He — maybe she — got away before I could find out."

"Didn't you explain?" Nick stopped at the door.

"Of course, but he didn't want to hear it." She lowered her voice as they entered the building. "I just thought you ought to be prepared. I think he may be on to us."

Nick looked so nervous that Jess regretted telling him anything. There was no time for reassurance as Barton appeared from the storeroom. "Follow me, please." From his tone, this definitely wasn't good.

They followed him silently and sat down at his desk. Barton glared at Jess. "I cannot believe I've had you in here two days running." He shook his head, making her feel even more of a failure.

"I've just discovered that you two are responsible for providing a child here with a mobile phone. Perhaps one of you would like to tell me why?"

Uh-oh.

"What phone?" Nick asked, and he sounded as if he didn't know what Barton was talking about.

Barton pursed his lips. "The one found during a search of Piotr's belongings. One of his cabinmates saw him charging it and complained because mobile phones are against the rules. As you both know."

"I didn't know Piotr had a phone," Nick said. "Where did he get it?"

"That's interesting. I wonder why he had your mobile phone numbers programmed into it. I've double-checked against the contact details in your files and they match. Perhaps he broke in here and read them?" The sarcasm in his voice was unmistakable.

"Wait. It was my fault," Jess said. "I bought him the phone. He saw mine once during a class and was so envious. He's never had one before. I just bought him a cheap and cheerful one as a little present. I told him not to use it until he left here, but I guess there was a communication problem. I was trying to tell him by gestures because he doesn't speak English."

"Well, if that's true, how do you account for the

fact your numbers were programmed into his phone?"

Jess felt a momentary rush of relief. It looked like they still didn't know Piotr could speak English. That was good. "I was trying to teach him how to program in numbers. He couldn't understand the instruction book, so I read it and showed him. I programmed my number and Nick's in because they're the ones I know off the top of my head. We practiced for a while until Piotr was able to do it alone."

"Is this what happened?" Barton challenged Nick. Jess pushed her foot against his.

"I guess so. I don't know about any phone."

"Fine." Barton said, but his tone was still cold. "You may go."

Nick hesitated for a moment, looking at Jess fearfully.

"Now, Mr. Maddocks."

Jess watched as he left. When the door had closed behind him, she turned back to Barton, who glared at her. "You evidently have no regard for rules. Your selfish arrogance could lead to others suffering, so further to your final warning yesterday, I am hereby dismissing you with immediate effect. Please pack your belongings. I expect you to have left by nightfall." He stood, indicating that the conversation had ended.

Jess left his office without comment.

Nick and Caitlin were both waiting at her cabin when she got there.

"What happened?" Nick asked.

"I got sacked. I have to go tonight."

"For the phone?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes."

"I don't get it. Why wasn't I called in with you two? I thought my number was programmed in, as well."

"It was," Jess said. "I don't know, either. It looks

like he has some reason to want to protect you.”
There. I said it.

“What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing.” Jess shrugged.

“Go on, spit it out.” Caitlin said. “I think you need to get it off your chest.”

“You do, do you?” Jess stared at her, angry. “Well it looks to me like you’re a lot more friendly with Barton than you’ve been letting on. First, that cosy little chat I interrupted the other day, then you gave up chasing that spy, and now you don’t even get called in for something I lose my job over. It was probably you who got our cabin searched, too. Great acting job you did there. You certainly had me fooled.”

Caitlin’s expression went from sympathetic to disgusted as Jess unleashed her bitterness. “It looks like you’ve got that all worked out. Is there any point in me trying to defend myself?”

“No, not really. I don’t believe anything you say anymore. If you’re with them, that means you’re responsible for Sergey.” She stood and jabbed a finger at Caitlin’s chest. “I hope you can live with that, because there’s no way I could.”

Caitlin glared at her for a few long seconds. Just when Jess thought she was about to speak she turned and left the cabin.

“That was pretty full-on,” Nick said after Caitlin had gone.

Jess ran her hands through her hair. “It’s really frustrating me. Why do people have to mess about pretending to be something they’re not? Why can’t they just have a tattoo on their forehead telling everyone they’re a liar?”

“Did you hear Caitlin talking to Barton about stuff?”

“No. I caught them in here together, drinking coffee and being all pally-pally. They looked so

shocked when I came in, like guilty school kids."

"Did you get back early from your day off, then?"

Jess thought back. "No. Late, actually."

"So they wouldn't have been all that surprised, then. It's your cabin and you were due back. Maybe it was innocent after all."

She turned on him. "Make up your mind, Nick. You were the one telling me we had to watch out for her, saying that you didn't trust her."

"Hey, I was just giving you a heads-up and to be careful, like what you said to me. I didn't mean for you to go off on her like that."

Jess pulled her suitcase down from on top of the wardrobe and threw it on her bed. "I can't believe you. I came here to help you because you asked, and now you're turning on me." All her anger at herself and her situation was pouring out, its venom distorting everything.

"Jessie, relax. I'm not turning on you. I'm just saying you were very hard on her considering you don't know for sure that she's in with the bad guys. What if she's not? Imagine how she must be feeling right now."

"Then why don't you go and find her, if you care so much? Don't worry that I just lost my job covering your back. Or that there are kids in danger here." She practically spat the words, she was so angry and hurt.

"Hey, that's not fair —"

"Just go. Go find Caitlin, if that's what you want to do. I don't care anymore."

He looked like he wanted to say something else but evidently decided not to. He shut the cabin door quietly behind him, leaving her alone, staring at her suitcase, fighting tears. Fighting her pathetic urge to fall on her bed and sob, Jess stamped around the cabin, emptying stacks of clothes straight into her suitcase. Part of her wanted to phone Grace, but even that was denied. Her mobile was dead and the

charger was still missing. Anger built on anger, white hot in her veins. Barton, Caitlin, Nick, the binge, weight, failure, shame. The triggers flicked across her mind, inciting her into deeper fury. She wanted to scream at the world. There was no escape from any of it.

As her suitcase filled, her anger solidified. Her thoughts of vengeance turned inward. *All of this crap and I'm the link. I bring this on myself.* She was gritting her teeth so hard she felt shooting pains in her temples. She moved to the bathroom and threw her belongings into her wash bag. Caitlin's toothbrush looked lonely. Jess imagined her chatting with Barton about how well they'd played her. Then another image came to mind. Caitlin stroking a horse, innocent and hurting because of her. Jess felt her throat tighten with self-loathing. She needed to get out of her head. The pain was unbearable.

She looked at the disposable razor in her hand. *You really hate yourself? Prove it.* She took her scissors out of the bag and used them as a lever, breaking the plastic around the blade. She dropped the pieces into the bag until she was left with just the blade, which seemed so thin. She pressed the sharp edge of it to the skin of her left forearm and increased the pressure until she felt it bite. Then she dragged it toward her. A line of red drops sprang up in its path then rushed to meet one another. A perfect red line. It didn't hurt enough. It needed to match how badly she hurt inside.

She walked to the kitchen, cupping her right hand under her arm to catch the blood. She rummaged in the utensils drawer until she found the knife she wanted, the largest. The blade was about twenty centimetres long and five at its base. It seemed more appropriate for her purposes. She put the blade at a different angle, aiming to make a cross with the existing red line. This time she had to use more force to get the knife to bite. Her flesh bulged on either side

of the metal. She pulled the knife slowly along, feeling it squeak along the flesh.

The cross she'd cut wasn't enough. She needed more. Inside, she was overwhelmed, lost, hopeless. She made two more cuts, quickly this time, but going as deep as she could. Tilting the blade, she scraped it across the lines, smearing the red across the freckles on her skin. Her third cut wasn't bleeding enough. She traced the line with a new cut and this time, she had to force her way through the pain.

Her anger was beginning to ebb, flowing out of her body with her blood. She tried to harness the last of it, pressing the blade down into two more lines. They weren't as deep now. Her pathetic pain threshold stopped her from doing what she wanted. Six large gashes showed on her arm. It still didn't do justice to the turmoil in her mind, but it was something. She was coming back to herself now. The courage had left her to make any more cuts.

She dropped the knife into the sink to deal with later. Reaching for the roll of paper towels, she ripped a piece off then wrapped it around her arm, taking grim satisfaction in watching it turn scarlet in seconds. She waited for a few minutes then took the paper away. Her arm looked a mess, swollen all round the areas she'd cut and the blood spread by the knife was beginning to dry. The six gashes varied in length, probably between four centimetres and seven. Her arm throbbed, hurting in a dull way that was somehow more painful than the intensity of cutting had been.

She returned to the bathroom and disposed of the bloody paper towels down the toilet. She had to flush twice to get rid of the pink water. Dropping the last of her belongings into her wash bag, she completed clearing the bathroom.

"PIOTR? WHERE ARE you going?" Jess had gone to his cabin to say goodbye, but instead found him packing.

"I don't know. They say I have to go in a car somewhere."

Oh no. Not him, too.

"They took my phone," he said, looking up at her with anguish.

"I know. I just found out."

"I don't want to go." He was trying not to cry.

"You don't have to. C'mon." Jess grabbed his hand and they ran back to her cabin. She barged inside and went straight for her car keys. The half-full suitcase still lay haphazardly on the bed, but there was no time for that now. "It's okay," she said as she gave Piotr a smile. "Let's go, shall we?"

They walked from her cabin to the outskirts of the car park. Piotr stuck close to her, his face pale. "You stay there," she said. "I'll get the car going, drive to you here, and you get in the passenger seat, okay?"

He nodded, fear on his face.

"It's all right. We'll be gone before anyone realises." She gave him a quick nod then walked over to her car, trying to look as though she wasn't expecting bogeymen to jump out at any second.

The car park was nearly full, but her Lexus stood out with its higher roof and blacked-out rear windows. Jess almost wished she had a more nondescript vehicle, but she approached its familiar form with a sense of relief. She pressed the button to unlock it remotely and had to force herself not to run to the sanctuary that it offered. As soon as she closed the door, she risked a look in the mirrors. Nobody was in sight.

She turned the key in the ignition, relieved when it started first time. She backed out of her space then cruised to where she'd left Piotr. He was there, waiting for her. As soon as she stopped, he darted

forward and clambered into the passenger seat. "Okay?"

"Yes," he said, relieved.

She pushed down on the accelerator and started down the drive. The temptation to rush was incredible, but she didn't want to attract attention. Instead, she maintained a steady twenty miles per hour for what felt like hours. As they approached the road, she checked once again in her rear-view mirror. Still no sign of company. *Good.*

Out of habit, she turned right and headed in the direction of home. She hadn't thought where they would go. She'd just acted on the obvious need to get Piotr to safety until they knew what he faced. The country roads had little traffic but plenty of corners, so it was hard to tell if anyone was following them or not. Jess made some random turns at junctions taking any direction as long as it was away from camp. After six junctions she began to relax.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay." He looked in the wing mirror.

"It's all right. There's no one behind us. We're safe."

He gave a half-smile in response.

"I haven't thought about where to go. We could go to my house, or I could take you straight to the police and we'll talk to them together. Which would you prefer?" She wanted him to have a choice.

"Neither." The voice that answered was too low for Piotr.

As she heard the reply, she was suddenly aware of movement in the back of the car. Mickey's head appeared between the two back seats. Fear flooded Jess's body.

"Hello." He grinned, but not in a friendly way.

Piotr gasped.

A car horn sounded to Jess's right, warning her that she had wandered into oncoming traffic. She

turned the steering wheel hard and the car fell back into lane. They all leant with the momentum.

"Steady there," Mickey said as he heaved his shoulders through the gap. "We want to get back to camp in one piece."

"We're not going back." Jess said through clenched teeth.

Mickey pulled his legs through the gap and sat down on the back seat. "Yes, we are. You can drive until you run out of petrol, but I'll still be here. As soon as the car stops I'm taking Piotr." He leant forward and reached his arms around to encompass Piotr and his seat. "By force if needs be." Piotr whimpered as Mickey's arms tightened and Jess saw the metal of a blade. "I'm sure nobody wants to see anything happen to boy wonder here. Particularly as I see he can speak English after all."

Jess tried desperately to think of options, but it felt as though her brain had short-circuited with shock.

"You didn't see this coming did you?" Mickey laughed. "I bet you're desperate to know how I did it. It was so easy, too. All I had to do was get the keys while you were teaching your last session and unlock the car leaving the door ajar. I put the keys back on the way to fetch you for Barton then, while he was keeping you busy I hid in the boot and shut the door on myself. The tinted windows were the icing on the cake."

Jess only half listened to his crowing. She was searching her mirrors and the world outside the car for some way out of the trap.

"Turn around at this roundabout ahead." Mickey instructed. "You've got no options and I've got stuff to do at camp."

Jess looked down at the telephone control on her steering wheel.

"You could try and call someone," Mickey

suggested, "but I've had your charger for a week now. I doubt your phone has any battery left, right?"

She cursed herself for assuming she'd left the charger on her last visit home.

"Piotr's phone's been confiscated." He made a disapproving tutting noise. "Let's see. You could go straight to a police station, but then I'd have to get a bit more forceful and I don't think Piotr would enjoy that. All in all, I think it's best we just go back to camp."

She looked across at Piotr. He had lost his colour again and his eyes were wide with fear. Mickey was right. There were no options. She couldn't try and get the knife away from him and still drive. Going back was the only thing she could do without risking Piotr getting hurt.

"Okay." She looked at Piotr again. "It's all right."

He didn't look convinced, and neither was she.

Mickey kept his grip on Piotr for the return journey, depriving her of any chance to make a move. When they pulled up in front of the administration building, Barton was waiting for them. They all got out of the car at the same time. Jess wondered whether to tell Piotr to run, but where would he go? Mickey would catch him, anyway. Instead, she tried to give him a reassuring smile as Mickey led him away. *I've not given up*. She willed him to feel her support.

"Ms. Maddocks. My office."

Jess debated whether to follow. She still had her car keys in her hand and she owed him nothing. That wouldn't help Piotr, though. Settling her emotional armour into place, she followed him. As she sat down in the now-familiar seat, she knew her face would show how she despised him. She didn't care.

"Thank you."

The first thing he said was not what she expected.

"I needed to know just how much you were

willing to interfere and you demonstrated perfectly."

Jess felt sick. All of that just to play into their hands.

Barton looked smug. "Anyway, now I must decide where we go from here. I suppose I could put you under citizen's arrest for kidnapping."

Jess remained silent.

"Perhaps you should explain what possessed you to take Piotr like that?"

"We fancied some ice cream."

Barton frowned. "Ms. Maddocks, I've had quite enough of you. I suggest you don't test my patience further. Why did you take Piotr?"

She eyed him. "For ice cream."

"Fine."

They glared at each other in silence until Jess realised Barton had nothing else to say. He was waiting. She jumped up and ran to the door. The handle wouldn't turn. She twisted it with both hands, shoving with her body to try and force it open.

"It's locked."

Jess stopped and gathered her dignity. "Please unlock it. I wish to leave."

"No. Not until Mickey gets back. I didn't expect you to cooperate, but I thought I'd give you the chance."

Jess looked at the ground floor window. The slatted blinds were tilted so nobody could see in.

"Locked as well."

"Now who's involved in a kidnapping?" She shot as she tried the door again. Maybe she could get out with brute force. She rammed her shoulder against it as hard as she could. It stayed solid. Her fear gave her strength and she started bashing repeatedly, yanking the handle as hard as she could. Maybe someone would hear her.

"Stop it!" Barton had grabbed her arm and tried to pull her back.

She swung round to face him, overwhelmed with the desire to punch him. Instead, she shoved him away from her. "Don't touch me."

They both stopped to listen as the key turned in the lock.

"Watch out," Barton shouted.

Jess tried to force her way through as soon as the door opened but Mickey was there, ready to catch her. He grabbed her right arm and twisted it up behind her back. It felt like it would rip off at the shoulder any second. She yelped with pain.

"Shut up," Barton said. He started walking along the corridor and Mickey forced her to follow.

"Don't try and run or shout," Mickey said, "or I'll have to keep an even tighter grip on you." He forced her arm up even more, sending shooting pains into her shoulder and up her neck.

Jess followed in silence. She couldn't think for the pain in her arm. Where was everyone? Where was Nick? Why was the place so empty? She looked around, desperate to see someone who would help her, but the camp was deserted.

They reached the old equipment shed without meeting anyone else. Jess had seen it, but never been in. It was well out of the way of the other buildings and she'd never had the need to use it.

"You're going to spend some time in here," Barton said as he unlocked the padlock. "We don't want you indulging any more ice cream cravings."

Mickey shoved her through the entrance and into the semi-darkness of the shed. She heard the door shut behind her and the click of the padlock. She stretched her arm out and then hugged it across her chest. The sensation of pins and needles flooded it as the blood began to circulate again.

As she worked on her arm, Jess circled on the spot to assess the shed. A dim, orange light filtered in from the two high windows. It must have come from some

security lights, as it was now fully dark outside. She hoped they stayed on all the time. She didn't want to be in here in complete darkness. The windows were too narrow for her to climb through even if she could get up there. Perhaps she could drop a note out or something, though.

The shed smelled of rotting grass and oil and was full of clutter. Most of the stuff was so covered in rust and dirt it was hard to figure out what it was. Taking up the space nearest her was a line painting machine. There were also some shelves with paint cans, a pair of netball goals, a wheelbarrow, and a half of an oil drum contraption that looked like a customised barbeque.

She moved to the door and tried the handle. The door felt heavier than she'd hoped. Something crawled on the back of her neck. Jess brushed at it with her hand. *Please, no spiders*. She jumped about, hoping that anything else would fall off. "It's all right." She spoke aloud in an effort to reassure herself. "We'll get out of this."

Peering through the gloom, she saw a broom leaning up against the wall. She reached for it, repulsed when her palm met the soft clinginess of cobweb. Grabbing it tightly, she flung the broom onto the floor by the door and wiped her hands forcefully on her jeans. For a minute or two she toed the broom around on the ground, giving any spiders the chance to run away.

She picked it up and tried not to look too closely. Spiders were the worst, but their cocooned morsels weren't much better. Jess angled the handle end of the broom in the crack where the door met the frame. She opted for a spot near the floor, hoping she would be able to get enough of a gap to offer some leverage. After several tries, it was obvious it wasn't going to work. The broom was too wide and there wasn't enough of a gap to lodge it in.

Jess leaned the broom up against the wall again and started to look for something else, like a crowbar. "They probably searched this place already," she said, her voice sounding eerily loud in the silence. The only things that looked like they might work were attached to something else. The leg of the barbeque caught her attention but it had been welded to the drum. The whole thing was packed in tightly behind other junk. If she had any chance of using it, she'd have to dig it out first.

She dusted off an old crate with her broom then sat down to think. The adrenaline rushes of the day were catching up with her and, as usual, she was hungry. Both her arms hurt, one from Mickey and the other from her cuts. She tried not to think about her thirst. Tilting her watch face to the light she saw it was half past eight. Surely Nick or Caitlin would be looking for her? Or at least Nick. He'd see her car was still here so he'd know she hadn't left. Hopefully, he was watching Piotr, too. If Barton wanted her out of the way, there must be something going on. He couldn't keep her cooped up in here for too long, could he?

As her thoughts became increasingly gloomy, Jess mentally kicked herself. She had to keep moving. The cold had given her goose bumps and the chill was settling in her bones. She worked on freeing the barbeque in the absence of any better idea. It took her about half an hour and multiple spider incidents, but by the time she reached it, she was much warmer. She dragged it out to the space by the door and tilted it onto its side. Shoving it forward into position, she tilted it up slightly and lined up the lower legs.

The metal of the legs was much thinner than the broom and she could almost slot it into the gap. Each time she lined it up, however, the other part of the v caught. There just wasn't enough clearance to get the metal in there. She knew it was hopeless, but she

didn't want to give up. Not until she had another idea. In the end, the decision was taken from her when the security lights went out.

The shed was in full darkness—the disturbing type where everything looks the same whether your eyes are open or not. Jess stood still for a few minutes, hoping that they were on a sensor or something and would come on again. They didn't. She fought the urge to cry. She would be in here overnight. Groping her way forward, she retreated to her crate and sat down.

"Think happy thoughts," she told herself, her voice quiet this time. She imagined herself with Grace. They were walking, and Jess was thin. It wasn't a happy thought. It was one that reminded her of everything she'd done wrong. Every failure of willpower, moment of greed, and weakness of character. She forced her thoughts away and moved on to Caitlin and Nick and the arguments she'd had with each of them. The lump in her throat was painful. "All, right, how about animals? French animals. How many can I name?" She started with lapin.

After twelve animals, including questionable entries, she switched to colours. Then she switched to English counties. By the time she tried the American states, her teeth were chattering with cold. The only thing that could give her any warmth was an old tennis net that she'd moved to get to the barbeque. She hated to think of how many spiders there'd be in that.

Cartoon characters kept her occupied for a long time but her concentration wandered. The cold made her nose run and her toes hurt. She did a few half-hearted star jumps to try and get her blood moving, but it made her too conscious of her physical self. She needed to distance herself from her body and its unhappy situation. So she thought about films she

had seen and books she had read. In her mind, at least, she was free to roam.

Chapter Sixteen

JESS WOKE STIFF and uncomfortable with part of the tennis net draped over her back. Weak daylight shone in through the windows. She shrugged the net off and stood up, stretching to alleviate the kinks in her muscles. Quarter past seven. She jumped up and down, trying to warm herself and wake up a bit. Time to get out of here.

The shed was located on the other side of the main field, far enough away from the rest of the buildings that shouting wasn't going to help. She had tried and failed to force the door, so she was going to need some way to get attention. Like a "help" banner. She looked up at the windows. Maybe if she could post enough stuff out of them, someone would get curious and investigate. It was worth a try.

Jess righted the barbeque and dragged it under one of the windows. It was solid enough that she could use it to stand on. Carefully, she stepped up and paused in surfer pose while she got her balance. The window was well within reach now, but she had to crouch slightly to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling. The view out was reassuring. People were up and about—signs of normality.

The window, however, wasn't designed to open. She tapped on it to check it was glass and could thus be broken. Stepping back down, she retrieved the broom and turned it upside down. She stood as far back as she could then lined up the brush end with the window. Keeping her face down, she smashed the broom into the glass. There was a thud, but nothing broke. It took a few tries, as her aim fouled when she looked away. Finally, the window gave in and the sound of smashing glass filled the shed. Shards scattered down around her and Jess felt the sting of cuts on her hands and arms. Some pieces went in her

hair, too, so she tilted forward and gently shook them out.

She looked up, and experienced some satisfaction at the hole in the window. *Good*. She used the bristles of the broom to push debris from the window outside. When she had the hole as big as she could make it, she switched to clearing up the debris from her workspace. As she moved around, the pieces of glass crunched under her feet and she was glad of her boots.

She started dumping things out the window, beginning with the paint cans, as they were moveable and within reach. It took quite some time as she had to keep getting up on the barbeque to do it. Next went some planks of wood. Then flower pots. She heard a couple of the ceramic ones break as they landed. The tennis net was tempting, but she thought she ought to keep it in case she had to spend another night in here.

After a while, Jess paused and looked around. She was having a hard time trying to find things narrow enough to slot through. There was a chance she could get the netball goals through if she angled them correctly. The bases would have to stay in because of the supports but if she could get two goals sticking out of the window, surely someone would notice how odd that looked and come to check it out.

Working around an old cylinder mower, Jess managed to wheel the first post out and to the window. She started with it too close and had to pull it back in to have enough clearance. With some persistence, she worked the hoop through the gap and then tilted it to work on the trunk. It was almost too heavy for her to move but the base of the window took some of the weight and sheer determination did the rest. She paused, resting, then went to get another post.

“Hey, is someone in there?”

Jess stopped, heart thumping in anticipation. The

voice was better than Christmas.

"Yes! Help, I'm locked in."

"Jess?"

"Yeah. Is that Caitlin?"

"Sure is. I've been looking for you all night. What happened?"

"Long story, but Barton stuck me in here."

"Barton? What's going on? Wait, we'll talk about it later. I'll get you out. I just need to go and find a screwdriver. I'll be back."

"Promise?" What if Caitlin was still angry about what Jess had said the day before?

"I promise. Hold on."

The next ten minutes seem to drag even longer than the night. Jess was torn in her thoughts about Caitlin. Was she on Barton's side and had run off to tell him? Was she on her side and was working to help her? What if something happened in the meantime?

"I'm back," came Caitlin's voice. "You still okay in there?"

Jess grinned at the door with relief. "Yeah. But I'm ready to get out."

"Okay. Hold on. I'm just taking the latch off. The padlock seems pretty heavy-duty."

Jess waited. It was hard to be patient when you were desperate to use the bathroom.

"There're a couple of bolts too... almost there."

There were two thuds as the bolts went back then the door opened and daylight rushed in. Jess squinted.

"Come on," Caitlin said. "Let's get you to the cabin and you can fill me in on what happened on the way."

"JESS, I NEED to tell you something." Caitlin said as soon as Jess had fixed her emergency needs. "Nick's missing. And Piotr. I've been trying to find

them, and you, but I'm not having any luck."

Jess stared at her, anxiety shooting through her veins. "Since when?"

"Last night. I couldn't tell you exactly what time, but I stopped by Nick's cabin twice—once late—and couldn't find him. I went again this morning and then I went looking for Piotr, as well, but no luck. I was hoping y'all were together, but I guess not."

Missing. Oh, no. "Have you phoned the police?"

"Not yet. I wasn't sure what to do so I phoned Grace this morning when you still hadn't come back. I think she's on her way."

Jess sat down on the edge of the bed as her mind tried to catch up. Grace? Caitlin called Grace? "Okay, first, when did you last check Nick's cabin?"

"This morning at about six-thirty. His bed hadn't been slept in. Same with Piotr's."

"They must have gone sometime last night. When did you last see them?"

"Nick was with you when I left here yesterday afternoon and I saw Piotr earlier, at tea. He was upset that they'd taken his phone, so I gave him mine."

"You gave him yours? He must have had it on him in the car, then." Jess wondered whether things could have worked out differently if she'd known that. *No, probably not.* "Maybe he's been trying to contact me." She hated herself again for not acting on the missing charger.

"No, I've been using yours. That's how I called Grace."

"How did you charge it?"

"I asked around. Claire has the same kind, so I borrowed her charger."

"I should have thought of that." Jess shook her head.

Caitlin shrugged. "You didn't know it would matter. Anyway, there's something else. Piotr's been signed out on the register."

"Oh, no. It's the same as with Sergey, then."

"Maybe. Maybe not. For all we know, Nick took him to the police."

Maybe that's what had happened. She could only hope. "True. Either way, it looks like I was the last to see them both. Nick left not long after you and Piotr I last saw when we got back here with Mickey yesterday evening. I'd guess it was at half-seven or eight. Mickey must have taken Piotr somewhere, but I don't know where."

"Do you think they're together?"

"I reckon there's a good chance. Nick wasn't due for time off and he isn't the type to go away overnight."

"Maybe he was with a woman," Caitlin offered.

Jess shook her head. "No, he's not got anyone at the moment. He gets a special kind of grin when he's got romance on his mind. I'd have known. Have you tried calling him?"

Caitlin nodded. "It goes straight through to voicemail."

"It must be switched off, then." Jess ran through several thoughts at once. "I think we ought to tell the police."

"I agree."

"Wait—have you seen Barton? Is he around?"

She shook her head.

"What about Mickey?"

"No. Haven't seen either of them."

That could be good or bad, Jess decided. She wasn't supposed to be here, since Barton had sacked her yesterday. There was a chance he hadn't mentioned it to other staff, but that seemed unlikely, so she'd best keep a low profile. Jess took her phone from Caitlin and then searched her wallet for a particular business card. She dialled the number carefully, double-checking each digit as she went.

"D.I. Knight." The inspector answered after two

rings.

"This is Jess Maddocks from Camp Condor."

"Ms. Maddocks...yes. How can I help?"

"I'm not sure, but both my brother and Piotr are missing. We suspect they're together."

"I see. When did you last see either of them?"

"Nick was at about five last night and Piotr at eight. Apparently, Piotr has been signed out on the register but it can't be genuine. He'd been told he was leaving and he was frightened, so I tried to get him away from camp yesterday evening. It turned out to be a trap. One of the camp staff was hiding in my car and threatened us with a knife. We had to turn back. When we got back to Camp Condor, they took Piotr away and locked me in a shed overnight. I've only just got out."

"Say that again? They locked you in a shed?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but Barton, the camp manager, and the staff member who had hidden in my car, forced me into the shed and locked me in. It's located away from the other buildings and my roommate had been looking for me all night and only just found me this morning."

"One moment...who hid in your car?"

"His name is Mickey. I don't know his last name."

"And this Mickey and Barton, the manager, forced you into a shed?"

"That's right. Barton locked me in his office first. When I tried to escape, and Mickey grabbed my arm and twisted it behind me in such a way that I couldn't escape. They took me to this shed, which is rarely used, and locked me in for the night. I didn't have my mobile and couldn't call anyone and my roommate told me this morning after she'd found me that Nick and Piotr are missing."

"Where is Barton now?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him and nobody's come looking for me since I got out of the shed." A

thought occurred to Jess. What if Barton and Mickey had Nick and Piotr?

"Okay," D.I. Knight said. "This is a very serious matter. I'm on my way. Can we reach you on this number?"

"Yes. It's my mobile."

"Right. Speak to you soon."

Jess disconnected, glad to have freed the line.

"Why don't you grab a shower?" Caitlin said. "I'll get you something to eat."

"What if Nick calls?"

"I'll keep your phone and I'll let you know if anything happens."

Jess hesitated, but only for a moment. Maybe Caitlin wasn't in on anything. She'd helped her out of the shed, right? "Okay. I'll be quick, though."

Within a half-hour Jess was feeling in a much better state for dealing with problems. Both the shower and food had helped to wake her up and she felt less queasy than when she had been running on adrenalin alone. She'd just come back from checking Nick's cabin. "Still no signs of life." She paced the cabin, worried. Where was D.I. Knight?

Caitlin sighed. "I wish we knew what to do." She sounded genuinely worried as she handed Jess a steaming mug of coffee. "Jess!" Her exclamation nearly caused Jess to drop the cup.

"What?"

"What happened to your arm?"

Jess looked down, seeing that her sleeve had ridden up. The lower parts of her cuts were showing and there was some fresh blood since her shower. Too late to hide it now.

Caitlin reached out and eased Jess's sleeve up, revealing the grisly mess in full. "Did Barton do that?" she asked, gazing into Jess's eyes.

"No." Jess searched for a plausible lie. None were forthcoming.

"You did it?"

Jess dropped her gaze. "Yeah."

Caitlin lifted her arm gently and inspected the cuts. "Knife?"

"Yeah." She tried to pull her arm away. She felt like some freak show exhibition.

"Did you clean these and disinfect them?"

She shrugged, ashamed. "It really doesn't matter."

Caitlin didn't comment and instead pulled Jess gently to the kitchen and retrieved the first aid kit from under the sink. She made a solution of disinfectant and warm water. "Put your arm over the sink."

Jess felt the familiar contradiction of her own feelings. Part of her wanted to run away and maintain her privacy. Another part was desperately relieved that someone had noticed her pain and wanted to help.

Caitlin took her hand and supported Jess's arm over the sink. Using a cotton wool ball from the kit, she dampened the skin all over the area.

Jess sucked her breath in. The stinging made her eyes water.

After dropping the first one in the sink, Caitlin took a second ball and gently wiped at the dried blood. She worked slowly and carefully until the six slashes stood out cleanly, surrounded by pink skin. Some of the cuts had begun to bleed again so Caitlin dabbed them. Then she took the tube of antiseptic and squeezed a white line onto her finger. Very lightly, she traced the cuts, covering them in a layer of cream. It went pink in places where it merged with the blood, but the layer seemed to stop further bleeding.

"There. Keep your sleeve up and let the air get it. We can put a bandage on it later, but for now let it breathe."

"Thanks."

Caitlin studied her. "Have you done anything like that before?"

"No." She avoided Caitlin's direct gaze.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Jess shrugged. It seemed she spent all her time thinking or talking about her problems, but it never seemed to make them any better.

"Is it because you don't think you can trust me anymore?" Caitlin's tone was neutral, but Jess saw the look of hurt before she turned away to tidy the medical supplies.

"It's not that." *Well, not really.* She felt too exhausted to try and work out if Caitlin was friend or foe. "It's just the same old problems. Anyone else would just get on with it, but I seem to be crippled. It's pathetic."

"It's not pathetic." Caitlin straightened and looked her in the eye. "It's the voice of Ed," she said, using the euphemism for an eating disorder Jess had read about online. "It doesn't matter what eating disorder you have, the voice says the same thing. It tells you that you're not really sick, that you're just trying to get attention or you're trying to make excuses for yourself. Nothing you do will ever be enough for Ed. If you cut your arm, he'll want you to do it again and again. Worse each time. If you lose weight, he'll want you to lose even more. If you throw up, he'll tell you it's still not enough."

"I binged," Jess blurted, a knot of self-loathing in her chest.

"Is that why you cut yourself?"

"Partly." Tears welled in her eyes. "I wanted to be thin and happy for Grace. I want to get a job. Instead, I'm turning into some crazy loon who just got sacked from a crappy job. I despise myself."

Caitlin shook her head, and the spark of life seemed to have left her eyes. "This is typical Ed. It isn't about you and Grace or you and jobs. It's just

you with you. Your self-esteem and confidence. Ed ruins all that so insidiously that you don't even realise it's happening."

"But I don't have anorexia or bulimia. I feel wrong saying I have an eating disorder, like pretending I have cancer or something." She wiped her eyes.

"What did I just say about nothing ever being enough? Eating disorders are just that—disordered eating. You starve yourself until you faint, then you binge, then you hate yourself and now you've begun cutting. All of these are forms of self-mutilation. Your eating is disordered, whether it falls into some classification or not. Jess, I'm serious, you need to get help."

Jess didn't know what to say. These were big, life-changing thoughts but she couldn't deal with them right now. There was too much else going on.

Jess's mobile rang, interrupting the stalemate. She looked at the phone. "Reception. I'm not supposed to be here."

Caitlin reached out. "I told them I was expecting a visitor and gave them this number." She took the phone then answered. "Hello?" She paused. "Okay, thanks." Caitlin pressed the button to hang up then passed the phone back to Jess. "Grace is here."

Crap. Jess rubbed her forehead and frowned. Grace was here and she was going to see what a mess she'd made of everything.

Caitlin looked concerned. "I'm sorry, I probably shouldn't have called her, but I didn't know what else to do. I thought maybe your car had broken down and you'd had to go home without it or something."

"It's all right. I'd have done the same."

"Do you want me to get her so you can keep a low profile?"

"Probably a good idea," Jess said. She'd been sacked after all. Now she was a pariah trespassing where she had no right. She watched Caitlin leave

then sat down and waited for Grace, and more judgment, to arrive.

Chapter Seventeen

JESS HEARD CAITLIN'S voice outside the cabin. "Just in there."

Footsteps on the porch. The rub of the door on the floor as it opened. Then Grace appeared. It felt like months rather than days since she'd last seen her. So much had happened. The binging, cutting, her sacking and foiled escape, now Nick and Piotr. What if they were hurt or worse? And here she was still obsessing about her own petty dramas. She wanted to run to Grace and hide against her neck but she didn't deserve that relief. She was a selfish, worthless failure.

"Jess!" Grace charged at her. "Thank God you're all right. I've been trying to call and then when Caitlin rang—"

"I'm sorry." She stood and hung her head.

A black-and-white whirlwind launched itself at Jess.

"Willow!" Jess couldn't help but smile as she tried to stroke the ecstatic dog that circled her legs.

"Sit," Grace commanded, and Willow did so immediately. Jess was tempted to do the same. Grace had quite an authoritative air when she needed to.

"That's better. Good girl. You can calm down. Our Jess is right here."

"*Our*"? A little flash of hope momentarily drove the bad thoughts away. But only for a moment.

"Knock, knock," Caitlin called as she put her head around the door. "Anyone want coffee?"

"Yes, thank you," Grace said, relaxing a little.

"White with one," Jess called after her.

As Caitlin went to get the beverage, Jess told Grace what had been happening, beginning with how Barton had fired her and finishing with, "I tried to get Piotr away from here last night but Mickey was

hiding in the car so we had to come back. When we did, they took Piotr away and locked me in a shed."

"What?" Grace took Jess's hand. "Locked you in a shed? Are you all right?"

"None the worse."

"How did you get out?"

"Caitlin found me this morning. She was looking. Anyhow—" Jess was keen to move on, "now both Nick and Piotr are missing."

"Do you think they're together?"

"We don't know," Caitlin said as she put the coffee down on the table by Grace. "Jess called the police and they're on their way."

"D.I. Knight?" Grace addressed the question to Jess.

Jess nodded. "Hopefully, they'll be here soon. I hate this sitting around, not knowing what's happening."

"Where's Barton?" Grace asked.

"I don't know, but I hope I never have to see him again."

"Maybe he's got Nick and Piotr," Grace mused aloud.

"Could be," Caitlin said noncommittally. "But there's no telling."

Twenty minutes later, the coffee mugs empty, they were still sitting and there was no sign of the police. "Do you think it's worth checking Nick's cabin again?" Jess asked.

"No." Caitlin said.

"But if you want to, it wouldn't hurt." Grace gave Caitlin a pointed look.

"It's up to you." Caitlin looked at Jess, who felt trapped between these two women when her mobile sounded its text message notification. She reached for it, desperately hoping for good news. "From Caitlin." She looked up, confused.

"It's from Piotr! He's got my phone," Caitlin said

as an explanation to Grace. "What does it say?"

"Nothing." Jess frowned with confusion. "It's a picture." The phone chimed again. "Two pictures." She held the mobile at an angle so all three of them could look. "I can see Piotr in the first one and he's tied up. Maybe Nick took the photo?" If so, he was in better shape than she'd feared. She flicked to the second picture.

"It looks like he's trying to show us where he is," Grace said, squinting at the screen. "The picture is really small, but it looks like a disused building of some sort. There's no furniture and you can see a tree through the roof there."

"Can I have a look?" Caitlin asked.

Jess handed the phone over, fearful that even with this clue she wouldn't be able to help.

"I know that place," Caitlin said. "And it's not far from here. I've gone around it a few times on some of my longer rides."

"Really?" Jess was thrilled. "Let's go."

"Wait," Grace admonished. "How do you know it's not a trap? Maybe Barton or Mickey found the phone and they're taking the pictures and sending them."

"But as far as they know, I'm still locked in the shed. I really don't know," Jess admitted. "But if there's a chance to find them, I have to try."

Grace's brow furrowed. "Don't you think it's a bit handy that Caitlin knows where this place is?"

Jess stared at Grace, wide-eyed.

"I'm sorry to be rude," Grace continued, addressing Caitlin, "but I don't want Jess running off into some trap. She's already got too much at stake here."

Caitlin had an odd smile on her face. "Well, at least I know where Jess's suspicions came from."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Grace shot back.

"Please," Jess interrupted. "There's no time for

this. And Caitlin, it wasn't just Grace. We'll talk about it later, see if we can work this all out. But right now, what else are we going to do? Sit here and wait for the police? By the time they get here, Nick and Piotr could've been moved. They're obviously not there out of choice. I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Grace sighed and drummed her fingers on the table. "Okay. Jess is right. I'm sorry for making assumptions, Caitlin. I just want to make sure we go into this with our eyes open. Where is this place? Can we drive there?"

Caitlin nodded. "Yes, but that's not the best way. It's an old farmhouse with a narrow road leading to it from the main road. It curves around, too, so if anyone was watching, they'd see us before we could even get close."

"That's probably one of the reasons they chose that location, then." Grace frowned. "What about other ways to get there? You mentioned you'd been on horseback?"

"That would be a lot better. There're a lot of woods around it that would give cover till we were really close. I could do it, but I don't know about you two. If the horses spooked, you could get hurt."

"I'll be fine," Grace said. "I've ridden quite a bit."

"I could use a quad bike," Jess volunteered. "There's bound to be a spare one with so few kids here."

"Good idea." Caitlin looked at her approvingly. "You'll need to keep back a ways when we get close to the farmhouse so the engine noise doesn't give us away, but we can work that out closer to the time."

"Would the horses be all right with it?" Grace asked.

Caitlin looked at her, maintaining civility. "They're used to all sorts, including quads." She stood. "All right, let's get ready. We're going to need supplies—phones, rope, knives, med kit, and a

blanket wouldn't hurt."

Jess was desperate to go. "We need to hurry. I don't want to miss our only opportunity to do something."

"It won't take a minute to get this stuff together. Most of it's at the stables. I've seen my share of incidents on the ranch, and preparation saves time in the long run. Trust me."

"Okay," Grace said. "Jess, you update the police then get the quad bike. Meet us at the stables. Caitlin and I will get the horses ready and gather kit."

Jess hesitated, wondering if she could trust that the two of them wouldn't be at each other's throats. The last thing they needed was another distraction. Enough. She had to prepare. She walked to the wardrobe and fetched her bow and quiver, pulling the bow from its case before stringing it for use. Buckling the quiver around her waist, she took her full set of twelve arrows.

"Are you planning on using that?" Grace asked, surprised.

"Not if I can help it. But if we're going prepared, then I'd be stupid not to have it. Plus, Mickey was waving a knife around last night. I want some kind of advantage on our side."

Grace's eyes widened. "What happened to your arm?" She approached for a closer look.

"It's fine. It's nothing." But Jess knew neither of those answers would work. Not with Grace. "Can I promise to tell you about it later?"

Grace's expression was horrified. "All right," she said finally. "But make sure you do." The look on her face told Jess that she expected an explanation. Did Grace know about Jess's issues?

"I promise. Can we take Willow with the horses?" Jess asked, keen to change the subject.

"They'll be fine," Caitlin said. "One of the boys who comes to help out at the stables sometimes brings

his dog, so they're used to them."

"Okay." Jess looked from one to the other. "I think we're all set. We'll meet at the stables and go as soon as we're ready." She turned toward the door.

GRACE APPROACHED THE stable, where Caitlin was leading a large bay outside. She hoped her riding would be adequate after the long break.

"Find everything?" Caitlin asked.

"Yeah, I got three of everything, so if we get separated we'll still be all right."

Caitlin regarded her for a long moment. "You don't trust me at all, do you?"

Grace started, surprised at the blunt accusation, though Caitlin's honesty was admirable. "I don't know you. What I do know is that we are about to go into what will probably be a dangerous situation and neither Jess nor I know, without doubt, that you're on our side. I know Jess desperately wants to trust you, but this isn't about friendship, it's about safety. I'd be foolish to assume."

"I suppose so. About as foolish as someone who's oblivious to her friend's worsening eating disorder. Or maybe the fact that her friend's tying herself in knots trying to be the person she thinks you deserve." Caitlin's expression showed her contempt quite clearly.

The attack found its target and Grace winced. "First, since you're accusing me of making assumptions, perhaps you shouldn't assume that I haven't noticed. Nor should you assume what kind of relationship Jess and I have, or what kind of relationship we might have. Second, I don't think that discussing Jess's eating disorder is something you and I should do, since we're clearly off to a bad start here." She barely kept her temper in check, barely stifled the "how dare you" that almost slipped out.

Grace needed to maintain her cool if they were to be any help to Jess, Nick, and Piotr.

Caitlin backed down a bit. "Fair enough. Maybe we can continue this conversation later, see if we can find some common ground."

"And maybe it's not a good idea ever," Grace said. "But at least we know where we stand."

"We do that, don't we?"

They glared at one another in silence. Caitlin seemed to expect Grace to respond further, but she had no intention of complying. She'd deal with what Caitlin had said privately.

Caitlin huffed out her breath. "Are you sure your riding skills are good enough? I don't want to be worrying about you on top of everything else."

"You won't have to. I'll be fine."

"Okay, in that case, I'll give you Galahad. We use him for more advanced riders. He's a bit spirited and he'll test a new rider to see what he can get away with, but ultimately, he's motivated by his stomach." Caitlin continued talking as she walked to the tack room, forcing Grace to follow in order to hear.

"We'll be fine," Grace said, reassuring herself that however much Caitlin disliked her, there probably wouldn't be an evil horse at a children's activity camp. Her childish side recognised she was being challenged, and she was well aware that Jess was supposed to be the prize. Whilst she wasn't prepared to compete, part of her was still determined to dazzle.

"Here." Caitlin thrust a large saddle at her then balanced the bridle on top. "He's in his stable and his name's on the door. When you've tacked him up, come back here and get a hat, boots, and gloves. There are crops, or whips, too, if you like to ride with one. I'll get Queenie ready to roll."

Grace watched Caitlin briefly as she strode away, feeling a peculiar combination of dislike and sympathy. Her behaviour was completely at odds

with the friendly, bubbly character Jess had described. The reason for the change seemed fairly obvious—Caitlin had feelings for Jess—but Grace forestalled any more thought about it. She wasn't about to engage in some kind of duel over Jess. And did Caitlin mean it when she said that Jess was tying herself in knots over her? *I should have talked to Jess earlier about her eating habits.* Grace kicked herself, thinking she'd ended up helping Jess put herself in jeopardy with that, and the thought pained her. She turned to walk back down the stable's corridor, and it occurred to her that the cuts on Jess's arms might have been self-inflicted. Grace stopped walking and stared blankly at the floor. Why hadn't she pushed Jess harder to talk about things? Why hadn't she tried to figure out what to do? How could she have let someone so important to her feel so badly? She blinked back tears and worry and refocussed. The rescue mission was all she needed to be worrying about right now. There would be time for other things later. Hefting the weight of the tack, she walked back out into the yard and went in search of Galahad.

JESS REDUCED HER speed as she approached the stables, not wanting to frighten the horses. Fortunately, neither Barton nor Mickey had been around to stop her getting the keys to the equipment shed. The other staff showed no sign of knowing she'd been fired, which might explain why she was able to move around so freely. She chose her quad based on the fullest petrol tank. Nick had already taught her how to ride, so she was ready to go. It took her a few minutes to get her bow strapped on securely and then a little bit of riding to remind her of the sensitivity of the controls and then she was away.

"Hey," Jess greeted Caitlin as she cut the engine and stepped down. "Where's Grace?"

"Just here."

Jess turned and saw Grace kitted up and leading a large black horse with a white stripe running down the length of his face. She had a pang of envy and wished she were good enough to go on horseback. Then she had another thought entirely, one that threatened to make her blush, as she studied Grace. She tried to ignore it.

"Okay guys, are we ready?" Caitlin asked.

"Yes." Grace put her foot in the stirrup, pushed off the ground and swung her leg up and over. She landed gracefully in the saddle, a confident expression on her face.

"I'll take the lead till we get closer." Caitlin mounted Queenie equally nimbly and trotted her out of the yard.

"You all right?" Grace asked Jess.

"A little worried, but I'm trying not to think about it," she said, looking up at her.

Grace nodded sympathetically. "When this is through, I want to spend some time with you. I've missed you."

Jess's heart lifted and she smiled. "I'd like that." *She missed me. Grace missed me.*

"Good. First things first, though. Let's find Nick and Piotr." And she smiled down at her and wheeled Galahad to follow Caitlin.

Jess climbed back onto the quad bike, taking care not to dislodge her bow in the process. She watched Galahad and Queenie for a few moments then started the engine and followed them to open countryside.

At any other time, Jess would have relished the journey. The quad bike was great fun to ride as it bumped along woodland paths and bridleways. The wind whipped her hair around and added to the exhilaration of the adrenaline that fuelled her. After a particularly soggy area, Jess was liberally splattered with mud, but the bike churned through it all with

ease. Up ahead she saw the two horses keeping pace with one another, their riders as one with their mounts. In the open spaces they cantered, but when they returned to the woods they were forced to restrict themselves to a trot or walk to avoid injury. Willow ran by Galahad's side, her pink tongue hanging out with excitement and exertion and for a moment, Jess imagined what it would be like, to ride with Grace in such a way, Willow at her horse's side. Like a family. She gripped the handles tighter and concentrated on the trail.

After they had travelled for about twenty minutes, Caitlin held her arm up and slowed Queenie to a walk. Then she came to a full stop. Grace reined in next to her while Jess eased the quad bike forward to avoid spooking the horses. "It's not far, now," Caitlin said, her voice hushed. "Be as quiet as possible and stop just before we get close enough for them to hear. Jess, keep behind us a bit. I'll let you know when to stop."

They continued forward at a slower pace and Jess noticed increased levels of light penetrating the trees ahead of them just as Caitlin signalled the final halt. Cutting the engine, Jess slid off the bike and moved toward the riders. "I'll go and scout. You stay here." Before they had a chance to object, she retrieved her bow and left, watching for any sign that they had been spotted.

Caitlin had timed it perfectly, because after only a few metres the building came into view. As Caitlin had said, it was an old farmhouse, surrounded by derelict outbuildings of varying sizes. Jess crept forward using the trees for cover. All her senses were on high alert and she remembered the last time she'd done this, sneaking toward a building. That's how she met Grace. *How do I get into these situations?* She forced the thoughts from her mind. For the time being, all she wanted to do was get an idea of what they were facing.

Chapter Eighteen

JESS PAUSED JUST inside the tree line, deciding to watch for a few minutes before charging into the open. The farmhouse was located about fifty metres across clear ground to her right. A car was parked to the left of the house at the top of the drive. Its bonnet faced away from her, but she could tell there was nobody sitting inside it. She glanced around and saw no signs of anyone. Opposite her was a semi-derelict structure with a low roof that looked like it might have once housed pigs. If she could reach the pigsty, she'd have a clear track to the car. Flattening the tyres would give her a big advantage, since it was the only vehicle apparent and if it wasn't driveable, then whoever held Nick and Piotr wouldn't be able to go anywhere. Another look and still nobody about that she could see. Jess took a deep breath and ran. Just as she was approaching the pigsty, she heard a man shout.

"Hey, you, stop!"

Jess gave up on the tyre idea and instead ran back toward the horses. She could hear the heavy footfalls of the man behind her but she was too busy dodging trees to look back. More shouts from farther away confirmed that others had been alerted. The sounds of the man grew louder as he crashed through the shrubbery, gaining on her with frightening speed. Fear gave Jess additional energy, but running had never been her forte and she knew that if she couldn't get away, capture was inevitable.

She could hear her pursuer's breathing now. He was practically on top of her, his footfalls coming faster than hers. A moment later and arms grabbed her around her waist, stopping her in mid-stride and sending her sprawling to the ground. Her assailant fell with her but recovered quickly, rolling her over to

face him. He pinned her to the ground with his knees on her shoulders. It was Mickey, and he glared at her, his face twisted with hatred.

"You just couldn't help sticking your nose in, could you? Maybe it's better we keep you where we can see you." He raised his fist.

Jess closed her eyes and flinched in preparation, but the blow never came. Instead, rapid hoof beats thumped through the earth beneath her. Opening her eyes she saw a swiftly approaching blur she vaguely recognised as Queenie, cantering toward them with unnerving speed. Caitlin held a length of rope in her hand and she looked straight at Mickey. With a loud cracking sound she charged past, hitting him full force in the chest with the rope. He fell backward, stunned by the impact. Jess seized her opportunity and scrambled to her feet, running back to the quad bike as fast as she could.

"Quick, they know we're here," she shouted to Grace as she mounted the bike.

Grace kicked Galahad forward, charging after Caitlin with Willow in pursuit. Jess got the quad moving then forked off to the right, knowing the lay of the land ahead from her earlier reconnaissance. She rode as fast as she dared, given the terrain. The engine noise seemed deafening at high throttle, but Jess didn't care. The time for subtlety had passed.

After a few seconds Jess emerged from the trees into full daylight. There was no sign of Mickey or the horses, but she could see four figures by the car. Riding closer she recognised Barton and Hendred bundling Nick and Piotr into the vehicle.

"Nick!" she shouted as she advanced on them. He was watching her, but Hendred shoved him into the car. Nick complied without a struggle.

Jess revved the bike, her movements clumsy with desperation. The men slammed the rear doors and threw themselves into the front section of the car. The

engine started and the tyres spun on the gravel before the vehicle accelerated away.

Jess focused on the rear window and pushed the quad as fast as it would go. She was running out of time. As soon as the car went from gravel track to tarmac, she'd have no chance of catching them. She scanned the terrain, desperate for something she could use to her advantage. Ahead, the track curved to the left, avoiding a cluster of trees. That could work in her favour. She changed direction. Keeping the speed up, she headed for the biggest gap between the trunks and ducked to avoid low branches before she cleared the trees ahead of the car.

Ahead the track curved again, this time to the right. To the left, the trees extended from the wood, but there was a patch of rough ground in between a few of them. From where she was, the patch looked wide enough for a car to get through. Jess glanced over left shoulder and saw the vehicle gaining on her. She set the quad in a direct line to the corner ahead. When she reached it, she turned and squeezed the brakes to a sudden stop. The quad came to rest at right angles to the road. *I must be crazy.*

She dismissed her doubts as she got off the quad and grabbed her bow. The car was already closer than she'd hoped. She ran to the trees on the other side of the uneven ground. Now, the car would have to go between her and the quad to continue down the road. The car sped forward, driver apparently unfazed by her actions. Jess stepped to the edge of the trees and loaded an arrow. She raised the bow, took brief aim, and released. There was a metallic scrape as the arrow thudded against the car's bonnet. Jess reloaded and fired two more arrows in quick succession. They both hit the windscreen and thankfully, the glass held. But the arrows had their effect.

The driver jerked the car to the left, heading back toward the quad. Jess fired another arrow just as he

began to correct. He flinched in reflex, and jerked the car away from the gap and on a collision course with the quad.

Jess retreated into the trees, making use of a thick trunk to cover her from the impact. The crash was less dramatic than she expected. No explosion or fire. Just a loud bang followed by the crunch of metal twisting. She peered around the tree, uncertain what to do next. She could see Barton in the passenger seat struggling with the air bag. Piotr was behind him and seemed to be unable to get the door open. She loaded another arrow and ran forward.

"Stop!" Hendred bellowed, holding a knife to Nick's throat.

Oh, no. Not Nick. No. She stopped, staring.

"Put the bow down." Hendred adjusted his hold on the knife.

She dropped it, staring first at Nick, then at Hendred. How was she going to get them out of this?

"And the arrows."

She unclipped the quiver and placed it gently on the grass beside the bow. Her movements were slow as she tried to think of something to help them, but fear seemed to overtake all other thought.

Piotr whimpered. Barton had got out of the car and grabbed him by the wrist.

"We can't stay here." Hendred addressed Barton. "But we can still pull this off. Get some rope and tie her hands."

"Gladly." Barton eyed Jess with malevolence.

Jess looked at Nick and Piotr, relieved to see them both whole and conscious. Nick had some bruising to his face and a cut lip. Both of them had their wrists bound behind their backs but the real restraint was in the knife.

"Hands behind your back." Barton pulled her wrists together roughly before tying them tightly. Jess gritted her teeth as the coarse fibres scraped against

her cuts. "Get on," he shoved her toward the other two hostages.

"What did you do to Mickey?" Hendred demanded.

"I hit him then tied him to a tree," Jess lied. She didn't think they knew that Grace and Caitlin were still out here somewhere. She didn't want to give that away.

Hendred frowned. "Stupid boy, fights like a girl. We'll leave him there and go back for him later if we have time. For now we just need to get out of here."

Jess kept her mouth shut, though she wanted to give Nick and Piotr hope. No sense in that, though. Barton would probably hit her or one of them and they'd lose the element of surprise.

"I'll go in front," Hendred said, tucking the knife into his belt. "Follow behind me in single file. Barton will be at the back. Any funny business and we'll stab whoever is closest. Consider that your only warning."

Jess gave Piotr a reassuring smile, nodding for him to follow the instructions. Nick went first, glancing at her and managing a little smile, whilst Jess took the rear, positioning Piotr to be shielded between them.

Hendred set a challenging pace, leading them cross-country away from the car. Jess wasn't sure whether he knew the area or simply wanted to put as much distance as he could from the attention-grabbing wreckage. Maybe both. Hendred kept scanning the immediate area nervously, but Jess knew for sure that others were out there. *Please make Caitlin on our side.* She repeated it a few times, holding on to hope. If she wasn't, Grace could be in trouble, too, and that was something too horrible to contemplate.

Jess stumbled slightly as they marched through a muddy gateway into another field. It was hard to keep her balance with her arms tied behind her back. As they passed into another field, she tried to look

around without seeming expectant. The field was vast but empty, bordered by woodland that curved around the right-hand side. The woods she had ridden through earlier extended farther than she had realised. Good cover for Grace and Caitlin.

"Hurry up." Barton shoved her in the back.

Jess stumbled again but caught her balance. She lifted her chin high in defiance, eager to get to the trees.

WITH MICKEY UNDER control, Grace and Caitlin watched the drama from a hillock near the house. Grace kept Willow in check with a command and they had used the elevated land as cover as well as a good vantage point. Grace watched in horror as Jess parked the quad in line with a car and then stood beside it to fire. She'd started running toward Jess, but Caitlin had held her down. She'd been right to do so. They'd stayed hidden, which gave them and the hostages an advantage over the captors. But Grace had to watch as Jess was tied and the group frog-marched away. She vacillated between anger, worry, anxiety, and helplessness, but at least she was free to mount a rescue.

"Okay, we need a plan." Caitlin sat up, her expression grim.

"We're going to have to surprise and disarm them before they can pull a knife on anyone. If they start holding someone at knife-point, we'll be no better off than Jess was."

Caitlin stared in the direction they'd gone. "The woods keep going the way they're headed. We could try and get in front of them then trap them till the police come."

Grace shook her head. "The police won't know where to find us. We'd be better ambushing them on open ground. That way, we can use the horses to our

advantage."

Caitlin frowned, still staring after Jess. "We can probably do that. The woods border fields. They'll probably head that way to get to the path that goes to the village."

"Right," Grace concurred. "Let's go."

They returned to the woods where they had tethered the horses. There was a disconcerting lack of detail to their plan, but Grace was worried they'd wasted too much time talking. The important thing was to get themselves into a good position that would allow for the element of surprise. Hopefully, there would be more time to plan then. They mounted the horses and returned to the bridle path, Willow running behind.

Caitlin led the way again and this time, their pace was even more challenging. Grace concentrated on guiding Galahad, wondering, too, if Caitlin felt the same urgency as she did. They avoided the edge of the woods, and the trees served both as visual cover and helped muffle their hoof beats. Grace still didn't trust Caitlin completely, but she was more willing now to give her the benefit of the doubt. After all, if Caitlin was working for the other side, she'd missed several opportunities to demonstrate it.

After about ten minutes, Caitlin reined Queenie to a halt and waited for Grace to draw alongside. "I'm guessing this is the path they're heading for." She pointed to the worn track that wound its way across their path. "It'd take them into the village where they could find transportation. I can't think of anywhere else they'd want to go."

Grace spent a moment getting her bearings. They were closer to the edge of the wood now that they'd stopped moving, and she could see a large, grassy field on her left. If she was right, that would be where they would come from.

"You can see 'em coming now," Caitlin said. "We

have a few minutes to come up with a plan." She smiled, though it seemed strained. "So let's start brainstorming."

Grace nodded. "Okay. I guess we let them get as close as we can then charge and hope to catch them off guard."

"We're going to have to be really careful with that. We don't want to hurt our own."

"I know. And if Barton and Hendred use them as shields, we're stuck. We need to wait till the very last minute so they don't have time to think."

Caitlin was silent for a few moments. Then she nodded and looked over at Grace. "I think that's our best bet. Let's hold off and wait until we've got that window of opportunity."

After a few more moments, the figures were close enough to identify. "Okay," Caitlin said, urgent. "The guy from the school is in front. I'll take him. Barton's at the back. He's yours."

"Got it." They sat in silence now, watching and waiting. Anxiety mixed with adrenaline cruised through Grace's veins. She licked her lips, trying to clear her mind of doubt about anything and just concentrate on the task at hand. The horses' ears swivelled in response to the tension in their riders. Galahad shifted and fidgeted his hindquarters. "Easy boy," Grace murmured. "Not long now."

JESS'S WHOLE BODY was tense as they neared the woods. If Caitlin and Grace were waiting, things were about to get even more exciting. She was poised to take advantage of any opportunity she had. And if they weren't there, she'd have to think of something else. Perhaps she could charge and slam Barton against a tree? Nick would have to deal with Hendred. And at least Piotr might have a chance to run for it.

She stared into the trees. Was that movement or her imagination? She was practically praying that Grace and Caitlin would be there, but she was also almost sick with worry that they'd come right into harm's way.

"Get on with it." Barton shoved her again.

She resisted the urge to turn around and kick him. The odds were too heavy against her. She focused on the back of Piotr's head when suddenly, the tree line exploded with activity. Two large horses appeared, galloping straight at them. Their riders screamed like demented demons, and Hendred jerked to a halt. The hooves thundered onward, heading straight for them. The horses kept coming, spit flying from their mouths, eyes rimmed with white.

"Nick, down," Caitlin shouted, already raising her rope and swinging it in a wide circle above her head. Nick responded quickly, turning and bumping Piotr to the ground with him. Timing her aim perfectly, Caitlin released the rope, and its loop landed neatly around Hendred before he had chance to retrieve his knife. With a jerk, she pulled him away from the hostages.

Grace, Galahad, and Willow all charged straight at Barton while Caitlin was engaged with Hendred. Jess stood completely still, not wanting to distract Grace. Galahad kept racing toward them until he was almost upon them then Grace brought him to a stop and made him weave from side to side, herding Barton away from Jess. Barton tried to run but Grace was too quick, guiding Galahad in a tight circle into his path. Willow joined in, snarling and snapping at Barton until he stood still, his hands raised.

"Jess." Grace waved a knife and beckoned at her.

Jess strode to the side of the horse as Grace dismounted. She turned around and held her bound hands still while Grace slit the ropes. The relief was exquisite when the ropes fell away and she regained

movement. She stretched her arms out in front then around her chest in a self-hug. Her muscles stung as her blood flow returned to normal.

A loud frenzy of growls warned them that Barton was trying to run. "Take the knife." Grace handed it to her, hilt first before re-mounting.

Jess advanced slowly, ready for any movement from Barton. "Get your knife and throw it on the grass here."

He looked murderous. Galahad weaved behind him and Willow intensified her growling.

"She'd love to be given the command," Jess said with a grin. "I'll happily do it, too, if you don't do as I say."

He reached for his knife, keeping his other hand in the air. With a glare of defeat, he tossed it in the grass near her feet.

"Thank you." Jess picked up the weapon. She held it up, hilt first for Grace to take.

"I'll untie Nick and Piotr," Grace said. "I think Caitlin's still got her hands full."

Jess risked a glance at the rest of the group. Nick and Piotr were sitting down, patiently waiting for some help. Caitlin still had Hendred in her lasso and was keeping him moving, leading him around like a prize bull. She was grinning broadly.

Jess turned back to Barton. "Get face down on the ground with your hands behind your back." She kept him there, waiting until one of the others was free to tie his hands. Willow had quietened now, but she was still watching him intently. Jess suspected she'd jump on him if he tried to move.

Caitlin trotted past leading a red, puffing Hendred. "Here you go," she tossed Jess some ropes.

Nick hurried over while Grace remained mounted, probably in preparation should someone make a run for it. Nick was unusually quiet as he took a rope and wound it round Barton's hands. He took his time and

tested the tightness of the knot before switching to work on his ankles.

"Your turn," Jess called to Hendred a few minutes later.

"But I'm having such fun," Caitlin said, sighing theatrically. She swung back in an arc toward them and allowed the lasso rope to slacken.

"Try any funny business and I'll start stabbing," Jess informed Hendred in a parody of his earlier threat.

Panting heavily and looking relieved to be still, he collapsed on the grass. Nick bound his hands and feet, once again making sure the knots were tight.

Finally, with both men under control, Jess relaxed a little. The earlier surge of adrenaline had waned and now she felt a little shaky and tired. She walked to Nick and gave him a bear hug, careful to keep the knife well out of the way. "I was so worried about you."

"I'm all right." He squeezed her again. "I'm sort of put out that you came after us—Jessie, you know how much you worry me," he said, half-teasing.

"So you'd prefer to be on your way to Ukraine or wherever they were going?"

"Don't know. I've never been to Ukraine..."

She rolled her eyes at him in sisterly affection and he relented. "I'm glad you came after us. I've been trying to keep Piotr's spirits up."

"Always. I'll always come after you." Jess squeezed even tighter then released him. She reached up and stroked his bruised cheekbone. "You've got an impressive shiner there."

"Yeah?" He looked chuffed.

"Very. Do you want to take over jailor duties?" She handed him the knife, relieved to see the return of his boyish grin.

"And you—" Jess turned and hugged Piotr. "You were very brave back there."

He smiled proudly. "Thank you."

Caitlin had dismounted and was letting Queenie graze. Jess knew that when she had the chance, she had some serious apologising to do. But there was something else she had to do first.

Grace slid down from Galahad and gave him an appreciative scratch on the neck before handing the reins to Caitlin. She looked up and met Jess's gaze. They walked a few steps toward each other then stopped, each looking at the other. For the first time that day, Jess felt truly terrified. But it was an amazing sort of terrified.

Grace's brown eyes glistened with unshed tears. "You are so hard on a girl's nerves. What the hell were you thinking, facing down a car like that?" Her chin quivered slightly.

Jess covered the remaining distance between them with two strides. She cupped Grace's cheek. "I'm sorry. I just needed to stop them getting away. I couldn't see what else to do. But it's okay, isn't it? Everyone's fine. Just a few bruises."

Grace smiled and a tear escaped to fall down her cheek. She wiped at it and sniffed, her gaze still locked with Jess's. "You're so hard-headed sometimes. You had me so worried. I'm still worried about you. But I know one thing. I want you. Just as you are right now. I've been waiting to tell you till you're ready, but you're doing stupid things. You're hurting yourself and I couldn't bear it if you ran out of luck and I still hadn't told you how I feel."

"Hey, hey." Jess smiled, taking Grace's other cheek and cradling her face. "It's all right. Everything's fine."

"It's not." Grace was sobbing freely now. "You cut yourself, didn't you?"

Jess dropped her hands and looked down, deeply ashamed. "Yes."

"Don't you realise that what you do to you, you

also do to the woman I love? It hurts me, that I wasn't able to stop that. It hurts me that you won't eat, and that you think so low of yourself that you'd do that."

Jess kept her gaze on her feet. "I'm sorry." It seemed such a small offering. How much had Grace realised? And then she started. *The woman Grace loves? Is she talking about me?*

"Look at me."

Jess looked back up, tentative.

"Please don't be sorry for being you. What you did is part of you, and I'm trying to make you understand that I want that. All of that. The pleasure and the pain. It makes you who you are."

Jess felt her own eyes welling and a painful lump form in her throat. Acceptance like that was overwhelming and not something she was used to dealing with. "I'm—I'm in love with you, Grace."

"Then kiss me." Grace implored.

Jess leant forward and slid her hand behind Grace's neck. She closed her eyes and eased their faces closer, rewarded by the soft touch of Grace's lips on hers. A cheer in the background reminded her of their audience, but Jess didn't care. Now she'd started doing what she'd longed to do for months, she never wanted to stop.

Chapter Nineteen

"HEY, LOOK, POLICE!"

Jess ended the kiss and smiled self-consciously at Grace. She was still stunned about what Grace had told her and about her own reaction. Her apprehension eased when Grace reached for her hand and gave it a squeeze. There was a lot more to say, but it would have to wait. She turned to look at the approaching four by fours, painted up in police livery. Everyone remained silent but Jess doubted she was the only one keen to hand the men over. When it had reached them, the lead vehicle stopped, allowing D.I. Knight to get out.

"It looks like you've done the hard work for us," she said, nodding toward the two bound men.

Jess released Grace's hand and stepped forward. "Things snowballed a bit since I last spoke to you."

D.I. Knight chuckled. "That's a bit of an understatement, I gather."

Grace giggled and Jess smiled.

"Sorry we're late. We had some trouble finding the right farmhouse based on the little information you had. Is everyone all right?"

"We're all fine. Just tired."

The police officer needed no further prompting. "We'll drive you back to the camp and you can give us a quick run-down of things on the way. I'll need official statements from all of you, but you can come and give them at the station this afternoon or tomorrow morning." She turned and motioned to the officers from the second vehicle. She pointed to Barton and Hendred. "Arrest these two on suspicion of kidnapping and get them back to the station. We'll meet you back there shortly."

"There's another man," Jess said. "Grace, where's Mickey?"

"Tied to a tree near the farmhouse."

D.I. Knight nodded. "Okay. We'll get him on the way past."

The policemen untied Barton's hands and feet then fitted a set of handcuffs to his wrists. As they worked, they recited what she guessed to be the standard arrest warning. They helped him to his feet, led him to the jeep and guarded his head as he got in. When they turned to Hendred, Willow growled.

"Willow," Jess called. "Come on, come here." She patted her thigh and smiled, relieved when Willow ran straight to her. She squatted and wrapped her arms gratefully around Willow's neck. "You're a good girl."

Caitlin cleared her throat, interrupting. "I'll ride back to camp. I'm pretty sure Galahad will let me lead him from Queenie."

"No, don't worry," Grace said. "I'll ride back with you. There isn't much room in the car and I'd enjoy a leisure ride after all the excitement."

"You sure? I don't want to be interrupting anything..." she glanced meaningfully at Jess then back at Grace.

"No, go ahead." Jess motioned toward Nick and Piotr. "I want to catch up with those two and make sure they're really okay."

Caitlin nodded and gave Grace a smile that bordered on friendly. Maybe the two of them would give each other another try. And maybe Caitlin would give her another try, as well.

"Okay," D.I. Knight instructed, "anyone who wants a lift to camp jump in."

Nick, Piotr, and Jess got into the jeep in turn. Grace remained with Caitlin and the horses. She gave the others a wave as they set off then turned back to Galahad. She slipped her foot back into the stirrup and mounted. "My muscles are going to be complaining about this tomorrow." She gave a light

laugh, hoping Caitlin would at least meet her halfway. She did feel badly about judging her harshly earlier.

"You've done really well," Caitlin said. "It's been a tough ride even for someone experienced."

Grace nudged Galahad forward, falling in beside Queenie and letting the two horses walk side by side. Willow trotted along behind them, taking advantage of the more relaxed pace to stop and sniff at anything that caught her attention. "I've really enjoyed it—the riding, I mean. I didn't much enjoy the other stuff."

"I think maybe there was another bit you enjoyed." Caitlin kept her eyes on Queenie's ears, but there was a little warmth in her tone.

Grace looked across, trying to read her expression. "Yes. Well...that's been a long time coming."

"You make a sweet couple." Caitlin continued to avoid eye contact. "I'm sorry I gave you a hard time earlier."

"Forget it. I was convinced you were part of a child trafficking ring. That's far worse." Grace hoped Caitlin could see the humour in the situation.

"How about we start again?"

Grace grinned. "Good idea." She guided Galahad closer to Queenie and held out her hand. "I'm Grace. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Caitlin. And the pleasure's all mine, ma'am." Caitlin employed her Texan drawl to best effect.

"I can see why Jess likes you."

They rode in silence for a few minutes, letting the horses walk at a steady pace after their earlier exertions. Caitlin looked across, her expression serious. "If you find another one like her, send her my way, huh?"

"Will do. I suspect one is going to be quite enough to deal with, though."

They laughed together and Grace was grateful for the opportunity to set things right between them. She

relaxed into the ride and by the time they got to the stables, she knew there was no way that Caitlin could have been on anybody's side but theirs.

JESS COULDN'T STOP grinning. She was alone in the cabin, probably for the last time. Nick and Piotr had each gone for a shower but they were going to come back when they were done. Grace and Caitlin should be back soon too. *Grace.* Jess's grin widened. Grace, who wanted her just as she was. It was miraculous. Nothing short of that.

"Knock, knock."

"Hi, Nick." She smiled as he appeared in the doorway, his hair still damp from the shower. She walked over and wrapped her arms around him. He smelled of washing powder and shower gel and his body was reassuringly solid. "I was so worried about you."

"It was fine. Nothing I couldn't handle."

She stepped back and flicked him on the midriff with the back of her hand.

"Okay," Nick said, "I was a little worried about me too. But don't tell anyone." He winked at her.

"You did really well."

"Thanks. But we wouldn't be all right if it weren't for you and Grace and Caitlin." His expression changed from happy to concerned. "Oh, no. Jess, did they do that? I thought nobody was hurt." He was looking at her arm.

"No, it wasn't them. It really doesn't matter." She felt a stab of anger at herself. It was selfish to have everyone worried about her when there were so many important things going on.

"What happened? Who did it?" He wouldn't let the subject drop.

"I did." She sighed. "I just felt down and for some reason, that felt like the best way to deal with it at the

time."

"Oh, Jessie." He stared at her, anguished.

"Please don't be disgusted."

"I'm not. No way. I just wish I could help."

"You are helping. You're always supportive and I know I can go to you with anything. I'm going to try and get some professional help or something. We'll see." She wasn't sure what the "or something" was, but she'd decided to make some enquiries, at least.

"That's good. Please, Jessie. Don't keep hurting yourself like this."

She glanced away, uncomfortable.

He looked over his shoulder at the door. "Come on, then. They'll be here soon. So was it great?"

"What?"

"What?" He shook his head. "Hello! Kissing Grace."

She blushed. "It was amazing. Beyond great." She could feel the sloppy smile on her face.

"Like sparkler great or Catherine wheel great?" He kept ribbing her.

"Like Blenheim Firework Proms great."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

They were giggling together when someone rapped on the door. "Come in," Jess said, expecting Piotr.

A tall man with ginger hair stepped into the room. "I'm looking for Jess Maddocks."

"That's me."

"Oh, good. I hope you don't mind the intrusion. I'm Thomas Royson, the owner of Camp Condor."

Jess shook his hand. "Nice to meet you. This is my brother, Nick. He's your mechanic."

"Nick. Excellent." They shook hands. "The police contacted me this morning to say that there had been some problems. I got over here straight away and they've just updated me on the arrests this morning. I

gather you were involved in helping with this terrible situation?"

"No, there's a whole group of us." She heard voices outside, including an unmistakable Texas drawl. "You're about to meet them."

Grace, Caitlin, and Piotr all filed in, and each was surprised to see a stranger.

"The conquering heroes." Nick saluted them.

Jess continued with the introductions. "Grace, Caitlin, Piotr, this is Thomas Royson, the camp owner. Thomas, this is Grace, Caitlin and Piotr." She indicated each as she named them. "Caitlin is the riding instructor, Piotr's a guest, and Grace is a...friend of mine." She felt the flush that must have coloured her cheeks. "Oh, and this is Willow."

"Wonderful to meet you all." He patted Willow on the head. "I gather from the police that you've been through an awful time to look after the guests at this camp. I'm so sorry you were put in that situation, but extremely grateful for your actions. What can I do to thank you?"

"There's really no need," Caitlin said. "We all just did what we thought was right."

Jess nodded in agreement.

"How about asking the cooks to do us an early lunch? I'm starving."

"Nick!" Jess gave him a forceful look.

Thomas laughed. "No, that's quite all right. It's the least I can do. I'll go and make the arrangements. Why don't you follow me over when you're ready?"

"That's great, thanks." Nick looked pleased with himself. "We may as well catch up on the stories over food."

"I can't believe you did that," Jess said. "Why, I don't know. You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

"You know you wouldn't have me any other way." He looked smug. "Come on, Piotr, let's go see what the kitchen can manage to rustle up for us. No

loitering Jess. There's plenty of time for Blenheim Firework Proms kissing later."

Grace and Caitlin sniggered.

"Just for that, I won't rescue you next time."

"Yeah, yeah," Nick called back as he and Piotr left the cabin. Caitlin followed, leaving Grace and Jess alone in the cabin.

"Did you really say that?" Grace asked.

Jess looked at her boots. "Yeah."

"Good." She turned toward the door. "And he's right."

"Mmm?"

"Plenty of time for that later."

JESS SIGHED CONTENTEDLY. Finally, she was home to stay. She was lying on the sofa with her head pillowed against Grace's thigh. Willow was curled up between Jess's legs, her rhythmic snores adding to the general sense of tranquillity. She wished she didn't have to ruin it, but she couldn't risk waiting any longer. "Grace?"

"Hmm?"

"I need to be honest with you before, we...you know. Get too couply."

"Okay."

Jess couldn't see Grace's face, which was probably a good thing. She was embarrassed enough about what she had to say. "I've not been too well health-wise. You know, up here." She tapped her forehead. "It all got worse at camp, but I didn't realise how bad until I, you know, cut." She stopped talking, not knowing what to say next.

"It's all right." Grace curled her fingers around Jess's. "I know you've got some issues with food and your body. I've known for a while, but I honestly didn't know how to approach it with you."

"Yeah. I'm going to try and do something positive

about it all, but it's not going to be a quick thing. It might even get worse before it gets better." She rolled the hem of her jumper between her fingers. "I feel like I'm broken and I don't want to offer you damaged goods."

"Jess, I meant what I said in the field." Grace's voice was firm. "I love you in your entirety. I've lived with you long enough to understand that some things are different with you. Like when we eat out and how you barely eat anything unless we're hidden away in a corner somewhere."

"I didn't realise you'd noticed that." She paused to think about it. "I feel like people look at me and think it's disgusting for me to be eating when I'm already so big."

Grace squeezed Jess's hand. "I know we can find some support for you but in the meantime, don't shut me out. Whatever happens, we can work through it together, okay?"

"What if you think I'm repulsive?"

"How could I? For months now, I've been falling for you more and more. What is suddenly going to change that?"

"You'll see me naked."

Grace giggled. "I'm sorry. I know this is supposed to be a serious conversation. It's just that thought couldn't be further from the truth."

Jess stared at the beams on the ceiling.

"You're having a hard time believing that aren't you?" Grace sounded surprised.

"Yes. I mean no. I don't know. I do believe you, I just can't believe the sentiment."

"Fair enough. Let me tell you what it's like. Do you remember when we got back this afternoon and you were talking about Willow and I hadn't heard?"

"Yeah."

"My thoughts had wandered. It started when I noticed the pulse in your throat. I imagined what it

would be like to kiss it. How the skin would feel to my lips. I fantasized about kissing you slowly down your neck while my body was pressed up against yours. I pictured you throwing your head back and groaning."

"Grace—" Jess giggled and tried to ignore the heightened pulse in her groin.

"And later, while you were leaning over sorting your washing? I was imagining standing behind you and cupping your breasts in my hands. It was so real I could almost feel their weight and smoothness."

Jess's breath caught in her throat and the pulse erupted into fully-fledged arousal.

"And just now, before you started this conversation, I was daydreaming about chucking Willow off the sofa, unbuttoning your jeans, and sliding them down over your hips. I wanted to experience the intimacy of running my fingers over your inner thigh, just lightly to tease you and I'd watch as your skin reacted with goose bumps."

Jess's inhalation was audible and her hands clenched with need. She ached to believe Grace, wanted nothing more than to know that it was true.

Grace's voice was husky. "I can only guess at what you'll look like naked, but I have no doubt about how much I want to touch you. You shouldn't, either."

"I'm glad I'm not the only one so easily distracted." Jess sat up, facing Grace, her arm resting on the back of the sofa. "Like now, for instance. I'm thinking about picking up where we left off in the field, minus the audience."

"I'd like that," Grace murmured. She looked down at Jess's lips. The tiny movement increased Jess's arousal, leaving her throbbing for Grace's touch.

Jess tilted her face and leant in, pressing her lips to Grace's. The kiss started gently but quickly become passionate. Jess's hands were threatening to wander and her body ached to be explored. She pulled away.

"Come on, I like my creature comforts."

Taking Grace by the hand, she led her upstairs to the bedroom. They collapsed onto the bed mid-kiss, their hands already reaching for one another. An ominous crack startled them both. "You're very hard on my furniture," Jess said, her mouth millimetres from Grace's lips.

"And you are hard on my patience," Grace retorted, rolling Jess onto her back and pushing her hands above her head. "If you stop me now, I refuse to be held accountable for my actions."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"Good. Now where were we?"

Chapter Twenty

JESS FLIPPED THROUGH the pile of letters that had gathered since her last trip home.

"Anything interesting?" Grace peered over her shoulder and kissed her neck.

"No. Just looks like bills and junk mail."

"Want some breakfast?"

Jess considered, not knowing what to do for the best. It was hard to be off the diet. She'd lost all direction about what she was supposed to eat when. "Maybe a slice of toast?" It seemed a good compromise.

Grace disappeared into the kitchen but Jess could still hear her humming. She hadn't realised it before, but Grace's humming made her happy. The cabin had been too quiet without it. Sliding her thumb into the corner of the next envelope, she tore it open in neat, bouncing movements. Retrieving the piece of paper inside she unfolded it, recognising the headed paper with sudden excitement. She read the letter through twice to make sure. "Grace." She walked through to the kitchen. "It's from my lawyer. They've offered a settlement."

Grace grinned and came to see.

"They've offered a year's salary and benefits as a full and final settlement for any claim relating to unfair dismissal or negligence." Jess stared at the paper. "A whole year."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I feel great. Think of what we could do with an extra year's salary. We could go on a cruise around the world or get ourselves a herd of horses."

Grace laughed. "We could. Or we could be sensible and make sure we have enough to pay the bills and cover you until you find another job."

"I could set up my own business. Maddocks

Management Consultancy. MMC for short. What do you think?"

"I think I'm glad to see you this happy. You deserve it."

Jess reached for her hand. "I don't think I mind what we do as long as we do it together."

"That works for me."

The telephone rang before Jess could reply. She sighed. "I'll get it." She walked to the living room, her smile returning when she heard Grace humming again. She picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Jessie, it's me. I just wanted to see how you're doing after all the excitement."

"Hi, Nick. We're fine here. I have to say, I'm glad to be home."

"I bet you are, after that kiss." He laughed. "Seriously, though, I'm pleased to see you two sorting it out finally. I was beginning to think you'd turned straight or something."

Jess thought back to the previous night and blushed. "Hardly. Don't forget, the best things are worth waiting for. Anyway, how are you doing?"

"I'm good. Thomas put Caitlin in charge with Barton and Mickey out the way. She's doing a good job."

"Fantastic. Are you still happy working there after everything that's happened?"

"Yeah. I've always liked the job. I just knew something weird was going on. I bet that's the last time you question my nose for adventure, huh?"

Jess was reassured by his chipper response. "Probably. But next time, try not to make it so dangerous. I don't enjoy seeing you with a knife at your throat."

"Ah, you had everything under control. You should've heard Barton squeal when you started firing at the car."

"That was scary. I was banking that the toughened

glass would protect you."

"And it did. Anyway, I'll leave you in peace. I just wanted to check in on you. Give my love to Grace."

"Will do. Call again when you get chance."

"Bye."

Jess slotted the phone back in its cradle then returned to the kitchen. Willow was lying on the rug in front of the Aga, watching Grace preparing food. "That was Nick checking in," she explained. "He sends his love."

"Great." Grace wrapped her arms around Jess's waist. "I don't have to go to work till this evening. How would you like to spend the day?"

"I can think of a few things. None involve leaving the house."

"Jess, are you thinking what I think you're thinking?"

Jess grinned. "Maybe."

"That sounds perfect."

"That's what I hoped you'd say," Jess said as she leant in to kiss her.

"SHE SHOULD BE here any time now." Grace glanced at the clock.

"I hope so," Jess said. "I'm looking forward to seeing her. It feels like I left camp a lot longer than two weeks ago."

"That's because we've packed a lot into those two weeks."

"Mmm." She sauntered over to Grace and hugged her. "Time well spent, if you ask me. Hey, I've been meaning to ask you. How do you feel about pet names?"

Grace seemed to ponder it. "I think they can be fun. Nothing too sickly, though. Like Snookie-Wookie-Wattle-Baby."

Jess snorted. "Oh I don't know, that's kind of

catchy." She leant in and whispered it into Grace's ear.

Grace laughed. "This isn't going to get lunch ready, you know."

"I know." Jess tightened the embrace, taking it from playful to passionate. Her hands had been heading for interesting places when the doorbell chimed. "Oh, I was starting to hope she'd be late."

"Go on. We'll continue this later."

Jess headed to the hall and was unsurprised to find Willow already waiting at the door. "Good girl. You stay there." She opened the door, already smiling expectantly. "Hi, Caitlin. Glad you made it. Come in."

Caitlin returned the smile but stayed where she was. "Is it all right for both of us to come in?"

Jess was puzzled. "You brought a friend? Sure, bring them in too." Her thoughts immediately went to lunch, hoping there would be enough for one extra. They'd work it out somehow.

"Come on." Caitlin beckoned to someone just out of sight.

Curious, Jess leant out. "Sergey!" She knelt down and pulled him into a tight hug. "Oh, I'm so glad to see you." The more time that had passed, the less hope she had of ever seeing him again.

Sergey returned the hug with small arms. "Yess." He grinned, clearly enjoying the pleasure of her reaction.

Grace appeared in the hallway. "Oh, I see we have an unexpected addition. Come on in, everyone, into the warm."

Jess led Sergey in by the hand. "This is Grace. Grace, meet Sergey."

"Why, hello," Grace squatted and held out her hand.

"I've had a hard time trying to keep him quiet," Caitlin said, smiling. "It's taken all my willpower to wait till today rather than blab it out over the phone

as soon as I knew he was all right."

"How did you find him?" Jess asked.

Grace slapped her playfully on the arm. "Let them get their coats off, at least. Caitlin, would you like a drink? Lunch will be ready in about half an hour." She gestured for them to sit down in the meantime.

When they were settled, Jess prompted Caitlin for her answer. "You were just about to tell us how you found Sergey."

Caitlin placed her glass on the table next to her. "A lot happened quite quickly. I gave my statement to the police the morning after and they already knew I'd agreed to manage the camp for a while. I guess Thomas told them. They asked me to report anything suspicious that came up. I didn't think anything of it, really. I figured with Barton, Hendred, and Mickey out of the picture, that'd be the end of the trouble."

"Oh, no. I guess it wasn't?"

"Nope. I got a call from a man the next day, demanding to speak to Barton. I made out that he'd been called away on urgent business, but I'd been left in charge of everything, including the Ukraine project."

"He bought that?" Jess was surprised.

"He was desperate, I guess. Must have been out of money or something with the Piotr thing not working out for them. It turned out he was higher up the chain. I played along and got enough information for the cops to find him."

"Well done," Grace said. "How's Piotr doing? Is he still at the camp?"

"No, he left. I had a word with the headmaster of the school. He had nothing to do with the scheme and was very upset about the whole thing. I think he felt guilty about his ignorance. I gave him a nice way out and he jumped at it. Now Piotr is enjoying a legitimate scholarship there. He can go back home any time he wants, but he has the chance to stay there

till graduation."

"Nice." Jess smiled. "You still haven't said how you found Sergey, though."

Caitlin held up her hands in defeat. "Okay, sorry, there's just been so much going on." She laughed. "When the cops arrested this other man I told you about, they found some records on children that had already been sold. Sergey was lucky. He's been living with a couple in Nottingham, apparently, and he's fine. As he's so happy, he's been able to stay there while the authorities do the standard adoption checking procedure. If the checks are positive and Sergey still wants to, they'll be allowed to adopt him legally."

Jess watched Sergey as he played with Willow. "That's great news. I'm so glad he's okay. I thought the sort of people who adopt in that way aren't the sort of people you want bringing up a child."

Caitlin shrugged. "For the majority, you're probably right. As I said, Sergey was lucky. Apparently, this couple can't have kids and had no luck with IVF. They tried adopting, but they wanted a younger child than was available. I think they got in some hot water for their part in the thing, but Sergey's testimony has done a lot to help them. He wanted to stay with them rather than go back to Ukraine. I don't know. I've seen Sergey with them and he seems really happy. That's the main thing, right?"

Grace left the room for a few moments then returned with some printer paper and colouring pencils. "Here you are," she said, placing them down on the coffee table by Sergey.

He flashed his dimples at her in gratitude. "Thank you."

"Hey, you're learning English." Jess grinned.

Sergey nodded and smiled. Holding out a red pencil, he invited her to join him.

"While the kiddies are playing, you can tell me how you're getting on running the place," Grace said to Caitlin.

"It's going okay. Good experience and everything. There's a much happier atmosphere now that Barton isn't there anymore. The kids seem to be picking up on it, too. I'm getting kind of homesick, though. I think these old bones need some Texas sunshine."

Jess looked up. "Are you going away?"

"Yes, but not for a while, yet. I said I'd stay till a permanent manager takes over but after that, I think it's time to go home and face a few demons." She leant forward to look at the drawings. "Oh, that's good," she said, looking over Sergey's shoulder at his fairground picture. She peered at Jess's horse. "That one needs a little more work."

Reaching round, Jess backhanded her. "I haven't missed you at all. Hey, that reminds me. What were you talking about with Barton that time in the cabin?"

Caitlin looked nonplussed. "When?"

"In the cabin, when I came back from my day off. You were drinking coffee together and looking really guilty."

"Oh, yeah. That. He came to warn me to keep away from you."

Jess stared at her, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"He told me that you were a bad influence and if I wanted to continue working there, I should distance myself from you."

"Charming." Grace said.

"I didn't have any intention of listening, but it kind of worked that way anyway, what with you thinking I was one of them."

Jess grimaced. "I'm sorry Caitlin, I really should have trusted you. But why didn't you tell me at the time what he said?"

Caitlin shrugged. "You jumped all over it and I figured you'd think I was lying, given your state of

mind."

"I am so sorry."

"Hey, don't worry about it. You had to be careful, I understand that. I'll keep it up my sleeve though. You never know when a little guilt-tripping might come in handy." She laughed. "Did you get that list of books I sent you?"

Jess nodded. She'd ordered a couple and was working her way through the first slowly. It was one thing to read about body acceptance and quite another to try and implement it. "Yes, thanks. It's interesting stuff."

" 'Interesting'?" Caitlin raised an eyebrow, repeating her.

"Interesting, scary, exciting, frustrating, take your pick." Jess smiled. "It's giving me a lot to think about."

"How about therapy?"

"I've made some enquiries. Nothing major. The few eating disorder counsellors I've found only seem to deal with anorexia and bulimia. The books are a good start, though." She wanted to keep the conversation as positive as possible.

Grace gave Jess's shoulder a supportive squeeze. "Slow and steady wins the race."

Caitlin nodded. "True. So, how are you guys doing anyway? It looks like you're still in the completely goofy phase." Her smile showed there was no negativity in the observation.

"We're good." Jess smiled and looked at Grace. "Really happy."

Grace nodded. "Next time I want a bigger part in the adventure, though. There was too much standing on the sidelines and worrying in this one." She gave Jess a pointed look.

"Okay, Doctor Fluffkins."

"Doctor Fluffkins?" Grace shook her head firmly. "No. No to that."

"Okay. How about Racy Gracy?" Jess suggested, her face set in her best attempt at angelic innocence.

Grace grabbed a cushion and waved it menacingly. "I dare you to say it again."

Jess stood, ready to run. "Racy Gracy." She gave a yelp and ducked as Grace charged, wielding her cushion with deadly precision. Sergey started laughing and dodged out of the way while Caitlin roared with laughter. Grace caught Jess in the kitchen and backed her into a corner.

"Racy Gracy, huh?" She advanced until she was just inches away.

"How about we settle this after lunch?" Jess kissed her meaningfully.

"Oh, I plan to settle it," Grace murmured against her lips. "And then we'll see just how racy I can be." She pushed the cushion against Jess's midriff. "Go entertain our guests. I'll finish up in here. And then, later, I believe I have a score to settle."

Jess took the cushion. "I can't wait." She headed back toward the living room but hesitated.

"What?" Grace looked up from the counter.

"I love you."

"And I love you."

Jess gripped the cushion tighter and returned to the living room, a huge smile on her face.

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