

A man and a woman are standing on a lush green golf course. The man is wearing a blue blazer over a white shirt and tan trousers. The woman is wearing a black and white striped dress. They are both looking towards the camera. The background shows a line of trees and a clear blue sky.

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At Last It's True Love:
The Wedding

**A Prince Edward Island Love Letters &
Legends epilogue novella**

JESSICA EISSFELDT

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Eight months after the events of "At Last It's True Love"

NICKY CLOSED HER eyes and inhaled deeply. The scent of fresh laundry on the line and sea-salt in the warm May air made her smile. A sense of contentment curled up and settled around her heart.

Victoria was beautiful this time of year. The smile lingered around her lips. Well, it was beautiful any time of year because she was here with Quinten.

She shook her head. Had it really been eight months since they'd met? Time went by so quickly. It was so precious. The May sunshine filtered through the horse chestnut tree she stood beside in Quinten's back yard.

After the princess's treasure had been returned to the Polish authorities, Quinten had asked Nicky to move in with him.

She'd paid the rent remainder on her apartment, given notice and moved up here, glad to escape New York at last. It hadn't taken her very long at all to feel at home in Victoria.

Mrs. MacPhail had helped see to that. She'd arranged a potluck in the back yard of the Orient Hotel and all Quinten's friends and neighbors had been there.

They'd played several games of croquet then laughed and talked far into the night around a bonfire.

She smiled at the memory. How she'd held hands with Quinten the entire time and exchanged not-so-secret, love-filled glances. Every so often, he'd squeeze her hand, as if to reassure himself she was really here, really with him at last.

Nicky arranged the final sheet on the line and pinned it with a wooden clothespin beside the rest of the laundry that flapped in the gentle breeze.

She picked up the empty wicker laundry basket just as a pair of strong arms encircled her waist from behind.

"Thank you for doing that," Quinten murmured in her ear. "Sheets fresh off the line are one of my favorite things."

Nicky turned in his arms to face him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Well, I know what your *very* favorite thing is," she whispered back in a teasing tone.

"Do you now?" he said, before he leaned in and kissed her.



One week later...

THE SCENT OF coffee drifted up to Nicky as she yawned and stretched then sat up. She pushed back the covers and got up.

Smelled like Quinten had started breakfast. A warm surge washed through her. He was so good about that. Taking care of her. Giving her what she needed, wanted. Her heart expanded in her chest. More and more, lately, she found herself imagining being with him...forever.

Her heart flipped. They hadn't talked specifically about marriage, but every time Quinten looked at her with those blue-gray eyes of his, all lit up like a kid at Christmas, she knew—her toes curled—that forever was certainly on his mind.

She slipped into a long white skirt and a pale green blouse with puffed sleeves. One of her new favorite finds from Linda's Closet in Charlottetown.

Though she'd checked, there were no secret pockets or hidden letters in it. She'd felt a slight ping of disappointment. But surely an adventure like the one she

and Quinten had experience together only came around once in a lifetime?

She padded barefoot across the wide wooden floorboards of their bedroom, headed out to the second-floor landing and then walked down the wooden steps to the first floor.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Quinten called from his place at the coffee pot.

“Good morning, sunshine,” she echoed—their usual morning ritual—before she leaned in to peck him on the lips as she took the coffee mug he handed her.

“Listen, I was thinking... since today is Sunday, what do you think about going to Island Chocolates for brunch? Grab some chocolate waffles.”

“Ooo, I love the sound of that.” Nicky took a sip of her coffee. “It starts at ten, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Quinten said as he leaned against the doorframe and slid a hand into his pocket. Did he seem...nervous?

Nah. Nicky mentally shook her head at herself. “Well,” she glanced at the clock on the wall, “it’s five to now. Shall we?”

They strolled hand in hand down Victoria’s main street, the warm May sunshine caressing Nicky’s cheeks.

Quinten ran a thumb back and forth across the back of her hand. Nicky threw a sideways glance at him. He only did that when he was preoccupied.

“Something on your mind, Quinten?”

“What? Oh, no, no.” He smiled broadly.

Nicky narrowed her eyes at him. “Whatever you say...”

They walked up the steps of the chocolate shop.

“Hey Quinten. Nicky.” Gemma smiled at them as they walked inside. “Your usual?”

Quinten nodded. “Yup.”

“Shouldn’t be too long for your waffles then, guys. Go find a seat. We’re pretty packed today,” Gemma said.

“Gemma, how’d that trip to Brazil go?” Nicky asked.

“Oh, it was great. Derek made some useful contacts for chocolate suppliers. And I had such a good time in Rio.”

“I’d love to go there sometime,” Quinten said.

“Maybe we could go together,” Nicky responded as she gave him a nudge with her shoulder.

He wiggled his eyebrows at her. “Maybe so.”

Gemma laughed. “You two. Oh, Quinten, how’s your great uncle doing? My mom asked, since she just got back from Nova Scotia.”

Quinten rubbed his jaw. “He’s still down near Prospect there. Last I heard, just fine.”

Gemma nodded. “I’ll pass that on to Mom.” She held up her coffee pot. “Better run.”

Quinten turned to Nicky. “So. Where do you want to sit?”

Nearly all the tables in the room were full. But, Nicky noticed, Quinten’s favorite table by the picture window had no one sitting there. A small vase with Nicky’s favorite flowers sat in the center, too.

Nicky pulled out one of the green metal chairs and sat down; Quinten sat across from her. “I love roses.” She leaned in to sniff the old-fashioned pink ones.

Quinten’s lips lifted in a secretive smile as he watched her.

“Here you go, guys,” Gemma said a few minutes later. She put down one plate of chocolate waffles in front of Quinten and then the other plate in front of Nicky.

After she’d placed the espresso beside Quinten, she also put a small green saucer with a single chocolate in front of Nicky.

Gemma exchanged a glance with Quinten that Nicky couldn’t quite read then said, “And this is on the house.” She winked at Nicky before she left.

Nicky reached for the chocolate but hesitated. “Do you want to split it? I don’t know why there’s only one.”

Quinten’s eyes widened briefly. “Uh, no, no. Don’t worry about me.” He smiled. “Let’s just, uh, eat breakfast first.” He picked up his fork.

Nicky glanced at the chocolate, then shrugged and picked up her fork.

"Mmm, the waffles are always sooo good," Nicky said as she dabbed her mouth with the napkin then set it on her now-empty plate with a sigh of satisfaction. She finished her hot chocolate and then picked up the saucer with the chocolate on it.

"Do you want some of this now?" She looked over at Quinten.

He reached for her free hand, covered it with his. "You, um, go ahead."

She reached for the chocolate. It looked like a salted caramel one; another of her favorite things...

She picked it up. And gasped.

Nestled carefully underneath the chocolate was a diamond ring.

Warmth surged through Nicky and her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Quinten." Her breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded as she met his blue-gray gaze across the table. He stood up, picked up the ring from the saucer and then got down on one knee.

People looked over at them by the window.

"Nicky," Quinten said in a husky voice, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears, "I love you." He took one of her hands in his own. It trembled, Nicky noticed.

Nicky choked back a half-sob, half-laugh. She barely registered the gasps and murmurs of the others in the chocolate shop.

"I knew you were the one for me. You're my anchor; you help me feel stronger and better. I'm more of the man that I know I can be, when I'm around you. I love you so much and I want to spend the rest of my life with you." He took a deep breath. "Nicky Stendahl, will you marry me?"

Quinten gazed at her, his blue-gray eyes shining, his expression so full of love that Nicky's heart surely would burst from her chest.

"Yes!" She jumped up from her chair and threw her arms around Quinten's neck. "Yes, Quinten Leard, I will

marry you.” She grinned as joy zinged through her. “You are definitely the one for me, too. I love how you’re so kind, generous, loving, caring. I love everything about you. I love how you believe in me and how I’m a better person when I’m with you. I love you so much. I thought you’d never ask!”

She laughed through her happy tears as Quinten slipped the ring on her finger.

Applause erupted around them as Quinten wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close. She threaded her fingers through his hair and leaned against him, sealing her words with a kiss.

One year later...

IN THE BRIDE room at The Grand Victorian on the outskirts of Victoria, Nicky took a last look in the mirror and a deep breath then smoothed down the ivory satin of her vintage 1940s wedding gown.

Her heart pounded beneath the lacy bodice embroidered with tiny seed pearls.

She'd found the gown at, where else? Linda's Closet in Charlottetown. Someone had donated it from their grandmother's attic.

The door opened and Nicky looked in the mirror's reflection. "Are you all set, Nicky?" Maggie, Nicky's friend and former boss, came into the room, followed by Maggie's friend Ruby. Both women wore pale green bridesmaid dresses and held small bouquets of old-fashioned pink roses.

Nicky blinked rapidly and dabbed a tissue under her eyelashes.

"Take deep breaths, Nicky," Ruby advised. "That's what helped me when I married Nathan." Her new friend approached and gave Nicky's shoulders a squeeze.

Nicky laughed softly. "Thanks. I'll try to remember that."

From the other side of the door, a twinkle of piano notes sounded. Her cue. Nicky stood and picked up her bouquet with a shaky hand.

Quinten had somehow persuaded Elliot to loan the Princess Royal piano for their ceremony. That way,

Quinten confided to Nicky, at least some small part of his Grandma Viv could be present at their wedding.

Nicky put a hand on her stomach and inhaled then exhaled deeply. She watched as first Ruby, then Maggie, exited the small room.

Then it was Nicky's turn.

Taking her father's arm, she hugged him before they stepped out into the large open space of the converted former Presbyterian church.

As the piano notes drifted toward her, Nicky felt the butterflies in her stomach settle into something like peace that flowed through her as she began to walk down the aisle.

Even though nearly a hundred pairs of eyes smiled and watched her progress up the aisle, all she focused on, drew strength from, was the sight of Quinten at the altar.

He looked so handsome in his light-gray morning suit with its pale green satin waistcoat and rose-bud boutiniere.

But she would've married him with paper rings, dressed in pajamas as they exchanged vows in his wooden barn...

...Because this was just the ceremony, just one day. She loved him. Her heart swelled. She just knew they'd be together the rest of their lives. They fit together perfectly; their personalities, their communication styles, their understanding of each other's strengths and weaknesses.

It was as if their relationship, their love, was a tree growing toward sunlight, fed by the sunshine of love and the willingness to stand strong in their firm commitment to each other.

Nicky took a deep breath as she came to the front of the aisle. Her father gave her a kiss on the cheek and then she came to stand beside Quinten.

He swallowed hard as he looked over at her and brushed a tear from the corner of his eye.

Oh Quinten, Nicky thought to herself as her heart lifted and joy filled every fibre of her being.

She smiled at him tenderly as they joined hands. The official began the ceremony.

“...I now pronounce you husband and wife. I think you know what to do.” The officiant winked and a ripple of laughter moved through the assembled guests and the wedding party.

As she stepped toward Quinten, he pulled her close and she wrapped her arms around him, felt the warm sweetness of his lips on hers.

Joy and love swept through every part of her soul as they stood there, caught in the first moments of the rest of their lives together. Stronger, together.

She interlaced her fingers with his as they walked back down the aisle, fingers interlaced.

Quinten squeezed her hand and whispered in her ear, “I love you, Mrs. Leard,” as they made their way to the front doors and then stepped out into the May sunshine.

Cheers and applause filled the air, and a myriad of iridescent bubbles swirled around them as people waved bubble wands and smiled at them.

The photographer began to click away and Nicky leaned in to kiss Quinten again as she murmured, “I love you too, Mr. Leard.”

EARLY THE NEXT morning, Nicky wiggled and then settled her head against the seat back as Quinten steered his silver Acura across the bridge that connected Cape Breton Island to the rest of Nova Scotia.

"Where is our B & B again, honey?" Nicky asked as she unfolded the official Nova Scotia roadmap.

"You can get my phone out to look it up if you want," Quinten teased.

"I know. But I like doing it this way."

"Another thing I love about you." Quinten chuckled. "The place is pretty close to my Great-Uncle Sam's, just to the north of Prospect."

"So we're headed onto Cape Breton now; Sydney's the only city on the island, right?"

Quinten chuckled. "Pretty much. But what it lacks in population, Cape Breton makes up for in natural beauty." He gestured to the winding highway, where Nicky caught glimpses of blue Atlantic between the dense pines situated on the clifftops.

Nicky noticed a signpost that called the road the Cabot Trail. "And, you'll love this," Quinten added, "it also has historical significance."

"Ooo." Nicky sat up a little straighter. "Really?"

Quinten gave her knee a squeeze. "Really. It has the Fortress of Louisbourg, which is on our list of honeymoon must-sees. It's a pretty impressive partial reconstruction of an 18th century French fortress and walled town. Haven't been there since high school. They have living history re-enactments and stuff there, too."

“Very cool. Kind of like Williamsburg, Virginia.”

“Exactly,” Quinten said. “But,” he added in a conspiratorial tone, “that’s not all that you’ll find historically intriguing about this province.”

“Oh?”

“Nope. My great-uncle always claimed, well, that his side of the family’s ancestors had something to do with missing silver when the British burned Washington during the War of 1812.”

Nicky’s eyes widened. “Wow. Tell me more.”

Quinten chuckled. “I thought you’d say that, which is why I’ve scheduled one of our stops at Sam’s place. Haven’t seen him in ages.”

“You thought of everything,” Nicky laid her head on his shoulder.

He kissed the top of her head. “Well, it’s only fair. You did so much of the wedding planning. I figured planning the honeymoon was the least I could do.”

She patted his chest.

A little while later, they arrived in the town of Sydney.

As Quinten pulled into a gas station to fill up, Nicky retrieved her phone and checked her messages. Loads of congratulations from her extended family and friends.

She smiled to herself. It still didn’t quite feel real, being *married* to Quinten. She glanced at him through the rather bug-smearred windshield.

Then she noticed that beyond him, a black SUV with—she cocked her head—California plates pulled up to the pump opposite Quinten’s Acura.

A couple of guys got out. One was tall with dark hair and wore a blue NorthFace windbreaker. Hmm. His profile looked sort of...familiar. The other was a bit shorter and had a Nikon slung around his neck.

Must be tourists.

But then she did a double take and her eyes darted back to the dark-haired man. She smacked her forehead. Of course.

He was in all the teaser trailers for that new historical mysteries show she'd seen advertised all over social media. It looked pretty good. She'd have to watch it when the pilot came out. What was it called again....?

She frowned. Scrolled through her phone. That's right: *Passport to Romance & Relics*. The dark-haired man was the host.

The Acura's driver's door opened and Quinten stuck his head in. "I'm gonna go pay. Want any snacks?"

"I'm good, honey. You want me to wash the windshield?"

"You're the best. Thanks, sweetie." Quinten pecked her on the lips. She smiled at him and got out.

But as she headed over to grab the squeegee, snatches of conversation drifted to her from the two men. Nicky frowned. What was the guy's name...? Jack? No. Jake. Yep, that was it. Jake Ford.

"...Yeah, that's what he said. Major General Robert Ross." Jake Ford said. "Same guy who was in charge of the British forces burning Washington, and what was then called the President's Palace—the first White House."

She tried to act as if she wasn't eavesdropping while she took her time lifting the squeegee out of its bucket.

"...Well, that makes sense. Because that support diver said the platter definitely showed the United States Seal," the man with the Nikon said.

Nicky paused, squeegee in hand.

"Then it could really be Dolley Madison's missing silver service, couldn't it?" Jake Ford chuckled. "That's amazing!"

Nicky walked the few steps to the Acura and begin to wash the windshield. She could still hear the conversation between the two men.

The shorter man slapped him on the shoulder. "You always use that phrase."

"Well, it's sort of my trademark." Jake Ford shrugged. "Gotta brand myself and all. And I *do* think it's pretty amazing. I mean, who would've thought that Dolley

Madison's stolen silver service would end up off the coast of some Canadian province? That's the heart of this show. Uncovering intriguing historical mysteries for the world to see."

"Don't forget the romance part—legendary love stories are part of the show too." The other man chuckled. "But this is only the pilot episode *and* we can't prove without a doubt that it is the Madison silver yet; you do know that, right?"

"Hey, I'm an optimist," Jake Ford said. "Once we shoot this and air it as the pilot, well...you never know just how popular this show's gonna get. Social media channels' stats show good results with the teasers."

"Mmm, yeah. Tank's full now. I've prepaid, so let's get back on the road. Long day ahead," the shorter man said before both of them got back into the SUV and drove off.

Nicky finished the windshield and put the squeegee back into the bucket with a plop. Interesting. Her thoughts whirled. This was a pretty small place. Was the *he* that Jake Ford had mentioned Quinten's great uncle?

Just then she saw Quinten exit the station with a bag of Covered Bridge chips and return to the Acura.

"Mmm, I love these lobster-flavored ones," Nicky said as she took a chip from the open bag.

"That's why I got them. Plus, they're not bad. Sort of an acquired taste." Quinten shrugged playfully.

"Hey now," Nicky said and gave his shoulder a playful shove. "Just for that, I'm driving next." She got into the driver's seat. "Um, can I see the map?"

Quinten laughed as he passed her the road map. "Might be easier if I navigate with my phone?"

"No. I like paper."

"So you do," Quinten said.

"Okay, we need to take a right at the next light here..." Nicky studied the map one last time before she pulled away from the gas station.



AFTER THEY SETTLED into their top floor honeymoon suite at the B & B, a converted lighthouse with a blue and white nautical theme, Quinten and Nicky headed back outside to take a stroll along the boardwalk by the lighthouse.

"It's such a gorgeous evening," Nicky said as she took in the pink and peach streaked sky.

"Mmm, yes it is," Quinten said as he put an arm around her shoulders.

"So now that we've visit Louisbourg, what's the plan for tomorrow?" Nicky cuddled into his embrace.

"Well," he said, and Nicky could feel the rumble of his words as she put a hand on his chest. "I was thinking we could pay a visit to Sam. I've called him and he said he'd be happy to see us. But," Quinten paused, "he also said something about a TV crew arriving mid-afternoon, so we'd have to either come before or after."

"TV crew?" Nicky's pulse jumped. She'd been right. "Um, did you see those guys in the black SUV at the gas station this morning?"

Quinten's brow furrowed. "Uh, maybe? You know you have a better memory for details than I do." He pecked Nicky on the lips.

Nicky pulled him closer to deepen the kiss. The salty breeze blew around them, and seagulls cried overhead. But all she felt was the taste of Quinten's kiss and the warmth in her heart.

THE ACURA'S TIRES crunched on the gravel as Quinten and Nicky pulled into Sam's driveway.

"Yep, I was right." Nicky nudged Quinten and pointed to the black SUV with California plates that was parked in front of the house.

"So you were. Wow, California. That's a bit of a drive," Quinten said.

"That's where this travel-history show's based, I guess. Even though I remember reading somewhere on social media that the woman who's the main producer came from Wisconsin."

"Interesting. Well," Quinten checked his Apple watch. "I bet they're just wrapping up. Sam texted me earlier and said it was fine to come on over."

Nicky opened her door. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Quinten chuckled as he followed her up to the front door of the small light blue cottage with white shutters.

A very large anchor sat to the left of the front door. A pair of olive green rubber boots lay on their side nearby.

Nicky stood beside Quinten as he knocked. She heard the rumble of voices and then a second later, the door swung open.

A man in his late 80s opened the door. A pair of red reading glasses were on top of his snow-white hair, and he had on a navy blue pullover with *Halifax Piping Band* emblazoned across it.

His blue-gray eyes lit up at the sight of Quinten. "It's been too long, Quint." He turned his head. "And you must

be Nicky. Lovely to meet you at last. Come in, come in, the both of you. Join the party.” He chuckled as he opened the screen door wider for the pair of them to enter.

They took off their shoes before they followed Sam into the small and neat living room. A comfortable-looking couch with red plaid throw pillows sat along one wall.

A couple of captain’s chair were drawn up beside it. The two men from the gas station sat on them, deep in conversation with each other. A TV camera sat on a tripod behind them.

A few key lights were arranged strategically behind the couch, and Nicky noticed a women in the far corner of the room, furiously writing something in a flip book.

Opposite the couch was a large picture window with a view out to the water. In the distance, Nicky could see a few boats bobbing along. “Nice view,” she commented.

“That it is,” Sam said as he joined her by the window. “I’ve looked out on this view for near on fifty years and it never gets old.” He took a sip of coffee from a chipped mug with what looked like ship’s signal flags painted on its side.

“Did we catch you at a bad time?” Quinten joined Nicky and Sam by the window.

“Nah. Never a bad time for relatives,” Sam said. “Besides, Jake and the crew were just finishing up here, I think.” He paused, then said in a carrying voice. “You boys need anything more from me?”

The other two men stopped talking and looked over at Sam.

Jake glanced at the notebook in his hand. “I think we’ve got all the footage we need.” He rifled through the pages of notes he’d taken. “But I did want to clarify... Your ancestor Seamus MacDougal, it was *his* wife who knew Dolley Madison and had worked at the Madison White House before they got married and came up here?”

Sam glanced at Quinten then answered Jake. “Far as I know, yes, that’s the family story. Seamus was Loyalist who fell in love with a Patriot; they ended up here.”

“Perfect. That’s what I needed to know.” Jake grinned as he wrote down a few more things then started talking with the other man again.

“Wait,” Quinten said to Sam. “You’re talking about our ancestors? Who took in the survivors from one of the ships in the *Fantome* fleet after they wrecked on the sunken by Phantom Cove out there?”

“That’s right, Quint,” Sam said. “That’s what they’ve interviewed me about. Because you know, I still have that sterling silver fork with the eagle embossed on it, round about. I was just showing it to them here.”

Quinten’s eyes widened. But before Sam could say anything else, the two men got up.

Jake crossed to Sam and shook his hand. “Thanks so much, Sam. Like I said earlier, we’ll be in touch if we need anything else. But I think everything’s good to go. You’ve been very helpful, you know. The maker’s mark and the seal matches what we found *in situ* on the wreck site out near the bay.”

“Well, thanks, Jake. It’s been great fun chatting with you boys. And if you do hear a positive result with talks between Parks Canada, the British Museum and the Smithsonian, please let me know. I’m happy to donate my family heirloom to the cause.”

Jake clapped Sam on the shoulder. “We appreciate that, man. You never know. The Canadian and British governments *could* agree to raise the artifacts. It’d be pretty awesome if they did—a permanent loan of the Dolley Madison silver to the Smithsonian. Only time will tell.”

The crew began to pack up their things. A little while later, they’d gone. Somehow the house seemed much quieter now that there were only three of them in it.

Sam sank with a contented sigh onto his couch and ruffled his head. “Nearly forgot what that’s like.” He chuckled.

Quinten sat on one of the vacated captain’s chair; Nicky beside him.

“What do you mean?” Quinten asked.

“Oh, just recalling all those family stories. Did you ever hear the whole thing, Quinten?”

Quinten leaned back, put his arm across the back of Nicky’s chair. “Don’t think I did, no. Just bits and pieces from Grandpa Wallace.”

“Well, during the War of 1812, Major General Robert Ross’s and Admiral George Cockburn’s troops looted and then burned Washington and the first White House, among other government buildings in Washington. But that was actually in retaliation for the Americans having already burned down key buildings in Canada.”

“Really?” Nicky interjected. “I never learned *that* in my high school U.S. history class.”

“Well,” Sam replied, “depends which side you’re on, how history is presented.” He took a breath and continued the story. “According to the historical records, the HMS *Fantome* started out as a French brig. Got captured by the British and used in the War of 1812. By November 1814, a Captain Sykes of the British Royal Navy commanded the *Fantome*.”

“That’s a lot of changing hands,” Quinten commented.

“That’s war,” Sam replied.

“Well, after seeing action in Chesapeake Bay,” he continued, “Sykes started to head up to Canada. Had captured American ships along with him.”

“Filled with stolen goods from Washington?” Nicky couldn’t help but grin as she leaned forward.

“That’s where the facts get a little...murky. Some people say the *Fantome* fleet had nothing to do with the raid on Washington. But others claim differently. Say the Brits loaded the captured American ships with their stolen White House goods and headed back up to Halifax—Nova Scotia’s capital—because that was the headquarters for British North America at the time. Third largest harbor in the world, actually. But they never made it. The *Fantome* fleet ran aground near Prospect, here. At night. In winter. Without modern nautical navigation equipment, of course

they didn't see the big sunkeners and shoals that lurk along the coastline here. Looks like deep water but you can't tell anything much. Especially at night."

"Wow," Quinten said.

"But the crew made it to shore, along with a few piece of their loot. Including, so the story goes, some pieces of Dolley Madison's stolen silver. Now, they didn't get it all, mind; just a few pieces. So, in gratitude for saving crew lives, Seamus and his wife got a piece of the presidential sterling silver. Nothing was ever verified, though. Until now, actually. Jake and his crew went down to the wreck site with some researchers who've had a new lead in the case. Found more artifacts. Took bunches of photos."

"They only took photos? They can't just bring things up to the surface for historical preservation?" Nicky said.

Sam shook his head. "It's all basically owned by the Canadian government. But Britain owns the fleet wreck site. So no one can remove anything. Called *in situ* preservation. I don't agree with it. The objects are basically left there and gradually, over the centuries, the ocean ends up destroying them. History is lost, reclaimed by the sea."

"So when Jake Ford talked about a permanent loan...?" Nicky asked.

"He's hoping with the verified connection made between my own artifact and the wreck site, that something could be worked out between the Smithsonian and the British and Canadian governments."

"That's be great if it could," Quinten said.

"Yes," Nicky agreed as she smiled at Quinten. "History's too important to be lost."



Three months later...

QUINTEN OFFERED THE last handful of popcorn to Nicky from the green plastic bowl as he snuggled with her on

their couch while the credits for *Passport to Romance & Relics* scrolled on the TV above the fireplace.

“Thanks.” She smiled and took the handful.

“So. What did you think of the pilot episode?” Quinten said.

Nicky stretched, catlike, then grinned at him. “Oh, I loved it. I think it’s my new favorite TV addiction.”

“Jake Ford certainly knows how to amp up the intrigue and romance side of history,” Quinten said.

“Definitely. That’s what makes it so good.”

Quinten chuckled.

“We’ll have to keep a lookout for the next episode,” Nicky said, her eyes bright.

Quinten put an arm around her shoulders. “That’s a date,” he murmured, before he leaned in and kissed her.

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MacKinnon, Robert; Murphy, Dallas. *Treasure Hunter: Diving for Gold on North America's Death Coast*. (New York, Berkley Books, 2012)

Author's Note

After I read the book *Treasure Hunter: Diving for Gold on North America's Death Coast* by Robert MacKinnon (with Dallas Murphy), I became intrigued with MacKinnon's account of diving on the HMS *Fantome* fleet wreck site near Prospect, Nova Scotia.

In the book, MacKinnon said that when he dived on the wreck site in the early 2000s, he found a metal plaque with the words "Of the United States." The book also mentions that every once in a while, Nova Scotia estate sales turn up an artifact from the 1814 raid on Washington. I knew I wanted to use these bits of historical mystery and real-life facts in some sort of story eventually...

So when I decided to write Quinten and Nicky's honeymoon story, I realized I had the perfect opportunity: they could honeymoon in Nova Scotia, have a family connection to the lost treasure, and meet Jake Ford, the hero of my series *Passport to Romance & Relics*, too. (I have taken a bit of poetic license with my story, as it's not proven that Dolley Madison's silver service is on the wreck site; the wreck site also remains undisturbed, as it remains under *in situ* preservation.)

By the way, if you're looking for a great non-fiction read, MacKinnon's book is pretty fascinating, because looted goods from Washington may still be at the bottom of the North Atlantic... !

Treasured Hearts

**A Passport to Romance & Relics prequel
novella**

JESSICA EISSFELDT

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“I’M SARA BLAKELY, coming to you live from Mansion Hill here in Madison. After a protracted legal battle, the Madison Society for Historical Home Preservation finally lost in court yesterday against the Windy City Development Corporation for the right to purchase the 1850s Bly House located behind me here.”

Sara indicated the property behind her but kept her eyes on the red light and spoke clearly. She wanted to make sure viewers knew exactly what piece of history was being lost in this city.

“The Chicago-based company, which set up a local branch office here in Madison earlier this year, is slated to demolish the once-lavish home and build a series of ultra-modern condominiums at this location. I’m here with the society’s executive director, who will fill us in on the latest from their side.”

Sara turned to face the woman beside her. She wished there was something she could do about the Bly House, some way to save it from the developers.

“That’s right, Sara,” the executive director said. “We fought long and hard but ultimately it’s simply a situation where we as a society didn’t have enough funding to purchase the property to save it. Because of that, and because of the home’s poor state of repair, Windy City Development saw an opportunity, swooped in and purchased this piece of history. The sale went through this morning, as per the litigation.”

“Wow. They seem to move quickly. Tell me, Rachel, when will the demolition take place?”

“The property’s slated to be razed by the end of this week; Friday.”

“Only four days away. It’s such a shame a historic place like this can’t be saved.”

“Sad as we are to lose this fight, sometimes things like this happen, despite everyone’s best intentions. You see, this particular home happens to sit just outside the historic district portion of Mansion Hill, so it wasn’t filed with the National Register of Historic Places. That was a big point against things for us, too. Not to mention, the cost of renovating something like this, bringing it back to its former glory, is astronomical, even in this day and age of crowdfunding and grants for historic preservation.”

“Well, Rachel, we’ll have to hope you’re able to do something great with the next house you can save. Thank you for your time.”

Sara turned back to the camera. “This is Sara Blakely for WCXB News here in Madison.”

Sara waited until the red light blinked off before she shifted her weight and wiggled her toes. She was still breaking in the pair of new blue pumps she’d bought from The Pink Poodle last week. But the extra effort would be worth it once she got this promotion to news anchor.

She smiled. After she got the anchor job, she’d be that much closer to her really big dream of being co-producer. Then, she’d be able to influence the types of stories the station focused on. Share the kinds of stories with viewers that she felt would be important, that they’d want to hear about. Ones like this one she’d just wrapped.

She’d worked at WCXB for almost twelve years. Even since she’d graduated from the University of Wisconsin. Her boss wouldn’t pass over all her years of dedication and experience for someone like Tiffany, fresh out of broadcast school and only three months into her job with WCXB. Would he?

He couldn’t. This was her chance to finally make a name for herself. To do something important. To chase her dream. Her boss knew that. He had to.

“All set, Sara? I’ve got the cameras loaded up in the SUV. Ready to head back to the station?”

“Good to go, thanks, Norm.” Sara nodded and got into the passenger seat of the Chevrolet beside the cameraman.

After Sara returned to the station and plopped down her purse by her desk, she headed to the break room for a much-needed caffeine fix. Her friend Nancy looked up from the romance novel she was reading.

“You finally get ahold of the mayor, Nancy?”

The other woman grinned. “What are reporters if not persistent? I have good contacts at city hall. Got a great sound byte directly from her.”

“Last time I interviewed her, I got a great quote too. She’s a good source. So what’s she say the city plans to do with that extra few million in surplus?”

“Something about looking for the right cause to invest in.” Nancy shrugged. “We’ll see what happens.” She flipped a page of her book. “Hey, you catch *Junk or Jem* last night?”

“It was Monday, so you know it. Love appraisal shows like that. Even more so when it features a local place like Rick’s Olde Gold. If I was co-producer, I could do something like that here...”

“Sure could,” Nancy said. “When are you supposed to find out, anyway?”

“End of the day today, Martin said.” Sara poured coffee into her favorite red and white Bucky Badger mug then sat down near her friend.

After Sara took a sip, she said, “So what did you think of Rick’s appraisal of that antique silver hairbrush set he had on the show?”

“I think he totally nailed it,” Nancy replied. “It’s about time I go down there and buy myself something fun. Wanna come?”

It was a running joke of theirs to see how much they could buy at the secondhand jewelry and antiques place on Williamson Street.

Sara tapped a polished French-tipped fingernail against her chin and pretended to think about it.

Nancy laughed. "So that's a yes."

Sara grinned back. "But seriously. I want to get that sugar spoon of mine appraised."

Nancy put down her novel and leaned forward in her chair. "How did you end up with it anyway?"

"You've heard of the Vilas House, right?"

"It's that big fancy mid-1800s one that William Vilas and his wife Anna owned on Mansion Hill. Think the boathouse is the only thing still standing on that property now."

Sara nodded. "Well, not long before the house got torn down back in the 1960s, my dad and his friend Kyle—kids at the time—went into the abandoned building."

"Oh really?"

Sara nodded. "Dad's friend Kyle had a connection with the construction company hired to demolish it, so they sort of had the run of the place; no one blinked an eye, apparently."

"Okay."

"Unfortunately, the Vilas House hadn't been well taken care of by that point and was beyond repair."

"Hmm, that sounds like the house you just covered."

"I know." Sara sighed. "There are a few parallels. Which is why it bothers me so much, I think... But anyway, Dad and Kyle spent a lot of time exploring the old house. It had hand-painted ceilings, gold-leaf crown moulding, Austrian crystal chandeliers, the whole works."

"Wow," Nancy said. "But how does this relate to the spoon?"

"The day before the house was scheduled to be taken down, my dad spotted this marble-topped side table. Since the whole place was going to get wrecked, he decided to rescue this piece of furniture. He and Kyle dragged the thing outside. Dad took it to his parents' house. Where it stayed for as long as I can remember."

Nancy nodded.

“But it was only years later that Dad discovered one of the drawers in that side table had a false bottom. When he lifted it up, he saw this single sugar spoon tucked inside. He gave it to me since he knew how much I love history.”

Nancy rested her chin on her palm. “Wow. I mean, who puts a sugar spoon in a false-bottom drawer?”

“Maybe because it had a ruby embedded in the handle?”

“Maybe so. Guess we’ll never really know.”

“Guess not.” Sara stood. “Well. I’m ready when you are.”

Nancy stood too. “Next stop, Rick’s Olde Gold.”



“HEY TODD,” RICK called from the back of the Ford pickup he stood in, “give me a hand with this credenza.”

“Sure thing.” Todd Vaughn propped open the front door of Rick’s Olde Gold on Williamson Street before he walked over to his boss. He took one side of the large walnut piece of furniture. “Where’s this one coming from?”

“Some big house over by Maple Bluff,” Rick said as the two men maneuvered the furniture down off the pickup bed.

“From the woodwork, looks like it’s a reproduction Sheridan,” Todd said as he eyed the piece.

Rick nodded. “Think so.”

They carried it through the narrow doorway and down the stairs into the basement of the secondhand jewelry and antiques store where the majority of the large items were kept.

After they’d put the piece safely down, Todd rubbed the small of his back.

“Not missing that little banker’s cubicle in Chicago you ran away from, are you?” Rick glanced at Todd from under the brim of his New York Yankees ball cap.

“Not for a second,” Todd replied. “Lifting furniture beats the gym.” He grinned. “I love it here.”

“Good. Lots to do that’ll keep you beyond busy. I could use your expertise around the place.” Rick headed for the basement stairs.

Todd followed him up the narrow wooden staircase to the main level.

“Expertise might be a bit of a stretch,” Todd said.

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re damn good at naming and dating period pieces.”

“Guess all that time helping my ex-girlfriend with her import-export business in Chicago paid off.”

“Guess so.” Rick glanced at his silver Rolex. “Did you take your break?”

Todd shook his head.

“Go on. Think there’s an apple fritter or two left from the Green Bush Bakery on the desk in the back there.”

“Thanks.” Todd snagged one and stepped outside the two-story red brick building. He took a left.

Maples shaded the narrow sidewalk of the downtown city block. Todd walked along for a few minutes before he spotted a wrought iron bench and sat down. It was good to get out of Chicago. Slower-paced. Better quality of life.

Madison had always been a place he’d wanted to live for awhile. He could see how it’d ranked in the top ten of best places in America to live.

He’d just finished the cinnamon-laced fritter when he noticed two women head up the street toward Rick’s shop. One was a woman in her fifties, with short-cropped graying hair. The other appeared to be in her thirties and had curly blonde shoulder-length hair.

He’d better get back in there.



SARA PAUSED AT the threshold of the two-story red brick building that looked like it’d been built sometime in the

1920s. She glanced up at the blue and yellow sign that read Rick's Olde Gold.

She couldn't help but smile. The huge plate glass window displayed everything from stained-glass lampshades and flapper cocktail rings to Mariachi guitars.

This was one of her favorite places in the city. All the history, all the stories behind each piece...

The bells overhead jingled as Sara pushed open the yellow door and stepped in to the long, narrow space.

She saw shelf after shelf of everything from Ming vases to camel-back mantel clocks to resin-cast statues of Parisienne women with flowers in their hair.

"Hello ladies," a man called from behind the long glass-topped jewelry counter on Sara's right. He wore a Yankees ball cap, a light gray T-shirt and a pair of comfortably worn-in jeans.

"Hi Rick," they said nearly in unison.

"Take a look around. See anything you like, let me know," Rick continued. Behind him were even more shelves filled with treasures.

Sara nodded and gazed around. He'd gotten some new things in since she'd been here last. Was that a bronze statue of Hermes?

Nancy was already deep in conversation with one of the other employees as she headed down the basement stairs.

Sara had just turned to the row of jewelry cases when she heard the bell jangle behind her.

"Todd," Rick said to the person who'd just come in. "Will you watch the front for a minute?"

"Sure." The man who'd just entered the room—Todd—slipped behind the counter.

"Can I help you find anything?" he said to Sara.

She looked up from the case and met his gaze. Her heart jumped as a pair of warm green eyes regarded her. A hint of stubble grazed his jaw.

His slightly wavy brown hair was styled in an expensive-looking haircut and his neatly pressed pale blue

dress shirt was tucked into dark-wash jeans. He had on a highly polished pair of brown loafers.

He looked like he belonged behind a computer console in some steel and glass skyscraper, not behind a counter filled with Victorian brooches and diamond bracelets.

He looked to be around her age. What was he doing working here?

Then again, was she judging him by appearances? It seemed so. She flushed as the seconds stretched and realized she'd not replied. "Uh..."

She cleared her throat and tried again. "Thanks but I'm actually not looking to buy anything at the moment. I'm wanting an appraisal done."

"Oh, sure. I'm pretty new here and don't do the appraisals. That would be Rick. Just a minute. I'll go get him."

The man turned away from her and walked to the back of the long narrow space. She couldn't help but admire the way his dress shirt stretched across his broad shoulders.

She shook her head at herself. She needed to focus on her reason for coming here. The sugar spoon. She shouldn't distract herself with wondering about random men. Even if they were attractive and—

"Whatchya got?" Rick called as he approached her with Todd a few paces behind him.

"Oh, let me just..." Sara unzipped an inside side pocket and pulled out the small sugar spoon.

As she set it on the counter, Rick let out a low whistle. Todd raised his eyebrows in her direction before he glanced down at the sugar spoon, too.

An intricate pattern of vines and leaves wound its way down from the tip of the spoon's handle, twined around the midsection and ended at the bowl of the spoon. The bowl flared slightly, decorated around the rim with engraved leaves.

Rick picked up the spoon and studied it. "I haven't seen this vine and leaf pattern before. Unique how it

twists all the way around the handle, not just on the top. Where'd you get this?"

Sara shifted her weight. "You know the spot where the old Vilas house was up on Mansion Hill?"

Rick nodded. "Sure. I've lived here all my life. One of the last native Madisonians around it seems, these days." He glanced at Todd. "No offence but it seems like half of Chicago lives here now."

Todd shrugged and chuckled. "None taken. Madison sure beats the Windy City."

"Got that right," Rick said. "So. The Vilas House?" He turned his attention back to Sara.

She told Rick the story she'd already relayed to Nancy earlier that day.

"Wow. A real piece of Madison history right here." Rick hefted the spoon. "Judging from the intricate carvings on the handle here, I'd say it was crafted in the 1840s or '50s."

He flipped the spoon over. "And it's marked sterling. You got yourself a nice little piece there. I'd say it'd be worth between five hundred and a thousand, give or take the spot price of silver, and its historical connection to Madison. Anything you wanna add, Todd?"

Todd took the spoon Rick handed him. As he examined it, Sara couldn't help but study him a bit more closely. No wedding ring...

And—what was she thinking? The last guy she got involved with who worked in antiques was her scammer of an ex-boyfriend, Craig. Sold a whole load of knock-off Spode china to an unsuspecting woman in her 90s.

How many other cons had he pulled before she'd found out about the Spode and broken up with him? That Sara'd actually believed him and stayed with him, until that incident, had been a testament to either her own stupidity or her own willingness to be blind-sided. She wasn't going to trust that easily again.

"Think you're right, Rick," Todd murmured. "Definitely Antebellum sterling. What makes it even more

unusual is this ruby embedded in the top. You don't know anything about that?" Todd looked at Sara.

Sara shook her head. "No. I just assumed it was maybe associated with the Vilas family or perhaps with whoever had placed it in the false-bottomed drawer. But I've never seen a piece of silverware with a jewel in it. Have you?"

Both Todd and Rick shook their heads.

"Well," Rick said, "the Vilas family has certainly been around Madison long enough for something interesting to have happened to them." He chuckled. "If you want to know more, I'd suggest a chat with the historical society. They're over on State Street." Rick glanced back and forth between Todd and Sara.

"I should get back to my paperwork, so I'll let you kids finish up here," Rick said. "Todd, I'll be in the back."

"Sure," Todd said, as Rick walked away. "What do you mean about the Vilas family?" Todd turned back to Sara.

"Oh," Sara said, "William Vilas was a U.S. senator from Madison and served in the Civil War. I think he got promoted to lieutenant colonel or something. Anyway," she waved a hand, "he and his wife donated 75 acres for what's now the Henry Vilas Park and Zoo."

"I drove by there for the first time the other day." Todd propped a forearm on the counter and slid the spoon back to Sara. She admired the play of muscle in his arm as he did.

She tore her gaze away. "And," she finished in a firm tone as she reached out for the piece of sterling silverware, "the area that the Vilases used to live in, well, lots of college students live up there currently. Since it was so close to the capitol building, that area originally was for the wealthy. It's pretty close to Lake Mendota, so it's sort of prime real estate. But pretty much all the old mansions up there have been either torn down or subdivided into rental units."

Todd rubbed his jaw as he listened. "Wow. Really? Interesting." He seemed to appreciate the history lesson.

Sara fiddled with the spoon handle, flipping it over and over in her hands. "Rick said the vine and leaf design along the handle went all the way around the back of the spoon too."

Todd nodded.

She paused. "That's odd."

"What is it?" Todd met her gaze.

She dropped her eyes to the spoon. "This line here on the back. It's pretty much obscured by the vine and leaf pattern. That must've been why I never saw it before."

"Line?" Todd leaned across the counter toward her and she caught a pleasant hint of cedar. Must be his cologne.

No, no. Focus. "Across the base where the spoon's bowl meets the handle." Sara indicated with her French-tipped fingernail.

Todd reached into his pocket and pulled out a jeweler's loop. "You're right," he said as he studied the spoon under the magnification. "And it looks like..." His brow furrowed. "What the heck?"

"What is it?"

He lowered the loop and met Sara's gaze. Her breath hitched.

"I think it's some sort of...hinge," Todd said.

"Hinge?"

"Mmm, think so. Whoever silver-smithed this was pretty clever about working the hinge into the design of the leaves and vines, which is probably how it went unnoticed."

"But why would someone do that? It's a spoon."

"I have no idea. But we could try to find out." A sparkle came into his eyes. "If you're okay with it, of course."

Sara's heart sped up. "What do you have in mind?"

Todd turned to the shelf behind him and rooted around. "There's a... here we go." He held a very small pair of pliers and a can of WD-40. "Hold this?" He handed her the spoon and their fingers brushed.

Sara's heart beat a little faster as she took it.

"Just hold it upright," Todd said. Very carefully, he applied a dab of lubricant across the line and then applied pressure to the handle with the pliers as Sara held the spoon.

Nothing happened.

Todd's brow furrowed more.

"Could be rusted shut?"

"Sterling doesn't rust. It tarnishes, yes, but..." Todd applied a bit more WD-40 and tried again. This time, there was a faint pop and the handle started to bend at a right angle down from the bowl of the spoon.

Sara's eyes widened. Todd put down the pliers and met Sara's gaze. He looked like he'd just found an extra present under the Christmas tree.

She couldn't help but smile at his enthusiastic expression.

After what seemed a second longer than necessary, Todd broke their eye contact and looked down at the spoon again.

"Do you see that?" Sara asked Todd.

"What?" He leaned toward her as she pointed.

"There." She couldn't help herself as she leaned toward him too and whispered. "I think there's some sort of small cavity in the handle."

"Good eye."

"Thanks." She warmed at the compliment.

"And it looks like something's in here." Todd picked up the pliers again.

"Paper?" Sara cocked her head, moving nearer.

He used the pliers to gently tug out a very yellowed and fragile-looking slip of paper.

It was tiny—it had to be to fit inside such a small space—but it was definitely paper.

"Should we see if it says anything?" Todd met her gaze. The green in his eyes seemed to darken with intensity, curiosity.

“Well, we can’t stop now.” Sara found herself just a bit breathless. Was it from his expression or what they’d uncovered?

She watched as Todd very carefully picked up the pliers again and used them to open the tiny slip of paper.

Sara exhaled slowly as writing was revealed on the page. In a neat elegant script that had faded to a dull brownish-red.

*Pigeon’s blood
almost engulfed
with uncivil fire
Lost but for the
circle of the
heart’s desire*

“What on Earth?” Sara whispered.

“I have no idea,” Todd whispered back, so close now Sara could feel his body heat. “But if I had to guess, I’d say it sounds like some sort of...riddle.”

JUST THEN, SARA’S smartphone buzzed. She jumped. “Sorry. I’m expecting an important—”

Todd nodded as she turned to answer her phone. He tried to focus on the words on the page but he kept getting drawn back to the woman in front of him.

He’d been in numerous relationships but somehow, something about Sara felt...different. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it but it seemed like he had always tried and failed to find what he was looking for in a relationship.

He shook his head. No. He was trying to figure out his own life. He didn’t have time for trying to figure out Sara too.

But when she turned back to him, the expression in her blue eyes looking a tad crestfallen, Todd found himself reaching into his pocket and pulling out a business card.

“If you want help figuring out this word puzzle, don’t hesitate to call me. I’m pretty good at crosswords.” He smiled.

For a brief second, Sara’s eyes lit up but it was quickly replaced by sadness. Todd wondered what the important call or text had been about. But he didn’t press her, only pressed his card into her hand.

“Thanks,” she gave him a small smile and slipped it into her purse. “Here’s my card, too.” She handed it to him.

Then she picked up the fragile piece of paper and put it into her inside zippered purse pocket. “It was nice to meet you, Todd. Thank you for your help. I should go find my friend.”

“You’re welcome. It was nice to meet you too, Sara.” Todd said.

His gaze lingered on Sara as she and her friend left the shop a few minutes later. Would he see her again?

AS SARA STEPPED out into the bright sunshine on Williamson Street, she tried to blink away the tears but failed.

How could her boss think that someone like Tiffany, who'd graduated just this December, would be a better fit for news anchor than she was?

She ground her teeth. No. Took a deep steadying breath. She wasn't going to let this get the better of her.

"Want to stop at Culver's?" Nancy said as they got back into her car. "They just got their new flavor of the week."

"Ice cream therapy sounds great right about now. I could really go for one of their sundaes. With extra cherries."

"Oh no. I know that tone of voice. What's wrong?"

Sara withheld a sigh. She shouldn't complain. She had a good job that she loved...

"Martin chose Tiffany over me."

"I'm sorry, Sara." Nancy tsk'd. "I know it's hard to believe these days but sometimes in this business, the younger the news anchor, the prettier she's considered, so the higher the execs tend to think the ratings will be." She rolled her eyes. "Kind of like in Hollywood where women over 30 start getting passed over for roles."

"But that's...I'm only 33. Is that even legal in this day and age?"

Nancy made a wry face. "Probably not. But when you run your own television station, you can do pretty much

whatever you want even if it's not politically correct. He still considers himself part of the Old Boys' Network."

"Mmm. You're right. I should've seen it."

"Don't beat yourself up too much. You'll get the next one."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Nancy." But several knots formed in Sara's gut as Nancy pulled into the parking lot at Culver's several minutes later. What was she supposed to do now?

As she dug her spoon into her ice cream sundae with extra cherries, she said, "I really thought that developer story would show Martin my skills. I spent weeks doing research, digging up all the right sources...I put so much work into it. And for what?" She twirled one of the cherries on its stem. "I sound pretty bitter, don't I?"

"Just disappointed," Nancy said with a warm smile, as she finished the last of her banana split. "You could always start your own channel."

"Mmm." Sara laughed before she finished her sundae and ate the last cherry. She wiped her mouth with a napkin then said, "Ready to go?"

"Sure. I'll drop you back at your place."

"I'm glad tomorrow's the first of my days off," Sara said as Nancy pulled up in front of Sara's condo on Old Sauk Road.

"That'll be nice. Big plans?" Nancy said.

Sara grinned. "Not really but who knows? Thanks for the ride." She got out of the SUV. "Next time, I'll buy the ice cream."

"Next weekend it is," Nancy grinned and pulled away as Sara waved and headed to her front door.



AFTER WORK WEDNESDAY evening, Todd slipped behind the wheel of his Lexus and put the key in the ignition.

As he navigated away from downtown, crossed Fish Hatchery Road and headed onto Wheeler Road toward his

rental, he kept seeing Sara's expression and the lines on that piece of paper they'd found together on Tuesday.

As he pulled into the garage of his rented townhouse, he couldn't help but wonder what was going on. Why would someone put some random lines in a spoon and then hide it away?

And was Sara right? Was it some sort of riddle? He chuckled to himself. You only heard about that in novels or movies. Not real life.

His pulse pounded. But still, this sure beat sitting behind a computer talking about lines of credit and calculating percentage points on fixed-rate mortgages. This was actually...exciting.

He felt a glow. Sara had an appreciation for history. That was a nice change from other women he'd known. Even his ex with the import-export business. They'd all seemed to care more about their manicures than names, dates and places. Not that he could blame them. They were all nice. But still...His mind drifted back to Sara.

Yes. Leaving Chicago had been the right thing to do. Long over-due, in fact.

As he headed inside his place, the lines seemed to repeat themselves in his head. Almost like they were a rhyme or lines from a song. Stuck in his mind.

He went over to the scratch pad he kept by the landline telephone and wrote down the words. But that only made his curiosity grow.

As he made supper and then ate, the words swirled in his head. Pigeon's blood. Uncivil fire.

Maybe he could ask Rick? He might have some ideas. In fact, they should've asked him right away.

Then again, Rick might just think the new guy was crazy and... No. Todd was better off starting with an internet search.

He typed the first line into the search bar. Pigeon's blood. He scanned the results.

He needed to perhaps put this in context of the era that they'd determined the spoon to be. Antebellum. Which meant before the Civil War.

He tapped the keys. More results. But nothing conclusive.

But at least it looked like pigeon's blood was conclusive. Apparently that was a term used by jewelers to refer to a certain shade of red in rubies.

Now he was getting somewhere.

He was just about to dig a little deeper when his fingers froze over the keyboard.

What was he doing? This wasn't his spoon. This wasn't even his riddle. He should be sharing this information with the rightful owner, shouldn't he? Yes. Besides that, it was the perfect excuse to call her. He grinned and picked up the receiver.



SARA PUT THE last of her supper dishes in the sink and made herself a cup of Swiss Miss before she curled up on the couch. She'd put her purse down by the leg of the rose-colored velvet piece of furniture when she'd gotten home, the scrap of paper still inside.

But now, as her mind wandered back over the trip to Rick's Olde Gold, she couldn't help but remember the curiosity and intensity in Todd's eyes as they'd discovered the riddle together. How she'd warmed at his compliment. The way he'd listened to her. Seemed to appreciate her take on history...

She ran a finger across her lips.

...His wavy brown hair. Those green eyes. That stubble. She hadn't felt that much of a thrill in a long time. And not just about the handsome employee.

She reached into her purse and pulled out the piece of antique paper. Studied the lines. Somehow, in all the drama about the promotion, she hadn't thought to mention any of this to Nancy.

What could—

Her phone buzzed. She glanced at the caller ID. Not a number she recognized. But she picked up anyway. Might be a source with a good lead.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Sara? This is Todd. From Rick’s Olde Gold.”

Sara’s pulse jumped. “Hi. How are you?”

“I’m good, thanks. Listen, I hope I’m not interrupting anything?”

“Nope, I’m just on my couch looking at that page we found.” He had a nice telephone voice. The deep tone.

“That’s why I’m calling, actually. I figured out what the first line means.”

Sara’s heart leapt into her throat. “You did?”

“Yep. Pigeon’s blood refers to a deep red coloration in rubies.”

Sara caught her breath. “It does?”

“Yep. I’m looking at the internet search result that says it right now.”

Sara sat upright. “So that means there must be something to this poem or riddle or whatever it is...” Sara paused then blurted out. “Do you want to try and figure more of this out together?”

Where were these words coming from? She didn’t have time for this, did she? Then again, since she’d been passed over for the promotion, she had nothing but time, it seemed.

“Great minds think alike,” Todd chuckled. “I was just going to suggest that.”

Warmth fizzed in her stomach at his words.

“How about tomorrow morning?” Todd continued.

“I have the day off, so that’s perfect.”

“Where do you want to meet?”

“Well,” Sara said, “how about Bradbury’s Espresso & Crepes on North Hamilton Street? Grab a coffee then I think it makes sense to start with the historical society, like Rick suggested.”

“Great. Looking forward to it,” Todd said.



AT EXACTLY 9:30 a.m. Thursday, Sara strolled into Bradbury's. She'd made sure her pen and notepad was in her purse. Never knew what might make a good story. Todd was already seated at one of the tall stools in the front corner by the picture window with a view of the street.

She couldn't help but admire his profile. Just then, he looked up and she waved. She indicated the order counter. He nodded.

After she picked up her mocha latte, Sara headed toward Todd, admiring the way his hair fell forward as he studied the papers in front of him.

She took a sip of her drink and smoothed down her top. As she walked to the corner where Todd sat, she was suddenly glad she wore the new pink chiffon sleeveless blouse she'd got last week on sale at T.J. Maxx.

Todd stood when he saw her approach and pulled out the stool next to him.

Sara's eyes widened momentarily at his chivalric gesture. She smiled. "A man with manners. There's something you don't see every day. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He chuckled. "My mom raised me all by herself, so I think she might've wanted to make sure I didn't grow up to be a heathen."

"You're far from it."

"Thanks. What'd you get?" Todd rummaged around in his leather messenger bag and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

"Mocha latte. They're my favorite." Sara took a sip.

Todd smiled. "I did a little more research about rubies." He tapped the stack of papers with an index finger. "Printed it out. Thought it might be a good starting point."

After about forty-five minutes of pouring over the pages together, Sara looked up and rubbed at the back of her neck.

“We can take this with us,” Todd said. “Ready to head to the historical society?”

“Yep,” Sara said. “I’ll drive.”

SARA HEADED BACK to her car with Todd a few steps behind her. As she got behind the wheel and Todd slid into the passenger seat, his cedar cologne drifted to her.

She made herself concentrate on pulling away from the curb and merging into traffic.

A few minutes passed in silence. But Sara couldn’t help but notice that it wasn’t an awkward silence. Even though she didn’t know Todd, she felt as if she could just relax in his company without having to worry about filling up the silence with conversation. That was nice. A small smile curved her lips.

But finally, she couldn’t stop her curiosity and so she asked, “How long have you been working at Rick’s?”

“A little over two months,” Todd said. “Sure beats banking.”

Oh. So that explained his dressier attire. “How long were you in that line of work?” she asked as she navigated North Hamilton and headed toward State Street.

“Too long.” Todd tugged at his earlobe.

“That bad, huh?”

“Well,” Todd said, “when you start caring more about your days off than your days at work, that’s a sign, at least for me, that it’s time for a change.”

“That’s logical. I’ve actually been wondering about my own work,” she added as she turned onto State Street.

“Really? Your card says you work for WCXB, right?”

“Yeah. I’m a reporter there. And I just got passed over for a promotion...” She trailed off. Why was she telling him this? But there was an open easiness to his demeanor that made her feel safe to open up.

Todd winced. “That’s rough. How long have you been working there?”

“Since I graduated from UW twelve years ago.”

“That’s about the same length of time I’d been in banking.”

“Oh, interesting. So why did you switch to, a uh...”

“...more low-key job?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Todd rubbed the back of his neck, “I’ve always loved history and antiques and my ex-girlfriend, actually, had an import-export business. Discovered I really enjoyed it. So when I came across a job posting at Rick’s, I figured I’d give it a try for awhile, just til I figure out what I want to do.”

“Makes sense,” Sara said as she came to an intersection.

There was a slight pause before Todd asked, “So where’s the historical society again?”

“We’re almost there,” Sara replied as she went through an intersection. “We’re actually going to the Library, Archives and Museums Collections division of the society.” She drove along State Street until she got to the right building. “Which is right here.” She glanced over and smiled at Todd.

“I’ll get the hang of this city eventually,” he said. “Then again, I never was very good with directions.” He laughed.

Sara joined in. “Me either. Let’s go.”

They climbed the steps to the front door. Todd opened it for her and then followed her inside.

Sara walked to the front desk. “We’re looking for someone to speak with about the possible historical significance of some silverware.”

“Hmmm. Silverware...” The woman behind the reception desk tapped a finger against her chin. Shuffled through some papers. Scanned a list of names. Then looked up. “That’d be Jane Cummings. Room 608. She just finished a meeting so I think she’s free. Go on back.”

“Great, thanks.”

A minute later, Sara knocked on the partially open door of Room 608.

“Come in,” a soft voice said.

Sara stepped inside, followed by Todd.

"Hi there. My name's Sara and this is Todd. We were wondering if you knew anything about silverware?"

"Depends on what you're trying to find out." The woman smiled. She was in her early 60s, with reddish-blond wavy hair that framed her narrow face. "Please, have a seat."

After both Sara and Todd sat down, Sara pulled out the sugar spoon. "We are wanting to know if you might know something about this? It was found in the Madison area."

The woman put on a pair of green half-moon reading glasses accented with rhinestones. She tilted her head. "May I see it?"

Sara handed her the spoon.

The woman's eyes lit up as she examined the pattern of vines and leaves. She nodded to herself. "Mmm. Yes. If I'm not mistaken..." She put the spoon down and turned to her computer.

After tapping at the keys for a few moments, she grinned. "That confirms it."

"What?" Todd leaned forward as if he could somehow discern her thoughts.

Jane turned back to the pair. "This sugar spoon," she cleared her throat, "is an exact match for the sterling silverware set originally owned by Mrs. Ada Emmaline Bly." She held the spoon up as if she were giving a lecture. Which she very well could've been.

"That name sounds kind of familiar." Sara's brow furrowed.

"I've never heard of her," Todd said.

Jane chuckled. "If you haven't brushed up on your Wisconsin history, you might not know." She studied the spoon a moment more. "We have several of her pieces here in our collection but the sugar spoon had always been missing." She regarded Sara, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"I'd be happy to donate it but I think I'll need it a little while longer." Sara said as she drew out the pen and

notebook from her purse and began to scribble notes. Things were getting interesting. She grinned to herself.

"Of course. We can discuss particulars later. I'll give you my card. Where on Earth did you find it?"

"It was found in the Vilas house."

"Ah," Jane nodded. "That explains it. The Blys and the Vilases were quite close. But back to Ada. She was a prominent activist for women's rights in her later years. One of the first women in the state who lobbied for the vote for women, actually."

Jane drew breath and Sara scribbled notes. Her heartbeat quickened. What if she did a piece about this woman? Maybe her boss would notice her then...

Jane's voice brought Sara's attention back to the present.

"Ada was a Southerner. She grew up near Charleston, South Carolina, had her pick of suitors in the Antebellum South. But according to her diaries on display here, her heart was given to one man in particular. A Mr. Thomas Marion Standish. On the eve of the Battle of Simmon's Bluff, there was apparently a lavish soiree prepared by Ada's family to celebrate the engagement of their daughter and this Thomas person. But before the party could start, the Union forces showed up and torched the place. Ada barely escaped with her life. Everyone else in her family was killed in the blaze."

"And what happened to Thomas?"

"Unfortunately for Ada, he died in the battle, actually," Jane said. "But Ada fled north. To Wisconsin, in fact, and set up a life for herself here in Madison. Married a lumber baron from Prairie Du Chien. They lived on Mansion Hill."

"But the rumor is," Jane leaned forward in her chair and placed her hands on the tabletop, "that she hid a Civil War treasure."

"What do you mean?" Sara asked, even as she kept scribbling notes. She exchanged a glance with Todd. A thrill zipped down her back as he raised his eyebrows at her.

“I’m afraid I don’t know much more than that.” Jane leaned back in her chair. “We deal with history and facts, here.” She laughed, a light chiming sound. “But if you want to talk to someone who deals with stories, go visit Franklin Hayes.” She reached for a bright pink sticky note and wrote something down then handed it to Sara. “This is his address and phone number. Tell him I sent you.”

“SO WHO IS this Franklin person?” Todd said when they’d both gotten back into her car, an easy grin on his face.

“Not sure.” She grinned back. “But I know a way to find out.” Her heart jumped. He was certainly easy to talk to. And this was *fun*. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d enjoyed a man’s company so much.

Sara pulled out her smartphone as they sat in the parking spot. She scrolled a minute. “This *Wisconsin State Journal* article calls him the Storyteller of Mansion Hill.” She angled the phone so he could see the article, too. “His family’s been in town for generations, apparently.”

As he leaned toward her to read, their shoulders brushed. But Sara didn’t move away from the contact, and neither did he.

She couldn’t help but notice that the top button of his dress shirt was undone. They were so close that from this angle, she could see that there was a freckle on the side of his neck, near his collarbone. His skin looked soft, smooth, there. What would it feel like if she—

“Apparently he’s ‘as energetic as a grasshopper in July.’ That’s a direct quote, by the way,” Todd said as he pointed to her screen then looked at her.

She jumped and tore her gaze from his body to his eyes.

“Did I startle you?” he murmured.

There was a beat of silence. He didn’t break eye contact with her.

“Uh, I...” She wet her lips.

He watched the motion.

Sara's pulse jumped.

His gaze flicked up to her eyes then down again to her mouth.

She pressed her lips together. Suddenly the car seemed too small, his presence too much. She swallowed.

"Wait a minute," she said as she leaned back slightly. "Don't you have to be at work or something?"

He cleared his throat, leaned back too. "My shift starts mid-afternoon, so I have a little time for some treasure hunting."

"Okay." She took a breath. "Right. Well, let's go talk to Franklin." She started the car.

"Sounds good to me," Todd said. She stole a glance at him. Had he just considered kissing her...?

No. She wouldn't get carried away. That's what happened with her ex. Just because Todd was nice, just because he was attractive, just because she liked spending time with him, didn't mean he was like her ex. Right?

Sara forced her thoughts back to the road as she navigated over to West Gorham Street.

The road went up a gentle hill and Sara pulled her Toyota to the curb across from the address Jane had given her.

It was a three-storey Victorian house with fish-scale shingles, a wrap-around porch and a turret. She dialled the number. "Hello, is this Franklin?"

"Speaking," came a bright voice.

After Sara explained who she was and how she'd gotten his information, he said, "Of course, of course."

Sara and Todd walked up the wide front porch steps and knocked. After a moment, the screen door swung open.

A man with bright blue eyes and a shock of white hair answered the door. Sara guessed him to be somewhere in his 90s. He wore a crisply pressed blue plaid shirt and a comfortably worn in pair of beige dress pants. "You must be Sara. I'm Franklin." He extended a hand.

Sara shook it. Todd introduced himself and also shook Franklin's hand.

"Just put the kettle on, so you're right on time," Franklin said. "Come in, come in."

They walked into the living room scattered with bright Oriental rugs and various pieces of overstuffed furniture upholstered in blues and greens.

Franklin indicated a comfortable-looking green couch as he said, "Would you like some tea?"

"Oh, you don't need to bother."

He wave a hand. "No trouble." He smiled and said in a conspiratorial tone. "It's peppermint."

"In that case," Sara couldn't help but smile back, "I'll take a cup. Thank you."

"And you, young man?"

"Sure, I'll have some too. Do you need a hand in the kitchen?"

But Franklin waved him off. "That's kind of you but no, no. I need the exercise. Make yourselves comfortable."

A few minutes later, Franklin returned with the tea.

"I always appreciate company but I do find myself curious to know what this is all about. You said Jane sent you?"

"Well, actually, it's about a sugar spoon." Sara said. She explained how she'd come to own it.

"I see, I see." Franklin took a sip of his tea.

"We went to the historical society and they told us about Ada Bly," Todd explained. "And, that this sugar spoon was once owned by her."

"Ah, yes. Ada." There was a twinkle in his eyes. "Did Jane mention she hid a Civil War treasure?"

"Yes," Sara said. "But Jane seemed to think you might know something more?" She cocked her head in his direction.

Franklin leaned back in the over-stuffed navy blue chair opposite the couch. "Well, yes, she might've been right at that." He steepled his fingers. "My family has been

in Madison since it was founded. We always considered ourselves keepers of stories, if you catch my meaning.”

Sara nodded.

“My grandfather was head groundskeepers for the Bly house a little ways down the hill. Had the prettiest roses this side of the Mississippi, he used to say. And my grandmother was the head maid. Not only that, the Hayeses and the Blys ended up being trusted friends. The Blys were also close with the Vilases. Anna Vilas and Ada Bly knew each other quite well. So I’d wager that’s how Ada’s spoon ended up in a side table from the Vilas House.”

Franklin paused. “Jane might’ve told you about Ada’s fiance?”

“Only that he died in battle, and something about a party.”

“Right. Well, when Ada was still in the South, apparently Thomas gave her a set of ruby-encrusted hair combs as an engagement present. But after the fire they went missing.”

“The Civil War treasure, then?” Todd nudged Sara. She grinned at him.

“Exactly,” Franklin said. “Then, on her deathbed, Ada confessed to my grandmother that she had hidden the ruby combs. But Ada didn’t say where. She’d been afraid the Civil War might turn out badly for the North. Wanted to keep the last token of Thomas’s love safe from any possible invading army. Ada died before anyone could find them. No one’s found anything pointing to the rubies’ location.” Franklin sat back.

Sara reached into her purse and pulled out the antique scrap of paper. “Until now?”

FRANKLIN SPREAD OUT the antique scrap of paper on the tabletop and leaned forward to examine it. He scanned the page. “I see, I see. Hmm.”

After a minute or two of silence, Sara said, “So what do you think?”

"I think you two might have a bit of mystery on your hands." Franklin's bright blue eyes narrowed in thought. "You haven't told anyone else, or shown this to anyone else?"

Todd shook his head and glanced at Sara. She shook her head too.

"Good. It's probably better that way."

"Why?"

"Because this riddle, I do believe, refers to the lost rubies of Mansion Hill."

"Ada's ruby hair combs," Sara said.

"Exactly." Franklin studied the lines a moment then put on his reading glasses and studied the lines again. "If this is in fact Ada's riddle, then this is incredible." He looked like a kid in a candy store.

Todd nodded. "We know for sure it's Ada's sugar spoon."

"But," Sara said to Franklin, "how do we know for sure it's Ada's riddle?"

"That's easy to find out. The historical society has her diaries," Todd said. "If we go back there, match up her handwriting—"

"Actually..." Franklin stood suddenly. "Excuse me one moment."

He returned holding a piece of clear plastic sheet with a yellowed page inside. Wordless, he handed it to Sara. She positioned the page so Todd could read, too.

Dearest Thomas,

Some may say it is silly of me to write you, while I know you are long gone, taken from me so many years ago. But now that my own time is near, I find myself thinking of you once again. Though I have loved and lived a full life with another, I find there is a small part of me that cannot forget your face, before fire and war destroyed everything. I cannot forget the way that your eyes glowed in the candlelight when you got

*down on one knee. They sparkled brighter than any
ruby you could gift me.*

*My treasured heart is yours,
Ada*

"Yes," Franklin tapped a finger on the old brittle page. "this letter confirms that first line of the riddle—*pigeon's blood*" he rubbed his chin "—refers to Ada's rubies, I'm one hundred percent sure. Now, you said you found this inside the sugar spoon that the historical society confirmed was one of Ada's pieces?"

"Yes." Sara nodded.

Todd added, "But Jane didn't mention any of this."

Sara glanced at him. He looked torn between excitement and confusion. It was kind of cute.

She forced her attention back to what Franklin was saying.

"It's be expected, actually. Because my family worked for the Blys we were, well, privy to certain things, you could say."

Sara's thoughts whirled. Could this be the perfect angle for a deeper dive into a historical piece for the TV station? Sara's heart raced.

"Any ideas on how the riddle got into the spoon, Franklin?" Sara asked.

"Mmm. I'm not sure. Best guess, Ada got someone to modify the piece of silverware then she secreted it inside."

"Makes sense. So what about the next part?" Sara said.

"...almost engulfed/with uncivil fire." Franklin rubbed his jaw.

"That must refer to the Civil War," Todd said. "Because didn't Jane say Ada fled the South and came up here during the height of the war?"

"That's right," Sara said. Her heart fluttered as she met Todd's gaze. Was it from this discovery or her attraction to him? Maybe both...

But she pushed those thoughts aside. “The Union soldiers burned down her plantation, Jane said,” Sara added. “That’s the opposite of civil. Literally.”

“Bingo,” said Todd. “*That’s what almost engulfed/with uncivil fire* means. Civil War soldiers acted uncivilly by burning down her house.”

Sara caught her breath. “So this means?”

“It means,” Franklin said before he took a last sip of his peppermint tea. “that if you figure out the rest of the riddle, you just might have a shot at finding the lost rubies.”

“DO YOU KNOW anything about the rest of this riddle, then?”

Sara held her breath but Franklin shook his head. “I really don’t.”

“Oh.” Sara sat back and studied her fingernails.

“But don’t despair,” Franklin said. “I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out. After all, you’ve come this far.”

“Here’s hoping.” Sara crossed her fingers. “Thank you so much for your help, Franklin,” Sara said as she stood up.

“Yes,” Todd added, “we really appreciated your tea and your time.”

“Of course, of course. Come back any time.” Franklin got up and walked with them to the front door. “And let me know what you find out?”

“Will do. Thanks again.” Sara waved as she followed Todd back across the street to where they’d parked.

After they got back into Sara’s car, she felt a thrill run through her. What if they could actually find the rubies? Restore a piece of Civil War history to its rightful place? Yes. This is the perfect angle for a story that would really show Martin what she could do. Then he’d have no choice but to notice her, to promote her. He had to.

So she sent him a text.



SARA TURNED TO Todd and grinned. “So where to next?”

“Much as I’d love to continue,” Todd paused, as he realized how much he wanted that, “I need to get to my work shift, actually.”

Sara checked her watch and Todd noticed she couldn’t keep the disappointment out of her voice as she said, “You’re right. It’s almost 2 p.m. now.”

“But,” Todd said, “do you want to meet up after work? Maybe we could do some more in-depth digging on the Bly house itself. Might give us some leads on what direction to go in next.”

“I’d like that.”

Warmth spread through him at the prospect of spending more time with Sara. “Great.”

After Sara dropped him off, Todd couldn’t help but whistle a few notes to himself as he walked into the secondhand antiques store.

“Someone’s in a good mood,” Rick said as he looked up from polishing some Navajo silver-and-turquoise jewelry.

Todd laughed. “Call me crazy but this job just keeps getting better and better. You know that sugar spoon you appraised the other day?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Todd glanced around and lowered his voice, but no customers or other employees were in the store. “It might lead to some sort of lost treasure.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Rick said as he inspected the now-shiny silver. “If I had a dollar for every time...”

“No, but I’m serious,” Todd said. “The handle of the spoon had this...riddle inside of it. And now I’ve just found out that there are some missing ruby hair combs.”

Rick put down the silver piece and picked up another. “Well, you never know. I’ve heard some pretty weird and wonderful stuff in my time in this business.”

Todd chuckled. “I bet.” He picked up a polishing cloth and started to help Rick, “I’m beginning to think this is so much better than banking.”

“You and me both,” Rick said. “You and me both.”



LATER ON THURSDAY, Sara slipped her feet out of her pumps and sighed in relief as she sank back into her couch cushions. Back on the job tomorrow afternoon. The job.

She rubbed her feet. Yawned. She wanted to move up in her life. She wanted to see that all her hard work had somehow paid off, turned into something more...

Nancy's words ran through her mind. *You could always start your own channel.*

She blinked sleepily. What would it be like to be in charge of her own station, her own content? Cover whatever was important to her. Like history...She closed her eyes. She'd rest for a second.

She jerked awake and glanced at the clock. Sat upright. Yikes. She must've dozed off. She jumped up off the couch. She had to get ready to meet up again with Todd this evening.

As she did her hair and applied a little lipgloss, she couldn't suppress the butterflies in her stomach as she remembered Todd's smile, his expression as they'd listened to Franklin. As they'd sat side by side in the coffee shop.

She liked working with him, she realized. He was level-headed. Thoughtful. Considerate. Had good ideas and made intelligent observations.

All traits her ex-boyfriend had too. At first... But then he'd become someone she hadn't recognized, had scammed that elderly woman out of money, had—Her gut tightened. She needed to watch herself. She couldn't just throw herself head-long into these growing feelings for Todd. She had to be careful.

There was a knock at the door. Speaking of. She straightened her spine and went out to meet Todd.



HE LEANED AGAINST the porch rail of her condo, a to-go cup in hand. "Hi there." All her doubts dissolved as she saw him, opened the door and stepped outside.

"Hi, yourself." She couldn't help the smile that flitted across her face as she locked her door. "Ready to go do some more research?"

"That I am. Oh, and I brought you a mocha latte." He extended the to-go cup. "Careful, it's hot."

"Oh, I..." Her heart squeezed. "Thank you." He remembered? She melted, just a little, as he turned and walked to his car.

He opened the passenger door for her then went around to the driver's side.

"Thanks," she said as she got in and took a sip of her latte.

"So you think city hall would be a good place to start?" Todd said.

"I'm thinking the city county building. Register of Deeds office," she said as she took out her notebook and jotted some things down, adding to her pile of notes for the in-depth coverage she was planned to wow Martin with.

"I'm thinking they might have stuff the historical society doesn't," she continued. "Maybe they'd even have some blueprints and we could see if there were any hiding spots around."

"Oh, that's a great idea."

They arrived at the city county building about fifteen minutes later. Sara approached the front desk. "We're looking for the Register of Deeds Office."

"Just through there," the woman said.

After following her directions, they stepped into the registry office.

"Hi, we're looking for information about the Bly house," Todd said.

"Oh sure, let me just pull up the records for you," the young man behind the counter said. He crossed to the back of the room and opened a filing cabinet drawer on

the very bottom. After a few minutes, he pulled out a manilla folder. "Here you go."

Todd took the file. "Thanks."

"Let's sit over by the window," Sara said. They both pulled out chairs and sat and began leafing through the papers.

Forty-five minutes passed in silence as they looked through things. Sara took more notes.

After another fifteen minutes, Sara glanced up at Todd. "I think I found something."

"What is it?"

"It says here," she pointed to a transfer of title document, "that the house was built by Ada's husband's father in 1850." She looked up. "That's only a few years after Wisconsin became a state."

"And it goes on to say that Bly family descendants" her eyes widened, "continued to own the property up until the twentieth century. But after the oil crisis in the 1970s, the house fell into disrepair. The family couldn't pay their taxes. So the state repossessed it. And the state is who the developers bought it from."

"Big place like that, I can see why the family'd have trouble with the upkeep," Todd said.

"Mmm-hmm." Sara lowered her voice. "But this doesn't tell us much about what we want to know. I'm going to ask about blueprints."

A few minutes later she returned with a rolled up page. "They had the original drawings scanned so I paid their fee and they printed this out for us," She put the sheet on the table and unrolled it.

Together, they examined the document. "Looks pretty normal to me," Todd said.

"Yeah, I don't see—" Sara stopped and tapped a fingernail on the far right corner of the paper. "What's this?"

"What?" Todd leaned forward. Sara noticed the way his hair shone in the light as he moved. Would it feel as

soft as it looked, if she ran her fingers through it and—Sara forced her eyes back to the page.

“This...chimney here.” She pointed to the base of one of the interior chimneys. “It looks completely round.”

“You’re right,” Todd said. “Which is kind of...unusual... for a chimney.”

“But what does *that* mean?” Sara chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “Well, round. A circle...” She frowned. “Maybe not so odd. The riddle said something about a circle...”

She pulled out the page. “Yes,” she said in an undertone, “*lost but for/the circle of the heart’s desire.*”

Todd looked back at her as a slow smile spread across his face. “I’d say we have a house call to make.”



SARA SHIFTED IN her seat. Even though she tried to push the thought away, she couldn’t help but recall that her ex wore a very similar expression when he told Sara about his con with the knock-off Spode. “A house call?” Sara’s stomach clenched.

“Yeah,” Todd said, that easy smile still on his face. “Stop by, take a look around...” He shrugged.

Her heart dropped. “But we don’t—” She chewed the inside of her lip. This was a mistake to get herself wrapped up in this.

Todd frowned. “Sara.” He leaned toward her. She leaned back. “What’s wrong?”

She studied him. “You’re suggesting we *trespass*?”

“What? No. Of course not.” He ruffled his hair. “Where did you get that idea?” He gave her a long look, studied her for one moment. Then two. His mouth turned down at the corners as he said, “I don’t mean we should do anything illegal.” He crossed his arms. “But if you don’t trust that I’m telling you the truth...” He glanced at her, but his expression was distant.

Sara's stomach twisted. Her eyes darted to and then away from his face.

"I don't know what to trust," she said. But it came out a strangled whisper. She pushed away her chair and stood up, the copy of the blueprints pressed to her chest. "I—"

"You've made your point," Todd said in a clipped tone. "If you don't trust me, if that's how you feel, then there's nothing I can do or say to convince you otherwise." Todd raised his hands in surrender. Stood also. Started to gather his things.

Sara's stomach plunged. He wasn't going to discuss this? Wasn't even going to try to tell her she was wrong? Wasn't going to—Well, fine. If that's the way he felt, then she was better off doing this by herself.

She'd rushed into this far too fast. She should've used some caution. Prudence. Common sense. Not just let herself get caught up in the excitement of possibly uncovering real life treasure, of an attraction to a man who she in truth, knew so little about.

She walked out the door without a backward glance.



SARA SLOWLY UNLOCKED the door to her condo a little later and stepped inside. She frowned as the moments in the deeds office replayed in her head.

She shook her head, as if she could dislodge the thoughts. Force Todd's expression out of her mind. She could trust lines on paper. That was purely black and white.

She spent the rest of the evening doing her best to forget. And it worked, for awhile.

But as she changed into her pajamas, brushed her teeth and then her hair, the blueprints came back to her. The chimney.

How did it connect exactly to the riddle's lines? Circle of the heart's desire, yes. She'd figured out that much, with

Todd's help. She grimaced as she crawled into bed. Pushed away thoughts of his distant expression. Their argument.

She chewed her lip. Her thoughts went back to the riddle. It felt like there was something else, something *more* to it...

Chimneys were, what? Circular. Round. Around. Her brow furrowed. There had to be a deeper meaning. But before she could figure it out, she fell asleep.

Her alarm jolted her awake the next morning. But then she remembered today was another day off. She stretched and yawned. Got up and made herself a leisurely breakfast.

As she ate some scrambled eggs, her mind returned to the riddle. Hmm. Circles. Lines. Drawings... The blueprints. The chimney.

Her head snapped up. The chimney. She narrowed her eyes in thought. The drawings showed the exterior of the chimney. But chimneys had flues. Sometimes those flues were circular. And more importantly, chimneys were a conduit for a fire. Well, heat created by a fire.

Yes. The riddle wasn't referring to a circle separately from a fire. No. The riddle referred to *both*. The Civil War fire as well as a literal fire—circled by or contained by—a chimney. Which meant they had to look *inside* the chimney. Not *at* the chimney.

She grinned. What would Todd—But her smile faded. Todd. She clattered her dirty dishes into the sink and turned on the tap. His words came back to her: *...if you don't trust that I'm telling you the truth.*

She sighed. He'd been right. She hadn't trusted him. Her hands paused above the soapy water. No. That wasn't the most important thing here. The most important thing was that she hadn't trusted herself. She plunged her hands into the warm water. Because she'd been afraid. She scrubbed at her breakfast dishes. She'd just assumed he'd acted with the same motivations, the same intentions, as her ex, Craig.

But if she thought about it, perhaps she was wrong. Maybe she'd painted Todd with the same brush as Craig without taking the time to discern the difference between the two men.

Yes. She'd been wrong. She bit her lip to stop it from trembling. She exhaled slowly. She wanted to be able to trust herself, to know that she could. To not just jump to conclusions. To know that she could trust her own first impressions, her own intuition, about Todd. That he was a good man.

She finished the dishes. Dried her hands on the dishtowel. She had to find Todd. Had to tell him that. But there was one thing she had to get Nancy's help with, first. She sent her friend a text.



FRIDAY MORNING, SARA stepped onto the sidewalk on Mansion Hill. She rounded the corner and gained the top of the slope.

"Todd," she called. Please turn around. Please. But he just kept walking. Her heart sank. Not that she should've expected anything else, given their last interaction. But...she bit her lip and broke into a jog.

"Todd," she tried again. Louder this time. Still nothing.

She increased her pace on the sidewalk. Came nearly even with him and tapped him on the shoulder.

He glanced over his shoulder. His eyes widened. "Sara?"

She came to a stop beside him, out of breath.

He held up a pair of earbuds. Looked a bit sheepish. "Sorry. Podcast on the history of Madison. Thought it might give me some ideas..." He paused. Crossed his arms. "But what are you doing here?" Her heart sank at his guarded look. "And how did you know where I was?"

She shifted her weight. Rubbed the back of her neck. "I'm sorry. I came to apologize. I went by Rick's but he didn't know where you'd went. So I thought I'd take a

chance and see if you'd be up here. Looks like I guessed right."

"Okay." He hand't uncrossed his arms.

Sara took a deep breath. "Listen, Todd, I really am sorry. I reacted first and thought later." She pressed her lips together. "I, uh, was afraid," she said softly. "You were right. I didn't trust you."

Todd uncrossed his arms.

"I thought you were the same as my ex, Craig."

Todd shoved his hands in his pockets. Opened his mouth to say something but Sara rushed on.

"I let my fear get the better of me. I should've trusted..." she swallowed "...myself. Because I realize now that you hadn't intended anything bad." She darted a glance at his face.

His gaze softened. "Sara." He reached out, put a hand on her arm. The warmth from Todd's palm seeped through the thin cotton of her sleeve. "I just assumed you were thinking the worst of me. I let you leave because I didn't think you'd want to talk about it. My ex-girlfriend, the one with the import-export business, she never trusted I'd told her the truth. No matter what I'd say to her, or do, well, she'd never believe me. So I figured I couldn't explain things to you, either, and have you believe me." He sighed. "She got pretty testy, there at the end and I just, I guess," he said softly, "I thought you were doing the same thing." He paused. Looked into her eyes. Reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sara, I—"

But the buzz of Sara's cell phone interrupted his sentence. "Sorry," she glanced at the caller ID. "It's the newsroom. I have to take this."

TODD NODDED AND Sara stepped a few feet away. "Hello?"

"Sara?" It wasn't her boss, but Nancy.

"Hi, Nancy."

"Got the text you sent a bit ago. Couldn't get ahold of the mayor but left a message on your behalf. Pulled some

strings with a few of my contacts at city hall like you'd asked, too. So that means you can go in there now."

"You're the best, Nancy. Thank you. Todd and I are on Mansion Hill right now."

"Good luck. Let me know how the treasure hunt goes. But you won't have long. I also found out the demolition schedule's been stepped up from Friday. Something about a big project in Chicago that's been rescheduled. So the Bly House demolition's happening today at 11:30 a.m."

Sara's eyes widened and she glanced at her watch. "It's 10 a.m. now. We'd better get going. Thanks again for your help, and the heads-up."

"You owe me a sundae," Nancy said with a laugh.

"I'll buy you two," Sara promised before she hung up. She turned to Todd and grabbed his hand. "Come on. We don't have a minute to lose."

They broke into a run. It wasn't long before they reached a set of wrought iron gates. The gates were set into stone posts that had ivy running wild across the stones. A carriage lamp was embedded on the top of each post. But the gates were fastened with a hefty padlock. And a tall stone fence surrounded the property.

But inside the grounds... Sara peered through the gates and felt goosebumps rise on her arms...A three-story stone mansion that looked like something straight out of a fairy tale. A turret covered in the same ivy was on the left side of the house. Several wrought-iron Juliette balconies jutted out of second-story windows. The slate roof looked like it was almost completely covered in moss and lichen. And sagged badly.

"Wow. This is something else," Todd said as he searched for a way inside. The smaller wrought-iron gate, wide enough for a person to go through it, stood beside the padlocked entrance. But it was shut and half buried in the ground.

"This doesn't have a padlock," Sara said.

Todd begin to tug and pull on the half-buried gate. It didn't budge. Sara joined in the effort. But it still didn't budge. Sara chewed on her bottom lip. "Now what?"

Todd glanced around. "The water side. This property's a corner lot. And it goes all the way down the shoreline."

"You're right. Let's go."

They walked quickly down the hill and along the shore of the lake. The scent of seaweed and dead fish drifted to Sara. "Tide must be low," she murmured to herself.

"Smells like it," Todd said with a laugh. "Okay, we're almost here."

Sara looked up and saw a small boathouse to her right. There was a small, easily scalable wooden gate built into the stone fence there.

"Bingo," Todd said with a grin. "We're in."

AFTER TODD SHUT the gate behind them, they walked side by side up the grassy slope toward the large old house. Huge oak and shag-bark hickory trees shaded the wide expanse of now-weedy back lawn.

Sara could almost hear the rustle of silk hoop-skirts as the building in front of her became, in her imagination, not a derelict abandoned mess but a sturdy, warm and welcoming abode with warm yellow light spilling out across the neatly trimmed lawn and smiling laughing guests as they danced at a celebratory ball at the end of the Civil War.

A smile lifted her lips.

She and Todd approached the back door. Todd tried it. "Wish I would've brought a crow bar or something. This thing looks pretty solid."

"Did you try the knob?" Sara reached out and turned the tarnished brass handle. It swung open easily.

Todd tugged at his earlobe. "Right. I knew that."

Sara gave him a nudge. "You would've thought of it eventually."

Todd laughed and they stepped into the dim interior together.

"So. You're the blueprints expert here. What are we looking for?" Todd whispered low next to her ear and she couldn't suppress a shiver at his nearness and the deep timbre of his tone.

She swallowed then explained what she'd realized back at her apartment. "If I'm right, we find that chimney and then we look for some way to access its interior."

She took out the blueprint and held it up. Todd shone the flashlight app from his phone down on the page.

"If I remember correctly," he said, "the chimney on the outside of the house was to our left when we were standing outside, so if we go to our right, we should find it."

"Sounds like a plan."

Todd kept his phone out and used it as a light to shine on their trail.

"I think that the best place to start is the first floor here and if we don't find anything obvious there, we can move to the second and third floors. Maybe even the basement, if there is one." She checked her watch. "It's 10:45 now."

"Then we don't have too much time, do we?" Todd said, "Come on."

They entered a long, low room that must have been the formal dining room at one point. Nothing more than a heavy layer of dust in the room now. Their footprints made deep tracks and they both coughed.

"There's a chimney in this corner." Todd nodded to the far corner.

"But," Sara said as she glanced again at the blueprints, "it's the wrong shape."

"Mmm, you're right. And now that I look at it, there's nothing circular about it."

"Let's check the rest of the rooms down here then try upstairs."

Todd smiled at her. "Good idea." A beat of warmth filled Sara.

But after they went through every other room on the main floor, they came up with nothing. So they headed upstairs. The first few rooms they encountered were bedrooms. None of them contained chimneys.

But the final room at the end of the hall had its door slightly ajar. When Todd pushed it open, it creaked on its hinges.

Goosebumps rose on Sara's skin as she heard the sound and followed him inside.

"There's a chimney in here," Todd said. "It's round. Just like the one on the blueprints."

Sara's heartbeat increased as they stepped up to the chimney. "Let's hope my theory about the flues is right."

Some light filtered into the room from a dust and cobweb-encased round leaded glass window with a pattern of leaves and vines on the top and bottom panes.

In the dim light of the dirty round window, along with Todd's flashlight app, they began to examine the chimney.

Sara glanced at her watch. "Thirty minutes now." She bit her lip and forced all her attention to the chimney. She ran her fingers along one side and Todd did the same on the other.

"There's nothing here. I don't see any switches or levers or anything." Frustrated filtered into Todd's voice.

"I'm not seeing anything here either...No access to the interior." Sara murmured. "Maybe I was wrong about the clue in relation to the chimney?"

A low rumbling sound reached Sara and she looked over toward the window. Crossed to it. Rubbed a spot free of grime and dirt and peered out. If she craned her neck she could just see the street. She swore under her breath.

"What is it?" Todd joined her by the window.

"They're here."

"AND THEY'RE EARLY." Sara's eyes narrowed. "But they'll take a little while to get set up. That gives us an advantage." She strode back to the chimney. "We just have to look harder."

"It's all we can do," Todd agreed.

Sara began to tap the bricks in sequential order, bottom to top as high as she could reach. Todd did the same thing on the other side. But neither found anything.

Sara huffed out a breath as she moved to the front side of the chimney. She began the same process. Again, nothing. Todd reached the front as well. As he came

around the corner, he stumbled slightly over an uneven floorboard.

“Careful there,” Sara said in a teasing tone. “Don’t want the house to jump up and bite you.”

Todd laughed. But he frowned a moment later as he finished his examination of the remaining bricks on the chimney. “Well, that’s that. There’s really nothing here.”

Sara bit her lip. “Now what? This can’t lead to a dead end. We can’t have come all this way for nothing.”

“I know what you mean.” Todd’s brow furrowed as he stepped a couple of paces away from the chimney and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Sara joined him. She put her hands on her hips. Looked at the chimney. Around the room. Then her eyes drifted to the floor. There was nothing here. Nothing they could—

She grabbed Todd’s arm. “Do you see that?” She whispered as her grip tightened.

“Where?”

“There. On the floor.” She rushed forward to the spot where Todd had almost tripped.

“It looks like...” Todd crouched down beside Sara. The distinct rumble of a diesel engine revving startled them both.

But Sara tightened her jaw. “...what we saw on the sugar spoon handle. Right here.” She ran a finger along the small but perfect leaf carved into the wooden plank by the end of the chimney, directly below the round window.

“I think the floor board is already loose.” Todd reached into his back pocket for his smartphone. He pulled the phone out of its tight case. “This cost me a bit but it’s one hundred percent titanium. Super-strong.” He rapped his knuckles on the smartphone case and reached for the floorboard.

But Sara caught his wrist. “No, I don’t think...” She cocked her head. “This matches the sugar spoon.”

Todd nodded.

The shouts of men giving directions reached them.

Sara talked faster. "We don't look under the floorboards. I think it means this leaf is actually an arrow. I didn't put it together til now actually being in the room. She said '*circle of the heart's desire*.'" Sara pointed. "See how the tip of the leaf is facing the wall? I think—"

"—it's the round window," Todd finished for her.

"Exactly," Sara grinned at him as they both moved toward the dirt-streaked round window and studied it.

"I'll try sliding it up." Todd held up his smartphone case. He slid the long slim piece of metal into the space between the window sill and window casing. Then he pried upward.

Shouts of men's voices drifted to them. Todd's knuckles tightened on the metal. "Come on, come on," he muttered to himself.

The sound of a diesel engine got nearer. Sara put her hands on top of Todd's. There was a creak and a groan as the wood finally shifted.

Together, Todd and Sara shoved the warped wooden window casing the rest of the way upward.

They looked down. And saw the exposed casing had a hinge. Decorated with that same pattern of leaves and vines. Sara lifted. And found herself peering into a pitch black cavity.

A sudden rumble and shake caused the whole house to tremble. Sara gasped. "They must have started."

"And they don't know we're in here," Todd finished. He swore. "Do you see anything in here?" He shone his flashlight app around.

Sara saw nothing at first. But then a shape caught her eye in the far back corner of the cavity. She leaned forward. Her fingers brushed cold metal.

"It's some sort of box." Her fingers scrabbled for it even as the rumble of engines grew louder outside and the house trembled again. A piece of plaster fell down from the ceiling.

"I've almost—" She leaned father forward, now stretched full length to give her fingers the full extent of

their length in order to snag the edge of the box “—got it.” She grinned up at Todd as her fingers closed around the box.

She pulled it out just as another piece of plaster fell from the ceiling. “Let’s go.”

The chandelier overhead rattled and there was a groaning noise from somewhere within the house.

“Come on,” Sara grabbed Todd’s hand and together they ran out of the room and back down the stairs. She almost stumbled and fell headlong on the last step but Todd’s strong arm around her waist prevented it.

They’d just ducked outside and sprinted across the long lawn toward the shoreline when Todd put a hand on her arm. “Maybe we should find out what’s in the box before we go any further?”

“Where’s the fun in that?” Sara replied, a sparkle in her eyes. “But you’re right. We should double-check what we have.”

They paused under the shade of a shag-bark hickory tree by the water and Sara held up the box to the light.

“There’s no lock on it,” Todd said.

“But there’s also no visible means of opening it,” Sara mused. She pried at every angle with her fingers but nothing happened.

“Can I see it?”

“Sure.” Sara handed it to Todd.

He inspected all the sides. “What’s this?” He pointed to a shallow round indent.

Sara frowned. “I’m not sure.” She cocked her head, “But it is another circle...”

She rummaged around in her zippered jacket pocket and pulled out the sugar spoon. “What’s round on here?”

“Well,” Todd said as he rubbed his jaw, “you have the bowl of the spoon.”

“But that’s too big. And oval.”

“But you think that something from the spoon would fit into that spot and open it?”

"I'm betting on it," Sara said. "Why else would the spoon be hidden separately from the other silverware and from the box? Separate the lock from the key and all that."

Todd furrowed his brow as he examined the spoon alongside Sara. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers. "The ruby," he said.

Sara's eyes widened. "You're right. That makes perfect sense." She lifted the spoon, positioned the pointed facets of the ruby into the tiny slot on the front of the box.

A perfect fit. Her heart skipped a beat. Just like her and Todd?

"I think if you press a bit harder..." Todd put his fingers on top of hers and pressed down gently. She heard a faint pop. The lid raised a fraction of an inch. Together, they lifted the lid all the way.

Sara gasped.

Nestled inside against a faded pale blue velvet cloth, sat a pair of exquisitely carved silver hair combs, encrusted with deep pigeon's blood red rubies. The very same color ruby embedded in the sugar spoon.

Her eyes met Todd's. A grin split her face. An answering smile filled his. "We did it," she murmured.

"Yes," he said, "we did." Todd opened his mouth to say something else but before he could, Sara's cell phone rang. She checked the caller ID. The mayor?

"Sara Mason speaking."

"Sara. I'll get straight to the point," the mayor said. "Your coverage of the Bly House earlier this week was excellent."

"Uh, thank you, ma'am."

"I meant to call and tell you sooner but I've been drowning in meetings." She chuckled. "All for a good cause, though." She paused. "As you might've heard, the city has a bit of surplus funding. After watching your coverage of the Bly House, I had a special meeting with several of my advisors. We just finished up talks about an hour ago. Got your friend Nancy's message, too. My councillors and I agreed that something had to be done. So

I wanted you to be the first to know that the city has agreed to re-allocate some of its surplus to purchase and restore the Bly house. Windy City Development has just been notified.”

Sara’s eyes widened and her pulse raced. “Wow. This is great. It will mean so much to the citizens of this city who care about historical preservation. Can we set up an interview time later today? WCXB would love to get an exclusive from you on this.”

“Certainly.”

After they arranged the details, Sara ended the call. She was about to put the phone back in her pocket. But her phone vibrated with an incoming text message. Her boss. She made a wry face as she read it. Glanced at Todd then back at her phone.

The demolition crew started to pile into their pickups and drive off. The only sound now came from the rustle of the shag bark hickory’s leaves overhead.

He raised his eyebrows at Sara and took a step nearer. “What is it?”

She held up the phone. Moved closer and showed him the text. “My boss refused my pitch about the lost rubies. Why, I have no idea.” She sighed. “Definitely newsworthy to me. But this is a clear indication to me of where his priorities are. So I’m going to turn in my resignation. After I cover my interview the mayor, of course.”

“You are?”

She took a breath. Nodded. “Doing all this research, hearing all these stories, unraveling this historical mystery...It’s what I didn’t know I wanted to do. I mean,” she laughed, “I’ve always loved history. It was so obvious that I couldn’t see it.”

“I know what you mean,” Todd murmured as he put a hand on her shoulder.

Sara put her hand on Todd’s arm. “Not getting that promotion was a great gift, actually. Because I now realize I don’t even want to be news anchor. Well, I never wanted that—just saw it as a stepping stone to co-producer. But

discovering the lost rubies of Mansion Hill with you has made me realize that I want to be producer of my own television series. Share the excitement and intrigue of historical mysteries with viewers. Be the one to call the shots." She laughed. "Literally."

"That's fantastic," Todd said, as he returned her smile. "I'm glad to hear it." The look in the depths of his green eyes made her heart flip. "I think this is cause for celebration."

She grinned at him. "I think you're right. We found the treasure."

"We found something else, too," Todd said. For a second, neither spoke as Todd moved even closer and ran his hand down her arm.

Her eyelids fluttered closed for a moment at his touch before she smiled up at him and moved her hand to his chest.

"What's that?" She grinned at him from under her lashes.

He slid his arm around her waist. "Would you like to have dinner with me at The Stamm House tonight?" He lowered his voice. "Apparently, it used to be a speakeasy in the '20s. But before that, it's speculated it was an Underground Railroad way station."

"Oooh." Sara threw her arms around his neck. "I like the sound of all that history."

Todd grinned. "Thought you might."

"It's a date." She leaned into him. "Then I can tell you the details about this television series idea of mine."

"Mmm, sounds great." He tugged her to closer. "You know, I've been thinking a bit about my own future, too. Rick's inspired me. I want to have my own antiques shop."

"Really? I'm glad." Sara twined her fingers through his hair.

His lips were mere inches from hers as he murmured, "So what's this television series of yours going to be called?"

“Passport to Romance and Relics. It’ll be all about exploring historical mysteries. Across America. Maybe even all around the globe.”

“Sounds captivating. Just like you,” Todd whispered before he closed the last bit of space between them and kissed her.

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A sweet holiday romance prequel novella

JESSICA EISSFELDT

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OUT OF BREATH, Lillian flattened a flyaway strand of curly brown hair as she dashed up the subway stairs from the station and wove through hordes of people who all seemed to be going in the opposite direction.

She glanced at her watch and bit her lip. Already five to. She'd promised Rose she'd be on time.

Her heart pounded under her blue and white polka dot blouse. She couldn't miss this meeting. She sprinted down the sidewalk as she tugged the strap of her purse back up onto her shoulder.

Only one more block to go. That was the good thing about living in downtown Chicago. She didn't need to go too far to work. Inside her purse, the hard spine of her well-worn copy of *Lorna Doon* bumped against her ribcage. She always kept it in her purse. Never knew when she'd have the opportunity to escape to the misty moors of Scotland by opening its pages...

A smile touched her lips. Scotland. She loved it. She'd never been. But somehow, it felt like...home. Or at least, like a place she'd love to see.

All that history. All those beautiful crumbling castles. The gorgeous Scottish Highlands. Purple heather on the moors...And, of course, Scottish men in kilts. She grinned but just as abruptly shook her head.

Almost there.

She scrambled for the steel and chrome door handle and managed to heave it open just as the minute hand ticked over to 10 a.m.

Panting, she jogged to the bank of elevators and pressed the call button. She took a deep breath in through her nose and exhaled through her mouth several times. Her heart rate slowed and she closed her eyes a moment, willing herself to feel calm. Composed. The elevator doors opened with a ding.

Because if this meeting went well, who knows where it could lead? Maybe even to an actual permanent position with Travel Life magazine.

She grinned as she stepped inside. That would be a real dream come true. She pressed the button for the twentieth floor.

LILLIAN SWALLOWED AS her eyes darted to the frosted glass doors that read Travel Life Magazine World Headquarters.

Just breathe, she reminded herself. Even if this failed, she had other freelance jobs she could pursue. Plenty of contacts, plenty of—No. She was here now. She needed to focus on that.

She stepped out of the elevator, straightened her spine and opened the door.

“Hi, I’m Lillian. I have a ten o’clock with Rose,” she told the woman behind the tall glass and chrome desk.

The woman, who wore a headset, looked up at her. She smiled, nodded and pressed a long lime-green fingernail onto one of the switchboard buttons. “I’ll be with you in just a second,” she said into her mic.

Then took it off and smiled at Lillian, giving her her full attention. “I’ll let Rose know you’re here. Have a seat. Would you like anything to drink? There’s tea, coffee, mineral water. On the table over there.” She indicated a glass-topped table lined with a coffee machine, some sort of fancy-looking tea kettle and a glass cooler full of water with limes and lemons floating in it.

“Thanks. A water would be great.”

“Sure thing.” The receptionist smiled. “Help yourself.”

Lillian filled a paper cup with lime-and-lemon flavored water then took a seat on one of the caramel leather chairs arranged in a semi-circle across from the front desk.

She'd only just sat down when she heard her name. She glanced up. A well-dressed man in his early twenties addressed her. She couldn't help but notice the sheen of his faux-crocodile loafers seemed to match the white of his teeth as he indicated she follow him.

Lillian stood up, smoothed down her blouse and took a deep breath.

"Right this way," the man said. He looked a bit harried. He consulted what looked like his phone calendar in one hand, and compared that with a rather large flip calendar in the other hand.

"She's been, uh, awfully busy, what with that new spa opening up in Venice." He glanced over at Lillian then back down to the calendars, a frown between his brows. "One of our senior writers got sent on that assignment..." He grimaced, then added, almost to himself, "I made a bit of a goof with the plane tickets on that one, but I sorted it all out, eventually."

He glanced at Lillian. "Wished it was me on that spa assignment but I'm just the editorial assistant. Only been here a few months. How long have you been working for Rose?"

"Oh, I've been a freelancer almost twelve years. But this is only my fourth assignment with Rose."

The man's eyes widened a tad as they walked down a long gray-carpeted hallway, past several rows of frosted glass doors.

"But trust me," Lillian continued, "That's why I became a travel writer, actually. To bring global cultures and experiences to as many readers as possible. I'd love to work full-time for this magazine."

The man laughed. "Don't we all. Anyway, here you go." He knocked on the doorframe of the office at the end of the hall.

A woman with a sleek, steel-gray hair cut looked up. Her red oval-framed plastic glasses were perched on the end of her nose, and a creamy white silk blouse draped her slender frame.

She glanced at the slim gold Cartier watch on her wrist. A small frown creased her forehead but she said, "Thank you, Derek."

The man left and Lillian stepped into the office.

"Please, have a seat."

"I'm sorry I'm late," Lillian said as she sat. "There—"

"That's all right," the editor said. "No need to explain. These things happen."

Lillian's fingers relaxed on her purse handle.

"Thank you for coming in, Lillian. I know this isn't the usual way to do things: me asking you, as a freelancer, to come in to discuss an assignment." She gave a chiming laugh.

Lillian nodded, almost holding her breath.

"But," the editor removed her glasses. Studied Lillian a moment. "I see potential in you. Your writing is excellent. Those last three stories you turned in were on deadline and on-target."

Lillian's cheeks warm. "Thank you."

"I don't give praise lightly but in this case, it's merited. So," she leaned forward, her forearms on the edge of her organized desk. "I want to give you this opportunity before anyone else."

Lillian mouth went dry and she wished she'd brought that paper cup of water with her. She leaned forward in her seat.

"I just got word there's a new boutique hotel being opened up."

Lillian nodded.

"In the Scottish highlands, actually. And I want you to cover it."

"Really? Wow. That's—" Lillian laughed. "I mean..." she straightened up. Pulled out a notepad and pen from her purse. "What are the details?"

She started to scribble as her editor continued to talk.

"The place is called MacEachern Manor."

Lillian's pen hesitated and she looked up at her editor. "Um, how do you spell that? And for that matter," Lillian laughed, "how do you pronounce it?"

Her editor joined in the laughter and spelled the name. "As for pronunciation, it sounds like the name Katherine with an Mac on the front."

Lillian grinned. "Got it. So you were saying..." She held her pen aloft.

Her editor cleared her throat. "It's called *rustic luxury*."

Lillian cocked her head.

"Sort of a new trend in the hotel industry, apparently. Emphasis on the old world rustic, but with 5000-thread-count cotton sheets." Her editor waved a hand. "That way, owners don't have to do as many renovations. We think people are going to eat it up. You'll be put up by the magazine, of course. And all your travel expenses are paid, plus a stipend for daily expenses like food."

Lillian's mouth almost fell open. But she managed to keep it closed, just in time. In the past, she'd been lucky if she got paid in full and on time by other travel magazines she'd written for. Then again, Travel Life was on par with *Travel + Leisure* or *Conde Naste Traveller*, so it made sense they'd treat their writers well.

"All the photographs you'll be taking will be submitted with the piece on deadline, too. I love that shot you got a few articles ago for the Pacific Northwest Beaches issue. Now where was I? Oh, yes. Apparently this Scottish place was originally a castle. Owned by, well, the MacEachern clan since I think the 12th century or something like that. The current owner, a man in his early 30s by the name of Cameron MacEachern, apparently can trace his roots back to the first MacEachern laird. Now," she paused, glanced at Lillian, "those facts are a little foggy in my head, so don't quote me on that. Anyway, I'll leave it up to you to gather all the details for the article."

She paused. Flipped through her desk calendar, then looked back at Lillian. "Derek, my assistant, has been a bit overworked at the moment, what with this big spa issue we're working on, but he's managed to squeeze in orchestrating all your travel details. But..." Her editor held up a finger, studied Lillian a moment.

"I know you've had your eye on something more permanent with us. So. If you get this in to me, on-target and on deadline, which," she gave Lillian a warm smile, "I'm sure you will, then I'll consider giving you a permanent staff writer position with the magazine."

ALL THE WAY from the twentieth floor back down to the first floor, Lillian couldn't stop grinning. But she didn't care if she looked a little foolish to anyone else in the elevator. This was her big chance. Her one opportunity. The assignment that would make everything she'd ever wanted come true.

Maybe that was being a bit over-optimistic, but it never hurt to think big, now did it?

Her fingers drifted to the sterling silver brooch attached to the strap of her purse. She glanced at it and drew reassurance from its delicate Celtic filigree border of double love knots. She brushed her fingers across the smooth surface and once again wondered just where it had come from...

She'd gotten it three years ago from a flea market at the south end of the city here. That didn't explain its history, though.

Her fingers brushed the green stone, which looked like emerald. But for the price she'd paid, she was sure it wasn't a real gemstone; not that she knew much about jewelry.

The piece looked old. Then again, when she'd found it, it had been coated in dust and grim. The cashier had barely glanced at it as he'd rung up the sale.

The elevator doors opened soundlessly and Lillian stepped out. Now, she'd better stop daydreaming and get busy. She had a plane to catch.



LILLIAN SHUT THE lid of her laptop, picked up her packed carryon, and checked the time. The taxi would be here any minute.

She double-checked that the brooch was still secure on her purse strap. She'd thought of it as a good luck charm ever since a guy she'd had a crush on at her favorite coffee shop had asked her out.

Even though that relationship had ended, Lillian still considered the brooch her lucky charm. Whenever she wore it, it seemed, good things had happened. After all, she'd gotten this fabulous assignment. Her pulse raced.

Well, she smiled, as she gave the pin a glance, all the more reason to make sure to bring it along on this trip.

With any luck, she'd have that permanent job in Chicago here by end of the month.

She glanced out her window. The yellow cab had pulled up. She took a breath. This was it.



LILLIAN SETTLED BACK into the aisle seat as the plane taxied and then took off. She closed her eyes. In seven hours, she'd be in Scotland...

"Please ensure your tray tables and seats are in the locked and upright position."

Lillians startled awake and blinked in the harsh lights as the plane readied to land.

"Any items you have for disposal, please give to the flight attendants who will be coming through the cabin momentarily before we start our final descent into Glasgow International Airport. If you have connecting flights, check them inside the terminal. Flight attendants are no longer able to provide that service for you. Thank you and enjoy the rest of the flight."

Twenty minutes later, the seatbelt light dinged and Lillian stood up along with everyone else.

She grabbed her carry-on and glanced out the plane window. But all she could see was a piece of the airport.

Behind it, though, the pink-streaked dawn spread across a pale blue sky. She grinned. Looked like a beautiful day.

She checked her watch and adjusted for the time zone. Her train to Inverness didn't depart for about four hours. Maybe she'd see a tiny little bit of Glasgow before she headed into the misty moors of the Scottish Highlands.



LILLIAN STUDIED THE digital readouts on the leader board at the bustling Glasgow train station. Now, if she didn't get the platform mixed up and get on a train heading in the wrong direction, she'd be just fine. She glanced from one approaching train to the other. Both were coming in to platforms on either side of where she stood.

"Excuse me," she turned to an older woman nearby. "Is the one pulling in on platform 3 the train to Inverness?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, 'tis. Going on holiday there?" Her faint Scottish accent reminded Lillian of all the reasons she'd always wanted to visit this place.

"Oh, no. Not exactly. I'm a travel writer. I'm covering the grand opening of MacEachern Manor—it's a new boutique rustic luxury hotel."

"Oh, how lovely. Good on you, miss."

"Thank you."

Lillian boarded.

The train pulled seamlessly away from the station. Soon, the bustle and noise of Glasgow were behind her.

Lillian glanced out the large plate glass train window as the landscape began to roll by.

"Ticket, miss?"

Lillian startled. "Oh, uh, yes. They printed me a paper one..." She rooted through her purse and handed the ticket to the conductor.

"Inverness, then. Been to the Highlands before?" he said as he punched Lillian's ticket.

Lillian shook her head. "My first time in this country, actually."

"Well." He touched a finger to the brim of his conductor's hat. "Welcome to Scotland."

As the hours passed by, Lillian spent most of it either reviewing her notes on the hotel that she'd already made, or peering out at the sun-warmed landscape.

As they'd left Glasgow, the landscape had been mostly flat and open, with the occasional small pond interspersed with fields and trees.

But as the train headed farther north, the subtle changes in topography had surprised her. A rushing stream here. A clump of gorse there.

Not to mention that at every train stop, the signs had been written in English as well as Scottish Gaelic.

The train slowed again and Lillian glanced up. Another stop. They were getting closer to Inverness. She glanced at the sign. Birnam Wood. She couldn't help a small smile as Shakespeare's play *MacBeth* came to mind.

Before Lillian knew it, the automated voice announced their arrival at Inverness station.

She gathered her belongings, disembarked, and asked at the information desk where to find the bus station.

MacEachern Manor was near the small village of Beaully, about twenty-five minutes from Inverness.

She yawned as she left the train station. At least she felt more rested now that she'd had a chance to catch up on some sleep during the train ride.

The honey-colored sandstone of many of the buildings in Inverness brought a smile to her face as she walked along.

She quickened her pace. As she arrived in the bus station, bought her ticket and then looked around for her gate, she absently rubbed her fingers across the pin. The jewel in the center gleamed momentarily in the light.

Oh, there was the right gate. She didn't have too long to wait before the bus pulled up. With a hiss, its doors opened.

Soon, Inverness was left behind and Lillian could see at last the looming shapes of the Highlands.

Not mountains in the same way that the Colorado Rockies were mountains, she couldn't help noticing. More like large and rather imposing-looking craggy hills. Very tall, very steep hills, Lillian realized; almost like foothills. Well, according to her guidebook, the Highlands were actually an ancient mountain range worn down by eons of weathering.

As the afternoon sun glinted off what looked like a silvery stream winding its way down one of the mountainsides, Lillian's heart expanded in her chest. So beautiful here.

As they drove along, Lillian noticed the landscape shifted again. Low stone walls were on either side of the bus as it wound along a narrow paved road.

Between stands of large oak trees, she spotted grazing sheep in pastures. Hay bales in other fields. And light-brown, almost caramel-colored shaggy cows with long curved horns eating grass in other plots of land.

Those must be Highland cattle, she realized as she spotted another clump of them as the bus whizzed by. Yes, the photo in the guidebook matched.

She turned her attention back to the road as the bus started to slow down. Her eye caught a blue and white sign: *Beaulieu*. This was it. Her pulse quickened.

She stood up as the bus came to a stop in the middle of the village square. "Thanks so much," she told the driver as she stepped outside.

She took a breath as the bus pulled away. She couldn't help smiling as she glanced around the village.

A central green space was surrounded by one and two-story buildings made of either red brick or that same honey-colored sandstone that she'd seen in Inverness. Shop windows had hand-painted signs. Awnings in blues, greens and yellows stretched over various storefronts.

Pots of pink and purple petunias bloomed along the sidewalks and in window boxes along the main street.

What looked like a churchyard at the far end of the village's center caught Lillian's eye. A tall arched window. That was where she was supposed to meet her ride out to MacEachern Manor, so she wandered over.

Beaulieu Priory. The churchyard held the remnants of what must have been a medieval building. Only some of the walls and tall, arched glass-less windows set into the reddish-brown stone remained.

After she'd wandered round, a bronze plaque near the priory caught Lillian's attention. Oh. Interesting. Mary, Queen of Scots passed through Beaulieu on a royal tour.

Goosebumps broke out on Lillian's arms. So much history. So much beauty. She kind of wanted to stay here forever. A small sigh escaped her and she turned to glance at the street then at her watch.

She frowned. The groundskeeper was supposed to have met her by now. Hmm. Well, she'd give it a few more minutes. Might just be running late.

Except, thirty minutes later, he still hadn't arrived. Lillian was just about to pull out her phone when a small blue Skoda pulled to the curb and a gray-haired man got out of the driver's side.

Lillian exhaled in relief.

"You must be Lillian from that American magazine?"

"That's me," Lillian said with a smile.

"Good. I'm Barnum, the groundskeeper at MacEachern Manor. Apologies about the late pick-up."

"That's all right," Lillian said. "These things happen."

"Got only the one bag?"

Lillian nodded. "I like to travel light."

"Me too, lass." He winked.

THE RIDE TO MacEachern Manor took about fifteen minutes. Lillian's stomach had enough time to tie in a few knots. She cocked her head. Maybe not knots. Maybe more like flutters of anticipation. Yes. She smiled. That was more like it.

The Skoda wound along the narrow paved road. She glanced out the window. Somehow the low stone walls seemed even closer from this vantage point.

Barnum navigated around a curve.

"The roads are only one car wide. That's so narrow," Lillian said. "What do you do if—"

Just then, a gray sedan came around the bend from the opposite way.

Lillian's fingers curled tight around the door handle. But Barnum simply slowed the car and pulled off the road onto a patch of pavement that looked as if it had been created for the very purpose.

The gray sedan passed the Skoda with an inch to spare. Barnum chuckled. "You do get used to it, miss. These roads were really just the carriage ways that have been paved over. That's why they're so narrow. And with the stone walls, too, well, that's also part of the reason. Anyways, no need to stress yourself too much longer. We're nearly here."

The car took a left onto a slightly wider paved road. The car approached a set of wrought iron gates. Lillian leaned forward in her seat and peered through the glass. Barnum pressed a code into a metal keypad on one of the gateposts, and the gates swung inward.

The car began to wind up a curving route. Pine trees lined either side of the drive.

Lillian caught glimpses of that same honey-colored stone through clusters of pine trees as the car continued upward.

"The manor's perched on a pretty tall crag," Barnum said. "Kept it safer from other clans. 'Course, that was quite a ways back," he chuckled. "Then again, Scots tend to have long memories."

"Uh-huh," Lillian murmured, as the car rounded the final stretch of driveway.

Set back a quarter mile down the road, a honey-colored stone manor house reigned over the rest of the landscape.

The rolling green manicured lawn was set with box hedges and bright splashes of flower beds.

Lillian caught her breath.

"Now, it's been added on to a few times in the centuries since it was first built," Barnum said as he opened his car door. "But don't let that intimidate you."

Lillian got out too. "It's a lot bigger than I imagined."

"Was a castle first, though you cannae tell that now. All in ruins for several centuries. Round about 1720, the clan used the foundation to build the manor you see now." Barnum said. "Here's your bag then." He handed her the carry-on.

"Thank you." She paused. "I, um," her eyes darted to the house and around the grounds.

"Don't worry, I've sent word ahead and—Ah, here she is."

A slender dark-haired woman who appeared to be in her late 20s, approached the car.

"Thanks ever so much, Barnum," the woman said.

The older man nodded. "Gotta go tend my black currant bushes, so if there's nothing else...?"

The other young woman shook her head.

"Good then." He turned back to Lillian. "Welcome to MacEachern Manor."

"I'M FIONA." THE dark-haired woman smiled and extended a perfectly manicured hand.

Lillian wished she'd taken the time to at least buff her nails. But she raised her chin and extended her hand.

No reason to feel intimidated. She was here to do a job, not win some sort of self-imposed popularity contest.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Lillian, with Travel Life magazine."

"As pleased that my brother and I are that you're here to cover the grand opening," Fiona said, "I'm afraid there's been a bit of a mix-up."

A knot re-tied itself in Lillian's stomach.

"The magazine seemed to have gotten the dates wrong," Fiona continued. "That's why Barnum was late picking you up. We only just realized there'd been a mix-up."

Lillian's brow furrowed. "But my editor told me that everything had been arranged."

"On our previous schedule, I'm afraid," Fiona murmured as she gestured for Lillian to follow her up the gravel path through the flower beds to the house.

Lillian caught the scent of pine and the sound of rushing water. The property must back up against a river? A thrill surged through her, momentarily causing her to forget Fiona's words.

"...so that's why things have changed," Fiona finished.

"I'm sorry," Lillian said, "I didn't catch that."

"Oh," Fiona waved a hand, "that's all right. Suffice it to say things have been hectic around here and we've fallen a bit behind schedule, so the grand opening doesn't happen for another week. But you're welcome to stay here in the meantime. I'm sure my brother will agree."



"NO." THE TALL dark-haired man who stood in the manor's great room a few paces from Lillian crossed his arms over his broad chest and frowned.

A lock of black hair fell across his brow but Lillian refused to be distracted by it or by the way her heart had jumped at his good looks.

She raised her chin. She wasn't going to give in to this...this...attitude of his. She crossed her own arms. "And why not?"

He remained quiet, the frown still in place.

"Cameron," Fiona stood beside Lillian, "it's only for an extra week." She put a hand on his shoulder.

He shrugged it off.

"That's a week too long, in my mind." He glanced at Lillian then away. His jaw tightened.

Lillian's cheeks heated. She opened her mouth to say something but before she could, Fiona spoke.

"Cameron, be reasonable," Fiona said. She glanced at Lillian then back at her brother and lowered her voice. "Dad's gone."

"I'm well aware of that fact." A muscle in Cameron's jaw ticked.

"Well, then you can't use that as an—"

"Fine," Cameron said, the single word clipped. His eyes flashed. "But we can't have the media around snapping photos and asking questions at entirely the wrong times when we're in the middle of trying to set everything up," he added.

Fiona placed a hand on her brother's arm. "I'm sure," she glanced at Lillian then looked back at her brother, "that Lillian knows better than to get in the way."

Lillian forced herself to unclench her jaw and speak in a level tone. "Of course. I'm not with the National Inquirer, after all. Travel Life a well-respected magazine that's—"

"—only going to bring hordes of the wrong kinds of day trippers and holiday makers who won't appreciate the history and beauty of a place like this." Cameron uncrossed his arms to make a sweeping gesture that seemed to encompass everything. Her. The room. The manor. The whole estate.

Fiona clicked her tongue. "We've been over this, Cameron. Travel Life is a high-end glossy publication and—"

"—You're the one who thought of this whole idea in the first place to create media buzz. I only agreed to it because if we don't, we risk losing the whole estate. And you *know* what this place meant to Dad." He paused. Gave Fiona a loaded look. "We both know how much money running a place like this costs."

Cameron shoved his hands in his pockets and studied the well-worn Oriental rug beneath his feet.

For a moment, Lillian felt a pang of empathy toward the man. She knew what it meant to struggle to make ends meet.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. How many thousand cups of Ramen noodles had she eaten on that avocado-green couch in the well-worn one-bedroom apartment she'd shared with her mother? All through her growing up years, that's how many.

Lillian glanced over at Cameron but his face was as unreadable as the sandstone blocks of the manor itself. He gave a curt nod, turned on his heel and left the room.

She withheld a sigh. But she straightened her spine and lifted her chin. She wasn't going to let this one person stop her. She'd come too far for that. She was going to get her story.

SHE TURNED TO Fiona, "Listen, I can talk to my editor. I'm sure she'll understand the mix-up, and I can adjust my deadline accordingly."

Fiona nodded, the furrow in her brow relaxing as she smiled. "Yes. And you know what, the crofter's cottage is free right now. No one's using it, so let's get you settled over there." She paused. "I'm sorry that I don't have anything to do with the day to day running of the place. I'm just in PR in the city and thought I'd try to help my brother out with this." She sighed. "But sometimes he can be so...stubborn. So..."

"Scottish?" Lillian supplied.

Fiona laughed. "Exactly."

"Well, I appreciate your effort, anyway, Fiona," Lillian said.

Lillian followed Fiona out a side door and into a smaller side garden. Though the bright yellows and oranges of the flowers bloomed brightly, if she looked closer she could see signs of wear on the flower pots.

An ancient-looking garden hose lay nearby on some bricks. And as she glanced back at the manor itself, she saw a few windows on the third floor needed repair.

Mmm. Rustic-luxury was right...

"It's just around the corner here," Fiona said, as they came out of the garden and the yard opened up. Down at the far end, tucked into a grove of trees, a small stone cottage came into view.

"It looks like something out of a fairy tale," Lillian couldn't help but exclaim as she saw its curved wooden

door painted a pewter blue. The window boxes and shutters were painted to match the door. A slate roof with a stone chimney completed the picture.

Fiona made a wry face as she opened the door. "The amenities might be straight out of a fairy tale too, I'm afraid. It's a bit...old-fashioned."

"I'm sure I'll manage." Lilian gave Fiona a bright smile.



AFTER LILLIAN UNPACKED her carryon, she pulled out her laptop and began typing up notes that she'd made during her trip so far. Good to give the magazine's readers an idea of the journey to the manor. She made sure to save her work. The laptop had been acting a bit funny lately.

She bit her lip as her fingers paused over the keyboard. She tried to push away the thought but it persisted. Cameron hadn't been exactly open to giving her the interview she needed...

She could talk to Fiona instead. But her heart sank. Fiona wasn't the owner of the hotel—she'd made that clear.

She worried her lip between her teeth again but realized she was doing it and stopped. Turned back to her computer screen. Should she tell her editor about the hotel situation? About Cameron's uncooperativeness?

She tapped a finger against the side of her laptop. Hmm. No, not yet. She'd just mention about the dates mix-up when she got a second; probably tomorrow. No need to alarm her editor yet with anything else.

Better to work things out for herself here. After all, she'd think of something. Right?



AFTER LILLIAN MADE a quick supper with some groceries Fiona had dropped off, she decided to do a bit of exploring. Surely Cameron wouldn't begrudge her that.

She raised her chin. She'd just tell him she was familiarizing herself with the estate layout.

She grabbed a small notebook and pen, slipped them into the back pocket of her jeans then headed outside.

The sun was low in the sky now; a cool breeze had picked up and the scent of pine lingered in her nose.

Lillian paused on the threshold of the cottage. If she listened hard enough, she could just barely hear the rush of water. Sounded somewhere off to the left...

On impulse, she slipped back into the cottage and grabbed her Nikon, too. She took a moment to fasten the pin to the camera bag's strap. Right now she needed a bit of good luck.

A few minutes later, she'd circled around the manor house and crossed another garden in a somewhat better state of repair than the side one.

She couldn't quite figure out Cameron. If he hadn't wanted publicity then why had he let his sister talk him into it?

Maybe the money had been such an issue that he'd had no other choice. Travel Life was well-reputed and—Oh.

Fiona had probably arranged it. Lillian bet Cameron hadn't even taken the time to look at the details, and with them both being so busy with opening preparations, probably neither of them had time to double-check the dates, either.

Well. She was still here. She had to try to do her job. And she'd do the best job she could, given the circumstances.

THE GRAVEL CRUNCHED under her sneakers as the path sloped downward away from the manor house and towards the woods surrounding it.

The sound of rushing water got louder as she entered the woods. As she steadily headed downward, she inhaled deeply; the forest air reminded her of time spent on the pine-filled woods at her grandmother's house in

Minnesota. Felt like home. Her eyelids fluttered closed and for a moment, she just savored the sensations.

The call of a raven made her open her eyes and realize she wasn't quite at the end of the path.

The path levelled out a few moments later. She stood in a small clearing, a rushing river, water nearly black, a few paces ahead.

The sunset, through the trees, streaked the horizon with pinks, oranges and purples. This would make a great shot for the piece. Certainly a million-dollar view for future hotel guests.

She unhooked her camera bag from her shoulder and set it on some rocks beside her, then rustled around inside it as she picked up her Nikon, adjusted the neck strap and slid it around her neck.

After she uncapped the lens, she brought the camera to her face and fired off a few shots. This would be perfect. Her editor would love it. The readers would—

"Enjoying the view?" a male voice said behind her.

Lillian startled and almost dropped the Nikon.

She turned. Cameron.

He stood a few feet from her, near the rocks where she'd put the camera bag.

His hair was windblown and his maroon T-shirt looked rumpled. He'd stuffed his hands into his pockets again, she noticed.

A slight frown marred his forehead. Was the man always stressed? Not that she should judge him.

He met her gaze and his lips compressed. Stubborn Scot. Her father had been just like that; stubborn, and half Scottish.

She tamped down the impulse to put her hands on her hips. Confront him.

Because this man wasn't her father. And she shouldn't paint the two with the same brush. But it was so easy to do...

Then again, she hadn't know her father that long. He'd abandoned both her and her mother when Lillian had

been only six years old. With no child support, it had been up to her mother to work two jobs to keep things afloat.

So yes, Lillian might be a wee bit bias, thanks to the stories about her father that her mother had told her. Still and all.

Lillian raised her chin. "As a matter of fact, I am. Such a gorgeous view. Your hotel guests will love coming down here. You could built a lookout point, actually."

He looked slightly startled at her suggestion but then recovered. Took his hands out of his pockets. Rubbed his jaw, which had a hint of dark stubble. "I never thought of that, actually." He gave her a sidelong glance. "It's a...good idea."

Now she was the one to look startled. "Oh, uh, thanks." She cleared her throat. Held up her camera. "The magazine will like these, anyway."

Cameron crossed his arms again. Looks like she'd crossed a line.

"About that..." He sighed.

She stiffened. Now what?

He continued. "My sister has some great ideas." A smile played around his lips. Despite her best intentions, she couldn't help but notice the sculpted lines of his mouth. But she tore her eyes away from his lips and made herself pay attention.

"But," he continued, "she doesn't always take the time to think things through, sort out all the little details. Hence the timeline mix-up." He made a wry face.

So it was Fiona who'd missed the detail, not Cameron? Interesting.

She studied the man a moment. Was he actually making an attempt to apologize? She winced. Perhaps she *had* been too quick to judge.

"I see," Lillian said. "So what would you like me to do then? I came here because my editor expects a piece on a grand opening."

He frowned. "I never said you had to leave."

"No, but you certainly implied it."

He raked a hand through his hair. "Look, I'm sorry. I just..." He rolled his shoulders, "have a lot on my mind lately and I—" His gaze cut to her. "You're a guest here."

Lillian put her hands on her hips. "While I appreciate your apology and your explanation, that doesn't make up for the fact that you were, well, to put it bluntly, kind of rude."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I know. That's why I want to, uh," he shifted from one foot to the other, "make it up to you. I think Fiona had a good idea about publicity." He rushed on, "That's all. I'm not..." He cleared his throat. "That is to say," he shoved his hands in his pockets again, "I'd be happy to give you the interview you're needing for the article," he said at last.

Lillian's mouth almost fell open. He caught her expression and those sculpted lips of his pulled upward into a full-fledged grin. Her mouth almost involuntarily pulled into a grin of her own.

The man was mystifying, aggravating, but at least he was honest about it. That was something she couldn't say about her father.

"Okay." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "When can we start?"

"How's about tomorrow morning, say nine o'clock in the front hall."

"I'll see you there."

LILLIAN KEPT TURNING the encounter over and over in her mind long after Cameron had left. She'd stood there, as sunset faded to dusk and then twilight and then finally, tiny pinpricks of light high above meant the stars were out.

She shivered as a chilly breeze sprang up. She'd been out here too long. And spent far too much time analyzing the angles Cameron's lips had formed as he'd grinned at her, his hair windblown, his hands in his pockets, his eyes the color of good whiskey.

Eyes that, if she wasn't careful, she could get herself lost in. She shook off the thought as she headed back across the grounds and over to the crofter's cottage.

As she got ready for bed and brushed her teeth, though, her mind returned to her love life. She hadn't really even had a relationship in the three years since the coffee shop guy...

She shrugged. No one had come along that she'd really been interested in...Until now?

She scrubbed the toothbrush across her teeth with more force than necessary. No. She certainly was in no way interested in Cameron MacEachern.

And yes, there had been men she would've liked to know better. But she'd just let her own fears about a real, committed relationship affect her judgement. Play on her heart.

Because, deep down, she was scared. What would happen if she got involved with someone, and he simply—her heart clenched—abandoned her?

She blinked moisture from the corners of her eyes. Her fists clenched around her toothbrush. Like her father had done to her mother.

She spit out the toothpaste, rinsed her mouth and then climbed into bed.



NINE O'CLOCK EXACTLY. She looked up from her watch and into Cameron's caramel-brown eyes.

"Thinking I'd be late, did you?" Cameron said.

"I, uh," she cleared her throat, determined not to let him get to her. "No." She adjusted her ponytail. "Of course not."

"I was only kidding," he said, a twinkle in his eye.

Lillian's shoulders relaxed. She took out her notepad and pen. "I'm going to take handwritten notes mainly, if that's okay."

“That’s fine.” Though was that a flicker of annoyance in his gaze? But as she glanced at him again, there was only professionalism.

“Now, what would you like to know first?” He glanced over his shoulder as he started to walk across the flagstone foyer.

She leafed through until she found a blank page. “Well, I guess you could start by giving me a history of the place. Beyond what’s on the manor’s website. Maybe talk a bit too, about your involvement with things.”

“All right. As you might already know, this manor was originally a castle. Built in 1234 by Dougal MacEachern, who’s considered the founding laird of the MacEachern clan in this area.”

As Cameron continued to fill her in as they walked along, she found herself only jotting down the occasional point, forgetting to take more thorough notes as she got pulled in by his storytelling ability. Before she knew it, two hours had flown by.

She followed Cameron into one of the last rooms off the main hall.

Dark red leather wingback chairs stood on either side of the large slate fireplace. A coat of arms, which featured a stag on its hindquarters battling with a knight wielding a sword, hung above the mantel. Both figures had jewelled eyes. Emerald, from the look of it. And a double Celtic love knot surrounded the two figures on the coat of arms.

Cameron finished up his current story and leaned against the fireplace mantel.

“And I thought the Irish had the gift for storytelling,” she found herself tease Cameron. What had gotten into her?

His dark eyes twinkled as he held her gaze. “Don’t say that too loud in this country.” He chuckled.

She laughed. Her heart jumped as they regarded each other for one quiet moment. Then two. She shook off the swooping sensation in the pit of her stomach. “That, uh, is an interesting coat of arms.”

“Yes,” Cameron shifted his gaze away from her and up to the the piece she’d been looking at earlier.

“It’s actually unique to this branch of the MacEachern clan. In fact,” he turned back to Lillian, “all our clan’s jewelry is all like that.”

“You mean with the coat of arms?”

“No.” He paused. “The double Celtic love knot design around the border.”

“Oh.” Lillian’s eyes widened.

“What is it?” he asked, his voice softening at her expression.

“I, uh, well, I’m not sure but I think I might have a piece of jewelry that’s from your clan.”

Cameron raised his eyebrows.

“I found it in a flea market in Chicago,” she explained, her cheeks heating.

Cameron took a step toward her. She caught a hint of woodsy cologne as he did. It smelled good. Her heart thudded. Like the forest around the estate.

She swallowed then smiled to cover her nerves. “The person I bought it from thought it was just cheap costume jewelry.”

As he looked at her, Cameron’s gaze darkened momentarily. With curiosity? Interest? “Did they?”

Lillian took a half-step back as she nodded.

Cameron slid a hand along his chin as he regarded the coat of arms then her. “History is like a clan tartan,” he said softly, “if even one thread is pulled, the whole fabric can become misshapen. Even unravel. That’s why,” he added, “this manor, this estate, is so important to me.”

“I can understand,” Lillian said softly. “I really love history, myself. After all, what is the present if we don’t understand where we came from?”

He tilted his head. Looked at her with what seemed to be respect in his gaze. “Exactly.” Cameron studied her a moment more, as if seeing her more clearly for the first time.

Her cheeks flushed.

Cameron shoved his hands in his pockets. Pulled his gaze away from her. "Do you have it here? I'd like to see it if you do."

"I did bring it with me, actually. It's just in the cottage."

"Great, maybe you can show me after we're done the tour?"

"I'd like that." The words tumbled out of Lillian's mouth before she realized it. What was happening to her?

"So would I," Cameron said, then looked a little surprised too. He cleared his throat and quickly added, "I can show you the final room on this floor."

He swivelled away from her and crossed the threshold into the hall again.

As she stepped into the hall too, she glanced around. The high mullioned windows spilled light across gray flagstones worn smooth and uneven from generations of footsteps.

A smile played at her lips. If walls could talk... She paged back through her sporadic notes. She was getting a lot of good information here that Travel Life readers would love....

She tapped her pen against her chin. Now, what could she use for the perfect sidebar addition to the story? Maybe the coat of arms?

She stole a glance at Cameron and couldn't help but admire the way the fabric of his green dress shirt stretched across his broad shoulders as he moved.

No harm in looking. She tore her eyes away. But she couldn't let herself *feel* anything for him. She was leaving too soon for that. Besides, they lived in two different countries and—

"The great room," Cameron said as she came to stand beside him. Professional. She had to stay professional. This was only an assignment. She couldn't lose her heart. To this man, or to this country.

It would do her well to remember that.

She pulled her attention back to the room Cameron indicated with a sweep of his arm.

Tall windows flanked a large marble fireplace on one end. A long oak dining table ran for a good portion of the center of the room, and the gold and maroon upholstered chairs in the English baronial style with clubbed feet and curved arms perfectly fit the space.

“This is gorgeous,” Lillian murmured as she admired the room. “I can see why it’s called the Great Room.”

Cameron chuckled.

Lillian laughed. It felt good. She liked this newfound easiness between them. Her throat tightened as she glanced at him. But once the article was written and she had to fly home...?

LILLIAN SPENT THE rest of the afternoon transcribing her notes onto her computer and shaping them into the beginnings of the article's first draft. Cameron certainly knew how to provide quote-worthy content.

Her lips quirked as she gazed out the window at the afternoon sun slanting through the trees. A few dark clouds gathered on the horizon. Was it going to storm?

She recalled the look she'd shared with Cameron in the billiards room. Her heart flipped. There seemed to be more to him underneath that initial exterior of cool reserve...

She took a breath—had to focus on her work, not on Cameron. Her computer's screen flickered, and Lillian hastily saved her work. Maybe the transatlantic voyage hadn't agreed with her computer.

After she'd finished with the notes, she crossed her fingers as she picked up her phone. Better send a quick note to her editor explaining about the dates mix-up.

But the phone buzzed in her hand before she could send anything. She looked at the phone's screen. A video call. From her editor. She swallowed.

The phone buzzed again.

Her finger hovered above the answer button. The phone buzzed again. And again.

Finally, she drew in a deep breath and hit answer. "Hi, Rose."

"Hello, Lillian. Just wanted to check in and ask how things are going? How was the opening? Haven't heard an update but I figured you've been busy."

Lillian swallowed. "Oh, I've gotten a first draft started. My main source was a bit uncooperative at first but that's all worked out and I—"

"How was the grand opening? I hope you got some good shots." The older woman leaned forward in her chair, her eyes missing nothing.

Lillian's shoulders hunched. "Got some great vista shots of the water. The castle's—"

"Lillian." The older woman pursued her lips. Steepled her fingers. "What are you not telling me?"

Lillian exhaled and briefly closed her eyes then opened them again. "There was no grand opening."

Her editor laughed. "I thought as much."

Lillian blinked.

The other woman continued. "I used the same stalling tactic on my own editor when I was given my first overseas assignment. It went awry. I lied. Didn't want to blow it, so I figured the less she knew, the better." The editor gave Lillian a piercing look. "Level with me."

"Uh," Lillian opened then closed her mouth. But after a moment, she explained about the dates mix-up, what Cameron and Fiona had told her.

"I see." Her editor fiddled with the leg of her reading glasses. "I can't give you a deadline extension. This magazine doesn't have unlimited funds. You have until Wednesday. Think you can get what you need by then?"

That was only two more days. Cameron's face flitted across Lillian's mind's eye even as she said, "I hope so."

"Good. Keep me informed."

The screen went dark.



A PRICKLING SENSATION filled Lillian's stomach. With a bit more time, she'd nearly have the first draft. But what she need to complete the picture was literally, the photographs from the grand opening.

But if the grand opening didn't happen until Saturday then what was she going to do? And she still hadn't decided on a good side bar. She tapped her fingers on the desk.

A knock on the door startled her out of her thoughts. She got up to answer it. A cool rain-spattered breeze blew in as she said, "Cameron. Oh! Uh, hi."

He studied her face a moment, as if he could read her confusion and concern about the story. "I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

She rearranged her expression. Made herself smile. "No, I...No. What can I help you with?"

He adjusted the cuffs of his button-down. "Actually, I was wondering..."

Lillian's heart sped up and she realized she was holding her breath.

"...if you haven't eaten already, would you like to have dinner? With me, I mean. Tonight? At the house? Fiona's out and it seemed you enjoyed the great room and so I thought, well," he cleared his throat. "Now I'm rambling." He abruptly stopped talking.

Lillian's cheeks flushed. Was this a...date? No. It couldn't be. "Sure. I mean yes, that would be nice. Thank you," she finished at last, annoyed with herself for feeling flustered. But maybe that was because she was so pleasantly surprised?

"Good." He checked his watch. "Say, 7:30? Oh, but would that give you enough time?"

Her heart squeezed at his earnest expression. How considerate. "That's perfect," she assured him.

"Great." He smiled at her. "I'll see you soon."



THUNDER RUMBLED AS Lillian slipped a pair of faux pearl earrings in on impulse after she'd slicked on some pale pink lipstick and spritzed a dab of her body mist on her wrists and behind her ears.

She surveyed herself in the mirror. Her heart jumped beneath her lavender chiffon blouse. Maybe she was a little too dressed up? But looking nice never hurt. She was just being professional. She gave herself a sly smile in the mirror. Right.

Sure, they'd gotten off to a rocky start...But now? She recalled his expression as he'd shared more of his family history, his family stories with her, that morning. Her heart softened.

He loved history just as much as she did.

So... she wanted to impress him? Mmm. No, that wasn't quite accurate. Make a good impression, she corrected herself. She liked his appreciation for history. She liked the ease between them. And, well, his good looks didn't hurt the equation, either.

She smoothed down a wayward strand of curly hair and then headed out the cottage door, umbrella in hand.

As dusk had fallen, the evening had grown somewhat cool as the rain continued to fall. Lillian crossed the threshold. Thunder boomed again. Lightning flashed. More thunder. Lillian jumped as another loud crack of thunder sounded, nearly overhead.

In that moment, as she started to cross the lawn, the warm glow of lights from the manor house, flickered out.



"LILLIAN?" CAMERON'S VOICE sounded from around the corner as she made her way slowly into the foyer. "Sorry about all this. The power's just gone out."

"I saw that. I'm over here," she said as he came around the corner, flashlight in hand. "I think—will the power come back on, do you think?"

"With wiring this old, I'm not too sure when that'll happen," he said, a hint of humor in his tone. His voice sounded somehow seemed warmer, closer, in the semi-darkness, as he came nearer.

“Watch your step.” He shone the light ahead of them, put a hand on the small of her back as he guided her in the direction of the great room. The warmth of his fingertips sent a tingle down her spine.

A small fire licked at the logs in the stone fireplace as she stepped into the great room.

“Fire’s a good idea,” she said, to distract herself from the lingering sensation of his touch after he took his hand from her back.

“Had a time finding matches for the candles. But that’s pretty much the only extra light source around here. We don’t have that many spare flashlights. Something we should remedy before guests show up.”

“Mmm,” Lillian made a non-committal noise. “It’s a bit chilly tonight.”

“It can do that, even in July in these parts. I was talking about that with Fiona earlier today, actually. We’re finalizing the last few details for the website. She suggested fireplaces as a feature to highlight for guests during the grand opening.”

“About that,” Lillian said as she headed over to the dining table, which was set with what looked like hand-painted china rimmed in silver.

A silver candlestick served as the centerpiece and a three-candle candleabra was lit. Lillian darted a glance at Cameron. This was...decidedly romantic. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger.

“You were saying?” Cameron came over to the table and stood by her. His cologne drifted to her. Her heart fluttered as she spoke. “My editor wants me to wrap things up by Wednesday.”

The corners of his mouth turned down. “But the grand opening is on Saturday.”

Lillian sighed. “I know. That’s the problem.” She rubbed her temples. “I’m sorry.” She looked over at him. “I don’t mean to spoil the atmosphere with work worries. I’m sure I’ll be able to figure something out.”

Cameron nodded. Smiled too. "I'm sure you will. Now," he indicated the table, with covered dishes, "are you ready to enjoy some local cuisine?"

"I am."

"Good." He pulled out her chair for her. She smiled at the quaint gesture.

A salad of local greens with a rich creamy vinegarett dressing was first.

"The greens are all from the garden in the back, here. Organic, too. I've actually been thinking a small restaurant might be a good thing to help boost the revenue here, too," Cameron said as they finished the salad course.

"Delicious," Lillian agreed. "And a great idea. From my research, and experience, that's often something guests expect. But the local food angle would really help seal the deal," she added as she picked up her fork for the main course.

"Did the salmon come from around here too?" she asked as she cut into the filet.

"From the river."

Lillian nodded then took a bite. Rich, creamy dill and sour cream mixed with the subtle flavor of the salmon. Lillian's eyes fluttered close for a moment. "Mmm." She'd never tasted anything so...fresh and delicious.

"You like it, then." Cameron's voice was low, almost husky, as he spoke. Warmth flooded through Lillian. "Yes." She opened her eyes to discover Cameron's gaze on her in the flickering candlelight.

Neither spoke.

The fireplace crackled. Lillian held her breath. All at once, she found herself wishing, hoping, imagining she could stay here forever, in this moment, in this room, with him.

Her pulse pounded in her throat. Cameron's eyes were drawn to the spot. Her cheeks flushed but she didn't move, hardly dared to breath. Did he feel this same...frisson...between them that she did?

But the look in his eyes answered her question almost before she'd thought it.

After one more suspended moment, he moved to take a sip of his drink.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Took a breath. Cleared her throat. "Your cook or chef or whomever you had prepare the meal did an excellent job."

Cameron darted a glance at her; did he look almost...shy? "That was me, actually."

"My compliments, then." She raised her glass in his direction.

"Thank you." He paused, then leaned forward. "You know, I've always enjoyed cooking." He took another sip of his drink. "Maybe because I have such good memories of my Gran. Helping her in the kitchen was one of my favorite things growing up. Helping her make her famous oatmeal raisin cookies." He shook his head, a faraway look in his eyes. "Every time I make that recipe now, I think of her. Somehow, cooking, I think, brings people together." He met Lillian's gaze. "A shared experience," he said quietly.

Lillian nodded as she murmured. "No matter the quality of the food. I remember my mom and I seemed to have the best conversations over Ramen noodles when I was growing up." She hesitated then continued. "While we might've not been well off, somehow the food brought us closer together. A shared experience, like you said."

They were both silent again. But this time, it wasn't a fraught silence with undercurrents of implication but simply a companionable one.

"You were close with your grandmother, then?" She put an elbow on the table and rested her chin in her cupped palm.

"We were close, yes. Maybe also because I was the only grandchild." He tilted his head, a faraway look in his eyes. "But I do think we did share a special bond, somehow..." He traced the wood grain of the table with a forefinger as he continued. "She taught me everything I

know about cooking. And my family's history. I still miss her sometimes," he said in a low voice, his eyes still on the tabletop. "Some days it feels like she's—" he chuckled with a tinge of sadness "—nearby, even though she passed away nearly ten years ago."

On impulse, Lillian reached out and placed a hand on his forearm. He looked up, surprised.

But he placed his other hand on top of hers and met her gaze. His eyes filled with warmth and gratitude.

The heat of his palm on the back of her hand seemed to seep through her and spread the feeling throughout her entire body.

She held his gaze, studied the golden flecks in his eyes even as his expression seemed to echo hers. Her heartbeat sped up. Could he feel the change in tempo?

She felt his breath fan against her bare arm. Her cheeks heated. What it would be like if she leaned forward, traced a hand down the side of his face, felt his stubble under her palm...

How would his expression change if she came even closer? What would he do if she brushed her lips against his, if she wound her arms around his neck and gave in to these growing feelings for him?

Her heart pounded as she felt herself leaning ever so slightly forward—

Ping. Ping.

She startled at the electronic sound and pulled back. He blinked and reached for his pocket. Pulled out his phone. Made a wry face then looked at her. "I'm sorry. I have to take this."

She nodded. A whoosh of relief and a pang of disappointment mixed in her stomach.

She watched him walked away from the table, only to return a few minutes later.

"That was my sister. Fiona's having a bit of a car issue and I need to go help her."

"Oh no. Is there anything I can do?"

“That’s very kind of you.” He paused. Assessed her face. “Thank you, but no. I’m sorry to have cut things short; I’ve been enjoying this. We didn’t even get to pudding.”

“Pudding?” she said. “Did you plan for chocolate or vanilla?”

“Oh,” he chuckled, “I didn’t mean literally pudding. You call it something else in America, don’t you?”

Lillian’s brow scrunched for a second. “Oh! You mean dessert.”

He snapped his fingers. “Right, that’s the name. Was on the tip of my tongue.” He chuckled again. “I’d like to make it up the evening to you. You haven’t seen the entire grounds, have you?”

When Lillian shook her head, he said, “How about we meet up tomorrow afternoon? I can bring the pudding. Not vanilla, though.” He winked.

CAMERON’S WORDS ECHOED through her mind the next morning as she got out of bed and headed to the tiny kitchen in her pjs to make herself some breakfast. *I’ve been enjoying this.* So had she. Her cheeks warmed. What would’ve happened if his phone hadn’t interrupted her movement?

A thrill sparked up her spine at the thought. But she forced her thoughts back to her assignment as she buttered a couple pieces of toast. She’d be gone come Wednesday. She couldn’t allow herself to think like this.

Except she already had.

Bright sunlight streamed through the chintz curtains. Looked to be a hot day today. She checked the weather as she finished breakfast. Yes. Truly summer temperatures.

She decided on a pale yellow cotton sundress and sandals, and wound her hair into a braided bun.

She’d need to take some more photos this morning of the grounds and a few more interior shots. She’d seen Barnum and some younger men arranging flower boxes

strategically at the front entry. The article was coming together nicely.



LILLIAN'S STOMACH RUMBLED as she lowered her camera. She glanced through the photos she'd taken.

Would this work? She chewed on her lower lip. She'd gotten some great ones of the front entry, including the antique Scottish baronial credenza that would serve as the reception desk.

If only she'd *be* here for the opening... She needed a great sidebar. Something else, just as good, if not better, to include with the article, instead, since she wouldn't be here for the opening. But what? Her brow furrowed.

A bead of sweat trickled down the back of her neck. She glanced at the wooded landscape and imagined the cool darkness she'd find under the spreading shade of the oaks and pines.

She checked her watch. She should grab a quick bite of lunch before she met up with Cameron. But she needed to save room for pudding.

After she'd returned her camera to its bag, she went to the cottage and fixed herself a sandwich.

She'd started to tidy up the small space when she glanced at the shoulder strap of the camera bag sitting on the counter.

Her stomach dropped. Where was the pin?

She stooped down. Scrutinized the floor. But there was no tell-tale flash of silver. No delicate filigree on the floorboards.

She'd just finished searching the entire cottage without any luck when there was a knock on the door.

She spun around. "Cameron, oh. Hello."

"What is it? You ok?" He crossed the few steps into the little cottage to where she stood, and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, thank you, yes I’m fine. I just—think I lost something.” She glanced at him. What would he think if he knew it was the pin that she suspected was somehow a part of his family’s collection? She chewed the inside of her cheek. Best not to alarm him. She was sure she’d find it soon enough.

He put down the basket he’d been holding. “Can I help you look for it?”

“Thanks, but it can wait. I’m really looking forward to the pudding and the tour of the rest of the grounds.”

He picked up the basket again but studied her a moment. Then smiled. “Great. Let’s go. Pudding first?”

She grinned. “Yes.”



“OH, THIS SHADE is so refreshing,” she murmured as they walked side by side amid the oaks and pines.

The light breeze stirred the wisps of hair at the nape of her neck as they followed a narrow path among the forest undergrowth, different than the one she’d explored initially.

“This is so peaceful and quiet, you’d hardly know the house was nearby,” Lillian said.

“That’s part of why I’ve always loved this path through the estate’s patch of woods. I’ve done some of my best thinking out here.” Cameron said. “Walking helps me process my thoughts.”

They followed the narrow path among the forest undergrowth. Afternoon sunlight dappled the forest floor and the scent of pine mingled with the river as fallen leaves and pine needles cushioned their footsteps.

“I can see why,” she said as she glanced around.

“Mmm,” he agreed. Then pointed. “We can stop here for our food. The first tour site I wanted to show you is just up here, too. It’s quite ancient.”

They stepped into a small clearing. Lillian glanced around. Gnarled pine trees with roots twisting their way

along the ground formed a loose circle, interspersed with taller oaks. The patch of blue sky above somehow seemed a world away.

Cameron crossed over to a nearby pine. "See?"

She smiled at the excitement in his tone as she came closer and put a hand on his arm. "What is it?"

"Behind here." He pointed. Lillian looked behind the tree trunk. Her eyes widened. "It looks like...is that a standing stone?"

He nodded. "There are only a few of the stones left in this little clearing. But far as I know, they've been here for centuries. My family's always known about this spot, anyway." He put a hand on the edge of the weathered stone. "It's something people tend to associate with Ireland, but Scotland has its fair share of stone circles, too."

Lillian reached out and ran her fingertips down the vertical surface of the rough gray stone. Patches of yellow, brown and green lichen clung to its uneven face.

The stone was a little bit taller than she was, and maybe three or four feet wide. As she looked around the edge of the clearing, she spotted a few more. Seven in total.

She turned in a slow circle as she took it all in, goosebumps rising on her arms. She rubbed them as she hugged herself. Something about this place...this clearing...had her thinking all sorts of things. She darted a glance at Cameron.

Out of the corner of her eye, as if reading her thoughts, Cameron came to stand beside her. For a moment they simply stood there together. But then she heard his voice, low and soft near her ear as he spoke again.

"This place has always been special to me." He paused. Took a breath. "And I guess I've always been a bit of a private person," he said. "Sometimes I find it easier to be alone with my thoughts rather than open up about things."

Lillian's mind flashed back to their initial meeting. She could definitely see that.

"I can understand," Lillian said quietly, "I know that I find it sometimes hard to, well, trust that people aren't just going to disappear."

He put a hand softly on her waist.

Her pulse jumped and warmth spread through her at his touch. She could feel each one of his fingers through the thin cotton of her dress as she turned her head slightly to look at him.

Sunlight caught the deeper amber flecks in his eyes and her breath hitched as he looked back at her.

He reached up and smoothed a wisp of hair off her neck, his thumb sliding across the warmth of her skin even as his eyes searched her face. "Lillian," he said so quietly it was almost a whisper, "I don't usually say things like this to people I've just met." His lips curved upward and she watched the motion. "But the truth is, I'm starting to feel something toward you that I've never experienced before with any other woman."

"I know," Lillian whispered as she leaned forward, felt his body heat radiate toward her, wanting nothing more than to press herself against him, wrap her arms around his neck, bury her fingers in his hair, "because I'm feeling the same way."

His hand on her neck slid upwards and her eyelids fluttered at his touch. She hardly dared breathe as his thumb stroked her cheek. She felt her knees go weak.

She reached out, put a hand on his chest, could feel his heart's quick pace beneath her palm as she slid her hand up to his broad shoulder and took the final step toward him, closing the gap between them.

As her eyes closed and the warm moist firmness of his lips brushed against hers, she buried her fingers in his thick dark hair.

She heard herself sigh softly. But the sound made a cold hard knot formed in her stomach. Made her brain kick back into gear.

What was she doing? She couldn't just kiss some Scottish highlander in the woods of his estate and expect

to walk away with her heart unscathed. She was being foolish. Taking way too much of a risk. Things were moving way too fast. She'd only just met him.

As he slid his arms around her waist and started to press her even closer to him, instead of melting against him, as she so wanted to do, she heard the logical, rational part of her brain get louder and louder. The part of her mind that was warning her to stay away. Walk away.

Run away before she could get hurt. To stay safe. To pull back. Because if she walked away, didn't get involved, then she wouldn't be abandoned... Her throat closed up. ...like her father had done to her mother.

She froze in place at the realization.

Cameron pulled away slightly. "Lillian?"

She couldn't do this. Not now. This was crazy. Her eyes darted to and away from the confused and concerned look on Cameron's face.

"Are you all right?" he continued, his arms slowly lowering to his sides.

She blinked away moisture from the corners of her eyes. Struggled to make sense of her tangled thoughts. But the fear shouted the loudest.

It was only lust. It was only some sort of unreliable something that couldn't be relied upon at all. It was fleeting. It was—

"This isn't right," she said.

"What isn't?" Cameron's brows furrowed. Hurt tinged his tone.

Her stomach felt hollow. Empty. "You—this—I...I need to go back to the cottage," she managed. "I have some work I need to catch up on. Thank you for the uh—" she gestured around at the forest even as she turned and began to walk back down the path they'd followed.

"Lillian," Cameron said, reached for her arm. "Wait. Don't run away. I'm sorry if I rushed into things, if you're not comfortable. I didn't mean—"

"No," she said as she avoided his touch, her words clipped. Curt. "It's not you. It's me."

“Lillian,” Cameron tried again, even though she could see storm clouds begin to form in his eyes. Good. He’d thank her later for shutting him out. “Can we talk about this?”

“We just did,” Lillian said, her shoulders stiff.

Cameron shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I need to go.” She turned and nearly ran all the way back to the snug little cottage.

LILLIAN BREATHED A sigh of relief as she closed the little cottage door behind her. She straightened her spine. This was the best way. The only way. The straightforward option, her brain told her.

But her heart twisted.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth and tried not to think about how, only minutes before, Cameron’s lips had been on hers...

She brought a shaking hand to her mouth and ran a fingertip across it. But she pressed her lips together and dropped her hand.

No.

She forced her mind to focus on the task at hand. Which was finishing her assignment.

She was basically done the story. Except for the sidebar. But maybe she actually didn’t need that? She *could* send the story in as-is, let her editor decide.

She picked up her camera bag. Again, the brooch flashed through her mind. Where had it gone? She must have dropped it somewhere...

Well, she had better things to worry about than a piece of possibly heirloom jewelry.

She went to switch on her laptop. But it made an odd whirring noise and then the screen went black.



HER THROAT CONSTRICTED. No, no, no. This couldn’t be happening. But two hours later, she realized, as she’d tried

and failed to boot up the machine repeatedly, it was happening. The computer was officially dead. All her typed notes, lost. The entire draft article, gone.

Lillian tugged at the ends of her hair. Jumped up. Began to pace.

Put her fingers back on the keyboard. Pushed the power button again. But it was useless.

She swore under her breath. Then she remembered the notes she'd taken by hand. She picked up her notebook. Leafed through the pages. She frowned. Was there enough here...?

But as she re-read the disjointed, scattered bits and pieces she'd jotted down, she kept seeing Cameron's face as she'd turned away from him.

His whispered confidences. Then the storm clouds in his expression.

She rubbed her temples. She couldn't worry about that now. Maybe if she talked to Fiona, went into the manor, it would jog her memory and help her re-construct the draft? Then she could borrow a laptop and re-write the thing.

She shoved the lingering images of Cameron's face out of her mind, grabbed her notebook and camera and rushed out the door of her cottage, as if she could somehow outpace the memories. The mistakes.

But heading into the foyer of the big house, she kept seeing Cameron everywhere. In the flagstones that they'd crossed on the way to the great room.

In the high mullioned windows. Even in the way the sunlight streaked through the glass.

All reminders of how she'd let her own fears get the better of her, instead of allowing herself to open up, to trust.

She tightened her jaw as she raised her camera. Fired off some final shots. She'd made the right decision.

Right?

“*L*ILLIAN!”

Lillian whirled around at the sound of her name. “Fiona, oh, hi.” She managed to paste on a bright smile. No need to upset more than one member of the MacEachern clan.

But Fiona’s expression looked torn between sadness and confusion.

The pit in Lillian’s stomach deepened.

“You’re leaving so soon. Cameron just told me. I’d thought that perhaps you’d like to stay a few extra days... after the grand opening and all of that.” She gave her a warm smile.

What *else* had Cameron told Fiona? Lillian bit her lip.

“Oh, that’s very kind of you, but I, uh,” Lillian fiddled with one of the dials on her camera, “need to get going Wednesday. Have my next assignment to think about, after all.”

Fiona’s smile faded. “I’m sorry to hear that. Well, you’re welcome back any time.”

For a fraction of a second, hope leapt into Lillian’s heart. But she pushed it away. “Thank you,” she said through stiff lips.

Fiona put a hand on her arm. “Before you go, would you like to see the family jewelry display?”

Lillian’s brow furrowed.

“You didn’t hear about it before because,” Fiona glanced around before she leaned in toward Lillian, “I’ve been working on it sort of in secret. I wanted to do it as a tribute to our family for the grand opening. As a surprise

for Cameron, since I know how much he loves family history. Come on.” She took Lillian by the arm and gently steered her down a corridor off the foyer.

“It’s all set up now in the library on the second floor,” Fiona added. They walked into a walnut-panelled room with burgundy curtains and green club chairs dotted around on a faded blue and maroon Oriental carpet.

Several oak reading tables were arranged around the perimeter of the room, but sitting on a round table in the center of the room was a rather large glass-topped display case with a sheet draped over it.

Lillian’s heart rate increased as Fiona took off the sheet. Now *this* would be the perfect thing to substitute for the grand opening, wouldn’t it?

Lillian peered inside. She grinned. Yes. Definitely.

“That’s the clan tartan as the backdrop for the jewelry. I thought the colors set off the gemstones the best.”

Lillian opened her notebook and turned on her camera. “Mind if I...?”

“Go ahead,” Fiona said.

“Fiona,” Lillian paused. “Can I ask you a favor?”

“Of course,” Fiona said. “What is it?”

“My laptop’s died and I need to retype the article I had saved on it. Is there a computer I could borrow around here...?”

“I’ll give you mine.”

Relief flooded Lillian. “Thank you so much.” She turned back to the case. “These are really something,” Lillian said as she snapped pictures, took notes; she leaned forward to look at the display more closely.

Neat horizontal rows of sterling silver jewelry were arranged. Several jewelled bracelets were arranged diagonally across from a cluster of silver filigree brooches and long, thin kilt pins.

“Most of this is semi-precious, so having it out like this isn’t as big of a deal as you’d think,” Fiona added, as Lillian took the time to jot down coherent notes. “But on opening day, we’ll have a few of the lads standing sentry since I

want to put in some more valuable gold and emerald pieces. As you can see, the double Celtic love knot is a recurring theme.” Fiona waved a hand over the case.

“Yes...” Lilian said slowly, “I can.” Suddenly, she straightened up. “Fiona,” Lillian said, her voice firm with conviction, “that missing piece of your family’s jewelry...Is there some sort of story behind it? Like, it’s quite important to the clan?” She recalled Cameron’s words as they’d stood in the billiards room: *history is like a clan tartan...*

“The kilt pin, you mean?” Fiona studied her a second.

“Right.”

“Yes, our family did place quite a significance on it.” She paused. “As for a story...” Her cornflower blue eyes became a little dreamy. “Sure there is.”

Lillian’s breath caught even as her pen raced across the notebook page. What would it mean to Cameron if she found the brooch? Not to mention, readers would love a good piece of family lore.

“Our family legend says that there was a kilt pin that was hand-crafted in 1352 by Fraizer MacEachern as a betrothal gift for his Ellen.” A faraway look came into Fiona’s eyes. “But their love hadn’t come easy, you see.” Fiona’s eyes gleamed. “Rather an almost-tragic tale. You see, the MacEachern clan had been warring for at least four generations with the MacIssac clan. No one really knew any more at that point why or how the hatred first started. Probably a lost sheep.” Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Anyway, Ellen MacIssac and Frazier MacEachern fell in love. Of course, their families forbade their courtship. But in true Scots nature, they stubbornly met in secret. Frazier, however, got tired of all the cloak and dagger shenanigans, and wanted to come clean about his true love to his family, as he and Ellen had made plans to be wed. Hence, the pin.”

Fiona took a breath. “He hand-crafted the brooch himself and presented it to Ellen, who wore it with pride. But her father got wind of what had happened. Mr.

MacIssac followed Ellen one evening out to where she was to meet Frazier. He unsheathed his claymore and was about to run Frazier through but Ellen threw herself in front of him before he could. Only the fact that she wore the kilt pin over her heart saved her from her own father's blade."

Fiona's lips curved upward. "Or so the story goes. Either way, after that, the MacIssacs and the MacEacherns made peace with each other and the couple wed. Ever after, that kilt pin became a symbol for this clan to stand up for what you truly believe in, no matter the cost."

Goosebumps rose on Lillian's arms and her eyes widened. No matter the cost... The cost. The cost of her own fears. Lillian swallowed. She'd paid a heavy price for letting her fears take over, guide her actions, instead of believing in her heart, believing in herself.

She hadn't been believing in herself; she had only been believing in her own fears. And if she could somehow explain that to Cameron, and have him actually believe her, then maybe—her heart skipped a beat—she could fix things between them.

If she could find the brooch she'd lost, give it to Cameron, then perhaps she could fix what she'd broken between them.

AFTER LILLIAN PIECED together a second first draft on the borrowed laptop, she sent to straight to her editor.

Now. The most logical place to start the search for the brooch would be where she'd left her camera bag in the cottage.

Sure, she'd already searched there; around the cottage, too, but it was possible she'd missed something.

But after scouring every square inch of the small abode and turning her camera bag inside out and upside down, she'd found nothing.

She sat back on her heels as she looked around the room. She'd pinned the brooch to the strap of her camera

bag. But before that, she'd had it on her purse. She rushed over to it.

But found nothing there, either.

Her heart sank to her toes.

What was she—

The buzz of her cell phone interrupted her thoughts. She reached for it. "Hello?"

"Lillian. Loved the article," her editor said. "And the sidebar about the family jewelry."

Lillian exhaled in relief. "That's great. And the photos?"

"Superb. But I do have a question that I think our readers would want to know the answer to, as well. This missing family brooch that you mention; well, it'd be great if we could get a picture of it to round out the piece."

"But it's...missing." From her own actions. But Lillian didn't add that part.

Her editor chuckled. "I know. But do some digging. What I mean is, the family must have a drawing or an old photo or something around there."

Lillian's heart sank even as she injected enthusiasm into her voice "I'll do my best and see what I can find."

"Great. I'm really impressed with your work on this, Lillian. I think you have great potential for the team."

Lillian chewed the inside of her bottom lip as Cameron's face flashed through her mind. "Thank you. I'm glad you think so."

"Let me know what you find, and then send along the photo or image if you're able to get it."

"Will do," Lillian said, as she hung up the phone. Now what? The brooch wasn't in the cottage. It wasn't in her purse. It wasn't in her camera bag...

She gazed out the window, the chintz curtains billowing slightly in the breeze. Out beyond the manor house, Lillian could see the sparkle of the almost-black waters; the river's edge. With the way the sunlight hit it, it certainly would make a pretty pic—

Pictures. Wait. The camera bag. Lillian's eyes widened. That's *right*. She'd fastened the brooch to the strap of her camera bag *before* she'd gone out to take those pictures of the forest at sunset.

She needed to look there.



LILLIAN BRUSHED AWAY wisps of loose hair from her face. Breeze was a little stiffer out here. And the river was rising, she noticed, as water began to pool around the rocks farther out from shore. Must be from the storm earlier.

She put her hands on her hips. Now where had she put the bag again? She cocked her head. She'd been standing here, and then she'd moved to put the bag down... on those rocks right over there.

She moved a few paces to the right. Yes. The shape looked familiar. She peered around the base of the rocks. Nothing there.

Then she peered in between the two rocks, in a deep crevice. A flash of silver caught the sunlight. There.

Her heart lifted.

She clambered up onto the rocks and reached an arm down into the crevice. But her arm only went about halfway down. Try as she did, her fingers strained against nothing but empty air.

She muttered under her breath, her brow furrowed.

She glanced around the steep, rocky river's edge. She needed a stick or something else to—A larger rush of water crashed against the rocks. She swiped at her face again. She stood, wobbling back and forth at the now-slick rock under her feet.

She hopped down onto the damp soil and turned in a circle. As she came fully back around, she spotted a small piece of branch off to her left.

She picked it up. Her breath held, she climbed back up onto the rocks. But as she shifted her weight, the tread of

her left sneaker slipped and her arms pinwheeled. But she held firm to the stick, re-gained her balance and slipped the branch in between the two rocks. Just about there—

“What are you doing?”

“Ahh!” Lillian gave a little shriek and dropped the branch, her heart in her mouth.

“Cameron?” she whispered. All the words she wanted to say to him clogged in her throat. He wasn’t supposed to just show up like this. She was supposed to retrieve the brooch, go back to the manor house, present it to him in triumph. She frowned. He’d messed that all up.

He crossed his arms. “Rocks will get slippery with the river flooding, and it can get dangerous. You shouldn’t be out here. Might get hurt.”

Her heart clenched. “While I appreciate your concern,” she said in a formal tone, “I’ve already figured that out for myself.”

“I can see that.” He eyed her damp sneakers. “What are you doing out here, anyway?”

Lillian ignored the question and scrabbled for the stick she’d dropped, instead. After she snagged it, she bent her head and—

“Lillian,” Cameron said softly as he came closer. Her heart jumped. “Why are you out here?”

She gritted her teeth. “I-I told you already.” She fumbled with the stick but managed to dislodge the gleam of silver. Yes. It was the brooch.

“You’re not supposed to have come out here looking for me anyway,” she added, barely registering what she was saying to him as she concentrated on reaching down with her left hand while she used her right to navigate the stick to push the brooch up high enough so she could pick it up with her left hand.

Her fingertips brushed the filigree and she closed her hand around the antique object.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cameron’s eyes widen. He blinked. Studied her. That was not the best thing to have said to him. She bit her lip. Glanced down at

the brooch as she closed her fingers around it; the emerald's facets caught the fading rays of the setting sun.

Fiona's words wove through her thoughts: *stand up for what you truly believe in, no matter the cost.*

Their eyes met. Something in his amber-whiskey eyes made her heart shift, ease, relax. She had to speak her truth.

"I'm sorry, Cameron," she said. "I was afraid. Of you. Of my own fears. Of these growing feelings I have for you." She swallowed hard.

"Oh, Lillian," he said softly.

She began to scramble off the rocks. When Cameron reached out a hand to help her, she let him.

She came to stand in front of him. "And when I heard the story of this brooch, I knew I had to...Retrieve what I'd lost." she looked down at the brooch in her now-open palm, "Because you were right. I was running away." She swallowed hard. Said quietly, "My father abandoned my mother when I was young. Somehow, I had all that twisted up in my head and my heart, thinking that if I ever got myself seriously involved with anyone, he'd just...vanish."

Cameron put a hand on Lillian's shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere," he said quietly.

She lifted her palm and presented the brooch to him. He looked at it, gently cupped her hand in his and closed both their fingers around the antique piece of jewelry. "I forgive you," he said quietly. "I was a bit..." a sheepish smile tugged at his lips, "...stubborn. I resisted that notion of forgiveness, I guess, because I hadn't really forgiven my dad for dying before his time and leaving me with this place to deal with. It somehow felt so overwhelming and I...took that out on you, in a way, when we first met." He winced. "If anything, I need to be the one to ask your forgiveness." He studied her face, as if wanting to memorize every tiny detail.

Something in her heart melted and she smiled up at him. He was just as cautious, just as affected by life as she was. She could understand that.

She reached up and put a hand on the side of his face. “I forgive you,” she whispered, before she leaned in and kissed him, her heart as bright as the highland summer.



Epilogue

Ten months later...

FIONA GRINNED AT Lillian, her cornflower-blue eyes bright. “Can you believe it? Only three months after we opened, we had over 500 five-star reviews on almost all the big travel review sites. And now that it’s been almost a year, we have over two thousand.”

Lillian hugged Fiona. “I’m so glad.”

“And, Lillian, it’s all thanks to your article in Travel Life,” Fiona added. “Well,” she amended, as she looked at her brother, “it might also have a little to do with your delicious cooking.”

Cameron laughed as he put an arm around Lillian and squeezed her shoulders. “Maybe so. Now, we’d better get going, Fiona. Lillian and I have a train to catch.”

Fiona smiled. “I can’t let the newly engaged miss their first trip aboard together, can I?”

Lillian and Cameron laughed and glanced at each other as Barnum put their bags into the back of Cameron’s car and shut the hatch.

“Go on, you two,” Fiona gave them a playful shove, “I’m sure I’ll read all about your trip now that Lillian’s officially the overseas correspondent for Travel Life.”

“I’ll mail you a copy, Fiona.” Lillian called as she and Cameron got into the car, waved and pulled out of the drive.

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