

Chapter 1

*New Moon: When the moon, positioned between the earth and sun,
nearly disappears, leaving only darkness.*

November

The sabotaged kayaks beckoned. Sophie Shaw trod a thin layer of ice pellets on the lawn as she headed to the lake's edge, where eight boats waited to be returned to the storage rack. The fickle New England weather had offered sleet-dropping clouds an hour earlier. Now, a wink from the sun reflected against Blue Moon Lake.

She dragged the first boat up a small incline, annoyed some bored teenagers had considered destruction of property entertainment. Growing up she and her friends had respected the local businesses.

A UPS truck screeched to a stop in front of a row of shops on Main Street. The driver hopped out and ran into Annabelle's Antiques with a box tucked under his arm. Sophie glanced both ways along the road for signs of Matt, whose new driver's license and clunker car played to every mother's fears. Fifteen minutes earlier, she'd texted him for help with the boat mess. He'd replied "k."

Sophie's flats glided along the slick lawn. She gripped the cord of a bright orange sea kayak and, using two hands, struggled backward up the slope. Her foot skidded. The heel of her shoe wobbled for security but instead, her toes lifted off the ground and flashed toward the clear sky. The burning skid of the cord ripped across her palms just as her other foot lifted and launched her airborne. *Thud!*

Air whooshed from her lungs. Pain coursed through her shoulder blades, neck, and spine. The ground's chilly dampness seeped into her cotton khaki pants, raising goose bumps on her skin. Seconds passed without breath before she managed to swallow a gulp.

Lying flat on her back, she stared at the cornflower blue sky and spotted a chalky slice of the moon. The night Henry died, a similar crescent had hung from the heavens,

barely visible nestled among the glittering stars. She prepared for the scrape that threatened to tear the gouge of her scarred heart. Seven years. Seven painful years. She closed her eyes and after a few seconds, the weight of sadness lifted off her chest.

Tears gathered along her lower lashes. She pushed a strand of unruly long hair from her face. Footsteps crunched on the ice pellets and headed her way.

“Matthew Shaw...” Fury pooled in her jaw as she resisted the urge to yell at her son. “You’d better have a good excuse for taking so long.”

A man with cinnamon hair, short on the sides with gentle waves on top, knelt at her side. She studied the strong outline of his cheeks and the slight bump on the bridge of his angular nose that gave him a rugged touch, but he wasn’t familiar.

“Are you okay?” He searched her face.

The stranger hovered above. Tall treetops, clinging to the last of their earth-toned foliage, served as a backdrop to her view. A vertical crease separated his sandy brows. She couldn’t pry herself from his vivid blue eyes, in part stunned from the fall, but also by her first responder.

For several long seconds she stared, and then mumbled, “I think so. Just a little shocked.”

A whiff of his musk cologne revived her with the subtle charm of a southern preacher casting his congregation under his spell.

He frowned. “Does it hurt to move anything?”

“Sometimes it did before I fell.”

The stranger’s face softened and his lips curved upward. “A sense of humor, huh? That’s a good sign.”

“I suppose.” His deep voice relaxed her like a cup of chamomile tea, the balanced and certain tone of his words easing her wounded spirit. Maybe this guy was a sign her rotten luck might change. “So, where’s your white horse?”

“In the stable. Today I came in the white Camry.” He motioned with a wave of his hand to a corner of the parking lot.

She pushed up on her elbow to look and a sharp pain jabbed her neck. “Ow!”

“Careful.” His smile disappeared. “I was on my way over to help when you fell. You hit pretty hard.”

The heat of embarrassment skittered up her cheeks. Not only had he witnessed her spastic aerobics, but she never played the distressed-damsel-on-the-dirty-ground card. A woman proficient at fly-fishing, who learned how to drive in a pickup truck and who, in her job as a journalist, had uncovered a corrupt politician, should be up and running by now.

“Go slow.” His request suggested doling out orders came easy. “May I help?”

She nodded. He slipped a gentle hand into hers. The chill coating her skin melted against his warm touch. His well-groomed nails and thick fingers suggested he didn’t work outdoors, rather the clean hands of a man who spent his days in an office. No wedding band either. He helped her sit and studied her as if a question perched on the edge of his thoughts.

“Can I call someone?” He blinked. “Your husband?”

“Oh, I’m not married.” She caught the slight twitch of his mouth. “My son’s supposed to be on his way to restack the boats.”

Since her divorce from Mike, she’d concluded the available men in Northbridge were as predictable as the assortment at the dollar rental video store, filled with decade-old hits she’d seen so many times they held little interest. This man was a refreshing change.

“Ready to try to stand?” He took her by the elbow and she nodded.

Once on her feet, their hands remained together.

He glanced at them and let his drop. “You’ll probably think this is crazy but—”

“Sophie?” The owner of Griswold’s Café stood across the street and wiped his hands on a stained white apron. He’d placed the call to her father to alert them about the vandalism at Dad’s boat shed. “You okay?”

“I’m fine.” She waved. “Thanks.”

She returned to the newcomer’s gaze, as blue as the deep Caribbean Sea and as shiny as a starburst.

He raised his dirt-stained hands. “You might want to check yours.”

Sure enough, her palms carried the same smudges from the impact of her fall. “Hold on. I have something to clean us off.”

She trotted to her car, hoping the backside of her blazer covered any mess on the

back of her pants.

After finding a package of wipes in the center console, she cleaned herself spotless and peeked in the rearview mirror. Her dark chocolate curls scattered with the freewill of a reckless perm. She neatened them with her fingertips then grabbed her cell and tried to call Matt but landed in his voice mail. The second she hung up, the phone rang. Bernadette's name showed on the display.

"Hey."

"Is your speech ready for tonight? You're our star speaker."

Bernadette always latched onto a crusade. The first was in third grade, a petition over the slaughter of baby seals for their skins. For tonight's public hearing, Bernadette had promised everyone the fight of her life. Her special interest group's concern about the large-scale development on Blue Moon Lake proposed by Resort Group International was a sore topic for many local residents, especially Sophie.

"Better find a new star speaker. There's a change of plans." Sophie readied herself for a negative reaction. "I'm covering the story for the paper now."

"You? Has Cliff lost his mind?"

"No. The other reporter can't do the assignment. Her father had a stroke earlier today. Cliff wanted to take the story himself, but I insisted he stick to his job as editor and let me do mine. I even made a five dollar bet I'd get a headline-worthy, bias-free quote from the company president."

"Do you think you can? I mean, RGI stole that land right out from under your nose. What was it...three days before signing the contract?"

Those were almost Cliff's exact words, along with some mumbling about how the paper's cheap new owner had cut his staff and he saw no other choice. "Two days."

"Honey, why would you want this story?"

"I have my reasons. This won't be the first time one of us needed to report on something close to us."

"Yeah, but wouldn't some public chastising against the corporate giant be good for your soul?"

"In a way." Sophie hesitated then decided to tell her best friend the truth. "Look, this is a chance to redeem myself. Prove to Cliff I really *can* stick to my journalist's creed

after...well, you know, what happened with Ryan Malarkey.”

“Mmm, forgot about him. He makes all us lawyers look bad.” A long pause filled the air. “Guess that’s a valid reason.”

Sophie still harbored guilt from the last time a story got personal and she’d been fooled into violating her hallowed reporter vows. “Hey, on a lighter note, it’s raining men over here at the lake.”

Bernadette laughed. “What?”

“Some kids vandalized Dad’s kayak shed. He asked for my help and this handsome guy appeared out of nowhere to help me. Fill you in later. He’s waiting.”

On her way back to the stranger, she studied his profile. Men this desirable didn’t drop out of the sky around here. Why was he in town? Visitors to Northbridge weren’t unusual in the summer, but not late fall. He faced the water, looking in the direction of the rolling hillside of Tate Farm, the property under discussion at tonight’s controversial public hearing.

She neared the visitor and he turned around.

“Are you the owner of this place?” He pointed to the wood-sided shed with a sign reading “Bullhead Boat Rentals.”

“No. My father runs it with my brother. Dad’s too old to be walking around in this icy mess and my brother is gone for the day.” She handed him a wipe. “They also operate run the local tackle shop and Two Rivers Guided Tours, guided fly-fishing trips.”

“I remember the tackle shop.” He cleaned his hands and tucked the dirty wipe in his jacket pocket. “My family came here for a couple of summers. Close to thirty years ago.”

Sophie studied him again. Summer vacationers passed through here with the blur of a relay race.

He brushed a dead leaf off the knee of his faded, well-pressed jeans. “Such a great little town.” He scanned the main street, unhurried and relaxed, then took a deep breath, as if to savor a nostalgic moment. “Quintessential New England.”

Although she’d lived all her forty-four years in Northbridge, she looked around with him. A few cars parked on the road near a long row of pre-WWI buildings, now housing retailers who had serviced the town’s residents for countless decades, such as

Handyman Hardware and Walker's Drugs. The retail stretch was sandwiched between her favorite place to eat, Sunny Side Up, a metal-sided, trolley car-shaped diner and the weathered façade of Griswold's Café. The popular hangout for waterfront meals had a karaoke night the locals rarely missed.

She examined his profile again. Surely she hadn't forgotten someone with such a sexy full lower lip and strong chin?

"I can't imagine anybody being unhappy here," he said, his tone quiet.

She held in the urge to retort with a cynical remark. Every time she stuck a foot out of town, circumstances jerked her back. "Too bad you picked today to return. Most of our visitors enjoy the warmer weather."

"I'm house hunting."

"Oh. Well, we have a lot of summer residents."

"I want a year-round place."

The absent wedding ring held renewed interest. "Where are you from?"

"Manhattan."

She adjusted her crooked scarf. "Living here will be a big change."

"I know. I've always loved this place, though." He reached out and tenderly brushed a leaf off Sophie's shoulder. His gaze flowed down her body like a slow trickle of water.

An unexpected burn raced up her cheeks.

He lifted his brows. "Hey, I never knew the lake went by another name. The town website said the original name came from an old Native American word."

She nodded. "Puttacawmauschuckmaug Lake." The long name rolled off her tongue with ease, the pronunciation a rite of passage for anyone born and raised around the body of water. "It either means 'at the large fishing place near the rock' or 'huge rock on the border.'"

"What?" He chuckled. "Puttamaum..."

She shook her head and repeated the difficult word.

"Puttacawsch—"

"Nope. It's a toughie. That's why a reporter who visited here at the turn of the century suggested in his column we change the name. He said the water's beauty was as

rare as a blue moon, and the phrase stuck.”

He grinned, easy and confident. “My kids will love this place.”

Kids? Sophie buried her disappointment. “Are you and your wife looking at the other towns bordering the water?”

“No. I like Northbridge. Oh, and I’m not married,” he said matter-of-factly. His gaze arm-twisted her for a response.

She wanted to fan her hot cheeks but instead regrouped while pointing across the lake. “If you have a spare few hundred thousand and want to help the town out, take a look at Tate Farm. A developer wants to buy it to put up a large resort. Maybe you can outbid the guy.”

“Oh?”

“Uh-huh. There’s a public hearing tonight.”

The hearing would be her first chance to meet the corporate vipers from Resort Group International face-to-face and she couldn’t wait to hammer firm president, Duncan Jamieson, with some tough questions. With any luck the zoning board would vote down their request so the offer she’d made, along with her dad and brother, would be back in play.

The stranger’s brows furrowed and he stroked his chin.

“Don’t worry. I’m confident our zoning board will vote no on their proposal and keep the nasty developer away. By the way, I’m Sophie.”

He dropped his gaze to the ground for a millisecond then looked back up. “I’m Carter.”

If Nana were still alive, she’d have said in her thick Scottish brogue, “Verra good sign, Sophie. Carter comes from the word cart: someone who moves things.” Nana held great stock in the art of name meanings.

He’d certainly moved Sophie.

Matt’s rusty sedan whipped into the lot, ending the lusty thoughts. Her son hurried over, unease covering every corner of his face. “Sorry I’m late.”

“What took you so long?”

“Grandpa called to make sure I helped you.” He dragged his hand through his messy dirty-blond hair. “We were talkin’.”

She had her suspicions about the topic but rather than ask, she introduced him to Carter.

He turned to Matt. “What do you say we let your mom take it easy and we’ll finish this job?”

Matt nodded and trotted to the boats.

At her car, Carter opened the driver’s door. “Better hop in.” His tone lowered. “Your hands were cold before.”

Sophie’s knees softened and she tried to speak, but no sound came out. Turmoil reigned inside her body as he jogged away from her and caught up with Matt.

She tried to shake off the lost control caused by this stranger. This little incident had stolen some of her strength and lately every morsel was necessary to stay afloat. On the roller coaster of life, she had been taking a wild ride. First due to a chance to own the vineyards, giving her a helping hand from her inner grief and fulfilling a life-long dream. Then two weeks ago, RGI had barged into town and yanked her offer from the table.

Carter pointed to a kayak and said something. Matt laughed. The scene made her miss having a man in their household. Her heart softened, awed by the way this knight who’d arrived in a shiny white Camry galloped in and took charge...and how she’d simply let him.. Was something good finally stepping into her life?

Disappointment skimmed her chest. Who was she kidding? Nothing would come of this.

Her cynical nature hadn’t developed overnight. Rather, she had soured over time. Lost opportunities, gone due to circumstances beyond her control: Mom’s cancer, Sophie’s unplanned pregnancy, her subsequent marriage to Mike, even her lost bid on the land RGI now wanted.

Time to forget this guy and concentrate on her job. She’d have to work harder than ever to stick to her journalistic creed, but any teeny, albeit truthful, crumb of negative news about RGI or its president, Duncan Jamieson, could sway the scale on the zoning board vote. Then the greedy developer would disappear from Northbridge forever.

Her family wanted that land. Land their ancestors were the first to settle back in 1789. Land where the winery plans of their dreams could come to life. The most important reason, though, was protecting the sacred place where her firstborn son, Henry,

had died.

Chapter 2

A long line of cars pulled into the well-lit high school parking lot, higher than usual volume for a public hearing. Sophie grabbed her bag and hurried toward the entrance, hoping she could still get a seat up front.

As she neared the large regional high school, she passed a noisy group standing in a circle at the front of the building, chanting the plea “Save our Lake.” Their signs bore the acronym “S.O.L.E.” stacked on the left and the words, “Save Our Lake’s Environment” extending from each corresponding letter. Protestors weren’t the norm at these types of events and their presence added a thick cloud of tension to the cool night air.

Bernadette marched with the vocal group. Nana had liked to remind everyone how Bernadette was living proof her name theory worked. “I canna think of a better name for that lassie. She’s named to ‘be brave like a bear’ and sure acts the part.” There were times Sophie found *any* explanation about people’s behavior to offer a measure of peace. After all, a wise person took heed in all the messages around her and her name meant “wisdom.”

She waved to Bernadette, who yelled with more exuberance than any other protestor. A rosy glow highlighted her full cheeks and her large green eyes burst with equal excitement. She shook a defiant fist in the air.

“Nice boots,” Sophie yelled over their noise. Bernadette had tucked her jeans into new boots, with razor thin heels and pointy toes, which crossed the border into sexy. Opposite of the sensible heeled style Sophie wore. “You’re Northbridge’s own *Che Guevera* in her Jimmy Choo’s.”

“You’d better start reading *Vogue*. These are from Target.” Bernadette pushed aside her sable brown bangs, which always seemed due for a trim. “Grab a sign.”

“I’m working. Remember?” Any public appearance of bias while covering a story could get back to her editor.

“Yeah, yeah. Same old excuse.” Bernadette punched a follow-up fist of solidarity at the sky and resumed her chant.

The details about Carter would have to wait until after the hearing. Since Sophie’s

chance meeting with the handsome visitor, she couldn't shake her craving to learn more about him, a sensation that left her liberated and scared at the same time. Talking to the stranger was easy and comfortable, the way sliding into a pair of well-worn slippers let her know she was home, safe and exactly where she belonged.

She turned toward the entrance and slammed into a stiff body, making her stumble back a step.

"'Scuz me." Otis Tate dipped his bushy eyebrows in annoyance, his Adam's apple jutting out just beneath the scruffy edge of his white beard. As usual, his younger brother, Elmer, lagged several steps behind, shoulders stooped and taking away the extra few inches of height he held over the senior of the two septuagenarians.

"Sorry. I didn't see you." A cold breeze sent a chill through Sophie's wool skirt and tights, numbing her immediate reaction to scream "traitor." The mere sight of them made her blood boil. After they'd accepted Resort Group International's offer, they didn't even have the decency to give her a phone call. Bernadette had learned about the deal at her law office and called Sophie, adding to her humiliation. They probably hadn't given any consideration to the deep ties she held to the land. With no wives or children, their only goal was to sell to the highest bidder and retire near some friends in Florida, a consideration no self-respecting New Englander would utter aloud.

Otis cleared his throat. "Listen, we want you to know this isn't personal."

"I'd suggest you look up what personal means."

Both his brows arched. "Listen Sophie, we hadn't signed anything with you yet. Business is business. You'll find another spot for your winery." He elbowed Elmer.

Elmer flinched but didn't respond. Instead, he stared at the protestors, his downturned mouth giving away his sadness.

Otis leaned close enough for her to catch the warmth of his breath. "I heard Cliff gave you this story last minute. I assume you'll give it fair coverage."

The comment struck Sophie as hard as a kidney jab.

Her tone downshifted to a harsh whisper. "Nana was a friend of your dad's. She told me his name meant honorable. I wonder what she'd say about his sons."

Otis' face turned beet red and Elmer's froze like ice, as if her words cast a voodoo hex, Nana-style.

She raised her voice. “You don’t have to fret over my coverage. I’ll report on this with the unbiased dedication of an attorney defending a murderer.” She turned to walk away then stopped and glared at both men. “Correction. Alleged murderer.”

Elmer dropped his chin to his chest and it touched the ends of his flannel shirt collar. Sophie didn’t care if she’d shamed the nicer of the two brothers. He, of all people, understood why she didn’t want the land in the hands of strangers.

Two weeks after her son died, Elmer had paid Sophie a visit. Several people in town wished to set up a memorial garden for Henry, right on the spot where he’d passed away on the Tates’ land. Elmer had requested her permission, admitting he wanted the memorial too. Henry had worked their farm every summer since turning fifteen and had grown close to Elmer, often calling the gentle old man his surrogate granddad. She’d agreed to the garden.

Now the place was hallowed ground. She visited there every year on the anniversary of Henry’s death, his birthday or any other time she needed a tangible reminder of his life.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have to get inside.” The thick lump settled in her throat and tears burned in the back of her eyes.

Once inside the auditorium, she managed to get one of the last seats in the front row. On stage, members of the Northbridge Zoning Board had already taken their places behind a dais of two old rectangular fold-up tables with several microphones spaced along the tops.

She took a breath to relax. Attitude accounted for ninety-nine percent of any situation and regret over her backlash at the Tate brothers moments ago hit hard and fast. The wall clock showed three minutes before seven, so she used the time to scribble more questions for RGI on her notepad. A minute later, the group of protestors noisily filled the empty row behind her, where they’d left a few belongings to save their seats.

“How’d we sound out there?” Bernadette craned her neck to examine the crowded auditorium and slipped off her coat to reveal a white tee shirt with green letters spelling out S.O.L.E. printed across the bust line.

“Menacing. Only a fool would face you guys.”

Bernadette pointed with her chin to the back of the auditorium. “Speaking of

fools, here they are now.”

A group of five men in suits had entered. Amongst town officials, she recognized the lawyer from Hartford representing RGI, who dressed fancier than the locals in his expensive-looking suit. She studied the two men to the attorney’s side and stifled a gasp. The pitter-patter of her heart picked up speed.

Bernadette tapped Sophie’s arm. “There’s the head fool himself. Duncan Jamieson, president of RGI.”

“Which one?”

“The hot tamale on the end, with wavy hair and wearing a navy suit.”

“Are you sure?”

A puzzled expression flitted across Bernadette’s face. “Absolutely. He came into the office two days ago to schmooze with one of the senior partners.”

Sophie’s mouth went as dry as dust. Bernadette had just identified Duncan Jamieson, head of RGI, as none other than Carter.

His presence begged for attention and separated him from the other men. Besides the expensive shine to his suit, assuredness permeated from every pore. He surveyed the crowd then leaned close and said something to his attorney, who nodded.

The group of men walked toward the stage. As he neared Sophie’s section, his gaze met hers then dropped to the press badge dangling from her neck. He looked at her again and blinked. She held her breath, as much afraid he’d remember her as he’d forgotten her. After a negligible pause, his lip curled into a smile of clear delight. Before she could react, he winked and sealed the acknowledgement.

Sophie’s pulse pounded in her ears as she neared code red. His cozy wink not only told others they’d met but dredged forth the lusty awareness of him which had consumed her body earlier. A sharp poke jabbed her back.

“What the hell was that?” Bernadette whispered. “Do you know him?”

“In a manner of speaking.” She refused to turn around.

Carter, a.k.a. Duncan Jamieson, took the steps up to the stage and sat behind the long table with the other men. That guy had played Sophie more smoothly than a winning hand of poker, but she wasn’t about to take his lies in silence.

Chapter 3

“Welcome to tonight’s public hearing. For those who don’t know me, I’m Northbridge First Selectman, Buzz Harris.” Buzz spoke close into the microphone and his rough voice made the speakers screech. “Since this is a zoning matter, our moderator tonight will be....”

Sophie’s anger drowned out his chatter. She clamped her jaw vise tight as she watched the man she *now* knew as Duncan Jamieson whispering into his lawyer’s ear.

She flinched when both men stopped talking and stared right at her. She glanced stage left to the dark curtains as her neck and ears went impossibly hot. Wait. She wasn’t the liar. She snapped her head in their direction, but they’d turned their attention on Buzz.

The second-term selectman gripped the sides of the podium, his brown suit jacket tightening around his stocky arms. He continued his opening statement in support of the resort project, the lines on his square face pulled more taut than usual. A sweep of his fingers through the thick gray hair near his temples, a habit of his whenever controversy was present, confirmed his discomfort.

Buzz continued his opening address. In his role as a full-fledged member of the local old boy’s network, he manipulated the boards under his reign with ease. Sophie kept a careful watch on politicians like him, just waiting for them to cross the fine line into genuine corruption. What kind of pull did he have with zoning on this matter?

As she scribbled down one of Buzz’s statements, she remembered her five dollar bet with Cliff. Would he consider “Reporter Wooed by Nemesis” an adequate win?

Buzz introduced Duncan Jamieson. The handsome executive strode to the podium with the self-assurance of a king. He leaned with his elbows on the walnut top, all five fingers steepled together while he surveyed the crowd. His gaze lingered over her longer than the others. This time, she didn’t look away and tried out her best death glare.

He cleared his throat and scanned the room. “First, I’m happy the hearing is so well attended. One thing is clear. The residents of this community care about its well-being.” His arms opened wide, a gesture that would’ve made Dale Carnegie proud. “The vision RGI holds is for our resort to become a part of the lake’s history and to honor the people who live here by our contribution to the area.”

The confidence Duncan had exhibited when taking over Sophie's boat problem was magnified in his formal presentation. He addressed Board members with familiarity, as if he'd known them forever, and discussed the town with the authority of a newly anointed mayor.

Bernadette's dated auditorium chair squeaked. Her breath gushed next to Sophie's ear. "Jeesh, you'd think this guy was the new grand pooh-bah."

Sophie turned sideways. "Confidence isn't one of his problems."

Bernadette raised a questioning brow.

"Later."

"RGI is committed to working collaboratively with all parties." Duncan put on a contemplative frown. "Especially those who have concerns. We hope to have a partnership with S.O.L.E. because my firm cares about the environment as much as the rest of you."

Bernadette exhaled, so loud Duncan's head jerked in their direction. Her seat squeaked again and she whispered in Sophie's ear. "I'll bet he thinks he'll finish and waltz out of here tonight without a single question. Guess he doesn't know how things work in Northbridge."

Sophie nodded. Their small New England form of government was called a town meeting format. The residents were seasoned pros at public forums, where local decisions were often made. Public hearings were their idea of a fun night out. Bernadette liked to brag she could recite *Robert's Rules of Order* with the same ease she could list the ice cream flavors at the Dairy Inn.

"Most important, RGI wants full disclosure of all information." His gaze drifted to Sophie, causing the same jolt she'd received the first time they met. "I hope to work closely with the local press to ensure everyone is informed."

She attempted no outward reaction. Inside, though, her emotional needle swung back and forth between desire and rage.

Bernadette surfaced again with the persistence of a pesky gnat. "Hmmm. I'll bet he does."

Sophie narrowed her gaze at Bernadette, who leaned back in the seat, her lips pressed into a thin smirk.

How could she interview this guy afterward? His flirty wink suggested he hadn't thought twice about the sham he'd tried to pull on her.

He finished to applause mixed with low boos. The moderator and zoning board chairman, Adli Zimmerman, went to the podium and opened the floor for public comments.

Bernadette popped from her seat, in perfect position to win the relay race to the microphone. Several others lined up behind her. Adli ran an anxious hand across his bald scalp, centered between trim white mounds melting into sideburns on the side of his head.

She grabbed the microphone fast and tight. "Bernadette Felton. Twenty-four Appletree Drive."

Buzz hurried from his seat and went to Duncan, his forehead crumpled with deep lines of worry. He whispered in Duncan's ear. The executive nodded, but the slight wilt of his shoulders suggested the secret stole some of his confidence.

Sophie's nerves twitched. One question circulating around town about this project was founded in pure gossip. Nobody had the nerve to ask this in a public venue. Nobody except Bernadette.

* * * *

Three hours later, the line at the microphone had dwindled to one person. Sophie's bottom ached from sitting so long and she wanted to run to the restroom yet didn't want to miss something good. This would go down as the longest public hearing on record and she hoped this speaker was the last.

The speaker finished in less than a minute. Bernadette hooked her hands over the back of Sophie's chair. "My first trip to the mic was a warm-up. Watch this." She bolted for the metal stand, her zeal as she grabbed it holding the promise of a hullabaloo.

Buzz's jaw unhinged and pure fear settled on his face, as if the ghost of Elvis just entered the building. "Excuse me, Adli." The speakers screeched. "Only those who haven't spoken should come forward. Many of us want to get home."

A low boo rumbled from the crowd.

From behind the podium, Adli adjusted his wire-framed glasses. "I understand your concerns, Buzz. However, the first time Bernadette spoke, she represented her special interest group. In fairness, we should give her an opportunity to speak once on her

own behalf.” He peered over the tops of his spectacles at Bernadette. “If that’s what she intends to do.”

Bernadette tucked one side of her layered hair behind an ear and tilted her head. “Yes, it is. Thank you, Adli.” Her sweet tone oozed charm. “My question is for our First Selectman.”

Buzz clenched his jaw tight, so tight it seemed seconds away from snapping.

“Mr. Selectman.” She adjusted the microphone to her height. “There’s a great deal of talk around town suggesting some of our elected officials might personally gain from changes in the current zoning. Can you assure the public a fair and democratic process will take place on the board and members won’t be...well, let’s just say I hope they won’t be tainted by outside financial influences.” She paused and stared straight at RGI’s president. “Such as bribes.”

Duncan Jamieson had appeared to listen to the last hour’s worth of speakers with neutral interest. Bernadette’s comment, however, made the color drain from his face. His worried gaze traveled to Buzz, whose profile resembled stone, his anger so tight she half expected his cheeks to crack and crumble.

“Rumors are *not* statements of fact, Mrs. Felton!” Buzz’s roar shook the room. “I’m a patriotic man and take our democratic process quite seriously. I resent your implication that I, or anybody else in my administration, would do what you’re suggesting.”

Voices filled the air like the low roll of thunder. Buzz pushed his microphone back and threw an angry glare in Adli’s direction. Adli nodded.

“All right, everybody. Calm down. This has been a long night. Most of you have spoken. I am calling an end to this meeting at ten forty-five. Do I hear a second for this motion?”

Someone seconded it and Adli shouted above the noise, “Thank you all for coming.”

Sophie stood, opened her bag, and stored her notepad and pen. Bernadette returned and picked up her jacket from the seat behind Sophie, her satisfied grin suggesting great pleasure over tonight’s outcome. “Guess I raised a few eyebrows, huh?”

Sophie slipped a wool scarf around her neck then zipped her bag closed. “You

sure did, my friend. Any idea where the rumor started? It's just the kind of lead to help me find some legitimate dirt on RGI."

"No idea." Bernadette leaned close and whispered "Sooo...what's going on with the sandy-haired hottie?" She fanned herself with her fingertips. "Lawdy, lawdy. If his wink didn't tell all."

"I'll discuss it later. I need to interview him now."

Bernadette twisted her lips and shook her head. "Be careful. You blushed when he winked."

"I was angry."

She shrugged. "If you say so, but from where I sat, the last time a guy made you blush, you know what happened."

Sophie threw a warranted glare at her friend. "Yes, I remember." She leaned close to Bernadette and whispered, "Listen, this is my chance to prove to Cliff my personal feelings won't interfere with a story ever again."

Ryan Malarkey's arrival in town three years ago would forever fill Sophie with embarrassment. She'd met him around the time she emerged from the dark hole of her divorce and losing a child. Ryan was the defense attorney for a well-known writer living on the lake who'd been accused of murdering his wife.

Ryan's wavy brown hair and rich chestnut eyes would score an eight on the appearance scale, but what had ruptured Sophie's better senses was his suave manner and focused attention on her. Each time he begged her to go on a date, she'd refused. After all, she hadn't completely forgotten about her integrity as a journalist. However, his extra doses of attentiveness soothed her aching soul, empty and untouched for so many years. Thus, when he'd tossed some story leads her way, all favorable to his client, she'd chased them like they were nuggets of gold. They'd run a story based on those leads, leads eventually revealed as false. After reality hit, Cliff just shook his head and mumbled, "Seems your lawyer friend actually is full of malarkey. Now we look like fools." He'd forgiven Sophie in no time, yet she still hadn't forgiven herself.

Bernadette touched Sophie's forearm. "Honey, I'm not sure what's already gone on between you and *El Presidente*, but be careful this time. I know how much you got hurt when Ryan took advantage of you. Okay?"

“Trust me, Bern. I’ll never forget how stupid I felt.”

She turned her attention to the stage. Duncan Jamieson schmoozed with two zoning board members, the three of them all smiles.

“Your mention of the rumor definitely ruffled a few feathers up there, starting with RGI’s president. In fact, he just gave me my first lead.”

* * * *

Duncan hurried to the parking lot. After the hearing he’d been pulled aside into a private meeting with the board members and had missed his chance to catch up with Sophie.

He’d wandered to the different pockets of residents huddled in groups talking, searching for her face. Several people cast dirty glances in his direction as he scrutinized them in the dim light. When he entered the auditorium earlier, he’d been elated to spot her amongst the crowd. Her scorching glare, a few seconds after the shock of seeing him passed, reminded him of his misleading introduction.

He turned to the sound of footsteps. Sophie rushed to her car, her blazer tails flapping with a gentle breeze.

Duncan trotted toward her. “Hi. I wondered if I’d run into you tonight.” Puffs of condensation exploded with each word.

“Oh. Hello, Mr. Jamieson. Yes. I work for the local newspaper.” Her relaxed tone from earlier now sounded stiff and formal. “I’ve been looking for you, too.”

The tall parking lot lights glinted off her press badge. “*Blue Moon Gazette*, huh? I wouldn’t have recognized you from the picture.”

In the photograph, Sophie wore her dark brown hair shorter and her pretty eyes seemed void of life. Different than the long, soft curls she had today, or the smoky quartz sparkle of her gaze that blew him away when he’d helped with the boats.

She wrapped her arms across her chest and covered the photo. “It’s old. I’m the paper’s staff reporter.” She straightened her posture. “As long as you’re here, may I ask you some questions?”

“Sure.”

She removed a pad and pen from her bag, all while her unmistakable glare scorched his skin.

“I’d be happy to answer any questions, but first—”

She flipped open the pad. “What specific steps will your firm take to address environmental concerns—”

“Wait.” He held up a hand. “I’m concerned you might be wondering why I’d tell you my name is Carter.”

“Tell me the specifics about what you plan to do.”

“I plan on having an environmental group perform a study. Sophie, earlier I didn’t—”

“Plans with the scope of RGI’s development are unheard of on this lake. Would you consider modifying them to a smaller scale project if the results show significant damage to—”

“Did I do damage by telling you—”

“That your name is Carter and you’re here to buy a house for your family? You sure did.” She shoved the pad back into her bag. “Neglecting to mention you’re the president of RGI and *you’re* the one buying the land. That’s what tipped the scale.”

“Sophie, my middle name is Carter. It’s used in—”

“In Northbridge, Mr. Jamieson, a person’s reputation and word go a long way. Actions are never forgotten...both good and bad.”

Duncan counted to ten in his head so he didn’t blow his stack. This frustrating woman had unraveled the calm cool exterior he wore at all times, especially when conducting business. If he yelled at her the way he wanted to right now, God knows what would end up in the newspaper. He couldn’t recall anybody ever having talked to him this way. He drew a breath and then slowly exhaled. “Based on your anger, I’d say I’ve done something so unforgivable neither you nor your newspaper will give fair coverage to my resort story.”

“Fair coverage?” She squeaked. “Is that all you care about?”

A couple walked by and said hello to Sophie. She nodded and forced a weak smile in their direction. When they passed, she looked at him and lowered her voice. “Is your appearance at the kayaks today even a coincidence?”

“What?” Her directness threatened to loosen the bolts of his rusty confidence.

“Look, people have done far crazier things than flirt with someone to manipulate

the press.”

“You thought I was flirting with you?” Maybe he wasn’t so rusty. He tried to put on a some-day-we’ll-look-back-on-this-and-laugh grin, hoping she’d find humor in what had happened.

“Whatever!” She waved her hand in the air. “Look, I don’t know what your game is. I’m sure you think you’re very clever.” She stepped to the car door.

“I wasn’t trying to be clever, and I—”

“I think you’ve answered all my questions, Mr. Jamie—”

“Stop being so formal!” A blast of heat rushed up his cheeks. Damn her! The final cord of control belonged to him and he refused to let her end this conversation. “Call me Duncan...or Carter. You’re not even listening to—”

“My work is done here.” She pulled open the door. “Thank you for your time.”

Sophie scooted into the driver’s seat and slammed the door. The car started and her window rolled down. For a half second, he hoped she’d reconsidered leaving.

She glared at him, yet sadness smoldered in the very depths of her dark-brown eyes. “This lake means something to me you’d never understand. Before you go changing things, think about those of us who live here.”

She threw the car into drive and peeled out of the lot. Her taillights disappeared down the road, leaving Duncan’s ego as flattened as if she’d run him over on her way out.

What the hell had just happened?

Regret over the white lie he’d told when they first met doused any remaining confidence. He pulled off his leather glove, reached into his pocket, and removed a hard butterscotch candy. His fingers fumbled as he removed the crinkly cellophane, then he popped it into his mouth. The smooth, sugary treat pacified his nerves like a Glenlivet on the rocks. The day he’d spotted the buttery candies in a drug store, just like the ones he used to enjoy when he visited his grandmother’s simple home, he’d located a satisfying replacement for his Marlboros.

The sound of footsteps made him turn around.

“Sophie’s bark is worse than her bite.” Buzz’s smug smirk hinted he’d heard some of their conversation.

“What?”

“She seemed mad.”

The selectman’s coat hung open over his suit. Duncan’s winter wool overcoat was buttoned to his neck with a scarf and he still had a chill. “We had a little miscommunication.”

“Because you trumped her on the deal with the Tates?”

“She was the other buyer?” He rolled the candy over his tongue and digested the new information. He bit down and it shattered.

“Yeah. Her brother and father wanted in on the purchase too. A big stretch financially for them, though.” Buzz raised a dismissive hand. “They wanted to restore the vineyard, produce wine there like the Tates did years ago. The finances got complicated. Otis and Elmer were pretty happy when you came along.”

He’d heard another buyer had been close to signing. Duncan never dreamed it was Sophie. He swallowed the candy remains. “When you told me about the land, I wish you had mentioned I’d outbid *her*.”

“Why?” The cracked age lines in Buzz’s skin furrowed with a frown. “Would you have changed your mind?”

Would he? “I’m a businessman. I like all the facts.”

“Okay, okay. Not a biggie. Besides, you oughta be able to handle Sophie. With your charm, I’m sure she’ll find her way to your side. Remember, if we can get the local paper to push the favorable points of this project, it’ll make things easier for zoning to vote for the changes.”

Over the years, Duncan had acquired a carefully balanced appreciation for politicians like Buzz. He didn’t care for them. Still, they were a necessary part of dealing with the types of projects his firm handled.

“Buzz, I want the press on my side, but only if we do things properly. Tactfully.” Duncan paused and replayed his little fib to Sophie. “And with the truth...as much as possible.”

“Uh-huh. Don’t go fretting over that tree-hugger study, either.” He shoved his hands into his overcoat pockets, as if he wished to instead stuff away his earlier aggravation toward the special interest group spokesperson. “Bernadette Felton’s always

on the opposite side of the fence from me. I swear to God, if I opposed your proposal, she'd support it!"

The mention of the S.O.L.E. activist and her bribery accusation brought a return of the sick pit in the hollow of his gut. "Any idea where those bribery rumors started?"

The selectman's face tightened. "No idea. One person speculates in this town and suddenly the theory spreads like wildfire. Like I said, don't lose sleep over her."

"She's not what I'm worried about. It's...never mind. I want the local *Gazette* to have good things to say about my firm. An environmental study might be the thing."

"I guess." Buzz pressed his lips tight.

"What's Sophie's story?"

"Hometown gal. Got divorced a while back." Buzz cocked his head. "That should work in your favor."

Duncan ignored the implication. "She'd probably love to see my project fail."

Buzz's throaty grunt showed agreement.

"Anything else I should know about Sophie? I mean, if I'm to get her to come around to our side."

Buzz hesitated a second too long. "Nope. Do yourself a favor. Don't try to figure her out. Or any other woman, for that matter."

Duncan forced a smile but only to hide an unexpected wave of sadness sweeping over him. If he'd been able to figure out his wife, maybe their marriage would've been happier. "The voice of experience, huh?"

"Married almost forty-five years." Buzz turned to walk toward his car and Duncan followed. Buzz chuckled. "I met my wife back in tenth grade, when the fellas bet me that if I asked a pretty senior named Marion Price to the prom, she'd say no."

The tender tone in Buzz's voice surprised Duncan, who'd only seen the political side of him until now. "So she said yes and the rest was history?"

"Nope. Lost the bet and had to shave my head. As the bristles grew in, they started to call me Buzz." He shrugged. "Name stuck. After college, I tried again and this time got Marion."

Duncan chuckled. Buzz had just proven he didn't give up easily, a quality Duncan respected in others.

After several seconds of silence, Buzz looked at Duncan. “There’s another reporter at the paper. Cliff had assigned her this job. Not sure why Sophie showed up. Want me to talk to the editor?”

“No.” He liked seeing Sophie again after so many years. She hadn’t remembered him, but he’d changed a great deal from the pre-pubescent boy who hung out at the tackle shop. “I can handle her.”

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