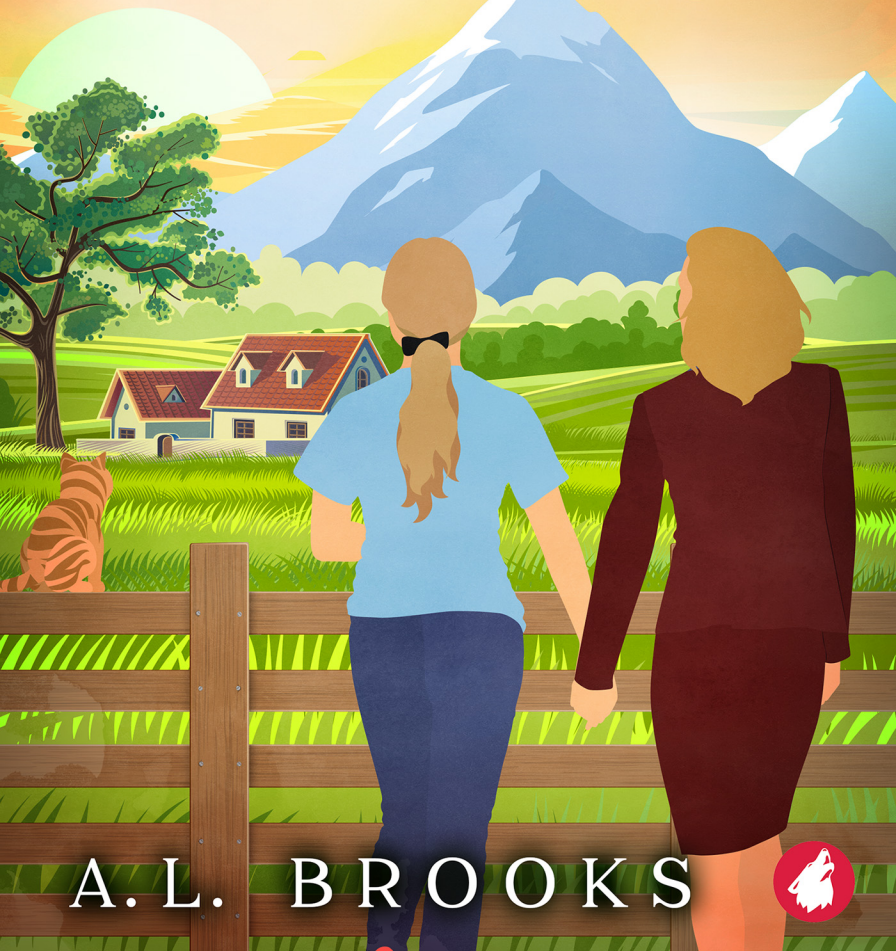


Chasing DREAMS



A. L. BROOKS



Chapter 1

“I’LL NEED THE ANDERSON PAPERWORK on my desk no later than noon.” Claire scrolled through her list of missed calls. “And someone needs to run blocking on Dean Mackay. That man seems to think I am his personal advisor.”

“On it!” Harrison’s voice was higher pitched than usual.

Claire glanced over at him and scowled at the fear in his eyes. This one wasn’t going to last the full term.

She stopped walking; the two people who had been close on her heels, Desiree, her chief of staff of many years, and Harrison, the intern, only just prevented themselves from slamming into her.

Harrison blinked at her, his hazel eyes paler than usual. A tic repeatedly lifted the left corner of his mouth.

“Well?” Claire stared at him.

“Oh! Yes! Anderson paperwork.” He spun on his heel and jogged back down the corridor.

Claire turned to Desiree. “When is his review?”

Desiree held her gaze for a moment, her dark brown eyes revealing nothing, then swiped across her tablet’s screen. “Thursday at ten.”

“Get me some time with HR on Wednesday.” She didn’t have to explain why; Desiree had worked with her for long enough to know her mind. *Why can’t they all be like Desiree?* Efficient, calm, able to anticipate what Claire wanted and when. Yes, maybe Claire pushed the interns hard, but that was what they were here for, wasn’t it?

“Shannon called, wondering if you were free tonight?” Desiree tapped her long fingernail against the tablet’s screen. “You have a gap at eight before the A5A Corporation call at nine thirty.”

Claire's mood instantly mellowed. Mm, time with Shannon. Her mind threw her an image of Shannon's naked body laid out before her, Shannon begging her for more. Oh yes, it had been too long. "Sure, sounds good. Book a room at the Marriott, tell her to meet me there, but make sure she knows I only have about an hour. I'll take the A5A call from there once she's gone. Then have a car collect me from there at ten thirty to take me home." Without waiting for a response, she strode into her office and shut the door.

She had barely made it to her desk before her phone rang.

"Claire!" Helen Porter's voice boomed down the line. "How the heck are you?"

Wincing, Claire eased the phone away from her ear a little. While Helen's enthusiasm for her job was admirable, Claire wished she would learn how to tone it down. "Very well. Busy, as always—what do you have?"

"I found it."

It took a long moment for Helen's words to sink in. "Are you certain?"

"Uh-huh."

"Where?" Claire tapped a steady rhythm on the desk with her pen.

"Eagle Cove, south of Crater Lake."

The small town of Eagle Cove was some way down the list of places she had been considering. However, she also knew Helen wouldn't send her something that didn't fit most of her other criteria. "Can you—"

"I'm emailing it over right now." Helen's voice was almost a purr.

Claire opened the email as soon as it arrived and quickly scanned the documents and pictures Helen had attached. "It needs some work." Even as she said the words, she knew she didn't care. The images before her made her heart race with excitement.

Helen snorted. "And then some. But you budgeted for that. And, sure, it's not in as big a town as you hoped, but honestly, Claire, I think this is as good as it's going to get."

Claire rubbed a thumb over her chin, playing with the small mole there. It was a habit she had picked up years ago, and it always inexplicably calmed her. "Who do I need to contact?"

"Guy named Doug Brennan. I'll connect you today, if you like."

"Do it. And Helen?"

"Yeah?"

“Good work.”

Helen laughed, then hung up.

Claire swiveled in her chair and looked at the gray June New York City sky outside her window. If all went well, soon she would be swapping this view for something considerably nicer. The thought thrilled her.

* * *

Ruby, heartily singing along to the classic “Stop! In The Name of Love,” saw the flash of gray shooting across the cream-colored gravel of the track in front of her just in time. She hit the brakes, bringing her truck to a sliding halt at an angle across the track. “What the—?”

She exited the truck and looked to her left. Huddled against a large clump of grass on the side of the track was Misty, Mr. Pinkett’s cat. She stared in disbelief—the animal was about two miles from home. “How in the hell did you get all the way out here?”

Misty, a beautiful combination of smoky gray fur with pale pink patches on its forehead and paws, blinked up at her, its tail bushy and swishing.

“Come on now, honey. It’s me, Ruby.” She took a cautious couple of steps closer. When the cat didn’t move, she tried a couple more. Then she crouched and held out her hand. She rubbed her thumb against her forefinger as if some tasty tidbit lurked between her digits. “Come on, sweetie. Come here.”

After a few moments where Ruby held her breath, Misty wound herself sinuously around the clump of grass toward her. Then the cat stopped a couple feet away from Ruby, her ears pricked and turning like radar dishes.

Ruby heard it too, the low hum of a vehicle approaching. “Shit.” Who knew in which direction the cat would sprint if the vehicle scared her? Only one thing for it: Ruby judged the distance, the terrain, and her angle of attack and pounced.

Her breasts hit the hard dirt of the track just as she took hold of the scruff of Misty’s neck. Her breath left her in a whoosh at the impact, but she grinned; Misty wasn’t going anywhere now.

Before she could wriggle upright again, the vehicle pulled up in front of her truck. Ruby glanced up to see a rental sedan—she’d recognize one anywhere—and a beautiful woman gazing down at her from the driving seat.

The driver had blonde hair that was stylishly cut, just reaching her collar and feathered across her forehead in a way Ruby was sure was meant to look messy all the time. Her skin was porcelain white, and she had a straight nose, high cheekbones, and full, pink lips. Her cool, blue-gray eyes stared at Ruby. “Are you all right?”

Ruby chuckled, knowing darn well how things must look. “Actually, yes. Just rescuing Misty here, who’s a long way from home.”

The woman nodded, but the frown that creased her forehead told Ruby she didn’t understand at all what was going on. “Right. Well, do you think you can move your truck? I’m in a hurry.”

It wasn’t snooty, as such, but it wasn’t super nice either. Another out-of-towner who had probably got lost on the back roads and was scared they would never see civilization again.

“Sure.” Ruby wouldn’t argue with the woman—what was the point, given she was highly unlikely to see her again? Instead she used the energy born of irritation at the woman’s manner to push herself to her knees, one hand still tight around Misty’s scruff. “Give me a moment to secure this one, then I’ll be out of your way.”

“Good.” The woman was well-spoken, her accent East Coast, Ruby would guess.

Ruby threw one last glance at the woman, noting the starched shirt collar, and the expensive-looking watch on her wrist. Then she focused her attention on the cat squirming in her arms. “Come on, you.” She scratched the top of Misty’s head, and it seemed to calm the animal some.

She walked to the back of the truck, where she was pretty sure she’d left...yes, an empty cardboard box from the last egg deliveries she’d made. Perfect. She placed the box on the passenger seat, then reached for her hoodie, draped over the back of the seat. She lined the box with the garment, then tucked Misty inside. The cat seemed instantly taken with her new accommodations and settled down into a classic cat curl.

Ruby caught the woman’s eye. “All done. Have a nice day.”

The woman gave her a brief nod, then turned her attention to her steering wheel.

Sighing, Ruby clambered back up into the truck, started the engine, and pulled away from the woman’s car. “You’re welcome,” she muttered as the woman didn’t even acknowledge her when their vehicles passed. She

looked quickly at Misty in the box beside her. "Thanks for that. Now I need to turn around and get you home."

It was annoying but not the end of the world. Sure, it would have been great to see the old Pruitt place once more on her day off. She loved nothing more than driving up there in her truck, parking at the gate, and dreaming while she gazed at the old run-down property. But she could do that on any day off. After all, the place had been empty for ten years now. It wasn't like it was going anywhere soon.

Smiling, she used the next turnoff to slowly turn the truck around back in the direction of Eagle Cove and headed for Mr. Pinkett's place. He was a grump, everybody knew. But she hoped the sight of his returned cat, whom he might already be missing, would bring some cheer to his day. Maybe she'd stay a while with him, have a cup of coffee out on his beautiful porch. She knew he didn't do that so much since his wife had passed a couple years ago. It might be something nice she could offer, give the old man a lift.

With that thought, she increased her speed and headed along the road back into town, a sleeping cat snug in a box beside her.

* * *

"So what are you going to do this fine Friday night?" Ned placed the last of the eggs into the tray and folded over the lid.

"Maybe have an ice cream at the diner to start with. Hang out some with whoever's there. Then head to the bar to see Katie." Ruby turned from the sink. "Unless you want me here?"

Ned gave her his trademark grin, one side of his mouth arching up so high he almost winked. "I'm fine, don't you worry. It'll be good for you to head into town. You've been too busy lately."

"I know." She sighed. The last two weeks had run her ragged. What with her regular job at the library, then the unscheduled stop at Mr. Pinkett's on her day off the week before, as well as rescuing the abandoned sack of puppies she'd found wriggling by the side of the Klamath road only the other day, she didn't know whether she was coming or going. A Friday night hanging out with her friends was just what she needed.

"I can finish that." Ned gestured to the jars she was washing. "And I can check on the animals. Go on, get into town."

She pulled her hands from the soapy water and dried them on the towel he passed to her. “Thanks.” She leaned forward and kissed his stubbled cheek. “You’re the best, Grandpa.”

He scowled at her. “You know I hate it when you call me that.”

“Yes.” She smirked. “I do.”

Main Street was busy as she slowly drove along it. Warm air brushed across her arm where it was propped on the open window; for June the temperature was high, and couples of all ages were taking a stroll. The diner was packed, and the town’s Italian restaurant, Mario’s, looked just as busy. Up ahead, she could see a line of vehicles parked in front of Katie’s bar.

The town’s only stoplight flicked to red, and she slowed to a halt. A group of people waited to cross from her left, but her attention was drawn to one woman who stood apart from them, near the edge of the sidewalk where Ruby’s truck idled, her head turned away as she looked up Main Street.

“Well, hello, gorgeous,” Ruby murmured.

The woman was blonde, tall, maybe five ten, with a slender build and long legs. She was dressed smartly—tailored black slacks and a pale green blouse, a black sweater draped over her shoulders. The whole look screamed sophistication, money—and out-of-towner.

Ruby forced her gaze away. Nope, not going there. Since getting her heart broken by Melody, Ruby had sworn off relationships, not wanting to risk her feelings yet again. After a few months of loneliness, the offer to spend the night with a tourist with whom she’d gotten chatting at Katie’s had seemed the ideal solution to her problem. Easy, no-strings intimacy and no drama afterward. It had soon become a fairly regular habit, hooking up with a tourist for one night of fun. But while the sex was usually good, or at least a way to find some relief, each time it left her a little emptier.

She’d stopped the hookups back in February, realizing the brief sexual thrill they gave her only made her feel lonelier when she left her temporary partner’s hotel room a couple hours later. If she was going to get intimate again with someone, it would only be when she was ready to make something more of it. Which seemed a long way off given how she still hurt from what had transpired with Melody.

“Excuse me?” The voice was strong, confident, and a little husky.

Ruby snapped out of her musings and looked to her left.

The woman she'd been admiring had stepped nearer to the truck and looked at Ruby through the open window. Up close like this, Ruby realized she knew her—it was the woman from the previous week who'd come across Ruby lying in the dirt with an escaped cat in her hands. *Oh, great.*

The woman smiled at Ruby, exposing perfectly straight, bright white teeth.

Ruby tore her gaze away from the woman's sensuous mouth. "Yes?"

"I would guess you're local, so I was wondering if you can tell me the best place to eat around here?"

Wow, she has the most incredible eyes. Ruby sank into the woman's gaze.

"Did you hear me?"

Ruby jumped. Oh, crap, she'd drifted off. How embarrassing. "Um, sure. Yes. Sorry." *Come on, focus!*

The woman grinned.

Ruby's face heated further. "Okay, you've got four options, but they're all usually busy on a Friday night. The diner across the road does your regular burgers, pies, stuff like that. Mario's, back behind us, is Italian. Katie's, up there a ways, is mainly a bar, but you can grab a great basket of wings. Farther up the road is La Casa, which does a mix of Mexican, Spanish, and traditional American."

The woman nodded. "Which do you recommend?"

"I've always liked Mario's myself."

"Great. Thanks." The woman tapped one hand on the door frame, then turned on her heel and left.

"You're welcome." Ruby watched her go, noticing how deliciously the woman's ass moved as she strode along, her head held high, her shoulders squared.

Down, girl. She eased off the brake and at the next corner turned off Main Street to find somewhere to park.

* * *

Ruby pushed open the library door the next morning with a skip in her step. Her Friday night out had been just what she needed, and she was all fired up for another day in her beloved library. Saturdays were always busy, which she adored.

Something furry wrapped itself around her legs as she closed the door, and she gazed with fondness at Ninja as he peered up at her with his big green eyes.

“Hey, buddy!” She leaned down to rub the top of the tabby’s head. “Where have you been hiding the last couple days? You had us worried.”

The cat purred at her attentions, pushing his head into her hand, twisting so that her fingers would rub over his ears.

She smiled. “You don’t care, do you?” She straightened. “Come on, let’s see if you’re hungry. I’m sure we have a can of tuna in the staff room.”

Ninja trotted along at her heels as she headed to the library’s private offices.

“Good morning, Shirley!” she said as she strode into their small staff room. “Isn’t it a fine day?”

Shirley threw her an indecipherable look. “It...is.” She stood from where she’d been sitting at the tiny table in the corner. “Have you, um, heard from Doug Brennan?”

Ruby tilted her head. “Doug? Not recently, no. Why?”

“Oh dear.” Shirley pressed a hand to her chest, her naturally pale complexion turning paler still. “Oh dear.” Her glance darted this way and that.

“What’s wrong?” Ruby rushed over, startling Ninja, who scuttled under the table.

Shirley met her gaze, her expression fearful. “I think you’d better sit down.”

“Huh? Shirley, come on, just tell me. You’re scaring me.”

“I really thought he would have called you already. Honestly, that man can be such a weasel sometimes.” Shirley blew out a long breath. “I certainly didn’t want to be the one to break the news to you.”

Ruby glared at her boss. “Honestly, if you don’t tell me right this minute, I’ll—”

“The Pruitt homestead’s been sold.” Shirley spoke the words quickly and took half a step back as if bracing for impact.

Ruby shook her head as if she’d gotten water in her ears from swimming in the creek. “The... What?” No, she couldn’t possibly have heard what she’d just heard. No way.

Shirley sighed and clasped her hands together. “The Pruitt homestead,” she said softly, and much more slowly, “has been sold. I bumped into Doug at the market last night. He was all happy with himself and told me all about it.”

“But...but...” Ruby stared at her, her heart pounding, cold sweat breaking out on her back. “But...”

Shirley stepped forward and opened her arms. “I know, honey.”

Ruby held up her hands. “No, I can’t... I... Not yet.” She looked at the floor, her mind racing. Doug had sold the homestead? Without telling her? She whipped her head up. “Shirley, I need to take some personal time and start work a little later today. Please feed Ninja. I’ll be back soon.”

“Ruby, wait! Don’t go over there angry. It’s—” Shirley tried to lay a hand on Ruby’s arm, but Ruby whirled around and strode out of the room.

Chapter 2

“MR. BRENNAN.” CLAIRE SHOOK HIS HAND, schooling her features as his clammy palm met hers.

“Mizz Pressley. So good to see you again.” Brennan’s smile reminded her of an alligator’s gape. “I hope you had a pleasant evening here in Eagle Cove last night?”

“I did.” The quality of the Italian restaurant had been a nice surprise, and she’d mentally thanked the flustered truck-driving woman who’d recommended it to her. “Do you have the paperwork?”

“I sure do. Give me a second.” He fixed her with another oily smile, then moved to a filing cabinet on the other side of the office.

Claire tapped her foot. He had known she was coming in at nine thirty. Why hadn’t he gotten everything prepared in advance?

“Here we are.” He dumped a large folder onto his desk, then pulled open the desk drawer to retrieve a set of old, slightly rusted keys. He grinned sheepishly. “You’ll probably want to get new ones cut as soon as it’s officially yours.”

“I will, and—”

The door to the realtor’s office crashed open, setting the old-fashioned bell that hung above it into a loud, clamoring ring.

Brennan’s eyes went wide. “Oh, shit,” he muttered before hurrying around his desk.

Claire swiveled to see a curvy woman with strawberry-blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, maybe in her late thirties, standing in the doorway. The woman’s hands were on her hips, her jaw was thrust out, and her face was twisted in a snarl.

“Now, now.” Brennan raised his hands. “Let’s just stay calm, shall we?” His face paled, and his hands shook as the woman stomped toward his desk.

“Calm? Are you serious?” The woman glared at him. “When the hell were you going to tell me?” Her voice shook.

Claire observed the angry woman, something about her prickling at the corners of her mind, and then recognition dawned. The woman was the same one she’d spoken to the night before. In fact, she realized, she was the same one she’d seen crawling in the dirt with a cat in her hands on her previous trip to Eagle Cove, when Claire had seen the Pruitt homestead for the first time.

Brennan opened his arms. “Ruby, I’m sorry, but business is business.”

“We had a deal! You said you would warn me if anyone ever came looking at it!”

“I know, I know. But things can move fast in this business, and I can’t let the grass grow under my feet. My client wanted a quick deal and offered top money. That’s just the way it is.” He smiled, but Claire could see the steel back in his eyes.

She cleared her throat, her impatience rising at the delay. “Mr. Brennan, can we return to our business?”

Brennan glanced her way. “Yes, of course. Ruby, I need to get out to the Pruitt place right now, but perhaps we can meet later? I’m sure I can find another property soon, maybe a little smaller and cheaper, that we can take a look at.”

The woman—Ruby—tutted. “Oh, like you’ve done such a good job with that the last few years.”

God, enough with this ridiculous drama. So a property had been sold that this Ruby had had her eye on. More fool her for not buying it sooner. As Claire well knew, if you wanted something that badly, you went for it. Delaying simply wasn’t an option. And talking of delay. “Mr. Brennan, can we—”

“Wait, wait a minute.” Ruby looked at Claire, then at Brennan. “Why are you heading out to the Pruitt place?”

Brennan shifted his feet. “Mizz Pressley here is the new owner, and we’re going to—”

“*You?*” Ruby turned back to stare at Claire. “You bought the Pruitt homestead?”

Claire quirked an eyebrow, baffled at the woman's reaction. "That is correct, yes."

"Ruby, don't you need to be getting back to work?" Brennan's smarmy voice grated on Claire's ears.

Ruby stood rooted to the spot, opening and closing her mouth like a fish for a few moments.

Claire looked between Brennan and Ruby. She was on a tight schedule today, and although it was clear that this Ruby was extremely upset over the sale of the Pruitt homestead, this wasn't Claire's issue to resolve. She fixed her gaze on Ruby. "I'm sure you have somewhere to be, as do we, and I only have limited time."

"Oh. Well, excuse me. I'm so sorry if my anger at the way my realtor has trashed all over me is interrupting your busy schedule." The sarcasm in Ruby's tone caused Doug to flinch.

Claire was unfazed; she had faced down far angrier people in her business over the last two decades. "Not that I need to defend Mr. Brennan, but as he said, business is business."

"This was more than business for me," Ruby snapped, her eyes shining with tears.

The words slammed into Claire, and she only just managed to keep her mask in place. Memories of another deal she had made that had turned out to mean so much more crowded into her mind. *It is not the same*, she mentally repeated a couple times. *Not at all*.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Ruby turned away from her to face Brennan.

"I'll come see you another time. Talk about other options." Ruby's voice was tight.

Brennan's posture relaxed. "Of course. Any time you like."

With barely a glance at Claire, Ruby left, the door crashing to a close behind her.

Brennan expelled a loud breath. "I'm sorry about that, ma'am. Now, where were we?"

Claire, who was watching Ruby stride off down the street with her head down, inhaled deeply, pushed back the memories, and turned back to the realtor.

* * *

“Another.” Ruby pushed her glass toward Katie across the smooth wood of the bar.

Katie’s brown face creased into a deep frown, and she laid one hand on Ruby’s forearm. “You sure you haven’t had enough?”

“Nope.”

Katie stared at her for a moment, then shook her head and picked up the glass. As she filled it with beer, Ruby slumped over her folded arms. Her head immediately swam from laying it down, so she sat up quickly. Yeah, maybe Katie had been right about not having this next beer.

Once more, the scene in Doug’s office played through her mind, and she wanted to groan in frustration. That woman had bought the homestead? She of the fancy suits, expensive watch, and all-round classiness was buying a run-down old homestead?

Ruby had wanted to ask so many questions, but at the same time, she hadn’t wanted to hear any of the answers. Because the only thing that actually mattered was that this Ms. Pressley had the homestead and Ruby did not.

“Here you go.” Katie laid the foaming glass in front of Ruby’s arms. “But in my official capacity, I’m cutting you off after this one, you hear?”

“Yes, Katie.” Nobody argued with Katie when she cut you off. The last guy that tried got asphalt burns on his ass when she’d thrown him out the front door. Allegedly.

“And in my capacity as your best friend, I’m also gonna ask you to come sleep at my place tonight.” Katie’s concerned look warmed Ruby. “I don’t think you should be alone.”

“I’m fine. I’ll get a ride back to the farm with someone.” She propped her chin in her hand, working hard to keep her thoughts on track. “You know I have to look after the animals first thing.” She picked up her beer mug and took a big swallow of the cold drink, then smacked her lips as she lowered the glass from her mouth. Yes, she was at the lip-smacking stage of her drunkenness—but past caring. Drowning her sorrows had never felt so good.

“Okay, if you’re sure.” Katie wiped the bar in front of Ruby, her eyes narrowed. “You gonna tell me? Not that I can’t guess. I heard about the Pruitt place this afternoon.”

Ruby snorted. “Yup.”

“It’s business.” Katie’s voice was gentle. “It’s nothing personal on Doug’s part.”

“Whatever.”

“Jesus, would you listen to yourself?” Katie’s voice was sharp. She rapped her knuckles on the bar, and Ruby had no choice but to sit up straight or risk those knuckles hitting her chin. “You’re better than this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ruby pretended to salute, then focused on Katie’s face and registered even in her befuddled state the genuine concern displayed in her friend’s gaze. “Sorry.”

Katie waved her hand. “It’s fine. Look, hon, I understand. You’ve had this dream for a long time now. I know as much about it as you do, given how many nights we stayed up talkin’ about it. And I know today is a setback. But being mad at Doug ain’t going to achieve—”

“Mad at Doug?” Ruby blinked. “Is that what you think?”

“Well, ain’t you?” Katie tilted her head.

“Well, yeah, but...” Ruby sat up even straighter. “I’m mad at her too. That...woman.”

“Oh.”

Ruby leaned forward, her anger rising once more. “How dare she? She rides into town out of nowhere, oozing all that hot sexiness just to confuse me, then steals the homestead from me!”

Katie’s mouth quirked. “Hot sexiness?”

Ruby groaned as her face heated. “You weren’t supposed to hear that part.”

“So, she was hot?” Katie’s smirk widened. “Is that what’s got your panties in a twist?”

“No!” She groaned. “Well, a little. But that’s beside the point. She’s mean.”

Katie laughed. “Just because she bought the property you wanted does not make her mean.” Ruby tutted but Katie plowed on. “And you better learn to deal with her hot sexiness, because she’s gonna be around here for a while.”

Ruby drank some more of her beer. “I know. Well, actually I don’t know. I have no idea what’s she’s planning to do with the place now that she owns it. Maybe it’ll be turned into some fancy holiday home she uses only once a year.”

Ugh. That thought made it even worse. The things Ruby had had planned for that place! The good things she could have done, all the animals she could have helped. Sure, she still had the space at her grandpa's farm to work with, but it wasn't enough. The Pruitt place would have been perfect. And now this coldhearted woman from out of town had taken that away from her without even blinking.

"Who?" Mack slid onto the stool next to Ruby.

"Oh, hey, Mack." Ruby tried a friendly slap on his back, but her hand-to-eye coordination was way off, thanks to the beers, and she only succeeded in swinging her hand through empty air.

Mack stared at her. "You okay?"

"Fine." She managed a smile. "How's things for you?"

"All good." Mack, his weathered face even more tanned after the last week of sunshine, turned to Katie. "Good evenin', Katie. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Mack. How's business?"

"Can't complain. Tourist season's pickin' up, and those airport runs are pretty nice."

How could they both talk about such normal, mundane things when Ruby's whole life had fallen apart? She wanted to scream but realized in the next moment that she was being completely selfish, which only made her feel worse. She reached for her beer once more and downed a big mouthful.

"I'll bet they are." Katie grinned at Mack. "So, what'll it be?"

"A light beer, please."

"Coming right up." Katie moved away to pour his drink.

"So, who's got a holiday home?" Mack pulled the basket of pretzels over and grabbed a handful.

Ruby forced herself not to sound too whiny. "The woman."

Mack rolled his eyes. "What woman? And, hey, how many beers have you had already? Your eyes are doin' that funny glassy thing."

"Yeah, maybe one too many. But I have reasons!" Oh good, whiny was back.

Mack patted her arm. "I'll drive you back to the farm after I've had my beer, okay?"

"Thanks, Mack." Now she wanted to cry. Saturday night was supposed to be Mack's night off from driving people and here he was offering her a ride home because she was a mess.

“So, what woman?”

Over the remains of her beer, Ruby filled him in on the story of the homestead.

“Well, I’m truly sorry to hear that, Ruby.” He patted her arm once more. “I know you had grand plans for that place.”

“What place?” Pete took the stool on Ruby’s other side.

“The Pruitt homestead,” Mack said before Ruby could open her mouth. “Got sold.”

“Yep.” Pete waved at Katie. “Gonna be some fancy-ass spa for rich ladies.”

“What?” Ruby and Mack said in unison, each of their jaws dropping open.

Pete shrugged and pulled on his large nose, the tip of it, like his cheeks, permanently red from all the time he spent out in the sun delivering the town’s mail. “That’s what Bernice said. Told me she overheard the woman, Ms. Pressley, talkin’ to Doug yesterday.”

“Well, that’s the last thing we need around here!” Ruby was aghast. That woman couldn’t be serious. Could she?

“It’s a real shame, all right,” Pete said before ordering a beer from Katie. “Gonna be damn ugly too, if she goes ahead with fencin’ it all off like she said.”

Ruby’s ire rose further. “She’s doing what? But what about Graciela renting the land for grazing her cattle?”

“I’m only tellin’ you what I heard.” Pete shrugged. “Just another part of what Bernice overheard.”

“This is ridiculous! How dare she?” Ruby scowled and thumped her hand on the bar.

Pete flinched and looked as if he regretted ever sitting down next to her. “Well,” he said, scratching his ear, “we may not like it, but you know, she owns it now. She can do whatever the hell she likes with it.”

The alcohol muddled everything, and all Ruby could feel was frustration and sadness, not only because she’d lost out on owning the old homestead but also because her own plans for the place would have been far more sympathetic to the town and their community. “I need to go home. Mack, you take your time. I’ll wait by your cab.”

Before anyone could stop her, she slid off her stool and weaved her way through the bar to the cooler air outside.

* * *

“Good morning, angel,” Ned said as he stepped into the kitchen.

Eleanor followed him, clucking loudly.

“Morning, Ned.” Ruby yawned and reached for the coffee pot. “Want some?”

Ned nodded and pulled out the chair opposite hers but didn’t take his eyes off her. “What happened to you?” He sat slowly, wincing a little. Probably his knees acting up again.

Ruby looked down at herself, then back up. “Huh?”

“You look like the walking dead.”

“Gee, thanks, Grandpa. I love you too.” She stuck out her tongue.

Ned waved a hand, which from him could have meant anything from “I’m sorry” to “Screw you.”

Ruby sighed. “I had some beers at Katie’s last night.” She poured her grandpa a coffee and pushed the cup toward him. “Maybe one too many.”

Ned let out a soft kind of half grunt, half snort and took the coffee. “You know that isn’t the way to deal with life’s disappointments.”

“I know, I know. But it was all I had last night.” She rubbed at her tired eyes. Despite her drunkenness, she hadn’t slept well. Her mind had refused to switch off, conjuring up all sorts of nightmare scenarios of what this Ms. Pressley might come up with for the homestead. “I just can’t stop thinking about what will happen to the Pruitt place now. Or how much it sets me back from what I wanted to do now it’s gone.”

Ned nodded. “But you’ve still got your space here. You’re still doing good work with the animals we can take in.”

“I know, and I’m so grateful to you and Audrey for making that happen; you know that. But every time I have to refuse to take one in because I’m out of space here, it hurts. I always hoped that one day all that extra space up at the Pruitt place would mean I’d never have to turn away some poor creature again. And now I’m nowhere nearer making that happen because the one place I wanted is out of reach.” She sighed and shook her head. “Anyway, enough of me feeling sorry for myself. How are you? With work,

the news about the sale, and then being a dumbass and heading to the bar, I never saw you all day.”

“I’m fine.” He sipped his coffee.

His hands, two fingers on each twisted with arthritis, gripped both sides of the cup with care. His piercing blue eyes still held the same vigor he’d carried all his life, but his body was failing him, and Ruby knew he wasn’t happy about that. He was in his late seventies but still running the farm full-time. They hadn’t ever talked about the future, and she realized, with a jolt of fear, that maybe they should.

“We’re going to start repainting the sheds this week. Decided it’s time.” Ned nodded to himself.

“Okay. Just don’t overdo it, all right? Luis and Hector can do all the heavy stuff. That’s why the Leavitts offered for them to help you out. You know Graciela would not be happy to find out you aren’t taking advantage of her nephews’ muscles.”

Ned ignored her, casting his glance down at the chicken who roamed the kitchen.

Eleanor clucked again, pecking at whatever minuscule specks on the stone floor would attract an old chicken’s attention.

Deciding not to push her grandpa, Ruby also turned her attention to the bird. “And how are you, Eleanor, after your exciting adventure behind the washer yesterday, hm?” She pointed a finger at Eleanor, who also ignored her.

“Again?” Ned glared down at the bird.

Ruby shrugged. “Yep. I have no idea what she finds so interesting back there, and I really wish she’d either stop investigating or work out how to move backward once she’s jammed herself in there. Her squawking would raise the dead.”

“Stupid bird.” Ned’s voice faked irritation, but Ruby could see the softness in his gaze as he looked down at Eleanor. He drained his coffee and stood. “All right. Time to work on that darn tractor.”

“I thought it was fixed already?”

Ned huffed. “So did I. Fan belt keeps slipping. Probably going to have to fit a new one, but Bert reckons he has a spare that’ll fit, so I’ll probably head on over to his place in a little while.”

Ruby grinned. "Oh, right. How convenient, given it's such a nice day for sitting by that pond of his with a fishing pole in your hands."

Ned glowered at her, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "You've still got way too much sass in you, young lady. Audrey'd pitch a fit if she heard you talking to me that way."

Now Ruby laughed. "Are you kidding? Grandma'd be standing here agreeing with me. Mind you, then she'd be making you some sandwiches and a Thermos of coffee to tide you over for your little visit to Bert."

Ned's smile was like a ray of sunshine. "That she would."

They shared a moment of silence in memory of Ruby's grandma until Eleanor's loud squawk pulled them back to the present.

"Stupid bird," Ned said once more, then stooped and picked her up, tucking her neatly under his left arm. "Come on, then, let's get you back to the yard." He glanced up at Ruby. "What are your plans for today, angel?"

"I want to give the goats a checkup, then wash the dogs. I'm going to take some photos of them to print some new flyers for posting in the library. See if I can find them some proper homes."

Ned smiled. "Gonna give them little bows and everything?"

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Just a wash and haircut. And then I need to prepare for tomorrow's reading time, but that won't take long. It does look like it's going to be a fine day, so maybe I'll head back into town later and collect my truck. Katie said she'd come get me if I wanted. Maybe I'll treat myself to lunch at the diner with her. I still need a little cheering up."

To her surprise, Ned walked over to her and gave her a one-armed hug, making sure to keep the squawking Eleanor out of pecking reach. Her grandpa was her height, a wiry man, all muscle and sinew and inner strength, and even with one arm he held her as tight as a vice. They rarely hugged, despite the deep love they held for each other, so when they did, it gave Ruby a strength of feeling that was hard to put into words.

"You do that," Ned said. "You're allowed this weekend to sulk, then you need to pull up your pants and get on with life." He stared deeply into her eyes.

Tears welled up, and she swallowed hard to keep them at bay.

"There will be other properties, other opportunities." Ned's voice was gentler this time. "I know you had your heart set on the Pruitt place,

and I wish we could have done something about that before it got sold. But remember what your grandma used to say: don't wait for the right opportunity, go out and grab it."

Ruby nodded, her tears escaping despite her best efforts. "Yep, I remember."

Ned gave her a squeeze then stepped back. "You'll dust yourself off soon. And when you do, maybe you could start a little project to find something better than the Pruitt place to follow your dream. You've got good money saved up. If you ask the right people the right questions, you never know what's out there."

"You're right." Ruby kissed his grizzled cheek. "Thanks."

Ned nodded and stepped out into the morning sunshine with Eleanor chattering to him nonstop.

By the time Ruby made it out to the small barn where she kept the animals and strays she'd rescued and acquired in the last few years, Ned had his head under the hood of the tractor on the other side of the yard. He threw her a wave over his shoulder when she called out to tell him where she was heading.

Then she stepped into the barn and breathed in the scent of her animals. As always, the strange combination of smells—some pleasant, some bordering on not-so-pleasant—soothed her soul. Animals had been her therapy for years, beginning right after her parents died. Now, even years later, being around furry creatures calmed her, let her mind settle and relax.

She knew she was lucky her grandparents had understood her desire to care for animals, and had at least afforded her the opportunity to turn one of their smaller barns into an unofficial sanctuary for the variety of creatures she wanted to take in. They still needed most of their land and barns to run their successful beef cattle herd—without that they'd have no income, of course. But they'd changed a few things around, and she'd gained a corner of the property where she could follow her dream in some small way. She just wished she could follow it completely.

The small goats, three in total, bleated softly as she entered. Hettie the donkey, old and slow, merely lifted her head, blinked a couple times, and then turned her nose back to her feed. The two stray dogs that Mike, who

owned the hardware store, had found a few miles out of town, leaped up from the back of their pens when they caught sight of her.

She grinned and walked quickly over to them, offering her hands for them to rub and push against as their tails wagged constantly. They'd been in a sorry state when Mike had brought them in, but she'd soon realized it was mostly dirt matted to their fur that made them look so pitiful. Only one of them, the light brown mongrel she'd named Twister for his way of turning in circles whenever he saw food, had had a slight injury. A quick trip to one of her vet contacts over in Franklin had seen the wound stitched up and antibiotics administered, all for the price of two dozen eggs from the farm.

"All right, boys. It's bath time." She laughed out loud when almost instantly, their ears dropped and they sat back down, tails stilled. They may have been strays for a while, but they clearly remembered being bathed at some point in their pasts—and they clearly hadn't liked it one bit. "Come on, this might be the last time. I'm going to make you all pretty and see if we can find you each a nice place to live."

She ruffled their ears, sighing happily at the feel of the soft fur beneath her fingers. This was exactly what she needed after the crap of the day before. As she got everything ready to bathe the dogs, immersing herself in their care, her own worries faded away.

Chapter 3

CLAIRE EXITED THE CAB OUTSIDE Chez Pierre and paused for a moment outside its pillared entryway. She didn't want to do this. Not in the slightest.

Still, she had faced worse meetings in her life. And at least in this meeting, she had an inkling of what to expect. It was her parents after all, and she'd honed a finely tuned understanding of them over the years, one that had led her to choose the neutral territory of an uptown restaurant for this get-together.

The sticky New York air clogged her nostrils; behind her, cab horns blared, and the hum of traffic buzzed in her ears. She couldn't wait to leave all this behind. At least her meeting with the partners had gone well. Although they would rather she didn't leave, considering how much money she'd earned them in her time with the company, they'd known something was in the cards for a while. All the legal parts of the process to sell her shares and hand over her clients were in motion. Soon she'd have the final payout, her nest egg for a future life so very different than the one she'd led for the last twenty-something years.

She was the first to arrive and was relieved. By the time the waiter had brought over a bottle of water and poured her a glass, her nerves had settled somewhat.

However, she only had two minutes to enjoy that feeling as her parents approached from across the room, their stern faces making her swallow hard before she stood to greet them.

"Hello, darling." Although her tone was cool, her mother leaned in for the requisite air kiss on either cheek, then took her seat.

Claire's father shook her hand, as always, and sat next to his wife.

"Mom. Dad." Claire retook her seat and was disappointed with herself when her fingers trembled as she reached for her water glass.

The looks on each of their faces was more than enough hint to know they'd found out about her leaving the company—and they weren't happy about it. She'd assumed meeting here meant they were less likely to cause a scene, but from the steely glint in her mother's eyes as she gazed at Claire from across the table, she now wasn't so sure. "So, how are you both?"

"Fine." Her mother's tone was clipped.

Her father leaned in and steepled his fingers. "Is there something you need to tell us?"

Ah, okay. Going straight for the jugular. "I assume you've heard, judging from the question." She tried a smile, but it did nothing to alter the two unforgiving visages that glared back at her. "Yes, I have tendered my resignation. The other partners were great about it." Not quite the truth, but her parents would never hear that from her or her two partners. "We just finished working out the details of the share buyback."

"We've been fielding calls for days." Her mother's lips were so pursed, Claire was surprised words could even make it through. "Have you any idea how embarrassing this is for us?"

"I... What?" That was their biggest problem? She might have known.

Her shoulders itched to slump, but she refused to give her parents the satisfaction. Of course they were more worried about how her departure from the company impacted them and their reputation. Of course they didn't care one bit what exactly she planned to do or how she felt about it all. Why had she expected anything else? She supposed she had thought that after all this time, after being the dutiful daughter and doing everything they had wanted, they might have finally let her live her own life for once. Apparently not. And it hurt far more than she was prepared to accept. *Damn them.*

"Claire, do you need...help?" Her father's stumble over the word almost made her laugh. "Clearly you're going through some kind of crisis. We can, with discretion of course, find you someone who can fix whatever it is that's caused this."

She snorted, and both her parents startled. "There is nothing to fix. I'm forty-three years old, and I'm ready to do something for me. Live a life that

is everything I want, not one that simply pleases you.” The words shot out of her mouth without thought, but as soon as they were spoken, she had no regrets.

“What on earth do you mean?” Her mother looked genuinely perplexed.

Sadness overwhelmed Claire. It had been this way since she was a child. She had often, as she grew older and could observe the world around her and how other parents treated their children, wondered why they had even had her. She seemed to fulfill nothing more than a role as some status symbol. As if *have a child* was merely something they needed to tick off a list in order to appear complete to their so-called friends—those influential, rich people they shared their time with, all of that time superficial and full of falsities.

Claire had tried. She had wanted their approval—what child didn’t? So she had worked harder than anyone through college, then again through her formative years in investment banking. Yes, her father had secured her first position through one of his contacts, but she had been the one who had thrown everything at that job. She had progressed quickly, earning a reputation as quite the shark in the capital markets. It had come at a cost, of course. Friends from college days had drifted away as Claire had less and less time for them. Relationships had started and ended quickly for the same reason. She had convinced herself it was a price worth paying, that the career was what she wanted, what made her happy, because with every success, her parents glowed even more.

And then had come the Cobb deal, and that false shine Claire had put on everything suddenly revealed the darkness underneath. The human cost of all of those deals, the Cobb one in particular. And when she had tried to explain to her parents how she felt about it, they had stared as blankly at her then as they did now.

They would never understand. She knew that now with a certainty. So where did that leave their relationship? Suddenly her big change of life took on even more meaning. Despite her previous determination not to let her parents’ viewpoint derail her plans, her stomach roiled with nerves and fear.

“This life doesn’t fulfill me any longer. I’ve tried. I thought it was what I wanted, I truly did. But I can’t do it anymore.”

Her mother blinked, and Claire could almost see her brain trying to make sense of Claire’s words. “But whatever will you do instead?”

Okay, here goes. They wouldn't like it, but she wasn't going to lie to them. "I've bought a property, an old ranch. Out in Oregon, near the Pacific Crest Trail. I'm going to run a guesthouse there. It's been my dream for a while now, and I finally decided it was time to follow that dream."

Her father blanched; his fingers gripped each other so tightly, his knuckles went white. "A guesthouse?" He made the word sound dirty. "Whatever for?"

"Because I want to." She leaned forward, willing to make one more attempt to get them to understand. "You remember how much I used to hike in college?"

"Did you?" Her mother shook her head. "I don't recall."

Trying hard to keep the impatience out of her voice, Claire spoke slowly. "I told you. Each time I declined one of your invites to join you on holiday. I told you I was going hiking instead." At their blank looks she sighed. "You never did listen, did you?"

Her quiet words dropped like a stone between them. For a moment, regret flitted across her mother's face; her father's remained impassive.

Well, that was that. It hurt, but there was nothing she could do about it now. They were miles apart and always had been. She had just been too scared to recognize it. Somehow there was a kind of release in acknowledging it now, despite the pain. No need to pretend anymore. No need to push herself to impress two people who clearly did not care.

She eased back her chair and stood. "I've lost my appetite. Please stay and enjoy your meal—it will be charged to my card regardless."

"Claire!" her father snapped. "Sit down and—"

"Dad, no. Let's not pretend anymore, shall we?" She stared down at him, proud that her spine was straight, her tone even, her face relaxed.

Her parents exchanged a look but said nothing.

"Good night." Turning crisply, Claire made her way to the front desk. After quickly arranging to have her parents' meal charged to her card, she took up the offer from the woman behind the desk to have a cab summoned.

It was only when she was tucked into the back of the taxi that she realized her cheeks were wet.

* * *

“Oh, fuck, a little lower, *please*.” Shannon’s voice was strained, and Claire smiled against the heat of her center, pressed so close to Claire’s lips.

God, she had needed this. After that horrendous meeting with her parents the night before, losing herself in the familiarity of Shannon’s body was a balm.

She let her tongue drift that little bit lower, once again intoxicated by Shannon’s scent and regretful that she would never get to taste her. The dam was necessary and she wouldn’t not use it, but still.

“Yes! Right there!” Shannon’s hips thrust in a regular rhythm.

Claire moved with her, reveling in the warm thighs that held her head in their vice-like grip.

When Shannon came, her throaty cries filling the hotel room, Claire held her tight, riding out each wave until she slumped back on the bed.

“Hell, yes. That never gets old.” Shannon looked down her own body at Claire, a wicked smile on her flushed face.

“Indeed.” Claire sat up, wrapping the dam in a tissue and tossing the package in the vague direction of the trash can under the desk behind her. She gazed at the landscape of Shannon’s magnificent body, then sighed. “And it’s a shame it won’t happen again.”

Shannon’s face scrunched in confusion. “What?”

I knew I should have told her earlier. “This is the last time we can do this.” She held up her hands when Shannon propped herself up on her elbows and opened her mouth. “I didn’t tell you before because, well, I wanted to make sure we could have this one last time.”

Shannon bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes for a moment. “Well, this is a first. Normally your timing is impeccable.” She threw Claire a rueful smile and pointed in the region of her own clit. “A minute ago being a case in point.”

Claire breathed a sigh of relief; Shannon’s wry humor told her she was forgiven. “I’m leaving New York.”

Shannon sat up straighter, her eyes widening. “Seriously? Does that mean...?”

Claire grinned. “It does. I bought a property at last.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic!”

“It is.” She swallowed. “I wasn’t sure when it would all come together, which is why I’d not mentioned it before now.”

Shannon shook her head. "You always play things so close to your chest. Alison will be very sad. You'll have to come to dinner before you go. Can we make that happen?"

Claire felt a twinge of guilt at Shannon's words. Her relationship with Shannon and her wife Alison had been important to her, and not just because of the fabulous sex she and Shannon had on a regular basis with Alison's blessing. It was also because they, as successful businesswomen in male-dominated industries, could relate to the pressure Claire had been under most of her working life.

"Of course we will make that happen." Claire ran a soft hand over Shannon's calf. "And, you know, once the guesthouse is up and running, you should both come to stay."

"Out in nature?" Shannon looked horrified.

Claire laughed. "The guesthouse will be very modern. You won't need to have any interaction with nature other than looking at the view, if that's what you want. There'll be a big wraparound porch for sitting on and perhaps sipping cocktails, if you like."

"Oooh, now you're talking!" Shannon tapped her chin. "And Alison's been talking lately about painting again. This could actually be a great idea." Then she playfully slapped Claire on the shoulder. "But, really, what am I supposed to do now for my additional thrills? You know I'm not like Alison, flitting from one lover to the next at the drop of a hat. I like a more reliable arrangement. I can't imagine finding anyone like you, and definitely not as good as you, darling."

Claire couldn't help the flush of pride Shannon's sultry look engendered. "I'm sure you will find someone. You still attend as many events as when we first met. There will be plenty of opportunities."

Shannon tilted her head. "And what will you do? I can't imagine the back country of Oregon would offer up a plethora of lesbians for you to choose from."

Smiling, Claire shook her head. "Probably not, but we'll see. You know I prefer this sort of arrangement anyway, so—"

"But you could also use this move as a chance to change all that." Shannon's gaze was piercing. "You will be settling down there, after all. Putting down roots. Far more important roots than the half-hearted ones

you put down here in New York. It could be the perfect time to look for something, or rather someone, more meaningful. It's been a while for you."

Claire pondered the words, surprised to find a small part of her excited at the thought of finding something more than a friends-with-benefits arrangement. Then she brushed the thought off—it had been too long, and she was getting rather old to be looking for romance now, wasn't she?

They looked at each other for a moment.

"Well." Shannon slid her legs beneath her and crawled across the covers to Claire. "At the very least, we'd better make sure you have something to remember me by, hm?" She kissed Claire's chest, then leaned across to the pack of latex gloves on the nightstand. When she looked back at Claire, there was a devilish gleam in her eye. "Lay down and open your legs for me, darling."

Claire had no hesitation in doing exactly as she was told.

* * *

The next morning, Claire knew there was one more person she needed to tell her news to. She had waited a while, needing to line up a few things to ensure Desiree would not be left high and dry with her departure, but now it was time.

The elevator whisked her to the thirty-fourth floor, and she marched to her office, her laptop case swinging at her side.

"Good morning, Desiree." Claire paused and took in Desiree's appearance. "Your hair looks marvelous."

"Good morning, Claire. And thank you." Desiree patted her Afro and smiled. "It was past time for a change."

For me too, Claire thought with an internal wry smile. "Could you come into my office?"

Desiree nodded, left her desk with her tablet in hand, then followed Claire into her glass-walled office.

Claire glanced around the space. She would miss the view with the early-morning light. But soon she would be waking up to mountain views. The thought thrilled her once more.

She placed her laptop bag on her desk, then pulled out a chair at the meeting table in the opposite corner of her large office. "Shut the door, please. Then take a seat."

Desiree blinked in surprise but did as she was told.

Claire folded her hands together on the table's surface and leaned forward. "You'll have noticed that I've been meeting with the other partners a fair amount in the last couple of weeks."

"Yes, I did notice that. And you have one this afternoon. Is there anything you need prepped for that?"

And that was why Claire was rather sad about having this conversation. Desiree had been invaluable as her chief of staff all these years and, to some extent, someone she had allowed to see more of her real self. If she had been someone Claire didn't feel comfortable with, she wouldn't be feeling so emotional about what she was about to tell her.

"No, nothing needed. The reason I've been meeting with them is..." Claire inhaled. "I am leaving the company."

Desiree's eyes popped so wide, Claire wouldn't have been surprised if she had pulled a muscle. "You're...leaving?" There was a catch in her voice that only made things worse.

"I'm sorry to throw this on you with no warning. Everything has happened much more quickly than I anticipated."

"What... I mean, it's none of my business but—"

"No, it's fine; I'm happy to tell you." Claire managed a smile. "I'm retiring from the business and starting a new venture."

"Oh." Desiree nodded slowly. "The trips to Oregon."

"And this is why I will miss you as much as I will."

They shared warm smiles.

"I'll miss you too," Desiree said quietly. "Working for you has been the most rewarding experience of my career."

Claire blinked. "Really? Even though I drive everyone mad with my demands?" Claire knew what they all said about her, had said for years, but it was water off a duck's back to her. In this business, being tough was the only way to survive—especially if you were a woman.

Desiree laughed. "You're not that bad." Then her face fell, and she twisted her hands together. "I assume that means I'm out of a job?"

"No! Definitely not. They'll have to bring in someone to replace me. I'll be recommending they offer at least the role, if not the partnership, to Javier. And he will need an extremely competent chief of staff to support

him with the step up. I know he speaks highly of you. Would you like me to put your name forward?”

Desiree’s relief was obvious in the way her posture relaxed. “I would. Thank you. And I’d love to work for Javier.”

“Okay, good. Now, I need to head up to Legal. More paperwork to review.”

Claire stood and smoothed out her skirt and jacket.

Desiree walked around her and tugged at the back of the jacket. “There, that’s it.”

They faced each other, and Claire willed down the ball of emotion that made a rapid pathway toward her throat. “Thank you. We still have a couple of weeks together, but I just want you to know that I couldn’t have had a better chief of staff.”

Desiree waved her fingers in front of her eyes and blinked rapidly. “Stop, you’ll make me cry.”

Claire managed a small smile and had to look away as her own emotions climbed. All of these goodbyes were necessary, but she hadn’t anticipated them affecting her so much. She had thought she would be so excited about her new life that she wouldn’t give her old one a second’s thought.

She wasn’t used to being wrong, and she felt a wry smile on her face as she left her office and headed back toward the elevators.

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CHASING DREAMS

BY A.L. BROOKS

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