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THE NEWCOMER

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THE NEWCOMER



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One

It was a warm, sunny afternoon in early April, a rarity on the Oregon coast at this time of year. The frequent spring rainstorms meant that the beautiful wildflowers—the best in the country—were on their way. Hank Cooper sat out on the deck of Ben & Cooper’s Bar in his white T-shirt and jeans, his feet propped up on the deck rail. Hamlet, Sarah’s harlequin Great Dane, sat beside him, watching the sea, his ears perking up when a person, a boat or bird caught his eye. Cooper was enjoying a heavily creamed coffee and watching his lovely Sarah Dupre paddleboarding out on the bay. She wore the wet suit—short sleeves, knee-length—he’d given her for Christmas. It kept her warm even though the water hadn’t warmed up yet; it was icy cold. The Pacific was always cold, except maybe down San Diego way. But Sarah was an expert; she rarely got her feet wet.

The way that wet suit hugged her body—it was like art. She had incredibly strong legs, a perfect round tush, breasts about the size of his palms. She’d been born in a coastal town and was probably as comfortable on the water as she was on the land or in the sky—diver, swimmer, surfer, helicopter pilot.

Cooper and Ham had been watching Sarah for an hour; she’d gone all the way out to the mouth of the bay and back. She was finally coming in, just ahead of the fishing boats headed home to the marina.

This life was the furthest thing from what Cooper had ever envisioned for himself. He had come to Thunder Point last October to look into the death of a good friend, Ben Bailey. To his surprise he had inherited what was Ben’s falling-down bait shop and bar. For lack of a better idea he renovated the place, turning it into a first-class beach bar, and had found himself a new home. He also found a woman in Thunder Point, another surprise he hadn’t been looking for. After all the women in his life, short- or long-term, Sarah was everything he’d been waiting for.

He had officially opened the beach bar—minus the bait—in late February. Now, as the proprietor, there was plenty of time to visit with folks from town, let the gentle lapping of the bay soothe him, watch his woman on her board, gently gliding across the calm water between the huge offshore boulders in the bay. Cooper had a farmer’s tan, stronger shoulders from lifting and hauling bar supplies and a lot of new friends when he’d always considered himself a solitary kind of guy.

Sarah leaned her board and paddle against the dock and came up the stairs. When she reached the deck, Cooper tossed her a towel and she dried off her feet, glad of the warm sunshine.

“What have you been up to?” Sarah asked.

“Absolutely nothing. Just watching my mermaid.”

She laughed. “Did Hamlet behave himself?” Hearing his name, the huge dog got up and walked over to Sarah.

Cooper nodded. “He said he’d prefer to live here, with me.”

“Did he now?” she asked with a laugh, giving Ham a gentle pat. “Get your own dog.”

“There isn’t room for another dog around here. Come here,” Cooper said, pulling her onto his lap.

She went to him, sat down, picked up his coffee and helped herself to a sip.

“Want me to make you a hot cup?” he asked. “You cold?”

She shook her head. “It’s nice out there. Breeze gets a little chilly sometimes, but the sun is so wonderful. You start to crave sun around here after all the winter rains and winds.”

Her cell phone rang. She’d left it on the deck with Cooper when she took her board out. She picked it up and looked at the caller ID then said, “Yes, little brother?” She listened intently and then laughed. “I’m at Cooper’s. I just took my board out—the bay is beautiful. I have the Razor and the dog. Then yes, have fun and I’ll see you later.”

She clicked off.

“How many times a day do you talk to Landon?” Cooper asked. Sarah and sixteen-year-old Landon were a family of two and they kept pretty tight tabs on each other. And with Sarah being a Coast Guard search-and-rescue pilot who worked out of the North Bend station, sometimes it wasn’t easy.

“As many as it takes. Now that he’s dating Deputy Yummy Pants’s daughter, I don’t worry so much. Well, I worry that Mac might shoot him if he gets too frisky with Eve, but I figure that’s a long shot, forgive the pun. I think we check in three or four times a day.”

“At least,” Cooper said. “Did I interpret that last call to mean you’re now free for dinner?”

She grinned at him. “Is the chef preparing something special?”

“It won’t be busy here tonight, at least after seven—it’s a weeknight and by then the sunset will be over. I have some steaks in the freezer, potatoes in the cooler...”

“Do you have anything *green*?” she asked.

Cooper’s bar menu was based on deli items purchased from Carrie’s deli in town—simple things from pizzas to sandwiches as well as some desserts, things that could be served cold or warmed. His place was not a restaurant per se. Cooper bought himself a grill for his own use, but it was never used to prepare food for the patrons.

Cooper had also inherited a helper, Rawley Goode, a Vietnam vet who was not overly comfortable dealing with the public. While he was a good cook, he was needed for other things—maintenance, cleaning, running errands to the big box stores like Costco. Cooper had to admit that between Rawley and himself personal groceries were often in short supply.

“I bet *you* have something green,” he suggested.

“I live on green things,” she said.

“I know this.”

“And you eat like a fourteen-year-old boy. You’d live on steak, hamburgers and home fries if it weren’t for me. If I go home to shower and change and bring a salad or a vegetable back with me, will you clean your plate?”

He loved her. He was frequently shaken by the intensity of his passion for her. He’d clean his plate and then he’d tune her up for good measure. He knew his eyes glowed and knew she interpreted him correctly. When the closed sign was on the front door and the doors were locked, they’d eat steak in front of the fire and then retire to the playpen, his large bed upstairs. “Take my truck and leave the Razor.”

“I have to work in the morning.”

“That’s okay. You can take my truck and your dog home later. Much later. Then I’ll drive your Razor across the beach and trade vehicles tomorrow morning.”

* * *

That night Sarah was home in bed before eleven. Not only did she have an early start the next day, but she also wanted to be home because of her brother, Landon. Landon wouldn’t be either shocked or

disapproving about the fact she and Cooper were sleeping together—in fact, he had met Cooper first and they were pals. If Sarah wasn't mistaken, Landon would consider it a personal favor if Sarah and Cooper somehow made a lasting commitment. That might be a possibility in the future but there were complications, not the least of which was Sarah's recent brief, disastrous marriage. She was understandably gun-shy and she had Landon to think about. He was just finishing up his junior year in high school and was headed for a fantastic senior year—his athletic prowess and academic performance would undoubtedly land him a scholarship. And they *needed* that scholarship. Sarah did all right financially but sending someone to college for four years would be a big challenge.

* * *

The next morning Sarah was finished in the bathroom and on her way out the door before Landon had even stirred for school. She left him a note and twenty dollars for gas or lunch or incidentals. She headed off to work feeling fit and fresh after her day off on the bay yesterday. A nice dinner with Cooper, followed by a couple of hours of recreation under the sheets—something Cooper had a particular talent for—helped make her feel brand-new and full of energy.

The Coast Guard station was getting ready for a big inspection in the next couple of weeks and there was plenty to do, from preparing for check rides to auditing maintenance records. They'd have to show the command they were one of the best air stations in the Coast Guard, and they'd have to get ready for this inspection while continuing to perform business as usual. Given that Sarah—Lieutenant Commander Dupre—was second in command of the flying operation at the station, her role in this prep would not be small. It was no surprise that when she turned on her computer she found a note from her immediate boss, Buzz Bachman, asking her to come to his office ASAP. She was sure, if she knew the man at all, he had a long list of things for her to do.

She made herself a cup of coffee on the way, stirring in some cream and sweetener. “Morning, boss,” she said, entering his small office.

“Morning, Dupre. Shut the door, okay?”

She turned to close the door and thought, *Uh-oh, someone's in trouble*. The commander's door was seldom closed and when it was someone would generally say, “The spanking light has been lit.”

“We have a busy week and an inspection team en route the end of the month.”

“We'll be ready,” she said, sipping her coffee.

“I want to tell you something I'm not supposed to know,” Buzz said. “How's your poker face?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “When has my poker face ever let you down?”

“This could be tough. It affects you directly.”

The eyebrow dropped. “Make it fast,” she said. “Rip that Band-Aid off.”

He took a breath. “I have a mole in HR,” Buzz said. “I've been cultivating him for a long time. I want as much warning as possible for my next change of assignment. What I didn't expect was to learn that one of my 'men' was being looked at for a reassignment. An early reassignment because of a compelling need. This means you, Dupre.”

Sarah was stunned into silence. Her mouth hung open slightly. She forcibly closed her mouth. “I guess an automatic refusal if they don't know I'm a woman. Right?”

“I wish. I shouldn't say anything. It could all go in another direction. Between now and notification someone could put in for those air stations and this could all go away. But I wanted you to have as much time to think about this as possible—we have two retiring commanders and a compelling need with no outstanding applications for those locations and they're both...” He paused to cough lightly.

“They’re both on the east coast. Maine and south Florida. As you might surmise, you’re probably going to be awarded a promotion to commander within the year. I suspect this makes you a better than prime candidate.”

“And I’m not due for either,” she said, sliding forward on her chair a little bit.

“There’s no surprise here, Dupre. You’re good at your job. You’ve had a successful Coast Guard career. You’d make an excellent boss. You’re an excellent leader now.”

She looked at him earnestly, humbly. “I need another year here. Landon...”

“I know your situation and I sympathize. That’s why I’m breaking protocol and leaking this. So help me, you let on and we’ll have a real issue...”

“Crap, there’s gotta be some wiggle room in here...”

“I just gave it to you. I think you’ll be notified by June and then you will have a couple of months to make the move.”

She shook her head. “This plays hell on my family...Landon is prime scholarship material, but not I move him. That’s saying nothing of the trauma of moving a kid right before his senior year in high school, moving him away from his football team, his friends, his school, his town. He’s done so well here, you have no idea.”

“I have every idea,” Buzz said. “I know *exactly* how you feel—I’ve gone through two divorces, proof of how the pressures weigh down the family. At least you’re not married.”

But there’s someone I can’t bear the thought of leaving, she thought. “Damn it, I love my job. But I don’t love this part of it.”

“And the Coast Guard loves you, Dupre. I thought you deserved time to think of your options. Aren’t you from Florida?”

“Long ago and far away. I grew up in Boca, practically on the water, but I’ve been north for most of my Coast Guard career. And there’s no family left in Florida—it’s just me and Landon. And I only have one more year with him before he goes off to college, and starts a new phase of his life.”

“You always have that option we’re not talking about, even if you can’t retire yet.”

“Resign my commission? I have no idea what I’d do outside of the Coast Guard,” she muttered, looking into her coffee cup.

“And I know that feeling, too,” he said.

She looked up and made eye contact with him. She gave a half smile—small wonder he’d been married twice, he was a good-looking man. Blond, expressive brown eyebrows, strong, smart and a savior of choppers that would put Donny Osmond to shame. All this had earned him the nickname Buzz Lightyear. “Why do you have a mole in HR?” she asked.

“I can retire,” he said. “I want plenty of notice on the next assignment, which should be coming down the pipeline in about six months. I don’t want a new location or a promotion. I’d like to fly forever, I love helicopters and I love the C-130 even more. Being a captain means more desk time than flying time and I have kids in California and Alaska. I’m moving on, Dupre. In probably a year.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I’m working on that. But I’ve been down this road and I have done twenty years of service. My decision is made. You’re the one who has decisions to make. Maybe there’s some family friends around who can keep Landon in this school for one more year?”

She shook her head. “There’s no one.”

“Good friends?”

The only ones who came to mind were Gina and Cooper. Her friend Gina was trying to develop a new life with Mac—aka Deputy Yummy Pants—and she had a small house crowded with her mother

and her sixteen-year-old daughter. And Cooper? Oh, as great a pal as he was for Landon, he wasn't in the market for instant guardianship. She couldn't ask either of them for a favor this big. "The Coast Guard has always been inconvenient," she heard herself say. "Not a lot of stability. But the job itself made up for that most of the time."

"Where does Landon stay when you sit alert overnight?"

"He's pretty much okay on his own, as long as he has his phone and my contact numbers. If I have temporary assignment out of town, like simulator training or something, there's this guy I've been seeing...local guy, civilian. He doesn't mind Landon duty for a few days or a week, but trust me..."

"Guy?" Buzz said. "Guy? Why don't I know about this guy?"

Sarah smiled in spite of herself.

"How long has this been going on?" Buzz asked.

She gave a shrug. "Six months or so."

"You never bring him around. You protecting us from him or something?"

"I could be protecting him from you..."

"Hmm. Well bring him around sometime. Happy hour or something.

"I just wanted you to have a heads-up on the assignments," he said. "With any luck someone could request a relocation in the next couple of months—maybe just the right person will come along and take these potential east coast assignments off your hands..."

"Two of them?" she asked cynically.

"There are people who would kill for a chance like you have," he said.

"I know," she said. She could go far in the Coast Guard; Commander was a prestigious rank in a demanding service and she'd earned it. She was only thirty-three. "I could quit, but I can't retire..." Quit and do what? There was the little matter of paying rent, buying food, making car and insurance payments...*tuition*. She stood up. "Well, thanks, boss. I guess."

"Don't panic," Buzz said. "Yet."

* * *

Sarah wasn't one to panic, unless her career was about to turn everyone she loved upside down once again. She could tell Landon, give him time to adjust to the possibility and come up with his own coping options, but she wouldn't do that—not yet, anyway. She wasn't afraid he'd balk and sulk, she was afraid he'd say, "Whatever, Sarah. Just let me know." He was that kind of kid, that kind of brother. He wasn't a typical sixteen-year-old boy, probably because of how challenging his life had been. She often worried about how much disappointment he was holding inside to spare her feelings.

Landon was only five when their parents were killed in an accident and he spent one horrifying year with their mean spinster aunt and then had spent the past ten years as her responsibility. She'd moved him five times, put him through a divorce from a man he'd grown attached to and now, just when he was happiest... No, she couldn't talk to him yet, not until she had time to think things through.

She could tell Cooper. He loved her; he was proud of her. But he'd just put all his time and energy into setting up his new local business and she couldn't put him in the position of choosing between breaking it off with her or leaving behind everything to follow her. She could tell that his new lifestyle not only suited him, but he was also very happy. Relaxed.

* * *

That afternoon she hadn't even made it home after work before Landon called her cell. "You going o

to Cooper's tonight?"

"Not tonight," she said. "I have things to prepare for for our inspection."

"If Eve comes over to do homework tonight, will it bother you?" he asked.

"Nope. I'll take my paperwork to my bedroom. What are you cooking?" she asked.

He laughed at the joke. "Want me to pick up a pizza? I still have that twenty you left me."

"I'll make sloppy joes. Save the pizza money—I sit alert tomorrow night and you're on your own. And before you even ask, no, Eve cannot spend the night."

"Damn," he said, making her laugh.

She made the same excuse to Cooper, though he didn't buy it as quickly. "Can't you do your paperwork tomorrow night while you sit alert?"

"I have enough work for both nights. We're gearing up for a big inspection. I'll see you in a couple of days. I mean, we'll talk, but—"

But I have to work on my poker face.

"—I have the day off after my twenty-four at the station and I'll come out to your place. If the sun is shining, maybe I'll take out my board."

"I love to watch you on the water," he said. "The ocean is more beautiful when you're out there."

* * *

Sarah hadn't seen Cooper in a couple of days and she could've taken the Razor—the all-terrain vehicle—across the beach with Hamlet, but they both needed some exercise. She'd just had two long nights and now she was stiff and groggy and Hamlet was restless.

Rather than getting right to their walk across the beach to Cooper's, Sarah stopped at the diner to say hello to Gina. Hamlet enjoyed that part of his walk almost as much as being on the beach. He didn't mind being hitched to the lamppost with a bowl of water and treated to pats and pets from every passerby.

Mac McCain was sitting at the counter in the diner. Gina was on the other side and they were holding hands across the counter. Sarah realized she'd been so self-involved she hadn't even remembered that almost every midmorning around this time the diner was usually empty and Mac took his coffee break with Gina. They were so focused on each other, Sarah was impressed that they looked up and smiled at her. "Hey," she said.

"Hey, yourself. I hear you've been putting in a lot of hours," Gina said.

"A lot of hours, but I'm off today."

Gina and Mac might be the cutest couple in Thunder Point. They'd been best friends for years. Both single parents, their sixteen-year-old daughters were also best friends. Just a couple of months ago, they came out as a couple. A real couple, not just a couple of good friends, and ever since that had happened, they'd been staring soulfully into each other's eyes when they weren't stealing the occasional kiss. For a brief moment Sarah turned cynical and almost said, "*Look out—when you think you're staring happily ever after in the face is when the fates get jealous and pounce.*"

"On your way to Cooper's?" Mac asked.

"Yep. I think I'm going to take my board out for a while. There's sun today and I could use some exercise." *And alone time, think time.* Not that she hadn't had enough of that over the past day or two. "And Cooper always needs quality time with Ham." She laughed. "If we ever break up, I'll have to share custody."

"You'll never break up," Gina said. "You're down for the count."

No, she thought. Just down...

Two

Mac and Gina might be enjoying new love, but that didn't keep them from spending plenty of time talking about their families. While Gina only had one child, sixteen-year-old Ashley, Mac had three kids. His oldest, Eve, also sixteen, his son, Ryan, was twelve and another daughter, Dee Dee, was ten. Recently, their sixteen-year-old daughters seemed to take up most of their conversations about kids—Eve was a little too in love with Landon, sometimes worrying Mac, and while Ash had had a steady boyfriend for the past year, she had seemed a little out of sorts lately. Ashley was sulky and down in the dumps.

“Things haven't been what you'd call hearts and flowers between Ashley and Downy lately,” Gina said, wiping down the counter. “All Ashley will say about it is that Downy seems to be too busy to take her calls or return them, something that hasn't happened before now.”

“And I've got nothing but hearts and flowers between Eve and Landon,” Mac said. “Doesn't help me sleep at night, either.”

Since teenage girls can fluctuate between true love and moodiness with regularity, Gina didn't worry overmuch about Ashley's sulk.

* * *

After work, Gina walked home to find a message from the high school on her answering machine. The school had resorted to leaving recorded messages that informed parents if their child had been absent. Ashley had missed her last two classes. Since she'd borrowed Gina's Jeep for cheerleading practice after school, Gina wondered what was going on. She immediately called her daughter, but Ashley didn't answer her cell phone. Gina then called Eve, who answered right away. “She skipped practice,” Eve said. “I don't know why—she didn't say anything to me.”

“Do you have any idea where she could be? She's not answering her phone.”

“I have no idea,” Eve said. “If she calls or shows up, I'll be sure she calls you.”

Gina's mom, Carrie, had just returned home herself, and hearing Gina's story she said, “You know how these girls can get distracted. You left her a message, right?”

Of course she had. And Gina was not typically a worrier, but Ashley had been in a real funk for the past week, complaining that Downy was acting weird, as if he couldn't be bothered with her. After a year-long, intense romance, one in which the phone calls and texting seemed annoyingly constant, even Gina wondered what was up. But Downy was a college freshman now and baseball was in full swing. He was attending Oregon State on an athletic scholarship; he was a baseball star. Maybe he just had a lot going on.

A couple of hours later, just as the sun was going down, Gina called Downy's cell phone. He didn't answer, either, and she left yet another message. “Downy, it's Gina. I don't know where Ashley is and I'm really worried. Have you heard from her? Call me please.”

A half hour later Carrie said, “You're pacing, Gina. Call Mac. Maybe he'll have some advice.”

Gina sat at the kitchen table and punched in his numbers. “Mac, I have a problem. As far as I know no one has seen or heard from Ashley since about one o'clock this afternoon. She skipped her last two

classes, didn't go to cheer practice, isn't taking or returning calls. Eve hasn't seen or heard from her and Downy isn't picking up." She felt her voice go all warbly. "I'm worried. I don't know what to do. I'd go look for her, but I don't know where to look. Could Downy be playing ball? Maybe that's why he isn't picking up?"

"Stand by, let me check," Mac said. A moment later he said, "No game today. The next game is in three days and it's a home game."

"My God, where could she be?"

"Leave another message for Downy. Maybe call some of her other girlfriends?" Mac suggested.

"Okay, I'll see what I can find out." Gina disconnected and placed another call to Downy. This time she used her mother voice. "Crawford Downy, I can't find my daughter. If I don't hear from you in five minutes, I'm going to call the police." Then she clicked off.

"You *did* call the police," her mother said, placing a glass of wine in front of Gina. "Calm down. What are you so afraid of?"

She looked at Carrie imploringly. "That she's in some kind of trouble. That she's missing. That she ran off with Downy or something...I don't know. This really isn't like..." Her phone twittered. "Downy," she said to her mother. She picked up the call immediately. "Where's Ashley!" she demanded.

"Easy, Gina," Downy said smoothly. He'd grown up in Thunder Point, just like Ashley had. He'd known Gina and her mother since he was a little kid. "She's on her way home. She's fine."

"On her way home from *where*?" she demanded.

"She came here, to State, to Corvallis." He took a breath. "She wanted to talk about our...ah...situation. I was going to talk to her in person after our weekend game—I was coming home mostly to talk to Ash. But she couldn't wait and drove up here."

Gina sank weakly onto a kitchen chair.

"She'll be home in a couple of hours or less," he said.

"She drove all the way to Corvallis to ask you why you don't pick up or return her calls and you say she's *fine*? Downy, what the hell is going on?"

"Can you just ask Ash about that, okay? Because it's—"

"Is my daughter pregnant?"

She felt rather than saw her mother sit straighter, even more alert. Gina had been an unmarried teenage mother.

"No! God, no!" Downy nearly yelled into the phone. "Listen, really, if you'd just talk to Ashley about this when she gets home..."

"Tell me right this second, Crawford Downy! My daughter has been upset about your relationship and she lied to me to take my car, drove three hours to Corvallis to talk to you and she's just now on her way home? Tell me right now or I'll call your mother!"

The young man took a deep breath. "I don't want to tell you this, Gina. It's really between us, but...I felt like we might be getting too serious. I thought we should take a breather, maybe date around a little, you know."

Gina felt her stomach tie itself in a tight knot. Oh, God, her poor girl. No one could know better than Gina how something like that felt.

"Let me guess, there's someone at State you've started dating *a little*?" she asked acidly.

"Come on, hey. I'm all the way up here, only see Ash a couple of weekends a month at the most. It got kind of old, sitting around my room alone twenty-six days of the month. She should be getting out more, too. It's not that big a deal. We just need to lighten up a little, y'know?"

“Why didn’t you tell her this before she drove all the way to Corvallis to find out what’s going on?”

“I didn’t want to say it over the phone! I wanted to be decent about it!”

And he hung up on her.

It was just as well. She was going to have to kill him, anyway. Downy was eighteen. His behavior was hardly odd for a boy his age. Still...

Gina looked at her mother. “I would not have let her drive all the way to Corvallis alone. Driving home alone. At night.”

“I know. But she’ll be okay,” Carrie said. “She’s a bright girl. There’s no rain tonight. She knows the way as well as you do.”

“God, I hope she’s okay,” Gina said.

There was a knock at the door. “Mac!”

Carrie got up from the table and let him in. “Hey, Mac,” she said.

“Hey, Carrie. What do we know?”

Carrie just inclined her head toward Gina.

“She drove to Corvallis to talk to Downy, who, I gather, dumped her and sent her back home.”

Mac lowered his gaze and shook his head.

“She’ll be home in a couple of hours,” Gina said. “But what if she’s so upset she’s not safe and something happens?”

Mac walked into the kitchen, slipped a strong arm around Gina’s waist and pulled her against him just briefly. He put a finger under her chin and looked into her eyes. “Never a good idea to drive when upset, but try to be realistic—if teenagers who just had a breakup had accidents, the accident rate would be too shocking to imagine. The road is good, the weather is good, she’ll get here. And she’ll need some comforting, I imagine.” He lifted one of her hands, which was trembling. “I think the wine is a good idea. Just calm down and be ready to be wise and understanding.”

“What if I have to go get her or something?”

“I’ll do it. Or Carrie will. Gina, honey, stuff like this happens. It’s not deadly.”

“It sure feels that way,” she said in a small voice.

* * *

Gina and her mom sat at the kitchen table together talking quietly, waiting for Ashley to arrive, while Gina sipped on a glass of wine. They were two women who knew how deeply a girl of sixteen would feel the trauma of a breakup. Leaving the two of them to talk, Mac stepped away, into the living room where he used his phone.

When Ashley started dating Downy, Gina was brutally honest with her about the possible consequences of too much love too fast. She tried to discourage the dating, but there was little she could do—they saw each other at school every day and it was a match made in heaven. Gina had worried about what would happen when Downy moved on to college, leaving Ashley—who was two years younger—behind. But they had managed to make it work. Downy was back in Thunder Point most weekends, especially during football season and for holidays, and they talked and texted every day, many times a day.

And then, in the peak of spring, with love all around, suddenly and without warning, Ashley said, “Something is wrong. Downy sends me right to voice mail and he doesn’t call me back. Mom, something is *wrong*.”

Gina had said, “He’s probably overwhelmed. He’s got baseball and, academically, he sometimes

struggles. Try to be patient.” Downy was a jock, but not a strong student, which presented problems for some college athletes.

“It never happened like this before,” Ashley wailed. “He’s said about ten words to me in a week. He’s busy, he says. He’s studying, he says. He doesn’t call me back because he doesn’t have time. He doesn’t answer my texts. He always texted more than me—right during class. I think he might be with someone new.”

“Did you ask him?”

“Of course! He said no! But he’s lying. I can tell he’s lying. And he’s never lied to me before!”

“Ash, he’s only eighteen. You’re only sixteen. Let’s try not to go crazy here. Maybe this is a little adjustment of some—”

“He said he loved me! What am I going to do?”

The poor darling, Gina thought. Shattered and helpless. She took another sip of wine. Glancing at her glass she said to her mom, “Good suggestion.”

“It’s always more dramatic when it’s your daughter. It cuts deeper,” Carrie said.

“I don’t want her to ever hurt.” Gina whispered.

“I know,” Carrie said. “Believe me, I know.”

Gina hadn’t taken Ashley’s pout over Downy too seriously. After all, he was the scholarship kid with the atomic arm, gone to State to play ball and it was spring—baseball was the game of the day and Downy, a freshman, was starting pitcher. He was busy with practices and games, maybe too busy now to text and call Ashley all day. But Gina’s attention was definitely snagged by Ashley’s flight to Corvallis and Downy’s explanation that, stated simply, he was done with her. There was not a woman on the planet who didn’t know how much getting dumped could hurt. And as for mothers? It hurt more when your little girl suffered than when you suffered yourself.

Mac came into the kitchen, poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down with Gina and Carrie. “I called my aunt Lou and told her what was going on and that I’d be staying with you until we knew a little more. Lou will manage the family while I’m here. And I talked to Eve. She knew Ashley was all sideways about Downy and she was worried about her, but she didn’t know she’d driven to Corvallis. I find that strange—they usually know everything the other is doing. Eve thought Ashley just skipped out on practice. So I’ll stay with you until she’s home.”

“You need to get home to your own family, Mac,” Gina said, but inside she thought if he left her now, she’d collapse. “It’s just a broken heart.”

“There’s no such thing as *just* a broken heart,” he said.

And he should know, Gina thought. His young wife left him with three little kids when he was twenty-six years old and even though Gina hadn’t known him then, she knew him now and knew he hadn’t been with a woman in the ten years since. Until Gina. They were two single parents who had waited a long time to find each other.

Mac muttered something about how, given a choice, he would never want to go back to those youthful days—those young years are so serious and painful. Gina said even more painful was when your kids hurt.

“I’ll never forget when Ash wasn’t invited to the very first boy-girl party ever because the mother of the little girl throwing the party didn’t approve of me, a never-married single mother. Ash didn’t understand that, but she was devastated by being excluded and I had at least six months of guilt and pain.”

“When Eve was six,” Mac said, “after Cee Jay left us, she didn’t want to go to school. She was afraid her mother might come home during the day and Eve didn’t want to miss her.”

“When I was a young mother,” Gina said, “there were very few other young mothers with small children who were friendly toward me. Certainly none who were sixteen...”

“Small towns are brutal,” Mac said. “The best thing about Thunder Point was leaving Coquille, where I made all my mistakes. Of course, they followed me—my kids were soon known as the kids of the deputy and the woman who abandoned them.”

“Is there any way to keep them from paying for our mistakes?”

“Yeah. They’ll eventually make enough of their own to take the heat off. Meanwhile, we just have to stay strong and know we are doing the best we can.”

Carrie got up from the table and started rummaging around in the refrigerator. Being the owner of deli and catering service, she always had special meals on hand. She did a little slicing and scooping, microwaved a couple of plates—tri-tip, red potatoes, Broccolini spears, a little dark au jus. She made a large helping for Mac, smaller ones for Gina and herself and the three of them ate, though not with big appetites. Everyone at the small kitchen table had personal experience with this kind of heartache. Then Carrie cleaned up and put a pan of her healing chicken soup on the stove. “She might not want anything to eat, but if she does at least it’ll be something soothing,” Carrie said.

It was eight-thirty when they heard the car. Everyone stood expectantly, fearful of what they would see walking in the door. And then Ashley came into the kitchen through the back door.

She was messy; there was evidence of crying in her puffy eyes and pink cheeks. Her beautiful red hair was flat and slack and her clothes wrinkled, but otherwise she looked normal. Except for the expression on her face, which was one of pure agony.

“I had to do it, I had to go to State,” she said. “I sent him two hundred texts and voice mails that he ignored, so I went to face him. I’m sorry I lied and took your Jeep. I promise, I’ll never do it again.”

Carrie took a step toward her. “I made you some soup, honey.”

“Thanks, Gram, but I don’t want any...”

“I’ll be going. Now that you’re home safe,” Mac said.

“You don’t have to go, Mac,” Ashley said. “I’m going to bed.”

“We need to talk, Ashley,” Gina said.

“There’s nothing to say,” she said, walking through the house toward her room, her head down, dragging her backpack behind her.

“Ashley,” Gina said, following her. “Ash, I really want to talk to you. Please.”

She turned sharply to face Gina. “He doesn’t want me anymore,” she said coldly, tears gathering in her eyes. “I gave him everything he wanted and now he’s done with me. The guy I saw today? I don’t even know that guy. That was not my Downy.” Then she went into her room and closed the door.

Gina turned back to face Mac and her mother. “Oh, God,” she said. And then the only thing she could think of. “Thank God there were no cell phones when my heart was being ripped out.”

* * *

Ashley laid down on her bed in her clothes. In fact, she laid there for a while before sitting up and throwing off her jacket.

She was probably about six years old when she first noticed Crawford Downy Junior. Everyone had always called him Downy; only his mother called him Crawford. Ashley went to school with his younger brother Frank. There was a third brother two years younger than Frank—Lee.

That was back when Ashley’s mother or grandmother wrestled her naturally curly red hair into braids in the morning. Downy called her twerp or carrot top or pesky pants. She alternately crushed or

him or thought he was a giant turd. She liked him when he said things like, “Good catch, CT,” instead of carrot top. She hated him when he said, “Stand back, she’s going to let down her hair!” and put out his arms as if her curly mane would be bigger than the Goodyear Blimp. Right up to junior high she had those ridiculous red ringlets *and* thick glasses. Frank had thick glasses, too, so Downy never teased her about the glasses. Then when she’d barely figured out how to control her wild hair, she had braces. “When you getting the tin out of your mouth, CT?” he’d ask her.

Ashley and Eve McCain met in seventh grade and spent the next two years studying teen magazines for trending clothes, makeup and hairstyles. Eve was always naturally beautiful with thick dark hair, bright blue eyes, but she also had braces. It was one of the first things that had bonded them. That and the fact that they had single parents and neither had much money to spend on clothes—so they improvised and shared.

Sometime in ninth grade, Ashley made peace with her hair. She discovered the magic of detangler, the circular brush, a blow dryer. Her thick crazy hair became soft waves. Some of the orange of her youth was replaced by a darker, copper-red. The braces came off, she got contacts and she made the junior varsity cheerleading squad. And one day in the spring of her sophomore year, when she was wearing her short, pleated cheerleader skirt, Downy said, “Hey, Ashley.” He actually used her name!

And she said, “Hey, Downy.”

He was a senior then and the toast of Thunder Point athletics. He played football, hockey and baseball. Frank was more academic and Lee was still too young to be taken seriously.

And Downy said to her, “We should go out sometime.”

“Out?” she asked.

He laughed and said, “You know. On a date.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?” he repeated. “Is that a yes or a no?”

She nearly died. But before she died she said yes. But she was fifteen and Gina would only let her go if they double-dated. He took her to a movie in Bandon along with two other couples. But the other couples went in one car and she was alone with Downy so all the way there they talked and laughed. After the movie they went to a pizza place. She was the only sophomore—the rest of them were all seniors. After pizza they went to a pretty secluded outlook facing the ocean and made out. Downy kept trying to get under her shirt and she kept slapping his hand away. At some point he said, “I knew I shouldn’t be messing with a fifteen-year-old. You’re just too young.”

She said, “Fine. We won’t go out again. But don’t think you’re all that and I’m going to just give it up because you’re good at sports and kinda cute.”

He grinned and said, “You think I’m cute?”

“Not *that* cute,” she said.

But he walked her to every class, held her hand, leaned into her at her locker to kiss her, asked her repeatedly if she’d be at his game. They talked on the phone every night when they weren’t together, texted all day until Downy had his phone confiscated by a teacher for two weeks. Then, at assembly, his full ride scholarship to State was announced. At the end of summer, he’d be gone to football camp and then to school, three hours away. “I suppose you’ll just break up with me now,” she said.

With a look of serious misery he said, “I’m trying to figure out how to take you with me. I think I love you.”

So she let him touch her breasts. And said, “I think I love you, too.”

Before summer was very old, Ashley was on the pill. Surprisingly, college had not seemed to be the barrier Ashley had feared. They talked and texted constantly, Downy came home to Thunder Point as

often as possible if he didn't have a football game or practice and since he was a freshman, he wasn't first string, so he had a little freedom, though he practiced hard all week. "And by the time I'm playing a lot, you'll be at State and we'll be together," he told her.

And then in one week in March, almost exactly a year since they started dating, it all fell apart without warning. The calls dwindled to nothing; the texts weren't answered. He didn't come home on the weekend and knowing—*knowing*—something was terribly wrong, she drove to Corvallis. She went to his frat house. He was sitting on the porch with a girl, his arm around her shoulders, leaning close to her like he was finished kissing her or just about to start.

"Downy!" she shouted.

"Ash!" he shouted back, backing off the girl like she was on fire.

"Who is *that*?" the girl with him asked.

He stumbled and blubbered for a moment before he said, "The girl I dated back home."

"Well, take care of the child and call me later," she said, getting up and walking away. Gliding away, full of confidence, not the least bit intimidated by Ashley.

To Ashley, the girl looked like a sophisticated runway model, full of poise and beauty and maturity, all the things she didn't feel she had.

The next two hours were a blur. He wouldn't talk to her at his frat house within hearing of his fraternity brothers. They went to Gina's Jeep, sat in it and Ashley sobbed and fought and yelled while Downy just shrugged and shook his head. He said he worried they'd been getting too serious, needed a little space, a little freedom, a little dating experience. "Have you *slept* with her?" Ashley demanded. "Are you *doing* her, Downy?"

"It's different in college, Ash. People don't make such a big deal about sex in college."

So *of course* he had.

He finally insisted she go home. She wasn't done with him but he was clearly done with her. "I care about you, Ash," he said. "But we need to cool things down a little right now. I can't get home every weekend during baseball—I'm playing every game. It's not like football where I'm the junior player and mostly warm the bench. I'm starting. In fact, the baseball coach will probably make me quit football—we can't start the season with injuries. We should use this time to...you know...branch out. Date around, maybe."

"And summer? What about summer?" she asked. "You just plan to get back together again in summer?"

"I don't know. I'm thinking about staying up here. Taking some classes, getting a job...I'll play baseball all summer if we make finals and it's too far to commute. Then football camp is in August. If I'm still playing football then."

She sobbed so hard all the way back to Thunder Point she could hardly breathe. She had to pull over once because her chest started hurting. She knew her mother was going to be furious that she'd taken the Jeep but she didn't care. There were moments on the drive home that she wondered if life would be easier if she just went off the road at one of the high-cliff curves, but something kept her going.

When she was alone in her room, she called Eve's cell phone. She could barely tell her story, the sobs came so hard. And Eve was outraged. "Want me to call him, Ash? Give him a piece of my mind?"

"It won't matter—it wouldn't help. He dumped me for a college girl. And she's beautiful, Eve. She owns him. You could tell in one second!"

"He's slime. He's scum. I will never forgive him for this!"

"But...what do I do without him?" Ashley had cried.

After they hung up, Ashley just cried for another hour. There was a light knocking on her door and she knew it was her mother. She didn't answer or say "come in." She laid there, her head on her pillow, leaking tears, gripping her cell phone in case Downy called her to say he'd made a terrible mistake.

Gina came into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. "I brought you some tea," she said, her hand on Ashley's back.

"No, thank you," Ashley said thickly.

"Ash, I'm sorry this happened."

"Really, I can't talk about it anymore."

"Just a little, please? So I can understand where you are right now? Emotionally."

Ash rolled onto her back, her wet eyes red and swollen. "He has another girl. A beautiful, snotty college girl who he's screwing because he says it's not that big a deal. And right now I just don't want to even live."

"Ashley, please, don't say that. Don't ever say that."

"I'm not going to school tomorrow. Maybe not the next day, either. Maybe never."

Three

Cooper noticed Sarah had been preoccupied over the past couple of days. Quiet and maybe a bit sullen. She said the inspection was going to be hell and while she might not be worried about her team, a strong leader always worried about the inspectors. They had to be ready for anything.

All Cooper could do was be available, support her in any way he could. He found himself fighting the worry that Sarah had changed her mind, that something had caused her to reconsider those three little words. *I love you*. Yet when he possessed her, when she was joined to him, her passion for him drove worry from his mind. During those times she was one hundred percent his and he was completely hers.

In the meantime, he had a business to learn. This beach bar was unlike anything he had ever done before. Ben's old helper, Rawley Goode, *old* being the operative word, might be a little on the strange side, but he had turned out to be a damned good assistant. Rawley was somewhere in his sixties and he'd been ridden hard. Rawley told Cooper that Ben used to only be open in the mornings and evenings. Ben had put in his longest days during summer, and he bumped up the schedule with the help of part-time teenage help. Rawley said, "I clean and get supplies. I can work in the kitchen or behind the bar, but I ain't social. You give me a list and cash. I go to Costco and other stores. But in summer, you have to stay open late. The sunset over the bay is better 'n football on HD."

During his first week of operation Cooper noticed that the bulk of his traffic was between seven and ten in the morning and four and seven in the afternoon. There were stragglers here and there at other times. Those patrons were almost exclusively Thunder Point residents. But on the weekends, particularly in good weather, there was heavy traffic all day and into the evening—bikers, cyclists, pleasure boaters, sport fishermen, folks traveling on Highway 101 in want of a meal. He did an impressive business on bottled water alone, not to mention the other things he was able to offer. When he inherited this place, it had been a run-down shack with a homemade sign on the road that said *Cheap Drinks*. Now it was upgraded and classy and he was damn proud of it. Cooper put a decent sign on his property at the turnoff from highway 101. *Ben & Cooper's*. And beneath that, *Food and Drink*. He stocked liquor and non-alcoholic beverages and had a contract with Carrie James, owner of the town's deli, for prepared and wrapped food items. The reopening of the bar benefited both of them.

A lot of his first patrons from out of town wanted to know what had happened to Ben. Well, it was a sad story and he didn't like to dwell on it, but the fact was that Ben had been found at the bottom of the cellar stairs and at first it was thought to be an accident. But, since then, there had been evidence to suggest he'd been killed by a blow to the head that caused the fall. The suspect—a seventeen-year-old kid from town—was out on bail awaiting trial. That still blew Cooper's mind—a seventeen-year-old kid. The kid, Jag Morrison, had been trying to convince Ben to sell the beach and adjacent property to his father, a local developer.

Cooper had been just going through the motions—renovating and opening for business. He didn't think he was a shopkeeper or bar-owner kind of guy. He had been a pilot for fifteen years—helicopters. But the more he got to know the town, the people and the many moods of the Pacific Ocean, the more the place grew on him. After just a short period of time instead of moving on, he wa

considering making even more improvements to the property. After watching Sarah on the water, he thought renting kayaks and paddleboards would be an excellent idea.

None of it came naturally, however. Cooper bought himself a new laptop with a decent accounting spreadsheet program and was still figuring it out. Rawley wasn't able to help him out with this part of the business. It was during his weekday midmorning downtime that he sat at his own bar and was plugging numbers from bills and receipts into his spreadsheet that the door opened and Mac McCain walked in. With relief, he closed the laptop. "Hey," he said. "Aren't you usually at the diner about now?"

"Usually," Mac said. "Gina's daughter stayed home from school. She went home to check on her and I didn't feel like having coffee with the cook. Stu just isn't as pretty no matter which way you cut it."

"I noticed that. How's everything else?"

"Same," he said. Mac went right behind the bar and helped himself to a cup of coffee. "You? Business shaping up?"

"Aw, I don't know. I mean, business is good. There are people in here all the time. But I'm not really clear on the accounting and that sort of thing. Kind of makes me wonder how Ben managed. He was a genius with a wrench but he didn't seem to take to paperwork and numbers."

"Everyone wondered that same thing," Mac said, sipping his coffee.

"It's tedious, that's for sure. Say, something's been weighing on my mind a little bit. Been a long time since I had a girlfriend, you know? You ever wonder what the hell's going on in Gina's head?"

Mac broke into a huge grin. "You're kidding me, right?"

"So that's a no? Because Sarah—she's got a lot on her mind, I know that. But man, she's on another planet sometimes. Makes me wonder if anything is wrong. But then she's back and I wonder why I wondered..."

"Coop, you remember how many women I live with, right? There's Lou, Eve and Dee Dee at home but then there's Gina and all her women—her mother and her daughter, who at the moment is a mess over some boyfriend issue. Half the time I don't have any idea what's going on in any of their heads!"

"Oh," he said. "That's a no?"

"That's a no."

"How do you handle that?"

"Do you see me handling anything? I pretty much just duck."

"Oh, you're a big help..."

"Sorry, man. I just do as I'm told most of the time," Mac said.

Cooper just stared at him. "Why aren't you completely bald?"

"It's a wonder, isn't it? Lou says there's something in the male hormone that prevents me from getting it. She's probably right."

* * *

Gina went home during the midmorning slow time at the diner to check on Ashley, as she'd done the two previous days. This was her third day of grieving and Ashley just lay in her bed, clutching her phone. Gina had tried prying it out of her fingers once but her daughter tearfully whimpered, "But what if he calls me?"

"It would probably be best if you just turned the phone off," Gina said. "If he calls you, let him find you're over him!"

"I'm so not over him," she said.

"~~This can't go on, Ash,~~" she said. "~~You have to get a grip. You have to get up, get cleaned up, go to school.~~"

"You have no idea what you're saying," she cried.

"Don't I? Ashley, my boyfriend left me pregnant at fifteen. When I told him, he ran far and fast and never looked back! Ashley, I know how this hurts, believe me."

She rolled over, her red hair everywhere, and tearfully said, "I wouldn't mind that, you know. At least you still had a part of him to live for. What do I have?"

Gina wanted to shake her. "Your dignity! He cheated on you—you should kick him to the curb, not suffer in rejection. Get mad! I hope the sorry bastard gets a disease!"

"Mama," she cried, fresh tears spilling all over her face. "Don't say that, Mama. You love Downy. And my heart hurts...."

She didn't love Downy anymore. How could he take her little girl's innocence and then dismiss her so cruelly? Describe her as "the girl I dated back home" like she was history? He should be brutally punished. *How could he?*

Because he's an eighteen-year-old boy, her wiser self said. He did what most eighteen-year-old boys do. And Ash is just a sixteen-year-old girl, doing what comes naturally—grieving her loss. It could just as easily have gone the other way—Ashley could have become bored with her absent boyfriend and found someone new at school, some current popular jock who had time to date, to take her to the dances and games. This could be Downy wallowing in depression because his girlfriend had dumped him.

Why couldn't it be that way, huh? she asked herself. She didn't want her daughter to be mean and insensitive, but she also didn't want this—this sobbing, broken mess who wouldn't get out of bed.

"I'm going back to work," she said. "When I get home later I want you up. I want you showered, doing your best to get on with life because you can't fix this, Ashley. I'm not going to let you shrivel up and waste away just because Downy was an unfaithful ass. Do you hear me? Tomorrow you go to school, no excuses."

She rolled over and looked at her through wet eyes. "I loved him," she whispered. "I loved him so much."

"But you can't make a person love you back," Gina whispered.

"Are you sure? Because somehow I made him love me once."

Gina smoothed her crazy red hair back off her brow. "I know, baby. Someday you're going to understand that you dodged a bullet here. You don't want a boyfriend who can't be faithful, who can't keep his promises. Believe me."

Ashley just shook her head. She rolled over and, gripping her phone, as she had been for days, she gently wept.

Gina got away from the house. She walked down the hill to the diner before pulling out her own phone. She stared at it for a moment. She sat down on one of the benches outside the diner's front door and clicked on Marjorie Downy's number. When the woman answered she said, "Marjorie, hi. It's Gina James."

"Hi there, Gina."

"I wonder if you know—Downy and Ashley broke up."

There was a heavy sigh from Marjorie. "I did hear that. I can't say I'm surprised. I thought that when they were apart for a while, at different schools, it might end up like this. That's too bad for Ashley, Gina."

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