

RESTORING  HERITAGE · 2

until I
met you

TARI FARIS


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To my parents,
Dave and Joyce Thompson.

Thank you for believing
I could be an author
and doing everything in your power
to help me become one.

one

Today was a new start, and this time running back home wasn't an option. Libby Kingsley pulled alongside the curb in front of her brother's house and shoved her car into Park. She reached back and ran her fingers through the thick fur of her yellow lab asleep in back. "We're here, Darcy."

The dog stretched his neck and leaned into the scratch. He was the perfect balance of confidence and calm—two things she needed more of.

Her phone rang, and she pulled it out to check the display. She sighed and answered the call. "Hi, Mom. I'm here safe and sound."

"How are Luke and Hannah?" Her mom's words were casual, but she'd probably been tracking her phone every mile of her drive from their Chicago suburb to Heritage, Michigan.

"I haven't even made it out of the car." Libby leaned over her steering wheel, taking in her brother's restored Victorian. The mid-day sun highlighted the white siding, black shutters, and large bay window. "But the front of his house looks amazing."

"He's done so much with that place in such a short period." Her mom carried on as if she was ready to talk all day. "Perhaps marriage and a baby on the way gave him that extra push of determination."

Libby scanned what she could see of Heritage. A moving truck was backed up to the house next door, the rear door rolled up and the ramp extended. If someone was moving in, at least she wouldn't be the only new face in town. "Maybe I'll find those in this small town too."

"A husband and a baby?" Her mom's voice wavered. "Don't rush into anything."

A man Jane Austen couldn't have written any better stepped out of the neighboring house and marched to the moving truck. Black hair a little long on top, square jaw, and arms strong enough that he could probably unload the truck single-handedly. Libby swallowed against her suddenly dry throat. The guy's gray T-shirt pulled tight across his wide shoulders as he lifted a box and disappeared into the backyard.

Heritage was looking pretty good.

"Libby?"

The guy reappeared but this time with a large white dog on his heels. Darcy's ears perked up as he watched the other dog nudge the man's leg with a chew toy hanging from its mouth. The man knelt and scratched at the thick white fur, then tossed the chew toy into his backyard. He grabbed another box from the truck as the pup dashed behind the fence again.

Darcy whimpered at the window, and Libby ran a soothing hand over his head. Okay, so the dog was not always the example of calm. But could she blame him?

"Now, Libby." Her mom's voice shook her back to the present. "You remember what happened last time you—"

"No, not a husband." She dismissed the image of the man. No doubt he had a pretty little wife around there somewhere. "I meant I want to find an extra push of determination. Or purpose. Or something adultlike. I think this job will be a good fit for me."

"Did Hannah give you any more details about the library?"

Darcy nosed her shoulder, and she offered him another scratch. “I’ve worked at enough public libraries to know it’ll be pretty straightforward. Besides, it’s time I stop hiding from the past. It’s time to live again.” Her voice rose, bringing silence from the other end. A new job, new address, and new life were just what the doctor—er, therapist—had ordered, even if her mom didn’t want to hear it.

Libby rested her forehead against the steering wheel. “Besides, Mom, I want to be near Luke and his new family. I want more than the occasional text or phone call. I want a front-row seat watching his kids grow up. We missed so much with him. I don’t want to miss any more.”

“Maybe you could talk him into moving back here.”

Libby picked at a thread on her skinny jeans and resisted the temptation to pull it. “He’s happy here, Mom . . . and I think I could be too.”

“You can always come home, Libby.” The tenderness in her mother’s voice nearly undid her. Her mother was a strong, wise woman, but losing Luke at such a young age had broken something in her—in all of them. Ever since, her mom had a hard time letting her children go. Libby had let her mom rescue her three years ago. She’d gone home to heal and never left.

That was why this *had* to work. Going back was not an option for her. It was time to stand on her own two feet.

She reached for the leash and snapped her fingers. “I’ve got to go, Mom. I’ll call later.”

Darcy’s caramel-colored snout shoved between the front seats before Libby could get her phone back in her purse. “Whoa, boy.”

Heavy paws jammed into her leg as a bundle of fur blurred past her the instant the door popped open. Clearly, he hadn’t learned his manners from his namesake—Fitzwilliam Darcy. The finest example of a swoon-worthy hero if there ever was one. Her

college roommate always said that Libby's love of literature made her standards for dating too high. But since her last boyfriend had held her at gunpoint and left her a borderline agoraphobic for three years, maybe her standards weren't high enough.

Libby climbed from her car, soaking in the sweet scent of the moist ground and new beginnings. A cool breeze holding on to the tail of a summer storm whipped her long blonde hair around her neck, sending a shiver up her spine. The first week of August in Michigan should be warm—hot even—but Michigan was known for playing dice with the weather no matter the season.

She pressed the lock on her key fob and waited for the comforting click before giving the handle a test tug. Her two bags, pillow, and box of books in the back seat would be safe on the street, right? The town was practically Mayberry, but then again, experience had taught her appearances could be deceiving.

The leash in her hand jerked her toward the town square across the street. Libby recovered her balance and pulled Darcy toward Luke's porch. "Later, boy. I promise."

The brass hippo that Hannah had told her about lay facing her on the sidewalk about halfway between Luke's and the new neighbor's house. It was like he'd shown up to greet her. Maybe he had. What was his name again?

"Libby! Just in time." Luke burst through the door, rattling the hand-painted Welcome sign hanging on the door. His brown curls stuck up at odd angles as if he'd been combing his hands through them over and over. Was his hoodie inside out?

Libby glanced at her watch. "I'm two hours ahead of schedule."

"Right. Sorry, just give me a minute." Her younger brother, normally the example of cool and collected, charged down the stairs and threw a bag in the bed of his red pickup. He circled her light blue sedan and pulled at the door.

“You locked it?” He shot her a grin. “You’re in Heritage now, not Chicago.”

She clicked the key fob but didn’t comment. Leaving the doors locked was a habit she was okay with keeping.

Luke hefted her box of books from the back seat. “I know you want to get your own place, but there isn’t a lot to rent right now in Heritage. But we have an idea. We bought the house two doors down to flip, but it needs a lot of work like this one did.” With long-legged strides, Luke took the porch steps two at a time. “We thought you could live there while I’m working on it. You’d be close by but still have your own space. And the owner will give you the best rent in town.”

A dog barked from the other side of the door, accompanied by a thud.

Luke propped the box on his hip as he opened the door, blocking his shepherd-Lab’s escape with his knee. “Easy, Spitz.”

Inside, Luke dropped the box by the door and reached for Spitz’s collar. He invited Libby inside with a wave of his hand, then closed the door behind her.

“Sounds great.” She set her bag next to the box. “Should I carry my stuff there now?”

“No, it’s not quite ready. But almost.”

She detached Darcy’s leash just before the two dogs pounced on each other. Pawing, sniffing, circling. Spitz spun and dashed through a large dog door with Darcy at his heels.

“Hey, Luke, do—” She turned to where he’d just been standing, but he’d disappeared. They wouldn’t have a dog door without a fence, right?

She hesitated in the entryway, then moved to the window. Both dogs romped in the fenced side yard, happy as could be. Maybe she needed to stop freaking out over every little thing. Beginning with her dog playing outside.

Libby sat on an antique bench in the entryway and slid off her shoes. She placed them next to a square basket filled with shoes and a few chewed tennis balls.

The dark wooden floors, white baseboards, and painted blue-gray walls had been there at Christmas, but something still felt different—warmer. Maybe it was the sweet smell of vanilla and cinnamon that hung in the air. Her stomach growled and she pressed her hand against it.

“Sorry for the poor welcome.” Hannah, her sister-in-law, walked in as she secured her long dark hair in a messy bun on top of her head. Dressed in what appeared to be Luke’s old sweatpants rolled up at the ankles, a burgundy oversize sweatshirt, and a pair of polka-dot socks on her feet, she shuffled toward Libby and wrapped her in a hug.

Hannah still had a few months to go, but there was no hiding the fact she was eating for two. Beckoning Libby into the kitchen next to the entryway, she slid into a chair at the table with careful movements and reached for a sheet of paper. “I wrote out some notes for you. Make yourself at home. Hopefully we won’t be gone long.”

“You’re leaving? Is everything okay?” Libby hated how weak her voice sounded. But it was easier to be brave when she wasn’t going to be alone in a strange town.

“I’m having a bit of bleeding.” A slight waver accompanied her words as Hannah rubbed her hand over her belly.

Libby’s chest tightened as a list of worst-case scenarios ran through her mind. “You have three months to go, right? Why didn’t Luke call me?”

Hannah placed her hand on her back and shifted positions. “I’m twenty-seven weeks. It started just about an hour ago, and you don’t answer your phone while you’re driving.”

Libby gripped the back of the chair next to her, reminding herself to breathe. In through the nose, out through the mouth.

Hannah leaned forward and placed a hand on hers. “Don’t worry, though. My doctor wanted me to get checked but said it could be a number of things. With any luck, we’ll be back tonight. That’s what we’re praying, anyway.”

Right. Praying.

Libby had stopped putting faith in prayer over twenty years ago when Luke never came home.

Hannah pointed to a plate of oatmeal raisin cookies wrapped in cellophane on the table. “I made these for the new neighbors. We haven’t seen them, just the truck. Luke says they may just be workers because that house is in bad shape. But I made them cookies anyway. Oh, and Luke put your bike in the shed. Patty, is it?”

“Petunia.” Knowing her bike was near released a bit of the ever-present knot in her stomach and shoulders. Luke had brought it up in his truck last week. It had only made sense, but a week without Petunia had been rough. Bike rides were one of the few times she didn’t feel weighed down by life. “I know it’s weird that I name my bike.”

“I think it’s awesome. And I’d offer to go for a ride with you”—she patted her rounded belly—“but we’ll have to wait a few months.”

Luke burst back into the room with another bag, his chest heaving as if he’d been doing sprints, and grabbed his keys from the hook. “Ready?”

Hannah reached for Luke’s hand. “How much stuff do you think we need?” She turned back to Libby. “Lib, I know it’s a lot to ask, with you being new yourself, but would you mind delivering the cookies while they’re fresh? Tell them we’ll stop by once this little one settles down a bit. Oh, and Spitz needs to be fed.”

“Cookies to the neighbors. Feed Spitz. Make myself at home.” Libby forced a confident smile as she made check marks in the air.

Luke reached out and gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We’re

glad you're here, Libby." He slid an arm around Hannah's waist and guided her toward the front door. "We'll call as soon as we know anything."

His words rolled over in her head a couple of times. Libby blinked away the tears blurring her vision as she offered a final wave. She closed the door and pressed her back against the wooden panel.

Luke was glad she was here. That's what mattered. Life had given her and her brother a second chance, and this time she'd be here for him. And if right now being here for Luke looked like taking care of his dog and greeting his neighbors, then she could do that.

Returning to the kitchen, Libby scooped up the covered plate piled with warm oatmeal raisin cookies and looked out the window toward the moving van. Her hands shook a little, and she drew in a slow, calming breath. One thing she'd learned from her therapist was that avoiding a hard situation now made it twice as hard later.

She straightened her shoulders and rehearsed the words. "Welcome to the neighborhood. Welcome, neighbors. Hey, you, welcome."

It shouldn't be that hard. Friendly people moved to small towns, right?

Libby slipped on her shoes and stepped onto the porch as the Mr. Knightley—incarnate neighbor slid into the cab of the moving truck with a second man. This guy had blond hair and was less literary hero and more military but just as attractive. The first guy started the engine and pulled away before she'd even gotten to the first step. So much for item number one.

She went back inside, turned the dead bolt, and returned the cookies to the table. She added food to Spitz's bowl and then found a bowl for Darcy.

Item number two—check.

Now to make herself at home.

How was she supposed to do that in someone else's house? Crossing the dark wooden floors, Libby circled the living room a few times. Her twin brothers, Logan and Liam, would have claimed the two matching recliners that faced the large flat screen in the corner, but that wasn't her style. She dug her toes into the plush area rug.

A brown microfiber couch by the window caught her eye. Maybe it wasn't the couch as much as the open novel that lay facedown on the arm. Or maybe the discarded white knitted throw that still held the shape of the absent reader. That had potential.

Libby snatched *Persuasion* out of the box Luke had left by the door, sank into the other end of the couch, and pulled the throw over her legs. The knotted muscles at the base of her neck started to unravel. Yes, this would do.

Now all she needed was Darcy. But since he'd run off to play with Spitz the instant his bowl was empty, for now she'd have to be content with Captain Wentworth.

Three pages into chapter 8, her phone buzzed. Pulled from her book coma, Libby stretched and dug her phone out of her purse. It was a text from Hannah.

Still waiting on tests. We have an underground fence. I left a collar for Darcy by the back door. Thx again.

Libby sat up straight. Underground fence? She glanced out the window at the wood-plank fence she'd seen earlier. What about that one?

Her eyes darted to Spitz asleep in his bed in the corner and then searched the room. Where was Darcy?

"Darcy?" She tossed the blanket aside and jumped to her feet, knocking her book on the floor. She ran into the kitchen. "Darcy!"

Nothing.

Flinging the back door open, Libby rushed outside, the early evening air biting her cheeks. She ran around the corner of the house and froze. The wooden fence wasn't Luke and Hannah's. It was the backside of the neighbor's fence.

She cupped her hands around her mouth. "Darcy!"

Still nothing.

She yelled his name louder. Her heart smacked against her rib cage as adrenaline flowed through her veins.

Libby dashed back inside and shoved her feet into her shoes, then sprinted out the front door. Standing in the front yard, she called again. And again.

She ran to the sidewalk, looked down the street, and cocked her head, listening for barking in the distance.

Empty. The street was quiet as far as she could see.

Darcy had wandered off once or twice before, but that had been at home where he was familiar with the neighborhood. He didn't know this place and neither did she. She didn't even know where to begin looking.

What if he . . . What if . . .

Her mom was right. She should've never left home. And now she was paying the price for thinking she could have a fresh start.

Austin Williams had only two goals this summer—to keep the family landscaping business from going under and to make his dad happy by getting along with his brother, Nate. But right now, both seemed out of reach.

He navigated the long hallway toward his dad's assigned room, taking care not to knock the end table against the wall. A door up ahead opened. Then closed. Then opened. Then closed. When it opened another time, the wheel of a walker made it into view, but

that was all. Austin set the end table against the wall and rushed forward. A tiny woman struggled to navigate her walker through the doorway. Austin pushed the door wider and helped guide the walker out.

Her smile creased deep lines in her face and added a twinkle to her eyes. “You’re a handsome fellow. Do you work here?”

“Nope. Moving my dad in.” He made sure she was stable before he stepped back.

“If he’s as handsome as you, I’ll have to meet him.” She attempted a wink, then moved down the adjacent hallway.

Austin was still smiling when he arrived at his dad’s room a minute later. “I think you’ll like it here, Dad. I already got you a date.”

His dad’s vacant expression fixed on the blank TV as he rubbed the top of his head. His hair had gone fully gray in the past year, but he still had it all. “You forgot to hook it up. I’m going to miss the game.”

Austin wedged himself between the console and the wall, connected the cables to his dad’s forty-eight-inch flat screen, and tested the power. All seemed to be working, and just in time. He checked his watch. He couldn’t wait for Nate any longer. He knew better than to depend on his brother, but he’d foolishly done it again. Now he had to rush to get the truck back or be charged for another day.

“This is the last box. Thanks for leaving me the heaviest one.” His childhood buddy Grant walked through the door of the assisted-living suite and set the box by the door to the bedroom.

“Consider it an initiation into the family. Besides, you can’t let those old military muscles of yours go soft.”

“Since I married Caroline last year, I’m not sure the initiation idea works. And if you want to talk about going soft, I saw you struggling with the grill earlier.” Grant brushed his blond hair out of his eyes and turned full circle, taking in the room. As if there

was a lot more to take in than the generic white walls, gray Berber carpet, and a kitchenette. “Looks good.”

They’d gotten the TV set up and hung his dad’s prized, autographed Alan Trammell jersey. Tomorrow he’d have to locate the photo of his father with the baseball legend to hang next to it.

“I don’t like it.” His dad shifted his position on the brown leather couch and propped his broken foot on the wooden stool with a thud. At least his dad had gotten to bring his own furniture. He would’ve hated institutional furniture.

“It’ll feel more like home when we get everything unpacked.” Austin found the box labeled “Photos” and peeled back the tape. He pulled out an old family photo from ten years ago. Back when his mom was still alive and when he and Nate had been more than brothers—they’d been best friends.

Time heals all wounds.

What a dumb saying.

He set that photo next to an old black-and-white wedding photo of his parents. Austin couldn’t imagine a love like that. They’d known some hard times, but they’d lasted. They’d trusted each other with no strings attached. No one loved like that anymore. Everyone had their agenda. That’s why life was easier single.

He set a few other framed photos out and then pushed the box aside. “I’ll unpack the rest of the boxes tomorrow. It took longer than I expected to unload the truck.”

Because he’d planned on it being a three-man job, not a two-man job.

Grant dropped into the well-worn, overstuffed recliner. “Give it a chance, Uncle Henry. The staff is great, the building is well maintained, and you have a nice view.”

Austin glanced at his watch and then out the window of Reflections Care Home. Long summer grass had grown over the edges of the glorified pond. Still, Grant was right—the pine trees and

the way the setting sun painted the water orange and yellow on nights like tonight would be calming for his dad.

“I meant the TV. I want it there.” His father pointed to the exact place Austin had put it three tries ago.

“You said it had a glare there.” Austin’s hand tightened on the keys in his pocket, but he kept his voice calm.

“Forget it. I’ll move it myself.” His father grabbed his cane and hobbled toward the bathroom, his walking cast causing a muffled thud on the dense carpet with every step until he slammed the door.

Grant shot a look at Austin, stood, and jerked his head toward the TV. “I’ll help.”

“Thanks. Then we have to get going or I’ll be late.”

Grant detached the row of cords from the TV. “I don’t remember your dad being this . . .”

“Grumpy? He’s not usually.”

“You don’t think I confused him by calling him Uncle Henry, do you? I know he’s Caroline’s uncle, but he always felt like an uncle even before.”

“No, he just doesn’t want to be here, and I was the one who forced the issue.” Austin lifted the TV and waited while Grant slid the console to the other corner.

“Because of his broken foot?”

Austin set the TV back on the console and started attaching the cords. “That didn’t help. But when he nearly burned the house down trying to make eggs last month, I had to draw the line. I should’ve forced the issue two months ago when he decided to go for a walk and got lost. He ended up five miles away, unable to tell anyone where he lived or who he was.”

“You aren’t worried about that here?” Grant gathered the wires and handed them to Austin.

“This is a specialized unit for Alzheimer’s. It feels more

independent—like an apartment. But there are alarms if they wander. Plus they’ll make sure he eats and gets his daily medications.” Austin fitted the first HDMI cord to the satellite box, then inspected the TV for the right input connection. “I can’t be there all the time, and he refused to have someone stay with him. Even if he’s lucid half the time, he needs someone around the other half, and I can’t do that and work.”

“How’s the business going?” Grant settled back on the recliner.

“We aren’t under yet.” He connected the last cable and tested the power.

Grant leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and chuckled. “Caroline thinks you should breed Shiro.”

“I know.” Austin sighed, not relishing the idea of a houseful of puppies, but a litter from his purebred Japanese Akita could bring in over ten thousand dollars. That might be enough to hold off some of his creditors a little longer. The last thing he needed was to get the truck repossessed. “I have to decide soon too. She’s in heat.”

“If you have any questions, ask Caroline. Did she tell you that she’s been researching adding a service-dog breeding program to the ranch? She’s taken a couple classes, and we have enough books on dog breeding and service dogs in our house to open a library.”

Austin scrolled through the input menu with the remote and cringed. He’d switched two HDMI cables. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

His dad emerged from the bathroom and walked toward the couch, leaning on his cane with a stronger limp. “When are we eating lunch?”

Grant looked at Austin with a raised eyebrow. “We ate on—”

“Are you hungry, Dad?” Correcting him only caused frustration. Austin had learned that early on in his father’s illness. “I bought some of those nutrition shakes you like.” He grabbed a bottle promising to taste like a vanilla milkshake from the almost bare fridge and handed it to his dad with a large white pain pill.

“Knock knock.” Nate opened the door, holding a white grocery sack. “Canned meat and spray cheese. Housewarming gifts of champions.”

“Nate, you saved me from eating this junk.” Their dad waved the bottle, then set it on the end table. At least he’d taken the pill.

“I told you he’d make it.” Grant glanced at his watch and shrugged. “Sort of made it.”

Austin didn’t comment. He just stared at the face too much like his own. Nate had the same black hair. Same gray eyes. Same build. Same cowlick on the left side of his forehead. People had confused Nate and Austin for twins a lot growing up, even though there were ten months between them. They still had a similar look. But no one would confuse them these days. Not with the four tattoos Nate had—or was that five now?

Austin returned to the TV, squatted down, and undid the two wrong cords.

Nate set the grocery bag on a small oak table by the door and pulled out the spray cheese and a box of crackers. “I know I said I’d be here two hours ago, but an emergency came up at church and—”

“Not a problem.” Their dad cut Nate’s words off with a wave as he reached for the food in Nate’s hand. “I know you have important things to do. Austin has lots of time.”

Right, because saving the family business their father had run into the ground was no work at all.

Austin checked his watch again before attaching one of the cords. “I’ve got to drop the truck off before I’m charged for another day.” He shot a look at Nate. “Can you still give Grant and me a ride back to Heritage?”

“Sure thing.” Nate dropped onto the couch next to their dad and pointed to the spot where the TV had just been. “I would’ve put the TV by that wall.”

“Think so?” Their dad studied the wall. “Maybe you’re right.”

“You’d better get moving if you’re going to get the truck back, Austin.” Nate stood, shoved his hands in his pockets, and nodded toward the TV. “I’ll meet you at the place after I get the TV moved.”

Their dad smiled at Nate like he’d been the one who’d offered to rearrange his entire day to get him settled.

Austin dropped the remaining unattached cord and stood. “Can I talk to you in the hall?”

Nate’s back stiffened, but he nodded and followed Austin out.

Austin leaned against the floral wallpaper opposite the door. “What were you thinking showing up with that junk food? Did you read *any* of the material I sent you?”

Nate winced and had the decency to look embarrassed. “I will. It’s been a busy week.”

“Alzheimer’s symptoms are exacerbated by nitrates. Nitrates are in highly processed foods. Canned meat and spray cheese are about as processed as you can get. The article even used both as examples of some of the worst foods.”

“I won’t buy him any more.” Nate picked at the oak chair rail lining the wall. “I’m sorry. I just bought his favorites. I didn’t know.”

“Of course not.” Austin pushed off the wall and paced down the hall a few steps, then back. “You didn’t know because you haven’t been the one watching Dad slide into this dark disease over the past year or spent your free time researching it. You haven’t been trying to pull the family business back from bankruptcy that Dad nearly landed us in because he couldn’t seem to remember the commitments he’d made or the bills that were due.”

Austin stopped and stared at the paneled ceiling. After drawing a slow breath, he leaned back against the wall and met his brother’s gaze. “Listen, Dad wanted to be near you, so I found him a respectable place fifteen minutes from Heritage. I found him a local doctor who specializes in Alzheimer’s. I even rented a

house in Heritage so I could be within driving distance and finish the town square job that Dad signed a contract for without asking me. All I'm asking you to do is read what I send you."

"You could've lived with me."

Austin snickered. "You think that would've worked well?"

A twentysomething blonde nurse wearing light-blue scrubs pushed a cart past them and offered them a smile, blushing as Nate smiled back. The guy hadn't even given a flirty smile—just something polite. What was it about him and women?

"The board wants me to meet with you about your plans for the town square before the interview with *Reader's Weekly*."

Austin's attention snapped back to Nate. "You?"

Nate rubbed the back of his neck. "As assistant fire chief, I'm also on the town council. And since it's our family business and I volunteered to be your assistant, I became the point man for the project."

"I don't need an assistant." Austin pushed off the wall.

"With Dad in here, you'll need help with a project this big."

"I don't believe this." Austin clenched his molars and took a step toward Nate. "Almost bankrupting us six years ago wasn't enough? Now you decide to come back and finish the job?"

"I'm trying to help you save the business. You're going to hold my past over my head my whole life?"

Austin stiffened. He hated the feeling that he was being the unreasonable one here. But he had been the one busting his tail to get them out of the hole Nate had dug for them. "Choices come with consequences, and some things can't be undone."

Their dad's door popped open as Grant stepped out. His wide military shoulders wedged between them. "I see you two are finally talking. Good progress. But just so you know, we can hear you in here. And your dad is setting up a game of chess to play with Nate."

"Of course he is," Austin mumbled. "The golden child has arrived. Break out the games."

“That’s not true.” Nate glanced at Grant as if looking for backup.

Grant shrugged, clearly not wanting to take sides. “It’s a little true.” He ducked back inside the room, shutting the door behind him.

Nate reached for the door handle. “We need to meet before Wednesday. That’s the day of the interview. Just let me know when and where.”

Austin didn’t respond. Following Nate back inside, he reached for his coat. “I’ve got to get the truck back.” He winced at the edge in his voice and the way their father’s brow had pinched into a scowl.

He’d promised himself that he wouldn’t let Nate get to him today. So much for that. And by the look on their dad’s face, he’d let him down too.

Austin forced a smile and clapped a hand on their dad’s shoulder. “I’ll stop by tomorrow, Dad, and help unload the last of the boxes.”

Nate picked up one of the photos from the box. “Why is this here?”

“That’s me and Greg.” His dad pointed at it with a smile. “We had some great adventures together. You remind me a lot of him, Nate.”

The muscle in Nate’s jaw twitched as he put the photo back in the box and took a seat next to their dad.

His dad patted Nate’s hand. “Tell me about life as a pastor.”

Grant pointed at the TV. “I’ll move that and come with Nate.”

Austin shoved out the door without another word. No doubt Nate believed that Austin had brought the photo on purpose, but he hadn’t. He had no idea how it got in the box. He hadn’t even seen that photo in years.

Austin pulled up the directions on his phone. The quicker he left, the quicker today’s stress would melt away.

On the app, an icon indicated an accident, and a dark red line followed US 31 South. Exactly where he needed to go.

With traffic, he was looking at a forty-five-minute drive. No way he'd get the truck back in thirty minutes.

Terrific.

Numbers ran through his mind of how much this was going to cost him.

He dug the keys out of his front pocket, unlocked the truck, and slid behind the wheel, resisting the urge to slam his fist against the dash. He gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles whitening.

He needed to find another job fast or figure out how he was going to work with Nate. Because history had proven he and his brother were an explosive combination.

Maybe breeding his dog was the better option. He pulled up the number he'd been given for a possible stud appointment and hit Send. After all, a houseful of puppies would be easier than working with his brother.