



Turn
to Me

A Misty River Romance

BECKY WADE

Author of the 2018 Christy Award Book of the Year

Turn to Me

A Misty River Romance

BECKY WADE



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Turn to Me • Becky Wade

Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group © 2022 used by permission

© 2022 by Rebecca C. Wade

Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wade, Becky, author.

Title: Turn to me / Becky Wade.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of
Baker Publishing Group, [2022] | Series: Misty river romance ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2021056246 | ISBN 9780764235627 (paper) | ISBN 9780764240089
(casebound) | ISBN 9781493425235 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Romance fiction. | Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A33 T87 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20211119

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021056246>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations labeled esv are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover photography by Todd Hafermann Photography, Inc.

Author is represented by Linda Kruger.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In memory of my beloved Writer Dog, Sam

2010–2021

You were beside me

while I wrote the PORTER FAMILY series,

the BRADFORD SISTERS series,

and the MISTY RIVER ROMANCE series.

Your love and companionship

made my life so much richer.

Thank you, sweetheart.

PROLOGUE

NOVEMBER

Finley Sutherland's father had left her several things in his will, the most surprising of which was a clue.

"But . . . I don't understand," she said to Rosco Horton, attorney-at-law.

"Your father planned a treasure hunt for you." Mr. Horton leaned forward over his impressive potbelly, huffing at the exertion, to extend a white envelope to her across his desk. "He stipulated that you be presented with this, the first clue in the treasure hunt, at the reading of his will."

She accepted the envelope, instantly recognizing her father's handwriting and the thick flow of black ink from his favorite fountain pen.

For Finley, he'd written on the outside.

"He asks that you store the envelope in a safe location," Mr. Horton said, "and wait until the morning of your next birthday to open it. When is your next birthday?"

"January."

"Do you think you can resist peeking until then?"

“Absolutely.” It felt sacrilegious to even consider violating a request left for her in her dad’s will.

Finley held the envelope carefully, aware of the attorney’s attention on her as she looked down at it in her lap. Her father had named Mr. Horton the executor of his will. And since she was the only child of a bachelor, he’d named her his sole beneficiary. After the will cleared probate, she’d inherit his property, bank accounts, investments, and assets. And yet this—a simple envelope—was the thing stirring both grief and wonder within her.

Her father had died suddenly in prison one month ago.

She hadn’t expected him to speak or write another word to her. Yet through this mysterious, surprising letter, he’d found a way to continue communicating with her. *For Finley.*

“Your father told me that he used to create birthday treasure hunts for you when you were growing up,” Mr. Horton said.

She raised her face. “Yes. Every single birthday before I left for college, he’d send me on a treasure hunt to find my gift.”

“Sounds like a nice father-daughter tradition.”

“It was.” Memories rushed like a film reel through her brain. Her gasps of discovery when she’d solved one of his clues. His deep chuckle. The patter of her feet as she’d race to see if she’d guessed the location of the next clue correctly. Tearing away shiny pink paper to reveal the dollhouse he’d given her when she turned seven.

Astonishingly, her father was reaching out from the grave to give her one final gift.

CHAPTER ONE

JANUARY

This wasn't the first time that Luke Dempsey had been burned by his belief in the concept of honor among thieves.

This was only the most recent time.

When he'd been burned in the past, he'd told himself he wouldn't put himself on the line again. But in time, his conscience would butt in where it wasn't wanted. He'd put himself on the line. Then pay the price. Then tell himself all over again that he'd learned his lesson.

This time he really *had* learned his lesson. For the final time.

On this cold, overcast Wednesday morning, Luke set his jaw and walked from his parking space toward Furry Tails Animal Rescue Center. A black metal roof topped the dark gray modern building that occupied several acres on the road leading east out of Misty River, Georgia.

He'd waited a long time to be free. In fact, he'd spent all seven years of his incarceration meticulously planning his future. The second he finished his obligation here, he'd move to Montana and build a house with a view of mountains and big sky. From his home office, he'd launch a career in software and website development.

He'd walked through the rooms of his Montana house in his

imagination so many times, furnishing every square inch, that those rooms had become more real to him than the rooms of his childhood home. He *needed* to get to Montana and begin work. His old life had been stripped away, and his new start was the only thing left that mattered to him.

But thanks to his inconvenient sense of honor, he first had to keep his promise to Ed Sutherland. Until he made good on that, he'd be stuck here, in the hometown that reminded him a hundred times a day of the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

He let himself inside the building.

No one waited in the foyer. The Furry Tails logo—a stylized dog inside a circle—had been painted in white on the slats of wood covering the wall opposite him. Four chairs surrounded a coffee table. On top of that sat a few small pots of cacti and a stack of *ASPCA Action* magazines. The air smelled like pears and dog. A baby gate guarded the bottom half of a door that led to a concrete hallway and the distant sound of barking.

Frowning, he tapped the bell resting on top of the magazines. He hadn't even started his first workday here, and irritation was already infecting his mood.

He waited. No one responded to the bell, so he punched it with his fist. It rang loudly.

“Coming!” a feminine voice called cheerfully from the back.

According to Furry Tails' website, Finley had started the non-profit eight years ago out of her house while working a full-time day job. Six years ago, a local farmer had donated the use of his barn as her headquarters, and she'd become the organization's first paid employee. Two years ago, Furry Tails had built and relocated to this facility—

A woman sailed into the room. She was young, beautiful, and dressed like a hippie in a strange felt hat with a wide brim. “May I help you?”

“My name's Luke Dempsey. I'm here to see Finley Sutherland.”

She smiled. “I'm Finley Sutherland.”

His body tensed in surprise.

She extended her hand. He shook it.

“It’s great to finally meet you,” she said.

How could this be Finley?

“Welcome to the Furry Tails team.” Stepping away, she stuck her fingers into the tiny front pockets of her bell-bottom jeans. Her head tilted. “Were you expecting someone older?”

“Yes.” Much older.

“That’s a common response when people meet my dad before they meet me.”

“He was in his eighties.”

“I was born when he was fifty-two. You’d think that more children would have resulted from all of those passionate love affairs of his.” She shrugged. “But no. He only had me. And fairly late in the game.”

Ed’s nickname had been Mountain Man. He’d had thick white hair. A white-gray beard. His features were strong and even, but his skin had been deeply lined and permanently tanned.

Luke would never have expected Ed’s daughter to look like this. Skin as pale as the moon. Bright blue eyes. Long black hair. Around five foot eight with slender limbs. Her beige sweater looked like it had been knitted by a person instead of a machine. She wore brown clogs and gold rings on almost every finger.

Why would anyone wear a hat indoors to work with animals? Her body was perfect, though. And those lips—

Stop it. He needed to think straight. It’s just . . . How could *this* be Ed’s daughter? “How old are you?” he asked bluntly.

“I’m about to turn thirty.” She beckoned him to follow. “Come. Let me give you a tour.”

They walked past the baby gate, which she clicked closed behind them.

“This is a big day for us because you’re Furry Tails’ fifth official employee,” she announced. “For the most part, we function thanks to a large number of volunteers.” She gestured right and left. “Our offices are through there. This is our meeting and training room.

This is the classroom for the after-school program. Here are the restrooms. This is the equipment room. This is where we bathe the dogs.”

Through a doorway, they entered a wide space lined with kennels on both sides. About half were occupied with dogs.

“Hello, sweethearts,” she said to them as they made their way toward a door marked with an exit sign.

Luke had only had one dog in his life, when he’d been in elementary school. A golden retriever named Caramel. She’d been very laid-back and he’d gotten along with her fine. But he definitely hadn’t been an animal-crazy kid and wasn’t an animal-crazy adult.

“The rest of the dogs are outside having recess,” Finley told him as they stepped into a large fenced yard. Beyond, forested hills arched toward the sky. Here, toys littered the ground. So did short tunnels and equipment for the dogs to climb.

Dogs of all ages ran around, yipping. One of them was missing an eye. Another had three legs. Another had wheels strapped to his hips, which functioned in the place of his limp back legs.

Mentally, he tried to count how many hours he’d have to work here before he could fulfill his promise and quit.

“When I started Furry Tails, I rescued all kinds of animals near and far,” she said. “But I quickly figured out how important it was to concentrate my mission. Now we focus on dogs in Rabun County. Specifically abandoned puppies, senior pets who’ve been surrendered by their owners, and dogs with special needs. As you probably noticed, several of the dogs here are pugs.”

He hadn’t noticed, nor cared.

“I’m very involved with pug rescue,” she said.

“I see.”

One of the pugs approached, and she knelt to scratch under his chin. “Hello, Harry, you gorgeous dog. You’re gorgeous, aren’t you? So gorgeous!”

Harry was not gorgeous. And Furry Tails was a lame thing

to call a shelter. The pugs' tails weren't even very furry. They reminded him of pigs' tails.

"Do the dogs . . . get along okay?" It couldn't be a good idea to put a lot of rescue dogs in a yard together, could it?

"We can accommodate sixteen animals here at the shelter. The animals who stay here all have the ability to play nicely with others. We release half of them to the playground at a time. We know from experience that these eight, and the eight who are inside and will have the next turn, get along great." Harry reached his nose upward to give her better access. Based on Harry's breathing, it sounded like he suffered from allergies. "The large majority of the dogs in our program don't stay here."

"Where do they stay?"

"Foster homes. We have a wonderful network of foster parent volunteers who support our primary mission."

"Which is?"

"To place every dog in a loving forever home."

An old dog waddled over and put her paw on Luke's shin. Awkwardly, he gave her a couple of head pats.

"Our secondary mission," she continued, "is to stop the needless killing of animals. We do everything we can to keep them out of the pound. We offer a food pantry for owners struggling to afford the cost of dog food. We also organize spay and neutering clinics." Harry and the old dog lay down near their feet. Finley straightened, rattling off statistics about how many dogs and cats were euthanized each year.

Luke crossed his arms. Expressionless, he watched her cheeks turn pink as she got riled up about her topic. She moved her hands to underscore what she was saying. Clearly, it made her furious that senior, special needs, shy, stray, and aggressive animals didn't stand a chance at the pound.

"We rescue as many as we can off death row."

He'd always thought bleeding-heart animal activists were eccentric, and Finley was proving him right. She was odd. Probably

entitled, if her dad had handed her everything in life. Soft. Idealistic and naïve. A dreamer.

She finally paused long enough to take a deep breath. “Do you have any questions about our mission?”

“No.”

“Well, when questions occur to you, feel free to ask.” She met his eyes. “My dad really wanted you to work here while you’re getting back on your feet. It’s fulfilling to see his plan come to fruition.”

He didn’t tell her that he didn’t need this job to get back on his feet. He had both plenty of money and plenty of direction. “How much do you know about my friendship with your dad?”

“He talked about you a lot, so I know quite a bit. I know that you arrived at the penitentiary not long after he did.”

“Right.”

“How long had he been there when you got there? A year or so?”

He inclined his chin.

“Dad’s fellow inmates knew that I lived in Misty River. So they told Dad you were from here. He made a point of introducing himself to you and liked you from the start.”

“He was a good man.”

“Yes, he was.” Above, the clouds shifted. The first sunbeams of the day moved across the yard, sparkling against her rings. “Last summer, he told me that you’d be coming up for parole in the fall. He knew that you’d gotten a bachelor’s degree and master’s degree in computer science while in prison. He also knew that Furry Tails was in the market for a new website. You see, we need a more sophisticated way of matching available animals with people looking for certain criteria in a dog. We want to sell merchandise from our site. We want a platform for online fundraisers. We could really use more effective SEO, newsletters, ads, and social media. In my dad’s eyes, you’re a tech genius.”

“Your dad was over eighty. I think he viewed everyone my age as a tech genius.”

“No. He was hard to impress. If he thought someone was a genius in an area, he or she probably *is* a genius.”

He grunted.

The small dog with three legs stopped and gave Finley begging eyes. She scooped it into her arms. “Are we agreed that you’re enough of a genius to handle Furry Tails’ tech needs?”

“We’re agreed.”

“Excellent.” Carrying the dog, she led him back inside. After she pushed open the door marked *Offices* with her foot, they walked into a room with three desks on one side, facing windows. An island with storage below and a worktop above was positioned at the center of the space. A printer, copier, fax machine, water cooler, coffee bar, and mini fridge filled the wall across from the desks.

“This is our central work area. And this desk will be yours.” Supporting the dog with one hand, she indicated the desk farthest from the hallway with the other. “Do you have a computer, or do you need me to supply one?”

“I brought my own desktop computer. It’s in my truck.”

“Perfect. These two desks belong to Kat and Trish. They’re working today, but not in the office. They’re out doing home visits for prospective adoptive parents.”

Home visits? Was the bar to adopt a one-eyed dog high? He couldn’t imagine how she found homes for any of these animals.

“Kat handles adoptive parent training, volunteer committees, grants, the spay and neuter clinics, and all the paperwork and financials. Trish is the liaison for veterinary care, fundraisers, and the pet food pantry.”

“And what do you do?”

“I communicate with everyone who reaches out to us, which takes quite a bit of my time. I get more than a hundred daily emails and phone calls. I speak at events. Meet with donors. Stay in contact with the county pound. We all split the care and training of the animals.”

“You said I was the fifth employee. Who’s the fourth?”

“Akira, who runs our after-school program.” The dog with three legs sneezed. “I’m anticipating that you’ll spend most of your time at the computer. The rest with the animals.”

“I’m not experienced with animals.”

“Not a problem.”

Maybe not for her.

“We’ll teach you everything you need to know,” she said. A door at the end of the work area led to a smaller room. “This is my office. Please, have a seat.”

She’d painted the walls dark turquoise. Her shag rug seemed like a weird choice for a building that included dogs who might not be house-trained. More cacti were grouped on her Lucite desk next to a lamp, a mug, and an alabaster statue of a pug.

They sat.

It was hard to take her seriously while a dog was draped across her lap like a blanket.

“You make that chair look small and uncomfortable,” she said, obviously amused.

“That’s because it’s both.” Her chair was large and yellow. His was little and patterned, with shiny metal armrests.

“It’s neither,” she countered warmly. “I think it’s just that you’re large and predisposed to discomfort.”

He held her gaze but didn’t reply.

Finley did not subscribe to stereotypes.

That didn’t mean that she failed to note the characteristics of the people she met. She did note them. She just refrained from sticking people into boxes based on those characteristics.

She’d grown up running free across her father’s acres. With a tangle of hair flying behind her and a pack of animals dancing at her heels. It hadn’t been a conventional childhood, and she viewed herself as open-minded.

So, despite the fact that Luke Dempsey fit neatly into a box marked *Ex-Con*, she steadfastly refused to place him there.

His barricaded hazel eyes were thrown into prominence by his light tan. He had a regal nose that would have suited a nineteenth-century Italian prince. His lips formed a straight, serious line. Thick scruff covered the lean angles of cheekbones and jaw. His hair was a beautiful shade of dark brown. He'd cut it in a masculine style that had grown out so much that some of the strands were almost long enough to catch in his eyelashes. He wore a gray hoodie beneath a black leather jacket. His black jeans ended at lace-up boots.

She didn't often feel short around men, but he was several inches taller than she was. Six foot two, maybe? His muscular body moved with both defensiveness and the smoothness of an athlete. Had she not already known him to be thirty-three, she'd have guessed him to be slightly older.

Luke reminded her of slabs of slate. Craggy. Unyielding.

Typically, she surrounded herself with calming music, calming herbal teas, calming smells, calming poetry. He was not calming. He was quiet, but in the way that a volcano is quiet while magma rises dangerously below the surface.

Fortunately, silence didn't make Finley uncomfortable. She'd spent a lifetime talking to pets who couldn't talk back. In fact, few things—other than the killing of animals, nuclear weapons, injustice, war, the destruction of natural habitats, and the banning of books—made her uncomfortable.

“When did you get out on parole?” she asked.

“November.”

“Oh?” The sound communicated her surprise. “I told Dad months ago that I'd hire you as soon as you got out. Why did you wait until last week to contact me?”

“Because the promise I made to your dad doesn't go into effect until this weekend.”

If her brain had been a runner, the runner had just hit a brick wall. “Hmm?”

“What did they tell you about your dad's death?”

She scrambled to understand. He'd made a promise to her dad? Connected in some way to his death? "Everything I know about my dad's death came from the report the prison gave me. It said that Dad was in the common area, playing checkers. He stood up, swayed, and collapsed. His friends called for help, and he received treatment quickly. But there was nothing that could be done. He'd suffered sudden cardiac arrest. Within just a few minutes, he was gone."

He'd died on an especially golden October day. She'd been driving back to work after lunch out with donors, windows down to let in the beautiful weather, when she'd received a call from the prison. "Both Sides, Now" by Joni Mitchell had been playing. Immediately, she'd pulled to the shoulder of the road, rolled up her windows, and turned down the sound system so she could concentrate on the conversation. Thus, she'd heard loud and clear the news that her father—the one who'd loved her, defended her, believed in her, and placed her at the top of his priorities—was gone.

Every time she thought back on that moment, she heard the strains of the song she'd been listening to when the call came in. *So many things I would have done. But clouds got in my way.*

"I was the one playing checkers with him before his cardiac arrest," Luke told her. "Everything happened just like you were told."

"You were with him when he died?"

He dipped his chin.

"Was he in pain?"

"Some pain, yes."

Grief stabbed her, clean and deep.

"But he wasn't panicking," he added. "He was speaking clearly—"

"Wait. Can you tell me exactly, word for word, what was said? I really . . . I just—it would help me to know every detail." Luke had been beside her father—where she wished she'd been—during his final moments. She needed the details.

"After he collapsed, I bent down and asked him what was the matter. He said that it was his chest."

“Okay.”

“I yelled for help, but I could see that the other guys and the guards were already on it. I tried to tell Ed to take it easy, but he interrupted me. He said that if he didn’t make it, he needed me to do something for him.”

Foreboding circled her ribs and squeezed.

“He was short of breath,” Luke continued, “but he managed to tell me that he’d set up a birthday treasure hunt for you. He said you’d open the first clue on January ninth. He said that he needed me to start work here before that date, then keep you safe during the treasure hunt because it might put you in danger.”

“Danger?”

“That’s what he said.”

She slid the ring on her middle finger up a few millimeters, then back down to meet the ring below it. *Click*. Up and down. *Click click click*. Dad had confided in Luke about the treasure hunt. He’d done so before she’d known of its existence, and he’d added a detail she hadn’t received: potential danger. “So, you told Dad that you’d work here and . . . keep me safe?”

“Not at first. I had—*have* things I want to do. But he pleaded with me. I didn’t know if he was dying, but I could tell it was bad. So I agreed. He made me promise him. After that, it was like he had permission to go. He closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he was unconscious.”

She pulled her mug of peppermint tea in front of her, wrapping her hands around it as if it could offer comforting warmth. It couldn’t. It had long since grown cold. “Thank you. For being with him. For making that promise. There’s not a doubt in my mind that you eased my dad’s final moments.”

After she’d told her dad she’d be willing to hire Luke, Finley had educated herself on prisoner reentry and acclimation. With every page she’d read, her enthusiasm had grown. Following incarceration, men and women often had a hard time finding employment. She’d wanted to fill that need and, in doing so, benefit a man like

her father. Plus, animals were therapy. What could be more ideal than parolees helping animals and animals helping parolees? She'd viewed Luke's new job here as his lifeline.

Now she saw it might be his albatross.

"Please know that I won't hold you to your promise," she said. "You don't have to work here. You don't have to help me with the treasure hunt. You can go."

"No, I can't."

"You said you have things you want to do. Feel free to go and do them, with my blessing."

He was not a man who wore his emotions on his sleeve, but she saw a subtle flash of longing on his hard features.

"You're free," she told him. "I'll hire someone else to redesign the website."

"The promise wasn't between you and me, so you can't free me from it. It was between me and your dad." His body language communicated stubborn resolve. "I'm going to keep my promise."

She considered him, lining up what she saw before her with what she knew of his past.

Once upon a time, a group of middle school kids had survived more than a week buried in the rubble of an earthquake that had struck while they were on a mission trip in Central America. They'd become known as the Miracle Five, and they were Misty River's best-known and best-loved sons and daughters.

Luke was one of the five.

Almost twenty years had come and gone since that fateful earthquake. The former middle school kids were all adults now, and Luke remained the most reclusive of the five. After their rescue, he'd immediately retreated from the spotlight and never consented to interviews or public appearances.

The other four had gone on to become successful. Natasha MacKenzie, an attorney and mother. Genevieve Woodward, Natasha's sister, a Bible study author. Ben Coleman, high school teacher. Sebastian Grant, pediatric heart surgeon.

The day Luke had turned eighteen, he'd dropped out of high school and left home. He'd worked for a chop shop in Atlanta until he'd been arrested for stealing a car and sent to prison.

It didn't take much intuition to discern why Luke had gone off the rails while the other four were living constructive lives. The earthquake had resulted in two thousand fatalities, but only one Misty River resident had died.

His name had been Ethan. He'd been twelve years old. And he was Luke's younger brother.

Finley had moved to this town after college, so she'd had no interaction with Luke when he was young. But everyone who'd known him then agreed that he'd been a golden boy before his brother's death. The natural disaster had ripped from Luke both his brother and his promising future.

And now she was struggling to absorb the realization that this injured, complicated, infamous man knew about her birthday treasure hunt. Even though Luke was hard as slate, he was also, apparently, compassionate enough to grant her father's dying wish. Which was that Luke . . . protect her?

From what?

She'd been envisioning the hunt as a very personal journey between herself and her father. Perfectly safe, just like all the prior hunts. Resistance was pushing upward inside her at the idea of embarking on this hunt with a stranger.

Gradually, though, an opposing force matched and then surpassed her resistance.

The tug to rehabilitate.

Luke Dempsey was a tragic and thorny case. Many would say he was a lost cause.

Thing was, she had a soft spot for lost causes. It ran contrary to her nature to abandon any creature to its lostness. Over the years, she'd come face-to-face with numerous ferocious animals. Dogs who'd been beaten. Feral cats. Unbroken horses. There'd even been the memorable case of one very angry raccoon.

So many times she'd sensed, at the deepest level, that God had entrusted a certain wounded creature to her care.

That's exactly how she felt now. About Luke.

Not a single one of her past "lost causes" had remained a lost cause. No one—no animal or person on earth—was beyond redemption. If she and Luke worked together here at Furry Tails and on her treasure hunt, she'd have double the opportunity to assist in the Restoration of Luke.

"Can you explain the treasure hunt?" he asked.

She told him about their annual birthday tradition during her childhood and how her father had left the first clue in his will.

"How did he plant the rest of the clues? He was in prison for eight years."

"He must have prepared the hunt, hidden the clues, and gotten his will in order after he'd posted bail and before he went to trial."

Luke held himself with uncommon stillness, his strong hands resting on the ends of the armrests. "Where's the first clue now?"

"It's been in a safe-deposit box for the last couple of months. My birthday's on Saturday, so I just went the day before yesterday and picked it up. At the moment, it's sitting on my kitchen table."

"I'd hide it."

She nodded. "I'm completely stumped as to how or why this hunt could put me in danger."

"My guess is that he hid something valuable for you this time. So valuable that other people might want it."

"If so, I can't fathom what the treasure might be."

"When on Saturday will you open the clue?"

"In the morning, right after I finish eating breakfast. Just like old times."

"I'll meet you then."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'd like to be alone when I open the envelope."

He looked displeased. Luke did displeased very well.

“I won’t go in search of the treasure,” she added. “I’d just like time to . . . process.” Absently, she stroked the warm head of the dog still snoozing on her lap. “How about you come over for dinner on Sunday night? I’ll show you the letter then.”

Another serving of Displeased Luke.

“If you’re going to be involved with this treasure hunt—” she began.

“Which I am.”

“Then you’re going to have to enter into my life at least a little. And compromise with me. We’ll need to do this on my schedule. Both my literal work schedule and my emotional grieving schedule.”

“How long do you think it will take to finish the hunt?”

“When I was young, the hunts were quick and easy. I could finish one in thirty minutes. During my teenage years, they became more and more elaborate. The last one took me a couple of months to complete. He had me crisscrossing North Georgia on weekends.”

Luke looked like she’d just informed him they’d have to go to the town dump and sort through every item of trash. “In order to protect you, I’ll need you to share all the information you have about the hunt, your dad’s arrest, his career, his family, his friends, his mistakes, his money. Will you do that?”

“I . . . guess?” She hadn’t had to answer to anyone in years.

“Finley.”

“Fine.”

“Who else knows about the treasure hunt?”

“Just my dad’s attorney.”

“Name?”

“Rosco Horton.”

“We can’t trust anyone,” he said. “No one other than you, me, and Rosco can know anything about this.”

“I haven’t told anyone. And I won’t.”

“Good.” He moved as if to rise.

“Not so fast.”

He returned to his seat.

“Since you’re asking for concessions,” she said, “it’s only fair for me to ask you for something.”

“I’m listening.”

“Furry Tails really does need a revamped website. So if you’re going to stay on, I’d ask that you complete the site, regardless of how quickly we complete the hunt.”

“I’ll finish your website.”

No one had ever mistaken her for a hard-nosed capitalist, and talking about finances made her itchy. That said, she was a businesswoman and transparency was one of her highest ideals. “Also, Furry Tails can afford to pay your salary, but I didn’t budget body-guard payroll into my monthly personal expenses.”

His hazel eyes could cut diamonds. “I don’t want you to pay me anything extra.”

“Okay then. You and me. Treasure hunt partners?” This really was the most unlikely pairing ever.

“Partners,” he agreed.