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## Prologue

He barely escaped with his shirt.

“I am *never* signing another book as long as I live.” Reese Clark’s voice echoed like a gunshot through the five-story Mall of America parking garage. He swept off his black Stetson and dragged a hand through his unruly, shoulder-scraping brown hair. He grimaced at the layer of sweat that came off in his hand.

The book signing had disintegrated into chaos, just as he’d expected. After two hours of orderly lines, with women breathing in his face and fawning over him as if he were a teenage movie idol, the peace had evaporated. Normal, law-abiding women began to push and argue.

He’d climbed on his chair, waved to the back, and assured the crowd he would sign every copy of *Siberian Runaway*. Yet they still fought for space in the line that curved past Macy’s, snaked down West Market, and probably ended around the far corner of Nordstrom, another block farther. Despite ample bookstore security

and two well-muscled mall uniforms barking orders, the crowd erupted. The noise and confusion resurrected enough ugly memories to send him looking for escape in the concrete parking labyrinth.

“Reese, come back here!” Jacqueline Saint marched up behind him, her spike heels echoing in monstrous volumes against the cement floor. “If you want to sell books, you’ll wipe that pout off your face and march back inside.”

He scowled at his publicist. “Back off, Jacqueline. You saw them in there.” He made a show of shuddering. “I’m done. I’m not doing this anymore. One more fanatic reader and I’m going over the edge.” Reese drew a deep breath. The smell of motor oil, cement, and dusty ceilings twisted his empty stomach. “I need some air.”

Jacqueline dug her ruby red manicured fingernails into his arm. “You’ve got to loosen up, Reese. This isn’t Chicago. No one is lurking in the men’s room. I’ve made sure security is on you like glue. You’re fine.”

He stiffened. “Maybe I just have a better memory than you do.”

He heard her clucking, a habit that could shred his nerves to rags. “The price one pays for fame,” she said, not gently.

He tried not to rise to that. She was the closest thing he had to a real friend right now, and that thought turned like a knife.

“Listen, you’re almost done,” she soothed in false tones. “One more week on the morning-news circuit, then you can disappear and cultivate that ‘mystery man of the mountains’ image you love.” Her voice hardened. “Until then, baby, you sign books.”



Reese jerked out of her grip. “Give me five minutes . . . at least.”

Jacqueline raised a thin eyebrow and ran her cool gray eyes over him as if evaluating prey. Checking the time on her gold watch, she nodded crisply. “Five minutes. Clock starts now.”

Reese tightened his jaw and stalked away. Jacqueline might be the best publicist his editor had to offer, but after three months of her nonstop company, he was ready to topple her off those lizard-skin spikes.

He exhaled a hot, uneven breath. One week left. Then he would have nine peaceful months before the release of his next book. Soon he’d be off to the mountains—good riddance civilization. Not that he itched to shoulder a pack or climb inside his worn, polar sleeping bag again, but a multihued mountain sky, the threat of a storm, and even mosquitoes the size of his fist seemed a more welcoming atmosphere than a crowded mall bookstore. More welcoming—and safer. He’d take a face-to-face encounter with a grizzly over a lovesick fan any day, month, or year. He’d seen enough of crazed women up close and personal to make his blood turn cold.

The book tour served its purpose, however—funds to explore the planet. His books sold millions. Why, he still didn’t understand. He wrote them because they called to be written, but women hungered after them, buying them in hardback, hot off the presses. Jacqueline reasoned it was because his hero never found the woman he sought, and his readers all fantasized they could be the one.

Reese wandered between a Lexus and a grimy blue

Chevette and leaned on the edge of the railing to peer down onto the highway, a spiraling mess of noise and exhaust. Beyond the concrete, the red-and-orange autumn foliage shimmered in the trees lining the Mississippi River. An errant breeze drifted toward him, carrying the tinge of drying leaves and the crisp anticipation of fall. They beckoned to him, and he never felt more trapped. Yes, he loved the writing, the traveling . . . it was the invasion of his privacy that pushed him to his last nerve. He was already plotting his escape. As traffic hummed below, Reese sunk his head in his arms.

The car behind him coughed and sputtered. It wasn't the Lexus. Reese whirled, intending to scuttle between the two vehicles. He made it as far as the front driver's door. It swung open, crashed into his knees, and swiped dirt across his tailored suit pants. As the driver barreled out of the Chevette, he jumped back, frowning, and dusted off his knees. "Watch it!" he growled.

He heard an offended gasp and immediately regretted his tone. Rudeness wasn't his standard.

"You watch it. My car can't move; you can!" The spitfire comeback didn't match the petite blonde steaming before him. Shoulder height and dressed in a black skirt and a white cashmere sweater, she didn't look the type to drive such a clunker or to meet her problems head-on. He blinked at her.

She clamped her hands on her hips, her eyes blazing. "What are you doing next to my car, anyway?"

He raised his brows. "Well, I certainly wasn't going to steal it."

Her mouth flew open a second before she harrumphed and shook her head. With one swift move she reached



down beside the seat and popped the hood. When she stepped back and slammed the door, the sound clamored along the low-hanging ceiling.

Silence passed between them as she stared at him. “Well, are you going to move, or are you paid to block traffic?”

“Sorry,” he mumbled as he raised his hands in surrender. He scooted back to the railing.

The woman brushed past him, widely avoiding the scum on her car. She slid two fingers under the hood and heaved it open. As she propped it up, she shot Reese a sidelong look. Her eyes seemed to soften. “Sorry,” she muttered. “I’m having a rotten day. First I lock myself out of the house, then I rip my skirt climbing through the window, then Macy’s computer eats my layaway. And now, old Noah here won’t start.”

He bit his lip to stifle an unexpected grin. “Noah?”

She tucked a chunk of golden hair behind her ear. “Don’t ask.”

Still warring with a smirk, he stuck his hands into his pockets and leaned back against the cement wall, intrigued by a woman in fancy duds jiggling cables, adjusting the oil cap, and fingering the connections to her car battery. Remarkably, she had only a light coating of grease on her fingers when she turned back to him.

She chewed her delicate lip for a moment. Her forlorn gaze shifted past him, as if the answer lay in the bronzed hills. Then abruptly, she pinned him with a tentative look. “Know anything about cars?”

Reese rubbed his chin. He wasn’t interested in getting dirty. Especially since he had to return to a crowd of cheering women in the bookstore. . . . “Yep, I know a

few things.” He stepped up to the car and leaned over the engine compartment.

Beside him, she peered into the blackness. “What do you see?” Her hair fell over her face, and she flipped it back.

Reese glanced at her and stifled another snigger. She had wiped a dash of oil across her cheek, like a football player. She *was* having a bad day.

Pinching his lips together, Reese examined the black hole of her car. Rusty wires merged with fraying cables, and sticky muck layered the corroded battery. After a moment of perusal, during which the odor of oil seeped over him like a fog, he reached in and tweaked the spark-plug wires. “Give her a try,” he said, slapping his hands together.

“Really? That’s all?” Her mouth opened in amazement when he nodded.

“Loose spark-plug wires will stop you cold every time.”

Her green eyes glowed with sudden delight, and for the first time he noticed they were the color of finely cut emeralds, with magical golden flecks. They reached out and held him until he blew out a breath and broke away. “Give her a try,” he repeated hoarsely and looked for a place to wipe his blackened fingers.

“Righto!” She sprang toward the driver’s door.

Reese fished around in his back pocket and found a handkerchief. So much for his starched appearance. He worked the grease off his fingers.

The motor roared to life, and with it, inner snapshots of Reese’s high school days. The hum of a Chevy could never be forgotten, especially the sweet melody of his Corvette, shined and stored on blocks in a place he was trying to forget.



With a sheepish grin, the blonde climbed out of her car. “It looks like you saved me.” Her face brightened into a genuine smile. “Thank you so much.” She reached over the open door. “Mona Reynolds.”

Reese took her grip. “Clark.”

Her eyes shone, and didn’t she have the most beautiful smattering of freckles dotting her high cheekbones when she grinned?

“I suppose I should buy you a cup of coffee, huh?”

He handed her the handkerchief. “Nah, I happened to be in the right place at the right time.” She frowned at the handkerchief, confused. He pointed to her face. “You’ve got a dab of war paint there.”

She wrinkled her nose and ducked into the car, adjusting her rearview mirror.

Reese snared the moment to gather his senses. Coffee suddenly sounded nice. An escape with a pretty, sincere woman who didn’t fawn over him might be just the breath of air he needed.

She turned around, a line of red where the oil had been. “Thanks.” She handed the handkerchief back to him.

“About coffee . . . ,” he began.

“Oh, I would really love to treat you. Give me your card, and I’ll call you.”

His hope deflated. “Uh, well, I don’t have one on me.”

“Oh.” She appeared stymied, her lips puckering into an intriguing pout. “Well, maybe you could give me your number or your e-mail address?”

Reese pulled off his hat and rubbed a hand along the brim. His vision of a quiet coffee date with him safely disguised as an out-of-town business executive named Clark disintegrated under the glare of reality.

This was getting too complicated, especially with a crowd of fans waiting inside. It would only take running into the media and things would turn ugly. He shook his head. “Actually, I’m just passing through town.”

She looked crestfallen, and he nearly changed his mind. After a silent moment, she sighed. “Well, thanks again. You were my hero today.”

He smiled at that. Playing the part, he snuggled the Stetson back on his head and pulled the brim like a courteous cowboy.

She shut the car door, waved once as she backed out, then disappeared in a fog of exhaust.

Reese scowled against the acrid smell, and disappointment pinched his heart. For a second there, he thought Mona might have turned out to be more than just a fan. He’d never find a woman who would be able to see beneath the Reese Clark veneer. It was painfully clear he and women just weren’t meant to be.

“Reese!”

He and Jacqueline weren’t meant to be either. Reese trudged back to the skyway and his book tour.



Applebee’s parking lot seemed fairly crowded for the predinner hour. Enormously late, Mona found a spot in the back and hustled to the entrance.

Stopping at the hostess booth, she craned her neck and spotted Liza Beaumont waving crazily at a high table in the middle section. “Excuse me, my party is

here,” she said to the annoyed hostess and hurried toward Liza before her roommate made a scene and started hollering her name.

“Well, look how she’s grown!”

Mona skidded to a stop, cringing as Edith Draper rose from her seat at Liza’s table. The older woman headed toward Mona, her wide manicured hands reaching for Mona’s face. Her mother’s best friend thought she was still twelve years old.

“Hello, Mrs. Draper,” Mona said weakly.

“I just wish your mother was here to see you take this big step. Imagine, owning your own business. I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were my own child!” Edith’s eyes glistened.

Mona surrendered to a hug. “Thanks, Mrs. Draper.”

She drew back and waggled a finger in Mona’s face. “Oh no. I’m Edith now. I’m going to be your neighbor.”

Mona smiled warmly. She couldn’t help but be drawn in by Edith’s enthusiasm. “Okay . . . Edith.”

“I ordered you a coffee,” Liza announced as Mona slid onto a high stool and hooked her heels on the bottom bar.

“You look harried, dear.” Edith put a wrinkled hand onto Mona’s arm.

“I’ve had a horrible day,” Mona replied. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She scanned the restaurant before returning her gaze to Edith. “Where’s Chuck?”

The older woman waved her hand and shrugged. “You know how men are—have to use the bathroom wherever they go.”

Mona smirked and spied Chuck Parson emerging from the men’s room. Hitching his black jeans around

his basketball stomach, he looked uncomfortable in his own skin. Poor guy. He was out of his element.

“Mona!” he called out from halfway across the room. Mona saw a waitress glare at him. Sliding off her stool, Mona met him two steps from the table. He wrapped her in a bear hug. “You’re looking better than ever.”

She sighed. She had them all fooled. Her insides were in knots, and her knees wanted to give out. If this thing really happened, her dreams were just a skip away. She kept pinching herself, waiting to wake up. God was so good to her to give her this miracle. She planned to grab on tightly to this chance and never let go. Now—to remain calm and focused. She had her heavenly favor, and God expected her best effort to make it happen. One shouldn’t look lightly on the Lord’s grace. Besides, God helped those who helped themselves.

She untangled herself from Chuck’s embrace, and they climbed onto the stools. A waitress approached, balancing sodas and a steamy coffee. Mona didn’t bother to look at the menu. “Chinese chicken salad and a side of plain toast.”

Liza also ordered her regular—double-bacon cheeseburger and curly fries. Mona shook her head. It wasn’t fair. Liza had legs that reached to her chin. The woman didn’t know what it was like to just look at a Twinkie and see it appear on your thighs. Mona monitored her every bite with precision. She couldn’t afford to buy new clothes. But she and Liza had been roommates for nearly a decade, and Mona had learned to live with the envy.

“I brought the layout and some pictures.” Chuck hauled up a vinyl briefcase dated from the seventies. “Now don’t get discouraged. It has potential. You just



need eyes to see it.” He dealt the photos on the table like playing cards. “The porch might need a little hiking up here and there, but the foundation is good. There’s a cozy apartment above the garage and an outbuilding, just like you wanted.” He paused and scanned Mona’s face with unmasked anticipation.

She picked up a photograph. It was perfect. The two-story Victorian answered both her prayers and her wildest dreams. “I’ll take it.”

Edith clutched her arm. “Dear, are you sure?”

Mona nodded and glanced at Liza. Liza’s black eyes sparkled as she grinned wildly. Mona read the look. “Yep. I know what I’ve been waiting for, and this is it.”

Edith sat back in the chair, a smile of satisfaction on her face. “I can’t wait to tell your mother.”

Mona fought the urge to roll her eyes. The last thing she needed was Edith Draper giving her mother in Arizona a chapter-by-chapter chronicle of her life.

Liza leaned close, her exotic perfume running over Mona like a wave. “This is it, Mone. The place where dreams come true.”

Mona felt fear ripen in her stomach. *Please let Liza be right.*

“Oh!” Edith cried, clapping her hands together. “You have to see what I picked up today at the Mall of America.”

Mona crossed her arms over her cashmere-clad chest and sighted a smudge of oil still staining her fingers. She grimaced. “I have to wash my hands.”

“No, wait.” Edith snared a bag at her feet. “I caught a book signing today.”

“Who was it?” Mona grabbed a napkin and attempted recovery.

“I forget his name. He’s that really famous writer . . .” Edith snapped her fingers as if she were a genie, waiting for the answer to poof.

“John Grisham?” Mona offered.

“Tom Clancy?” Chuck suggested.

“No, he’s that one that was attacked a couple of years ago . . . in Chicago, I think. I read about it in *USA Today*. Some article about dangers to celebrities. Reminded me of something out of a Stephen King novel. A fan cornered him in the men’s room and robbed him . . . stole his boots or his hat. . . . I think he even ended up in the hospital.” Edith dug into her bag and pulled out a hardcover. She cocked her head as she examined the cover. “Not a bad-looking fella, either, the author. Even if he does need a good haircut.” She plunked the book on the table, front cover down. “Reese Clark!”

Strikingly handsome in a forest green, plaid flannel shirt, a smiling man in a black Stetson stared back at her from the back cover. His brown curly hair dragged on his shoulders, and his blue eyes spoke of some hidden mystique. Reese Clark, Mona’s favorite author. *Authors aren’t supposed to be that good-looking*, Mona thought as she squinted at it. She wasn’t great at remembering faces, but it seemed she had seen that one before.

Suddenly the memory hit her, and she cried out in shock.

“What is it?” Edith went ashen and put a hand to her throat.

Mona pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut. “I’m a complete idiot.”

Liza leaned forward. “Well, besides the fact you just painted your nose black, why?”

Mona looked at her fingers and grimaced. “My car



broke down at the mall. The guy who put it back together was Reese Clark.”

She could have buried herself inside any one of the three astonished gapes.

“And you didn’t get his autograph?” Edith looked at her as if she had sinned.

Mona shrugged. “I didn’t recognize him.”

Liza stifled hysterics. “Mona, you wouldn’t know your own dog if it came up and bit you.”

She made a face at Liza. But her roommate couldn’t have said it better. Despite Mona’s infatuation with his ongoing hero, Jonah, Reese Clark could have popped her a fairy-tale kiss and she wouldn’t have known it was him. She groaned. “I actually invited him out for coffee. He probably thought I was some goggle-eyed fan trying to invade his privacy.” After Edith’s story, it was no wonder he had backed away from her at the speed of light.

“Oh, well,” Mona murmured, heading for the ladies’ room, “some things just aren’t meant to be.”