

# *True Colors*



*Also by Kristin Hannah*

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*Magic Hour*

*Comfort and Joy*

*The Things We Do for Love*

*Between Sisters*

*Distant Shores*

*Summer Island*

*Angel Falls*

*On Mystic Lake*

*Home Again*

*Waiting for the Moon*

*When Lightning Strikes*

*If You Believe*

*Once in Every Life*

*The Enchantment*

*A Handful of Heaven*

# *True Colors*



*Kristin Hannah*



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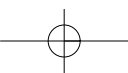
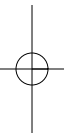
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*For the women who have come into our family  
and brightened us with their presence:  
Debra Edwards John and Julie Gorset John.*

*For two friends, Julie Williams and Andrea Schmidt.  
You made me laugh in the craziest of times,  
and I thank you.*

*And, as always, to Benjamin and Tucker,  
without whom I would know so much less about life  
and love and joy.*



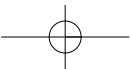
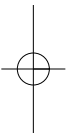
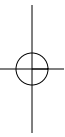
## *Part One*

# Before



What is passion? It is surely the becoming of a person. . . . In passion, the body and the spirit seek expression . . . The more extreme and the more expressed that passion is, the more unbearable does life seem without it. It reminds us that if passion dies or is denied, we are partly dead and that soon, come what may, we will be wholly so.

—JOHN BOORMAN, FILM DIRECTOR



# *Prologue*



1979

**F**ifteen-year-old Winona Grey stared out at the waterfront ranch that had been in her family for four generations, looking for something that had changed. Loss like theirs should leave a mark—summer grass gone suddenly brown, dark clouds that refused to lift, a tree split by lightning. Something.

From her bedroom window, she could see most of their acreage. At the property's back boundary, giant cedar trees stood clustered together, their lacy boughs draped downward; in the rolling green pastures, horses milled along the fence lines, their hooves beating the tall grass into muddy submission. Up on the hill, tucked into the deep woods, was the small cabin her great-grandfather had built when he homesteaded this land.

It all looked ordinary, but Winona knew better. A few years ago, a child had died in the cold waters along the Washington coast not far from here, and for months the tragedy was all anyone could talk about. Mom had taken Winona aside and warned her about invisible dangers, undercurrents that could drown you even in shallow water, but now she

knew there were other threats lurking beneath the surface of everyday life.

Turning away from the view, she went downstairs, into a house that felt too big and quiet since yesterday. Her sister Aurora sat curled up on the blue and yellow plaid sofa, reading. Pencil-thin and bony at fourteen, Aurora was in that awkward stage that was neither quite childhood nor maturity. She had a small pointed chin and dark brown hair that fell long and straight from a center part.

"You're up early, Sprout," Winona said.

Aurora looked up. "Couldn't sleep."

"Yeah. Me, either."

"Vivi Ann's in the kitchen. I heard her crying a few minutes ago, but . . ." Aurora shrugged her skinny shoulders. "I don't know what to say."

Winona knew how much Aurora needed life to be steady; she was the peacemaker in the family, the one who tried to smooth everything over and make it right. No wonder she looked so fragile. No pretty words could soothe them now. "I'll go," Winona said.

She found her twelve-year-old sister hunched over the yellow Formica table, drawing a picture.

"Hey, Bean," Winona said, ruffling her sister's hair.

"Hey, Pea."

"Whatcha doing?"

"Drawing a picture of us girls." She stopped drawing and tilted her head to look up. Her long wheat-blond hair was a bird's nest of tangles and her green eyes were bloodshot from crying, and still she was beautiful: a perfect Dresden doll. "Mom will be able to see it from Heaven, won't she?"

Winona didn't know how to answer. Faith had always come easily to her before, been as natural and effortless as breathing, but no more. Cancer had come into their family and broken it into so many separate pieces it seemed impossible they would ever be whole again. "Of course," she said dully. "We'll put it on the fridge."

She walked away from her sister, but it was a mistake, that move-

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ment, and she knew it instantly. In this kitchen, memories of her mother were everywhere—in the handmade canary and blue gingham curtains, in the Mountain Mama magnet that clung to the refrigerator door, in the bowl of shells on the windowsill. *Come on, Winnie, let's go to the beach and look for treasures . . .*

How many times had Winona blown her mother off this summer? She'd been too busy to hang with Mom, too cool to scavenge the beach, looking for pieces of smooth broken glass amid the shattered oyster shells and drying kelp.

That thought sent her to the fridge. Opening the freezer door, she found a half gallon of Neapolitan ice cream. It was the last thing she needed, but she couldn't help herself.

Grabbing a spoon, she leaned against the counter and started eating. Through the kitchen window, she could see the dirt driveway in front of the farmhouse and the raggedy barn-red loafing shed in the clearing. Up there, her dad's beat-up blue truck was backing up to their rusted six-horse trailer. He got out of the driver's side and went back to the hitch.

"Tell me he's not going to the rodeo," Winona muttered, moving forward.

"Of course he is," Vivi Ann said, drawing again. "He was up at dawn getting ready."

"The rodeo? You're kidding." Aurora came into the kitchen, stood beside Winona at the window. "But . . . how can he?"

Winona knew she was supposed to step into her mother's empty shoes and explain why it was okay for Dad to get on with everyday life on the day after his wife's funeral, but she couldn't imagine forming a lie of that magnitude, not even to spare her sisters pain. Or maybe it wasn't a lie—maybe that was what adults did in this world, maybe they just went on—and somehow that was even more frightening, even more impossible to voice. The silence lingered, made Winona uncomfortable, she didn't know what to say, how to make this bearable, and yet she knew it was her job to do just that. A big sister was supposed to take care of her siblings.

"Why's he getting Clem out of the pasture?" Aurora asked, taking the spoon from Winona and digging into the ice cream.

Vivi Ann made a sound that was part cry, part scream, and ran for the door, flinging it open so hard it cracked against the wall.

"He's selling Mom's horse," Winona said sharply. It irritated her that she hadn't figured it out first.

"He wouldn't," Aurora said, and then looked to Winona for reassurance. "Would he?"

Winona had no assurance to offer. Instead, she followed Vivi Ann's lead and ran. By the time she reached the parking area by the shed, she was out of breath. She skidded to a stop beside Vivi Ann.

Her father stood there, holding Clem's lead rope. Sunlight hit the sweat-stained crown of his cowboy hat, glinted off the saucer-sized sterling belt buckle he wore. His chiseled face reminded her of the nearby mountains: granite planes and shadowed hollows. There was no hint of softness there.

"You can't sell Mom's horse," she said, panting hard.

"You gonna tell me what to do, Winona?" he said, letting his gaze linger for just a moment on the ice cream.

Winona felt her cheeks redden. It took all her courage to speak up, but she had no choice. There was no one else to do it. "She loves . . . loved that horse."

"We can't afford to feed a horse that don't get ridden."

"I'll ride her," Winona promised.

"You?"

"I'll try harder than before. I won't let myself be afraid."

"Do we even got a saddle that'll fit you?"

In the excruciating silence that followed, Winona lunged forward and grabbed the lead rope from her father. But she moved too fast or spoke too loud—something—and Clementine shied, bolting sideways. Winona felt the sting of a burn as the rope yanked across her palm and she stumbled sideways, half falling.

And then Vivi Ann was beside her, controlling Clementine with a

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word, a touch. "Are you okay?" she whispered to Winona when the horse was calm again.

Winona was too embarrassed to answer. She felt her father moving toward them, heard the way his cowboy boots sank into the mud. She and Vivi Ann turned slowly to face him.

"You got no horse sense, Winona," he said. It was a thing she'd heard all her life from him. From a cowboy, it was as cutting a remark as was possible.

"I know, but—"

He wasn't listening to her. He was looking at Vivi Ann. Something seemed to pass between them, a piece of communication that Winona couldn't grasp. "She's a high-spirited animal. And young, too. Not just anyone can handle her," Dad said.

"I can," Vivi Ann said.

It was true, and Winona knew it. Vivi Ann, at twelve, was bolder and more fearless than Winona would ever be.

Envy hit her like the snap from a rubber band. She knew it was wrong—mean, even—but she wanted her father to deny Vivi Ann, to cut his most beautiful daughter down with the sharp blade of his disapproval.

Instead he said, "Your mama would be proud," and handed Vivi Ann the ragged blue lead rope.

As if from a distance, Winona watched them walk away together. She told herself it didn't matter, that all she'd wanted was to keep Clem from getting sold, but the lies were cold comfort.

She heard Aurora come up beside her, walking up the hill now that the drama was over. "You okay?"

"Fine."

"What matters is that he didn't sell Clem."

"Yeah," Winona said, wishing that was how she saw it. "What do I care about who rides a horse?"

"Exactly."

But years later, when she looked back on that week of her mother's

death, Winona saw how that single action—the handing over of a lead rope—had changed everything. From then on, jealousy had become an undercurrent, swirling beneath their lives. But no one had seen it. Not then, at least.

# Chapter One



1992

The day Vivi Ann had been waiting for—January 25—seemed to take forever to arrive. When it finally came, she woke even earlier than usual. Long before dawn had lightened the night sky, she threw back the covers and got out of bed. In the cold darkness of her room, she dressed in insulated coveralls and a woolen cap. Grabbing a pair of worn leather work gloves, she stepped into big rubber boots and went outside.

Technically she didn't have to feed the horses. Her latest ranch hand would do it. But since she was too excited to sleep, she figured she might as well do something useful.

Without a moon to guide her, she couldn't see anything except a ghostly silvered image of her own breath, but if there was one thing Vivi Ann knew in this world, it was the lay of her father's land.

Water's Edge.

More than one hundred years ago, her great-grandfather had homesteaded this property and founded the nearby town of Oyster Shores. Other men had chosen easier, more populated areas, places with easier

access, but not Abelard Grey. He had crossed the dangerous plains to get here, lost one son to an Indian raid and another to influenza, but still he'd moved West, lured by a dream to this wild, secluded corner of the Evergreen State. The land he chose, one hundred and twenty-five acres tucked between the warm blue waters of the Hood Canal and a forested hillside, was spectacularly beautiful.

She walked up the small rise toward the barn they'd built ten years ago. Beneath a high, timbered ceiling, a large riding arena was outlined by four-rail fencing; twelve box stalls flanked the east and west sides of the structure. After she opened the huge sliding door, the overhead lights came on with a sound like snapping fingers, and the horses instantly became restless, whinnying to let her know they were hungry. For the next hour, she separated flakes of hay from the bales stacked in the loafing shed, piled them into the rusted wheelbarrow, and moved down the uneven cement aisles. At the last stall, a custom-made wooden sign identified her mare by her rarely used registered name: Clementine's Blue Ribbon.

"Hey, girl," she said, unbolting the wooden door and sliding it sideways.

Clem nickered softly and moved toward her, sneaking a bite of hay from the wheelbarrow.

Vivi Ann tossed the two flakes into the iron feeding rack and closed the door behind her. While Clem ate, Vivi Ann stood beside her, stroking the big mare's silky neck.

"Are you ready for the rodeo, girl?"

The mare nuzzled her side as if in answer, almost knocking Vivi Ann off her feet.

In the years since Mom's death, Vivi Ann and Clementine had become inseparable. For a while there, when Dad had quit speaking and started drinking, and Winona and Aurora had been busy with high school, Vivi Ann had spent most of her time with this horse. Sometimes, when the grief and emptiness had been too much for Vivi Ann to handle, she'd slipped out of her bedroom and run to the barn, where she'd fall asleep in the cedar shavings at Clem's hooves. Even after Vivi Ann

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had gotten older and become popular, she'd still considered this mare her best friend. The deepest of her secrets had been shared only here, in the sweet-smelling confines of the last box stall on the east aisle.

She patted Clem's neck one last time and left the barn. By the time she reached the house, the sun was a smear of butterscotch-yellow light in the charcoal-gray winter sky. From this vantage point, she could see the steel-gray waters of the Canal and the jagged, snow-covered peaks of the distant mountains.

When she stepped into the shadowy farmhouse, she could hear the telltale creaking of floorboards and knew her father was up. She went into the kitchen, set three places at the table and then started breakfast. Just as she put a plate of pancakes into the oven to warm, she heard him come into the dining room. Pouring him a cup of coffee, doctoring it with sugar, she took it to him.

He took it from her without looking up from his *Western Horseman* magazine.

She stood there a moment, wondering what she could say that would start a conversation.

Dressed in his usual work clothes—well-worn Wrangler jeans and a plaid flannel shirt, with a saucer-sized silver belt buckle and leather gloves tucked in his waistband—he looked like he did every morning. And yet there was something different, too: a subtle collection of lines or wrinkles that aged his face.

The years since Mom's death had been unkind to him, sharpening his features and adding shadows where none belonged, both in his eyes and in the fleshy bags beneath. His spine had curved; it was the mark of a farrier, he said, the natural result of a lifetime spent hammering nails into horses' hooves, but loss had played a part in that curving of his spine, too. Vivi Ann was certain of it. The weight of an unexpected loneliness had reshaped him as surely as the hours he'd spent hunched at work. The only time he really stood tall anymore was when he was in public, and she knew how much it pained him to appear unbowed by his life.

He sat down at the table and read his magazine while Vivi Ann readied and served breakfast.

"Clem's made some awesome practice runs this month," she said, taking her place across from him. "I really think we have a chance of winning the rodeo in Texas."

"Where's the toast?"

"I made pancakes."

"Fried eggs need toast. You know that."

"Mix them in with the hash browns. We're out of bread."

Dad sighed heavily, obviously irritated. He looked pointedly at the empty place setting on the table. "You seen Travis this morning?"

Vivi Ann glanced through the window toward the barn. There was no sign of their ranch hand anywhere. No tractor out and running, no wheelbarrow by the barn door. "I fed the horses already. He's probably out fixing that fence."

"You picked another winner with that one. If you'd quit rescuin' every hurt horse between here and Yelm, we wouldn't need no help around here at all. And the truth is we can't afford it."

"Speaking of money, Dad . . . I need three hundred bucks for the rodeo this week and the coffee can is empty."

He didn't respond.

"Dad?"

"I had to use that money to pay the hay bill."

"It's gone?"

"The tax bill just came, too."

"So we're in trouble," Vivi Ann said, frowning. She'd heard it before, of course, had always known there wasn't much money, but for the first time, it really hit home. She understood suddenly why Winona was always harping about saving money for taxes. She cast an upward glance at her dad. He sat hunched forward, with his elbows on the table. Her sisters would have seen that as rude; Vivi Ann was sure she knew better. "Your back hurting you again?"

He didn't answer, didn't even acknowledge the question.

She got up, went into the kitchen, and got him some ibuprofen, setting the pills gently on the table between them.

His splayed farrier's hand closed over them.

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"I'll find a way to get the money, Dad. And I'll win this week. Maybe as much as two thousand bucks. Don't you worry."

They finished the rest of the meal in silence, with him reading his magazine. When he was done, he pushed back from the table and stood up. Reaching for the sweat-stained brown felt cowboy hat that hung on a hook by the door, he said, "Make me proud."

"I will. 'Bye, Dad."

After he left, Vivi Ann sat there, feeling unsettled.

For most of her twenty-four years she'd been like a leaf on the water, just floating along, following whatever current came her way. She'd tried changing direction a few times, but every attempt (like community college) had ended quickly, with her returning to this land.

She loved it here, plain and simple. She loved being around the horses, training them, and passing her expertise on to the bright-eyed girls who idolized her riding ability. She loved that everyone in town knew who she was and respected her and her family. She even loved the weather. Lots of folks complained about the gray days that followed each other, one after another, from November to April, but she didn't mind at all. No rain, no rainbows. That was her motto, and had been since she was twelve years old, a girl standing beside a freshly dug grave, trying to make sense of an incomprehensible loss. Then, she'd told herself that life was short and having fun was what mattered.

Now, though, it was time for her to grow up. Water's Edge needed her for once, instead of the other way around. She wasn't sure exactly how to make a change. Business and planning were hardly her strong suits, but she was smarter than people gave her credit for being. All she had to do was think about it.

But first she needed to borrow three hundred dollars from one of her sisters.

She'd tell them it would be a good investment.

Winona liked running the show. Any show, every show. And not from the sidelines, either. In college, all it had taken was one constitutional

law class, and she'd glimpsed her future. Now, at twenty-seven, she had her life pretty much as she wanted it. Not completely, of course (she was unmarried, not dating, childless, and struggling with her weight), but pretty much. She was far and away the most successful attorney in Oyster Shores. It was common knowledge that she was fair, opinionated, and smart. Everyone said she was a good person to have on your side. Winona valued her reputation almost as much as she did her education. Dad and Vivi Ann might worship at the altar of their land, but Winona had a broader religion. For her, it was the community that mattered and the people who lived here. It was okay that Vivi Ann was the beautiful heart of town; Winona strove to be its conscience.

She reached for the intercom on her desk and pushed the button. "The council will be here in about ten minutes, Lisa. Make sure we have enough coffee."

Her receptionist answered promptly. "Already done."

"Good." Winona turned her attention to the slim pile of paperwork in front of her. There were a couple of environmental reports, a proposed short plat map, and a real estate sale contract that she'd written up.

It could save Water's Edge.

Well, perhaps that was a bit of an exaggeration; the ranch wasn't poised on the edge of financial ruin or anything. It was more like one of those pathetic starving horses Vivi Ann kept rescuing: limping along. Every month Dad and Vivi Ann barely made enough to keep the place running, and the taxes kept going up. This secret corner of Washington State hadn't been "discovered" yet by the yuppies who turned rugged waterfront lots into gold, but it was only a matter of time. Someday soon a developer would realize that their sleepy town sat on a spectacular stretch of beach that overlooked the Swiss Alps-like Olympic Mountain Range, and when that happened, Dad would find himself sitting on one hundred and twenty-five desirable acres. The rise in taxes would force him to sell the land or lose it, and no one seemed to notice the inevitability of this future except her. It had already happened all across the state.

She jotted notes down on her yellow pad, words to use in talking to

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him. It was imperative that he understand how important this was, how she'd found a way to save and protect him. Equally imperative was that she be the one to solve the problem. Perhaps then, finally, her father would be proud of her.

The intercom buzzed. "They're here, Winona."

"Send them into the conference room." Winona slid the documents into a manila folder and reached for her blue blazer. Slipping into it, she noticed it had gotten tighter across the bust. Sighing, she headed down for the conference room.

Her office was housed in a large Victorian mansion on a corner lot in downtown Oyster Shores. She'd bought it four years ago and renovated it room by room. The entire downstairs was completed so far. She could hardly have people judging her public rooms and finding them lacking. Next year, she'd begin on the living quarters upstairs. She had saved up almost enough money.

In the hallway, she paused at a mirror just long enough to assess her reflection: A plump, pretty face, dark brown eyes set beneath arching black brows, full lips, the shoulders of an NFL lineman, and enough bust for three women. Her one outstanding feature—her long black hair—was pulled back from her face and held in place by a white and blue scrunchie.

Forcing a smile, she kept walking and turned into what had once been a ladies' sunroom. Floor-to-ceiling glass windows and a pair of antique French doors covered the back wall. Through the rectangular panes could be seen her winter-brown garden, and beyond that were the brick and wooden buildings along Front Street. In the center of the room was a long oak table. The members of the Oyster Shores city council sat around it, including her father, who wasn't technically a member, but was invited to every meeting nonetheless.

Winona took her usual place at the head of the table. "What can I help you with today?"

Beside her, Ken Otter, the town's dentist, smiled broadly. He always smiled broadly, saying it was free advertising. "We want to talk about what's going on at the reservation."

The reservation again. "I've told you before, it's not possible to stop them. I think—"

"But it's a *casino*," Myrtle Michaelian said, her round face turning red at the very thought. "Prostitution is sure to follow. The Indians are—"

"Stop," Winona said firmly. She glanced around the table, eyeing each person for a long moment before she turned to the next. "First of all, they're Native Americans, and you don't have the legal right to stop them from building the casino. You can spend a lot of money fighting them, but you'll lose."

They argued on for a few moments, but the mention of spending money had pulled the wind from their sails. In the end, their dissent conked out like a dying engine and they rose to leave, thanking her for saving them money and helping them out.

"Dad?" she said. "Could you stay for a minute?"

"I got to be in Shelton in forty-five minutes."

"It won't take long."

He gave her a short nod, just a flick of the chin, really, and stood there, arms crossed, while the council members left. When everyone was gone, Winona went back to her place at the head of the table and sat down, opening her manila folder. As she glanced over the paperwork, she couldn't help feeling a swell of pride. This was a good plan.

"It's about *Water's Edge*," she said, finally looking up. She didn't bother asking him to sit down. She'd learned that lesson well: Henry Grey moved when and where he wanted. Period. Trying to influence that only made the speaker look foolish.

He grunted something. She didn't think it was a word.

"I know how tight your finances are right now, but there are a lot of things at *Water's Edge* that need fixing. The fences are in bad shape, the loafing shed is starting to list, and someone's going to get lost in the mud in the parking area someday if we don't get a grader in there and lay some gravel. And don't even get me started on the taxes." She pushed the short plat map toward him. "We could sell off the ten acres along the road—Bill Deacon is ready to pay you fifty-five thousand dollars for it right now—or we could short plat it into two-acre parcels and

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double the price. Either way we can make enough money to tide you over for years. God knows you must be tired of shoeing seven horses a day, every day." She smiled up at him. "It's perfect, isn't it? I mean, you can hardly see those acres. You'll never miss them, and—"

Her dad walked out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

Winona flinched at the sound. Why had she allowed herself to hope? *Again*. She stared at the closed door, shaking her head, wondering why a smart woman such as herself kept stepping into the same mud puddle and expecting it to be dry. She was an idiot to still want her father's approval.

"You're mentally ill," she muttered to herself. "And pathetic."

The intercom on the table buzzed loudly, shocking her out of her thoughts.

"Luke Connelly on line one, Winona."

She pushed the red button. "Did you say Luke Connelly?"

"Yes. Line one."

Winona drew in a deep, steadying breath as she picked up the phone and answered. "Winona Grey."

"Hey, Win, it's Luke Connelly. Remember me?"

"Of course I remember you. How's Montana?"

"Cold and white right now, but I'm not there. I'm here, in Oyster Shores. I want to see you."

She caught her breath. "Really?"

"Everyone says you're the best lawyer in town—not that I'm surprised. I'm considering buying half of Doc Moorman's veterinary practice and I'd like to talk to you about the terms. Would that be okay?"

"Oh. You need a lawyer." She refused to feel disappointed. "Sure."

"Could you come over to the house tomorrow? I'm knee-deep in work over here. The last renters really left a mess. So, what do you say? We'll sneak a beer. It'll be just like old times."

"How about four o'clock? I hear that's Miller time."

"Perfect. And Win? I can't wait to see you."

She hung up the phone slowly; it was as if the air had thickened suddenly to water and resisted her movement. *I can't wait to see you*. She got

up and left the conference room, walking down to the foyer, where Lisa sat behind an antique dining room table, typing a letter on her big green IBM Selectric typewriter.

"I'm going out," Winona said. "It's an emergency. I'll be back in an hour."

"I'll reschedule Ursula."

"Good."

Winona left her quiet office and walked down the sidewalk, following the cement strip two blocks to her sister's impeccably maintained brick rambler.

There, she opened the unstained wooden gate at Aurora's backyard and went up to the laundry room door to knock.

It took Aurora forever to answer, and when she finally did, she looked harried. A four-year-old child was on each hip, a boy and a girl. "You just missed Vivi Ann. She borrowed three hundred bucks for the rodeo. Said it was an investment."

"With a straight face?"

Aurora smiled. "You know Vivi. Good things just come to her."

Winona rolled her eyes at that, even though they both knew it was true. Their youngest sister often seemed to be standing in a ray of sunlight that excluded everyone else. "Did she leave for Texas?"

"Just now. I hope that old truck makes it."

"If it breaks down, she'll meet Tom Cruise at the gas station." Winona pushed past her sister and went into the small, cluttered laundry room, where stacks of folded clothes layered every surface. "Can we talk about me for a change?"

"Come on, kids," Aurora said behind her, "Aunt Winona is crazy today. Give her plenty of room. You never know when she'll blow."

"Very funny."

Aurora took Ricky and Janie upstairs and put them down for naps, or television; whatever mothers did with four-year-old twins in the late afternoon. Fifteen minutes later, she was down again.

"Okay, what's going on?" she said, standing in the middle of the living room. Today she was wearing tight black jeans, penny loafers, and a

boxy jacket with oversized shoulder pads. Her straight brown hair was drawn back from her face in a French braid. Bangs poufed out over her forehead like a tiny awning.

Now that Aurora had asked directly, Winona found herself reluctant to reveal her true reason for racing over here. Stalling, she said, "I told Dad he should sell off the back ten acres or short plat them and then sell them."

"Yeah, well, you've got the learning curve of a lemming."

"Water's Edge is going under. Why else would Vivi Ann have to borrow entry money? And have you noticed how run-down the place looks?"

Aurora sat down on her new gray and mauve sofa. "You can't tell him to sell his land, Win. The man would rather sell his sperm."

"It's a few acres you can't even see, and it could give him financial security."

Aurora leaned back, drumming her long red fingernails on the glossy mahogany end table beside her. "You know you should talk to Vivi or me before you do something like that."

"I shouldn't—"

"I know. You think you're smarter than we are, and it's your responsibility to take care of everyone 'cause you're the oldest, but honest to God, Win, when you get a thing in your mind, you can't see the forest for the trees."

"I was just trying to help." Winona sat down on the salmon-colored brick hearth. A moment later she got up and went to the window. From here, she could see Aurora's child-friendly backyard and the houses behind it.

Aurora frowned. "I haven't seen you this jumpy since Tony Gibson asked you to go away for the weekend."

"We promised never to mention that."

"You promised. How can I forget the image of him stripping down to his women's panties?"

Winona couldn't take it anymore. She blurted out: "Luke Connelly called me today."

"Wow. That's a blast from the past. Last I heard he was off to vet school."

"He's back in town, and thinking of buying into Doc Moorman's clinic. He wants me to look over the documents."

"He called you as a lawyer?"

"That's what he said." Winona took a deep breath and finally turned to face her sister. "And that he was looking forward to seeing me."

"Does he know you had a crush on him?"

Crush. That was a pretty small word for what she'd felt, but she certainly wasn't going to tell Aurora that. Instead, she said, "I'm going to meet him at four tomorrow. Do you think you could help me look good? I know it's a herculean task, but—"

"Of course," Aurora said without smiling.

"What is it?" Winona asked. "You're giving me the something's-wrong look."

"I won't say anything. Okay, I'll just ask a question. It's about Luke, right? Just Luke."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad always wanted the Connellys' land. Don't pretend you don't know that. And he liked them."

"You think I'd go out with someone to get Dad's approval?"

"Sometimes I think you'd do almost anything for it."

Winona forced a laugh, but it didn't fly. Sometimes she worried about that, too. How far would she go for her father's approval? "This whole conversation is pointless because I'm fat. Luke won't want to go out with me. He never did."

Aurora gave her a sad, familiar look. "You know what amazes me about you, Win?"

"My keen intellect?"

"How wrong you are when you look in the mirror."

"Says the size six former cheerleader." Winona pushed to her feet. "Come over at three tomorrow, okay?"

"I'll be there."

"And Aurora? Don't tell anyone about this. Especially Vivi Ann. That

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stupid crush was a long time ago. I wouldn't want anyone to think it matters now. Hell, he's probably married with three kids."

"Your secrets have always been safe with me, Win."

The next afternoon, Winona stared at herself in the full-length mirror in her bedroom. These were not good fashion times for a woman of her size: shoulder pads, high-waisted slim-legged jeans, and cowboy boots were hardly helpful to her cause.

Aurora had done her very best, and Winona appreciated the effort, but some endeavors were simply destined to fail, and trying to slim her down was one of them. She kicked off her boots and actually felt some satisfaction when they thunked against the wall. Instead, she slipped on a pair of well-worn flats.

"He's going to think I haven't stopped eating since he left."

All the way to her car, and through town, she reminded herself that this was a business meeting with a man she used to know but didn't anymore. She absolutely should not tangle the past up with the present. Her crush on him had been a childhood thing, not substantial enough to last.

She drove along the waterfront, past the touristy shops that lined the Canal, and turned left at the end of town. Here was the Water's Edge property line. She couldn't help noticing again how ragged the fences were looking. It reminded her again of yesterday's meeting with her father. Out at the highway, she drove south for a quarter of a mile and then turned onto Luke's land. Although the Grey and Connelly parcels were adjoining, Luke's land had been vacant for years; the grass, even in winter, was tall and clumpy. Alder trees had sprouted up like weeds in the past few years, giving the acreage a spindly, unkempt look. The old house, an L-shaped rambler built in the early seventies, was sorely in need of paint and the shrubbery around it had grown wild. Junipers tangled with rhododendrons, which peeked through azaleas.

She parked alongside his big dually truck and killed the engine. "He'll just want to give you the papers and say how nice it is to see you

after all this time. Then he'll introduce you to his wife and kids." She took a deep breath and got out of the car.

The grass between her and the front door was soggy and brown. She left footprints that immediately filled with muddy water.

At the front door, she ran a hand through the hair Aurora had so meticulously curled and sprayed. Then she knocked at the door.

He answered almost instantly—and that was how quickly she knew she was in trouble.

He'd been tall in high school, but lanky and a little gawky. Those days were gone. He was tall and broad-shouldered and narrow-waisted—the kind of guy who went to the gym. His hair was still thick and mink brown, a perfect complement to his green eyes. "Win," he said.

And there it was: the smile that had always kicked the hell out of her heart.

"L-Luke," she stammered. "I came by for those documents . . ."

He pulled her into his arms and gave her the kind of whole-body hug she'd nearly forgotten existed.

"You think I'm going to let my best friend from high school just pick up some papers and go?"

He took her by the hand and led her through the house. It was like stepping into a time machine, being in the room that had changed so little in the past years. The same burnt-orange sculpted carpet was beneath her feet, the same brown and gold and orange plaid sofa hugged the wall, the same amber glass lamps with beaded switches sat on the end tables.

"The only thing missing is a black light," Luke said, grinning as he opened the avocado-colored fridge and pulled out a pair of beers. "It smells musty in here. I think the renters were smokers. Do you mind if we sit outside?"

"It wouldn't be the first time." She followed him out to the big cement patio that ran the length of the house. Off to the left, a barbecue was slowly rusting apart and dozens of dead geraniums sagged in flower boxes along the railing, but none of that could diminish the view. Like

Water's Edge, this parcel of land looked out across the Canal—flat and silver on this late afternoon—and right at the saw-blade, snowcapped Olympic Mountain Range on the opposite shore. A thicket of trees provided total privacy between their properties. They sat in the rocking love seat that had once been Winona's favorite place in the whole world.

"I guess we should start with the basics," he said, opening his beer and leaning back to take a sip. "After we moved to Montana, I ended up going to WSU to become a vet. Big animals. Where did you go to school?"

"UW. Undergrad and law school."

"I thought you were going to run off and see the world. I was surprised to hear that you'd come back."

"They needed me at home. What about you? Did you ever make it to Australia?"

"Nope. Too many school loans."

"I know what you mean." She laughed, but when it faded, the day felt too quiet. "You ever get married?" she asked softly.

"No. You?"

"No."

"Ever fall in love?"

She couldn't help turning to him. "No. You?"

He shook his head. "Never met the right girl, I guess."

Winona leaned back, looked out over the view. "Your mom must hate that you've moved away."

"Nah. Caroline has four kids and no husband. That keeps Mom busy most of the time. And she knew I was getting restless."

"Restless?"

"Sometimes you have to go looking for your life." He took a sip of beer. "How are your sisters?"

"Good. Aurora met a guy named Richard a few years ago—a doctor—they have four-year-old twins. Ricky and Janie. I think they're all doing well, but it's hard to tell with Aurora. She wants everyone to be happy, so she doesn't talk much about what bothers her. And Vivi Ann's still the same. Spontaneous. Headstrong. She dives in first and thinks later."

"Compared to you, no one thinks enough."

Winona couldn't help laughing at that. "What can I say? I'm always the smartest person in the room."

They fell into a companionable silence, staring out over the untended field, drinking their beers, then, quietly, Luke said, "I think I saw Vivi Ann pulling out of the gas station yesterday."

Winona heard something in his voice, a little catch that put her on guard. "She was on her way to Texas. She makes a lot of money at weekend rodeos. And meets a lot of handsome cowboys."

"I'm not surprised. She's beautiful," he said.

Winona had heard that sentence from men all her life; they usually followed it up with: *Do you think she'd go out with me?* She felt herself stiffening, drawing back whatever feelers of hope she'd allowed foolishly to unfurl. "Stand in line," she muttered under her breath.

What had she been thinking, anyway? He was too damn good-looking for Winona; it was dangerous to let herself expect anything at all. Especially now that he'd seen the beautiful Vivi Ann.

"It's good to be back," he said, bumping her shoulder-to-shoulder the way they used to when they were kids, when they were best friends, and suddenly her own warnings fell out of reach, clattered away.

"Yeah," she said, not daring to look at him. "It's good to have you home."