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A LOVE STORY

ARCHER'S VOICE

WITH AN
EXCLUSIVE
EXTENDED
EPILOGUE!

MIA SHERIDAN

Archer's Voice

A Sign of Love Novel

Mia Sheridan

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my boys, Jack, Cade and Tyler. The world needs as many good men as possible. I'm proud to be putting three of them out there. Brothers 'til the end.

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Epilogue

The Legend of Chiron the Centaur

The Centaurs as a group, were known to be rabble rousers, given to drunkenness and rowdy, lusty behavior. But Chiron wasn't like the rest—he was called the 'Good Centaur,' and 'The Wounded Healer,' wiser, gentler, and more just than those of his kind.

Sadly, he was shot by his friend, Hercules, with a poisoned arrow when Hercules was fighting the other centaurs. Because Chiron was immortal, he was unable to find relief from this incurable wound, and lived his life in agonizing pain.

Eventually, Chiron came upon Prometheus who was suffering an agony as well. Prometheus had been sentenced to eternal torment by the Gods and was tied to a rock, where, every morning, an eagle was sent to eat Prometheus' liver, and every evening, it grew back.

Chiron offered to willingly give up his life for Prometheus, therefore setting them both free from their eternal torment. Chiron dropped dead at Prometheus' feet. But because of his goodness and service, Zeus made Chiron a part of the stars, the constellation, Sagittarius, where his beauty could be gazed upon for all time.

Chiron's wound symbolizes the transformative power of suffering—how personal pain, both physical and emotional, can become the source of great moral and spiritual strength.

CHAPTER 1

Archer – Seven Years Old, April

"Grab my hand! I got you," I said real soft, the helicopter lifting off the ground as Duke grabbed Snake Eyes' hand. I was trying to play as quiet as I could—my mama was banged up again and I didn't want to wake her where she was sleeping up in her room. She'd told me to watch cartoons up in bed with her and I had for a while, but when I saw she was asleep, I'd come downstairs to play with my G.I. Joe toys.

The helicopter landed and my guys jumped out and ran under the chair that I had put a towel over to make into part of an underground bunker. I picked the helicopter up and lifted it off the ground again with a *whop, whop, whop* sound. I wished I could snap my fingers and make this a real helicopter. Then I'd pull my mama onto it and we'd fly away from here—away from *him*, away from the black eyes and my mama's tears. I didn't care where we'd end up as long as it was far, far away.

I crawled back into my bunker and a few minutes later, I heard the front door open and close, and then heavy footsteps walking through our foyer and down the hall toward where I was playing. I peeked out and saw a pair of shiny black shoes and the cuffs of what I knew were uniform pants.

I crawled out as fast as I could saying, "Uncle Connor!" as he kneeled down and I threw myself into his arms, making sure to stay clear of the side where he kept his gun and police flashlight.

"Hey, little man," he said, hugging me to him. "How's my rescue hero?"

"Good. See the underground fortress I built?" I said, leaning away and proudly pointing back over my shoulder at the fort I had made under the table using blankets and towels. It was pretty cool.

Uncle Connor smiled and glanced behind me. "I sure do. You did a good job there, Archer. I've never seen a fortress quite as impenetrable-looking as that one." He winked and smiled bigger.

I grinned. "Wanna play with me?" I asked.

He messed my hair, smiling. "Not right now, buddy. Later, okay? Where's your mama?"

I felt my own face fall. "Um, she's not feeling real good. She's laying down." I looked into Uncle Connor's face and golden brown eyes. The picture that popped into my head right away was the sky before a storm—dark and sort of scary. I moved back slightly, but as quick as that, Uncle Connor's eyes cleared and he pulled me into him again, squeezing me.

"Okay, Archer, okay," he said. He set me back from him and held onto my arms as his eyes moved over my face. I smiled at him and he smiled back.

"You have your mama's smile, you know that?"

I smiled bigger. I loved my mama's smile—it was warm and beautiful and it made me feel loved.

"But I look like my daddy," I said, looking down. Everyone said I had the Hale look about me.

He just stared at me for a minute, looking like maybe he wanted to say something, but then changed his mind. "Well, that's a good thing, buddy. Your daddy's a handsome devil." He smiled at me, but it didn't move up into his eyes. I looked at him, wishing I looked like Uncle Connor. My mama told me once that he was the most handsome man she'd seen in her whole life. But then she'd looked guilty like she shouldn't have said that. Probably because he wasn't my daddy, I guessed. Also, Uncle Connor was a police officer—a hero. When I grew up, I was gonna be just like him.

Uncle Connor stood up. "I'm gonna go see if your mama's awake. You play with your action figures and I'll be down in a minute, okay, buddy?"

"Okay." I nodded. He messed my hair again and then walked toward the steps. I waited a couple minutes and then I followed him up silently. I stepped around every squeak, holding on to the banister to move me forward. I knew how to be quiet in this house. It was important that I knew how to be quiet in this house.

When I got to the top of the stairs, I stood just outside the door to my mama's room, listening. The door was just open a crack, but it was enough.

"I'm okay, Connor, really," my mama's soft voice said.

"You're not okay, Alyssa," he hissed, his voice breaking at the end in a way that scared me. "Jesus. I want to kill him. I'm done with this, Lys. I'm done with the martyr routine. You might think you deserve this, but Archer. Does. Not," he said, spitting out the last three words in a way that let me know that his jaw was tight like I'd seen it before. Usually, when my daddy was around.

I heard nothing but my mama's soft crying for a few minutes before Uncle Connor spoke again. This time his voice sounded strange, no expression in it.

"You wanna know where he is right now? He left the bar and went home with Patty Nelson. He's screwing her three ways from Sunday in her trailer. I drove by and could hear it from inside my car."

"God, Connor," my mama's voice choked out. "Are you trying to make this worse—"

"No!" his voice roared and I jumped slightly. "No," he said more quietly now. "I'm trying to make you see that it's enough. *It's enough*. If you think you needed to pay a penance, it's paid. Don't you see that? You were never right in that belief, but for the sake of argument, let's say you were—it's paid up, Lys. It's long since paid up. Now we're all paying. Christ, do you wanna know what I felt when I heard the sounds coming out of that trailer? I wanted to bust in there and beat the shit out of him for humiliating you, disrespecting you that way. And the fuck of it all is that I should be happy that he's with someone other than you, *anyone* other than the woman that is so fucking deep under my skin, I couldn't dig you out with a jackhammer. But instead, I felt sick about it. Sick, Lys. Sick that he wasn't treating you right, even though him treating you right might mean I could never have you again."

It was quiet from inside the room for a couple minutes and I wanted to peek inside, but I didn't. All I heard was my mama's soft crying and some slight rustling.

Finally, Uncle Connor went on, his voice quiet now, gentle, "Let me take you away from here, baby, please, Lys. Let me protect you and Archer. Please." His voice was filled with something I didn't know the name for. I sucked in a quiet breath. He wanted to take us away from here?

"What about Tori?" my mama asked quietly.

It was a couple seconds before Uncle Connor answered, "I'd tell Tori I was leaving. She'd have to know. We haven't had any kind of real marriage for years anyway. She'd have to understand."

"She won't Connor," my mama said, sounding scared. "She won't understand. She'll do something to get even with us. She's always hated me."

"Alyssa, we're not kids anymore. This isn't about some stupid competition shit. This is about real life. This is about me loving you. This is about us deserving to have a life together. This is about me, you and Archer."

"And Travis?" she asked quietly.

There was a pause. "I'll work something out with Tori," he said. "You don't need to worry about that."

There was more silence, and then my mama said, "Your job, the town..."

"Alyssa," Uncle Connor said, his voice gentle, "I don't care about any of that. If there's no you, nothing else matters. Don't you know that by now? I'll resign from my job, sell the land. We'll live a life, baby. We'll find some happiness. Away from here—away from this place. Somewhere we can call our own. Baby, don't you want that? Tell me you do."

There was more silence, only I heard soft sounds like maybe they were kissing. I had seen them kissing before when my mama didn't know I was spying, like I was doing now. I knew it was wrong—mamas weren't supposed to kiss men who weren't their husbands. But I also knew that daddies weren't supposed to come home drunk all the time and slap their wives in the face, and that mamas weren't supposed to look at uncles with the soft look my mama always got on her face when Uncle Connor came around. It was all mixed up and confused and I wasn't sure how to sort it all. That's why I spied on them, trying to understand.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time, my mama whispered, so I could barely hear, "Yes, Connor, take us away from here. Take us far, far away. Me and you and Archer. Let's find some happiness. I want that. I want you. You're the only one I've ever wanted."

"Lys... Lys... My Lys..." I heard Uncle Connor saying between heavy breaths.

I snuck away, making my way back down the stairs, in between the noisy spots, not making a sound, moving in silence.

CHAPTER 2

Bree

I slung my backpack over my shoulder, picked up the small dog carrier on my passenger side seat, and closed the car door behind me. I stood still for a minute, just listening to the morning cricket songs echoing all around, almost, but not quite, drowning out the soft swish of the trees rustling in the wind. The sky above me was a vivid blue and I could just make out a small sliver of glistening lake water through the cottages in front of me. I squinted at the white one, the one that still had the small sign in the front window declaring that it was, *For Rent*. It was clearly older and slightly run down, but it had a charm about it that immediately appealed to me. I could picture sitting on the small porch in the evenings, watching the trees surrounding it sway in the breeze as the moon came up over the lake behind me, the smell of pine and lake water in the air. I smiled to myself. I hoped the inside offered a little charm too, or at the very least, some *clean*.

"What do you think, Phoebus?" I asked softly. Phoebe chuffed agreeably from her carrier.

"Yeah, I think so too," I said.

An older sedan pulled up next to my small VW Bug and an older, balding man got out, walking toward me.

"Bree Prescott?"

"That's me." I smiled and took a few steps, shaking his hand. "Thanks for meeting me on short notice, Mr. Connick."

"Please, call me George," he said, smiling back at me and moving toward the cottage, both of us kicking up dust and dead pine needles with each step. "Not a problem meetin' you. I'm retired now, so I don't really have a schedule to keep to. This worked just fine." We walked up the three wooden stairs to the small porch, and he pulled a ring of keys out of his pocket and began searching for one.

"Here we go," he said, putting the key in the lock and pushing the front door open. The smell of dust and faint mildew greeted me as we stepped inside and I looked around.

"The wife comes out here as often as possible and does some dusting and some basic cleaning, but as you can see, it could use a good once-over. Norma doesn't get around quite as well as she used to with her hip arthritis and all. The place has been empty all summer."

"It's fine." I smiled at him, putting Phoebe's dog carrier down by the door and moving toward what I could see was the kitchen. The inside needed more than a basic cleaning—more like a complete scrub down. But I immediately loved it. It was quaint and full of charm. When I lifted a couple of covers, I saw that the furnishings were older, but tasteful. The wood floors were wide planked and beautifully rustic, and the paint colors were all subtle and calming.

The kitchen appliances were older, but I didn't need much as far as a kitchen went anyway. I wasn't sure I'd ever want to cook again.

"The bedroom and bathroom are in the back—" Mr. Connick started to say.

"I'll take it," I cut in, then laughed and shook my head slightly. "I mean, if it's still available, and okay with you, I'll take it."

He chuckled. "Well, yes, that's great. Let me get the rental agreement out of my car and we can get that all taken care of. I listed the security deposit as first and last, but I can work with you if that's a problem."

I shook my head. "No, that's not a problem. That sounds fine."

"Okay then, I'll be right back," he said, moving toward the door.

While he was outside, I took a minute to walk down the hall and peek into the bedroom and bathroom. Both were small, but they would do, just as I'd figured they would. The thing that caught my attention was the large window in the bedroom that faced the lake. I couldn't help smiling as I took in the view of the small dock leading to the calm, glassy water, a stunning blue in the bright morning light.

There were two boats far out, not much more than dots on the horizon.

Suddenly, looking out at that water, I had the strangest sensation that I wanted to cry—but not with sadness, with *happiness*. Just as soon as I felt it, it started to fade, leaving me with an odd nostalgia that I couldn't begin to explain.

"Here we go," Mr. Connick called and I heard the door shut behind him. I left the room to sign the papers for the place I would call home—at least for the next little while—hoping against hope that this was where I'd finally find some peace.

Norma Connick had left all her cleaning products at the cottage, and so after I had lugged my suitcase out of my car and put it in the bedroom, I had gotten to work. Three hours later, I pushed a damp piece of hair out of my eyes and stood back to admire my work. The wood floors were clean and dust free, all the furniture was uncovered and the entire place thoroughly dusted. I had found the bed linens and towels in the hall closet and washed and dried them in the small, stacked washer and dryer next to the kitchen, and then made up the bed. The kitchen and bathroom were scrubbed and bleached and I had opened all the windows to let in the warm summer breeze that came off the lake. I wouldn't get too used to this place, but for now, I was content.

I unpacked the few toiletries I'd thrown into my suitcase and placed them in the medicine cabinet and then took a long, cool shower, washing the hours of cleaning and more hours of travel off my body. I had broken up the sixteen hour drive from my hometown, Cincinnati, Ohio, into two eight hour hauls, staying overnight in a small, roadside motel one night, and driving through the next to arrive this morning. I had stopped at a small Internet café in New York the day before and looked online for rental properties in the town where I was headed. The town in Maine I had chosen as my

destination was a popular tourist attraction and so after more than an hour of searching, the closest I could get was across the lake, in this small town named Pelion.

After drying off, I put on a pair of clean shorts and a t-shirt, and picked up my phone to call my best friend, Natalie. She'd called me several times since I'd first texted her and told her I was leaving, and I'd only texted her back. I owed her an actual phone call.

"Bree?" Nat answered, the sounds of loud chatter in the background.

"Hey, Nat, is this a bad time?"

"Hold on, I'm going outside." She put her hand over the mouthpiece and said something to someone and then came back on the line. "No, it's not a bad time! I've been dying to talk to you! I'm at lunch with my mom and my aunt. They can wait a few minutes. I've been worried," she said, her tone slightly accusing.

I sighed. "I know, I'm sorry. I'm in Maine." I had told her it was where I was heading.

"Bree, you just took off. Geez. Did you even pack anything?"

"A few things. Enough."

She huffed out a breath. "Okay. Well, when are you coming home?"

"I don't know. I thought I might stay here for a little while. Anyway, Nat, I didn't mention this, but I'm running low on money—I just spent a big chunk on a security deposit for my rental. I need to get a job, at least for a couple months, and make enough to fund my trip home and a few months of living expenses once I get back."

Nat paused. "I didn't realize it was that bad. But Bree, honey, you have a college degree. Come home and put it to use. You don't need to live like some kind of vagabond in a town where you don't know a single person. I already miss you. Avery and Jordan miss you. Let your friends help you get back to life—we love you. I can send you some money if it means getting you home more quickly."

"No, no, Natalie. Really. I... need this time, okay? I know you love me. I do," I said quietly. "I love you too. This is just something that I need to do."

She paused again. "Was it because of Jordan?"

I chewed on my lip for a couple seconds. "No, not entirely. I mean, maybe that was the straw, but no, I'm not running away from Jordan. It was just kind of the last thing I needed, you know? Everything just got to be... too much."

"Oh honey, a person can only *take* so much." When I was quiet, she sighed and said, "So the semi-strange, impromptu road trip is already helping?" I heard the smile in her voice.

I laughed a quiet laugh. "In some ways, maybe. In other ways, not just yet."

"So they haven't gone away yet?" Natalie asked quietly.

"No, Nat, not yet. But I feel good about this place. I really do." I tried to sound chipper.

Nat paused again. "Honey, I don't think it's about the place."

"That's not what I mean. I just mean, this feels like a good place to get away to for a little bit... oh gosh, you've gotta go. Your mom and aunt are waiting for you. We can talk about this another time."

"Okay," she said, hesitantly. "So you're safe?"

I paused. I never felt entirely safe. Would I again? "Yes, and it's beautiful here. I found a cottage right on the lake." I glanced out the window behind me, taking in the beautiful water view again.

"Can I come visit?"

I smiled. "Let me get settled in. Maybe before I turn back around?"

"Okay, deal. I really miss you."

"I miss you too. I'll call again soon, okay?"

"Okay. Bye, honey."

"Bye, Nat."

I hung up the phone and went to the big window and drew the shades in my new bedroom and climbed into my freshly made bed. Phoebe settled in at my feet. I fell asleep the minute my head hit the pillow.

I woke up to the sounds of bird calls and the distant lap of water hitting the shore. I rolled over and looked at the clock. It was just past six in the evening now. I stretched and sat up, orienting myself.

I got up, Phoebe trotting along behind me, and brushed my teeth in the small bathroom. After I rinsed, I studied myself in the medicine cabinet mirror. The dark circles under my eyes were still there, although less pronounced after the five hours of sleep I had just gotten. I pinched my cheeks to bring some color into them and gave myself a big, cheesy, fake grin in the mirror and then shook my head at myself. "You are going to be okay, Bree. You are strong and you are going to be happy again. Do you hear me? There's something good about this place. Do you feel it?" I tilted my head and stared at myself in the mirror for a minute longer. Lots of people gave their own reflection pep talks in the bathroom, right? Totally normal. I snorted softly and shook my head slightly again. I rinsed my face and then quickly pulled my long, light brown hair back into a messy twist at the nape of my neck.

I went out to the kitchen and opened the freezer where I had put the frozen meals I had had in a cooler on ice in my car. I hadn't had a lot of food to bring with me—just the few things that were in my refrigerator at home—a few microwaveable meals, milk, peanut butter and bread, and some fruit. And a half a bag of dog food for Phoebs. But it would do for a couple days before I had to find the local grocery store.

I popped a pasta meal into the microwave sitting on the counter and then stood eating it with a plastic fork. I watched out the kitchen window as I ate and noticed an old woman in a blue dress and short white hair come out of the cottage next to mine and walk toward my porch with a basket in her hands. When I heard her light knock, I tossed the now-empty cardboard meal box in the trash and went to answer.

I pulled the door open and the old lady smiled warmly at me. "Hi dear, I'm Anne Cabbott. Looks like you're my new neighbor. Welcome to the neighborhood."

I smiled back at her and took the basket she offered me. "Bree Prescott. Thank you. How nice." I lifted a corner of the towel on top of the basket and the sweet smell of blueberry muffins wafted up to me. "Oh gosh, these smell delicious," I said. "Would you like to come in?"

"Actually, I was going to ask if you'd like to come have some iced tea with me on my porch. I just made some fresh."

"Oh," I hesitated, "okay, sure. Just give me a second to pull on some shoes."

I stepped back inside and put the muffins on my kitchen counter and then went back to my bedroom where I had kicked off my flip flops.

When I came back to the front, Anne was standing at the edge of my porch waiting for me. "Such a lovely night. I try to sit out in the evenings and enjoy it. Pretty soon I'll be complaining about how cold it is."

We started walking toward her cottage. "So you live here all year round?" I asked, glancing over at her.

She nodded. "Most of us on this side of the lake are year-round residents. Tourists aren't interested in this town as it is. Over there," she nodded her head toward the far side of the lake, barely visible from this distance, "is where all the tourist attractions are. Most in this town don't mind that, like it even. Course all that's going to change. The woman who owns the town, Victoria Hale, has plans for a bunch of new development that will bring the tourists here as well." She sighed as we climbed the stairs to her porch and she sat down in one of the wicker chairs. I sat on the two-person porch swing and leaned back on the cushion.

Her porch was beautiful and homey, full of comfortable white wicker, and bright blue and yellow cushions. There were pots of flowers everywhere—wave petunias and potato vine cascading over the sides.

"What do you think about bringing tourists here?"

She frowned slightly. "Oh, well, I like our quiet little town. I say let them stay over there. We still get the passer-throughs which is enough for my taste. Plus, I like our small town feel. Supposedly condos are going up here, so there won't be any more lakeside cottages."

I frowned. "Oh, I'm sorry," I said, realizing she meant she'd have to move.

She waved her hand dismissively. "I'll be okay. It's the businesses in town that will be closed down because of the expansion that I worry more for."

I nodded, still frowning. We were quiet for a second before I said, "I vacationed on the other side of the lake with my family when I was a little girl."

She picked up the pitcher of tea on the small table next to her and poured us each a glass and handed me one. "Did you? What brings you back here now?"

I took a sip of my tea, purposefully stalling for a couple seconds. Finally I said, "I'm on a short road trip. I was happy there that summer." I shrugged. I tried to smile, but talking about my family still brought a tightness to my chest. I settled on what I hoped was a pleasant expression.

She studied me for a second, taking a sip of her own tea. Then she nodded. "Well, dear, I think that sounds like a good plan. And I think if this place brought you happiness before, it can bring happiness again. Some places just agree with people, I think." She smiled warmly and I smiled back. I didn't tell her that the other reason I was here was that it was the last place my family had been truly happy and carefree. My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer when we got home from that trip. She died six months later. From then on, it had just been me and my dad.

"How long are you planning on staying?" Anne asked, pulling me out of my reverie.

"I'm not sure. I don't really have a specific itinerary. I will need to get a job though. Do you know anyone who's hiring?"

She set her glass down. "Actually, I do. The diner in town needs a morning waitress. They're open for breakfast and lunch. I was in the other day and there was a sign up. The girl who worked there before had a baby

and decided to stay at home with him. It's right on the main street in town—Norm's. You can't miss it. Always nice and busy. You tell them Anne sent you." She winked at me.

"Thank you." I smiled. "I will."

We sat quietly for a minute, both sipping our tea, the sound of crickets singing in the background, and the occasional mosquito buzzing past my ear. I could hear distant shouts from boaters on the lake, probably about to head in and call it a night, and the soft sound of the lake lapping on the shore.

"It's peaceful here."

"Well, I hope you don't find this forward, dear, but it seems like you could use a good dose of peaceful."

I let out a breath and laughed softly. "You must read people well," I said. "You're not wrong there."

She laughed softly too. "Always have been good at peggin' people. My Bill used to say that he couldn't hide anything from me if he tried. Course, love and time will do that too. You get so the other person is practically another part of you—and you can't hide from yourself. Although some are good at tryin', I suppose."

I tilted my head. "I'm sorry. How long has your husband been gone?"

"Oh, it's been ten years now. I still miss him though." Melancholy skated briefly across her features before she pulled her shoulders up and nodded her head at my glass. "He used to like a little bourbon in his sweet tea. Made him frisky. Course I didn't mind. Kept him smiling and only took a minute or two of my time."

I had just taken a small sip of tea and I put my hand over my mouth not to spit it out. After I had swallowed it down, I laughed and Anne grinned at me.

I nodded after a minute. "I guess men are pretty simple that way."

Anne smiled. "Us women learn that young, don't we? Is there a boy waiting back home for you?"

I shook my head. "No. I have a few good friends, but no one else is waiting back home for me." As the words spilled from my lips, the true

nature of my alone-ness in the world felt like a sucker punch to my gut. It wasn't news to me and yet somehow, saying the words brought it home in a way that the knowledge itself didn't. I drained my glass of tea, attempting to swallow down the emotion that had suddenly overcome me.

"I should get going," I said. "Thank you so much for the tea and the company." I smiled at Anne and she smiled back, beginning to stand as I did.

"Anytime, Bree. You need anything at all, you know right where I am."

"Thank you, Anne. That's very kind. Oh! I do need to make a trip to a drug store. Is there one in town?"

"Yes. Haskell's. Just drive back through town, the way you came in and you'll see it on your left. It's right before the one stoplight. You can't miss it."

"Okay, great. Thanks again," I said, stepping down the stairs and giving her a small wave.

Anne nodded, smiling and waved back.

As I walked back through my own yard to get my purse out of the house, I spotted a lone dandelion full of fluff. I bent and plucked it out of the ground and held it up to my lips, closing my eyes and recalling Anne's words. After a minute, I whispered, "Peace," before I blew and watched the fluff float out of sight, hoping that somehow one of those seeds carrying my whisper would reach that something or someone who had the power to make wishes come true.

CHAPTER 3

Bree

The sky was just beginning to dim when I drove into Pelion, a quiet, almost old-fashioned, little downtown area. Most of the businesses looked to be family, or individual-owned, and large trees lined the wide sidewalks where people still strolled in the cooler, late-summer twilight. I loved this time of day. There was something magical about it, something *hopeful*, something that said, "You didn't know if you could, but you made it another day, didn't you?"

I spotted Haskell's and pulled into the parking lot to the right of it and pulled into a spot.

I didn't need groceries just yet, but I *was* in need of a few basic necessities. It was the only reason I'd run out at all. Even though I had slept five hours or so today, I was tired again and ready to settle into bed with a book.

I was in and out of Haskell's in ten minutes, and walking back to my car in the deepening twilight. The streetlights had blinked on in the time I had been in the store, and were casting a dreamy glow over the parking lot. I pulled my purse up on my shoulder and switched the plastic bag from one hand to the other when the bottom of the plastic tore open and my purchases fell to the concrete, several items rolling away, out of my immediate reach. "Crap!" I swore, bending down to pick my stuff up. I opened my large purse and started tossing in the shampoo and conditioner I'd picked up, when I saw someone stopped in my peripheral vision and I startled. I looked up just as a man bent down and put one knee on the asphalt and handed me the bottle of Advil that had rolled away, apparently directly into his path. I stared at him. He was young, and had shaggy, long, slightly wavy, brown hair that was in desperate need of a cut, and facial hair that looked more neglected than purposefully rugged. He might be handsome, but it was hard

to make out exactly what his face looked like under the overly-long beard and hair that fell over his forehead and down around his jaw. He was wearing jeans and a blue t-shirt that was stretched across his broad chest. The t-shirt had had a message on it at some point, but now was so faded and worn away that it was anyone's guess what it had once said.

I took all of this in in the few brief seconds it took me to reach for his extended hand holding the bottle of pain medication, at which point, our eyes met and seemed to tangle. His were deep and whiskey-colored, framed by long, dark lashes. *Beautiful.*

As I stared at him, it felt like something moved between us, almost as if I should reach out and try to grab the air surrounding our bodies—like perhaps my hand would come back holding something tangible, something soft and warm. I frowned, confused, but unable to look away as his eyes quickly darted from mine. Who was this strange-looking man and why was I sitting here frozen in front of him? I shook my head slightly and snapped myself back to reality. "Thanks," I said, taking the bottle from his still-outstretched hand. He said nothing, not looking at me again.

"Crap," I quietly swore once more, returning my attention to the items strewn on the ground. My eyes widened when I saw that my box of tampons had opened and several of them were lying on the ground. *Kill me now.* He picked up a few and handed them to me and I quickly stuffed them in my purse, glancing up at him at the same time he glanced at me, but there was no reaction on his face. Again, his eyes darted away. I felt color rising in my cheeks and tried to make small talk as he handed me a few more tampons and I snatched them and threw them in my purse, suppressing an hysterical giggle.

"Darn plastic bags," I breathed out, fast talking, then taking a deep breath before continuing, a little slower this time. "Not only bad for the environment, but unreliable really." The man handed me an Almond Joy candy bar and a tampon and I took it from him and dropped it into my open purse, groaning inwardly. "I tried to be good about using my own re-usable shopping bags. I even bought really cute ones in fun patterns... paisley, polka

dot," I shook my head, stuffing the last tampon on the ground in my purse, "but I was always leaving them in my car, or at home," I shook my head again as the man handed me two more Almond Joy candy bars.

"Thanks," I said. "I think I've got the rest of this." I waved my hand over the four remaining Almond Joy candy bars lying on the ground.

I looked up at him, my cheeks heating again. "They were on sale," I explained. "I wasn't planning on eating these all at once or anything." He didn't look at me as he picked them up himself, but I swore I saw a miniscule lip twitch. I blinked and it was gone. I squinted at him, taking the candy bars from his hand. "I just like to keep chocolate around the house, you know, for a treat once in a while. This here should last me a couple months." I was lying. What I had bought would last me a couple days, *if that*. I might even eat several of them on the car ride home.

The man stood and so did I, lifting my purse over my shoulder. "Okay, well, thanks for the help, for rescuing me... and my... personal items... my chocolate, and coconut... and almonds..." I laughed a small, embarrassed sound, but then grimaced slightly. "You know, it would really help me out if you would speak and put me out of my misery here." I grinned at him, but immediately went serious as his face fell, his eyes shuttering and a blank look replacing the warmer one I had sworn was there moments before.

He turned and started walking away.

"Hey, wait!" I called, starting to step after him. I stopped myself though, frowning as he moved away from me, his body moving with grace as he started to jog slowly toward the street. The strangest feeling of loss washed over me as he crossed and walked out of sight.

I got in my car and sat there unmoving for a couple minutes, wondering at the odd encounter. When I finally started the engine, I noticed that there was something on my windshield. I went to turn on the spray, when I stopped and leaned forward, looking more closely. Dandelion seeds were scattered across the glass, and as a light breeze blew, the fluffy ends were caught in the moving air and danced delicately off my windshield as they took flight, moving away from me, in the direction the man had gone.

I woke up early the next morning, got out of bed, and pulled up the shades in my bedroom and stared out at the lake, the morning sun reflecting on it, making it a warm, golden color. A large bird took up flight and I could just make out one singular boat in the water, close to the distant shore. Yeah, I could get used to this.

Phoebe jumped off the bed and came to sit by my feet. "What do you think, girl?" I whispered. She yawned.

I took a deep breath, trying to center myself. "Not this morning," I whispered. "This morning you're okay." I walked slowly toward the shower, relaxing minimally, hope blooming in my chest with each step. But as I turned on the spray, the world around me blinked out and the shower became the sound of rain, beating on the roof. Dread seized me and I froze as a loud clap of thunder pounded in my ears and the feel of cold metal moved across my bare breast. I flinched at the jerkiness of the gun tracing my nipple, the cold making it pebble as the tears flowed faster down my cheeks. Inside my head sounded like the high-pitched shriek of a train screeching to a stop on metal rails. *Oh God, Oh God.* I held my breath, just waiting for the gun to go off, ice-cold terror flowing through my veins. I tried to think of my dad lying in his own blood in the room beyond, but my own fear was so all-consuming that I couldn't focus on anything else. I began to shake uncontrollably, the rain continuing to beat against the—

A car door slammed outside, snapping me back to the here and now. I was standing in front of the running shower, water puddling on the floor where the curtain was open. Vomit rushed up my throat and I turned just in time to make it to the bowl where I heaved up bile. I sat there gasping and shaking for several minutes, trying to get a hold of my body. The tears threatened to come, but I wouldn't let them. I squeezed my eyes shut and

counted backwards from one hundred. When I made it to one, I took another deep breath and stumbled to my feet, grabbing a towel to mop up the growing puddle in front of the open shower.

I stripped off my clothes and stepped under the warm spray, leaning my head back and closing my eyes, trying to relax and come back to the present, trying to get the shaking under control.

"You're okay, you're okay, you're okay," I chanted, swallowing down the emotion, the guilt, my body still trembling slightly. I *would* be okay. I knew that, but it always took a little while to shake the feeling of being back *there*, in that place, in that moment of utter grief and terror, and then sometimes several hours before the sadness left me, but never completely.

Every morning the flashback came, and every evening I felt stronger again. Each dawn I had hope that *this* new day would be the one that would set me free, and that I would make it through without having to endure the pain of being chained in grief to the night that would forever separate *now* from *then*.

I stepped out of the shower and dried off. Looking at myself in the mirror, I thought I looked better than I did most mornings. Despite the fact that the flashbacks hadn't ended here, I had slept well, which I hadn't done much of over the past six months, and felt a sense of contentment that I attributed to the lake outside my window. What was more peaceful than the sound of water lapping gently on a sandy shore? Surely some of that would seep into my soul, or at the very least, help me get some much-needed sleep.

I went back to my bedroom and pulled on a pair of khaki shorts and a black button-up shirt with cap sleeves. I was planning on going into the diner in town that Anne had mentioned and wanted to look presentable since I'd be asking about the—hopefully still available—job. I was running low on money. I needed one as quickly as possible.

I blew my hair dry and left it down and then put on a minimum of makeup. I pulled on my black sandals and was out the door, the warm, morning air caressing my skin as I stepped outside and locked up.

Ten minutes later, I was pulling up to the curb outside of Norm's. It looked like a classic, small town diner. I looked in the big, glass window and saw that it was already half full on a Monday morning at eight a.m. The Help Wanted sign was still in the window. *Yes!*

I opened the door and the smell of coffee and bacon greeted me, the sounds of chatter and soft laughter coming from the booths and tables.

I walked toward the front and took a seat at the counter, next to two young women in cutoff jean shorts and tank tops—obviously not part of those stopping in for breakfast on their way to the office.

As I took a seat on the rotating, red, vinyl covered stool, the woman now sitting next to me looked at me and smiled.

"Good morning," I said and smiled back.

"Good morning!" she said.

I picked up the menu in front of me and a waitress, an older woman with short gray hair, standing at the kitchen window, looked over her shoulder at me and said, "I'll be right with you, honey." She looked harried as she flipped through her order pad. The place was only half full, but she was obviously alone and having trouble keeping up. Morning crowds were always looking for rush service so they could make it to work on time.

"No rush," I said.

A few minutes later when she had delivered a couple meals and came up to me, she said distractedly, "Coffee?"

"Please. And you look slammed—I'll make it easy on you and have the number three—just as it comes."

"Bless you, honey." She laughed. "You must have experience waitressing."

"Actually," I smiled and handed her the menu, "I do, and I know this isn't a good time, but I saw the Help Wanted sign in the window."

"Seriously?" she said, "When can you start?"

I laughed. "As soon as possible. I can come back later to fill out an application or—"

"No need. You have waitressing experience, you need a job, you're hired. Come back later to fill out the necessary paperwork, but Norm's my husband. I have the authority to hire another waitress and I just hired you." She held out her hand. "Maggie Jansen, by the way."

I grinned at her. "Bree Prescott. Thank you so much!"

"You're the one who just made my morning better," she called as she went down the counter to refill the other coffee cups.

Well, that was the easiest interview I'd ever had.

"New in town?" the young woman next to me asked.

I turned to her, smiling. "Yes, just moved here yesterday, actually."

"Well, welcome to Pelion. I'm Melanie Scholl and this is my sister, Liza." The girl on the right of her leaned forward and extended her hand.

I shook it, saying, "Really nice to meet you."

I noticed the bathing suit ties sticking out of the back of their tank tops and said, "Are you vacationing here?"

"Oh no," Melanie laughed, "we work on the other shore. We're lifeguards for the next couple weeks while the tourists are here and then we go back to work at our family's pizza parlor during the winter."

I nodded, sipping my coffee. I thought they looked about my age, Liza most likely the younger one. They looked similar with their reddish brown hair and the same large, blue eyes.

"If you have any questions about this town, you just ask us," Liza said. "We make it our business to know all the dirt." She winked. "We can tell you who to date, too, and who to avoid. We've pretty much run through them all in both towns—we're a wealth of information."

I laughed. "Okay, I'll keep that in mind. I'm really glad I met you girls." I started to turn forward when something occurred to me. "Hey, actually, I have a question about someone. I dropped some stuff in the pharmacy parking lot last night and a young man stopped to help me. Tall, lean, good build, but... I don't know, he didn't say a word... and he had this long beard—"

"Archer Hale," Melanie broke in. "I'm shocked he stopped to help you though. He doesn't usually pay anyone any attention." She paused. "And no one usually pays him any attention either, I guess."

"Well, I don't know if he had too much of a choice," I said. "My stuff literally rolled right in front of his feet."

Melanie shrugged. "Still unusual. Trust me. Anyway, I think he's deaf. That's why he doesn't speak. He was in some kind of accident when he was a kid. We were just five and six when it happened, right outside town, on the highway. His parents were killed, and the town Police Chief, his uncle. That's when he lost his hearing, I guess. He lives at the end of Briar Road—he used to live with his other uncle who home-schooled him, but that uncle died a couple years back and now he lives by himself out there. He never even used to come into town until his uncle died. Now we see him every once in a while. He's a total loner though."

"Wow," I said, frowning, "that's so sad."

"Yeah," Liza chimed in, "because, have you seen the body on him? Of course, runs in the genes. If he wasn't so anti-social, I'd do him."

Melanie rolled her eyes and I put my hand up to my lips so coffee wouldn't spew out of my mouth.

"Please, you hooker," Melanie said, "you'd do him anyway, if he'd look your way once."

Liza considered that for a second and then shook her head. "I doubt he'd even know what to do with that body of his. A true shame." Melanie rolled her eyes again and then glanced up at the clock above the order window.

"Oh darn, we gotta go or we're gonna be late." She took out her wallet and called to Maggie, "I'm leaving the bill on the counter, Mags."

"Thanks, hon," Maggie called back as she walked quickly by, holding two plates.

Melanie scribbled something down on a napkin and handed it to me. "Here's our number," she said. "We're planning a girl's night on the other side of the lake soon. Maybe you'd like to come with us?"