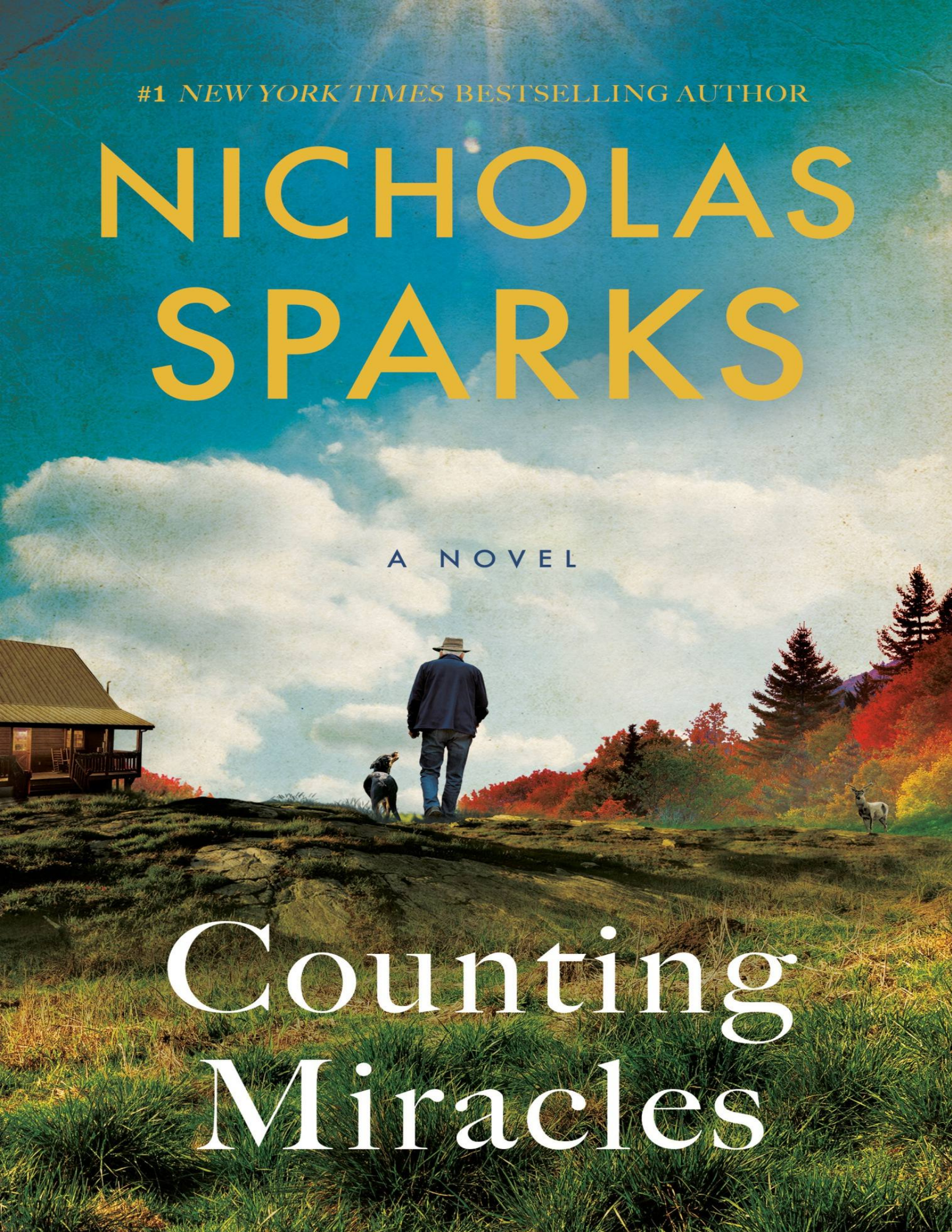


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NICHOLAS SPARKS

A NOVEL



Counting
Miracles

BY NICHOLAS SPARKS

Counting Miracles

Dreamland

The Wish

The Return

Every Breath

Two by Two

See Me

The Longest Ride

The Best of Me

Safe Haven

The Last Song

The Lucky One

The Choice

Dear John

At First Sight

True Believer

Three Weeks with My Brother

The Wedding

The Guardian

Nights in Rodanthe

A Bend in the Road

The Rescue

A Walk to Remember

Message in a Bottle

The Notebook

COUNTING MIRACLES

— A NOVEL —

NICHOLAS SPARKS



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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For Dr. Eric Collins

He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.

JOB 9:10

CHAPTER ONE



I

March 2023

TANNER HUGHES STEPPED onto the porch of the cottage that had once belonged to his grandparents and locked the door behind him. In one hand, he held a duffel bag, in the other a garment bag protecting the suit he'd worn to his grandmother's funeral five weeks earlier.

He looked up, noting a single cloud glowing brilliant white in the morning sunshine. It would be another postcard-perfect Florida day and he thought again that his grandparents had chosen a nice place to settle down for good. Pensacola had always been a military town and many veterans moved to the area to retire; he suspected that his grandparents, especially his former army mechanic grandpa, had fit right in.

He left the key beneath a flowerpot for the realtor, who planned to come by later. The furniture had already been moved out, painters had been scheduled, and the realtor had hinted that the place would sell quickly. Tanner had spent much of the last month sorting through his grandparents' things and processing the final months he'd spent with his grandma.

He glanced over his shoulder one last time, missing her, missing his grandpa. His grandparents were the only parents he'd ever known, his single mother having died minutes after Tanner had been delivered. It felt strange to know they were no longer around, and the word *orphaned* felt apt. After all, his mother had existed for him only in photographs, and until recently, he'd known nothing about his biological father at all. In their taciturn way, his grandparents had implied they hadn't known his father's identity, and Tanner had long ago convinced himself that it didn't really matter. Sure, sometimes he wished he'd known his parents, but he'd been raised in a loving home, and that was all that really mattered.

Pushing his thoughts aside, he started toward his car, thinking it looked *fast* even while parked in the driveway. A reproduction 1968 Shelby GT500KR from Revology Cars, it was candy-apple red with Wimbledon white stripes; even though it was brand-new, it looked identical to the ones that rolled off the line more than half a century earlier. It was the most extravagant thing Tanner had ever purchased for himself, and when it had arrived, he'd wished his grandpa had been alive to see it. They'd both loved American muscle cars, and while this

wasn't an original, it was made to be driven, not stored in a collector's garage, which suited him just fine.

Yet, come summertime, it was going to end up in a garage anyway.

Tanner squeezed the bags into the trunk next to a box of keepsakes from the cottage. His backpack was already on the passenger seat. The engine started with a throaty roar, and he headed through town, toward the interstate, passing chain stores and fast-food restaurants, thinking that aside from the beach, Pensacola didn't strike him as all that different from other places in other states he'd visited recently. He was still getting used to the sameness in much of the United States and he wondered whether he'd ever stop feeling like a stranger in the country.

As he drove, he felt his mind drifting through the highlights of his life: a youth spent on a dozen different military bases in Germany and Italy, basic training at Fort Benning in Georgia, nearly a decade and a half in the army. The numerous deployments to the Middle East and after he left the service, his security work with USAID—the U.S. Agency for International Development—all of it spent overseas.

And since then?

He'd pretty much stayed on the move, if only because it was all he knew. Much of the last couple of years had been spent on the road, his travels taking him from one side of the country to the other. He'd filled his phone with photos of national parks and various monuments as he'd reconnected with friends and, more important, visited the families of other friends he'd known in the service who'd passed away. In all, he'd been able to name twenty-three friends who'd been killed or died by their own hand after they'd left the service. Talking with their widows or parents felt right somehow, as though he was getting closer to an answer he needed, even if he still wasn't sure what the question might be.

Though there were a few more families on his list he intended to see, the road trip had been cut short last October, when he learned that his grandma's time was running out. Somehow, despite their regular calls and texts, she'd neglected to mention that she'd been diagnosed with a terminal lung condition a few months earlier. He'd rushed to Pensacola, where he found her propped up in bed and attended by a caregiver. His first thought was that she seemed smaller than he remembered and her breathing was labored despite the oxygen tank, making speech slow and abbreviated. The visible reality of her condition made his stomach clench, and for the next few months, he rarely left her side. He took over much of her feeding and grooming, and often slept on a cot he'd set up in her bedroom. He made calorie-dense milkshakes and mashed her food until it was soft enough to be eaten by a baby; he tenderly brushed her thinning hair and applied balm to her cracked lips. In the afternoons, when she wasn't sleeping, he often read to her from a poetry collection by Emily Dickinson while she focused on the view outside her window.

Because speech became more difficult for her as the weeks went on, he did most of the talking. He told her about the Grand Canyon, Graceland, an ice hotel in northern Wisconsin, and a dozen other places, hoping she'd share in his enthusiasm, but instead, the concern in her expression spoke volumes. *I'm worried about leaving you behind*, she seemed to be saying, *your life is unsettled*. When he tried to explain again that his recent travels had been a way for him to

honor the friends that he'd lost, she shook her head. "You need a...home," she rasped out, before succumbing to a prolonged coughing spasm. When she recovered, she motioned for him to hand her the pad of paper and pen on her nightstand. *Find where you belong and make that place your own*, she scrawled.

Knowing she'd be disappointed that he seemed no closer to settling down, he didn't tell her that Vince Thomas, an old friend of his from USAID, had reached out to him in January. Vince was leaving for a new gig in Africa. They'd worked together in Cameroon before, and he'd told Tanner that he needed a deputy head of security who was familiar with the country and its politics. Tanner could remember accepting the offer, thinking at the time that it felt like as good a next step as any.

Now, back on the interstate for the first time in months, the flat countryside of northern Florida passed in a lazy blur. After a quick visit with his best friend, Glen Edwards, and his family, Tanner planned to travel to Asheboro, North Carolina, wondering what, if anything, he would find.

Asheboro.

His grandma had written the name of that small town on a notepad, not long before she lapsed into a coma.

II

LIKE PENSACOLA, EASTERN North Carolina was a favorite retirement destination for veterans, and after leaving Delta—army special forces—Glen had landed on his feet. He ran a tactical outfit there that trained police and SWAT teams from around the country, owned a home with his wife, Molly, in Pine Knoll Shores overlooking Bogue Sound, and was raising two kids, both approaching middle school age. Tanner wasn't surprised when Glen met him on the front porch with a bottle of beer as soon as Tanner had stepped out of the car; they'd been through so much together in the service that it almost seemed as though they could read each other's minds.

The house boasted high ceilings and gorgeous views and had the messy, lived-in look of a family, with backpacks piled in the corners and athletic gear stacked near the door. When the kids weren't demanding Glen's attention, they craved Tanner's, showing him videogames or asking if he'd watch a movie with them. He loved it—he'd always liked kids—and Molly, with her easy smile and air of patience, was the kind of woman who brought out the best in Glen.

He spent three days with them, sharing meals and visiting the family. They went to the beach and the North Carolina Aquarium, and in the evenings, they'd chat on the back porch beneath a canopy of stars. Molly would usually head off to bed first, and then Tanner and Glen would have long talks, one-on-one.

The first night, Tanner caught Glen up on his travels and the sights he'd seen before describing his visits to the families of friends he'd lost. Glen sat quietly through that part—he'd known many of them as well—and finally admitted that he wouldn't have been able to do it.

"I'm not sure what I would have even said to them."

Tanner knew what he meant—it hadn't always been easy for Tanner, either, especially when suicide was involved—and the conversation eventually shifted to easier topics. He told Glen about his upcoming job in Cameroon and toward the end, he spoke about his last few months in Pensacola, including the surprising revelation his grandma had finally offered, which explained his upcoming trip to Asheboro.

“Wait,” Glen said, once he seemed to fully process the information. “She just shared that information with you now?”

“At first, I thought she was confused, but when she wrote it down, I knew she was serious.”

“How'd that make you feel?”

“Shocked, I guess. Maybe even a little angry. At the same time, I knew she believed she'd done the right thing for me by withholding it. Like maybe she thought she was protecting me somehow. And...I still love her. To me, they were my parents.”

Glen brought his lips together and said nothing, but later, on their last night together, Glen returned to the subject. “I've been thinking about what you told me the other night, and I've got to admit that I'm a little worried about you, Tan.”

“Because you think I'm making a mistake by heading to Asheboro?”

“No,” Glen answered. “Your curiosity about your past makes perfect sense to me. Hell, if someone dropped that sort of bombshell on me, I'd probably do the same thing. But I'm concerned about the way you've been living since you quit your last job. I mean, I can understand taking a little time to travel around and visit friends or whatever, and I get that you had to take care of your grandma when she was sick. But returning to Cameroon? I don't get that part. It strikes me that you're postponing your life instead of actually living it. Or even moving backward. I mean, you've never even owned a home, right? Hasn't life on the move gotten tiring for you yet?”

You sound like my grandma, Tanner thought, but he kept that to himself. Instead, he shrugged. “I liked it there.”

“I understand that.” Glen sighed. “Just know that if you ever decide to settle down, you have a job waiting for you with my company. You can live wherever, set your own schedule, and have a chance to work with some of the Delta guys again. Molly even has a sister who's single.” He waggled his eyebrows, at which Tanner had to laugh.

“Thanks,” he said, taking a swig of beer.

“And about your search...”

“I thought you just said you understood my curiosity.”

“I do. I was just wondering whether you tried using 23andMe or one of those other DNA sites?”

“I tried all of them, but other than a couple of very distant relatives in Ohio and California—as in many, many times removed—there wasn't anyone. It must have been a small family. But if you have any suggestions that might cut the legwork, I'm open to ideas.”

“I don't,” he said, “and your plan is definitely old-school, but who knows? It's the way people used to search, right? You just might get lucky.”

Tanner nodded, but wondered again what the odds were of locating someone from more than forty years ago, especially when the first and last names were so common as to be almost meaningless. In the United States alone, there were almost two million people with the same last name—he'd googled it—and more than a hundred of them lived in Asheboro.

Assuming, of course, his grandmother's memory could even be trusted by that point. In her shaky, almost illegible scrawl, all she'd managed was

*Your dad
Dave Johnson
Asheboro NC
I'm sorry*

III

FROM PINE KNOLL Shores, the drive to Asheboro took four hours, and after pulling into town, Tanner swung by a Walmart for a map, notebook, and pens before finding his way to the library. With help from a nice lady at the checkout counter, he learned that while the library didn't have phone books dating back to the 1970s or 1980s, she'd been able to scrounge up one from 1992. It would have to do.

Next step, finding his father, a man he'd never met.

At one of the library tables, he unfolded the map and divided the town into four quadrants. Then, using the old phone book, he jotted down the name and address of everyone named Johnson and roughly pinpointed their locations on the map; using his iPhone, he cross-referenced the Johnsons in the recent online white pages with the older ones from the phone book, circling on the map those that matched. He figured that if he was going to start knocking on doors, he might as well try to do it as efficiently as possible.

He hadn't been able to finish before the library closed, which meant he'd have to return on Monday. He considered visiting the county offices as well; property records might aid in his search, but that, too, would have to wait until after the weekend.

After dropping his things at a Hampton Inn and feeling the need to stretch his legs, he explored the downtown area. He strolled past an antiques store, a florist, and a handful of boutiques occupying the ground floors of buildings constructed early in the previous century. There was a lovely park in the center of town and, despite the thickening clouds in the sky, the sidewalks bustled with people walking their dogs and pushing baby strollers. The scene struck him as a throwback to another era and Tanner tried to picture what it must have been like to grow up here. Had his father somehow met his mother here? he wondered. As far as he knew, his grandparents had never lived here, so how would his mom and dad have crossed paths? More questions his grandma would never be able to answer, he knew, wishing he'd had just a bit more time with her.

He made it back to the hotel not long before the first drops of rain began to fall. He read until dinnertime, immersing himself in a book about the Pacific theater during World War II, thinking about the ways that modern warfare had evolved since then, even if some of the devastating effects on combatants remained the same.

When his stomach started to grumble, he found a sports bar on his phone where he figured he'd get some dinner. When he arrived at Coach's, he was surprised to find the parking lot full. He had to circle the area twice before finding a spot. He walked toward the entrance and after pushing through the door, he was deluged with the sound of multiple TV screens broadcasting a college basketball game on high volume and a packed house of cheering fans. He vaguely remembered Glen mentioning something about March Madness, the NCAA men's basketball tournament.

Tanner maneuvered through the crowd, automatically scanning the faces and body language around him, pegging anyone who was drunk or might be spoiling for a fight. Not far from the bar, clustered around a high-top table, he noted three men who were likely carrying weapons. Each of them had the telltale bulge at the small of his back, but judging by their haircuts and postures, he suspected they were off-duty police officers or sheriff's deputies, unwinding after a day at work. Nonetheless, he chose a spot at the bar where he could keep an eye on them, as well as most of the other patrons. Old habits died hard.

When the bartender finally noticed him, he ordered a burger and a craft beer, something made locally, and enjoyed both. After the bartender came by to scoop up his empty plate, he absently watched the game while finishing his beer. As he sipped, the crowd suddenly roared, making Tanner instinctively freeze. The televisions showed a replay of a point guard sinking a three-point shot. He exhaled, even as he picked up on another sound, one that didn't seem to belong.

A voice. A female voice.

"I said LET GO!"

He turned and saw a young woman with dark brown hair. She was standing next to a booth, struggling to free her arm from the grasp of a young man wearing a backward baseball cap. Tanner counted what appeared to be five teenagers—three guys and two girls, including the brunette—and watched as she was finally able to tear her arm free. While he wasn't eager to get involved, he was wary of men using their physical strength to intimidate women. If the guy grabbed her again, he decided, he'd feel compelled to do something.

Fortunately, the girl stormed off toward the front door. Her blond friend quickly slid out of the booth and followed while the guys at the table began to laugh and shout after the departing girls.

Idiots.

Tanner turned his attention back to the television and when there were only a couple of swallows of his beer left, he set it aside, ready to go. As he gathered his jacket, his gaze traveled to the booth he'd been watching earlier, and he realized that the guy with the backward baseball hat—the one who'd grabbed the girl—was no longer at the table, though his two friends had stayed behind.

Damn.

He hustled through the crowd toward the door. As he emerged from the bar, he scanned the parking lot and spotted Baseball Cap and the two girls near a black SUV. Even from a distance, it was plain that another argument was in progress. Baseball Cap had taken hold of the girl's arm again, but this time her efforts to free herself were futile. Tanner started toward them.

"Is there a problem?" he called out.

Their collective gaze swung in his direction.

"Who the hell are you?" Baseball Cap snarled, without letting go.

Tanner closed the gap between them until he was only a few feet away. "Let her go."

When Baseball Cap didn't react, Tanner stepped even closer. He felt his Delta training kick in, every nerve ending on high alert. "I'm not asking," he said, keeping his voice even and steady.

The young man hesitated another beat before finally releasing the girl's arm. "I was just trying to talk to my girlfriend."

"I'm NOT your girlfriend," the brunette suddenly shrieked. "We went out one time! I don't even know why you're here!"

Tanner turned toward her, noting that she was rubbing her arm as though it still hurt. "Do you want to talk to him?"

She let go of her arm. "No," she said quietly. "I just want to go home."

Tanner met the young man's eyes again. "Seems clear enough," he said. "Why don't you go back inside before you get into trouble?"

Baseball Cap opened his mouth to say something before thinking better of it. He took a step backward and then finally turned to leave. Tanner watched him go. Once Baseball Cap was back inside, Tanner directed his attention to the young woman again.

"Are you okay?"

"I guess," she murmured, not quite meeting his eyes.

"She'll be fine," her friend chimed in. "You didn't need to scare him, though."

Maybe, Tanner thought, *maybe not*. He'd learned that bruising an ego was often better than the alternative. But it was done now. "Have a good night, then." He nodded. "Drive safe."

He headed for the far end of the lot and found his car. Once behind the wheel, he maneuvered down an aisle of the lot to get to the exit. When he passed the spot where he'd encountered the three teens, the girls were gone.

Realizing he needed his phone for directions, he stopped the car and leaned sideways to fish it out of his back pocket. Just then, the large black SUV on the passenger side of his car suddenly reversed into the aisle at full speed. Before Tanner could react, he felt the rear of his car lurch sideways, his head whipped, and he registered the sound of crunching metal. And then all at once, it was over.

Reverting to training, he automatically surveyed himself for injury; his arms and legs were fine, he wasn't bleeding, and though his neck and back might be sore in the morning, he hadn't been seriously hurt.

But his car...

He drew a deep breath as he opened his door, hoping it hadn't been as bad as it felt or sounded, but already suspecting the worst. He went first around the front, then to the back, and saw that the rear quarter panel of the Shelby had been mangled to the point that it pressed into the tire. The taillight had been shattered and the impact had also popped open the trunk. When he tried to close it, the latch wouldn't catch.

My car, he lamented. *My new car...*

Caught up in a surge of rising anger, Tanner needed a moment to realize that the other driver had yet to emerge from the SUV. It was one of the bigger ones—a Suburban—and he steadied himself by drawing a few long breaths. When he was finally confident that he could deal with the guy without losing his temper, he started toward the driver's side, which seemed unharmed. As he reached it, the door swung open and a pair of thin, shaky legs emerged. Tanner came up short, realizing he was face-to-face with the brunette again. She was pale, her eyes wide, and she made a choking sound before bringing her hands to her face and beginning to cry.

Christ, Tanner muttered under his breath. *That's what I get for trying to be a nice guy.*

He gave her a minute, then another. Her age, coupled with the reaction, made him suspect it was her first accident, always a traumatic experience. Finally, when the waterworks began to subside, she swiped at her nose with her sleeve. Tanner pressed his lips together. He suspected that raising his voice might trigger another burst of tears, which was the last thing he wanted.

"Hey, listen to me," he said, using the same no-nonsense tone he'd used earlier with Baseball Cap. "Before anything else, can you tell me your name?"

It seemed to take a moment for his words to register. She looked up, as though trying to focus. "My mom's going to kill me," she offered.

God help me, Tanner thought. While she hadn't answered his question, he took her statement as a sign she was thinking straight. "I need to make sure you're not physically hurt. Can you turn your head from side to side, like this? And then, see if you can nod, okay?"

Tanner demonstrated, and after a brief delay, the girl slowly mimicked him.

"Does your head or neck hurt?" Tanner asked. "Even a little?"

"No," she said with a sniffle.

"How about your arms and legs, or your back? Do you feel any tingling or stinging or pain or numbness of any kind? Can you twist?"

She frowned briefly before rolling her shoulders and twisting at the waist. "It feels okay."

"I've had some experience with first aid, but I'm not a physician. While you seem uninjured to me, you might want to get checked out just to be safe."

"My mom's a doctor," she said, sounding distracted.

Noticing that her hands were still trembling, he continued to keep his voice reasonable. "The parking lot is private property so I doubt we need to call the police, but can you get your license, registration, and insurance card?"

"The police?" she asked, her voice rising in panic.

"I just said we won't have to call them—"

"She's never going to get me my own car now," she interrupted.

Tanner raised his eyes to the heavens before trying again. "Can you please find the things we need? Registration, license, insurance information."

She blinked. "It's my mom's car," she said, her voice almost a whisper. "I don't know where the registration is. Or the insurance stuff."

"You might try the glove compartment or the center console."

The girl turned, looking off-balance, and slowly crawled up into the SUV. Meanwhile, Tanner used his phone to take photographs of the accident from various angles. When she finally emerged, she handed over the registration and her license.

"I can't find the insurance card, but my mom probably knows where it is."

Tanner flipped the registration over; on the back was the name of the insurance company along with the policy number. "It's right here." He snapped photos before handing the license and registration back to her. Because she obviously had no idea what to do, he retrieved his own documents.

"Do you have a phone?"

She was staring at the damage to the vehicles. "What?"

"Use your phone to take pics of my license, registration, and insurance card."

"My cellphone battery died."

Of course it had. Using his phone, he took pictures of his own cards. "You said it's your mom's SUV, right? I'll text the photos of my info to you and her." He pulled up the dial pad on his phone. "Can I have your numbers?"

"Can't you just text them to me? So I can explain what happened before she starts getting photos from a number she doesn't recognize?"

He considered it. "Okay," he agreed, "I'll send them to you, but can I have her number, too? Just in case?"

She offered her cell number first, then her mom's. He stored the numbers and texted the photos to her; when he glanced at her again, he saw her biting her lip.

"You should probably call your mom to come pick you up," he suggested, offering his phone to her. "Your hands are shaking, you're in shock, and you're in no condition to drive."

She stared at the phone without taking it. "It's our only car."

"How about your friend, then? Is she still here?"

"She left already."

"How about someone else, then? Do you have another friend you can call?"

"I don't know their numbers."

"How can you not know their numbers?"

She stared at him as though he was daft. "They're in my phone and I just told you the battery's dead."

Tanner closed his eyes and tried to visualize himself as a Buddha. "All right...How far away do you live? Maybe I could drive you home in your SUV?"

She stared at him as though trying to gauge whether he was trustworthy.

"I guess that would be okay," she finally agreed. "It's not that far."

"Can you pull back into your spot? To separate the cars?"

“Me?”

“Better yet, I’ll do it,” he said. “Are the keys inside?”

Sniffing, she waved a hand at the car, which Tanner took as a yes. Luckily, the engine started right up, and he inched forward into the space. Next, he checked the rear bumper of the Suburban, but aside from a few scratches, it seemed fine.

“The good news is that yours has hardly any damage,” he said, pointing. “Wait here, okay? I’m going to park my car and be right back.”

Tanner hopped into his car and found an empty space in the next aisle, driving slowly and wincing at the sickening sound of metal scraping against the tire. In the rearview mirror, the cockeyed trunk blocked part of his view.

He wondered if he’d have to get the car shipped back to Florida or whether the repairs could be done locally, but figured he’d find out soon enough. For now, he’d drive the girl home and hope he could find a way not to be too irritated to fall asleep later.

Returning to the SUV, he found the girl leaning against the side, morose but dry-eyed. She walked around to the passenger side, leaving Tanner to climb into the driver’s seat. Once he got behind the wheel, Tanner pulled up the photo of her license on his phone.

“Do you still live on Dogwood Lane?”

She nodded.

“With your parents?”

“Just my mom,” she mumbled. “They’re divorced.”

He entered the address into his phone, which showed that her house was only eight minutes away.

“Make sure you buckle up,” he said before pointing the Suburban toward the exit. Once they reached the main road, he glanced over at her. She had the demeanor of a prisoner being led to an execution.

“You’re Casey, right? Casey Cooper?” he asked. “I saw it on your license.” When she nodded, Tanner went on. “I’m Tanner Hughes.”

“Hi,” she managed, her eyes flicking to his. “I’m sorry you have to drive me home.”

“It’s okay.”

“And I’m really, really, *really* sorry about hitting your car.”

You and me both. He tried to channel his grandmother’s voice. “Accidents happen.”

“Why are you being so nice about all this?”

He thought about it. “I guess I just remember that I was young once, too.”

She was quiet for a moment before she looked at him again. “My friend said that you have cool eyes. Camille, I mean. The girl that was with me.”

He’d been told they were an unusual color—hazel that appeared green or gold depending on the light. “Thanks,” he said.

“She said your tats were cool, too.”

At this he merely smiled.

She paused, staring out into the night. Then, shaking her head, she spoke in a low voice. “My mom is going to be so mad. Just, like, *beyond*.”

“It might take a little time, but she’ll get over it,” Tanner said. “She’ll be happy you weren’t hurt.”

She seemed to think about that as they turned into a leafy subdivision, and she directed him through the appropriate turns. Most of the homes were two stories, with brick façades and vinyl siding, fronted by neatly trimmed hedges.

“It’s that one,” Casey finally said, pointing to one of the brightly lit homes. It had a small front porch complete with a pair of rocking chairs, and as he pulled into the driveway, he saw a flash of movement in the kitchen window.

Tanner shut off the engine, but Casey didn’t appear to be in any rush to get out.

“Do you want me to wait here? While you tell your mom what happened?”

“Would you?” she asked. “In case she needs to talk to you?”

“Sure.”

With that, she finally seemed to summon her courage. As Casey entered the front door, Tanner stepped out of the SUV and leaned against the door to wait.

About five minutes later, a woman emerged from the house, Casey trailing. *Her mom*, Tanner thought, but as she hesitated for a moment under the glow of the porch light, he found himself looking closer.

She was dressed in faded jeans and a simple white peasant blouse, her long brown hair pulled back into a messy ponytail; at first glance she looked too young to be Casey’s mother. Her loose clothes couldn’t hide the generous curves of her body, but as she raised a hand to tame a stray lock of her dark hair, he thought he saw an uncertainty there, a tentativeness that hinted at past disappointment, or perhaps regret. *For what?* he wondered.

It was just a gut feeling, an instinctual flash, but as he watched her gather herself and step off the porch, her bare feet with red nails flashing below the cuffs of her jeans, he found himself thinking, *This woman has a story to tell, and I want to know what it is.*

CHAPTER TWO



I

AFTER TRYING AND failing to reach her daughter yet again, Kaitlyn Cooper had set the phone on the counter and stared out the window above the kitchen sink. A half disk of a moon was sandwiched between clouds, casting a silver glow over the front lawn, and she wondered idly whether the storm had passed, or whether it was simply taking a breather.

It didn't really matter, she supposed. With the car gone, she was pretty much stranded at the house regardless of the weather. Surveying the kitchen, she felt the familiar dread of having to clean up from dinner. Instead of diving in, she reached for her wineglass. There was still a little wine left in it and she took a sip.

She supposed she could ask Mitch to help—at nine, he was old enough. But she could see him in the living room, assembling the Lego Star Wars X-Wing Starfighter that she'd picked up earlier from Walmart, and she decided not to interrupt him. It had been an impulse buy—the last thing he needed was more Legos, but since buying things for the kids seemed to work for her ex, she'd figured she might as well earn some brownie points instead of always having to be the bad guy. Besides, Mitch deserved a nice surprise now and then. He was doing well in school and was consistently cheerful at home, and Lord knows, she needed that, if only because she doubted it would last. His older sister, Casey, had been delightful—if strong-willed—when she was young, too. And though she was still a good kid, her teenage years had transformed Casey from a bright, pleasant little girl into a young woman Kaitlyn sometimes found insufferable. Even if, obviously, Kaitlyn loved her.

But those *moods*...those *tones*...

Kaitlyn knew she wasn't alone in navigating the challenges of raising a teenager, but that didn't make life with Casey any easier. In the past two years, the harder Kaitlyn had tried to be an understanding parent, the more Casey had seemed to challenge her. Like tonight, for instance.

Was it so hard to join the family for dinner one night a week? Between school and homework and Casey's cheerleading practice—and Kaitlyn's hours at the office—having a regular sit-down meal together during the workweek was all but impossible. Because Kaitlyn also saw patients on Sunday evenings, Saturday was the only remaining option. Kaitlyn understood that wasn't always convenient, but it wasn't as though she expected Casey to hang

around afterward. All she'd wanted was an hour, from six to seven, or even five to six, and then Casey could have gone her merry way.

But what had she done?

She'd taken the old Suburban without asking, and then spent the next few hours ignoring phone calls and texts from her mother. Most likely she was with her friend Camille, but there was always the chance that she'd snuck out to see Josh Littleton, a young man who'd set off little alarm bells in Kaitlyn's mind. When he'd come to the house to pick Casey up a few weeks back, Kaitlyn sensed something *off* about him, for lack of a better word, and she'd secretly breathed a sigh of relief when Casey later insisted that she wasn't interested in him. In the past week, however, Kaitlyn gleaned that Josh had continued to text Casey, and knowing that Casey might react to her mother's disapproval by provoking it further, Kaitlyn had been careful not to comment.

Watching Mitch peruse the Lego instructions, the lenses of his glasses pressed close to the sheet of paper, made her heart contract just a little. She knew that he'd been bothered by his sister's no-show. He'd had a good day, spending part of the afternoon with Jasper—a nice old man who was teaching Mitch how to carve—and he was excited about going to the North Carolina Zoo tomorrow. But he adored his older sister and he'd asked more than once whether they should postpone dinner until Casey got home. Once he'd realized she wasn't coming, he'd barely spoken at all. Kaitlyn tried to soften his disappointment by joking that she hadn't liked hanging out with her mother when she'd been a teenager, either, but when he merely shrugged in response, she could tell he felt rejected.

She sometimes wondered whether Casey's attitude had been affected by the divorce. Casey had been twelve when they separated, and the following years hadn't been easy for any of them. Casey missed her father; and Mitch viewed George as something akin to a superhero. Kaitlyn, too, had once believed herself lucky in her choice of spouse. George was intelligent and hardworking, and as an interventional cardiologist, he had the ability to remain calm in the most volatile of situations. He saved lives daily, and he was successful enough to allow Kaitlyn to work part-time when the children were young, for which Kaitlyn would always be appreciative.

Moreover, he'd fit perfectly into Kaitlyn's life plan, the one she'd devised even before she started high school, and that now seemed painfully naïve: *Get good grades, go to college and then medical school. Date but don't get serious until the mid- to late twenties; after that, meet an intelligent, stable man, fall in love, and be married by thirty. Have two kids, buy a nice home, maintain a rewarding private practice while also treating underserved communities, and live happily ever after.*

So much for that, especially the last part. While she was thankful that the sharp, often overwhelming emotions associated with the divorce had waned—and she'd definitely put George behind her—there were moments when she missed the intimacy and quiet moments associated with being a couple. These days, her life revolved around work and the kids, with no time left for anything else—tonight being a prime example—and she reached for her phone again. She tried Casey, listening as her call went straight to voicemail, and disconnected, feeling frustrated. She took a final sip of wine and dumped the remainder into the sink before beginning