

“Christina Suzann Nelson offers readers a compelling and well-written story in *If We Make It Home*. The characters are clearly distinct in personality and life circumstances, but bonded by a friendship that survives the toll of years and the battering of their crises. Nelson skillfully draws readers into character emotions in a way that sets us up for what lies ahead. No neat and tidy bows at the end, but hope-filled and courageous conclusions. Nelson’s storytelling is a gift to her readers.”

—CYNTHIA RUCHTI, author of twenty-two books,
including *A Fragile Hope*

“If you love discovering new authors with a lyrical, literary voice, then you’re in for a treat. If you like those voices to also deliver a powerful, engaging story with true emotional depth, then you’re in for a feast. Highly recommended.”

—JAMES L. RUBART, best-selling author of *The Five Times I Met Myself* and *The Long Journey to Jake Palmer*

“I turned the final page of *If We Make It Home* with a sigh of satisfaction. Christina Suzann Nelson is a writer to watch! The adventure these three friends found themselves on had me wide-eyed and holding my breath, but their inner journeys were even more breathtaking. High stakes for each of the characters, yes, but a payoff that is so worthwhile.”

—DEBORAH RANEY, author of Christy Award finalist
Home to Chicory Lane and the Hanover Falls series

“*If We Make It Home* is a powerfully well-written novel layered with complex characters, witty dialogue, and superbly plotted collision courses of divine destiny. Three estranged friends, reunited decades after college, make an unusual wilderness journey so life-changing that readers can’t help but be changed alongside them. Christina writes with an unpretentious poetry and finesse that charmed me from the first page to the last.

A life-and-death drama brimming with tension and wry humor, *If We Make It Home* moved me with its gut-wrenching honesty and profound wisdom. It's beautifully raw. Elegantly real. Simply stunning. Christina Nelson has created an absolute must-read masterpiece.”

—CAMILLE EIDE, award-winning author of
The Memoir of Johnny Devine

IF
WE
MAKE
IT
HOME

*A Novel of Faith and Survival
in the Oregon Wilderness*

CHRISTINA SUZANN NELSON

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To my grandpa and my dad,
the men who raised me to love stories.

Chapter 1

IRELAND JAYNE

The scents of wood, essential oils, and accomplishment float over me as I enter my office. I take a moment to savor the view from my third-story vantage point. Old-growth fir trees shade my window from the harsh sun and give me a glimpse of the private college campus. They stand like guardians, keeping me safe in my oasis, protected from the hurt and chaos of people.

I ease down onto the ball that serves as my desk chair as it strengthens my core. My woven-hemp bag is packed for my trip, and I only have a couple hours today to work on the article I'm writing about the changes in the environmental movement. The picture at the corner of my desk defines so many of these shifts in my own lifetime. The image of me in my twenties, my hair hanging in dreads, my face decorated with piercings. In those days, saving the planet was more than my passion; it consumed me, surrounded me, insulated me.

For many of my students, this is still the truth of their existence, but I've grown older. My finger glides over the small bump below my lip where a metal hoop used to hang. It's been years since I chopped off the dreads, replacing them with short curls that tumble over my head.

Today's movement is no less valuable. It's intellectual. It's in my writings, my academic talks, and my teachings.

Pulling in a deep breath, I lay my palms over my diaphragm, feeling the expansion of my lungs. The air whistles out of my pursed lips as my shoulders drop and the tension in my neck begins to rest, my body and mind sinking into tranquility.

The calm is extinguished with a hard knock at the door. It opens without my invitation, and Dr. Doogan steps into my space. I jump to my feet, the ball crashing into a potted aloe behind me. He's about the last person I would have expected to come to my office. Any meetings we've had in the past have taken place in his domain.

I pull the gauzy scarf from my head and run my fingers through my curls.

His wiry eyebrows press together, and he grips his elbows.

"Professor, I'm sorry, I wasn't expecting you. Please, have a seat." I step around my desk and offer him the only real chair in the office, a second-hand recliner that barely fits in the corner.

He eyes the chair, then shakes his head. "This won't take long. I know you have a train to catch, but it is important."

Something in his tone pushes me back until my legs bump into my desk and I sit on its smooth, cold surface. "Is there a problem?"

He nods. "Unfortunately, there is. McCormick Wilson came to see me yesterday."

A muscle above my right eye twitches. Mac, as the other students call him, has been a waste of this institution's time from the first class he attended. His heart has never been in the cause. When he completed his graduation requirements, I was glad to see him go. Even if it meant sending him into the world to make money off people who legitimately cared about the future of the planet. "What did he want?"

"He claims his entrance to the master's program was denied for unsavory reasons."

"The boy is a fraud. I call *that* unsavory, don't you?"

"Those aren't the reasons he's claiming." Dr. Doogan sucks his lower lip into his mouth, chewing it, then turns to my sacred window. "He says he was denied based on his refusal to have a physical relationship with you."

I lean forward as I absorb the punch. "No." There are no other words. I feel Mac's attack as if he were in the room with me now. As if he's actually

reached out and assaulted me. The pain and shock leap from the shadows and pull me down.

“Don’t say anything else. I’m not here to get your statement. In fact, I’d rather you keep your side of the story to yourself for the time being. If we play our cards right, maybe this will blow over. Mr. Wilson could see the error of his ways and let it go. The last thing we need to do is antagonize him.”

Tingles run down the length of my arms. I shake out my hands, trying to restore control. “Okay. But what is he even doing here? He graduated.”

“He’s talking about filing a lawsuit to force us into admitting him to the program.” Dr. Doogan huffs out a breath. “And he’ll want restitution for . . . suffering.”

Fire spreads over my skin. His *suffering*? What a joke. A very unfunny joke.

“We can’t let him do this. What if other students get the idea that they can bully the university into whatever they want? Grades, classes—anything? How am I supposed to teach when Mac is trying to destroy my reputation?”

“That’s the thing. You won’t be. At least not for the time being. Ireland, I’ve talked to the university’s attorneys. They strongly suggested putting you on leave. Call it sabbatical if it feels better.”

“Where exactly am I supposed to go?”

“You have your speaking engagement at the University of Northwest Oregon. You can still do that. Maybe enjoy some time at your alma mater.”

My heart sinks further. If only it were that easy. Going back. It’s not the same. There’s hurt in the loss. Why that loss should hurt any more than the other hundreds, I don’t know.

“Just don’t mention this situation to anyone. I mean it. Anyone. We don’t want the media getting hold of this any sooner than necessary.” He laces his fingers, tucking them beneath his chin as his narrowed eyes drill into me. “Your job is on the line here.”

“My *job*?” I step back, building an invisible wall between us. “What do I care about this place anyway? This may be just the catalyst I need to go somewhere else and start over. There’s nothing here for me.” I can’t calm the waver in my voice.

He scoops his fingers through thin gray hair. “Ireland, you know better than that. You’re getting too old to run when life doesn’t go your way. Remember, I’ve seen your résumé. This is the longest you’ve stayed in one spot. Don’t throw away all you’ve built because you’re scared.”

His words hang in the air like cloying humidity. I fight the urge to brush at my arm in an attempt to escape their grip.

I yank my duffle bag from the floor and fling the strap over my shoulder. Grabbing my phone, computer, and charger, I take off. I don’t even bother to wait for Dr. Doogan to go. I don’t lock my door, set my voice-mail to “out of the office,” or turn off the salt lamp.

I just leave.



A kid screams in the seat in front of me. Great. I take the train for the peace. The *clack, clack, clack* of the rails. To see the scenery outside the window, from waterfalls to open fields. I am not here to listen to someone’s child screech about a spilled snack.

Some kind of artificial neon gummy thing falls between the seats and lands on the top of my hemp bag. Seriously? No wonder he’s having a meltdown. What do people expect when they fill their kids with chemicals? He’s probably a walking GMO billboard. That’s right. The next generation of Americans, built with food “grown” in laboratories.

With the back of my hand I brush the junk away, then reach in and find my phone. Tucking the earbuds in tight, I pump up the volume of the Eagles and lie back, my head swaying with the rhythm of the music and the train.

Outside, we pass fields dotted with sagebrush. As we approach the

Cascades, the memory of the sweet, pure Northwest air expands my chest. On the other side of these mountains is a life I walked away from twenty-five years ago.

What a child I was. Oh yes. Back then I thought all our problems could be solved with recycling. And faith in God. What a joke. The Earth is ready to crumble. That beauty outside the window could almost make me forget the problems we're really facing.

Almost.

McCormick Wilson has chosen to destroy my life. Well, the joke is on him. My life exploded a long time ago. I killed my own happiness. All that's left is the burnt and broken pieces. He can't ruin something that's already obliterated.

I rip the headphones out of my ears. They may block the noise, but they let my thoughts loose.

Scrolling through email on my smartphone, I notice another from Professor Jensen. I'm due to arrive in six hours, and she's supposed to meet me at the train station. That will give me an hour to get ready for the first class of the day.

Professor Jayne,

Thank you again for coming to UNWO to speak with my environmental change classes. I noticed your name on the Emery House invitations list. You didn't tell me you were an Emery girl. I lived there from 1998–2001. I assume you'll be at the reunion on Saturday. It's such a shame about the closure.

Sincerely,

Sequoia Jensen

Professor of Global Environmental Change – Ecology

Emery House . . . closing? My stomach sours. I may have been foolish back then, but it was a good time, probably the happiest time I'll have in this life. Closing my eyes, I see Hope, Vicky, and Jenna. My eyes snap

open. I can't go there. Not now. It's futile. I can't bring the past back any more than I can restore the ozone layer.

Using my phone, I open an email account reserved for junk and type *Emery* into the search. Ten emails come up. The first five are pleas for alum to write the university. Then comes the final news.

My skin burns. Just like the money-hungry university to wipe out a house that doesn't give them the financial rewards of their sky-high hunk of metal dorms.

I open the last email. It's the invitation. It's such a coincidence. I have to consider it. I'm already on my way home, or whatever you want to call Carrington, Oregon. There's no way I would have made the trip for the reunion. And in all reality, I don't have the time to make it now. My train leaves again on Saturday afternoon.

But I have nowhere else to go. No family to visit. Dr. Doogan made it clear he'd prefer I didn't come back any time soon. This Mac kid could destroy the only good thing left in my life. He could crush my career.

The train jerks, sending my cell to the floor and my chia water pouring onto my lap. I grab the bottle and mop up the mess as we come to a stop.

In the middle of nowhere.

For two hours I sit in my assigned seat while the temperature climbs, transforming the train car into an oven. That GMO kid started wailing within minutes, but finally wore himself out and went to sleep. I think we're about to die a global-warming kind of death when they finally give the okay, letting us go outside into the fresh air.

Like a herd of enslaved sheep, we follow the line of people down the aisle and out the door. The air here is dry and hot, but it's not toxic like inside. Large rocks roll under my feet as I make my way as far as I can from the train while still ensuring that I won't miss the call to reboard.

My nerves remain unsettled since the Emery email. I have to get away for a moment. Take time to refocus. To find center. Balance.

Breathing clean air into my lungs through my nose, I count. One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four. Then slowly blow out through my rounded lips.

The muscles in my neck and shoulders yawn as I roll my head in circles. My tension eases a fraction under the fingers of the penetrating sun.

If the universe is on my side, Mac will back down, and I'll soon return to my own little college, teaching a few young and enthusiastic students how to do what I hoped to do. Change the world. And I'll be comfortable again. Safe in the nest of the life I've built for myself.

Alone.

Shaking my hands out, I try to push those negative thoughts away. They have no place in my world. Neither does that girl I used to think I was. Emery House. It's Emery's fault.

Up ahead of me, a man and woman walk hand in hand. Her multicolored skirt brushes the ground, and she seems unaware that she's picking up twigs and fallen leaves with her hem. They stop. He turns her toward him, revealing the child bound to her chest, curly blond ringlets spilling over his eyes, his fist slurped into his mouth. The man takes her face in his hands, scooping his fingers into her dreadlocked hair. And I look away.

We must have looked so much like that family.

Why can't the past stay in the past?

Yesterday, I was fine. Now my peace is cracked and memories are flowing in through the holes.

Pain starts to claw at the left side of my head. Another migraine. I reach into my bag and pull out the brown dropper bottle. Unscrewing the cap, I inhale the scents of peppermint, eucalyptus, and valerian root from my self-made mixture. I release drops onto my finger tip. Rubbing the oils into my temples, I feel myself returning.

A fall chill rides on the gentle breeze. I turn toward the train. Back to my cave. It may be restrictive, but it's also safe.

Back at my seat, I pull my copy of *Silent Spring* from my bag. Without the squawking kid to distract me, I'm able to go deep into the words, making scribbles in my notebook. My issue becomes clear: I need to get free from the clutter of society. Maybe a retreat of some sort. A true sabbatical. I need to be in nature, and let it become a part of me.



When the train finally rumbles into the station, I'm worn from traveling and my skin is sticky with dried perspiration. I need a long shower and a bed. The day is gone, and the classes I was to speak to, they're over. It fits. I'm sure my career is over too. And my job is all I had left.

To my surprise, Dr. Jensen is standing on the sidewalk outside my window. She's alone, the only figure in the dim light of a flickering safety lamp.

I heft my bag onto my shoulder and stand. Age cries from my joints, especially my hips. It tells me I'm too old to start over again. Too tired to form another new life in another new place with all new people.

Cold air floats over my skin as I step onto the platform. The sensation is both shocking and luxurious.

Jensen approaches me. She looks like her picture—young, her skin still taut and unblemished. Brown spiky hair is tipped with bleached ends and her deep blue eyes shine bright behind round glasses. The expression on her face, the way she bites at her bottom lip, gives away her anxiety.

Something's coming.

"Dr. Jayne. I'm glad you finally made it."

"I'm so sorry I missed the classes. It seems my trip has been all for naught." I brush at my wrinkled linen pants. At one time I chained myself to an old-growth tree not too far from here. I stayed there along with a dwindling crowd until the tear gas showed up. I don't think I felt as filthy then as I do at this moment.

She tugs at a hanging crystal earring. "I was wondering if you'd consider staying on through Monday." This woman gets right to business. "The university will pay for your hotel and travel. My students were so disappointed today. It's not often we have someone of your experience and expertise come to visit. And an alum even. What do you think?"

I think that she'll think very differently if the news of my impending scandal hits social media before I'm able to impart whatever knowledge I may have to her students.

My stomach growls. Roasted pumpkin seeds only last so long.

She smiles, like my discomfort may give her an edge. “We have a wonderful vegan restaurant near campus. Have you heard of Almost Normals?” Without waiting for my reply, she turns and starts walking toward a blue Prius, one of the few cars in the parking lot.

She’s got me. I’m starved. “Let’s talk through the details as we eat,” I say.

I tag along like a hungry stray. The truth in the phrase is so real, so tangible. I should skip dinner and march down the street to the tattoo parlor. *Hungry Stray*. I can see it stamped across my flesh. Identification. It’s freeing, the thought. The real truth of who I am out there for everyone to see. No more hiding, trying to be someone I can’t. No more putting on a show as if I’m really to be listened to. It’s just me. The hungry stray.

Whether it’s the hunger or the familiarity of this town, somehow I’m so vulnerable the breeze on my skin stings. I’m raw and ragged, and I don’t know if I can go another step without collapsing.

“Dr. Jayne?”

My chin snaps up. How long have I been standing in front of the open hatch of her car, my bag pulling down my right shoulder? “I’m sorry. The trip drained me.”

“We’ll get you dinner, then I’ll take you to the hotel. I think you’ll like it. It’s right down the street from Emery House.”

I nod. She’s taking me home. The only home my life can claim. And though I didn’t think I’d ever come back, I realize this is the one place for me right now. This is where I can find myself again. Where I can ask forgiveness for my life . . .

Before it’s completely wiped away.

Chapter 2

JENNA SAVAGE

Every bite of my second cinnamon roll stretches my stomach, but I keep shoveling in one forkful after another. The sticky frosting I lick from my lips doesn't have the same sweet-as-heaven flavor as it did when I began this feast.

The fork clanks on the plate as I slide it onto the coffee table.

Andy Griffith plays on the television. His deep southern drawl washes over me like my father's once did. Maybe that's why I never miss this show. Or it could be the fact that everything works out in Mayberry. And it only takes thirty minutes. Less if you don't count the commercials. But Andy had more than Opie. He was the sheriff. When Opie left the show, life went on.

A door clicks at the end of the hall and footsteps approach. I fluff the knit blanket draped over my legs, sending crumbs flying through the air and landing in the carpet.

"Smells like the first day of school." Mark enters the kitchen. He stops at the counter and stares down at the pan of cinnamon rolls. "Couldn't you cut down this recipe? There's no way the two of us can eat the whole pan." He's smart enough not to mention the two missing rolls.

"I suppose I could have done that, but I don't even have a pan that small." There's a sharp edge to my voice I wish I could reach out and soften.

"It'll just take some adjustment. We'll figure it out."

We. From where I sit, I see a man who's moved on with life as though our triplets were never here. As though the last eighteen years were a dream, and he's awoken to just another day in his satisfying life.

He pulls a roll from the pan and drops it onto a plate. Melted frosting dives off the sides of the steaming bread. “What are your plans today?”

Right now, my plan is to have another cinnamon roll, but that’s not the answer he’s looking for, or the one I’m willing to give. “I’ll take Scoop for his walk, then make cookies for the care packages.”

“Didn’t you just send them boxes last week? Calvin won’t even get his until basic training is over.” He pushes his plate aside, a chunk of roll still sitting in a puddle of goo. “We’ve got to be careful about the budget. Shipping is expensive.”

“So were children, but you never complained about feeding and clothing them.”

“You know what I mean. I’m trying to make sure we have enough to help out where we can.”

“And making sure they remember that we’re here and we love them is not help?”

He steps around the counter and walks the three strides into the family room to where I lay. “Maybe you should talk to someone about what you’re going through.”

I push myself off the couch. “What exactly am I going through?”

“You know.” He has the decency to retreat two paces. “Empty-nest syndrome.”

Is he kidding me? No way he just said that. Next he’ll be attributing my moods to PMS or menopause. “I’m a mother, Mark, not some crazy plumbing problem. I’m not going to talk to a professional about the fact that I miss my children. They are my children. What kind of mother wouldn’t?”

“I think maybe this has gone beyond the typical missing. You barely get out of bed.”

“Do I look like I’m in bed right now?” I glance down at my pajama pants and nearly-worn-through slippers. Ugh. I’ve been bested.

“All right. Listen. Tomorrow is our anniversary. Let’s take the chance

to enjoy being just the two of us again.” He steps closer and rubs the fabric of my worn t-shirt. “Please.”

I nod, keeping my gaze on the carpet.

He hooks his fingers in mine and leads me to the front door.

What started as an act of love has become a twenty-year-old ritual.

I step outside with my husband and tip up on my toes to kiss his cheek. This has been my routine every day of the school year since he started teaching. I walk him out the door to his truck and wave as he leaves. It used to make me feel like Lucy Ricardo saying goodbye to Ricky. Now it’s just habit. But this tradition is about the only thing in my life that hasn’t left me in the last few weeks.

“I love you,” he says.

Before I can tell him I really do love him too, he hops into his pickup and backs out of the driveway. His red and rust tailgate disappears around the corner, and he’s gone. Today marks what will be his twentieth year teaching science at the high school in our small Northern California community. And one day away from our twenty-fourth anniversary.

Even after all this time, and even with my heart now splintered and cracked open, I still love him. And I think he loves me too. But I’m not really sure why. I don’t bring much to our marriage.

Empty-nest syndrome. That shows just how little he really understands. My emptiness can’t be mended with a diagnostic Band-Aid. The simple dismissal with those three words bring me further down until I plop onto the porch. The same porch where I posed my long-prayed-for triplets each fall from toddlerhood, through homeschool, and before each first day of high school.

Here, with the jasmine climbing up the trellis, the sweet scent floating over me, I can still see their matching smiles as they packed up the most essential of their belongings and, for the first time, moved to places other than this house. Three separate places. Calvin, the last to leave, started basic training for the Air Force only a couple weeks ago. Carrie’s been gone for a month to college in Washington State,

and Caroline, she left a week after her sister, but to school in Southern California.

Never has the length of our state seemed so unbearable. It would take me a full day to get to either one of my girls, and even longer to reach Calvin. What if they need me? What if one of them gets sick or injured? How can I stop being their mom in the way I have been since the day the doctor confirmed their beginnings? It's unnatural.

Behind our cherry-red front door, the kids' Airedale terrier whines. Scoop understands. He's the only other creature who seems to realize how vacant our home is without the triplets.

I pull myself up and open the door. At the same time, a gray squirrel darts across the lawn.

The Airedale's ears lift and his back straightens.

I loop my fingers into his collar as he lunges forward. For a few awkward strides, I stay with him, then it's too much for my stubby legs, and my knees collide with the freshly watered lawn.

Scoop runs free.

"Scoop. No. Scoop!" Water soaks into my pajama pants and slippers. My shoulders slump, and I give up, falling back onto the grass. The scent of earth and bark mulch rolls over me. A single cloud floats through the blue-as-the-ocean sky. "Scoop."

This time the plea comes out with no real urgency. He'll come when he's ready. And not a moment earlier. Ten years with this dog, I know the only thing to be gained by screaming his name are odd looks from people who wonder what kind of a person would name their dog Scoop.

The kids begged me to get the beast. And my response, for as long as I could hold out, was, "Who's going to scoop all that poop?" Maybe I'd said it too many times.

Closing my eyes, I let the fact that I'm lying in the front yard in full view of the neighborhood, with wetness seeping into my clothes and hair, while my dog runs free after an uncatchable squirrel, slip away. This is another type of Lucy moment. Not the kind I want to dwell on.

It's time to surrender. My life has become inconsequential and obsolete. I'm the outdated model of a mother with my only hope being the future possibility of revival as a grandmother.

A warm tongue slaps me across the mouth and I sit up, aware that my rounded middle makes bending less graceful than when I was young and active. I lift the neck of my shirt and wipe it across my face. "That's nasty, Scoop."

He flops down next to me and flings a mud-lined leg over my lap.

"Well, I hope you're happy. That was your walk for the morning."

He doesn't answer, and I'm struck by the fact that the majority of my conversations are with this overgrown, breathing teddy bear. But I'm fine. I've had friends. They were an expensive investment and the loss of them hurt too bad.

"Come on, dog. Let's get cleaned up." I roll to my knees and heft myself to standing. Chunks of grass clippings cling to my skin and clothes. The back of my head is soaked, and the hair sticks to my scalp.

In an oddly obedient manner, Scoop follows me into the house where I wipe him down with the dog towel then flip my slippers off and head through the silent hall. On the way to the small bedroom I share with Mark, I pass two closed doors. If only I could go back. I'd enjoy every moment of craziness. I'd hear their music booming from their rooms and recognize the noise as a beautiful sign that my children were happy in our nest.

In my room, I peel off my wet clothes, throw them along the edge of the hamper, then yank on a pair of sweatpants I have to roll up to fit my stubby legs. I finish my housewife-chic ensemble with one of Mark's t-shirts.

As I walk back through the hall, I touch Calvin's door, then Carrie and Caroline's. It's become another of my rituals, a way to wish them well and pray for them when words are too heavy to speak.

On the television screen, Barney Fife pulls his trusty bullet from his pocket as I drop onto the computer chair. None of my eighty-four

Facebook friends have updated their statuses since the last time I checked. I hit refresh again. Still nothing.

I lean back in my seat and twist around. This room is the reason we chose to buy the house. The family room is an extension of the kitchen. Here I was able to be part of my children's everyday lives while I cooked the endless meals that three growing people required.

I loved it then. Now, not so much.

Tears prick my eyes. I can't even think about the triplets without a waterfall of emotions flowing over my cheeks. What am I supposed to do with my life now? I scan their graduation pictures, hung evenly over the gas fireplace. Three individual shots of Carrie, Calvin, and Caroline, then under them a large print of the five of us together, the kids still in their black robes, gold tassels hanging to the side of stiff mortarboards and smiles stretched across our faces.

The photographs give no hint of what was to come when they went separate ways. There's not even the smallest clue on my face that soon that mother would be alone in a vacated home day after day, with nothing to show for her life. Nothing to give her days value.

Where did I go wrong? My friend, Laura, her kids have all gone to the local college. Her oldest daughter was married a year ago and is now expecting Laura and Dan's first grandbaby. They live less than a mile apart.

I can't breathe. The loss suffocates me. I gave everything to have those three precious children. How could I have missed the fact that someday, a day that would come too quickly, they would all three leave me at nearly the same moment. That's what people don't understand, the plight of the mother of multiples. They all leave at once.



The light outside is dimming and the candle I've placed in the middle of the table has burned halfway down, but still no Mark. I scoot the chair

back and sigh as it creaks with the relief of my weight. How could he be late on our anniversary?

I blow out the flame, leaving the room dark. In the silent house, the quiet tenses my muscles. Feeling my way to the couch, I let my body flop over the armrest and onto the cushions. My fingers graze the remote. Just as I'm about to click on some needed distraction, light cuts across the room.

The rumble of the engine dies and a door slams.

I roll off the sofa, my knees hitting the floor hard and the wind puffing from my lungs. With all I have, I scramble to my feet in a race to be upright before Mark switches on the hall light. The effort leaves me breathless and damp.

"Jenna? Are you here?" The light snaps on, and we're staring at each other.

I wipe my hand over my forehead. "Dinner is cold."

"I'm so sorry. I sent you a text. Didn't you get it?"

I roll my eyes. So what if this expression of my emotion makes him furious? I haven't even charged my cell phone since the last road trip. I use the land line. Why would I use my cell when I'm almost always right here, waiting?

"Listen. I told you I could be late. It was all I could do to get here this early. Tonight is the fall sports parents meetings. Ken was not thrilled I was having my assistant coach take over. I really thought he'd let me out of it."

My shoulders slump. Ken may be a friend, but he's still a harsh principal. Mark isn't making anything up here. It was my own fault for expecting him to be home at six. But still, I can't turn and let Mark off the hook. Something keeps my feet planted and my face turned away from him. I don't want to be wrong—again.

He makes the effort and walks around to face me. "I have something for you." His eyes twinkle as he reaches into his pocket and extracts a lavender envelope.

A card? He gets me a card every anniversary. Running my finger under the flap, I tear the top and pull out a Hallmark anniversary greeting. I think it's the same one I got last year. As I open it, a folded piece of paper slips onto my palm.

Electricity runs over my nerves. I look up into his gaze and see excitement in his features.

"Come on," he says.

Dropping the card and envelope onto the coffee table, I train my attention on the small print. It's an airline itinerary. For one person. To Carrington, Oregon. How did he know?

"I heard about Emery House closing and the reunion. I thought this could be a great chance for you to reconnect. What do you think?" His palm warms my shoulder, and tension melts away from me as I lean into him.

"I'm scared."

"Of what?" His arms encircle me, pinning my own to my sides.

"Of what everyone will think of me at the reunion. I'm not the same."

He lifts my chin. "No one is the same after this many years. No one. I'm sure they're all thinking similar things."

"They have careers, lives. I have—I have a spare tire around my middle and no idea what to do with my time." My forehead drops onto his chest.

"First of all, I think you look great. Secondly, it sounds like this is the perfect opportunity for you to take some time and find your path. Maybe being at the university will inspire you. You know, you could take classes here at the community college or online. Instead of thinking about how much you miss the kids, how about looking at the life you have left to live? You can do almost anything."

I've married a dreamer. In his mind, I still have time to do wild things like fly to the moon. But in reality, I'm a forty-six-year-old woman who hasn't used her degree in almost twenty years.

Doesn't he realize I still listen to eighties music? I have no idea what's playing on the radio, and I have no desire to find out. My main source of

entertainment is the oldies television stations, the more black-and-white, the better. I'm not the kind of woman who's about to take a leap and do something new and unfamiliar. I love reruns. Even in my real life.

An overly dramatic moan weaves from my mouth. It's like it hangs there and no matter how much I cringe at the immaturity of it, I can't pull it back or make it drift away.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I'll give it a try." The lie in my words sickens me. But I can't have this talk again. Not tonight. It's our anniversary.