

“A page-turner that perfectly captures the lore of Appalachia with superstition, suspense, and sweet love. Mountain beauty hides the secrets of a murderous family’s past—until Tessa and Zeke unearth the truth. *The Sound of Falling Leaves* completes my must-have list for a Southern story filled with intrigue, romance, and unforgettable characters.”

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“As an Appalachian native, I’m a bit particular about books set in my beloved mountains. In *The Sound of Falling Leaves*, Lisa Carter has composed a story that honors the beauty and heritage of the region and its people while taking readers on a trek as serpentine as a mountain road. Get ready to white-knuckle your way through each new twist and gasp at the beauty of redemption and love.”

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“Lisa Carter deftly weaves small-town corruption, generational blood feuds, and the haunting ballads of the Appalachian Mountains into a suspenseful, moving story of second chances. You will remember Zeke and Tessa long after you turn the last page.”

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“Compelling characters. A twisted plot. Finding justice for terrible wrongs. A beautiful love story. It’s all in *The Sound of Falling Leaves*. The story will grab you on the first page and not let go until the end.”

PATRICIA BRADLEY, author of the Natchez Trace  
Park Rangers series

THE SOUND *of*  
FALLING  
LEAVES

LISA CARTER

 GILEAD  
PUBLISHING

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## *Chapter One*

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Zeke Sloane stood in the autumn-bronzed shade of the pecan trees that bookended the farmhouse, waiting.

Old Dicy Goforth had called from the rehab center early this morning. She'd told him to be on the lookout for the arrival of her niece. And he'd been none too pleased at this further complication of his plans.

When the BMW turned off the main road and steered through the crossbars of the Goforth orchard, his lungs contracted. In a flume of dust, the coupe topped the rise on the long, graveled driveway, framed by apple trees laden with fruit ready to be harvested. The car came to a stop in front of the house. He pushed off from the rough bark of the tree.

A young woman emerged from the vehicle, and he straightened. His gaze swept over her. In dress slacks and a creamy silk blouse, she remained motionless beside the car. A smoky quartz color, the car was as classy as its well-heeled owner.

They stared at each other a long moment. The silence stretched. The knot in his gut pulled taut.

Finally, she extended her hand. "I'm Tessa Goforth."

Stomach tanking, he ignored her outstretched hand. "I know who you are."

Dicy's niece dropped her hand. "You must be the new orchard manager, Ezekiel Sloane."

He folded his arms across his chest. "It's Zeke."

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "You were here when Aunt Dicy fell."

He didn't care for her tone. "And you weren't."

She bristled. "That's not fair."

"Dicy was in the hospital for a week. She's been in rehab another week." He curled his lip. "Nice of you to finally check on her."

She went rigid. "Why didn't she call me as soon as it happened?"

He scowled. "Because she didn't want to be a burden to you."

Tessa scowled back at him. "Aunt Dicy isn't a burden to me."

Somehow the distance between them had shortened. He found himself looming over her. Had she moved toward him, or had he taken a step toward her? "You're the only family Dicy has left."

On her toes, she was all up in his face, glaring at him. "Aunt Dicy knows I'd do anything for her."

Bitterness rose at the back of his throat. "Except be here when she needs you."

Her gaze grew stormy. "I'm here now."

Zeke shook his head. "She's needed you long before she broke her leg. Where were you when Dicy was worried about the orchard?"

She came down onto her heels. "What's wrong with the orchard?"

"It's been too much for her for quite some time."

Tessa swallowed. "She never said anything."

"She wouldn't, though, would she? But that's why she hired me to take over the management of the orchard. Since you're so disinterested in your family legacy."

"Hold on a minute." Tessa cocked her head. "Are you from Roebuck County?"

Zeke opened his mouth and then clamped his lips together. "No."

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you have any experience managing apple orchards?"

Zeke pinched the bridge of his nose. "No, I don't."

Her mouth twisted. "Kind of convenient, your showing up right before my elderly aunt falls and breaks her leg."

Zeke knew better than to let her get to him, but she did anyway. "For your information, since it's obviously been too inconvenient for you to bother to ask Dicy, I've been working the orchard since last winter."

"Well, like I said before, Ezekiel . . ." Her chin came up. "I'm here now. Dicy is no longer your concern."

"Your aunt has made the orchard my responsibility." He widened his stance. "And harvest is our busiest time of year."

She gave him a look. And if looks could've killed, he reckoned he would've been dead where he stood.

"As you pointed out, the orchard is *my* family legacy." She jabbed her finger in the air between them. "Not only do I intend to help Aunt Dicy get back on her feet, but I'm also planning on helping with the harvest."

"Just don't get in my way."

Her mouth went mulish. "Don't get in mine."

Zeke clenched his teeth. "Gladly."

"I'm glad we've come to an agreement of how things stand."

He snorted. "Hardly."

She headed into the house. He went back to work. But fifteen minutes later, she found him outside the barn. "I'm leaving to visit Aunt Dicy at the rehab center."

Bent over the tractor engine, he didn't bother looking up. Dicy should've replaced the antiquated John Deere decades ago, but for sentimental reasons she hadn't. Therefore, he spent hours each day keeping it up and running.

"Did you hear what I said, Ezekiel?"

Irritation burned at his stomach.

She shuffled her expensive and ridiculously high-heeled shoes. "But I'll be back."

"Whatever," he mumbled.

Over the next few days, she spent some time with her aunt, but most of her waking hours she hung around the house or the orchard. She was like an exotic, hothouse orchid mysteriously planted in the middle of an Appalachian mountain meadow. She didn't belong here. Nor did he. He just pulled it off better.

Jittery as a june bug in July, she made him uncharacteristically nervous. So ever alert to her whereabouts, he always kept her within his line of sight. The wisest course of action when confronted with an unknown species.

Leaning his weight against the top of the ladder, he peered through the leafed-out canopy at the open door of the apple shed. She wore a pair of torn-at-the-knees jeans—the hundred-dollar kind ripped by some fashion designer—and a simple long-sleeved tee.

He would've bet last week's paycheck that without makeup Tessa

Goforth would be pale and washed out like other redheads he'd known. But like so many things when it came to her, he would've been wrong.

There was a lot about her that confused him. She was not how he thought she'd be.

Compared to the photos Dicy proudly displayed on the mantel in the house, at some point in the recent past, Tessa's natural slenderness had become a painful thinness. There were shadows under her eyes. Coming and going like he did, he'd seen the farmhouse lights blazing at all hours of the night.

Her face often forlorn, she was too quiet—except for when arguing with him. Or questioning everything he did. Or looking over his shoulder. She reminded him of one of those obnoxious, needling burs in the meadow. The kind that stuck to clothing and were the very devil to pluck off.

For his own sanity, that afternoon he set her to grading the picked apples and out of his way. So, hair swept out of her face and fastened in a high ponytail behind her head, she sorted the Staymans.

As for that hair of hers? He almost fell out of the tree thinking about her hair. Red didn't begin to describe it. A fiery golden copper, not unlike the heirloom apple he held in his hand.

Her knee-buckling tresses. Waves of curls. The mouth-gone-dry strands of silk. The stomach-clench—

Zeke didn't like redheads. Yet his heart thumped inside his chest.

He grimaced. The thumping certainly wasn't because of her. More likely, it was the result of the crisp mountain air. Tucking the Rome Beauty into the canvas pick sack slung across his body, he climbed down the ladder.

Zeke had taken his eyes off her just long enough to get his feet on solid ground but suddenly, she emerged from behind the gnarled trunk.

Hand to her throat, she jolted and stepped back a pace. "I-I didn't see you there."

Whereas unfortunately, he saw her everywhere. He grunted.

"Always so eloquent, Ezekiel." She smirked.

He'd always hated his full, given name. And somehow sensing that, she used it against him at every turn. "Says the ginger."



Those green foxfire eyes of hers flashed with annoyance. From which he took not a small amount of satisfaction. The dislike was mutual.

He didn't know what it was about her that riled him so much. Probably a gut reflex to the hair. Her hair . . . Perspiration had curled stray tendrils of her hair around her neck. He rubbed his tingling fingers down the side of his jeans.

Tapping her running shoe on the grass, she shot him a searing glance. Not hard to imagine her opinion of him—a crude, not-so-bright mountain hick.

Worthless. Shiftless. A good ole boy. Exactly how he wanted her to think of him. And safer for them both.

She closed her eyes for a second before frowning at him. "I'm headed to town to see Aunt Dicy."

He scanned the horizon above the ridgeline. "Once the sun gets behind the trees, the light goes quick. No streetlights outside of town. You're not used to driving the mountain roads."

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate your concern."

She was good at sarcasm. A defense mechanism, Dicy had warned. But he didn't enjoy being on the sharp end of her tongue.

"However, you're not my father, Ezekiel."

*Thank God.*

"And I'm a grown woman."

He was well aware of that. Too aware. She had this husky, spoken voice . . .

Tessa wrinkled her nose. "Orchard manager, that's your job title, right?"

*Such a flatlander snob.*

"The title does not mean you get to manage me."

"Somebody needs to," he growled.

The look she gave him scorched the earth between them. "When I want your advice, I'll ask for it." Ponytail swinging, she stalked down the orchard row toward the white frame, two-story farmhouse.

*Good riddance.* He shucked off the strap of the pick sack. Time for him to call it a day too.

She wasn't his problem. With her gone, he could focus on what was

of real interest to him in this backwater end of nowhere in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Carolina.

Fitting in with the local boys. Ingratiating himself with the Cozart political machine that ran this county in the heart of Appalachia.

And making himself indispensable to a gang of murderers.



She couldn't seem to stop herself. Once again, she'd been rude to Aunt Dicy's orchard manager. Tessa stomped up the back porch steps and into the farmhouse.

That first day when she'd gotten out of the car, they stared at each other for what seemed an inordinate amount of time. Pinpricks of awareness had danced along her spine.

She'd waited for him to say something. He'd seemed to wait for her to speak first. Neither said anything.

There was just something so irritating about him.

With eyes like blue lasers, he'd glowered at her after she introduced herself. As if she was the biggest disappointment since green ketchup. Or New Coke.

Go figure.

She changed out of her work clothes. In the living room she grabbed her purse off the chair where she'd left it last night. Scattered across the coffee table, Aunt Dicy's vintage album collection mocked her. She'd clean up when she returned from town.

Fun as the little exchange with Sloane had been, she was running late. Dicy would wonder what was keeping her. She flew down the back steps, threw her purse into the Beamer, and slid behind the wheel.

As she pulled away from the house, her gaze cut to the rearview mirror. Sloane had his dark head bent over the John Deere again. What was it with men and machines?

Better question—what was it with men?

She'd never met one she could trust. Or depend upon not to abandon her when the going got tough. And now, her trust having been proven so tragically misplaced in New Orleans, she feared she could no longer rely on her instincts, either.

Turning out of Goforth Gap Orchards, she hit paved road and headed toward the county seat of Buckthorn.

Over in Asheville—as the crow flew, not too far from Roebuck County—Thomas Wolfe once said a person could never go home again. He might or might not have been right. She had no idea.

You had to first have a home before you could go back to it.

The closest she'd ever come to home was Aunt Dicy and the orchard. So when her great-aunt called to say she'd had a bad fall in the midst of the busy apple harvest season, Tessa got a neighbor to look after her condo and then drove north without hesitation. Dicy hadn't asked her to come. She hadn't needed to ask.

Despite what that lanky, backwoods Neanderthal thought of her, she wasn't the one taking advantage of Aunt Dicy's broken leg. With his cocky, womanizing swagger, Sloane had somehow managed to con her seventyish aunt into giving him the job as orchard manager. And also occupancy of the little cabin across the creek on the other side of the meadow.

Tessa strangled the steering wheel. Fields flashed by on either side of the road. Small, isolated farms tilled for generations. Rolling hills. She'd forgotten how glorious autumn could be in the Blue Ridge.

She didn't know why she and Ezekiel Sloane couldn't speak without sparring, but there was something about him that raised her hackles. Something secretive in his blue-sky eyes. Something seething below the laid-back, country-boy demeanor.

It was clear he resented her presence at the orchard. But she wasn't the one who didn't belong. She couldn't believe sharp-as-a-tack Dicy had been taken in by the likes of him.

Although honesty compelled Tessa to acknowledge that, with the sensuous mouth of his framed-by-dark-beard stubble, he did resemble one of the good-looking outlaw country music singers. The type that appealed to a certain sort of woman. But not to her, or as she would've supposed, her elderly aunt.

Perhaps there was another explanation for Sloane getting the job. Maybe Aunt Dicy's mental faculties were in decline. Tessa hoped not.

But no matter, she'd protect her aunt from a grifter like him. One look at him and Tessa could tell he was up to no good. She wouldn't allow

Aunt Dicy to be taken advantage of—not on her watch. She'd come just in the nick of time.

Tessa wrenched her attention to the ear-popping, backcountry road that corkscrewed around the mountain range between the orchard and the nearest town. Roebuck was one of the most sparsely populated counties in North Carolina. She hadn't visited since Uncle Calvin's funeral, but not much in the landscape had changed. There was only one town—Buckthorn—and a profusion of crossroad communities.

Apple orchards dotted the valleys. Hardscrabble farms clung precariously to the sides of the mountains. The population was working poor. By necessity, most Roebuck citizens made the daily one-hour commute to nearby Asheville, where there were more job opportunities.

She entered the Pisgah National Forest.

The national park comprised a significant portion of the county. Much of the rest of the county had long ago been designated as a wilderness area. Roebuck was a land of deep gorges, broad valleys, and hidden coves. Hollers is what they called the coves here.

And the people in the mountains spoke an English that Tessa, who'd been trained to also sing in Italian, French, and German, sometimes needed a dictionary to translate. Quaint, old-fashioned words.

When the gas light flicked on, her gaze darted to the gauge. Still enough to get to town. She'd meant to fill up yesterday, but after leaving her aunt, she'd needed to buy groceries. And, desperate for a decent cup of coffee, she'd detoured over the mountain pass to Asheville. She should've filled the tank then. After her visit to Dicy this evening, she absolutely must remember to get gas.

Rounding the last vista, she wound around the slope, careful to take the curves slowly. Not much shoulder on the road. Nothing but a flimsy metal barricade to keep her from hurtling into a chasmic abyss.

Gaze fixed on the winding yellow ribbon of asphalt, she didn't risk glancing over the side. Even just thinking about the plunge made her insides do a nosedive.

Heights didn't used to bother her. But since the fire . . . She inhaled sharply.

*Don't think about that now.* Her knuckles whitened on the wheel. *Can't ever . . . Mustn't ever think about that night.*

Because thinking about that night meant thinking about Anton. Though every time she closed her eyes, she saw him . . . one of the reasons she no longer slept well. She bit back the rising tide of nausea.

*Stop it. Stop it. Stop it.*

Tessa beat the wheel with her palm. Thinking did no good. Remembering didn't change a thing, didn't bring anyone back from the grave.

When the road straightened out, she accelerated. As if speed could help her escape the demons of that night. She'd been so stupid. So naive.

She shook her head and a cloud of hair came loose from the bun at the nape of her neck. With a swipe of her hand, she brushed it out of her face. *No more thinking.*

Her life—the life she'd known—was over. Earlier this week, Aunt Dicy's phone call had come as a godsend.

Though where God figured into that night of hell, Tessa hadn't a clue. And from her vantage point, when desperately clinging to the highest pinnacle of the opera house, He'd been conspicuous in His absence.

Shying away from old memories, she left the Pisgah behind. The deeply canopied forest gave way to the sunny valley below.

Hemmed in on one side by the mountains, on the other by the French Broad, the little hamlet of Buckthorn boasted two stoplights. Portions of Main Street were part of the Appalachian Trail itself.

At the edge of town, she crossed over the bridge spanning the river. Below the bridge, buses from the local rafting company were parked at a put-in spot. In the summer, the French Broad became crowded with a flotilla of inner tubes and kayaks floating along its course. But this time of year, rafting, like the apple harvest, was nearing the end of season.

She drove past a few Victorian homes converted to bed and breakfasts. Clusters of through-hikers congregated on the wooden picnic tables outside The Burger Depot. Retired from the railroad tracks that also followed the river, a caboose had been remodeled and now served meals out of its tiny kitchen on wheels, food truck style.

Tessa pulled into the small parking lot beside the bright-red caboose. She'd promised to bring Dicy a milkshake, burger, and fries. She got out of the car.

After placing her order at the window, she sank onto a sun-warmed

bench to get her emotions under control. Orange rubber rafts bobbed farther down the river as enthusiasts enjoyed the October white water.

The deep breathing exercises the therapist had given her to avert the anxiety attacks had done nothing to ease the day terrors, so she'd reverted to an old childhood habit of finding the music in the sounds around her. A game she'd played for so long, she didn't remember when or where she learned it.

Yet nothing held the nightmares at bay. She'd resisted the lure of pills or booze thus far. But if fresh air and hard work didn't do the trick? A lump settled in the base of her throat.

She wasn't sure how many more nights she could take, too terrified to fall asleep. Every time she closed her eyes, the continuous loop of horror replayed in her head.

Even here in the open, she felt exposed and vulnerable. Would she ever feel safe again? She did a quick scan of her surroundings, something she did constantly since the fire.

At a nearby table, the hikers in their expensive outdoor gear and boots were probably one of the final groups attempting to make the Maine-to-Georgia trek of the Trail before the snow arrived.

The hikers were a mixture of men and women. Gap-year students. Those battling midlife crises. The geriatric couple most likely aiming for one last adventure in their sunset years, a swan song of sorts.

She knew about swan songs. She shuddered. *Stop it. Think about the hikers—*

Never very outdoorsy or athletic, she preferred Prada to Patagonia. And she'd had enough adventure—if that's what one called what had happened to her—for a lifetime.

Roughing it in the wilderness wasn't her idea of fun. Never physically brave, she'd nevertheless been a risk-taker when it came to her career. This scared-of-her-own-shadow person wasn't who Tessa was. Or at least, who she'd been. But that Tessa, a rising operatic star, was gone forever. Burned to death in the ashes of the Théâtre de l'Opéra. As good as dead.

If only she'd listened—really listened. Perhaps if she hadn't been so focused on her career, she could have stopped Anton . . . *Don't go there.*

Therein, lay madness. Like the madness that had terrorized her. Nearly ended her life. Destroyed her voice. Forever robbed her of song.

Dicy's phone call had been the impetus Tessa needed to move forward. Without hesitating, she'd fled civilization to care for her aunt. For the foreseeable future, she'd decided to hunker in this isolated backwater to lick her wounds and regather her shattered nerves. An added bonus would be proximity to the folklore center to research her dissertation.

She'd wanted to die that night in New Orleans. But death had forsaken her, as had the music. Her punishment for failing to stop him, for failing to save the others.

The fear and the regret were eating her alive.

Physically shaking herself, she refocused her mind and tuned her inner ear to the sounds around her.

*Listen, listen. What do you hear?*

The *clackety-clack* bump of cars passing across the bridge. The chatter of the hikers, as cheerful as a bunch of squirrels. Gradually, the intrusive noises faded, like onion skin peeling away to the pearl at its core.

Her breathing slowed. Her heart rate subsided. The tight coil within her loosened.

*Listen, listen. What do you hear?*

She heard the steady roar of the river, rushing past to the rapids downstream like musical notes suspended in the air. Lilted, floating over the sandbar. The streaming water playing in time with the flowing current.

If she opened her mouth, she was sure, almost sure, this time she could resurrect the exact pitch from the sepulchre of her throat. That life-giving, effervescent tone would pour out of—

“Order up!”

Tessa jumped, cutting her eyes at the now-empty tables around her. She'd gotten lost again. For how long this time?

After staggering to her feet, she retrieved Aunt Dicy's order. She wasn't getting any better. Perhaps this was as good as she would ever get.

Clutching the grease-stained, white paper bag, she hurried to her car. She paused, gazing at the dark water lapping against the bank below. If this was as good as she'd ever get, why not just—

The chargrill aroma of the burger rose in her nostrils. Dicy was

counting on her. And she'd promised to give the mountains and the orchard a chance.

For what? Healing? She pulled out of the parking lot no longer sure healing was an option.

And what was worse, no longer sure that's what she even wanted. Not anymore.



## *Chapter Two*

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In the late afternoon sun, the gold-leafed dome of the neoclassical courthouse gleamed. Driving down Main Street, Tessa glanced out the window.

Typical, small-town America.

A hardware store. The Cozart Auto Repair Shop, and lots of buildings with the Cozart name. Law office. The Cozart-Roebuck library. Cozart Real Estate Development.

The bakery was new, though. And on the other end of town, the medical campus was also new. Change had managed to make its way over the steep mountain ranges. At least, to some extent.

Progress, but still no coffee shop. She could use a cup about now. Too much caffeine kept her unable to sit still, but mainly, it kept her from having to close her eyes.

After parking, she bypassed the emergency entrance and headed toward the rehabilitation center for post-op patients.

White gravel crunched beneath her open-toed, brown suede ankle boots. The double glass doors slid open. She skirted past the not-so-small bronze plaque affixed just inside the Cozart Medical Complex. The doors whooshed shut behind her.

Inside the thoroughly modern facility, an antiseptic smell assaulted her nostrils. Hurrying down the hallway, she almost lost her balance on the slippery, clean, tile floor.

Overhead, someone paged a doctor, and from a distant corridor, the rattling wheels of a cart squeaked. No one manned the duty station.

Mountain life was casual. And as a consequence, no check-in was required. Everybody knew everybody plus their fourth cousins.

Down the hall to the left, turn right at the elevator, around the corner, second door on the—she ran smack into a man.

He dropped his cell, and the phone skittered across the linoleum.

Bouncing against the wall, she lost her hold on the paper bag. “The milkshake! Don’t let it—”

His hand shot out, catching the bag in midair, saving Aunt Dicy’s dinner from disaster and a close encounter with the floor.

“I’m so sorry.” Tessa bit her lip. “I wasn’t looking where I was . . .”

The startling blue of his eyes momentarily robbed her of breath. Intense eyes. Intelligent. Amused.

She had the odd sensation she’d met this stranger before, once upon a time. Yet not him exactly.

With a start, she realized he was waiting for her to take the bag from him. Flushing, she reached for it. But he didn’t let go. Not right away.

“I should be the one apologizing.” His lips twitched. “I need to get my head out of my phone”—he cocked his very attractive head—“before life passes me by.”

She made a wry grimace. “Or knocks you off your feet.”

He laughed, exposing strong, white teeth. “As you say.”

For the love of Verdi, he was handsome. Like movie star handsome. In Buckthorn. Who would have ever guessed?

She put her hand to her throat. At least she’d changed out of her work clothes before she left the farm. And put on makeup. A redhead had no eyes without makeup.

The statuesque roles had invariably gone to her, being tall for a woman. Yet he was a few inches taller, just shy of six feet, and slightly older than her, around thirty.

He vaguely reminded her of Dublin. With the thick black hair, he was darkly handsome like some of the men there. Black Irish, they called them across the pond.

“I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.” He stuck out his hand. “I’m Colin.”

No brogue, however. American English, with just a hint of a drawl. An educated, cultured Southern drawl. Unlike Sloane and Roebuck natives who favored jeans, boots, and flannel, Colin wore a well-tailored suit.

Sans tie, however. The open collar of his shirt exposed a strongly corded neck. The hue of the shirt set off the blue in his eyes.

Her hand, possessing a mind of its own, slid into his. "Tessa Goforth," she breathed.

This time it wasn't amusement that flickered across his face. She was almost sure they'd never met. Was it her name that prompted the flare of recognition?

She'd been so afraid of men since the fire. Repulsed after what Anton did to Sandy. Afraid she'd never feel attraction for any man again. It was such a dizzying relief to feel normal.

Or almost normal.

"Not quite Lauren Bacall." His fabulous eyes narrowed like a sommelier, trying to identify just the right note in a wine. Pear or apricot? Oak or— "Ava Gardner perhaps?"

She'd always spoken in a lower range than most women. Her musical trademark. Her speaking voice had quickly rebounded from the effects of smoke inhalation. Her singing voice hadn't been so fortunate.

He hadn't let go of her hand.

"You like old movies." So did she.

*Dearest Debussy, those eyes of his.*

"You don't look like a smoker."

She dropped her hand. "I'm not."

"I didn't mean to offend."

On a woman, his full mouth might be called "pouty." On a man, his chin might be considered a trifle weak. These days, trust didn't come easy.

"I only meant your voice is lovely."

What was with her? A man, handsome and admiring, yet she probed for flaws. Her not-so-brave new reality. "You didn't offend me."

"Buckthorn is so small." He leaned closer. "How is it, beautiful Tessa, our paths have not crossed before?"

The trapped feeling hit her like a wave. She reared. Her shoulder blades scraped the wall. Panic leaped in her chest. She swallowed. "I-I . . ." What was wrong with her?

The paper bag with Dicy's poor, mistreated supper crinkled between them.

"We've just met." He gave her a boyishly sweet smile. "But I would love to take you to dinner."

The Tessa who'd sung to packed houses would have wanted him to take her to dinner. Tessa, the cowering wreck unable to force the music from her throat, wanted nothing so much than to lock herself away from the rest of the world for good.

He swept back the dark lock of hair that had fallen onto his smooth forehead. "Mayhap there are other things besides a familiarity with old movies we might discover we have in common."

Fear, not attraction, sparked in her gut. Her heart raced. Her breaths became shallow. Why couldn't she—*You're being ridiculous*.

Mayhap . . . Who said words like that these days? But that was Roebuck County, a place out of time.

It had been almost a year since the fire. The therapist had pushed Tessa to take back her life. Encouraged her to pursue new interests. Finish the graduate work begun years ago, before success took her by surprise and life became a whirling kaleidoscope of sound, color, and music.

"Keep moving forward," the counselor had said. "One step at a time." Was dinner with a handsome stranger another in a long line of baby steps? It didn't feel like a baby step. It felt monumental.

She was so sick of being a coward.

Tessa moistened her bottom lip. "I-I would like that, Colin."

From the corner, his phone buzzed insistently. He snatched his cell off the floor. Glancing at the screen, he frowned. "My family . . . Cozart business." He let out a sigh. "Rain check, lovely Tessa?"

A not so tiny part of her felt immediate relief. The rest of her experienced a sting of disappointment. It wasn't so much about Colin, but that the longing for something more, that for which she'd been searching, had to be postponed once again.

Rain check. Snow check. Sun check. Whenever check. She'd be better prepared and ready next time. She would.

"That would be great, Colin."

"If you wouldn't mind me calling you . . ."

Mind having a handsome man talk to her? What was to mind? "I wouldn't mind."

Turning that languid gaze of his full force upon her, he handed her his phone. "Would you put in your number for me?"

She set the bag beside her feet. And somehow, despite her real befuddlement in the face of his devastating, Greek-god virility, she managed to remember her cell number.

"Perfect . . ." He checked what she'd typed before tucking the phone inside his blazer. "Duty calls." He made a move as if to go. Reluctantly, or so she told herself.

She lifted the bag. "Me too. My aunt."

Touching a hand to his forehead, he gave Tessa a one-finger salute. "Until we meet again." He disappeared down the corridor.

She took a long overdue breath. Had she actually forgotten to breathe?

If he bottled even a tiny part of that charisma of his, he'd make a fortune. He had a way of making a woman feel as if she were the only person in the room, the only creature he had eyes for. No one had looked at her like that in a long time.

She was so tired of being the crazy, opera lady victim.

Tessa shook herself free of his spell. Because that's what it was. She was a connoisseur of sounds, and his voice was like a velvet purr. He played with words the way she played with notes.

A vast improvement over monosyllabic Sloane. She practically had to draw blood to pry speech from him.

From the cut of his suit, if whatever family business Colin did so successfully ever failed, he could have a future on the screen. The camera would love him. If there was one thing she knew, it was stage presence, which he possessed in spades. Today was turning out to be not so bad after all.

After meeting Colin, Nowheresville, USA, didn't seem nearly so unappealing. But suddenly ripe with all kinds of tantalizingly, distracting possibilities. And considering what she'd gone through, if anybody on earth needed a pleasant interlude, she did.

Here in Buckthorn, it came as no surprise he was a Cozart.

Outside Dicy's room, Tessa faltered at the sound of raised voices.

"It would be in your best interest, not to mention hers, if she gets out while she still can," a man's deep voice growled.

"You've sunk so low that you've taken to threatening old ladies, have you, Judson?" Her aunt's voice was shrill.

Tessa rushed through the open doorway. "What's going on here?" Hastening to her aunt, she glared at the fifty-something man looming over the hospital bed.

Beneath the tidy, gray beard, his features tightened. "It's not a threat, but a warning you would do well to heed, Dicy Goforth."

Tessa reached for the switch to summon a nurse. "I'm calling security."

He gave a short bark of a laugh.

"There's no need." Dicy's lips thinned. "Mr. Cozart was leaving."

Judson Cozart's blue gaze assessed Tessa, leaving her feeling once again oddly vulnerable and exposed. "Ah, the niece."

Dicy's mouth twisted as if she'd tasted something sour. "Your network never lets you down."

That seemed to amuse him.

"You've said what you came to say, Judson."

"And you best tell her what I said." The humor vanished from his face. "Nineteen days and then my dozers roll. Whether she's gone or not."

"Get out," Tessa hissed.

With a meaningful scowl at her aunt, he strode from the room. Her aunt collapsed against the pillows.

"Aunt Dicy, should I—?"

"I'm okay." Her aunt fussed with the lace collar on her gown, but her arthritic-shaped hand shook.

"What did he want you to tell me?"

"Not you." Folding her shaking hands one over the other, Dicy lay them atop her lap. "Someone else."

"Judson Cozart . . . Any relation to Colin?"

Dicy's eyes, blue like faded denim, sharpened. "You've met Colin?"

She gestured toward the door. "A few minutes ago."

"Ain't that ever the way." Her aunt's countenance had taken on that sour lemon look again. "Where there's one viper, there's bound to be two."

"Colin didn't seem like that."

Dicy snorted. "Scratch the surface and none too deeply, they're all like that. Colin is Judson's nephew. His brother Ransom's son."

"I could see the family resemblance. The eyes. Something in the smile."

Her aunt reached for the Styrofoam cup on the bedside table. "And the ruthlessness."

She handed the cup over the bed rail to her aunt. "Colin seemed perfectly—"

"He's the charm behind the muscle. Next-generation Cozart, God help us. Slick as a moss-covered log in the rain." Dicy took a sip from the straw. "The velvet glove encasing the iron fist."

"From the looks of things in Buckthorn, the Cozarts—"

"Cozarts run this town, missy." Her aunt handed Tessa the cup. "You'd do best to steer clear of 'em while you're here."

She pursed her lips. "The uncle—Judson—is a jerk, but the rest of them can't be as bad as you're making out."

Dicy's shrewd old eyes narrowed. "Colin's already managed to turn your head, has he? Cozarts don't do anything without an agenda."

Tessa stiffened. "Do you find it impossible that a man—an extremely handsome, intelligent man—could actually find me interesting?"

Her aunt waved her hand. "Don't go getting your pantaloons in a wad. That's not what I'm saying."

*Pantaloons* . . . She shook her head. "Colin wants to take me to dinner one night. I see no reason not to go out with him."

"All them Cozarts are easy on the eyes, I'll give you that. Colin tends to be their front man." Dicy grimaced. "And Judson's the enforcer."

She rolled her eyes. "You make them sound like some sort of Appalachian Mafia."

"Not far off the mark. The Cozarts stick together." Dicy's mouth hardened. "But then so do we."

"Who is *we*?"

The old woman heaved a sigh. "You've got a lot to learn about folks hereabouts, Tessie. Other than God, family is the most important thing."

She set the cup on the nightstand with more force than necessary. Her aunt was right about one thing—she didn't have much experience with family. Thanks to her dysfunctional childhood.

Dicy smoothed the coverlet over her legs. “But no matter what I say, you’re going to do like you want. Always do. Like your dad. Stubborn. Hardheaded.”

“I am not like my . . .” She pressed her lips together.

A relationship with her emotionally unavailable father had been a wish-true dream that remained a never-shall-be reality.

Dicy took her hand, her grip surprisingly tenacious. “Your father was never interested in the source of the strength your uncle Calvin and I taught you.”

But Tessa wasn’t strong. Not at all. Not anymore.

“Hobnob with the Cozarts, and you’ll be playing with fire.” Her aunt patted her hand. “And after what you’ve been through, honey, I’d hate to see you get burned.”

The unspoken “again” hung between them.

“So would I, Aunt Dicy,” she whispered. “So would I.”