

Chapter 1

“You have arrived at your destination.”

“Come on, GPS,” Liz Nemesek muttered. “At least pretend you’re as nervous as I am.”

She angled her car to the curb and stared at the trim house with its neatly shoveled sidewalk. Number 74. This was her parents’ new home? The street hadn’t even existed when she left Galena Landing.

She switched off the ignition and took a deep breath. Should she have called first? All she’d done was email from her friend’s apartment in Fresno a few days ago, saying she was on her way.

The curtain beside the wrought-iron numbers twitched then fell. An instant later the front door swung open and a gray-haired woman ran toward her with outstretched arms.

Liz surged from the car. “Mom?”

She barely got the word out before she was rocked from side to side and squeezed breathless. Who knew her mother had so much strength in her?

“Liz. Oh, Lizzie, you’ve come home.”

Liz’s face was damp from either kisses or tears. Was Mom crying or was she? Likely both. She hadn’t planned on getting emotional. Hadn’t expected to be treated like a prodigal daughter. Would a reunion feast in her honor be next?

“Come inside, Liz. Your daddy can’t wait to see you.

How long are you staying? Please say you're home for good." Mom looped an arm around Liz's waist and tugged her up the sidewalk. "Let me call your brother. Maybe he and Jo and the kids can come for dinner."

Third millennium version of the fatted calf. Check.

Liz took a deep breath and allowed Mom to tow her into the house. She blinked, adjusting to the dimness after the bright December sun. Her vision narrowed to her father as he struggled to rise from a leather recliner across the room.

"Lizzie Rose?"

Her heart hiccuped. Sure, news of the illness that devastated him had reached her in Thailand over six years before. Six years. How could she — no. She wouldn't let the guilt get her.

Would. Not. Let it. She was here now, and it had to be soon enough.

Liz blinked back tears. "Hi, Daddy." She closed the distance and wrapped her arms around him. That horrid disease — Guillain-Barré — had done a number on him. He seemed frail. Much older than his sixty years. She should've...

No guilt, Liz. No guilt. She just couldn't go there.

He hugged her close. "Good to see you, Lizzie Rose. How long are you staying?"

That question again. She kissed his cheek. "Not sure, Dad. We'll see."

His brown eyes searched hers. "You're welcome as long as you can. We have room. Always for you."

Liz pushed out a smile. "Thanks." Where that space might be, she couldn't guess. If her parents extended the

dining room table — about the only piece of furniture she recognized from her childhood — it would take up half the living room. A tiny hallway revealed three doorways and no stairs.

Yeah, she wouldn't be able to stay with them more than a day or two. Certainly not long enough to figure out her life. Oh, who was she kidding? She'd been trying for the last decade and more. Why think she might nail it this week... or next?

Mom set her cell phone down. "Zachary is stopping in on his way home from work. He says Madelynn was up all night sick, and he doesn't want to give us her germs, so they won't be coming for supper today."

Maddie. A niece Liz hadn't met yet. How old was she? Three? Four? "I'm sorry she's not feeling well." But it would be easier seeing her brother alone than with his happy little family around him. She'd never have guessed Zach would get his degree in veterinary medicine and return to northern Idaho to buy out the old vet clinic. He'd wanted out of Galena Landing as badly as she had.

Who else had come back? Hopefully she wouldn't run into anyone from her high school class.

"Would you like a cup of coffee? Or do you prefer tea?"

"Whichever you'd like. Really. I drink both."

"Or maybe hot apple cider. I know you used to like that."

Oh, man. Mom was fluttering. "It honestly doesn't matter."

"Or hot chocolate?"

"Mom..."

Mom dabbed her eyes. "I'm just so happy you're home."

I can't believe you're really here. You look so nice. So tanned. Thailand must have agreed with you."

At times it had. Other times, not so much. Liz managed a smile. "It was a good place. A good job."

Dad shuffled over to the table and lowered himself into a seat. "Was? Are you home for good, then?"

Keep the smile on, Liz. "I'm moving back to the States permanently, yes, but I'm not sure exactly where I'll make my home. A recruiter in Vegas is putting together some leads."

Biting her lip, Mom stared at her a moment before turning to put the kettle on.

"Galena Landing has really grown in the past eleven years." Dad folded his hands on the table. "You might find a good opportunity right here."

Trust Dad to have kept track of the exact amount of time. "I'll see." She might have to. The opportunity she'd returned to interview for in Fresno had been offered to someone else. Life wasn't fair. It never had been and apparently wasn't starting now.

The kettle whistled, and Mom poured hot water into the teapot. At least that was still the same one Liz remembered from her childhood. Why couldn't her parents have kept the old Formica kitchen table and padded vinyl chairs instead of the formal dining table and wooden chairs? They just ditched everything when they moved to town?

Of course, she'd ditched everything when she moved to Thailand.

Not going there. She'd had good reasons, and one of them was the guy she'd convinced herself she was in love

with back then. She'd managed to block him out of her mind, sometimes for weeks at a time. When she'd been in Fresno, she'd asked Kara for news, but her friend hadn't kept up with many of their high school friends. Being back in the USA brought so many memories surging to the surface.

She didn't need a better reason to look for a job far from Idaho. Mason would return to visit his parents, at least occasionally. Because everybody did that, except her. She'd poke around a bit, discover where he lived now, and find herself a new job somewhere across the country. The continent was big enough for both of them.

"Here you go, Liz. Cream? Sugar? Or maybe honey. We get buckets of it from Green Acres."

"Green Acres?"

"Where Grandma used to live. We sold the farm to three young ladies back before your dad got sick. Then your brother married one of them." Mom smiled. "It's like we gained three daughters at once."

Right. One daughter had run away, but no big deal. Three random strangers could take her place. They were probably good Christian girls like Liz's older sisters. She'd never figured out how to measure up. "That's nice. I can't wait to meet everyone." It might not be exactly true, but it was appropriate. At least meeting her niece and nephew would be a good thing. She liked kids.

Picturing her big brother as a husband and father, though? That took a ton of imagination.

Mom removed a package of meat from the freezer and put it in the microwave.

"What kind of work are you looking for?" asked Dad.

The million-dollar question. How did a one-month course on how to teach English and a decade of experience in a foreign culture translate into a job back home? “I’m not entirely sure.”

Dad nodded. “The feed store is looking for someone, or there’s always Super One. Or you might be able to find a spot at Green Acres.”

Her brother’s commune? Not likely. “I’ll see what’s available.” Somewhere else. Liz rose. “If you’re certain you have room for me for a few nights, I’ll get my bags in from the car.”

Mom turned, flapping her hands. “Oh, leave them. Zachary will be here in a minute. I know he won’t mind getting them for you.”

Liz opened her mouth, shut it again, and sat back down. Mom was probably trying to ram a decade of lost hovering into one day.

A truck rumbled to a stop outside the house and a couple of doors slammed.

Mom rushed over to the door and opened it. The winter wind whistled in. “There’s your brother now.”

Liz took a deep breath. She could do this. She stood and took two steps closer before Zach stomped in wearing a down parka, knit cap, and mitts. Another man, equally bundled up, followed him and shut the door.

Liz reached for Zach, and he wrapped her against his cold coat. “Lizzie! Good to see you.” He released her and smiled into her eyes for a second before turning. “You remember Mason Waterman?”

No. Couldn’t be.

The other man pulled off his knit cap, revealing the blond hair and square jaw of someone she used to know far too well. His blue eyes warmed. “Hi, Liz. Welcome back to Galena Landing.”

Not Mason. Anyone but him. The room swam, and she grabbed Zach to stay upright.

* * *

Mason Waterman glanced at Steve, Rosemary, and Zach. They were all staring at Liz, who looked about to faint dead away.

Not the response he’d been going for, but perhaps not unexpected. He reached for the doorknob behind him. “I, uh, I’ll just wait out in the truck.”

That snapped Rosemary out of it. “No, Mason. It’s too cold out there.”

It wasn’t all that cozy in here, either. At least not when Liz’s narrowed eyes met his again. Her set jaw told him she remembered every minute that had passed between them that spring. He had plenty of regrets, but maybe this wasn’t the right moment for apologies. After all, what did her family know about their past? By everyone’s current confused response, he’d bet the answer was *nothing*.

“I just put on a pot of tea.” Rosemary pointed back at the kitchen. “And I baked chocolate chip cookies. Please don’t rush off.”

Zach shrugged out of his parka and kicked off his boots while Liz backed away. “We can stay a few minutes. Can’t turn down homemade cookies, can we, Mason?”

At this moment, he'd have no trouble doing so.

Liz gripped the back of a dining chair with enough intensity to turn her knuckles white. There were no rings on her left hand. That was good, right? Or, no. It might have been better if she'd found some other guy. Gotten married. Had a few kids. That would've proven he hadn't hurt her too deeply.

Mason had skipped the wedding part and gone directly to having kids. A family hadn't been enough to keep him and Erin together, though. Man. Where would he even start explaining — let alone apologizing — to Liz? Erin certainly hadn't been open to hearing any of it.

Please, God. You've forgiven me for all the messes I've made. Is it too much to hope that Liz might, too?

By the look on her face, he'd better not hold his breath.

Mason slowly peeled off his coat and hung it in the nearby closet before removing his boots. Zach had already taken a seat at the table with a mug of tea in front of him. Liz still stood, her hands clenched on the chair between her father and brother.

Keeping a buffer. He couldn't blame her. How could she have guessed he'd follow Zach in the door? She couldn't. Likely no one had even thought to tell her he and the twins had moved back to Galena Landing. Their old crowd had dispersed long ago. No one knew or cared anymore about what had happened way back then.

Except Liz.

And him.

Mason took the chair on the other side of Zach and smiled at Rosemary. "Thanks for the tea."

“You’re very welcome. What brings you along with Zach?”

He shrugged. “I dropped my car off at the shop to get a new transmission installed this morning. He offered me a ride for the next couple of days until it’s ready.”

“Handy you live so close then.” Steve reached for a cookie then nudged the plate over to Mason.

Liz’s head came up and she glanced sharply from one to the other. She knew as well as he did that the Waterman farm was across the valley from her childhood home.

Steve turned toward Liz. “Mason’s renting our old farmhouse from Green Acres. Did your mother tell you your brother and his group bought the home place?”

Her nod seemed a bit jerky, but her gaze flicked back to him. “That’s nice.” Not at all what her eyes said.

“Come out to the farm tomorrow for supper?” Zach asked Liz.

“Mom said your daughter was sick.”

Zach chuckled. “Nothing keeps Maddie down for long. We do, however, try to remember that Dad has a compromised immune system, so we give him a buffer of a few days to make sure.”

“You’ll want to meet Jo and the children.” Rosemary’s voice held a hint of hope. Meet Jo and the kids? Wow. How long had it been since Liz had been home? She’d taken her retreat to the Far East more seriously than Mason had realized.

She took a deep breath. “I, um, I could probably do that.”

“And the rest of the gang,” Steve put in. “Busy place they have out there.”

“Th-the gang?” Liz’s eyes flicked to Mason’s then away.

“The other members of their community,” Rosemary said.

“Um...”

Liz probably wanted to know if he’d be there for dinner. If he was part of the gang. Then she could find a way out. He wasn’t going to make it that easy. Not until he’d found ten minutes of privacy to let her know how sorry he was. Then he’d leave her alone.

He hadn’t received an invite for tomorrow’s meal yet, but it wouldn’t be hard to wrangle one. He nudged the plate closer to her. “Want a cookie? Your mom hasn’t lost her touch.”

She shook her head. “No, thanks.”

Rosemary jumped to her feet. “So sweet of you to say that, Mason. Let me send a few home for the twins.”

Once again Liz’s eyes snapped to meet his. “Twins?” The word came out more a breath than audible.

Mason tried to hold her gaze with sheer force of will. “Avery and Christopher. They’re not quite six.”

A smile that didn’t reach her eyes pushed at the corners of her mouth. “Well, congratulations to you and the missus.”

Not what he wanted to get into in front of her family. “There is no Mrs. Waterman, Liz. Besides my mother.”

“I’m sorry.”

He was sorry, too, but the loss likely wasn’t what Liz expected. “I’ve never been married.”

“Then—” She clamped her mouth closed.

Mason took a deep breath. “My life didn’t exactly turn out the way I’d intended when I was a teenager. Did yours?”

Twin red dots rose high in her cheeks. “That is none of your business, Mason Waterman. Excuse me, please. I need to get my things in from the car before it turns pitch dark.”

“Let me do that.” Zach pushed back his chair, glancing from one to the other as he snagged another cookie. “Staying in town long, Liz?”

Her eyes shot fiery darts at Mason. “Two or three days. Tops.”

She wasn’t going to make this easy, was she? But he’d do what it took to grab a few minutes. She had to hear him out. She might never forgive him, but maybe he could finally forgive himself.