

*My dearest Darek,*

*Even as I write this letter, I know I'll tuck it away; the words on it are more of a prayer, meant for the Lord more than you. Or maybe, in the scribbling upon this journal page, the words might somehow find your heart, a cry that extends across the bond of mother and child.*

*The firstborn child is always the one who solves the mystery of parenthood. Before I had you, I watched other mothers and wondered at the bond between a child and a parent, the strength of it, the power to mold a woman, making her put all hopes and wishes into this tiny bundle of life that she had the responsibility to raise.*

*It's an awe-filled, wonderful, terrifying act to have a child, for you suddenly wear your heart on the outside of your body. You risk a little more each day as he wanders from your arms into the world. You, Darek, were no protector of my heart. You were born with a willfulness, a courage, and a bent toward adventure that would bring me to the edge of my faith and keep me on my knees. The day I first saw you swinging from that too-enticing oak tree into the lake should have told me that I would be tested.*

*Your brothers shortened your name to Dare, and you took it to heart. I was never so terrified as the day you came home from Montana, fresh from your first year as a hotshot, feeling your own strength. I knew your future would take you far from Evergreen Lake. I feared it would take you far, also, from your legacy of faith.*

*Watching your son leave your arms has no comparison to watching him leave God's. You never seemed to question the beliefs your father and I taught you. Perhaps that is what unsettled me the most, because without questioning, I wondered how there could be true understanding. I held my breath against the day when it would happen—life would shatter you and leave your faith bereft.*

*And then it did.*

*It brought you home, in presence if not soul. If it hadn't been for your son, I might have done the unthinkable—stand in our gravel driveway and bar you from returning, from hiding.*

*Because, my courageous, bold oldest son, that is what you are doing. Hiding. Bitter and dark, you have let guilt and regret destroy your foundation, imprison you, and steal your joy. You may believe you are building a future for your son, but without faith, you have nothing to build it on. Evergreen Resort is not just a place. It's a legacy. A foundation. A belief.*

*It's the best of what I have to give you. That, and my unending prayers that somehow God will destroy those walls you've constructed around your heart.*

*Darek, you have become a mystery to me again. I don't know how to help free you. Or to restore all you've lost. But I believe that if you give God a chance, He will heal your heart. He will give you a future. He will truly lead you home.*

*Lovingly,  
Your mother*

## Chapter 1

Ivy Madison would do just about anything to stay in the secluded, beautiful, innocent town of Deep Haven.

Even if she had to buy a man.

A bachelor, to be exact, although maybe not the one currently standing on the stage of the Deep Haven Emergency Services annual charity auction. He looked like a redneck from the woolly woods of northern Minnesota, with curly dark-blond hair, a skim of whiskers on his face, and a black T-shirt that read, *Hug a logger—you'll never go back to trees*. Sure, he filled out his shirt and looked the part in a pair of ripped jeans and boots, but he wore just a little too much “Come and get me, girls,” in his smile.

The auctioneer on stage knew how to work his audience. He regularly called out names from the crowd to entice them to bid. And apparently the town of Deep Haven loved their firefighters, EMTs, and cops because the tiny VFW was packed, the waitresses running out orders of bacon cheeseburgers and hot wings to the bidding crowd.

After the show was over, a local band would take the stage. The auction was part of the summer solstice festival—the first of many summer celebrations Deep Haven hosted. Frankly it felt like the village dreamed up events to lure tourists, but Ivy counted it as her welcoming party.

Oh, how she loved this town. And she'd only lived here for roughly a day. Imagine how she'd love it by the end of the summer, after she'd spent three months learning the names of locals, investing herself into this lakeside hamlet.

Her days of hitching her measly worldly possessions—four hand-me-down suitcases; a loose cardboard box of pictures; a garbage bag containing *The Elements of Legal Style*, *How to Argue and Win Every Time*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*; and most of all, her green vintage beach bike—onto the back of her red Nissan Pathfinder were over.

Time to put down roots. Make friends.

Okay, *buying* a friend didn't exactly qualify, but the fact that her money would go to help the local emergency services seemed like a good cause. And if Ivy had learned anything growing up in foster care, it was that a person had to work the system to get what she wanted.

She should be unpacking; she started work in the morning. But how long would it take, really, to settle into the tiny, furnished efficiency apartment over the garage behind the Footstep of Heaven Bookstore? And with her new job as assistant county attorney, she expected to have plenty of free time. So when the twilight hues of evening had lured her into the romance of a walk along the shoreline of the Deep Haven harbor, she couldn't stop herself.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd taken a lazy walk, stopping at storefronts, reading the real estate ads pasted to the window of a local office.

*Cute, two-bedroom log cabin on Poplar Lake*. She could imagine the evergreen smell nudging her awake every morning, the twitter of cardinals and sparrows as she took her cup of coffee on the front porch.

Except she loved the bustle of the Deep Haven hamlet. Nestled on the north shore of Minnesota, two hours from the nearest hint of civilization, the fishing village-turned-tourist hideaway had enough charm to sweet-talk Ivy out of her Minneapolis duplex and make her dream big.

Dream of home, really. A place. Friends. Maybe even a dog. And here, in a town where everyone belonged, she would too.

She had wandered past the fudge and gift shop, past the walk-up window of World's Best

Donuts, where the smell of cake donuts nearly made her follow her sweet tooth inside. At the corner, the music drew her near to the VFW. Ford F-150s, Jeeps, and a handful of SUVs jammed the postage-size dirt parking lot.

She'd stopped at the entrance, reading the poster for today's activities, then peered in through the windows. Beyond a wood-paneled bar and a host of long rectangular tables, a man stood on the stage, holding up a fishing pole.

And that's when Deep Haven reached out and hooked her.

"Are you going in?"

She'd turned toward the voice and seen a tall, solidly built middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a jean jacket. A blonde woman knit her hand into his.

"I . . ."

"C'mon in," the woman said. "We promise not to bite. Well, except for Eli here. I make no promises with him." She had smiled, winked, and Ivy could feel her heart gulp it whole. Oh, why had she never learned to tamp down her expectations? Life had taught her better.

Eli shook his head, gave the woman a fake growl. Turned to Ivy. "Listen, it's for a good cause. Our fire department could use a new engine, and the EMS squad needs more training for their staff, what few there are. You don't have to buy anything, but you might help drive up the bids." He winked. "Don't tell anyone I told you that, though."

She laughed. "I'm Ivy Madison," she said, too much enthusiasm in her voice. "Assistant county attorney."

"Of course you are. I should have guessed. Eli and Noelle Hueston." Noelle stuck out her hand. "Eli's the former sheriff. Hence the fact that we've come with our checkbook. C'mon, I'll tell you who to bid on."

*Who to bid on?*

Ivy had followed them inside, taking a look around the crowded room. Pictures of soldiers hung in metal frames, along with listings of member names illuminated by neon bar signs. The smells of deep-fried buffalo wings, beer, and war camaraderie were embedded in the dark-paneled walls.

A line formed around the pool table near the back of the room—what looked like former glory-day athletes lined up with their beers or colas parked on the round tables. Two men threw darts into an electronic board.

Then her gaze hiccuped on a man sitting alone near the jukebox, sending a jolt of familiarity through her.

Jensen Atwood.

For a moment, she considered talking to him—not that he'd know her, but maybe she'd introduce herself, tell him, *I'm the one who put together your amazing plea agreement*. Yes, that had been a hot little bit of legalese. The kind that had eventually landed her right here, in her dream job, dream town.

But Noelle glanced back and nodded for Ivy to follow, so she trailed behind them to an open table.

"Every year, on the last night of the solstice festival, we have a charity auction. It's gotten to be quite an event," Noelle said, gesturing to a waitress. She came over and Eli ordered a basket of wings, a couple chocolate malts. Ivy asked for a Coke.

"What do they auction?"

"Oh, fishing gear. Boats. Snowblowers. Sometimes vacation time-shares in Cancún. Whatever people want to put up for charity. But this year, they have something special on the

agenda.” Noelle leaned close, her eyes twinkling. Ivy already liked her. And the way Eli had her hand wrapped in his. What might it be like to be in love like that? That kind of love . . . well, Ivy had only so many wishes, and she’d flung them all at living here, in Deep Haven.

“What?” Ivy asked.

“They’re auctioning off the local bachelors.”

And as if on cue, that’s when the lumberjack bachelor had taken the stage.

Ivy sipped her Coke, watching the frenzy.

“So are you going to bid?” Noelle asked.

Ivy raised a shoulder.

The lumberjack went for two hundred dollars, too rich for Ivy’s blood, to a woman wearing a moose antler headband. He flexed for her as he walked off stage, and the crowd erupted.

A clean-cut, handsome young man took the stage next, to the whoops of the younger crowd down front. “That’s my son,” Noelle said, clearly enjoying the spectacle. He seemed about nineteen or twenty, tall and wearing a University of Minnesota, Duluth, T-shirt. He was built like an athlete and had a swagger to match.

“He plays basketball for the UMD Bulldogs,” Noelle said. She placed the first bid and got a glare from the young man on stage.

A war started between factions in the front row. “Should I bid?” Ivy asked. Not that she would know what to do with a bachelor ten years younger than her. Maybe she could get him to mow her lawn.

“No. Save your money for Owen Christiansen.”

Probably another lumberjack from the woods, with a flannel shirt and the manners of a grizzly. Ivy affected a sort of smile.

“Maybe you’ve heard of him? He plays hockey for the Minnesota Wild.”

“No, sorry.”

“He’s something of a local celebrity. Played for our hometown team and then got picked up by the Wild right after high school.”

“I’m not much of a hockey fan.”

“Honey, you can’t live in Deep Haven and not be a hockey fan.” Noelle grinned, turning away as the wings arrived.

Ivy ignored the way the words found tender space and stabbed her in the chest. But see, she wanted to live in Deep Haven . . .

Noelle offered her a wing, but Ivy turned it down. “Owen’s parents, John and Ingrid Christiansen, run a resort about five miles out of town. It’s one of the legacy resorts—his great-grandfather settled here in the early nineteen hundreds and set up a logging camp. It eventually turned into one of the hot recreation spots on the north shore, although in today’s economy, they’re probably struggling along with the rest of the Deep Haven resorts. I’m sure Owen’s appearance on the program is a bid for some free publicity. Owen is the youngest son of the clan, one of six children. I’m sure you’ll meet them—all but two still live in Deep Haven.”

A redhead won the bachelor on stage and ran up to claim her purchase. Ivy escaped to the ladies’ room.

What if she did bid on Owen? Truly, the last thing she needed in her life was a real bachelor. Someone she might fall for, someone who could so easily break her heart.

Maybe she could ask said bachelor to show her around Deep Haven. Teach her about hockey. Certainly it might give her a little social clout to be seen with the town celebrity.

She could faintly hear the announcer stirring up the fervor for the next contestant, then a

trickle of applause for the main attraction as he took the stage. She walked out, standing by the bar to survey this hometown hero.

They grew them big up here in the north woods. Indeed, he looked like a hockey champion, with those wide shoulders, muscular arms stretching the sleeves of his deep-green shirt that read *Evergreen Resort—memories that live forever*. He stood at ease like one might do in the military, wearing jeans that hugged his legs all the way down to the work boots on his feet. The man looked like an impenetrable fortress, not a hint of marketing in his face. So much for winning the audience.

In fact, to use the only hockey term she knew, he looked like he'd just been checked hard into the boards and come up with some sort of permanent scowl, none too happy to be standing in the middle of the stage of the local VFW as the main attraction.

"C'mon, everyone, who will start the bidding for our Deep Haven bachelor tonight?"

Ivy looked around the room. It had hushed to a pin-drop silence, something not quite right simmering in the air. She glanced over to where Jensen Atwood had been sitting and found his seat vacant.

On stage, the man swallowed. Shifted. Pursed his lips. Oh, poor Owen. Her heart knocked her hard in the chest. She knew exactly what it felt like not to be wanted.

"One hundred dollars? Who has it tonight for our local hero?"

She scanned the room, saw patrons looking away as if embarrassed. Even Eli and Noelle had taken a sudden interest in their dinner.

Owen sighed and shook his head.

And right then, the pain of the moment squeezed the words from Ivy's chest. "Five hundred dollars!"

Every eye turned toward her, and for a moment, she had the crazy but horribly predictable urge to flee. But the words were out, so she took a step forward, toward the stage. "I bid five hundred dollars," she said again, fighting the wobble in her voice.

Ivy shot a look at Noelle, expecting approval. But Noelle wore an expression of what she could only pinpoint as panic. Wasn't she the one who'd suggested Ivy buy the man?

And then from the stage, she heard, "Well, that's good enough for me! Sold, to the pretty lady in the white jacket. Miss, come up to the stage and claim your prize."

Still, no one said a word—not a cheer, not a gasp, nothing. Ivy swallowed and met the eyes of the man on stage. "I'll meet him by the bar," she said, her voice small.

Owen looked as relieved as she was that they didn't have to create some public spectacle. He moved off the stage and the auctioneer mercifully introduced the band. The men in back resumed their pool playing.

Ivy couldn't help it. She edged over to Noelle. "What's the matter? I know he looks a little rough around the edges, but—"

"That's not Owen," Noelle said, wiping her fingers with a napkin. She shot a glance past Ivy, possibly at the stranger she'd just purchased.

"What?"

"Owen couldn't make it. That's Darek Christiansen. His big brother."

Ivy turned now, found her man weaving his way through the crowd. He didn't stop to glad-hand anyone or even slap friends on the back.

In fact, it seemed she'd purchased the pariah of Deep Haven.

Noelle confirmed it. "Brace yourself, honey. You've just purchased the most ineligible eligible bachelor in town."

\* \* \*

Everything inside Darek told him to keep going, right on out of the VFW until he hit his Jeep, and then punch the gas toward the hills.

And hide.

He would murder Owen next time he saw him, which wouldn't be anytime soon, given the kid's celebrity demands. *Sorry, Bro. I can't make it up today—I have a photo shoot.* Owen couldn't have thought ahead to that, maybe rearranged his oh-so-packed schedule? But Owen didn't think beyond practice, improving his shot, and updating his Facebook status. Last time Darek checked, his twenty-year-old kid brother had 32,876 fans.

Darek had maybe thirty-eight friends on his own page. Not that he was counting, but it seemed like some sort of commentary on his life.

The minute Darek had hung up with Owen, he should have made himself scarce—loaded Tiger into the Jeep, attached the boat, and headed for some pristine lake. Except losing his head and forgetting his responsibilities was how he got here in the first place.

Instead he'd experienced a streak of clearly misplaced hope that the stigma, the gossip, might have finally died and he might once again be an eligible bachelor. Someone who just wanted to start over, for himself and his son.

The near silence in the room when they'd called his name, when he'd stepped up to take Owen's place, confirmed that no, nothing had been forgotten.

Darek stalked past the bar, where, of course, his high school buddies gave him tight smiles.

He hadn't seen any of the former Deep Haven Huskies getting up to sell their . . . well, it wasn't exactly his body, and she certainly didn't expect a real date, right? So he wasn't sure what he was selling up there.

Darek glanced at his father, John, sitting at the end, nursing a Sprite. A linebacker-size man—bigger than any of his boys; he'd played fullback for the Minnesota Gophers back in the day. That he'd ended up with hockey players could only be blamed on the skating rink he'd cleared on the lake every January.

"Great job, Son," his father said, catching his arm.

"This was a bad idea," Darek grouched, slowing his exit.

"Five hundred dollars doesn't sound like such a bad idea. You were the most expensive bachelor here. That will make the news."

"Yippee," Darek said. But his father was right—he'd created a bit of buzz, and hopefully it would someday turn into goodwill for their lakeside vacation spot, Evergreen Lodge Outfitter and Cabin Rentals, which most people shortened to Evergreen Resort.

"Do you know the woman who bid on you?"

Darek scanned the room to locate her. He couldn't see her well from the stage with the lights in his face, but he thought he'd glimpsed a redhead wearing a white jean jacket, her hair in a messy ponytail. She wasn't tall, maybe five foot four, and a little on the curvy side.

Now he found her, sitting next to Noelle Hueston and staring at him like she'd purchased . . . well, the devil.

Darek turned away, his lips a grim line. "No, I don't know her."

His father wisely said nothing, took a sip of his Sprite. Then, "She looks pretty."

"Next time you want to sell your flesh and blood, pick a different son."

He caught his father's smirk as he turned to leave, and it only darkened his mood.

No one from Deep Haven, not a soul, had bid on him. What was so different about him from, say, the two previous bachelors?

Okay, maybe that wasn't a fair question. Neither of them walked around with the stigma of being the youngest widower in town, pity and probably the tsk of tongues following in their wake.

He glanced over to the chair where Jensen Atwood had sat, smug, rich, wearing a fancy leather jacket, his hair cut short and slicked back, contempt in his eyes. Yes, he'd seen the man sitting near the back, next to the jukebox, like no one would notice. He had a lot of nerve showing up here, and Darek had just about launched off the stage toward him. That might be a show the locals would bid on—a go-round between Jensen and Darek. Finally.

Instead he'd dark-eyed the guy into fleeing. It fed the heat inside him, gave Darek the strength to stand there like an idiot while the town shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

Until, of course, Moneybags piped up.

Five hundred dollars.

Wow, did she waste her money on him.

And what kind of woman paid five hundred dollars for a man she didn't know? Hopefully she didn't want a real date. He wasn't a real-date kind of guy.

In fact, he was a *never*-date kind of guy.

Darek shook his head and headed out the door.

He paused on the sidewalk for a moment, drawing in the clean air, shaking off the reek of old cigarettes, whiskey, and town gossip that coated him like grime. The moon had risen, hovering above the town, milky light washing over the trading post, the Blue Moose Café, pooling in the harbor, icing the waves of the lake.

He could feel his heartbeat thundering in his chest and hated how easily his guilt took hold of him, turned him surly. At the least, he should swallow his pride—what was left of it—and meet the woman who had forked out good money for him. For charity.

Instead he moved away from the door and dug out his cell phone, about to call home.

“Hey, where are you going?”

He turned, pressing End. His “owner” had followed him out of the VFW. A fireball with green eyes and freckles, wearing the jean jacket he remembered over a T-shirt and a green scarf. She stood about to his shoulder but had no problem slamming her hands to her hips and toeing up to him.

“I thought we had a date.”

“Is that what you want? A date?” He didn't mean for it to emerge so sharp, even angry, and didn't blame her for the way she opened her mouth as if she'd been slapped.

“No, I, uh—”

“Then why did you buy me? And why on earth would you pay five hundred dollars? Sheesh, lady, you must be desperate or something.”

Wow. He must have lost control of everything decent inside him. But he didn't like the feeling of being humiliated.

Or owned.

In fact, the entire thing made him feel trapped and small, and he'd had enough of that, thank you.

Her mouth closed. Pinched. “I'm not desperate. If you want to know the truth, I felt sorry for you.”

He probably deserved that, despite the way it sideswiped him. He didn't let on, however, preferring to stare at her, something icy he'd learned from his years on the rink. “Okay, then, let's just get this over with. What do you want?”

“I—”

“You should know that I’m not like the other guys in there. If you’re looking for some kind of fling, I’m not your man. I can probably hook you up with one of my buddies—”

“Wow. Stay *away* from me.” She whirled around, heading down the sidewalk, and he knew he was a first-class jerk.

“Wait!”

She held up a hand. “Forget it! You’re right; this was a bad idea.”

He ran after her—boy, she had a fast walk for such a short woman. “Listen, I’m sorry. Really. It’s just that you don’t want a date with me. If you ask, I’ll bet you can get your money back.”

“I don’t want it back.”

She didn’t stop and he was walking fast to keep up.

“Then what do you want? Why did you buy me?”

She stopped, breathing hard. Pressed her fingers to her eyes. Oh no, she wasn’t crying, was she?

He swallowed, his throat on fire, hearing his words and wishing he wasn’t the kind of guy who ran full speed into hurting others.

*You are so selfish.* Felicity, in his head. Always in his head.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, shoving his hands into his pockets. The wind took his words, flung them toward the lake. “It’s just that I’m the last person you want to be seen in town with.”

She sighed, turning her face away from him. “Well, I don’t have anyone else.” Her voice emerged small and wheedled in past the anger, the annoyance.

It settled inside, in a place he reserved for Tiger, and he tempered his tone. “Are you here for the weekend?”

“No. I live here.” She said it with a layer of determination, as if convincing herself.

Really? “I know nearly everyone in this town—”

“I moved here yesterday. I’m the new assistant county attorney.”

Uh-oh. He’d heard that the current assistant CA had resigned to stay home with her newborn child. He’d miss the way she tolerated his monthly phone calls. But someone had to keep tabs on Jensen, right? He looked at this angry sprite and grimaced, imagining her reaction next time Jensen threatened a restraining order.

Darek might be the one doing years of community service.

“Sorry,” he said again.

Her shoulder jerked in a halfhearted shrug.

“Maybe . . . maybe I could help you carry furniture or chop wood or mow your grass or something.”

She had folded her hands across her chest. “Wow, I must be a real catch for you to offer to mow my lawn instead of being seen in public with me.”

“No, I—”

“Like I said, you’re off the hook.”

“I don’t want to be off the hook. You bought me fair and square.”

She pursed her lips.

“I have an idea. C’mon.”

She frowned at him, and frankly he was done begging, not sure how he’d gotten to this point in the first place. So he turned and headed for the Jeep, parked just down the street.

He didn’t look behind him but heard her steps. When he reached the car, he held her door open like a gentleman, although he knew he might be a little late to resurrect any sort of real

gallantry.

She looked up at him before getting in, her eyes big and shiny in the moonlight. They caught his and for the first time, he noticed how pretty they were, with golden flecks at the edges.

“I’m safe, even if I’m a jerk.”

“I have friends who will hunt you down and kill you if I go missing.”

“I have no doubt.” He took a long breath and stuck out his hand. “Darek Christiansen, Deep Haven tour guide, at your service, milady.”

She regarded his hand for a moment, and he sensed something shifting inside her. “Ivy Madison.” Then she slid one of her petite hands into his and smiled.

The full force of it reached out and poured into him, hot and bold and shaking him through. He dropped her grip, swallowed. Stepped back.

She climbed into the Jeep and reached for the seat belt, her eyes on his as he closed the door. Oh, boy.

Maybe he should have run when he had the chance.

\* \* \*

Jensen sat outside the VFW in the Pine Acres work truck—the one he took to town when he wanted to hide—and watched Darek get the girl. Again.

And why not? Darek Christiansen always won.

Tonight, he’d stared Jensen down until he’d had no choice but to slink out. The last thing Jensen wanted was a fight. Especially with only six weeks left on his sentence. He didn’t need a judge deciding he wasn’t repentant enough and upgrading his community service to a stint behind bars.

Jensen should simply concede that Darek would always win. His streak began in fourth grade, when they’d both started playing hockey, and continued long after Jensen moved away, returning every summer as they vied for Felicity’s attention.

Sure, Jensen had a few glimmering moments. Like the summer Darek escaped to Montana to fight the fire in Glacier National Park with the Jude County Hotshots, after Jensen had given up his own firefighting dreams. Jensen and Felicity had nearly become something that stuck then—probably would have if Darek hadn’t returned home tan and triumphant.

And of course, there was the simple fact that in the end Darek had *married* Felicity. Jensen hadn’t quite seen that one coming. But then again, he doubted Darek had either.

He watched as Darek and the redhead headed out of town in his Jeep Wrangler. For a moment, he debated going back inside to listen to the Blue Monkeys. After all, that’s why he’d braved the auction—Jensen normally slunk in late for the band’s events, sitting in the shadows so no one saw him. But today he’d misjudged the time, the auction ran over, and well, creeping back in now felt too much like tucking his tail between his legs.

He had at least a smidgen of pride left.

Jensen put the truck into gear and pulled out.

One hundred hours and he’d be free; he could leave Deep Haven and never look back. Maybe keep driving all the way to California or Mexico, where he could change his name and leave his past in the dust.

On top of the hill over the town, Jensen resisted the urge to glance out the passenger window at the scattering of lights that made up Deep Haven. Eyes, watching him, blinking, accusing.

He kept his gaze on the road, slowing as he took the truck around a curve carved through the granite, where the shoulder disappeared. His hands slickened and he caught himself holding his

breath.

He couldn't wait to leave. But to do that, he'd have to find a few more places where he could go, hat in hand, begging for hours. Deep Haven seemed determined to keep him from fulfilling his community service, especially lately. Volunteer jobs had fizzled to ten hours a week and some places, like the after-school tutoring program, had turned him away.

Apparently the fact that he had graduated from college and managed two years of law school didn't matter to the English teachers struggling to teach their sixth graders to read.

No, if the citizens of Deep Haven had their way, he would have been their first public stoning.

He turned south where the road split around Evergreen Lake and took the paved road to the end, pulling in to the gated community of Pine Acres. The electronic gate and pass card could probably be considered overkill, but his father had promoted safety for the vacation homes when he jumped into the world of property development and created the luxury vacation community, and he kept his word. At least to the residents of the community.

As Jensen drove through the gates, he noticed that deer had snacked on the currant bushes by the entrance. He'd have to reshape them, maybe spray. A bulb was out on the automatic entry lights, and he spotted a tree down along one of the wooded drives. He'd come by tomorrow on the four-wheeler and clean it up.

He had to mow, anyway, and finish painting the Millers' garage—a project his father thought might fill time and create some goodwill. After all, the Millers were one of his father's largest clients in the Cities with their string of cinemas.

Jensen crawled into the driveway of his father's massive vacation home and parked the truck outside. As he got out, the stars created a canopy of brilliance, innocent and bright. They felt so close he wanted to reach up and touch one. The wind hushed in the white pine and birch, the poplar and willow that surrounded the property.

Motion sensor lights flickered on as Jensen moved toward the service door, blinding him for a moment. Then he let himself into the darkness of the garage and didn't bother to turn on the lights, toeing off his shoes and moving from memory up the stairs to the great room. At the top, moonlight streamed through the grand windows that overlooked the lake, waxing the wood floor with light. The ceiling rose two stories, trapping the silences of the grand house, and the place smelled of the walleye he'd cooked for lunch in butter and dill. He dropped his keys onto the granite countertop and opened the double-door stainless fridge, peering inside for something. Anything.

Grabbing a root beer in a tall bottle, he twisted off the cap and padded out to the deck.

The lake rippled in the darkness, fingers of light feathering over the surface. He could barely make out Gibs's light next door, trickling through the woods and across the sandy beach. He should check on the old man. A canoe lay moored on the sand, evidence of a recent visit by his granddaughter, Claire. How she loved to canoe the length of the lake.

Jensen didn't mean to stalk, but he loved watching her. And what else did he have to do, really?

Across the lake, almost directly from Pine Acres, the lights of the Evergreen Resort main lodge blazed.

Once upon a time, he and Darek had been the kings of Evergreen Lake.

He set his root beer on the railing and dug out his harmonica.

The sound echoed across the lake, long and twangy, Johnny Cash's "Cry! Cry! Cry!" Maybe it was a little indulgent, but tonight, he couldn't help it. "*You'll call for me but I'm gonna tell you, bye, bye, bye . . .*"

He listened to the last of the sound lingering as he finished. It was so easy, sometimes, to just close his eyes, lose himself in memories. The heat of the sun on his skin, the taste of trouble in his laughter. Standing on the bow of the canoe, his feet balanced on the edges. Claire and Felicity on the seat in the middle, and at the stern, facing him, similarly balanced, stood Darek.

Jensen had seen that sparking of challenge in Darek's eyes as he said, "You can't knock me off."

"Watch me." Jensen gave the canoe a playful jerk.

Felicity squealed. The summer had turned her hair a rich, luscious blonde, and with her skimpy bikini, he could barely keep his eyes in his head. She faced him, grinning, and he wondered if she could hear his heart pounding in his chest.

Claire grabbed for her side of the seat, and he caught her gaze on him. She always made him feel a little naughty, even when he wasn't thinking anything he shouldn't. Then again, he supposed that's what a missionary kid was supposed to do. Make you behave.

But on days like this, with the sun streaming down his back and both girls smiling up at him, he didn't care about behaving.

Just winning.

Jensen jerked the canoe hard, and Darek's arms windmilled. He nearly went over but found his balance and stamped his foot, making the canoe lurch the other direction.

Jensen caught himself and jerked it back, this time fast, hard and—

Darek leaned into it, and suddenly Jensen found himself in the air. The chill of lake water swept away his breath, and he kicked hard to right himself.

He found Darek's hand reaching for him when he came up. Jensen took it. And yanked.

Darek flipped over his head and into the lake. Darek came up sputtering, then launched himself at Jensen. They wrestled until they both hung on the side of the canoe, breathing hard.

"Let's take your dad's boat out, get some dinner down at the Landing," Felicity said as Darek reached for her. She swatted him. Glanced at Jensen. "Please?"

"Sure."

Claire reached out and helped Jensen into the canoe. Darek climbed in after him and they paddled back to shore.

Thankfully, his father wouldn't be back until the weekend to grouse about the boat. Claire and Felicity met him in sundresses and they picked up Darek across the lake, then motored down to the outside grill and restaurant, Jensen's knee propped on the diver's chair as he guided the boat.

"Faster, Jens!" Felicity said, so he pushed up the throttle. Darek frowned, his eyes darkening, but Felicity was laughing and Jensen could feel it in his chest.

Her laughter always felt sweetly dangerous, like if he hung on too long, it might burn him. He could still hear her sometimes, in the darkness across the lake. Taste the memory of that curious summer when he had her all to himself, feel the texture of her kisses. What a fool he'd been, gobbling up the idea that if he did it right, she might belong to him. Believing that he even really wanted that.

Because she'd never belonged to him. Not then, not later.

He opened his eyes, staring into the night, at the lights across the lake, pressing into the darkness.

He should have remembered that Darek Christiansen always won.

