



One of These Nights: The Harvest Cove Series

By Kendra Leigh Castle

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From the author of *Every Little Kiss*, a heartwarming novel that proves sometimes the only way to let people in is to let go....

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Harvest Cove series

“A delightful story filled with endearing characters and laugh-out-loud humor.”—Katie Lane, USA Today bestselling author of *The Last Cowboy in Texas*

“Kendra Leigh Castle delivers a fresh and honest story guaranteed to make you smile, laugh out loud, and even shed a few tears. I can’t wait to read more.”—Candis Terry, bestselling author of *Sweet Cowboy Christmas*

“Kendra’s writing is smooth and easy to follow, and she gives us a small-town romance in a place I can easily visualize.”—Harlequin Junkie

“[A] fun, slightly steamy novel....Castle’s Harvest Cove promises to be worth repeated visits.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Sweet and sexy character-driven romance!...Both a poignant and fun romance with a wonderful collection of characters.”—Fresh Fiction

About the Author

Kendra Leigh Castle is the author of numerous romances, including the Hearts of the Fallen series, the Dark Dynasties series, the MacInnes Werewolves trilogy, and RITA Award finalist *Renegade Angel*, along with a number of shorter published works. She lives in Maryland with her husband, three kids, and menagerie of pets, and she can usually be found curled up with her laptop and yet another cup of coffee.

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Chapter One

It was going to be one hell of a storm.

Jason Evans ducked his head, walking into a rising wind that made the leaves on the trees rattle and hiss. The air was sultry, loaded with humidity, and scented with the rain that was about to fall. He’d done plenty of work in the rain before, but today he was actually ahead of the game—there were no holes that needed digging, no trails that needed clearing, and, most important, no people who needed directions, saving, or a lecture on why they shouldn’t do whatever they were doing. Most of the visitors had fled the oncoming storm, and Owens State Park was ninety-nine percent squared away, at least for the next hour or so. He’d have plenty to do once the wind had stopped throwing things around. For now, though, there was just one thing left on his list.

He was hoping the teenage kid with the awful sunburn was wrong about the noises he’d heard coming from deep in the trees along this part of the trail. The kid’s flip-flops hadn’t been suited to wading into the underbrush to investigate, but at least he’d been concerned enough to hunt down a park ranger.

Jason stopped near the trail marker he'd been headed for and waited, lifting his head and listening intently. At first he heard nothing but the wind in the trees and the stillness between gusts that was a sound all its own. He breathed deeply, beginning to relax. The kid had thought he'd heard a dog, and maybe he had. Could have been a camper's pet wandering where it shouldn't have been. Then again, it could have been a wild animal in the wrong place at the wrong time. The woods were full of creatures that preyed on one another. Those encounters weren't pleasant things to hear, but nature wasn't always pleasant.

Mostly, Jason just hoped that whatever the kid had heard out there was gone. He wanted to get back inside and enjoy the storm.

Encouraged by the silence, Jason gave a sharp whistle, then called, "Hey, doggie! You out there? Come here, pup!"

Almost immediately, he heard the whimper. Jason closed his eyes and cursed silently as thunder rolled overhead and rain began to patter to the ground around him, the first fat droplets wetting his face. This was going to be a soaking rain, and he was out in it. Again.

The fact that somebody's lost dog was also out in it got his feet moving. Jason left the trail and headed into the trees, his boots crunching through pine needles and twigs. He continued calling, and a stronger, sharper yelp had him shifting direction slightly. *Sounds like one of those yippy little mutts that bite everybody. Great. My favorite.* He rubbed his thumb over the old crescent-shaped scar between the thumb and forefinger on his right hand while he stepped over a fallen branch, then around a jagged old stump. When a twig snapped beneath his boot, the dog began to cry in earnest, howling for all it was worth. It definitely sounded small, Jason decided, and it sounded hurt. But the dog knew he was close, and it was strong enough to make a hell of a lot of noise. That was a good sign.

"Right here, boy," he said. "I'll get you." There was an answering bark, almost lost as the wind picked up and began to whip around him, strong enough to give Jason pause. They were under a severe thunderstorm warning, and out in the trees, with the ground already saturated from last night's heavy rain, wasn't the best place to be if this weather really got going. The sky opened up just as Jason stepped over another gnarled, moss-covered branch and saw it—a dirty tan-and-white ball tangled up in some sort of cord and an exposed root. Its dark eyes were bright and a little wild when they met his, but instead of continuing to bark, it just gave a high-pitched whimper that hit him like a gut punch.

He might not be much of a people person, but animals were his soft spot, yappy little mutts included. It was one of the reasons he'd become a park ranger. He got at least as much time with wildlife as he did with humans. Raccoons and Homo sapiens could both be assholes, but raccoons tended to be more entertaining about it.

Jason focused on the little dog, forgetting the rain soaking him. He made his way to it, then crouched down, mindful of the way wounded animals could react to well-meaning humans. "Hey, little guy," he said softly, and he saw its tail—a curled plume that it probably carried proudly under better circumstances—begin to flutter. The dog whined again and tried to come to him, its bowed front legs scrabbling at the ground without propelling the dog anywhere. Between the dog's fruitless struggle to get to him and the look on its odd, smooshed-in face, the sight melted him.

"Poor puppy," Jason said softly, gently reaching out. He half expected to soon find its sharp little teeth in his skin, right in the soft spot already scarred from Great-Aunt Tilly's Maltese. Instead, the dog quivered beneath his touch, then began licking furiously at his hand while Jason tried to figure out how it was caught. The sky above flickered with light, then crackled and boomed. The rain slapped his face when the wind gusted, plastering his hair against his head, but Jason barely noticed. Someone—someone not fit for animal ownership—had tied a thin cord around the little creature's neck so tightly that it was a wonder it hadn't strangled itself out here. That cord, which looked to be maybe four feet long, had snagged on the root, and

the dog had wrapped itself around it good. Jason pulled a utility knife from his belt and cut the cord, finding his arms immediately full of ragged, wet, wriggling fur. A startled laugh escaped him.

“Okay, now. It’s okay. Just chill out—I’ve got you.” He liked big dogs, slobbery dogs that chased sticks and chewed giant bones and had big, shaggy heads. Fussy little pillow dogs just weren’t his thing. So the rush of affection he felt for the animal he’d just freed surprised him. That intensified, and mingled with something darker, when a stroke of his hand made it yelp in pain.

Jason glowered at the blood on one of the dog’s haunches. He’d seen this kind of thing before. Somebody had been having some fun with a BB gun.

“Hell,” Jason muttered. He gathered the dog in his arms—all maybe ten pounds of it—and stood, holding tightly as another gust of wind tore at them. “Come on. My cousin Jake’ll fix you up.” There were perks to being related to the town veterinarian. Being able to get this sodden, wounded pup treated ASAP was one.

He began to clomp back through the trees, his boots sinking into soft and muddy ground. The next roll of thunder was so loud he could feel it reverberate all the way through him, and the wind pushed him so hard that he staggered to one side before bracing himself against it again. Unease unfurled in the pit of his stomach as the trees around him crackled and creaked, and a rushing sound filled his ears, blocking out everything else.

When the big old pine tree started to come down, time seemed to slow. Jason was incredibly aware of every tiny movement he made, from clutching the dog more closely to his chest to dodging out of the way and slamming his foot down into a shallow depression in the ground that had been concealed by leaves and debris. He felt a rush of air, scented with a whiff of pine, at the same instant his leg twisted oddly and then snapped. He felt it break, felt the searing pain shoot directly up his injured limb, so intense that it stole his breath. Jason landed hard on one hip, and the world went gray for a few long moments. When the woods, the storm, came back into focus even more sharply than before, he began to wish he’d blacked out. Shock became agony. When he could breathe again, he drew in a giant lungful of air and roared. The dog in his arms shivered, a dim reminder that he wasn’t alone out there. Jason released it as gently as he could, then clutched at the leg now bent at a strange angle. Nausea roiled in the pit of his stomach.

When he could organize his thoughts into something coherent, he grabbed at the radio on his belt to call for help, then curled forward, hands over his face. Through waves of pain, he felt a gentle pawing at his thigh, then heard a soft sound of complaint just before a small, wet, injured dog clambered into his lap. Jason slid his hands down to look into a pair of dark and serious eyes focused intently on him. *You take care of me*, that look seemed to say, *and I’ll take care of you*.

The idea of this particular dog being able to take care of anybody should have been laughable. Right now, however, it wasn’t a sentiment he was in any position to argue with.

“Okay,” Jason growled, putting one hand lightly on the dog’s soaked back. He was surprised to find its warmth comforting. “Okay. We’ll talk about it. Later.”

That seemed to be good enough for the dog, which turned its head to look out into the woods. *Keeping watch*, Jason thought, and wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. Still, a ten-pound guardian was better than none. Right now, he’d take what he could get.

The wind whipped around them, buffeting Jason and his small would-be protector. Then he heard a siren, distant but getting louder, and knew that Brent had been quick about calling in the emergency from the station. Lightning made the air around him flicker, and another violent burst of thunder echoed so loudly that he felt he must be at the center of it. He heard a sharp crack nearby as another tree gave way, not nearly so close this time, thankfully.

One hell of a storm, he thought. *It sure is.*

Jason breathed out on a moan of pain and focused on the steady breathing beneath his hand. He'd be fine, he told himself. A broken leg wasn't the end of the world, even if it felt like it right this second. He'd manage. He always did, especially when he had a job to do.

And as unlikely as it seemed, right now, he had a lap full of wet fur that said he was needed, and might be for quite some time . . . whether he had volunteered for it or not.

* * *

Zoe Watson adjusted the painting, took a step back, and eyed the grouping she'd just put together.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, tilting her head and narrowing her eyes. She could spend hours arranging and rearranging the work on display at her gallery, Two Roads. She found it soothing, even though it drove her assistant crazy. She knew this because Samantha Henry, now Samantha Smith in her day-to-day life, was more than just her right-hand woman and one of the gallery's top-selling artists. She was also her closest friend in Harvest Cove—close enough to have told Zoe on numerous occasions that she needed to find a better hobby before Sam lost it and stabbed her with a palette knife.

"It looks great."

Zoe turned her head to glare at the pretty blonde who sat at the antique desk they were currently using to handle purchases and some of the paperwork. Sam's head was down as she scrawled something on a Post-it, then stuck it on what looked to be a contract.

"You didn't even look!"

"Yes, I did," Sam said calmly, with a brief glance up. Zoe got a glimpse of striking blue-green eyes before Sam refocused on whatever she was doing. "It looks almost exactly the same as it did the last time you asked me to look. You know, ten whole minutes ago."

Zoe tapped a finger against her hip. "Part of your job is to indulge me, you know."

"Is it? Somehow, I don't remember signing anything that spelled that out."

"You're a terrible henchman, Sam," Zoe said with a sigh. "You're supposed to ooh and aah over everything I do, which in turn will give me the confidence I need to take over the world."

Sam looked up, propped her chin on her folded hands, and smiled innocently. "We prefer 'henchwomen.' And if you want me to look at a virtually unchanged grouping of paintings twenty times in the space of an hour while stroking your ego, we're talking overtime and extra perks."

Zoe wrinkled her nose. "Thanks a lot, henchwoman."

"You don't like it, take it up with the union."

Zoe gave a soft huff, but she was smiling when she turned to look at her handiwork again. It really *hadn't* changed much in the last hour. Enjoyable though fiddling had been, it was probably time to pack it in.

"Fine. You win. I'll leave it alone. For now."

"That 'for now' means I never really win." Sam sighed, rising to brace her hands on the small of her back and stretch.

“Come on, now. Every day with me is its own reward.” That earned Zoe a grin.

“Of course it is, O Benevolent Ruler,” Sam said, then glanced at the small silver watch on her wrist. “Any big plans for the evening? I heard a rumor that today is Friday.”

“I heard the same rumor,” Zoe replied. “I have plans.”

That piqued Sam’s interest, as Zoe knew it would. “Seriously? What kind of plans?”

Zoe had a brief, intense urge to make up something interesting—something involving a handsome stranger, a candlelit dinner, and the unspoken potential for the kind of date that was likely to continue through the following morning. Except Sam would know she was full of it, because ever since they’d known each other, Zoe hadn’t been a spontaneous, wildly romantic date kind of person. She never really had been, much as she loved imagining such things.

Coming to Harvest Cove from Atlanta, Georgia, had been her choice. Starting a new life here, trying to plant some roots and make a go of her gallery: also a choice. The lack of attention she’d paid to her personal life had been less of a choice, more of a necessity while she’d been getting things off the ground, but lately, Zoe had started to wonder whether she’d been a little *too* determined to fly solo until she got settled in here. Because it didn’t get much more settled—or much more single—than she was right now.

And her current dry spell, not counting a brief and ill-advised interlude with an egocentric orthodontist, was at three years and counting.

“It’s true,” Zoe finally said, trying not to let her sudden pang of melancholy creep into her voice. “My plans involve a comfy couch, some hot tea, my favorite blanket, some snuggling—”

“With the blanket, right?”

“Maybe.”

Sam groaned and rolled her eyes. “Zo, we’ve talked about this. Binge watching recorded TV shows is not a substitute for actual human interaction. Why don’t you come hang out with me and Jake? We were talking about going down to Beltane Blues and having a drink later.”

“Just the two of you?”

“Emma and Seth might join us,” Sam replied. “Maybe Shane and Fitz. So don’t start with the third-wheel thing again, because you wouldn’t be. You never are.” Sam closed the distance between them and gave Zoe’s arm a tug. “Come on . . . it’s been a while since you let us drag you out. You’re getting as bad as Emma used to be.”

“Hey, you be nice about your sister,” she said. Emma Henry was a little older than Sam and a lot more uptight, but she’d come a long way since her drunken dance at Sam’s bachelorette party had given her a dose of unwanted local fame. Of course, the fact that her fiancé, Seth Andersen, was the laid-back, quiet type was probably just as much of a factor in her recent loosening up as her brief brush with notoriety.

That was how it should be with couples, Zoe thought. They should bring out each other’s better natures. Lately she thought her better nature might have packed up and gone on permanent vacation, probably somewhere tropical with a lot of half-naked men. If it was smart, anyway. “Not all of us are born party animals, you know,” she added, dismayed that her voice came out as a surly grumble.

“I know, because I’m not one, either,” Sam replied, ignoring Zoe’s tone. “But there’s a lot of space between

party animal and hermit. Even Aaron's been threatening to show up at your door, slap a sparkly bathrobe on you, and force-feed you Jell-O shots until you start having fun again. And I think he's serious."

"He usually is, underneath the sass." Aaron Maclean was a successful sculptor and one of her closest friends. He also took great pleasure in being a complete pain in her butt, though she loved him for it. Zoe rolled her shoulders uncomfortably, allowing herself a brief fantasy of having someone waiting at home to rub the knots out of them before banishing the images to the mental dustbin marked "Unnecessary Distractions." That thing was full to overflowing, Zoe thought with a wry smile. Kind of like the vacuum she kept in the closet in her office. Full of dust, dirt, sticks, the occasional rock . . .

"You're starting to sound just like Treebeard, you know that?"

Zoe wrinkled her nose at her nickname for Jason Evans, otherwise known as the Most Unnecessary Distraction of All. The big, surly park ranger darkened her doorstep at least once a week and seemed to take great pleasure in tracking in dirt, spending some time sparring with her, and buying something just often enough that she couldn't justify booting him out. Calling him Treebeard, after Tolkien's slow-moving and treelike Ent, made her feel a little better about the encounters. Especially because Jason didn't know she called him that.

It was as though she'd summoned him into the conversation just by thinking of the messes he left for her to clean up, courtesy of his giant boots.

"I do not."

"Do, too. You two ought to start a club for antisocial hot people. You'll be the only members, and I'll be the outside consultant who sets up your activities since neither of you likes to do things."

The thought of being alone with Jason was way more appealing than it should have been . . . which would explain why she'd spent a fair amount of time pondering the scenario. Outwardly, Zoe brushed off the teasing.

"No way. I know enough about how your twisted little mind works. I don't need to see what you'd come up with for awkward seduction scenarios, which is all those so-called activities would be."

"By 'awkward' I'm going to assume you mean 'amazingly smooth.'"

"Amazingly *something*, anyway," Zoe replied. "Kind of like you, in fact."

Sam snorted. "You love me. Me and my schemes for getting you and Jason together for an evening of hard liquor and strip poker."

"Setting aside the fact that I don't even know how to play poker . . . oh my God."

"Exactly." Sam's evil grin made her laugh, at least. And it was a good reminder that one thing she *did* have here in Harvest Cove was friendship. The important, tell-each-other-anything kind. The sort of friendship that stayed.

"There. You don't look quite as stabby now, at least. Remember that the next time you disparage my skills as a henchwoman."

Zoe laughed again and shook her head. "I'll try. And I'm not stabby. Just tired, I guess. Long week."

"Longer when you don't take days off," Sam admonished her, but her voice was full of affection. "Well,

you've earned hanging out with your blanket and TV if that's what you want to do. But we'd love to have you along if you want to come tonight, okay?"

She was being let off the hook, Zoe knew. But that was Sam's way. Never a frontal assault, just a little smacking around with a velvet glove, followed by a hug. That was usually all that was needed, and this time was no different.

"I probably could stand to spend some time in civilization. Maybe I'll swing by. Okay?"

Sam's smile was immediate and full of delight. "Way more than okay. We should be there around eight."

Zoe bit back a groan, partly in complete disgust with herself. When eight o'clock sounded late, when the thought of being in her favorite pajamas at that hour on a Friday night was preferable to anything else she could think of, she worried she was turning into her grandmother. And at thirty-two, she was hardly grandmother material.

Whatever was wrong with her lately, she needed to break the cycle, Zoe decided. Maybe it was the fact that her friends all seemed to be moving into the coupled-up phase of their lives. Maybe she was still down from her brother Marcus heading back home after his visit. But she needed a change, and there was a cute little halter top with the tags still on it hanging in her closet at home that had *How you doin'?* written all over it. She'd been waiting to take it for a spin—knowing that the wait might wind up being forever—but really, there was no time like the present.

"All right," Zoe said lightly. "I'll see you there a little after eight."

Sam clapped her hands together, then did a small happy dance that shouldn't have been possible in heels. "Yes!"

"Don't get too excited. You know I'm only good for a couple of hours before I need to go curl up in a corner somewhere."

Sam waved her hand dismissively. "And you know I'm the same way. We can use each other as an excuse to bail and go watch some trash TV together when we've had it. And the people watching should be good in the meantime."

This, Zoe thought with a smile, was one of the many reasons she loved Sam. Though they operated at different levels of sociability, they were both homebodies at heart. She started to head back to her office, then paused, suddenly suspicious.

"You didn't find a way to drag Treebeard out of his forest to meet us tonight, did you?" she asked, turning back to narrow her eyes at Sam.

"Uh, that would require superpowers I don't possess, but I'm flattered you think I could manage it," Sam replied.

Zoe expected to feel relief, but there was some definite disappointment mingling with it. Sam was right. She really *did* need to get out more, especially if she was missing the sight of Jason Evans.

"I've seen you be formidable when you want to be," Zoe replied, then waved a hand. "Just making sure. You brought him up, so I thought maybe you'd cooked up some kind of crazy plan." She frowned. "You know, he hasn't been in to pester me in a couple of weeks. It's a little strange. I hope he wasn't eaten by bears or something."

Sam tilted her head, a puzzled smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “You mean you didn’t hear?” The surprise in Sam’s voice meant that she’d managed to miss out on some widespread local gossip, a subject Zoe prided herself on keeping up with. She might not be from the Cove, but this was her home now, and she liked to know what was going on. Things that escaped her notice irritated her, especially when they were things she tried so hard to pretend to ignore.

“Hear *what*?” she asked.

“Jason got caught out in those severe storms that came through last week. The ones that caused that nasty accident out on Juniper, with the hail? Some trees came down, and he broke his leg getting out of the way of one of them. Totally out of commission for the time being.” Sam’s look turned sheepish. “Sorry. I thought you knew.”

“No.” It was unexpected news, accompanied by an equally unexpected burst of concern that hit her like a punch to the gut. She spent a lot of time telling herself she didn’t like Jason. Almost as much time as she spent wondering when he’d be in to bother her again. She felt her cheeks heating as Sam watched her, an involuntary reaction that was entirely unwelcome. She didn’t fluster easily. And certainly not over men like *Treebeard*.

“Are you . . . blushing?” asked Sam, watching her with more interest—not to mention amusement—than she thought was warranted. Zoe gave her a warning look and turned on her bootheel to head for her office. Naturally, Sam followed.

“You *are* blushing! Aha!” she said, trailing her.

“Aha nothing,” Zoe said without turning her head. She opened the door to her little office, which she thought of as Command Central. She kept it as neat as she could, but the paperwork was a constant battle. And if she let it go for a couple of days, the various cups she drank her tea out of began threatening a hostile takeover of her space. It hurt her neat freak’s heart, but it seemed like the nerve center of her tidy little universe was destined to stay just a little messy. Zoe inhaled deeply, surveying the clutter, and tried to push the current conversation out of her mind. “I’ve been slacking. These cups have got to go.”

“You know,” Sam said in a tone that clearly indicated she was about to say something Zoe wouldn’t like, “since you brought him up, Jason *is* a loyal customer. It might be nice to send, I don’t know, a get-well card or something.”

“*You* brought him up, remember? I just didn’t know he’d busted his leg. I’m sure it’s done wonders for his personality. Surprised he didn’t bite the doctors who treated him.” She stacked four cups one inside the other, straightened a stack of papers, and then braced her hands on the desk without turning around, dropping her head. “You’re serious. You want us to send him a fruit basket.”

“I know you don’t like him all that much—well, you’re good at pretending not to, anyway—but it’d be a nice gesture.” Sam’s voice was full of gentle, affectionate reproach.

“I don’t dislike him. I don’t *anything* him. Apart from his purchasing habits and his dirty footprints, *Treebeard* isn’t even on my radar.”

“Which is why he merits a special nickname, at least one daily mention, and those fire-engine red cheeks?”

Zoe turned to give Sam a pained look. “Really? We’re going to go *there* again?”

“Nope,” Sam replied. “Mostly because I value my life, and I really want you to come out tonight. I’m just saying that despite his more frustrating qualities, Jason has been supportive of the gallery in his own special

way. He'd probably appreciate the well-wishes."

Zoe grabbed her big leather tote and slung it over her shoulder, heaving a loud sigh. "You may be right. I'm just finding the whole appreciative-Treebeard thing hard to picture. He doesn't respond to nice, that I've seen."

Sam's brows lifted. "You've tried nice?"

"In *my* own special way."

"Hmm." Sam waited as Zoe grabbed a few things she needed, slid them into her tote, and then walked out of her office.

"You're still following me, I see," Zoe said calmly as she checked the locks and switched off most of the lights. "Okay. Will it make you happy if I say I'll send a card? Maybe some flowers? Though he'd probably rather have a bundle of twigs. Seems like it'd be more his thing. He could light them on fire, poke people with them. . . ."

"Yes, it'll make me happy. Unless you really do send twigs." Sam laughed softly. "Some dog food and a few squeaky toys might be more useful."

Zoe turned, frowning. "Why? Is this some weird fetish of his I don't want to hear about, or did that man give up on humanity altogether and decide to inflict himself on some poor animal instead?"

Though it wasn't an expression she saw from her often, Zoe thought that Sam looked a little smug. It was rare that she knew something before Zoe heard about it, and she was obviously relishing the triumph.

"Neither. Well, maybe a little of the second thing, but not on purpose. Jason was out in the storm because he was saving a dog." When Zoe simply stared, unable to quite process that, Sam elaborated. "One of the park guests had heard it crying. Jason found it all wrapped up in a cord, caught on a root. And somebody had shot it with a BB gun."

Oh, hell no. I'm not going to feel mushy about this. I am not.

Zoe opened her mouth to say something dismissive, but all that came out was a soft, high-pitched sound: "Aww."

"I *know*, right?" Sam replied, eyes rounding. "Jake got her all fixed up, though. She's going to be okay. She also seems to be a stray, or at least nobody's looking for her. I think Seth would adopt her in a heartbeat—he said he had a dog just like that when he was a kid—but I don't think Jason's interested in giving her up. She's a sweetie."

"So, not just a dog, but a girl dog?"

"Yep."

Zoe shook her head. "Well, since that's probably as much female companionship as he gets . . . good for him, I guess. Dog probably minds the debris field less."

The idea of Jason Evans, Animal Savior and Softy, wasn't one Zoe could quite reconcile with her mental image of him. So she set it aside as best she could, squared her shoulders, and decided to end the conversation before she was confronted with any other information she didn't know how to handle. Like maybe that Big Al Piche, who was the Cove's bizarre, weirdly intelligent village idiot, was a James

Bond-level international superspy.

Though all things considered, Big Al being a spy was easier to believe than Jason having a heart of gold.

“I’ll make sure we get something over to him,” Zoe said, then shifted gears. “So, are we doing food tonight, or just drinks? I’ll wait to eat if this is a late dinner thing.”

She caught the knowing look Sam gave her, but Zoe didn’t care if she’d been smooth about changing the subject. She wasn’t about to let Jason take up any more of her time than he already had.

Especially, she thought as she locked the gallery door, because he already took up a lot more time than anyone, even—*especially*—Jason himself, knew.

Chapter Two

“Mom, really, it’s okay. No, no, I’m happy to have you come for a visit, but a week is more than enough. Yeah, I know I’m going to need help for a while.”

Jason sat on the couch and glared at his bum leg, the lower half of which was immobilized in a clunky cast. His leg might be the issue, but this whole thing was a giant pain in his ass. He adjusted the phone between his shoulder and his ear and listened to another dozen reasons why his mother was coming to take care of him, possibly forever. Her voice, calm and deceptively patient, continued to gently pummel him. People thought she was sweet. She was . . . sort of . . . but they tended to miss the steel underneath. He didn’t, and he knew when he was in for it. This was one of those times.

“Honey, I know you don’t like anyone fussing over you, but I remember what it was like when your father broke his arm falling off that ladder a few years ago. He needed a lot of help, and I’m sure you do, too. Are you eating? You never did cook; you’re probably just living on cereal. Do you have any clean clothes? I know you don’t, Jason Patrick Evans, and don’t even think about lying to me. You need help, and I’ll be there on Sunday, just like we planned.”

“Like *you* planned,” Jason muttered, which earned him a sharp snort from the woman who he had once been convinced kept the entire planet from spinning off its orbit and out into space through sheer force of will. He’d gotten his stubbornness from her. That was one reason why occupying the same enclosed space with her for an extended period of time filled him with dread. He loved his mother dearly, but he gave it a matter of hours before she was after him about everything from his holey old boxer shorts to his lack of a social life. And right now, the state of his house wasn’t going to help his cause.

Jason scanned the high-ceilinged great room, which encompassed most of the log home’s living space, and winced. Dust swirled lazily in a sunbeam. Dishes sat haphazardly in the sink. Clothes were tossed over the furniture, left there because just getting them off was enough of a chore right now. The sight did nothing for his mood—he was a lot of things, but a slob wasn’t one of them. Unfortunately, his plans of powering through this with sheer orneriness weren’t working out that well so far.

“If I didn’t do the planning, nothing would happen. You’d sit there and fester until your cousin called me out of desperation, and we’d be back at the same place.” She sighed, and guilt mixed with his frustration. He didn’t want to upset her. He just wanted to crawl in a hole somewhere until his leg was better.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“Uh-huh. I’m used to it. You were never a treat when you were sick. Unlike your brother. You know he still

asks me to come make him soup when he gets a cold.”

Jason bit back a groan. This was one of the many reasons he had to find a way to give this impending visit a definite end point, and the sooner the better. He didn't want daily updates on the endless charms and delights of his baby brother, who had oozed perfection from his pores since birth. At least, according to the rest of the family. It wasn't that he didn't love Tommy. It was just that Tommy had never really seemed to need it . . . he got more than enough love from everybody else.

Story of his life.

“When your father gets back from this fishing trip they've got him going on for work—I don't think for a second it's not just an excuse for a bunch of them to escape onto the water and drink too much for a few days, but they're calling it work—he said he'd like to come out to stay for a bit, too, not just to get me and run. He has plenty of vacation time saved up. Maybe we can get your brother to come visit, too, at least for a weekend. What do you think? We haven't all been together since last Thanksgiving, and that was only for a couple of days. I miss the Cove this time of year. You know we love Florida, but it's hotter than hell right now and I don't want to learn to fish, even if your dad does keep after me about it. Oh, if we can get you up and around, maybe we can go to the field days! I told Tammy and Paul I was coming into town, and they said . . .”

Her words washed over him, but Jason stopped hearing them. It all sounded like a rushing, rising wave of pure panic to him. He had to do something. Anything. Otherwise, his small sanctuary in the woods was quickly going to become his idea of hell on earth. Unfortunately, in his current condition, running away until further notice wasn't a viable option.

It took a few seconds for the soft knocking at his door to register, and even then he might not have noticed but for the way the bundle of tan-and-white fur that had been sleeping smashed up against his thigh suddenly burst into motion, barking furiously as she flew off the couch and scrambled toward the door.

Her injuries sure hadn't slowed her down any, Jason thought, ruefully amused. *That makes one of us.*

“Oh, somebody there?” his mother asked.

“Yeah, probably just Jake. He said he was going to swing by after work to check on me.” He covered the receiver for a minute to call out, “Come in!” over the wild barking before returning his attention to the conversation at hand.

“Your cousin is sweet. I hope you appreciate what he's doing.”

“Sure,” Jason drawled. “He comes over, I verbally abuse him until I get tired, he plays with Rosie, and we both end the day happy. It works out.”

“*Jason.*”

He was in mid-smirk when he heard the light tap of a heel on his floor. A familiar—and very feminine—voice reached his ears and rippled all the way through him. Just the way it always did.

“Hello?”

He took a breath, pushed aside his immediate instinct to whip his head around and start snarling at her out of complete mortification at what she must be seeing, and managed a reasonably civil, “Hey,” with a slight turn of his head. “I'll just be a . . . second.”

Jason had to force the final word out, since his brain stalled the second he caught sight of her. He was used to seeing Zoe Watson in what he thought of as her work uniform: long, loose shirt, sometimes a sweater, usually with an incomprehensibly tied scarf, over leggings and a pair of boots from Zoe's wide and varied collection. The woman seemed to have some weird riding-boot fetish. Not that there was anything wrong with that. But this was after work—the first time he'd ever actually seen her outside the gallery, he realized—and either she was deliberately messing with his head or there was a lot he didn't know about Zoe.

Probably both.

She was wearing one of those shirts that looked like a silky handkerchief that had been cleverly tied to her in a couple of key spots, along with a pair of skinny white pants cut a few inches too short and some kind of strappy heels that made his mouth water despite the fact that they made no sense to him. Zoe was little, maybe five-two, and he knew she had a great figure, but this evening she was showcasing her hourglass curves in a way he'd only imagined. Every inch of her, from her long, shapely legs to the curve of her backside to the graceful neck she almost never showed off, was a feast for his eyes. Her mocha skin had a warm glow in the hazy light filtering in through the windows.

It took longer than it should have for him to realize she was watching him closely—curiously. However he'd been staring at her, she didn't seem to know quite what to do with it.

“Not a problem,” Zoe said with a small smile. “I'll wait.” Her big gray eyes regarded him with something like amusement before she shifted a potted plant she was carrying from one arm to the other and dropped into a crouch to fuss over Rosie. Jason tried to collect his thoughts, aware his mother was insistently repeating a few words. A question? Yeah, it was a question.

“Jason, *who is that?* Because if I didn't know any better, I'd say it was a woman.”

Jesus, you'd think she just spotted a unicorn.

He readjusted the phone against his ear, listening to Zoe croon at his dog. He hadn't had her pegged as a dog person. He hadn't really pegged her as an anything person, actually. He was usually too busy trying not to drool on himself while he was arguing with her. The body might be heavenly, but her face, a perfect oval with a pert little nose and full lips she often painted some lickable shade of red, not to mention those *eyes*, was enough to knock any sane man on his ass. He'd been sure he was building up immunity thanks to their regular arguments.

So much for that.

“Jason, are you still there? Who—”

A thought occurred to him then, just a wisp of an idea stamped *This Might Work*. He grasped at it like a drowning man confronted with the bobbing remnants of a shattered ship. It might not be enough to save him, and Zoe would probably kill him anyway, but what choice did he have?

“That's Zoe, Mom.” He saw her look up sharply from where she was petting Rosie.

“Oh?” It was a loaded question, and he knew it. He could hear all the other questions running just beneath the surface of that single, simple word. Zoe rose and came to stand before him, one hand on her hip in a stance he was well acquainted with by now. The arched eyebrow meant she was curious, but the hand on the hip? It didn't bode well for him.

Maybe she'd cut him some slack because he was injured. He was also desperate. And so while Zoe stared at him, he told Molly Evans the biggest lie since she'd been on the front porch at two a.m. asking his

seventeen-year-old self whether he'd been drinking. "Yeah, well, she's been helping me out. That's why I'm not sure about all these plans you've got going. . . . I mean, I'd love to have everybody for the rest of the summer, but my place is pretty small and she's, you know"—he scrubbed a hand through his hair—"around a lot."

Zoe's mouth dropped open.

Yep, I'm dead.

To Zoe's credit, she didn't hurl the potted plant in her hands at his head. She looked like she wanted to, but she didn't. Instead, her storm gray eyes full of fire, she mouthed, *I will kill you.*

There was a moment of dead silence. Then his mother spoke: "Well, *finally!*"

Her laugh, her voice, held so much relief that any hope that his relationship status had ceased to be a topic of interest in the family evaporated. They still talked about him—poor, lonely, brokenhearted Jason—because of course they did. Because of Sara. When the divorce had been finalized, he'd assumed she was gone for good. He hadn't known that just the idea of her would continue to give him problems four years on. And as hard as she'd been at the end, he didn't think this was what Sara had intended, either. She'd just wanted to go. In the end, he'd let her.

He just wished everybody else would, too.

As Zoe's jaw tightened and the hand at her hip curled into a claw, Jason tried to tell himself that what he'd just done was no big deal. A girlfriend, even an imaginary one, would make his mother quit worrying and save him from weeks of having a social life forced on him when all he really wanted to do was convalesce and brood. It might keep Tommy Evans, Local Superstar, down in Miami where he belonged instead of up here showing off. Zoe didn't even have to be around. Hell, he'd invent a different Zoe if he had to, and then send her on an equally imaginary vacation or . . . something. But no matter how he tried to sugarcoat it, he couldn't escape the fact that he'd just dragged the real Zoe into his life in a big way, without asking permission, and with a whole lot of potential ramifications that she seemed fully aware of. That was why she was going to kill him. He probably deserved it.

But that was still a more appealing thought than having his family pile in on him for a month.

Damn. This is a new low.

His mother's voice chirped happily in his ear, pulling him back into a conversation he had no idea how to participate in. Not with Zoe's death stare fixed on him. He held up one hand toward her, tried for an expression that he hoped was somewhere in the vicinity of too-pathetic-to-annihilate, and mouthed the words, *Wait. Please.*

"Hey, Mom, look, I've gotta go." Jason hoped he didn't sound as panicked as he felt. "Yep, see you Sunday." He was ready to hang up when she said the words that shoved a sliver of ice-cold fear directly through his heart.

"I can't wait to meet the mystery woman."

She was being perfectly sincere. But as it tended to do on the rare occasions he slipped into panic, the verbal tic Jason had worked so hard to rid himself of when he was a child returned to tie his tongue in knots. "I-I-I-I'm sure she'll be h-happy to meet you, too."

Nice. In front of Zoe, even. You're on a roll today, man.

Zoe's expression changed, ever so slightly, and Jason looked away. He had to. The last thing he needed was a dose of pity from a woman who was already way the hell out of his league. His mother clucked her tongue at him across the miles. "Oh, don't be nervous, honey. I'm sure I'll love her. It's about time you found somebody who appreciates you. After all Sara put you through, you deserve it."

"Uh." It was the only response he could muster, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Love you, see you Sunday!" she chirped. "I'll call once Moira picks me up and we're on our way!"

His aunt Moira, Jake's mother. A woman who knew damn well he wasn't dating anyone. His spur-of-the-moment plan was already in flames, and he hadn't even hung up the phone. Maybe he ought to be glad he now had an epic fail like this to hold up as the ultimate proof that he really just needed to give up on having a social life.

"Bye," Jason said, his voice barely a growl, and hung up. He tossed the phone to the side, where it landed between a couple of couch pillows, and shoved his face into his hands. He didn't need to look at Zoe's face to know what must be written all over it. There was a long moment of silence. And then finally, in a voice that would have been as rich as cream but for the violence vibrating through it, Zoe spoke. Carefully. Deliberately.

Homicidally.

"*What. Did. You. Just. Do?*"

Chapter Three

Zoe stared at the big scruffy idiot on the couch and tried to decide whether the man was some sort of cosmic punishment for a whole lot of wrongs committed in a former life. If he was, then his continuing torment of her might make some kind of sense. If he wasn't, well . . . somebody up there had a very twisted sense of humor.

Even now, laid up with one leg in a clunky cast and wearing a pair of ragged old cargo shorts and a T-shirt that had seen better days, Jason was too appealing for his own good. *Nasty, miserable, inappropriately attractive dirt farmer*. He lifted his face from his hands to look at her, and it was hard not to feel sorry for him. Well, a little sorry. The rest of her was too busy being furious with him right now.

"I can explain," he said, the low rumble of his voice rippling through her in ways that were just as inappropriate as the rest of him. His brown eyes were pleading, a new look for him. They were also flecked with gold when the light hit them, a fact Zoe had been determinedly ignoring ever since he'd first clomped into her gallery. Not that it was ever easy. And not that she ever really managed it anyway. His fault, obviously. Right now, she was happy to blame him for everything from his pretty eyes to the phases of the moon.

"Explain what?" she snapped. "Why you just told your mother I was your girlfriend? Good, because this is something I really have to hear."

"I didn't say that." Now he was getting defensive, and that was something she *was* used to. She stared at his guilty face—his annoying, ruggedly handsome, guilty face, with all its interesting angles and stubble and *Damn it, Zoe, focus*—and pressed her lips together, exhaling loudly.

"Jason," she said, "I am standing right here. Don't you lie to my face."

He screwed up his mouth and seemed to consider this, then winced as he shifted uncomfortably on the couch. His little dog jumped up beside him, panting happily as she settled herself against his side. Jason stroked her absently. Rosie, he'd called her. The fluffy little flat-faced dog, who'd done a happy dance while she'd petted her, was about the last kind of creature she would have expected to find Jason living with. Snakes, raccoons, maybe even a turtle, sure. Pampered lapdog, no. And Rosie was wearing a very sweet little pink collar. With rhinestones on it.

Zoe had no idea what to do with that, so she tried to stay focused on her anger. With Treebeard, that tended to be a good rule of thumb.

"Okay," Jason finally said. "I heavily implied it. I know."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Yes. You do."

"I was kind of desperate."

"That's flattering."

He growled, sounding more like a bear than a human. "That's not what I mean. Zoe, look. I need help."

She kept her tone as cool and indifferent as she could. It was hard, since she'd never seen him looking this helpless or dejected before, and the way he was scratching Rosie behind her ears in a way she obviously loved was very sweet. Still, she managed.

"You do need help. All kinds of professional help." Zoe looked around at what would be a really great space minus the clutter and out of pure pique added, "You also need a maid service. Because *damn*."

His brow furrowed, and the familiarity of his glare was a weird sort of comfort. She knew where she stood if they were arguing. If they stopped doing that, then she might do something stupid, like be nice to him, and that would just lead to all kinds of trouble she didn't need. He was the furthest thing from her type possible, a leaf-covered hermit who probably thought that wearing a clean T-shirt was "dressing up." She liked men who were refined. Men who were cultured.

Well, she also fantasized about big, sexy alpha males who came from other worlds and could knock down buildings and fly and fight evil, but since Jason hadn't exhibited any superpowers except the ability to irritate her beyond all reason . . . no. Just no.

"It's usually clean, for your information. You try housekeeping with a busted leg."

"I wouldn't. I'd hire help."

He snorted and rolled his eyes. "Of course you would."

"Yes, of course I would," she shot back, letting him get to her. She always did, despite her best efforts. Something about him just got her going. *Everything* about him. "Because I have a brain in my head and don't have a problem asking for help when I need it. Unlike other people who apparently have rocks in their heads and think they should just—"

She forced herself to stop and took a deep breath. If they headed down this path, she'd end up storming out of here without ever discovering why Jason had decided to make her his imaginary girlfriend. Really, really imaginary. *So* imaginary. Zoe held her hands in front of her, palms out.

"All right," she said slowly. "Let's just back it up. Forget about the clutter. What on earth possessed you to

let your mother think you and I are together? And I mean, did I hear all that right? She'll be here in two days?" She searched his face for some clue as to what he'd been thinking, but he was as unreadable as ever. "What are you *doing*, Jason?"

He nodded slowly and seemed to be locking his own considerable temper away. His hand moved on Rosie's back, gentle, rhythmic, a sharp contrast to the venom that had been in his voice just a moment ago. When he locked eyes with her again, his had softened, full of a level of melancholy she wouldn't have thought him capable of.

"Okay," he finally said. He lifted his free hand to push back the wavy brown hair that was even shaggier than usual. "You want the short version or the shorter version?"

"Whichever one makes more sense."

There was a brief curve of his lips that had Zoe's breath catching, just for a beat. He wouldn't have noticed her pause . . . but she did, and she immediately wished she could kick her own butt to make it stop. If Sam ever found out just why she found Jason so frustrating, she'd never hear the end of it. Flustered, she schooled her features into polite interest and waited. Jason's flicker of humor vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"All right, the short version. My mother is coming. She figures that me with a broken leg is a great opportunity to try and fix my life for the billionth time, mostly because I can't escape. I can handle that for a week or so, but this time it's going to be more like a month unless I've met her threshold for having my shit together. She was really winding up about her plans to include my father and little brother in the festivities, you walked in, I had a dumb idea to try and save myself, and here we are."

Zoe took a moment to process all that. It made a weird sort of sense. In a rude and unbelievably stupid way, yes, but she got it.

"What was the even shorter version?" she finally asked, curious.

This time his smile was more than a flicker, full of a boyish mischief that transformed his whole face for a brief instant. It was one of the first times she'd ever seen him look approachable. And maybe even . . . *fun*.

Dangerous stuff.

"Couple of grunts and a 'Get out,'" Jason said. "Kind of like you sound every time I walk in the gallery."

Her lips twitched with a smile she didn't want him to see. "I'm a lady. I don't grunt. And I don't tell you to get out when you remember to use that fancy doormat I bought just for you."

"I use it. You just don't think I do it right."

"Well, you *don't*." They looked at each other for a moment, and Zoe couldn't stop the soft laughter from bubbling up. This was their little routine, she guessed. Funny how comfortable it was by now. A low rumbling reached her ears, and Zoe was startled to realize that Jason was laughing with her. It made her feel uncomfortably warm and sort of mushy and strangely sweet, so she blew out a breath and looked at the ceiling. "Well. This is a new one on me—I'll give you that. I don't even know what to say."

He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "It was a dumb idea. You don't have to say anything. I'll just . . . deal with it on Sunday. Forget about it." Then he looked away and mumbled, "My family makes me crazy."

That was something she could understand, at least. And not something she would have expected to have in common with Treebeard the Annoyingly Hot Park Ranger. Much against her better judgment, Zoe found

herself intrigued. And sympathetic.

Users Review

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