

LIBERTY

CITIZENS OF LOGAN POND

BOOK 2

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For Dad

Who taught me the power of words

*Reason, which is that Law,
teaches all Mankind
that being all equal and independent,
no one ought to harm another in his
Life, Health, Liberty, or Possessions.*

John Locke

one

Greg Pierce bolted up in bed, listening. He could have sworn he heard a motor, but that was impossible. The only motor they heard in the Logan Pond subdivision was Oliver Simmon's patrol car, and that motor hadn't sounded like a car. He listened a moment.

Nothing. Another dream.

They were getting worse. Usually he dreamt about swimming with his sister at Salvo Beach, North Carolina. Kendra's head would slip beneath the surface, and Greg would struggle to reach her. He was always too late. Why drowning, he wasn't sure. She'd died of pneumonia a year ago in a government hospital—a drowning of the lungs, he supposed.

This was the first time a beach jeep patrol tried to help in his dream. The motor he'd heard.

With a groan, he threw an arm over his head to block out the early sun. He knew better than to fight his way back to sleep. Cursed morning person. Strangely, the thought made him smile. He wasn't the only morning person in the clan. Standing, he peeked out his window to see if Carrie Ashworth was—

He heard it again. A motor thrumming in the distance, low and rhythmic. Not a dream.

His heart kicked into gear. It sounded like a helicopter, only he hadn't seen any aircraft in the six years since the global financial collapse wiped out everybody's transportation, including the government's. Frantic, he searched every inch of morning sky as the rhythmic sound grew.

Greg slipped out of his bedroom and out his grandparents' front door for a better look. On the porch, he spotted the black dot in the sky heading their way. His pulse matched the beat of the rotors. This better not be some new government tactic, air sweeps instead of ground raids. How would their illegal clan guard themselves?

Even though the helicopter was miles off and Greg technically had a citizenship card, he backed against the front door, searching every inch of every yard. His grandparents were sound asleep, the rest of the neighborhood looked dead, but what about the yards he couldn't see? He wouldn't have time to warn his illegal neighbors, those squatting on government property. Hopefully they were smart enough to stay inside until the helicopter passed.

Assuming it would pass...

Just as it seemed the helicopter would fly over their neighborhood, it turned sharply east and disappeared behind his grandparents' house. Greg crept along the brick, through the side gate, and past the milk goat in the backyard. Once there, he saw the helicopter's true destination.

A huge, black cloud hung in the distant eastern sky, turning the morning sun blood-orange. It wasn't a storm cloud since the rest of the sky was a promising blue. This cloud looked too dark, too...dispersed. Smoke. And lots of it. If he lived in California, he'd think there was a forest fire to the east, but he lived in a small suburb in northern Illinois. There weren't any forests east of them, only city, which meant one thing:

Chicago was on fire.

Or at least a big chunk of it.

Seemed like something the new regime would do.

The helicopter headed right into the thick of the haze. When no others followed, Greg went back around to the front yard. He surveyed the neighborhood. Not a soul had come out to check on the noise. He doubted anybody even heard.

He shook his head. This clan felt too safe under Oliver's care. Greg, too.

Out of the last six years, he'd only spent a few months with actual citizenship: the last two, plus a few weeks in Raleigh when he and his mom tried to save Kendra. The rest of the time he'd slept with one eye open and both ears pricked for the slightest sound.

How had he almost slept through the helicopter?

Heading back inside, he decided it was time to move out of his grandparents' house. Finally.

His mom moved into Richard O'Brien's on their wedding day, and Greg planned to move then, too, but then everything fell apart. Jeff Kovach went ballistic after his wife died and attacked several in the clan, including Greg's grandpa. Greg stuck around to help after that. But now his grandpa was mostly better, and Greg was desperate for space. He hadn't lived on his own since his sophomore year at the University of North Carolina, the year of the final stock market crash.

He packed up every last thing he owned. It took all of three minutes, one of the benefits of being poor. He would have left then, but there would be dramatic consequences if he didn't say goodbye first. So he shoveled goat manure, checked on Carrie's tomato plant, watched the black haze in the distance, and even got up the nerve to feed the chickens, keeping busy until breakfast.

"I thought the army had shut down," Greg said, pushing his fried potatoes around his plate.

"You think it was a military helicopter?" his grandpa asked.

"What else could it be? President Rigsby and his cronies caused enough issues when they were as broke as the rest of us, but if they have money for helicopters now..." Greg shook his head.

"Why aren't you eating, Gregory?" his grandma said, breaking into the conversation. "Eat! The only thing you should worry about is that sweet girl down the street. How is Carrie anyway?"

Carrie. His grandma's favorite breakfast conversation. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, and virtually any waking time between.

"Good," Greg said, scooping up a few last bites. And before she could pester him, he stood and slung his frayed backpack over his shoulder. "Well, I'm takin' off. Thanks for breakfast—and givin' me a place to live these few months. Remember, Grandpa, no movin' stuff without me, alrighty? I'm not that far away."

"Wait!" His grandma nearly leaped out of her seat—if leaping were possible at her age. "I thought you were moving out tomorrow."

"Nah. I wanna get settled before I head into town."

"But, but..."

It started. Her bottom lip trembled and she started to cry, loud and heavy, as if he was eighteen and leaving to some far-off country, instead of twenty-five and moving four houses down the street. Between his

mom's terminal illness and recent marriage, his grandma could hardly sweep the floor without falling apart.

She followed him to the front door. "You have to come back for lunch. Dinner, too, since your mom and Richard are coming. We're having soup."

"Thanks," Greg said, "but I think I'll just bachelor it from now on."

"But do you even know how to cook over a fire?"

Next she'd tie his shoes. "I'll have you know that Ma and I traded cooking duty comin' north. I'm a pretty dang good cook."

"I'm sure, Gregory. I'm sure. Just..." She pulled off her thick glasses and wiped her eyes. "You come back and visit us soon, okay?"

He scratched his clean-shaven cheek. "Soon? With everything goin' on, I might not make it *all* the way back here until, say, Thanksgiving."

"Thanksgiving? That's six months away!" she cried.

"Right, right. Better say Christmas," he said, working to keep a straight face. "But I promise to write y'all real soon—assuming I can find some paper. And a pen."

Finally realizing he was teasing, she swatted at him. "Oh, get out of here already."

Suppressing a grin, he headed down the street. The skies still looked clear of aircraft, and the smog in the east had dissipated. Maybe Chicago wasn't a total lost cause.

Of the twenty-eight homes in the neighborhood, only twelve were occupied. Under Greg's consolidation plan, most of the clansmen had moved into the cul-de-sac to make the sub easier to guard. That left only a few open homes for Greg to take.

He stopped in front of his new two-story home. Originally he picked this one because it sat halfway between his grandma who smothered him with affection and Jeff Kovach who wanted to smother him with a pillow. Now that Jeff and Jenna were gone, he could have taken their house, equipped with a wood-ready fireplace. But he couldn't take Kovach's house—not after everything—so he stuck with this one.

The house directly across from Carrie's.

The yard looked like a jungle, a tangled mess of overgrown grass, newly-sprouted trees, and a crumbling driveway. Of course, that described all the homes, allowing them to keep up the charade of abandoned housing. But this inside was just as bad. Cobwebs, mouse droppings, and enough dust to fill Logan Pond twice over. He was glad

his mom wasn't moving in with him. The dust would aggravate her coughing spasms. Same with Kendra, whose asthma always—

He caught himself too late, and Kendra's death smacked him upside the head for the second time that morning. The anniversary of her death was a week away. Maybe that explained the nightmares. Then again, they'd started after Jenna Kovach's death. Another death he could have prevented—*should* have prevented. Different circumstances, different fight.

Same blasted outcome.

He trotted inside and looked around twice to make sure he was in the right house. A few interior doors were missing and holes dotted the walls where TVs and pictures had once hung. Nothing new there. Dropping his bag by the front door, he wandered into the great room where the morning sun hadn't quite reached the windows.

His nose figured it out first. No more dirty, dusty smell. Instead a warm, tantalizing aroma greeted him. He followed the scent to the kitchen where a small bundle sat on a dark granite counter. He unwrapped a hand towel to find several corn muffins. They were still warm and smelled like heaven.

Surprised, he looked around. The muffins weren't from his grandma—he'd have known if she'd baked—and while his mom was an amazing cook, anytime she got her hands on corn, she made grits, not muffins.

Greg bit into one. Buttery yumminess melted in his mouth. He searched the counters for a hint, and that's when he realized the full extent of the change.

His house was spotless.

Somebody swept the floors and carpets. No more mouse droppings. No more cobwebs and inches of dead bugs on the window sills. Every granite counter had been shined, all except the one next to him.

Bending down, he studied the dirt on the neglected counter. A few lines had been traced into the dust as if somebody ran their finger through it. The marks were organized into letters and words. Three words, to be precise:

WELCOME HOME NEIGHBOR

Straightening, he looked out his window to the house across the street. He broke into a wide smile. Miss Carrie Ashworth. Leave it to her to pull off something like this. She couldn't help herself, as if she had an obsessive-compulsive need to help people. She probably even talked herself out of it a dozen times:

No, I can't encourage Greg. He just wants to be friends. Cleaning is a bad idea. But he's so good-looking, and I love his mouth—especially when it's shut. Plus, Greg and I are still friends, right? Best friends even. Friends do nice things for each other, even clean their house?

With Jeff and Jenna gone, their little boys living with Sasha, and Carrie's own siblings growing up, she was running out of people to pamper. Greg couldn't figure out what a sweet girl like her saw in a jerk like him, but he was more than willing to be on the receiving end of her generosity.

Smiling, he turned full circle and pictured her bright blue eyes in his kitchen, alive with the joy of serving somebody, her honey-colored hair glowing in the sun-lit windows, large smile threatening to break through as she worked. He remembered their dance, how she felt in his arms, and the moment Jeff choked her to the point Greg thought he was going to lose her, too.

His smile faded.

Living across the street from Carrie would be sheer torture.

Setting the muffin aside, he grabbed his bag and ran upstairs to unpack. It took all of two minutes.



Carrie couldn't see Greg anymore, but she stayed by her window. Her stomach twisted at the thought of living across the street from him, a stupid thing to worry about considering their new friendship. There was no reason to stress about him living in her line of vision. Every. Single. Day.

She lucked out cleaning when she had. May said he was moving out tomorrow, but Carrie sneaked in after sunrise to finish before she had to teach home school. She'd only been home a few minutes when she saw him striding down the sidewalk with that confident walk. What would she have done if he'd walked in while she was scrubbing the floors? Then again, maybe he wouldn't notice. He was a guy after all.

No.

Greg Pierce noticed everything.

Her cheeks warmed. From the beginning, he'd known how she felt about him, even before she had. Cleaning was over the top, but after all he'd done for her—all he'd done for everyone—she had to repay him somehow.

Absentmindedly, she stroked her neck where the bruises had faded. Jeff Kovach hadn't just threatened to kill her, but also her brother, Zach. If Greg hadn't intervened... A chill ran down her body. She owed Greg more than a clean house and a few stupid muffins. She owed him her life.

Still, nothing said love-sick puppy like a girl scrubbing your toilets.

With a frustrated grunt, she pushed away from her window. She was acting like Amber, her teenage, boy-crazy sister. That couldn't be good.

Throwing on her dingy yellow work shirt, Carrie rolled up her bedroll and headed to May's backyard. With the whole Jeff mess, they were weeks behind on planting, and she had a little time to weed before teaching school.

As she walked, she took in the colors and smells of spring. The neighborhood seemed to have blossomed overnight, splaying everything with white, pink, and lime green. If she ignored the bottom half of everyone's yards—the neglected half—she could almost pretend her neighborhood was still beautiful.

Butterscotch, their milk goat, nipped at her shirt as she opened the gate, but Carrie shooed her back to inspect the garden.

Bright green sprouts popped up along the rows of early crops. Unfortunately, many of those were weeds. Bypassing the hoe and shovel, she used the tools she knew best: her hands. She savored the feel of cold soil on her fingers while the sun warmed her hair. The garden was the one place in the world she felt most alive.

When she reached the third row, she smiled. A single tomato plant stood out in the garden, out of place in the peas. Her "little fighter" was the only plant she'd started indoors that survived the government raid in March. Technically, tomatoes weren't supposed to be in the ground until the last threat of frost was gone, but after Jenna's death, Greg convinced Carrie it was ready. Now it stood out. Her little survivor.

The gate squeaked behind her, and Sasha Green entered May's backyard with two empty water buckets.

Sasha and Dylan had moved into the cul-de-sac a month ago as part of Greg's consolidation plan. That put them closer to Carrie's new well. Maybe if other people used her well instead of May's, she wouldn't feel so self-conscious about Greg giving her the first one.

Standing, Carrie brushed the dirt from her jeans. "Morning, Sasha."

Sasha looked up. "Oh, hi. I didn't see you." She picked up the first bucket and dropped it in the deep crevice.

"I don't know if Dylan told you," Carrie said, "but the water in my well finally settled, so you can use it now."

"No thanks," Sasha said.

"But..." Carrie watched her struggle to wind up the bucket. Water was heavy. It didn't make sense to carry it twice as far every day.

Unless...

This wasn't the first time since the Jeff blowup someone had given her the cold shoulder. Sasha—and maybe others—must blame her for Jeff leaving. For the rift in the clan. For Jenna's death.

For everything.

Emotions rose in Carrie's throat. Before Jeff left to find his parents in North Dakota, he said he didn't blame Carrie and Greg for Jenna's death. Yet Sasha was definitely giving off less-than-friendly vibes as she dumped one bucket and then two.

"How are Little Jeffrey and Jonah adjusting?" Carrie asked. Boys too young to understand why their parents had disappeared.

"Fine," Sasha said. "They're going to wake up any minute, so I better go. Bye."

She started off, buckets in hand. Carrie couldn't help but follow.

"I can watch them sometime if you need," Carrie said. She used to babysit them so Jenna could rest during her horrible morning sickness. According to May, Sasha was struggling to adjust to instant motherhood anyway. Carrie ached to see Little Jeffrey and Jonah, to hold them again. "Anytime," she added desperately.

"I know. You've already offered." Just shy of the gate, Sasha turned, eyes narrowing. "By the way, I hear you and Greg are having a tiff. Is that true?"

"A tiff?" Carrie said in surprise. "What do you mean?"

Sasha huffed. "Honestly, I'm glad you two broke up. Jeff told you it would only cause trouble. For all our sakes, I hope Oliver forgives you

for cheating on him. Beg if you have to.” Her expression darkened. “You owe us all that much.”

Stunned, Carrie watched her storm away. What did that mean? Carrie and Greg couldn’t have “broken up” because they hadn’t dated. True, she hadn’t seen him much the last few weeks, but he was the type of guy who couldn’t stand to sit around and socialize. Between his projects, helping his injured grandpa—plus terminally-ill mother—Greg barely had time to sleep.

An engine purred, and she saw a flash of dark green through the fence. Oliver’s patrol car, the only car they saw anymore, pulled past May and CJ’s, heading toward her house like every Thursday morning. He was early today.

Carrie went to the well, scrubbed the dirt from her fingers, and then latched the gate and headed home.

She stopped three houses away.

Greg was on her driveway talking to Oliver. Her nerves prickled at the sight of the two men together, men who seemed to occupy all of her thoughts lately. They were as opposite as men could be: Greg, an outspoken, confident leader in an illegal clan, and Oliver, a shy, gentle protector in patrolman’s uniform. Most clansmen refused to associate with Oliver because of his government position, but not Greg. Somehow the two men had become friends in spite of their vast differences—or their feelings about her.

Oliver spotted her and waved. Greg waved, too, but then turned and trotted across the street to his new house.

Odd.

She wouldn’t have thought twice about it if not for Sasha. Carrie shook it off. Sasha Green was just an incurable gossip.

“Morning, Oliver,” Carrie said, meeting him on her driveway. “You’re early today.”

“I know. Sorry. I just...” Oliver shrugged. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’m always up with the sun,” she said. “How’s your new promotion?”

He glanced down at his arm. His green patrol uniform looked freshly pressed with beige tie and black gun belt, but instead of one gold bar on his arm, he wore two, his reward for exposing two coworkers selling on the black market.

“The promotion is fine. Mostly,” he said.

Mostly? He should have been thrilled with his higher rank and pay, yet his gray eyes looked troubled, almost shaken.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Yes. No. Well...” He glanced across the street. “Kind of.”

Carrie tensed. “Did Greg say something?” Greg, who tended to boss people around—especially Oliver. A trait he inherited from his grandma.

“No. Greg just asked me about Chicago. By the way, don’t worry about that helicopter or smoke. It was just a small disturbance. Hopefully.”

“What helicopter? Smoke?” Carrie asked.

“Never mind. I just...” Oliver ran a hand over his bald spot. “It’s just that...”

Panic rose in her chest. Oliver couldn’t even meet her gaze. Maybe Sasha was right. Oliver knew she loved Greg now. Maybe he wanted a polite way to escape his obligation to their clan. He’d hidden them for almost five years, jeopardizing his job and life week after week. Jeff Kovach and others were convinced he was only doing it because he’d fallen for Carrie, but she didn’t believe it. Oliver Simmons would help them regardless of how she might feel—or not feel—about him.

Wouldn’t he?

The silence stretched between them until his gray eyes finally lifted to her. “My boss is assigning me a partner, Carrie.”

She relaxed. “Oh, that’s great. You work so hard. Maybe now you can...”

She trailed off as his words sunk in. He was getting a partner. Someone who would be with him for every sweep, every stop by her house. Someone who would know everything he was doing.

Including hiding thirty illegal citizens.

“Oh, no,” she breathed.

two

Carrie stared up at the tall patrolman, mind racing. Oliver came alone for government sweeps—and even then he only searched the abandoned homes for stray vagrants they didn't know about. But if he had a partner, he'd have to search every single home, every single time. Government sweeps happened two or three times a month, which meant all thirty-four clansmen would have to pack up their belongings and crowd into May and CJ's house, the only valid homeowners in the neighborhood.

If Oliver got a partner, they were in serious trouble.

“Could your partner search our neighborhood anytime?” Carrie asked. “Even without a scheduled sweep?”

“Technically?” Oliver's shoulders fell. “Yes.”

She felt ill. They'd have to post guards around the clock like they had that first year. Their entire lives could be thrown into upheaval—or destroyed—in a matter of seconds.

Carrie said the only thing she could think to say. “Oh.”

They stood on her driveway, him fingering his gun belt, her ready to throw up.

“What does Greg think?” she asked. Greg would know what to do. He always did.

“He left before I could tell him.”

So she'd have to break the news. One little hiccup, and things felt even more unstable in her unstable, secluded world.

“I'm sorry, Carrie,” Oliver said. “With this new promotion, I have a larger territory and my boss thought I needed help. I don't, but...well...yeah.”

“It’s fine. We’ll be fine.” Besides, their safety was *their* concern. Not his.

He kicked the cement softly. “I’m not sure when I’ll be able to stop by and see you anymore either. It will be hard to get away.”

Thursdays, too?

His visits were part of her routine. He never stayed long, just long enough to warn her about the next sweep. The two of them would make small talk and then he’d leave. Nothing special, but it had been their routine for years.

Her stomach clenched. Jeff Kovach said this would happen.

So had Greg.

“As soon as you reject him,” Greg had said, “he’ll promise to keep coming, but it’ll get harder and harder to see you. His visits will spread out until he stops coming altogether. And then what?”

Even if this had nothing to do with her choosing Greg, the timing couldn’t be worse.

“Beg if you have to,” Sasha whispered from her memories.

“How soon?” Carrie asked softly.

“I’m not sure. With Jamansky and Nielsen’s arrest, we’re down a couple guys,” Oliver said. “Chief Dario is desperate, so when he finds someone. Maybe as soon as next week. I...I’ll let you know before it happens, so don’t worry yet.”

“Yet?” she echoed.

His forehead wrinkled. “I’m really, really, really sorry, Carrie. Really sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She forced herself to smile. “We’ll be fine.” Physically, at least. She dreaded taking the blame for another thing, but they had at least a week to plan. They could come up with something by then.

Like twenty-four seven guards?

Desperate for a different subject, she said, “The chickens are doing well. They’ve already lost their yellow down.”

“Oh. Good. The lady told me they would be good layers. I hope they are.”

Her smile faded. Oliver bought her chickens after his coworkers wiped out their flock. She struggled to picture him asking some lady in some farm shop which chickens laid the best eggs, knowing he’d never eat a single one. Patrolmen didn’t need to raise chickens. They had

government grocery stores. She couldn't believe he'd go to all that trouble for her—especially after she chose the other guy.

Her eyes wandered across the street. Why had Greg left?

She was sure he felt something for her—he'd basically admitted as much. But he kept insisting Oliver was better for her, a ridiculous notion that she hoped he'd give up. Not yet, apparently.

Oliver leaned down to study her. Cheeks flushing, she turned and pretended to take in the colors of spring around the neighborhood.

"The trees were so pretty," she said. "I miss seeing Downtown Shelton in the spring. Main Street was lined with white flowering trees that seemed to go on forever. Every spring my mom and I made a special shopping trip to walk under their blossoms. You should see them. They're breathtaking. Unless the government ripped them out." She frowned at the possibility. "They didn't tear them down, did they?"

"No. I actually saw them on the way here. They...uh..." He played with a button on his uniform. "They made me think of you."

The joy slid off her face. Why was he doing this? Didn't he know her heart was taken? She didn't want to hurt him. She never even sought his attention.

"Carrie?" He cleared his throat. "Would you ever...I mean, would you want to maybe, to go see those trees? If you have time, I mean. We could even go right now for a quick drive."

"Now?"

He shrugged. "It wouldn't take long. If you want."

"But wouldn't it be dangerous?" Ten years ago, a quick drive into her town would mean nothing. Now the thought terrified her.

"No. The other patrolmen in Shelton were arrested. Plus, I'm a senior officer now. No one should question me. But...I could write you a travel permit if it would make you more comfortable."

Which might work if she had a citizenship card: yellow, blue, or green.

Sometimes she wondered if Oliver remembered how illegal she was. Even if he forged a citizenship card for her—any color—she'd only be allowed to travel between municipalities, not take some leisurely drive. If anyone spotted her, they'd arrest her and throw her into a prison work camp. She could lose everything and everyone, but he acted like it was no big deal. Maybe it was. Maybe she understood President Rigsby's card system less than she thought. She knew little of anything happening

outside of her neighborhood except that she trusted Oliver Simmons. And if he thought it was safe...

The morning breeze blew her wavy hair around her face. Go for a drive. Leave the neighborhood. She hadn't ridden in a car since the Collapse—she hadn't even seen any cars besides his—but that's not why she hesitated.

It sounded like a date.

Oliver must have read her mind because he quickly amended, "Other people can come with us. Zach, Amber, and even"—he winced—"Greg."

Greg couldn't go because it would torture Oliver. But she didn't want to go without Greg because it would only torture her. Thankfully, Zach's best friend, Tucker, came strolling down the sidewalk with his brother, Chris. And not too far behind them was Richard O'Brien, an old accounting professor from Chicago who agreed to teach Carrie's small class of teenagers today.

"I would love to," Carrie said, "but I have to teach school."

Oliver turned and saw the group heading their way. "Right. Sorry. I forgot. Um...maybe we could go another day, like next week?"

Her front door burst open and Zach shot out of the house. "What? Go where? Can I come?"

Oliver smiled down at Carrie's thirteen-year-old brother. "I want to take Carrie downtown to see some trees in Shelton. If she says it's okay, you can come."

"Yes!" Zach punched the air. "I'd do anything to get out of this place. Did you hear that, Tucker? I'm leaving!"

Carrie shot him a warning look. "Zach, go back inside. I'll be there in a second."

"But Oliver said—"

"Zach," she said firmly.

He glared at her, a look he'd perfected from Amber, before turning. His friends followed him inside.

"Good morning, you two," Richard said, coming up behind them. "Nice to see you again, Officer Simmons."

Oliver shook Richard's hand. "Good to see you, too, Mr. O'Brien."

"Please, it's Richard now," Richard said warmly. Then he turned to Carrie. "Am I too early?"

“No. We just need the girls. Maddie and Lindsey should be here any minute.”

Nodding, Richard joined the others inside. When Carrie told her class they were getting accounting lessons, Amber whined about how pointless it was to learn about money when they had none. But considering Zach didn’t know the difference between a nickel and a quarter, Carrie figured the lesson was long overdue. She still had hopes these kids would get jobs—and a chance at a real life—someday.

“I’m in Joliet this weekend for training,” Oliver said. “Do you want to go next week, maybe Monday?”

For whatever reason, Oliver really wanted her to see those trees.

“I can go Monday!” Zach called through the window. He and Tucker had their noses pressed to the glass.

The eagerness in their faces broke down the last of her defenses. She smiled up at Oliver. “Monday would be great. Thank you.”

And if she asked May to join them—someone who would appreciate the spring colors—it wouldn’t look like a date, especially if she insisted May sit in the front seat.

“Good. Great,” Oliver said, eyes bright with pleasure. “I’ll pick you up around 2:00, possibly 2:15. Is 2:15 okay?”

No one in their clan had a working clock. They were lucky to know which day it was.

“Anytime is fine,” she said. “How many people do you have room for?” she asked, reminding him—and herself—of the non-date-ness of this drive.

“Three besides you.”

Zach high-fived Tucker who had, no doubt, already conspired for the other spot. A quick drive might do them all some good. They’d been cooped up in Logan Pond long enough.

Amber’s two best friends were heading down the street, laughing and giggling, and Carrie remembered that six chatty teenagers were about to overtake her house. If she didn’t nip it in the bud, she would never get them to calm down enough to listen to Richard.

“See you Monday, Oliver,” she said.

Oliver smiled another rare, genuine smile. “See you Monday, Carrie.”

He was still smiling as he drove away.

Carrie glanced across the street, wondering if Greg had watched the interchange. Would he be glad she agreed to go? Probably. But she couldn't help feel like she'd betrayed him somehow. The feeling intensified when she walked in and Richard gave her a quizzical look.

She'd barely shut the door when Amber descended on her. "I'm going with you on Monday," Amber announced. "I don't care what you say."

That got the other teenagers going. The room broke into a heated discussion over who got the last seats. Carrie and Oliver were driving into their small, deserted town to see some spring trees in bloom, and yet the teens nearly started a fist fight over who got the last spot. Carrie had no chance whatsoever to get her class back on task.

Or ask Greg to go.

three

Amber knocked the clan signal on the Ziegler's door. Unfortunately, Mrs. Ziegler answered.

"Braden isn't home," Mrs. Ziegler said.

No point beating around the bush. Amber liked that. She used to visit her best friends, Maddie and Lindsey, all the time, but since their dreamy older brother started paying attention to her, she and Mrs. Ziegler no longer pretended why she visited.

"Do you know where he is?" Amber asked.

"Straining milk," his mom said. "Or at least, he better be. He has a lot to do today."

A veiled warning. Mrs. Ziegler thought Amber 'distracted' Braden from his jobs. However, Amber just kept him entertained. Since Greg finished the well in Amber's backyard a few weeks ago, her water chores had been cut in half. Luckily Carrie hadn't replaced them. Besides, Braden was an adult now and Amber would be seventeen in the fall. It was time people stopped bossing them around.

"Thanks," Amber said with a wave.

She strode down Woodland Drive, clutching Braden's finished gift.

Come on. Be there, she begged silently. *Love it.* She grinned. Of course he would love her gift. What guy wouldn't?

Amber found him straining goat's milk behind May and CJ's. His dad was turning manure into the garden. Braden's back was to the well, and he didn't hear her enter the gate, so she took a moment to appreciate the lines in his back, the muscles working in his shoulders. His hair, a soft, sandy-blond, was on the long side, hanging down over his turquoise eyes. Now that Jenna Kovach was dead, their resident

beautician, maybe Braden would let her cut his hair like Carrie cut Greg's.

Tiptoeing forward, she jumped out in front of him. "Boo!"

The bucket of goat's milk nearly toppled. But Braden's look of shock melted into a crooked smile, showing off the adorable chip in his tooth.

"Hey, Amber," Braden said. "What's up?"

"I have a gift for you. Here."

He turned her homemade gift every which way. "Wow. Thanks. Uh...what is it?"

"It's a bracelet," she said proudly.

His turquoise eyes widened.

She giggled. "Don't worry. It's very manly. And this isn't just any bracelet. I made it from my old red t-shirt. I have a matching one, see? Only mine is smaller and more girly."

"Matching...bracelets?"

Mr. Ziegler snorted a laugh from the garden. *Jerk*. But when Amber looked up at Braden, she was all smiles.

"Want me to tie it on for you?" she asked.

"Right now?" he said. "Okay. Yeah. Sure."

Draping the straining cloth over the well, Braden held out his wrist. Amber tied it on, letting her fingertips brush the muscles of his tanned forearms.

"Thanks, Amber," he said, admiring it. "I actually like it."

His dad coughed back another laugh, which Amber ignored. Thankfully Braden did, too. He slid his hands into hers. Taking that as an invitation, she went up on tiptoes to bring her face closer to his.

"You really like it?" she whispered outwardly, while the inside of her shouted, *Kiss me!* He still hadn't. He'd held her hand, flirted like crazy, so why wouldn't he kiss her? *Maybe my breath?* she wondered. Carrie only found mint leaves in the woods a few weeks of the year, but other couples in the clan kissed all year long.

Amber leaned closer and tipped her chin up. His light beard was shorter than others in the clan, and she was dying to know what it would feel like.

Through Braden's long bangs, she saw his gaze drop to her lips.

Yes! she cheered. *Do it!*

His dad stopped raking and cleared his throat. Loudly. Braden dropped Amber's hands and leaned back. "Uh, I should get back to work."

Amber glared at Mr. Ziegler again. Braden's parents were worse than Carrie. With a huff, she watched Braden work until she felt cold sprinkles on her shoulder.

"Rain!" she cried, jumping under the safety of May's roof. "Come on. It's raining."

"It's just sprinkling," Braden said. "Don't be such a baby."

Baby? Is that why he hadn't kissed her? Maybe he didn't consider her old enough. Pretty enough. Anything enough. Her bottom lip jutted out, which only made him laugh.

"What? You think you're safe under there, water girl?" He reached into his bucket and flicked water on her. A lot of water.

Amber squealed and backed against May's house, but he kept flinging water at her. She was ready to dump the whole bucket on his stupid head. This time of year, it took forever to dry off.

Before she could yell at him, Mr. Ziegler trotted over. "Braden, I need to deliver the milk to Sasha and the boys before the rain really starts. Finish cleaning up here." He eyed Amber before continuing. "Don't get distracted. It's going to downpour any minute."

"I'll help him clean up," Amber offered.

Mr. Ziegler rolled his eyes but left. Considering Amber was best friends with their three children, Braden's parents should adore her. They used to, but they'd turned on her once Braden started paying attention to her. Maybe when she and Braden were married with their own kids they'd have a change of heart.

It only took seconds for the clouds to let loose. Large drops fell.

"Let's go," Amber said.

Braden set the goat stuff aside and joined her under the roof. "Wait. I have a gift for you, too."

"Really? What is it?"

He put his finger to his lips and looked around to see if anyone was watching. No one was, but that didn't stop him from being careful. He was always careful. Too careful.

Leaning down, he whispered in her ear, so close the heat of his breath sent shivers down her arms, "It's on the side of the house. You might get wet. Do you mind?"

The only things on the side of May and CJ's were stacked wood and smelly buckets of chicken food scraps, but she would follow Braden Ziegler anywhere. Hurricane. Typhoon. So she lied. "No."

Squeezing her hand, he pulled her alongside the brick in the small foot of space where the roof hung over the house. Amber tried to figure out what he might have hidden over there for her. A flower? A necklace? She grinned. And Maddie thought the bracelet was a stupid idea.

Once around the corner, Braden stopped and turned, giving his other shoulder a chance to get wet.

Amber shivered. "My present is here?" He better not give her some stupid piece of wood, because she spent a long time making that—

So fast she wasn't sure it happened, Braden leaned down and kissed her. A jolt ran down her arms as his warm lips found hers. She was so stunned she almost fell back, but he held her tight.

When he pulled back, he smiled another crooked smile. "I know it's not really a gift, but I've wanted to give it to you for a while."

"Well, feel free to give me," she paused, feeling wonderfully breathless and giddy, "that present anytime."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He leaned down and kissed her again.



Greg headed over cornfields, an old golf course, and deserted woods on the trail into Shelton. The rain fell in slow, lazy drops, chilling him in his thin t-shirt. Served him right for trusting the morning sun. Illinois weather was part woman. Unpredictable. Temperamental. Anxious to punish him.

He sped up to make it before the worst of the storm hit.

As he neared town, he hung back under a large pine to study his surroundings. Citizenship card or not, open civilization still made him nervous. Too many years hiding. Technically, if a patrolman stopped him, he could flash his yellow card and go on his merry way. But patrolmen didn't like people wandering around in the open, not even legals. Under President Rigsby's 'emergency laws,' they could detain Greg for no other reason than he sneezed wrong, so he stayed low and out of sight.

He wondered how many legals were left in the small town of Shelton, because downtown looked dead. Shop after shop had been

boarded up, and trash blew down the street with the stiff wind. The only things that looked alive were the township office, the adjoining patrol station, and dozens of flowering trees lining Main Street. The cheerful white blossoms clashed with the rest of town, unaware the world had come to a screeching halt years ago.

Carrie would love them.

Rubbing the cold rain from his goose-bumped arms, he procrastinated the reason for his trip. He scanned sign after ruined sign until he spotted it, a small flower shop on the corner. Carrie's life dream, *Buds and Roses*, sat a stone's throw away.

Greg once had the idea to fix it up and turn it into a farmer's market, his attempt to generate income for the clan. Now that he, his mom, and Richard were taxable, legal citizens, his grandpa's cash was flying out the window. At the current rate they'd be broke in fourteen months, and that's if they continued to barter on the black market for supplies and didn't use an ounce of electricity. Forget taking his mom to a government doctor. Once the cash ran dry, not only would they lose their citizenship, the clan would lose their safety net. No more house to hide in during government raids. No more yard for crops or chickens. They had to generate income somehow and thus his idea.

As far as he knew, starting a business was as illegal as squatting on government property, but maybe the mayor would make an exception. Greg's idea would generate money for Shelton, too. The black market had thrived in this area, so why not make trading legal again?

The wind picked up, and his damp clothes made him crave Carolina weather. He should renew his citizenship card before it was an all-out downpour, but he couldn't seem to tear his eyes from that faded flower shop.

Carrie was the only one who knew about his plan. He needed somebody like her to pull it off. Two years of business and finance classes at UNC and Greg knew enough to get things going, but Carrie understood vegetables, chickens, and more importantly, people. She could be the warm smile behind the counter, the welcoming presence to help people ease back into the idea of free commerce.

At first she thought his idea was crazy—which it was—but somehow he sold her on it. That is, until he proposed. Though it was for business purposes only, his marriage proposal went over like a lead balloon. He was a citizen now. If he married Carrie, she could be, too. She had to be

legal to traipse around downtown, plus she was half in love with Greg anyway. Marriage was logical. So her rejection came out of nowhere. When he suggested she marry Oliver instead—anything to get her legal—she about punched him.

Women, he cursed.

And yet...

Wild graffiti covered the cracked gray paint, and any shop windows that weren't boarded up were broken, exposing the interior to the elements.

Checking for any signs of life, Greg sprinted across Main Street and slid around the corner. He tried the back door to the flower shop. Locked.

Wiping the rain from his eyes, he peered in a broken window. The inside looked trashed. The counter was destroyed, the tiled ceiling hung low from leaks, and plants grew within the walls that hadn't been part of the original merchandise. He couldn't see a single redeeming thing in there, but Carrie would. She always found the good in the bad, the sunshine in the storm. After seeing the miracle she performed on his house, he knew she could work miracles here.

He pictured her behind that counter, eyes bright as she explained a certain type of tomato plant to a customer, how they should only plant it under specific conditions. The customer wouldn't understand a word she said, but they'd still smile. Not because of the tomato. Because of Carrie.

They could do it. They could.

He stopped the thought cold. It didn't matter what Carrie *could* do if she refused to get citizenship.

After everything with Jeff and Jenna, maybe it was for the best. Things were strained enough in the clan. A marriage to Carrie—even a fake one—would only cause a bigger rift.

Who was he kidding anyway? Even with her legal, it was a one in a million chance the mayor would agree to capitalism on any scale.

The whole idea was a joke.

Giving up, he checked down Main Street. The rows of white flowering trees caught his eye again. They were stunning. Tiny white petals broke free of the branches and blew along with the trash.

Cold, damp, and not really sure why, Greg pulled his knife from his pocket and cut off a small branch from the closest tree. The white

blossoms clung together in small clusters. He lifted them to smell and lurched back, catching the scent of something vile. The blossoms stunk like rotting—

“Hey!” somebody shouted. “What are you doing?”

Greg froze. Two patrolmen in uniform ran down the street toward him, guns pointed at his chest.

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