

BETHANY TURNER

COLE

*a
love
story*

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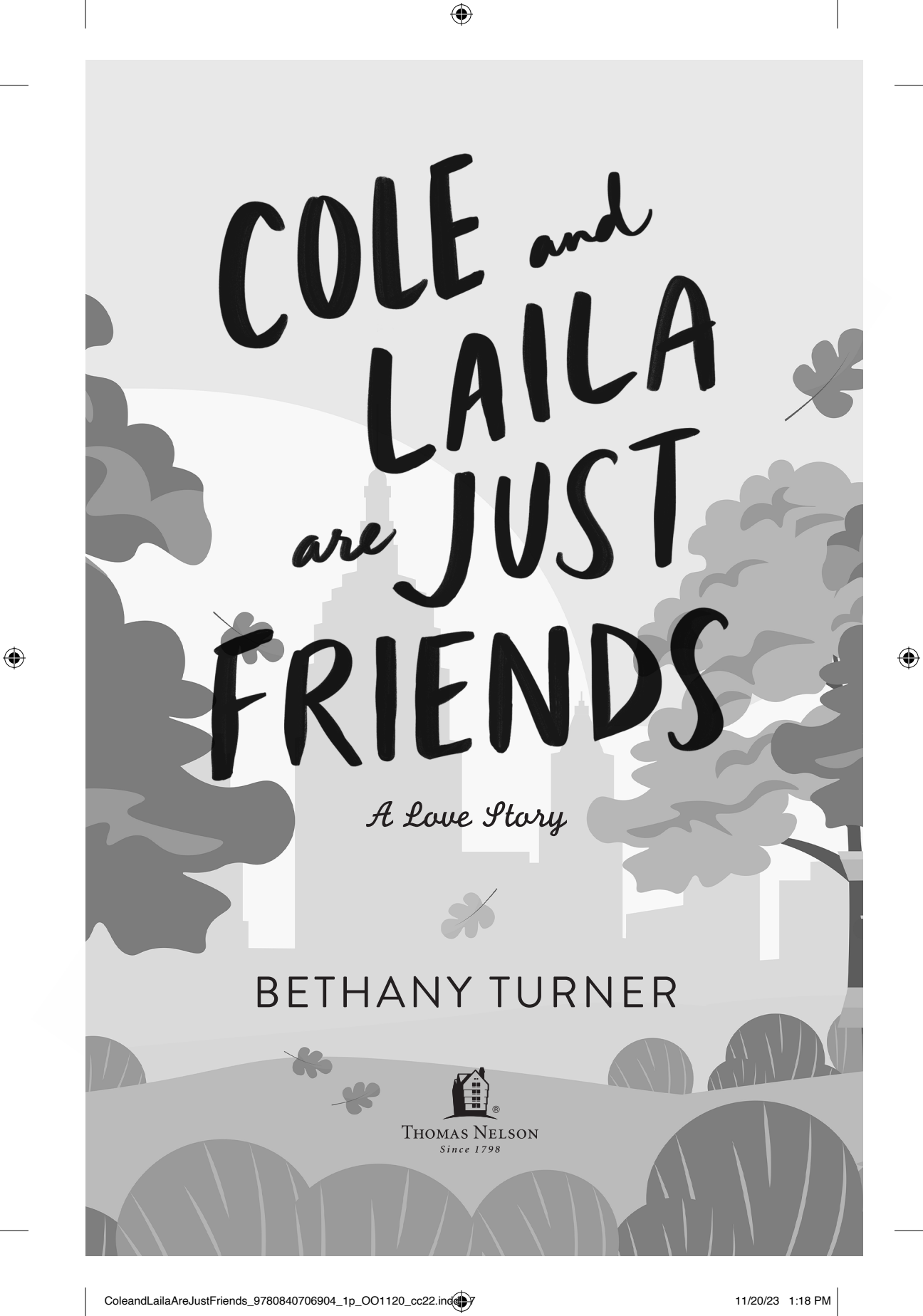
LAILA

are

JUST

FRIENDS





COLE *and*
LAILA
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FRIENDS

A Love Story

BETHANY TURNER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Cole and Laila Are Just Friends

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PROLOGUE

LAILA

My grandma Hazel always told me that big, life-changing events come in threes. Like most things she said, I took that with a grain of salt. After all, this was the same woman who spent years insisting World War II was the only thing standing between her and Paul Newman, little nuisance that it was. For years we heard about the forbidden romance between Grandma Hazel and the young Newman, who Grandma told us was working as a waiter at the lodge where her family stayed on a trip to Yellowstone when she was seventeen. There were instant sparks when he took her order for a turkey club sandwich with potato salad, and sweet nothings whispered during midnight strolls near Crystal Falls. She would sneak out after her little sister, my great-aunt Clara, went to sleep, and she and Paul would hold hands and steal innocent kisses, and she would stare into those dazzling blue eyes under a clear, full moon.

When she and her family returned to their home in Adelaide Springs, Colorado, Paul promised to write. And write he did . . . until he enlisted. She never heard from him again, and soon she met my grandfather, who ended up being the great love of her life for more than sixty years.

But that didn't stop us from jokingly referring to Newman as Grandpa Paul every time *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* came on TV. Even my grandfather would pretend to be jealous and say things like, "Stay away from my woman, Blue Eyes."

It wasn't until Grandma Hazel was in her final weeks of life, and

Grandpa Clarence had been gone for a few years, that she looked up from her crossword puzzle one day and said, “*Pete* Newman. That was his name. Not Paul.”

So, yeah . . . What came out of my grandmother’s mouth always needed to be verified. But the “life-changing events come in threes” thing had always checked out. Jobs were lost on the same day friends passed away and homes burned down. Babies were born hours before engagements were announced and college scholarships were received. Those things wouldn’t necessarily all happen to the same person, of course, but in a person’s “circle of influence,” as Grandma Hazel liked to call it. Within a community of friends and family.

So maybe it was superstitious hooey, but . . . yeah. I was just a little bit nervous that someone else’s life was going to change on September 6. That morning, my stepmother, Melinda, had received the call she and my dad had been waiting for, finally putting a name to the symptoms she had been dealing with for months. Parkinson’s. The diagnosis wasn’t a surprise. In fact, having some answers had generated a fair amount of relief, even if we’d been hoping against hope for a more hope-filled answer.

And then two of my closest friends got married that afternoon. Although Brynn and Sebastian’s wedding had been on the books for months.

Still. That was two biggies in the life-change column.

But by the time Brynn and Sebastian said, “I do,” everyone was happy and having a great time, and I was so focused on the love and light on my friends’ faces that I’d forgotten to be on the lookout for number three.

CHAPTER ONE

LAILA

“I’m pretty sure that’s the last of it!” I stepped into Cassidy’s Bar & Grill and kicked my foot up behind me to shut the solid-oak door just as the creaky, swinging screen door slammed itself closed.

Cole’s head appeared in the kitchen service window. “What do you mean that’s the last—” His eyes flew open at the sight of me standing just inside the door, peering at him over the mountain of precariously stacked catering equipment in my arms. His top half disappeared for a quick second, until all of him came barreling through the kitchen door. “What are you doing? I told you I’d be back to grab more.” A handful of sizable strides got him close enough to grab the heavy stainless-steel chafing dish sets from my hands, but rather than relieve me of them, he took a step back and sighed.

“What?” I muttered against the slipping fuel canisters I’d just been forced to catch with pouted lips.

He simultaneously groaned and laughed as he grabbed a fuel canister in each hand, set them on the table behind him, and then came back for more. “Oh, nothing. I just didn’t know Laila Jenga was on the activity schedule for the evening.”

“I would have planned better,” I insisted once the remaining catering-grade containers of oil and wicks and such—along with three or so long-stem lighters I had slipped into the gaps between all the highly flammable things—were no longer being precariously balanced by my chin. “But by the time I realized how little was left to carry in—”

“You mean by the time good sense and a little bit of patience gave way to some good old-fashioned Laila Olivet stubbornness . . .”

“I didn’t really have the wiggle room to stack things better.”

“Clearly.” Cole maneuvered a coffee urn out from under my arm while balancing some serving platters with his other hand.

“Be careful with that,” I instructed as he prepared to lower the urn to the floor, in the second before we both heard gentle clinks reverberate from inside it.

He set the serving platters on the table and then unscrewed the vacuum-sealed lid of the coffee urn and looked inside. I watched the progression of emotions dance across his face—dismay, annoyance, frustration . . . Every last emotion accompanied onto the dance floor by humor and, more than anything, not even the tiniest tinge of surprise.

“Thank you for protecting the champagne glasses,” he finally said, smiling at me as he looked up.

I waited for the follow-up, but there was none. He just kept smiling at me.

“Oh. You’re welcome.” I placed a couple of scalloped deli crocks into his waiting hands and then dug into the pockets of my coat, pulling out the serving utensils I had crammed in there and setting them in the crocks. “I thought you were going to make some crack about how if I had time to open up the urn, take out the coffee filters you had in there— Ooh!” I reached into the front of my dress and pulled out the package of plastic-wrapped coffee filters resting at the dress’s waistband. I’d almost forgotten. Cole shook his head slowly as I handed them to him but remained otherwise unfazed. “And, you know, had time to wrap the glasses in dish towels—”

“What? You thought I’d make some crack about how if you had time to do all of that, you probably had time to just wait thirty more seconds until I came back out there to help you bring it all in?”

“Yeah.” I looked up at him sheepishly.

“I would never.” He spotted the basting spoon I had slipped through my increasingly deflated updo. “Can I take that, or is it the

latest in maid-of-honor fashion?”

I laughed and attempted to pull it out as easily as I had slipped it in. No such luck, however. The weighty steel spoon end slipped down to my shoulder, further entangling my hair and the ridged, coated handle as it went.

“You’re a mess,” Cole whispered as he stepped in to rescue me. Or to rescue his catering utensil, which he may have felt ever so slightly more protective of in that instant.

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?”

“It was,” he replied, but his focus was definitely still on trying to sort out the chaos on my head.

“And a super-fun reception.”

He shrugged. “That I’m a little less sure of.” He placed the palm of his hand flat on my head and applied some pressure as he handed me the almost-free spoon with his other hand. “Hold this,” he instructed. Once I had it within my grasp, his hand returned to my head and promptly pulled out a couple hairs.

“Ouch!” I exclaimed, though truthfully the grounding pressure he had preemptively applied to my scalp kept me from feeling much of anything. “You pulled my hair out!”

“I did.” He took the utensil from my hand and began unraveling the connected hair as he made his way back to the kitchen. “And I would never even consider making a crack about just how very, incredibly, overwhelmingly much you only have yourself to blame for that. Wouldn’t dream of it.”

The corner of my lips smirked at him, and I scratched my head at the site of impact. “That’s good of you.”

“What can I say? I’m a nice guy.”

I rolled my eyes as he smiled widely at me back through the service window. Once he turned away, I indulged in a soft chuckle. Not a moment sooner.

“So why didn’t you have fun?” I called to him as I raised the coffee urn to a tabletop and began carefully removing the bridal party champagne flutes.

“Hmm?”

“At the reception. Why didn’t you have fun?”

I heard the familiar roar of the commercial dishwasher coming to life. The first of several times it would have to run before Cassidy’s was ready to open tomorrow for the dinner crowd.

He stepped out of the kitchen with a sigh, dish towel in hand. “Oh, I don’t know. It wasn’t that I didn’t have fun, really. I was just more focused on making sure everything went perfectly for them. It wasn’t supposed to be fun. I was working.”

I turned and leaned my hip against the table as I faced him. “And since when is that not fun for you?”

Cole finished drying his hands and threw the dish towel over his shoulder. “The fun was had in the kitchen, ahead of time. At the reception I was just trying to fulfill my best-man duties while simultaneously doing all I could to keep the hot food hot and the cold food cold on the top of a mountain. Not to mention never taking my eyes off the open bar to make sure the PTA ladies stayed out of trouble. That was work.”

I’d been serving the PTA group at their Tuesday night meetings at Cassidy’s for years. He wasn’t wrong.

“You should have let me help you more.” I began shrugging my arms out of my coat, and he stepped behind me and held it as it slipped off.

“You helped plenty.” He folded my coat over his arm as he stood in front of me again. “You helped so much, in fact, that I don’t even know why I bothered hiring those fancy-schmancy waiters from Denver. I *thought* the point was that you were going to focus on being maid of honor.”

“Um, hello. First of all, if you have any doubt as to whether or not I more than adequately fulfilled my maid-of-honor duties, you need only ask me how many times I reapplied Brynn’s makeup due to tears and/or wind. Spoiler: The answer is approximately seventy-two thousand. And second, don’t give me that. You hired fancy-schmancy waiters because this was your first celebrity wedding, and you didn’t

trust me not to spill food on Hoda and Jenna.”

“Allow me to say once again: Brynn and Sebastian invited neither Hoda Kotb nor Jenna Bush Hager to their wedding, Laila.”

“But *why*, Cole? This makes no sense to me.”

“You know as well as I do they just wanted it to be family and close friends—”

“Yes, but they both know Hoda and Jenna. I guess I just don’t see how you can know Hoda and Jenna and *not* consider them close friends. I mean, I’ve never met either one of them, but I would be willing to make them the godmothers of my future children right now. No questions asked.”

“Some things do indeed defy understanding. Regardless, you’re the best waitress I’ve ever seen, and you never spill food.” He turned to carry my coat to the door to hang it on the coatrack. While he was straightening it, he looked out the window toward our vehicles. “I mean, look at that. You managed to close the doors and still carry all that stuff in, and all you lost were a couple unrelenting strands of hair. That really is impressive.”

“Thank you. Now don’t you feel bad about all those things you thought but didn’t say?”

I crossed into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. Truth be told, as fun as the day had been, watching two of my favorite people so happy and so in love and being celebrated by all the people who mattered to them, it had been a lot of work. I’d been too busy to eat—a fact I hadn’t really thought about until I found myself practically inside the fridge, rummaging around, the sound of my growling stomach reverberating as I lustfully eyed an unopened pack of raw bacon in the back on the top shelf.

“When was the last time you ate?” Cole asked, his voice distant and tinny, like he was calling to me from the outside of the cave I was lost in.

Hmm . . . When . . . Good question . . .

“On the drive up the mountain, I guess.” It had been too warm during the day to put my coat on, so I’d thrown a poncho on over my

dress, like I was in the front row of a Gallagher show, bracing myself for all the watermelon smashing. Hadn't spilled a drop of that peanut butter sandwich, thank you very much.

Ooh! Whipped cream!

I grabbed it and stood from my crouching position, beginning to remove the safety seal from the can's plastic lid as I shut the refrigerator door behind me.

Cole laughed and snatched the can out of my hands just as I lifted it upside down and prepared to shoot it straight into my mouth. "I think we can do better than that. Here." He reached behind him and set the whipped cream down, then handed me a storage container of food. *Real* food. I pulled back the plastic lid and was assaulted by the delicious scent of rosemary. And thyme, maybe? Didn't know, didn't really care. All that mattered was it smelled amazing and Cole Kimball had made it, so I was sure it *was* amazing.

"You're the best!" I hurried out of the kitchen and set the food down on the bar before hiking my dress up above my knees and hopping onto a barstool. Then I dug my fingers straight into the tender, aromatic chicken breast, which tasted even better than it smelled. I moaned in satisfaction. "I didn't realize you had any left," I muttered with my mouth full, stuffing a steamed baby carrot in to make it even fuller.

"There wasn't much." He grabbed a glass from above the bar, filled it with Sprite from the soda gun, and set it in front of me. "I sent a veggie tray with Maxine for Prince Charlemagne."

"Seriously, Cole, there are vegetarians in Aspen who don't eat as well as that bearded dragon."

"And Jo gathered up a smorgasbord of cake, cookies, and eclairs to drop off with my grandfather."

"Oh, good." I took the napkin and fork he handed me and quickly wiped off my hands before diving into the mashed potatoes. With the fork. I'm not a barbarian. "He'll have something besides pie for breakfast for a change."

"Variety is the spice of life." Cole chuckled, but the humor faded

quickly as he studied me. “And I made a couple plates for Larry and Melinda. Dropped them off on my way back into town.”

It wasn't as if my dad and stepmother had ever really been out of my thoughts throughout the day, of course. Or even over the course of the past months as Melinda's voice had grown gravelly and the nervous energy we'd teased her about for years morphed into an unmistakable tremor, however slight. But the mention of their names brought them to the forefront once again.

“Thanks for doing that.”

“Of course.”

“Did they seem okay?”

“Yeah. Your dad was asleep, so Melinda and I talked for a couple minutes. You know how she is. She's just ready to get to work. She's already ordered a bunch of books and supplements, and she's looking forward to going to Denver to meet with the neurologist at the end of the month. I think she's a lot more worried about Larry than she is herself.”

I nodded as guilt washed over me. I shouldn't have gone all day without checking on them. No, I didn't have cell signal at Adelaide Gulch, and no, I didn't so much as find time to get onto the wooden parquet dance floor. Right about the time Lucinda and Jake Morrissey were trying to pull me out there for the Cupid Shuffle was when I'd had to go shoo away a fawn that nearly hit the scavenging jackpot with Cole's cheese and fruit charcuterie board.

Still. I should have gone straight over to check on them when I got back into town.

Cole leaned onto the bar across from me and lowered his head to try to catch my downcast eyes. “She's worried about you too. So am I, for that matter. You doing okay?”

“Yeah,” I responded as I looked up at him. And I meant it. “I'm really glad Dad has something to work with now. You know how he is. He hates feeling helpless.” I swallowed down the argument in my mind that we were still going to be helpless bystanders far more than seemed fair to Melinda.

“Must be a hereditary trait.” He studied me. “Want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Not right now.” I set down my fork, my appetite suddenly satisfied—or forgotten. I’m not sure which. “Thanks, though.”

“Do you mind if I change the subject for a minute, then?”

“Please!”

He stood up straight, and his face took on a completely different countenance. His bottom lip was caught between his teeth, and his eyes darted around the room. “Okay, I want your opinion on something.”

I took a sip of my soda and nodded.

“And I want you to be completely honest.”

I snorted in response to that unnecessary request, causing a few carbonation bubbles to burn their way through my sinuses, resulting in Cole throwing another napkin at my face while laughing at my pain.

“I know, I know,” he continued. “But really, Lai. I know you’ll be honest, but I don’t want you to sugarcoat anything or try to be considerate of my feelings or anything like that. If this is a stupid idea, I’m counting on you to tell me.”

I raised three fingers to communicate my commitment to tell the truth via “Scout’s Honor,” though I got hung up for a moment thinking I might have just volunteered as Hunger Games tribute instead. When in doubt, use words.

“What sort of friend would I be if I didn’t stand at the ready to point out your stupidity as needed?”

The nervousness on his face was replaced by a warm smile as he sidled up next to me at the bar. I turned on my stool so I could face him and prepared to listen and honestly respond, but the assuredness that had overtaken his eyes made me fairly confident whatever was about to come out of his mouth wouldn’t be stupid at all.

“Okay, so I’ve been thinking. Adelaide Springs is growing. Between the attention Brynn and Seb have brought to it and the success

of Township Days, more and more people are visiting, and it looks like people are even starting to stay. To actually move here.”

They were indeed. The combination of an It power couple calling Adelaide Springs home and the revival of a kitschy annual festival that was just weird and wonderful enough to attract attention from social media influencers and YouTubers (who obviously hadn’t played a role in Township Days’ first incarnation, starting in 1975) had already resulted in the town’s biggest population boom since they found silver in Adelaide Canyon in 1889.

Early indications were that the population would surpass five hundred before the end of the year.

“And obviously no one can blame Andi for closing up the Bean Franklin. I mean, her sister died. Of course she’s going through a lot and dealing with things. But Wray’s been dead for weeks now, and we’ve barely heard from Andi at all. We don’t know when she’s coming back. Or even, at this point, *if* she’s coming back. And, of course, if she does, there’s more than enough business for everyone. But with the Bean closed, there aren’t any other restaurant options for breakfast and lunch, and I’m afraid we’re going to start losing tourists to Alamosa or something. So I was thinking—”

“You should open Cassidy’s for breakfast and lunch!”

His shoulders fell. “Wow. Nothing like letting a guy build up to a joke and then stealing the punch line.”

I gasped and covered my mouth with both my hands and then reached down and rested my hands on his knees. “I’m so sorry. I just got excited. Forget I said anything. Go ahead. You were thinking . . .” I chewed on my bottom lip to keep myself from interrupting again, and I felt the contained energy begin to bubble at my feet, which were suddenly rocking up and down on my barstool’s footrest.

He laughed and leaned in and kissed me on the cheek before standing and going back behind the bar. “Just tell me it’s not stupid, and I’ll forgive you.” He tossed me the can of whipped cream, which he had very wisely brought out with him.

I caught it and jumped down from the stool. “It’s *so* not stupid,

Cole! Cassidy's is ready for this. *You're* ready for this. *I* feel stupid for not thinking of it and telling you to do it." I shot some whipped cream into my mouth as the possibilities swam around in my head. "You need Wi-Fi," I insisted, enunciating as well as I could through the cream. "For the breakfast crowd, especially."

He motioned for me to give him a hit, and I filled his mouth to overflowing as I rambled on about needing more staff and maybe having a trivia night and creating punch cards for frequent customers. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms, listening to every word I said, until I finally paused long enough to shoot the nozzle into my mouth for a refill.

"So you're with me on this?"

I tilted my head and actually went to the trouble of swallowing before speaking. "Of course I'm with you on this. I'm with you on everything. Always. And this is also just a fabulous idea, so I'm pretty sure I'd be with Prince Charlemagne on this, if *he'd* thought of it first."

The smile returned to Cole's face, and I knew I'd told him exactly what he needed to hear. "Who says he didn't? I don't give away veggie trays for nothing, you know."

I nudged my shoulder into his chest, then slipped my arms around his torso. "I'm so proud of you. This is going to be great. Seriously."

He sighed and wrapped his arms around my back before leaning his cheek down onto my head. "It's going to be a lot of work."

I scoffed and pulled away to look up at him. "Nah. Not really. Not compared to all the work you've put in already." I separated myself from him and turned to face the door into the kitchen. "Remember when that led to nothing more than rows of shelves and stacks of boxes? And remember when there was just that one lamp hanging from the ceiling, with the bulb we had to turn on with the chain, like we were in an old-timey interrogation room or something?" I shuddered at the memory. I'd spent the first half of my life creeped out by that dark, dingy storeroom.

I turned back to face him. "Your dream and your vision and your hard work turned Cassidy's into *this*. And it's about to get even better."

He nodded once. "Thanks, Lai."

I shrugged. "What sort of friend would I be if I didn't point out your brilliance?"

The smile returned to his face. "Well, then . . . here is the real test of friendship. You'll point out my stupidity, and you'll point out my brilliance, but are you willing to help me deglaze stained pans while wearing . . ." He reached down and grabbed the fabric of my skirt between his fingers. "What is this? Taffeta?"

"Beats me. But I do happen to have a poncho for just such an occasion."

I began heading toward the door to grab the poncho from my car but stopped short at the sight through the window of Mrs. Stoddard walking up the steps and onto the porch. Cole noticed her at the same time I did and hurried over to open the door.

"Hey, Jo," he greeted her as she stepped inside. "What's up?"

"Hi, kids."

Kids. She'd been our teacher all through school, right up until high school graduation. Never mind that we'd been out of high school for more than twenty years. Half the people in Adelaide Springs called us kids, and I figured they always would.

"Sorry to barge in so late."

"No problem," Cole assured her with a smile that quickly fell away. Just as familiar to us as Mrs. Stoddard the strict educator was Mrs. Stoddard the caring adult who was completely invested in our success and committed to our well-being. The warmth and concern in her eyes informed us it was *that* Mrs. Stoddard standing before us. "Is everything okay?"

Grandma Hazel always said big, life-changing events came in threes. I really wish she'd been right about Paul Newman instead.

CHAPTER TWO

COLE

For a couple hours, people had been trying to come up with nice things to say about his grandfather. They'd walk by the casket, spend the appropriate amount of time staring at the top half of the body of an old man who was wearing a suit for the first time since his wedding day, and then walk up to Cole and say, "Bill was one of a kind," or "This place won't be the same without him." Both statements were true, but Cole wasn't sure what he was supposed to do with either one of them.

It wasn't that Bill Kimball had been a bad guy. He was just a grump. A textbook curmudgeon. The emotional love child of Oscar the Grouch and pretty much every role ever played by Ed Asner. But just like Oscar and Lou Grant and Carl Fredrickson in *Up*, you always knew there was a heart under there somewhere. At least Cole always knew. There were probably a lot of people in Adelaide Springs who weren't so sure about that. Plenty of kids who had feared him, far too many young adults who had been offended by his lack of verbal filter, and even a handful of peers from Bill's generation who had long ago given up on befriending him.

And those had been the people passing by the casket. They'd made an appearance during the visitation time—out of respect for Cole, maybe, or at least so word wouldn't get around their small town that they hadn't bothered to show up—and then made an excuse why they couldn't stay for the memorial service itself.

That didn't bother him a bit. And it certainly wouldn't have both-

ered his grandfather. The people who mattered hadn't even made their way to the casket yet, but they'd been there. All day. Sitting in the pews of the little church, checking on Cole every so often to see if he needed some coffee or some help getting away from a particularly clingy half-hearted mourner. And while people stood in his space, attempting to come up with nice things to say, he kept his eye on the people who mattered and noticed that no matter how engaged in conversation they were or how focused elsewhere they seemed, they always had an eye on him.

And then there was Laila. His lifelong best friend was an eternal optimist and the sunniest person he'd ever met, but she was struggling today. Truthfully, she'd been struggling ever since Mrs. Stoddard broke the news that when she'd gone to Spruce House—the assisted living center where Bill had lived for about six months—to drop off his desserts, she'd discovered he'd never awakened from his evening nap. It was as if Laila was absorbing and carrying all of the grief she assumed Cole was feeling or resisting. Or maybe she was just expressing her own grief in a very Laila sort of way.

That's what Cole was pretty sure *he* was doing. Expressing his grief in a very *Cole* sort of way. Which, admittedly, hadn't yet proven to be very expressive.

Today, the "very Laila sort of way" meant she had shifted into hostess mode, and he was grateful. Not only did it take some of the pressure off him to meet and greet and be hospitable, but it also kept her busy. It wasn't that he minded her asking him how he was holding up. He appreciated it and knew she genuinely cared. But how many more times would he have to tell her he was fine before she believed him?

He *was* fine. Whether Laila believed him or not.

"How are you holding up?"

Cole groaned and faced her as she stepped up beside him and checked in on him. Again. "Lai, the man was ninety years old and had had two strokes in the past six months. He ate pie and ice cream with every meal—quite often *for* every meal—for the last ten years.

Yes, he was my grandfather, and yes, I loved him. Miserable old man that he was, I'm going to miss him. But this is not a traumatic loss. I knew it was coming."

She studied him intently and he knew she was surveying the damage. Looking for chinks in the armor, imperceptible to anyone but her. He smiled in response to her concerned, compassionate eyes, his momentary irritation with her forgotten.

"I really am fine. But thank you for caring so much. Thanks for all you're doing."

She wrapped her arms around him and leaned her head on his chest. "Of course I care. And I'm not doing anything you wouldn't do for me."

He smirked against the top of her head. "I *have* done it for you. Or are you forgetting the top-notch buffet I prepared for Happy Gilmore's celebration of life?"

She pulled back and looked at him, humor and lightness radiating from her shimmering eyes for the first time in days. "That kitty litter quinoa *was* delicious . . . no matter how disgusting the name."

The fact was Laila had had to say goodbye more often than he had. And not just to cats—though there really had been *so* many cats. There had also been beloved grandparents, aunts and cousins who had died far too young, and a mom who hadn't died but whose departure after divorce had required its own grief and period of mourning. And each time, Cole had been her shoulder. Her rock. When they'd felt deserted by friends, it had been *their* loss, each time. And each time Laila had mourned in her Laila sort of way, and Cole had mourned in his Cole sort of way. In those situations, the Cole sort of way had always been easy to define: take care of Laila and find healing as he helped *her* find healing. Until now, he'd never been alone at the center of the loss. He supposed it wasn't surprising, really. Laila had always had more to lose.

"How are you doing, kid?" Doc Atwater came up beside them with a refreshed cup of coffee in his hands. After years of pumping his bloodstream full of the stuff—black and "strong enough to press a

man's shirt from the inside"—he had given in to the mounting pressure from his daughter Addie and Jo Stoddard (the only person in town who never hesitated to give medical advice to the town's doctor) and made the switch to decaf a while back. Cole could tell from the bold aroma emanating from the cup in his hands that Doc had determined today was not a day for trifling around with the stuff from the pot with the orange lid.

"I'm fine." He turned toward Doc as Laila focused her attention on straightening the late-season wildflowers arranged on the casket. "I'm good, actually. I mean, if one more person who didn't really know him tells me my grandfather was a teddy bear, I may no longer be able to resist a *very* inappropriate outbreak of laughter, but otherwise . . ."

Doc chuckled. "Bill certainly wasn't the unfeeling man he wanted everyone to believe he was, but a teddy bear he was not." He took a sip of his coffee and paused long enough to savor it. "He sure loved you, though."

Cole looked down at the shoelaces of the fancy boots he'd had to buy as part of his wardrobe as Sebastian's best man. The boots he'd thought he would hate but had ended up loving. He hadn't given Sebastian enough credit—and he'd temporarily forgotten that the man had somehow found a way to fit into Brynn's high-class, star-studded, designer life without ever letting himself (or Brynn) lose touch with the slower, methodical simplicity of Adelaide Springs. The boots could have been the mascot for their combined life.

Cole hadn't been looking forward to his grandfather's funeral, of course, but he did have to admit he was glad to have another opportunity to strap on the boots. And right now, they were proving especially useful as something to focus his attention on.

"I know he did, Doc. Thanks."

"And he was proud of you. I hope you know that."

He was pretty sure he did know that. Not that his grandfather ever would have come right out with those words. That wasn't his way. But things would slip out every now and then. A smile that seemed to be reserved just for his grandson when no one else could see. A

“Yep, that’s what I would do,” in response to the way Cole had handled a situation with a food vendor or a drunk customer at Cassidy’s. Sometimes Cole would show Bill the profit-and-loss statements for the restaurant and be met with nothing more than a nod and a firm slap on the shoulder. It may not have been much, but Cole knew what was being communicated.

Bill had owned Cassidy’s since the 1970s, and for more than thirty years, it was just a bar. A hole-in-the-wall, backwoods bar for locals. But from the time Cole was a teenager, he’d always dreamed that it could be more. The building itself was a beautifully built corner-post log building, fortuitously surrounded by some of the most beautiful pine trees and aspens on earth on a secluded but easy-to-access piece of land, just off the main road. For years, Cassidy’s—much like Adelaide Springs, and maybe like Bill Kimball himself—just existed for itself. After Cole’s grandmother passed away when he was sixteen, his grandfather started spending all his time there. Not drinking. No, Cole couldn’t remember ever seeing his grandfather drink more than a sip for a New Year’s toast. Work was how he numbed the pain.

It was around the time of high school graduation that Cole finally mustered up the courage to share his dreams for Cassidy’s with his grandfather. What if it was more than just a bar? The huge storeroom could become a kitchen. They could refinish the floor, which had been scuffed up beyond recognition during country line dancing’s heyday, and add a few four-tops. Maybe a six-top. There weren’t a lot of food options in town, after all. Andi had just opened the Bean Franklin, but that was only for breakfast and lunch. Maxine Brogan made the best tamales you’d ever tasted, but you couldn’t exactly count the way she sold them (wrapped in aluminum foil, out of an original Igloo KoolTunes cooler under an umbrella on her porch) as a legitimate business. Cassidy’s had a real opportunity to make a mark.

Cole’s ideas had been shot down, of course. Time after time after time. So, in his early twenties, he left home for the first time in his life and went to Boulder to get his culinary arts degree. His thought had been that he would pick up more knowledge and improve upon

his natural ability in the kitchen, and then he'd go somewhere else to live out the dreams he'd had for Cassidy's. His stubborn old grandfather was never going to come around, after all. But his two years in Boulder—just 173 miles away as the crow flies, though the drive took nearly six hours—had clarified for him that his window had closed. Not his window for being able to leave Adelaide Springs, but his window for wanting to.

Not that he ever told his grandfather that. Not when the man who had helped raise him suddenly seemed willing to consider implementing some new ideas if it meant his only grandchild—the last family he had in Adelaide Springs—wouldn't go away again.

He'd been silently staring at his nothing-that-costs-this-much-is-supposed-to-be-this-comfortable boots long enough that Doc read the cues and changed the subject.

"Is your mom going to be able to make it back in time?"

Cole caught himself and turned a disappointed sneer into an indulgent grin before he looked up. "You know how she is, Doc. 'Funerals are just a stopgap toward closure, and the souls of our loved ones deserve to be released from the burden of our sadness.' Or something." He shrugged. "She's been checking in with me a lot, but as far as actually showing up . . ." That sneer sure was determined. "I don't think that's exactly her style."

The oak double doors at the end of the aisle groaned open for the first time in a while, and Cole looked up with his well-rehearsed smile—the one that said, "I'm just barely holding it together, of course, but seeing *you* has made everything a little bit better"—to see who had shown up for their tour past Old Man Kimball's casket. He couldn't imagine there were many people left in town.

He hadn't expected to see two of his favorite people, who were supposed to be somewhere off the Amalfi Coast right about then. Laila gasped behind him. Cole didn't gasp, but he felt the same sort of surprise at seeing Brynn and Sebastian walking toward him, all in black. Surprise, yes. And gratitude. Love, certainly. But also the tiniest bit of frustration.

“What are they doing here?” Cole muttered.

He met them halfway down the aisle. He hadn't quite formulated words in his head yet. He wanted to say something about how he couldn't believe they were letting his grandfather's death ruin their honeymoon. But before he could say anything, Brynn was on her tiptoes, and her arms were wrapped around his neck.

“He was a miserable old man who seemed to look for every opportunity to torment me,” she whispered before she pulled away and looked into his eyes. “From the time I was six years old, I can't remember him ever saying a kind word to me, and I'm sure he was awful before that too. I just can't remember. He was quick to point out my mistakes, and he *never* commended me on a job well done. And yet . . . somehow . . . I knew he was looking out for me. You know? I knew he was cheering me on. Somewhere. Deep down.” She cleared her throat. “I'm really going to miss him.”

Cole chuckled and wrapped his arms around her waist to pull her against him again. “I know. Me too.”

CHAPTER THREE

LAILA

“I’m so glad that’s over,” Cole exhaled as he collapsed into a wooden chair at a table in the center of Cassidy’s, laid his head back, and closed his eyes. Sebastian had finally chased him into the dining room to join Brynn and me. Sebastian could cook pretty well and would do just fine preparing some burgers for the four of us, but Cole was never a fan of giving up his kitchen. Nevertheless, relief seemed to permeate him as he allowed himself to relax for the first time in days.

“Do you need a drink or something? Can I get you anything?” I asked.

His eyes remained closed as he shook his head. “Thanks, I’m good. It’s just nice to have a moment to myself.”

Brynn and I looked at each other and smiled, completely understanding he wasn’t passive-aggressively hinting for us to go home. To spend a little time with just the Sudworths and me was to be able to completely unwind. There were no pretenses or polite-smiles-for-the-sake-of-appearance necessary among the four of us.

“Hey,” Brynn started, sitting up straighter in her seat. “Was that Lottie Carlson I saw pulling out of the church parking lot right about the time Seb and I got there? How’s she handling things? I bet she’s heartbroken.”

Cole chuckled, head still back and eyes still closed. “She told me to call her if I need a grandma hug.”

Laughter burst from Brynn. I thought I’d gotten my own giggles out after overhearing her say it—and overhearing Cole respond by

asking, “How is a grandma hug different from a normal hug?”—but I found myself losing it all over again.

Charlotte Carlson had been a few years ahead of us in school, so she had to be all of forty-five now, at the oldest. She’d had three short-lived marriages to increasingly exotic men who always whisked her away from Adelaide Springs. Each time, the people of the town had been cajoled into big au revoir send-offs and bridal showers before she got married in some far and distant land. And each time she got divorced, she’d suddenly just reappeared in the flow of everyday life again, like none of it had ever happened. After the third divorce, she’d changed tactics and begun pursuing local men. Cole had been in her crosshairs for a while and had kindly but efficiently communicated his fears of ending up the subject of an unsolved mysteries podcast if he so much as had dinner with her.

Let’s just say that from there, Lottie had started chasing an older demographic. And since Cole’s grandfather was the oldest, most financially solvent single man in town, it hadn’t taken her long to zero in.

“She wore a veil, Brynn.” I was still giggling as I pictured it. “Like, an actual black veil like you’d see in the movies.”

“No!”

Cole nodded and opened his eyes. “Yep. She was straight-up dressed like Diane Keaton at Vito Corleone’s funeral in *The Godfather*. It was quite remarkable.”

“Who?” Sebastian asked as he came from the kitchen carrying a platter of burgers on buns. “Lottie?”

“Got it in one,” Cole answered. He adjusted his posture to get ready to eat, loosening his tie as he did.

Seb set the platter in the center of the table and took his seat between Brynn and Cole. “I suppose poor Doc will be next in her widower crosshairs.”

“Well . . .” We had the restaurant to ourselves, but that didn’t stop me from looking around to make sure no one would overhear. “I suspect Doc may not be on the market much longer.”

Brynn's eyes flew open, and she leaned in to get the scoop, but Cole shook his head. "Don't encourage her, Brynn. She's about to fill your head with theories based on *zero* evidence and no semblance of fact whatsoever—"

"Jo?" Seb asked as he reached in, grabbed a burger, and placed it on Brynn's plate and then repeated the action and got himself one.

"Yes!" I squealed and pointed at Cole. "Yeah, no semblance of fact . . . Whatever! You see it, too, don't you, Seb?"

"Of course." He jumped up as he realized he'd left the bag of potato chips on the bar. "I've always seen it."

Cole rolled his eyes. "They're just friends. They've been friends for—what—sixty-some years?"

"At least," Seb confirmed.

"So what makes you think that all of a sudden—"

"Except it wouldn't really be all of a sudden, would it?" Brynn interjected. "Seb's always seen it. I see it. Laila sees it. Something's been developing for a while."

Cole seemed to consider the possibilities for a moment. "Still," he finally said between bites. "When you know someone that well, what would it take to flip that switch?"

Sebastian raised his hand. "Am I the only one who would rather not think of Doc and Jo flipping any switches?"

"If you know what I mean . . .," I said in the most innuendo-laced tone I could, causing Seb to shudder and Cole to cover his ears and call out, "La-la-la-la-la! I can't hear you. I can't hear you!"

"As fun as it is to picture the senior citizens in our lives in *flagrante delicto*—"

"Gross," Cole muttered just as Sebastian asked his wife, "Is that really necessary?"

Through her giggles, Brynn stood and raised her glass. "To Old Man Kimball, who may not have always been a barrel of monkeys but who made a huge impact in my life and the lives of so many. He came through for me more than once, and I'll always be grateful. Most important, he helped shape one of my favorite people in the world. Any

man who can raise you to be the man you are, Cole, can't be all bad."

Cole chuckled and cleared his throat before standing and raising his glass. Seb and I joined them.

"To Old Man Kimball!" we all said in unison before taking a drink.

We began sitting back down, but Brynn shot up again. "Ooh! I almost forgot!" She dug into the pocket of her black pencil skirt and pulled out some crumpled bills and some coins and set them all on the table.

"What's that for?" I asked as Seb began laughing.

"*That,*" she responded, "is six dollars and forty-two cents I owed Bill for some whiskey glasses I broke in 2001."

Cole laughed as he reached across the table and scooped the money into his hand. "I know it's a symbolic gesture, but you're rich, and I have absolutely no qualms whatsoever about taking your money."

We sat around laughing and eating and sharing memories of Bill for a few more minutes until the bell over the front door began ringing.

"Sorry," Cole called out as he turned to face whoever was entering. "We're not open today. Family situat—" A familiar face appeared around the doorframe. "Oh, hey, Doc."

"I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Not at all." Cole stood. "Why don't you join us?"

Sebastian was already heading to the kitchen. "It will just take a minute to throw another burger on the grill."

"Nah, thanks, Seb. I appreciate it, but Jo already fed me."

Brynn and I looked at each other knowingly—mischievously—causing Sebastian to roll his eyes at us before he said, "How about a cup of coffee, then?"

"That I won't say no to. Thanks."

Cole had already pulled a fifth chair up to the table, between him and me, by the time Doc finished his walk across the room to us. I leaned in and hugged Doc as he sat, and Brynn stood from her chair to come around and do the same. We had all just seen each other not

even an hour ago, but Doc had been like another parent to all of us. There was just something about losing one of the parental figures in your life that made you want to hold the ones you had left a little closer.

“Thanks, Seb,” he said with a nod as Sebastian set the cup of coffee in front of him and went back to his seat on the other side of Cole. “I really am sorry to break up your time together. I know it’s a little more difficult to come by these days.”

That was true, though Cole and I had all the time in the world together, of course. We’d worked together at Cassidy’s at least four days a week, every week, since he’d convinced his grandfather to invest in his dream of turning it into a restaurant. And what had that been? Ten years now? Fifteen, maybe? There had been lots of times over the course of those however many years that he’d apologized there weren’t other opportunities for me there. That there weren’t ways for me to “move up.” Well, no . . . there wouldn’t be, would there? Moving up in Adelaide Springs wasn’t really a thing.

Someday, maybe I’d be able to convince him I was okay with that. I loved waiting tables at Cassidy’s. I loved having the opportunity to chat with pretty much every tourist passing through town—because, seriously, where else were they going to eat? I loved our constant carousel of regulars, be it Fenton Norris, who always watched whatever ball game was on television and talked about the weather with whoever else wandered in, or Neil Pinkton, twenty years old and inching toward his own definition of adulthood by sitting at the bar with the old men, drinking a soda. Mostly I loved playing my small part in Cole’s success.

For a few years, the team had gotten even better. I really wouldn’t have thought that was possible, but having Sebastian behind the bar had made the whole thing click into place at a new level. I mean, he’d resurrected the karaoke machine, for goodness’ sake.

Once in a while we still got him behind the bar and on the stage, but of course he and Brynn lived in New York a good part of the time these days. And now that Sebastian was a journalist again, even when

they were in town, we didn't see them nearly as often. He was writing or working on his podcast. Now that they were newlyweds, it seemed unlikely their time would magically free up for their friends. And how long would it be before they had kids?

Would they have kids? Did they even want kids? It was sort of difficult to imagine, honestly. They'd both be great parents—I was absolutely sure of that—but with their busy lives, I didn't expect they'd make time to add a kid to the mix anytime soon. They already had Sebastian's dog, Murrow, who traveled the globe with them—or at least with *him* when they traveled the globe in separate directions. A little human Sudworth child might not travel so well. And if they didn't expand their family *soon* . . . Well, they weren't exactly spring chickens.

None of us were, of course, though I was a few months younger than Brynn and Cole, and we were all a few years younger than Sebastian. What did that make me? A summer chicken? *Early* summer at best. Though, really, who was I kidding? The countdown to forty had begun. I'd be thirty-nine in a week, and then we'd start turning forty. *Forty*. Cole, then Brynn, then me. Nope, not a single spring chicken in the bunch.

Though . . . should I think of myself as a late-winter chicken rather than an early-summer chicken? We'd had a lot of animals growing up, but never chickens. I couldn't say with absolutely certainty that I understood the metaphor.

"Earth to Laila, " Cole teased melodically from across the table. "You still with us?"

I looked up in surprise at the sound of my name. "I was just . . ." I shook away the stupor. "Sorry. What did I miss?"

"Doc was telling us his reason for stopping by."

"As I was saying, after the funeral, I went to the bank to get Bill's will out of my box." He reached into the inside pocket of his jacket.

"Not sure if you knew he asked me to be his executor?"

Cole chuckled. "I didn't even know he had a will."

"Yeah, always has had. This one is new. He updated it just a few months ago."

Cole eyed the yellow envelope with curiosity. “A few months ago? Why? Nothing’s changed.”

Doc shrugged. “The only thing that changed, I figure, is he finally started believing he was a mere mortal after all. After the strokes and everything. The other one was pretty old, I think. He probably just wanted to make sure everything was current and in order.”

“Do you know what’s in there?” Cole asked.

“No. We can find out now, if you want . . .”

I raised my hand. I’m not sure why. I just wasn’t sure I was part of the moment enough to speak freely during it, I guess. Thankfully, I didn’t take it so far as to wait to be called on.

“Sorry, but does there not have to be some sort of will reading or something? I always picture these things taking place in an attorney’s office.”

“That’s just a device invented for the movies.” Sebastian smiled. “Certainly more dramatic than an envelope being pulled out of Doc’s pocket, but unless there are beneficiaries contesting bequeathments or things being held up in probate, it’s typically a pretty nondramatic thing.”

“I did call your mom,” Doc said to Cole. “As next of kin I figured she had the right to know everything first. She said to just go ahead and get with you—”

“And I can let her know how much money she gets?” Cole filled in the rest of the thought. When Doc raised his hands in a way that clearly communicated, “Nothing so crass as that, but for all intents and purposes, you nailed it,” Cole laughed. “Well, alright, then. Let’s do this thing. Let’s find out how many more orphans can have their lives changed by a generous endowment from the Cassidy Dolan-Kimball Foundation to Save the World.”

CHAPTER FOUR

COLE

Doc looked around the table and then back at Cole. “I’m pretty sure I know the answer to this, but just to be sure . . . Are you okay with everyone being here?”

His friends all jumped up, maybe a little bit horrified that they hadn’t even thought to ask whether they were welcome to stay for the awkward business-and-legality part of the day, but also, it seemed, a little bit horrified at the thought of leaving. Brynn and Sebastian started rattling off lists of things they needed to go do while Laila refused to meet Cole’s eyes. Her mouth was moving, but he had no idea what she was saying. She was probably just copying Brynn and Seb’s excuses.

Actually . . . yeah. That was it. He was able to make out the faint echoes of “. . . laundry . . . pack . . . Murrow . . . *Sunup* . . .” coming through her mumbles, though none of that had anything to do with the reality of her life.

They all hated the thought of not being there for him, and Cole loved them for it.

He laughed and pointed a finger down toward the chairs. “Sit down, you numbskulls.” No other explanation was necessary, and the three of them sat back in their seats without another word.

“Okay, then,” Doc began with a fond twinkle in his eyes. He slipped his fingers into the seal of the envelope and opened it up, then pulled out the trifold of white pages. Four pieces of paper. Maybe five.

Cole didn’t expect to feel any sadness right then, but all of a sud-

den, his throat constricted and he bit down on the right side of his bottom lip, just to keep things in check. Ninety years of life and family and investments and prudence and being a cheapskate but also surprisingly generous (not that he ever would have allowed most people to know that) and loving a town an irrational amount despite being its most unyielding critic . . . This was what was left to show for it. Whatever was in those four pieces of paper. Maybe five.

“Scoot.” He looked up at Laila, standing to his right, instructing Sebastian to make room for her. Without another word being spoken, Brynn scooted into Laila’s seat, Sebastian scooted into his wife’s former chair, and Laila sat down next to Cole, grabbing his right hand in both of her small, delicate ones.

“I’m fine, Lai,” he whispered to her.

“I know.”

How had she always been able to do that? To detect his mood, correctly assess it, and provide the perfect amount of support in less time than it took most people to slip off their shoes when they walked in the front door of their homes at night?

In their group, Cole was known as the protective one, but at least when it came to him, Laila was a one-woman triage unit.

He squeezed her hand and looked to Doc. “Ready when you are.”

Doc folded the papers back on their creases to straighten them out and then pulled his reading glasses from the outside chest pocket of his heavy-duty denim jacket. He slipped them over his ears and cleared his throat. “Let’s see here.” His eyes skimmed the first few lines before he muttered, “Legal jargon. Ah, okay . . . here we are.”

Lowering his foot to the floor, he sat up straighter in his chair, running his finger along the words at the bottom of the first page and then flipping to the second. “The house located at 23394 County Road 14, Adelaide Springs, Colorado . . .” He looked up and smiled at Cole. “It’s yours, of course. Along with everything in it.”

Cole released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He certainly wasn’t sure *why* he had been holding it. It had never even occurred to him that there was a chance the house wouldn’t be his, but

he'd also never thought of it in those terms. To think of it in those terms would have been to acknowledge, in some small way, that it wasn't his already. No, his name might not have been on the deed, but apart from his two years in Boulder, he'd never lived anywhere else. His earliest memories were in that house with his grandparents and his mother. Then his grandmother had died, and his mother went off to chase her restless desire to save the world. And eventually his grandfather needed more care than he could give, so Grandpa went to Spruce House, and Cole lived in that big house alone. He'd probably known they'd never live together again. They'd probably both known that. But they never discussed it. And Cole hadn't so much as repositioned his grandfather's chair from right in front of the fireplace where he liked it.

Cole nodded. "That's very generous."

Doc's eyes continued skimming the pages, and about the time he flipped over to page three, they started growing wide. Wide and full of bewilderment.

"What is it?" Sebastian asked.

Doc looked up from the pages. "You're all in here."

"What?" Brynn and Sebastian asked in shocked unison, while Cole just shook his head and smiled. That had been the story of his life. For nearly forty years, every single time he'd thought he had his grandfather figured out, the old man did something that surprised him. Genuinely surprised him. Maybe it was finding a bunch of wrapped Christmas gifts in the closet and realizing they weren't for him but for the kids of some of the miners who were clinging to desperate hope they wouldn't have to relocate their families when the last of the silver mining dried up in the late eighties. More than once it had been the way his miserly stubbornness had been overruled by compassionate humanity and he'd used his vote as a member of city council to actually make people's lives better. And how many times had Cole been ordered into the car after school, grumbling and full of resentment that his video game time was being taken away from him, only to end up having one of the best afternoons of his adolescence sneaking around with his grandfather, pretending to be invisible su-

perheroes on a mission to pick up trash and pull weeds without being spotted?

Of course he'd wait until he was gone to display his heart and reveal his true feelings for some of the people he liked to pretend vexed him more than any others. Cole didn't know why he was surprised.

Doc chuckled and looked at them all over the rims of his readers. "I think I'll just read this part aloud. It's unmistakably Bill's voice." He looked back at the papers and cleared his throat. "To Sebastian Sudworth, I leave my Benjamin Homer Brass Barreled American Flintlock Pistol, crafted in Boston, Massachusetts, circa 1775, along with certificate of authenticity. Credit where it's due." Doc looked at Sebastian. "That's all it says. No actual credit given, it seems, but—"

"Yeah, I get it." Sebastian nodded and studied his hands resting on the table while the outbreak of a smile threatened to overtake the twitching corners of his mouth. "That means a lot."

In the three years or so that Bill Kimball and Sebastian Sudworth had served together on the Adelaide Springs city council, they'd only voted the same way a handful of times. The most notable had been in support of the new plan Brynn and Sebastian had hatched to bring back Township Days in a way that was sustainable, affordable, and forward thinking. Oh, Bill still complained every chance he got, of course, but by bringing back Township Days, Sebastian had finally earned the old man's respect. Credit where it was due.

"To Brynn Cornell," Doc continued, and Brynn froze in her seat at the sound of her name. "I forgive a debt in the amount of \$6.42, valued at approximately \$41.30 when adjusted for inflation and accrued interest."

The entire table erupted into laughter, and Brynn stood from her seat and reached across the table. "Hand it over, Kimball. I'm free and clear, baby. Free and clear." Cole pulled the money from his pocket and handed it back to her as Brynn continued laughing.

"To Laila Olivet," Doc resumed, being the adult in the room, as always. But this time the chuckling continued and the uneasiness that had originally accompanied the seriousness of the occasion seemed to

be gone. At least it was until Doc said, “Oh. Well . . . Hmm.”

Everyone snapped back to attention, but Laila still attempted to keep things light. “I’m pretty sure I paid him back for everything *I* ever broke, Doc. Everything he knew about, anyway.”

Doc smiled at her and held the document to his right so Cole, who was craning his neck, could see what had caused Doc’s reaction. Cole’s eyes flew open as he looked quickly to Doc and then back to the paper.

“Okay, now you’re freaking me out.” Laila exhaled a shaky breath. “What does it say?”

Cole faced her, his eyes no longer wide but his grin getting wider by the second. “My grandfather left you ten thousand dollars.”

The color drained from her face in an instant. “What? What are you talking about? Why would he . . . *What?!* What does it say? Did he say *why?* That doesn’t make any sense!”

“It says, ‘To Laila Olivet I leave ten thousand dollars.’” Doc raised his gaze over his glasses again and smirked. “You know Bill. He always had a way with words.”

“That’s too much. I can’t accept—”

“Of course you can,” Cole argued. “It’s what he wanted. And as to *why* . . .” He hadn’t seen it coming, but it actually made all the sense in the world to him. “You know you were his favorite.” He was filled with affection for her—and his grandfather—as he watched her grapple with her emotions. Bill Kimball had been a man who didn’t like many people and had no trouble finding fault with all of them. All of them except for the wife he had loved and lost.

Cole’s grandmother aside, Bill had thought Laila Olivet had fewer faults than all the rest.

Doc resumed reading. “And then there’s a little bit of money to your mom, Cole. And some of your grandmother’s belongings, it looks like. Engagement ring, some other jewelry, a fur coat . . . those sorts of things. Then it looks like everything else . . .” His voice faded. “That can’t be right,” he said under his breath as he flipped from page three to page four and back again. His eyes met Cole’s. “Everything else goes to

the town, with a good portion earmarked for Township Days.”

Cole snorted. “Sounds right to me. I’m surprised there wasn’t some sort of stipulation in there that Brynn’s \$6.42 debt forgiveness must be accompanied by an unbreakable vow to always support the festival and give it top-of-the-hour coverage on *Sunup*.” He began looking over Doc’s shoulder. So how much is ‘everything,’ anyway? I know he had a few stock investments and some money in the bank, but—”

“One point eight million.”

Silence echoed around the table. Everyone stared first at Doc, as if trying to make sense of the words he had just said, and then at Cole, as if he’d been holding out on them. Big time. For their entire lives, in some cases.

Of course it didn’t take long at all to observe the slack-jawed confusion Cole knew his face expressed and realize that if anyone had been held out on, it was him.

“I’m guessing you didn’t have any idea Bill had that sort of money?” Sebastian asked him.

Cole raised his eyebrows and shook his head. “If you’d have asked me what sort of liquidity he had left, after the house and investments and all that, I would have guessed a hundred grand. Maybe two if he was savvier than he let on.”

And the thing was he *had* suspected his grandfather was savvier than he let on. No surprise there. For all the ways he struggled with technology and railed against advancements and a changing world and such, he also dropped names like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates into conversations often enough that Cole would sometimes tease him by asking if he had Rupert Murdoch on speed dial.

Bill would respond by acting like he didn’t understand the concept of speed dial.

But one point eight million? How was that even possible?

“An amount like that is going to change everything for Adelaide Springs,” Brynn whispered—in excitement and fear, Cole guessed. Cole understood the tone because he understood the sentiment.

“Is there any sort of instruction, Doc?” Cole asked. “Apart from supporting Township Days, I mean. Did he say anything about a trust being set up or how to spread out payments to the town, or anything like that?”

Doc shook his head. “Doesn’t look like it. Not in here, anyway. But obviously there’s got to be more paperwork somewhere. I guess I’ll have to get with his lawyer—”

“I have his number.” Cole pulled out his phone. “I’m assuming it’s the same firm we used in Grand Junction when we set up medical power of attorney.”

Doc reached into his inside jacket pocket again and pulled out a pen and handed it to Cole. Cole wrote the information on the envelope the will had been in and handed it to Doc. “Here you go. Let me know how I can help with any of that.”

“Same here,” Sebastian chimed in, and Brynn nodded her agreement. “Something like this has the potential to make it all too big too quickly if we’re not careful.”

Laila’s quiet, shaky voice broke through the ongoing speculation. “What about Cassidy’s?”

Hub. Cole hadn’t given any thought to Cassidy’s. Yes, they were sitting right in the center of it, but it hadn’t been on his radar even so much as his grandmother’s fur coat (which his mother had already sworn she would sell, the proceeds going to an animal rights charity). His grandfather’s house had been just that—his grandfather’s house. Never mind that Cole had never received his mail anywhere else or that nearly every paycheck he’d ever earned had contributed to the utilities and upkeep. Never mind that on the odd occasion he had a day off from Cassidy’s, he would find himself on a ladder or in the attic or mowing the yard. It was his grandfather’s house.

But he couldn’t remember the last time he had thought of Cassidy’s Bar & Grill as his grandfather’s business. Cassidy’s was his, and he suspected his grandfather had seen it that way for even longer than he had.

And now he just had to hope that a long-standing shared view wasn’t going to cause any unnecessary problems.

“Did he forget to include Cassidy’s in his will?” Cole asked. “What happens then? Will it have to go to probate or something?”

“You may get your movie drama after all,” Brynn teased Laila from across the table.

Cole chuckled and envisioned just how nondramatic that might be. *People’s exhibit A: Cole’s Bacon Cheeseburger with Cassidy’s Sauce. On the menu since 2016. Can anyone else in the entire world recreate the recipe for Cassidy’s Sauce? No? The defense rests. Case dismissed and bon appétit!*

Doc wasn’t laughing. He had flipped to the fifth and final page, and it was holding all his attention. And just like that, the seriousness of Doc’s expression had captivated the attention of everyone else at the table.

“What is it, Doc?” Sebastian finally asked, after everyone’s eyes had shifted around to each other several times and his had landed on Cole. “What’s wrong?”

It wasn’t until Cole heard the question from Sebastian’s mouth that it clicked that something was, in fact, wrong. Sebastian was the keenest observer he’d ever known, and Cole was suddenly afraid he was missing something.

“He did leave Cassidy’s to me, didn’t he?” The thought of any other alternative was unfathomable, but that didn’t stop his brain from spiraling down a list. Not of worries, but of possibilities. If he had to, he’d buy it. From whom, he had no idea—the town, maybe?—and with what money he had even less of a clue. The house was his and had been free of debt for twenty-five years or more. His credit was good and his reputation was spotless.

The more he thought about it, he wasn’t all that concerned. He had a little bit of lingering guilt that he hadn’t helped his grandfather keep a better eye on things, but he would just have to live with that. He would have insisted on more than just medical power of attorney if he’d known wills were going to be rewritten in the last months of his grandfather’s life, but he’d seemed more together than anyone in his condition had any right to be.

It was what it was. If “everything else” was going to Adelaide

Springs, that must include Cassidy's. He'd figure out a way to pay what the restaurant was worth—and to him, it was worth whatever it took.

Besides, he thought as he looked across the table and a smile returned to his face, two of his best friends were loaded. They would make a sizable donation to his GoFundMe account.

"Cole, I don't know how to explain what I'm looking at here." Doc's voice was grave as he looked up from the papers in his hands and met Cole's eyes. "It looks like he sold it."

The complete difference in terminology from what had just been flooding his brain—the difference between leaving something as an inheritance and selling it—didn't register. "Okay, so who do I need to talk to? Do I make an offer with city council, or—"

"No, listen to me, son." Doc turned and placed his hand on Cole's shoulder and transmitted the complete weight of his caring, compassionate nature as his eyes bored into Cole's. "Bill sold Cassidy's Bar and Grill. Months ago, it looks like. To an investment group of some kind."

Gasps escaped from Laila and Brynn, while Sebastian scooted his chair from the table, the legs scraping against the wood floor and teetering to maintain their balance as Seb faced away from his friends and muttered his frustrations toward the log wall.

As for Cole, he didn't know what to say. What was he *supposed* to say? Ultimately, as Laila squeezed his hand and Doc held his gaze as stoically as he could and Sebastian wandered in a way mildly reminiscent of a caged animal and Brynn held her tongue and her breath, he said the only thing that made any sense at all to him.

"No." He shook his head, and a confused chuckle escaped. "No. There's been some sort of mistake. For all the things he . . . I mean, I know he wasn't exactly . . ." Cole let out a deep breath. "No. He never would have done something so cruel. Without even telling me? No way. Not a chance. I'm sorry, Doc, but you're wrong."

Doc set the papers down on the table in front of him. "I can't tell you how much I wish I was."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Emilie Haney of EAH Creative

Bethany Turner has been writing since the second grade, when she won her first writing award for explaining why, if she could have lunch with any person throughout history, she would choose John Stamos. She stands by this decision. Bethany now writes pop culture–infused rom-coms for a new generation of readers who crave fiction that tackles the thorny issues of life with hu-

mor and insight. She lives in Southwest Colorado with her husband, whom she met in the nineties in a chat room called Disco Inferno. As sketchy as it sounds, it worked out pretty well in this case, and they are now the proud parents of two sons. Connect with Bethany at bethanyturnerbooks.com or across social media @seebethanywrite, where she clings to the eternal dream that John Stamos will someday send her a friend request. You can also text her at +1 (970) 387-7811. Texting with readers is her favorite.



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