

Here to Stay

Melissa Tagg



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To two of my favorite people in the world,
my grandpa and grandma,
Arnold and Jeane Flessner



If the letter—the one that could change everything—didn't arrive today, she'd stop hoping.

Autumn tucked a runaway strand of auburn hair behind her ear and crept across the Kingsley Inn's rooftop on all fours, the dirty black slate tile smudging the knees of her jeans. Sun warmed the tile under her palms despite the late November chill and a lakeside breeze whispering over her face.

Tarping the roof's leaky spot probably would've been a job better saved for someone less queasy about heights. But she'd had to lay off their handyman months ago, which left her playing amateur fix-it girl. She probably looked ridiculous crawling across the roof, but hey, she'd gotten the job done.

Except . . . *Wait*. Autumn scanned the edges of the roof. Where was her ladder?

Gone. And it didn't take a genius to pinpoint the culprit. "I don't have time for this, Harry." Despite her muttered words, a smile tugged at her cheeks as she fished into her pocket for her phone. Twenty-eight wasn't too old to still appreciate a good prank.

Phone pressed to her ear, she took in her rooftop view while waiting for Harry to pick up. Beyond a span of parking lot

and lawn, browning grass faded to a pale ribbon of beach, where the turquoise waters of Lake Michigan tussled with the shore.

She *was* getting impatient for word about the potential career move of a lifetime, but pretty Whisper Shore wasn't such a horrible place to linger.

If only she didn't feel as if she'd been lingering her whole life.

"Thank you for calling the Kingsley Inn. My name is Harrison. How may I—"

"Can it, Harry." Her focus snapped back to where her ladder should've been. "You can help me by returning my ladder." Her tone flat-lined, but she had to hand it to the deskman. He'd one-upped her but good.

"Ladder? Whatever are you talking about, Miss Kingsley?"

Ooh, she could just picture him two floors below, leaning against the lobby's mahogany check-in desk, all smug-like. *Weasel*. "Very funny. You should be on that show with the senior citizens who pull pranks."

"Are you calling me old?"

He did have twelve years on her. "Well, if the sweater vest fits . . ."

"And now you're making fun of my wardrobe. I hope you're prepared to sleep on that roof tonight."

Phone balanced between her ear and shoulder, she started crawling again . . . and reached the edge of the sloping roof just as the sound of car tires crackling over gravel carried upward. *Uh-oh*. Had her bride and groom arrived early for their appointment?

She swallowed, chalky dread clenching her throat. She'd been steeling herself for this meeting all week long. *Dylan Porter*. Suddenly the idea of staying up on the roof was all sorts of appealing.

It's been three years. This doesn't have to be awkward.

Yeah, then why the Tilt-A-Whirl case of nerves? “Come on, Harry, let me down. Pretty please?”

“Nineteen years you’ve known me, and you still can’t get it right. Har-ri-son.”

On another day she’d have thrown out a few more *Harrys* just to hear the man whine and threaten to quit like always. Of course, he’d never actually go through with it. Harry had been a fixture at the inn since Autumn’s preteen years, landing in Whisper Shore when he’d decided to take a year off college. Sometime in the last decade and a half, he’d stopped talking about going back. His love for the inn nearly matched her own.

As, too, she suspected, did his fears about its future.

But the sound of a car door clinking shut kept her from teasing. Her fiancé awaited.

Scratch that. Ex-fiancé.

“All right. Harrison, Harrison, Harrison. Is that better?”

“Yes, Jan Brady, much better. Give me a sec, the other line is ringing.”

“But—”

The phone clicked before she could finish. She squinted against cascading sunlight, its brightness along with the front lawn’s massive cottonwood blocking her view of the parking lot’s newest car. If that was Dylan and his replacement bride arriving early, no way did she want to be caught on the rooftop—windblown and in clothes too dingy for the Goodwill pile.

Autumn sucked in a cold breath and inched over to where the porch roof jutted out from the first floor. The drop wasn’t so far. Maybe . . .

But the rattling of the metal ladder against the rain gutter conveniently interrupted that questionable plan.

“It’s about time, Harry.” Autumn dangled one foot over the edge, found her footing on the ladder rung, then the other. “Can you stall them while I change?” Moments later, her feet thudded to the ground and she turned.

Only it wasn’t Harry standing to the side, steadying the ladder while a lawyerly tan trench coat whipped in the wind behind him.

“H-hey, Dylan.” The greeting choked up her throat. Really, if ever there would’ve been a day to call in sick. “The ladder . . . you . . . thank you.”

“Autumn Kingsley.” Dylan’s smile was as GQ-devastating as ever, and between the perfectly styled blond hair and his chiseled-as-a-statue’s jaw, it certainly wasn’t a surprise he’d found a new fiancée—only that it’d taken so long.

Look who’s talking. She hadn’t been on a date since Zach Dawson coaxed her into sharing his blanket at the Fourth of July picnic last summer, then proceeded to spill the entire contents of his paper plate on her. She’d sat there watching fireworks that were supposed to signal freedom, thinking surely the potato salad in her lap was just one more sign she needed to stop wasting time waiting for her life to start in Whisper Shore.

Dylan coughed.

“Um, sorry I’m dressed like this.” She glanced at her tattered jeans. Easier than eye contact. “Figured I’d have enough time to change before you got here, but Harry thought it’d be funny to trap me on the roof.”

Dylan’s baritone chuckle poked at the tension hovering between them. “I thought you two would’ve run out of pranks by now.”

“Well, apparently my creativity is waning. I went old school this morning—salted his tea.”

“What were you doing on the roof anyway?”

Autumn plunged her hands into the pockets of her fleece jacket. It wouldn't do to get into the Kingsley Inn's current financial predicament. Dylan didn't need to know that with tourist season over they now had more empty rooms than full—that Autumn had already dipped into her own measly savings once this fall to pay the mortgage. And next month was looking even more dire. The whole thing was embarrassing.

Owning and managing the family inn may never have been her dream job, but even so . . . who wanted to fail? It's why booking this wedding reception was so important.

And why she held her breath every day when she checked the mailbox, yearning for the letter from the hotel in France. The one that could breathe life into the hope still lurking along under the surface, the hope that eventually life might hold something more. *Travel. Excitement. Adventure.*

“Autumn?”

“Sorry, yes?” She blinked, finally allowing herself to meet Dylan's eyes.

Oh, how she used to gush over those jade irises. But her fascination with Whisper Shore's most eligible bachelor had worn thin the longer they'd been together. The more he'd talked about settling down for the long haul, the more she'd ached for life outside the confines of her hometown.

Ironic, really. She was the one who longed to escape, but Dylan was the one who had gone off to Detroit, found himself a new life and a new bride, while Autumn was still . . . stuck.

“The roof. What were you doing up there?”

She shook her head, stray hair tickling her cheeks. “Just checking a to-do off the list. So, where's your fiancée? Mariah, is it?” First things first. She couldn't will the Paris hotel to hire her. But she could nail this reception reservation.

Only now Dylan was the one to look away. His focus landed on the inn.

And she couldn't help following his gaze. The inn used to be the glory of the surrounding shore, its sprawling wrap-around porch reminiscent of a Southern plantation. Lattice crawled up one side, and the flowerboxes now filled with fall mums under gangly windows added a homey feel.

But did Dylan notice the way the late-afternoon light highlighted a web of cracks in the three-story building's pale yellow siding? Or how about the white shutters in desperate need of a good painting?

He looked back to Autumn. "Mariah . . . isn't coming."

Autumn nudged her chin into the high neck of her fleece. "Do we need to reschedule?"

"No. I already felt bad that we asked you to fit us in the day after Thanksgiving, and now . . ."

Dylan shifted his weight, and a knot of worry tangled through Autumn. *We need this*. Even if that letter finally came and said what she hoped, she still had a responsibility to keep the inn running. "Dylan, it's no problem to reschedule."

"No. I only came out tell you we don't need the appointment anymore." His expression softened, even if his tone didn't. "We won't be holding our reception here."

A testy gust of wind scraped over her cheeks, a dozen arguments jamming in her throat. Dylan had no way of knowing how much she'd counted on booking their reception. On the deposit that could've covered at least a couple repairs.

"Mariah wanted to get married in Whisper Shore since she doesn't have any family in Detroit, and I couldn't help bringing up this place. You have to understand, Autumn, I didn't think you'd still be here. I assumed someone else would be running it by now. After all, you said . . ."

His voice trailed as her own words on the day she'd returned his ring came back to her in snippets.

"I have this dream . . ."

“If I don’t feed this restless piece of me now, I’ll regret it later. I know I will.”

“I’m sorry, Dylan.”

Though spoken years ago, the desire, her dreams, hadn’t lost their weight. Circumstances had simply delayed them.

“I know what I said.” A sigh dangled from her voice now. “But things changed, and—” her forced chuckle came out garbled and fake—“I’m still here.”

“And Mariah doesn’t like that. As soon as we got to town, well, you know how people talk here.”

Oh yeah, she knew. Gossip made its way from the town a mile down the shore to her lakeside inn with lightning speed.

“I tried to talk Mariah into at least coming out to see the place. But then she caught a glimpse of the Hunziker Hotel.”

Her jaw pinched as the unwelcome image of their main competitor’s pristine building arose. Small-town charm on the outside, sleek and modern amenities galore on the inside.

Autumn’s spirits slumped as the front door banged open and footsteps sounded on the whitewashed porch boards. Harry to the rescue, probably. A little late for that.

“Autumn, you’ll never guess who just reserved a room in December.” Harry’s voice tapered off as he came up beside her, his skinny basketball player frame towering over her. “Dylan,” he said, greeting stiff and maybe even a little protective. Sweet and brotherly, if unnecessary.

“Hi, Harry. Anyway, I’m really sorry, Autumn. Mariah knows what she wants. And . . . well . . .” He shrugged. “She was gung ho to check out the Hunziker Hotel tonight, but their staff is all busy with the welcome home party for the mayor’s son, and—”

This time she couldn’t hide her flinch. “Wait, what?”

Dylan buttoned his coat. “Some party at Mayor Hunziker’s house.”

“The mayor’s son?” Harry asked. “Who . . . ?”

Autumn folded her arms, fingers clenched, as a hundred memories of her sister’s pained eyes scraped through her mind. “Dylan’s talking about Blake, the younger son. You know, the one who’s been in all the headlines, with Miranda Woodruff.” Her answer fluttered like a lone leaf clinging to a naked tree.

As if she’d needed one more reason to leave Whisper Shore. Blake Hunziker had finally come home.



After more than half a decade playing adventurous nomad, was it pathetic that coming home felt like the bravest thing Blake Hunziker had ever done?

Blake turned his car onto Cedar Lane. The years away might’ve reshaped him, but it hadn’t changed this street. It was the same as ever. Bony trees casting craggy shadows in the early evening dim. Brick houses rising from expansive lawns, manicured hedges walling each property. The ashy scent of someone burning leaves.

“All right, Kevin. This is it. Last house on the right.”

The mutt in the passenger seat only tipped his head, his straggly brown-and-white hair flopping over his eyes.

“Dude, you need a haircut more than I do.” It’d be a miracle if his mother allowed the dog in the house. But Blake hadn’t been able to leave the mangy animal where he’d found him, stranded along the highway a good fifty miles from Whisper Shore—skinny and limping. He’d stopped by a couple vet’s offices along the way, leaving his contact information in case the owners turned up.

Which had been a pretty good procrastination effort if he did say so himself.

Blake parked in his parents’ driveway, exited, and rounded

the vehicle. He jabbed one arm into the open trunk of his inherited cherry red Firebird—would it never stop feeling like Ryan’s car?—and pulled out his duffel bag, the one that had seen more airports than he could count. He slung it over his shoulder, closed the trunk, and moved to the passenger door.

“Okay, Kev, you get to hang out here for a little while. Just until I see how this is going to go down.” He unrolled the window a bit to provide Kevin some air and turned, hesitant resolution thudding through him as he covered the distance to his parents’ front door, behind which he’d probably find his father’s steely eyes and his mother’s disappointed frown.

Because surely they’d seen the interviews when they returned from their international vacation. The tabloid covers. Headlines. *TV Host’s Husband Exposed As a Fraud*.

Yep, he may only have been back in the States himself for a few months, but it had been . . . an eventful few months.

A restless wind whooshed over his skin as he reached the door. The hair curling out from under his stocking cap tickled the back of his neck. Was it just him, or was the lion’s head doorknocker glaring at him? Like it, too, was angry at Blake for skipping town and taking so long to make his “triumphant” return.

Well, I’m here now, Aslan.

No roar in reply, only the sound of Blake’s knock puncturing the quiet. And his heart performing a Riverdance routine. He shifted as he waited, his duffel bag jostling against his thigh. Another knock. Another impatient shuffle of his sandal-clad feet.

Note to self: November. Cold. Shoes. Finally he shrugged, grasped the doorknob, and pushed his way in.

And then stopped two steps into the house, greeted only by the dark marble-floored entryway. What little sun lingered

outside the front door did him no good. Someone had drawn the curtains.

Okay, pause. He *had* called to tell them he was arriving today, right? His mother had answered. Said they were home from their African safari. He hadn't hallucinated that whole conversation, had he? Did they really care so little that he was finally coming home?

"Hello?" He croaked the word, and his bag thudded to the floor. "Helloooo." Singsong this time, sounding like the kid he used to be and not the almost-thirty-year-old playing reluctant prodigal.

A creak. A whisper. And before Blake could make a move, the lights came to life and people, so many people, erupted into cheers, spilling into the entryway from the dining room to the right. His gaze hooked on the *Welcome Home* banner hanging from the base of the second-floor balcony.

And Mom and Dad, standing in the center of the room. Smiling like . . .

Like he hadn't once destroyed their world and then from it, disappeared.

"Whoa." It came out an awed whisper as someone hit the stereo—smooth Miles Davis, his father's favorite. Hands patted his back, chatter sprinkling the room as the party fanned out.

"Son."

Linus Hunziker stepped forward. His linebacker frame had slimmed since Blake saw him last. The silver that once streaked his temples now covered his head. And when had his father traded in his classic leather shoes for something out of an orthopedic catalogue?

Blake met his father's eyes.

The lines etched around Dad's mouth deepened as he grinned and grasped Blake's hand. "Don't ask. Someday

you, too, will fall prey to a bossy podiatrist.” The handshake turned into a full-blown hug.

Blake stepped back, numb disbelief finally wearing off. “I can’t believe . . .”

Mom squeezed in then, nudging Dad out of the way and throwing her arms around Blake’s neck. Almost laughably diminutive compared to Linus, Francie Hunziker barely came up to her son’s shoulder. Though small, his mother had a fierce side to her. One flash of her brown-almost-black eyes and she’d been able to silence her sons at their wildest. “Hey, Mom,” he said over her head.

Dad wound his arm around Mom’s shoulders when she moved to his side. Blake pulled the hat from his head, raked his fingers through his shaggy hair—a self-conscious move. He’d expected anger. Maybe tears from his mother. If not because of his disappearance after his brother’s funeral, then at least because of his latest stunt. The one that landed him on TV and made his name a household laughingstock.

This . . . happiness? So not in his crystal ball.

Miles faded into a hush, replaced by the brass of Sinatra’s “Come Fly With Me.” Someone, maybe one of his father’s employees, clapped his palm on Blake’s shoulder as he scooted past, aiming for the buffet table edged against the base of the open staircase. “Welcome home, Blaze.”

His father chuckled at the use of Blake’s nickname—the result of one too many accidental fires over the years. The sparklers. The metal travel mug in the microwave.

“I don’t get it,” he finally sputtered. “I thought—”

“Whatever you thought, let it go. Your mother and I couldn’t be happier you’re home. Lose the duffel and enjoy your party.”

So many questions somersaulted through his brain. Didn’t they wonder where he’d been all this time? Why he’d finally

come home? What had possessed him to agree to last month's celebrity charade? Emotions—too many to name—pressed in as this place, so familiar and forgotten all at once, blurred Blake's mental vision.

Home. Ryan. And Frank Sinatra telling him to fly.

"Want something to eat?" Mom's voice cut in.

His stomach rumbled at the thought of food. He glanced down at his holey jeans. "I should run upstairs and change first."

Linus reached for the duffel and placed it over Blake's shoulder. "Hurry down."

Blake nodded, then wove through the crowd, returning greetings and smiles. He took the stairs two at a time to the second floor, his sandals flopping against each step.

Music and voices faded as he walked past the doorways to the room he'd called his own for the first eighteen years of his life. Twenty-two if he included the summers he'd spent at home between college semesters.

On a different night he might've trailed to a stop outside Ryan's door, let a rush of memories whisper over him—maybe even wished for a ghost of the older brother he still missed.

But something had changed the moment the lights flickered on downstairs, when he'd heard pride instead of punishment in his father's voice. Reluctance morphed into pulsing determination.

In his old room, posters and basketball trophies had been replaced with generic prints and whatever knickknacks Mom must've tired of seeing elsewhere. He pulled a pair of wrinkled khakis from his bag. A white collared shirt, too. Closest he had to dressy.

Maybe this whole not-living-out-of-a-duffel thing would stick.

Maybe he could finally be the son his parents had lost.

The man Ryan would've been. Work at Dad's hotel, settle down. Meet the right girl—as in, not a celebrity, not a fake relationship.

Not that pretending to be a DIY celebrity's husband hadn't had its fun moments. He'd agreed to the crazy scheme solely to help Randi Woodruff attempt to save her television show, *From the Ground Up*. And honestly, it'd been pretty cool watching her pick up the pieces when the lie of a life she'd built for herself came crashing down.

She'd changed. Found love, the real thing. And faith. Most of that didn't make it into the tabloids, though. And now, almost a month after moving out of Randi's home, the whole thing felt a little like a dream. Well, except for the lingering swirl of media interest—which he'd mostly managed to dodge during the past couple weeks.

But what if he could find the same things Randi had—new life, freedom from the past, the kind of identity he could be proud of rather than a reputation shadowed in shame? It was that hope that'd prodded him home even when worry about his family's—the whole town's—reception crept in.

Blake traded in his sandals for a pair of leather shoes he found in the closet and soon after descended the staircase. The chandelier overhead cast a whitish yellow glow over the heads of his parents' guests. What were the chances they'd invited anyone under fifty-five?

The clink of silverware against glass stopped him at the bottom of the stairs. Dad lifted his arms to quiet the attendees. "All right, as everyone can see, my son has rejoined the party." His father motioned to him. "Come over here, Blake."

But Kevin was still in the car. He'd hoped to slip out and free the dog. Blake rubbed one hand over his stubble-covered chin, catching the look of anticipation in Dad's

eyes. Kevin could wait a few more minutes. He moved to his father's eyes.

"Most of you know Blake has spent a fair amount of time traveling. For a while he led excursions in the Rockies. Then for the past five years he's globe-trotted so much, *Lonely Planet* should hire him. You've probably also heard about his more recent, um, exploits."

Dad paused to allow a sprinkle of polite laughter.

"Blake's an adventurer. And while Francie and I might have appreciated a few more postcards over the years"—Dad gave Blake a pointed look—"we're overjoyed at his return. So I'd like to present him with a gift. Delaney?"

As in Ike Delaney, Blake's old flight instructor?

Dread wormed its way under Blake's skin as Ike moved to the center of the room, something jingling in his hands. The pilot's smile—friendly, exuberant—jarred Blake's confidence. *No, Dad didn't . . .*

"The keys to your Cessna 206. A six-seater with a custom paint job. Took the liberty of naming it: *The Blaze*."

Chuckles spread through the room as Ike pressed the keys into Blake's hand.

"Now, this isn't a toy. It comes complete with a job offer—private pilot for the hotel, providing air shuttle for our high-end guests."

His father continued his speech, all gusto, no notice of Blake's heavy breaths. His fingers curled around the keys, metal digging into his palms.

He couldn't make out Dad's words, heard only the roar of wind from an open airplane door. The hum and growl of the engine. Panicked words from his brother's best friend. And his own silent prayers as he scanned the skies from the cockpit, knuckles white on the controls, begging God to let him be wrong. . . .

Nothing.

A slap on his back yanked him back to his parents' home. His father's voice. "Well, Blake, what do you have to say?"



She'd shrug it off. Dylan's cancellation. Blake's return. Just shrug it all off.

From the inn's front porch, Autumn watched Dylan's Lexus motor down the lane toward the road that would lead him south to town and out of sight. So they wouldn't be hosting their wedding reception here. So what.

She turned, jiggling the front door's finicky handle and hefting open the massive door. "So we won't be getting a new storm door anytime soon—that's what." Or new siding. Or fixing the cracks in the dining room ceiling.

From the check-in desk, Harry waved her over as soon as she tripped into the lobby. He'd zipped back inside earlier when they'd heard the phone ringing, leaving Autumn to say her awkward good-bye to Dylan.

A wash of orange sunset spilled through long windows, painting mint-green walls bold and glinting over the waist-high wood wainscoting. The lobby was flanked by a fireside sitting room on one side and the dining room on the other. A wide, open staircase divided the lobby.

Harry gestured again, phone propped against his ear. *Right*. He'd said something about a reservation.

"No, we don't have an indoor pool, but—" Harry offered her a helpless shrug as the person on the other end of the line started talking again.

See, this is why they kept losing guests to the Hunziker Hotel. Because apparently a spectacular view of Lake Michigan couldn't compete with the downtown hotel's spa and

indoor pool and oh-so-sturdy roof that probably wouldn't leak if a monsoon hit town.

"Unfortunately, no, it hasn't snowed just yet, but I can certainly try to put in a good word with Mother Nature." Poor Harry was definitely not winning this phone call. Which meant her inn was definitely not snagging this guest. She breathed her dozenth prayer for snow, for guests, then plucked a bottle of Old English and a rag from behind the desk.

"Find me when you're off the phone," she whispered, then headed for the dining room. Might as well check another to-do off the list while waiting for Harry. Guests received a complimentary breakfast in the table-dotted room, and it operated as a restaurant four evenings a week—for guests and the occasional community member who still remembered the inn existed.

Ten minutes later, she'd just about finished polishing the room's baseboards. She paused at the squeak of the swinging door leading into the kitchen, the sight of Betsy's purple old-school Nikes tapping to her side.

"Tell me what you're thinking, kiddo."

"Kiddo?" Autumn looked up from her kneeling position, the lemony scent of Old English wafting around her. "You're only nine years older than me, Bets."

"Yeah, but as your self-appointed big sister or maybe aunt—pick your surrogate family member of choice—I'm entitled to an endearment or two." The inn's chef straightened the apron cinched at her waist. "I saw Harry come in to catch the phone. Before he answered he said Dylan cancelled. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

Betsy tilted her head, black pixie hair held in place by a lace headband. "How fine?"

Autumn capped her bottle of Old English and stood. “So fine someone should write a song about it.”

“Autumn—”

“Why stop at a song? Why not a whole musical?”

Betsy’s eyebrows peeked under her swooping bangs. “With dancing?”

“And outlandish costumes.” She handed Betsy her rag and bottle, then reached around to pull a small notebook from her back pocket. Autumn plucked the pencil from behind her ear, drew a line through the second to last to-do on her list, and added, *Oil kitchen door hinges.*

“I think you’re avoiding the topic at hand.” Mild reprimand lingered in Betsy’s voice. Which is what made Betsy less girlfriend and more nagging babysitter in times like these.

Sometimes Autumn didn’t mind it. After all, her own big sister hadn’t stuck around to play the role. But today . . . no thank you. *I don’t need advice or a listening ear. I need guests. I need to catch up on mortgage payments. I need Dylan to turn his car around, say he changed his mind. I need that job in France.*

Any or all of it would do. Just some tangible signal God hadn’t forgotten her.

“Autumn.” Betsy tried once more.

Autumn turned away. Surely Harry was off the phone by now. She tracked toward the lobby, skirting around tables that probably wouldn’t see guests tonight. “Don’t you have cookies in the oven or something?”

“I think you’re more bothered than you’re letting on.” Betsy trailed behind her.

She sniffed the air as she passed into the lobby. “I think I smell something burning.”

Betsy’s voice followed her through the doorway. “I think I see Dylan again, hearing he’s booking the hotel instead

of the inn, and finding out Blake Hunziker is back all in the same afternoon is enough to fluster even you.”

Harry had managed to mention all that before answering the phone?

“You’re not even listening to me anymore, are you.”

Autumn tugged her hair free of her ponytail, and it fell in a mess of tangles to her shoulders. She sighed. “I’m listening, Bets, I’m just choosing not to let this turn into an impromptu therapy session. Because, seriously, I’m fine.”

Betsy’s eyes narrowed. “You do realize each time you say it, I’m less inclined to believe it.”

Autumn angled around the check-in desk. Truthfully, seeing Dylan again had been more humiliating than anything. Especially when he’d made that comment about her “fitting them in” the day after Thanksgiving.

Oh, if he could only see her empty appointment book. Almost as empty as their reservation spreadsheet—and that alone would be enough to make her financial advisor swallow his dentures.

But her financial advisor wasn’t the one charged with keeping the Kingsley Inn open. No, that had fallen to her. And the responsibility seemed just as heavy now—maybe heavier—as the day Mom had presented her with the deed. A surprise birthday gift two and a half years ago.

“I know your Dad would’ve been proud to hand down his family’s inn to you if he was still alive today.”

It had been all Autumn could do that day to clamp down her shock and plaster on a smile in a display of pleasure she didn’t feel. Because Mom hadn’t known about Autumn’s hopes to leave the Kingsley Inn and all of Whisper Shore in the dust as she took off on the trip of a lifetime. Her greatest dream had been to land an international job. It was the reason she’d called off her engagement in the first place.

Instead, she'd ended up with a commitment that often felt just as weighty as marriage. What was that Proverb about hope deferred?

Betsy leaned across the counter, voice dropping to a whisper since Harry still spoke on the phone. "Okay, so Dylan didn't bother you too much, but what about Blake?"

A clawing irritation finally scraped past her calm. "Closed subject."

"Autumn—"

"For the sake of what little calm I have left, Bets, drop it." She heard the dark tone of her tight words, saw the flinch Betsy tried to hide with a pause and a shrug.

And then, "Consider it dropped."

Betsy retreated into the dining room, the apology Autumn should've called after her struggling to get out from under the weight of a desperate desire to avoid the topic of Blake Hunziker.

She groaned as she replaced the cleaning supplies in a hidden shelf and then leaned over the surface of the desk, elbows propped, forehead in her hands. She heard the beep of Harry ending his call.

"What'd you say to her?"

Autumn only shook her head.

"You two bicker enough I could almost believe you really are related."

Autumn lifted her head. "Wasn't her. It was all me. I hate it when I'm like this. Snappish and . . . and . . ."

"Irritable?"

"Really, I'm irritable?"

Harry pushed his keyboard out of the way and balanced his elbows beside hers on the counter. "You actually want me to answer that?"

"Not so much."

“Well, this ought to cheer you up. It’s what I came outside to tell you.” He tilted his computer screen to face her. “Check out who booked the third-floor suite next month.”

Autumn leaned in to read the name on the screen. “Dominic Laurent.” She straightened, tapping her finger against her chin. “Dominic Laurent, why does that sound . . . ?”

“Think about it. The Laurent family? Ring a bell?”

“Oh my goodness.” The screech exploded from her. “Laurent Lodging International. He’s one of *those* Laurents?”

“It sounded familiar, so I Googled him as soon as I got off the phone. Definitely one of *those* Laurents.”

The ones who owned hotels all over the world—mainly Europe, but lately in the U.S. too. Hadn’t they just invested in a resort in Maine, turned it into a five-star destination? “He’s staying *here*? Do you think it means . . .” Autumn’s words rammed into each other as they tumbled out.

“Yeah, I do.”

“But how . . . ?” Autumn broke off at the sight of a pile of mail stashed beside Harry’s computer keyboard.

“Maybe they saw our website,” Harry said as she reached for the mail. “Or wait, we placed that ad in *Travel International* a few months back. Perhaps they want to invest? Or even buy you out.”

Autumn fingered through the envelopes, heart racing and hands suddenly clammy.

“Except you wouldn’t really sell, would you?”

Autumn stopped at the oversized envelope with the foreign postage. The words *Par Avion* stamped over the address. The name of the Paris hotel in the corner. This had to be it.

“Oh, this is a weird day.” The words came out a whisper. “A weird, weird day.”

Everything was happening in twos:

The thorns: Dylan and Blake.

The roses: Dominic Laurent and the envelope from France.
“Autumn?”

Harry’s voice pulled her from the fog, and she slipped her fingers over the envelope’s return address. She hadn’t told him about the job possibility, the phone interview two weeks ago. The nerves eating away at her as she waited to find out if her whole life might change by the time the new year rang in.

“You wouldn’t sell, would you?” he asked again.

Focus. Just until they’d finished this conversation. And then she could run home, tear into a bag of Reese’s Pieces, and rev herself up to open the envelope.

She looked up. “I-I don’t know.” She chewed on her bottom lip, hope and excitement and just a tinge of fear tangling into an untidy knot. “But any investment from LLI could keep us from going under. When’s he checking in?”

“December 20.”

Her breathing hitched. Three and a half weeks to get ready.
Three and a half weeks to save her inn.
Before finally saying good-bye.