

# Chapter One

My excitement builds as I rush down the jetway, trying not to bump into anyone. The four-hour flight from Boston was bad enough, but now everyone seems determined to get in my way. I struggle to remain calm, but knowing this is the start of the next chapter in Michael's and my life together doesn't help. It will be perfect, and I can't wait.

Michael moved here three months ago. After medical school, he accepted a neurosurgical residency in Wyoming. I stayed behind in Boston while he got things organized out here. We'd been inseparable for close to six years so it was a long three months, but I knew it would be worth it. This move is the start of something big.

As I reach the main terminal, I check my phone for the text Michael said he'd send telling me where to meet him. My heart flips as I see his message:

*Can't be there to pick you up so sent Rick. He'll meet you at baggage claim. He's tall and should have a dark cowboy hat on.*

I freeze and read it again. What could have happened? I push this thought aside realizing Michael's no doubt tied up at the hospital. I'll need to get used to the demanding life of a doctor. Now I only need to find a tall man in a dark cowboy hat. How difficult can that be? I race through the terminal, not really taking notice of the many people I dodge around.

At baggage claim, I find the carousel my bags should be at and, while waiting, I search for a tall man in a cowboy hat. This can't be right. Almost every man is wearing a cowboy hat, and most of them are dark. Right then, I hear a voice behind me. "Are you Miss Strake? Miss Jazmine Strake?"

I turn to find a tall, slender man, about mid-twenties, wearing the

prescribed dark cowboy hat. “Yes, I am. Are you Rick, my ride?”

“Yes, ma’am. Are your bags here yet?”

Ma’am? I doubt I’m even a few years older than him. “Please, call me Jazmine. They should be coming soon.” The carousel starts and bags are moving along in front of us. I spot one of mine and reach for it, pulling it off.

“I’ll take that, ma’am,” Rick says, taking it from my grasp. “Are there any more?”

“Just one more, and really, you can call me Jazmine.” I spot my other bag and point to it. “Here it comes.”

Before I can, he grabs it and, with my two bags in tow, turns and motions to the exits. “I’m parked across the way. It’s not far.”

We exit the terminal, and the cold hits me as he leads me across a large parking lot. I thought he said it wasn’t far? After a long trek to the middle of the lot, he stops at a pickup parked among the rows of pickups. I stifle a laugh. I’m definitely not in Boston anymore.

He stows my bags as I climb into the passenger side. Not a simple task given my short dress. I saw it in a store window last week and knew it’d be perfect for seeing Michael for the first time in months. For reminding him what he’d been missing.

Once inside, the warmth from the truck’s heater helps thaw out my legs. Maybe the dress is not the best for Wyoming? As Rick drives away from the airport, I watch the views passing, which further solidifies we’re not in Boston anymore. That’s okay. I’m here to start my new life with Michael.

As we park in the drive, I see the house for the first time. Depression threatens to overcome me, but I fight it back. Michael found this meager house in the country, wanting a place to relax from what promised to be grueling days ahead. I remind myself this is temporary. We will make do.

Rick helps me inside and sets my bags by the sofa as I scan the room. It’s modest and contains a few pieces of drab furniture arranged on the speckled gray linoleum covered floor. There is a gray couch, a small, scarred coffee table, and an old chrome and Formica dinette table with two vinyl cushioned chairs.

On the far wall is an open metal cabinet which appears to have woodgrain contact paper covering it. Two more chairs are on each side, and an old TV is on top. A gray metal wardrobe sits by the front door in place of a closet. The room’s distinct lack of color, thanks to the dull beige paint, and the musty smell speak volumes on its lack of attraction. The gray curtains covering the windows and a single frameless mirror above the TV are the extent of the decorations.

“It’s not the Taj Mahal, but it should work for now,” Rick says.

“It is rather basic,” I agree while surveying the minute room.

He interrupts before more dread appears. “Dr. Stenson said your boxes are in the back bedroom.”

“Oh, perfect. Did Michael say how long he’d be?” The title of doctor makes me smile, which helps since I’m seeing little reason to be positive.

“Ah, no, ma’am.” Something in his voice causes me to break off my survey of the room and turn in his direction. He’s holding out an envelope. “Dr. Stenson said to give you this. He said it will explain things.”

“Explain what things?” Negative thoughts flood my brain.

“I’m not sure. He said to give it to you when we got here. I’m sorry, but I’m on the late shift and need to go to make it in time.”

The sound of the door closing behind Rick intensifies my sensation of being alone. I stand in what they call a great room, but it doesn’t appear great to me. I fight to keep the overwhelming dread from consuming me, trying to concentrate on the positive. I can do this. We can do this. It’s temporary. The means to our future. All our hard work and sacrifice for his schooling is about to pay off. Yet here I stand, and no Michael.

The envelope Rick gave me doesn’t help my thoughts to remain positive, and magnifies the silence closing in around me. Jazmine is written in bold letters on the front, mocking me. Fearing what it might hold, I’m reluctant to open it and eliminate any chance I’m wrong. Why do I jump to the negative? This could be anything. Maybe my worst fears are nothing but that. However, with my past life and its disappointments, I always expect my worst fears to come true. He could be working the late shift at the hospital? But why wouldn’t he call? If there was an emergency and he’s assisting surgery, he couldn’t call. But a letter?

My pulse races as I stare at the envelope in my shaking hand. I know I must open it. Breathing is hard, and I’m sure I hear my heart pounding over the whooshing sound in my ears.

With a diminishing thread of hope, I open the envelope and remove the pages. I focus on the words while fighting to stay positive. As I read, tears fill my eyes.

*Dear Jazmine,*

*I trust Rick found you. I’m sure you might be a little shocked and I’m sorry, but I have thrilling news.*

*About a month ago, the head surgeon, Dr. Williams, wanted to see me. He said he was impressed with me and that he’d been talking with a colleague*

*about me.*

*To cut to the chase, there was a position for me in the residency program at UCLA Medical Center. He explained my talents demanded more than they could provide here and told me all about the program there. I couldn't let this pass.*

*The next few weeks were a blur. I wanted to tell you but didn't want to jinx it. Last week, all the details were finalized. The one issue was I needed to be there before you arrived. Not my choice, but I couldn't say no.*

*It was obvious this was fate since everything just fell into place. I have a place to live with Dr. Williams' daughter, Felicia, who is also going to UCLA for her psychiatric residency. We hit it off right away.*

*I needed to be there by Thursday, meaning yesterday, and it being a two-day drive, Felicia and I left Tuesday. Sorry I couldn't let you know sooner, but things snowballed and before I knew it, I had to leave. You'd already sent back the signed lease for the house, so I left it in your name. Now you're set. It's not much, but a year will go fast. You can find another place then. I was going to call to tell you not to come, but I knew how much you wanted to get out of Boston. Now you are. I used part of the money you sent for the first and last month's rent and to get the utilities started. The boxes are in the back bedroom, and I stocked a few groceries.*

*Jazmine, it's incredible how everything worked out for us. We're away from Boston and able to start our new lives. I appreciate all you've done and know you're thrilled with this fantastic opportunity for me. You're a special friend.*

*Now I leave you to start your quest for the perfect life. You deserve it. Take care, and with any luck, we'll meet down the road.*

*Michael*

My heart creeps into my throat and warm, salty droplets spill down my cheeks. My legs weaken, and my knees buckle. The couch breaks my fall as I land on it. My eyes blur from tears as I read the letter over and over, hoping I'm missing something, but deep down I know I'm not. I thought ours was a close relationship, I thought we were about to start our perfect life. He makes it sound like this was nothing more than one friend helping another. I left everything behind in Boston to be with

him, and now he wants me to start my quest? What happened to our quest?

My sobs rack my body, and while I wipe my eyes yet again with my already damp palms, I consider the possibility I'll never recover from this dark, desolate place.

The pages fall from my shaking hands, floating to the floor. I can't handle this. I've never felt so abandoned, so hopeless, so alone. Unable to stop, I slump to the side and end up lying on the couch in a ball. My arms hold on tight to everything I have, which is me, nothing but me.

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I wake in a dark room. Somehow, I found my way to a bedroom. My coat is over me, but being cold and seeing my boxes in the moonlight, I stumble to reach them. After rummaging through, I drag out a blanket and wrap it around me, tumbling back on the bed. Once again, I'm all alone.

My head knows he's gone, but something has pulverized my insides. There's nothing left. How could he think we were nothing but friends hanging out? I thought what we shared was real. How did I not see this coming? The tears continue as my mind searches for answers. Was he biding time until a better offer came along? Someone he could upgrade to, like Felicia?

There's been a lot of sorrow in my life, but nothing like this. The pain in my chest is excruciating, and I hope it's a heart attack and I'm never able to leave this bed.

I wake again with the blanket wrapped around me, but it's little comfort. It's a struggle to rise, but I make my way out to the front room. In the pale moonlight it's even more depressing, and my gaze lights on the pages of Michael's letter spread out on the floor. My legs give way and I drop, but there's no couch to land on this time, nothing but the floor. With my legs against my chest, I pull the blanket tight. I should get up, but I have no energy.

While I lie, the tears flow again as thoughts of Michael fill my mind. The joy he brought back to my life. How he helped me to open myself to someone else. To concentrate on the positives. The fun we shared shopping for bargains and adding our own touches to our apartment. How for the first time since my father, I felt someone deeply cared about me. We shared everything and spent every moment together. Even when buried in our own school work we were together, across the table from each other. There was a home and someone to share it with, and that was all we needed. Now, there's no Michael. I'm alone.

I must have dozed off again, because the cold seeping through

the blanket from the hard, worn linoleum wakes me. I struggle to get up, my stiff body refusing to cooperate. The realization there's dim light coming through the dingy windows gets through my stupor. Crawling to the couch, I gather my strength to stand behind it and gaze about the room. The dull light of the breaking morning does nothing to improve what is around me.

Not knowing where to go but needing to move, I take the few steps to walk past the couch. I trip on my bags and grab the couch to stay upright. My gaze again finds the pages of Michael's letter spread across the floor. Tears fill my eyes, and knowing I'm losing it, I stumble back to the bedroom, toppling into the bed.

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When I wake again, sunlight fills the room. My phone shows it's close to noon, but the shock is it's Sunday. My flight here was on Friday, which means I slept through Saturday and most of this morning. I can't remember ever feeling like this, not when my mother died, or when my father left. Not even when I lost everything and moved into a foster home. This pain will never end.

It's not far, but stumbling to the meager bathroom adds to my misery. The hideous image in the flaking mirror startles me. My makeup is smeared, my hair's a mess, and my eyes are red and puffy. The revolting reflection matches how I feel.

There isn't much here. The small, worn sink below the mirror has visible cracks and two tatty faucets. The toilet crammed beside it has a seat but no lid, and there's a large tank mounted above it with a hanging chain. Across from these is what you could call a bathtub. It's miniscule, and there's not even a shower.

Maybe a bath will help? After turning on the water, I stagger to the bedroom to collect what's needed and return.

The water is getting warm, but I can't find the switch to shut the drain. There's a rubber stopper on a chain attached to the faucet. How old is this place? After plugging the drain, I undress. As I slip my dress off, I remember how excited I was seeing it in the store window, thinking Michael would be even more excited when he saw it on me. Now he never will. Not that he would care what I wore. It's only me, after all. The loser who sacrificed so much for him. The naïve little girl whose dreams will never be real. I want to toss the dress aside, but it's not its fault I can't attract anyone. That's all on me. I'm the one no one can stand to be around.

In the bedroom, I slide the thin, gray curtain covering the small closet open and hang the dress. It's a good thing I don't have a lot of clothes. Back in the bathroom, I step into the bath. While trying to lie

back and let the heat soak into my body, its minute size becomes painfully obvious. As soon as I contort my body into a semi-comfortable position, I need to sit up to turn off the water. At least it's not a long reach.

I try not to think about my dismal life. My attempt fails and soon I'm crying again. Maybe I should end it all, let myself sink below the water and let go. No, that's not me.

The water is cooling, so I drain some and add more. The water coming out is colder than what is in the tub so I shut it off. With hardly any water left and my body shivering, I know my bath is over.

While drying off, I catch my reflection again. At least my face is no longer smeared with makeup. I brush my auburn hair the best I can, which takes time since it's well down my back. Michael bugged me about the time I wasted on my hair, but I prefer it long. After returning to the bedroom, I put on cut-offs and my favorite shirt. It was my father's and all I have left of his. It's old and several buttons are missing so it might reveal more than it should. Not that anyone is here to see. I could parade around nude.

Might have to, since my budget didn't allow much for clothes. While packing, I'd thought this would change since Michael would have an income here. Now, though, what I have must last even longer.

My suitcase is open where I left it, with the boxes from Boston off to the side. They contain everything I own. Might as well sort out my meager belongings. It's all on me, and will be from now on. What else do I have to fill my time? The tears start again.

Since there isn't much, it doesn't take long to unpack. It's a good thing I have so few clothes since there isn't much in the way of drawer space in the four-drawer scarred wooden dresser. In the kitchen, I find the basics, but knowing how to cook would help. Three frozen dinners are in the freezer, so I won't starve right away. When I discover there's coffee, I get my old coffee maker going and soon have a cup poured. I amble through to the living room, desperate not to let the drabness affect me.

With few choices, I flop on the musty couch and contemplate what is next. Michael's letter on the floor in front of me doesn't help. The tears are stinging my eyes again when I hear a knock. Before I can get up, there's another. After setting my cup on the bare coffee table, I hurry to the front door and open it. A man stands outside the porch door. He waves, smiling. The icy air making itself known makes me conscious of my missing buttons. I grab my coat and open the porch door, finding to my amazement a cowboy, complete with hat, boots, and a heavy coat I think they call a duster. I didn't know cowboys still exist.

I motion him into the enclosed porch and he steps in, removing his hat and releasing his mid-length light brown hair with its lighter blond highlights. He's much taller than my five-six, and even though he's wearing a heavy coat, appears more than fit. "Afternoon. I'm Jason Withers. My grandmother sent brownies to welcome you to the neighborhood."

"Neighborhood? I have neighbors?"

He chuckles. "She's the closest and lives over the hill. She wanted to welcome you, but she's not real mobile and asked me to bring these by," he says, holding out a covered plate.

"Oh! Well, thank you. I'm Jazmine. Jazmine Strake," I tell him, taking the plate. "You say your grandmother lives nearby? Do you live with her?"

He smiles. "No! She'd think I was trying to take care of her."

"Well, it was nice of you to bring this by. I'll return the plate as soon as I can." That is a farewell. I'm hoping he'll leave.

"No hurry, take your time. I understand you're here alone?"

I'm not sure if he's trying to make conversation or what, but he seems nice. "Yes, the original plans didn't work out."

"I heard they offered your friend a better position."

How small is this community? Does everyone know? "Would you like some coffee and brownies?" Why did I ask that?

"No, I shouldn't come in, but thank you, I enjoyed meeting you. Let me give you this. It's my number, in case you need anything."

As I glance at the card, I'm startled by his title. "Doctor? You're a doctor?" I pause, appalled at my tone. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like it sounded."

"No problem. I'm not the type of doctor you're thinking. I'm a DVM, Doctor of Veterinarian Medicine. A large animal vet. You can still call me though, if you need something."

"Well, thank you. I might take you up on it."

"You should. Again, welcome."

He turns to leave and I half expect a horse to be close by, but no. Instead, there's a monstrosity of a truck out front. I've never seen a pickup that big. Not that I've seen that many. His name on the door with the words "Veterinarian Services" along with his phone number makes me snicker. I guess everyone has his number. He backs out and gives a wave before making the turn onto the road.

Not knowing why, I watch him disappear down the road toward who knows what. Fingers of depression crawl across my skin once again. Here I am, in the middle of nowhere, and I don't know which direction to go if I needed to go somewhere. Besides, I have no way to get there

even if I did. How much more pathetic can my life be?

Back inside, I slip a brownie off the plate. It's rich and chewy and oh so tasty. I cram the entire thing in my mouth. Once in the kitchen, I set them on the worn, gray counter and leave before eating them all. Quite possible, considering my current mood. After taking the three steps to get to the living room, I stand still, thinking what to do. My image in the wall mirror is a fright as I realize my shirt reveals more than I thought. Why didn't I close my coat?

No wonder he didn't want to come inside the house. There's little left to the imagination. Might as well not even be wearing a shirt. I'm sure word will spread far and wide. In no time it'll be everywhere—how the big city harlot moved to town and flashed the local vet. Perfect, just what I need. As I collapse on the couch, the tears pooling behind my eyes pour unabated down my cheeks.

After more time wallowing in self-pity than I want known, I must do something. What is there to do? The memory of the brownies has me heading for the kitchen. Now I'm not a cook in any way, shape, or form, but I can make one thing well. Chocolate chip cookies are my forte. They were Michael's favorite, and I discover he bought everything I need to make them

While starting on the dough, my pathetic brain reminds me how he would sneak a cookie when they came out of the oven and was always asking for more. I tell myself to stop thinking about him, but I can't help thinking my life is over. I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts, and concentrate on the cookies.

Not impressed by the grungy appearance of the old kitchen sink, I try scrubbing it while the cookies are in the archaic oven, but find what I thought was grime and dirt are marks of wear. Knowing the stains are permanent helps me feel better, and I decide the sink should work for washing my hair. After retrieving my shampoo and a towel from the bathroom, I do the best I can with what I have to work with while monitoring the cookies. Once they are done, and with my hair in a towel, I head for the bedroom and my hair dryer.

With the cookies finished and my hair dry, it's time to do something, anything. After removing the brownies and washing the plate, I place a generous portion of cookies on it and wrap it in foil. In the bedroom to change, I remember how cold my legs were when I arrived in the short dress. This time I opt for a cute pair of jeans, a nice blouse, and one of my favorite sweaters. Knowing boots will work best, I put on my knee-high black leather ones with the four-inch heels. It's time to venture out.

My mind screams: What are you thinking? Where will you go?

Why even try? Just stay here in your miserable existence. But that's not me. I must move forward. I must push through this. Regardless of how pitiful I am. My first adventure outside will be to meet my neighbor.

Once I leave the house, it's obvious my Boston coat might not be enough for the weather around here. Even being October, the cold is noticeable. While it's more for fashion than function, my coat has a hood of sorts and my scarf helps a little. I forge ahead, determined to accomplish my task.

At the road, I pause, not sure in which direction to turn. The road goes over a hill to my left and levels out to my right. Left it must be since Jason said it was over the hill. I start with a purposeful stride. He said she's my neighbor. How far can it be?

After what feels like miles, I reach a driveway. Like in western movies, there's a sign stretching across above it reading "MOOSE RIDGE" and a sizeable house set back from the road with two large barns visible in the distance. It's a large, rustic, western-style house built with stone and timber. This must be it, since there's no other house in sight. Pushed on by the cold, I hurry along the long driveway.

At the top of the porch steps, I can't find a doorbell so I knock on the frame. After a few moments, there's movement behind the curtained window, and the inside wooden door opens to reveal a mature lady. Once she sees me, she hurries out and ushers me into the enclosed porch. "Well, where did you come from?" Her cheery voice brings a smile.

"I'm Jazmine, your neighbor. Jason dropped off the brownies, and I wanted to return your plate."

"Oh, my dear, you didn't have to so soon." She takes the plate while glancing out toward the driveway. "Where's your vehicle? You didn't walk here, did you?"

"It's okay, I'm used to walking."

"Come inside, and we'll see what's on this plate." She heads in without giving me a chance to say I should leave. Tentative at first, I follow her through the front door, thinking it's a splendid idea to get warm before heading back. She calls out, "These cookies smell magnificent. We must try them. Would you like something to drink? Coffee or tea?"

"I should go," I say, walking the direction she went. As I walk through the front room, I notice how homey it feels. The braided rugs spread across the shiny wood floor have similar colors to the elegant drapes covering the many windows. The style carries on as I walk past the wide staircase and across the dining room with its massive two column dark wood dining table surrounded by matching chairs and a

huge hutch filled with delicate china and crystal.

“Why? You have a hot date?” Right, like that will ever happen. “You can’t leave until we sample these cookies. Did you make them?”

I find her in the large kitchen where she’s setting the plate of cookies on the wooden table. “Well, yes. I didn’t want to return an empty plate.”

“Then your mother taught you proper. Many seem to overlook it nowadays. Which do you prefer? Coffee or tea?”

“Coffee is fine.”

“Have a seat and I’ll get it.” She indicates a chair by the table and walks to the counter where a coffee maker sits.

The warmth of the room provides a cozy and comfortable atmosphere. I drape my coat on the back of the chair before sitting.

She returns to the table with the pot and two mugs. “I like your sweater. Did you make it?”

I chuckle. “No. I’m afraid the cookies are the total of my homemaking skills.”

While pouring our coffee, she glances my way. “Well, the rosy color is picture-perfect for you. Highlights your blue eyes. Now, I must apologize for not introducing myself. Guess my manners are slacking. I’m Sadie, or Conswella Sandra Stephenson, but I prefer Sadie. Jazmine’s a pleasant name. Is it a family name?”

“No, it was my mother’s favorite flower. She used the z instead of the s.”

“Well, it suits you. You’re as pretty as any flower I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you.” Not liking the subjects of my mother or me, I need to find another. “Is Conswella a family name?”

“No, it was the name of my mother’s childhood friend. She vowed to use it for her first-born daughter. Sandra was my grandmother’s name. I’m sure you don’t want to hear all this.”

“Honest, I don’t mind. You were the first child, then?”

“Heavens, no. There were four boys before me.” She places a mug in front of me. “I was the only girl, though. After me were three more boys. Do you want sugar or milk?”

“Sugar will work. My, eight children? Must have made for interesting times.”

“Yes, we had our moments. However, my mother wished I was more like the original Conswella. I was too much of a tomboy. What did she expect? I grew up with seven boys on a ranch,” she says, chuckling. “Glad you chose coffee. Afraid you’d be a tea drinker when I heard you were from Boston.” Grinning, she slides the sugar my way.

“No, not me. Mind you, I didn’t always live in Boston. I’m from New York City.” Why do I feel so comfortable talking with her? “The coffee is delicious. Seems to have a pinch of something.”

“A little cinnamon makes it special,” she says, and I notice a slightly mischievous expression as she takes a bite of cookie.

“It does. I’ll have to try it.”

“A hint is all you need. I’m sure you’ll get it right. Anyone who can make cookies like these will have no problem.”

“Thank you, but these are the full extent of my baking expertise.”

“I doubt that. These are excellent. Did your mother teach you to make them?”

“No, it was trial and error.” I don’t want to get into my past.

“Well, you hit on a winner. I hope I’m able to make them last. I might eat them all tonight.”

“You go right ahead. There’s more where these came from.”

“If you’re from New York City, why did you move to Boston?”

“I went to college there.”

“There are fine schools in Boston. Which did you attend?”

“Harvard.”

“Harvard’s a wonderful school. Were you an undergrad?” I’m sure she’s doesn’t mean to be nosy.

“Yes, and continued to get my MBA and MSF.” I enjoy sharing this, even if it may sound like bragging.

“An MBA is impressive, but what’s an MSF?”

“It’s a Master’s of Science in Finance. It complements my MBA.”

While we chat, I glance around. It’s such a sizeable house, I can’t believe she lives here alone. I wonder if she gets lonesome in such an enormous place. Even in my matchbox of a house, I feel alone.

“This was my parents’ home,” she says.

“It’s nice. Large enough for eight children, for sure. Do your brothers live close by?”

“No, I’m the last of the family remaining. My two oldest brothers never came back from the war. One died at Pearl Harbor and the other in Europe during the Battle of the Bulge. Two other brothers died while serving. One in Korea, and the youngest in Vietnam.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. That must have been heartbreaking to lose so many to war.”

“They happened years apart, and war didn’t take them all. Another died of influenza, the same as our mother, and another in a car accident. The brother before me died of cancer five years ago.”

Knowing her thoughts are on her many losses, I feel the need to say something. “I’m sorry to cause you to remember them. I didn’t realize.”

“No, it’s fine. I think of them often. They played an enormous part in making me who I am, and I’m ever so grateful they were in my life, even if for nothing more than a brief time.”

She’s a resilient woman. I wonder what her secret is?

We sit for a while before she asks what I’m sure she’s been wanting to since I arrived. “Now, why are you here living down the road from me? Not the dream location for such a beautiful girl, not to mention a Harvard grad. Why Wyoming and why Cole Creek Road?”

“Not my first choice,” I say with a giggle. “Things didn’t follow the plan.”

“I know part of the story. Not much goes unnoticed around here. I’m sorry things didn’t work out. Remember, when one door closes, God opens another. It’s what I’ve found. You wait. There is something delightful coming for you. Mark my words. In less than a year, you won’t even recognize your old life.”

“Well, I’ll agree my old life didn’t turn out how I thought it would.”

“Don’t worry, dear. God has a plan. You need to allow Him to work things out. You’ll see.” I guess she’s one of those who believe in a god. With living all her life in such a rural area, I doubt there was much opportunity for an education or experience with the actual world. I’ll overlook it. She’s a sweet lady, and I don’t want to offend her.

We sit, and she describes the surrounding area. It’s obvious I’ll need to figure out how I’ll get places. With my cup empty, I let her know I should get back. It’s getting dark out. She walks with me to the front and helps me with my coat. I thank her again for the brownies, coffee, and the visit.

Just before I leave, she hands me a flashlight. “Here, you’ll need this. Don’t want you wandering around in this cold. Now you be careful!”

“I can’t take this,” I say, holding it out.

“It’s a loan. You’ll bring it back tomorrow.”

This catches me by surprise. “I’m coming back tomorrow?”

“Of course. You need to go shopping and don’t know your way. In the morning we’ll go shopping.”

It’s not a request per se, more an order, but in a nice way. She’s lost me. “How? I don’t have a car.”

“Not a problem. You’ll take my truck tonight. It’s parked on the side. Keys are in it.”

“What? I can’t do that.” Why would she do this for someone she just met?

“Why not? You drive, don’t you? Now, you need a vehicle, and my old pickup is sitting there doing nothing. You take it tonight, be back in the morning at nine, and we’ll have a beautiful day. Now drive careful.”

Seems I have no choice in the matter. “Okay. I guess.”

To my amazement, she hugs me. I’ve not gotten many hugs in my life and never one like she gives. It feels so enjoyable I’m close to tears. I’m quick to say thank you again and head out to find her old truck. She watches me through the bright gingham draped windows surrounding the porch as I walk to the driveway and give her a slight wave.

The pickup concerns me. My sum total of rides in a truck is one, and it was last Friday. There’s one parked near the back of the house, but it doesn’t appear old. Climbing in, one concern vanishes seeing it’s an automatic. The keys are in the ignition, like she said, and I try it.

It starts right away. Why does this surprise me? The heater is on max, and the windshield is clear. Here goes nothing. Once it’s in reverse, I back out with care.

The drive to my place is shorter than expected. Guess I didn’t walk miles after all. I bundle tight and climb out, taking the keys. Once inside, I put the flashlight where I’ll remember it. Not wanting to lie in bed letting my mind remind me of my pitiful state, I check out the TV.

There are more channels than expected. I come across the Hallmark Movie channel, which will do. I’m thrilled to find the small microwave on the kitchen counter works and put in one of my frozen dinners. One down, two to go. Maybe shopping tomorrow isn’t a bad idea.

After the second movie finishes, I shut off the TV. Another day in my catastrophe of a life is complete. As my eyes close to sleep, I must admit there were delightful times today. Maybe tomorrow will be even better. Yeah, right. What are the odds?