



*Legacy of the  
Celtic Brooch*

# Bootlegger's Bride



*Marty Kindall*

Bootlegger's Bride [Legacy of the Celtic Brooch Book 4]  
by Marty Kindall

**The Wild Rose Press**

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Welcome to the Legacy of the Celtic Brooch series. The authors of this series were handpicked by our editors at The Wild Rose Press, and asked to write a tale using an heirloom Celtic Brooch as the one constant in each story. Beginning in March, 2007 with English Tea Rose and Tarah Scott's *The Pendulum*, and ending sometime in early 2008 with Marly Mathews from the Faery Rose Line, we will follow this brooch on its mystical journey from Regency England to modern times.

It might show up as part of a dowry or be used to pay a ransom. It might be magical; it might simply be a piece of jewelry. Every author was asked to put her own spin on the brooch's appearance, and they have all done a beautiful job.

We welcome your comments on this series and hope that you will enjoy reading the stories as much as our authors enjoyed creating them for you.

Enjoy the journey!

*RJ and Rhonda*

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Dear Reader:

Thank you for purchasing this electronic copy of the fourth in our "Legacy of the Celtic Brooch" series. Please send the following code, along with your first and last name, to [legacyseries@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:legacyseries@thewildrosepress.com). You will be entered into a drawing for an actual Celtic Brooch.

The winner will be drawn at the end of the series, approximately January 2008. Only one entry per person per story is allowed. If you purchase all 13 stories as they come out this year you will have 13 chances to win this authentic Celtic Brooch.

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## Dedication

For Jo, who knows all about starting a new life.

## Chapter One

January 16, 1920

Bryeton, North Carolina

"What's the big deal?" Aidan Palmer struck a match against the sole of his boot and lit a cigarette behind his cupped palm. He pulled up the collar of his plaid, wool jacket against the biting winter wind. "Carolina's been dry since '08. Volstead Act nothin'. Federal prohibition don't change a thing 'round these parts."

"Only thing it changes," Frank Sharpe leaned in to say, "Is who's chasin' you and how much time you do if you get caught."

"And how much money you can make." Aidan leaned against the fender of his new Chevrolet 490. Frank had been on him for a couple weeks about running 'shine from Bryeton to the Piedmont in his new auto. Seems they couldn't keep up with demand.

The Volstead Act had enough teeth to keep him away if he were smart—and not bored to tears. As things stood now, though, he might need the money more than he needed his common sense.

"What do you say, Preacher Boy?" Frank pressed. "The bigger the chase, the bigger the pay."

Aidan didn't say anything. Just last night, he'd broken the news to his father that he had no intention of attending seminary. All those plans had been made before. No sense in being a preacher after all he'd seen and done in the Great War.



Reverend Palmer had been less than understanding, especially after Aidan admitted he'd spent the money the family had set aside for seminary on his new car.

Aidan took another drag on his cigarette, hiding the tremor of his hands in the shadows. "I say we head on down to the Stomp and celebrate that damn amendment with the rest of the unrighteous."

Frank roared his approval, and the pair hustled into the car for the short, bumpy trip along the riverbank.

Nestled behind a grove of trees, the Hickory Stomp had started life as a legitimate tavern, but had existed since 1908 as a kind of speakeasy. Everyone in town knew what went on there, and Aidan supposed the revelry would continue so long as no one prominent got hurt.

Since he was not the least bit prominent, he felt more than welcome. In the year and a half since his return from Europe, he'd learned to find the Stomp in the dark.

The joint was already jumping, spirited music spilling from between wide wooden planks. Yellow light splashed onto the hoods of the cars parked just outside. Aidan pulled the Chevy to a stop under the namesake hickory tree, just off the road.

Frank hopped out and ran ahead, like an anxious pup on the scent of good game. Aidan lingered, a twinge of envy leaving a bitter taste in his throat. Foolish boy didn't understand anything. He'd been too young to serve.

"C'mon!" Frank turned, framed in the open doorway, and waved him forward. "It's the Prohibition Ball!"

Because a drink sounded like the only thing that could wash his mind clean of memory, he smiled, and followed his

friend inside. What his father called 'debauchery,' Aidan preferred to think of as 'survival.'

As he squeezed through the doorway, someone handed him a drink. He held the glass over his head, and weaved through the jostling crowd. Men and women, most of whom he didn't recognize, danced like the world was about to end.

Crazy how just two years ago, the world really could have come to an end. Now, everyone seemed to have forgotten.

He downed his hooch in one shot, then shed his jacket and aimed for the far corner, where he liked to sit. Except this time, his usual table was occupied. A stunning young creature with copper hair and porcelain skin turned her ice blue eyes on him as he approached.

His blood ran colder than the frigid river. At this point, turning away was out of the question. Trapped, he took the other chair at the table, flipped it around, and straddled the seat. "Evenin', Grace. What are you doing on the outer edge of town?"

A sad smile bloomed on her painted pink lips. "Lookin' for you, Preacher. I couldn't believe my ears when they said I'd find you here."

He leaned on the slats of the chair. "Well, isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

Her soft reply slipped right under his skin. "I suppose so."

\* \* \* \*

Grace Louise McAfee Currie studied her old love. Aidan looked older, but then, she hadn't laid eyes on him since he'd enlisted, nearly three years ago. She'd only glimpsed him on

the street since his return. "Where've you been hiding yourself?"

His furrowed brow and sour frown made her feel more out of place, if that was possible. His clipped answer told her she'd made a mistake in tracking him down. "I've been right here."

Tears misted her eyes, and she glanced away. As if it had been up to her to find him, not the other way around.

Aidan's next words came through the din, soft, and clear. "I didn't know what to say to you, Gracie. I lost him."

Him, meaning her husband. The late, great, Carson Currie. First in his class, first to volunteer for the Army, and the only son of a well-loved county commissioner, Carson had a golden future in local politics if he so chose. The whole town had mourned his heroic passing, though he'd barely been eighteen.

Grace tilted her head, and took another look at Carson's former best friend. Dark circles of exhaustion ringed Aidan's moss green eyes, and he hadn't shaved for at least two days. His sandy-brown waves were cut too short, which made him look like he'd just rolled out of bed. She wanted to smooth him down, make him look like the gentleman she remembered.

"You didn't lose Carson," she answered, tucking her hands under the table. "You didn't even ship out together."

"I saw him that day—" Aidan stopped, as if he'd admitted something he'd never meant to. "By chance. I was on a three-day pass. I tried to talk him into asking for one, too."

"Let me guess." Grace smiled. "He wouldn't shirk his duty. Not even for you."

Jaw working, Aidan stared at the wall over her head. "He never came back."

Oh, he'd come back, all right. In a pine box, draped with an American flag. He'd been buried just around the bend, in Bryeton Memorial Gardens. "It's not your fault, Aidan. Is that why you haven't spoken to me since you've been home?"

His glazed eyes focused on her. He nodded, then looked away again, his fingertips white against the glass in his hand. "I asked after you, Grace. To be sure you were okay."

Grace almost choked on a laugh. Okay? Not in the least. "You had to know I'd want to see you."

His troubled gaze locked on hers, flooding her mind with questions. Did he remember all those years ago? Before Carson? Before her father and brother, for reasons of their own, had cornered her into marrying a man she didn't love? She and Aidan had lain under the stars, talking together about seeing the Seven Wonders of the World, living a life beyond ... all these limitations.

The music changed, and she made an effort to lighten the mood. "You know the Charleston?"

He nodded, the hard lines of his face softening as he extended his hand. He helped her to a little spot on the floor, and her feet started to move in time to the music. She closed her eyes and pretended, for just a moment, that she felt the frenzied happiness of the others in the room.

A sudden misstep on the uneven planks pitched her forward, and Aidan caught her around the waist, holding her

close a moment longer than necessary. She flushed hot, then cold, crushed against his chest.

Her heartbeat stuttered with hope. He might still care. She'd taken a huge risk, sneaking out of the house to come here tonight. She had to make him understand that with Carson dead, she'd become a McAfee again, with all the restriction and scrutiny that entailed. She feared that her personal history might repeat itself, that she wouldn't be a widow for long if the men in her family had their way. She hoped Aiden craved freedom as much as she.

Pulling back, she looked at him, her hands still fisted in his shirt demanding his attention, and tried to say everything in her heart at the risk of being turned away. *Save me.*

\* \* \* \*

Through the watery haze of his last drink, alarm bells sounded in Aidan's head. Something was very wrong. Grace McAfee shouldn't be here. They shouldn't be speaking. And she definitely shouldn't have ended up in his arms, looking like she needed him more than her next breath.

He smoothed stray wisps of hair from her cheeks and forehead, as if the room had melted away and no one could witness his affection for her, still strong after so many years.

Absence had made his heart grow madder. The crazy urge to kiss her surged through his veins, hotter than the bathtub gin Hal Whitting served up for the Sharpe brothers to run.

A flailing dancer bumped him, and he came to his senses, the whirlwind of music and drunken chaos rushing in again. He released her, and turned to the bar for another drink. Her

small hand clung to the back of his shirt, like she was afraid to lose him again.

The distilled liquor slid down his throat like a cold serpent. Maybe he'd drink enough swill to lose his vision, and no longer have to see Grace's beautiful, tortured face, remember how she'd abandoned him to marry Carson.

Her hand slid from the small of his back into his own hand, and he pulled away. She needed to talk, while he craved only silence from the voices in his head.

Over the din, he shouted, "Why did you come here?"

"I need you," she admitted, just as loud, not seeming to care who heard. "Aidan, please. Talk to me."

He sighed, and tried again to untangle himself from her. One conversation to clear the air with the woman he could never seem to wipe from his memory? He thought of a million other, less painful things he'd rather do. But she wasn't going away, and so long as they were together, he might as well get it over with.

"All right." He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her through the crowd like a rag doll. The cold night air hit him like a sobering slap in the face. If Grace needed her coat, she didn't say so, but stalked to his car and climbed inside.

Cloistered inside the Chevy, he turned to her. "Well?"

The tigress who'd pounced on him earlier, demanding his attention, now seemed demure. She drew a trembling breath and said the one thing he longed to hear. "I never stopped loving you."

Aidan turned his head and stifled the glimmer of hope in his heart. She couldn't mean it. She'd turned on him before

without explanation. "Is that why you married Carson? Because you loved me so much?"

"I was only sixteen!" she protested, eyes blazing. "I did what my father told me to do. I had to! You have no idea how awful he can be, how he twists everything around. I was scared."

Her stale argument sent him back in time, before the war, before everything had gone wrong. "My best friend, Gracie? You had to marry my best friend? Your daddy's not that much of a bastard."

"He threatened you, said he could drive your family out of town. I-I was too young to know truth from lies. And now I'm back there, with them, and all I can think about is you." Her voice drifted into a whisper. "I remember every word we said, every promise we made."

So did he. Those memories had been enough to keep him alive on freezing nights in a filthy trench somewhere in France. But she hadn't written any letters to him. Not a single word.

None of that mattered now. "I'm not the same man, Gracie."

Grace took a deep breath, and her next words fogged the window. Her warm fingers slid around his wrist. "We can be together now, while we're still young enough to have the life we dreamed about."

His heart froze in a potent combination of fear and hope. Only twenty-one, he felt more than twice his age. But she brought him to life. He sat still, buzzing with powerful

emotions for the first time since returning to the States. Common sense tempered the urge to give in to her pleas.

When glanced at her, his heart strained at the tears glistening on her eyelashes. Her voice trembled when she asked, "Do you still have it?"

"Have what?" he snorted, and pretended not to know what she was talking about.

The silence thickened while they sat side by side, yet miles apart. Her shaky breath broke the moment. "The brooch, the one my grandmother gave me. Do you still have it?"

Aidan's throat tightened around his answer. Of course he still had it. On her wedding day, he'd pinned it on the high collar of her dress, and forced himself to watch the woman he loved marry his best friend.

Afterward, when no one was looking, she'd slipped the brooch back into his hand after the ceremony had ended.

Was that why she'd come? Did she need that trinket to sell? Was that what this was all about?

"Aidan?"

His knuckles turned white as he choked the steering wheel. The confession tore from his throat. "Yes, I still have it."

This time, he welcomed her touch, the gentle stroke of her hand over his. She inched closer, and he reached for her, slipping his hand around the back of her neck to draw her toward him. Her head rested on his shoulder, the scent of lavender and rosewater making his senses spin.

Before he could stop himself, he tilted her head back and kissed her soft, willing mouth. Her fingers trailed up his shirtfront, over his collar and into his hair. She tasted like



peppermint and gin, and all the familiar memories he thought he'd left on the battlefield. He pulled back. "Gracie..."

"Don't talk, Preacher," she warned, laying her finger across his lips. With eyes wide, she smiled. "Do you remember?"

He groaned, and pulled her astride his lap. Of course he remembered. One long ago, starry night, two naïve lovers had found their way to one another. A different time, in a different place. Different lovers.

Biting her bottom lip, she nestled against him and closed her eyes, her body the perfect fit for his growing desire. One subtle swerve of her hips, and he claimed a searing kiss from her, a gentleman no longer, taking all he wanted...

Because she owed him.

He rained kisses across her cheeks, down her neck, and across her chest. Her warm, excited breath tickled his skin, and the words she murmured pushed him to the edge of control.

"Aidan..." she breathed, giving him a moment to regain his bearings. "You do remember..."

Her words stilled his hands. Despite how she seemed to need him tonight, and despite their long history—or maybe because of it—he slid her from his lap and back onto the seat.

Though she didn't protest, his heart settled into a painful gallop. He rubbed his chest, then reached for the key and started the car.

Just when he thought he'd blocked out the world, Grace stormed the gates. But he didn't know why, and he couldn't risk caring. It didn't matter. It was too late.

Wasn't it?

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"I'll take you home."

## Chapter Two

"Let me off here." Grace waved Aidan down a narrow alleyway, a short distance from the back of her family's huge brick home near the center of town. They hadn't spoken a word since he'd rebuffed her.

In those moments, being with him had seemed like the most natural thing in the world. Now, she worried she'd made a mistake. His silence soured her stomach. Had he changed so much in so short a time? Had she underestimated what it would take to rekindle their longstanding spark?

He idled the car just around the corner, and stared straight ahead, his fingers loose around the wheel. Her gaze moved from his hands to his profile. Square jaw set against some unseen enemy, he blinked, then glanced at her.

"Say something." She flinched at the hint of desperation in her voice. She'd missed him so much and needed him so badly. If he didn't feel the same way...

He leaned across the seat and kissed her forehead. "You should go inside, Grace. Night's not getting any younger."

That was it? Her hands went numb with her failure. She scrambled to open the door, and stumbled onto the gravel-strewn road. He lunged after her, and caught her by the wrist.

Gasping, she righted herself. He didn't let go. His eyes flashed, and he frowned. "I never could let you fall, Gracie."

Relief surged through her. "Give me another chance, Aidan. That's all we need, I swear."

He swore under his breath, then released her arm and retreated into the car. "Go inside. And don't come back to the Stomp—you don't belong there any more than I do."

Stung, Grace backed away and shut the car door. Ever the gentleman, he waited for her to walk to the house before backing out of the alley. She listened to his car roar down the street from behind the door.

Her hands shook as she unlatched the servant's entrance and stole into the kitchen with the nimbleness of a cat. When she reached the stairs, she stalled, one foot on the first step. Above, house lights shone brighter than the winter sun. Fear surged up her throat.

They'd discovered her missing. What else could go wrong this wretched night? Her father would have her hide, literally, and she'd never be able to break away again. Her fate as a pawn in her brother's games would be sealed.

A long shadow slanted across the stairs. Startled, she hid, hoping for another few moments to gather herself before the confrontation.

"Where have you been?" The sharp voice didn't belong to her father. "Grace Louise? I know you're down there."

Frozen in panic, she struggled for air. What was her brother doing here, in the middle of the night? Didn't he have his hands full enough with a house and family of his own?

Each tick of the grandfather clock in the hall echoed the dread building in her heart. She took a deep breath, then stepped into the pool of light at the bottom of the stairs and stared at her brother in mute defiance.

His lip curled as he took her in. She must look a mess. Without giving him time to fire questions, she marched up the stairs, forcing him backward.

"What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" she demanded, taking the offensive. The door to her parents' bedroom was shut, although light spilled from under the door.

"Father had another stroke, you twit." The newly elected county judge, the honorable Eldridge McAfee, inspected her from head to toe. "Probably because he discovered his daughter missing in the middle of the night."

"Shut up!" she snapped. If they didn't already know she'd snuck out, they would now. Of course, no one would have known a thing if not for the stroke. Was Eldridge right? Had she been a contributing factor?

Smoothing first her hair, then her dress, she started for her parents' room. Mother must be overwrought.

Eldridge stepped in front of her. "The doctor's with them now. Get yourself cleaned up. You look like a cheap whore."

Choking back an impotent mixture of resentment and rage, she whirled and locked herself in her bedroom. Propped against the door, she closed her eyes while scalding tears took their toll. Between Aidan's rejection and her father's ill health, the timing couldn't be worse.

But she didn't have time to think about Aidan, now. This was Father's third stroke in as many years. Could this mean the end for him this time? She had to be prepared to face the news that her father might not recover. Mean as he was, as much as she wanted out from under his tight control, the man

was still her father. She cared more than she wanted to admit.

And she worried very much about what might happen if her father didn't pull through. She'd known full well how to maneuver around the old man, but Eldridge was another matter. Just as mean, and ten times craftier, she knew he considered her a piece on the political chessboard, the same way her father had.

She grappled for something to comfort her, and flashed back to those warm moments when Aidan had held her tight as their mingled breath had fogged the windows. Her imagination, full of delicious desires, served as the only sweet reminder. She touched her lips to remember his kisses.

Seeing him tonight had been worth the risk. Now that her future spun on the edge of a dime, she clung to the memory for all its worth, and hoped against hope Aidan would give her the chance to prove how much she loved him.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan stumbled through the door shortly after dawn, without any pretense. One good whiff would tell his parents where he'd been, and most of what he'd been doing.

He expected them to be waiting, sitting in their matching chairs, wrinkling their brows, wringing their hands, and perhaps reciting a catchy line from a sermon or twelve.

They didn't disappoint. Even with bleary vision, Aidan flinched at their scowls of disapproval. Grace hadn't looked at him like that. She'd seen right through him, like she'd understood how much confusion he endured every day.

"You never tried to understand," he slurred, shutting the front door with his knee. "You never tried."

"Aidan..." His mother rose, but his father held her back. "Mary, there's no point. Look at him—he's a disgrace." Reverend Palmer strode toward his son, hands balled at his sides. "What's to understand? You're out every night, drinking, running around like a tomcat. You're shirking your responsibilities, young man."

"My responsibilities?" Aidan asked, his voice rising from behind clenched teeth. "It was my responsibility to serve my country, to go halfway around the world. My responsibility to use my weapon, to watch my friends die around me—and then to kill other soldiers before they killed me!"

The admission ripped his body open stem to stern. The strength of his words pushed his father back into the chair, and paled his mother's sweet face.

He took a deep breath to steady himself. "I come home, and no one says anything. No one wants to know what happened over there. You act like I never left home ... but I've changed."

Anxiety swept up Aidan's spine and broke through his skin in a cold sweat. Afraid he might lose whatever remained in his stomach, he fled to his bedroom. Before he could shut the door, his father followed him inside. Silence pulled the walls tighter around them. The breaking point had been coming for months, their entire disagreement centering on Aidan's refusal to attend seminary.

"Dad, I just don't know if I ... believe any more." Holding his head between his hands, Aidan sank onto the bed. "Not after what I've seen and done. Can't you understand?"

"Of course you still believe, Son," the reverend's unequivocal answer rang hollow, a failed attempt to transfer his faith to his child. "Once you get to school, you'll see you made the right choice."

"I told you. I'm not going." Tired of the same debate, he stood and crisscrossed the room like a caged animal. "I've told you a hundred times."

"Then you can't stay here." The hard edge of his father's voice barely registered. "You can't live here and continue to do the things you're doing. Do you hear me?"

Aidan stopped pacing and turned to stare at his father, a man with more care and compassion for strangers than his own kin. "What?"

"You have to try, Son." He came forward and laid a heavy hand on Aidan's shoulder. "You have to at least try to reclaim your future."

Aidan shook his head. Nothing he'd said or done could change his father's mind. The man would accept no other path than the one he'd planned for his only son long ago. Aidan would go along if he could.

Except he couldn't blank out the war, the nightmares, or the way his hands shook when a car backfired on the road. And nothing on his father's list excited him like the adventure of being with Grace again. He reached a simple conclusion. "I guess I'd best pack up."

His father's eyes widened. "That's your answer?"



"I'm tired of fighting about this." He worked his jaw, trying to find the right words. "I'm tired of fighting, period. I'm sorry I'm such a disappointment."

While the word 'coward' flashed across the reverend's face, it didn't come out of his mouth. "Son, sell that car, and use the money for school. You'll forget all about this foolishness in due time."

Aidan refused to beat his head against the stone wall of his father's will any longer. "I'll never forget. That's the problem. That's why I've got to go."

A sob came from the doorway, his mother, holding both hands over her face. Heartbreak pinched her small frame. "Patrick, please!"

The reverend shook his head and pushed past his wife. Seconds later, the front door slammed. He'd left the house, left Aidan alone with his mother.

"He doesn't mean any harm," she whispered, tears thickening her words. "He loves you so much."

"I know." Stepping to her, he circled an arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head, much like he'd kissed Grace to comfort her only a few hours ago. "I don't mean any harm, either, but things change—people change—and I can't pretend I'm the same as I was when I left. It would be a lie."

She squeezed the air from his lungs. "Where will you go?"

"I'll find something." He shrugged, and pushed away from her. He'd started and lost five jobs since his return. "At least I won't cost the reverend his parish. That's the important thing."

"You know it's not," she argued. Then her voice softened. "How much trouble are you in?"

"Ma," he assured her, "I'm not in any trouble, I swear. I'm just ... trying to find my place."

She nodded, and waited in the doorway while he packed his clothes and a few odds and ends. With his back to her, he reached under his mattress and retrieved Grace's brooch, safe in a little white box that he slid into his duffel.

Some things, a man couldn't leave behind. Other things were better lost than found.

Half an hour later, Aidan pulled up to the backwoods home of Joseph Sharpe, where Sharpe lived with his son, Frank. The one place in the world he wouldn't be turned away. And the only place he could mull over his situation with Grace Currie in peace.

Burly Joe met him on the saw-toothed front porch with a hunting rifle and a knowing smile. "Didn't you just leave?"

Aidan parked the car and ambled up the steps as Frank whooped from behind the screen door. Aidan grinned as he took a wary step down the wrong path. "Reckon I'm back."

Frank burst from the house, full of nervous energy even though he hadn't slept a wink. He threw a wiry arm around Aidan. "Old man kicked you out, didn't he?"

Nodding, Aidan shoved Frank. "You are one nasty buzzard—take a bath for cripe's sake."

Frank cursed, then fell silent while Aidan looked the elder Sharpe in the eye. Joseph slung the rifle over his shoulder and cracked a smile. "That mean you're in?"

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How deep into this bootlegging business could he go without losing his way? Swallowing a remnant of pride and a healthy dose of guilt, he shrugged. "Reckon so."

### Chapter Three

Aidan took a final drag off his cigarette, then flicked the butt out of the car and into the gutter. Half a pack had gotten him down the mountain and into town. Four days had passed since that night with Grace, and he couldn't get her off his mind.

Neither drink, nor a snowstorm blowing through the gap could erase the searing memory of her touch, the words she'd said about being together now. Reconciling the past with the present required another face-to-face meeting. This time without falling headfirst into old habits.

As he circled through the center of town, it became obvious that something else now interfered with his spontaneous plan to have things out with Grace once and for all.

A constant stream of visitors bustled to and from the McAfee house, dressed for church or some such occasion. He parked across the square, in front of the Copper Kettle, and watched as dusk closed in. Windows brightened, and still the people came, some carrying food.

Either a funeral or a wedding. He squinted as the front door opened, and a tall, thin man stood silhouetted against the frame. Eldridge McAfee. Aidan hesitated, remembering the young, starkly ambitious upperclassman from his school days.

The door closed behind a pair of exiting guests, leaving Eldridge inside. Aidan took a chance. He sprang from the car

and met the departing couple as they crossed the snow-covered grass of the square.

He recognized them as his father's parishioners. "Good evening, Mr. Monroe, Mrs. Monroe."

"How are you, Aidan?" Evan Monroe extended his hand, and his wife smiled. "So sad about Harlan—not unexpected, though."

"Yes, sir." Everything fell into place. He had to get inside that house. He bid the Monroe's a hasty farewell. "Be careful on the roads."

Grace's father was gone? Aidan's heart sank. As tough as that old bird had been, Aidan had often thought he might live forever.

He slipped his hand into his pocket and fingered the heavy silver brooch that Grace had given him. Whether or not he meant to return the token to her, this might not be the best time to have a conversation with her. Maybe he should head back before the roads froze over.

He glanced at the house, and spied a shadow in the upstairs window. Grace's room. The curtain drew back, and he felt conspicuous, hesitating in the moonlight. He'd know her anywhere, even without being able to see the fine print.

With grim determination, he forged ahead, and knocked on the front door. A few moments passed before a petite brunette opened the door. With one hand sliding over her pregnant belly, she waved him inside with the other.

"Ma'am," he muttered, stepping over the threshold.

"Come in, come in." She shut the door against the cold. "Let me take your coat."

Aidan shrugged off his jacket, and looked past the entranceway, into the living area. A standing-room-only crowd of mourners had gathered. Eldridge McAfee stood head and shoulders above most, and two tow-headed little boys circled his legs. The pompous man held court, puffing on a cigar, offering a long-winded introduction of some local politician.

"You know my husband?" the woman asked, shadows under her eyes giving away her exhaustion. "That's the new state senator with him, Alexander DeWitt."

"Who doesn't?" Aidan smiled over an unbidden flicker of jealousy and doubt about the presence of the senator in the house. The situation felt too familiar, too much like Grace's forced courtship with Carson. "I'm here to see Grace. To pay my respects."

"Oh." She blinked. "Last time I checked she'd gone upstairs with Mother. I'll see if I can find her."

"No, please, you're worn out ... I'm sorry, I don't believe I know your name."

"Sylvia," she filled in the blank. "You know your way around the house?"

"Once upon a time," he answered, already moving around her, toward the mahogany staircase. "I won't be more than a minute, anyway. Thank you."

She let him go with a weak protest, and he climbed the stairs before Eldridge spotted him. On the landing, he paused at Grace's lilting voice coming from the room ahead, her parents' bedroom.

"Just rest for a little while, Mama," she soothed from inside the doorway. "People will understand."

Aidan closed his eyes and let the sound of her voice wash over him, familiar and sweet. In it, he heard a reflection of the home he wished he'd returned to after the war. Over the years, he'd talked himself into believing that only she could make sense of everything he'd experienced, smooth away his rough edges the same way she did for her grieving mother.

"Aidan!" Her gasp opened his eyes as she rushed forward, into his embrace. "I didn't think you'd come..."

He tightened his arms around her, holding her fast while she shuddered against him. If he'd known about her father, he would have arrived sooner. With a presence of mind he didn't realize he had, he reached behind her with one hand to close her mother's bedroom door.

He stroked the back of her head, soothing her even as he took comfort in holding her again. "Hush, Gracie. I didn't know, I didn't know."

"I wanted to come to you," she whispered against his neck. "This ... it's been horrible. I'm so glad you're here. When did you find out?"

"Today. Just now." Guilt swamped him as he remembered his initial reason for coming. He gentled her away. Red-rimmed eyes showed a gathering storm of despair. He brushed copper waves of hair back from her face, and off her shoulders. A flicker of hope lit in his jaded conscience. "I'm so sorry..."

"Matter of time, at least that's what everybody says." She sniffed, then stilled in his arms. Taking a step back, she

studied at him, brows drawn together. "Why did you come, if you didn't know about my father?"

"What?" he asked, the emptiness that accompanied her retreat pouring confusion into his already jumbled mind. The urge to pull her close again and promise to take care of her threatened to undo his best attempt to reach some kind of understanding with her.

She frowned, and backed away another step. "If you didn't know, why did you come?"

Inside his pants pocket, he fingered the brooch, his fingertip sliding around the smooth circle of metal. "After the other night ... we need to clear the air, don't you think?"

"Clear the air? What do you mean?"

He hesitated, in the face of her recent loss, to confuse their situation any further tonight. Yet when would he have another chance to put her intentions to the test? He had to know how she truly felt.

Pulse thundering in his ears, he pulled the silver brooch from his pocket and opened his hand. "I came to return this."

She stared at the jewel as if she'd never seen the thing before. Then she looked away, toward her mother's closed door. Her shoulders slumped, and without warning, she began to shake. Covering her mouth with both hands, she stifled a heart-wrenching sob.

Aidan caught her as her knees buckled, and lowered her to the floor. The brooch clattered to the hardwood planks between them. She reached for it, then pulled her hand back in a fist, leaving the brooch on the floor.



At the moment she might have broken, might have dissolved into tears, her blue eyes flashed, and she jerked away. "You go straight to hell, Aidan Palmer, and take that thing with you!"

\* \* \* \*

"Who do you think you are?" How dare he come into her home and hand her back the one item that represented her love for him? If he felt nothing for her, he could just as well not have come in the first place.

Seeing through her initial outburst, she riled anew at the impish grin on his face. She gave into her anger and reared back, intent on slapping the smile off his handsome mug.

Aidan stopped her on the downward swing and pulled her close, fending off the attack with a well-timed, forceful kiss.

Confused, her body responded before her head or her heart. She wound her arms around his shoulders, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

When he pulled back, she tightened her grip. After all the grief this long week had brought to her doorstep, how could he toy with her this way?

But he was still smiling, and she caught a glimmer of the old Aidan she knew and loved.

"Don't play games with me," she breathed, her fingers finding her grandmother's brooch between them, its face turned down against the floorboards. "Not now."

His expression grew serious. His hand covered hers, pressing the pin against her palm. "No more games. For either of us. Deal?"

Her heart turned over in her chest. Had she passed some kind of test? No matter—she wanted what she wanted, regardless of how many gauntlets he threw down. Eldridge had not been subtle in having her meet Alexander DeWitt. He wanted to marry her off. Carson had been a small catch compared to the fish Eldridge hoped to reel in this time.

"Deal." With that, she regained a fraction of her daring, and looked him in the eye to make her pitch. "Run away with me."

Holding her breath, she watched emotion play over his face, tightening his forehead, then lifting the corners of his mouth. She might have misjudged how badly Aidan wanted a new start, but not by much.

When he didn't answer, she sold the idea with excited whispers. "You and me, Aidan, free in the world. We can go wherever we want—do all the things we've always wanted to do. Now is the right time—we might never have a better chance."

A sad smile and a slow shake of his head rewarded her effort. He didn't want to leave his family, perhaps, or maybe he'd decided to attend seminary after all. Her heart pounded in her ears, making it close to impossible to hear his answer.

"How?"

Hysterical laughter bubbled up her throat. How, indeed? He had an automobile, but they'd need other things, like cold cash to clear town and find a new place to start their life together.

Apparently unable to suppress a chuckle of his own, he ran his hand up her forearm, lingering at the elbow. "What's so damn funny?"

Leaning into his shoulder, she prodded, "Is that a yes, Preacher?"

His knuckles grazed her cheek while his soft, honest answer brushed her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. "I told you I could never let you fall."

"We'll find a way..." She pressed her lips to the spot on his neck where his pulse jumped, a sigh of relief escaping against his skin. Behind her, the bedroom door creaked open.

"Mama?" Grace skittered away from Aidan, clambering to her feet like a newborn foal. "Why aren't you resting?"

Muted understanding bloomed on the silver-haired widow's face. She lifted her finger, and pointed at Aidan. "The preacher's come?"

Grace gulped past her fear, and approached her mother with both false calm and genuine concern. "Yes, Mama, he's finally here. See? Everything you wanted."

While he straightened, Aidan studied the scene before him. He didn't utter a word, and Grace steadied herself when he tilted his head.

"Yes, Grace." She patted her daughter's shoulder. "Harlan would have liked him, I think."

"I'm sure he would." Grace bit her tongue and swallowed the truth. Her father had tolerated Aidan because Patrick Palmer was the minister at their church, at times a political ally. Not because he had any affection for Aidan. "Why don't you go back to your room now? I'll turn on the radio for you."

A moment of confusion drew white brows together. "You're not the preacher."

"Come on, Mama." Grace helped her back through the doorway. Casting a stricken glance over her shoulder to Aidan, she concentrated on helping her mother forget who she'd seen. "Of course it's the preacher."

She shut the door, then settled her mother into her oversized rocking chair. When she bent to turn on the radio, she caught a glimpse of herself in the bureau mirror.

Dressed in a black wool dress with a lace collar, she looked remarkably pulled together, considering the firestorm she'd gone through in just the last few moments. Except for her eyes, bloodshot and glassy, and the way her left hand fisted around the brooch, she passed for a dutiful, grieving daughter.

She dragged herself away from her reflection and returned to her mother, whose head lagged against the side of the chair.

Grace tucked a blanket over her mother's legs, kissed her forehead and slipped from the room. Aidan lingered in the shadows, just out of sight from the landing below. When he extended his hand, she grabbed on, and found renewed strength in the embrace that followed.

He stroked her hair. "How long has she been like this?"

"About a year." Grace sighed, and listened to the thrum of his heartbeat. "Sometimes she's fine. But those moments are few and far between, and they don't last as long as they used to."

The unasked question hovered between them. Taking a deep breath, Grace volunteered the answer. "Eldridge and Sylvia will take good care of her. He's been very kind to her since she started ... forgetting things."

"I had no idea."

His arms tightened around her, and she breathed in the scent she loved, like the woods after a rainstorm.

"You should go," she whispered against his collar, hating to give life to such a thought. "I can't be away much longer, and if Eldridge sees you..."

"Okay." His beard chafed her cheek as he kissed her again. Even his gentlest caress had rough edges. "Come to the Stomp and we can work everything out."

"When?"

"When can you get away?" he murmured.

"No sooner than the day after tomorrow." She slid from his arms and pressed the brooch into his hand. "Sell this."

"What?"

"We need the money," she answered, placing her hands on either side of his surprised face. "If it will help us be together, you should sell it."

"I don't think I can."

Grace smiled. She'd underestimated how much the token had meant to him. She hoped she hadn't underestimated his feelings for her. "Just think about it, then."

He nodded, and slipped the silver brooch into his pocket. "I'll see you soon, Gracie."

The gravel in his voice went straight to her heart, and she satisfied her hunger for him with one last, urgent kiss. "Not

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*by Marty Kindall*

soon enough."

## Chapter Four

"Where is this place?" Aidan's breath puffed white in the cold morning air. He'd parked his car on the side of the road, and after nearly an hour off the beaten path, he couldn't feel his fingertips, and suspected his toes might be missing.

Frank Sharpe forged through the rough undergrowth a few feet ahead without answering. Twigs broke underfoot like tiny gunshots, and Aidan thought of a hundred other places he'd rather be than scrounging through Verkler's Gap to find Hal Whitting's well-guarded still.

"Frank!" he called.

"Will you hush up?" Frank rasped, doubling back. "Hal's got an itchy trigger finger."

Aidan disliked the shadow of foreboding that followed them into the woods. "You said he was expecting us. I didn't come out here to get my head blown off."

"You said you wanted cash," Frank corrected, wagging his finger. "So I'm taking you to the cash man."

Another twinge of conscience harassed Aidan. His decision to meet with Hal about running 'shine hadn't been easy, even with the knowledge that fast, easy money meant a ticket out of town with Grace. His father might be surprised to learn that breaking the law—even a ridiculous law like prohibition—didn't sit well with Aidan.

Still, he couldn't deny the rush of excitement that pushed him forward. His pulse raced and his vision sharpened as his feet skimmed the grass. The element of danger woke him like nothing else. Such quirks had made him an ideal soldier.

Frank raised his hand, a signal to stop. Aidan crouched behind his friend, fingers curling around an imaginary rifle out of drill.

As Frank parted the thick bushes, Aidan caught sight of a dilapidated old house, little more than four sticks and a tin roof. A young boy sat on the brick steps, a switchblade in one hand, stabbing the wooden slats beside his leg.

"Who's that?" Aidan whispered, unable to make out the face behind a curtain of limp hair.

"Hal's boy, Kirk," Frank answered. Then he hooted like a barn owl, paused, and hooted again.

The boy sat up straight. When Frank called a third time, Kirk stood, pocketed his knife, and scurried inside the house, rusty door hinges screaming like an animal gone mad.

Aidan had no time to reconsider, as Hal Whitting emerged, bird rifle in hand, his son a slight shadow behind his heft.

"Who's there?"

"Frank, Boss." In one fluid movement, Frank rose from the brush, his empty hands in the air. "I brought the runner I told you about."

Figuring that was all the introduction he was likely to get, Aidan stood, and stepped forward. Taking in Hal's sturdy frame, his eye was caught again by the child. "You bring your son out here?"

Hal grinned and shouldered his rifle so he could sling an arm around the boy. "Your old man know where *you* are?"

Aidan strode the short distance to the porch, and took the measure of Hal Whitting. Handsome enough to have been married twice, Hal kept a low profile around town. Yet Aidan



wasn't surprised to learn of his role in one of the two bootlegging outfits in Bryeton. Always had been something a little off in those hooded eyes.

"I need money," Aidan said. "I've got a fast car, and I know how to drive these roads. Frank says you need new legs now that Herman Swank's gone off on his own."

Hal's eyes narrowed, a flash of danger in an otherwise smiling face. "Damn do-gooder. Surprised you're not wheelin' for him instead, Preacher."

"I told you," Aidan lowered his voice. "I need money."

Kirk howled, although nothing struck Aidan as funny. Hal cuffed the boy on the shoulder. "What do you think, son?"

"Run him, Pa, run him," Kirk goaded.

Aidan flinched. If Hal was a little off, his son had been further shortchanged. Maybe he should run for Swank instead. Forget the fast, easy way.

As if sensing Aidan's hesitation, Hal said, "I'll give you a shot. I got a load needs to go out tomorrow night. You make the delivery, you get ten percent."

"Twenty," Aidan bartered. His skin tingled as he bought into the risky venture.

"Fifteen, then." Hal smiled. "This is a bitch of a run, straight through Asheville, down to Shelby. Be up to the Stomp around eight, to load up. I'll be there when you get back."

Tidy enough, since he went there almost every night. With a final nod of agreement, Aidan turned to Frank, and motioned them off the premises.

But Hal's final warning made the hair on the back of Aidan's neck stand at attention. "Don't try anything, son. I know the take on this one, and if I'm one penny short? Well, it won't be me you'll be dealin' with then."

On their way back to the road, Aidan lit a cigarette and nudged Frank. "Who's behind his operation? You said it was all Hal's set-up."

Slowing the pace, Frank shook his head. "That's the part I didn't tell you. Hal's got some big money backing him up—only keeps a percentage himself. That's why Swank's catdaddy tastes better—Hal doesn't have the time to do it up right because the demand's so high, and everyone takes a piece of the profit."

"That's why he needs more runners," Aidan concluded, a bad taste settling in the back of his throat.

"And that's why the money's better, Preacher."

"Any idea where all the green comes from?" Having two operations in such a small town seemed counter-productive.

Frank frowned, and picked up the pace. "Best kept secret in town."

\* \* \* \*

Grace sat on the edge of her bed, her back stiff against the sudden upheaval in her home, watching the orange sun retire behind the distant blue ridges. She rubbed her damp palms on her skirt and bunched the material in her fists, fighting tears of frustration and loss.

Despite knowing she'd never get out of the house tonight, she'd still put on her coat, in case the perfect opportunity presented itself.

Rapid-fire footsteps popped against the stairs, and she closed her eyes against the unfamiliar onslaught of noise. A mere twenty-four hours after her father's funeral, Eldridge had moved his family into this larger house, lock, stock, adoring pregnant wife, and twin boys. Only Sylvia had offered an apologetic shrug as they trundled their belongings inside and staked their claim.

"Oof!"

Grace's mattress shook, and she opened her eyes as one of the twins flopped like a fish on her bed.

The urge to snap at the rambunctious child died in her throat. None of this mess was the fault of either of the two little tornadoes her brother had sired. Besides, she didn't know which name to yell, Colin or Corbin. Identical to the last speck, they even grew at the same rate.

The blonde-haired boy settled beside her. At two, he didn't have much vocabulary, so he tugged at her sleeve.

Grace glanced at her attire. "I'm silly, aren't I? I've forgotten to take off my coat."

The little boy patted her leg, and leaned his head on her shoulder.

Aha. Corbin. Slipping an arm around the sweeter of the pair, she asked, "Where's your daddy?"

"Down."

Grace sighed. With her escape route through the kitchen still blocked, moments scraped by like bits of glass shredding

her soul. If she didn't make it the two blocks to her girlfriend's house in the next thirty minutes, all was lost. Worse, Aidan might doubt her intentions. He'd be waiting at the Stomp for her, and she wouldn't come. Couldn't even let him know why, or when she might be able to see him next.

She had to find a way out. Scooting Corbin out of her room, she took off her coat and hovered at the top of the stairs, straining for telltale signals from below.

With dinner long past, and Mother already in bed for the night, why didn't her brother and sister-in-law at least leave the kitchen and move to the front of the house? Always huddling together, those two. Heads bent, voices lowered. She doted on him, and he, well, Grace had no idea what Eldridge felt for his wife, though he treated her well enough most days.

Just when she thought she couldn't stand still another moment, Sylvia called to the twins, "Come on, boys, time for bed."

Amid the usual protests and complaints, the heavy office door creaked open, then shut with a solid bang. As Sylvia hustled the boys up the stairs and into their new bedroom, Grace held her breath.

She wouldn't get a better opportunity.

She waited a few moments, then hurried to kiss the twins goodnight and stole back into her room for her coat. Creeping downstairs, she stayed close to the wall, avoiding the squeaks near the bottom of the staircase.

At the landing, she paused. To the right, the office. To the left, escape, through the kitchen.

As she pivoted to the left, her brother's tense voice behind the door caught her ear.

"You say you found someone?"

The muffled answer came in an unfamiliar drawl. "That's what I said."

Grace edged closer to the door, her thundering pulse blocking out the following words. But the next question she heard didn't surprise her much.

"How much 'shine have you got?" Eldridge asked. "And how much room does he have? The car's gotta look natural, like it's not carrying weight, you know."

"Relax," the other man said. "I'll handle everything. If he gets pulled, there's nothing to tie him to either of us."

Grace rested her hand on the closed door, risking more than if she'd simply sneaked out of the house. While Eldridge was no saint, she shuddered at the idea that he'd dug himself a more criminal hole than she'd imagined.

"All right, then, here's the twist," Eldridge continued. "I just got word that it's become a race. Herman Swank thinks he can deliver sooner than we can. Bets on the delivery are being placed in his store, and whoever wins gets the purse, plus the percentage of the sale."

A low chuckle crawled up Grace's spine. A lot of money had just gone up for grabs, and that froze her feet to the floor.

"He'll win," came the answer.

"How do you know?" her brother asked. "An untested driver on his first run? Swank knows these roads with his eyes closed."

"Fair enough, but nothing pushes a man like the need for cash in his pocket," came the answer. "You mark my words, Boss. He'll get there fastest every time."

When laughter broke out between the two men, Grace backed away from the door and darted toward the kitchen, risking the sound of her shoes on the tile. Weaving around the table and chairs, she headed for the door, freedom, and Aidan. She needed to talk to him now. Something about that conversation sent a spike of dread into her heart, and it didn't have anything to do with her brother.

"Just where do you think you're going?"

She froze, her hand on the doorknob, fear balling in her throat as Eldridge's long shadow overtook her. His footsteps drew closer, and she readied herself for the worst.

"I think your going-out days are over, Grace, now that you and Senator DeWitt have met."

With everything she'd just overheard still whirling in her mind, she turned to look at the face of stark greed and ambition. Her brother, an elected servant of the people, had something to do with breaking the law to pad his pockets.

Dread turned to ice in her gut. She couldn't let him think she knew about his involvement in this scheme. Not until she had all the puzzle pieces locked in place. She lifted her chin and offered haughty smile. "Looks like you caught me."

"I can't believe you, sneaking around like this, with an invalid mother and a father not cold in his grave." He gripped her elbow and pulled her away from the door, his face lined with anger ... and worry.

She tore free and stood her ground, careful to make him focus on her rebelliousness, rather than his mysterious guest. "I'm a grown woman, a widow. I can come and go as I please, Eldridge. I can do what I want."

He sneered. "And what you want is to embarrass this family, when you've managed to catch the interest of a senator?"

Tired beyond measure of how often he played that card, Grace sighed and challenged him again. "I have a right to a life of my own."

"The hell you do." His face purpled with rage, and Grace took a step backward. She'd angered her father many a time, but had always known where to draw the line. This was foreign ground. Maybe she'd made a mistake, pushed her brother too far. "You'll be an asset to this family, Grace. Not a roadblock."

"Eldridge..." she began, but quick as lightning, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her enough to spark the fear of God.

His flash of raw fury scared her, and she managed to wrench free before he actually hurt her. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Eldridge?" Sylvia's voice floated from the staircase. "Are you coming upstairs? The boys are asking for you."

When he grumbled, Grace took the opportunity to shove past him and escape to her room.

She passed a bewildered Sylvia in her nightdress on the way. "What on earth? Grace?"

The slam of Grace's bedroom door ricocheted through the house, but she didn't care. Her entire world had been turned upside down by the events of the past few days—her father's death, the arrival of these interlopers in her home—and she'd had enough to last a lifetime. And now he wanted to plan her life, as if a modern woman didn't have the smarts or gumption to make big decisions for herself.

Several deep breaths calmed her, and to distract her mind from where she was supposed to be tonight, she relived the things she'd seen and heard between her brother and his unknown visitor.

Hours later, the two most important elements emerged from the tangle. One, her brother was a moonshiner, involved in a fairly complex operation involving at least his guest tonight—and an all-too-familiar new driver who needed fast cash.

And, two, if threatened, her upstanding brother wasn't above using violence to achieve his ends.



## Chapter Five

Aidan paced the short patch of grass beside his Chevy, his hands shoved in his pockets. The sun had set long ago, and his auto now held a fifty-gallon load of white lightning to carry to Shelby. The weather, rainy earlier in the day, had cleared, and a good dose of moonlight promised to brighten the way.

Anxious to get started, he paused, and looked down the road at a pair of oncoming headlamps. A shot of adrenaline pumped through his body. This had to be Swank. Man was late for everything, and since this had somehow become a race, they couldn't start without him.

His hand closed around the heavy brooch, still in his pocket from earlier in the day. When Grace had failed to show up last night, the idea of taking the thing to pawn had gotten a little easier. Nothing made a man feel like an idiot quite like waiting for a woman who had no intention of showing her face.

"You ready to go?" Frank eased from the shadows of the Stomp and stepped in front of Aidan, grabbing his attention.

Aidan nodded, then let go of the brooch in favor of lighting a cigarette, and focused on the job at hand. So what if he'd learned about the race a couple hours ago? His automobile was top-notch, even loaded with gin.

And so what if Grace was full of empty words? Same rules still applied. He needed money to skip town—not Grace. The faster, the better, and this race would provide plenty of speed.

Herman Swank pulled his specially outfitted flatbed Ford next to Aidan's new Chevrolet, and idled the engine. He rolled down his window and frowned at his competition.

"They didn't tell me you were the runner."

Aidan flicked his butt aside. "That make a difference?"

Swank shrugged. "Might on Sunday mornin'."

"Not for me," Aidan answered, while an excited crowd edged closer to the two automobiles. "But if it worries you..."

"Nothing worries me, Preacher." He extended his hand, and Aidan stepped forward to shake it in the spirit of competition. "Let's keep this friendly-like."

Aidan smiled at the well-loved storekeeper. "Not a problem. See you on the other side."

He glanced across the faces as they started to cheer for the start of the race, searching in vain for Grace despite his determination not to let her get to him again. True, a million things could have kept her away last night, yet his gut reminded him that when faced with a similar choice before, she hadn't picked him.

Gritting his teeth, he returned to his car, and slid behind the wheel. The machine ran smooth as silk, and he gunned the engine to signal his readiness.

Fingers tightening around both the wheel and the gear-shift, he used his anger to focus, like he had under enemy fire. Everything else fell by the wayside.

Ahead, Frank Sharpe called for their attention, and held a white handkerchief aloft in the bright beams of their headlamps. He counted backward from three, "...two ... one!" and dropped the flag.

Aidan released the clutch and hurtled into the night with a grim smile of determination. If the clear weather held, he'd have a pile of cold, hard cash in the palm of his hand the next time he saw his buddy Frank.

\* \* \* \*

Grace lingered in the shadowed corner of the Hickory Stomp, her gaze raking through the larger-than-usual crowd. Agitation stirred her empty stomach.

A day late and a dollar short. All questions and no answers, she edged around the room, trying to blend in. A strange excitement tinged the air. Taking a deep breath of the electrified atmosphere only made her more nervous.

She'd missed her opportunity. Imagining Aidan's doubt and frustration turned her hands to ice. She might have risked her brother's wrath by sneaking out tonight for nothing.

"You looking for Preacher?"

A scruffy, half-drunk man sidled up to her as she neared the back of the Stomp. He looked vaguely familiar, yet she couldn't quite place him.

"What if I am?" she answered, catching the vinegar scent of her new companion.

"You missed him." The gaunt young man took a swig from a dirty glass. "Just took off down to Shelby."

She bit, afraid of the answer. "What's in Shelby?"

"Ain't you Judge McAfee's sister?"

"So what if I am? Who are you?"

He straightened an imaginary tie. "Frank Sharpe, at your service, ma'am."

Frank Sharpe had gathered a nasty reputation since dropping out of school. How did he know anything about Aidan? Her voice shook, as she moved one step closer to confirming her suspicions about Aidan's whereabouts tonight. "How do you know Aidan?"

"Hell, lady, he moved into my house when his old man kicked him out."

Another gulp emptied his glass, giving her heart time to drop to the floor. "They what?"

"You heard me right." Frank grinned, his front teeth at odds with one another. "Man's on his own, now."

She reached for a chair. Why hadn't Aidan said anything? This information narrowed the picture. Certainly that strange conversation she'd overheard in her father's—no, brother's—study somehow involved Aidan.

"Where is he?" she asked Frank.

He pursed his lips and pretended not to hear her.

She grabbed him by the collar. "Where is he?"

"Relax, lady." Peeling her off his person, he leaned closer. "He's making a fast trip to the Piedmont."

Not one to appreciate games, she stared Frank down. "Is that some kind of code for running moonshine down the mountain?"

"Could you maybe announce it for me? Sheesh!" He stepped away, then softened. "Don't look like that, he's fine—he'll be back before midnight with a wad of bills in his pocket like he's never seen before. If he's all that important to you, you might want to wait and see for yourself."

With the strength of a wet dishrag, Grace nodded, and let Frank slip into the crowd while she pulled a chair into the corner. Her heart thumped a mile a minute. Surely, Aidan didn't know anything about her brother's back-room role in this illegal operation, even if he had driven to Shelby.

And surely, he wouldn't be out there, risking his life and freedom, if he'd any better options. Fast money, he'd said. Had he sold the brooch? Did that not bring enough cash?

Her imagination rumbled with images of dangerous mountain passes and rabid federal prohibition officers. Anything from a flat tire to a bullet could harm him tonight.

If only she'd gotten out last night, met him, and been able to explain what she'd discovered about her brother. He might have changed his mind. How much money did they need, anyway?

The girlfriend she'd arrived with motioned to her from the doorway. If she wanted to get home without being missed, they had to leave now. On shaky legs, she stood, and took two steps forward. Then she stopped, shook her head, and waved her friend away.

She couldn't leave without seeing Aidan. Her heart wouldn't let her. She had to make sure he made it back in one piece. She needed to explain the danger she'd discovered, and assure him that they'd find a way to be together, even as it seemed the world closed off one option after another.

So she stayed put, determined to find the way out.

\* \* \* \*

Aidan flew up the side of the mountain, his car lighter and faster on the return trip. Downshifting, he brought the horses to bear, and kept his momentum going up the inclined road.

Cold sweat plastered his clothing to his chest, shoulders, and back. He checked his mirrors, saw Swank's lamps behind him, the Ford close enough to catch him if he made a mistake.

He licked his lips, braced himself for the pull of the next bend in the road. When he straightened the wheel, he released his breath. Down the home stretch they roared, Swank tight on his tail.

Another man might have bumped him off the road and taken the race. With no berth to pass Aidan, Swank backed off, and let his competition take the winnings.

Bursting into the clearing around the Hickory Stomp, Aidan stood on the brake, bringing the excitement to an end in a cloud of red Carolina dust.

A handful of rowdy patrons pulled him out of his auto, none more excited than Frank, who hustled him inside to settle with Hal Whitting and claim his winnings.

After a quick exchange of cash with Whitting, Aidan received a cheer from the crowd, along with a heavy roll of bills from the betting pool. With his business complete, exhaustion bled into the excitement of his win.

Someone slung a drink into his hand, and somewhere nearby, Herman Swank started telling the story behind the run. The music stalled, and a knot of curious patrons gathered to hear, while Aidan sank into a chair near the door.

"Ev'rything was fine up into Shelby. Fact, we arrived ahead of schedule, and it's a good thing, too."

"What happened?" someone asked.

Aidan had the good sense to feel sick, recalling the close call. He took up the story. "Either we were early, or the state boys ran late. Soon as we took off, the place got raided."

"Like a swarm of bees," Swank interrupted. "I bet they was federal men. They came up the state route from the other end, didn't see us buzzing out the opposite way."

Aidan had seen the arrival of the lawmen in his mirror, like some kind of scene out of a Wild West dime-store novel. No doubt every drop of that delivery had been wasted in the dirt.

Swank punched his shoulder. "This kid didn't even blink. Nerves of steel, I tell 'ya. Must have been that Army training."

"Must have been." Aidan's vision blurred, the bathtub gin having an immediate effect. With the thrill fading, all he wanted to do was count the money and see where he stood.

Swank went on, peppered with questions, while Aidan's gaze drifted to the back of the room. A copper-haired woman stood still as death, her face as pale as her white blouse.

Despite his nagging doubts about Grace, his heart still turned over at the sight of her. He bowed his head, forcing his gaze to his hands, strangling a glass of moonshine.

Satisfied that he might slip away without much notice, he stood and weaved through the enraptured listeners toward Grace.

She managed a smile, but her cheeks held no color. Her eyes shone with concern, and one hand worried the other. "Hey."

Nodding, he led her to a table and they sat, elbow to elbow. Not knowing how to start, he felt foolish for not believing in her, yet angry she'd given him any reason to doubt.

"I'm so sorry about last night," she started. "Eldridge moved his family into the house yesterday. No warning. I tried to get away, but he caught me."

In a heartbeat, he forgave her, leaning forward to kiss her temple. Of course she wouldn't desert him. Not this time. "It's all right."

"No, it's not," she argued. "A grown woman should be able to come and go as she sees fit. I told you I'd be here, and I wouldn't blame you if you doubted me."

She understood him better than he'd believed. "You're here now, that's what matters."

Under the table, she rested her hand on his knee. "What are you doing, Aidan? All this tonight—how did you get tied up in this so fast?"

He took her hand and squeezed, trying to erase the apprehension in her eyes. "I don't know—we needed money, and Frank said—"

"I met Frank," she muttered. "He got you into all this?"

Aidan shrugged, while inside he sorted through reasons Grace might understand. "I didn't put up much of a fight. We need money fast, and this is faster than anything else I know."

"What about the brooch?"



He shook his head, hiding the truth that the jeweler in Boone had proclaimed the thing a worthless fake. Instead, he said, "I couldn't. It's worth more to me than money."

That brought a familiar glow to her face, so he continued, "A few of these runs will give us more than enough cash to start over anywhere we want, especially with the added race winnings."

"But..."

"I know," he hushed her and his own conscience at the same time. "Who's it hurting, Grace? People will drink, and someone will make those runs. Might as well be me. I made it through the war—I can make it through this without a scratch."

She shook her head. "You might change your mind once you hear what I have to say."

"Do you want to stay in Bryeton?" His defenses went up. "I don't want you in that house a minute longer now that your brother's moved in."

At the mention of Eldridge McAfee, Grace frowned, then plunged ahead. "There's something you don't know. My brother's the one fronting the money—and pocketing the profit—from Hal Whitting's bootlegging business."

## Chapter Six

Aidan's thrilling high dropped faster than a two-ton boulder. "Are you sure about that?"

Grace nodded, strands of her bronze hair bouncing. She leaned closer, her voice scratchy and desperate. "I overheard him in his study. I think he was with Hal ... and I just knew they were talking about you."

Everything made sense. Of course Eldridge McAfee fronted the business. How could he have missed something so obvious? Prestigious men never rose from the common good, and the new judge had enough raw nerve to think he'd never get caught.

Music started up again, and Aidan fought for a clean breath. A clear thought. He'd made a fool of himself. Once Eldridge discovered that his baby sister had sneaked out of the house to meet his fastest runner, God only knew what he'd do. If he thought his scheme to gain power through a political marriage was in jeopardy, he'd protect himself by any available means.

When he pushed away from the table and stood, the room whirled around him. He listed against Grace's shoulder for support.

"Let's go." She stood beside him, his arm looped across her shoulders. Directing his weight forward, they moved through the thinning crowd and out the door. "You're drunk."

More than drunkenness, disappointment swirled in his murky thoughts. He leaned against the car while she opened the door.

"Can you drive?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, Grace—God help me, I just want to get out of town with you. I didn't know what I was getting us into."

"Don't be sorry," she cautioned, a defiant twinkle in her eye. "And don't give up yet."

Catching her ray of hope, he leaned inside and started the car. "You drive."

"Where to?"

"Down to Frank's—it's not too far, and we can be alone for a while." The wheels of his mind creaked back to life as the cold January wind tore away the things that didn't matter.

They had a few stolen hours tonight, and on the other side of that, their secret tryst would most likely be revealed. If that came to pass, then they'd run out of time.

He climbed into the car and instructed Grace on her first driving experience. Together, they lurched down the back roads at a snail's pace, each keeping their own desperate counsel.

Each knowing they might never have another minute together.

\* \* \* \*

Grace pulled the brake and, when she let up on the clutch, the engine sputtered to a stop. She sighed, and glanced at Aidan. His jaw worked, as if his mind dissected the world's biggest math equation.

Adding the two of them together didn't seem so difficult to her.

He jumped when she rested her hand on his arm.

"Here we are," she murmured, then risked a bolder question. "What are you thinking, Aidan?"

He flashed a lopsided grin. "Wonder how cold it is inside."

Her heart raced as he laced his fingers with hers. "We can build a fire."

"Come inside, then." He kissed the back of her hand, then released her and came around to the driver's side to help her out. "We'll see about that fire."

She turned into him, her shield from the wind, and walked with him into the house. White moonlight filtered through tattered lace curtains. Once upon a time, a woman's touch had graced this place. Long neglected, the room resembled a bear cave more than a home.

"It's not much," Aidan admitted, bending before the hearth to start a fire. The sulfur scent of the lit match wafted toward her, followed by the promising sound of hungry flames. "I didn't have anywhere else to go."

She shook her head. He should have been able to knock on her door, like any respectable gentleman. How had everything become so dire so quickly?

Stealing up behind him, she rested her hands on his broad shoulders, the sputter of sparks reflecting her worn nerves. "Anywhere with you is perfect."

"You deserve better." As heat radiated from the fire, Aidan shrugged off his coat and spread it across the floor for her to sit on. Then he lowered himself beside her, and loosened the collar of his broadcloth shirt.

Her pulse quickened yet again, the suggestive tilt of his head telling her everything she needed to know. She offered

an inviting smile, and he rocked forward to kiss her, his rough urgency like a match on dry grass.

She responded without hesitation, her fingers roaming across his chest, up his neck, and into his hair. When he groaned, she set her nimble fingers to work on his shirt buttons.

The blaze in the hearth seemed too hot now, and she tore at the buttons, eager to remind herself of his lines, the smooth, muscled planes of his chest.

Aidan broke the kiss, a thin sweat glistening across his face. He tossed aside his shirt, then lifted the undershirt over his head as well.

When he leaned in for another kiss, she slowed her frantic pace, wanting him in a different way than she'd wanted any other man. This time she needed to enjoy each minute.

He was the same, yet different, older. In the dancing light, she both remembered him and discovered a more mature man. Her fingertips lingered over a scar at his collarbone, and she raised her eyes to him. "What happened here?"

"Nothing," he answered, kissing each of her fingertips. Would he ever talk about the war, those long years of separation she'd rather forget?

Not now. Closing her eyes, she shivered with the progress of his lips from her fingers to her elbow. With her free hand, she loosed the mother-of-pearl buttons on the front of her blouse, then at the waist of her skirt. When Aidan reclaimed her mouth, her garments fell away under his assured touch, leaving her only a thin chemise for cover.

Thankful for the cool edge to the air, she took and held a deep breath while Aidan appraised her nearly naked form. Stark desire simmered behind his eyes, as if he meant to reclaim something that had been taken from him, starting with another torrid kiss.

She surrendered, letting go of the tight control that bound her to daily life. His weight leveraged her backward, and she relaxed against his scratchy wool coat.

Twining her arms around his shoulders, she nuzzled his neck while his hands roamed her body. He found his way under her chemise, sweeping it up and aside with no effort. When he rested his weight against her, she felt his desire hard against her hip.

Her body responded without benefit of thought, their kisses more fluid, the friction chasing away the last fringes of cold. His lips moved against her neck and he sighed her name in her ear, while his hands cupped and massaged her breasts.

"Grace," he whispered again, pulling back, his brow tight.

She smoothed her hands over his face. "What is it?"

"Tell me you thought about me." His hand slid up her thigh. "Tell me."

She gasped when he touched her center, and brought her hand to cover his, driving his caress deeper. On the verge of losing control, she leaned forward, and loosened the buttons on his trousers.

Holding his arousal to her belly, she looked him in the eye. She didn't have to lie. "Every single time, Aidan."

Something like triumph flashed across his expression. "Some things are meant to be."

He shifted his weight, and she opened herself to him, more than ready to wash those ordinary nights with her husband from her memory. She'd always put Aidan into her mind at those intimate moments with Carson, a painful, unfair, and necessary comparison, if she wanted to feel any kind of emotion.

Aidan took her by slow inches, rocking forward finally to fulfill her need. Her fingernails bit into his back as she surged closer.

Despite the gentle beginning, the pace quickened in mere moments. His touch grew rougher, his kisses more demanding, and when she drew her legs around his waist, the contact pushed her to her limit.

She cried out, the dizzying experience of climax like a freefall. Aidan drove into her a final time, then collapsed to her side after his release. Still entangled, she pressed her face into his shoulder, and cried.

\* \* \* \*

"Shh..." Aidan curled around Grace. He smoothed her hair from her face and tried to console her. "There's nothing to cry about."

She stiffened in his embrace. Aiden frowned. Didn't she think they'd be able to be together past tonight? Didn't she realize he'd do anything to keep her safe? He'd had his doubts, as well, but wasn't ready to give up. They'd find a way to make a clean break. Now, more than ever, he wanted to be on his own, forging a life with her by his side.

"What's the first thing you'll do when we get out of here?" he asked.

She sniffled, and lay quiet, thinking. Then she answered, "Cut my hair."

Running his fingers through her long copper strands, he didn't dare discourage her. "Why?"

"I see it in all the magazines. It's called a bob, cut about here." She turned and indicated her chin. "It sounds silly, I suppose. It means something to me, though."

"What's it mean?" He draped the coat over her back to keep her warm. "Freedom?"

She nodded. "Breaking with tradition."

"We'll make it," he murmured in her ear.

"After tonight, Eldridge won't let me out of his sight." Excitement faded from her eyes. "Especially when he realizes you're his new runner."

Aidan snapped his fingers. "That's it."

"That's what?"

"Our ticket out." He lowered his voice, as if anyone could overhear. "Don't you see? You know more about him than he knows about you."

He held his breath, willing his pulse to slow while the plan took shape. After a moment, realization dawned on Grace's face only to be tempered by caution.

"You don't know what he's capable of," she warned. "Threatening him might cost more than you think."

Aidan relaxed against the scuffed floorboards of the old house, more confident than he'd ever been in his life. Yes, his



idea was risky, but, "If we want to start new with more than the dirt stuck to our shoes, we have to take a gamble."

Grace rested her head against his chest and slid her arm around him, the fire and their passion enough to keep him warm. Point by point, he laid out his plan, each sentence more audacious than the last. Finished, he waited for her response.

She raised her head and smiled. "It's crazy enough to work, but we won't get a second chance."

He kissed the top of Grace's head. "We won't need a second chance."

## Chapter Seven

Eldridge McAfee couldn't afford to wait. Only two days later, Frank brought Aidan an offer for another run—this time a load of one hundred gallons—into the outskirts of Charlotte, leaving at midnight that same night.

Despite the bitter bite in the February air, Frank broke a sweat as they wandered into town to grab a few necessities at Swank's general store.

Aidan smelled a rat. "When did you talk to Hal?"

A few specks of snow shivered in the wind while Frank hemmed and hawed. "At the Stomp, after you ran off with that uppity gal."

Biting back fighting words, Aidan asked, "So why's this the first I'm hearing of it?"

"He said it was possible—things got finalized today." He glanced ahead, to the store. "Ask Swank. He's taking the bets on the race."

Adrenaline zipped through Aidan's veins, and he reached for a cigarette to calm his nerves. "You didn't say it was a race."

"I think pretty much anything Hal puts you on is gonna be a race," he grumbled, shoving his hands in his pocket. "It's all about the greenbacks, Preacher, and you brought 'em in."

Right into Judge McAfee's well-lined pockets. Aidan grimaced as they hustled the last few steps to the store. A cowbell over the door announced their arrival.

"No smokin' in here, boys." Swank bellowed from behind the counter. Aidan responded as he would to any command—

he automatically obeyed the order and ducked outside to kill the smoke after one last, deep drag.

His pulse raced as he reached for the door handle. Time to put the plan he and Grace had devised into action. Once it started, there would be no to stopping.

Swank waved him inside. "Thanks, Preacher."

Aidan ambled to the counter, where Frank leaned, jawing over the odds on the race. "You mean he's still that far down? I thought sure the odds'd be better."

"Yep." Swank looked Aidan dead in the eye. "New driver, new car, heavy load, and that long twisty stretch. You sure you know what you're doin'?"

Aidan nodded, a lump forming in his throat. He coughed. "Frank, didn't you have something to buy?"

"Right, right."

Once his friend disappeared toward the back of the store, Aidan leaned across the counter. "Can you do me a favor?"

Swank shrugged. "If I can."

"You know Grace Currie?"

"Don't everybody?"

Smiling, Aidan fished in his pocket for the brooch. He slid the package, wrapped in white tissue, toward Swank. "I need this delivered to her. Today."

"I don't like the look in your eye." The burly storekeeper crossed his arms over his chest. "I ain't runnin' no delivery service."

"It's important, and I can't do it myself." Taking a chance, he added, "What would you do for love?"

After a moment's thought, Swank picked up the tissue-wrapped brooch and tucked it into his shirt pocket.

"Somethin' stupid. Which is just what you're doin'. Nobody's beat Brett Baker, and nobody's caught Brett Baker. He's as dangerous as I am sweet. You'd best believe them revenuers'll be hot and heavy after him—not to mention the state boys."

"So how do I beat him?"

"Beat him?" Swank chuckled, then sobered. "What kind of con are you runnin'?"

Aidan chewed over his answer, and made sure Frank hadn't come back into earshot. "Can't rightly say, but if I don't win tonight ... your operation won't get off the ground, either. You need to be the only game in town."

Swank's gaze narrowed, and his friendly eyes took the bait. "If you're sayin' what I think you're sayin', you can count me in. You want to beat that hillbilly? You'll have to drive dirty and remember—it's not you they want, Preacher. It's him."

\* \* \* \*

"Where on earth did you find that?"

"You gave it to me, remember?" Grace closed her hand around the brooch and stared at her mother. The frail woman leaned forward in her rocker, her watery gaze clearer than usual.

When Raylene Swank had delivered some groceries in the late afternoon, she'd pressed the wrapped pin into the palm

of Grace's hand. On edge for the sign from Aidan, she'd gone straight to her mother to sit while she rambled about nothing.

"Course I remember." She sighed. "Some things I recall clear as day. My aunt sent that to Mother all the way from Santa Fe, New Mexico."

Regret clouded Grace's vision. Her only loss, leaving this dear woman behind. She laid her hand on her mother's bony fingers. "You remember how much I love you, hear?"

She'd drifted away again, lost in a fog of patchwork memories. Grace lingered a few more minutes, gathering the courage to confront Eldridge using what little leverage they had as soon as the clock struck eight.

The way Aidan had explained things, bootleg runs always took place well after dark, so she couldn't make her move too early. Willing herself to stay calm, she instead went to her room and threw a few necessities into a carpetbag.

The clock chimed eight, and in an attempt at normality, Grace went through the motions of helping put the twins to bed. She kissed each boy on the forehead, breathing in their sweet, innocent scent.

She wouldn't see them grow up.

Blinking away a tear, she followed Sylvia from the room, and left the door cracked for a little light. Sylvia stretched her back and rested her hands on the shelf of her pregnant belly. Another event Grace wouldn't share in.

"I hope you have a little girl," Grace said. "Just like you wanted the first time."

Sylvia tilted her head. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." She waved her hand to dismiss the question. Grace couldn't help but like Sylvia, didn't want to make her part of this drama. Perhaps one day her sister-in-law would see around the blind spot she had about Eldridge, or perhaps it was better that she never did.

"No, I know Eldridge was hard on you when you were out all night." Sylvia caught Grace's hand and held her gaze. "Maybe you shouldn't be running around town like that."

"You're right." Grace didn't have to lie to reassure her well-intentioned sister-in-law. "I won't be sneaking around any more. You have my word."

"Good." She let go of Grace's hand. "You worry me some."

Grace took a deep breath and waited on the stairs until Sylvia disappeared into the bedroom she shared with her husband. Once the door clicked shut, she took the long journey toward Eldridge's office.

Lamplight splayed against the floorboards. As she approached, she heard the unmistakable scratch of his pen against paper. Hitching a deep breath, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

He welcomed her with a growl. "What do you want?"

She tried to see the man behind the hateful exterior, but no one—except perhaps Sylvia—had glimpsed him in years. With hands balled into fists, she tossed out the first volley. "I know you're behind Hal Whitting's moonshine business."

When he threw back his head and laughed, she persisted. "I heard him in here with you the other night. I know what I heard, and I know what it means."

"You're imagining things."

His patronizing tone pushed her further into the room. She leaned over his desk. "I know you're an elected official who's breaking the laws he swore to uphold."

"Prove it." Eldridge sneered, his face mottled as the truth settled between them.

"I don't have to prove it." Her words flew like bullets. "The mere idea will be enough to ruin you."

He jumped up from his chair, and towered over her. "What's your game? Running around town at all hours of the night like you were raised on the river bend. Who is he? And why is he so important to you?"

Grace backed up a step. Eldridge hadn't figured out that she'd been seeing Aidan. Her mind spun. In order for the plan to work, they'd assumed he knew.

"Is it that war vet with the shiny new car? The one you wanted to marry all those years ago? It is, isn't it?" His thin lips curved into a wicked grin, as he put the pieces together. "I know all about him, little Gracie. Don't you worry. You have more promising gentlemen in your future. After tonight, he won't bother you any more."

Her voice caught in her throat. "What have you done?"

A smile of smug satisfaction split his face while he rearranged himself at his desk. "Lots of people say that Frank Sharpe's good for nothin', but I disagree. He's good for many things, including talking to the revenuers."

Grace tasted bile, the thought of Aidan caught and locked up sending her over the edge. "So help me, Eldridge, if Aidan doesn't come back tonight—"

"You'll do what?" He threw down his fountain pen. "Do you really want to marry a man at his wit's end? To birth babies you can't afford to keep? That man's good for nothing."

"I love him." She held her ground and held onto the edge of the desk. "You can't tell me who to love."

He eyed her with the wariness of a battle-scarred soldier. "Tell you what, darlin'. I'll make you a deal."

She didn't trust him. "What kind of deal?"

"If Preacher comes back in one piece, I'll let you leave with him. That's what you're planning, isn't it?" He waited for her to nod, then continued, "Provided, of course, that you don't share my ... business dealings."

"If he makes it, we keep the money. Every red cent."

"Sure, honey." He chuckled, a soft, low sound that grated on her nerves. "Whatever you say."

Grace took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. She'd struck the bargain she and Aidan had wanted, and even made the scheme seem like Eldridge's idea. She offered her own icy smile. "Then we have a deal."

\* \* \* \*

Aidan neither blinked nor breathed until the flag fell, then he shifted into gear, gravel pinging the undercarriage of the car. The Chevy had undergone some necessary adjustments that afternoon, but still ran sluggish with such a heavy load.

As breath hissed from between his lips, the engine purred. Loosening his grip on the steering wheel, Aidan stayed tight and a hair to the left of Barker's Model-T. Plenty of time to find a way around.



Plenty of time left to think, too, which could be far more dangerous. Doubt poked holes in his exhilaration. Had Swank found a way to deliver the brooch—the sign he and Grace had agreed upon? If not, she wouldn't know that tonight was the night to confront her brother, to make her claim for freedom.

For a day or two, he'd believed Eldridge might not use him again, although to toss a fast runner aside didn't make good economic sense.

Barker slowed, and Aidan followed suit, downshifting to make the hairpin turn at Albemarle Pass. It didn't take a practiced eye to see the weight shift in Barker's turn. Aidan smiled, his own stash more tightly secured.

Around the curve, he accelerated again, picking up speed as they zoomed downhill. Most of the trip would be this way, close turns at high speed. The return would be the opposite.

He shook his head to clear the questions and focused on the road. Think positive. Of course Judge McAfee knew she'd been sneaking out to see him. And of course Grace had handled her end of their business.

For his part, Swank had been right. Federal revenueurs and state prohibition officers probably followed a guy like Barker to the outhouse. Sure, they wanted Barker, but in a pinch, they'd take him, too.

Reaching beneath his coat and into his shirt pocket, he pulled out a sheet of paper folded in quarters. He held it against the wheel and opened it. Within the flickers of moonlight, he glanced at the now-familiar lines Swank had drawn. The thick, black marks represented the state route,

while the thinner, curved ones indicated shortcuts through the countryside.

Aidan's heartbeat matched the speedometer as they came up fast and furious on Cutter's Bridge, a narrow, two-way stretch where the Feds liked to lay an easy trap.

Pulse pumping, Aidan couldn't see a thing. Were they there or not? The map crumpled under his hands as they choked the wheel. At the last second, Barker jerked his car left, off the road, toward the railroad trestle.

Aidan followed. The tracks had been torn up not three months ago to standardize the gauge. Glass jars clanked as the Chevy bounced over rough terrain. His front wheels hit the edge of the track, and spun. A little extra gas got him onto the smoother run, and he chased Barker over the railroad bridge.

Sweat poured down Aidan's forehead. The black cars of the Feds were easy to see while he and Barker whizzed by. He wiped his brow with his sleeve.

They'd gotten around the trap, but headlamps in his mirrors meant only one thing. They'd be chasing him all the way to hell and back.

## Chapter Eight

"Don't move another inch."

The menace in her brother's voice froze Grace as she reached for her coat. From the hallway, the clock struck twelve-thirty. "Don't you want to know who wins?"

"I already know who's going to win." Eldridge slid Grace's coat beyond her reach. "That's the best part of being the boss."

Grace suppressed a shiver at his show of complete confidence. As his certainty rose, hers fell. By now, Aidan was well on his way to the Piedmont, and if the twists and turns didn't get him, the law just might.

"You see," Eldridge continued while he maneuvered between Grace and her coat while lighting a cigar, "I don't play games I can't win. You should know that by now."

As the smoke swirled around her head, her thoughts tumbled to the unthinkable. She'd expected him to tip off the authorities, to try and have Aidan arrested. Now his insinuations drove her to suspect something far worse.

Her voice shook. "What have you done?"

Eldridge leaned his lanky body back in the desk chair, more at ease than she'd seen him in days. "Relax, Gracie. There's nothing you can do. The Preacher is in God's hands now."

She stilled, as if caught in quicksand, every breath a struggle. The real danger didn't lie in the race itself. Flying bullets meant nothing, compared to one, well-aimed shot. "You'd go so far as to have him killed? Does forcing me into

some meaningless, loveless marriage mean that much to you?"

One look in his soulless eyes gave her his answer.

\* \* \* \*

The night took a cloudy turn, blocking the moonlight Aidan relied on to see the turns ahead and gauge his progress on Swank's map. Now, he relied on Brett Barker's expertise and the additional lamplight of the Feds on their collective tail.

Three cars full of regulatory men, and they all seemed content to lay back. The hairs on the back of Aidan's neck stood up. They didn't lack horsepower. A second trap most likely waited somewhere ahead.

He found it almost impossible to read Swank's wrinkled map in the limb-tangled web of shadows and light. His bearings told him that just ahead, the road widened where the state route veered, toward Boone.

Already on Barker's bumper, Aidan tapped the gas in anticipation. As they slid into a left-angled turn, dirt flying, Aidan used the extra room to pull even with Barker.

The scrape of metal against metal shot sparks into the night sky. Locked together, Barker met Aidan's burst of speed as they roared out of the turn where the road narrowed again.

Panic rising in his throat, Aidan stomped on the gas, surging ahead before he ran his car up the side of the hill. Barker settled behind him, tight enough for Aidan to see the grimace on his face in the flickering moonlight.

The pockmarked road slanted downhill, and would soon spill into the flatland of the Piedmont. He checked his mirrors, saw the Feds still a few paces behind Barker.

The one-way bridge over the Catawba River basin lay dead ahead, so shrouded by trees that he couldn't see anything on the opposite bank. He held his breath and pressed on the gas for a little breathing room.

His tires hit a low spot, spewing rocks and dirt. The spray pelted Barker's windshield, and Aidan's opponent slowed as he weaved right, then left, to avoid the barrage.

Aidan hit the bridge with a thump, and shot out the other side, a car-length ahead of Barker. When tires squealed behind him, he twisted, and looked over his shoulder.

Herman Swank's Ford blocked the exit to the bridge, locking Brett Barker in as the Feds caught up to the biggest fish in the pond. Aidan downshifted, let out his breath, and bootlegged in a tight 'u', to double back onto a cut-through toward the state route.

Now off the beaten path, he relaxed his grip on the steering wheel and wiped a cold sweat from his upper lip. With any luck, he'd miss the second half of the trap laid by the Feds, and make his delivery only a few minutes behind schedule.

Twenty minutes later, he pulled up behind a warehouse near the Charlotte city limits and unloaded his shipment. The cash felt heavy as he closed his hand around the bills, and he repeated the mantra he and Grace had come up with to justify their actions. A one shot deal, to beat the devil at his own game.

With Barker most certainly out of the race, Aidan had only one reason to speed back up the mountain. His future lay at the end of tonight's long, winding road. With Grace by his side, he'd collect his winnings and they'd make their new start.

A high-pitched whistle broke the relative silence. Aidan flinched, knew the sound of a bullet when he heard it. Another whine. The shot pinged off the steel reinforcement Swank had installed over his radiator.

What the hell? Unable to tell where the shots came from, he flattened himself against the seat. With only a second's warning, another bullet tore into the rear fender.

He fishtailed, rising on two wheels before slamming back to the ground. A sniper? In the middle of the river valley?

The truth settled on Aidan with the force of a sledgehammer. Judge McAfee had no intention of letting Grace get away. He'd probably known all along they'd try to make a break for it, and this was his way of putting a stop to that kind of nonsense and keep her for his own games.

Another shot rang out. Dread forced Aidan's blood to his feet, and the clammy sweat of near-death stole his thoughts. Hands glued to the wheel, Aidan drove like the devil sat on his shoulder, waiting for the best chance to take him home.

\* \* \* \*

Grace stood sentry in the front window of the house, all the lights blazing like a lighthouse beacon. She'd captured her coat and laid it across her lap, ready to put it on when Aiden arrived. She'd pinned the silver brooch to her lapel to bolster

her strength, although with each passing hour, her confidence in Aidan's ability to handle anything thrown his way began to flicker like a dying candle.

Her carpetbag sat beside the door, waiting for her to snatch it up. She straightened her spine and clung to hope. When Aidan returned to the Stomp and found her missing, he'd have to come. He'd have to.

And she'd be ready.

Sweet cigar smoke haunted her, Eldridge now in his office, shuffling papers, no doubt hoping for the last laugh. When the tobacco stench wafted closer, she turned to find him leaning against the doorway.

Anger rose like acid in her throat. "What is it to you if I want to marry Aidan Palmer?"

The red tip of the cigar burned as he drew on the stogie. "It's not personal, Gracie. Didn't you ever study Rome? Kings marry queens. It's all about position, alliance. That's all Carson was about, and that's all Alex DeWitt is about."

"Politics?" She spat the word like it was poison. "You'd sacrifice your own family? Kill a man over politics?"

"Not politics," he corrected. "Power. There's a subtle difference."

She shivered despite the coat, the lives of those poor twin boys and their unborn sibling flashing in front of her eyes. Poor Sylvia had no idea she'd married a monster.

Grace turned to the window again, and her heart seized. Yellow headlamps appeared at the far end of the square, one strong, the other winking.

Snowflakes danced in the beams as the light grew more intense. Gripping the brocade curtains, Grace held her breath while the auto inched toward the house, then stopped. Black paint had been peeled from the passenger side, silver steel slashing through the dark like a streak of lightning.

The engine sputtered, then died, and Grace caught Aidan's profile as he climbed from the car. She dashed forward, grabbing her bag mid-stride. Then she flung the door open, only to stop short on the threshold.

Dried blood marred Aidan's gaunt face, and the hard set of his jaw warned her to stand aside. He stalked toward the house, brushing her hand as he passed.

The screen door banged shut behind him, and a moment later, a soft, yellow light came on at the top of the stairs. Sylvia's shadow lingered on the landing, the woman within earshot.

"Aidan..." Grace stole behind him, and tried in vain to get his attention. "Let's just go!"

Eldridge straightened, a few inches taller than Aidan. "You've come to ask for my sister's hand?"

"I've come to take her out of this house," he answered, his voice strong. "Enough people know the truth about you to bring you to your knees."

Eldridge sneered. "I doubt that. But I made a deal with Grace, and I'm a man of my word. Take her and get out of town."

Grace pulled on Aidan's coat sleeve. "Let's go."

He put his arm around her and kissed the crown of her head. Spearing the judge with a hard look, he said, "Don't



come after us, or everyone will know what kind of man you are."

"She's dead to me, now." Eldridge waved his hand to dismiss them. "Get her out of my house before I change my mind."

Grace stood stunned as her brother retreated into the shadows. It was too easy. He was letting her go without a fight? Of course he was. Making moonshine profit was more important to him than kin.

This time, Aidan pulled on her coat sleeve to prod her out the door. Pausing only to pick up her bag, he hustled her to the car and shut her inside.

She didn't breathe easier until the engine started. The auto ran rougher than before, and the front glass sported hairline cracks. When they lurched onto the road, she glanced at the man beside her.

"Is this really happening?" she asked, sliding closer to him on the seat. "He's just going to let us go?"

Aidan paused, as if weighing his answer, while the center of town disappeared behind them. He let out a breath, and took hold of her hand. "It's all real. Too real."

She squeezed his fingers in return, tears of relief and concern scalding her cheeks. "Are you all right?"

He nodded, and she didn't dig for details. She was just happy to have him in one piece. To have him at all. Twisting in her seat, she peppered his cheek with kisses. When she thought of what he must have gone through to make their escape possible, she whispered, "Do you think we risked too much?"

"Never. You'd have died a bitter woman in a loveless marriage." He shifted gears, then continued, "And I believe Herman Swank will see to it that the judge walks a straight line from here on out."

"He only let us go because he thinks no one else knows about his schemes," she mourned, tempted to look back at the house. "Those poor children, poor Sylvia."

"Leave it all behind, Grace." He pulled her close, his eyes on the road while his lips grazed her temple. "We're starting new."

A thrill raced down her spine as the road opened before them, and a lifetime of making the most of their opportunities stretched into forever. Whatever lay ahead couldn't possibly be as difficult as what lay behind.

"Where do you want to go first?" she asked. Over the years, they'd talked about seeing everything from the Pacific Ocean to the Great Wall of China. He should be the one to choose their first destination. "Anywhere you want."

"How about we cross into Tennessee and find a justice of the peace?" he suggested. "You can wear that fancy brooch on your dress, and I'll get you a ring."

"A ring? You want to get married?" She squeezed his hand, giddy with the freedom to make such choices. Still, she wondered, "You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure." He grinned and winked at her. The last ounce of tension between them fell away like dust on the open road. "Don't you want to be this bootlegger's bride?"

Settling against him, she dared to dream the details of their life together like never before. A clean start. A home,

children, a life of freedom together. "There's nothing I want more."

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