

March: HUMMINGBIRD LAKE

one

*September*

The echo of the gunshot jerked Sage Anderson out of her nightmare. Her eyes flew open. She lay in the darkness, panting, sweating, her heart pounding in fear, her hands clenched into fists. Oh, God.

The images. The sounds. Oh, dear God.

It was a dream. Just a dream. One of those old, horrible, terrifying nightmares that had haunted her since the events she dreamed about had been her reality.

Slowly the past retreated. Her pulse calmed and her fingers relaxed. At that point, the shivering began, a reaction to both the chill in the room and the aftermath of the dream.

Sage rolled up and reached for the bedclothes she'd kicked off the end of the bed during the dream. This was the first time in months that she'd been plagued by one of these nightmares. She had thought she'd put them behind her.

"I am so totally done with this," she said aloud as she yanked up the sheet, tugged up the comforter, and fished for her discarded socks at the bottom of the bed. When she finally cuddled beneath goose down and Egyptian cotton, she turned her head into the pillow and tried to cry.

She badly wanted to succeed in the effort, to sob and wail and release these vicious emotions churning inside her. As usual, the tears wouldn't come. In the past few years she'd managed to find catharsis in tears only a handful of times.

When her eyes remained stubbornly dry and the possibility of sleep appeared completely beyond reach, she focused her attention on more pleasant thoughts. She thought about weddings. Her best friend's wedding. Well, one of her best friends, anyway.

Yesterday Nic Callahan had returned to town and reconciled with her husband. They planned to reaffirm their wedding vows at St. Stephen's church later this morning prior to the grand opening celebration for Angel's Rest, Celeste Blessing's healing center and spa. Sage was thrilled for Nic and Gabe. She was pleased for Celeste and excited for Eternity Springs. Today promised to be a lovely day.

And I'm not going to let a bad dream ruin it.

With that determined thought uppermost in her mind, she glanced at the bedside clock, where 4:07 glowed in red numerals. Today promised to be a lovely day—and a long one, she realized with an inner sigh. She knew she wouldn't get back to sleep at this point.

Sage sat up and took stock of her options. She could read or watch TV or surf the Net. She could catch up on paperwork or tackle the painting she'd begun yesterday for her upcoming show in Fort Worth. Except she wasn't in the mood for the first three, and she needed to let that painting sit for a few days. Something wasn't working with it, and experience had taught her that walking away for a day or two almost always helped her figure out the fix.

Her thoughts returned to the wedding, and at that point she knew what she wanted to do. She'd grab a new canvas and see if she could create a gift for Gabe and Nic to mark their special day. She'd do something simple, but light and bright and beautiful.

"Perfect." She blew out a breath, rolled out of bed, and headed for the studio she'd set up in the cottage's second bedroom. This was what she needed now—something positive to think about, a task to take her out of the shadows and away from the pain and the past.

In the studio, she placed a blank canvas on her easel and studied it, opening her mind to inspiration. She shied away from one image that hovered in her head, a leftover from her nightmare. Instead, she thought about Nic and Gabe and the obstacles they'd overcome while finding their way to today. She opened her mind to the promise of their bright and happy future, and inspiration flowed. An idea took shape in her imagination. She picked up her paintbrush and went to work. When she stepped away from her easel three hours later, she studied the finished painting and smiled. "Good job, Anderson."

She had managed to shake off the lingering ugliness of her dream and create something she knew her friends would treasure. All before breakfast. "Not a bad start for the day."

She showered and dressed and had just decided to toast a bagel when, to her surprise, someone rapped at her front door. Warily Sage peeked through the window blinds.

Celeste Blessing stood on her front porch, a canvas tote bag in one hand, a relaxed smile upon her face. She had gorgeous silver-gray hair and youthful, sky-blue eyes. This morning she wore a stylish bright red jacket, and gold earrings shaped like angel's wings dangled from her ears.

Sage relaxed. When she grew up, she wanted to be just like Celeste. The woman was the kindest, friendliest, smartest, and most active senior Sage had ever met. She rode a Honda Gold Wing motorcycle for fun, watched DVDs of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* for entertainment, and never missed a Sunday at church or failed to give her opinion about the preacher's sermon. It had been her idea to turn the Cavanaugh House estate into Angel's Rest Healing Center and Spa, and construction alone had already proved a boon to the economically depressed town even before today's official opening.

The townspeople loved Celeste for doing her part in rescuing Eternity Springs. Sage loved Celeste for herself. In many ways, she was the mother and the grandmother Sage had never had.

She opened her door with a smile. "Celeste. What brings you out this way?"

"The Landrys offered their vacation home as an overflow facility for the center, and since we're

packed to the rafters with the grand opening, we'll need to use it tonight.”

The Landrys were a lovely family from Texas who owned the only other house on Reflection Point, the narrow little peninsula where Sage lived. “I wanted to stop and drop off a little welcome basket,” the older woman continued. “When I saw your light, I decided to come beg a cup of coffee.”

“I’m glad you did. I was about to toast a bagel. Care to join me?”

“Actually . . .” Celeste held up the tote bag. “I happen to have breakfast fixings with me. Care if I make myself at home in your kitchen?”

Sage blinked. “That’s fine with me, but, with the grand opening, aren’t you swamped?”

“Everything’s under control, and frankly, with all the hustle and bustle, I’m glad to have a few moments of peace and quiet out here at Hummingbird Lake. I have bacon, eggs, a loaf of bread for toast, and a jar of homemade strawberry jam.”

“That sounds much better than a bagel.” Sage eyed the bag appreciatively. “Tell you what. My stovetop is persnickety when it comes to heat regulation. You have to talk to it just right. Why don’t you let me man the frying pan while you handle the toaster?”

Celeste’s blue eyes twinkled. “An excellent plan.”

Sage took the tote bag and led Celeste through the cozy little cottage to the kitchen, where the women went to work. Their conversation centered around the two main events of the day, but when they sat down to eat, Celeste sipped her coffee and introduced a new subject. “How are you feeling, Sage? You look a bit tired.”

She attempted a dodge. “I got up early and painted a gift for Nic and Gabe.”

“That’s nice,” Celeste said. “Although I’m sure they wouldn’t have wanted you to miss sleep because of it. This wedding is a last-minute thing, after all.”

“Actually, a nightmare woke me up. I couldn’t get back to sleep.” Sage set down her knife, surprised at herself for admitting the truth. She never talked about the nightmares.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Celeste clucked her tongue. “I’m so sorry. Does that happen often?”

“No, not really.” Sage took a bite of jam-slathered toast and realized that something about Celeste invited confidences. She was simply so easy to talk to. After savoring the flavor of springtime in the jam, she swallowed, sipped her juice, then added, “Since I moved to Eternity Springs, I sleep pretty well. I think the mountain air is magic.” “Eternity Springs is special,” Celeste agreed. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again. This valley nurses a special energy that soothes troubled souls—if those souls open their hearts and minds to the possibilities.”

Sage couldn't argue against it. Heaven knows the town had been working its magic on her these past few years. She'd been a basket case, running away from life as she knew it, when she literally arrived at a crossroads on a Colorado mountain road and turned left, ending up in Eternity Springs.

She couldn't explain it to anyone—she couldn't explain it to herself—but she'd known in her bones that the left turn had been the rightest turn of her life. Call it instinct or intuition or a message from her very own angel, but Sage had understood that she was meant to live and work in Eternity Springs, at least for a little while.

So she'd moved here and made friends here. She'd made a life and a career here. Except for the occasional nightmares and flashbacks, she was happy here.

“Eternity Springs has been good for me. I predict your healing center will be a wild success, Celeste.”

“I completely agree. Those who open themselves up to all that life has to offer here will find great rewards. You remember that, Sage. Now, let me help you with the dishes. Breakfast was simply divine.”

“It did hit the spot. Thank you for providing both the idea and the supplies.”

“You're very welcome. I'm a big believer in having protein for breakfast, especially since you and I have a packed day ahead of us.”

Sage didn't argue with her, but she didn't anticipate her own day being all that busy. Other than showing up at St. Stephen's thirty minutes early to help Nic dress, the only tasks on her docket were to witness the wedding and stroll Celeste's estate as a guest at the grand opening. She didn't intend to open Vistas, her art gallery, at all today.

After Celeste left, Sage wrapped her gift for Nic and Gabe in plain brown paper and fished a red marker from her junk drawer in order to draw hearts as decoration. When the memory of a homemade valentine that had giraffes sporting heart-shaped spots drifted through her mind, she sucked in a breath.

“Stupid dream,” she muttered, then gritted her teeth as the pain washed over her. Following a dream, invariably the memories stayed around like a hangover. Not all memories were bad, but the good ones seemed to be buried beneath the mountain of ugliness she'd brought home from Africa.

Sage set down the marker and walked to her kitchen window, where she gazed out across Hummingbird Lake toward Eternity Springs. Taking in that view went further to rid herself of that hangover than ingesting any painkiller ever could.

“Forget the nightmare,” she murmured. “The sadness ends now.”

Well, at least for today. Today was going to be a wonderful day. This was Nic's real wedding day and the culmination of Celeste's "Angel Plan" for the economic survival of Eternity Springs. It was a day for celebration—not one for nightmares and heartbreaking memories—and it was time she headed for the church.

As she retrieved her car keys from her bedside table, she stared longingly at her pillow and added aloud, "A day for celebration, and maybe a nap."

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