



I Really Do Miss Your Smile

A Christiansen Family Novella Prequel



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I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

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1976

Chapter 1

Ingrid hadn't spent two years waiting for tonight to let her sister's threats scare her away.

Kari stood in the bathroom, at the tiny mirror, spraying another layer of shellac on the long Farrah Flick she'd taken an hour to craft. "I swear, if you embarrass me, I'm ditching you."

Of course she looked like a younger version of Farrah Fawcett, with that long blonde hair parted in the middle, finely plucked brows, the perfect pout to her glistening lips. The Deep Haven boys wouldn't be able to tear their eyes off her.

All except one. Hopefully.

Ingrid met her eyes through the mirror. "I won't embarrass you."

Kari narrowed her eyes, her gaze burning through Ingrid. "Fine. But not a word to Mom and Dad, or I swear, this is the last time you'll go anywhere with me."

Not a word to Mom and Dad about what? She didn't want to ask, to sound naive.

Kari studied her.

"You need more blue eye shadow if you want to make an impression." Kari grabbed the powder. "Close your eyes."

Ingrid obeyed, feeling Kari's hands rough on her face as she painted her. Kari had already plowed through her suitcase, finally unearthing a pair of jeans and a plaid shirt, knotted at the waist over a tube top that her parents wouldn't see until after she left the house. She'd dressed Ingrid in a T-shirt and a pair of overalls.

"Do you think...that...John Christiansen will be there?"

“Perfect, take a look,” Kari said, stepping back.

Ingrid glanced in the mirror. She wished she'd at least gotten her bangs cut. Still, she hadn't a prayer of being noticed next to her glamorous older sister. Not with her limp, long straight hair, the too many freckles. The blue eye shadow just made her look like a Charlie's Angel wannabe. She put her hopes in the fact that Kari knew best, being two years older, and a senior next year in high school.

“And I already told you, you have to unhook one side.” Kari reached for Ingrid's shoulder, but Ingrid yanked away.

“I don't like it. It makes me feel naked.”

“Don't be such a prude, Ingrid. Trust me, guys like a girl who tries a little.”

The hair, the eye shadow, the overalls – this was Ingrid trying. “I don't like feeling undressed.”

Kari rolled her eyes. “Johnny Christiansen won't notice you, anyway.” She painted on another layer of lipstick. Popped her lips. “You need to get over your crush.” She picked up her new woven purse. “Whatever you do, don't ask him to dance.”

Don't ask him to dance? But she'd rehearsed it for the last six months. Saw herself walking up to John, her voice casual, even as her heart hammered through her ribs, smiling up into his devastating blue eyes, his long, dark Robby Benson hair brushing the collar of his jean jacket as he leaned against the brick wall of the Ben Franklin, and...well, for the first time, he would see her.

He'd take her hand, lead her into the street, under the diamond starlight of the sky over Deep Haven, casting magic into the night as the band rolled out covers from The Doobie Brothers, or Styx. The wind would carry enough tang of summer, the breeze off the lake fresh and mysterious. And, as he put his hands at her waist, as she looped her arms around his neck, he would realize... Ingrid Young had grown up.

Yes, tonight, John would take his eyes off Kari and finally notice the girl from Cabin 12.

Ingrid grabbed her bag, flung it over her shoulder, and raced after Kari as she headed down the gravel path toward the parking lot of Evergreen Resort. Kari made a point of standing on the gravel walkway and calling out to their parents, reading on Adirondack chairs by the lake. The canoes for the guests lay on the beach like walleye, the water grey and tinny, a streak of red parting the waves as the twilight cascaded through the trees.

“Home by midnight!” her mother yelled back, waving. Her father looked up from the book on his lap – Ingrid recognized it as his Bible. He gave Kari a look, something of warning in it.

Ingrid's insides tightened, just a little. But this was Deep Haven, not Minneapolis. How much trouble could Kari get into, really?

Ingrid didn't glance at the lodge as she climbed into their father's red Pontiac. She knew the Christiansen family lived upstairs, knew that the new red and white Chevy Silverado in the dirt lot belonged to John. He'd pulled it onto the grass this morning, and she'd seen him out with a bucket and suds on her way to town. He'd stopped Kari when they returned, offering to take her for a ride, a jar of turtle wax in his hand.

Ingrid could have strangled Kari for the way she lifted her nose, shook her head.

Take me for a ride. She'd tried to cover up for Kari's rudeness by complimenting the truck, but he just ducked his head, went back to polishing.

Maybe he'd finally figured out that Kari didn't like small-town boys. Even if they did have a summer tan and a nice set of football biceps, a smile that could make a girl forget that she wasn't the beautiful, long-legged cheerleader of the family.

"Remember, don't embarrass me," Kari said as she rolled down the window and tugged a pack of Benson and Hedges from her bag. Ingrid's eyes widened as her sister lit up, blew smoke out the window.

She looked away. Bit her lip.

Kari ejected the Pat Boone album and shoved in an 8-track of the Steve Miller band.

"Where did you get that?"

Kari shrugged. "Contraband. You'll learn."

Ingrid had no doubt she'd learn a lot tonight.

The music lured them in as Kari parked the car off Main Street, then led Ingrid to the festivities. The town blocked off all four blocks of Main, the street edging the harbor where the lake slid over the rocks in rhythm to the beat. A perfect night for the annual fisherman's picnic street dance. Kari slung her purse over her shoulder and added a swing to her hips as she forayed into the crowd. Mostly teenagers, some adults, groups of locals intermixed with the congregation of tourists who claimed Deep Haven during the summer. Like her parents, who'd rented the same cabin at Evergreen Resort for the last twenty years.

In a way, Ingrid had grown up with John, watched him go from annoying kid who pushed her off the dock to hunky football player who could sweep her breath from her lungs with a single blue-eyed look. Last year, during the precious hour her parents allowed her to attend the

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

festival, Ingrid perched herself on the steps of the State Bank and glued her gaze on John, watching as he hung out with his pals, leaning against their trucks, flirting with girls like Kari.

This year, he'd flirt with her.

Kari walked right into a crowd of friends. Ingrid recognized some of them from past years – it seemed the same resort crowd heralded into town the same week every year. A couple faces she recognized from their school, down in Wayzata, a suburb of Minneapolis.

Ingrid stood at the outskirts, shooting her gaze in and through the crowds. The band started in on the first few bars of the new England Dan song.

“Wanna dance?” The words brought her back, but their aim focused on Kari, who giggled and surrendered to the attentions of a letter-jacketed senior from Minneapolis. Craig. Brown hair, brown eyes, nothing spectacular, except that Kari moved her arms up around his neck, her body in close.

Ingrid looked away, searching, and her heart stuttered in her chest when John parted the crowd and strode into a wash of streetlight, a rock star. He wore a jean jacket, a white T-shirt tucked into his jeans, a pair of tennis shoes, and when the wind raked his long, beautiful brown hair from his face, she couldn't breathe.

Now. She'd ask him now before her courage died. Besides, he was already heading toward the clump of dancers. She dashed out into the street, nearly knocked over a couple girls, and caught his arm.

“John?”

He turned, as if startled, and for a second, seemed not to recognize her.

And why not? With her makeup and hair, she didn't resemble at all the tomboy fifteen-year-old he'd seen landing a fish off the dock this morning.

Thank you, Kari.

“Uh...hi, Ingrid.” He had a low voice, and she could feel it touch her bones.

“Would you...would dance with me?”

There. The words were out and she added a smile, tremulous at the edges.

He frowned, looked at the dancers. Then, at her. He smiled. “Sure.”

She could barely walk as he took her hand, wove them through the crowd. She noticed how he planted her next to Kari, and she wound her arms around his neck.

They swayed to the music, his hands on her hips. She settled her cheek on his jacket. He smelled good – woody, with a touch of cologne, like he'd tried. She locked her fingers behind his neck.

I'm not talkin' 'bout movin' in, and I don't wanna change your life. But there's a warm wind blowin' the stars around, and I'd really love to see you tonight.

She hummed to the song then smiled up at him.

He was looking over her shoulder, his gaze glued to someone behind him, his jaw tight. She glanced over her shoulder and spied Kari nestled up against Craig.

"I like your new truck."

He glanced down at her. "Thanks." He smiled again, but up close, she realized it didn't touch his eyes.

She swallowed her heart back into her chest, let it burn there. He held his hands loosely on her waist even as she pressed her body close to him.

He sighed.

Then, suddenly, he moved his hands to his neck, grabbed her wrists. "I gotta go."

He unlatched her arms and pushed past her

As she turned, she saw Kari leaving the dance floor, Craig in tow. And behind them, pressing through the gap in the crowd, John, hot on their trail.

Ingrid wrapped her arms around her waist, listening to the last of the song die into the night.

* * *

Whatever Kari Young saw in Mr. Letter Jacket, he had nothin' on John Christiansen. John just had to help her see it.

He hadn't spent the last day washing and waxing his new Chevy Silverado C-10 to lose her in the arms of a guy from the city. He'd only waited for this night an entire year, saving every dime,

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

working after practice at the Fishhouse then snowplowing and even trapping on the property north of his place until he could pay cash for the truck.

He deserved Kari's attention tonight. So he was a year younger than her – he'd made varsity defensive end last year and a flock of girls who chased him around the school.

And one look at her last Sunday as her family pulled into the resort told him she'd been worth the wait. She even smiled at him as he'd helped unload her father's Pontiac, brought their bags to the cabin. She leaned against the railing to the deck, wearing those short shorts, her blond hair long and feathered back from her face, and asked him if he planned on attending the Saturday night dance.

If that didn't sound like an invitation, what did?

He would have asked her to dance if it weren't for her pesky kid sister. Sure, Ingrid wasn't a dog – not with that long silky blonde hair, but she had braces and was only fifteen, for Pete's sake. Still, what was he going to do, brush her off and let it get back to his dad? Ingrid was a guest, after all.

He left the crowd, following Kari and Craig to the beach. Craig sat on the big rock jutting from the middle of the beach and reached out for Kari, who giggled and settled her arms around his neck. Craig stuck his hands in her back pockets.

The sight turned John hot and he probably lost a little of his mind when he closed in on them. "Hey Craig, did you bring your wheels with you this year?"

Craig looked up, frowning, and Kari glanced over her shoulder. An enigmatic smile played on her beautiful lips, and he could nearly smell her sweet fragrance in the breeze. "Yeah, so?"

"A bunch of us are going to the gravel pit. Not that you'd be interested." He stuck his hands in his pockets, casual. Like he couldn't care.

His heart thudded into his ribs.

"Yeah, sure, whatever." Craig reached out for Kari's hand, but she broke away and turned to John.

"Was that your truck you were washing today?"

He nodded.

She pressed a hand to his shoulder. "It's pretty."

He managed to shrug, keeping it casual, not at all like his heart nearly leaped from his body.

He scoped out the crowd for Nate and found him talking to a couple out-of-town girls, evidenced by their fancy hairdos and designer jeans. Lean and wiry, and dressed in his cross-country letterman's jacket, Nate looked like he might score, with the grins the gals were giving him, but church-boy Nate wouldn't have a clue what to do with a couple city girls.

Not that John did, but he planned on figuring it out, should he get the chance. He motioned to Nate as he walked past, and his best pal jogged up to him. "What?"

"We're going to the gravel pit."

Nate raised an eyebrow but nodded, following him to the truck. He climbed into the cab, and a couple of John's football buddies landed in the bed, slapping the cab as John turned on the radio. Boston blared through the speakers.

He tore out of town and headed up the Gunflint trail highway towards the gravel pit.

More than a feeling...

A string of cars lined up in his rearview mirror – Craig in his fancy red Jeep, Kari riding shotgun, her sister behind her, her hair wild in the wind, another car full of resort kids – probably Nate's chicks somewhere in the mix.

Last year, Bradley and his Camaro challenged Craig to a drag race along Country Road 44.

Craig edged up beside John on the narrow road, then he punched it hard and flew past him, spitting up rocks onto John's new paint job.

"Think again, jerk!" John floored it and moved out into the left lane.

"Dude, it's dark – I'd rather not die tonight," Nate said.

"Hey! Everything's copasetic. Chill." John gripped the wheel and whooped out the window as he passed the Jeep. Kari sat with her pretty feet up on Craig's dash. Behind her, Ingrid held onto the roll bar with a death grip. John laughed as he flew past them, his headlight slicing through the darkness. "Bam! That's right – in your face!"

He hit the brakes and skidded into the entrance of the gravel pit, letting his truck spin up dirt as it stopped. The Jeep rolled in behind him, screaming Zeppelin, followed by two more cars. His football pals jumped over the bed, high-fived him.

Kari climbed out of Craig's Jeep, but John noticed that she stood slightly apart from him, her arms akimbo. She wore the kind of smile that could make John do crazy things.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

Like, “Can your pansy-rich-boy Jeep climb to the top of that?” He pointed to the gravel hill, some thirty feet high.

For the first time, Craig’s expression slacked, a little muster falling away. Yeah, that’s right, cheese head. This was north woods, real-man stuff.

“No problem. Let’s rock it.”

Craig climbed back into the Jeep, turned up his radio.

Ingrid had joined her sister, and Kari looked at her, frowning, then lifted her fist. “C’mon Craig!”

That stung, but she’d change sides before the night was over.

Craig shifted into gear and gunned it toward the gravel pit, the headlights shining against the red tin of his car, the grey metal of the gravel. His wheels dug in and he churned up the side, grinding his way up ten feet, maybe more.

Then, the night burned with the sickly sound of the car coughing, spitting up gravel, the wheels clogged. The Jeep ground to a halt, beaten.

Cursing. Then Craig put it into reverse and backed it down. Got out, folded his hands across his chest. Glared. “Your turn.”

“Catch ya on the flip side.” John got into his truck, glanced at Kari. She looked at Craig, then back to him.

Suddenly, she stepped up to him, hanging on his open window. “Can you really do this?”

“Of course, babe.”

She wore mischief in her eyes. “Far out.”

He thumbs-upped Nate and gunned it. The truck hit the wall too hard, but the force give it enough momentum to charge up the gravel. He passed Craig’s sinkhole, slowing, but still climbing. Higher, past halfway.

And that’s when the ground started to give out. He felt the truck rock over to the driver’s side, and made the mistake of gunning it.

The left wheels stopped turning, the right churning up pellets with the force.

And then, the truck flipped, right onto its side. The momentum pushed him over, and then again, rolling down the hill, faster, like a log.

John braced himself, slamming against the door, the far window, pain flashing through him.

The sickening crunch of metal filled his ears as his world turned black.

He slipped in and out of the shadows against a blur of sounds, his face wet, his head on fire. Somewhere in the background he made out Nate's voice, but he couldn't be sure what he said.

Then, again, darkness.

"Johnny-boy, wake up."

The voice drew him out of the cottony grip of unconsciousness and he blinked against the harsh lights overhead. He felt fuzzy around the edges, gray pressing into his peripherals.

Nate stood above him, blood on his letter jacket, his eyes dark, even angry. "Geez, Johnny. You could've gotten killed."

The Deep Haven ER. John recognized the desk, the array of medical condiments on the painted cart, the smells of regret. And was that Nate's mom at the trauma desk? Oh no.

Which meant his dad would find out. "Oh, no. My truck. Don't tell me—"

"It's pretty wrecked."

He groaned. "That's just aces."

"And you knocked yourself out. Got about ten stitches in your head there where you hit the glass. Broke out your side window."

John just wanted to close his eyes, sink back into the darkness.

Nate folded his arms over his chest. "You did manage to make a friend though. She kept the pressure on your cut all the way to the hospital. I think she likes you, man." Nate winked.

A friend? Kari --

The voice came into the room before her, sweet and kind, and for a second, he had no words for the blond who came to his bedside. "I found him some water. Oh, you're awake." He hadn't exactly seen her before, not really, and for a second took a good long look at her freckles, her long blond hair parted in the middle, a little too much makeup on her, okay, yes, sorta pretty face. She wore a pair of overalls and smiled down at him, so much concern in her eyes that he felt like a first-class jerk.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Hi,” she said. “I’m glad you’re okay. You scared us a little.”

He smiled at her, reached out for the glass. “Thanks, Ingrid.”



1977

Chapter 2

John Christiansen had no right to ignore her. Not after she'd held pressure to his wound, fetched him water, and even helped him lie to his parents about the accident.

Ingrid had spent the year remembering that moment when she'd pushed back the hospital curtain, holding the glass of water, and he'd looked up at her, surprise on his face. Sure, it faded in a second, and then, after a moment, he'd loosened up, and they'd collaborated on a story to tell his parents.

Not that she liked lying, but, well maybe it showed him that she could be trusted. That they could be friends.

She'd spent a year preparing for this week in Deep Haven, losing a few pounds, scouting through Kari's wardrobe to find the right attire. She'd even purchased some contraband Cosmopolitan magazines to teach her how to apply makeup.

She deserved notice this year. Especially since Kari boycotted the trip north. Without her beautiful big sister to distract him, John would see Ingrid, and realize that he missed her, even if just a little.

But, ever since her arrival, he'd dodged her. Like when she went out to the outfitter's shack to offer to help him pack up supplies for an outgoing group of adventurers. He'd barely acknowledged her presence as he filled Duluth packs with camping equipment and homemade granola.

And then, later, when he'd hung out at the dock, she'd worn her new red bathing suit, the one-piece that tied behind her neck and showed off her curves.

He'd barely looked at her, even when she dove off the dock, swam out to the floating plat-

form.

Finally, last night, at the campfire. She'd watched him through the flames, sitting across from her, laughing at one of his sister's jokes. "Your marshmallow's about to burn," she said, one second before it torched.

He'd jumped up, shaken it out, and didn't even look at her. As if it might be her fault it turned to ash.

Now, Ingrid stared at her choices, laid out on the bed. She'd planned on wearing a jumpsuit, one of her sister's discards, with a red scarf at her neck. Instead, she reached for the jeans, a halter top, a jean jacket.

If he was going to ignore her, then she'd ignore him, too. She pulled on the jeans, the top, then parted her hair in the middle and gathered it into two long ponytails.

She should stop trying to be Kari. John Christiansen simply wasn't going to notice her, and she had to stop dreaming.

"Back by ten," her father said as he handed her the keys to the Pontiac. She refused to search for John, to glance at the basketball court, or maybe the grilling deck as she left the resort.

But his battered truck, the one that looked like crinkled newspaper, wasn't in the lot.

The summer sun warmed her arm as she hung it out the window, heading toward town. The sultry smell of campfires hung in the air, the lazy sound of a band seasoned the festivities as she pulled into town and found a spot next to the drive-in ice cream parlor.

Sawhorses cordoned off the four blocks of the street where vendors hawked fishcakes, popcorn, and cotton candy. Down the street, she heard the whine of a chainsaw, and spied, on a stage, two contestants sawing apart a log. Woodchips flew from the power, dust feathered the air.

On the beach, tourists lounged on picnic blankets while children threw rocks into the waves of Lake Superior, indigo blue under the clear skies.

The whirring stopped, and she turned back, saw one of the contestants pounding his fist into the air.

The announcer introduced the next contestants. Her breath caught, held in her chest when she heard John's name.

He mounted the platform then, and she just stared. He wore a black T-shirt, a pair of faded

flared-bottom jeans, work boots. His shaggy dark hair flared out of a mesh gimme cap and he appeared bigger, stronger, his body chiseled from those hours as a football player. She'd heard from her parents' conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Christiansen that he'd made varsity defense last year.

He ripped the chainsaw's cord, holding the machine like it might be a toy. It roared to life, and he gunned it.

Then, the starter pistol cracked and he set the saw onto the log, about the size of a tire, chewing through it, first down, then back up, sheering off a chunk of wood five inches deep. It fell like a saucer onto the pile of sawdust, and he lifted the saw above his head. They announced his time, and she didn't care how he did.

Clearly she hadn't a hope of ignoring John Christiansen.

She stayed in the crowd, standing just far enough away to watch him as he jumped off the platform, glad-handed his football pals, local boys who'd emerged from the woods for the festival. Most of them worked as trail guides or loggers during the summer months.

The tourists, big-city kids mingled in their own cache of camaraderie, smoking and eyeing the local girls, who'd dolled up for the weekend festival. John made it to the final two, fighting it out against a Paul Bunyan the size of an ox. The crowd went wild when the hometown boy won the match.

Ingrid tried not to be pitiful as she lingered behind John and his friends. She wasn't spying, just...

"Hey, John, sign up for the fish toss! Let's see if you can win that, too!"

She watched as they stopped in front of the booth, his buddies scribbling their names to register. She recognized Nathan, John's friend from the hospital. He'd filled out this past year, his hair long, to his shoulders. He wore a cast on his arm.

John shook his head. "And who am I going to toss with, dude?" He gave Nathan a push, grinned.

"But you have a title to defend."

"Yeah, our title. If you hadn't decided to go dirt-biking—"

"I'll do it with you."

The words issued from her mouth before she could stop them, and had the effect of parting the crowd. John turned, looked at her, and for a second, time stopped, her heart simply lodged in her ribs.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

His blue eyes darkened and he frowned, took a breath.

“Hey, yeah. I remember you. Ingrid, right?” This from Nathan, who stepped past John, drew his arm around her shoulders. “You were there, last year, after the accident.”

“Nate—” John started, warning in his tone. But Nathan directed her toward the booth.

“You’re a guest at Evergreen Resort, right?”

She nodded as he shoved a pencil in her hand.

“See John, she’ll help you defend your honor.”

But John didn’t move. “I don’t need help defending anything.”

She wrote down her name then turned and handed him the pencil.

He stared at her. The first time in a week, he looked at her.

He was angry with her. She read it in his pursed lips, the way he sighed. And the look of annoyance in his eyes.

Like maybe she knew too much. Like maybe he didn’t want her remembering his mistakes. No, he hadn’t just been ignoring her. He’d been trying to erase her.

She bit her lip, turned back to the sheet, and began to scratch out her name.

“Fine. Yeah. Let’s toss a fish.”

Her eyes burned, and she blinked back moisture. “No, forget it.”

“I said yes, okay?” He came up behind her and nearly grabbed the pencil from her grip. “Yes.”

“No, I don’t want to—”

“Ingrid.”

She looked away from him, but he leaned down, found her eyes. And made a face. “I’m sorry. It’s cool. C’mon, for Evergreen?”

Then he gave her a one-sided, chagrinned smile.

She couldn’t speak, but she didn’t stop him from penciling in his name next to hers.

His hand on her arm burned as he led her away to the ice chest to choose a slimy northern pike to toss.

She stared at the fish, stiff and clammy. "You don't have to do this."

"Yeah, actually, I do." He leaned down, picked up a fish. "Really, I'm sorry I'm such a jerk."

She stared at the fish, the gray-black skin shiny, the eye bulging out of its long, lean head, almost as if it might be in shock. "What do I do with it?"

"We stand apart, and toss it. You gotta catch it, or we're out. Then we take a step back and repeat. The last team to catch the fish wins."

She held out her hands, and he dumped the fish into it. It smelled, and slimy goo slipped off its body onto her skin.

John laughed and she looked up at him. "What?"

"Your expression. It's priceless."

"This is gross."

"Mmmhmm," he said. He reached out and pulled one of her ponytails. "I have to admit, Ingrid, you're nothing like Kari."

He shook his head, walking away, and she wasn't sure that was a compliment.

* * *

She wouldn't last the first round. John watched Ingrid's nose wrinkle as she handled the fish, trying to find a grip along its slimy body, and he just barely stopped himself from shaking his head in defeat.

He should have simply walked away. The second she piped up from where she'd been shadowing him, he should have pretended not to hear her. But then Nate had to go rope her in and...

And right then, the image of her standing in the hospital a year ago, looking so worried, so compassionate, blood staining her overalls, rushed at him, and he just froze.

It wasn't her fault that Kari left the gravel pit with Craig, that John's parents, when they

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

discovered his lie, grounded him for six months. That his truck resembled a crushed can of Tab. Seeing her this week brought it all back, along with the searing prick of humiliation, and he'd done his best to dodge her.

Until now.

What he'd seen in her blue eyes, something raw and desperate and...he'd recognized it. He'd stared at his own desperation in the mirror more times than he could remember this year, longing to yank back his stupid challenge to Craig.

Clearly Ingrid hadn't gotten over her crush on him. He wasn't stupid – he saw how she followed him, how she'd tried to get his attention by diving off the dock, making a big deal about swimming out to the floating platform. And, at the campfire, her invasive gaze kept him from paying attention. He'd nearly lit the forest on fire with his marshmallow.

All the same, as she stood there in front of his friends, in front of Deep Haven, he just couldn't hurt her.

And anyway, if his father found out he'd turned down a long-time guest at the resort, well, he might just be grounded for another six months.

So, he'd toss her the fish, she'd drop it, and they'd all go home happy.

“Let's practice,” he said, and gave her a grin his father would be proud of.

She stepped back, grabbing the fish behind the gills with both hands. “It's really slippery.”

He laughed. “It's a fish. Have you ever caught a football before?”

She shook her head. “But I play volleyball and baseball.”

Really? He didn't know that. Which accounted for the way she swam out to the floating dock, the strength with which she pulled herself out of the water. And yes, he'd noticed her curves as she wrung out her hair. He was a red-blooded male, after all, but it didn't mean anything.

“You want to hold the fish with two hands underneath it.” He reached out and took the fish, showing her how to grip it behind its gills with one hand, the other around the small of its body, right before the tail. “You'll sort of launch the fish at me, keeping the head up, so it lands in my hands the same way.”

He tossed the fish at her, and to his shock, she caught it.

So, maybe they'd last the first round.

"If you have to, get your body into it. You can pin it to yourself, hug it to keep it from sliding away."

"Gross."

He laughed, and then his smile vanished as they practiced.

Wow. Nothing like Kari at all. In fact, he couldn't even imagine Kari touching the fish, let alone cradling it in her arms. "Just keep a tight hold on it, and don't let it wiggle away."

She looked up at him, her eyes big, and nodded.

She had pretty eyes. Blue, with flecks of green around the edges. Like the lake on a sultry summer day. He hadn't really noticed that before.

The announcer called for them to line up, and he took a spot next to Eli Houston, a running back a couple years younger than himself. "You're going down, Houston."

Eli grinned at him. "You're throwing with a girl."

He had John there. John held out his hands. "Okay, don't overthrow—"

She swung it toward him, stronger than he'd expected, and he caught it with both hands, just above his shoulder.

"Sorry!"

So, maybe she had the arm strength to get them to round two.

Eli, also, had caught his fish, along with the string of other locals. Only a couple tourists at the end had dropped their catch. The entire line backed up.

"Ready?"

She nodded, and crouched, like she might be ready to field a grounder, and he had to grin at the determination on her face. He flung the fish, and she bit her bottom lip as she held out her hands, catching it like a pro.

Her face lit up, bright and sweet. "Got it!"

Two more contestants went down, and they backed up.

"Northern pike comin' your way!" She flung it hard, and he took a step back catching it away

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

from his body. The fish had begun to dry; it made it easier to hold.

Which, probably, was why she caught the next pass, twirling in a circle with the momentum. She held the fish above her head to the roar of the crowd.

He looked down the row, saw that only Eli, himself, and two others remained.

Ingrid grinned at him, bent low, warmed up with a swing, and then let the fish fly.

He caught it, but it slipped and he bobbed it. Finally, he wrapped his arms around it and hugged it to his body, the head near his own.

“Getting friendly with the marine life, Johnny boy?” Nate called. John made a face at him, but grinned when two more contestants went down.

He and Eli remained. John blew out a breath.

Eli went first, and John watched the fish soar through the air toward Clay Nelson. He held his breath as Clay bobbed it, and then the pike dropped with a smack onto the pavement.

A groan released from the crowd. John glanced at Ingrid, and she had him in her gaze, something solid and calm in her expression. She smiled, and strangely, he felt it slide over him, through him, and touch his bones.

Then, he nodded, took a step, and flung the fish.

He tossed it poorly. Short and high, like a pop-fly, and he groaned.

But she moved like a softball player, getting under it, her eyes following it down as she held out her arms, angling for the right catch.

It smacked into her embrace, and she curled it into her body.

The crowd roared as she turned to John. Then she held the fish high, like a trophy, slime covering her tank top, grinning like she'd won the World Cup.

He came toward her as she dropped the fish. Without thinking, he swept her up in a hug. More instinct than intent, it just felt right to pull her to himself, swing her around. Her arms went around his neck, and her body molded to his, small, strong, as if they fit.

It jolted him, this sudden closeness, and heat zapped through him, a surprising rush of warmth.

Appreciation. Respect – that’s what he’d call it. He put her down, and she looked up at him, drinking him in with those way-too pretty eyes.

And he realized, if he didn’t watch himself, he’d be in big trouble. Because no, Ingrid was nothing at all like her sister.



1978

Chapter 3

This summer, Ingrid would end it in John Christiansen's arms. And not just because she'd been dreaming of this night for more than three years, and not just because it just might be their last opportunity, but because she'd seen it in his eyes.

Last summer, as the band played the BeeGee's "How Deep is Your Love," he'd started across the street toward her, the interest in his gaze telling her that maybe, in the course of one evening, he'd stopped seeing her as Kari's kid sister, and instead considered her something more. Or different.

If it weren't for some pretty local girl intercepting him, it would have been Ingrid with her arms laced around his neck, breathing in the smell of sawdust and woods on his skin.

And then, to make curfew, she'd had to leave the dance, the stars still sprinkling romance on the evening. She'd waited up on the deck of the cabin, though, relieved when his truck lights skimmed across the trees before midnight.

As her father said, nothing good ever happened after midnight. Not that John was that type of guy. One reason her family kept returning to Evergreen Resort was Sunday church service by the lake. Her dad liked the way John's father, Chester, preached in his moccasins. John was one of the good ones, and this year, she just knew he'd give her his heart.

She hoped he liked her hair. Bangs, and she'd spent an hour curling the ends. Kari would be proud of her, although who knew when she'd ever see it – her sister hadn't returned home from her trip to California after she graduated from high school. One year, and only sporadic calls. John should be grateful Kari hadn't broken his heart, too.

Ingrid pulled on an orange sundress then slipped her feet into a pair of flip-flops.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

She didn't know when she'd felt so pretty.

"Midnight?" she asked her father, who sat on the deck reading a newspaper in the lamplight. He swatted away a mosquito. "Eleven."

"Daddy, I'm not Kari."

He looked up at her, his lips pursed.

"Please?"

"Midnight, not a second later."

She popped a kiss on his cheek and grabbed the keys to the new Ford Country Squire wagon.

Air Supply's new album played on the 8-track, and she hummed along as she drove down to Deep Haven. She'd hardly seen John this week – he'd taken a group out to the boundary waters for a canoe trip and returned only last night. She'd watched him this morning as he dove off the pier, swam out to the floating dock and back. Then, he'd taken his canoe out onto the lake and spent the rest of the morning fishing.

Probably working on his summer tan. He'd filled out over the year; she'd read in the Deep Haven newspaper her dad had subscribed to that John made all-conference in football, had accepted a scholarship to the University of Minnesota.

Which meant that he'd forget about her unless she made an impression.

If, that was, she could find him. As the band played on the stage, she wandered through the crowds, teenagers smoking in groups on the sidewalks, youngsters throwing rocks into the lake, couples dancing in the street. A thumbnail moon hung over the dark water, as if smiling. Approving.

She leaned against a park bench, rubbing her arms as the wind came up, prickling her skin. Certainly he wouldn't miss the Saturday night dance.

"Ingrid? Did you come alone?" She turned, and smiled at Nathan, John's friend. He wore a pair of dark red polyester pants, a wide-collared print shirt, looking every inch the future college boy.

"No, well, yes. I was looking for John."

"He's here, somewhere." He held out his hand. "But you look so pretty, you should be dancing."

She smiled at him and took his hand. It was smooth and warm and he led her to the street, wound his arms around her waist.

She kept herself apart, her arms loose across his shoulders. "So, where are you going to college next year?"

He shook his head. "I'm not. I had a scholarship at Winona State, but..." He lifted a shoulder. "I'm just going to stick around here for a while." His eyes had gone dark, hooded, but she didn't press.

She propped her chin on his shoulder, and as he turned her, she saw him. John, wearing a plaid shirt, a pair of jeans, a canvass jacket, leaning against a street lamp.

He stared at her without a smile, his gaze fixed. She stilled for a moment, and Nathan released her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, forced a smile. Glanced past his shoulder. John hadn't moved from his perch under the glow.

Nathan followed her gaze. "Oh," he said, then gave her a wry smile. "Thanks for the dance."

She knew she should finish the dance, but John had the power make her forget anyone else. She walked toward him as he pushed away from the lamp. "Hey," he said.

"Hi."

Football attired him well, his muscles sculpted, his shoulders broad. He'd cut his dark hair, but it still hung over his face. The wind combed it back, revealing his too-blue eyes. "You look nice," he said quietly. "Real pretty."

She bit her lip, hiding a smile.

He looked her up and down. "Let's get out of here."

She didn't resist when he reached out and took her hand, pulling her down the street. He motioned to a motorcycle.

"This is yours?"

"Yep. Traded in the truck." He turned, and strapped the helmet below her chin, his hands brushing her skin. He met her eyes, then, and his expression softened. "I was hoping I'd see you tonight."

Oh. Any lingering worry left her and she climbed onto the back of his bike, wrapped her

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

arms around his body. He was solid and warm despite the wind teasing her dress. He drove her through town then down to the rec park. He slowed and took the bike off-road, onto the trail back to Honeymoon Bluff.

She'd heard of the place, the bald hill that overlooked the lake. Kari's stories tripped through her head.

A shiver threaded through her, but she hung on as he gunned it up the hill. They stopped at the apex, and he put his foot down, moved the bike back onto the kickstand.

"Wow," she said, as she stared out over the inky lake. The moon teased a finger of light across the surface, and out on the water in the distance, a freighter's lights winked in the darkness.

"Yeah," he said, but when she turned, his gaze wasn't on the water. He helped her off the bike, held her hand, and found a place in the grass for them to sit.

She sat next to him, smoothing her skirt. The wind raked up gooseflesh and she shivered again. John shucked off his jacket and settled it over her shoulders. A gentleman, John was, despite his quiet mood. Maybe he was nervous, too.

"You were gone all week," she said, and then realized it sounded as if she might be desperate, might have been pining for him.

"I know." He picked up a long blade of grass, slipped his fingernail into it, splitting it down the middle. "I saw you, though. This morning. I was going to say hi but..."

He put the grass to his lips, blew, and whistled into the night.

"But?"

He blew out a breath, tossed the grass away. "But I'm going away in a couple weeks, and...I wasn't sure it was such a great idea."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to the university to play football."

"I know," she said softly.

He turned to her then, something she couldn't read in his eyes. He reached out and touched her hair, twirling his finger through her curls. "I like your hair tonight. It reminds me of Kari's."

Oh. She tried not to let that bother her.

He let her hair slip from his touch. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"Why would I get hurt?"

He met her eyes then. Touched her face, drawing his fingertips down her cheekbone. "I probably won't be back. So I was thinking that tonight is our last night together."

Maybe. Or not. She leaned into his hand, kept her eyes on his.

Then he moved his hand behind her neck, leaned forward, and kissed her.

She'd never been kissed before, wasn't sure exactly how to react. Should she stay still, or maybe move her lips like he did? She opted to leave them pliable and soft, to drink in the taste of him, and let him nudge her mouth open, to deepen his kiss. It sent a thrill through her, sparks that touched her stomach, and she didn't stop him when he moved closer, winding his hand around her waist and leaning her back onto the grass.

He kissed her neck, leaving a trail of heat prickling her skin, and she trembled.

"John?"

He held her in the crook of his arm and raised his head. "Yeah?"

"Do you love me?"

He stilled, frowned. Then shrugged. "Yeah. I love you."

Then he bent to kiss her again.

But with his words, something shifted, a darkness pooling in her gut, an acid climbing up her throat. He kissed her neck, then her lips. His hand moved northward, off her waist.

She shook her head, wriggling away from him. "No."

He looked up, frowning. "What? I thought this is what you wanted."

She turned away from him, her eyes burning, horrified when a cold tear dropped on her lips, still on fire with his touch. "I thought so, too. I don't know what's wrong with me."

She wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she hadn't left his jacket in the grass.

He scooted up next to her. "I thought...I mean...You agreed that this was our last night together."

She glanced at him over her shoulder. "But I didn't mean...well, I'm not Kari."

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Obviously.” His mouth formed a tight line.

She turned away. Hated the pleading in her voice. “Maybe we could...we could write to each other.”

“Yeah, sure.” He got up, held out his hand. “C’mon, I’ll take you back to the dance.”

She stared at his outstretched hand, more tears forming. “But...couldn’t we just sit here for a while?”

“It’s called Honeymoon Bluff for a reason, honey.”

She stood up then, meeting his eyes. “You’re going to do just fine at the university.” Then she brushed past him, nearly running back down the hill toward town.

Maybe it was a good thing she’d never see John Christiansen again.

* * *

He wasn’t sure what had happened, but this night hadn’t turned out remotely like he’d planned. Or hoped.

He’d spent the better part of a year plotting this evening, how he’d wipe from Ingrid’s mind any lingering doubt that he might not be just as exciting just as a city guy, cool, aloof, the kind of guy a girl might find irresistible.

“Ingrid, c’mon, get on.” He revved the bike near her, not wanting to scare her, wishing he could roll back the night and restart it. He’d tell her how he’d raced down to town tonight, hoping she’d be around and how his heart felt a little black when he’d spied her dancing with Nate. How, in that orange dress, her hair long and curled, he’d forgotten last year’s smell of fish, the way she used to drive him crazy, and how all that changed somehow until he just wanted to take her into his arms.

And then, his brain stopped working. The feel of her in his arms, soft, and smelling so good—flowers, maybe, and the sense of anticipation on her lips.

He’d lost himself a little.

No, a lot.

And then, when she'd pushed him away, he'd been embarrassed. Now it seemed he couldn't fix it.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, John. You're not the boy I thought you were."

He winced at that, trying not to let her words sear his chest. But she was right – for a moment there he hadn't recognized himself, either.

He could still feel her in his arms, feel her hair between his fingers, taste her on his lips.

He'd kissed a few girls before, but no one like Ingrid. No one with such innocence, such wonder in her touch.

Yeah, he didn't deserve her. But she had no right to treat him like he'd...like he'd attacked her.

"I know I screwed up. Just – please, let me explain!"

She stopped so abruptly, the motorcycle whizzed past her. He had to stop, pull it up on its kickstand, then climb off and race back to her.

She stood under a tall oak, the shadows pooling around her. The music from the street reached out as if to reel them in. The lights of the town sparkled, fireworks against the murky water.

She folded her arms across her chest, her face tight. "I'm listening."

He swallowed, reached out for her, but she backed away. "Okay, yeah, I know maybe I went a little too far. It's just...I wanted to impress you."

"By being rude to me?" She shook her head, started to brush past him, but he stepped in front of her.

"I'm not always going to be small town," he said. "You have to know that."

She frowned. "But being small town is what I like about you."

"But I don't want you to. I'm headed for big things. I'm going to play professional football... and well, I might never come back here."

She frowned at him. "Of course you will."

No. He shook his head. "Don't you get it? I have to leave, or I'll be stuck here forever. Running the resort, like my dad. I don't want that."

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“I get it,” she said softly, so much sadness in her eyes, he realized that no, she didn’t get it. Not at all.

She brushed past him then, and he let her go. He could find a dozen girls at the dance who might want to watch the stars with him on Honeymoon Bluff.

He parked the bike and headed over to a group of girls. He knew one of them, a regular from the rental cabins down the shore. A short blonde, she smoked a cigarette and he reached for it, took a drag, then handed it back to her. She smiled up at him, and he pulled her onto the dance floor.

He danced with each of her friends, watching for Ingrid to return. When she did, her face looked a little chapped under the streetlights, as if she’d been crying. He turned away, smiled down at the girl he was dancing with, and gave her a long kiss.

She tasted of an ash tray. She tried to pull him to the beach, but he shook his head and disengaged himself.

He spied Ingrid talking to Nate. She was rubbing her arms, and Nate slipped off his jean jacket and put it around her shoulders. John’s gut tightened.

Why did he care so much about this stupid girl? Sure, she was a babe, and yeah, she’d kissed him like he meant something to her. But he didn’t have time for a girlfriend, not with football camp starting in a week.

Maybe we could write. Yeah. Like he would remember her name in a year.

Still, he sat on a rock, settled in the shadows, watching as she let Nate buy her cotton candy. She laughed, but he decided it could only be fake.

To his relief, she left early, long before the band stopped playing. He got on his motorcycle and followed her home, at a distance, just to make sure. He turned off his lights then, and after she’d parked and found her way to her cabin, he pulled in, parking the bike behind the house, and headed out to the end of the dock.

He couldn’t swallow away the lump lodged in his throat as he sat and leaned back on his hands, staring at the stars. He’d destroyed something tonight, and it bugged him that he even cared.

He’d just been trying to have some fun, like every other guy down at the festival.

He didn’t see his father’s shadow until it loomed over him, until the scent of his Old Spice

seasoned the breeze. He glanced over his shoulder, saw his pop standing behind him, hands in his jean pockets, wearing a flannel shirt, an old cap.

“What are you doing out here?” John said.

“I thought I’d take the canoe out, see if I couldn’t get a better look at the stars.”

John frowned at him but shrugged and got up, following his father to shore to help put their canoe in the water. They’d spent the better part of the last four years building the wooden canoe from scratch. They’d found and cut the wood, molded the pieces to fit, from the ash keels and gunwales to the cherry decks and caned seats and even the cedar strips that comprised the body. His father carved their names into the smooth maple yoke, and kept the canoe protected from the guests.

Now, they toted it to the water, letting it slide into the dark, murky surface of the lake, the light of the moon icing the waves with a soft gleam. His father climbed into the bow, picking up a paddle on the way, and John took the stern.

They slipped out onto the lake, quiet, soundless. A loon mourned over the surface of the water. His father kept paddling until they reached the center, then set the paddle across the bow to drift.

John brought his paddle to his knees. The exertion of paddling had eased the knot from his chest, but something inside him still ached.

“Seeing the sky, spilled out like this brings a hymn to mind.” His father began to hum, and John heard the words in his head. Oh Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands hath made...

He didn’t join in, just listened to his father hum, consumed with the terrible urge to tell him about tonight. But despite their hours together, working the resort, building the canoe, he’d never quite found the right time – or the courage – to tell him the truth.

He took a breath. “I’m not coming back, Dad.”

His father stopped humming, but he didn’t turn.

“If you’re expecting me to take over the resort...I’m planning on playing football.”

He saw the old man’s profile as he nodded. “I know.”

John hadn’t expected that. Nor the way his father went back to humming, as if, he didn’t care that John was throwing away his legacy. Their legacy.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Isn’t it interesting that, against the darkness, God provided light for us to find our way home?”

“So, you’ll have to find someone else to run this place. Because it’s not what I want.”

His dad nodded again, still humming.

“I was made for bigger things.”

“I have no doubt you’ll be a success at whatever you do,” his father said quietly, unruffled. He picked up his paddle, began to move them through the water.

He’d expected something more, protestations, anger, from his father, a cool whoosh of relief inside at releasing the truth.

Nothing. Fine. If his father wanted to live in denial, then that was his problem. John dug in, paddling hard. But he would be someone – and he’d do it without Evergreen Resort, without Deep Haven. Without Ingrid Young. Really, he’d already forgotten her.

“Son, you’d better ease up or we’ll ram the shore.”

“It’s cool, Dad.” John maneuvered them past the dock, toward shore. Above, the moon dipped behind a cloud, turning the shoreline dark.

“To the left, John!” His dad put out his paddle, steering them hard, but not quite fast enough. The canoe slid over a boulder under the water, just a foot off shore and John heard the sickening crunch of wood, then splintering as the rock tore at the shell of the boat.

His dad jumped out, picking up the bow of the canoe to rescue it, but as John clambered out, he saw water filling the boat.

He muttered a curse, and it soured the air. His father said nothing as he towed the canoe through the water, to shore.

John helped him turn it upside down, then ran his hand over the wound. They’d have to tear off the cedar strip, remake it, refasten it, reseal it – hours upon hours of work.

His father sighed, deep and long. Then, “I guess we’ll have to repair it.”

“No, it’s not worth it.” John dropped the paddle on shore. “Just turn it into firewood.”

He heard his father pulling the canoe farther onto shore, out of the way, but he couldn’t bear to watch. Maybe it was for the best. Nothing to draw him back to this achingly small town, their

backwoods resort.

His gaze drifted over to Cabin 12, where a thin light burned on the deck. He thought he heard a screen door whine, thought he saw a shadow cross the light.

Yes, he'd leave this place, and these memories, and finally be the man he was meant to be.



1979

Chapter 4

“Aren’t you going to town tonight?”

Ingrid looked up from where she sat on the Adirondack chair, her feet propped up on the wide arm, and propped a thumb in her book while she answered her father’s question.

“Nope.”

The sun had ducked behind the trees on the far side of the lake, the buzz of moths flirting with the deck light a hum behind the slurp of the lake on the shore, the far-off cry of a loon across the water.

She’d miss Evergreen Resort next year, she could admit it, despite the memories that dogged her as she drove north, the air cooling, along with her resolve to face John.

And tell him what?

Something. Anything to prove that she wasn’t the love-struck teenager from last summer – no every summer. She’d spent the year sorting out the churning emotions wrought from last year’s train wreck of an evening. She may have over-reacted, she could admit that.

After all, John hadn’t treated her like she owed him something, not like Michael did at this year’s pre-prom date.

In fact, compared to Michael, John might be considered gallant. Especially the way he’d followed her home that evening, as if making sure she returned to Evergreen Resort safely. And she’d seen him watching her as she tried to lose herself in Nathan’s easy friendship. But she’d failed, miserably, and it hadn’t helped that John seemed to dance with half the girls in Deep Haven.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

But he'd taught her a valuable lesson, and she'd realized that Kari was right – boys only wanted one thing. Well, they wouldn't get it from her, and frankly, the thought helped her scrape John from her heart.

She was so over John Christiansen. So over being naïve and stupid.

“Are you sure, honey? I know how you love the street dance.”

“I'm fine here, Daddy.” Ingrid opened her book, finding her place, reading the sentence three times before he walked away. Or not. Her dad pulled up another chair and perched it front of her.

“What?”

“You could talk to him, you know.”

“What--? Who?”

Her father frowned. He'd aged more than the two years since Kari left, since she returned home and dismantled their lives with her drug abuse, her anger, her string of live-in boyfriends. How they could grow up in the same family and turn out so differently confused Ingrid. Still, the age, the worry, only deepened his frown.

“I'm not blind. You've been pining for John Christiansen since the first day you saw him, swinging into the lake from the rope on that big oak.”

“I wasn't pining. Just...just wishing he saw me, and not Kari.” In fact, she had a terrible nagging suspicion that's exactly who he might have been holding in his arms last year. At least in his mind. “But those days are behind me.”

“You know he's here, right? Showed up yesterday, leg brace and all.”

She lifted her book, her shoulder.

“He might never play football again with an injury like that. He could use a friend.”

Then he could choose from any of the girls he'd danced with last year. She wasn't wowed, not any more. “We're not friends, Dad.”

Again, he frowned. “Funny. That's not what you said three years ago, when you covered for him after his accident.”

“I was a stupid girl, with stupid dreams.” Like the idea that a guy like John might see her,

plain Ingrid, instead of flashy Kari.

Oh, see, just the mention of his name stirred up old hurts. She stared at her book, the lines blurry.

“Of my children, Ingrid, you are not the stupid one.” He leaned forward, met her eyes. “But you are the compassionate one.” He patted her knee and got up. Turned to glance at the lodge.

In the glow of the light cascading over the lodge porch, she saw John, his crutches leaning against the picnic table, sitting on the tabletop, his hands clasped, head bowed. Defeated.

Shoot.

She put her bare feet into the cool grass, let the blades find her toes. Became again the girl holding John’s wounded head as Nathan drove him to the ER.

No, not that girl. Because, she was over John Christiansen. And all men, for that matter, at least for now. But her dad was right, maybe he needed a friend.

And, because she was over him, she could be that.

She tucked the book under her arm and headed down the grass to the lodge. The night was cool on her skin, her tan rich after working as a lifeguard all summer. She wore her cut-off jeans, her red staff shirt. Down at the fire pit, she spied John’s mother, Eva, and his dad, Chester, building a campfire. Her parents would spend the evening roasting marshmallows, their own Saturday night tradition.

John didn’t look up as she stepped onto the deck, stood at the edge. She tried not to stare, not to wince, but his knee seemed three times its normal size, inflamed and red, evidence of the hyper-extension injury. If possible, he’d filled out even more this year, his body thick and strong, proof of a year of conditioning. He wore a pair of maroon football shorts, a white gopher emblazoned T-shirt, his hair shorter than she ever remembered, just over his ears. It still fell in a long, tempting lock over his eyes.

“John?”

He looked away, and the pain on his face speared her heart. She came over to sit beside him on the picnic table. “I heard about the accident.” She didn’t add that, in fact, she’d followed his first year at the University of Minnesota, knew he’d gotten into a couple games near the end of the season.

“How’d it happen?”

He still hadn’t looked at her. Now, he shook his head. “Stupid accident. My spikes got caught

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

in the wet grass, and I was slow coming off the ball. The center dove low, for my knees, and I just felt it pop. And then I was down.”

“Did it hurt?”

His mouth tightened in a grim line. “It hurts more to know I might not get another chance to show what I have to offer. That it’s over before it even began.”

“You went in a couple times last season—“

He shot her a look, his eyes wide and oh no, she hadn’t wanted to give that away. But she forced a smile, shrugged. “My father follows Gopher football.”

He nodded, like that made sense.

“But why is it over? Can’t you come back? After surgery, after you heal?”

“I’ll be away from the game for a whole season. What if I can’t come back?” He closed his eyes as he spoke, too much vulnerability in his words.

“Really, John? This from the guy who tried to pound all the dents out of his truck after he rolled it. And convinced me to catch a slimy trout—“

“Northern, and as I remember, that was your idea.” But she’d coaxed the slightest smile from him.

Oh, she’d forgotten how much she’d missed it.

“And what about the chainsaw competition? That guy doesn’t give up.”

He said nothing. Then, “And what about the guy who totally blew it last summer?” He met her eyes, serious now, his eyes so blue it could take her breath away. “I’m really sorry, Ingrid. I thought...well, it doesn’t matter. I shouldn’t have assumed.”

Her throat thickened, and she looked away. So maybe she had pined, just a little, for this version of John Christiansen, the one she knew was locked inside all that small-town swagger.

But she wasn’t stupid, so she found a just-friends smile. “It’s okay, John. I probably overreacted. We were both just kids.” Translation: young, immature, and not going back there.

She stared out at the lake, at the cracking fire, the sparks vanishing into the sky.

“Are you going to college?”

“Peace Corps. Peru, or maybe Ecuador. And then, I don’t know. Maybe I’ll be a teacher. Or a missionary.”

He frowned at that.

“What?”

“I just thought...” He lifted a shoulder. “For some reason I thought you would move to Deep Haven.” He shook his head. “I’m not sure why. It’s just silly – I mean, everyone is trying to get out of here, right?”

Not right. “I’d love to live in Deep Haven someday. I love the simplicity, the way everyone knows each other, like a family. I love the beauty of the North Shore, the blue of the lake against the cloud-streaked sky, the smell of campfires, the crunch of pine needles under my shoes. It’s a life I want. I’ve always dreamed of living here. I can’t understand why you’re so desperate to leave.”

He opened his mouth, closed it. Then rubbed his hands together. “All my life, I’ve been trapped here while tourists revolve through the resort, bringing with them the life in the city. New cars, movies – stuff we don’t have up here. Deep Haven is caught in a time warp, Ingrid. Nothing exciting ever happens here.”

“That’s good, isn’t it? That’s why people come here –“

“And that’s why people leave. I want more than Deep Haven, than this resort. I want a bigger life. A better life.”

“I guess we have different definitions of what is better,” she said softly.

The silence shifted between them, and in it she felt his gaze on her. She refused to turn, to let him see the sadness in her eyes.

“Ingrid, I gotta know. Did I wreck it so much that...that I can’t come back? That I can’t fix things between us?”

The question startled her, and she stared at him, wide-eyed. Her throat filled, her words gone.

She had no choice but to get up, glare at him, and flee.

So much for not being stupid.

* * *

He'd made her run away. Again. John watched Ingrid stride off the porch, into the darkness, and he wanted to shout with frustration.

Come back.

In fact, he'd wanted to shout that all year. Come back. Or maybe he just wanted to reel back time to the night when things felt simpler, easy.

When he'd believed in himself. When he stood at the crest of his future and longed to dive off.

He ran his hand down his leg, to where the swelling started, pressed it with his thumb and fingers, feeling the fluid, wincing.

He hadn't wanted to return to Evergreen, but he was short on options after his injury. The docs in the cities said that maybe it would heal on its own, but after three weeks, he thought he heard the word surgery muttered in the doctor's quiet words to his coach.

Surgery, rehabilitation, and maybe, someday, football.

He might end up in Deep Haven after all. A life almost lived.

Down by the lake, the campfire spit into the night, tiny red embers snuffed out by the darkness. Laughter lifted from the night, his parents, and a few of the guests in their Saturday night ritual. He couldn't remember the last time he'd missed the Saturday street dance. If ever.

He stared after Ingrid. She'd missed it, too. Why had she stayed home tonight?

The thought stirred a fading hope and he got up, reaching for his crutches, and headed out into the darkness after her. He didn't remember the path being this rocky, and nearly fell twice, but he made it down to Cabin 12. The light over the deck pressed out over the lawn, the empty Adirondack chairs. He'd started for the stairs when he saw the figure just inside the glow of light, down by the shoreline.

She had her knees up, her arms clasped over them, her head buried in her arms like she might...be crying?

His chest thickened for a moment, but he couldn't bear to leave her there, even if he'd caused her tears, so he limped out toward her.

She didn't even lift her head. "Go away, John."

"Please, Ingrid--"

She looked up at him, her expression in the wan light incredulous. "Seriously?"

"I know I blew it – I...maybe we could just be friends?"

Her gaze, in the glow of the porch light, looked right through him, and he just about turned around. Then she sighed, long, painful, and turned back to the lake.

She hadn't said no. Which gave him the courage to sit next to her, stifling a groan as he went down.

"Friends, huh?"

"We could write."

She let out a burst of laughter, short, harsh. But her expression softened and the knot in his chest loosened. "Listen, John, just so you know, I'm not interested in dating. Anyone."

"Ever?"

She looked away.

"Why are you crying?"

She blew out another breath. "Because I don't want to be stupid. Again."

Because of him. Because of the way he'd treated her. "I'm so sorry—"

"It's not just you, John." She picked up a rock, threw it out into the water. It splashed, unseen, in the distance. "It's...guys. I should have listened to Kari."

"What did Kari say?" He had a feeling he knew, though, and his throat tightened.

She looked at him then, and he knew he'd guessed right.

"Ingrid—"

"Stop, John. I know you're sorry. I forgive you, okay?"

"How can I make it better?"

She shook her head. "You can't. It's just...I'm a silly, stupid girl."

He didn't like how that sounded, and his voice lowered, the timbre of dread in it when he

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

asked, “What happened?”

She went quiet then, and he felt the silence string around him, banding his chest. “Ingrid—”

“I didn’t go to prom.”

Huh?

“I mean, I was asked, but...well, my date wanted to go out before prom to ‘get to know each other’” she finger-quoted the words. “Which meant, well, getting to know each other.”

He stilled. “Please, don’t tell me—”

“Nothing happened. I mean, something happened, but not enough Michael.”

He couldn’t deny the crazy relief that flooded through him.

She swallowed. “He cancelled a week before the dance and asked someone else. A girl from another school. Someone prettier.”

He had this terrible urge to track down the guy and take him out at the knees.

“I still have the dress. My mother made it for me, spent weeks finding the right pattern, the right material, getting it just right, preparing for the perfect night.”

She shook her head again. “See, I’m a silly, stupid girl.”

He felt sick. “No you’re not, Ingrid. Not every guy is like that.” Oh, he wanted to mean that.

She met his eyes then, her wounds in her gaze. “I wish I could believe you.”

He had no words, his shame thickening his throat.

“I just want a man who wants what I want. A home, family. Small town, yes, but a man of honor, who wants me, not Kari, and not...well, who is willing to wait for me.”

Her words stirred something inside him. “Please, give me another chance, Ingrid.”

She considered him, and in the space of time, he felt his heart bang against his ribs. Then, “Were you serious about writing to me?”

He was nodding even before the words crested her lips. “Every day.”

Her gaze was in his, testing. She was so close, if he simply leaned forward, he could kiss her. Just brush her lips with his, like a whisper. He could hardly breathe with the desire for it, the

taste of her suddenly real and bold and unquenchable.

But he didn't. He just stilled, and watched her, holding his breath until...

Until she nodded. "But only if you promise to get back in the game." She pointed to his leg. "I want to see you play football, John Christiansen."

He smiled. "I'll send you tickets to my first game." He held out his hand. "Friends?"

She hesitated a moment, then took it. "Friends."

Maybe he could start over, after all.

Dear John,

Thanks for the news clipping of your spring scrimmage with the Gophers. I knew you'd make it back on the team! And yes, I'll take you up on your offer for tickets next fall. I can't wait to see you play. I can imagine how much hard work it took to get back into shape, but that's who you are, so I'm not surprised.

We finally finished the roof on the school. It's a shiny tin that's already turning to rust in the rain and sunshine of the mountains. Sometimes I sit on the back porch before English classes start, drinking a cup of tea and watching the mist lay low over the Andes mountains. There's a smell here, a ripeness in the air stirred up by the wet breezes of the rainforest. Humid and almost moldy, so different from the pine of Minnesota, but I've learned to love it. There's a parrot that's taken roost near my dormitory - it wakes me up every morning with a squawk, like it's warning me not to miss the day. I long for the loon call across the lake.

Ecuador is colder than you'd think, especially here in the mountains. I love the U of MN sweat-shirt you sent me for Christmas - even if I got it in March!

It's been harder than I thought to go away for a year. I thought I'd love the Peace Corps. I used to think, when I watched slideshows from missionaries in our church, that I wanted to be a humanitarian aid worker. I didn't realize how much of that time would be digging wells and giving TB shots. I've discovered, however, that people here want the same things we want - safety, health, family...love. It's made me realize, too, that probably I don't have to leave home to do something that changes lives.

You'd be proud of me - I learned how to drive a clutch! Phil Samson taught me (although I thought he might kill me before I got it). Now I'm driving the Jeep for the team, transporting people to Quito and back. The new team flies in a few weeks before our annual retreat to Evergreen - I hope to make the trip with my family again this year. I don't know your plans, but I'd really love to see you.

May 20, 1980

Ingrid



1980

Chapter 5

John could see her sitting crosslegged on the ground, her notebook in her lap, her lip caught in her teeth as she wrote to him. Her blond hair would be long and caught by the cool Ecuadorian wind, her skin a deep brown, her arms shaped with muscle. When he'd read about her learning to drive the Jeep, a crazy, unbidden tightness grabbed him around the chest. He couldn't bear the thought of her laughing with this Phil guy.

John should have been the one teaching her how to drive a clutch.

Maybe he'd take her out on his motorcycle tonight, lean over her shoulder as he taught her how to shift gears, put his hands on her hips. She wouldn't even notice as he'd breathe in her smell, let her soft, silky hair slip through his fingers.

Maybe he could even hide how he'd started to thirst for her letters this year. How he longed, as his physical therapy bore down on him, to jump on a plane and escape his so-called dreams and find new ones.

With Ingrid.

But she'd be back, tonight, and because of that, he'd returned to the resort for the summer, guiding fishing trips and packing Duluth packs and repairing cabins and cutting firewood and hoping, waiting for her to return.

Holding his breath for their Saturday night.

When her parents arrived a week ago, alone, he could admit to a layer of panic. So much that he'd managed to casually ask, one night by the campfire, if she might be coming home. The

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

fact that she would drive up when her flight came in set a swirl of heat in his gut, one he couldn't seem to douse.

He rinsed his razor in the sudsy water then scraped another layer of whiskers off his cheek. He'd never seen the guy in the mirror quite so well groomed. In fact, he'd hadn't seen so much of his face in years, but he liked the shorter cut, especially since it hid the fact that he'd begun losing his hair. And it revealed the rather gnarly scar above his eye.

He'd probably end up like his grandfather, bald at thirty. But maybe Ingrid wouldn't notice his lack of hair. He rinsed his face, dried it, then put on a clean pair of jeans, a gold T-shirt. He'd grown another inch this past year and put on fifteen pounds of muscle.

She might even be impressed. He hoped she'd see more than the guy from last year, ready to throw himself into the lake, or the kid in his foolish high school years who'd actually thought Ingrid Young might be forgettable.

Right. With every letter, Ingrid lodged further in his brain, his heart, until she dogged him at practice, stalked him in the library, edged into his dreams. Her belief that she could change the world irked him until he realized she'd changed him, made him long to be the person she saw.

He kept every piece of mail, found himself responding on notebooks, hastily scribbled, his thoughts –who knew what he really wrote – shoved into an envelope before fear turned his letter into a crumbled wad.

Ingrid Young was about as forgettable as the sunrise.

John glanced out his window and saw a new car in the lot, a Dart parked beside the Young's station wagon.

He experimented with a little cologne then grabbed his jacket and headed downstairs.

His mother took a batch of cookies out of the oven and let them rest on the cutting board on the counter. He swiped one.

She stopped him with a touch to his arm and pointed to her cheek. He obliged with a kiss and headed outside.

For a moment, before he hopped on the bike, he debated walking down to her cabin, knocking on her door, asking if she might want a ride. But...but tradition created magic. He wanted to spy her at the dance across the crowded street, make his way to her, see the anticipation in her smile.

He found Nate at the Deep Haven Realty booth, handing out brochures.

“How’s your mom?” John asked, taking a brochure. Nate’s picture on the back evidenced his friend’s hard work this past year - and his future.

“In remission. We’re hoping she’s licked the cancer.” Nate glad-handed a tourist couple, turned his attention to them. “Are you looking to buy land in Deep Haven?”

John purchased a fish burger from the Lions’ booth, keeping a casual eye out for Ingrid as twilight slid over the harbor in shades of lavender and rose. Behind him, the smells of the remnant summer, grilled hamburgers, cotton candy, the sweet tang of ice cream, hung in the air. The street band, set up on a stage in the park, began to warm up.

He was watching a family of tow-headed boys losing a war to their ice-cream cones when he spotted her; her hair long and blond, her back to him, wearing a pair of jeans, a sleeveless shirt. A little thinner than he remembered, but that’s what overseas living did. She stood with a cadre of long-time guests from Evergreen, laughing. He caught her profile, just briefly, as he headed toward her, tasting his heart.

“Ingrid?”

She turned, and for a moment, everything stopped. The sounds of the band leaning into the first few bars of Blondie’s “Call Me,” the cheers of an enthusiastic, eager audience, the stir of the summer wind, his pulse.

Not Ingrid. Kari. She had a hint of a burn on her nose, her face clean and tanned, looking every inch the beauty he knew she’d be. And, in the way her eyes lit up, the smallest memory of her invading his dreams revived.

He whispered her name, almost involuntarily, and she laughed.

“Really? You’re that surprised to see me?”

“I thought...well, is Ingrid here?”

Kari stepped up close to him, blew out a ring of smoke. Only now did he notice her T-shirt, the neck ripped down to reveal too much untanned flesh. How could he have ever confused her for Ingrid? “Ingrid didn’t come home.”

He frowned. “But...” He swallowed back his words, fought against the tenor of disappointment. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. She just said she was staying. Who knows why Ingrid does what she does.”

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

He knew why. Because Ingrid cared about people more than fun. If she didn't come home, she had a good reason. Like the new team hadn't shown up, or they needed help at another village, or maybe even, she couldn't bear to leave the youngsters she'd invested a year in.

He moved away from Kari but she caught his arm. "John. Really. Ingrid? Listen." She moved herself against him, her hand up around his neck. "Once upon a time, you chased me through Deep Haven, remember?"

He wished he didn't. He reached up, unlaced her arm from his neck. "That memory faded long ago."

She pouted, something false and dangerous. "Let me remind you."

But he moved away, shaking his head. "Tell Ingrid, if you write to her, that I'll be here next year."

She rolled her eyes, but he headed to his bike, lifting a hand to Nathan. His friend frowned, but John didn't look back as he drove toward Honeymoon Bluff.

If there were any memories he longed to stir, it was the ones of holding Ingrid in his arms. And the strange, lingering hope that he might, again.

* * *

They hadn't made promises to each other. In fact, if Ingrid could recall their last face-to-face interaction, she'd reminded him that they would be friends, just friends.

She'd even sealed it with a handshake.

Apparently, those words sunk in, found fertile soil.

So she shouldn't have thought, despite the warmth in his letters, that over the year they'd tacitly agreed to be more.

She tucked her knees up into her sweatshirt, now fraying around the cuffs, and rested her chin on her knees, while she creased the edges of Kari's letter with her fingers to a razor-sharp edge.

To the east, the sunlight began to spill into the valley, ribbons of light, dropping into the

tangled green forest, thick with spires of bamboo. From where she sat, two giant steps would plummet her into a gulley a thousand feet deep.

Times like this, she liked to sit at the edge.

Even if John hadn't felt a shift in their correspondence, that didn't mean he shouldn't have told her about his night with Kari. Lies by omission still counted as lies.

The wind chased up the hill, tugged at the letter. She nearly let it go, but then gripped it tight, crumpling it in her hand.

She just might have to read it a dozen more times before she believed it, before Kari's descriptions touched her bones.

I saw John Christiansen. You're right, I'm not sure why I never really noticed him before. Wide, sculpted shoulders, he's tall now, and every inch a linebacker. He came down for the street dance, and the moment he saw me, I saw it – that subtle shift in his eyes that told me he remembered me. Of course he remembered me. He'd been pining for me for years.

He mentioned you, so apparently he considers you friends. It's nice you two can stay in contact, for now.

I probably shouldn't kiss and tell, Ings, but the truth is, he was worth the wait. He took me to Artist's Point, and we watched the waves roll in all the way to dawn. I hope you don't mind, but I figure with you off digging wells and giving TB shots, you had more important things to worry about.

I hope to see you at Christmas!

Love, Kari

Worth the wait. Ingrid closed her eyes, felt the moisture burn her cheek, wiped it away before it fell. Yes, indeed, he would have been. She could see him, as Kari described him. Tall, his hair cut shorter – he'd mentioned how he liked it out of his face, although honestly, she'd miss the forelock of dark hair – muscles stretching the sleeves of his maroon University of Minnesota T-shirt.

He would look at her with his too-handsome smile she missed and ask her to go for a ride on his motorcycle.

She'd dreamed of it for months, actually.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

And he hadn't helped, not with the suggestions he'd made in his last letter that she might mean more to him. She'd received it two weeks before she intended to leave Ecuador, two weeks before the torrential rain that cut off all communication. She'd barely been able to get a telegram to her parents.

I decided to move home this summer, help my dad with the resort. I know I keep saying I don't want to come back but...but I was thinking that maybe you'd be home, and I was thinking, that if the night was warm, and the stars were out, we could take a ride on my bike.

I'd really love to see you.

I'd really love to see you. That didn't speak of a man easily wooed into rendezvousing with her sister.

But maybe she'd simply seen the John Christiansen she drew in her dreams instead of the man he kept claiming to be.

She should pay attention.

Behind her rose the smells of the open kitchen, sausage frying with fresh eggs, the whine of hungry dogs rising, the early morning attention of a rooster.

She missed the soft lap of the lake on the fir-padded shore.

"Ingrid, you okay?"

She looked up to see Phil, dressed in a pair of cut-off green army pants, a Hawaiian shirt, and Birkenstocks, leaning over her, his shadow blocking the sun. He wore a tan, the sun bleaching his blonde hair, a gentle smile.

He reminded her a lot of Nathan, John's best friend. Quiet. Understanding.

She looked up at him, tried a smile, and he plunked down next to her. Pointed to the letter. "News from home?"

She folded it in half. "My sister. Telling me about the summer vacation in Deep Haven. My family goes every year, and this year, well..."

"Bummers. I know you wanted to leave, but with the rains – "

"It's fine. Worst was, I couldn't get word out until it was too late and..." She lifted a shoulder. "It's no big deal."

“You could go home for Christmas. With the road rebuilt, they’ll have another team of recruits ready to replace us.”

She nodded. Sighed.

“You miss home.”

“I miss...Deep Haven.”

“Or someone in Deep Haven.”

She glanced at him, and he lifted his own shoulder. “You talk about him every time you get a letter. John had surgery. John made it off his crutches, John made varsity. John, John, John—”

“I’m sorry.”

“I get it. Or did, until I see that look on your face.”

She bit her lip, turned away. “I guess I just thought we were...we were meant to be. I’ve loved him since I was thirteen—”

“Loved?”

His question settled between them and she rolled it around in her head. It sunk into her, like the heat of the sun.

Yes, loved. Maybe an adolescent crush at first, but over the past year, she’d seen a different side of John. Fragile. Searching. Hopeful. Courageous.

The man she knew he’d become, if she gave him time.

The man who’d been worth the wait. At least for Kari.

She nodded. “Loved. But maybe that’s over.” She tucked the letter into her shirt pocket. “I’m thinking of staying.”

“Re-up for another year?” A new warmth rose in Phil’s coffee-brown eyes. His voice softened. “I’d like that.”

Then he reached over and wove his fingers into hers. Sweet, the kind of intimacy that didn’t scare her, didn’t flood over her, didn’t bring with it a breathlessness that made her ache for more, despite the warnings in her head.

But maybe sometime it would.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Can I show you something?”

She nodded and he helped her up then held her hand as he led her away from camp, toward a path that wove up a hill, through the forest. They walked in silence, their feet whispering on the worn path. They reached the apex of the hill, and he directed her across the top, pointing out roots and fallen bamboo, parting leaves bigger than her face. They finally emerged into a tiny, worn clearing.

“Look down, over there.”

She followed his gesture, and there, through the trees, dropping two-hundred feet down and spilling into the dawn with jeweled spray, a waterfall. The fresh breath from the fall of water lifted into the air and brushed her skin with moisture, soft and cool.

Her skin prickled.

“It’s called Angel Falls. You stand here and close your eyes, and you feel like the angels are breathing on you.”

She closed her eyes.

The mist feathered over her, Phil’s hand wove into hers, not letting go, and Ingrid wished she felt angels instead of the weeping of her heart.



1981

Chapter 6

This should be the happiest day of her life. With the sun cascading through the trees, jeweled fingers of light reaching out to embrace her, the smell of marshmallows roasting over a campfire, the chorus of the lake, the north shore wind in the trees...yes, she should be over the moon.

After all, not every day did the man of her dreams propose to her. Okay, so he might not have officially proposed yet, but Ingrid could read through Phil's flimsy attempts to hide the fact he chased her father down, alone yesterday. After nine months of dating, she could figure out why.

Besides, they'd talked about it so many times, well, it felt like the next logical step in their relationship.

Yes, she should be celebrating. Not casting glances over to the lodge, seeing if she could spy John's motorcycle in the dirt lot. Not wishing for a glimpse of him over the week they'd spent here; probably her last. Not hating herself for the shards of disappointment that pierced the blanket of joy that should be hers.

She should hate John Christiansen for skulking around her heart. And he hadn't picked up the hint in real life, either. Despite the obvious cooling in her letters, and then her eventual silent treatment, he continued to write. As if he hadn't betrayed her, hadn't broken her heart.

And she could blame herself, yes, just a little, for not telling him how his actions with Kari viscerated her. But she had no claim on him, not really, so what would she say?

"Are you okay, darling?" Phil handed her a golden-to-perfection marshmallow, swelling between two crisp graham crackers, a slice of Hershey's chocolate dissolving into the mess. "You seem far away."

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

She found a smile for him. He'd cut his hair since Ecuador, something his substitute teaching position at the elementary school in suburbia Minneapolis demanded, and looked preppy in his oxford shirt and khakis, even if he still wore his trademark Birkenstocks.

"Yum, thank you." She took the s'more, tried to maneuver it into her mouth. Marshmallow goo landed on her chin, and she laughed as she tricked to lick it off.

"Phil tells me you're thinking of applying to college, maybe getting a degree in education," her father said. He wore a strange, enigmatic look. The kind that said he knew her, wasn't buying her false cheer.

Which made it only worse because no, it wasn't false.

Phil was the right man. Her brain told her that, after watching him embrace his classroom of fourth graders, after he'd spent Christmas with her family, playing monopoly and attending Christmas Eve service. After encouraging her to apply to college to get her degree. Phil hadn't an unfaithful bone in his body, wanted a family, a home. Might even consider moving to Deep Haven someday.

"I have the application but I haven't filled it out yet."

Phil glanced at her. "But she will."

"Why don't you two kiddos head down to town, to the street dance?" her mother said, adding another marshmallow to her stick.

Oh, Mom. And then what? Fight another slough of memories? Joining her parents for their annual vacation now seemed a colossally bad decision.

"A street dance? Sounds fun," Phil said, a gleam in his eye.

Oh no. He wouldn't propose during... She took a breath. "I wouldn't mind staying here."

"Oh no, let's go," Phil said, standing up.

She couldn't help it – she glanced at the lodge again. But John hadn't shown up all week; she should stop kidding herself. He wouldn't suddenly appear on the sidewalk, see her dancing with Phil.

And what if he did?

Oh, see, her heart had decided to simply draw a wall around her feelings for John, let them simmer, while every other part of her fell in love with Phil.

She hoped it was enough. It had to be enough. Because John Christiansen didn't belong in her heart, not anymore.

Ingrid changed into a pair of jeans, her flip-flops, a white sleeveless shirt, grabbing a jean jacket before climbing into Phil's VW Bug. From the highway leading down the hill, Deep Haven spread out before her, lights twinkling like a Christmas package, the lake dark and mysterious. She gathered her long hair in her hand, trapping it to keep the wind from blowing it into tangles.

"Such a beautiful little town," Phil said. "I can see why you vacation here every summer. So many childhood memories."

She smiled, nodded. Looked out the window. Remembered the feel of the wind on her face as she'd wrapped her arms around John. Shook the memory away and reached out for Phil's hand. He gave it a squeeze right before he downshifted.

They parked at the new ice cream parlor, Licks and Stuff, then got out and wandered toward the music. The band played "Endless Love" and Phil roped his arm around her, pulled her to his side. His body radiated warmth against the cool evening, and she leaned against him as they stopped next to a street lamp, watching the crowd.

Sawdust littered the street from the annual chainsaw competition – she didn't want to consider who won this year. In the harbor, children threw stones into the water, counting the sound of splashes until they faded.

She spotted Nathan in a short-sleeved oxford, dancing with a slender blonde sporting the smile Ingrid should be wearing.

Phil nestled his arms around her, pulled her against his chest, her back to him. "I'm not sure it has the magic of Angel Falls, but I can see the charm." He pressed a kiss to her head. "Want some cotton candy?"

She looked up at him, nodded. "Sure. Thanks."

"I'll be right back." He disappeared into the crowd, her man, fetching her a treat.

The song changed; Air Supply's "Nothing's Gonna Change my Love for You," and she wrapped her arms around her waist, began to sway. Hum.

A voice behind her filled in the words. "If I had to live my life without you near me... The days would all be empty."

She stilled, the tenor strumming through her body. Oh...

No. She turned, and her mouth opened, just a little, at the sight of John standing behind her,

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

grinning like a man proud of himself, holding a secret.

“What are you doing here?” She didn’t mean for it to emerge quite like that, quick and sharp, and his smile faded a little.

“I skipped practice and drove five hours to get here. It’s our Saturday night.” His blue eyes clouded. “I thought... I miss you, Ingrid. And I hoped you be here. Aren’t you glad to see me?”

A fist had grabbed her chest, started to squeeze, yet, despite the suffocating loss of breath, she couldn’t stop herself from nodding.

Oh, yes, she was painfully, terribly, ecstatically glad to see him.

Shoot.

He smiled then, and her world dropped from around her. Such blue eyes, they simmered under the glow of the lights. He wore a pair of faded jeans, a hooded sweatshirt under a jean jacket, his dark hair shorter, thinning almost, but it only gave his gaze that much more power to undo her. And, Kari didn’t lie about his linebacker build.

Ingrid tightened her jaw against the sudden burn in her chest, her eyes at the memory of Kari’s words. No, no – she turned away, not wanting him to see her stupid reaction to the memory of his betrayal.

“Ingrid, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I’m – yeah, I’m glad to see you.” She ran her fingers over her eyes. Silly girl - he should not have this much power over her. Especially since she was practically engaged to another man.

She searched the crowd for Phil, but didn’t see him. Then it didn’t matter, because John stepped in front of her. “Ingrid, please help me understand what’s going on here. I don’t understand why you stopped writing me. Or why you suddenly... I don’t know. I’m not a very emotional guy, but it felt as if... Are you angry with me?”

She closed her eyes. Opened them and looked away, toward the harbor, where a thousand stars fell into the water. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It does matter – to me. I...I came here last year, looking for you – ”

“And found Kari, I know.” Sarcasm. Anger. She heard it in her tone, the feelings as fresh as they’d been last year.

“Yeah. I saw her, too. But, I realized something. I didn’t care about Kari. I...geez, Ingrid. I missed you. Your smile. Your laughter. I wanted to see you.”

“Funny. Did you figure that out before or after you two had your fling?”

He just stood there, not moving, and she finally looked up at him. He looked stricken, shaken by her words. And a cold, brutal realization stole through her as he said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I barely spoke two words to Kari last year.”

Oh no.

The hand in her chest returned, pressing against her sternum.

“Clearly, we have to talk.” He curled his hand around her arm, and she let him lead her away, off the street, to a nearby alley.

She didn’t have a thought to resist him.

Kari had lied to her. All this time –

Ingrid couldn’t breathe. He released her when they reached the shadows of the alley, and she turned, braced her hand against the brick wall, pressing her hand over her eyes.

“Are you okay?” His voice fell so achingly tender over her. And, away from the smells of the festival, she could smell the scent of soap, the remnant of his afternoon practice on his skin.

She couldn’t look at him, or she’d be undone. “Kari wrote me a letter and told me that you two...” She couldn’t say it. “She said—”

“I can figure it out,” he growled. “And you believed her?”

It was the hurt in his voice that made Ingrid look up at him. The raw emotion on his face nearly stole her words. “I remember... You’ve always had a thing for her, and Kari is awfully hard to ignore.”

“I haven’t thought of Kari in years,” he said quietly, his hand reaching up to touch her face. It lay large and warm on her skin, and when he brushed his thumb across her cheek, she thought she might cry. “You’re the one I can’t forget.”

John. This couldn’t be happening. Not now.

And what about Phil? He’d be looking for her. She had to get back to him, just simply walk away from John. Now.

She put her hand to his, intending to pull it away, but he misinterpreted her meaning. Or

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

maybe not, because he cupped her face with his other hand and searched her eyes, and she didn't pull away.

How could she when he looked at her with a hunger, a need that stripped the moisture from her mouth.

She opened her mouth to protest, but didn't even try to stop him when he leaned down to kiss her.

He delivered the kind of kiss she'd dreamed about, too many years. Not the arrogant, sloppy kiss of his youth, but purposed, deliberate. The kind of kiss that spoke of patience, and longing.

The kind of kiss worth waiting for. He tasted of salt, as if he'd eaten French fries on the road, and the brisk tang of Coke, and as his mouth moved against hers, the world blurred around her.

John.

He made a sound in the back of his throat, something deep, as if he'd had a tight fist over his emotions and they'd begun to spill out. Or maybe that was her sound, because he lifted his head, met her eyes, and in the silence she could hear her heart pounding, filling her ears.

Then, in a whisper, "I love you, Ingrid. It scares me a little how much I love you."

Her eyes widened, but she had no words as he bent his head and kissed her again, this time wrapping one arm around her waist. He braced his other arm on the building behind her, pulling her up against the solid, hard planes of his football physique.

And despite the warning screaming in the back of her head, her arms went up around his neck, and she simply surrendered. Surrendered to the rub of his five-o'clock shadow against her skin, the softness of his mouth as he nudged her lips open, the rhythm of his heart against hers...

John. Finally, John.

* * *

He shouldn't have panicked. Shouldn't have let what-ifs stir in his brain until he skipped practice and jumped on his motorcycle, driving like a man on the verge of losing his last chance.

Or maybe he did exactly the right thing, because holding Ingrid in his arms as she molded

his body to his, every doubt, every hour reading and re-reading her letters trying to decipher why she'd turned cold to him, just simply slipped away.

Only her sweet surrender in his embrace remaining. She tasted like marshmallow and chocolate, sweetly dangerous, and the way the smells of the north shore embedded her hair, her skin, it felt like coming home. She felt like coming home.

Honestly, he'd dreamed of kissing her like this, like they belonged together, like finally, finally, he could free the tight hold he had on his heart, for two years, ever since he'd asked her if they could start over.

Since she'd agreed to let him into her life.

And now, she had her arms locked around his neck, the night humming around them, the caress of the waves on the shore, the music drawing them into a quiet dance as he slowed his kiss, lingered at her mouth, then pressed his lips to her cheekbones, the well of her eye, then down to her neck.

He could inhale her, she tasted so good, but he didn't want to scare her. He refused to repeat the fumbling stupidity of his youth. So he closed his eyes and just put his head down and curled her closer.

"I was worried," he said into her neck. He lifted his head. Found her beautiful eyes. "I was worried that...that maybe you'd found someone else. That you..." He swallowed. "I know we said just friends, but I was starting to think, over the past few months, that you really meant it."

She looked away, her lower lip caught in her teeth, and for a second, the fear returned, quick, like a sliver in this perfect night.

He leaned back, trying to search her face, reassure himself.

"We're okay, right? I didn't totally screw this up? Because I was thinking that maybe you were right. Maybe, if you wanted to, I could come back to Deep Haven – "

"John—"

He had her attention now, by the shock on her face.

"I know I always said I wanted to play NFL football, but..." He tried a smile. "I keep thinking about what you said about always wanting to live here – "

"But you don't want to live here. Football is your dream. And you had an amazing year."

She started to untangle herself from his arms, and her words, her light tone didn't seem to

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

make sense. Didn't she want this?

"I know, but...the NFL is... That's a pipe dream, right? That's not really going to happen."

Now she was really freaking him out, because she was backing away, breathing fast, rubbing her hands on her arms, as if cold. He took a step toward her, wanting to fix it, but –

"No, John. Listen. You can't give up your dreams for me. You have to play football. It's what you've wanted, your whole life."

He stared at her, nonplussed. Was it? "I don't understand."

"I...oh, John..."

She wore a stricken look, not at all the response he'd expected. And the sliver inside swelled, wove its way deeper.

"What's going on, Ingrid?" he said, his voice low, containing an edge he hadn't heard for a year, maybe more. Back when he had to prove himself, back when he felt like he wasn't enough.

"I thought I'd misread you..." She was shaking her head, backing into the street, taking his heart with her when suddenly he heard her name, distant, above the crowd.

She winced.

And just like that, he knew. A terrible knot twisted in his chest, and he actually had to put out a hand to brace himself on the wall.

Ingrid came toward him. "John, I...you... I thought you had chosen my sister! I was hurt, and angry, and it just happened."

He held up his hand, wanting to stop her from talking, the words tearing through him. "Who is he?" he managed.

"Phil. I met him last year, in Ecuador."

He tightened his lips, nodded. "I remember. He taught you how to drive a Jeep."

She went a little white then. "Yeah."

He stood up, his balance back, but pressed his hand to his chest, willing himself not to cry in front of her. Shoot, he might be having a heart attack.

Her name again, and she stepped out of the alley, waved.

John had the strangest urge to run. But not alone – to reach out and grab her and just flee. Jump on his bike, and head anywhere but here.

Because, even as she smiled, even as the owner of the voice appeared, worried, holding a stick of cotton candy, John knew Deep Haven had no place for him without Ingrid.

But he didn't run. Didn't reach out for her, didn't land an uppercut to the man who landed a kiss on the woman he loved. Just stood there, the world opening up beneath him as this tourist came right up to Ingrid as if she belonged to him. "Where'd you go? I was worried."

Clean-cut blonde hair, an oxford shirt, a pair of khakis – a city boy, a wannabe roughneck with Birkenstocks. Of course. She'd just pretended to want a Deep Haven boy. Just like Kari.

"I was catching up with an old friend," she said to Phil, her voice lacking a bit of her usual shine.

John just shook his head. But he wasn't the guy who, once upon a time, might have behaved badly, so he stuck out his hand. "John Christiansen. My family runs Evergreen Resort."

"John. Sure, Ingrid has mentioned you." Phil's voice was cool, even, but held the finest edge of warning that made John glance at Ingrid. She held her cotton candy and stared at it as if it held the secrets of the universe.

"Really."

"I haven't seen you around this week," Phil said. "What brings you to up Deep Haven?"

John heard the dare in it, but Ingrid appeared as if she might shatter, on the verge of tears, and he couldn't bear that, despite the roaring inside.

"I just came up for the night. But I'm headed back to the cities. I have practice on Monday."

"You're not attending services tomorrow? I hear your dad is a great preacher. My future father-in-law says that he preaches the gospel in moccasins."

Father-in-law? He closed his mouth, his jaw tighter than he intended, but Ingrid just looked up at Phil, her eyes big, as if he'd leaked a secret.

Phil wore a smug, confident smile.

"Congratulations, Ingrid," John said quietly.

"John, we –"

He held out his hand to Phil. Shook it. "Take care of her, then."

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Good luck next season. Maybe we’ll come to a game.” He slipped his arm around Ingrid. She was staring at John, a look he couldn’t read on her face. He avoided it.

“I’ll make sure you get tickets,” John said, then glanced at Ingrid, one last time. She’d wiped all pretense from her face, the emotion on it raw, desperate. Like she hadn’t wanted to hurt him, like maybe, their friendship, or more, had been real.

Like, for the briefest of moments, back in the alley, she had belonged to him.

That made it all the worse. Somehow he found his voice. “I always did want you to see a game.”

Then he turned and headed back down the alley, forcing himself not to run, not to howl, and vowing, even as he got his bike, never to return to Deep Haven again.



1982

Chapter 7

The rain spit from the sky, tears upon the window pane, the trickling of a river outside the cabin evidence of the rainiest week they'd had in seven years at the resort. Ingrid's father lit the furnace at the far end of the two-room cabin and it glowed hot enough to temper the chill of the misty day. Still, Ingrid sat on the sofa, curled in a homemade knit afghan, trying to focus on her novel.

She read the sentence three times before putting the book down on the arm of the sofa. Kari looked up from where she was playing a game of cards with her husband, Bradley. Their son Matthew sat on the floor, gumming the ear of his stuffed bear. "Aren't you going to town? They're moving the dance into the community center – I heard about it in town today." She peered out the window as a roll of thunder fractured the air.

"No. It's my last night here. I'll spend it with the family."

Kari shook her head, picked a card from her hand. "Gin."

Bradley made a face, and Kari giggled. "You know you can't beat me." How her sister had managed to land true love while Ingrid still couldn't pry herself away from her broken heart seemed colossally unfair. Especially since...

Ingrid took a breath. No. They'd already had the fight, Kari had already confessed the truth, that she'd seen John's expression when she told him Ingrid hadn't come home, and that jealousy had burned inside her. Especially since, he belonged to me first.

Ingrid didn't argue, didn't want to remind her that John belonged to no one. He made that perfectly clear from the beginning. Not Kari, not Ingrid, not Deep Haven.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

And that had never been clearer than when Ingrid chased him down at a football game, some nine months ago.

Like a love-struck fan, she'd waited for him, maneuvering down to the sidelines after the game, praying he'd see her, that her presence might shock him out of the silent treatment long enough for her to explain.

To tell him that she and Phil called it quits.

After all, she couldn't give her heart to one man when it belonged to another.

But, clearly, John didn't share her problem. That day at the football field could still send a shudder through her, still cause her to unravel with regret.

John had run off the field, his helmet in his hand, his dark hair glistening with sweat, looking fierce and amazing in his football pads after a win. The crowd pressed around her, but she'd called out his name.

For a second, his gaze turned, caught hers. And in the sudden darkening of his eyes, so abrupt after the energy of the win, she saw the truth.

He didn't want her. Maybe even hated her, or something like it, because his jaw tightened, his eyes narrowed, and a shiver went through her.

This John, maybe she didn't know.

But she wouldn't have let it deter her. Wouldn't have let his anger push her away. Because she owned the truth, and he needed to know--

Then, from the opposite sidelines, a shapely blonde in a Gopher's cheerleader outfit launched herself at him, her arms around his neck.

And John wrapped one of his strong arms around her, picked her up, and twirled her around, kissing her hard on the mouth.

He didn't look Ingrid's direction when he put the girl down, just draped an arm over her and headed into the locker room.

Ingrid signed up for the trip to Uganda not long after that. Nine months later, she had her ESL certificate, and the sooner her flight left next week, the better.

She hadn't planned on joining her parents at Evergreen this week, but with Kari happily married, with little Matty delighting their days, she couldn't deny them this last family outing.

Thankfully, and like she'd suspected, John hadn't returned home.

Ingrid got up, draping the afghan over her shoulders, and headed into the back bedroom. Her Bible lay on her bed, open to where she'd read this morning in Ecclesiastes. Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

Her letter to John, creased and dirty, lay in the folds of the Bible, a place holder. She took it out and closed the Bible. Probably, she should throw this away. After all, she'd mailed it three times, and each time he'd sent it back.

Message received.

She pocketed it in her jeans then lay down in the quiet of her room to read. An hour later, creases in her cheek from the bedspread, she woke up to the quiet hush of an abandoned cabin. Rising, she walked out into the living room and discovered the rain had stopped, a watery twilight flooding the lake in reds and purples. She spied Kari and Bradley outside on the shore, her father reading on a chair outside.

"I've made cookies for the campfire tonight," her mother said from the tiny kitchen. "Would you be willing to take some over to the lodge? Poor Chester is still weak from his treatments and I don't want Eva to think she has to cook for anyone."

Ingrid took the plate covered in tinfoil. "What's wrong with Chester?"

"Cancer." Her mother said it softly. "But they think they got it all, and with the chemo..." She folded her hands and sighed. "We never know, though, do we?"

Ingrid shook her head and slipped on her flip-flops.

The path to the lodge was edged with mud, the grass glistening, the sky still mottled with anger. She spied a figure sitting on a chair, blanket wrapped around his shoulders, and for a moment, her heart leaped into the past. To John, wounded and angry, right before he'd begged her to start over.

How she longed to snatch back that moment, or a thousand others, and rewrite their story. But they would have no more fresh starts. And tomorrow, she'd leave Deep Haven and never look back.

She climbed the stairs to the deck, and Chester looked over at her. The cancer sucked the life from his face, leaving it gaunt and tired. He wore a flannel shirt, a pair of jeans, but he swam in them, the veins of his hand purple and thick as he reached for the cookies. "Your mother is a gem."

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“She is. I agree.” Ingrid stood there a moment, not sure what to say.

“I don’t suppose you’d sit with me for a bit. “

She slid onto the picnic table, right where she’d tried to cheer up John so many years ago.

“Your parents tell me you’re headed to Africa.” His hand sneaked in under the tinfoil and emerged with a cookie. He offered it to her but she shook her head.

“I’m teaching ESL; it’s a five-year contract.”

“Five years. That’s a long time.”

She raised a shoulder.

He took a bite of the cookie. He said nothing then, leaning back and closing his eyes. “I’m really going to miss this place.”

She frowned. “Where are you going?”

He smiled. “Heaven.”

“Oh, Mr. Christiansen—”

“Sweetie. I know it, even if no one else does. And frankly, I’m not sure I’ll tell them.”

“You mean John doesn’t know how sick you are?”

Chester shook his head. “If he finds out, he’ll only come home. And that’s the last thing he wants right now.”

“But he belongs here.”

She wasn’t sure where that came from, but she felt it, her words as natural as the pine scent scoured up by the rain.

“I mean, I know he wants to play football, but he should be here, with you.”

“But he has to figure that out for himself. I can’t make him love this resort. I can’t make him love Deep Haven.”

“But he does love Deep Haven, I just know it.”

Chester looked over at her, a warmth in his eyes that she recognized. “You’re right, Ingrid. And when he realizes this…” He took a breath. “Well, I was hoping you might be here.”

Her mouth opened just a little, but she closed it fast. “I don’t know what you mean—“

“I mean I’m asking you for the impossible. I’m asking you not to go to Africa. To stay in America, and wait for him.”

“Mr. Christiansen—”

“I’m going to die, Ingrid. And when I do, he’ll need you.”

“He doesn’t need me. He has that cute blonde--” She winced. “Sorry.”

“He doesn’t have anyone. He didn’t make the draft, so he’s playing arena ball down in Iowa. Andrea didn’t stick around.”

Oh. “But he could come back, get on a team, right?”

“Maybe. And the fact that you still believe in him tells me that you still care for him.”

She reached for the plate of cookies. “It doesn’t matter. I hurt him, and he doesn’t want me.”

A low chuckle emitted from Chester. “He wants you. And you’re right, he wants Deep Haven. And this resort. It’s in him, and when he needs it, he’ll realize that.” He turned to her. “And he’ll need you.”

She found a cookie, tasted it. The chocolate swam in her taste buds. Tangy. Familiar. “I wish that were true, but don’t think so. And I can’t wait for a man who is never going to show up.”

Chester turned back to the lake. The rain had washed a canoe out into the water. It rode the waves, bobbing closer as they rippled toward shore.

Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again.

Right. She handed the plate back to Chester. “I’ll be praying for you, Mr. Christiansen.” She caught his hand, felt the bones, frail and brittle, but he squeezed her hand back, strength in his grip.

“And I will be praying for you. We’re really going to miss your smile around here.”

She landed a kiss on his cheek before heading back to her cabin. A loon mourned over the water, and she couldn’t blame the rain for the wetness against her cheeks.

His father decided to die four minutes into the third quarter. Not soon enough for John to ditch the game at halftime and catch a plane for northern Minnesota, but with him still on the field, lining up to blitz the quarterback.

He didn't get off the line of scrimmage, the running back breezing by him. He should have stayed on the ground, the taste of frustration locked in his teeth.

That felt better than facing the emptiness of Evergreen Resort without Chester Christiansen.

John retrieved the floral arrangement, the big one sent by the Lions' club, brought it to the house. "I'll be back to get the box of casserole dishes in a minute," he said to his mother, struggling to climb out of his truck. He should have taken his father's old Buick to the cemetery, but he couldn't find the keys. He longed for his motorcycle, but he'd sold that a year ago, tired of the memories, the what-ifs.

He set the arrangement on the Formica countertop and paused, the view of the lake just beyond his parent's sliding glass doors strangely calling to him. Pristine blue water, lapping against the dilapidated dock, shaggy evergreens waving in the wind. Cirrus dragged across the sky, a reluctant traveler.

"He never fixed the dock," John said.

"He left it for the new owner." Eva dropped her purse on the bench by the door.

John tried to shrug off her words. After three generations, the legacy of the Evergreen family resort would pass to different - and unfamiliar - hands.

Funny, he'd always considered that, but had never truly felt those words until now.

What if they took down the rope swing by the big oak? Or decided to do something stupid, like upgrade with television sets in the cabins?

He retrieved the casseroles. "How long before the resort changes hands?"

His mother's lined face - aged a decade in the last year - put a knife in his chest. Dad owed them all an explanation, including Mom. He'd told her that he was in remission - and hadn't even mentioned his cancer to John.

But a man didn't survive in the north woods of Minnesota without a Norwegian stubborn streak. Still, his father could have prepared them all, allowed John to pick up the pieces.

Give him a reason to come home. Maybe...even to go after Ingrid, beg her forgiveness. Tell her he'd been a fool instead of letting her fly off to Africa.

A stubborn fool who didn't deserve her. She was right to leave him, probably.

"Soon," Eva said, in answer to his question. "I made arrangements to go live with my sister in Minneapolis. Maybe I can watch one of your games."

Or maybe it was time for him to face the truth. He hadn't made the NFL, and Arena ball only bandaged the wounds, didn't heal them.

"Nathan is coming over later with some paperwork." His mother put enough casseroles in the freezer to outfit them for a year. But that's the kind of town he lived in – no one starved in Deep Haven. "You know, he's making a real name for himself in the real estate business now that his mother is over her cancer."

Not a flicker of resentment from his mother that maybe, just maybe, God might have spared her husband, too.

"I still can't believe he stuck around. He had that cross country scholarship –"

"Some people simply belong in Deep Haven, honey." Eva patted him on the arm. "By the way, the sink is leaking. Could you take a look?"

He climbed under the sink, found the soggy wood from where the pipe leaked. "How long has it been like this?"

"A year or so."

Of course. Judging by the state of the entire resort, his father had abandoned any repairs long ago. As if he'd already resigned them to the next owner.

Instead of asking his son for help.

Their last real father-to-son conversation had happened when he was eighteen, when he hadn't the wisdom to listen. Now, he longed for the old man's quiet voice against the lap of the lake, telling him what to do with his life.

"I need tools."

"Look in the garage." Eva ducked into her bedroom to change out of her mourning dress.

He headed outside, past the potholed basketball court to the garage.

Flicking on the light, John paused for a moment. The redolence of grease soaked into the dirt

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

floor, a century of oil and gasoline embedded in the walls. The ancient twin track snow machine sat dormant, hibernating. He headed toward the tools scattered along the far workbench and squeezed around a long, tarped object propped on saw horses.

No. He paused for a moment before he flung off the tarp.

The canoe. He stared at it, wordless. Last he saw it, the boulder had gashed a hole in it larger than his fist. He'd told his father to turn it to firewood. He ran his hand over the keel, expecting to rut against the gash. Instead, smooth, fresh wood met his touch.

"He spent all last spring on it. His last project." His mother stood in the door, her eyes glistening. "Take it out."

Take it out. Maybe...one last time.

John hoisted the canoe up by the portage pads and carried it out to the lake. A summer wind skimmed the surface as he flipped it, lowered it onto the water. It parted the surface without a sound.

Paddles lodged in the gunwales, and he climbed in the back, retrieved one.

The canoe slipped like a prayer through the pristine waters.

And then he saw it. His name, etched in the cross bar next to his father's. The sun warmed it, and he couldn't help but reach out, run his fingers into the grooves. His eyes burned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

A loon answered, a mourning across the water. He paddled the length of the lake, the sun hot on his shoulders, the scent of the pine in the air.

You'll have to find someone else to run this place. Because, it's not what I want.

In the quiet of the hour, his voice echoed back.

But maybe he did want it. The thought gathered beneath him, sluiced adrenaline through his chest.

How long had he been dodging it? This truth? He belonged here, on Evergreen Lake, in Deep Haven. This life, this faith, this legacy. Sure, he'd made a name for himself in the cities, but...but maybe not the name he wanted.

Not the life he wanted.

He leaned forward, closed his eyes. The sobs came from deep in his chest, soft until they rushed over him. He put both hands over his head and let them take him, consume him. Wring him out.

He wasn't ready to say good-bye.

I have no doubt you'll be a success at whatever you do.

He'd thought he'd had to leave to become someone, a man. A success.

Maybe he didn't have to. The thought trickled into his grief, parted it.

In fact, maybe that was why Dad fixed the canoe – and nothing else. Maybe he knew.

John leaned back, listened to the lap of the water against the canoe. So much beauty here. Pine trees, shaggy and full amidst the white paper birch. The blue of the lake against the aqua sky. He heard the song deep inside, and let himself hum it. Oh Lord my God, when I in awe-some wonder, consider all the worlds thy hands hath made...

Yes. Maybe his father hadn't called him back, because he'd wanted John to discover the beauty on his own. He wiped his eyes.

I'm sorry, Lord. I'm sorry that I despised the legacy my father gave me. The legacy you gave me. It's time for me to come home. Please, help me.

He didn't have to leave. Nathan could help him figure this out, help him withdraw the sale.

Yes, he could stay. Build his own legacy. Raise his own family...

Then, as if still drifting across the barren, gray lake, he heard the past, something his father said, too long ago. Isn't it interesting that, against the darkness, God provided light for us to find our way home?

Light. Like Ingrid's smile, cutting through the darkness of his anger, his stubbornness, his frustration.

He sat up, pressed his hand to his chest.

Wow, he missed her. So much that the ache felt like something he'd never escape. He still remembered the sickness that spread through him as he saw her standing on the sidelines a moment before Andrea landed in his arms.

It irked him the rest of the season, enough that he asked his parents about her last summer, when he'd called, just to see if she was there. Enough that he discovered she hadn't married Phil.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

Which meant that day in the stands, he'd hurt her as much as she'd wounded him.

Probably, she was better off in Africa. But maybe, one day, she'd come back. On their Saturday night. Maybe he'd even write to her and invite her.

Tell her how he'd really love to see her. How he so desperately missed her smile.

He'd build a home for her, and wait.

The waves had nudged the canoe toward shore, so he picked up his paddle and headed in, the sun low in the trees, the golden rays turning the lake to butter.

As he drew near, he saw a woman standing on the dock, a white sundress fluttering in the wind.

He put his hand over his eyes to shade his view and his breath stopped in his chest.

Ingrid raised her hand and smiled.

Even from here, she could undo him, her blonde hair long and straight, pulled back in a hair clip. She was tan, and thin, probably from her work in Africa.

He pulled up to the dock, his heart large in his chest. "What are you doing here?" Oh, he didn't mean it like that. He wanted to leap out, to crush her to himself, to touch her hair, run his hands down her arms. But...

But what if she returned only to say good-bye?

She reached down for the canoe, wrapping the rope around the dock pegs. "I...I was worried."

He climbed out, grabbing the paddle. "Worried?"

She stood up, her eyes just as beautiful as he remembered. "How are you?"

He must be wearing his grief on his face. Still, he shrugged. "I'm okay. I guess. It's hard. He didn't tell anyone and.... I thought you were in Africa. Um, you didn't fly home for....well, I mean..." Oh boy, he was just as eloquent now as he was at seventeen.

"Don't you want me here?" She wrapped her arms around her waist and he couldn't bear it. He dropped the paddles.

"No. Of course I want you here. I..." Shoot, he was tired of holding back, of denying the

layer of truth that simmered deep inside. “I missed you, Ingrid. Wow, it hurts how much I missed you, and the fact is, I’m staying. And not because you want me to, but because...it’s where I belong. And I know that. And I also know you have this other life now, but--”

“I didn’t go to Africa.”

She gave him a smile then, and the power of it rushed over him. Nearly took him out at the knees.

“You didn’t?” He no longer cared that he sounded desperate, foolish.

She shook her head. “Your father asked me to wait. He told me that you’d be back, and that this time, you’d stay.”

“How could he know that?”

“John, really? He was your father. He knew you.”

He did, didn’t he? The thought washed over him, through him. His dad had done this – given him a home, a future. Ingrid. “I can’t believe you...you waited for me...”

“I’ve been waiting for you since I was thirteen years old. I don’t know how not to wait for you, John.”

She lifted an envelope from her pocket. Took his hand and pressed it into the palm.

He stared at it. “Your letter.”

“You don’t ever have to open it. But it says that I’m sorry I didn’t believe in you. And that it will never happen again.”

He looked up at her, at her incredible blue eyes, glistening in his, at the way the wind teased her hair, at the way she smiled at him, nothing of guile in it.

The way she’d always smiled at him, as if he might be her whole world.

“I love you, Ingrid.”

“I know.” She stepped up and caught his face in her hands. “You’ve always loved me. It just took you a while to realize it.”

Then she drew his head down and kissed him. He couldn’t move – not at first. And then he wrapped his arms around her and caught up, drawing her into his embrace, his world.

The world they called home.



1987

Epilogue

Sometimes, she still stood at the edge of the curb, her breath caught, hoping he'd see her across the crowded street. She wore a pretty white dress tonight, her arms and legs tan from the summer working outside, tending the garden, caring for guests. John had built a basketball court, added a swing set to the yard for the guest's children. His latest project was attaching a rope to the old oak over the lake, at the far end, by the Gibson's place.

She spotted him through the crowd, talking to Nathan, but didn't raise her hand, didn't try for his attention.

Just stayed there, listening to the band belt out Starship's "Nothing's Gonna Stop us Now," her hands over her secret, her secret still hers alone.

Overhead, the seagulls cried out, the smell of hotdogs sizzling on a nearby grill in the cool summer air. Earlier, the blue-skied day, heavy with marshmallow cumulus had suggested the perfect summer evening. The kind of evening where she and John would sit on the shore, throwing rocks into the lake.

But not tonight.

She wrapped her arms around her waist, swaying, watching. He needed a cut, but she couldn't bear to cut the curls from his dark hair. And those blue eyes – they had the power to hold her captive.

She couldn't take her eyes from him.

Then, as if he heard her, he turned. His smile could steal her breath from her chest. She lifted her hand to wave, but didn't have to because he ran toward her, through the crowd.

I REALLY DO MISS YOUR SMILE

“Mama!”

She scooped him up, holding his tiny toddler body to her, breathing in the sweet smell of his skin.

“He missed you,” John said from behind her. His hand dropped to her waist, and he landed a kiss to her neck.

“I saw you two standing there, and I thought you’d never notice me.”

“I always notice you.”

“Mmmhmm,” she said, wiping ice-cream from baby Darek’s chin. “Contraband.”

“I can’t help it. He has special powers. You gave birth to a charmer.”

“I know.” She tousled Darek’s hair. “Have you been getting into trouble?”

“He’s going to be a regular lumberjack. I caught him trying to make off with one of the chainsaws.”

“Right. And, he’s also superman.”

“I’m just saying, we’ve have our hand full.”

“His father’s son.” She laughed.

He curled his arm over her shoulder. “I was hoping I’d see you here tonight. Are you feeling better?”

“Must have been something I ate.” She kissed the little boy and handed him back to John. He propped Darek on his hip.

“You missed the fish-throwing contest.”

“Oh, for sad.”

He laughed. Then, his voice turned low, husky, the sound of missing her in his tenor. “Will you dance with me?”

She pressed her hand to his whiskered cheek. He smelled of sawdust, the benefits of maintaining his reign as the Deep Haven chainsaw champion.

The band picked strummed up an oldie, an England Dan song that stirred memories of that

first summer, of hope and young love, the promise of so many tomorrows.

“I thought you’d never ask.”