

Prologue

Twelve Years Ago

Two men whom Grace Willoughby had known her entire life watched her and her boyfriend with undisguised scrutiny. Of course they did. Her brother, Hayden, and his best friend, Callum, had never treated her like anything other than a kid. Now that she lived on her own and had returned home with a boyfriend for her family to meet, both were making this family dinner more awkward than it already was.

Her boyfriend, Dominic Marino, sat at the outdoor table on her parents' back deck. Despite the fact that Dominic had insisted on meeting her parents, it was clear he didn't want to be there. If she were honest, their relationship was too new. It'd only been weeks since he'd swept her off her feet. Far too soon for family introductions, but Dominic always got his way.

She tried to ignore the small stirrings of doubt and found herself staring at Callum. She quickly jerked her gaze away.

Callum Hale. Broad shoulders. Powerful long legs. He wasn't family, though he acted like it and probably believed it to be true as he sat next to Hayden and shot the shit with her dad.

She hadn't seen Callum since he and Hayden had graduated from Army Ranger School. His stormy eyes melted her insides, and when he turned his bourbon-brown gaze on her, she wanted to drag him to bed. So she did what she did best: ran her mouth and rolled her eyes and tried her damndest to treat Callum like Hayden. It might have worked to the outside world but didn't change the stupid-level of arousal that coursed through her veins when he smiled.

Her backup plan was to ignore him. Ignoring him was a talent she'd mastered over the years, because there was only so much world-class sass she could spew before her sarcastic well was depleted. If she wasn't able to shield herself from Callum, her insides turned into a gooey, upside-down tornado. That would have been a terrible problem to have while standing next to her actual boyfriend.

And her actual boyfriend was a verifiable catch.

Handsome: Check.

Wealthy: Double check.

Polite—erm, well, half-check.

He gave excellent interviews, had topped more than his fair share of famous people lists of the likes of Forbes, Inc., and Bloomberg, and once had paparazzi in speedboats follow his yacht while he partied with nepo babies and Los Angeles royalty.

How could she compare Dominic to Callum, who literally never noticed that she had grown up from the kid next door to a woman with a figure that wasn't all that bad? Nice curves and a pretty smile, if she said so herself. But nope. Not even so much as a second glance. That was probably good, because if he had given her a fraction of a thought, he would have noticed that she'd pined after him from the moment she'd noticed boys.

Irony of all ironies, he noticed her now.

Or rather, he was noticing her sitting on a two-person bench with Dominic.

His steely eyes had tracked Dominic since the moment Callum eased into his chair, longneck beer sweating in hand, frowning in a way that said he clearly didn't trust her boyfriend.

That was fine. Callum didn't have to trust Dominic.

Dominic didn't seem to notice Callum. He wasn't fazed by the uncomfortable small talk or broiling summer heat. In expensive khaki pants and a polo shirt, she wondered how he could look so cool and detached. Hayden and Callum wore boardshorts and T-shirts and looked like they might walk to the neighborhood pool after burgers and beers.

She ignored them and focused on her boyfriend. "Do you want something cold to drink?"

Dominic's flashy smile was one more layer of his put-together persona. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Killer smile. "I'm fine, darling."

Darling. Was she a darling? It wasn't the first time she'd asked herself that question. Darling always sounded like he was speaking to someone else. Just as "Mrs. Willoughby" would always be her stepmother, "darling" would be someone else.

Someone more blue-blooded or pretentious.

Someone who wore pearls and sweater sets.

Someone who looked like they should be on Dominic Marino's arm.

The nickname would take getting used to. All new things had a breaking-in period.

Her dad returned to the deck with a tray of burgers for the grill. "These shouldn't take long. Hope everyone is hungry."

She was starving. Between the time zone change and flying into a private airport, she hadn't grabbed a meal all day. The flights were supposed to have been catered, but as best she could tell, that meant champagne, liquor, and charcuterie boards. After more than a few olives and fancy deli slices, she agreed with Dominic that she'd eaten several days' worth of calories. She had still been hungry, but the flight attendant cleared the tray at Dominic's request.

She wanted to disagree, but her boyfriend had a weird way of finagling her agreement. *Manipulating?* No, that didn't sound right, but Grace could never pinpoint how it happened.

"Hayden says you work in finance," Callum said.

"I do." Dominic's lips curved into that effortless smile he used in board meetings and when schmoozing clients. "Crypto. Bitcoin. I specialize in blockchain technology."

"That's, like, pretend money, right?" Distrust tightened in the corners of Callum's eyes. He tilted his head toward her brother. "Everything in Las Vegas is fake."

Hayden's gaze narrowed as well. "Think so."

Dominic didn't spend all his time in Las Vegas. She wished she hadn't told Hayden and Callum that they were flying in from there. It raised too many questions about where Dominic lived. Las Vegas. New York. Miami. Washington, DC.

Dominic chuckled good-naturedly, as if Hayden and Callum weren't acting like overprotective buffoons. "The business opportunities in Las Vegas are as real as the money in my bank account."

Hayden snorted, Callum rolled his eyes, and Grace blushed. Talking about money like that was crass. Then again, it was his money that had been whirling her around the country, gifting her with over-the-top bouquets of flowers, dining her with unbelievable meals. She literally couldn't catch her breath under the weight of his attention. Who was she to judge when Dominic was lavishing her with attention in a way she hadn't known was possible?

Her stepmother shot a warning glance at Hayden and Callum. "That sounds exciting. Don't mind them."

Dominic hooted as though they were all in on a funny conversation. The hint of his thinly veiled condescension echoed with his laughter. If she heard it, Hayden and Callum did as well. Her stepmom, who always saw the best in people, probably didn't.

“No, it’s fine,” Dominic said. “Digital assets are a complex market. Hard to understand. Takes a lot of understanding. *Not for everyone.*”

Her stomach churned. Dominic’s snarky side comments wouldn’t help everyone get along. Wasn’t that what she had wanted? For everyone to get along? For her family to be swept off their feet by Dominic as she had? Yes? *Yes.* That was why they were here.

She should have known it had been too early for him to meet her parents. Much less Hayden and Callum. She’d never brought a guy home before, and the timing of Hayden and Callum’s leave from base was unfortunate.

Wait—what? She never wanted to miss a chance to see her brother and Callum, and nearly exploded from excitement that Callum—*that both of them*—would be home.

Callum is only a family friend, she reminded herself.

She’d let go of her dreams of him years ago, and Dominic had treated her like a precious possession since the moment he’d swooped into her life. She’d never had to fight for Dominic’s attention. Never second-guessed what his intentions were. Dominic cared about her, wanted a future with her. Why shouldn’t they all meet?

“The thing you have to understand is,” Dominic continued, “the bigger the risk, the bigger the reward.” He wrapped his arm over her shoulder and secured her close with a possessive hold. “It will definitely provide for a great life.”

The churning in her stomach intensified. Her family never shied away from public displays of affection. Dad and Mari snuggled, held hands, and did everything in their power to be near one another when lounging around the house. Theirs was a comfortable love. Terrific role models. Dominic’s hold on her now wasn’t comfortable. His arm around her shoulder was more a message to her brother and Callum than anything indicative of their relationship.

She wanted to inch away. She needed breathing room. But Dominic didn’t do breathing room. He’d barely let her catch her breath since they first met. Las Vegas and New York City. Fancy dinners and shopping. A declaration of love on their third date. Her boyfriend drove fast cars, owned a private plane, and lived life to its fullest. Now she was, too.

Callum’s face tightened. The muscles in his jaw twitched. He glared at Dominic’s hold. “How long did you say you’ve been dating?”

“A few weeks,” she managed.

“That’s pretty fast.” He took a pull from his longneck without taking his eyes off of her.

“Why waste time when it’s the right woman?” Dominic asked.

She blushed again and couldn’t hide her smile. This gorgeous man adored her. He’d offered her the world. Everything had been so right, so absolutely overwhelmingly amazing, that she couldn’t see how it could go wrong.

Hayden grunted his skepticism.

“Come on, boys, give the kids a break.” Dad flipped burgers on the grill. “We’re glad the timing worked so that everyone was here at once.”

Kids. Dominic was the same age as Grace. With a three-year age gap from Hayden and Callum, she would always be the youngest in her family. Three years might well have been a decade. Dominic’s important job and flashy lifestyle wouldn’t change that.

Her stepmom stepped outside with a bowl of potato salad. “Hayden, grab the watermelon from the counter.”

Callum took the bowl from her and set it on the table. “What else do you need help with?”

Flames licked from the grill as Dad shoveled the burgers onto buns. “Gracie, hold out the tray.”

She pulled away from Dominic and stepped next to her father. Heat radiated from the grill. Still, it was nice not to be pressed against someone in the summer swelter.

Everyone helped set the table except for Dominic. He was a guest, though, and new to their dynamic. Not that they were waiting on him, but more that he didn’t know how to lend a hand.

Callum and Hayden sat in their usual seats. Her stepmom topped off drinks and then joined them. Grace returned to her place next to Dominic. Her dad circled the table, dishing out burgers. “Which one do you want, Gracie?”

Mouth watering, she eyed the one with extra cheese melting out the side.

“That little one looks good,” Dominic suggested.

“Oh, that little guy is the one we make for Sprout.” Dad gestured to the old dog sleeping under the table. “That’s not even half—”

“It’s fine, Dad. That’s good for me. There’s more than enough for you to halve a burger for Sprout when we’re done.”

Dad frowned. His spatula-wielding hand hovered. “Well, uh...” He scooped up the comically small burger with the bun tipped off the side. “Sure. You can always have seconds.”

She didn’t have to look up to see Callum and Hayden scrutinizing her burger selection.

Dinner went downhill from there.

Finally, the night wrapped. When they were alone, she’d explain to Dominic how he made her and her family uncomfortable. She’d point out a few things that would make their next family get-together run more smoothly.

Grace offered awkward goodbyes to her dad and stepmom, ignored Hayden and Callum, and, hand in hand, let Dominic escort her to his BMW. His firm grip was the slightest bit too tight, and he shut her inside the fancy car with a hint of too much force.

All she had to do was ask him to relax. Maybe her unflappable boyfriend had felt ganged up on. Hayden and Callum certainly hadn’t made dinner a relaxing time. Then again, Dominic had been combative with subtle condescension and a few straightforward jabs.

Dominic rounded the hood. His brooding dark eyes and set jaw made her nerves bubble. Grace looked toward the childhood home that always made her feel happy and carefree. Until tonight.

Callum watched from the porch. His thick arms were crossed, and his scrutinizing glare followed Dominic. Then his gaze dropped to hers. Her stomach plummeted. Every concern that she tried to ignore was lit up on his face like a billboard in Las Vegas. His angry frown pulled down so far that she worried he would come down to the BMW.

But he didn’t.

Besides, she didn’t need him to. She was more than capable of having a private conversation with her boyfriend. Dominic needed to ease up. She had a voice, and she’d never been scared to use it before.

Dominic closed the door and turned on the engine. Warm air blasted over her, and the music kicked on. His irritation flooded the car. He slapped at the controls, as if changing the settings would immediately blast cool air on a ninety-degree day.

Grace squirmed in her seat as the air conditioning barely cooled the car. Sweat prickled on the back of her neck. Callum still watched from the porch. “I just thought today would be...”

“Would be what?” Dominic snapped.

She inched away and leaned against the door. “Different.” Her tongue pressed to the roof of her mouth as she combed through the most important issues to bring up. “I can pick my cheeseburger out.”

“You didn’t go back for seconds, so it must have been the right burger to fill you up.”

She hadn’t because Dominic, Callum, Hayden, and her dad—probably her stepmom too—were watching what Grace ate. She’d wanted another burger but had loaded up on sides instead. “That doesn’t matter. Don’t pick out my food for me.”

He let out a long breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, and after another long breath, he turned and took her hand. This time, his handhold was gentler than any time he’d touched her all day. “I’m sorry, darling. I was overheated. I just want you to be happy and healthy and to take care of yourself.”

She was happy and healthy and tried to understand what he meant. So...he was looking after her? Sort of. But choosing her burger wasn’t her only issue with the day, and she didn’t understand how this perfect gentleman, this well-spoken business executive, had been so rude and arrogant.

“Grace, I’m sorry.” He released the tender hold on her hand and reached into the center console. “I got you a little something. I planned to give it to you later tonight, but I can’t stand to see you upset.”

She eyed the small blue box that she now recognized as being from his favorite jewelry store in New York City and wanted to say she wouldn’t need a present now if he’d been kinder to everyone. Actually, she didn’t need presents. At all. Period.

Warmth radiated from his eyes and into his smile. This was the Dominic she knew and loved. Still, she hesitated.

“Open it, Grace.”

She lifted the top. A keychain wasn’t what she expected. Not that she *expected* anything. “What is this?”

“What does it look like?”

Grace lifted it from the box. The metal keychain was heavier than any she’d had before, and if she had to guess, it was real silver or white gold. Her eyebrows lifted. “I know it’s a keychain, but—”

Dominic held out a key. “For you.”

An empty feeling pitted at the bottom of her stomach. She swallowed hard and looked from the key to him. His smile was almost nervous, almost shy, but it was the excitement in his eyes that won her over. Dominic, her macho boyfriend who commanded boardrooms and made million-dollar deals, was insecure and hopeful. Okay, that was sweet. “You’re giving me a key to your condo?”

“I’d like to call it *our* condo.”

She had hardly set foot in her apartment since the day they’d met. Everything was happening so fast. She blinked, trying to get a handle on the way he’d acted earlier. They’d been dating for weeks. That was all. Not to mention, she liked her own place. It was nowhere near as nice as his polished properties, but it was her own space. Grace gnawed on her bottom lip. Was he asking her to move in with him? Or was it just a key? It had to be just a key.

Still, she hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“Grace, I’m sorry tonight didn’t go the way you imagined.” He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. “But I wanted to meet your parents before I gave you this.”

She met his dark eyes. They twinkled as if this was something he needed. Almost like a challenge—no, that didn't make sense. Almost like he was scared she'd say no. The corners of his lips lifted. Dominic clasped his key in her palm and closed her fingers around it, then brought her hand to his mouth, pressing it with the softest kiss. "I love you, Grace."

Her apprehension melted away. How could she doubt a man who saw their future together? He was stable, secure, and he would treat her like she was precious. "I love you too."

"My lawyers will handle your lease. We'll have movers bring over whatever you want to keep. Simple."

Wait. He *was* asking her to move in with him. Alarm bells sounded.

"You're the love of my life." He glanced over her shoulder. Callum was probably still standing there, watching. "Tell me you know that."

"I know that."

"That you'll never break my heart."

"Of course I won't." They were moving in together. A luxury condo. Maid service. Rooftop pool and gym. Concierge and doorman. It was safer than her apartment. It was the next step.

Grace forced herself to ignore Callum Hale as Dominic drove them toward her unexpected future.

Chapter One

Present Day

Almost everyone Grace had ever met thought she was dead. She lived in hiding, yet somehow her ex-husband had found her. Years of lying with the sole goal of keeping Dominic away had been a big, fat failure. The peace that she'd precariously clung to evaporated.

Grace blocked the exit of the grocery store, frozen under the blowing air that cascaded from above the door. Could he see her? She crouched behind her cart. A sleek black Mercedes stood out in the quiet rural parking lot of the Shop 'n' Save like a dark god lording over its thralls. No, Dominic hadn't even seen her yet. That she was sure of. If he had, she wouldn't still be standing.

Her ex was supposed to be in prison.

Well, just like she was supposed to be dead.

But Dominic really *was* supposed to be behind bars. There had been a courtroom showdown and more than one guilty verdict handed down by a hangman judge who was worth his weight in gold. Or rather, cryptocurrency, as Dominic would have preferred.

Dominic's lawyers had been trying for years to throw out his conviction. They'd tampered with evidence, terrified witnesses, and worked every angle the justice system offered. She'd known their playbook. That had been the primary reason she'd "died." Guess his attorneys had finally been successful, because she had no doubt he was outside the grocery store.

But she'd set up warning systems. His release from prison should have triggered a heads-up. No one had called her. No one had warned her. The safety measures that had been put in place to give her time to ensure her safety had failed—unless she was wrong, and that wasn't Dominic.

"Hey, lady, get a move on," a man called from behind her.

Grace looked over her shoulder and wanted to apologize but couldn't get a word out. It was as if Dominic had wrapped his hand around her throat yet again, but this time without even being in front of her.

Maybe he wasn't really here.

No. She wasn't wrong. The black Mercedes sitting like a vengeful menace among the pickup trucks was all the proof she needed.

He was waiting for her. Screwing with her. Hoping she'd run across the parking lot and dive into the nondescript car registered to a shell company LLC so he could chase her. He needed their cat-and-mouse games where she ran for her life and he took her down. It was foreplay. At least to him.

That sadistic game that he relished was the reason he hadn't waltzed into the store and dragged her out of the frozen food aisle. No, Dominic parked in the handicapped spot, wanting to be seen. Everything was a mind game.

"Excuse me?" A woman inched her cart closer. "Can you move?"

Grace furtively glanced over her shoulder. Behind the woman with a baby in the cart, a man in Carhartt overalls, waiting impatiently for her to move, held his deli hot bar lunch sack. She couldn't meet their eyes. "I'm sorry."

They probably didn't hear her. The staccato rhythm of her heartbeat drowned the words from her own ears.

"Lady, get outta the way," the Carhartt man demanded.

"I..." Grace couldn't catch her breath. It was as if her chest was devoid of oxygen while simultaneously squeezed to capacity. Her lungs would burst like a balloon if she said another word to them.

She abandoned the cart and sidestepped past the woman with her baby. Grace pressed her crossbody purse to her stomach and put her hand behind her to smoosh her backpack closer. The baby reached for Grace as she skirted between them and the promotional tower of colas. Her backpack threatened to push a twelve-pack to the ground.

The Carhartt man grumbled. His judgment burned into her ducked shoulders. Blistering shame curled down her back. Grace fumbled with her purse for her burner phone. Her thumb slid over its raised buttons as she tried to decide who to call.

She could call her parents and ask them to check on Dominic's prison status. The Bureau of Prisons' website listed where inmates were located, but hell, what good would that do? It would only confirm what Grace had seen with her own two eyes. Dominic was out of federal custody.

Hayden would know what to do—except her older brother was deployed somewhere overseas and likely incommunicado. On the off chance that he was in the US, Grace was certain Hayden wasn't anywhere near the little rural Maryland town she'd hidden in. Her parents and brother never knew where she was. That was part of the magic of keeping her family safe from her ex's reach.

The only option was to escape from the grocery store and melt into one of the hiding places she'd used over the years. Grace had a safe contact—a protective friend she'd made—who lived relatively nearby and had always helped without asking too many questions. She hurried to the customer-service desk.

The manager held court there, ready to sell nicotine and lottery tickets or take complaints and requests. He pushed his long hair back and shifted behind the battered and bruised counter littered with legal notices and age requirements. "What can I do for you today?"

She focused on his name badge. *Johnny*. Johnny seemed like a reasonable guy who wouldn't ask too many questions. "Can I use your back door?"

His hair fell loose again, and she imagined he played death metal on the weekends. "Sorry?"

Grace twisted the black tourmaline beads on her bracelet and tried to catch her breath. No one would understand her if she mumbled and rushed. Minor mistakes like that would slow her down, and Dominic would pounce. She glanced toward the front exit. No sign of him. Not that she expected him to walk in and find her. Where was the fun in that? Better for her to walk out and straight into his open arms.

She noted that the traffic jam she'd created was gone. Her abandoned cart had been moved out of the way. Did Dominic see it? She licked her lips and forced herself to speak slowly. "I have to—" Breathless, she had to pull it together.

Johnny pushed his hair back again, dark eyes studying her as though she might cause a problem in his store.

"If I use your back door, will an alarm ring?" She couldn't meet his eyes, but his silence bore into her. "Please."

His wariness softened. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

Ha. Not in a million years. She had no immediate plan other than to run. No access to most of her belongings. No place to go without a friend's help. Even her car had to be abandoned. She'd figure out what to do about that and the little place she'd rented under a false name later.

"Ma'am?" Johnny leaned against the marred counter. His hands planted over the taped notices and the stack of Shop 'n' Save coupons.

She couldn't meet his eyes and dropped hers to study the worn grooves where years of use had faded the faux wood. Years of therapy had come down to this moment that she knew would inevitably arrive. She had two choices: get her anxiety under control or have a panic attack at the customer service desk.

Grace inhaled through her nose and held it. An eternity crawled by before she released the breath. "I can't go out the front door. There's someone out there—I just can't."

"I can call the police for you."

"No. Don't. Please. That will make it worse." She stared at his name tag again. A valued employee for more than five years. So much could change in five years. Five years ago, her parents and brother had buried her in a family-only closed-casket ceremony. "Johnny. Please. I need to go out the back. Will an alarm ring if I do?"

His fingers tapped on the worn groove of the counter. He had short fingernails with dark nail polish mostly scratched off and wore several rings. A portion of a tattoo peeked out from his shirt sleeve. If only she could meet his gaze, if she could see what he was thinking, and he could see her desperation, then maybe he would answer her.

"Nah," he finally said. "Come with me. No alarms."

Relief flooded as if a cold rag had been wrapped around her neck on a sweltering day. "Thank you." But he couldn't have heard her whisper that had caught in her throat. She followed him and tried again. "Thank you."

His keys clinked as he guided her down the canned vegetable aisle and past the deli, where the lunch crowd waited for mac and cheese, potato wedges, and fried chicken. They entered a dim hallway and passed the restrooms until Johnny pushed through the old swinging double doors.

Boxes and pallets lined the walkway. They stopped beside two large, closed truck bays next to a beaten-up door with a handmade poster that read, *Don't forget to clock out.*

Johnny swung the door open as though he wanted to catch someone lurking by the dumpster. The bright noon light momentarily blinded her. Grace's eyes watered. She faltered in her escape, but Johnny lifted his hand to block Grace until he'd inspected the space. She appreciated everything the guy was doing for her.

"There's no one out here."

"Thanks." Slowly her eyes adjusted to the sunshine. Grace inched out and surveyed the delivery area as Johnny had. She clung to the door as if it tethered her to safety. No sign of Dominic.

"You sure you don't need me to call the cops? Family? Friends? Anyone?"

"No. Please don't. I won't be a problem—"

"Lady, I'm not worried about you being a problem."

Summer heat baked the back lot. She hesitantly let go of the back door and carefully stepped onto the oil-stained asphalt. The delivery area backed up to the employees' entrances for the grain and feed store, the post office, and a rarely staffed real estate office. Its lone Realtor was a part-time long-haul driver. Grace had used that to her advantage when she'd found her little rental house online and finagled the keys without ever having to meet anyone in person.

"Hey, lady. You need anything? Food? Formula? Something?"

His humanity squeezed her heart. She shielded her eyes as tears pricked, but she didn't have time to tell him how much that might mean to a woman in trouble. Grace just smiled.

"Thank you for even asking."

She hurried toward the feed store's delivery bay and climbed the stairs to the employee entrance. With a little prayer for luck, she tried their back door and let out a deep sigh of relief as it creaked open with an overused, under-maintained groan.

The sweet smell of grain and corn hung in the air. Machinery beeped, and voices floated nearby. Her eyes adjusted from the summer sun. Overhead fluorescent lights illuminated the space stacked with boxes and pallets. She'd never been inside the feed store before, but its customer parking lot was always busier than the Shop 'n' Save. Their inventory towered around her. She hurried down the makeshift aisle, searching for a way into the store.

"Hey," a forklift operator yelled as Grace crossed an open space. "You can't be back here."

Grace ducked her head and rushed by.

"Yo, you're going the wrong way."

Shit. She paused and turned toward him.

He wasn't a tenth as helpful as Johnny, but he did lift his hand and point a different way.

"Thanks." She rushed that way and, a moment later, saw the entrance into the store.

Grace burst through without any of the hesitation she'd had stepping out of the grocery store's back door. Dominic wouldn't be in the feed store. He was probably sitting in the air conditioning, making crypto deals on his phone, counting the minutes until Grace would stumble out of the grocery store like a bumbling idiot, straight into his clutches. He always thought she was stupid. At least that worked in her favor this time.

The feed store's bright lights beckoned her into its aisles. The merchandise caught her off guard. There was far more than livestock food. She rushed through the section devoted to shoes and boots and farther into the store. A cordoned-off area with large metal troughs held center court. Grace slowed and, curious, glanced down. Little chickens waddled under heat lamps.

She moved next to a toddler standing on tiptoes while her mother focused on the fussy baby in her arms.

“Dwucks.” The toddler reached toward the chickens with an outstretched finger. “Dwucks!”

“Chickens,” the mother corrected.

A tiny pain panged in Grace’s heart. The frazzled woman didn’t notice Grace but had something Grace desperately wanted. A simple life. Kids. She realized everyone had their problems. The fussy baby and the exhausted mother were clearly having a moment. But that was a moment that Grace would never have. *Because of Dominic*. She had to focus.

Escape was paramount. Grace glanced around. She’d had no idea what was actually in a feed store. Maybe if she hadn’t been scared to leave her rental for anything more than food, she would have known.

Grace ducked behind a display of pest control options. Across from the safety of the baby chickens, she called her brother Hayden.

No answer.

She could leave a message, but what would she say? She’d seen an expensive car parked at the grocery store and had known with every ounce of her being that her ex-husband had tracked her down? Grace would have to admit that she hadn’t told him the complete truth about how she’d been living. Staying off the grid had been important. But she’d done something wrong for Dominic to realize that she was alive, much less track her down.

Grace redialed her brother. The voicemail picked up again. She cleared her throat and, after the beep, left a message. “Hey, it’s me. I don’t know how, but Dominic’s out early. And he’s here. At the grocery store. *He knows about me.*”

She swallowed the rising wave of panic and inhaled, then let it out slowly. The adorable little cabin that she’d secretly called home for the last few months and her car would have to wait until she returned. *If* she returned. She had to put distance between herself and Dominic. Calling Hayden had been a bad idea. Now he would freak out and have questions she wouldn’t want to answer.

The most important question was already reverberating through her thoughts: How did Dominic know? “Actually, Hayden. Sorry. Ignore me. Everything will be fine. If it’s him,” she said, knowing damn well it was Dominic, “I’ll figure out a plan and let you, Dad, and Mari know. Bye.”

Hayden wouldn’t ignore her.

Damn it. Why hadn’t she thought her next move through before calling him? Oh, yeah. Because her brain short-circuited when Dominic was involved. She had places to go; friends who had helped her in the past and would again. All she had to do was get there without being seen.