

Chapter One

Are You Still Here?

Missy

“Are you still here?” Nathan groaned.

“Yeah,” I grunted, wriggling a little, trying to ease my way out from underneath his left arm, which lay heavily across my stomach. “I live here, so...”

“This is your apartment?” He smacked his lips, then made a displeased noise, like he wasn’t altogether satisfied with the smell of his own morning breath.

“Where did you think we went last night?”

“Honestly...” He exhaled weightily then rolled to the left, moving his arm off me so I could scoot away and establish a bit of space between us. “I’m not sure. I can’t remember much after we started dancing and...”

Self-consciously, I pulled the sheets up a notch higher, covering myself. “Then you don’t remember how we...” I allowed my words to trail away, not wanting to come right out of the gate, testing his memory, trying to determine just how much of the night we spent together had been lost in a fog of champagne and sweet kisses.

Nathan turned all the way over so that we were face-to-face. I hadn’t been able to shimmy far enough away from him to create a wide chasm between us, so his elbows bumped mine and I could see the look of surprise clearly etched on his handsome features.

Oh, Nathan Hamilton...

Even slightly hungover, the man still looked amazing. His chestnut brown locks which were highlighted with gorgeous honey-colored hues were messy and tangled, probably because I’d been running my fingers through them just a few hours before. The soft morning sunlight that was peeking through the curtains in my bedroom touched his blue eyes, making them sparkle like the surface of a backyard pool. And the faint dusting of freckles on his nose and cheekbones was almost non-existent because his complexion was slightly red, possibly from embarrassment or perhaps because he’d been sleeping with his face pressed against the pillows.

I resisted the urge to lift my hand and stroke his cheeks. As tempting as it was to renew the intimacy that had always come so easily to us, I wanted to have this talk with Nate. We *needed* to discuss what had happened here last night. And if I made light of the situation or allowed the two of us to get carried away by our passions again, we’d be no better off than we were before he’d come to town for this quick visit.

“I...I’m almost afraid to ask this, Missy, ‘cause I’m pretty sure I already know the answer...” He stopped and a small, impish smile quirked the corners of his lips. “But what did we do last night?” Slowly, he propped himself up on his elbows and surveyed my bedroom.

For the first time, I focused on something other than the man sitting in my bed. There were two glasses of water, both half full, resting on my nightstand. Our phones were right next to them, but neither of us had remembered to plug them in, evidently, because the charging cords dangled uselessly over the edge of the nightstand. While I had the top creamy white bed sheet pulled high up to my collarbone, my comforter had been kicked on the floor. It lay next to our clothes. Nate had worn a dark blue suit with a periwinkle tie and my aquamarine bridesmaid gown was heaped right on top of his shoes. I tipped my head to the side and gazed at the dress for a long moment.

Adair got married. She really, really did it.

I'd watched her walk down the aisle. I'd heard both she and her husband, Wes, utter their vows. And yet, I still couldn't believe that fact.

I'd been there the whole time, standing right by her side. I'd spent months helping her prepare for this occasion, but I still thought it was out of place in the grand scheme of things. I never imagined that Adair would be the first one in our group to get married, and now here it was, the day *after* her wedding ceremony.

I glanced at the clock on my nightstand, ignoring—or attempting to ignore—the rings left there by the water glasses and saw that it was already 10:30. I hadn't slept this late in years. On a regular day, even a weekend, I would've been up for hours, already burned through a workout and then headed on with the rest of my day.

When I want time to stand still, that's when it passes the quickest.

That thought brought my attention back to Nathan. He'd been saying something while I was off daydreaming, and now I felt a bit of guilt for not actually listening. I made a solid effort to start tuning in and give him my full attention.

"So, what exactly happened last night?" he asked with his eyebrow hooked high in the air.

Turning once more onto my side so we could be eye-to-eye, I answered in my most nonchalant way, "Adair got married."

"Yes, she did," he said and grinned widely. "That was some reception, huh?"

We both snickered at that suggestion. Jessica Adair and Wesley Jefferson, her groom, had spared no expense in throwing the bash of the century. While the ceremony itself was relatively intimate, the reception could be best described as expansive. Adair had invited most of her clients and she'd even insisted that Ian Whitley and Cora Collins, the newest additions to her record label, perform throughout the evening. I couldn't decide if she was celebrating her marriage or her new catalog of artists. Maybe it was a little of both.

Jessica Adair had built DieLou Records from the ground up and she had every right to be proud of her work. She'd spent obscene amounts of time and money making her business successful, and it felt right to pull the biggest day of her life and her greatest achievement together in one colossal event.

Plus, I'd never been to a wedding that was so spectacular.

I thought I'd mention that to Nathan.

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "Then, I guess you haven't been to that many weddings, huh?"

"I've been to a few," I said defensively, trying to add up my wedding experiences in my mind.

"Sure, everyone's been to a few, and I agree with you that nobody does it like Adair, but . . ." He let his words trail off.

"What's up?" I asked before I could help myself. I was getting a weird vibe off Nathan. This conversation was stilted and lacked substance. We weren't really getting anywhere. I felt like he wanted to talk about something, but instead of just coming right out with whatever he was thinking, Nate was intentionally holding back.

"Nothing." He shrugged casually. His brow wrinkled and I could tell he hadn't just stopped talking in the middle of his sentence because his brain was still addled by the copious amounts of alcohol that he'd consumed the night before.

Nate's hiding something...

I'd known him for a long time, and we'd been friends for what felt like ages. So, I could detect when he was feeling a little off. But when the silence stretched between us and he still didn't elaborate on his thoughts, I grew uneasy.

Maybe he's not hiding something. Maybe he's just confused about what happened between us last night...

And I didn't blame him for having a truckload of questions. Now that I was contemplating it truly, the whole event had my mind spinning.

What did we do? Could any of this even be close to a good idea? We've obviously been together, but what does that mean? Did we get all hot and messy because we care about each other or was it a little more noncommittal than that?

I cringed at the way my thoughts were spiraling out of control.

This is exactly the sort of thing that sent Nate running for the hills in the past.

He never wanted to talk about anything serious and as far as having a relationship status update chat, that was surely a discussion he'd rather put off until another time.

But time wasn't on our side today anyway.

I snuck a quick glance at the alarm clock which sat behind the water glasses on the nightstand, then asked a question I'd been dreading, "Nate, what time do you have to leave today?" Suddenly, the idea of having this laborious little talk, spinning out the finer details of the evening, discussing what our actions all meant in the long run seemed rather exhausting and like an enormous waste of time and energy. Even though just a few seconds before I'd been convinced that I wouldn't let him wiggle away this time without talking things through with me, just as abruptly, I changed my mind. We *didn't* need to talk about last night. We needed to focus on what was happening right now...in the present.

His eyes fluttered shut and he squeezed them closed for a full ten seconds before answering, "Why? Please tell me it's not already the middle of the afternoon."

"It's not so late in the day yet," I murmured, reaching out impulsively, and tracing my fingertip over the curve of his mouth.

My movements must've surprised him because his eyes flew open, and he gazed at me, tipping his head to the side slightly and gifting me with the most adorable grin. "Thank goodness. 'Cause I need to shower and we've gotta talk about..." He paused and waved his hand at me, then gestured to the rest of my bedroom. "...all this."

I gulped. "Do we need to talk...really?"

"Come on," he said, perking up once more, then nodding at the closed door to the bedroom. "Let's get cleaned up and go for a walk."

"You wanna..."

"I want to talk to you, Missy," he interrupted. "Seriously." He leaned forward and brushed the tip of his nose against mine. "Don't you think we ought to have this out...once and for all?"

Frankly, I didn't love the way he posed that last statement. Even though I knew we ought to have a candid discussion, I wasn't keen to answer any questions about what happened last night. Every few seconds I bounced back and forth between wanting to say what was on my mind and determining that we'd be better off letting our little escapade go down in our shared history as just another tryst we didn't talk about later. But now that Nate was asking...really asking... me to take this leap with him, I found that I couldn't resist the exquisite temptation of finally getting the answers to all my most pressing questions.

Chapter Two

What Will it Be...Love or Money?

Nathan

“What do you wanna do today?” Missy asked. As my hostess for the weekend, she’d insisted that I take the first shower, but now, as she reentered her bedroom, with a baby blue towel wrapped around her body and tucked neatly underneath her arms, it was disconcerting to see the frown on her face and the way her eyes went directly to the clock. I’d noticed her checking the time every few minutes since we’d both awakened and it made me feel a little nervous. I was almost certain she wasn’t trying to get rid of me or making the mistake of wishing away our time together, but the way her pretty, bluish gray eyes kept drifting back to that clock on her nightstand made me itch to get out of her bedroom and away from the wretched timepiece that seemed to be dictating just about everything.

“I’ve got almost an eight-hour drive ahead of me today, so I’d probably better be on the road early this afternoon.”

“Right,” Missy agreed. “I know you’ve gotta get up early for work tomorrow morning, and I don’t want to even think about you overdoing it by staying out too late tonight.”

I smiled affectionately at her.

This was one of the things I loved most about Missy. She was always thinking four steps ahead...trying to figure out how best to take care of everyone else in her life...including me.

“Let’s not worry about what I’m doing at work tomorrow or even think about my drive later. Let’s just go have some fun while we can.”

“All right.” Missy sauntered to her chest of drawers and pulled out a simple, white cotton T-shirt. “Did you have anything in mind you wanted to do?”

“I could think of a few things,” I murmured, eyeing her closely as she plucked a pair of black athletic capri pants out of another drawer.

She turned and gave me a slow, easy grin. “I thought you said you wanted to talk?”

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved my hand dismissively at her. “I guess that’s something we oughta do.” I was sitting on the corner of her mattress, watching her get dressed and that alone made it difficult to concentrate. I’d known Missy Lawrence a long time, but from my vantage point, she’d never looked more beautiful.

Oh, she’d always been pretty in a girl next door kind of way, and when we’d first dated in college, I’d been smitten by her good-natured, amiable smile. But now that we’d both been out of school for a few years and hadn’t seen each other in person for longer than I wanted to admit, I had to admire all the ways she’d changed.

Her hair was longer than it’d been a few years ago. It skimmed her shoulder blades and fell in one long, straight curtain. If I wasn’t mistaken, her locks were a slightly different shade, too. They were darker, maybe a little more caramel hued than the platinum tint they’d been before. But Missy’s smile was still the same. As she yanked on her clothing, grabbed a pair of white athletic ankle socks and a set of blue and gray sneakers, then plopped on the bed next to me to tie up the laces, I found myself getting distracted by her gorgeous grin. It wasn’t just that she had straight, white teeth, or full, cupid’s bow lips. It was the way Missy’s mouth turned up at the corners...as if she was smiling just because I was there. This smile...Missy’s smile...was unique and she’d conjured it up just for me.

“What?” she asked, meeting my gaze, while also fiddling with the tongue on her left shoe. The thing wouldn’t lie flat, no matter how much she smooshed and prodded it with the pads of her fingers.

“I’ve got an idea.” I hopped off the bed and she immediately gave up on fixing her shoes so she could join me.

“You know what you wanna do today?” she ventured.

“Come on,” I said, taking hold of her hand and leading her out of the bedroom. “We’ve got places to go.”

Missy giggled as she skipped right behind me. “Yeah, you’ve gotta go home and...”

“I do,” I said, cutting her off. “But I’m not ready to go yet. And besides, there’s someplace special I’d like to take you.”

She jerked my hand, pulling us both to a stop. “Someplace special? What’d you have in mind?”

Now that I was excited by the idea, I didn’t want to spoil the surprise by telling her all about our destination before we got there. So, I just squeezed her hand and nodded at the door that would lead us out of her apartment. “Do you trust me enough to stop asking questions?”

Her eyes widened to the size of golf balls, but I could tell she was giving my words some serious contemplation because her lips pursed tightly.

“Hmm...” she hummed. “I’m not real sure what’s going on here, Nate, but I’m trusting you.”

I laughed, then tugged her hand, pulling her along.

“But I need my purse,” she said as we passed the counter that separated the kitchen and dining area from the living room. “And I’ve gotta grab my keys.” She didn’t let go of my hand, so when she leaned over the countertop, making a racket as she rummaged in the tiny, ceramic heart shaped bowl for her set of keys, I nearly toppled over.

“Missy, come on, would ya?” I said, righting myself and yanking her along with me. Now that I had an idea of how I wanted to spend my day with her, I was reluctant to hang around the apartment, missing out on what was sure to be a glorious late morning and early afternoon.

She snatched her keys from the bowl, tucked them into the purse she’d slung across her body, then patted her sides. “Do I need anything else for this little excursion?”

“Nope,” I assured her, then, as her enchanting smile once more lit up her features, we exited her apartment and raced down the stairs. At first, it was awkward because we were still holding hands, but both Missy and I had competitive natures and once we recognized that we could race, rather than walk, we both took off.

Missy darted ahead of me, elbowing her way by me on the stairs, sprinting to open the exterior door to the Fountain Park apartment complex, then turned and gave me a triumphant grin.

“Where to now?” she asked. Her blue eyes were dancing with mirth, and I wanted, more than anything, to see her smiling like that at me not just for today...but for all the rest of our days.

“We’ll need to go for a short drive,” I said, motioning to the parking spot my little truck occupied.

“All right,” she agreed, skipping toward the passenger side of the vehicle. She beamed at me, and slowly my own grin slid into place. It was a gorgeous day. Late August tends to be one of two things in Charlotte: really hot or really spring-like. There’s a joke around town that the four seasons of the year are spring, almost spring, late spring, and construction. It’s corny, but usually accurate. Today, thankfully, the weather was cooperating and peaking at just around seventy-five degrees. The sun was shining warmly, and even though I was wishing I’d remembered to bring my sunglasses along with me, I couldn’t deny that I was truly happy.

It didn't take long to drive across town and reach the outskirts of the University of North Carolina's Charlotte campus. After parking the truck, I skirted around so I could open Missy's door for her and when I offered her my hand to help her out of the vehicle, she took it.

"I'm not letting this hand go for the rest of the day," I promised, leaning over to brush a quick kiss across her knuckles. Even though I'd been sincere, Missy chuckled.

"Sure," she muttered. "You'll hold my hand until it's time to race again."

"No more racing today. I think I pulled a hamstring coming down those stairs," I quipped.

"You want a massage?" she teased.

"Maybe later." I smiled broadly at her. "But for now, let's just agree to stick together."

Missy shrugged her slender shoulders daintily and squeezed my hand. "Sounds good to me."

We walked along companionably for a few minutes, not saying much, simply meandering down the gravel pathway, heading toward the special spot I wanted to share with her.

"Sometimes the weather's nice in Pittsburgh, but we never have days like this," I said after a spell before lifting my chin and gazing upward, embracing the sunlight.

"I know," she agreed. "There's no other place in the world that has weather quite like Charlotte."

"Absolutely." I nodded, then turned to glance at her. "Maybe I should move back here . . ."

"Move back for the weather? That seems a little impulsive . . ." I was sure Missy meant to keep talking, but then her face turned bright crimson and her words just evaporated.

It was apparent she was hiding something, maybe concealing some of her thoughts, so I pushed ahead and let her know what I was thinking, hoping that by being transparent, I might urge her to do just the same. "There're plenty of reasons for me to move back to Charlotte. There are lots of things here that I love." Gently, I drew a heart shape with my thumb onto the soft part of her hand.

I was sure she'd say something then, cave to her journalistic instincts, and ask a follow-up question, but Missy stayed quiet.

When the silence engulfed us so fully that I almost felt like I was suffocating, I whispered, "You okay?" while rubbing my thumb across her hand again, massaging her smooth skin.

"Yeah," she breathed.

I waited for her to say something else, but she didn't. I was used to Missy having a bubbly personality, the kind that couldn't be hampered or contained. She was a bit of a question box really, always peppering people with queries, wondering what they were thinking, then being bold enough to come right out and ask the questions others might not. But today, she was unusually quiet and that made the place I was about to share with her seem even more special. I was glad I'd asked her to trust me and allow me to lead the way.

"We're here," I said softly, nodding for her to follow me down a winding pathway.

"Where?" she returned, twisting her neck slightly, slowly surveying our surroundings. There were tall conifer trees lining the pathway, obscuring the sunlight a little. As we stepped into the wooded area, the path was no longer made of small pebbles, but it became a dusty, dirt-covered trail. There were a few trees off to one side of the forest that needed clearing away. I couldn't tell when they'd fallen, but the branches hung limply and those that were closest to the ground were covered in ferns, ivy, and moss.

"This is one of my favorite places," I explained, squeezing her hand tighter. "I maybe should've brought you here a long time ago, but it seems appropriate to come today."

"Appropriate how?" she questioned and for the first time, I caught a hint of trepidation in her voice.

"We're almost there," I replied. "Then, you'll be able to see for yourself."

As we came through the woods, I scanned the small, luscious park which lay before us. The grass was a spritely green and trees ringed the area. There were a few stone benches within my line of sight and just up ahead there was a concrete bridge.

“This bridge used to be wooden and rickety,” I explained, taking her hand, and leading her forward. “But in recent years, especially as the water started to recede, and this became more of a tourist attraction, the city rebuilt the bridge.”

“How do you know that?” Missy asked, tipping her head to the side, and giving the whole place a pensive stare. “You haven’t lived here in a few years, Nate, and even if this is one of your favorite places to go when you do come back to town...”

“Welcome to Blessed Creek,” I interjected. “Even though I don’t come here as often as I used to, I keep my eyes on the place.”

“Really?” Missy snorted. “And what sort of superpowers do you employ so you can keep a watch over this park?”

I laughed lightly, then gestured with my free hand to a brown and white sign which sat prominently to the left of the bridge. “They’ve got a camera over there. And the ranger who takes care of this place posts updates directly on the regional parks and rec. department’s website from time-to-time.”

“Too bad,” Missy joked, sighing softly. “I was sort of hoping you might possess some secret abilities you’ve been carefully concealing all these years.”

“Oh?” I took a step closer to her, inhaling the tea tree scented shampoo and conditioner combo she’d recently used to wash her hair. “If you’re looking for magic...then I’ve brought you to the right place.”

Missy’s left eyebrow crooked sardonically. “I was just joking around before. I don’t believe in people possessing superpowers and as for having magical capabilities...” She stuck out her tongue, lifted her free hand and turned her thumb down, then blew out a raspberry, showing her disdain for the topic quite clearly.

“You should,” I coaxed, nodding toward the bridge before leading her to the center of the structure.

“Really?” she challenged, giving another appraising look around us. “Tell me why.”

I must admit at this point that there was nothing remarkable about the bridge or its surroundings. The park had been a sweet little spot and the idea of an enchanted meeting place for lovers was intriguing, but the view from the bridge itself left much to be desired. There was water and trees, but very little else to recommend it.

I glanced at Missy quickly then released her hand so I could lean forward and wrap my fingers around the railing that was right in front of us. I leaned forward and looked down at the water which burbled underneath the bridge. She followed my example, but then I heard her sigh dramatically.

“Am I missing something here?” She asked. “Is this a science thing and I’m just not appreciating it the way I should be?” She continued leaning forward, bending at the waist, tucking her upper body around the bar, and making it seem like if the safety feature wasn’t there, she just might dive straight into the creek.

This was another thing I adored about Missy—her spontaneity. Most of the time, she was willing to plunge right into the thick of things.

“It really is a beautiful day,” I murmured. My words seemed to spark something in my companion because she righted herself slowly, then turned to look me fully in the face.

When our eyes met, I saw something that I’d been missing before. Missy was looking at me the way she used to do, when we were dating in college, and she trusted me fully and completely. We didn’t need to say everything we were thinking or feeling because with just one look, we knew what

we had. I didn't want to be the first to break the stare because my insides were thrumming. My blood was pumping heatedly through my veins, and I felt renewed, as if I could do anything at this moment, so long as Missy kept looking at me.

Maybe that's what's magical about this place...the way it turns friends into lovers.

"So..." she said at last, breaking our silence, and pulling out the word long, "does the park ranger come through here and give a talk soon or...?"

"This is Blessed Creek," I said softly, "and there's a legend surrounding this place."

"Uh-huh," Missy grunted. "What sort of legend?" She rocked back a little from the railing and crossed her arms over her chest, now giving me a skeptical look. I liked this pose almost as much as I did the last because this one reminded me of the way Missy used to behave when she was hot on the trail of tracking down a lead. She might be willing to jump into a situation with both feet, but then, before pushing forward, she wanted answers.

I took a deep breath, then unfurled the tale. "The way I heard the story was that years ago a sailor and his crew were lost on these shores. A beautiful woman happened to be walking along the shoreline, and when she figured out that the men needed help, she was able to lead the captain in the right direction."

"Wait." Missy held up her hand. "What shores? How did a sailor and his crew get *here*?" She gestured that same hand around us, indicating how this was just a creek and we were surrounded by trees.

"It's a story," I replied. "Just go with it."

Her little nose wrinkled, and a slight humming sound buzzed from the back of her throat as she was clearly thinking over whether she'd prefer to just stay quiet and keep listening or continue to probe further.

When she didn't interject, I proceeded, "As payment for her assistance, the man offered her a bit of treasure." I stopped talking and dug around in my pocket, pulling out a dingy penny. There was nothing astounding or stunning about the coin, but when I held it up for Missy to inspect, the sun glinted off the worn edges, giving it a bit of luster. "He had a gold locket around his neck, a cherished item, but since the woman had saved his life and helped his crew out of a tight spot, he wished to repay her the best he could." Missy cocked her head to the side and gazed at the penny. "Since the man and woman didn't speak the same language, communication was stilted. It took some time for her to realize he meant to pay for her assistance and while he was gazing at her, he admired her beauty. So, he decided to offer her an alternative form of payment." Missy's eyebrow ticked a little higher, showing her intrigue. "She could take the coin, or she could kiss the sailor."

"Hmmm . . . interesting choice," Missy murmured thoughtfully. "Which did she pick?"

I stared at her expectantly. "Which would *you* want?"

"A kiss or some money?" she returned.

"Yeah," I breathed slowly and steadily, willing her to make her choice, the obvious decision, the one I was sure we both wanted.

She leaned forward and brushed her lips against mine. The kiss was soft and sweet and while there wasn't much heat behind it, my heart still managed to skip a beat in response. My hand clenched around the penny and my eyes fluttered shut. I wanted this moment to last for a very long time. Just as I was reaching for Missy, hoping to wrap my arms around her waist and tow her even closer, she pulled away. Slightly chagrined, I opened my eyes and saw that she was smiling broadly. That grin swept away all my less than satisfied thoughts immediately.

"I was hoping that'd be what you picked . . ." I admitted. Then, I opened my palm again and presented her with the penny. "Here," I said, nodding at her to take the money. "Now that you've chosen me, you can throw the money in the creek and make a wish."

"I get the treasure *and* the kiss?" she questioned.

“Yep, but only because you made the correct decision.”

She took the penny from my palm and looked at it carefully for a second. Then, she unzipped her purse and dropped the coin inside.

“What’re you doing?” I asked. “You’re supposed to throw it away and make a wish.”

“I think I’ll hang onto my wish,” she said, smiling in a contented way. “Cause right now, I’ve already got everything I want.”

Chapter Three

Missy Will You Meet Me There...Please?

A half hour later, we were sitting at my kitchen table eating a very late breakfast. It was past lunch time, but when I asked Nathan what he wanted to eat, he'd suggested waffles. So, I'd grabbed the waffle maker off the shelf, put some sausage in the oven, and even whipped up some scrambled eggs. Now, we were shoveling breakfast foods, drenched in syrup, onto our forks and then into our mouths. I smiled at him every few seconds, thrilled with the day that we'd spent together.

"Morning," Hope said lazily as she waltzed into the kitchen still wearing a pair of fuzzy pink bedroom slippers and a cotton candy pink bathrobe.

"Morning?" I joked, flicking my eyes toward the digital clock on the oven range. "It stopped being morning hours ago."

Hope yawned broadly while reaching for the Carolina Panthers coffee mug she'd gotten last fall as part of a promotional giveaway at the Bank of America Stadium. "I can't help it if I like to sleep late."

"Late?" Nate spoke around a mouthful of waffles. "We waved bye-bye to *late* hours ago."

My little sister shrugged, then leaned her hip against the kitchen countertop so she could turn and look at us. "The two of you make it sound like I was sleeping the day away. Didn't you guys bother to sleep in a little bit this morning?"

"Sure," I replied as I dipped my sausage link in syrup then took a big bite. "But we've been up for ages and already ventured over to Blessed Creek."

Hope drummed her thumbs on the countertop, collected her mug that was now brimming with freshly brewed French roast, and plopped into the vacant chair next to mine. She reached over and snatched a sausage link off my plate. "Never heard of it."

I nodded at Nathan, and he quickly explained the little legend surrounding the place. When he was done, Hope took a long sip of her coffee, then shot me a confused look. "Is it just me or are there a few details missing from that story?"

"Like what?" Nate asked, scooping eggs onto his fork then taking a hearty bite.

Simultaneously, I said, "I know, right? Like what happened to the princess?" I picked up my glass of orange juice, drank a bit, and swished it around in my mouth while waiting for him to answer.

"What princess?" He countered before shoving a piece of waffle into his mouth. I watched as a trickle of syrup dribbled over his lips.

"The princess in the story—you know. What happened to the princess? Did *she* choose the kiss or the treasure?"

"She wasn't a princess. Who said she was?" He had his head tipped to the side, looking for all the world like a silly little doggy that was begging for scraps at the dinner table. Judging by the quizzical expression that was stamped across his face, he was surprised I'd added details to the story which just plain didn't exist.

"I guess I thought that she was . . ."

"I made that assumption, too," Hope added, leaning over, and grabbing hold of my fork. I pushed my plate toward her.

Apparently, we're sharing my breakfast.

And that was all right with me, but I didn't want her to have to keep reaching over top of me to get at the food. She took a quick bite of the scrambled eggs, made a disgruntled face, then

snatched the pepper shaker from the center of the table. "I think the story'd be better if the lady were a princess," she said before covering the breakfast food in a thick layer of black pepper.

"Would it?" he asked teasingly, straightening up his head, while winking in my direction. "I thought the way I told it was just fine and the ending was pretty nice, too."

I groaned. "But you *didn't* end the story, Nate. So, just tell us. Because I can't take it anymore. What did she decide?" I leaned as far across the table as I could get without knocking over Hope's coffee cup, my glass of juice, or jostling the breakfast plate we were sharing.

Nate's eyes danced with glee. "The woman in the story took the gold and threw it into the water. She kissed the captain just seconds before she walked out of his life." He smiled a little as he finished the story, but I was dissatisfied.

"Why did she leave him? Weren't they in love? I mean, you made it seem like *he* loved *her*, so maybe, because she kissed him that signified that she had the same feelings, too." I felt grief rush into the room like an unwelcome visitor. "When you love someone, you don't leave them!" I cried.

"Who said they were in love?" Nathan asked me, putting down his own fork.

"No one, I guess," I huffed discontentedly, crossing my arms over my chest. "I just assumed it."

"And who said that you're never forced to leave the person you love?" He continued as if I hadn't spoken.

"I guess that happens sometimes, too."

We both stared at each other and this time he was the first to break the silence.

"But what if you didn't have to give up the person you loved? What if you could stay with that person forever?"

It was Hope who answered him. She blew out an exasperated sigh while nibbling at the mound of eggs. "Wouldn't that be something?" she snorted. "You could find somebody you really liked and then...*wham!* You just got to spend the rest of your life with them?" She rolled her eyes, as if we hadn't been able to pick up on her sarcastic tone before. "It'd almost be like getting marr..."

"What if we did that?" Nate interrupted.

"Did what?" I returned.

He leaned forward so that we were nearly nose-to-nose. "What if we got married, Missy?"

"Wh...what?" I squeaked.

Hope dropped her fork. For a second the only sound in the room was the noise the silverware made when it clattered against the tabletop.

"Did you just...are you serious?" she asked, taking the words right out of my mouth.

"Come on," he cajoled, sitting back a little so we had some breathing room lingering between us. "Think about it. We could get married. We could have a big party just like Adair's and Wesley's or we could run down to the courthouse and make things official right now." He licked the corners of his lips where some of the sweet, sticky syrup had collected, then continued to rattle off possibilities. "I could move here if that's what you wanted. And we could have a whole bunch of kids. We could..."

"Kids?" I gulped.

Nate snickered. "Sure. We could have loads of them."

"Loads?" I parroted, unable to come up with anything else because I was totally dumbstruck.

His smile broadened. "Well, maybe not loads, but I guess I always figured we'd have six or seven babies and..."

Hope guffawed loudly. "Why do you want so many kids? You thinkin' of starting a family band?"

Nathan's grin turned lazy as he sat back a little way in his chair, stretching his arms high over his head. "Maybe," he joked.

I sucked in a sharp intake of breath and jumped up from my seat at the table. I wasn't sure what to do, but my instincts were telling me to get moving. I started to walk out of the kitchen and head to my bedroom, but Nathan was right behind me. He grabbed ahold of my elbows and spun me around so that I couldn't go anywhere. Once again, we were stuck, gazing into each other's eyes, but this time my nerves jangled and jounced, making me feel uncomfortable. I wanted to walk away, but I also wanted to stay. I *needed* to hear what he was going to say next.

"Missy," he whispered and suddenly the lackadaisical expression he'd worn back in the kitchen was gone. A more serious, temperate man gazed earnestly back at me. "I know I'm not perfect. I've never been before, and I know I'm certainly not now. I'll never be the kind of guy who shows up at your apartment carrying a bouquet of flowers and I won't ever be able to say the right thing at the right time." His eyes darted quickly back and forth, and I had the feeling he was searching my face, trying to read my expression. "But I love you, Missy and you love me back. I know you do. Despite everything we've been through and the distance between us, I can feel how much I mean to you, because you hold the same special place in my heart, too. We...we've got something amazing here and..."

"But you're leaving," I interceded, stepping away from him a pace, allowing my nostrils to fill with the aromas of waffles and syrup, rather than the strong masculine scent that distinctly belonged to Nathan. "In just a few minutes, in fact. Your bag is already packed and..."

"Say you'll marry me," he pleaded. "I know we don't have everything worked out right now, but isn't this what you want? Don't you think we ought to be together all the time?"

I couldn't answer. There were times, over this last year, when my friends were getting on with their lives, moving in with boyfriends, finding new jobs, and even, in the case of Jessica Adair, weaving their way to the altar, when I'd dreamed of having Nathan ask me precisely this question. And, ninety-nine percent of the time, in my fantasies, I envisioned accepting his marriage proposal. Because the truth was that I did love him. Of course, I did. But now, with him standing right in front of me, asking the question...the reply wasn't sitting right on the tip of my tongue as I'd always expected it to be.

"Don't answer right now," Nate suggested, taking his hands away from my arms and cupping them both underneath my chin. He leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. The sensations that rippled through my body at that moment were so potent that my knees knocked together in reply. "Before I leave, I'm dropping by the UNC campus for just a few minutes. I promised some of my frat brothers who still live in town that I'd try to see them if I got the chance. So, I'll go to the house, but..." He paused and shot a quick glance at the wall. I knew he was looking at the clock which hung just to the left of the door. "In an hour...meet me at Blessed Creek."

"What?" I breathed. "Why there?"

"You picked love, Missy," he whispered, then a soft smile cracked his serious veneer. "You got to keep the money, too. But when you were given the chance, you chose to love me...to kiss me. If you want to be my wife, meet me at Blessed Creek...please?"

