



**Not Quite Home**

**Moss Point, Book 1**

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## Chapter 1

Adam squeezed his eyes shut against the shelves filled with legal books and clenched his fingers in his hair. He didn't even have the benefit of a view from the high-rise office building in downtown Atlanta. Instead, he stared down the sleek oak conference table surrounded by trendy black chairs filled with relatives he had never met and never planned to see again.

The ghost of Nathaniel Aiken hadn't existed in Adam's world until after the stranger passed into the afterlife. Adam fought the urge to slouch through the reading of his great-uncle's will.

"Finally, to my great-nephew, Adam Moultrie, I bequeath Oakwood Plantation."

With monotone congratulations, the lawyer thrust the deed into Adam's shaking hands.

Adam dropped the paper on the table and fought to hide the chill that ran through his body.

He pulled out his phone and used an app to check in for his flight to Portland, Oregon, leaving Atlanta at six o'clock. Like that would erase his unwanted inheritance. If he weren't an architect, he would decline the damn thing. At least he'd be back to the comfort of blueprints and computer design systems tomorrow.

For the third time, he looked for a text from Jake Hatcher. Adam's half-sibling on paper was his full brother in every way but blood. He sent Jake a quick text. *Are you done?*

Jake fired back after a few seconds. *Just leaving Georgia Aquarium. Good news. Can't talk yet.*

Of course he couldn't. *See you at your hotel. I'm at least ten minutes away. If you beat me there, get me a drink.*

The fifteen-minute cab ride provided too much time to think. Years of escaping to the disintegrating antebellum house as an unruly teenager crept from the recesses of Adam's memory just as it peeked through the three-hundred-year-old oaks that canopied its sand and shell drive. Adam had thrown it and his hometown in his rearview mirror as soon as he graduated high school. Family was the reason he left. After fifteen years, family was forcing him back.

Adam squinted as he skulked into the hotel, leaving what should have been a beautiful afternoon to those lucky enough not to have had their lives upended by a scene straight from a soap opera. The drama-free life he engineered for himself had fallen under siege.

His brother sat at the bar, draft beer in hand, and a bourbon on the rocks waited for Adam when he arrived.

"Well?" Jake asked, wearing a mischievous grin that deepened Adam's scowl.

Adam took a gulp of the fiery liquid. "You aren't going to believe this. I don't."

He had no memories of his father, who effectively had disappeared when Adam was still in diapers. The man's only parting gifts were his blue eyes and chestnut hair. When the lawyers first called, they talked Adam through the family tree and maiden names he'd never heard.

He climbed atop the stool only after he'd finished his first drink and signaled for another. The disparity in the half-brothers' height was less obvious as they sat side by side. With Jake hovering about six inches above Adam and his green eyes peeking through sun-streaked hair that looked about a month overdue for a cut, no one would ever guess they were related.

Jake leaned in, concerned. "How bad can it be?"

"It seems I've inherited some property in Moss Point." Jake still lived in the little town nestled among the marshes and rivers that meandered down the coast of southern Georgia.

Jake fell back and guffawed so loudly the scant other patrons stared. "Howdy, neighbor."

"Don't think this means I'm coming back. I might just give it to you," Adam warned. He had never shared the devastating circumstances of his departure with Jake, which meant he'd never shared them with anyone.

"What kind of property?"

Adam took a swallow of his fresh drink for courage. "Oakwood." Every time he said it aloud, it generated a heavier weight on his shoulders, and he fought the urge to thunk his head on the polished wood.

Jake sat there staring at him, trying to absorb the truth of the situation. "Let me get this straight. My brother, Adam Moultrie, famed heathen of Moss Point, Georgia, is now the owner of the town's prestigious antebellum home?"

Adam absorbed the comment and snorted. "Yep. I hadn't thought about it from that angle. The way you put it, it's like the universe is playing some sort of perverse joke on all of us. You would be the one to find this funny."

They broke into laughter, and Jake raised a toast. "To Moss Point's newest upstanding citizen."

"Only until I can sell it." Shockingly, Adam defined "upstanding citizen" now, having learned to channel his temper into his work. He hadn't been in a fight since college, only finding motivation to develop self-control when the conduct board threatened to revoke his scholarship. No one in Portland knew his past. Nor would they ever if he had his way.

"Whatever," Jake scoffed. "In other news, I have an opportunity for a fellowship working on different conservation methods. Loggerhead turtles. I got the call before my meeting."

"Like you need to study some more." Jake had majored in marine biology after he fell in love with the endangered species on Bristow Island just off Moss Point. Jake strived hard to achieve his position at such a young age, but the effort as a volunteer and unpaid intern had afforded him scholarships, positions, and an excuse to stay away from their childhood home.

"You'll never guess where it is."

Adam absently crunched some bar snacks. "Somewhere between Cape Hatteras and Key West?"

"Not this time."

Adam's eyes widened. "Good for you. How far?"

"It's five hours to the Atlanta airport then another twenty hours in the air, not counting layovers."

Adam snapped the pretzel in his hand. "So that puts you where? In southeast Asia?"

"Australia. Tryon Island, off of Queensland. It's part of the Great Barrier Reef. I honestly can't believe I'm going." Jake shook his head and looked at his beer but didn't stop grinning.

"We've got to go to Vegas before you go."

"I leave in six weeks, and I have experiments to finish, volunteers and assistants to train. On top of that, it's the beginning of sea turtle nesting season so there will be hundreds of hours of fieldwork to coordinate. Last night was my going away party. We just didn't know it."

Adam had counted on Jake to be around to help him deal with this whole Oakwood situation. He might not actually physically need Jake to do anything, but Jake was the one person who would halfway understand, the one person Adam could reach out to with no holds barred, no questions asked. Instead, it was going to be a logistical nightmare to even locate his brother while they were both awake. *Do they have cell phone towers near the Great Barrier Reef? Or will Jake need to use a satellite phone?*

Adam fought an oncoming headache from just thinking about trying to contact his brother and only support system. Had Adam really become such a loner that his whole "system" was comprised of one person? *Pitiful*, he thought. But this was his reality. He would have to suck it up and fly solo. Oakwood was his albatross, after all. His and his alone. He would deal with it. Burdening Jake wasn't an option, not with him leaving so soon. It would be better not to involve him at all. For what felt like the millionth time in Adam's thirty-three years, he chose to be alone.

"How's Portland?" Jake interrupted Adam's thoughts. They hadn't taken time to really catch up last night, choosing to go out and enjoy the city instead.

"Wet. Cool. Just the way I like it." Cool, like Adam's semi-detached voice.

"Great. That's great." Jake paused. "Um, have you started seeing anyone?" Jake leaned forward, quite the opposite of the trademark slouch that the tall, lanky blond seemed perpetually stuck in. His questions were at odds with his posture.

"No. I'm not involved with anyone. You know I wouldn't have been buying those girls drinks at the dance club last night if I were."

Jake's shifted on the barstool. "I know."

"What's up, Jake? What aren't you telling me?"

"I hate to even have this conversation." Jake stopped, leaving Adam to imagine the worst.

*Don't ask. Don't ask.* "Is it about Lulu?" *Damn.* Adam's conscience overrode his brain. Lurleen Simpson Moultrie Hatcher was their mother, if you could call her that. Funny how people noticed she left home only to stumble to the liquor store or the pool hall by the bail bonds office. Like he and Jake had any influence over that. They couldn't control her. Hell, she'd chosen that lifestyle before they were out of diapers. It wasn't fair that only he and Jake experienced the town's shunning because Lulu was too wasted to care.

"No. I swing by every couple of days. Just to make sure she's okay. I drop off some groceries." Jake studied the condensation on his glass.

"No money, though, right? We agreed. No cash." Adam reinforced the point.

"No, no money. No more gift cards, either."

"What happened?"

“I got her one for the grocery store. Figured it would be okay since they don’t sell hard liquor...”

“Jake.”

“Bonehead move, right?”

Adam responded with a frown that shouted disappointment more than any of his words could convey. He sighed, not wanting to waste another breath on Lulu. “What else is going on?”

“Well, Mamaw and Papaw aren’t getting around as well lately.” Jake’s dad’s parents were the only grandparents either of them had ever known.

“Last month you said they were fine.” Adam scowled.

Jake took a gulp of his beer. “They are. Mostly. I just didn’t see the point in covering daily logistics when I was there to manage them.”

“Explain.” Adam cut straight to the heart of the matter, a skill that translated professionally and made him notorious for meeting his clients’ needs.

“Papaw is starting to get cataracts. They aren’t bad enough for surgery yet, but he’s not driving as well as he used to and won’t admit it. At least Mamaw knows she shouldn’t be behind the wheel.”

“How do they get to the store? Are you taking them everywhere? Do they need to move to assisted living?” Adam needed more information before he could conduct the research needed to generate solutions.

“Nah. He drives them around town, to the store and the beauty salon, but if they need to see a specialist in Savannah—like the eye surgeon—I drive them. And no, they definitely don’t need assisted living.”

“I’m happy to hire a limo or nursing assistance or someone to cook their meals, if it would help.” Why would Adam need to go back? He could navigate this family minefield with no problems. He would coordinate with a driver and home healthcare by phone. And he would avoid setting a firm date for a visit.

Jake’s ire came out on a growl. “Throwing money at a problem isn’t the same as being there.”

“Being there to do what?” The longer this dragged out, the closer Adam’s mood swung to a volatile zone.

“You can check on them—and Lulu—in person. A stranger won’t know how they used to be. Papaw doesn’t tell me everything the doctor says, so I sneak in with him once in a while. Since you have to take care of your home anyway, there’s no reason you can’t do it.”

No reason other than Adam having zero intention of leaving the existence he’d worked so hard for. Adam’s stern tone ended the argument more effectively than his words. “Jake, you need to understand something. I don’t want you to worry about anything except making the most of your fellowship. My life is in Portland, and I will do what needs to be done. I’ll make sure that everyone is taken care of in the months that you’re gone.” *And I will do it without setting foot in Moss Point.* Adam wouldn’t call it home.

\* \* \* \*

The next week Adam’s attention was fully absorbed by a scale model of an office building that resembled a house of cards when he got the call from his contractor in Moss

Point. Eric Carter, the only builder in Moss Point, had been in Jake's class, three years behind Adam. He'd taken a similar track to Adam's in high school—in academics, not behavior. He'd studied everything from mechanical drawing to construction in order to learn the field from the bottom up. Because of that, Adam trusted Eric's knowledge, abilities, and opinions.

"What are we looking at?" Adam asked.

"The property hasn't been touched—by the owners, that is—since you last saw it. Most of the foundation is still solid, so all three levels are standing. There's a little crumbling in the brick around the basement entrances and in the kitchen area, but that's insignificant. The outside steps and handrails are completely gone now, but there are enough planks to hopscotch to an entrance since the support beams are intact."

Adam relaxed in his chair, scrawling notes out of habit on one of the firm's monogrammed pads. "What about the windows?"

"They're mostly intact, though the framing needs to be replaced."

"So I'm looking at years of work if I decide to restore it," Adam summarized.

"Basically, yeah. The only upgrades are the fresh beer cans. Looks like the kids are still partying there every weekend. Anyway, I'll email you the detailed report this afternoon."

"Thanks for keeping quiet about this. I owe you one." The last thing Adam wanted was for the firestorm of gossip about Oakwood to use him as kindling.

Eric chuckled. "No problem. I've told folks that someone from out of town inherited it. A long-lost relative. Someone started a betting pool. So far 'Damn Yankee' is winning over 'Internet Billionaire' and 'Wall Street Tycoon.' To my knowledge, your name hasn't made the list yet."

Adam laughed. There was nothing like gossip in southern towns. When it was good and juicy, it was better than the best TV shows. When it was bad, it caused more damage than a Revolutionary War cannon at Old Fort Jackson in Savannah.

"I'll look for your email, Eric. And thanks again for keeping this on the down low."

Relief crested over Adam as he expelled his mouthful of breath. He knew what shape the plantation had been in fifteen years ago, specifically prom night when he had toured the entire first floor in search of his date. With rotting porches and missing handrails, he'd recognized Oakwood as a deathtrap then. It had to be even more so now. Still, he wasn't ready to examine it in person.

Adam only had to step as far as his memories to see his new property liability. He knew what teenagers did there—primarily escaping from all forms of authority to drink whatever they could steal from their parents' liquor cabinets. Couples made out on sleeping bags. Shivering at ghosts in the shadows, girls sought safety with the boys who went as far as their dates would let them go. That was the attraction.

Legally Oakwood was an "attractive nuisance," a minefield of potential injuries for those who were too young to understand warning signs and made it their playground anyway. That would have to be remedied until he sold the property.

Planning to handle all of that remotely from Oregon, he opened his email and started a work list for Eric from his verbal report. Adding "No Trespassing" signs to the perimeter of the property and blocking points of entry to the house were top priorities. Adam would pay overtime to expedite the process. He saved the draft, locking it in a mental box with all things Moss Point, and returned to the knife and cardboard and safety

of the world he was driven to construct for himself.

\* \* \* \*

Three weeks passed, and Adam hunched over a compilation of blueprints of Portland's Museum of Modern Art with his team.

The speakerphone buzz interrupted their discussion. "Mr. Moultrie has a package. He has to sign for it in person."

"Give me a minute," he responded, quickly turning back to the designs. He made his point before stalking to the lobby.

"I'm sorry to disrupt your meeting, Mr. Moultrie. I know that's an important client," the receptionist meekly apologized for something beyond her control.

He reined in his agitation. "It's not your fault."

A bike messenger greeted him. "Adam Moultrie?"

"Yes?" Adam looked over the opaque glass counter for a pen.

"Consider yourself served."

And with that, the twenty-something guy left, helmet still on his head and bicycle on his shoulder. Adam stood casually with the folded white papers in hand, watching the process server juggle the door like a pro as he moved on to his next unsuspecting victim.

Ignoring his single audience member, Adam popped a stick of gum before strolling through the maze of cubicles until he could close himself in his office. He gripped his chair precisely, pulling it from behind his desk. With floor-to-ceiling glass walls facing the associates, body language was the only weapon Adam had against the incipient speculation of the firm. Within minutes, news would travel from the front desk to the associates and to the group he'd just abandoned.

*At least the papers aren't blue like they are on TV. Maybe I just need to appear as a witness for something, possibly an expert. But why?* Adam carefully opened the documents and read. The top page listed him as "THE DEFENDANT" in a lawsuit in Georgia. *Oakwood. Damn albatross.* That was the only thing it could be about.

The complaint was filed by a Victoria Johnson. Adam's forehead wrinkled as he struggled to place the name. Reading on, "NEGLIGENCE" was the first count, citing grounds on which Oakwood was an "ATTRACTIVE NUISANCE". *The owner knows that children are likely to trespass...unreasonable risk of death or serious bodily harm to children...because of their youth do not realize the risk involved...possessor fails to eliminate the danger or otherwise protect the children.*

Adam spat out his gum and grabbed the phone so he could grind his teeth in Eric's ear. "Do you want to tell me how the hell I have a personal injury suit from Oakwood?" *Fucking albatross.*

"Damn."

"Damn, you got busted for not following my instructions? If this is because you did lousy work—or no work at all—I'm coming after you."

"Hold up. We did everything you requested, and we did it to spec. I checked it personally. Ask Jake."

Adam's voice rose fractionally. "How is Jake involved in this?"

"He asked. We were talking, and he asked. If I'd known the topic was off limits to him, too, I would have honored that. I figured because he already knew..."

Adam's protective instincts were irrelevant if Jake didn't want to be protected.

“Never mind. How soon can you get out there to check it out?”

“I’m getting in my truck right now.” In the background, Eric’s door slammed, and his engine turned over.

“Who is Victoria Johnson?”

“Oh, boy. Is that who’s suing?”

“What do you know?”

“Her mother is Melissa Valentino.”

“Missy? My prom date, Missy?”

“That’s her,” Eric said, confirming Adam’s fears. “She’ll be out for blood.”

Adam snorted a self-derisive huff. “With me? Yeah. She will.”

\* \* \* \*

Adam sat on his black leather sofa staring at the brick wall in his loft. He would be proud that he’d bothered with a glass for the Jack Daniels on his steel coffee table if he weren’t so numb. He’d worked his way through a third of the bottle and didn’t feel any different than he had on the first swig. Slumped forward with his elbows on his knees, he couldn’t believe his luck.

Surely this nightmare couldn’t be his reality. How had he wound up as sole owner of a run-down monstrosity in Moss Point, Georgia, and target of a lawsuit because of it? More importantly, what was he going to do about it?

Moss Point was the very last place he wanted to live. Still, as an architect, he couldn’t bring himself to decline inheritance of an antebellum home. He had options—selling to a colleague he trusted, paying for the restoration so he could sell it as a private residence, or even donating it as a historic landmark.

But then it hadn’t mattered because Adam had been served with the suit. Missy’s teenage daughter had fallen and cut her arm while trespassing on the property. Her friends had taken her to the emergency room at the county hospital. Ever efficient, they had given her a staph infection along with her stitches. Instead of controlling her child, Missy had elected to file suit against the owner. The new owner. Adam.

His local lawyer had not been optimistic, especially since the new owner had never laid eyes on the place. What judge or jury would find in his favor if he hadn’t bothered to even show up? How could he defend himself? From Portland, he couldn’t. If he was found to be at fault, then he could lose everything he owned and then some. And when it came out that he was an *architect*, it would all be over. His reputation in tatters for anyone who Googled his name. He would be let go from his job. Others would be scarce.

So he would have to be present for the trial. He would deal with Oakwood himself. Adam would do the one thing he’d managed to avoid for the past fifteen years, the thing he wanted to do least in this world. He would go back to Moss Point. All because he had the bad luck and bad timing to inherit the decrepit mess from his father’s side of the family. His old man had been gone thirty-two years and was still causing him trouble.

Adam finished his whiskey, and ice rattled as he set his glass by the bottle. He said a temporary farewell to Jack and returned him to the bar he’d custom designed. He pulled his smartphone from his pocket and set up a new project list titled “Move.”

\* \* \* \*

Within days, Adam stood in the office of the managing partner of Burke & Associates, one of the premiere architectural firms in Portland. He carefully placed the document he had tediously slaved over in front of his boss. *It needs to convey a sense of urgency and inevitability. It should make him understand that this isn't what I choose but rather that I have no choice. That I don't want to leave...and that I'll return as soon as possible, whenever that is.*

"What's this?" Jonathon Burke scanned the letter. "A resignation?"

"No, sir." Adam cleared his throat. "I need to take a leave of absence. Personal business."

Burke frowned. "Is this regarding your current legal situation?"

*Of course he knows.* Word had spread despite Adam's façade of normality. "Yes, sir."

"Nothing major, I hope."

Adam stiffened his spine and set his shoulders as if he was facing the Spanish Inquisition.

"It's related to a recent inheritance I received. I'm hoping it won't take long."

"The suit is here in Portland?"

"No, sir. It's in Georgia."

"Atlanta?"

"Moss Point."

"I'm not going to pretend to know where that is."

"It's on the coast, down from Savannah."

Burke sighed. "How long do you need to be there?"

Adam couldn't tell if his boss was more exasperated with the interrogation or the results. "I'm not sure, sir."

"Are we talking days? Weeks?"

"Possibly months." Adam doubted it would go that long, but he should prepare everyone for the worst.

"Well."

Adam dove into the most pressing issue. "Regarding status on the museum expansion project—"

His boss interrupted. "How soon do you need to leave?"

"I'm heading out Sunday. Driving." Not that Burke had asked.

"That's not much notice."

"I'm quite aware, sir. Unfortunately, it's unavoidable. I've looked at the situation from every angle, and this is the only option."

"That's unfortunate. I suppose it doesn't matter now, but last week the board voted to offer you an associate partnership in the firm."

Adam was caught off guard, and his heart sank. His knees weakened slightly. Burke was throwing him a bone—one just out of his reach. Thoughts of what could be, or rather could have been, flashed through his brain. He would've had the recognition he craved like air. *Albatross. Too bad Dad didn't sever his parental rights so I wasn't Nate's sole heir.*

Burke added insult to injury. "Until your legal matter is resolved, we have to withhold the offer. We can't risk a partner being the object of negative publicity."

"Why share this with me, sir?"

“Quite honestly, I’m providing you with incentive to expedite resolution of whatever you’re involved in. While someone else can take over the museum project, we sold the reconstruction of the riverfront microbrewery on your talent and skill. The client specifically requested you before the contracts were even signed. I’d be lying if I didn’t say this would have a negative impact on our business. I’m willing to fight dirty to keep you.”

The conversation tore Adam apart, but all he could see was himself, destitute and unemployed. There was no choice to make. He might lose the associate partnership, but that was better than losing everything he’d worked so hard for, most of all his good name.

## Chapter 2

Kate Braswell sat behind the wheel of the six-year-old silver Volvo station wagon she'd kept through her divorce, analyzing how she'd gotten herself into this fix and, more urgently, wondering how to get herself out of it. When she'd spoken to the realtor about the business of her dreams, this location had seemed perfect. Her coffeehouse in the corner unit of a single story building located in the heart of downtown Moss Point would draw local businesspeople and courthouse employees on their way to work and when they needed an afternoon pick-me-up. She'd named it Local Flavor, not only for the signature coffees and pastries she planned to offer but also for the art she would carry on consignment.

A few days earlier, Kate had gazed upon what would be her new baby with joy rising in her heart. She could envision the pale turquoise walls covered with paintings, could imagine colorful ceramics and sculptures in the teal display cases that spanned the glass, could already hear the purr of the commercial-grade coffee grinder, could smell the roasted beans, the aroma permeating everything cocooned within the walls of the shop. For the first time in years, Kate felt a dream of her own coalescing. Even the rain that had soaked the town off and on for a week hadn't sullied her mood.

When Kate lifted her eyes, she squinted and craned her neck at a weird angle to see through her rain-splattered windshield into her shop.

*No. It's a trick of the light. I must need glasses. This is not happening.*

Kate opened the door of her car and stepped into a light drizzle. Her keys, which now included one to the door of her maybe-hopefully-soon-to-be-coffeehouse, were in her hand. She carefully stepped around her car, eyes locked on the ceiling of her new place of business. She approached the plate glass window slowly then cautiously crept toward the door.

*No. I'm wrong. There's another explanation.*

She tried to convince herself of the possibility and shake her fear by holding her shoulders back as she unlocked the front door.

*I should be excited about this. This should be a happy moment. If I hadn't earned it myself, I would want someone to carry me over the threshold like a bride...*

The lights weren't on, but they didn't need to be. The space was filled with natural light even in the gloom—one of the reasons the location appealed to her. She could see perfectly, yet she couldn't believe what she saw.

Four of her ceiling tiles had brown Rorschach-esque splotches on them. She hadn't even moved in yet, and her roof was leaking. *I will not fall apart. I will not fall apart. Just because my shop is doesn't mean that I will.* Kate had thought she was on a lucky streak. She had obviously been wrong.

Kate's thought processes consumed her attention, and she didn't hear the car pull up. She turned to see her best friend, Ali, her husband, and their two kids climbing out of their minivan. Enjoying a lull in the rain, the girl and boy took off at a sprint toward the waterfront park, moving at different paces, each trying to run faster than their legs would allow. Kate remembered that sense of freedom and wished she could recapture it now. Ali waved at Kate through the glass and followed her progeny at a leisurely pace. When

Kate's family had moved to Moss Point, she and Ali had been high school freshmen. It was cliché, but they'd sat together at lunch the first day of class and had been best friends ever since. Smiling at Ali's back, she gladly acknowledged that reconnecting with her friend held as much appeal as the town itself. Unlike Kate's parents and ex, Ali never wanted more from Kate than herself and her happiness.

Chuck, Ali's so-called better half, let himself in to join Kate. He couldn't have been more supportive of her or of her friendship with his wife. The girls had double-dated for years and married their sweethearts. Ali and Chuck were happily married. Kate was now happily divorced.

Chuck approached Kate and held her in a side hug—something she imagined a brother or sister might do if she had one. He squeezed her shoulders and followed her eyes to the ceiling. “Another item for your to-do list?”

Leave it to Chuck to be the model of sanity.

“One more than I hoped, but yeah, it looks that way.”

“You're going to do this, Katie.” It felt right for him to have a nickname for her. “You're going to make it a success.”

“Lord, I hope so.”

With that, she ushered Chuck out of her shop, locked the door, and went to sit with her best friend on a damp bench by the river, keenly appreciative of the luxury of being enough.

\* \* \* \*

Adam was on his own. After weeks of working in dangerous conditions like Oakwood and the spire on the steeple of Moss Point's Episcopal Church three stories up, Eric had broken his leg from a relatively short fall while cleaning the gutters over his own front porch. Now Eric would be laid up for weeks with a compound fracture in his femur. Adam knew what had to be done, but he needed a Georgia general contractor's license to do the work himself.

Halfway to Salt Lake City, Adam's ass had already fused to the bucket seat in his truck. The “lane departure alert” feature—whatever that was exactly—had seemed superfluous when he bought the vehicle. Now he was beyond grateful for it. Between the stretches of highway and the audio study guide for his new license, he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't fall asleep at the wheel. Or on the wheel, for that matter.

Apparently Eric was slated to start on a project for Jake's friend and neighbor, someone who'd come to town after Adam graduated high school. It seemed the woman was on a tight deadline and that Adam might be the only one qualified and available to help her. Eric had convinced Jake to ask Adam as a special favor, but if Adam helped her, then he wasn't working on Oakwood. It was almost as if forces were conspiring to keep him in Moss Point before he even got there, after he'd left for what should have been for good. Just driving past Mount Hood had felt like passing through a shadow of doom.

Not only was he saying farewell, at least for the foreseeable future, to an associate partnership in a high profile urban firm, but he was also saying a temporary goodbye to his work as an architect. He was used to working with contractors, to showing them how to execute his concepts and plans. He respected them, highly, and often asked for their thoughts on where to run plumbing or wiring. But, by God, he'd busted his butt to complete the five-year architecture program at one of the best schools in the country. He

didn't go through all that not to use it. It was his passion, his reason for getting up in the morning. His relationships with women had been few, far between, and insignificant next to his career.

There was something else to say goodbye to. In Portland, if he wanted a date, he had a series of websites to find someone on. If it worked out, great. If not, no harm and no foul. It would be impossible to do that in Moss Point, where everyone knew what you had for breakfast before you even got to the office. That was another thing. No more office. That would be "job site." Good thing he'd sprung for the truck console with the filing compartment. That would be getting some use now. Since his apartment—no, Jake's apartment—would have to double as an office indefinitely.

Still, Adam discovered small things to be thankful for. He found a friend of a friend who was leasing a corporate apartment when he was down from Seattle and was willing to sublet Adam's condo instead. That was a painless transaction. Well, as painless as it could be to indefinitely leave your custom-designed living space for your brother's apartment in a converted Victorian near the marsh. It had great views of the gold and green sea grass and meandering tidal creeks that wove through it like scrollwork, but he'd much rather have his view of the Willamette River in downtown Portland.

He'd gotten on the road later than he wanted, and it was almost midnight when he stopped at a hotel outside of Salt Lake City. At least the In-N-Out Burger was still open, so he took advantage with a Double-Double, fries, and a shake. The messy, so-slippery-it's-hard-to-eat cheeseburger with its dressing-like secret sauce had the potential to be the highlight of his trip. With a full stomach and legs happily extended, he escaped into the relative comfort of a firm bed in an interstate chain hotel. One that didn't include breakfast.

Seventeen hours later, Adam pulled off into a truck stop in what felt like Nowhere, Wyoming. His mind and eyes had to take a break. He also needed coffee and to stretch his legs. The mountains were beautiful. *Jake and I will have to visit here sometime. We can stay at a ranch and learn how to ride horses.* But that would have to wait until after Adam settled this lawsuit and after Jake had returned from his fellowship. Adam had a mental itinerary planned for them before he'd cleared the Rocky Mountains.

The Midwest on I-80 from Cheyenne to the far side of Nebraska was one long field from hell. How could the athletes from the University of Nebraska be the Cornhuskers when there were soybeans as far as the eye could see? The audio study guide probably made it seem a thousand times worse than it was. That and the fact that he wanted to do a U-turn in the middle of the highway and go back to the condo he no longer lived in and the promotion he never had in the city he didn't want to leave because he didn't want to go back to Moss Point, Georgia.

Adam remembered that fight fifteen years ago as if it happened yesterday. His stomach churned, still as nauseous whenever he thought about it as he had been then.

*Get out! Get the hell out, you sonovabitch! I don't ever want to see that damn face of yours again.*

Lulu was oblivious to the irony of her name-calling. Even if she had been smart enough to realize she had insulted herself, odds were good that she was too drunk to notice. No wonder Adam's father had divorced her before Adam was a year old.

Adam followed her orders but not because of her. He couldn't have cared less about what she wanted, just as she couldn't have cared less about him. Cared less about feeding

him. Cared less about clothing him. Cared less about anything except her precious vodka. By the time he left, she'd been up to a liter a day. It was a miracle she hadn't burned the house down by passing out mid-cigarette with her two-pack-a-day habit. Adam missed Jake, but that was about it. He despised the community as a whole, the people who feigned ignorance of how Lulu mistreated him. The "good" people who were blind to his torn jeans and holey T-shirts. The classmates who looked down on him because he qualified for free lunches.

How Jake had flown beneath Lulu's radar, Adam would never know. Maybe Jake's father, Adam's stepdad, had run interference. Maybe his little brother dodged it because he was always out finding ways to get to Bristow Island. To this day, Adam had not told Jake the details of the fight.

By the time Adam crossed into his old home state, his stomach was queasy though he hadn't eaten in hours. His hands were clammy, and the cold sweat on his forehead pissed him off, but it was nothing compared to the fear. One of his New Age girlfriends had told him that F-E-A-R stood for False Evidence Appearing Real. While he didn't buy into all that "hokey stuff," as he called it, right now he would believe anything that would make this sick feeling go away.

*I'm safe. It's fine. I'm grown up now. I'm bigger and stronger than her. She can't hurt me.* Adam worked harder and harder to convince himself it was true, but he was pale and shaking when he reached his destination. *It's my blood sugar. It must be because I haven't eaten.* He couldn't admit the truth, even to himself. He didn't stop for dinner. He couldn't have kept anything down anyway. Ashamed, he slid into the rough sheets of the hotel bed and yearned for sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Look ahead." Kate addressed herself as she sorted files. "Focus on the future. It's not like you can go back. You can do this. Really, you can."

When had she developed the habit of speaking to herself aloud? Oh yeah. After she finally made a decision for herself and then did something about it. Was this a temporary symptom of stress, or did she need therapy? Since she couldn't afford it right now, that didn't really matter.

Changing into exercise gear and strapping on the running shoes she never ran in, Kate stepped out of her first floor apartment in the converted Victorian mansion. Her upstairs neighbor, Jake, trudged in through the back door with his chocolate Labrador retriever. The dog promptly ran to her, dancing around her until she bent to scratch his soft ears.

"Did your daddy play fetch with you?"

Jake cringed. "Do you have to be so sappy about it?"

"Oh. Sorry." She stared at the floor.

"Hey—I'm teasing. Sort of. I'm respecting your need for space now, but just because I'm stuck being your friend doesn't mean that you need to completely emasculate me."

"You know you're gorgeous. I'm sure you have women chasing you all over the place. Come to think of it, didn't I see a brunette doing the walk of shame across the front lawn a few days ago?"

His face didn't even flush. "I plead the Fifth."

"On the grounds that you might incriminate yourself." Kate crossed her arms. "How

long have you been seeing her?”

“Long enough.”

Kate laughed. “Good for you.”

Looking at her shoes, he changed topics. “I didn’t know you were a runner.”

“What? Oh, I’m a conscientious objector. I walk. Sometimes I even walk fast.”

Jake snorted. “Do you want to take Squirt with you?”

“How can you call a dog like that Squirt?”

“I stole it from *Finding Nemo*. That surfer dude turtle was my hero.”

Kate rolled her eyes as she made for the front door. “Thanks for the offer, Turtle-Guy, but I’m flying solo today. Oh—are we still on for a movie tonight?”

“Yeah. Celia’s coming, too.” Her downstairs neighbor and home healthcare nurse joined them when she wasn’t on overnight assignments.

“Great.” Kate escaped, uncomfortable with a single guy as cute as Jake, even if he *said* his feelings were platonic. She had been with Brett for so many years that she didn’t know how to interact with men as a single woman, regardless of how friendly they were or weren’t.

The blue wrap-around porch with its antique white wicker chairs, railings, and gingerbread trim were new enough to Kate to draw her smile. When she hit the sidewalk, she couldn’t resist looking back at the picture they made against the shrimp-colored wood. *Could they have picked a more appropriate shade with shrimp boats and the marina in sight down the street? No wonder Moss Point feels like home. Now it’s up to me to actually make it one.*

Optimism flowed through her veins as she turned on her iPhone. But the first song kicked off the soundtrack to the implosion of her marriage. She stumbled over a bump in the cement where roots of a three-hundred-year-old oak tree had battled for territory and won. Fumbling with the device, she fought to delete the song that had played on the radio as she packed the car and said goodbye to her entry-level job at the museum—after Brett had submitted a resignation on her behalf. Her employer was more than happy to accept the charitable donation that accompanied it. *Please, please, please let me be more competent with Local Flavor than with this stupid gadget.*

Three blocks later she passed what would soon be Local Flavor. Afraid to stop, afraid to have time to think about what she had risked by pursuing her dream, she kept moving until Mrs. O’Malley called to her from the white picket fence that held the promise of the best bed-and-breakfast in town.

“How long until you open, Kate?”

Kate hoped the panic she felt wasn’t broadcast across her body like a drive-in movie. “A month.”

“Well, hurry up. These tourists are driving me crazy asking for cappuccinos and lattes and other drinks I’ve never heard of. I’m not buying one of those fool machines, so I need someplace to send them.”

“Really?” Kate had hoped she would see customers from there but didn’t expect the demand to be as high as what the semi-retired businesswoman relayed.

“If one more camper begs me for an espresso when they get back from the island...”

Kate laughed. “I get the point.”

Her heart was more than willing to comply. Her mind just didn’t know how.

An hour later, Kate pressed her cell phone to her ear as she paced the pine hardwood

floors in her apartment and willed her best friend to answer. *Come on, Ali.*

A plastic box of hand-labeled manila files sat in a kitchen chair with some of its contents splayed across the round wooden table. She had painted the thrift store dining set white and sanded it to give it that distressed look, as though it had come straight from a farmhouse in the French countryside. She gripped the tattered notebook that felt like her anchor. Her master list was on page one, with all the corresponding sections separated with colored tabs. Kate grabbed the closest pen and scribbled five big black question marks next to “Construction.”

She noticed the pen bore her realtor’s name and swore. If only Kate could erase her signature from the documents she’d signed last week. Maybe the bank would lose them. But the realtor would have to lose them, too.

“Hey, Kate. What’s up?”

“*Ericbrokehisleg.*” The garbled words exploded out of Kate’s mouth.

“Wait—slow down. I can’t understand you.” Then a muffled, aggravated, “Kids, be quiet!”

Kate clearly enunciated, “Eric. Broke. His. Leg.”

“Eric Carter?”

Kate’s exasperation rang in her voice. “Yes, Eric Carter. His sister just posted it on Facebook. Apparently he’s at the hospital in Savannah. He’s got to have surgery, and she says they’re putting in a rod and some pins. He’ll be in a wheelchair for at least a few weeks.”

Kate had been approved for and signed the small business loan. Then she’d signed the lease. Then she’d read about Eric’s accident on Facebook. Then she knew she was toast.

Kate didn’t have a contingency plan. How could she have known that she would need one?

“Oh, no! That’s horrible.”

“No, *I’m* horrible. I know it’s selfish, but I need a new contractor. Builder. Somebody. Oh, I don’t even know the difference.” Local Flavor formed the foundation of Kate’s strategy. Right now her plans were shot. “I don’t even know what I don’t know.”

“You’re pacing, aren’t you?” Ali knew her so well.

Kate begrudgingly answered, “Yes. How can I think about myself at a time like this? I’m awful.”

“No,” Ali stated firmly. “You are not a bad person. You’re just in a bind of your own.”

“I’ll have to bring in someone from Savannah. They’ll have to get a place to stay here or drive back and forth every day. You know they’ll bill for that, and I have no idea how I can afford it. What if they aren’t even on-site to supervise? All sorts of things have to be approved by the building inspector before I can open. Someone’s got to coordinate all of it.”

“You can’t panic. Panicking is not in the plan.”

“Neither was Eric’s accident. I can’t go back to Atlanta and move in with Mom and Dad. I will *not* ask them or Brett for help right now. None of them think I can make it on my own. I won’t give them the satisfaction of telling me ‘I told you so.’”

“When is your first payment due on your loan?”

Kate didn’t need to consult a calendar. “Eight weeks. Renovations were supposed to

take three. There's not that much that has to be done to convert the space into a coffeehouse, but Eric was going to build all the shelving and displays himself."

"I'm sure the artists will understand the delay."

Kate's voice flattened. "That's not the problem. The Health Department won't let me do food prep while we're under construction. Then there are the sales from the art itself. I can't open unless work is completed on both sides of the counter. There are also the supplies—ceramic coffee mugs, paper cups with plastic lids, stirrers, even the coffee itself—coming in three weeks so I'll be ready to open in four."

Alison quieted, obviously not sure of the right thing to say—if there was a right thing to say. She always found a silver lining, and she supported Kate as enthusiastically as they had led cheers at Moss Point High School football games. Now Ali was practically speechless. "What are you going to do?"

After a deep breath, Kate pronounced her final judgment. "I have no idea, Ali. I'm screwed."

### Chapter 3

“I hate leaving you like this...” Jake started.

“We’re good. Seriously,” said Kate. She scratched Squirt’s chin as they stood in the doorway of her apartment. Whenever Jake could take the Lab with him, his eighty-pound shadow was there. The ship in Australia was not one of those places.

“I know it’s a lot of work since he’ll need to be walked. But you can play fetch in the backyard to exercise him, too.”

“We’ve been over this. It’s best for him, better than your grandparents keeping him in their yard. He’ll be missing you already, and taking him out of his home and away from people so much of the time would make it even harder. Squirt and I get along great. Besides, I’ll appreciate the company.” She rubbed his furry head, and Squirt licked her hand. “See? He understands. Don’t you, boy?”

Jake’s head tilted down on his six-foot-four frame, his eyes focused on hers, doing his best to amplify the importance of the information. “The vet’s number is on a magnet on the refrigerator. If there’s an emergency, he’ll see you as a walk-in.”

“I already programmed it in my phone. It’s on speed dial, just in case.”

“He needs a bath if he gets in the marsh.”

Kate’s face contorted into a mask of repulsion. “I’ll clean him up. Believe me, that won’t be a problem.” She laughed.

“If he’s too much work—”

“Then I’ll do you like you said and bug your brother.” Though she would never do that. She was more grateful for Jake’s friendship than she could say. Babysitting Squirt paled in comparison.

Jake put his hands on his hips and blew his dark blond bangs out of his eyes. It was odd that they and their housemate, Celia, had bonded so quickly in the short time they had been neighbors. “Thanks, Kate. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Somehow I suspect you’ll find a *sheila* or two to keep you busy. Of course, you may be too wrapped up in research to miss us.” Kate’s Aussie lingo was courtesy of Outback Steakhouse, not because she’d actually been to Australia. She’d wanted to go there on vacation, but Brett’s priorities always took precedent. Just like her father’s. Status trumped happiness. Always.

“Kate, I almost forgot. You know who my brother is, right?”

“Beyond the name Adam? Not a clue.”

“He’s your builder.” Jake grinned.

“What!” Kate jumped to throw her arms around his neck, and he bent instinctively. She let go and glared at him. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she accused.

“Actually, I’m still talking him into it, so I didn’t want to get your hopes up. You’ll need to close the deal.”

“Not a problem. I’ll do whatever it takes.” She believed it.

A horn honked, and they knew their time was up. Jake gave her a quick hug then bent to one knee, wrapping Squirt in his arms and leveling threats against him if he pissed in his keeper’s apartment. She opened the front door and waved to Jake’s boss, who had insisted on driving him to the airport in Savannah. Then Jake’s arm was around her waist,

and he delivered a peck to her cheek. “See ya, Kate.” He grinned as he stepped away through the rain.

She stood on the wide wooden porch, Squirt stoically by her side, and watched his master descend the stairs and climb into the waiting Suburban.

“Come on, Squirt. Let’s fix some lunch for me and grab you a bone.”

\* \* \* \*

That afternoon, Kate bent over at her hips gathering the stack of mail she’d just dropped in the hallway while trying to unlock her apartment. It was mostly junk, but since she was collecting Jake’s along with her own, there was twice as much scattered on the floor. She focused her attention on gathering the pile of slick cards and envelopes. So much so that she didn’t hear the front door open or close.

“Hello?”

Kate snapped up and screamed, mail flying in every direction. She wore her old Levi’s, a faded pink Powerpuff Girls T-shirt, and black Converse hi-tops. Her blond ponytail flew as she spun around. The owner of that male voice was laughing—at her.

“You live here?” he asked, still chuckling.

“Yeah,” she responded. As she recovered, her eyes began to catalog the man before her. Even as a new resident, she suspected not enough strangers came through Moss Point to forget one like this. He was too rugged to be handsome. That compact body had broad shoulders and muscles everywhere. But that wasn’t what made her speechless. His eyes, those bright blue, sparkling eyes, seemed to read Kate to the point of her own discomfort. Eyes that looked even bluer next to the scruffy chestnut hair peeking out from under a wet green ball cap. Hair that she wanted to run her fingers through as he held her with those strong hands and laid her down—

Kate flashed a smile and tried to remain calm. For heaven’s sake, her hands were shaking. *This is ridiculous. I’m overreacting. No—I know what it is. Adrenaline, it’s just adrenaline. You know, like fight or flight. He startled me, and now I want to run and hide under the chenille covers of my wrought-iron bed. He’s just a guy. I swore them off. Breathe.*

“I said are you Kate?”

The stranger looked at her as if she was dense or something. No wonder as she hadn’t even heard him the first time. He wasn’t laughing anymore.

“Oh. Yeah. I’m Kate.” Surely her brain would start functioning any second now. What was her problem anyway? She had just gotten out from under Brett. She wanted a man like she wanted the plague. Didn’t she? Yet here she was, drooling like a teenager. Worse yet, like Squirt. “Can I help you with something?”

“Do you have the key to my apartment?”

“Your apartment?”

“Upstairs. I’m Adam, Jake’s brother.”

*Oh boy. This is not good.* How was she supposed to function with her hormones running out of control? Then it no longer mattered because they came to a grinding halt.

“You’re him,” she declared.

“Yeah. I’m him.”

She didn’t catch the exasperation in his voice. “No, you’re *him*.”

“I’m who?” His brows furrowed, and he took half a step backward. He looked at her

warily, but she was too excited to care.

She stepped forward, staring up at him in wonder and awe. “My builder. You’re my builder.”

He looked down at her, then around the foyer. “Uh, is the landlord here?”

She ignored his reaction. “That doesn’t matter. I’ve got the key. Oh, this is wonderful!” She clapped her hands with joy. She laughed, and the man looked that much cuter in his discomfort. “No, you don’t understand. You can replace Eric, and you’re going to be my neighbor. This is so great. Maybe we can catch up on the project schedule after all. I mean, we can work here at night, going over plans and doing whatever can be done off-site—”

Adam interrupted her, his tone curt, “Kate, there’s obviously been a misunderstanding. I am not, nor will I be, your builder.”

“But Jake said...”

“Jake was wrong. I spent the last four days trapped in my truck and cheap motel rooms. I listened to thirty hours of the driest audiobooks in the world and passed another ten kicking myself for not activating satellite radio. Except for the four hours I spent in a hard plastic chair surrounded by concrete walls in a waiting room so I could get my contractor’s license, I have been looking at soybeans. Then I had the pleasure of spending two hours on the interstate in the pouring rain. The last thing I want to do right now is think about work. I am tired, and I want to sit comfortably, in peace, somewhere other than my truck.”

Kate stuffed her hands in the front pockets of her well-worn jeans and offered a sympathetic, “Of course you do.”

Oh dear. It seemed Adam was not responding well to her positive thinking. It looked as though her new builder—she maintained her upbeat outlook—was a little hesitant to acknowledge his role. If she didn’t manage this just right, it could have disaster written all over it.

He repeated, “Would you get me the key to my brother’s apartment?”

Visions of bankruptcy court and her parents’ house flashed in her head. Retreat seemed to be the wisest option. Quietly and carefully, she turned, sidestepping the mail and disappearing into her home. She returned as he requested, turtle key chain in hand. Silently, she passed it to him and left again. She waited until he was gone to deal with the mess on the floor. If only she could sort out her life as easily as she did the mail.

Kate’s positive attitude obviously had been over the top. She had no extra money to offer him an incentive even if she wanted to. Then it hit her. They said the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach. Maybe that would be true for business relationships, too. Clinging to a ray of hope, she headed for her kitchen and pulled out the ingredients for the chocolate chip cookie recipe she knew by heart.

She paced her small apartment while they baked. Visions of pages from her notebook drifted through her mind, but she refused to let herself pick it up. Instead, she checked the cookies every five minutes until the timer buzzed.

While they were still warm, she transferred them to a plain white dinner plate, the most testosterone-laden dishware she had, and covered them in clear plastic wrap. She pulled out her collection of notecards from her desk. Selecting a monogrammed one with a blank interior, she opened it and wrote two words inside. Kate placed it in the envelope and put it on top of the cookies.

Feeling a little like an idiot, Kate tiptoed up the house's creaky old stairs. Jake's—no, Adam's—apartment sat directly above hers. She heard nothing through the door, though that wasn't unusual unless the TV volume was turned up. She gently slid the plate onto the floor, knocked three times, and then crept away as stealthily as she'd come. Satisfied she'd done all she could do for now, Kate had to do what she hated: sit back and wait.

Surely he wouldn't reject her peace offering. Heaven help her if he did.

\* \* \* \*

Adam could think of only one person who'd be knocking on his door, and she was the last person he wanted to see. *Kate must not like to take "no" for an answer.* Prepared for the worst, he yanked the door open to nothing. He peered out into the hall, looking both directions and not seeing a soul.

Then he smelled them. Cookies. Was a neighbor baking? He glanced down as he turned to shut the door and saw the plate and card. Again, one person came to mind. *What's she up to?* He was afraid to speculate. He hadn't eaten in hours, and the cookies were there, so he picked them up and carried them inside to the bar at the galley kitchen.

He opened the envelope and saw the name "Kate Braswell" monogrammed in a simple decorative font on the card. Navy on white. His artistic sensibilities appreciated the impression, classy without being stuffy. She hadn't come across that way. Maybe the stationery was a gift. He opened it and read, "I'm sorry."

*She should be.* She'd all but cornered him when she discovered who he was. Shoot, he hadn't even had a chance to get his bags out of the truck. He felt human now that he'd showered and changed—while she was baking cookies, obviously. He unwrapped them, and their aroma filled the apartment. His stomach growled, and he had a thought. Milk. Jake had been gone only a day. Maybe, just maybe, there was some left in the fridge. Adam rounded the counter and opened the door to a half-full gallon jug of the stuff that didn't expire for another week. He said thank you to his brother.

After pouring a short glass, he took his first bite and gave thanks for Kate as well. She might be a little high-strung, not ideal for a neighbor, but man, could she bake. The warm cookies were golden and lightly crisped. How did she do that? He could have sworn he tasted a hint of honest-to-god butter melting into the gooey semi-sweet chocolate chips. Chopped nuts, he tasted those, too. He finished the cookie and took a long swig of the milk. *Apology accepted.*

Maybe he needed to reexamine his perspective on Kate. Adam thought back on the shock in her eyes when he'd greeted her in the foyer. It was endearing, and her eventual smile made it worth wading through her initial confusion. If he wasn't wrong, she appreciated what she saw, too, which, considering he looked like hell after driving cross-country, really said something. Maybe he could salvage this situation after all.

The next morning, Adam got a late start thanks to his jet lag. He might not have flown east this time, but driving took a different kind of toll on his body. It didn't matter. Adam needed to see Oakwood, to have an understanding of what needed to be done. To bring himself closer to resolving this lawsuit and going home to Oregon.

Adam ate a bowl of Jake's chocolate-flavored kids' cereal and managed to put together a pitiful tasting cup of coffee in a travel mug before heading out mid-morning. Locking up Jake's apartment, he headed through the drizzle to climb in his silver pickup

parked on the side street. He headed toward the interstate to find a gas station. While Adam filled up his tank, he poured out his excuse for coffee and refilled his mug with the contents of the freshly brewed pot in the convenience store, stirring in two sugars and three packets of creamer.

With the hope of feeling more human than zombie, he downed a hefty swallow of his concoction and checked out with the clerk, who didn't look as if she was old enough to drive. Once he resettled his drink in his cup holder and himself under his seatbelt, he turned his truck back toward Moss Point. About halfway in, Adam hung a right onto Jones Creek Road, which ran along the coastline tracing the edges of the marsh. One half mile past its namesake, he hit his turn signal.

Adam had made this drive so many times in high school that he could still do it on autopilot. The five-foot, rectangular tabby columns made of oyster shell and limestone marked the entrance as they had for the last one hundred eighty-something years. The warped and rusty wrought-iron gates mirrored those in Adam's memory. He had a surreal moment when he realized the "No Trespassing" signs no longer applied to him because they belonged to him.

The dirt drive was overgrown from the bottom with grass, from the sides with blackberry bushes, and from the top with moss draped heavily like seaweed from the canopy of water oaks. Adam navigated it slowly, dodging the worst of it to protect the shiny paint of his relatively new truck. He'd managed to keep it intact for almost a year and had every intention of returning it to Oregon in the same condition it was in when he left, with the exception of an additional six thousand miles on his odometer. That couldn't be helped.

Adam's attention was so engaged in the obstacle course of an entrance that it was a relief to reach the circular drive at the end. Maybe he should have prepared himself better for this moment, coming to Oakwood after all these years. He reached for the pack of gum he'd forgotten to buy at the convenience store. The rain had morphed into a light drizzle, so he didn't bother to pull on the hood of his forest-green parka. Instead, he placed his faith in his matching Oregon Ducks ball cap, which was fraying around the edges and focused his attention on the uneven ground. Shutting the door, he turned to face his albatross in all its glory.

Adam shut down his memories to look through ten-foot tall shrubs, analyzing Oakwood from bottom to top. The brick and mortar ground-level basement was weatherworn and crumbling in a few places. That was only aesthetics. A couple of inches missing from the two-and-a-half-foot thick wall was structurally irrelevant. The front porch that sagged on its base was another story. Over half of the boards were missing, and those that weren't were warped by time and the elements. Four massive round columns supported the portico, which, if marble, could have easily passed for those of a Greek temple. These giants were covered in now dingy white plaster, which was cracked and had fallen away in places, revealing their brick cores. Even when Oakwood was built, few artisans had the technical expertise to form the simple tapered pillars from rectangular blocks. He would rather restore the originals than replace them with some formed from fiberglass and shipped from a factory. The very thought repulsed him.

Eric had hauled off the wooden palette that kids had propped against the front of the house as a makeshift ladder. Spiders reigned in the basement, but he had nailed plywood to the original window frames to secure that level anyway. Even as a teenager, Adam had

recognized the decrepit stairs that connected the ground floor to the main level as hazardous. He wondered about the state of the interior but wasn't going to undo Eric's work to satisfy an illogical sense of curiosity, especially in the rain and without supplies.

The front windows and doors on the porch had been barricaded in much the same manner as those on the above-ground basement. Adam circled the structure, checking the left and right brick wings that created an H-shape off the plaster facade of the wide center hall. Both were in the tight grasp of spindly fingers of vines. A few patches of Spanish moss were draped from the less secure second-story windows, windows that should have been protected by their decrepit wooden shutters hanging askew. Through the missing slats, he could barely distinguish grayed strips of plywood that had been nailed horizontally on the inside of the frames. Against his will, Adam's eyes wandered to the back corner, to the kitchen. *If I hadn't caught Missy in there, she might have left me alone. But she chose to screw that guy, and now she's trying to screw me.*

The rain fell harder, and Adam abandoned his survey. He heaved himself back into his truck, steeped in uselessness. Before Eric's accident, the builder had bombarded every possible entry point with more nails than your average adolescent had the strength to pry out. Adam couldn't have sealed the place up better himself. *If it was boarded up like this when I was a teenager, I'd have driven the extra half-hour to the nearest beach instead of trying to get in.*

With his lawyer tied up in court until Tuesday, Adam couldn't make any progress on the lawsuit for the next few days. He had left his job and his home to come back to Moss Point, only to be relegated to impotence. There was absolutely nothing for him to do right now.

Unless he decided to help Kate.

Even if he didn't take on her project, the rote motions of evaluating her space might occupy his mind. He preferred that to hiding out in Jake's apartment for the next few days, as he certainly wasn't going out to socialize. He could spend the weekend watching TV in Jake's recliner, then explore his temporary distraction on Monday. *I wouldn't mind seeing Kate again. I wonder what she's like when she's not rattled?*

Adam sent an email to Eric's work address. Someone had to be checking it. Surely the team wouldn't have a problem with Adam picking up where Eric left off.

\* \* \* \*

Kate spent the weekend playing with Squirt and tempting Adam. Between walks around town and a trip to Savannah for Squirt to visit a "real" no-leash dog park, she slid photos of her unfinished shop under Adam's door. She left snicker doodles and blond brownies outside his apartment. Colored index cards read, "Aren't you just a little curious?" and "Will you take a peek?"

Her subversive tactics must have worked because he agreed to, as he put it, "just look it over as a courtesy."

On Monday morning, Kate arrived at her shop a half-hour before they were supposed to meet. She'd opted to wear a pale yellow Tahari suit left over from her high society days, a pair of not-too-high heels, and full makeup to highlight her almond-shaped green eyes. Her straight blond hair was in its usual ponytail, though today it was secured elegantly at the nape of her neck. She considered her understated diamond jewelry from Tiffany's to be the perfect finishing touch. The forecasted storms had rain falling in

sheets, and she'd elected to use an umbrella. She had her notebook, her favorite black gel ink pen, her paint swatches, and a bad case of nerves.

Adam strolled in, oblivious to the weather—that happened much like receiving a vaccine against rain when you moved to the Pacific Northwest—at ten o'clock, right on time.

“Good morning.” Kate managed a chipper yet professional tone as she opened the door for him. She would be his dream client today.

“Morning. Thanks.” Adam's worn plaid shirt, Levi's, and work boots signaled his readiness to take on the job—or so she hoped. He carried an armful of rolled-up blueprints and a travel mug she assumed held coffee. He walked to the counter and set everything down. Then he faced her and shuffled his feet, eyes downcast.

“Listen, about the other day...”

“You were right. I was out of line.”

That had him raising his head. “Thanks for the cookies. They were really good.”

“You're welcome,” she said with a casualness that masked her fear that he still might reject her as a client. “Can we start over?”

“Sure.” He extended his hand. “Adam Moultrie.” Kate's smile turned to shock. Then shock to horror. She'd forgotten every bit of manners she'd ever been taught.

“Oh, hell no!” came out of her mouth before she could think.

Tales of Adam Moultrie's misdeeds were legendary in Moss Point. From getting drunk before school—didn't they find him passed out on the baseball field one morning?—to throwing desks and playing with knives in class to leaving his prom date at a party at Oakwood, he defined “bad boy.” She heard he rode his buddy's motorcycle through the halls of the Moss Point High, and even though people had sworn they personally witnessed it, the allegation seemed so absurd that she couldn't bring herself to believe it was true. People still placed bets on whether he was dead or in prison somewhere. There was no way she would trust her dream, her livelihood, and therefore her life to this icon of irresponsibility. No, this was not acceptable. It was worse than having no builder at all.

### **Author's Note**

Thank you for reading the first three chapters of **Not Quite Home**.

The book is available at [www.lsbooks.com](http://www.lsbooks.com) for [pre-order with a 20% discount](#) until its release on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

It also will be available at major retailers, such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and iBooks.

## **About Kristine Bria**

Kristine Bria was the annoying teacher's pet who made straight As. That good little girl grew up to marry a very bad boy. They ride his motorcycle and drive their boat as fast as they can. She likes to read romance and watch spy movies. Her heroes and heroines won't leave her alone until she tells their stories of falling in love. The scenes play like movies in her mind so she writes what she sees whether it's lovers' quarrels, or hot sex. Is that crazy? Tell her at [www.KristineBria.com](http://www.KristineBria.com).