

ONE

Riley Harrison sat in the booth, her hands framing the cup of coffee she'd been nursing for the past half-hour. It might've been a mistake sitting by the window. She'd taken this seat so she could keep an eye on her car, out in the parking lot of the first coffee shop she'd spotted when getting off the interstate. But that also meant she had a clear view of all that snow and ice out there. Driving on it had been bad enough.

Shivering, Riley turned away from the window. In the booth directly across from hers sat a man who'd wolfed down a meal that would've sustained her for days. Fascinated—and wondering where he put it—she'd sneaked the occasional glance in his direction.

He pushed his empty plate away and leaned back, plaid shirt pulling taut across a broad chest and firm midsection. Then he looked over, and gave Riley a white-toothed smile that peeked out from the stubbly growth of a short brown beard. Caught staring, Riley dropped her eyes to her cup, scolding herself for feeling so flustered. But when he'd looked directly at her, she'd almost forgotten about the ice and snow outside.

Almost.

She sighed. There was no more putting it off. Her grandmother was expecting her. It was time to make the last leg of her trip. Picking up the new red parka that rested beside her in the booth, she headed for the cash register near the front door.

After handing her money to the woman at the register, Riley slipped her arms into the parka.

"You look familiar," the cashier said as she pulled change from the till. "Are you from around here?"

"No, just visiting," Riley told her.

The woman stared for a moment, then a broad smile played across her features.

"Omigod. Riley Renee Harrison—is it really you? It *is* you."

Eyebrows arching in surprise, Riley took her change. She hadn't been back to Minnesota in several years. The woman had an open, friendly face with a scattering of freckles across an upturned nose, but there was nothing familiar about her. Or... was there?

Something tugged at the back of Riley's mind, a memory that wanted to surface but was hidden so far back in the shadows of her subconscious that it hadn't seen the light in many years. *Freckles... suntan lotion...*

She was still struggling with elusive recollection when the cashier came out from behind the counter and, to Riley's utter astonishment, threw her arms around her. Caught off guard, Riley could only endure the embrace with open-mouthed astonishment, aware that the man from the booth had stepped up behind her and was watching them with a bemused expression.

When she was at last released, Riley almost stumbled backwards.

"How long has it been?" the woman asked enthusiastically, looking ready to lunge at Riley again.

Unable to hide her bewilderment, Riley could only mumble, "Um... I'm not sure."

The woman's cheeriness wavered. "You don't remember me, do you? It's *me*—Lauren Ross. Well, it was Lauren Winslow way back when we used to hang out together.

That's been, what... fifteen years? No, longer than that, because I was twelve when my family moved here, and you were staying with your grandparents for the summer."

"L-lauren?" Riley stammered. The old memory peeked out from the dim shadows. *Suntan lotion... giggling phone conversations... deep, meaningful discussions about the latest pop star...* "I do remember you. Wow. This is incredible."

"It sure is. I thought—wait a minute. Aaron, let me ring that up for you, we might be a minute here."

"I'm in no hurry." The man behind Riley spoke in a low rumble of a voice, but he approached the counter and handed over his bill.

Still struggling to process this new information, Riley stepped to one side.

It'd been during the summer of her twelfth year that she'd come for her annual visit to her grandparents' lakeside resort, and had made friends with a skinny girl named Lauren. They'd spent a busy August splashing in the clear green water of the lake, trolling the sand for shells, whispering their innocent secrets and vowing to write to each other over the winter months. Their friendship had lasted through three summers, halted prematurely when Riley's visits to Lake Okoboji had ended. When she was fifteen Riley's parents had divorced, at which time she'd channeled her hurt and confusion into full-scale rebellion. She'd stopped spending her summer months with her grandparents, and she'd all but forgotten Lauren, her friend in Minnesota.

Now here was Lauren—older, as was Riley, but still freckle-faced and cheerful, her smile revealing the lively teenager she'd once been.

After paying his bill, the man at the counter gave Riley a friendly smile and moved aside, but seemed in no hurry to leave the coffee shop.

Turning again to Riley, Lauren pelted her with questions. "Are you still in Texas?"

"Yes. I'm in Dallas now."

"What do you do there?"

"I'm in web design."

"Cool. Married?"

"Nope. Never been."

Almost two decades fell away as they slipped easily into the verbal shorthand of those long-ago summers.

"I was, but not any more. I've been divorced for a couple of years now."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Riley said.

Lauren shrugged. "I'm better off without him, and I have two great kids. Are you here to visit your grandmother?"

Riley told her that she was. "I'll only be here for a week," she added. "But it's been a few years since I've been back, and I'm not sure I remember the way. What I *do* remember is how easy it is to get lost on these roads."

"*That* hasn't changed. Here, I'll write down the directions for you."

But before Lauren could reach for a pen, the bearded man spoke up. "I'm headed in that direction. Follow me, Red—I'll take you right to it."

Riley winced. As a kid she'd endured the teasing that invariably befell redheads, but as she'd grown older her hair had deepened to a more acceptable auburn, and she'd hoped

the nickname was behind her. Apparently not, and she almost ran her tongue over her teeth to see if the braces had returned as well.

Eyeing him, she asked, "You know the way to my grandmother's house?"

"If you're talking about Bette Harrison, sure I do." His smile was slightly crooked, curving up more on one side than the other, his teeth straight and white. The stubble of beard and longish hair, combined with a flannel shirt beneath a casually opened jacket, gave him an untamed look that put Riley's city-girl guard up.

"All I need are directions," she insisted.

"This'll be easier." He was already opening the door, his crooked grin widening as though enjoying her discomfort.

Seeing her hesitation, Lauren spoke up. "It's okay, Riley, you can trust Aaron Wolfe. I'll vouch for him."

And so Riley's fate was sealed, though she wondered who would vouch for Lauren. She hadn't seen this woman since they were kids, yet here she was sending Riley off with a man who looked, as he towered in the open doorway letting all the cold air in, like someone Riley would otherwise have crossed the street to avoid. Seeing no way to gracefully refuse, Riley put her change in her pocket and stepped through the doorway.

Lauren called out, "I'll call you later at your grandmother's house. We have lots of catching up to do while you're home."

Home. Riley almost turned around to correct her—this wasn't home, this was a visit—then thought, what the hell.

On the way to her car Riley's impractical shoes slid out from under her. Arms pinwheeling, she yelped, "Whoa!" as she struggled to stay upright. She might have fallen, but Aaron Wolfe grabbed her around the waist, his arm as solid as an oak branch through her parka.

"Careful," he said, and held her tight.

"I'm okay," she gasped. She wanted to shake him off and tell him she could manage. She didn't need his help, didn't need anyone's help. She'd been doing things on her own for a long time. But his grip, for the moment, was welcome. With no other choice than to cling to him, Riley looked up into his face, and when he grinned something inside her tumbled out of her control.

Oh, my. What big teeth he had.

"You'll want to wear better shoes while you're here," he said. "Just for a week, is it?"

"That's right." Her words sounded shaky, which annoyed her, so she cleared her throat and added, more forcefully, "One week."

"That's too bad. That you're leaving so soon, I mean."

He continued to hold her close, and Riley had the distinct impression that he found her amusing. Sure, it was easy for him to laugh at the city girl who couldn't walk on ice. She wanted to push him away, but was afraid that if she did she would suffer the even greater indignity of landing on her butt.

He helped her the rest of the way to her car, then made sure she was safely inside before releasing her.

"Thanks," she muttered, reaching for her seatbelt.

"I'm parked right over there," he said. "Follow me. I promise to go nice and slow."

The way he looked at her made Riley's face flame. There had been something decidedly suggestive in that remark, but she only nodded and put her key in the ignition.

Determined to make the best of the situation, Riley dutifully followed him from the parking lot. His vehicle was a late model SUV, streaked with slush from the salted roads, an environmental gas-hog that was undoubtedly practical for winters in the Midwest. When the SUV turned on a road that was not clearly marked and held no remnant of familiarity, she had to admit, if only to herself, that she wouldn't have chosen this route on her own. If Aaron Wolfe really did know his way around this heavily wooded area, it was probably a good thing she'd allowed him to lead the way. Not that she'd ever tell *him* that. She still sort of resented the way he'd moved right in on her conversation with Lauren.

But then she thought again about his strong arm, and the way he'd held her even after she'd regained her balance. Shaking her head, Riley forced away the feelings that brief contact had brought about. She was here to see her grandmother. This was not the time to be having unsettling thoughts about some guy who looked as though he hadn't shaved in a month.

After all, she was only going to be here for a week.

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Aaron kept a watchful eye on the car in his rearview mirror as he drove the familiar roads around the west side of the lake. Running a hand across his chin, he wished now he'd

shaved, but he was just getting back from a stay at his cabin up north, and of course he'd had no idea he'd be running into a pretty little redhead almost immediately upon his return.

"Riley." He said the name, liking the way it felt on his tongue. It was an interesting name for a woman, and somehow it suited her. She'd shown a flash of spirit when he'd let his arm creep a little too familiarly around her waist, and he chuckled at the memory. Every muscle in her little body had tensed, coiling as tightly as a spring, but she hadn't pushed him away and he'd been hard-pressed not to laugh out loud. He'd felt a tantalizing hint of womanly softness beneath the bulky clothing, which made him speculate as to what other hidden wonders might be waiting to be revealed.

This could be interesting. He'd been way too bogged down with business these past couple of years, with getting his restaurant up and running efficiently again after a near-bankruptcy. Since he'd taken it over, he'd been so wrapped up in work that he'd mostly neglected his social life.

Maybe it was time to relax and have some fun. Riley Harrison looked like she could be fun, and the best part was he didn't have to worry about a couple of casual dates turning into anything serious, which was the last thing he wanted.

After all, she was only going to be here for a week.

*A-a-a-w-o-o-o-o.*