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Henry Allen Taylor sat straight-backed in his chair at the outdoor café while the early afternoon London traffic swished across his vision in a blur. He closed his eyes. Sweat dotted his neck and a storm churned in his gut. If he could be anywhere but here ...

He pried open his eyelids, turned his attention to his lunch date. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

She pressed her lips together.

The fish and chips he'd consumed for lunch grappled in his belly like a couple of hot-tempered rugby players.

"Yes." She lifted her chin, eyes misty. "This isn't easy for me, Henry. We've been friends since childhood. I didn't mean to hurt you."

A perfect way to celebrate May Day. After all this time together, his girlfriend, Charlotte Baker, had decided it was time for them to part ways. Did he get a vote?

He took a drink of his water, then placed the glass back in the moisture ring it had left on the table. Everything had its place, and Charlotte had made it clear that her place was not with him.

"Look, Henry, I'm leaving tomorrow on holiday. When I get back we can—"

"Let's not prolong this. We made sense. Or I thought we did. People change. Right?"

"We did make sense. That's the problem."

Another skirmish circled through his insides.

"I just, well ..." Charlotte twirled the diamond tennis bracelet he'd given her for Christmas in circles around her wrist. "Everything between us worked like clockwork. But it's like you're holding a piece of yourself back from me. From everyone. After college After your accident ..." She hesitated. "I know that was hard for you. For all of us. But these past few months, I've wondered if you were all in. Or were you just playing it safe?"

All in? They'd discussed marriage. Family. A future. He'd pledge to support her in everything. He placed both hands on the table, gripped them together. "Playing it safe? What does that even mean?"

She reached a hand across the table and curled her fingers over his. "Where's that daring guy I was friends with back in uni? The risk taker. The one who wouldn't hesitate to jump at a new adventure?"

"That guy ..." He swallowed hard. "That guy grew up. Learned his lesson. And if it's adventure you want, we'll book a cruise."

She yanked back her hand as if scorched by a flame. "I'm not talking about a vacation. I'm saying I don't know what's going on inside here." She pointed to his chest. "What do you really want? Do you want to marry me because we've known each other for years? Is the plan for us to have two-point-five children, send them to private school, and holiday off the coast of France every summer?"

He lowered his hands beneath the table, stretched his fingers out over his knees, and squeezed.

"I care for you, Henry. I always will. I don't want you to settle just because we make sense." Her breath hitched before she added, "And I don't want to settle either."

Fire clawed across his chest. He reached for his glass, took another drink. The tepid liquid trickled down his throat before he replaced the cup in the ring.

"God has someone for you, Henry. Someone who fits into that well-organized box you've built around your heart. Someone who won't rock the boat." Charlotte blinked back tears as she pulled her purse off the back of the chair and withdrew her wallet. "But it's not me."

He pressed a hand over the ticket sitting next to his plate. "I've never let you pay. I'm not going to start now."

She nodded, releasing her wallet back into her purse before looping the gold chain strap over her shoulder.

"I need to get back to the office." He laid the payment on the table, pulled himself to his feet. "I wish you well, Charlotte."

She lifted her chin, face drawn. "I wish you well too."

After buttoning his suit jacket, he swiped his briefcase off the ground, strode to the curb, and threw his arm up to hail a taxi. Several long, torturous seconds passed before a black cab pulled up to the curb. He yanked open the door and sank into the back seat.

"Where to?" The cabbie eyed him from the rearview mirror.

Going home, brewing a cup of tea, and sequestering himself in his library for the rest of his life sounded like a stellar idea.

"St. Martin's." Instead, he'd go to the office and lick his wounds.

Charlotte had been a childhood friend, and in college, they'd dated. After the accident, when he'd come home from the hospital, broken and withdrawn, she reached out, and their friendship morphed into something more. Or so he thought.

Henry stretched out his left arm, wiggled his stiff fingers before turning his hand over and kneading the puckered scar painted across his palm. *The accident had been hard on all of us.* Hard? It had altered his life.

After he'd finished physical therapy, he craved order. Simplicity. And his relationship with Charlotte checked all the boxes.

He glared at the raised flesh. The pain was gone, but the ache in his soul would always be a reminder of how one rash decision could change things. Forever.

The cab pulled up to the corner at Trafalgar and St. Martin's.

"Thanks, mate." He paid the fare, then stepped out onto the sidewalk, avoiding an inky puddle.

Cab horns intermingled with the rumble of a double-decker's engine. Crowds zig-zagged through the square, phones to their ears or posing for photos near the fountain.

May in London. Tourist season. And just like the flowers blooming in the parks, crowds had sprouted up all over the city, cluttering the walkways.

He slammed the door shut and smoothed his hand down his suit jacket. With a tug of each sleeve, he corrected the angle of his T-bar cuff links. Sterling silver. Diamond inlay. A gift from his father.

"Hey, mate." The cabbie peered through an open window and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder. "You left your briefcase."

Pulse humming, Henry hauled open the cab door and retrieved his satchel. He shut the door once more and stepped onto the sidewalk.

The cab took off, and water sprayed from the puddle, just missing his pant leg.

Henry shook his head. "Maybe it's time to move to the country."

Gripping his briefcase, he walked to the building across the street and made his way to the corner office, four floors up, at the end of the hall. A peaceful quiet fell over him. This is what he needed. Something familiar. Predictable. Research for H & G held the rhythm he craved.

He set his briefcase on the desk. After shrugging off his jacket, he hung it on the hook behind the door and sidled up to the window. Flocks of sightseers gawked at the Georgian church across the street. Arched windows, black iron fencing, and ornate columns shaped the beautiful building. A gnawing emptiness clawed at his gut. He'd stared out this window dozens of times, but it was long since he had admired the scene. Or joined the activity.

An urge to mingle with the tourists simmered inside him. Could he escape the dull ache clinging to his heart? Or these thoughts of uncertainty?

A buzz in his pocket pulled him out of his restless thoughts. Withdrawing his phone, he checked the caller ID. It was his brother, James Taylor. So much for predictable.

"Good morning, James." A cacophony of travel announcements echoed over the line. "Are you at the train station?"

"Yes. Kell and I are heading to Brussels." James paused as another notice blared in the background. "We'll only be gone for three days. Her mum's staying with Noah. Can you check on them while we're away?"

"Of course."

"Perfect. Hey, you sound a little—"

"I'm fine." Henry glanced out the window as the sun's rays bounced off the glass panes of the church. Just fine.

"Good. Kell and I got a lead on our latest case and wanted to check into it. I'll need you on standby if we find anything." James lowered his voice to a murmur. "We also needed a getaway. Just the two of us. Life's been a little hectic."

"I'm glad you're taking a short holiday." Henry's heart twisted. *He* needed a holiday. "Let me know what you find in Brussels."

Henry ended the call and kneaded his shoulder, pressing the knot

that had formed at the base of his neck. While James trekked around the world, he remained in London, staring out windows. *Where's that daring guy I was friends with back in uni? The risk taker?*

Charlotte's words stabbed at his heart. Risk got people killed.

He slid the phone back into his pocket and stepped away from the window. He'd keep his three o'clock run, order curry for dinner, and finish off the night with a good book. Tomorrow, everything would be back to normal.

With a sigh, he slipped into his desk chair and opened his laptop. He'd focus on work. Work made sense. Heart things, not so much.

He tapped on a few keys and brought up the case James and Kelly were working on in Brussels. All the data appeared in order, but he'd research a few more angles and see if he could dig anything else up.

His phone buzzed again, but he didn't bother to look at the screen. "Hello."

"Henry. Aiden Hayes."

He paused, taking a moment to place the voice with a face. American firefighter. Tech wizard. A quiet, lumberjack type who lived on a small island north of Seattle. He was also a Gatherer with H & G.

"Hey, Aiden. What have you been up to?"

"Not much. Work, sleep, repeat."

Henry chuckled.

"I ran across something in a forum you might be interested in."

"What's that?"

"Someone's asking about your family crest."

Henry straightened. "Who?"

"Let me send you the link."

After a few moments, an email notification popped up on his screen. Henry opened it and clicked on the link. He studied the post in the forum, along with the photos of a metal box nestled in red dirt. He zoomed in and studied the shield etched on the top of the box. The Taylor family crest.

"What do you think?" Aiden's question yanked him back to the phone call.

"You're right. It's our family crest." The post didn't say much, except to explain how the box was found after a round of flash flooding in Oklahoma. Henry scrubbed a hand down his cheek. "What would an antique box with the Taylor family crest be doing in Middle America?"

"I had the same thought. The post's been up for a few weeks. I thought you might want to pass it on to James so he can hunt it down."

Henry bristled. James wasn't the only one who could unravel a mystery.

After catching up with Aiden, Henry ended the call and returned to the website. One photo showed the box open and empty. Maybe the finder had removed the contents for the photos.

He flipped over to another site and searched. Nothing on their family tree linked to Oklahoma.

Switching back to the forum, he clicked the poster's screen name, *SouthernBookGirl*. Whoever they were, they obviously liked books and lived in the South, but that gave him little else to go on. The user pic was a teacup sitting on a stack of books. He read the brief bio, then eyed the location. Payne County, Oklahoma.

Clicking off the website, he brought up a map of Oklahoma. The state was shaped like a saucepan. He typed in Payne County, zoomed in, and surveyed the city names and other landmarks. The main roads divided the land into neat parcels, unlike the spiderweb of roads circling London. He did a couple of quick searches and found that Payne County covered almost seven hundred square miles. That was a lot of ground to cover. He'd need to narrow the search.

Clicking on the username, he did a deep dive into other forums and social media sites.

"There you are." He studied *SouthernBookGirl's* social media posts. "Miss Paisley Ann Snyder. Small town bookstore owner. Dabbles in hobby farming. Obsessed with Jane Austen and Charles Dickens. Has a pet pig named Jane." Henry's lips tugged at one corner. "Jane took first place in the prettiest pig pageant in Payne County last spring."

Relaxing back in his chair, a chuckle escaped his lips. "I wonder if Miss Austen would appreciate her namesake bestowed on a swine."

He scrolled through a few more of Paisley's social media posts until his gaze landed on a link for a guest house rental.

"Miss Snyder also dabbles in rental properties." He clicked on the link and read through the details.

Welcome to the Book Bungalow. A two-bedroom bungalow nestled in the middle of one hundred acres of sprawling Oklahoma prairie. While you're here, enjoy a leisurely ride on one of our gentle horses and take in some of the most breathtaking sunsets in the country. The entire bungalow is your own

private reading nook and offers a tranquil getaway from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Warmth seeped into his chest as he scrolled through the photos. The outdoor pictures promised sunsets, horses, and blonde-tinted prairie grass. There were two bedrooms, each decorated tastefully and promising a peaceful night's sleep. In the quaint living area, leather wingback chairs flanked a red brick fireplace, while floor-to-ceiling bookshelves with rows of colorful spines lined the walls.

As if in a daze, he clicked on the link that took him to a calendar and selected two dates spanning one week. He scrolled forward, making it two. His heart ticked up a notch as he checked the availability for the entire month of May.

"What am I doing?" Sweat gathered at his collar as he catapulted out of his seat and paced in front of the window. "I can't just up and leave. That's madness. What about the case in Brussels? What about my clients?" *What about my schedule?*

Halting, he stared at the antique maps lining the opposite wall. He'd vacationed all over the world, but he'd never been to Oklahoma. Wide open spaces. Fresh country air.

His gaze traveled to a shelf full of books and photographs. One caught his eye. He and James were kids, standing in front of the Mediterranean. Big smiles on sun-kissed faces. Oh, to be that carefree boy again who'd dared his brother to run into the sea and hunt for buried treasure.

He shuddered. His gaze drifted to another photo. Dad. Died on a mission. Looking for gold. An accident. A miscalculation. The taut muscles in his back yanked at him as if he were a marionette. He wasn't cut out for fieldwork.

Slumping back into his desk chair, Henry lowered his head into his hands as a storm stirred in his belly. His throat tightened, heart raced. Anxious thoughts poured through his mind like an open spigot. *God, help me.* He inhaled, exhaled, whispered another prayer. His breathing slowed.

Lifting his head, he returned to his laptop and checked airfares to Oklahoma City. He whistled low. "That's a long flight."

He threaded his fingers behind his head. He didn't need to do this. He didn't need to prove anything to anybody. He could hand off the information to James when he returned and let him track down the box. Play it safe.

A fire ignited in his veins as his gaze darted back to the maps on the wall. It was time to take a risk. Step out in faith. Stop staring out windows.

He turned his attention back to his laptop. "How hazardous could Middle America be?"

Heart pumping, he read the description of the *Book Bungalow* again.

A respite from the storm.

A trip to Oklahoma was exactly what he needed.