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Paisley Ann Snyder burrowed back into her pillow and tugged Dickens, her short-haired tabby cat, into her chest, giving him a scratch behind the ears. With a contented sigh, she stretched her legs, wiggling her toes under the cool sheets. Heaven. Or just the first Saturday in months she hadn't needed to set an alarm.

Dickens curled out of her hold, ducked under the covers, and darted for her feet.

She squealed. "Dickens. No." Yanking her legs up, she twisted away from the feisty feline's pointy claws.

Dickens shot out from under the covers and flashed her a devilish look.

"Bad kitty." Paisley rolled to her side and relaxed her legs. "You're going to have to wait to go out. I'm not leaving this bed until absolutely necessary."

Snatching her phone off the side table, she browsed her calendar. She had six hours until her renter arrived to stay in the bungalow down the lane, and with someone opening the bookstore, today promised to be stress-free.

She opened her email and scanned the lodger's information. Mr. Allen, a businessman from Virginia, had rented her place for an entire month. According to his message, he was here to get a break from the city. He liked reading, preferred quiet to activity, and looked forward to learning the history of their little town. Her wild plan to provide a temporary oasis in the middle of Oklahoma might just pay off.

She continued reading. Mr. Allen liked tea, not coffee, had no diet restrictions, and wasn't allergic to animals.

She made a mental note to grab a box of cinnamon rolls, a morning paper, and a few bags of local tea blends from the Made-In-Oklahoma section at Bobby-Lynn's boutique. If she wanted her first review to be five-star, she needed to make a memorable first impression.

Dickens nudged her hand, begging another snuggle.

"You won't stop bugging me until I let you out, will you?" After setting her phone down, Paisley scooped up the persistent furball and gave him another cuddle.

He mewed, pawing at her nose.

"Okay, fine. Give me one more minute."

When she released him, Dickens did a pass over both his paws with his sandpaper tongue, then jumped off the bed and shimmied down the hallway.

Groaning, she slinked out of the comfort of her sheets, slipped her feet to the floor, and crinkled her toes over the chilly hardwood. She eyed her pink fuzzy slippers. With one last longing glance back at the mountain of pillows, she stood and wiggled her feet into the well-worn house shoes. At least she'd slept in until nine. As the owner of two small businesses, it might be a while before she had that luxury again.

A yowl carried down the hall.

"I'm coming, sir." She padded down the stairs, into the kitchen, and swung open the back door. Dickens darted out just as Wickham, her rescue rooster, belted a raspy hello. "Morning, Wickham."

Wickham pranced in a circle, wiggled his plumage, then dove for a beetle creeping across the ground.

Shaking her head, Paisley shut the door. She pressed start on her coffee pot and shuffled back upstairs to get ready.

After slipping on a pair of jeans and boots, she threw on her favorite Jane Austen T-shirt with the words *Team Lizzy Bennet* scrolled across the front. She skipped full makeup, but added moisturizer and some gloss, then secured her hair in a long braid before tossing on her favorite trucker hat.

She grabbed her phone and skipped down the stairs for a cup of joe. When she entered her office, mug in hand, Wickham belted out another cry.

Paisley pushed back the curtain and peeked outside. Dickens sat

like a sentinel on a fence post, while a flock of hens hopped away from Wickham. Dropping the curtain, she relaxed into the desk chair and pulled her Bible off a stack of books. She turned to where she'd left off in Matthew. The disciples were caught in a storm. Jesus slept.

Save us, Lord; we are perishing.

After she finished reading the passage, she reached for her journal and opened it up to a fresh page.

What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?

She took a few minutes writing her thoughts and meditating on what she'd read. She knew what kind of man He was, but why was it so hard to trust Him in the storms?

Her attention slid to the picture frame on her desk. Paisley's eyes misted. The last photo she'd taken of Daddy while he watched the sun set from the porch.

With her finger, she traced the contours of his face, a lonely ache creeping into her heart. "I miss you, Daddy. The house is too quiet without you."

She missed his dad jokes and the way he made pancakes with whipped cream funny faces. Or how he'd argue with the college football announcers and watch tornado chasers like they were on reality TV. Most of all, she missed the long talks they had about their family. He'd passed on his love for history and shared anecdotes of how the Snyders were interwoven throughout every facet of their little town since its fledgling days.

A tear trickled down her cheek and she swiped it away. This storm, a grief storm, refused to lift. Tornados she could escape, but weathering the loss of Daddy was something she couldn't hide from.

Taking a long drink of her coffee, her gaze slipped to the metal box sitting on her desk. After a night of severe storms, erosion in the pasture had uncovered the mysterious treasure box, sparking questions about the previous owner. *Daddy, I wish you were here.* She shook off the thought. He wasn't coming back. This mystery she had to unravel by herself.

Opening the lid, she stared at the contents. Where to start? She'd check the genealogy forum for messages.

As she slid her laptop over and pried it open, her phone buzzed, making her jerk.

She put it on speaker and placed the phone on the desk. "Hey, Stace. Is there a problem?"

"No. Just a question." Stacey Cartwright, her ex's sister, was home from college for the summer and had become her right-hand woman at the bookstore. Her breakup with Logan Cartwright hadn't affected their friendship. In small towns, that kind of sisterhood was worth its weight in gold.

"Shoot."

"A mail truck just delivered ten boxes to our front door. I wasn't sure what to do with them."

"Ten?" She stood, grabbed her phone and mug, and stormed off to the kitchen to turn off the coffee pot. So much for her second cup. "Just move them out of the way of the door for now. I'll stop by the store before I do my errands."

"Aye, aye, boss."

Paisley laughed and disconnected the call. After setting her mug in the sink, she grabbed the keys to Emma, her old farm truck, and rushed out the back door. Her research on the mystery metal box would need to wait.

After taking care of the delivery at the bookstore, Paisley finished her shopping, then strolled down Main Street to Della's Diner for a late afternoon lunch.

"Paisley Ann." As she stepped over the threshold, Della wrapped her in a crushing hug. "How are you doing today, darlin'? I noticed Stacey May opened the bookstore this morning."

She stepped out of Della's embrace. "She is. I don't know what I'd do without her."

"Booth's open." Della motioned toward her favorite table behind the jukebox. "What can I put in for you today?"

"Cobb salad with grilled chicken sounds great."

"My flavored iced tea is sweet-mint today. Do ya want some?"

"Do june bugs crash into windows?"

Della laughed. "Take a seat, sweetheart. I'll be right out with your order."

Before she slipped into the booth, Paisley dug out a quarter from her pocket and dropped it into the jukebox, picking an upbeat girl-power anthem.

Della joined her, holding a large glass of sweet tea. "Need a little pick-me-up today?"

"My renter's coming in later this afternoon." Paisley shimmied with the beat before taking a seat. "And I just had to deal with a delivery mistake at the bookstore."

"Small businesses." Della set the tea down and waved a hand around the restaurant. "They're a labor of love."

"They are."

"I'll check on your salad. Need a hazelnut chocolate chip cookie to go with that?"

"Of course."

After a few minutes, Della returned with her salad, cookie, and a refill on tea. "So, you decided to go through with the rental property." Della cocked a hip against the table, folded her arms. "Are you sure it's a wise idea to have a stranger staying out at your place?"

"I promise I'll be careful. Besides, I have all his information. His reviews as a renter are all five-star." Paisley took a bite of her boiled egg, then chased it down with a sip of mint iced tea. "I even checked if there were a string of crimes under his name on the internet."

Della huffed and put a couple more napkins on the table. "I just worry about you, Paise. You still got your daddy's shotgun, right?"

She munched on her salad before taking a swipe at her lips with one of the napkins. "A pistol by the bed and a shotgun by the back door."

"I don't like to admit it, but our little town's growin'. You might consider an alarm for your house." She pointed to the town junk collector nursing a coffee by the window. "Cecil Ray put an alarm on his place after someone stole his flatbed trailer right out of his driveway."

"I'm sure everything will be okay." Paisley set her fork down and took a bite of the cookie as a true crime podcast rolled through her thoughts. "Mr. Allen sounds like a quiet, older gentleman who's hoping for a retreat from the city. Exactly what I plan to offer him."

"It's the quiet ones you gotta watch out for." Della's eyebrows cocked. "And if he's handsome—run."

Paisley laughed, chasing another bite of cookie down with a swig of tea. "I'll remember that. If he looks like a hot serial killer, you'll be the first one I call."

Shaking her head, Della squeezed Paisley's shoulder. "Just lock

your doors, sweetie. And keep your daddy's pistol on your bedside table."

"I will."

After she finished her lunch, Paisley gave Della a hug before heading back home.

She parked Emma, gathered her shopping bags, and rushed inside. She had a little over two hours before Mr. Allen's check-in time.

Grabbing a basket off one of the hooks by the back door, she set it on the counter and lined the bottom with a striped tea towel. Inside, she placed the box of cinnamon rolls, two tea canisters, a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels, and an oversized mug painted with the saying, "Oklahoma sunsets warm the soul."

She stepped back, surveyed the gift. She'd already stocked the fridge with milk and orange juice. She wanted her lodger to feel welcome when he arrived. A smile tugged at her lips. Mr. Allen needed a place to rest, and she planned to deliver.

Dickens skirted her heels as she walked the dirt road down to the two-bedroom cabin Daddy had built years ago. He'd planned on adding another one a few acres away, with the hopes of renting them out as a place for families to enjoy a bit of temporary farm life. She'd give it a few months; if this rental worked out, she might continue with his dream.

As she rounded the corner, the sight of a broad-shouldered man leaning against the hood of a silver two-seater sports car stopped her in her tracks. She gripped the handle of the basket with both hands. This was not the homely Mr. Allen she'd envisioned.

Side-stepping, Paisley tucked in behind a cluster of trees. Mr. Allen was supposed to be stout, wearing a sweater vest and a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses. Instead, this man wore a light blue Oxford shirt and dark chinos that draped over his body like a second skin.

He pushed himself off the hood and slipped his phone into his pocket. So much for a paunch or grandfatherly stoop. He stood tall and lean. Almost head level with the tip of the baby redbud she'd just planted.

Biting the inside of her cheek, she continued to ogle him like a stalker in the woods.

He glanced up at the cloudy sky, turned in a circle, and scanned the yard until his attention landed on her hiding spot.

Paisley darted back, stumbling over a tree root. Had he seen her? She peeked around the knotty trunk.

Mr. Allen slipped off his sunglasses and hooked them into the unbuttoned *V* of his shirt. He turned back toward the bungalow, checked his watch, his shirt sleeve pulling taut around his bicep.

Sweet, buttered biscuits. With his golden hair mussed in the breeze and buttoned-up good looks, Mr. Allen looked like he'd just walked out of a vacation ad for Martha's Vineyard.

Fanning her face, Paisley pressed her back against the tree. Maybe it was time to call Della.