

# BREAK OF DAY

AN ANNIE PEDERSON NOVEL

COLLEEN COBLE



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*Break of Day*

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*For my mother, Peggy Rhoads,  
who went to join my brother Randy  
in heaven on July 29, 2022.*

*Miss you so much, Mother.*

*Hug Randy, Grandma and Grandpa, and Tiff for us.*

*We'll see you soon.*



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

# ONE

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## **STUPID KAYAK. ELLA ANDERSON LAY SPREAD-EAGLED**

on her back on a tiny spit of land in Lake Superior. She was cold, wet, and tired, but snuggling against Scout, her golden retriever, would warm her. The dog licked her arm and went back to sleep.

Right now she wondered why she'd even decided to tangle with the big lake when she could have been warm and comfy in a tent underneath the big trees. But her kayaking trip had cleared her head. She'd chafed under her parents' constant orders—clean your room, be home at a decent hour, help with laundry and housecleaning. She was eighteen years old and should be able to make her own decisions, but her dad had always rattled off that “As long as you're under my roof” spiel.

She would be under their roof until she went off to college next month. Once she was in the dorm, she could manage her own time. She loved them, but a little distance would be a good thing. Getting through the anniversary party was the first priority, and it was a small price to pay for all they'd done for her. Then she could move on to her own life.

Most of the trouble had started when she'd met Alex. Just because he was married didn't make him a bad person. He was

separated and getting a divorce, but her dad thought he was the devil. And, yeah, he was ten years older than her, but that was nothing now that she was an adult herself.

Things would change soon.

She sat up and brushed the sand off her arms and tried to reach her upper back. A fingernail snagged on her necklace, and it broke. She tried to catch it as it flipped off her neck, but the necklace went flying off into the weeds. She scrambled up to search for it but gave up after fifteen minutes. Her parents would get her another one.

The July sun warmed her skin, and the breeze from the water lifted her blonde hair from the back of her neck. She should shove off in the kayak before she fell asleep or she wouldn't make it back to the Kitchigami boat launch before sundown. She had her tent with her so she could sleep anywhere, but she was done with this big lake. She wasn't the best at directing the kayak, and those vigorous waves were looking bigger and harder to navigate.

She rose and called Scout, who jumped into the front of the kayak with no prompting. Ella shoved her yellow kayak into the water, then grabbed the paddle and settled herself. The waves bobbed around her, and before she knew it, she was yards away from the island's shoreline. No matter what she tried, the paddle wouldn't take her in the direction she thought she was heading. The waves bounced her in the opposite direction, and another island loomed in the distance.

Her arms were tired, and her head hurt. Maybe she should just let the kayak go that direction. It was a larger island, and there were probably people on it. Maybe even cell service, and she could ask her mom to hire a boat to come get her. Fighting this

big lake was too exhausting. She'd underestimated how fatigued she'd be after a few hours on the water.

The waves lifted her kayak and it slid down the trough in a surge that took her closer to the other island. If it wasn't taking all her strength, she'd pull out her map and figure out where she was, but there would be time for that once she was safely ashore. She'd assemble her tent and sleep for a week.

She paddled for a few minutes and realized she was getting farther from the island, not closer. What was going on? She could have cried with frustration and fatigue until she heard the sound of a motor and spotted a boat heading her way.

She didn't dare stand up, but she waved her arms to help them see her. "Help!" Scout barked and added more noise to her call.

The craft switched direction and skimmed over the waves toward her. Two guys were aboard, and her gut clenched when she recognized one of them. Wasn't he the man who'd gotten a little too friendly when she was setting off on her adventure? There had been a sinister edge of danger to him, and she didn't like the big knife or the gun he carried on his belt.

She lowered her hands, then waved off the boat. "I'm okay. Go ahead!" she shouted.

But the boat engine cut off, and the craft slowed and came to bob near her. The man she feared smiled and beckoned to her. "Hello again. We can take you wherever you want to go."

She began to tremble and shook her head. "I'm not going with you."

"We won't hurt you."

The soothing words contrasted with the fierce stare he focused on her, and she clenched the paddle in her hands. "No thanks. I don't want to leave my kayak."

“We can take it with us. Climb aboard.” His smile turned wolfish.

“No.”

His smile vanished, and a gun appeared in his hand. “Get up here or I’ll shoot you where you sit.”

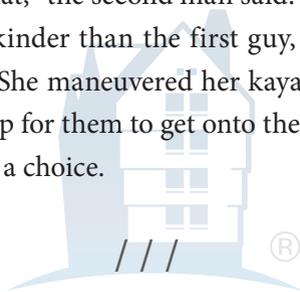
The other guy put his hand on the armed guy’s shoulder. “Easy. Don’t scare her. I won’t let him hurt you, Ella.”

*They knew her name?* She swallowed down the fear clogging her throat and shook her head. “Just leave me alone.”

“We can’t do that,” the second man said.

His eyes were kinder than the first guy, and Ella hoped he would protect her. She maneuvered her kayak close enough for her to lift her dog up for them to get onto the boat.

She didn’t have a choice.



Lake Superior was in a pensive mood this morning, with swells from an incoming storm slapping at the boat’s hull.

Annie Pederson tensed as the Tremolo Island dock loomed nearer, and she spotted an asylum of loons patrolling a small cove. Their short hoots of communication didn’t bother her, but she wanted to be out of here before the loons’ crazy laugh would begin to sound around dusk. She had too much to do to deal with the nightmares the birds’ tremolo always brought.

Max Reardon lifted a hand in greeting and came to tie up her boat. “Anu is resting on the porch while my cook whips up our lunch. I hope you’re hungry.” His smile widened when his gaze landed on Kylie. “And you brought my favorite little girl with you. I’m sorry Jon couldn’t make it.”

A handsome man in his sixties, Max's bearing and clothing oozed money, from his styled salt-and-pepper hair to his Italian leather shoes. He'd leased this island from Annie when she needed the income most, so she harbored a soft spot for him.

She threw him the line. "His dad had a doctor visit in Houghton. He was sorry to miss lunch." She paused to help her eight-year-old daughter to the freshly stained boards.

Kylie was a carbon copy of Annie with big blue eyes and shoulder-length blonde hair. Kylie promptly went to hug Max before moving to the edge of the water to watch the loons.

"Anu is recovering nicely from her surgery."

"I'm eager to hear how it went." While Bree had filled her in that the ovarian cancer surgery had gone well, Annie was eager to hear the results—and to see her friend Anu Nicholls with her own two eyes.

She spotted Anu on the expansive porch along the front of the massive log home Max had built. Anu saw her and waved. Though the older woman was in her sixties, she looked forty-five. Her silvery-blond hair just brushed her chin, and her clothing was always impeccable. She rose as Annie reached the porch, and she seemed as strong and steady as usual.

Annie went up the steps ahead of Max and Kylie to embrace her. Careful not to hug her tight enough to press against her incision, Annie inhaled Anu's perfume, a light scent with a citrus note.

Annie guided her back to the chair. "How are you feeling?" She pulled another Adirondack chair closer to Anu and settled in it. Kylie perched on her knee.

Anu smoothed the crease in her tan slacks. "Quite well. I am still sore, but I am healing every day." She smiled and reached

over to take Annie's hand. "I can see the question on your face, *kulta*. I do not have the biopsies back yet, but I am most optimistic. The doctor told Max, Bree, and Hilary that it appeared the cancer was confined to the ovary. If the biopsy confirms that prediction, I will not need to have chemo or radiation. I am praying that is the case."

"Jon and I are praying for that too."

"So am I!" Kylie chimed in.

Anu's smile widened. "I appreciate that very much, my Kylie. And it is thanks to dear Jon that we had such good news."

"And Milo!" Kylie said.

Anu nodded. "It was most astounding to discover such a young puppy has the ability to sniff out cancer. And that Jon's intuition led him to the right reason for Milo's behavior. I am very blessed."

"Annie!" Max came hurrying toward her holding a satellite phone. "It's Jon."

Jon Dunstan, the love of her life and Kylie's father, had suddenly reappeared after nine years. "Hey, Jon, what's up?" He wouldn't bother Max on the satellite phone unless it was important.

"Hussert escaped."

Annie's stomach bottomed out. Glenn Hussert had imprisoned a woman to try to hide his embezzlement from a women's shelter. Mason Kaleva suspected he might know more than he was telling about other crimes in the area. Glenn had kept Sarah locked up, too, and for all Annie knew, he might have killed her if her sister hadn't managed to escape.

"Does Mason think Sarah is in danger? Or Michelle?"

Michelle Fraser had been kept in an abandoned cabin for over a week while Glenn demanded evidence she'd hidden.

"He thinks it's possible. Without the kidnapping victims' testimony, Hussert would only be charged with fraud, which is a much lesser crime. I heard about it when I went to pay Sarah's bail. Bree and Kade are taking the kids to Wisconsin Dells for a week, so Mason's concerned Bree's guest cottage might not be as safe as we'd like with no one in the lighthouse. What should I do about Sarah?"

While Annie had been willing to bail her sister out even though she'd kidnapped Kylie, Annie hadn't wanted to see her, but did she have a choice? "I don't know."

"I could let her stay in Dad's cottage. No one would know she was there."

"She's not trustworthy, Jon. She's likely to talk about it in town."

"Maybe not if she's scared of Hussert. And I could drop off food and supplies to her. She wouldn't have to go to Rock Harbor at all."

"I'm not sure she has the good sense to be afraid." Annie winced at how bitter her words sounded. "I'm sorry, that didn't come out well."

"She's hurt you a lot, love." His voice went soft. "We could revoke the bail."

Annie was reluctant to toss her sister back in jail, but the thought of having her near Kylie gave her pause too. Was there anywhere safe Annie could send her? She didn't want to be responsible for Hussert getting hold of Sarah again. Her baby sister had been missing and presumed dead for twenty-four years,

but her recent return had not been the joyful event Annie had hoped for.

“How did he escape?” she asked to delay a decision. “He barely woke up.” Hussert had been in a coma after a mountain lion’s stranglehold nearly killed him.

“The deputy guarding him was drugged, and there was some kind of incident at the nurses’ station that caused a distraction. A security camera showed three men in a back stairwell taking him out in a wheelchair in the wee hours this morning.”

More evidence Hussert’s crimes involved more than embezzlement and kidnapping. And clearly others were involved as well. Her gaze went to Kylie skipping rocks across the placid pond.

Nothing mattered to her more than her daughter. Kylie was her priority. “Take Sarah to your dad’s cottage. I think it’s the only option.”

“It’s the right decision,” Jon said. “I’ll see you at dinner. I have a killer recipe for gluten-free orange chicken Kylie will like.”

“See you then.” She ended the call and handed the phone back to Max.

Sarah would be closer than Annie would like but still far enough away she might be able to forget her betrayal for a while.

## TWO

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### THE GEESE UNDERFOOT ALONG THE PATH SCATTERED

as Jon neared the steps to the back deck. The scent of charcoal and grilling steaks wafted to him from the campground, and his stomach rumbled. With the injuries he'd suffered from falling off a cliff ten days ago, it was difficult to balance the two sacks of groceries in his good arm while digging in his pocket for the key to Annie's cottage. He'd had to go to Houghton to find all the ingredients he needed for orange chicken, but it would be worth it when he saw Kylie taste it.

The pain in his head was better, at least for now, which left him looking forward to the evening. He found the key and got the door open, then set the bags on the counter. His phone vibrated before he could unpack everything and get to work.

His finger paused midswipe when he saw the name and picture on his screen. His former boss, Olivia Thompson, was calling. Did he even want to talk to her, or should he let it go to voice mail? The horrific accusation against her of euthanasia had left him reeling.

Shaking his head, he accepted the call. Who was he to pronounce judgment without giving her a hearing? "Jon Dunstan."

“Jon.” Her voice rose with a note of relief. “I wasn’t sure you’d answer my call. No one seems to be taking them these days. How are you?”

He began to unload the groceries while Milo, a German shepherd-chow puppy sired by Samson, squirreled around his feet yipping with excitement. “Doing okay. Concussions and dislocated shoulders are no joke. You’d have thought I would have figured that out without having to experience them myself.” Might as well cut to the chase. “I heard about your trouble, Olivia. Is it true? Did you actually euthanize some patients?”

The silence on the phone continued so long that he pulled back the phone to check the screen. Still connected. “Hello?”

“You believe that of me?”

His gut clenched at her tormented tone. “They have it on camera, Olivia.”

“He was *dying*, Jon. He asked for my help.”

“That doesn’t make it right. We doctors aren’t God. We took an oath to do no harm. You did the ultimate harm.”

“He was a Christian. I knew he was going to a better place.”

Had she done this with any other patients? Since this news broke, he’d checked his patient files, and one other patient had died when he’d thought she would pull through. The official cause of death was a heart attack, but they wouldn’t have checked for potassium chloride.

Was it too late to find out? His patient had died a year ago, but if he brought it up now, would the police think he was in on it? It would be far easier to say nothing, but Jon cared about his patients, and he didn’t think he could ignore that.

Olivia’s voice took on desperation. “My daughter is going off to college in August, and I can’t go to jail, Jon. I just can’t.

Would you testify for me and tell the court you believe in me? That would help.”

He put the milk in the fridge and shut the door before he sank onto a chair at the table. “Olivia, I can’t lie. You just admitted you did it. And what about Tessa Abston?”

“What about her?”

Was it his imagination or did she sound guarded? “Did you kill her? She’d just found out she had stage-four pancreatic cancer before she broke her ankle. I told you about it.”

“Look, I’m not some kind of serial killer!”

But was she? Jon didn’t know anymore.

Her voice hardened. “I gave you a start, Jon. Took you on when you were brand-new and taught you the ropes. You owe me this.”

What she said was true enough. He’d been delighted and honored to be offered a position with her and her colleagues. People came from all over the world to see Olivia or one of her practice’s doctors. But that didn’t mean he was willing to lie for her. And what would this do to his reputation?

“I can’t lie for you,” he repeated.

The line went silent, and he glanced at his phone to see the call had ended. A text came through on the heels of the conversation. He stared at the phone for a long moment. It was his duty to report his uneasiness about Tessa Abston. Sometimes duty was painful.

What would it mean for his career if Olivia had killed one of his patients? Nothing good, that much was sure. He’d been proud of how far he’d traveled up the ladder at his age of thirty-four, but it might all explode in an instant. He clenched his fists and rose to finish putting away the groceries.

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Annie was nearly to the dock at Tremolo Marina and Resort when her phone sounded. The phone screen showed Unknown, but in her line of work as a law enforcement ranger, that happened a lot. “LEO Annie Pederson.”

The caller was a man, but that was all she could tell from the garbled, “Annie.”

“Hello? This is Annie.”

“Help me.” The words were a harsh whisper. “He’s going to kill me.”

She cut the engine and let the boat idle in the Superior waves. A gull landed almost immediately on the bow of her boat and stared at her with hungry eyes. “Who’s going to kill you? Who is this?”

“Took me, eh. Hospital.”

Something in the man’s Yooper accent tickled her memory. She knew that voice. “Glenn? Glenn Hussert?” Annie glanced at Kylie, who thankfully didn’t seem to be paying attention as she tossed bread crumbs to a gull.

“Glenn. Yaass.” His voice vibrated with relief as he drew out the word.

“Where are you, Glenn? I’ll come right now.” She turned on the speaker so she could hear while she called up her message app and shot off a swift text to Mason. *Track my number. Glenn is on the other end.*

If she could only keep him on the line long enough, Mason might be able to track him. But it was a long shot. That kind of thing wasn’t instantaneous even if Mason happened to be in the office at the moment.

“Need help. Kill me,” Glenn muttered again.

He hadn’t spoken much since he came out of the coma. Just mumbling and nonsense. The doctor had said he might have some memory loss, and there was no guarantee they’d get much information out of him. Should she press for more information about who had him or try to find out where he was?

Maybe something more personal would keep him on the line. “Have you seen Lissa? Was she trying to get you help?”

“Lissa?” His voice held bewilderment. “No Lissa.”

Before Annie could ask anything more, she heard an angry shout on the other end. It sounded like a man’s voice, but she didn’t recognize the speaker. The sound ended a few moments later.

“Hello? Glenn?” She pulled the phone away from her ear and checked the screen. The call had ended, and she was sure it hadn’t been long enough to track, but she called Mason to check anyway.

“You didn’t get the location, did you?”

“Not enough time,” Mason said. “You sure it was Hussert?”

“Positive.” She told him about the man’s garbled words. “I think he’s in trouble.”

“He certainly wasn’t well enough to walk out under his own power. Makes sense with what we gathered from the hospital cameras. Keep your phone on you in case he calls back, and I’ll have your calls monitored until we find him.”

“Okay.” She throttled up the engine and motored for her dock.

The gull flapped its wings and took off to skim across the white caps on Lake Superior. The wind tugged at Annie’s blonde strands and blew them around her head and into her eyes. The humid air cooled with the breeze as night began to fall, and it felt good against her skin, baked by the sun on this hot day.

Kylie turned off her tablet. "Who was that, Mommy?"

"The sheriff," Annie said.

"The call before that. It sounded like he was in trouble. Are you going to help him?"

"He didn't tell me where he was. The sheriff is in charge, and he will take care of things."

Annie's work usually involved much lower-profile cases than she'd investigated recently, and she didn't like Kylie knowing about the more dangerous circumstances. Her little girl worried enough about her when she was checking out a car break-in. It was time for life to settle down here for them, but so far, there'd been no sign of normalcy.

By the time she tied up at the dock, the sun had sent its dying rays into the fading light of the evening sky. The scent of ginger and garlic wafted her way, and her stomach rumbled.

Kylie sniffed the air. "That smells good."

"Jon is fixing us orange chicken."

"You wouldn't let me have it at the restaurant the other day." Kylie's voice vibrated with outrage. "It has gluten."

"Not this one. Jon said he found a good recipe."

Kylie followed Annie across the soft grass toward the back deck of their cottage. "Does he have to come over every night? I miss being with you by myself."

Annie stopped at the bottom of the deck steps and pulled her daughter in for a hug. "I thought you liked Jon after he saved your life. That should count for something, honey."

Kylie stiffened in Annie's embrace. "I like him fine, but he's never really going to feel like my dad."

Would Kylie ever adjust to the truth that Jon was her biological father? She clung to Nate's memory with everything in

her, and Annie couldn't fault that. Until a few weeks ago, she'd thought he was Kylie's father too. It was a sea change of tsunami proportions for them both.

Headlamps swept over the grass, and they both turned toward the parking lot as a big SUV parked. Two people got out, and Annie straightened when a familiar voice called her name.

Kylie squinted in the dark. "Grandma?" She ran toward the figures.

Annie's chest compressed as the realization sank in that Nate's parents were here. Without warning and without her being prepared to tell them what had happened. This wasn't the way the truth was supposed to come out with them. She'd wanted to wait until Jon's DNA test came back for absolute confirmation in case they wanted to see it, and it was due anytime now. Yet here they were.

She shot a glance through the window toward Jon moving around in the kitchen. Running wouldn't work, though everything in her wanted to bolt for the safety of her truck.

THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

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## THREE

**KYLIE'S BEAMING FACE AS SHE HUNG ON HER GRAND-**parents after dinner shattered Annie's heart. This was Nate's parents' usual behavior—an unexpected visit laden with gifts followed by a quick departure and long silences.

Jon's surprise orange chicken had fallen flat with Kylie, who barely touched her food because she was so eager to dive in to the gift bags her grandpa Lars had hauled into the living room. Maryanne claimed they'd eaten already so they hadn't touched the meal either, but she'd peppered Jon with questions about what he'd been up to for the past nine years. Jon and Nate's friendship had existed since their teen years, and Maryanne hadn't given any indication she suspected Jon's presence was more than a casual visit.

Annie tried to encourage Jon with sounds of delight about the food, though she barely tasted the bite of ginger in the meal over the taste of fear on her tongue.

Kylie put down her fork. "May I be excused?"

Annie started to order her to eat more, but it would be a waste of breath. "Go ahead. I'll be right there."

Jon's wink as he rose and gathered dishes from the table with

his good arm told her he appreciated the effort. He brushed her cheek with a kiss. "Go ahead, love. I'll clean up."

She ran her fingers through his brown hair. "Leave them for now. I'm going to need moral support. Kylie won't stay quiet about what's happened. We both know it'll come spilling out."

He removed his hand and carried the dishes to the sink. "I'm right behind you."

How did she deserve him? He was strong and kind, and his green eyes were always so steady and tender.

Her wobbly legs didn't want to support her as she stood, nodded, and headed to the living room. Kylie sat snuggled up against Maryanne, who had her arm over the little girl as if she would never let her go. And the funny thing was, Annie believed they did love Kylie. But life got in the way and they let other priorities push contact with their granddaughter to weeks, even months, with no call.

Annie sat across from the sofa and folded her hands in her lap. "Looks like you've got presents, and it's not even your birthday."

Maryanne's light-brown hair brushed a chin line with no sagging skin. She had a subtle tan from their recent trip to the Caribbean.

She leaned forward and picked up the first pink package. "We found this in Turks and Caicos. I think you'll like it."

With a squeal Kylie ripped the paper out of the bag and yanked out a stuffed sea turtle. She hugged it to her chest. "I love it!"

She plowed through the other four bags: a sundress with vivid Caribbean colors, a hammock from Cozumel, an amber bracelet, and a beautiful conch shell. With her booty surrounding her on the floor, Kylie appeared happier than Annie had seen her

in a while. It wasn't the gifts though—it was the attention from Lars and Maryanne.

Jon had entered while the focus had been on Kylie, though Annie didn't think anyone else noticed him slip in and sit on a chair against the back wall. His presence grounded her and steadied her for the moment she knew would come sooner or later. If only there was some way to keep Kylie from blurting out the truth, but no eight-year-old knew how to hold back anything important.

Kylie sprang to her feet with the gifts in her arms. "I'm going to try on my dress." She scurried toward her bedroom door.

A reprieve, at least for a few minutes. Annie turned on the light beside her on a table. "How long are you in town?"

Lars answered before Maryanne could. "Two days. I've got a meeting in New York on Friday, so we'll fly out early in the morning."

Maryanne twisted in her seat and motioned for Jon to come closer. "Jon, is your dad here too? I'd love to see him while we're in town."

Jon picked up the chair and brought it around to face the sofa. "He's staying at the Blue Bonnet."

"That's where we're staying too," Maryanne said. "We'll be able to catch up."

"We've been remodeling the old cabin," Jon said. "It's nearly done."

"Are you going to sell it?" Lars asked.

Jon's gaze darted to Annie, and she recognized the question on his face. He didn't know how much to reveal. Maybe blurting out the truth while Kylie was out of the room would be the better option.

She opened her mouth, but Kylie's door slammed, and she pranced down the hall toward them. The sundress fit her well and emphasized the tan she'd already acquired. She spun around for them to see. "I never want to take it off!"

Maryanne tugged a few folds on the shoulder. "It's perfect, just like you. We're going to be here a couple of days, and I thought we might go shopping in Houghton tomorrow if your mommy says it's okay."

"That's fine," Annie said.

Lars rose. "We should probably get to the Blue Bonnet and check in."

"Grandpa Daniel is staying there," Kylie said.

"You call Jon's father Grandpa?" Maryanne's voice held a touch of frost.

"Well, he's my grandpa too." Kylie's face fell and uncertainty crept into her blue eyes. "You know, since Jon is my father."

Lars and Maryanne gasped a collective sound of dismay. Maryanne's hazel eyes went round as she stared at her granddaughter, then swiveled her gaze to Annie. "You've remarried without telling us?"

"Lars, Maryanne, we need to have a little talk," Jon said. "Kylie, it's time for your bath. You can take your seashell into the tub with you."

Kylie's mutinous expression smoothed when he mentioned the shell. She hugged her grandparents and dashed back down the hall.

Annie stood and laced her fingers with Jon's. "This isn't an easy thing to tell you. We've recently discovered Jon is Kylie's father." She moistened her dry lips. "I had no idea until Kylie was diagnosed with celiac disease."

Lars and Maryanne glanced at each other, and Maryanne shook her head as if to clear it. “I don’t understand.”

“I married Nate a month after Jon and I broke up. I didn’t know I was pregnant and never suspected Kylie wasn’t Nate’s biological child. But Nate will always be her daddy, and I’ll make sure she never forgets him. And you know how she loves you. That will never change.”

The silence stretched out as the older couple absorbed the news. Annie held her breath, praying they’d understand, but when Maryanne’s lips tightened, Annie knew they wouldn’t be that lucky.

Maryanne stood and took her husband’s hand. “I always wondered about your real feelings. You never loved Nate. Not really. Jon was always there between you.”

Annie’s chest felt like it had been kicked by a horse. How did she even counter that statement?

THOMAS NELSON  
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Since 1798

Jon felt the tension rolling off Annie in frantic waves, and he pressed as much comfort into her hand as he could. Nate’s parents stared at them both with matching expressions of disbelief, anger, and grief.

Jon could only imagine how they felt in this moment. “Please don’t say anything you’ll regret. Annie and I are doing the best we can right now. You have to know I loved Nate like a brother. I would never want Kylie to forget him. From everything I have heard, he was an amazing father.”

Lars had been sagging where he stood, but he drew himself

up to his full height of six feet. "Like you would know, Jon. You cut him off when he married Annie."

"I did, and I was wrong. Very wrong." There was no real excuse for his behavior, so Jon didn't try to dredge up one. "Nate was one of the best people I've ever met. I miss him every day."

Maryanne shot him a glare of contempt. "Yet you let him think Kylie was his child when she is yours."

Annie made a movement that pulled her hand out of his grasp. "We didn't know, Maryanne. I didn't even suspect." She took a step toward them with her hand outstretched. "Nate tried to help when he saw how much I was hurting after Jon and I broke up, and I let him. We married so quickly, and I never once let myself think Kylie wasn't his. If not for her diagnosis of celiac disease, we still wouldn't know the truth."

"You asked us if anyone in the family had it," Lars said. "It's hereditary?"

"There's a genetic component, and I have celiac disease," Jon said. "When she was diagnosed with the same thing, Annie remembered that Kylie was born a few weeks early. Annie had a DNA test done."

"I didn't expect it to show Nate wasn't her father. We are still adjusting to the truth ourselves. Please don't step away from Kylie. She loves both of you, and she craves time with you."

Lars folded his arms across his chest. "She has another grandfather now. She doesn't need us."

When Maryanne backed away from Annie's outstretched hand, she dropped her arm to her side. "She needs you even more. This has hit her hard, and she needs your stability. Don't punish her for my mistakes."

Maryanne reached for her purse. "We're going now. Lars, I

think we should spend the night somewhere else. I have no desire to see Daniel and hear him crow about his new granddaughter.”

She marched toward the door with Lars trailing her. Jon started to go after them but thought better of it. They were too angry to listen to any explanations, and he remembered his own reaction to hearing the truth. He hadn’t been ready to listen to Annie either. Maybe they would cool off after a few hours.

Annie sank onto the chair and covered her face with her hands. “Kylie will blame me,” she said in a shaking voice. “I didn’t want it to come out like this. I should have called them right away.”

He squatted in front of her and put his hands on the knees of her jeans. He loved everything about her—those big blue eyes and delicate Scandinavian features were etched in his heart. She was thirty-two but still as beautiful as the first time he saw her when he was eighteen. He hadn’t allowed himself to think about how she’d loved Nate in his absence, but having the Pedersons show up had brought out that underlying tension he hadn’t admitted.

Had she loved Nate more than him? Who would she pick if she had the choice?

He pushed away the fear and gathered his thoughts. “There hasn’t been time to even think about letting them know, Annie. Everything has fallen in on you at once. They’ll come around, and if they don’t, it’s their loss.”

She uncovered her face to reveal reddened eyes and wet cheeks. “It’s Kylie’s loss too, and she’s gone through so much. Though they haven’t given her the attention I would have liked, they were still a piece of Nate in her life.”

He pressed her hand in a comforting squeeze. “I have so many stories about Nate. I’ll make sure he’s alive in her heart.

We don't need Lars and Maryanne to make sure Kylie has a good life with poignant memories of her daddy."

Annie's blue eyes filled again, and she leaned forward to rest her head against his. "You're a good man, Jon Dunstan. We've upended your life in every way possible, yet here you are still helping and encouraging. I don't deserve you."

His taped ribs ached at the awkward angle, but he didn't stand to relieve the pressure. Not when Annie needed him. "You have that backward. I'm the one who doesn't deserve the two of you." He held her and inhaled the sweet scent of her hair. They'd get through this. They'd already endured so much, and truth was always worth it.

When she lifted her head away from him, he held his bad arm against his body and struggled to his feet. "One of us had better check on Kylie. She's been in the bathtub a while."

"I'll do it."

When she disappeared down the hall, he went into the kitchen and began to load the dishwasher. It was slow going with his arm and aching ribs. Cooking dinner had flared the pain, and he was overdue some ibuprofen. He paused long enough to find the meds in Annie's cupboard and popped three of them.

Before he resumed the job of cleaning the kitchen, Annie appeared in the doorway. "She's getting on her pj's. I told her she could play on her iPad for a little while." She pointed to the chair at the kitchen table. "Sit while I clean. I can tell by your pinched mouth that the pain is bad."

He didn't argue. Once he was settled on the chair, he watched her swift, efficient movements for a while. Her blonde hair gleamed in the overhead light, and his gaze lingered on the sweet

flush of her cheeks. To have a second chance was more than he deserved.

“You’re staring,” she said.

“Any man would stare when the most beautiful woman in the world was in front of him.”

The color in her heart-shaped face heightened. “And you’re not a bit prejudiced.” She leaned over to put the last plate in the dishwasher.

“Not a bit.” He stretched his legs out in front of him. The ibuprofen had eased the pain some. Though he didn’t want to tell her about the trouble coming his way, unity and communication were glue for their relationship. She needed to know, and he could use her help. “I got a call from Olivia before dinner. I might be in trouble, Annie.”

She turned to face him. “What’s happened?”

He told her about Olivia’s request and how he’d remembered another possible victim—one of his own. “I’m not sure the police will believe I had nothing to do with this.”

Her expression grew fierce. “We can’t let her problems spill over into life here.”

He hadn’t even had to ask for her help, but that was the kind of woman she was. Pulling her into this problem wasn’t something he wanted, but their united front felt good.