

Chasing Dreams in Barbourville

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Chapter One

Chase Cunningham grimaced when the bright green road sign came into view. “Barbourville, Tennessee, thirty miles,” he read aloud, then tightened his grip on the steering wheel with hands that had suddenly gone damp. Barbourville was one of the last places he wanted to be. Nevertheless, he was on his way.

Even if he *was* a day late, which meant he’d missed the grand opening of Josh’s pet project, the fancy new Barbourville Animal Shelter.

But Josh wouldn’t hold it against him. Josh was absolutely the best stepbrother anyone could hope to have. Patient. Supportive. Understanding.

At least he *hoped* that Josh would be understanding when he heard about the car wreck that had landed Chase in the hospital eight weeks earlier. He should have told Josh as soon as the wreck happened. Josh had a right to know, especially considering that Chase’s injuries had caused him to be late getting to Barbourville.

Unfortunately, later today when he explained to Josh about the wreck, he’d be forced to admit that he shouldn’t have been driving, which meant he couldn’t expect any sympathy from Josh.

Not that he deserved sympathy. He’d known he was sleepy and he’d known that driving sleepy was dangerous. Still, he hadn’t pulled over for a cup of coffee or better yet, to grab a quick nap.

He just thanked his lucky stars that he’d been the only vehicle involved when he ran off the road. He’d lived, which was a miracle, but at least he hadn’t hurt or killed anyone else.

Just reliving that instant when he’d opened his eyes and realized his car was in flight, sailing over an embankment and toward a grove of trees, pumped enough adrenaline into his system to make his heart rate speed up. And that alerted him to the fact that he might be going a little too fast for these blasted curves leading up the mountainside toward Barbourville.

He immediately eased off on the gas as he steered into the next curve, then cursed under his breath. Sitting dead still in the bend of that upcoming curve was a car, one of those little things that would be half obliterated if he rear-ended it with his big SUV.

His heart rate soared as he slammed on the brakes, then felt the back tires sliding on the blacktop. He wrenched the steering wheel toward the right, praying there was enough shoulder to keep him from slamming into the embankment on that side of the highway. He’d barely survived his most recent car wreck. He might not be as lucky this time.

Seconds later, he slid to a stop, his windshield enveloped in a mass of shuddering maple leaves. It took him a minute to process the fact that there’d been no collision. His front end wasn’t wrapped around a tree the way it had been eight weeks ago.

Still, even though he was safe, adrenaline continued to pump into his bloodstream. His lungs felt starved for oxygen, and he had just gulped in a deep breath

when his car door was wrenched open by a blonde—one so gorgeous he almost lost his breath all over again.

She leaned toward him. “Are you all right?” she asked. Her eyes, a deep blue, were wide and shimmering with unshed tears.

“I think so.” He reached to unfasten his seat belt.

“What happened?” the woman asked.

Chase pulled in another deep breath. He wasn’t much in the mood for senseless questions. Besides, the adrenaline had turned his mouth dry. He reached for the bottle of water he’d left in the cup holder only to discover that it now lay in the floorboard in the middle of a spreading puddle. “Damn it,” he yelped.

The young woman jumped back as though scalded.

Chase clamped down on his temper and pushed his door open. The woman took another step backward and watched with widened eyes as he climbed out.

“That your car?” Chase nodded toward the subcompact still sitting in the roadway.

The woman nodded.

“Car trouble?” Chase set his teeth. A dull ache was moving up his arm from the wrist toward his elbow. His cast had come off just yesterday, and apparently his fight with his steering wheel this afternoon wasn’t sitting well with the barely healed break.

“I think I ran out of gas.”

“You *think*?” Chase stared at her with his mouth hanging open. “You *think*? Who doesn’t know if they have enough gas in their car, especially when they’re going to be driving in a near wilderness for mile after mile?”

More tears welled in her eyes. Darn it all, she’d caused him to run off the road and now she was making him feel guilty.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I’m a little shook up.”

She nodded and tried to force a smile but it was decidedly wobbly. “That’s okay. You have a right to be upset. It’s just that, well, nothing seems to be going right lately.”

“Tell me about it,” Chase grumbled through clenched teeth. Then, “Have you called someone to come help you? Auto club maybe?”

She sighed. “I thought about that, but there’s no cell service here.”

“Ah.” Chase turned to inspect his SUV. “Best I can tell, there’s no damage to my vehicle. I’ll drive to the nearest service station and get some gas and bring it back to you. I’m not familiar with this area, so I have no idea how far I’ll have to drive and how long I’ll be gone. Do you want to ride with me?”

The woman shook her head. “No thanks. I’ll stay with my car.”

Chase wondered if she was afraid of him. He couldn’t blame her much if she was. He was a stranger, and he hadn’t been exactly friendly toward her. Not that he was feeling any friendlier now. He shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I’d better try to push your car out of the middle of the road. Someone could easily come around this curve and ram you from behind. But first I’ll walk back and set out a couple of emergency road flares.

Those, hopefully, will help keep us safe until we can get your car pushed off to the side.” He aimed his remote control and pushed the button to open his vehicle’s tailgate.

“You carry emergency road flares?” the woman asked. Her tone implied that she couldn’t imagine anything more eccentric.

Chase didn't bother to answer. He walked over to his vehicle and rummaged around in the newly stocked safety kit, then pulled out two flares. "I'll be right back." He marched down the highway toward the beginning of the curve, thankful that this road wasn't heavily traveled. He'd hate to end up as roadkill before he could see Josh and explain why he was running late.

He quickly set the flares in place, then breathed a sigh of relief. Now to go back and see if he could push that woman's little car off to the side. Even if he couldn't get it all the way off the road, he should be able to push it far enough to allow traffic coming up from behind to swerve around it.

He'd covered only a few feet back toward Miss Blonde and Ditzzy's stalled car when he heard a vehicle approaching. He whirled to look, then stepped onto the shoulder of the road.

The car wasn't flying by any means, but the driver did slam on the brakes when he spotted Chase's flares. The light bar on top of the white car clued Chase in to its purpose even before he saw the word "Sheriff" painted in blue on the front of the hood.

He stood and waited while the man inside pushed his door open and climbed out. He was a young man by all appearances, maybe in his thirties, with striking blue-green eyes. His hair, a shade lighter than his tan uniform, was cut short. He carried himself with an air of authority as he rounded the front of the squad car and nodded toward the flares. "Problem?" he asked.

Chase took a couple of steps onto the blacktop. "I stopped to help a lady who'd run out of gas. She's sitting in the middle of this lane of traffic. I had to swerve onto the shoulder to keep from rear-ending her. My plan was to push her car off to the side and then go buy some gas to get her started again. You being the sheriff here, I'm hoping you can tell me how far it is to the nearest service station."

The man finally smiled. "I can do better than that. I'll go get the gas myself. There's a station a couple of miles up the road. But first, let me help you push her car. You look like you're favoring your right arm. Were you injured when you ran off the road?"

Chase hadn't realized he was supporting his right arm with his left. He let both fall to his sides. "I broke my arm a few weeks ago and it's barely healed. I guess I just irritated it a little bit. It's really nothing."

The sheriff shrugged. "If you say so. But I'd definitely better help you push that woman's car. You don't want to irritate your arm even more. Let's go."

Chase fell into step beside the sheriff. "Thanks for helping. My name is Chase Cunningham, by the way."

"Daniel McCray. As you deduced, I'm the sheriff of McCray County."

"I've heard Josh speak of you. He said you came out to his place last year when that storm blew through and caused so much damage countywide."

"You talking about Josh Preston?"

"Right. Josh is my stepbrother."

The sheriff stopped short and turned to look Chase in the eye. "Oh? I thought Josh's stepbrother was named Jacob."

"You're right. Jacob is my name, but I go by my nickname. I've been called Chase since I was a kid." Chase could gauge from the way the sheriff narrowed his eyes

that he wasn't convinced Chase was who he said he was. He figured he'd better expound on his story.

"I was supposed to arrive yesterday to attend that grand opening ceremony for the new animal shelter, but my doctor got tied up with an emergency and couldn't take my cast off. I couldn't drive with my right arm in a cast, so I missed Josh's big day. I hope all went smoothly."

The sheriff nodded. "It was a nice day and everybody is happy to have the shelter open. Your brother must have been disappointed when you told him you couldn't be here."

"I didn't tell him. He would have wanted to know why, and since I hadn't planned to tell him about my broken arm, it seemed best to just say nothing."

The sheriff's eyebrows shot up. "That's between you and Josh. In any case, we better get this lady's car gassed up so you can be on your way."

He started walking again and Chase followed. A few seconds later, they rounded the curve and Miss Beautiful Airhead pushed off from the side of her car where she'd been leaning and started walking to meet them, her heels clacking on the pavement.

The sheriff reached toward his forehead as though to doff his hat, then appeared to recall that he wasn't wearing a hat and instead gave a sort of salute. "Good afternoon, ma'am. I'm Daniel McCray, the local sheriff. I hear you're out of gas. I'm going to help push your car out of the road as far as we can get it, then I'll go get some gas for you. I should be back in twenty minutes or less."

The female blew her breath out in a sigh, then flashed a crooked smile composed of straight white teeth and seemingly practiced charm. "Thank you, Sheriff. I really appreciate your help."

Chase grunted softly. She hadn't thanked him even once, not that he cared. In fact, he was thrilled she hadn't batted those long eyelashes at him. If she had, he would probably have laughed in her face, and their already rocky relationship would have deteriorated even further.

The sheriff returned her smile. "Happy to help, ma'am. Now, if you'll get in your car and put it in neutral, this gentleman and I will push it off the road for you."

Five minutes later, they'd managed to get the car to the side of the road and the sheriff had climbed back into his cruiser to go after gas. Chase had hoped that Miss Color Me Pretty would ask to accompany the sheriff, but she didn't, so he announced that he'd go retrieve his flares.

He took his time, but of course the sheriff still hadn't returned when he got back with the flares. The female was again leaning against her car. He had to admit that she wasn't dressed provocatively although her soft blue denim skirt was short enough to showcase long, shapely legs, and her solid white tee was fitted just enough to hint at ample curves.

Her eyes narrowed when she saw him, but she managed to smile. "I haven't thanked you for stopping. I appreciate your help." She sounded more resentful than appreciative, but Chase nodded in acknowledgment of her words.

"You're welcome," he said shortly, then held up the flares. "I'm just going to return these to my safety kit."

She didn't respond, so he turned and took his time opening up the back of his SUV and stowing the flares in his kit. By the time he finished, he heard a car approaching and turned. He sighed in relief when he saw it was the sheriff.

He glanced toward the female, whose expression had lightened. Obviously she liked the sheriff a lot more than she did him, which suited him to a tee. After all, with any luck, he'd never see her again after this afternoon.

The sheriff opened his trunk and pulled out a five-gallon gas can.

Chase hurried toward him. "Need any help?"

"You can loosen her gas cap for me," the sheriff replied. A couple of minutes later, after pouring the gas into the tank, he turned to address Chase.

"You can be on your way any time now. I'll take it from here."

Chase had to sit down on himself to keep from yelping with relief. He tried for a solemn expression. "Okay, but only if you're sure you don't need me any longer."

"I'm sure. Tell Josh I said hello and that I'll give him a ring tonight to make certain that everything is going smoothly at the animal shelter."

Chase figured the sheriff's real reason for wanting to call Josh was to make certain that Chase wasn't some dude impersonating Josh's stepbrother Jacob, but that was okay. He liked that the sheriff seemed to be on top of things.

"I'll be sure and give Josh the message," he said. He jogged over to his SUV, climbed in, and started it up. He carefully backed up into the highway, then held up his hand as he drove past the sheriff and the female, both still standing by the side of the road.

He hoped the woman didn't think he'd been waving at her.

Chapter Two

Aurora Nolan watched the huge silver SUV disappear around a curve in the road and wrinkled her nose in distaste. She despised those big old road hogs. And she was equally unimpressed with the man who'd been driving it. Oh well, at least he deserved a smidgeon of credit. He'd stopped and tried to help, even if he *had* treated her like she was first cousin to a polecat.

When she turned from watching the SUV, she saw that the sheriff was regarding her with a worried frown. "Did that man bother you in some way, Miss?"

Suddenly aware that she was still scowling, Aurora gulped and smiled. "Not at all, sheriff. He wasn't especially friendly, but he was kind enough to stop and offer to help. And I don't blame him for being a little irritable. After all, it was careless of me to forget to gas up before I started to Barbourville."

The sheriff's frown cleared but he still regarded her solemnly. "If you don't mind my asking, what's your business in Barbourville? I don't think I've seen you in these parts before."

"No, you wouldn't have seen me before, but I have a cousin who lives in Barbourville. Or somewhere in the county. I'm not exactly sure. You might know her. Mattie Meadows-Vance. She came here a few years ago to write an article for a travel magazine and ended up marrying Denver Vance. She's been trying to get me to visit her for months but I was always too busy. Now I'm not."

The sheriff chuckled. "Small world. Denver Vance is my wife's uncle, so of course I know Mattie. Did she give you directions to their house?"

Aurora grimaced. "Actually, I didn't tell her I was coming. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. I intended to call before I got there, but then I ran out of gas in a spot where there's no cell coverage."

"Coverage is spotty around here. Why don't you follow me into town? If you can't get a signal on your cell, we'll borrow somebody's landline."

"Thanks, sheriff. And if you don't mind..." Aurora felt warmth creeping from her neck up to her cheeks. After being stranded so long, she really needed a bathroom but decided to mention a secondary need first. "I'd love to grab a bite to eat before I call Mattie. I haven't taken time to eat anything today."

"Good grief. It's midafternoon. You must be half starved. But I know just the place. Follow me to Sonny's Diner and you can get a good solid meal that will perk you right up."

"That sounds great, Sheriff. Is it far?"

"About fifteen miles. The road's curvy though, so it may take us half an hour. Do you want to stop at the service station just up the road and grab a snack?"

Aurora bit her lip. Her previous experience with restrooms in rural service stations didn't leave her inclined to go that route. "No, thanks. I'll be fine until we get to the diner you mentioned."

"Okay. Let's go then. Since you're not familiar with these curves, I'll drive slow and keep you in my rearview mirror."

Aurora thanked the sheriff again before climbing into her car. He'd made sure it would start, so she felt no qualms about pulling out into the road behind him. She just hoped he didn't drive too slowly. She really needed to find a decent restroom as soon as possible. Then she'd worry about something to eat.

Half an hour later, Aurora followed the sheriff's car down Kessler Boulevard, the main thoroughfare in Barbourville. He was driving slowly enough that she had ample time to glance to either side of the street, and she was impressed with what she saw. Neat storefronts faced a wide sidewalk with planters every few feet overflowing with bright, seasonal flowers. Small trees had been evenly situated in spaces between the planters, giving the street a pleasant community feel. Mattie had told her that Barbourville was a nice town, but she really hadn't expected anything this charming.

A couple of minutes later, the sheriff rolled down his window, stuck his arm out, and pointed to a parking space in front of an older brick building with a large plate glass window lettered with the words "Sonny's Diner."

"Thank goodness," Aurora murmured to herself. Her need for a restroom was becoming critical. She cut her motor and looked around for the sheriff. He'd pulled into a space on the opposite side of the street. He had already exited his cruiser and was making his way toward her. She opened her door and climbed out just as he came even with her.

"I'll escort you inside Sonny's and introduce you to the proprietor," he said. "Sometimes Sonny is a little reserved around strangers, but once you get to know him, he's one of the finest people you'd ever want to meet."

"Thanks," Aurora murmured. "I hope he has a restroom I can use."

"Sure thing. I'll point you in that direction first and wait for you at the counter."

The restaurant was almost deserted at this midafternoon hour, and as soon as they stepped inside, true to his word, the sheriff pointed to a back corner. “The ladies’ room is right back there.”

Aurora glanced at the taciturn man behind the counter as she passed. He regarded her solemnly for a second before turning toward the sheriff with a nod and raised eyebrows. If this man was Sonny, he must have something going for him besides his personality.

But his less-than-welcoming attitude was the least of her worries. As soon as she used the restroom and freshened up, she needed to call Mattie, and that was a call she dreaded making. Sure, Mattie had been urging her to visit for some time, but she hadn’t suggested that Aurora just drop in unannounced. And Aurora had met Mattie’s husband only once, briefly. Denver might be less than thrilled to have an unexpected houseguest.

Aurora sighed aloud as she washed her hands at the old-fashioned lavatory and examined her reflection in the wavy glass of the mirror. At least the redness had faded from her eyes, and her lids were no longer puffy. She’d never been an attractive crier and had looked especially bad after a day and a half of crying.

But she was determined to put that behind her. She hadn’t shed a single tear today although she’d come very close when that irritable SUV driver had snapped at her. What was his problem, anyway? She hadn’t run out of gas on purpose, and he’d had ample time to avoid hitting her even though he did have to pull off on the shoulder. Jeez!

After freshening her lip gloss, Aurora squared her shoulders and stepped back into the restaurant. Time to think about calling Mattie.

The sheriff had seated himself on a stool at the counter. He had a cup of coffee in front of him and appeared to be in a conversation with the proprietor. The two glanced at her and the sheriff motioned for her to join them, but a second later, both men turned to look toward the front door, which had just been pushed open with a degree of enthusiasm that sent the little bell over the entrance tinkling wildly.

Aurora also spun to see who was causing that racket. A large man sporting a shock of white hair stepped inside. His slightly ruddy face was graced with such a wide grin that Aurora was tempted to grin back but a second later was glad she hadn’t. The man tossed up a hand as though in greeting, but then he paused, pursed his lips solemnly, and shook his head. “Is this what we’re paying the county sheriff to do—sit around all day and drink coffee? I better bring this up at the next commission meeting. My fellow commissioners may want to consider advertising for a new sheriff.”

Horrified, Aurora jerked her head around to see how the sheriff was taking this insult and was surprised to see him grinning. “Afternoon, Uncle Bob. I’ll bet you’ve come to see if Sonny has any leftover biscuits and gravy, but I’ve got an even nicer treat in store for you.” He paused to motion toward Aurora. “This lady is a cousin to Mattie.”

The sheriff smiled at Aurora. “Uncle Bob—most people call him Judge McCray or just Judge—is your cousin’s stepfather. She’s probably mentioned him to you.”

“Oh!” Aurora realized her mouth had dropped open and she closed it quickly. “Of course. Mattie’s told me many wonderful things about you, Judge McCray. Especially about your barbecues.”

The judge laughed heartily. “My reputation precedes me, I see. But you have me at a disadvantage, young lady. Just which cousin would you be?”

“I’m Aurora. Aurora Nolan.”

A slight frown touched the judge's forehead but quickly cleared. "You must be the cousin they call Rori. Mattie's talked a lot about you. She was always proud of how you took over management of that store in North Carolina and made it so popular and so profitable."

Aurora gulped. Darn it all. She had hoped to get away from the nickname that had followed her since she was a child and too often led people to think she was a man. And she'd also hoped to get away from discussions about her former career. So much for her hopes. She swallowed a sigh. "Yes, I'm Rori."

The judge beamed as though he'd just solved a particularly knotty puzzle. "Mattie will be so happy you finally made it to Barbourville. I wonder why she didn't mention that you'd be visiting?"

Rori gulped again, then tried for a self-deprecating smile. "Maybe because she didn't know. This was a spur-of-the-moment trip for me. Please don't tell me that Mattie's out of town on assignment." Darn, she hadn't even considered that possibility.

"Nope, you're in luck. In fact, she's not accepting many of those writing assignments these days because she said she's getting tired of traveling so much."

Sonny, who'd been leaning on the counter, straightened. "Denver was in here early this morning to grab a bite of breakfast. Said he was on his way to Chattanooga for some sort of installation job and might have to spend the night. He said Mattie had stayed home to bake a cake. Seems she's really getting into this homemaking business."

"Like mother, like daughter," the judge interjected. "My dear Evelyn has always loved cooking and baking, and I've got the waistline to prove it." He patted his ample belly and laughed.

Rori decided she was going to like the judge. She hadn't been sure based on the wild tales she'd heard about him from Mattie. None of those stories had been bad although they'd certainly portrayed the judge as a figure bigger than life.

The sheriff pushed himself off his stool and addressed the judge. "Miss Nolan needs to get a bite to eat before going to Mattie's house, and she also wants to call Mattie. She couldn't call earlier because she couldn't get a signal on her way up the mountain."

He hadn't mentioned her running out of gas, which she appreciated. She thanked him with a smile. "I'm hoping I can get a signal here in town."

"You should be able to. If not, I'm sure Sonny will let you use his landline." He pulled out his billfold and laid a dollar on the counter.

Sonny frowned. "I've told you, Daniel, that you don't need to pay for coffee when you're on duty."

The sheriff shrugged. "Put it in the tip jar for Opal Acosta then. She's turning out to be a good waitress. In the meantime, I'd better get back to work before Uncle Bob decides to report me to the county commission for real."

The judge snorted. "Like they'd listen to me. Besides, they all think highly of you for some unfathomable reason."

"There's no accounting for tastes," the sheriff agreed with a twinkle in his eyes. "See you folks."

Rori watched him walk out the front door and somehow felt as though she was losing her only friend in Barbourville. But the judge immediately placed a hand on her shoulder. "Now don't you worry, Miz Rori, because Mattie's going to be tickled to death to see you."

Rori was slightly jolted by the judge referring to her as *Miz Rori*, but almost immediately she recalled Mattie saying he referred to all women as *Miz* and that no one had ever objected because he obviously did so with a solid sense of respect. She smiled. "I'm really looking forward to this visit myself. Mattie and I were especially close when we were younger."

The judge pulled a phone out of his pocket and held it up. "Do you want me to give her a call for you?"

"Would you mind? My battery's probably low by now. I forgot to plug my phone in last night."

"Happy to," the judge responded instantly. He pushed a couple of buttons and was soon speaking into his phone. "Afternoon, Miz Mattie. I have a nice surprise for you. I'm standing here in Sonny's Diner with your cousin Rori. Yep, I'm sure. Pretty blonde with big blue eyes. She'll have half the single men in Barbourville falling over their own feet trying to get acquainted with her. Would you like to speak to her?"

He grinned and held his phone out. "She's tickled to death, just like I told you she would be."

Rori couldn't suppress a slight sense of dread as she held the judge's phone to her ear. "Hi Mattie. Sorry to surprise you like this. I had some unexpected free time and decided to take you up on your invitation."

Her dread eased a bit at Mattie's enthusiastic welcome. A few seconds later, she had promised to hurry and "get herself on out to the house" as soon as she possibly could, which meant putting off eating for a while longer. Rori didn't mind. She was hungry but not hungry enough to delay seeing her cousin. She smiled with relief when she handed the judge's phone back.

"Now then, didn't I tell you she'd be mighty happy that you're here for a visit. I'll drive out by her house and you can follow me. There's a wrought iron sign at the foot of her driveway that reads *Meadows-Vance House*. I'll point it out to you and then drive on home."

"That's very nice of you, Judge."

"I'm happy to, Miz Rori." He turned to address Sonny. "I'll probably see you tomorrow and we'll talk more about that committee meeting. Tell the missus and the rest of the family I asked about them."

"Will do, Judge," Sonny replied before turning around and disappearing through a door leading toward the back.

"Where are you parked?" the judge asked.

"Right out front."

"Me too. I'll walk you to your car."

The judge held the door for Rori, then stepped outside with her. "How much time do you have off from your job?" he asked, pausing on the sidewalk.

Rori gulped. This was the question she'd been dreading. She hoped she could answer without choking up. Mr. Cramdon's betrayal was still fresh enough that her mind hadn't fully come to terms with her new situation. She pulled in a deep breath and forced a smile. "I'm no longer employed at the Cramdon Country Store," she said. "Mr. Cramdon sold out and the new owner let everyone go."

"What?" The judge's mouth dropped open. "Well, that new owner must be a fool to let you go. Mattie told us how you turned that business around after you were hired on

as the manager. How you came up with all those ideas that started drawing people in from near and far. How you rearranged the merchandise and starting stocking local products and how within six months the store was making a substantial profit for the first time in years.”

“Unfortunately, the new owner isn’t interested in continuing to sell the type of products that we had been successful with. He’s clearing out the merchandise and plans to buy products that he can sell more cheaply.”

The judge rolled his eyes. “Dang fools just want to change things because they can. He’ll eventually learn his mistake, but in the meantime, I guess you’re out of a job.”

Rori nodded. “But don’t think that I came here to sponge off Mattie. I’ve got enough saved to see me through a long dry spell. I just need a shoulder to cry on for a day or two.”

“Hmmm,” the judge hummed. He pinched his chin and frowned, then looked directly into Rori’s eyes. “You won’t be rushing off too soon, will you?”

Rori frowned too. Why on earth was the judge interested in her schedule? “I guess that will depend on Mattie and Denver. I don’t want to impose.”

“Don’t worry about that. They’ll be glad to have you. But do me a favor.”

“A favor?” Rori replied hesitantly. “What kind of favor?”

“Don’t leave town without talking to me first.”

“But why?” she asked.

“Can’t say right now,” the judge murmured. “Well, we’d better get a move on or Mattie will think we’re lost. That’s my car right there. You just follow me and I’ll lead you where you need to go.”

With a sly smile pulling at the corners of his lips, he turned and loped off toward his vehicle. Rori had to hurry to get into her own car and get buckled in before he pulled out and motioned for her to fall in behind him.

She strongly suspected the judge had just come up with some sort of scheme involving her, and based on the stories she’d heard about the man, she couldn’t help feeling a considerable degree of apprehension.

An hour later, Rori sat across from Mattie in the kitchen of Meadows-Vance House eating a sandwich and reveling in Mattie’s sympathy and indignation on her behalf.

“I can’t believe Mr. Cramdon sold the store without bothering to tell you his plans,” Mattie exclaimed. “Especially after promising you that you had first right of refusal if he ever did decide to sell. What excuse did he give you? Not that there’s an acceptable excuse for that sort of betrayal, but still...”

Rori swallowed a bite of the sandwich Mattie had thrown together for her after learning that she hadn’t eaten all day. “First he said that he wouldn’t have had to sell the store if I hadn’t started carrying such high-end merchandise. He claimed he was losing money because of me, but that isn’t true. His oldest daughter, Mitzi, took over the bookkeeping a few months ago, and I suspect she convinced him he needed to sell when he got a very favorable offer from a conglomerate in Charlotte. Of course, the folks in Charlotte wouldn’t have been interested in buying the store if my ideas hadn’t made it so profitable.”

“That’s for sure,” Mattie said, slapping the table with the palm of her hand. “And besides, he should have given you the option of raising the money to meet their offer. I know a lot of people who would have been happy to invest in that store with you. I’ll bet you could have beat the conglomerate’s offer.”

For the first time since she’d learned that her former boss had broken his word to her, Rori could breathe without feeling a constriction in her chest. It didn’t surprise her that Mattie had been able to lift her spirits so quickly. The two had grown up in the same small Georgia town and, although Mattie was a little older, they had been confidants.

Finally, Rori was able to take a deep breath and force a smile. “Maybe it’s all for the best. We never know. In any case, it’s done and now I just have to get over it and figure how what to do next.”

Mattie reached across the table to grasp her hand. “I’ll tell you what you’re going to do right now. You’re going to stay here with me and relax. We haven’t had a chance to catch up in forever, and I’m thrilled you finally came to visit me.”

Rori raised her brows. “Denver might not feel the same way.”

“Don’t you worry about Denver,” Mattie responded with a laugh. “He’s the most laid-back man you’ll ever want to meet. He won’t object at all to my having my favorite cousin visiting for a while. And after you’ve had time to unwind a little, we’ll start figuring out what you want to do next.”

Rori heaved a sigh of relief. No doubt about it, she’d done the right thing in coming to Barbourville to see Mattie. Now she simply had to put Mr. Cramdon’s betrayal out of her mind and try to come up with a plan for the rest of her life.