

# REGINA HART

## HARMONY CABINS

*❧ A Finding Home Novel ❧*



*Who said you can't find  
big love in a small town?*

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Audra didn't remember helping Jack repack the cooler. She didn't recall leaving the waterfall or walking down the hill through the woods. Her mind didn't clear until they arrived at her cabin. The gravel path crunched beneath her sneakers. She didn't remember putting those on again, either.

Jack climbed her porch beside her. "Did you eat the fish you caught Monday?"

She could still feel his hand between her thighs and he wanted to talk about fish? "Yes. It was delicious."

"I was thinking of cooking mine for dinner tonight. Will you join me?" His quiet question caused the muscles at the tops of her thighs to pulse again.

Should she? "I don't know if it's a good idea for us to spend more time together."

"I'm not suggesting we take our clothes off." Jack's onyx eyes probed hers. "But I was serious when I said you're changing me, and for the better. I haven't laughed or even smiled much since . . . in a very long time. I'd like to get to know you."

Either he was telling the truth or that was the best pickup line she'd heard in her thirty-one years of life.

She was playing with fire. Twice he'd shown her that with a look, a touch, or a taste, he could make her forget her best intentions.

But the fact was she wanted to get to know him better, too. "All right."

Jack's smile was her reward. "I'll see you at seven." He turned to leave.

"Should I bring anything?" Her question stopped him.

"No, I've got it covered." And he winked at her. He actually winked.

Audra dug her keys from her front pocket, then let herself into her cabin. This was the way she would have felt if she'd had a date to her high school prom.

**Also by Regina Hart**

*Fast Break*

*Smooth Play*

*Keeping Score*

*Trinity Falls*

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REGINA HART



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*To my dream team:*

- *My sister Bernadette, for giving me the dream*
- *My husband Michael, for supporting the dream*
- *My brother Richard, for believing in the dream*
- *My brother Gideon, for encouraging the dream*
- *My friend and critique partner, Marcia James, for sharing the dream*

*And to Mom and Dad, always with love*

## CHAPTER 1

Audra Lane strode with manufactured confidence to the vacation rental cabins' main desk and faced the man she thought was the registration clerk. She curled her bare toes against the warm polished wood flooring and took a deep breath.

"You're probably wondering why I'm wearing this trash bag."

"Yes."

That was it. That single syllable delivered without inflection or emotion in a soft, bluesy baritone.

Audra's swagger stalled. She tugged her right earlobe.

Maybe that was his way. His manner wasn't unwelcoming. It was just spare. He'd been the same when she'd checked into the rental cabins in *Where-the-Heck-Am-I, Ohio*, less than an hour earlier.

In fact, the entire registration area was just as spartan as the clerk. Despite the large picture windows, the room seemed dark and cheerless in the middle of this bright summer morning. There weren't chairs inviting guests to relax or corner tables with engaging information about the nearby town. It didn't even offer a coffee station. Nothing about the room said, *Welcome! We're glad you're here.* There were only bare oak walls, bare oak floors, and a tight-lipped clerk.

*What kind of vacation spot is this?*

Audra pushed her questions about the room's lack of ambience to the back of her mind and addressed her primary concern.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her black plastic makeshift minidress. "I'd left some of my toiletries in my rental car. I thought I could just step into the attached garage to get them, but the door shut behind me. Luckily, I found a box of trash bags on a shelf."

She stopped. Her face flamed. If he hadn't suspected before, he now knew beyond a doubt that she was butt naked under this bag.

*Oh. My. God.*

She'd ripped a large hole on the bottom and smaller ones on either side of the bag for a crude little black dress, which on her five-seven frame was *very* little.

Audra gave him a hard look, but his almond-shaped onyx eyes remained steady on hers. He didn't offer even a flicker of reaction. His eyes were really quite striking, and the only part of his face she could make out. When he'd checked her into the rental, she'd been too tired after her flight from California to notice his deep sienna features were half hidden by a thick, unkempt beard. His dark brown hair was twisted into tattered, uneven braids. They hung above broad shoulders clothed in a short-sleeved, dark blue T-shirt. But his eyes . . . they were so dark, so direct, and so wounded. A poet's eyes.

How could the cabins' owner allow his staff to come to work looking so disheveled, especially an employee who worked the front desk? Did the clerk think he looked intimidating? Well, she'd been born and raised in Los Angeles. He'd have to try harder.

Without a word, the clerk turned and unlocked the cabinet on the wall behind him.

He chose a key from a multitude of options and pulled a document from the credenza.

“Sign this.” He handed the paper to her.

The form stated she acknowledged receipt of her cabin’s spare key and would return it promptly. Audra signed it with relief. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He gave her the key.

A smile spread across her mouth and chased away her discomfort. Audra closed her hand around the key and raised her gaze to his. “I don’t know your name.”

“Jack.”

“Hi, Jack. I’m Au . . . Penny. Penny Lane.” When he didn’t respond, she continued. “Thanks again for the spare key. I’ll bring it right back.”

“No rush.”

“Thank you.” Audra turned on her bare heels and hurried from the main cabin. That had been easy—relatively speaking. At times, she’d even forgotten she was wearing a garbage bag and nothing else. It helped that Jack hadn’t looked at her with mockery or scorn. He’d been very professional. Bless him!

Jackson Sansbury waited until his guest disappeared behind the closed front door. Only then did he release the grin he’d been struggling against. It had taken every ounce of control not to burst into laughter as she’d marched toward him, the trash-bag dress rustling with her every step.

He shook his head. She’d been wearing a garbage bag! Oh, to have seen the look on her face when the breezeway door had shut behind her—while she’d been naked in the garage. Jack gripped the registration desk and surrendered to a few rusty chuckles. They felt good. It had been a long time since he’d found anything funny.

He wiped his eyes with his fingers, then lifted the replacement key form. A few extra chuckles escaped. She’d signed this document, as well as the registration, *Penny Lane*. Jack shook his head again. Did she really expect him to believe her parents had named her after a Beatles song?

Jack lifted his gaze to the front door. She’d given a Los Angeles address when she’d registered. Who was she? And why would someone from Los Angeles spend a month at a cabin in Trinity Falls, Ohio, by herself under a fake name?

“Benita, when you told me you’d made a reservation for me at a vacation rental cabin, I thought you meant one with other *people*,” Audra grumbled into her cellular phone to her business manager, Benita Hawkins.

Although still tired from the red-eye flight from California to Ohio, she felt much more human after she’d showered and dressed.

“There aren’t any people there?” Benita sounded vaguely intrigued.

“The only things here are trees, a lake, and a taciturn registration clerk.” Audra’s lips tightened. Her manager wasn’t taking her irritation seriously.

“Hmmm. Even better.”

Audra glared at her phone before returning it to her ear. She could picture the other woman seated behind her cluttered desk, reviewing e-mails and mail while humoring her. “What do you mean, ‘even better’?”

“I told you that you needed a change to get over your writer’s block. You’re having trouble coming up with new songs because you’re in a rut. You see the same people. Go to the same places. There’s nothing new or exciting in your life.”

*That was harsh.*

Audra stared out the window at the tree line. She’d noticed right away that none of the windows had curtains. The lack of privacy increased the cabin’s creepiness factor.

A modest lawn lay like an amnesty zone between her and a lush spread of evergreen and poplar trees, which circled the cabin like a military strike force. In the distance, she could see sunlight bouncing on the lake like shards of glass on the water. The area was isolated. Audra didn’t do isolated. She’d texted her parents after she’d checked into the cabin to let them know she’d arrived safely. Maybe she should have waited.

“This place is like Mayberry’s version of the Bates Motel.” She turned from the window. “How is this supposed to cure my insomnia?”

“Writing will cure your insomnia.”

“Have you been to these cabins?”

“No. When I was growing up in Trinity Falls, Harmony Cabins went into bankruptcy and was abandoned. They’ve only recently been renovated.”

“I’m coming home.” But first she’d take a nap. The red-eye flight was catching up with her. She wasn’t safe to drive back to the airport.

The cabin itself was lovely. The great room’s walls, floors, and ceiling were made of gleaming honey wood. The granite stone fireplace dominated the room. But a large flat-screen, cable-ready television reassured her she’d have something to do at night. The comfortable furnishings that were missing from the main cabin were scattered around this room, an overstuffed sofa and fat fabric chairs. The dark décor was decidedly masculine. That would explain the lack of curtains at the windows. Men probably didn’t think about details like that.

“You promised me you’d give it thirty days, Audra.” The clicking of Benita’s computer keyboard sounded just under her words. “I sent the rental a nonrefundable check for the full amount of your stay in advance.”

Audra frowned. Benita’s check had allowed her to register as Penny Lane. “It was your check, but my money. If I want to cancel this anti-vacation vacation, I will.”

They both recognized the empty threat. The cost of a monthlong stay at a rental cabin was too much to waste.

Benita’s exasperated sigh traveled twenty-four hundred miles and three time zones through the cell phone. “You owe the record producer three hit songs in four weeks. How are they coming?”

Audra ground her teeth. Her deadline was August 4, twenty-five days from today. Benita knew very well she hadn’t made any progress on the project. “How can you believe this place is the solution? You’ve never even been here.”

“Do you really think I’d send you someplace that wasn’t safe? I have family in Trinity Falls. If there were serial killers there, I’d know.”

Audra tugged her right earlobe. She was angry because she was scared, and scared because she was outside her comfort zone. “I don’t want to be here. It’s not what I’m used to.”

“That’s why you *need* to be there. And this is the best time. Trinity Falls is celebrating its sesquicentennial. The town’s hosting its Founders Day Celebration on

August ninth. I'll be there."

"One hundred fifty years. That's impressive."

Benita chuckled. "I'll see you in a month."

Audra stared at her cell phone. Her manager had ended their call. "I guess that means I'm staying." She shoved her cell phone into the front pocket of her tan jeans shorts and turned back to the window. "In that case, I'll need curtains."

The chimes above the main cabin's front door sang. With three keystrokes, Jack locked his laptop and pushed away from his desk. The cabins had had more activity today than they'd ever had before.

Jack hesitated behind the registration desk. It wasn't a surprise to see the chair of the Trinity Falls Sesquicentennial Steering Committee had returned. Doreen Fever was a determined woman.

"Afternoon, Doreen." He knew why she was there. She wanted every citizen to be involved in the festivities surrounding the town's 150th birthday. The problem was, Jack wasn't a joiner.

"I'm still amazed by how much you've accomplished with the rentals in so little time." Doreen gazed around the reception area.

"Thank you."

Doreen was the sole candidate for mayor of Trinity Falls. She also was the artist behind the bakery operation of Books & Bakery, and the mother of Jackson's former schoolmate, though she looked too young to have an only child who was just two years younger than he was. Her cocoa skin was smooth and radiant. Her short, curly hair was dark brown. And her warm brown eyes were full of sympathy. Jack didn't want anyone's sympathy. Not even someone as genuine and caring as Doreen.

"I hear you have a lodger." Doreen folded her hands on the counter between them.

How did the residents of Trinity Falls learn everyone else's business so fast? His guest hadn't even been here a full day. "Not by choice."

Confusion flickered across Doreen's features before she masked it with a polite nod. "A young woman."

"I noticed."

"I'm glad to see the cabins' renovations are going well and that you're taking in customers."

"Thank you."

Doreen gave him a knowing smile. "The elementary school was grateful for your generous donation. I take it that was the check from your guest? Are you sure you don't need that money to reinvest in the repairs?"

"The school needs the money more. I appreciate your stopping by, Doreen." He turned to leave.

"Jack, you know why I'm here." Doreen sounded exasperated.

Good. He could handle exasperation. Pity pissed him off.

He faced her again. "You know my answer."

"The town will be one-hundred-and-fifty-years old on August ninth. That will be a momentous occasion, and everyone wants you to be a part of it."

Jack shook his head. "You don't need me."

“Yes, we do.” Doreen’s tone was filled with dogged determination. “This sesquicentennial is a chance for Trinity Falls to raise its profile in the county and across the state. You, of all people, must have a role in the Founders Day Celebration.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Yes, it is.” Doreen leaned into the desk. “This event, if done well, will bring in extra revenue.”

“I know about the town’s budget concerns. I have an online subscription to *The Trinity Falls Monitor*.” Reading the paper online saved Jack from having to go into town or deal with a newspaper delivery person.

Doreen continued as though Jack hadn’t spoken. “If we host a large celebration with high-profile guests, we’ll attract more people. These tourists will stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants, and buy our souvenirs.”

“Great. Good luck with that.” He checked his watch for emphasis. It was almost two o’clock in the afternoon. “Anything else?”

She softened her voice. “I know that you’re still grieving Zoey’s death.”

“Don’t.” The air drained from the room.

“I can’t imagine how devastated you must feel at the loss of your daughter.”

“Doreen.” He choked out her name.

“We understand you need time to grieve. But, Jack, it’s been almost two years. It’s not healthy to close yourself off from human contact. People care about you. We can help you.”

“Can you bring her back?” The words were harsh, rough, and raw.

Doreen looked stricken. “I can no more bring back your daughter than I can resurrect my late husband.”

Paul Fever had died from cancer more than a year ago. He’d been sixty-seven. In contrast, leukemia had cut his daughter’s life tragically short.

Jack struggled to reel in his emotions. “People grieve in different ways.”

Pity reappeared in Doreen’s warm brown eyes. “I went through the same feelings. But, Jack, at some point, you have to rejoin society.”

“Not today.” Some days, he feared he’d never be ready.

Caring about people hurt. He’d loved his ex-wife and his daughter. He never again wanted to experience the pain losing them had caused. If anything, the experience had taught him that it was better not to let people get too close.

The persistent ringing shattered Audra’s dream. She blinked her eyes open. Had she fallen asleep?

Her gaze dropped to the song stanzas scribbled across the notebook on her lap. Was it the red-eye flight or her lyrics that had lulled her to sleep?

She stretched forward to grab her cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Did we wake you?” Her mother asked after a pause.

Audra heard the surprise in the question. “It was a long trip.” She refused to believe her writing had put her to sleep. “Is everything OK?”

Ellen Prince Lane sighed. “That’s what we’re calling to find out. We thought you were going to call us when you arrived at the resort.”

“I sent you a text when I landed.” Audra scrubbed a hand across her eyes, wiping away the last remnants of fatigue.

“A text is not a phone call.” Ellen spoke with exaggerated patience. “How do we know that someone didn’t kidnap you and send that text to delay our reporting you missing?”

Audra rolled her eyes. Her mother read too many true-crime novels. Her father wouldn’t have suspected foul play was behind a text from her.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“This whole idea worries me.” Her mother made fretting noises. “Why couldn’t you have stayed in Redondo Beach to write your songs? Why did you have to go to some resort in Ohio?”

Audra wanted to laugh. No one would mistake Harmony Cabins for a resort. But this probably wasn’t a good time to tell her mother that.

“We discussed this, Mom. Benita thought a change of scenery would cure my writer’s block.” And even though she had her doubts, Audra didn’t want to add to her parents’ worries.

Ellen tsked. “How long will you be gone?”

They’d discussed that, too. “About a month.”

“You’ve never been away from home that long.”

“I know, Mom.”

“You don’t even know anything about that resort.”

“Benita’s friend owns the cabins. I’m sure I’ll be comfortable here.”

“How will you eat?”

“There’s a town nearby. I’ll pick up some groceries in the morning.”

“What do they eat there?”

Audra closed her eyes and prayed for patience. “I’m in Ohio, Mom. It’s not a foreign country. I’m sure I’ll find something familiar in the town’s grocery store.”

Ellen sniffed. “There’s no need to take that tone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Your father’s very worried about you, Audra.”

Yet her mother was the one on the phone. “Tell Dad I’ll be fine. The cabin is clean and safe. There are locks on all the doors and windows. I’ll be home before you know it.” She hoped.

Audra looked toward the windows beside the front door. She needed curtains. She didn’t like the idea of the windows being uncovered, especially at night. She’d feel too exposed. She checked her wristwatch. It wasn’t quite three in the afternoon. It wouldn’t be dark until closer to nine at night. She had a few hours to figure something out, like hanging sheets over the windows for tonight.

Her mother’s abrupt sigh interrupted her planning. “Your father wants to talk with you. Maybe he can get you to see reason.”

Audra rubbed her eyes with her thumb and two fingers. This experiment was hard enough without her mother’s overprotectiveness.

“My Grammy-winning daughter!” Randall Lane boomed his greeting into the telephone. He’d been calling her that since she’d been presented with the Song of the Year Grammy Award in February. Before that, she’d been his Grammy-*nominated* daughter.

Audra settled back on the overstuffed plaid sofa. “Hi, Daddy.”

“Will you be home in time for my birthday?”

She frowned. Her father’s birthday was in October. It was only July. “Of course.”

“That’s all that matters.”

“Randall!” Ellen’s screech crossed state lines. “Give me back that phone!”

“Your mother wants to speak with you again. Have a nice time in Ohio, baby.”

Her mother was as breathless as though she’d chased her father across the room.

“Aren’t there coyotes and bears in Ohio? And mountain lions?”

Audra’s heart stopped with her mother’s questions. She was a West Coast city woman in the wilds of the Midwest. Talk about being a fish out of water.

She swallowed to loosen the wad of fear lodged in her throat. “They don’t come near the cabins.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do,” she lied. “I’ll be fine.”

“I think you should come home, Audra. What does Benita know about writer’s block? She’s your business manager, not a writer. I’m your mother. I know what you need. You need rest.”

Her mother had a point. Audra hadn’t had a full night’s sleep ever since she’d taken the Grammy home.

She stood and paced past the front windows. “Benita may be right. Maybe I need to get completely out of my comfort zone to jump-start my writing.”

Ellen sniffed again. “Well, I disagree. And so does Wendell.”

Audra stilled at the mention of her treacherous ex-boyfriend. They’d broken up three months ago. Her mother knew that. “What does he have to do with anything?”

“He’s been trying to get in touch with you. He wants your forgiveness.”

That made up her mind. She was definitely staying at Harmony Cabins for at least a month. “Please don’t tell Wendell where I am. Even if I forgive him, we’re never getting back together.”

“What has he done? You never told me why you broke up.”

Shame was a bitter taste in her throat. “Wendell used me. I’m not giving him or anyone else the chance to do that again.”

## CHAPTER 2

Early Saturday morning, Audra locked her cabin door, then stretched her arms high above her head. Her bright orange running jersey slid up her torso. She leaned left, then right, stretching the muscles of her back and sides. Audra jogged in place as she set the stopwatch feature on her digital wristwatch. It was only six-thirty, eastern standard time, three-thirty back home. She'd do an easy thirty-minute run out, then retrace her way back.

Her footsteps crunched along the gravel path, then abruptly silenced when the surface changed to dirt. A warm mid-July breeze followed her, carrying the scents of morning dew, grass, and pine from her isolated cabin toward the nearby lake.

*"Aren't there coyotes and bears in Ohio? And mountain lions?"* Her mother's question stalked her.

Audra stumbled on the smooth path. Why had Ellen planted that fear in her mind? Maybe jogging in the woods wasn't a good idea. She didn't know this area. She couldn't assume it would be as safe as the path four miles from her Redondo Beach townhome.

She was almost to the clearing surrounding the lake when she saw a figure sprint from the wood on the other side.

*Jack!*

He was a blur of gray T-shirt and black shorts. His feet barely touched the ground. Audra gasped, jumping back. She crouched beside some bushes. Her heart thundered in her ears. Her body screamed with tension. What the hell was chasing him?

She shot a look back toward the tree line behind him. Even after several breathless seconds, the path remained empty. Her attention returned to Jack. He'd slowed to a walk.

Oh, for Pete's sake! Was that the way he completed his morning run, with a sprint to the end of the path as though the hounds of hell were hunting him? She wished she'd known that before. Audra bent over, trying to catch her breath. But she kept a wary eye on Jack.

Without warning, he stripped his sweat-soaked T-shirt over his head. Her breath lodged in her throat. Again. She could barely see him on the other side of the lake. Still, her fingers shook with the need to trace his taut sienna back. She could almost feel the heat and dampness of his skin. There was something carnal about him that stirred a longing deep inside her that she didn't recognize.

Audra's gaze followed Jack as he crossed the whimsical blond-wood bridge back to the rental cabins' side of the lake. He continued on the path to the main cabin. Only after he was out of sight did Audra exhale.

She found an easy pace that carried her over the same bridge and into the woods across the lake. Her pulse quickened. Her stomach muscles quivered with nerves. Audra shook her head. She had to step out of her comfort zone and confront her fears. Jack had gone running on this trail and had returned in one piece. It must be safe. Right? She replaced her mental images of lions, tigers, and bears with one of Jack,

bare-chested and sweaty. The trick vanquished her fears. Now her breathing was shallow for other reasons.

Two hours later, Audra had showered and dressed after her workout. She skipped down her weathered front steps and started toward the main cabin. It was almost half past eight o'clock. She bent her head back and gazed through the leaf-laden tree branches. The sun shone on the green leaves framed against the bright blue sky. Beautiful.

Audra arrived at the main rental cabin's front door; this time, she was fully dressed and wearing shoes. She entered and closed the door before turning toward the registration desk—and Jack.

“Good morning.”

“Ms. Lane.” His smooth, deep voice made the greeting more formal.

His braids were even more disheveled this morning than they'd been yesterday. And his beard . . . was he channeling his inner ZZ Top? Audra's thoughts flashed to the 1980s music video of the pop band's hit song “Sharp-Dressed Man.” Jack could use some help with that.

“You can call me, um, Penny.”

Jack didn't respond. His onyx eyes were steady on hers. What was he thinking? Was it too much to hope he'd forgotten the garbage bag she'd worn the last time she'd come to the cabin? Probably.

Audra smoothed the neckline of her lime green cotton blouse. “Do you have a map of the town? I'd like to get a few things, like groceries and curtains.”

“Curtains?”

“There are a lot of windows in the cabin, but none of them have curtains. I feel exposed.”

Jack stared at her in an unnerving silence for seconds before turning to the gray metal file cabinet behind him. He plucked a trifold brochure from a folder and returned to the desk. He spread the map across its surface, then picked up a pen.

“Groceries and curtains.” He circled a section on the map.

Audra leaned closer to study the area he'd marked. She caught his scent, soap and sandalwood. Audra glanced up, startled to find him once again staring at her. She stepped back.

“Thank you. Could you recommend a place where I could get breakfast?”

Jack paused before scanning the map again. He drew another circle in a location that appeared in the heart of town. “Books and Bakery.”

Her smile returned. “You aren't much of a talker, are you, Jack?”

“No, Ms. Lane.”

“Please call me Penny. Or does your management have a policy against employees addressing guests by their first names?”

“No, ma'am.” Finally a flicker of reaction flashed into those serious eyes. Just as quickly, it was gone.

Audra gathered the map. “Thank you for your help.”

Jack's nod was curt.

She turned to leave. Was everyone in Trinity Falls as antisocial as the desk clerk? If

so, she'd demand Benita return her money.

Audra was having one new experience after another. Last night, she'd slept in an isolated cabin in the woods, using spare sheets and towels as makeshift curtains. This morning, she'd gone jogging in the forest. Now she was going to experience small-town life. If new experiences were the measurement of success, at this rate, she'd finish writing the contracted songs by the end of the week.

*I hope you're happy, Benita.*

It was a short drive into Trinity Falls. Audra was instantly charmed by the redbrick roads, quaint streetlamps, manicured front yards, and rows of 150 YEARS STRONG banners, proclaiming the town's upcoming sesquicentennial. She followed the map's directions to the Trinity Falls Town Center and parked her rental car in front of Books & Bakery. The town and its shopping center looked like something out of a fairy tale. Audra expected a crowd of little people to swarm her, shouting, "Follow the Yellow Brick Road!"

She stepped from her silver Toyota Camry and stood observing the town center. The little slice of commerce in this modern-day Mayberry was comprised of six stores grouped in a semicircle around the parking lot: Are You Nuts?, Fine Accessories, Books & Bakery, Ean Fever—Attorney-at-Law, Skin Deep Beauty Salon, and Gifts and Greetings.

Were the residents of the enchanted town under the spell of the Good Witch or the Wicked Witch? She approached Books & Bakery with caution. But when she opened the door, a sense of warmth and cheer greeted her like an old friend. She forgot she was in an unfamiliar place, surrounded by strangers.

Audra took in the dark hardwood flooring and bright, inviting wall displays. The scent of lemon wood polish lingered in the air. Sesquicentennial banners similar to the ones that lined the town roads hung from the bookstore's ceilings and draped the walls.

Special-interest tabletop displays and overstuffed red armchairs drew Audra farther into the store. The bookcases were made of the same dark wood that shone beneath her feet. New releases were shelved beside perennial best sellers. The rows upon rows of books mesmerized her. Only hunger kept her focused on her destination—the bakery.

Audra followed the aisles, making mental notes of the sections to linger over after breakfast. The inventory included local artist crafts, like framed artwork, greeting cards, and jewelry.

She glimpsed glossy magazine covers as she wound her way toward the smells of fresh pastries and coffee, and the sounds of banter and laughter. She skimmed the titles on the mystery and romance shelves and glanced toward the science-fiction and fantasy section.

"You must be the new guest at Harmony Cabins." A woman's voice hailed her.

Audra tensed at the greeting. How did the attractive, older woman behind the counter know who she was? Her warm brown eyes twinkled and she smiled as though she were happy to see Audra. Short, curly brown hair framed her round, cocoa face.

Audra stopped in front of the bakery counter. "Yes, I am."

The stranger offered her right hand. "Welcome to Trinity Falls. I'm Doreen Fever,

the café manager.”

Audra accepted Doreen’s hand. “I’m Au . . . Penny Lane.” Her face heated with her slip.

Doreen released her hold and offered Audra a menu. “Well, Penny, what would you prefer, a late breakfast or an early lunch?”

“I’m hungry enough for both.” She requested eggs, wheat toast, and coffee before settling onto a bar stool, leaving an empty seat between her and the other patron at the counter.

Doreen brought her a mug from a supply behind the counter and filled it with coffee. “Your breakfast will be right up.”

“Where are you from?” The question came from the patron beside her. She was a beautiful woman, with long ebony hair and café au lait skin.

“Redondo Beach, near Los Angeles.”

“Really?” The woman’s movie star features brightened. She migrated to the empty bar stool between them, bringing her mug of coffee with her. “I’m Ramona McCloud, mayor of Trinity Falls, although my term is over in six months. Do you live near the beach?”

Audra absorbed all of that. “A few miles away.”

“Wow.” Ramona spoke the word on a sigh. “Why aren’t you there now?”

Audra tugged her right earlobe. “Where?”

“At the beach.”

“I needed a break.” Or so Benita claimed, repeatedly.

Ramona laughed. “That’s like saying you need a break from paradise. Beaches and beautiful weather—if I lived in Los Angeles, I’d never leave.”

“Now you want to live in Los Angeles?” The deep voice startled Audra.

The newcomer was about six feet tall and built like a running back for a professional football team. He walked past Audra and placed a quick kiss on Ramona’s full lips. His rugged, dark good looks held Audra’s attention.

“That depends.” Ramona gave the man a flirtatious glance. “Are you going to Los Angeles?”

“No, temptress, I’m going to Philadelphia.”

“Then so am I.” The love shining in Ramona’s ebony eyes made her even more beautiful.

“Knock it off. I’m about to eat breakfast.” A querulous voice interrupted the lovers’ exchange.

Audra turned to find another tall man on the bar stool beside her. His long, lean figure sprawled elegantly on the seat. The humor in his midnight eyes belied the scowl on his model good looks. Whereas the first man looked like a professional football running back, this one reminded her of a wide receiver.

Audra glanced around at the tables, filling up behind her. She hadn’t imagined the café at Books & Bakery would attract so many people. She waited for her discomfort of crowds to return. It didn’t.

Ramona gestured toward the handsome man beside her. “Penny Lane, this is Dr. Quincy Spates. He’s the new professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania.”

Quincy shook her hand. “Welcome to Trinity Falls.”

Ramona continued. “And the degenerate behind you is Darius Knight. He’s lucky to

be gainfully employed as a reporter with *The Trinity Falls Monitor*.”

“Penny Lane, huh?” Darius’s eyes were curious as he offered Audra his hand. “I was surprised to hear Harmony Cabins had a guest. What brings you to Trinity Falls?”

Audra shook the reporter’s hand. “I’m here on vacation.”

Darius cocked his head and released her hand. “I hadn’t realized anyone outside of Trinity Falls knew the cabins existed.”

A tall, slender woman in a royal blue skirt suit entered the café. Her confident strides carried her behind the counter. “I didn’t know Jack had any cabins that were fully renovated.” She offered Audra her right hand. “Welcome to Trinity Falls. I’m Megan McCloud.”

Audra returned her greeting, trying to remember everyone’s name. Apparently, Jack was the only antisocial person in town, the taciturn hermit in the enchanted forest.

On Audra’s right, Ramona sipped her coffee. “Megan owns Books and Bakery.”

Audra’s eyes widened. “It’s a wonderful bookstore. I can understand why it’s so popular.”

Megan grinned. “Thank you. What do you do?”

Audra tensed. “I’m a musician.”

Darius leaned forward. “What instrument do you play?”

Ramona lowered her coffee mug. “You should talk with Vaughn Brooks. He’s Trinity Falls University’s band director.”

Doreen reappeared with Audra’s breakfast. “I doubt Penny wants to talk shop on her vacation.”

Audra sighed with relief—for both the food and the interruption. She hated lying to these nice people.

Megan crossed her arms. “The books Jack ordered came in. Would you mind taking them to him when you return to the rental cabins?”

“No, not at all.” Audra sipped her coffee.

Megan nodded. “Thank you.”

Doreen topped off Audra’s coffee. “How long will you be with us?”

“About a month.” Audra bit into the wheat toast. The bread tasted homemade. “Delicious.”

Doreen flushed with pleasure.

“A month?” Ramona’s eyebrows rose. “That’s some vacation.”

“Ramona, are you prying into someone else’s personal life?” Another tall, dark, and handsome stranger materialized.

Ramona gasped. “Hardly. That’s Darius’s job.”

The new arrival walked to the counter and leaned forward. Megan met him halfway. They exchanged a quick kiss over the salt-and-pepper shakers, sugar packets, and napkin holders.

He then stepped behind the counter to kiss Doreen’s cheek. “Hi, Mom.”

Doreen cupped his jaw. “Would you like some breakfast?”

He shook his head. “Just coffee, please. I’ve already eaten.”

Was she watching a Saturday-morning tradition? The camaraderie among these friends was so natural. They were more like an extended family. In contrast, the people in Los Angeles she considered friends were more like well-acquainted strangers. Was this what small-town living was like? If so, she envied them.