

Riley rubbed her eyes, struggling to keep her attention trained on the invoices in front of her. The task proved challenging. First, the two-inch stack of papers were bills she had to send out to Davis Air Transport's customers—and therefore tedious to the point of making her cross eyed. Second, her thoughts kept racing ahead to the upcoming weekend.

*Three years.* It seemed a lifetime ago since she'd seen Jakes face or reminded him to be safe as he left for his shift on the Cincinnati police force. For all the good her entreaties did.

“Hi there, sunshine.”

She spun her chair around, finding Brian leaning against the wall of her cubicle. “Hi yourself,” she said, returning his grin. “What kind of trouble are you getting into today?”

A deep chuckle rumbled up from his chest. “I'm trying to stay out of trouble.”

They'd grown more comfortable with each other during their time working on the Victory for Veterans fundraiser—at least enough so that she no longer fought the urge to flee when he trained his hazel eyes on her.

Her gaze traveled from his smile to his thick biceps straining the sleeves of this T-shirt and across his broad chest. She licked her lips, her mouth suddenly growing dry. “Are you and Grant having lunch?”

His smile broadened. “Nope. I came to see you. Got a minute?”

Her pulse soared. Okay, she'd gotten a *little* more comfortable being around him. But she'd clearly not become immune to his rugged good looks, or the allure of spending time with him. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Can you meet tomorrow for a couple hours? We need to look at the menu for the gala and discuss the entertainment.”

Riley crashed back to reality as guilt pierced her chest. What was she thinking? A handsome face and she'd completely forgotten the anniversary of her husband's death. Distracting herself with work was a matter of survival, but openly flirting with another man wasn't like her at all. She swallowed past the knot in her throat. "I can't. I have a thing this weekend."

His brow furrowed. "What kind of thing? If you don't mind me asking."

For a split second she considered fabricating an excuse other than the real reason taking her out of town. Instead, she went with the truth. If there was anyone in Magnolia Springs who could understand what it was like to lose people you loved, it was Brian.

"It's the anniversary of my husband's death. I'm going up to Cincinnati to put flowers on his grave." She'd also made a decision and needed to tell Jake.

Several heartbeats of silence passed. She expected Brian to provide an alternative time for them to meet or offer his condolences—the usual responses.

"Want some company on the trip? Cincinnati is a good eight hours away. I could help with driving."

Her eyes widened. "I can't ask you to do that."

Brian closed the distance between them then cupped her face. His gaze met and held hers. "You didn't. I'm offering."

Her go-to answer was to shut him down. He didn't need to deal with her grief. He had enough of his own. One of her recent decisions was to begin letting people into her life. "Thank you. I really appreciate that."

Twenty-four hours later, Brian drove his sedan through Shady Oaks cemetery. Bronze urns punctuated the acres of grass and marked the final resting place of thousands. "Follow the

road to the right,” she said, sadness descending like a weight on her shoulders. She and Jake should have had decades together, instead of the five years fate granted them.

The car wound around to the back corner of a place she’d spent more hours than she could count. “Right here,” she said pointing to the stone bench where she’d sat every Sunday for over two years. She’d made the right call in moving to Georgia. Living just blocks from here, she’d been caught in a circle of perpetual mourning.

Brian’s palm went to the small of her back as they walked the final few yards. “I’ll give you some privacy.”

“Thanks,” she murmured, her chest aching with fresh grief. “I won’t take long.”

“I’ve got all the time in the world,” he said, giving her hand a squeeze before he retreated a few yards.

Riley knelt down, placing the flowers in the bronze urn. Her fingers caressed the marker. Name, birthday, date of death, seemed too little to sum up a life.

“Hi, Jake,” she began, tears welling as she said his name aloud. “It’s been another year since you were taken from me.” Some days it seemed like yesterday that he’d been gunned down while making a routine traffic stop.

“I made that move to Georgia like I told you about. Everyone’s very nice to me down there.” Her heart warmed thinking about the way the people of Magnolia Springs had welcomed her. “Remember how you were always after me to put myself out there? Well, I’ve done it. I’ve made quite a few friends.” She glanced over her shoulder. “One in particular. Brian is a real good guy. He knows what it’s like to lose people you love.”

She drew in a breath, coming to the reason she’d made the trip. “I came here not just because of the date, but because I wanted to let you know something.” Her throat tightened

around the words. “I’m always going to love you Jake Logan, but I can’t keep living in the past.” She leaned down, pressing her lips to the marker. “This is the last time I’m coming to visit. I’m finally ready to move toward my future.” Peace washed over her as her decision solidified. She’d finally laid Jake to rest as well as given herself permission to go on living.

Brian caressed her head, and she turned to find him kneeling beside her. “You doing all right?” he asked.

Riley pushed to her feet, and then took his hand as they headed toward his car. She resisted the urge to look back at Jake’s marker. Her future laid ahead and several hundred miles south.

Perhaps she and Brian would be no more than friends. But it was nice to finally feel there was room for more than grief in her heart. Weaving her fingers through Brian’s, she said, “Yeah, I think I’m finally okay.”