

Chapter 1

*As far as small towns went,
Runaway, Wisconsin, was pretty much the perfect cliché.*

In a once-popular song, John Mellencamp said you could breathe in a small town. That might be true. As long as you didn't mind everyone knowing what your breath smelled like.

The local cab that had picked me up from the county airport pulled into Papa Joe's driveway at the end of the cul-de-sac. The house hadn't changed in the six years I'd been gone. The L-shaped, brick ranch with narrow rectangular windows still had the same 1960s doctor's office vibe.

According to Papa Joe his house on a hill was the trifecta of prime real estate—surrounded by the highway for a quick escape, a corn field for Norman Rockwell photo ops, and a golf course for culture and class. He ignored the bull-breeding farm at the other end of the street.

I shoved a twenty over the seat to the cabbie, who happened to be Mr. Jensen, my former fourth-grade teacher. Filling me in on his life story, he'd explained he was too old to teach and not hip enough for Uber, so he'd invested in an old cab.

Not sure how he paid the bills. In the tiny town of Runaway, Wisconsin, you could pretty much hoof it anywhere you needed to go.

"Not taking your money, Hendrix." My ex-teacher slung an arm over the seat and twisted toward me.

Yep. Hendrix. That's what happens when you let a hippie with an obsession for '70s guitarists name a kid. I'd be living Papa Joe's legacy forever.

I shoved the money back in my purse.

Mr. J. cocked an eyebrow the way he did when I'd turned in my homework late. "Papa Joe's

gonna be real glad you're back."

My grandpa had been everyone's grandpa ever since I could remember. His kitchen table was more popular than Runaway's one and only bar.

"I'm just here for a quick visit." I thought about asking Mr. J. to keep the meter running, but that might get expensive. With Papa Joe in the hospital, I'd need to be here at least through the weekend. Wednesday tops. Then I could hightail it back to Cali. Even if I no longer had a job to hightail it back to. But that wasn't something Papa Joe needed to know.

"Thanks for the ride, Mr. J." I slung my purse over my shoulder and tugged my carry-on with me out of the cab.

As soon as I shut the door, the cab engine sputtered, wheezed, and died. A small black cloud drifted from under the hood. And something inside me sighed.

Not a good omen for my homecoming. I'd stayed away for a reason. A number of them actually. But they all rolled into two words: small town. The big-city girl inside me had been trying to claw her way free since the day she realized there was a bigger world out there than cow-tipping, cornfields, and cheese curds.

Mr. Jensen stepped out of the cab and lifted the hood.

"Need any help?" Not that there was anything I could do. Machines weren't my thing. Marketing was. Or it used to be. Unless one of the thousand résumés I'd scattered over Southern California suddenly revived my shorted-out career.

"Happens all the time." He waved me off and bent into the smoke for a closer look.

Missing half a wheel, my rolling bag swayed and limped behind me like a drunk tractor. Couldn't make myself replace the plastered carry-on with a sober suitcase. It was part of the set

Papa Joe got me for high school graduation.

I saluted as I passed the statue of Mary bumped up against the bronze bust of Martin Luther on the front walk. Even though Papa Joe was full-on Lutheran, when it came to the ever-after, he believed in hedging his bets.

A sudden prickle of dread rooted me to the concrete and in the reality of why I came—to assess the situation, get him out of the backwards county hospital, and set up some kind of home care. Or better yet, get him to come back to Orange County with me so I could keep an eye on him.

I couldn't lose the only family I had. Couldn't leave him alone and weak and vulnerable. Not the grandpa who stepped in as dad when my mom didn't want me. The man who bedazzled my bike, took an online course in *The Art of the French Braid*, never once booked me on a guilt trip for breaking the heck out of this going-nowhere town, and traveled to see me on every major holiday.

This whole situation might turn out for the best. He'd move to an apartment near me, live near a real hospital, and we'd see each other more often. Win, win, and triple win.

I waited outside a moment, in no hurry to enter a silent, empty house void of Papa Joe's laughter and Old Spice. My hand shook when I stuck my key in the door.

But the house wasn't silent. Or empty.

Shouts and laughs and an occasional groan drifted from the lower level.

Letting my purse and carry-on fall to the worn yellow linoleum, I beelined for the wide staircase at the end of the living room and tore down the carpeted steps.

Not a stellar idea.

Where the wall opened into the giant walk-out family room, my heel slipped. I stopped, dropped, and skidded down the next three steps on my butt, my skirt shimmied up my thighs, and a mess of hair escaped from my blonde business bun.

I grabbed the iron railing like a guard rail, using my wrists as bungee cords to slow my fall. Only they didn't stretch—they jerked me to a hard stop that came with an embarrassing grunt and a sharp pain shooting up both arms.

“Bug! You're here.” Papa Joe stood in the middle of the room, shaking what I hoped was a drained bottle of Budweiser at a field full of life-size football players on a TV screen that covered the entire wall.

Tall and reedy, his trimmed mustache matched his gray ponytail. Wearing a threadbare Jimi Hendrix T-shirt and a pair of wide-bottomed dark jeans, he looked like a first-generation hippie who'd found his way home from Woodstock after a forty-year detour.

And he wasn't weak or vulnerable or alone. His three VA buddies, my self-appointed uncles, sprawled on the couch and recliners, decked out in leather and jeans and square-toed boots, resembling retirees from Grizzly Adams's biker gang.

“Bug's back.” Coop jumped up, twisting his Yosemite Sam mustache. “Grab some pizza, girl.”

“It's Chicken Supreme, your favorite.” Papa Joe gave me a sideways grin before going back to yelling at the Packers' offense.

Bo and Duke tipped their beers at me.

That prickle of dread grew into pissed-off porcupine needles. I pulled myself up, yanked down my skirt, and marched in front of the screen to a multitude of boos and a pelting of

popcorn. “You’re supposed to be in the hospital. Sick.”

“I am sick.” Papa Joe pointed to the screen. “Did you see that turnover? The Packers are twenty-seven to twenty-six, two minutes left at the fifty-yard line, and that wuss just took a knee.” He motioned for me to move.

I locked my knees and stared him down. “You called me from the hospital.” I’d read the caller ID.

Taking my shoulders, he guided me out of the way of the end zone. “Big playoff game. Hospital screen’s too small, and they nixed the beer the guys brought. So I checked myself out.”

“You what?” I surveyed the empty pizza boxes piled on the coffee table and the beer bottles scattered around the room. “You had a heart attack, and you’re throwing a frat party?”

“More like a kegger.” Duke chuckled, patting a belly that hadn’t missed a meal since ’75.

Grandpa shot him a look obviously meant to shut him up. Or shut him down. “Not a heart attack, Bug. Just a little angina.”

Those porcupine needles bristled up and down my back. “You sounded like you were dying.” John Mellencamp lied. I’d been back a total of twenty minutes, and the last thing I could do was breathe.

“Are you really mad I’m not?” He popped the top of another beer on the edge of the scratched coffee table and offered it to me. “Kick off those fancy LA heels and take a load off.”

“I live in Orange County, not Los Angeles.” Believe me, it mattered. I crossed my arms. “Stop acting like you’re nineteen. You’re sixty-five.”

“Only on the outside.” Bo swiped the beer I didn’t take from Papa Joe and downed it in one chug.

“Hey, Bug.” Papa Joe balanced on the arm of the couch. “If you don’t want to watch the game, can you run down to City Hall and collect something for me?”

“An arrest warrant for an illegal frat?” A lie detector for whatever else he was about to tell me?

“No. The mayor.” He punched up the volume on the game.

Had he lost his mind? “You want me to bring you old man Miller?”

“He retired. I need the new guy.” He checked his watch. “The annual scavenger hunt started ten minutes ago. I’m in for Last Chance Lutheran with a Benjamin against Coop and HECC this year.” In a town of a few thousand, the only two churches—Last Chance Lutheran and Hope Eternal Catholic Church, affectionately known at HECC—were constantly in competition.

Coop shot Papa Joe a look that definitely wasn’t Sunday appropriate.

“I’m not bringing you the mayor.” I wanted answers, not a chore.

Papa Joe reached into his pocket and tossed me the keys to his old VW Bug. It was a close race for who’d been in his life longer. Me or that car. “I don’t actually need the mayor. Rules changed when the scavenger hunt went digital. I just need a pic of the mayor in his office.”

Digital? A pic? Did I miss the invasion of the pod people? “Who are you, and what have you done with Papa Joe?”

“Future don’t slow for no one, girl,” Coop said.

“Gotta jump into all that cloud nonsense.” Papa Joe waved his hand heavenward.

Had he officially lost his mind? Or maybe that was me. Because I headed to the garage, got into his car, and took the three-mile trek to City Hall.