

Cassidy

Cassidy's life in Whispering River had always felt like a fragile illusion of stability, a calm surface masking the lingering fear that everything she loved could be taken away. Living on Dandelion Road with her father, Nigel, a ranch manager, she had found comfort in the predictable rhythm of her days—working at the hot springs, enjoying the warmth of her close-knit community, and caring for her beloved pets. Her father, a steady and reliable presence, had become the foundation of her world, someone she could trust without hesitation. Yet, in the back of her mind, she always carried the shadow of her past with her mother, Marigold, whose chaotic and unpredictable nature had made Cassidy fearful of sudden upheavals. She had deferred her admission to Stanford, unsure whether leaving this place she called home would be the right choice. Despite the love she felt for her father and the people around her, there was an ever-present fear that her happiness was only temporary, something fleeting that could vanish in an instant.

That fear became reality when the night sky turned an eerie shade of orange, and the smell of smoke filled the air, signaling an approaching wildfire. Cassidy woke to the sound of firefighters shouting orders outside, their voices sharp against the crackling air. Her father stood at her bedroom door, his expression calm but firm, telling her it was time to leave. Panic gripped her as she struggled to process the urgency of the situation, her body refusing to move even as her mind screamed at her to run. She didn't want to abandon the home that had become her sanctuary, nor did she want to acknowledge the possibility that she might not return. Her father, always the rational one, reassured her that they would be fine, but the uncertainty in his voice unsettled her. Instead of acting immediately, she found herself curling beneath the blankets, as if shielding herself from the reality of the situation could somehow keep the danger at bay. But as the urgency grew, she forced herself up and grabbed only the few things

that mattered most—her mother's old digital camera, a notebook filled with memories, and a bag of treasured letters and words that carried the weight of her emotions. Everything else—the tangible evidence of her life—was left behind, sacrificed to the unknown fate of the fire.

As they drove away, Cassidy's thoughts fixated not only on the fire but also on the strange behavior of her father before their departure. Just as they were leaving, she had noticed him retrieving two dusty boxes from the attic, handling them with an almost reverent care that sent unease rippling through her. She had never seen those boxes before, nor had she ever heard him mention them, yet there they were, carried with the same urgency as their most essential belongings. When she finally worked up the courage to ask him about their contents, his response was uncharacteristically short, almost dismissive, as if he was hiding something. The way he avoided her gaze, the tightness in his jaw—it all signaled that whatever was inside those boxes carried a weight far heavier than she had anticipated. Cassidy had always trusted her father implicitly, believing him to be the one person in her life who had never kept secrets from her. But as they drove further away from the flames, she couldn't shake the feeling that this moment had changed everything.

She stared out the window, the once-familiar landscape now distorted by smoke and the ominous glow of the fire, her mind a storm of unanswered questions. Who was her father before he became the man she knew? What had he hidden away in those boxes for so many years? And why now—of all times—did he choose to take them with him? She realized with growing unease that the fire was not the only thing threatening to consume her world. Whatever secrets her father carried, they had been buried long before the flames arrived, and Cassidy could no longer ignore the feeling that their escape wasn't just about survival—it was about something much deeper. As the road stretched ahead of them, she felt an unsettling certainty settle in her chest: she was about to uncover truths that would change everything she thought she knew.