

1ST CHAPTER ROMANCE
SAMPLER

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LOVE AT SOLACE LAKE SERIES

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Love at Solace Lake – series blurb

Love is worth the risk...

When their grandfather dies, the Lindquist sisters, Harper, Scarlet and Maggie, inherit the northern Minnesota fishing lodge that had been in their family for three generations. The inheritance is bittersweet. They were raised at the lodge by their grandparents. The natural beauty of the place hasn't changed, but the building itself is crumbling and desperately in need of repair. The lodge also reminds them of what they lost. Twenty-two years previously, their parents died there in what was ruled a murder/suicide.

As the sisters struggle to breathe new life into the failing lodge, old fears and questions rise to the surface even as new love presents itself. Why did their father murder their mother? What truths did their grandparents keep from them? The sisters must fight to keep the wounds of the past from putting their futures, and their fledgling relationships, in jeopardy.



Lies and Solace

Book 1, Love at Solace Lake

She can't live with one more lie. He can't tell the truth.

Harper Lindquist is convinced she's found the answer to her financial prayers. Unless she pours cash into crumbling Solace Lake Lodge, she'll lose her family's legacy. Her would-be savior arrives in the middle of a Minnesota blizzard and she's determined to prove to her reluctant, and trapped, financier the lodge is a sound investment. But Harper isn't completely honest with him. And she has no idea the lake is hiding secrets of its own.

Ethan James is a liar, but his money is very real. He isn't convinced a broken-down inn is a smart investment

opportunity. But the more he understands Harper's dreams and desires, the more he wants to be the man to make them come true. The trauma in both

their pasts means neither can fully trust the other. They must find the courage to love, to trust, and to accept, or yesterday's sorrows will keep them apart.

Lies and Solace

Prologue

Harper Lindquist stood on a wooden crate and handed her grandfather a wrench, watching in rapt attention as he disassembled an outboard motor. She was fascinated by the inner workings of the motor and the way Grampa Bill knew how to coax life back into the old beast.

Grampa raised an eyebrow at her. "Don't let Grandma see those dirty hands. Make sure you clean up before you go back to the lodge."

Harper held up her hands to inspect them. They were covered in dirt and grease gathered under her nails. She stopped herself from wiping them on her T-shirt. The last time she'd done that Grandma had scolded, saying she should be more like her little sister Scarlet. Scarlet never got dirty or ruined her clothes. Harper had been hurt and embarrassed when Grandma called her a filthy little hellion. She said that at ten years old, she should be learning to bake, not hanging out in her grandfather's garage like a grease monkey.

But Mom had defended her, telling Grandma it was just an old T-shirt and could always be washed. She'd kissed Harper and helped her scrub the grease from beneath her nails. As much as she loved her grandparents' fishing lodge in northern Minnesota, she'd be glad to go home to Minneapolis, away from Grandma Dorothy's critical eye.

But as the summer dragged on, she began to worry that they were never going home.

"Grampa, is Daddy going to live with us again?"

Grampa Bill heaved a sigh. "I don't know, child."

Harper frowned. That wasn't the positive reassurance she'd been hoping for. Daddy had moved out of their house in the spring, leaving a huge hole in her family. In the months before he left, Harper had heard arguing between her parents and had caught snippets of words and phrases

she didn't fully understand, like "unfaithful". And some she did, like "divorce".

When school let out for the summer, Mom packed their things, bundled her and Scarlet and baby Maggie into the car and drove to the lodge. Mom said they'd stay there until she worked some things out. Harper had no idea what that meant, but she'd been ecstatic when Daddy had shown up unexpectedly today.

Harper ached to have him back home. She wanted things to be the way they used to be, when Daddy used to kiss Mom and play with her and Scarlet. He was often away for work, but when he was home he was the best daddy ever.

"Why doesn't Daddy want to come home? Doesn't he love us anymore?"

Grampa Bill laid his big hand lightly on her head, sadness etched in the weathered lines of his face. "Harper, your daddy will always love you, no matter what. But sometimes adults have problems they need to work out. Your mom and dad are talking. That's a good thing. Maybe that means they're both willing to try."

Harper nodded. She hoped they tried real hard so they could all go home together.

Willy Eklund, Grampa's handyman, stumbled into the garage, his breathing labored and his eyes wild with fear.

"She's in the water! He hit her!"

"What are you talking about?" Grampa asked.

"Miranda! She was arguing with her husband, and then he hit her with one of the oars. Miranda fell in the water and he jumped in after her, but I never saw either of them come up again."

Miranda? Mom? The wildness in Willy's eyes scared her. Why would Daddy hit Mom? Were they okay?

"Where did you see them?"

"Around the point. I was on the shore, picking blueberries."

"Get a boat ready, quick. We're going out." Grampa turned to her and she could see he was scared. Her stomach clenched like when she was going to throw up. If Grampa was scared, it was really bad.

"Run to the lodge. Tell Grandma what happened. Tell her to call the police. Go!"

She nodded and ran, tears streaming down her face.

Fear made her stumble on the path and skin both knees. They *had* to be okay. They just had to be.

Chapter One

Twenty-Two Years Later

Harper woke abruptly, groggy and unsure what had disrupted her sleep. Then she heard it. *Bang, bang, bang.* Someone was pounding on the front door of the lodge and ringing the doorbell over and over.

She groaned and threw back the covers, shivering when her bare feet hit the cold wooden floor. As she slid her feet into slippers and threw on her robe, she checked her alarm clock; twelve-ten a.m. Who could be at her door at this hour in the middle of a January blizzard?

Whoever it was, she couldn't let them freeze on her doorstep. Tying the belt on her robe securely, she hurried to the door.

As Harper tried to open the heavy wooden front door, the howling wind ripped it out of her hands and sent it crashing against the wall. A cold gust blew snow into the foyer, instantly chilling her to the tips of her worn slippers. A snow covered man stepped over the threshold and, struggling against the wind, pushed the door shut. He brushed the snow from his dark hair as he turned to look at her, and Harper's breath caught in her throat. Whoever he was, with his dark brown eyes and chiselled cheekbones, he was easily one of the best-looking men she'd ever seen.

"I'm really sorry about this," he said. More snow fell to the floor as he brushed off his overcoat. The smell of wet wool and citrusy aftershave filled the small foyer. "I hit the ditch this afternoon on my way here to our meeting, and I had to wait for hours till a snow plow came by and pulled me out. I haven't seen a blizzard like this in years."

Harper blinked at him. This was the guy she'd waited on tenterhooks to meet all afternoon, the guy who held the future of her lodge in his hands. "Are you Ethan James?"

"Yes. You must be Harper Lindquist."

"Yes." She conjured up a polite smile. "Welcome to Solace Lake Lodge."

He pulled off his gloves and extended his hand. "Thank you. I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Lindquist. Again, I'm sorry to wake you at this hour. This wasn't exactly how I'd hoped to begin our business association."

It wasn't the way she'd wanted to begin either. She'd been corresponding by email with him for two weeks, ever since he'd responded to the ad she'd placed in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* looking for an investor willing to put up the money necessary to bring the lodge back to life. She'd been thrilled when Ethan James told her his employer, Hainstock Investments, wanted him to visit the lodge to investigate its possibilities. He'd told her Mr. Hainstock himself was very excited about her property.

"When you didn't arrive by four, I assumed you'd decided to postpone the meeting because of the storm."

He grimaced. "Unfortunately, I wasn't smart enough to do that. I tried calling you, and then discovered I didn't have cell service. I'm really sorry."

She'd been crushed when he didn't show. She'd spent days planning her presentation, cleaning the lodge, even deciding what to wear.

Get over it, Harper. There wasn't anything she could do about it now. But perhaps she could still salvage the meeting. Time to play the gracious host. "No problem. I'm glad you made it here safely. Can I get you anything? Are you hungry?"

His smile was almost comical in its relief. "Starved."

She couldn't help smiling back. "That I can do something about."

She hung his damp overcoat on the coat tree near the door, taking in the designer label. The elegant dark grey suit he wore obviously didn't come off the rack at Suits-R-Us. It fit him perfectly, from his broad shoulders to his narrow hips. Even after hours stuck in a ditch, Ethan James looked like he stepped off the pages of *GQ*.

She, on the other hand, looked like a homeless person. Despite telling herself to buck up, she couldn't resist a glance down at her ancient pink chenille robe, worn fuzzy pink slippers, and pajama bottoms emblazoned with images of Mickey giving Minnie a smooch on her mousy lips. Her hair was likely a tangled mess and she could feel crusty things in the corners of her eyes.

Great.

Sadly, the homeless part was frighteningly close to the mark. If she didn't convince Mr. Hainstock's representative that Solace Lake Lodge was a viable investment opportunity, she really would be homeless.

Harper squared her shoulders and plastered on a smile, trying to forget about her less than professional appearance. Instead, she channeled the confident air of the businesswoman she was striving to be. "Why don't you follow me into the kitchen and I'll fix you a snack."

"Thanks, that sounds great. Do you mind if I use your washroom first?"

"Of course. Right down this hallway and to the left."

"Thanks."

While he headed toward the bathroom, Harper hurried to the kitchen. Her mind whirled with excitement and trepidation. With Ethan James in the lodge, at least she had a fighting chance to save her home.

After washing her hands, she pulled the roast beef from the fridge that she'd sliced earlier in anticipation of serving him lunch. She buttered a couple of fresh buns, and reached back into the fridge for mustard, dill pickles and the plate of carrot and celery sticks she'd prepared. At least her previous work wasn't going to waste.

Hopefully, none of her preparations would go to waste. She mentally rehearsed the pitch she'd memorized.

Eco-tourism is the way of the future. By investing in the Solace Lake Lodge, Hainstock Investments could get in on the ground floor.

This had to work. She'd make it work.

When Ethan stepped into the kitchen, she gestured for him to take a seat at the table. She put the sandwiches on a plate and set it on the placemat in front of him. "Would you like coffee?"

"I'd love some. Can I help you with something?"

"No, I'm fine. Why don't you go ahead and eat?"

While she measured coffee grounds, she watched from the corner of her eye as he pulled the blue and grey silk tie from his shirt collar and stuck

it into the pocket of his jacket. He opened the top three buttons of his immaculate white shirt, and Harper's mouth went dry at the sight of the small triangle of tanned chest.

Embarrassed by her reaction, she spun away, busying herself with finding cream and sugar. Had it been that long since she'd seen a man as attractive as Ethan James?

Definitely. There weren't a lot of unattached men her age in this part of north central Minnesota. And certainly none who looked like Ethan James. Minnewasta, some ten miles down the road, was a great little town but not exactly a breeding ground for good-looking men. The town's population of fifteen hundred, which hadn't changed much since she'd started elementary school there as a ten-year-old, were salt-of-the-earth kind of people but decidedly average looking.

By the time she had herself under control and brought coffee to the table, Ethan had already devoured his food.

"You look like a guy who could use some apple pie."

His beautiful brown eyes lit up. "I never say no to apple pie."

Harper grabbed the pie from the fridge and cut it into six even pieces. After placing one piece on a plate, she warmed it for a few seconds in the microwave before bringing it to him.

"Bon appétit."

"Thank you."

He dug into the pie with obvious enjoyment. It occurred to her that with the blizzard blocking the roads, Ethan was likely going to be a guest at her table for several more meals. She did a quick inventory in her head of the contents of her freezer and pantry and hoped they'd be adequate.

She refilled both their coffee cups and got him another piece of pie. The way this guy ate, running out of food was a distinct possibility.

Ethan finished the last bite of his dessert, then wiped his mouth with his napkin. "That was great. Did you make it?"

"No, I'm not much of a pastry chef. The cook at Miller's Golf Resort down the road made it and gave it to me. I work there part-time. She's always giving me food. Says she's trying to fatten me up."

Harper averted her gaze. That tidbit of embarrassing information had spilled from her mouth too easily. It had to be the late hour.

"When you see her again, tell her it was delicious."

Hoping her cheeks weren't as red as she thought they were, she turned back to face him. "Well, I'm supposed to see her tomorrow, but with this storm, I'm not sure either of us is going anywhere."

His dark brows furrowed in a frown. "I guess not. Like I said, I hate to impose, but do you think I could spend what's left of the night on your couch?"

"I think I can do better than that. I have plenty of room. This is a hotel, after all." She tried to keep her smile upbeat as she added, "At least it used to be."

"Thank you. I'll leave as soon as the weather clears."

"There's no rush. You can stay as long as you need to."

"You're very kind."

"Actually, I'm more practical than kind. If you stay here long enough, maybe I'll be able to convince you to recommend investing in my lodge. I need you alive and unfrozen, Mr. James."

Something flashed in his eyes before he looked away. But then he laughed softly, and she thought it must have been fatigue that made her think she'd seen a trace of guilt on his face.

"I'd kind of prefer that myself," he said.

She liked the sound of his laugh. Despite the impression of privilege and power given by his expensive suit, his laugh was genuine and unpretentious. Hope blossomed in her heart. Ethan James seemed like a decent guy. With luck, he was a guy with the ability to look past all the lodge's faults to see the possibilities she saw. "Can I get you anything else?"

"Thanks, no, I'm fine. But it's been a long day. If you don't mind, I think I'd like to take you up on that offer of a room now."

"Of course. Do you have anything with you, any luggage?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing. Not even a toothbrush. I'd planned on a two-hour meeting, not an overnight excursion."

"I think I can rustle up a few things, maybe even a toothbrush."

"Thank you. I appreciate your hospitality."

"You're welcome. Mr. James—"

"Please, it's Ethan."

"Ethan," she repeated with smile. "I want to thank you for coming here and considering the investment potential of the lodge. It means a lot to me."

He nodded, but said nothing more. Ethan James was her last hope. None of the banks she'd contacted would lend her money. If he and Mr. Hainstock decided Solace Lake Lodge was too big a risk, it was all over.

Harper pushed down her fear and made herself smile. "If you follow me, I'll show you to your room and find you a few things."

She led him up the stairs to what had once been the best room in the lodge. It still had the best view of the lake, but everything else about the room screamed shabby, with none of the chic. The area rugs were worn and faded, and the wooden floors had long ago lost their shine. The bedspread and matching curtains hadn't been replaced since her grandmother died some ten years previously. They'd been washed so many times that the once vibrant blues and greens were now faded and dull.

As she entered the room, she lifted her chin slightly, refusing to be embarrassed. The room was spacious, and she made sure it was always scrupulously clean. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

Except maybe...

"I'll bring you an extra blanket and a space heater. With this wind, it's going to get cold in here tonight."

"Thanks." Ethan opened the door of the closet and then closed it. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Down the hall, third door on the left."

He looked surprised. "Oh."

"There's extra towels and soap in the bathroom." Even to her own ears, the promise of soap and towels didn't sound like much to get excited about.

But then that was why he was here – to help make the lodge something a lot of people *could* get excited about.

“I’ll be back in a moment.”

She fled back down the stairs and hurried to her own quarters on the main floor. Lifting the heavy lid of the large, old-fashioned trunk in the corner of her bedroom, she rummaged through the clothes and other items stored there until she found a man’s robe and pajamas, a T-shirt, a couple of flannel shirts, and a pair of jeans. Though normally practical to a fault, she hadn’t been able to part with some of Grampa Bill’s old clothes. Somehow, giving them away meant he was really gone. Harper lifted a flannel shirt to her face and inhaled. Even though she’d washed the clothes before putting them away, she swore she could still detect the faint scent of her grandfather’s favorite pipe tobacco. The thought made her smile.

After finding a space heater, an extra quilt, and a new, still packaged toothbrush along with a mini tube of paste from her last visit to the dentist, she hauled everything back up the stairs to Ethan’s room. The door was open, but she stopped on the threshold, feeling uncomfortable about walking in unannounced.

“Ethan?”

He turned from the window where he’d been staring into the darkness and stepped toward her. “Here, let me take that from you.”

His fingers brushed hers as he reached for the space heater. A tingle of awareness made her shiver. She lifted her gaze to his, blinking rapidly. “Well, I should be going. Goodnight. I hope you sleep well.”

“You too. Thank you, for everything.”

She nodded before turning around and hurrying back down the stairs. A moment later, she retreated into her own room and closed the door. She stared at the lock, her hand hovering above it. After a moment’s hesitation, she turned it. Locking the door made her feel slightly ridiculous, as if she believed she was so irresistible Ethan wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her. As if she had to worry about him ravishing her in the middle of the night.

What would it be like to make love to him?

Harper tossed the ridiculous notion from her mind, embarrassed by the direction her thoughts had taken. The only thing she wanted from Ethan James was his belief in her project.

And lots and lots of money.

Buy Link: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B079TDDSY4>

Secrets and Solace

Book 2, Love at Solace Lake series



No matter how deeply buried, secrets rise to the surface.

Scarlett Lindquist has agreed to help her sisters rebuild the dilapidated fishing lodge in Minnesota they inherited from their grandparents. Although the lengthy restoration is bringing the three sisters closer together, Scarlett's support is temporary. Her leave of absence from her job in Chicago is temporary and she has no intention of staying at Solace Lake Lodge, where the lake holds dark secrets. When frightening childhood memories resurface, they are tempered by her fascination with an irritating contractor. If only she could trust her feelings for him. If only he could trust *her*.

Cameron Hainstock meets Scarlett at his brother's wedding to her sister and their attraction

is instantaneous. But Cam avoids the beautiful marketing executive. All his efforts are aimed at battling for custody of his only child. When the unimaginable happens and Cam faces the biggest challenge of his life, he's reluctant to accept help to halt his downward spiral. Can they learn to trust each other and fight for a future together or will they go their separate ways?

Secrets and Solace

Prologue

Angry voices hung on the humid summer air, as heavy as the scent of the pine trees in the forest surrounding her. Scarlet Lindquist tiptoed along the well-worn path, the soft earth muffling her steps. If Mom and Daddy caught her following them, they'd be mad. They'd told her to stay with Grandma at the lodge because they had things they needed to talk about. Adult things.

Her older sister Harper said Daddy's unexpected arrival at their grandparents' fishing lodge meant he was taking them home. He wouldn't have come all the way from Minneapolis if that wasn't his plan. Didn't he tell them how much he'd missed them since he went away?

Scarlet wasn't so sure. Harper hadn't heard the fighting between Mom and Grandma Dorothy. But she had. They thought she didn't understand, but she understood plenty; she was eight, not a baby like her sister Maggie. Mom said the marriage was over, and she was never going back. She was going to start a new life. Grandma said she'd be a fool to throw away her marriage. That she had a good life with Daddy, a secure life, and surely there could be forgiveness. Mom said Grandma didn't understand, that she'd never understood.

She hoped that didn't mean her parents were getting a divorce. Her friend Becca's parents got a divorce and she had to move between their houses every week, and they were constantly telling her how much they hated each other. Scarlet wished Daddy would come home, so things could be the way they were before.

She stopped and crouched behind a clump of trees. Her parents had arrived at The Point, a finger of land that stuck out into Solace Lake. Her mom kept her canoe here because it was easy to launch from the small sand beach on the very tip of the point, but today Scarlet saw that her mom's yellow canoe was tied to the dock. Grampa had built the dock at The Point for the use of his customers, the fishermen who came up to the lodge to catch the fish that lived in the lake. There was another dock closer to the

lodge, but Grampa said fishers liked this one because the deep water at the end of the dock was the best spot on the lake to fish.

When she peeked between the branches, she saw that her parents had stopped walking and were facing each other on the beach. Scarlet held her breath, afraid they'd hear her and make her go away.

"I know what I said before, but I can't give you up. I don't want a divorce. We can try again. We can work this out." Daddy's voice sounded funny, as if he was crying. "You know I love you, don't you? I've always loved you. That hasn't changed."

"I know," Mom said. "But I can't go on like this, living a lie."

"It's not a lie! We have a family! The girls need us. Can't we try again? At least for them?"

"It's too late, Rob! You know it is!" She shook her head. "I'll never keep Harper and Scarlet away from you, no matter what happens between us. They need you."

"I can't bear it, Miranda! I can't lose you. I'm sorry I wasn't the husband you needed. I'm sorry I put my work first too often, but I can change. Can't you give me another chance?" He covered his face with his hands. "If you leave me and take the girls, I have no reason to live. I'd rather be dead."

She'd never seen her daddy cry before and it frightened her. She couldn't stop her own tears from streaking down her cheeks. She put both hands over her mouth so her sobs couldn't escape.

"Don't talk like that, Rob. It's not fair. You know as well as I do, we're no good together. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. You deserve someone who loves you to distraction, and that's not me."

They stopped talking and Scarlet heard only the birds singing in the trees. Then daddy sighed, his voice sounding tired and sad. "Do you love him?"

"Yes." Scarlet heard the hitch in her mother's voice. "I always have."

Who were they talking about? Did this mean they were never going home again? She didn't want to stay here forever with Grandma Dorothy and Grampa Bill. She hated the fishing lodge. She hated the bugs and the crawly things. She wanted to go back to their big house in Minneapolis and play with her friends. She wanted her daddy.

A sob escaped despite her hands covering her mouth. She curled into a ball and made herself as tiny as possible.

The branches parted and her mom peered down at her. "Scarlet, honey, what are you doing here? Didn't we tell you not to follow us?"

"Why can't we go home with Daddy?" Fear and anger made her shout.

"I'm sorry, honey. For now, we're going to stay here."

"I don't want to stay with Grandma and Grampa! I want to go home!"

Her mom pulled her up and gave her a hug, her arms so tight Scarlet could barely breathe. "We won't be here much longer. We're going to have a new home soon."

"Will Daddy be there?"

"No, honey, he won't. But you can visit him, and you can talk to him on the phone anytime you want to."

"Will Harper and Maggie come to our new home, too?"

"Yes, of course. We'll all be together."

Except for Daddy.

Mom kissed her cheek. "Go back to the lodge now. Daddy and I will be along in a little while."

Scarlet nodded. Over Mom's shoulder she saw her daddy. His hands were in the pockets of his jeans and his head was down. He looked sad, like he was going to cry again.

She scrambled out of her mom's arms and down the path to fling her arms around his waist. He sank to his knees and hugged her back. Then, he grasped her shoulders in his hands and looked into her face.

"I love you, Scarlet." He kissed her cheek. "No matter what happens, always remember that, okay?"

"Okay."

He gave her a brief, sad smile. "Good girl. Now listen to your mother and run back to lodge. We'll see you in a few minutes."

Tears ran down Scarlet's cheeks. "I don't want to leave you."

He kissed her again and then gave her one of his goofy grins. For a moment he was the Daddy she'd always known, the one who laughed a lot

and told them funny stories. "Are Mom and I going to have to go out into the middle of the lake to have a private conversation? C'mon, go back to the lodge now, pumpkin."

She wanted to argue. She wanted to cry and scream and tell him not to leave her. But the sadness was back in his eyes, and she knew it wouldn't do any good.

Scarlet looked to her mom, hoping to appeal to her, but she'd stepped onto the dock and jumped into her yellow canoe. In the weeks since they'd been at the lodge, Scarlet had seen her on the lake lots, drifting around on the water.

Her father straightened to his full height, his movements stiff and angry. "Miranda, we haven't finished talking. Don't turn your back on me."

"I think we've said everything there is to say."

"That's your solution for everything, isn't it? Walking away and shutting me out. That's not going to work anymore."

With a sigh, Mom climbed back onto the deck. "Fine. Say whatever it is you need to say."

Scarlet turned and ran back the way she'd come, not wanting to hear them fight any more. She heard her mom call after her, but she ignored her and kept running. Partway back to the lodge, she saw Willy, Grampa's handyman, running in the opposite direction on another path toward her mom and daddy. They wouldn't like him listening to their conversation either.

Instead of going back into the lodge, she stumbled her way to the little fort in the trees that she and Harper had built by piling together sticks and branches. Even though it was next to the path between the lodge and Grampa Bill's shed, it was hard to see unless you knew where to look. She pushed aside the branches at the opening and went inside. She didn't want to go back to the lodge and face Grandma's questions about where she'd been.

Scarlet curled up on the dried leaves lining the floor of the fort and tugged on her ponytail, twisting her hair between her fingers. Where was this new home Mommy was talking about? Was it here in the country, close to Grandma and Grampa's fishing lodge, or someplace else? It was scary not knowing. Would she have friends there? When would she get to see her daddy again?

She fell asleep and was awakened with a start when she heard someone running along the path, sobbing. She stuck her head out of the fort in time to see Harper trip over a root on the path and skin her knees. Her sister was two years older and Scarlet had rarely seen her cry, even when she'd fallen out of the tree in their backyard and broken her arm. It scared her to see her crying now.

"They're in the water!" Tears streamed down Harper's face. "Willy said Mom and Daddy are in the water, and they didn't come back up. We have to tell Grandma!"

Scarlet ran behind Harper, her heart racing. Did Mommy and Daddy go out on the lake because she'd followed them? Because they didn't want her to listen?

If something bad happened to them, it was all her fault.

Chapter One

Twenty-Two Years later.

Scarlet Lindquist struggled to hold back tears as she lifted her champagne flute in a salute to her sister and her fiancé. She hated public displays of emotion, especially when she was the one whose emotions were on display. But as maid of honor, she was expected to give a toast to the bride and groom at their rehearsal dinner and welcome Ethan Hainstock into her family.

"Please join me in toasting the happy couple. I wish you many years of love and wedded bliss. To Harper and Ethan."

The small gathering of family and friends of both the bride and groom rose together and lifted their glasses. "To Harper and Ethan."

She clinked her glass against her sister Maggie's and then turned to her left to touch Ethan's brother's flute, though she noticed the best man had passed on the champagne. A shiver trembled down her spine when her gaze locked with Cameron Hainstock's. His dark eyes openly assessed her. She was used to men's scrutiny; males had been staring at her since she was fourteen and developed breasts. But she sensed more in Cameron's gaze than simple sexual appreciation. It was as if he was trying to look inside her soul to determine what kind of person she was. She wondered what conclusions he'd made.

With the toast over, Scarlet tore her gaze away from Cameron's and gratefully resumed her seat. Her thoughts returned to the reason they were all gathered at Miller's, the resort down the road from their fishing lodge on Solace Lake in north central Minnesota. She and her sisters had inherited the lodge from their grandparents and were currently renovating it. Harper's relationship and subsequent engagement to Ethan Hainstock had happened so quickly. At first, Scarlet been suspicious of Ethan, but she'd come to like him, mainly because she could see how much he loved her sister. She was happy for Harper, she really was.

But to marry so soon? Scarlet hoped she was doing the right thing. Nobody deserved happiness more than Harper.

When they'd announced their engagement and said they wanted to get married right away, she'd been pleased, but cautious. They didn't have to rush into marriage. They'd only met a few months ago. It wouldn't hurt to wait. She had no doubt they loved each other, but was it enough? It certainly hadn't been enough for her parents. And she wasn't exactly a

shining example of the power of love. She prayed Harper and Ethan would be the exception to the rule.

Ethan's sister Lydia got to her feet. "It's been a lovely evening, but it's time for us to go. Tomorrow's a big day, isn't it, Tessa?"

Cameron's five-year-old daughter nodded solemnly. "I get to be flower girl tomorrow."

Cameron leaned over to kiss his daughter's hair, the color the same deep chocolate brown as his own. An unwelcome emotion caused a lump to form in Scarlet's throat at the tenderness in his touch. "You're going to be the best flower girl ever."

"I know."

Everyone laughed at Tessa's earnest reply. Cameron lifted her out the booster seat and held her in his arms. "Come on, pumpkin. Time for this flower girl to hit the sack."

Pumpkin. Scarlet had a sudden flashback of being carried in her father's arms in the same way, her head resting against his shoulder in complete trust.

She swallowed and pushed the memory from her mind.

Cameron turned to face her. "Ethan said you needed help decorating the wedding tent tomorrow. What time did you want me to be there?"

She blinked in surprise. "I didn't know you'd volunteered to help."

Harper touched her arm. "I know you, Scarlet. You're planning some decorating extravaganza, aren't you?"

"Maybe." Her sister really did know her. She wanted Harper's wedding to be beautiful, and very special. Besides, she loved decorating.

Ethan put his arm around Harper's shoulders. "I thought maybe Cam and Drew could give you a hand."

Scarlet glanced over at Drew, Ethan's twenty-one-year-old nephew. He was acting as Ethan's groomsman and had been paired with Maggie in the wedding party. He flashed her a smile and a thumbs-up, and she smiled back. She enjoyed working alone, liked making the ideas in her head come to life. But there was a lot to do and, though she hated to admit it, she could use some help. She only wished Cameron's presence didn't make her feel so...unsettled.

She forced a smile. "I appreciate the help. I'll be at the tent around nine a.m. The tables and chairs we're renting are supposed to be delivered between ten and eleven, and I'd like to get most of the decorating finished before then."

Cameron nodded. "We'll be at the lodge at nine."

"Thanks. I'll see you then."

Ethan clapped his brother on the back. "Good. Thanks, Cam."

Scarlet smiled as she watched her sister and her soon-to-be husband cross the room. He was dark to her fair, tall to her petite, brown eyed to her blue. But in every way that was important, Harper and Ethan were a match. A perfect team. Ethan had made Harper's dream to bring the fishing lodge back to life his dream as well. Together, they were turning the old lodge into an eco-friendly resort the whole family could be proud of.

To have someone to share her dreams, someone to have her back and love her no matter what seemed like a fairy tale to Scarlet.

"They're a good-looking couple, aren't they?"

Cameron's deep voice broke into her thoughts, chasing away her fanciful notions. *Nothing but wishful thinking.*

"Yes, they are."

He adjusted a limp, nearly asleep Tessa in his arms. Her head lay against his broad shoulder, while one hand rested on his chest, as if she wanted to feel the beat of her father's heart. For some reason, the thought made her heart ache.

"Is Harper pregnant?"

She jerked her head up at his whispered question. "What? No, of course not!" In her surprise, her voice was louder than she'd intended.

"I had to ask. They're getting married in a hell of a hurry."

At least, she didn't think Harper was pregnant. She and her sisters often withheld the truth about their lives from each other, especially when the truth was unpleasant, but she'd hoped they'd put those days behind them. Surely if Harper was pregnant, she would have shared the news with her and Maggie.

Harper turned to give her a puzzled stare, alerted by sound of her raised voice. Scarlet flashed her a phony smile before speaking to Cameron

again, this time in a lowered tone. "Do you think that's the only reason he'd marry her? Call me sentimental, but I believe they're marrying for love."

"They barely know each other. What would be the harm in waiting a few months? I don't want Ethan to get hurt."

She, too, had concerns, but she was too insulted on behalf of her sister to admit to them. He better not be suggesting Harper was only marrying Ethan for his money. Five years ago, Ethan won over a hundred and seventy-five million dollars in a lottery, though Harper hadn't been aware of that when they first met. Because of painful past experiences, he'd kept the secret far longer than he should have, afraid it would alter the way she saw him.

Scarlet straightened and looked Cameron in the eye. "I don't want Harper to get hurt *again*. He lied to her about the money and she's the one who walked away."

He leaned in close, his voice low and his eyes glittering. "But she came back, didn't she?"

Before she could respond, he turned and walked across the room. A moment later, he left the dining room of Miller's Resort with his family, Tessa still in his arms.

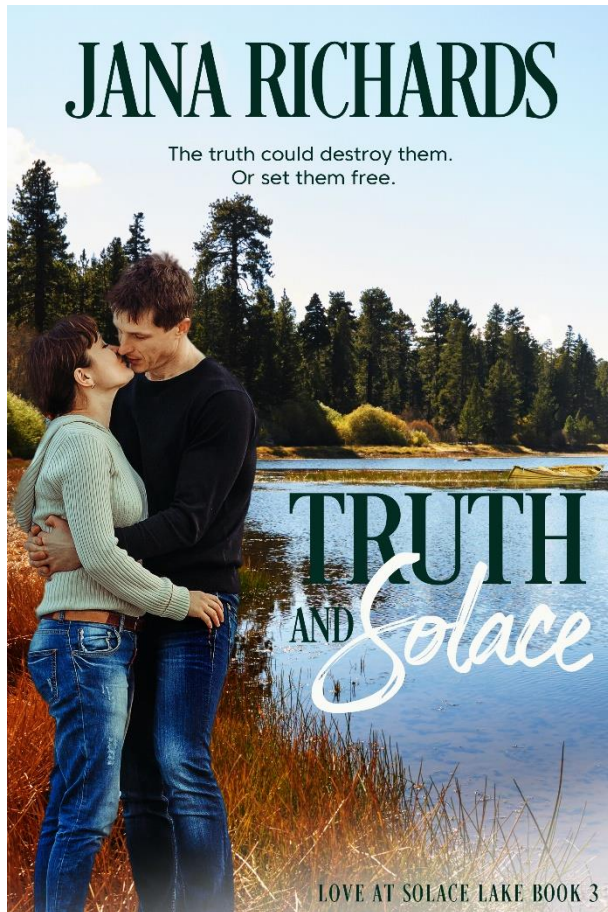
Anger swirled in her gut. Was Cameron Hainstock planning to make trouble for Harper?

Her hands fisted at her sides. *Not on my watch, he won't.*

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Truth and Solace

Book 3, Love at Solace Lake series



The truth could destroy them. Or set them free.

Maggie Lindquist left Solace Lake determined never to return. Circumstances have pulled her back and she's helping to restore her family's dilapidated fishing lodge. When she agreed to the plan she didn't expect to have to work side by side with the man who abandoned her ten years earlier. She didn't expect to like him, or want him ever again. But can she trust him as she once did?

Luke Carlsson rushes home to tend to his ailing mother. Her lengthy illness means he needs to stay, at least temporarily. And to stay, he needs to work. Solace Lake Lodge offers him a job and an opportunity to work with the woman he's never stopped loving.

But the restoration is unleashing secrets hidden for decades and no one is left unscathed. Especially not Maggie and Luke, whose love needs to be resilient enough to forgive, and strong enough to build a future together.

Truth and Solace

Prologue

Margaret Catherine Lindquist stepped off the school bus in front of the old fishing lodge and trudged up the stairs to the front porch. She hoped Grandma hadn't noticed the arrival of the bus because she couldn't bear one of her interrogations. Not today.

She made it to her room undetected. After quietly closing the door and locking it, she leaned her forehead against the solid wood and allowed the tears she'd been holding back to fall. Staggering to her bed, she curled into a fetal position and clutched Mr. Jingles, the Teddy Bear she'd owned for every one of her fourteen years.

It wasn't fair. All summer, while Luke had worked at the fishing lodge for her grandfather, they'd been close. He said he didn't care that she was four years younger. He'd told her all his dreams for the future, kissed her like she meant something to him, made love to her in their secret place in the forest. Though it had been the first time for them both, they'd soon overcome their initial awkwardness and learned where to touch and how to please. It had been a magical summer.

But now it was September, and the magic was over.

Maggie was back in school, and she'd heard Luke was working at a restaurant in Minnewasta. A love of cooking was something they shared. Someday, he'd promised, he'd own a restaurant and she'd be his head chef.

The tears flowed harder. He'd lied to her about that, too.

When she'd received a crumpled note from Luke earlier in the day, delivered by one of his bosses' kids, relief and excitement had overwhelmed her. He asked her to meet him at the football field behind the bleachers during afternoon recess. As soon as the bell rang, Maggie ran across the school yard. She hadn't seen Luke in almost two weeks, not since Grampa Bill had caught them together in one of the outbuildings. He'd fired Luke on the spot and told him to get off his property. It had been agony not to see him. And she'd been afraid he blamed her for losing his job and getting him into trouble.

When she arrived at the bleachers, Luke was there. But he wasn't alone. He was locked in a passionate embrace with Cheryl Bradley. Cheryl was as mean as she was pretty. Maggie had confided to Luke about how

Cheryl's nasty comments about her dead parents had hurt her. The shock and betrayal of seeing him kissing her made Maggie sick to her stomach.

"Luke! What are you doing?"

He'd casually hung his arm around Cheryl's shoulders, his eyes cold and hard as he stared at her. An involuntary shiver crawled up Maggie's spine. Luke had never looked at her with such disdain before. Such disgust.

"I'm leaving town," he said flatly. "Don't do something stupid like try to follow me."

"You're leaving? Where are you going?"

"Someplace far from here."

"But you'll be back, right? You said you'd wait for me, and we'd go away together. You said—"

"Forget it! You're a kid. I don't want you! Leave me the hell alone. Go home and play with your dolls."

With that, he'd grabbed Cheryl's hand and pulled her away. Cheryl glanced over her shoulder with a smirk full of smug triumph.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. She tuned out Ms. Carter in math class last period, too shocked to make sense of anything she said. Now, all she could do was cry.

She must have done something to make Luke fall out of love with her.

She'd go crazy if she didn't know. She had to find out what went wrong. She had to talk to Luke and make him explain. Maybe she could make things right and he'd take her with him.

Maggie clamoured off the bed and pulled a beat-up suitcase from underneath. She could hitchhike back to town and go to Abby's house. Abby was Luke's mother, the only person who'd known about their relationship. Abby had been her mother's best friend, and Maggie trusted her.

She pulled her waist-length hair into a low ponytail and haphazardly stuffed her things into the suitcase. Praying her most prized possession survived the journey, she hastily folded the delicate crystal unicorn Luke had given her inside a couple of T-shirts and stuck it amongst some other clothes where she hoped it would be protected. She hesitated over Mr. Jingles and then, with one last hug, she set the Teddy bear back on her bed. Time to put away childish things.

If she hurried, she could catch Luke before he left town. It didn't matter that he'd broken her heart when she'd found him kissing Cheryl. It had to be a mistake. Maybe if she'd been able to tell him how much she loved him, he wouldn't have done this. She wished it wasn't so hard for her to say the words, but if she caught up with him, she could tell him now. She'd make him see they belonged together.

A little voice in her head screamed she was wrong, that he'd betrayed her and taken advantage of her innocence. No eighteen-year-old boy on the brink of manhood would want a girl of fourteen. And if he really loved her, he wouldn't be kissing Cheryl Bradley. She shoved the voice away and snapped the suitcase shut.

"Maggie, open up!" The doorknob rattled as her grandmother tried to open it.

"Go away!"

"Maggie, please. I know you're upset, but letting that boy go is for the best. Your mother would want what was best for you."

Rage poured through Maggie at Grandma Dorothy's words. If Grampa hadn't fired Luke and forbade him from seeing her again, he wouldn't be leaving her now. "How do you know what my mother would have wanted? She's been dead for twelve years!"

"Margaret Catherine! Watch your smart mouth!"

The doorknob rattled again and then gave way as Grandma pushed the door open. Like everything else in the fishing lodge, the lock was old and broken.

She eyed the suitcase. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving. I can't stay in this place a minute longer. I hate it, and I hate you!"

Grandma pointed her finger at her. "You're exactly like your mother! Headstrong and stubborn. And look where it got her! If she'd listened to me, he wouldn't have killed her!"

"He didn't kill her! It was an accident. Abby said—"

"Oh, Abby said!" Grandma Dorothy spat the words.

"She said it had to be an accident. Daddy loved Mommy too much to ever hurt her!"

"How does Abby know anything? Was she there? Did she see your father and mother out on the lake that day? If she had, she would have seen how he grabbed that oar and split open her head."

The death of her parents – murder/suicide, the police said – occurred a few months past her first birthday. Maggie had imagined the horrible image in her dreams a thousand times, but this was too much. She covered her ears with her hands and turned away. "I don't have to listen to you anymore. I won't!"

Grandma grabbed her arm and twisted her around. "You have to listen before you make a mistake as big as the one your mother made. I know you're going to try meeting up with that boy, but he's gone, and he won't be coming back. Good riddance!"

"Luke will wait for me. I know he will. He loves me and I love him. You can't keep us apart."

"I won't let you make the same mistake Miranda made. She tried to run away from her problems but in the end, they killed her. I won't let that happen to you."

Tears of anger and frustration and grief ran down Maggie's face. "No! Let me go!"

"You think he loves you? He was only using you." Grandma tightened her hold. "You're lucky he's gone. He would have ruined your life like that man ruined your mother's life."

Maggie struggled to free herself from Grandma's strong grip. She beat her fist against her shoulder. "Let me go! Luke loves me. I know he does. I hate you! I hate you!"

"You are so like your father, it breaks my heart!"

Grandma Dorothy's grip on her arm abruptly loosened, and she staggered backward. Her face turned a funny greyish color and she clutched her stomach as if she was going to be sick. "She wouldn't listen to me. She wouldn't give him up."

Maggie seized the opportunity to grab her suitcase from the bed. "I'm leaving and I'm never coming back!"

Grandma clutched the bedpost. "She should have listened to me. She never listened to me. Oh, Miranda, my darling girl. Why didn't you listen to me?"

She slumped to the floor.

Maggie stared at her, fear making her immobile. "Grandma? Grandma, what's wrong?"

Grandma Dorothy's breath came out in ragged puffs. She struggled to lift her head. "I'm begging you, Maggie, don't run away. Don't make the same mistakes she did."

Maggie dropped her suitcase and slid to her knees beside her grandmother. Anger and love mixed with fear as she reached out her hand to touch her arm. "What's wrong? Should I get Grampa?"

Grandma Dorothy grabbed a handful of Maggie's T-shirt, her eyes pleading. "He was no good for her, but she said she loved him. She couldn't give him up. And it killed her."

"Who couldn't she give up, Grandma? Who did she love?"

"Your father."

"I don't understand, Grandma. If she loved Daddy, why did she run away? Why would he kill her?"

Grandma Dorothy's body went limp. Maggie stared at her, unable to move. She knew Grandma had a heart condition. She took some kind of pills for it. She shouldn't have argued with her, upset her like that. This was her fault.

Oh, my God. I've killed her.

She uncurled Grandma Dorothy's fingers from her T-shirt and stumbled away from her body. Tears of guilt crashed down her cheeks as she ran out of the lodge and raced to Grampa's shed.

You're exactly like your mother. The words taunted her, even as they confused her.

Nothing Grandma said made any sense. What had she meant? What had her mother done?

Anger welled up in her chest. This was all Luke's fault. He'd abandoned her when she needed him most, and she never wanted to see him again.

Chapter One

Ten Years Later

Dammit, she knew better. Some chef she was.

Water boiled bubbled over the top of the pot and flooded her new stove's pristine surface. The pot was too small for the amount of pasta Maggie wanted to cook, but the bigger pot was already in use and she figured she could get away with it, just this once.

Wrong again, Maggie.

She turned off the gas burner and yelped in pain as water splashed up and scalded her bare arm.

Damn, that hurt, but it served her right for being so careless and for thinking she could cut corners in the kitchen. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Suddenly, a man was standing next to her at the stove, sliding a heavy lid over the pot and pushing it onto a back burner. She'd been too distracted to notice his arrival in her kitchen, but now as she looked up into his face, her heart jumped into her throat. Though she hadn't seen him in ten years, she remembered every angle of his face, every golden speckle in his grey-green eyes, every wave in his dark hair.

"Luke."

The old resentment burned in her chest, surprising her with its intensity. She thought she'd put it behind her. Put *him* behind her.

Without a word, he steered her to the sink, turned on the cold water and pushed her arm beneath the stream. The water immediately soothed her scalded skin.

"Keep your arm under the cold water till the pain goes away."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The corner of his mouth turned up in the way her teenage self had always found sexy. Now, as a grown woman, it only made her angry.

"I'm here to apply for the job, but I wanted to talk to you first."

Maggie's mind went blank. She couldn't think with him looking at her, touching her. She could barely breathe. She hated that he still had that affect on her. "What job?"

"The job as your hotel and restaurant manager."

Her sister Harper and brother-in-law Ethan had been searching for someone experienced in the hotel business to handle the job. With the renovation of the fishing lodge Maggie and her sisters had inherited from their grandfather nearing completion, they needed help running the new and improved Solace Lake Lodge. Years ago, Luke's mother Abby told her he'd gone out to California to work in a hotel, but Maggie didn't know the specifics. She had avoided talking to Abby since she moved back to the lodge.

"I've been working at a boutique hotel in the Napa Valley for the last eight years. I manage the hotel and restaurant, and I oversee the wines we serve. I've taken special training in pairing California wines with food."

Maggie turned off the water and dried her arm on her apron. As soon as her skin dried the burn stung again, but she ignored it. "That's a very nice resume, but what I want to know is why you're back in Minnesota. Tired of all the sunshine, are you?"

"My mother is sick. Her doctors say she'd dying."

She stared at him in shock as guilt washed over her like a tsunami. Abby had asked to see her. Her sisters had visited and told her Abby asked for her repeatedly. But she'd been too childishly angry to go. After her grandmother's death, Abby had been her friend and confidant. She'd helped her through sadness and loneliness, and moments when Harper forgot she was her sister and not her mother. Abby had been her only connection to Luke and even though she resented the way he'd left her, she still craved news of him.

But then Abby married Reese and moved away. The abandonment had devastated Maggie. Someone was always leaving her.

And now she was losing Abby again.

"She's sick? How long...?" She couldn't finish the question.

"When the doctors discovered breast cancer, she had a double mastectomy, but it had already spread to her lungs. Her doctors say she's terminal, that she has less than six months, but I don't accept that diagnosis."

"What do you mean?"

"I've done some research, talked to cancer specialists. I'm trying to get her to continue treatment with a new doctor. I need to be here to help her. That's why I'm applying for this job on a temporary basis."

“Temporary?”

“I’ve taken a leave of absence, but I can’t afford not to work. I’ll go back to California when...when Mom has stabilized.”

“But what about Reese? He’s devoted to Abby. Surely, he’s done everything possible for her.”

“Reese is a good man, but he’s accepted what the doctors here have told them about my mother’s health. I think we need another opinion from someone who isn’t going to give up on her.”

Luke turned away on a deep breath. His pain reached out and touched her like a living thing. He’d always been close to his mother. Years ago, Abby had told her how Luke had been conceived during a brief affair she’d had in her twenties. She’d said she couldn’t regret the affair because it had given her Luke, and he was the light of her life. It had been the two of them against the world—three counting her mother. They’d lived with Abby’s widowed mother Phyllis in the small town of Minnewasta all through Luke’s childhood and adolescence.

“Before I have my interview with your sister, I needed to talk to you. We have a history, and the way I left you...wasn’t fair. If my being here is awkward for you, or makes you uncomfortable, I won’t apply for the job.”

She snapped to attention at his words. Abby needed Luke right now, and Luke needed to be with his mother. Her petty concerns meant nothing. “Don’t be ridiculous. That was years ago and we were kids, or at least I was. Whatever happened back then doesn’t matter anymore. Abby’s care is all that matters now.”

He nodded, but a look of anguish marred his handsome features. “Yeah. That’s all that matters.”

An hour later, Maggie heard voices in the lodge’s main entry as Harper and Ethan walked Luke to the front door. She stood behind the staircase where she could listen unobserved.

“How soon can you start?” Harper asked.

“I can start right away, but I want you to phone my references before you make any decisions,” Luke said. “Don’t give me the job because you feel sorry for me.”

“Luke, please. Let us help.”

"I'm serious, Harper. I want you to know for certain that I can do this job for you. I want to be an asset to the lodge while I'm here."

That was the Luke she remembered, the boy with so much pride and so determined to go his own way.

Without her, as it turned out. She closed her eyes, pushing down the anger and pain. She hated that his rejection mattered even now.

"We'll phone your employer in California if that's what you want," Ethan said. "I'll call you as soon as we've done that."

"Thank you. I appreciate your kindness."

They said their goodbyes, and Maggie heard the front door open and close. She ventured out of her hiding spot. "So, you're going to hire Luke?" she asked.

"Probably." Ethan put his arm around Harper's shoulders. Her sister leaned against her husband, looking as if she was about to cry. "I'll call his employer as a courtesy to him, but if the information on his resume is true, he's exactly what the lodge needs right now."

"Why didn't you tell me Luke was coming for an interview? I didn't even know he was back in Minnesota." Seeing him so unexpectedly had been a shock, one she'd wished she could have prepared for.

"We didn't know. He phoned shortly before showing up here. He said he'd seen our ad on an internet job site." Harper dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I can't believe Abby's doctors say she's terminal. She's never given any indication how sick she was."

"Luke said he's trying to convince her to see a new doctor and try another treatment." Maggie prayed this doctor could perform a miracle.

"Reese never said a word," Ethan said. "He must be going out of his mind. I know I would."

He pulled Harper into his arms and held her close, murmuring something in her ear. Maggie retreated back into the kitchen to give them privacy. Harper and Ethan shared a close, loving bond. Her sister had all but given up on the idea of finding love, but then Ethan swept into her life and changed everything for her.

No one deserved to be happy more than Harper. But sometimes, especially now that her other sister Scarlet was about to marry, Maggie wondered if that kind of happiness would always elude her.

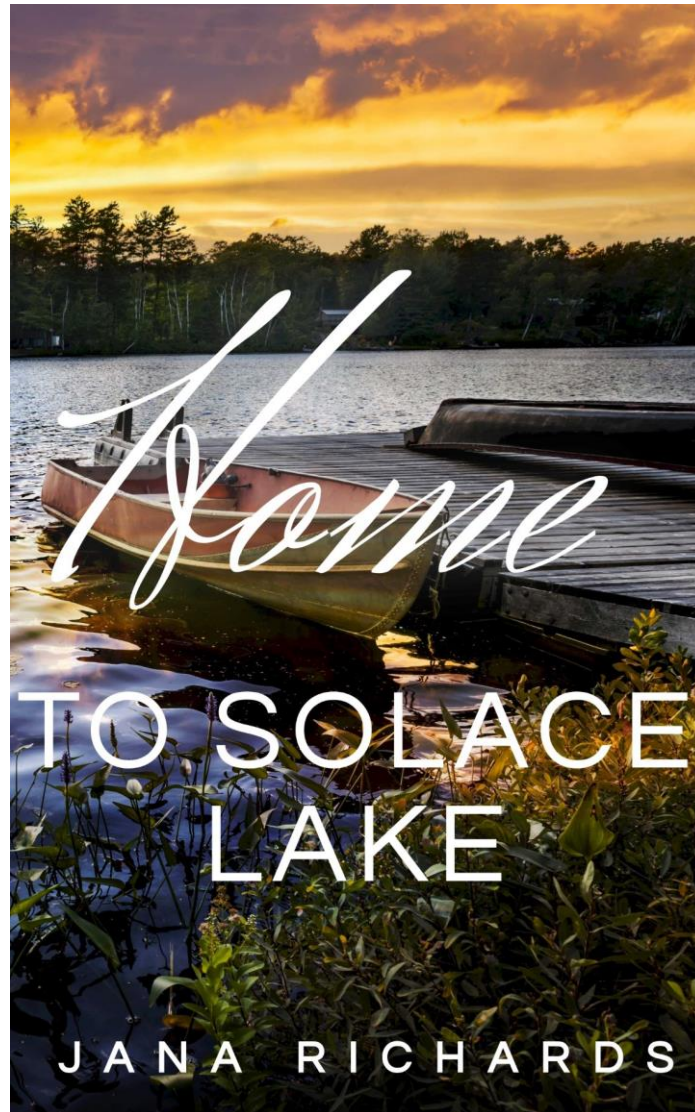
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Prequel to the Love at Solace Lake novels:
HOME TO SOLACE LAKE

After Jerry Fields buried his mother twenty-two years ago, he cut all ties to the small town in Minnesota where he grew up. He swore he'd never return. But when his biological father, a man who never acknowledged him, leaves Jerry his entire estate, curiosity has him returning to Minnewasta. Why did Earl Rogers will him everything he owned when during his lifetime he didn't give Jerry a minute of his time?

Denise Rogers wants to save the business that her deceased husband loved so much. But when her father-in-law Earl leaves all his property to his illegitimate son, saving the business gets much more complicated. Denise is determined to buy the property from Jerry Fields to keep it from being demolished and turned into condos. She wants to continue to run the business as a marine repair shop, knowing it's what her husband would have wanted. But events throw her plans into disarray, and she has to give up on her dream. Until Jerry offers to work with her over the summer to help her buy the property.

Jerry can't stomach the idea of putting his half-brother's widow out of a job and a home, so he decides to stay in Minnewasta to help her. At the end of the summer, Denise will purchase the property from him, and they'll go their separate ways. But as they work together, their feelings for each other deepen into love, and they uncover long-held secrets that force Jerry to question everything he thought he knew about his parents. Can Jerry overcome past hurts and fears for a chance at love?



Chapter One

Jerry Fields pulled into the gravel parking lot of Rogers Marine Service and brought his rental car to a stop. As he turned off the ignition, he stared at the two-story building, his stomach tying itself in knots. He shouldn't have given in to his curiosity by coming here to Minnewasta. He should have handled the sale of Earl's property from his home in Texas. It wasn't like his hometown had ever welcomed him before.

And it wasn't like his biological father had ever welcomed him either. Earl Rogers hadn't provided Jerry's mother with a dime to help with his upbringing. And he certainly didn't give Jerry two minutes of his time. He made it abundantly clear he wanted nothing to do with his illegitimate son.

So why the turn around on his deathbed?

What had prompted Earl Rogers to leave his entire estate to him?

Jerry had asked himself that question many times since he first got word about Earl's will. But in the end, the reasons didn't matter. Earl left him the property and now he had to deal with it. He was back in his small hometown of Minnewasta, Minnesota for one purpose—to sell the property. And then he'd get the hell out of town.

As he stared at the building, memories assailed him. He'd ridden his bike past Rogers Marine Service on the outskirts of Minnewasta many times as a kid. He often stopped and stared, longing for something he couldn't put a name to. But his mother forbade him to go inside the shop or to make contact with his father, so after staring his fill, he'd get back on his bike and pedal away.

Jerry straightened his shoulders. *Enough*. He had every right to be here. He wouldn't let bad memories chase him away.

Checking his watch, he saw it was time for his meeting with the agent. He left his car and entered the building.

A counter ran the length of the small reception area, behind which was a door and a window looking into the shop where a mechanic was currently working on an outboard motor. To the right stood several floor to ceiling shelves with bins that probably contained parts to fix boats and motors. There were a couple of doors on the right that were probably offices.

This was the first time he'd ever been inside Rogers Marine. The first time he'd been *allowed* inside the building. Anger and resentment followed the thought and his resolve stiffened. *Get in, sell the property, get out*. This was no sentimental journey down memory lane.

A woman in a navy-blue suit stepped out of one of the offices and approached with a smile, her hand extended. "Mr. Fields? Hi, I'm Justine McWilliams with Lakeview Reality. I'm handling the sale of the property. I'm sorry for your loss."

Her condolences caught him off guard. How could you mourn a father you never knew? He accepted her hand in a shake and nodded.

"As per your instructions, we've done an assessment of the value of this property, including the building and the five acres surrounding it, as well as a rental unit in town that Earl owned. My office has been acting as property manager for the rental for the last few years. A family is currently living in

the property. Do you want us to put it up for sale as well? If so, we'll have to give the family adequate notice."

Jerry had no desire to kick anyone out of their home. "I don't have to sell the property right now. Once the renters move out, you can put the unit on the market."

"All right. I'll let my colleague in the property management branch know." Justine cleared her throat. "As I mentioned in my email, a condo developer is interested in this property. I told you what the developer offered."

"Right. Seems like a fair offer for a beautiful piece of land like this." He'd been surprised at how much Earl's property had been worth. Probably because it was lakefront, on the shores of Solace Lake. There likely wasn't much serviced lakefront property available for the developer this close to Minnewasta.

Justine bit her lip. "Yes, that's true. However, we've received a new offer in the last couple of days."

"Okay." Perhaps a hotel wanted the land. "What's the offer?"

"I'll let the person making the offer tell you about it." Justine turned to her right. "Could you join us, please?"

A lovely blonde woman emerged from behind the parts area and walked towards them. She stood beside Justine and stared at Jerry with eyes so blue they were almost violet.

Justine cleared her throat. "Mr. Fields, this is Denise Rogers, daughter-in-law of your late father. And full disclosure, she's also my sister. She has a proposition for you." If this woman was Earl's daughter-in-law, that meant she was married to his half-brother Paul, who'd been born when Jerry was about ten. He vividly remembered his mother's tears in reaction to the news of the birth. Though Jerry had seen Paul around town they never had a relationship, had never spoken to each other. Paul had been about eight when Jerry left Minnewasta for good.

Why wasn't he here pleading his case instead of his wife? And why hadn't Earl left the property to Paul?

"A proposition?" He looked at Justine. "I thought you said it was an offer."

Denise Rogers took a step towards him. "It's both, actually. Would you hear me out?"

Jerry stared into her earnest blue eyes. He'd listen if for no other reason than to find some answers. "All right."

She gestured toward a nearby table in front of the sunny windows. "Please. Have a seat."

Jerry took a seat at the table while Justine poured coffee, and Denise retrieved some papers from a briefcase sitting on the reception counter. She returned to the table and sat across from him.

"I would like to make an offer on the property." Denise passed a paper to Jerry. "I believe it's a fair offer."

"Denise may be my sister, but I haven't shared any information with her," Justine said. "She knows there's another offer, but she has no idea about the dollar amount."

"I see." Should he believe her? This could be an elaborate scam. After all, Denise and Paul had been cut out of Earl's will. Maybe this was their way of getting revenge. He decided to play this out and see where it led.

He looked at the figure. It was lower than the other offer, but in the ballpark. "So, you want to buy the property and develop it yourself?"

"No," Denise said. "I want to continue running it as a marine repair shop."

Justine added, "She's been running the shop for the last two years. Earl hadn't been well enough since—"

"It's still very much a viable business. We have more clients than ever. In fact, we just won three big new contracts. We're going to service the rental fleets for three marinas this summer."

"Okay." Obviously, Denise Rogers was both ambitious and a hard worker.

"There's a caveat to Denise's offer," Justine said. "She needs to complete those contracts over the summer in order to pay you. In the fall, she can pay you in full, in cash."

"I had hoped for a quick sale." He wanted to close this chapter of his life and move on.

"I understand, but it's only a few months." Denise looked up at him with pleading eyes. "This business meant a lot to your father. He and his father built it from scratch. I hoped you'd be interested in seeing it continue."

"The business means nothing to me." Jerry heard the coldness in his voice, but he didn't care. Earl Rogers didn't want him to even enter the building

when he was growing up, so why should he care about it now? "Is this what your husband wants, too? His not being here tells me he's not overly interested in saving the business."

Some emotion flickered briefly on Denise's face before she lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "My husband isn't here because he's dead. He died two years ago."

Jerry stared at her, stunned. Considering he'd never met his half-brother, the news hit unexpectedly hard. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

Denise accepted his condolence with a nod. "Earl's health declined dramatically after Paul's death. I think he just gave up. And Louise... well...she's still grieving."

Louise. Earl Roger's wife. Jerry often heard his mother say her name, usually in anger. Or in tears. Unhappy memories suddenly closed in on him. Louise Rogers had been the boogey man of his childhood. The person, according to his mother, who stood between him and his father. And happiness.

He needed to get out of this place. He quickly rose to his feet and picked up the papers Denise had given him.

"I'll look these over and get back to you with my decision."

He hurried out of the building before either woman could say anything more. As he drove away, he questioned why Earl hadn't left the business to Denise.

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