

# Bricks and Bones

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Published by Kristen Hogrefe Parnell, 2022.



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BRICKS AND BONES

First edition. May 2, 2022.

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Written by Kristen Hogrefe Parnell.



To Lauren, Vivian, and Evelyn, who share my appreciation for  
cheesy jokes and a good adventure



# Chapter 1

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*"I'm afraid for the calendar. Its days are numbered."*

*– Justin Vibes*

• • • •

**M**onday morning, October 18

"Why did the girl have purple hair?"

Tori Bones glanced up from putting fresh donuts in the display as Justin Vibes slapped his dirt-crusting biking gloves and a package on the counter. A large smudge covered part of his cheek, but there was no blood. A good sign that whatever crash he'd had on the way here was minor.

She flipped her violet-brown braid over her shoulder. "Puh-lease. I told you why yesterday. If you were listening."

But once Justin started a joke, he couldn't stop. "She did it on purpose!" A loud snort and hoot followed.

"Seriously, that's not even funny." At least Travis, the cook, was otherwise occupied in the kitchen and didn't overhear her boyfriend bantering with her before Fred's restaurant opened. "How did you even get in here?"

"Oh, I caught Josh on his way in. He doesn't care if I harass you a little before you start your day."

Once before, she had made the mistake of letting Justin stop by early to say hello, and now, he made semi-regular appearances before biking to his job at the Beech Mountain ski resort, which doubled as a downhill bike park during the summer.

Justin stuffed the gloves under his arm. A frown creased his otherwise carefree, boyish face. He was the only twenty-five-year-old she knew who didn't look a day over eighteen. Maybe growing a beard would help.

"Everything okay? My morning girl doesn't seem happy."

With a sigh, Tori moved out from behind the counter to collect yesterday's local newspaper from where a guest had left it. The front page featured the latest heist the so-called Cupid Capers had committed in her area. "I'm tired, and I'll probably catch a cold after last night."

Justin's blue eyes took on the classic lost puppy look. "Sorry, babe, you know my memory stinks. What was last night?"

She bit her tongue. Maybe if he took fewer risks, he'd have fewer head injuries and a better memory. But telling a semi-pro downhill biker to be careful was as pointless as telling a whale to grow wings.

"I had that Wizard-of-Oz costume party job last night, and the birthday brat—who not only insisted that Dorothy dye her hair—also chose me for the dunk tank." She sneezed just thinking about the sixty-degree water.

"I'm sorry." Justin retrieved the package from the counter. "Maybe this will brighten your day."

"Is it—"

"Yes, it's the stem and grips for your bike. They arrived yesterday. Can't wait to kit out the Green Wizard."

Her throat tightened against another sneeze. The Green Wizard was what they called the bike Justin had helped her buy so he could teach her to ride with him, and he'd been going halves with her on bike mods. But her credit card bill was already high this month, her next college loan payment was due, and her Summa Cum Laude diploma was just collecting dust.

Justin cleared his throat. "Don't worry about paying me back. I thought maybe we could work on it after dinner at my place, but if you need to rest—"

"No, I have the money. I got paid for the gig last night." Her face felt hot. Was she catching a fever? Maybe it was just her stubborn pride. Justin was the best thing that had happened to her since her career fell apart. But she didn't want to be the needy girlfriend.

"Tori, wait."



But she had already darted to the back to retrieve her bag. Stuffing her hand inside it, she felt for the envelope with five twenties that the birthday girl's mother had counted out for her last night.

A much-thicker envelope greeted her hand. She yanked it out and blinked. Had Mrs. Graycroft swapped out the twenties for one-dollar bills? What a stinkpot thing to do. She had enough ones from tips.

With a sigh, Tori tugged out the first few bills. And gasped.

They weren't ones. They weren't twenties. They were Ben Franklins.



*M*onday afternoon, October 18

Having her middle-school social studies teacher as the present-day sheriff was odd but weirdly convenient. Especially when she had been something of the teacher's pet and had grown up skiing the slopes with his kids every winter.

"Mr. Jafferson—Sheriff Jafferson—what do you think?" Tori sucked a deep breath when she finished her story. After leaving a rather incoherent message with his front desk staff, the receptionist had made an appointment for her to meet with him.

The overstuffed envelope lay on his desk. The amount totaled five-thousand dollars and a jade ring.

"I think you remain the most honest young woman I ever taught—and you might just be our first lead to catch the Cupid Capers," he said.

"Me? A lead? How?"

"Don't you read the news? Our sleepy town has seen a sudden spike in home robberies. Surveillance videos consistently show the couple kissing as they leave the house. We call them the Cupid Capers."

Only Beech Mountain could romanticize home invaders. "Yes, I know who they are, but what do they have to do with this money?"

Jafferson didn't seem to hear her and instead grabbed a tissue to more closely examine the jade ring. "Tell me more about this job. I thought you went to school for paralegal work or something."

How far her dreams had crumbled. "Yeah, I graduated top of my class. But you remember Jaxon and Truit's firm, right?"

Jafferson whistled. "Oh man, I was so sad to see them close the doors after all these years. Such a shame."

"I had only been working there a year. And as you know, this area isn't hopping with law firms. I'm on half a dozen waiting lists, but right now, I'm working part-time at Fred's, house-sitting for my parents' wealthy friends, and taking costume party jobs. Thanks to having our own Wizard of Oz theme park, Beech Mountain is the only place little girls want Dorothy at their party instead of Princess Anna and Elsa."

"My granddaughter will be five next month. I'll keep that in mind." Jafferson's smile turned serious. "But back to this costume party. The thief must have intended this envelope for someone else, unless you happen to be one of our mystery Cupids."

"I am not. Why would I turn in the cash if I were?"

"Don't forget the ring. Maybe you broke up?"

Tori's cheeks blushed. "Justin and I are good."

Jafferson's eyes twinkled. "Justin Vibes? He was a horrible student, but he has a good heart."

"I agree."

The sheriff pulled out a notepad. "I'm teasing you. You didn't cheat on my tests when I accidentally gave you the answer keys—not once but twice. And you warned me every time John McSky was about to prank me. You've never lied to me before, and Justin would pee his pants if I accused him of such a thing. But enough about you kids. What can you tell me about last night?"

## Chapter 2

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*“I don’t trust those trees. They seem kind of shady.”*

*– Justin Vibes*

• • • •

**L**ast night, October 17

Who knew she would be using her *Autumn at Oz* Dorothy costume to earn a living? But that job at Beech Mountain’s annual Oz festival last month had certainly made her October weekends full of party requests.

Tori sighed and dropped her bag on the floor of the third-story room. Her employer for the night, Mrs. Graycroft, who was dressed in a dazzling emerald-sequined dress, had directed her to the first room at the end of the stairs, the place she designated for the other costume actors to leave their things.

As if anyone would bother stealing her simple things in a mansion like this.

At least the woman had been kind enough to pay up front. The envelope with her night’s earnings was already tucked into her bag.

The high school junior dressed as the Wicked Witch snorted behind her. “Why did they choose you to play Dorothy?”

Tori bit her lip. She had babysat Nina Fanning years ago, and now, the teen was a head taller than she was—and a lot mouthier than she remembered. Nina’s little sister was also one of the birthday girl’s friends she would have to contend with tonight.

“And what’s with the purple hair?”

“Special request.” Tori focused on a small mirror and checked her red lipstick. “The temp agency called me Monday for this party with the request to have blue hair. I didn’t remember a character in the Oz cast having blue hair, but I did what I was told—er, at least I tried. I should have

bought better dye, because it ended up purple. Then yesterday, I learned I was Dorothy. Here's hoping the birthday girl likes purple as much as blue."

"It looks ridiculous."

Tori bowed. "Thank you, your wickedness."

"Such an amateur mistake. My father's farm only uses experienced costume actors for its fall festival and parties. I can't believe I agreed to this gig." Nina rolled her eyes and disappeared down the stairs. Tori lagged behind, pretending to adjust the bow in her hair. But really, she hated costume parties.

She had gone to school to be a paralegal. Not a dress-up doll for rich kids' birthdays. But it paid the bills, along with her other part-time gigs, until another *real* job opened.

A thud behind her made her spin.

Another tall woman—but then, everyone was taller than her—entered the room with her blonde hair stiffly braided into pigtails. Her elaborately pleated dress and dunce cap could only mean one thing: she was a munchkin.

Tori cleared her throat. "Hey, I'm Tori. Just getting ready to go down to the party."

The woman's green eyes, shadowed by dark lash extensions, squinted at her. "Vanessa, but you can call me Van. Everyone does."

Maybe Tori wasn't the only one who had met hard times. Van had to be in her thirties. "You—uh—do these parties a lot?"

Van sniffed. "Definitely not. This is a personal favor to replace someone who canceled last minute."

"Nice of you." Tori edged toward the door. "Well, see you downstairs." Even a bratty birthday girl couldn't be more oppressive than that woman's ego.

She had just reached the base of the stairs when a black and gold dash nearly toppled her legs.

"Whoa!" A scratchy hand—Was that straw?—reached to steady her.

“Th-thanks.” Tori winced as her red heels met the man’s boots. “Oh, Steven—Scarecrow?”

“Yep.” Her ex-boyfriend, Steven Starnes, still held her arm.

She hadn’t seen him in years, not since he transferred from their small-town Lees-McRae College to the University of Utah on a full esports scholarship. She would have made a long-distance relationship work, except that he also distanced himself from his faith in the process.

Not that she was doing too great herself these days. She hadn’t picked up her Bible in weeks or been to church in—months?

“What are you doing here?” Tori pulled away from Steven to pet the black Labrador retriever panting at her feet. Someone had tied a plastic lion’s mane around his neck.

“Hello to you too.” Steven smoothed the straw hat that did nothing to detract from his piercing gray eyes.

“Sorry, I just didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I’m here to visit my girlfriend.”

“Oh, is she here?” Tori rose to face him and hoped her question sounded polite. They had both moved on, so she could be a grown up about this. Still, part of her wished she could follow the lion-lab down the hallway and avoid niceties with her ex.

“No, she flew back to our flat in LA this morning for a promotional job but asked if I could stay an extra day to help with the birthday party. The strawman canceled last night, and we had to overnight this outfit.”

Tori frowned. “Wait, so you’re dating—”

“Essie’s step-sister, Maggie Reese.”

Tori felt even smaller than her five-feet. “The TikTok sensation?”

Steven grinned. “Yeah, she’s amazing.”

“Small world.” Tori swallowed the lump in her throat. “Anyway, I’m going to go out back, where Mrs. Graycroft asked us to meet for a picture with Essie before the party starts.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.”

Part way down the hall, she stopped in her tracks. A large hallway mirror seemed to mock her. Her purple hair didn't match her blue checkered dress. She'd never liked her wide eyes, though Justin told her they were beautiful, and now, she just felt like a freak clown, overshadowed by her ex's sensational girlfriend.

"Just get through the night," she muttered and stepped through the open sliding door onto the patio. Half a dozen tables showcased poppy flower vases, and from the ceiling hung flying monkey cut-outs. Outside the patio was a short yellow brick road leading to a bounce-house, face-painting stand, dunk tank, cotton candy machine, corn hole game, and pony ride. How many kids got a real live pony ride on their birthdays?

"There you are." A high-pitched voice made her jump.

"Oh, Essie, happy birthday." Tori forced a broader smile than she felt at the ten-year-old birthday girl who stood eye-level with her. Essie wore a dazzling white dress that billowed out from the waist, exactly as the good witch Glenda's had. She tapped her white wand in her open palm as if assessing her.

"You are a disappointing Dorothy."

Tori felt her jaw drop but quickly clamped it shut. "I—it's great to meet you too. I hope you have a lovely birthday."

"I don't like you."

Her face flamed. She was no Maggie Reese, but c'mon, this was a birthday party.

"Now, Essie, be nice." A deep voice came to her rescue. She turned to see Essie's father, aka the Tin Man, march through the open doorway, holding a tray of miniature cakes, each decorated like a yellow brick.

Essie stomped her foot. "She has purple hair, Peter."

Tori did a double take. What ten-year-old addressed her dad that way? Oh wait, Peter must be her step-dad.

Peter Graycroft leaned down and whispered in Essie's ear. Her cheeks pinkened, but she nodded stiffly. "Yes, Peter."

He straightened and acknowledged Tori. “Thank you for being here. You look great, and I’m sure all the children will have a nice time. Now, let’s get that picture taken, and then Essie needs to welcome her guests.”

At least someone wanted her here. “Let me take that tray for you.” Tori offered, and Peter seemed grateful to be rid of it.

“Thanks, we’re short-staffed tonight.”

What was it with everyone not showing up for this party?

She set the tray down on the dessert table, which already overflowed with cookies, a triple-decker cake, donuts, and candy. This party was diabetes waiting to happen.

“I have plans for you.”

Tori let out a little squeak and nearly tipped the yellow-brick cake tray. Essie stood behind her, clutching her wand.

“Essie, you—”

“It’s the dunk tank for you, Dorothy.”

## Chapter 3

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*“Did you hear the rumor about butter? Well, I’m not going to spread it!”*  
– Justin Vibes

• • • •

**M**onday evening, October 18

The late afternoon sky grayed with rain clouds as Tori trudged from the mail box to the front door of the Wilkerson’s three-story mansion. These friends of her parents had asked her to housesit while they vacationed in Greece.

At least her last job of the day involved sitting on someone else’s couch. Justin offered to bring over pizza once his shift ended at the bike park. Thankfully, she had told him her bike mod job would have to wait for another night. She was exhausted.

She fumbled for the key and hoped Tigger hadn’t hurled another hairball for her to clean up. Once inside, she disarmed the security system and placed the mail on the end table.

The top envelope’s return address caught her eye. *Graycroft Accounting Services*.

Small world. Which Graycroft was an accountant?

But the tiger-striped tabby weaving between her legs threatened to trip her if she didn’t put down its dinner pronto.

The Wilkersons should have called the kitten Pooh. It was always hungry.

“I know, I know.” She dropped her bag on a chair and scooped up the meowing furball. “I would’ve been here sooner if not for the police report.”

*If you think of anything else, call me.*

That’s what Sheriff Jafferson had said when he’d given her his personal cell number. As much as she liked her former social studies teacher, she



sure didn't plan to chat with him again. She had recounted everything she could remember of the night. It was up to the experts to figure out where the five-thousand had come from—and the ring that matched the one stolen from a house on the mountain last week.

Why anyone would try to use a kid's birthday party to make such a transfer was beyond her. Though the fact she had rubbed shoulders with a thief last night did make her uneasy.

She had no sooner set down Tigger's food than someone knocked on the front door.

"Coming!" Justin must have gotten off work early.

But the teenager standing at the door wasn't Justin.

It was Nina's boyfriend Easton. And yes, she had babysat him as a kid, too. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

The teen wore board shorts, a plain black shirt, and a backwards baseball cap. "Is that your car in the driveway?"

"Yes, why?"

"You house-sitting for the Wilkerson's?"

She nodded, still not sure what Easton needed from her.

He jerked a thumb toward his pick-up at the end of the road. "They asked me to pressure wash their driveway while they're gone. Can you move your car?"

"Oh, sure. But I think it's going to rain."

He shrugged. "I'm getting wet anyway. Thanks."

"Okay." She retrieved her keys and parked across the street in the empty lot. Easton gave her a thumb's up, and she waved back. At least the kid was doing honest work. He had been a terror as a child but seemed nicer than his girlfriend. Maybe he should break up and look for less sarcastic waters.

*Leave it alone. They're just kids with a lot of growing up to do.*

She shot off a text to Justin to park in the vacant lot, collapsed onto the couch, and flipped through the channels on the wide-screen TV mounted on the wall. One channel was playing a special about *The Wiz-*

*ard of Oz*. Her finger hovered over the channel button, but she paused. It wasn't the movie, but a documentary. Maybe it would be interesting.

Or maybe not. The host was elaborating on L. Frank Baum's munchkins, a cheerful race of short people whose favorite color was blue. They were also the wealthiest and healthiest Ozites ...

A whole race of short people. Tori snorted. Maybe to them, she'd be tall, but then, they were make-believe.

She wouldn't mind her height if people would stop being rude about it.

Her mother's words drifted into her mind. *Sticks and stones can break your bones, and words can be even more hurtful. But only if you believe them. Instead, believe what is true: that God made no mistakes when He made you, and He doesn't look on your height but at your heart.* She'd heard the lecture more than once, thanks to being a constant object of teasing all throughout school.

But she was an adult now. Jeers and jokes shouldn't bother her anymore. Yet Essie's cruel words resurfaced in her memory and pulled her thoughts to the very place she wanted to forget: the birthday party.

When she had finally crawled out of the dunk tank, her teeth had been chattering so badly she couldn't talk. Beech Mountain evenings remained cool year-round, and whoever filled the dunk tank hadn't used warm water.

"Here you go, dear." Mrs. Graycroft had appeared with a large beach towel. "There should be a Dorothy dress upstairs in the dresser you can change into."

"Th—thanks, but how—"

The hostess dismissed her question. "It's Maggie's dress, but she's never worn it. Probably because—"

She bit her lip and wiped at her eyelid, smudging her concealer.

"If she wo—won't mind, I'd love to—to change." Tori had to stop shaking.

Mrs. Graycroft straightened. “Oh, she won’t mind. She never touches anything Peter buys her.”

A bitter chuckle escaped the woman’s lips. “Some days, I wish I never had either,” she muttered and turned to leave, her emerald dress looking somehow duller.

Tori penguin-walked up the stairs toward the third-floor room, hoping that Maggie’s dress would fit. She couldn’t wear this sopping outfit any longer, or she’d freeze.

The dress was buried in the bottom drawer, still partially wrapped in tissue with a card tacked onto it. Tori pulled out the blue outfit, much softer and nicer than her own. It was too long and would hit her mid-calf, but the size was just one larger than she normally wore.

Once she stopped shivering, Tori draped her soaking dress over the tub in the adjoining bathroom and redid her braids. In the mirror, her gaze focused on the card and tissue she’d discarded on the floor.

Why did Maggie dislike Peter so much?

It was none of her business. But she was curious. Striding back into the room, she retrieved the card and read: “My dear Maggie, I know we will be the best of friends. I love your mom very much and can’t wait for us to be a family.”

Someone had scrawled through Peter’s words and written in an angry print, “Liar! You just want our money, and you can’t have it.”

She had dropped the card and tissue back in the dresser and shoved the drawer closed.

A thud outside the Wilkerson’s front door drew her from the memory, and Tori jerked her gaze toward the hallway. Was Justin here now?

The window to her right revealed daylight had faded, and a drizzle now misted the pane. The documentary had long since ended.

Her stomach growled. Yes, surely that had to be Justin.

But as she rose, the room glitched into darkness.

A power outage? The storm didn’t seem that bad. At least pizza was here, and she didn’t have to cook dinner.

Another small thud came from the front doorway, just as her phone lit up.

Justin texted, “Sorry, babe, running late. Be there in 5.”

Her hand froze around her cell phone. Then who—

The glass window beside the door shattered, and she screamed.

## Chapter 4

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*“Why did the math book look so sad? Because of all of its problems!”*  
– Justin Vibes

• • • •

**M**onday evening, October 18

Eating cold pizza in her boyfriend’s smelly van was the perfect way to end the day.

Said Tori never.

Justin tapped on his steering wheel as they watched the crime scene investigators tip toe around the shattered front door. Flashing police lights warned any curious neighbors to stay away. “Sorry I didn’t get here sooner. Bill asked me to work late, and we were extra busy for a Monday.”

Tori swallowed the chewy crust. “Not your fault someone scared the living daylights out of me. At least my scream scared them away.” She shivered. What would she have done if they had kept breaking in?

“Glad you’re okay. Hope the cops can get fingerprints or something,” Justin muttered.

“Yeah.” But the intruders would have used gloves, and the investigators probably wouldn’t bother with fingerprints on a robbery attempt.

This attempted break-in had all the markings of the Cupid Capers. Wealthy estate. Owners on vacation.

Something nagged in the back of her mind, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

An officer walked up to the van, and Tori lowered the passenger window. “You’re the house-sitter, right? Thanks for waiting,” the man said.

Tori nodded. “Sure thing. Is there anything I can do to help?”

The officer tapped on his tablet. “Did anyone know you were going to be here tonight?”

“Just the Wilkersons—the owners—and Justin. Why?”

The officer turned to Justin. “And you arrived after someone smashed the glass, right?”

“Yeah, I work at the ski resort and got off work late. I picked up the pizza and was heading here when Tori called me. I came as fast as I could.”

“Neither of you saw anything?”

Tori shook her head. “Like Justin said, he wasn’t here, and I didn’t actually see whoever tried breaking in. Earlier, a high schooler came by to pressure wash the driveway, but I haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Do you and that student go to school together?”

Heat crept up Tori’s neck. “No, I’m a college graduate. But I do know Easton’s family.”

The officer offered a tight smile. “Sorry, I saw the purple hair and in the dim lighting, I just thought—”

Something snapped in Tori’s memory. *Hair. That was it!* She didn’t care how old the officer thought she looked. She needed to call Sheriff Jafferson.

Justin patted Tori’s hand and shrugged at the officer. “You’re not the first person to mistake Tori for a teenager, but she’s the smartest college grad I know.”

Tori grabbed a pizza napkin and scribbled her name and phone number on it. “Here’s my number if you think of any more questions for me or need me to look up Easton’s phone number. He’s the kid who did the pressure washing.”

“Thanks. We’ll have the broken window boarded up when we’re done collecting evidence. I would try to contact the owners if you can.”

“I already emailed them. Is it okay to come back tomorrow and let their cat out of the bathroom? She has food and water, but I didn’t want her to get in your way.”

“That’ll be fine.” The officer thanked her and returned to the scene.

Justin quirked an eyebrow at her. “You okay? I thought for sure you’d say something snippy about his teenager comment.”

Tori fumbled for her cell phone in her hoodie pouch. “At least he was nice about it. But I need to make a call.”

“I thought you said the Wilkersons were in Greece?”

“I’m not calling the Wilkersons.” Tori bit her lip. Why hadn’t she made this connection sooner? “I’m calling Sheriff Jafferson.”

As the call started ringing through, she offered Justin an apologetic smile. If only there were time to explain her jumbled thoughts to him.

Sheriff Jafferson answered on the fourth ring. “Tori?”

“Sheriff, I need to talk to you. I thought of something else.”

“I’m at the station, but it’s crazy right now,” Jafferson said as a woman shouted in the background. “If you want to come by and wait, that will be fine.”

“Thanks, I’ll come by.” With that, she hung up and reached inside the pizza box. She’d eat the slice while driving to the station.

Justin groaned. “I take it we’re not just going to relax and eat cold pizza with my roommates tonight?”

“Nope.” Tori popped open the passenger door and retrieved her car keys from her pocket. “But you don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

A grin tugged at the corners of his jaw. “I’ll follow you there. Whatever is simmering in your brain, I want to hear it.”

• • • •

Tori pulled into the station, and Justin was just a few meters behind her. He deserved a gold star. Justin had volunteered to go with her, even though hanging out at the police department didn’t have the makings of a casual date night.

But even Tori wasn’t prepared for the screaming match waiting for her in the station’s parking lot. She had just parked and popped open her door when a string of expletives froze her to her driver’s seat.

A couple stood behind a gray SUV shouting at each other. A parking lot light illuminated their silhouettes and animated gestures.

“... about the money. It’s about trust, Peter!”

*Peter.*

Tori squinted to get a better look. The man was dressed in black jeans and a black muscle shirt, while his wife wore a mustard blazer and jeans. Could it be the Graycrofts?

“... treat me like second class. I may not be her father, but I love her—”

The SUV’s back door swung open and a shrill voice cried out, “No, you don’t! Leave my mom alone.”

*Essie.* She might be a spoiled brat, but no child should have to watch her parents fight like this. What were all three of them doing at the sheriff’s station?

Susan reached for Essie, who had jumped onto the pavement, and hugged her to her side. “Let’s go inside, Essie. We’ll wait for an Uber.”

Peter threw his arms in the air. “Be reasonable. You’re already suspected of robbery. Do you really want to go back in there and add domestic problems to your resume?”

But Susan pushed Essie in front of her and marched straight for the automatic door. Peter cursed again, jumped in the SUV, and sped away.

As Justin pulled into the space beside her, Tori hesitated. She wanted to see Sheriff Jafferson, but she hadn’t planned to include Essie and Susan in that equation.

No, this was important. She would get a private audience with the sheriff anyway. She could ignore Essie’s sass since she wasn’t being paid for a party.

Justin rolled down his window. “Want me to come with you or wait here?”

Tori stuffed her keys in her bag. “Come with? Hopefully it won’t take long, but the receptionist said I might have to wait.”

Seconds later, Justin hopped to her side and reached for her hand. She wasn’t the touchy-feely kind, but right now, his hand holding hers felt good.



They had no sooner stepped inside than Tori spotted Susan and Essie waiting in a few seats off to the side. After checking in with the woman behind the desk, she and Justin settled into seats on the other side of the room.

Essie had been playing a game on her phone, but the moment she looked up, her face turned red. She leaped to her feet and pointed at Tori. “That’s her! That’s the witch!”

## Chapter 5

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*“If a child refuses to nap, are they guilty of resisting a rest?” – Justin Vibes*

••••

**M**onday evening, October 18

Tori was trying to pick her jaw up off the floor when the receptionist called her and Justin back to see the sheriff. Susan Graycroft had been unable to shush her daughter and chose to wait for her Uber outside. But not until she had cast Tori a scowl or two of her own.

“What was that all about?” Justin whispered as they followed the receptionist down the hall.

“She must have mistaken me for—” but Tori didn’t finish. She needed the sheriff’s help to check out her theory first.

Sheriff Jafferson looked ten years older than he did during their meeting earlier that day. The poor man must be working a twelve-hour shift. Still, he welcomed her and Justin to his office and motioned for them to sit down.

He got right to the point. “What’s this about new information?”

Tori took a deep breath and leaned forward. “Sheriff, I think your Cupid Capers—or at least one of them—worked with me during Essie Graycroft’s birthday party.”

The sheriff folded his hands on the desk. “I think you’re right. The Graycroft’s were just here. Someone anonymously reported Susan Graycroft as targeting her clients’ accounts and robbing them when she knew they were out of town. We didn’t have enough to hold her, but she is a suspect.”

“Interesting.” Tori recounted seeing an envelope, presumably an invoice, from Susan at the estate she was house-sitting. An estate that someone tried to rob just a few hours prior.

“But why would she rob her own clients?” Justin asked.

“Good question,” Jafferson said.

Tori bit her lip. Would the sheriff think she was crazy? “Maybe she didn’t. Maybe she’s the target.”

Jafferson arched an eyebrow. “Come again? We just ran a search on the estates that have been robbed. The connection among all of them is that they use Susan Graycroft as an accountant. It would seem she has wormed herself into these clients’ confidentiality and knows how to access their home safes before anyone can respond to the security systems.”

“You’re right that she looks like a prime suspect,” Tori said. “That’s one reason I think you’re wrong. Isn’t the obvious suspect usually the wrong one?”

Jafferson chuckled. “You’ve read too many mystery books. The obvious suspect is usually guilty.”

Justin tapped Tori on the arm. “Didn’t you say you saw the Graycrofts in the parking lot arguing with each other?”

“Domestic disputes are pretty common in emotionally charged situations,” Jafferson said.

“What about their daughter calling you a witch in the lobby?” Justin pressed. “What was that about?”

Jafferson leaned forward. “Why would Essie Graycroft call you a witch?”

Tori sucked a deep breath. “Because, Sheriff Jafferson, she thinks I’m the woman ruining her mom’s life.”

The sheriff arched an eyebrow. “And are you?”

Tori couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across her lips. “No, sir, but with your help, I think I can prove who is.”

••••

*Saturday morning, October 23*

“I think I make a pretty great scarecrow.” Justin’s goofy grin was the only thing keeping her from hurling every last piece of the perfect Fred’s cinnamon roll she’d had for breakfast.

She swallowed the rising bile and scanned the growing line of guests buying tickets for a day at Fanning Farm. “What if they don’t come? What if this doesn’t work?”

“It’ll work. Who could resist free passes to the best fall festival in town and the promise that they may have been selected to win ten thousand dollars?”

He tore off another piece of blue cotton candy from a giant bag he’d bought. The concessions at Nina’s family farm were above par by Justin’s estimation and a sugar coma waiting to happen by hers. “Want some?”

She shook her head and picked at the pleats in her Dorothy dress. It was the second time in less than a week that she’d worn it, and this time, she was an actress in more ways than one. The Fannings had agreed to host the reveal for Beech Mountain’s first annual Red Slipper award, designated by an anonymous beneficiary. The winner would receive ten thousand dollars, and the five female finalists, including herself, had been contacted that week. All had accepted, and the rumor mill had begun spilling. Who was this beneficiary? What did the Red Slipper award represent?

If only they knew that it would be awarded to the woman who was one half of the Cupid Capers, and the ten-thousand “prize” money was the same as the reward offered for any news leading to their captures or arrests. Tori could really use the money, but if putting it on the table led to the confession and capture of the criminals, the sacrifice would be worth it.

The invitation had specified to have fun, dress up, and bring her date. Hopefully, that would entail the other half of the Cupid Capers.

Tori glanced at her phone. There were less than three minutes till the farm opened. “Let’s make our way to the hay chapel. Sheriff Jafferson and his men should be undercover already.

Justin stuffed the cotton candy bag under one arm and reached for her hand with the other. “Okay, so now that the big reveal is almost here,

are you going to spill? Because Jafferson wouldn't tell me if your suspicions were right."

The hay poking out of his sleeves tickled her wrist, and she swatted him away. "No, I'm too nervous to say a word until it's all done. Maybe I'll be able to sleep tonight."

Justin shrugged and led her down the center aisle of the hay chapel, which consisted of hay bales for seats and an arbor at the end, decorated with hay and fall leaves with pumpkins surrounding the base.

A sign noted that the "chapel" was reserved for Red Slipper invitees only, and ropes helped cordon off the remaining entrances.

Something clanked behind her, and Tori spun to see the Tin Man, aka Sheriff Jafferson, marching down the aisle. The costume completely concealed his face and features, and chances were, most people wouldn't recognize his voice.

He gave her a salute and stationed himself at the front by the arbor. A lion and wizard climbed over the rope and moved on either side of him.

Did everyone in Beech Mountain have a costume for at least one Wizard of Oz character?

"You." A girl's voice came as a hiss.

Tori jumped in her seat to see Essie Graycroft holding her mother's hand. "You don't belong in the Red Slipper runnings."

"Come, Essie." Mrs. Graycroft tugged her daughter toward a seat near the front. Her husband trailed her by several feet and left space enough for a whole other person between them on the hay bale his wife chose. Essie was reusing her Glenda costume, and both her parents sported matching red sweaters.

How ironic. They may be fighting, but they were keeping up appearances.

Next down the aisle came Nina Fanning herself, dressed as Dorothy with perfect braids and bright red lip stick. She hung on Easton's arm. Her date had a black nose and brown face, which paired with the wings

on his back, suggested an evil monkey. Points to Easton for putting up with that costume.

Vanessa—Van—Evans slinked down the aisle wearing a red mini dress. Poppy maybe? Or were all these characters wearing red because they thought they would win? Dark eyeshadow set off her stunning green eyes. She chose a seat in the back, away from the others.

Last but not least, Steven Starnes appeared wearing a wide-brim cowboy hat. Beside him, Maggie Reese wore a black witch's hat and leather bodysuit that showed off her long legs.

Justin elbowed her in the ribs. "Stop staring at people. And I don't care if that Reese girl is a TikTok sensation. She looks like a mannequin, and that's creepy."

Tori squeezed Justin's arm. "I like you a lot, you know that?"

Justin pulled her so close his breath tickled her ear. "I like you too, just the way you are."

*Just the way God made me.*

She snuggled into the crook of Justin's arm. Being short made it the perfect height for her head.

"I might like you even better if you'd just tell me what's going to happen."

Tori nodded at Tin Man Jafferson. "You're about to find out."

## Chapter 6

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*“Why did the scarecrow win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field.” – Justin Vibes*



Jefferson made a sweeping gesture, howbeit a stiff one, thanks to his metallic arm coverings. “Thank you all for coming today. I know you’re eager to learn the winner of the first annual Red Slipper award. But first, there’s a housekeeping matter.”

Heavy footsteps, like boots crunching on the straw walkway behind them, made Tori shift in her seat. Half a dozen men and women, dressed in black with tan cowboy hats, now lined the perimeter of the hay bale chapel. She smirked to herself. The sheriff had clearly taken the precautions to make sure the thieves didn’t escape today.

“Most of you here are not only candidates for the Red slipper award, but were also present last weekend for Essie Graycroft’s birthday party.”

Murmuring swept the small space, as those in attendance made the connections. Tori’s gaze locked on Essie, who was leveling her with a scowl. Hopefully, the child’s hatred toward her would abate after this meeting—not that Tori ever wanted to be best friends.

“During her party, a large sum of money changed hands, but someone misplaced it—in another woman’s purse. That brings us to these questions. First, who was paying a woman such a large amount? Second, how did a jewelry piece, recently stolen by the Cupid Capers, end up in the envelope with the cash? And third, why did the guilty parties use a child’s party as a cover?”

Peter Graycroft jumped to his feet. “What is this all about? Our invitations said this was an award ceremony, not a criminal investigation.”

Though his tone remained level, Jafferson's voice took on a sterner edge. "Please be seated, Mr. Graycroft. As all these events transpired at your home, you should certainly want to know."

Peter crossed his arms and sat down, even farther away from his wife than he had previously been.

"Let's begin with our host, Nina Fanning. Her father graciously agreed to let us use his farm. Nina, you were a costume actress at the party, correct?"

"Ye-ess." Nina's bright red lipstick pursed in a frown. This was clearly not the attention she had been expecting.

"What was your role?" Jafferson asked.

Nina glanced at her monkey-costumed boyfriend. "I was the Wicked Witch of the West."

"And was he your cohort?"

Easton's make-up-stained monkey face creased in confusion. "I wasn't there."

"No, but you did happen to be pressure-washing the Wilkerson's driveway right before someone broke in."

"Right, and I told you—"

Jafferson made a "cutting" motion across his neck, and Easton's voice trailed off. The poor boy looked so lost that Tori felt bad for him. If only Jafferson would get on with his main point.

Nina's dark eyes flashed. "Seriously? He had nothing to do with that—neither of us did. The only reason I was at the Graycroft's was because Maggie asked me to since the maids who were supposed to help quit because—" Her voice trailed off, and she glanced at Maggie. "And she's my friend, so of course I said yes."

"They quit because of all the household fights between the Graycrofts, is that what you mean?" Jafferson asked.

"Who are you, anyway?" Maggie Reese pointed at the Tin Man. "This is a small town. You can't keep secrets."

"You are correct, young lady, and you will know in due time."



Justin jabbed Tori in the ribs and whispered, "It's just like how he used to put us in our places back in middle school."

It was very much the same, except now, more than lunch detention was on the line.

"Let's talk about you, Ms. Reese, and your boyfriend, Steven Starnes." Maggie laughed. "I wasn't even at the party."

"Right, but your boyfriend was. And the room where the money crossed hands was none other than your old room. If your boyfriend was trying to leave something for you to find on your next trip home, that room would have been a good place to start."

"Doesn't prove anything," Maggie sniffed.

"Perhaps you were trying to pay off the woman who threatens to destroy your parents' marriage?"

Peter Graycroft once again jumped to his feet. "This is an outrage!"

"Sit down," Susan hissed.

Jafferson shifted his gaze to the unhappy couple. "I am sorry to cause any undue embarrassment, but the truth must come out."

Susan stiffened. "What do you want from us? A struggling marriage isn't proof of any crime."

"No, my dear, but it is a catalyst. You and your husband are unhappy. That is no crime. Your husband cheats on you. That is not a crime, except in God's book. Your husband and his lover rob your clients to place suspicion on you in order that he might gain custody of his step-daughter and her large inheritance. Now that would be quite a crime."

Susan's face went sheet white. Essie jumped to her feet and pointed at Tori. "It's her! I know it's her!"

"Now, Essie," Jafferson said, "You are forgetting one important clue, are you not?"

Essie silenced.

"Did you, or did you not, request that the costume actor playing the role of a munchkin have blue hair?"

The girl's brows knit together. "Well, yes, because that's how they were in the books I've read."

"And did your munchkin actor have blue hair?"

Essie rolled her eyes. "No, Peter must have forgotten to tell her."

"Actually, your step-father did request the original munchkin actress, Tori Bones, to dye her hair blue. And she did—or she attempted to—but it turned out purple instead because of the cheap dye she used. But when your step-dad knew you overheard him talking to "Dorothy" before the party, he switched the actresses, so that Vanessa Evans played the munchkin instead of Dorothy, and Tori played Dorothy instead of the munchkin. Unfortunately for him, he also mixed up their purses."

Essie's glare wavered as she shifted her gaze to Vanessa—Van—Evans, who sat alone in the back. The woman seemed to shrink into herself but didn't protest the way Peter Graycroft had.

"What are you suggesting, Mr.—?" Susan clasped her hands in front of her. "We don't even know your name. How do you seem to know us all so well?"

Jafferson removed his Tin Man helmet to reveal his unsmiling, mustached face. "I'm your sheriff, and it's my job today to arrest the Cupid Capers: Peter Graycroft and Vanessa Evans."

Once more, Peter jumped to his feet. "You have no proof, except for the crazy story you've spun."

"Oh, I do have proof." Jafferson nodded at the officers in the back who moved in groups toward Peter and Vanessa. "First, you got lazy at the Wilkersons. You didn't expect someone to be there when you broke the window. Nor did you expect Easton to have forgotten his cell phone on the property after pressure washing the driveway. He saw two figures run away from the house, and, out of curiosity, followed them to a dark blue convertible parked a block over. He even snapped a picture of the license plate, registered to Ms. Vanessa Evans."

Peter snorted. "You have nothing on me. I had never seen Vanessa Evans prior to hiring her as a costume actress."

“Liar!” Vanessa jerked away from one of the officers. “You said we were in this together.”

Ignoring her, Peter grabbed his wife’s arm. “I’ve never loved anyone but you—and our family.”

Susan’s face was a stone. “Don’t be dramatic. I gave Jafferson permission to monitor my computer. Turns out, you’ve been logging on when I’m asleep and hacking into my clients’ confidential files, no doubt to target them on your next thieving spree. Thanks to you, Jafferson even thought I had something to do with this for a hot minute.”

Officers handcuffed Peter and escorted him and Vanessa toward the parking lot.

Tori let out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. The outcome went better than she had hoped.

Peter Graycroft scowled and cast one angry look back at Jafferson. “So there was no Red Slipper award.”

Jafferson shook his head. “Actually, there is. Thank you for reminding me. The winner of the Red Slipper award—for her part in apprehending the Cupid Capers—is Tori Bones.”



The hay bale chapel now empty, no one could have guessed that the area’s most notorious thieving duo had been apprehended an hour before. But Justin didn’t want to waste the free passes to Fanning Farm. They had just finished the corn maze, and Justin had purchased yet another bag of cotton candy.

This time, Tori accepted some when he offered it.

“You’re basically a Beech Mountain hero.” Justin popped a blue glob of sugar into his mouth and swatted some wayward hay away from his temple. Why he was still wearing the itchy strawman hat was beyond her.

“I was in the right place at the right time.” She shrugged. “So was Easton for that matter.”

“What are you going to do with all that money?”

“Pay down my student loans—and maybe buy my boyfriend some new bike gloves since his old ones are too dirty and worn to recognize the original color.”

“Why, thank you.” Justin bowed. “Is that my award for assisting you in your sleuthing?”

Tori rolled her eyes and tore off another piece of cotton candy. “If that’s what you want to call it. Sure.”

They passed the hay bale chapel one final time on their way to the parking lot, and Justin suddenly stopped. “Hey, are you free tomorrow morning?”

Tori paused. “Yeah, I just have an afternoon shift at Fred’s. Why?”

Justin nodded toward the hay-bale chapel. “I’ve been thinking. I know with our jobs, we have to work Sundays a lot, but since I’m off tomorrow and you’re free, maybe we could go to church—a real church? I mean, we’ve been dating a while now, and if we’re going to do this right, I think we ought to make sure we’re listening to God. I used to go all the time, but then—”

“Life got busy,” Tori said softly. “Same here.”

And her last boyfriend Steven didn’t care about a relationship with God enough to find ways to strengthen either of theirs.

“So, you want to go?”

“Yeah.” She reached for his hand. “Thanks, it means a lot that you asked.”

“Okay.” He gave her hand a squeeze and offered her the rest of the cotton candy. She picked at a handful as they reached the farm entrance where two giant scarecrows lined the exit.

A mischievous spark lit Justin’s eyes. “You know, that reminds me ... Why did the scarecrow win an award?”

Tori popped her cotton candy into his open mouth to stop the bad joke. Justin gulped it down and then gasped for air. “Hey—”

She tiptoed and stopped his protest with a kiss, then whispered, “Hay is for horses.”





## About the Author

Kristen Hogrefe Parnell writes suspenseful fiction from a faith perspective for adults and teens. Her own suspense story involved waiting on God into her thirties to meet her husband, and she desires to keep embracing God's plan for her life when it's not what she expects. An educator at heart, she also teaches English online and enjoys being a podcast guest. Kristen and her husband live in Florida and love sharing their lake home with family and friends.

*Take My Hand*, her first romantic suspense novel with Mountain Brook Ink, releases December 2022, and it is the first in a planned series called Beech Mountain Bravery. Readers can sign up for her monthly newsletter for the latest about her new release, plus current book giveaways, and an encouraging word from Kristen. To learn about her award-winning young adult novels or to simply say hello, visit [KristenHogrefeParnell.com](https://KristenHogrefeParnell.com).

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