

A FOG HARBOR
ROMANCE

The
Words
We
Lost

NICOLE DEESE

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N I C O L E D E E S E



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. The location is real, but artistic liberties have been taken throughout the novel.

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To my baby sister, Aimee Brooke.

July 26, 1987—November 25, 2013

Missing you always.

“The sincere friends of this world are as ship lights in the stormiest of nights.”

–Giotto di Bondone

1



Every *tap, tap, tap* of my editorial director’s blood-red fingernail against her ceramic coffee mug feels like another second closer to the death of my career. And unfortunately, my only chance at an exoneration is currently limping his busted bicycle through the soggy streets of San Francisco on this uncharacteristically wet day in July. Below the conference room table, I twist the black sea glass ring on my right index finger, wishing it held the power to summon an ETA text from my assistant. Preferably one that starts with: *Just arrived! Be right up!* But instead, when a notification brightens my silenced phone, it reads: *Can you stall for ten more?*

“You’re up next to pitch, Ingrid,” SaBrina Hartley says, managing to draw my two-syllable name into three. It’s a practice she’s perfected since her transfer and subsequent promotion to our division nine months ago, along with her many lectures on the importance of signing *established authors* with *established platforms*. “You ready?”

This, of course, is a rhetorical question. Nobody ever tells SaBrina they’re anything but ready.

“Uh, yes. Sure.” I surrender my phone face-up on the conference room table, as if Siri might sense my panic and offer me a preemptive bailout plan. Sadly, no such thing happens. Heat prickles at the base of my neck when I open the cover of my iPad and stare down

at the proposal for a dual-time novel I know far too little about to discuss intelligently.

Of the two critical meetings scheduled during the summer publishing season, this is the one I'd allocated to Chip, the young, enthusiastic editorial assistant I'd trained straight out of college. He's also quite possibly the only reason I still have a corner office and the title of Senior Acquisitions Editor. While I'd been overloaded with deadlines for our national sales conference at the end of the month, he'd completed all the prep work for today's meeting. Not only was Chip the one who'd reviewed the manuscript and researched every comparable title for the proposal we'd planned to pitch together—with Chip shouldering the majority of our shared talking points—he was also the one best-equipped to answer SaBrina's cross-examination questions about the book and author. Truth is, I'd only managed to read the first couple chapters before I handed it over to Chip, and not even the most accomplished editor in the world could successfully pitch a manuscript for publication after reading so little of the story.

Another truth: there's no mystery on how long it's been since I last acquired a new book contract.

More than nine months and twenty-six days ago.

I hook the lock of dark hair obstructing my vision behind my right ear and lift my gaze to the exposed brick walls of our rectangular conference room. The space is bookended on either side by shelves filled with plaques and awards and the internationally recognized bestselling fantasy novels most of those accolades belong to. Their astonishing success single-handedly launched our midsize printing press into an entirely new stratosphere roughly five years ago. Consequently, they are the same best-selling titles that shoot a flaming harpoon through my ribcage whenever my gaze lingers too long in their direction.

I divert my attention to the half dozen unsmiling faces of our acquisitions team: four editors and two assistants who rarely lift their eyes from their laptops. It's strange to think that once upon a time—back before SaBrina Hartley arrived from our New York imprint

and before my brain short-circuited to a pace slower than dial-up internet—that *this* was once my favorite meeting of the month.

Under past leadership, this space was a welcome reprieve from the endless cycle and demands of publishing—a safe launching pad where fresh ideas and premise hooks sailed back and forth like a crowd-pleasing game of hot potato. We'd laugh over the scrambled coffee orders we'd have delivered and swap them with ease the way we once swapped inside jokes and stories from around the Golden City. The only stories we share now are the ones we pitch in an atmosphere as hospitable as Alcatraz.

I tap my iPad screen and stare down at the proposal Chip emailed on my behalf to each editor in this room while I'd been cramming for a sales conference I might be uninvited to after today. I clear my throat and twist the underside of my ring with the tip of my thumb, turning the band around until the oblong piece of frosted black glass is tucked safely against my palm.

“*Moonlight on Sutter’s Mill*,” I begin in my most professional-sounding voice, “is a dual-time narrative that’s unique for several reasons, the first being that the setting is the iconic sawmill in the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas where gold was first discovered in 1848.” I swallow and try to remember any other snippets of interest Chip might have shared with me while I continue to panic-skim the digital proposal. I glean whatever I can from the summary, throwing key terminology out like a magician practiced in sleight of hand: generational family feud, unsolved mysteries, debauchery and scandal, and a secret Romeo and Juliet love affair. “But perhaps,” I read directly from the fourth paragraph, “the most interesting fact is that the author herself, Mary B. Jespersen, is a direct, albeit distant, descendant to the Sutter family.”

My vision warbles in an obnoxiously familiar warning. I blink twice in vain, though I know from experience that the only remedy for the coming onslaught of brain fatigue is time.

Unfortunately, time is the one thing I never have enough of.

“And is this the reason you’ve listed no previous works in her

bio—because she has a connection to a distant, dead relative?” Sabrina interjects before I can locate the notes Chip wrote about the author’s platform. But in the same way I can predict the ending of nearly every work of fiction I’ve ever read, I can also predict Sabrina’s next words. “As I’ve stated before, Ingrid, I have no interest in taking on a debut author in our current market—far too much risk for far too little reward. Fog Harbor Books is interested in authors with established platforms only.” She sighs in that dramatic way Chip loves to emulate, second only to his perfected pronunciation of the capital *B* in our boss’s name. Rumor has it, Sabrina only became *S-a-B-r-i-n-a* upon her transfer here, as if adding a second capital letter to her first name would give her more professional clout. “Established authors mean established readerships, which in turn equals higher pre-order sales, visibility, and marketable placement on best-selling lists.” Her gaze finds me again. “Great story hooks don’t sell books. Platforms do.”

I clamp my teeth together as a rebuttal builds behind my closed lips. It wasn’t too long ago that Fog Harbor Books said yes to a no-name author after she was submitted to an editorial director via a no-name editorial intern who was so passionate about the power of story that she was willing to sacrifice her career track to see it published. But I don’t say this. Not only because the legendary tale of how I snuck Cecelia Campbell’s manuscript onto Barry Brinkman’s desk is as well-known as the five-book deal she struck because of it, but because it still hurts too badly to speak about my best friend in past tense.

With everything in me, I fight to recall the reason why Chip was so convinced he could get Ms. Jespersen’s novel sold despite all the contracted authors Sabrina hasn’t renewed for lack of sales this last year. But try as I might, I can’t remember, so instead, I go with what I can remember about the two chapters I managed to read. “Mary Jespersen writes with a rare blend of old-soul and a twist of modern snark. She also has a pitch-perfect sense of time and place. The tension and conflict is evident from the first few

sentences in each storyline, which isn't often the case with dual-timelines. I was impressed with the current-day plot and the focus on the great-granddaughter, who is the historical protagonist, and the inheritance she means to—”

“Again, Ingrid, you offering a recap of the story won't fix the fact that Jespersen remains unproven.” SaBrina's perfectly groomed eyebrows arch in exasperation. Due to her high-end fashion and expensive cosmetics, her age is nearly impossible to pinpoint, but given her career track my guess is she's hovering close to forty.

Early on in her invasion, when employee morale was still as much of a priority as analyzing the concerning downward trend in book sales, I chose to believe Barry must have seen something special in her, the same way he'd seen something special in Cece's writing all those years ago. The same way he'd once seen something in me, too.

But now I'm convinced that whatever Barry saw in SaBrina when he and the board selected her as our new director was exactly what SaBrina had *wanted* them all to see. After all, she is nothing if not strategic.

SaBrina pushes her chair away from the conference table and stands with covetable grace in her dark pencil skirt and heels. When she sashays toward the bestseller shelf, my pulse trips over itself, ratcheting higher with every step.

She stops in front of a framed picture I know almost as well as the books standing guard on either side of it. The woman staring out from behind the glass is holding up an award for *Editor of the Year* on a stage bigger than any she'd stepped foot on before that evening. Her ruby lips are a perfect color match to the glamorous, floor-length gown that hugs her curves as if it was designed with her figure in mind. The hazy aura cast from the spotlights on her long, shiny black-brown hair illuminates the amber flecks in her dark eyes and her bare, naturally tan shoulders. Due to the sweeping success of her best friend's series, the outcome of that award ceremony hadn't come as a huge shock to the editor smiling in that photo, or to the publishing house she represented.

But three years and two major plot twists later, I can hardly believe the woman in the framed photo is the same one I saw reflected in my bathroom mirror this morning.

When SaBrina turns her gaze on me it's clear she, too, is playing the spot-the-differences game between the Editor of the Year Ingrid in that picture and the one who's struggled to pitch a single manuscript since that dark day last September. It's not that I haven't tried to keep up the professional appearance SaBrina requires. I still follow the business casual dress code at the office; I still style my shoulder-length hair in headbands and clips; I still dab my cheeks with blush and swipe my lashes with mascara and blot my lips with the same sheer gloss I've worn for a decade. But it seems no matter how I try to conceal it, grief's shadow is permanent.

The ball of nerves at the base of my belly squeezes tight as SaBrina reaches for the familiar spines of the Nocturnal Heart series beside her. She taps the special edition titles of all four of the epic fantasy novels one after the other: *The Pulse of Gold*, *The Keeper of Wishes*, *The Art of Thieves*, *The Twist of Wills*. She stops there, her fingernail sliding up the spine of book four, the wildly infamous cliffhanger that sparked nearly as much commentary as news of the author's sudden and tragic death.

Unbidden, the text from Cece's dedication page inside her fourth and final published work scrolls through my mind.

Joel—there are a billion sappy quotes for siblings and next to none for cousins, so it's a good thing that you and I have never been much for sap. However, I would like to point out the fact that I'm the one dedicating a book to you. May this also serve as a collection notice that you still owe me a blackberry lemonade slush for beating you to the lighthouse.

We had a witness. Pay up.

And then, just like that, I'm there with the two of them all over again—seventeen and filled with the kind of blissful, adolescent

recklessness adults fear most. The sea breeze whips through our hair and tugs on our shirts as we race to the base of the hill before the start of the climb to the top of the rocky bluff. Cece and Joel are neck-and-neck on their flashy trail bikes, standing on their pedals as they pump their legs hard to reach the top first, when Joel suddenly squeezes his handbrakes and plants his feet. In an instant, Cece shoots out of sight, leaving the two of us behind on a deserted bath pike. With little more than the sly wink he tosses me over his shoulder, Joel rolls backward down the hill while I pedal the rust out of my secondhand ten-speed. His chest is still heaving from the exertion of his climb as I pull even with him, yet it's his hypnotizing smile that suspends my breath—that calming presence he carries with him everywhere as if he's never known true fear. As if he doesn't even believe it exists. As soon as he's able, he takes hold of my handlebars and eases me so close our front tires kiss. The simmering heat of his arm when it settles against mine feels like the warmth of the afternoon sun when it finally breaks free from the clouds. When his fingers clasp around mine he says, "*Cece can gloat about her win all she wants, but a few minutes alone with you is the real prize I'm after.*"

My skin prickles in remembrance as SaBrina's voice snaps me back to the present. Back to this meeting in which I'm failing to pitch a book I've never read. Back to this life I built from scratch after the one I wanted was washed out to sea.

"*This*"—SaBrina holds up Cece's last novel—"this is the kind of golden goose we're after, folks. Stop searching for a trendsetter and start targeting the genres and readerships that are eager for a comeback. Cecelia Campbell's fans have been champing at the bit since her last book left them hungrier than ever." Her statement slices through me. "Your job is to find an established author who can fill the shoes Cecelia Campbell left behind."

"That's not possible," I fire back with the confidence of an editor who never could have imagined consulting a grief therapist about her declining comprehension of the written word. "Cece was a prodigy

of the pen.” The same quote forever memorialized on her headstone. “Her instinct for story and mastery of prose isn’t replaceable—not by any author, in any genre.”

A reverent hush descends over the room, and my right hand curls tighter around the ring still cupped into my palm. For the first time since SaBrina’s takeover after our beloved Barry Brinkman took his position on the board, SaBrina actually appears chagrined. Her gaze shifts uncomfortably around the room. But unlike whatever cutthroat work environment she’s tried to shape us into, we aren’t some heartless crew of ladder-climbing monkeys. The authors we sign at Fog Harbor Books San Francisco have always been more than names on contracts. And Cecelia Campbell was certainly so much more than an author to us all.

“Well, of course not. I’m not suggesting she can be replaced,” SaBrina backtracks. “But Cecelia’s colossal fanbase, loyal as they’ve been to her series—albeit an incomplete series—are still ravenous for comparable content. They want angst and danger, intrigue and adventure, and most of all, they’re craving an original high-stakes romance promising to entertain multiple generations in the same household. That’s what her books offered the world.” She holds out *The Twist of Wills* like Rafiki holds baby Simba in *The Lion King*. “It’s *our* job to give them the fiction they want. It’s *our* job to stir the coals Cecelia’s imagination ignited with her record-breaking saga.” She studies the group of us, then locks eyes with me once again. “And short of locating her missing final manuscript, it’s our job to carry her legacy forward by bringing the world more of what her voice gave us—addictive storytelling.”

There are a few murmurs of agreement, but I can’t bring myself to join in. SaBrina may be a pro when it comes to persuasive speeches, but she can’t possibly have any real understanding of the legacy Cece left behind for the few who knew her best. In the lull that follows, I remind myself that today can’t be about Cece’s contribution to the publishing industry or even about the plummeting bottom line Fog Harbor Books is desperate to recover from in light of the

incomplete Nocturnal Heart series. Today has to be about proving to SaBrina that I'm still an editor who can pitch a book worthy of a contract and—

The conference door bumps open, and Chip, my ever-faithful assistant, drips his way across the threshold. Even with his half-drowned appearance, his prep-boy grin and teddy bear brown eyes steal the room's attention. He fists several paper towels as he makes his way toward the empty chair to my left. He dabs his face and hair, all while his loafers slog a path across the gray carpet squares. Astoundingly, the cross-body messenger bag at his waist appears unscathed from whatever drama he's encountered on his commute to work.

Chip bows his head low before issuing his regrets with the impeccable manners of a kid whose given name is Chadwick Knightly Stanton the Third. "Please forgive my tardiness, Miss Hartley." The corners of his eyes crinkle at SaBrina before he scans the rest of the group. "My back tire went flat about ten blocks east, which caused me to miss the BART by a whopping six seconds. And you may not believe it by looking at me now, but I was actually successful at dodging the worst of the rain with my bike until a delivery truck found a puddle as deep as the bay and decided to give me a test swim." He gestures at the splattering of mud displayed on his tan pants from hip to ankle and takes full advantage of the comedic interruption he's causing. I've only known two people in my life who can shift the mood of a room in less than thirty seconds: Chip and Cece.

He glances over at my lit iPad. "I hope I didn't miss too much discussion about this dual-time proposal. I happen to be a huge fan." He gives me an affirming gaze. "When Ingrid told me it had the grit and intrigue of *Yellowstone* and the tension and romance of *Outlander*, I couldn't wait to read it for myself. The deep-seated family connections and betrayals throughout the historical thread adds a palpable, page-turning punch, as does the twist in the great-granddaughter's story. When she took that DNA test in order to receive her inheritance only to find out she's actually related to her

great-grandfather's rival . . . *whew*." He shakes his head, laughs. "I might have let a few choice words slip. And that was all before I realized how networked this author is—I'm sure Ingrid told you about the documentary being made of Jespersen's own great-aunt and uncle? She'll be a featured narrator." His grin is huge as he unveils what I'd failed to remember. "Couldn't ask for a better marketing plan than a simultaneous documentary and book release."

For the millionth time since Chip was assigned to our department, I'm floored by his ability to command a room and deliver exactly what that room needs to hear most. He may only be four years my junior, but his exuberance for life often makes me feel thrice his age.

SaBrina's lips twist into something resembling amusement and, at least for a moment, the conference room curse seems to be broken as several editors begin to comment on aspects they enjoyed about my—*Chip's*—proposal as well as the sample chapters he provided them. With his timely jog of my memory, I'm able to add what I hope is valuable feedback to the discussion. If only my reading speed and comprehension could be jogged as easily.

Clearly satisfied with his performance, Chip drops his chin onto his fists and smiles in a way that only serves to highlight his innocent and enviable perspective of the world.

After our pitch earns the covetous stamp of approval to be pushed through to the publication board, I will my body to release the nerves it's been harboring since last month's uncomfortable meeting. Only SaBrina's gaze continues to linger.

For the next hour and a half, she continues to eye me with unnerving interest, and it's a struggle to track the storylines my colleagues pitch to the group. Chip comes to my aid multiple times, seamlessly pulling me into conversations as if the two of us have discussed each editor's proposal at length prior to this meeting.

At the wrap-up, relief comes in the form of a full breath as I gather up my belongings to make a quick exit on a quest to find Chip and fill him in on what he missed before he granted me yet another career-

saving stay of execution. I'm guessing he's in the hallway sorting out his lunch offers for the day. If Fog Harbor had a yearbook, Chip would be voted *Most Popular Lunch Companion*. Ironically, the only person he's interested in lunching with is the elusive, pink-haired barista in the lobby coffeeshop he's been pining after for months.

I'm halfway across the carpet squares toward the exit doors when SaBrina says, "I think there are a few things you and I need to discuss, Ingrid. I'll plan to stop in for a chat when I return from my lunch meeting."

My blood cools to a thick sludge inside my veins, and I rotate in her direction. "After lunch as in . . . today?"

"Were you planning on going out?" There's no challenge to her question as she knows the answer already. I eat lunch at my desk. I don't have time not to.

"No." I work a polite smile onto my lips, reminding myself that I've earned my place here. Despite the devastation of the last year, I'm still a good editor. "But if there's something more on the dual-time you're wanting, I'm happy to send it off to you as soon as I'm back in my office. I can get you the market analysis you requested and more on the family's documentary—"

"There's absolutely nothing I need from your pitch today or any other day that I can't get from Chip." Her words hit their intended target with the accuracy of a marksman whose patience has finally paid off. "Keep your schedule open this afternoon." She zips her laptop into its case, slips the satchel strap over her shoulder, and smiles a grin that fills in the blanks of my overtaxed brain.

My execution hasn't been pardoned after all.