

Chapter One

Gavin McCabe was going to kill someone. Not just anyone, but Richard Archibald Jensen III—Dickey for short. Budding reality star and current pain in his ass.

“I’m drowning! You’ve got to help me, man.”

Jason Reeves, Gavin’s partner in their security firm, shook his head and planted his fists on his hips as he watched the spectacle. “He’s an idiot.”

Understatement of the century right there. Gavin shoved a hand through his hair and watched Dickey go underwater again. Damn it. As much as he’d love to watch the dickhead drown, it wouldn’t be worth the paperwork. Sighing, he toed off his shoes and tossed his coat to Jason, who caught it with a smirk.

He dove in, ignoring the icy water, which immediately tried to steal his breath. *Shit*. Dickey was a world-class pain in the ass but he wasn’t going to last long in this. Gavin looked around and spotted the jackass fighting with his clothes while he struggled to stay afloat. Three quick strokes got him within reach to grab Dickey by the back of his coat. Instead of allowing himself to be rescued, however, Dickey turned to Gavin and scrambled onto his back like a baby koala, shoving them both under.

If Dickey couldn’t get hold of himself, Gavin was going to have to knock him out. A kernel of glee sparked at the thought of being able to knock the crap out of Dickey. But no such luck.

They’d barely broken the surface of the water before he was sputtering again.

“You’ve got to g-get me out of here, m-man. My d-d-dad will r-r-reward you.”

“Shut up, Dickey,” Gavin gritted out, peeling the kid’s arms from around his neck so he didn’t drag them both under again. He hauled him over to Jason, who was waiting on the dock. Together, the two of them worked to get him up and out of the water without further incident. Thank God. Gavin didn’t think he could take any more incidents today.

Dickey had decided to bring half of L.A. with him when he came home for what he referred to his “forced holiday.” That in and of itself would have been fine if his hangers-on weren’t all a pack of idiots. People were coming and going out of all areas of the house and grounds, setting off alarms and motion sensors while they partied like the world was about to end. Gavin’d even caught a couple of them snorting lines in the pool house, seconds before the police showed up. Dickey’s younger sister had decided to give the show a ratings boost by call the cops. And then today’s disaster. Dickey had decided to take the sailboat out onto the lake and nearly capsized the thing.

Just the way Gavin wanted to spend what was supposed to be his day off.

Gavin let Jason drag the still-sputtering Dickey back toward the house to get warmed up before flopping back onto the dock, finally able to breathe a little easier. Today had been a shit show from the start. The kids—*his* kids—had been up early, which he never minded since he didn’t get to spend nearly as much time with them as he wanted, but a knee to the kidney was not the morning greeting he looked forward to. Not that he’d had a more welcoming morning greeting in way too long. Two guys calling out sick with the massive hangovers had him scrambling for a babysitter and coming in to work.

Now, here he was, laying on a dock freezing his balls off. Living the life.

Exhaustion was dragging at him, but instead of giving in, Gavin got to his feet and headed to the guard house. A shower and dry clothes. It wasn’t a warm, willing woman, but it would do for the time being. Jason could deal with Dickey and his father while Gavin took a short break

to beat hypothermia. The second shift would be there soon, and he could salvage what was left of his day with his Jackson and Savannah.

Being a single parent wasn't for the faint of heart. Being a single parent and a business owner required juggling skills he was still trying to master.

The guard house wasn't bad as far as shacks went. A full wall of computer terminals that fed right into the offices downtown allowed them to keep an eye on every estate they managed remotely. Here there was also a full-sized sofa, a couple recliners, kitchenette, and a three-quarter bath. It was overkill for the few guards they ever had on hand for this property, but Gavin had never been as grateful for the excess as he was in that moment. He jacked the shower up to scalding and stepped inside. The water was returning the feeling to his numb limbs with a vengeance just as the door opened.

"Dude, your coat's ringing."

"No." Regan Sinclair leaned back on her heels, her thighs burning in her squat, and stared at her sisters. "Not just no, but hell no, no. I'm not a babysitter."

Becca, who was reclined against the plush sofa cushions with her arm over her eyes, threw a light punch into their other sister, Chloe's, arm. "I told you she'd say no."

"She's only saying no because she doesn't understand the whole situation yet," Chloe assured their youngest sister. Her voice was soft as she patted Becca's leg. "Once we explain, she'll be begging for the chance to watch the twins."

Regan rolled her eyes so hard she caught a glimpse of yesterday. "I'm right here, you know. I can hear you. And I guarantee there will be no begging to watch anyone." Regan glanced over her shoulder to the other room where the five-year-old twins, one boy, one girl, were sitting with their backs to her in front of the TV, entranced by whatever cartoon character was singing and dancing across the screen.

She dropped her voice a bit, not wanting them to hear her refusing to babysit. Not that they would notice considering how glued they were to the television, but she didn't want to hurt their feelings. "I'm sure they're perfectly delightful children, but I'm not up to babysitting today. I had lunch with Dad earlier. The only thing I want to do now is dig through however many boxes it takes to find my cork screw and open a bottle of wine."

Chloe leaned forward, her brow creased in concern. "Was it terrible?"

Regan felt the throbbing in her temples ease a bit at Chloe's obvious concern and smiled to reassure her sister. Their father was boorish and overbearing on the best of days. Having Regan return to Sapphire Creek divorced and unemployed had sent both her parents in a tizzy. They simply couldn't understand why she'd left Todd. Being married to a doctor was a big deal to them. The fact he was a cheating bastard didn't blip their radar at all. Let alone the fact that their relationship had completely destroyed her personal career aspirations and dreams.

Shaking her head, Regan dug the heels of her hands into her thighs to ease the burning in her muscles. She needed to get to the gym more often. Maybe she could get in some hiking before the weather shifted completely into winter mode. She used to love spending hours on the trails around Sapphire Creek, Montana, her home town and current refuge. Perched on the side of the mountains, the town offered no shortage of lakes, mountain trails and waterfalls to keep her occupied, yet was still close enough to a city – a Montana version of a city, but still a city – that she could enjoy the comforts of a larger town should she want to. "It was pretty

much what we expected,” she answered her sister. “Mom’s feelings are hurt that I didn’t tell them I was coming home, Dad’s disappointed that I would run from a little adversity. Blah blah blah.” She took a bracing breath, not wanting to admit how much their lack of support hurt her.

“Did you know Todd has been calling them?” Regan had been stunned when her father had casually dropped that news. Todd, her slimy, cheating, jerk of an ex, who was—according to the lecture she’d received during lunch—so heartbroken that she’d left him and the life they’d created together to join a worldwide healthcare organization that helped underserved populations. Regan had barely been able to restrain herself from snorting when her father told her that. As if. Todd had been so busy seducing the nurses at the hospital she doubted he’d noticed she was gone until long after she’d arrived at the camp in Central America.

A dry cough interrupted her wandering thoughts and Regan refocused on her sisters. She should have come home sooner. More often. Despite what her parents thought, she had tried to make things work with Todd, sacrificing herself in the effort. If she’d been less stubborn she’d have realized what a lost cause it was.

“Honey,” she said to Becca, imploring her to understand, “I get that you take your responsibilities here seriously, and that’s a really great thing. But I can’t be the replacement babysitter.” She held up her hand to stop her sister’s objection. “I don’t even know their parents.”

The girls gave each other the side-eyed look that had Regan backing away again, falling flat on her butt. They were up to something. Why hadn’t she noticed it right away? “What?” she asked, dreading the answer. She did *not* want to know. Nothing good ever happened when the two of them put their heads together. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Desperation sliced through her. She knew she was trapped, but just like when they’d been younger and they manipulated her into doing something, she couldn’t stop herself from following along. “The two of you have thirty seconds to spill about whatever it is that you’re planning or I’m walking.” That didn’t sound nearly as threatening as she’d intended, as evidenced by the smirks on her sisters’ faces. “Actually, I’m going to leave now. You obviously don’t need me, so I’ll head home to finish unpacking. That way we might be able to eat off something other than paper plates the next time you guys come over for pizza.”

She’d been back in Sapphire Creek for a few days, but the truck with her stuff had only arrived that morning. There’d barely been time to direct the unloading before she’d raced off to meet her dad for lunch.

Getting to her feet, she couldn’t quite make herself move toward the door. Not yet. There was something about the way they were looking at her. The way they calmly waited out her freakout.

Damn it.

“Seriously, tell me what you want,” she ordered.

“We did,” Becca said, sliding back farther against the arm of the sofa and closing her eyes again. “You just aren’t listening.”

Becca was looking a little green. “Tell me again,” Regan ordered, reaching out to feel Becca’s forehead and cheeks with the back of her fingers.

Chloe let out a sigh and shifted so she could pull Becca’s legs into her lap. “We need you to finish out the babysitting shift while I take Becca home.”

Regan shook her head, her ponytail swinging. "Why can't you do it and I'll take her home?"

"Well..." Chloe drew out the word as she twisted her hair around her finger. "I'm no longer on the list of pre-approved babysitters. You they like, or used to like, or whatever."

The throbbing in her temples ratchet up and wrapped around to the back of her skull. "What do you mean, no longer on the list? What list?"

"The parents went through a not-so-nice divorce a few years ago," Becca explained, implying friendly divorces were the norm. Regan had heard of such things, but had never actually seen it up close. In her experience, when a couple broke up they didn't exactly keep each other on the Christmas card list. Well, apparently Todd kept her parents on his, but that hardly counted. "Chloe sat for them when they were still together and it was an epic disaster, so she was blackballed by both camps."

"It wasn't an epic disaster," Chloe objected, giving Becca a light smack on her leg before looking back to Regan. "They came home earlier than planned, that's all."

Becca snorted, which quickly turned into another coughing fit, raising Regan's concern even more.

"They came home early and found her with her boyfriend, doing the nasty on the sofa," Becca informed her once she caught her breath.

"Eww. *That* sofa?" Regan wasn't sure why it mattered, but the thought of parking her butt where she knew her sister had sex didn't appeal in the least, no matter how many times the upholstery might have been cleaned. "What were you doing having sex when you were supposed to be watching the children?"

"No, not this one," Chloe said, stroking the suede with her hand. "I think Kathy won that sofa in the divorce. It was quite comfy."

Regan leveled a look at her. "Eww," she repeated.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "The kids were asleep. They were babies, all they did was sleep. And I was nineteen years old and head over heels in love. Turned out Darren was a jerk who got scared off when they came home early. It's not like I staged it to get caught."

Shaking her head, Regan couldn't help but peek over at the kids again. They were super cute in the way that was reserved for children and puppies. The boy's dark hair was a touch long and starting to curl. The girl had a lopsided ponytail that at some point during the day had slid down and was now hanging under her ear. There was something oddly familiar about them, but that was impossible. She hadn't been back to Sapphire Creek in nearly five years. They must just have that all-around cute kid thing going on that made them look like a thousand other cute kids.

Regan drew in a calming breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. It didn't help her pounding head much, but it allowed her to hang onto the strands of patience that were slipping away as her sisters tried to manipulate her. Again. "That doesn't explain why I should turn into a babysitter. I'm twenty-eight years old, I don't babysit anymore. Ever."

"Never say never," Chloe cautioned with a smile in her voice.

Becca tried to hold back a laugh, but quickly fell into another coughing fit. The girl was not faking this just to get Regan to do whatever it was she was planning.

"Honey, you really need to go home. Get some rest." Regan reached out to lay her hand against Becca's forehead again, only to have Becca swat at her.

"I can't leave the kids alone," Becca reminded her.

There was no two ways around it. Regan was going to give in and babysit. "There's no one else you can call to come take over for you? Someone on the pre-approved babysitter list?"

Becca shook her head. "No. I called their dad to let him know I wasn't feeling great, but he didn't answer. He normally answers right away when I call while I'm babysitting, but today something was funky with him getting called into work. He wasn't expecting it and didn't seem all that happy about it either."

"So this guy is already stressed out. Finding some random woman watching his kids isn't going to make him happy."

"He'll be okay with it," Becca assured her. "I think he just wants to make sure he gets home before his ex-wife comes to pick them up."

Chloe dropped Becca's legs from her lap and stood, pulling Becca upright into a sitting position. "You're going to thank us for this."

"Thank you for Becca getting sick and me watching some kids I don't even know? You may be on the blackballed list, but I can't imagine he's going to be too pleased to find a complete stranger in his house, no matter what you guys say."

"Savannah, Jackson," Becca called the children over. They skidded into the room with more energy than Regan could even begin to imagine.

"Are you going to throw up, Becca?" the little boy asked around the gaping hole where his front teeth should be. He sounded somewhere between awe and glee at the thought.

The little girl nodded, her eyes huge and glued to Becca's face. "You don't look so good."

"I'm not feeling so good," she told them, sliding off the couch and crouching to their level, but keeping her distance. "I'm going to go home, but my big sister is going to watch you until your dad gets home."

At the words, two sets of identical brown eyes swung Regan's way and pinned her like she was a butterfly to a mat. "Hi," she said suddenly feeling self-conscious. "How's the show?"

Chloe snickered behind her and Regan lifted her middle finger behind her back. It was her fault that she was here, about to babysit, of all things. If she hadn't done that, she could be the babysitter and Regan could be enjoying her wine right now.

The kids didn't seem to notice any of the undercurrents and quickly launched into what had been happening on the cartoon, complete with reenactments and sound effects. "That sounds like a ton of fun," she told them when they finally slowed down to take a breath.

"Regan is a friend of your Aunt Gwen's," Becca told them, getting to her feet and taking her coat from Chloe.

"Gwen?" Her best friend from high school, the one person who knew her secrets—all but one of them—and stood by her through it all.

Gwen. Regan unexpectedly felt light headed and staggered to sit on the now-vacant sofa. Her heart leapt into her throat just as her stomach hit her toes. She looked at her sisters in disbelief. "So, these kids, they're...?"

"Their dad is Gavin McCabe," Chloe told her, wrapping her arm around Becca and shoving her toward the door. "Enjoy your evening."