

## Chapter One

Blair McCartney rubbed her eyes and slid her glasses back in place. One more time. She reread the bewildering instructions for the international fashion design contest, hoping for a spark of clarity. Her friend Lisa, currently living Blair's dream in New York, had sent the link the previous day.

Through the picture window of the small rental house in Brenner Falls, Blair spotted the red T-shirt of her six-year-old son, Jake. He ran back and forth in the small side yard, kicking a soccer ball, despite the summer heat.

A drawn-out sigh escaped her lips. She could submit the summer collection she'd created last year to the contest. Those designs lay tucked in a sketchbook under her bed. Or maybe one of her current ideas? Her gaze went across the cluttered living room to an unfinished storyboard studded with swatches of color, fabric, and notions. She'd already applied for a contest two months earlier, but that response could take months.

There must be an easier way to scale the walls of the fashion industry. For the last eight years since she'd finished her fashion design program in college, her dream remained a mirage on the horizon, always out of reach.

The door swung open with a loud clatter and Jake thrust in.

"Hey, what's your hurry, big guy?" Blair glanced toward the door to make sure he'd closed it behind him. No sense in letting the hot air in. Jake's cherub cheeks were red and moist with sweat.

"Mr. Walton yelled at me. He's so mean. I hate him."

She rose from the table and knelt in front of him. "What happened, sweetie?"

Her son's normally serene face twisted as he fought tears. "My ball went into his bushes, so I ran over to get it. I didn't hurt anything. All the bushes are dead anyway. He doesn't ever water them."

She bristled, nudged to remind Mr. Walton Jake was a child, not a hoodlum. She drew Jake into her arms and squeezed him for a moment. "Know what we should do, buddy?" she asked against his blond curls.

He squirmed, no fan of extended hugs.

She leaned back on her heels and grinned at him. "Pray that one day we'll get a friendly neighbor, okay? Let's ask God for it."

Jake sniffed. "I hope he'll answer fast."

Blair stifled a chuckle of silent agreement. It wasn't her son's first run-in with the old curmudgeon. She pinched the child-sized baseball cap from Jake's head. "Wash up for dinner," she said. "It's almost ready."

"Kay." Jake took off running toward the back of the small house. The kid seemed incapable of walking anywhere.

She went to the kitchen of the house where they'd lived for almost a year, and absently gave the pot of chili a stir. A strange meal choice for July, but she and Jake both

liked it. The sharp aromas of chili powder and green pepper floated through the air, and her stomach growled.

Blair's eyes roamed the chipped beige cupboards, formerly white, and a stained backsplash. A shaft of afternoon light spilled through the small window over the sink, adding a somber cast instead of cheer to the dreary room. The entire house had seen better days, but it was all she could afford. After they moved in, she unleashed her creativity in the house, or tried, with colorful curtains, pillow covers, rugs, and wall hangings. She'd partially succeeded in making it a cozy nest for her and Jake.

The best feature, despite its view of Mr. Walton's house, was a row of floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room. From there, she often glimpsed the sun sinking over a watchful row of lofty pines just beyond his house. At times, a sparkle of sun reflecting off the nearby river pierced through the trees. Wishful thinking, more likely someone's headlights. She and Jake lived several blocks from the river and walked along its banks when time and temperatures allowed.

A sizzle of burning rice snatched Blair's attention. She slid the pot to an unlit burner and pulled a bag of frozen vegetables from the freezer. They were often tasteless, but so easy. And she hoped to imprint Jake's young mind with a vegetable habit.

The cellphone on the counter buzzed. She glanced at it. Bad timing, but she'd catch up with Lisa, her longtime college friend, while she cooked. "Hey, Lisa."

"Hi, Blair. Did you get the contest link?" Her friend's voice comforted her, a connection with her old life and her persistent dream.

"Yes, thanks, Lisa. Looks complicated, but I haven't had much time to study it."

"Think you'll apply?"

Muffled voices in the background gave Blair the impression Lisa was still at work.

Blair pressed her lips together. It would take time to complete the requirements and send the contest application. The deadline was only weeks away. "I'd like to try. I don't have much time to get ready for it but can submit the spring collection I designed last year."

"Oh, that won't matter," Lisa said. "No one'll know it's last year's, as long as you reference next year's colors and a couple new style trends."

"I was thinking the same thing. I should have time this weekend. How are things in your world?" Lisa had followed the conventional route at a fashion house in New York doing errands for the monarchs of the industry. Inching her way up, she'd gotten a few tiny openings for her own designs.

"Pressured. Crazy. We have a catwalk coming up. I now understand why they call it a *catwalk*. The claws have been out all day." The women chuckled.

"Living the dream."

"Yeah, I guess so." Lisa's voice softened, as if sensing Blair's wistful resignation across the phone. "You'll get there, Blair. I know you will."

"I hope so. I'm taking the non-traditional route, but hey, look at Ralph Lauren. He wasn't exactly traditional, was he?"

“Exactly. And it is a grueling life, make no mistake.”

“Well, I don’t lack for grueling. That’s for sure. Just a different kind.” They’d finished college with the same stars in their eyes. But as graduation appeared on the horizon, so did a little red line to indicate Blair was pregnant. It was the moment her life plan took a drastic detour.

The two women caught up on news, while Blair surveyed the vegetables and tossed in a handful of cut herbs from the flower bed. She pulled ceramic pasta bowls from the cupboard, the phone still tucked between her shoulder and her ear. They talked mostly of Lisa’s exciting life in New York, which consisted of roommates, her tiny but well-located apartment, and daily tasks working with up-and-coming names in New York fashion. Blair didn’t have much to add, since her job at a clothing factory was a long shot from what Lisa did every day.

They disconnected, and she set the table. How different her life was from Lisa’s. Blair refused to allow her dreams to disintegrate. The career climb of a fashion designer was steep under the best circumstances. In Blair’s situation, it was Mount Everest. But she couldn’t give up. It still burned in her bones and guided her decisions.

“Is it ready?” Jake ran into the kitchen where a two-seat table filled one corner. “You said I should wash my hands.” He wiggled his fingers at her.

“Hmm, let me see those.” Blair took each of his hands and covered his palms with kisses until he giggled and pulled them back. “They look perfect,” she told him. “Now, sit and we’ll have some chili.”

“Yum. Can I put Fritos on top? And cheese?”

“But of course. It’s the McCartney recipe, isn’t it? Over rice?”

Jake grinned and nodded, his tight fist grasping the fork.

Before they ate, Jake offered a child’s prayer for the food. “And help Mr. Walton be happy,” he added. “And please give us a new neighbor soon. Amen.”

Blair stifled a smile at Jake’s heartfelt prayer, but her eyes stung too, since Jake had prayed for the old man to become happy. To be blessed.

At moments like these, her misgivings about her fumbled route to fashion design floated off her like dust and blew away on a winter breeze. If she never achieved even one of her dreams, she wouldn’t trade her precious boy for all of them. Each time she looked at him and her heart swelled with emotion, it confirmed the rightness of her choice to raise him herself rather than placing him for adoption. It was a hard choice. Well, both options were brutal in their own way. She remembered that time too well. Because of her choice, both Jake’s life and hers weighed squarely on her shoulders.

After supper, Blair cleared the table and Jake settled onto the living room rug with his stuffed dinosaur and plastic trucks. From the kitchen, she heard his noises, a growl from the truck motor, a roar from the dinosaur. As she rinsed the dishes, she yielded to a full-width grin.

She and Jake spent most evenings in the living room, him with a game or in front of the TV, and Blair at her sewing machine. After working all day behind a sewing machine

at the factory, she continued each evening creating prototypes of her own designs, as well as purses, aprons, tote bags, or children's clothes to sell at the local market on Saturdays. She usually fell into bed exhausted at eleven or twelve, only to follow the same routine the next day.

Returning to the living room, she stared at the rectangular table along the opposite wall. Fabric swatches, sketches, straight pins, and boxes of sewing supplies covered its surface. Two headless mannequins stood in the corner, one still draped with half a spring party dress glittering with straight pins. She should finish up the projects she planned to sell at the farmer's market next Saturday, but her thousand-pound fatigue wouldn't allow her to move toward them.

Her gaze roved from the table to Jake to the couch, where soft cushions lured her. Back to the table. Back to the couch. She'd have time to finish tomorrow, wouldn't she? She'd also put off the fashion contest to the next day or so. Instead, she'd peruse a fashion industry magazine while savoring the animated, playful sounds of her son.



Cooper Dawson flexed his fingers on the steering wheel. He stared out at the layered pink and purple horizon, then glanced over at his dog, Zipper, who snored in the passenger seat next to him.

Heaviness layered inside him. He should be euphoric, having cut the ribbon, so to speak, the previous day. Windsor Fountains, a planned subdivision, was officially complete. The project he'd been married to for about a year was almost literally in the rearview mirror.

It should have been different. Miles should have been there to celebrate with him. Now it was time to go home, wherever *that* was these days.

His phone rang. Amber's name popped up on his dashboard screen, so he punched the response button. "Hey, sis. Was just about to call you."

"Where are you, Coop?"

"I left just over an hour ago, so I should be at your house in around thirty minutes."

"Great. I made fried chicken. Your favorite. Despite the fat content."

Cooper laughed. "Thanks, Amber. See you in a few."

"Um, Coop?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing okay? Are you all set to start this new chapter?"

He forced out a hearty, "It's about *time* I settled somewhere. I'm more than ready." Zipper awoke and let out a whine. He too was ready. Ready to see more of his master than he had over the last year.

"Is your house ready? If not, you can crash here as long as you want."

“Thanks. I’ll just stay tonight. Tomorrow, I’ll move back to the house and survey the property.”

“Sounds good. See you soon.”

Returning to Brenner Falls should be therapeutic, washing his mind of the daily reminder of his partnership with Miles. Of the business they’d planned since their teens when they realized they shared an interest and aptitude for architecture and construction.

Cooper punched his mom’s number on the dashboard, hoping to flick away his rapidly sinking emotions.

“I wondered if you’d gotten on the road, son.” Her warm voice held a coating of concern. Why was everyone worried about him? He was a grown man of thirty-four. Miles was everyone’s loss, not just his. The whole family lived beneath the weight of shared grief.

“I’m about twenty minutes from Amber’s house. So, within the hour, I’ll be at her table eating fried chicken.”

His mother laughed. The frequent sound he’d grown up with had always been like music to him.

“Fried chicken and green beans with bacon, right?” she said. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were raised in the south, not in the middle of Pennsylvania. But I guess you acquired all kinds of tastes in your travels.”

Yes, he had. Especially Indian. Yet another painful story.

“It’ll be good to get a fresh start,” she said. “I wish you lived closer but knowing you and Amber are in the same town is the next best thing.”

“Maybe you and Dad should move to Brenner Falls.”

His mom chuckled. “Visits will do fine for now, though you never know. When do you think you’ll break ground on the new house?”

Cooper stuffed several fingers through his straight, too-long hair as his gaze found a road sign for Brenner Falls. He was almost there. “As soon as I can. I’m ready to get started on *my* project for a change. I have to get the land cleared first before the foundation goes in. Once there’s something to see, you can come for a visit.”

“And you’ll stay in the little house you bought a couple years back until the new one’s ready?”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. Gotta go now, Mom. I’m at my exit.”

“Be careful. Love you, Cooper.”

“Love you too, Mom. Say hi to Dad.”

Although losing Miles still burned a hole in his heart, he had Amber, Mom, and Dad. His anchors. And he had God, of course, who was his true anchor, though Cooper didn’t lean on him nearly as much as he should. Might have helped him through the last year.

Instead, Cooper had worked like a machine, holding up the business alone. He’d finished the subdivision in record time, to the delight of the shareholders and pre-sold residents. No one realized he wasn’t a prodigy, but only blockading his tears with hard

work. He'd done it willingly, for Miles and his widow, Tarin, though not a single day had gone by without a fresh wave of grief for his fun-loving yet brainy older brother.

Time would heal and had already begun. A change of pace and place would help. Being near Amber would too. His little sister had lived in Brenner Falls for the last eight years, working as a physical therapist. Then four years ago, she'd gotten a tip for a building project there and passed it along to Cooper and Miles.

Miles had preferred to commute since Tarin was expecting their first child. Cooper had planned on staying with Amber, but as the project expanded, he decided to buy a little house and live there. He'd seen enough of Brenner Falls to know he'd like to settle there one day. Aside from the quaint setting and friendly residents, he'd fallen in love. . .with the river. That mesmerizing, calming river. He'd found it easy to visualize his dream house near it, waking up each day to sparkles of sun reflecting from its broad, majestic surface. A home where he'd plant deep roots, finding solace and security he wouldn't so easily lose. A home he'd already cultivated in his mind for the last three years.

Before he knew it, Cooper was in front of Amber's house. He turned toward Zipper. "Ready, pal?" Zipper's tail thumped in response.

Amber greeted Cooper at the door with a hearty hug. "Missed you, Bro. I'm *sooo* glad you're here to settle." Her green eyes sparkled, baring her sincerity. She bent to scratch Zipper's head. "Hey, old boy. Good to see you too."

"You're as beautiful as ever." And she was. Her thick dark hair hung in a fabric tie down her back, longer than he remembered. Why no man had snagged her yet was a mystery.

He grinned back at her and lifted his face to take a satisfied sniff. "And it smells great in here." He let his knapsack drop with a thump on the floor.

"Is this all you brought?" She frowned. "I thought you were moving back for good."

"The rest is in the car. No sense in unloading it twice."

"Ah, right. Of course. Well, how about chicken first?"

"Yes, immediately would be fine."

"Over dinner you can fill me in about your plans for this next chapter, including the dream house you want to build."

"The next chapter," he murmured to her back as he followed her into the kitchen, clutching a small bag of dog food. The next chapter of his life was anyone's guess. He prayed it would be brighter and better than the last one. It had to be.

