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CARLA NEGGERS

A Swift River Valley Novel

CIDER BROOK

"[A] beautifully described tale that rewards readers with an intriguing mystery as well as a deliciously satisfying romance."

—*Library Journal* on *Secrets of the Lost Summer*

Unlikely partners bound by circumstance...or by fate?

Being rescued by a good-looking, bad-boy firefighter isn't how Samantha Bennett expected to start her stay in Knights Bridge, Massachusetts. Now she has everyone's attention—especially that of Justin Sloan, her rescuer, who wants to know why she was camped out in an abandoned old New England cider mill.

Samantha is a treasure hunter who has returned to Knights Bridge to solve a 300-year-old mystery and salvage her good name. Justin remembers her well. He's the one who alerted her late mentor to her iffy past and got her fired. But just because he doesn't trust her doesn't mean he can resist her. Samantha is daring, determined, seized by wanderlust—everything that strong, stoic Justin never knew he wanted. Until now...

Praise for Carla Neggers and her novels

“Neggers captures readers’ attention with her usual flair and brilliance and gives us a romance, a mystery and a lesson in history.”

—*RT Book Reviews*, Top Pick, on *Secrets of the Lost Summer*

“Only a writer as gifted as Carla Neggers could use so few words to convey so much action and emotional depth.”

—Sandra Brown

“With a great plot and excellent character development, Neggers’ thriller *Saint’s Gate*, the first in a new series, is a fast-paced, action-packed tale of romantic suspense that will appeal to fans of Lisa Jackson and Lisa Gardner.”

—*Library Journal*

“*Saint’s Gate* is the best book yet from a writer at the absolute top of her craft.”

—*Providence Journal*

“*Cold Pursuit* is the perfect name for this riveting read. Neggers’ passages are so descriptive that one almost finds one’s teeth chattering from fear and anticipation.”

—*Bookreporter.com*

“[Neggers] forces her characters to confront issues of humanity, integrity and the multifaceted aspects of love without slowing the ever-quickening pace.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

Cider Brook

Carla Neggers



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To my friend Fran Garfunkel

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Excerpt

Samantha Bennett slipped her grandfather's antique silver flask into an outer pocket of her khaki safari jacket. He'd claimed the flask was from an old pirate chest, but she'd discovered in the three years since his death at ninety-six that not everything he'd told her had been factual. Harry Bennett had been a grand spinner of the strategic tall tale. He'd probably been drinking rum from the flask when he'd spun the pirate-chest story.

No rum for me, Samantha thought, glancing around her grandfather's cluttered office on the second floor of the Bennett house in Boston's Back Bay. She'd filled the flask with the smoky Scotch he had left in one of his crystal decanters. If she was going to hunt pirate's treasure, she figured she ought to have whiskey with her.

Although what could go wrong in little Knights Bridge, Massachusetts?

Her grandfather smiled at her from a framed black-and-white photograph hanging on the wood-paneled wall behind his massive oak desk. At the time of the photo he'd been forty-seven, roguishly handsome, wearing a jacket much like hers. He'd just arrived back in Boston after the Antarctic trip that had sealed his reputation as a world-class explorer and adventurer. It had almost killed him, too. Her couple of nights' camping in an out-of-the-way New England town hardly compared to an expedition to Antarctica.

She buttoned the flap of her jacket pocket. There were endless pockets inside and out. She was already forgetting where she'd put things—her phone, compass, matches, map, the earth-tone lipstick she'd grabbed at the last second, in case she went out to dinner one night during her stay in Knights Bridge.

Out to dinner? Where, with whom—and why?

If nothing else, a few days away from her grandfather's clutter would do her good. He had been born on a struggling New England farm and had died a wealthy man, if also a hopeless pack rat. Samantha hadn't realized just how much he'd collected in his long, active life until she'd been hired by his estate—meaning her father and her uncle—to go through his house and his London apartment. She swore she'd found gum wrappers from 1952. The man had saved *everything*.

The morning sun streamed through translucent panels that hung over bowfront windows framed by heavy charcoal velvet drapes. Her grandmother, who had died twenty-five years ago, when Samantha was four, had decorated the entire house herself, decreeing that gray and white were the perfect color for this room, for when her husband was there, being contemplative and studious—which wasn't often, even in his later years. He'd spent little time in his office, mostly just long enough to stack up his latest finds.

Samantha appreciated the effect of the filtered sunlight on the original oil painting that she'd unearthed from the office closet a few weeks ago. The painting was unsigned and clearly an amateur work, but it had captivated her from the moment she'd taken it out into the light. It depicted an idyllic red-painted New England cider mill, with apples in wooden crates, barrels of cider and a water wheel capturing the runoff from a small stone-and-earth dam on a woodland stream. She'd assumed it was untitled but two days ago had discovered neat, faded handwriting on the lower edge of the simple wood frame.

The Mill at Cider Brook.

Her surprise had been so complete that she'd dipped into the Scotch decanter.

She didn't know if the mill depicted in the painting was real, but there was a Cider Brook in Knights Bridge, barely two hours west of Boston.

Of all places.

A quick internet search had produced a year-old notice that the town of Knights Bridge was selling an old cider mill in its possession. Had someone bought it? Was it still for sale?

Samantha had checked the closet for anything else her grandfather might have stuffed in there related to Cider Brook. Instead, she discovered a legal-size envelope containing about fifty yellowed, handwritten pages—the rough draft of a story called *The Adventures of Captain Farraday and Lady Elizabeth*.

She suspected but had no way to prove that the story was by the same hand as the painting, but it didn't matter. It had sealed the deal, and now she had Harry Bennett's antique silver flask tucked in her jacket and her plans made for her return to Knights Bridge—a town she had expected, and hoped, she would never have to visit again.

Plans more or less made, anyway. Samantha had no illusions about herself and knew she wasn't much on detailed planning.

Her first visit to the little town had been two and a half years ago, on a snowy March day a few months after her grandfather's death. She had expected to slip in and out of town without anyone's knowledge, but it hadn't worked out that way.

"A carpenter told me he saw a woman out here. You, Samantha?"

Yes. Her.

The carpenter had been her undoing. She didn't know who he was, but it didn't matter. She would be more careful on this trip, even if careful wasn't a Bennett trait.

This was her chance to put things right.

* * *

Samantha returned the painting to the closet, pulled the drapes, locked the doors and met her uncle and cousin out front. They had collected her grandfather's forty-year-old Mercedes from its parking space behind the house. It was a staid gray and had Massachusetts plates, but it was destined to stand out in Knights Bridge. In some ways, Harry Bennett's frugal upbringing had never left him. While he'd bought an expensive car, he'd decided to keep it until he ran it into the ground. It would have helped he'd driven it once in a while, but he'd never liked to drive.

His younger son, however, loved to drive. Caleb Bennett was a rakishly handsome maritime historian in his early fifties. He and his wife, a rare-books specialist, lived in London and were the parents of four, the eldest of whom, Isaac, a high-school senior, was strapped into the seat behind Samantha. Isaac and his father were heading to Amherst, the first stop on a tour of New England colleges. Samantha, who didn't own a car, was hitching a ride with them.

"This will be great," Caleb said as she got in next to him. "I can't remember the last time I drove into the New England countryside."

"Are you sure you don't want me to drive?"

"Nah. Sit back and enjoy yourself."

The three youngest Bennetts would be arriving in Boston with their mother that evening for a weeklong visit. At some point, Samantha's parents were due to arrive from the Scottish coast for an even shorter visit. A sort of family reunion. Her uncle and Isaac would pick her up in Knights Bridge on their way back to Boston.

Caleb pulled out onto busy Beacon Street. It was late September, a great time to be in Boston—or anywhere in New England. He glanced at Samantha. “You look as if you’re about to walk the plank.”

“Do I? I don’t feel that way. I’m excited.”

“That bastard Duncan McCaffrey fired you, Sam. Going back to Knights Bridge just picks the scab off a wound that should be healed by now.”

Isaac leaned forward. “Duncan McCaffrey? The treasure hunter?”

Samantha’s throat tightened, but she tried not to let them see her tension. She and Isaac shared the Bennett golden-brown hair and dark eyes, but he was lanky, angular and a gifted tennis player. She was active but had no patience for tennis, and, at five-five, she had obviously not inherited the Bennett height. Even her mother, Francesca, a marine archaeologist, was taller. Samantha considered herself lucky to have inherited her beautiful mother’s high cheekbones and full mouth.

“That’s right,” she said finally. “I worked for Duncan for a short time. He’s gone now. He died two years ago this past June.”

“He fired your cousin three weeks before he died,” Caleb put in.

Seventeen days, to be precise. Samantha, let it go. “I didn’t tell him things he thought he was entitled to know,” she said.

Isaac’s eyes widened. “You lied to Duncan McCaffrey?”

“Not exactly.”

Her cousin sat back in the soft leather seat. “Wow. That’s got to haunt you. Talk about bad timing. What does Knights Bridge have to do with him?”

“I’ve heard stories in treasure-hunting circles, but I don’t have all the details. Apparently Duncan was searching for information on his birth parents and ended up buying property in Knights Bridge. His son inherited it. Dylan. He’s now engaged to a woman from town.”

“Wait,” Isaac said. “You’re going there for revenge because Duncan fired you?”

“No. I’m not going for revenge.” Samantha took a breath, not knowing what to say to her cousin, especially with her uncle right next to her. She’d already told Caleb more than she’d meant to. She exhaled, her tone matter-of-fact as she continued, “I’m going to test a theory.”

Caleb grimaced next to her. “You’re stirring things up for no good reason.”

“Dylan McCaffrey doesn’t even have to know I’m there.”

“Sam...” There was a note of dread in Isaac’s voice. “Sam, please tell me this trip isn’t about pirates.”

She swiveled around to look at him. “What, you don’t like pirates, Isaac?”

“I got over pirates when I was twelve. Are you searching for the lost treasure of Captain Hook?”

“Show some respect, Isaac,” his father said. “Samantha’s an expert on East Coast privateers and pirates. Captain Hook is fictional. She’s only interested in real pirates and such. Right, Sam?”

Samantha ignored the skeptical note in his voice. “I’m researching Captain Benjamin Farraday, a Boston privateer-turned-pirate who disappeared before he could be hanged for his crimes.”

Isaac yawned as the Mercedes sped west on Storrow Drive, along the Charles River, which was dotted with small sailboats and Harvard rowers. “You think this Captain Farraday buried treasure in Knights Bridge?”

“It’s possible.”

Her cousin groaned. “Sam, nobody believes in buried treasure anymore.”

His father glanced sideways at her. “You see? His mother’s influence. He’s got both feet planted firmly on the ground.”

“He wants to go to Amherst College. That’s Grandpa’s alma mater.” Samantha winked at her cousin.

in the backseat. “There’s some Bennett in you.”

Isaac rolled his eyes. “Don’t remind me.”

* * *

Dozing—and pretending to doze—on the drive west at least allowed Samantha to stop trying to convince her uncle that she hadn’t lost her mind. He’d interrogated her on the contents of her backpack—he was pleased she had a first-aid kit and an emergency whistle—and her reasons for venturing to Knights Bridge on her own. “*You and this damn pirate, Samantha. You’re obsessed with this Captain Benjamin Farraday of yours.*”

No argument from her.

She hadn’t mentioned the cider mill painting and the story she’d discovered in his father’s Boston office. She had enough to overcome with her uncle without telling him she was off to Knights Bridge because of an anonymous painting and the fanciful writings of an unknown author—a woman, Samantha would guess given the feminine handwriting. She had no doubt her uncle would have dismissed *The Adventures of Captain Farraday and Lady Elizabeth* as worthless to a proper historian and tossed the pages into the fire.

Samantha had copied them and brought them with her, possible clues to her pirate mystery, as well as a reminder of the reasons she was undertaking this mission and returning to Knights Bridge. It was a fun story. One particular passage had stuck in her mind.

Lady Elizabeth Fullerton refused to choke on the terrible rum the black-haired, black-eyed pirate had thrust at her. “What’s your name?” she asked, returning the flask to him.

“Farraday. Benjamin Farraday. And yours?”

“Bess.” She’d already considered what name to give him. Something simple and not too far from the truth, so that she wouldn’t forget. “Bess Fuller.”

He grinned and leaned in close to her. He obviously didn’t believe her. “Well, Bess Fuller, drink up. We’ve a long way to go before you’ll see England again. You can thank me later for saving you.”

“I’d rather have drowned than to be rescued by a pirate rogue.”

It was a rousing tale of a spirited high-born British woman who’d been captured for ransom by a dastardly enemy of her remote but wealthy father and then “rescued” by a dashing pirate. Although entertaining, the story bore only marginal resemblance to the life of the real Farraday—at least his known life. There was much not yet known about the Boston-born pirate and his exploits.

Samantha had her grandfather to thank for sparking her interest in Captain Farraday. A few months before his death, he had plunked a copy of an eighteenth-century broadside in front of her. It detailed the crimes credited against Farraday, then a wanted man. “*You like pirates, Sam. Check out this guy.*”

She had dived in. As her grandfather’s health quickly had begun to fail, he loved for her to sit at his bedside and tell him every new development in her research. She had theorized that Farraday might have hidden treasure in the wilderness west of Boston, first as his personal insurance policy against his capture, arrest and ultimate execution, then to finance a new sloop to continue his raids on other

ships.

She had little to go on—no proof beyond snippets here and there and her leaps to connect the dots in her research. She didn't know why her grandfather hadn't told her about the painting and the manuscript pages in his closet—he could have simply forgotten they were there. Now she suspected at least the story had brought Captain Farraday to his attention in the first place.

“Samantha—Samantha, we're here.”

She sat up straight at her uncle's voice. “Right. So we are.”

He slowed the old Mercedes as they came to the Knights Bridge town common, an oval-shaped green encircled by a narrow main street with classic homes, a town hall, a library, a general store and a few other businesses.

Caleb shuddered. “This place is straight out of 1910.”

“It just looks that way on the surface.” She pointed vaguely. “You can drop me off anywhere here.”

He stopped in front of the Swift River Country Store. “What about mosquitoes? Ticks? I hope you packed DEET.”

“DEET and Scotch,” Samantha said lightly. “The necessities when hunting pirate treasure.”

Caleb looked at his son. “You're going to be an engineer.”

Isaac managed to stifle enough to wish her luck. As she grabbed her pack out of the backseat, she caught him smirking and muttering something about hoping she found herself a sexy pirate of her own.

“This isn't about sexy pirates,” she told him.

He gave her a knowing grin. “Right. It's about scholarship.”

She ignored him. “Enjoy your college tour.” She smiled at her uncle. “Thanks for the ride. I'll see you in a few days.”

“Have fun. Steer clear of carpenters.”

Samantha wished she hadn't told her uncle how Duncan McCaffrey had come to fire her. Being spotted in the snow by a small-town carpenter paled in comparison to some of the ways her father and his baby brother had gotten themselves into trouble over the years.

Caleb and Isaac didn't linger. Samantha waited for the Mercedes to disappear back out the winding road to the highway before she set off. There was nothing she needed to pick up at the general store. She didn't have to ask for directions—she had a paper map and a map on her phone, but she'd committed her route to memory.

* * *

Ninety minutes later, Samantha slipped off her backpack and set it at her feet as she paused on a simple wooden bridge. It spanned a rock-strewn stream that had to be Cider Brook. She was on a back road that meandered among green fields, old stone walls and woods that were changing color with the arrival of autumn.

She could see a sliver of the Quabbin Reservoir in the distance, its quiet waters shining blue in the afternoon sun. Before Quabbin, three branches of the Swift River had run through a valley of peaceful New England villages. The valley's abundance of freshwater streams, rivers, ponds and lakes had proved too tempting for growing, thirsty metropolitan Boston to resist. In the 1930s, the villages had been forcibly cleared out, razed and the valley flooded to create a pristine source of drinking water for their neighbors to the east.

The “accidental wilderness,” as it was called, was a stunningly beautiful sight on an early-autumn

afternoon.

Samantha wished the weather was cooler. The day had turned warmer and more humid than she'd expected. She unbuttoned her jacket and was tempted to take it off altogether. She doubted she would have use for the merino wool throw she'd packed, in anticipation of a chilly night looking up at the stars. With little ambient light out this way, the night sky would be spectacular.

Across the bridge, the narrow road curved uphill to a rambling white clapboard farmhouse with black shutters and a red barn set on a hill that overlooked the valley. Huge maple trees, their leaves just starting to turn color, shaded the front lawn. A dark brown dog slept in the driveway, and a white duck—a pet, Samantha assumed—paraded across the grass as if it owned the place. She could hear an unseen rooster crowing in the summerlike stillness.

If she remembered her map correctly, the farmhouse was at a hairpin turn in the road, which then wound back toward the village. That meant the stream under the bridge definitely was Cider Brook.

She lifted her backpack again and slung it over one shoulder. She would strap it on properly once she was on her way again. She crossed the bridge and left the road, pushing through knee-high ferns down a steep incline to the edge of the brook. The brook was narrow here—far too narrow to support even a small cider mill—but would widen farther downstream. The coppery, clear water was shallow winding downhill over and around rocks and boulders that created natural pools and mini waterfalls.

She brushed away a mosquito buzzing by her head. A hundred years ago, this area had been largely farmland. Now much of it had been reclaimed by a mixed hardwood forest.

An old cider mill could easily be tucked in the woods, and she could walk right past it.

At the rate she was going, she would be finished with Knights Bridge well before her uncle and cousin headed back this way. She hadn't calculated the exact distance from the bridge to the reservoir but it would be a pretty hike—an adventure, even if she didn't come across a nineteenth-century cider mill.

More mosquitoes found her, and she stopped alongside the brook to refresh her bug spray. Thunder rumbled off to the west. She looked up at the sky, hazy and blue directly above her but with ominous dark clouds behind her. Tucked in the trees as she was, she couldn't see far enough to get a sense whether the storm was coming her way or moving off in another direction. This late in the season, she hadn't considered she might run into a thunderstorm. Of course, once she thought about it she realized a storm wasn't out of the question.

She noticed a trail on the other side of the brook. She had a feeling she was close to the spot where Cider Brook curved toward a dirt road that jutted off the paved one she had followed to the bridge. If she got in trouble with the weather, she could always work her way out to the road and find a house or a shed or flag down a car. Something. Right now, she wanted to get across the brook and on the trail.

Adjusting her backpack, Samantha tested a jagged, half-submerged rock. When it didn't move, she stepped onto it, then jumped to a flat-topped hunk of granite, the cold brook water swirling and gurgling, soothing her sudden sense of dread as more thunder growled. She leaped to the opposite bank, sinking slightly into the soft ground, and thrashed through ferns and skunk cabbage onto the trail.

Lightning flashed, and the darkening clouds created eerie shadows. She picked up her pace. She didn't need a detailed weather forecast to know a nasty storm was bearing down on her. The trail continued to follow Cider Brook into the woods. As she'd anticipated, the brook widened as smaller streams joined it on its gentle descent toward Quabbin.

As the trail curved past a huge, old red-leafed tree, she could see sunlight ahead—a clearing of some kind. A simultaneous bolt of lightning and ferocious clap of thunder propelled her into an

outright run. Trees swayed in strong wind gusts, and she could hear the hiss of rain in the woods behind her. Fat raindrops splattered on the dirt trail.

Breathing hard, debating whether she should seek shelter in a protected spot in the woods, she emerged into a clearing. She came to an abrupt halt in front of an old rough-wood building, maybe thirty feet by twenty feet, tucked next to a small stone-and-earth dam and quiet millpond.

Damned if she hadn't found her cider mill.

Or *a* cider mill, anyway.

It resembled the one depicted in the painting in her grandfather's office, but it was run-down, obviously abandoned and definitely not new or painted a rich, vibrant red.

Hail pelted her, an unpleasant reminder of her immediate situation. It was dime-size and quickly covered the ground.

"Ah, damn."

Of *course* there was hail.

She bounded up to the mill's solid wood door, but it was padlocked. Why, she couldn't imagine. Three small windows were encased in thick, dirty plastic. A garage-style door, where wagons had once unloaded apples and loaded cider, was boarded shut.

She knew how to pick a padlock. Her uncle had seen to teaching her that particular skill himself. "*It's only to be used in self-defense, Sam. No breaking into a vault or anything like that.*"

She noticed faded Do Not Enter and Danger signs to the left of the door.

Lightning lit up the sky, and thunder echoed in the woods.

She needed to get inside.

Now.

The storm was fierce, intense and downright unnerving, but Samantha rode it out inside the dusty, empty cider mill. With the rain stopped and the thunder clearly off to the east, she had her grandfather's flask out of her jacket pocket and was debating whether to imbibe now or wait until after dark.

Then she smelled smoke.

Smoke? She groaned in disbelief. Wouldn't *that* just top off her day?

She tucked the flask back in her pocket and breathed in deeply, hoping the smell of smoke had been a trick of her imagination. The mill consisted of a single room with rough-wood walls, wide-board flooring and a pitched ceiling with open rafters. It would go up in flames in no time if it caught fire.

The smell didn't dissipate, and it wasn't her imagination. It was definitely smoke.

Could the wind have carried smoke from a chimney in a nearby farmhouse?

What nearby farmhouse?

She could taste smoke now, feel it burn in her eyes.

She reached into the open compartment of the backpack at her feet, grabbed her four-by-nine-inch documents pouch and slipped it into an outer jacket pocket, opposite the one with the flask.

A strange hissing noise seemed to come from beneath the floor by a half-dozen old wooden cider barrels pushed up against the wall. In another moment, smoke, visible now, curled through cracks in the floorboards and floated up to the rafters as if it were a living thing. Samantha stared at it, transfixed. She couldn't delude herself. She was in a fire.

She didn't have a minute to waste. She clicked into action.

She knew she had to leave everything—tent, sleeping bag, food, water, toiletries, bug spray, first-aid kit, flannel pajamas and her merino wool wrap, a gift from her mother. So much for watching the stars come out, envisioning life here in the early eighteenth century.

More smoke poured through the floorboards.

Samantha dropped low, remembering that was what someone was supposed to do in a fire, with rising smoke. She pulled her jacket collar over her mouth and nose and launched herself toward the door.

She swore she could hear flames under her in the mill's cellar.

Her eyes were blurry and watery with smoke, but she could see an orange, fiery glow by the north wall. She felt the heat of the fire now. Sudden, intense.

How long did she have before the old, dry wood exploded into flames?

Stifling a surge of panic, she crouched even lower, coughing as smoke filled the enclosed space. She kept moving. She had to get out of here before she collapsed due to smoke inhalation.

Flames burst through the floorboards by the barrels and crawled up the wall, bright and terrifying in the gray light. Fire and smoke seemed to join, forming a monster ready to consume everything in its path.

She got onto her knees, gasping for air. Her hand fell from her jacket, exposing her to more smoke. She covered her mouth and nose with the crook of her arm and decided she would crawl on her belly. She had to...but she couldn't move, couldn't breathe. There was no pirate rogue to save her. She had to save herself. She had to stay conscious, get moving, steer clear of the flames.

The front door banged open, startling her.

“Is anyone in here?”

A man’s voice. Soothing, firm, maybe a little annoyed. Or was it her imagination, or a passage from the pages she’d discovered in her grandfather’s office?

Samantha tried to stagger to her feet. “Captain Farraday?”

“Easy. Are you hurt?”

She shook her head and blinked, but she couldn’t focus—couldn’t see the man through the smoke and her own burning tears.

Strong arms reached around her. “Stay low,” her rescuer said. “We need to move fast.”

He had her up off her feet before she realized he had lifted her. In a few long strides, he had her out the door and down the stone-slab step, then flung onto the bank of the small millpond. She landed in cold, wet grass, rolled onto her stomach, coughing, spitting, sucking in the clear air.

“Do you have medical issues?”

The man again. Samantha sat up, her eyes and throat burning, aching. She tasted smoke and grime and felt her heart thumping in her chest. She blinked rapidly, peering up at the man standing between her and the mill. He was tall, looming over her. She made out dark short-cropped hair, deep blue eyes, a firm mouth, a square jaw, broad shoulders. He wore a black canvas shirt over a black T-shirt, jeans, scuffed leather boots.

Hauling her out of the mill had obviously not taxed him to any degree, but he didn’t seem happy about it. She had no idea who he was. A hiker? A local man? Did he own the cider mill? She hadn’t considered she might have to contend with an owner, or that it might be a tough, humorless man not much older than she was.

“I’m sorry,” she said, clearing her throat. “What did you ask me?”

He sucked in a quick breath. “Do you have asthma, allergies, a heart condition, anything—”

“No. Nothing. No medical issues.” Her voice was raspy, tense. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

He showed no sign of lowering his guard. “Fire department’s on the way. I have to get to work. You sit tight.”

“What can I do to help?”

“Stay out of the way.”

He hadn’t hesitated even half a beat before firing off his answer. He didn’t wait for a response and set off toward the mill. Thick smoke billowed from the open door into the cool, clear air. Flames glowed orange behind the dirty plastic and cracked glass in the windows.

Samantha watched as her rescuer stopped at a dusty-gray pickup truck, parked with its hood facing out the pitted dirt driveway. In seconds, he had donned fire gear—hat, mask, jacket.

A firefighter?

He grabbed an ax and headed for the mill.

The fire seemed to have sucked the door shut. He kicked it open and went inside.

Whoever he was, her rescuer was strong and utterly fearless.

She shivered in the cooler air. She hadn’t called him Captain Farraday, had she? Not out loud. It just wasn’t possible.

She heard sirens and realized a road was closer than she’d thought. In another thirty seconds, fire trucks and a lone police car descended. Samantha moved to a small boulder by the brook. With the downpour from the storm, the water was high, rushing over rocks, moss and mud.

As she watched firefighters set to work, she could feel the padlock in her jacket pocket.

If no one asked about it, she saw no reason to mention it.

Her rescuer's name was Justin Sloan.

Or so he told Samantha right before he demanded she produce his padlock.

He put out a callused hand. "Where is it?"

The fire was out, the mill intact if damaged. The firefighters had loaded up their gear and left, and the two uniformed police officers had followed them along the rutted driveway to the road. One of the officers had interviewed her. She'd told him the truth about how she'd ended up in the cider mill—that she'd ducked inside to get out of the thunderstorm. He'd asked if she'd noticed the Do Not Enter and Danger signs. She'd said she had. He'd scowled and hadn't requested further details.

He was a Sloan, too. Eric Sloan.

One of the firefighters was also a Sloan. Christopher.

Small towns, she thought.

Justin, she now realized, was a volunteer firefighter. After helping put out the fire, he'd returned his gear to his truck and then joined her by her boulder. Samantha had dipped a hand into the cold brook water and done what she could to wipe the soot off her face, but she doubted she'd gotten it all. The acrid fire smells wouldn't be easy to eliminate from her skin or her clothes. She had travel wipes and fresh clothes in her backpack, assuming it had survived the fire and wasn't too contaminated by smoke.

Telling Justin Sloan that his missing padlock was in her jacket pocket didn't seem like a particularly wise course of action at the moment. Although he gave no indication, he had to be in high-adrenaline mode after coming upon the old mill in flames, discovering a woman was more or less trapped inside, carrying her to safety and then helping to put out the fire.

Samantha realized she was in high-adrenaline mode herself. She stood, the seat of her pants wet, and flicked an ant off her knee. Casual. As if she hadn't picked the padlock to get into the mill and didn't have it in her jacket.

The banter she'd overheard between the firefighters had confirmed her suspicion that her rescuer owned the old cider mill.

"Hell, Justin, this place is even more of a dump than I thought."

"I can't believe you spent real money on it."

"Firetrap, Justin. Told you."

That last had come from Christopher Sloan. Apparently he was one of two full-time firefighters in Knights Bridge. Everyone else was a volunteer.

"They're your brothers?" Samantha asked. "Eric and Christopher?"

"My brothers. Yes." Justin snapped two fingers of his outstretched hand. "My padlock."

Not a man easily distracted. She tried to look as if she didn't quite understand him. "Padlock?"

"The one you picked or broke to get into the mill."

He lowered his hand to his side, but she could tell from his set jaw that he wasn't giving up. She didn't feel guilty at what she'd done, but she didn't want to explain herself to a man who'd just carted her out of a burning building and had helped put out the fire. He didn't look as if he'd be a willing listener on a good day. Since one of his brothers was a police officer and another was a professional firefighter—and he himself was a volunteer firefighter—she wasn't *afraid* of him. He wasn't a thug. He was just not in a great mood.

“It was a dangerous storm. Downright scary, and I’ve been in some scary storms.” She decided to change the subject. “My name’s Samantha, by the way.”

His deep blue eyes narrowed on her. “What’s your last name, Samantha?”

“Bennett,” she said, sounding more tight-lipped and reluctant than she would have liked. She hadn’t volunteered her last name on purpose. She’d told Eric Sloan, the police-officer brother, but he’d asked, leaving her no choice. She doubted the Bennett name meant anything to him, Justin or the other firefighters who’d rushed to the old cider mill, but she’d intended to get in and out of Knights Bridge without the knowledge of any of its residents.

“Are you a Sam or a Samantha?”

“Either works.”

“Mostly Sam?”

“Mostly Samantha, actually.”

“Well, Samantha, you’re damn lucky you got out of there in time.”

“No argument from me. I noticed the smoke about fifteen minutes after the storm ended. Lightning caused the fire?”

He gave a curt nod. “Looks as if it struck the roof and traveled down the side wall to the cellar. The fire started there and worked its way up the wall. We’ve had a string of severe storms this past month.” He looked at her as if she might have caused the recent bad luck with the weather. “A microburst hit the center of town a few weeks ago. It uprooted a bunch of trees and damaged some homes and businesses. No serious injuries.”

“That’s good. About the injuries, I mean.”

Samantha glanced up at the sky, graying now with dusk. It would be the kind of cool, beautiful night she’d anticipated. She’d checked the forecast on her phone on the drive from Boston, but she’d missed any reference to the force and speed with which the cold front would move into this part of New England.

Of course, it was just like a Bennett to be struck by lightning.

“What were you doing out here?” Justin asked her.

“Hiking.”

“Most people hike in Quabbin or one of the state forests. Why’d you pick here?”

“I wanted to follow Cider Brook to where it empties into Quabbin.”

“Any particular reason?”

“It seemed like a good idea this morning.” She smiled, feeling less jittery now that the fire was out.

“That could be my family’s motto. ‘It seemed like a good idea at the time.’”

Justin didn’t appear amused.

She added, truthfully, “I like the name Cider Brook. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Never thought about it. Where’s your car?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Someone picking you up?”

“Not today.” She gestured vaguely toward the mill and surrounding woods. “I planned to camp out here.”

He shook his head. “Not happening. Most of your gear’s wrecked, and I can’t let you inside the mill until I’m satisfied it’s safe.”

Well, that was inconvenient. Samantha considered her options. Amherst, where her uncle and cousin were spending the night, wasn’t that far—but she would have to figure out how to get herself there. If they had to make a detour to pick her up early, she would never hear the end of it. Uncle

Caleb would carry on about why she hadn't known about the storm before it hit, the odds against a lightning strike setting the mill on fire and what she was going to do now that she'd come to the attention of the locals. She could just hear him: "*You never should have gone to Knights Bridge in the first place.*"

But she had, and now she needed to figure out what to do. Send Justin Sloan on his way and then...what? Buy a new tent and sleeping bag? Where? What about dinner? Water? Clothes? If her things were trampled, soaked, burned up in the fire or just out of reach, she would have to start from scratch. She didn't even have a toothbrush.

"There's an inn down the road," Justin said, interrupting her thoughts. "You can stay there tonight. I'll drop you off."

The Farm at Carriage Hill. Had to be.

It was owned by the woman who was engaged to Dylan McCaffrey, Duncan McCaffrey's son.

Samantha carefully arranged her features so she wouldn't look as if her rescuer had just invited her into the lion's den. She could be hard to read herself. It just wasn't her natural state. Her natural state was to be open, honest and straightforward, but she had to be circumspect now that a fire had put an end to her low-profile presence in Knights Bridge.

"Thank you, Justin." She even managed a smile. "I appreciate all you've done."

"Not a problem."

"I'm glad the damage to your mill wasn't any worse. It's a good thing you got here when you did, isn't it?"

"Yep." He took a half step closer to her and pointed at her jacket. "My padlock is in the inside pocket on the right. I felt it when I rescued you."

"I didn't need you to 'rescue' me."

"Yeah. You did." He tapped the lower left pocket where she'd tucked her grandfather's flask. "Booze?"

"Scotch. Lagavulin. I was going to sip it under the stars."

He gave just a hint of a smile. "I'll bet you were."

He went back up to the cider mill and disappeared inside.

Samantha exhaled but didn't relax. She'd had a close call with the fierce storm and then the fire—closer than she wanted to acknowledge. It wasn't easy to admit that if Justin Sloan hadn't come along when he had and swept her out of the burning mill, she could have been overcome by smoke and gone up in flames.

She would return his padlock to him. Just not right now. Better to wait until they'd both had a chance to deal with the adrenaline dump of the fire.

Justin emerged from the mill with her backpack. He opened the passenger door to his truck and tossed the pack inside. "Hop in," he said. He left the door open as he circled around to the driver's side. "Carriage Hill is a ten-minute drive."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

He got into his truck, shut the door and started the engine, clearly in no mood to wait. Samantha suspected his terse manner was the way he was, although the events of the day might have exacerbated his natural tendency. She reminded herself she wasn't in Knights Bridge to make friends, or even because of Captain Farraday, as intriguing and as entangled with her true reasons as her colorful eighteenth-century pirate and his illicit treasure were.

She looked up at the old mill, bits of barn-red paint visible in its worn exterior. The fire smells were strong in the cool late-afternoon air. She wanted to know about the painting she'd found in her

grandfather's closet. She wanted to know how the author of *The Adventures of Captain Farraday and Lady Elizabeth* had ended up writing a fictional story about a real pirate, and why Harry Bennett had put her—his eldest grandchild—onto the trail of the mysterious New England pirate.

All of that was interesting, but Samantha knew it was only a small part of the reason for coming to Knights Bridge. The main reason—the real reason—was to make peace with Duncan McCaffrey, a man who'd hired her and mentored her.

Who'd trusted her.

"Damn, Samantha. It never occurred to me not to trust you."

She tightened her jacket and headed for Justin Sloan's dusty-gray truck.

* * *

The combination of adrenaline, an enclosed space and an intense man behind the wheel turned the ten-minute drive to The Farm at Carriage Hill into something that felt a notch short of an eternity. Samantha was accustomed to being around rugged men, but this was different. Even if she could have gotten out of the mill on her own—and she remained convinced she could have—Justin Sloan had, in fact, rushed into a burning building and carried her out. A courageous deed by any standard. As the beneficiary, she felt a mix of gratitude and guilt but also a physical awareness that had taken her completely by surprise.

Justin had rolled up the sleeves of his canvas shirt to just below his elbows, revealing taut, well-developed forearms. Samantha guessed that his volunteer firefighting plus whatever he did for a living kept him in shape. She wasn't going to ask for details. Personal questions on her part risked personal questions on his part.

He pulled in front of a cream-colored center-chimney house, the last home on a narrow road that once had been a main route from Knights Bridge into the Swift River valley towns—long before major highways and interstates. Now it dead-ended at a Quabbin gate. Not only had she studied her map and the history of the area but she'd been out here before, if only that one time on a snowy March day.

She shook off that thought. Couldn't go there. Later, maybe. Not now.

Justin turned off the engine. He'd parked next to a sign for The Farm at Carriage Hill painted with its signature blossoming chives. Although Samantha hadn't done nearly enough planning for her trip to Knights Bridge, she knew that Olivia Frost, the owner, was a graphic designer, as well as Dylan McCaffrey's fiancée.

Samantha unlatched her seat belt and pushed back a surge of regret that she hadn't stayed in Boston and walked the Freedom Trail with her aunt and young cousins. No point second-guessing herself now. Dylan had only ventured to Knights Bridge earlier that year, meeting Olivia in the process. After his career in the National Hockey League had ended, he'd teamed up with his childhood friend, Noah Kendrick, an MIT genius. Together they had transformed Noah's fledgling NAK, Inc. into a profitable high-tech entertainment company that had gone public last fall. Samantha had never met Dylan during her weeks working with his father, and she wasn't in Knights Bridge to intrude on his and Olivia's lives.

But here you are, on their doorstep.

Justin pushed open his door. "Carriage Hill's just opened. It's not a regular inn." He glanced sideways at her. "Your hands are trembling. A little wobbly? It's normal after a fire."

"I'm okay. Hungry. What about you? Are you wobbly?"

"Me?" He grinned. "No. Not wobbly."

“You’ve had experience with fires, but this one was on your land.”

“Doesn’t change anything.”

A dark-haired woman was arranging pots of yellow-and-white mums on the steps to a one-story el off the main part of the house. Olivia Frost, presumably. Samantha turned to Justin. “Am I expected?”

“I didn’t have a chance to call ahead. It’ll be fine.”

She didn’t move as he headed to the stone walk. He’d left the door open. She could hear Olivia as she approached Justin, dusting off her palms on her baggy cargo pants. “Dad just called about the fire. He says it was a lightning strike. Yikes, Justin. You’re all right?”

“Yep. Fine.”

“The storm must have gone right over the mill. It wasn’t that bad here. Dad says a woman was camping there—”

“Samantha Bennett,” Justin said. “She needs a place to stay tonight.”

“Of course. We have loads of room.”

He motioned to the truck. “Hop out, Sam. Come meet Olivia.”

Samantha could think of a hundred other places she would rather be. She wished she’d at least found refuge somewhere else besides Justin Sloan’s cider mill. The chicken coop at the farmhouse upstream would have done nicely.

She stepped out of the truck, misjudged the distance and felt her knees buckle under her. Even as she steadied herself, Justin was there, one hand on her elbow. “I guess you’re wobbly after all. No shame in it.”

“I’m not that used to trucks is all.”

He lowered his hand. “I’m not surprised.”

Olivia stepped forward with a smile and introduced herself. “My father was at the fire. He’s a volunteer firefighter. I’m so glad you weren’t hurt.”

“Thanks,” Samantha said. “It’s been quite an afternoon.”

“You must be beat. We’d love to have you stay with us.”

“If you’re sure it’s not too short notice—”

“I’m positive,” Olivia said graciously. “Did Justin explain that Carriage Hill isn’t a regular inn? We’re just getting started with destination events. Showers, weddings, meetings—that sort of thing, mostly on weekends. My friend Maggie and I are having a blast so far.”

Samantha stood back. “You mean you don’t take in overnight guests? I can find a place to pitch my tent. Really. I don’t mind.”

“Your tent didn’t make it out of the fire,” Justin said.

She frowned at him. “It burned?”

“I told you most of your gear was wrecked.”

Olivia shot him a disapproving look, apparently not appreciating his bluntness.

He shrugged. “Your tent and sleeping bag were trampled and soaked. They’re easily replaced.”

“Is there some place in town I could buy new ones?” Samantha asked.

“The Swift River Country Store on the town common,” Olivia said. “We call it Hazelton’s—they were the original owners. It’s got everything. They must have tents.”

“Then I could pop over there,” Samantha said.

Justin shook his head. “They’re closed.” When Olivia glared at him again, he softened his expression and added, “You’ll like Carriage Hill. Maggie and Olivia are even making their own goat milk soap these days.” He glanced at Olivia as if to say “*Better?*”

She ignored him and shifted back to Samantha with an encouraging smile. “We do take in overnight

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