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(coming October 2020)

RomeAntically Challenged

MARINA ADAIR



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*To my daughter, Thuy.
Your adoption story will forever
be my favorite.*

Chapter 1

The moment Anh Nhi Walsh stepped into her wedding dress and shimmied the eighty-year-old silk over her hips, she knew there had been a mistake.

A mistake so terrible, all the chocolate in the world couldn't fix it.

Annie had pulled a thirty-six-hour shift, so her brain was a little slow on the uptake, but the longer she stood in her silver Jimmy Choos and yesterday's makeup, the more certain she became that even the world's best push-up bra couldn't compensate for the obvious.

This was not her dress.

"Oh my God," she whispered through her fingers.

Sure, the gown had arrived on her doorstep in the trademarked cream and blush-colored–striped box, special delivery from Bliss, Hartford's premiere bridal design boutique. And, yes, that was the silk gown Grandma Hannah had hand-carried from Ireland, now billowing around Annie's waist. But *this* was *not* Annie's dress.

Annie's dress was elegant and sophisticated, a heartfelt tribute to her grandmother, the one person Annie had wanted by her side when she finally walked down the aisle. Grandma Hannah wouldn't let something as insignificant as death keep her from her only granddaughter's wedding. But Annie had wanted to feel her in more than just spirit.

Which was why she'd commissioned a modern-day restoration of the 1941 Grecian gown with cap sleeves and embellished mermaid train, cut from the same cloth that the most important woman in Annie's life had worn on her special day.

Annie pulled the bodice of the gown to her chest and wanted to cry. The too-big, too-long, and most definitely D-cup rendition was that extra-special kick in the gut she needed to find closure.

Six years as an ER physician's assistant had instilled in her a rational calm that allowed for quick and efficient assessment of any situation. Taught her how to differentiate between the life-threatening and painfully uncomfortable. With that in mind, she pulled up the planner app on her phone.

"Add *Murder fiancé* to my to-do list," she instructed.

"*Murder fiancé* added," the digitized female voice said. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes." Because Annie understood murder wasn't a rational response, and besides, Dr. Clark Atwood was no longer her fiancé. Or her problem.

According to the elegant handwriting on the linen thank-you card that Bliss had included with the gown, that responsibility now fell to Molly-Leigh—with a

hyphen—May of the pinup curves and double-D’s.

Anh Nhi—always mispronounced—Walsh of the boyish build and perky but barely-a-handful B’s had moved on to bigger and better things. And that didn’t include cleaning up her ex’s messes.

Not anymore.

“Call Dr. Dickless,” she said.

“Calling Dr. Dickless,” the female voice chimed. Annie had deprogrammed her sexy 007 British narrator the day she’d heard of Clark’s upcoming nuptials. She was taking her new man-free existence seriously.

Clark picked up on the first ring. “Jesus, Annie. I’ve been calling you for weeks,” he said, as if she were the one inconveniencing his life.

“I’ve been busy with my new job, decorating my new place, apologizing to my relatives because it seems that ‘The groom’s marrying another woman’ isn’t an acceptable reason for airlines to grant a refund.”

Three months ago, Annie had awoken to an empty bed, an emptier closet, and an awaiting text on her cell:

Sorry, Anh-Bon, I can’t do this. U R the best thing in my life, and if I could have made it work w/ anyone, pls know that it would have been you. IDK if I’m cut out to be husband material. Forgive me.

It had taken an entire week for her to realize that the wedding, the romantic Roman honeymoon with walks along the River Tiber, the future they’d spent years building toward was gone.

It had taken only a single Instagram post of her—*so recent I still have the ring*—ex and a perky blonde with the caption “I finally found my one *true love*” for Annie to give her two weeks’ notice—which was more courtesy than Clark had spared her—and apply for a temporary ER position in Rome.

Once the offer came in, she packed her suitcase, sent in a change of address, left the ring and the rest of the gifts behind for Clark to return, and promised herself a future full of exciting opportunities and exotic destinations. She had become a traveling PA because she’d wanted to see the world, and her six-year layover in Hartford was over.

Now, it was her time.

“You do have a lot going on—how did you find the time to add ‘Murder fiancé’ to the top of your to-do list?” he asked, and Annie flipped her phone over to check for a listening device. She was about ready to rip out the battery when

Clark added, “You still have me as a recipient on your calendar.”

“Just because I forgot to delete you doesn’t give you the right to read my personal stuff,” she accused.

“Hard to ignore a death threat or my personal favorite, “Alone time with B.O.B.” Clark let out a low whistle. “Five times a week. How many batteries are you burning through?”

“Not as many as when I was with you.” Humiliation vibrated through her as she thought back to the numerous reminders she’d put on her to-do list over the past few months. “And if you saw that, then you had to have seen that I contacted Bliss to cancel the alterations and return my grandmother’s dress. Untouched.” She looked at her reflection in the mirror. “The dress has been touched, Clark. A lot.”

“Yeah, about that.” She could hear the familiar squeak of leather as Clark reclined in his office chair. “I guess there was a mix-up between orders, and your grandmother’s dress was used to make, uh, Molly-Leigh’s gown.”

Annie eased onto the couch and rested her head on her knees.

“How did Molly-Leigh end up at Bliss?” she asked. The question exposed an ache so deep, it was as if she were reliving the breakup all over again. Because Bliss wasn’t the kind of off-the-rack-shop most brides visited. It was a custom gown boutique that specialized in vintage restoration and had a yearlong wait-list.

Bliss didn’t work with just any bride, and Annie hadn’t wanted any old dressmaker to handle her most precious family heirloom. Which was now retrofitted to support Dolly Parton, the New Year’s Eve ball in Times Square, and the scales of justice—that never seemed to tip in her favor.

“She saw a sketch of your dress in the wedding journal and fell in love with it.”

Annie jerked her head up and glanced out the window to the back deck, breathing out a sigh of relief when she spotted her wedding journal. The evening’s marine layer had come in fast, leaving a light dusting of dew, but it was right where she’d tossed it, beside the pool, under the patio table, in a box labeled DIRTY LAUNDRY, DRY OATMEAL, AND BROKEN DREAMS. “How did she see my wedding journal?”

“*Our* wedding journal,” he corrected, and a bad feeling began to swirl in her belly. “I had one of the nurses make a copy of it for me.”

“That’s an inappropriate use of hospital staff and supplies. And why? You barely went to any of the appointments.”

“I went to the ones that mattered.”

“You mean, the one. The *one* that mattered to you,” she corrected. “You

showed up twenty minutes late to the cake tasting. And only because you were determined that it *had* to be carrot cake. Nobody likes carrot cake, Clark. Nobody.”

“My mom does. And so does Molly-Leigh.”

Ouch.

“I guess you found your perfect partner then,” she whispered, raising her hand, her ring finger looking heartbreakingly bare.

Other people’s choices are not a reflection on me, she reminded herself.

They were the words her childhood therapist had given her when she began to suffer panic attacks brought on when confronted with situations that left her feeling inadequate. Throughout her teens, she wore it like armor. As an adult, she liked to think it was more of a coping device when insecurities paid her an unwelcome visit.

“You still owe me half of the deposit,” she reminded him.

“That’s my Anh-Bon,” he said softly, and once upon a time, the nickname would have given her heart a flutter. Today it made her want to throw up. “Always calling me on my shit. Without you, I never would have gotten through my selfish stage.”

Annie laughed at the irony.

Growing up the adopted child of two renowned therapists, and the only rice cracker in a community of Saltines, Annie had acquired the unique ability to identify and soothe away people’s fears. She could find a solution before most people realized they had a problem. It was what made her so good at her job. And so easy to open up to.

The nurses at the hospital had taken to calling her Dr. Phil.

Annie was a good girl with a good job who managed to attract good guys with the potential for greatness when it came to love. Her life had been a nonstop revolving door of serial monogamists, each with a fatal flaw that kept him from finding *the one*. For most of their time with Annie, the men were convinced *she* was the one. Then, ultimately, she’d fix what was broken and make some other woman enormously happy.

Annie had wife-in-training written all over her DNA. She had a knack for helping her boyfriends overcome their issues. Four of her last five met their wives within months of breaking it off with her. The fifth married his high school crush, Robert.

Then came Clark. Her practical knight in surgical scrubs, with an amazing family, a solid life plan, and an unshakable foundation. He was the first guy to get down on one knee, tell Annie that, for him, she was it.

Foolishly, she’d believed him.

And when he'd recanted, confessed he wasn't husband material, that it was him not her, she'd believed that too. Until mere weeks after ending their engagement, when he and Molly-Leigh had "put a ring on it."

"You have a lot to be called on. Let's start with the money for the dress you now owe me."

He sighed, long and loud. "How much?"

"Four million dollars."

"Oh, for the love of God."

"No, Clark, for the love of my grandmother's dress. *My* grandmother's dress." Her voice cracked, and so did her heart.

"Anh-Bon..." The sympathy in his voice was real. Sadly, so was the pity, damn him.

"Five million dollars. Price just went up! And before you Anh-Bon me one more time, don't forget you also owe me half of the cost of the cake, the three hundred and fifty invitations," of which only fifty were hers, "and the deposit I put down to hold the venue." Being the mature bride-to-be, she had insisted on covering. God forbid she appear incapable of being a full partner in their union. "Since I haven't received anything from the Hartford Club, I'm guessing the check was mailed to you?"

It was the only reason she could gather for why her bank account was still short ten grand. Ten grand she desperately needed.

"You can forward me the check," she continued. "I assume you know how to break into my contacts and find my new address?"

"It's not breaking in if the owner grants you access," Clark teased. Annie didn't laugh. "Come on, Annie, don't be like that. I'll Venmo your half of the cake cost now, and I'll pay you back the deposit for the venue after the wedding."

"Pay me back?" Annie's hold on the dress slipped, the silk sliding nearly past her waist before she caught it. "What is there to pay back? The planner specifically told me that if the venue was rebooked by another party, she'd send a refund. The venue was rebooked over a month ago. Where's the refund, Clark?"

"Molls and I met my parents there for lunch, and I remembered what a great location it was." His tone was wistful. "Historical but with modern conveniences. Intimate but large enough to hold everyone. Classy but not too expensive."

Perfect but not for me. "Get to the refund."

"It checked off all our wedding wants and more. When Mom asked about availability, we were told they still had us booked for that weekend."

“Impossible. My mom told me she canceled it.” Her statement was met with silence. “She never canceled it, did she? That’s why my grandma’s dress was still at Bliss.”

“She said she was hoping we’d work it out.” His words were followed by a long—that’s not happening—pause that caused her insides to heat with embarrassment. A reaction that often accompanied her mother’s matchmaking attempts. “I thought under the circumstances, it would be a shame to let such a beautiful venue go to waste.”

That bad feeling had moved through her chest and worked its way up to twist around her throat. “What’s a shame is that I spent two years waiting for that perfect venue. Half my wedding budget to reserve that venue.” Her hand fisted in the silk at her waist, the pressure wrinkling the silk. “Clark, please tell me that you didn’t promise Molly-Leigh my venue.”

“I didn’t know what to do. She took one look at the giant windows and said the light from the afternoon sun illuminated the hall as if it were lit by a thousand candles. What was I supposed to say?”

“That you’ve been there, done that, dumped the bride, so that venue is off-limits.”

“I tried, but she said after experiencing the magic of the Hartford Club, she couldn’t think of a better place to get married.”

Frustration bubbled up in her throat and the anger expanded, sealing off her airway until breathing became impossible and she feared she might pass out. Reaching behind her, she popped the top two eyehooks of her corset to let her lungs expand far enough to take in air.

It didn’t help so she popped a third.

“Grab a pen and paper,” she instructed, fury vibrating through her words. “Because I can think of a thousand other places to get married. Ready? Great. Now jot this down. ‘Anyplace that isn’t where you were going to walk down the aisle with another woman.’ Or how about ‘Find a place that won’t hold my ex’s money hostage.’ That’s my rainy-day money, Clark,” she stressed. “I need it back.”

“It’s supposed to be a dry summer, but I promise I’ll pay you back after the wedding. It will just be easier and less confusing that way.”

“For who?” she asked.

Clark was silent, his devastating disregard for her situation sobering. “It’s my grandparents’ wedding date.”

“I know,” he said softly. “Which is the other reason I’ve been trying to get ahold of you. I wanted to get your thoughts before we committed to anything.”

“The dress isn’t up for discussion. Period.” Realtering it again would be

daunting, maybe even impossible, but there was no way in hell her grandmother's dress was going to be worn by any woman other than a Walsh.

"Of course not," he said, doing a piss-poor job of hiding his disappointment. "I was referring more to the day of the wedding."

Annie had worked with Clark for six years, lived with him for three of those, so she knew his moods and quirks. Knew by the long, soft pauses between words that renowned surgeon Dr. Clark Atwood wasn't providing options. He was delivering a prognosis.

Whatever hopes Annie had about the possible outcome of this conversation were beside the point. Clark had weighed the possible scenarios, come to his decision, and nothing was going to get in the way of his wedding. It was moving forward regardless.

Any rational person would shout a resounding "Fuck off" to the universe, Clark, the inventor of carrot cake, and—she popped another eyehook—all of Victoria's rib-crushing secrets. But anger wasn't a luxury Annie had ever afforded herself.

"Clark, it doesn't matter what I think or even what I say. It's your wedding, you've made up your mind, and I'm no longer the bride."

Her heart gave an unexpected and painful bump, followed by enough erratic beats to cause concern. Not with resentment or jealousy. Not even anger. She'd learned long ago that resenting other people's happiness didn't lead to her own.

No, the familiar ache coiling its way around her bones and taking root was resignation. Resignation over losing someone who had never really been hers to lose.

Too tired to hold on any longer, Annie released her grip on the silk and the dress slid to her hips, leaving her with only a matching corset set, heels, and an overwhelming sense of acceptance, followed by acute loneliness.

"I know," he said gently. "But you're still my friend. When we broke up, we both promised to do whatever it took to keep our friendship. I don't want to lose that."

"You convinced me you weren't ready for marriage, and not even a month later you were Instagramming love sonnets about another woman."

"That was shitty timing on my part. I should have handled it better." He released a breath, and she could almost picture him resting his forehead on the heel of his hand. "I don't even know how to explain what happened. Meeting Molly-Leigh was unexpected and exciting, and I know it seems completely insane but . . . suddenly everything made sense, the pieces all fell into place, and I couldn't wait another second to finally start my life."

Annie expelled a breath of disbelief, which sent Clark backpedaling.

“God, Annie, I didn’t mean that how it came out. But when it’s the right one, when it’s your person, you know it. And there’s this urgency to grab on and hold tight. No matter what.”

That’s exactly how Grandma Hannah had described meeting Cleve. A single spin around the dance hall and—*bam*—they were in love.

“And when you said you loved me? Was that a lie?”

“No. I meant every word I said, and I still do. But over time it became clear that we were better as friends. You and I both know that.”

Yeah, she did. But the rejection was still raw. Her best friend now belonged to someone else. And that hurt most of all.

“Good to know,” she said. “Because I expect all my money to be Venmoed to me by tomorrow.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he said, then did the whole *hand over the mouthpiece while talking to a make-believe secretary*. “What? Okay, I’ll be there in one second. Prep OR—”

“—Seven,” Annie said in harmony with him, and he went silent. “Remember I was there when you invented OR seven to get off the phone with your ex?”

“Which is why I’d never be stupid enough to use it on you. I really am needed in the OR,” he lied. “Gotta go.”

“Don’t you dare hang... up on me,” she said the last few words to herself because he’d already hung up.

Annie dropped the phone on the couch and wondered, not for the first time, when it would finally be her time to belong. She wasn’t greedy. One person would be enough.

Her grandparents had belonged to each other. Her parents, to their patients. Which was why she’d been so understanding of Clark’s late hours, his dedication to his career. Because in that world, she knew where she fit. Now she felt like she was in a free fall, spinning out of control, unsure where she was going to land.

Chapter 2

If Annie didn't come up with an escape plan—and STAT—she was going to be stuck in wedding hell. A ridiculous thought, since she was no longer even a bride. But the universe didn't seem to care.

Kicking off her shoes, Annie reached back for the next eyehook. Either her arms were too short, or the hook was too low, but she was willing to bet her last piece of pepperoni and green olive pizza that even Houdini couldn't liberate himself from this dress.

Gripping the cream silk and lacy cups with both hands, she pulled the bodice to the side. It didn't budge. She gave a hard tug while sucking in her belly, then again while jumping in the air.

“Shit!” The stupid thing had been so easy to put on and now she was afraid she'd have to cut herself out. “Shitshitshit!”

She'd relocated far away from everyone she loved and everything she knew to steer clear of Clark's wedding. Cut her long black hair—much to her mother's horror—into choppy layers that framed her face. Worked thirty-six-hour shifts to avoid answering the phone and reassuring her parents that she was fine—and her mother that she did not look like a boy. Which meant reassuring herself that she was fine.

And there she was, so *not* fine, stuck in some other person's wedding.

Even moving one hundred miles from her past hadn't changed the trajectory of her future. It was as if she were still back in Hartford instead of making her fresh start in Rome—Rome, Rhode Island not Italy. Which explained the missing four thousand miles on her travel itinerary.

Sadly, when the temp agency e-mailed her a job offer in Rome, Annie had been head deep into a pity party for one—hosted by none other than Jose Cuervo. So she'd responded with a resounding yes. Which was how she'd arrived at this remote cabin on the banks of Buzzards Bay in historic Rome, Rhode Island, instead of a villa on the River Tiber.

Yup, Annie was living in the one state that was shockingly less diverse than Connecticut. Her ex-fiancé wanted her opinion on what lighting would make the first kiss most romantic. And her wedding was moving forward with a replacement bride.

“I guess if the medicine route doesn't work out, I could always start my own business,” she said to the moose head that hung above the fireplace. “I'll trade in my PA for a PPA, Professional Practice Fiancée, and give men lessons on being a proper husband.”

She'd make millions. She was already five for five in the happy-couples

department.

Huffing her hair out of her face, she bent at the waist and tugged the fabric toward her head while making a shimmying motion with her torso. Finally! With a small tearing sound, which she'd feel for years to come, the dress fell to the floor.

Sweaty and overheated, she closed her eyes and let her hands dangle toward the floor. "What is up with my luck?"

"I've been asking myself the same question. In fact, I'll give you twenty bucks if you promise not to stop," an unexpected male voice said—from inside her house!

A lump of terror materialized in her throat as every horror movie Annie had ever watched came rushing back.

Telling herself it was still Clark on the phone, she opened her eyes and squeaked.

A big, broad figure loomed behind her—in her bedroom doorway. Even from her upside-down between-the-legs view, he looked mean and menacing, and very ax-murderer-esque.

Her heart pounding as if it were going to shake apart, she gripped her stiletto and whirled around. As a weapon, it wasn't quite as lethal as she'd like, but she leveled him with her most intimidating glare. A glare, Clark had said, that could scare small children, ward off vampires, and cause even the most impatient of patients to take a seat.

Clearly, ax murderers were immune. Or hers was, because he lifted a single brow and she swallowed—hard.

Huh. Simple, but effective.

"Who the hell are you?" She took in his bare chest, boxers, and bedhead—no sign of the ax. "And why are you sleeping in my bed?"

His eyes took in her attire while his lips kicked into a crooked smile. "I was about to ask you the same thing, Goldilocks."

Chapter 3

Emmitt Bradley was exactly two days out from a three-week stint in Shenzhen's finest ICU, and already he was experiencing some disturbing symptoms. Hallucinations being the most concerning.

She was certainly the sexiest little hallucination he'd ever conjured. He'd take it over the blinding headaches any day. Hell, maybe he was still overseas, and waking up to find nothing but cream lace and toned skin traipsing around his house could be some kind of medically induced wet dream.

No, he remembered the explosion, the crushing force of the blast that had leveled both him and the subbasement of the concrete factory he'd been covering. The ride to the hospital and following few weeks were a bit fuzzy, but the cold sweats and stabbing pain as the cabin pressurized on his flight home would be forever branded into his memory.

The doctor had warned him about flying before he was ready. Even gave him a strict list of things to avoid upon being discharged:

Work.

Whims.

Whisky.

Women.

Okay, the last had been his addition, because without bossy women he wouldn't be sidelined while someone else covered his story. Something he didn't want to talk about just yet, which was why he'd kept his homecoming on the down-low.

Maybe he'd gone to the local bar and invited some barfly back to see if his bed was too big, too small, or just right. In his condition it was doubtful, but not out of the realm of possibility.

He sized her up with a single glance. Nah, a woman who looked like this one didn't hang around the Crow's Nest looking for one-night flings. And guys like Emmitt never offered more.

He was back to the coma theory. And if there was one thing Emmitt knew how to do better than anyone, it was testing a theory.

"Normally, I'd say the more the merrier." He ran a hand through his hair and—*damn*—even his follicles hurt. "But tonight's not good for me."

Her fear was immediately replaced with contempt. "I'm so sorry to intrude on your precious man-time," she said, then slung her heel at his head. "Now, get out!"

"Jesus." He ducked, because hallucination or not, that thing looked dangerous. Bright red, pointy toed, and sharp enough to pierce steel, or—he

looked up at the spot on the wall where his head had been two seconds earlier—wedge itself into sheetrock.

“Seriously, who put you up to this?” he asked.

“What?”

“It was Levi, wasn’t it? All self-righteous about dating, telling me my luck was bound to run out and I’d end up attracting one of those Crazy Cuties.” He took his time giving her another once-over, paying extra-special attention to her panties—cheeky cut, if he were a betting man. “You don’t look like one of those. But I’ve been wrong before.”

“Crazy?” She snatched the remote control off the coffee table.

“See now, Goldilocks, you’re missing the whole cutie part.”

She stood there, straddling that threshold between retreat and retaliation, remote poised and aimed for complete castration, and contemplating her next move.

Emmitt stepped closer, dwarfing her with his size, then leveled her with a *Come at me, I dare you* look that would scare most grown men shitless.

This woman was neither scared nor intimidated. Stubborn, narrowed eyes met his and made him wonder where the meek people-pleaser he’d heard on the phone had disappeared to. There was nothing meek about the woman standing in front of him. She looked like a genie who’d broken free from her lamp. Not that blond babe who granted wishes either. No, this genie looked as if she had a thousand years of anger stored up and ready to unleash on some poor SOB.

“My name is Anh Nhi Walsh. Or Annie if that’s too cosmopolitan for you to manage.”

He was about to inform her that his passport had more stamps than a philatelist when she decided *he* was the poor SOB.

Clutching the remote for all she was worth, she pulled back and smiled. Emmitt knew that smile well. He’d invented that smile.

In fact, he was the grand fucking master of smiles, with double-barreled dimples that he’d hated as a boy and exploited as a man.

Emmitt Bradley was a certified chameleon who could comfort, intimidate, or seduce with a simple twitch of the lip. But her particular smile promised war—painful and bloody.

So he took that smile and raised her a grin—Cheshire with a just enough *How you doing* to make her pause—and that was his window. Without giving her time to react, he did some quick maneuvering, pressing her against the adjacent wall, her hands pinned above her head.

With a startled gasp, she looked up at him with eyes that had to be the darkest shade of brown he’d ever seen.

“Let go,” she shouted, her breath coming in erratic bursts. With every breath she took, the lace of her corset brushed his chest, reminding him that, between the two of them, they were barely wearing enough fabric to floss their teeth.

“You done?” he countered. When she narrowed her gaze, he took the remote from her hand, then tossed it on the chair. He gave her wrist one last warning squeeze. “We good?”

She nodded.

“I’m going to take your word for it.” He studied the stubborn set of her chin, her full pouty lips, and those dangerously dark and tempting bedroom eyes that could make a man forget his good sense. She was trouble. And, *damn*, he loved trouble—almost as much as he loved women. “You break that trust and try to throw anything other than panties my way and I’ll pin you to the floor. Got it, Anh Nhi Walsh?”

She froze the moment he spoke her name. And yeah, it had been good for him too. Kind of slid right off his tongue, coming out more a promise than the threat he’d intended. But hey, he’d go with it. Everything behind his boxers was demanding he rethink that no-women rule.

“Annie’s fine. And my panties aren’t going anywhere.”

He stared her down for a long minute, then let her wrists go. He didn’t back up though. He could pin her to the floor, but he was pretty sure he was sporting a woody and didn’t want to bring any more attention to it.

She must have noticed, because her cheeks turned the sexiest tint of pink.

“Annie it is.” He glanced at his home security panel. The light was blinking a steady red. It was armed. “Now, you want to tell me how you got past the security system?”

She opened her mouth to shout again—he could tell—so he put his fingers over her lips. His head was one word from the jackhammers breaking the rest of the way through his skull. “Quietly. Tell me quietly.”

“I punched in the pass code,” she said through her teeth. “Now you. How did you get in?”

“By unlocking the door I installed when I bought this house.” He jerked his chin to the key ring hanging by the door, only then noticing the starlit sky beyond the windows. It was just as dark as when he’d closed his eyes earlier. “What time is it?”

“Eight-thirty.”

He’d barely slept a few hours. No wonder he felt like crap. He was thirsty, tired, and needed to pee. Time to tell Goldilocks to start looking for a new bed, because even if his was just right, it was closed for the summer.

“Look, it’s been fun,” he said, running a hand down his face and coming to a

hard stop when he reached his jaw. He touched it again and felt the days-old scruff against his palm. “What day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

“Jesus.” He’d slept twenty hours—not two—losing an entire day.

Slowly, he made his way to the kitchen, where he opened the fridge and grabbed a beer.

“*You’re* Emmitt Bradley?”

“Never heard my name sound like an accusation before, but yeah.” He popped the cap, took a long swallow, then contemplated spitting the liquid back in the bottle.

Whoever thought—he read the label—kiwi paired with hops should be fired. With a grimace, he lowered the bottle and found her standing in front of him, her earlier outfit covered by a blue scrub top.

“Emmitt of the ‘Hey Emmitt, this is Tiffany,’” she said in a perfect barfly voice that was three parts helium, one part phone sex operator. “‘You’d better call me when you get back in town. I had to hear it from Levi that you’d come and gone without so much as a kiss hello.’” She rolled her eyes and her voice went back to the deep, throaty one he preferred. “That’s Tiffany with a Y. Not to be confused with Tiffani with an I, who won’t be back until the leaves start to fall but wanted you to know she was thinking of you.”

Fighting back a smile, he wiped the back of his mouth and set the bottle on the island. “And you know this how?”

Her bare feet shuffled over to the telephone. There was a stack of sticky notes posted next to it. She flipped through them, then held up exhibit one. “This is Tiffany with a Y.” She walked over and smacked it on his bare chest. “This is Tiffani with an I.” Another smack. “Then there’s Shea, Lauren, and Jasmine.”

Slap slap slap.

“Rachelle and Rochelle.”

He grinned down at her. “That was only one slap. Which was it, Rachelle or Rochelle?”

“Both,” she said dryly. “When your mailbox here filled up, they stopped by. Together.” As his grin grew, her lips pressed together until they resembled a single line. “Then there’s Chanelle, Amber, Ashley, Nicole, Sweet P, Diana”—she looked up—“who made me promise I’d write down ‘Dirty Diana.’ Said you’d know what that meant.” That one got a big smack.

“Ow,” he said, but she didn’t look concerned.

“Here.” She handed him what was left of the stack.

He pulled them off one by one, looking for the only message he cared about. He dropped them to the floor as quickly as he disqualified their importance. The

further he went, the worse his head ached, until squinting only made things unbearable.

He held the notes back out to her. "Can you find the one from Sweet P?"

"I'm not your secretary."

"Now, there's another side of Annie I'd like to see. Glasses, pencil skirt." He gave a low whistle to which she responded by folding her arms over her chest.

The action didn't do much up top but gave him a hell of a lot of skin to admire down below. This getup was far less revealing than what she'd been sporting a minute ago, but he liked Hot Nurse Annie almost as much as Stripper Annie.

Almost.

"But just the message from Sweet P will do for now." He shoved the remaining sticky notes into her hands. When she didn't move to take them, he sighed. "Seriously, you've been squatting in my place for what?" He looked around at the cozy little nest she'd made for herself. "Six months?"

"Six weeks."

"You did all this in six weeks?"

His normally sparse cabin was decorated with minimal furniture, minimal fuss, and minimal effort. All he wanted was a quiet street with unobstructed views of nature. It was the one place on the planet he could decompress, find a sense of balance and peace.

There wasn't a shred of peace left. Every surface held a picture frame or stack of old books. His beer stein collection was hidden behind sparkly wine flutes. And the usual scent of cedar was now masked by some kind of flowery candle. Probably the light purple ones burning on his mantle beneath his stuffed moose head.

He blinked—twice. "When did I get a mantle?"

She shrugged.

Then there was his couch. His very manly leather, made for watching hockey and Bear Grylls couch was barely visible beneath 137 throw pillows and a matching blue blanket.

And not a masculine dark blue either. Not even superhero blue. Nope, the big fuzzy atrocity was the same light blue as those jewelry boxes women go bonkers for. And don't even get him started on the twinkle lights dangling from Bull's antlers.

Emmitt had barely been upright when he'd arrived from the airport, so he hadn't noticed the changes. But now they intruded so violently, it was triggering a migraine.

"It's not permanent, so when I go, it goes."

At least she was honest about her crimes. Other people, he'd witnessed firsthand over the years, would go to great lengths to hide them.

"Then reading me one message is the least you can do for emasculating Bull"—he pointed to the moose—"and violating the privacy of my messages."

"Your voice mail is apparently full, so they started calling here. All hours of the night, ringing and ringing, so I began jotting down messages. And you emasculated him when you stuck his head on your wall as a trophy." She took the stack and flipped through it, huffing the entire time. Then handed a sticky note to him. "Here it is. Sweet P."

"Bull isn't real, and he was a gift. Now, could you read it aloud to me?" There went the stubborn set of her chin again. "I don't have my contacts in and I don't know where my glasses are," he lied.

With an exasperated sigh, Annie took the note.

"She's called a million times—her words, not mine—about this dress she's just got to have, again her words, not mine." To his relief, she didn't do some kind of sex operator impersonation. "She's saving you the first dance. How sweet." She looked up. "Although, I bet Tiffani will have a problem coming in second."

Shit. He'd been looking forward to this dance for a long time, and he would be pissed if he missed it. "Did she say when the dance was?"

"No. Now, is that all, or do you want me to recite her number too?"

"I know it."

She considered that. "Do you know all of their numbers?"

"Nope." He smiled. "Just Sweet P's."

Paisley's was the only one that mattered.

"You might want to tell the others so they stop calling. It only leads to misunderstandings," she said, all kind of hoity-toity in her tone.

"So does pigeonholing," he said without further explanation, impressed by the way she managed to look both accusatory and apologetic.

It wasn't his fault Annie had jumped to conclusions. Emmitt worked hard to ensure that when it came to the most important person in his world there were zero misunderstandings—Paisley Rhodes-Bradley was his everything. His beautiful surprise of a daughter who owned his heart.

"Is the woman who's holding a bridal dress hostage judging me?"

"It's. My. Dress!" She stuck the message to his chest.

"So you said earlier. I don't think Clark got the memo." He pulled off a blank note and stuck it to her collarbone. "Maybe you should write it down for him."

She looked at the sticky note, then up at him through her raised brows.

Neither gave an inch until the tension between them became murderous. Then she smiled, a *bite-me* smile that was surprisingly a turn-on.

“That’s great advice, Emmitt.” She grabbed a pen, scribbled something, then held it up.

“Fuck off?” He read with a chuckle. “Simple, straightforward, and leaves zero room for misinterpretation. I approve. Do you need an envelope and stamp?”

“It was meant for you.” She tried to stick it to his forehead but she was too short, so she settled on his chin. His five o’clock shadow was too much for the glue, and they both watched it flutter to the floor. “I would never say that to a friend.”

“Maybe you should try. Because from where I’m standing, he isn’t a very good friend.”

“Just because it turned out he’s not my guy doesn’t make him a bad guy,” she said, trying to defend something that, in Emmitt’s opinion, was not defensible. But he’d learned from experience, and she was going to have to come to that conclusion on her own.

“All I’m saying is, exes can’t be friends.”

“How about all of those.” She pointed to the stack of sticky notes. “They seemed ready to get friendly.”

“Those aren’t exes. They’re friends.” He wiggled a brow and she smacked his hand, sending to the floor the notes he was holding.

“Then why don’t you give one of them a call, see if they want to share a bed with you? Because I don’t, and yours came as part of the rental agreement.”

Emmitt choked on the residual bubbles stuck in his throat. “What?”

“Oh yeah,” she purred. “If you want, I can write down the day my lease is up. That way you’ll know how many friends you need to have lined up. I’ll even read it to you.”

Emmitt rarely spent more than a few weeks in Rome at any one time. In fact, since he’d purchased the house a decade ago, he’d spent more time overseas on assignment than in his cabin. So he’d sometimes rent it out as a rustic Airbnb, splitting the profits with his buddy Levi, who managed things while he was gone.

“How much time left on your vacation? Morning snuggles for a few days won’t be so bad. I’ll even let you be the big spoon.”

She moved until she was practically shrink-wrapped to his body. “I’m sure Tiffany wouldn’t mind spooning. But be careful. She might turn into one of those Crazy Cuties.”

“I’m leaving in a few weeks.” As soon as he got a doctor to sign off so he

could go back to work. His editor was intentionally following every rule to the letter. No doctor's clearance, no more assignments for her news desk. Including the one he'd been injured researching.

Carmen was a perfect example of why exes should never remain friends. Three years later, she was still holding his nuts to the fire because he'd moved on more quickly than the *Girlfriend's Guide to Breakups* thought respectful.

"Have a nice stay in Rome." Annie gently took the beer bottle from his fingers. "My lease lasts for another four months and I'm not leaving."

With that she swished her ass all the way into the bedroom.

"It's been fun," she said shortly before the door slammed, and he heard the lock engage.

Chapter 4

September was in a mood. The air was so thick that with one breath Emmitt choked on the humidity. He took it as a sign that Mother Nature was menopausal and his trip home was going to be a series of hot flashes with intermittent night sweats and unpredictable outbursts.

Emmitt shoved his hands in his pants pockets and took in the yellow and white house on the other side of the street. The large Cape Cod-style house was family ready with a charming front porch, matching bikes, a mini-me mailbox, and a Subaru that had just enough mom-mobile vibe to give any self-respecting bachelor hives. It was a far cry from the bungalow he'd grown up in a few blocks over.

It was the kind of place that had happy family written all over it.

Emmitt had never experienced that kind of family until the day he'd met Paisley.

One look at her and his entire world had changed. Emmitt had changed. Becoming an insta-dad had that kind of effect. And every day he was changing more and more. He only hoped he could change as fast as Paisley deserved.

But instead of knocking on the front door, he stood on the curb sweating his balls off in a hoodie and ballcap, looking like some kind of stalker casing the joint. By tomorrow his stealth homecoming would likely make the front page of the morning paper, and he wanted Paisley to hear it from him first. Which was why, instead of picking the lock and climbing into bed with his smart-mouthed tenant, Emmitt had come here.

Ignoring the sweat on his brow, which had nothing to do with Mother Nature, Emmitt strode up the cobblestone pathway to the bright red door. There was a wreath of sunflowers hanging in the center, twinkle lights lining the porch rail and twisting up each of the columns, and a bronzed plaque on the wood shingled wall, reading THE TANNER FAMILY.

Emmitt let that sink in, and even after ten years it didn't sit right.

He pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes and, ignoring how gritty they were, entered the door code. The lock clicked open, and he let himself in. He considered hanging his jacket next to the others lined in a neat little row on their rightful hooks. Then he considered just how pissy Gray became over "outside" clothes lying on the upholstery and had a better idea.

Grinning, Emmitt tossed his jacket over the back of the couch. His ballcap went over the lamp, sneakers stayed on, and the loose leaf stuck to his right heel went squarely in the middle of the coffee table. Satisfied with his handiwork, he walked down the hallway toward the loud voices erupting from the kitchen, sure

to squeak his shoes on the recently polished wood floor.

Sunday at the Tanner house was reserved for football, barbecuing, and—after Paisley went to bed—a few rounds of poker. And while he'd missed the feast part of the festivities, the four-letter tirade coming from the kitchen told him he'd arrived just in time for the cards.

In keeping with Tanner tradition, his buddies were engaged in a high-stakes game of car-pool poker where someone's man-card, it sounded, was in question.

"It's just a few hours out of your week," Gray said, cards in hand and working extra hard to maintain his poker face. For a guy whose career included delivering life-and-death news, he had more tells than an OCD patient in a public bathroom. "You know how important this dance committee thing is to Paisley."

"The science club was important to her, too, which was how I wound up spending a good chunk of last year knitting sweaters for penguins in New Zealand." This came from Grayson's brother-in-law, Levi Rhodes. A straight-shooter and retired sailing legend who now owned the Rome marina and attached bar and grill, he was also Emmitt's best friend—and the reason Emmitt had a half-naked woman sleeping in his bed. "I paid my time. You're up, pal."

"When she told me she'd signed me up to help with the dance decorations, I completely forgot that tomorrow is my only day off," Gray said and Emmitt might have stepped in to help a friend in need—had either one of his friends bothered to remind him that the dance in question was this month. Okay, so he'd been out of reach for a few weeks, but an e-mail would have been nice. So he stood quietly in the doorway and waited for them to notice his arrival.

"I have plans," Gray added.

Dr. Grayson Tanner was only a few years older than Emmitt but acted as if he were the grandpa of the group. He was stable, straitlaced, starched, and in the running for Stepdad of the Year. He liked long walks on the beach, shell collecting, and making detailed grocery lists color coded by category. He was a hometown freaking hero, and every single lady's real-life Dr. Dreamboat.

Not that Gray was all that interested in dating after losing the love of his life four months ago. Emmitt wouldn't be surprised if the guy never looked at another woman again.

"What? With a bottle of lotion?" Levi plucked two cards from his hand and placed them facedown, pulling two fresh ones from the deck.

"With your mom."

Levi met Gray's gaze over the top of his cards. "Everything all right?"

Gray shrugged. "Just catching up. We haven't seen each other much since Michelle's... uh... funeral."

“Want me to talk to her?”

“I don’t need you holding my damn hand,” Gray said, discarding not a single card. “What I need is for you to find someone to cover the bar so you can go with Paisley to the meeting, then take her home.”

“No can do.” Levi leaned back and cracked his neck from side to side. He was built like a bouncer; had more tattoos than fingers; and, with his buzzed head and badass attitude, was often taken for a fighter rather than a boat builder who hand-carved high-end sailboats from wood boards.

“The Patriots are playing tomorrow, which means all hands on deck at the Crow’s Nest. I know that’s breaking news, since I have so many free nights,” Levi patronized. “But I’ll be working the bar and overseeing my new manager, which means you’re doing decorations and babysitting.”

“Can’t someone fill in for you?” Gray tossed three flash cards into the pile—two COOK DINNER and one EMPTY DISHWASHER. “I call.”

“Since when does a fifteen-year-old need a sitter?” Emmitt finally said, stepping into the room.

Both startled gazes swung toward him. Levi’s accusatory. Gray’s pissy.

Ah, home sweet home.

“What the hell are you doing home?” Levi asked at the same time Gray said, “Are you wearing shoes in my house? There’s a shoe rack for a reason. I even put a sign above it so you’d remember.”

“Oh, I remembered.” Emmitt opened the fridge, and the light caused a sharp pain to build behind his eyes. “I trampled through your flower bed on the way in. Lots of tread on these babies, wanted to make sure they were nice and dirty.”

“You don’t call, you don’t write, you just show up and drink my beer,” Gray said.

Water was more Emmitt’s speed these days. Not that a cold beer didn’t sound good after the shit in his fridge at home, but it wasn’t all that compatible with the elephant-tranquilizer-sized painkiller he’d taken before leaving home. He popped the cap then tipped the bottle back, nearly emptying it in one swallow. He grabbed a second bottle before closing the fridge.

He was still in the throes of jet lag. “Jet lag” that, according to the doctors in China, could last another three to forever weeks, depending on how lucky he got. Recent history told him lady luck was one vindictive bitch.

“Seriously, what are you doing home?” Gray pressed.

“Nice to see you too.” Emmitt flipped a kitchen chair around and, straddling it, took his seat at the table. “China was epic, by the way. The trip home was a little bumpy, but arrived safe and sound, thanks for asking.” He turned to Levi. “Call him out. He’s got a shit hand.”

“Looking at my cards and then spilling isn’t cool.” Gray stood. “This is why I hate playing with you two.”

“You love playing with us,” Emmitt said. “For the record, don’t look all smug when you have a shit hand. It tells everyone you have a shit hand.”

“I fold.” Gray tossed his cards on the table and stomped to the stove. When he came back, he held a big plate with a piece of chicken and—what smelled like—Michelle’s mac-n-cheese recipe.

The delicious scent of the melted cheddar had Emmitt’s stomach rumbling. He hadn’t eaten more than a few bags of peanuts and a protein bar on his flight home. That was thirty-some-long-hours ago.

“Any more of that in the oven?” Emmitt asked.

“Nope.”

“How about an extra fork?”

Gray looked up. Zero amusement on his face. “If you’d called to tell us you were home, I would’ve made more.”

“Would you also have reminded me that the father-daughter dance is this month?” When the other two exchanged guilty looks, Emmitt added, “I got a note about needing a dress.”

“Would it have mattered if I had told you?” Gray asked. “You’re supposed to be on assignment for another few months.”

Jesus, was the guy serious?

“Hell, yeah, it would have mattered,” Emmitt said. “It’s the *father-daughter* dance. I’m her father. Therefore, *I* should have been informed about the dance since I’ll be the one taking her.”

Her name was Paisley Rhodes-Bradley, for Christ’s sake. Emmitt had first met Paisley’s mom when he’d moved to Rome in middle school. He was twelve, Michelle sixteen, and she was his best friend’s sister. But it wasn’t until Emmitt had come home from college, when those four years didn’t seem to make such a big difference anymore. Michelle was fresh out of a relationship and looking for a rebound, and Emmitt was looking to live out one of his childhood fantasies.

The timing seemed perfect.

All it took was one kiss and their fates were sealed. That kiss led to a sizzling-summer weekend spent together on a deserted strip of beach, sleeping in a tent and bathing in the Atlantic. They both knew it going in, the weekend was all they had, so they enjoyed every moment.

It wasn’t until six years later, when he was covering a subway bombing in Berlin, that he heard from Michelle again. She’d had a baby. And she was pretty confident Paisley was his.

When Paisley had been born, Michelle thought the father was her current

boyfriend, leaving no reason to notify Emmitt. But after some lab work had proven that Paisley's dad wasn't the guy on the birth certificate, she'd e-mailed Emmitt immediately. He was on the first flight home, ring in his pocket, ready to do the right thing.

Only, Michelle already had a steady man in her life. Dr. Dreamboat had come onto the scene a few years earlier with a heartfelt drop to a single knee.

Not that it mattered. One look at those big brown eyes and adorable dimples and Emmitt didn't need to wait for the test to come back. Without a doubt, that travel-sized pixie in soccer cleats and a grin that could heal the world was one hundred percent his.

Overnight, Emmitt had become daddy to a five-year-old little girl.

But Paisley was a package deal. She didn't go anywhere without her mom and the two men in her life—Uncle Levi and Stepdad Grayson, who'd already staked a solid claim in her little world.

Since Emmitt was the last one to the table, he was still fighting for his rightful place in the family, and in Paisley's life.

"If you're going by that logic," Gray explained, "then I'd like to go on record saying that since she introduces me as her father and you as her dad, I'm the most logical choice to take Paisley to the *father*-daughter dance."

"Go on record?" Emmitt laughed. "This isn't an autopsy, Doc. It's my kid's dance. And since my name's on the birth certificate now, it blows your logic right out of the water."

"So is mine," Levi interrupted. "She's a born-and-bred Rhodes. I'd also like to point out that I was around before any of you guys bothered to show up."

To say his family situation was complicated was an understatement.

"Raise your hand if you changed a single diaper," Levi went on.

Gray started to raise a hand, and Levi skewered him with a look. "Paisley's diapers? Your patients don't count."

Grayson folded his arms across his chest.

"Ever do a late-night drive through town until she fell asleep?" He looked around. His was the only hand up. "No? How about an early morning feeding where she puked your sister's breast milk all over your face? Snotted on your workshirt? Kicked you in the junk?"

All three hands went in the air at the last question.

Levi shook his head and gave an unimpressed huff. "She was already mobile by that point. That's on you guys." Levi put his hand down. "All I'm saying is that if anyone has a right to take Paisley to that dance, it's me."

"Like hell." Gray stood, getting on his self-righteous soapbox. "It's quality, not quantity. I'm the homework guy, the *hold my hand while I get a shot* guy,

wipe away the tears guy, PTA guy, carpool guy—”

“Only because you’re a shitty poker player,” Levi pointed out.

“I’m the *everyday in the trenches* guy.” Gray ended with so much superiority, Emmitt was surprised he didn’t jump on the table and drop the mic.

“Sounds like you’re the tight-ass guy who no one wants to take to a dance,” Emmitt joked.

Gray didn’t laugh. In fact, he looked more serious than usual. “I’m the guy who shows up every day, no matter what.”

Emmitt didn’t think Gray meant for his words to cut as deep as they did, but they’d definitely leave a mark.

When Emmitt was in Rome, he threw off the natural balance of things. He’d known that the moment he’d been accepted into the fold. It also wasn’t a secret that when he was away on assignment, everyone else’s life got a whole hell of a lot less complicated. Paisley didn’t have to choose whose house she was going to sleep at. Didn’t have to rush over before school because she’d left her homework at Gray’s place. And she didn’t have to divide her attention among her three dads.

Gray was always on his ass about cutting back on the number of assignments he took, being home more. Easy for someone whose job restricted him to a one-block radius to pass judgment.

Emmitt *had* cut back a lot over the past few years. With Michelle gone, he planned on cutting back even further. He’d even approached Paisley about moving in with him full time. To Emmitt’s disappointment, her therapist had agreed with Gray that it was best to keep Paisley in the only home she’d ever known.

Emmitt had buried another dream that day. The full-time guy wasn’t going to be him. That honor went to Gray. So Emmitt went back to being the cool dad, the one who interviewed the occasional star, gave outlandish and indulgent gifts, and came home on random weekends and holidays.

It sucked. Big time. But there wasn’t much he wouldn’t do to make his little girl happy, even if it meant co-parenting with a guy who was the poster child for Dad of the Year. And an uncle who fancied himself the father figure against which all other father figures should be measured.

Every girl should be so lucky as to have this much love surrounding her.

“I’d have an easier time showing up if you weren’t always keeping me out of the loop on things. Such as, I don’t know? The father-daughter dance.”

“I’ve been a little distracted. I buried the love of my life four months ago, and this is the first big event since Michelle’s been gone,” Gray whispered. “Let me have this. Michelle would have wanted it.”

The table was silent for a long moment. Finally, Levi spoke, “Are you playing the widower card?”

Gray slowly smiled. “Did it work?”

“Hell no,” Levi said, and they all burst out laughing.

“Michelle would have loved this,” Emmitt said. “The three of us acting like a bunch of old biddies over a dance card.”

“Yeah, she would have.” Gray sobered, as did the rest of them.

The moment was suddenly swallowed by the grief that clung to each of them, weighing them down and making it hard to breathe.

Michelle had been Emmitt’s last thought when the concrete factory he’d been covering in China exploded. She was the glue that held everyone together, the gentle strength of the family, and the one person who never gave Emmitt shit for being Emmitt and chasing a story.

Levi had lost his sister, Gray his soul mate, and Emmitt had lost the one person who never judged him.

And Paisley?

God, Paisley hadn’t just lost her mom. She’d lost her best friend, her sounding board, and her advocate. The grounding love in her life that all other loves would be compared to. It was a soul-deep kind of loss Emmitt could relate to. So he’d vowed on his way to the hospital that Paisley wouldn’t lose two parents in the same year.

He knew how isolating and painful it was to lose a parent. His mom had died when he’d been a little younger than Paisley. His dad became withdrawn, sullen, rarely putting the bottle down long enough to check in on Emmitt—let alone stock the kitchen or drive him to school. That day standing next to the empty hole in the cemetery, Emmitt buried his childhood along with his mom.

So when they’d lost Michelle, he’d committed to doing whatever it took to make sure Paisley didn’t grow up faster than she needed to.

“Does that gash on your arm there have anything to do with your unexpected arrival?” Gray pointed to the patch of raw skin, puckered from recent stitches, peeking from beneath Emmitt’s shirt cuff.

Emmitt tugged down his sleeve. “There was a little mishap at the factory I was covering, and I got caught by a few pieces of stray concrete.”

He resisted the urge to pull the bill of his ballcap lower. The last thing he wanted was to bring attention to the gash on his head. Not if he wanted the always cautious Dr. Grayson to clear him for duty, the last condition Emmitt had to meet before Carmen would put him back in the field. Emmitt didn’t need Gray learning about the meteorite-sized chunk of concrete that had knocked him out cold.

“According to CNN, that *little mishap* leveled the entire factory,” Gray corrected.

“You know how reporters exaggerate for ratings.”

“That’s what Carmen said.” Gray’s eyes never strayed from Emmitt’s as he spoke. “When you didn’t check in, I called your office. According to her, you’d finally got what was coming to you. According to Paisley, you were enjoying your trip.”

“Aw, you do care,” Emmitt joked, surprised at how moved he was to learn that Gray had checked up on him. He’d woken in the hospital to a few texts from Paisley but nothing from Levi or Gray. Not that Emmitt had contacted them. Paisley’s mental well-being had precluded calling home.

His little girl had trouble sleeping as it was. She didn’t need to see him bruised and battered in a hospital bed whenever she closed her eyes. So he’d kept a steady text thread going with her—funny memes, photos of China, the latest Maru the Cat videos—but not a word about how bad his injuries were.

“I told P that it was just a few—”

“Scrapes and bruises,” the guys interrupted in unison. Then Gray said, “We heard.”

“Scrape.” He pointed to his arm, then showed his other elbow. “Bruise. As for the rest, I wanted to tell her in person. Is she asleep?”

“She’s staying the night at Owen’s,” Levi said, referring to Paisley’s best friend.

“On a school night?” Emmitt clarified, because here they were worried about a fifteen-year-old staying home alone for a few hours after school, but saw zero problems arising from her staying over at a boy’s house—school night notwithstanding.

Was he seriously the only one unsure about his daughter’s best friend being male. Yes, he was aware that Owen had been Paisley’s bestie since they were in diapers. He was also aware that Owen’s mom had been Michelle’s best friend and would protect Paisley as if one of her own.

But a lot had changed between them. Most importantly the toxic level of hormones that could have even the most levelheaded teens losing their good sense—and clothes. They were forced to sleep in different rooms now, so Emmitt was going along with it. But the second Owen started looking at Paisley as a girl, there was going to be some kind of come-to-Jesus meeting, with Owen in the hot seat.

“Tomorrow is a late start. Some kind of district meeting for the teachers,” Gray said as if that were supposed to make everything better. “You want me to call her and tell her you’re here?”

“No, if I wanted someone to call her, I’d call her myself,” Emmitt said, wondering just how out of touch the guys thought he was when it came to his own daughter. “I’ll surprise her tomorrow.”

“She’ll be bummed she missed you,” Gray said. “But it’s your call.”

It was his call. And he was choosing to wait until he didn’t feel as though his head were about to crack in half. And until he wasn’t the reason for a fun “late start” sleepover to come to an early end. “It’s been real, boys.” Emmitt stood and went to stretch, cutting it short when a searing hot pain raced up his right side. Masking a gasp with a yawn he added, “I’m going to head home and catch a few more Zzzs.”

“Oh shit!” Levi stood too. “You’re headed home. Like *home* home. When did you get in? Please tell me you came straight here.”

Emmitt had to laugh. Thinking back to the feisty brown-eyed beauty sleeping in his bed, he had an idea why his friend was anxiously scrolling through the contacts in his phone.

“Nope. Met my new bunkmate first.”

“Ah shit.” Levi’s head dropped into his hands, his fingers working the temples, pressing into the deep grooves of exhaustion in his face. “I kept meaning to e-mail you, but things have been crazy. Between trying to get the marina up and running and making sure the family bar stays open for business, I haven’t had a spare second. So when Gray came to me with a preapproved tenant for your place, I jumped at it. I mean, I haven’t even had time to work on my boat since, uh, Michelle.”

A mix of complicated emotions, which had been knotting in Emmitt’s stomach for the past few months, swelled and expanded until breathing became a painful reminder that the gaping holes left behind by Michelle’s absence went further than just emotional. And everyone was struggling to fill the void in their own way.

“Tenant,” Gray said firmly. “Unless you’ve bought a set of bunk beds, she’s not your bunkmate, your bedmate, or even your roomie. And she sure as hell isn’t a person you can ever see naked. Is that clear?”

Emmitt considered that, then smiled. “Can she see me naked?”

“No!” they said in unison.

“That will make things challenging.” Emmitt tapped a finger against his chin, hoping to lighten the mood. “I do love a good challenge. It forces me to get creative.”

“Oh no,” Gray said. “Annie is strictly off-limits.”

“Since when did you become the dating police? You gonna tell me where to piss next?”

“If it keeps you from pissing all over my plans,” Gray said firmly. “Levi is, as you heard, busy and I’ve had my plate full with new patients ever since Dr. Smith retired, not to mention helping out in the ER. Annie is my temp physician’s assistant and, until Denise comes back from maternity leave, she’s the only reason I’m able pick up Paisley after school.”

“I can pick her up. What?” Emmitt said to their disbelieving faces. “She gets out at three—”

“Two.”

“Two. I’m around. I can even get there a little early. Chat up some of the hot PTA moms while I wait. How hard can it be?”

“Hot PTA moms are a bad dad move,” Levi said. “Trust me, you don’t want to go there.”

“Okay, so I avoid the moms and drive Paisley home. I mean, I’m here, I can do it and still have plenty of time to get better acquainted with Anh.” Emmitt forced himself to appear more casual than he felt. He’d love to spend his afternoons helping Paisley with homework, making after-school snacks, kicking the soccer ball around. Getting to know Anh wouldn’t be a hardship either, but he’d mainly added that part to piss off Gray.

“For how long?” When Emmitt started to argue, Gray held up a silencing hand. “You’re here now, which is great. But in a few weeks, when you get bored or a new assignment comes in and you head off to Siberia, we’re stuck without someone to hang with Paisley after school. Because you’ll be gone, and Annie will have bailed even though you told her up-front you’re only capable of casual. Because we all know, when it comes to you and women, they all think they will be the one to change you from globe-trotter to groom. But she won’t. She’ll be heartbroken and then quit. I’ll be out a PA, and a sitter, and it’ll be Paisley who suffers.”

“Annie’s had it rough,” Levi added. “She came here to put her life back together. Not have her heart stomped on by some guy who’s just passing through.”

“Passing through?” Emmitt scoffed. “I own a fucking house.”

“That I spend more time showing to potential tenants than you do sleeping in it,” Levi pointed out. “To be safe, why don’t you crash on my boat?”

“And listen to you snore all night?” Emmitt shook his head. “Thanks, but you’re not my type.”

“Neither is Annie and we both know it,” Gray said, proving just how little he knew about Emmitt.

Annie was absolutely, positively, tight bod with a sharp tongue and soft lips, his type—which was why he tended to steer clear of women like her. It wasn’t

his fault fate had a twisted sense of humor.

He wasn't sure what was going on with Annie's love life, but based on what he'd heard, he had a pretty good idea. And it pissed him off that his two closest friends would lump him in with a guy like Clark. Emmitt had never once led a woman on. He was up-front and honest about what he was looking for and what he was capable of.

Women knew the score before he even ordered a second round.

"I know that what Annie and I do is none of your damn business," Emmitt said, loving to watch Gray squirm. "I also know she's a grown woman capable of making choices for herself, unless you think otherwise. I'd be happy to pass on your concerns about her ability to navigate the dating world, Doctor."

"Just leave her alone. You can have any other woman in town, just not Annie," Gray said, and Levi shook his head. "What?"

"Man, you just issued him a challenge," Levi said.

"Which I have accepted. And I'll pick Paisley up at two."

Chapter 5

Annie was in a bad mood. Any hope she'd had that her new roommate was just some terrible nightmare vanished when she was jarred awake at two in the morning by the front door slamming shut, signaling his return.

If his mother had taught him any manners, he'd long since forgotten them.

Emmitt flicked on every light in the house, including the hall light, which lit up her room like a solar flare. Then—as if to let her know it was intentional—he made himself a smoothie of metal bolts, glass shards, and the wails of small children.

Not even her noise-canceling headphones could block out the sound.

Whistling, he opened and closed some cupboards—seven to be exact—then slammed a few more before settling in for a long summer's snooze. Based on his sonic boom of a snore, evidently the hall light didn't bother him, because he'd left it burning bright.

And he'd been the one to make her feel guilty for waking him up at an hour when most people would be sitting down for dinner.

Beyond irritated by the hypocrisy of it all—another thing to add to her WORST ROOMMATE EVER list, right between HUMBLE-BRAGGING and STEALING MY BEER—she flung back the covers; marched out the door; and came to a sudden, startled stop as the bottom of her stomach dropped out.

Sweet baby Jesus. Her lungs seized, unable to release any air because three feet in front of her was Rome's very own Romeo. Sprawled out on the recliner, with his ballcap pulled low, he and his Calvin Kleins were on full display. The man clearly had a thing against wearing pants.

Or he was marking his territory. Bringing out the big guns—the big *everything*.

She barely had time to register that he'd moved the recliner one hundred and eighty degrees, leaned it all the way back with the footrest fully extended, successfully blocking any escape come morning. Because her attention was drawn elsewhere.

With her blue fuzzy blanket only partially covering him, she was able to watch the hypnotic rise and fall of his chest—his very defined chest that had just the right amount of hair and just the right amount of muscle.

The peaceful way he slept irritated her. One arm flung over his eyes, a leg resting on the floor, and—*hello*—if that was his morning wood at two a.m., her body sighed a breathy *oh my* at the thought of how it would look come sunrise.

Placing a hand to her chest, Annie gave herself five seconds to gawk. Five seconds, then she'd retreat and he'd never know, because he'd clearly won this

battle. As she saw it, her only other options were:

1. Hope that he'd wake up before she had to go to work and move the chair—not likely, because he was settled in for the long haul.

2. Nudge him awake and tell him he was a jerk—which meant admitting he was getting to her.

3. Come morning, crawl under the footrest—only, she was done shimmying for any man.

4. Crawl over him while he was half-naked—and wouldn't that just make his entire year to catch her on top of him, her heart going pitter-patter.

Which led her to another problem. When he was sleeping and not spewing man-speak, he almost looked human.

She could see how some women could find his strong, capable hands and washboard abs appealing. He was tall, fit, handsome in that worldly way that showed he'd lived a full life.

Oh, who was she kidding. The man was sex-tabulous.

“Reconsidering that spooning offer?” The deep rusty voice brought her attention to the fact that while she had been watching him, he'd been watching her. “There's room.”

He patted his lap, mere inches from his mighty impressive package, and Annie's heart picked up pace as if it were racing in the Indy 500.

She pinned her guilty and embarrassed gaze on his, which was not embarrassed at all. His lack of pants didn't seem to affect him one iota, just brought a charming grin to his lips, and amusement—plus something a whole lot more dangerous—to his eyes.

“Nope. Merely reevaluating our public education system. Are you illiterate or just rude?”

Emmitt glanced at the empty carton on the ground with a big neon pink “*Anh's, Do Not Drink*” sticky note stuck to the front of it. “Rude would be putting it back with just a swallow left.” He shifted in the chair, the movement starting a domino effect of ripples from his shoulder muscles all the way down past his abs.

His pecs danced mockingly, and Annie jerked her gaze north to find him smiling. “Now who's the one being rude?” He tsked. “Objectifying me when I'm in a vulnerable position.”

She snorted. “Please, you knew exactly what you were doing when you decided to park yourself in a chair in the hallway in nothing but your boxers.”

Picking up the blanket, he draped it over his belly as if making an effort, when really all he managed to cover was his right rib and flank, leaving his sirloin and all other loins completely on display. Then he reclined the chair even

farther back, folding his hands behind his head in a pose that was so male, it had her lady parts tingling like champagne bubbles on the tongue. “What am I doing, Anh?”

“Trying to rattle me!”

“I have that effect on women.” His voice was rough with sleep—as if he’d spent the earlier part of the night sharing long, hot, drugging kisses.

“Not this woman. I’m not rattled at all,” she lied. “So sorry, your big plan to make me leave won’t work.”

“Actually, I—”

“May I finish?”

“Continue,” he said, looking so unrattled it rattled her more.

“What you did was shitty. It’s not as if my night hasn’t already been crappy enough. You knew I was frustrated and tired and, well—hurt.” The admission caught her off guard, but she decided to own it. “Yes, I was hurt and embarrassed, and to make it all worse, I discovered a stranger was, *rudely*, eavesdropping on a very difficult conversation. So I went to bed to lick my wounds in private and sleep because, well, because . . .”

“You are frustrated and tired and hurt,” he prompted.

“Frustrated and tired, no longer hurt. Now I’m mad. At you!” She stabbed a finger in his direction.

“Me?” he asked as if finding this all incredibly entertaining.

“Yes, you! *I* am needed at the hospital very early, and *you* felt it necessary to come home and slam every cabinet in the kitchen. If you wanted to make a big enough ruckus to wake me, then well done, Emmitt Bradley, well done.” She ended with a mocking slow clap.

“I didn’t mean to wake you. And for that, I’m sorry. I also wasn’t aware you had to work early, or I would have been quieter.”

Admittedly, she was a little thrown by his sincere apology. “I don’t actually have to work early. One of my patients is going in for gallbladder surgery tomorrow and she doesn’t have any relatives on this coast, so I offered to be there when she woke up.”

“Do you offer this kind of bedside service to all your patients?” he asked softly. No teasing, no goading, and absolutely no boyish innuendo. Just a tender look in his eye that she hadn’t seen before.

“Just the special ones,” she said, but didn’t move, a sudden shyness taking over.

He let her comment hang in the air, then gave her the tiniest of smiles, which had her looking away.

“As for the cabinets, again I apologize. I came home with a splitting

headache, and since all my things, including my painkillers, were locked in the bedroom, I went in search of my backups, which used to be over the sink. Imagine my surprise when I found a small warehouse of scented candles in their place. It seems while I've been gone, someone's reorganized my kitchen."

"Oh," Annie said, now aware of how furrowed his forehead became when he spoke or moved, as if tensing it in anticipation of pain. Had she completely misjudged the situation? "I thought you were just being a jerk."

"I'm surprised, Goldilocks." He placed an affronted hand to his chest. "I took you for someone who looked beneath the cover before passing judgment."

It was the second time he'd said as much tonight, which had her reconsidering if, perhaps, she had been hasty in labeling him a self-absorbed playboy. The playboy part was true, but the other part? She wasn't so sure anymore.

"Seriously? Look at you, sitting here like the big bad wolf, blocking my exit and trying to intimidate me into getting your way."

"I think you're confusing fairy tales," he said, although his big, bad smile said he liked the comparison.

"I was afraid you were pissed from earlier," he went on, "and decided to play a game of hide-and-seek with my things. So I stationed myself outside the bedroom, in case you tried to sneak past me and lock the door before I could grab my things from inside."

She studied him for a good long moment and, even though her BS meter was going ballistic, she couldn't sense an ounce of deceit. And when he explained it like that, all sincere and rational, Annie felt like the jerk.

"Admittedly, I had a bad night and you may have caught some of the brunt, and for that I'm sorry. But I'm not actually one of those Crazy Cuties of yours who would do something like that," she said, embarrassed that he'd think she'd stoop to such immature antics. "I did gather your personal things from the bedroom, though, and placed them next to the garage door so they'd be closest to your car when you left tomorrow. Even stuck a note on the pile."

"Bet I can guess what the note said." When she merely grinned, he laughed. "Then I guess it was worth it."

"I guess so," Annie said, and realized she was laughing as well. That was when Annie had another, more shocking, realization. She was no longer upset over her call with Clark. In fact, the apples of her cheeks felt bruised from her enormous grin.

"Imagine how good it will feel when you unleash on some guy who actually deserves it, like, I don't know, that asshat you were talking to earlier. A little suggestion though—you might want to consider cutting down the smile a bit and

maybe lose the snickering, but I bet he'd drop that check in the mail A-sap."

She covered her face. "Just how much of the call did you overhear?"

"Enough to know that you clearly have a sweet side and that he's taking advantage of it." His tone was soft, his expression stone-cold, almost as if he were being defensive—of her.

"I'm as sweet as sweet comes. You just happen to bring out my—"

"Bad girl side?" He sounded hopeful.

"I was going to say my impatient side."

"Whatever it is, you might want to channel the girl who doesn't have a problem telling me to fuck off next time that idiot calls for wedding advice. Otherwise, you may as well kiss your ten grand goodbye."

"Just because I'm nice doesn't make me a pushover."

"Good." Emmitt scratched his chest like a bear settling in for the winter. "Then call him."

"What?"

"Go on," he goaded. "Call him and tell him that you aren't his Anh Bon and demand that he repay the ten grand immediately."

"Um... My phone is charging in the bedroom."

He lifted his cell from the armrest and offered it to her. "You can use mine."

"I don't need to call him in front of you to prove I'm not a pushover. I'll handle it."

"Good to know," he said, but it didn't look as if he believed her.

Even worse, Annie began to doubt whether she believed herself. Not only had she given Clark permission to steal her wedding venue and her grandparents' wedding date, the call ended before she could squeeze a concrete date as to when he'd return her money.

"Just don't come to me looking for a plus one when he asks you to be the best man. One look at me in a tux and you'll be elbowing ladies right and left to catch the bouquet."

"In your dreams."

"Seriously though, you need to say screw everyone else and just do you," Emmitt said without a hint of teasing in his tone. "I mean it. You don't owe him anything. Hell, the prick owes you—and not just the money. He owes you one hell of an apology for putting you in that situation. Then he needs to apologize to you in front of your friends and family about the dress and stealing your grandparents' wedding date."

Wow, not only had he heard nearly everything but he'd thought about it long enough to form a strong opinion. The whole situation turned Annie's stomach.

It wasn't what Emmitt had said or even how he'd said it that burned. It was

the humiliating fact that he was the first person in her world to say those words, to tell her to stand up for herself. *What did it mean that a perfect stranger was able to understand what her closest friends and family had pushed aside in favor of civility? What did it say about her that she'd allowed them to?*

"Do you think all of that will fit on a sticky note?" she asked.

Emmitt's gaze lazily roamed over Annie's body and down, and Annie felt zips of awareness follow in its wake. "You strike me as the type of woman who, once she sets her mind to something, doesn't let anything stand in her way."

The confident way he said it sent a rush of tingles racing through her body faster than her mom checking out a Black Friday sale.

"That's a bold statement to make about someone you've spoken to twice."

"What can I say—they've been insightful conversations. Plus, you're pretty easy to read."

Annie snorted—twice—because she was about as easy to read as a darkened street sign to a glaucoma patient.

Born Asian and raised by white parents, Annie came into the world a walking oxymoron. In fact, the more people came to know her, the more their initial assumptions were proved inaccurate. Annie was proof that you can't judge a book by its cover. So she was embarrassed she'd done the same to Emmitt.

If being mysterious was considered intriguing, being a never-ending surprise was off-putting. People liked to rely on their judgment, and Annie was often misjudged.

"You laugh, but I bet I know more about you than most guys would after six dates."

"This should be impressive, since I doubt you've been on six consecutive dates in the past six years." When he opened his mouth to argue, she added, "With the same woman?"

"I'm so observant, I don't need the same amount of time other people do to know if it's a forever kind of thing," he said, which surprised her because when he said "forever" he didn't look as if he wanted to gag or would break out in hives.

"Are you saying you're open to commitment?"

"If it's the right person who came along?" He shrugged. "Why not? But I don't need to string someone along to figure out if they're right for me. I don't play games with the people in my life, making them jump through hoops in order to figure out where they stand. Nah, that's childish and pretty shitty, if you ask me."

Annie saw a flash of fresh pain cross Emmitt's face and realized that beneath the confident swagger lingered an uncertainty that drew Annie in. Her gut said

he'd been played by someone he trusted and cared for. Based on the new sadness lurking beneath his words, that someone had deeply hurt him. And recently.

The caretaker in Annie wanted to ask if he was okay, but the pragmatist in her understood better than to pry. The more she knew about him, the more human he'd become, and the harder it would be to kick him out of his own house.

After a night like tonight, a smart girl would cut her losses and go straight to bed. Only Annie was tired of playing things smart, because instead of wishing him good night, she said, "Okay, wow me with your observation skills."

If she was going to steer clear of charming players, then she might as well learn how to recognize the signs.

"Oh, you'll be wowed," he said and she rolled her eyes. "You don't believe me? Then let's make this a little more interesting. If I wow you with my superior observational skills, then tomorrow I get the bed."

As far as she was concerned, Emmitt wasn't going to be living here come tomorrow. So what was there to lose? "Wow me."

"This is going to be good." He rubbed his hands together like a kid in a candy store. "You have a thing for British mysteries, Shemar Moore, and reality dating shows."

"Knowing what's on my Hulu account doesn't make you observant, it makes you a snoop."

"No rules were stated at the beginning of the game as to how I come by my information. But I will lay off your horrific taste in television and get back to what a romantic you are."

"Of course I'm a romantic," she argued. "I was recently planning my own wedding. I'm sorry to say, Emmitt, you're just another man whose talents have left me wondering why I bother."

"You've clearly been hanging around the wrong men," he tsked. "I was going to say, your romanticism goes far deeper than dream weddings, Goldilocks. Most women would jump at the opportunity to blow a few grand on a new dress, yet you went in search of the perfect tailor to alter your grandma's. You also wanted to share her wedding date, which tells me she was not only the most important person in your life but that you never had to guess where you stood when you were with her."

He went silent, studying her in an intense way that kept Annie shifting on her feet.

She was practically bouncing on her toes when he finally said, "I imagine that without her, you've felt a little lost throughout this whole ordeal."

"Of course, I still miss her. It doesn't take a psychic to determine that."

“What was her name?” he asked, the question causing a wave of warm emotion to roll through her.

“Hannah,” Annie said on a swallow, wondering why the simple exchange of sharing her grandmother’s name felt so intimate. “And lots of women choose to wear their grandma’s dress. It’s a pretty common tradition.”

“You didn’t mention your mom wearing it, so I don’t think it was a tradition thing. I think you did it because you wanted Hannah there with you and that was the closest you could come,” he said, and her stomach did a little flip of uncertainty, because the guy was nailing it. “But clearly wedding talk isn’t wowing you as much as it’s upsetting you.”

“I’m not upset,” she lied, refusing to show him how hard it still was to talk about her grandmother. “I’m tired.”

“Then I’ll speed this up. You prefer baths but take showers to save on time. You have an appreciation for unexpected pairings, like pepperoni and green olives, dipping chocolate in jelly, oversized T-shirts and tiny panties. You’re a neat freak, but I bet you have one place where you say screw it and throw order and tidiness out the door.”

Her expression must have given away her surprise, because he laughed. “Is it the inside of your purse? Or maybe it’s your car, littered with wrappers, empty water bottles, and probably even a few of those madeleine cookies floating around in case of emergency. Wherever it is, I bet it’s a complete disaster. You are as much a romantic as a pleaser. You think nothing of sacrificing what you want in order to make things easier for other people, which is why you’re okay with being called Annie when you prefer Anh.”

A raw and familiar vulnerability swept through her, filling her heart before spilling over and burning like acid on metal everywhere it touched. Either he was incredibly intuitive or everyone else in her life was blind. And she wasn’t sure which upset her the most.

“You’re staring,” he said roughly.

“Just trying to figure you out is all, but since that would likely take longer than a PhD, and I have an early morning, I say we call it a night.”

“I guess even bleeding hearts need their sleep.”

“I guess they do.” And before she did something stupid, like climb onto his lap and ask him to tell her a fairy tale, Annie flipped the switch, plunging the room into darkness.

Oh boy, was that ever a bad move.

She should have made Emmitt turn off the light after she locked the bedroom—with her safely on the other side. Then she wouldn’t have noticed the way his Calvin Kleins seemed to grow brighter—and bigger—by the second. Perhaps her

eyes were merely adjusting, still fully dilated to take in as much light as possible.

Or maybe her luck had finally hit rock bottom, because his undies were, without a doubt, glowing. The more her eyes became accustomed to the dark, the more confused she became, until she could hold back her laughter no longer. Emmitt of the “superior intuitiveness” Bradley wore a pair of glow-in-the-dark boxers.

She laughed as the shapes took form. “Are you serious? Kittens and rainbows.”

His grin grew two sizes that day. “Tell me, Goldilocks. Is it too big or just right?”

Annie went through all the options she’d laid out before and decided on option five. A full, humiliating retreat.

She turned and ran, as if hellhounds were nipping at her butt, and made it to her room in two leaps, slamming the door before jumping into bed. Still feeling ridiculously embarrassed, she pulled the covers over her head and closed her eyes for extra protection.

“Was it the kittens?” he called through the door.

Chapter 6

Her mom often called her stubborn. Whereas Annie liked to think of herself as determined. But as determined as she was not to lose another second of sleep over the man in the glow-in-the-dark boxers, when the first hint of sun peeked through her window, she found herself wide awake.

Every time she'd closed her eyes, her breathing would become ridiculously erratic, her heart nearing stroke level.

"He's not all that," she said while she lay there until the combination of the comforter and her hot breath turned her bed into a sauna and she felt as if she'd suffocate.

"Damn him." She threw the covers back.

There was no way she could face him. She'd never be able to unsee all of... *that*. She'd never be able to look at a Calvin Klein ad and not have some kind of visceral experience. And she sure as hell couldn't, under any circumstances, let him know that he'd gotten to her.

Nope, no man had the power to derail her life. And the one outside her bedroom door was not going to steal another moment's peace from her.

She climbed out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

Feeling like a zombie, she took her time in the shower—letting the hot water run until she'd emptied the water heater. It didn't help much. Her eyes were still gritty, her brain sluggish, and she ended up washing her hair with shaving cream. Which meant that every time she caught a whiff of her hair her nipples tightened.

Annie didn't know how she did it, but somehow she managed to talk herself out of crawling back into bed with trusty old B.O.B. Instead, she changed into jeans and a T-shirt, then, afraid he was still parked outside her door as he had been when she'd checked earlier, she did what any mature woman in her situation would do.

She quietly climbed out the window and ran for her car, sure to rev the engine a few times and wish him a long and loud good morning honk just in case he was still asleep. But as she peeled out of the driveway, an irritating thought jumped into her head.

Had she outsmarted him, or played right into his hand?

* * *

It was a new experience to go unrecognized at her place of work, and Annie relished her anonymity at Rome General. With her scrubs in her bag and a bouquet of wildflowers in hand, she wasn't dressed the part of physician's assistant.

In Connecticut, that wouldn't have mattered. She would have been spotted, and approached, by a dozen colleagues and patients before she'd even cleared the lobby. There would be questions—so many questions—about the wedding, her feelings, Clark, until eventually the inquisitors would arrive at the questions everyone wanted to ask: Why did *she* think Clark had called it quits?

If Annie knew the answer to that, then she wouldn't have had to relocate for perspective.

Here in Rome, Annie was an unknown. A fresh face, able to walk the halls of the ICU undetected. Able to focus on providing the kind of unconditional nurturing that had drawn Annie to medicine in the first place. She wanted to spend her days proving that every person deserved to be cared for.

Today, that person was Gloria, a retired school bus driver who needed a little extra in the care department. Could benefit in some support to help her overcome her fear of hospitals long enough to have her gallbladder removed. Annie wasn't there to read Gloria's chart or take her pulse. She had come to the hospital hours before her shift began simply to hold the older woman's hand.

No one deserved to feel alone.

The ICU was uncharacteristically quiet as Annie made her way to Gloria's room. She lay in the bed closest to the window, her eyes closed, still coming out of the anesthesia. Annie silently walked over to the window.

Outside, the sun was radiant, shining through fluffy white clouds and blue skies. A slight breeze swayed the crape myrtles that lined Main Street, resembling dual rows of bright pink lollipops stretching all the way to the shoreline, where the whitecaps of the Atlantic kissed the sand.

"Are those forget-me-nots?" a sleep roughened voice asked.

Annie turned to find Gloria coming to, her cheeks warm with shy gratitude.

"And some lantana." Annie's hands brushed the brilliant red and orange umbrella-shaped blooms.

"My favorites," Gloria rasped, and Annie poured her a glass of water, then held a straw to Gloria's laugh-lined lips. "How did you know?"

"Delores at The Watering Can might have mentioned it."

"They're beautiful." Gloria's smile turned serious as she checked the door. "No one's looking, go check that chart there and tell me when it looks like I'll be going home. If it doesn't say today, then let's do a little fixing until it does."

"I am not looking at your chart, because I'm not your surgeon." Plus, they both already knew Gloria wasn't going home today. Gallbladder surgery was usually an outpatient procedure, but Gloria would be kept for two days because there was no one at home to care for her.

And if there was one thing being adopted had taught Annie, it was that

traditional families didn't have a lock on from-the-heart caring.

Annie placed the vase of bright flowers on the empty table and took the seat next to the bed. She wasn't just the day's first visitor. She'd be the only visitor.

"How are you feeling?" Annie asked, taking Gloria's frail hand between her own.

The older woman gave a tentative smile, her fingers delivering a warm squeeze. "I'm better now."

Gloria silently watched Annie, as if wanting to cling to her company and enjoy the feeling of not waking alone, but her lashes soon began to slip lower until finally coming to rest on her cheeks.

Annie waited until she could hear even breathing, then headed into the hallway to call Gloria's sisters in Canada. Being the bearer of good news and giving loved ones peace of mind was a highlight of the job. Witnessing the love shared between family members was always so fascinating and Gloria's sisters did not disappoint. Even two thousand miles and an international border hadn't diminished the deep bond among the three older women.

The connection between siblings had always been as interesting to Annie as it had been isolating. She'd been born the youngest of three in Vietnam but raised as an only child in America. She had no recollection of her sisters, but even before Annie had heard her adoption story, she had always felt the absence of her siblings.

Every adoptee had their own story, retold around the family table every Adoption Day. In Annie's house, Adoption Day was as big a celebration as birthdays or Thanksgiving. And as her family cuddled up on the couch, and her mom opened the love-worn pages of her adoption album, Annie would find herself unable to breathe until they arrived at the part about her sisters.

She didn't know their names or their ages, only that there were three in total. All with shiny black hair and rich coffee-colored eyes, and all sharing the same dimples when they smiled. And for most of her life, the knowledge that they were out there brought some much-needed solace when the loneliness tucked her in to bed at night.

Was the love of a sibling more powerful than the love of another person because it was preordained from the moment of birth? If so, then what did it mean for someone such as Annie who was chosen by strangers to receive their love.

Annie had always thought that love, in any form, could be nurtured into the kind of unbreakable connection Gloria and her sisters shared. It was why she held so tightly to those in her life, because even when love changed forms, it was still love. Wasn't it?

After last night, when Emmitt had accused her of being a pushover, she began to wonder if maybe she was willing to hold on to love even when it was no longer healthy. Her talk with Clark had felt anything but healthy, leaving her feeling discounted and used.

And that wouldn't do. Not unless Annie was trading in her lab coat to become a Professional Practice Fiancée. So after ending the wellness call with Gloria's sisters, Annie gave herself a stern pep talk and made another pressing call—this one for her own peace of mind.

Clark was the one who said, above all else, he wanted to remain friends. Well, he was going to get his chance to prove himself. And Annie would get her chance to prove that remaining friends with an ex wasn't only doable, it could be healthy if done right.

Afraid she'd chicken out, Annie stepped into an empty exam room and immediately dialed. Her heart raced faster with each ring, until it stopped cold when he answered.

"I am so glad you called." His voice was bright and cheerful, as if he'd slept like a king last night. As if she were being silly and the past few months had changed nothing between them, leaving Annie painfully confused.

"You are?" She'd imagined this call going differently. In fact, she'd made a mental list of approximately ten thousand things to do *instead* of calling Clark—labeling sample tubes, buying doughnuts in desperate need of a home, fixing the leaky faucet in exam room nine—but it turned out she hadn't needed to.

Annie was about to set some boundaries and, it seemed, Clark was ready to acknowledge them.

"Of course. I wanted to apologize about last night. I got off the phone and felt like a dick. Emotions were high, and I wasn't really thinking before I spoke. And you called it, there was no patient waiting. I was avoiding the inevitable."

"I think I have been too," she admitted. "Last night was an awkward situation, and we both could have handled it better." Annie thought back to what Emmitt had said. Make it simple, straightforward, and leave zero room for misunderstanding. "But the only way things will start to feel normal between us again is to clear the air."

Look at her go, confidently putting it out there. No softening or sugarcoating, just stating the facts and clarifying the game plan.

"You can't believe how happy that makes me," he said. "I not only felt like a dick, I felt as if I left you hanging. Afterward, I talked with Molly-Leigh, and she pointed out just how badly I'd blown it. I knew I needed to make things right. So I stopped by the post office this morning on my way in to work."

"Wow, Clark, that's great." And it had been so easy. "I thought you'd

Venmo it along with the invitation money and cake deposit, which I got this morning by the way, so thanks for that. But if you'd prefer to settle the rest by check, that totally works too."

It would take a couple more days than she'd planned, and the bank might not clear a check of that size right away, but come Monday, she'd be cuddled on her own couch with a bottle of wine and a large pepperoni and green olive pizza all to herself.

"A check? What are you talking about?"

"The deposit for the venue. You dropped it in the mail, right?"

"What I put in the mail was an invitation to the wedding," he said as if she had somehow lost her mind. "We settled the venue issue last night."

"Actually, no. You said it would make things easier if you could wait until after the wedding to pay me back. I said that didn't work for me. It still doesn't. I need the money, this week."

"See, this is what I've been talking about. You and me, we're not the same as we used to be. You never used to freak about things like a deposit or a dress. It's like we're... I don't know..."

"Broken up?"

He ignored this. "Ever since you moved, it feels as if we're off somehow. And you know how much I hate it when we aren't on the same frequency. I mean, we vibe, that's what we do."

Surely, Annie misunderstood. She was talking about squaring up, paying off debts so she could move on—literally—and he was using words like *vibe* and *we* when there hadn't been a "we" in months.

"We don't have a frequency, Clark. When you changed the setting from KANW to KMLM, 'we' were no longer 'vibing,' which is why I have an issue with your keeping my money for another five weeks. *Five weeks*. I'm not freaking out, I'm moving on. So inviting me to your wedding is completely inappropriate."

"Inappropriate?" He, honest to God, sounded hurt by her words. "For the past six years, you have been the single most important relationship in my life. Nothing will change that."

"The ring on Molly-Leigh's finger says otherwise."

"So I'm getting married. So what? Molls knows how much I rely on you," he said, and Annie wondered how she'd ever considered him a sweet talker. "One day you'll get married too—that doesn't mean we can't be each other's rock."

"That's exactly what it means."

"Look, I didn't take your call to argue, I wanted to tell you that I blew it last night, not extending the invitation properly. Nothing would make me happier

than for you to share in that special day with us,” he said.

“You handed over your future happiness to another woman, Clark. I’m no longer responsible for your feelings.”

“But you’ve put so much into this wedding, Annie,” he went on as if she hadn’t even spoken. “You deserve to enjoy the product of all the hard work. I invited your parents and assumed you’d know that invitation extends to your whole family, but I wanted to make sure I was clear. We want you at the wedding, Anh Bon.”

She cringed. “You invited my parents?”

“Of course. How could I not? Maura’s like a second mother to me.”

Betrayal stuck to her ribs and pushed at her sternum. “Because she’s *my* mom. And if you invite her, you know she’ll feel obligated to say yes?”

“She should say yes and so should you. Even Molly-Leigh hopes that you’ll come. She told me to pass along that she’s saved you a seat at our table for the rehearsal dinner, so we can catch up. I’ve missed you.”

Annie closed her eyes to keep the pain from spilling over. The only reason a woman wouldn’t mind her man’s very recent ex-fiancée coming to her retrofitted wedding was if she knew for certain the ex posed no threat. And while Annie had zero romantic interest in Clark now, it still stung to think his love for her had been so superficial that it was insignificant.

It was devastating that a single word summed up six years of her life. The most important romantic relationship she’d ever had was insignificant.

She tried to get angry, tried to picture Emmitt handing her that sticky note, but that one word seemed to take all the steam out of her. She wished she could be the woman to tell Clark to fuck off, but what was the point when her love was nothing more than a passing note in the life of the man she’d thought to marry.

This was why Annie subscribed to the head-down, pick-your-battles method of coping. She was about to turn the big three-oh and still hadn’t found the right battle. But she knew in her heart, this wasn’t it.

“I wish you well, Clark, I really do, but I won’t be at your wedding. And I can’t be your go-to person anymore. It hurts, and as long as you still have the power to hurt me, this won’t work,” she said, leaning forward and resting her forehead on the exam table. “I need some space. Some time away from you, the wedding, my parents, so I can figure things out.”

Time away to figure out why she kept choosing people who didn’t choose her back. To discover how she’d gone from blushing bride to Hartford’s resident PPF.

More important, it was critical for her to understand what major life lesson she still had to learn to avoid ever finding herself in this situation again.

She thought back to her grandparents' house. To the wedding picture that hung above the fireplace in the living room.

As a child, Annie would wait until everyone was asleep before sneaking into the living room to stare at the photo in wonder. She used to believe it was her grandmother's dress that captivated her. As she grew older, Annie realized it was the way her grandparents looked at each other that made the risk of getting caught out of bed worth it.

Even through the photograph's patina of age, the unbreakable connection between the two had been visible. The love, mind-boggling. *They* were each other's person.

Clark had never looked at her that way. And, if she were being honest, she hadn't looked at him that way either. Annie feared she'd fallen victim to the fantasy of what marriage and happily ever after would mean for her.

She was too old to put stock in fantasy and fairy tales.

Especially after she'd accidentally come across Clark's Insta feed where he was looking at Molly-Leigh with the same adoration as her grandparents in that photo. It proved that a picture could be worth a thousand words.

Or at least as many as Annie needed to close all doors leading to Clark.

She'd closed a lot of doors over her lifetime. Just once, she wanted to be standing on the other side with someone holding her hand when the door slammed shut. Looking at her the way Grandpa Cleve always looked at Grandma Hannah.

Neither of them said anything for a long moment, just listened to the other breathe. The silence wasn't uncomfortable or weighted down with tension as Annie had imagined it would be. And the ache that was always wrapped around her like a leash, yanking her around at will, was gone. In fact, this was the lightest she'd felt since Clark had dropped to a knee and she'd said yes.

"Can you give me that?" she asked.

"Time? I can give you all the time you need," he said with sudden pep in his tone. "Just don't take too long. The wedding is right around the corner and—"

"I already said no."

"—the invite's already in the mail."

"Doesn't matter. You said you were waiting for my answer. Which, unless there's ten grand in that invite, is absolutely not."

"I'll see you at the wedding, Anh-Bon."

"It's not happening." Silence. "Clark?" But he'd hung up.

"Damn it!" She hung up, too, then immediately redialed his number. It went directly to voice mail. By the time his greeting ended she was fuming.

"Friends don't ask friends to go to stolen weddings, Clark. So, no, I'm not

going to your wedding. And I need that deposit back now. Not next month, not at my stolen wedding, not even when the sun hits at the right moment and the hall looks like it's illuminated by a thousand candles. I need it back this week or ___”

Her phone chimed that she had a new event on her calendar. She glanced down at the phone's screen and swore.

Clark and Molly-Leigh's Wedding

Pursing her lips, she opened tomorrow's calendar and her fingers punched a new event into the screen.

Send Annie \$10,000. Or she'll call your mom.

Only moments after adding Clark to the event, it disappeared. Only to reappear on the day of the wedding—with her as the recipient. She didn't even have time to scream before a text appeared.

**And Mom would love to hear from U.
Tell her I say hi, Anh-Bon.**

“She's not my mom and stop calling me Anh-Bon!”

Chapter 7

Emmitt strolled through the leaded glass doors of Tanner and Tanner Family Practice, and the cool air chilled the sweat beaded on his forehead.

He wasn't sure whether it was walking ten blocks when the thermometer registered in the high eighties, with matching humidity, that had his chest spasming as if he was having a heart attack or if it was simply his body's reaction to the pain slicing through his head.

Bottom line, Emmitt needed a comfortable place out of the direct sun to sit—preferably with AC—before he embarrassed himself on the main strip in town.

Christ. What would his climbing friends say if they saw him now?

Two years ago, he'd climbed Everest with nothing but a rucksack, his camera bag, and ten days at base camp. Today, he'd made it a whole half a mile before oxygen deprivation made it feel as if his chest was about to explode.

If it exploded in Gray's clinic, Emmitt was SOL and would likely spend the next six weeks playing invalid on his couch. Then another scenario came to mind, one involving a sexy nurse-not-nurse who was—*lucky him*—into cheeky cut lace and possessed the softest hands he'd ever had the pleasure of being shoved with.

Would you look at that. Emmitt was suddenly all smiles. Teasing her last night had been fun. Better than fun, amusing. It was also one hell of a diversion from his other problems. Now, though, he needed to focus, get back into fighting shape. At least appear as if he wouldn't buckle under the force of a gentle summer's breeze.

Emmitt had one goal here: Convince Gray to clear him so he could get back to work.

Because, while Gray didn't approve of doctors who fudged on medical forms, Carmen made it clear that she wasn't going to risk sending an injured journalist on any kind of assignment, even the editorial variety—which was total bullshit—until a doctor cleared him. Neither his charm nor his Fear Nothing style of journalism was going to help him this time.

Emmitt had searched for a loophole that would allow him to keep working, without any luck. Carmen seemed fine being down one—take any assignment no matter how insane—journalist, and Emmitt was slowly going nuts being forced to sit stationary while stories were breaking somewhere in the world.

Maybe it was the thrill-seeker in him, or maybe it was that ten-year-old boy who needed answers to impossible questions, but photojournalism was in his blood. He didn't want to be so pretentious as to say it was his calling, but no matter how difficult the topic or how dangerous the landscape, something inside

him refused to let it go.

Everyone deserved to have their story told. Emmitt sought out stories from the silenced, the ignored, and the so completely marginalized the rest of humanity was unaware of their struggles.

There wasn't enough time in the world to tell every person's story, but Emmitt was committed to shining the light on as many as possible. So every day he rode the bench over a stupid doctor's note was another missed opportunity to share someone's story.

There was no way Gray would clear Emmitt for work if he knew the extent of the accident and injuries. His co-parent wasn't the kind of guy who could be bribed, bought, or charmed into looking the other way. Something that shouldn't piss off Emmitt the way it did.

When it came to his work, Emmitt had implemented his own strict code of ethics—and had never wavered. Didn't mean he was above misleading or manipulating a situation if it kept him from the truth. Unfortunately, the good doctor had but one kryptonite—and she was off limits.

Emmitt would bathe in BBQ chip dust and play punch-tag with a rabid grizzly before ever bringing Paisley into this. Which left him with just one option. He wasn't particularly proud of his game plan, but he was desperate. And desperate men did desperate things. Like lie to a man who could remove Emmitt's kidney while he slept.

Dragging in a few deep breaths, Emmitt wiped his brow and entered the waiting room of the clinic. The place was hopping with patients, ringing phones, and intercom pages. Behind the table sat Rosalie, who ran the front office with the efficiency of an air traffic controller.

Emmitt didn't know which was older, the town of Rome or Rosalie Kowalski. As far as he knew, she had been the office manager since before Dr. Tanner Senior hung out his shield sometime in the sixties.

Most people had assumed that when Gray graduated from med school he would come back to Rome and join the family practice. Anyone who knew Gray, like really *knew* him, would explain he was the kind of guy who liked to earn his accolades. Who always took the right path, even when it was the hardest.

Emmitt respected that. Respected him even more when, after his grandfather had a stroke, Gray gave up a lofty position in Boston to help his father with the practice until he could find another partner.

Then he'd met Michelle and decided Rome was where he wanted to be after all. Love was funny that way.

"Well, look who's here," Rosalie said, managing two phones at once. At first

glance, the silver bun and perpetually nose-perched glasses brought to mind a plumper Professor McGonagall from Hogwarts. But while Rosalie had played Mrs. Claus in every Rome Christmas parade since the beginning of time, she was also the leader of Grannie Pack, a motorcycle club for people fifty-five and older. “Our own hometown hero.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I bet those women you pulled from the fire would disagree.” Rosalie placed a pudgy hand to her chest. “Putting their lives before your own. We couldn’t be prouder.”

Emmitt itched the back of his neck. “The women?”

“Yes, the group of Future Female Engineers of the World who were visiting the plant the day of the explosion. I heard you saved them all in one fell swoop.”

Emmitt cringed. The only way to keep his condition quiet was to say as little as possible. But instead of slowing the gossip, people took his silence as permission to fill in whatever holes were missing from his story.

In small town speak, people were flat-out lying.

“The lengths I’ll go through to get a pretty lady’s number.” The only numbers he’d received were from his doctor. The number of ribs fractured. Number of shrapnel pieces extracted. The number of days he’d been unresponsive. The number of months it would take to recover.

And the number of ways he was damned lucky to still be alive. Twenty-two women, eleven men, and nine children couldn’t say the same.

Emmitt had reported on a lot of disasters over his career. One of the worst was a story he’d covered in Iraq when a truck bomb detonated three feet from the walls of a Marine base. It took seventy-three soldiers two weeks to locate all the genetic material belonging to the fourteen downed Marines, twenty-one civilian contractors, nine local workers, and six naval hospital corpsmen caught in the blast.

Soldiers go into a war zone trained to keep atrocities from happening, but equally trained in case the worst happens. In China, these were day laborers in a concrete plant. Moms and dads who felt safe enough that many of them brought their young children to the day care located just outside the factory.

The knot in his stomach tightened and squeezed, which made his eyes burn with grit and his head pound double time.

Rosalie watched him with growing concern.

He was tempted to tell her it wasn’t necessary. He was concerned enough for the two of them. And, before she got it in her head that he needed feeling sorry for, he flashed her enough pearly whites to thoroughly rattle her. It was one of those half-smile, half-grin deals that released a set of double-barreled dimples

he'd hated as a kid but came to appreciate the moment he started *appreciating* women.

"I'm still waiting for your number, Rosalie," he said and, *would you look at that*, it worked like a charm.

He'd rather be home *rattling* his new roomie, but she'd snuck out of the house before he could see what color scrubs she had on today. And wasn't that a damn shame.

"Why are you sweet-talking me, Emmitt?"

"If you have to ask, then you're long overdue for some sweet talk and pampering. So why don't you call that uptight boss of yours out here. I'll set him straight."

"My boss treats me just fine. And he's too busy to be bothered by you."

"So the doc in, then?"

"Depends. You have an appointment?" Rosalie's smile vanished.

"No, but—"

"No appointment. No entry. You know the rules."

Emmitt liked to bend the rules whenever possible, and if he happened to screw with Gray's schedule in the process, all the better. "It will just take a minute."

"Dr. Tanner doesn't have a minute. You see this waiting room?" She pointed to the overly full room of patients. "He has a packed schedule, one of the nurses called in sick, and there's an outbreak of scabies going around the elementary school."

On second glance, Emmitt noticed that the room was filled with moms and kids. Itching and scratching kids. "Trust me, I'll make it quick."

Emmitt had slept in some of the worst conditions humanity had to offer, dined on crickets before it was a delicacy, and covered every pandemic from malaria to Ebola and a recent outbreak of H1N1. But there was something about little bugs feasting on his skin that wiggled him out.

Rosalie shook her head. "It's a no."

"I just need a minute."

"I heard you the first time." Rosalie crossed her arms and looked ready to take him down if necessary.

"Look, golden boy told me to stop by today."

"I have two PhDs," Gray said from the hallway. Glasses on, face buried in a file, he looked to be treating the scabies breakout singlehandedly. "I'm not a boy. And why are you here?" He paused. "Jesus, don't tell me it's because you can't pick up Paisley anymore? You can't bail thirty minutes before on me."

"I'm not bailing," Emmitt said, the *Fuck you, dickwad* clear in his tone. He

might have lost a little track of time, but he'd never bail last minute on his kid. Especially not four months after losing her mom. "You told me to drop by. So here I am."

"I told you to drop by this morning." Gray pointed to his watch. "I don't know how time works in your world, but for the rest of us, morning comes after sunrise and before lunch. Come back tomorrow. *Morning.*"

Emmitt didn't have a big brother. Growing up, it was just him and his pops. If he'd had one, though, he imagined the guy would be as annoying as Gray.

"Can't. And I don't want to be late picking up Paisley. That would be... what did you guys call it the other day? Oh yeah, a bad dad move." Repeating the comment stung, almost as much as it had when the guys had uttered it last night. "So we'd better make this quick, Doc."

They exchanged glances. Neither one gave.

Gray crossed his arms. Emmitt followed suit. Same went for the glare. But when the boy with the ketchup stain on his upper lip—who'd been scratching his junk a moment ago—dropped his Matchbox car and it started rolling toward Emmitt, he pointed to Gray's watch.

"Tick tock." He tapped with his middle finger.

"Fine." Gray handed a stack of files to Rosalie. "Could you push back Tommy Harper by five minutes. And if that five turns into six, buzz in and pretend I have a call so I can kick him out."

Offended, *Him* said, "I'm right here."

Gray ignored him and began walking back toward his office. "Five minutes. I'll be watching my clock," Rosalie said to Emmitt.

He gave a respectful salute, then headed down the hallway, surprised to locate Gray in an exam room instead of his office.

Emmitt walked past the exam table, which was prepped for a thorough checkup, and plopped down on the chair usually reserved for the patient's plus one.

Sitting back, he leaned his head against the wall, sprawled his legs all the way out, sure to take up as much territory as possible. While the position helped with the dizziness and alleviated some of the soreness, he had to admit that the agitated way Gray moved around Emmitt's legs was even better.

Emmitt took great pleasure in ruffling the good doctor's lab coat every once in a while.

"So what brings you in?" Gray asked.

"Do I need a reason to visit my domestic partner?"

"We don't live together, so we aren't domestic partners." Gray took the Velcro thing from the wall and wrapped it around Emmitt's arm—tightly.

Emmitt opened his mouth to respond—and in went the thermometer.

Gray pressed his finger to Emmitt's wrist and silently checked his watch. He was grinning as if he found some kind of sick pleasure in making Emmitt follow the rules.

"How's my pulse?" he asked around the thermometer.

Gray lifted a single brow and struck his serious guy pose. "Did you swim back from China?"

"No."

"Then it's not good."

"The closer my proximity to assholes, the higher it gets."

The thermometer beeped. "It's 98.9." Gray coiled the stethoscope back around his neck and took a seat. "What happened in China? And before you give me some half-baked answer, like you did last night, remember I can order a whole panel of random tests if I think you're wasting my time."

Needles and being controlled were two big triggers for Emmitt. One came from watching a parent slowly die, the other from being on the receiving end of the remaining parent's coping techniques.

"I pretty much told you all of it," Emmitt began, choosing his words carefully. He needed to give enough info so Gray would clear him but not so much that he started asking more questions. "One of the silos failed, whatever warning system was in place failed, and kaboom." His hand became a bomb, his fingers sizzling fireworks.

"What I read online doesn't sound as benign as you're making it out to be."

"It wasn't. Over sixty people died," he said, unable to look anywhere but his lap. "It looked like a war zone, bro." He could still hear the screaming of the people stuck inside who—if they weren't lucky enough to pass out from the toxic smoke—were burned alive. He woke up every night to the lingering scent of smoldering ashes. "I was on the other side of the factory when it blew, so I was nowhere near the blast area. Most of my injuries were from flying shrapnel. I got off easy."

The sound Gray made said he strongly disagreed. "Are you talking to someone about it? These kinds of traumatic—"

"Yes, Dr. Phil. They brought in grief counselors and made all of us talk to someone at the hospital." Emmitt had been unconscious for the first part, and sweet-talked his way out of the last. Rehashing it wouldn't help. The only thing he could think about was getting home and hugging his kid. That hug would feel better than anything some shrink could have given him.

"Good to hear. I started seeing one after Michelle—" Gray cleared his throat. "It helped. A lot." Before Emmitt could ask how he was doing, the good doctor

was back to doctoring. “Did any of that flying shrapnel hit you in the head?”

Emmitt looked him directly in the eye and didn't waiver. A convincing technique he'd picked up while imbedded with a team of SEALs in Fallujah. When people lie, their gaze tended to shy away. Maintaining eye contact was an easy way to convince someone of your truthfulness—even when you're lying.

“Everyone was hit with little particles, but beside some lacerations from concrete and a few bruises, nothing major.” Not a lie. It was the crumbling floor above him that did the real damage.

“Then you want to tell me why you couldn't sit still last night? Hell, you couldn't follow the card game.”

Yup, Emmitt had been stupid enough to mention the embarrassing shrapnel he'd taken in the ass. Levi had asked him how badly he'd been injured, Emmitt had panicked, and out came the one part of the whole unlucky event that they'd never let him live down.

Better than spilling the truth though. Paisley was clearly having a tough time with her mom gone, and coming clean on all the details would have done nothing but unnecessarily worry her.

“Hard to concentrate on cards when the table is bitching like a bunch of biddies.”

“That doesn't explain why you're so moody. Plus, you look like shit. How have you been sleeping?”

“As well as a man can when forced to sleep on his own recliner,” Emmitt said, and the dickhead had the nerve to smile, as if finding Emmitt's current living situation hilarious. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“You have a problem, talk to your property manager.”

“Levi may have agreed, but I know damn well it was because you pressed him,” Emmitt said. “A heads-up would have been nice.”

“If you'd kept in touch, I would have warned you.” Gray picked up his pen and the little notebook he always carried, as if he hadn't been informed of the computer revolution. “Okay, here's how this will work. You want me to clear you? You have to be up-front with me.”

Emmitt gave a noncommittal shrug. “What more do you want to know?”

“Were there any complications from the blast that you're not telling me?”

“That would affect my ability to read and edit words?” When Gray waited for Emmitt to answer his own question, he sat up, and the sudden movement caused the throb in his head to settle behind his eyes. “No, Gray, I can read and write just fine.”

“Doesn't matter. When you're hurt on the job, you need to be fully recovered before returning—you know this.”

“You’ve been talking to Carmen.”

He closed his notepad. “I took an oath, which is why I’ll need to see the file from the hospital in China before we go any further.”

“I don’t have one.” That was the truth. “They released me. I flew home. The only paperwork I got was a bill for my insurance company. Even if I did have my medical papers from the hospital stay, which I don’t, they’d be in Mandarin.”

“Then you’ll need to call the hospital where you were treated. After they e-mail me their findings, we’ll schedule an appointment for a proper checkup.”

“Are you serious?” Emmitt scoffed. “Is this because I’m claiming my right to take Paisley to the father-daughter dance?”

Gray lifted a judgmental brow.

Okay, that came out a little angrier than he’d anticipated but, *Jesus effing Christ*. Why did Gray have to be such a Boy Scout all the time? Emmitt wasn’t asking for clearance to drop into a hot zone from thirty thousand feet up. All he wanted was to finish the article he’d started, which required a few more interviews and pictures.

His camera and computer had made it back to Rome, but most of his notes and all the digital recordings Emmitt had compiled for the story were accidentally shipped to the home office in New York and were now being held hostage by Carmen.

“How about we make a deal?” The throb in his head had settled firmly behind his eyes. “You send Carmen an e-mail stating that I’m good to go and I promise not to take any new assignments until after the dance.”

“Lie to Carmen Lowell?” Gray laughed. “That woman isn’t going to let you off the hook until you apologize for every transgression since you met her.”

“Which is why I need a doctor’s note. Then it wouldn’t be up to her. HR would step in and she’d have to let me finish the story.”

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe the order came from HR and Carmen was just the messenger?”

No, Emmitt hadn’t. He’d been so frustrated by the entire situation that he’d just assumed it was another one of her Carm-trums. “Remember when she sent me on a last-minute assignment to Moscow, booked me a flight that landed at three a.m. in the middle of January, only the person I was supposed to interview was in Moscow, Kansas?”

“And the story wasn’t even yours to cover?” Gray had the nerve to laugh. “I warned you about mixing business and pleasure, Em. What can I say, you made your bed—not my problem that she’s still pissed to no longer be in it. But backburning a story and having to redo the entire layout of the magazine seems a little extreme, even for Carmen.”

“I’m not so sure.” But if Carmen wasn’t behind it, that meant the higher-ups made the call, and he needed to get Gray on board more than ever.

“Either way, you see why I have to do this by the book. If I clear you and then you’re further injured on the job, I’m opening up myself and the hospital to a lawsuit.”

“We both know I’d never sue you,” Emmitt scoffed. “You’re just making shit up because you get off controlling my life.”

“Life isn’t always about you and what you need, Em,” Gray said in that calm zen way of his that pissed Emmitt off. “When my practice merged with Rome General, I had to adopt an entire binder of rules and a board I answer to. We can’t all run around the world making up the rules as we go.”

As far as direct hits went, that one sank his proverbial battleship.

Emmitt didn’t globe-trot just for the hell of it. He had bills to pay, a college fund to contribute to. His job afforded him the opportunity to take Paisley on amazing trips around the world and explore places she’d never know of otherwise. She wasn’t old enough to have a driver’s license, but she had a stamp in her passport from four of the seven continents. Her upcoming graduation present—visiting the penguins of Antarctica—would bring that number to a whopping five.

From the moment Paisley had come into Emmitt’s life, Gray had always managed to have the advantage. He had a say in what weekends and holidays Emmitt got to spend with his own kid, how Paisley was raised. He even had the nerve to school Emmitt on what kind of gift was considered “too extravagant.”

Yes, Gray had been in Paisley’s life since before she could remember. And yes, Emmitt was thankful every day that Michelle had someone to help her raise Paisley. But just because Gray had showed up first to the race—a race Emmitt didn’t even know he’d been entered in until Paisley had turned five—that didn’t make him a better dad.

“You’re right, I don’t play by the rules. Funny how if it benefits you, like when I didn’t go after custody when Michelle died, it’s the noble thing. But when there’s nothing in it for you, I’m being selfish.”

Gray went so very still he didn’t even breathe. He just sat as if trying to register what Emmitt had said. When he spoke, it was barely a whisper, “You considered going for custody?”

“Damn right I did. She’s my kid.”

“She’s mine too,” Gray said, and Emmitt watched as the truth settled on the other man like a concrete slab. “Are you still? Thinking of going for custody?”

“I don’t know.” It was an honest answer to a difficult question he’d been struggling with since the day Paisley had called him in hysterical tears to tell him

about Michelle's accident. At the time, he knew leaving her in her childhood home was the right call.

But a lot had happened since then, and Emmitt had started questioning his decision.

"Paisley is my life," Gray said. "The day I asked Michelle to marry me, I also asked Paisley if I could be her stepdad. And the day of the accident when I went to see Michelle, I promised I'd take care of Paisley."

"That's the thing, man," Emmitt said, standing so he could face Gray head-on. "You always assume you're the only one fit to take care of her. Did it ever cross your mind that she has a dad to keep her safe and wipe away the tears? That she has me?" Emmitt pressed his palm to his heart, as if the act alone would heal everything.

"How could I? You never let me forget," Gray accused. "But you always manage to forget that I'm the guy who's raised her since she was small."

"Not by my choice. If I'd known I had a kid, I would have been there from day one."

"I know." Gray sat down, resting his forehead in his palm. "Michelle said it was her biggest regret. But she also made it clear, she wanted Paisley to live with me."

Emmitt sat too. Or maybe his legs gave under the mounting insecurity that nugget of information had caused. "I know."

"Stability and routine are extremely important for a kid who is suffering loss. Mixing things up now could have horrible repercussions."

"I know. You don't need to lecture me."

"I mean, my house is the only home she knows."

"I know, Gray. Which is why I didn't sue." That and because Paisley had told him at the funeral that she wanted to stay with Gray. It wasn't a great conversation; in fact, it made Emmitt question what he was doing wrong. It seemed the longer he stayed in Rome, the more problematic his presence became, until every step forward with his family felt as if it complicated their routine—which was so vital to keeping Paisley's life on track.

After the funeral, tensions were at an all-time high, and Paisley struggled to keep it together, spending more and more time away from home to avoid talking about her feelings. The last thing she needed was one more dad asking her how she was handling things.

In the end, Emmitt felt about as effective as a pinball machine flipper. All he wanted was to be her rock during that painful time. What he became was one more bumper for her to collide with, so he accepted an assignment where he felt useful—and Paisley had one less person to worry about.

“She’s my world. Especially now with Michelle gone.” Gray’s voice hollowed out on the last word. “She’s as much my kid as if she were biologically mine. Loving someone more would be virtually impossible.”

And when he met Emmitt’s gaze, a blast of raw agony hit him square in the chest. It was almost as humbling as the guy’s love for Paisley. That was what always kept Emmitt in check. That another man in the world loved Paisley as fiercely as Emmitt.

Last night, Annie had implied he rattled people for amusement, and he’d quickly laughed it off. Listening now to Gray, Emmitt didn’t feel much like laughing.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “She isn’t going anywhere anytime soon. Where she wants to stay is her choice. I don’t like that it’s your place, but I’d never put her in a situation where she felt she had to choose between us. And I’d never stand in the way of her happiness.”

“Same,” Gray said with a rough chuckle, calling a truce.

Emmitt didn’t mind ruffling the good doctor’s lab coat occasionally, knocking him off his high horse. Michelle had always let the guys have their fun with each other—because they were all jackasses—but now they’d lost their buffer.

They’d lost the heart of their patchwork family. And they were all feeling her absence. The loss of her love.

“Paisley loves you, Em. She loves when you are around, and when you’re gone she talks about you constantly. You’re the fun dad, the one she brags about. Her love for me doesn’t detract from the way she loves you.”

The warm burst Emmitt usually experienced when talking about his daughter was slow to come. This time it was overshadowed by a dull longing that had slowly built over the past few months.

God, he was homesick. But for some unexplained reason, Emmitt didn’t feel as if he’d made it home yet. In thirty minutes he was going to see his baby for the first time in months, and he felt about as uncertain as the first day he’d met her.

Chapter 8

For once, Annie wanted to know where she was going to land before she took off.

As Rome General's newest floater, her schedule was in constant flux. Besides the afternoons, when she filled in for Dr. Tanner, her shifts consisted of one surprise after another. Annie hated surprises, almost as much as infuriating landlords who dropped in unannounced.

Her new job was a lot like men: inconsistent and predictably unpredictable. Only on the hospital floor there was no window to crawl out of. No door to hide behind. And absolutely no room for error.

Annie had left Connecticut with the intent to shake things up a little, put some of the fun and excitement she'd been missing back into her life. But a little stability here and there would be nice. She missed the comfortable rhythm she'd mastered at her previous job. The friendships she'd fostered, the confident stride she'd adopted the moment she slid on that lab coat.

She was unflappable and unstoppable.

But here, every day seemed like a new opportunity for the universe to flip her the big one. It was as if she were trapped in a bizarre Groundhog Day loop that played the same twenty-four hours over and over. Only the obstacles were different, the learning curve steeper, and she was always the new kid on the ward.

While her morning had started out great, with Gloria laughing and telling stories about growing up as a triplet, by the time Annie was ready for her shift, she was still feeling a lingering ickiness from her call with Clark that she needed to shed.

Annie pulled on her lab coat and waited for Alicia Keys's song "Girl on Fire" to start playing in her head. Waited for the bass of life to kick in, the crackle of energy to thump against her chest.

All she felt was heartburn.

Resigned, she went to the nurses' station and checked the posted schedule: ER duty followed by a few hours in oncology and ending with the only constant in her day, family practice.

She started off strong, treating a set of siblings with strep throat, a sprained ankle, and three cases of the flu. Then the attending doctor asked her to take a patient to radiology to get an MRI, which the doctor assured her was scheduled.

It was not.

By the time she straightened things out, she was informed the MRI was no longer needed. From there, she spent the rest of her day playing catch-up. For a

woman who listed “Accountability” as the second most important trait in a potential significant other—right beneath “Looks at me the way I look at pizza”—Annie’s new life was about as predictable as a bouncy ball in a glass shower.

Every day brought a new department, new faces, and a whole new set of challenges. Even her patients were a complete mystery right up until the moment she walked through the exam room door.

The only thing she could count on lately was ending her day eating a large pepperoni pizza with green olives, drinking an extra-large glass of wine, while snuggling on the couch for some one-on-one time with good old Stephen Colbert, who managed to charm her with his wit and humor—numbers five and seven on her Boyfriend Checklist.

She couldn’t cope with losing the comfort of that routine. Not after her chat with Clark. And not to some smooth-talking playboy who needed a pack of sticky notes to keep his dates organized.

A strong motivator for Annie to spend her breaks trying to devise a solution to her living predicament. *Trying* being the operative word. A quick search online told her that without her ten thousand dollars, moving out wasn’t an option. Late summer was still peak season for tourists, leaving rent prices and her pocketbook as incompatible as Annie and her new roommate.

She needed a plan.

By the time Annie had completed her stint in the ER and was headed over to the oncology department, she’d managed to eliminate every possible option except two: get Clark to return her ten thousand dollars or force Emmitt to move.

Option one hinged on going to her own wedding as a guest. There was no way Clark was going to give her the money beforehand, and hiring a lawyer would take too much time—and money. Even so, she was no-way no-how not-enough-wine-in-the-world going to that wedding. Which left option two.

Force Emmitt to move.

It wouldn’t be an easy task. Emmitt was about as moveable as a cement truck with four flats and as sympathetic as the IRS. No, she’d have to get creative if she wanted Stephen and her pizza all to herself.

Her stomach rumbled at the thought. Oh wait, it was her cell phone vibrating in her shirt pocket. She fished it out, read the text, and—*oh my God*—closed her eyes. But that was a bad idea because the dark reminded her of things that glow, which brought to mind a particular pair of boxers that—

Oh no. This wouldn’t do.

Annie’s eyes snapped open, letting in all the light, but that didn’t help one bit. Because in the light she could picture exactly who was wearing those boxers

and what he looked like in them.

Pressing her phone to her chest, screen to skin, Annie glanced around the hallway and, when she was certain no one was looking, ducked into an empty exam room.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

Once inside, she reread the four words on the screen.

What are U wearing?

It was followed by a second text.

U act like white cotton but we both know U prefer silk & lace.

Annie paced the room, deciding exactly how to reply. She didn't need the phone to register anything other than Unknown Caller. The way her right eye twitched told her exactly who was annoying her.

How did you get my number?

She watched the three dots blink at the bottom of the screen. They blinked so long, she anticipated a lengthy reply. All she got was:

Rental agreement.

It was followed by a picture of her rental agreement. A bright pink "For a Good Time Call" was written above her number, and "Snore" was added to the disclaimer section at the bottom of the sheet.

That's for emergency use only.

This is an emergency.

The dots disappeared, then reappeared, only to disappear again, and Annie's hands began to sweat at the possibilities. The only person she'd given the house number to was her mom, and her mother would call there only if she couldn't reach Annie by cell. She was about to check her missed calls when his text came through.

We need to discuss what we're having for dinner . . .

Was he serious? Of course he was. His black book was a collection of sticky notes. Stabbing the screen, she typed back.

There is no we! Discussion over.

Releasing a tired breath, she rested her head against the far wall and closed her eyes. This time she didn't picture glow-in-the-dark boxers or their owner half naked. No, this time she pictured a brand-new deadbolt on the front door.

"That's a shame, because I was wondering if you wear silk and lace in other shades," an oh-so-smooth voice said from the doorway.

An unexpected—and unwelcome—warmth spread through her body, lighting up parts of her she'd forgotten had been extinguished. Bracing herself, she turned around and—*look out, trouble*—there stood her temporary roommate in the doorway, grinning like a big, bad decision ready to tempt some poor, unsuspecting woman into throwing caution to the wind.

Annie might be poor, but she knew exactly what to expect when it came to men like him. "My lingerie is none of your business."

"Isn't that a shame." He flashed a smile that said *I'm yours—for tonight, anyway*.

"I was hoping for some light blue or maybe teal."

"Most men would say red," Annie said, wondering where the intuitive guy who'd called her Anh had disappeared to.

"I'm not most men."

Wasn't that the truth. Even fully clothed, and with the charm dialed down to panty melting, he made it hard for her to speak without her breath getting stuck in her throat.

Even in flip-flops and low-slung button-fly jeans, he looked delicious. Then there was the French blue button-up that hung loose and rolled at the sleeves, as if he couldn't be bothered to tuck it in. Up top he sported a well-loved ballcap, mirrored aviator glasses, and a cocky grin.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I was next door chatting with Gray, then got distracted by a familiar pair of scrubs and came by to say good morning."

"Oh, you mean you were chatting with Gray about what's under the hat and glasses," she said.

“Want me to disrobe, Nurse Annie?” Emmitt hopped up on the exam table. “All you have to do is ask.”

He shot her one of those smiles she was getting to know, but it was a little strained at the corners, and something about the way he was acting felt off. Curious, she played along.

“How about we start with the hat and glasses? I like to see my patients’ eyes when they’re bullshitting me.”

“Didn’t know I was your patient.” He removed his glasses and set them on the exam table—the hat stayed on. It didn’t matter; his golden-brown eyes locked on hers and something entirely inappropriate began to heat south of the border—not to mention in a few northern colonies.

“I was in the lab and heard that there’s a poll going around about how you were injured,” she said, watching him to see how he reacted. “The pot is up to three hundred and twenty dollars. Barb in phlebotomy is convinced you were hurt while rescuing a church full of virgins. Janice in urology said you helped a group of lost hikers climb down Everest.”

Resting his palms next to his thighs, he leaned forward. “What do you think?”

She studied him for a good long minute, noting the way his eyes dilated, the fine line that started at his temple and disappeared beneath his hat, and how his head was tilted so the bill of his cap shaded his face. Most of all, she noticed a flash of uncertainty that she could relate to.

“I think that whatever happened in China really shook you,” Annie said quietly. “I think that your injuries are worse than you’re letting on, and I think you sought me out because you’re lonely and I’m the only person in your world who didn’t know you before, so you don’t have to worry that I’ll notice the changes.”

A slow smile spread across his face, but it never reached his eyes. “You didn’t wow me, but you certainly haven’t left me bored,” he said. “As for your observation skills, a factory exploded, so half of China was shaken. Like I told Gray, flying concrete sucks but I’ve got nothing that won’t heal. And I sought you out”—his smile turned genuine—“because I like talking to you and I didn’t get the chance to wish you good luck with your special patient before you climbed out the window.”

“Oh,” she said, surprised that he’d remembered. It had been late, they’d both been tired, and he’d been in pain, yet he remembered. “Gloria is her name, and she’s doing great. She should be ready to go home with part-time help in a couple of days. Thank you for asking.”

“Thank you for sharing.”

“I think I did wow you,” she ventured, and his expression told her she was correct.

“I imagine you wow everyone you meet,” he said, and her heart went a little gooey.

And then, because he was being so sweet and she had an ethical obligation to tell him, she confessed, “I saw your file this morning. I was taking a few patients off Gray’s plate this afternoon and there it was, right on top. So I peeked.”

He seemed to be amused at her confession. “And what did you learn?”

Uncomfortable with the formal way they were situated—him on the exam table, her facing him as if she were treating him—she stood next to him and rested a hip against the table. “That you’re home on a medical furlough. And employers don’t like for their people to spend their days at home texting a roommate on the company dime.”

“Roommate? I’m growing on you.”

“Temporary roommate.” It wasn’t as if she could kick him out of his home now. Before, when he was just being sexy and irritating, he was fair game. “I’d look like a jerk now, kicking the hometown hero out of his own house and throwing him to the mercy of the single ladies of Rome.”

“This hometown hero won’t be home for long,” he said. “This is more a case of ‘exes can’t be friends’—my boss is benching me for personal reasons, claiming HR won’t let me work until I’ve been cleared.”

“You slept with your boss?” Annie gasped.

“She wasn’t my boss at the time.” He laughed. “But yeah, we dated a few years back and it burned hot and fast. When she started talking about mingling families, I knew it was time to call it quits. I don’t bring that part of my life home, ever. So I broke it off with her, left on good terms, and took an assignment overseas. When I came back, she’d been promoted to senior editor, and here we are.”

“And here we are?” she repeated, sending him a disbelieving glance. “Clearly things weren’t as clear-cut as you thought. *We want different things* doesn’t make a woman hold a grudge for a *few* years.”

He shrugged. “Shortly after I got back from the assignment, I ran into her at a bar. She was with her girlfriends. Bad timing, because I was making friends with a girl.”

“Ah.” Annie laughed. “And how long was this assignment?”

“Two weeks.” At least he had the decency to sound sheepish. “I walked over and hugged her, asked about her dog, then bought them a round. I knew she was uncomfortable, so I left and went to a different bar.”

“With the other girl?” Annie didn’t even need to ask—she already knew the

answer. “Seriously?”

Again with the shrug.

“Does your ex have a name? Because it would break my heart if, when Clark talked about me, he referred to me as *she* or *her*. I’d hope that after sharing so much, he’d call me by name and not a pronoun.”

“Carmen.” He nodded gently. “Her name is Carmen. And you’re right, I never thought of it that way.”

“Can you see that maybe she did?” Annie asked, because *hello?* What was he thinking? “You knew she was upset seeing you and you left, but you took the girl you’d just met? That’s shitty.”

“Is this some kind of girl code thing?” he asked, and she caught a glitter of amusement in his eyes. “You stick up for each other even if you’ve never met?”

“I’m not sticking up for her,” Annie said, thinking back to the day she’d found out about Molly-Leigh. The humiliation she’d felt after spending the entire day doing rounds, talking to colleagues, catching awkward glances from her peers, clueless that Clark had announced to the world that he’d finally found love. Meaning he’d never loved Annie in the forever kind of way. “I’ve been her and it sucks.”

“I have always been straight with women, Ann.” His words were spoken softly but delivered with conviction. “I’ve never cheated or lied, and I don’t make promises I can’t keep. I don’t know what you went through, but I know it crushed you and that pisses me off.”

She was so lost in what he was saying, she didn’t even see his hand until it was resting on her upper arm. But there it was, palm flattened against her skin, his fingers gently brushing back and forth in a soothing pattern.

“You know what else gets to me?”

Annie swallowed and shook her head. A slow heat started at his fingers and wound its way up to the hairs that were brushing the back of her neck. Each follicle sparking with sexual awareness.

“The idea that you think I’m a bad guy. I’m not saying I’m a good guy, and maybe I could have handled it better, but the bottom line was that Carmen needed me to be someone I’m not, and pretending isn’t my thing. I felt awful that our first time running into each other happened the way it did, but it wasn’t intentional.”

Deep down, Annie believed him. Trusted that he’d never intended to hurt Carmen. He wasn’t callous or mean. In fact, in the short time she’d known him, he’d proven himself to be a warm and genuinely caring person. Yet his thoughtless decision had hurt Carmen in a way that had probably shaped the last few years of her life, and Emmitt wasn’t seeing the big picture.

“When I saw a photo of Clark and Molly-Leigh on social media just weeks after our breakup—”

“I’m not Clark,” he said sharply, a little defensive for someone who claimed to have “left things on good terms.”

“I’m not saying you are,” Annie said calmly, noticing that even though he was a little prickly, he hadn’t moved his hand. In fact, it was now resting on the curve of her neck, his thumb sliding behind the curve of her jaw. “I’m only trying to explain how she might have felt. I knew Clark would move on quickly—he doesn’t do single very well—but when he posted that he’d found *his person* so soon after our breakup, it was like I had to relive the breakup all over again. Friends called to console. My parents hovered. I saw Clark at work every day and he’d never told me he was seeing someone seriously. It hurt almost as bad as his breakup text.”

“He broke up with you by text?” Emmitt’s hand tightened. “Now that’s shitty.”

“It was.” Annie laughed. It was easier to joke about it now, but at the time it had caused her to question everything about her life. “But so is leaving a bar with a virtual stranger in front of your very recent ex.”

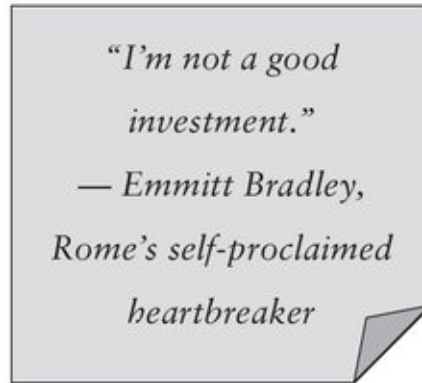
Emmitt leaned back against the wall and ran both hands down his face. “Jesus, I should’ve just called it a night and headed home alone. I really screwed that up, didn’t I?”

“Maybe you should tell her that.” Annie placed a hand on his arm. “It sounds like Carmen invested a lot of herself in you and your relationship. Maybe all she wants is for you to acknowledge what you both lost. I know it would have helped me.”

“I’m not a good investment, Annie,” he said quietly. “I’ve never hidden that from anyone.”

Chapter 9

When someone stated who they were, Annie had learned it was best to listen. Which was why she made a mental sticky note and stuck it front and center in her memory.



As sad as his statement was, he clearly believed it and was determined to live his life as if it were the truth. So no matter how fiercely her heart argued that he was wrong, Annie's head was telling her to steer clear. Which left her with only one option: She had to find a way to get her wedding deposit back so she could rent a new place.

After a quick stop at Holy Cannoli—the best Italian bakery this side of the Vatican—where she picked up a piece of limoncello pie, Annie headed toward the nurses' break room. She'd barely turned the corner when she became aware of excited chatter and energy in the air right outside the door.

Informally called the Fortress of Solitude, it was the only place nurses could go—besides their car or the bathrooms—to escape the noise, the headaches, and the doctors.

Surgeons, PAs, and doctors were persona non grata, with Annie being the exception. Sometimes being the exception came with perks.

The nurses took pity on the floater *and* new girl, awarding her temporary membership. Sometimes, Annie wondered if it was just because they needed someone to clean out the fridge every Friday. Either way, she was grateful.

Annie opened the door and was immediately waved over by Beckett Hayes, Rome's personal concierge who specialized in getting shit done. She also specialized in training emotional support companions and was a regular in the pediatric ward.

She had short choppy hair, a shorter temper, and the biggest heart of anyone Annie had ever met—one of the many reasons she was Annie's closest friend in Rome. She was also Team Ride or Pie's founding member.

Today Beckett was dressed in a superhero shirt, a frayed denim skirt, and

Doc Martens. Today's hero of choice was Captain Marvel. Her boots were fire engine red with mismatched socks peeking out the top, and her chestnut hair was pinned into short pigtails.

At her feet was Diesel, a board-certified English bulldog and emotional support companion who was a favorite with the kids.

"Did you bring the necessities?" Beckett wanted to know.

Annie handed over the box, and Diesel didn't move an inch, but his eyes tracked the box's every move. "Did you text Lynn?"

"She's on her way." Beckett opened the pink pastry box and froze. Over the lid she said, "Limoncello pies with chocolate ganache? This must be some problem."

Annie slipped off her purse and hung it over the couch arm. "Do you think I'm a pushover?"

"What did Clark want this time?" Beckett guessed with a startling confidence that had Annie wishing she'd told Clark to fuck off earlier.

"He invited me to the wedding," Annie said, and someone growled. Annie wasn't sure if it was Diesel or his owner. "He actually called to tell me he dropped, not the money he owes me, but an invitation to the Clark and Molly-Leigh dream wedding in the mail. Can you believe that?"

"That you seemed so surprised concerns me," Beckett said.

Well, damn, clearly the answer to her earlier question was a resounding yes, Annie was the queen of pushovers.

Beckett was about to go after the pie when Annie slapped the box shut—on Beckett's hand. "You know the rules. No nibbles until the meeting is called to order. Plus, I'm the one who's been pied, I get the first nibble."

"You already used Clark pieing you off, you can't use it again. Not when limoncello pie with chocolate ganache is in play," Beckett argued. "Double jeopardy, against the rules. Sorry."

Beckett went to open the lid again, and again Annie smacked it closed. "That is nowhere in the rules, and if you'd like to add it to the rules, then it will need to be voted on. When everyone is here."

"Fine." Beckett sighed and put the box in her lap, Diesel still tracking the package. "You might as well sit down then, because you look beat and Lynn was finishing up saying goodbye to her dreamboat. Plus, you look beat."

"I feel awful." Annie plopped down on the couch and leaned her head back against the pillows. Her eyes burned as she closed them. "I barely slept at all last night."

"Girl, if a man is keeping you up all night and you don't get your cookies, then I shouldn't have to tell you something's wrong."

Something was more than just wrong; it was broken. And Annie was afraid that something might just be her.

“The boutique screwed up the wedding dress,” she said, her heart giving a painful squeeze at the reminder of just how fragile life plans could be.

“Oh, honey, your grandmother’s dress?” Beckett said. “I know how much that dress meant to you.”

“It’s still in one piece—it just won’t ever fit my pieces.” Annie tried to shrug it off but just couldn’t.

“We can fix it,” Beckett assured her. “I am the MacGyver of broken possessions. Between my dad’s clumsiness and my brother’s outbursts, I have learned that there isn’t anything duct tape, fishing line, and a pocketknife can’t fix. Just this morning, I handed Thomas a piece of paper and asked him to write down what we needed at the market. When he said he didn’t have anything to write on, I told him to use the wall.”

Annie laughed into her hand. “Oh no, please tell me he didn’t.”

“Do exactly as I said? Yep.” Beckett looked heavenward as if seeking divine intervention. It was a look Annie had come to know well whenever Beckett relayed her family’s day-to-day dealings. “I now have ‘tampon’ written in marker on my kitchen wall.”

Annie burst out laughing; she couldn’t help it.

Thomas was Beckett’s teenage brother and full-time responsibility. Diagnosed with Asperger’s when he was six and Beckett was still a kid herself, Thomas had come to rely on her for a lot of things. Then, a year later, their mom left for work, and somewhere between dropping Thomas off at day care and her office, she decided to relocate to Las Vegas—alone.

They still lived with their dad, who also had Asperger’s, although he was higher functioning than Thomas. A brilliant musician who scored a lot of television shows and movies, he could take care of himself. Taking care of his son, though, was often beyond his capacity.

Which left Beckett. She had forgone college to become a personal concierge, a job with enough flexibility to work around her brother’s and dad’s needs. Even with all that on her plate, she found time to be a good friend.

“Your stories make my life seem boring,” Annie admitted.

“I’ll trade you one night of boring for a night of Hayes family fun. *Jeopardy!* starts at seven if you want to feel unfit to hold a high school diploma.”

“Or you can suffer through dinner with my mother-in-law, who comes in tonight for her end of summer stay,” Lynn Vu said, plopping down between Annie and Beckett. “Tonight Ken and I get to tell her the good news, that we’ve decided to put the baby thing on hold so I can go back and finish grad school.”

“Why take on more debt when you’ll be home with the babies,” Beckett said in her best mother-in-law impersonation.

Lynn snorted. “Exactly.”

Lynn was a pediatric oncology nurse—making her a real-life superhero—who completed their Ride or Pie posse. She was petite, patient, and as fierce as a lioness when it came to her patients’ recovery. She was also the mother hen of the group, who was never without her Mary Poppins of take-out bags.

“Then these are in order?” Beckett opened the bakery box, and Lynn sucked in a breath.

“Limoncello pie,” she said, sighing. “Ken called earlier to say he had a late meeting, so I get his mother all to myself.” Lynn pulled out three forks from her bag and passed them around. “I told him, while he’s cleaning the house this weekend, I’ll be getting pampered at the spa. Anyone want to join?”

“For a girl’s day? I so need one of those,” Beckett said with a sigh.

Annie sighed right alongside her friend. A day of pampering sounded heavenly. A day to not think about anything except herself would be a dream. The sudden silence said her friends were thinking the same thing. Annie had come into the lunchroom feeling as if life was picking on her. She needed this reminder that everyone’s life was hard. Some more than others. And while she was, by no means, the one struggling with the biggest issues, her friends didn’t have to go home and face them alone.

Crazy families or not, her friends both had people waiting for them after the workday finished. Annie had her pizza, her wine, and Stephen Colbert, but she didn’t have anyone to share them with. Normally that didn’t bother her, but for some reason, today it did.

“So when is this girls’ day?” she asked. “Because I’m in.”

“Not until you set things straight with this whole wedding BS,” Beckett said. “No guilty piers allowed to ruin girl time.”

“Wait, why are we still talking about Clark?” Lynn asked. “I thought we kicked him to the curb.”

“We did,” Beckett said. “But he’s like that supergerm everyone is terrified of—once you catch him, he just won’t go away.”

Both of her friends knew the story of her breakup. Had heard it several times. But as Annie launched into the events of the last twenty-four hours, her friends sat speechless. The deeper Annie got into the retelling, the more doormat-like she sounded. By the time she reached the wedding blackmail part of the story, her girls looked ready to fly to Connecticut on Annie’s behalf and do some pieing of their own—only Annie imagined they were leaning more toward the steaming kind of pie that one lit on fire and chucked at ex’s front doors.

She hadn't had many girlfriends like them back in Connecticut, friends who didn't need to know all the sides and details in order to have Annie's back. They were squarely in her corner simply because they were friends.

It was refreshing to have that kind of person in her life.

"I should call his new fiancée," Beckett said, rubbing her hands together like an evil genius. "Warn her Clark is a habitual runaway groom."

"One time doesn't make it a habit," Annie said.

"If they run once, they'll run again," Lynn disagreed, placing a pie on a plate and handing it to Annie. "And girl code states that someone has to at least give the woman the facts. What she does with them is up to her."

Annie forked off a bite of pie and passed the plate around. "This meeting of the Ride or Pie club has officially begun."

Annie held up her fork and, after tinkering with the others, slid it in her mouth. The mix of tart and sweet teased her tongue, and her eyes slid shut while she sighed in ecstasy.

"As for inviting your parents, that was a dick move," Beckett said around her second bite. "I haven't even met your mom and yet I know that she'd take one look at the invitation and be swayed by the card stock paper and embossed white doves."

"You need to call your mom before the invitation arrives and set her straight," Lynn said sternly. "They need to support you, no matter how badly your mom may want to go to the wedding."

"My mom loves to be the one to share news. If she went, it would be so she could tell the neighbors how much better the wedding would have been if she were still the mother of the bride," Annie said, feeling the need to defend her mom.

Even though her mom was nosy and opinionated, Annie never doubted how much her mother loved her. But where Annie was soft-spoken, her mother was like a freight train, and in emotional situations where Annie's instinct was to roll over, her mother often forgot to avoid Annie's tender spots.

Misunderstood? Absolutely.

Unloved? Never a day in her adopted life.

"I mean it's not a huge deal if she goes—"

"No," her friends said in unison.

"It is absolutely, categorically wrong on so many different levels," Lynn said. "You shouldn't even need to have this conversation. But from what you've said about your mom, even I know that this conversation is a must. And soon."

"You needed to be up-front with your mom from the moment the engagement ended," Beckett clarified. "Actually, you needed to be up-front the

moment the engagement ended and your mom told Clark he was still welcome at Sunday brunches.”

“And after that call, you need to do a wash and repeat with Dickless Wonder.” Lynn covered her mouth. “Whoops, I meant Clark. Repeat after me, Anh, ‘I am not a pushover.’”

Annie did, ignoring the way her gut hollowed at the thought of confronting her parents. Even though her mom was nosy and her dad easily distracted, Annie always felt cherished. But where Annie sought meaningful connection, her father favored his own company, and her mom tended to ride roughshod over Annie’s opinions.

Growing up a tender spirit in a strident household had often caused a young, lonely Annie to look inside herself for ways to diminish the growing distance between family members. It was a coping mechanism that spilled over into even her current relationships.

Not all relationships were meant to go the distance, but she’d be crushed if one ended because she hadn’t tried hard enough.

“I think I’m going to have to do another few wash and repeats,” Annie said with a sigh, silently begging the universe for a break. “And I need to get rid of my roommate.”

“I didn’t know you had a roommate,” Lynn said.

“It was news to me too,” Annie said, although she was so tired she wasn’t all that sure she hadn’t dreamed him up. He was more like a nightmare—one hell of an annoying and sexy nightmare. “The owner of the cabin came back early, didn’t know the place had been rented out.”

“Your roommate is Emmitt Bradley?” Lynn asked, and Annie slapped her hand over her friend’s mouth.

“Not so loud,” Annie whispered. “I don’t want to be the object of the next break room gambling pool. He came home early, and no one told him about me or me about him. Trust me, he was as surprised to find me there as I was to find out he isn’t planning on leaving anytime soon.”

Lynn slapped Annie’s hand away. “I’m still stuck on the part where you spent the night in the same house as Emmitt ‘Big O’ Bradley and you came in here talking about Clark. We need another piece of pie.”

“We *need* to find a way to get rid of him,” Annie said. “Both of them. I need a man-free zone.”

“Easy, kick him out. If he comes back, throw his things on the lawn and light them on fire. He’ll get the message,” Beckett said, giving Diesel the empty plate. The dog licked every inch twice, then gave a grunt of pure bliss and lay back down.

“First I think I’ll pull out my contract, see what rights I have.” She would read it line by line. “The last thing I want is to live with a man right now.”

“Especially one you aren’t seeing naked on a regular basis,” Beckett said. Not for the first time that day, Annie remembered just how good Emmitt had looked in nothing but his boxers. Glowy kitties or not, the man made David Beckham look flabby.

Even worse, he made her tingle.

Claiming it was nothing more than heartburn from having the first half of her cheesecake for breakfast, she said, “I may be in the market for a new place soon.”

“You can always stay on my couch.” Beckett was back into fix-it mode. “It’s lumpy and you’ll likely wake up with Thomas staring at you, but it’s better than sitting on the toilet when both seats are left up.”

“There’s always my guest room,” Lynn said. “You’d have to share it with Ken’s mom for the next eight weeks, but then it’s all yours,” Lynn said.

Annie lolled her head to the side to look at her friends,

“Thanks for the offers,” she whispered, her throat a little tight with emotion over the genuine show of kindness. “But I think I’ll need something more permanent. I checked Craigslist and Zillow, but there’s not a lot of availability right now. And of the little there is, nothing is in my price range.”

“It’s the tourists!” Beckett said, and Diesel released a startled fart. “They’re like locusts. They come in swarms from New York and Boston, jacking up the prices on everything, crowding the beaches, eating up every reservation in town, stealing all the single men. It makes me wish for early snow.”

“I thought you were done with men.”

“I am. God, I’m so done with men I might as well burn my Spanx, donate all my sexy heels, and take up speedwalking,” Beckett said. “I’m just saying that the only way to get anything in this town is to know someone who knows someone.”

Annie gave a toothy grin. “I know you. Do you know someone?”

“If I did, do you think I’d be living in a six-hundred-square-foot studio above my dad’s garage?”

“No.” Annie flopped back down. “How do locals find affordable housing?”

“Usually someone has to die,” Beckett said, one hundred percent serious. “I suggest keeping an eye on the obituaries.”

“I think one of my auntie’s friends has a summer cottage she might be willing to rent out,” Lynn said. “I can also see if anyone in my cooking group knows of one that might be coming on the market.”

“Just like that?” Annie asked, skepticism in her tone.

“Yeah, my cousin might know someone who knows someone and, poof, you have a new place. That’s how things work in my world.”

Annie wasn’t sure what to say. She’d watched how hard Lynn had advocated for a friend’s niece who wanted a job at the hospital. Annie admired how close the Vietnamese community in Rome was. It was a small community, but everyone looked out for one another, even reaching down to pull others up with them. Jobs, cars, dating, services, and apparently even housing. Until today, Annie had only been an observer of the community.

Lynn wasn’t just Annie’s first friend in Rome. She was also Annie’s first Vietnamese friend.

Oh sure, Annie kept in touch with the girls she’d met at Heritage Camp. When they were too old to be campers, they became camp counselors, and when they were too old for that, they started planning girls’ trips every summer. But they were like her, born in Vietnam, raised by white parents.

They called themselves the In-Bees, in betweeners, with a foot grounded squarely in two separate worlds. Born with Vietnamese features and raised in white communities, In-Bees felt extreme pressure to represent both. And every July the In-Bees reunited for a week of girl bonding, which included drinks that came from a shaker, food that was prepared by someone other than them, and stories and struggles that only an inbetweener could ever understand.

Annie loved her parents for providing a group of friends she looked like and whom she could relate to, even if it was just for a week. Her parents had gone above and beyond to give Annie a taste of her heritage, but she always felt there was a piece missing.

Questions unanswered.

Important questions that she needed to explore before she could be whole. She knew a meaningful connection to her culture wasn’t going to be achieved by going to Thet celebrations, Vietnamese restaurants, or a summer camp. But while she was growing up, it was all that was available to her.

Since moving to Rome, Annie had learned more about what it meant to be Vietnamese from Lynn than she had in all her years in Connecticut. Rhode Island wasn’t her dream destination, but it gave her the distance and freedom to explore who she was. And she was starting to find her place here. No way was she ready to leave.

Not yet.

“That would be great,” Annie said. “Thanks for offering, and let me know if you hear of something.” She shot Beckett a stern look. “That isn’t a result of premature death.”

“Your loss.” With a shrug Beckett reached over to open Lynn’s bag.

In seconds the break room filled with a warm, spicy smell that made Annie's lunch feel as if it belonged in her Backstreet Boys pail.

"What is that? It smells amazing."

"Wonton soup. *My mom's* wonton soup," Lynn clarified. Using her hands, she waved the heavenly air in Annie's direction. "I'm bringing the recipe to the next Pho Shizzle meeting." Her face became animated, and she clapped her hands. "You should totally come. You'd help bring the age average down, and you can ask around about rentals."

"I've asked you a dozen times for that recipe and you've never invited me," Beckett said, *after* she helped herself to some of Lynn's lunch.

"I invited you once. You chickened out."

"That's because Nurse Tran was there." Nurse Tran was Rome General's very own Nurse Ratched. Well, to the staff she was. To the patients she came off like everyone's favorite grandmother.

"Wait." Annie held her hands up. "Nurse Tran, who could scare Satan into wetting his pants, is part of a cooking group named Pho Shizzle?"

"She started the group," Lynn said, tilting the bowl and scooping rice into her mouth. "We meet once a month to share family recipes. It's a nice term for a bunch of competitive old ladies who get together and argue about whose recipe is better. Slurs are thrown, egos are tested, and enemies are made. But everyone always leaves with a full belly. You should come."

"Sounds like a blast," Annie deadpanned.

"It's for serious cooks only," Nurse Tran said, suddenly standing in front of Annie. The woman was old enough to have been Buddha's first disciple, and the look of challenge on her face made Annie wonder if there could be truth to the rumors that Tran had made a murderous biker gang leader cower.

"We all make the same dish and compare—"

"Argue," Lynn corrected.

"—recipes. Then after the winner is chosen—"

"After the other participants are threatened into voting her way," Lynn interrupted again.

"We share secrets and useful tricks—"

"Steal, only to claim your family invented the trick during the Tang Dynasty."

Nurse Tran shushed Lynn before she continued. "This month's dish is *Mì Hoàn Thành*."

"I love dumpling soup." Annie smiled ridiculously big, as if she'd just proven she was fluent in the language rather than adept at reading a takeout menu.

“Good, then you have a family recipe to bring?” Tran said, launching into “Head Nurse” interrogator mode. “It has to be a family recipe, not something from the *Joy of Cooking* or *Martha and Snoop’s Potluck* or whatever your generation uses.”

Annie looked at her friends and, using every silent gesture from the Wing Girls handbook she knew, silently pleaded for someone to throw her a line. One line would be fine. Even just an encouraging smile of support while she faced the most feared person in the hospital would have helped.

In return, she got a giggle and a snort from Team Ride or Pie. Their message was clear: She’d awoken the beast—she was on her own.

“Yes, my mom’s dumpling soup is amazing.”

The older woman’s eyes narrowed. “From a can?”

Annie stood, bringing herself to forehead level. Meaning her eyes met the nurse’s forehead. Annie had an inch and a half on the woman, easy. “Never.”

“No bouillon allowed.”

Her friends watched as if this were the final match at Wimbledon.

“From scratch. In fact, neighbors feign the flu just so my mom will bring them some of her soup.”

Nurse Tran glowered. “My recipe is six generations old.”

“My mom’s dumpling soup has been in the family since, uh, the parting of the Red Sea.”

She knew the response had thrown the woman slightly off-kilter but, to Annie’s amazement, Nurse Tran rallied quickly. “Friday night. Six p.m. Hai Linh will give you the address.”

“Hai Linh, that’s me.” Lynn waved her hand.

“See you then.” And because Annie was raised with manners about speaking to her elders, she added, “Thanks, *Bác Oi*.”

The nurse stopped at the door and turned, piercing Annie with a look that had her shivering. “Hoan.”

“Excuse me?” Annie asked, certain the woman had just told her to screw off or something.

“You should always know the name of the person who will annihilate you. Mine is Hoan.” With that, Hoan Tran left the Fortress of Solitude.

No one said a word as her threat settled.

Lynn finally broke the silence. “I didn’t know your mom cooks dumpling soup.”

“Matzo balls are little dumplings floating in broth. How different can it be?”

Chapter 10

The sun was bright, the sky was blue, and Emmitt found himself humming as he strolled up to Rome High School. In a few minutes, the bell would sound and he would be reunited with his baby girl.

He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she spotted him. Granted, as he walked past the line of cars, each waiting for its respective kid, he felt a little like the idiot who strolled up to the drive-through window on foot.

He'd considered going home to get his car, but since he was already near the high school, he didn't see the point. Plus, until his vision was a little more 20/20 and a little less water-in-the-goggles, Emmitt was going to be huffing it a lot more.

Today, being on foot would work to his benefit. What better way to catch up with his kiddo than a walk home on a sunny day? He'd ask her about school. She'd tell him first about the mischief she and Owen had gotten into on their late start morning, while it was still a fresh story.

The bell rang and kids spilled out the front doors and down the steps. Emmitt waited for Paisley at the edge of the lawn so she could easily spot him. But it was Emmitt who did the spotting. He had to do a double take to make sure it was his kid, but her long blond curls confirmed that the teen in the second-skin jeans and knee-high boots talking to a guy, who looked as if he sweet-talked girls out of knee-high boots between passing periods, was indeed his daughter.

Emmitt knew approximately forty-eight ways to kill a man with knee-high boots, and he was about to demonstrate his top five when Paisley spotted him.

"Dad?" she asked, uncertain. Then her eyes went wide, lighting with something that warmed Emmitt all the way through. "Dad! You're home!"

Yes, I am, he thought, looking at her bright smile.

This, right here, was home. The moment Paisley walked down the steps, her bouncing curls coming his way, everything spun back to right. The explosion, the story, even the headache faded into the background.

Whenever he was gone, all he could think about was coming home to Paisley. And yet, whenever he was home, he worried that he was upsetting the delicate balance of her life. Emmitt never had many options growing up. Paisley had so many she worked hard keeping everyone happy—including him.

There were a lot of things he wanted to be for his daughter. A burden was never one.

When he felt the dynamics of their patchwork family begin to shift, he headed out on a new assignment.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said, and as if she suddenly remembered that

she was standing on the front lawn of her high school, her smile flattening into boredom. No “I missed you” or “I’m so happy you’re home.” Just a simple “I wasn’t expecting you.”

Even the frosty greeting wasn’t enough to distract him from the silk and lace top she wore. The shirt—if it could be labeled as such—was held together by a single strap that crisscrossed around her waist and secured in a bow right above her belly button.

“Come here,” he said, searching for a clothed speck of body by which to hold her. When it became clear it was physically impossible, he considered giving her his T-shirt, the way he used to when she’d get too much sun at the public pool. But there was a strange vibe directed his way that made him reconsider.

Concluding the safest point of contact was her shoulders, he reeled her in. She came to him like a hesitant fish, arms flapping loosely at her sides, sucking in enough breath to last her until she made her escape. He’d thought about this moment, nonstop, for two months and she conveyed all the excitement of a wet noodle.

“God, I’ve missed you, kiddo.” Thinking it was the height of her boots making the embrace awkward, he shifted slightly and tried again. But it was as if he’d never hugged anyone before and was doing it all wrong.

She didn’t smile, didn’t wrap her arms around him, didn’t even pretend to return the hug. Nope, the only word that came to mind was *endure*. Which was so far from the complex mix of emotions filling Emmitt’s chest.

It was as if he were a boy, standing in front of a girl, asking her to love him—and she was saying, “It’s not me, it’s you.”

He wasn’t sure what had transpired since he’d left for China, but he didn’t like it.

Not one bit.

He was about to give up when he felt a brief shift in her posture, and the foundation of her walls wobbled; then everything changed. She tucked herself into him, her head resting against his shoulder, and she let out a shuddering exhale. Her breathing changed and her heartbeat synched to his as if she needed this hug as much as he did.

“I love you so much,” he whispered.

Clearly it was a case of “too much too soon” because she immediately went rigid. Before he could tighten his hold and save the moment, she pretzeled herself sideways in one of those duck-and-twist moves she used to make when spotting anything green on her dinner plate. The result left them in a weird side hug before she pulled back entirely.

“How was school?”

“It was school,” she said, casually studying a chip in her nail polish. It gave him time to casually study her and, *damn*, that was a lot of makeup, a little bit of shirt, and boots that might well have come with a do-it-yourself pole kit. And boobs! His kid had sprouted boobs, side-hugged him—the fun dad—and was talking to boys who shaved. What the hell was happening?

“Why are you here?” Her tone said she was no longer irritated by his presence. She was pissed. At him.

This was new territory for Emmitt. He and Paisley didn’t do pissy—not with each other. They joked and went on adventures and pulled outrageous pranks on the other “dads.” They even shared the occasional tear over a bucket of ice cream and *Lilo & Stitch*.

But beneath the attitude, Emmitt sensed a deep sorrow that he couldn’t fix with a joke or a trip to a tropical island. And the day he was no longer able to make her laugh was the day she no longer needed him.

Levi and Gray handled everything else.

“I thought we could walk home together. Catch up. Gray told me that you’re thinking of trying out for varsity soccer. I want to hear all about it,” he said, his excitement sounding a little forced even to him.

“This is high school, not middle. Only losers walk. Tryouts were last week. I made varsity. Yay me. And I have dance committee in an hour.” She picked at her fingernail. “We all caught up? Great. Now, I have to go.”

“Wait.” He reached for her hand before she could make her escape. The second their fingers brushed, she jerked back as if he had cooties. “I came early so we could hang out. It’s a nice day and I figured, instead of waiting here until dance committee starts, we could walk to Smoothie Social and share a Brazzle-berry shake.”

“Smoothie Social closed,” she said, back to peeling the glittery blue goo on her nails. “You’re two months too late.”

“I didn’t know,” he said quietly, wondering if he could have screwed up this reunion more. Not likely.

Social Smoothie was their place. It had been the weekend drop-off spot. Every other Saturday after soccer, Michelle would bring Paisley to Smoothie Social and the three of them would have celebratory smoothies before he and Paisley started their weekend together.

There was no Levi, no Gray, no distractions. Just the three of them doing family their own special way. Now Smoothie Social was gone and, just as he’d been MIA when Michelle died, he hadn’t been there for Paisley when it happened.

At moments like this, he questioned why he'd left home in the first place.

Not long ago, it had been all about the assignment. Back when he was looking for any adventure that would get his blood buzzing. Becoming an instant dad had changed a lot of that, but not the thrill of the assignment.

He'd just had the rush of a lifetime and walked away with his head still attached, but he wasn't sure it was screwed on the same. He should have come home feeling charged and invincible, excited to get his ducks in a row so he could head back out.

But now, looking at Paisley, he had to admit that navigating parenting without Michelle scared the shit out of him. He was five minutes into his big dad moment and he'd already struck out so bad, he was bound to ride the bench for a good long while.

"I'm sorry, kiddo."

She lifted a slim shoulder and let it drop. "Whatever. I'm more into lattes anyway."

They both stood there silently, and Emmitt wondered where the comfortable companionship that was so easy for them had gone.

He watched as the wind played with her curls, and when the sun caught her eyes, his chest tightened. She looked just like the photos of his mom when she'd been Paisley's age.

The sound of laughter and chatter circled around them as more students filed out of the buildings, saying their goodbyes before heading for home. He remembered what it felt like in those early days after losing his mom, knowing there was nothing but an empty house waiting for him. It felt a lot like the lonely confusion hiding beneath Paisley's couldn't-care-less posture.

He thought sadly back to the last time she'd looked this small and lost. It had been the day of Michelle's funeral, when Emmitt didn't think his heart could ache any more for his little girl.

He'd been wrong.

"You hungry?" he asked quietly. "We can grab a slice of pizza at Mangia Mia. I'll even splurge for a Piz-ookie."

Her forehead puckered. "Dad, I'm gluten intolerant."

"You are?" That was new, seeing as how he'd watched her down two helpings of lasagna with a couple pieces of garlic bread the night before he left for China. "I'm sure they have gluten-free crust."

She sighed. "I really need to get going. I'm supposed to work on a project with Owen before dance committee. This year's grades are really important. College is right around the corner."

"I doubt Harvard will reject you because you had a slice with your old man,"

he joked, but her eyes darted back to a group of kids standing at the entrance to the school.

“I have to go. Owen’s waiting for me in the gym.”

“Then I’ll walk you there,” he said, falling into step with her. “In fact, I’m headed to the gym myself. I called the school this morning to see if they needed any help with the dance, and I volunteered to help build the arches.”

“You can’t volunteer!”

“Already a done deal, kiddo.”

“Why?” she accused. “Why now? You’ve never helped before!”

Wow, okay.

“I thought it would be a fun way to spend time together,” he said, and thought that if Annie still needed help channeling her Fuck Off persona, then she could take lessons from his daughter, because the look Paisley shot him could reverse global warming.

“Oh my God, Dad! You’re ruining my life.”

* * *

“What the actual fuck?” Emmitt asked Levi, wondering if his daughter had been abducted and replaced by some kind of cyborg. “How worried should I be?”

“Assuming you just made that one infraction? She should be talking to you in a day or two,” Levi said through the phone.

“I said hi. She lost her shit.” Emmitt scanned the gym to see if Paisley had come in yet, but he didn’t find her in the crowd of gathering teens. She’d not only stormed off but gone into hiding. The dot on his phone pointed to her still being on campus, but it was a big campus and technology hadn’t quite reached the *I never want to see you again* level of GPS. So he’d waited in the gym, with the sounds of the girls’ basketball team practicing on the court, every bounce of the ball reverberated painfully around his brain.

“You didn’t follow the rules, man,” Levi said, and Emmitt pressed his cell closer to his ear so he could hear over the voices echoing through the gymnasium.

“I must have heard you incorrectly, because you are implying there are a set of rules. Rules, I’d like to point out, I was not given when Gray conned me into taking his place on the parent committee.”

“I didn’t con you.” And there was Gray, pulling a total Gray move, his voice appearing out of nowhere to dispense some of his dad wisdom. “I was extending you an olive branch. Which I will happily take back.”

Emmitt looked at the gymnasium, full of paper lanterns and glitter cannons and kids running around making more of a mess than progress. Then he spotted

Paisley across the gym, working extra hard to let him know his presence wasn't welcome and everyone else know she wasn't with the weirdo in the corner.

"Know where I think you should shove that olive branch?" he said, wondering when his life had become one big episode of *Dr. Phil*. "And who invited you anyway? I called *Levi*."

"And I patched in Gray because laughing at you alone just isn't as much fun as it is with a friend," Levi explained.

"Fuck you," Emmitt said a little too loud, because a fire hydrant of a woman in a maroon track suit and matching visor across the gymnasium, with sound amplifiers for ears, skewered him with a look.

He'd been on the receiving end of that look most of his life. Growing up, he wasn't a bad kid so much as curious to a fault. After his mom passed, that curiosity became an impulsive thirst to challenge each line in the sand, find out how deeply they were drawn, and question how much disruption would result from crossing those lines.

Not much had changed over the years. Emmitt was just bigger now, and the lines he challenged came with far greater repercussions. The bigger the story, the higher the risk, the more alive he felt.

If someone had asked him six months ago, he'd have sworn it was enough. But something had shifted. Even before China, the rush that had fueled him was growing more fleeting, until half the time he felt as if he was running on empty.

The only way he was going to get his life back was to satisfy that thirst. First though, he needed to reflect on how he'd reached this point. Understand why all the things that used to come easy felt as if they were slipping away.

"What did I do wrong?" he asked, knowing he was announcing open season on himself.

"Let's start with you approaching Paisley in front of her friends," Levi said, his last few words dying beneath Gray's laughter.

"Levi told me you waited for her on the campus lawn, but I didn't know you approached her." Gray let out a low whistle. "Rookie move, man. Rookie move."

"Says the guy who didn't tell me about any fucking rules. How can I make a rookie move when I didn't even know the game had switched?" he asked, pressing a finger to his ear because someone's playlist was blaring through the gym's sound system.

"He's got a point, Gray. You didn't explain, so you can't blame," Levi said as if it were the theme to an after-school special. "But I'm still confused, and this is really why I called you, Gray. Approaching usually doesn't bring on a *You're Ruining My Life* episode."

“No,” he agreed. “She’s been prickly all week, but she seemed happy today when I dropped her off at school. What else did you do?”

“Why does it have to be something I did? I said hi, she was with some punk, I was excited to tell her we were working on the dance together, then I gave her a hug and—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Levi interrupted.

“Never, ever initiate physical contact in public,” Gray added, and Emmitt once again felt like the odd dad out. He also felt a headache coming on—and this one he couldn’t blame on Gray’s nagging.

“I hugged her because I haven’t seen her in two months. Then I tried again because she looked upset. That’s what dads do,” he said. “She was smiling while chatting up that guy, but even from the lawn I could tell something was up. So I thought I’d do something to make that forced smile of hers real and offered to take her to get smoothies. And before you blame me for that, it was not my fault.” Emmitt turned his head away from the gym door, but the movement made him wince. A normal reaction, his doctor had assured him, for someone who’d suffered extensive head trauma. “How was I not informed that Smoothie Social has closed down?”

The laughing and ribbing immediately stopped, and a tense silence vibrated through the phonenumber. A silence that told Emmitt everything he needed to know. Paisley’s reaction this afternoon wasn’t about rules, and it wasn’t about the hug.

He pressed his palm to his forehead. “Hasn’t anybody talked to Paisley to see if she’s upset by the closing?” he asked. “How she feels about her and her mom’s favorite hangout being gone?”

“I totally blanked on the closing. I am so sorry,” Levi said, and Emmitt could hear the regret in his friend’s voice. “I’ve been so focused on getting her out of her room and interacting with people, I didn’t even think... That’s it. I didn’t think.”

“We’ve all been dealing with a lot, and you guys are juggling work, Paisley, and figuring out how to function without Michelle,” Emmitt admitted, gratitude thick in his voice. “My intense travel schedule hasn’t helped.”

“It’s your job,” Gray said. “We all have to keep moving forward, but I’m just not moving as fast as you guys. And if someone else were telling me this sob story, I’d call bullshit. But the last time I tried to talk to Paisley about Michelle, she holed up in her room for five days. Only came out to eat.”

Gray released a breath big enough to hold all the problems of the world, and everything inside Emmitt stilled.

“The truth is, I’m scared,” Gray said, emotion choking his words. Levi didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to. The gravity of those two words weighed

heavily on all of them.

The hell of it was, they were doing everything right, everything they had done before to make Paisley feel safe, happy, and loved. But now it clearly wasn't working and none of them knew why.

More concerning, none of them knew how to help.

Emmitt scanned the growing group of kids and parents in the gym and immediately zeroed in on his little girl. Only she wasn't so little, and she seemed to be as confused about that as he was. But what broke his heart was that the daughter who used to cuddle up in his lap and talk about anything and everything was doing her best to pretend he wasn't there.

"We have a dinner date tonight—I'll talk to her and fix it," he said, and the guys laughed.

"Let us know how that works out for you," Levi said. And the last thing Emmitt heard as he disconnected was loud, patronizing laughter—in stereo.

Chapter 11

It was official. Annie was in.

She'd never been "in" before, and she had to admit it felt good.

Three nurses from Lynn's Vietnamese-inspired cooking group had introduced themselves. One even told her about a relative's house coming up for rent next month. It was a sprawling two-bedroom with breathtaking views of the ocean and in walking distance to downtown. She was certain, on a photojournalist's salary, Emmitt could easily afford it.

But even if the place came through, that still left a few weeks of cohabitation—which was not going to happen. Annie knew she couldn't do many more ten-hour shifts on two hours' sleep before she hit a wall. Just as she knew she couldn't do many more half-naked, bump-in-the-night encounters before someone did something they regretted.

With new resolve, Annie picked up a yellow folder from the wall rack and walked in to meet her next patient, Leslie Jacobs.

"Hi, Leslie," she said, studying the chart. "I'm Annie Walsh. I'll be helping out Dr. Yates today."

"It's Les, and Dr. Yates is an idiot," Leslie said, his voice scratchy from a lifetime of smoking. In fact, everything about him was scratchy.

Mr. Jacobs was tall and wiry with squinty eyes and appeared as cuddly as a cactus. His skin was flaky and sallow from chemo, and his clothes draped from his frame as if his body were nothing more than a hanger. And Annie's heart gave a hard tug.

Where most people would see a gruff old man, Annie saw a lonely and scared patient who needed someone to hold his hand. Luckily for Les, Annie specialized in hand-holding.

Even when she was well past hand-holding age, Annie still held her parents' hands while they walked to and from school, around the market, or even at home. In elementary school, her classmates teased her about it, but Annie was more afraid of letting go than she was of being called a baby.

Betty Everett got it wrong when she sang, "If you want to know if he loves you so, it's in his kiss." For Annie, it's in the way he holds hands.

Like kisses, there was an entire language built into the art of hand-holding. Sadly, most people took for granted just how intimate and expressive the gesture could be, and what had once been the greatest display of love and affection had, in modern times, been dismissed.

But since hand-holding wasn't a medical board-approved method of provider-patient interaction, Annie sat down on the chair and wheeled herself

right into Les's personal space, then gentled her voice. "Dr. Yates is one of the best oncologists in the state."

"I've got hemorrhoids older than him."

"He has successfully treated more patients than years you've been alive." She clicked her pen and opened his chart. "Shall I add hemorrhoids to the issues we need to discuss today?"

One bushy brow lifted in reprimand, but then his lips slowly tilted up at the corners, transforming his face. "You're plucky. I want you to be my new doctor."

Annie grinned. "From you, I take that as a high compliment. Unfortunately, I'm not an oncologist or a surgeon."

"Doesn't bother me since I'm not having the surgery."

"But it's already scheduled. The operating room is reserved. The anesthesiologist is booked. I thought that was why you were here today. To discuss the removal of your—" She scanned the chart. "Ovaries?" She paused, reread the prognosis again, then looked up. "There must be some mistake."

"This is what I've been telling you. That doc wanted me to get a physical before the surgery. Blood tests, MRI, the whole shebang," he said. "I have more appointments than days in the week and usually see him more than I see my grandkid. But I agreed to the surgery. Why? Because he's the doctor. So there I am, missing out on my weekly bocce ball game, thinking the doctor's going to give me a simple checkup, make sure I'm not too sick to go under the knife."

"Isn't that a joke. Gotta be sick to get any real help but not too sick that they won't help you," he went on. "But there I am waiting for my checkup. Next thing I know the nurse hands me a pink gown and tells me to strip. Then I see these stirrups for my feet and I knew she wasn't going to ask me to cough. Damn idiot sent me to the lady doctor!"

Oh boy.

Annie turned her attention to the rest of his chart, trying to make sense of what was happening.

Leslie F Jacobs. Five eleven, 173 pounds at 68 years of age. Suffers from heart disease, high blood pressure, and—talk about typos—ovarian cancer.

She closed the file and rested it on the counter. "Just give me a moment and let me find out what's going on. I'm sure it's a computer glitch."

"What's going on is, I'm leaving." Les slipped one foot into a shoe and started lacing. "I don't really know a whole lot about ovaries, except they make

women nuts, but if I had some, I wouldn't want Dr. Yates anywhere near them." He laced up the other shoe and stood. "Just like he isn't messing with my boys."

"This is most likely a clerical mistake," Annie said, but Les wasn't listening. He was leaving. "I'm new and still learning the system and"—and a floater was the exact wrong person to handle this appointment. Les needed someone who was familiar with his diagnosis and his medical history—"and if you could have a seat, I'll call Dr. Yates and he can fix this in a jiffy."

Les gave a stern head shake. "Lady, if he can't tell by looking at me that I don't have ovaries, then this can't be fixed."

"Don't give up on Dr. Yates," Annie urged, walking behind him. "I've seen you in the chemo center. I know this is a scary time, even without the mix-up. You're clearly upset and need answers." Annie placed her arm on his shoulders. "Let me help you get them."

Les stopped at her touch. After a moment he slowly turned to face her, and Annie's chest ached for the man.

"All right." He held up a finger to make sure he was understood. "But only because you're a sweet girl and I don't want to get you in trouble with your boss. Idiot or not, he looks like a hard-ass. But if I come back and he requests a mammogram—"

"He won't," Annie said quickly. "I promise."

Les lifted a challenging brow.

"You have my word," she reassured him, but Les was already shuffling down the hallway, like a penguin with his egg between his feet. The moment he was out of sight, Annie burst out laughing.

It wasn't the most appropriate response to this mess, but it was better than crying.

Or quitting. Thankfully it was her lunch break, and she'd brought leftover pizza.

Annie researched the correct department to address Les's unusual situation and sent an e-mail detailing what had transpired. She was signing the e-mail when her phone buzzed.

She checked her phone's screen and her belly did a little flip—with excitement or nerves she wasn't sure.

**Back 2 dinner. I was thinking steak & potatoes.
Pick up some beer while U R at it. And none of
that girly shit you have N the fridge.**

She refused to let herself smile as she texted back.

Sorry. Got plans.

Plans that didn't include sharing her day over a beer with a man who wore glow-in-the-dark undies and warned women that he wasn't a good investment.

Why don't U text one of your "friends" to see if they R free.

Not the kind of friend I'm looking for tonight.

His words gave her pause. The downfall of texting was that there was no way to decipher the intent behind his words. On the upside, he couldn't see her blush. The emotion-free factor made texting the communication choice of men everywhere. But if she had to guess, she'd say those words were carefully chosen and loneliness was the reason behind his reaching out.

Not many people knew what it was like to be with company and feel completely alone. Nor did they know how isolating it was.

This "friend" is staring down a night on the couch. Too tired.

The bed is big enough for 2 😊

My mom warned me about men who rely on emojis 2 express themselves.

Don't worry, Goldilocks, I have much more creative ways to express myself

She'd barely finished texting when another one came through.



Annie's lips twitched; she couldn't help it. Three little emojis had erased all the ick from the day. By the time she texted back, she was laughing.

Not happening. Ever.

I hope that's what U said 2 friendly ex.

Annie paused, her fingers in mid text.

STILL working on that.

I can help U work on it over dinner. U need inspiration & I need a friendly face.

Is the commitment-phobe offering 2 give me dating advice?

Not phobic. Picky.

Was he trying to say that out of his limitless options for dinner companions, he'd picked her? Regardless, the last thing she needed was to play house with the sexy roomie who made her nervous. His smile made her nervous too. But not as much as the way her body reacted when he was near.

Like I said, have plans. Bye!

Annie was about to power down her phone when the screen lit up.

**I noticed U didn't say GOOD before that BYE.
That's not very nice, Nurse Annie.**

**I'm not feeling very nice. And please take note,
I'm not a nurse!**

Are U saying the sponge bath is off the table?

“You are so annoying,” she shouted at the phone, ignoring the orderly who clearly thought she was crazy.

Emmitt made her crazy, in all the wrong ways—and some of the right ones.

While she’d been text-fighting with Emmitt, a speck of giddy anticipation had crept its way out of that deep, dark place she’d buried it and into her belly, making it tingle.

Tingling was bad. Tingling over an immature argument with her male roommate was very bad.

Afraid she might text back “*Sponge baths happen in bed, not the kitchen,*” Annie turned her phone to airplane mode, then zoomed in on the rental agreement photo. It was only the first page of the contract, and she read it twice, but it did zilch to calm her nerves.

All she could gather was that the house was officially listed as an Airbnb, so the agreement wasn’t your standard lease. It did, however, contain a clause that allowed for the owner, or renter, to terminate the agreement seven days prior to stay. Did that mean if Emmitt gave her notice today, she’d have to find a new place by next week? Or that he’d had to have issued the notice seven days prior to the beginning of her stay?

She hadn’t a clue. There was only one thing of which she was certain. Tingles or not, Annie was done with being the one to always pack up and move.

Chapter 12

As Annie circled the grocery store parking lot, she contemplated whether now was a good time to call her mother.

By good, she meant the best time for the call to go to voice mail.

She needed the Walsh family matzo ball soup recipe. Not a lecture on how Annie had let another good one slip through her fingers. She pulled up her mom's contact info, her palms going sweaty when it rang.

"Annie, honey? Is that you?" Her mother's voice filled the car. "Marty, Annie's on the phone."

In the background came a muffled, "Is that Annie?"

While her parents discussed the likelihood of it being Annie—even though her name must have appeared on her mom's phone the moment the call connected—Annie thumped her forehead on the steering wheel. Three times.

Her mouth opened, but all that came out was, "Mom?"

"Of course it's Mom. You called me, so why do you sound surprised?" Maura asked.

"I'm not. It's just, uh..." *In thirty-five years, this is the first call you've ever answered during Jeopardy!* "After I dialed, I realized what time it was. I didn't want to interrupt *Jeopardy!*. So I was just going to leave a message. In fact, I can still do that. Hang up and I'll call you back and leave a message."

"Why would I do that?" There was more muffling, as if her mom was covering the receiver with her hand, then a distant "She wants me to hang up so she can leave a message.... No, she thought she was interrupting *Jeopardy!*."

When the hand was removed, it was her father on the line. "Remember Frank Shubert from the tennis club? His oldest just moved back home. What's his name?" The last part was directed at his wife.

"Jacob."

"Right. Jacob set us up with a new device that lets you watch shows anytime. It's really something. I just speak into the remote, and it plays what I want to watch. Next time you're over, I'll show it to you."

Her dad sounded so excited, Annie decided not to remind him about the Hulu subscription she'd given him last year for his birthday. And she most definitely did not remind him that he'd canceled it.

Other people's choices are not a reflection of me.

"But Mom likes to watch *Jeopardy!* live."

"There's no commercials, Annie," her mom said, as if she'd just been shown the eighth wonder of the world. "Can you believe that?"

"No, Mom. I can't," Annie deadpanned.

“Jacob got divorced—that’s why he’s home. What a shame. He’s such a nice boy.” One concerned sigh later, Maura perked up. “He’s single, no kids, got a stable job now. He’s lost a little of his hair around the front, you know, like your cousin Benjamin.”

“Benjamin’s bald.” This from Marty. “I need a ten-letter word for *roused* that ends in *D*.”

“*Receding* is the term they use nowadays,” added Maura, the foremost expert on rousing. “Oh Annie, why don’t you come home this weekend for dinner. I can invite the Shuberts. Wouldn’t it be nice to catch up with Frank and Susan?”

“It would”—*not*—“but I can’t this weekend.”

Mom rolled on without a pause. “And of course Jacob would be invited. I’m sure spending time with old friends would be good for him right now.”

“We were never friends,” Annie pointed out.

“Isn’t that just perfect?” Maura giggled with delight. “Making up for lost time and missed opportunities! He’d make a fine plus one to Clark’s wedding, wouldn’t he, Marty?”

“What?” Marty shouted.

“I said, ‘wouldn’t Jacob make a fine plus one to Clark’s wedding?’ ”

“I thought you were taking me?” Marty asked. “And here I went and got my suit pressed.”

“I got your suit pressed. And I was talking about Annie,” Maura chided. “You could meet him this weekend.”

“Sorry, Mom, but I’m working.” Working on finding any excuse not to go home.

“Both days? That can’t be healthy, now, can it? Maybe you should take a personal day. Shouldn’t she, Marty.”

“Personal day?” Her dad laughed. “We didn’t have that in my day. We were thankful to have a job.”

“Times are different now.” Annie could almost hear her mom batting Marty’s words away.

“Different or not, when has Annie ever called in sick? Never,” Marty said, answering his own question. “Then why’s she going to miss it for some balding divorced guy who lives above his parents’ garage?”

Annie had to smile. Her dad was picking sides—and he’d picked Annie’s. Something warm and familiar wove its way around Annie’s heart.

She might not have much in common with her mom, but there were countless traits she shared with her dad. They were both bookworms, homebodies, people pleasers, and they tended to fall somewhere between structured and neurotic on the OCD scale, which drove Maura nuts. Her dad was

also big on hugging, which worked out because Annie needed a lot of hugs. Top 5 things he was not big on:

1. Surprises.
2. Clutter.
3. Stuffed peppers.
4. Impulsiveness.

5. Parties—dinner, birthday, block, or any other variety that included more than three people and/or cloth napkins.

Once, Annie had overheard Maura describe Marty as dull. Whenever Annie thought of her dad, she felt warm and safe.

“Flapjack . . .” The use of her childhood nickname brought a sudden flood of emotion to her eyes. “How do you feel about missing a day of work to have dinner with two people old enough to be your grandparents and Alex Trebek?”

“Dad, you don’t look a day over sixty.” Impressive, since her dad had turned seventy-eight this past spring. A child of two professionals who’d decided to adopt at the height of their careers, she was often taken for her parents’ grandchild. “And if I didn’t have work . . .”

“There, she’s been asked and she’s answered,” he said. “Now, let the girl be, Maura.”

Her mother ignored him. “If you come down this weekend, we can go shopping and find you a nice dress for the wedding.”

Annie’s head shot up as the word finally registered. *Shitshitshit!* The invitation had beaten her to the punch. “I’m not coming home this weekend, and Mom, we are not going to the wedding.” She made a big deal out of stressing the *we*.

“Don’t be ridiculous, of course we are. When I ran into Clark’s mom in speedwalking class, she was adamant that we were still on the list.”

“Of course she said that.” Likely after her mom interrogated Ms. Atwood about every detail of the wedding. “She was being nice and so was Clark by sending the invitation.”

“Instigated!” her dad shouted. “Damn, it doesn’t fit. Either that or I got nine across wrong.”

“Nice or not, she told me herself that the wedding wouldn’t be the same without her Annie.”

“That’s the point, Mom. I’m not her Annie anymore, so showing up would change everything. And not in a good way.”

Had it not been for her friends, Annie would believe that she was the crazy one. Because how could anyone think that her going to the wedding was a good idea? For her or Clark?

“Your father and I were talking, and we both think going to the wedding might be good for you. We will both be by your side the whole time in case you need us. We think you need closure, dear.”

It was the same speech they’d given her on the first day of dance class. Her therapist had suggested that enrolling her in a group activity might help with her shyness. The last thing six-year-old Annie wanted was to join something that required her to perform in front of a crowd of strangers.

Her parents lived up to their word that day. And every day after, until Annie was comfortable enough to go to dance class on her own. For three years, one parent or the other sat on the studio floor during class. They never complained or made her compete and, as it turned out, dance was the ideal outlet for Annie to express herself without the pressure of being perfect.

But going with your parents to ballet and going with them to your ex’s wedding were two wildly different things. She’d rather audition for Juilliard in a thong than sit at the table in the back of the ballroom, reserved for people whom the bride and groom are obligated to invite but hope don’t show up. On the seating chart for Annie’s wedding, it had been table nineteen.

Other people’s choices are not a reflection of me. And Annie was nobody’s table nineteen.

“I’m not going, Mom.” *Be strong.* “And I don’t want you or Dad to go either.”

“But I already RSVPed. For the whole family. I ordered us all the vegetarian option. The chicken is always so dry at those things.”

“Then un-RSVP.”

There was a long pause during which Maura strategized her approach. Annie didn’t need to strategize—she wasn’t going. End of story. What her mother did now was out of Annie’s hands. She’d expressed her opinion, even if it wasn’t the loudest.

Feeling a touch of indigestion coming on, Annie said, “Actually, I’ve got to get going. I need to prep OR Seven,” she lied, hating herself for using Clark’s trick. “I just called to ask if you could send me Grandma’s matzo ball soup recipe.”

“I didn’t know you liked my matzo ball soup. You always looked like you thought it was bland.”

Annie opened her mouth to say of course she liked it but paused. It was soup—what was not to like? But suddenly Annie found herself wondering about the soup her mother served every Passover. The soup her neighbors raved about, and her mother served so proudly.

“Of course it’s not bland,” she finally said. “Which is why I want to learn

how to make it.”

“You know Grandma never wrote it down,” her mom said. “It’s all by feel. She showed me. I’d have to show you.”

Which meant Annie would have to go home. Not happening anytime soon. Or her mother would have to come to her. Annie thought about Emmitt and his glow-in-the-dark undies.

Never going to happen!

For a psychologist, her mother had extreme passive-aggressive tendencies. Probably why she never treated people, just studied them.

“Maybe you could guesstimate the amounts and e-mail me the recipe.” She could figure out the rest. How hard could it be? “Thanks so much—gotta go. Love you both.”

“We love you, Flapjack,” her dad said, and then disconnected, most likely so that her mother couldn’t invite herself and the Shuberts down for a fun cooking lesson at Annie’s.

Silently, she sat there a moment, recalling the events that had brought her to this point in her life: being asked to be her parents’ third wheel at her ex-fiancé’s wedding while sitting in a parking lot in Rome, Rhode Island.

How had everything gotten so out of control? And when did Annie’s opinion come to mean so little in her mother’s eyes?

A loud tap on the passenger’s-side window made her shriek and smack her head hard on the headrest. Cussing, she rubbed the smarting area and turned to see what had struck the glass. Only to find Emmitt, standing on the other side of the pane and laughing.

“Oh, come on. I give up.” She sank down into the seat and closed her eyes.

“I can still see you,” his gravelly—and extremely annoying—voice said from outside the car. “Who are you hiding from?”

Everyone, she thought. In fact, she was seriously considering moving to Siberia so she could get some privacy. Otherwise, this was how her time in Rome was going to play out. Until one of them found another place to live, they were going to be all up in each other’s space.

Annie had left her own personal hell in Connecticut and wound up living with the devil. It explained why her body tingled with heat every time he was around.

This wasn’t going to work. Someone had to give in, and it wasn’t going to be her. Why should she be the one to move? *She* was most definitely not the problem. Everyone else was.

Straightening, she locked eyes on Emmitt and spoke loudly enough for her voice to carry through the closed window. “I’m not hiding.”

His lips curled into a grin that slowly made its way up to his eyes. “As your friend, I should warn you to never play poker. Or if you do, make sure I’m there. The starting bet will be socks to get them out of the way up-front.”

He didn’t have to yell to be heard. His voice just slid through the glass and down her spine. The jerk.

She pulled out a slip of paper and a pen, then scribbled a note. She cracked the window just enough to slip it through.

He took his sweet-ass time reaching for the note, then slowly slid it from her fingers. Before he read it, he said, “I’m flattered, but I already have your number. It’s on the rental agreement. Remember?”

Oh, she remembered. “Information that, going forward, will be used for business purposes only.”

“I thought I made it clear when you were naked in my kitchen, I’d love for you to be my business.”

And there he was, lightening the mood and making her giggle. Annie didn’t realize how giggle deprived her life had been. “The note,” she reminded him.

He unfolded the note, and a big grin spread across his face.

“What?” she asked with an offhanded shrug. But—*holy trouble*—his grin was as contagious as the measles, only a lot more fun. “As your roommate, I feel it’s my duty to point out ‘that the eighties called, and they want their mirrored aviators back,’” he read. Casually resting his forearm on the roof of the car, he leaned down and, even through the glasses, she could feel the intensity of his stare.

He’d cleaned up, she noticed. She also noticed that his scruff was trimmed, leaving a perfect five o’clock shadow that made his lips *oh-so* mesmerizing. He was wearing the heck out of a pair of jeans and a dark gray T-shirt that did little to hide the muscles beneath. He also had on a ballcap, turned backward, lending a boyish charm to the whole rugged ladies-man vibe he had going on.

Then, as if he were Magic Mike and this was some kind of *I’ll show you mine* moment, he made a big deal of lazily lowering the sunglasses down his nose, then tilting his head just enough to give her a glimpse of those tempting brown eyes twinkling back.

A move, she was sure, he’d used on half the population in town. The female half. Well, Annie told herself, she wasn’t going to be sucked in to whatever game he was playing. But as she told herself this, she felt herself being sucked in.

Not by his ridiculous grin, although it was a pretty powerful grin, but by the patch of raw skin splitting his left eyebrow. There was also the faint hint of yellow starting at his temple and disappearing into his hairline that was

concerning. Together they hinted at a different story about why he'd come home unexpectedly.

As if sensing her interest, he straightened and pulled his cap around and down low. Annie knew when to press and when to back off. His body was flashing a big red *Do Not Push* button.

"Why are you following me?" she demanded.

"I was actually here first, so I think that means you were stalking me." Something across the parking lot caught his attention, and he froze.

"Shit," he mumbled and, without further warning, dropped to the ground, completely disappearing from view.

Unable to contain her curiosity, Annie unbuckled herself and maneuvered in the driver's seat until she could scramble onto her knees. Just in time to watch Emmitt perform some maneuvering of his own—an improv duck-and-cover routine that reminded her of a puppy trying to avoid crate time. He wasn't quite on all fours but was headed in that direction.

After one of the most entertaining thirty seconds of people-watching she had ever participated in, Annie saw Emmitt try to conceal himself from anyone exiting or entering the market. He was, however, in Annie's line of sight.

Unable to help herself, she reached for her phone to video the entire episode when he dropped down so far, he disappeared from her view.

She wasn't sure whom he was hiding from, but whoever it was, they had him taking ghosting to a whole new level—to the tune of sliding under her car.

Annie felt sorry for whoever this woman was and wanted to see just how far Emmitt would go to avoid a real conversation with one of his friendly friends with benefits.

Annie thought back to the men in her life and wondered why it was easier for them to run from conflict than talk it out.

Annie cracked her window and said, "Hey, whatcha doing down there?"

His reply was uttered through clenched teeth but still came through crystal clear. Four letters, rhymed with *duck*, and wasn't very neighborly of him.

Annie paused and, with a snort, picked up her phone. "Hey," she said out the window. "Guy hiding under my car. Do you know a ten-letter word for *roused* that isn't *instigated*?"

He was silent so long, she doubted he'd answer. Then a very annoyed, very loud whisper said, "*Aggravated*? Or, I don't know, how about, *Shutting Up*? *Zip it or Pay*? Oh, I know, *It's my House*."

"All good suggestions, but I don't think they match the spirit of the clue. Do you?"

She was met with silence, so she decided to see what had *roused* the bear.

She scrambled across the center console, narrowly escaping an intimate moment with her parking brake, to get a closer look. And look she did.

Annie looked until her mouth went dry—which was the exact opposite of what was happening in her cheeky-cut panties. Because Emmitt was peering beneath her car to check whether the coast was clear, and the position forced his butt to stick up in the air, showcasing that grade A backside of his. It also did a lot to showcase just how worn and soft his jeans were.

Gravity did the rest.

The dark gray T-shirt that moments ago had clung to his chest with the day's humidity slid up to expose a slice of that work-honed body. He shifted slightly, gifting her with a profile view, which was equally impressive since it included some premium side coverage, starting from his upper ribs all the way down to the impressive V that must leave women drooling as it disappeared into his jeans.

You're becoming one of those women, she told herself, a little ashamed that she was objectifying him and a little breathless over the idea of just where that V ended.

Then she thought of *all* those women. The Tiffanys and Tif-fanis of the world who had been led on and then left hanging by guys like Emmitt.

How one minute he would be dancing them into bed, the next ducking under cars to avoid talking.

Not this time, buddy. Not on her watch.

Annie cracked the window.

“Emmitt?” She spoke with a raised voice so it would easily be heard by whomever he was avoiding. “Is that you? I didn't know you were back.”

Slowly he turned his head and looked directly up at her window. *Are you fucking kidding me* was written clearly across his face.

Annie shrugged a dramatic *Whoops*.

His brow rose in challenge. *Game on!*

It happened in slow-mo. She saw him reach for the door handle, saw the intent in his eyes, and before she could hit the locks he had the door open and was diving across the seats. Well, diving as far as a six-foot-plus guy with a very impressive set of biceps and thighs could in her fuel-efficient compact.

There was a lot of grunting and elbows flying, and then next thing she knew, Annie was flat on her back, emergency break shanking her in the kidney, 180 pounds of solid man on top of her.

A grunt and three jabs to his ribs later, Emmitt lifted up enough for her to breathe.

“What are you doing?”

“Finding a new hiding spot, since you rudely blew mine.”

“Get off me and then get out of my car!”

He considered her demand for a moment but didn’t move. “Why don’t you yell at Clark like that?”

“I don’t yell. It’s a waste of energy!”

“You’re yelling at me right now. In fact, you yell at me a lot,” he said, and she was embarrassed to realize she *was* yelling at him. And this wasn’t the first time. Nearly every time she was around him, he managed to get under her skin and set her off—and not necessarily in a bad way. “Ah, you’re into me.”

“We aren’t in grade school, and this isn’t the playground,” she said, careful not to raise her voice. “I’m not into you. I’m annoyed by you.”

He smiled, his toothy grin glowing in the darkness. “It’s a start. And a hell of a lot better than the pleasant *don’t-want-to-upset-anyone* Annie who comes out when you’re talking to Clark.”

“Seriously, get off me.” She shoved, taking in the intimacy of their bodies. She could feel every breath, every ripple, every, um—she wiggled and . . .

“I wouldn’t do that,” he warned.

Good thing it was dark, because there was a high probability that she was blushing. Wouldn’t that just make his day.

She placed her hands on his chest, careful not to touch anything too intimate, and gave a shove. He didn’t even budge. “Seriously, move.”

“Not until the coast is clear.” He lifted his head long enough to glance out the window. “You couldn’t stay quiet, could you?”

“Probably one of your fans. Let me guess, one of your girlfriends wants to know why you’re ghosting her.” She was able to lift her head enough to peek out the window. But all she saw was an older couple with a shopping basket, an employee in a red vest collecting carts, and a group of teenage girls.

“Worse,” he said, and dropped low again. “I think my daughter just caught me following her.”

She laughed. And because of their position, she literally laughed in his face. “*You* have a daughter?”

He did not laugh. Not even a little. Nope, the confident and cocky, smooth-talking Emmitt was nowhere in sight. Even in the glow of the supermarket lights, she could see he’d become all prickly edges and defensive spikes.

And when he clenched his jaw tight and exhaled like a bull during a fight, she caught a glimpse of the raw power and charisma that drew people to him. *Like screws to a magnet*, she thought, a spark of sexual awareness sizzling through her.

Without a word, he lifted himself off her and into the passenger seat, careful

to stay low enough that, with his ballcap and aviators on, he wasn't identifiable.

Not sure what had just happened, Annie shifted in her seat and straightened her clothes.

The jerk didn't need to straighten out anything. He looked perfectly imperfect, just like a man of the world should. "Gah!"

"What?" he finally said, his voice drained of any emotion. "You don't think I'd be a good dad?"

If he'd asked her that question five minutes ago, she would have kicked him out of her car. But now, seeing his emotional state, she didn't doubt for a minute that he was not only a father but a good one.

She glanced at the group of teens, now climbing into a minivan, and caught a glimpse of her boss's stepdaughter.

"Paisley," she said. "Wait, Paisley is Sweet P! She's yours?"

"Yup."

Annie wasn't sure what was more shocking: that Emmitt had a kid or that his kid was fifteen and female. She knew Paisley, knew Gray was her stepdad, even knew that Paisley's biological father was a photographer. But she'd never put two and two together and come up with Paisley was Emmitt's kid.

The single dads Annie knew didn't keep a dictionary-sized black book, nor did they scour the world's most dangerous places in search of injustice and suffering. And they most certainly did not look like a Range Rover dressed in North Face gear.

On one of the times Paisley had stopped by the hospital to see Gray, she'd mentioned that her "bio dad," as she called him, was stationed in China. Annie had assumed he was either military or an overseas contractor. She couldn't have been more wrong. Which made the tingling sensation swirling around in her belly all the more annoying.

"Then why are you hiding in my car instead of saying hi to her?" she asked.

He let out a breath. "I'm keeping an eye on her. Trying to figure out how she ticks."

Annie snorted. "She's fifteen. She doesn't tick, she explodes. Her goal is to be unpredictable and challenging and test every single limit to see how far she can push before one of you breaks."

With a shaky laugh, he tossed his glasses on the dash and leaned back. "Then she's doing a good job. She said a total of ten words to me today before she broke me. I don't know how she did it, but I'm broken." He turned to look at her and, *oh boy*, if this was him broken, she was in big trouble when he got back to his fighting weight.

His ballcap shadowed his face from the outside glow, but not so much that

she couldn't see his eyes. A warm whisky color that reminded her of caramel. Annie loved caramel. She also loved the soft way he was watching her, his gaze gently searching hers, as if reaching out to create a connection. But there was also a sadness there, and a jumble of other intense emotions she didn't want to see.

"Is that why you wanted to hang out tonight?" she asked quietly.

"We were supposed to have dinner together, but she blew me off after dance committee. In the past, when there was a problem with Paisley, I'd go to Michelle and she'd help me see the female perspective, but Michelle's not here and . . ."

"And I'm a female?" She laughed.

"And sweet," he said. "Even when you're yelling at me, you can't hide it. I guess I needed a little sweet in my day."

Even through his dark lashes, Annie could see the flicker of humor in his eyes. She didn't know how to respond. It was probably one of the nicest things someone had ever said to her. But with Emmitt she could never decipher what was charm and what was real.

Thankfully her phone rang and an ABBA song played from her cell. She studiously ignored the call and groaned.

"Aren't you going to get that?" he asked.

"Just a telemarketer."

"Playing 'Mamma Mia'?"

The call went to voice mail, and Annie sighed in relief. "My mom and, before you ask, no, I'm not going to call her back."

"If she's anything like my dad, I get it."

"She's not so bad. I'm just having a day."

"My day started about three weeks ago and hasn't stopped."

She chuckled. "Having been a teenage girl once, I can tell you it is only going to get worse if she finds out you're spying."

"I'm not spying. I'm researching the subject. It's step one of a four-part plan to get to know my kid better."

"Give it whatever name you want, if she catches you breaking her trust, it's game over."

"Then she won't catch me." He took in her skirt and tank top, something she'd thrown on before leaving work, and whistled his appreciation. "Who are you hiding from?"

"Nobody." She exited her car and slammed the door. Shooting him a pissy glare over the hood, she said, "I need groceries. This is a grocery store. Have a good night."

Without waiting to see what dark shadow he'd slink into, she headed toward the supermarket. The doors opened, and she was hit with a cool blast of sweet strawberry and fresh-baked bread. Annie took a moment to appreciate the slow rhythm and flow of the post-dinner-rush supermarket.

Annie picked the late hour precisely for this reason.

Leisurely shopping in a quiet store had become one of her favorite things. A great way to come down from a long day on the hospital floor. With no pressing matters to attend to, and no one waiting for her at home, she could drift up the produce aisle, past the butcher stand, and down the ice cream section, picking up nothing more than a basket of strawberries and vanilla ice cream.

The nurses at work had taken healthy to a whole new level. Annie didn't think she could ever look at a kale smoothie again and not gag a little. Grabbing a basket, she headed to aisle six—cookies and candy and wine, *oh my!*

"Great thinking," her shadow said, rolling up next to her with a shopping cart. "We can get food for dinner, then carpool home together. Good for the environment."

"What do you mean, home? You still plan on staying?" Annie grabbed a box of multigrain crackers, a bag of chips, and a jar of olives—then crossed all three off her list.

"It is my house." He picked up some cheese in a can and added it to her basket.

She took it out and placed it in his cart. "Which you rented to me."

"About that." He took her basket and emptied it into his cart, then set the basket on the top shelf, where she couldn't reach. "I looked at the lease and it seems pretty standard."

"You don't even know what kind of rental agreement you use?"

"Don't need to."

"This explains so much," she murmured.

"Anyway, it's a standard Airbnb agreement."

"When I saw Airbnb on the letterhead, I wasn't sure what it meant, so thank you for mansplaining. You have a good night now." She shoved the can of cheese into his chest, then, with a wiggle of the pinkie, took off with the cart.

She hooked a hard right, choosing produce instead of the alcohol aisle—which meant she would have to make do with the wine in her pantry. If it brought this fun grocery store adventure to a close, the sacrifice would be worth it.

"Look at that, Roomie." Back in went the aerosol cheese, along with some pudding cups. "Two days together and you read my mind. I'd kill for some baked potatoes."

“I also looked up the Airbnb legalese. Did you do that? No? Great. Then let me explain it to you.” He stood in front of the cart, blocking it. And, in case she decided to back out in a bid for freedom, he put his foot on the under-rack of the cart. Then took his sweet time selecting the perfect potatoes, which meant holding and weighing each one as if he were twelve and they were boobs instead a starchy side dish. “It states that, as the owner, I can cancel up to seven days prior to the stay.”

“I’ve been here a month!”

“Which means you know the town by now. And here I was worried I’d be a dick for kicking a lady out of my house.”

They turned the corner, almost colliding with a tall blonde wearing heels and a high-end handbag with a white fluffy feline in it. The cat looked at Annie and hissed.

“Emmitt! I thought that was you. It’s so good to see you,” she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and climbing him as if he were made of catnip.

“Great to see you too.” And there was something douche-y about the way he said, “you too,” dragging it out while patting her back, that told Annie if the world depended on his knowing the blonde’s name, then Annie had better get moving on her BEFORE THE WORLD ENDS list.

When Emmitt managed to pry himself free, Annie gave him a friendly punch in the shoulder. “Emmitt, why don’t you introduce me to your friend?”

Emmitt’s *Fuck me* face was in full effect. It was followed by an uncomfortable chuckle, and finally a loud clearing of the throat, which did nothing—Annie was certain—to jog his memory.

“This is my roommate, Annie. Annie, this is Lena.” He said the name so quickly, Annie almost missed it.

Lena was in the same boat, because she looked at him strangely, but only for a moment. Then he winked. “Annie works for Gray, and since she is new to town, I offered up my place for a few weeks until she could find her own pad.”

“Oh,” the blonde said, her eyes darting back and forth as if trying to size up Annie and Emmitt’s relationship. Annie gave him another slug to the arm, and Lena—whose name was not Lena—took that as a sign that Annie had been friend zoned. Therefore a nonthreat. “I was so sad you couldn’t make our dinner. I heard you left to unearth some horrific world-shattering story.”

“It was just a human-interest piece, but I had less than two hours to catch my flight.”

“Human-interest piece?” Lena-not-Lena placed a finger on his chin, giving it a poke—complete with sound effects—before letting it run down his chest. “You make it sound like you’re doing a puff piece on pandas in China instead of

single-handedly rescuing a bus full of kids who were on a field trip when the factory blew up.”

“Single-handedly?” Annie looked at Emmitt and held back a snort. “Sounds like a puff piece to me.”

“I called to make sure you were okay. I heard you were, but not from you.”

“Sorry about that. Only just back.” With a wink, he gave the cat’s tail a little ruffle, eliciting a purr—from them both.

“I guess I can let you make it up to me.” Her shrug said she’d forgiven him before he’d even left for his last assignment. She stuck her card into his front pocket—the pocket of his jeans. “Call me. Nice meeting you, Annie.”

“Bye, Lena,” he said, and Annie plucked the card from his pocket—with two careful fingers.

She read the card and laughed. “Lena?”

“Was I even close?”

“Her name is Lana.”

“Close enough.” He picked up a handful of frozen pizzas.

“Have you had sex with her?”

“What kind of question is that?” He was aghast, as if she were the rude one.

Annie stared him down. He smiled—one of the most arrogant smiles in the history of mankind.

“Then not close enough.” She flung the card in his face. “Give Lana a call. I’m sure she’d be more than happy to house you. If you need a reference, have her call me.”

“No can do. Sets a bad precedent. If I sleep there, then she’d expect to sleep at my place. See the problem?”

He added a gallon of milk next to her almond milk, then gave a mischievous wink and added in a can of whipped cream.

This “peaceful” trip to the market had already blown past anything remotely relaxing. But, Annie had to admit, she was having fun. Her cheeks were sore from trying not to smile, her step lighter than it had been since Clark-2K struck. She imagined Emmitt could make going to the dentist fun.

“When diagnosing a problem, we look for contributing factors, things all the situations have in common. You’re the only constant.” She leaned in and whispered, “I’m afraid, Mr. Bradley, *you* might be the problem.”

A flash of something almost human flickered before it was gone. Or maybe it was hiding behind the arrogant swagger he adopted as he leaned in to match her stance.

“I think your prognosis is wrong, Nurse Annie,” he whispered, his lips so close to contact, she could taste the mint on his breath. *Knew*, beyond a shadow

of a doubt, that he, Rome's Resident Sex Bandit, was going to kiss her, the Husband Whisperer.

And right there, clutching an ear of corn next to the peach and cantaloupe display, which read JUICY AND RIPE FOR THE PICKING, Annie decided she just might let him. All he'd have to do was move a little closer and she'd know if his kiss lived up to the hype—it would be a first in Annie's world.

"I bet if we polled other women who have been in *any* kind of situation, position, or scenario with me, nine out of ten would say I'm not the problem. I'm the cure."

The way he said it, all smooth and full of innuendo, had her stomach fluttering—and her warning bells blaring.

"Well," she said on a breathy sigh, dropping the corn back in the barrel and smiling, "I guess we'll never know who's right, since you left your sticky notes at home on the fridge."

With a carefree shrug, Annie grabbed some salad fixings, mushrooms, and a couple of pears, leaving Emmitt behind her—laughing.

"You know what the tenth would say?" And there he was again, right behind her, with an armload of ingredients that would never aspire to be anything more than game-day food.

"Don't care."

"She'd say it was a religious experience."

"Doesn't matter because, one, you're moving out soon." She ticked off a finger. Then another. "Two, we are just roommates and roommates don't care about each other's sexual score card. Nor do they point out that eighty percent of women fake 'Paying Witness' in order for the sermon to just be done. Three, until you move out, *no one* is to bring 'bed buddies' into the house."

"My house." He lowered one of her fingers. Then another. "If you want to keep it monogamous, that'd be new for me but I'm willing to give it a go." He left her with her extra special finger up. "And in seven days, depending on how this monogamy thing goes, I can invite over whoever I want."

With a kiss to her middle finger, he grabbed the cart and pushed it toward the butcher stand. "So what's for dinner?" He picked up a couple of T-bones and tossed them in. "I'm not all that picky. In fact I love just about everything except salmon, olives... oh, and I can't stand kale."

"Bummer, I was making a kale salad with broiled salmon and an olive tapenade."

"Huh. Did you know kale is food for people who don't know how to smile? It's scientifically proven."

"Liar." She was ordering that T-shirt for Clark. She'd send it anonymously in

a box wired with a glitter bomb. Colors to coordinate with the wedding theme, of course.

“How about we go back to the steak idea? Two great big steaks with baked potatoes. We can grill them out back while drinking beer. What kind do you prefer? And don’t tell me we’re getting some passionfruit-flavored craft beer.” He reached into the chilled section and selected a six-pack from the back of the bottom shelf, making his rear look all kinds of amazing.

He set it in the cart.

Giving up, she moved it to the back of the cart, using a loaf of French bread to act as the wall of Jericho between their foods. “We won’t be drinking beer.”

“Ah, you’re a wine lady.” He looked her up and down, and Annie squirmed as she felt her face heat. She was tired, sore, and a mess. “I bet you drink one of those boring fruity, neutral white wines that are in the cabinet at home.”

Hands on hips, she said, “Why? Because I’m boring?” Boring was synonymous with dull. And while most of the time she didn’t mind being like her dad, today the word stung.

“My guess? Those bottles were gifts from someone who doesn’t know a thing about you. And you’re too nice to tell them, and too practical to buy a new bottle before you’ve finished those. And Anh”—his tone made her gooey inside—“I’d say you’re the most interesting woman I’ve met in a long while.”

This time when he looked at her, she didn’t feel silly or embarrassed. She felt understood and, *oh boy*, was *that* sexy. And suddenly she was okay being boring—preferred it, in fact.

“So who bought them,” he went on. “A boyfriend?”

That’s all it took. One line and he was back to annoying. Oh, he was still sexy, just not to her. “My mom. She gives me a bottle for every holiday.”

“The same mom you’re avoiding?”

“I sound awful when you say it that way.”

“Awful is a cabinet full of that wine. If she brought me that, I’d avoid her too.”

“She really isn’t that bad. She just likes what she likes,” Annie said.

Emmitt studied her for a long moment, and Annie felt her face flush. “And because you’re her kid, she thinks you should like it too?”

Annie shrugged. “The wine isn’t horrible, and it gives her one more thing in common with me that she can tell her friends about. So that’s the wine story. Moving on.”

“Does your boyfriend like the wine?”

She laughed. “You don’t give up. And no, you already know I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Just double-checking. That would have been awkward. You living with me while having a boyfriend. Imagine the rumors *that* would start.”

“I’m not living with you. We’re roommates.” She took the cart back and picked up her speed. “Temporary roommates. Nothing more.”

“We’re temporary roommates who know what the other looks like naked.”

“I wasn’t naked. I was in my undergarments.”

“Undergarments are cotton and don’t fall into the thong or cheeky cut category.” Her speed did nothing to deter him. He merely sped up, tossing marshmallows in her cart. “Now for some graham crackers and chocolate. Then we can discuss the finer points of undergarments around the firepit while making s’mores.”

“I hate marshmallows.”

“Chocolate sauce is fine too.”

“We are not making s’mores.” In with the chocolate sauce. Milk chocolate—the jerk was playing dirty. “This is not a pajama party.”

“So it’s a PJs-optional kind of event.” He shrugged and slid his sunglasses back on, as if he were big stuff and they were in Hollywood. “I can hang. Pillow fight later?”

Chapter 13

“Did you know in some cultures, putting groceries away with someone is a form of foreplay,” Emmitt said, unlocking the front door and flicking on the lights.

“In my house, it was called being helpful,” Annie said, not even sparing him a glance as she walked past him into the kitchen.

She set her bags on the counter and began emptying them in categories. Frozen foods first, then dairy, canned, dry. Even the produce was quickly divided into fruits and vegetables before going into the proper bins.

He plucked an apple out of Goldilocks’s little hands, taking a big bite when she reached out to grab it back, intrigued when her lips went plump as she frowned.

“That’s for the salad,” she said, giving him a little shove. “If you plan on eating the ingredients, there won’t be anything left to make a meal.”

Sweet, bossy, and stubborn. Quite an unexpected pairing.

“Well, in my house”—he grabbed two stemmed glasses and a bottle of wine from the bag, then placed them on the table—“guests enjoy a glass of wine while I prepare the food.”

She sent him an amused look. “You’re going to cook? For me?”

“Some women find that romantic.”

“Some women find it romantic when you remember their name.”

Check. And mate. He was liking her more and more. “I must have missed that day in sex ed. I was more of a hands-on learner. Spent a good amount of time that year being tutored by Misty Callahan, the freshman next door, who liked my dimples.”

“Exploring each other’s dimples behind the bleachers isn’t romantic, Emmitt. No wonder you’re so—”

“Magnificent?”

“Cocky, arrogant, stunted.” She broke off with a gasp. “Oh my God.” Her face lit with an excitement that made her eyes sparkle and Emmitt’s dimples man-up. “A ten-letter word for *roused*. *Challenged*.” She threw her head back and laughed. “You’re romantically challenged.”

Emmitt wasn’t sure how to respond to that completely inaccurate summation of his character. He’d been on the receiving end of some pretty colorful criticism from women, but never when it came to his romantic prowess. And there he was pulling out all the stops—a little wine, top shelf banter, and his guaranteed-to-have-her-wanting-more pepper-crusted steak with pomegranate chutney that had a near-perfect proven success rate, and she was laughing at his game.

“Laugh all you want, Goldilocks. But I promise you that one night in my bed, with me, and you’ll be changing your tune.” He placed his hand a little lower on her back than was polite as he guided her to the island. With a wink, he gave the bar stool a pat.

She looked at it, and him, skeptically. And okay, maybe he did lean down to smell her hair as he pulled the stool closer. And in the process, he may have caught a hint of her scent, the same jasmine with a hint of amber that was all over his sheets.

Oh yeah, when Goldilocks left for work, Emmitt had crawled into his bed and crashed. Even with fresh sheets he couldn’t escape the sexy scent of Annie. It fueled a few thoughts about how she looked in that soft gray pajama set, which was nothing more than drawstring shorts and a top with skinny straps, but on her, *man oh man*, it was hot as hell. He sank into the mattress, buried beneath all dozen of her pillows and instantly he was dead to the world for a solid six hours with her smell to keep him company.

It was the best sleep he’d had in recent memory. There was something soothing about all the candles and little knickknacks she had lying around. There was also something soothing about seeing her in his kitchen.

Annie sent him a sidelong glance. “I will take that glass of wine, but whatever game you’re playing, it won’t work. We both know I have the right to stay here, and you’re morally obligated to find alternate housing. You’re just trying to charm me into giving up the bed, and I paid for that bed. It’s mine.”

“You should have some guy charming you every day of the year, Anh. But tonight I don’t want to talk about the housing situation. I just want to talk,” he said. “To you.”

Emmitt watched the way her lashes lowered to rest on her cheeks when she disappeared behind her shyness. He decided then and there, before this thing between them ended, she’d never feel shy around him again.

But since this was in the beginning stages, and she was closing up on him, he needed to lighten the mood. “I’m more of a *ring on my finger before shacking up* kind of guy.”

“Turns out, I’m allergic to rings.” She wiggled her fourth finger and they both laughed.

“How about we agree not to talk about our housing problem tonight,” he said, then slid around to the other side, filling up his glass with water. “To a shitty day.”

She paused for a moment, as though trying to figure out if there was a catch. There wasn’t, but he didn’t need to tell her that.

Emmitt had offered to cook her dinner to throw her off-balance, but one look

at her in that frayed denim skirt and scoop neck tank and his brain had been scrambled. She must have changed from her scrubs into this piece of art before she arrived at the market.

His good fortune.

She had a smoking body and amazing legs, he decided when she kicked off her Converse and hopped up on the stool. Two powerful weapons he'd have to be diligently aware of.

Then she smiled and, *holy shit*, all the tension he'd been carrying since he landed stateside vanished.

"To a shitty day," she agreed and even toasted.

Before she charmed him beyond reason, Emmitt went to work making a stellar spinach and arugula salad while Annie eyed him tentatively over her wineglass.

"How did you leave it with your daughter today?"

"To be honest, I don't know. There was yelling, there was hugging, there were tears, there was avoidance, there were so many emotions. All the emotions all at once, it was terrifying."

"My dad says my teenage years are to blame for his premature graying. And I was a pretty easy kid," she said. Emmitt must have had a look of abject horror on his face, because Annie reached over and patted his hand. "You'll survive."

"Yesterday, I would have agreed with you. Today?" He gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "I don't know. She's blowing me off to have dinner with one of her friends, choosing to sleep at Gray's, and I'm stuck building the arbors for the dance's six selfie stations at a father-daughter dance, where I don't think I'll be welcomed."

She muffled a laugh. "What's a selfie station?"

"Hell if I know. I hate selfies on principle." But working with his hands sounded like fun. "Give me a nail gun and electric saw and I'm good. But what I was really hoping for was time with P, so I didn't give a shit what job they gave me. I'm there to initiate step two."

"Step two?" She laughed and, cupping her glass with both hands, rested her elbows on the counter. "Please enlighten me. What are these steps to decoding the mind of a teenager?"

"You laugh, but I've got this covered. I'm looking at this like an assignment."

"You already mentioned step one. Research."

"Yes." He was beyond pleased that she'd remembered. "And working with her will allow me to, step two, connect with the subject. Being on the committee allows me to, step three, watch her in her natural environment so I can, step four,

show up prepared.”

“I see,” she said, but her smirk said all she saw was this plan blowing up in his face.

It was true, he knew jack shit about glitter and color themes, but Paisley asked him every few months to redecorate her room, so what better way to connect? Plus, how hard could it be to decorate a gym? Streamers, balloons, maybe a disco ball.

Piece of cake.

“Now, if I can just get her to wear clothes that aren’t made of dental floss and lace—*oh*, keeping her away from guys who are too old to be looking her way, so I can sleep nights, would be nice.”

“Wow, I never thought what it must be like for guys like *you* to have a daughter.”

“Guys like *me* get offended when people like *you* lump us in with assholes,” he said. “But I get your point. Today at the high school, most of the boys were huddled in groups talking about the girls, the girls were talking to their friends about the boys, and neither side had a clue as to how this dance is played out. But then there was this one guy who thought he was hot shit.”

“I take it he was the ‘too-old-for-my-daughter’ guy you mentioned earlier?” She covered her mouth to hide her laugh. “I’m sorry, but this is just too good not to laugh. Plus, you never know, he might be a nice kid.”

“Oh, he isn’t, trust me. Nice guys don’t look at nice girls the way he was looking at P, with me standing ten feet away.” Emmitt didn’t need to meet the guy to know what he was after, because Emmitt had been that guy. Hated to admit that, most of the time, he still was.

It had been in second grade when May Chen shared her rice crispy treat with him that he’d realized he had a way with girls. The next day she brought him one shaped like a heart, and every day after until her parents relocated to Idaho.

A flip was switched that day, and for Emmitt there was no going back.

His mother taught him to be respectful of women, to remember that they were all someone’s sister or daughter. Emmitt didn’t have a sister, but now he had a daughter and he wondered if this was karma playing at irony.

Paisley was hitting an age when she’d start dating guys—guys who thought like he did, charmed girls like he did, and broke hearts the way he did.

“God, I’m screwed.” He looked at Annie, who was finding a hell of a lot of humor in his situation. “I’m serious. The way she acted today, the attitude and clothes. God, the lost look when talking about her mom. It gutted me.”

The humor faded and her eyes grew tender and warm. Once again, she reached out to touch his hand, to comfort him. “She’ll get through whatever this

is. Losing her mom at such an important age is hard and will be a huge struggle for her. But a lot of what you're worried about is just Paisley being a normal, emotionally charged teenager."

"This is normal?" he choked out, and God help him, he hoped she was joking. Because if this was normal teenage behavior, then he still had a few years of it to struggle through.

"Yes, and I promise you'll survive," Annie said, showing him her sweet side, which was a nice treat.

"How did your dad do it?"

"He loved me for who I was in that exact moment. When you're loved like that, you don't have to worry about letting anyone down," she said, a warm glow lighting her face.

Emmitt pictured her as a little girl, all her dolls lined up in order, her quiet sweetness lighting her smile and imagined she would have been easy to love.

"That's what I want for Paisley."

His kid deserved that kind of love, but Emmitt had a thing about disappointing others. He'd been disillusioned so many times over the years, especially his younger years, that he went to great lengths to avoid being that guy to someone else.

Bottom line: He didn't want to be somebody's disappointment.

"I'm pretty sure she has it, she's just too emotional right now to realize it," Annie said.

"I hope you're right," he said, then he opened a cabinet, expecting to find his serving bowls and instead found pots and pans.

"It's more logical to put pots and pans on the bottom, because they're heavier." She bit her lower lip, then looked across the island at him, those dark brown eyes filled with a mix of guilt and sass. He wondered how they'd look if he leaned over and just kissed her.

Before he could answer that question, she slid off the stool and walked over to a cabinet to the right of the stove. "Serving bowls should go next to the stove so when you're ready to serve, you just lean over and grab."

She opened the door and, *voilà*, all his bowls, platters, and even some white modern-looking dishes he didn't recognize were stacked nice and neat. She did the game show girl thing with her hand, looking mighty proud of her handiwork.

"I'll grab a bowl." She went up on her tiptoes, causing her skirt to slide up, up, and even farther up. And he found himself thinking that sharing quarters with her for even a few weeks was going to be a hell of a long time to keep his hands to himself. Especially if she preferred skirts.

"Let me help," he said, knowing damn well she could reach the bowl on her

own but, *come on*, he'd have to hand in his man card if he didn't take this opportunity.

Ignoring her protest, Emmitt slowly made his way toward her, sliding up right behind her and taking the bowl from her fingertips. She turned her head and, *again with the voilà*, her gaze went right to his lips.

"Did you know that's incredibly offensive to petite people?" she said, but he noticed her breath catch.

Interesting. She was as aware of the sexual heat that was blazing between them as he was.

His gaze slid down to the base of her neck, watching her pulse pound. It also afforded him a generous view of the black lace she had on beneath that tank.

"I didn't mean to offend you. I was just being helpful."

Not believing a bit of his BS—smart girl—Annie snuck under his arm and headed back to her perch, placing the counter between them, but it didn't matter. It was clear Goldilocks thought he was just the right size.

And suddenly Emmitt knew that their living situation wasn't the problem. As long as they resided in the same town, this thing, whatever it was, wasn't going away anytime soon.

They both had a lot to prove, him even more so. And doing something as stupid as acting on this attraction would be crazy. But Emmitt also had a thing for crazy.

And Annie was proving to be just his kind of crazy.

Chapter 14

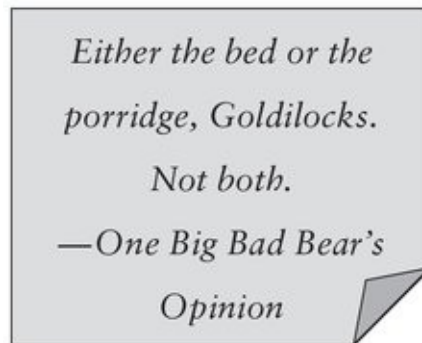
The only thing that pissed Annie off more than someone stealing her leftovers was if those leftovers were pizza.

She didn't have to look far to find the guilty party. And she had nobody to blame but herself.

After Emmitt cooked her a delicious dinner the other night, she'd decided to return the favor and order an extra-large pizza, which normally would have survived three days. But when feeding a man who ate like a bear after hibernation, the slices disappeared faster than she could say "Hands off my pizza."

Afraid it would be inhaled in one sitting, Annie had snatched up the last two pieces and tucked them safely away in her neon green PANGRY: A CRANKY STATE RESULTING FROM A LACK OF PIZZA lunch sack.

Only lunch break was here and instead of finding her pepperoni and green olive pizza, she found a sticky note.



Annie wasn't sure what bothered her more: that he'd eaten her lunch—*after* complaining that green things didn't belong on a pizza—or that she was starting to look forward to these little blips of Emmitt in her everyday life.

Annie had uprooted her world in Hartford because it was easier than daily reminders of her past failures with men. So starting today, she was going to pick up as many shifts as she could: ER, pediatrics, urology—she wasn't choosy. The less time she was around Emmitt, engaging Emmitt, or whatever the blip was happening between them, the better it would be for her goal.

And her sanity.

Being forced to move would have been an easy solution. Only he hadn't threatened to enact the seven-day eviction clause yet, which was good, since the other place had fallen through and she hadn't located a single rental in her price range that wasn't a room-for-rent. If she wanted to stick to her man-free plan, then she wasn't sure how long she'd be able to stay.

But if she were being honest, she didn't want to move. She'd come to think of that cabin as her sanctuary and sparring with Emmitt as entertainment. Moving in with another roommate had all the appeal of steamed cabbage. Plus, it would feel like starting over again.

Been there, done that, had the Dolly Parton wedding dress to show for it.

Moving wasn't high on her list of how she wanted to spend her days. She'd come to Rome to move on, not move around from room to room. She had more entertaining ways to use her data plan than searching Craigslist.

With a grin, she picked up her phone and typed

Since I'm the paying customer it's only fair I get the bed.

She stood there waiting for the reply and groaning over how ridiculous she was being. Dr. Tanner's office had been a drive-through for strep throat and bronchitis patients today. There were enough cultures to label and paperwork to input that this would likely be her only downtime until she signed out. She shouldn't be wasting her break texting—especially with her pizza-thief of a roommate-not-roommate.

She set the phone on the table and pulled out the lone cup of applesauce that would make up her entire lunch while she stared at the phone.

The three little dots appeared on the screen, and anticipation danced in her chest.

Your rent covers half the cost, therefore U get half the bed. Since I'm a gentleman, I'll let U choose which half.

Lunch forgotten, her fingers glued themselves to the screen, and did a little click-a-dee-click dance of their own.

Sorry, I don't play well with others.

Maybe U aren't playing with the right people then.

Sleep in the spare room.

No can do. That's Paisley's room & I promised it would be hers any night she needs it.

Statements like that made it hard for her to dislike him. She'd been told when she rented the cabin that the locked room was off-limits, so she'd never looked inside. She hadn't thought that rule applied to the owner, but now she knew it did.

He wanted Paisley to feel that she had her own space at his house, and he would rather sleep on a lumpy recliner than invade her privacy.

Enough had happened over the past couple days to have Annie reconsidering her earlier assessments. Either Emmitt wasn't as bad as she'd thought, or he was so good he had her conned. She was certain of one thing: He wasn't faking the little groan he tried to hide whenever she flicked on the lights or he moved his head too fast. Which made her feel guilty for taking the bed.

He didn't offer up any explanation for his injuries, and she didn't pry, but it was clear there was more going on than he was telling everyone. Her curiosity was further sparked when she overheard Gray ask Rosalie to contact the hospital in China—so that part was true, at least—and have Emmitt's medical records sent over.

Her phone vibrated. She wiggled in her seat.

What do U need 2night, Goldilocks?

“Are you sexting?” Lynn asked from over Annie's shoulder. It wasn't both of her friends' sudden appearance at the table that had her dropping her phone, but the fact she'd been caught—sexting?

That was what she'd been doing, right? If not, then it would most definitely qualify as some kind of millennial foreplay.

Before she even registered Beckett was present, her friend had snatched up Annie's phone and was scrolling through the text history.

“Oh my God, she totally is!” Beckett waved the phone so Lynn could see. Annie reached for it, but Beckett held it above her head. And since Beckett was built like a runway model—well, a runway model in a Grumpy Cat shirt that read, *THE PROBLEM WITH SOME PEOPLE IS THAT THEY EXIST*—Annie gave up. “Oh girl, he so wants to play with you.”

“Hand it over,” Annie demanded, and Beckett complied. Before Lynn decided she wanted a look-see, which might lead to scrolling through the entire thread, Annie shoved it into her pocket. “And we were just having a roommate argument over the bed.”

“If Emmitt ‘Big O’ Bradley was my roommate, I’d make it a rule that every argument happened *in bed*,” Beckett said.

Annie shushed her and looked around the break room. Thankfully, it was busy on the floor, so the break room was almost empty. “I don’t want any rumors to start, and Emmitt seems to be patient zero for half the town’s gossip.”

“Also for half the town’s orgasms,” Lynn said sweetly, while Beckett made a lewd gesture.

“Can you not?” Annie stuck her spoon in the applesauce and pushed it away, no longer hungry.

Beckett picked it up, sniffed it, and made a face as if she’d just sucked on a lemon. “Since when do you eat all healthy?”

Annie knew she’d met a kindred soul in Beckett when her friend had announced that a chocolate bar and a jar of peanut butter was a balanced meal.

“Since Emmitt stole my leftovers.”

“He stole your pizza and you didn’t kill him?” Her friends exchanged meaningful glances.

“He also picked off the olives.”

“You sure he’s just a roommate?” This from Lynn, who was setting out a lunch that looked Gordon Ramsay approved. Knowing Lynn, though, she’d likely made it as she dashed out the door. Lynn was awesome that way.

“Yes. Trust me, even that is too much of him.” She tossed her applesauce in the trash. “I can’t believe I’m asking this, but any new deaths this week?”

Lynn sliced her panini à la perfection in half and handed it to Annie—on a cute napkin of course. “Is he really that bad?”

“He’s really that charming,” she said around bits of bacon and avocado. “It was easier when I hated him. Only, the more I learn about him, the more I’m starting to like him.”

“It’s the lure of the unattainable lover syndrome,” Beckett said. “It drives guys like Emmitt nuts.”

“What do you mean?” Annie asked, because it was better than focusing on the way her belly dipped when she thought about being his lover.

“Guys like Emmitt never have to work hard for things, so when they meet a challenge like, say... a woman who expresses her lack of interest, they become invested in proving you wrong.”

“He wants what he can’t have,” Lynn agreed.

Beckett sat back in her chair and propped her feet up on the empty seat between them. “You want to go back to thinking he’s a tool? Go along with the flirting and pretend you’re really into him. He’ll disappear. Trust me, that’s his MO.”

“Are you saying sleep with him?” she asked, annoyed at the way her belly fluttered.

“Flirt, kiss, sleep.” Beckett shrugged. “What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I sleep with my roommate!”

“Who never stays in town for very long,” Beckett pointed out. “If he doesn’t follow his usual MO, then it’s no biggie because your contract is up in a few months. And while I’d love for you to stay here forever and ever”—Beckett took her hand—“you have the world to see. Remember?”

She remembered. “What happened to ‘Guys aren’t worth the heartache? Man-Free Living’?”

“Who said anything about involving your heart? Man-Free Living doesn’t mean orgasm-free, or I would have turned in my chip last night. It’s about living your life on your terms,” Beckett said, and it was as if she were speaking Swahili. Everything Annie did, she did wholeheartedly. Halfway wasn’t in her genetic makeup.

Annie had learned firsthand that halfway led to regrets, and regrets wound up hurting the people you loved. Then again, maybe that was her problem. “You mean a fling?”

“He’s been called the Male Wonder of the World. Supposedly one night with him and it’s like you’ve been reborn. I’ve even heard his dic—”

“Beckett!” Annie stopped her friend before she did the whole *I once caught a fish this big* routine.

“What? See if it’s legend or legit. Either way, you have one hell of an awesome rebound sex story, and you close the door on Clark forever.”

“He’s marrying someone else. That pretty much closed, locked, and deadbolted the door.”

“But this would be on your terms,” Lynn said, and Annie’s belly fluttered for a whole different reason.

Everything in Annie’s life had always been on someone else’s terms. From birth, all the way up until Clark, she’d never acted out or taken a risk for fear of disappointing someone.

“I’ve never had a fling,” she admitted. “I’ve never had a one-night stand.”

Even saying it made her feel as if she’d engineered her entire existence around exceeding external expectations. And maybe she had. Annie was so desperate to fit in, her life had been short on risk and adventure.

She'd learned early on that Asian women were placed in one of two stereotypes: the exotic dragon lady or the bookish curve setter. Annie didn't relate to either, but the older she became, the more determined people were to label her.

Her mother had once explained that when people struggle to understand someone different from themselves, they find comfort in labels. Annie had a few labels to overcome. She was a woman of color, raised by white parents in a predominantly white community. And she was adopted.

All things that made her different—not relatable.

She found, once labeled, people didn't bother trying to know *her*, and instead relied on the role they deemed the most fitting when making their assessments. To avoid awkward situations, she'd allowed herself to be cast, and even played the role to perfection because, like everything else in her life, Annie did it wholeheartedly. Which was how she'd become a grown woman who didn't know what she'd find staring back at her in the mirror most mornings.

Damn, she was tired of wondering.

Annie slumped in her chair. "I'm almost thirty and I've never had a one-night stand. That's weird, isn't it?"

"It's not weird," Lynn said, but Beckett covered her mouth as if Annie had just confessed that she'd never licked the bottom of an ice-cream carton.

Emmitt was a lot like ice cream. Moose Tracks ice cream with its swirled caramel and fudge around chunks of cookie dough. One bite would lead to scarfing down an entire tub. Only to wake up the next morning, bloated and nauseous, vowing to never give in again. Until the next lonely night came along, and Moose Tracks was the only fix.

"I'm a binger," she said. "Work, junk food, Netflix. My control vanishes. Did you know I watched all three seasons of *This Is Us* in a single week? I got out of bed only to get tissues and pay the pizza delivery guy."

"So maybe you're just not a one-night-stand kind of girl," Beckett said, this time without an ounce of judgment in her tone. "Doesn't mean you can't have a fun summer fling."

Her heart raced at the very idea. "I've never had a casual anything. Not even friends."

Annie had never subscribed to the concept of a permanent ex. She kept in touch with every friend and boyfriend she'd ever had. In fact, she was the only reason the In-Bees were still so close. She took seriously the responsibility of fostering and nurturing relationships.

"And I wonder why I keep getting my heart tromped on." She laughed. "I've gone into every relationship I've ever had as if that person were the missing

piece of me. And hoping I was theirs.”

“Talk about pressure,” Beckett said. “On you and the guy.”

“I don’t know how to do it any other way.”

“Hey, as a fellow good girl, I get it,” Lynn said. “Thinking long term, always doing the right thing, putting everyone else first. It can make you nuts. Trust me, it gets to all of us at one point or another. For me it was spring break 2010. I have a tattoo of Zac Efron on my butt to prove it.”

Beckett owl eyed Lynn. “Like *High School Musical* Efron? Or *The Greatest Showman* Efron?”

“*High School Musical*.”

Beckett laughed so hard, she snorted.

“Wait, I’m still stuck on you having a tattoo!” Annie gasped. “You are a bigger good girl than I could even aspire to.”

“That’s because I learned my lesson. Making stupid decisions when suffering from bad-girl envy is a decision you will come to regret.”

“Maybe that’s the problem,” Annie said. “I’ve never done anything I regretted. I’ve never even attempted to do something a little wild for fear I’d regret it. Or disappoint someone. Or—”

“Been there, done that, got the tattoo. You aren’t missing out.” Lynn was trying really hard to prove a point. A point that clearly worked for Lynn, since she had a career she loved, a circle of friends who loved her back, and went home every night to a super great—not to mention incredibly hot—guy who adored her.

It was dangerous to get into a comparison game with someone like Lynn. Not that Annie didn’t deserve the same kind of happiness, but Lynn wore happiness like a silk robe. She made it look sexy. She wore so many hats and wore them with ease.

Annie didn’t even know what effortless and sexy looked like on her. And she wouldn’t go so far as saying she was depressed, but finding happiness always seemed harder for her than everyone else. Whereas Lynn could make vegan cookies taste like the real thing, Annie wasn’t even sure if her mom’s soup made her happy.

She was tired of trusting everyone else. Wanted to experience things for herself. Wasn’t that what this adventure of hers was about? Man-free didn’t have to mean no flings. It just meant living her life for herself and not for a man.

“But how do I know if I don’t even try? And look where caution has gotten me. My mom used to say, ‘Good girls get good husbands.’ And here I am, single and childless with a wedding dress fit for another woman.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.” Beckett held up a hand. “Not the

wedding-dress part, but the rest of it.”

“It just seems like I’ve been playing by the rules and no one else has. Or maybe everyone’s playing by a different set of rules and I was never given the playbook. Otherwise, how is it possible that every time I meet a good guy, he tells me I’m the best thing that’s ever happened to him, and in the next breath he just wants to be friends? Well, I’m tired of being everyone’s friend. I want to have some fun. You know what happens to women who spend their entire lives trying to do the right thing and thinking about consequences?” Annie stood. “You turn thirty never having had a one-night stand or a tattoo on your ass.”

“And the biggest good girl award goes to you,” Lynn deadpanned.

“Are you saying I shouldn’t take a risk here and there? Because, serious confession time, I’ve never even kissed a stranger.”

“Kiss away.” Lynn laughed. “Just be careful you don’t wind up with Zac Efron tattooed on your left ass cheek.”

* * *

The sun was calling it, disappearing into the horizon and settling in for a good night’s sleep. Something Annie would normally be doing, but tonight she had other plans.

Drinks with her girlfriends—on a work night! One couldn’t go bad girl over a single serving of applesauce. There were steps to be taken, toes to be dipped, skills to be acquired before she took the plunge.

She wanted to splash around, identify dangerous waters so as not to get caught up in a current that pulled her out to sea.

Annie got out of her car and nearly melted in the humidity. Or maybe it was the anticipation of tonight. She was meeting Lynn and Beckett at the Crow’s Nest, a bar and grill that jutted out over Lovers’ Point beach, offering some of the best views in town—since it was located between the Coast Guard office and the firehouse.

The views of the Atlantic were nice too.

The former 150-year-old fish market had been repurposed into a place where Rome’s locals could pull up a chair and throw back a few with friends while listening to live music. The two-story bar specialized in drinks served by the shot, shaker, or half shell and fancied itself a Rhode Island sourced, caught, and brewed kind of grill—making it a local hot spot.

Tonight was Tidepool Tuesday, so the billiards were on the house and anything that came in a barrel or a shell was half off. Half off meant double the drinks, double the laughs, and double the crowd.

Annie spotted her friends at the far end of the bar and waved before stepping down into the sway. As she pushed her way through the sea of tipsy patrons,

barely able to see above the swell of the crowd, she quickly found herself disoriented.

“Excuse me,” she yelled to be heard over the crowd. No one moved.

She patted a large man in front of her on the shoulder. “Excuse me, just trying to get past.”

Being vertically challenged never really bothered her unless she was in a big crowd, and people used her petite stature as an excuse to ignore her. Like Paul Bunyan, who glanced down at her then, with a smile, went back to chatting up his bros.

“Jerk,” she mumbled while searching for another way across the room. She backed up to retrace her steps when a hand slid around her waist and pulled her into a very big, very toned chest. She looked up to find a very smug Emmitt smiling down at her.

“If you wanted to dance, you could have just asked,” he said, his voice having no trouble carrying over the crowd.

“I didn’t even know you were here,” she shouted.

“What?” He cupped his ear. “You want to buy me a beer? I’m flattered, but I have to be up-front. I’m not a *kiss on the first date* kind of guy.”

“No, I think a date would be too much commitment for you.”

That earned her a smile. “Need help out of here?”

“I’m good. Just going over there to meet my friends.” She pointed toward the spot where she’d seen them, only Emmitt grabbed her finger and turned it in the opposite direction.

“Seriously?”

“Afraid so. The guys and I have been watching you walk around in circles for about ten minutes. There’s even a betting pool on how long you’d last before you started throwing your shoes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“I’m not surprised.” He looked down at her very high, very red, very sexy stilettos, and when he grinned, it was pure sin. “I see you came armed.”

“I heard there were pizza thieves afoot.” She batted his hand off her waist. “And I was not circling.”

His hands went around her waist again with startling speed. She couldn’t even protest before he lifted her off the ground as if she weighed twenty pounds and turned her to see his friends. A group of men waved back.

“You’re a jerk.”

Then he swiveled her to her friends, who were—farther away from her than when she’d started—giving her the A-OK on the hottie.

“Fine, I was a little lost. Can you put me down?” It was hard to appear tough

when you were being carried like a child.

He set her down, ever so slowly, their bodies sliding against each other. By the time her feet were on the floor, her entire body was humming. “You did that on purpose.”

“Did what?”

“That whole *slide me down your body* move. Is that how you get women? Pretend to save them, then get all handsy?”

Emmitt glanced down at her hands—which were pressed, fingers spread, across his pecs, her body leaning in to his. Even worse, his hands were in his pockets. “Who’s getting handsy with who, Nurse Annie?”

She jerked her hands back and, well, she didn’t know what to do with them. She was a little light-headed from all the touching and arguing, and she was hyperaware of her body.

“I didn’t come here to argue,” he went on, “but since you seem so bent on it, want to argue a little more over there, on the dance floor?”

Wanting to test Beckett’s “Lure of Unrequited Love” theory, Annie said, “Maybe later. Tonight I’m hanging with my friends.”

He gave a well-practiced pout, his hands sliding around her waist yet again. “I thought we were friends.”

“Friends don’t steal friends’ leftovers. Now shoo.” She was about to swat him away when the big guy behind her was shoved by an equally big guy, who nearly toppled over Annie. Had Emmitt not curved his body around hers like a cocoon—a warm, manly, yummy-smelling cocoon that was actively shielding her from the world—she would have landed on her butt.

Old-fashioned or not, there was something sexy about a man who placed himself between you and danger. Even if that danger was just a two hundred pound beer bottle with limbs. There was also something almost intimate about the way he held her. Not so much sexy, but as if there were a deeper connection forming between them.

He felt it, too, because that playboy grin faded and his eyes became warm and melty. Which was okay with her, because she was going warm and melty as well—in too many places to count.

“You okay?” he whispered, and he was so close she could hear. She nodded. “How about I help you to your friends, and we never have to speak of this again.”

“Agreed. Whoa—” She clung to his neck as she was suddenly airborne. “What are you doing?”

With one arm behind her back, the other beneath her knees, he had her in his arms, as he did a convincing *An Officer and a Gentleman* reenactment through

the bar. “Getting you safely to your friends.”

“I didn’t think you’d carry me. I thought you’d clear a path or something.” She squirmed, but he only pulled her closer.

“Give up, Goldilocks,” he said. “Clearing a path would have been easier, but then I wouldn’t have had the chance to carry you. And I must admit, you look good in my arms.”

“Enjoy it, because this is the last time it will ever happen.” Damn, why did she have to sound so breathy? Bad girls definitely didn’t do breathy.

“Oh, I intend to enjoy it. And Annie, it will happen again, only we’ll be doing a hell of a lot more than crossing a dance floor.” The intensity of his gaze made those caramel pools heat to melted milk chocolate—a close second in favorite midnight snacks—and Annie was glad she was in his arms, because she was certain her legs were like two wet noodles. “And I would put good money it will be instigated by you.”

“You always this sure of yourself?”

“It’s the first thing I’ve been sure of since the night you flashed me your panties.” She shivered at his words. He grinned. “Yeah, that’s how it will go down, because even though you would rather die than admit it, I get to you. I get to you bad.”

Before she could reply, he was sitting her on the stool next to her friends, who were gawking at Annie. And Annie was gawking right back.

Seemed she’d missed the memo stating dump the little black dress and, instead, come as you are. To be fair, her dress was more navy blue than black, but it looked red carpet worthy next to Lynn’s pink knit top with white collar.

And don’t even get her started on Beckett, who was in her basic blue jeans, teal flip-flops, and a matching teal SAVING MANKIND. ONE MISSING SOCK AT A TIME tank. On her lap was a lop-eared bunny she was training for an autistic girl in town.

“Annie,” Lynn said. “Introduce us to your friend.”

“Roommate,” Annie said.

“We’re living together,” Emmitt quickly corrected.

Lynn and Beckett exchanged a few looks. Which was okay, since Annie was exchanging a few looks of her own. *What the actual hell?* and *Way to leave a girl hanging* were the heart of her message, with some serious *You guys suck* undertones.

“Lynn, Beckett, this is my *roommate*, Emmitt.” She leaned back so hands could be shaken. “Emmitt, these are my sneaky friends who punked me into dressing up for church.”

“Sweetie, I’ve never seen a dress like that in church,” Lynn said. “Plus, we

didn't want to steal your thunder."

Annie felt her cheeks heat, because she had picked this dress for that exact reason. And while she'd never admit it aloud, she wondered what Emmitt would think. She hadn't expected him to be here, but secretly she'd been hoping.

Beckett grinned. "No one could steal my thunder." She lifted up the bunny and kissed its nose. "This is Lord Hoppington. He decided to crash girls' night."

If Emmitt thought it was weird that her friend had brought a bunny into a bar, he didn't say anything.

"It's just a dress, and he's only my roommate for a few more days," Annie announced. "I'm looking for a new place to stay."

"That's not a dress. It's a statement." Emmitt scooted closer, sheltering her again from the crush of the crowd. Not a human shield so much as an exclamation point for anyone who might be thinking of bumping her chair. She didn't think he was aware of the gesture, but her nipples took notice. "As for the living arrangement, I think I have a solution."

"You're moving out? Wonderful, I'll bring the boxes and packing tape."

"While I do love me a good box party, admit it, you'd miss me." Before she could say something snarky, he added, "As of four hours ago, I'm Rome High School's official Decoration Chair for the father-daughter dance."

"I have no idea how that relates to your moving out—"

"I'm getting there."

"But you? On a decorating committee? Emmitt, that is the worst idea ever." *Like ever.* "I don't think faux taxidermy and stein collections are really what the committee is looking for."

"Let me restate, I am the committee. Me. Myself. And I. Crazy, right?"

"That's a word for it," Annie said.

"I admit, it's not the ideal position for a self-appointed bachelor, but that was the only way to work on the same committee as Paisley. The list came out today and while I was on the selfie-arbors, P was put in the decorations group. So I had to decide, nail gun and electric saw but never see Paisley or head up Team Glitter and Bling and spend every meeting right next to her."

"And you thought, 'How hard can glitter and bling be?'" Annie asked, not even bothering to hide her disbelief.

"Maybe at first. But then this lady hands me a tome full of color swatches, fabric pieces, and clippings of every formal high school dance from the past decade. These kids are expecting a royal wedding or something."

"What's the theme?" Lynn asked.

"Once Upon a Time," he said, and all the ladies laughed. Even Lord Hoppington twitched a whisker.

“Before you say it, the guys already gave me shit about how I’m going to ruin the dance and Paisley will never speak to me again.” With a huge sigh, he sat down on the stool—her stool.

Scooting her over until she had but one butt cheek on the cushion, he slid in beside her. If it hadn’t been for his arm around her waist—which was doing some sliding of its own—she would have fallen to the floor. “I was ready to call Rachel, the lady in charge, and admit I was in over my head, but Paisley already knows, so I can’t bail.”

“Are you breaking out in hives?” Annie turned to her friends. “Emmitt has adverse reactions to commitment, boring wine, and admitting he doesn’t have the proper skill set to get the job done.”

“Don’t forget the green olives.” He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “And you haven’t seen my skills because, if you had, you’d know I always get the job done.”

Goose bumps tingled over her exposed flesh while unadulterated thrills heated up everything else.

“It’s a chromosome genetic disorder thing,” Beckett was saying. “Ninety-nine percent of males suffer from it.” She drained her martini in one swallow. “Imagine an X and one of the legs breaks off. What do you have? Oh, a Y. World’s never been the same since. True story.”

“Then it’s a good thing I saw you,” he said to Annie. “Here I am with my broken X, when I see you looking like a Roomba trying to map the room, and it hits me. That book. The one that’s sitting on my patio? It was pretty extensive and detailed, leading me to think you have some serious planning skills.”

Annie swallowed hard, lowering her voice so the conversation was just between the two of them. “You looked at my wedding planner?”

“Hard not to when it’s wide open on my back porch. You’ve clearly got this event-planning thing down. I mean color schemes, napkin holders. Real thing, who knew napkins needed holders?”

“They’re called rings. And it was for a *wedding*, not an event.”

“Thanks for the clarification. You’ve planned four, right?”

Annie looked over her shoulder, relieved to see her friends were engaged in conversation with the bartender. “It was two.”

“Two more than most.”

“I was nine the first time. The groom was Ricky Martin.”

“That explains the Copacabana theme.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You snooping through my things?”

“One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Tell me, did you intend to invite *all* your exes to the wedding?” he asked, seeming awfully satisfied with himself.

“Before meeting you, I’d heard about women who stayed friends with their exes but, like most broken X’s, I’d assumed they were an urban legend. Kind of like serial brides.”

“Maintaining healthy relationships with one’s exes doesn’t make a woman a serial bride, it makes her mature,” she said, not sounding mature at all.

Annie had always taken pride in the way she maintained close friendships with her exes. Yet talking about it now, considering her proclivity from a fresh perspective, she began to question what it really said about her. Was inviting people who’d disappointed her and broken her heart to share in her special day a sign of maturity, or did it just make her a pushover?

Annie knew which side of the argument Emmitt would fall on, and last week she’d been positive where she landed. But after the irritating situation Clark had put her in, uncaring how it inconvenienced her and complicated her life, Annie realized she needed to do some serious soul searching.

“Well then, mature Anh, what do you say to helping a friend in need? And before you say no again, hear me out. I have an offer you can’t refuse.”

“You’re leaving Rome?”

“Better. I’m asking you to be my official roommate. You can stay at my place, rent free, until your contract with the hospital is up.”

“With you there?” She gave a dramatic sigh. “I don’t know. Right now I need to focus on my job and myself. That was my whole reason for coming to Rome.”

“Then moving should be out of the question,” Beckett interrupted with a grin. “Think of all the time you’d waste checking out new places, applying, credit checks.”

“Not to mention the deposit,” Emmitt said. “Did Boy Wonder ever get your money back to you?”

“No.” And since Clark hadn’t returned any of her calls, except with a text saying she didn’t need to bring a gift to the wedding because that might be awkward, she wasn’t counting on seeing even a penny until after the wedding.

She looked at Emmitt and felt her resolve falter. “Fine. I will help plan, but I am not doing anything the day of.”

“Does this mean you’re staying?”

“It means I’ll think about it.”

“Now who’s afraid of commitment?” He leaned in. “Come on, just say it, we’re good together.”

“You stole my pizza.”

He waved a hand in surrender. “Won’t happen again. I promise. Now, I think we should seal this deal with a kiss.”

“If you want to kiss someone, any one of those ladies at the bar would say yes. Go ask one of them.”

His gaze trailed down to her lips. “Seems I’m more of a one-woman kind of man lately. Plus I love it when you get all opinionated.”

“I’m not in an arguing mood.”

He leaned in. “What kind of mood are you in?”

“Are you flirting with me? Because that’s not in the roommate agreement.”

“What roommate agreement? You haven’t said yes. Are you saying yes?”

“If I do, we’ll have a roommate agreement drawn up and it will state ‘No Kissing’ right at the top.”

“We’ll need to be clear,” he said. “No kissing you? Or you can’t kiss me? I’m unsure how I feel about that. It’s not really fair if you can kiss me but I can’t kiss you.”

“I’m already regretting this.” She put her face in her hands. “Don’t you ever stop?”

“Not until I get what I want.”

“That’s all it is for guys like you.”

“What do you mean *guys like me*?” He rested an elbow on the counter, then his cheek on his hands, leaning in as if all ears.

“If this went one flirt longer than you wanted it to go, you’d burn rubber out of here.”

“Try me.”

“I want to get married and have two kids by the time I’m thirty-five.”

“And that’s the problem with women like you.” He tapped the tip of her nose with his pointer finger—twice. “The second a guy doesn’t click off enough boxes in the Potential Husband category, you rule him out.”

“I am not like that,” she argued, but she so was like that and they both knew it. “And you’d never stay in one spot long enough to find out.”

“I don’t know, Goldilocks. Maybe I’ve just been searching for the right bed.” He leaned down and rested his lips against the shell of her ear. “Think about it.”

Chapter 15

Emmitt didn't have to be an arson investigator to know that if you played with enough fire, eventually someone would get burned.

As he sat on the other side of the bar, watching Annie and her friends, he decided that was reason enough for him to pack up his things and move onto the boat with Levi. The other reason was that barely legal blue number Annie had going on.

Short, sleek, and tied in place by two thin straps that disappeared over her shoulders, only to crisscross all the way down her back—from the curve of her neck to the gentle curve right above her panty line. Thong, he believed, a gut call he'd made while carrying her across the room.

There hadn't been much between his hand and her back because of the open nature of the dress. It must have been a bitch to get into. Getting out of it would be a whole other story.

A single tug of the string and the whole thing would come apart.

Then there was her body, slight and delicate with a waist his hands could span all the way around, and they did. While some might think her demure or fragile, Emmitt knew better.

What Annie had going on was a steely grace that was as rare as it was lethal. The main reason Emmitt had stationed himself on the opposite side of the bar, where a group of guys he often hung with were shooting the shit. Not that he was tracking the conversation—he was too busy watching his roomie nursing a pink cocktail.

If she wound up like her friends, who were swigging their drinks as if they were punch, she might need help. And never one to leave a lady in need, he would offer. He was good with complicated dresses. He was real helpful that way.

Tonight, she'd worn her black layered hair sleek and straight, the glossy strands hitting right below her chin and inching shorter in the back, exposing her elegant neck.

There was something erotic about seeing the back of a woman's neck. It was as if he were getting a peek at something that should be covered. Viewing a silky patch of skin he'd love to gently bite.

He couldn't stop looking at her, and she knew it. Oh, she was pretending to be absorbed in conversation with her friends, but the way she kept fidgeting with her earlobe told him that he'd gotten to her.

Levi waved a hand in front of Emmitt's face. "You going to order?"

"What?"

“The bar is packed, and the dining room is a forty-minute wait.” Levi pointed to the crowd clogging the entry to his bar, where local families and a few unfamiliar faces were waiting to be seated. “Dan called in sick, and so did my new hostess, which means they’re probably taking each other’s temperature with their tongues, so I don’t have time for you to be eye-fucking my patrons. Either order or give up your bar stool.”

“I’ll have a burger and one of whatever you have on tap.” It had been well over twelve hours since his last painkiller. “And for the record, I’m not eye-fucking your patrons.”

Emmitt was only interested in one patron, and she’d throw her stilettos at him if he used that term.

Levi set a frosty mug under the spigot of a local IPA. “You know Gray will kick your ass if you screw around with his temp.”

“I’m aware.” And it wouldn’t be nearly as bad as what Emmitt would do to himself if he hurt her. “And nothing’s happened.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Nothing physical had happened, but a whole lot of other stuff was happening even as Annie pretended to ignore him. That she was pretending so hard confirmed it.

Being around her felt good. Watching her prance around his kitchen in her cotton pajamas while griping that he’d drunk all the milk was even better. Sitting at the kitchen table and sharing pizza and beer with her made him wish for things he shouldn’t be wishing for.

Levi slid Emmitt his beer, and frothy foam spilled over the side and onto the bar top, which was made of planking stripped from an old boat. “You need to get laid by someone other than Annie before you do something stupid.”

“Says the born-again virgin.” Emmitt took a long swig. “Unless something happened since I was here last, you haven’t been on a date with someone other than Paisley since Beth sailed away with that weekend warrior from Vermont.”

“I’ve dated.”

“Lotion and a sock don’t count.”

Levi rested his elbows on the bar top and leaned in. “You’re just pissy because you’ve got a thing for Annie, and it scares the shit out of you.”

“So, I think she’s cute. So what?”

“Cute? I don’t know if that is the pussiest thing you’ve ever said or the most refreshing.”

“How else do I say that while, yes, I find her insanely attractive, I also like her, and not just in my bed. Not that I’ve had her in my bed. Okay I have, just not at the same time as me. But what I’m saying is I like her out of bed. It’s weird.”

“It’s about to get weirder.” Levi’s grin was a little too big for Emmitt’s comfort.

Someone slid up to the bar next to him. A very cute someone with pink glossy lips, who hip-checked him as she took half his chair. “Okay, deal.”

“Seriously?” he asked, knowing he had a dopey grin on his face.

“Are you giving me a chance to reconsider?”

“Bartender, two glasses of your finest boring Pino Grigio.” He held up two fingers.

Annie raised just one. “No more boring Pino for me.” Then to Levi, “I’ll have what he’s having.”

“Actually, she can have mine.” He waved Levi off, then slid his mug her way.

She eyed the mug with suspicion. “Trying to pass off bad beer?”

“There are a couple things I’m not bad at. Picking a good beer is the other one.”

After a skeptical look, she tilted her head back, making the delicate lines of her neck elongate, and took a sip. A tiny sip. Then her eyes twinkled with delight and she took a big gulp.

It was the freckles, he decided. The light sprinkling right across the bridge of her nose and cheeks was all kinds of cute. He’d never considered himself a freckles man. But she had him seriously reconsidering.

“So, what changed?” he asked.

She shrugged. “When I left Connecticut, my goal was to try new things. To throw caution to the wind and be open to experiences that come my way.”

He picked up the mug and took a drink. “I’ve seen your aim. I wouldn’t advise throwing anything.”

“Then I will go over these one by one.” She fanned a stack of bar napkins under his nose. “Now that it’s official. Here.”

“What are those?” There must have been fifteen napkins in the pile.

“Things any roommate should know, but since we weren’t officially roommates, I won’t hold it against you.” She placed the first one down. “No kissing of any kind, as previously agreed upon.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to any such thing.”

She ignored him and placed another napkin down, spinning it to face him.

“No leftover stealing,” he read. “Whoever claims the leftover gets the leftover, unless said leftover is pizza; then it automatically belongs to Annie.” He plucked the pen from her fingers and poised it on the napkin to make an addition. “May I?”

“Be my guest.”

“You mean, be my roommate.” As he scribbled on the napkin, he noticed she was reading over his shoulder, so he turned his body to block her view. She let out a huff that had him chuckling. When he was finished, he slid it to her.

She picked it up and laughed. The napkin now read, *Whoever claims the leftover gets the leftover, unless said leftover is pizza with green things on it. Then it automatically belongs to Annie. All other pizzas are up for grabs.*

“Next.” He wiggled his fingers impatiently. She handed over the rule, which he read to himself, then tossed on the bar top. “Wait. You’re bitching that I leave the toilet seat up in my own bathroom?”

“When the bathroom is connected to the bedroom I’m sleeping in, yes.” She was indignant now, and for some reason that turned him on. “I don’t like falling in the water at three in the morning.”

“Who says you get the bed?”

She handed him the next napkin and he looked down, but focusing on the handwriting strained his eyes. “You read it.”

The quirk of her brow was pretty much screaming bullshit. He quirked his back, and with a huff she reluctantly read it aloud. “Annie gets the bed, the whole bed, because she was there first and called dibs on it.”

She gave him a sunny smile, and he laughed. That smile had him doing a whole lot more than laughing, but he was pretty sure *that* was against the rules too. But damn, her smiles were going to create problems. He already knew it. “How about we put up a wall of pillows and—”

“Nope,” she interrupted. “The whole bed or it’s a deal breaker.”

“Fine, but I get to hold the remote control.” He couldn’t give two shits about the remote control. He just didn’t want her to think he was a pushover. Even though, when it came to her, he totally was.

“As long as it’s understood that just because you hold the remote, doesn’t make you boss.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She pointed to the napkin, and he dutifully added that he didn’t get to be the boss. They went through the remaining napkins, mostly rules about dishes and cooking and snooping. He added a few of his own, including that anything silk or lace had to be either in her drawer or on her body. If he found it hanging in the shower, she’d have to model for him.

When they were done, she stacked the napkins and handed them to him. He folded them in half and slid them into his front pocket. “Feel better?”

She bumped her shoulder with his. “A little. But there’s one more.”

Her eyes were filled with uncertainty as she handed him the last napkin. It was warm, the corners worried from being clutched in her hand. He wondered if

it was separate from the others because she'd been considering holding it back.

He looked down, and his chest gave a hard thump. "Roommates have to be up-front and honest with each other. No fake promises or lies."

He met her gaze, but she was fiddling with the mug, tracing a line of foam down the side with her finger. Her eyes were hidden by a curtain of hair, her shoulders slumped forward like a protective barrier.

He hated that she felt the need to add the last two words, because it meant she'd had her fill of lies and disappointments, and that didn't sit right with him.

Annie dedicated her heart to everything she did and everyone she met. Her warmth filled the room even before she entered. What really astounded him was her amazing capacity to love. If she loved as openly and deeply as she did everything else, he could only imagine how many times she'd been let down over the years. How many Clarks had, intentionally or not, caused her pain?

Tucking her hair behind her ear, he tilted her head toward him. "No fake promises or lies."

She gave him a small smile. "Then we have a deal." She stuck out her hand, and the minute it slipped between his, something heated sparked between them. Rules or not, they were going to end up in bed.

True story.

She took a sip of beer, then passed him the mug. "Can I ask you something? Not because I'm snooping, but because now that I'm your roommate, if anything happens, I should know." This time she reached out, running a gentle finger from his temple to his eyebrow. "How bad is your head injury?"

Not what he was expecting. And not something he wanted to talk about in a noisy bar, if ever. So he leaned back until she was forced to drop her hand. "I'll tell you. Just not right now, okay?"

"Okay, but you're going to have to come clean soon. Your file is being sent from China, and I want to know what it says. But I'd rather hear it from you."

He didn't respond to her statement, only flagged down Levi to get a glass of water. But when Levi came over, he had his cell in hand.

"Where's Paisley?" Levi asked as if Emmitt had gotten her an after-school job at a strip club.

"She's at her friend's house working on some project."

"What project and what friend?" This was from Gray, who was on speaker phone. "Because Owen stopped by to work on their chemistry project. He said he swung by your place but you weren't there, so when she didn't answer his text, he came here. This is the second time Owen's come looking for her when she was supposed to be with him."

"I'm not sure what project," he said, feeling a little like a kid being called

into the principal's office. "And she's at Sammy's."

"Sammy?" Levi sputtered. "You let her go home with Sammy?"

Gray said something similar except his question was much more colorful than Levi's. "Yeah, she seemed like a nice girl." From across the gym anyway.

Levi ran a hand down his face. "Sammy is Samuel Allen. The biggest player at the high school. Or as the teens would say, the biggest fuck boy in RHS history."

The same knot that had twisted around his chest when she'd told him he was ruining her life tightened two times harder. He told himself to breathe in and breathe out. "Fuck boy or not, Paisley wouldn't do anything."

"You mean like sneak a mini skirt and thigh-high boots to school in her backpack, sneak out, steal my beer?" Gray yelled. "Wake up and smell the estrogen."

"Dude," Levi said. "Sammy is you fifteen years ago. Just better looking."

"Shit." Emmitt stood and started searching his pockets for his keys, coming up empty. He looked at Levi. "I Ubered here."

"Of course you did. I'll get her," Gray said.

"No," Emmitt ground out. "I'm on duty tonight. I screwed up. I'll get her."

"You sure?" Gray sounded less than convinced, and Emmitt wanted to pull him through the phone. "You can't let this shit slide."

"I know how to parent."

"Says the guy who Ubered to a bar on his night," Gray spat out.

Emmitt was about to say something he couldn't take back when he felt a warm hand slide around his arm. And then there was Annie, with that big heart of hers right there in her eyes. "Actually, I'm headed home. We can pick up Paisley on the way."

Chapter 16

“I can’t believe she lied to me!”

It was the first thing Emmitt said after folding himself into Annie’s car. She’d barely had time to say goodbye to her friends before he started ushering her out the door. Beckett gave her the *Go for it* thumbs-up while Lynn was mouthing “Zac Efron tattoo.”

At least she’d make one of them proud.

“In my experience, teen girls lie when they don’t feel as if they have options,” Annie said.

“That girl has more options than a drive-thru menu,” he said. “I don’t know about Curly or Moe back there, but I’ve made it clear she can come to me about anything.”

She cut Emmitt a glance. “Even if it’s about a cute boy?”

“Yes.” He seemed absolute in his answer, but moments later added, “A cute boy? Absolutely. Some tool who’s old enough to shave and is looking to ‘Netflix and chill’ with my kid? No conversation needed. It’s a hard no.”

Yikes! That was a pretty extreme answer to a very benign question. She could only hope he hadn’t reacted this way with Paisley. If he had, it explained a lot.

“Let me guess, Sammy is the tool in question?”

“Fuck.” He hit the dash. “I know I sound like some naive parent, and I know I said I had this handled, but I really thought... no, I really believed she was being straight with me.” Emmitt ran a hand down his face. “How could I have not put this together sooner?” He patted his pants pockets, front then back. “Crap. I can’t remember where I put his address.”

He rechecked the front again before pulling out all kinds of napkins. Their roommate agreement he put on the dash. A bunch of receipts and gum wrappers. Those went on her floor. A business card with lipstick on it balanced on this thigh. Last, he pulled out a wadded-up piece of crepe paper.

“Here it is.” He punched the address into his phone and, lovely, they were being directed by what sounded like an Australian phone sex operator.

She motioned to a business card. “What’s that?”

He picked it up and studied it before slipping it into his pocket. “It’s from a woman I met at Paisley’s school.”

“Seriously, you’re using your kid to meet hookups.” Annie snatched the card and threw it out the window.

“First, I went to the school to be with my daughter. Second, Grace is on the dance committee and gave me her number. I didn’t even know she stuck it in

here. And last, even if I had been into her, which I am not, Gray warned me off sleeping with the PTA moms.”

“You needed guidance in that?” Annie clicked on her blinker and turned toward the residential side of town, as the GPS instructed.

“God, that sounded awful,” he admitted.

“I was just giving you a hard time,” she said, and he chuckled. “So what exactly did Paisley say this afternoon?”

“We were at another dance committee meeting.” He glanced her way. “She comes bounding up all smiles and *Please Dad*, asking if she could go to a friend’s house. And if it weren’t so dark in here you’d see the big fucking air quotes I put around the term ‘friend.’ So yeah... she sweetens the deal by giving me a hug, right there in front of God, Principal, and the student body, and I started thinking maybe I’m not the worst dad in the world.”

“What would you have said if you knew Sammy was a guy?” she asked quietly as she pulled off the main road into one of the newer developments.

“I would have told her no. Then I would have told her all the reasons why it was a no. And before you say it, I understand that is the exact wrong approach.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I can hear your judgment. But the bottom line is, she didn’t ask, I didn’t say no, she lied. End of story.”

Extremely aware that the worried dad in her passenger seat was gripping the oh-shit handle as if it were “the tool’s” neck, she ventured cautiously with her next question. “Did she lie? Or did you make an assumption that she didn’t bother to correct?”

When his answer was to crack his neck from side to side, Annie pulled up to a red light and stopped before turning to face him. “Emmitt?”

Absolute silence.

“When you’re done plotting this poor kid’s death, you might want to think about that. Like when everyone in your family assumes you’re doing fine and you don’t correct them.”

He turned to her and—*holy smokes*—he looked ready to blow. One wrong word from either Paisley or her friend who was a boy and Emmitt would go off like a roman candle.

“I know where you’re going with this, and no, it’s not the same as me hiding my medical issues.”

And he was back to staring out the windshield.

“So you admit there’s a problem?”

“The light is green.”

“No one’s behind me, so we can wait here all night.”

He leaned back against the headrest and closed his eyes. “There’s a problem.”

His raw honesty cracked through her carefully constructed walls and wrapped around her heart.

“How bad?” she whispered. Annie reached across the seat and took off his ballcap. Instead of pulling away or swatting at her hand, he leaned into it while she gently traced the puckered skin above his brow. “You’re what, four weeks out from the accident and still having light sensitivity issues, headaches when you read, dizzy spells, or you wouldn’t keep riding with me. How bad was the swelling?”

His eyes opened, but he didn’t move. Except to take her hand with his and press it to his cheek as if he found her touch soothing. “I was unconscious for the better part of a week. Some of it medically induced, some of it not. Thank God I insisted on wearing my plate carrier that day, because I only wound up with a couple of bruised ribs.”

“The plate carrier probably saved your life.”

He finally looked at her. “The doctors said the same thing. It also limited the area of scarring but didn’t do a damn thing to protect against a baseball-sized chunk of cement to the head.”

Annie slid her fingers over the bruise, tracing until they disappeared into his hair. “Where is the scarring?”

“Most of it’s on my back.”

Which explained why she hadn’t seen it that first night. Without having to ask, he tugged the hem of his shirt up and turned his body until she could see his back. She didn’t need to flick on the overhead light. The traffic light had cycled back to red, casting enough of a glow for her to get a good look at the scars. They weren’t from stitches. They were from pellet-sized pieces of concrete spraying his body at a close distance.

A galaxy of craters ran across the right side of his lower back, angry gouging wounds that told a story. Annie didn’t have to try all that hard to fill in the details. She’d seen enough in the ER to piece it all together.

“Emmitt,” she whispered, because he’d been shouldering this all by himself. Never once letting on how much pain she knew he had to be in. Walking to the market, working on the dance, even carrying her through the crowd at the bar must have caused him excruciating pain.

He whispered something back, maybe something sweet, she wasn’t sure. She was too busy running her palm down his side and staring into his eyes. He was doing the staring thing, glancing at her from over his shoulder, his gaze tracing her lips.

It was starting to become inevitable, this thing between them. She could feel it in the air whenever they were within touching distance, growing stronger the longer they were together.

A horn honked behind them and *poof*, the building intimacy became awkward, and Annie pulled through the intersection.

Clearing her throat, she said, "If your head took even half the force of your back, you need to tell Grayson."

"No way," he said, and out of the corner of her eye she watched as he stubbornly crossed his arms across his chest, making his biceps flex. The man was a driving hazard. "He'll tell Paisley and then she'll worry, and after Michelle..." He shook his head. "I can't tell them. Not right now. I need Gray to give me a clean bill of health so I can go back to work."

"You'll have to come clean soon. If Grayson gets your records from China before you tell him, he'll be hurt."

"He won't get them. I told the hospital not to release them. I need to be cleared by a doctor before I can finish my piece on the concrete factory. And Gray is too much of a Goody Two-shoes to sign off on me if he knew, so he can't know yet."

"Nothing wrong with having a Goody Two-shoes on your side," she said, wondering why she'd thought being a bad girl would be fun. "And loving someone means trusting them. It's hard to have one without the other. You've made a family with these guys, and family doesn't keep secrets."

"Is that your roundabout way of saying that Paisley's not straight with me because I'm not straight with her?"

"I'm not a parent, and I don't know the first thing about being one, so I don't know how much you should tell Paisley. You know her better than I do. But maybe try coming clean on smaller things." He was looking at her again with those golden brown eyes. "When she asked if she could go to Sammy's, you could have told her you'd been looking forward to spending tonight with her."

"I don't ever want her to feel obligated to hang out with me."

"Why not?" she asked. "I felt obligated to hang out with my dad every Saturday when he'd take me fishing."

"You fish?"

"With my dad I do. And stop grinning—it's our thing. Being obligated to do stuff with your parents is normal at her age. Her pretending to be all put out for having to spend time with you is normal as well, because inside she's secretly enjoying it."

"Fishing, huh?" he asked.

She squared her shoulders. "Yes, and I happen to be pretty good too." She

placed her hand on his arm. “Emmitt, I know she loves your time together and probably even looks forward to it.”

“Thank you for that, but I’m still not telling them.”

“Men.” She sighed. “Is this another symptom of male chromosome genetic disorder?”

“I don’t know. Up until this week I thought I understood women, but clearly I have lost my touch, or that blast did more damage than I thought.”

“Don’t go blaming a poor piece of concrete for your being a stubborn ass.”

He grinned. “You like my stubborn ass.”

* * *

“What are the things you need to remember?” Annie said.

“Validate her feelings. Levelheadedness leads to listening. Don’t be a dictator.” Emmitt repeated the guidelines they’d talked about.

“And?”

“And remember, no matter what is going on inside that house, love her for exactly who she is in that moment.” He sent her a sidelong glance. “That’s a lot to ask of a dad whose kid is sneaking around with the school fuckboy.” Annie raised a condemning brow, and Emmitt sighed. “Fine, but I don’t have to like the moment.”

Annie chuckled, but inside her heart went out to him. Giving the town playboy a daughter who was into playboys was payback for all the nights his dates’ parents spent pacing the floor—awaiting their daughter’s safe return. “Nope, but you do need to try to see it through her eyes. She knows she screwed up, is probably super disappointed with herself. And while she needs to know that what she did was not okay, she also needs to know that you still love her.”

“Right,” Emmitt said, but he was too busy glaring out the window to be looking at Annie.

She followed his line of vision to the teenagers up ahead participating in some pretty PG-13 PDA. There was kissing, and then there was *kissing*, and the two high schoolers were quickly passing the first kind, racing toward the second.

“Not on my watch.” Emmitt unfolded himself from the passenger seat, and before Annie could tell him to take a deep breath, he was already halfway up the walk, his chest puffed out, his arms pulled slightly from his body and swaying as he walked.

He looked like the Hulk coming to crash the party.

“Hey,” he yelled as he disappeared into the night. “What are you doing to my daughter?”

“You’re not my dad!” some girl said.

“Where’s Paisley? Paisley Bradley-Rhodes, you better get your butt out here

or I'm coming in!"

Not the levelheaded she was hoping for.

Annie strained to hear what was said next but could only make out the words "worst" and "nightmare," and she was certain it was Emmitt talking.

She told herself not to snoop. *This is none of your business.* Emmitt and Paisley were both going to be embarrassed by how tonight was going down. They didn't need some short-term tenant gawking at, what should be, a private family moment. That was what she told herself as she ducked her head to look out the passenger window.

The sun had set hours ago, and the moon was barely cutting through the thick fog that had blown in off the ocean. She could make out figures but no details, leaving her with two options: turn her car to face the house and flash the high beams, or press her nose to the passenger's side window and squint.

While the first choice was tempting, she decided to check out how good the view was from the other side of the car. After unbuckling her seat belt, she climbed across the console and, knees on the seat, searched through the window for Emmitt.

She spotted him. He was standing on the front porch, with Paisley next to him while he towered over a boy who was likely Sammy. To the kid's credit, he didn't wet his pants or burst out crying. *If he came at me like that,* Annie thought, *I would have.*

"You. Car. Now!" Emmitt bellowed at Paisley, then turned back to Sam, and even through the fogged-up window, he looked lethal. "This is over. Understand?"

The kid stood silent as Emmitt marched Paisley—poor girl looked as if she were walking to her execution—straight to the car.

"Shit." They were headed her way.

In a panic, Annie lost her balance and tumbled backward, landing ass-first between the console and seat. She twisted and turned, used the steering wheel to get leverage, then cursed herself for not taking yoga more seriously. Wedging her heel into the seat, she pushed up and—thank God she was free—rolled into her seat.

She smoothed her hair out of her face and pretended to be watching the wind blowing through the trees.

Both doors opened at once, and she felt the car dip to the right a little before Emmitt settled in the passenger seat and then slammed the door. So hard the car rocked.

A little afraid of what she might find, she turned her head and saw one very pissed off father who was struggling with the reality that his daughter had

conned him. It wouldn't be the last time Paisley pulled one over on Emmitt, but this time was hard because it was the first.

Her heart went out to him. Never had she wanted to hug someone as much as she wanted to hug Emmitt just then. His jaw was clenched, his muscles taut, and his body language screamed *failure*.

"My life is officially over," Paisley hissed as Annie pulled away from the curb and headed toward home. "I'm never going back to school again. Maybe I can homeschool or transfer to Eastland High, but no way am I ever going to be able to face Sam or any of his friends!"

"You should have thought of that before you lied to me," Emmitt ground out.

"I didn't lie. I said I was going to my friend Sammy's house. Sam is my friend, and I was where? Oh, at his house! It's not my fault you don't know who Sam is. Daddy and Uncle Levi would have. And if they didn't, they would have asked before saying yes."

The comment was meant to hurt, but Annie didn't think Paisley realized just how much power she had over her dad—who didn't move, except for his hand tightening around the bill of his ballcap.

Annie knew Paisley's comment was spoken in anger, but the words hit Emmitt so hard he flinched. His face went blank and he stared blindly through the windshield. Annie's heart broke for him. Although Paisley would probably forget the whole incident in a month's time, for Emmitt her words were Sharpied into his heart. Every future decision he made as a parent would be impacted by this moment. Whenever he was confronted with a hard situation, he'd question himself.

"Are you seriously blaming this on me?" he finally said. "I know Levi and Gray would have asked—they made that fuc . . . *abundantly* clear when no one knew where you were."

"You could have texted to find out. Or called and I would have told you where I was. You didn't have to come barging in and threaten Sam or embarrass me in front of everyone!"

"You threatened a teenager?" Annie asked.

"He's eighteen and I didn't threaten him, just enlightened him on how things were going to be moving forward."

"No," Paisley argued. "You came in all President of the Cock Block Committee when nothing was happening. *Nothing!* And now nothing is ever going to happen."

Emmitt's grin said he wouldn't be losing any sleep over that.

"We were just hanging out," Paisley continued. "With his friends. And then his sister came out, and he introduced us, and the minute we started talking, the

guys acted like we weren't even there. I think Sam just invited me over because his sister's a freshman and doesn't have any friends and he thinks I'm nice or something. So all that 'This is over' BS only made me look stupid. He's just a friend, even though I thought maybe it was more. Basically he's never going to speak to me again, if that makes you happy."

Annie looked in the rearview mirror right as Paisley's lower lip began trembling. But no matter how hard she tried to keep her emotions at bay, she'd clearly hit her breaking point and burst into tears. She was no longer trying to hide her feelings or interested in talking to her father. In fact, she slid on a sweatshirt and pulled the hood over her head, cinching it around her face.

Annie was uncertain how to proceed. This was clearly a family situation and she wasn't family. Then again, Emmitt had come to her for help, not to mention her heart ached for Paisley. The poor girl had been caught, tarred, and feathered in front of half the varsity football team. She'd just experienced her first heartbreak—in a very public forum—and, more than anything, needed her dad's reassurance.

Annie reached over and gently squeezed Emmitt's hand, letting him know that she was here for him. His chest rose, then fell, and after a few breaths he gave her a little squeeze back.

"It doesn't make me happy, P," he finally said, his voice three octaves lower than it had been moments ago. "Seeing you upset would never make me happy."

Paisley didn't answer, just let his words hang in the air while she stared out the window and silently cried in the back seat. Emmitt looked as if he was debating between grounding her for life and buying her a convertible to get her to stop crying.

Annie let the silence go on for another few streets before she had to say something. She glanced again in the rearview mirror and saw Paisley curled into herself. Emmitt looked about as miserable, only he wasn't crying.

"What if he does talk to you again?" Annie asked, and before Paisley could answer, Emmitt was already shaking his head.

"Are you crazy?" Emmitt shot her a hard look. "He's eighteen. She's fifteen."

This time she shot him a look before returning her attention to the rearview mirror. She waited until Paisley met her gaze before saying, "What if he did talk to you again, and he wanted to be more than friends? Your being underage is a natural concern for your dad. Especially when you weren't up-front about today."

"If I was up-front, he would have said no," Paisley said with a sniffle.

"*He* is sitting right here. And *he* not only knows teenage boys, he knows the

law. Sam is eighteen and you're a minor. End of story."

"I can only imagine how flattering it would be to have a senior guy ask you to hang out," Annie said gently. "How embarrassing it would have been to explain that your dad wouldn't let you come over. But if you love someone, you have to trust them. One doesn't work without the other. Do you love your dad?"

"Sometimes."

"Then you need to trust that he's doing what he thinks is the right thing for you."

"He thinks the right thing is for me to die a virgin." Paisley sat forward. "It's my body, my choice."

"Not until you're eighteen and living on your own," he said.

"Can't wait!"

Silence filled the car until it was thick enough to choke on. No one said a word, not even when Annie pulled into the driveway and put the car in Park. She undid her seat belt and turned to face Emmitt. He didn't turn her way, so she just waited until he finally looked back. When their eyes met, instead of being pissed, he took a deep breath and then gave a small, defeated smile.

"I'm trying my best to see why this is such a big deal," Paisley said.

Emmitt closed his eyes, and Annie could almost see him counting to ten.

"Seriously?" He turned in his seat to face his daughter for the first time since they'd gotten in the car. "That's your takeaway?"

Emmitt silently stared at his daughter and, as the seconds ticked by, he looked more and more overwhelmed by exhaustion. Finally he shook his head and said, "Then try harder, kiddo."

Annie gave Paisley a soft smile to let her know that while she had screwed up, she wasn't alone. Then she rested a hand on Emmitt's leg. "Or you could say, 'Loving someone means trusting them. And pushing boundaries is what kids are supposed to do. So starting now, I'll trust you enough to sit down and have an open and honest conversation about anything, as long as you promise to be honest back with me.'"

"Holy shit," Paisley said.

"Language," Emmitt scolded.

"You guys are totally dating," Paisley scolded back.

Annie jerked her hand off his leg as if it were on fire, her head rapidly shaking back and forth. "God, no. We're just roommates."

"Good." Paisley grabbed her backpack. "Because you deserve way better than my dad."

* * *

The slamming of the car door was like a gunshot right through Emmitt's

chest. It did a pretty good job of rattling his skull too.

“I blew that.” He closed his eyes to keep the overhead light from piercing his retina. “On a scale of *She’ll get over it* to *Imminent emancipation*, how bad was it?”

“It was like you were walking through a minefield and decided to wear clown shoes,” she said, and he laughed.

Even though he heard her shift closer and smelled the cool evening air on her skin, he was still surprised when her soft hands settled against his forehead, moving in slow circular sweeps.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said anything.” Her voice was as gentle as her hands. “I’m not a parent and challenging you in front of Paisley didn’t help.”

“So you’d wait to challenge my parenting skills until after she got out of the car?”

She gasped. “Somewhere between this afternoon and tonight I became my mother. I won’t ever challenge you again. That is a promise.”

“Ever?”

She hesitated. “Well, about parenting stuff. As long as we’re roommates, the rest of it’s fair game.”

Instead of being annoying, her insistence on calling him on his shit was a complete turn-on.

“I know your comments came from a good place. They just touched on a sore spot. I’ve never been the enforcer and it sucks. I suck at it, just like the guys said I would.” He could already hear Gray’s lecture coming. “I tried to be the fun dad, but that’s Levi’s job. Gray’s had a lock on the live-in dad since before I was even in the picture. No matter what role I try to fill, someone else has been doing it longer or is better at it than me.”

And then, because he couldn’t keep his mouth shut, he added, “I catch grief from all sides now. But hearing it from you? Man, that rubbed me a little rawer than hearing it from them.”

“You’re a great dad, Emmitt. Even I can see that.”

“I used to be the world’s best dad. Even have the mug to prove it.” He carried it with him everywhere he went. Even when he was limited to a single rucksack, that mug was never far from reach.

“You don’t need a mug. The way she looked at you, even when she was mad, spoke loud and clear. You are her everything.” The naked honesty in Annie’s tone had him shifting in his seat. “Paisley is lucky to have as many people looking out for her and loving her as she does. My intention was to get her talking, not make you mad.”

“You accomplished both. At first, it felt like you were taking her side, that it

was me against the world again, and I was mad as hell. But it's hard to be mad at you when your hands are on me."

She paused, her tone light when she said, "I can take them off you."

"Tease," he whispered, meeting her dark, dreamy gaze. She was leaning so far over the console, it wouldn't take much to pull her into his lap. Which was exactly where he wanted her—in his lap with her hands all over him. Because—Lord help him—he wanted his hands all over her.

And the wants didn't stop there. He could fill a book with all the things he wanted when it came to Annie.

"Concerned," she said, her fingers going back to his head.

He groaned because, *Christ*, his head was pounding. He wasn't so sure he'd make it to the couch if Paisley had left all the lights on inside the cabin.

"Here." She pressed a couple aspirin into his palm.

He looked down and laughed. "That's about as efficient as a bandage on a broken bone." He took a pain pill from his pocket and swallowed it dry. "If this concussion doesn't kill me, then my kid will."

"She's a great kid, Emmitt."

"It sounds like you have a *but* coming."

"No buts. You guys have raised a smart and loving daughter." Her palms cupped his cheeks, her thumbs gently massaging his temples. "Maybe let her explore how smart she is."

"That's the same as saying but."

She laughed, soft and husky. "When I was Paisley's age and my mom would forbid me to do something, it made me want to do it more. Not that I ever did—I was too much of a Goody Two-shoes, like Gray."

Wanting to get his hands on her for a moment, he ran his fingers through her hair, around to the back of her neck until the short, silky strands slid from his grasp and fell forward. "Trust me when I say, you are nothing like Gray."

"Why do you say that?" Her breath was unsteady as she spoke.

"I've never wanted to kiss Gray." Damn, her lips were right there, parted and ready. His part—oh, it was more than ready. "I've never wanted to kiss anyone this badly."

"Sounds like a but coming."

"I promised you that when this happened, you'd have to make the first move." Stupidest promise he'd ever made. "And I don't want to be some line that you want to push. I have enough of that in my life. When we kiss, I want it to be real."

"I wanted to take risks and be bold tonight, but being a bad girl is exhausting." The smile she gave him damn near severed his heart. It was full of

resignation and disappointment, not at him but at herself.

“Bad girls are a dime a dozen. I like the cautious, caring, sweet Annie.”

She rolled her eyes. “You forgot boring, pragmatic, and opinionated.”

“Ah, Goldilocks.” He clasped her hands in both of his and brought them to his lips. “You took a job in Rome. You were ready to fly to the other side of the world, but when you discovered it was Rhode Island, you still took the job. You didn’t know anyone here, had never even been to this town, but you took a chance.” He held her hands captive. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” she breathed.

“You take risks, Anh. You take calculated ones. But maybe if you put aside some of the caution when the right opportunity comes your way, you’ll find you have fun. You might be disappointed, or maybe you’ll find what you’ve been looking for.” He kissed the tips of each and every finger. “Isn’t that worth the risk?”

Chapter 17

“At least you didn’t get a tattoo,” Lynn said, grabbing an armful of warm blankets.

Annie had been assigned to the infusion center today, working alongside Lynn to ensure that their patients were as comfortable as possible while undergoing various types of treatments.

“I also didn’t get kissed. The whole point of the dress, the heels, the night was to take risks and get a kiss.” Annie topped off mugs of hot cocoa with whipped cream.

“No, the point of last night was to dip your toes, not have...” Lynn looked over her shoulder at Penny, a six-year-old sporting a pixie dress and daisy-chain crown, and lowered her voice. “S. E. X. But you dipped, I saw.”

“Not even my little piggy toe, and you know it. I wasn’t expecting to have S.E.X. But a kiss would have been nice.” She’d settle for a warm embrace from someone other than her mom at this point.

“The person you wanted to kiss would have left you with nothing but sweaty sheets and an ‘It’s Complicated’ addendum to your roommate contract.”

“Honestly, I don’t know which would be a more awkward morning after. Seeing him in the kitchen this morning in nothing but pajama bottoms after he rejected my kiss”—Annie looked up from dusting each mug with rainbow sprinkles—“or seeing him in my bed in nothing at all.”

Lynn eyed her over an armful of blankets. “He didn’t reject you. He said he didn’t want a casual fling. Then you ran into the house and barricaded yourself in the bedroom.”

“He’s the king of casual—what was I supposed to do? Kiss the guy whose Patronus is an alley cat during mating season?”

“Who knows, maybe he isn’t the alley cat everyone claims,” Lynn said, and Annie had to admit that, after last night, she’d been wondering the same thing. “Harry Potter thought he was a doe, when it turns out he could change his Patronus at will. Maybe Emmitt wants to change his to a penguin.”

“Or maybe it’s just a bad case of unattainable lover syndrome.” Stacking the mugs on a tray, she balanced it on one hand, leaving her other free to grab a couple of pillows. “And once it’s requited, he’ll be miraculously cured and I’ll be sleeping a wall away from him and his glow-in-the-dark boxers, wondering what I did wrong. I’ve ridden that train too many times to believe I’m really last-stop material.”

Annie turned around and nearly dropped the tray when she saw Nurse Tran in the doorway. “Behavioral Medicine is on the third floor. Now, if this therapy

session is over, we have patients waiting.”

Annie gave Lynn an apologetic look as her friend escaped into the main room. Annie tried some escaping of her own. She got as far as the door when the other nurse said, “*Cháu Oi!*” and while the term was usually a Vietnamese endearment, Nurse Tran did not look endeared with Annie right then.

Annie turned and Nurse Tran rapidly smacked the back of one hand against her other palm.

“No more dillydallying, got it.” With a salute, Annie scurried out into the infusion room and took shelter behind the patients. Not even wanting to think about how awkward home would be tonight, she handed out the hot cocoas, then brought the pillows to the little redheaded girl.

“Here you go,” she said, propping her up and making her as cozy as possible. “How about I grab you one of the tablets that have movies. I think we even have *Tinker Bell*.”

“I don’t need one, but Rosetta might.” Penny held up her doll, a red-haired fairy who had a bandage in the same place Penny’s port would be, and Annie’s chest squeezed.

Every week Penny came in for her platelet infusions, and every week she sat in a too-big chair, hooked up to more IV bags than years she’d been alive, and smiled at everyone who passed. Both of her parents always came and sat in the waiting room, holding hands, their love too strong to give up.

Not for the first time, Annie wondered about her birth parents, her birth mother mostly—and if she’d given Annie up out of love or rejection. She didn’t know a lot about her birth family, only that Annie had been the third child of a married couple. She had two older sisters somewhere in the world whom she’d never met but thought about daily.

Not that she’d remember even if she had met them. Annie had been given up at birth, but she liked to think that if they’d been there when she was born, maybe her sisters thought about her every once in a while. She wondered if they were aware she’d been raised in America or that her favorite color was yellow, because that was the color of the blanket she’d left the hospital with.

She still had that blanket. It was in a keepsake box Annie brought with her everywhere she went. Lying between the adoption photo album her mom had made for her and her grandmother’s quilt, it was one of her most valuable treasures.

She might never know the why, but every time a ladybug landed on her, she liked to think it was her birth mother sending her love.

“Would Rosetta like a hot cocoa too?” Annie asked.

Penny whispered something in her dolly’s ear, then nodded. “Extra

sprinkles?”

“Extra sprinkles it is.”

After she got Penny and Rosetta settled in, Annie worked her way around to the other side of the room. She fluffed pillows, started drips, and even gave Mr. Parson a little back rub. She had just grabbed a new supply of warm blankets—because the room was as frigid as an ice bar—when she saw Mr. Jacobs hobble past the window, his cane overhead like a pitchfork.

Annie set down the towels and dashed after him. She finally caught up with him at the welcome center where he was slumped low in a chair, with sweat beading his forehead, and his cane resting against his leg.

“Mr. Jacobs,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Mr. Jacobs was my dad. Call me Les,” he said, managing to sound surly even though he was breathing like he’d just run a 10k. “And no, everything is not okay. I remembered I had an appointment today with my doctor, one I’d made a few months back, before all this ovary nonsense. So I came to face my impostor and tell her I want my identity back.”

She bit back a smile. “They still haven’t fixed the problem? Did you call the number I gave you?”

“Six times. Wasted a whole day being on hold, transferred, or hung up on. People in customer service don’t know a thing about their customers or good service, so I came in person to handle things my way.”

“With a cane?”

“If that’s what it takes. Only I dozed off while sitting in the waiting room. I woke up to the nurse say my name. And that’s when I saw her, my impostor. She was spitting mad, storming out of the office and making a ruckus. She was fast, but I did see she was a redhead, and you know how fiery they can get.”

“I wouldn’t lead with that if you ever meet her.” Annie sat down and placed her fingers on his wrist to take his heart rate. “And as soon as you catch your breath, we’ll get this taken care of.”

“Waste of time, I tell you.” He waved off the offer with his free hand. “They don’t have more than three brain cells among the lot of them.”

“I graduated top of my class, so I can assure you we will get to the bottom of this.”

He considered this, then nodded. “But only if you hold my hand while we walk there. Cuz we can get Dottie—she’s the only one old enough to vote over there—to take our picture and I can show the guys at bingo what a pretty lady my doctor is.”

“Physician’s assistant.” She took his elbow and helped him up, holding his hand the whole way. And he wouldn’t even give Dottie his insurance card until

she took the picture.

“She was just in here,” Dottie said. “Talk about a mix-up. What are the odds of two people with the same name, and insurance numbers one digit off?”

“Pretty good, it looks like,” Les grumbled under his breath.

“I’ll tell you the same thing I told her. I have to take this to my boss, but I promise it will be straightened out by Monday.”

“Better be, or me and my you-know-what are going to find another hospital.”

Dottie handed Les her card and scribbled her personal extension on it, which seemed to placate him.

He stuck the card in his shirt pocket and gave it a pat. “Got my picture taken and a number. Wait till I show the guys at bingo.”

By the time Annie got him back to the welcome room, he was all worked up again. His skin was pale, and he looked ready to fall asleep—right there in his chair.

“I don’t think you should drive right now,” she said. “Is there someone I can call to pick you up?”

“Nope. Five minutes and I’ll be good to go.”

Five hours was more like it. So when he closed his eyes, Annie went to the closest terminal and opened his file. She scanned down to the emergency contact person, and Annie had to check her own heart rate.

Convinced it had to be either another clerical error or the universe’s way of telling her she shouldn’t walk outside in a thunderstorm, she double—then triple—checked.

Oh boy.

“Um, Les, why don’t I give your son a call.” *I have his number in my phone. It’s the one with all the sexting under the name, Big Bad Wolf.*

Les was suddenly wide awake and standing next to her. “Don’t bother. He doesn’t have time to pick me up.”

“What do you mean? Your son *Emmitt* has plenty of time for his dad.” Annie waited for Les to correct her, to tell her his son was named Dale and lived in Alaska on a husky ranch. But Les didn’t so much as blink.

“He’s a big-shot photographer,” Les said, and Annie couldn’t help but notice the sadness under the pride when he spoke. “Travels the world and reports on things. Big stories. In fact, he’s on assignment in Tasmania doing a story on those spinning devils.”

The way his gaze kept darting around as he spoke told Annie that Emmitt wasn’t some deadbeat son who wouldn’t come get his dad if called. Les didn’t want to call him for some other reason.

Emmitt never brought up his dad, even when Annie spoke of hers. He talked

about Paisley, Levi, Gray, even Paisley's mom. Never once had he brought up Les. Which wouldn't be all that strange, since the two of them were just roommates—and new ones at that—except he knew she was a medical practitioner.

The moment people found out what she did for a living, they disclosed every ailment they or their family were suffering from. Questions about treatments, side effects, if their doctor's advice was sound.

Unless she was at work, Annie always redirected them back to their medical professional. She hadn't had to redirect Emmitt, because he'd never said a word.

"Les," she began softly. "Does he know you have cancer?"

Les looked as if his legs were going to give out, so she sat him down.

"Only Chip from my complex knows," he admitted. "And that's how I want it to stay."

"It's proven that patients who have their family's support have greater odds of beating it. They heal faster, they're happier, and"—she took his hand—"they don't have to go through it alone. Can't argue with science."

"It's my constitutional right to argue with anyone I want. And I'm not alone." He took his hand away. "I have Chip. And I'll tell you what I told that doctor of mine. I'll sue anyone at this hospital who says boo to my family."

Great, one more secret to keep from Emmitt. Not only couldn't she kiss him for fear of falling in like with him, but now she couldn't tell him that his dad has stage three cancer.

"At least let me call Chip and have him pick you up," she asked.

"Only if you're holding my hand when he pulls in."

Like father, like son.

* * *

It was a matzo ball standoff. Annie on one side of the counter, whisk in hand. Maura on the other, her face bigger than life on Annie's tablet. No matter how many times Annie explained she didn't need to hold her iPad to her face, Maura seemed to think the closer she got to the screen, the closer she was to Annie.

It was either video call Maura or run the risk of her showing up on Annie's front porch, with a suitcase big enough for a two-week stay.

"Scooch me closer," Maura said, her squinting eyes filling the entire screen. When that didn't work, she put on her reading glasses. "Are those jars? There are no jars in my recipe."

Shoot. Annie had forgotten to move them out of sight when she emptied the groceries.

"It's stock, organic and locally made. The lady at the store guaranteed no one would be able to tell the difference."

“Then maybe you should ask the lady at the store for her recipe, because I guarantee mine doesn’t use cans, boxes, or jars.”

Annie sighed. “I don’t want the lady at the store to help me, Mom. I want you to help me but I don’t have six hours to make your stock.”

“You don’t need six hours, just use a pressure cooker,” her mother explained as if everyone owned a pressure cooker.

“I don’t have one.” Annie regretted her admission immediately.

“No pressure cooker? Marty, Annie doesn’t have a pressure cooker.” Delight beamed off her mother’s face before she disappeared from the screen. A split-second later the clanking and rustling began. Then came, “I’ve got an extra you can borrow. Marty, get some pants on. Annie’s borrowing our pressure cooker and I want to get on the road before it’s dark.”

“Mom, you don’t need to drive over,” Annie said, and Maura’s head peeked up from the bottom of the screen. “I can pick one up at the cooking shop downtown after I get off work tomorrow.”

“Why waste the money on a new one when we have an extra that will work just as well?” Her mom was already moving toward the front door. Annie had to look away from the screen because watching her childhood home whiz by was enough to make her seasick.

“Mom,” she yelled, covering her eyes, but not in time. “Flip the screen back so I see you and not Dad.” Who was sitting in his recliner in white boxers reading the day’s paper.

“Oh, I must have hit the button. Hang on.” It took her a good minute, and three flashes of her dad, up close and personal, lounging in his Fruit of the Looms, to swap views. “Oh, here we go.”

Annnnnnd... Maura was back.

“Thanks for offering to come here, but I work the a.m. shift tomorrow and I’m scheduled for doubles this week. Maybe I can just pick up some soup at a takeaway place near the hospital.”

“Oh,” Maura said, completely deflated. “But then it won’t be *your* mom’s recipe.”

The last thing she wanted was to disappoint her mom. Maura had canceled a Bunco game with her friends to teach Annie her recipe. The least Annie could do was serve her mom’s soup at Pho Shizzle.

“You said I can freeze the cooked matzo balls, right?” Annie asked, noticing the spark was back in her mom’s smile—well, what she could see of it at the bottom of the screen. “Why don’t you and Dad mail me the pressure cooker? I’ll pay for the shipping, and we can do the stock Friday afternoon.”

It would be cutting it close, and the shipping would cost her more than

buying her own pressure cooker, but if the appliance would cut down the cooking time *and* make her mom smile like that, then it was worth every cent.

“And maybe you can throw in some of the Whole Food Plant Based muffins Dad was telling me about.” Which would make her dad smile.

“I’ll have your dad drop it in the mail first thing in the morning.” Maura put a hand to her mouth, her eyes watering. “And I’ll add the recipe with the muffins. You can’t even tell there’s no butter, sugar, or oil in it.”

“I’ll be sure to mention it to Dad,” she said. “Then I’ll Venmo you the cost of the shipping.”

“Nonsense. You can pay me back when you come up for the wedding.”

And just when Annie thought they were starting a new chapter in their relationship, Annie found herself right back at *Once upon a time there was a girl who couldn’t keep a man...* “I e-mailed Clark’s mom and said I wasn’t going to be able to come,” Annie lied, making a mental note to cancel with Ms. Atwood, since Maura would likely check the validity of Annie’s story.

“Funny, I saw her at the dry cleaner and she assured me there was room for our family at the table.”

Other people’s choices are not a reflection of me. Other people’s choices are not a reflection of me. OTHER PEOPLE’S CHOICES ARE NOT A REFLECTION OF ME!

“Hold on a sec, Mom.” Annie muted the call and stepped out of view. “Are you kidding me? Your choice to make me look like some pathetic stalker of an ex is reflecting on me. And.” She stomped. “That.” She stomped again. “Reflection.” A whole body stomp. “Is not looking good!”

“What you should be saying is, ‘Loving someone means trusting them. It’s hard to have one without the other.’” The amused whisper came from the bedroom. Annie didn’t have to turn to know who was talking; her lips tingled their hello.

Emmitt wore faded jeans riding obscenely low on his hips, a wrinkled shirt, and bare feet. His hair was tousled, his eyes sleepy, as if he’d just woken up.

“You’ve been waiting to use that, haven’t you?” she asked.

“If I say yes, will you throw that whisk at me?” he asked, and she laughed, deep from her belly until her eyes grew moist. Only partly from frustrated tears.

“Hey,” he said, coming closer and pulling her into his arms. He was warm and strong and smelled like heaven. And she didn’t want to ever let go.

His arms tightened around her as if he understood. The intensity of the emotion behind his embrace shook her. It was protective and real, and somehow pure.

Incredibly stupid move, she thought. Because one simple touch and her entire

body registered just how amazing it felt to be in the safety of his arms. Tender and warm, he was holding her like he was a ninja master of hugs. Holding her as though he alone could make everything better.

A dangerous position for a woman who'd spent her entire life looking to belong, only to be replaced, time and again, by the people she loved.

"If you want, I can tell your mom Clark is an ass and nobody wants an ass for a son-in-law."

"No." She backed up and wiped her nose.

"Moms love me."

"That's the problem. She'd take one look at you, with the sleepy eyes and bed-tousled hair, and consider it as good as you asking for my hand. The wedding invites would be in the mail before you hung up."

"Hey, if we plan it on the same day as Clark's so it's impossible for you to go, I'm in."

He was joking, she knew he was joking. But her heart rolled over at his offer. It had been a while since someone had her back.

"That's okay. If I'm willing to dole out advice, I'd be a hypocrite not to take it in return. Especially when it's wise advice."

He grinned. "It's your wisdom."

She smiled. "I know." She blinked a few times. "Does it look like I've been crying?"

He wiped her face with the soft cotton hem of his shirt, which smelled like sexy, sleepy man. He studied her, and the grin turned almost gentle. "You look beautiful."

She didn't know about beautiful. She was in cut-off jean shorts and an old college T-shirt bedazzled with wet matzo, and her hair was a mess. But when he looked at her like that, she felt beautiful.

"Thanks," she whispered. Her tablet started ringing and again and she released a huge sigh. "It's my mom."

"Who loves you no matter what," he reminded her softly.

After soaking in one last second of their closeness—okay, a few seconds—she walked around the counter and answered. "Sorry, Mom, I was, uh, thing is..." She looked at Emmitt, who gave her an encouraging thumbs-up. "I'm not going to the wedding. Not because I'm working or have other plans or can't find a date—"

"I'd date you," Emmitt whispered.

She shushed him with her eyes.

"I'm not going because Clark and I aren't together anymore, and it wouldn't bring me closure, it would bring me back to an unhappy time."

Her mom looked completely befuddled. “You two were incredibly happy. Everyone said so. Didn’t they, Marty?” Then back to Annie. “Everyone said so.”

“Everyone wasn’t us, Mom. And we weren’t happy together. But he’s happy now and so I am,” Annie said, feeling pretty darn proud that she got through that without a fresh stream of tears.

“Well, I...” Maura took a shaky breath. “I never meant to stick my nose where it didn’t belong. I just thought... Apparently I thought wrong.”

“We love you, Flapjack,” Marty said, and his face appeared on half the screen. All puckered forehead and brows, just like her mom.

“I love you, too, Daddy,” she said. “But why do you want to go to the wedding?”

“When he asked us for our permission, he became my son,” Maura said. “Just because you broke up, that doesn’t mean I can just walk away. He’s family to me. But if it really makes you upset, I’ll tell him I can’t go.”

Annie was floored. She’d never once considered what it was like for her parents when Annie’s relationships didn’t work out. It was the same fierce love that allowed Maura to love Annie as if she’d carried her nine months that kept her from missing Clark’s big day.

Heart in her throat, Annie shoved away all the Clark-inspired frustration over the situation. “Go, Mom. It will be a beautiful wedding.” *I should know.* “You can tell me if the floating peonies look as elegant as we pictured.” Then quickly, “But don’t feel obligated to share that picture.”

“Are you sure?”

“This way you can get the ten grand Clark owes me.”

They went through their five-minute routine of saying goodbye, which included Annie promising to eat three whole meals, Maura reminding her to floss, and blocking out time for the next video call—in pen.

“Love you guys,” Annie said, finger poised to end the call.

“Maybe I’ll find you a nice husband at the wedding,” Maura said.

“What your mother means is, we love you,” Marty said, then ended the call for her. He must have heard Annie request the rest of the muffins and wanted to return the favor.

She looked up at Emmitt, who was leaning against the counter, casual as can be, brows raised in question. “Flapjack?”

“Before you say anything more, remember Sweet P,” Annie said. “Every kid gets an embarrassing nickname from their dad.”

“Mine was Dump Shit,” he said, and Annie was so stunned she jerked back.

“He”—she caught herself right before saying Les—“called you that?”

“And Sweet P is a great nickname,” he said, ignoring her question.

The front door blasted open, and Emmitt and Annie sprang apart moments before Paisley came bursting into the kitchen. Backpack on the floor, bag of glitter and fabric on the counter, she jumped into her dad's arms.

"I passed out all the invites," she squealed. "And guess what?"

"What?"

"Everyone is coming." She gave him a big smack on the lips and then stepped out of his arms and skipped to the fridge. "Everyone! Even Kristan. She drove me home today. Don't worry. Daddy already knows her and she's driven me home from school before, and she's going to help me plan the most 'epic sleepover'"—she did dancing quotes with her fingers—"Kristan's words not mine. In fact, that's what she wants to refer to it as. She thinks it will help distract everyone from your 'No Boys policy,'" she said, not stopping to take a breath. "Oh, and I promised I'd talk to you about possibly removing the—"

"No boys. That was the deal."

"That's what I told her, but you know Kristan." She stopped and tilted her head sideways. "Wait, you do know who Kristan is, don't you?"

"Nope, but you seem excited. That's enough for me," he said, and it was Annie's turn to be amused.

"She's a junior who has her own car. Her own car!" Paisley's hands were in constant motion, grabbing a soda, a snack, putting her water bottle in the sink, bouncing around the kitchen like a pinball. Annie needed a nap just watching her. "It's super old, like a 2009 Nissan or something. Her grandma gave it to her, but who cares, she says we can go shopping for all the party stuff next week." And for the first time since she came home, she paused. "Is that okay?"

"Ah, yeah," he said. Paisley might never know just how much her simple question had affected Emmitt, but Annie could see the emotion in his eyes. "I can give you some cash."

"That's okay. Daddy gave me his credit card, and—" She turned. "Oh my God, I totally forgot to tell you, Sam told me what you did today."

Oh boy. Annie glanced at Emmitt, wondering what he could have done to possibly top threatening the kid. Only instead of yelling, Paisley began squealing.

"I assume he talked to you about being on the decoration committee?" Emmitt was speaking to Paisley, but his *ye of little faith* tone was all for Annie.

"Yes! He joined! I'll tell you about it at dinner, I have homework to do, plus I have to Snap Kristan." Paisley slung her backpack over her shoulder; grabbed her soda; and, with a bag of chips between her teeth, said, "Hi, Annie. Bye, Annie."

Annie waited until she heard the bedroom door shut before she said, "A

sleepover?”

He shrugged. “This morning at drop-off, one of the moms warned me of a rumor going around about a party at the Cliffs the weekend after the dance. It’s a three-day weekend, and it’s a ‘go all-out’ party. I know what those parties are like, so I figured that if I offered to have a party here, P and her friends will have a legit reason to be no-shows.”

Annie rested against the counter next to him, their hips an inch apart. “That was very proactive of you. Your right eye didn’t even start twitching when she brought up Gray paying for it.”

“I get to be the hero and he picks up the tab?” He shrugged. “Fine with me. I’m more interested in you noticing I wasn’t twitching.” They were still a friendly distance apart, but his tone ate up any space between them. “Does that mean you were gazing into my eyes, Anh?”

She loved it when he said her name like that. “You have pretty eyes.” Eyes that were fixed on her mouth as if she was the most erotic thing he’d ever seen. They were filled with promises of what was to come. “And they didn’t burn with the flames of hell when she brought up Sam. You really asked him to be on the decorating committee?”

“Sam was already on the committee. I just convinced Gray that if they are properly supervised, it’ll be okay for them to hang out.”

She hip-checked him, but it wasn’t playful like it had been the other night at the bar. Oh, there was a playful element to it, but there was also a whole lot of heat sparking between them. “Wow, I’m very impressed.”

“Before you go getting all sweet on me, you should know that I moved the decoration committee meetings to Gray’s house. So he’ll get to play the enforcer and I get to be the hero. Even if for just a minute.”

Chapter 18

Annie should have stayed home, and that was the truth of it.

She hadn't even said her hellos and already she was dreaming up a list of excusable reasons for why she had to dish-and-dash.

It was Friday, and the monthly Pho Shizzle potluck was in full swing. When Lynn had invited her, Annie had imagined a dozen or so women in various stages of life sitting around the room sipping wine and talking about food.

Pho Shizzle was an ethnic cooking group that focused on homestyle Vietnamese dishes, so it was not unexpected to find a lot of dark-haired petites there. But looking around the room,

Annie realized they were *all* dark-haired petite women. In fact, they were all Vietnamese.

A warm and unfamiliar emotion spread through her that she couldn't quite explain or describe, other than to say it's what she'd always imagined it felt like to belong.

It was ridiculous that Annie had been on the planet nearly thirty years and this was her first time being in a large group where everyone looked like her—and where she wasn't in the minority. For many, it wouldn't seem like a big deal, but to someone who had always been the odd girl out, it was huge.

Annie watched the women flutter back and forth in the kitchen, putting the final touches on their dishes, chattering away all at once. She could hear the conversations overlapping, people talking over others to be heard—mainly the older women.

But as the night drew on, and women paused to look at all the dishes, that feeling began to chill, because Annie was beginning to see that, while no two dumpling soups were alike, hers was suffering from a serious case of “one of these things is not like the others.”

Par for the course, she thought, watching the hustle and bustle around her.

Annie had managed to whip up a darn good replica of her mom's soup, fueling false hopes for the outcome of the night.

Her goal had never been to come into Nurse Tran's home and show her up, although she'd dreamed last night that Hoan was so taken by Annie's soup she'd asked Annie to host the next get-together. Now her goal was simply to make it through the night without crying.

Not sure how to slip seamlessly into the well-oiled machine that was Pho Shizzle, Annie turned out to be more of an obstacle than an extra hand. After mistaking ginger for galangal—a root vegetable that looked as if it had come through the wormhole with Dr. Who—and telling Lynn's grandmother her broth

had too much fish sauce—because she'd said she used too much and Annie had agreed—Annie had given herself a culinary time-out.

So there she sat, on a bamboo and seagrass high-backed chair with a fragile smile on her face, as she watched not one, not two, but three generations of Vietnamese women laugh and learn and—the most beautiful part—love.

All in their native language. Menu Vietnamese wouldn't help Annie now.

Assigning herself to the role of Annie's advocate, Lynn seated herself right next to Annie and translated the conversations around them. Her efforts, as sweet as they were, only managed to make Annie feel more out of place. Instead of being the lone Asian girl in a Caucasian community, she'd become the lone Caucasian-raised girl in a tight-knit Asian cooking class.

And she wasn't sure which was more uncomfortable.

"I'll be right back," Lynn said, standing. "My grandma knows she's supposed to ask for help when lifting heavy pots, and... *Bà Oi*, no! Let me get that." Lynn said something else in Vietnamese, but Annie didn't need to pull up her translating app, because Lynn's grandmother shuffled over to sit next to Annie.

Mai, her grandmother, was now Annie's assigned keeper.

When Annie had first arrived, Lynn had introduced her to everyone, and it quickly became apparent that the new "girl" didn't speak the language, so she wasn't surprised when the older woman spoke to her in English.

"Hai Linh tells me you're a Hanoi girl." The older woman smiled with her entire being, exposing a lifetime of crinkles and crannies and canyons of joy. "My family sent me from Hanoi to live with my aunt in New York when I was twenty-six." Which explained the thick accent that came through her words. "They wanted a better life for me, so I came to find a husband."

"Did you find him?" Annie asked, and Mai laughed.

"Yes, I found him and the next and the next."

"You've been married three times?" Annie asked, liking the idea that she wasn't the only one unlucky in love.

Mai shook her head. "Four grown kids, four grandkids, and four husbands. Four was my lucky number."

Annie wasn't sure what her lucky number was, but she hoped it was closer to two than ten.

"Do you miss your family in Hanoi?"

"Most have passed. But I miss the smells and sounds and commotion of the city. So much happening, so many things to do, but there wasn't a lot of opportunity for my generation." A frail hand came to rest on Annie's arm. "How old were you when you came to America?"

“I was five days old when my parents adopted me, but they had to wait for one more piece of paper to come through, so we didn’t come home until I was a few months old.” Her parents’ three-week voyage turned into three months, but they’d refused to leave without her.

They had both taken a leave of absence from their practice to stay in Vietnam, going to the hospital every day during visiting hours to hold Annie. Her mother would sing to her and her dad would read nursery rhymes.

There were photos of that time in Annie’s adoption album, a present from her mother on Annie’s eighteenth adoption day. Each one had a handwritten description, detailing the location and names of the people in the photo, and each one was accompanied with loving words from her parents about what that precise moment meant to the both of them.

At times, Annie struggled with how to be the person her parents saw when they adopted her.

Before Annie could ask Mai more about growing up in Vietnam, another woman sat in the chair across from her and pulled a brightly colored fan from her pocket. She fanned herself while speaking to Mai—about Annie.

Annie didn’t need to know the language to understand she was the topic of their conversation. The puzzle they were trying to solve.

“You are a lucky girl that your parents picked you,” the newcomer said.

“It’s her ears,” Mai stated, reaching out to pinch Annie’s lobes. “They are small, which means lucky in Viet Nam.”

“I’ve heard that,” Annie said.

“Yes, lucky. You don’t speak Vietnamese—how come?”

“Uh, I speak a little,” Annie said. “The town I grew up in didn’t have a big Vietnamese community, so there wasn’t the opportunity to learn. But I can order some mean takeout.”

Annie laughed. The newcomer did not.

“Hai Linh was born here in Rome and she learned how,” the woman said, as if Annie was somehow lacking.

For women like Lynn it was so simple, growing up in a house that passed down all the cultural wealth to the younger generation. But for someone like Annie, who never fit into either community, it wasn’t so simple.

The older woman eyed Annie calculatingly. “How much did you cost?”

Even though there was no harm intended by their questioning, they made it sound as if Annie had been one of many kids locked in kennels while her parents strolled along saying, “Oh, she’s too old. And this one’s too fussy. But this one, right here, she has small, cute ears—we’ll take one of her to go, please.” Before handing over a cashier’s check that amounted to their entire life savings to the

“Baby Seller.”

And while most of America would be shocked at the line of questioning, Annie took it in stride. She’d been asked it enough over the years to understand that the adoption process was a mystery to most, and every culture viewed it through a different lens.

But adoptive families came together the same way as biological ones. Annie was Maura and Marty’s daughter. She just happened to have been carried by another woman, eight thousand miles away. And instead of being the product of two people’s love, people like Annie were the sum of four people’s.

In her book, that made her twice as loved and doubly special. At least that’s what she told herself in moments of doubt. Moments like this.

“My mom says I’m worth every penny.” It was the light-hearted answer that always got a laugh. And it didn’t fail her tonight.

She fielded more painfully familiar questions that sparked even more painfully familiar emotions as she recited the recycled answers. Eventually, the questions slowed, leaving only awkward silence, marking the end of “Get to know Anh.”

Only they didn’t know *her* at all. They knew her story, where she came from, and how to properly say her name. But they didn’t know the first thing about *who* she was, and that was as isolating as the conversation that continued in front of her, none of which she was included in or could understand.

The result: Annie had never felt so out of place in all her life—and that was saying a lot.

“*Cháu Ơi,*” Nurse Tran said to Annie. “There is something wrong with your *Mì Hoành Thánh.*”

Yeah, about that.

Annie stood and smoothed her sweaty hands down her shirt. She’d taken care with her appearance, wearing a denim skirt with a silky teal top. “It’s not really *Mì Hoành Thánh*. It’s my mom’s version of dumpling soup.”

Nurse Tran sent her a leveling glare. “But I explained that this was *Mì Hoành Thánh* night.”

“*Mì Hoành Thánh* is a Vietnamese dumpling soup, right?” When no one moved, she added, “Well, I brought matzo ball soup. It’s my mom’s signature dish.”

The ladies exchanged looks, but it was Nurse Tran who spoke. “You mean, your mom’s American dish?”

“My parents are Irish, but it’s a traditional Jewish dish that we make around... well, that doesn’t matter. It’s my family’s recipe and it’s quite good. In fact, my mom has won awards at the local temple cook-off.”

“Hai Linh takes me to temple every week,” Mai said gently, patting Annie’s knee in support.

But Nurse Tran wasn’t having any of it. She said something in Vietnamese, speaking for so long Annie thought maybe she was reciting the complete works of William Shakespeare just to screw with her.

Finally she finished, and all eyes were on Annie when Mai nodded and said, “Ah.” A single sound that ricocheted off the chip Annie now had on her shoulder.

Time to get back to making that dish-and-dash list so she could get the heck out of there.

* * *

Emmitt walked up the steps of the Tanner house. It wasn’t even six and the sun had taken shelter behind a cluster of clouds moving off the coast that had spread out to cover Rome and most of the neighboring towns. Summer had held on for longer than normal, so Emmitt had been surprised when the air became chilled, announcing that fall was about to make an appearance.

He looked up at the sky and squinted at the tiny molecules of rain fluttering down. A drop landed on the tip of his nose and he smiled.

Tonight was his night. Steps one through three were coming together, and he was ready to implement step four.

In his line of work, being prepared could mean the difference between a couple of bruised ribs and coming home in a casket. If he’d thought there’d be any need for a helmet at that factory in China, he wouldn’t have been caught with his pants down. Even though he was covering the work conditions of the factory, and not investigating the fact that the builders used inferior supplies to cut their bottom line, he should have known better.

Should have trusted his gut.

Well, he was listening now. As soon as he got the sign-off from Gray, Emmitt was turning this story into a two-part series, which he knew would be some of his best work.

Kind of like the chocolate cream pie he had in his arsenal this evening. No way was he walking in blind again. He had gone to great lengths to ensure he came out of tonight’s family dinner with his World’s Best Dad title reinstated.

Bypassing the knocker—because this was, after all, Family Friday and he was as family as family could get—he let himself inside the house. He was greeted with a warm blast of air, which smelled awfully close to Michelle’s corn bread recipe, and a cacophony of laughter coming from the kitchen.

Frowning, he checked his watch. Ten to six. He held it to his ear to see if his grandfather’s 1936 Elgin had finally given out, but according to the steady

ticking, he was ten minutes early. Strange, since it sounded as if the fun was well underway.

Slipping off his shoes and placing them in the rack—*You're welcome, Gray*—Emmitt padded into the dining room where... *what the actual fuck?* Family Friday was in full swing.

Oh, they hadn't served dinner yet, but the table had been turned into a game center. Plates and glasses were shoved to the side, the Pokémon version of Monopoly he'd given Paisley for Christmas was spread out over the table, and Gray was purchasing Park Place as if the entire "family" was all well and accounted for.

And the part that was like a flaming arrow to the heart was the startling sight of his dad sitting in Emmitt's chair. Leslie Fucking Jacobs, the guy who hadn't bothered to show up at Emmitt's high school graduation, the guy he'd expressly forbidden to be a part of Paisley's life, was sitting in as Emmitt's replacement.

"Am I late?" he asked, because that possibility hurt a hell of a lot less than the idea that they'd started without him.

"Hey, Dad," Paisley said, picking up the die and rolling. No hug, no squeal, just a distracted "*Hey, Dad.*"

Levi wasn't any better. He looked up from the table and said, "Dude, is that your mom's chocolate cream pie?"

Emmitt felt like holding it above his head the way he used to when he and Levi were kids and he didn't want Levi to play with his favorite toy. "I brought it for P."

"What's in it?" she asked without even looking up.

"Chocolate, cream cheese, crumbled Oreos for the crust. It's all homemade," he said proudly, even though his mind was flashing *Warning! Warning! Eject before it's too late.*

"Does it have sugar?" This from Paisley, who was staring at her phone, texting someone other than him.

"Well, yeah. It's pie." He chuckled. She texted. "But it's gluten free. I got special Oreo cookies from the health food store in town."

Her nose wrinkled as if he'd just said it was made from cooked cat shit and vomit. He didn't know what had happened between the last time he'd seen her—when he was the "best ever"—and now. But Emmitt was feeling like the ball in a foosball table.

"God, you don't know me at all," she said. "My friends are right."

He wasn't sure what her friends had to do with his mom's chocolate pie, but he was ready to call bullshit on the whole setup. Because that's what this had felt like from the get-go, one big setup. Just because Emmitt was the last dad to the

party didn't mean he wasn't her dad. Didn't have Dad Rights.

Uncertainty crept in. Hell, it wrapped around Emmitt and started choking him. Not only was he unsure of what he'd done wrong, he hadn't a clue how to fix it.

Needing a wingman, he looked at Levi and Gray, who were all shrugs and bafflement—and dressed like twins in matching jerseys, because *that's* normal. They were basically as helpful as a Q-tip in a gunfight.

When it came to women, Emmitt knew, when in doubt always apologize. “I'm sorry, P. When Gray asked me to bring a dessert, I immediately thought of my mom's chocolate pie.” He held it up again, hoping she'd take a second look and her eyes would light up with the warm memories he associated with this pie. No such luck. “This was your favorite dessert when you were little. You used to ask if we could have it for breakfast.”

“First off, in case you can't tell, I'm not little. Second, I'm on a strict no-sugar diet.”

“When did that start?” He'd bet the second he said, “I brought pie,” but she claimed her whole soccer team was doing a cleanse.

He looked at Levi for confirmation, since he was the soccer coach, and Levi lifted a confused hand, neither affirming nor denying that such a cleanse was going on within his team.

Emmitt scratched his eyebrow with a raised middle finger, leaving no confusion as to his response, then looked back at the only person in the room who mattered right then.

“You're right, you're not little and I feel like I'm playing a catch-up here.” He considered what Annie would say in this situation and added, “Stick with me, and trust that I'm getting there, because there is nothing more important to me than you and your feelings.” He just wished there weren't so many of them. “So if pie isn't your thing, maybe after dinner we can go to the store and pick up something you can eat. It will give me a better idea of what kind of snacks you want for the sleepover.” Without waiting a beat, he turned to Les. “And what the hell are you doing here?”

“I was invited?” Les said, using the table to help him stand. Emmitt noticed the familiar grooves lining his father's face, which had become deeper and more pronounced since he'd seen Les last.

“By who?”

“By me,” Paisley said, finally sparing him a glance. “And before you ask why, Grandpa's here because it's Friday, which is family dinner night. Do you have a problem with that?”

Fuck yeah, he did. Les was the walking, talking definition of a problem.

Emmitt met his old man's gaze. "This is a problem between me and him."

"We aren't talking about you and him. We're talking about *me* and *my* grandpa."

"He's right, sweetie," Les said in a soft tone Emmitt hadn't heard since his mom died, then walked over to place a comforting hand on Paisley's shoulder. "Why don't you let your dad and me talk about this. I don't want to ruin dinner."

"*You* aren't ruining anything, Grandpa," Paisley said, her tone neither soft nor comforting. In fact, she was shooting Emmitt an *eat shit and choke on it* look that implied *he* was the problem. "Anyone who thinks differently can leave, especially since my other dads don't have a problem with it." She turned to her "other dads," and asked, "Right?"

The Bobbsey Twins nodded, Paisley continued to glare, and Les—wanting to be the bigger fucking person for the first time since Nixon took office—said, "It's a little more complicated than that, sweetie. So, I think I'm going to check if there's any of those ice pops you bought still left in my freezer."

"Still the same old Les. Stir things up, then go on your merry way, completely oblivious to what you've done," Emmitt accused.

"I know what I've done, son," Les said. "But Michelle had a strict 'no swearing' policy in the house, so I think it's best I excuse myself. Thanks for the dinner."

"Grandpa..." Paisley jumped up, her voice animated and her face full of concern. Emmitt's heart tore in two when his daughter wrapped her arms about Les's neck and begged, "Don't go. We haven't even gotten to our game of chess."

"I know," Les said, giving her a kiss on the crown on her head. "But I'm a little tuckered out tonight. How about tomorrow? You and me, chess on the bluff?"

She gave a small nod and, just as she used to do to Emmitt when she was six, Paisley went up on her tiptoes and kissed her grandpa's cheek. "Tomorrow. Promise?"

Les gave her a wink, then did what he did best, went on his merry way.

"Do you have a problem with that?" she asked, her hip popped out, challenging him to a showdown of who could walk the bad side better.

What she didn't know was, when it came to the bad side, Emmitt was the founder, mayor, and ruler supreme. "Actually I do. Not that you reached out to him but that you invited him and didn't give me a heads-up before I got here."

"If anyone deserved a heads-up, then it was Grandpa," Paisley said. "Because you're the new face at dinner, not him."

Everything inside Emmitt slowed down until every breath, every movement,

every sound in the room faded away and all he was left with was the cold hard truth. He wasn't the third wheel in the trio of dads; he was the guy no one wanted at the party but felt obligated to invite. He was the guy who wasn't important enough to inform that his daughter was spending time with the man who'd made Emmitt's childhood one giant disappointment.

A man Emmitt was so desperate to escape that the day he turned eighteen, he went down to the courthouse and changed his last name to his mother's maiden name.

That—*that*—was who Levi and Gray had invited to dinner, and they hadn't even bothered to clear it with him. He didn't expect them to run everything by him. But this required his sign-off.

"You knew, man," he said to his supposed best friend, Levi. "You knew what he put me through, and you didn't think that, hey, maybe I should give Emmitt a call before we invite Les to all the family get-togethers?" He set the pie down for fear he'd chuck it at one of the idiots across from him. "Not all the family get-togethers, just the ones I'm not at."

"It's not like that," Levi tried to explain, but there was no explanation in the world that could justify what they'd done.

"Then tell me what it's like. Because I'm starting to connect the dots, and the picture it's making is pretty damn ugly."

"It isn't his fault," Paisley said, standing in front of Levi, as if he was her main concern. "I'm the one who reached out to Grandpa. I'm the one who invited him to dinner. I found a picture of him when I was at your house, and Mom told me he was my grandpa. So one night when Owen was sleeping over, we decided to look him up online. He was living like a mile away, so the next morning we jumped on our bikes and rode to his house."

And the blows kept coming.

"Michelle knew?" Emmitt staggered back a few steps. "How long has this been a thing?"

"Since sixth grade when I had to do a family crest."

"That was four years ago." Anger didn't even come close to what he was feeling when he turned to the Bobbsey Twins. "You two have been lying to me for four years? Jesus, you had Paisley lying to me."

"Michelle thought it would be better if this was about Les and Paisley, not you and your dad's relationship," Gray said.

"Les doesn't have relationships, Gray. He has burdens. And one mistake and it's game over."

"He's changed," Paisley said, her eyes a little too shiny for his liking. Then again, he was close to tears himself.

“He hasn’t, sweetie,” Emmitt said, his voice raw. “And I’m trying hard to understand why you didn’t come to me when you started having questions about your family roots.”

“Try harder, Dad,” she said, throwing his words back at him. “And you know why I didn’t come to you? You were gone, in South Africa, and the project was due in two weeks. I called, but you were somewhere without reception, so I went to Mom and she helped me find the pictures I needed, and I’m glad because I love Grandpa, and I love having him at family dinners.”

Emmitt wanted to ask if she loved having *him* at family dinners but was afraid of the answer. Jesus, his kid had needed him and he hadn’t answered her call. What kind of dad did that make him?

“I wish I’d been there, and I want you know that I’ll always be here for you, but sometimes when I’m away—” He stopped dead in his tracks because he sounded just like his dad. Even worse, Paisley was calling him on it.

“I wanted to tell you, but I didn’t want you to freak out. You’re not around much, so it didn’t seem like a big deal for Grandpa to come over,” she said. “And in case you go away between now and the dance, you should know that there is no sleepover. At least not at your house. My friends’ parents won’t let them sleep over at a house if they don’t know the chaperone. So it’s either no sleepover or I have it here with Daddy.” She looked around the room at all three men. “Bet you wish you’d never offered. I know I do.”

She didn’t wait for a response, which cut deep because he didn’t know how to respond. And she knew it. Here he’d come in thinking he had this whole dad thing figured out, that he was doing what needed to be done, and he’d missed every mark.

The screen door slammed, rocking on its hinges.

Emmitt ran a hand down his face, trying to collect himself enough so that he didn’t embarrass himself in front of everyone.

“We never meant for you to find out this way,” Levi said, and Emmitt lost it.

“When did you mean for me to find out? Graduation? Her wedding? And what does that even mean? Since when is it your choice when I find out that *my* kid is spending time with someone I’ve worked hard to keep her from? And in case you didn’t hear me, she is my kid.” He looked at Gray. “She might call you Daddy, but I’m her dad. Check the birth certificate.” Then it was Levi’s turn. “And you’re her uncle. The only two people who had the right to make decisions about Paisley were me and Michelle. When she passed, her legal rights didn’t transfer to either of you.”

“Take it down a notch,” Levi said, putting his hand against Gray’s chest as if holding him back.

“Ah, I get it now. You’re too busy watching his back to even notice the knife in mine,” Emmitt scoffed. “And what the hell are you wearing?”

Emmitt knew he was coming off like an asshole, but it was better than breaking down in front of the two biggest traitors in bro-code history. Never in his life had he felt so left out, so insignificant and alone. And with the childhood he’d had, that was saying a lot.

Levi looked at Emmitt as if he were the crazy one. “We play softball on Fridays.”

“Since when?”

Levi and Gray looked at each other, sharing some secret glances Emmitt wasn’t included in. Par for the course.

“Since four years ago,” Levi said. “Michelle signed us up. She signed you up too, but when you didn’t show up at the first few practices, they filled your spot.”

“I swear to God, if you say with my dad, I will lose my shit.” He didn’t let them answer. “You both have my number—you could have texted or called or e-mailed. If you needed me, you knew how to get hold of me.”

“That’s just it, man,” Gray said. “We’re not your keeper. I work hard to make sure you’re looped in as much as I can, but at some point you have to take the initiative.”

“Here’s the thing, *Gray*. You seem to think you’re my daughter’s keeper.”

“E,” Levi said cautiously. “It’s a stupid weeknight league. It’s not a big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal, because I’m trying to be a part of this family.” He punched his chest with his fist, but it just felt empty. “And you both know that. I’m doing my best from five thousand freaking miles away. I thought you had my back.”

“When was the last time you had ours?” Gray asked, and that’s when Emmitt saw it.

The one thing that highlighted just what a joke of a dad he was. Sitting on the table next to Gray was the hit that brought him to his knees.

A WORLD’S BEST DAD mug.

Chapter 19

Going with the whole “Early shift tomorrow” excuse, which Annie felt was far more believable than “My friend’s toothless cat just gave birth and I have to cut the umbilical cords,” she said her final goodbyes, then blew out of there as if her butt were on fire.

She didn’t trust Nurse Tran not to check the schedule, so she called a coworker, who was a new mom, and offered to take her morning shift, then let the scheduling office know of the switch.

Annie turned onto the highway, her eyes straining to see the lanes through the sheets of water sliding down her front windshield. While she’d been inside, the drizzle had become a downpour, and the roads were overflowing with runoff.

Hands at ten and two, she drove at a snail’s pace, listening to her Adele-inspired playlist, trying to come up with something to explain away her sudden departure to Lynn. It would have to be good enough to make her friend think everything was okay.

The last thing she wanted was for Lynn to bring out the kid gloves around Annie, the way her friends back in Connecticut had.

After what seemed like an eternity, she pulled into her neighborhood and loosened her hold on the wheel—and her emotions.

It was only then that Annie let herself cry. She had allowed herself to believe that tonight would get her one step closer to a deeper understanding of who she was. Maybe it was the universe, karma, and the tooth fairy—who still had it in for Annie since she’d refused to hand over her teeth for a measly twenty-five cents a pop—all coming together to tell her, “Understand now?”

Maybe she had to grow up and face the facts that all this searching wasn’t going to change a thing. And that hollowed-out feeling in her chest she felt at night when the house was quiet and the rest of the world was at peace? It was never going to go away.

And okay, some of the tears came from a severe lack of sleep. Annie was so tired that she was tired of being tired. Tired of hoping and wishing and winding up all alone. Just when she thought she couldn’t be any more pathetic, Adele’s song, “Someone Like You,” filled her car.

The soul-crushing words slowly trickled through the night, sliding down her spine and into her heart, poking needle-size holes through her chest, as if it were the only way to let the pain drip out, tiny bits at a time because all at once would be too much.

Annie wasn’t crying over Clark or her birth parents or even what had happened tonight. She was crying because she really, really loved this song. She

loved it so much that when the chorus started, she cranked it up, belting out the lyrics with Adele, as if this was carpool karaoke and Adele was in the car singing with her.

After grabbing a take-out napkin stashed in her glove box, she dabbed at one eye and then the other before giving a quick blow. Just then, a shadowy figure emerged from the mist.

“What the hell?” Annie screamed, and jerked the wheel.

Heart hammering, she stomped on the brakes, sending up a quick prayer that she’d reacted fast enough. Her car slid across the slick road, stopping mere inches before she would have engaged in a very messy game of chicken with a pedestrian who, she noticed, was wearing a pair of low-hung jeans that encased one hell of an amazing butt. A very drenched butt she’d been secretly admiring all too often lately had crossed the road right in front of her car.

She watched until he reached the sidewalk, then turned off the radio and took a few deep breaths to calm herself.

He had no umbrella, no raincoat, and absolutely no reason for walking in the middle of the road on this dark and stormy night. Not that he seemed to care.

Wiping her eyes on the sleeve of her coat, she slowly pulled alongside him. One last sniffle—God, she hoped it was dark enough outside that he would not be able to make out the telltale puffy eyes and red nose—and she rolled down the window.

“You know, there’s a crosswalk ten yards ahead,” she said out the window.

Silently, he stormed past her car without even sparing her a glance. Emmitt was in a mood—and working hard to ignore her.

Slowly, she crept forward until she was again by his side. “You okay?”

He stopped and turned to face her. Those usually warm brown eyes flickered with fire, but it was the way the soft planes of his face had folded in on themselves that had her worried. He was clearly in pain.

“Seriously, Emmitt, are you okay?” When he didn’t answer, she added, “Hop in and let me give you a ride home.”

He waved her off. “No thanks. I’m in a shitty mood and need to clear my head.”

“In the rain?” The water was flowing across the street in sheets. “Why don’t you clear your head in my car, where it’s dry and warm. If you want, I can open the moonroof and it will be just like you’re outside. Only you won’t get wet.”

“Already wet. Don’t care,” was all he said, and continued to head due north.

Annie took her foot off the brake and kept pace with him. Ignoring the rain pelting her in the face, she stuck her head out the window. “I care because you get grumpy when you’re wet and I don’t want to have to deal with Grumpy

Emmitt.” She gentled her voice. “Did something happen at the dinner?”

“What didn’t happen?” He laughed, but there was zero humor in it.

“You want to talk about it?”

“So you can feel sorry for me? No thanks,” he said, and considering the amount of water he had to trudge through, he was moving rather quickly.

“You want *me* to feel sorry for *you*? The guy with a booty-call list a hundred sticky notes long?” Hearing about someone else’s shitty night might distract her from her own.

“Yeah, you know me,” he said, tossing his arms in the air, then winced. He cracked his neck and went on—talking and walking. “The town stud, the *play it fast and loose* guy, the guy who gets to see his kid only on weekends, the guy who no one fucking thought to tell that his dad, who didn’t give two shits about him growing up, now sits in his seat at family dinners.”

Right, his dad. His stage-three cancer patient of a dad whose secrets she was legally bound to keep. Not that this would be the time to reveal them. The way Emmitt held his head every time he passed a streetlight was a good indication that if he didn’t take his pain medicine and lie down, he was in for an unpleasant night of pain.

“How blurry is your vision?” she asked, and he came to a hard stop.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t lecture me, don’t diagnose me. And please, God, don’t go all Nurse Annie on me. I don’t want a ride. I want peace and quiet.”

“You can kiss that ride home goodbye,” she said, but she was talking to the air because he’d taken off again. This time when Annie pulled up alongside him, she made it clear she wasn’t going anywhere. He glared at her. “And I’m a PA, not a nurse. I’m pretty much a doctor who can’t do surgeries. Which means I am a badass in a white lab coat. It also means you can’t tell me where to drive.”

She thought she heard him chuckle, but he could have been mumbling for her to fuck off.

“It’s your night,” she continued. “Spend it how you want.”

Clearly, he wanted to spend it walking home in the pouring rain. And since he seemed set on this ridiculous plan, Annie followed right alongside him.

Him in the rain, her in her car, the entire way. Every so often, she’d flash her headlights at him and he’d flash her the bird in return. It wasn’t until he reached the driveway that he finally stopped—keeping his back to her.

“They kept it from me,” he said, his voice getting lost in the wind. “All of them. Even though they knew how strained my relationship with my dad is, *knew* I didn’t want him around Paisley, they still went behind my back and let it happen. The people who I thought were my family put Paisley in a position to hide things from me.”

With a shrug that spoke volumes on his emotional state, he turned and met her gaze. Annie felt the air leave her lungs in one long gasp, because he wasn't angry, as she'd previously thought. No, he was shell-shocked and devastated.

Absolutely, positively heartbroken.

"Oh, Emmitt. I don't even know what to say. That must have been hard for her to keep from you. And so incredibly hard for you to find out." Especially the way he did.

Emmitt was already uncertain about his role in Paisley's life, so desperate to do right by her, to be an active and meaningful presence in her life, that keeping something like this from him was cruel.

"This isn't a one-time thing either. He's been coming to dinners for more than four years. Four years! Can you believe that shit?"

"No. I can't." Annie knew how crushing it had been to learn that Clark wanted out of their relationship. She couldn't even imagine the anguish a secret this destructive could cause. "But I am sorry for how this all played out."

"Me too," he said, the defeat in his voice nearly tearing her heart in two.

A flash of light cut through the night's blackness, quickly followed by a booming rumble that had goose bumps dotting her arms. The temperature had fallen, making the drops of rain feel more like little pinpricks against her chilled flesh.

When lightning lit the sky again, he gripped his head and sucked in a few harsh breaths.

"If I were being PA Annie, I'd tell you I have some Excedrin in my purse, but I don't want to rouse Grumpy Emmitt."

That earned her a little smile, but she didn't imagine he'd be vertical longer than it took to stumble through the door and onto the couch.

With a few colorful words directed at Mother Nature, Emmitt made his way up the driveway but stopped short of the front porch, standing in the rain as if it were penance.

Annie parked the car and, grabbing her mom's pot, climbed out. By the time she reached him, her hair was plastered to her head, her clothes soaked through. The only dry part of Emmitt was the patch of forehead his ballcap protected.

The wind blew the rain sideways, and the streetlights flickered on and off before plunging the entire block into darkness. When Emmitt didn't move, Annie resigned herself to wait it out by his side until he told her differently. She knew what it was like to be on the outside, and maybe having her next to him would make it a little less painful.

Breathing deep through his nose, he cupped the rim of his cap over and over, tilting his head to the sky. Eyes closed, he let the rain wash down his face.

“Just once,” he said, breaking the silence. “Just one damn time, I’d like to be in the know when it comes to my kid. She’s my fucking kid.” He dropped his head all the way to his chest. “Where do they get off keeping something like this from me?”

She hiked the pot against her hip and with her free hand touched his cheek. As he had the other day, he leaned into it and closed his eyes. “I wish I had been there so you wouldn’t have felt alone in such an emotionally charged moment.”

He looked up at her through rain-spiked lashes. “You can’t help yourself, can you? Annie the Protector is on a mission,” he teased warmly. “Were you born taking care of others or—”

He stopped short and, in a very manly fashion flipped his cap backward and got eye level with her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She gave a bright smile, knowing she could fake anything with convincing success. She was a master.

Emmitt looked right past that smile and into her eyes, searching for what Annie hoped she’d buried deep enough to avoid detection. Hiding anything from a guy who read people for a living was harder than she’d first imagined. She knew the exact moment he realized her night hadn’t gone all that stellar either.

“Nothing, my ass. Who made you cry?” he said as if he were vowing never to sleep again until he fixed whatever wrongs had been thrust upon her.

“No one.” Which was the God’s honest truth. No one person had made her cry.

“Who, Anh?”

And he’d teased her about being a protector? He looked ready to pummel whomever she blamed. His need to care for those around him—even at his own expense—made Florence Nightingale look apathetic.

“Seriously, it’s allergies,” she said, and this time she did lie. “Did Paisley want to spend time with her grandpa?”

“God, when you say it like that—‘Spend time with her grandpa’—I feel like a dick.” He looked up at the sky as if afraid of what *she’d* see. Now who was hiding? “She said she likes hanging with my dad. She was even the one to approach him.”

“It’s natural for her to be curious about her grandpa, especially with her unique family situation.” She knew exactly how that felt, just like she knew how Paisley’s curiosity caused Emmitt pain. It was this exact reason that Annie had waited so long to research her culture—and her birth parents.

She’d never wanted her parents to feel as if they weren’t enough.

Right now, Emmitt was afraid he wasn’t enough, and she wanted to tell him that he was more than enough. But he wasn’t ready to hear that. Right now he

needed someone to listen, so she took his hand, which was like holding melting ice, and without hesitation, his fingers laced with hers.

“She decided not to tell me because she was afraid it would upset me and, get this, she said that because I’m not around much, it was no big deal. Jesus, my kid thought I was too busy to listen.”

“Were you?”

He sent her a sidelong glance. “You said as much the first time you heard I was a father.”

“I also didn’t know you very well, and you’ve changed, which is what’s important. Emmitt, you realized Paisley needed more so you stepped up and became the dad she needed. That’s what love can do.” She quickly debated whether to confess her recent connection. By not doing so, she’d be no better than his family. But he’d had all the *Funny thing happened* kinds of confessions he could take, so she said, “Maybe with age, your dad has changed too.”

“No way.” He spoke with absolute certainty that had Annie wondering exactly what had happened to break this family apart. “This is what my dad does. He’s great at playing people. Then once he gets bored or busy or they disappoint, *poof*, he disappears. And trust me, when you realize you were nothing but a passing interest, you never fully come back from that.”

Annie suddenly understood why Emmitt was the way he was. Why he was so against going all in when it came to relationships. And why he rarely let people see the deep, soft, and wonderful guy hidden beneath. If all he gave them was this easygoing, *everything slides right off me* persona, there was zero chance of building anything lasting and real—leaving zero chance of getting hurt.

“Emm itt—”

“Don’t need to say it. I see the irony.”

“I was going to say, ‘People change,’” she said lightly. “Maybe your dad is trying to make up for how he parented you with Paisley. Maybe he wants to make it up to you but doesn’t know how to reach out.”

“My kid isn’t the person he gets to use to feel better about himself.”

“People who are given a second chance in life rarely waste it.”

He looked at her as if she’d just confessed to sprinkling arsenic over Pediatrics’ lollipop dish.

“I get that you’re just trying to help. But you shouldn’t talk about things you don’t understand. His condescending tone was as confusing as it was hurtful. “Those studies you’re always quoting are cute. But this is real life, Anh. And in real life, people disappoint. Beyond what a day of fishing can fix.”

The remark was so below the belt, Annie dropped his hand and immediately stepped back. She’d only known him a few weeks, but that one comment cut

deeper than anything she'd experienced tonight. He'd managed to humiliate her and discredit her in a single assessment. Even more upsetting, he'd gone about it by using personal and meaningful details from her life that she'd shared with him.

There were a few dozen hurtful things she could throw back at him. But Annie didn't do mean. She also didn't do confrontation, which was why she'd rather relocate to another state than continue this discussion.

"Noted," was all she said before turning toward the front door. Because she was one harsh word from embarrassing herself.

She sped up the driveway and wrestled with the door's lock, but her trembling hands and misty eyes weren't doing her any favors. Finally, after what seemed like eternity, the bolt clicked over. Not waiting to see if he was coming, she went to open the door when a large masculine hand appeared above her head, keeping her from budging it.

"Let go," she said, her voice unsteady.

"After I apologize." She could feel his breath against her ear, the warmth of his close proximity seeping through her clothes. "I was mad and took it out on you, and that's not fair."

"You did warn me. Next time I'll listen. In fact, next time, instead of offering you a ride, I'll drive by and splash mud all over you," she said, still not facing him.

"I deserve a drive-by mudding and a whole lot more." He moved closer, and she rested her head against the wood door. "I'm sorry for what I said, Anh. Not only was it mean, it was uncalled for and you were the last one who deserved my wrath tonight."

"Apology heard. Now let go."

"After you tell me why you were crying." He rested a hand on her hip and pulled her back against him.

"It was just a really bad night?"

"Tell me what happened and how I can make it better?" he asked and for a brief moment Annie considered telling him about her night. Then his lips brushed her ear, and she felt his touch zing all the way down to her toes.

He felt it too, because he tugged her even farther into him, his hand sliding over her hip and—*oh my God*—he groaned. The kind of groan that had zero to do with Annie sharing her awful night, and everything to do with them sharing the bed all night long.

He whispered her name, and Annie jerked out of his grasp and yanked open the door.

"I cry when confronted by assholes." She stepped inside and whirled around.

“Oh, and Emmitt, as your friendly neighborhood PA, I need to tell you that apologies aren’t all roses and makeup sex.”

With that, she slammed the front door in his face. And locked the deadbolt.

Chapter 20

Emmitt came awake with a start, clammy and shaking like a leaf, his head pounding louder than the thunder that had woken him.

He opened one eye to find it was still dark. The pink cotton sheets were tangled around his legs, the rest of the bedding had been shoved to the floor, and his heart was pounding out of his chest as if he'd spent the night playing a fun game of naked Twister with the sexy PA down the hall instead of crammed in Paisley's twin bed with Pookie the Cuddle Bunny and Mr. Big, the only two stuffed animals who had lived to tell the tale of the Great Paisley Purge of seventh grade.

Emmitt had waited for Annie to go to bed before turning in. Once the light under her door went out, he'd settled in his recliner for the night. It was a lumpy and impractical sleep space as it had always been, and after about an hour he gave up and crawled into Paisley's bed.

It wasn't his night with her—even if it had been, he doubted she'd have come home with him—so there was no sense twisting his body into a pretzel for another sleepless night when there was a spare bed available.

Not that a mattress and the ability to get completely horizontal helped. After spending the first three hours in bed rehashing the evening, he'd finally dozed off and managed to accomplish a whole forty-three minutes of sleep.

“Christ,” he mumbled to himself, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Kicking off the last of the covers, he sat up and grabbed for his head, hoping to put enough pressure there to help with the spinning he had going on.

Too late. A blinding pain came at him hard from behind his skull, stabbing him through the left eye, making his stomach roil and the rest of him feel as if he were standing on a tilt-a-whirl. He'd forgone his pain pills tonight in an effort to prove something to himself.

All he'd managed to prove was that he was an ass, just like Annie accused.

Annie.

Man, he'd screwed that up. The look she'd given him there at the end, before she'd locked him out of his own house, pretty much gnawed at him all night. He'd have locked himself out too.

And he wouldn't have unlocked the back door for his sorry ass. Even when she was pissed, she couldn't help herself. Which was all she'd been trying to do earlier, protect him from his own stupidity.

And he'd pretty much told her to fuck off.

Taking a few deep breaths, he tugged on his sweats and padded to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat. Since he hadn't partaken in the family dinner, he

was about ten hours out from his last meal. And his prescription came with a strict “take with meal” direction.

Forgoing the light switch, because he didn’t need any more hurt right then, he opened the refrigerator door. Leaning his forearms against the top, he stared at his options, looking for anything that piqued his appetite.

“You really need to wear a bell around your neck. Or one of these times, I’ll get lucky with my aim,” Annie said.

He looked over his shoulder and knew what he was craving. Because one glance at her illuminated by the soft glow of the refrigerator light and he felt as if his luck was changing. He also felt the bumbling idiot who always said the wrong thing around Annie waking up.

She was wearing a cotton T-shirt again—her sleepwear of choice, although it wasn’t oversized or sporting her college logo. Tonight she’d gone for a plain white shirt with a low V neckline and an even higher hem that, had she been standing, would have come way up on her thighs.

But she wasn’t standing. Oh no, Annie was sitting on the island, bringing that hem to barely legal levels, while going after a gallon of ice cream with the scooper—as if she’d decided mid-snacking that it was an out-of-the-tub kind of occasion.

Her normally silky straight hair was sticking up everywhere, making him think she’d crawled into bed without bothering to dry it off. But what had his heart rolling over was that her eyes were soft and half-lidded, as if she’d sleepwalked her way through the first half of the carton.

Then there were her bottoms—or serious lack thereof. Because peeking out from beneath that shirt was nothing but golden skin and teal-colored lace. Teal lace cheeky-cut undies, to be exact. Which had his bottom parts RSVPing for a pillow fight party of two.

“If I wear a bell, what will you be wearing?” he asked

“How’s your head?”

“Rebelling against being upright, but at least I don’t feel like puking anymore.”

“Life goals,” she said around a mouthful of ice cream. “You want some tea? Caffeine might help.”

“More of a coffee guy, and already downed the pot left over from this morning.” Which might be part of this whole sleep issue.

“Ice cream is always an option.” She gestured to the abandoned spoon on the counter, which felt more like an olive branch. “It’s just regular vanilla, but there’s fudge and peanuts in the pantry if you need something a little more decadent.”

“Decadence is overrated.” Closing the fridge, he picked up the spoon and slowly made his way toward her, stopping only when he was pressed against her knees. “Vanilla happens to be my favorite.”

“And if it were chocolate, what would you have said?” She held the container hostage, like Gollum with the Ring.

“That vanilla is my favorite, but I’m an equal opportunity connoisseur when it comes to sharing ice cream with a beautiful woman.”

She rolled her eyes but released her death grip on the container.

His gaze never leaving hers, he made a big to-do about dipping his spoon in and taking the biggest helping possible. The ice cream was half-melted but he made do.

“Is this the reason you’re awake at three a.m.? An ice-cream craving?” he asked.

“Ice cream is best eaten at three a.m. But no.” She worried her lip. “I had a hard time sleeping. Every time I closed my eyes, my brain would start processing everything you have going on right now. And all the stress you’re under, all the new demands on you, and, well, if you want me to move out, I can call Beckett. She said I can crash on her couch until I find a place.”

He’d been operating under the assumption that she’d been awake because she was mad at him. That the things he’d said had ruined any chance he had at repairing this *thing* growing between them.

She was still searching for solid ground after her world had fallen apart, and yet she was more concerned about his recovery than her own. Was even willing to uproot herself again and sleep on a couch if it made his life a little easier.

Annie was the only easy thing in his life, and he knew he’d have to work damn hard to make up for tonight. Even harder, if he wanted to stand a chance of keeping her. And he wanted. Good thing hard work had never scared Emmitt. Losing Annie? Now, that scared the shit out of him.

Emmitt had met a lot of women in his life, but he’d never known one as compassionate and selfless as Annie. He didn’t think he’d ever meet another quite like her.

“Do you want to move out?” he asked.

Her response was to shove a scooper full of ice cream into her mouth and shrug. Most people would take that as indifference, but Emmitt knew better. Annie was preparing herself for another blow.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” he began. “I was a complete dick earlier and there isn’t enough pepperoni pizza in the world to make up for the things I said.”

“You had a rough night and you were in a lot of pain. You still are.”

“I’m still a dick? Or I’m still in pain?”

“Both,” she said with a teasing smile. “But I know you’re going to need time and privacy to work things out with Paisley, and I don’t want to be in the way, which is why I’m offering to move.”

He stuck the spoon in the ice cream and left it, freeing up his hands. Leaning forward, he rested his palms on the counter, bringing his eyes level with hers and his thigh flush with her bare legs. Her very sexy, very silky, very tempting bare legs.

“I’m really sorry about what I said. But I don’t want you to move out.”

“You don’t?” she breathed.

“No. I don’t. I like the arrangement. I like you being here. In fact, I like you.” He parted her knees slightly, and she did the rest, relaxing so he could slip between them. Which he did. “A lot.” But instead of going in for the kiss—which based on the way she was scoping out his mouth, he totally could have—he went for comfort and support, which was what he should have done earlier. “You want to tell me why you were crying earlier?”

“Not really.”

“You sure?” he asked. “Because someone once told me that roommates need to be open and honest with each other, in case something happens. What happened, Goldilocks?”

“Is my being your roommate the only reason you want to know?”

“No. I want to know because I like you.” He noticed her eyes were puffy from a recent cry, which gutted him. “A lot.”

“I just spent the whole night being reminded that I don’t fit in.” Her voice was soft and full of exasperated suffering, which he knew she’d never actually verbalize. “I went to the potluck so excited to find a deep connection, only to be smacked in the face with how different I am. I didn’t connect. At all.” She let out a laugh that was too close to a sob for his comfort. “I didn’t even have the right words to begin to connect. Literally, they were all speaking Vietnamese, so I sat in the corner, acting like that shy little In-Bee I worked so hard to leave behind.”

“In-Bee?”

She paused for a moment, as though trying to figure out if he was messing with her or being serious. “You know, someone who got stuck in between? Always battling people’s expectations and my reality. Half the time, I feel like a big fake.”

He shook his head. “You are as real as they come. That you care so much makes you uniquely Ann.”

“Being unique is exhausting and always comes with disclaimers and explanations. Sometimes I just want to be like everyone else so when I walk into

a room I don't have to play Twenty Questions before getting to the standard Get to Know You ones. Because no matter which side is asking, I'm never going to live up to their first impression."

"You exceeded mine in the first ten minutes, and you continue to amaze me," he said. Even in the limited light of the moon, he could see the tears pooling on her lashes, one blink from spilling over.

"When I walked into that room of women, they assumed I spoke Vietnamese, and when they realized I didn't, I explained that my parents didn't neglect their cultural duties; they're just white. Which led to the whole adopted part of the story, where they told me how lucky I was that I was picked, which made me think about all of the kids who weren't picked. And what it was that made me pickable so I keep doing that and not disappoint my parents. Maybe it was a onetime thing I happened to do, and Mom was like, 'Did you see that, Marty? She laughed just like my mom used to. She's the one!' But I don't really laugh like that, so maybe they feel conned, which ultimately leads me to the reminder that in order to be picked someone had to discard me first."

She took a breath, jerky and trembling, and his heart clenched. Because when she'd said "discard" she looked embarrassed and a little lost and, the part that really slayed him, as if she believed she was truly discardable, when it couldn't be further from the truth. She had the kind of heart that, if one was lucky enough to receive even the smallest piece of, deserved to be protected and treasured forever.

"I know this all sounds crazy and I'm probably scaring you off," she said.

"You don't sound crazy, and if a stiletto torpedo didn't scare me off, nothing you do ever can," he whispered. "You mentioned the other side—what do they do when they meet you?"

"When I walk into a room of white people and they learn that I don't have fly chopstick skills or fall into some Asian stereotype, I have to explain that I was born in Vietnam but raised here in the states by white parents. The 'white bread upbringing' gives me enough cred that they take a chance getting to know me, but they should want to get to know me just because of me, not where I was born or what race my parents are. It's like, I have to straddle two worlds, knowing I'm never going to be fully accepted or fit into either one."

No wonder she worked so hard to please the people around her. Her life had been a nonstop battle to belong, where everyday encounters forced her to defend her own identity.

"You fit with me." Taking the ice cream out of her hands and setting it on the island, he took her into his arms. "See, a perfect fit."

She slid her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest, holding on

as if this was the most important hug of her life. Hell, it was for him. She fit so damn perfectly he never wanted to move, so he didn't. Just stood there, silently holding her while his heart pounded against his chest. Her heart was doing some pounding of its own, fast and erratic, the tempo radiating through him.

"You've never asked about any of that. Why?" she whispered.

"None of that matters to me," he murmured back, his voice a little huskier than before. "The moment you locked me out of my own room, I knew I wanted to learn everything there was to know about you."

"You said I was crazy."

"You always seem to leave out the cutie part," he said. "And while I do love a cutie, I was even more intrigued by the woman who tried to kill me in my own house, then lectured me and locked me out of my bedroom. Independent, real, honest, strong—and stubborn enough to call me on my shit even after you realized I was your landlord."

"You forgot smart." Her fingers, which had been laced around his neck, slowly slid up through his hair.

"And sexy." His fingers did some sliding too, down her back, lower and lower until he was reaching a line that, once crossed, could never be undone. "So incredibly sexy you have me stumbling over myself trying to impress you."

It was dark so he couldn't be certain, but he was pretty sure she was blushing—and staring at his mouth.

"For the record, you aren't my landlord, you're my roommate." She shimmied toward the edge of the counter—and him—making this a serious *run don't walk toward that finish line* kind of scenario, and he was just waiting for her to blow the whistle.

"We're a whole lot more than roommates, Anh."

"This would never work," she said—against the side of his neck. "You're all about grand gestures, and I'm into the little things."

He pulled back enough that she had to lift her head. "Only because you've never had a gesture grand enough to be worthy of you. And for the record, I think this will work just fine."

She seemed to have flipped to the same page as he, because she didn't take her gaze from his lips. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

"I believe this is a ladies-first kind of situation," he said, knowing full well he didn't give a shit who kissed who first. All he cared was that it finally happened.

Actually, that wasn't true.

Emmitt knew Annie's life had been a revolving door of disappointment, and he cared about her too much to be one more person to take her for a spin.

“Which also means ladies set the rules. How far, how fast—this is on your terms,” he whispered. “But if you’re asking for my consent, then the big ‘Fuck Yeah’ in my pants is all the consent you need.”

And luck of all that was lucky, she got the message.

One minute her lips weren’t anywhere near his mouth; then she leaned forward and there they were and—Christ almighty—when Anh Nhi Walsh set her mind to something she was fully, completely, and mind-body-and-soulfully committed to the cause. And right now, she was proving that she was a kissing genius of the superhuman kind.

Emmitt had been kissed and he’d *been kissed*, but he’d never come close to being kissed like this. On a scale of scorching to molten lava, Annie was nearing surface-of-the-sun levels.

Not too hot that he’d be afraid of getting burned.

Not too cold that he’d have to wonder if she was going to ditch the shirt and teal lace.

Oh no, his Goldilocks’ kiss was just right.

Teasing and languid, her mouth gently moved against his as if she’d been dreaming of this moment for as long as he had. And knowing her, his sweet and methodical Annie, she had a very detailed plan that, based on the sensation of her fingers gliding down his back and around to his bare chest, she’d worked out every detail. Not that he was complaining.

Nope, Emmitt was enjoying the hell out of every glide and touch.

Her kiss was finally going to shift the debate from *Who gets the bed to who’s on top*. Although she seemed to be headed toward a *Heating up the kitchen* fantasy, which he was A-OK with.

As for her consent, that came when she smoothed her hands down his stomach, making a brief visit right over, *bingo*, the front of his sweats. Talk about fantasies. This woman was checking off every box.

Never one to neglect his part of the work, Emmitt made his way out from her shirt and down to palm both cheeks of her ass—and what an outstanding ass it was—molding them until she was sitting on his hands instead of the counter.

“Emmitt,” she said against his lips. Then her hand found its way under the hem of his sweats, going the extra millimeter just for him, and giving a startled laugh when she made contact. “I guess that answers my question about whether you normally sleep naked.”

“I do a lot of things naked,” he said, and then he was groaning because those elegant fingers of hers were exploring up and down and all around his consent.

“Big words for a guy who wears glow-in-the-dark boxers.”

“Don’t let the boxers fool you,” he said, and in a move that was inspired, he

had his hands under her ass, her legs around his waist, and she was pressed against the nearest wall while he kissed her with the power of a dozen restless nights spent playing out this exact moment.

Hundreds of hours to dream up hundreds of ways it could go down, and none of them could have prepared him for the real thing. Until Annie, he'd never had anything real with a woman. But she was as real as it got, so instead of one of his hot-and-heavy kisses, he delivered the kind of *whole-body, these cheeky cut panties are toast, real earth-shattering* kiss that a man gives a woman when he wanted to be clear about just how hard he's going to rock her world.

And rock it he did, kissing her until his arms were shaking and his head was spinning and one kiss melted into another. They were sharing the same breath, moving with the familiarity of two people who had known each other for years, decades even.

"Emmitt," she said between kisses, her hands tightening in his hair.

It was a few minutes longer before she spoke again. "Emmitt, wait. No fake promises, remember?"

"No fake promises." He leaned in to pick things back up, and she stuck a hand between their mouths and held it there until he pulled back.

"I need you to say it out loud so we both hear it, and nobody misunderstands."

Is she serious?

"I need you to promise you won't say anything you don't mean," she whispered, and he realized she was not only serious, she was completely terrified of his response.

Needing to give her question the consideration it deserved, the consideration she deserved, he walked over to set her on the counter opposite the spot where they'd begun.

Brushing her hair back so he could see her, he asked, "What do you think is going to happen? I make a promise to get you into bed and then tomorrow act like nothing's changed?"

She glanced down. "It's been known to happen."

Emmitt lowered his head so she was forced to look at him. She slammed her eyes shut.

"How are you going to know I'm being honest if you have your eyes closed?"

"Trust me, I've gone in eyes wide open before and it didn't work out so well for me. I figure if something goes wrong this time, I can blame it on my closed eyes."

"Or you can trust that I'm not the guy everyone seems to think I am, and

when I tell you I won't ever lie to you, you can believe me," he said gently, and she opened one eye, then the other. "No fake promises."

"Thank you." She placed a tender whisper of a kiss on his lips. "And I believe you."

"Talk about a turn-on." He kissed her back.

"Me thanking you or trusting you?"

"Both. All of it. Everything about you is a turn-on, and that is as honest as it comes."

And they were finished with the discussion part of the evening, because Annie got down to the nonverbal communications section.

Emmitt had a PhD in nonverbal communication, so when she leaned back and lifted her arms he properly translated her invitation and, easing his thumbs under the hem of her shirt, slowly pushed it up. The higher the hem went, the harder he got, until he brushed the undersides of her breasts. When he tugged off the shirt, leaving her in nothing but teal, his breath lodged itself in his throat.

"Jesus." He ran a hand over his mouth. Toned core, elegant shape, and soft curves all there for him to catalogue and savor. And savor he did.

He started with letting his gaze roam her entire body, followed by his hands, which explored and worshiped every single inch of silky skin. And when he got to those cheeky cuts, he got up close and personal with her lace before continuing his trip all the way down until he was on his knees kissing each painted toe.

Annie wanted to rush him along, he could tell, but she patiently sat there, letting him look his fill. And to reward her for her thoughtfulness, he used his mouth on the way back up.

Gently taking her foot, he placing an opened-mouth kiss on the little divot above her ankle, and she let out this sexy noise that was the vocal equivalent of a hand job. Had he not promised her "big words," he would have gone right to the main course. But he was a man of his word, so he took his time to build the heat.

He placed another kiss, this one right below her knee. His mouth took a languid tour all the way up her leg, not stopping until he was inches from her pleasure button. Then he placed her foot on the edge of the counter and gave her a little pat, signaling for her to leave it there.

He did the same with her other leg, placing that foot in line with the first, and her in the right position for what would come next.

Specifically, her.

He watched her watching him as he kissed his way around the edge of her panties, loving how her eyes got wider and wider as her breathing became shallower and shallower. He nipped the inside of her right thigh, deciding to lick

the left, and then because she seemed to like that so much, he pressed her legs open even farther and licked her right up the middle of that teal lace.

“God, Emmitt,” she moaned, leaning back on her hands.

“You can lose the God part. Emmitt’s fine,” he said, taking a moment to appreciate how the lace hugged her ass. Man, what a sight. The only thing he’d love to see more was for it to be gone.

This man of action was on the problem, hooking his finger under the scalloped edging by her leg and pulling it to the side so that when he licked a second time, there was no lace between them.

He nipped and teased, learning what she liked and memorizing what she loved. He’d always been a quick study, because with a few more strokes, he did this swirling thing with his tongue and she flew apart, screaming out his name. Not once, but over and over again until his name was nothing more than a sated whisper.

When she peeled herself off his chest, she looked up at him with a mischievous twinkle.

“These need to come off,” she said.

“I couldn’t agree more, Goldilocks.”

And funny thing, he started tugging at her panties at the same time she went after his sweats, until they were a tangle of limbs and laughter.

“Not me,” she said. His sweats lodged around his knees like a Hula-Hoop refusing to go down without a fight. She gave his ass a smack. “Your turn.”

“Or.” He kicked off his sweats and in a one-two action that even impressed him, Annie’s panties joined his sweats on the floor, and she was over his shoulder. “Both our turns.”

“Put me down.” She smacked his ass again, so he gave her a little slap in return. Ignoring her laughs, he carried her over to the recliner after making a pitstop in the bathroom to grab a condom.

Taking a seat, he plopped her on his lap, noticing how her boobs gave a little jiggle. When he kicked the recliner back, they jiggled again.

“You’re doing that on purpose.” She scrambled upright, putting a leg on either side so she was straddling him, her wet, hot skin settling over his.

“You bet your sweet ass I did.” He didn’t smack it. Oh no, he planted his hands there as if claiming it for himself and gave a slight jerk that sent her falling forward and pressing those very naked body parts against his. “There, problem solved. No more jiggling.”

“This problem is far from solved.” She pressed against him in a lap-dance move that had his eyes rolling back into his head. “In fact, we have a very big problem on our hands.” She sat back and smiled. “More correctly, in my hands.”

Hands that she used to slowly drive him out of his mind and under her spell. A spell that was going to be broken in only a couple of ways. “One, you keep that up and this will end in quick and pleasurable fun for one. Or, two, you help me get this on”—he held up the condom—”and we can cross that finish line together.”

“How about one, then two?”

“Yeah, one happens and it’s going to take some serious recharge time before we get back to two. I made some pretty big promises and I intend to keep my word.”

No longer able to wait for her to decide, Emmitt took charge, which had him bringing the chair upright so he could tear open the condom wrapper.

It was a little tricky, with her hands doing more stroking than helping, but together they managed to get him wrapped and inside her in a single thrust.

“Jesus,” he moaned at the same time she groaned.

“So big.”

Normally, he would have taken a moment to soak in the compliment, even thank her for it, but before he knew it, the chair tilted back, Annie tilted forward, and they were both fully horizontal. Her hands were braced on either side of his head, those incredible breasts jiggling right in his face.

“I’m never getting rid of this recliner,” he said, because all he had to do was lean up and—*sweet mercy*—he was appreciating her breasts the way they were intended to be appreciated.

Annie was done being patient, because she arched her back and sank down even further, pushing until he was all the way inside of her. They both stopped breathing, stopped moving, and for a long moment he swore he was going to cry at the rightness of it all.

But it was Annie to the rescue as she rose up only to sink deliciously back down. Taking her by the hips, he helped steady her while she moved faster and harder, their bodies becoming slick from the friction.

Sex with Annie was just like arguing with her: honest, real, and so damn unexpected he knew he’d never tire of it. Of her.

“Big promises,” she challenged, and he was all in.

Lifting her by the hips, he guided her down at the same time that he rose up, and she choked on his name. Not that he was holding strong. A few more times and breathing seemed to do nothing but piss off his chest, so he gave up on it.

They found a frenzied but steady rhythm, and he was about to ask for mercy when she gasped, “Do that again.”

“This?” he asked, lifting his hips. He knew when he hit the bull’s-eye because she let out a throaty moan and closed her eyes. Then her body tightened,

and all Emmitt could do was hold on while she exploded around him. But only a fraction of a second before him. Cutting it damn close, but not so close he couldn't technically claim he'd been true to his Ladies First oath. Then everything went black, and he collapsed against the chair, but not before he cradled her to him.

When he was finally able to breathe without danger of passing out, he noticed Annie was covering him like a blanket, her right hand intertwined with his left. She also had her eyes closed and was lightly snoring.

He brushed her hair away from her face and watched silently as she slept, her lips gently parted, her lashes resting against her flushed face. Emmitt didn't think he'd ever seen anyone look so beautiful.

Or feel so perfectly right.

Now he just had to convince her that *he* was *her* perfectly right.

* * *

One minute, Annie was having *the* best orgasm of her life and the next she came awake drooling on Emmitt's chest.

It was still dark out, so she wouldn't have to do this walk of shame with the morning sun shining down on her. She listened to the steady rhythm of his breathing before she even dared to open one eye.

Whew. He was sound asleep.

Using the armrests for balance, she slowly lifted herself up and off Emmitt without disturbing him. Well, part of him was already wide awake.

Annie picked her panties up off the floor, then her shirt before using it to wipe her drool off Emmitt's chest. She didn't think a wet spot was what they had in mind when the term *drool-worthy abs* was coined.

A quick dab and—okay, she might have looked a little longer than was kosher for a smash-and-dash, but he had the kind of good looks usually reserved for the big screen.

He was clever, and tender, and felt things deeply. And the way he'd held her, as if he never wanted to let go—Annnnd... this was the reason she was pulling a smash-and-dash.

She believed him when he said no fake promises, but he'd never promised her anything resembling a relationship. So before she went and got herself all moony over the man, she needed to retreat to her own bed.

Her eyes had a mind of their own and lingered for another very long moment before she forced herself to turn and walk away. She made it to the bedroom and was just reaching for the handle when she heard him chuckle.

"You weren't going to invite me to share the bed?" he said, his voice all rough and sexy with sleep.

She turned around. “We’re back to roommates, remember.”

“Roommates who’ve seen each other naked.” He appeared at the end of the hallway, hands on hips, everything else on display, as if proving his point.

“That doesn’t imply morning cuddling or any other benefits. Remember?”

He laughed. “Then what the hell was that?”

Arousing amusement in a naked man didn’t say a whole lot about her casual sex sophistication. Neither did gawking at him—all of him—as he snagged his sweats from the floor and stepped into them. With a smile that promised all kinds of things she was afraid to address, he stalked toward her.

Every step he took, she retreated backward—right into the door.

“Anh?” he whispered, closing the minuscule gap.

Sucking in a breath, she reached behind herself, blindly grabbing the doorknob with both hands—which was better than reaching for him because, blindly or not, she knew where her hands would end up.

He reached too—around her, capturing both her hands with one of his. “What was it?”

“Me taking a calculated risk,” she whispered.

She expected him to get mad, but instead he grinned a boyish grin that did her in. “Was it worth it?”

She nodded, watching as he slowly lowered his head. With their gazes locked, his lips brushed hers, gently probing until the kiss became more of a conversation. A back and forth of emotions and questions they were too uncertain to voice.

But, *man oh man*, was she in trouble. If this was how he kissed when he was free and clear of any entanglements, she could only imagine how it would feel to be kissed by him when he was all in.

He pulled back, and it took Annie a moment to realize she was wrapped around him like a koala in a eucalyptus forest. “Good night, Goldilocks.”

The door opened behind her and a rush of cool air rolled over her, causing her to break out in goose bumps.

“Good night,” Annie said, but he’d already disappeared into the darkness of the house.

She backed into the bedroom and closed the door. Arms out to her sides, she fell backward on the bed and looked up at the ceiling with a goofy smile.

“Don’t be stupid and fall for him.” Then she told her heart, which was getting way ahead of itself, to slow its roll. Until further notice, it was on total lockdown—all perimeters were secured, and no unwanted emotions were permitted to enter or exit the premises.

Unfortunately, her heart was too busy rolling over and offering up its soft

underbelly to get the memo.

Chapter 21

Feet propped up against the wall and her head hanging off the end of the mattress, Annie stared at the doorknob, willing it to turn.

There was no light filtering under the crack in the door, and she hadn't heard so much as a rustle since Emmitt kissed her good night. But she could sense that he was still awake.

She'd made the right call. Her heart was already becoming too involved with Emmitt, and her life was becoming intertwined with his family's. But as she lay there in his bed, all she could think about was how much more comfortable it would be with him in it.

Annie had never considered herself a cuddler, but she had a strong suspicion that if Emmitt slid in beside her and wrapped those strong arms around her, she'd be a convert.

Who was she kidding? After tonight she was already a convert.

Annie let out a frustrated sigh. She'd been lying there with the window open, listening to the rain dance against the wood deck for the past hour, recounting the steps that had led to her falling asleep on him in the chair. That wasn't normal, right? To be so comfortable with someone that seconds after shouting out her big O, she immediately fell asleep on him.

The part that really scared her, she realized in the middle of a cold shower, was that when she was first coming awake, in that split second when dreams merge with reality, she'd had this overwhelming feeling of belonging.

She'd gone to Pho Shizzle tonight searching for a better understanding of who she was, where she came from. Yet she'd walked away feeling as if she were an interloper and worrying that she'd always be in transition. Her outsider status gave her the fluidity to move from one group to the next, one patient to another, make them all feel loved and cared for in the moments when their own people couldn't be by their side.

But when she'd been curled into Emmitt's side, their arms causally slung over one another, their bodies stuck together like magnets, she'd imagined that was what it felt like to be with "your person."

Here she was, no longer touching him, and that feeling hadn't disappeared in the slightest.

A gentle breeze lifted the curtain, and a few of the leftover sprinkles dotted the fabric. The storm had passed through, but Annie didn't want to risk getting the windowsill wet. She rolled off the bed and padded over to close it.

The night was still. The leaves on the maple tree hung heavy with rain, and the grass shimmered in the moonlight. She watched the runoff slide down the

roof in a slow but steady drip into the swimming pool below, creating ripples on the surface and breathed in the fresh scent, which reminded her of wearing her dad's bright yellow galoshes and jumping through puddles.

She was about to close the window when something caught her eye at the far end of the pool. Two lean legs hung over the side, their bare feet dangling in the water. A closer look revealed Paisley, slouched on a cushion from the patio chair and dressed in jeans and a drenched hoodie, looking small and lost.

Annie checked the time even though she already knew that it was way past curfew.

She quickly ran through every option before deciding that there was no right way to handle this situation. The possibility that any of Paisley's dads would allow her to wander between houses this early in the morning, was close to nil. Especially when it was cold and wet out. Nope, if anyone knew she wasn't safe in her bed, Emmitt would already be out searching for her.

His first stop would likely be Sam's house.

To add to Annie's conflict, Paisley had come here, to Emmitt's, for a reason. It seemed she was waiting for the courage to reveal that reason because she hadn't bothered to wake him. So while the adult thing to do would be to wake Emmitt and tell him his daughter was crying in the backyard, girl code demanded that Annie go out there and see if Paisley needed to talk.

When put like that, her choice was clear.

Grabbing a roll of chocolate doughnuts from her emergency stash—some people had Go Bags; she had doughnuts—and the blanket off the bed, Annie climbed through the window.

She wasn't even all the way out when Paisley spotted her. Without missing a beat, Annie confidently strode across the deck as if she were meeting up for a girl chat and plopped down next to Paisley.

Paisley watched, eyes wide like a cornered bobcat, as Annie wrapped herself in the blanket, then opened the roll of doughnuts and popped one in her mouth. She may have moaned just a little, then licked her fingers before grabbing another. This one, she nibbled at before setting the bag on the edge of the blanket nearest Paisley.

Paisley cautiously met Annie's gaze in question and Annie shrugged a shoulder, letting her know the doughnuts were fair game.

Paisley selected one, and the crinkle of the plastic was amplified by the stillness of the night. Neither said anything for a long while, just sat beside one another, watching the movement of the water. At one point Paisley pulled her feet out of the pool and hugged her knees to her chest. Annie took a corner of the blanket and draped it over her knees.

When the last doughnut was gone, Paisley asked, “You going to tell my dad?”

“Depends,” Annie said. “Do you think he’d be worried if he found you weren’t where you were supposed to be?”

“I guess.” Paisley tilted her head slightly toward Annie. “But everyone else does it and no one freaks out. I mean, Dad One gets a call and the next day he’s gone, or Bonus goes out sometimes for month-long sailing trips and no one says a word. But if I want just a quiet night to myself, or to go to the beach and just think, my dads think I’m depressed or that something’s wrong.”

Annie considered what Paisley had said, put two and two together, that Dad One was Emmitt and Bonus was her uncle. “What’s Gray’s nickname?”

“Dad Two.”

“Do they know you call them that?”

She scoffed. “No. I don’t do it to be mean. I do it because when I’m really upset, calling them Dad One or whatever takes some of the sting out of it.”

“Makes sense,” Annie said, looking back out at the pool. “My dad calls me Flapjack.”

“Are you like a pancake freak?”

“I like them, but I’m really a *pastry for breakfast* kind of girl.” Annie shook the empty bag, and Paisley gave a tiny laugh, not much more than a little breath pushing through her nose, but Annie could tell she was starting to relax.

“Then why did he call you that?”

“When I was six, my parents tried to enroll me in school, but they discovered one of the papers from my adoption had never been filed, so the adoption had never been finalized. My parents had to go through the whole adoption process again, prove they were good parents, that they had no criminal background, a ton of red tape kind of stuff. Then they had to go in front of a judge and petition to adopt the daughter they’d raised since birth,” Annie said. “So for about two months my parents were terrified that they’d somehow lose me.”

“They were your parents—how could someone just decide to take you away?” Paisley asked in a protective tone that was all Emmitt.

“My parents argued the same thing. But in the end, it all worked out. The judge finalized the adoption, and I remember my dad saying that his love for me was so big he adopted me twice,” Annie said, surprised that after all these years she still got emotional telling her adoption story. “On the way home we stopped at a diner to celebrate, and my dad asked what I wanted, and I said flapjacks, which made him laugh. He ordered flapjacks for the whole table, and somehow the name stuck.”

“Does he still call you that?” Paisley asked.

“All the time,” Annie said, and Paisley looked as if she’d just discovered where babies came from. “I know, it’s silly, and when I was your age it embarrassed me, and once I told him to stop. Later that night he came into my room and said he called me Flapjack because it was a name between us, it wasn’t on any official papers or court transcripts, it couldn’t get misfiled or lost, and no matter what, it could never be taken away from us. The next day I told him I was okay with the name, but he could only use it at home.”

Annie learned that day that her nickname represented an important part of her story. It was the day her parents stood up in front of a judge and fought to keep their family together. As she got older, she began to realize that her parents weren’t just fighting for their family, they were fighting against society’s views of what constitutes a family.

A piece of paper didn’t make them family. It was their love.

“He uses it everywhere, by the way,” Annie said. “But now I like it. And your dad—I mean Dad One—has a nickname for you. Sweet P, right? So it’s only fair if he gets one too.”

“I wasn’t very sweet tonight,” Paisley said with a shiver.

Annie scooted a little closer and shared more of the blanket. To someone looking on, they would appear to be a couple of friends chatting over doughnuts. But this was so much more.

“You don’t always have to be sweet.” Annie nudged Paisley with her shoulder. “You’re figuring out who you are—that’s hard.”

“Does it get easier?” Paisley asked, and tears lined her lashes.

“I don’t know if easier is the word,” Annie said gently. “The older you get, the better you’ll become at figuring out who you are outside of other people’s expectations and making choices that are right for you. When you get there, then I think it’ll be easier.”

At least that’s what Annie was banking on, that by getting enough distance from all the noise and influences, her choices would suddenly become clear.

“What if no matter who you become, you’re always going to make someone sad,” Paisley whispered.

Annie took the time to choose her words before speaking. She didn’t want to push too hard, but she also didn’t want to wait too much longer before letting Emmitt know that Paisley had gone AWOL.

“Hypothetically, does this situation have to do with a daughter trapped between her many dads?” She slid Paisley an amused look. “Asking for a friend, of course.”

“If I were to tell Dad One that I wanted to sleep at Dad Two’s on his nights, he’d be so hurt. But if I don’t ask, then Dad Two’s at home all alone.”

“Honey...” Annie wrapped her arm around Paisley’s shoulders and tucked her in close. “Those guys have been taking care of themselves since before you were even a thought in your mom’s head. And yes, for two guys who claim they aren’t competitive, they can make the girls on *The Bachelor* look reserved. But when it comes to you and your happiness, from what I’ve seen, they’re a team. They want you to be happy, even if it means they don’t get exactly what they want.”

“It’s hard when everyone’s telling you to be happy but you don’t want to be,” Paisley said, and Annie felt her own tears welling up. “Sometimes I just want to be, I don’t know, nothing. Like, have everything inside just go still.”

“I bet it’s hard to be happy when the people around you are still so sad. It would be even hard to be sad when they’re sad.” Annie had seen Gray at the office. He was clearly drowning in grief. It was hard for Annie, as his friend, to watch. She could only imagine how painful it was for Paisley.

“Have you told your dads this?” Annie asked, and Paisley shook her head. “Do you think that’s maybe why you came here? Even though you’re mad at Emmitt, you don’t have to feel so much here. You can just be?”

Paisley picked at a small tear in her jeans. “He’s really pissed at me right now.”

“I couldn’t love you more for who you are at this exact moment,” Emmitt said, and both Annie and Paisley turned to find him standing by the back door.

He had on the gray sweats from earlier, no shirt, and no ballcap to hide his injury.

“Dad.” Paisley stood. “I was going to tell you I was here. I just needed—”

“Someplace quiet, where you feel safe,” he said, walking toward them. “I get that. I needed the same thing earlier.” His gaze locked on Annie, and “my person” was all she could think.

Which was so far from the truth.

One romp didn’t make him hers. One cuddle on the recliner didn’t make him hers. And just because he was looking at her as if, he too thought, tonight was more than sex, that didn’t make him “her person.”

“And you know what helped?” he said, and Paisley, who was trembling with pent-up emotion, shook her head. “A really great hug. Want to see if it works for you?”

“Dad,” Paisley whined, but walked right into his arms.

Emmitt pulled her so close, she almost disappeared in his embrace. Which was exactly what his daughter needed, because her body started shaking and Annie could hear snuffles.

It was exactly what her dad needed as well.

Paisley pulled back and frowned. She reached up and gently touched his head. “What happened? Are you okay? Oh my God, Dad, that looks serious.”

“How about after we spend some time just being, you and I have a talk?”

Paisley buried her face back into Emmitt’s chest and mumbled, “Okay.”

Emmitt looked at her over Paisley’s head and mouthed, “Thank you.”

She just smiled, but her heart was beating double-time. She had completely misjudged him, and now that she saw who he really was, Annie knew she was in trouble.

The kind of trouble that could cost her her heart.

Chapter 22

Annie took pride in her ability to navigate a difficult situation with effortless grace. After working her first two years in a mental facility and the last four alongside her *It's not you, it's me* ex-fiancé, there wasn't much that shocked her.

Not that she was completely shocked. Annie had heard stories about the great and generous Dr. Widdle, from his renowned methods in the ER to his willingness to mentor younger practitioners. She had secretly hoped for a chance to work alongside the admired doctor ever since taking the job at Rome General. So when he asked her—out of all the amazing and talented practitioners working the ER that day—to consult on a difficult case he felt she was best equipped for, Annie could barely contain her excitement.

She'd worked hard her entire career for the chance to work under doctors such as Widdle—to learn from them. It was another reason why she embraced the idea of being a traveling PA. The only way to grow as a practitioner—and a woman—was to leave her comfort zone behind for the challenging experiences that came with working under exemplary figures in her field.

With a bright and ready smile, Annie strode through the ER toward exam room six to find her patient.

Annie pushed back the curtain and froze—her bright smile dimming a tad—when she saw an elderly woman embracing a feverish and fussy toddler. The child was tugging at his ear and wailing to the gods; the woman was babbling on and on. But when she saw Annie, she went silent, as if she, too, understood Annie would be no help.

The woman looked at Dr. Widdle and back to Annie, her expression one of contemplation—as if she was thinking about shoving the child in Annie's direction and making a run for the nearest exit. Considering the volume and deafening dog-whistle pitch of the poor kid's screams, Annie withheld judgment.

"Thank God you're here," the great and generous Dr. Widdle said, looking expectantly at Annie. Had he really asked her to consult on what any first-year nursing student could tell was a standard ear infection?

"How can I help?" she asked, holding tight to her smile, even though her cheeks were giving under the strain.

"I need to know what medications Jun is allergic to," Dr. Widdle asked.

"Do you want me to check his file?" Annie prayed her assumption was wrong and Dr. Widdle was just one of those elitist doctors who was "too busy" to pull his own patient files.

"He's visiting his grandmother, so we don't have a file, which is part of the

problem.”

“The other part?”

“He’s allergic to some kind of antibiotics.” He shrugged. “That’s all I was able to understand, so I called you.”

Annie considered asking the good doctor to give *her* an ear exam to prove that she’d simply *misunderstood*. Otherwise, no amount of hard work or hope was going to help Annie navigate this awkward moment gracefully.

“And you called me because?” She wanted to hear him say it.

“You speak Chinese, right?”

Right.

Shock wasn’t quite the correct term. Disillusionment and anger were more accurate descriptions of what it felt like to know that a colleague, one she admired, considered her a translator instead of a talented practitioner.

Annie had endured situations like this before, so it shouldn’t have thrown her off-balance the way it did. But being stereotyped in her place of work pissed her off.

Dr. Widdle had been too busy cataloguing her features to see her outstanding credentials. If his decision had been swayed by a nurse’s breast size the way it had by Annie’s Asian features, he’d be fired. Sexual harassment was illegal in all fifty states, but racial profiling was harder to prove.

“Chinese isn’t a language, it’s an ethnicity,” Annie said in her most professional tone. “Your patient is speaking Mandarin. It wasn’t offered at my high school, so I took Spanish because I heard it was easier than French. Even then, I was so bad, I had to retake Spanish 1 twice before I scraped by with a C minus. Man, was my mom ever PO’d. Grounded me for half the summer.” With a look of faux embarrassment, she gave a little shrug of the shoulders. “Google Translate would be more helpful than me.”

There was nothing fake about Dr. Widdle’s mortified expression. Annie let him stew in it for a moment or three, then placed the file back in its holder. “Is there anything else?”

“No,” Dr. Widdle said.

At the same time, Nurse Tran stepped into the room, getting nose-to-nose with Dr. Widdle. “Dr. Widdle called you to help. Looking at this patient, what would you say is the prognosis?”

“An ear infection,” Annie said, thankful to be on this side of Nurse Tran’s wrath for once.

“Spot-on diagnosis.” Nurse Tran volleyed, “Wouldn’t you agree, Dr. Widdle?”

The doctor cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Absolutely.”

“Then we are all in agreement.” Nurse Tran steepled her fingers, and Annie knew she was just warming up and was about to bring the heat. “As you can see, Miss Walsh is a gifted physician’s assistant whose talents are better used elsewhere than on a simple ear infection. She is not to be mistaken for a translator from patient relations. Understood?” Dr. Widdle nodded. “Not that this could have any bearing on her job performance, but she is Vietnamese, not Chinese. So you have not only offended her, you have offended Ms. Chin, who would never make the mistake of mixing up you and Harvey Miller, the security officer who works the ER.”

“I am so sorry for my ignorance,” he said to Annie, the genuine embarrassment in his expression making it hard to hold anything against him. “It won’t happen again.”

“Good, because this hospital was lucky when Anh agreed to lend our small facility her expertise for the short time she can spare. I am sure there will be a case when her talents will be critical to your department, and I would hate for you to make a bad impression twice.”

“Absolutely, Nurse Tran.” He turned to Annie. “And I would love to consult with you at a later date.”

Before Annie could answer, Nurse Tran said, “If we can spare her. She is an extremely valuable asset to our department. For the record, a plea of ignorance is beneath you, Dr. Widdle.”

With that she ushered Annie out of the room and down the hallway. When they were out of the ER, and hearing range, Annie said, “Valuable asset?”

“You are,” Nurse Tran said, then broke out into a laugh. “I shouldn’t have been so hard on him. He’s a nice man. But he asked you to come all the way over here to translate when we have an entire department for that and he was just too impatient to wait for them to fulfill his request.”

“And the other part? About him and Harvey?”

She stopped and faced Annie. “Did I ever tell you about the time I was called in to assist with a craniectomy on a sixteen-year-old? It wasn’t until I had scrubbed up and was told to stand aside that I realized they already had a full surgical team. Then I saw the photographer and knew having me in the photo would showcase the difficult surgery and that there was diversity here at Rome General.”

Annie covered her mouth. “What did you do?”

“I made myself useful, then asked for a promotion because if I was talented enough to be on a surgical team who successfully pulled off a craniectomy on a teenager, then surely I deserved one.” She gave Annie’s cheek a maternal pat. “Just like you can now use consulting on a difficult case with Dr. Widdle on

your résumé.”

“Thank you,” Annie said. “You didn’t have to step in on my behalf, but I am grateful you did.”

“I’ll have to tell you about Nurse Kramer, my boss when I first started here, and the time she ripped one of the thoracic surgeons a new one when he told me how he took his coffee.” With another pat, Nurse Tran started walking toward the elevator.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?” Annie called after her.

“I will, at the next Pho Shizzle.”

Annie ran to catch up with her. “You want me to come to the next potluck?”

“Yes. You left so fast I didn’t have a chance to tell you how much the ladies loved your mom’s dumpling soup. It was the winner of the night.” She gave Annie a warm smile. “We all decided you were just what the Pho Shizzles need, a breath of fresh air.”

“Really?”

“Here.” She handed Annie a slip of paper with a name and number.

“What’s this?”

“That is my sister-in-law, Van. She is a retired schoolteacher who now runs a Vietnamese school out of her house. Tell her I sent you and she’ll give you fifteen percent off the language package. She’ll try to give you only ten percent—she’s cheap—but barter until she gives you fifteen. Bartering is very Vietnamese. It will impress her.”

“Why are you giving me this?” She’d never mentioned her desire to know more about where she came from or learn to speak her native language.

“So that when you come to my home, you don’t come as a coworker or a student looking to learn about who you are. You come to my house as my friend.”

Maybe Annie hadn’t been the only one playing Twenty Inappropriate Questions the other night. “I’ll call her tonight.”

“Good. You can learn how to properly pronounce your name.” The doors opened and the nurse stepped inside, pushing the button to her floor. “Oh, and we’re continuing our soup theme for the fall, so the next dish is *Pho Ga*, and we are all anxious to try your mom’s chicken noodle soup recipe, if she has one.”

“It’s actually my paternal grandmother’s recipe and it’s won a ton of awards,” Annie teased.

“I’m counting on it.”

When the doors slid closed, Annie shoved the card in her pocket, only to find it already filled. She pulled out the paper, and her heart leaped when she realized it was a folded-up sticky note. She unfolded it and read.

*How about pizza,
Netflix, and at least
two Happy Endings
tonight? No pressure, just
throwing things out there.*

*— Roommate with
Benefits Looking
for More*

Annie let out a laugh that started in her chest and radiated through her entire body. It was loud and unapologetic and came from a place of sheer happiness. And when she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the polished elevator doors, the joyful glow and big bright smile was one hundred percent real.

Chapter 23

“Do you feel like it had enough of, you know, the *Fuck off* vibe I was going for?” Annie asked, reading back over her e-mail.

“Read it one more time,” Emmitt said, not even bothering to hide his smile.

“You just like to watch me swear.”

“I like to watch you do a lot of things. But this doesn’t even make my top ten list,” he said, and a zing of heat shot through her, heading for the equator.

It could also be because his hands had been making lazy circles on her legs for the past twenty minutes while she crafted an e-mail to Clark.

They were sitting on opposite ends of the couch and he had her feet in his lap, rubbing his hands up and down her legs. With each stroke her flesh broke out in little bumps. What started as him trying to soothe her stress away had quickly turned into foreplay. And they both knew it.

“You have a list?” she teased.

“I have a list so long even Santa couldn’t compete.” He cupped both of her feet and tugged her closer, then ran his hands up and under the bottom of her skirt. “I can recite it to you.”

“You’ve memorized it?”

“All of the important things I keep right here.” He tapped his head with a finger.

“I’m surprised—most men would have pointed somewhere else.”

“A few weeks ago I would have been one of those men,” he said, and his tone was so sincere and convincing she wanted to believe him. But since the other night on the recliner, he hadn’t asked once about the bed. Which left her confused.

“Okay, I’m going to send this before I chicken out.” Her finger hovered over the Return key, and she let out a breath. “What if he calls my bluff and asks to speak to my lawyer?”

In the e-mail, Annie had clearly laid out that Clark had until Monday to deposit the money into her account. If he failed to comply, her lawyer would reach out to him. Only Annie didn’t have a lawyer.

“Then you give my friend Judy his contact info, and she will reach out on your behalf.”

“Emmitt, the whole point is that I’m broke, which is why I need the money. I can’t afford to pay a lawyer to scare off my ex,” she explained.

“Judy is a friend of mine who owes me a favor,” he said, and Annie pulled her feet up under her.

“You’re sending me to one of your *friends*? What kind of favor does she owe

you?”

Emmitt grabbed her feet and pulled them back into his lap. “Judy was my mother’s best friend, and when she and her husband renewed their vows on their fortieth, she asked me to photograph it for them.”

Annie’s cheeks heated. “That’s sweet. But why would she help me for free?”

“Because I asked her to,” he said. “I told her a very special friend of mine might need a lawyer to scare the crap out of a prick.”

“You did not say that?”

“The part about the special friend I did.” His fingers moved up the inside of her legs, then rubbed them down the outside.

“Your website says you don’t do any kind of portrait or wedding photography.”

“For Judy I do,” he said, and there was a boyish look to him whenever he spoke of anything having to do with his mom. “For special people in my life, I’d do almost anything.”

Their gazes locked, and Annie’s heart fell to her stomach. She believed every word. Emmitt would go to the end of the earth for his people.

He already had.

Her pulse quickened as she wondered what it would be like to be on the receiving end of that kind of devotion.

“Have you been googling me, Goldilocks?”

Annie had to swallow before she could speak. “I needed to know I wasn’t rooming with an ax murderer.”

Emmitt laughed and leaned back against the armrest, but his hands never slowed.

“Tell me about the photographs on the wall,” she asked. “There aren’t many, which surprised me.”

“Digital cameras have changed photography. People go on vacation and come home with three hundred pictures,” he said. “The people I’m shooting deserve more than a bunch of random clicks of the finger. For me, it’s about getting the shot.”

When she’d first moved in, she’d remarked to Gray how odd it was that there weren’t a lot of pictures on the wall. Gray had laughed and explained his friend didn’t take pictures; he took photographs.

At the time, Annie had found it incredibly obnoxious. But now, after getting to know Emmitt, she thought the statement couldn’t be more fitting.

At first glance, it would appear that Emmitt had never bothered to personalize his space by putting any of his belongings on display. There were no family pictures with Mickey Mouse, no Boy Scout camp photo of a grinning

child holding a fish, not even a puff pic—like him climbing Kilimanjaro, which she knew from Gray that he had done. In the day and age of selfies, that was telling. Almost as much as the collection of photographs he had chosen.

She'd looked at them before, many times. There were nine in all, sitting in large, identical solid glass frames. Each photograph was of a different size, showing people she'd never meet from places she'd never been, and each sparking an equally powerful but wildly different emotion.

Annie wondered what emotion she'd feel tonight when she looked at her favorite one with its artist in the room. Hanging near the fireplace, it had particularly drawn Annie.

She set her laptop on the coffee table and slid her legs out of Emmitt's embrace, then crossed the room.

The image was black and white, taken of a young girl, maybe four or five, standing barefoot in the dirt, eyes closed, face upturned as someone off camera poured a bottle of water over her head. The shutter must have snapped the moment the first few drops hit the child's skin, because Annie could see tiny spots where the water had barely mixed with the hot dust before it slid over the girl's face.

The photo itself would barely fill out a four-by-six frame, but the look of wonder on the girl's face contained enough joy to erase the war-torn conditions around her. The contrast was as heartbreaking as it was breathtaking.

"That one was taken at a refugee camp right outside Afghanistan," Emmitt said from over her shoulder, and Annie realized that while she'd been studying his photos, he'd been studying her—from kissing range. "Madeena and her mother walked barefoot, nearly sixty miles through the mountains in hopes of finding her lost brother, whom they'd been separated from months earlier."

"Did they find him?" Annie asked past the tightness in her throat.

Emmitt's smile was light and warm, real and so completely unexpected that she took a step back, but there really wasn't anywhere to go, so she bumped into the wall. "Who do you think is holding the bottle?"

A pang of emotion had her clearing her throat. "How long ago was that taken?"

"Six years. She's now a fourth grader in Germany who loves science, kittens, and Pokémon. And pink. Last year she was all about bows. This year it's pink."

She laughed, and the release of emotion felt good. "How do you know?"

"Every year she sends me a first-day-of-school picture to show off her new dress," he said as if it was a normal thing to impact the life of a tiny girl on the other side of the world enough that she'd send him a photo. Every year.

"Did you buy those dresses as well?" She could tell he was shocked by her

deductive reasoning, which, based on his shy smile, was spot-on.

His hands cupped her hips, and he turned her to face him completely, but he didn't let go. "I figure a girl whose smile can light up even the darkest corners of the world deserves a pretty dress now and again."

"But you don't keep the school pictures framed?" She moved a little closer.

"Nah, they're in a box in the garage," he said, and Annie knew there was only one box in the garage. It was big, metal, and fireproof. The kind of box where people kept their most precious items. But she also guessed there was another reason he didn't have those pictures lying about. Because then people would ask.

Emmitt didn't send Madeena dresses because he had a hero complex or wanted to impress. He did it because he cared. So deeply he didn't wish to share the feeling with just anyone. But he'd shared it with her.

"You're a very complex person, Emmitt Bradley," Annie said, placing her fingertips on his wrists, then slowly tracing his muscles all the way up his arms.

"Funny, with you I feel real," he whispered, tugging her closer.

Annie decided that today was the day to be bold. "Why haven't you tried to come in the bed?"

His expression was a mix of confusion and disappointment. "Because you haven't invited me."

Placing her hands on his shoulders, Annie went up on her tiptoes. "Emmitt, I'd like to go to bed now. And I'd like for you to come with me."

"I thought you'd never ask." And then they were kissing, and what a kiss it was.

Soft, tender, special. The kind of kiss someone shared with their person.

* * *

Emmitt was at his computer, working on one of the images he'd shot in China, when his vision started to blur.

Sitting back in the chair, he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Maybe Gray wasn't being a Beaver Cleaver. Maybe he was right in advising him to take more time.

Emmitt couldn't stare at the screen for more than twenty minutes before the headache came back. That Gray was stuck with the decoration committee for the next two hours made him smile though. He was picturing the look on Gray's face as he realized the committee consisted of twenty teens, a few of whom smelled like saltines and BO, when the front door burst open.

"Dad?" he heard Paisley yell, and he could hear the tears in her voice a room away.

Before he could even stand, she came rushing into his office and flung

herself into his arms. Her makeup was streaked, her face wet with tears, and Emmitt's heart stopped beating.

He wanted to ask her what had happened and who he needed to beat up, but she was making the quiet sobs she used to make when she was a kid and needed to let out her grief, so he just held her tight and said, "It's okay, baby. I got you."

When her sobs became little hiccups, he ventured, "You want to talk about it?" She wrapped her arms around his middle and buried herself into him. "Or we can just sit here in silence—whatever you need. Just know that if you want to talk about anything, today, tomorrow, next week, I'm here. No lectures, no judgment."

Lifting her eyes just high enough to meet his, she said, "About anything?"

"Anything, kiddo."

"You were right. Sam's a jerk." She paused, her expression said she was waiting to see if he was serious about the whole no judging or lecturing promise. Emmitt bit his tongue. "I just caught him kissing my supposed friend in my bedroom."

"Do you want me to kick his ass?" he said, earning a giggle.

"That's not at all what I thought you were going to say." She laughed.

"I guess there are things we both need to learn about each other," he said.

"Yeah," she agreed. "And thank you for being on my side. Not telling me you told me so."

"How many times do you have to remind me that your mom's chili is too spicy for me?"

"Hundreds."

He wiped a tear away with his thumb. "We'll discuss how public education is failing you in simple math later. The point is, I still eat it even though I know how miserable I'll feel later. Why? Because the chili is too good to pass up."

"Are you saying Sam is my chili?"

"Do you feel bloated, gassy, and like your chest is on fire?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh, which made his chest swell. "Guys aren't worth it. I am totally over the whole boyfriend thing."

"Not all guys are Sams," he said. "And while I'd be perfectly happy with you being single until you're thirty-five, I also understand that's about as unlikely as you being 'totally over the boyfriend thing.' Someday, sooner than I'd like, a great guy is going to come into your life and figure out what a cool chick you are and just how lucky he'd be to have you on his arm."

"I don't know about that. But a nice guy who doesn't try to pawn me off on his sister would be nice."

"Man, did he ever Sam things up with you."

“Yeah.” She laughed. “What a Samhole. At least his sister is nice. We’re going to the movies next week.”

“Do you want to stick with the story that all these tears are over some guy?” he asked, because Annie was right, the boy thing was normal teen stuff. But Paisley was also dealing with some pretty heavy issues that a girl her age shouldn’t be forced to deal with. “Or do you maybe want to talk about your mom?”

She shook her head as she said, “It just feels like everything is upside down right now.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know. Mom’s gone, if you haven’t heard.”

He took a napkin from the basket and dabbed her tears.

“I know,” he said gently, brushing her hair out of her face. When he looked into those sad brown eyes, it nearly did him in right there.

“Do you? Because I don’t. I don’t feel like I know anything. Nothing makes sense, and the things that do don’t matter.” She let out a shaky breath and shifted sideways, resting her cheek against his chest. “I mean, Mom goes to the store to get me almond milk because I decided to be vegan and some guy keeps driving because of a missing stop sign. Neither one was speeding or drinking. There was no higher power in play, no destiny involved, just this freak occurrence that took her away.”

“Gray told me that the stop sign had been stolen that day,” he said. And the fact that he had to quote Gray because he hadn’t been there to hold his kid like this when it happened made him feel as angry as it did selfish. There was no reason he had to take that assignment. He’d done it because life in Rome began to get complicated, so he’d bailed.

What kind of dad bails like that? Not the kind of dad that Emmitt wanted to be.

“The cops told us that a couple of guys thought it would be funny to hang it in their frat house above the bathroom door,” Paisley went on. “If that’s college fun, I don’t want to go. I overheard Rosalie tell one of Daddy’s patients, it was just a perfect storm, one of those things.”

“Your mom’s life was too meaningful to everyone she came in contact with, everyone she loved, to be summed up by ‘Just one of those things.’ You know that, right?”

“When she said it, I was so mad, but now... I don’t know. My life is just one of those things. You came home for a weekend when Mom happened to have an ear infection, her doctor happened to give her antibiotics that canceled out her birth control, you and Mom happened to, you know, and here I am. Some kids

steal a stop sign and here we are.”

“I don’t buy into the whole *everything happens for a reason* crap, because if that were true, neither of us would have been forced to grow up without our moms. And your mom and I might not have been in love, but you came from the purest form of love,” he said. “You are so loved, P. And just because your mom is gone doesn’t take away from the fact that she loved you so fiercely when she was here, and it doesn’t mean that her love for you vanished.”

“Love hurts,” she whispered.

“After I lost my mom, I promised myself I would never love again because losing her felt like losing my whole world. Nothing felt right after that. I was still me, but it was as if I was living in an alternate universe, where everything was the same except me.”

“Did you ever love again?”

He kissed the top of her head. “The first day I met you, I learned just how much someone could love.”

She looked up at him. “When did you start feeling at home again?”

“It took a while, but when my mom’s sister told me it was okay to miss her, my life started to feel more normal. So I’m going to tell you the same thing she told me. You’re allowed to not be over her. You’re allowed to miss her.”

“Am I allowed to be angry?”

“Oh, baby, anger is not only allowed, it’s expected.”

“Am I allowed to be angry at you?” she whispered.

Emmitt cupped her face in his hands, waited until she was really looking at him. “For as long as you need to.”

“Because I am,” she said, and he could tell she was trying her best not to cry, but it was a losing battle.

“I know, kiddo. I am too. I remember what it was like going through high school and not having my mom to talk to—it was hard. Worse than hard. It was the most difficult time of my life, and the one person who always loved me no matter what was gone.”

“How old were you when she died?”

“Eleven.”

“I’ve seen pictures of her at Grandpa’s,” Paisley said.

“She was pretty amazing.” Man, he missed her. Didn’t matter how much time had passed—he still missed her like it was yesterday. “Whenever I would have a bad day at school, which was often because I hated school, she’d bake me these cookies.”

“Wait, you hated school?” She sounded shocked. “Listening to you and Uncle Levi talk, you made it sound like you two ran the school.”

“That was when we were upper classmen. Before that I was a skinny kid with a camera attached to my face who worked on the school paper and wanted to be an Anderson Cooper. Yeah, school pretty much sucked. But then I’d get home and there they were, the cookies.”

“Cookies?”

“Peanut butter chip oatmeal cookies. Man, they were good.”

“Better than your mom’s chocolate pie?”

“They were my chocolate pie,” he said. “I never had to tell her it was bad day. She just knew. I’d come home and they’d be there sitting on the counter with milk. Chocolate milk. And she’d sit across from me and talk about my day. That was the best part, that I could say anything to her.”

“Maybe we can make her cookies.”

“I’d love that.”

She looked him dead in the eye and said, “When does it stop hurting?”

“I wish I could tell you it does, because I’m your dad, and dads should be able to protect their kids from pain and disappointment, but you’re not a kid anymore and we’re doing this whole trust and honesty thing, so the truth is, it doesn’t. But over time the sadness eases and the memories become a part of you.”

“Do you still get sad when you talk about your mom?”

“Sometimes, but the good memories always outweigh the sad ones.”

Paisley laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. They sat in silence, and he could feel she was thinking about Michelle.

“Did the sadness ever scare you?” she asked. “Like today was the best it would ever get?”

“Does it scare you?”

Because it sure as fuck scared him to hear her say that. But he remembered to love her for exactly who she was in this moment. And in this moment, she was a scared teen who had to face the loss of a parent way too soon. If he wanted her to keep the line of dialogue open, and be honest with him, then he needed to be honest with her.

“Sometimes,” he said. “You know, it’s okay to be sad and it’s okay to admit that the sadness is too much to carry alone, and in those moments know that I’m here for whatever you need.”

“Love you,” she whispered.

“Love you, kiddo,” he said, and she stood up. “How about we go find my mom’s cookie recipe?”

“I’d like that,” she said. “But first, I think I need to text Daddy and explain why there are a bunch of kids at his house making decorations and I’m here.”

Emmitt smiled. “Maybe you should also let him know you’re safe and with me, and that I can drive you home after we make cookies.”

“Okay.” She picked up her phone but hesitated. “Do you think maybe I can tell him I’m sleeping here for a while?”

“You are welcome here anytime. This is your house too,” he clarified. “And as long as Gray is okay with it and you aren’t staying here to get back at him for something, you can stay as long as you want.”

“I want to stay with you because I miss you. And since we’re working on the honesty thing, I also want to stay because it’s not my home.”

Talk about a hit to the chest. “I understand.”

“No, I mean, this is my home with you, not my home with Mom. Everything over there reminds me of her.”

“That’s a good thing. When my mom died, Grandpa boxed up everything that was hers and pretended she never existed.”

“Is that why you hate Grandpa?”

“God, P, I don’t hate him,” he said, feeling like a shitty parent for letting her think that. “We just have a lot to work through.”

“When you’re ready to talk about it, I’d like to hear more about Grandma and Grandpa and what happened.”

He took both her hands. “When I’m ready, I’d love to tell you all about it. I even have an album my mom made with all kinds of embarrassing photos of me.”

“Is that why you became a photojournalist? Because of that album?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But I’m sure it had something to do with it.”

“Maybe we can make one for me. With pictures of you, mom, me, all of us.”

“It can be our thing,” he said, and she looked confused. “You know, *our thing*.” He wiggled his upper body in a total dad move. “You go to Gray for some things and Levi for others. Maybe this album can be something that we do together.”

“If you say so, but I’ve always wanted to know how to take pictures like you do, so this will be fun.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek, and Emmitt’s world was back to normal.

“Oh, I had coffee with a couple of your friends’ moms the other day,” he said.

She clasped her hands and bounced on her toes. “And?” “And it looks like they are all fine with the party being here if you still want it.”

She covered her mouth. “Seriously?”

“Once they got to know me and learned that Annie is going to be here, they were okay with the whole thing.”

“That’s awesome. And Annie’s okay with it?”

Play the honest card, buddy.

“I was thinking we could both ask her over pizza. Butter her up with pepperoni and green olives, then finish it off with vanilla ice cream—I’ll get you a tub of sugar free.”

“Regular vanilla is fine. I was just being a jerk,” she admitted. “You said you guys aren’t dating.”

“We’re not.”

“But you want to?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, shocked at how excited he was by the idea of a potential relationship. Usually, if a woman even said exclusive, he’d break out in a sweat.

“I didn’t mean what I said in the car the other night, but I do know that she’s different from anyone else I’ve ever seen you with, and it’s clear she likes you, which is why—”

“Really? Go back. Define like. Like, she likes me, or she *likes* me?”

“If you’re asking, you already know. And if you’re asking, it means you know she’s special, because you never ask me about girls. Ever. So here’s my advice, Dad.” She grabbed his cheeks and squished them together, making his lips pucker. “Don’t Sam all over this and blow it with a cool chick.”

“That’s the plan.”

“Good. Oh, I meant to ask you, would you be my date for the dance?”

He stood. “Absolutely. Yes and yes. All the cookies in the world yes. Do you have a dress? Can I buy you a dress?”

“First, I’m going dress shopping with Owen. Second, you’re so lame.”

He pointed to his smile. “This is called being honest. And speaking of honest, maybe I should text Gray and Levi while you’re in the shower and let them know.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Kidding. Kind of. Not really.”

“Just so you know, I’m going to ask Gray and Levi too, since this is a father-daughter dance and all three of you are my dads.”

“Of course.” He pulled out the recipe box from the cabinet and set it on the island.

“But Dad, I asked you first.”

“I know!” He high-fived the air, and once again she rolled her eyes. “Can I always be number one?”

“You are. Just ask Annie. You’re Dad One and Gray’s Dad Two.”

Emmitt paused and his forehead crinkled. “Wait, like Thing One and Thing Two?”

Chapter 24

Emmitt was riding the bench—or the bleachers in this case.

It was the father-daughter dance, and this father had had exactly one dance with his daughter. More like a half of a dance.

He'd been right where he wanted to be, twirling his baby under the twinkle lights and holding back his tears as she looked up at him as if maybe, just for tonight, he was once again her prince who had ridden in and, with some epoxy, a blowtorch, and cascading glam lights strong-armed into the shape of giant stars, turned her life into a shimmering and glittery fairy tale.

Only instead of him playing the role of Prince Charming, that title belonged to some beanpole of a basketball player who was president of the junior class and therefore “working” the beverage stand. Emmitt wanted to point out that he needed to get his ass back behind the beverage table instead of “working” on Paisley. But Levi had yanked him back.

“A bottle of water,” Emmitt said. “The little prick showed me up with a bottle of water.”

“Being benched sucks, doesn't it,” Gray said, still bitter that the sleepover was going down at Emmitt's place next weekend.

“You're more than welcome to come to the party,” Emmitt offered, noticing that the strobe light wasn't making his head ache as much as he'd anticipated.

“Oh, to the party I'm paying for?” Gray folded his arms over his chest and glared. “Thanks.”

“Hey, are that kid's hands on her butt, or is that a shadow,” Levi asked, squinting into the crush of people on the dance floor and pointing in the general direction of where Emmitt had last seen Paisley.

“Definitely her butt. Good thing for that kid, he's not groping Paisley,” Gray said, taking Levi's finger and repositioning it to the opposite side of the gym. “There's Paisley, behind the dad trying to foxtrot his daughter around the room.”

“Ah, well then it's some other dad's problem.” Levi relaxed back, resting his elbows on the bleacher row behind them. “It was the *way too short to be our kid's dress* that confused me.”

“They're all wearing *too short to be kids' dresses*,” Gray said. “And Paisley was right, the foxtrot does look lame.”

“About the other girl,” Levi began.

“Which one?” they both said.

“The one I thought was P. What if her dad isn't here or stepped out to take a call or something and he doesn't know that some punk is getting all handsy with his daughter?”

“Rookie move if he went to take a leak and left his daughter in that dress around this many horny boys,” Emmitt said. “He should tough it out and stay dehydrated like the rest of us. I haven’t had even a sip of liquid in seven hours, because I came prepared.”

“Levi’s right,” Gray said. “If some guy was all over Paisley and one of us wasn’t there to set the punk straight, I’d hope another dad would step in.”

“I agree,” Emmitt said. “But I already threatened one teenager this month—someone else will have to do it.”

Levi sat forward. “I thought this was supposed to be a father-daughter dance. How did all these guys get in here?”

“According to the women in my Ladies Who Lunch group, the kids who didn’t use the whole *my sister invited me because we’re that close* excuse to get in volunteered to help out.”

“Sneaky little shits,” Levi said, sending Emmitt a sidelong glance. “Why didn’t we think of that when we were kids?”

“They didn’t have a father-daughter dance back in the day.”

“Right, well, someone needs to fix this, because it creates a false sense of teen celibacy.”

“We’re meeting next week to discuss how to address it for next year,” Emmitt said, and both guys exchanged amused looks. “What? I felt it was time to get to know the other moms, so they’d feel comfortable with their kids hanging out at my place.”

“Just how well do you know these moms?” Gray asked in a tone that had Emmitt gritting his teeth.

“Well enough to know that they’re nice ladies, some of whom have shitty exes and sometimes they need a dad’s perspective on things.”

“How many of them are single?” Levi asked.

“All but three,” Emmitt said. “Most of them have kids who are friends of Paisley’s, which makes sleeping with them a bad dad move.”

“I told you not to start up with Annie, and you clearly didn’t listen there,” Gray snapped.

“She doesn’t have kids, therefore not a bad dad move,” Emmitt clarified. “And you said Annie was strictly hands-off. You never said anything about her hands on me.”

“Always looking for the loophole,” Gray said. “Annie’s been through—”

Emmitt held a hand in front of Gray’s face. “I know exactly what she’s been through. She’s told me everything, and we’re both on the same page.”

Gray batted at Emmitt until he lowered his arm. “What page is that?”

“A page that’s between me and Anh.”

“Anh,” Gray said. “She prefers for everyone to call her Annie.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not everyone,” Emmitt said. “And I know exactly what she prefers, so why don’t you shut the hell up?”

“What’s crawled up your ass?” Levi asked.

“Nothing.”

Levi chuckled, and then a slow grin spread across his face. “Holy crap. You’ve got a smoking hot roommate sleeping in your bed, and you’ve been sleeping on the couch this whole time.”

Actually, it was the recliner. Not that he’d admit that to these boneheads, because the truth of it was, now that he knew what it felt like to sleep with her in his arms, sleeping with a wall between them was driving him nuts.

“She’s setting the pace.”

Levi laughed. “That sounds like the title of some chick flick.” Gray rested his elbows on his knees and turned his head to Emmitt. “I take everything I said back. Annie’s not the one in trouble, you are! And, man, I can’t wait to see what happens next.”

Neither could Emmitt.

Annie had said she needed a couple of days to think things through. And even though, by his calculations, a couple of days meant two, day six was coming to a close and he still hadn’t resorted to sweet-talking her into going faster than she needed.

Oh, he’d been sweet, and they’d talked—nearly every night and about nearly everything. And on the nights they didn’t talk, they snuggled up and watched movies. She favored rom-coms, and that was all right with him. Rom-coms led to kissing—okay, they kissed every night, rom-com or not—but he’d never pushed her for more.

Odd thing was, he didn’t feel like anything was missing. Did he want to sleep with her again? Yes. Did he want to do more than just sleep? Hell, yes.

But he wasn’t willing to do anything to screw up this relationship blossoming between them, and the fact that he used the word *blossoming* said just how far gone he was.

Annie was more than just a lover. She was a friend. If he played his cards right, she could be a whole lot more.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, and the guys laughed.

“I haven’t received your file from China,” Gray began, and Emmitt swore. “Until you come back in so I can give you a complete evaluation, my recommendation is to avoid all forms of work and strenuous activity.”

“Ohhhhh.” Levi knocked knuckles with Gray, right in front of Emmitt’s face. “You’ve been put on a sex hiatus by the good doctor here.”

Emmitt was about to knock the smirks off their faces when the slow song ended and something more upbeat began to play. The partners separated, the dads took their designated seats—as far away from their kids as possible—and it became a big mosh pit of girls dancing.

“About time,” Gray said.

“I slipped the DJ twenty bucks to play something that didn’t sound like foreplay,” Levi admitted.

Emmitt thought he saw Paisley looking his way. “Is she—?”

“Yup,” Levi said, shifting to the edge of the bench, his back straight and his body language set to *You want to dance?*

“Hey, Dads,” Paisley said, swishing up to them. “Anyone want to dance?”

“Me,” all three guys said simultaneously.

There was a lot of jostling and elbow jabbing going on as they all stood at the same time. Emmitt’s palms began to sweat as if he were fifteen again and the prettiest girl in the room had asked him to dance.

“Good thing it’s a fast song,” she said, kissing Levi on the cheek, then taking Gray and Emmitt by the hand. “I bet I’ll be the only girl on the dance floor lucky enough to dance with three dads.”

* * *

Standing at the counter covered in a light dusting of flour and a worn Boston University shirt she’d borrowed from Emmitt, Annie kneaded a batch of egg noodles for Grandma Hannah’s farmhouse chicken soup recipe. It was her fifth batch and third change of clothes of the night.

Her mom had told her to buy the egg noodles, but Annie was determined to make it just like her grandma had when Annie was little. The next Pho Shizzle potluck was a little over a week away and, with some serious kitchen time, she actually had a shot at nailing this. Plus, the kneading brought up warm memories of the summers she’d spent in her grandparents’ kitchen, Grandma Hannah whisking up one of her many recipes with Annie standing on a wooden chair in pigtails and an oversized apron, with flour down her front, acting as sous chef.

She hadn’t quite mastered the noodles, but she knew she was close to figuring out the perfect balance of working and resting time. It was more than she could say for her personal life.

She glanced at the sticky notes on the fridge that had been waiting for her when she came home from work, and her heart did a serious *baa boom* before rolling all the way over.

*Off to the dance. Please
don't wait up. I might be
late. Prince Charming got
it all wrong.*

*He fell for the ballgown
and glam, when he
should have gone for a
girl in scrubs. They're
way hotter.
— Much More Than a
Roommate in Rome*

She didn't know which part was sweeter—the big red line through the word “don't” or that he loved her scrubs.

Oh yes, she was in trouble. It was becoming more than apparent—no matter how much resting time she gave herself between kisses, she didn't think her need for Emmitt would ever go away. And it wasn't the physical need that frightened her.

She'd left home on a journey of self-discovery for one, vowing to figure out who she was on her own before inviting a man to the table. What she hadn't anticipated was just how long and lonely that journey could be. Nor had she imagined how much she would grow to like the person she was around Emmitt.

She'd never been around someone who affected her the way he did, but the changes he inspired didn't happen in a smothering or all-consuming way, like relationships of the past. His impact was gentle and nurturing and, when she let herself admit it, loving. He awakened parts of her personality she'd thought had taken a permanent sabbatical.

And she could see the subtle changes in him as well. Changes that were more a result of her shutting off what people said about him and seeing him for the man he really was. It was no surprise she'd fallen for him.

Which she had. Totally, completely, and irreversibly. She'd fallen hard for a guy who considered the world his home.

They had agreed—no fake promises and no secrets. While the good girl part demanded that she live up to the agreement and come clean, the other part of her, who remembered exactly how painful it was to be rejected, warned her that all being honest would do was effectively ruin the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Because being honest meant coming clean about everything. Love and trust

were both vital parts of a relationship.

And if she were being honest with herself, it wasn't her fear of taking things too fast that had her stalling. She couldn't make love to Emmitt again—because they'd blown right past casual sex—until she came clean about Les's cancer.

Professionally, it wasn't her secret to share. But the feelings Annie had developed for Emmitt were anything but professional. So when she'd run into Les in the infusion center yesterday, she'd told him that he had to come clean with Emmitt. Or she would set up an accidental “run-in” for the two of them to get reacquainted. Which wasn't exactly breaking her medical oath, but in her heart she knew it would be breaking an ethical one.

She looked down at the tough and rubbery ball of dough and sighed. Another contribution to the garbage, she thought, as she chucked it into the trash bin she'd dragged to the end of the island. At least her shooting skills were improving.

She knocked the cutting board against the side of the sink to get the remaining flour and dough off, then set it back on the counter, swaying to the music coming from her phone. The ingredients were already lined up, so she added the flour and salt to a clean bowl and was whisking them together when her cell vibrated.

She carefully picked the phone up between the palms of her hands, so as not to gum it up any further with dough. After blowing some stray hairs out of her face, she lifted the cell high enough to swipe right with the only part of her body not covered in flour—her nose. A text popped up.

How's the soup coming?

Annie took in the disaster of a kitchen and laughed. Based on the mess, she should have a nine-course meal prepared. She used her knuckle to text back.

Well, the broth isn't too salty.

**That good, huh? Sounds like U need a break.
How do U feel about dancing?**

And just like that, a million butterflies took flight in her stomach. She glanced at her reflection in the polished stainless-steel refrigerator door and gasped. Lord, was she ever a mess.

I'm about as cut out for public consumption as my soup.

I can't wait to taste both. But first we dance.

Only Emmitt could make her laugh and horny with a single text. It was another one of the many things she loved about being around him. She'd laughed more with him than she'd laughed in all her years with Clark.

I'm N an old t-shirt & covered N flour. I don't think I'm dance material at the moment.

“You left out that it's my shirt and you're not wearing pants,” a very amused and very masculine voice said from the general direction of the front of the house.

Startled, Annie dropped the phone and it landed with a muted thud, followed by a cloud of flour. Her heart was doing some thudding of its own. The longer she looked at Emmitt, dressed in a suit and tie fit for the red carpet with a leather jacket that added a touch of bad boy to the GQ vibe he had going on, the louder the thumping became, until she was certain he could hear it.

“My T-shirts and jeans are in the wash,” she explained, then reached into the bowl for her phone. But her hands were wet, which caused the flour to stick to them.

“Lucky me,” he said, coming up behind her until his front was pressed against her back and his arms came around. “Let me help.”

He took her phone and set it on the dish towel next to the cutting board, then brushed her hair to the side so he could kiss the curve where her neck met her shoulder. And kiss and kiss, until her head dropped back against his chest.

“As good as I remembered,” he whispered.

“I didn't expect you home until later,” she said. “How was the dance?”

“Guess which dad got the first dance,” he asked.

Smiling, she turned, expecting him to back up, which he did not. She got an up-close-and-personal look at just how happy he was. “You?”

“Me.” He placed a hand on either side of her waist, then brushed a tender kiss across her cheek, and her *baa booms* became louder, and closer together with an urgency that made her dizzy. “And guess who got the last dance of the night?”

“You?”

“Technically all three of us dads shared the last dance, but the last slow dance of the night went to me.” He kissed the other cheek. “And guess who didn’t threaten any teenagers, even when they danced with my daughter?”

“I’m so proud.”

“Me too. It came close, but I managed to hold it together.” This time when he spoke, it was barely a whisper. And when he kissed her, it was on the tip of her nose. “And guess whose house Paisley wants to spend more time at?”

“Yours?”

“Yeah.” Another gentle kiss, this one against her lips, gentle and sweet and over way too quickly.

“I’m so happy for you, Emmitt,” she whispered. “I know how hard you’ve worked to make tonight special for her and to show her how much you love her. The best part is she knows now. You deserved a night like this with her, and that you did it with Gray and Levi will only make the memory that much sweeter.”

“Tonight was pretty perfect,” he said. “Except for one thing.”

“Gray was there?” she teased.

“No. You weren’t. And I wish you had been,” he said, and the bottom dropped out of her stomach, like it always did when he said things she wanted so badly to be true. “For the pictures, the dancing, the memories, all of it.”

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it,” she warned, telling herself more than him.

“Look at me and tell me that I don’t,” he softly challenged, and she looked and—*fairy godmothers be true*—he meant every word. It was right there, staring back at her, everything she’d hoped to find but had been too afraid to acknowledge—love.

She wasn’t saying it was the *forever and ever amen* kind of love. But what she saw was enough to make her breath stall out in her chest. And the longer she looked, the more apparent it became that along with the hunger and desire—was a vulnerable need to share his world with her.

As she realized how much she wanted to be on the giving *and* receiving end of that, her chest relaxed and all the air left her lungs in a whoosh.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “It caught me off guard too. So much so that tonight, when I saw people taking selfies under the arbors, I wanted to take one too. With you.”

“Emmitt Bradley, award-winning photojournalist, taking a selfie?” she teased.

“What can I say, with you I want to try new things.” He moved closer and lowered his voice. “All the things.”

Annie had it all wrong. Emmitt wasn't romantically challenged. He was romantically choosy. And he'd chosen her.

"Let's start with the selfie." Because that was as far forward as her head would allow her to fantasize. Too bad her heart was one selfie away from forever. "What would we be doing in this selfie?"

"Dancing." He took one of her hands in one of his and slowly moved them to the center of the kitchen. "You would have been wearing that red dress that's hidden in the back of the closet, the one that still has the tags on it, and I would have taken you in my arms, and then as we started to move, I'd snap the camera to capture every single emotion I experienced when dancing with you for the first time."

She looked down. "I don't think the red dress is going to happen anytime soon."

"That's just it. When I came through the front door and caught you swaying in the kitchen, covered in flour and my shirt, I realized that even in the red dress you couldn't look any sexier."

Annie remembered singing a very bad, very embarrassing rendition of "Girl on Fire" by Alicia Keys while shaking her booty. "How long were you watching?"

"Long enough to make sure your dance card was open," he said, sliding an arm around her back, settling it low on the curve. "Put your arm around me, Anh."

"I'll get you all dirty."

"I like it when you get me dirty, but I love it when you hold me in your arms," he whispered, and she complied, because that was, quite possibly, the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her.

She looked up at him through her lashes. "I can turn on some music."

"We can just sway all night for all I care." He pulled her close and their bodies brushed as they moved together. So incredibly slow it was more like swaying while their feet took the tiniest of steps, and they barely moved at all.

But inside, Annie's heart was moving things around, making room for Emmitt, because she could no longer avoid the reality of this whole situation. Annie's journey of one had merged with his the moment she threw her shoe at him and he'd smiled.

She should have known then that she was going to fall, because he'd seen the irrational side of Annie come out in one of the most imperfect moments of her life, and instead of walking away or placating her—as so many other people had—he'd been intrigued. And the more of Annie she let out to play, the more interested he became. Now she was standing in front of him, covered in her

many failed attempts at being a true Walsh woman, and all he wanted was to dance her around his kitchen.

So instead of just sliding her arms around his neck, she rested her cheek against his chest and finally, *finally*, gave in.

He groaned, and his embrace tightened. “And you slay me when you do that,” he murmured against her ear, then slowly turned her in his arms.

“Then maybe I should do it more often.” She pressed closer, tucking her body into his. He groaned again.

Around them the air felt magical. A gentle hum started at every point of contact they shared, softening her heart until it lifted a little white flag of surrender. No longer able to deny her feelings, Annie closed her eyes and gave her heart completely over to his care.

Unaware of how long they swayed in each other’s arms, she felt tipsy on romance when he whispered, “I don’t know how I will ever be able to thank you for everything you’ve done for me and Paisley.”

“Thank me?” She looked up and, *pow*, he was the one who was doing the slaying. Stripping away her fears, her uncertainty, her insecurities until it was just Annie swaying in his arms. “Emmitt, everything that happened tonight was a result of your willingness to really hear what Paisley was saying and meet her on her terms.”

“I never would have gotten there without your advice.”

“Advice is easy to dole out. You were the one who put it into action.”

And she couldn’t have been prouder or happier for him.

“It wasn’t just the advice, but for you being you. You didn’t hold back when I was totally blowing it with Paisley, you helped me out with the dance when I was in over my head, and you even made my kid’s year when you agreed to host and chaperone her party.”

“Co-host,” she clarified—against his lips. And since she was already there she figured she might as well steal a couple—dozen—kisses. “And how could I say no when she buttered me up with my very own extra-large pepperoni and green olive pizza? I wonder where she got that idea.”

“Goldilocks, you had your own pizza because everyone else knows you don’t put green olives on a pie,” he said, their gazes locked as if magnetically charged. “Plus, I know a bunch of ways to butter you up, none of which include food.”

Her body revved its engine, waiting for her to wave the white flag so they could do the damn thing. “It’s just a party, and it will be fun. Although I wonder who’s going to chaperone the chaperones?”

“We can take turns. You chaperone me while I try to seduce you, and then

I'll chaperone you while you try to seduce me." He smiled. "Ah, I see the problem."

"I know." She stopped and, going up on her toes, planted one hell of a kiss on him. "How about we give up the whole pretense of a chaperone."

"Thank Christ," he growled against her mouth, and without breaking his hold he lifted her into his arms and carried her down the hallway.

"What are you doing?" She laughed.

"What I wanted to do the first night I met you. Make love to you in my bed, then wake up and do it all over again, until neither one of us can move." He tossed her onto the mattress, disposing of his tie and shirt before covering her with his body. "You have a problem with that?"

"No, but I, ah—" She tried to sit up, and he froze.

He came up on one elbow. "Don't shut me out," he whispered, dropping a tender kiss on her lips.

"What? No." She touched his face, and he leaned into it. "I'm not shutting you out. It's the opposite. I wanted to talk about something before we had sex again."

"Does it concern you and me and anything that is going to happen in this bed?"

She shook her head.

"Good." Pushing her hair back from her eyes, he traced the line of her lower lip. "Goldilocks, I have spent the past month talking it out with everyone in my life, dealing with more emotions than I knew existed, and worrying about everyone and everything to the point of exhaustion. But tonight, it all felt like it came together, and for the first time in a long time everything feels right and good and how it should be. And to make things even more perfect, I was able to come home and share it all with this amazing, sexy woman who gets me."

Annie's throat tightened and her eyes swelled with emotion.

"Usually, the problems I cover are either too big to solve or too small to matter, but with you, Goldilocks, it feels just right. So unless there is anything pressing that requires more talking or for you to leave this bed anytime soon, please just kiss me."

Afraid she was about to cry over the lovely and tender words he'd shared, she gripped the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss that reinforced what he'd said: The fit was just right.

When he lifted his head, she teased, "I should let you know that I do have work on Tuesday."

"Tuesday?" The sexy grin he gave her made everything tingle with anticipation. "That gives me seventy-two hours to convince you that you belong

in my bed, with me, my arms wrapped around you, my heart pressed against yours.”

Giving Annie seventy-two hours to convince herself that the guilt she was feeling was all for nothing.

Chapter 25

Normally, Emmitt would have ignored Gray's phone call to remind him of his appointment that day, but Annie had already left for work, after giving Emmitt one hell of a good morning, so he answered and agreed to be there at his scheduled time.

Their extended weekend hadn't offered up much in terms of sleep, but Emmitt wouldn't have had it any other way. They'd spent seventy of those hours in bed and the remaining two in the kitchen making egg noodles from scratch. It was an apron-only dress code with a hands-on approach to cooking.

There was more hands-on than cooking, but they'd managed to create some pretty amazing egg noodles. And the soup? He was never eating store-bought again.

He was in such a good mood, even Gray couldn't ruin his day. Which was why Emmitt arrived five minutes early for his appointment and, even when Gray took Emmitt to the exam room instead of his office—meaning this was a *turn your head and cough* kind of appointment—Emmitt didn't bring up the fact that Paisley had chosen him over Gray for the first dance.

"So, I hear Rosalie was able to get a copy of my chart from China," Emmitt said, hopping up on the exam table.

"Even from the distance of seven thousand miles, the woman can instill fear in her prey." Gray got busy with the pregame warm-up, taking Emmitt's blood pressure and such. "It's why I pay her so much."

"I thought it was because you're scared of her."

"That too," Gray said, taking a seat and flipping the monitor around so Emmitt could see. "So we can skip over the whole *just a bit if shrapnel BS* you've been preaching."

"Like you believed it."

"When you walked to pick up Paisley I started to wonder, but when you Ubered everywhere, I knew it was bad."

Emmitt let out a breath and asked the question he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to. "How bad is it? I had a feeling a lot was lost in translation."

"It's a miracle you're alive. A millimeter to the right and you wouldn't have walked out of there, and that's not even considering the trauma to the head." Gray walked over and began to gently probe Emmitt's head, taking notes on the remaining sore spots. "Scale of one to passing out and puking, how are the headaches?"

"Today, I'd say a five, but there are times when the puking threatens. But not nearly as frequently as before." And since there was no point in hiding anything

from Gray any longer, he took off his shirt.

Gray gave a low whistle. "That must have hurt like a bitch."

"Is that your official diagnosis?" he asked. Gray sent him a look. "And yes, it did and sometimes it still does."

"How often?"

Emmitt took a deep breath and thought of what Annie had said about how lucky he was to have a family to support him, if he'd just let them. And while he'd never admit it aloud for fear that Gray's ego would grow big enough to eclipse the sun, he loved the guy. He loved how Gray was with Paisley, respected the hell out of him for how seriously he took his role as her stepdad.

Oh, who was he kidding? Gray was as much Paisley's dad as Emmitt. He loved her with a ferocity that rivaled Emmitt's and would give his life if it meant saving Paisley's.

Bottom line, if Emmitt wanted this patchwork of a family to work, and he did, then he needed to start treating them all like family.

"More than it should," he admitted. "It's getting better, but if you were to accidently bump me in the ribs, it would knock the breath out of me."

"The soreness could last another four to six weeks, but that just means you're healing. That said, if you promise to take it slow and ease back into things, I'm comfortable clearing you for work."

"That's... I don't know what to say." Emmitt tugged on his shirt. "Thanks, man. This is great news." He could finally put this story to rest.

Gray's expression implied he wasn't so sure. Clearing his throat, he scooted to the computer, and the screen lit. "I can e-mail this to you, or if you can wait a few minutes, I'll have Rosalie get the paperwork together and your sentence in Rome will be over."

"I can wait," he said. "And for the record, I don't hate being home. And you can wipe the dumbfounded look off your face. Contrary to all the crap you guys give me, I love being home."

"Yet you keep hounding me about when you get to leave."

"And the second I'm gone, all I'll think about is coming home to Paisley. It happens every time." Emmitt shook his head. "When I'm working, I know where I stand and what my job entails. Then I come home and it's like I'm the idiot on *The Bachelorette* who thinks he's the one, then finds out he's only around because he got the pity rose."

"You watch *The Bachelorette*? *The Bachelor* I get, ton of babes, but *The Bachelorette*?"

Emmitt ignored this. "What I'm saying is, with Michelle gone, everything is uncertain and overwhelming. And if I'm feeling this way, I can't even imagine

what it's been like for Paisley. I know that this man-off between us isn't helping, and I know she needs her family's support. All of her family."

"Wow."

"Seriously?" Emmitt stood. "I say all that and you come at me with *wow*?"

Gray raised a hand. "You dropped a lot right there, and *wow* was my first reaction. I needed to absorb it for a minute so that I could give you a response as honest and real as what you gave me. So take a seat."

Emmitt did—but in the chair this time.

"I agree with everything you said." Gray sat and rolled his chair closer. "And I'll admit I've been an ass lately."

"Lately," Emmitt deadpanned.

"Okay, ever since you stuck your hand out and said, 'Hi, I'm Paisley's dad, who the fuck are you?'"

Emmitt chuckled. "I did say that, didn't I? Guess it wasn't the best way to greet the man who'd raised my daughter. And before you whine that you're her dad too, I know. You're not some stand-in or temporary fix. You're her dad, and she loves you like a dad."

Gray nodded three or four times, not as if agreeing but as if the motion helped him pull himself together. "Thank you. It's hard, and I'm scared as shit that one day you'll decide I'm not relevant and take her away."

"I'd never take her away from someone who makes her so happy, and if we're sharing shit like we're on *Dr. Phil* or something, I'm scared to death that she comes to stay with me only because she feels obligated, not because she wants to. That when I come home, instead of making things better, I disrupt everyone's plans and I'm scared that at some point she'll come to resent me." He held up a hand. "And I see you itching to drop some serious medical knowledge on me, but before you go all doctor on my ass, I'm talking to my co-parent right now."

"Understood. Reeling it back in," Gray said. "First, as a co-parent, thanks for initiating this conversation. I'd like to think I'm man enough that eventually I would have broached it with you, but I'm not sure. Which takes me immediately into the second thing, because I don't want to give you a chance to ask me to repeat that you're the bigger man. Is this why you want to get back to work? Because you feel that there isn't room for you here?"

"I wouldn't have worded it like that, but yeah. The first time I walked in to meet my kid, I thought I'd find this little girl whom I was going to raise and love and who would need me to teach her how to ride a bike or throw a punch. Instead, I walked into a ready-made family, with Levi in the role of surrogate dad and you firmly entrenched as stepdad. With three already established

parents, Paisley wanted for nothing. There wasn't anything she needed that she couldn't get from you guys."

"No matter how hard we tried, we could never give Paisley the kind of love she gets from you. We all love her, but the love from each of us feels different to her, and she needs all of it to feel complete."

"If you really mean that, then after I lay this story to rest, I want to talk about the possibility of her spending more time at my house," Emmitt said. "That's why I want to get this story done. I admit, when I first got here, I just wanted to get back to China, because I hate leaving things open ended, especially with the promises I made to the families I met there. But after a while, I started to see what I was missing out on and began to fall into a rhythm with you guys and with Paisley—"

"And Annie?"

"Annie and I had a rhythm the second we met," he said, shocking not only Gray but himself. "And I don't want to lose the ground I've gained with anyone here. You were right—it's not your job to keep me in the know. I need to be in touch more. I don't ever want to come home and feel like I'm clueless about my kid and her life, or feel like I've been left out of the important stuff. I missed her first step, first word, hell, nearly all her firsts. I'm going to work hard not to miss any more."

"We never meant to leave you out," Gray said, and Emmitt let the reference to "we" slide off his back. "And if you're willing to keep in touch with me, then I'll do my best to keep you in the loop on what happens when you're on assignment."

"I'd love to be able to work locally like you and Levi, but that's not an option. So I've been thinking of a compromise. As soon as I finish this story, which I *can* do from here, I'm going to cut back on some of the travel and start taking assignments that are a little closer to home."

"Are you serious?"

"Talking to Paisley made me realize that the only way we're going to get through the next few years is to tackle it together."

"Hey—" Emmitt stuck out his hand. "I'm Paisley's dad, and I want to thank you for everything you've done for her. I look forward to sharing this amazing kid with a guy like you."

Gray shook his hand, then pulled him in for a side hug. "No one I'd rather do it with."

"We better call Levi and tell him we love him too," Emmitt joked. "We don't need him whining like a little girl tonight during the ball game."

* * *

Emmitt headed toward the lobby with an extra skip in his step and an official letter from Gray's office in his back pocket. He wouldn't be diving out of planes or spending time on the front line anytime soon, but the more he thought about it, the more he warmed up to the idea of slowing things down a bit.

Make no mistake, Emmitt was itching to get back to work, but that didn't mean walking away from what he'd found in Rome. Something special was happening here, and he'd be damned if he didn't see where it led.

Gray offered to e-mail his company directly, but Emmitt told him to hold off for a couple hours. Carmen deserved to hear the news from Emmitt. And not some "Doctor is sending clearance. Please overnight my things" text. She deserved an apology. So he found a quiet cove off the lobby and dialed her direct line.

"Carmen Lowell," Carmen answered, her voice so bright it had Emmitt's chest pinching painfully. Not because he was about to say he was sorry, but because he'd been given a glimpse of the other side of goodbye through Annie and Paisley, and he was ashamed to admit that, when it came to Carmen, he'd acted no better than Clark or Sam.

He was sure there were quite a few other women over the years who would consider themselves part of that list.

"Hey Carmen, it's Emmitt."

There was a long pause and he could practically hear her deflate until, when she spoke, she had all the warmth of a cardboard box. "If you're calling to sweet-talk me into changing my mind, you're wasting your time."

"Actually, my doctor's office is sending over the letter today. I've been cleared," he said. "And I wanted to tell you before you heard it from HR."

An exasperated laugh muddled through the earpiece. "Why am I not surprised? Emmitt Bradley always gets his way, no matter how it complicates everyone's life. How old was the nurse you sweet-talked?"

Okay, he deserved that one. "Actually, Gray's the one who cleared me, so you know there was no sweet-talking or shenanigans."

"Then you're okay?" she breathed.

"I have to take it easy—no extreme assignments for a few months—but I'm okay," he said. "I know I gave you shit for benching me, but it was the right call. I needed time to heal and decide my next steps."

"I'm happy to hear that, Emmitt, I really am." The sincere concern in her tone humbled him, made him uncomfortable because he didn't deserve her concern. "And it wasn't my call to bench you. That came from the top down. I admit, I enjoyed being the one to put a temporary hole in your sail. So I guess you're calling because you need your things?"

“Actually, I’m calling because I wanted to say sorry.”

“For telling the other journalists I was throwing a Carm-trum,” she accused. “Thanks for that, by the way. I don’t think the junior journalists had heard that term before.”

“I haven’t talked to anyone since the explosion.” But he hadn’t squashed the term that one of the younger journalists, who felt Carmen wasn’t giving him big-enough assignments, had coined. “But I’m sorry that I implied you were anything but professional. I’m also sorry for the way things ended.”

“Seriously, Emmitt, it’s okay, it was a long time ago and I’ve moved on.” She waved it off, as he’d seen her do so many times when forced to deal with one of the hundred a-holes she managed or encountered while simply doing her job.

“It’s not okay,” he told her. “When I ran into you at Mahoney’s I was too busy thinking how hard it was seeing you again. I didn’t stop to consider how you were feeling. I should have, just like I should have handled the situation differently.”

Carmen went silent, probably trying to figure out if he was BSing her. With their past interactions, he didn’t blame her.

When she finally spoke, her voice was full of surprise and something warmer that he hadn’t heard from her in years. “I’m actually at a loss for words, and you know how rare that is for me. I have a response to everything.”

Emmitt leaned against the wall and smiled. Speaking with Carmen had been one of his favorite parts of their relationship. She was smart and funny and loved to talk, about anything and everything. “You don’t have to say a word. I made a shit move that night. I was on a high because that assignment went amazing, but when I came home I realized I didn’t have anyone to share it with. Paisley was on a family camping trip, you and I... well, we weren’t that to each other anymore.” And once he started talking, he decided to lay it all out there. “I knew breaking it off before it got more serious was the right call, but I didn’t realize how much I’d miss you and how hard it would be to get over *us*. So I decided to head to Mahoney’s and celebrate with a beer. I had no idea you would be there. If I did, the second the woman at the bar started chatting me up I would have shut it down.”

“I could have left too,” she admitted. “I knew you were home and, afraid I’d spend another weekend with Ben and Jerry, my girlfriends kidnapped me for a man-bashing night out. You were the man of the hour.”

“I saw your roommate’s T-shirt,” he said, and Carmen laughed so loud it sounded muffled through the phone.

“I told all the girls to keep their jackets on until you left.”

“Everyone wore one?” He smiled, thinking back to when her roommate yanked open her jacket, flashing him with her custom-made THE ONLY THING MY EX HASN’T FUCKED... IS OFF shirt with Emmitt’s face front and center.

“I slept in mine for a long while after we broke up,” she admitted.

“I’m not surprised.” His voice turned somber. “I never cheated on you, Carmen. I may not have been the forever guy, but I never cheated.”

“I know,” she whispered. “But you let me fall in love with you, even when you knew you’d never commit.”

“I wanted to. I just never got there,” he admitted gently. “I knew your feelings were stronger than mine, but we had so much fun together that I let it go on longer than I should have. I just kept telling myself that because I’d been upfront with you, told you I’m not a long-term guy and I’d never change, it exonerated me from any wrongdoing. I was wrong. Out of respect for you and what we shared, I should have ended things sooner, and I should have left the bar that night alone. You deserved better, and I am sorry.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. “It wasn’t all you though. You know that, right?” she asked, and Emmitt realized that, no, he hadn’t.

For all the times he played it off that Carmen was just another Crazy Cutie, he carried a lot of blame for hurting her the way he did.

“Looking back,” she continued, “all the signs were there. I was ignoring them. We both lied to ourselves, and we both made mistakes, but you’re a good guy, Emmitt.”

“A little slow on the uptake, but I’m working on that.”

They both laughed at that, but eventually a comfortable silence grew between them as the past became lighter, creating space for a fuller future. A future that he could now picture. A future he wanted and was willing to work for.

With Paisley, the guys, and with Annie.

“I’ll have your equipment and research overnighted to you,” she said, her tone going more professional. “Do you want me to have it sent to your place in Rome? Or will you even be there long enough to sign for it?”

“Rome is fine.” He wasn’t planning on going anywhere anytime soon. How he saw it, there was enough in that small coastal town to keep him busy for a good long while—possibly forever. He’d still take assignments, still dedicate his time to finding the stories everyone else ignores, but they’d have to be pretty spectacular to drag him away from what he was building in Rome.

“I’ll get it out today,” she said. “Oh, and Emmitt, I wouldn’t be so sure about the whole *I’ll never change* number you’ve done on yourself. Because whoever she is, she looks nice on you.”

Emmitt was still smiling when he disconnected and reached the lobby exit.

The sun was out, the sky blue, and he'd been given the all clear to roam at his pleasure. Yet all he could think about was making dinner with Annie.

There was a lot he couldn't wait to do with Annie. Between her working double shifts and him helping Paisley prep for the sleepover party, they'd barely seen each other since Tuesday. So yes, he couldn't wait to (fill in the blank) Annie.

Kiss.

Touch.

Talk.

Lick.

Cuddle.

Grinning like an idiot, he sent off one more text, this one to the woman who'd been his big spoon more than once. And even liked it.

If U could fill in a blank with any action, what would it B?

Instead of heading to his car, he leaned against a column and waited for her reply. Before he knew it, those three little dots that created more anticipation than foreplay were blinking. Then came her reply.

Are we playing Texting Mad Libs?

Something like that. Action, go!

Is this one of those questions where I'm supposed to tell the truth? Like . . . what are U wearing? And I come back with "dirty scrubs & orthopedic shoes." Or would you rather it be a little more entertaining, like, "Black thong, red heels, matching lipstick & nothing else." Please advise on rules.

He barked out a laugh. Only Annie would ask for the rules in a made-up game. Man, she drove him crazy—in all the right ways.

His fingers slid over the screen, tapping out his reply.

#1 has honesty going for it, and honesty is a complete turn-on I've recently learned. #2 creates an image that just flew to the top of my Lonely Nights Playlist. But I think I'll have to go with what's behind door #1, because I have a thing for a woman in scrubs. But U still haven't given me an action.

Thinking of a good one. Oh, hang on, Beckett's trying to read over my shoulder. Repositioning. Stay tuned.

BTW, Dr. cleared me for strenuous activities. In case that affects your reply

The dots disappeared and he settled in to wait for her reply, a big dopey grin on his face. The same kind of grin Emmitt used to give Gray heat for texting with Michelle.

His phone buzzed. The grin grew dopier.

Swallow.

Lord have mercy, he was no longer grinning or feeling dopey. He was alert and focused, and things were getting a little crowded in his jeans.

UR good at this game. I give U an A+

You'd give any game that uses the word Swallow an A+

Big words demand big gestures

No fake promises, remember? BTW, what word did U pick?

Oh, he remembered, all right. And every promise he'd made he was going to follow through on. Every. Single. One. Which was why his answer was more of a collection of words, each one requiring its own space.

Kiss.

Touch.

Talk.

Lick.

Cuddle.

He could imagine the expression she'd have when the texts came in one after the other.

**Can I rearrange the order? How about . . . Kiss.
Talk. Cuddle. Touch. Lick.**

He'd never been one for lists or notes, but Annie had him rethinking his stance. She knew what she liked and wasn't shy about letting him know. Which worked for him, because it ended the whole *feeling things out* BS people did when they were dating.

Nope, with Annie there were no pretenses, no uncertainties, and absolutely no games. She was, in a word, refreshing.

But a little spontaneity was always welcome, so he decided to add one more word to his list. He typed then backspaced right over those last four letters because, WTF, he had really typed "love."

I wasn't finished. My final word is . . . love

Well, his heart had, because there was no way his brain had anything to do with that snafu. He'd not only typed it, he'd almost sent it, and after all their No Fake Promises talks. He wouldn't have meant it.

Or maybe he would have. Wasn't that a thought he wanted to save for a rainy day. And just his luck, the forecast called for heavy showers tonight, because when it rained in Emmitt's world it poured down shrapnel and words like "love." So he added a very Emmitt-like "fuck" to the end of that text, then reread it.

I wasn't finished. My final word is . . . fuck.

Send. He was replaying the last few seconds of his life, wondering how he was going to get back to the way things were before he prematurely typed the L-word, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to take it back.

Even crazier, he hadn't tried all that hard before realizing he wasn't checking airlines for the next flight to Anywhere But Here or crafting a list of 192 reasons he couldn't feel the L-word after only a few weeks of knowing someone.

He'd had his emotional maturity compared to that of a twelve-year-old boy at a boob convention more times than he cared to remember. This might just be another case of his impairment confusing the situation.

Then again, loving someone meant trusting them, and one couldn't exist without the other. He trusted Annie implicitly. He trusted her more than he trusted himself, and that was saying a lot for a guy whose life often depended on following his instincts. And his instincts were telling him that in this case he didn't think it was a *trust before love* kind of situation.

If he trusted her, then he must also be feeling the other half of the equation. His phone vibrated and he glanced down.

Well, that changes things. I get off at nine tonight.

He texted back the completely expected response.

Which means you'll be getting off with me by 9:15.

Emmitt wondered if she'd come back with another expected response when he noticed a man who looked suspiciously like his dad. He was dressed in white sweats that were held up by a belt around the waist, a polo and—*what the hell*—was he wearing house shoes?

Chapter 26

“Don’t you run away from me, Leslie Jacobs. I know what you’ve been up to,” he hollered, confirming Emmitt’s suspicions that the man charging through the hospital lobby like a madman was, indeed, his father.

It wasn’t so much his voice that gave him away, because he sounded winded, but the fact that he was wielding a cane like a sword and charging at some unsuspecting passerby.

Les hadn’t noticed him yet, and Emmitt considered slipping out the back exit to avoid running into him, except his dad wasn’t just winded, he was having a hard time keeping his balance. Emmitt looked around for a nurse, but the lobby was completely empty.

Except for Les, who was looking as if he was gasping for breath.

“Ah shit.” Emmitt pocketed his phone and went over to make sure his old man wasn’t going to stroke out. By the time he made it across the lobby, Les was leaning heavily against the wall, gasping for oxygen.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Fit as a fiddle,” Les said, not able to lift his head to look Emmitt in the eyes, which told him just how bad off his dad was. Les had taught him that a self-respecting man always wore a belt and looked people in the eye when speaking.

His situation couldn’t be too dire, Emmitt thought. He’d managed to get the belt part down.

“Let’s take a seat over here,” Emmitt said, taking his dad by the elbow, shocked at how frail Les felt. He didn’t have time to consider much else, since Les jerked his arm away.

Not willing to go head-to-head with his father’s stubbornness—he was still seeing stars from the last time—Emmitt stood back and, hands up in surrender, let Les work it out on his own.

Silently, Emmitt took the seat next to him and waited. And waited. A good five minutes passed before Les spoke.

“Did Annie send you here?” Les began. “I knew I couldn’t trust that girl. She’s too sweet on you.”

“Why would Annie send me?” he asked, and Les closed his mouth so tight it looked as if he’d lost his teeth and forgot to put in his dentures. Then again, Emmitt hadn’t a clue if his dad wore dentures.

Something he’d have to rectify since Les was now a part of Paisley’s life, and Paisley seemed to care about him. If he was serious about the things he’d said to Gray, which he was, then he’d have to come to some kind of understanding with his dad.

For P's sake.

"And you can trust Annie," he assured Les, not sure how or why his dad knew Annie—he'd get to that question when Les didn't look like he was two heartbeats into cardiac arrest.

"I got to get going then," he said, using the armrests to stand as if they were an extension of his hands. "If I sit idle too long, I'll lose my namesake and they'll try to give me a hysterectomy. Bad enough they want to fiddle with the boys—they aren't giving me a hysterectomy!"

Les was on his feet before Emmitt could ask him a few simple questions: What year was it? Did he recognize Emmitt? Did Santa Claus visit him regularly? Les sure was spry for a man who'd lost his marbles. It took Emmitt some effort to catch up to him.

"Where you going?" Emmitt kept pace next to his dad.

"Chasing a pretty blonde."

"What's new?" Emmitt laughed. His dad had always had a thing for blondes. So had Emmitt until he'd met his new roommate. Now he had a thing for Annie. "Whoa, slow down. You're going to trample someone if you're not careful."

Actually, Emmitt had no such concern. Les running into a wall and knocking himself stupid? That was a different story.

"Last time I slowed down, she got away."

"Maybe she doesn't want to be caught." Then again, when it came to women, Les and Emmitt were cut from the same cloth. So his dad wouldn't be giving in until he found his lady.

Les barreled into the public relations office and walked right up to the counter. No one was manning the help desk, so Les started rapping his cane against the window.

"Dad, they can hear you in California," Emmitt said. "Let's take a seat and I'm sure someone will be out in a minute to help."

"Dottie said I could come anytime. Well, it's anytime." He rapped again.

Emmitt was about to take away his cane when a petite blonde in her early fifties came around the corner.

"Les," she said, opening the glass partition. "How nice of you to visit."

Les patted down his hair and straightened. "I saw her. She was walking out of the infusion room again, and I nearly caught up with her, but she's slippery, that one. Managed to get away again."

"Actually, that's what I was doing in the back," Dottie said. "I was able to figure out the problem, and it's an easy fix. All I need is for you both to fill out this form and you'll have your name back."

"Name back?" Emmitt asked, hoping that maybe there was a simple

explanation for this whole situation that didn't end with learning his dad was losing his mind.

"It seems Mr. Leslie F. Jacobs here and a Mrs. Leslie E. Jacobs had their files mixed up."

"One little missing line and some lady's in charge of my life."

Emmitt laughed. "Seems to be going around a lot lately."

"Well, the buck stops here. She doesn't get to say what happens to my boys." Les used one hand to shield the other as it pointed to his crotch. "They're mine and I want them intact."

"I've been a widow for over a decade. I'm not sure I'd know what to do with your boys," announced a petite blonde who'd been sitting unnoticed in the back of the room. She had likely been born in the same decade as Les and was dressed as if going to church. Her poise and honeyed accent made Emmitt think of a southern belle.

"You must be Mr. Leslie F. Jacobs." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Mrs. Leslie E. Jacobs."

And just like that, one pretty little soft-spoken Southerner took all the bluster out of the mighty Leslie F. Jacobs.

"Dad," Emmitt whispered. "Shake the lady's hand."

"What? Oh, right." He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he brought it to his lips. "It's so nice to finally make your acquaintance. I was telling my son, here, that I couldn't wait to put a face to my name."

Les clearly needed some help on his game, but Leslie E. Jacobs didn't seem to mind. Nope, hand to her chest, she let out a musical laugh that left Les blushing.

"I just feel so awful about this mix-up," she began. "I'm new in town, and my penmanship isn't what it used to be. I reckon when I filled out my paperwork, the E for Elizabeth looked more like an F for, well, I guess I don't rightly know."

"Frank. Leslie Frank Jacobs." Resting on his cane, he took a bow. "I've lived in Rome my whole life, and it would be a pleasure to show you around."

"Why don't we sign these papers and then see about getting some iced tea. I don't know about you, but that treatment really takes the wind right out of my sails," she said, and Les did everything he could not to meet Emmitt's gaze. "Plus, I'd rather not wait until I've lost all my hair before our first date. Although, yours seems to be holding strong."

Les smoothed a hand over his hair and said, "It's a toupee."

Which explained the ridiculous color and style. But for every question that was answered, a dozen more sprang up in its place.

“Bless your heart for being honest. Mine’s a wig too, but I didn’t think it would be wise to lead with that.”

“Mrs. Jacobs,” Dottie said. “Would you mind coming to the window and filling this out?”

“Excuse me,” the older woman said and waddled—the same waddle Emmitt had noticed Les using at the family dinner—to the counter.

When it was just the two of them, Emmitt asked, “Testicular cancer?”

“Afraid so,” Les said, giving Emmitt the respect to meet his anger head-on.

Anger Emmitt had no right to be feeling. It wasn’t as if he and Les had much contact, or the kind of relationship where Les would want to come to him with the scary truth. But he felt it all the same.

“Do Paisley and the guys know?”

“No, and I don’t want you telling them either. I don’t want her to be worrying about losing her granddad so soon after losing her mom.” He held up a hand. “Not that I’m dying. The doctors give me fair odds, even at my age. Your mama would have said I was too stubborn for cancer to even stand a chance.”

“Christ.” Emmitt took a seat. It was either that or let his knees give out. “I won’t tell anyone—that’s your place.” But he could already hear Gray giving him a lecture about how karma works. Because Emmitt was now starting to understand how painful it was to discover his own family hadn’t come to him with something as serious as cancer.

Not that he’d gone to his dad after China.

And it wasn’t just anger he was feeling. There was a lot of sadness mixed in there too. That they’d come to this place in their relationship. That his dad had suffered through this alone. That Emmitt had been so holier than thou at the family dinner he hadn’t even noticed how frail and sickly his dad was.

“Does Levi know?” he asked, because he didn’t like the idea of his dad being completely alone through this experience.

“Nope, just Chip and Annie.”

Emmitt wasn’t sure what had happened in his throat, but speaking was impossible. So was breathing and pretty much every other bodily function necessary to sustain life.

“Annie knows?” he got out finally. Then to be abso-fucking-lutely sure they were talking about his Annie—because look at how many lives were sent into chaos over a simple E looking like an F—he added, “Annie Walsh?”

“I don’t know her last name. She’s my doctor. About this high, black hair, pretty eyes,” Les said. “You know, the cute little thing renting your room.”

Oh, Emmitt knew all right. Knew that he was a complete idiot. Twelve-year-old boy at a boob convention, that was him.

“She’s a special one, that girl,” Les went on as if Emmitt’s world hadn’t taken a nosedive. “Sweet as can be, never too busy to help me when I need it.”

Just too busy to tell the guy she was sleeping with that his dad had testicular cancer. Annie, of the “No fake promises or lies,” who’d given him shit for keeping his family in the dark about China, had been sitting on a secret so big that when it detonated Emmitt took a hit that made concrete shards feel like cotton balls.

Then there was this searing hot pain in his gut, like a knife cauterizing his insides. He wanted to double over in pain. Instead he sat down, memorizing exactly what it felt like to have his heart shredded to pieces so that he’d never, ever make this kind of mistake again.

“I know that stubborn look, son. And before you go blaming Annie, you need to know that I kept her quiet by using that doctor-patient privilege jargon.”

Emmitt had used a similar tactic, only she’d given him a deadline to come clean or she’d spill his secret. Clearly, she took Les’s secret a hell of a lot more seriously.

“She couldn’t tell you,” Les said, and wasn’t this just the person he needed to hear the truth from. The guy who’d ruined the first part of Emmitt’s life had teamed up with the woman who had effectively ruined the second part.

It was a one-two punch to the throat.

“Uh-huh,” he heard himself say, but none of that mattered.

Sure, he got the whole confidentiality crap. What he didn’t get was why, knowing about his dad’s cancer, she’d made all those suggestions about his dad and Paisley, second chances, being honest with family, leading him to believe she was on his side. Period. Hard stop. End of story.

He thought she’d chosen him. That when push came to shove, she’d have his back every day of the damn week. Because that’s what he’d been offering her.

He’d busted his ass proving to her that he was all in. He’d let his walls down, shared things with her he’d never shared with another living soul, let her so far into his heart that the marks she’d leave behind would be as good as branded. The scar tissue would harden over until the only love he’d have left to offer was for the people already inside his heart.

Love and trust can’t exist without each other, my ass.

He was such a fool.

His phone buzzed and he felt a wash of anger and anxiety that made him light-headed. He glanced at the screen, wishing to hell that it was Annie with an excuse that would make everything okay. It was Carla.

How fast can you get the China piece done? I've got an assignment of a lifetime.

Carla framed every assignment as the assignment of lifetime, especially the ones in some remote village afflicted with malaria and the avian flu. Both sounded less painful than the story he was living right now.

"I've got to get going." Emmitt stood. "You got a ride home?" he asked Les as if Emmitt himself had driven there instead of walked.

"Yeah, Chip's waiting for me outside." Les went to shove his hands into his pockets, only to remember he was wearing sweats. He rocked back on his heels instead.

"I hope you get this all straightened out without too much of a hassle," Emmitt said as if the cancer would go away once Les filed the right form.

Not sure what else to say in such a royally screwed-up situation, he turned to leave. He made it as far as the door when he paused, then blew out the mother of all breaths before turning back.

"When I'm in town, if you ever need a ride to the family dinner, or an appointment or whatever, just call. I can always swing by and pick you up."

"That would be good, son." Les swallowed and got the same tightened expression he'd worn the day of his wife's funeral. "That would be good."

"Oh, you probably need my number."

Emmitt handed over his card. And how surreal was that, standing in a hospital helping his dad locate his missing identity, learning he had cancer, then offering him a ride, only to hand over a business card so his dad could contact him.

He was calling it. Day over. He was done.

Maybe Emmitt was the one who'd lost his mind. Either that or he was about to embark on locating his own identity—one that Annie wasn't part of.

And all these years later, Emmitt finally understood his dad's grim expression.

It was how the Jacobs men showed grief.

* * *

Annie finished her double shift and didn't see herself volunteering to take on anymore. She was done hiding, from Emmitt, from her feelings, and from herself.

When she'd set off for her Roman holiday, she'd never imagined being grateful to have landed in Rhode Island and not Italy. Her contract was up in less than a month, and she was considering applying for a full-time position at Rome

General.

She was also hoping to land a full-time position in Emmitt's life. He hadn't mentioned there being an opening, but the way he'd looked at her this morning when she'd woken in his arms gave her hope that there would be one soon.

Which brought her to the other thing she'd been hiding from—telling Emmitt about his dad. Les still had a few days left to come clean, but Annie couldn't carry this secret any longer.

It wasn't just that she knew Les had a better chance of making it through his treatment with familial support; it was also that Les's family had become Annie's family. And while he might be okay keeping secrets from them, Annie wasn't.

Dropping her keys in the bowl by the front door, she walked into the kitchen to set her things on the table, next to the bags and bags of party supplies for Paisley's sleepover. She was surprised to find all the lights off.

It was already after nine and Emmitt was usually home by now. Or at least he'd text to let her know he was running late.

After the to-do list they'd come up with earlier, she wouldn't have been surprised to find him naked on the bed surrounded by a pool of rose petals.

Come to think of it, that was the last time she'd heard from him. She'd texted him but he hadn't responded. Concern pinched at her throat as she fished her phone out of her purse. She quickly scrolled through all the texts, looking for his thread.

Eleven texts from her mom, five from her dad telling her to check the texts from her mom, two from Gray, and one from Paisley about a cupcake recipe of her mom's that she wanted to make for the sleepover.

None from Emmitt.

She opened their thread and was about to ask where he was when a sticky note caught her attention.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she walked over and plucked it off the fridge. It was something he'd started doing a few weeks back. Leaving these cute sticky notes for her on the fridge. But by the time she was three words in, her smile felt as if it would shatter. By the sixth word she could barely see through the tears gathering, and by the time she got to the end, she was rubbing her chest.

"Emmitt," she called out.

No response.

She read the note again, waiting for it to make sense, then raced to the bedroom, which seemed like a better plan than sitting there crying. It was empty. He wasn't in the family room snoring away on his chair; she would have seen him.

The hits kept coming as she checked Paisley's room and the garage: both dark and heartbreakingly empty. By the time she found herself back in the bedroom, her heart was pounding against her chest so hard, she wished it would just break free so it wouldn't hurt this much.

"Emmitt?" she cried again.

She went to the dresser and jerked open each and every drawer he'd claimed. Empty. Empty. So completely empty. Kind of like what was going on in her chest.

Refusing to give up hope, she stumbled to the bathroom and pulled the top drawer all the way out, dumping it on the floor.

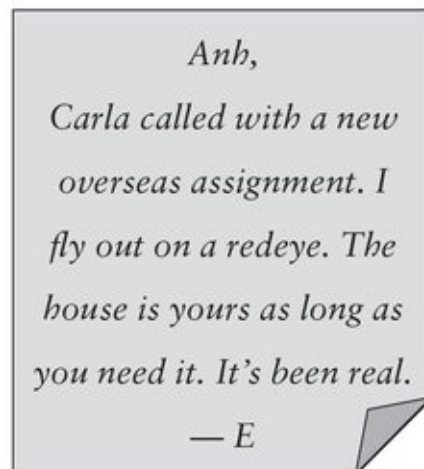
"No." She dropped to her knees, frantically sifting through the few things that remained.

No toothbrush. No razor. No aftershave that made him smell like a sex god. The only thing left was the Bubblicious-flavored toothpaste with laughing baby animals on the tube that she'd given him as a joke when he'd used hers without asking.

But no matter how long she looked, or how many times she told herself she was missing something, she couldn't locate a single toiletry or item of clothing.

"Emmitt?" she cried out, not expecting an answer this time. He'd summed up everything she needed to know in a single sticky note.

Swallowing past the pain, she leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. The hurt cut so deep, it became impossible to think or breathe. Just when she thought she couldn't bear another moment of it, she looked down and found the note still in her hand.



*Anh,
Carla called with a new
overseas assignment. I
fly out on a redeye. The
house is yours as long as
you need it. It's been real.
— E*

No quippy signature or comment about the future. She didn't even warrant his name at the bottom of the note. Just a single letter that caused all the hope that had been growing inside her heart to well up and slowly slip down her cheeks to puddle on the cold tile floor.

They'd made no promises, there'd been no talk of what was to happen after her contract was up, but she'd let herself believe it would all work out. That was on her.

But to leave her with only a note, no explanation, nothing but a meme that was more suited for a high school yearbook than a goodbye after what they'd shared? After confiding in him about the ending of her last relationship? That was mean and spiteful.

Which was even more upsetting, because Emmitt was a lot of things, but she'd never imagined mean and spiteful were among them. So what did that say about her? Because her therapist was wrong; other people's choices were most definitely a reflection on her.

The wording in this note, or the lack thereof, told Annie exactly how important she'd been in Emmitt's life. The one person who, only moments ago, Annie couldn't imagine her life without had walked away with only a sticky note.

Maybe he thought ending it the way they had begun was poetic. She thought it was bullshit.

"Bullshit!" she sobbed, her words echoing off the tile walls. "You hear me? I call bullshit, Emmitt! On you, on us, on your stupid smile. But mostly I call bullshit on this sticky note."

She crumpled it up, then wadded it until it was nothing more than a glorified spitball. She threw it in the toilet and flushed. Then flushed again, making sure she never had to see it again.

Annie had experienced rejection. She'd lived through heartaches, big and small. She'd even managed to dust herself off after heartbreak. But Emmitt had accomplished in a single sticky note what no one else had ever come close to achieving.

He'd destroyed her desire to ever be loved.

Chapter 27

Annie needed to be more specific when it came to her wishes.

When she'd left Connecticut to go in search of a life-altering experience, she hadn't expected to wake up in the fetal position on a strange couch with her eyes swollen shut from crying. Nor had she expected to suffer through the lowest moment of her life with an audience.

"Are you awake?" Beckett asked.

Unable to stay in the cabin for even a night, Annie had called Beckett around two in the morning. Her friend caught on quickly that she was an emotional disaster and a danger to drivers at large, so Beckett's dad picked Annie up.

That had been two days ago.

"I'm awake," Annie said, pressing her hand to her eyes. Her head throbbed, her face was puffy, and when she blinked it felt as if she'd exfoliated her eyes. Then there was the cold emptiness that had settled so deep inside, her bones ached.

"You said that ten minutes ago, then went back to sleep," Beckett said. "I'm not falling for that trick twice."

"Eleven minutes and twenty-one seconds ago," put in a monotone voice that sounded a lot like Siri—had Siri been a pubescent boy.

Annie opened her eyes to see Thomas, Beckett's brother, curled up at the foot of the couch. Dressed in navy blue sweatpants, a navy blue shirt, and navy blue socks with a blanket draped over his lap and a book in his hand, Thomas looked as if he'd been there awhile. "Morning, Thomas."

"It's afternoon," he said. "I want to play Minecraft. I'd like you to get up now."

"Hey, buddy, can you give Annie and me a minute to talk in private?" Gray said from the entry to the kitchen, and Annie threw the covers over her head.

"My name is Thomas, not buddy, and I will give you one minute," Thomas said, and Annie heard the beep as he set his watch alarm.

"What Gray meant was he needs to talk to Annie," Beckett clarified. "He isn't sure how long he'll need, so why don't you and I go to your room and you can show me your baseball card collection."

"I don't want to go in my room. I want to play Minecraft, and I can't play that in the bedroom. I can only play that out here so they can have one minute."

"We going to do this today?" Beckett asked, and apparently, they were. Thomas started counting down the seconds until Gray's minute was up, Beckett started bartering, which turned to bribing, and before the clock struck zero, Gray promised to take him to the ballpark next time his local softball team played a

game. Finally, he relented, leaving Annie and Gray alone.

Yippee.

“You okay?” he asked, and the gentle concern in his voice almost inspired the waterworks again.

“If you came to check on me as a friend, I’m fine. If you came as my boss, I’m still down with the smallpox.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny anything you’re telling me since you have a blanket over your head.”

Annie took a moment to gather herself together, settled on no new tears, and shoved the blanket off her face. “See, I’m fine.”

The look on Gray’s face said she was nothing of the kind.

“You need to work on your poker face, Doctor,” she said.

“You need to come up with a better lie than smallpox, since that was eradicated in the eighties,” he said. “I did go to medical school. I know things.”

“What kind of things do you know?” she asked, sitting up. His lips thinned and she said, “I see you know all the things. Friend and doctor.”

She anticipated how hard it was going to be to talk about Emmitt, but for Gray to be the first person she told made it so much worse. With Beckett or Lynn she could call Emmitt a bunch of crude names, and they’d call him even cruder names. But with Gray, she had to be mature about the whole thing. And she wasn’t feeling very mature at the moment.

“I am sorry.” He ran a hand through his hair. “You don’t even know how sorry I am.”

“You hunted me down and barged into my friend’s house. I think I might have a good idea.”

“I went by your place a few times to check on you when you didn’t show up to work. When I called, it went to voice mail.” He shrugged. “I was worried.”

“It’s Emmitt’s place, and I left the night he did. As for my phone, I may have accidentally thrown it out the window and into oncoming traffic on my drive here.” She glanced at the clock on the wall, and Thomas was right—she’d slept through the morning. “Shouldn’t you be at work?”

His concern turned to serious concern. “It’s Saturday.”

“Oh? Really?” She counted on her fingers and grimaced. She’d been here four days not two. Then she remembered Paisley’s party and shot up. “It’s Saturday! Paisley’s sleepover is tomorrow night, and since it’s a long weekend, the kids plan on spending Monday in the pool.”

Gray held up a hand. “That’s not why I’m here. I just wanted to check in on you and let you know that you can take as much time as you need.”

“Okay.” Was that his way of letting her know her job had already been

filled? Not that she'd blame him.

Gray arrived to work every morning at nine and left every night at six on the dot so he could have dinner with Paisley. Some nights he came back to the office to finish up paperwork, after Paisley went to bed, but he never missed dinner. Rosalie said that was why Gray had merged his practice with Rome General, so that he could have more time with his family.

Then his wife had died, and he'd taken a two-month personal leave. He'd been back for less than a month when he'd hired Annie, so he could have the time he needed at home. With Annie calling in sick, he wouldn't have been able to get home in time for dinner.

"I'm sorry if I left you in the lurch the past few days. I planned to come back on Tuesday. If you still need me," she added, giving him an out.

And maybe giving herself one too. She wouldn't leave until she could train her replacement. But then she was gone. There was nothing for her here in Rome.

"I hadn't even thought that far." Gray squeezed the back of his neck. "I came to check on how you were and to give you this."

Gray pulled an envelope out of his pocket and handed it to her. She immediately recognized the writing. It was from Clark. It was also open. She looked up at Gray, and he shrugged.

"Rosalie intercepted it before I could. A lawyer came by the office this morning to drop the letter off. Rosalie said there's a note and a check inside." He held up a hand. "I didn't look."

Annie didn't want to look either. She wanted to cry over the irony. Clark had finally come through, right after Emmitt had left her behind. It was as if the universe were struggling to find balance.

He held out the envelope, and Annie jerked back as if he were handing over a petri dish of Ebola. "Yeah, I'll pass. I think I've read my fill of notes lately. I don't even want to touch it." With a scrunched nose, she waved it off. "Would you just tell me what it says?"

Gray's face softened as he took out the letter. "Annie, I'm sorry for the delay," he read, "but enclosed you'll find a cashier's check for the full amount of the deposit, plus interest. I'm sorry to hear you won't be attending the wedding, but know you'll always have a little piece of my heart, and my world is brighter for loving you."

"Um, can you sum it up? This is too weird."

"Thank God," Gray said, wiping a hand across his brow. He scanned the note, then folded it and put it back in the envelope. Placing it on the coffee table, he said, "It seems your mom convinced the caterer, the florist, and someone

named Molly-Leigh to withhold all future services until Clark, and this is in quotes, ‘makes things right with you.’”

The idea that her mother had riled everyone up on Annie’s behalf—including Molly-Leigh—was beyond touching. “I guess girl code works both ways.” She glanced at the check. “Looks like I won’t have a problem finding a new place.”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Gray said. “If I’d had any idea Emmitt was coming back, I never would have offered you his place. And when he did come home, I should have found you different housing.” He looked up at her. “I haven’t been as attentive to details lately, and that’s going to change.”

“I’m a grown woman, Gray. If I needed a new place, I would have found one on my own or come to you. Honestly, I didn’t want to move. I think, subconsciously, I knew that first night that I wanted to stay there. With him.”

“He cares for you, Annie. I’ve never seen him care so much for anyone except Paisley.”

“I’ve been on the receiving end of some pretty shitty variations of caring, but a complete disappearing act kind of takes the cake.” She didn’t get into the details. If Emmitt wanted to share that with his friends, it was his prerogative.

His gaze darted briefly away. “He’s going to kill me for telling you this, but he knows about Les’s cancer.”

Annie felt herself nod, as if her head were no longer connected to her body. “That’s good, for both of them. I’m glad Les came clean.”

“Oh, he didn’t come clean. Emmitt happened to stumble across him at the hospital and learned about it in a pretty sucky way. Les told me he also let it slip that you knew. That you’d known for a while.”

It’s been REAL.

“Oh my God.” Annie’s hands flew to her mouth to stop the guttural sound building up, but it slipped through her fingers. She’d done this. She’d set the ball in motion, and it had built so much momentum by the time it hit Emmitt, there was no going back.

“No wonder he left without a word. And no wonder he hates me so much that...” That he’d end things the way he had. “I’d hate me too.”

“He doesn’t hate you. In fact I’m pretty sure it’s the opposite. And before you go defending him, understand that you found yourself between two stubborn men who have been battling for over twenty years. He’s choosing to blame you because it’s easier than blaming himself, which is pretty shitty in itself. But then to act like an idiot, tearing out of here without thinking of how it would affect the people he left behind. That’s all on him.”

“What did Paisley say? Is she upset?”

“She won’t admit it, but I can tell she’s devastated. I’ll give him credit for

coming to the house and talking with her. Explaining that he had an assignment that couldn't wait and no one else could handle. He assured her that if she didn't want him to go, he'd tell his editor it wasn't happening."

"Paisley told him to go," she guessed, wondering just how hard that must have been for her.

"She said she could just move the party to my place."

"Wow, I bet that hurt."

"Yeah, he brought her an adult problem so she gave an adult answer, but I know it wasn't the answer either of them was hoping for." He looked at her. "I've been so busy dealing with Paisley's emotions, I didn't think to come and check on you sooner."

Annie placed a hand on his shoulder. "Really, it's okay. You have enough on your plate without having to worry about your employees' dating lives."

"You aren't just an employee, Annie. You have become an important person in my life and Paisley's, one who would be impossible to replace. Which is why I'm hoping you'll stay on full time."

"You're offering me a job?"

"I hadn't planned on offering it like this, but yes." He laughed. "I was going to sit you down when your contract was coming up for renewal. In my office, where it would be professional. But when Emmitt left and you called in sick, I began to worry that if I waited any longer, we'd lose you."

"I don't know. I was thinking about moving on to San Francisco," she said. "One of my friends from medical school works at UCSF Medical Center and has been trying to get me to move there for years."

"They'd be lucky to have you," he said. "And if that's what you choose, I'll write you a stellar recommendation letter. But I hope you'll consider us when making your final decision. Maybe find it in your heart to give us a second chance."

"I'll think about it," she said, and he kissed her on the cheek and stood. "And Gray, they did so much work on the backyard for her party, I'd hate to see the party moved. My offer to chaperone still stands, that is, if Paisley's okay with it."

"She would love that," Gray said. "But you don't have to do this."

"I know, but I want to. I made her a promise and I'd like to see it through," she said. "Plus, I think I need to see it through."

Annie needed to spend one last night in the house, and she was too afraid to do it alone. It might be her only chance to find some sense of closure, and she desperately needed to find a way to close the door on her time in Rome.

* * *

Emmitt sat in a back office at the American embassy in India, waiting to interview a source who had proof that the Chinese concrete company had knowingly purchased faulty suspension preheaters that had the potential to explode if air quality caused overheating. The company was suspected of installing them at all seventeen of their plants, three of which were located in India.

The source made it clear that he'd speak only with Emmitt, and only in a specific room located in the underbelly of the embassy that didn't have windows, to eliminate the chance of being photographed speaking with a journalist.

So here he sat, for the third day, waiting for a guy who had yet to show his face. He was giving it another day, then packing it in. If the higher-ups took issue with his decision, then one of them could drag their sorry ass to India and spend their days in this stuffy, hot prison of a room.

Emmitt picked up his phone to check the time and saw he'd missed several calls from the Bobbsey Twins and one from Paisley. Moving to the one corner where his phone registered a single bar, he called Paisley back.

She picked up on the first ring.

"I was starting to think you were avoiding me." A very annoying, very Levisque voice came through the line, and Emmitt considered hanging up.

"I'd say don't take it personal, but I'd be lying," Emmitt said. "And using your niece's phone to trick me into answering is a new low. Even for you."

"I had to do something to save you from yourself. Annie called in sick again today."

Emmitt rested his head against the wall and rubbed his hand over his chest, trying to ease the raw ache that had been gnawing at him. It didn't help. Not even being seven thousand miles away helped.

In fact, the farther the plane flew, the deeper the ache got and the hollower his chest felt.

He hated hearing she was sick, almost as much as he hated that his first reaction had been to get on a plane and fly home to make her some of her grandmother's chicken noodle soup. Because if he went home, he'd forgive her.

As it was, he could barely eat, he wasn't sleeping at all, and every time he thought about how she must have looked when she'd seen his note, his eyes started doing this whole watering thing that most people would mistake for tears.

"I don't know what you want me to say, other than *she* lied to *me*." How many times was he going to have to repeat himself before his family got it? He was the injured party here.

"Says the pot about the kettle. Dude, she didn't do anything you haven't

done, and you know it. And what exactly did she lie about? Did you ask her how your dad was doing?”

“No.”

“Did you ask her if any of your family members were suffering from a potentially terminal disease?”

“No, but—”

“But what? I threw in the disease part because the men in your family are suffering from a terminal case of stupidity,” Levi said. “From what I understand, the moment she made the connection that Les was your dad, she encouraged him to come clean. But Les being Les, she had to give him an ultimatum. He had until the family dinner to come clean or she was going to tell you.”

“I didn’t know that,” he said, not that it mattered. She’d had plenty of time to tell him and didn’t.

“You hung up on me before I could get to that part,” Levi said. “Only you could fall in love with a woman who actually didn’t think you were an asshole, then blow it.”

“I didn’t say I loved her,” he said, wondering again at the power of the L-word.

Not just the word, but the little flutter he got saying it. He’d told himself when he walked out of his kitchen, it was over. That it was better this way, to end it before they became too invested—even though he knew he was already a goner.

“You didn’t have to, man.” Levi laughed as if this was all so hilarious. “Only love could make you crazy enough to ruin what was an honest-to-God chance at what we’re all hoping to find one day. You had it, right there in front of you, and you ran.”

“I didn’t run. I’m working.”

“Working at being a miserable turd, like your old man.”

“Well, maybe I finally understand him a little better.”

“Are you kidding? Your mom died. Annie just kept her vow as a health practitioner. News flash, that’s life, not some big slight against you.” Levi lowered his voice. “And if anyone should understand the difficult position Annie was in, then it should be you, man. The guy who went to jail rather than reveal his source. Hell, I’ve bailed you out of a ton of situations that had to do with your refusal to give up a source, and I’m still here.”

“Those were sources, not family.” Didn’t Levi think he’d gone through the similarities a thousand times over, only to come to the same conclusion? “I didn’t trust them with my kid or my secrets or my—”

“If you say love, I’m going to be the one hanging up on you. Because if you

love her, then how could you punk out when all she was trying to do was give Les a chance to tell you, rather than give you another reason to hate him,” Levi said. “And if you can’t see that or admit just how badly you hurt the most honest and giving person you’ve ever been with, then don’t come home. Because she deserves to be with someone who won’t bail every time he gets his panties in a bunch.”

“You done?” Emmitt asked.

“I don’t know. Yeah, I guess I am.”

“I did more than punk out. I hurt her,” he said for the first time aloud and... “Jesus, I think I’m going to be sick.” He sat down, or maybe his legs buckled under the ugly, staggering weight of what he’d done.

A rush of shame and regret choked him as he realized he’d left Annie alone to figure it out for herself. Made a decision when he was mad that would affect her for the rest of her life. What kind of man was he?

Not one his mom or daughter would be proud of. “Breathe, man, you can fix this,” Levi said, but Emmitt was already shaking his head.

“No, I can apologize and do everything in my power to make her realize I’m the ass, and I’m going to. But I don’t know if I can fix what I did. To love someone is to trust them.”

And Emmitt didn’t deserve either from her.

Chapter 28

By the time Annie set out the last of the appetizers, she had batter dried to her shirt, shards of broken twinkle lights under her nails, and a thin dusting of glitter in every nook and cranny. She also had a heartache the size of the Grand Canyon and enough bags under her eyes to start her own airline.

“Why don’t you go take a shower before everyone starts arriving,” Levi said from atop the ladder. “I can finish this up on my own.”

They were in the backyard, hanging the last few strands of lights, effectively turning Emmitt’s backyard into a twinkling wonderland. The planter boxes were filled with colorful flowers, the deck around the pool resembled a tropical paradise, complete with a makeshift tiki bar stocked with all the virgin daiquiris the girls could drink.

“I’ll make it quick.”

“Take your time,” he said. “Gray texted a few minutes ago to say Paisley is on her fifth change of clothes and it’s not looking good for number six, seven, or eight.”

Annie smiled at that as she reached up to grab the empty box Levi had placed on the roof. But when she went to take it from him, he held on until she was forced to meet his gaze. She felt her smile crumple.

“I can’t, Levi.” Her words trembled. “I just need to get through tonight without crying, and when you look at me like that I want to cry, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, and the sympathy in his voice was worse than the look.

He finally let go of the box, but she could tell it went against every manly fiber in him. Like Gray, Levi wanted to fix this mess, felt some kind of obligation to make right all of Emmitt’s wrongs.

They didn’t know what she knew. No amount of fixing would ever make her world right again. And it wasn’t just Emmitt’s wrongs. He’d left her at the first sign of rough waters, but he hadn’t been solely to blame.

She’d betrayed his trust by keeping Les’s condition from him. And he’d betrayed her love when he walked away without even a backward glance.

She tried not to think about that as she stripped and stepped under the hot spray. Just like she tried not to think about the last time she’d been in this shower, when Emmitt had been the one lathering her up.

Rather than using his shampoo and risk smelling like him, she used the body wash and wound up smelling like rosemary and lime. She’d match the tropical theme of the night.

And when the trying got too hard, she stood under the spray with her forehead against the tile wall and let the tears fall.

God, she was tired. The kind of tired that comes when the grief becomes larger than the soul. Annie had witnessed a lot of loss working in oncology and then the ER, but that kind of loss was different, and so was the grieving.

In oncology, the families were able to grieve in increments, experience the loss over time. There was the loss of future dreams, the loss of mobility, the loss of a full home, and finally the loss of the soul entirely.

In the ER, fatalities were often sudden and unexpected, leaving loved ones to overcome the shock of it all before they could even address what changes they were going to face. There were no last words, a lot of things left unsaid, the endless “what ifs” that coincided with instantaneous death, and the guilt. The guilt in itself could be paralyzing.

Annie wasn't certain one loss was more painful than the other, but she did believe that the instantaneous loss had the most potential to shatter a person beyond repair.

That's where Annie was, still reeling from the shock of it all, afraid what had been done was beyond fixable.

She'd tried texting him, but he hadn't responded.

That was when she'd come to the decision that she didn't need a response. She wasn't reaching out so she could feel better about how things had gone down, but because he deserved to hear from her how truly sorry she was. He also deserved to hear from her how deeply he'd hurt her, not because he'd ended things—she'd given him more than enough reason—but because of the way he'd gone about it.

And while she spent every night staring at her phone, waiting for those blinking three dots to appear, wishing for him to open the lines of communication, she started to realize she'd have to find closure in her own way.

So she'd begun writing him a letter, on sticky notes, which was yet to be finished. It was more about his part in their breakup than hers at the present, but she was finding it therapeutic. And when she could say his name without wanting to cry, then maybe she'd be ready to write him a real letter.

But that day wasn't today, she decided, wiping angrily at her eyes.

Turning off the water, she stepped out of the shower and slowly began to dress. It was a one-leg-at-a-time pace, because that was all she could handle. She'd managed to get into her bra and panties, both brand-new with no sentimental ties, when she remembered she'd left her dress out on the bed.

Releasing a few more shuddering breaths, she walked into the bedroom and bent over to pick up her dress.

“Those are new,” an unexpected but aching familiar voice said from behind her.

A lump materialized in her throat as every memory they'd created in this room came rushing back. Then she turned around. The real thing was way more painful than the memory.

Emmitt stood in the doorway dressed in slacks, a wrinkled button-up, his leather bomber jacket, and aviators. He looked handsome and worldly, the quintessential photojournalist for hire. He also looked sad, as if his heart were breaking too.

Hers was pounding hard, threatening to shake apart. "Does Paisley know you're here? She's going to be over the moon."

"It's a surprise," he said from across the room as if they were mere acquaintances.

"Oh, right. You probably want to shower first. I can, uh..." Holding her dress to her as if it had the power to keep her from breaking down, she grabbed her bag, then spun around looking for, "My shoe." She held it up. "I just need to find the other one, and I'll get out of your hair. There it is, under the bed." She looked up at him and gave a hysterical laugh. "Of course it's under the bed. Don't mind me."

She crouched down, her new panties and bra making a lasting memory she was sure, and retrieved the shoe. She was adding it to the pile of belongings when two big hands came into view.

"Anh," he murmured, taking everything but the dress from her, then helping her stand. "You don't have to leave. In fact, I've grown to love how you feel in my hair."

She looked up and met his gaze, and a seed of hope that she was certain had extinguished grew warm in her belly.

"Don't cry," he said, as if she had control over the matter. She looked at him like an idiot.

"I don't know what else to do," she admitted, then batted away his hand when he went to dry her face. "And you don't get to come in here and wipe away my tears just because they make you uncomfortable."

"They don't make me uncomfortable. They break my heart."

"Well, when you chase someone relentlessly until they give in, then charm them until they fall for you, only to dump them via sticky note, tears happen, Emmitt," she sniffed, building up steam. "It was a really mean note, by the way. I would say it was some of your best work if I wasn't the subject. It evoked all kinds of emotions and epiphanies, like men suck."

She threw her shoe at him, but he ducked. "Men are cowards." The other shoe went flying, and he caught it. "Men are a waste of space."

Out of shoes, she went for her handbag, which landed to the right of him,

dumping all its contents on the floor.

“Men are spineless jerks.” Left with only her dress, she wadded it up and threw it as well. It fluttered through the air and landed, draped over his head. “You’re a spineless jerk. And the worst epiphany,” she whispered. “That I really am difficult to love.”

He removed her dress from his face. “I’m all that and a whole lot of other colorful and unforgivable things. And you have every right to walk out that door and never give me a second thought. But I want to make sure that you know you were wrong about one thing.”

“Really? You’re going to point out that I’m wrong? I understand why you were mad. Had the roles been reversed, I’d be mad too, but I would have at least given you the chance to explain. What you did, that went beyond a mistake. It was intentional and purposeful and broke my heart, Emmitt. You broke my heart.”

Feeling vulnerable and exposed, she crossed her arms.

“It was all those things, and also the biggest regret of my life.” He handed her dress back, and she slipped it on. “But I am going to point out that one of your epiphanies was incorrect.” He took a step closer. “Loving you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. Getting out of my own way was the problem. You are everything that is right and good, and I was so lucky to experience being with you for even a moment. If you give me another chance, I’ll prove to you just how easy you are to love.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said, when—*dear Lord*—she wanted so badly to believe everything he was saying. But she was afraid to open herself up to that kind of pain again.

FOOL ME THRICE wasn’t a T-shirt she wanted to own.

“Then I’m going to have to trust you,” he whispered, closing the gap between them. “You once told me that if you love someone, you have to trust them. I love you, Anh, so damn much, and I’m putting my trust in you, believing that you meant every word you wrote.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out her Dear Diary sticky note collection. Annie stopped breathing. When she’d started that note it was with the idea of giving it to him, but the agonized words that she’d poured onto those sticky notes were her raw and unfiltered thoughts and fears, things about herself that she had a hard time admitting. It was everything she hated about herself in fifteen three-by-three notes. She’d never intended for anyone to read them.

Especially not him. And not with her in the room.

“You weren’t supposed to see that. It’s a work in progress.” She reached for the notes, and he lifted them over his head. “I’ll say whatever you want me to

say, just please give them back.”

“Did you mean what you wrote?”

“Please, Emmitt, give them back,” she cried, her chest collapsing in on itself.

“As soon as you answer my question, because I read all fifteen notes, front and back, and I need to know if you meant it.”

If she thought she’d reached her lowest point the other day, it was nothing compared to the humiliation and pain she felt now, burning so cold that her body felt as if it would crack into a million pieces.

“Yes,” she said, sitting on the end of the bed.

He knelt in front of her. “Do you still mean it?”

She lifted her head so that he could see all the tears and embarrassment and pain. Everything she was feeling, stripped naked for him to see. “What do you want me to say?”

“The truth.” This time when he went to wipe away her tears, she let him. “Just the truth.”

“Yes, I meant every word and I still do,” she whispered.

“Even this part?” He flipped to the last note and pointed to the last line.



“Even that part.”

He took her hand in his and placed something in her palm. “Then I have a note for you. I didn’t have access to any sticky notes, so I used this.”

With trembling hand, and a terrified heart, she took the note.

*Anh,
Love, once given, never
goes away, nor can it be
returned. Once you find
the real thing, all you want
to do is hold tight,
because going on without
it wouldn't be a life worth
living. You have my heart
and I hope in time you can
trust me with yours.
— Just a Boy, Standing
in Front of a Girl, Asking
Her to Love Him in Rome*

She was so stunned by the vastness swelling inside that she didn't realize he had pulled her onto his lap. Then he cupped her face between his hands and lifted her gaze to his. "I love you, Anh Nhi Walsh, and wherever you are is where I want to be. I don't want to be some chapter or footnote in your story. I want to be in every part of your story that you allow."

"I came to Rome looking for a new life, and I found you. And I don't want my life with you to end."

"Thank Christ." He brushed a kiss to her lips. "Otherwise this would have been an awkward moment. Flip it over."

She did, and in her hand on the back side of his note, were two tickets to Rome, Italy.

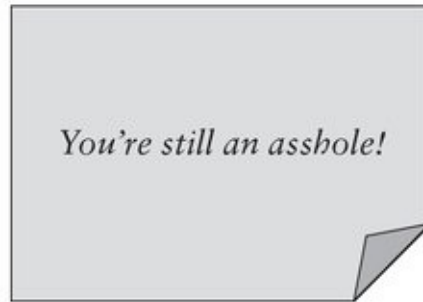
"You want to take me to Rome?" she asked.

"I want to take you a lot of places, but I figured I have a lot of groveling to do, so I picked one off your list first," he teased, and she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him. "With that reaction, I'm good going solely off your list."

“I love lists,” she said, kissing him again. “And I love you.”

And when they were done kissing, Annie asked, “Did you read the PS on the back of my last note?”

His expression said he had, in fact, not. She pressed her lips together while he flipped it over, then let out a laugh.



“I guess I have a lot more groveling to do.” He planted one on her that left them both breathless, and Annie was no longer afraid to be one of a kind, because with Emmitt she was perfectly happy to be exactly who she was—living and loving and thriving in the in-between.

Dear Reader,

This story began nineteen years ago in a hospital in Hanoi, when our family was brought together in the most unexpected of ways.

There I stood, staring down at my daughter, Thuy, with her gentle spirit and cute little ears—a sign of luck, I was told—and I thought, *What a miracle*. Among the billions of people on this planet, and separated by over seven thousand miles of ocean, we managed to find each other. Being a mother and raising Thuy has been the greatest experience of my life.

Her journey hasn't always been easy. I've watched with pride and sometimes anger as she's struggled and fought for her place, not just as a woman but as a woman of color, in today's society. Raised in a predominantly white community, she felt isolated as the only Asian girl with white parents.

She felt trapped between two cultures, fearing she'd never be fully accepted by either. It was her courage and desire to see people like her in the pages of my books that inspired me to write *RomeAntically Challenged*, a story about a Vietnamese adoptee's journey toward self-discovery when her origins are seven thousand miles away.

I am thrilled to introduce Annie Walsh and Emmitt Bradley, two lost souls

who come to Rome, Rhode Island, in hopes of finding that elusive thing they're missing—not knowing that the answer might be standing right in front of them. I truly hope you have loved reading their story as much as I loved writing it.

With love,
Marina Adair

Acknowledgments

When my husband and I met two strangers at the San Francisco International Airport, we had no idea it would end up here. I want to thank Rich and Hoan Sherwood for welcoming two complete unknowns into your family and, especially Hoan, my real-life Joan of Arc, for charging through every obstacle so we could bring our daughter home. And to the other gracious people whose kindness I could never even begin to repay: Aunti Thao and Brother-in-law Hai for treating us like family, Phuong Anh for ensuring Thuy was in my arms on Mother's Day, Thai and Van Nguyen for being our Ho Chi Minh City liaisons (and lifelong friends). And to Dr. Tsuong, Nurse Tran, and the entire nursing staff at Hanoi Obstetrics & Gynecology Hospital for the excellent care and compassion you showed our family. To Mr. Dat, Mrs. Thu from the Ministry of Health, the people from the passport and visa offices, and the many, many other people who were a part of this amazing journey. And to North Bay Adoption, on behalf of all the families you helped, thank you for your dedication to international adoption, uniting families, and believing that families come in all forms.

A special thank-you to my editor Alicia Condon for her enthusiasm and support for a story about a woman of color and about marginalized communities, Alex Nicolajsen for encouraging me to write Annie as I saw her and for your friendship, and the rest of the team at Kensington for all the support. And to my wonderful agent, Jill Marsal, who has become one of the most important women in my life, I treasure you.

And finally, to my husband, Rocco, a master of the art of handholding and unconditional love. And to my daughter, Thuy, the inspiration behind Annie, a character who represents all your sides. Being your mother has been the most rewarding and important part of my life, I couldn't be prouder of the woman you've become. The day you were placed in my arms was the day my heart became whole.



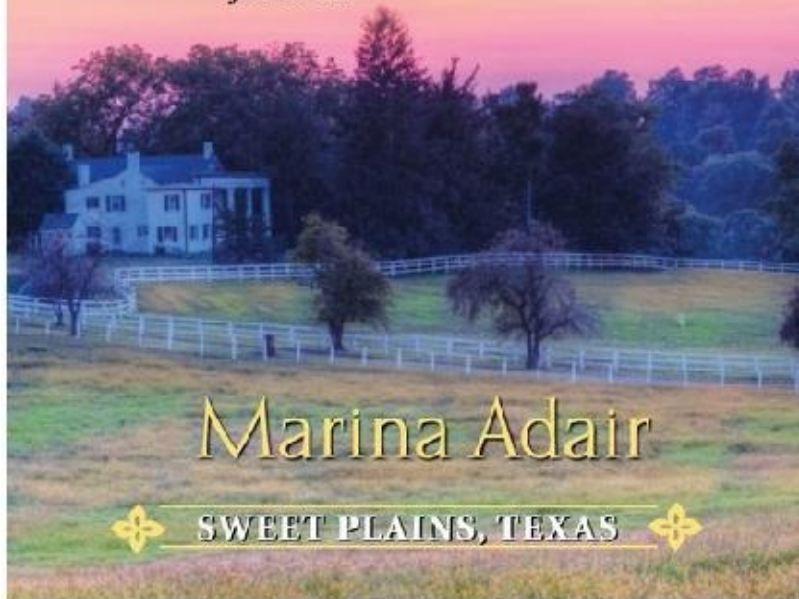
Marina Adair may have been raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, but with a Southern father and a live-in granny, growing up was closer to the Clampetts than the Cleavers. Marina graduated magna cum laude with a BA in film studies and is working toward a master's of fine arts in creative writing at San Jose State University. A member of the Romance Writers of America, she currently resides in the majestic redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains with her husband, daughter, three kitties, eleven chickens, and the occasional wild turkey. Check out her website at www.MarinaAdair.com or become a fan on Facebook, MarinaAdair, and follow her on Twitter: MarinaEAdair.

*The only thing hotter than a Texas summer
is a cowboy's love...*

Tucker's Crossing

"A perfect mix of heart and heat, Adair
keeps the pages turning."

— *New York Times* bestselling author
Jill Shalvis



Marina Adair



SWEET PLAINS, TEXAS

