

*Rome Antically
Challenged*

ALSO BY MARINA ADAIR

Nashville Heights series

Promise Me You

Sequoia Lake series

It Started with A Kiss

Every Little Kiss

The Eastons

Chasing I Do

Heroes of St. Helena series

Need You for Keeps

Need You for Always

Need You for Mine

St. Helena Vineyard series

Kissing Under the Mistletoe

Summer in Napa

Autumn in the Vineyard

Be Mine Forever

From the Moment We Met

Sugar, Georgia series

Sugar's Twice as Sweet

Sugar on Top

A Taste of Sugar

Sweet Plains, Texas series

Tucker's Crossing

Blame It on the Mistletoe

(coming October 2020)

Rome Antically Challenged

MARINA ADAIR



KENSINGTON BOOKS
WWW.KENSINGTONBOOKS.COM

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, or events, is entirely coincidental.

KENSINGTON BOOKS are published by
Kensington Publishing Corp.
119 West 40th Street
New York, NY 10018

Copyright © 2020 by The Adair Group

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means without the prior written consent of the Publisher, excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

To the extent that the image or images on the cover of this book depict a person or persons, such person or persons are merely models, and are not intended to portray any character or characters featured in the book.

All Kensington titles, imprints, and distributed lines are available at special quantity discounts for bulk purchases for sales promotion, premiums, fund-raising, educational, or institutional use.

Special book excerpts or customized printings can also be created to fit specific needs. For details, write or phone the office of the Kensington Sales Manager: Kensington Publishing Corp., 119 West 40th Street, New York, NY 10018. Attn. Sales Department. Phone: 1-800-221-2647.

Kensington and the K logo Reg. U.S. Pat. & TM Off.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4967-2769-5 (ebook)

ISBN-10: 1-4967-2769-X (ebook)

ISBN-13: 978-1-4967-2766-4

ISBN-10: 1-4967-2766-5

First Kensington Trade Paperback Printing: August 2020

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

*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 be-

gan 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 to-night'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 lev-

eled 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 imper-

sonation. “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, straightfor-

ward, 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, dis-

carding 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 level-headed 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 heart-broken 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 HUMBLEBRAGGING 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 pain-killers, were locked in the bedroom, I went in search of my back-ups, 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 asshole 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.