



Engaged
TO AN
**ALASKAN
MAN**

AN ALASKA ROMANCE SERIES
EVANGELINE KELLY

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR

Engaged to an Alaskan Man

EVANGELINE KELLY

TOM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Contents

[Free Book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

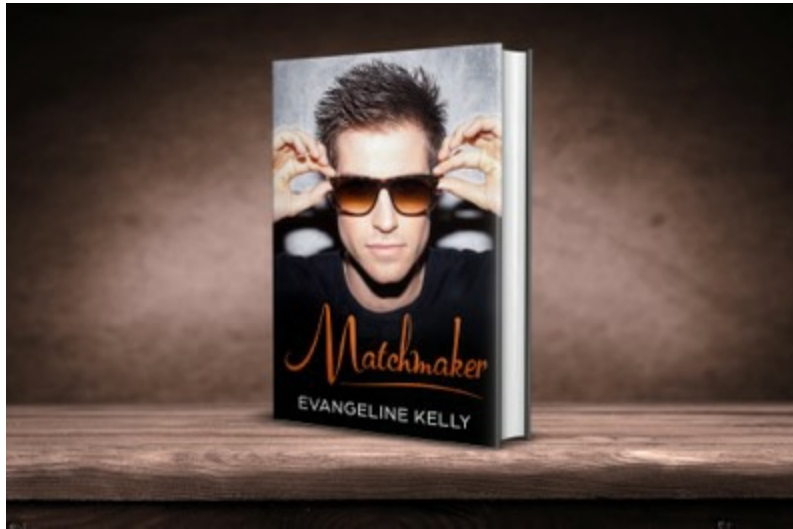
[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Other Books by Evangeline Kelly](#)

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Chapter One

Finn

It was a crisp March morning when I loaded groceries into the back of my black Chevy Silverado and slid into the driver's seat to listen to a voicemail my friend Wesley had left. He'd recently started dating a woman at our church, so he hadn't been around much, not that I blamed him. If I found someone I connected with, I'd probably disappear too. But there was no love interest in my life, unfortunately. Palmer, Alaska, had a population of approximately sixty-five hundred residents, and I knew or had met, most of the people in my age group. I was thirty-two, to be exact. Most of my friends were already married, and those that weren't had moved away long ago. There were some singles remaining, of course, but it was hard to find someone I clicked with.

I tapped on the voicemail message and hit the speaker button. "Hey, it's Wes. We're having a video call this evening with a bunch of us from church. Jasmine will be on as well. Just thought you'd want to know that important bit of information." He chuckled as if he knew he was pushing my buttons, and he was. He knew I wasn't interested in Jasmine, but he always brought her up. "Spring is in the air. Anyway, you should join us. I'm sure Jasmine will be happy to talk with you. Natalie sent a text earlier with all the info."

I rolled my eyes and put my phone away. Yeah, I'd seen the text and I hadn't planned on joining in. Nearly everyone was either married or in a relationship, and I hated feeling like the odd one out. Plus, I was tired of Natalie Campbell's attempts at setting me up after my wife, Zoey, died. Natalie had been several years ahead of me in high school, and she was married with two kids. She loved playing matchmaker, though I didn't think she had succeeded with anyone yet. I knew she was just trying to help, but her efforts were mostly...unhelpful.

My life had taken several twists and turns in the last few years. My wife,

Zoey, passed away from cancer, and then Josh and Vicky, two of my closest friends, died in a car crash.

I'd known Josh and Vicky since high school. Zoey had been one grade below us, and we quickly became an item. When Zoey and I got married years later, Josh was my best man and Vicky was Zoey's maid of honor. After Josh and Vicky's son, Cody, was born they asked if we would be his guardians if something were to happen to them. Josh's parents were no longer living, and Vicky refused to allow her mom and dad to raise her child. She didn't agree with their parenting techniques, as they had failed to show enough love and patience when she was a kid. As an adult, she had built a better relationship with them, but she didn't trust them to parent her children if she was out of the picture.

Zoey and I had agreed to take Cody if Josh and Vicky passed away unexpectedly, but neither of us actually believed that would happen. They were in their twenties, and they were full of life and vitality. We all thought we would grow old together and be the best of friends for a lifetime.

When Zoey died from colon cancer two years ago, I was so engulfed in grief that I didn't think about my earlier commitment to be Cody's guardian. I also didn't consider this when their daughter, Cara, was born. Maybe it was denial, but I couldn't fathom losing two of my closest companions after I'd already lost my wife.

One night, Cody had a high fever, and they bundled him up and took him to the emergency room, leaving Cara with their next-door neighbor. It was dark and visibility was poor. Another driver fell asleep at the wheel and his car slid into their lane, creating a head-on collision. The man survived, but just barely. My friends did not.

I wasn't aware of the collision at first. The police informed Vicky's parents, Ed and Susan about the accident, and they drove out to take care of Cara so she wouldn't have to be placed in foster care. They notified me about the accident two days later, as they found my name on an emergency contact list on their daughter's refrigerator. That same day, Josh and Vicky's attorney informed me of their wishes regarding Cara's guardianship. Needless to say, the news shocked me. No one would have blamed me for backing out at that point, but I couldn't do that to my friends.

I was clueless when it came to raising children, but thankfully, I had the support of my parents and my sister, Melissa, who immediately stepped in to help me.

I shook my head to clear away my thoughts and started the car. Sometimes it was difficult to trust God with the ups and downs in life, but I knew He had a plan.

From the highway, I turned onto the dirt road leading to my home, my tires sliding over the loose gravel. Seeing my farm in the distance, I let out a deep sigh. The truth was, I desperately wanted to find love. Sometimes the emptiness and sadness were so strong it felt like I couldn't breathe, but I had a responsibility to Cara, and that kept me from sinking into the depths of depression. She needed me, so I wouldn't allow myself to fall apart. If I ever got married again, it would have to be to a woman who was willing to take on a baby. That might make finding someone more challenging, but I had to trust God. He would provide a wife if that was His will.

Once I pulled into my driveway, I took the groceries out of the trunk and headed inside. My sister, Melissa, was sitting at the kitchen table with my wedding album open, her dark blonde hair brushing the tops of her shoulders. She quickly wiped her eyes and forced a smile when she saw me. "Hey, you're back. I thought you'd be out longer."

The unspoken message was... *I didn't think you'd catch me looking at your wedding pictures for the second time this week.*

I set the bags on the counter and put the cold items away first. "Guess the lines at the grocery store weren't as long today."

Melissa and Zoey had been close. In fact, Melissa was a bridesmaid for Zoey, and she was like the older sister Zoey had never had. Melissa took it hard when Zoey found out she had cancer, and she was there for us, bringing over meals, and offering encouraging words. My sister was one of the most loyal people I knew. When she loved someone, she gave everything she had one hundred percent of the time, even to her own detriment.

She was still helping me, now that I was a single dad and needed assistance with childcare. She offered to look after Cara for free, but I paid her a weekly income because I didn't want to take advantage of her. Sometimes her presence felt a little smothering, but I kept my grievances to myself to avoid appearing ungrateful.

Although lately, I was considering hiring someone for childcare as a way to create some boundaries. The only reason I refrained from doing that before was because I knew Melissa wouldn't take it well. She loved Cara fiercely and took good care of her, even though she had other responsibilities. Her kids, Anabelle and Simon, were eight and ten, and she loved them to pieces.

She and Carter had been trying to have another baby, but that hadn't happened as of yet.

Once I put everything away, I headed into Cara's nursery to check on her. It was nap time, so I was careful not to disturb her, but I placed my finger over her little palm and she instinctively closed her hand. My heart swelled, and I knew in my whole being that I would always protect her.

When I returned to the living room, Melissa was packing a few items in a black duffel bag, and my gaze caught on a pair of Cara's shoes as she laid them inside and zipped the top. My head jerked back in surprise. "Are you headed somewhere?"

She glanced up at me, her eyes clouded as if her thoughts were elsewhere. "What? Yeah, of course. I'm going home."

"Why are you taking Cara's shoes?"

She frowned, seeming genuinely confused. "I'm bringing her with me. I told you yesterday that Carter and I are going away for the weekend. Mom and Dad are watching Annabelle and Simon."

"Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"I told you—"

"No, you said you and Carter were heading out of town. You never said you wanted to take Cara."

She straightened, and the corners of her mouth tightened in annoyance. "I thought I told you. Is this going to be a problem?"

My shoulders and back tensed up, and I felt a sense of uneasiness. Melissa had become very attached to Cara and sometimes she made decisions about her welfare without consulting me. "Actually, I want her to stay here with me."

She frowned and set the duffel bag down, still holding on to the handles as if waiting for me to change my mind. "I just thought you'd like to have some time for yourself."

Her words took the fight out of me, and the muscles in my shoulders loosened. She was doing what she had always done...putting others before herself. "You already help me five days a week. Please go and enjoy your weekend with Carter. Cara and I will be fine."

"It's no trouble." Her voice wavered the slightest bit. "I'd be happy to take her along. You need your rest. You've been looking worn down lately."

There was a prickling at the back of my neck, and I was once again reminded that I needed to draw appropriate boundaries. "I appreciate your

assistance, but she's my daughter, and I want to spend time with her too."

Her head fell forward in disappointment and she pursed her lips. "Well, feel free to call if you need anything. We'll only be a couple of hours away so I can come home—"

"Mom and Dad are here if something comes up. Don't give us another thought."

She looked like she wanted to protest, but she finally shrugged. "All right." The corners of her mouth tipped up slightly in a strained smile, and I could tell she wasn't happy about my decision. She unzipped the bag, pulled out the shoes, and handed them to me. Once she left, I frowned. This was turning into a complicated situation.

Later that evening, after feeding Cara and putting her to bed, I jumped on the video call that Wesley had encouraged me to join. I got on a few minutes late, so everyone was already talking. They were asking Jasmine questions about Arizona and how she was adapting there.

Jasmine was cool. I liked her, even though Wesley annoyed me with his good-natured ribbing. A while back, Natalie tried to set Jasmine and me up, but we'd both resisted, mainly because neither of us had more than platonic feelings for each other. To be fair, I wasn't ready for a relationship back then, and Jasmine's focus was on moving, so dating was the last thing on either of our minds. My sentiments remained unchanged, now that some time had passed. Jasmine was great, but I didn't feel a spark and I was pretty sure she didn't as well.

"So, what's been going on with everyone?" Jasmine asked in that bubbly tone of hers. She swept her long brown hair over one shoulder.

Several people chimed in with stories about work, and two others talked about their kids. I was tired after a long day and didn't say a whole lot, but no one seemed to notice.

"Have you met any nice men in Arizona?" Natalie asked.

Jasmine let out a snicker, her eyes twinkling. "I've encountered plenty, but you know me. I'm enjoying my singleness entirely too much."

"Speaking of relationships," Wesley said, "I have some news." He paused for effect. "Jasmine, you haven't been in the loop because you've been away, but Danielle and I are officially a couple."

Jasmine squealed and clapped her hands. "That's awesome, Wesley. I'm so excited for you."

Wesley had complained about his single status for a long time, so I was

happy he and Danielle had made a connection.

“Now we just have to marry off Finn,” Natalie said.

I cringed-laughed, feeling awkward. “I don’t want to be anyone’s project.”

“Maybe he’s not ready,” Danielle said carefully.

I appreciated her concern. At least someone was considering my feelings in the matter. She was probably thinking of Zoey and wondering if I hadn’t taken steps to date because I was still dealing with grief. But time had passed, and I knew Zoey wouldn’t have wanted me to be alone.

I cleared my throat. “No, it’s fine. I want to get married again, but you know how it is. Zoey and I dated in high school, so it was easy. When you’re older, it’s much harder to meet someone special. And then you’ve got to date them and court them and get to that place where you’re both comfortable with each other. It just seems so hard.” I hadn’t meant to share all of that, and it felt like I’d dug myself into a hole. Everyone was silent, waiting for me to continue. “It would be a lot easier if I could find someone willing to enter into an arranged marriage.” I laughed, hoping the joke would break some of the tension.

No one else seemed to think it was funny, and thankfully, the conversation turned to other things. When the call was over, I sat there for a long time, contemplating my state in life. I had a fierce longing to find love again, but I didn’t know where to start. Closing my eyes, I lifted up a quick prayer. *Lord, you understand my desires. Please help me.*

Chapter Two

Annie

Organic Bakery and Cafe, a small restaurant in the center of town, was bubbling with energy. I was sitting at a table, waiting for my friend Jasmine, but she would be here any minute. A waitress had already come over and brought two menus at my request. After browsing through it, I decided to go with the chicken soup and homemade bread. My stomach growled, and I glanced at the entrance, hoping Jasmine would get here soon so we could eat.

It was the end of the day, and I was tired but looking forward to some adult conversation. I loved my position as a nanny for three kids, but it had its challenges. The kids were the best part of the job. The parents, Drew and Janette, were usually great, but sometimes they weren't respectful of my time. They'd hired me to work eight to five, but they often didn't return until late in the evening. They did me a favor by hiring me, and I didn't believe they were trying to take advantage of me per se, but they knew they could get away with it because I needed the work.

As long as I had no prior commitments, I was okay with them working later. This morning I had emphasized that I had to leave by five-thirty because I had plans with a friend for dinner. Janette arrived back at six-fifteen, which didn't give me enough time to stop at home and clean up. Glancing down at the jelly stain on my white blouse, I winced. I looked like a mess. My straight red hair had fallen limp, and I wasn't wearing any makeup. It was a good thing I was meeting a friend and not a date.

When my stomach rumbled a second time, I scanned the room again, hoping Jasmine would arrive so we could order. My gaze stopped at a table with a familiar-looking man and my eyes widened. It was Jason, my ex-boyfriend, and he was sitting across from a petite woman with straight black hair and beautiful porcelain skin. Jason and I had dated for three months, and it hadn't ended well. Initially, his charm and good looks drew me in, but it

didn't take long for his know-it-all attitude to get on my nerves. He was a Christian, and I wasn't doubting that, but he needed to grow in a few areas.

I glanced away, hoping his date would be so captivating that he wouldn't even notice me. It had only been a few weeks since we'd broken up, so it would be awkward if he noticed me.

A moment later, Jasmine strode in wearing navy blue jeans and a red blouse. Her heels clicked as she walked over, a huge smile stretching across her face. "I'm sorry I'm running a few minutes late. The traffic was horrible."

"No problem." I smiled and nodded toward Jason's booth. "But look who's here."

She turned in the direction I'd indicated, and her eyes widened. "Nooo." She placed her hand over mine in concern. "If you want to go somewhere else, I completely understand."

I shook my head adamantly. "I'm starving, and it'll take too long to pick a place and then drive there. We had to run into each other at some point, but maybe I'll get lucky and he won't realize I'm here."

Her forehead wrinkled as her gaze traveled back to his table. "Look at that woman he's with. She's drop-dead gorgeous. I can't believe he found someone so quickly." She flinched as if realizing what she'd just said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. You're better off without him."

I shrugged. "Don't forget, I was the one to break up with him. I'm not heartbroken that he moved on. It's a good thing, actually."

"You're always so mature about everything."

"Well, I am thirty." I chuckled. "I should have *some* common sense by now. If only my maturity made me better at picking men."

She knew what I was referring to, as we'd discussed my past. I'd been married for three years to my high school sweetheart, Dereck, but he died unexpectedly seven years ago. I'd thought we had a good marriage, only to find out after he passed away that he cheated on me with a mutual friend of ours. He'd never given any indication that he was cheating. I'd never sensed a change in him, so it had been especially devastating because I couldn't confront him or have a conversation about it. There had been no closure other than the fact that I had to accept it and move on. It had messed with my mind in so many ways. The worst part was not knowing if I could trust my instincts and intuition when I hadn't recognized the signs of his affair.

"You can't blame yourself," Jasmine said.

"I know... It just makes it hard when I'm struggling to find a man with

integrity. How can I be certain he is who he says he is? What if I end up in the same situation? I wish another person could choose for me.”

Jasmine arched an eyebrow. “What are you saying?”

I winked, attempting to lighten things up. “Maybe an arranged marriage wouldn’t be so bad. Someone else with better discernment should do the choosing.” I was trying to make her laugh, but the joke went over her head.

She placed both hands on the table and smiled as if something had just occurred to her. “I know the perfect man if you don’t mind a long-distance relationship. In fact, he was saying the other day that he wanted an arranged marriage as well. You two are an ideal match.”

I sat up straighter, my heart beating a little faster, not because I was excited about her suggestion, but because I thought she was out of her mind. “Wait a second... I was joking when I said—”

“Finn Mercer is as faithful and loyal as they come. He’s a widower, and he has a baby. He adopted her, but that’s a long story.”

Our waitress came over at that moment, and since we’d been talking the whole time, Jasmine needed a few minutes to look at the menu. Once she figured out what she wanted, and we’d both ordered, I tried to steer the conversation in another direction. “So, how’s work been lately?”

She gave me a knowing smile. “We can discuss that after we finish our discussion about you and Finn.”

“You do understand that I was joking about an arranged marriage, right?”

She shifted slightly in her chair and leaned forward, her long dark hair spilling over her shoulders. “It doesn’t matter. I think you two would be good for each other. You both lost a spouse, and you both want someone who loves the Lord. He’s a great guy.”

“If he’s so great, why aren’t you dating him?”

She slouched back in her chair, appearing stumped at the question. “A mutual friend tried to set us up, actually, but I was looking to get out of Alaska, and he’s pretty settled there. Plus, I knew his wife, so it just seemed weird to see him as a romantic interest.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay, that’s understandable, but what makes you think I want to move to Alaska after all the times you told me you desperately wanted to leave the state?”

She shrugged. “It depends on how badly you want to find someone. Don’t misunderstand. Alaska is amazingly beautiful. It’s a great place to live, but I grew up there and I was looking for fresh adventures. Maybe you’re in the

same position and could use a new challenge.”

She wasn't entirely wrong about that. My parents were deceased, and I didn't have anything keeping me in Scottsdale, Arizona. I could move anywhere without entanglements, as long as I could find a job. “Do you have a photo of him?”

She nodded and pulled her phone out of her purse. After scrolling through a bunch of pictures, she stopped at one. “Here's one he sent to our group chat recently.” She handed the phone to me and I studied it closely.

He had dark brown hair and a well-trimmed beard, but it was hard to get a good look at his face because he was staring down at the baby in his arms. I immediately focused on the little one, my lips pressing together, everything in me softening at her adorable smile. Her fingers were in her mouth as was typical for most babies. “She's very cute. Check out those cheeks! They're so pinchable.”

“She *is* really cute,” Jasmine confirmed.

Finn was standing next to a cabin, and in the distance, there was a pond surrounded by a grassy area. Beyond that, tall trees stood in front of a mountain. “Is this where he lives?” I turned the phone so she could see what I was referring to.

“Yep, that's his place. He has an orchard farm.”

“That scenery is stunning. It's so beautiful it almost doesn't look real.”

Jasmine smirked. “You've commented on the baby and the scenery. What about the man? What do you think about him?”

I studied him a little longer, trying to come to a conclusion. “He isn't unattractive, but I wouldn't call him handsome either. He's not looking at the camera, so it's difficult to tell. Do you have another picture?”

I handed the phone to her, and she searched through her photographs for several minutes. She clicked on something and held it up.

It was a group photo with people milling about, but he was standing in the background and it was still hard to make out his face. I sighed and shook my head. “I don't know. He's really different from the type of guys I'm normally attracted to. I prefer the refined, educated type, and I'm not sure I can see myself on an orchard farm in Alaska.”

“He's educated,” she said, sounding slightly offended. “He has a college degree in Horticulture, and he's very well-read. I wouldn't set you up with just anyone.”

“I know, and I'm not trying to come off as a snob. All I'm saying is that

he's different from the type I normally go for." Just as I said that I glanced up to find Jason and his date walking out the door, and a sense of relief swept over me. He was leaving, so I wouldn't have to have an awkward conversation with him.

Jason was the epitome of my type, as he dressed nicely, groomed himself well, and was somewhat of a "pretty boy." He worked out at the gym, but I doubt he'd ever done any actual manual work. He had a nice job at an insurance agency, and he was great at networking. And yet, none of that mattered in the end because when the rubber met the road, we didn't make a solid connection.

If I was choosing all the wrong men, maybe I needed to go with the opposite of my first inclination. It could be a good thing that I wasn't attracted to Finn. These high-emotion relationships that I always ended up in led to heartbreak every time. What if I focused on finding a man who was kind and would treat me well? We might not have the sparks I usually looked for, but look where that had gotten me in the past? I'd had a husband who cheated and a string of men who were all very nice-looking, but something typically went awry in the relationship. The latest, of course, was Jason, who had a lot of room to grow in his walk with God.

Matthew 7:3 came to mind, convicting me. *Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*

What if I was the problem? What if I'd been choosing men for all the wrong reasons? Despite the heartbreak of my first marriage, I desperately wanted to remarry and find the love of my life. And more important than that, I wanted someone I could trust.

I turned to Jasmine with a determination I didn't have before. "I think I've been shallow when it comes to choosing men. If you believe Finn is a good guy, then I'll give him a chance. The only thing I'm worried about..." I hesitated, hoping she could read my mind, but she just stared at me. "What about...you know. My past... What happened after Dereck passed away? Is that something Finn could accept?"

She tensed, her mouth dropping open suddenly. "Right. I almost forgot about that." She glanced down as if pondering the question. "To be honest, I'm not sure, but you should discuss it with him."

I shrugged. "Fair enough. Go ahead and set us up. We can see where it leads."

She smiled brightly, seeming pleased with my decision. "This is going to

be fun.”

Chapter Three

Finn

I woke up early, tossing and turning in bed for several hours, worrying about finding a spouse. The older I got, the harder it would be to find someone. I knew I had to trust the Lord, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to do something if I wanted a wife. Sitting around, hoping she'd fall into my lap, wasn't exactly working. No surprise there.

Sleep evaded me, so I rose and made myself a cup of coffee. The house was quiet except for the sounds of birds outside the window. I picked up my Bible and sat down in my favorite lounge chair to read. I'd been reading a lot of Psalms lately, as they were a huge source of comfort.

I read through Psalm 147 and then came back to verse three. *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.*

I swallowed hard, thinking of all the heartbreak I'd endured over the last few years, and how much I'd had to lean on the Lord to get me through. My parents and Melissa had been there for me, but I longed to reclaim my life. Not that I wasn't living, but I missed that feeling of waking up next to my wife and being in our own little world. I missed planning the future together.

When I got married, everyone stepped back to let us have some privacy, but now that it was only me and Cara, it felt like people were overly involved in my business. They were always helpful so I never complained. But Melissa's bossiness was starting to get to me. She'd even brought over some vegan pamphlets the other day and said I should try it for my health. She'd already started the plan with her own family and hoped to get me on board. While it was nice that she cared, I had to put a stop to that immediately. I loved meat too much to give it up, and it was time to speak up about what I wanted.

Zoey used to handle all the meal planning, but we'd usually been on the same page as far as the kind of food we both liked. Unfortunately, we weren't

always on the same page when it came to other things.

Most people thought we had the perfect marriage, but that was far from the truth. The situation got difficult for a while and she'd even brought up divorce a couple of times. She told me once that we didn't have much of a spark, and that nearly killed me.

I'd asked why she married me if she felt that way, and she'd only shrugged and said I was the safe choice. Initially, I suggested getting marriage counseling, but then she got her cancer diagnosis and we put that on the back burner so we could deal with the bigger issues of her health.

I'd had time to grieve the loss of my wife as well as the loss of a life we'd never had, and my heart filled with yearning for something more. Sucking in a breath, I bowed my head.

Lord, I want to find a wife, but I can't go through that feeling of rejection again. I loved Zoey, but she didn't love me as much as I loved her. Please bring me someone who will love me deeply. I don't feel cut out to be alone, and there's no one in my life that I can picture a future with.

I wanted to say more but my heart wouldn't let me. A single tear slipped out, and I quickly wiped it away. I didn't cry often, but it was too hard to push down my feelings this time.

I didn't know if it was God's will for me to get married again. How many single women would want to sign up for an instant family, especially with a baby and all that entailed? It might just be me and Cara from here on out. The solitude would be hard to bear, but I would never turn my back on my baby girl.

I got up to make breakfast, determined to distract myself from unpleasant thoughts. An hour later, Cara woke up and I bottle-fed her while sitting in the rocking chair. Once Melissa arrived, she took over with Cara and I headed out to do the chores.

I labored in my orchard all day, and the work kept my mind off the feeling of loneliness that lingered. Around four, I came back to the house to take a short break when my phone rang in my bedroom. My caller I.D. said it was Jasmine, which was unusual since we mainly communicated through the group chat and had only spoken over the phone twice. I accepted the call. "Hey, Jasmine. What's up?"

"Finney boy, how are you?" she asked in her husky tone. She used to call me that when she lived out here, and it always annoyed me because it made me sound like a little boy. I'd never told her how I felt since I didn't like to

start trouble, and it wasn't that big of a deal.

"I'm fine. How about you?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm great. I had dinner with a friend a couple of days ago and we got to talking..."

She hesitated for several seconds, and I frowned, not sure where she was going with this. "Okay..."

"She said something that reminded me of you, so I thought I'd call you." More silence.

I shifted, glancing around my bedroom. This felt awkward. "Uh...what did she say?"

"That she was tired of choosing all the wrong men and wouldn't mind a set-up of sorts. You know...an arranged marriage." She emphasized arranged marriage as if that would mean anything to me. "You kind of said the same thing in our group chat. Remember?" She sounded a little flustered, but I could tell she was leading up to something.

"Uh...yeah, I said it as a joke. I wasn't serious."

"I'm aware of that, but it had to be on your mind for you to even say it. My friend's name is Annie Davenport, by the way, and she's a wonderful Christian woman. I showed her that picture of you and the baby that you sent to the group chat, and she thought Cara was so adorable. Anyway, Annie is beautiful and smart, and to be honest, she's probably a little out of your league, but that shouldn't—"

"Hold on a second. She lives out in Arizona with you?"

"Yes, well, we don't live together, but we go to the same church."

"I don't see how that's workable unless she's willing to move to Alaska. I can't leave my farm. It's my livelihood..."

"Oh, I know that," she said. "We already discussed it, and she's not opposed to moving if something were to work out between you two. You have a lot in common. Her husband passed away seven years ago, so I'm sure you both can relate on some level." She paused. "I hope that wasn't insensitive of me to say."

I swiped a hand through my hair. People always worried that bringing up Zoey would upset me, but I was past the initial stages of grief, and it didn't bother me anymore. "No, not at all."

"Good. That's a relief. So...back to Annie. She's a nanny, she loves kids, and did I mention that she's beautiful?"

I didn't answer because I wasn't sure what to make of this. The woman

that Natalie tried to set me up with—Jasmine—was now trying to set me up with someone else. “Why are you doing this, Jasmine? I’m a little confused.”

“Because you’re a great guy, and Annie is a wonderful lady. Something might come of it. And I’d like to see you happy. You deserve it.”

“But I am happy.” That was generally true, as I found my contentment in Christ, but not everything in my world was to my satisfaction.

“What are you telling me, Finn? Are you saying you don’t want the chance to get to know her?”

I blinked, realizing how foolish I was for hesitating. Hadn’t I just prayed about finding a wife this morning? “No, I’m not saying that at all. We can talk and see how things go from there.”

“Great! I’ll email you her picture. She said you can text or email her. I’ll send you all the details.”

Once we ended the call, I immediately turned on my computer, a sense of hope filling me when I saw a new email from Jasmine. I clicked on it and scrolled down, seeing an attached picture.

My heart did a nose dive into my stomach the second I laid eyes on it. Jasmine wasn’t kidding when she’d said Annie was out of my league. She was strikingly beautiful. She had straight, fire-engine red hair that fell a little past her shoulders, smooth creamy skin, and eyes that looked almost gray. Yeah, I was definitely interested.

I bit my lip and reined myself in after a few moments had passed. Looks weren’t everything. If I got married again, I wanted a wife who loved the Lord and who had a genuine, sweet personality. Beauty would eventually fade, and it was the person inside that would matter the most. Plus, there was no telling if Annie would think much of an orchard farmer in Alaska.

I wasn’t ugly. Most folks I knew said I was fairly good-looking, but those comments came from people who already cared about me. If you asked my mom, she’d say I was the most handsome man in Alaska, but that was my mom. She had to say stuff like that. But what would Annie think? She could probably get anyone she wanted. The whole thing made me a little suspicious, but I wasn’t about to back out of the opportunity.

I found Annie’s contact information and wrote her a quick email.

Hey, Annie, this is Finn. Jasmine sent me your info and said you might be interested in chatting. To be honest, I’m not sure what to say, but I live on an orchard farm in Alaska. I think Jasmine probably told you that, but I’ll share it again in case she didn’t. I have a six-month-old baby named Cara, and

she's the center of my world. She's the sweetest baby with the most wonderful disposition. I adopted her when my friends Josh and Vicky passed away. Also, I've been married before. My wife, Zoey, tragically died two years ago. It was difficult, but I'm ready to move on and meet new people.

I paused, not sure what else to say. I hated writing about myself and didn't know what details to include. It felt uncomfortable, but I had to at least try.

So, anyway, feel free to ask me anything. I do have a question for you. Jasmine mentioned you're a nanny. How many kids do you take care of and how do you like it?

I reread what I'd written and almost deleted everything because it sounded stilted and boring. But since I couldn't think of how to make it better, and I wasn't the greatest writer, I left it alone and hit send.

I returned to the orchard to work, but I was fidgety the rest of the day. What if she didn't want to communicate with me, and Jasmine was pushing her into it? I had known Jasmine to be a little pushy when she believed she was right. It was odd that she'd latched on to my one statement about an arranged marriage—something that had clearly been a joke—and she thought she could play matchmaker. I pushed it out of my mind and decided not to think about it. Annie probably wouldn't get back to me soon, anyway.

But when I turned in that evening, I headed straight to my room to check my email...just in case. To my surprise, a new message sat in my inbox from Annie. I clicked on it and started reading.

Hi Finn, thanks for your email. It looks like Jasmine thinks we might have a few things in common, so I'm interested to get to know you better to see if that's true. To start off, I have a few questions for you. What kind of woman are you looking for? Do you expect your wife to work in your orchard with you, or are you content with her having other priorities? Could you describe the chores you do? Do you need someone to help you with that? Also, I forgot to ask Jasmine if you live off the grid, and I'm going to be straightforward with you here... I'm not sure I can picture myself in that kind of situation. Please don't think I'm negative. I'm only trying to be realistic, and we should probably get that subject out of the way before we move on.

To answer your question, I take care of three kids ages five, three, and nine months. Their names are Tyler, Peyton, and Baby Eliza. It's a lot of work but I love every second of it. I started with this family a year ago, while my employer Jannette was pregnant with Eliza. Jasmine told me you adopted

a baby named Cara. How are you handling that with a job? Do they have a daycare near where you live? Or do you have someone to help you?

I knew I should wait a little before responding so I wouldn't come off as desperate, but I found myself preparing to reply, anyway.

Hey Annie, thanks for getting back to me. To answer your questions, I wouldn't expect my future wife to do any of the outdoor chores or work in my orchard. I'm fully capable of taking care of those things on my own, and I have hired help as well. But I wouldn't have a problem allowing her to assist if she so desired. Hopefully, that puts your mind at ease. And one other thing, I don't live off the grid. I have the best of both worlds in that I live on a plot of land with some of the most amazing scenery in the area, but I'm also pretty close to town, which means I have electricity, plumbing, and satellite television. My home is bigger than the typical off-the-grid landowner. It's not huge, but seventeen hundred square feet is enough for my needs, and there's room to add on if necessary. You asked how I take care of the baby while I'm working. My family lives nearby, and my sister, Melissa, stepped up to help me right away. She comes to my home five days a week and my mom steps in if Melissa has somewhere else she needs to be, which isn't very often. Since I work on my property, I'm able to check in with her throughout the day. That's amazing that you are a nanny for three kids, and one is a baby. You've been caring for that baby her whole life, it seems. You must have a heart for children.

I hit send and got up to go check on Cara. Melissa was snuggling with her while sitting on the couch, watching a show I'd seen her watch many times before about contestants in a bake-off. While she was involved in that, I headed to the kitchen to prepare Cara's bottles and then returned a few minutes later. I plopped down next to Melissa and reached out to take Cara.

She smiled but didn't make a move to hand her over, which seemed to be her typical response lately. She bounced Cara in her lap and addressed her as if I weren't there. "We don't want to go to Daddy, do we, little one? Not when we're so happy in Auntie Melissa's arms. We could stay here all day, couldn't we?" Cara smiled at the baby talk, though she cognitively couldn't understand what Melissa was saying. Melissa held Cara even tighter and pressed her face against Cara's cheek. "I love you, sweetheart. Wish I never had to let you go."

I respectfully waited a few more seconds before I reached for her again, this time more assertively. "Thanks, I'll take her off your hands so I can feed

her.”

Melissa sat up straight and put her fists on her hips. “Oh, I could’ve done that for you. Maybe you’d like to rest a few minutes before I have to go.”

I shook my head. “Nope. I’m good. Thanks for your help. Don’t know what I’d do without you.” I gave her a warm smile, trying my best to convey how much I appreciated her.

She smiled as well and then patted me on the arm. “I’m happy to be here for you, bro.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about for a while now. I’d like to hire someone else to assist so you don’t have to be here all week. You’ve got your own family to attend to, and I feel bad hogging so much of your time. You’ve been a lifesaver, but I’m sure you’d like to be at your own home more often.”

She cocked her head to the side and smiled. “That’s very thoughtful of you to think about my needs, but the system we’ve been following seems effective. The kids love their summer activities program, and Carter has no problem picking them up when he gets off work. And in the fall, they’ll attend the after-school program. I get home just in time to start dinner. It’s a win-win all around.”

As much as I loved and appreciated Melissa, I needed space from her, but I didn’t know how to tell her that without hurting her feelings. I had hoped she would want time apart as well, given the needs of her own family, but she seemed content to keep things as they were. I’d just leave it for now...

“Okay, if that’s how you feel...”

“Yep, no need to get another babysitter. This baby is mine.” She leaned forward and kissed Cara on the cheek, and a wave of uneasiness washed over me.

“She’s my kid, but I’m happy to share.” I gave her a big smile to let her know I wasn’t getting territorial, even though I absolutely was. It bugged me when she made comments like that.

I must have hidden my mood pretty well because she didn’t seem to notice the tension in the room. “Maybe when she gets a little older,” she said, “you’ll let me take her home. She could even stay the night sometimes.”

It wasn’t an unreasonable thing to ask, but I sensed her moving in, taking an inch anywhere she could. If I didn’t watch out, she’d move Cara into her home and claim her as her own.

“We can discuss that in a few years, but in the meantime, I’m hoping to

get married at some point, and I won't need your help anymore."

She laughed and glanced at me over her shoulder as she stood and headed for the door. "It'll be challenging to find someone, given the limited number of single ladies at our church."

Why was that funny to her? "Actually, I just started talking to a woman named Annie. It's brand new. So new that I don't know if anything will come of it, but I'm hopeful. I prayed God would open the door for a new relationship, and I'm excited to see what He does."

The corners of her mouth turned down slightly as she considered that. "Who is she?"

"Jasmine called today and said she had someone she wanted to set me up with. She lives out in Arizona, but she's interested in talking. We've already exchanged a couple of emails."

"Oh, honey." She gave me a pitying smile. "You made it sound like you have a real prospect. What you've got is a pen pal."

I could feel myself deflating. "Yeah, you're probably right, but we'll see how it goes."

"Is that the same Jasmine Natalie tried to set you up with?"

I nodded.

"Jasmine would have been perfect for you if she'd been willing to stick around."

"Not really. We had a platonic friendship, and that's it."

"Well, don't go getting your hopes up about this new woman. Keep it realistic. She's unlikely to move to Alaska, and you don't need another heartbreak after all you've been through."

Once she left, I shook off her negative advice. Regardless of what she'd said, God could do anything, and I believed that with all my heart.

Chapter Four

Annie

I sat down at the table with my laptop open, feeling underwhelmed. Finn and I had been exchanging emails back and forth for the last two weeks, and while he seemed like a nice guy, it hadn't been exciting, per se. It was more of an exchange of information. We each asked questions, but it wasn't moving us forward. Knowing facts about a person didn't tell you whether or not you had chemistry, or more importantly, who that person truly was.

Usually, when I met someone new, I was able to gauge how I felt by getting a sense of their personality, and that could only happen in person. A man's behavior, the tone of his voice, and the way he responded to me all played a role in determining whether I had sufficient interest to continue.

Since Finn lived out of state, we couldn't have a face-to-face conversation quite yet, so I had to be more patient with the process than I normally would be.

I had to continually remind myself that I planned on treating this situation differently. Instead of looking for a spark, I needed to accept that not all relationships had to be full of passion and excitement. Some of the best marriages were built on mutual affection and respect. Plus, I kept choosing all the wrong men, and I wanted to let someone else choose for me this time. Jasmine thought Finn was great, so I was trying to give it a longer chance.

I was tired of broken relationships. I just wanted a man who would always be there for me and would never let me down. In fact, I didn't want to experience heartbreak like I had with Dereck. That kind of relationship had nearly killed me.

After he died and I found out he'd been having an affair, I went into a deep depression. I held onto his things for a while, but I eventually decided to clear out some of his stuff and give it to charity, as seeing his clothes and belongings had only made the loss that much worse. They were a constant

reminder that the man I thought I knew was gone forever, and I would never be able to ask him why he betrayed me.

In the process of moving all the boxes with his stuff, I hurt my back, and going to chiropractors didn't seem to help. I finally saw a doctor who said I had a pinched nerve that was contributing to the severe pain I'd been having. He recommended surgery, so I went through with it. I was on some heavy-duty meds afterward, and I got addicted. The doctor eventually cut me off, but I found some underground sources that provided what I needed as long as I was willing to pay.

It was bad. One of the worst things I'd ever dealt with, to be honest. The grief from the loss of my husband and the way it all ended brought me to despair. The only good that came out of that situation was that I found Christ and He changed my life. I had to hit rock bottom before I could recognize my need for a Savior. I started reading the gospel of John, and John 20:31 stuck out to me. *But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Once I put my faith in Christ, my whole life changed, and I gave up the drugs and left my past behind. Not everything was automatic or easy, but the Lord helped me every step of the way.

An incoming video call came through my laptop, bringing me out of my thoughts. Finn and I had agreed to video chat for the first time at eight o'clock. I was two hours ahead, so it was six in the evening for him. For a moment, the pressure started to get to me and I considered not accepting the call and giving Finn an excuse later.

Did I want to go through with this? What if it was a waste, and we didn't have much of a connection? Why had I listened to Jasmine? Wouldn't it have been better to try to meet someone who at least lived in the same state?

My pulse raced as I tried to figure out what to do. I stared at the screen, unsure of my next move. I desperately wanted to get married and have that stability, but was it worth putting myself through this? The ringing stopped after nearly thirty seconds, and my heart dropped in disappointment. My head fell forward, and I brushed my fingers over the length of my hair. Ugh! I really hated being single. Even worse, I hated the search for a potential husband and the hurdles I would have to jump over. Dereck and I had known each other in high school, and everything had fallen together so easily. But this... This was torture.

I was about to leave when the ringing started again. The poor guy was

still trying to reach me, and shame washed over me because I was acting like a coward. It wasn't that I was afraid to talk to a stranger. I'd done it before. The real fear was that I would push myself into a relationship I wasn't excited about.

A sense of dread filled me. How could he be the one when I was this uncomfortable? Wasn't everything supposed to fall into place more easily than this?

After the fifth or sixth ring, I felt myself giving in, figuring I should keep my word. I'd told him I would be available to talk this evening, so I shouldn't flake out. I would get through this conversation, and then I would let him know we weren't a good fit. It would disappoint Jasmine, of course, but she wasn't the one who had to marry the guy.

I hit the accept button and a video chat opened. Finn's face filled the screen and for a moment, I was confused, wondering if the wrong man had called. The man staring back at me was quite handsome. In fact, he was way more handsome than I had expected. He was looking down at his baby in the picture Jasmine showed me, but now he was staring straight ahead, and that photo hadn't done him justice. The first thing that struck me was his eyes because I couldn't figure out the color. They appeared brown, but it was almost as if someone held a light behind them, making them seem greenish-gold as well. I'd never seen hazel irises like his before.

Long lashes framed those eyes, and he tilted his head back slightly as he took me in. My stomach fluttered and twisted at his intense gaze.

After several seconds passed, I cleared my throat. "Hi, Finn. It's a pleasure to talk with you finally."

He blinked as if thrown off guard by my voice. "Hey. Sorry, I hope I didn't get you at a bad time. I wasn't trying to bug you. I just wasn't sure if the first call went through." There was a boldness to his tone that caught me by surprise. He was sure of himself even while unsure.

"Oh, no. You're not bothering me. Sorry about that. I was starting to get cold feet, but we agreed to talk, so..."

His lips tipped up at the corners as if he found my admission humorous. He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. "I understand the cold feet part. You'll have to forgive me. I'm not very good at this sort of thing. It feels awkward, but hopefully, it'll get easier the more we talk." His voice was so masculine, so deep and comforting.

"I agree. The initial stages of meeting someone new are always

challenging.” My voice wavered slightly, which surprised me. While I could agree that it was uncomfortable, I was hardly ever nervous, mainly because the beginning of a new relationship was the easy part for me. Men usually took well to my appearance and confidence. It was only when they found out about my past that they went running for the hills.

It would be wise to tell Finn upfront about my drug history. I would have to figure out a way to work it into the conversation.

“Do you mind if we take a moment to pray?” he asked.

My head jerked back a little and my eyes widened in surprise. No one had ever started a conversation like that with me before, and I wasn’t sure what to make of it. “Um...okay.”

He closed his eyes and inhaled a breath through his nose as if praying was as easy as breathing. “Lord, you know exactly what you want to do here, even if we don’t have the slightest clue. Please guide our conversation and be with us as we talk. Take away our nervousness and help us to relax in each other’s company. Give us wisdom as we navigate this situation. Amen.”

“Amen.” I wouldn’t admit that I watched him the entire time instead of closing my eyes. I was following along with the prayer, but I couldn’t stop looking at him. There were two opposing forces at work here. He seemed a little nervous, but he exuded confidence as well. Or maybe it was an inner peace. It was hard to tell over a video call.

We talked about our jobs and our free time, which we both admitted we didn’t have a lot of. He told me more about Cara and how shocked he’d been when his friends Josh and Vicky passed away. He hadn’t been ready to take on a baby initially, but he wouldn’t turn his back on her either. I couldn’t help but admire him for having such strong convictions and taking on that kind of responsibility. He could have easily bowed out, but he chose sacrifice over convenience. None of the men in my life would have done the same thing, and it made Finn stand out. Jasmine had shared that he’d adopted, but I hadn’t known all the details, and hearing him share the early days of diapers and bottle formula and figuring out a feeding schedule... It warmed my heart. I could tell by the way his eyes lit up that he truly loved her and had no regrets.

He cleared his throat expectantly. “So, there’s one thing that’s been on my mind. I purposefully didn’t ask how you came to Christ while we were emailing because I wanted to talk in person, or at least over the phone. Do you mind sharing that with me? Or would you prefer that I share my

testimony first?”

Pressure clamped down on my chest and a thread of panic wove its way through my throat. “You go first.” My face heated because I sounded like I had a frog stuck in my vocal cords, which hardly ever happened to me.

My testimony involved my drug history, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to bring that up at the beginning of our conversation. In a moment of uncertainty, I’d been so certain that he wasn’t the one for me before the call started, but now that I had the opportunity to see him and hear his voice, I wanted to give this more of a chance. I also liked that he’d begun with prayer. It showed he had some leadership ability in the spiritual domain. Jason, the last guy I dated, had never prayed with me, not even before meals.

“Not a problem. I don’t mind going first.” Finn began to share how his parents were both Christians and they’d raised him in the church, but he never truly understood that going to church didn’t make him a Christian until he reached his freshman year of high school. He spoke for at least ten minutes, giving me the rundown of his family dynamics. His mom and dad were solid Christians, but they hadn’t known how to get through to him. “God got a hold of my heart at a Christian camp and I was confronted with my sin and my need for a Savior. I’d always thought that because my parents believed in Jesus, that meant I did as well, but I learned that I had to have a personal relationship with him. On the last night of the camp, the speaker turned to Colossians 2:14, and he quoted the verse, *“by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”* He paused. “He described it like this... Imagine if God recorded all your sins into a spreadsheet and held them against you. When you believe in Christ, He takes a certificate of debt that encompasses your entire life, and He nails it to the cross. No more debt. No more shame. All because you put your faith in Jesus and decided to follow him. He wipes it all away, providing complete forgiveness.” He let that sink in before continuing. “That was the message that got me, and my life changed that night. I turned from my sin and I started serving Jesus.”

“That’s a beautiful testimony,” I said, blinking back a tear. The way he’d spoken of that certificate of debt made goosebumps break out on my arms, maybe because it seemed as if my debt was so much bigger than everyone else’s.

“What about you? How did you come to the Lord?” he asked.

I wanted to tell him the truth. I really did. But for the first time in my life,

I felt like I was the one who needed to prove myself, not the other way around. I longed for his approval, even though I didn't feel like he was judging me. The lack of enthusiasm I'd felt before the call had completely vanished, replaced with a yearning I couldn't fully understand.

Perhaps that was why I was hesitant to talk about my history. I wasn't ready. I just couldn't discuss it now. It would have to wait.

As he looked at me with a smile in his eyes, waiting for me to share, I knew I couldn't avoid the subject completely. "Well, I was married for several years. We met in high school as well, so I know what you mean about how much easier it seemed back then. Anyway, he died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm. We were both so young, so it came as a terrible shock. Not more than a day after he passed away, a mutual friend of ours contacted me and confessed they were having an affair."

Finn drew in a quick breath, and his eyebrows furrowed. "Oh, wow. Jasmine didn't tell me that part. That must have been devastating."

"It was. The hurt and the anger festered for so long after that, and I was broken inside, like a shattered vase with a million pieces all over the floor. You might glue a couple of cracks together, but you can't fix it. That's how I felt, and I stopped caring about my future. I went into a deep depression. Long story short, after that, I started having back pain and that led to getting surgery." I hesitated for several moments, not wanting to explain the rest. Finn waited patiently, seeming to understand that this was hard for me to talk about. My heart began to pound against my ribs and I couldn't get the words out. "There are some details that I'm not ready to share with you yet, but I can sum it up by telling you that I went through a very dark period and that's when God got ahold of me. One day I was at an outdoor shopping center and someone handed me a tract. I read it when I arrived home, and I broke down in tears because I knew I needed God's help. I prayed and told Jesus that if he changed me...truly changed me...I would serve him forever. After that, I had an amazing sense of peace that I'd never felt before. I'd driven past this one church many times, so I decided to check it out." I glanced away, knowing I'd left out a big part of the story, but it would have to wait.

Finn's eyes filled with compassion. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Annie. It's amazing to see how God works in people's lives. I appreciate you being open with me, and I understand not wanting to share all the details yet. We have time."

A tear slipped out before I could stop it, and I hastily wiped it away.

“Thanks for understanding.”

We talked about other things after that, and I was relieved when he shared a funny story about Cara throwing up all over him. I laughed so hard that my side hurt, and it felt good to release some of the tension that had built up when he asked about my testimony.

Glancing at the clock, I realized it was ten p.m., and I needed to go to bed. “I hate to end the call, but I have to get up early tomorrow. I enjoyed talking with you, Finn and I have to be honest with you...” Hesitating, I knew I was about to say something that may or may not be reciprocated, but I was ready to take that chance.

Finn stared at me, a slight wrinkle forming on his forehead. “Yeah?”

“I enjoyed talking with you, and I want to continue this...if you feel the same way.”

He broke out into a wide smile, relief showing on his features. “I expected you to say this wasn’t going to work out.”

“No! It’s the opposite.” I laughed. “I had a great time talking with you.”

He sat up straighter, his confidence lifting. “Maybe it’s too soon to bring this up, but I’d like to fly out to Arizona to meet you in person. If it’s too early to make these kinds of plans, please tell me.”

“It’s not too early at all. I would love that.”

He nodded once with a smile. “Great. I’ll look into some flights and get back to you. We can talk more and figure out the best time for me to come.”

After we’d ended the call and I’d gotten ready for bed, I lay there with my head against my pillow, dreaming of what it would be like to see Finn Mercer in person.

Chapter Five

Finn

I waved at Melissa as she drove out of my long driveway with my daughter in the backseat. It was a beautiful May morning, and I was flying out to Arizona to meet Annie. Melissa had finally gotten her wish to take Cara home with her. It was a Friday, so it would give me a chance to spend some time with Annie this evening and all day tomorrow. On Sunday, I would head back to my place. It would be a brief visit, but I figured that was the wisest thing, considering it was the first instance I'd ever left Cara. Even though she was in Melissa's capable hands, the separation was going to be difficult...for me, at least.

And I could tell Melissa had been over the moon when faced with the opportunity of taking Cara for two complete nights. Although, there had been a lingering something...

I sensed she disapproved of my decision to meet a woman in another state, but she was holding back her opinion for now. Still, she'd made a couple of dismissive statements that she could have kept to herself.

Don't get your hopes up. Setups like these rarely work out.

That had been the first thing she'd said, and I hadn't minded too much because she was right. I did have to watch that my expectations didn't exceed reality. But it was her next statement that annoyed me.

To be honest, I think it's too soon to start a new relationship, but I know you're going to do whatever you want.

She was the only one who thought that because everyone, including our parents, had been encouraging me to move forward. It wasn't up to her, though, so I ignored it and moved on.

When my friend Wesley showed up to drive me to the ANC airport in Anchorage, I hauled my black duffel bag into the backseat of his gray jeep, and we were off. It was about forty-three miles away, so we had some time to

talk.

Once on the road, he glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “I’m praying for you, bro. I know you’re taking a big leap here, but I hope it works out with Annie.”

“Thanks, man. I have a good feeling about it, but we’ll have to see how the first meeting goes. She might take one glance at me and say, ‘This guy ain’t worth movin’ halfway across the country for.’”

He belted out a laugh. “That sure is one possibility. Considering how pretty she is in that photo you showed me, she doesn’t have to look out of state if she doesn’t want to. That said, we can pray, and I’m definitely rooting for you.”

“I appreciate it. Maybe it’s not good to be this hopeful, but I can picture it all happening; her flying out here, I mean. We’ve been video chatting every day for the last few weeks and it feels like we’ve got something special.

He cleared his throat. “One positive thing you have going for you is your family. They’ve always been there for you, and I’m sure they’ll step up to the plate and welcome her into the fold, just as they did with Zoey.” He grew quiet and rubbed the side of his jaw. “Sorry, maybe I shouldn’t have brought her up.”

“No, it’s fine. Doesn’t bother me anymore.” Wesley was one of the few who knew about the marital issues Zoey and I’d had, as we’d talked about it at length after she passed away.

“I hope I’m not stepping over the line by saying this,” he said, “but I’d like to encourage you to make sure Annie has the same level of attraction for you that you have for her. After what you went through with Zoey toward the end... I just don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

He had a point. It was an uncomfortable subject, but Zoey had said some hurtful things to me during our marriage. I tried to focus on the good memories and not dwell on the other stuff. Even so, I didn’t want a repeat of the same problems in my next relationship. “I hear you.”

“I’m only bringing it up because I care. You’re a great guy, and I want you to be with someone who recognizes that.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

The rest of the day went by slowly after that. Thankfully, I got to the airport without any problems, but sitting on that plane for hours on end in those small seats with barely any legroom wasn’t fun. I tried to watch a movie on the screen attached to the backside of the seat in front of me, but I

was so excited about meeting Annie that I couldn't concentrate. I finally gave up and rested my head back against the cushion, praying that God would make this short trip worthwhile.

When we touched down at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport, my heart rate picked up in anticipation. Everyone stood to get their carry-on luggage, and I lifted my duffel bag out of the overhead compartment and threw the long strap over my shoulder. I should have been nervous, but a settled calm had come over me, and it was evidence that God was answering prayer and sustaining me on this journey.

I walked through the air bridge to the terminal and immediately saw two familiar faces staring at me. Jasmine waved, and I waved back. But once my gaze found Annie, I couldn't stop looking at her.

She stood there, hands clasped in front of her, gazing at me just like I was gazing at her, long cherry-red hair falling below her shoulders, porcelain skin as smooth as a bowl of whipped cream, eyes lit up in anticipation, and a huge grin turning up the sides of her mouth. She wore a purple blouse with some kind of ruffle at the collar. Dark blue jeans revealed her slender figure and bright red ankle boots showed off her sense of style.

She took my breath away.

I strode in her direction and stopped in front of her, uncertain of what to do. I wanted to hug her, but wasn't sure if she felt comfortable enough for that. Our gazes met and held for several seconds. I found myself pulled into the depths of those gray eyes, framed by long lashes. "Annie." Saying her name made it finally feel real. Five weeks of communicating through email, text, and video chat culminated in this one moment. "You're not a figment of my imagination."

She laughed but didn't say anything at first...just stared at me, her eyes sweeping over me as if taking me in. When she eventually spoke, it wasn't what I expected. "You're so much better looking in person." She blinked. "I thought you were handsome when I saw you over video chat, but..."

Jasmine snickered as if she'd said the funniest thing in the world, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from Annie to acknowledge the laugh. "But what?" I asked.

"You're just better in person, that's all. You have...presence. Sorry, if I'm not making much sense. I'm a little nervous." She held up her hand to show that it trembled slightly, and her willingness to reveal her vulnerability brought out a protective side in me.

Instinctively, I took her hand and rubbed it between my own, warming her cold skin. I held it for a few more moments and then let go. “No need to be anxious. I won’t bite.”

A shy smile curved her lips upward. “Good to know.”

Jasmine shoved my arm to get my attention, and I glanced over at her. “Hey, friend,” I said. “Thanks for coming with Annie.”

“Of course! It’s great to see you.”

She reached out to hug me, so I pulled her into a quick embrace. When I drew back, she stared at me, her eyebrows creasing slightly. “You look different.”

I shrugged. “I’ve got the same haircut. Same beard. I trimmed it before I left but—”

“No, that’s not it.” She frowned as if trying to figure out what had changed. “I don’t know. There’s just something...new.”

I shrugged again. “Beats me, but let’s get out of here. I could barely eat that food on the plane and I’m starved.”

Since I already had my carry-on bag and had brought nothing else, we didn’t need to go to the baggage claim. We headed out to the parking lot and Jasmine chattered the whole time about their drive from Scottsdale and all the traffic they encountered, while Annie and I kept sneaking peeks at each other. As we walked, I caught a whiff of vanilla wafting off that luxurious hair of hers, and my stomach twisted in ways it hadn’t in years.

The sensation was exhilarating but scary at the same time. I would have to do whatever it took not to mess up this opportunity.

Chapter Six

Annie

After Jasmine and I took Finn to his hotel to check in, the plan was for the three of us to go out to eat. Earlier, when we drove to the airport to pick up Finn, I'd asked Jasmine to be a buffer and have dinner with us since she already knew Finn. She'd protested, saying it wasn't necessary, but she gave in after I'd begged a few times.

But now that we were heading to the restaurant, I regretted that decision because I wanted his full attention. Maybe that was selfish, considering they were friends and would want to catch up, but we wouldn't have much time together, and the awkwardness of our initial meeting had already faded.

Meeting someone in person was a completely different experience than looking at a picture, or even talking over video chat. Finn was taller and broader than I'd realized. Believe it or not, we'd never discussed height or weight, so all of that was a surprise. He had to be at least six feet, two inches tall, and his shoulders were rock solid. Maybe that was to be expected since he worked outdoors for a living.

His masculine energy made my pulse rise every time he spoke. He had a deep, booming voice, and there was a confidence about him, coupled with a settled calm, an inner peace that radiated from his very being. It was too early to call it charisma, and I wasn't even sure that I would describe it as that. I didn't get the feeling he was an extrovert, but there was something I couldn't quite put my finger on that stood out. He appealed to me, and I was looking forward to getting to know him better.

At some point, I needed to explain my past with painkillers, but I wanted to make sure it was the right time. It was a slippery slope. Tell him too soon and I might scare him off. Tell him too late and he might feel like I hid it from him.

We discussed where to eat once we left the hotel and ended up agreeing

on a barbeque place not too far away. Even though I had initially regretted asking Jasmine to hang out with us, it turned out to be a good decision after all because she brought up things about Alaska I wouldn't have thought to ask.

She and I sat on one side of the table while Finn faced us from the other side. I leaned back in my chair and took in his dark brown hair brushed over his forehead, his firm jaw and full lips, and a rust brown polo shirt stretching across his chest with a zipper partway down from the collar.

I glanced over to find Jasmine watching him with a curious look on her face, almost as if she were seeing him for the first time. "Finney boy, you've buffed up since I saw you last. Have you been working out?"

If she hadn't already told me she and Finn were strictly platonic friends, I would've gotten jealous by the way she was looking at him. In truth, I probably did feel a spark of jealousy, even if it was unwarranted.

"Maybe a little," he said, smiling slightly. He turned to me. "Did you have any problems getting off work? I know Drew and Jannette like to keep you waiting sometimes."

I laughed. We'd already discussed that my employers were often late. "I told Jannette that I needed the day off if she didn't think she could make it back in time. She promised she'd return home early, and she did, thankfully."

"That's good."

"Yeah, I made it clear it was important."

We continued to talk about my job and around ten minutes later, our waitress brought our meals to the table. The amazing smells caused my stomach to growl loudly, and I blushed, placing a hand over my abdomen.

Jasmine giggled. "Someone's hungry."

"Let's get some food in this woman," Finn said playfully. Just then, his stomach growled as well, and we both laughed.

I'd ordered a chicken sandwich with fries, Jasmine had soup and salad, and Finn had a big plate of barbeque ribs with mashed potatoes and green beans. We all dug in, and Jasmine and I talked about recent events at our church. We'd both been helping in the nursery in the evenings since there had been a conference and a few helpers had been out sick.

"You must really love babies," Finn said, "considering you take care of one during the day and then help out with the nursery every Sunday."

"It's every other week, but yeah, what's not to love about a cute, cuddly baby? I can never get enough."

He placed his muscular forearms on the table and leaned forward. “Does that mean you’d like to have kids of your own?”

Surprisingly, we hadn’t discussed that topic yet, and I wasn’t prepared. “Oh...um.” I bit into my chicken sandwich, needing a few moments to think about how to word this. I chewed and held up a finger while Finn and Jasmine watched me patiently. Jasmine already knew the answer to this, but she waited quietly for me to speak up on my own. After swallowing my food, I gulped water. “Yeah, I’d love kids.”

Finn nodded and broke out into a wide smile. “I figured as much.”

“But maybe you should tell him,” Jasmine said with a concerned look on her face.

A spark of irritation swept through me because I didn’t need her to remind me. I was about to share before she spoke up, and now it appeared like I was holding back. “I was just about to.”

Finn glanced between the two of us uncertainly. “Tell me what?”

“She might not be able to have kids,” Jasmine said nonchalantly before taking a sip of water.

My face heated, and I side-kicked her under the table. She hadn’t worded that correctly. “That’s not completely true. The doctor checked me out and there’s nothing wrong with me. It’s just that Dereck and I were married for three years and we never conceived. We used protection most of the time, but I told him I wanted to have a baby. We tried for a year, up until he passed away. It never happened, obviously.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s not uncommon. Zoey and I had a bit of trouble as well, although I found out toward the end that she was still on birth control. That was before she was given a diagnosis.”

“I never knew that,” Jasmine said.

“Well, it’s not like we disclosed it to everyone. And when we found out she had cancer, I was relieved she hadn’t gotten pregnant because that would have made the situation that much more complicated.”

I paused between bites. “I’m sorry you both had to go through that. It must have been very hard.”

“Thanks. God is sovereign, and she’s in heaven with him now, so I take comfort in that.”

“You and Zoey had the most amazing relationship,” Jasmine said, smiling. “She was one of the nicest people I knew. Everyone loved her.”

Finn got really quiet, and I wondered if talking about his late wife was

bringing up old memories and feelings. He'd confessed during a video chat that he hadn't dated anyone since she died. Concern washed through me at the thought. What if he wasn't ready to move on? We'd have to talk about it more, but not while Jasmine was here. I cleared my throat, needing to change the subject. "Would you—"

"Zoey was one of those people who never forgot a name," Jasmine continued. "She walked right up to me the first day I visited Mountain Ridge Church and introduced herself. It took me a few times to remember her name, but she didn't forget mine."

There was a moment of silence, and then Finn cleared his throat. "She was good at greeting people. What were you about to say, Annie?"

"It was nothing. I was going to ask what you'd like to do after we eat dinner. If you're tired, we can take you back to your hotel and meet up with you tomorrow morning. Or if you're in the mood, we can walk around at the mall after we finish here. It's up to you."

"Oh, he's definitely coming with us to the mall," Jasmine chirped. "Aren't you, Finney boy?"

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, trying to figure out what her deal was. I'd had to convince her to join us at dinner and now she was inviting herself to the outing at the mall? She'd been very clear that she wasn't interested in him, so it had to be that she was enjoying herself and not thinking.

"Of course I want to go. I didn't travel all the way out here just to lie around in my hotel room all evening, especially when there's a beautiful woman right in front of me."

Our gazes locked and a thrill shot straight through to my stomach.

"Two beautiful women," Jasmine interjected.

"Of course. Forgive me," he said, laughing. "Two very beautiful women."

After we finished eating, Finn excused himself to the restroom, and Jasmine placed a hand on my arm. "I am so sorry for saying you couldn't have kids. That was not my place, and I didn't think before I spoke."

I winced. "Yeah, that was a bit uncomfortable, but it's over now. I'm sure you didn't mean to speak for me."

"You won't mind if I tag along with you guys at the mall, will you? Going home so early on a Friday night doesn't appeal to me, and I can be your buffer."

"Actually, we don't need a buffer anymore."

She was quiet for several moments. “It’s just...seeing Finn makes me homesick, and it would be nice to hang out a little longer.”

“Oh, that's understandable. Yeah, it’s fine if you come, I guess.”

“You don’t look too excited at the thought of a third wheel,” she said. “I get it. I would feel the same way if I were in your position.”

“I would prefer this not to be awkward. If you want to join us, I’m fine with you being there.” And I meant it. Jasmine was the one who had set this whole thing in motion, and I certainly wouldn’t exclude her.

“Good. Thank you. I appreciate that.” She smiled and glanced away.

Finn returned a few minutes later, and he paid the bill. When we all rose to leave, Jasmine linked arms with him and started talking to him in a hushed tone. They walked in front of me, and a strange feeling washed through me. I wondered yet again if she had feelings for him she hadn’t told me about. I was definitely detecting something on her end. As for Finn, I couldn’t tell where he stood.

Once we exited the restaurant, I gave Finn my keys and asked if he would get the car and pick us up in front. I needed a few moments alone with Jasmine to settle a few things. Finn graciously agreed and promised to return in a few minutes.

I turned to Jasmine, feeling an uneasiness in my spirit. “If I ask you a question, will you be honest with me?”

She paled and nodded slightly, staring at the ground. “Okay...”

“Do you have feelings for Finn?”

Her head jerked up suddenly as if my question surprised her. “No, what makes you think that?”

“I’m sorry... Maybe I got the wrong idea. It just seemed...” I felt like an insecure idiot to even be having this conversation. “Forget I said anything.”

She was silent for a few seconds and then cleared her throat. “Okay, I never had feelings for him, but you wanted me to be honest, so I should probably tell you what’s been going through my head. Finn seems...better than I remembered. I don’t know why I’m just now noticing, but I had a few moments of regret at dinner when I asked myself why I didn’t give him more of a chance. I’m a little angry with myself for not realizing it sooner.”

A knot settled in my stomach, and I didn’t know how I was supposed to respond. Did I bow out? I really didn’t want to because I was starting to like Finn. But on the other hand, I hesitated to move forward with this if Jasmine wanted to pursue something with him. I lifted up a quick prayer. *Lord, I’m at*

a loss here. Please show me what to do. I hate to hurt Finn or Jasmine, but I'm not sure how to handle this. I never thought I would find myself in this situation.

I couldn't help but feel a tinge of frustration with Jasmine for putting me through all of this if she was going to place a claim on Finn. I let out a frustrated breath and attempted to calm myself. "Maybe you and Finn should go to the mall on your own so you can iron this out."

Finn was in my vehicle, driving toward us, and Jasmine touched my arm. "No, the opportunity to get together with him has passed. What kind of friend would I be if I arranged all of this and then changed my mind after you started liking him? I won't do that to you."

"But—"

"It's settled. I'm not going with you to the mall. You guys can drop me off at home first."

"Jasmine, I feel terrible about this."

She shrugged, looking defeated. "He's here, so we'll have to talk about it later."

He pulled up in the car and rolled down his window. "Did you prefer to drive? Or do you want me to? Figured I should ask since it's your vehicle." He grinned.

I wanted to smile but I couldn't, not after the conversation Jasmine and I had just had. "I'll drive."

Once we were on the road, everyone was quiet, and tension filled the air. I was trying to decide if I should ignore Jasmine and head straight to the mall without dropping her off at home or honor her request. If she regretted not going out with Finn, that would create a rift between us and I didn't want her resenting me. The two of them needed to talk this out before I could move forward with him. The thought made me a little sick to my stomach, but I had to do the right thing.

"Is everything okay?" Finn asked from the passenger seat, glancing between the two of us.

I was expecting Jasmine to answer, but she must have been waiting for me. I finally cleared my throat. "Yeah. We're good." But my tone didn't sound too convincing.

"Uh, Annie, you just missed the exit to take me home, but you can get off at the next one and backtrack," Jasmine said.

I glanced at her through the mirror. "I'm not taking you home. You're

coming with us, right?”

“No, we decided you would drop me off first.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re part of the group.”

We went back and forth a few times until Finn glanced at me uneasily. “Look, I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. If Jasmine can’t join us and you don’t want to be alone with me, I completely understand. We just met and—”

“Don’t be silly,” Jasmine interjected. “She was only trying to include me, but I’m a little tired, anyway. You two go on without me.” She hesitated for a few moments. “Annie, I insist.”

I pressed my lips together and glanced at her over my shoulder. “No, I insist.”

Chapter Seven

Finn

The next morning, I woke up early to pray, needing to pour out my heart to God. After spending twenty minutes praying for God's guidance, I read a few Psalms and then got in the shower. My mind quickly wandered to yesterday's events and the strange dynamic.

Meeting Annie had gone above and beyond my expectations, in that she was surprisingly nice. Talking with someone over the phone was entirely different from having a personal interaction. She was genuinely pleased to see me when she and Jasmine met me at the airport. And my breath had caught in my throat the moment I laid eyes on her. That red hair was stunning.

All things considered, it went well...initially. We were connecting, and it appeared as if we were on the same page. But after dinner, there was this weird tension, and it seemed like something had changed. She didn't want to be alone with me and even though Jasmine kept insisting that we should drop her off at home, Annie wouldn't hear of it. She'd practically forced Jasmine to come with us, which was awkward, to say the least.

Once we were at the mall, Annie grew quiet, and it was mostly me and Jasmine talking while Annie hung back, repeatedly walking behind the two of us. Anyone who didn't know the situation would have thought I'd flown out to see Jasmine, not Annie, considering how often Annie yielded to Jasmine.

It bothered and confused me, so I tried engaging Annie. She was always friendly if I initiated, but it seemed like she was holding back for some unknown reason. I wasn't sure if I'd said something to offend her or if she just wasn't that into me.

A couple of times, Jasmine and Annie exchanged hushed words, their expressions hinting at underlying frustration.

The whole situation felt off, and I was starting to conclude that Annie wasn't interested. At the end of the evening, we dropped Jasmine off first, and then Annie brought me back to my hotel. I asked her to be completely honest with me and told her we didn't have to get together tomorrow if she wasn't feeling a connection. The last thing I wanted was for her to feel like she had to see me if her heart wasn't in it.

But that was where things became confusing. She'd said she did feel a connection, and she was looking forward to seeing me again. I almost brought up the weirdness between her and Jasmine, but I decided to let it go.

I sighed and brushed off my thoughts, needing to finish my shower. After toweling off, I got dressed. The hotel offered a free continental breakfast, so I grabbed a cup of coffee and snagged a couple of blueberry muffins. Annie had told me she would pick me up at ten, and we were supposed to do some sightseeing. I hoped our time together went smoother than yesterday.

When ten rolled around, she called and said she was out front, so I headed out to the entrance and slid into her vehicle, not sure what to expect. Would she be happy to see me? Or was she following through with this out of a sense of obligation?

"Good morning," she said in a chirpy tone. "How did you sleep last night?"

I chuckled. If she only knew how difficult it had been. I could sweep it all under the rug or tell the truth, but the truth was always the better way to go. And I was trying to improve after Wesley's reminder that I needed to work on my communication.

"I had trouble falling asleep, to be honest."

Once I put my seatbelt on, she drove away from the curb and headed through the parking lot until she found the exit and turned onto the street.

"Was it because of the time difference? We're two hours ahead of Alaska, so I imagine that messes with your biological clock."

"That may have played a role, but I if I'm being straightforward, I couldn't stop thinking about last night."

Her eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

"I know you said you felt a connection, but something was going on between you and Jasmine. Your entire demeanor shifted after we ate dinner at the restaurant. Are you sure I haven't offended you?"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry if that's what you've been thinking this whole time." She hesitated for several seconds and then placed her hand on

my arm. It felt nice...and strangely comforting. A moment later, she returned her hand to the steering wheel and glanced at me. "Something was going on between Jasmine and me, but I can't go into it. I know that doesn't clarify the situation, but I will say this. You should talk to her before you go back to Alaska."

"Talk to her? About what?"

"Just...talk."

I frowned, thoroughly confused. "Okay... Is she upset with me?"

"No."

"Then what's the issue?"

"I'll let the two of you discuss that." She winced as she ran a red light and then lifted a hand to her forehead. "Oh my goodness, I never do that. Guess I'm a little nervous. Generally, I'm pretty chill about things, but today..." She made a quick turn and pulled into the parking lot of a spacious park. It was a Saturday, so a few kids roamed around on the playground while parents sat on nearby benches.

"You didn't mention we're going to the park." Not that I cared. I was willing to go practically anywhere as long as it allowed us to get to know each other.

"It was a last-second decision. I think we need to discuss some things before proceeding with any plans. If we visit the museum I had in mind, we'll just talk about art." She laughed nervously.

I got the strangest intuition that she was about to let me down nicely. My stomach sank, but it made sense considering how out-of-place everything had seemed yesterday. Perhaps I hadn't done anything specifically to upset her, but she just wasn't experiencing the level of excitement she had anticipated. She'd said she felt a connection, but she was probably being polite. Now that she'd had some time to think it over, it was possible she didn't want to move forward with a long-distance relationship. The thought caused my stomach to clench, but I had to respect her feelings, whatever they were.

I cleared my throat. "Am I about to receive bad news?" I chuckled, trying to be cool about it, but it felt like a huge letdown after all the planning to fly out to meet her. Maybe I'd built this up in my head, hoping something special would come out of this meeting when she didn't feel the same way. I'd weathered much bigger storms, but for some reason, the thought of her not being interested made me nauseous.

"No!" She touched me lightly on the arm this time, laughing playfully.

“I’m sorry for being so cryptic that you keep jumping to the wrong conclusions.” She pivoted to face me, her expression relaxed. “Look, let me make it very clear so you don’t have any doubts. I like you, and you can trust my word on this. I see a potential relationship developing. It’s just…” She glanced down at her hands and blew out a breath. “Going back to what I was saying earlier, I want you to talk to Jasmine before you return to Alaska. Can you do that?”

I frowned again, not understanding what Jasmine had to do with anything. “Yeah, sure. There’s no reason I wouldn’t say goodbye to her before I head back home.”

“I’m not talking about saying goodbye. The two of you need to talk.” She emphasized the last word as if it should mean something to me. I must have looked clueless because she rested her hands on her knees and blew out a breath. “Trust me on this. I know you don’t understand, but it’ll make more sense when you both have that conversation. Will you follow through on that?”

I nodded slowly. “Sure.” I had no idea why I needed to speak with Jasmine, but I would if that’s what she wanted.

“Good. And there’s something else we need to get out of the way before we can move forward.” Her expression shifted and her eyes grew a little misty. “This is really hard for me to talk about. It might change how you feel about me, but I can’t hide it any longer.”

Chapter Eight

Annie

I didn't understand why my eyes were filling with tears when I'd shared this story many times before and had no trouble holding it together. When Finn and I had exchanged testimonies early on, I'd left out some important details because I wanted him to like me. But we couldn't move forward until he knew everything, especially because he had a daughter to think about.

My chest tightened, nearly stealing my breath. What if he decided the risk of dating me wasn't worth it? What if he and Jasmine were meant to be together? Maybe the Lord had orchestrated this entire situation so they could finally develop a romantic attachment. I could picture them talking about it at their wedding. Jasmine would look at him adoringly. *I didn't realize how I felt about him until I set him up with my good friend, Annie. He flew out to meet her, and it was during that trip that he recognized his feelings for me as well.*

I shook my head to clear it. The mere idea of it made my heart squeeze so tightly that I thought I might pass out. It was strange how underwhelmed I'd been when we first started emailing. But once we spoke over video chat, and I heard his voice and observed his kindness, I fell for him. And now that he was here in person, my feelings were even more intense. I didn't want to let him go.

"Hey, are you okay?" Finn asked, placing a hand on my upper arm. "The color drained from your face all of a sudden."

A tear slipped out before I could stop it, and I nodded quickly. "Yeah, I'm fine. I think I just need some fresh air." Before he could say anything more, I slid out of the car and closed the door behind me.

He followed suit, watching me with concern. He rounded the vehicle and came to a stop before me. His tall frame towered over me, and his eyes flickered with compassion. "You don't have to discuss this now if you aren't

ready—”

“I have to tell you this, Finn, and we can’t move forward until we have this conversation.” If I waited, I would only grow more attached to him and it would make it that much harder to talk about. Plus, I didn’t want to waste his time if he couldn’t get over my past. Also, I felt guilty for not bringing it up sooner.

“Okay, then. Let’s walk.” He nodded toward an open field and we strolled in that direction. “It’s always been easier for me to express myself when I’m out in nature.”

I smiled, despite the heavy emotions that had settled over me. The park lacked natural beauty, so it didn’t feel like we were in “nature.”

“I bet Alaska is more stunning than this,” I said. “I love Arizona, but it feels a little dry.”

“You guys have cool mountain formations out here. Maybe you’re used to it, but from an outsider’s point of view, it’s pretty amazing. Every state has its perks.”

“That’s true.”

We dodged a couple of kids kicking a soccer ball back and forth, and we continued on our walk. We were both quiet, and I admired that Finn didn’t try to fill the silence with empty chatter. Instead, he waited patiently for me to talk when I was ready, which showed his ability to be sensitive to my needs.

I cleared my throat, needing to get this over with. “When I shared my testimony earlier, I left out one important part. After Dereck passed away and I learned of his betrayal, I got rid of his clothing and any other belongings that reminded me of him.”

He nodded. “Makes sense.”

“In the process of packing and moving some of the boxes, I hurt my back. It was terrible. The doctor suggested surgery for my pinched nerve, so I decided to go through with it. I would have done anything at that point to make the pain go away. After the surgery, I was on some heavy-duty pain meds which led to…” I swallowed hard. “An ongoing addiction for almost a year.”

I glanced at him to catch his reaction, but his expression had clouded over and it was difficult to tell what he thought. He stared straight ahead, staring off into space as if pondering how that might affect a future relationship with me. Or at least, that was what I imagined was happening inside his head.

Gathering courage, I pushed on. “I was a high-functioning drug addict, so

no one knew what was going on with me. When I hurt my back, I had to quit my job at the daycare. I lived off of Dereck's life insurance, so I wasn't in dire need, thankfully. At the time, I was very young...only twenty-three. We had been married for three years, but we'd known each other since ninth grade. In retrospect, there were some red flags I should have heeded, but I wasn't mature enough to understand how serious they were."

"What were the red flags?" Finn asked.

"He sometimes flirted with other women, and when I would bring up my concerns, he told me I was insecure. I believed him."

"No one advised you not to marry him?"

I shook my head. "I kept my doubts to myself. My parents got married at twenty, so they didn't have a problem with us marrying at the same age. I'm glad they weren't around to witness the severity of the situation. Dad passed away first from congestive heart failure, and Mom died five months later while visiting a friend. A tornado hit, and they weren't prepared. Six months after that, Dereck died. It felt like my life was falling apart."

Finn's eyes filled with tenderness. "No wonder you turned to drugs. That's a lot of grief for anyone to deal with, much less someone so young."

"And I didn't have a great support system. He cheated on me with my closest friend. Honestly, I just...crumbled, and I didn't care if I lived or died."

Finn stopped walking and took my hand. "With your closest friend?" His voice was quiet, yet fierce. His jaw clenched. "How heartless of them both to do such a thing. You didn't deserve that."

"I know. It crushed me."

"Annie, what you went through was horrific, and it makes me angry to think of you going through it alone."

"The silver lining is that it led me to Jesus. Because I hit the deepest low, I knew I needed His help. I was very aware of my sin. When I learned Jesus could make a broken person like me whole again, I turned to Him and never looked back."

We continued walking, but Finn didn't let go of my hand. We circled the playground section and walked on a path leading to a picnic area. The wind blew against our faces, but it wasn't uncomfortable.

"I'm thankful you found the Lord," he said. "I just wish it had been easier for you."

"Thank you. I don't regret anything, and I've come to realize that if I can

overcome that, I'm capable of facing any challenge."

"What did you do about the addiction?"

"By God's grace, an intake worker accepted me into a drug rehab program immediately, and I got my life back. I waited until I was twenty-nine and I'd been clean five years before I started working with kids again. And I was never arrested, so nothing pops up on a standard criminal background clearance." I hesitated. "A specialized clearance might find the drug program, but Drew and Jannette didn't request one. Regardless, when I interviewed for the job, I felt God leading me to be upfront about what happened. They both had colorful pasts, so they were more accepting than most. They asked if I would do random drug testing, and I agreed."

"How does that work, exactly?"

"If they ask, I have to go to a clinic of their choosing and do the test the same day. If I don't, I lose my job. Those were the terms, and I was happy to accept them. Honestly, I didn't expect them to give me a chance, but I'm grateful they did."

"So, that's why they regularly come home late. They figured that since they did you a favor by overlooking your past, they could get away with pushing the boundaries."

"Yes, exactly. But, I don't mean to complain about them. I truly am appreciative that they gave me the opportunity to work for them."

"Have they ever asked you to undergo testing?"

"Yeah, a bunch of times, and I've always been clean."

"Have you ever relapsed?"

I shook my head proudly. "Never."

"Do you feel tempted at times?"

"I haven't been, but I can't guarantee I'll never face temptation since I can't predict the future. But I can say I'm repelled by the idea of turning to drugs to fix an emotional problem. God has changed me, and I can't even imagine going back to that."

We reached the picnic tables, and I gestured to one. "Care to sit for a while?"

"Sure."

We sat across the table from each other and remained silent for at least thirty seconds. Finn appeared deep in thought and I didn't want to interrupt that. He needed time to process what he'd heard without me jumping in to change the subject, even though I desperately wanted to talk about other

things.

He finally met my eyes, his gaze steady and penetrating. “Thank you for opening up and sharing that, Annie. I know it must have been difficult.”

“Yes, it was. But Finn, I won’t hold it against you if you decide not to pursue anything further with me. I probably should have shared that story before you flew all the way out here, but I wanted us to meet in person so you could see that I’m genuine. I can’t erase my past, but I can promise that I’ve matured since that all happened eight years ago.”

He was quiet for several long seconds, and it seemed to stretch on forever. And then he said the words I was dreading to hear. “It’s a lot to take in, Annie. I don’t know what to say.”

Chapter Nine

Finn

“I get it,” Annie said. “I just dumped a lot on you and you need time to sort through it.”

For once in my life, something had truly stumped me. All I wanted to say was, “*None of that matters to me, and when can we set up our next visit?*” I really liked Annie. I liked her so much that it pained me to even think of ending this new relationship for any reason at all. My desire for this to work with her was so strong that I doubted my own judgment, which frightened me.

I had a daughter I had to consider. Her safety and well-being had to come first, regardless of my needs and desires.

“You’re right,” I said. “I need some time to pray about it, but I want to clarify that I care about you, and I’m hoping this works out between us.”

Her expression softened, and she seemed relieved. “I’d like that too.”

“Your past isn’t enough to make me walk away, but I have to consider if this is the best path for us going forward. I’m a firm believer that God can forgive anything, but I also have to put my daughter’s needs above my own. I’m sorry if that upsets you—”

“You don’t have to say another word. I completely understand and I respect your position. Your daughter should absolutely come first, and the fact that you’re being upfront about it makes me admire you even more.”

“Thanks.” When she didn’t say anything else, I pressed on. “We have plenty of time to pray about this. We don’t have to solve any problems today, thankfully.”

She smiled slightly but sadness flickered in her eyes. “That’s very true.”

“I don’t want you to feel that I think less of you because that’s not the case at all.”

Back in high school and college, I was one of those people who had never

touched drugs, even when I'd had the opportunity. I'd also never abused painkillers, but I wasn't prideful enough to believe I was above falling, maybe not with drugs, but with something else. We all had sin, and we were all weak in different areas. There was a saying... *There, but for the grace of God go I.*

She nodded. "I appreciate that."

Annie didn't know the Lord when all of that had happened, and who could blame her for shutting down when the people she loved most disappeared from her life? I couldn't imagine how I would've handled it if I'd found out Zoey had cheated on me. We'd struggled, and there were times she'd admitted she wished she'd dated other guys before settling down. That admission had wounded me to the core, but that was nothing compared to what Annie had gone through.

"You're a beautiful woman with a beautiful heart," I said.

Instead of perking up, her posture fell and she seemed to deflate right in front of me. "You don't have to say that to make me feel better. I understand that dating me brings on a whole new set of challenges."

I reached across the table and took both of her hands in mine. "The last thing I want is for you to think I'm using flattery to console you because nothing could be further from the truth. You are by far the most beautiful woman I've ever set eyes on."

I paused, realizing I'd just admitted she was more beautiful than Zoey, and Zoey had been extremely attractive. Guilt pricked at me because I had never given a compliment like that to any other woman except my wife, and it felt a little disloyal. But Zoey was gone, and despite all our problems, she would have wanted me to find love with someone else.

The corners of Annie's mouth curled up in a grin. "You're pretty easy on the eyes as well, Mr. Mercer."

I shrugged. "I'm okay. We both know you're out of my league."

She snickered. "That's not true at all."

"It's fine if you admit it's partially true," I said lightly. "You won't offend me."

She burst out laughing as if I'd said the funniest thing. "Finn Mercer, you're being silly. I am not, by anyone's standard, out of your league."

She genuinely seemed to believe that, so I let it go, even though I knew what I knew. Annie was stunning, and she could do a lot better than an orchard farmer from Alaska.

After that, we talked about a lot of things. I showed her pictures of Cara that I'd taken on my phone, and I told her stories about my parents and sister until she relaxed and appeared to forget the tension from earlier. We got up and did another loop around the park and then headed back to her car once we were ready for lunch.

As the day flew by, I had the strongest sense that Annie would be an important person in my life. A few stray thoughts about her drug history made me anxious, but I sensed God filling me with peace. I didn't know what the future held, but I entrusted it to the Lord, knowing He loved us both.

We hit a few tourist spots and had dinner at one of her favorite bistros. Earlier, she'd asked me to talk to Jasmine before I left, and I'd had every intention of following through, but I lost track of time. It wasn't until my phone rang and Jasmine's caller I.D. popped up that I realized I'd better schedule something with her since I was flying out in the morning. I glanced at Annie. "It's Jasmine. Should I make plans to see her this evening?"

She nodded reluctantly. "Yeah, you should."

"Are you sure? I flew out to visit you, and—"

"I'm positive. You should answer it before you miss the call."

She bit down on her lower lip as if concerned, and I wondered why this was so important to her. What was Jasmine going to share that Annie couldn't tell me herself?

"You'd better answer," she urged.

I nodded and accepted the call. "Hey, Jasmine, how's it going?"

"Finney boy, how are you?"

I forced myself not to roll my eyes at the mention of Finney boy. "Good. I'm sitting here with Annie. We're almost done with dinner."

"Oh, I see. How's that going?"

"Really well." I glanced up and winked at the beautiful woman across from me. "Pretty sure Annie has figured out by now that I'm smitten with her."

Annie chuckled and caught my eye before glancing away. I waited for Jasmine to say something but there was only silence. "Hello? You still there?"

"Oh, yeah." She cleared her throat. "I'm here."

"So, I fly out tomorrow morning and I was hoping to see you before I leave. Do you have time for coffee this evening or perhaps dessert?"

"I would love that," she said enthusiastically.

We made plans for Annie to drop me off at Jasmine's apartment after dinner, and Jasmine said she would bring me back to my hotel after we got beverages at a local coffee house. The whole thing was a little odd, but I kept my comments to myself. This was what Annie wanted, so I was following through.

* * *

An hour later, Jasmine and I were sipping coffee at a place down the road from where she lived. I was tired after a full day with Annie, and jet lag was having an effect, but I did my best to appear alert. She asked me a lot of questions about Cara and the orchard farm, which was nice but unlike her. In the past, she had consistently been friendly, but I'd never gotten the sense she was interested in the details of my life. Or at least, she'd never asked before. We always had a topic to discuss, but it never got too personal.

The situation felt awkward. Annie and Jasmine knew something I didn't. I had a suspicion, but I was trying to go with the flow and not read too much into things. I could easily overthink it and still come to the wrong conclusion. Even so, I'd promised Annie I would talk to Jasmine, so here I was...making the effort. Clearing my throat, I leaned forward on my forearms. "So, Annie told me you and I needed to discuss something."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "She said that?"

I nodded. "I'm not sure what the issue is, but I'm assuming you know?"

She glanced down and placed both hands around her coffee mug. "Um... maybe, but I told her it wasn't necessary."

"What wasn't necessary?"

She fidgeted in her seat, appearing uncomfortable. "Let's drop it."

I let out a low chuckle. "I don't even understand what I'm dropping."

"It's not a big deal. Annie shouldn't have said anything to you."

"Okay, but now I really want to know."

She tapped her feet on the floor. "Uh... Just forget it."

Although I was still curious, I let it go since she was visibly uncomfortable. Regardless of my curiosity, I wasn't a nosey person, so if she said to drop it, I would. "All right. If you say so."

She seemed relieved and distressed at the same time, but I couldn't address what she refused to talk about.

After that, we chatted about her transition from Alaska to Arizona, and she told me how much she was enjoying all the changes in her life with a new environment, job, church, and friends.

"I'm happy for you," I said. "It's not easy to pick up and move like you did, but you're a brave woman, and I admire that."

She blushed a deep shade of red. "Thanks. I appreciate the compliment." She brushed a lock of hair away from her face and held eye contact a little longer than normal.

Was she feeling something for me? I shook off the thought. She'd been the one to set Annie and me up. Why go through all that trouble if she had feelings for me? Also, she'd never been interested before and nothing had changed, so it didn't make sense. My ability to read women wasn't always the greatest, so I needed to be careful that I avoided jumping to conclusions.

I glanced away and cleared my throat. "I'm probably putting the cart before the horse, but I can picture Annie and I having a future together. If she decides to relocate to Alaska, maybe you'll help her with the transition... since you know what it's like to move across state lines."

She grimaced. "Oh, yeah...of course. I can do that." She fidgeted some more, and I wondered if we'd been sitting for too long.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my arms over my chest. "Are you ready to go?"

She seemed surprised by the question, but she nodded. "Yeah, if you're tired, we should head out." The corners of her mouth drooped down, and I was concerned I'd said the wrong thing.

"We don't have to if you'd like to stay longer."

She shook her head, appearing annoyed. "No, it's okay. I can tell you want to leave."

"No, that's not the case. You just seemed restless, so I thought..."

She stood and picked up her purse. "We can go."

I might be dense about the meaning of body language, but even I could tell she was upset. "Hey...I'm sorry if I said something to offend you. I haven't thanked you enough, and I want you to know how much I appreciate you setting me and Annie up. It was kind of you to think of us."

She pressed her lips together, her eyes down. "No problem." She glanced around as if agitated. "Let's get out of here. You have to wake up early

tomorrow and I'm feeling tired."

* * *

The next day, once my flight landed, I waited outside in front of the airport terminal for Wesley to pick me up. I'd gotten up early that morning, and I'd taken the hotel's complementary shuttle to the airport. The flight wasn't bad, but I was eager to get home.

I spotted his gray Jeep minutes later. He pulled up to the curb and I threw my duffle bag into the back seat.

Once I was in the vehicle and we were on our way, he glanced at me with a smile. "So, how did it go?"

"It went well. Annie... she's amazing."

"That's awesome. I prayed for you while you were gone."

"Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

"So, you like her then?"

"I like her a lot. We connected on so many levels, and she's sweet and friendly... It's a completely different experience meeting someone in person than talking to them over a video chat."

"I bet."

"Did you encounter any challenges, or was it smooth sailing?"

My smile faltered slightly as I contemplated Wesley's question. I thought about mentioning Jasmine's involvement in those challenges but decided against it, not wanting to burden Wesley with unnecessary details. Also, that last part with Jasmine left a sour taste in my mouth. She'd seemed unhappy with me when we had coffee, but she was unwilling to express why or what was going through her mind. At one point, I suspected she was interested, but I didn't want to be "that guy" who believed every woman liked him. Perhaps she felt I wasn't appreciative enough of her role in setting Annie and me up. I had tried expressing that, but it didn't seem to help.

Wesley glanced at me, a questioning look in his eye, and I shook my head to clear it. "There were a few bumps in the road, but it's too much to go into now."

"Oh, come on. Don't leave me hanging," he said, laughing.

I definitely wouldn't be sharing what Annie had told me regarding her past. That was her story to tell, not mine. "When we met at the airport, it was amazing. There was an instant connection. Honestly, bro, she's drop-dead gorgeous. I was stunned. Everything seemed great, but later that evening there was some weirdness between her and Jasmine. I don't want to go into the details, but I was starting to think she wasn't as into me as I was into her. But I brought it up and she assured me she was interested."

"Well, that's good. You have to remember that a situation like that can be overwhelming."

"Oh, of course. I was the one living it."

We both laughed.

"So, yeah... There were a few complicated situations, but all in all, I believe it was a success. I can't wait for her to fly out here to meet everyone."

Wesley reached across and gave me a fist bump, his eyes filled with genuine happiness. "Good to hear. I'll continue praying for you. Keep me posted."

I grinned. "Thanks. I appreciate it, and I will."

After that, we talked about Wesley's job and he shared some local news. By the time his gray jeep bounced along the rugged dirt road leading up to my place, I was feeling antsy to get home. I missed Cara, and I was eager to find out how she was doing. The jeep's tires kicked up small clouds of dust as Wesley expertly maneuvered his vehicle and drove up to the house.

I jumped out of the car and retrieved my duffle bag. It was nice to visit Arizona and witness some of its beauty, but there was no place like home. My farm offered breathtaking landscapes that provided a sense of quietness and serenity, grounding me in a way that nothing else did, except for the Lord, of course.

The front door flew open and Melissa walked out carrying Cara, a wide smile on her face. "Welcome back. How'd it go?"

"It was great!" I immediately went for Cara, and she came right to me. Once I held her, she let out a happy giggle. "Little one, I've missed you." I kissed one of her chubby cheeks and smiled.

"I have an appointment I have to get to," Melissa said, "but there's vegetable lentil soup in the refrigerator, and we'll talk later."

"Great. Thanks, Melissa. You're a lifesaver."

"You're welcome."

She hurried off, and I waved goodbye to Wesley and expressed my

gratitude once more, then took Cara inside. I laid a blanket on the floor with some toys and spent some quality time playing with my daughter. Being back felt right, but Annie's face was fresh in my mind and I longed to see her again. Soon.

Cara cooed as if agreeing with my thoughts. I had a lot to pray about, but I trusted that the Lord would guide me.

After a while, I gently placed Cara down in her crib for a nap. I watched her for a moment, overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility. If I only had to think of myself, I would rush forward with the strength of a wild bull, but I needed to be patient, making sure that Annie and I were right for each other. If I married her, it would affect Cara's life as well, hopefully in a good way.

Returning to my living room, I sat on the couch and dialed Annie's number, my heart beating faster as I waited for her to pick up.

She answered after it rang a few times. "Hey, Finn. How was your flight home?"

"Hey. Not bad. I mostly slept on the plane."

She laughed. "I'm sure that made it easier."

"Absolutely. It's good to be back, but I already miss you. I had an incredible time with you."

"I feel the same way. I wish we'd had longer."

"Me too. Speaking of that, when are you coming to Alaska?"

She burst out laughing. "You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

"Nope."

"Well, I'll have to talk to Drew and Jannette to find out when I can take some time off. A lot depends on their schedule."

"Fair enough."

"How did it go with Jasmine?" Her voice wavered a bit. "Was it okay?"

I reached up to loosen my collar. "You haven't spoken to her?"

"Um...yes, we talked, but she never mentioned anything, and I wasn't sure if I should bring it up."

"Well, I told her you said we should talk, and she said to drop it, so I did. I wanted to respect her feelings."

"Oh... So, she didn't open up with you?"

"No. Do you mind telling me what that was about? It was a little confusing."

She let out a long sigh. "I don't want to speak for her, but I'm sorry for the confusion. You must think we're a couple of nutcases. I hate that there

was tension there, and if it made you uncomfortable—”

“Don’t worry about it. If Jasmine was ready to let it go, then I am too. I won’t allow it to overshadow the best part...and that was meeting you.”

She let out a relieved breath. “You’re a good guy, Finn.”

“And you’re an amazing woman.” I could hear the smile in my voice.

We stayed on the phone for a couple of hours after that, talking about a little of everything and nothing in particular. When we finally ended the call, I silently prayed that God would work in our situation and give us wisdom for the future.

As the sun shone through my window, warming my face, I thought about what it would be like to have a family with Annie. I was ready for whatever this new journey held for us. I stood and started doing all the chores around the house that needed to be done, but there was a lightness in my step that hadn’t been there before. The future felt bright and full of possibility.

Chapter Ten

Annie

I sat in my seat on the plane, my fingers nervously fidgeting in my lap. It was June, a full month after Finn and I last saw each other, and I was finally able to get some time off to visit him in Alaska. We'd been video chatting regularly since then, but I couldn't wait to give him a hug. I was also looking forward to meeting his family. So many emotions were flowing through me. Excitement. Worry. Eagerness. Longing. But what if his parents and sister didn't like me? What if I got out there and I wanted to turn around and go home?

My mind raced with thoughts about what life on Finn's orchard farm would entail, a life that was so different from the one I had now. Not that either of us had made a commitment or were anywhere near that, but it was hard not to imagine a future. I was looking forward to the idyllic scenery, but what about all the challenges I would encounter? I was used to the city and didn't know what rural living entailed. Granted, he'd said he lived close to town, so there was that.

Finn and I were covering a lot of ground quickly because of the nature of our long-distance relationship. If we'd lived in the same local area, we would have already gotten together multiple times and there would be less pressure to figure things out. We would be talking about our next date, not meeting family and assessing the potential of a future marriage. Okay, maybe I was exaggerating a little and we weren't moving quite that fast. But I felt the seriousness of this endeavor, as we were investing a considerable amount of time and money into figuring out if we were a good match. I was trying not to feel overwhelmed, but it was difficult.

The pilot announced we were twenty minutes away from landing, and excitement, mingling with anticipation, fluttered in my stomach. I took a deep breath and lifted up a quick prayer, asking God to give me peace. My

turbulent emotions slowly subsided as I held on to my faith in the Lord. Regardless of what happened with Finn, the Lord had a plan for my life, and I could trust Him with it.

When we landed on the runway, I peered out the tiny window at the vast, open space underneath the golden afternoon sun. We disembarked from the plane and I headed down the tarmac. There was a “Welcome to Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport” sign with an arrow pointing in the direction of the baggage claim at the end. I scanned the small crowd for Finn’s familiar face and quickly spotted him, his hands shoved in the pockets of his blue jeans, his eyes glittering with excitement. His face lit up with a lopsided grin when he saw me, and he stood there, brown hair slightly disheveled from the wind outside. He looked as if he wanted to jump over the people separating us. He hurried over, pushing through the sea of people, and then wrapped me in a tight embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

My heart swelled, and I breathed in the scent of pine and sunshine that clung to his shirt. “Me too.”

Anxious butterflies flapped about in my stomach, but one look at the kindness in his expression, and I relaxed.

We headed over to the baggage claim and I described my large blue suitcase so Finn could help me search for it. I spotted it first, and he moved forward to pick it up off the conveyor belt, his arm muscles rippling as he lifted it and brought it down like it weighed nothing. A small grin tugged at the corners of my lips as I tried to hide my admiration for his strength.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, and we made our way to his vehicle. Once we were in his black truck, he inquired about my flight, and I told him about some of the funny things people did. “There was this kid who kept kicking the seat of the man in front of him, and he couldn’t have been over four years old. The guy nicely asked the kid to stop, but he didn’t listen, so he turned to the parents and appealed to them to control their child.”

Finn’s eyebrows rose. “What did they do?”

“They told him they were raising their son to make his own decisions and they didn’t want to hinder his creative impulses.”

Finn chuckled. “Just wait until he’s a teenager and his impulses backfire on them.”

“Exactly.”

“Did he call a flight attendant for help?”

I shook my head. “Nope. He told the kid he’d give him fifty cents if he stopped, and the kid agreed to the deal.”

“That’s it? If I were his age, I’d ask for at least a dollar.”

I snickered. “Right?”

“Did the kid follow through with his promise?”

I let out a burst of laughter. “He did, but he started kicking his Mom’s pullout tray instead. She complained to the man that her son wouldn’t be doing that if he hadn’t offered him money. He reminded her that she shouldn’t hinder his creative impulses.”

Finn slapped his thigh, cracking up. “Sounds like some poetic justice was in order.”

“I agree with you on that.”

I told him a few other stories, and then we drove through miles of pristine wilderness in a comfortable silence as I took in the beauty before me, our hands close to touching, but not quite.

We eventually traveled down a long, paved road with a smaller dirt path splitting off from it. That path was slightly bumpy, and then his orchard farm came into view, along with a picturesque cabin with rows of trees laden with rosy apples in the distance. Rolling green mountains and tall pine trees created an amazing backdrop. A nearby pond mirrored the blues and grays of the sky above, and it was even more stunning than the pictures Jasmine had shown me.

“It’s beautiful,” I breathed.

Finn parked his truck and turned to look at me. “You like it?”

“How could I not? I can’t imagine how wonderful it must be to wake up to this every day.”

He winked, grinning mischievously. “I was hoping you’d say that. I figured if my charm didn’t win you over, the spectacular views would seal the deal. It’s my secret weapon.” He chuckled, his eyes twinkling with playful humor. “But don’t worry, it’s not the only perk. I also make a mean apple pie.”

I unbuckled my seatbelt. “We’re a match made in heaven then because apple pie happens to be my favorite dessert, especially if it has whipped cream on top.”

“Well, I’ll have to see to it that we bake at least one pie while you’re here.”

“I’m holding you to it.”

We got out of his vehicle, but we left my suitcase in the trunk since I was staying in a guest house on his parent's property. We'd both agreed that was best for the sake of propriety, as no one else lived with Finn besides his daughter.

"Ready for the grand tour of my home?" he asked.

"Can't wait."

His cabin stood proudly, exuding rustic charm and warmth. It was a nice-sized home with a honey-hued wood finish, two levels, and a sprawling porch. It was much nicer than the off-the-grid cabins I'd seen pictures of when researching Alaska.

Finn led me through the entrance, an eager smile on his face. We stepped into a large living area, flooded with natural light streaming through triangular windows up above. High ceilings made the room seem even more spacious. It had an open plan layout with the living room, dining area, and kitchen seamlessly integrated into one cohesive space. The dining room table sat next to an enormous window with spectacular views of the pond and the wilderness beyond that. A large beige couch sat over wood floors, with a coffee table and burgundy rug in front. Two big brown plush chairs stood near a fireplace, along with a rocking chair with a soft blue blanket draped over it.

I glanced over at the kitchen, and a large island occupied the center with several barstools and three hanging lights overhead. Modern appliances, including a stainless-steel refrigerator, gave the space a contemporary feel.

"Welcome to my humble abode," Finn said, his voice filled with pride.

"This is really nice." I glanced around, taking in the wood-burning stove in the corner of the room, the tall bookcase, and a television mounted on the wall. "You managed to incorporate all the modern conveniences with a touch of rustic charm. I especially like that wood-burning stove."

He ran a hand through his hair and smiled. "Thanks. It keeps the place toasty during the colder nights. We don't need it during the summer, but it definitely comes in handy for the remaining months of the year."

He showed me the rest of the house, including the four cozy bedrooms, each with a picturesque wilderness view. Cara's nursery had a butterfly theme, and it was absolutely adorable. From the wallpaper to the curtains to the quilt draped across a plush white chair in the corner, all reflected the theme in shades of pink, coral, and purple.

After the tour of his home, Finn took me around his property where we

viewed a rustic red barn that held his equipment.

We then ventured out to the orchards. It was a sea of vibrant, lush green trees surrounding us on either side.

“When I bought this property,” Finn said, “the previous owner had already planted the trees. He made a nice living but ultimately retired in Washington where his daughter lived.”

“What motivated you to do this kind of work?” I asked.

“I love being in the outdoors. Can’t imagine being locked up in an office somewhere without the fresh air. This is where I belong.”

“I can understand that.”

The sun warmed my skin, and the delicious aroma of apples filled the air. Considering the serene environment, I could see why he enjoyed working out here so much. He shared that he also had pear, plum, and peach trees as well.

“The previous owner chose varieties that would withstand cold weather climates,” he said.

“What kind of maintenance does your orchard require?”

“Pruning in the dormant season, pest and disease management, fertilization and soil tests to determine nutrient deficiencies, irrigation, weed control, cold protection with insulation and tree guards, and of course, harvest and storage.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

He chuckled. “That’s why it’s a full-time job.”

“You mentioned before that you have helpers?”

He nodded. “I do. I carry out the bulk of the work, but I couldn’t do it all without employing extra hands. In fact, I’ve arranged for several people to take over while you’re out here so we can hang out together.”

“I appreciate that.”

“I’m looking forward to the break.”

“You mentioned cold protection. How do you successfully grow fruit despite the inclement weather?”

“Well, as I shared before, the previous owner chose varieties that do better in a cold climate. He also planted them where they’d receive more sunlight. I add extra mulch to keep the soil moist and warmer during winter.” He laughed. “I could talk about this stuff for hours, but I don’t want to bore you. What do you say we head to town to get something to eat, and then I’ll take you to meet my parents, sister, and Cara?”

“That sounds great.”

My stomach fluttered at the mention of meeting his family. The more I grew to like Finn, the more I wanted his family's approval. I just needed to be myself and hope for the best, entrusting it to the Lord.

I enjoyed the drive to town, taking in the scenic views and rural atmosphere. A sense of contentment washed over me, and I could see myself living here, growing accustomed to a simpler way of life. It wouldn't be hard to leave the fast pace of the city behind.

Finn had been right that the town wasn't far away. He took me to a local diner, surrounded by quaint shops that oozed small-town charm. The restaurant had a history and had been family-owned for two decades. We slid into a booth, and I was pleasantly surprised when our waiter, Jack, introduced himself to me as the owner. It was great to see that Jack didn't think it was beneath him to step in and take our order, and he and Finn looked like good friends. He seemed like a down-to-earth guy. I ordered a bowl of hearty beef stew and Finn got the same. When the food was ready, Jack brought it to our table, along with fresh cornbread.

"This smells amazing," I said.

We both dug in and then Finn met my gaze. "So, tell me... What questions do you have about living out here?"

I chuckled because somewhere in my suitcase I had a list of things I wanted to ask him, but that could wait. "There are so many I don't know where to start."

Chapter Eleven

Annie

Jack stopped by our booth, refilling our water glasses and asking if there was something else we needed. We expressed our gratitude and reassured him we didn't need anything at the moment. New customers arrived and the lively chatter of patrons filled the room.

Finn rested his forearms on the table. "I know you must have a lot of questions, but why not start with the most pressing one?"

I thought about that and cleared my throat. "Are the folks out here accepting of newcomers?"

He pondered that for a few seconds and then nodded. "I would say so. Most people are down-to-earth and friendly. There are a few that are crabby and unwelcoming, but you'll find that anywhere you go."

"True."

He took a spoonful of beef stew and chewed. "What else is on your mind?"

"Is it hard to adapt to the shorter daylight hours in the winter?"

His shoulders fell slightly. "To be honest, it's not always easy, and I've grown up out here so I'm used to it. But then you get the increased hours of sunshine during the summer, and that helps a lot. While I wouldn't say it balances out, each season has its perks." A wrinkle formed on his forehead. "Is that something you're concerned about?"

"I consider myself a pretty flexible person. I'm able to adapt to change fairly quickly, but some of these things are on my mind."

"That's understandable."

I peppered him with more questions after that, and he did his best to answer. We talked for at least an hour and a half before he paid the bill, and we left.

His parents lived on the other side of town, but on the drive over, I felt

antsy and nervous, which wasn't typical of how I'd responded in other relationships. In the past, I'd brushed this kind of thing aside with a *c'est la vie* attitude. If it failed, there was someone better around the corner. But I didn't feel that way this time. I was eager to embrace a new beginning, as Finn was unlike anyone I had ever met. I could easily attribute some of my nervousness to the circumstances and situation, but I knew without a doubt that the bigger reason was my growing feelings for Finn.

He must have sensed my anxiety because he glanced over at me with concern. "You doing okay? Would it help if I held your hand?"

I nodded, and he reached over and clasped my hand, warming it with his own. It was comforting and helped to reassure me.

"You seem a little anxious," he said, glancing at me.

I blew out a breath. "I am, but I'll relax once the introductions are out of the way."

"My parents are easy, so you have nothing to worry about. They're supportive and non-critical. You're an amazing woman. There's no reason they won't like you." He let out a snicker. "If anything, my sister, Melissa, is the one who might be harder to win over, but you shouldn't take it personally. She's great—don't get me wrong—but she's grown very attached to Cara. It's been difficult for her to accept that I'm moving on after Zoey died, but she'll come around."

"Okay, good to know."

Finn drove through a small housing community and pulled up to his parent's house. There were three vehicles out front: a blue Ford Explorer, a gray Honda, and a white compact SUV. He parked, and we exited the vehicle and walked to the main entrance of the home.

Finn knocked lightly, and his mom answered with a bright smile. She had short brown hair and hazel eyes, just like Finn. "Hello, hello! You must be Annie. Hi, I'm Debbie and it's great to meet you at last. Finn has said wonderful things." She gave me a welcoming hug and took a moment to look at me. "You are even more beautiful than the pictures Finn showed me."

I felt my face heat from the compliment. "Thank you. That's sweet of you to say."

"I'm not just being sweet. It's the truth. Come on in."

She opened the door wider and we stepped inside. The interior was spacious and homey, and the scent of apple pie permeated the room. "It smells wonderful in here, by the way."

She giggled as if she had a secret. “Finn texted me earlier and said apple pie is your favorite, so I whipped one up before you got here. It’s in the oven.”

My mouth dropped open in surprise. “Wow, thank you for thinking of me, especially on such short notice.”

Finn chuckled. “Mom loves apple pie as well. She’ll find any excuse to make one, so it wasn’t exactly a hardship.”

“Looks like we’re kindred spirits in the dessert department,” Debbie said with a twinkle in her eye.

Debbie showed us into the living room where two blue couches faced each other. Finn and I took one couch and his mom sat across from us on another. “I’ve tried so many versions of apple pie that it’s become a game for me.”

A tall man with brownish-gray hair ambled down the stairs and joined us. He walked up to me and shook my hand. “I’m Kevin, Finn’s dad. It’s nice to meet you.” He smiled warmly and then took a seat next to Debbie.

They asked questions about my flight to Alaska and what I thought of Finn’s property. Additionally, they filled me in on local information and things I might want to see while I was out there. They immediately set me at ease and I got the sense that they supported Finn starting a relationship.

“We’re really excited you’re here,” Debbie said, glancing at her husband with a smile. “Kevin and I have been praying that Finn would meet someone.” She waved a hand in the air. “Oh, but we’re not putting pressure on you. We understand new relationships take time to figure out.”

Kevin winked mischievously at Finn and me and then elbowed her in the ribs. “You might as well just tell her you’ve been praying for a daughter-in-law.”

Her mouth dropped open slightly, and she seemed flustered. “I’m trying to make her feel welcome, not like she has to run for the hills.”

We all laughed and I couldn’t help but like both of them. They wanted me to feel comfortable, and I appreciated that.

After about twenty minutes of talking, Finn started glancing around. “Where’s Melissa and Cara? Are they upstairs?”

His mom glanced at the time. “Melissa took Cara on a walk in the neighborhood and said she’d be back in twenty minutes, but that was nearly an hour ago.”

Finn’s eyes flickered with concern. “I hope they’re okay. Maybe we

should get in the car and look for them.”

Debbie waved a hand. “Oh, I’m sure they’re fine. You know your sister. She’s most likely on the phone with a friend and lost track of time.”

Finn’s brows lowered. “Yeah, probably, but if she has her phone with her, we should call her.” He took out his cell and tapped her number on speed dial, then put it on speaker. He let it ring until it went to voicemail. “Hey, Melissa, this is Finn. Just checking on you and Cara. Annie and I are here at Mom and Dad’s, and Mom said you were on a short walk. Call me.”

A timer buzzed, and Debbie stood and headed toward the kitchen. “Excuse me, I have to check on the pie.”

While she was gone, Kevin engaged us in conversation, inquiring about my job and what it was like living in Arizona. He was a great conversationalist, showing interest in everything I shared with him and asking follow-up questions.

Finn was quiet, and I caught him glancing at his phone several times. Eventually, he cleared his throat. “I don’t understand why Melissa isn’t returning my call, and I’m getting worried.” He stood and called her again, holding the phone to his ear as he paced back and forth. It must have gone to voicemail because he ended the call. “I’m trying not to overreact, but it’s not like her to say she’ll be twenty minutes and then take more than an hour. Just to be safe, I should drive around and see if I can locate them.”

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

His Mom walked out just as we were heading for the door. “Where are you going?”

“To look for Melissa,” Finn said. “She’s not responding to my calls.”

Her forehead wrinkled with concern. “Okay, I’m sure you’ll find her in the neighborhood somewhere, but keep us posted. When you all get back, we’ll have some apple pie.”

“Let me know if you need me,” Kevin said. “But I’m sure she just lost track of the time.”

Finn gave a slight nod, and I followed him out the door. We stopped at his vehicle, but he paused and glanced at the vehicles parked in front of the house. “Melissa’s car is gone. The white Toyota RAV4 belonged to her. I know for a fact that it was here when we arrived.”

“The compact SUV?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“I remember seeing it. There were three cars when we pulled up.” Now

there were only two, not counting Finn's truck.

Irritation flickered across his features, and he let out a breath. "Maybe I should call Carter."

"Is that her husband?"

He nodded and clicked on his number on speed dial. It rang several times and then he answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Finn. Do you know if Melissa went home?"

"Um...not sure, but I'm picking up the kids shortly, and then we'll head over there."

"She told Mom she was taking Cara for a twenty-minute walk in the neighborhood, and it's been over an hour. Her vehicle was here but now it's gone—"

"Tell you what, I'll see if I can contact her and then get back to you."

"Thanks." Finn ended the call and slid his cell into his pocket. He let out a heavy sigh. "They're probably fine. I just don't like the lack of communication."

I nodded, not sure what to say. Hopefully, it was only a misunderstanding.

We got in his truck and he turned on the engine. "I don't understand why she would leave when she knew we were stopping by and you were supposed to meet her and Cara. She had to have seen my Chevy. Why wouldn't she stop in before leaving? It doesn't make sense."

A bad feeling settled in my gut because there were a limited number of reasons something like this would happen. Either there had been foul play, or Melissa had purposefully avoided meeting Finn's new love interest. There could be a third unknown reason, but this situation didn't sit right with me. The second option seemed more likely, but I lifted up a prayer, asking God to keep Melissa and Cara safe, just in case.

A moment later, Finn's phone rang and he quickly answered, putting it on speaker. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Carter. I spoke with her and..." He let out a heavy breath. "She's under the impression you wanted her to watch Cara so you and Annie could visit with your parents without any distractions."

Finn's expression relaxed and his body sagged in relief. "So, they're okay then?"

"Yeah, they're fine."

"Well, that's good to hear." He hesitated for several seconds and then

frowned. “It just doesn’t make sense why she wouldn’t have stopped in to say hello, or at least return my call when I tried to reach her.”

“She was making dinner when I called, so maybe she didn’t hear the phone ring earlier.”

Finn nodded slowly. “Okay, well, thanks for getting back to me. I guess I’ll swing by to pick up Cara on the way home.”

“Sure thing.”

“See you later.” Finn ended the call and let out a sigh. “I don’t understand what went wrong here, but I’ll have a talk with Melissa and sort it out. Sorry you weren’t able to meet Cara today, but I’ll ensure you get the chance tomorrow.”

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to go with the flow and not let it bother me. “Not a problem. I’m just glad everyone is okay.”

“Me too.”

We went back inside and his mom served up apple pie for all of us. His parents seemed as baffled as Finn with Melissa’s strange disappearing act, but my gut was telling me something was off with Melissa. Hopefully, it didn’t amount to anything major and all would be fine tomorrow when I met her and Cara. Regardless, it was out of my control, so I pushed it from my mind and concentrated on getting to know Debbie and Kevin.

After we talked for quite a while, they set me up in their guest house, which turned out to be a cute little cottage in their expansive backyard, surrounded by a sturdy fence. It had its own bathroom and shower, along with a small kitchen that included a narrow refrigerator they’d stocked with a few items, a compact stove and oven, and a miniature microwave. It had a bedroom with a queen size bed, as well as a modest sitting area with a couch and TV mounted on the wall. Finn went back to the car to retrieve my luggage and then brought it to the guest house. We kicked back and watched TV after his parents went to bed, and it was nice to relax and hang out with him at the end of the day.

Except for the mishap with Melissa, things had gone well. Exhaustion had taken hold, and I was ready to get a good night’s sleep. Thankfully, the bedroom had blackout curtains, and I would need them, as I wasn’t used to the longer daylight hours. After Finn left, I got in bed and prayed that God would smooth the way for a deeper relationship with Finn if that was His will. *And please work out the situation with Melissa. I don’t know what’s going on there, Lord, but I pray there wouldn’t be any tension between us.*

Chapter Twelve

Finn

A sense of dread filled me as I parked my truck in front of Melissa and Carter's house. I was eager to pick up Cara and relieved that she and Melissa were okay, but I couldn't ignore the gnawing feeling that Melissa was purposefully being difficult. She knew how important this visit with Annie was to me and how much I wanted her to meet Cara. Still, I didn't want to overreact and misjudge the situation either.

I exited my vehicle and strode to the front porch, then knocked on the door. Nearly a minute passed and I knocked again. Carter opened it this time, looking tired and a little ragged. He ran a hand through his hair and smiled. "Hey, Finn. Come on in."

I walked inside, the scent of some sort of tomato sauce hitting my nostrils. Carter opened the sliding glass door and stepped outside, the sounds of my niece and nephew playing drifting in. Melissa ambled out of the kitchen holding Cara, who looked as if she'd been crying.

"She's been a little fussy," she said.

I leaned in to take Cara from her but she pulled back slightly. "I think she senses something is up. Why don't we sit down for a while so there's an easier transition."

I frowned. "Transition? What are you talking about? I'm her father and she lives with me."

"Oh, I know that, silly. I'm only trying to put her needs first."

I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. Why was she acting as if she was the parent and I was the babysitter? I shook my head to clear it. I was probably imagining things. It had been a full day, and this wasn't the time to freak out over the way Melissa handled the situation. I paused, willing myself not to respond in frustration.

"What happened earlier? You and Cara were supposed to be at Mom and

Dad's house when I brought Annie over. That was the plan, wasn't it?"

Her brows furrowed, and she tapped her foot restlessly. "It was just a misunderstanding. I thought you and Annie would arrive sooner, but something must have delayed you. I took Cara out for a walk and got sidetracked when Mom's friend, Jane Lemley, stopped me and wouldn't stop talking. By the time I returned, I needed to get home to make dinner since Carter would be back with the kids. I figured it would be easier if I went home without disturbing you."

"I understand that you're busy and you have a family to take care of," I said. "But the lack of communication was frustrating. I was concerned that something might have happened to you and Cara since you didn't return on the walk and you weren't answering my calls."

She pressed her lips into a grim line. "But you got ahold of Carter, correct?"

"Yes."

"And you received communication on the issue, right?"

"Yes, that's true, but—"

"Then stop making such a big deal out of nothing." She let out an irritated laugh. "I thought I was helping you out. Cara can be a handful, and I'm sure Annie wanted a few minutes to talk to Mom and Dad without the distraction."

Hesitating, I took a step back. "I can see your point there."

"You have to understand that I have a lot of responsibilities, and I'm doing my best. I've done a lot for you and Cara. The least you could do is give me some slack here. You don't need to worry about every little thing. Cara is safe with me, as always."

My head jerked back and guilt washed through me. She'd stepped in for me in so many ways, and she'd never asked for a dime, although I had always compensated her for her work. What was my problem? It had been a minor misunderstanding, and here I was, getting on her case.

"I'm sorry. You're right. I guess I'm just overwhelmed because I want Annie's visit to be perfect, and not knowing where you and Cara were threw me off balance."

"Did Annie give you a hard time about this? If she has an issue with a few glitches, she may not be the right woman for you."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Hold on..." I let out a frustrated breath. "Annie never complained. Let's not jump to, 'She may not be the

right woman for you,' so quickly."

Carter opened the sliding glass door and walked inside, joining us. He must have sensed the tension in the air because he glanced between us with concern. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine," Melissa said. She turned to Carter. "Hey, can you hold her for a second? I need to make sure the sauce doesn't burn."

She was about to give Cara to him when I stepped in and lifted her out of her arms. "I've got her." My jaw clenched at how easily she had asked Carter to take my baby, but she wanted some sort of transition before I took her. It felt like she was purposefully trying to keep Cara away from me. Maybe that hadn't been her exact intention, but I knew I wasn't overreacting. Plus, Cara had never had any difficulty with the transition before, so it seemed as if she was using it as an excuse to hold onto her longer.

There was a serious problem here, but I didn't have the emotional bandwidth to deal with it this evening. There was too much going on with Annie's arrival today, so that discussion would have to wait.

"Have you eaten?" Carter asked cheerfully. "You're welcome to stay for dinner."

"Thanks, but Annie and I ate at the diner earlier."

He nodded pleasantly. "How'd it go with her?"

"It's going well for the most part." I tried to smile, but I was still angry with Melissa.

Carter glanced in the direction of the kitchen, then stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Go easy on your sister. She's been thinking a lot about Zoey lately, and the notion of you starting a relationship with someone else has been difficult for her. But don't worry, she'll come around."

I nodded reluctantly. "I know they were close, but surely she doesn't expect me to be single for the rest of my life."

"Of course not. Just give her time to get used to the idea."

I was about to voice my concerns about her attachment to Cara when Melissa returned. "So, you never told me what Mom and Dad thought of Annie?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk to them alone, but I could tell they liked her."

She waved a hand as if my explanation wasn't good enough. "I'll ask them later."

Carter chuckled and gave her a quick shoulder rub. "Babe, why don't you

give everyone a little space to figure this out without meddling?”

She turned on him, nostrils flaring. “It’s not meddling to ask how the visit went and what they thought of this woman who has taken an interest in my brother. I want to ensure he doesn’t make a mistake—”

Carter and I exchanged a look. I frowned and cleared my throat. “It’s not up to you to determine if I’m making a mistake. Did I get involved when you and Carter were dating?”

She laughed. “You were sixteen years old, and you were so enamored with Zoey that you didn’t care who I was seeing.”

That was true. “Look, just...calm down. Annie and I are both level-headed individuals, and we know what we want in life. Try not to be so critical.”

She pursed her lips and glanced away. “I’m not critical. I’m concerned.”

“And what are your concerns, exactly?” I should have dropped it like I normally did when she got this way, but I couldn’t this time.

“That you’re moving too quickly.”

My jaw clenched. “I don’t understand. How are we moving too fast?”

“Well... You...” She blew out a breath. “I can just tell that you’re more serious about her than you should be at this stage.”

Carter let out a burst of laughter and slapped his thigh. “Babe, you were ready to marry me on our third date.”

Melissa threw her arms up in frustration. “It’s impossible having a discussion when you two constantly back each other up. I don’t have time for this when I need to tend to dinner.” She glanced at me. “Are you bringing Cara over tomorrow?”

“Yes.” That was the plan we’d previously discussed since I was taking Annie on a hike.

She lifted a shoulder. “You might as well leave her here then. What’s the point of taking her home and then bringing her right back?”

I stared at her in disbelief. “What’s the point? She’s my daughter...”

Carter just shook his head. “Go on, Finn. Get a good night’s sleep and enjoy your day with Annie tomorrow.”

Cara’s bag was sitting on a nearby chair, so I picked it up and headed toward the door. Melissa and Carter were talking in hushed tones, but I didn’t care what they were saying at this point. All I knew was that once Annie returned to Arizona, Melissa and I needed to have a firm discussion about how things were going to look in the future.

Chapter Thirteen

Finn

On my way to pick Annie up for our hike, I couldn't stop thinking about all the drama the previous evening with Melissa. I loved my sister, and I appreciated her more than she even realized, but I was at the end of my rope with some of her antics. Nonetheless, I determined to put it out of my mind so it wouldn't ruin Annie's visit. I knew the issues weren't going away, but that didn't mean I had to focus on them. Today was all about spending time with Annie, and I wouldn't let anything get in the way.

I arrived at my parents' house just as Annie was finishing breakfast at the kitchen table. They were all laughing, and I caught the tail end of something Mom said.

"Finn's dad and I only dated for six months. Some people thought we needed to slow down, especially his mother, but we made it work."

I walked into the kitchen and Annie glanced up, her lips spread wide in a huge smile. She wore a pair of dark blue jeans and a blue long-sleeved T-shirt. She'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail, exposing her smooth, creamy neck.

"Hey, there you are," she said with a smile.

I sauntered over to her and gave her a hug. "Looks like I came right as you're finishing up."

"Don't rush that girl," Mom said, chuckling. "If she wants more pancakes, give her a few more minutes."

I threw my hands up in surrender. "Sorry. Take your time and eat as many pancakes as your heart desires."

She laughed. "Actually, I've had more than enough and I'm plenty stuffed." She glanced at Mom. "They were delicious, by the way. Thanks for knocking on my door this morning and inviting me over."

"Of course. What kind of hosts would we be if we didn't even invite you

over for breakfast?”

Dad filled up his mug of coffee and sat down at the table. He grinned mischievously. “Finn, are you here to save me? These women want to talk about girl stuff, and my testosterone level is shrinking by the moment.”

Mom playfully smacked him on the arm. “You’re the one who brought up the dating stories, remember?”

He gave her a sheepish smile. “Oh yeah. I forgot.”

I glanced at Annie and gestured for her to come with me. “These two will keep you here all day if you don’t learn how to make a quick exit.”

Mom put a fist on her hip and cocked her head to the side. “What are you trying to say?”

“Nothing. Love you, Mom.” I flashed a mischievous smile and snagged a piece of bacon on a platter in the middle of the table, then hungrily bit off a portion of it and chewed.

Annie gave both of them a hug goodbye, and they seemed pleased by the gesture. On the way out the door, I nudged her. “Look at you, winning over the parents.”

She smiled. “You were right. They are so easy to get along with. Your parents are great people. I enjoyed talking with them this morning.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

“I see where you get your kindness from.”

Warmth flooded through me, and I smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

We both slid into my vehicle, and I drove for about twenty minutes to the hiking trail. It was a fairly easy hike, and the views were spectacular, so I knew Annie would love it. When we got there, we took the path that led straight through the forest and up the mountain. As we walked, the sun dipped through the treetops, creating shadows below.

I attempted to walk slowly, so she didn't feel forced to match my stride. That was something Zoey had complained about when we went on walks together. She always reminded me that my legs were longer than hers, and she couldn't keep up with my pace. It was hard being a widower at my age, but at least I'd learned a few things about relationships, and I was determined to make use of those lessons.

After about a mile, we reached the upper ridge of the mountain. We were both out of breath, but Annie had done well. She held onto my arm as we looked at the view below, a vast landscape of mountains and wilderness stretching as far as we could see, with a small river carving through the

center.

“It’s breathtaking,” she said in a reverent tone. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my life.”

“It’s definitely a highlight in this area.”

I slid my backpack off my shoulder and opened it so she could pull her camera out. She’d told me earlier that she had a fancy camera that took professional quality photographs, and I’d offered to hold on to it for her. She lifted it and started snapping pictures from different angles. After taking numerous photographs of the scenery, she took one of us, selfie-style, holding the camera up high.

After that, we continued down the mountain until we came to a small clearing near the river. I took out a brown blanket and we sat on a grassy area close to the water. Annie leaned her head on my shoulder, and I put my arm around her back while we appreciated the views. We didn’t say a single word, but we didn’t need to. It was nice to sit in silence, enjoying the peace and tranquility.

Eventually, Annie peered up at me, her gaze meeting mine. “When you came to Arizona to visit me, I shared a lot about my past. I’m wondering if you’d share a little about yours?”

“Sure, what would you like to know?”

“You talked about Cara and your orchard farm, but what was your marriage to Zoey like?”

Knots formed in my stomach, but I was ready for this discussion even though it wasn’t the most comfortable thing to talk about. For a moment, a hawk circling over the mountain distracted me, but I blinked and returned my attention to Annie.

“Well, as you know, we dated in high school.”

“Yes... That was one similarity you and I have, since my late husband and I were high school sweethearts as well.”

“Yeah... We got married right out of college. Everyone was happy for us, and daily life was easy for the first couple of years.”

Annie nodded. “All marriages start in the honeymoon phase.”

I chuckled. “Very true. Initially, it seemed almost effortless because we knew each other so well. But after some time passed, I noticed Zoey seemed discontent with a lot of things.”

“What was bothering her?”

I laughed. “The real question is, ‘What didn’t bother her?’”

“Oh...”

“It’s not that her personality lent itself to complaining, but generally speaking, she wasn’t happy in our marriage.”

“Did you argue a lot?”

I shook my head. “Hardly ever. I did my best to please her. I brought her flowers and took her out on dates, but none of those things seemed to help. On the outside looking in, our peers thought we were the perfect couple, but that was far from the truth. One day, she finally told me what was going through her head.” My stomach clenched, and it felt like a burden resting on my shoulders. It was hard to admit this to Annie, but I wanted her to know everything, including the problems I’d faced in my marriage. “She said she didn’t feel a spark anymore, and she wished she’d dated other people before agreeing to settle down. I asked if she still loved me and she told me she did, but she clarified that it was more of a platonic love. After that, I tried to change so she would love me more, but it didn’t work.”

“Oh, Finn, that’s horrible,” Annie said, softening her voice. She reached for my hand. “I’m so sorry you went through that. That’s the last thing any married person wants to hear from their spouse.”

I hung my head, my cheeks flaming from embarrassment. “It made me feel like there was something wrong with me.”

“There is nothing wrong with you. I can’t speak from Zoey’s perspective, but I can speak from my own. You’re an amazing man and any woman would be lucky to have you. To be honest, I’m thankful you’re considering *me*.”

I laughed outright. “It’s the other way around. I’m lucky you’re giving me a chance. I’ve got a baby and a farm in a remote area of Alaska, and you’ll have to bend over backward to make your life fit with mine.” As soon as I said it, I regretted the words. “I’m not trying to scare you away, but that’s the truth.”

“And it’s one of the reasons I like you, Finn. You’re upfront and honest. You don’t hide anything or pretend to be someone you’re not.”

I gave her an appreciative smile. “Thanks for being so positive and encouraging.”

She squeezed my hand. “If this thing between us goes further—I hope I can be your biggest encourager.”

It was only one statement, but it showed the depth of her kindness. Someone as beautiful as her could have anyone she wanted, but she was here with me. It blew my mind. “God brought us together at exactly the right

time.”

“I agree with you.”

I cleared my throat. “So, I just need to say this, and then we can move on.”

She nodded, her forehead wrinkling. “Okay...”

“I know it’s a little early to figure out some of this stuff, but if you don’t feel a spark with me... If the attraction you know you should have isn’t there —”

“You have nothing to worry about in that department.”

“Because I’m starting to fall for you, Annie, and it would be painful to find out you didn’t feel the same way later down the road. I think now’s a good time to address it.”

Her cheeks flushed a fiery crimson that matched the color of her hair. “Since you’re asking, I’m very attracted to you, and I’m falling hard as well.”

Relief rushed through my chest, and I pulled her close, breathing in the flowery scent of her perfume. “Thanks. I needed to hear that.”

She drew back and glanced up at me with a small smile, her cheeks still stained pink. “What about you? Are you attracted to me?”

A snicker escaped my lips before I could suppress it. “Am I attracted to you? Are you kidding me? You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. How could I not be?” I met her gaze so she could see the sincerity in my eyes. “But it’s more than that. I’m drawn to the person you are inside: your joy, your positivity, and your kindness.”

I didn’t think she could get any redder, but I was wrong. She placed her hands over her face and chuckled. “I must be as red as a bowl of cherries.”

“It’s a good look on you.”

She shook her head, laughing. “Okay, we need to change the subject so I can stop blushing. Quick...anything.”

I searched for a random topic and then said the first thing that came to mind. “Apple pie.”

She smiled. “What about it?”

“What is your favorite version?”

“The classic one, for sure. But caramel apple pie is my next favorite.”

“Do you prefer a top crust in addition to the bottom, or only the bottom?”

“Definitely a top crust.”

“Green or red apples?” I asked.

“I like Granny Smith for their tartness and firm texture.”

“Me too, actually, but I’ll take any variety.”

We continued to talk about apple pie until we were both craving a slice, and then we headed back hand in hand.

“So, you were concerned if I felt a spark,” Annie said, glancing at me. “I guess I’m concerned about whether you can accept my past.” Her brows furrowed slightly. “I don’t expect you to give me an answer now, but it would hurt to find out later that you had reservations and didn’t voice them.”

“That’s completely fair,” I said. “I know I might have seemed a little hesitant when you first told me, and I’m still praying about it, to be honest, but I feel a sense of peace. We all have things that trip us up and—”

“It was more than being tripped up, but I understand what you’re saying. You’re trying to boost my morale, and I appreciate that. I want you to know that I take it seriously, and I’m in a different place in life than I was back then. Now that I have the Lord, He helps me with disappointments and discouragements.”

I put my arm around her shoulders as we walked. “I truly believe we can make it work. The last thing I want to do is harp on something you overcame. It’s in the past, and the Lord has transformed you.”

She glanced up at me and smiled. We strolled through the forest in the direction of my vehicle, the sound of our feet crunching over pine needles. Overhead, the birds were chirping up a storm, and a sense of peace and contentment stole over me. I silently thanked the Lord for bringing Annie into my life. There was no way I could have found someone like her on my own. I would forever be in debt to Jasmine for setting us up. And that reminded me...

“Hey, I know we discussed this a little after I visited you in Arizona, but whatever came of that issue between you and Jasmine?”

Annie winced and stared at the ground for several long seconds. “It’s still the same situation. I don’t think it’s my place to say anything. I can’t speak for her, and I don’t want to make things uncomfortable. So...if you feel it’s something you need to know more about, go back to her and discuss it.”

I nodded slowly. “I hope she’s not interested in me.”

Annie’s eyes bulged and she quickly glanced away. She remained quiet, which meant... Jasmine was probably interested or Annie would’ve clarified immediately. “Hey... Just so we’re clear, Jasmine and I are only friends. I’ve never had feelings for her, and she never showed an interest in me.” It was baffling to think she suddenly felt something different, and I couldn’t

imagine what that was based on. Still, I didn't want to overthink it since she'd refused to discuss it before I flew back home. It probably wasn't a big deal. I truly hoped she would find someone who was a better match for her. "You don't have to say more. We can change the subject."

Annie nodded, and it appeared as if my words had reassured her. We talked about lighter things after that, and when we finally emerged from the woods and I saw my truck in the distance, I pulled Annie into an impromptu hug and brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm glad we did this today."

"Me too."

I leaned in and rested my forehead against hers, dizzy with love and possibility. "This week is already going by faster than I want it to, but I plan to savor every second."

"I agree," she said. "We may not have a lot of time, but let's make every moment count."

Chapter Fourteen

Annie

After that amazing hike, we drove back to Debbie and Kevin's house, and I was relieved to see Melissa's vehicle in the driveway. I would finally get to meet her and Cara, and I truly hoped it went well. Finn had told me on the way over that his sister had said her disappearance the previous day was a misunderstanding, as she had intended to give me undistracted time with his parents. That seemed reasonable, but I could sense Finn's uneasiness about it. I figured it was more complex than that, and I understood building connections required patience. It wasn't like she and I would be best friends overnight, but I genuinely wanted to make a good impression on her. I didn't have a family of my own, so it was important that Finn's family accepted me.

We strolled up to the front porch, and Finn didn't stop to knock but opened the door and walked in. "Hellooo," he shouted in his deep voice.

I heard more voices coming from the back room. Melissa hesitantly approached us first, holding Cara. Melissa's wavy, dirty blonde hair brushed her shoulders, and her brown eyes looked similar to her dad's.

"Hi, Annie. Nice to meet you," she said in an overly cheerful tone. Her smile was tight as she leaned in and gave me a stiff, one-armed hug.

"It's nice to meet you too," I said. "I've heard great things about you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, Finn told me how you stepped in to help with Cara and how amazing you've been."

She shrugged. "It's not a hardship if that's what you mean. Cara is like my own daughter."

"I didn't mean to imply that it was a hardship, only that you've been a tremendous help."

"That's what families do." Her eyes flashed as if challenging me to disagree with her. "They support each other."

Finn frowned, his shoulders tensing. “No need to get defensive, Melissa. She was only pointing out how helpful you are to me.”

She blinked and then relaxed her expression. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to come across as rude. I was just trying to convey that Cara is a delight, and I love her very much.”

“Of course,” I said.

My gaze immediately went to the baby, and my heart swelled. Her plump cheeks and bright, curious smile were so endearing. She was even more precious than her photo, and my arms ached to hold her. But I sensed Melissa wouldn’t easily let her go, so I restrained myself, respecting Melissa’s bond with her niece. I was sure Finn would give me the chance later on.

He introduced me to Melissa’s husband, Carter, and their two children, Anabelle and Simon. Carter had a wide smile, and the kids were both polite and friendly. Finn’s dad waved at us from the other side of the room. “Glad you made it back. How was the hike?”

“Awesome,” I said. “The views were spectacular. I got some amazing photographs.”

Finn leaned in and put his arm around me. “I enjoyed it for different reasons. I had Annie’s company, and that was all that mattered to me.” He said it playfully, but there was a serious note in his voice that melted my heart.

“Don’t blame you there,” his dad said, chuckling. “Oh, by the way, we ordered pizza and it should be here any minute. Your mom was going to cook, but I told her not to worry herself.” He glanced at me uncertainly. “Do you eat pizza?”

“Oh, yeah, I love it.”

“That’s a relief. I wanted to make sure we got something you liked. We chose a place that also makes vegan pizzas, so Melissa can eat it, but we have a separate one for us that has cheese and pepperoni.”

“I’m fine with either, actually.”

He smiled appreciatively. “That’s great.”

Finn walked over to Melissa and took baby Cara from her arms. Melissa seemed hesitant to give her up, but she didn’t protest. He strode over to me, his expression reflecting the pride that only a father would have. “Do you want to hold her?”

“I would love to.” I reached out to take her from him, smiling from ear to ear. She smelled like baby powder and strawberries, and she stared at me in

wonder for several moments. As I held her close, I felt a radiant sense of joy. “Hey, little one,” I cooed. “Look how beautiful you are.”

She smiled in response, and a rush of warmth and tenderness filled my heart. I tickled her feet, watching for her response. She giggled, then reached for my hair with her chubby hands.

“Aw, who’s the cutest widdle baby?” I asked, not even caring that I sounded like an idiot. “Yes, you are! Yes, you are!” I bounced with her in my arms and she giggled again.

“Actually,” Melissa interjected, her voice tight, “we don’t use baby talk around Cara. We believe it’s better to talk in a normal tone.”

I blinked, surprised she was making an issue the first time I even met Cara, but I wanted to keep the peace. “Okay, I didn’t know that. Thanks for telling me.”

Finn shook his head and laughed. “I regularly use baby talk with her.”

“But remember when I addressed that with you?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t think it matters at her age. When she’s learning to speak, I’ll be more careful.”

Melissa shrugged. “It’s up to you, I guess, but that’s my opinion, and I’ve done well with Anabelle and Simon.”

Mischief flickered in Finn’s eyes, then he turned to Cara with an exaggerated, serious expression. “You hear that, Cara? No baby talk for you. Only sophisticated conversations from now on.”

Melissa socked him on the arm and laughed. “You’re silly.”

I smiled, watching the two of them. They clearly had a strong sibling bond, and Finn had a way of breaking down Melissa’s defenses.

But as I continued to engage with Cara, Melissa hovered, observing my every move. Being a nanny, I was used to that, so it didn’t faze me, but I wondered how long she would keep that up.

“Make sure you hold her securely but gently,” she instructed, even though I already was. “And don’t let her grab your earrings—she’ll yank them right out.”

Finn cleared his throat. “Didn’t I tell you she’s a nanny? She takes care of a baby, so she knows what she’s doing.”

“But thanks for the reminders,” I said. “I’m glad you’re looking out for us, and I promise to be careful with her.”

“Of course.” She drew back, appearing slightly embarrassed. “I get a little overprotective at times because she doesn’t have a mother.”

“That’s completely understandable,” I said.

Finn ran a hand over his jaw and gave Melissa a pointed look. “Would it be okay if we had some private time? Just the three of us?”

“Sure.” She looked at me as if expecting me to leave, and I didn’t know what to do.

“Annie, me, and Cara,” Finn clarified.

“Oh, right.” Her cheeks flushed, and she turned and headed toward the kitchen.

Once she was gone, Finn leaned in. “Sorry about that. She’s very attached to Cara as you can see.”

“That’s okay. I’m just glad Cara has someone who loves her that much.”

Finn gave me a small smile and winked, his eyes filling with emotion. “Thank you for being so patient.”

My heart ached for Melissa because I could tell this was hard for her, but I wasn’t sure how to reassure her I had the best of intentions. Hopefully, in time, we would become friends, and she would relax.

When the pizzas arrived, we all dug in, and everyone was lively and fun. We played charades after dinner, and Finn and I were partners, which made it even more enjoyable. As the evening progressed, Melissa kept her distance, but she wasn’t outright rude. I felt this immense pain in my heart for her, and I sensed that God was giving me empathy for her situation. I wanted to reach out to her, but I didn’t know how.

Suddenly, an idea came to me. I pulled Finn aside and leaned in. “What would you think if I invited Melissa for coffee tomorrow morning? Just the two of us…”

Finn’s expression softened and he squeezed my shoulder. “That’s a great plan.”

“Maybe if she and I spent some time on our own, it would help break the ice.”

“I agree. Thank you for taking the initiative on that. It shows your heart.”

His sister was just walking out of the kitchen, so I cleared my throat. “Hey Melissa, would you be interested in having coffee with me tomorrow?”

She stopped in her tracks, her brows furrowing in confusion. “You mean with you, Finn, and Cara?”

“No, only the two of us.”

She paused for several seconds as if processing that information. “But aren’t you here to spend time with Finn?”

I smiled encouragingly. “Yes, but I’m also here to meet his family as well. We’re considering a future together, and that includes you. I just thought it would be nice to get to know you better.”

She looked like a deer in headlights, and I instantly felt bad for putting her on the spot. Maybe she didn’t care for the idea. The thought hurt, but I refused to take it personally. She didn’t even know me, and there were other issues at play here.

She bit her bottom lip and glanced over at her kids as if looking for an escape. “Um…”

“It’s okay if you can’t,” I said, trying to give her an out.

“Yeah, I think that might be difficult,” she said. “I have some errands I need to do, and I’ll have Cara as well.”

“I’ll watch Cara,” Finn said. “And I’m sure the errands can wait for a couple of hours. Either that, or maybe you and Annie should plan it for a different day.”

She glared at him and glanced away. It happened so quickly, it would have been easy to miss, but I managed to catch it.

I didn’t want to force the issue and make things worse. “Look, it’s okay. I know you’re busy, and if you aren’t able to get together while I’m out here, that’s fine. We can try again in the future.”

She was about to say something when Finn interjected. “Nonsense. She has plenty of free time while the kids are at their day camp. One hour out of her day won’t cause a problem.”

She pressed her lips together and then nodded curtly. “Sure, we can get together tomorrow morning.”

Even though she didn’t seem enthusiastic, I felt slightly encouraged. Once she got to know me and understood that I wasn’t trying to get in the way of her bond with Cara, her response to me would improve. I just knew it instinctively. At least… I hoped.

Chapter Fifteen

Finn

Things were going well with Annie. I enjoyed spending time with her the previous day when we went on the hike, and it seemed that my parents genuinely liked her. Dinner at their place with Melissa and her family had gone okay for the most part. Melissa had been a little difficult, but it didn't surprise me, considering the concerns she'd brought up.

Annie's efforts to get to know her better had impressed me, especially since Melissa hadn't given her the warmest reception. I truly believed that once they had some time on their own, they would form a friendship, as long as Melissa gave it a chance.

The plan was for Melissa to pick Annie up from Mom and Dad's at eight-thirty a.m., and they'd spend an hour or two at a coffee place in town. After that, Melissa and Annie would drive over to my house, and Melissa said she would watch Cara while Annie and I found something to do.

And speaking of that... I'd woken up this morning with a sudden idea, so I'd called in a favor from a friend who gave helicopter rides to tourists. He'd said he would pencil in an hour for Annie and me around noon, and I figured I'd take her out to lunch after that. We'd previously asked each other a lot of questions in the early stages of talking over the phone, so I knew she wasn't afraid of heights. I couldn't wait for her to see Alaska from the sky with all the glorious sights. Maybe it would make her want to move here, and I'd do anything to encourage that.

Later in the morning, around ten-thirty, my phone rang, and the caller I.D. showed Mom's number. I picked up right away. "Hey, Mom."

"Hi, have you heard from Melissa at all?"

"No, but I'm assuming she and Annie should be here any minute. Why?"

"She never came to pick Annie up, and that's not like her. I've been calling and calling, but she's not answering her phone."

My heart sank and irritation swept through me. “Did you check with Carter?”

“I hate to bother him at work, but I thought she might have called you.”

“No, she didn’t.”

Mom sighed. “Hmm...well, I don’t know what happened. Maybe she assumed the plans were on a different day.”

“No, I specifically heard her say she would stop by this morning.”

“Well, I hope she’s okay.”

My jaw tightened. I didn’t want to say it to Mom, but there was a good chance she disappeared on purpose, considering how she’d been acting lately. “She’s probably fine, but I’m in a bit of a pickle because I scheduled an impromptu helicopter ride for Annie and me. Can you watch Cara?”

“Sure, of course. Bring her over. You might as well come now.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you in a bit.”

I ended the call and let out an angry grunt. Melissa had always been so dependable, but suddenly she was the biggest flake when it came to Annie. I’d been patient with her, but this was not acceptable. I sent her a quick text. *Hey, what happened this morning? Mom said you never showed up.*

I put Cara in her car seat and drove to Mom and Dad’s place. Right as I was parking out front, my phone dinged with a text. *Oh, my goodness. I am so sorry! I had a horrible headache last night and took one of Carter’s painkillers for his back. It made me extremely groggy, and I accidentally overslept. Please apologize to Annie for me.*

Okay, that was weird. Why would she do that when she knew she had to get up early? Maybe it was just an excuse. The timing was too convenient. Dread washed over me as I thought about how to explain this to Annie. I wanted her to feel good about her visit, and the last thing I needed was for her to sense that one of my family members didn’t accept her. The more time I spent with her, the more I hoped things would work out. What if she saw this as a red flag and was hesitant to move forward? Not wanting to deal with difficult in-laws was high up on the list of reasons someone might break things off. I had to smooth this over somehow.

I typed out a quick response. *Sorry to hear about your headache. When would you like to reschedule? This is very important to me. I want you and Annie to get along.*

I tucked my phone in my back pocket and got Cara out of her car seat, then brought her inside. Mom and Annie were sitting on the couch laughing

with a photo album in front of them.

Annie glanced up and grinned. “Your mom’s showing me pictures from your childhood. You were so cute!”

“Oh, great... Mom, you can skip over the one of me at two, running through the house naked.”

“Too late,” Mom said, snickering.

My face heated, but I brushed it off. Wasn’t this a rite of passage? Moms were supposed to show embarrassing pictures to one’s love interest.

“Can I hold her?” Annie asked, glancing up at Cara.

“Of course.”

She stood and took Cara from me, her face instantly lighting up. “Hello, sweetheart. How are you this morning?”

Cara cooed and then smiled, and it warmed my heart to see her responding so well to Annie.

I glanced at Mom. “I brought everything you’ll need, along with some toys for her.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“Ohh, toys,” Annie said. “Do you mind if I take out a few and play with her for a while?”

“Sure, go ahead.” I pointed to some space on the other side of the room. “Set her down over there. There’s more space for her to move around.”

While she got Cara situated on the baby blanket, I moved closer to Mom and spoke in a quiet tone. “Melissa texted me. She said she took one of Carter’s painkillers last night and slept in.”

Mom nodded discretely. “I know. She called right before you arrived. She must have had a terrible headache if she took something that strong.”

“Maybe. But she’s been resistant, and I’m getting vibes that she’s having trouble with me moving on.”

“She and Zoey were close,” Mom said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, but I think it’s more than that. She’s gotten very attached to Cara. And I’m sure she knows on some level that if I get married, I won’t need her help on a daily basis anymore.”

Mom pressed her lips into a grim line. “She has her own family to tend to. Carter has mentioned some concerns more than once, but I didn’t want to believe it was true.”

“Really? What did he say?”

Mom bit her lip and was quiet for several long moments as if hesitant to

repeat anything.

“Tell me,” I demanded.

She leaned her forearms on her knees and winced. “Apparently, she asked him how he would feel if they took Cara permanently.”

I was so taken aback that my mouth dropped open and my heart began to race. If Annie hadn’t been there, I would have lost it. “Are you serious? Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

She gave me a guilty look. “Carter asked me not to. He said he knows how to deal with Melissa, and he didn’t want to worry you.”

“But that’s serious.” I ran a hand through my hair and let out a breath. I glanced over at Annie, who was happily playing with Cara on the other side of the room before leaning in again. “Things need to change. I was already thinking about putting Cara in daycare before you brought this up. Melissa hasn’t been recognizing my authority in Cara’s life for a while now, and it’s frustrating.”

Mom nodded sadly and mouthed, “We’ll talk about it later,” just as Annie picked up Cara and walked over.

“Is everything okay?” Annie glanced between us. She must have sensed the tension from the other side of the room.

I forced a smile. “Yeah, we’re fine.” I pushed my negative thoughts to the back burner so it didn’t affect her. “So, guess what? I have a surprise for you.”

She immediately brightened. “You do?”

“Yep. Mom’s going to watch Cara while we go off and do our own thing.”

“And what does that entail?” she asked, laughing.

“It won’t be a surprise if I tell you. Have you eaten breakfast, by the way?”

“Yes, your mom was gracious enough to make eggs and toast this morning.”

“Good, I wouldn’t want you to do this on an empty stomach.”

“Well, now you’ve sparked my curiosity.”

I smiled. “You’ll find out shortly. First, you should grab some warm clothes just in case you get cold.”

“Okay, let me run to the cottage. I’ll be right back.” She walked over and handed Cara to me, then took off in the direction of the guest house.

Once she was gone, Mom gave me a pointed look. “Don’t allow this thing

with Melissa to sour your visit with Annie. Your father and I like her, and if I'm not mistaken, the two of you seem to get on well. I can tell by the way you look at her that you see something special in her."

"Yes, she's amazing. I have limited time with her, and I don't want any of this drama to interfere. I'll deal with Melissa once Annie returns to Arizona."

Mom stood and nodded her agreement. "That's a solid plan."

I took out my cell phone to check if Melissa had texted back, but there was nothing from her. Whatever. I wouldn't let it bother me. I would do my best to shield Annie from any unpleasantness, and I'd talk with Melissa later.

Chapter Sixteen

Annie

After handing Cara over to Finn, I jogged out to the cottage in the backyard to pick up a light jacket in case I got cold. I loved surprises, so when Finn shared he was taking me somewhere, a sense of anticipation filled me. Once inside the guest house, I searched through the closet for my jacket and grabbed it as soon as I found it.

My thoughts turned to a particular issue that had concerned me earlier. When I was playing with Cara, I could have sworn Finn and his mom were whispering about something, and the mood in the room was tense. They'd kept their voices low so I couldn't hear them, but when I asked if everything was okay, they assured me they were fine. It probably had to do with Melissa not showing up for our coffee date. It hadn't surprised me when she flaked, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed. A knot formed in my stomach thinking about it, but I pushed it aside. I had done nothing wrong, so there was no reason for Melissa to hate me. Hopefully, she was telling the truth about having a bad headache the night before.

When I got to the main house, Finn and Debbie were waiting for me. Debbie told us to enjoy ourselves, and then she shooed us off. At least Finn's parents had been kind. In fact, they'd been more than welcoming, and I was enjoying getting to know them. Once Finn and I were in the car, we talked about where we wanted to have lunch in town, so I knew the surprise had to be local.

We drove for a while, and when we finally got there, my eyes widened when I saw a sign that said *Alaskan Peaks Helicopter Excursions*. I clapped my hands in delight. "Are we doing this?"

Finn nodded. "Yep. I called in a favor and my buddy scheduled us for an hour."

"That's amazing. Thank you!" I quickly leaned in and hugged him.

Without thinking, I pressed a kiss to his cheek and then drew back slightly, laughing at my impulsiveness. “Oops. I got some lipstick there.” I wiped it away with my thumb.

Finn didn’t seem to mind at all by the way he was smiling. “Feel free to do that anytime.”

I chuckled as we both exited the vehicle and headed inside a small office. Finn checked us in and we had to sign some liability forms. I used the restroom, and then a staff member led Finn and me to the helicopter that was already waiting for us.

We boarded, strapped ourselves in, and put on noise-canceling headphones. The headphones allowed us to talk to each other through a microphone, but it helped to block out some of the other loud noises. My heart raced as the rotors whirred to life and we lifted into the sky, the landscape below extending into a beautiful array of forest and wilderness. I stared in awe at the untamed beauty. It felt like I was in another world. “Wow.”

Finn laced his fingers through mine, and I glanced over at him and smiled.

“Look over there,” he shouted through the headphones, pointing at a herd of bison running gracefully across the plains.

Their powerful bodies moved in unison, captivating me, and I took several pictures with my camera. I squeezed his hand, grateful for the opportunity to experience this with him. “They’re incredible.”

Eagles soared beneath us, riding the wind currents and drifting in and out of view. The rugged beauty of this untouched land filled me with a strange longing. I wanted to lose myself in this place, to shed the remnants of my old life and start over with Finn. My face heated at the thought. What would he think if he could read my thoughts? Were we on the same page? Or were my feelings surpassing his?

Our pilot spoke through the headsets and gave some history of the area. We continued to glide over the territory, spotting a moose eating some foliage in the distance. We drifted over jagged mountains and an enormous glacier came into view on the other side. I gasped at how massive it was, its blue and white hues shimmering in the light. The ice formations around it appeared like frozen rivers forming pathways below. “I’ve never seen anything more beautiful in my life.”

Finn chuckled. “Didn’t you recently say that when we went on the hike?”

I smiled. “Yeah, but it keeps getting better and better. I understand now why you don’t want to leave this place. If I lived here, you couldn’t drag me away.”

Maybe it was the adrenaline talking, but seeing God’s creation with Finn made me feel an intense connection with him in a way that I’d never experienced with anyone else. Things were moving so quickly with us, and it was a little scary at times, but there was an undeniable bond between us that grew stronger with each day. I could picture a life here with him, and at that moment, I knew without a doubt that I was falling in love with him. I was falling in love with Alaska, too.

Finn turned to face me, his eyes flickering with emotion. “If you lived here, I don’t think I could ever let you go.” Suddenly, a burst of laughter escaped his lips. “That sounded a bit stalkerish.”

I chuckled, finding his statement humorous. “Finn Mercer, is there something I should know about you?”

He held his hands up in surrender. “No, I’m definitely not a stalker.”

“I’m only teasing. You’re too sensible to do a thing like that.”

The chopper brought us closer to the glacier, and its enormous crevasses and icefalls astonished me. Every detail made me lift my heart in praise to the God who had created it all. I felt so tiny and insignificant, yet I knew the Lord cared about even the small things that mattered to me.

We descended deeper, following the glacier’s course through mountain passes and valleys. We swiftly rode through the air, the terrain blending into rivers and a few isolated trees. Enormous granite peaks protruded into the sky, guarding the unspoiled land below.

When the chopper abruptly banked, it turned my field of vision upside down. We swung over a sizable canyon with misty depths, and my breath caught in my throat. I didn’t know how to process the beauty set before me.

On the way home, Finn leaned in, his eyes glimmering. “Was it a pleasant surprise?”

I choked back a laugh. “Are you kidding me? Good doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel right now. It was amazing. Better than anything I could have chosen to do on my own.”

He smiled, seeming pleased. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“I didn’t *like* it. I absolutely *loved* it.” Our gazes locked, and there was another meaning behind my words, but I wasn’t sure if he realized it yet.

* * *

The days swept by, and my two-week trip came to an end before I was prepared to depart. Finn and I had done so many amazing things together that I could barely keep track of them all. We'd visited a reindeer farm where we'd gotten the chance to observe those remarkable creatures up close. And we'd picnicked at Reflections Lake, taking in the glassy waters and the stunning mountain scenery beyond. We had endless walks on Finn's property, played board games with his parents twice, and I even got to visit his church and meet his friends, Wesley and Danielle. It was a whirlwind that ended too quickly. I would be flying home this evening, and to be honest, I was dreading it. I didn't want to leave.

Finn and I'd had countless conversations about the future. We'd discussed our compatibility, and we both felt positive about the prospect of melding our lives together. There was still so much we didn't know about each other, but we were willing to learn and grow through the challenges. We'd leaped over hurdles and progressed farther than we'd ever dreamed possible, yet it left me wanting more. I didn't want to say goodbye to him. The thought brought tears to my eyes.

We were spending our last day together with Cara at his place. We'd played with her all morning and took her on a walk around the farm. She was currently napping while I watched Finn make his promised apple pie. He had just finished rolling out the flaky pie crust, and he gently pressed it into the glass dish. I'd helped slice the apples, and he made a sauce to go with it. Once he poured the filling into the pie shell, he covered the surface with another layer of crust and sealed it with the edges of a fork. After creating a few decorative slits on top, he put it in the oven and set a timer.

"All done," he said with a smirk. "Did you take notes?"

I laughed. "Sure, some mental notes, but you'll probably have to demonstrate the process a second time before I get the hang of it." I'd made apple pie before, but it was fun teasing him a little.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me in close. "I'll make it as many times as you want."

I drew back slightly and gazed at him. "Promise?"

His eyes clouded as if suddenly realizing what he was agreeing to. Embarrassment washed through me because I wasn't trying to use the situation to get him to agree to a future with me. It was something I'd said in jest. I moved away, my cheeks growing hot. "Sorry. I wasn't trying—"

"I know. It's okay. I could easily just agree, but when I give my word, it means something. The last thing I'd want is to make a flippant promise when I'm not sure I can deliver."

"I get it. We're still trying to figure out what we want. I didn't intend to make you pledge yourself to me."

His eyes twinkled. "But if I had pledged myself to you, would it have made you uncomfortable?"

I didn't even hesitate. "No, not at all."

He winkled. "Good to know."

The air warmed, and there was this incredible pull, drawing us together. He leaned in, cupping my face, and he was just about to kiss me when Cara started crying from the other room.

We both drew back, and I laughed. "Duty calls." I laughed again at his devastated expression. "It's okay, we'll have other moments."

"But you're leaving this evening."

"Right." My stomach clenched at the reminder. It was as if we were in our own little bubble and I'd already forgotten how quickly it was coming to an end.

Finn left to get Cara from her crib while I glanced at the time. We had four more hours until we had to leave for the airport. This was tough. Way tougher than I'd thought it would be. The trip had gone so well, so I should be celebrating, but instead, I felt miserable. It was at that moment that I realized something that shocked me a little. If Finn asked me to marry him right now, I would say yes. I wouldn't even have to think about it. More than anything, I wanted this life with him and Cara. I could picture it...envision the three of us together. It was a beautiful sight, but at this point, it was only a fantasy.

Chapter Seventeen

Finn

The airport was bustling with people as I helped Annie bring her suitcase to the luggage counter. I waited as she stood in line to check her bags, and then we walked to the security checkpoint. I held on to her hand and didn't want to let go. What started as admiration in the early days of communication had developed into much more, even though we didn't have the luxury of living in the same state. We'd had to be purposeful and intentional about getting to know each other, and it had paid off.

Now I understood why so many people said long-distance relationships were hard. It was excruciating to have to say goodbye when all I wanted to do was keep her here with me in Alaska. My feelings were intense. More intense than I had expected at this stage in the relationship. A couple of times I almost went down on one knee and proposed, but I didn't want to risk her pulling away because it was too much too soon. I would wait and be patient. It would be difficult, but I would do whatever had to be done.

"I wish we had more time," I said, my voice cracking.

"Me too." She glanced down and wiped the corner of her eyes. "I had such an amazing trip, Finn. It was a dream vacation, but more importantly, I got to know you better, and I don't want to go home."

"I don't want you to go either."

"My only regret..."

My eyes widened slightly. "Yeah?"

"My only regret is that Melissa and I never went for coffee."

At least her regrets didn't have anything to do with me. Despite that, the issue with Melissa had upset me a great deal. I didn't want her to worry about that, though. Melissa was my problem to manage. "Please don't take it personally. She has some emotional issues that are making it difficult for her to see me move on. I'm not happy with the way she acted while you were

here, but I don't want you to stress about it. She'll come around."

She nodded. "Yes, I think she will." There was some doubt in her eyes, but she didn't voice whatever thoughts were going through her head.

She glanced at the security checkpoint and swallowed hard. "I should probably go."

The muscles in my shoulders tensed. "Yeah... Guess this is goodbye." Our gazes locked, and I could see her fighting back tears.

"Thank you for everything," she whispered.

I pulled her into an embrace and we stood like that for the longest time, neither one of us wanting to be the first to let go. "I'll visit you as soon as I can break free."

She sniffed as tears slid down her face. "I know you have a lot of responsibilities, so if it's too hard, I understand."

I cupped her face and wiped her tears with my thumbs. "Hey, you're a priority now. I'll do whatever it takes to see you. The moment you walk away, I'm going to miss you, so expect to hear from me soon."

She laughed at that. "I'm holding you to it."

I leaned in and brushed my lips over hers, tasting the salt from her tears. Our kiss was tender and sweet and filled with longing. Reluctantly, I pulled away and let out a sigh. "Annie, there's something I need to tell you before you go."

A crease formed on her forehead, and she glanced at me with uncertainty. "Okay..."

I looked her straight in the eye. "I don't want to freak you out by moving too fast, so if this is too much—"

"Tell me," she demanded.

"I love you."

Her smile lit up her face, and she drew me back into a hug. She wrapped her arms around my neck and held on for several long moments. "I love you too, Finn. I've been waiting to hear you say those words."

We remained in the embrace, neither of us wanting to break away. "By the way," I said, casually, "was the apple pie all that you hoped it would be?"

She burst out laughing and drew back, wiping her eyes. "Only you would ask about an apple pie when we're declaring our love for each other, but since you're asking, it was the best apple pie I've ever had."

My grin stretched from ear to ear. "I know my thoughts must seem disconnected, but I guess I just want you to be happy. I want to please you."

“You already have.”

Those words went straight to my gut. At times, it had felt like I would never please Zoey, but Annie was happy with who I was and what I did for her. “Thank you for being so sweet.” I pulled her in for one last hug, kissing her on the cheek, and then I let her go. “Call me when you land, okay?”

She nodded. “I will.”

She turned and joined the line at the security checkpoint. I waited until she went through it and was out of sight, and then I headed back to my truck. She had barely left, and I already felt an ache in my chest. As I climbed into my vehicle and drove away, my mind started whirring with possibilities. It would be difficult to take off more time, but I would make it happen somehow.

* * *

The next day, I ambled toward the house after putting in a full day’s work in my orchard. All morning I’d been thinking about what to say to Melissa, and I’d concluded that the best way to approach this was to be as straightforward as possible. Melissa wasn’t one of those people who could take a hint. She needed clear, concise communication on the matter.

When I walked inside, Melissa was holding Cara and watching TV. She glanced up briefly and smiled. “I made a vegan casserole for you earlier. It’s in the refrigerator. All you have to do is heat it up in the oven.”

I froze, wondering what went into a vegan casserole. “What are the ingredients?”

“It’s good. You’ll like it. It’s got potatoes and apples and sauerkraut. Very healthy.”

I resisted the urge to gag and instead forced a smile. I was sure it took time and effort, so I remained quiet to avoid offending her. “Thanks.”

“Let me know what you think after you try some.”

I wasn’t certain if I would, but I didn’t want to start off this conversation by upsetting her. “Okay.” I cleared my throat. “Um...Melissa, we need to talk.”

She turned hesitantly. “Sure, what’s up?”

“Maybe you should put Cara down in her crib first. I don’t want her picking up on any tension.”

Her brows lifted. “There’s going to be tension in this discussion? I don’t know if I want to hang around for that.”

Since she hadn’t moved a muscle, I went over and took Cara from her and brought her to her room. She was falling asleep anyway, so it wouldn’t hurt to put her down for a quick nap. When I returned, Melissa was gathering her purse and getting ready to leave.

“Can you sit for a few minutes?”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t do this with you right now. It hasn’t been the easiest day for me and I don’t want it to get any worse.”

“What happened?”

She pressed her lips together and glanced down at the floor. “Carter told me his boss wants him to do some overtime in the next few weeks, which means I’ll have to pick the kids up from their summer day camp.”

“All right...”

“And it’ll be hard keeping Cara’s routine and then driving across town to the day camp.”

My spirits lifted slightly because I had a hunch this was my out. “Your family needs to come first. I can put Cara in daycare or hire a nanny—”

“No!” She retreated a step. “That’s not what I was leading up to.”

“Okay, what were you planning to say?”

She glanced to the side, avoiding eye contact. “I was thinking that maybe Cara should stay with us, and then I won’t have to drive back and forth.”

My brows furrowed, and I stared at her in shock. “That’s out of the question. I can’t believe you’re even suggesting it.”

“Just think about it, Finn. She needs to be in a family environment. You’re a single dad, and there’s nothing wrong with that per se, but if she lives with Carter and me, she’ll have two parental figures, as well as siblings —”

“Stop.” It didn’t sound like she was talking about a temporary situation.

“You’re not even considering it,” she huffed.

“You’re not thinking straight. What if I took Simon and said I wanted him to come live with me? How would you feel about it?”

“That’s not the same thing. He’s not a baby. Cara needs more than you can give her. She needs a mom.”

Her words were like a punch to the gut, but I refused to let her upset me.

“You’re out of line.”

“If you just think about it, you’ll see that I’m right.”

I blew out a breath and raked a hand through my hair. “Look, Melissa, I don’t always plan on being a single dad, as I’m sure you’ve figured out. Annie and I—”

“Are in the beginning stages of a relationship. You don’t even know if it will work out with her. What are the chances she’ll drop everything and move to Alaska?”

“She’s considering it.”

“Or so she tells you...”

Why did she have to assume the worst? “This makes me think of something else we need to discuss. I’m not happy with the way you treated Annie during her visit. She attempted to reach out to you, and you flaked.”

She frowned. “I have a family. I can’t just drop everything to get to know someone who may or may not stay in your life.”

“You truly don’t want me to succeed, do you?” I shook my head and laughed bitterly.

She drew back with a guilty expression. “That’s not true.”

“When Zoey died, I thought my world was over. It took time to overcome the grief, but I did and I’m ready to move on. I love Annie.”

“She’s not right for you.”

“You don’t even know her, and that’s your fault. You had the opportunity to sit down with her and have a conversation, and you didn’t show up. Don’t tell me that Annie isn’t right for me when you don’t know what you’re talking about.” I’d reached a breaking point where I was now yelling, but I didn’t care. “You’re too attached to Cara, and you cross boundaries all the time. You treat me like I’m your child, not your brother, and I’ve had enough. It stops today. From now on, I’m looking elsewhere for childcare.”

She placed a hand over her heart and gasped. “You wouldn’t dare. Think about what’s best for Cara.”

“I am thinking about her best interest. If you hired someone who wanted to take one of your kids, you’d drop them in a second. You’re undermining my parenting, and that’s not good for Cara.”

Angry tears slid down her face, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “I can’t believe you’re treating me like this after all I’ve done for you.”

“The only reason I haven’t spoken up sooner is because I feel guilty that you’ve given up so much. I appreciate it more than you’ll ever know. I love

you, Melissa, but I can't let this go on. It's not healthy for you, for Cara, or for me. You need help. Maybe some counseling..."

She headed for the door. "Goodbye, Finn. You won't be seeing me for some time. I hope you're happy with how you handled this. You single-handedly caused a family division with one conversation."

"No, you did that."

"Good luck making your own meals," she spat.

"I don't like your vegan casseroles anyway." I winced because that was a cheap shot and I shouldn't have said it, but she knew how to get under my skin.

She didn't bother to respond, but opened the door and slammed it behind her as she left.

I immediately went to check on Cara, who was still sleeping in her crib after all the raucous. Thank goodness she didn't wake up. Sighing, I lifted her into my arms and walked out to the living room. I lowered myself into the rocking chair and rocked back and forth with her, replaying the conversation in my mind. That hadn't gone the way I'd hoped it would. Melissa had pushed my buttons, and I exploded. I had intended to have a direct but compassionate conversation with her, but that didn't happen. Hopefully, we'd talk again once we both cooled down because the last thing I wanted was family division. But I also wouldn't allow her to take my daughter from me.

* * *

After I'd had a moment to collect myself from the conversation with Melissa, I gave Mom a call and explained the situation to her. She sounded distressed about Melissa's request to take Cara, but not completely shocked, considering Carter had already given her a heads up.

"I think it's time I have a talk with her," she said. "She doesn't realize how unhinged she's behaving."

"That might help."

"I hope so. She's been struggling with infertility, but I keep telling her to be grateful for the two kids God has blessed her with. I know that won't take away the desire for more children, but she's going about this the wrong way."

“I feel bad for her, but I’m hurt that she’s not thinking about my feelings.”

“She isn’t considering you. That’s true.”

I let out a breath. “So, I have another issue. Obviously, she can’t continue to watch Cara anymore. I plan to look into daycare options, but would you be willing to babysit Cara in the meantime? If it’s too much for you, I can figure something else out.”

“Of course I’m up for it. I’ll do anything for Cara. Bring her over.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Once I ended the call, I fed Cara and played with her for a while before getting her ready for bed. As I slowly rocked back and forth in the rocking chair, I hummed a lullaby and watched as her eyelids drooped with drowsiness. The incident with Melissa still weighed heavily on my mind, but being with my daughter brought a sense of comfort and solace. I cherished these moments and couldn’t imagine living without her.

Once she went down for the night, I headed to the kitchen to see what I could round up for a late dinner. When I opened the refrigerator, I immediately gravitated to the last slice of apple pie. And that brought up a flood of memories of my time with Annie. I smiled at the way she’d laughed when I’d asked her if the apple pie was all she’d hoped it would be.

I set the dessert on the counter and looked through the refrigerator for something to eat. Melissa’s vegan casserole was sitting there, front and center, and I almost threw it away out of spite. She knew I hated that stuff, yet she continued to make it for me. There wasn’t much else to eat, so I decided to suck it up and try a little. If it was horrible, I would throw it in the trash.

I scooped a small amount onto a plate and covered it with cling wrap, then put it in the microwave. Once it was ready, I sat at the table, bracing myself for the taste. Sauerkraut and potatoes sounded gross to me, but maybe I could choke it down. I took a bite and waited, chewing it slightly and swallowing. It wasn’t as terrible as I thought it would be, but I needed another taste to make sure.

When I did, I came to the conclusion that it was okay. I wouldn’t say it was delicious, but I didn’t feel like throwing up either. I ate the rest as quickly as I could and then washed it down with the slice of apple pie.

The pie reminded me of Annie again, and a pang of longing filled my chest. I desperately wished there was a way to speed up this courtship and go

straight to marriage. Of course, I couldn't speed up time, so I had to wait like everyone else, but I was struggling. I bowed my head and prayed, asking God to help me bear that burden, as well as the situation with Melissa and the need for childcare for Cara. It was a lot to deal with all at once.

As soon as I opened my eyes, it was as if a lightbulb went off in my mind. Annie was a nanny. And I needed a nanny. It was such a simple solution that I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it sooner.

I wouldn't ask a woman I was in a relationship with to move across the country to be my child's nanny unless I was thinking long-term, and I was. In fact, if Annie was willing to marry me tomorrow, I'd snatch her up in a second.

She might not feel the same way, however, so I hesitated to call in case the idea made her uncomfortable. I sat with the plan for another hour, and then I called Mom and Dad.

Chapter Eighteen

Annie

My trip to Alaska had been truly remarkable and awe-inspiring, but now that I was back, I couldn't stop thinking about the next time I would see Finn. I was feeling down and a little depressed, but I was trying to focus on the positives. The challenge of navigating and sustaining a long-distance relationship was turning out to be harder than I'd expected, but I reminded myself that I'd rather have Finn in my life than not have him at all.

What frightened me the most was how intense my emotions had become in such a brief period. How much longer would I have to wait to be with him? And could my heart handle it? What if it was years before Finn realized that he wanted to marry me? The thought brought tears to my eyes.

The only thing that would bring me peace was prayer, so I got on my knees and asked the Lord to provide a solution. I didn't know what that would be, but I trusted He knew what was best for me.

I could attribute some of my melancholy feelings to exhaustion, and I was thankful I'd requested an additional day off so I had time to unpack, wash my clothes, and get some rest before returning to work.

There was a knock, and I frowned, wondering who that could be, as I wasn't expecting anyone. I padded over and swung open the door to find Jasmine standing there with a huge smile. "Hey, stranger."

"Jasmine, I didn't know you were stopping by." A sense of dread filled me, and I immediately felt guilty for not wanting to see her. She was a good friend, but things had been a little awkward between us before I'd flown out to visit Finn. She'd hinted at having an interest in him but refused to discuss it further, so I'd left it alone. But I couldn't help but wonder what I would do if she suddenly wanted to call him and confess her feelings. The time for moving aside was over. I'd given her an out when he initially visited, but my heart was deeply involved now.

“Can I come in?”

I hesitated for several seconds and then blinked. “Of course.” I opened the door wider so she could pass by me.

“Sorry for not calling you earlier, but I won’t stay long,” she said.

“Oh?”

She shifted slightly, her eyes reflecting a mix of genuine concern and perhaps a flicker of guilt. “I just wanted to check on you and see how your trip went.”

Was she fishing for information? I forced a smile, not wanting to create more tension between us than there already was. “It was good.”

“And...how was Finn?”

“He was great.”

She approached and sat on the couch, a troubled expression on her face. “I messed up, Annie, and I owe you an apology.”

After a moment, I reluctantly walked over and sat next to her. “Okay...”

She folded her hands in her lap and glanced at me. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened, and I’m so embarrassed about how all of that went down. I put you in a difficult situation. First, I persuaded you to consider a man who lived in another state. I set the two of you up, and then once he flew out to meet you, I insinuated I had feelings for him too.” She closed her eyes. “If someone had done that to me, I would have cut them off. You were much more patient than I deserved.”

I took a few moments to pull my thoughts together before responding. “I can’t pretend that the situation didn’t bother me. On the day Finn flew out, I was really excited to meet him, and then picking up on your feelings and not being sure if I should call the whole thing off or not...” I cleared my throat. “Let’s just say it was extremely distressing.”

“I wanted to keep what I was feeling to myself. I should have done that, but you asked and I was trying to be honest.”

“That’s true. I did. But there was no way I couldn’t ask after the signals I was picking up. Such as... When you said I might not be able to have kids. It felt like you were attempting to make me look bad.”

The corners of her mouth drooped, and she stared at the floor. “I know that’s how it looked, but I promise, that wasn’t my intention. I spoke too impulsively. Looking back, I should have given you more time to explain yourself. I had a knee-jerk reaction, and I’m sorry.”

“I can understand from your perspective why you would want to make

sure I was completely upfront with Finn.”

“Thanks, but I should have been more careful about what I said. What happened was not okay, and I hope I didn’t destroy our friendship.”

“You didn’t.” I reached out to touch her arm. “It was a little awkward, but I don’t fault you for having feelings for him. It’s not as if you purposefully planned for that to happen.”

She shook her head, her shoulders sloping down in resignation. “Definitely not.” She met my gaze and let out a long breath. “I don’t know what came over me. Maybe seeing another woman interested in Finn made me think about what a great guy he is. Who knows? But I want to set your mind at ease. I’m completely over him now. I’m not sure why my feelings were so short-lived, but I promise I won’t interfere or be a problem.”

“Hey, you wouldn’t even tell Finn what was going on with you, so I know you were doing your best to be a loyal friend.”

Her eyes watered. “I really was trying. Thankfully, after that, I had some time to dwell on what I wanted, and I couldn’t imagine moving back to Alaska. I love my life here in Arizona, and I have no desire to go anywhere else. I just hope you can forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you.” I paused momentarily, allowing the weight of the situation to sink in. “I was concerned when I opened the door and saw you standing there, so I didn’t elaborate on how things went. The truth is, the trip was a lot better than ‘good.’”

Her eyes lit up and she sat up straighter. “Really?”

I couldn’t stop the silly grin that spread over my face. “Yeah. We both said those three little words to each other.”

The corners of her mouth edged upward. “I love you?”

I nodded, still smiling.

“Wow, that was quick, but I’m not surprised. You two are obviously a good fit.”

“I believe we are too.”

She bit her bottom lip. “One positive thing came out of this on my end. A friend of mine has been trying to set me up with her brother for months, but I’ve been putting her off. I finally realized that I was being silly. I was setting other people up but wasn’t open to it myself. We went on a date and I had a wonderful time. We’re going out again next week.”

“That’s great!” I was genuinely happy for her and so relieved that we could lay aside the awkwardness between us.

She rose from her seat and grabbed her purse. “I can’t stay, and I’m sure you have things to do.”

I stood as well. “Thank you for stopping by and apologizing. I’m glad it all worked out.” I gave her a hug and then walked her to the door.

After she left, I took my clothes out of the washing machine and put them in the dryer. When I returned to the living room, my phone rang, and I smiled when I recognized Finn’s number. I answered immediately. “Hey, how are you?”

“I’m good. Thinking of you.”

“Yeah? I’ve been thinking about you too.”

He paused for several seconds and then cleared his throat. “So, I’m going to propose something that may sound outlandish. But bear with me and feel free to shut me down if what I’m about to say sounds off the wall.”

“Well, this sounds interesting.”

He hesitated. “Okay, here it is. I talked with Melissa and she will no longer be looking after Cara—”

“No way.” My eyes widened. “What happened?”

“She needs to take a step back. She’s too attached, and she suggested I let her bring Cara home with her for good.”

My mouth dropped open in shock. “Finn, that’s over the top. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, but now I have the task of seeking daycare.”

“Are there places nearby?”

“There are, but I was thinking...” He hesitated. “How would you feel about coming to Alaska and being Cara’s nanny?” Before I could respond, he rushed ahead. “I spoke with my parents and they said you can stay in the guest house for as long as you want, and they won’t charge you rent. And if you’re out here, that means we get to see each other every day, and I would love that.”

I was so stunned by the offer that I couldn’t speak for several seconds. “Wow, I didn’t see this coming.”

“I know, and I don’t want you to feel pressured. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything, but I thought if there was the smallest chance—”

“Yes.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. “Wait, what?”

“Yes, I want to come. I don’t even need to think about it more. I hate being apart from you, and to be honest, I left my heart in Alaska. It was hard

coming back.”

“Really? You’re willing to drop everything and move out here?”

“Actually...yes. I know that seems impulsive, but—”

“Not more impulsive than me asking.” He laughed. “Don’t you want to know what I’ll be paying you first?”

I snickered. “Sure. I guess I should have considered that.”

“I’ll give you more than what you’re making now. Just come.”

“That’s generous of you, but you don’t have to do that. Drew and Jannette pay me to watch three kids.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re the one who has to upend your life. I’ll pay for your moving costs as well.”

“Finn...you seriously don’t need to do that.”

“I know, but it will make me feel better.”

I ran my fingers through my hair and then took a seat, the enormity of the situation sinking in. My hand trembled. “There is one thing I’m worried about.”

“What’s that?”

“Things have been great between us so far, but what if our relationship doesn’t work out? You’d be my employer, and that would complicate matters.”

He sighed. “I understand why you would be concerned about that. This is your decision and you have to feel right about it. But I’d like to assure you I’m ready to move forward in my relationship with you, just as soon as you’re ready. There is no uncertainty on my part. I know my own mind.”

“What are you saying?”

“I want to marry you.”

So much joy washed through me, but I caught myself before I started celebrating. “Is that a proposal?”

He laughed. “No. I would never propose over the phone, but it’s a statement that you and I could be married soon, as long as you’re ready to take that step.”

Before I could think better of it, I blurted, “I’m ready.”

“You are?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m absolutely sure.”

There were a few seconds of silence, and then Finn spoke up. “You have

no idea how happy this makes me.” He sounded choked up. “Granted, all of this is sudden and people will probably think we lost our minds, but I’ve never been more certain about anything in my life. I want you to be my wife.”

“I want that too.” Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, and I wanted to reach through the phone to hug and kiss him. “I wish I was there with you right now.”

“Me too.”

Our conversation stretched on for hours after that, filled with excitement and plans for our future together. As we discussed the details, a game plan began to emerge. First, I needed to give Drew and Jannette two weeks’ notice. Finn assured me he would fly out to help me with the packing process, so I wouldn’t have to deal with it on my own.

After we said goodbye, the conversation left me in a state of elation. What I was doing was monumental, but I didn’t have any doubts. It was crystal clear to me that my place was with Finn and Cara in Alaska, and the thought of being with them filled me with an overwhelming sense of belonging that I had never experienced before. I was approaching a new chapter in my life, and I was ready to get started.

Chapter Nineteen

Finn

I hadn't spoken to Melissa since the day she'd stormed out of my house. She hadn't contacted me either, which surprised me because I thought she would want to see Cara. I wasn't sure how to fix that situation, but I continued to pray about it regularly.

But even though that weighed heavily on my heart, so much had happened in the last few weeks with Annie that I didn't have time to worry about my argument with Melissa. Annie gave notice to her employers, who were understandably upset that they were losing her, but they were happy for her in the end. We had a little hiccup because her landlord refused to let her out of her lease, but I wasn't going to allow that to impede our plans. I paid off the amount for the three months that were left of the year-lease. Annie insisted on reimbursing me, and I told her to keep her money. We went back and forth on that for a while and then I eventually agreed to split it since she wouldn't let it go.

She sold most of her furniture and gave away what remained, so we only had to worry about getting her clothes and belongings out here. We shipped her vehicle and most of her possessions, and then we both flew out yesterday.

Mom insisted on babysitting Cara for a few more days so Annie would have a chance to rest and get situated before she took over, and Annie genuinely appreciated that. Her decision to come back made my parents happy, and I could see how much they wanted this to work out for us. Since Annie had some time off, I had a few plans of my own in mind. I'd hinted about engagement rings and asked what she liked. She told me she wasn't picky and preferred to be surprised. So, I'd gone to a jewelry store and found a gorgeous ring I was sure she would love.

We were currently driving to Reflections Lake, a spot I'd taken her to when she came out to visit the first time. It was picturesque and serene and

she'd loved it, so it seemed like a great place to return. I told her I was taking her out on an outing and it was a surprise. She recognized our destination as we got closer and I could tell that she was pleased. I parked and we slid out of my truck.

"Thought you might enjoy coming back."

She glanced around, absorbing the scenery of the lake, forest, and snow-capped mountains. "This place is so incredibly beautiful that I've been having dreams of returning."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Thank you for bringing me here. I'm thankful to see it again, but I'm mostly thankful I get to do it with you."

"Let's go enjoy it then." I grabbed her hand and we took a leisurely walk around the lake, and I pointed out the spot where we'd had a picnic during her first visit.

She brushed away a lock of hair as we wandered along. "I'd come here every day if I could. There's something about being out in nature that makes me feel closer to God. It's refreshing. Do you know what I mean?"

"Absolutely. Remember when I said I didn't want a desk job?"

She laughed. "Yeah, I understand it now. Once you get a taste of the outdoors, it's hard to settle for less. The moment I set foot off the plane, I felt like I was home."

I smiled and was glad she was already embracing Palmer in that way. I couldn't think of a nicer place to live, but it was even better now that she was here. After we meandered around for a while, I found a secluded spot by the water, away from other visitors, and we sat down on a blanket. I cleared my throat. "I brought you here for a reason."

Curiosity showed in her eyes, her lips pulling up slightly. "What's that?"

"I thought it would be nice to reminisce about how our relationship started and think about what we want for the future."

"Okay." She sounded intrigued by the suggestion.

"When Jasmine initially sent me a photo of you, my first response was that you were gorgeous and out of my league."

She chuckled and playfully nudged my shoulder. "That's not true at all."

"It's one hundred percent true, and I'm glad you gave me a chance."

She moistened her lips. "I'll admit, it took me a little time to warm up because it's hard for me to make a connection through email and texting. The initial "get-to-know-you" phase seemed like we were exchanging information

about each other, but our first video chat blew me away. Your eyes were so striking and I thought you were handsome. In the picture Jasmine showed me, you were looking down, so I couldn't see all of your face. But talking with you and hearing your testimony impressed me. I felt something special, and it's only grown from there."

Taking her hand, I squeezed it. "I felt something special too. When I flew out to meet you, I was so excited, and you took my breath away."

"We had a strong connection," she said.

We discussed some of the awkwardness that had happened because of Jasmine, but neither of us held it against her. It was a part of our private story now, although my initial confusion regarding how Annie felt about me wasn't easy. But we'd gotten past that pretty quickly.

"It's been an amazing journey," I said, pulling her into an embrace as we sat there, looking out at the crystal-clear water. "We've discussed our future some and you already know how I feel about you." Drawing back slightly, I shifted positions so I could look her in the eye. "I'm in love with you, and I can't imagine my life without you."

"I love you too, Finn."

"And that brings me to a question I want to ask." I pulled the ring box out of my pocket, and since I was already sitting down, I got up on one knee. "Will you marry me, Annie Davenport?"

She seemed startled at first as if she hadn't seen that coming, but then she rose slightly so we were both on our knees and she threw her arms around my neck. "Yes, I will marry you, Finn. You are my dream man, and I can't wait to spend every day with you."

I opened the small box and slid the ring on her finger. The oval diamond with tiny diamonds surrounding it shined brilliantly in the sun.

Her eyes glittered as she took a closer look. "I love it! It's amazingly beautiful. I'll cherish this for a lifetime."

Overwhelmed with happiness, we embraced once more, and I held her close, whispering my love to her again and again. Drawing back, I brushed my lips over hers gently at first and then more fervently, my heart racing in my chest. There was an intimacy in our connection that went beyond the physical touch. It was a merging of our hearts.

When I released her, Annie was beaming with joy. "We did it," she said. "We got engaged."

"Did you ever think you'd marry a man from Alaska?"

She laughed. “No, but it was the right choice, obviously.”

After that, I took her to a fancy restaurant to celebrate and we ordered so much food we were both stuffed. After that, we headed to my parents’ house to share the good news.

On the drive over, Annie looked at me nervously. “How do you think they’ll take it since we got engaged pretty early in our courtship?”

“I’m sure they’ll be thrilled.”

“What if they aren’t?”

“They trust my judgment, and I’m not worried.”

“Okay...” She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. “Finn, there’s one thing we need to discuss. I should have brought this up sooner...before you asked me to marry you, but I can’t let it go.”

“All right...”

“Remember when Jasmine mentioned I never got pregnant with Dereck?”

I frowned slightly. “Yeah.”

“Well, I mentioned to you earlier that I received a medical evaluation and the doctor concluded that there was nothing wrong with me. But what if...” She released a breath, her eyes flickering with apprehension. “What if we struggle to have kids? We never discussed that, and I don’t want you to be disappointed if it doesn’t happen.”

“I didn’t forget, and I won’t let it keep us from getting married. We’ve got Cara, and if we face infertility, we can adopt, as long as we’re both on the same page.”

She let out a relieved breath. “Okay, I just needed to make sure before we move forward.”

“Annie, I’m committed. Whatever obstacles come our way, we’ll face them together.”

“One other thing...” She wrung her hands in her lap. “What about my past? I’m assuming you’ve accepted it since you asked me to marry you, but what about your family? What will they think?”

I let out a breath. “I hate that you’re even worried about that, Annie. The past is in the past. I’ll admit I was a little taken aback when you first told me, but I’ve had time to pray about it and give it more thought. You’ve been open and honest about it, and it’s not something you’re currently struggling with. As far as I’m concerned, it’s no one else’s business. What you shared with me stays between the two of us unless you choose to open up to someone.”

Her shoulders relaxed, along with the concern on her face. “Thank you.”

She smiled and then gripped my hand and squeezed it.

When we arrived, we walked hand-in-hand to the front porch and then knocked. No one answered, so I rang the doorbell several times.

A few moments later, Mom threw the door open, appearing surprised to see us. “Finn. Annie. I wasn’t expecting you back so early. Did you want to hang out with us before Annie turns in?”

My grin stretched from ear to ear, and I ignored her question. “We’ve got some news that couldn’t wait.”

Her eyes widened slightly, and she waved us in. “Well, you’d better come in then. Let me get your father.” She yelled up the stairs for him to hurry down, and he joined us a few moments later.

“Hey, what’s up?”

I wrapped my arm around Annie’s waist. “Today, I asked Annie to be my wife and she said yes.”

His eyes bulged and he glanced at Mom briefly, but then a smile lit up his face. “That’s wonderful news.”

Annie held up her hand and both he and Mom took a look at the ring.

“Great choice,” Mom said. Her eyes watered as she grabbed Annie and hugged her. “Congratulations. I had a good feeling about you from the first day we met.” Once she pulled back, she hugged me as well. “I’m so happy for you. I can’t tell you how much I’ve prayed you would find another woman to share your life with. And God certainly blessed you with Annie.”

“Yes, He did.”

Dad hugged both Annie and me at the same time and then smiled. “This is thrilling news. I’ve been praying too, Son.”

Mom rubbed her hands together. “So, give us all the details. How did it happen?”

“I took her to Reflections Lake and we sat on a blanket and talked...and then I just asked her.”

Mom glanced at Annie. “Were you surprised?”

“Completely. We’d been talking about marriage, but I certainly didn’t expect him to ask at that moment.”

My parents listened attentively as we shared more, and soon we were all smiling and laughing. At one point, Annie glanced at me and winked, and I could tell she was relieved that they approved.

As I’d told her before, Mom and Dad were easy. It was Melissa we had to worry about. Given that she and I hadn’t spoken, she would probably learn

the news from our parents. I was trying to be nonchalant about it since I couldn't control how she behaved, but there was a pain in my chest that she wasn't here, celebrating with us. I loved my sister and she was such an integral part of my life that it felt strange for her not to be involved in this. But I had to entrust it to the Lord.

Mom clapped her hands together. "Let's celebrate with some apple pie."

Annie and I both looked at each other and laughed since apple pie was quickly becoming our thing. "That's perfect," Annie said.

Mom swiftly cut a pie and scooped slices for all of us while we gathered around the kitchen table. As the aroma of fresh apples filled the room, I pushed aside thoughts of Melissa and concentrated on enjoying the moment.

* * *

About a week later, Dad called me one late afternoon. He said that he and Mom shared the news of my engagement with Melissa because they wanted to prepare her. They knew it would hit her hard, especially because she was close to Zoey. Dad suggested I reach out to her since we hadn't been talking.

"She needs to apologize," Dad said. "She was clearly in the wrong, and she knows that. But she's been having a rough time and I think it would help if you started the conversation."

I was hesitant to do that because Melissa needed to humble herself and admit for once that she messed up. But I also had a soft spot for her and it bothered me that there was a rift between us. Ultimately, despite not wanting to be the first to reach out, I truly believed that mercy and forgiveness triumphed over bitterness, and I didn't want this to fester. I held the phone to my ear and sighed. "I'll reach out."

"Great. When I spoke with her she seemed willing to work things out with you."

After ending the call with Dad, I tapped her name on speed dial, not wanting to put this off and have it hang over my head. She picked up after several rings. "Hey, Finn."

There was a moment of silence before I cleared my throat. "Hey."

"Dad must have called you."

I chuckled. “Yep. He mentioned he told you about my engagement to Annie.”

“Congratulations,” she said in a subdued tone. “I’m happy for you.”

She didn’t sound happy, but at least she’d responded positively.

“I know this is hard for you because…” There was more than one reason, so I didn’t complete the thought.

“No, no… This isn’t about me. It’s time for you to move on. You’ll never find another Zoey, but Annie seems nice.”

I scrunched up my face, not liking the way she’d put that. “Please don’t say things like that because it’s disparaging to Annie. You know how much I loved Zoey, but there’s no need to compare them. It doesn’t denigrate Zoey’s memory to embrace Annie wholeheartedly. You’ll see that Annie is an amazing woman once you get more acquainted with her. Do you understand?”

“You’re right. I wasn’t trying to speak disrespectfully about Annie. I said it before thinking.”

“Okay…”

“Look, I’m sorry, Finn. I was wrong to suggest that I could do a better job with Cara. She’s your daughter, and you were correct when you said I wouldn’t like it if someone tried to take one of my kids. I just love her so much.” Her voice broke and she started crying. “I’m struggling to let go.”

Hearing her cry brought tears to my eyes because I didn’t want her to be in pain. “You will always have a special place in her life. You’re her Auntie Melissa, and that relationship won’t end. But I hope you understand why I want Cara to have some time to bond with Annie. She’s going to be her new mama.”

“I know, and I recognize that this is important to you.” She let out a heavy breath.

“Melissa, I love you, and I don’t want this rift between us to continue. I’m confident that we can find a resolution and keep our relationship intact.”

“Don’t worry, we will. I need a little breathing room to cope with all the changes.” She sounded distant. Depressed.

“I can respect that. If you want to see Cara, just give me a call.”

“To be honest, I’m struggling and it might be difficult to visit her right now.”

“Of course. Let me know when you’re ready. I’ll always be here for you.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

After we said goodbye, I put my phone in my back pocket and sighed. That hadn't gone as badly as I thought it would, but there was still some unresolved tension. Melissa wasn't emotionally ready to fully embrace Annie, even though she was trying to say the correct things. She wasn't thrilled about the situation, but hopefully, over time she would adapt and make more of an effort.

Chapter Twenty

Annie

It had been a week since I'd started working with Cara as her nanny, and I was loving every second. She was such a sweet, precious baby, and I was enjoying this time with her. Finn and I had discussed the future, and the plan was for me to adopt her after we got married, and I wasn't nervous in the slightest. I was excited and looking forward to family life with Finn and Cara. Things had happened so quickly, but the Lord had given me a strong sense of peace. I'd always been flexible, and that quality would help with the transition. I was eager and ready to see what God had in store for us.

Cara had just gotten up from a nap, so I sat and played with her on a blanket on the floor. Finn had purchased a lot of developmental toys for her, and she had a curious spirit, so she was always willing to try out something new.

After we exhausted all the toys, I entertained her with peek-a-boo using a puppet. Every time I hid the puppet and then made it reappear, she laughed and laughed like it was the funniest thing she had ever seen. A baby's laughter had the power to make everyone smile, and I was certainly not immune. If I could bottle it up, I could sell it for a million dollars.

I missed Tyler, Peyton, and Eliza a lot. I'd called Drew and Jannette through video chat and talked to the kids a few times. I teared up when I heard their voices, but they were doing well with their new nanny and I was grateful for that. Eliza couldn't talk, obviously, but she held up toys, and I loved seeing her.

A little before noon, I took Cara on a walk around the property to get some fresh air. I put her in a stroller and headed out to meet Finn. She was fond of the outdoors like her dad, and I was too. Sometimes Cara and I sat on a blanket near where Finn and his men labored, and it was interesting to see all they did day-to-day. Finn was a strong guy, but seeing him in action made

me appreciate even more how hard he worked. He enjoyed it when we stopped by to see him, and it gave him a chance to take a break. He was tending to some trees when we arrived, and he paused his work to come over.

“Hey, how are my girls?”

I greeted him with a peck on the cheek and a bright smile. “We’re great. Just thought we’d get some fresh air and check on you.”

He grinned. “I’m glad you did.”

I unbuckled Cara and lifted her out of the stroller so she could see her daddy. She smiled and reached out her arms to go to him. He took her and held her while we talked about his progress in the orchard. I listened attentively, eager to learn and be a part of his world.

When it was time to head back, Finn leaned in and gave me a brief kiss, but it was enough to make my stomach flutter. We all returned to the house together, and I fed Cara before taking out a chicken and broccoli casserole I’d put in the oven.

Finn and I sat at the table and talked while we ate, and an amazing feeling of joy swept over me as I thought about all the things I had to look forward to. There would be many milestones to celebrate with Cara, and I was growing more and more in love with Finn every day. I appreciated that he was a kind and thoughtful man. He was strong from all his outdoor work and very masculine, but he had a sensitive heart.

After lunch, Finn headed back, and I did a few chores around the house while Cara took a nap. While I cleaned the kitchen and mopped the floor, I thought about everything that had happened since I’d flown out from Arizona. It was like a whirlwind, and it had all been positive except for the issues with Melissa.

It was a complex situation, so I knew it wasn’t all about me. When Finn decided to date again, it pushed her to deal with her grief over Zoey’s death, and it reminded her that she wouldn’t always be Cara’s caregiver.

Finn’s mom and I had talked a little, and she told me that Melissa had been trying for another baby but had run into some infertility issues. I didn’t know much more than that, but it explained why she’d crossed some boundaries regarding Cara. Not only had she grown closer to Cara because she was with her every day, but she wanted a baby of her own. I felt a lot of empathy for her, and I related to the inevitability of forming a strong emotional bond with a child when you cared for them on a daily basis.

Though I understood her aversion to me wasn’t personal, I was still a bit

anxious about the future. She and Finn had always been close, so I didn't want to cause a problem in their sibling relationship. As I worked, I prayed God would give me guidance and wisdom on how to deal with her in the future. I wanted to reach out to her, but I was waiting for God to show me how to do that.

* * *

A few days later, it was eight o'clock at night and I was just settling in at the guest cottage when I got a call from Finn. I answered right away. "Hey, how's it going?"

"Not good." There was an urgency in his tone that made me sit up straighter.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm driving with Cara to Mom and Dad's." He let out a breath. "Carter called and said Melissa was unconscious and he couldn't wake her. His bottle of painkillers was open on the nightstand next to the bed."

"Oh, my goodness." I placed a hand over my mouth and a chill went down my spine, causing goosebumps to spread over my skin.

"He called an ambulance and he's in the E.R. with her."

"Oh, Finn, I'm so sorry. What can I do to help?"

"I need you to watch Cara so I can go with Mom and Dad to the hospital. I just got off the phone with them and they're getting dressed. They were already in bed."

"Yes, of course, I'll watch Cara."

"I'm pulling into the driveway now," he said.

"Good, I'll meet you there." After ending the call, I practically ran out of the guest cottage, then jogged around the side of the house to the driveway. Finn had parked his vehicle, and he was getting Cara out of her car seat. She was still asleep, so he handed her to me while he got her baby bag with all the essentials.

I thought about Melissa's kids and glanced at him. "What about Anabelle and Simon?"

"They're staying with the neighbors across the street. They came out

when the ambulance showed up and offered to help.”

I nodded, and we headed to the front porch. Debbie swung the door open and ushered us in, looking frantic. “Hurry up, Finn. We need to go.”

“I’m trying,” he said, his expression grim.

His dad hurried down the stairs, his hair in disarray. His eyes were full of fear as he rushed outside with Debbie. Finn gave me a quick hug and then followed his parents to his vehicle. They were already in the back seat of his truck when he climbed in. I waved as he backed out of the driveway and then disappeared down the street.

My heart ached at what they were about to deal with at the hospital.

Oh, Lord, please let Melissa be okay. Don’t let this end badly...

I wiped several tears that fell, and I wandered over to the couch, still holding Cara. She was sound asleep, thank goodness.

The situation was a little too close to home, considering my past with painkillers, and it brought up flashes of dark memories I had left behind years ago. The emotional turmoil when my husband died. Finding out that he’d cheated. Dealing with back surgery without a support system. The physical pain had been real, but the medication deadened the heartbreak and became a crutch I couldn’t let go of. I blinked and forced myself to think of other things.

I remembered Debbie mentioning she had a crib in a guest room on the second level, so I stood and walked up the stairs, careful not to wake Cara up. Moonlight poured through the window of the guest room. There was a crib against one wall and a twin bed against the other. Once I lowered her into the crib, I headed back downstairs and sat on the couch, my head between my hands.

I couldn’t stop thinking about Melissa, and my heart broke for her. She had to have been in a lot of emotional pain to resort to such a drastic measure. With determination, I continued praying, asking God to give the doctors wisdom to provide the best care for her and to strengthen Finn and his family while they dealt with this. I begged God for Melissa’s life. I begged him over and over, as I knew how hard this would hit everyone if something happened to her. Even though this had nothing to do with me personally, I couldn’t help but feel like I was the catalyst that propelled Melissa to this point.

Hours later, Finn drove up and parked his vehicle. His parents weren’t with him, and I didn’t know what that meant. He got out, and I met him at the doorway. We flew into each other’s arms and his hot tears slid down his face

and fell onto my shoulders.

He pulled back and wiped his eyes. "She's going to be okay."

"Thank goodness." I let out a relieved breath and lifted a grateful prayer to the Lord.

"They pumped her stomach, and she's staying overnight so they can observe her. Carter talked to an insurance agent, and he's setting up an outpatient program for her."

"Where are your parents?"

"They're still at the hospital with Carter. He said he would bring them home later." He swiped a hand over his face, his expression full of anguish. "I feel responsible."

"No, Finn. This is not your fault. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Maybe I was too harsh with her."

I shook my head. "You don't have a harsh bone in your body, Finn Mercer. You're one of the most caring people I know. Do not blame yourself for what happened."

He let out a shuttering breath and motioned for us to go inside. We sat on the couch and he placed his face in his hands. "I should have handled things differently. I knew she was depressed, but I never thought she would take it this far."

"Listen to me." I rubbed circles on his back. "I've been where Melissa is right now, and I know she wouldn't want you to blame yourself. This isn't about you setting boundaries with her. She's dealing with some deep issues that have nothing to do with you."

I drew him into another hug and we stayed in each other's embrace for several minutes, not saying a word. When we pulled apart, I cleared my throat. "When she's better, maybe I should sit down with her and open up about what I went through."

Finn's expression softened. "You don't have to do that if you're not comfortable."

"I know. But maybe this will help break down the wall between us."

He took my hand and held it firmly. "You might be right about that, but I want you to think of your own well-being. Melissa has a strong support system around her. She'll be okay, even if you decide not to share that with her."

"It's possible it could backfire if she wants nothing to do with me." I let out an uneasy breath. "Maybe I'll play it by ear and pray for guidance."

“That’s a good idea.”

After that, I slept in the guest room with Cara, and Finn stayed in a guest room on the first floor. We got a few hours of sleep before Carter brought Debbie and Kevin home. They seemed shaken, but they were holding up well. They gave us a quick update, informing us that Melissa was doing fine, and then they went to bed. It had been a difficult night, but I was grateful Melissa was okay. The days ahead wouldn’t be easy for her, but I determined I would do my best to be there for her, as long as she was willing to allow that.

Chapter Twenty-One

Annie

A few days after Melissa returned from the hospital, Finn and I drove to her home to visit. Carter had said she was ready to receive visitors. Debbie and Kevin had already seen her, and they'd offered to watch Cara so we could go together. Everyone had agreed that it wasn't a good time to bring the baby over.

Finn and I were quiet, each lost in our own thoughts, and I prayed for guidance on whether to share my personal issues or remain silent. I felt a little awkward since she had avoided me from day one, but I decided not to let that get to me. I would make an effort to be kind, and hopefully, she would be receptive to me coming along with Finn.

When we arrived at her house, she was sitting on her living room couch, looking visibly shaken and emotional. Carter sat near her in a chair and the kids were playing at a friend's house so everyone could talk freely.

"Hey, Melissa," Finn said, taking a seat next to her on the couch.

I sat on a chair opposite her and folded my hands in my lap. "Hey."

"Hi, guys." She sniffed, and her eyes were watery. She turned and looked directly at Finn. "I promise I didn't have any of those pills when I was with Cara. I would never do anything to put her at risk."

He bit his lip. "I know you wouldn't."

She nodded and glanced at me. "When you came out for your two-week visit, I took one the day before I was supposed to meet you for coffee because I had a headache. It made me groggy, and I overslept." She sucked in a breath and let it out while gripping a tissue in her hand. "It relaxed me. Helped me to cope. I wasn't planning on taking it again. I'm not big on using medication not prescribed to me, but I was feeling so depressed and didn't want to think anymore." Tears slid down her face and she wiped them with the tissue.

Carter stood and went to her, giving her a shoulder rub. "We're going to

help you get better. You know I love you.” He bent down and kissed her cheek. I could tell this was hard on him as well.

“Thank you, sweetheart.” She reached up and touched his hand, then turned and looked at us. “I wasn’t trying to kill myself, by the way. I thought the dose I took was too mild, and I didn’t think the extra I swallowed would have the effect it did.”

“That’s why it’s not good to take other people’s meds,” Finn said carefully.

She pressed her lips together. “It was a bad judgment call on my part, but I want to emphasize that you don’t need to worry about me trying to harm myself. I have too much to live for with Carter and the kids... And you too, Finn.” She leaned over and hugged him, and they remained in the embrace for several seconds. When they broke apart, she turned to me and reached out to clasp my hand. “And you as well, Annie. You’re family now.”

I squeezed her hand and smiled, relieved that she was including me.

She drew back suddenly, eyes downcast. “You’re probably wondering what you’re getting into. I haven’t given you the warmest welcome and now this. What must you think of me?”

This was it. This was the opening I’d been waiting for to tell her about my past, and I sensed the Lord urging me to share. I looked at Finn briefly, seeking support, and he gave me an encouraging smile. Turning back to her, I leaned my forearms on my knees. “Actually, I went through something similar, so you won’t find any judgment from me.”

She glanced up quickly, her eyes meeting mine. “What do you mean?”

I launched into the story, telling her first about Dereck’s death and how heartbreaking it had been to discover his infidelity. And then I shared about injuring my back and getting surgery. “The recovery was hard, and I got hooked on painkillers. In the midst of everything, I found the Lord.”

She placed a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. “Oh, my goodness, Annie. I wasn’t aware that you went through that. I knew your husband had passed away, but I didn’t know your story.”

“I’m telling you now because I want you to understand that I’ve been through it too, and I relate.”

“Thank you for sharing that with me. And I’m so sorry for avoiding you and not welcoming you as I should have. I was upset about a lot of different things, but that’s not a good excuse. Hopefully, you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

I reached forward and took her hand again. “Of course, I do. And I’m here for you if you need me. Maybe you’ll allow me to bring dinner for you sometime and help out around the house. Finn told me earlier you’re starting day treatment in a week, so if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

Carter and Finn got up and went outside so Carter could show Finn a project he’d been working on, and Melissa and I continued talking on our own. I shared even more about how difficult that time in my life had been, but that God brought me through it and I was confident He would do the same for her. Although I would never wish for Melissa to go through something like this, I was glad I was able to be here for her, and that we bonded over a common experience. The wall between us was finally coming down. When Finn and I left, relief swept through me. That hadn’t been easy, but I was thankful Melissa and I connected, and I was able to be a support for her.

On the drive back, Finn glanced at me. “I’m proud of you for sharing your heart with her. It’s hard to be vulnerable when you’re not sure how someone will respond, but you reacted selflessly. I deeply admire and respect you for it.”

“Thanks.” I reached over and touched his arm. “She’s family now, and I’ll do anything I can for her.”

* * *

Several weeks had passed since Melissa went to the E.R., and I’d been visiting her frequently, providing encouragement and support by offering a listening ear. I also helped her around the house while she was in treatment, so she didn’t feel overwhelmed when she got home. I’d brought dinner a few times, and Debbie had as well. Carter had stepped up and was doing a lot of the cooking so Melissa could concentrate on her recovery plan. She’d made significant progress and was taking part in therapy to help her cope with the emotional issues that caused her to use the painkillers. Most of all, she was learning to seek the Lord through this trial and was spending more time in scripture, meditating on God’s character and promises.

I was initially unsure how Finn's parents would react to hearing about my past, but they accepted me with open hearts, and I was grateful for that.

Finn and I were busy solidifying our wedding plans, and I was hunting for a bridal gown, but I'd had trouble finding one within my budget. As I'd been married before, I wasn't looking for anything extravagant. I'd done the large wedding and desired something different this time around. Finn and I were on the same page there. We both wanted a simple ceremony and reception with family and a few close friends.

It was a Saturday, and I was driving to a local thrift store, hoping I might find a dress that would work well for a wedding. It didn't have to be a bridal gown, per se. As long as it was pretty and fit comfortably, I would be happy.

I headed inside and located the women's section. There were several racks of formal attire with everything from prom dresses to outfits for a nice evening out. But none of it aligned with my vision. I kept looking, checking every single garment on that rack. And then I found it. The white gown was made almost entirely of tulle with a V-neck and a fitted waist. The sleeves were sheer, and the skirt had a blush lining at the bottom that popped with color. It was simple and understated, yet elegant. I checked the tag and the price was reasonable. I could easily afford it, but first I had to try it on to see how it fit. Once in the fitting room, I turned this way and that. It was a little big, but I was sure I could get a seamstress to take it in. I absolutely loved it. I walked out with a huge grin on my face, feeling like I'd found the greatest deal around.

Later that evening, Finn and I went to his parent's house for a game night, along with Melissa, her husband, and their kids. Warmth and laughter permeated the atmosphere, setting this family get-together apart from the first one I had experienced with Melissa. This time, she was chummy with me, and it felt great that the wall between us was finally coming down.

I glanced over, noticing that Finn watched us from across the room with an expression of relief as she and I chatted. Whenever I said something funny, she threw back her head and howled with laughter. It was a huge change, and I had to give credit to the Lord for changing her heart toward me.

When dinner rolled around, I helped Debbie set up the sub sandwiches and chips while Melissa held Cara and gently bounced her, making her smile. She'd visited her a week ago for the first time since she'd stopped providing daily care. It was nice to see the two of them together. Cara needed that as well, and her sweet smiles when Melissa made funny faces showed the

strength of their bond.

After we ate, Carter pulled out the game “Twister,” and we all laughed hysterically as we tried to maneuver ourselves into different positions on the life-size board.

Even Debbie and Kevin played, though they weren’t able to last very long because they said their backs were killing them. I didn’t blame them. Mine was hurting as well, but I played as long as I could because it made me feel a part of the group.

Toward the end of the evening, after Melissa, Carter, and the kids went home, Finn and I sat on the living room couch and talked with his parents about our upcoming wedding plans. It had been four months since Finn and I first started communicating through email, and the time had flown by.

“We’re going to have the ceremony at Mountain Ridge Church,” Finn said as he smiled at me. “And there was a cancelation in two months, so we took that slot.”

His parents listened intently as I explained that since I’d recently become a member there, we both thought it was the perfect spot for us to get married.

I shared that the reception would take place at a restaurant in town that had a separate room for special parties. We didn’t plan on inviting more than fifty people because we preferred the intimacy of a small wedding. I would invite Jasmine, of course. She’d been the one to set this whole thing in motion, and I would forever be grateful for that. Wesley and Danielle would also receive an invitation, as well as some family friends of Finn’s.

“That should be really nice,” Debbie said. “Everything is falling into place. Now you just have to get yourself a wedding dress.”

“Actually, I found one today.”

Her smile brightened and she sat up straighter. “That’s wonderful. I bet it’s gorgeous, and I can’t wait to see it.”

“I’ll show it to you when Finn isn’t around. Maybe you can give me some ideas on how to accessorize it.”

“I would love to.” She patted my knee. “This is starting to get exciting. We have a wedding to look forward to!”

We all talked for another hour after that, and I felt a deep sense of happiness and belonging as I reflected on becoming a part of this loving family. God had done amazing things in our lives.

I was so encouraged that He’d answered prayer in so many ways, especially regarding Melissa. Most of all, I was thankful that the Lord had put

it on Jasmine's heart to introduce me and Finn. I couldn't imagine what life would be like without him, Cara, and his wonderful family. I felt so incredibly blessed.

Epilogue

1 year later...

Annie

I pushed Cara in her stroller as we took a walk on our property and I thought about all the things that had happened over the last year. It was amazing to think that Finn and I were anticipating our first anniversary in a couple of months. The wedding had been just as special as we had hoped it would be. Finn loved my dress. Debbie had been kind enough to lend me her pearls, and Melissa let me wear a pair of her diamond earrings. After it was all over, we'd gone to Cancun for our honeymoon, and it was an incredible trip.

Beyond that, there were so many milestones and firsts. Cara was walking now, and she was picking up new words. When she said "Mama" my heart melted. Melissa and Carter had recently adopted a sweet baby boy they named Caleb, and they were so in love with that little guy. He was adorable, and Cara loved bringing small gifts and setting them down beside him.

Debbie and Kevin were doing well. They'd joined a walking club for older adults, and they were continually taking pictures of wildlife and plants and sending them to us.

And then there was Finn and me. I didn't think it was possible to love someone as much as I loved him. We hit a few bumps in the road toward the end of winter when I was tired of the shorter daylight hours, but we used light therapy boxes that mimicked natural sunlight, and that helped lift my mood a lot. It was something I would have to adapt to, but I was committed to making it work because I loved Palmer, Alaska, and I couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

As I headed to the house, I thought of one more thing that had been on my mind. I was late on my cycle this month, and I planned on taking a pregnancy test as soon as I got back. We'd been striving to get pregnant all

year with no progress, so I had to manage my expectations and not raise my hopes. When I returned to the house, Finn was watching TV on the couch. I lifted Cara out of her stroller and set her next to him so he could watch her.

“How was the walk?” he asked, glancing up.

“It was great.” I headed straight for the bathroom and took the test, then placed it on a paper towel and waited for the outcome. After several minutes of waiting, the results finally came in and my heart nearly stopped. I immediately picked it up and went out to the living room.

“Hey, Finn...”

“Yeah?” His attention was on the television.

“I have something important to show you.”

He looked at me with a curious expression as I approached. I held out the test, and his eyes widened. “You just took it?”

I nodded, grinning from ear to ear. “Yep.”

“We’re going to have a baby!” he said, as he quickly stood and gathered me into his arms. He kissed me and drew back with a smile. We both laughed and cried, and then we stopped to pray and thank God. I picked up Cara and told her she would be a big sister. Of course, she had no clue what I was telling her, but she sensed our mood and was giggling right along with us.

Finn stood taller as if just realizing something. “I am so glad Melissa and Carter adopted Caleb before you got pregnant.”

“Me too. It would have been hard if it had happened the other way around. But Cara, Caleb, and our new little one will be close cousins. It’ll be fun watching them grow up together.”

Finn reached forward and planted a kiss on my lips. “I’m so thankful we’re in this together. I love you to the moon and back.”

“And I love you so much it feels like my heart could burst.”

After that, we were so excited that we started looking up things online that we would probably need, and I made a doctor’s appointment for follow-up care. Our lives were about to change in big ways, and we were ready to embrace all the changes wholeheartedly. This was just the beginning of a beautiful story that God was weaving with us in mind. There would undoubtedly be challenges ahead and times of uncertainty, but Finn and I would weather those moments together and trust in the Lord to guide us along the way.

* * *

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