



THE SHERBROOKES BOOK TWO

IT WAS

Always You

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**CHRISTINA
TETREAULT**

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CHRISTINA TETREault

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ONE

ADAM ADDED THE MATTRESS TO THE CRIB HE'D SPENT THE LAST HOUR assembling. Without a doubt, it was the very last piece of furniture he ever would've imagined himself putting together this weekend—or perhaps ever, for that matter. Yet, it was precisely what he'd been doing this afternoon, and tomorrow the other furniture he'd ordered for the room would arrive.

Grabbing his water bottle, he glanced around at the various unopened boxes. He had never imagined a baby needed so much stuff, most of which he hadn't known existed until a few days ago. Of course, the amount of baby stuff that would soon fill his house was the least of his worries. No, she wouldn't arrive until Tuesday. Not much bothered Adam. He'd learned early in life that worrying accomplished nothing, especially about things he couldn't control. But the mere thought of his goddaughter arriving in a few days had him so stressed, he barely slept at night. And his appetite was nonexistent most of the time.

What the hell did he know about taking care of a six-and-a-half-month-old baby? Sure, he'd been around children even younger, but he'd never been responsible for them. Seriously, he'd never even seen anyone change a diaper, and in a few days, he'd be the one changing them. But changing diapers wasn't what kept him up at night. No, the thought of being responsible for another living person's every need did.

Six-and-a-half months ago, when his long-time friend Nolan and his wife asked him to be not only Reagan's godfather but also her legal guardian if anything ever happened to them, Adam agreed without hesitation. After all, while the chances of Nolan and his wife both passing away weren't statistically impossible, it was improbable.

And when he'd agreed, Adam pictured himself as the fun uncle, even though he wasn't related to the family. He would be the one who spoiled Reagan while leaving the parenting and dirty diapers and late-night feedings to Nolan and Arielle.

The phone call he'd received earlier in the week from Martha Durand, Nolan's mom, changed all that. Throughout the entire conversation, he'd expected to either wake up and have it all be a bad dream or for the caller turn out to have dialed the wrong number. For the woman explaining that Nolan and his wife had been in a car accident to be a stranger talking about two people who just had the same names as his friends.

Unfortunately, neither happened. So he'd done the only thing he could: hit the internet and buy every item the parenting websites insisted a child under the age of one needed.

Adam finished his water and considered the various boxes in the room. Some were labeled, but most weren't, leaving him to guess what was inside. According to the parenting websites he'd read, babyproofing the house was a must. All recommended doing it long before the baby started crawling. The last time he'd seen Reagan, she'd been two months old and unable to even sit up, never mind crawl. But had she started? From what he'd read, it wasn't typical for a baby her age to be crawling, but it wasn't impossible either. He didn't want Reagan getting into something she shouldn't because he'd waited to babyproof the house. And, considering how using statistics in the past had turned out for him, he probably shouldn't rely too much on it now. So babyproofing would be the next task he tackled today.

As he cut through the tape on a box with the words BabySafety.com

printed on the side, his cell phone chimed, alerting him to someone at the front door.

Pulling the device out, he saw his cousin, Jake, standing on the steps.

"Damn."

On Monday, he'd invited his cousin over to watch tonight's baseball game. When he left this morning, he assumed he'd have enough time to get some work done when he got home and then grab some takeout and beer before Jake got there. But not for the first time this week, other thoughts had distracted him, and he'd lost track of time while putting the crib together. His gut told him it wouldn't be the last time that happened this month.

More like this year.

Oh well, they'd have to have food delivered and drink whatever beer he had left in the refrigerator tonight.

More boxes greeted him downstairs. Much like the ones in the bedroom, many either weren't labeled or had names of companies he'd never heard of before this week. Tomorrow, he'd sort through them and find an appropriate home for everything—not that he expected anything to remain where he wanted it for long. Jake had two children. While one wasn't even six months old, the other was chaos on two legs. The young boy had more energy and toys than anyone Adam knew. It surprised him that Jake and his wife had the energy to do anything at night once Garrett went to bed. But obviously, they did, since their family of three had become a family of four in December.

"I stopped at Cormac's on my way here." Jake handed him a paper bag after walking into the house. "They had some new brown ales, so I bought a variety pack of those. And their Shamrock Red Ale was in still stock, so I grabbed a six-pack for both of us."

One of Cormac Brewery's seasonal beers, the Shamrock Red Ale was only available from late February until it sold out. Once it was gone, the brewery didn't produce and sell it again until the following year. The six-pack he'd bought was long gone, and he'd hoped to stop there today and grab some

more, assuming they had any left.

"I hope you brought yours in, then, because I'm not sharing mine with you tonight."

"Since I delivered it, I think I'm entitled to one of them. Consider it a delivery fee," Jake said, following him down the hallway.

Adam added the beers to the refrigerator and grabbed two IPAs that were already cold. "I'll think about it. What are you in the mood for eating tonight?" He had takeout menus for at least a dozen different places.

"Pizza from the restaurant you ordered from the last time I was here sounds good to me."

No restaurant within at least a twenty-mile radius of Westford had pizza as good as Colosseum Pizza.

"Pick out the kind you want." Adam handed Jake the menu as he pulled his beeping cell out of his pocket. Since he moved to the area last summer, he'd ordered pizza from Colosseum enough to know what his favorites were, so he didn't need to review the menu.

Thankfully, he found a message from his sister, Tory, rather than his mother on the screen. He loved his parents, but he didn't always like them. Especially recently. For some reason, his mom had decided he needed to get serious about finding a wife. Even worse, Mom happily provided him with the names of potential candidates. Usually, they were the daughters of his parents' friends, but sometimes they were women making a name for themselves in business or politics. Even if he were interested in getting married right now, which he definitely wasn't, he'd avoid all his mom's candidates at all costs.

Checking in. I haven't heard from you in a while.

Sorry, just been busy.

He'd been more distracted than busy, but whatever.

I get it. Anything new going on?

Talk about a loaded question. It was also one he'd rather not answer via a

text message.

Yeah. I'll call and tell you about it later. Jake's here.

Ok. Are you still coming next weekend?

His mind really was crap this week. Since he had a four-day weekend coming up, he'd planned to leave next Saturday after the track meet and head to Boston to see his sister and her boyfriend. At some point, he'd travel with Reagan. Traveling was one of his favorite pastimes, but it sure as hell wouldn't be next weekend.

Change in plans. I'll explain when I call.

A thumbs-up emoji appeared on the screen.

"Did you decide on what you want?" Adam asked, selecting the number for Colosseum Pizza from his contact list.

"Yeah, order the Mediterranean pizza."

Adam couldn't argue with his cousin's choice. After calling their order in, one that also included a chicken Alfredo pizza, he grabbed a bag of chips and left the kitchen.

"Someone cannot be trusted with a credit card and access to the internet," Jake said, following him into the living room, which, at the moment, looked as though it was doubling as a shipping center for the post office.

He'd definitely ordered more in the last few days than he had since he moved to Virginia last year.

"Is that a gift for your sister?" Jake pointed at the only box in the room that he didn't need to guess what was inside, thanks to the photos of the baby stroller stuck to each side.

"Why do you think it's for her? Do you know something I don't?"

He didn't think Tory would tell someone else in the family and not him if she was pregnant, but maybe she'd told their mom and she had shared the news. Mom wasn't known for her ability to keep her mouth shut, even when someone asked her to.

Jake shook his head. "I haven't talked to Tory since... January, I think."

His cousin tilted another box back so he could read the name printed on the side. "You have a stroller and a box from 4Moms, a company that only sells baby and toddler products. If Tory isn't pregnant, who is? Anyone I know?"

So far, he hadn't shared the life-changing news with anyone except one of his assistant coaches and the school district's superintendent.

Adam switched on the television but muted the volume because his answer would understandably only raise more questions.

"This is stuff for me."

His cousin stopped mid sit, his ass inches away from the sofa. "Did you just say this baby stuff is for you? I didn't even know you were seeing someone." Jake sat and lifted his beer toward his mouth, but the can never reached its destination. "Please tell me Delilah isn't pregnant."

Even the thought of having a child with his ex-girlfriend made him cringe.

He'd met Delilah Reynolds in August. Like him, she'd been a regular at a café about half a block from where he worked. The first few times he'd seen her, they'd chatted while waiting for their orders. Then, after a few weeks of that, he'd asked her to dinner.

Things had been great for a little while. But things started to change when basketball season started requiring him to attend multiple games a week rather than just one meet on the weekend like when he'd been coaching cross-country. Then one Friday night following a game, they'd had yet another argument about how he was spending too much time with the team and how unnecessary it was given who he was. From there, Delilah had again brought up them moving to California and him taking back his old position as Director of Technology at Trident. It had been the second part that put the proverbial stake in their relationship. If she couldn't accept that he preferred working and coaching in a local school district to the corporate world, their relationship would never work. That had been back in mid-January, and he

hadn't been out with anyone since.

"No, thank God."

"Then who are you having a baby with?"

"No one."

"So collecting baby products is just a new hobby for you? That isn't exactly normal, you know. You might want to get some professional help."

Sometimes Adam wondered if Jake just enjoyed hearing his own voice.

"Thanks for the advice, but if you'd shut your trap for five seconds, I'd explain why I spent the last hour putting together a crib."

His response had its intended effect, and Jake didn't have a comeback for him.

"Nolan and his wife died in a car accident earlier this week."

"I'm sorry. I know the two of you were friends for a long time," Jake said, all humor gone from his voice.

"Thanks. It still doesn't seem real."

At one time, he'd expected Nolan to die young. The guy had always pushed the limits, looking for the next adrenaline rush—the more dangerous the activity, the more Nolan wanted to do it. Then Arielle came into his life, and he'd given up base jumping altogether. Rather than go cave diving, he settled for old-fashioned scuba. While he continued to go mountain climbing, he'd stopped seeking the most strenuous climbs in the world.

"Right after she was born, they asked me to be Reagan's godfather and guardian if anything ever happened to them. So she'll be coming to live with me in a few days."

"Not that I doubt your abilities, but why didn't they ask a family member? That's often what people do. And it's what Charlie and I did."

It was a fair question, and Jake was right. But while his cousin had met Nolan a handful of times; he'd never met Nolan's parents.

"Nolan was an only child. Martha and Henry never wanted children, and he wasn't born until Martha was in her early forties. They even sent him away

to boarding school when he was ten."

The beer can in Jake's hand didn't make it to his mouth. "At ten? Are you serious?"

Like Adam, his cousin had gone to boarding school for grades nine through twelve, but they'd both lived at home and attended private schools until then.

"Yep. He came home most weekends. Sometimes he'd spend them with his parents. Other times he'd stay with us. Before he asked me to be her guardian, Nolan and his wife discussed their intentions with his parents. They agreed it was best, since they're both in their early seventies."

He could understand a person not wanting to raise a child while in their seventies, but he suspected their decision had more to do with them not wanting to change their lifestyle than their age. Both led active social lives and liked to travel at a moment's notice. A baby would make both difficult.

"Martha and Henry will continue to be part of her life, though. They enjoy being grandparents."

Jake nodded in understanding as he took a drink. "What about Arielle's family? They were okay with this too?" he asked, putting the can on the end table.

"Unfortunately, her mom passed away a few years ago from cancer. And she didn't get along with her dad, stepmom, or sister. I don't think they've ever met Reagan."

He wasn't anywhere near as close as Jake was to his parents. Still, he couldn't imagine ever having a child and his parents not being somewhat involved in their life. The same was true of his siblings. While he was much closer to his sister, Tory, he had a decent relationship with his younger brother, Tyler, and knew he'd be a good uncle.

"Wow, that's too bad. Families can be complicated sometimes."

He didn't need Jake to tell him that.

"Are you going to get her, or are Nolan's parents bringing her here?"

“I offered to fly out to California, but Martha insisted on bringing Reagan here. She felt it’d be difficult for my first few hours alone with Reagan to be on an airplane. They’ll be here on Tuesday.” He’d been grateful for Martha’s willingness to come to him because he imagined a plane ride added an additional level of difficulty to caring for a baby.

“Have you figured out what you're going to do about work?”

"I've got at least this week coming up off, and I've got the names of some good daycares in the area."

One of his assistant track coaches and the superintendent had children who'd attended daycare when they were younger. They’d both highly recommended the ones they’d used. They’d also suggested a few in the area they knew to have good reputations.

"I'll have to find a babysitter for when I have track meets on the weekend, and for the nights I'm going to get home after daycare closes."

Adam could give up his position in the district and quit coaching, but he'd rather not. He enjoyed his new job and liked the people he worked with there. As far as coaching, he loved helping student-athletes attain their goals.

"Getting her into daycare quickly might not be that easy. Liz, the chief development officer at the foundation, started looking at daycares before her baby was even born. It might be even harder to find a good babysitter to pick Reagan up from daycare on the nights you're going to be home late."

That wasn't what he wanted to hear. He could do some work from home, but he couldn't coach from his sofa, and taking a six-and-a-half-month-old to the track was out.

"You'll probably be better off hiring a nanny. Since they'll come to the house, you wouldn't have to worry about dropping off in the morning or pick up. And you could work together to make a schedule that works best for you. A daycare won't do that."

Why didn't I think of that?

Adam knew all about nannies. His parents had employed one until he and

his siblings started school because his mom enjoyed her lifestyle before children too much to give it up. In fact, he often wondered why she had children in the first place.

"Some agencies employ live-in nannies. That might be even better for you, especially if you keep coaching. And you've got the in-law suite they could use."

Hiring a nanny made more sense than bringing Reagan to daycare five days a week and then getting a babysitter when he needed one. As far as a live-in one went, he'd have to think about it. He enjoyed living alone and wasn't sure he wanted an unknown person suddenly invading his personal space, even if it would make his life much easier.

"A nanny seems like the way to go. Do you know of any good local agencies?"

An internet search would give him names, but he'd prefer a personal recommendation from someone he trusted.

"We used Elite Nanny Company when Charlie was on bed rest. Meg was phenomenal with Garrett."

He'd forgotten Jake's wife had been on bed rest during the last month or so of her pregnancy, and since he'd been in the middle of high school basketball season, he hadn't seen the couple at all. "You must have had to pay her double the normal rate to care for him."

Jake smiled as he reached for his drink. "Garrett kept her on her toes, that's for sure. But seriously, she was great. She had degrees in early childhood development and child psychology. Garrett cried when she stopped coming. Call them now and see if she's available. Even if Meg isn't, I'm sure they'll have someone who can help you."

The doorbell sent Adam to his feet. "After caring for your son, she might never want to work for a Sherbrooke again."

If Jake recommended Elite Nanny Company, he'd call as soon as he answered the door because his cousin wouldn't trust his son to just anyone,

so he would've done his research before contacting the company.

EVELYN, better known as Evie to her family and friends, kicked off her sneakers and crossed her legs on the sofa. When Leslie, her former neighbor and friend, called earlier and invited her over for a girls' movie night, she'd said yes before Leslie finished speaking. The hotel room she currently called home was nice, but a person could only spend so much time there. As it was, she'd been spending far more time in it than she'd like, since she was between placements.

She'd accepted her last position taking care of two-year-old twins, knowing it was only for two months. Actually, her past two placements had been short-term ones. Her previous long-term job had ended in early November. She'd taken care of the Jordans' children for a little over two years. Unfortunately, the Pythons traded Chase Jordan, one of their wide receivers, to the New England Rebels right before the NFL trade deadline. While the family asked if she wanted to move to Massachusetts with them and even offered to pay her moving expenses, she declined after considerable consideration. As much as she loved the Jordans' two children, her family and friends were in Virginia. Not surprisingly, her decision disappointed the couple, but they'd understood. They'd even insisted Evie continue to stay in the guest house on their property until either she found a new place, or they received an offer on the estate.

Although she missed the Jordans and their children, she'd taken the downtime between positions to look for a house—something she'd been saving for since her divorce five years ago. Around the same time the Jordans received an offer on their property, she'd found the perfect home. Since she needed to be out of the guest house but could not move into the new home yet, Leslie had insisted she stay with her until the closing rather than waste

the money on a hotel—a closing that should've been over a week ago.

Unfortunately, mother nature had other ideas. Three days before her appointment to sign the final paperwork, an intense thunder and lightning storm came through the area. Naturally, the lightning strike couldn't hit the shed in the backyard or the old playhouse she didn't need. Nope, it hit the house, leaving it in need of extensive repairs before anyone could live in it again.

Leslie had immediately offered Evie the use of her sofa again, but a person could only sleep on a pull-out mattress for so long. Evie's stepsister invited her to stay with her and her husband, but they lived almost an hour and a half away without traffic. If Evie's next position ended up in Alexandria or DC, like her last two, she didn't want such a long commute. Her mom and stepdad lived even further away. As for her dad and stepmom, even if they were close by, she'd go insane living with them. For now, staying in a hotel seemed like the best option while she waited for the real estate lawyer she'd hired to work with the current owner's lawyer.

She loved the layout of the house and the neighborhood, but she wasn't willing to wait nine or ten months for repairs to be completed. If that turned out to be the case, she'd look for something else. And at least, according to her lawyer, she could still walk away from the deal and suffer no consequences if the cost to repair the property was substantial. Regardless of whether she ended up waiting for repairs or looked for a new home, she wanted to avoid leasing an apartment and getting stuck with it for six months to a year.

“Should we watch a romantic comedy or a classic tonight?” Leslie asked, setting a veggie tray and dip on the coffee table.

Her friend almost exclusively only watched two types of movies: romantic comedies, regardless of when they were made, and films from the '80s, which she considered classics. The only time she made an exception was if Anderson Brady or CJ Ferguson were in the film—two actors Evie

could watch in a movie any day as well because in her opinion they were two of the hottest men in Hollywood.

“I’m fine with either, as long as we don’t watch any *Star Wars* movies.”

She enjoyed sci-fi but couldn’t stand the *Star Wars* movies. Why Leslie loved them so much, she’d never understand.

Sitting down, Leslie grabbed a celery stick and pointed it at Evie. “You’re no fun. But fine, no *Star Wars* tonight. How about *Back to the Future*?”

She could handle a little time travel back to the 1950s. “Sure.”

They’d already agreed on Indian food tonight, and it was her turn to buy. “I’m going to call in an order. What do you want?”

Evie scrolled through her contact list for their favorite Indian restaurant. The intro to “Thought You Knew,” her favorite song by Blake, erupted from the device before she reached the number, and the name Claudia was on the screen.

If her boss was calling on a Saturday, it could only mean one thing. She had a new placement for her. It was about time. Her last job ended almost two weeks ago.

Their food order would have to wait. “Hi, Claudia. How are you?”

“I have the perfect position for you,” Claudia said after returning Evie’s greeting.

Claudia was a genius when it came to matching potential clients with nannies. If she said it was perfect for her, it probably was.

“It’s in Westford and comes with a live-in option.”

Her boss knew about her current housing situation because they’d been in a meeting when Evie got the call about the house fire.

“How long is the placement?” She’d prefer something long-term, but an unemployed nanny with no place to live couldn’t be picky.

“Indefinite.”

So far, she liked what she was hearing. Westford wasn’t far from the home she should own right now. With a potential live-in option, she could

stay there until either the current owners made the repairs on the house so she could proceed with the purchase or until she found another one.

“How many children?”

The answer didn't really matter. The agency frowned upon its employees refusing positions without meeting the clients first. Even after the initial meeting, an employee needed a darn good reason for not taking a position if the client decided they wanted you. In the five years Evie had worked for the agency, she'd only turned down one job, and it had been because the family owned two cats, something they failed to tell Claudia. Unfortunately, Evie was allergic to them, so even though she liked the family, she turned down the placement.

“Just one. A six-and-half-month-old little girl.”

Both the Jordans and the Baileys, the first family she'd worked for, had a six-month-old child when she started working for them, so she was quite comfortable taking care of children that age.

“It's an unusual situation. You have a meeting with the client on Monday at ten. I emailed you all the details. Unfortunately, the client cannot meet any other day next week, but if you need to change the time, we can.”

Her Monday was wide open. “That time works fine for me. I'll read over everything you sent me tonight, and I'll let you know if I have any questions.”

Although curious about the details, Evie called in their usual order before she logged into her email account.

“Is the client Claudia called about close?” Leslie asked before popping a cherry tomato into her mouth.

“Yep, and she said it's an unusual situation.”

If her boss hadn't said that, Evie probably would've waited until she got home to check the details.

She found Claudia's email between one from the Red Cross asking her to donate blood again and one from her preferred supermarket, letting her know

they had sea scallops on sale this week—an offer she would've taken them up on if she had a place to cook. However, her only appliances currently were a microwave, a mini-fridge, and a coffee pot. Scallops weren't something you cooked in a microwave, especially when that microwave was in a hotel room.

“The client is offering a live-in option, so I'd have a place to stay until I get my housing disaster settled,” Evie answered while she waited for the file to open. It had been more than two years since she had lived in the building, but it still had the slowest internet on the planet. Some things never changed.

“And I'd be taking care....”

Her lungs stopped working, and she almost dropped the phone when she saw the name Adam Sherbrooke printed next to the word client.

Before she could prevent it, an image of Adam popped into her thoughts. She'd be lying if she said she never thought of him, but thankfully it happened less and less over the years.

“Taking care of who?” Leslie's voice jumpstarted Evie's lungs and drove away the image of Adam, the man she once thought she'd spend the rest of her life with.

“A six-and-half-month-old girl.”

Evie forced her eyes to the following line and slumped back against the sofa when she saw the address. 100 Maplewood Drive, Westford, VA.

She'd grown up in the town next to Westford, so she knew it was a pleasant area. She'd even dated a boy from Westford during her junior year of high school. But, while it had some beautiful houses, none were anything like what Adam most likely called home these days.

No, the Adam she'd walked away from years ago and who still occasionally haunted her dreams lived in California in a home like his parents' estate in Palo Alto. Not to mention, if he had moved to Virginia, Josie, a mutual friend they still shared, would've told her. At least Evie assumed she would. She had the last time Adam had briefly moved to Texas before once again returning to California.

It wasn't unusual for people to share the same name. She knew for a fact that if she typed Evelyn Caldwell into a search engine, she'd get a lot of results. So whoever this new client was just shared his with the man she'd unfortunately now be dreaming about tonight.

She scanned the rest of the client's background. The man looking for a nanny worked for the Westford School district.

Yep, this person and the Adam Sherbrooke she'd dated for almost three years in college were not the same people. The Adam she'd known worked for either one of his family's companies or some other place found on the Fortune 500 list. A public school district in Virginia wouldn't even fall on his radar.

TWO

MONDAY, EVIE PASSED WESTFORD HIGH SCHOOL AND CONTINUED THROUGH the center of town. If she had to guess, it had been at least seventeen years since she'd last been in the area. In her senior year of high school, the state track and field meet occurred at Westford High School. She'd walked away as the state champion in the 100-meter race and the runner-up in the long jump.

Other than the senior center located in what had been the town library and the new library across from the fire station, it looked like not much had changed since her last visit. That observation further affirmed her belief that the Adam Sherbrooke she'd known and the one she was about to meet was not the same person. Despite her brain repeatedly telling her that ever since she received the email, she had sent Josie Moreno a text message last night, asking where Adam called home these days.

Of all the mutual friends she and Adam shared in college, Josie and her husband were the only ones they were both still in contact with. Not that Evie went out of her way to know what he was up to these days, but over the years, his name had occasionally popped up in conversation. The last time it happened, Josie mentioned they were meeting up with Adam, who was in Seattle on business. That had been at least a year ago; Josie definitely had not mentioned him the last time they spoke, which had been right before the

holidays.

Unfortunately, Josie still hadn't responded to Evie's text message, which wasn't a big surprise. Josie had been terrible about getting back to people for as long as Evie'd known her. She'd gotten even worse since her son was born last year. Evie would be lucky if her friend sent back a response by the end of the week.

At the stop sign, Evie turned left on Maplewood Drive. Neat well-cared-for lawns and two-story homes lined both sides of the street. While clearly a nice neighborhood and not one a person right out of college could easily afford, it wasn't one a person whose family owned a winery and one of the largest construction companies in the country would live in.

Her cell phone chimed as her GPS announced her destination was on her right. After pulling into the driveway, she turned off the engine and hoped the message was from Josie, confirming the Adam she'd dated was still living on the other side of the country and not in the house in front of her.

Instead of finding the message she'd hoped for, she found one from Mom.

Alan and I boarded.

Evie started a reply, but a second message popped up before she could finish it.

The ship is amazing.

To celebrate their eighth wedding anniversary, her mom and stepdad were taking a twenty-five-day Southern Caribbean and Panama Canal cruise. It was the first one either had ever been on, and Mom had been talking about it for months, something Evie could understand. It wasn't every day you went on such a trip.

Have fun. Love you.

Evie hit Send and then switched her phone to silent mode. Knowing Mom, she'd already started taking pictures of everything and would send them to her. She didn't want her phone chiming every other minute during

this meeting. Later, when she got back to the Colonial Hotel, she could view the pictures and live vicariously through her mom and stepdad.

A brick walkway that screamed out for some evergreen bushes or maybe some colorful annuals stretched from the driveway to the front steps. If she owned the property, she'd plant a row of winter gem boxwoods along each side and then add some primroses for color. Although the walkway wasn't as long as this one, it was what she'd planned to do at the house she should be living in right now. She also had all sorts of ideas for the empty space on either side of the front steps and paint colors picked out for the interior—ideas that she might never see happen.

Much like the walkway, the front door needed some decoration. The spring wreath she'd purchased on Etsy for her new house would look perfect hanging there.

Another brief pang of fear ripped through her as she reached out to ring the doorbell. What if the man inside who needed a nanny was her Adam? She couldn't exactly turn around and run back to her car. Even if it weren't immature and rude, it might get her fired. She was already without a home. She couldn't afford to be without a job too. Not to mention that if it was him, what did you say to the man you once expected to spend your life with after thirteen years? "Hey, it's been a long time" just wouldn't cut it.

Man, she wished Josie had responded to her text message yesterday.

It is not him. Relax.

After ringing the bell, she stepped back and forced her thoughts away from her ex-boyfriend and to what to buy her mom. Her birthday was this month, and she didn't know what to get her. Mom wasn't one for jewelry, and Evie had bought her a new purse for Christmas, so she didn't want to go that route again.

Maybe they could go to a show and then have dinner. When she got home, she'd see if any good productions were running in the area. Or they could possibly have a spa day. They'd done that two years ago for Evie's

birthday, and she'd been wanting to do it again. She just hadn't had a good excuse to spend the money. Mom's birthday was a great reason in her book.

The door opened, and Evie grabbed onto the railing to keep from falling down the stairs as she prayed that she was asleep and having a nightmare—one she'd had before that she'd wake up from at any second. And when Evie did, she'd be safely in bed at the Colonial Hotel, not face-to-face with the Adam she'd once known. And despite looking a little older, the man standing in front of her was without a doubt her Adam, not a random stranger who shared his name.

Seconds that felt more like hours passed in silence. Adam's expression mirrored how she felt, and for the first time since her divorce, Evie wished she'd returned to using her maiden name. If she had, Adam would've asked Claudia to send someone else when he learned the agency was sending a nanny named Evelyn Murphy. Then again, he might have done the same as she had and assumed the nanny merely shared his ex-girlfriend's name. When they'd been together, she'd planned to be an elementary school teacher, not a nanny.

“Evie?” Adam asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “You're Evelyn Caldwell from Elite Nanny?”

It was possibly the stupidest question she'd ever heard. Did he think she was standing there to sell him Girl Scout cookies? Yet, at the same time, it made perfect sense. When Adam opened the door, he'd expected to see a stranger, much like she had.

Evie nodded, unsure of what to say. Should she offer to call Claudia and see if someone else was available for the position? If she did that, Claudia would want to know why Evie didn't want it, and she'd prefer not to share that with her boss, no matter how much she liked the woman. And while she could make up an excuse, she'd prefer not to lie either. Then again, maybe Adam would call Claudia and request another individual. If he did, Adam would have to give her boss a reason he didn't want her taking care of his

goddaughter.

“Um, hi, Adam. I, uh, didn’t realize my meeting was with you today. I mean, I thought I’d be meeting with someone who shared your name. Not you.”

She had honestly never expected to see Adam again. But if it ever happened, she never would’ve envisioned it happening like this.

Adam dragged his hand through his hair and stepped back. “Why don’t you come in?”

How many times had she run her fingers through his hair? Too many to count, for sure. And even though it had been thirteen years since she’d last done it, her fingers itched to do it one more time.

It didn’t surprise her to see a baby gate at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor. Adam had always done his research when taking on something new. And from what she’d read in the file Claudia emailed her, he’d only recently learned that the baby would be coming to live with him. And although she shouldn’t care, she wondered how he was dealing with the news.

Evie followed him into the living room. Besides the usual items, there was also a 2-in-1 baby activity center and a pack-and-play. There was also a baby jumper hanging in the doorway to another room. No doubt if she went upstairs, she’d find a crib ready and waiting.

The file Claudia emailed her mentioned Adam was single, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t involved with someone. Although it wasn’t any of her business and wouldn’t change how she did her job—assuming he didn’t ask for another nanny—Evie scanned the room for any photos of Adam with a woman. The only picture in here was one of Adam with his sister and brother. Judging by their outfits, someone took the photo at a formal event such as a wedding. Someone had also taken it recently, because Adam appeared to be about the same age in the picture as he was now.

“Please have a seat.” Adam gestured at one of the two sofas before

stepping over to an armchair.

Polite as always. It looked like that hadn't changed about him either.

ADAM DIDN'T KNOW what he'd done to piss off fate, but he'd obviously done something. How else did you explain losing your long-time friend, learning you were now responsible for a six-and-a-half-month-old, and coming face-to-face with the woman you'd once been hours away from proposing to, all in less than a damn week?

No, it was even worse than that. Not only was Adam sitting across from Evie, but she was the potential nanny the agency sent. Yeah, fate had something against him.

Since his cousin had the director's number in his contact list, Adam had called Elite Nanny before he dug into his pizza on Saturday. He'd explained the situation and requested that the company send the best nanny it employed, regardless of the cost. Evidently, the more experience a nanny had, the higher the rate. When Claudia said Evelyn Caldwell, their most experienced and qualified nanny, was not only available but would likely be interested in the live-in option, he'd been able to breathe again for the first time since Martha's phone call.

Later, when he'd reviewed the woman's portfolio, he'd thought he'd hit the jackpot. Evelyn Caldwell had over five years of experience, several of which had been with children under one. She also had degrees in human development and early childhood education as well as various related professional certificates. Plus she was certified by the American Red Cross in first aid and CPR. If that wasn't enough, all her previous clients had given her glowing recommendations. Adam couldn't have created a more qualified candidate.

But it looked like the joke was on him.

Adam had heard his phone in the other room, alerting him to someone at

the door seconds before the bell rang. He hadn't bothered to go into the other room for the device. He was only expecting one person today: Evelyn Caldwell, nanny extraordinaire.

It had been like a fist to the gut when he opened the door and found himself facing his ex-girlfriend instead of a modern-day Mary Poppins.

Never at a loss for words, he'd been unable to do anything but stare until the shock wore off enough for his brain to send messages to his mouth once again. His only consolation was that Evie appeared just as surprised as him.

Adam looked at the woman whom he'd once known so well. She sat with her hands folded on top of a leather planner and her legs crossed. But she was anything but relaxed. Instead, her posture was ramrod straight, and she had a deer-in-the-headlights look about her. He imagined there was a similar look on himself. He'd love a few minutes alone to regroup.

"Can I get you something to drink?" He wouldn't solve his immediate problem by escaping to the kitchen, but it would give him a minute or two to clear his head—something he couldn't do sitting across from her.

"Um, sure, thanks. Whatever you have is fine."

She probably would love a minute too. "I'll be right back."

Stepping into the kitchen, he leaned back against the counter and closed his eyes. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He needed a nanny, and according to Claudia, the agency's best one was sitting out there—a claim reinforced by her resume and references.

If she were Evelyn Caldwell, an unknown person until this moment, he'd hire her in a heartbeat. However, she wasn't, and time wasn't on his side. Reagan arrived tomorrow. What if Elite Nanny didn't have anyone else available? Or what if the next person they sent wasn't as qualified? He wanted the best for his goddaughter.

Adam's thoughts stopped there. If Evie was the best, there was no question about what he needed to do. He'd ignore the past and hire her. That was, of course, assuming she'd work for him. She might not be willing to

ignore the past.

One thing at a time.

His mind cleared enough for the moment; he grabbed the lemonade from the fridge. Only after he filled both glasses did he realize he'd picked one of Evie's favorite beverages—a minor detail he shouldn't remember, but damn it, he did.

When he walked back in the living room, her posture reminded him of a bunny ready to bolt at the slightest sound, but she'd lost the deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Thank you.” She accepted the glass and immediately took a sip, perhaps as a way to put off speaking to him—a sentiment he understood.

He retook his seat and glanced at her left hand resting on her planner. Other than a small emerald, her birthstone, on her middle finger, she wore no other rings. Claudia mentioned Evie might be interested in the live-in option. If she were married, that most likely wouldn't be the case. At least he wouldn't want his wife living somewhere other than with him. That fact and the lack of a wedding ring but a different last name told him Evie had been married and now was either divorced or separated. And although absolutely none of his business, he wondered which it was.

“How have you been?” Given their history, it was a safe enough question and as good a place as any to start.

Evie gripped her planner tighter. “Good. You?”

He wouldn't dig for more if she wanted to sum up more than a decade in a single word. Although, come to think of it, he probably didn't want to know more.

“Okay.” He took a drink and put the glass on an end table. “When I spoke to Claudia, she assured me you're the best nanny the agency employs. Your references suggest the same. Did she explain my situation to you?”

Evie nodded. “The file she sent me said that you recently became the guardian of your six-and-a-half-month-old goddaughter. I understand that

you'll need coverage during the week when you're at work and sometimes on evenings and weekends because you also coach high school sports. Claudia also told me you'd like for me to start soon."

"Nolan's mom is arriving with Reagan tomorrow." Claudia had given her the basics, but he wanted to expand on them.

Her eyebrows pinched together. "Nolan's daughter is coming to live with you? What happened?"

When he'd been at the University of Virginia, Nolan would occasionally drive over from Georgetown and visit. And more than a few times, Adam and Evie went to see him, so Evie had known Nolan.

What happened didn't pertain to her being Reagan's nanny, but he'd answer anyway.

"Nolan and his wife were killed in a car accident. A drunk driver ran a red light. Nolan died instantly, and Arielle died at the hospital. Thankfully, Reagan was with Nolan's parents that night, and she's been with them ever since."

"Oh, my god, Adam. I'm so sorry. I know you and Nolan were good friends." She started to stand but then seemed to think better of it and sat again.

Had she been about to hug him? It wasn't uncommon for someone to offer an embrace after hearing such news. Part of him wished she had. Another part was damn glad she hadn't. Their past was just that. She was here for one reason, and it didn't require hugging.

"Thank you. Anyway, I have this week off, so I'd like everything in place as soon as possible. Based on Claudia's comments and what I read in your portfolio, I couldn't ask for anyone better to take care of Reagan. So if you're comfortable with the situation, I'd like you to be her nanny."

He'd understand if she turned down the offer. In her shoes, he might too. But this wasn't about them. This was about a little girl who'd lost both her parents and was now stuck with him—a man who'd never realized how many

different diaper brands there were.

Evie played with the earring in her left ear, a sign he recognized. She was considering the situation from all angles.

Why the hell do I remember that?

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to see if Claudia can send someone else?”

Adam wouldn’t beg her to take the position, but he would be honest. “I want the best for Reagan. Everything tells me that’s you, and whatever happened between us in the past doesn’t matter to me. The only thing that matters to me is Reagan’s welfare.”

Bullshit.

He didn’t think of her often, but once in a while, when he was alone, she snuck into his thoughts. And although he would never ask, he’d still love to know why she’d left him. No, she’d done worse than leave him. She’d ended their almost three-year relationship with a note instead of in person. Then afterward, she’d refused his phone calls and text messages.

“But if you’d be more comfortable, I’ll see if Claudia can send someone else.”

She readjusted her position and nodded. “As long as you’re comfortable with the situation, so am I. When do you want me to start?”

“Tomorrow if you can. You don’t have to be here all day. But a few hours would be great. I’ve got zero baby experience. Any help you could give me to get me up to speed would be greatly appreciated.”

More like imperative, but he didn’t want Evie to know how nervous he was about being alone with Reagan.

“Sounds like you need a baby 101 crash course.” Evie smiled for the first time since he’d greeted her, and the memory of the first time they met broke out of his lockbox.

“Yeah, something like that.” Adam needed more like a year-long full-immersion program similar to those that students studying foreign languages

took.

“I can be here tomorrow. What time?”

“Martha and Reagan’s plane should arrive at three. I will pick them up and drop Martha off at her hotel. So maybe six? If that doesn’t work, you can come later.”

He’d asked Martha to stay with him, but she’d insisted on spending the night in a hotel before flying back to California on Wednesday. She’d told him she had friends in the area who wanted to see her. Then on Wednesday, she’d have a car service bring her back to the airport. Adam hadn’t argued, since it meant he didn’t need to prepare a guest bedroom or make multiple trips back and forth to the airport.

“Okay, I’ll plan on six, and if something changes, you can call or text me.”

Elite Nanny had included her cell phone number in the portfolio they sent him. Much like him, she had a different one than when they’d been together.

“Claudia mentioned you might be interested in living here. If you are, I can show you the in-law suite before you go.”

The suite took up the entire space over the three-car garage. Unfortunately, Adam hadn’t bothered to furnish the area with much since he moved in because he didn’t need to use the space. He had three spare bedrooms guests could use. Well, two now, since he’d turned the one closest to his bedroom into a nurse’s station. Although, since he’d lived there, he’d only had overnight guests twice. His brother had spent a few nights with him in September, and his sister and her boyfriend had visited in January.

“I haven’t decided. Can I get back to you about that?”

Adam understood her apprehension. Even before he found himself face-to-face with Evie, he’d been on the fence about a stranger living with him. But he’d told Claudia it was an option because it made logical sense. Now that Evie was the one who’d be taking care of Reagan, he was having second and third thoughts about her calling the space over his garage home. But he’d

made the offer, and it wouldn't be right to withdraw it just because they'd known each other in a different life.

“Yeah, of course. But if you decide to move in, I'll need to get more furniture for up there. Right now, there is only a bed.”

One downside to the suite, it didn't have a private entrance. When he'd first looked at the property, the real estate agent mentioned the owners had intended to attach a staircase to the balcony already there and replace the sliding glass door with a steel one for better security so the wife's mom could move in and use the space. However, before construction started, they found a home with a first-floor in-law suite with its own entrance on the other side of town. Since the suite was on the first floor, it was better for the wife's mother who sometimes relied on a cane to get around. If Evie did move in, he'd get some quotes to have the exterior stairs and new door added. On second thought, he'd get them either way.

“Why don't I just show you now? It might help you decide.” Adam stood, even though she hadn't agreed.

Evie set her planner aside and came to her feet. “Sure. It can't hurt.”

THREE

EVIE SCROLLED THROUGH THE MOST RECENT PHOTOS FROM HER MOM. SHE'D found the first set waiting for her when she'd returned to her hotel room last night and checked her messages. She'd also had a text message from Josie letting her know Adam had moved to somewhere in Virginia, but she couldn't recall where, although she'd offered to get the information. Naturally, she'd also asked why Evie wanted to know where Adam lived because in all the years they'd stayed in contact, Evie had never asked about him. Unfortunately, last night she'd been in no state to answer Josie. One good thing about having a friend who was terrible about communication was that Josie didn't notice when she didn't get an immediate response. If it had been Leslie, on the other hand, she would've driven over for an answer when Evie didn't respond. Thankfully, Leslie knew nothing about the situation. Evie had briefly considered sharing her concerns on Saturday after learning the client was named Adam Sherbrooke. Ultimately, she'd decided against it, since she'd been 99 percent convinced her concerns were unwarranted.

How wrong she'd been.

Maybe later, she'd send Josie a text message explaining the situation. That was, of course, assuming she survived. When he'd opened the door, it had felt like she was experiencing three massive heart attacks all at the same time. Even her lungs had stopped working. She wasn't sure her body could

handle a similar reaction today.

Evie viewed the last of this afternoon's many photos. It was a picture of one of the multiple pools on board. Really, Mom shouldn't be left alone with a camera.

I'm jealous.

Mom hadn't been exaggerating yesterday when she said the cruise ship was amazing.

I hope you and Alan are having fun.

Even if her mom and stepdad were suffering from the worst seasickness ever, they were having a better few days than her.

We are. I can't wait to tell you all about it. Anything new with you?

"Yeah, my life has turned into a living nightmare," Evie muttered but didn't dare type.

No, not really.

As the only child of divorced parents, it had been just her and Mom until about ten years ago when she and her friend Melinda introduced their parents to each other, so they had a close mother-daughter relationship. It was rare that Evie didn't share what was going on in her life. She'd keep the current situation to herself, at least for the moment. If she told Mom about it now, she'd worry about how Evie was dealing and not enjoy her vacation. Mom and Alan deserved to enjoy the cruise they'd been looking forward to since last year.

Alan and I are off to a cooking demonstration. I'll send you more pictures later.

She wanted to tell Mom it wasn't necessary. The view from the top deck was the least of her concerns. But Mom meant well and had no idea of the personal hell Evie found herself in at the moment. A personal hell she could have gotten herself out of if she declined the position and asked Claudia to send someone else. And in hindsight, she should've done just that.

Sounds good.

Setting down the device on what doubled as her desk and kitchen table, Evie turned in her chair toward the window and stood. Dark clouds filled the sky, and heavy rain made visibility poor. All in all, the gloomy weather was a good representation of her mood this afternoon.

When she woke up this morning, she immediately wondered if she'd dreamed about yesterday's meeting. Although silly, she'd even checked her phone to see if the name Adam Sherbrooke was among her contacts. Sure enough, his name and number were sandwiched between Alan Schmidt, her stepfather, and Leslie Simpson.

After that, she'd tried to dismiss him and the fact that she'd see him again tonight from her mind by spending some time in the hotel's excuse for a gym. Thirty minutes later, she'd worked up a decent sweat on the elliptical, but thoughts of Adam remained. She then spent a chunk of the morning and early afternoon running errands, both those she needed to take care of and some that just gave her an excuse to be away from her hotel room. Finally, she'd returned when the mall, somewhere she only ventured inside when left with no other choice, was the only place left to go. Except for when she went through the boatload of pictures from Mom, she'd spent about the last hour either pacing or staring outside.

Down below, two figures sprinted across the parking lot toward the hotel's main entrance. No question about it, the rain had intensified since she'd been out. Hopefully, it would let up a little before she had to go to Adam's. The only thing she liked less than driving in the rain was driving in the snow.

Evie rested her palms on the windowsill and watched another guest leave their car. However, unlike the previous two guests, this one opened a bright orange umbrella before getting their luggage from the trunk. Rather than watch them, she gazed up at the sky and wondered the same thing she had last night. Not only what were the odds of her seeing Adam after all these years, but what were the odds of her seeing Adam again because he needed a

nanny?

First, there was the unlikelihood of him living so close to her. Virginia wasn't as big as, say, Texas, but it wasn't a tiny state either. Not to mention, why was he living here, anyway? He'd grown up in California. And while he'd gone to college in Virginia—if he hadn't, they never would've met—he didn't have any family here as far as she knew.

Then there was the fact that Elite Nanny employed at least seventy-five employees just in the Alexandria office, which wasn't their only one in the state. Plus, it wasn't the only nanny agency in the area.

He could've called any of them. But the same bad luck that caused her potential new house to catch on fire thanks to a lightning strike had him calling Claudia.

Maybe I should buy a lottery ticket.

If she'd defied the odds on meeting Adam again in such a strange manner, maybe she'd hit it big and not need to work for him—or anyone else, for that matter.

Since dismissing him from her mind was impossible, Evie gave their meeting yesterday her full attention.

Some people didn't age well, others seemed to hardly change, and on rare occasions, people got better with time. Hands down, Adam fell into category number three.

She wouldn't have thought it possible back in college, but somehow Adam was hotter now than ever. He'd worn his hair a little longer back then, but it looked just as soft and thick as she remembered. There were a few laugh lines near his Sherbrooke blue eyes—eyes she'd once envisioned their children having. Rather than detract from his good looks, they made him look sexier. And unlike some men she'd run into from high school or college, he didn't have a belly that suggested he drank a six-pack every night and two on Sundays while watching sports and eating pizza.

The last didn't surprise her. Adam had always taken care of himself.

Unlike many other college guys, he hadn't drunk until he passed out at parties and lived off fast food. When they'd been together, it wasn't uncommon for them to stay in on a Friday night and cook together; usually, she'd done more of the cooking, and he'd handled the prep work. However, Adam hadn't been a lost cause in the kitchen. Afterward, they'd watch a movie or whatever sporting event was on television. More often than not, she'd spend the night at his apartment, which he'd had to himself, rather than return to hers—an apartment she'd shared with four other women.

What else about Adam hadn't changed?

Soon I'll find out.

He expected her in about an hour.

Her stomach did a pirouette at the thought of seeing him again. Last night, he'd insisted their past didn't matter. That he only cared about his goddaughter having the best nanny possible. She couldn't fault him for that, even if the comment had stung a little. Actually, that said a lot about the type of person he was. And although Elite Nanny employed some terrific nannies, Evie knew she was one of their best, at least out of the Alexandra office. She knew nothing about the people the company employed in other parts of the state or the country.

Since he'd been so adamant about their history not mattering, she hadn't wanted him to think it was an issue for her either. While she could lie to him and say it was no big deal, she couldn't lie to herself. She'd been the one to walk away, not him. And while it hadn't been an easy decision to make, it had been the right one because she hadn't wanted to end up like her mother. After that one week with Adam's parents, she'd known someday that would happen.

That didn't mean she'd never questioned her decision, especially those first few months when Adam kept trying to contact her.

She'd spent less than an hour with him yesterday, and it had brought long-buried memories to the surface, not to mention a multitude of emotions

—perhaps the biggest one being guilt. Starting today and ending who knew when, she'd see him five or six days a week. She was already afraid to see what other memories or, worse, painful emotions popped up. Not to mention that if she accepted his offer to use the in-law suite over the attached garage, she'd see him even more. And what an offer it was. Evie wished he hadn't insisted on showing her the space before she left last night.

Evie wasn't staying at a run-down motel like you often saw criminals use in movies or police dramas. But it wasn't a suite at the Keystone, a luxury hotel in DC, either. The space at Adam's had a moderately sized bedroom that was separated from a small sitting area and kitchen by a partial wall, and it had a bathroom. It lacked only three items: a tub, an oven, and a private entrance. The bathroom only had a shower stall, which wasn't a big deal, and the kitchen had a countertop stove with four burners so she could cook, but any baking was out. Considering the only cooking she could do now was in a microwave, a countertop stove was a vast improvement. Of the three items, the last was the biggest issue, although Adam assured her he'd have an exterior staircase added to the balcony that was already there. Until that happened, though, the only way to access the suite was via the upstairs hallway, so she could run into him at any time when they were both home.

Thoughts of the suite had her turning away from the window. Her hotel room wasn't tiny. It contained a king-size bed and the other standard hotel furniture, but compared to the guest house where she'd lived while working for the Jordans, it was like living in a walk-in closet. The bed was comfortable enough, and she had to admit it was nice having someone come in once a week to clean the bathroom and change the sheets. She'd give up both perks for her own place, though. Then there was the cost. She'd heard from her lawyer this morning. She'd informed Evie that the current owners had a meeting with another construction company scheduled to discuss costs to repair and a time frame. They'd met with the first company Friday, and it had quoted them a five-figure dollar amount and a time frame of eight to nine

months. Another month, maybe even a month and a half, here wouldn't completely drain her bank account, but it would put a nice dent in it—something she'd rather avoid, since she'd planned to use some of the money to furnish her new house. Eight or nine months was a different story. There was no way she could afford to stay here for that long, and she didn't want to wait another eight months to own a home. If all the companies came back with a similar time frame, she'd look for something else, and the homeowners would have to find another buyer.

Regardless of what happened with the house, if she moved into Adam's in-law suite temporarily, she could save money on both the hotel and gas because she wouldn't be driving back and forth to his home. But while it would save her bank account, what would it do to her sanity?

No, she'd stay here until she knew how seeing him for an hour or so a day affected her.

Maybe I won't even see him that much.

When she arrived each morning, he'd leave for work. The opposite would happen in the evening. She'd seen the Jordans far more than that, but she'd lived on their estate, so even on her days off, she would sometimes bump into them. Plus, she had gotten to be friends with them—something she and Adam would never be again.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she became Adam was right. Their history didn't matter; only his goddaughter did. Seeing him would take a little getting used to, but it would get easier now that the initial shock was over.

I hope.

TEN MINUTES UNTIL SIX.

Since Adam had last checked his watch, only five minutes had passed.

Had time slowed down tonight? It had undoubtedly done the opposite earlier. No sooner had he given up on sleep and gotten out of bed around two, he'd been heading out for the airport. At least, it seemed that way. In reality, he'd had time to visit the gym and get a swim in before coming home. He usually worked up an appetite while exercising. Not this morning. All he'd been able to get down was some orange juice and coffee. After that, he'd stopped at the local police station so they could make sure he'd installed the car seat correctly in his car. He could follow directions as well as anyone, but some things were better left to people with experience.

Two people occupied his thoughts between his visit to the police station and when he went to the airport—the same two who'd kept him from sleeping last night. Although nervous about caring for Reagan, he'd accepted it. Adam was still struggling with the fact that Evie was back in his life. She was the last person he'd ever expected to see again. Honestly, he would've been less surprised if he'd opened the door yesterday and found Santa Claus standing there.

A tiny leg in the car seat moved, halting Adam's thoughts, and he held his breath. Reagan had been wide awake when he met her and Martha at the airport. She'd remained that way throughout his brief visit with Martha. At some point between when they'd left the hotel and arrived here, his goddaughter had fallen asleep. Call him a chicken, but when he carried her inside and she remained sleeping, he'd put the car seat on the floor and parked his ass on the sofa. He been sitting there watching Reagan while praying she didn't wake up until Evie arrived ever since. His ex-girlfriend might be detrimental to his well-being, but she'd know what Reagan needed. Hopefully, Evie would show him enough so they'd both survive the night alone together.

Adam breathed a sigh of relief when a cry didn't follow the leg movement and Reagan's eyes remained closed. With a potential crisis averted, his thoughts returned to the woman he was both counting down the

minutes until he saw while simultaneously dreading her arrival. He'd rarely found himself suffering from such polar opposite emotions regarding a woman. But then again, Evie had always made him feel emotions he had never experienced with anyone else. He'd dated women before meeting her in college and since they'd been together. However, he'd never loved any of them the way he had her.

Before memories better kept locked away could come out and taunt him, the doorbell rang as the app on his cell phone chimed. He'd never found the doorbell loud, but just then, it seemed loud enough for his neighbors to hear. He glanced at the car seat again as he stood, expecting to see Reagan awake. After all, how could anyone sleep through that noise? But like the last time he looked at her, she remained asleep.

Reagan started crying as he opened the door.

Good timing, kiddo.

Even though Adam expected to see her, it still took his brain a second or two to register that Evie stood on his front steps. Yesterday, she'd been dressed for an interview. Now, she wore jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt, reminding him of the woman he'd once known so well.

I'm doing this for Reagan.

"Come on in."

Evie closed her umbrella and stepped inside as Reagan became more vocal. "How are things going so far?"

"So far, so good. But Reagan just woke up."

"And it sounds like she's requesting your presence."

He preceded Evie down the hall to the living room, expecting her to criticize him when she saw Reagan still strapped into her car seat.

"She might be better off if you take the lead. She fell asleep on the ride here from the hotel. When I carried her inside and she didn't wake up, I put her in here with me."

"I don't blame you. Unless I have to wake a baby her age, I leave them

sleeping. And she's safe as long as the car seat is on a flat surface like the floor and she's strapped in."

Evie put her canvas bag and purse on the floor before kneeling near the car seat. "She's beautiful." Then, after unlatching the straps, she lifted Reagan out. Immediately his goddaughter's cries lessened but didn't entirely stop.

She wouldn't get an argument from him. Reagan took after her mom. Adam didn't see any of his friend Nolan in the little girl except for her eyes. Reagan's eyes were the same shade of golden brown as her dad's.

Adam rubbed his finger over Reagan's fist where it was resting on Evie's shoulder, amazed at how tiny it was compared to his hands. "Reagan looks like her mom." Evie had never met Arielle, but it seemed like the appropriate thing to say.

"When was her diaper last changed?" Evie asked, standing as she rubbed Reagan's back.

"Martha changed her before we left the airport, so it's been a few hours."

He'd considered asking Martha to show him before he and Reagan left the hotel in case he needed to do it before Evie got there. But he decided against it because he didn't want Nolan's mom to think she was leaving her only grandchild with a complete idiot. The woman had looked emotional enough as it was. She hadn't cried while they were together, but her eyes reflected her pain. Martha Durand might have been an unconventional mother, but she had loved Nolan, obviously more than he'd ever realized. Perhaps more than his friend had ever realized too.

"We'll start there and see if she stops crying. Do you have any diapers down here?"

Adam grabbed the floral diaper bag Martha gave him. Before he and Reagan ventured out, he'd transfer everything in it to the backpack he'd bought because he wouldn't be caught dead carrying around a floral bag, no matter what was inside.

“Time for lesson one. Get a diaper, wipes, and a blanket or towel for her to lie on.”

He’d investigated the bag’s contents earlier and knew a foldable pad was inside. “Will this work?” Adam held up the item.

“Even better. You could change her on the sofa, but I recommend on the floor in case she moves around a lot.”

Once he had everything ready, Evie placed Reagan on her back. “I’ll do this one, and you can watch. I’m sure she’ll need to be changed again before I leave. You can get that one.”

She wouldn’t get an argument from him.

In no time, Evie had the tiny snaps on Reagan’s peach-colored one-piece outfit undone, the wet diaper off, and a new one in its place.

“I think even I can handle that.”

Evie’s expression as she snapped the outfit again said, *Just wait*. “Wet diapers are simple.”

He understood what she wasn’t saying. Diapers filled with poop were a different story. But Adam would deal with one issue at a time.

Despite the clean diaper, Reagan still cried when Evie picked her up.

“Do you know when she last ate?”

“Martha said she had a bottle on the plane, but I don’t know what time that was.”

“I bet she’s hungry. Is she eating solids, or is she just having formula?”

“She’s getting both.” And he already had a variety of baby food and baby utensils in his kitchen waiting for her.

Since Evie had changed the diaper, he expected her to feed Reagan while he watched and saw how it was done. But Evie had other ideas. Once Reagan was strapped into her highchair, Evie handed the baby spoon and the container of mashed bananas to him. Then she sat on the other side of the highchair while he tackled his first attempt at feeding his goddaughter, which took longer than he’d expected considering the amount of food in the

container. Afterward Evie had him make Reagan a bottle. The formula smelled awful to him, but Reagan finished off almost the entire thing. Even better, though, she hadn't cried since before eating. And for the past ten minutes, she'd been content sitting in the activity center and playing with the various toys attached to it.

Now that Adam had taken care of Reagan's stomach, his stomach realized he hadn't eaten since lunchtime, and it was demanding food. "I haven't eaten dinner yet. Are you hungry?"

"I went through the drive-thru at Hilltop Sandwich Shop on my way here."

He stopped there often himself. "They have the best roast beef sandwiches."

Evie nodded. "It's what I got today."

"Do you live near there?"

Adam hadn't noticed if Evie's resume listed an address. He'd been more concerned about her credentials and references than where she called home.

"I'm not too far from there."

If she didn't want to share personal information, such as where she lived, it was okay with him. She was his goddaughter's nanny, not his friend. "I haven't eaten since lunch. Do you mind if I make myself a sandwich?"

"Go ahead. I'll keep Reagan company. Then, when you come back, we can work on my schedule, and I have a few things to give you."

Growing up, he'd loved peanut butter and jam sandwiches. So much so that when he was ten, he'd gone through a phase where he'd refused to eat just about anything else. It had driven his mom crazy. Finally, after about six months, he'd grown out of it, but to this day, he still loved them. So, even though he had deli meat in the fridge, he made two peanut butter and strawberry jam sandwiches. Then, before returning to the living room, he grabbed two bottles of sparkling water from the refrigerator. Evie might not be hungry, but she might like a drink.

An invisible fist knocked the wind out of him, stopping Adam in his tracks when he walked back into the living room. Evie now sat on the floor near the activity center, and she was murmuring to Reagan. When they'd been together, they'd discussed having children someday. Evie had wanted at least two children because she insisted being an only child was lonely. He hadn't cared about a number or gender. If things had gone differently between them, how often would he have walked in on scenes like this, but it would've been his son or daughter in the activity center?

It is in the past.

The reminder got his feet moving again.

"I brought you a drink." Adam held out the bottle.

"Thanks." Evie accepted the bottle and grabbed her canvas bag. "I wasn't sure what you had, but I brought a few things for you." She pulled a book out and put it on the table near his plate. "I think this is one of the best books out there. It covers the stages of development a baby goes through and gives you approximate times when they should hit certain milestones. There are also some fun games and activities to encourage a baby's development."

Since the title was *The Guide to Baby Development*, he'd known the book wasn't about gardening.

"I wasn't sure if you had a thermometer. Even if you do, I always like to have more than one in case the batteries die in one." Evie placed a brand-new non-contact pediatric thermometer and a package of batteries on top of the book.

He bought a thermometer when he'd ordered all the baby stuff. But Evie was right. It never hurt to have more than one.

Baby fingernail clippers and a large container of Aquaphor joined the items on the table. He'd overlooked fingernail clippers during his shopping spree, and he didn't know what Aquaphor was.

"This is great for chapped skin and diaper rash. I even use it on my hands in the winter." She pointed at the container before reaching back into her bag.

“You want to have baby Tylenol around if she gets a fever. And these anti-gas drops can be a lifesaver.”

He'd bought Tylenol, and he'd also found a bottle of it in the diaper bag. Much like with the thermometer, it didn't hurt to have some extra on hand.

“When the last babies I cared for were Reagan's age, they loved this when they were teething.” Evie held up a giraffe and an infant toothbrush. “She doesn't have any teeth yet, but brushing her gums is still a good idea, and it gets her used to it.”

He'd known he needed to change diapers and feed Reagan, but for some reason, brushing her teeth hadn't occurred to him. But it wasn't like she'd be able to do it herself for a few years.

“When should she start getting teeth?”

“I think she's started teething. If you look at her bottom gum, it's swollen, and she keeps putting either her fist or toys in her mouth. Most babies like to chew on things when they are getting teeth. That book covers signs and ways to help soothe the discomfort.”

He'd start with that section tonight.

“The last three families I've worked for have taken their children to Dr. Wilson. She is phenomenal. If you haven't already found a pediatrician, this is her number and address.” A piece of paper joined the other items on the table.

“My cousin recommended Dr. Wilson too. Reagan has an appointment with her on Thursday afternoon, and I've already requested her doctor in California send her records.”

“You have a cousin in the area?”

“Three, although one doesn't live in Virginia full-time. But only Jake and his wife have children.”

“That's good. It's nice having family near you.”

When they'd been together, her mom had moved to Norfolk to be closer to Evie's grandparents, and her dad and stepmom had been in Virginia

Beach. Unless they'd moved, Evie's closest family was about three hours away. Much like Evie's marital status, where her parents called home these days was none of his business.

"So about my schedule. I know you have this week off. Do you want me to come by again, or are you all set until next week?"

He told Nathan, one of his assistant coaches, to let the team know he might not make the meet on Saturday. But he hated to miss the first one of the season. "If you can come Friday afternoon around two o'clock and then Saturday morning at eight, that would be great. Friday is the last practice before the track team's first meet of the season on Saturday."

"I can be here. Then, starting on Monday, what time do you want me here?"

"By eight. Most days, I should be home by five thirty unless we have a track meet. But this season, I think all of our meets are on weekends except for two."

Evie gathered up her purse and empty bag and then stood. "I'll see you on Friday afternoon." She stepped away but then stopped. "If you have questions or need help, call me."

He had a feeling he knew the answer before he asked the question. "Do you always let everyone you work for call you like that?"

"No, but they all had months to prepare for a baby in the house. You had less than a week."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Adam hoped he didn't need to take her up on the offer.

FOUR

IT DIDN'T SURPRISE ADAM TO SEE REAGAN SLEEPING WHEN HE REMOVED HER car seat from his car early Thursday evening. She seemed to sleep best while in the car. She certainly didn't enjoy sleeping in her crib. At least, that was how it seemed. She'd woken up twice during the night on Tuesday and Wednesday. The book Evie left him claimed roughly 70 percent of sixth-and-a-half-month-olds slept through the night on a regular basis. Adam wasn't sure if he was doing something wrong or if Reagan just fell into the 30 percent who didn't. The same book said babies her age needed two and a half to three and a half hours of sleep during the day. His goddaughter seemed to think otherwise.

Yesterday she napped for roughly half an hour when he put her in the crib. He'd tried again later in the day, and she'd cried. However, she fell asleep before they reached their destination when they'd gone out because he needed a few things at the store. So rather than wake her, he'd turned around and gone home. Then, like on Tuesday, he carried her car seat in and left her sleeping in it while he caught up on some emails.

Earlier today, she'd cried as soon as he put her in the crib and continued until he couldn't take it any longer and got her. Since it had worked yesterday, he'd taken her for a ride in the car and then let her finish her nap strapped in her car seat in the living room while he sat on the sofa and

worked.

After grabbing his backpack, he headed for his cousin's front door. Since Jake's house wasn't far from the pediatrician's office, his cousin had invited Adam over for dinner. While he enjoyed spending time with Jake and his family, it wasn't the only reason he'd immediately accepted his cousin's invitation. No, the fact that he would be with two experienced parents for a few hours had also factored into his decision. So far, he and, more importantly, Reagan had survived their first two days together, but it hadn't been smooth sailing. More than once, he'd considered calling Evie. But since her past clients never did that on her days off, he'd stopped himself each time.

Jake was holding his four-month-old son when he opened the door. "Sorry, it took me so long. I was changing Brady, and Charlie is in the backyard with Garrett."

"That explains why it's so quiet in here," Adam said, stepping inside.

"Trust me, it won't stay that way. I swear Garrett and Brady sometimes try to see who can make more noise. It's going to be a circus around here when Brady starts walking."

If Brady ended up having even half as much energy as his older brother, Jake would be in a world of trouble. But it sounded like his cousin already knew that.

"I've got the grill heating up already."

Adam followed his cousin through the house and into the backyard.

"Hi, Adam. Make yourself at home," Charlie said as she pushed a mini replica of his cousin on a swing. "I'll be over in a minute."

He didn't doubt it. Garrett might look content now, but Adam knew from experience the young boy would move onto something new in no time. He never stayed still for long. Somehow he was even worse when his cousin Kendrick was around. The two boys were only months apart in age and had similar personalities. It was probably a good thing for the sake of both sets of

parents that the cousins lived in different states and only saw each other once a month or so.

“How is everything going?” Jake asked as he put Brady into a baby seat on the patio.

Adam set the car seat and backpack near the patio table and then walked to the refrigerator. Eventually, he’d like an outdoor setup like his cousin’s, which included a stove, a grill, a woodburning pizza oven, and a refrigerator. Right now, all he had out back was a grill, although he did have patio furniture on the way. At some point, he’d have to get a swing set and other outdoor toys similar to what Jake had for his sons, but he figured Reagan being able to use those things were still months away.

“It’s been interesting.” He grabbed an iced tea and twisted off the cap.

“Can you give me the steaks and one of those while you are over there?”

Opening the refrigerator again, he removed a platter with three large filets and another bottle of iced tea. “I’ve learned a lot in the past two days. I don’t even want to think about how many diapers I have changed.”

So far, perhaps the most important lesson had been not to feed Reagan prunes. It was a lesson he would’ve preferred never to experience.

Prunes weren’t something he ate, but since pureed prunes had been among the baby food selections, he guessed it was something babies did. Reagan had eaten the entire container at lunch, despite how disgusting they looked. Since she’d seemed to enjoy them so much, he’d given her the second container at dinner.

Later, when he’d noticed her light purple onesie now had an odd brownish stain, it had taken him a moment or two to realize what it was. He stood there staring at her for several seconds, trying to figure out how he would remove the onesie without getting crap in her hair and on her face. In the end, he’d grabbed scissors and cut it off her. She’d still needed a bath, though. At least she’d seemed to enjoy that. Afterward, he threw her clothes and the diaper outside in the trash and made a mental note never to buy her

prunes again.

Jake placed the filets on the grill and then closed the cover. “Welcome to parenthood.”

“When did Garrett start sleeping through the night?”

“Double-check with Charlie, but I think he was around eight months.”

“Check with me about what?” Charlie asked as she joined them.

Yep, he’d been right. Garrett had left the swing behind and was now in his sandbox.

“How old Garrett was when he slept through the night,” Jake answered.

“Just shy of eight months.” Charlie hugged Adam before squatting down near Reagan’s car seat. “She’s beautiful. How old is she?”

“Six and a half months.”

“Wow, she’s so much smaller than Garrett was at that age. I don’t think Brady is much smaller than her, and he’s two months younger.”

Adam glanced at Brady and then down at Reagan as she opened her eyes. Charlie was right.

“Do you want me to take her out of here?”

“Mommy,” Garrett shouted from the sandbox.

“I’ll get her. I think you’re being summoned.”

Wednesday, when he’d taken her out of the car seat for the first time, he’d been nervous. He’d held her so many times since then, he no longer feared he’d accidentally hurt her.

“You look comfortable with her.” Jake sat and grabbed a cheese wedge and a cracker from the charcuterie board on the table. “I brought the extra highchair we have out in case you wanted to use it.”

It made sense Jake had an extra highchair. Both his brother and sister had children, as did Charlie’s brother, not to mention many of their other cousins did too. And they all visited regularly.

Later he’d put her in the chair, but for now, he’d let her sit on his lap. In the short time Reagan had been with him, he’d learned she liked to be held.

“The first day was rough, but I don’t worry about breaking her every time I pick her up anymore.”

Adam sat and grabbed a black olive off the board. Immediately the memory of first time he and Evie ordered pizza together popped up out of nowhere. They’d been trying to decide what toppings to get. And she’d told him her two favorite toppings were black olives and sausage. He’d insisted black olives, much like pineapple, didn’t belong on pizza. Unable to agree that night, they’d ordered two pizzas, and she’d convinced him to try a slice with the olives-and-sausage combo. Much to his surprise, he’d liked it. After that they often ordered the combination.

Damn it.

He’d barely thought of the woman in years, and now after a few hours in her presence, he was remembering her favorite pizza toppings.

“How did it go with the nanny you met with on Monday?”

He let out a long, audible breath as he got a cracker and some cheese. No more black olives for him tonight.

“Sounds like it didn’t go well.”

“The nanny Claudia sent is my ex-girlfriend.”

Jake’s eyebrows rose a fraction of an inch. “Delilah works for Elite Nanny? I thought she did something in finance. Claudia sent us Meg’s whole portfolio beforehand. Did she not send one to you?”

He understood Jake’s assumption. Jake knew he hadn’t been in a relationship with anyone else since he moved here in the summer. “It wasn’t Delilah. And Claudia did send it to me, but Evie must have gotten married after we were together, because she has a different last name. So I didn’t realize it was her until I opened the door.”

Jake cringed as he reached for another cracker. “Oh, that must have been awkward.”

“That’s putting it mildly. You never met Evie. But we were together for almost three years in college.”

When he'd been in college, he'd rarely gone home, and he'd skipped more Sherbrooke family events than he'd attended. It wouldn't surprise him if he'd seen his cousin less than ten times during the four years he attended college in Virginia.

Jake shook his head. "I don't think you ever even mentioned her to me. Is it safe to assume it wasn't an amicable breakup?"

He'd argue such a thing wasn't possible, but what did he know? "I planned on asking her to marry me a few days before graduation. I had it all planned out. But when I went to pick her up, Evie was gone, and her roommate handed me a letter she left for me."

A dull ache settled in his chest as the memory snuck out of its hiding spot.

He'd hoped to propose on her birthday in May, but it had taken the jeweler longer than expected to complete the engagement ring. But he'd picked it up the Monday before graduation while Evie had been at work. When he stopped by the next afternoon, and Melinda, one of Evie's roommates, said she'd gone home, he'd thought she was joking around at first. Then she'd handed him the letter. His world had come to a screeching halt. He'd tried calling and texting. When she ignored both, he driven to her mom's house. Only no one had been there. He'd continued trying for weeks to get in touch with her, but she never answered. Eventually, he'd given up and locked away all memories of her. Or at least tried.

"Damn, that is cold."

Cold. Cruel. Adam could think of a lot of adjectives to describe her actions.

"Do you know why she did that?" Jake asked the same question he'd wondered for a long time back then. Hell, he still wondered why whenever thoughts of her hit him.

"Nope. I never heard from her again. She even skipped graduation." He'd only attended because he'd hoped to see her there, but she'd been a no-show.

Evie's friends had been no help either. They all insisted they didn't know where she was. Although he hadn't believed them, he couldn't force them to share the information either.

“What did you do when she showed up on Monday?”

Adam had briefly considered slamming the door in her face. Even if she did deserve it, it'd seemed like a childish move. “What could I do? I let her inside.”

Tired of the sandbox, Garrett climbed into the chair next to Jake and tried to get his father's iced tea. “That's not for you.” Standing, Jake got a mini juice box from the refrigerator and stuck the straw into it before handing it to his son. “I'm not sure I would've been as nice.”

His cousin's parents had drilled to many manners into Jake for him to have done anything else despite what he might say.

Rather than sit again, Jake checked the steaks on the grill. “That must have been an awkward conversation. Has Claudia sent someone else for you to meet with yet?”

“You didn't like the nanny you met with on Monday?” Charlie asked, joining them now that Garrett was sitting at the table.

He didn't feel like sharing the details again. “It's a long story, Charlie. Ask Jake to fill you in later. But to answer your question, I didn't ask her to send anyone else. According to Claudia, Evie is the best nanny the agency has. Her portfolio supports that claim. If Evie is the best, then I want her taking care of Reagan.”

After closing the grill, Jake sat and added some food to his appetizer plate. “Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“I don't know what I missed, but Elite Nanny doesn't employ just anyone. If they sent their best employee, why wouldn't it be a good idea for her take care of Reagan?”

“She's Adam's ex-girlfriend.”

“Yep, I can see why he'd want someone else. I would, too, if they sent

one of my exes.”

“It’ll be fine. I won’t see her much anyway.”

Maybe if he told himself that enough, he’d finally believe it.

THURSDAY NIGHT, Evie heard her phone chime, alerting her to a text message as she waited for Leslie to answer the door. Yesterday, when Leslie called and invited her over for dinner tonight, Evie hadn’t hesitated to say yes, since it meant she didn’t need to eat another frozen dinner she’d heated in the microwave.

The phone chimed a second time, reminding Evie she had a message from someone. She didn’t care who it was from as long as it wasn’t from Mom or Adam. She’d even take one of those surveys political groups were also sending out before a text from either of them.

Every day this week, she’d received pictures from her mom. Sometimes she received them more than once a day. She was glad Mom and Alan were enjoying themselves so much, but a person could only take seeing so many pictures someone else took while on vacation.

Although, she’d rather receive ten messages from her mom than one from Adam. She’d regretted telling him to call if he needed help before she’d even made it to her car. And she’d expected him to take her up on the offer. Each time she received a text message or a phone call on Wednesday and earlier today, she’d expected his name to be on the screen. Much to her relief, she hadn’t heard from him at all. Unfortunately, the lack of contact hadn’t kept him from Evie’s thoughts.

Evie offered a silent thank you when she found a text message from her stepsister, not Mom or Adam, when she pulled the device out of her pocket.

Any updates on the house?

No sooner did Evie reply to Melinda’s question, another appeared.

Going to the lake tomorrow. If you're not busy, come and spend the weekend.

I wish I could. Working Friday and Saturday afternoons.

She hadn't seen Melinda and her husband, Rob, in weeks. It would be nice to catch up with them while staying at the lake house Melinda's in-laws owned.

Come when you finish on Saturday.

She wasn't sure how late Adam would return from the track meet. Not to mention driving four hours to the lake and then four hours home on Sunday for such a brief visit didn't appeal to her.

I'll come next time.

The door opened as Evie sent her reply.

"Help yourself to anything. I'm trying to get a straight answer from customer service about my missing order." Leslie returned to the kitchen table and started typing on her laptop.

She didn't need to uncover the casserole dish on the stove as she passed by to know what was inside. The delicious aroma of chicken and spinach alfredo filled the kitchen. It was Leslie's favorite dish, and she made it multiple times a month. Evie wouldn't complain about her friend's selection. The homemade alfredo sauce was delicious, and since Leslie always made so much, she'd give Evie leftovers to take home. That meant tomorrow she could avoid another frozen meal or takeout.

"I'm never ordering anything from the Crafting House again."

Yeah, right. Evie kept the thought to herself as she poured a glass of lemonade.

Leslie not ordering from her favorite craft store was as likely as ten feet of snow falling in August.

"What happened?"

"Sunday afternoon, I ordered some iron-on vinyl and paid extra for two-day shipping. It still hasn't arrived, but the tracking says the post office

delivered the order this afternoon, and now customer service is telling me they don't have any in stock and haven't for over a month. Their website said they had it when I placed the order."

She understood her friend's frustration. The ability to order products and have them delivered straight to your door was great. But it didn't always go smoothly.

Five minutes later, Leslie closed her laptop. "Sorry about that. I'm making headbands for Kay's soccer team. They have their first game next weekend, and I wanted to get them done so they'd have them for it."

Her friend was always making or buying something for Kay, her eleven-year-old niece.

"What was the final outcome?" The company couldn't send what they didn't have, but that still left the mystery of the missing delivered order.

"They issued me a refund. Tomorrow I'll have to stop at Johnson's and see if they have what I need. They're just always more expensive." Leslie put the laptop on the counter and picked up the casserole dish. "Let's eat. I'm starving. I haven't eaten since breakfast."

After adding a decent portion to her plate, Evie snagged a slice of bread from the basket. "How did your date go Monday night?"

For the next few minutes, Leslie filled her in on her night out with Daniel, someone she'd known for several months. However, they'd only recently become romantically involved, and Monday had been their fourth date.

"Do you have any plans on Sunday?" Leslie asked before popping the last of her bread in her mouth.

"Why?" She'd made the mistake of not asking why too many times when Leslie asked a question like that.

"Daniel and I have a mutual friend at work, and we thought the four of us could go out together."

She'd let Leslie try to set her up once, about a year ago. It wasn't a mistake she'd make again. "I'd love to, but I'm organizing my closet Sunday

night.”

“You could just say no. But if you change your mind, let me know. Oliver is very nice. I think you would get along well.” Leslie cut a piece of chicken in half, then lifted her fork toward her mouth. Her hand stopped before it made it there. “Do you even have a closet?”

Evie nodded. She had a small one, but there wasn’t much in it. When she’d moved out of the Jordans’ guest house, she’d stored many of her belongings at her mom’s house.

“How are things going with your new placement? Are you going to move in until you get your housing situation figured out?”

The question was a logical one. But unfortunately, it was also one she’d prefer to avoid tonight, though she had known it would come up at some point.

“It’s complicated,” Evie answered as she stabbed her chicken.

“He’s a client who needs someone to watch a six-and-a-half-month-old. What’s complicated about that? You’ve taken care of other children that age. Is he a jerk or sleazy creep who makes you uncomfortable?”

Oh, Adam made her uncomfortable all right, just not in the way Leslie meant.

“He’s an ex-boyfriend.”

Leslie choked on the water she’d swallowed and started coughing.

“Who? Did Max move back? Please tell me it isn’t Julian. He can barely take care of himself, never mind a baby. No one in their right mind would make him someone’s guardian.”

In the five years since her divorce, she’d only been in two relationships, so Leslie’s confusion made sense. Although Evie wasn’t sure she’d been with Julian long enough to qualify as a relationship.

Her relationship with Max lasted for about eight months. It ended when he got a promotion that required him to move to Vancouver. She’d had no desire to move to Canada, and neither of them had wanted a long-distance

relationship. As far as Julian went, whoever came up with the saying “the only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys” had him in mind. Last she’d heard, Julian had moved back in with his parents.

“Neither. Adam and I were together for almost three years in college.”

“I’m assuming he’s an ex for a reason.” Picking up a second piece of bread, her friend covered it with butter and took a bite. “Did he turn out to be a jerk?”

Evie wished that was the case, but at least the Adam she’d known had been the opposite of a jerk. Based on the little time she’d spent with him this week, it didn’t seem like that had changed.

“Or did he cheat on you? That killed my relationship in college. Kevin and I dated throughout high school, and after graduation, we went to colleges about forty minutes apart. Before our first semester ended, he was dating girls at his school during the week and spending weekends with me.”

No longer hungry, Evie put her fork on the table. “No, he didn’t cheat on me. I broke up with him because of his family.”

“Too nosey, or were they judgmental? I’ve dealt with both. I’m not sure what is worse, a family who constantly butts their noses into personal matters or one who thinks no one is good enough for their son.”

The topic wasn’t bothering her friend’s appetite, because she raised another forkful of pasta to her mouth.

“Too rich.”

Leslie’s eyes resembled the dinner plates they were using. “You broke up with someone because their family has money? No offense, but that might be the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard, and I’ve heard a lot of stupid stuff.”

All her friends knew her parents had divorced a long time ago. They also knew Evie had a much better relationship with her mom and her mom’s side of the family. Most, though, didn’t know the why behind the divorce or why her relationship with her dad and paternal relatives was the way it was. She didn’t care to share tonight.

“Maybe it was a stupid reason, but it’s why.”

Well, more or less. If she hadn’t overheard Adam’s mom that afternoon, she might not have ended their relationship when she had. But in the end, it wouldn’t have lasted forever, anyway.

“When you say too rich, are we talking CJ Ferguson kind of money or Dylan Talbot rich?” Leslie asked, comparing the A-list Hollywood actor they both had a thing for to the current CEO of Sherbrooke Enterprises, who also was President Sherbrooke’s son-in-law.

Not that it mattered, but she got her friend’s point. “Somewhere in the middle, I’d say. Adam is a Sherbrooke. But his branch of the family isn’t involved in Sherbrooke Enterprises.” At least back then, Adam said none were. But, of course, a lot could change in over a decade. “His father owns Desjardin Winery, and his grandfather founded the Trident Corporation.”

Her friend’s eyebrows now resided near her hairline; honestly, it wasn’t a good look.

“I have some wine from Desjardin. In my opinion, their white zinfandel is the best on the market. At least in that price range. But I’ve never heard of the Trident Corporation.”

She’d never heard of it either until meeting Adam. “It’s one of the largest construction companies in the US. They build things like office buildings and hotels.”

“Now that you mentioned wine, I feel like a glass. Do you want some?”

“Sure.” She wouldn’t be leaving for a few hours. So even if she had two glasses with dinner, she’d be fine by the time she drove back to the hotel.

“Since you said nothing the night Claudia emailed you the information, I assume you didn’t realize the client was your ex.” Leslie pulled a bottle from the wine rack and then searched for a bottle opener.

“Nope. I thought it was a coincidence they shared the same name.” She’d gone to school with two people named Catherine Bird. One had been in her grade, and the other the grade behind her, so it wasn’t uncommon for people

to share the same name.

Leslie handed her a glass of white wine and placed the bottle on the table. “What happened when you met with him on Monday?”

“We both got the surprise of our lives.”

“Well, yeah. I assumed that. I meant afterward. Are you working for him until someone else is available?”

“Adam said he wanted the best person Elite Nanny employed, and Claudia told him that was me. In his opinion, my portfolio evidently backed up her statement.”

“You are the best nanny the agency has, Evie.”

She appreciated Leslie’s and Claudia’s opinions, but she would’ve settled for being second best if it meant she wasn’t in this uncomfortable situation.

“Meg Beckman is great too and has almost as much experience.”

Leslie waved a dismissive hand at her. “Whatever. Finish telling me about what happened.”

“According to Adam, our past doesn’t matter to him, and he wants me to be his goddaughter’s nanny.”

“Ouch. That’s a little cold.”

His comment had stung a little, but it hadn’t surprised her either. They’d gone their separate ways, and even if she wanted to, there was no undoing the past.

“I told him if he was comfortable with the situation, then I was too.”

“So you lied?” Leslie asked.

Evie shrugged and reached for her glass. “It seemed the best course of action.”

“Are you sure you’ll be okay with the arrangement? I couldn’t stand dealing with one of my exes five or six days a week.”

“It’s not as if I’ll spend much time with him. I’ll see Adam when I arrive and then again when I leave.”

“It’s too bad he’s an ex-boyfriend. Since the position had a live-in option,

I really hoped you could move out of the hotel this week. At least until you know what is going on with the house.”

You and me both.

“I haven’t completely dismissed the option yet.”

“Does he have a guest house for you to use like when you worked for the Jordans? I guess that would make it a little less awkward.”

If Adam had a guest house like the Jordans, it would make the situation easier. Even a private entrance for the in-law suite would help.

“Unfortunately, no. But if I need to look for another house, who knows how long that will take? I can’t afford to live at the Colonial indefinitely.”

“You can always stay with me again.”

“For a week, sure. But not for months. I asked Adam if I could get back to him about living there.”

In the meantime, she’d keep her fingers and toes crossed that the homeowners received an estimate with a much quicker time frame than the first one. And if that didn’t happen, she hoped she could find a house that she liked in her price range much faster the second time around.

FIVE

EVIE HAD NEVER SEEN SOMEONE LOOK SO EAGER AND YET SO RELUCTANT TO leave until this afternoon. Although not intentionally, she'd arrived ten minutes earlier than the agreed-upon time. But, unlike on her last visit, Adam wasn't alone when he answered the door. After inviting her inside, he'd told her to make herself at home before going upstairs to change Reagan. The fact that he hadn't handed the baby off and asked her to change the diaper told Evie Adam was far more comfortable with the little girl now than he had been on Tuesday. That night, he'd been about as far from comfortable as a person could get.

The change in him didn't surprise her, though. There were some situations where you either sank or swam. This seemed like one of those to her. Not to mention that failure had never been in Adam's vocabulary. She saw no reason that would've changed since college.

When Adam returned downstairs, he settled Reagan in her activity center as he went over the basics with Evie, such as when the baby had last eaten and when he expected to be home. Throughout the interaction, he'd given off an "I want out of here vibe." Despite his apparent eagerness to be away from her, and there was no doubt in Evie's mind she was the one Adam didn't want to be around, he hadn't bolted out the door as if the house was on fire. Instead, after gathering his stuff, he'd knelt by the activity center and spoken

to Reagan. She'd kept her distance so he didn't think she was eavesdropping. Still, Evie had overheard him promise Reagan he'd be home soon before kissing her forehead. Evie's heart had melted faster than ice cream left out on a ninety-five-degree day when he'd done that.

After that, he'd walked toward the door, but rather than leave, he'd returned to the living room and told her to call him if anything came up while he was gone. He'd then given Reagan another kiss before finally leaving the house.

In the years since she'd started working as a nanny, she'd seen parents leaving their child for the first time with a stranger act in various ways. Some walked out as soon as Evie arrived, without so much as a backward glance at their child. Others acted much like Adam had the first few days she worked for them.

Adam's behavior hadn't surprised her. He was, or at least had been, a caring individual who wasn't afraid to show those he loved affection. And clearly he loved Reagan despite the fact that she wasn't biologically related to him.

Unfortunately, watching him kiss Reagan goodbye brought back unwanted memories. Whether it would be an hour until they saw each other again or a week, he'd always kissed her before leaving. Sometimes it had been a quick kiss on the cheek or forehead, like he'd given Reagan. Other times they'd been catch-your-hair-on-fire kisses that left her needing a frigid shower. Despite her best effort to dismiss those memories as she read Reagan a book, they lingered. Even worse than that, they had her wondering if Adam was kissing someone the way he used to kiss her these days.

So far, she'd seen no evidence that a woman spent time there. Then again, a girlfriend wouldn't keep her underwear or a toothbrush in the drawer next to the spoons either. Those types of things would be in Adam's bedroom—a room she'd walked by but had no intention of going inside even if it might satisfy her curiosity.

It's none of my business, Evie reminded herself as she passed the only closed door upstairs and entered Reagan's bedroom, which happened to be right across the hallway.

"Too bad you're not talking yet, Reagan."

Most children had no filter and told you anything and everything, often to the embarrassment of their parents. If Reagan was a little older and Adam had a girlfriend who visited the house, she would, without a doubt, at some point share the information. Of course, if she were old enough to share such information, she'd probably do it by saying she'd seen Adam kissing someone or, worse, Reagan might tell Evie that Adam's girlfriend spent the night.

Before she could stop herself, Evie looked out the door as she grabbed a clean diaper. Yep, she could picture a beautiful woman who Adam's family approved of exiting his bedroom, wearing one of his old T-shirts, which was something Evie did when they'd been together and she spent the night at his place. Heck, she'd occasionally even worn his T-shirts to class.

"Maybe it's a good thing you're not talking."

In response, Reagan put the giraffe Evie had given her Tuesday in her mouth. She'd been putting toys and her fist in her mouth since Evie arrived, leaving little doubt in her mind that Reagan was teething.

Slipping a clean diaper into place, she considered her surroundings—a much safer topic than whether Adam was in a relationship and having sleepovers with a woman.

"Reagan, this room needs a makeover."

She'd seen several nurseries and children's bedrooms in the past five years. However, this was by far the most boring.

Aside from the crib and changing table, nothing suggested this was a baby's room. The walls were the same beige as the hallway and guest bedrooms. Chocolate-colored curtains decorated the windows, and the hardwood floor remained bare.

If it were up to her, she'd start with painting the walls. Many people went with pink for baby girls. She'd never cared for the color. For this room, she'd go with some shade of purple or maybe a soft yellow. Once she finished painting, she'd have a large wooden name sign cutout made and hang it on the wall over the crib. Finally, she'd add a throw rug and a comfy armchair in the corner so she could sit and read Reagan stories before bed.

Since it had nothing to do with her, Evie would keep her mouth shut. Adam had hired her to be Reagan's nanny. He hadn't asked for her opinion on his home décor. Besides, Adam might already have plans to change things. It wasn't as if he'd had much time to paint or decorate the room. It was also possible he was in a relationship, and his girlfriend would handle making this look less like a guest room and more like a nursery.

Evie averted her eyes from the closed door again as they exited Reagan's bedroom and headed back downstairs.

"What do you feel like eating tonight?" Evie settled Reagan into her highchair and secured the straps.

She hated to be nosey and check all the kitchen cabinets. However, on Tuesday she'd been preoccupied and hadn't noticed where Adam got the baby food from, and she hadn't thought to ask before he left today. She'd always kept dishes and pans in cupboards close to the stove. Her mother did, too, so she dismissed those and started with the one by the sink. Three tries later; she found what she needed.

Adam had obviously stocked up when he went shopping, because the cabinet contained at least fifty jars of baby food and several containers of baby formula. He'd also bought fortified baby cereal and snacks that Reagan wasn't quite old enough to eat yet.

"I think we'll go with the sweet potatoes tonight."

Behind her, Evie heard the door into the garage open, and the scent of food filled the kitchen. Whatever Adam had brought home smelled good. Maybe she'd pick up something on her way home rather than eat the rest of

her leftovers. While she enjoyed Leslie's chicken and spinach alfredo, she'd eaten it last night and then again today for lunch. When Leslie prepared dinner for them Thursday night, she'd made a separate batch for Evie to take with her, so she had enough for three more meals in the refrigerator at the hotel.

"I'm just going to bring my bag upstairs; I'll be right back." Adam placed a takeout container on the table and left before she could even say hello.

Please don't rush back on my account.

Even though she was faced away from the doorway, Evie knew when Adam came back into the room. Evidently, her Adam senses had turned back on despite not being used for years. Reagan looked toward the doorway and smiled, which verified her senses weren't malfunctioning. It was a reaction Evie understood. A lifetime ago, the sight of Adam always brightened her day too.

"Sorry, I'm a few minutes late. I needed to review who is participating in what events tomorrow with my assistant coaches because we have a few athletes that won't be at the meet. And then when I stopped for my order, it wasn't ready."

Evie shrugged and held another spoonful to Reagan's mouth. "Don't worry about it. I didn't even notice."

Some people obsessed about time and got upset when someone didn't arrive at the time they claimed they would. The way she saw it, too many things outside a person's control could affect life and whether they arrived when they planned. Besides, five or ten minutes was nothing in the grand scheme of things. The only time a client's tardiness bothered her was if the parents regularly ran twenty or thirty minutes late and didn't bother to let her know. The first family she worked for when she started with Elite Nanny had been notorious for doing that.

"Hey, cutie." Adam kissed the top of Reagan's head before sitting at the table.

He might not be biologically related to Reagan, but he was treating her like a father would. Or at least how a father should treat a child, in Evie's opinion.

"How was Reagan this afternoon?"

"Good. We went for a walk, and then I read to her. I brought nine or ten books with me. They are on the table in the living room. I wasn't sure if you had any."

Adam rested his forearms on the table and clasped his hands. "Reading to her now didn't occur to me. I thought it was something I'd start when she got a little older."

"It's never too early to start reading to children."

"I'll order some books tonight. Is there anything you recommend?"

"There are no specific titles I'd order. But I would get some picture books that you can read to her and some board books that she can hold and manipulate. Many of them incorporate different textures on the pages. I can send you a link to one publisher I like, or if you want, I can order the books, and you can reimburse me."

"I'll do it tonight, but definitely send me the link so I have a place to start."

As she got another spoonful of food, Evie's ringtone started playing "Thought You Knew," and she pulled her cell phone from her back pocket.

Better late than never.

Anyone else, and she'd let the call go to her voicemail, but she'd been waiting to hear from Ava, her lawyer, all day. The lawyer representing the homeowners had promised Ava an update on the second quote today.

"Sorry, it's my lawyer. I need to take this."

PEOPLE HIRED lawyers for many different reasons. And although none of his business, he wondered why Evie needed one as he watched her face for

any hints. She had been interested in using the in-law suite, so maybe she was getting a divorce. Or maybe she'd been in a car accident and the caller was a personal injury attorney.

Evie closed her eyes and rubbed the spot over her left eyebrow. "No, you're right. It's not what I wanted to hear."

The comment only told him the lawyer hadn't called with good news. Then again, in his opinion, lawyers often delivered unpleasant news, so maybe he shouldn't be surprised.

"Unfortunately, I can't wait eight months."

Well, it didn't sound like something a person would say to a divorce lawyer. But he'd never gone through a divorce, so what did he know.

"Yes. And I'll call you when I'm ready again. Thank you for your help." Ending the call, she set the device aside and sighed.

Her comment about calling when she was ready again had him crossing a personal injury lawyer from the list too. However, that left a bunch of different reasons for hiring a lawyer.

"Is everything okay?" It was either ask her that or "Why do you need an attorney?" Even though he wanted answers to both questions, the second seemed like one you would only ask a family member or a close friend. Neither relationship existed between them.

"Yeah, everything is fine." Evie gave Reagan the last of her food and then walked away from the table to wet a facecloth.

Fine, my ass.

"Are you sure?"

She wiped Reagan's face with the wet facecloth as she spoke. "I expected the bad news Ava had for me, but it still stinks."

Bad news didn't tell him much, but he couldn't think of a justifiable reason for asking more questions.

"If you're all set, I'm going to call in a takeout order so I can pick it up on my way home and then go. Do you still want me to be here for seven?"

“Why don’t you stay and eat with me? There is more than enough for both of us.”

For all he knew, he might be crossing a nanny-client line by inviting her to stay for dinner, but he wasn’t ready to see her leave. And it had nothing to do with needing her help with Reagan either. No, if Evie stayed, maybe she’d share what she’d been up to for the past thirteen years, because despite wishing he wasn’t curious, he was.

“Um, are you sure?”

Adam hated when people asked that. “I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t.” After opening the fried fisherman’s platter, he removed a thick onion ring. “You won’t find better onion rings anywhere.”

Evie loved onion rings. Maybe offering one to her was low, but if they got her to stay, he’d use the deep-fried vegetable.

She hesitated before taking it. “The food smells amazing, but I’m paying for half of it.”

He didn’t need or want the money, but if he argued, she’d leave. “Sure, or you can pick up the tab some other night.”

Rather than agree, she opened her wallet and took out cash.

Big surprise.

“How about something to drink?” he asked, shoving the bills into his pocket.

“Sure. Whatever you’re having.”

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Adam rarely found it difficult to start a conversation. However, tonight the combination of the memories of eating dinner with Evie brought up and the strangeness of the situation left him searching for a safe topic.

“This is delicious. There’s a restaurant around the corner from the hotel where I’m staying that has a good fisherman’s platter, but this is better.”

A response sat on Adam’s tongue. However, he realized she’d said she was staying at a hotel before he got it out. Most people didn’t call a hotel

home. According to her portfolio, she'd worked for Elite Nanny for five years. He doubted she'd been living in a hotel the entire time.

"You're living at a hotel?" She might not like the question, but it shouldn't surprise her either.

Evie cringed. Clearly, she'd spoken without thinking. "For now, anyway."

Once again, it wasn't his business, but unlike before, he couldn't keep his mouth shut. "Why?"

"Because it's more comfortable than my friend's sleeper sofa."

While an honest response, it didn't fully answer his question. "I don't doubt it, but are you doing renovations on your house?"

Or are you getting a divorce? Both were rational reasons someone might temporarily call a hotel room home.

She washed down the fried scallop she'd eaten rather than immediately answer. Even after setting the glass down, she remained silent momentarily. "I wish that was the reason." Evie dragged a french fry through the ketchup.

"The last family I worked for had a guest house they allowed me to use. In the fall, the family moved to Massachusetts after the Pythons traded Chase to the Rebels. They asked me to go with them, but I didn't want to move. So they let me use the house until the property sold, or I found a house."

In their recommendation, the Jordans mentioned how they considered Evie a part of the family and would miss having her with them. So her comment about them allowing her to use the guest house even after they moved didn't surprise him.

"Which I did. Unfortunately, lightning caused a fire at the house a week before the closing. It's too damaged for anyone to live in right now."

Talk about rotten luck.

"That's what my lawyer called me about. Unfortunately, it will be at least eight months until the contractors complete the repairs."

His role as Director of Technology at Trident Corporation hadn't required

that he know much about the building process itself, and it had never interested him enough to learn about it. So even though he'd worked for a construction company, he knew next to nothing about building homes. However, if it was going to take that long, the damage must have been extensive.

“Before the fire, I'd been staying with a friend because there was a two-week gap between the two closings. She offered me the use of her sofa again, but a hotel is more comfortable, and I'd hoped it would be a short-term thing.”

“You didn't want to stay with family?”

She took the last onion ring. The one he'd wanted but had intentionally left for her. “Mom and Alan still live in Norfolk. Melinda invited me to stay with her and Rob, but they're almost two hours away.”

Adam didn't know who Alan was. Maybe later, he'd ask, but it didn't apply to this conversation.

“Even if I could stand living with Dad and Debra, they moved to North Carolina last year.”

When they'd been together, she'd had a complicated relationship with her father and stepmom. Although his relationship with his parents had been complicated in a different way, it had been something they had in common. It sounded like that hadn't changed.

“So when Claudia mentioned this position had a live-in option, it seemed perfect. Until, well, no offense, it turned out to be working for you.”

“No offense taken. It's an unusual situation.”

After eating the last fried shrimp on his plate, he added a few more and considered his words. Whether Evie lived in a hotel or slept on her friend's sofa wasn't any of his concern. All that mattered was that she showed up to take care of Reagan when scheduled. Still, it bothered him that Evie was without a home, because if the nanny position had been with someone else, she would no longer need to be staying at a hotel. At least that was part of the

reason it bothered him. Adam refused to acknowledge the other.

“I know you didn’t ask for it, but in my opinion, you should move into the suite here,” Adam said, choosing his words carefully. Evie didn’t like being told what to do. She’d do the opposite if he made it sound like he was doing that now. “We’re going to see a lot of each other even if you don’t. And you’ll save on housing while you either wait for the repairs or look for another house.”

When she didn’t immediately say no and touched the small silver hoop in her left ear, Adam knew she was considering his suggestion.

“You’re right, we will see each a lot anyway.”

She sounded not so much disappointed but rather resigned to a fact she’d didn’t particularly like. While that shouldn’t bother him, it did.

“And it will save me money while I look for another house.”

Adam wasn’t sure if she was talking to him or herself, so he kept his mouth closed.

“I’d be stupid not to temporarily move into the in-law suite here.”

Thirteen years ago, when she’d left him with nothing but a note, he called her a lot of things. However, stupid wasn’t one of them.

“When I come tomorrow, I’ll bring my stuff with me,” she said, releasing her earring.

“Sounds like a plan. Tell me what you want for furniture, and I’ll order it.” She’d be the one using the space, not him, so it made more sense to make the suite comfortable for her.

“I don’t need much. Maybe a table and a few chairs.”

“What about dishes and towels?”

“I have those in storage.”

“Well, if you think of anything else, let me know, and I’ll get it for you.”

Adam didn’t expect Evie to ask for more, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t provide her with a few more furnishings. It would make the space feel more like a home, and when Evie left, he’d have a great area for his

parents to use if they ever visited. Although he didn't see that happening anytime soon, which was fine with him.

SIX

EVIE RETRIEVED HER TABLET FROM THE END TABLE. IT AND THE COMFY armchair beside it that she'd spent a few hours using last night were the newest additions. The space had undergone a transformation since she moved in almost three weeks ago.

Although she'd told Adam she only needed a table-and-chair set, as Evie would prefer not to sit on the floor while she ate, he'd furnished the suite with everything one might find in a home. He'd even had a large-screen television mounted on the wall and internet and cable installed for her. And yesterday the contractor finished the new entrance, perhaps setting a record for getting home improvements done. As a result, the space now contained as much furniture as her first apartment. Not only that, but the pieces were also far more expensive than what she'd had there. Most of the things she had in that apartment had either been from thrift shops or Target. Even the furniture in the house she'd shared with her ex-husband hadn't been this nice.

If she'd been furnishing a place for an employee to use, which was exactly what Evie was, she wouldn't spend the money on high-end pieces they might damage. And even if Evie knew the person wouldn't intentionally damage anything like Adam did in this case, she'd stay within a much more modest budget—something Adam hadn't done.

When a sofa, chest of drawers, and a nightstand followed the delivery of

her table-and-chair set, she'd done a little investigating on the internet. The task had been easy, since she'd been the one to let the delivery people inside last week, so she'd seen just what furniture store they'd been from. The dollar amount he'd spent to furnish the suite had been an excellent reminder of how different she and Adam were. Much like when they'd been a couple, she forgot that when around him.

Not that she spent a ton of time around him. While Evie saw him more than if she lived elsewhere, they saw each other far less than she'd originally feared, which was okay with her. She got the impression it was okay with him, too, because he never went out of his way to prolong their conversations.

Before carrying the tablet and Reagan downstairs, she exchanged her sneakers for slippers. She and Reagan had already gone for their afternoon walk. Reagan might be too young to play outside, but Evie believed even babies needed fresh air and sunshine. And since it was approaching bedtime, Evie didn't see them going out again tonight.

The scent of cinnamon and sugar still lingered in the air as she settled Reagan into her highchair for dinner. After she'd moved into the house, Adam had told her to treat the kitchen as her own and to use it whenever she wanted. He hadn't said it, but she'd assumed he'd meant as long as he wasn't home. Regardless, since she had everything she needed upstairs to prepare meals except an oven—an appliance she could live without—she only used his kitchen to feed Reagan and heat up whatever she brought downstairs while she cared for the little girl.

This morning, though, she'd woken up with a craving for apple cinnamon bread. So earlier today, she'd taken Reagan shopping for everything she needed rather than comb through Adam's kitchen looking for ingredients—items that he probably wouldn't have had anyway because Adam had never been into baking brownies and cupcakes. He'd always been more of a grilling person who left desserts to others. Since he wouldn't be home until sometime

after seven because he had a track meet after school, which was over an hour away from Westford, she waited to bake until Reagan took her afternoon nap. While Evie could've put Reagan in the highchair while she worked, she'd wanted the relaxation that always came when she baked, which was something she wouldn't have gotten with someone else in the room, even a person as sweet natured as Reagan.

There was no such thing as a perfect baby, but so far Reagan came close—at least as far as Evie was concerned. It had taken several days to develop a napping schedule; Evie suspected her parents, or whoever had been taking care of her, had never used one. When it came to eating, Reagan wasn't fussy, and she didn't need to be held 24-7 unlike the Jordans' youngest son. According to Adam, she still wasn't sleeping through the night, but that was his problem, not Evie's. She'd given him some things to try and had flat out told him that at some point, he might have to let her cry it out. It sounded cruel, but in her experience, sometimes it was the only way. He hadn't said if he'd tried any of her tips, and she hadn't asked.

“Do you want peas and chicken or sweet potatoes with carrots?”

She didn't expect a response, but she glanced at Reagan, who was busy putting the head of her toy giraffe in her mouth. She'd noticed that Reagan's first tooth had finally broken through her gum yesterday.

“Yeah, peas and chicken sounds good to me too.”

Container in hand, Evie closed the cabinet and then removed the ringing cell phone from her back pocket. Somehow, it didn't surprise her to see Mom's name on the screen. Mom had called last week during her and Alan's stop in Curacao to say hello and see how Evie was doing. Of course, her mom had done most of the talking, telling Evie about all the beautiful places they'd visited. Once she'd gone into great detail about the locations, she'd moved on to the different excursions they'd taken. Evie had been fine with Mom dominating the conversation, since it meant she didn't have to share the specific details about her current placement. Actually, she hadn't even gotten

an opportunity to share that she had a new placement. While Mom had asked what she'd been up to, Alan had arrived at their cabin and reminded her their dinner reservations were in fifteen minutes before Evie could respond. Before hanging up, Mom promised to call back soon. Considering how much fun the couple was having, it didn't surprise Evie that it had taken Mom this long.

Evie put the cell phone on speaker mode before answering so she could talk while she fed Reagan dinner. Then, after greeting her mom, she put the device well out of Reagan's reach and sat in front of the highchair.

"Hi, honey. I meant to call you sooner, but I lost track of time. Alan and I have been having so much fun."

"I'm glad to hear it." Her mom and Alan deserved to enjoy themselves. This cruise was the first vacation they'd been on since they married that took them more than ten hours from home.

"How is everything?"

How is everything? That was a complicated question if Evie had ever heard one. She had a job and a place to live that wasn't a hotel, and she wasn't sleeping on Leslie's sleeper sofa. So in that regard, things could be worse. But she still didn't have a house of her own, and she had to deal with her ex-boyfriend almost daily. Okay, maybe it wasn't fair to say she had to deal with Adam because he was always polite and acted more or less like all the previous families she'd worked for over the past five years. It wasn't his fault that being around him brought up memories and emotions she'd spent years trying to forget.

"Okay. I have a new position taking care of a seven-month-old little girl in Westford."

"I always liked that town. What is the family like?"

Whenever she started working for a new family, Mom asked that question, and Evie had never had any reason not to answer. Tonight she considered her response as she got Reagan another spoonful of food. Mom had liked Adam a great deal and had disapproved of not only Evie's reasons

for leaving him but also how she'd gone about it. Who knew what she might say if she learned Adam was again in her life?

No, that wasn't true. Evie knew what Mom would say. She'd claim it was fate that brought them back together. Fate was one thing that seemed to be against Evie as of late.

"It's a unique situation. Adam isn't married, and he's not Reagan's father. He's her guardian. Reagan's parents passed away last month."

Thankfully, Adam was a popular name, so Mom would have no reason to suspect her new employer was her college boyfriend.

"How devastating for both of them. This Adam must have been close to the couple if they left the care of their daughter to him."

She didn't need to ask to know Adam had found the death of Nolan difficult, and under different circumstances, she'd ask if he wanted to talk about it.

"From the little he told me, I gather he knew Reagan's father a long time."

A dose of guilt hit her. While she wasn't lying, she wasn't being completely honest either. She normally didn't lie to her mother—or anyone, for that matter. Lies complicated matters and often came back to bite you in the ass. Not to mention, you had to remember the lies in case the person brought the topic up again.

"Does he work in DC like Ken Borden?"

Many of Elite Nanny's clients worked in DC, a place she didn't mind visiting but couldn't imagine ever living or working.

Evie helped Reagan get the spoonful of food into her mouth. "No, he works for the Westford School district."

"That's convenient for him. So is this a long-term placement or just for a few months like the last one?"

Mom knew she preferred long-term placements for a variety of reasons. "Long-term. And it includes housing."

“So you’re not at the Colonial anymore?” Her house fire had devastated Mom almost as much as it had Evie.

“No, I moved in here about three weeks ago.”

“And how is that going?”

When she’d moved into the Jordans’ guest house, Mom hadn’t been 100 percent comfortable with the situation. She’d worried the couple would take advantage of Evie, since she was so easily accessible. Initially, Evie had been a little worried as well, but Mom’s and her concerns had proved unwarranted.

“I can’t complain. Adam respects my time off and my personal space.”

At least she couldn’t complain about those things. Of course, she could complain about the fact that every time she saw Adam interacting with Reagan, a part of her wished she could travel back in time and change things. But that was all on her, not Adam.

“I’m glad to hear that, and I’m relieved you’re no longer living at the Colonial. Any updates on the house in Woodbridge?”

Much like not being about to tell Mom about her new position, Evie hadn’t had the opportunity to share the latest development in her housing disaster during their last conversation either.

“The cost of repairs is more than the amount stipulated in my contract, so I don’t have to go through with the sale. And since the repairs will take about eight months, I’m going to look for something else. Hopefully, I can find something else in Woodbridge.”

After telling Adam she’d use the in-law suite, she’d almost called her lawyer back before she left his house and told her she’d changed her mind and would wait for the repairs to be made. She loved the neighborhood and the house layout, plus she now had a comfortable place to stay. She’d stopped herself, though, because working for Adam was one thing. Living in his house for eight months, even if she had her own space, was something else. Honestly, she wasn’t sure she could handle it.

“At least there is no rush now,” Mom said.

If Mom wanted to believe that, Evie wouldn't tell her differently.

CINNAMON, a scent he'd never smelled in his house, greeted Adam when he walked into the kitchen through the garage door. Either Evie had baked today, or he was so hungry, he was imagining smells now.

After closing the door, he switched on the lights, and the golden-brown bread on the counter confirmed Evie had used his kitchen today. His first instinct was to grab a knife and cut himself a piece. It had been a long time since he had anything homemade like this. While he enjoyed grilling and could cook, mostly thanks to Evie, he didn't bake. Unlike something like chili, where you could get creative, baking required sticking to a recipe. When you made chili, adding a little more paprika and tossing in some chopped onions wouldn't ruin the dish. The same wasn't true when making cupcakes. Although he didn't like to bake, he loved eating the results when others did. And since Evie had made whatever was on the plate, he knew it would be delicious.

As hungry and tempted as he was, Adam grabbed a premade protein drink from the refrigerator rather than cut into something not intended for him. He was about to take a sip when Evie walked into the kitchen looking more beautiful than anyone should when dressed in faded jeans and an oversized T-shirt.

"I thought I heard the door open."

If she'd heard the door, she'd been in the living room rather than upstairs in her suite. He'd noticed that even if Reagan was sleeping when he came home, Evie was in the central part of the home. Why that was, he didn't know. Reagan's bedroom was down the hall from hers, and she could take the receiver for the baby monitor anywhere on the property, including outside. Maybe she thought he'd consider it unprofessional if she stayed in

her room while technically on duty.

Whatever the reason, the decision was hers. Although in her shoes, Adam would be more comfortable in his own space.

“I wasn’t expecting you for at least another forty minutes.”

Adam took a much-needed drink before he answered. “Our anchor for the boys’ 4x1 relay team wasn’t at school today, so he couldn’t run. He’s got the flu. And the second-best runner on the girls’ team twisted her ankle doing the long jump. Since we didn’t have any alternates, we couldn’t enter teams in the last two relay races, so we were able to leave early.”

Finding alternates for both teams was something he needed to work on this week because the athletes worked too hard to miss out on the chance to compete when one person was sick or injured.

“That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, but at least it was a regular meet, not the state championship. Is Reagan asleep?”

Evie nodded. “She fell asleep while I read to her. And I haven’t heard a peep from her since.”

He’d taken Evie’s suggestion and read to Reagan each night too. Some books he remembered from his childhood, while others were by newer authors. But regardless of the book, he enjoyed sitting down each night and reading to her while she sat on his lap—something he hadn’t expected.

“Let’s hope it stays that way.” Adam took another sip from the shake and considered his dinner options. He didn’t feel like takeout, and besides baby food, he had little to eat in the house that didn’t require time and effort.

“Is she still waking up at night?”

Adam wouldn’t be so tired if she weren’t. “Last night, she slept through the night for the first time since she’s been here.”

He already knew what he’d find, but he opened the refrigerator, anyway. “Whatever you baked smells delicious.”

Yup, he had some fresh fruit, veggies, and more protein drinks. He didn’t

even have any milk for cereal. Tomorrow he'd visit the grocery store. He'd also look into a delivery service going forward so he could cross shopping off his weekly to-do list.

"I made my grandmother's apple cinnamon bread recipe. That one is for you," she said, gesturing at the bread on the counter.

"You didn't have to do that." The contract they'd signed didn't include her baking for him.

Evie shrugged. "Consider it payment for the use of your kitchen."

It might not be the most well-balanced meal, but the bread would help fill the hole in his stomach. "Thank you. I'm starving." Adam finished his drink as he crossed the room for a knife.

"You haven't eaten dinner yet?"

Unlike during cross-country season, the track team was too big to stop at a fast-food place on the way home. And this morning, between getting himself ready for work and taking care of Reagan, he hadn't had time to pack himself anything. "No, but I'm about to." He didn't bother with a plate. Instead, after slicing a piece, he tore a corner off it and popped it into his mouth.

"That's not dinner. I have some leftovers from last night upstairs. It's nothing fancy. It's a cheesy taco skillet recipe I like. But I can get it for you."

If she were offering, he wouldn't refuse. "That actually sounds great."

"Be right back."

Adam was checking the barrage of emails he'd received since he left work when she returned.

"Here you go."

"There's more in here than I can eat. Do you want some?" he asked after opening the container and seeing how much food there was.

Silence followed what seemed like a straightforward question.

"Sure. Why not? I went with the apple cinnamon bread for dinner too," she finally answered.

“The same bread you just told me wasn’t dinner?” He shouldn’t tease her, but he couldn’t help it.

Rolling her eyes, Evie took the container back and put it in the microwave. “I couldn’t resist. I woke up craving my grandmother’s apple cinnamon bread, so as soon as it came out of the oven, I had some.”

Adam had woken up craving something or, rather, someone this morning too. But, unfortunately, unlike her, he couldn’t do anything about it. Despite how she’d treated him in the past, his body still wanted her, and knowing she was down the hall was torture.

“How is Felicia?”

Like everyone, Evie had two biological grandmothers, but he didn’t need to ask whose recipe she’d used. He’d never met Beverly, her paternal grandmother, but she’d told him enough about her. Beverly Murphy wasn’t the type to pass down recipes to her granddaughter. He didn’t think she was even the type to bake. On the other hand, Felicia had been a sweet woman who was the life of the party. She thought nothing of being the only one dancing at a backyard cookout and had once told him the secret to a great relationship was lots of chocolate, wine, and sex. According to her, the order didn’t matter. At the time, he hadn’t known what to make of the conversation, but Evie had found it amusing when he’d shared it with her.

He smiled at the long-forgotten memory.

“Nana hasn’t changed. She and Pop still live in the Norfolk area and are always going on trips the senior center organizes. The group is going on a bus tour to Maine sometime next month. They’re going to stop in five or six different places.”

Traveling with twenty or thirty people on the bus for hours sounded like torture. But everyone enjoyed different things.

“Wouldn’t summertime be better for a trip to Maine?” he asked.

If he were alone, he’d eat out of the plastic container. But since he wasn’t, he got out plates and forks.

“I think they want to avoid a little thing called tourist season. Maine will be far less crowded in early May than in July.”

Adam hadn't considered that. “Good point.” They needed a safe conversation topic if they were going to eat together. “How's your Mom?”

Wendy Murphy was, or at least had been, the opposite of his mom in every way imaginable. He doubted that had changed.

Evie set the container closer to him before sitting. “Mom's great. I talked to her tonight. She and Alan are having a fantastic vacation.”

She'd mentioned Alan during a different conversation, and like then, she didn't give him any additional details about him. But if Wendy was on vacation with the man, he must be important to her.

“Who's Alan?” Adam added a large portion to his plate and then pushed the container closer to Evie.

She looked at him in confusion for a moment and then shook her head slightly. “Mom married Melinda's dad eight years ago.”

Much like the other time they'd eaten together, it felt natural to have Evie across the table from him, and Adam wondered if asking her to eat with him again had been such a good idea.

“I don't know if you remember Melinda. She was one of my roommates in college.”

I remember her, all right.

He remembered everything from back then, including the fact that Melinda had been the one to hand him the note Evie had left for him.

Adam nodded as he shoved some food into his mouth. If he was busy chewing, he couldn't say anything stupid.

“How are your parents?”

Fair enough. He'd asked about Evie's family. “Same as always. Thankfully, they live on the other side of the country and haven't visited me since I moved here.”

“But tell me how you really feel.” Evie's grin was contagious, and he

smiled.

“I’m not sure why, but Mom has decided I need to get married, and she has a list of potential women for me.” If he ever got married, it wouldn’t be to a younger version of his mother. It would be to someone more like the woman sitting across from him.

Evie’s grin disappeared faster than a race car at the Indy 500.

“Dad still spends most of his time either at the office or his favorite country club.” Baseball might be America’s favorite pastime, but golf was his dad’s. While Adam enjoyed an occasional game, his dad played as often as possible. Sometimes Adam wondered if he played so much to get away from his wife. Not that he blamed his dad. If he was married to someone like Mom, he’d find ways to be away from home too.

“No one’s parents are perfect.”

Unlike before he’d mentioned how his mom wanted him to get married, Evie was no longer eating what was on her plate. Instead, she pushed it around with her fork.

“So how are your sister and brother?” Evie asked.

“Tory’s great. She’s living in Boston and recently moved in with her boyfriend. My parents are still pissed about both. They had someone handpicked for her.” He hadn’t been shy about sharing his thoughts when she’d briefly dated Grant Castillo, the only son of his dad’s good friend. But he liked Duncan, her current boyfriend, and expected him to propose before the year ended.

“My brother still doesn’t know what he wants to be when he grows up. And the woman he’s dating is as annoying as hell. I don’t know what he sees in her, but they’ve been together for eight or nine months.” Tyler might be in his thirties, but the guy often still acted like a college kid.

“Hey, I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up either,” Evie said, smiling again.

Since he’d opened the door and found her standing there, he’d been

wondering about a lot of things, including how she'd ended up being a nanny. Now seemed like a good time to ask.

“How—”

Reagan's cries coming from the baby monitor interrupted him. So much for sleeping though the night. At least he was already up and not asleep in bed.

“I can check on her.”

Before she moved, he stood. “You're officially done for the day. I'll get her. Stay here and finish eating.”

“I'm done. But I'll clean up before I go upstairs.”

He gestured at the table. “Leave everything. I'll come back down later and take care of it.” She was Reagan's nanny, not his maid. He didn't need or want her cleaning up after him.

SEVEN

PULLING INTO HIS DRIVEWAY, ADAM PRESSED THE GARAGE DOOR OPENER AND wondered which would be worse: seeing Evie tonight or not seeing her. Maybe if he didn't see her until tomorrow, the image of her that had been taunting him all day, including now, would finally disappear. An image that wouldn't be there if he hadn't knocked on her door this morning in the first place. Although, in his defense, it had seemed like a good idea when he'd stopped outside her door.

Last night, she'd helped him out by providing him with dinner. Something she was under no obligation to do. It only seemed fair to return the favor. Since he and Reagan were going to the store anyway, asking if Evie needed anything from there was a simple and painless way to return the favor.

He should've known better. Ever since Martha called and told him about Nolan's and Arielle's deaths, his life had been anything but simple or painless.

This morning Evie had opened the door almost immediately after he'd knocked, a cup in one hand and a concerned look on her face. He hadn't focused on either for long. Although she'd clearly been awake before he knocked, she hadn't changed for the day. While her pajama bottoms and matching long-sleeved shirt were modest enough for a nunnery, she'd

neglected to button the four buttons on the shirt, giving him a fantastic view of her cleavage. As if that wasn't bad enough, strands of hair had escaped the braid she had done since he'd seen her last night, reminding him all too well of how she had looked in the morning when she used to wake up in his bed.

Rather than say good morning, she'd asked if Reagan was okay. All things considered, her question made sense because why else would he be knocking on her door in the morning? Still, it stung a little that she hadn't even bothered with a hello, especially since he'd been holding Reagan and she wasn't crying. Actually, Reagan had smiled when she saw Evie. A bond had developed in the short time Evie had been taking care of Reagan, and the little girl often seemed to look for Evie when she wasn't there.

Once Evie had told him she didn't need anything, he'd bolted down the hall rather than stick around and have a conversation. A man could only take so much, and seeing Evie this morning had been pure torture for him. When he'd returned home with enough food for a family of five, her car had been gone. And after putting everything away, he and Reagan went back out.

Unfortunately, even as he pushed Reagan's stroller past the various swing sets on display, instead of thinking about which might fit best in his backyard, he fantasized about peeling off Evie's pajamas and joining her in the suite's king-sized bed. Despite his thoughts being someplace else, he'd managed to pick out a set thanks to the help of a friendly salesperson. The salesperson had arranged to have it delivered and set up later in the week.

Reagan couldn't use the set now except for the infant swing he'd added to the package, but this way, it would be there for when she was ready. The swing set would also give his cousins' children a place to play when they visited. Since the store also sold sandboxes, he'd ordered one of those as well. He'd almost told the salesperson to add a trampoline to his order. What kid didn't love jumping on things? But common sense had stepped in and reminded him it would be years, not months, before Reagan could use a trampoline like the one on display.

However, he already knew that he'd add one to his backyard for her and her friends to use when she got older.

Adam and Reagan's shopping trip hadn't stopped there, though, as was clear from the packages in his trunk. Since it was on the way to Jake's house, they'd stopped at Baby Zone, a toy store dedicated to children from infancy through preschool, before heading to his cousin's house. Admittedly, he might have gone a little overboard in the toy store. But, in his defense, Adam didn't know what Reagan might enjoy three months from now. It also hadn't helped that the store had everything from water tables—something he had never heard of before today—to play kitchen sets that made sounds when you put something on the stove or turned on the faucet. Much like the trampoline, he also saw one of those in his house at some point.

Anticipation hit Adam when he saw Evie's car inside the garage. He wished he could say it was the first time he'd felt that emotion since she came back into his life. But it wasn't. Adam experienced it every damn day when his alarm clock went off and then when he came home at night.

He'd deal with the stuff in his trunk tomorrow. Right now, getting Reagan to bed took priority. Per Evie's suggestion, he'd put Reagan on a bedtime schedule, and it was already way past the time he usually put her in her crib.

Much like when he came home last night, the scent of something delicious greeted him. But unlike yesterday, the kitchen wasn't empty. Instead, Evie stood at the sink, washing a mixing bowl.

“Something smells good in here.”

“I made chocolate chip cookies.” Evie turned off the water and reached for a dish towel. “The ones on the counter should be cool enough to eat, and I have more in the oven. Help yourself.”

Oh, he would. “I will when I come back. I want to put Reagan to bed.”

Usually, if Reagan was sleeping and he removed her from her car seat, she woke up right away. Tonight, she opened her eyes briefly, but when

Adam put her in the crib, she closed them again. Watching his cousin's son run around had made him tired; maybe it had the same effect on her. He wouldn't complain, whatever the reason Reagan went back to sleep. He also wasn't disappointed that it meant no bedtime story tonight. As much as he enjoyed the routine, no story right now meant he could see Evie before she retreated to her room, which she usually did not long after he came home each day.

"That was fast," Evie said when he returned to the kitchen.

"She opened her eyes for a few seconds and then went right back to sleep." He eyed the cookies cooling on the counter. "Did you wake up craving cookies this morning?" That had been her reason for baking yesterday.

Evie transferred the cookies from the baking sheets to an empty cooling rack, ones that must belong to her because he didn't have any. "It was a challenging day."

She didn't need to say any more. Baking was like therapy for Evie. Whenever she was upset or stressed out, she baked.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Since you weren't home, I didn't think you'd mind if I used the kitchen. I made chocolate pancakes for dinner down here because my stove isn't working. Since I had all the ingredients already out, chocolate chip cookies made sense. Don't worry; I made enough to share." Evie took a cookie off a cooling rack and handed it to him. "I played with the recipe a little. What do you think?"

"I'll have someone look at the stove this week," he said, accepting the cookie.

Adam wasn't sure which was driving him crazier, the smudge of flour on her cheek or the hair that had escaped her ponytail. Although not what he wanted to taste, he popped the cookie into his mouth. "Tastes great to me. What did you do differently?"

“I added anise instead of vanilla to the dough.”

Before his brain registered what his feet were doing, he moved closer.

Reaching out, he brushed away the flour on her cheek. In response, Evie swallowed, and she glanced at his mouth before meeting his eyes again.

“You had flour on your face.” He should lower his hand and put some space between them again. But now that he’d touched her, something he’d been dreaming about doing every night since Adam opened the front door and found her standing there, he didn’t want to stop.

Evie stepped closer as he skimmed his fingers across her cheek. No longer entirely in control, he slowly lowered his mouth toward hers. Rather than tell him to stop or move away from him, she closed the remaining space between them and rested her hand on his shoulder.

The rational part of his brain that should tell him to retreat switched off as the need to kiss Evie consumed him.

Home.

The thought, as well as a wave of need like he’d never experienced, ripped through him the moment his lips touched hers. A brief kiss wasn’t enough.

Adam moved his mouth over Evie’s, unable to get enough of her. And when she slipped her arms around his neck and traced his bottom lip with her tongue, the blood coursing through his veins became molten lava scorching him from the inside out.

God, he’d missed her.

The most annoying sound broke the silence and slowly penetrated the fog filling his head. But before he figured out what it was, Evie pulled away and turned toward the oven.

He’d never hated an appliance more than now as he watched Evie turn off the timer and pull out the cookies.

“Evie —” Reagan’s crying erupted from the baby monitor on the counter before he could continue.

Talk about lousy timing, kiddo.

“I need to check on her, but I’ll be right back.”

Evie nodded but didn’t look at him as she transferred the cookies to the cooling rack. “Okay.”

Only silence came from Reagan’s bedroom when he reached the door. Should he go inside and check on her or assume she’d fallen asleep and return downstairs? If she was sleeping, the last thing he wanted to do was wake her, especially right now. While he’d dreamed about kissing Evie, he’d honestly dreamed of the two of them doing a hell of a lot more. That being said, he never expected anything to happen between them. But now that they’d kissed, he wasn’t sure he wanted to go without her again. Unfortunately, a lot of crap stood between them.

Although the silence continued, Adam opened the door and entered the room. The light from the hallway allowed him to see well enough to cross to the crib and not walk into anything. Like the last time he’d been in the room, Reagan was asleep, her breathing steady. Evie had told him he shouldn’t rush into the room every time Reagan made a sound during the night. It looked like she was right. And from now on, he’d try not to go in the minute Reagan cried. But it wouldn’t be easy. He hated hearing her cry.

When he entered the kitchen, Evie was leaning against the counter and eating a cookie. “Is Reagan okay?”

“She was back to sleep by the time I got up there.”

“That’s good. Maybe she’ll sleep through the night for you tonight.”

That would be nice, but he wouldn’t hold his breath. But for now, Reagan’s sleeping habits weren’t foremost in his thoughts.

He’d never been able to stay away from her when Evie was in the same room with him. Now wasn’t any different. “Evie —”

This time it wasn’t Reagan’s cries that interrupted him. “Don’t apologize. I could’ve stopped you earlier, and I didn’t. What happened was just as much on me as it was on you.”

An apology had been the farthest thing from his mind. “I didn’t intend to.”

It might be a good idea to keep as much distance between them as possible right now, but he’d already shown he couldn’t make a good decision tonight. So why start now? He moved closer, stopping when she was less than an arm’s length away.

“Ever since you showed up here three weeks ago, I’ve wanted to kiss you.” He might be incapable of making a good decision right now, but he could be honest. “And knowing you’re down the hall from me has kept me up at night more than Reagan has.”

Adam figured he might as well lay it all out there.

Evie looked toward the ceiling as if she’d find answers there as she took a deep breath. Slowly, she exhaled before looking at him again. “Trust me, the feeling is mutual. So where does that leave us?”

He’d always appreciated that about her. She didn’t unnecessarily drag things out, and except for when she’d left him, she never left someone wondering about what her thoughts were about something.

Excellent question.

“I don’t know.” It might be a mistake to touch her, but he couldn’t resist. “Where do you want it to leave us?” he asked, skimming his fingertips across her hand on the counter.

Evie laughed, the sound somehow sad and sarcastic at the same time. “How about you ask me something easy, like how we make Mars habitable for humans?”

“If you know how to do that, you should call NASA in the morning.”

His comment had the desired effect, and Evie smiled. “I’ll be sure to do that.”

Several seconds passed before she spoke again. “I’m not sure what I want,” she said before shaking her head. “No, that’s not quite right. Under different circumstances, I know what I’d want. But I work for you.”

Adam hadn't considered that. He recalled nothing in the contract he'd signed regarding relationships, but he would understand if Elite Nanny frowned on them. "Does the agency have a policy against that?"

Evie shrugged. "I have no idea. It's never come up for me. But that isn't the only issue."

"Then what is?"

"You're still you, and I'm still me."

She was speaking English, but she wasn't making sense to him. "I don't see that as a problem, Evie."

Dragging a hand across her face, she walked away before turning and approaching him again. "I told you about my parents and why they divorced."

He still remembered how angry he'd been when Evie shared that Raymond Murphy Junior, her father, divorced her mom because his family hadn't approved of her. They'd seen her mom, Wendy, and to a lesser extent Evie, as somehow inferior because while Raymond Murphy Senior was a surgeon and his wife a wealthy socialite from a prominent Virginia family, Wendy's mom worked as a hairstylist, and her father worked as a truck driver. Although Evie's dad had initially gone against his parents' wishes, he'd caved and divorced Wendy when Evie was six. Not long after, he'd remarried a university professor who was also the daughter of a close family friend, and they'd had two children. So while Evie's dad and her paternal grandparents remained a part of her life, their relationship was much different from the one she had with her mom and maternal grandparents.

"Yeah. But I don't know why that matters here."

"Your grandfather started one of the largest construction companies in the United States, and your family owns a winery. Your parents have estates in Palo Alto and Healdsburg. They probably have other homes too. You've got a relative who calls the White House home, and another who has platinum records lining his walls. I could go on, but I'll stop there."

He wanted to interrupt her, but his gut told him it was a bad idea.

“I’m a nanny who doesn’t even have an apartment to call home. Do you really think your parents want someone like me in their son’s life?”

Adam didn’t care what his parents wanted. He never had.

“It’s why I ended our relationship in—”

“You walked away after almost three years together because of what you thought my family wanted?” His nails bit into his palms, and he forced his hands to relax. “My family didn’t care about your background. But even if they had, what about what you and I wanted? Did you ever think about that?”

When her stove hadn’t turned on earlier tonight, Evie should have eaten a bowl of cereal and then switched on a movie or read. If she’d done those things, she wouldn’t have been in the kitchen baking when Adam came home, and they wouldn’t have kissed. No kiss would’ve meant this conversation would not be happening—a conversation she’d never intended to have with him, or anyone, for that matter.

“Of course I did. And ending things seemed the best way to prevent us from—”

“No, you didn’t, because if you had, Evie, you would’ve talked to me.” The muscle in Adam’s jaw twitched as he moved toward her. “My parents liked you. But even if they hadn’t, it wouldn’t have mattered to me. I’ve never cared about what they thought. I still don’t. You knew that.”

“They liked me?” She wondered what they said about people they didn’t like, then. “Maybe that’s what they told you, Adam, but that’s not how they felt.”

She considered for a minute. She’d told no one, not even Mom, about the conversation she’d overheard. But maybe Adam deserved to know the reason she’d left him, even if such a long time had passed.

“I overheard your parents the week we visited them.” It had been the first and only time she’d spent time with his parents. Actually, it was the only time she’d been to California. “You were outside by the pool, waiting for me.

The door to your father's study wasn't fully closed, and I walked by just as your mom said my name."

Although she'd known eavesdropping was wrong, her feet had refused to move that afternoon.

"Your mom said she thought I was a nice young woman, but she was concerned because you'd wasted so many years with me. She wanted your father to talk to you, convince you it was time to move on and look for someone more suitable. Your mom mentioned wanting to introduce you to someone named Molly." Despite how long ago it had happened, pain exploded in her chest. That moment had been worse than when Lee told her he wanted a divorce.

A swift shadow of anger swept across Adam's face. "What was my father's response?"

"Your dad told her not to worry. That you were having some fun with me and that you knew what they expected. And when the time came to get serious, you'd marry the right person. After that, I kept replaying the conversation in my head."

His hand formed a fist again as he took a deep breath and exhaled. "I'm sorry you overheard that," Adam said, anger infused in his voice. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She'd considered it half a dozen times, but although she'd hated Benjamin and Shannon for what they said, they still were his parents. "I didn't want to start a fight between you and your parents."

"It might have, but I wouldn't have cared. My father was wrong. I planned to ask you to marry me the night I got your note. Does that sound like someone who is just having some fun?"

Evie had been so wrapped up in her own pain back then she hadn't fully considered how her actions affected Adam. "I'm sorry, Adam. So many times, I thought about calling you, but then I'd replay that conversation, and I didn't want to end up like my mom. If I could go back and handle things

differently, I would in a heartbeat.”

“Unless you’ve figured out how to build a time machine in addition to making Mars habitable, we’re out of luck.” A hint of a smile appeared on his face.

“I’ll work on it.”

“While you do, maybe we can start over,” he said, moving closer and taking her hand, “and see what happens.”

She’d never expected to have Adam in her life again, and now that he was, she didn’t want to lose him. But was that a good idea? He claimed he didn’t care what his family thought. Saying he didn’t care was one thing. What would he do if it became an issue? The other night he’d told her his mom had a list of potential women for him. How would Shannon Sherbrooke react if she found out Evie was back in her son’s life?

“Evie, you’re thinking about my family. Don’t. What they might want doesn’t matter to me, and it shouldn’t matter to you either. So let’s not let them screw things up again.”

“Guilty as charged. And you’re right.” Some weird twist of fate had brought them together again. She wouldn’t let anyone ruin their second chance.

Evie slipped her hand behind his neck and leaned into him. “Let’s take things slow and see what happens,” she said before pressing her lips against his.

EIGHT

EVIE RUBBED THE SLEEP FROM HER EYES AS MEMORIES OF LAST NIGHT HIT her. If she didn't remember telling him about the conversation she'd overheard, she'd question if it happened. Countless times she'd dreamed about being with Adam again. However, not once in thirteen years did she share the horrible conversation with him in those dreams.

Reaching over, she grabbed her cell phone from the nightstand. She'd turned the television off and climbed into bed again at five o'clock. It was now nine. She'd managed four whole hours of sleep.

Unlike her mom, Evie rarely had trouble falling asleep unless she was sick. Last night she had stared into the darkness for a solid hour before giving up and going to watch television. But neither the change of location nor the movie stopped her from thinking about what transpired in the kitchen or how life might have turned out if she'd shared her concerns thirteen years ago rather than bolting. Instead of being a divorced single woman who worked as a nanny, she and Adam might be happily married. Maybe they'd even have the family they had talked about.

They'd joked about a time machine last night, but she'd been honest. If Evie could go back and talk to her younger self, she'd tell her not to write the letter. She'd insist that she share her concerns with Adam and trust everything would be fine. But since she couldn't do that, she'd put the past

behind her and see what happened.

She answered a text message as she walked into the suite's kitchen. The stove might not work, but her coffee machine did. Her plan, at least for the next hour, was to search real estate listings and drink coffee. She'd figure out the rest of the day afterward.

Adam knocked on the door as she added cream to her cup, waking her up better than a shot of adrenaline.

"Good, I didn't wake you." Adam smiled, and she wished it was iced coffee in her hand instead of hot. She'd yet to meet someone with a better smile than his.

He was dressed in tan shorts and a dark blue T-shirt that showcased his broad shoulders, and his hair was still damp from a shower. So, unlike her, he hadn't just woken up. Even Reagan, who was in his arms, looked wide awake and ready for the day.

"If you'd knocked five minutes ago, you would've."

"Then it's good I didn't stop by to see if you wanted to run with us this morning."

They'd both been college athletes and had often gone running together. She hadn't had a running partner since Adam, actually. Her ex-husband had preferred lifting weights to cardio exercise. His only exception had been swimming.

"Next time, I'll go with you." It would be nice to have someone to go running with again.

"Do you have any plans today?" he asked, bending to pick up the toy Reagan had dropped.

Before they went to bed last night, they hadn't discussed how they would be spending the day, but she had hoped they would get a little time together.

"No, not really."

"Then how about the three of us go for a drive and see where we end up?"

Much like running together, getting in the car with no destination was something they'd done a lot in college. Sometimes, during the summer or school breaks, they'd pack overnight bags and spend a few nights wherever they found themselves. Other times they'd drive until they found a nice place to hike or a beach to relax on for a few hours before heading back to campus.

"I'd love to, but first, I need some coffee." A day out with Adam and Reagan would be much more fun than sitting around and combing through real estate listings. She could do that tomorrow while Reagan napped.

"That's fine. Reagan and I need to pick up a few things at the market. We'll be back in about thirty minutes. Come find us when you're ready."

Evie couldn't imagine what he needed. Yesterday, he'd bought enough food to last him a month.

"Do you need anything while we're out?"

"I'm all set."

Rather than shut the door, Evie watched him go down the hallway. Time machines didn't exist, but fate had given her a second chance. She wouldn't waste it.

After indulging in two cups of coffee, she showered. Most Sundays, she put little thought into what she wore. Usually, it was her day off, and she had no one to impress. This morning she considered her options rather than reach for her favorite jeans, the ones she'd had for so long, there were holes in both knees. She also passed over the T-shirts that were almost old enough to drive. Adam might not care what she wore; at least, he never had. He'd often commented about not understanding some people's obsession with fashion and how he liked that she wore what she was comfortable in rather than whatever a magazine told her she should. Today she cared, though. At the same time, since she didn't know where they might find themselves, she wanted to be dressed for anything. And as much as she loved her comfy black sandals, they wouldn't do if they ended up hiking.

Roughly forty minutes after Adam knocked on her door, Evie found

Adam and Reagan sitting on the living room floor with brightly colored squeezable building blocks scattered around them. From the doorway, she watched Reagan crawl toward Adam, something she'd started doing earlier in the week. When she reached him, he picked her up and settled her on his lap as if he'd been doing it for months rather than weeks before handing her a bright purple block.

While he'd unexpectedly become a parent, he was excelling at it. But then again, as far as she knew, he'd never failed at anything he tried.

"I'm a little jealous," she said, walking closer and kneeling on the floor.

He gave her a smile that sent her pulse racing, and Evie said a silent thank you that she wasn't standing. "You can have a turn on my lap later if you want."

They'd always been able to tease each other—something Evie had rarely done with her ex-husband because he often took offense. "Who said I was jealous because Reagan is sitting on your lap?" Evie picked up a yellow block with the number three on it. "I was referring to the blocks. I want a set of them to play with."

"Tomorrow, I'll order you one. In the meantime, I'm sure Reagan will share them with you. Are you ready to go?"

"Yep."

He opened the car door and waited for her to get in before putting Reagan in the back seat. "If it were just us, I'd ask if you wanted to use the bike instead. It's the perfect day for it."

She'd noticed the Harley the first time she parked in the garage. Adam had a similar one in college, and they'd used it whenever the weather permitted. But, unless he drove it to and from work, she didn't see it getting much use for the foreseeable future.

"The team has a track meet on Saturday, but if the weather is going to be nice next Sunday, I can see if Jake and his wife will babysit, and we can take it out."

As much as she'd enjoy that, next Sunday was out. "Next weekend is my mom's birthday. Since I'm taking care of Reagan on Saturday, I'm meeting them for dinner on Sunday."

Adam backed out of the driveway and then put the car in Drive. "That's fine. We can do it some other time."

Should she ask Adam and Reagan to join them on Sunday? Mom had adored him, and Alan was one of the friendliest people she knew. She didn't think either would mind the extra guests. But Sunday would be his only free day next week. He might want to spend it doing something he enjoyed rather than with her family.

He can always say no.

"You and Reagan are welcome to come with me. I know Mom would love to see you."

Adam didn't hesitate to respond. "Count us in."

For the next hour and a half, they talked about whatever came to mind, including the students he coached, since he had some interesting individuals on the team, and what summer movies they were looking forward to seeing. It didn't escape her that neither mentioned the past nor, with the expectation of saying her mom's birthday was soon, their families. She didn't know if it was intentional on his part, but it was on hers.

She didn't know about his relationship with his parents these days, but it had been less than ideal when they were in college. Even though it had happened a long time ago, he might ask his parents about what she'd shared last night. Even if he didn't, it might affect his relationship with them. And although she was still angry at their opinion of her, she didn't want to come between him and his parents.

"How does the beach sound?" Adam asked as they passed a street sign indicating Willow Beach was to the right.

She hadn't been paying much attention to their surroundings as Adam drove, so she wasn't sure where they were. But if a beach was nearby, and he

wanted to stop, she wouldn't complain. She loved the beach, regardless of location or the time of the year.

"You should know the answer to that question."

As he turned right, Adam squeezed her hand that he'd been holding for most of the drive. "Hey, you might have preferred something else today."

A refreshing breeze washed over Evie when she got out of the car. Closing her eyes, she tilted her face toward the sun. There was nothing like fresh air and sunshine. She didn't understand why some people preferred to stay inside all day, watching television or playing video games. Even in the winter, she got outside as much as she could.

Sensing Adam beside her, Evie opened her eyes. He held Reagan's car seat in one hand, a cooler in the other, had a blanket tucked under his arm, and the straps to something else hanging from his shoulder.

"Someone came prepared. I thought we were just going to see where we ended up today?"

"I didn't know we'd end up here, but I figured eventually we'd find a nice place for a picnic. That's why Reagan and I went to the market this morning. Do you mind grabbing the diaper bag?"

Both the weather and location were perfect for a picnic. "Nope, and give me some more stuff to carry too." She slipped the backpack he used as a diaper bag over her shoulders and then took the blanket and the cooler from him. He didn't need to carry everything down to the beach.

As they walked, Evie watched what looked like a yellow Lab run into the water after the toy its owner threw. The dog wasn't the only one swimming. There were also a few people who appeared to be in their teens enjoying the water. They'd had some hot days recently, but Evie wasn't sure the water would be warm enough for her to swim even if she had her bathing suit with her.

"Is here okay, or do you want to be closer to the water?" Adam stopped as far away from other people as they could get.

“Here’s good.”

After removing her sneakers, she opened the blanket and watched him. “You keep impressing me with your parenting skills.”

“Why do you say that?” Adam asked as he set up the baby sun shelter he’d brought with them.

“There are people who’ve had multiple babies that wouldn’t have thought to get a sun shelter for the beach. You have one, and you remembered sunscreen for Reagan.” Evie pulled the bottle from the side pocket of the backpack.

“The shelter came up as a recommendation when I ordered the pack-and-play. The sunscreen is just common sense. There is some in the diaper bag for us, too, if you want it.”

ADAM WATCHED Reagan play with the fabric book that was one of the toys he’d tossed in the diaper bag this morning. The toys and the sun shelter were things he’d thought to grab at the last minute. His parenting skills might impress Evie, but he often still felt clueless. It was an emotion a lot of new parents felt, according to the books he’d read over the past few weeks. On a positive note, though, Reagan appeared happy, and according to her pediatrician, she was healthy and developing as she should.

“When do you think she’ll start walking?” His cousin had warned him a walking Reagan would escort in a whole level of chaos. And after seeing the changes now that she was crawling, he could only imagine.

“Most babies start walking without help around eleven or twelve months. But I think Reagan’s going to be an early walker. Michael, the Jordans’ youngest son, started at nine months. But Liv, the first baby I cared for, didn’t walk until she was sixteen months.”

“How many families have you worked for?”

“A total of four, but two of them were short-term placements. I was with

the Jordans the longest. If the Pythons hadn't traded Chase, I'd still be working for them."

It had initially disappointed him when he read the Pythons, his favorite football team, traded Chase Jordan. Adam thought he was a far better player than Maurice Wright, who'd taken over the position. Now he was glad the team traded him to New England. If they hadn't, she'd still be working for them, and Claudia would've sent him someone else when he called.

It hadn't seemed appropriate before, but now he saw no reason he couldn't ask. "How did you end up working as a nanny? You loved being in an elementary school when you did your student teaching."

"A combination of bad luck and a suggestion from a friend," Evie said as she pulled her hair into a messy bun.

She'd be cooler with it off her neck, but he wanted to pull the hair tie out and run his fingers through it. Maybe later, when they got home, he'd do that; for now, he'd behave and keep his hands to himself.

"Most schools operate according to the last one in, first one out policy when they need to lay people off. At the time, I was working at a private school, and it needed to cut four elementary teachers because their middle school enrollment exploded, and they needed to hire teachers who were certified to teach at that level. I was the newest teacher there, so I was one of the unlucky ones. And unfortunately they waited until July to tell me. By then schools don't have many teacher openings."

"That su—" He needed to be more careful. Reagan wasn't talking now, but when she started, he didn't want her picking up anything inappropriate because he couldn't watch his language. She'd learn enough inappropriate words from her peers when she started school. "— stinks."

"That's one word to describe it." Based on her tone, Evie knew what he'd been about to say. "To make matters worse, Lee asked me for a divorce the same day I found out about my job."

Talk about kicking someone when they are already down. "What an ass."

“To be fair, Lee asked before I found out about my job. He’s not cruel. He even let me stay at the house until I found a job and an apartment.”

“How kind of him. He let you stay in your own house.”

He had friends who’d divorced. Some of them had even divorced more than once. In those cases, they sold the homes and divided the profits, or, in two instances, the wife kept the house, and his friends found places to live.

“Lee bought the house from his grandparents before we met, and it had been in his family for almost a century. So, it made sense for me to move out, not him.”

Adam couldn’t disagree with her, but he still hated that she’d found herself in that situation.

“Anyway, I thought about being a substitute teacher while I looked for a full-time position, but I wasn’t sure I’d be able to work enough to support myself, and I knew I might not get something until the following fall. Then, Leslie suggested I apply to Elite Nanny. At the time, her sister worked there. Within two weeks of Lee asking for a divorce, I had a new job and an apartment.”

He saw nothing wrong with someone working as a nanny, but it wasn’t what she’d intended. “Were you not able to find a new teaching position?” He found that hard to believe, but it would explain why she’d worked for the agency for so long.

Evie shook her head as she opened her water bottle. “At first, I couldn’t find anything full-time. But in the spring, an elementary school in Dumfries offered me a first-grade classroom. I considered it, but believe it or not, I would’ve taken a pay cut if I’d accepted it. And working as a nanny allows me to help children learn and develop more than if I was a classroom teacher. When you have a classroom with twenty or more six-year-olds, you can only give so much attention to each one. Since I’ve been a nanny, I’ve never taken care of more than three children at a time.”

“Being surrounded by twenty six-year-olds sounds like the premise for a

horror movie.” He shuddered at the mere thought.

Opening the cooler, he took out the prepackaged veggie platter he’d bought. Much like everything else he’d packed, it hadn’t been a random selection. They’d gone on a picnic for their first official date. Except for the baby food, everything he’d packed today was what they’d eaten then.

“It’s not for everyone.” She smiled, making his insides feel like they were on a corkscrew roller coaster.

He hadn’t kissed her since last night. And if he didn’t do it now, he might go insane. Although Adam wanted to ravish her mouth, he gently brushed his lips against hers. Not only were they in a public place, but Reagan was awake. If he did what he wanted, his focus wouldn’t be on her, and that was where it needed to be right now. Maybe when they got home and Reagan was safely in her crib, he’d kiss Evie the way he wanted.

Adam moved his lips away while he could but allowed his hand to linger on her cheek. “Do you think you’ll ever go back to teaching?”

She shrugged and dipped a carrot stick into the ranch dressing. “I don’t know. But I keep my teaching certification up-to-date just in case.”

He knew how long she’d been working for the agency, which meant he knew how long it had been since she got divorced. “How long were you married?”

Adam didn’t think of himself as the jealous type, but it bothered him to think of her with another man. It’d be even worse if she’d gotten together with her ex-husband right after leaving him.

“Almost two years, but we were together for close to four. A mutual friend introduced us.”

“You don’t have to answer, but why did he want a divorce?”

Some of his friends who’d divorced had rushed into getting married and regretted it when the person turned out not to be who they thought they were. In other cases, one of them had been unfaithful. It didn’t sound like Evie and her ex had rushed into marriage, and Evie wasn’t the type to cheat.

“Lee decided he didn’t like being married. He missed the freedom to do what he wanted without discussing it with anyone. He’s a freelance photographer and loves to travel. As a teacher, my traveling was limited to school breaks. It wasn’t a messy divorce. We’re still on good terms. He sends me a birthday card every year. And I still talk to his sister and occasionally his parents.”

None of the divorced couples he knew had that kind of relationship.

Evie used the celery stick to point at the subs he’d put next to the platter. “What type of subs are those?”

Bored with her book, Reagan crawled over and into his lap. He moved the container of macaroni salad away just in time to avoid Reagan’s hand going into it. “This isn’t for you, kiddo.” Adam put it on the other side of the vegetables. “Italian. Is that okay?”

“Macaroni salad, a veggie platter, and Italian subs. Let me guess: there are chocolate walnut brownies in there.”

At least he wasn’t the only one who remembered what they did and what they ate on their first date. “They didn’t have any with walnuts. I had to get chocolate peanut butter brownies. There is also baby food in here for Reagan.”

“Chocolate peanut butter brownies are better, anyway.”

He didn’t share her opinion, but Evie already knew that, just like she knew he preferred nuts in chocolate chip cookies.

Before opening Reagan’s food, he dipped a cucumber in the dressing. Reagan reached for it as soon as he got it closer to his mouth. “I’ve got yours right here.” He held up the container for her to see. “This is for me.”

“Do you want me to feed her while you eat?” Evie asked.

Her offer tempted him, but this was her day off. All responsibility for Reagan became his on those days regardless of how the situation between them might have changed. “I got it.”

“Don’t say I didn’t offer.” She unwrapped her sandwich and added

macaroni salad to her plate. Rather than dig in, like he wished he could with his lunch, she dipped a piece of celery in the ranch dressing and brought it to his mouth. “I don’t want you to pass out from hunger on me.”

Between eating her lunch, Evie fed him vegetables while he took care of Reagan. Thirteen years might have passed, but as they sat there, it didn’t seem like any time had gone by.

“Your turn,” Evie said.

“My turn for what?” He lifted the last spoonful of food to Reagan’s mouth.

“Answering questions.”

Adam tossed the empty baby food container in the trash bag and handed Reagan her bottle. “Go for it.” He had nothing to hide.

“Have you ever been married?”

A guitar riff forced him to reach for his cell phone instead of his lunch. When he saw the name on the screen, he mentally swore and hit Decline. Although rarely up for a conversation with his mom, he usually took her calls. She was his mother, and ignoring her only annoyed her, which in turn made a conversation more unpleasant for him when they did speak. However, if he talked to her now, the end result would be far worse than if he ignored her. Not to mention, he didn’t want Evie around for the conversation they needed to have.

Adam had been angry with his parents in the past. It was a normal part of the parent-child relationship. But never like last night after Evie shared the conversation that had sent her running from his life. He’d wanted to call them and rip them a new one for thinking so little of Evie and interfering in his life. Rather than fading, his anger intensified as the night went on, and before he climbed into bed, he called his mom. She hadn’t answered, so he’d hung up without even leaving a voicemail.

“I’ve never been married or engaged,” he answered, returning the device to his pocket. “In the past thirteen years, my longest relationship lasted about

six months.”

“Really? What, were you trying to keep up with your cousin Jake?”

Before getting married, his cousin had gone through enough relationships for multiple lifetimes and thanks to the media’s obsession with Jake most people knew that. Although Adam’s relationships never lasted long, the number didn’t even reach double digits.

Adam skimmed his fingers across her cheek and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Because none of them were you.”

NINE

ADAM FINISHED THE BOOK HE WAS READING ABOUT A BEAR GETTING READY to hibernate for the winter and stood.

“I’ll make a deal with you. If you sleep through the night again tonight, I’ll read you two books at bedtime tomorrow.” Reagan hadn’t woken up for the past three nights. Hopefully, the trend would continue, because he liked getting a full night’s sleep.

Reagan’s eyelids drooped in response as he put her in the crib and kissed her forehead. “Love you. I’ll see you in the morning, kiddo.”

His goddaughter had held a special place in his heart even before she came to live with him. But over the past three and a half weeks, that spot had grown, and he no longer thought of her as just his goddaughter. Now, he loved her as if she was his child.

She wasn’t the only one he loved in the house. He hadn’t intended to let it happen, but his feelings for Evie were no longer safely buried away. What that meant for the future, he didn’t know. This afternoon, his answer might have been corny and cliched when she asked why his past relationships never lasted more than six months. However, it was the truth. While he’d enjoyed spending time with the women he’d dated, he’d never loved them. And although it wasn’t fair to them, more than once, he’d compared them to Evie, and they’d all fallen short.

As much as he'd enjoyed the day, Adam wanted a chance to spend time with Evie and not worry Reagan might crawl off or try to eat a handful of sand. With her safely tucked into bed, he could now do that. Since Evie agreed to wait for him downstairs, he assumed she wanted the same.

When he entered the living room, Evie was focused on her cell phone, and the television was on, but the movie was paused.

"I offered to read Reagan two books tomorrow if she sleeps through the night again."

She typed a message and then put the device on the coffee table. "Sounds like a fair deal to me. I know you told me she didn't wake up on Thursday. Did she sleep all night yesterday too?"

"Yep, and Friday."

"Three nights in a row is promising. I'll keep my fingers crossed for you she does it again."

"So, what movie did you pick out for us?" He told her to choose something for them to watch while he was gone. However, he couldn't tell by the frozen screen what she'd settled on.

"Guess."

"Any hints?"

"You're not the only one who remembers what we did on our first few dates."

Considering the hint she'd given him, Evie might as well have him told the title. "*Highlander*."

They'd watched it on their third date. Evie had met him after class at his apartment. While they ate takeout, he told her to pick something from his movie collection. He'd known Evie was the one when she told him to put on the first *Highlander* movie because, until then, he'd never met any woman who enjoyed the film and the television show.

"I haven't seen it in a long time." Evie's phone beeped, letting her know she'd received a message, but she didn't pick it up again.

“You can answer that if you want.” Sitting next to her, Adam removed the hair tie holding her bun in place, causing her long mahogany-colored hair to cascade down her back and over her shoulders.

“Nah, it’s just Dad wanting to continue the conversation we had yesterday when I saw him.”

He recalled her comment last night about it being a challenging day. “Is that why you baked cookies?”

“Part of the reason. I should’ve said no when he called and invited me to join them for lunch in DC because I was already having a bad day. But RJ was going to be there, and I hadn’t seen him since the end of January,” she said, referring to her brother Raymond. Since his father and grandfather’s name was Raymond, everyone called her brother RJ to avoid confusion.

Despite the less-than-ideal relationship with her stepmom, Evie had a good relationship with her half-siblings, RJ and Kathryn.

“Is RJ living in DC these days?” With it no longer tied up, Adam ran his fingers through her hair like he’d wanted to do so many times since she’d walked into his house.

“You could say that. He started at Georgetown in the fall. He’s working on his third degree. I love him, but my brother knows as long as he is a full-time student, Dad and Debra will support him, and he’s taking full advantage of it. Besides working as a teaching assistant, he’s never had a job.”

Thanks to his family’s connections, Adam knew many people around their age who didn’t need to work because of their families. Many spent their days at their favorite country club or on vacations, but some donated their time to various causes.

“Before our salads even arrived, Dad started in on my choice of employment. He wasn’t a fan of me being an elementary teacher.”

Yeah, Adam remembered that. He’d always found it odd since Evie’s stepmom was a professor of American Literature, which was just a teacher who had focused more time on one area than your everyday high school

English teacher.

“But at least then I worked with other college graduates and there was room for advancement. He hoped I’d eventually go into administration. Dad equates me being a nanny to being a teenager who babysits for a few hours on a Saturday night so the parents can go out for dinner.”

Not only could Adam imagine her dad thinking along those lines, but he could see him sharing his views with his daughter.

“Ever since I started working as a nanny, he’s been suggesting I go back to college and earn a more useful degree.”

She made air quotes when she said useful degree, and Adam could again picture Evie’s dad making such a comment. In a lot of ways, her dad was like his. Although the two men had never met, Adam knew they’d get along well.

“He’s even offered to pay for it—something he did again yesterday. RJ did his best to change the subject, but Dad didn’t want to let it go. He even had ideas of useful degrees in areas he thought I would excel at.”

Unlike the single short beep Evie’s phone made earlier, the intro to “Thought You Knew” now came from the device, and she grabbed it.

“Even if I wanted to return to school, I wouldn’t let Dad pay for it because Debra would never let me forget they helped. Even now, she reminds me they helped me pay for my undergraduate degree.”

While he’d been able to tolerate Evie’s dad, he’d never liked her stepmom.

After silencing the call, she typed a message, and set the phone aside. “Enough about them.”

“What else happened yesterday?”

“My real estate agent let me know the owners of the two homes I wanted to see accepted offers on Friday. Unfortunately, there isn’t much out there that has what I’m looking for and fits my budget. It’s frustrating, and the agent said it will most likely only get harder now that it’s spring. I guess spring and summer are popular times to buy homes.”

Evie hadn't mentioned looking for a home since she'd moved in, and he hadn't thought about it.

It might be premature, but if everything went the way he hoped, the only place she'd be moving was from the in-law suite to his bedroom. "What's the rush?" he asked before touching his lips to hers for the first time in hours.

"This is temporary."

He felt like a heavy-weight boxer had punched him in the gut.

Don't assume.

"By this, are you talking about you living here or us, Evie?"

Evie placed her palm over his heart and lowered her mouth toward his. "Living here." Slipping her other hand behind his neck, she caressed his lips with hers.

The kiss became more demanding with each pass of her lips over his. Lust like he hadn't experienced in a long time crashed over him when their tongues met.

Adam moved his mouth to her neck when the need for air prevailed, and as he cupped her breast, she trembled against him.

"God, I've missed you," she said, her breathing as ragged as his.

He got the hint when Evie grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up. After yanking the shirt off, he tossed it on the floor and watched Evie pull hers over her head.

Kissing the crazy pulse in her neck, he eased her down on the sofa. Her skin against his ignited the embers that had been smoldering ever since they kissed last night. As she raked her fingers down his back and kissed his shoulder, more of his control slipped away. If they didn't stop now, they might not, and he didn't want her to have any regrets in the morning. Before he lost all ability to form sentences, he moved so he could see her face. Her eyes burned with the same fire raging inside him.

"Evie, tell me what you want."

"You."

His last coherent brain cell forced him to speak. “Are you sure?”

She ran her palm across his stomach and down to the waistband of his shorts. “Positive.” Her voice echoed his own longings as she undid the button.

EVIE LEFT the bathroom door open just enough so she could use the light from inside to navigate the room. Adam didn’t have clutter in his room, but she bumped into something on her way to the bathroom. She’d rather not do it again, especially since her toe still hurt.

The sheets were cool against her bare skin when she returned to bed. As if sensing her, Adam moved onto his side and wrapped his arm around her.

Saturday, when she’d said they should take things slow and see what happened, she had meant it. Last night, that had been the last thing she wanted. She’d never stopped loving Adam, and his answer to why his relationships never lasted long told Evie he still loved her.

Evie replayed the conversation and smiled. She hadn’t expected to be the reason all his relationships had been short-lived. But she somewhat understood. She’d cared about her ex-husband, and they’d gotten along well, but she hadn’t loved him the same way she had Adam. Actually, she hadn’t cared about any of the men she’d dated—not that there had been many—the way she did Adam.

The room-darkening shades made it impossible to estimate the time, and she’d left her cell phone downstairs. With any luck, she’d get at least another hour of sleep—something they hadn’t gotten much of during the night. If she got more than an hour, that would be even better.

The sound of an analog alarm erupted from Adam’s phone seconds after she closed her eyes.

So much for more sleep.

Next to her, Adam rolled over and switched the device off before resuming his previous position. “Didn’t we just go to sleep?”

She should go downstairs and get her phone because her alarm would be going off soon too. But that would require her leaving the comfortable bed and Adam. “It feels that way.”

“If I didn’t have a meeting with the superintendent this morning, I’d go in late.”

One nice thing about her job was that she didn’t often have meetings to worry about.

“What are your plans for tonight?”

Other than seeing Mom and Alan on Sunday, she didn’t have any plans for the week. She and Leslie had talked about getting together one night but hadn’t settled on anything yet. “Right now, I don’t have any.”

“Good. I’ll cook us dinner when I come home, and maybe afterward, we can watch a movie.”

They never got around to watching a movie last night.

If Evie cooked, she could have it ready for when he came home—meaning they could eat much sooner. “I don’t mind getting dinner ready for us.”

Adam nuzzled her neck. “It’s up to you.”

“I’ll take care of it. Is there anything you want?” Evie brushed her fingertips up and down the arm resting across her stomach and wished today was Sunday instead of Monday. They’d spent all day together yesterday, but it hadn’t been enough. And while they’d see each other tonight, it would only be for a few hours before they went to bed. Although which bed she slept in tonight was another matter and one she’d think about when she wasn’t lying next to Adam, so she’d be prepared if he asked her to stay with him again.

“You know what I like. And use whatever is in the kitchen.”

Considering how much he’d bought the other day, she shouldn’t have any issues planning a meal.

Adam's alarm clock went off again. This time after turning it off, he sat up, the sheets pooling below his waist. "I'd stay here all day with you if I could."

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to hers but didn't linger. A wise move, because if he had, they might not get out of bed any time soon.

"I'll see you downstairs."

He didn't bother to put on any clothes, and she enjoyed the view as he walked to the bathroom.

Before heading to her suite, she retrieved her cell phone from downstairs. In addition to the alarm going off, she had a text message from her mom that she'd received last night. She'd sent Mom a message while Adam put Reagan to bed, letting her know that Adam and Reagan were coming on Sunday. She'd expected an immediate reply because Mom no doubt had a lot of questions. However, she hadn't responded by the time Evie and Adam went up to his bedroom. And once up there, she never came back downstairs.

When she entered the kitchen thirty minutes later, she found Adam and Reagan already there like she did every morning. He wasn't always home in time to feed her dinner during the week, but he always handled breakfast before he left for work.

Adam smiled when he saw her as he helped Reagan get the spoon to her mouth. "I preferred the outfit you had on earlier."

"I could say the same about you. Do you need more coffee?" She stopped long enough to kiss Reagan's forehead and ruffle her hair on her way to the counter. Before she took another step, though, Adam grabbed her hand.

"Don't I get a kiss too?"

"So sorry." Like she'd done with Reagan, she kissed Adam's forehead.

"Really, that's all I get?"

"Do you want me to ruffle your hair too?"

"Maybe later." Adam tugged her down onto his lap and proceeded to show her the kind of kiss he wanted.

A ripple of need slid up her spine, and she leaned into him, wanting to be as close to him as possible.

Abruptly breaking off the kiss, he touched his forehead to hers. “That wasn’t the best idea I’ve ever had.”

She didn’t need him to elaborate, as she could feel his erection. “You should’ve had me just ruffle your hair.”

Laughing, he looked at her and tucked some loose hair behind her ear. “You’re right.”

“I usually am,” Evie said as she stood. “Do you need more coffee?”

“Please.” After handing her his cup, he went back to helping Reagan with her breakfast.

Most days she and Reagan went for either a long walk or a run right after Adam left and then a short walk in the late afternoon. Today wasn’t any different, and as soon as Adam left, she strapped Reagan into her stroller and headed out. Thanks to their daily walks, she’d met several of Adam’s neighbors, including the Robinsons who lived three houses down. This morning Laura Robinson, an avid gardener with three children, was planting flowers, and Evie waved as she passed their home.

They made it down Maplewood and onto Oak View before Reagan dropped the stuffed cat she took everywhere. In fact, Evie had suggested to Adam that he buy her an identical one in case it got lost. “Thought You Knew” interrupted the song playing through her earbuds as Evie handed the stuffed toy back to Reagan. Evie expected to see Mom on the screen, but instead she found the name Leslie.

Leslie’s voice came through Evie’s earbuds. “The new yoga studio near me is having a lady’s night tonight. All classes are half price. Do you want to meet me there?”

Located about ten minutes from Leslie’s apartment building, the yoga studio had advertised it would open at the beginning of March. However, renovations on the space took longer than the owners, friends of Leslie’s, had

expected. If she'd called and invited her yesterday, Evie would've agreed. The gym she belonged to used to offer yoga classes on weekends as well as one night a week, but the instructor moved, and it was no longer on the schedule.

Evie looked both ways and then crossed the street. "Sorry, I can't tonight. Adam and I have plans."

"Adam as in your employer? The man who is also your ex-boyfriend. Or have you met another person named Adam since I last saw you?"

She should've stopped after saying she couldn't meet at the yoga studio. Leslie was her friend, not her keeper. She didn't need to know the reason she wasn't available. But now that the cat was out of the bag, so to speak, Leslie wouldn't let it go until she knew more.

"Yes." Evie moved closer to the curb to avoid a home's sprinklers that were doing a better job of watering the sidewalk than the grass.

"Are these plans work related or personal?"

Reagan dropped her stuffed cat again, forcing them to stop. "Personal, but you already knew that."

"I assumed, but you know what they say about assuming things," Leslie answered. "When did this happen? You didn't say anything when we talked last week."

"This weekend, I guess. It's a long story." One she didn't care to share over the phone.

"How about the condensed version?"

Before Evie got a word out, Leslie spoke again. "Shoot. It's later than I though. I've got a meeting in less than ten minutes. Tomorrow night I'm busy, but I'm free on Wednesday and Friday. Let's meet at Sabroso, and we can catch up." Located about halfway between Leslie's apartment and the Jordans' estate, they used to meet there often when she worked for the Jordan family.

She hadn't seen Leslie in weeks, and a night out would be fun. At least it

would be once she got through Leslie's interrogation.

"I can meet you Friday. I'll be off by four." Adam's team had a track meet on Saturday, which meant he'd end practice early on Friday.

"I'll meet you there at five. I can't wait to hear about what's going on between you and your ex."

"See you then."

After disconnecting the call, music once again played through Evie's earbuds, and she turned her thoughts back to dinner options.

TEN

ADAM COULD SEE EVIE AND REAGAN IN THE BACKYARD WHEN HE WALKED into the kitchen late Friday afternoon. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got the room.” Dropping his bag on the floor by the door, he hung his keys on the hook. “After I get off the phone with you, I’ll call Jake and see if he wants to come by with his family.”

“Sounds good. GPS says I’ll be there in about twenty minutes,” Matt, his cousin, replied.

“See you then.”

Before heading outside, Adam called Jake, who accepted the invitation, and then grabbed two iced coffees from the refrigerator.

“I’m jealous.” He gestured at the baby pool Evie had set up and Reagan was using.

All week the temperature had been higher than usual for this time of year. Today, however, had been the hottest so far. If his pool had been open, he’d be diving into it. In fact, he might not even bother changing into a swimsuit first.

Evie accepted the bottle he handed her and immediately twisted off the cap. “Today is the perfect day for a pool.” She glanced at the covered in-ground pool before looking at him again.

“It’ll be open next week. I promise.”

Adam had considered doing it himself but decided to leave it to a professional. But of course, because he'd waited so long to schedule the opening, he couldn't get anyone right away. Next year he'd remember to call the pool company much earlier.

"My cousin Matt will be here soon. He's staying for a couple of nights. I hope you don't mind." Adam grabbed a chair and dragged it closer to her and the baby pool.

"It's your house."

His name might be on the mortgage, but every day, it felt more like their house rather than just his. "I still want you to be comfortable here."

"I am." Evie leaned closer and kissed his cheek. "And I don't mind if Matt stays for the weekend."

"Jake and his family are stopping by tonight too. So I plan to order some takeout. And I'll start a fire later on." He'd had the wood delivered earlier in the week, but they still hadn't used the new firepit.

"Sounds like fun, but I'm going out for a few hours."

Every night this week, they spent time together when he got home. He'd expected that to be the case tonight too.

"You're going out?"

"I thought I told you."

He forgot things like everyone else but would've remembered if Evie had told him she had plans tonight. "No, you didn't mention that."

"Sorry, I'm meeting Leslie at Sabroso. I'll probably be home by seven."

She had as much right as he did to spend time with friends. However, that didn't mean the news didn't disappoint him. "Jake and his family should still be here then."

Evie grinned. "Good, I'll finally get to meet Prince Charming."

The media gave his cousin that nickname years ago, and Jake hated it. "Do me a favor and call him that tonight. It drives him crazy."

"That doesn't sound like a nice thing to do during our first meeting."

“No, but Matt and I will enjoy it. Jake’s wife might too.”

“All the more reason not to call him that.”

Crossing his arms, he frowned. “You’re no fun.”

She patted him on the thigh. “You weren’t saying that last night.”

The memory of how they’d spent their evening after he put Reagan to bed rematerialized. As much as he was looking forward to catching up with his cousins, he was already looking forward to when he and Evie had some alone time.

“If you are all set, I will head out.”

“Reagan and I are good. Have fun.”

He watched Evie walk into the house and then turned his attention to Reagan. The pool contained a minimal amount of water; however, she’d splashed around so much that even her hair was wet. “I think now is a good time to get you into some dry clothes, kiddo.”

Aside from Nolan, no one knew Adam better than his cousin, Matt. Born less than a year apart, their parents both had estates in Palo Alto, so they’d been a constant in each other’s lives growing up, and then later, they’d roomed together while away at boarding school in New Hampshire. Much like Adam, his cousin had boycotted Ivy League colleges. Actually, Matt had boycotted college altogether right after high school graduation. Instead, he’d spent six months traveling the world. Following college, he’d refused a position at Trident and put all his energy into landing a record contract without relying on his last name or any family connections. And, despite their grandfather’s insistence that Matt was wasting his time, his cousin’s band had proved Benjamin Sherbrooke Senior wrong. Between his cousin’s tour schedule and Adam’s relocation, they hadn’t seen each other in almost a year. And he was looking forward to catching up with him this weekend.

Forty minutes after Evie left, Adam opened the door for Matt. But before his cousin stepped inside, Jake pulled into the driveway behind Matt’s car, a gorgeous dark gray Ferrari that Adam wouldn’t mind taking for a test drive

while his cousin was there this weekend.

“I got stuck in traffic,” Matt said, explaining why he’d arrived twenty minutes later than expected. “There was an accident, and the police had one side of the road shut down.”

His cousin hated to be late—something Adam found funny, considering Matt had been born a week late. “I figured you hit traffic.”

“There are two guest rooms upstairs. Pick whichever one you want.” Except for the wall paint, the rooms were identical. “Meet us out back when you’re done. Use the door in the kitchen.”

Compared to the homes they’d grown up in, his house was a tiny cottage, so Matt wouldn’t have trouble finding his way outside.

“We stopped on the way here and picked up some dessert.” Charlie handed him the pastry box she held as she entered the house.

Since the name Sweet Tales Bakery was printed on the box, he didn’t need to open it to know he’d love the contents. “I hope you got something for everyone else.”

“The rocky road brownies have mine and Garrett’s names on them. Touch them, and you might lose a few fingers,” Jake said, entering the house with his son.

“I’ll share with Garrett and Charlie, but sorry, you’re on your own, Jake.”

Charlie glanced over her shoulder as she walked alongside him. “See, I told you Adam liked me better.”

While he didn’t see his cousin’s reaction, Charlie simply laughed.

“A swing set and a sandbox already. Someone is an overachiever,” Jake said, following Charlie and Adam onto the back patio. “You realize it’ll probably be months before she’s even walking.” Not surprisingly, Jake’s son zoomed past them and ran straight for the swing set.

Adam settled Reagan in the activity center he’d brought outside. It not only gave her a safe place to sit, but since she enjoyed the toys on it so much, it would also keep her occupied.

“I wanted to be ready, and Reagan loves the baby swing.”

“It looks like the one we have.” Charlie placed the infant carrier on the patio and pulled up the canopy to keep the sun off Brady. Unlike his older brother, Brady remained asleep.

One of these days, he’d have a nice outdoor kitchen like Jake. But until then, he’d make do. Adam grabbed a beer from the cooler he’d filled with hard lemonade, water, and beer. “Help yourself. Food’s on the way.”

Rather than wait to see what everyone wanted, he called a delivery order into Colosseum Pizza, since it would save time, and everyone in attendance liked pizza.

“There’s a highchair in the kitchen and an extra child out here that doesn’t belong to Jake. Do you have a girlfriend with a baby?” Matt gestured at Reagan when he joined them. Since she’d been content and safe, Adam had left her in her highchair while he answered the door.

Matt’s question was a reasonable one, because if Adam had been expecting a baby, Matt would’ve been one of the first people he told. Last month, though, sharing the news that he was now Reagan’s legal guardian with his family had been the furthest thing from his mind. In fact, only his sister, Jake, and now Matt knew about her.

Although they hadn’t been close, Matt and Nolan had been more than acquaintances because of their association with Adam. Still, he hadn’t thought to tell Matt about Nolan’s death.

Adam squatted down next to the activity center. “No, Reagan is Nolan’s daughter. He and his wife died last month. Since I’m her guardian, she’s stuck with me now.”

“Man, I’m sorry. I remember Nolan got married, but I didn’t know he had a baby,” Matt said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Reagan could do much worse than you, Adam.”

He couldn’t disagree with his cousin. Reagan could’ve ended up with someone like his dad. To his father, everything was about dollars and cents,

unlike Uncle Graham, Matt's father. Even Jake's dad, who before he went into politics had been the CEO of Sherbrooke Enterprises, one of the largest hotel chains in the world, cared about more than the size of his stock portfolio.

"Does she go to daycare, or can you work from home?" Matt got himself a drink from the cooler and then sat at the table.

With Reagan content, Adam joined his cousin at the table and opened the chips and dip he had brought out earlier. "I hired a nanny."

"Makes sense," Matt said as he took a handful of chips.

"And how's that going?" Charlie asked, taking the seat across from Adam. "The nanny Adam hired is an ex-girlfriend."

Next to him, Matt laughed. "You hired an ex-girlfriend as a nanny. How the hell did that happen?"

"The portfolio the agency sent me had the name Evelyn Caldwell on it. I didn't realize she was Evelyn Murphy until she arrived here."

"Your nanny is the woman you dated in college and bought an engagement ring for?"

Other than his parents and siblings, Matt was the only member of his family who'd met Evie. He was also the only person other than Nolan who'd known about his plan to propose.

"Hard to believe but true."

"Jake didn't tell me you were going to propose." Charlie removed her son, who was now awake, from the car seat.

"I would've asked the agency to send someone else when I found out who she was," Matt said.

Jake chased after his son, who was already tired of the swing, and caught him before he jumped into the baby pool Adam hadn't drained yet. "Me too."

"I considered it, but she's one of the agency's best nannies. And Reagan deserved the best."

He'd second-guessed his decision several times during the first few days.

He'd even considered calling Claudia and asking who else they had available. Now he was glad he'd stuck with his original decision.

"That's all great, but you didn't answer my question. How is everything going with her as Reagan's nanny? I can't imagine interacting with most of the men from my past," Charlie said.

When it came to dealing with a person they'd been romantically involved with, most people would agree with Charlie.

"Evie's great with Reagan." Evie would be home soon, and it would be less awkward if everyone knew they were romantically involved before she arrived. "But she's not just Reagan's nanny anymore. We're seeing where things go between us."

Adam already knew where he wanted them to end up, but since he hadn't shared his intentions with Evie, it seemed inappropriate to tell anyone else. "Evie's out with a friend but should be back before you and Jake go home. I think the two of you will get along well, Charlie."

Rather than eat the chip he'd filled with dip, Matt moved it away from his mouth. "Did you get hit in the head while coaching shot put? The woman told you things were over with a damn letter, one she didn't even have the guts to give you herself, and then she refused all your phone calls."

He remembered the past well and didn't need his cousin's help. "Evie had her reasons." The three people at the table didn't need to know what they had been.

"I'd still be careful. Exes are usually that for a reason." Matt popped the chip into his mouth and reached for another.

If he wanted relationship advice, Matt would be the last person he'd ask. The guy's ex-girlfriend list could be used to measure football fields.

"Both of you be nice and give Evie a chance. We don't know what her reasons were." Charlie moved her drink out of her son's reach and grabbed a chip. "Sometimes people make decisions they think are right at the time and then later realize their mistake."

Adam wasn't worried his cousins would be rude. It wasn't in their nature. Still, he appreciated Charlie's comment, one he suspected was tied to her and Jake's relationship. While he didn't know the details, he knew Charlie and Jake had hit some problems in the beginning.

SHE SHOULD'VE KNOWN BETTER than to meet Leslie at Sabroso tonight because no matter how many times Evie told herself she'd be careful, she ended up eating too much. Maybe if everything on the menu wasn't delicious, it wouldn't happen. But Evie and Leslie had been going there since the establishment opened, and not once had they ordered anything she didn't love. That included both the food and the cocktails. Tonight, she'd indulged in a drink she'd never heard of called the Jungle Bird. If she didn't have to drive home, she would've ordered another, but unless she didn't need to get behind the wheel, one cocktail was her limit while out.

After pulling into driveway, she drove past a dark gray Ferrari with Florida license plates and a black SUV with Virginia plates. She didn't need to be a detective to determine the fancy sports car belonged to Matt, while Jake owned the SUV. Although the SUV was top-of-the-line and probably had every extra under the sun, it was still a vehicle she saw every day on the road and was designed to accommodate a family. The same wasn't true of the Italian sports car that possibly cost more than the house she'd almost bought. And unfortunately, it was a stark reminder of hers and Adam's vastly different backgrounds. Although the vehicle wasn't Adam's, he could easily afford one, which was something she could never do unless she planned on also living in it.

She'd never met Jake, but she hoped Adam hadn't shared anything about their past with him. However, she'd spent time with Matt. Back then, he'd been friendly, and not once had he given her the impression that he thought

she wasn't good enough for the family. After the way she'd ended things with Adam, though, he might not be so friendly tonight. Not that she would blame him either. If a guy had done something similar to her younger cousin, Evie wouldn't be very welcoming either. Hopefully, Matt didn't remember her and Adam hadn't shared who she was. And fingers crossed that if Matt did remember, he wasn't the type to hold a grudge. If she saw Adam's parents again, she'd like to know at least some of his family wasn't against her.

When Evie entered the kitchen rather than join everyone outside, she was tempted to go upstairs to change her clothes and put on some makeup. But she recognized the desire for what it was: a stall tactic. So despite wanting to go upstairs, she forced her feet to move to the french doors and outside.

The three cousins sitting near the firepit could easily pass for brothers. And she would've known the preschool-aged boy was Jake's son even if he hadn't been sitting on his father's lap. In another twelve or thirteen years, the boy could very well be appearing on magazine covers everywhere just like his father had before getting married. Even now Jake Sherbrooke occasionally appeared on magazines. However, unlike in the past, the articles written were about his foundation rather than who he was dating that month.

If Adam was alone, she would've sat next to him and not given it any thought. Now she considered the two empty seats. One was next to Adam, while the other was between Matt and Jake's wife. She didn't remember the woman's name, but she'd seen pictures of them together on the internet.

When Adam saw her, he stood and met her before she reached the circle of chairs. "I'm glad you're back." Even though they had an audience, he kissed her. "There's pizza inside if you're hungry."

"The last thing I want right now is more food. As usual, I overdid it at Sabroso."

"Jake and I go there sometimes. I love their Croquetas de Verduras," the other woman said. "By the way, I'm Charlie. Jake's better half. And this is

Brady.” Charlie gestured at the baby on her lap.

“And this little monkey is Garrett.” The little boy couldn’t stop laughing as Jake tickled him.

“Evelyn, but everyone calls me Evie. I’ve heard a lot about you from Adam. It’s nice to finally meet you both.”

“You’ve already met Matt.” Adam opened a hard lemonade and handed it to her before opening a beer for himself.

“It’s nice to see you again.” Nothing about Matt’s tone suggested he was upset about her presence.

Well, either he remembered her, or Adam had jogged his memory earlier. Either way, she appreciated that he seemed okay with her being there.

“How have you been?” Evie asked.

Talk about a silly question.

The man’s band had become a household name, and he’d landed two movie roles. Adam’s cousin had it all. But what else could she say to him?

“I can’t complain.” His mouth curved into a mischievous smile. “Do you remember the joke I made the first time I met you?”

She’d expected him to follow standard conversation 101 protocol and ask her the same question. “A joke? No, sorry, I don’t.”

Evie recalled that the first time she met Matt had been at Adam’s apartment, but she couldn’t recall anything specific from their time together. She also remembered spending time with him during the week she and Adam had traveled to California. But again, she couldn’t recall the details from any conversations.

“It was more of a comment, and you were the only one who thought it was funny, Matt,” Adam said, taking hold of her free hand and piquing her curiosity.

“Are you going to share? Or should we guess?” Jake asked, saving her from having to when it seemed like neither Matt nor Adam were going to.

“I suggested Evie start going by Eve instead of Evie, then the two of them

would be Adam and Eve.”

Oh, that.

She hadn't found it all that funny then, and she didn't find it all that funny now.

“Matt, only you and my husband find that the least bit funny,” Charlie said.

“Oh, come on, Charlie. It's a little funny,” Matt insisted.

Adam shook his head. “Stick with music, dude, and leave the jokes to someone else.”

“I'd take his advice if I were you,” Charlie said.

“I'm thinking about taking a little break from music.”

Matt's unexpected announcement switched the topic of the conversation to the issues Matt's band was having. Evie didn't mind the change, since it moved the attention away from her and events from the past.

Two hours later, only Adam, Matt, and Evie remained outside by the fire, which was slowly dying out.

“Does Jake's son ever slow down?” Matt asked.

“Nope. If you think he was bad tonight, you should see him when he's with his cousin Kendrick. The energy between the two of them could power the entire East Coast,” Adam answered.

“Thanks for the warning. And speaking of energy, I'm out of it.” Matt grabbed his empty bottle from the ground and stood. “See you guys tomorrow.”

Oddly, she wasn't tired, but it was getting late, and she couldn't sleep in tomorrow. Adam had to be at the high school by seven to set up for the track meet, so she needed to be up and ready to take care of Reagan before he left.

“I'm going to head to bed too. I'll see you in the morning.”

“You're not sleeping with me tonight?”

Three of the past five nights, she'd slept with Adam instead of in her bed. A fact that Leslie had so kindly pointed out was not exactly taking things

slow. Not that Evie had needed Leslie to remind her of that.

“It’s already late, and we both need to be up early.”

That sounded better than telling him she didn’t want to get too used to falling asleep and waking up with him, just in case things between them crashed and burned.

“If I go to your room, we won’t fall asleep any time soon, and you know it. Besides, your cousin is here.” Adam wouldn’t care that his cousin was there, so she didn’t know why she bothered to mention it.

Adam tossed a bucket of water on the fire, sending steam into the night sky. “We’re all adults. He doesn’t care about what we do.” Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her in close. “I promise we’ll go right to sleep.”

She knew him well. He might say that now and even mean it. Once they were in bed, things would slowly escalate, and they’d soon both be naked. “Tonight I’m sleeping in my bed. It misses me.” Evie pressed her lips against his, careful to keep the kiss brief. “Tomorrow, after you’ve been coaching for seven hours in the hot sun, you’ll thank me.”

ELEVEN

ADAM'S ALARM WENT OFF, WAKING HIM JUST AS, IN HIS DREAM, EVIE HANDED him a toddler with dark hair who resembled her.

Without opening his eyes, he turned off the offending device and reached for Evie. But instead of touching a warm body, his hand landed on cold sheets. Slowly, the sleep cleared from his head, and memories from the previous evening came to him.

He'd spent time catching up with his cousin Matt while watching Jake's son showcase a level of energy most adults wished they had. Afterward, Evie came home from her evening out and joined them. At first, she'd seemed hesitant, but she quickly grew at ease with everyone. He hoped that was a good sign because he wanted Evie to join him and Reagan on Memorial Day Weekend when they visited his sister and her boyfriend in Boston.

Unlike Matt, who she'd seen on multiple occasions when they'd been in college, she'd only met Tory the one time she'd come to California with him. Although they had different interests, he suspected the two women would get along well. As for Duncan, Tory's boyfriend, he'd managed to spend a week with his sister's ex-boyfriend and not punch him in the mouth. A person who could do that got along with everyone.

Any meeting with Mom and Dad could wait until he and Evie had perhaps half a dozen children. Assuming she wanted children. At one time,

she had, but people's plans changed. No one knew that better than he did. Six weeks ago, he expected to remain a childless bachelor and spoil any nieces or nephews he might someday have. Now he was the guardian of a seven-month-old little girl and thinking about when to propose to a woman he'd once never expected to see again.

Yep, things changed.

Adam stretched and looked at the empty pillow next to him. Since their picnic at the beach, she'd been staying the night in his room more often than in her own. So saying he'd been disappointed last night when she told him she was sleeping in her suite would be an understatement.

While the sex was fantastic, and he'd missed it last night, it wasn't the only reason he'd been disappointed. Adam simply enjoyed having her close and holding her at night and then seeing her as soon as he woke up in the morning. Still, he understood her reasoning last night. It was now five o'clock, and he had a long day ahead of him. They expected twenty-two high school teams at today's Westford Invitational. So when she said he'd be coaching for seven hours, she hadn't been exaggerating.

Time to get moving.

He might want a few more hours of sleep, but today he couldn't have what he wanted. In more ways than one. However, an early bedtime tonight might be in order. Correction: an early bedtime with *Evie* might be in order.

The weather forecast called for clear skies and a high of 90 degrees. It wasn't exactly the best weather for a track meet when there was very little shade around the athletic complex. And since Adam would be outside all day, sweating even though he wasn't a competing athlete, a shower seemed like a waste of time. Regardless, Adam took a nice cold one because it helped clear the cobwebs from his head. It also took care of the erection he'd woken up with and couldn't do anything about since *Evie* was asleep down the hall instead of with him and he had somewhere to be before she woke up.

He didn't expect anyone to be up this early, especially not his cousin.

Yet, Matt was standing in front of the open refrigerator when Adam walked into the kitchen thirty minutes later.

“Morning. What are you doing up?” Adam turned on the espresso machine. Today he wanted a little extra boost added to his coffee.

“I haven’t been sleeping well for about the past month. So I usually end up going for a run.”

From what Matt shared last night, he had a lot on his mind, so it was no surprise the guy was having trouble sleeping. Whenever Adam had a lot going on, he didn’t sleep well either.

“And if someone’s pool was open, I’d go for a swim when I got back.”

“Don’t start. I haven’t even had a cup of coffee yet.”

With the orange juice in hand, Matt closed the door and searched for a glass. “Someone is grumpy. I’m guessing you didn’t get any last night.”

“Everyone is grumpy at five thirty in the morning.”

Matt smiled as he poured himself a glass of juice. “Speak for yourself. I’m a ray of sunshine right now.”

Adam pressed the brew button on both the espresso and single-serve coffee machines. “Ray of sunshine, my ass. Do you want some?” He nodded toward the espresso machine as he waited for it to finish brewing.

“Not before a run. I’ll make some when I come back. But do you have any protein powder?”

“Cabinet to the left of the refrigerator. There should be a couple of different flavors.” He added the espresso to the coffee and took a much-needed gulp.

“What time is the meet today? I thought I’d stop by and watch some of it.”

“You mean stop by and critique my coaching.” He wasn’t an idiot. Matt had no interest in a high school track meet where he knew none of the athletes.

“The thought hadn’t crossed my mind.” A smile pulled at the corners of

Matt's mouth, but somehow, he restrained it. "But now that you mention it, I ran track in high school and was decent at it. So I might be able to offer you some pointers afterward."

Well, "ran track in high school" was one way to put it. His cousin had finished first place in the 200 meter and second place for men's javelin in the New Hampshire Meet of Champions during both his junior and senior year of high school.

Adam popped a bagel into the toaster. He wasn't hungry now, but who knew when he'd have time to eat again? "It officially starts at nine. It'll end when it ends. The athletic director told me it went until four last year."

That was one bad thing about track meets compared to football or basketball games, which lasted a set amount of time. A person never knew exactly when they would end.

"I've got plenty of time to get there, then," Matt said before he sipped his juice. "Maybe I'll see if Evie and Reagan want to come with me."

She'd mentioned bringing Reagan over to the school if it was a nice day. And although warmer than he'd like for a meet, the weather didn't get much better than today's forecast.

"If you do, be nice to her." Adam took another sip of coffee while he got out the peanut butter and jam.

"Hey, I'm always nice." This time, Matt couldn't prevent his smile. "Well, to people not related to me."

He couldn't argue with his cousin there. The only people Matt gave a hard time to were either related or very close to him. Evie didn't fit into either category, so she was safe from Matt's sarcastic side.

"Besides, despite the past, I like Evie and enjoyed talking to her last night."

The urge to tell Matt to keep away from Evie hit him hard. Even before his successful music career, Matt had women falling at his feet—not that Adam had ever suffered from a lack of women interested in him either.

However, the number had grown considerably with the success of Matt's band. But this was his cousin. The man might give him a hard time, but he'd never go after Evie, so when he said he liked Evie, Matt meant it on a platonic level.

"And I hope things work out the way you want this time."

"They will." Adam wouldn't accept any other outcome.

Matt said nothing as he mixed his protein shake, but his expression gave him away. His cousin had something on his mind but wasn't sure he should voice it. As if that had ever stopped him in the past.

"Spit it out so I can eat breakfast in peace." He spread peanut butter on both halves of the poppy seed bagel and then added a layer of blackberry jam. It wasn't the breakfast of champions, but it was quick, easy, and it would hold him over until he got around to buying a burger from the school's concession stand. Although probably the cheapest meat patties sold, the burgers the booster club sold at sporting events always tasted delicious.

"What was her reason for leaving you?"

He should've known that was on Matt's mind. "My parents. When we were in California, she overheard a conversation between them."

As they were his aunt and uncle, Matt knew Adam's parents well. "Not the response I expected, but somehow it doesn't surprise me either."

Adam wished he could say it had surprised him, but he couldn't. He still hadn't addressed the matter with Mom and Dad. Whenever he thought about it, his blood pressure went through the roof, and before he confronted them, he needed to know he could remain calm and in control. He knew from experience that shouting would only result in an argument and raised voices from his parents. He'd prefer to avoid both if he could.

"When are you going to tell them you're back together?"

It didn't escape Adam that Matt asked when he would and not if he had.

"Maybe after we have six or seven kids, and they all graduate from high school."

“Damn, you want six or seven? Did you slip while in the shower this morning and hit your head? What if they all turn out like Jake’s oldest son? I got tired just watching the kid yesterday. I cannot imagine living with him.” Matt’s smile faded. “Seriously, your parents haven’t changed. I don’t know what they said, but if they didn’t like Evie thirteen years ago, they won’t like her now.”

Adam licked the peanut butter off his finger, something his mom hated to see someone do. Maybe that was why he’d always done it. “Ask me if I care what my parents think. They agreed to the type of relationship they have. They tried to force it on my sister, and Tory rejected it. I plan to do the same. Hopefully, Tyler will too.”

WHEN SHE’D ACCEPTED the position and they’d discussed her hours, Evie had offered to start her day before Adam left for work and take care of Reagan’s breakfast. He hadn’t even considered her offer before declining. He’d explained that he wanted to be there for Reagan as much as possible.

Somehow, she’d been both surprised and not at the same time. When they’d been together, she’d believed he’d be a good father someday. However, Reagan wasn’t his daughter, and he’d gone from being a carefree bachelor to a single parent overnight. Not everyone could switch gears that quickly.

True to his word, though, Adam had taken care of Reagan’s morning routine every day so far except for one prior to today. The first weekend after Evie had moved in, he had to catch the bus for an away track meet early, so she’d been the one to get Reagan when the little girl woke up.

“How does breakfast sound?” Evie asked as she carried Reagan downstairs.

It sounded great to her. In the morning, she was either starving or not the

least bit hungry. Today was the first case.

Last night Evie had initially had a difficult enough time falling asleep. And after trying different positions and adding pillows, she'd revisited her decision to sleep alone. She'd been seconds away from giving up and heading to Adam's room when Leslie's voice popped into her head, reminding her that she said she didn't want to rush things. Somehow she'd known that if she gave in and slept in Adam's room, she wouldn't use her bed again. So instead she switched on the television and fell asleep on the sofa. Much later she'd woken up to use the bathroom. When she returned to bed, hunger instead of Adam's absences kept her awake. Eventually she'd caved and finished off what was left in the Goldfish bag. It had satisfied her enough to fall asleep, but she needed some real food now.

Evie found a note on the table when she entered the kitchen.

Have a great day. Miss you. See you tonight. Adam.

An irrational pang of disappointment dinged her. Evie knew to her core that she loved him. Actually, if she was honest with herself, she'd never stopped loving him. But she'd not allowed herself to say the words. If she wasn't willing to share, it wasn't fair to expect him to say them yet either. Still, the missing words bothered her.

Get a grip. You're the one who said you wanted to take it slow, not him.

With Reagan propped on one hip, she opened the cupboard and checked out the options. "Are you more in the mood for apples and oatmeal or bananas with strawberries?"

Evie moved aside the containers of sweet potato mixed with chicken to see what else they had. "Looks like we also have blueberries with apples."

It would be a while before Reagan could verbally tell anyone what she wanted, but hearing the human voice was vital for a child's language development.

Since there were several containers of the apples and oatmeal, Evie grabbed one of those and then a spoon.

Before she buckled Reagan into her highchair, she pressed brew on the coffee machine. While she feed Reagan, she'd enjoy some coffee. Then while Reagan had her bottle, something she could hold herself, Evie would get her own breakfast. Actually, the little girl was doing so well holding her own bottle, Evie intended to order her some sippy cups so they could slowly transition away from bottles. Some babies struggled with the change, while other picked it up quickly. Evie expected Reagan would fall into the second category.

Evie was holding a second spoonful of food near Reagan's mouth when she heard the front door open. Soon after, Matt entered the kitchen, dressed in running shorts and a drenched T-shirt.

Despite his red cheeks and the sweat dripping down his face, he smiled when he saw her. "Good morning."

Even sweaty and red-faced, no one with a pulse would ever deny that Matt Sherbrooke was drop-dead gorgeous. However, her body didn't stand up and take notice like it did when Adam was around. She felt no burning desire to wrap her arms around Matt and kiss him until they both forgot what month it was, which was a frequent occurrence when she and Adam were in the same room.

"Morning. Since you're on vacation, I thought you might sleep in today." Evie wasn't sure if vacation was the right word, but it sounded better than telling him she hadn't expected to see him before noon since he had no current responsibilities.

"I wish." Matt filled a tall glass with water and downed half of it before he spoke again. "I've been up since about five. I saw Adam before he left."

She'd briefly considered setting her alarm so she could see Adam before he headed out for the day. Common sense prevailed, though, and she left it set in time to get up for Reagan.

Matt drained the rest of his water and refilled it before grabbing a coffee mug. "Do you need more?"

“I’m good for now, thanks.” She’d only taken a few sips from her cup.

Rather than take his coffee and leave, Matt pulled out a chair and sat across from her. “If my Adam and Eve joke bothered you last night, I’m sorry. It wasn’t my intention.”

She’d dismissed the comment not long after he said it. “Don’t worry about it, but you and Jake really were the only ones who found it funny.”

“Later I’m going to the high school for the track meet so I can give my cousin some coaching pointers. Do you and Reagan want to join me?”

“Give him some pointers?”

“Hey, it’s the least I can do since he’s letting me stay here.”

“True. And I’m sure he’ll love hearing what you think,” Evie said before taking a sip of coffee. “I was already thinking about going, but aren’t you worried about drawing attention? You’re not exactly unknown.”

Matt shook his head. “No one knows I’m in the area, and no one would expect to see me at a high school track meet. When people see you in a place they don’t expect you, they often assume you’re a look-alike. I have actually had people tell me I could be Matt Sherbrooke’s twin. And you’d be amazed how helpful a baseball hat and sunglasses are for a disguise.”

She’d never thought about it, but what he said made sense. No one would expect him to be at a high school event.

“If someone does cause a scene because I’m there, I’ll leave.”

Although she’d been worried about visiting with Adam’s family last night, especially Matt, she’d enjoyed herself. They’d all been welcoming and friendly. Not once had they treated her as if she didn’t belong, and except for his joke about their names, Matt never mentioned the past.

Except for the neighbors, she didn’t know anyone in town, so some company today would be nice. “Sure, but I’ll have to drive.”

Matt’s car looked nice and went fast, but it lacked the space for Reagan’s car seat.

“Have you eaten yet?” Matt asked before he took another drink of coffee.

“It’s on my to-do list.” Evie helped Reagan guide the spoon toward her mouth.

“I’m starving. After I shower, let’s go for breakfast and then head to the high school.”

“Okay. Do you like pancakes? Because the Flying Pigs Diner makes the best you’ll ever taste.” She hadn’t been for a while, and an order of their blueberry pancakes and fresh-squeezed orange juice would hit the spot this morning.

“When it comes to breakfast food, there isn’t anything I don’t like.”

TWELVE

WHEN THEIR SERVER CAME TO TAKE THEIR ORDER AND STARED AT MATT, EVIE expected her to ask for his autograph. Instead, the woman said he looked just like Matthew Sherbrooke, the lead singer from Eclipse, and then asked if they were ready to order. Without missing a beat, Matt told the woman he got that a lot and then ordered a triple stack of blueberry pancakes with a side of bacon and a coffee.

Now, as she pulled into the high school's crowded parking lot, she hoped he continued to go unnoticed.

"Adam wasn't kidding when he said they were expecting a lot of people today."

"The Westford Invitational has always been one of the biggest track and field meets in the area."

Evie was about to move on to the next row when she saw a SUV backing out of a spot.

"Are you from this area?" Matt asked.

As soon as the SUV drove away, she turned into the empty spot. "I grew up in Bowman. It borders Westford. My high school always competed against Westford, so I've competed in this meet."

"Does your family still live there?"

She shook her head. "No, my mom moved to Norfolk while I was in

college, so I don't get to see her as often as I'd like. And my dad and stepmom live in North Carolina. I only see them every few months, but that's okay with me."

"Sounds like something Adam would say about his parents."

"Families can be complicated." What else could she say to a comment like that?

"Some more than others."

Evie closed the windows and then turned off the ignition. "It'll be a few minutes before Reagan and I are ready. You don't have to wait for us."

"I'm not in a rush."

If Matt wanted to wait, she wouldn't argue with him. After opening the stroller, Evie put the diaper bag and toys in its storage bin. Rather than put Reagan in the stroller, though, she strapped on the baby carrier and put her inside it.

"That looks uncomfortable."

"You get used to it." She expected Reagan to want out eventually, which was why she was also bringing the stroller. "I think we're all set."

"Would it be easier for you if I push the stroller?"

She wouldn't say no if he wanted to help. "That would be great. Thanks."

They'd walked less than a foot before Matt stopped for no apparent reason. "I wasn't going to say anything."

Matt's comment immediately sent up red flags.

"But since we've already talked about your family, I want to share something with you. Adam didn't give me the specifics, but I know my aunt and uncle were the reason you left him."

If he'd shared that information, what else had he told his cousin?

"Adam has always butted heads with his parents. And he's always done what he wants, not what they want. He wants to be with you. Nothing my aunt and uncle say or do will change his mind. Please remember that. Adam goes out of his way to avoid his parents, but eventually you will see them.

When you do, don't let a stupid comment from either of them upset you."

Easy for you to say.

"I'll remember that." She didn't actively think about it, but she knew if she wanted Adam in her future, seeing his parents was inevitable. "Do you get along well with your parents?"

"Yeah. I have a good relationship with them. But my dad and Uncle Benjamin are nothing alike. The only thing they have in common is their last name. My uncle is a lot like my grandfather."

She'd never met Adam's grandfather, but based on what he'd told her about him, the man was a lot like her own grandfather. "My dad and grandfather have similar personalities. Thankfully, my brother and sister are not like either of them." How that happened, she didn't know, especially since they didn't take after her stepmom either.

"Older or younger?"

"Both are younger. They're technically half-siblings. What about you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

Various names had come up during conversations, but Evie didn't know the specific relationships between all of Adam's cousins.

"Two younger brothers. They're twins."

A sea of colorful team tents filled the field behind the bleachers, giving the athletes a place to relax and get out of the sun. A long line of people waited at the concession stand. Evie didn't know what all the options were, but she could smell the hamburgers and hot dogs the booster club was cooking on the grills. Spectators of all ages either sat in the bleachers or stood near the fence, cheering on the athletes. Despite the crowd, no one paid any attention to Matt and Evie as they walked, which was fine with her. She'd rather not find herself surrounded by Matt's devoted fans, especially if those fans whipped out their phones and started taking photos.

"How many schools are here?"

"Adam said they were expecting twenty-two." Evie searched the area for

Adam, but while she saw plenty of people wearing Westford T-shirts, she didn't see him anywhere.

“We're going to be here a while.”

If by a while he meant hours, then yup, they had a long afternoon ahead of them.

THE FINAL RUNNER crossed the finish line, ending the competition, and Adam checked his watch. The athletic director had been right when she said they'd be there until at least four o'clock. It was three thirty now, and she still need to hand out awards. By the time she did that and the team cleaned up the equipment, it would be after four.

Adam loved the outdoors, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd spent seven plus hours outside. Except for the handful of times he'd checked on athletes who were with the athletic trainer or went to refill his water bottle, he'd had the sun beating down on him all day. While he'd applied sunscreen when he first arrived, he never got a chance to reapply. Both his forearms had a pink hue to them now. But compared to some athletes, that was nothing. He'd reminded everyone yesterday to bring sunscreen. But either they hadn't, or they'd forgotten it was in their bags, because half his team had sunburns on their shoulders and necks.

“The award ceremony will start in ten minutes,” the athletic director announced.

Off and on throughout the day, he'd looked for Evie and Reagan. With so many people there, finding her had been impossible. Now as the spectators and teams who hadn't placed packed up and left, he scanned the area again.

“I wonder what's going on over there.” Nathan, one of his assistant coaches, stopped next to him and gestured to a small crowd.

He'd noticed the group, too, but had dismissed it.

“Katie says Matthew Sherbrooke is here.” Tiffany, a junior and possibly the best pole vaulter on the team, walked closer to where Adam and Nathan stood, her eyes glued to the phone in her hands.

“Who’s Matthew Sherbrooke?” Molly, a fellow pole vaulter on the team, asked.

“How do you not know who he is? He’s the lead singer for Eclipse.” Tiffany’s voice was loud enough for Adam to still hear her even though they were further away now.

If Molly responded, Adam didn’t catch it.

“I think we have our answer about the crowd,” Nathan said, voicing Adam’s thoughts. “Wonder why he’s here.”

“Matt is my cousin, and he’s staying with me for the weekend.” If Matt was at the center of that group, Evie and Reagan were probably over there, too, assuming they’d come together.

“Uh, I never made the connection.”

While Adam didn’t deny who he was related to, he didn’t actively go around telling people either. Unlike many of his family members, he preferred to be out of the spotlight. If he went around telling everyone who was on his family tree, that would be difficult to do.

“At this time, I need all the winning athletes and their teams to make their way onto the field,” the athletic director said.

At the announcement, the crowd around his cousin thinned out, and Adam could see Evie and Reagan standing next to Matt. After saying something to his cousin, Evie walked toward the fence. He knew the moment she saw him because she waved and smiled.

For the next few minutes, everyone’s focus would be on the athletic director and the athletes who placed in the top three of their events. No one would care about where he was.

“If anyone is looking for me, I’ll be right back.”

“No problem,” Nathan said before walking over to the where the team

was gathered.

As he approached, Adam noticed he wasn't the only person whose attention was focused on Evie rather than the ceremony. And Adam's initial instinct was to let everyone know she was with him. Even though they weren't alone, he wrapped his arms around her and captured her mouth.

From behind him, he heard a wolf whistle. "Go, Coach." The statement reminded him they had an audience.

Adam stepped away and crouched down so he could greet Reagan in her stroller. "How's my girl doing today?"

Reagan gifted him with a smile.

"She just woke up."

"How long have you been here?" He kissed Reagan's cheek before standing up again.

"We got here around eleven. Before we came, Matt and I went to the Flying Pigs Diner for breakfast."

He'd heard of the place but hadn't eaten there. "I've never been there."

"You need to go. They have *the* best pancakes."

He tucked the information away for future Saturday or Sunday morning when they had nowhere to be.

Free from his adoring fans, Matt joined them. "Nice job today, Coach. You've got some talented athletes on the team."

Adam didn't need his cousin to tell him that. While not everyone placed in the top five of their events, both the girls' and boys' teams had a good chance of taking home the state title in their division this year.

"I've got some suggestions for you to pass along to your javelin throwers."

Usually, he could tell when Matt was being serious or not, but not now.

"How much longer do you think you'll be here?" Evie asked.

She'd been there for five hours, so he wouldn't blame her if she was bored or tired. "Not too much longer. But why don't you take the baby and

Reagan home?” He couldn’t resist insulting his cousin.

“Now I’m not going to share my suggestions with you.”

“What a shame. I guess I’ll have to manage somehow.”

Evie shook her head and laughed. “That’s enough, children.”

“I mean it. If you guys want to go, I understand.”

“It’s up to you, Evie. I’ll do whatever you want,” Matt said.

“We’ll head home. It’s almost time for Reagan to eat dinner.”

The kiss she gave him could barely be qualified as one. Before he could do a proper job of saying goodbye, she moved out of his reach.

“See you soon.” With a small wave, she walked away, taking Reagan and Matt with her.

The athletic director was handing out medals to the top three finishers in the girls’ two-hundred-meter race when Adam joined his assistant coaches. While he worked well with all three of them, he only considered Nathan both a friend and a coworker. In the fall, while Adam had coached the boys’ cross-country team, Nathan had coached the girls, and they had immediately hit it off.

“Sonia is going to lose it when I tell her Matthew Sherbrooke was here today.” Nathan kept his voice low enough so it didn’t disturb the awards ceremony or catch anyone’s attention. “She loves Eclipse. I think she’s seen them in concert at least four times.”

Oddly, in all the years his cousin’s band had been touring, he’d never seen them perform live.

“Any idea when they’ll be coming to the area again?”

Based on his conversation with Matt last night, it might be a very long time before the band toured again. But that wasn’t his business to share with the group’s fans.

“Matt hasn’t said anything to me about a tour. But if they do come through this way, I’ll make sure you get some front-row seats and backstage passes.”

“Sonia would be in heaven.”

The three athletes the athletic director had presented awards to returned to their teams, and she moved on to the next group.

“I’m assuming the baby in the stroller was Reagan.”

Adam nodded and clapped after the athletic director announced that Frank Doyle, a freshman on the team, had finished third in the men’s triple jump.

“Who was the woman with her? You haven’t mentioned going out with anyone since Delilah.”

He hadn’t been out with anyone since ending his relationship with Delilah in December. Basketball season had been partially to blame. With practice every day and multiple games a week, it didn’t leave much time for a social life. But he also hadn’t met anyone he cared to get to know better.

“Evie. We were together in college and recently reconnected.” Nathan didn’t need to know Evie had started out as Reagan’s nanny.

“Sonia and I met in college. I was actually dating her roommate when we first met.”

“I hope they weren’t close friends.” Something like that could kill any friendship.

Nathan shook his head and clapped as the athletic director announced another name. “The college randomly put them in the same room. They got along, but they weren’t close. I don’t think they ever spoke to each other again once the school year ended.”

Even if the two women hadn’t been close, he imagined it had created an uncomfortable situation between them.

“When the season ends, the four of us should go out,” Nathan said.

When he’d been with Delilah, the four of them had gone out a few times, and he liked the idea of Evie getting to know his friends. However, even though the team never had more than two meets in a week, there still wasn’t a lot of time for getting together with friends right now.

“Let’s plan on it.”

EVIE MOVED the red five of hearts over onto the black six of clubs. With no other possible moves, she drew another card and wondered how everyone survived without smart phones. She’d started the solitaire game yesterday but hadn’t gotten far. Twenty years ago, she would have most likely cleaned up the cards and started a new game some other time, but now technology allowed her to simply turn off the game until later. Since she didn’t know how long Adam would be upstairs, she’d opened the app on her phone and picked up where she’d left off.

A text from her mom popped up before Evie could move the queen of spades she just picked up over onto the king of hearts.

We’re looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. We changed the reservations to The Chateau.

Why?

Mom loved Portofino. Ever since she’d moved to Norfolk, they’d celebrated her birthday there.

The Chateau is more family orientated.

Portofino had delicious food, but Evie couldn’t recall ever seeing anyone younger than perhaps fifteen there. Reagan was usually well-behaved while out, but the only restaurant Evie had ever taken her to was the diner today. They’d spent about forty minutes there. Dinner tomorrow would last much longer, especially if they went to Portofino.

That was probably a good idea. Thank you.

When you leave tomorrow? Send me your ETA.

Will do.

And say hi to Adam for me. I’m looking forward to seeing him and meeting Reagan.

Switching back to the game, Evie managed to move the jack of diamonds over onto the queen of clubs before Adam walked into the room.

“My mom says hi.” Rather than close the game, she moved another card. “She’s looking forward to seeing you and meeting Reagan.”

Silence was all she’d heard last week when she told Mom who was coming with her tomorrow. It had lasted so long, she’d wondered if they’d been disconnected. Once Mom processed the information, she’d understandably bombarded Evie with questions. She expected a similar reaction from her stepsister when she found out Adam was back in Evie’s life.

“She changed our reservation to a more family-friendly restaurant.”

“Same time?” Adam sat next to her and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“Yep. It’s going to be another long day for Reagan.”

“She was exhausted tonight. She fell asleep on my lap as I read to her.”

She’d walked by Reagan’s bedroom one night while Adam read to her. The sight had both endeared him to her more—something she would’ve thought impossible—and at the same time left her mentally kicking herself in the ass. If she’d been upfront with Adam and talked to him thirteen years ago rather than running away, he might be reading to their children every night before bed.

“I don’t think she’s the only one who is exhausted.”

“Because of you, I didn’t sleep well last night,” Adam said right before yawning.

“If it makes you feel any better, I had a trouble sleeping too.”

Adam removed the pins holding her hair up and raked his fingers through it. “There is an easy solution for both our problems. Sleep with me tonight.”

“Who said I slept poorly because you weren’t there? Maybe a horrendous headache kept me awake or a stomachache because I ate too much.”

“You didn’t have a headache or a stomachache.” He trailed his lips down

her neck as his hand settled on her waist. “You missed me.” When he reached her collarbone, he reversed his path. “Just like I missed you.”

“Maybe I missed you a tiny bit,” she said, trailing her fingertips up his forearm.

“You missed me more than that, and you know it.” His hand slid under her T-shirt, and his lips covered hers but didn’t linger. “Sleep with me tonight.”

He captured her lips again before she could speak. Unlike a moment ago, Adam took his time, and when he used his tongue to tease her lips apart, she opened willingly for him.

A tsunami of desire crashed over her, and she barely noticed when Adam lifted her onto his lap. And when his lips moved away from hers, she took in a much-needed deep breath.

“I want you to move into my room and start thinking of this as our house, not my house.”

Although she hadn’t mentioned it to him, she’d still been looking at possible homes to purchase. So far she hadn’t found anything she liked enough in her price range to even visit.

“We’ll both sleep better at night.” His hand moved higher, leaving a trail of heat behind.

Evie caressed his neck and silently thanked fate for bringing Adam back into her life. “That is true.”

Her phone chimed, alerting her to a new text message, but she ignored it because whoever it was could wait.

“We can make room for any furniture or stuff you have. If you want, we can do some redecorating too.”

She didn’t have much in storage, but there were a few items she missed.

“What do you think?” Adam’s lips brushed against hers before he pulled back and looked at her.

Evie repeatedly told herself to take things slow. However, on some level

she'd known that wasn't possible. Despite the years apart, Adam remained a part of her soul.

"I think we'll both be sleeping better at night, roomie."

Adam smiled. "Sleeping better isn't the only thing we'll be doing tonight."

He leaned in to kiss her, but before he could, the intro to "Thought You Knew" erupted from her cell, and it chimed several times as she received multiple text messages. Something was up.

"You might want to check that."

She knew that, but honestly, she was a little afraid. What if something had happened to Mom, and Alan was trying to get a hold of her?

Two more texts came in, and she grabbed the device because ignoring it wouldn't change anything. When she saw her half sister's name on the screen, she breathed a small sigh of relief. If something had happened to Mom, Kathryn wouldn't be the one calling to tell her.

Evie barely managed to say hello before Kathryn asked, "How did you meet Matthew Sherbrooke from Eclipse?"

"I know his—" She stopped as Kathryn's question sank in. "Wait, how do you know that I've met him?"

"There are pictures of you together on, like, every social media site."

Her half sister would know. Kathryn had accounts on at least five different social media platforms, and she checked them all constantly.

"So how did you meet, and how long have you been together?"

"We're—"

"Is he good in bed? I read an interview with his ex-girlfriend who said Matt was the best lover she'd ever had. She said he was even better—"

"Kathryn, we're not together." Evie cut her half sister off before she could ask if Matt snored or something. "He is related to a close friend of mine. That's how I know him."

"Sure. Then why wasn't this so-called friend with you in any of the

pictures?”

“Adam was coaching. Matt and I went to the track meet together to watch him. There is nothing going on between us.”

“And what about breakfast, then?”

Since no one approached them, she’d assumed Matt had been right and everyone believed he was a look-alike as their waitress had. If there was a picture of them in the diner, that wasn’t the case. Maybe she shouldn’t be surprised. While he’d gone unnoticed for much of the track meet, a fan eventually approached him. Once someone saw Matt and the fan take a picture together, more people gathered around him. Maybe whoever recognized him in the diner had been too shy to approach him.

“You do realize that two people can eat together and not be involved, Kathryn.”

“I suppose.” Kathryn sounded unconvinced. “Was that his daughter with you? I never read anywhere that he has children.”

While she disliked that someone had taken and posted photos of her and Matt without permission, she hated that they’d included Reagan.

“No, it’s not his daughter. I’m Reagan’s nanny, and she came with us.”

“Oh, well, fans are speculating that she’s Matthew’s daughter and that you’re the mother. That much I knew wasn’t true.”

Great.

“Since you’re such good friends with him, any chance you can get me great seats the next time Eclipse is in the area?”

“Maybe. But I don’t think they have a tour scheduled.” She knew they had no plans to tour soon, but if she told Kathryn that, it would only elicit more questions. “Reagan’s crying, so I need to go. I’ll talk to you later.” She didn’t like to lie, but she wanted to check some social media sites and see what was being said about her.

Ending the call, Evie opened the app for Chat, her favorite and, in her opinion, the most user-friendly social media site, and did a search for any

posts containing either Matthew Sherbrooke or Eclipse. Immediately, posts popped up, all of which had multiple comments and had been shared with others.

“What’s up?” Adam asked.

“Someone posted post pictures of me and Matt on social media.” Evie scrolled through the posts, and each picture or comment sent her anger to the next level. “People need to mind their own business. Whoever posted this picture wrote: ‘Just spotted Eclipse’s Matthew Sherbrooke with a mystery woman and a baby. Does Matthew have a secret family?’” She scrolled down to the comment section on the post. “Can’t two people eat together?” she asked.

Taking the phone, Adam looked through the posts. “Good. You can’t see Reagan’s face in any of these pictures.” He turned off the phone and put it on the table, then slipped his hand under her shirt. “When you’re not seen with him again, everyone will forget all about it. You need to do the same, and I know how to make sure you do.”

The hand under her T-shirt moved higher as he took full possession of her lips, caressing her mouth more than kissing it. As the kiss continued, she felt his heart thudding against hers, and as desire replaced her anger, all thoughts of the photos disappeared.

THIRTEEN

NOT LONG AFTER THE PICTURES OF EVIE AND HIS COUSIN APPEARED ON social media sites, they were also featured on the cover of magazines like the *Star Insider* and the *Star Report*. While Adam hadn't been thrilled about seeing Evie and Reagan there, and he'd hated the assumptions the magazines made, their appearance hadn't bothered him anywhere near as much as they had Evie.

Unlike many of his cousins, Adam had always made sure to fly under the radar, so he only appeared in magazines or on social media when someone photographed him with an easily recognizable relative. And he had plenty of them. Since they'd spent little time with his family when they'd been together in college, Evie had never fallen victim to the media.

While he understood her anger, as no one liked to have their privacy violated, he was confident it wouldn't happen often. He enjoyed spending time with his family but preferred to do it in private settings, like when his cousins visited last weekend. But, of course, they wouldn't be able to entirely avoid settings where photographers might be. Later this year, he planned to attend his cousin Juliette's wedding. A former highly sought-after model who had walked runways around the world and appeared on billboards in Times Square, the media would be on hand to capture pictures. He hadn't mentioned the wedding to Evie yet, but in his head, there was no doubt she was coming

with him and Reagan.

One useful thing did come from the photos, though. They reminded him to be extra vigilant whenever he was with his family and Reagan was with him. The pictures from last weekend didn't show her face, but it still annoyed him that she was in them. In the future, he wanted to avoid even Reagan's little toe from showing up on social media or the cover of a tabloid magazine.

The lack of more photos this week hadn't stopped the media from continuing to speculate that Evie was Matt's baby mama—their words, not Adam's. But the more time that passed and no additional pictures appeared, the rumor would eventually die out. Regardless, the rumors had understandably angered Evie, especially since their neighbor had stopped her Tuesday while she and Reagan had been on their morning walk and bombarded her with questions. Based on what Evie shared with him, she'd been far more gracious than he would've been if faced with the questioning.

Right now, though, he didn't want to think about rumors or the media. Although last weekend had been great, he'd had to share Evie with first his family on Friday night and then hers on Sunday. Today he had Evie all to himself, and he had plans for them.

Evie entered the room as Reagan crawled into his lap. "I'm ready to go whenever you are."

Ten minutes ago, he'd changed Reagan's diaper, and he already had everything they might need for the next few hours packed up and in the car. "We're all set."

"Are you going to tell me where we are going, or do I need to guess?"

Evie could guess until she was blue in the face, and she'd never get it. "We're starting the day at Meadow Valley."

Adam had never heard of it until Nathan mentioned he and his wife visited the botanical garden. But after looking at pictures on its website, he knew it was a place Evie would enjoy. Even better, since it was mostly outdoors, Reagan wouldn't bother other guests if she got fussy.

“I’ve wanted to visit since it opened but haven’t had the chance. How do you know about it? Plants aren’t exactly your thing.”

It was more like he knew next to nothing about them. Earlier in the week, she’d asked if she could add some annuals and perennials to the yard. First, she had to remind him which ones came back every year because he always confused them. Once he had that straight in his head, she started naming various shrubs and flowers. Then, except for the roses, she had to show him pictures of everything she was considering for the house.

“Nathan and his wife enjoy gardening, and they went there last Sunday.”

It appeared as though every gardening enthusiast in the state was taking advantage of the beautiful weather. Unable to find parking in the main lot, he drove to the overflow parking lot. According to Meadow Valley’s website, it encompassed ninety-five acres of displays and walking trails. Adam hoped, with that much outdoor space available, the botanical garden wouldn’t feel as busy as it appeared to be based on the number of cars.

“Do you think we should use the stroller or the baby carrier?” Either was okay with him, but he suspected they’d be there a while. Reagan might be more comfortable in the stroller, especially since she could sleep in it.

“Let’s take both. That worked well last weekend at the meet.”

Anyone who saw them as they walked toward the visitor center would assume they were a family out enjoying a gorgeous spring day. They wouldn’t be the only ones. Each day that passed, Adam saw them as one more and more, although he hadn’t shared his thoughts with Evie.

“I wonder what kind of flowers these are?” Evie gestured at the flowers and shrubs planted around the large brick building that served as the visitors’ center.

“Don’t look at me. You’ve seen my yard. Unless we’re talking about roses, I don’t know the difference between a tulip and a pansy.”

Adam held the door open so she could push the stroller into the building.

On her way by him, she shook her head. “Give me a break. Everyone

knows the difference between those two. Even an anti-gardener like you.”

“Hey, I never said I was against gardening. I just don’t enjoy doing it. I think it looks great when someone else does the work.”

While people filled the gift shop off to the left, the building was fairly empty compared to the number of cars they’d walked past.

Evie gestured to the display of brochures in various languages mounted on the far wall next to the restroom entrances. “Should we grab one?”

“Get one. There might be a specific area you want to see.” They were unlikely to see everything today, and he wanted to ensure they visited the areas that most interested her.

The inside front cover contained a brief history of the garden as well as a list of ways people could support the facility through donations and volunteer work. A detailed map with a corresponding key, professional photos, and short descriptions of popular areas filled the rest of the brochure.

“Do you see anything that interests you?” He didn’t remember much of what he’d read on the website but recalled seeing a Korean Bell Garden and a children’s tearoom listed. The second didn’t make much sense to him. Children didn’t gather and drink tea, so a children’s tearoom seemed unnecessary.

“It all sounds great. But I think we should go this way. The path is marked as easy, so pushing the stroller shouldn’t be an issue.” She traced a walking trail that began to the left of the visitor center and continued past the area labeled the Great Lawn.

He couldn’t tell what made the area worthy of the adjective great, but if she wanted to stroll past it, he’d follow her lead.

“Judging by the map, there is a lot to see that way, and we can visit the Korean Bell Garden.” She pointed at the large white space before tracing another trail away from it. “Afterward, we can head down this trail to the lilac pavilion and the hosta collection.”

Hostas. He’d heard of them. Evie had asked him how he felt about her

planting some in the backyard. She'd also shown him a few different varieties. Adam hadn't been impressed but had given her the go-ahead if she wanted to put some in the yard.

"It looks like there will be a lot of good places to have our lunch or just get out of the sun." Evie pointed at one of the gazebo-style structures dotting the map.

Yep, he'd read that on the website, which was why he'd packed them a picnic.

Adam opened the side door. "Sounds like we have a plan."

It turned out the name Great Lawn was misleading because it didn't resemble anything he'd ever called a lawn. Instead, various plants and trees filled the area, and Evie identified many as they walked. A large koi pond occupied the center of the area. And they spent more time than necessary there because Reagan seemed to enjoy watching the colorful fish swimming. From there, they took a short sun break inside the gazebo built in the center of the manmade lake. While there, they transferred Reagan from the stroller to her baby carrier because she'd made it known she was tired of sitting.

"That's unique."

He didn't need to ask to know she was referring to the Korean Bell Garden straight ahead. Constructed on a hill, a pagoda with a giant bell made in South Korea was the focal point. The remainder of the area was filled with replicas of ancient Korean statues and stone walls adorned with traditional Korean symbols. Both visitors and a professional photographer were busy taking pictures of the area, themselves, and a large wedding party.

"It wouldn't be my first choice for taking wedding pictures, but it makes a beautiful backdrop," Evie said.

As they approached, they gave the large wedding party being rearranged by a photographer and her assistant a wide berth. Judging by the photographer's tone, they'd been there a while, and she was frustrated.

Thanks to the size of his family, he'd been to his fair share of weddings.

Most of the couples opted for photos outside but not all. “Where would you rather have them done?”

Assuming the weather cooperated, he’d vote for wedding photos outside, but he’d also seen some nice ones done indoors.

Evie shrugged as they followed her predetermined route and walked down the other side of the hill. “If you are asking about here at the garden, I’m not sure. But it would be an area with a lot of color. But the beach would be nice if we’re talking about anywhere. Or someplace where the mountains are in the background. I know it’s not always possible to take photos outside, but I think it’s much nicer when they are.”

“The mountains might be the one setting none of my relatives have married in.”

It was still a few feet away, but the area labeled Children’s Garden on the map was not what he expected. To Adam, it looked more like a giant playground, and currently, children of all ages were enjoying it. At the center were two swing sets, both at least twice the size of the one he’d bought, complete with slides, monkey bars, and a climbing wall. Just to the left of the entrance was a brick building with large windows. Several long tables and chairs filled one room, while the second appeared to be full of hands-on activities.

Evie paused at the entrance to the Children’s Garden. “When Reagan gets a little older, she’ll love this.”

“You think? I’d try the climbing wall or go down the slide if no one was here. Look at that thing. I’ve never seen a slide like it.” While three of the slides were standard designs, the fourth was much taller and had more twists and turns than any slide he remembered from his childhood.

“Now that I’d love to see.”

AFTER DINNER they'd decided to take advantage of the nice weather while they could, because according to the forecast, it was going to rain for the next three days. So while Adam put Reagan to bed, she gathered up all the ingredients for s'mores and started a fire. A childhood favorite treat, she couldn't remember the last time she had them. Whether they were part of a s'more or she planned to eat them by themselves, she liked her marshmallows golden brown, which required patience and the correct distance from the flames. Adam preferred his the same way. Unfortunately, he lacked the patience. Two had already caught on fire because he got tired of waiting and put them too close to the flames. Now it appeared as though a third would soon follow its predecessors.

Evie added the perfectly toasted marshmallow to the graham crackers and chocolate waiting for it. "Let's trade before you burn another one."

She didn't wait for an answer. Instead she took the stick he held and handed him her empty one, then pushed the paper plate with the s'more closer to him. "You can have this one."

Adam didn't waste any time biting into the simple but tasty treat. "So what was your favorite area today?"

"The seasonal garden gave me a lot of ideas for this yard. But the lilac pavilion might have been my favorite. I knew they came in different colors, but I didn't realize there were so many varieties."

She'd been surprised that Adam knew of Meadow Valley but not that he'd planned to take her there. Like everyone, Adam had his faults, but he was thoughtful. Countless times in the past, he'd gone to places or done things because he knew she'd enjoy them. She'd seen him do the same for others too. "Thank you for taking me there today. I know it isn't your kind of place."

He popped the last of his s'more into his mouth and then licked some marshmallow off his thumb. Although an innocent action, it immediately brought to mind how he'd used his tongue to wake her up this morning, and a

fluttering sensation started in her chest.

“Hey, I got to spend a gorgeous day outside with my favorite two people, so I have no complaints. And I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“How would you feel about going back in a July? They’re having a botanical mixology class.”

While one portion of the marshmallow was a little darker than she liked because of Adam’s impatience, the rest was perfect. She put the marshmallow on the chocolate and wished she’d brought the peanut butter outside. Growing up, she’d often gone camping with her next-door neighbors, and the family always either added peanut butter to their s’mores or used peanut butter cups instead of plain chocolate.

“I don’t know what a botanical mixology class is, but I’ll go with you. Tell me when it is, and I’ll see if Reagan can stay with Jake and Charlie that day.”

“I’m not sure it’s fair to ask them to watch Reagan. They already have their hands full with Garrett and Brady.”

“They offered to watch her if we wanted to go out. But if it would make you feel better, I can ask one of my other cousins.”

“Besides Jake, who else lives nearby?” The day she met Reagan, he said three cousins lived in the area. Since she’d moved in, only Jake and Matt, who had been passing through the area, had visited.

“My cousins Allison and Brett. Although, Brett and his wife are only in Alexandria when the Senate is in session. The rest of the year, they live in Massachusetts.”

Now that Adam mentioned it, she did remember that a Sherbrooke had run and won a seat in the Senate.

“Neither of them has children. Although, I think it’s only a matter of time before Allison and her husband do. They both come from large families. Allison has four brothers, and Rock has three brothers and a sister.”

“Four brothers. Your poor cousin. I hope they’re not all older than her.”

The same friend she used to go camping with had two older brothers. Both had driven her friend crazy, especially when she started dating and they both decided to play the role of overprotective brother. And while Evie had sympathized with her friend occasionally, she'd been a little jealous. Growing up, she only saw RJ and Kathryn every other weekend when she stayed with her dad and then for two weeks in the summer. That combined with the age gap—Kathryn was six years younger and RJ eight—meant she didn't have the same kind of sibling relationship as many of her friends.

Adam stuck another marshmallow on a stick and placed it close to the fire. "Nope. Two are older, one is younger, and the fourth is her twin."

"What is it with twins and your family? Matt told me his brothers are twins too."

"I also have a cousin who has identical twin daughters."

"Remind me not to eat or drink anything your family serves."

"Twins have to run on the woman's side of the family, so if we have twins someday, it won't be my fault."

Evie almost touched her chin to make sure her mouth wasn't hanging open. She'd given up on the idea of taking things slow last weekend. Still, she hadn't allowed herself to think about them getting married or having a family. It sounded like Adam had.

"What's the matter?"

She must not have hidden her surprise as well as she'd thought. Evie knew he most likely wouldn't believe her, but she'd try anyway. "Nothing. I'm just surprised you knew that about twins. A lot of people don't."

Adam shook his head. "Not buying it."

That figures.

"You don't want to have children?"

"No, I do." She tugged at the hoop earring in her left ear. "But we've only been back together for two weeks. I didn't expect you to say something about us having children."

“Time won’t change how I see our future.” Taking her hand, he pressed his lips against it. “And while I’d prefer to wait until Reagan is a little older before we have a baby—” Adam turned her hand over and kissed her palm, then laced his finger through hers. “—I see us married and having a family like we planned. I assumed you realized that.”

Evie swallowed to dislodge the golf-ball-size knot in her throat. “That’s what I want too. And I agree, we should wait until Reagan is a little older. But she needs a sibling close to her age.”

Even though she had two half-siblings, she’d more or less grown up an only child. Others might disagree, but she’d found it lonely. Friends were great, and she’d had a lot of them, but they weren’t the same as siblings.

“Whenever you think the time is right, say the word. And in the meantime, I think we should practice as much as we can.” Leaning closer, he pressed his lips against hers. And although his mouth only touched her lips, her entire body tingled as if he was touching her everywhere.

Needing to feel his body against hers, she ended the kiss and moved onto his lap. “I agree. We should practice every chance we get, starting right now.”

FOURTEEN

THERE WAS FLYING, AND THEN THERE WAS FLYING. THE PLANE RIDE EVIE HAD just experienced fell into category number two. She had flown first class once before when she'd traveled with Adam to meet his parents in California. She'd forgotten how much more pleasurable it was. She didn't fly often, but traveling first class was something she could get used to, and she was glad she'd conceded and allowed Adam to purchase her tickets.

Much like when they'd visited his parents, they'd clashed over who paid for her airfare. It had been their first disagreement since getting back together. Back in college, she'd held her ground until he compromised. She'd paid the amount she would for a seat in coach, and he'd covered the difference. This time Evie tried the same tactic. Unlike when they'd been younger, Adam refused to compromise and accept any money toward the ticket. She'd been so annoyed initially that she'd considered not going with him and Reagan to Boston. Eventually, Evie came around, though, because if their financial statuses were reversed, she'd do the same for him. Plus, although she had never imagined it happening, everything pointed toward her and Adam finally getting the happily ever after she'd always wanted. Arguing over who paid for plane tickets or dinner would be a moot point when that happened.

Although flying first class had made the flight a hundred times more

enjoyable, Evie was glad to be off the plane. She'd be even happier when they got out of the crowded airport. Crowds didn't usually bother her. Today, though, being surrounded by so many people only added to her jumbled emotions. They'd started Thursday while she packed for her and Reagan. As she folded T-shirts, memories of her and Adam's last trip to visit family popped into her head, followed by the effect the trip had on their relationship. Those memories led to apprehension about this weekend with his sister. Eventually, Evie convinced herself this visit wouldn't turn out the same way. Unfortunately, unease about the trip kept sneaking up on her. And ever since they'd left for the airport this morning, a second emotion had joined it. Although it made no logical sense, she couldn't shake the feeling that something significant was about to happen. Whether it was good or bad, she didn't know. Evie wasn't sure she wanted to find out either.

"We have everything now." Adam added his suitcase to the bags near her and Reagan. With space by the baggage carousel at a premium, she'd waited off to the side while Adam collected their luggage.

Finally. Reagan was content sitting in her stroller and watching people, at least for the moment, but Evie was about to jump out of her skin.

"Do you want something to eat or drink before we pick up the rental?" Adam asked as they passed a coffee kiosk.

Even in first class, the coffee tasted terrible.

"A coffee would be great. But I can get us some and meet you at the rental counter." They'd be out of there sooner if she got the coffee while he signed the necessary paperwork.

"I'm not in a rush. Let's stay together." Adam joined the short line and pulled out his wallet. "What do you want?"

The menu listed several coffee brews that could be served either hot or iced.

"Get me a large iced French roast with cream and three sugars." It made no sense, but while she could drink hot coffee black and sometimes did, she

needed cream and sugar in her iced coffee.

The employee was serving the two customers at the counter, and only one other person waited in line before them. Anyone, Evie included, would assume they'd have their coffees and be on their way quickly, especially since the place only sold coffee, tea, and baked goods. This afternoon she was reminded of why you should never assume anything. Either the two customers at the counter had severe coffee addictions, or they were traveling with a dozen other people. When they finally walked away, carrying what appeared to be fourteen drinks, Evie was surprised there was any coffee left.

Thankfully, though, there was, and the customer before them only ordered a small ice coffee and a blueberry muffin.

Evie waited until they were in the rental car to take a sip of her drink. The coffee that hit her tongue was the equivalent of flying first class, while what she'd had on the plane was liking traveling in coach.

"How far is it to your sister's?"

Reagan had not been happy when they buckled her into her car seat. She wanted to move around—something Evie understood. At least she and Adam had walked a little inside the airports. Reagan had spent the day either on their laps, in her car seat, or in her stroller. The sooner she could crawl around, the happier she'd be.

"Depends on traffic." Adam checked his mirrors, then merged into the next lane. "If it stays like this, about fifteen minutes."

That was sooner than she'd thought. Evie raised the cup toward her mouth, but her arm froze as a white box truck squeezed into the space separating them from a gray pickup, forcing Adam to slow down. Gripping the cup tighter, she waited for the sound of metal hitting metal.

When it never came, she loosened her grip. "That was a little too close."

Adam turned up the air conditioner and picked up his iced coffee. "You've got to love Massachusetts drivers."

"People probably say the same when they come to Virginia." There were

lousy drivers everywhere, including Virginia.

Adam shrugged, his attention on the traffic. “I don’t remember where, but I read that Massachusetts drivers, especially those from Boston, are more aggressive than those from other states.”

“I wonder why?” She didn’t see why that would be the case.

“The article blamed poor city layout and heavy traffic.”

She didn’t love city driving, but she had noticed some areas were better designed than others. It seemed plausible that a poor layout might affect how people drove.

“Is there any place you want to visit while we are here?”

“The only places I’ve heard of in Boston are Fenway Park and the North End.”

She doubted a person in the United States hadn’t heard of Fenway Park. As for the North End, Leslie, who’d gone to college somewhere in Boston, always talked about the great restaurants there. And whenever she went back to visit college friends, she stopped there for at least one meal.

Evie touched her straw to her lips but then moved it away. “Oh, and the USS Constitution.” She remembered reading about that in tenth grade US history class.

“You’ve never been to Boston?”

“Unless you count a layover at the airport, this is my first time in Massachusetts. I’ve spent a little time in Connecticut. Lee’s family has owned a house on Long Island Sound for nearly a hundred years. We used it twice while we were married.”

With most of her family in and around Virginia, she had no reason to travel to New England.

“We’ll have to do something about that, starting this summer. New England is one of my favorite places in the country.” Adam exited the highway and turned left. “If you want to do something inside, there are a lot of museums in Boston. There is also the theater district. I don’t know if there

is anything worth seeing, but we can check. This time of year, there are also nightly ghost tours of the city.”

She enjoyed a good show, and some museums had beautiful displays. But while she didn’t believe in ghosts, she loved ghost tours, and Adam knew that because they gone on a few together in college. While Evie had been on several, her favorite so far had been in New Orleans. “The theater or a museum isn’t the best place for Reagan, and a ghost tour would be too late for her.”

“My sister offered to watch her so we can go out alone.”

She adored the little girl, but having some time with Adam would be nice. “Let’s cross the theater off the list. I didn’t bring anything nice enough to wear.”

“I can—”

She knew what he planned to say. “We can go to a show some other time. Boston isn’t the only place with theaters. We do have them at home.”

Adam glanced her way as they waited for the light to change but didn’t argue with her. “We could also go to a baseball game if the Red Sox are in town. Tory’s boyfriend has season tickets. He’ll let us use them.”

It had been a long time since she saw a baseball game, and Fenway Park was the country’s oldest major league baseball park, making it one of a kind.

“Either that or maybe a general tour of the city with a stop in the North End and then a ghost tour.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Five minutes later, they passed a granite sign with Heritage on the Harbor Terrace engraved on it and then turned into an adjacent parking garage. Although more than four hundred miles away, the luxury condo building would fit in with the ones in Alexandria or DC. Since the building was not only in Boston but located on the water, she knew the cost of a condo here would be much like those in DC. In fact, while possibly smaller than Adam’s house, the condos here most likely cost far more. And while Tory’s home

was probably gorgeous and close to everything, Evie couldn't imagine living smack-dab in the middle of the city.

Much like the condos inside the building, many of the cars parked in the garage were well out of her price range unless she wanted to spend much of what she made on a monthly car payment.

Evie lifted Reagan out of her car seat and then slipped the diaper bag onto her arm while Adam removed their bags from the trunk. "How long has Tory lived here?"

The first conversation they'd had about their families came to mind. He'd mentioned his parents weren't happy Tory had relocated or the fact that she'd moved in with her boyfriend. That had been the same conversation during which he'd shared that his mom wanted him to get married and even had a list of potential women for him—a list Evie would never find her name added to.

"He wants to be with you. Nothing my aunt and uncle say or do will change his mind." Matt's words echoed in her mind.

If Adam wanted to be with someone his parents handpicked for him, she'd be here now, not me. Remember that.

"It was either August or September. You'll have to ask her the exact date, but I know she hasn't lived here a year yet."

"Did she meet Duncan when she moved to the city?"

"Tory and Duncan went to high school together. He was two years behind her. He is also good friends with one of our cousins. Actually Tory bought our cousin's condo after he moved to Sanborn Island. But Tory and Duncan didn't get together until this fall. In January, she sold her condo here and moved into Duncan's."

Evie had heard of the popular island off the coast of New Hampshire but knew little about it other than that it was a popular summer destination for the wealthy, much like Martha's Vineyard.

"I've never visited Sanborn, but this summer, I'd like us to go. My cousin

loves it there. And the only reason Duncan lives here and not on the island is because it's not a good location for Chat's headquarters."

Evie had never asked where Tory worked, never mind where her boyfriend did. But it didn't sound like Duncan was a mere employee for the popular social media site. "Is Tory with Duncan Ferguson?"

Duncan Ferguson and Matt Sinclair, two college friends, had founded Chat. She knew little about Duncan, but she'd never heard anything negative about him either. Plus, the CEO was a multimillionaire. If Adam's parents were upset Tory was with such a successful individual, they weren't going to be happy when they learned Adam was dating a former schoolteacher turned nanny.

"Yeah, I thought I told you that." Adam held the door open for her.

One look at the gleaming floors made Evie glad she'd carried Reagan inside and left her stroller in the car. The first floor reminded her of a five-star hotel. While children possibly lived in the building, if they ever ran inside with dirty sneakers or sticky hands, they'd give the concierge at the desk heart palpitations.

"Nope. You never told me what Tory does either. Does she work for Trident?" The cooperate headquarters were in California, but a company that large must have offices in other major cities.

Adam followed her into the elevator and pressed the button for the fourth floor. "She accepted a position at *Boston Home, Life, and Style Magazine* as the marketing director last year. That's why she moved to Boston."

Even if Evie lived in the area, it didn't sound like a magazine she'd enjoy reading.

Anyone meeting Tory for the first time would never guess she was Adam's sister. While Adam's eyes were a blue so deep they almost appeared sapphire like so many Sherbrookes' eyes, Tory's were somewhere between green and hazel. And while Adam's hair hovered between light brown and dirty blond depending on how much time he'd spent in the sun, Tory's hair

was a gorgeous shade of red. In fact, the first time Evie met the woman, she'd wondered if it was her real hair color or the work of a talented stylist.

The woman smiling at them still had the same gorgeous hair and flawless skin, and maybe because she wore a green T-shirt, her eyes appeared green rather than hazel today.

Tory hugged her brother before turning her attention to Evie. "It's great to see you." With Reagan in Evie's arms, Tory could only give her a partial hug. "You have no idea how happy I was when Adam told me you were together again."

Tory's eyes reflected her smile, and some of Evie's apprehension washed away. No matter what happened with the rest of his family, it seemed like she had Tory and Matt on her side.

"Sometime this weekend, we need to catch up." Adam's sister squeezed her shoulder, then turned her attention to Reagan, who was squirming to get down. "Except for her eyes, Reagan looks like Arielle."

"I agree," Adam replied as he closed the door.

"Can I hold her?"

"You can try. She's getting a little fussy. She is used to moving around." Evie handed Reagan off to Adam's sister.

"I baby-proofed everywhere this week, so she can crawl around all she wants."

She already liked Adam's sister, but her opinion of Tory went up several notches after hearing that. They were only going to be here for a few days. Most people wouldn't bother with baby-proofing, especially since they were only there for the weekend and it might be months before they visited again.

"What guest room do you want us to use?" Adam asked.

"I set up a portable crib in the same room you used last time. You and Evie can either sleep in there, too, or use the room across from it. You decide. It doesn't matter to me."

BY THE TIME Adam put their bags in the bedroom and entered the living room, Duncan was home. He liked his sister's boyfriend, whom he'd gotten to know when he'd visited Boston earlier this year. Unlike her previous boyfriend, they had things in common, and Duncan didn't act like a pompous snob. More importantly, though, Duncan treated Tory as an equal rather than as someone he could use to achieve his own goals.

"Do the Red Sox have a game this weekend?" Adam asked after greeting Duncan.

"They played last night and won't be in town again until Wednesday," Duncan answered.

That took a baseball game off their list of things to do.

"Larson Pike is actually performing at Fenway this weekend," Duncan said.

While not a fan of their music, he'd heard of the popular band. "I didn't know they did concerts at Fenway. Have you ever been to one there?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'm really not a fan of concerts anymore. It would have to be someone special performing in order for me to go."

Adam didn't blame him. He'd loved concerts as a teenager and in his early twenties. The older he got, the less he enjoyed them.

"Evie told me this is her first time in Boston. You should take her on a Duck Tour." His sister was sitting on the floor with Reagan. Evie had looked surprised when Tory said she baby-proofed the condo and set up a crib. Adam hadn't expected anything less. His sister always thought of everything. Not only that, but she was excited about being an aunt to Reagan.

On previous visits to the city, he seen the open-air amphibious vehicles referred to as Duck Boats. The tours drove through Boston past some of the most popular places and then went into the Charles River. He'd never been on one, but he understood their appeal. It wasn't every day you could be driving down the street one minute and then be floating along a river the next.

"We'll do whatever Evie wants." He'd prefer to tour the city on foot so

they could pick what areas they visited.

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I want to go on a ghost tour.”

“Why don’t you do the ghost tour tonight and the Duck Boat Tour tomorrow afternoon?” Duncan handed Tory a flavored water and then sat down on the floor next to her. “Or hang out with us tonight and do both tomorrow. Either way, Reagan will be fine with us.”

“I think you should do the ghost tour tonight. Tomorrow evening, the Boston Pops is performing on the Esplanade. It’ll be fun if we go together.” Tory tucked hair behind her ear, and Adam spotted the diamond on her left hand.

“Are you and Duncan engaged?” Not all diamond rings were engagement rings, but since Tory wore this one on her left hand, he had to ask.

His sister’s smile could light up half the city. “Duncan proposed on Monday.”

Adam didn’t expect his sister to share everything with him, but this wasn’t just anything. “And you didn’t tell me.” Adam didn’t want Tory to feel guilty, but he wasn’t able to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“We’ve only told Duncan’s family so far. And I wanted to see how long it would take you to notice today. If you didn’t say anything by dinnertime, I was going to tell you.”

“When are you going to tell Mom and Dad?”

Mom had shared that she and Dad were hoping Tory would come to her senses and get back together with Grant—an event Adam knew would never happen even if Duncan wasn’t in the picture. He didn’t understand why Tory had ever wasted her time with Grant in the first place. The man was intelligent and good-looking, but he was a pompous ass. The type of person who used another to achieve his own goals. According to Tory, Grant saw politics in his future. No doubt he considered a connection to the Sherbrooke family to be a way to increase his chances of getting elected.

“Mom and Dad will be here next weekend. We’ll tell them then.”

“Did you invite them, or did they invite themselves?”

His parents were more the telling rather than asking type. Once during the short time he'd lived in Texas, Mom told him she was coming to visit without asking if he had plans, which at the time, he had. His response had been simple. You can come, but I'll be in Colorado skiing. She never mentioned coming to visit him again while he lived there.

“It was somewhere in the middle. They're headed to France and decided to break up the flight. They're staying two nights in Boston. She said they'd like to stay with me. Unfortunately, I didn't have a good reason to tell her no.”

Sounded more like Mom had told rather than asked as usual. Thankfully, his sister and Duncan had to deal with them, not him.

FIFTEEN

EVIE WALKED INTO THEIR ROOM AS ADAM EXITED THE BATHROOM WEARING nothing but a towel around his waist. No matter how often she saw him like this, she'd still happily stand there all day and look at him. Or maybe a better way to say it was gawk at him while fantasizing about all the ways he pleased her.

Her ex-husband had taken decent care of himself, and she'd seen men before at the beach or running without a shirt. Very few of them fell into the same category as Adam. He had the perfect amount of definition in all the right places. If he ever grew tired of his current job, he could easily be a model or play an action hero in a movie.

And if she weren't holding Reagan right now, she'd remove the towel and pull Adam back into bed. Since that wasn't an option, she'd have to settle for staring at him.

As if he knew what she was thinking, Adam winked at her before opening a drawer and pulling out underwear. "How are my two favorite people this morning?"

"Hungry." It wasn't a lie. They were just hungry for different things.

"Me too." His voice echoed her desire. Adam kissed her cheek before he finished gathering his clothes for the day.

"You and Reagan can start breakfast without me. I'll be out in a minute."

Leaving before Adam removed the towel was by far the safest route. Plus, it was already after Reagan's usual breakfast time. She didn't know if Tory had put her to bed later than normal, but she'd slept longer this morning than usual.

"I'll meet you in the kitchen." Before Evie changed her mind and risked her sanity by sticking around and watching him remove the towel, she hightailed it out of the room.

When she entered the kitchen, both Duncan and Tory were already in there.

"Adam's getting dressed. He'll be out in a minute." Evie put Reagan in the highchair Tory had pulled out last night at dinnertime.

"Lazy bum." Tory smiled as she filled her coffee cup. "Do you want some?"

Nodding, she selected a baby yogurt from the refrigerator. Although she'd packed food for Reagan, Tory had also bought items for her to eat while there.

"Help yourself. If you don't like blueberry pancakes, I'm also making chocolate chip and plain ones." Duncan looked at her briefly before turning his attention back to the stove. A plate with blueberry pancakes sat on the table already, along with some fresh fruit, maple syrup, and whipped cream.

The last time she had pancakes for breakfast, they'd been blueberry. "I'll wait for the chocolate chips ones."

Before yesterday she wouldn't have guessed the CEO of Chat cooked breakfast on Saturdays, but after spending several hours with him and seeing how he treated Tory, it didn't surprise her. Duncan might be a self-made millionaire with multiple homes and cars, but he acted like the guy next door.

"How was Reagan last night?"

Reagan had been asleep when they came home, and Tory and Duncan had been in their room. But that didn't mean she hadn't been difficult while they were gone.

Tory set a coffee down in front of Evie and then sat. "She got a little fussy when we first put her to bed, but then Duncan read to her, and she settled down."

They'd forgotten to tell Tory about Reagan's nighttime routine before they left. "Adam reads to her every night at bedtime."

"My mom started doing that with my sister when she was about Reagan's age," Duncan said.

"If you remember that, she must be a lot younger than you."

"I was eleven when Harper was born."

That would explain why Duncan remembered such a detail.

"Did you have fun last night?" When Duncan set it down, Tory took a plain pancake from the plate and covered it with fresh strawberries.

"It was great, and I learned things about the city that probably aren't in most history books."

Maple syrup and whipped cream joined the strawberries covering Tory's pancake. "What about my brother?"

"What about me?"

Adam entered the kitchen, unfortunately fully dressed. It was a shame the man couldn't go naked all day. On second thought, maybe it wasn't. If he went around naked, women would never leave him alone.

"Did you have fun last night?" Tory asked.

He kissed Reagan on the head on his way to the coffee pot. "It was different. The tour wouldn't be for everyone, but it is an interesting way to learn about Boston."

That was one of the reasons she enjoyed going on ghost tours even though she'd never seen any paranormal activity while on one.

"Until last night, I didn't know the Union Army used a military fort in Boston as a prison for Confederate soldiers during the Civil War." She associated places such as Gettysburg and Atlanta with the Civil War, not Boston—or any place in New England, for that matter.

"If you enjoy ghost tours, you should go to Salem sometime," Duncan said, adding some chocolate chip pancakes to the table. "Just avoid going in October unless you don't mind crowds. The city is packed then, especially on the weekends."

She'd keep that in mind if they ever decided to visit the city well known for the Witch Trials in the 1600s.

"Can either of you think of any places Adam and I should visit today?" The city had a lot to see and do, and their time was limited.

While they ate, Tory and Duncan shared their favorite places in Boston. Some of them Adam had already mentioned to her as possible destinations. From there, the conversation moved on to Adam's track team and, finally, summer vacation plans—something she and Adam didn't have yet.

"Have you decided on a wedding date?" Evie took the last sip of her coffee and debated if she wanted more. Once Adam came back from changing Reagan's diaper, he wanted to leave, so it would make more sense if she grabbed one while they were out.

"Not yet. But we want an outdoor wedding, so it won't be during the winter," Tory said as she poured herself and Duncan more coffee.

"I suggested the middle of February because an outdoor wedding then would be unique, especially if there is snow on the ground."

Duncan was right. A wedding at that time of year in New England would be different. "It would be memorable."

"And it would reduce the number of guests."

Once again, she couldn't argue with Duncan's statement. She wouldn't attend an outdoor wedding in February unless she could wear a ski jacket, snow pants, and boots. Even then she might skip the ceremony and wait to see the pictures.

"If you really want to get married in February, we're doing it in Hawaii or Puerto Rico," Tory said.

"There's nothing different about that. People get married there all the

time."

"Maybe you could get married while scuba diving," Evie suggested.

"Impossible to say the vows without using sign language, which neither of us knows," Duncan said as he added milk and sugar to his coffee and then took a sip.

"We'll have —" The doorbell rang, interrupting Tory. "I'm not expecting anyone. Are you?"

"No. But I bet it's Cole looking for breakfast."

"You're probably right," Tory said before leaving the kitchen.

"My friend Cole bought Tory's condo. He often shows up without calling. And his visits somehow conveniently correspond with mealtimes," Duncan explained.

Leslie had often crossed the hall and knocked on the door without calling when they'd lived in the same apartment building.

"Is Dad with you?" Tory's voice reached the kitchen, and across the table Duncan cringed.

"He's meeting Jonathan for golf. He'll be by later."

Icy cold fingers slid down Evie's back.

"I put on my calendar that you guys were coming next weekend." Tory exchanged a don't-ask-me look with Duncan as she walked back into the kitchen.

"We decided to leave sooner and spend an extra week in France. I told you that last week."

Shannon Sherbrooke followed her daughter into the room, and the memory of the conversation Evie had overheard between Adam's parents thirteen years ago hit her like a freight train.

"No, you didn't, Mom. I haven't talked to you in about three weeks."

Adam's mom waved dismissively and put her purse on the table. "Oh well. It must have been Tyler I told."

She'd known seeing Adam's mom was somewhere in her future. But she'd

expected a chance to prepare for it mentally, not have the woman pop in during breakfast.

"Hi, Duncan. How are you?" Shannon didn't give her soon-to-be son-in-law a chance to answer. Instead she turned her attention to Evie. "You look so familiar. Have we met?"

DAMN IT. What the hell was his mother doing here? She should be on the other side of the country, not in his sister's kitchen, asking Evie if they'd met.

They should've left right after his shower and eaten breakfast somewhere else. Tory would have called and let him know Mom was there if they had. While it wouldn't have solved the problem of Evie having to see his parents this weekend, she at least would've had a chance to prepare for the encounter. Or, more appropriately, the ordeal, considering it involved his parents, two people Evie would prefer never to see again in her lifetime.

"Hi, Mom," he said before Evie answered.

Turing around, his mom looked from him to Reagan and then back to him. He didn't need her to speak to know what she was thinking.

"This is Reagan. Nolan and Arielle's daughter."

Even though Mom and Martha were friends, he doubted Mom had ever met Reagan before today.

"I'm her guardian. And you might remember Evie, my fiancée." While she wasn't his fiancée yet, if it were up to him, she would be by the end of the day.

Mom blinked several times, and Adam knew she was mentally scratching her head, something she would never actually do because it might mess up her hair. And it just wouldn't do for Shannon Sherbrooke to not look perfect.

"We were together in college." That should jog her memory.

"Oh, yes, of course. I knew we'd met before." His mom's forced smile was almost painful to look at. "Congratulations. When did you get engaged?"

Adam had never heard someone say the word congratulations with less enthusiasm.

"Two weeks ago." He should probably feel guilty about lying to his mother, but he didn't.

"Why didn't you tell your father and me any of this?"

"Between Reagan, work, and coaching, Mom, I've been swamped."

It was a weak excuse, but it was better than the truth. That he hadn't called recently because if he had, it would've been an unpleasant conversation for everyone.

"I planned on calling you and Dad when we got home."

This time it was less a lie and more a stretching of the truth. He did intend to call them when they were home. It just might be a month or two from now.

"Well, since we're together now, I'll have a chance to get to know Evie better. Have you discussed wedding dates?"

"Sorry, we have plans for the day, Mom. But we'll be back later tonight. We can talk then." Or maybe not, because depending on how things went, when they returned, the three of them might spend the night in a hotel.

"Is it still okay if Reagan stays with you and Duncan?" He'd understand if Tory wanted them to take Reagan with them. Spending time with Mom could be challenging enough without adding a baby to the mix.

"Of course. Have fun."

Adam didn't need to hear anything else. "I owe you one." After handing Reagan to his sister, he grabbed Evie's hand. The sooner he put some distance between Evie and Mom, the better. "We'll see everyone later."

Both remained silent as they stepped into the elevator, and Adam wondered what was going through her head. He'd caught the brief look of surprise when he said they were engaged. Unlike his mom, she'd quickly masked it. Adam didn't blame her. She didn't know he'd planned to propose this afternoon when they visited the Skywalk. The only one who even knew he'd purchased an engagement ring was Tory.

Evie waited until the doors closed before speaking. "Why did you tell your mom we're engaged?"

He didn't have a good answer for that other than he wanted Mom to know how serious their relationship was. Maybe if she did, Mom would be friendlier toward Evie when they returned tonight.

"She might notice I'm not wearing a ring. You should have told her the truth. And why didn't you tell her about Reagan before today? Being her guardian is a huge life-changing event."

So much for his plans. "I told Mom that because I wanted her to know you're a permanent part of my life. And I hadn't told them about Reagan yet because every time I call, she starts listing the names of woman she wants me to meet. I had enough going on when I learned about Nolan's death to deal with that too."

Adam led her to a sitting area after they exited the elevator. While still not a great setting for a proposal, the lobby was better than the elevator.

"As for her noticing you don't have a ring, that won't be an issue, since I have one." Removing the ring from his pocket, he slipped it on her finger. "Evie, will you marry me?"

Her lips parted, and she glanced at the ring before meeting his gaze. For half a heartbeat, he feared she'd say no, but then her whole face spread into a smile that was alive with affection.

"You're supposed to wait until I say yes before putting the ring on me, Adam."

"I've already waited thirteen years." Her smile answered his question, but still, he wanted to hear her say yes. "So, is it a yes or a no?"

Evie cupped his face between her hands. "Definitely a yes." She brushed her lips against his as she spoke. Pulling her hand away, she looked at it. "It's gorgeous. How did you know my size?"

"I brought one of your rings with me to the jeweler." He wanted her to be able to wear the ring immediately. So when he left for work one morning, he

took one of her rings with him and hoped she didn't notice it was gone.

Her smile faded, sending alarm bells off in his head.

"Your mom wasn't happy."

"She was annoyed I didn't tell her about Reagan and our engagement sooner."

"That might have been part of it, but not all."

"Her happiness isn't my concern. All I care about is that you and I are happy. If she says something to you, remember that. The same goes for my father." Neither would come out and tell Evie they didn't approve, but they might not be welcoming either. "If you want, we can stay at a hotel tonight instead."

Evie stood and reached for his hand. "No, I'll be fine. So where are we headed first today?"

"I thought we'd start the Skywalk. It's at the Prudential Building. On a clear day like this, the view of the city is incredible. I intended to propose there. After that, I planned to head over to the Boston Common and rent a swan boat for us before walking the Freedom Trail. But if you want to visit somewhere else, that's fine with me. I've visited Boston a lot."

BEFORE ADAM and Evie started back, they stopped at Ambrosia, a family-owned bakery and café. He'd tried their cannoli during his last visit to the city. They'd been by far the best he'd ever had. Tory assured him everything Ambrosia made was amazing. His love of pastries wasn't the only reason they'd gone there today. Considering the bombshells he'd dropped before leaving, Adam imagined his sister had had quite a day with their mom. The assortments of pastries were his way of saying he was sorry.

As they entered the condo building, he glanced at Evie, and not for the first time since the brief visit with Mom, he could tell her thoughts were

elsewhere. He hoped they weren't somewhere he wasn't going to like.

Hoping to distract her from whatever was on her mind, Adam nudged Evie with his elbow as he said, "I told you everything would make it home."

When they left the café, she'd predicted the box would be short at least one cannoli or brownie before they reached their destination.

"We're not at your sister's yet."

"You just don't want to admit you were wrong."

"If everything is in that box when we walk inside Tory's house, I'll admit I was wrong."

"Not only am I going to hold you to that, but I am going to record you saying it." Adam stopped in front of the elevators. Before he pressed the button, his arm fell back to his side. "We can stay at a hotel tonight. Tory and Duncan will understand."

Unlike when he'd suggested it earlier, she didn't immediately answer. Then she said, "Whatever you want is fine with me. But it might upset your parents if we leave."

How his parents felt didn't matter to him. His only concern was Evie, and at the moment, he was leaning toward booking them a room for the night. "Let's see how things go first, and then we can decide."

His father's voice greeted them when they stepped inside.

"He's engaged to Reagan's nanny?" Unfortunately, Dad lacked volume control when he was upset.

You had to share that detail with Mom, Tory.

"What is he thinking?" Dad's voice went up another notch, and Adam didn't need to see his dad's face to know his cheeks would be red.

When Mom walked into the kitchen this morning, Adam had thought the day couldn't get any worse. He should've known better.

Evie squeezed his hand, and he turned toward her. The shock and anger on her face fueled the rage burning inside him. Rather than explore the city, they should've packed and headed back to a hotel as soon as Mom arrived.

"I love you."

She swallowed. "I love you too."

"I need to talk to them."

His parents had ruined their relationship once. Adam wouldn't let it happen again.

"While you do that, I'll start packing. Do you want me to book us a room?"

They were on the same page there. He'd been about to suggest she get her and Reagan's things together. "No, I'll do it when I'm done with my parents."

He watched Evie walk away before he approached the other room.

"You know Adam. He's always...."

Rather than finish her sentence, Mom pasted on a fake smile when she noticed him. He'd seen it hundreds of times, but it had never bothered him until now.

"Good, you're back. I was just telling your dad about your engagement. I know you have plans with Tory and Duncan tonight, but it would be nice if you and Evie joined your dad and me for dinner instead. Tory, you don't mind watching Reagan while we're gone, do you?"

Even if Adam did want to join his parents, he wouldn't ask his sister to watch Reagan again. She'd already babysat Reagan last night and much of today.

"We'll take her to the concert with us," Tory answered.

"No need, Tory. Evie and I are leaving soon. She's packing her and Reagan's things now. But I do need to talk to Mom and Dad."

His mom's smile faded.

"I'll keep Evie company." Tory picked up Reagan, who was playing on the floor, then squeezed his arm as she walked by him.

Adam didn't know what Duncan was up to, but he didn't blame him for not spending time with his parents. He didn't enjoy spending time with them,

either, and he was related to them.

"Adam, what are you thinking?" Dad demanded once they were alone. "It was bad enough when you left your position at Trident to work in a public school district of all places. But now you're responsible for Nolan's daughter and engaged to her nanny. I know you've always done what you want, but even if you'd known her for a long time, marrying Evie is a bad idea. If you want to sleep with her, fine, go ahead. You're single, have fun. But when you're ready to get married, it should be to someone like Jillian."

He'd rather spend his life alone on a deserted island with nothing to eat but anchovies and bananas, two foods he detested, than marry someone like Jillian Palmer, his brother's girlfriend. The woman was a younger, more annoying version of his mom. And before he'd met Jillian, he didn't think anyone could be more annoying than Mom.

Pain shot up his forearm, and Adam unclenched his hands. Had his father always been such an arrogant ass?

"Evie and I were together in college."

"I don't remember her," Dad replied.

Adam didn't care either way.

"But that doesn't change the facts," his father continued. "You're stuck with Nolan's daughter, but you can do better than a nanny."

Violence might not solve anything, but damn if he didn't want to knock a few of his dad's teeth loose.

"Evie could be an unemployed circus clown, and it wouldn't matter to me." He kept his tone civil despite the anger seething inside him. "She's part of my life, and we're going to get married."

At least, he hoped so. Who knew what thoughts were going through her head right now?

"If you and Mom can't accept that, it's your problem, not mine."

"Adam, be reasonable," Dad said before he launched into more reasons why he believed Adam was making the worst mistake of his life.

SIXTEEN

EVIE YANKED THE CLOSET DOOR OPEN WITH MORE FORCE THAN NECESSARY and grabbed her suitcase. She'd met jerks before, but Adam's parents redefined the word. She'd known from Shannon's expression and tone this morning that she wasn't happy Evie was in her son's life again. And she'd assumed Adam's mom voiced her displeasure to Tory after they left. Still, she hadn't been prepared for the conversation they'd walked in on. In hindsight, she should've been, considering the past.

After placing the suitcase on the bed, Evie closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. How could Adam and Tory be so different from both their parents? While Evie was nothing like her father, she shared many traits with her mom.

She loved Adam and Reagan, but she wouldn't associate with his parents. Not unless they changed, which she doubted would ever happen. For either of them to change, they'd have to realize they were in the wrong. Neither seemed like the type to recognize that. Hopefully, Adam would be okay with her avoiding his family and attending events without her. If he wasn't, well—she didn't want to think about that right now.

Tory's voice followed a knock on the bedroom door. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah, of course."

Tory entered with Reagan, and Evie wondered if Shannon had

interacted with her at all today. Adam's mom didn't strike Evie as the grandmotherly type. If she and Adam had children, Shannon would most likely treat them much the way Evie's father's parents treated her. They'd be polite but hands-off. They wouldn't attend baseball games or band concerts. They'd send a birthday present, which would probably be a card with money, but not attend a party. And the children wouldn't have any weekend sleepovers.

"Any chance you want to take Duncan and me with you tonight? We'll even watch Reagan again so you can go out alone one last time before you go home."

"Sure, why not? The more the merrier." Back in Virginia she'd neatly packed her clothes on one side of the suitcase and Reagan's on the other. Now as long as she got everything into the suitcase so they could leave, she didn't care if everything mixed together. She could separate things later.

"If I'd known they were coming this weekend, I would've let Adam know so you could come some other time." Tory tossed the T-shirt her brother had left on a chair onto the bed and sat. "I should've called and confirmed with her again. It's not unusual for her to change plans and neglect to tell people."

It didn't surprise Evie that the woman was inconsiderate as well as a snob.

"Don't worry about it. It's not your fault they showed up today."

Tory had no more control over her parents than Evie had over her mom. Thankfully Mom wasn't a witch, and she'd never arrive a week early without letting her know.

Tory removed the bangle bracelet Reagan kept playing with and handed it to her. "I can't remember the last time I saw Adam so angry. He's usually good at controlling his temper."

"That goes for me too." Adam's jaw had been clenched so tight, she feared he'd crack a few teeth.

When Adam told her he needed to talk to his parents, she almost

suggested he wait until he cooled down. As angry as he appeared, he might say something he'd later regret. One look at his face, though, and she'd known making the suggestion was pointless.

"Are your parents always...." Evie paused and tossed the clean onesies into the suitcase. She'd been about to call them pompous jerks, but Tory was their daughter. She might not appreciate that. "So judgmental, or is it just with me?"

"I'd call them conceited snobs. But to answer your question, no, it's not you. If it makes you feel any better, they're not fans of Duncan either. Mom noticed my engagement ring not long after you and Adam left. She made her feelings clear about us getting married once it was just her and I."

"What's their problem with him?" Duncan was the wealthy CEO of a company. What did they have to complain about?

"He's not Grant, my ex-boyfriend. We dated for a few months last year. My parents and his are close friends, and they're all dead set on joining our families."

Evie knew nothing about Grant's family, but if they were close friends with Shannon and Benjamin Sherbrooke, they weren't struggling in the money department. However, they might want the social connections such a marriage would give them. But Tory's family didn't need that either. Maybe for them the marriage would help solidify a business venture. Regardless, marriage specifically to join two families sounded antiquated to her.

"Do you know why?"

"I've never asked, and since it's never happening, it doesn't matter," Tory answered.

Evie's curiosity would've gotten the better of her, and she would've had to know even if she knew it would never happen.

"Your parents are one of a kind." She'd met a lot of people but none like Adam's parents.

"That's one way to say it."

Despite how long they'd known each other, she'd only met a handful of his relatives. "Is the rest of your family like them?" If they were, she didn't want anything to do with them either. At the same time, she didn't want Adam to have to pick between his family and her.

Tory shook her head. "My aunt Denise sometimes forgets the world doesn't revolve around her. Thankfully, when she starts going on about herself, she never notices when you stop paying attention."

"Sounds like my stepmother." Over the past thirty years, she'd had plenty of conversations with Debra where all Evie did was nod as Debra went on and on about something that only related to herself.

"I'd love to be a fly on the wall in there right now," Tory said, tilting her head toward the hallway.

"No, thanks. I already know how they feel about me." A person could only take so much in one day, and she'd reached her maximum for not only the day but her lifetime.

"Who cares how they feel about you? You're marrying my brother, not them. Adam loves you, and I'm glad you're in his life."

Maybe she shouldn't care, but she did. Most people would. No one wanted their future in-laws to hate them or find them inferior.

Tory stood and walked over to her. "I hope you don't mind, but Adam shared what happened between the two of you in college." Her voice had a degree of compassion and concern. "Please don't let my parents' stupidity come between you again."

Yep, his parents were being stupid. "I won't." She'd made that mistake once. Evie wouldn't repeat it.

"Good. Now let's see the ring. Adam wouldn't show it to me yesterday."

Evie held out her hand, and the sunlight reflected off the diamonds and emeralds.

"You've got excellent taste," Tory said when the door opened and Adam walked into the bedroom.

“Thanks, I’m glad you approve, sis.”

“I’ll go keep Mom and Dad company while you pack.”

“No need. They’re packing and going to stay at a hotel.”

“Don’t tease me like that.”

“I’m not. We both managed to piss them off so much, they don’t want to be around either of us today.”

Tory pretended to wipe sweat from her forehead. “That’s the best thing I’ve heard today. I’m going to let Duncan know. He met Cole downstairs at the gym.”

Evie had been a little jealous when she learned the building housed not only a private gym for its residents but also a lap pool.

“We’re still on for the concert tonight, right?”

Adam glanced at her and then back at his sister. “We’ll let you know.”

Evie waited until the door closed behind Tory to speak. “Are you okay?” She couldn’t label the vibe coming off him, but something was off.

He’d gone off ready to start a fight. His conversation could’ve gotten ugly, and sometimes words hurt more than any physical attack. She knew that all too well. When she’d heard Benjamin’s comment, it had felt like someone threw a brick at her chest.

“I should be asking you that.” Adam pushed her suitcase aside and sat, pulling her down with him.

An adequate word to describe how she felt eluded her. “Let’s see. I’m angry, annoyed, and humiliated all at the same time. Your parents are the most conceited people I’ve ever met.” She’d been afraid to tell him that thirteen years ago. She wasn’t now. “Are you sure you and Tory aren’t adopted? Neither of you are anything like them.”

Despite the seriousness of the conversation, Adam laughed. “I look too much like my father to be adopted. But I agree with you. They’re full of themselves.”

His conversation with Mom and Dad took longer than it should’ve.

They'd argued their case, listing all the reasons he shouldn't marry Evie. In return he'd told them where they could stick their opinions. Since he'd already been at it, he'd finished his tirade by telling them to either accept Tory was marrying Duncan, not the man they wanted, or keep their mouths shut. That had gone over about as well as he'd expected.

Anger had kept his fear at bay while with his parents. Now that he'd gotten everything off his chest with them, his fear was sneaking up on him. Thirteen years ago, she'd bolted after learning how his parents felt about her. While she hadn't left him a note and hopped a plane back to Virginia, it didn't mean she planned to stay with him. On some level he'd understand if her thoughts were headed in that direction. His father's comments today were unacceptable, as was his mother's reaction this morning when he introduced Evie as his fiancée.

"Well, you do resemble your dad. And you didn't answer my question. I've never seen you so angry, and I'm sure that wasn't a pleasant conversation."

"I'm fine. But for the foreseeable future, I won't be seeing my parents." He didn't spend a lot of time with his parents, but he'd never imagined cutting them out of his life. Right now, he needed to do that.

"Adam, I don't want to come between you and them."

They might be his parents, but they still needed to respect his decisions and Evie. Until they could do both, he didn't want them in his life. Adam joined their hands. "If I have to choose between you and them, I'll pick you every time. We're a package deal. If they can't accept you, I don't want anything to do with them."

When his sister left the room, she'd put Reagan in the crib. As if tired of being ignored, she held onto the crib for support while standing and tossed her favorite stuffed cat onto the floor.

"And if they get their heads out of their asses and apologize, we'll see them." He pressed his lips against Evie's hand before letting go and getting

Reagan from the crib. “And if they don’t, it’s their loss, not mine.”

“What are the chances of that happening?”

His parents were stubborn, and they didn’t like to admit when they were in the wrong. Then again, who did? “I don’t know, and I’m not going to worry about it. Instead, we should think about when and where we want to get married.”

“Where, I don’t know. But let’s do it before the summer is over.”

Nothing about their conversation suggested anything had changed between them. Still, a weight he hadn’t even realized was there lifted off his shoulders.

Something in his expression must have given away his feelings, because Evie poked him in the shoulder. “You were worried I was having second thoughts after hearing your dad’s comments.”

“Can you blame me?”

“I’ve always regretted the decision I made back then. Now that we’re back together, I won’t let anything come between us again.”

“What do you think about a July wedding?” While he’d be happy with a short civil ceremony at the town hall this week, Evie would want something more traditional with her family and friends present. That type of wedding would require more than a few days to plan.

“It sounds perfect to me. As soon as we get home, let’s start planning.”

We get home. He loved the sound of that. “Do you still want to go out with Tory and Duncan tonight?”

“I think it will be fun, and it’ll give me a chance to get to know Tory and Duncan better. Not to mention, I think Tory wants to spend more time with Reagan. I know it seems *impossible*, but Reagan already has your sister wrapped around her little finger,” Evie said with a grin.

Adam looked down at Reagan as she squirmed off his lap and onto Evie’s. Tragedy had sent Reagan to live with him. In turn, Reagan and a strange twist of fate brought Evie back to him.

“That’s because Tory’s a big softie.”

Evie rolled her eyes. “*Oh, please.* Reagan has you wrapped around all her fingers.”

He’d expected her comment. “She’s not the only one.” Adam leaned closer and brushed his lips against hers. “You know there isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you, right?”

“Anything?”

“Name it.”

“When we get home, let’s also start working on giving Reagan a sibling.” She wouldn’t get an argument from him. “Consider it done.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Best Selling author, Christina Tetreault started writing at the age of 10 on her grandmother's manual typewriter and never stopped. Born and raised in Lincoln, Rhode Island, she has lived in four of the six New England states since getting married in 2001. Today, she lives in New Hampshire with her husband, three daughters and two dogs. When she's am not driving her daughters around to their various activities or chasing around the dogs, she is working on a story or reading a romance novel. Currently, she has four series out, The Sherbrookes of Newport, Love on The North Shore, Elite Force Security, The Sherbrookes. You can visit her [website](#) or follow her on Facebook to learn more about her characters and to track her progress on current writing projects.



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