



He's
completely
off limits!

ONLY
YOU

ZOE DOD

Only You

An Age-Gap, Forbidden Romance

Zoe Dod

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To Steve,

For all your love over the years. For always telling me I could. Your unwavering belief has seen me through and made my dream become reality. I love you more than words can say.

Zoe xxx

Only You

He was her sister's husband
Her niece's father
He's completely off-limits!

Chapter One

Ana

Ana stared at the message taped to her bedroom door and sighed.

Ana Lewis

Don't forget your rent is due this week!

James Williams

Landlord

Reaching up, she pulled the note with the scrawly writing down, then stuffed it in her bag. Something to worry about later. Ana was going to be late for work if she didn't hurry.

Damn train strikes.

Ana entered the kitchen, headed to her allocated cupboard, and gingerly opened the door. The hinges gave an ominous clunk as the door dropped, its broken lock swinging from a single screw. Ana had lost count of the times she'd asked James Williams, her landlord, to fix it since she moved in, but her requests, to date, had been ignored. Ana also knew when the door did finally fall off, James would use it as an excuse to deduct money from her deposit, which Ana could not afford. She'd seen it happen more than once. Baz had been made to replace a split shower hose and Sarah a broken toilet seat. It may not be her fault the flat was falling apart, but James had a nasty temper and was quick to blame his tenants for any damages, not his lack of maintenance.

Ana sighed as she spotted a lone box of cereal and a few tins of soup inside. She needed to go shopping when her next paycheque came in, but until then, she'd make do. She picked up the box but knew it was empty without shaking it, just like it had been the last three times she'd treated herself. But without a working lock, her food was fair game. Shutting the cupboard door, Ana dropped the box into the bin.

Ana glanced up at the clock above the kitchen table. She needed to get a shift on. Her job was not something she could afford to lose. Ana snatched up her bag from the kitchen sideboard and headed through the living room to the front door. She pulled the door closed and waited for the telltale click of the lock before giving it a shove to make sure the lock had engaged. Ana picked her way past her flatmates' abandoned bicycles and the several bags of rubbish that adorned the hallway and stairs. She would need to take them down to the bins before they started to stink, as she knew her flatmates wouldn't. But she didn't have time now. She was going to be late. Ana pushed her way out onto the street, breathing a sigh of relief.

The street was bustling with evening shoppers on their way home from work. Ana looked left, then right, before stepping out into the flow of people, careful to avoid any bags and briefcases. Looking right, Ana smiled and waved at Kevin, the shopkeeper of the fruit and veg store beneath their flat. Kevin was busy watching a young man who was taking far too much interest in the fruit crates against the shop window. Kevin looked up as Ana passed, nodding quickly before returning his attention to the kid.

Ana continued navigating the crowds as she made her way to the station. It was one of the first skills she had learned since arriving in London from Bristol. Ana was proud of how she had adapted to her new environment after only four months, and running the gauntlet from flat to train station was the first thing she'd mastered.

Ana breathed a sigh of relief when she reached the station, and her train arrived on time. Taking a seat, she dug in her bag and retrieved the note. With her four flatmates working different hours and shifts, taped notes to doors were typical. Even when everyone was home, they tended to stay in their rooms. Some people might tell her that was sad, but for Ana, it worked.

James Williams was not only Ana's landlord but also a fellow resident, bully and a total creep. Ana gave him a wide berth whenever he was around. His inappropriate comments and wandering hands made Ana uneasy, so she kept her distance whenever possible. She was immensely grateful that, even when everything else was falling apart in the flat. At least the lock on her bedroom door worked.

Aside from his creeper tendencies, Ana knew James was a stickler for prompt payment. Anyone who missed a payment had their belongings stacked outside, and the locks changed. There were no second chances with

James. It had happened twice in the four months Ana had been living there, so ignoring the note was not an option.

Chapter Two

Ana

The journey to work was only two stops away. Ana worked in what her father would have called a dive, somewhere he would never have frequented, but Ana didn't care. It was enough to pay her rent, and that was what mattered. Ana had met the owner, Randy Watson, when she'd arrived in the city. His restaurant was the first one she had approached for a job. He had been willing to take a chance on someone with no waitressing experience. Randy had been short-staffed and offered her a job on the spot. As bosses went, Ana couldn't complain. Randy spent most of his evenings in his office, leaving the staff to handle the customers. Meanwhile, he entertained a stream of mates in his office.

Ana shifted her bag from one shoulder to the other, grabbing her phone and checking the time. She relaxed her shoulders, allowing the tension to ease. Having skipped dinner, she was going to arrive in plenty of time. As she rounded the corner, Ana pulled up sharply. The street was alive with blue flashing lights, the pavement outside the restaurant cordoned off, and a growing crowd being held back by several uniformed police officers. Ana squeezed through the spectators before stepping up to the barrier.

"Excuse me," she said, motioning to the officer standing near the cordon.

He looked up and walked over. "Yes, Miss?"

Ana smiled at him. "I work at Randy's Bar and Grill. I'm supposed to be starting my shift. Has something happened?"

The area was filled with activity. The staff members huddled together near the bar while police officers walked in and out of the staff area carrying what looked like boxes.

Ana's heart sank.

The officer concerned, lifted the barrier and ushered her past the other spectators.

“Henry,” he called to his colleague, standing like a sentry by the door. “Another staff member to process.”

He ushered her forward, careful not to touch her.

Ana’s heart thundered in her chest. Something was wrong, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to become involved in whatever was happening inside.

Process.

What the hell did that mean? A slight chill swept its way down her spine. Then, before she could think, she was being motioned inside and towards the other staff members who stood in a huddle near the bar, glancing around themselves, unnaturally quiet.

“Ana!” Mike said, stepping forward.

Mike was Randy’s full-time bar manager and bouncer. He looked out for the staff when a punter got leery. Unfortunately, that happened more regularly than Ana liked to admit.

Mike stepped forward.

“Don’t look so worried. Everything will be fine. It’s all a misunderstanding,” Mike said before moving in to take Ana’s arm.

Ana stepped back. Mike nodded and held up his hand in apology.

“Why don’t you join the others?” He pointed towards the bar where the other staff were. “The police have told us they won’t keep us long. They just have a few questions.”

Ana gave him a slight nod and moved through the kitchen staff towards the others. Ashen faces and tense shoulders greeted Ana as she approached. No one was looking at one another. The only noise was coming from the police officers moving about.

Mike had been right. A plain-clothed officer came and addressed the group.

When it was Ana’s turn, they led her down the corridor to the staffroom. While she had been waiting, Ana had gleaned from the others that they had taken Randy away in a police car before she arrived.

“Name?” the officer asked without looking up.

Ana moved forward and lowered herself into the chair opposite. “Santana Lewis, but everyone calls me Ana,” she answered.

“Address and phone number?” Ana told the officer her address and phone number.

“How long have you worked for Randy Watson?”

The officer looked up and stared at Ana.

“Four months. Since I arrived in London.”

The officer looked down at his papers. Ana watched as he made a quick note before he looked up again. His gaze locked with hers, his expression softening.

“You seem like a nice young woman, Ana Lewis. I’m going to give you a friendly piece of advice. Be more careful where you seek employment. Men like Randy Watson are scum. They prey on innocent people.”

Ana swallowed hard. She didn’t want to know what Randy had been doing. He’d always been kind to her, but she kept her head down. She didn’t gossip. She did her job and left.

The officer sat up in his chair. “That will be all. I don’t think we’ll need to be in touch, but we have your information.”

Ana felt a churning sensation in her stomach as she walked to the door.

“Will they pay us on time?”

Ana already knew what his answer was going to be. The officer pursed his lips and sighed.

“I’m sorry, Ms Lewis. The authorities have seized all Mr Watson’s accounts and assets. I would suggest you find yourself another job. The restaurant is closed, effective immediately.”

Ana nodded, her head spinning as she left the room. One of the passing police officers steadied her as she stumbled into the restaurant. She mumbled her thanks, her mind in a tailspin.

Ana walked back to the other staff sitting around various tables.

Checking the banking app on her phone, Ana grimaced, her heart beating in her throat. Ana blinked against the growing wetness in her eyes. This month, she would have been free of her overdraft and had extra cash. Money was always tight, but she had worked a lot of shifts that month, and the money Randy owed her would have seen a turnaround in her fortunes.

Dropping her chin to her chest, she shuddered. She could stretch to that month’s rent but would have nothing left. The supplies she needed for her university course would have to wait, and as for food... she’d work something out.

It was late by the time the police had finished interviewing everyone. Ana left the restaurant with the other part-time staff. She didn’t want to be confronted by any of the other full-time staff. Ana was sure they knew

whatever Randy was into, and she wanted no part in it. Everyone was quiet as they made their way back to the tube station. Ana knew she wasn't the only person who needed this job. Randy's seemed to be a landing place for the city's desperate. Several of the girls were crying, while others were lost in thought. Ana joined in as they wished each other luck. As they all went their separate ways, Ana knew she wouldn't likely meet any of them again.

Ana let herself back into the silent flat and headed for her room. She unlocked and relocked her door before throwing herself down on the bed, all thoughts of food overwritten by the churning in her mind. Lying back, she stared up at the discoloured Artex ceiling, finding solace in its cracks and stains. It reminded her of her life. A mess. Drawing in a shuddering breath, Ana reminded herself how far she had come.

Four months ago, she'd made a life-changing decision. She'd known it would be difficult when she left her previous life, but staying was no longer viable. She had survived so far. Losing her job would not break her. She'd find another one. Her vision blurred, and she swiped at her eye before the first tear could escape. Ana rationalised that this was a setback, nothing more. It was not the end.

Her throat thickened.

She would not cry. She didn't cry.

Crying never helped. Ana had had that drummed into her from a young age.

Crying makes you weak, she was told. There was no place for weakness in this world. It was drilled into her.

Rolling over onto her pillow, Ana let out a silent scream. She closed her eyes. She'd allow herself that night to wallow, but the next day she would pick herself back up, as she had done before, and come out fighting.

Chapter Three

Andrew

Andrew's heart was heavy as he entered the school gates. This was the third phone call he'd received from the school in two weeks. He was out of excuses. As a single dad, he could admit he was no further along in understanding why Olivia, his seven-year-old daughter, was acting out. Olivia had always been so easy. The perfect baby, no toddler tantrums or terrible twos. He had hardly known he'd had her. That was until a couple of months ago when suddenly everything had changed.

Mrs Peterson looked up and smiled as Andrew entered the reception.

"Good afternoon, Mr Dennison. Lovely to see you again. Mrs Grant will be with you shortly. Olivia is still in the after-school club. Would you like me to get her for you?"

Andrew grimaced, forcing a smile. "Hello, Mrs Peterson. Please leave Olivia where she is. I think I need to talk to Mrs Grant without her."

Andrew's voice sounded dejected even to himself, but Mrs Peterson smiled and nodded before returning her attention to whatever she had been doing. Andrew took a seat in the reception area and waited, his mind racing. Damn, he needed to get on top of this. Work at the hospital was full on.

Between his NHS, private clinics, and now TV appearances, his schedule was full, but that was no excuse. He needed to know what was happening with her.

"Mr Dennison."

Andrew looked up as Olivia's teacher approached, her hand outstretched. Standing up, Andrew took her hand in his and smiled apologetically. Mrs Grant's smile was warm.

"Come with me," she said, leading him through the school doors and towards her classroom.

Entering the classroom, Mrs Grant motioned for him to sit. He folded

himself onto one of the tiny chairs, which he would have found funny if the situation hadn't been so serious.

"Sorry, Andrew, take this seat," Mrs Grant said, dropping the formality she'd previously held before grabbing a grown-up size chair from the edge of the room. "I forget when I'm around small people. I'm used to sitting in them."

Andrew smiled before switching to the adult chair. Laura had a way of making everyone feel at ease. He knew all the parents of children in her class loved her. She was one of the most popular teachers in the school. She just understood the children.

"How is Catherine?" Andrew asked.

Catherine was Laura's baby daughter.

Laura smiled, then let out a chuckle. "Growing up way too fast! She is the apple of her daddy's eye. Toby ruins her, but I suppose that is to be expected."

Tobias Grant was Laura's husband and a first-class lawyer. Andrew had got to know the pair well since he arrived in the area.

"What happened today?" Andrew asked, needing to understand the incident.

Laura's smile dropped, and her eyebrows drew together.

"I'm worried about Olivia," she said, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. "She's not herself. She had a fight with her best friend, Skylar, today. They wouldn't tell me anything about it. Then Olivia destroyed another child's artwork this afternoon by pouring paint all over it."

Andrew rubbed his hand down his face but refrained from interrupting. If Olivia was arguing with Skylar, something must be wrong. The two girls had been inseparable since he and Olivia had moved there from Leeds.

Skylar and her mum, Star, had lived with Laura and Toby when he had first moved to the area. It was how they had all become friends. He, Star, and her husband, Damian, had all remained close.

Laura continued. "When I asked her what had happened, she wouldn't say. Instead, she crossed her arms and went silent. The other children said it was intentional." Laura sighed. "I sent her to the head teacher, which had her in floods of tears. I'm sorry, Andrew."

Andrew swallowed as Laura continued.

"Do you know what's causing these outbursts? Is there anything going on

at home?” she asked carefully.

Andrew took a deep breath.

“Nothing new. Olivia spends a lot of time with my parents while I’m working, but that has been the case since we moved here. She seems happy with them, and Mum and Dad are great with her, albeit they spoil her.”

Laura leant back in her chair. “Have you spoken to Olivia?”

Andrew nodded. “Last time, she just cried and said she was sorry and didn’t mean it. I hoped it was the last time. My mum has spoken to her, but Olivia isn’t giving anything away.”

Andrew rubbed the back of his neck and looked down at his knees. His head began to throb.

“Behaviour doesn’t just change. We need to understand why Olivia is acting out.” Laura took a deep breath before continuing. “In the meantime, I cannot have her hurting or damaging other children or their work. I have spoken to Mrs Morris, the head teacher, and we will give Olivia lunchtime detention. It means I will keep her in instead of her going out to play with her friends.” Laura paused before continuing. “What I will suggest is not common practice, but if you agree, I’d like to keep Olivia in here with me. I want to observe her and see if I can get her to open up.”

Andrew looked up, his face displaying the shock he was feeling. He knew this was her going above and beyond. Laura gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Thank you, Laura. I can only apologise.” Andrew drew in a deep breath. “I will try talking to Olivia again. I do not know what to do. She is shutting me out.” Andrew ran a hand over the back of his neck. “It could be her way of punishing me. I am working long hours at the hospital and have often been absent with the new television contract.”

Andrew clenched his teeth. The more he thought about it, the more it turned his stomach. He’d allowed his bosses to take over his life, and now it was impacting his daughter’s life. His shoulders sank, and his heartbeat seemed to have moved to his throat.

“I’ll give Star and Damian a call tonight and see if Skylar has said anything. There must be something wrong if those two are arguing.”

Laura leant forward. “I want to help, Andrew. I’m here for you both.”

“Thank you again. I appreciate everything you are doing for Olivia. I’ll keep in touch.”

Andrew left Laura’s classroom feeling no better than when he’d arrived.

His daughter was hurting, and he didn't know why. Andrew walked into the after-school club, and his heart lurched at the sight of Olivia sitting by herself colouring. He approached her and knelt beside her.

"Hey, Sunshine, ready to go home?" Andrew swallowed hard as she looked up, her pain clear.

Olivia did not say a word as she left her pens and drawing where they were. She didn't even attempt to show him what she had been doing, which was not normal behaviour. Olivia loved to draw and paint. She was talented, and their home was full of her pictures. The fact she was ignoring what she had been doing was unsettling. Today was a turning point, and he needed to find the underlying cause of it.

He picked up her picture and stared at it. Something wasn't right. The two people in the picture looked sad, a sharp contrast to her usual drawings. Taking the picture with him, he helped Olivia gather her things before thanking Mrs Linford, the lady in charge of the after-school club. Ushering a silent Olivia into the car, Andrew strapped her in. This was where he wished he had a partner to help him navigate times like these, but he was flying solo. Climbing into the car, he could only hope he was enough to fix whatever was bothering his daughter and prayed Star might shed some light on what the girls had argued about.

Looking in the car mirror, Andrew stared at his young daughter, who sat with her hands clasped in her lap, shoulders slumped. "How was your day? Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," came a sullen reply.

Olivia's eyes remained fixed on her knees. Andrew watched as she plucked at her tights.

Andrew turned around in his seat and faced his daughter. "I know you got into trouble today. Do you want to tell me your side of the story?"

She looked up. Her eyes were defiant. "No," she said before turning her head and staring out the window.

"That's a shame," Andrew said, turning back and starting the engine. "Every story has two sides to it. I wanted to hear yours."

They drove home in silence. What was he going to do?

"He said mean stuff to me," came a quiet voice from the backseat.

Andrew inhaled deeply, trying to calm his racing heart.

"Mean stuff?" Andrew asked.

“He told me I couldn’t be part of their conversation because...” She didn’t say any more.

Andrew looked into the rearview mirror, and Olivia continued staring out the side window. Her pained expression caused his heart to constrict.

“What conversation, Olivia?”

“Nothing,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

It was easy to forget she was only seven. Andrew wondered if being around grown-ups all her life was a problem. Now was not the time to push. Andrew let the conversation drop. He would try again later. He had something to go on. Could he find out any more? That was going to be the million-dollar question.

Chapter Four

Ana

The smell from the local bakery next to the Tube station was too much for Ana to ignore, having skipped dinner the night before. Her head was swimming from both a lack of sleep and food. She knew she'd have to stretch her budget until she could find another job, but she needed food to function.

Ana grabbed one of their to-go breakfast meals before making her way to uni. Her first lecture was not until eleven o'clock. After last night, she was glad about the late start. The flat was deserted when she got up. Those on the night shift had locked themselves in their rooms while the others had already left for the day. She'd heard both sets in her semi-slumber, having spent much of the night tossing and turning.

It was a new day. Onward and upward, as they said. She would spend her frees in the library searching the job pages. Something would turn up. It had to. There was no going back.

The lecture hall was empty when Ana entered. Taking her usual seat at the back and in the far corner, she tucked into her breakfast pastry. She groaned aloud as the pastry dissolved in her mouth. She didn't think she'd ever felt this hungry or tasted anything so good. Until now, she hadn't needed to. The Head Chef at Randy's had always seen her and the other staff with a steady meal. The pay had been low, but she'd always had a full stomach. She knew the money she'd spent that morning was an extravagance, but she needed her wits about her.

It wasn't long before some of her classmates began to roll into the lecture theatre. Ana ignored the low hum of their chatter. It was only when two bodies flopped into the seats in the row in front of her that Ana's head shot up. She chose that spot because no one else did, which usually meant she was left alone. Ana looked away, trying hard to ignore them as she continued eating her breakfast. The duo, however, was having none of it. Instead,

turning around in their seats, they smiled up at her.

“Hi,” came a bright and cheerful voice.

Ana swallowed the last mouthful of her breakfast before looking up from her lap to stare at the girl sporting a short blond pixie cut with fuchsia pink tips.

“I’m Millie, and this is Georgina, aka George.”

The girl next to the pixie smiled at Ana, who took a long swig of her coffee to ease the sudden dry mouth and intense thirst that had overcome her.

The two girls sat and waited, smiling at her. Ana’s stomach tightened. What did they want? When neither said anything, Ana sucked in her cheeks and ran her tongue along the inside of her teeth.

“Hi,” Ana responded.

Ana looked at the young woman in front of her, whose enormous blue eyes radiated a warmth Ana was unused to. Claspng her coffee in both hands, she studied the pair. Both wore bright clothes, more in line with the fashion and textile students they were, than Ana with her very *beige* wardrobe. Ana had seen them before but had no interaction with either of them.

“You’re Ana, aren’t you?” the girl named Millie asked.

It was more of a statement than an actual question, but Ana nodded. She felt like she’d entered a twilight movie or an alternate reality. In the six weeks since their lectures had begun, no one had approached her, let alone spoken to her. Ana had remained invisible. Her peers had given her sideways glances and then moved on.

“Great,” Millie said, sounding surprisingly chirpy.

Ana must have given her a confused look as Millie laughed at George.

“Sorry,” Millie said. “They have partnered you with us for the next project. Today is the day we are being put into our groups. Did you not see the notice on the door?”

Ana groaned.

With everything that had happened, she had forgotten about the group project. Ana’s heartbeat returned to normal. They might be far too happy for Ana’s taste, but she had seen the work these two had produced during their previous individual task, and they were talented, *really* talented.

“Er, no... that’s great,” Ana said, unsure of what else to say.

She added a smile, although she was sure it came out more as a grimace. Millie seemed not to take offence and smiled back. Her smile was inviting,

making Ana clutch her coffee cup even tighter. Meeting new people and making small talk was Ana's worst nightmare, but working together meant these two were there to stay. She was going to have to get over it.

George had said nothing. She simply sat and watched as Millie tried to interact with Ana. George, like her friend, had a unique style. Her long hair was loose and harbouring a multitude of different colours. Ana thought about her dark brown hair and how boring it must look compared to these two. Ana wondered why they would want to work with her. Ana smiled to herself. Of course they didn't really. They'd been paired with her. Poor them, paired with the class outcast. Before she could think too hard about the strangeness of the morning, or her new partners, their lecturer entered, and everyone's attention shifted to her and their new project brief.

The class was all fired up and ready to go an hour later. Their lecturer had delivered their brief, and Ana had to admit it excited her.

"Do you want to grab a coffee and discuss what we need to do?"

It was George who spoke this time. As they stood up, Ana noted George was at least a head taller than Millie, which put her at around the same height as Ana.

Ana wanted to say no. She needed to get to the library and search the job pages for part-time work. She knew, however, she also needed to dedicate some time to her new partners. Her brain was awash with ideas, and she wanted, no, needed, to be part of their initial project discussions. Otherwise, she'd have to go along with whatever they decided.

"Sure," she said, grabbing her bag.

They made their way to the cafeteria in silence. Ana looked around. She had only been in there once before. It was bigger and busier than she remembered it. Millie and George waved to several students as they passed before grabbing them a table at the back.

"This should be quiet enough for us to chat," Millie said, dropping her bag onto a spare seat.

Ana pulled out a chair and sat down, grabbing her notebook. Looking around her, she realised how nice the cafe was. It gave off a friendly, warm vibe. She was older than the other students on their course. At twenty-two, she had a different life than those she was studying with. When not in class, she hung out in the library instead. She thought she looked a little sad sitting alone at a table in the cafeteria, and the library was a good cover.

“What can I get you?” Millie chirped up.

“Oh, nothing. I’m fine, thank you.” Ana had already blown that day’s food budget, so she didn’t need to add another drink to it. If she spent her money on anything, she needed to go to the bargain aisle at the supermarket later.

“Ok, no problem.”

Millie bounced off.

Ana watched her leave.

The girl was far too chirpy.

George dropped herself down into the chair opposite Ana and leaned back. Ana dragged her attention away from Millie and focused on the quieter one of the two.

“Don’t mind Millie, she’s a force to be reckoned with, but her heart is in the right place,” George said.

Ana realised those two must be close. Their friendship clearly predates the degree course they were all attending.

George smiled.

“She may only be five-foot-two, but she’s like an excited toddler. Confident with boundless energy and a kind and generous soul. Don’t worry. You’ll get used to her.”

Ana found herself smiling back.

“She appears to be.”

Ana wasn’t so sure she’d *ever* get used to Millie, but then they only had to complete this project together, and then they would go their separate ways.

Ana and George fell into a comfortable silence until Millie returned. Millie had ignored Ana’s request for nothing and had got her a mocha. “I smelt mocha this morning when you were drinking,” she explained.

Ana stifled a groan. This was why she stayed away from people. Now she would need to buy her a drink. Taking a deep breath, Ana centred herself. That was okay. She could do it.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll get the next one.”

Millie smiled. “It’s on me,” she said. “I hate to drink alone,” she said, as if sensing Ana’s unease.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll get the next one.”

George laughed. “No, you probably won’t, Ana. Millie’s parents are wealthy, and she struggles to spend her allowance. She feeds half the homeless around campus. Just accept her drink. It will make life a lot more

peaceful.”

Millie smacked George on the arm.

“I’m not that bad,” she said, her forehead wrinkling.

George raised her eyebrows and stared at her friend. “Er, yes, you are.”

The banter continued, and Ana felt herself relaxing more and more in their company. She found out she’d been right in her assumption. They’d been friends for years. Both came from wealthy backgrounds, although they’d brushed it off. Ana understood as she had come from a privileged background herself, but that was in her past. The more she listened, the more Ana envied their closeness. It was not something she had ever experienced, even at boarding school. Ana had always watched from the sidelines.

“So,” Millie said almost an hour later. “What are your thoughts on this project?”

Ana sat up straight. If she was honest, she had assumed they would close ranks and tell her what they wanted to do, and expect her to go along with it.

“Don’t look so shocked,” Millie giggled. “We’ve seen your work!”

Ana was proud of her work and liked the fact Millie and George had noticed. Sitting forward, she picked up her notebook and shared her initial thoughts on the brief, with Millie and George nodding and inputting their own thoughts alongside hers.

Another hour had passed before they had finished. Ana looked at the clock. “Rats!” she said before she could stop herself.

Millie looked up from the notes she had been scribbling. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

Ana stuffed all her bits into her bag. “Yes,” she said. “Sorry, I need to get to the library.”

Millie and George both looked at her, confused. The library wasn’t where textiles and fashion students were usually found.

Ana stopped in her tracks, unsure why, but she felt she owed them an explanation.

“I need to job hunt,” she said, slowing down her movements. “The waitress job I had... well, let’s just say I turned up last night to find the restaurant swarming with police and no more job.”

Ana sank back into her chair, exhaustion taking over as she said the words she’d been holding in all day.

Millie grabbed her hand and squeezed. “Time for another coffee,” she said,

standing up.

“No,” Ana said, getting to her feet again. “I have to get a computer.”

“Sit down,” George said, the strength of her tone shocking Ana. George must have seen the locked-down expression on Ana’s face because she continued. “We may be able to help you. We have family who own restaurants all over London. I am sure we can help you get a job somewhere.”

Ana slumped into her chair. The shock of the previous night and going up against these two was more than Ana could fight. What harm would it do to hear them out, even if it came to nothing? The library was still going to be there. She would just have to ensure she got to the supermarket in time for the reduction stickers. Checking the clock, she still had a couple of hours until then.

“Okay,” she said. “I’d really appreciate any help you can give.”

If these two could help and were willing, who was she to turn them down.

Millie clapped her hands in delight and went back to the counter to order another round of drinks. When Millie returned with coffee and a round of sandwiches, George rolled her eyes at her, but she simply shrugged.

“What? I’m hungry, and I hate to eat or drink alone.”

Millie shared out the food. Ana had decided she would accept her new friend’s gracious offer. She would make it up to them when life took a turn for the better.

Her attention caught on Millie, so Ana had failed to notice George was busy speaking on the phone.

“Great,” she heard her say. “I’ll pass on the details. You are a star, Uncle Robin.”

George grinned at Ana as she disconnected the call, passing her a piece of paper. Ana glanced down, and her eyes almost bugged out of her head. She coughed to clear the saliva that almost choked her, making both George and Millie laugh.

“Mount Crystals?”

Ana choked again. Mount Crystals was *the* restaurant in town. Anyone who was anyone wanted to eat there. It was a hangout for the rich and famous.

“Absolutely,” George answered. “My uncle owns it. He was trying to recruit me a week ago, and I knew he had a vacancy. I think you will fit the bill a little better than me.”

George smoothed her hand down her rainbow locks and winked at Ana. “You are exactly what he’s looking for.”

Ana’s throat closed over, and she pinched herself, making Millie and George share a look. Her eyes filled, and she had to blink several times before she could bring herself to speak. Before she could say anything, however, George jumped in.

“It’s only a trial. If Uncle Robin likes you, the job is yours. You just need to call the number on the paper.”

“Thank you. I don’t know what to say.”

Millie got up and hugged Ana. Ana froze, but Millie ignored her, squeezing her tighter.

“*‘Love and kindness are never wasted. They always make a difference. They bless the one who receives them, and they bless you, the giver.’* – Barbara De Angelis,” Millie added, stepping back.

Ana nodded, unable to speak. Millie wiped her own eyes as she sat back down.

“Right, now there are sandwiches to eat! I take it you can skip the library now?”

Ana nodded, instead leaning forward and grabbing the remaining sandwich.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at the two young women in front of her.

Chapter Five

Andrew

Andrew glanced down at his phone and saw he had a missed call from his mother. It was unusual for her to ring him during the day while he was at work. His heart sank. Had she been called about Olivia? Was Olivia in trouble again? It was possible the school would ring her. She and Dad were down as Olivia's next of kin with full disclosure.

After they returned home the previous evening, Andrew couldn't get any more information from Olivia. Her brief admission in the car had been all she would give him. Then she had clammed up, giving him sad, wide eyes that tore his heart in two, telling him she was tired and wanted to go to bed. No parent wanted to see their child in pain, especially when they wouldn't share what the problem was.

Andrew glanced at the clock. He had twenty minutes until his next patient was due. Picking up his phone, he dialled his mum's number. She answered after three rings.

"Hello, Darling. This is a lovely surprise."

The breath Andrew was holding whooshed out, disturbing the papers on his desk. "Hey, Mum. I saw a missed call. I just wanted to check everything was fine."

"Oh yes, of course, it is. Why wouldn't it be?"

Andrew realised at that moment he hadn't updated his mum on all the latest goings on with Olivia, not wanting to worry them. He also hadn't wanted her to probe Olivia and make her clam up even more. His mum was great, but sometimes she was like a dog with a bone for sorting things out, and he didn't want to make matters worse.

"No, it's okay," Andrew said. "What can I do for you?"

His mum's breathing picked up. "It's nothing. I can talk to you later. I'm sorry I bothered you, but I got overexcited, and then your father reminded me

you were at work.”

Andrew paused. Excited? What were his parents excited about? Had he missed something? An anniversary? Birthday? When Andrew said nothing, his mum carried on.

“We’ve booked our tickets to Australia.” The excitement in his mum’s voice was palpable. “We leave in a month.”

Andrew felt the blood drain from his face, and he slumped back in his chair, pulling his phone away from his ear and staring at it. They were going to Australia to visit Andrew’s brother and fiancée. Worst still, they’d told him at least three months ago, so he could arrange alternative childcare. How had he forgotten? Andrew dragged a hand through his hair. He knew how he’d forgotten. The hospital board had announced he’d be *The New Face of the Team*. With both work and the television studio, he’d put it out of his mind. Well, put it off and had then forgotten.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes. Yes... sorry Mum, Suzie just dropped some papers in,” Andrew lied to cover his rising panic as he put his mother on speaker phone.

This was all he needed. Olivia was going off the rails, and now his parents were going to be halfway around the world. He felt like his world was collapsing in on him, and he wasn’t sure how he would get around it.

“Andrew.” His mum’s tone brought him out of his panic. “You did remember we were going to Australia?”

The previous excitement had left her voice, and she had taken on a stern, no-nonsense tone.

Andrew shook his head, sighing, even though he knew she couldn’t see him.

“No, in all honesty, Mum, I had forgotten. But...” he added, “That is not your problem. That is mine, and I have everything in hand, so please don’t worry.”

“Damn your father. He told me not to keep harassing you and that you’d have it all in hand. Now look at what has happened. What are you doing with Olivia?”

His mum wasn’t about to be deterred.

“It’s fine. I have childcare in hand. Please don’t worry. This is an exciting time for you and Dad. I know Chris is looking forward to you visiting.”

Andrew did not know if that was the case. He and his brother hardly spoke

anymore, work and life got in the way.

“Ok then. I had better let you get back to work.”

His mum’s voice let him know she wasn’t convinced. This, however, was on him. They were and had been amazing with Olivia. Still, his father had retired, and it wasn’t fair they were putting their lives on hold because he had been in a disastrous relationship and needed support raising his daughter.

“Thanks, Mum. Give my love to Dad and don’t give him a hard time. This is on me,” Andrew said before adding, “I’ll see you tonight when I pop in to say goodnight to Olivia.”

“Okay, Darling. We can talk more about this later.”

Andrew dropped the phone back onto his desk. He ran a hand through his hair and down his face before pinching the top of his nose to stem the sudden pounding in his head. A soft knock on the door had him looking up. His next patient wasn’t due for at least ten minutes, so it had to be his secretary Suzie or one of his colleagues.

“Come in,” he said, straightening the folders Suzie had left on his desk.

“Oh, dear.” Suzie’s voice came from the doorway. Andrew looked up in surprise at her tone. “What’s happened?” she asked, stepping into the room and closing the door behind her.

Suzie was a happily married, glamorous, middle-aged mother-of-two and the most efficient secretary he had ever had. He was not sure how he would have coped without her over the past year. After moving to a new job and city, she ensured his working environment ran smoothly, even when the rest of his life was running out of control.

“Why do you think something is wrong?” Andrew asked.

Suzie gave him her motherly, raised-eyebrow look, which told him not to be so obtuse. “Andrew. I’m the mother of two teenage boys. Your hair is all messed up where you have run your fingers through it. You have stress lines around your eyes.”

Andrew’s fingers flew to the edge of his eyes, feeling for the lines she was talking about. At thirty-six, he supposed lines were a thing that was part of his future.

Suzie pursed her lips and ignored him. “You’re either stressed or coming down with something. As a surgeon, you would not hang around the hospital if you thought you were sick, so it must be the former. So, spill.”

She dropped the folders she was carrying onto the desk and sat down in the

chair opposite him.

Andrew sat back and stared at her. “There is such a thing as overstepping,” he said, looking at Suzie across his desk.

Suzie waved a dismissive hand at him. “Piffle. Come on, you’ve got your next patient in less than ten minutes. You need a clear head,” she said, ignoring him.

Andrew sighed. “My mother just rang to tell me she and Dad are taking a trip to Australia to visit my brother and his fiancée.”

Andrew paused.

“That’s nice...” Suzie said, raising a questioning eyebrow.

Andrew grimaced.

“In four weeks...”

Suzie sat up.

“And, of course, you have childcare in place to replace them?”

Andrew knew his guilt must be written all over his face. “Uh, that’s the problem. I forgot.”

“Andrew, you forgot your parents told you they were going to Australia. That you wouldn’t have any childcare?”

Andrew bristled. “It was the night before the TV drama with the board. Dad didn’t want her hassling me, so she hasn’t mentioned it since. I promised her the night she mentioned it, I’d be on it and not to fuss.”

Andrew groaned again and dropped his chin to his chest. He could remember the conversation clearly.

“Mum, please don’t fuss. This is an amazing opportunity for you both. You’ve wanted to tour Australia for years, and it gives you a chance to meet your soon-to-be daughter-in-law. Don’t worry about us. We can manage.”

Andrew landed back in the present. “Before you say anything else, yes, I am aware, they look after Olivia three nights a week when I work late shifts.”

Andrew’s shoulders slumped, and he exhaled. How had he got himself into this state?

Olivia’s childcare was why Andrew moved jobs and city over a year ago. Working in the north had been difficult, especially when Olivia had started school. Breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were finite in the time, they looked after their charges. Problematic when, as a surgeon, Andrew’s job had no distinct hours. If he was in surgery, he could not very well get up and leave a patient on the operating table to collect his daughter from school.

When Olivia was little, he employed an experienced nanny. Nanny Bea had been the perfect nanny. Olivia's birth mother had abandoned them both after her birth, leaving Andrew to raise their daughter alone. Nanny Bea had stepped in and helped Andrew as a new father, who had still been in the middle of his speciality training as a cardiologist and out of his depth. For five years, Bea had been a mother figure to Olivia, but when her husband had a heart attack, she took stock of their life and made the hard choice to leave her job and nurse her husband.

Olivia had been inconsolable. But fate had stepped in, and the perfect position had arisen in London. A position that had seen Andrew and Olivia move nearer to his parents. His mum and dad had been ecstatic, volunteering to look after their only granddaughter while he was working. Disaster averted, Andrew had jumped all over it, uprooting their lives and moving them there. Until recently, it had been perfect. He had peace of mind when he was working, as he knew Olivia was safe with his parents and being well cared for. He could do his job, and Olivia was happy. Or at least she had been until now.

"So, what are you going to do?" Suzie pulled him back into the present.

"Honestly... I don't know."

Andrew sighed, looking at the clock. His next patient was due, so he needed to get his head in the game. He had four weeks to sort out the mess. He had holiday allowance due, so if he needed to, he would take annual leave and look after Olivia himself.

Suzie got up, leant over the desk, and patted his arm. "Don't worry, I'll have a think and see what I can come up with. We have time."

The *we* in her statement made Andrew feel less alone. Suzie had become more than a secretary. She was his friend. He had to remember to give her a large Christmas bonus.

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Andrew gave a sigh of relief as his last patient of the morning left. They had all been follow-ups who were recovering well, so his mood had lifted. He loved success stories.

Grabbing his mobile from his top drawer, Andrew glanced down. A

message from his best friend flashed up on the screen.

JOHN: *Still on for dinner this evening?*

John Hammond, his childhood best friend, and oldest partner in crime. They had even gone to university together, although John had studied finance, not medicine. He had been Andrew's best man at his wedding and was Olivia's godfather. He was happily married with three children. They had been together through good times and the bad.

Dinner was another thing Andrew had forgotten. He remembered they had organised a meal out a few weeks back. His parents had Olivia tonight, as he was due at the television studio by five thirty in the morning, ready for makeup. Olivia stayed over, so his parents could do the Wednesday morning school run. Andrew groaned at the thought. His early morning television role was going to be another problem.

ANDREW: *You're on. See you at seven-thirty.*

JOHN: *Make sure you've showered!*

Andrew smiled. John had never understood how his friend could work with blood and bodily fluids.

Chapter Six

Ana

Ana stood on the pavement outside Mount Crystals and stared, wide-eyed, at the frontage. A vast difference from Randy's rundown Bar and Grill. The frontage and pavement were clean, the paintwork immaculate, unlike the peeling paint and rotting timber that had fronted Randy's. Ana still had to pinch herself that she was there, and it wasn't a dream.

Once George had told her about the position, she gave Ana her uncle's number and told her to call him. Ana had held her breath as she dialed the number, unable to believe that life might, at last, be taking a turn for the better. When George's Uncle Robin—Robin Downsend—answered, he had been friendly and put Ana at ease. They had spoken at length, and he had invited her for a trial that evening. Ana had jumped at the chance. They would provide her with a uniform, but she needed to be there at six-thirty. They offered almost double the pay from Randy's and shared tips equally. Ana had nearly fallen off her chair when Robin had told her what she might expect in her pay packet.

Ana shook out her arms before stretching her neck from side to side and breathing deeply. She knew her traits were standoffish and prickly. Years of looking in from the outside, both at school and home, had taken their toll. But that night, she needed to be *amiable Ana* and channel the few hours she had spent in Millie and George's company that afternoon. Who knew she'd appreciate the company of others? Maybe her time in London wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

Ana gathered her courage and entered.

Her eyes were instantly drawn to the art déco bar that spanned one side of the restaurant and the kitchen entrance. The place was a hive of activity. Bartenders were busy polishing glasses while others were restocking the fridges. The opposite wall housed private dining booths, beautiful artwork

hung above on darkened walls while ambient lighting gave off a calm, welcoming vibe. Each round table was made up perfectly on top of crisp, white tablecloths. The restaurant's centre was awash with individual tables of varying sizes, each positioned far enough apart that guests were extended their privacy. The whole restaurant resonated with class and sophistication, the atmosphere so calming, Ana felt her nerves begin to drop away.

A man rushed forward.

"Welcome, you must be Ana. Mr Downsend told me to expect you. I'm Thomas, the maitre d' of Mount Crystals. Please follow me, and I'll introduce you to the team and get you your uniform."

His smile was welcoming and soon Ana found herself quickly drowning in a sea of names and new faces.

"Don't panic," Thomas said, laughing. Ana knew her expression must be one of total panic. "No one expects you to remember their names, but we are a welcoming crowd."

Thomas ushered her into the staffroom. She had already given her clothes size when she had spoken to Robin on the phone, so she shouldn't have been surprised when a set of pressed trousers and a black, logo-embossed shirt were waiting for her.

"I'll pass you over to Julie," Thomas said. "You'll be working alongside her this evening. She will show you the ropes. Good luck."

With that, Thomas left, and Julie stepped forward.

Julie was not what Ana imagined. She introduced herself, talking in hushed, conspiratorial tones, which made Ana laugh. She was in her mid-twenties, from South Africa, on a working visa, enjoying the sights and British life. Julie had been working at Mount Crystals for six months and loved it. She gave Ana a guided tour of the restaurant, showing her where everything was and how the evening service ran. She explained that most of their clients were wealthy businessmen, businesswomen, or celebrities. They wanted exemplary service and to be left alone. The trick to great tips, Julie said, was to ensure you monitored empty wine glasses and plates. You never cleared a plate away until the entire table had finished, and when they had, you checked and were quick and efficient. Ana nodded, her mind in a daze as she tried to take in all she was being shown and told.

Before she knew it, the doors were open, and the first customers were being shown to their tables. Ana was wearing a badge that let patrons know

she was new. Julie reassured Ana that she wouldn't be penalised if she didn't know the answer, as everyone needed to learn. Ana watched in awe as Julie greeted the customers, took their drink orders and talked them through the menus and chef's specials. She knew she would get there. It wasn't much different to the job she had at Randy's, only the clientele was on a much higher level.

"So," Julie announced after Ana had watched her serve the first three tables of their six. "Are you ready to try the next table yourself?"

Ana's shocked expression had Julie laughing.

"Don't panic," Julie said. "You've got this, and I'll be right behind you to jump in if you get stuck."

Ana nodded as she gripped her hands together before moving towards their latest guests.

"Good evening," Ana said, trying to hold her voice steady and ignore the tightness in her chest. "Welcome to Mount Crystals."

She handed them their menus and pointed out the wine list before listing the chef's specials. Then, as Julie had done, she checked whether they were ready to order some drinks or whether they would like a few moments. Ana was pleased her memory was reliable, so the script flowed once she had gotten over her nerves.

Julie patted her on the shoulder as they reached the bar to file their drinks orders.

"You were awesome," Julie said, grinning. "I'll have to watch out for my job."

Ana shot her a sideways glance but relaxed when she saw Julie's grin.

"I thought my tongue would stick to the roof of my mouth. It was that dry," Ana heard herself admitting.

Julie smiled.

"You're a natural. Come on, another table just arrived. Tonight is going to be a busy one."

"Bring it on!" Ana said.

She was enjoying herself. Her eyes darted to where Julie was pointing, and she froze.

Julie shot Ana a questioning glance as if sensing something was amiss. "You, okay?"

The man in the doorway laughed at something his dining companion said.

Ana's heart stalled, and goosebumps prickled her skin. Her eyes widened at the sight before her. It had been over seven years since she'd heard that laugh, and it wasn't something she'd ever expected to hear again. At least not in person. His face was still the same, although his features had sharpened and matured with age. His dark-blond hair was more tamed than it had been when she had last seen him. It would be impossible for her not to recognise him. His deep blue eyes stared down at her every morning and evening from the walls of the tube station.

Julie touched her arm, snapping her back into the present. Ana's voice wavered.

"That's my ex-brother-in-law."

"Which one?" Julie asked.

"Please don't stare," Ana begged. "It's the one on the left."

"You mean the heart surgeon from Morning TV?"

Ana nodded, wanting the ground to open and swallow her whole.

"Yes," Ana replied quietly.

Ana glanced across, keeping her profile away from Andrew, not that he'd recognise her. The last day she'd seen Andrew in person, he hadn't been interested in Ana. He'd been there to beg her sister to not give up on their marriage and child. Ana could never understand how her sister could walk away from them. Especially when, later that night, she'd heard her crying through the bedroom wall. The whole thing had made no sense to her fifteen-year-old brain. But Eva had left Andrew seven years ago. Then within a year, when the divorce was final, Eva moved abroad to start a new life. That had been six years ago, and Ana hadn't seen her sister since.

"Ex is never a good word. Don't panic. Just stand behind me," Julie said, touching her arm in reassurance. "I've got this table."

Ana's heartbeat stuttered as they approached the table. Ana made sure she stayed out of Andrew's line of sight by hovering behind Julie. Andrew had only met her a couple of times, as she had been at boarding school during most of his and Eva's visits. Ana hadn't even attended their wedding. Their father had felt it frivolous and unnecessary for her to miss any school. The last time Andrew had seen her, she'd been an overweight, spotty fifteen-year-old, and he'd had much more important things on his mind than his wife's little sister.

Julie was the epitome of professionalism. Ana's heart sank as she realised

she had let herself down. What would Robin Downsend think when he heard. Or Millie and George, who got her the job?

The shock of seeing Andrew again left her with a heavy feeling in her stomach, but she needed to get over it.

“Sorry,” Ana said as she and Julie returned to their station a short while later.

“Don’t worry. We all have our moments. I had to serve a famous South African film star when I first started. I had to lock my knees and hope I could keep the drool inside my mouth as I took his order.”

Relaxing, Ana laughed. Julie’s aim at making her feel better was working, and Ana fell into a routine. They quickly covered all their tables in double time as Julie trusted Ana to fly solo.

It was ten-thirty when Ana heard a voice to her left.

“Excuse me?”

Ana spun around to find herself being beckoned over by Andrew’s companion. Ana looked around to see if Julie was about, but she was nowhere to be seen. Plastering a smile on her face, she approached their table, her skin tingling with discomfort.

“Hi,” Andrew’s companion said. “Can we order some coffee?”

“Of course, Sir.” Ana kept her eyes fixed on the man speaking. “What can I get you?”

“Andrew?” the companion asked.

Before Ana could stop herself, she turned to take his order. Her eyes locked on his. A look of shock passed over his face, and she watched him swallow.

“Santana?” he croaked.

Ana froze before fumbling with her order pad as it slipped from her fingers. Julie was at her side instantly, having returned to the floor from wherever she had disappeared.

“Is everything okay here?” she asked with a chirpy voice and saccharine smile.

It was Andrew’s dining companion who spoke up. Andrew and Ana seemed to have gone into shock as they stared at each other.

“Yes, it seems like my dining companion knows your friend,” he said, chuckling. “Andrew, what coffee would you like?”

Ana watched as Andrew shook himself out of his trance. “A cappuccino,

please,” he answered, his eyes never leaving Ana’s.

“I’ll have an Americano,” Andrew’s companion said.

Ana looked down as she scribbled their drinks order, her heart racing. She was about to back away when Andrew’s hand came up and grabbed hers. Ana froze again, heat radiating up her arm where his hand touched hers. Unable to stop herself, her eyes returned to his.

“It is Santana?” he asked.

Ana smiled. “It’s Ana now. It’s good to see you, Andrew.”

Andrew was about to say more, but his dining companion interrupted him, asking, “Santana? As in Eva’s sister?”

Ana did not wait around, using his distraction to escape.

“What the hell happened?” Julie said, grabbing hold of Ana’s arm and pulling her out of sight of any customers.

Heat infused her face. Ana dropped her pad on the side and patted her inflamed cheeks.

Oh my god, what had just happened?

Julie stared at her, then took pity. “It’s okay, I’ve got the coffees,” she said, giving Ana a conspiratorial wink.

Julie was true to her word and set Ana dealing with customers as far away from Andrew’s table as possible. Ana watched Andrew leave, ignoring how he looked over as they reached the door. His dining partner touched Andrew’s arm, saying something that had Andrew nodding before they had both walked out of the door. Ana felt her body sag in relief, the tension leaving her body.

What were the chances?

She finished up the last tables with Julie and saw out their final customers. Tips had been amazing. Four times what Ana was used to. When they finished cleaning down and laying up for the following day’s lunch, Julie guided Ana back to the staff room, where the other girls were buzzing.

It turned out a famous movie star had been in, and Ana hadn’t even noticed. Ana laughed along with the other girls while they all changed out of their uniforms. She approached Julie to thank her for her help and support over the evening. She appreciated all the other young women had done to make her first shift as pain-free as possible.

“How did your first shift go?” Ana spun around to find Robin Downsend behind her.

It shocked Ana to see him. She had expected him to leave it to the maître d' to discuss her work with her.

“I’ve enjoyed it,” she said, meaning every word. “And Julie has been amazing.”

Julie appeared at her shoulder, grinning as if sensing she was being talked about.

“We’ve got a good one here, boss,” she said, slinging her arm around Ana’s shoulder.

Robin smiled. “We discussed potential shifts earlier. Are you still happy with those?”

Ana nodded, her heart growing lighter. It looked like she had a job. A well-paid one at that. She wanted to jump up and down on the spot and do a happy dance but refrained.

Instead, she heard herself croak out, “Yes.”

“Fantastic, welcome on board.”

Robin shook her hand before turning and leaving.

Julie grabbed Ana in a bear hug.

“Yay! It’s going to be so fun working together.”

Ana hugged Julie back. From speaking to Millie and George, landing the best job, and bumping into her ex-brother-in-law, Ana had to admit the day had been surreal.

Chapter Seven

Andrew

Andrew arrived at the television studio and delivered himself to makeup, dropping into one of the vacant chairs. These early morning starts were hard going, but it helped he didn't have to worry about Olivia—yet.

Forgetting his parent's trip had been a massive error on his part. He recalled his mum and dad telling him about their plans, their initial excitement. He'd been completely supportive of it, telling them not to worry about him and Olivia. How could he resent them for their retirement? His father had worked hard. They'd always put his and his brother's needs ahead of their own. But he had to admit, he was in dire straits.

"Tough week?" Sally, his usual makeup artist, said, moving in front of him and getting out her things.

"You could say that," Andrew said, rubbing his hand over his face before Sally pulled it away and gave him an over-the-top-of-her-glasses scowl. She had told him many times not to rub his face.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly.

"Come on, share. A problem shared is a problem halved," she said as she set to work doing his makeup.

Andrew sighed. Sally had been amazing the past few months since he'd first been dragged into this crazy world of TV. She always asked after Olivia and ribbed him about his growing popularity. She had been in the business for thirty years and was one of the most down-to-earth people he had ever met. At seven in the morning, she made him laugh by recounting stories of some stars she had made up in the past. However, she was always professional enough not to mention names.

"My parents are taking a trip to Australia in four weeks, and I forgot."

"Oh... but don't they look after Olivia?" she started, stopping her brush strokes and staring at him.

“Yes. I forgot,” Andrew said, raising his hand to his hair, only to have it captured and returned to the chair arm.

“Wow. That is quite the *I forgot*,” Sally stated. Her face turned serious. “So, what are you going to do?”

“Nanny or au pair,” Andrew sighed. “That is my job for the rest of the day,” Andrew said, changing the subject.

It stressed him enough.

“What you need, young man, is to get out and meet someone,” Sally said, adding setting powder to the foundation she had applied.

Andrew grimaced. This was a conversation they’d had many times before. He barely had enough time in the day to breathe, let alone put any effort into meeting someone. Aside from getting to know them and then introducing them to Olivia.

“That may be so, but life is for living. It is also way too short. Don’t shut yourself away. You are doing both yourself and Olivia a disservice.”

Sally stopped talking after that, leaving Andrew to mull over her words.

He’d heard the same words from his parents and John. It wasn’t as though Eva had burned him. He’d dated in the early years while Olivia was a baby. But as Olivia got older, it got harder. He wanted to spend his free time with his daughter without a steady stream of different women passing through her life. So, he’d stopped. He had witnessed Olivia’s devastation when Nanny Bea left and was glad he’d made that call. He never wanted to see his daughter in that kind of distress again.

Now, his workload made it impossible. After he landed the TV spot, he had far too much media attention for his liking. He was the best of the best, and his bosses at the hospital loved it. He had become the most requested surgeon on the team. The hospital had pimped him out as their representative on morning television. His day job wasn’t changing. He couldn’t reduce his hours. His daughter was his world, but he wasn’t about to leave her with just anyone. That didn’t work for him. If he needed to, he’d have to ask for time off until he could find suitable care. It was not like he couldn’t afford it. His grandfather had passed away the year before, leaving him and his brother more money than they could spend in ten lifetimes. The rebuilding of London after the war had been a lucrative business. Andrew’s work was a vocation. He loved his job, but not at the expense of Olivia.

“All done,” Sally said. Andrew looked up as she rested her hand on his

shoulder. “It will be fine. What you need is a sister like mine. She used to take my kids in the early days when I was working. She still child-minds. I can ask her if she knows anyone?”

Andrew nodded, his mind wandering back to the previous night. The shock at seeing Eva’s baby sister had been huge. There had been no contact with Eva’s family for over seven years, but he instantly recognised Santana. It was not surprising. She was Eva’s doppelgänger. Her stature and bone structure, when her large brown eyes had locked on his, it had knocked the breath from his lungs. The only difference was Eva had always worn her hair short, whereas Ana wore it long, albeit tied up.

Andrew had only met Santana a few times. He had always felt sorry for her. She had been quiet and withdrawn the few times she had been home when they visited. Her father shut her down whenever she spoke, and from what he had gleaned from Eva, he sent her away to boarding school as soon as she was old enough. She had been an outsider in her own home.

Andrew knew Eva had been fourteen when Santana was born, the accidental baby Eva had called her. He wondered what she was doing in London, so far from her home in the West Country. He assumed she would follow the family tradition and enter the medical profession. There was no way she was in a residency if she was waiting tables. Her father would never have allowed that. Andrew couldn’t say he had ever warmed to his ex-father-in-law. He may have been an amazing surgeon in his day, but he was cold and dictatorial. Eva’s mother had been a quiet mouse who did everything her husband demanded of her, even though she was a general practitioner and worked long hours herself. Eva had told him one night when she’d had too much to drink, that her mother had been an even more promising surgeon than her father before they’d had her. The whole family setup had been alien to Andrew, who’d grown up in a supportive and loving environment. In the three years, he and Eva were together, they’d spent very little time with her parents. He was glad Olivia was not exposed to them.

“Thank you for listening, Sally,” Andrew said, getting up and moving towards the door.

“Any time,” Sally called after him. “My chair is always available.”

Andrew smiled before leaving the room. The morning circus was about to begin.

Chapter Eight

Andrew

By the time Andrew got into the hospital office, it was almost ten, but he felt like he had already put in a full day's work.

His mother had called to say that Olivia had got upset when it had come time to go to school and that she had made an executive decision and kept her home. They would bake cakes and have a girl's day as Andrew's dad was meeting up with the boys to play golf. Andrew didn't blame his mother. She wasn't aware of all that had been happening with Olivia. He had kept recent events hidden, not wanting to worry her, and maybe that was a mistake. Maybe his mother might have more luck finding out what was happening with his daughter. Let Olivia have a day with Grandma, he reasoned, while he quickly worked on finding a grandparent replacement.

Andrew dropped into his chair and picked up the piece of paper Suzie had left for him. She had written in bold letters across the top.

AGENCY LIST.

"Oh good, you found it."

Suzie's voice came from the door. Not waiting to be invited in, she closed the door before dropping herself into the chair opposite Andrew.

"Okay, I went through all the agencies that have positive reviews and made a list. I have listed au pair agencies and good old-fashioned nanny agencies." She pulled another list out of the folder she was carrying. "I made some calls this morning, and you should receive several CVs for potential applicants to your personal email."

Andrew's eyes left the list as he stared wide-eyed at Suzie.

"What?" she asked. "You didn't think I'd let the grass grow under my feet, did you? Time is of the essence. We need to get organised, and you need to interview. Olivia must have the chance to meet any prospective child carer, and so do you."

“Thank you,” he said. “I don’t know what to say. You always come through. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

Andrew watched as a warm glow-tinged Suzie’s cheeks. She brushed his comment aside.

“Believe me, you are the best and most appreciative boss I have ever worked for. If I can help, then I will.”

“Well, thank you,” Andrew said again.

His heart warmed at her words. She did not know what she meant to him. He needed to find a way to repay her.

Switching his computer on, Andrew logged onto his personal email account, and sure enough, there were several welcome emails from the agencies at the top of Suzie’s list. He began clicking through and saw links to potential candidates. It would take some time, but at least Suzie had ensured he was ahead of the game.

“Wow, you work fast,” he said.

He counted and had a list of ten potential candidates waiting to be reviewed.

“Excellent. They did promise they’d send them straight across. I let them know it was urgent.”

Suzie got up and made her way to the door.

“If you want a second opinion on any, fire them through,” she said before leaving the room.

Andrew sat back in his chair. After talking to Sally and now to Suzie, he felt better about himself. His mind wandered back to Santana. No, Ana. He wondered what she was doing.

Andrew sat forward and pulled up details of his ex-father-in-law. Seeing her made him wonder whether something had happened to her father.

No, he was still going strong, publishing papers, and giving lectures.

Andrew huffed out a sigh. He had more pressing concerns to attend to. Luckily, his diary had been empty because of his weekly TV spot. The night before, he phoned his boss and presented him with an ultimatum. He could either complete his rounds or take the day off. His boss had given him the day outside rounds to do what he needed. That was not to reminisce about a past life.

Chapter Nine

Ana

Ana woke with a grin on her face. She stared at the ceiling, her hand resting on her chest as she enjoyed the warm feeling spreading throughout her body. What a night! She had a job waitressing at Mount Crystals, of all places.

Before she had left, Robin, the owner, had caught up with her again, handing her all the paperwork she needed to complete. New staff were paid weekly for the first month unless they requested otherwise. He understood finding and getting a new job, especially in London, often left people out of pocket. Ana had wanted to hug him, the shock alone stopping her. She did not know where her touchy-feely persona was coming from. It wasn't something she had experienced before.

Ana rolled over on the bed, burying her face in her pillow and letting her arms and legs flail excitedly. If Robin paid her for her work, she could pay her rent and eat. It might even stretch to the supplies she needed for her course.

Life was looking up, and she would do nothing to jeopardise it.

∞∞∞∞

She walked into the lecture hall carrying a large bag from the local bakery. Millie and George were sitting in the same place as yesterday, so she dropped into the row behind them. They both looked up in unison.

“So?” George asked, grinning.

“It was amazing!” Ana responded breathlessly. She raised the bag she was carrying. “Treats to say a huge thank you. Your uncle was amazing. The waitress they partnered me with was amazing, and the restaurant... wow!”

Ana opened the bag and pulled out three coffees and three muffins. “Thank you.”

She didn't have any money in her account yet, but Robin had offered her several shifts. With the pay rise she was getting, life would soon be much easier. If life continued that way, she might even move to a better area and away from James the Creep.

"You didn't need to do this," Millie said, looking concerned, but George nudged her, and she grinned. "But coffee and munchies are never unwelcome."

Ana smiled back. "Well, if it wasn't for you both being so kind, I'd still be in a bind. Coffee and cake is the least I can do."

They all fell into a comfortable silence as they drank their coffee and finished their muffins.

Their lecturer entered before they had finished, so they all had to face the front and listen. Ana looked forward to the lecture ending and hoped George and Millie would be free to meet up. She wanted to tell someone about how amazing last night had been in more detail.

Millie and George insisted she joined them and filled them in on the previous evening. Ana was answering their questions before they had even left the lecture hall.

"What did you think of Julie?" Millie nudged her shoulder as they set off towards the cafeteria.

Ana smiled. "She is lovely. She really helped me last night."

Realising she hadn't mentioned Julie's name. Ana spun on Millie, head tilting, as she gave her a quizzical look.

"Oops," was Millie's response, clearly not sorry at all, as she turned to George, who simply nodded.

"Julie is George's girlfriend. George asked her to keep an eye on you last night and give you all the support you needed."

George looked down, embarrassed, but Ana felt a warmth spread through her body. Raising her hand, she rested it against George's arm.

"Thank you, George, that was kind of you. I appreciate it. Julie made my first shift..." Ana struggled to think of the correct word. A word her new friends might understand... accepted would sound strange. But Ana realised that for the first time in her life, strangers accepted her.

George saved her by blushing and shaking her head. "It was no problem. Julie liked you," she mumbled, a small smile touching her lips.

"I want to know who the hot older guy was?" Millie chirped up, linking her

arm through Ana's and George's before dragging them both towards the cafeteria.

The reprieve was brief. As soon as they arrived, Millie shot off again to get the coffees. George shrugged when Ana went to protest.

Millie returned in record time, almost throwing the coffee and snacks on the table in her rush to get seated. Unlike the previous days, the large space was almost empty. The white tables were ready and waiting for the student rush. Once again, they had taken up residence in the back corner.

"Older guy?" she spluttered.

Ana raised an eyebrow at George, who groaned. George had clearly not expected Millie to bring up what she had told her. Obviously, Julie had spoken to George about Andrew but not shared the details with her.

"What?" Millie said, looking offended. "Don't tell me you are not dying to know Georgina Lawson."

Ana couldn't help but laugh. These two were a strange couple of friends, but Ana felt Millie wasn't being salacious. Instead, she was asking out of interest.

Ana sat back, an unusual feeling of warmth infusing her body.

"He is, was, my ex-brother-in-law," she started. The two girls stared at her, open-mouthed. "My sister is fourteen years older than me. They were married when I was thirteen and divorced when I was fifteen. I was at boarding school for most of the time they were together, so I hardly know him."

The whole situation was surreal. Ana had barely known Andrew. He was a stranger who had married her sister. Ana had hardly known her sister. Ana had been four when Eva left home for university. Her big sister had been absent for much of Ana's childhood, although she had been there for comparison. Ana had found out early on that she could never compete with her perfect sister. Eva had been the perfect student, the perfect sports person, and the perfect daughter. Ana had been substandard in every way. It had been a relief when they shipped her off to boarding school at age ten. Ana had hoped being away from home, her life would have improved, but her parents had dictated what extracurricular activities she could and couldn't take part in, and if her grades slipped for any reason, they squirrelled her away until they rose again. They had refused to give their permission for her to leave the school grounds, and, as a result, it had made her an outsider looking in. Life had been as lonely at boarding school in a dorm full of girls as it had been at

home in her own bedroom.

Ana had been twelve when she had come home for the holidays, and Eva had arrived with a new boyfriend in tow. The boyfriend had kind blue eyes that sparkled when he talked. She had overheard her father saying to her mother, *he had a strong, determined jaw that would see him go far.*

To Ana, all she had seen was his floppy blond hair.

Ana wanted to laugh as it kept flopping in his eyes, making him brush it back, unlike her sister, who didn't have a hair out of place. He talked about their core surgical training and life at the hospital where they were stationed. He made it sound so interesting and exciting. Ana could have listened to him talk all weekend.

Both he and Eva were in their final year before they got to specialise. Andrew had talked about his desire to become a cardiothoracic surgeon, which had impressed her father, and for the first time in twelve years, someone had also been interested in her. Andrew had asked her questions, not that she was allowed to answer. Her father had always done that for her. Ana, like the trained monkey she was, had stayed quiet. But it had meant a lot to her that he had shown some interest. None of Eva's other boyfriends ever had, and Eva stayed out of her way or would go out whenever she came home, leaving Ana alone.

Ana still remembered the day she received a school letter letting her know that Eva and Andrew were getting married. The wedding was being held in Cyprus, and Ana had never been abroad. Her parents had always holidayed while she was in school, citing that it was cheaper. When Ana had been called in to see the head teacher, she had felt like her insides were vibrating. She had bounced her way to the office expecting to be told her parents would collect her. Instead, she was told her parents were going to be out of the country attending her sister's wedding and that they had made a neighbour her guardian in their absence. The head teacher had made it clear to Ana that she wanted no issues while she was their responsibility. Ana remembered swallowing hard, not wanting to let the head teacher see how upset she was. Her heart had felt like it was shrinking in her chest. When she made it back to the dorms, she had been violently sick. That day, a hollow feeling swept through her body when she realised she would never be as good as her sister or loved like her sister, and she was an inconvenience to everyone. At that moment, as Ana had sat alone in her dorm room, she promised herself she

would do more, make something of her life. Try to be as good as Eva, and then maybe her father and mother would have time for her. Just maybe she could get them to love her.

Millie and George didn't press any further, and the conversation returned to lighter topics. Topics that George and Millie included Ana in, like whose house party they would attend over the weekend and which shops they would frequent. By the time Ana made it home to prepare for her next shift, her heart felt lighter, her stomach fluttering.

Chapter Ten

Andrew

After a day of reviewing CVs, Andrew's brain was about ready to explode. Rubbing the muscle knots out of his neck, he made a mental note never to go into an administration role. The only thing he could be thankful for was the details of the six potential candidates printed out in front of him. As he stared at the pile, the law of averages told him at least one out of the six would be a perfect fit for Olivia and him.

All the women he'd shortlisted were free or coming to the end of their current contracts. The agencies had promised the process would be quick and pain-free. After speaking to Suzie, Andrew decided he wanted Olivia to be part of the process, so he had arranged the first interviews for the following evening. He wanted to see how she and any potential nanny interacted.

Some women wanted live-in accommodation, but all of them had stated they would need a room to stay over in. Should he require them to work late. The mere thought of someone sharing his space sent shudders sweeping down his spine. It wasn't ideal, but needs must. Thank god he'd had the foresight to buy a house with a basement annexe. He set up his gym down there and used it for storage, but with a light renovation and some new furniture, it would provide the nanny with their own space, whether they lived in or stayed over on Tuesday nights or at weekends.

A knock sounded at the door, and Suzie popped her head in.

"I'm leaving now," she said. "How's it gone?"

"Good," Andrew said, waving the stack of printouts in front of him. "Six candidates. Interviews start tomorrow evening. I'm going to talk to Olivia about it tonight and get her involved."

Suzie smiled. "Perfect. Having some ownership of choice will help her adjust faster. It has always worked with my children." Suzie looked at her watch. "Speaking of which. I need to be going. See you tomorrow."

Andrew waved goodbye as Suzie shut the door behind her. A minute passed before his mobile rang. It was his mother.

“Hey, Mum,” he said after hitting the accept button.

“Andrew, we need to talk. What is going on with Olivia? She was distraught this morning about going to school. She stormed off when we were making cookies as it went wrong and shut herself in the bedroom. When I went to see her, she was sobbing her heart out. Olivia refuses to tell me why.”

Andrew sighed, pinching the top of his nose hard to stem the oncoming headache.

“I’m on my way, Mum. I’ll explain when I get there.”

Andrew grabbed the files from his desk and stuffed them in his bag. Grabbing his keys, he made his way down to the hospital car park.

He arrived at his mum and dad’s house in record time. Pulling onto their drive, he climbed the three steps to their front door in a single bound. His mum was already opening the door before he knocked.

“Kitchen now,” his mother said, her face telling him she was out of patience.

“Olivia?” Andrew asked.

“With your father playing a board game. She can wait. I want to know what’s going on with my granddaughter.”

Andrew knew there was no point in arguing with her, so he followed her into the kitchen, dropping himself into the chair.

His mum placed a cup of steaming tea in front of him. A benefit of the phone tracking app she had insisted upon. She knew when he was on his way so she could get the dinner done on the nights she fed him when they had Olivia.

“Well?”

“Olivia has been having a few issues at school...”

“And I’m only just hearing about this now?”

Andrew filled his mother in on all the events that had been occurring over the past couple of months. By the time he had finished, his mother was slumped in the chair next to him.

“That’s it,” she said when Andrew shrugged. “We are cancelling Australia. We can postpone it until the new year.”

“You will do no such thing!” Andrew said. His tone let his mother know he would not even entertain it. “You have two sons, and the other one is looking

forward to seeing you. Olivia's happiness is my issue. I need to get to the core of her problems."

It was at that point his father entered, holding Olivia's hand. Olivia slipped from his grasp and threw herself at Andrew, her arms encircling his neck, squeezing him tight. Andrew scooped her up, returning her hug, pulling her onto his lap.

"Hey, sunshine."

Andrew's dad walked into the kitchen and leaned against the side.

"Are you going to tell Daddy, Olivia, or do you want me to?"

Andrew's eyes flew to his dad. Had he uncovered what both he and his mum hadn't been able to do? Olivia nestled further into Andrew's neck.

"Okay," Andrew's dad said. "It looks like a few people have been a little unkind to Olivia. Two boys have been excluding her from their conversations at the table because..." Olivia's arms tightened around his neck. Andrew ran his hand up and down her back, reassuring her that whatever was wrong, it would be okay. "She's been told to stay quiet because she doesn't know what she's talking about, as she hasn't got a mum."

Andrew's heart lurched. He uncurled her arms from his neck and used his hand to lift her chin until she was looking at him.

"Is this the boy whose artwork you destroyed?"

Olivia averted her gaze. "He told me I couldn't speak 'cause my mummy didn't want me. He said I didn't know what it was like to have a mummy, so I couldn't join in their conversation."

Andrew's heart moved to his throat, and he forced himself to swallow hard before allowing himself to speak.

"Have you spoken to Mrs Grant?" Andrew asked.

Olivia shook her head.

"Does Skylar know?"

Despite being only seven as Olivia's best friend, he hoped that Skylar would side with her, remembering her own experience of exclusion in the past.

Olivia nodded again, and Andrew breathed a sigh of relief.

"Skylar stood up for me," she said. "But Timmy ignored her. She's okay and allowed in the group because she has a mummy and a daddy. She has two daddies and two mummies, even if one is in heaven."

"You have a mummy," Andrew's mum dropped in.

Olivia turned on her, her face a hard mask. Andrew had never seen Olivia this angry.

“No, I don’t. She left me and my daddy. She didn’t want me.”

With that, Olivia descended into floods of tears. Andrew rocked her while she sobbed. He knew there was nothing he could say to make this better. Olivia’s mum had deserted them both. She’d never wanted children, and when a stomach bug had caused her birth control to fail, she’d made it perfectly clear it was her or the baby. When Eva had wanted to put the baby up for adoption, Andrew was horrified. He wondered who the hell he’d married. He still couldn’t understand it. After Olivia had been born, Eva had held her in her arms. Andrew thought he’d seen her soften, but then as her parents had arrived, she had hardened, handing over their newborn and telling him to get out of her sight. Her father had stepped in front of him, blocking his view. Andrew had taken their daughter and left. He chose his daughter and would make the same choice every time.

Olivia cried herself to sleep on Andrew’s chest. Both of his parents looked as distressed as he was.

“That’s it, we’re not going,” his mum stated.

“Yes, you are!” Andrew replied. “I have several interviews lined up for a potential nanny. The positions are live-in. If everything works out...” Andrew sighed, his eyes locking on his daughter. “Maybe I can do what you have nagged me to do for years. Get out there and find a partner. Find Olivia a mummy.”

Andrew’s dad moved forward and placed a hand on his wife’s shoulder, stopping her from saying any more. They all sat in silence, no one taking their eyes off the sleeping child. Andrew stood up, Olivia in his arms. He needed to get her home and into bed.

“I will speak to Mrs Grant and let her know what is going on. She’ll be able to monitor Olivia and ensure that Timmy understands the consequences of his actions.”

Andrew carried his exhausted daughter to the car. Placing her in her seat and strapping her in. His mother came up behind him, a boxed dinner in hand.

“Your supper,” she said, pulling him down and into a hug. “I love you, honey, both you and that little girl. Let me know if there is anything I can do for either of you.”

“You can go to Australia and have an amazing time,” Andrew said, hugging her back before turning and hugging his dad.

“Thank you, Dad. I’m not sure how you did it, but you got through to her. At least now I know what I’m up against.”

“I’m just glad we’ve uncovered what has happened. She’s a precious little girl, and I don’t like to see her hurting,” Andrew’s dad said.

Andrew could only nod, his throat thick with emotion. His dad gripped his shoulder, squeezing it as Andrew slid into the driver’s seat. As he pulled out of their drive, he looked in the mirror at his daughter’s sleeping form. He had thought he was doing the right thing, protecting Olivia from other women and potential relationships. Had he been wrong? He had to admit he had met no one he wanted in his life. Maybe if he had, he’d have acted differently. Was that a by-product of his and Eva’s relationship?

Andrew sighed as he focused on the road ahead. It was obvious things were going to need to change. His mission of finding new childcare would hopefully take care of one issue.

Chapter Eleven

Andrew

Andrew had finished work early to ensure he was home in plenty of time to prep for the interviews. Four of the women the agency had contacted had responded positively to the position, and they had also provided details of two more suitable for the job. Andrew had explained the situation to Olivia at breakfast, and she had been excited. Her strong bond with Nanny Bea being a positive incentive.

Andrew had picked Olivia up straight after school. After a lunchtime telephone conversation with Laura, he knew that the issue between Timmy and Olivia was being dealt with. Laura had apologised that she had missed the interaction. Andrew had reminded her she was a teacher, not Superwoman. Olivia, however, was much happier when he collected her, which Andrew saw as a positive start.

Olivia's face lit up when the first knock on the door happened five minutes before schedule. Andrew took both things as a positive sign.

Three hours later, Andrew was about ready to pull his hair out. The first lady had been the same age as Nanny Bea. Andrew had seen that as a positive on her CV, as Olivia had loved Nanny Bea. The only problem was she had turned up, not like Mary Poppins, but more like a character from a Roald Dahl novel... and not one of the nice ones! Olivia had taken one look at her, given him a wide-eyed stare and ran off to hide in her room.

The second nanny had arrived late, with a weak apology. She had busied herself looking around and started making demands. Another resounding no.

The third had been too giddy for Andrew's taste. He found his heckles rising after being in her presence for five minutes. The thought of sharing his home with her made him feel sick. Even though Olivia seemed to like her. Andrew was not sure. Even with her living in the basement, he couldn't stand it.

The interviews got worse, not better. When they saw the last one out, Olivia covered her eyes and collapsed back onto the sofa with a dramatic sigh. “Well, that didn’t go very well,” she said, sounding very like her grandmother.

Andrew tried hard not to laugh, instead, he rubbed his hand over his mouth. “There are lots more on the list. We have three weeks to find someone. We have time to find the perfect person.”

He only hoped he wasn’t setting himself up for a fall.

Olivia leant forward and patted his knee. “It will all work out, Daddy. Have faith. Someone will turn up.”

Now she sounded like him. Andrew pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head.

“They will sunshine.”

They had to. Andrew’s thoughts went back to his conversation with Sally. He looked down at his daughter, whose features were so like Eva’s, although her colouring was blonde like his. Olivia had missed having a female in her life. The only women she saw were his mum, Star, Skylar’s mum, and Laura. A thought sprung to mind.

Would Ana be interested in getting to know his daughter?

He shook off the thought. Of course, she wouldn’t.

Why would a twenty-two-year-old woman be interested in a seven-year-old girl? Then again, when his mum and dad went to Australia, maybe Ana would like to get to know her niece. Andrew began to mull the idea over as he got Olivia ready for bed. It had bones as an idea, but there was no rush.

After putting Olivia back to bed, he completed the feedback forms on the candidates he had interviewed and asked the agencies to call him. He could arrange some more interviews. They could not all be as disastrous as today’s had been.

Chapter Twelve

Ana

The following week went by in a haze of work, university, and socialising with Millie and George. It was more coffee and gossip, but she loved spending time in their company, and they made her laugh. The light-hearted feeling flooding her system, she attributed to them.

Millie and George, of course, continued to bamboozle Ana into partying with them. She had made enough realistic excuses that they let her get away with it. Plus, as she explained. Her new job often ended past midnight. The nights she was not working, she needed to catch up on her ‘beauty sleep.’ They told her they would forgive her for now, but that wouldn’t last forever. Ana had never been one for partying, even when she had been on her previous degree. Some people may have gone wild, gaining their freedom, but Ana could not see the point. She enjoyed her new friends’ company, but the idea of going out and getting drunk did not appeal to her. The one time she had tried it, she hated it, so she had refrained ever since.

That night, her shift finished early. It was a week since she had first started working at Mount Crystals. Robin had called her into his office and asked how she was finding it. She was sure her beaming smile had given it away, but she told him she loved it if he had been in any doubt. The staff were welcoming, the patrons polite, well, most of them, and she had earned more cash in one week than she had in almost a month at Randy’s. She had paid her rent, and life was good.

It was dark and quiet when Ana let herself into the flat, which was not unusual for the middle of the week. She looked around in disgust at the pizza boxes and unwashed plates, cups and roll-ups that littered every surface of the living room. James had had a party the night before. She had come home from work to a flat full of stoners. Lucky for her, The Creep had been nowhere in sight, and the flat was crowded. She’d snuck into her room

unnoticed and resorted to using face wipes to remove her makeup and bottled water to clean her teeth. She had not wanted to risk getting caught in the bathroom.

Ana walked into the kitchen and flicked the kettle on to make herself a drink. Taking out the folded piece of paper Robin had given her at the end of her shift, she stared at it before stuffing it back in her pocket. It was Andrew's phone number. She'd think about what it meant later.

"Hey beautiful," a voice sounded behind her.

Ana spun around to find James standing in the doorway, in sweatpants and not much else. Averting her eyes, Ana turned back to make her drink, deciding to ignore him.

"You going to make one of those for me?" he asked, walking into the kitchen and propping himself up against the counter.

"Sure," Ana said, a chill settling over her body. "What do you want?"

"That's the million-dollar question," he said, moving closer to her and running a finger down her arm.

Ana shrugged him off and moved away, only to have him follow her.

"I think I'll skip that drink," she said, moving towards the door only to find her exit blocked.

"Now Ana, that's not very nice," he said, smirking, "You were going to make your landlord a drink. I think I'll have a coffee."

He leaned against the doorframe, making it impossible for Ana to leave without brushing past him.

Ana turned back towards the side, grabbing two cups from the draining board. She glanced at James, who was still lounging in the doorway with an arrogant smirk on his face. He loved himself.

Ana looked back at the cups in front of her. She took her coffee from her cupboard and added two generous scoops to the mugs before adding the boiling water.

"Milk?" she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

"Black," he replied.

Ana could feel his eyes burning into her. She needed to get away from him. James had always made her uneasy from the day she moved in. His gaze felt like spiders running over her skin. She had tried her hardest to ensure they were never alone together, and she had managed it until then.

Moving to the fridge, Ana grabbed her milk and added a splash to her cup.

She picked them up and held one out to James, willing him to move out of the doorway so she could slip around him and into the safety of her lockable room.

“Aren’t you going to bring it over to me?” he asked, showing no desire to move from his current position.

Ana sighed and walked towards him, holding out the mug as she went. Keeping the coffee mug at arm’s length between her and him.

As she got closer, he reached out to take the steaming mug.

“Goodnight then,” Ana said, moving to make her way past him.

“Aren’t you going to stay and drink your coffee with me?” he asked. “It’s about time we got to know one another.”

“Not tonight,” Ana said, pulling her jacket tighter around herself. “It’s been a long day, and I’m exhausted.”

Ana decided it was now or never, so she went to go past him, head held high.

“It’s still early,” James said, moving, so she now found herself pressed against the wall. He, once again, blocked her exit.

“James. I’m tired. I just want to go to bed,” Ana said, as calmly as her voice would allow, a deep sense of dread sitting in her stomach.

She hoped one of their flatmates would come and rescue her, but nobody was expected back. She hadn’t been due back this early.

James raised his hand to her face, running his fingers down the side of her cheek.

Leaning in, he whispered, “I can always keep you warm.”

Ana jumped at his breath touching her ear. Her coffee slipped, and the boiling liquid soaking both James’ bare chest and tracksuit bottoms. Yelling, he threw himself backwards.

“You bitch!” he yelled, rubbing at the hot liquid on his chest, spilling his own down himself at the same time.

Ana pushed herself off the wall and out of the kitchen. Dashing across the living room, she ran down the hallway towards the sanctuary of her bedroom. Only when she got to the locked door, did she realise her bag and keys were still on the side in the kitchen. Ana leaned against the door, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps, her heart pounding violently in her chest. *Think!* She could hear James cursing and banging around in the kitchen. She hammered on some of the other bedroom doors. Maybe she was wrong.

Maybe some of her housemates were home. If someone else was here, she could retrieve her bag. James would have to back off.

Ana's heart sank as the doors remained closed, the flat silent. She heard James before she saw him. It was now or never. She needed to get out of there. She couldn't lock herself in the bathroom. A screwdriver would unlock that door.

Ana ran back down the hallway. She stopped at the living room door. James faced her across the room, his body filling the kitchen doorway. Ana's hands and body began to shake. The only thing separating them was furniture. Ana side-eyed the front door to her left. As if sensing her intention, James moved, but Ana was faster, unhindered by the cumbersome sofa that was in his path.

Ripping open the front door, she threw herself down the cluttered hallway to the stairs, pulling one of the bikes over as she went, giving herself time to get away. She heard James curse again as he tripped, but she didn't stop. Rushing onto the street, she hailed a passing taxi who swerved towards her. She would be forever grateful that he stopped, whether it was her desperation or something else.

"Are you okay, Miss?" he asked as she yanked open the door and dived in just as James burst onto the street behind her.

"If we're getting away from him, we should go now," the taxi driver said, looking in the mirror as James started jogging towards them.

"Just drive, please," she said, her breath coming in sharp bursts.

The taxi driver took off just as James reached the edge of the pavement.

"Where to?" he asked when they had reached the end of the road.

Ana thought for a moment. A shudder swept through her body, and tears pricked the backs of her eyes. She didn't have any money or her phone. She had nowhere to go. The taxi driver remained silent as if sensing she needed a moment.

Ana shoved her hands in her pockets and slumped further in the seat, dejected. It was then her hand touched a square of paper in her pocket. Fishing it out, she stared at the piece of paper Robin had given her earlier. Ana's heart beat wildly in her chest as she unfolded it.

"Where to?" The driver asked again.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do you have a phone I can borrow? I've left mine back at the flat. I—"

The taxi driver held up a hand, catching her eye in the mirror.

“No need to explain,” he said. “Here.”

He passed his phone into the back seat.

“Thank you,” Ana said, offering him a smile.

She thanked all the gods that there were still good people in the world.

Dialling the number Robin had given her, Ana prayed someone would pick up. The phone rang four times, and Ana was about to hang up before a gruff voice answered.

“Hello,” came a sleepy response.

“Andrew?” Ana choked out.

“Yes.”

The voice on the other end of the phone became more alert. Ana supposed it must be a side effect of years of being on call and having to wake up to deal with a patient.

“Andrew, it’s Ana.”

“Ana?”

She could hear him fumbling in the background.

“I’m really sorry to bother you... but I don’t know what else to do.”

“Where are you? I’ll come and get you.”

Andrew’s voice sounded serious.

“No need,” she replied. “I’m in a taxi.”

“Okay, pass me to the driver. I’ll give him the details. Come to my house.”

Ana paused, a lump forming in her throat.

“Thank you,” she mumbled before handing the phone back to the driver.

The driver took it and spoke to Andrew. Agreeing and then ending the call. Ana sat back, taking in the sights of London. They left the area she had called home in the busy East End and headed north into one of the richer, more affluent areas of London. It wasn’t long before the taxi driver pulled up outside a beautiful, huge, Victorian house. Large metal gates and a high brick wall sat on the roadside. The gates opened, allowing the taxi access. Andrew must have seen them pull up. Large sash windows faced the gravel driveway. All the houses they had passed on that road were breathtaking.

She realised Andrew lived in the lap of luxury.

“Here you go,” the taxi driver said.

Before Ana could say anything, Andrew appeared at the driver’s door. He was wearing tracksuit bottoms and a t-shirt. His dark-blond hair looked like

he had just got out of bed, which made him look a lot younger than his thirty-six years. He bent down and spoke to the taxi driver. Ana struggled to hear what they were saying as she found her gaze locked on Andrew.

Ana jumped as Andrew opened her taxi door.

“Come on,” he said, offering her his hand. “Let’s get you inside and warm.”

Ana took the hand he offered. Tingles radiated down her arm where their skin touched. She relaxed and let him help her out of the car. It was the shock. She knew that. She had just escaped being almost assaulted by her landlord. Ana let out a shuddering breath as Andrew lead her into his house.

“I’m sorry,” she stuttered as she entered the large hallway. “I didn’t know where else to go... I left my phone...”

A lone tear made its way down her cheek.

Andrew said nothing and simply pushed open the door to his right. He ushered her into what looked to be a sitting room.

“Take a seat,” he said, motioning to the sofa. “I’ll get you a drink.” Not waiting to see what she did, Andrew left her alone.

She could hear him crashing and banging in the room next door and a kettle boiling.

Ana took a seat on the sofa, sinking into its cushions. Looking around the room, the walls were decorated an eggshell blue, which accentuated the colours in the sofa pattern. Ana ran her hand over the material, centring herself. Whoever had decorated this room had beautiful taste. She wondered whether it was Andrew or whether he had a woman in his life.

Her thoughts were cut off as Andrew returned, placing a cup of tea next to her before sitting on the other sofa opposite.

Chapter Thirteen

Andrew

Andrew stared at the woman in front of him, amazed to have Ana in his home. When he'd called and asked to speak to Robin, he wasn't one hundred per cent sure what he was doing. When he'd left his number, he wasn't even sure she'd use it or if she'd want anything to do with him or Olivia. It was not like things with her sister had ended well. It was not like he'd ever really got to know Ana. She had been someone in the background. Hardly mentioned and barely visible during the three and a half years he and Eva had been together. He wasn't even sure what had prompted him to ring Robin Downsend earlier that day, but as he looked at the distressed young woman in front of him, he was pleased he had made that call.

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It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision when Andrew picked up the phone.

"Mount Crystals, Ellie speaking. How may I help?" a chirpy voice answered on the third ring.

Andrew took a deep breath, unable to believe he was actually doing this. "Hi, Ellie. I was wondering if I could speak to Robin Downsend, please."

"Of course, sir. Who may I say is calling?"

"Tell him it's Andrew Dennison."

Andrew knew Robin Downsend would have no idea who he was. He just hoped he'd be willing to take his call.

"If you could hold the line Mr Dennison, I'll see if Mr Downsend is available."

The phone clicked, and classical music filled the void. As he waited, Andrew once again questioned his actions. Before he had time to hang up, a

voice came over the phone.

“Mr Dennison. This is Robin Downsend. How can I help?”

Maybe one of the plus points of working on national television was strangers took his calls.

“Hi, Robin. I was wondering if I could ask a favour. One of your waitresses Santana Lewis, sorry, Ana.”

Robin interrupted, “I’m sorry, Andrew, but I can’t discuss any of my staff. I hope you understand.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Andrew said, realising how bad this must sound. An older man asking after a beautiful young woman like Ana. “Ana is my sister-in-law – sorry was my sister-in-law. She’s now my ex-sister-in-law.” Andrew paused. He must sound like a crazy person. Huffing out a breath, he started again. “I was wondering if I could leave my number for Ana. She is my ex-sister-in-law, my daughter’s aunt, and we haven’t seen her in seven years. I wondered if she wanted to make contact, but the ball is completely in her court.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“There is no pressure, I promise,” Andrew added quickly. “If she wants, she can put it straight in the bin, and I will never bother her again. But can I ask you to pass my number on to Ana? I would just like her to have it. As her ex-brother-in-law, not as a stalker.” Andrew almost groaned aloud at his words, realising that is exactly what every stalker would probably say.

What was this? A highly intelligent man, who stood up in public, presented papers to colleagues on his findings, had a slot on national TV, was turning into a bumbling idiot over leaving his telephone number for his ex-sister-in-law. He must need a holiday. Things were clearly getting too much.

“I can certainly pass it on, but what she chooses to do with it is up to her,” Robin said, his voice cool. Robin’s protectiveness towards his staff left Andrew feeling oddly pleased.

“Thank you, that is all I ask.”

Andrew had given his number to Robin, who said he would pass it on to Ana during her next shift. As Andrew ended the call, he realised Robin had been careful not to mention when that was.

It had clearly been that evening.



“I’m sorry,” Ana mumbled. “I didn’t know where else to go. I left my phone.”

Andrew saw how pale she looked and wondered what had happened. No phone and no money. The taxi driver had mentioned a guy chasing after her when he had gone to pay him, but he’d refused to accept his money. The taxi driver had said he was just glad she was safe. Andrew had made a note of his taxi number and would ensure they compensated him.

He deserved it.

“Where’s your phone?” he asked.

He didn’t want to spook Ana or get her to freeze up on him. He also didn’t want to make any assumptions. The guy chasing after her could have been a lover or a boyfriend. He realised apart from knowing she worked as a waitress, he knew little to nothing about the woman sitting on his sofa.

“At my flat,” she said, her eyes locking with his. Andrew watched as a shudder rocked her body, and Andrew realised she was going into shock. Grabbing a blanket out of the basket next to the chair, Andrew stepped forward and wrapped it around Ana’s shoulders.

Andrew breathed a sigh of relief as she relaxed into its warmth, and he took that moment to kneel in front of her. “Do you want to tell me what happened?” he asked.

Ana scrunched her eyes shut and inhaled deeply. After a moment, she opened them, reaching for the tea he placed on the table beside her. She cradled the cup in her hands before once again meeting his eyes.

“My landlord—” she paused.

Andrew watched as she swallowed, trying to get her emotions under control. Another shudder wracked her body.

Andrew moved back, giving her space before sitting back on the chair and picking up his own tea.

“He got a little over-friendly.”

Andrew watched as Ana grimaced.

“I poured boiling coffee over him... by accident... and didn’t hang around. I left my purse and phone on the side in the kitchen. Your number was still in my pocket.”

Andrew wanted to cheer at Ana's words. It sounded like the creep had got all he deserved if his advances were unwelcome.

"Well, I'm glad you used it," Andrew replied.

He was already in bed when she called. His five thirty start was a killer if he didn't get enough sleep, but this had been an emergency, and he was glad she had felt secure enough to use it.

Ana said nothing else. Instead, Andrew watched as she took in her surroundings. He held his breath. He'd bought the newly renovated Victorian town house from a developer, who had done a beautiful job of restoring it. Andrew had bought it during the final stages, so he had had quite a lot of say in the finishes the developer installed. He was proud of his home and wanted Ana to like it.

The sitting room they were in was large, with high ceilings and beautiful sash windows. The fireplace was original with a large surround. Andrew watched as Ana's eyes locked on the photographs positioned on top. Getting up, she walked towards it, the blanket still wrapped around her shoulders. Andrew found his eyes drawn to her; she looked like something out of a Christmas movie. Ana picked up a photo of Olivia and stared at it. A look of longing passed over her face. A small smile graced her lips. Before he knew it, Andrew found himself stood beside her. "That was Olivia when she was three." Olivia had been in the park and was grinning at the camera. She had loved her photo being taken when she was little. In the picture Olivia had just come down the slide for the twentieth time and had been laughing so hard, Andrew had captured the moment on his phone.

"She is beautiful," Ana whispered.

Andrew grabbed another, more recent photo from the table and handed it to Ana.

"This one was taken last Christmas at our friend's wedding."

The photo was of him and Olivia at Star and Damian's wedding. He received the photo from Star, who told him it was too nice not to be shown after the wedding photographer had taken it. Her thoughtfulness had touched Andrew.

Ana's face lit up at the photo and she ran a finger over Olivia's face.

"She looks so like you," she said, smiling up at him.

Andrew's breath hitched, and he rubbed his chest before returning her smile.

“Poor girl,” he joked.

Ana shook her head. “Lucky girl.” She sighed, handing him the photograph before making her way back to the sofa. “I’m sorry I’ve interrupted your evening,” she said.

Andrew wondered how long Ana had been in London, if she had nowhere else to turn. Andrew felt disappointed. She may only be here out of desperation, but... it was giving him a chance to talk to her, get to know her. Ana seemed interested in Olivia. Maybe she would want to be part of their lives. Olivia would love to know she had an aunt. An aunt who was only fifteen years older than her. Andrew’s heart spasmed as he realised there were only fifteen years between his daughter and her aunt. There were fourteen between him and Ana. The young woman in front of him was as close to his daughter’s age as she was to his.

“Olivia isn’t here tonight,” Andrew explained. “She’s staying with my parents. I have an early start in the morning, but I know she’d love to meet you.”

Ana smiled at him.

“I’d love to meet her,” she said, a frown marring her brow. “I don’t know how I’d explain.”

“Explain what?”

“Why Eva left.”

“But you wouldn’t know that,” Andrew said.

He himself struggled to understand why his ex-wife had left.

Ana looked down, a sense of sadness crossing her face.

“I just don’t want to cause any distress to Olivia or you. I should never have come here.”

“That’s fine. We don’t need to tell her,” Andrew replied. “It’s not like she knows about you.”

Ana stared at him wide-eyed.

When Eva had said she wanted nothing to do with the baby, Andrew had assumed she would come around. She had carried their daughter for nine months, had felt her kick, had given birth to her. He had waited and waited, hoping she would change her mind, that if it was post-partum depression, she would come back to them, but she never had. He had to finally accept their marriage was over, and she wanted nothing to do with him or their baby daughter when a solicitor’s letter arrived giving him full custody.

After the solicitor's letter arrived, Andrew had tried to speak to his in-laws, but they, too had closed ranks. His father-in-law had been clear that he and the baby were no longer welcome. Andrew had left their house in shock. He had looked at Eva's mum, but she had turned her back and left the room. He had always known they had different family values, but he had never thought they'd turn their back on their own flesh and blood.

"I'd love to meet Olivia." Ana snatched Andrew out of his thoughts and back into the present.

Andrew felt his shoulders relax, his hand moving up to knead the back of his neck. He hadn't realised how much he'd wanted to hear those words.

"Maybe we hold off telling her I'm her aunt," Ana surprised him by saying. "I don't want to confuse her or have her asking questions about my sister or family. Questions I can't answer."

Once again, Andrew wondered what the young woman in front of him had been through. Did she really have no contact with her family?

"How are your parents?" Andrew asked.

Ana shrugged, her laugh hollow. "I don't know. I stopped speaking to them over four months ago." Her coldness surprised Andrew after the warmth she'd shown when asking about Olivia. He decided against pushing her any further.

"Would you like to stay the night?" Andrew asked, changing the subject. "The spare room is made-up."

"I don't want to put you out," Ana said, "But I'd be grateful. I'm not sure where else to go."

"Well, you are family, and you are more than welcome to stay. It's late, and I need to be up and out at five." Andrew looked at his watch and realised it had gone midnight.

"I'm so sorry." Ana looked distraught. "Just give me a shout, and I'll be up and ready to leave when you need to."

Andrew laughed. "No, you won't. No-one wants to be up at that ungodly hour. I'll leave you a spare key on the sideboard near the front door. Just lock up when you leave." He stopped before adding, "It's not safe for you to go back to your flat alone. You are welcome to stay here until you find somewhere else. We can collect your belongings tomorrow evening after I finish work." Andrew watched as she was about to turn him down, so he added as a sweetener, "Olivia will be here tomorrow night. I know she'd love

to meet you.”

Ana’s face lit up. Heat radiated through his chest, making him want to punch the air. He wasn’t above using his daughter as a magnet. He did not want Ana to go back to her flat. Her landlord was a predator, and he doubted Ana was the first and wouldn’t be the last. Ana should report him, but now was not the time to bring that up. His protective instinct was coming out, and his priority was ensuring her safety.

Andrew watched as Ana bit the inside of her lip. “Are you sure you don’t mind me staying for a few days? I’ll aim to be out of your hair by the weekend.”

“It is no problem,” Andrew said, giving Ana a wide smile. “Now we have that settled. I can show you to your room. Unfortunately, I have an early start and am not as young as I used to be.” Andrew got up and led Ana up the stairs to one of the spare rooms. He grabbed a towel out of the airing cupboard and a new toothbrush from the bathroom cabinet.

Ana took what he was offering before pausing at her bedroom door. “Thank you, Andrew. You are a wonderful person.”

Before Andrew could reply, she had turned and entered the room, closing the door with a soft click.

Andrew walked into his own room, closing the door. Leaning against it, he dropped his head back. This was not how he expected the evening to go. Andrew closed his eyes before opening them, an idea forming, quickly taking route in his mind. His child-minder interviews to-date had been a disaster. Not one woman he had interviewed in the past week had been what he was looking for. Sally had mentioned her sister looking after her children. Who better to look after Olivia than her own aunt? A slow smile spread across his face. Ana coming into their life at this moment might be a godsend.

As he lay looking at the ceiling. He hoped Ana would return the following evening. If she stayed for a few nights, then he’d see her with Olivia. He had a feeling his daughter was going to love her. He wasn’t wild about the idea of not being honest with Olivia about who she was, but he could see Ana’s dilemma. Olivia was already having issues with her mother’s absence. Maybe finding out about her aunt might not help.

As he lay in bed, he liked the idea more and more. Ana could become Olivia’s child minder. She could stay in the spare room until the annexe was furnished, which would then give Ana her own space. She’d been interested

in meeting Olivia. Sending up a silent prayer, he hoped someone was listening.

Ana might just be the answer to all his problems.

Chapter Fourteen

Ana

Ana rolled over, the silkiness of the sheets beneath her waking her with a start. It took a few moments for her brain to engage and remember where she was and what had happened the night before. Rolling over, Ana groaned into her pillow. What must Andrew think of her, turning up on his doorstep late at night? The poor man had to work this morning, early! Guilt wracked her body. How was she going to face him? She rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling. There were no cracks on this ceiling. Everything was smooth and pristine. They had carefully recreated the cornices and rosary that framed the high ceiling with first-class replicas. Everything about the room was beautiful, from the matching wardrobe and chest of drawers to the king-sized wooden bedframe and heavy brocade curtains with matching bed throw. The furniture was a mixture of old and new, but somehow together, they made a warm and inviting space. She had to admit, whoever had designed this house had immaculate taste. Whether that was her ex-brother-in-law or not, Olivia was lucky to be raised somewhere like this. It screamed love.

Her parent's home had been functional. The house had been large, with sprawling grounds, a sweeping driveway, and imposing gates. Her father had liked to advertise his success to everyone and anyone. The inside had been like a show home. Not a thing could be out of place. Like his daughter, everything had to be perfect. Even Ana's room had, had little character. It was a neutral colour, and everything had its place. He removed anything that didn't fit. Ana's love for textiles and design had come from spending hours drawing pictures of how she would decorate and stage her bedroom. At nine, she had made the mistake of showing him one of her mood boards and room design. She had never seen him so mad; he had thrown himself into a frenzy, telling her she had wasted valuable time when she could have been working. He had grounded her for a month and destroyed the pictures she had made.

That was what had hurt Ana the most. Being grounded made no difference. It was not like she had any friends to go out with, anyway. She could never have birthday parties or go on play dates, so it hadn't taken long for the other children to exclude her. The lack of Internet privilege had hurt. It was her only contact with the outside world and she spent hours scanning fashions, magazines and celebrity websites to see their clothes but also their homes. Ana, however, carefully locked up and hid her passion so she would never make the same mistake again. It had been six months after that they had shipped her off to boarding school. It didn't matter what her room looked like after that; she wasn't home long enough to worry.

Ana pulled herself back into the present. The question now was, what was she going to do? Andrew had been kind enough to come to her rescue, but she hadn't given him much choice and she didn't want to become an unwanted guest. The flat she rented might not be a palace, but it was cheap and convenient for the university. She knew after last night there was no way she could go back. She had not wanted to face James on a good day. Having thrown scolding hot coffee all over him, whether or not he deserved it, it was going to make their living together implausible. The additional fact he was over-friendly and handsy added weight to the argument. Next time, she might not be lucky enough to be holding a hot cup of coffee.

Ana opened her eyes, she stared at the beautiful room she was occupying. It had high ceilings and the curtains that covered the windows were thick and satiny. She was lying on a king-sized bed.

Throwing back the covers, Ana climbed out. Although she couldn't help running her hands over the sheets before she left. She had never slept on cotton that felt as smooth as silk before; the thread counts higher than her daily step count. Andrew had given her an old t-shirt to sleep in before he had left her. Pulling it down, she made her way into the connecting bathroom. Even the en-suite was beautiful, with its large walk-in shower and his and her sinks. Ana stared at herself in the mirror before sweeping her tangled mass of dark brown hair away from her face. She thanked her lucky stars that her hair was poker straight, which meant after a few sweeps of her fingers, it was back under control. Returning it to its tie, she splashed cold water on her face and headed for the shower. She needed to get freshened up and get out of Andrew's house, so she could think straight and get some perspective. It was too easy to dream about living there. She knew she'd have to find somewhere

else to stay, even if that meant a hostel for a few nights. She'd could scan on-line ads in her free periods today and see what was available on the market. Luckily Andrew had given her until the weekend to sort herself out.

After a long, hot, and *peaceful* shower, Ana got dressed in yesterday's clothes and made her way downstairs. Andrew had left her a note on the kitchen island.

Good morning, Ana.

I hope you slept well. Help yourself to anything in the fridge and cupboards.

I've left you a set of keys and some cash. I know you left your purse last night and so you will need money for the Tube.

I'm picking Olivia up at six from after-school club. We will be home shortly after and can have some dinner.

See you later.

Andrew

Ana's heart stuttered as she read and reread Andrew's note. He said he looked forward to seeing her again that evening and that Olivia would be with him, so she would get the chance to meet her niece. Ana looked at the money, and her heart swelled at his thoughtfulness. She wouldn't be too proud to accept his help, but she would repay him as soon as she had retrieved her purse. Ana realised Andrew was a kind human-being. It was not every day a virtual stranger rocked up on your doorstep and begged for help. Yes, she might be his sister-in-law, but he barely knew her. He could be trusting the wrong person. She could empty his house, and he gave her the keys to do it. Not that she would, but trust was not something that came easily to Ana. She had never had the chance to build that kind of relationship with others. She knew she kept others at arm's length. It had always been easier that way. Less of a chance someone could hurt her if she didn't let them in.

Ana grabbed the keys and left the house. She'd grab something to eat when she reached university rather than take more than she already had. She was meeting George and Millie in the textiles' room as they were going to start the practical part of their project. It was still early, and although it would take her longer to get to the university today, she knew she would still have plenty of time. For this, Ana was grateful. Apart from chatting, they'd spent a fair bit of their time over the past week in the canteen, planning their project, so

for all intents and purposes, they were ahead.

Chapter Fifteen

Ana

“Wow!”

Ana jumped at the sound of Millie’s voice as she entered the empty room. “Someone got lucky last night.” George patted Millie’s arm, and Ana felt herself blush to the roots of her hair.

Millie’s eyes got wider. “You did?” she asked her expression one of shock and awe.

“Leave the poor girl alone,” George chipped in, but Ana could see she was as intrigued as Millie.

“Why do you say that?” Ana asked, feigning innocence as she approached their table. She had no bag with her, so she felt vulnerable.

“Well, you are wearing yesterday’s clothes,” Millie pointed out, her hand motioning to Ana’s clothing. “You are also missing your bag... you are never without your bag!” This is where Ana realised you would pull nothing over on a fashion and textiles student. They were, by default, observant creatures.

Ana dropped herself onto the stool opposite her new friends. Millie lent forward on the table and rested her chin on her hands in anticipation.

Ana shook her head. “It’s not what it looks like. I had a bit of a run-in with James, my landlord.” Millie was beside Ana in a heartbeat, her arm around her shoulder.

“Me and my big mouth,” she said, her teasing tone gone. George had sat upright, her face a mask of concern.

“Are you Okay, Ana?” George asked, leaning forward. Ana had told them about James the Creep during one of their many chats over the past week. They had all laughed together but understood the seriousness of Ana’s situation.

“I’m fine, honestly.” Ana drew a deep breath. “I’m not sure he is. I ended up pouring boiling hot coffee all over him as I made my escape.”

Ana then told them both about running out of the flat and into a taxi.

George sat back, and Millie squeezed her harder. “You go, girl, serves the perv right! Are you going to report him?” Millie asked.

Ana had thought about this late into the night. It would be his word against hers. “There’s nothing to report,” Ana said. “He made me feel uncomfortable. I knew what he was insinuating, but the coffee incident happened before anything else could.”

Millie returned to her seat, and George nodded. It was a difficult one, and Ana was sure she wasn’t the only tenant James had tried it on with. She wouldn’t be the last, but without evidence, she knew the police would have their hands tied. His word against hers. It would have been a misunderstanding; Ana had given him the wrong signals; she knew how these things played out.

“You should have called,” George said.

Ana’s heart warmed. She couldn’t believe she’d only known these two for a little over a week. Ana felt accepted and breathed a lot easier for the first time in her life.

Ana shook her head. “I left my phone and my purse in the rush to get out,” Ana said.

“Oh my god,” Millie said. “Where did you go?”

They looked at her, their minds racing.

“I went to Andrew’s place.”

Ana had to stop herself from laughing as Millie’s jaw dropped open.

“As in ex-brother-in-law, Andrew?” George asked, her eyebrows reaching her hairline.

“His was the only number I had. Robin gave it to me after my shift last night. Andrew called yesterday and left it for me. It was in my pocket.” Ana added. “He paid for the taxi and let me stay the night.”

“Wow, talk about fate,” George said while Millie was busy scribbling something on a piece of paper. She tore the paper out of her notebook and handed it to Ana.

“Our numbers. Keep them folded up in your pocket, or better still, memorise them!” Millie said. One look at Millie and Ana realised she meant it. These two girls had, in a short space of time, become her friends. They cared about her and her well-being. Emotion swirled in Ana’s chest, and she swallowed hard against the lump forming in her throat. Taking the piece of

paper, she looked down at it before folding it up and tucking it into her pocket. These two women did not know what they had just done or what it meant to Ana.

“Thank you.”

“What happens next? You can’t go back to your flat,” Millie said. “My parents would be happy for you to crash at mine.” Ana blinked rapidly at Millie’s words but shook her head.

“I am going back to Andrew’s tonight. He is going to introduce me to my niece.” Ana said. She still wasn’t one hundred per cent happy with the plan, but needs must. Her flat was a no-no, and she would at least get to meet Olivia. Ana felt herself smile at the thought. A warmth spread through her chest. “He has also promised to take me to get my stuff from my flat.”

Millie nodded. “As long as you have somewhere to stay. The offer remains open should you need it... ever!” Ana smiled and grabbed Millie’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“You don’t know what that means to me,” Ana said before sitting back. “Enough about me. We need to get on.” With that, Ana changed the subject, and the three of them spent the rest of the day working on their project.

Ana parted from Millie and George at three. She still had a lot of time to kill before Andrew said he’d be home at six. She didn’t want to risk returning to the flat if James was there. Instead, she had a brainwave. Andrew had mentioned making dinner when he got home. That was one thing Ana could do. She had been making dinner for herself and her parents for years. The rule had always been the first-person home, cooks. So, when Ana was home from Boarding School, they deemed it her job to cook.

Ana dropped into the grocery store she had passed that morning. Using some of the money Andrew had given her, she picked up some ingredients and added them to her shopping bag. Feeling she was contributing, she made her way back to Andrew’s house. A perfect thank you for letting her stay.

Chapter Sixteen

Andrew

Relief flooded Andrew's system when he picked Olivia up without incident. Instead of being offered 'that' look, or being stopped by one of the staff members, he entered the school, found Olivia playing happily with Skylar, and left. Olivia was still quiet in the car on the way home, but Andrew had to admit it had been a long day. He hated the fact she had to stay at school three nights a week, rather than being able to come home. His parents were great, but they had their own lives and the fact they had Olivia two nights, one of which was an all-nighter, Andrew couldn't complain. At least when he got around to hiring a child minder, Olivia could come straight home, even have play dates, like the other children in her class.

Andrew's mind wandered back to Ana. He found his thoughts drifting back to her all day. Whatever had gone down with her landlord the night before had scared her. She had been as pale as a ghost when she had arrived. Never had he been so thankful to have given his number to someone and have them use it.

"How was your day?" Andrew asked, looking in the rear-view mirror, waiting for his daughter to look up.

"Fine," she responded, continuing to twist a piece of ribbon around and around her fingers. It was the same every evening; *fine, okay, all right*. He'd been expecting one-word answers when she became a teenager and thought he had a few more years yet. He'd not expected them when she was seven.

"Just to let you know, there is someone at home. She will stay for a couple of nights." Andrew wasn't sure that was the case, but he thought it better to prepare Olivia. Olivia's eyes clashed with his and he thought he saw a flash of something, but it was gone as fast as it had appeared, her attention returning to the ribbon in her hand.

Andrew sighed as he returned his eyes to the road. They were nearly home,

and he prayed Ana was there. He had laid awake for a long time, running scenarios over in his mind. He hoped this evening, things would fall into place. If everything went to plan, he was hoping Ana would stay for a lot longer than a couple of nights.

Chapter Seventeen

Andrew

The first thing that Andrew noticed when he opened the front door was the smell. Olivia bent down and unbuckled her shoes, but hovered near the door, instead of doing her usual and hightailing it into the kitchen to see what snacks she could squirrel away.

Andrew, understanding his daughter's shyness, gave her a comforting smile and held out his hand before leading her into the kitchen. Ana stood at the island stove, cooking up a storm. The smell of roast chicken filled the air, making his mouth water. He hadn't realised how hungry he was. Andrew looked down at Olivia, who was half hiding behind him. He traced her gaze to the pile of freshly baked cookies. Andrew smiled to himself. Ana must be psychic. Olivia loved cookies.

"Hi," Ana said, looking up and smiling, her eyes shifting straight to Olivia. Ana washed her hands and came around the island towards them.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, motioning to the kitchen and food. "You said about making dinner, and I had some time to kill."

Andrew grinned. "Please don't apologise," he said. "It smells delicious."

Ana knelt to make herself eye level with Olivia, whose head tilted as she watched their interaction. "Hi," Ana said, "You must be Olivia. I'm Ana."

Ana held out her hand for Olivia to shake. Olivia locked eyes with Andrew, and he nodded to show that she should accept. Olivia held Ana's hand, and Andrew noticed Ana's joy when she gazed at his daughter. Olivia smiled back, clinging to his leg with her other hand.

If Ana noticed, she said nothing. She simply smiled as she let go of Olivia's hand.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Olivia. I hope you like cookies?" Ana moved away, pointing to a large plate filled with cookies. Ana smiled at Olivia. "I wasn't sure which you would prefer, so I made two lots. Some chocolate chip

and some plain.”

Andrew held his breath as Olivia moved to stand in front of him.

“I like chocolate chip,” Olivia said, moving towards the island and Ana before climbing up onto the stool, “but daddy, he prefers plain.”

Andrew dared not move as he watched his daughter interact with a virtual stranger. Olivia never put herself forward. She always let others do the talking for her. They said *blood is thicker than water*, but he had never had the chance to see it in action.

As if sensing this was a big moment for Olivia, Ana went back to straining the vegetables. “If you would both like to get washed up, then dinner will be on the table in five minutes.”

Olivia didn’t need to be told twice. She was out of the kitchen in seconds.

Andrew stepped forward but took a leaf out of his daughter’s book and got washed up. Taking the stairs two at a time, he changed out of his work suit and into some jeans and a jumper. Washing his hands in his bathroom, he made his way downstairs to find Olivia hovering outside the door.

When they entered, Ana was busy dishing up, having carved the chicken and placed it on a plate. The vegetables and roast potatoes were cooked to perfection, and his mouth watered just looking at it. The only roast dinners he and Olivia ate were at his mum and dad’s home. Cooking was one thing he had never mastered. It was why he paid Rosalind, his housekeeper, to cook on the evenings he and Olivia were going to be home. Fish fingers, mash and ready meals were about all he could throw together. This was a treat, and one Olivia was enjoying.

They all sat down together. Ana helped Olivia, asking how much and what she wanted. It shocked Andrew when Olivia answered unprompted.

“How was your day, Olivia?” Ana asked after they had sat in silence for several moments.

“It was okay,” Olivia said. Andrew choked on his carrot when she added, “We had art today. We are making a collage.”

Ana’s attention was fixed on his daughter. “Wow, what is your collage about?” Ana asked.

“It’s nature,” Olivia said. “We must use lots of different textures and things. The teacher puts a gigantic pile of stuff at the side of the classroom, and we can choose what we want to use. I used some foil for water.”

“Great idea,” Ana said, “I have to make a collage for my project.”

Olivia frowned. "Your project?"

Ana smiled. "Yes, my university project. I'm studying textiles and fashion."

"Daddy went to University, and then he went to medical school," Olivia chirped.

"I know," Ana said, looking up and smiling at Andrew, his breath catching. She looked so much like Eva at that moment, although somehow more.

"What is your collage about?" Olivia asked, drawing Ana's attention away.

"We have to make an item of clothing on architecture," Ana explained. She told Olivia all about her project before asking her more about her own. Andrew sat in silence as he listened to them both share their day. Only when silence descended did he realise they had stopped and were staring at him.

Olivia giggled, "Daddy, you're not paying attention." He swore he heard a tusk in his daughter's voice. "Ana asked how your day was."

"Sorry sunshine, I was away with the fairies," he said, embarrassed they had caught him daydreaming. "My day was good, thank you. It's my quieter day because of my early start, but everything went well at the television station this morning and this afternoon. I caught up on my paperwork." He looked through more application forms but thought he would never find the right person. The more he thought about it, Ana would be the perfect choice after what he had just witnessed. Would it fit in with her studies? That was the big question and something he hadn't factored in.

After they finished, everyone helped clear up. Ana took on the role of the clean fairy; Andrew's mind went back to her parents' house. It had always been immaculate with not an item out of place.

The doorbell rang, and Andrew went to answer it, knowing it was his mother. He had asked her to come and sit with Olivia so he could take Ana to retrieve her stuff. He had not wanted Ana going back to the flat alone.

"Granny!" Olivia threw herself at her grandmother, who scooped her up and gave her a big squeeze. Olivia wriggled out of her grasp, grabbing her hand. "Come and meet Ana."

Andrew's mum shot him a sideways glance as his daughter pulled her into the kitchen, where Ana was wiping down the sides.

"Granny, this is Ana."

Ana looked up, her eyes were wide. His mother had frozen to the spot.

Ana had never met his mother or father. She had not attended their

wedding or engagement party. His mum, however, had eyes, and Ana was a replica of Eva. His mum knew exactly who was in front of her.

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs Dennison,” Ana said, recovering first, sending Olivia into fits of giggles. His mum blinked twice, her gaze drifting down to Olivia before shooting up to him. Her last glance screamed retribution.

“Call me Linda, dear.” Andrew’s jaw fell open at his mum’s words, making him cough. Both his mum and Ana stared at him. He waved his hand as an apology, making them both redirect their attention back to one another. “You seem to have made quite the impression on someone.” Andrew heard his mum say.

“That would be the cookies,” Ana said, offering his mum a wider smile. The young woman standing in his kitchen did not know the immediate impact she had had on his shy daughter. One who was now openly smiling and laughing.

“We better go.” Andrew motioned to Ana.

“Go?” Olivia asked, her face dropping.

“We need to collect Ana’s stuff and bring it back here. Granny will stay with you.”

Olivia did not look convinced until Ana knelt in front of her. “There is ice-cream in the freezer... to go with the cookies if you want it.”

Olivia, who was still holding his mum’s hand, looked up at her, her eyes pleading. “Of course. Go and get it.” Olivia scrambled off as Ana left the room. Andrew was about to follow when his mum caught hold of his arm. “You have some explaining to do,” she hissed under her breath.

“Oops, Daddy, Granny isn’t happy with you,” Olivia said, ice-cream in hand, before heading to her counter to choose her cookie. Andrew shot his mother a warning look, which she acknowledged with a slight nod. Andrew knew his mother wouldn’t say anything to or in front of Olivia, so he was safe in that respect. He just had to figure out now what he was going to do. But first things first. He needed to help Ana get her things back. He was not letting her walk into the lion’s den alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Ana

The street was nearly empty by the time Andrew pulled up outside Ana's flat. The only shops still open were The Fish and Chip shop and the local corner shop/off licence. Ana wanted to curl up in a ball and hide as she let them through the external door into the narrow hallway. As they climbed the stairs towards her flat, she and Andrew picked their way through the rubbish that littered the space. What had she been thinking bringing him here? What must he be thinking? Andrew remained silent.

When they reached the small landing outside the front door, Ana tried her key, only to find it no longer worked. James had clearly changed the locks again. Banging on the door, she waited, feeling more aware of the man standing behind her and the drama she had dragged him into. Could this evening get any worse? Ana had seen the shock on Andrew's mother's face as they had stood in the kitchen. It was clear Linda had recognised her. Ana was glad the other woman had been able to hide her true feelings towards her from Olivia. She couldn't really blame Linda. What her sister had done would have tarnished their family in anyone's eyes.

Ana banged again, looking at her watch. Ana knew Baz should be home if not one of her other four flatmates. She heard some movement from inside the flat and held her breath, hoping it wasn't James. The door opened, and a bedraggled Baz stood in his tracksuit bottoms and not much else.

"What?" he asked, squinting at Ana as if trying to place her.

"Hi Baz, I'm here to collect my stuff," Ana said, taking a step forward.

Baz put a hand up and stopped her from entering. "Sorry, Ana, James has said you are no longer allowed in the flat."

"What?" Ana's heart was pounding. The nerve of the man. As Ana went to step forward, a protective arm snaked around her middle from behind, a firm hand preventing her from moving forward.

“Yep,” Baz said. “Not sure what went down, but he changed the locks this morning and issued us all with new keys. Sorry, Ana, I can’t let you in.”

Ana had to admit Baz did sound genuinely sorry, and she knew he wasn’t a bad guy, even if his loyalty was misplaced. She didn’t know him well, but the fact he was living there told her this wasn’t a choice. Ana relaxed, and Andrew withdrew his hand with the threat clearly over.

“What about my stuff?” Ana huffed, missing the feel of Andrew’s hand against her stomach.

It was Baz’s turn to look embarrassed. “I saw him with some bags and your suitcase this morning. I’m sorry, Ana, but I think he chucked all your stuff away.”

Ana gasped, her blood beginning to boil. Not that she had much, but to have thrown everything away was just too much.

Andrew stepped around Ana. His six-foot-two frame filled the doorway.

“Let me get this straight. Your landlord—who tried to assault Ana last night—changed the locks this morning and has disposed of all her belongings?”

Baz’s colour turned a darker shade of red.

“Look, I know nothing, man. I simply pay my rent and lay my head down here. Other than that...” Baz held his hands up in defeat.

“Well, tell your landlord he will hear from my lawyer,” Andrew said before taking Ana’s arm and leading her back down the stairs.

Ana turned her head, sending a shell-shocked Baz one last glance. She was glad Andrew had accompanied her. She focused on him as the pressure inside her chest built, squeezing tight. Ana tried hard to steady her breathing, in through her nose and out through her mouth. The odd breath catching as she fought to keep control. A further heaviness formed in the pit of Ana’s stomach as they walked away from the place she’d called home for the past four months. Not that she had much, but what she had, had been in her room, including all her textiles supplies and her precious sewing machine. Their loss hurt her more than anything, as without them, her course was going to be a lot harder.

Andrew stopped suddenly as they reached the ground floor, almost causing Ana to careen into the back of him. He turned to face her, capturing her icy hands in his warm ones, squeezing them. Ana looked up in surprise, and even through the haze of panic, she could read the concern on his face.

“You need to breathe,” he said. “In for four, hold and then exhale through your mouth.”

Ana followed his instructions, her focus locked on him until her breathing evened out. As the pressure in her chest eased, a new pressure built lower in her body. Where his hands held hers, tingles flashed up her arm, and she felt her face growing warm under his scrutiny. Ana pulled her hands away as an unfamiliar awareness flooded her system. “Thank you,” she heard herself mumble, no longer able to meet his gaze.

“No problem,” Andrew said. “Come on, let’s get out of here.” Andrew sounded his normal self. Ana shook herself, breathing a sigh of relief. What just happened?

Ana shot him a smile, unable to meet his eyes. She needed to get her scrambled brain back into working order before she did that. As they reached the door. Ana stopped, a thought crossing her mind. It wasn’t bin day until tomorrow.

“I need to check something,” Ana said, not wanting to get her hopes up. She made her way down the narrow hallway, along the side of the stairs, and towards the back of the building where the rubbish bins were situated. Before she reached them, she found her things piled high. James had been too lazy to throw them out, or he intended to sell them. Whatever it was, instead of throwing them in with the rubbish, he had piled them underneath the fire escape stairs. Ana breathed a sigh of relief as she bent down and rifled through the bin bags on top of her case, finding her purse and phone. She snatched up her sewing machine and held it to her chest, closing her eyes as relief poured through her. James was too stupid to realise the value of the machine. If he had, he would have kept it upstairs. Lucky for her, he hadn’t. That was one item she couldn’t have afforded to lose. Ana had spent the last of her limited savings on it after arriving in London. It was top of the range. With rent, food and travel, it was not something she could easily replace on her waitress salary.

“Is this everything?” Andrew said, looking at her with compassion as Ana’s heart constricted.

Ana nodded, unsure she could speak.

Andrew stepped forward and grabbed Ana’s suitcase and one of the bin liners filled with her clothes. “Come on, let’s get this loaded into the car.”

Chapter Nineteen

Ana

It didn't take many trips to load Andrew's car, and the car journey home was a silent one. Ana glanced over. Andrew was lost in thought, his jaw locked, and his knuckles white where he gripped the steering wheel. He was probably wondering what the hell he'd got himself involved in, or why he had exposed his daughter to someone like her. Ana sank into the car seat, shame eating at her as she stared out of the window. Her mind replayed the events of the evening as she asked herself again and again what she was going to do now.

Ana knew she needed to make plans. She didn't have many possessions. When she'd left home, she'd travelled light. Maybe Andrew would be kind enough to let her leave some of her belongings at his house, if she moved in with Millie or George in the short term. She didn't want to disrupt his and Olivia's life any more than she needed to, but her friends probably had limited space, and they wouldn't want all her clobber filling it.

"Thank you," Ana said, touching Andrew's arm as he pulled the car into the driveway.

Andrew sighed and turned to her. "I can't believe you were living there," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "That place is not fit for animals, let alone human beings."

"It was okay," Ana said, feeling like she had to defend her choice. "It was somewhere to sleep and store my stuff."

Andrew pressed his lips together as if she didn't understand.

She was not brought up in poverty. Her parents had been very well off. Her father, like Andrew, would have been horrified if he knew where she'd been living. But he'd cut her off financially the day she left, making her live with the consequences of her choices. She hadn't needed him or his narcissistic ways. She was now living her own life by her own rules.

"We can agree to disagree," Andrew said, getting out of the car and

grabbing her suitcase. "Let's get you set up inside."

Ana followed behind.

Olivia greeted them at the door, and Andrew's mum gave them both a quizzical look. Once they had emptied the car, Andrew told Ana he was going to drop his mum home and asked if she could monitor Olivia. Olivia jumped for joy, grabbing Ana's hand leaving her speechless. Ana smiled, saying goodbye to Linda, who acknowledged her with a nod.

"Come on, Ana," a little voice said next to her, a small hand worming its way into her grasp. Snapping herself back into the present, Ana spun and dropped herself down onto one knee, Olivia's hand still clasped in hers.

"I think it maybe past your bedtime," Ana said, glancing at the enormous wall-clock that adorned the wall in the hallway. It was gone eight-thirty.

Olivia gave her a cheeky grin. "It is," she whispered, "But I can't sleep without a story."

Ana smiled and raised an eyebrow at the little girl, who was grinning at her. "Is that a hint you would like me to read you a story?"

Olivia jumped up and down and sprinted for the stairs, leaving Ana on the floor. Getting herself up, she followed an excited Olivia to her bedroom.

"Brush your teeth and wash your face," Ana said, thinking back to her own childhood bedtime routine.

"It's okay. I did those things with Granny," Olivia said.

Ana wasn't sure whether to believe Olivia, but who was she to contradict the child? She popped into the en-suite bathroom and touched the toothbrush on the side of the sink. The bristles were dry. Picking it up, she waved it at Olivia, her eyebrows raised.

"Oops," Olivia said, grinning, not at all embarrassed she'd been caught lying.

Jumping out of bed, she took the toothbrush from Ana's hand before heading into the bathroom. Ana couldn't help but smile. Olivia was quite a character underneath her shyness. She reminded Ana more and more of herself. The only difference being she had a father who worshipped the ground she walked on and grandparents who doted on her. For that, Ana was thankful.

Olivia returned, grinning and showing Ana her now clean teeth. Ana smiled at her and lifted the covers, allowing her to climb into bed. Olivia pointed to the storybook resting on the bedside table. Picking it up, Ana

smiled. The Magic Far Away Tree, by Enid Blyton.

“One of my favourites,” Ana admitted to Olivia.

Olivia patted the bed next to her for Ana to sit down.

“I read a page, and then Daddy reads more pages,” Olivia explained.

“That sounds like a fair deal.” Ana opened the book and handed it to Olivia, who read. It amazed Ana how well she could read, only stumbling over a few of the longer words. Before long, Olivia was handing over the book to Ana and snuggling down under her covers. That was how Andrew found them when he returned. He kissed Olivia good night.

“I love you, Sunshine,” he said.

“I love you, Daddy,” Olivia replied, “Goodnight, Ana.” She said as she shut her eyes, making Ana stop.

She had only known her for a few hours, but Ana felt their bond strengthening. It was surreal.

Andrew motioned for Ana to step outside, shutting the door behind them.

“Can we have a chat downstairs?” Andrew asked, his face an unreadable mask.

Ana’s heart lurched. She prayed he would not tell her he wanted her as far away from Olivia as possible. A deep pain formed in her chest as she followed him down into the kitchen. She couldn’t blame him. Why would he want some screw-up near his daughter? By the time Ana sat down at the table, she was ready to grab her things and leave.

“Drink?” Andrew asked.

“Tea, please.”

Andrew worked in silence before placing a steaming cup of tea down on the table in front of her. Taking a seat opposite, he clasped his own cup in both hands. This time, his face was contemplative.

“I have a proposition,” Andrew said eventually. The shock on Ana’s face must have shown, and Andrew laughed. “It’s all above board... My parents are taking a three-month trip to Australia to visit my brother. They are currently Olivia’s main childcare outside breakfast and after-school club.”

Ana nodded, not sure where this was going, but feeling a spark of hope building in her chest.

“I was wondering if you would be interested in becoming Olivia’s nanny - at least until they return from Australia?” Hope and uncertainty filled Andrew’s face.

“What about university?” Ana asked. She had fought too hard to get to where she was and sacrificed so much, she would not walk away from everything she was achieving.

“It shouldn’t affect your studies,” Andrew said. “Olivia can still attend the breakfast and after-school clubs if she needs to. She is at school all day, and if your term time and Olivia’s don’t link up, the school also offers holiday clubs.”

Ana felt her pulse speed up. Could this be happening? She stopped short. She had nowhere to live.

“I’ll need to find somewhere to live. I also have my waitressing job.” Ana said, “I’d love to help, but...”

“The adverts I’ve put out are for a live-in nanny, so the position includes accommodation. This house has a separate flat/annexe downstairs, which I’m having renovated. You are more than welcome to live there. I only ask that you stay upstairs with Olivia until I am home. Your position at Mount Crystals may be a problem. I cannot always guarantee when I am going to be home, especially if I am held up in surgery.”

Ana held up her hand and smiled. “You don’t need to explain. Remember, my father was a surgeon, and we never knew when he was due home.”

“I will pay you,” Andrew added. “Rosalind, my housekeeper, comes in three times a week to run the house and prepare meals when Olivia isn’t at Mum and Dad’s home. I can increase her hours if you would rather. She can cook every night.” Ana gasped as he laid out the terms he was offering. It was more than she was earning as a waitress, and he included her accommodation. The biggest bonus was the time she would get to spend with her niece. A lightness filled her chest, and her pulse sped up. Could this be happening? Yesterday, her world had been falling apart. Today everything was... she couldn’t even describe it. She didn’t want to add words in case she woke up, and this was all a dream or she somehow jinxed it.

Ana started with a slow nod before an enormous grin broke out over her face, and she ended up nodding.

“Yes, a thousand yeses. I am happy to cook on the nights Rosalind isn’t here.”

Ana grinned. A grin that was mirrored by Andrew.

“Thank God,” he said, relaxing back into his chair and taking a sip of his tea. “Olivia has been so happy tonight. I think you will be good for her.”

“I can’t believe this,” Ana said, still grinning. “I will need to work my notice at the restaurant, but I’m happy to start immediately.”

Ana sat and listened to Andrew tell her about Olivia and the issues she’d been having recently. Ana’s heart bled for the little girl and cursed her sister for the pain she had caused. She would never understand why her sister had walked away from this wonderful, compassionate man and their beautiful daughter. But her sister’s loss was her gain. She was going to care for that little girl as if she were her own. Shower her with all the love she had missed out on growing up. Ana would make it her mission to help this beautiful man and his daughter return to their former stability, and perhaps they could help her out, too.

Chapter Twenty

Andrew

Andrew arrived at his parents' house and pulled into the drive. During the drive home, the night before, he had told his mum his plans for Ana. She had remained silent, so Andrew knew there was going to be some blow-back this evening, so he steeled himself before getting out of the car. He hoped his mum kept her opinions out of the earshot of Olivia.

Andrew stepped through the front door, calling out to make his presence known. Shutting the door, he caught what could only be described as a miniature tornado as she threw herself at him. Scooping his daughter into his arms, he gave her a big squeeze, his heart-warming at her touch.

"Hi, Daddy," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him on the cheek.

"Hi, Sunshine," he said, placing her back on the ground and smoothing her hair back from her face. "How was your day?"

Olivia grinned, and Andrew's heart stuttered. "It was good," she said before whipping around and moving back towards the living room.

"Olivia, make sure you tidy up your things," Andrew's mum said, popping her head out of the kitchen. Andrew knew from experience he would find all her toys spread from one side of the room to the other if he dared to venture inside. His parents were wonderful and allowed Olivia the freedom to express herself, but his mum also had strict rules, and tidying up after yourself was one of them.

Andrew watched his daughter disappear before following his mum into the kitchen. "Any issues?" he asked, knowing the school would have spoken to her at pickup had there been anything he needed to know.

"Nope, nothing. She came out-of-school smiling, holding hands with Skylar," his mum said, turning towards him. The lines on her face stressed the concern reflected in her eyes. "Are you sure this is a good idea, Andrew?"

He looked to the door, checking Olivia was out of earshot. "It will be fine, Mum. Ana is a lovely girl. Olivia seems taken with her."

His mum humphed. "What do you know about her?" his mum asked, a frown marring her brow. "I admit, it shocked me when I turned up last night. She's almost the spitting image of Eva."

His mum had never taken to Eva, finding her cold. She'd hidden it well while they were dating, even when they were first married, but once Eva had left, her true feelings had come out. At the time, this had caused a rift between mother and son.

"I'm worried, Andrew. This is all happening so fast... You've only just met her. She's a young student. How do you know she is trustworthy? reliable even?"

Andrew's mind wondered back to the night before. Ana's living conditions had horrified him. His gut tightened at the memory. He'd had to expel his breath slowly when she had dropped to her knees beside the meagre pile of possessions. Watching her scramble through her belongings, hugging a sewing machine to her chest, had almost been too much. He'd asked her outright if that was everything. He'd assumed her landlord must have pilfered items. Ana had smiled at him and told him she travelled light.

Every protective bone in his body had been on heightened alert, and he was furious that her parents had let her demean herself this much. There was nothing Olivia could do that would have him turn his back on her, and there was no-way he could now turn his back on Ana.

Andrew sighed, not wanting to fight with his mum. They were leaving in three weeks. He needed help with his daughter, and who better?

"Ana is family."

"A technicality!" his mother hissed. "Didn't you say Ana was a strange child? Is that who you want to raise your daughter? Do you know why they've disowned her? It all seems so sudden, and I'm not comfortable with it. I want you to think carefully before you jump in."

His mum took a deep, shuddering breath.

Andrew folded his arms over his chest.

"Do you think I would put Olivia at risk? You and Dad are leaving in three weeks. If you had seen the candidates I have interviewed, you'd be welcoming Ana with open arms." Andrew's jaw clenched. "Ana is a lovely girl. The way her parents treated her was strange. It was like she was an

outsider in her own home. She has a problem, and so do I. I am hoping we can help each other out.” After taking a deep breath and counting to ten, Andrew continued. “If it makes you feel any better, why don’t you help Ana settle in? Get to know her. If it doesn’t work out, then I’ll re-look at hiring a professional nanny. But I will give this a go. My gut tells me it’s going to work out.”

His mum turned to face the counter, her body braced on her hands, her head dropped. Andrew walked up behind her and pulled her into his arms, dropping a kiss on her head.

“I promise you, Olivia is the most important person in my life. I would not put her in harm’s way for anything.”

His mum’s face softened. She stretched up, pulling him down into a hug. “I know your father and I have caused this problem...”

Andrew pulled back, looking down into his mother’s face. “Don’t think for one moment that I don’t appreciate everything you do for us. You and Dad deserve this break. Go, enjoy yourselves, have fun with Chris, enjoy the sunshine. Olivia and I will be fine... I promise.”

It was at that moment that Olivia came flying back into the room. “All tidy, Granny,” she said, throwing her arms around his mum’s waist, her head buried in her stomach.

“Good girl. Have you got all your school things together?” his mum asked.

“All by the door,” Olivia said, grinning up.

His mum ran her hand over Olivia’s hair. “Grab them, sweetheart. Daddy needs to get you home.”

“Is Ana at home?” Olivia’s eyes shot to his face, her wide eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Yes, she is. So, go, do what Granny says and make sure you give Grandad a kiss goodbye,” Andrew said, encouraging his daughter to follow his mother’s instructions.

Olivia was back in a flash. Andrew watched as she kissed his mum goodbye before grabbing hold of his hand. There was nothing he would not do for his daughter. Was he making the right decision?

Only time would tell.

Chapter Twenty-one

Ana

Chaos hit the second weekend. On Saturday morning, Ana came downstairs to find Olivia hysterical in the kitchen.

“But, Daddy. You promised.”

Tears streamed down Olivia’s face as she stared at her father.

“I’m sorry, Liv. They’ve sold out. There is nothing I can do.”

Ana watched as Andrew ran his hand over his mouth. Her heart lurched as the scene unfolded before her, the anguish clear in Andrew’s eyes.

Ana stood in the doorway, not wanting to intrude. She had tried to stay out of the way as much as possible since moving in, but it was the weekend, and she couldn’t hide in her room forever.

As if sensing her, Andrew looked up, ushering her into the room. “Come in, Ana. You don’t need to stand in the doorway.”

Olivia got down from the stool she was sitting on and threw herself at Ana. Ana’s body froze before her arms enveloped the sobbing child, whose arms were locked around her waist. Ana’s eyes found Andrew’s. He looked as shocked at his daughter’s response as she was. Ana dropped to one knee, drawing the little girl to her, running soothing hands up and down her back.

Ana looked at Andrew for clarification. She was wary of getting between father and daughter.

Andrew grimaced. “Olivia reminded me she needs a Halloween costume for the school disco on Friday night. We discussed it a few weeks ago, but I forgot to order it.”

“And now they’ve sold out,” Olivia sobbed into Ana’s neck.

Andrew sighed, running his fingers through his hair, shaking his head.

“I... I... I was... going... to... be... partners... with... Skylar.”

Ana hugged Olivia a little tighter. The little girl’s distress broke her heart.

Ana looked up. Andrew was watching their interaction, a crease forming

between his eyebrows. Heat rushed to Ana's cheeks, and she untangled herself from the heartbroken seven-year-old. What must he be thinking?

"I might be able to help." Ana heard herself saying. Ana turned to Andrew, building up the courage to look at him again. "If you want me to?"

Taking Olivia's hand, she walked her back towards the kitchen island.

"Do you have a picture of the costume you want?" Ana asked once Olivia calmed down.

Olivia ran out of the room, her feet thundering up the stairs.

"You can?" he asked, sagging down onto the stool Olivia had vacated. Ana could see he was beating himself up at letting his daughter down. "I forgot, what with Mum and Dad going... forgetting things seems to be my current MO."

"You don't need to explain. It's been a crazy couple of weeks," Ana said, touching his arm, removing it as pulses zapped up her arm where their skin connected. Andrew looked as shocked as she did, so she continued. "Textiles and fashion student, at your service," she smiled, motioning to herself. A warm feeling spread through-out her chest as she realised she had something to offer Andrew, something of value, in return for all he had done for her. She pushed aside the thought of what touching him had just done to her. Lesson number one, keep your hands to yourself.

"You have been so welcoming and kind. Making a costume is the least I can do."

It was at that moment Olivia returned holding a book. She showed Ana the cover, pointing to the character on the right.

"Skylar is going as Trixie," she stammered, her bottom lip quivering, before pointing to the character on the left. "I'm supposed to be Lucile."

Ana looked at the character and smiled. Looking up at Andrew, she watched as his body visibly relaxed.

"Problem solved," Ana said, smiling down at Olivia. "We can make this costume if you like?" Olivia's eyes flew to hers.

"We?" Olivia said.

The tears were gone, replaced by watery eyes that sparkled with excitement.

"Yes, we. I will need a helping hand." Olivia grabbed her hand as if wanting to start immediately. Ana laughed at Olivia's enthusiasm. "I will need to get some material before we can start. I have quite a bit in my box of

tricks, but I don't think it's quite right for this project."

Olivia spun towards her father. "Daddy, can we get some material, please, so Ana and I can make my costume?"

Ana's heart did a little flip in her chest as Andrew rubbed his chin and shrugged. His blank expression let Ana know he was out of his depth.

"The market is the best place for material," she said, trying to distract herself from how attractive Andrew looked at that moment. Looking at the clock on the kitchen wall, Ana grinned. It was Saturday morning, so the market would open soon. "I can leave now and be back before my last shift at Mount Crystals," she said. Ana had to admit Robin had been fantastic when she had approached him about working her notice. As she was still on her probationary period, he had let her leave with the minimum of fuss, only asking her to cover the two Saturdays. She'd been happy to oblige.

Andrew stopped her. "Where is the market?" he asked.

"Shoreditch," she replied, her brain working out how she was going to get there on the Tube.

"Come on," he said, snatching his wallet off the kitchen island. Olivia jumped up and down in excitement. "We can grab some breakfast while we are there, too."

Before Ana could blink, Andrew was at the front door pulling on his shoes. She grabbed Olivia's abandoned book and headed after them both. It was becoming obvious Andrew was usually a man of action, leaving Ana feeling as if a thousand butterflies had taken up residence in her stomach. This man's love for his daughter was clear.

Chapter Twenty-two

Ana

Ana had to admit that taking over Olivia's childcare had been harder than expected. Andrew had been working long hours, so she'd only seen him in passing. Ana was halfway through the third week and already exhausted. When Andrew had mentioned his mum and dad would pop in to lend a helping hand and help her settle in, Ana had been relieved.

What she had not expected was them there every evening, from the time they got home until Olivia's bedtime. Linda was behind her every step of the way, pointing out every little detail and criticising everything Ana did, from making dinner to helping with homework and even Olivia's bedtime routine.

Ana could do nothing right.

"Olivia, Granny has asked you to do your homework first, and then we can make the finishing touches to your dress," Ana said, ushering Olivia towards the kitchen table.

"But you promised we could do my dress first," Olivia said, crossing her arms.

"First rule of parenting. Never make promises you can't keep," Linda said, walking into the kitchen. Ana wanted to tell her she would have been keeping her promise, only *Granny* had decided she wasn't allowing it. It horrified Linda when she turned up, and Ana's sewing machine was on the kitchen table. When Ana had explained why, Linda had put her foot down, telling Ana the costume was a luxury and should not take priority over learning or dinner.

"Homework first, then dinner and if there is time, your costume," was all Linda said.

"But Granny, we will never get my dress finished in time," Olivia wailed, her eyes filling with tears. Ana questioned why she had been stupid enough to promise Olivia they could finish her dress first and questioned whether she

was suited to childcare. She was making one blunder after another. They'd had a wonderful day on Sunday, making the pattern and pinning it to Ana's mannequin. Andrew had no issues. His mother, on the other hand.

"No."

Olivia ran from the room, tears streaming down her face.

"This happens when my son leaves an inexperienced child to babysit," Linda said, turning her fury on Ana.

Why was she bothering? She would never win with Linda. Ana couldn't blame her. She wasn't sure how she would feel if their roles were reversed. She was the sister of the woman who had broken her son's heart, now living in his house, and taking care of his daughter.

"Ana, can you give Mum and me, a few moments, please?"

Ana jumped at the sound of Andrew's voice. She hadn't expected him back this early. He had told her he was working late all week.

There was a tightness around Andrew's eyes she had not seen before, and his lips had flattened into a straight line. Ana looked down, her heart racing as she walked towards him. How had she made such a mess of it? Ana's stomach tightened as she walked past.

Should she pack?

She sucked in a breath as Andrew touched her arm. Small electric shocks zipped up her arm, causing Ana's eyes to clash with his. Ana's confusion deepened when he smiled and winked at her.

"It's okay. I just need to have a private word with Mum."

Ana nodded and left, seeking Olivia, taking her homework bag with her.

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Olivia's bedroom door opened.

"Daddy!" Olivia shouted, getting up and throwing her arms around him. Ana's heart melted every time she saw the interaction between father and daughter. Their love for one another was palpable.

"Hey, Sunshine. How was your day?"

"It was great. Ana is helping me with my maths homework." Olivia pulled a face. "But it makes sense now." She turned her hundred-watt smile on Ana, who grinned back. Ana had always loved maths and science. It was no

surprise really, as it was in her blood. Her family was all in the medical profession. She was the first in generations who had broken rank.

“I’m glad. Is it okay if I borrow Ana for a moment? We need to have a chat,” Andrew asked Olivia.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “A grown-up chat?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Olivia turned back to her work. Andrew motioned for Ana to follow him back downstairs.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew said, flopping down into one of the kitchen chairs before running a hand through his hair, messing it up. Ana realised that Andrew ran a hand through his hair when things were awkward, or he was flustered. His messily tousled hair made him look younger than his thirty-six years and much more human.

“For what?” Ana said, not wanting to assume what was coming next. Ana’s heart rate picked up. Had he decided this would not work? That his mum was right, she was too inexperienced to be looking after Olivia? Ana moved to grab the dinner Rosalind had put up for him out of the warming draw.

“Ana, stop. Please sit down.”

Ana took the chair opposite Andrew and waited. She placed her hands on the table, staring at them.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

Ana looked up. Andrew was staring at her.

“I’m sorry for the way my mother has been treating you. It won’t happen again.” Andrew shook his head. “When I said she was going to pop in, that is what I assumed it was going to be. I am sorry if she has made things difficult for you.”

Ana shook her head. The last thing she wanted was for Andrew to fall out with his mum and dad before they left for Australia. They had such a wonderful relationship, one Ana had to admit she was jealous of. She would have loved the family Andrew had grown up with.

“Please, Andrew, don’t argue with your Mum. It’s fine, she’s fine.” Ana knew she sounded desperate. “She means well, and Olivia loves seeing her. She was only trying to help.”

Andrew’s face relaxed, and he gave her a knowing smile. “It’s okay Ana, I haven’t fallen out with Mum. I just set her straight on a few things. I want

you to look after Olivia. You are Olivia's primary child carer, and therefore, what you say goes."

Ana shook her head. Linda would hate her now.

"It hasn't been that bad," Ana said.

It surprised Ana when Andrew let out a belly laugh.

"Who are you kidding? I know my mother, and I know what she can be like." Ana smiled at the way Andrew's eyes were now twinkling with mischief. "It's not only about you... My father called me today and told me I needed to speak to her. I know her interference has come from a place of love. She forgets I'm a grown man and Olivia is my daughter. Dad admitted she was terrified of leaving us, that something might happen while they were away. He wanted me to reassure her. She has spent the last year focusing her and Dad's life around Olivia and I." Andrew sighed. "She needs this break as much as we do."

Ana nodded, but her expression must have given her away.

"I understand you are sceptical. But tonight, when I spoke to her, she told me how happy Olivia has been since you arrived. She apologised to me and wanted to apologise to you, too. She knows you are not your sister." Andrew gave her a small, knowing smile. "I told her to go home. I thought you may have had enough of her for one evening."

Ana let out a long exhale.

"I don't blame her, Andrew." Ana sighed. "I don't think I'd want me around your daughter, either."

It was Andrew's turn to look confused.

"Andrew, my sister, walked out on you and your daughter. No proper explanation. My family is screwed up on a mammoth scale. I don't blame her for having reservations."

Andrew placed his hand on top of Ana's, spreading an unfamiliar warmth throughout her body.

"I don't have any reservations, Santana Lewis. I am glad you have come into our lives."

Andrew patted her hand and gave Ana a warm smile. Ana felt the walls around her heart begin to crumble. For the first time in her life, someone was accepting and appreciating her. Taking her feelings into account. How had she got so lucky?

Chapter Twenty-three

Ana

It was eight o'clock before Andrew walked through the door that evening. Olivia had messaged him multiple times, asking when he would be home. It shocked Ana when he walked into the sitting room where she and Olivia had been playing a board game. His eyelids were heavy, and there were dark circles around his eyes. Oblivious to her father's exhaustion, Olivia threw herself at him, talking ten to the dozen. Goosebumps slid along Ana's neck as Andrew scooped her up, love radiating from his eyes as he listened to what his daughter had to say. Before Ana could blink, Olivia was racing off. Andrew walked further into the room, sinking down into the chair, before tipping his head back and closing his eyes. Ana moved, wanting to give him space, but when she looked over at him, she found his gaze locked on her.

"Don't go," Andrew said, rubbing a hand over his face. "Olivia wants to show me her costume."

Ana had added the finishing touches after Andrew's mum had left the night before. Ana had to admit she was proud of what she had produced. Olivia had been ecstatic when Ana had shown her the finished costume that morning. She had thrown herself at Ana, who was getting used to the affection Olivia gave.

Ana sank back onto the carpet where she had been sitting.

"She's so excited. I hope you don't mind me letting her stay up to see you?" Ana said, wondering for the first time if she'd made a mistake in allowing Olivia to stay up. Andrew looked dead on his feet.

"No, you were right. It's hard when I'm on the late shift. I don't get to spend enough time with her. I really appreciate she's had you this week. She would normally stay at my parents, and I would not get to see her. This way, I've been able to see her in the mornings and check in on her at night. I'm just sorry it has thrown you in at the deep end." Before Ana could reply,

Olivia came flying back into the room wearing her new Halloween outfit. The expression on Andrew's face sent a wave of heat radiating through Ana's chest. Olivia gave her dad a twirl before running over to Ana and throwing her arms around Ana's neck.

"Isn't Ana amazing, Daddy?" Olivia said, giving Ana another tight squeeze before turning back to her father. "She even added this pocket which the bought one doesn't have." Olivia showed Andrew the secret pocket that Olivia had told her about when they had been discussing the costume. It was a special pocket where the witch kept all her important spell ingredients. Ana had added it as a last-minute addition, surprising Olivia that morning. Ana looked up and felt her cheeks heat under the intensity of Andrew's gaze.

"Thank you, Ana," he said, his gaze holding a genuine warmth. "I am very grateful for what you have done this week."

Ana found it impossible to hold his gaze, instead shifting her attention to Olivia, a smile forming as she watched her skipping and dancing around the sitting room.

"You're welcome. It's the least I could do, and Olivia has helped me. She is quite the seamstress."

It had been the perfect bonding activity. The costume had taken longer than usual to make. When Ana had said, we, Olivia had held her to it, wanting to learn how the sewing machine worked and how the pattern held together. Ana had thought she would struggle, having spent her life doing most things alone, but she'd enjoyed being able to share her passion with someone who was clearly interested. Ana had looked forward to their sessions, especially when Olivia's eyes lit up as soon as she mentioned it or had until Andrew's mum got involved.

Olivia heard the words and ran up, placing herself on her father's knee. She began telling him all about the sewing machine and how Ana and she were going to make dolls' clothes next. Ana grinned. The fact Olivia wanted to learn, and that she could teach her, was perfect. It was, after all, how Ana had developed a love for sewing and creating. She had taken her old clothes and re-purposed them for her dolls. The only difference was, she had had no one to show her. She was completely self-taught.

While Olivia talked, Ana excused herself and went to put the kettle on. She could hear Olivia talking animatedly to her dad. After making Andrew a cup of tea, she returned to the sitting room, placing it down on the coffee table.

Andrew nodded his appreciation, but Ana could see he was struggling to keep his eyes open. His determination to give his daughter his full attention when his eyes were rolling around his head, set butterflies dancing in her belly.

“Come on, Olivia, it’s time for bed,” Ana said, making an executive decision.

“But Ana...” Olivia said, looking back and forth between Ana and her dad.

“I thought you had a big party tomorrow?” Ana said, making her voice light. She understood Olivia wanted to see her daddy, but she could see how tired he was. “At this rate, you’ll be falling asleep in the bobbing apples!”

Olivia giggled. Ana was learning fast, whatever Linda thought. Olivia seemed to respond best when she thought it was her idea.

Giving her father a big kiss, she wiggled off his lap, Andrew shooting her a look of appreciation, his smile making Ana’s pulse dance.

“Come on, Princess. Let’s hang your costume up and get you ready for bed. It’s eight forty-five. All witchy princesses should be in bed, especially when they have a Halloween Ball to attend.”

Olivia rushed to take her hand, pulling her towards the door. “Goodnight, Daddy. I love you,” she shouted over her shoulder.

“I love you more,” came Andrew’s tired reply.

Ana climbed the stairs, a new warmth flooding her body as she thought about the relationship she was observing between father and daughter. It was in such contrast with her own relationship with her parents. They had never taken an interest in anything Ana had done. Her existence had been to be seen and not heard. The only time they ever paid attention to her was when her school report came in. If she wasn’t overachieving, then there had been hell to pay. She soon realised that focusing on her studies was the easiest way to be left alone. As a result, she had few friends and no social life, but it meant a quiet life at home. Andrew and Olivia’s interactions were not, however, alien to her. Her parents had shown her sister affection. They’d loved her and had openly chastised Ana for not being as good, clever, or beautiful as her older sister. Ana could see why. Eva was perfect in every way. What chance did *flawed* little Ana have? She couldn’t compete.

Ana got Olivia ready for bed, making sure she had washed her face and brushed her teeth. Olivia chatted non-stop about what she wanted to do at the party and how happy she was with her outfit. She and Skylar would be the best dressed out of everyone.

Ana tucked her in, dropping a kiss on her forehead. “Thank you, Ana,” Olivia said, throwing her arms around her neck. “I am so glad you live with us.” Olivia gave her one more squeeze before dropping herself back onto her pillow, and closing her eyes. Ana was glad. It meant the little girl missed the tears clouding her vision. She quickly turned and left the room, not trusting her voice, which she knew was choked with tears. Swiping a hand across her eyes, she checked her face in the mirror before returning downstairs to say goodnight to Andrew.

Entering the sitting room, Ana stopped at the door. Andrew was sprawled in the chair, his head back, eyes closed, and his features softened in sleep. Ana crept forward, her eyes never leaving his sleeping form. Grabbing a blanket from the basket, she lay it over him. Backing out of the room, she turned off the light. With one last glance, she headed up to bed, her heart full.

Chapter Twenty-four

Andrew

It was the night of the Halloween party, so after a full week of solo childcare, Andrew had given Ana the night off. She hadn't wanted to take it, but he had insisted. He wanted to spend some time with Olivia, having felt he'd offloaded her and his parents onto Ana all week.

His mum had been blowing up his phone all day, apologising for her behaviour. Andrew had told her it was okay, but everyone needed some downtime. His mother's hostility had horrified him. He knew she had a residual hatred for Eva, but Ana was her own person and not responsible for her sister's actions seven years ago. Ana had not complained, even tried to brush over it. But Andrew had seen her face when he walked in and he didn't want her to ever feel that way, not if he could help it. It had surprised him how protective he felt, but then she was looking after his daughter. He had to ensure she was happy.

When Andrew arrived at the pub, Damian and Christian were already at one of the tables. They'd agreed to meet at five before collecting the girls.

"Part-timers," he grinned as he sat down at their table.

"What good is it if you own and run multi-million-pound companies if you can't make it to the pub early on a Friday night?" Christian said, pushing a pint across the table at him.

Both Christian and Damian ran major international companies. The past year had seen their friendship develop alongside their daughters. They liked to meet up regularly, but life usually got in the way.

Christian was Skylar's biological father. Damian, her stepfather. Skylar's family set up being complex, but they made it work.

"No Star?" Andrew asked Damian.

Damian grinned. "Laura roped her into helping on the sweet stall at the party. The downside of your best friend being a teacher, so it's boys only."

Damian raised his glass. It had been a while since they'd got out on a boy's night.

"How was your trip, Christian?"

Christian had just returned from a trip to Thailand. Since taking over as CEO of his family business, he travelled quite a lot. Andrew had noticed his friend was not great at delegating, but then again, it was probably why his family company had grown exponentially under Christian's leadership.

It shocked Andrew when Christian could not quite meet his gaze. "It was fine," he said, not wanting to expand.

Damian laughed. "I've been trying to get out of him how it went since we arrived, but he's giving nothing away."

Andrew watched Christian grimace. Christian liked to keep his personal life close to his chest. He had only been in Skylar's life for a short time, and Andrew knew he did not feel comfortable talking about his love life where it could get back to Star. There was more to Christian and Star's sister, Lily. A story Christian had never divulged. Andrew knew that, but his friend remained tight-lipped, even with him.

"How's it going with the new nanny?" Damian asked, changing the subject. "I hear she has made the most amazing costume for tonight's party and got you out of a heap of trouble, old man. She is also causing quite a stir in the playground, from what I hear."

Andrew took a sip of his beer, groaning at Damian's words. He knew the playground gossip mill. He'd been at the centre of it himself when he and Olivia had first arrived. It was how he had become friends with Star. As single parents, they'd stuck together. That was before Damian had reappeared.

"She's been amazing. Olivia seems to have settled in. It's my mother who is causing the most problems." Andrew told them about the night before and his mother's reservations about Ana.

Damian and Christian stared at him wide-eyed. He'd failed to mention to them that Ana was, in fact, his ex-sister-in-law.

"Olivia doesn't know Ana is her aunt. It would cause too many questions that Ana can't answer. But blood is thicker than water, and their DNA connection is so strong. Their bond... I can't explain it. You must see it to believe it." Andrew added. He didn't want any misunderstandings or playground gossip. He didn't want Ana hurt.

“I’m happy for you,” Damian added, “I know Olivia has had a hard time. Skylar has been worried about her and that is something coming from a seven-year-old. If Ana is what Olivia needs, then you made the perfect choice.”

“I thought my relationship with Skylar was complicated,” Christian added, taking a large swig of his beer. There was something wrong. Andrew would need to get in touch with him. Tonight, however, was not the night.

“Now you have the perfect babysitter. You need to get out and meet someone. That will make your mother happy, and you. You’ve been on your own way too long.” Damian said, “You both have.”

Andrew rolled his eyes, looking at Christian, who was unbelievably quiet and lost in thought.

“Just because you have the perfect relationship,” Andrew said.

Damian raised his eyebrow at Andrew, “You know my relationship has been far from easy. Relationships aren’t, they take work. But unless you try, you won’t ever find someone.”

“True, but you and Star had history. We are starting from scratch and the thought of having to get to know someone, work out whether I even like them. Then, if I want to introduce them to Olivia, to only have it go wrong. I’m not sure I have the energy. I barely get a minute to myself with the hospital and television work as it is. How am I supposed to fit anyone else into our lives and hope to make it work without it affecting Olivia?” Andrew sighed; his friend meant well, but the thought of putting himself out there was terrifying.

Damian shook his head. “Just think about it. We’re not designed to be alone. Being with someone else, sharing your hopes and dreams. It’s worth the pain. Not to mention the sex.”

Damian had barely finished when Christian stood up. “I’ve got to go,” he said, grabbing his coat and heading for the door.

Both Andrew and Damian stared after him.

“Star’s worried about him. Something happened while he was away, but he’s refusing to talk about it.” Damian said, staring after their friend.

“He needs our support. His past is catching up with him and he’s going to break if he doesn’t get some help.” Andrew said.

Damian looked at Andrew. “You need to think about yourself. Like Star, you owe yourself a life. You cannot put everything on hold for Olivia. It’s

not right.”

Andrew knew Damian had worked hard to get Star to allow him in. One moment in a hospital room with them had told him they were made for each other. Star had fought their relationship every step of the way. She had erected so many walls to protect Skylar; it had seemed like Damian had an impossible task. Their love story had won out. But they’d had a past before all the drama. Their love had been a second chance at happiness. That would never be an option for him.

“If the right person comes along, they will love Olivia as much as you do, but you must put yourself out there and open up to the possibilities. Just think about it.”

“I’ll think about it.” Andrew looked at his watch. It was time to collect the girls from the party. He knew Olivia was going to have had fun and was glad Star had been there to keep her eye on things. Although life had seemed to have taken a positive turn, Andrew knew children could be cruel.

Chapter Twenty-five

Ana

Several parents complimenting her on Olivia's costume had approached the week after the Halloween party. Mums had asked her about making adult and children's costumes, and if she'd thought about setting up an online business. Ana explained she was a university student and her timetable was full. Before the party, Ana had hidden on the outskirts of the playground, the designer shoes and clothes worn by the other mothers, compared to her scuffed trainers and ripped jeans, making her stand out. The party meant she could no longer hide. Instead, she was dragged into the heart of the rumour mill and by mid-week, the conversation had subtly shifted from her working as a nanny to the mothers' fishing about Andrew. Ana wondered if he knew he was the talk of the playground. His new television role turned him into quite the celebrity.

It was Friday by the time the mums had decided they had wrung all the information they were going to get from her, so Ana was back to standing on her own.

"Hi. Ana?"

Ana jumped as a voice appeared beside her.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you." Ana turned to face the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She'd swept up her long hair and was immaculately dressed in a business suit. Ana smiled at the warmth radiating from the other woman.

"I'm Star, Skylar's mum. I was hoping to finally meet you." Star said, holding out a hand.

"Hi," Ana said, returning her smile and shaking the hand Star offered. This was Star, the mum she had heard so much about. Ana looked around her. The other mothers were eying them both. The rumour mill had told her Star had been close friends with Andrew, until Damian, her now husband, had arrived

on the scene. It did not surprise Ana after looking at the woman in front of her. They would have made a beautiful couple. A burning sensation formed deep in her chest.

“Would you and Olivia like to join Skylar and I for a milkshake when the children get out?”

Ana looked down at her ripped jeans and her stained t-shirt. She had been dying fabric all day and had come straight from uni. She looked a mess.

“I’m not dressed for going out,” Ana said, wishing she’d had the time to change before pickup. She did not want to disappoint Olivia, who she knew loved Star and Skylar.

Star laughed, “It’s Okay, nowhere fancy. I would love nothing more than to be in jeans and a t-shirt. Unfortunately, I had a client meeting today and didn’t have time to change. I’d like to get to know you. Olivia has been telling Skylar so much. You have made quite an impression.”

Ana felt herself warming to the other woman. “Okay,” she said.

They waited in a comfortable silence until the bell rang. The two girls came out together and ran over. Olivia was pleased to see Star and her together.

“How do you girls fancy a milkshake?” Star asked.

Olivia’s eyes flew to Ana’s. “Can we?” she asked, which took Ana by surprise.

“Would you like to?” Ana asked her back.

Olivia grinned, which was all the answer Ana needed.

“Do you want to follow me in your car?” Star asked Ana.

Ana nodded. Andrew had purchased a small run-around car for her. She had protested, but Andrew had asked her how she had intended to get Olivia to and from school, and herself to Uni, when the tube station was at least a thirty-minute walk away. She had agreed and had to admit it had been a ‘godsend’.

Olivia talked non-stop as they followed Star to the pizza and play-zone. The two girls took off as soon as they arrived, leaving Ana to follow Star to a table.

“So, it is nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you from Skylar.” Star said.

“Likewise,” Ana said, unsure of how this was going to work. Why did Star want to have drinks with her? She was the nanny, not Olivia’s mother or even

Andrew's girlfriend. Did she want to gossip about Andrew? If she did, she was going to be very disappointed.

As if sensing her confusion, Star smiled again, "I thought it would be nice to get to know you. Skylar and Olivia spend a lot of time together, and I wanted to get to meet the woman who has made such an impact."

"I'm not sure that is true," Ana said, feeling self-conscious.

Star gave her a knowing smile, "Don't worry, I'll not grill you. I expect you have had enough of that from the other mothers. The playground is a painful place to be, especially when you are single."

"I'm just the nanny," Ana said.

"Nope, you are young, beautiful and have the only eligible single male as your boss. You will never be just - the nanny." Star's face turned serious. "I also know you are Olivia's aunt and not just the nanny."

Ana's mouth dropped open at Star's words.

"Don't worry," Star said, grabbing her hand and squeezing it. "I know Olivia doesn't know, and I understand you are trying to protect her. Andrew explained everything to Damian. You are more than the nanny, Ana, you are family and I hope we can be friends."

Ana felt herself relax. It was obvious Star adored Skylar and comprehended her predicament. "It's not that I don't want Olivia to know. I'm worried if she found out. She'd want to know about Eva." Ana took a deep breath, "My sister is fourteen years older than me. She left home when I was four. I don't know her. I can't answer the questions Olivia is bound to have."

Star gave her a sympathetic look. "I lost my sister after Skylar was born. Skylar is her biological child, not mine. I have raised her since she was a baby, so she is the daughter of my heart. I know what it is to want to protect them from any unnecessary pain." Ana watched a sadness descend over Star's face, before the woman in front of her gave herself a little shake and offered Ana a sad smile before changing the subject.

"You are a fashion and textiles student?"

Ana smiled, a safe subject. This was something she could talk about. Ana opened up more and more as the afternoon progressed. Star was easy to talk to. The two girls appeared and disappeared while they sat and talked. Ana shocked herself when she explained how she had broken away from her parents to forge her own path.

“I think you are brave. You have not chosen a simple path. Take it from someone who knows.” Star sighed, her eyes seeking Skylar and Olivia as they climbed through a plastic tunnel. “I gave up everything I knew when I adopted Skylar. I turned my back on Damian. It scared me that my choices might destroy his life, so I pushed him away instead of allowing him to make up his own mind. Looking back, I suppose I was afraid he wouldn’t choose me. It was easier to break my heart than have him break it. When he came back into my life, it took me a long time to let him back in, to trust my heart and his. He showed me it’s OK to let others in and allow them to help us. He didn’t weaken me, he strengthened me. Together we are stronger.” Star gave her a faraway look. “Andrew and Olivia are your family.”

“I’m not Andrew’s family. I am Olivia’s. But I am only here while his parents are away. Once they return, my job will be done and I will be leaving. I only hope Andrew lets me stay in touch with Olivia.” Ana had tried to put out of her mind what was going to happen once Andrew’s parents returned from Australia. They were only going for three months. With the generous salary Andrew was paying her, she could save up enough money to find somewhere nice to live. Maybe she could find another childcare position.

The two girls returned looking hot and sweaty after their playtime. It was time to get home and get ready for the weekend. It surprised Ana when Star pulled her in for a hug as they left.

“Call me if you want to hang out. Sometimes it helps to take the girls out together as it gives them someone else to play with.”

Ana nodded but knew she wouldn’t call. She wasn’t intruding on Andrew’s life or his friends. She’d managed until that point. It was going to be hard enough leaving her niece in three months. The more ingrained she became in their lives, the harder it would be to move on when the time came. Instead, she smiled at Star and thanked her before ushering Olivia away.

Chapter Twenty-six

Ana

Linda and Peter's last night in the UK was an emotional one. Andrew had come home early from work and his mum and dad had come around for dinner. Ana had made them all supper and then removed herself to her room, wanting to give them some family time. That was why she was so surprised when, an hour later, there was a knock on her door.

"Come in," she said, from her cross-legged position in the centre of the bed.

The door opened slowly, and Linda poked her head around the door. "Do you mind if I come in?"

"Of course not," Ana said, swinging her legs off the bed and standing up.

"Thank you," his mum said awkwardly, shutting the door behind her.

Ana stood unsure what the protocol was for your employer's parent standing in your room. Ana motioned to the chair in the corner and Linda made her way across, smiling. As she took a seat, she waited for Ana to sit down.

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

Ana shook her head and smiled. "A welcome relief. It's the history of silk. A little dry in terms of literacy."

Linda smiled at her. The warmth of that smile, taking Ana by surprise. "We are leaving shortly, and I just wanted to come and say 'goodbye'. I also wanted to apologise again. This trip has left me feeling nervous, and I took it out on you." Ana watched as Linda took a deep breath. "I wanted to let you know how happy I am that Andrew and Olivia have you in their lives. I am truly sorry about my earlier behaviour."

Ana felt her mouth open in shock. Okay, this is not what she was expecting.

"I'm not saying I haven't had my reservations. I have. Why wouldn't I?"

Your sister broke Andrew's heart and no mother wants to see that. Olivia has also had a hard time, especially recently." Ana went to speak, but Linda held up her hand, stopping her. "What I want to say is... Olivia is happier than I have seen her in a long time. She needs a female figure in her life, someone she can look up to, talk to. You are closer to her age than either Andrew or I. Plus, for all his brains ...my son is a man and not aware of all the issues a little girl is likely to have in her life. I see how much you care for Olivia, and I hope whatever happens going forward, she will always have you in her life."

Ana swallowed against the lump that had formed in her throat. She blinked hard as her eyes burned. When Linda had entered, she had feared being read the riot act. Although they had called a truce after Andrew had spoken to her, their interactions had remained awkward.

"Thank you," Ana choked out.

Linda rose from the chair and made her way towards Ana, who rose to meet her. Ana froze as Linda wrapped her arms around her, pulling her in for a hug. "No, thank you. I am really sorry. I was out of line. You're nothing like your sister, and I had no right to compare you. Look after my precious family while I'm gone."

Ana pulled back. Linda had tears in her eyes. "I promise," Ana said.

"Thank you." With that, Linda left. Ana collapsed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, a tirade of emotions flooding her system that only stopped when another knock sounded and a tearful Olivia entered. Ana immediately scooped the little girl into her arms and hugged her tight.

"I'm going to miss them," Olivia said, sniffing.

"You will, but they will be back before you know it." Ana said, grabbing a tissue and wiping Olivia's tears.

"Granny said she's going to bring me back lots of Australian presents. That way, I'll have lots of things for 'Show and Tell' next term," Olivia said, a little more excitement entering her tone.

"And you'll be able to speak to them on video call," Ana said. "They can send you photographs. Maybe this term you'll be able to use those for show and tell?" Ana watched as Olivia cheered up. She knew it was going to be hard for the little girl. Her grandparents were a huge part of her life and now everything she knew was changing. Ana knew she had to take each day at a time, but she would be there for them both. They had opened their home and

life to her. The least she could do was make the transition as painless as possible.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Andrew

November flew by.

Andrew could not believe his parents had been gone for nearly a month. His life had fallen into a new and, if he was honest, better routine. Ana had slotted into their lives effortlessly. His days and nights ran like clockwork, but most of all, Olivia was happy. There had been no more calls from school. Olivia had been invited on several playdates, which Ana had accompanied her on. Life was good.

The new furniture for the annexe had turned up, but Andrew had not pushed Ana to move. He had found the presence of another adult in the house to be a relief. He had forgotten what it felt like to have an adult conversation outside work, and despite their age gap, Ana was interesting and mature for her years.

Andrew headed down to his gym. The annexe was in the basement. There was a storage room, the nanny's room, and a fully equipped gym.

He took good care of himself and was proud of his body. He might be thirty-six, but he refused to let himself go. Healthy body, healthy heart.

As he approached the gym, he heard a whirling from the running machine. Looking at his watch, he saw it was six-thirty. He liked to get his workout in before work, as he never knew when he would get home in the evening. Opening the door to the gym, Andrew froze, his hand gripping the door handle. Every muscle in his body tensed as he stopped and stared at Ana pounding on the running machine. She had headphones in and was staring straight ahead. Her focus locked, completely unaware of his presence. Andrew's heart rate jumped as if matching hers, his breath coming in short bursts. He'd only ever seen her in ripped jeans and shapeless t-shirts. He would never have imagined... her toned legs and bottom were clearly outlined in tight lycra leggings. A tiny sports bra exposed her toned back and

shoulders. Sweat dotted on her skin, making it glisten in the light. Andrew swallowed hard as his imagination took him to places he had no right to go.

Throwing himself backwards, he left the room quietly, shutting the door behind him. He leaned against the wall, hunched over. He had to get a grip on himself. His heart raced, and his pulse quickened as every cell in his body hungered for Ana.

What was he thinking?

He'd obviously been without a woman too long! He was not some old pervert, a cliché boss lusting after the nanny. Andrew drew a shuddering breath, his body hot and feverish. The door to the gym opened suddenly. Without thinking, Andrew ripped off his t-shirt, bunching it in front of himself, to hide the tenting in his shorts. Ana came out and drew up short, her eyes flying to his bare chest. Her cheeks were flushed from the exercise, but Andrew watched in fascination as the deep, rosy hue spread and darkened. Maybe taking his t-shirt off hadn't been the best option. Ana's eyes were drawn first to the detailed pattern of the tattoo on his upper arm and then to Olivia's name tattooed over his heart. Andrew watched as the tip of Ana's tongue slid out before she pulled her full bottom lip back between her teeth.

"Sorry," Ana muttered, her gaze dropping to the floor. "I'm usually finished by now. I hope you don't mind."

Andrew took a deep breath before answering. He was glad she was no longer looking at him. "You are welcome to use the gym anytime," he said, his voice sounding huskier than he had hoped.

"I'm just going to get a run-in before heading to the hospital."

With that, Andrew moved to step around her, her floral scent filling his nose and clouding his brain. Without looking, Ana stepped in the same direction, their collision unavoidable. When Ana's eyes shot to his, Andrew watched in fascination as her pupils dilated. Then, as if shocked, Ana jumped, the momentum driving her forward, her hands landing on his naked chest. Sparks of electricity flooded his body where they touched. Ana's lips parted, closed, and opened again, but no sound came out. When Andrew he dropped his head, Ana's fingers tightened against the muscles on his chest before sliding up and gripping his shoulders. Before he could stop himself, Andrew lightly pressed his lips against hers, inhaling sharply at the feel of Ana's lips on his.

Andrew slanted his head and deepened the kiss for a split second before

reality kicked in. Tearing his mouth away, Andrew stepped back, his hands going to Ana's upper arms to steady her. His heart rate was so high that he thought he'd need a defibrillator.

What was he doing? Ana couldn't look him in the eye, her chest panting as she raised a hand and swiped at her lower lip, not wiping him away but smearing him across her mouth.

It was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. But did Ana know what she was doing? Not wanting to think too hard about what had just happened, Andrew stepped around Ana, dropping his hands from her arms as he went.

He needed to get away from her before embarrassing himself like some pubescent teenager.

"I'll see you later," he said, not waiting for an answer before pushing his way into the gym. Andrew headed straight to the en suite bathroom. There was no way he would run or exercise with the monster he was currently sporting in his shorts. He had not been that hard in years, if ever.

Maybe John and Damian were right. He did need to get out more. He needed to meet someone new and move on with his life.

Ana was a beautiful young woman. As far as he knew, she was single, but she might not always remain that way. One day she would meet someone her own age and want to move out. For some reason, Andrew hated that thought. Ana was an old soul in a young body, but twenty-two was no age. He'd been in medical school at her age, drinking and partying, burning the candle at both ends. Ana didn't seem to want that life. He'd asked her briefly about her social life and her needs when she first moved in. He'd given her weekends off, but so far, she had chosen to stay at home. He knew she had money. He paid her well, and their agreement covered her bills and rent, but all she seemed to want to do was study. He'd heard her talking about Millie and George to Olivia, but he had yet to meet them. Well, if Ana didn't want to go out, maybe he should use the time to meet someone new. Maybe then he could stop his mind going where it shouldn't.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Ana

As time passed, Ana found herself hanging out more and more with Millie, George, and several of the other students on their course. University life had taken a turn for the better, and Ana was enjoying her newfound freedom and friendships. She knew she was still holding a part of herself back, but she couldn't change the habits of a lifetime overnight. Home life was also perfect. Andrew was happy with her care of Olivia, who was in herself much happier. Since Ana had started, there had been no more incidents at school, instead, since Halloween, Olivia seemed to have taken on a 'cool kid' persona, and according to Mrs Grant, was flourishing.

During the week, Ana had taken over the running of the household day-to-day, liaising with Rosalind when she was in and seeing to all Olivia's needs. Ana had spent so many years organising herself, so this was a doddle in comparison.

Ana's finances were healthier, as Andrew was paying her incredibly well. Weekends were her own, and although she knew her job was finite and she had to be careful, she had started to allow herself to enjoy uni life. When Andrew and Olivia went out, Ana either chilled in her room or met up with the girls. She wasn't really into nightclubs, so she always left before the real partying began, but an afternoon in the pub, bowling, or even the cinema was a change of scenery, giving her a feeling of belonging.

Weeknights were different. Most evenings, they sat down and ate together. On the nights Andrew worked late and Rosalind was off, Ana ensured she made enough food for Andrew, putting him up a dinner and leaving it in the warming draw. Ana had initially made herself scarce in the evenings, disappearing into her room once dinner was made, as she had not wanted to impose on Andrew and Olivia's time together. That had soon changed at Andrew's bequest, and now her evenings were filled with watching television

series with Andrew or discussing current affairs. Andrew was a well-read and interesting man, and she enjoyed their time together.

There had been no mention of their kiss. Life had continued on as if it had been a dream and not one of the most embarrassing yet exhilarating experiences of Ana's life. Ana had practically thrown herself at Andrew. Thank goodness he had come to his senses and walked away. She had been relieved when he hadn't brought it up, as Ana was unsure how she would ever have looked him in the face again if he had. The kiss, however, had lit a fuse inside her, even if it was becoming a distant memory.

It was a Wednesday evening that things began to change. Olivia was sitting at the kitchen table working through her maths homework. Ana was teasing her and reminding her she only had another nine years of maths, so she might as well get used to it. Olivia had questioned Ana about her own education, so she didn't hear Andrew enter the house.

"Before I moved to textiles and fashion, I was training to be a doctor," Ana said.

Olivia's mouth had dropped open. "What, like Daddy?" she asked.

Ana laughed. "Not like daddy, no. Your daddy is a surgeon. I only did two years of medical school."

"Why?" Olivia asked.

Ana turned to talk to Olivia when she spotted Andrew in the doorway.

"Yes, why?" Andrew asked, his expression a mixture of shock and something else she couldn't quite place.

Her eyes dropped to his mouth. Andrew was holding back a smirk, if she wasn't mistaken.

Mentally shaking off her lustful thoughts, Ana wanted to kick herself. What had she been thinking? She hated talking about the past. It brought back too many painful memories.

"I wasn't cut out for it," Ana said, dropping her eyes, no longer able to look Andrew in the face.

Ana had known when she walked away, her father would cut her off. It had been a sacrifice she was willing to make. She knew she could never afford a medical degree on her own. Seven years of fees and living costs would have been too much of a financial strain, so she had changed her course. Ana had loved medicine, but not enough to withstand what it would have meant for her future.

Andrew didn't push her, but Ana could sense his burning questions.

"I don't think I'd like all that blood either," Olivia said, her tiny nose scrunched up in disgust.

Ana laughed at her face. "It was gross," she said, using Olivia as a distraction.

Andrew moved over to his daughter, although Ana could feel his eyes burning into her. Her heart rate picked up, and a familiar tingling sensation gripped her body.

"What are you doing?" Andrew asked Olivia, bending over to look at her work.

"Maths," she said with clear disdain in her voice.

Andrew chuckled. "Only nine more years."

Olivia groaned. "That's what Ana just said!"

"Great minds," Andrew said, his eyes catching Ana's eye again and smiling.

Ana felt her cheeks warm. She really needed to get herself under control when Andrew was around. "Dinner will be ready in five minutes," she said, using it as an excuse to break Andrew's gaze.

Ana chastised herself. She was turning into a blushing mess. It had been a couple of weeks since she'd bumped into Andrew outside the home gym, but she could not seem to get her body back under control. A couple of weeks since that kiss.

She'd known he had a great physique. There was no hiding his shape under his shirts, but seeing his bare, muscled flesh and tattoos... feeling his mouth on hers... the memory left her mouth-watering and her body aching with longing. Too many times, she'd woken hot and breathless on the edge of an orgasm, Andrew having played the starring role in her x-rated fantasies. She could barely look at him at breakfast. One afternoon, she'd made the mistake of mentioning her dreams to Millie, who had taken to sending her links to online sex shops and some of the most outrageous toys. Their descriptions left Ana hotter and more wanting than before. She really needed to get out... or maybe invest in a toy.

Unlike her, Andrew seemed unaffected by their encounter. He had simply walked away. Ana had tried to rationalise his reaction, blaming it on her lack of experience. Andrew was an intelligent man of the world with a beautiful heart who adored his family and daughter. What wasn't there to love? But

Ana wanted him to see her as a responsible adult and be glad he had taken a chance on her. He would never think that if every time she saw him, she became a blathering, sex-starved mess.

Olivia slammed her book shut and moved it at record speed to the island. She clearly wasn't sorry to be stopping her maths. Washing her hands in the sink, she made her way back to the island.

Ana grabbed some knives and forks and handed them to a now-waiting Olivia. Andrew raised an eyebrow as he watched his daughter take them without argument and lay the table. She then went and grabbed some plates, while Ana dished up the food.

"Is there anything I can do?" Andrew asked.

"Wash your hands, Daddy," Olivia said before sitting down in her seat. Ana picked up the serving dishes and carried them across to the table. She walked the long way around, avoiding Andrew, who had moved to the sink.

Ana watched out of the corner of her eye as Andrew grabbed two glasses and a bottle of chilled white wine from the wine fridge. He waved a glass questioningly at Ana, who nodded. She would need some Dutch courage to get through the meal. Andrew poured two glasses and placed one in front of Ana before taking a seat opposite.

"How was your day, Liv?" Andrew asked Olivia.

Olivia spent the rest of the meal recounting her day from registration to pick up, allowing Ana to get her wayward body under control. Andrew's interaction with Olivia wasn't helping. She loved how much he cared for his daughter and showed an interest in everything she did. Not once had he switched off while she was talking, instead he asked her for more details. There was no rush. It was her time, and he was giving it to her.

"How was your day, Ana?" Andrew asked, making her jump back into the conversation.

Ana felt the colour in her cheeks rise once more. "Oh, it was fine. We handed in our group project, so things between now and Christmas will be quieter. How was your day?" Ana wanted to distract, so she pushed the conversation back to Andrew.

"It was good, thank you. This morning was a little crazy, getting to the TV Studio, but Sally did my makeup in record time."

Olivia broke down in fits of giggles. "You are not a girl. You don't wear makeup," she chastised her dad.

Ana couldn't help but laugh as Andrew went all conspiratorial with her. "Shh, don't tell anyone," he whispered, looking around. "But it's true, everyone on television has to wear makeup."

Olivia's eyes opened wide. "What, even the boys?" she asked.

"Yep, even the boys. I make sure I take every little bit off before I leave, or my patients might look at me strangely if I have a brown splodge on my cheek."

Olivia removed herself from the table and asked if she could watch television. Andrew agreed on the proviso she finished her homework the following evening.

Andrew raised the bottle and refilled Ana's glass.

"So, you were studying medicine?" he asked, clearly not going to let what he had heard earlier go.

"Yes," she said, staring down at her wine glass. "It wasn't sustainable when I broke away," she added.

Andrew reached across the table and placed a hand on hers, sending violent tingles shooting up her arm, making her head swim. She stared openly at where their hands met.

"I'm sorry," Andrew said, pulling his hand away, a frown marring his forehead.

"My father controlled every aspect of my course and my life. When I dated a fellow student, he locked me up, taking away all my freedom." Ana's eyes flew to Andrew's face at his sharp intake of breath. She couldn't decipher what she saw on his face, so she continued. "I spent a year saving up to break away."

"Did you want to leave medicine?" Andrew asked.

"Not really," Ana answered honestly. "But it was stay under his control and do everything his way and lose even more of myself. Or break away and become my own person. Even if it meant giving up something I loved. Sometimes giving up the things you love for the greater good is for the best."

"I'm sorry, Ana. Did Eva know what he was doing? What about your mum?" Andrew asked. It was clear he could not understand why no one had stepped in.

Ana gave a dry, flat laugh. "I haven't seen or spoken to Eva in years. She barely came around after you and she split." Andrew looked taken aback by Ana's comment but said nothing. "Mum never had a backbone where Dad

was concerned. Years of being belittled will do that to a person, I suppose.” Ana’s laugh was harsh. “Do you know what is funny?”

Andrew shook his head, his expression serious. The wine must really be going to her head. She had never been this open about her past.

“When I was studying, one of my lecturers told me how amazing my mum had been. She had been top of her class, she had so much promise as a surgeon, and then she married Dad and gave it all up. Seems like my dad’s streak of controlling people started years ago. Apart from Eva, of course, she was the apple of his eye.”

Ana knew she sounded bitter but couldn’t help it. Nothing she had done had ever been good enough. Well, now, the only person she was pleasing was herself.

“I’m sorry, Ana,” Andrew said.

“For what?” she asked. “I feel sorry for you getting mixed up with my screwed-up family.” Before looking at the door and softening her glance. “Olivia is the best thing to have come out of our bloodline in a long time.”

“I think you are pretty special too, Ana,” Andrew said, taking Ana by surprise and making her stomach clench. Her heart stopped. However, he added, “You have changed Olivia’s world and made it better. I am not sure how I can ever thank you.”

Of course, it was all about Olivia. She was why Ana was there, after all. Why Andrew had opened his home to her. Taken his twenty-two-year-old, down-on-her-luck sister-in-law into his life.

Ana sighed. “The feeling is mutual,” Ana said, disappointment flooding her system.

When had she started caring?

“I have something to ask you,” Andrew said. “I know I usually give you Friday nights off, but I was wondering if you could look after Olivia for me?”

“Of course,” Ana said.

She had nothing planned for the evenings, anyway.

“Great,” Andrew said. “I won’t need any dinner because I am going out on a date.”

Ana tried to smile as a heavy feeling descended on her chest. Getting up, she started clearing away their dishes as a distraction.

This was all the confirmation she needed that their kiss had been a mistake.

“Sorry, Ana, did you have anything planned?” Andrew asked, obviously

picking up on her discomfort but clearly clueless as to why.

“No, nothing. That’s exciting for you.” Ana said, almost choking on her words.

She needed to get out of there as her chest tightened. The wine had gone to her head, and she was feeling decidedly woozy.

“Sorry, I think the wine has gone to my head,” she said, making an excuse for herself and hoping to throw Andrew off. She loaded the dishwasher in record time and made for the door.

“Are you sure you’re okay with Friday?” Andrew asked again.

Ana gave Andrew what she could only describe as her most dazzling smile.

“Of course,” she said. “Olivia and I will have a movie night with popcorn. There is no better way to spend a Friday night.”

With that, she left the room, checking in on Olivia quickly before she went upstairs. Andrew liked to do bedtime when he was home, and that night, she was thankful for that fact.

Throwing herself down on the bed, Ana found herself once again looking at the ceiling. She waited for her heart rate to calm and the pressure to ease, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. If Andrew got a partner, what would happen to her? No woman was going to want their partner to be living with their ex-sister-in-law. Ana’s eyes burned; she didn’t want to feel this way. She’d let her guard down, opened herself up, and made herself vulnerable. Would a new woman want her to stop seeing Olivia? If Andrew stopped her from seeing Olivia, she felt her heart would break. Swiping at her eyes, she sat up. She needed to protect herself. Of course, Andrew was going to meet someone. He was thirty-six, successful, kind, hot-as-hell... the list went on. He probably wanted more children. That thought alone turned her stomach, almost causing her to retch. Some woman walking around, her stomach swollen with Andrew’s child... a sibling for Olivia. The thought made her head spin faster, and her hands shook. She stuffed a hand in her mouth to stifle the sob that nearly escaped. What was happening to her? Andrew and Olivia weren’t hers. She had no claim on them. No rights. She was only there when they needed her, and she had to accept that. This wasn’t infinite. One day, soon, she was going to have to leave. The problem was, she’d allowed herself to believe in the family dream.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Andrew

Andrew stared at himself in the mirror, unsure of how he'd found himself in this predicament. Then he thought about the young woman downstairs and remembered why everyone, from work colleagues to his parents, had been telling him for years he needed to get out there and start dating again. His inappropriate reaction towards Ana had proved this, but the thought of jumping back in, of finding time for someone else when he could barely make time for himself and his daughter, was daunting. Andrew had begun to realise he was being unfair to himself and his daughter. Ana had proven Olivia needed a woman in her life, and if he was honest, he too would love someone to share his life and bed with again.

Ana, moving in, had highlighted how much he missed having another adult in the house. From the day Olivia arrived home from the hospital, Andrew had raised her alone. The nanny would go home at the end of her shift, leaving him holding the baby. There had never been someone to share Olivia with or have a grown-up conversation with once night-time hit, and Olivia was in bed. There had been the television, a book, or a bed. Since Ana had moved in, things had changed. He had changed. Having another adult around the house meant he looked forward to coming home and sitting down for the evening. He no longer felt alone. His evenings were filled with conversation and laughter. He never wanted to go back to that empty feeling ever again.

Andrew felt guilty. He now had Ana to help with Olivia, but that did not mean he wanted to hand over all responsibility for his daughter to his ex-sister-in-law. She had brought so much joy to their lives already. Olivia was a different child; it was as if someone had lifted a weight from her little shoulders the day Ana arrived. But he could not burden Ana with their lives. Olivia was his daughter, not something he wanted to off-load or hand over. She was growing up so fast. He wanted to enjoy their time together while he

could. He could not expect her to indefinitely put her life on hold for her ex-brother-in-law and niece. If he had to go on a few dates to find the right person for him and Olivia, that was what he would do.

Andrew hadn't been on a date in years. Over the years, he'd had colleagues with benefits, but he had always been clear from the start. Olivia was his priority and always would be. There had been no dates, no getting to know someone past the here and now, or looking to see if there was potential for more. His pattern of casual sex had worked in the early days, but since he had moved here, it had stopped.

Now Ana was available to look after Olivia. He had no excuses not to get himself back out there. He had made the fatal mistake of confiding in John about his growing attraction towards Ana. John and his wife had taken that as a green light he needed to get out and date, setting him up a dating profile and short-listing potential candidates. That is how Andrew found himself, standing in front of the mirror in his bathroom, listening to Ana and his daughter giggling downstairs. While they prepared for their movie night, he was psyching himself up to meet a stranger, wanting to kick off his dress shoes and join them downstairs.

Should he cancel? He knew he wouldn't be doing right by Olivia if he didn't give dating a try. There was no magic spell for finding a partner or mother for Olivia. If he wanted to add to his family. He needed to take the first step and hated the idea of being an 'old' dad. Shaking off the sense of dread hanging over him, he headed downstairs and into the sitting room where the two girls had made themselves a movie nest.

"What do you think?" he said, holding his arms out to let the two women in his life judge him.

"You look very handsome, Daddy," Olivia said. "Doesn't he, Ana?"

Andrew watched as a deep flush darkened Ana's cheeks. He liked the thought she found him handsome.

"Very smart," she spluttered, not quite able to meet his gaze.

He had noticed recently she was making herself scarce when he was around. Had she realised the effect she had on him at the gym? He hoped not. Their kiss had been fleeting, and she hadn't mentioned it since. She probably wanted to put it behind them. He would hate for her to feel awkward around him.

"Do I meet your approval, ladies?" Andrew had to ask.

He found he enjoyed getting a rise out of his ex-sister-in-law.

“Most definitely,” she said, taking a more positive stance and moving all her attention to his daughter, which he found irked him slightly.

“I’ll be going,” he said.

“Have fun,” Ana and Olivia chorused before returning their attention back to the film.

Andrew took a taxi. A drink would help him relax. His date was with a thirty-year-old accountant named Kate. She had no children but, according to her profile, was ‘looking for love’. Wasn’t everyone! Even when you found it, you could never be sure it was what you hoped it would be.

Kate suggested they meet at a small Italian restaurant in the centre of London. Andrew had been there a couple of times. The food was fantastic, and it wasn’t overly noisy, so at least they wouldn’t have to scream at each other to be heard.

As he got in the taxi, his phone pinged.

JOHN: *I hope your date goes well.*

ANDREW: *Not sure how I let you talk me into this!*

JOHN: *Let your hair down and have fun, old man! You need to get laid!*

Maybe John was right. He was sure once he got there, he’d be fine. He simply had to relax and open his mind. Positive thinking, wasn’t that what he was always telling his patients?

Chapter Thirty

Andrew

Andrew made sure he arrived at the restaurant in plenty of time. When Kate finally arrived, Andrew's eyes widened. The woman who walked in was stunning. She had long blond hair that flowed over her shoulders and halfway down her back. Her blue eyes sparkled with mischief as they locked onto his. Andrew stood up and moved to greet her. Maybe tonight wouldn't be a complete failure.

"Thank you," she said, taking the seat he offered. "I was afraid you'd stand me up," she whispered almost conspiratorially. "I couldn't believe it when you got in touch and asked me for a date."

Andrew decided not to burst her bubble. It had been John and Sarah who decided who he should date first. Andrew had just gone along with them to keep the peace. He decided sharing that piece of information with her might not be the best idea for their first date, and he had to admit his friends had chosen well.

They didn't have to wait long before the waiter brought the menu. They agreed on a bottle of wine, which was quickly served. Andrew's thoughts went back to the bottle of wine he had shared with Ana, of them laughing over something Olivia had said. What! He needed to get his head into the present and stop thinking about the impossible? Andrew took several large sips of wine to calm his nerves. If Kate noticed, she said nothing, and Andrew felt himself begin to relax again. The conversation flowed easily between them. It wasn't long before they were laughing and joking. Kate was an intelligent and interesting woman, and they had a lot in common, liking the same sports, books, and television shows.

Glancing at his watch, Andrew saw it was eleven o'clock before looking around and realising they were the last customers left. They had spent three and a half hours talking non-stop.

Kate smiled and excused herself. While she was away, Andrew settled their bill and paused. He had enjoyed himself, not just a little, but really enjoyed himself. He had been a grownup, had adult conversation, and relaxed. Kate returned to the table and collected her bag. They thanked the waitress, who looked relieved to see the back of them.

“Do you need a taxi?” Andrew asked.

“It’s fine. My flat is only around the corner,” she replied, her head tilting questioningly.

“Can I walk you home?” Andrew surprised himself by asking.

Kate wrapped her arm through his. “That would be great.”

They walked in a comfortable silence, taking in the City’s hush at night, a sharp contrast to the day. When Kate had said her flat was around the corner, she meant it.

“Convenient,” Andrew chuckled as Kate motioned to the entrance.

“Sensible,” Kate said, turning to face him. “It means if it is a bad date, I don’t have far to escape.” Her eyes sparkled as she stared up at him.

“How was this date...” he left the question hanging.

“This date was one of the better ones,” Kate replied with a grin. She moistened her lips, and Andrew found his eyes drawn to the movement. “Would you like to come up for a nightcap?”

Did he? The question hit him hard. It was nearly midnight, and Olivia was home. Could he go upstairs? Olivia was fine with Ana. They were probably in bed asleep. Ana would have called him if there were any problems.

“That would be great,” he heard himself say.

He was an unattached, single dad, but why did it suddenly feel like he was doing the wrong thing? Andrew rubbed at the growing tightness spreading through his chest as they moved inside and made their way to the lift.

“Are you okay?” Kate asked.

“I’m fine,” Andrew said. “Too much food.”

Although he knew he was lying.

The lift arrived, and Andrew followed Kate into her flat. It was a beautiful modern flat with large windows overlooking the Thames.

“This is beautiful,” Andrew said, looking around.

“Thank you. I’m a trust fund baby,” she laughed. “This is all Daddy’s.”

At least she wasn’t after his money. Kate clearly had enough of her own.

“Take a seat,” she said before disappearing into the kitchen and returning

with two glasses of chilled wine. Andrew accepted one and watched as Kate sat down next to him, leaving hers on the table.

Placing his wine on the coffee table next to hers, Andrew watched as Kate turned to face him. She leaned forward and ran her hand up his arm, resting it on his shoulder. Andrew leaned forward and pulled her towards him until she straddled his lap, their eyes locked on one another.

Both her hands trailed over his shoulders before moving down to rest on his chest. Andrew's heart thundered under her hands, and he felt himself harden beneath her. His body reacted to the touch of another, something he had missed over the past couple of years. Reaching up, he cupped Kate's face, drawing her closer. Their mouths fused. The kiss was gentle. He had a beautiful woman in his arms who wanted him. Andrew pushed aside the growing tightness in his chest, choosing instead to enjoy the moment as Kate ground herself against him.

Kate's hands locked in his hair. She moaned in pleasure as their mouths nipped and teased. Andrew's hands moved up her back, drawing her closer. Kate had worked his shirt free from his jeans, and her nails raked across his skin, making his muscles contract. Andrew's thoughts flew to Ana, her small, delicate hands and the swipe of her tongue. Andrew groaned in frustration. Mistaking its cause, Kate pulled him back to her, her hands moving to the top button of his shirt. "Shall we take this somewhere more comfortable?"

Andrew froze. The tightness in his chest had become a pain in the back of his throat. His skin tingled with the need to escape. Andrew captured Kate's hands in his.

"I'm sorry. I need to go," Andrew said. "Tonight has been amazing, but I forgot, I have to be at the hospital early tomorrow."

The lie spilt easily off his tongue.

Kate looked up at him, confused. Andrew lifted Kate off him and got to his feet. Bending down, he dropped a kiss on her lips. "I really have enjoyed tonight," he said before making his way to the door. He needed to get out of there.

Kate had recovered and followed him.

"Goodnight then," she said, pulling him down for another kiss. When she tried to deepen it, Andrew pulled back.

"I'll call you," he said, opening the door and stepping outside.

Upon reaching the street, he hailed a passing taxi. What had just happened?

He'd had a beautiful and willing woman in his arms. Enjoyed an amazing evening. He was clearly sex deprived, and yet he'd turned her down. What was happening to him? As a red-blooded male, he never turned down sex. He loved sex! He'd call Kate in the morning and apologise. She seemed to like him and hadn't shied away when he had talked about Olivia and his home life. He'd just found it impossible to focus. Andrew shook his head. He needed sleep; he'd been working too hard. Christmas was coming up, and he had some time off. Maybe Kate would be up to try again.

Chapter Thirty-one

Andrew

The house was silent when Andrew entered, although light came from under the sitting-room door. Opening the door, Andrew drew himself up at the sight before him. Ana and Olivia were curled up in their movie cocoon, sound asleep. The movie had stopped playing, and Olivia's head was resting on Ana's chest.

Removing his jacket, Andrew hung it up in the hall and quietly re-entered the room. Taking out his phone, he snapped a picture of his two favourite girls. He would tease them the following morning over pancakes.

'Falling asleep in the popcorn,' he'd call it.

As he scooped Olivia up into his arms, both Ana and Olivia groaned, but neither of them woke. Andrew carried his sleeping daughter up to bed. Olivia had, at some point, changed into her pyjamas, so Andrew simply tucked her in, kissing her goodnight before closing her door. Teeth could have an extra brush in the morning.

Andrew crept back into the sitting room where a sleeping Ana hadn't moved. She looked so young and peaceful. He didn't have the heart to wake her. He could leave her there for the night, but he looked at the angle of her neck and knew she'd regret falling asleep in the morning. Andrew knelt on the sofa next to Ana before sliding his hands under her, scooping her up into his arms. He nearly dropped her when Ana snuggled into his chest, a contented sigh escaping her lips.

"Hold on," he said to her sleeping form, his stomach clenching hard as Ana's arms snaked their way around his shoulders, her hands sinking into the hair at the nape of his neck. Andrew's breath caught in his throat. He glanced down, only to realise Ana was still asleep in his arms and showed no sign of waking. His body temperature rose as he stared down at the woman sleeping in his arms, unable to remove his gaze. An almost electrical feeling pulsed

through him as his body stirred uncomfortably. What was happening to him? Maybe he should have taken Kate up on her offer. There was certainly nothing wrong with his body now. Andrews' arms trembled as Ana nestled herself into his neck, her lips pressed against his throat as she made herself more comfortable. Andrew looked at the sofa and wanted to sit back down and simply hold her while she slept. Instead, he fought his instincts. What the hell was wrong with him! What was his body doing? She was only twenty-two, fourteen years younger than him, she was Olivia's nanny, and worst of all, she was his ex-sister-in-law. He should not, could not, be harbouring these feelings towards her. It was all kinds of wrong!

Before his wayward body could argue, Andrew carried the sleeping Ana up the stairs, depositing her on her bed. As he lowered her, Ana's eyes flew open, and Andrew found himself staring into her dilated pupils. Andrew forced his gaze away as a sexy smile formed on her full lips.

"Hi," he said, untangling Ana's arms from around his neck so he could put some distance between them. "I thought you'd be more comfortable in bed," he added.

The half-asleep Ana smiled once more, her sexy, half-asleep look knocking the air out of his lungs. She rolled onto her side and snuggled into the bed. Her hair spread over her pillow. Andrew pulled his hand back as it moved to stroke her hair, clenching it into a fist instead. He wanted to crawl in next to her and hold her, to keep that smile on her face.

Shaking and chastising himself for where his thoughts had gone, Andrew instead drew the bed throw up and over Ana before taking a step back. Backing out of the door, he couldn't help but take one more look at her sleeping form. Andrew turned and shut the door, leaning against the wall, his head thumping back as if trying to knock some sense into him.

Oh, God help him.

His feelings towards Ana were spiralling out of control.

Chapter Thirty-two

Ana

Ana awoke the next morning. Her body was still and tight. Looking down, she found she was still in her clothes from the previous evening. She remembered watching the movie with Olivia. As all her friends had been doing, the little monkey had convinced her they should watch movie one and then two back-to-back.

As it was a Friday night, Ana had not been too worried, although she only remembered getting halfway through film number two. She remembered looking down and finding Olivia had fallen asleep on her. She'd not wanted to wake her, so she had left her where she was for the time being. The little girl's comfort must have sent her off, too, as she certainly didn't remember bringing herself to bed.

A flashback had her sitting up. Andrew had come home. He'd taken Olivia, then... Had he really carried her to bed, or had that been a dream? She remembered snuggling into his warmth, running a hand through the hair at the nape of his neck. Heat flooded her cheeks. She thought it had been a dream; it wasn't like she hadn't had enough of them recently. Oh damn, what if it hadn't been a dream? How was she going to look him in the eye? It had been getting harder and harder, especially with his starring role.

There was a knock on her bedroom door. "Come in," she called, still sitting on the edge of the bed.

The door opened, and Andrew popped his head in.

"Good morning," he said.

Okay, that was positive. He was smiling. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. Hopefully, in her dream state, she hadn't embarrassed herself by saying or doing anything inappropriate.

"Olivia wants pancakes. Apparently, her friend Skylar has them every Saturday morning, and you had promised to make her some."

Ana let out a sigh of relief.

“Yes. Yes, I did. We were watching the movie last night, and pancakes came up. I said I made a mean pancake, and told her I’d make her some this morning.”

Ana knew she was waffling, but she just couldn’t seem to stop.

Andrew raised an eyebrow but bless the man. He said nothing other than, “I’ll leave you to get ready then.”

Ana swore he was smirking when he left the room. That man was really getting under her skin. She wasn’t sure when she had stopped seeing him as Olivia’s dad or Eva’s ex-husband. Instead, seeing him as ‘all male’ with a smoking-hot body, she couldn’t get out of her mind.

To make matters worse, he was also kind and caring towards friends and family and a first-class father to Olivia. The guy had no flaws. Ana flopped back on the bed and ran a hand over her face. She needed to pull herself together. Andrew Dennison was off-limits where she was concerned. He shouldn’t even be a blip on her radar. It must be the proximity they were living in. Or the fact Millie was constantly talking about ‘gorgeous’ men and had pointed out to Ana, having seen Andrew on breakfast television, how incredibly ‘yummy’ her ex-brother-in-law was.

Damn Millie! She’d set her mind racing. Maybe this crush was nothing more than Andrew being the perfect dad, something she had never seen or experienced herself. His relationship with Olivia was enviable. She needed to get a grip! Andrew had been out on a date last night, so he was clearly not interested in her in that way.

Ana darted out of bed and into the bathroom. She needed to get ready before they sent a search party out. She had pancakes to make and a day to begin.

Ana got washed and dressed in record time. Olivia was already sitting on the island waiting for her.

“Good morning, sleepy head,” Olivia said, grinning and looking so like her father.

It took Ana’s breath away.

“Morning, Missy. You can’t talk. You fell asleep on me last night,” Ana said, grinning back at Olivia.

“You were both sound asleep on the sofa when I got back,” Andrew said, entering the kitchen behind her.

Andrew looked over at Ana, who felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

Andrew said nothing more. He directed his attention to Olivia, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“How was your date, Daddy?” Olivia asked her father.

Ana’s heart stuttered in her chest, and she turned towards the fridge, not wanting Andrew to see her listening, not wanting to know yet desperate to hear.

“It was lovely,” Andrew said.

Ana felt her heart sink further into her chest. She couldn’t listen to any more, or she might need to leave, so she turned round.

“Pancakes,” Ana said, clapping her hands. “Come on, Olivia, I need your help.”

Ana supervised Olivia cracking the eggs into the bowl and using the hand whisk to whisk them up. She then had her measure out the flour and add enough until the eggs were dry before adding some of the milk they had also measured out. Ana showed Olivia how mixing the ingredients together, a bit at a time, it stopped the mixture from forming lumps.

Andrew sat on the stool, watching them both. Ana tried to ignore the feeling of his eyes on her, but she felt super sensitive like they were burning holes into her skin.

Once the mixture was made, Olivia cheered as Ana flipped the pancakes in the pan.

“What do you want on your pancakes?” Ana asked Olivia.

Olivia looked at her dad and then at Ana. “Maple syrup,” she answered.

“Ok, well, get the maple syrup out of the fridge and the lemon as well,” Ana said, directing her. You can also lay the table.

Olivia jumped down and ran to do Ana’s bidding. They had developed quite the relationship over the past month and a half. Ana found she loved hanging around with her niece. She was an absolute joy.

“What are you doing today?” Ana jumped at Andrew’s question, nearly dropping the pan.

“Err, nothing. I was just going to relax,” Ana heard herself answer. Millie and George were with their families this weekend, so socialising was a non-starter. Not that Ana minded. She had been out nearly every weekend recently.

“Daddy and I are going Christmas shopping,” Olivia chipped in. “Do you

want to come with us?”

Ana found her gaze drifting away from Olivia and to Andrew. “You are more than welcome to join us,” he added. “And about Christmas, I’ve been meaning to ask you.” It was Andrews’ turn to look awkward. “I take it you won’t be going home this Christmas.”

Ana swallowed. No, she was definitely not going home this Christmas. It surprised her she hadn’t heard from her parents. She had left in June, and it was now mid-December. When they had said they wanted nothing to do with her, they had obviously meant it.

“No,” Ana said, shaking her head.

“Good,” Andrew said. Shocked at what he’d said, schooling his features. “Sorry, that came out wrong. What I meant to say was, the Hunt family has invited Olivia and me to spend Christmas Day with them. Star wanted to know if you would like to join us?”

Ana felt awkward. The Hunt family barely knew her. She’d met Star a couple of times at pick up and when she’d had Skylar for dinner, but to be invited to Christmas dinner.

“I couldn’t,” Ana said, not wanting to impose. She was sure Millie or George would invite her if they knew she was going to be home alone.

“Don’t be silly,” Andrew said. “Olivia would love to have you with us. Christmas wouldn’t be the same. Lucas and Mary, Damian’s parents, are lovely. As far as they are concerned, the more the merrier.”

Ana really didn’t want to spend Christmas alone. She had done that for too many years. Her parents chose to be on call rather than enjoy a family Christmas. “That would be lovely. Thank you, and please thank them,” she said, focusing her attention on the pancake she was plating up, unable to look at Andrew.

“Yay,” Olivia said, appearing at her side and throwing her arms around her waist. “We are also getting the Christmas Tree this weekend. Will you help us decorate it? Please,” Olivia said, her wide eyes looking up at Ana.

Ana grinned; she was a sucker for putting up Christmas trees. She had always decorated theirs when she came home for the Christmas holidays. It was the only tradition her father had agreed to, and that was only for show if people came round. He wanted to appear to be enjoying Christmas. Ana had never really understood it, but then there was lots about her parents she hadn’t understood, like why the hell they had her in the first place?

Ana tilted her head as she looked at Olivia. “Do you have decorations?” she asked Olivia seriously.

“Of course we do, silly,” Olivia said, giggling. “We have thousands and thousands of decorations!”

“A slight exaggeration Olivia,” Andrew said, butting in, which made Olivia laugh even more.

“Well, if that is the case, then I would love to decorate the tree... and house with you,” Ana said.

“What about Christmas shopping?” Olivia asked her.

“I’d love to come Christmas shopping with you if that’s okay.” Olivia squeezed Ana around the waist once more before letting her go and heading to the table. “But everyone needs to eat these pancakes before they get cold!”

They spent the next twenty minutes discussing the best places to shop. Andrew had made Olivia write her letter to Santa a few weeks earlier, and Ana had been squirrelling away the presents as they were delivered. Her newly decorated bedroom in the annexe was currently full of gifts for Olivia. Today was apparently about getting presents for The Hunt family and Suzie, his secretary.

Ana had already begun work on her present for Olivia. She knew Andrew had bought her an American Girl. Both Olivia and Skylar were obsessed with their dolls. Ana had decided she would make some doll clothes for both of them. She had already replicated Olivia and Skylar’s Halloween costumes so the girls could dress their dolls in the same costumes they had. Plus started making Olivia’s favourite Disney Princess dress as well. They were nearly finished. She just had to add a few finishing touches and find something for Andrew. She knew what she wanted to get him but needed to find it.

After they had cleared up, it was all hands to the deck to get out of the house. They took a taxi as London shopping this close to Christmas was manic. Olivia’s mouth dropped open as the taxi drove them through the centre of London. The Christmas tree lights were spectacular, as were the shops. They were finally dropped off on Regent Street outside Hamley’s Toy Store. Ana had asked if they could go. There was a small queue outside the store, but when Ana looked at Andrew, he simply shrugged, and they joined the end. Olivia’s face lit up as they made their way past the shop window adorned with Christmas decorations, toys, and fake snow. This was a child’s paradise, and Ana had always wanted to come here after seeing it on a

children's television show.

They eventually made their way inside, and Ana felt herself caught up in the moment with Olivia. Only when she looked up and caught Andrew staring at her did she feel awkward. What must he be thinking? Ana watched as his stare became a full-blown smile she found herself returning. Only when Olivia started changing her Christmas wish list Andrew decided they needed to leave.

They spent the next couple of hours walking in and out of shops. Andrew picked up some small presents for Lucas and Mary, and Star and Damian. When Ana asked what she should get them, Andrew held up a hand. "You are coming with us. These gifts are from all of us and are simply a token to say, thank you." While Olivia was distracted, Ana told Andrew about the dolls' clothes she was making Olivia and Skylar for Christmas. Andrew had thrown an arm around her shoulder and told her that was perfect. Ana had wanted to curl into him, but Andrew had quickly withdrawn his arm before moving away and returning his attention to Olivia. Ana's heart had sped up at the contact, her stomach tightening at his touch. Days like today, when they hung out like a family, were not helping her mental or physical state.

Andrew decided it was too late to bother cooking when they got back, so they made a pit stop to eat dinner. Olivia had requested pizza, which seemed to be her favourite go-to, so Andrew found them a table in an Italian restaurant.

Their waitress was an older lady who sat them down and told them she'd be back to take their food order. Olivia squished up to Ana's side on the bench, sharing her menu.

"What are you having?" Ana asked Olivia.

"Pizza!" Olivia said, rolling her eyes as if Ana should have known that.

Ana just laughed back and pointed to the list. "Ahh, but what type of pizza?"

Olivia looked at the list and then back at Ana. The choice for a seven-year-old was endless. Ana went through the list with Olivia while Andrew sat and watched their interaction, a small smile playing on his lips. Ana wanted to ask him what the smile was for, but if he was smiling, she was happy.

"What do you think, Daddy?" Olivia asked, after changing her mind too many times.

"Whatever you want, Sunshine."

“Ok, I’ll have the Margaretta.”

Ana had to stop herself from laughing. After all the choices, she went for the plain pizza. Ana’s eyes caught Andrews, and he winked at her. He’d known all along Olivia would go for the Margaretta, but he’d obviously enjoyed watching her work her way through the menu.

“What can I get this beautiful family?” the waitress asked as she returned. Ana felt herself freeze, but Andrew just smiled up at her, ignorant of the statement she’d made, and continued as usual. Ana knew she needed to relax. Of course, people were going to assume they were a family. She was amazed no one had put two and two together. Apart from colouring, which Olivia took from her dad, she had the same facial features as Eva and, therefore, Ana by default. Ana was getting too comfortable in their family. She no longer felt as if looking after Olivia was a job. It was a pleasure, one she would do for free if she could.

After giving Olivia her own order of chicken salad, they sat and chatted about their day shopping. Olivia soon got bored and started colouring with the set the waitress had left on the table.

“Ana, when do you finish for Christmas?” Andrew asked her, snapping her out of her daze.

“A couple of days before Olivia, so I’ll be home to look after her,” she blurted, not wanting Andrew to worry about Olivia’s childcare.

“That’s okay. If you need some time for yourself, let me know. The hospital has a childcare facility, and Olivia can come in with me.”

“I’m happy to look after her. I thought we could make mince pies, and I’ve always wanted to make a gingerbread house.”

“Can we?” Olivia chirped up.

Ana grinned at her. “Well, I’ve found a recipe, so if you want to help me.”

“Can I? Can I, Daddy?”

Andrew laughed.

“I think it’s up to both of you. If you don’t expect me to do anything. Last time I made gingerbread, your Granny threw me out of the kitchen.”

Andrew explained that he had eaten half the mixture when his mum’s back had been turned. Olivia pulled a face at her father, then looked seriously at Ana.

“I promise not to eat the mixture.”

Ana had to bite her lip to stop herself from laughing. Andrew’s eyes

twinkled at her, making her heart flutter wildly in her chest.

“I promise not to as well.”

They spent the rest of the meal discussing the Christmas tree and decorations. It was late by the time they left, which meant they got to enjoy the full effect of London’s Christmas lights. As the taxi made its way back towards their home, Olivia fell asleep on Andrew.

Ana stared lovingly at her.

“She loves you, you know,” Andrew said suddenly, drawing Ana’s attention.

“The feeling is more than mutual. Thank you for letting me be a part of her life,” Ana said, staring into Andrews’ eyes.

Andrew nodded as if trying to find the words to say. Instead, he turned away and stared out of the window. What had he been about to say?

Andrew was silent until the taxi pulled up outside the house. Andrew scooped Olivia into his arms and carried her to the door while Ana rummaged around in her bag for her door keys. She eventually found them, following Andrew up the stairs.

“It’s okay, I’ve got her,” Andrew said, turning around with his daughter sound asleep in his arms.

Ana smiled. “I’ll say good night then.”

She headed towards her bedroom.

“Ana,” Andrew said.

Ana turned and waited, her hand resting on the door handle.

“Thank you for joining us today.”

Ana couldn’t do anything but nod, her eyes unable to meet Andrew’s. She took a deep breath as she entered her bedroom and shut the door before leaning back against it.

This was not good. She had felt part of the family. She was in over her head. Her feelings for Andrew and her racing heart would give her away. She swore Andrew would have heard it if they hadn’t been in busy shops. She needed to protect herself. But a certain little girl was breaking down her barriers and letting others in too. Dropping onto the bed, Ana picked up the book she was reading. She needed to send herself off into a make-believe world where love was an illusion.

Chapter Thirty-three

Ana

Olivia was up at the crack of dawn to decorate the Christmas tree. Ana didn't realise Andrew had already ordered it, and they delivered the tree at seven. No lie-in that morning.

Ana dragged on some tracksuit bottoms and an old jumper. No point in snagging good clothes on branches. Ana had found that out many years ago after she ruined her new jumper. Her dad had gone mad and taken away her favourite doll as punishment. She never made the same mistake again.

Andrew had clearly anticipated his daughter's excitement, as the boxes of ornaments were already open in the sitting room. Ana had never seen so many decorations. Andrew saw Ana's expression and grinned, "We've had several colour schemes."

"Ah ha, that explains it," Ana said, grinning at Olivia, who was jumping from one foot to the other. "Olivia, what colour scheme should we go for this year? Any suggestions?"

Olivia dived for the red and gold box. "This looks like the colours in the Christmas movie we watched the other night. I think this would be perfect."

Ana had to admit the red and gold decorations were stunning. They would also go beautifully with the colour scheme in the sitting room. "Great choice," Ana said as she began removing the decorations from the box. "Lights?"

Andrew grabbed another box that he had clearly labelled lights. They all sat on the floor, untangling the tangled light string. Andrew then got the ladder. The beauty of having a large Victorian house was the high ceilings allowed for extra tall Christmas trees. The downside was you needed a ladder to decorate the top and hang the lights.

Once the lights were on, Andrew plugged them in. To make sure Olivia was safe, Andrew then helped her hang the baubles Ana passed to her. Before

long, the green tree was ablaze with colour and light. All three of them collapsed on the sofa and stared at the beautiful tree. Olivia clapped her hands. "That is the prettiest tree we've ever done, Daddy," Olivia said, snuggling into his side.

"I think you're right. Now it's time for the rest of the decorations."

Ana nearly fainted when Andrew pulled out more boxes. "You really weren't kidding when you said you had thousands of decorations."

Andrew gave her a sheepish grin, making him look ten years younger. "What can I say? I'm a sucker for Christmas."

Ana found she loved the idea that he loved Christmas and wanted to make it special, especially for Olivia.

Unable to stop herself, Ana dived into the additional boxes, finding garlands for the mantle pieces and stairs, which were quickly attached. By the time the three of them had finished, the downstairs looked like a winter wonderland.

"Movie time!" Olivia said when the last of the boxes had been packed away.

"Pardon?" Ana said to Olivia.

"It's Christmas movie time," Olivia explained as if it was obvious.

Ana shot Andrew a questioning glance.

"Family tradition, the tree and decorations go up, and then we watch cheesy Christmas movies for the rest of the night. You are welcome to join us," Andrew said. "You have definitely earned Christmas movie night."

"Please, Ana, watch Christmas movies with us," Olivia said, grabbing her hand and pulling her towards the sitting room.

Ana laughed, "All right, as long as you're sure it's okay."

Ana shot Andrew another look. His reply was to raise an eyebrow. Ana took that as do you really need to ask?

Andrew disappeared into the kitchen while Olivia set up the sitting room. This clearly was a family tradition. Andrew returned with a hot chocolate for Olivia and two glasses of red wine. Ana accepted the one he handed her and sat on the sofa's far end. Olivia sat in the middle, patting the seat next to her for her dad. For the rest of the evening, Ana laughed and joked with Andrew and Olivia in this Dennison family Christmas tradition.

Chapter Thirty-four

Andrew

Before Andrew could blink, Christmas had arrived. He lay in bed, his hand behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. Today was going to be a crazy day. He was on call, so he couldn't drink, which was probably a good thing. He needed to keep his wits about him. Since their Christmas shopping trip and Decoration Day, the household had fallen into the Christmas spirit, and Andrew had found himself swept along with it. The past two weeks had seen them play board games, watch more Christmas movies than he cared to think about, and then there was the laughter. The house had been full of it, more than Andrew could ever remember. Every night, he had returned to more tales of the day. If Andrew didn't know better, he'd have said Ana was a Christmas Elf in disguise. It was as if she had come alive with the Christmas decorations, immersing herself and Olivia in all things Christmas. So much so that Andrew did not want to go to work. Instead, he wanted to stay home, play hooky with the girls, and be part of the fun.

Once school had broken up for the Christmas holiday, Ana had Olivia baking mince pies and jam tarts, and they had attempted and finally built a spectacular gingerbread house. Andrew smiled at the memory. It had shocked him when he'd come home to find both them and the kitchen covered in icing, sugar and flour. The kitchen island looked like they had detonated a flour bomb in the centre. Olivia had excitedly thrown herself at him, covering him in white powder too. It horrified Ana, her open mouth and shocked expression making him want to laugh, take her in his arms and swing her around. When Ana had apologised, he'd grabbed a handful of the white flour mix from the side and thrown it at Olivia. The kitchen descended into a flour-fight from that moment until everyone had collapsed into fits of giggles. It was then Olivia showed him their masterpiece. They had carefully crafted a gingerbread house, with boiled sweets as stain glass windows, a chocolate

button and gingerbread roof and icing icicles framing the windows like snow. The whole thing was beautiful. Olivia explained how Ana had shown her how to do it, and she had copied it.

“It was hard,” Olivia said as Andrew fought to keep his attention focused on his daughter, not the woman inspiring her. “Ana helped me. The icing was difficult to pipe.”

“I think you’ve done an amazing job,” Andrew said, dropping a kiss on his daughter’s sweet-tasting head. “I think we need to get cleared up in here, and then you, young lady, need to get in the shower. You taste like a gingerbread house.”

Andrew wiped a smudge of icing from Olivia’s face, making her giggle.

Andrew turned to find that while Olivia had been showing him the house, Ana had already cleaned most of the kitchen. Her head was down as she focused on something welded to the kitchen sideboard. He smiled as he watched her determined expression, and a warmth spread through his chest.

“Why are you staring at Ana?” Olivia asked, snapping him out of his daze and bringing him back to the present.

He spun on his daughter and gave her nose a tweak.

“I think Ana also needs a shower,” he said before realising that the thought of Ana in the shower was not something he needed to picture right now.

“You get washed up,” he said, gently ushering Olivia out the door.

“Okay,” Olivia said as she vacated the kitchen as quickly as she could. Andrew knew she hated clearing up, and he should have made her stay, but he needed not to be under the scrutiny of a seven-year-old at that precise moment. He knew he should leave too, but that was unfair to Ana. She’d run for the hills if she knew the thoughts going through his head right now.

When he looked up, Andrew realised Ana had stopped and was staring at him. She looked away quickly as if embarrassed he’d caught her.

“The gingerbread house looks fantastic. Thank you for doing that with her,” Andrew said, needing to fill the silence.

A blush spread over Ana’s cheeks. She raised a hand and touched it, clearly trying to cover it up. He loved how her cheeks developed into a rosy glow whenever he complemented her. This time, however, she spread a streak of goo over her cheek. Before he could stop himself, Andrew had stepped forward and grabbed a kitchen towel, wiping her cheek. They both froze, their eyes clashing. Andrew watched as Ana’s pupils dilated and her

lips parted. He stepped back. What the hell had he been thinking? He stared at the kitchen towel in his hand.

He wanted to kiss her again. No, needed too.

“Sorry, you had something on your cheek.”

Ana’s hand returned to her cheek where he had touched her.

“I think we both have,” she said with an awkward laugh. “Sorry about your suit.”

Andrew looked down and realised his suit was a write-off. It would need the dry cleaners, but somehow, he didn’t care. “Don’t worry, it was probably due to be cleaned anyway,” he said, unable to meet Ana’s eyes.

“Why don’t you get changed?” Ana said. “I’m nearly done here.”

Andrew decided not to argue. He simply nodded and left, his fingers tingling with the need to touch her again, his body craving something he knew was impossible.

Andrew was jerked back to the present as his door was flung open, and a whirlwind threw herself onto his bed.

“Daddy! Santa’s been,” she said, jumping up and down on his bed as if it was her trampoline. Snatching her mid-flight, he tackled her to the bed.

“Merry Christmas, Sunshine,” Andrew said. “If Santa’s been, we better get downstairs.”

Andrew pulled back the covers and grabbed a hoodie to put over his loungewear pyjamas. There was no time or patience to allow him to get changed. Olivia was already out and thundering down the stairs.

Andrew made his way downstairs to find the kitchen light already on. Ana stepped forward, her face fuzzy with sleep, her normally perfect hair slightly messed where she had slept on it. She gave him a half-asleep grin and handed him a steaming cup of freshly brewed coffee.

“Merry Christmas,” she said, taking a sip.

Andrew accepted it, his fingers brushing Ana’s, making his nerve endings tingle and shoot shivers of pleasure up his arm.

“Merry Christmas, Ana.”

Ana remained calm, although he could have sworn he heard a sharp intake of breath. His mind was probably working overtime, looking for an attraction where there was none. He really needed to get out and get laid. It was the pent-up frustration of going without sex for too long.

“Come on, you slow coaches,” Olivia said, breaking the moment.

She had appeared in the sitting room doorway holding a large, wrapped present. Ana had volunteered to wrap all Olivia's gifts weeks ago, doing a much better job than he ever could. When he mentioned that his mum usually wrapped them, Ana offered to step in. She had found it highly amusing that he was a heart surgeon used to working in small spaces with delicate tissue, and his wrapping skills left a lot to be desired.

Turning towards his daughter, Andrew swept his hand forward, offering for Ana to take the lead. She smiled at him, hugging her coffee cup to her chest, making his heart flutter once more. They made their way to the sofa and sat down, watching as Olivia tore through all her presents. Andrew knew he had overdone it. He did most years, but he couldn't seem to help himself. The joy on Olivia's face was worth every penny.

The last present Olivia opened had her jumping for joy.

"Daddy, Ana, look... an American Girl!"

Olivia opened the box and snatched the doll out, squeezing her to her chest before looking at her carefully.

"She looks just like me," she said, grinning.

Andrew had bought Olivia a custom-made doll. One that looked like her. Star was doing the same for Skylar, so the girls would play with their look-alike dolls that afternoon.

Ana got up, grabbed a present from under the tree, and handed it to Olivia.

"This should go well with your new doll, I think."

Olivia smiled at Ana before turning back to the tree. She snatched up the present I had bought for Ana from us both.

"This is from Daddy and me," Olivia said, handing Ana a large box beautifully wrapped.

Ana looked at him and raised an eyebrow. Oops, he'd been caught out.

"Thank you, Olivia," Ana said, leaning forward and giving her a kiss on the cheek.

She then whispered something in Olivia's ear. Olivia squealed and ran to the back of the tree.

"Can't wrap, huh?" Ana said, nudging him on the shoulder.

Andrew coughed as the hairs rose on his arms and neck.

"You've caught me out," he said, sending her a cheeky grin.

His body froze as she rolled her eyes at him, his mouth becoming moist. Olivia interrupted his thoughts as she returned carrying a large flat present.

“This one is for you, Daddy, from Ana.”

Andrew smiled, taking the present from his daughter. He hadn't expected Ana to get him anything. She was a student, after all.

“Thank you,” he said.

Olivia had returned to the floor and was tearing open the present Ana had given her. Ana grinned as Olivia squealed in delight.

“Ana, it's just like my Halloween costume,” she said, holding up the tiny miniature version of the dress Ana had made her. There were several other outfits, as well as the present. Ana had obviously been busy. Olivia launched herself at Ana, Ana catching her mid-flight.

“Thank you, thank you,” she said.

“They should fit your new doll. If there are any problems, we can make some alterations.”

Olivia squeezed her around the neck before turning to Andrew and holding out the beautiful miniature clothes. Andrew took the outfit. He stared in wonder.

“These are amazing,” he said, his eyes capturing hers. “You should think about making these and selling them.”

Ana shook her head. “These are for fun,” she said. “I need to concentrate on my studies.”

Andrew let it drop, but she really was incredibly talented.

“Come on, Ana, open your present.” Olivia was shoving Ana's present into her hands.

Ana smiled at her.

“Okay, but I think I need your help.”

Olivia didn't need to be asked twice, helping Ana tear off the paper. Andrew watched as Ana's jaw dropped. Her eyes flew to his.

“Thank you,” she said. “This is...” Andrew watched as Ana ran her fingers gently over the material. Her shining eyes flew to his. “I... don't... know... what... to... say,” she stammered.

Andrew rested a hand over hers before he could stop himself and gently squeezed it. Andrew had been to a haberdashery, one the costume designers at the television station had recommended. They had helped him choose the swathes of luxury Mulberry Silk.

“As long as you like it,” Andrew said.

Ana threw her arms around his neck and hugged him before pulling herself

back abruptly. It was so quick Andrew hadn't had a chance to react, but his body wanted more. Ana, however, had switched her attention to Olivia. The only sign it had affected her was the deep flush that darkened her face and neck.

Olivia wriggled out of Ana's grasp and turned to him. "Come on, Daddy, you need to open Ana's present."

As with Ana's, Olivia gave him a helping hand. Andrew held up the canvas print in front of him. It was a colourful print with words depicting the type of surgeon he was, surrounded by a tree with human hearts hanging from the branches. Andrew loved it and knew Suzie would too.

"Thank you. This is amazing. My patients are going to love it."

Andrew gave Ana a genuine smile and saw her relax.

"I got you these, too, just in case," she held up another box.

Inside were two whiskey glasses etched with a pattern. On closer inspection, Andrew realised the pattern was, in fact, little human hearts.

Andrew smiled. "These will come in very handy," he said, directing Ana's gaze to the tree where he had all the gifts his patients had given him. A combination of chocolates, wine, and spirits. He knew there was an aged bottle of whiskey in there. Lucas had brought it for him at his last checkup when he'd also invited Andrew and Olivia for Christmas dinner.

Andrew looked at the time. They would need to get ready to leave for Lucas' home soon. Ana was already up and carefully putting the discarded wrapping paper into a bin liner while Olivia sat redressing her doll in one of the many outfits Ana had made for her.

"Come on, Sunshine. We need to get ready to go, or we will be late."

Andrew watched as Ana scooped the last of the mess up. The floor was still littered with toys, but that could wait until later.

They all headed out of the sitting room and made their way back upstairs. Andrew watched as Ana disappeared into her room, her box of material clasped to her chest. He smiled to himself, pleased she appeared to love his present.

Chapter Thirty-five

Andrew

Andrew had come down to Olivia, showing off the new dress Ana had made for her. Ana looked stunning in one of her own creations.

Was there no end to her talents?

Ana had made them all a small breakfast before they left.

They had decided to take the gingerbread house with them to share. There was too much for them to eat, plus they'd had more than their fill of gingerbread.

The drive to the Hunt household was about an hour away. They lived further north, on the outskirts of London, in a massive country house. Olivia had packed her bags as they had decided early on, pre-Ana, that she would stay the night. With Andrew being on call, they had arranged it as a precaution. It was no longer necessary with Ana, but Star had said it wasn't fair to the girls to change the plans, so Andrew agreed Olivia could stay.

Andrew noticed Ana was quiet on the ride over. He knew she was uneasy about coming. She felt she was imposing and had made that very clear. He'd told her there was no way she was being left at home... alone, on Christmas Day.

When they arrived, The Hunt family met them on the doorstep.

"Welcome, Welcome. Merry Christmas," Lucas said, his arms outstretched.

Skylar rushed past her grandfather towards Olivia, her own doll in hand. Olivia spun around and gave Lucas and Mary a quick hug, hello, looking to Andrew for permission before disappearing into the house.

Rosy the German Shepherd appeared, her year-old puppy in tow. Both made a beeline for Ana, who crouched down and was being loved up. One word from Damian had the two dogs sitting, their excitement instantly tamed. "Sorry," Damian said apologetically to Ana, "I promise they're harmless

teddy bears.”

Ana rose to her feet, giving Damian a shy smile. “No problem, they’re adorable,” she said, rubbing their heads.

“Don’t let Rosie hear you say that, or she won’t leave you alone,” Star said, stepping forward and sweeping Ana into a hug. “We’re so glad you could come. Merry Christmas.” With that, Star swept Ana past them all and into the house as if sensing the younger woman’s discomfort.

Damian rolled his eyes at his wife’s departing back. “Come on, let’s get you a soft drink,” he said, leading Andrew into the house behind Mary and Lucas.

The house was a winter wonderland. It appeared they were not the only family who had gone all out with Christmas decorations. The hallway held a fifteen-foot tree that stood next to the sweeping staircase. Olivia and Skylar had disappeared up to Skylar’s bedroom. Andrew doubted they would see them for a while.

They found Ana and Star in the drawing room; another beautifully decorated tree stood pride of place in the large window. Its twinkling lights stood out against the backdrop.

Damian came to stand next to Andrew, offering him a drink. “Mum and Dad have used Skylar as an excuse to get out the big guns this Christmas,” he explained, motioning to the decorations around the room. “Any excuse, I think.”

Andrew smiled, “Olivia and Ana have turned our house into a winter wonderland, too, so don’t fear. I am used to the Christmas spirit this year.”

Damian said nothing, but Andrew saw his friend’s lips tilt up at his words.

They all sat around talking. Lucas recounted some trips he and Mary had been on since his retirement over a year ago. Andrew never thought he’d see the day this man could let go. When he first met Lucas shortly after his heart attack, the man had been a ball of stress and tension. Now he looked younger and healthier than he had for years and was clearly happy with his family. Andrew loved seeing this family together, making him miss his own. His Mum, Dad and brother had called earlier that morning before they left. They were enjoying their Christmas day at the beach, which Olivia had found hilarious, especially when granddad had shown her the sandcastle he’d made for her.

Andrew watched as Mary fluttered around Star. Andrew grinned to

himself. He had noticed straight away that Star wasn't drinking.

"Star, are you doing dry January before January this year?" he couldn't help but ask.

Star shot him a glance, and colour blazed over her cheeks. "No," she said, rolling her eyes at him. "If you must know, although I think, doctor, you have already guessed. I'm three months pregnant."

Andrew watched as Ana grinned at Star, squeezing her arm. Andrew got up out of the chair and moved over to his friend, giving her a hug. "Congratulations," he said, knowing they'd been trying for a while.

"Best Christmas present ever," Mary sniffed behind him.

Andrew turned to give Mary a hug, too, before shaking Damian's hand. "There is going to be a real-life doll for our girls to play with," Andrew said, and everyone groaned.

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Christmas dinner was a monster feast. Mary had gone all out on the food, and everyone collapsed in a heap after dinner.

"Where's Ana?" he asked Damian when he noticed she was missing.

"She's gone upstairs to the playroom with the girls," Star said over her shoulder.

"I'll show you," Damian said, leading the way.

They made their way up the stairs. It wasn't hard to track them down. Andrew could hear singing all the way down the corridor. Damian opened the door, and Andrew found himself mesmerised. Ana was laughing and dancing with the girls. She had a microphone in her hand, singing along to the Disney hit that was playing on the screen. Her voice was clear and pure.

"Go on, Ana," Skylar cheered, "You're going to open the next level."

Ana finished the song in a breathless whirl, and they all collapsed in a heap on the floor, the two girls diving on Ana.

"You have it bad," Damian said to him, clapping him on the shoulder.

"No... what?" Andrew said, spinning towards him.

"Just telling you how I see it," Damian said, grinning at him.

Andrew scowled at him. Was he really being that obvious? If he was, then he needed to stop.

The girls had turned to stare at them. Ana dragged herself off the floor, clearly embarrassed, as she smoothed her dress.

“Daddy, Ana opened the next level for us,” Skylar said, launching herself at Damian.

“Well done, Ana,” Damian said. “Glad it was you, not me. Singing is not my strong point.”

Ana chuckled before Skylar butted in again. “Look what Ana made me for my doll.” Skylar had run back over and was showing Damian the miniature replica of her Halloween costume.

“That is beautiful,” Damian said to Skylar. “I hope you said thank you to Ana.”

“She did,” Ana said quickly, resting her hand on Skylar’s head.

It was clear to Andrew that Ana had these two eating out of her hand.

“Well, we came to rescue Ana and bring her back down to where the adults are,” Damian said, sweeping Ana out of the room before the two girls could protest anymore.

Ana re-joined the others downstairs. Andrew watched as she relaxed into a conversation with Mary and Star. Before long, the day had turned into night. He knew it was coming up to his shift at the hospital and knew they needed to get home. Saying ‘good night’ to Olivia, he told her to be good and that he would collect her in the morning.

He hugged Mary goodbye before turning to Star, who pulled him in for a hug. “She’s lovely, Andrew,” she whispered in his ear.

“It can’t happen, so don’t go getting any match-making ideas,” he whispered back.

Star pulled back and pursed her lips. “Never-say-never, Mr Dennison. Look at me.” Star winked before turning to Ana and pulling her in for a hug. “We must go out for dinner with the girls in the New Year.” Andrew heard her arrange. Ana grinned, all her misgivings of the day gone.

Andrew liked the idea of Ana getting on with his friends. She looked so relaxed as they got back into the car and headed home.

Chapter Thirty-six

Ana

“Thank you,” Ana said, turning to Andrew as they pulled out of the Hunt Estate and onto the main road. “Your friends are lovely.”

Andrew turned and smiled at her, sending a warm flutter through her stomach. “Glad I convinced you to come?” he asked, his tone clearly pointing out she had tried very hard to convince him not to take her with them.

“I take it all back,” Ana said, putting her hands up in surrender and relaxing into his teasing. It had taken Ana a little while to get used to Andrews’ teasing, but she had soon realised he liked to live in a relaxed environment. Serious issues were discussed accordingly. Everything else was fair game.

“The Hunts live in a beautiful house,” Ana said.

She knew Andrew had saved Lucas’ life the year before, after his heart attack, but they seemed to have become firm friends.

“Yes. Lucas is more than a patient. It turned out the world is a small place.” Andrew shot her a look, and she raised an eyebrow. Andrew continued. “After Skylar and Olivia became friends, I got to know Star by default. Star worked for Lucas, and then when Star and Damian got back together, our friendship snapped into place. He and Damian became some of my first friends down here.” Andrew sighed. “You haven’t met Christian yet. He’s Skylar’s biological father and my partner in crime when I manage to go out.” Andrew chuckled to himself, making Ana wonder what *crimes* the two of them had got up to in the past.

Ana’s heart sank at the thought of Andrew out on the town with another single man. He hadn’t mentioned his date again or how it had gone. If she was honest, she didn’t want to know. Ana didn’t want their little world to change, but she wasn’t naïve enough to think the dynamics of their relationship wouldn’t shift if Andrew got a girlfriend. She knew the chances

of him remaining single were small. She had eyes in her head and knew the impact he had on other women, not just her. Ana's throat constricted. She would be nothing more than the nanny. To date, Andrew had never made her feel like that. He treated her more like a member of the family.

The drive home was pleasant. They swapped stories of the day. Ana told Andrew how the girls had convinced her to help them with their game, and that was why and how he had found her singing Disney Princess Hits in the playroom.

"I don't think I'll be giving up my day job," she said, shoulder-bumping him as they laughed their way up the steps to the front door.

"Maybe not," Andrew said, his eyes twinkling as he stared down at her. "But if you decide to, you have two super fans already."

"Har-har!" Ana said, following Andrew into the house. Andrew flicked on a plug socket near the door, and all the Christmas lights came on in the hall.

"That's better. We need to continue the festive cheer. I'm going to get changed... as it's still early. Do you fancy watching another Christmas movie?" Andrew asked.

"Why not?" Ana answered.

Ana had enjoyed the day so much she was not ready to hide away in her room. She wanted to stay downstairs and continue enjoying her best Christmas Day ever.

Andrew nodded before they both headed upstairs to get changed. Ana hung up her dress and pulled on a pair of leggings and an oversized hoodie. Movie night meant comfort. Ana was the first back downstairs, and when she entered the sitting room, she laughed at the chaos that presented itself. Olivia's new toys were strewn from one side of the room to the other. The bag of discarded wrapping paper sat to the side. At least she'd had the foresight to tidy that away. Ana got down on her hands and knees and started piling up the recent presents. She would take them up to Olivia's room later and find somewhere to store them.

Andrew entered the room looking much more relaxed. He waved his phone at her before placing it on the coffee table. "No calls yet. I checked in, and everything seems in order."

Ana smiled at him and stood up. Olivia's presents in her arms. Andrew stepped forward to take them from her. His hands brushed hers and sent sharp electrical pulses shooting up her arms. Ana kept her eyes lowered, not

wanting Andrew to see how he was affecting her. She needed to get herself under control. As Andrew took the presents, Ana jumped in.

“I’ll make us a cup of tea,” she said, leaving before touching her hands to her flaming cheeks.

Ana heard Andrew climb the stairs and enter Olivia’s room. Ana filled the kettle and was leaning back on the side when Andrew entered.

“All tidy,” Andrew said. “Now we can watch a movie without looking at a room full of toys. Speaking of movies, what do you fancy watching?” Andrew moved further into the kitchen, and Ana found her body throbbing at his closeness.

Maybe watching a movie wasn’t the best option.

“I don’t mind,” Ana said, trying to focus her attention on the kettle and not on Andrew. It clicked off, and Ana lifted the kettle too quickly. Boiling water bounced out of the spout and onto her hand. “Ahhh, damn it!” she said, dropping the kettle on the side.

Before she had time to think, Andrew pulled her over to the sink, his arms looped around her from behind, his chest pressed against her back. Andrew immersed her hand in the flow of ice-cold water, taking her breath away. Ana tried to pull away, but Andrew held it firm.

“Hold still,” he said, close to her ear, his breath tickling her neck. Ana froze, her eyes closing as every nerve ending seemed to fire all at once. She could feel Andrew’s heat radiating behind her, his strength pressed into her back. It was all she could do not to collapse back against him. The water was getting colder and colder, but his touch soothed the burn. Ana wanted to groan when he finally pulled the scolded limb from the water, not because of the pain but the loss of his body. Andrew moved to the cupboard, pulling down a fully stocked first aid kit. He dried her wet hand and tenderly applied burn cream. Ana stood mesmerised as she watched him work.

“There. How does it feel?”

Ana lifted her gaze. Andrew was far too close for comfort. If she leant forward slightly, their lips would touch. Her eyes locked with his, her mouth suddenly dry, her stomach fluttering as if a thousand butterflies had just taken flight. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. This man was gorgeous.

She wanted another kiss.

Ana stepped back as if coming to her senses, her eyes never leaving his,

her hand still held within his.

“I don’t think it will scar,” Andrew whispered quietly, his thumb rubbing circles around the base of hers.

Ana dragged her eyes away, staring down at her hand, trying to hold it steady.

“Sorry, I must have overfilled the kettle.”

Ana went to turn away, but Andrew caught her arm, spinning her to face him.

Ana’s gaze locked on his once more, a wave of heat sweeping up and over her face under his appraisal. A small frown marred Andrew’s features before he raised his hand and brushed errant locks of hair behind her ear. His simple touch ignited an ache deep in her core. Ana bit her lip to prevent the rising moan. Andrew’s gaze moved to her lips. His thumb brushed the abused flesh. Ana could not prevent the moan that escaped this time as she watched Andrew’s breath deepen.

“What are you doing to me?” Andrew whispered, almost to himself.

“I was going to ask you the same question,” Ana said, drawing his thumb into her mouth, teasing it with her tongue.

It was Andrew’s turn to moan this time, his eyes closing.

“Not quite what I meant,” Andrew said, chuckling.

Ana squealed as Andrew swept her up, depositing her on the kitchen island before moving to stand between her legs.

“I should fight this,” he mumbled, using both hands to sweep her hair back off her face and cradle her head. “But I’m tired of fighting it. I’m tired of always doing the right thing.”

Their faces were now level. Ana watched as a tirade of emotions passed over his face. Holding his gaze, she moved her hands until they rested on his shoulders, his muscles contracting under her hands, giving her the confidence to move forward.

“You’re not the only one,” she whispered against his lips, barely breathing as she stared into his deep blue eyes.

That was all it took. Ana found herself caught in the circle of his arms, her head pulled tight to his as his lips crashed against hers. Ana gasped, opening her mouth. That was all the invitation Andrew needed to deepen the kiss. Their tongues danced around one another, tangling, seducing. Ana slid forward until her body was flush with Andrew’s chest and hips, her legs

curling around his waist, drawing him closer, locking them together.

Ana's hands wound their way up his neck and locked into the hair at the base of his head. He moaned again before tearing his mouth from hers, resting their foreheads together.

"What are we doing?" Andrew asked breathlessly.

Ana felt a warmth blossom in her chest.

"I don't know," Ana said, tipping her head forward and quickly kissing his lips. "But whatever it is, it feels right."

Andrew closed his eyes, a frown marring his brow.

"I'm too old for you, Ana," he whispered.

Ana pulled back and captured his chin in her hand, making him look at her. "Age is relative, isn't that what they say? I want you, and I want this."

Ana knew she had to do something quickly, or this would implode. Andrew was a man of honour, and if she allowed him to think too long about this, he would back away like he did outside the gym.

Ana felt Andrew withdraw. He untangled himself from her arms and legs and stepped sideways, leaning his back against the unit next to her, staring out of the window.

"We can't." Ana must have made a noise in protest because Andrew turned towards her, his face filled with pain. "I can't... you must see this is wrong. I'm taking advantage of you."

Ana felt her temper rise.

"What am I, Andrew? Twelve? You're not taking advantage of me."

Andrew looked away, which made Ana's heckles rise further. No one had ever allowed her to be a child, yet this man was treating her like one.

"I'm not a child, so please don't treat me like one... I want this as much as you." Ana's voice cracked at the last word, causing her to shove herself from the side and head for the door.

"I think I'll give the movie a miss," she said, leaving without looking back.

She didn't want Andrew to see the angry tears leaking from her eyes. God, what had she done? An uncontrollable shudder swept through her body. Would Andrew ask her to leave? The sheer thought made her stumble.

"Stop!" Andrew said, catching her arm and pulling her into his embrace. He held her tight, his cheek resting on top of her head until the shudders passed. "I'm sorry."

Turning her to face him, his hands captured her face and tilted it back so

she had no choice but to look at him. He groaned when he saw her tears, wiping them away with the pad of his thumb before leaning down and kissing the wetness away. "I'm sorry, so sorry," he repeated.

Ana melted against him. Her softness against his hard body. His lips found hers again, but he didn't wait this time. This was about taking and demanding, and Ana met him head-on. They were equals in their desire. She wanted him as much as he wanted her, and she would not apologise for it.

As they kissed, Ana's hands made their way under Andrew's jumper. A groan rumbled through his chest as her hands brushed against the skin of his stomach, the muscles contracting sharply under her touch. Ana smiled into their kiss. Andrew broke away, his lips moving to her neck and down towards the sensitive place where her shoulder and neck met. A shudder of pleasure racked Ana's body as Andrew sucked hard, her hips rocking forward. Andrew dropped a hand to her back, urging her forward, their lower bodies pressed together, leaving her in no doubt about how much he wanted her.

Ana pushed Andrew's jumper up before he stepped back, pulling it over his head and throwing it to one side. Ana bit her lip as she stared at Andrew's chest.

"Like what you see?" Andrew said, grinning at her.

Ana tilted her head, a slow smile forming on her lips as she trailed a fingernail down Andrew's chest. His breath grew faster and more audible, sending an almost painful ache flooding her body, pooling at her core. Andrew grabbed and stilled her hand, pressing her open palm over his heart. She felt his heartbeat thundering under her hand. Ana stared up into Andrew's eyes. She wasn't alone in this. Taking his hand in hers, she placed it over her own heart, which was beating in sync with his. They stood for a moment as if the world around them had frozen. They simply felt each other's hearts beating before the tingling sensation grew stronger and the need to touch and explore overtook them. They both moved, their mouths coming together, although this time, it was different. This kiss was coaxing, teasing, when Andrew's tongue slid between her lips. Ana's head swam. When his hands moved under her hoodie, the hairs on her arms and neck rose at the touch of his fingers against her bare skin. She needed more, wanted to feel his skin pressed against hers. Stepping back, she ripped her top off, adding it to his on the floor, before stepping back into the warm circle of his arms. Skin on skin, her temperature rose, and her body flooded with an

unfamiliar warmth. Andrew's hands roamed up and down her back, holding her flush against him while their mouths explored, their breathing laboured. Ana nearly screamed when Andrew's hand finally found her breast, encircling her nipple and pulling it gently.

"So sensitive," he mumbled, before unclasping her bra and replacing his fingers with his mouth, drawing her nipple deep into its warmth, his hot tongue teasing. Ana's moans filled the hall as she thrust her chest forward. If Andrew had not been holding her, Ana knew her knees would have given out. She clutched his head to her chest while he nipped and suckled.

A persistent ringing filled the room. Andrew pulled back, his hands trembling.

"Don't move," he said, dropping a chaste kiss on her lips before turning towards the sitting room where he had left his phone.

Ana grabbed her jumper, bunched it up in her fists and held it to her chest before following him.

"Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can. Get everything prepped."

Andrew hung up and turned to face her, running a hand through his hair as he did so.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm needed in surgery. I've got to go."

Ana felt herself nod. "Go. No apology needed," she said, quickly pulling her jumper on, covering her nakedness.

Andrew moved to stand in front of her, his finger tipping her chin to make her look into his eyes. Eyes that were firm and intense. "This is not over, Ana. We will talk when I get home."

Ana nodded, unsure what else to say.

Andrew gave her a slow smile before quickly kissing her lips and pulling away with a groan. "Terrible timing," he said before moving past her and out the door.

Ana stood frozen on the spot. She let herself sink onto the sofa only after she heard the front door slam.

Ana's fingertips touched her swollen lips, her other hand moving under her jumper to her naked breast. Her nipple ached with unfulfilled longing. Ana rolled it between her fingers, wanting—no—needing relief before throwing herself backwards on the sofa. Grabbing a cushion, she screamed into it. What had just happened? Ana sat up and shook her head. As she gathered her thoughts, she collected her abandoned bra from the bottom of the stairs.

Glancing at the clock, Ana saw it was only six o'clock. Maybe it was time to take a relaxing bath and get her head back in the game. She was not looking forward to Andrew coming home. She had a horrible feeling his chivalrous nature was going to step in. If it did, she wasn't sure how she could stay there. Now she'd had a taste and felt his hands on her, his tongue toying with her. Ana wanted it all.

She wanted so much more of the forbidden fruit that was her ex-brother-in-law and boss.

Chapter Thirty-seven

Andrew

Andrew watched as they wheeled his patient out of the operating room.

“Great job!” his colleague said, slapping him on the back. Andrew turned and gave him a half smile. It had been a complex procedure, but the new heart was healthy. He just needed Adrian’s body to accept the new organ. He was in no doubt it would. The young man in question had a lot to live for.

Receiving the call they had found a donor was always bittersweet. Someone had lost their life to enable someone else to live. The selflessness and generosity of the human spirit, in times of great loss, always blew his mind.

Andrew had arrived at the hospital in plenty of time. The heart was being shipped from the North of England, a road traffic accident, on Christmas Day of all days. Andrew’s heart went out to the family of the person who had lost their life, but as always, he could not think of that. His focus was on his patient. Adrian had been in good spirits. At twenty-four, he still had so much of his life ahead of him, and now he had the chance to experience it.

“Come on, let’s get cleaned up.”

He had spaced out for a moment, having just finished five hours of intense surgery. His body was tired yet wired, all at the same time.

“Yes, I could do with a shower,” Andrew said, following his colleague to the changing rooms.

They chatted about their day as they got changed, letting the stress of the past several hours ebb away. Andrew would pop up to the ICU before he left and check Adrian was settled in, but his job for the time being was done.

As he stood under the water spray, his mind wandered back to Ana. Would she be there when he got back? Her enthusiasm for their kiss appeared to be as great as his. Andrew stopped as he felt his body react to the memory of their kiss, of the way she had responded in his arms. He was not even sure

they would have made it to the bed if he hadn't received a call. He had never felt that connection with another person in such a long time. Ana made him feel things. She made him look at the world in a different light. She'd had a tough upbringing, but her openness to experience new things and her love for life made her shine. Andrew had allowed himself to become addicted. He needed to tread carefully. She was younger than him. She was still a student with her whole life ahead of her. She was his ex-sister-in-law. How would the world view their relationship? They'd probably see him as some dirty old man who had taken advantage of his young nanny. Was that the case? Had he taken advantage?

Andrew leant forward and placed his head against the shower wall, letting the hot water cascade over his back. He needed advice, but who the hell did he turn to? John's face swam into view. He'd known Andrew forever. He'd be honest with him. Tell him whether he was making a huge mistake. His dates had been disasters. He now knew why. The woman he wanted was already living under his roof. Loved his daughter and, it seemed, liked him. He had attempted to erase her from his thoughts but couldn't manage it. When he'd kissed his dates, the physical contact had stopped there. He couldn't take it any further, even when the women had been willing.

Switching off the water. Andrew dried himself off and redressed. He stared at himself in the mirror. He would call John in the morning. However much his friend loved him, he didn't think two AM on Boxing Day morning was appropriate. He would go home and sleep on it. He and Ana could talk in the morning before they went to collect Olivia.

Olivia, he needed to think of her. If things went wrong with Ana, what would happen to his daughter? She would be devastated if Ana left. He was sure Ana would want to maintain contact, but would he be able to? His mind swam as he walked into the ICU to check on Adrian.

The update and his vitals were all positive. Andrew stared down at the young man whose life was about to restart. When they'd met previously, Adrian had said he needed to live and love as if each day was his last, that he didn't want to be filled with regrets when he met his maker. It seemed Adrian had done exactly what he had said he was going to do. When Adrian had checked in earlier, he had introduced Andrew to his college sweetheart. The one he'd let get away. It was clear they were in love. As they had wheeled Adrian away, she had begged Andrew to take good care of him.

Adrian was right, he did only get one shot at life, and he must embrace it with both hands.

Andrew left the hospital and headed home. Whatever this was, he needed to relax and stop overthinking. He had been overthinking since Eva had walked out. Maybe it was time to live and see what life had in store. He would deal with the consequences as they happened.

Chapter Thirty-eight

Andrew

The house was quiet when Andrew entered. He wandered into the kitchen and made himself a hot drink. He needed to come down from the high that surgery gave him. His body was exhausted, but his mind was racing. His encounter with Ana before he left was also playing on his mind.

What the hell had happened? He couldn't believe that his feelings were not one-sided. He knew he should nip their relationship in the bud for many reasons. Olivia being one of them, but Andrew wanted to be selfish. Andrew wanted to have something for himself. The way he felt when he was around Ana was like nothing he had ever felt before. He had never felt this close to someone, not even Eva, and he had been married to her for three years. Then, of course, there was Eva. Why did Ana have to be related to his ex-wife? Why did life have to be so complicated? Andrew leaned forward on the island, staring at the steam wafting up from his cup.

He jumped slightly as arms encircled his waist, a head resting on his back. He stood up, turning in the arms that encircled him, pulling the body into his chest, absorbing their warmth.

"Hi," he said, kissing her hair before resting his cheek on top of Ana's head.

"Hi. You need some sleep," Ana said, snuggling closer.

"You didn't need to wait up," Andrew said, enjoying the closeness.

Ana pulled back and looked up at him. "I didn't. I'm a light sleeper. I remember how Dad would sit up for the rest of the night after surgery." Ana took Andrew's hand and led him towards the stairs. "You, Mr Dennison, need some sleep." Andrew followed as Ana led him up the stairs. It was strange having someone take care of him for a change. For so long, he had been the one taking care of everyone else.

Andrew smiled. "Are you always this bossy, Ms Lewis?" Andrew asked as

they reached the top of the stairs.

“Only with the people I care about,” Ana said as she pushed him towards his bedroom door.

Andrew grabbed her hand and pulled her towards him, encircling her with his arms. “We need to talk,” he said, looking down into her eyes, his body waking up at the sight and touch of her body against his.

Ana placed her hand on his chest, plucking at his jumper.

“We do,” she said, patting the jumper flat. “But is it a conversation for three AM?”

Andrew’s hands absently wandered up Ana’s back as if they had a mind of their own. Ana shivered at his touch, her eyes closing, a soft moan escaping her lips. Her loungewear pyjamas were soft under his hands and did little to hide the contours of Ana’s body. Andrew’s hands tightened on her waist, and she moaned, dropping her head forward onto his chest. She sighed as his hand travelled lower to the curve of her hip, pulling her firmly against his growing desire.

Andrew moved his head, dropping gentle kisses against her neck. Ana tilted her head, encouraging him, her hands winding themselves up and into his hair, cradling his head as he nibbled his way down to her collarbone. A deep inhale of breath let him know he’d found a sensitive area, so he continued his assault on her senses until he felt her knees give way beneath her, his grip tightening.

Andrew knew he was playing with fire. He should send Ana back to her room. What was he thinking? This was wrong. She had her whole life ahead of her and did not need to be saddling herself with a single father who was too old and set in his ways. But his willpower was spent. He’d spent weeks dreaming about how it would feel to have her sensational body beneath him. He’d tried to ignore it, but now that she felt the same way, it was impossible not to look at her and want her.

Another tremor wracked her body. Andrew placed his hands on her shoulders, moving her away from him.

“Ana, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have started this. You need to go back to your room before...” it was more of a plea. His willpower was almost down to zero.

Ana raised soft and shiny eyes to his. His eyes fell to her lips, her breath escaping in uneven pants. She gave him a shy smile, her head tilting before

trailing a finger over his lower lip.

“What if I don’t want to?” Ana whispered, her hand now cradling the side of his face. Andrew turned his head and planted a kiss on her palm. Closing his eyes, he counted to ten. He wanted to pick her up and carry her into his room. Show her what she was doing to him, but the choice was not his.

It had to be hers.

“You’re too young for me, Ana. I’m taking advantage.”

Ana took a step backwards, her face now a mask. “We’ve had this argument. I’m not a child, Andrew. Please don’t treat me like one.”

Andrew dropped his head. This was not a conversation he wanted to be having at three in the morning, but he’d started it. He wasn’t thinking clearly. If he had been, this would never have happened.

“Go to bed, Ana, before we do something you will regret.”

Ana’s face dropped, and she stepped back.

“Goodnight, Andrew, sleep tight,” she said, turning her back on him, walking into her room, and shutting the door.

Andrew stood there for several moments, staring after her. It was the right thing to do. He couldn’t risk messing up their relationship. It would destroy Olivia if Ana was no longer in their lives. He just hoped they’d be able to move past the mistake.

Chapter Thirty-nine

Ana

Ana entered her room and shut the door. What had just happened? She was sure Andrew had wanted her. His body certainly had. Her own body felt hot and alive. Her core pulsing with unfulfilled desire. She needed to get on the website Millie had sent her if this was as far as her love life was going.

Now she had a taste of what it felt like to be in Andrew's arms. She wanted more. It would be hard to un-forget and not look at him with longing. The desire to rip his clothes off...

Ana threw herself down on her bed. The ceiling, once again, her friend. Damn the man, she was not too young for him. Age was a mindset, and she was way older than her years. Her screwed-up childhood had seen to that. She'd been looking after herself since she was ten. How dare he patronise her? She wondered if Michael Douglas had said the same thing to Catherine Zeta-Jones or Rod Stewart to Penny Lancaster. He was only fourteen years older than her, not twenty-five. The man wasn't even forty yet.

Ana growled in frustration. He had sent her to bed like a child. *Go to bed, Ana, before we do something you will regret.*

How dare he.

Ana stopped her thoughts, her breath catching in her throat.

Andrew had not said he would regret it.

He had said *she* would regret it.

Ana shook her head, banging it down on the bed. Typical Andrew, always thinking of others above himself. Was he afraid she would regret them going further? She may not have a huge amount of experience with men, but did he not realise he was sex on legs? His starring role in her erotic dreams and fantasies would probably make a porn star blush.

Ana could not believe the night's turn of events. When Andrew had finally taken her in his arms... Ana felt a rush of warmth cover her neck and face.

Her body tingled at the memory of his touch. She wanted his skin pressed to hers. To feel his hands on her body, his lips trailing over her skin. Most of all, she wanted his body buried deep in hers.

Ana got up off the bed. Her heart hammering in her chest as she made her way to the door. Ana hoped she was right. If she let him walk away tonight, Andrew would rebuild his walls, and she might never get the chance to be with him. He would convince himself he was too old for her, that she needed someone her own age. What he didn't realise was she didn't want a boy. Ana wanted a man and a very specific one.

Before she could overthink her next move, Ana headed for the door. Taking bold strides across the hall, she stood outside Andrew's bedroom. She could hear him moving around, getting ready for bed. Before she could think twice, she put her hand on the door and pushed it open.

Andrew stood frozen in the centre of the room, staring at her. His jumper was gone, displaying his sculpted chest and tattoos. Ana swallowed at the deep V disappearing into his jeans. No wonder the television stations wanted him. His hand was frozen in his hair. His breathing was fast and audible.

"You said something *I* would regret?" Ana said.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped further into the room. Her heartbeat accelerated as she slowly removed her hoodie and then her nightshirt, dropping them to the floor.

Andrew's blue eyes darkened, and his jaw clenched. Ana watched as his eyes roamed over her, his gaze searing her skin.

"Do you want me?" Ana asked, taking another tentative step into his room, her eyes never leaving his.

Andrew rubbed a hand over his face.

"More than I should," he admitted, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

Ana's blood thundered through her body as she moved to stand before him. A tremor wracked his body as she placed a hand on his bare chest. His hand came up, covering hers, pressing it into his heart. A heart beating as violently as her own.

"I want you, Andrew Dennison. I want to feel your body pressed against mine. I want you buri—"

Ana never finished her sentence. Andrew's mouth descended on hers, the frantic nature of his kiss stealing the breath from her body. Her lips parted against his, returning his kiss with a matching sense of desperation.

Andrew's hands travelled around her body, sliding down to her hips, pulling her flush against him and leaving her in no doubt of his desire. Ana moaned against his mouth before her hands swept up, burying themselves in his hair.

Ana let out a squeal as Andrew swept her up in his arms, depositing her in the centre of his bed.

Breaking their kiss, he knelt down next to her beside the bed. "This only goes as far as you want it to," he said, cradling her face in his large palms.

Ana held his gaze. "No regrets," she promised before turning her head and dropping a kiss onto his palm.

Andrew closed his eyes, drawing in a shuddering breath. "You don't know what you do to me," he whispered.

"Come to bed," Ana said, scooting across the mattress to make room for him.

Andrew got up and walked to his bedroom door, and Ana wondered if her brazen approach was too much. But she knew this was not one-sided when he closed the door and faced her.

His scorching gaze never left her face as he stripped off his remaining clothes and tossed them aside.

Ana swept her tongue along her bottom lip, her gaze drinking him in. Her body quivered with a desire she had never felt before.

As Andrew approached the bed, every muscle in Ana's body tensed in anticipation. He dropped down next to her, his mouth once again finding hers in a searing kiss. Andrew made fast work of removing the rest of her clothes while Ana's hands explored the smooth skin of his shoulders and chest. When her fingertips grazed his nipple, Andrew grabbed both her hands in one of his, sweeping them up above her head and pinning them to the bed.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said before lowering his head and drawing one of her taut nipples into his mouth, teasing the tip with his tongue. Ana's back arched upward, pushing her body towards his in a silent plea,

Andrew drew back and stared down at her, his blue eyes filled with such longing it stalled her heart. Ana gasped in pleasure as Andrew's head once again descended, drawing her other nipple deep into his mouth. She clasped his head as he sucked and nipped at the sensitive peak, sending yet more waves of pleasure crashing through her. Draping her leg over Andrew's

thigh, she moved against him, his body jerking in response. A low moan rumbled deep within his chest, spurring Ana on.

Andrew didn't miss a beat. His hand moved down to cup her bottom, pulling her more firmly against him. Their bodies rocked together.

His mouth moved back to Ana's, swallowing her gasps of pleasure. His naked chest pressed against her heated skin. His hard muscles were a stark contrast to her soft breasts. Ana's hands wrapped around his back as he nipped and teased her lips, drawing him closer.

His hands roamed all over her body, causing electric shocks to ripple through her. Ana moaned in frustration and felt Andrew smile against her lips. The damn man was torturing her.

Andrew drew his mouth away, drawing a trail of kisses down her neck and over her collarbone. Ana mewled loudly as Andrew's mouth moved lower to the exposed skin of her stomach. His tongue drew circles on her navel, leaving a heated trail of desire wherever he touched. Ana's muscles contracted sharply under his lips. Her hands were now free, Ana clutched at Andrew's head, not wanting the sensation of his mouth on her skin to end.

Pleasure ripped through her core as her muscles contracted violently, calling for more.

"Andrew," she bit out.

Ana's hands grasped at Andrew. She heard herself pleading, unsure what she was pleading for. Her body had never felt so alive. All she knew was she needed... wanted more.

Andrew's hand slid down over her stomach's soft, smooth skin. His hands smoothed over her backside. Ana's body froze at the sensation of his fingers kneading the bare skin of her bottom before trailing further down her thigh. Ana buried her face in his neck, her teeth sinking into his shoulder. Andrew shuddered as he pulled away to look at her.

"Let me take care of you," he whispered as his fingers trailed lightly over her inner thigh, close but not close enough to her quivering centre. Ana whimpered against his neck as he drew close and pulled away. Her legs opened voluntarily, offering him access to the place she longed most for his touch.

Andrew's fingertips grazed over her mound.

Ana's head fell back as her body surrendered. His fingers found her soft, tender folds, parting them gently. He groaned at the evidence of her desire,

his fingers moving effortlessly over her heated skin.

There was no hiding how much she wanted him.

Andrew pulled back and stared down into Ana's eyes. He held her gaze as his finger moved down, circling, teasing, before moving up to her sensitive nub. His finger gently circled, his featherlight touch sending waves of pleasure crashing through Ana's core. She could feel an unfamiliar pressure building low in her body. Ana's back arched automatically, her bottom pushing down. Andrew slowed his movements as his fingers lightly teased and roused her silky flesh, driving her higher.

"Look at me, Ana," he demanded.

Ana stared up into his passion-filled eyes. Her legs opened wider, allowing him more access. Her hips moved of their own accord at Andrew's touch.

His finger moved to her opening. A warmth spread through her lower body, her breath hitching. Ana clutched Andrew's shoulders as his finger teased her entrance, dipping in and pulling out. Ana cried out, her body tensing when Andrew thrust his finger deep inside her body. No-one had ever been able to arouse her so quickly, her body was on fire. The heel of Andrew's palm rubbed her swollen nub while his finger curled and stroked the sensitive spot deep inside. Ana's legs spread wider as her hips thrust against his hand.

Andrew added a second finger. Ana shuddered at the alien sensation overtaking her body.

"Let go," Andrew whispered against her ear, gently biting down on the lobe.

Ana's body erupted at his words. Stars flashed in front of her eyes as her muscles spasmed around his fingers.

Ana opened her eyes to find Andrew looking down at her, his gaze heated. Smoothing the damp hair from her face, he dropped a kiss on her lips before whispering. "You are so beautiful, Ana."

Ana stared up at the man above her, a man who had just made her body explode. She used her hand to trace the contours of his face.

"So are you," she said shyly.

Andrew's fingers were still stroking inside her body. His touch was tender, prolonging her orgasm.

Ana watched goosebumps appear on Andrew's skin as she ran her fingernails down his chest.

“My turn,” she said, pushing him to his back and grinning at him.

His fingers slipped from her body as he moved.

“You’ve explored me. It’s only fair.”

Andrew sighed deeply as her nail gently raked over his nipple. His eyes closed in response. Ana leaned forward, using the flat of her tongue to lick over the stiff peak. Was he as sensitive as she was? The groan vibrating through his chest gave her the answer. “You’re going to be the death of me,” he said before his eyes closed as she trailed her fingers over his stomach, watching in delight as his muscles danced under her touch.

Ana made her way lower, her fingertips skating his hard desire, before returning and circling the hard column of flesh, massaging and exploring the entire length. Bending down, she slowly licked his swollen head before taking it into her mouth.

Andrew groaned and pulled Ana up his body, moulding her intimately against him.

“I won’t last,” he whispered before plundering her mouth with his. Ana felt the full force of Andrew’s desire pressed against her. Pulling back, she looked into Andrew’s eyes, losing herself in their depth.

“We don’t have to go any further,” Andrew said.

Ana smoothed her hands over his chest before snaking them to the back of his neck, playing with the soft hair she found there.

“Yes, we do,” Ana whispered. “I want to feel you, all of you. See if my dreams live up to reality.”

A low moan escaped Andrew’s chest as he shut his eyes.

“You’ve been dreaming about me?” he asked.

Ana nodded, her tongue darting out to moisten her lips. “I have woken hot and trembling on so many occasions since our first kiss. I have barely been able to look at you during breakfast.”

Andrew pulled her hard against him, leaving her in no doubt about the effect her words were having on him.

“How am I doing so far?” he asked, his head moving to kiss the sensitive spot beneath her ear.

Ana didn’t answer. Instead, she swivelled her hips against him. Andrew flipped them, dropping Ana onto her back and settling himself between her open thighs.

Ana’s hips bucked. Andrew again found her opening, teasing and driving

her body against his.

He leaned over and raked through his bedside draw. "I wasn't expecting this," he said, sounding genuine. Ana breathed a sigh of relief when he finally found a condom.

She watched in fascination as Andrew sheathed himself. Settling himself once again between her thighs.

"Are you sure?" Andrew asked.

"Yes... kiss me."

Andrew didn't need to be asked twice. He bent down, his lips capturing hers in a kiss that brought tears to her eyes.

"I want you," she whispered. "I need you. No doubts and no regrets," Ana said, wrapping her legs tightly around him.

Ana felt him at her entrance. The tip of his head pushed in, making them both groan.

"Oh," Ana heard herself say as her body tensed. Andrew froze.

"I'll go slow. You're so warm and tight. Breathe, gorgeous."

Andrew moaned, his forehead dropping to her shoulder.

Ana focused on breathing deeply and relaxing her muscles to take him fully. She wanted to feel more, so she pushed up experimentally. As if taking the hint, Andrew surged forward. Ana groaned as her body stretched to accommodate the invasion, the sensation overwhelming her senses. Andrew pushed up onto his forearms, his palms flat on the mattress, his eyes locking with hers.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

Ana couldn't speak, the sensations wracking her body, overriding her ability to speak.

Instead, she grinned.

He grinned back and linked their fingers on one hand, his mouth brushing hers.

Andrew started to move. Ana's muscles clenched at the feeling of him deep within her, another ball of heat building low in her body. Andrew moaned, his hand trailing down her thigh, pulling her closer. Ana felt him sink deeper, his body hitting that sweet spot, sending her spiralling into the abyss as another orgasm ripped through her.

Andrew froze above her, his own body shaking as she felt him pulse and jerk inside her, a shuddering groan rumbling deep in his chest. They both lay

unmoving, the only sound of their uneven breathing.

Their eyes locked as Andrew dropped a kiss on her lips.

“You are beautiful, Santana Lewis,” he whispered, carefully withdrawing himself from her body.

Ana lay sated. Her body was boneless in the aftermath of their lovemaking.

She lay still while Andrew disappeared into his ensuite. Ana heard the shower start. Andrew returned, scooping her into his arms before carrying her into the bathroom. He placed her on the heated tile floor and scooped up her hair, creating a top knot with one of Olivia’s scrunchies. She watched as Andrew felt the water temperature before stepping into the warm water, drawing her with him, his mouth once again descending on hers.

She had never felt so cherished in her life.

Chapter Forty

Ana

Ana awoke slowly, an unfamiliar warmth resting at her back, an arm looped over her waist, fingers entwined with hers. A smile ghosted her lips before she even opened her eyes, memories of the night before flooding her system and sending shafts of desire back to her core, making her body squirm as she clenched her thighs tightly together.

“Hum,” came a voice nestled against her neck, the warmth of his breath against her sensitive ear. “If you keep that up, we won’t be going anywhere today.”

Lips kissed her neck, and Ana raised her arm, snaking it behind Andrew’s head, drawing him closer. His hair was soft under her fingers, and she tilted her head, giving him greater access. His hand slid down to her breast, rolling her aching nipple between skilled fingers, sending pulses of pleasure straight to her centre. Andrew had lit a fire, one that was not going to be quickly extinguished. She wanted this man with every fibre of her being, and the previous night had only made those feelings more intense.

Ana moaned, shifting onto her back, pulling Andrew’s lips to hers, coaxing and teasing. Andrew’s tongue slid between her lips, driving her body off the bed and towards his, wanting and needing as much contact as possible. Ana’s hands caressed the hard contours of his back, groaning at the feel of the hard muscles moving beneath the skin. She pulled him closer, their bodies chest to chest, her nerve endings sizzling as the tension between them grew. Andrew let out a pained groan of desperation and flopped backwards, leaving Ana suddenly cold and exposed. She looked at him, confused, and then she heard it. A frantic ringing of the front doorbell.

Looking at the clock, Ana saw it was ten o’clock. It was not a shock that they had slept so late. By the time Andrew got back from the hospital, it was already three. They had finally fallen asleep at five, wrapped in each other’s

arms. It was Boxing Day, and they were not expected to collect Olivia until later that afternoon.

So who was ringing at this time of the morning?

Andrew rolled over, groaning. He stood up unabashed as Ana enjoyed the view of his perfect body.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

Ana watched as Andrew pulled on his jeans and jumper from the night before, before heading for the door. Ana smiled at his backward glance and collapsed back onto the pillow, her body still alive and pulsing with the start of their morning lovemaking.

Ana heard the gentle muffle of voices and threw back the covers. Whoever was downstairs was obviously not going to be leaving in a hurry. Grabbing her pyjamas, she quickly dressed and headed back to her own room. She didn’t want their visitor guessing that she had just rolled out of Andrew’s bed. Whatever they had going on, they still needed to have ‘the talk’. Life was already complicated, and they’d made it more so, but for the first time in her life, Ana didn’t care. Last night had been perfect. She had felt connected to someone for the first time. It showed her there was another way.

After her shower, Ana got dressed, tidied her hair, and headed downstairs.

She stopped halfway.

She could hear a woman’s voice coming from the kitchen this time. Shoulders back, Ana continued her journey, stopping sharply at the kitchen door. In front of her, Andrew was standing near the coffee machine, his face set in a hard mask, while at the island sat someone Ana hadn’t seen in six years.

Andrew looked up as if sensing her presence. The woman at the counter spun around on her perched stool.

“Hello, Santana. Surprise.”

Ana stared hard at the woman in front of her, a hollow feeling forming in the pit of her stomach. What the hell was Eva doing there? Ana’s heart rate picked up as they stared at one another. Their age gap had ensured they had never been close, but looking at her sister now, there was no mistaking they were sisters, especially as Eva had grown her hair, having always worn it short.

“It’s Ana,” both she and Andrew said together, causing Eva to throw a startled look between them.

“Well, isn’t this cosy,” Eva said, accepting the coffee Andrew had placed in front of her.

Andrew stepped around Eva and headed towards Ana, but Ana gave a slight shake of her head. He stopped in his tracks, a frown marring his features. Ana sent him a pleading look with her eyes. She did not want her sister to know what was going on between them. She was already uncomfortable enough with her being there. Had Andrew been truthful when he’d said he hadn’t seen Eva since she’d handed over Olivia at the hospital? What the hell was happening? She had the best sex of her life with her ex-brother-in-law, and then his ex-wife, her sister, turned up.

Was Fate having fun at her expense?

Andrew turned to Eva. “What are you doing here, Eva?”

Eva turned to face the room. She was the picture of elegance and poise. Not a hair or item of clothing out of place. Even her makeup was natural and flawless. Ana looked down at herself in her ripped jeans and sweatshirt. She could never compete with the woman in front of her. Her father had made that perfectly clear all her life. She was sub-standard in comparison.

Eva picked up her coffee, her movement and posture reminding Ana so much of Olivia it was spooky. This woman had nothing to do with raising her, but clearly, her genes were very much present in the little girl. Ana moved into the kitchen, grabbing herself a cup of coffee. She needed a pick-me-up, and Andrew’s coffee was designed for that.

“I could ask... Ana the same thing,” Eva said, stopping Ana in her tracks.

“What Ana is or isn’t doing here has nothing to do with you,” Andrew said, his arms folded over his chest as he stared his ex-wife down.

“I beg to differ,” Eva replied, placing her drink down. “We had an agreement. No one from my family was to have contact with you or Olivia.”

“Seven years is a long time, Eva, and things change.”

Andrew’s voice was clipped, and Ana cringed at his tone. There had been an agreement she stayed away. She had thought it was simply her father telling her to forget about Andrew and her niece for Eva’s sake.

Eva leaned back on the stool and sighed. “I didn’t come here to fight.”

She was no longer staring at Andrew, her focus being on her hands. Hands she was wringing frantically in her lap.

“I’ll ask again. Why are you here, Eva? Seven years... seven years ago, you told me to take our daughter and get out of your life. Out of the blue, you

show up on Boxing Day of all days, and you think it's strange that I want to know why?"

Andrew sounded exasperated.

Ana's stomach was churning. She felt too hot. The coffee wasn't helping. Instead, it was making her nauseous. She needed to get out of there. This was not her battle. This was between Andrew and Eva. She made her way to the door, but Andrew caught her arm, sending electric pulses firing up her arm where his fingers touched.

"Stay," he whispered. "Please, Ana."

She looked at where they touched. Memories of the night before flooded her brain, how his hands and lips had set her body on fire. "You two need to talk," she choked out.

Ana looked up at her sister, only to find her eyes watching her. She could not make out her expression. She was unsure she had it in her emotionally to decipher what was happening. The past twenty-four hours had been a bit of a roller coaster. Eva tilted her head as if asking a question, one Ana couldn't begin to guess. Her stomach churned, and she knew she had to leave, even if Andrew wanted her there. Eva might be her sister by blood, but they had never been sisters, and she was not prepared to get caught up in whatever game Eva was playing.

"I'm sorry," she said, not able to meet Andrew's eyes. "I've got to go."

Ana pulled away from Andrew's grasp and walked out of the kitchen. This time, Andrew did not stop her. She pulled on her shoes and grabbed her bag. She took the car keys and headed out the front door without a backward glance. It was only then she could take a long, indrawn breath. Climbing into the car, she rested her head on the steering wheel as the first tears fell. She swiped at them angrily, switching on the engine. She opened her bag and grabbed her phone, sending an SOS message to Millie and George before realising it was Boxing Day, and they would be with their families. Their response, however, was instant.

MILLIE: *Meet at mine.*

GEORGE: *I'll be there shortly.*

Ana wiped her face and put the car into gear, pulling out of Andrew's driveway. The roads were empty, so Ana made it through London to Millie's house in record time.

Like Andrew, Millie's parents were wealthy. Ana pulled into their drive

and got out of the car. The front door was flung open, and Millie ran out to greet her, sweeping her into a bear hug. Followed closely by George. Ana dissolved into tears in her friends' arms. She had never been a crier. What was happening to her? For once, however, she didn't want to put on a brave face, so she let her friends see all her pain. Millie and George simply held her until her tears turned to hiccups.

"Come on, let's get you inside," Millie said, taking Ana's hand and pulling her towards the house.

They passed Millie's mum, who shot her a sympathetic smile before saying, "The kettle is on. I'll make you all some tea."

Ana didn't listen to Millie's reply. She simply let her friends lead her.

Chapter Forty-one

Andrew

Andrew's heart sank as he watched Ana walk away. Taking a deep breath, he turned back to Eva, his always-controlled temper finally rising.

"I'll ask one more time. Why are you here, Eva? Last chance," he said, storming back over to the coffee machine and refilling his mug.

"I'm sorry, Andrew," she said quietly. "I honestly didn't come here to cause trouble."

When Andrew looked over, her eyes were firmly on her lap. She was twisting her fingers frantically as if trying to pull something off them. He watched for a moment before moving over and resting a hand over hers. He recognised stress when he saw it.

Her eyes flew to his, and the devastation he saw there almost took his breath away. This was not the super-confident Eva he remembered. He stared into her pain-filled eyes. Was he being played? She had always been a master manipulator. Did he owe her a chance to say her piece? No. But would he? Yes, if only for his daughter's sake.

"Let's start over," he heard himself saying. "Bring your coffee, and we'll sit in the sitting room."

Andrew left the kitchen, not waiting to see whether Eva followed. He needed a few moments to centre himself. His head was spinning. All he could think about was how he was glad he was Olivia wasn't here. If that was what she was hoping, she would be sorely disappointed.

Andrew watched as Eva followed him in.

"You have a beautiful home," Eva said before motioning to the photographs that had fascinated Ana when she had first been in this room. He nodded and gestured for her to look.

Andrew pushed aside his memories. They were something he would have to deal with later. He just hoped Ana was okay. Last night, they had gone

somewhere he'd never thought they would go. He was unhappy they'd not had a chance to talk. Ana had taken his breath away when she had entered his room. When she touched him... he had never felt such a connection to another person... This was not how he had foreseen their morning. His idea had been a leisurely breakfast in bed, followed by their much-needed talk and more lovemaking. But until he had removed Eva, he knew she would not want to come home. And this was her home. His heartbeat kicked up a notch. He realised he wanted this to be Ana's home, but he needed to temporarily shelve those thoughts.

He watched as Eva zoomed in on the photos of Olivia. She ran a finger down the latest picture, her throat contracting. After about five minutes, she spun around to face him.

"Thank you," she said before moving and taking a seat opposite him. "She is beautiful."

"She is. So?"

Eva took a deep breath. "I actually came to London looking for Santana," she said. "You were due to be second on my list." Andrew watched as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Maybe you need to start from the beginning," Andrew said, sitting back.

Eva took a few moments to centre herself. Leaning forward, she rested her forearms on her knees as she cradled her coffee mug in her hands. Staring down at the liquid, Andrew watched as she zoned out momentarily.

"I don't know what Santana's told you about after we split?" she said, still not looking at him.

"Not a lot. She said you left about a year after we split, but she didn't have any details other than you went to the US."

Eva gave an empty, harsh laugh. "She wouldn't. They certainly wouldn't have told her what was happening. It wasn't their style." The bitterness in her voice was palpable.

Eva finally looked up and stared at him. "A year after we split, I transferred my speciality training to a hospital in the US. I've been there ever since."

Andrew remained silent; he wasn't sure what she wanted him to say. Good for you. Glad you got to train in the US, having abandoned both your husband and your daughter. Something must have shown on his face because he watched her blanch and found he didn't care. Why should he? After all she had done.

Eva shook her head. "I deserve that look..." she said, looking up at the ceiling. "This is harder than I thought it would be."

Putting her cup down, she flattened her hands against her legs. Andrew remained silent. This was her story to tell. He would not make it easier for her, but he realised whatever was going on, she needed to get it out, so he waited.

Taking another deep breath, Eva's eyes came back to his. Shaking her head, he watched as she rubbed a quivering hand over her chest. "I thought this was going to be easy."

Andrew leaned forward. The pain emanating from his ex-wife almost suffocating. "Eva, look at me." Her eyes flashed to his. "Start at the beginning." His patience was waning, but he knew he needed to hear her out if only to allow himself to move forward.

She held his gaze and gave a slow nod. Taking a deep breath, she started.

"Santana wasn't the only accident. I was too." She stared absently at the coffee table as the words tumbled out. "Ana thought I was the golden child, but I wasn't. I simply had more time to learn to play his games. By the time she came along and I was old enough, I was out of the door, only coming back when I had to. I abandoned her the same way I abandoned you."

Andrew frowned, unsure of what Eva was trying to say. His confusion must have shown as Eva gave him a knowing smile. "My mother, like you and I, was on the same trajectory as my father. She was top of her class, and expected to make great waves in her chosen field. Dad married her. He wanted the best... always the best." She shook her head. "That was until she got pregnant with me."

"She was stronger in those days; she wasn't the brow-beaten woman you met. She told my father she was having the baby and took time out. She was a great mum during those early years, but as with everything, as time moved on, her confidence ebbed, or so she told me recently." Andrew watched as Eva composed herself. "She eventually went back to work, but as a GP. Dad's career took off. I remember well how he'd always pointed out how she'd thrown it all away and failed herself and him by having me. In the end, I suppose the long hours as a GP and being a solo parent wore her down. Then during her menopause, she fell pregnant again with Santana. The arguments and rows that followed." Eva shook her head as if trying to clear the memories.

She leant forward and picked up her coffee, taking a long sip. “I spent my childhood trying to win my father’s approval. The day I got into medical school, that dream came true. I was suddenly his wonderful, clever, intelligent daughter, *his little girl*. All those years I’d fought to get his attention, I suddenly had it. When I entered core surgical training... well, I’d made it. My father spoke of me with pride.”

Andrew couldn’t help himself. He was picturing the kind of childhood both Eva and Ana had experienced at the hands of their narcissistic father.

“What about Ana?” Andrew heard himself ask, not sure he really wanted to listen to the emotional torture the woman he was developing serious feelings for had experienced growing up. He knew some of it, he’d been there, but their father had wanted to impress him. He was from the right *stock* on the right *trajectory*, so he knew what he’d seen was probably a more watered-down experience, which had been bad enough.

Eva shook her head. “Mum tried to protect Ana. When she was old enough, She sent Ana away to boarding school to protect her from him. Ana learned, like me, to appease. She’s stronger than me...” Andrew’s head shot up, and he stared at Eva, open-mouthed.

Eva smiled, “She walked away, Andrew. Ana is a hell of a lot stronger than I am... she told him to go to hell and left. She walked away from a promising career in medicine. I know because I’ve kept an eye on her over the years... Did you know she was top of her class in both years of med school?” Andrew raised an eyebrow. “I had friends who would let me know how she was doing. When he tried to control her the way he did me, she turned her back on him.”

Andrew drew in a deep breath. His heart hurt for Ana. He knew there had been more to her story about leaving medical school. Somehow her excuse had not rung true, but he hadn’t wanted to push. It had been none of his business, not then, at least. But now... he wanted to find her, hold her. Eva shook her head, and Andrew watched a lone tear track its way down her cheek before she swiped it away.

Andrew stared at her for a long moment. He didn’t want to believe her sob story and wasn’t sure how he and Olivia fit in. She’d escaped her father. They’d been married. They’d barely spent any time with them. But he’d met enough narcissists, and Anthony Lewis fitted the bill. He only got away with things because he was at the top of his field.

“Forgive me, Eva, but you had escaped him. You’d married me. We were together. We had a life before you threw it away. Are you trying to tell me it was all because your father told you to? I’m struggling to buy it.”

Eva looked up and gave him a sad smile. “I had, but it wasn’t enough. It has taken me five years of therapy to understand how I destroyed my life to appease that man. I lost my husband, and I gave away my daughter.” Her voice caught on the last sentence.

Andrew stood up and paced to the mantelpiece, his hands gripping the marble. His back turned to Eva. He didn’t dare look at her as his disgust was growing stronger. She was trying to blame someone else for her actions. “You freaked out when you found out you were pregnant.”

“That isn’t entirely true,” Eva said, unable to look him in the eye when he turned around. “I knew I was pregnant from the start. I knew at five weeks.”

“But...” Andrew stared at Eva open-mouthed, unsure how to reply.

“I wanted it to be too late by the time anyone found out... before *he* found out... believe me, I wanted our baby so much.” Eva’s eyes filled with tears as she got up and moved to the mantle that was covered in pictures of Olivia through the years. She picked up one of Olivia’s baby pictures. A fresh set of tears rolled down her cheek. She looked up, and Andrew saw the pain in her eyes.

Taking her arm, he led her back to the sofa.

Eva sighed. “I don’t expect you to understand. It’s taken me a long time to get my head around what happened to me and why I behaved the way I did.” Andrew watched her grip the picture tighter, her knuckles almost white. “All I’d ever heard from Father growing up was that a baby would ruin my career. It had destroyed my mother’s career. My birth had been the end of her promising career as a surgeon. Who wanted to take a chance on someone with other commitments? I’d spent years watching my father brow-beat my mother, put her down. I thought if I kept my pregnancy a secret until it was too late, then he would come round. He would see that my career didn’t have to be over.” Eva shook her head sadly. “Do you remember I went to stay with them for the weekend? In hindsight, I shouldn’t have done it. I wasn’t strong enough. I couldn’t stand up to him. He was a bully, and he made me feel like a failure. I had spent so many years trying to please that man. I couldn’t face his disappointment when I’d finally earned it. He’d been so proud, and I was letting him down.” Tears tracked their way down Eva’s face, her eyes never

leaving Olivia's photo. "When I told him I was pregnant, he went ballistic. All the time and effort he'd spent on my career. I'd thrown it all away in his eyes. I was no better than my useless mother. He told me you would grow to resent me the way he resented my mother. You loved me because I was a bright shining star, not some washed-out housewife."

Andrew felt the colour leech from his face. He would never have resented Eva. He had been so happy when he'd found out they were pregnant because that was the way he'd seen it. They had been pregnant. Eva nearly destroyed him when she announced she didn't want their child. He had been desperate. Andrew had begged and pleaded with her to reconsider. Andrew knew his father-in-law was a piece of work, but he hadn't realised how badly Eva had been under his thumb. Had he really been so blind as to not see what was happening in front of him? Andrew had been twenty-nine when Olivia was born. He and Eva had been together for three years. In all fairness, they had spent little time with her family. She'd always preferred to spend the holidays with his, but when they had been there, she had always appeared to be worshipped.

If what Eva was saying was true, Anthony Lewis may not have physically abused his daughters, but he had spent years mentally abusing them. That Eva was as successful as she was, or that Ana had the inner strength to break away, even in the harshest of circumstances, was amazing. His daughter had grown up without a mother because some man had decided her career was more important and had brainwashed her into believing him.

Eva's tear-filled eyes broke something inside him. "I am so sorry for all I put you and Olivia through." She shook her head. "I have had years of counselling to understand what happened. Giving you up broke something in me. I finally snapped on Olivia's first birthday. It was then they diagnosed me with postpartum depression. One of my colleagues found and helped me. He knew some of what had happened and organised my transfer. He helped me get away. It took me a couple of years to face what had happened to me and to Ana, but once I did..." She trailed off, her eyes frozen on a spot on the floor. Whatever she was seeing was toxic for her. Andrew knew he needed to pull her out.

He snapped his fingers in front of Eva's eyes. She gazed at him, her focus gone.

"Eva. Eva!" he said, pulling her back into the present.

“I’m so sorry,” she said, dissolving into tears.

Andrew could not stand seeing the woman in front of him in so much pain. She had been his wife. She was the mother of his daughter. Whatever had gone on between them, she had given him the most precious gift someone could give another. He pulled her into his arms and rocked her as he had done a million times for Olivia when she was hurt. He sat and soothed her until her tears finally subsided.

Chapter Forty-two

Ana

Ana sat in silence as Millie's mum brought them tea. Her friends had wrapped her up in a blanket and sat her in what looked to be a television room in the basement. She couldn't believe she had called her friends and then cried all over them. That was so out of character. She was changing and wasn't sure it was for the best. She'd been complacent, opened herself up to new possibilities and allowed people in for the first time in her life, trusted and now... well, now she was reaping what she had sowed. Life had always been easier when she kept herself to herself and held people at arm's length. You couldn't get hurt if you only relied on yourself. She'd done it for years. She got the power to break away. Why should life be any different anywhere else?

It surprised Ana when George was the first one to speak up. "What happened, Ana?" her voice was soft and coaxing.

"Nothing," Ana said, offering her friends a bright smile. "It was me being silly. I'm fine, honestly." She shrugged off the blanket they had placed around her shoulders before taking a cup of tea.

Millie looked at George before turning back to Ana.

"Well, I call bullshit," she said, pursing her lips. "Don't try with the, *I'm fine, it was just me being silly!* Outside was far from fine and silly as you can get. So, let's start this again." Millie's face was a picture of frustration. Ana was sure if she'd been a cartoon character, smoke would come out of her ears.

Ana sighed and lowered her gaze. She couldn't look them in the eye and lie, but this was her problem, not theirs. It was Boxing Day. They should be with their families, not sitting there with her.

"Stop right there." Millie snapped her fingers in front of Ana's face. "Get out of your head and back into the present. Ana, please, we are your friends.

Let us help you.”

Emotion choked Millie’s voice, and her friend’s eyes were over-bright when Ana looked up. Ana reached out a hand to soothe her friend, only to find her hand clutched tightly.

Ana drew in a deep breath before moving to make eye contact with each of her friends. “I slept with Andrew last night,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. She wasn’t sure what she was expecting? Looks of disgust. Would her friends think badly of her... sleeping with an older man? Her boss? Worst of all, her brother-in-law? Instead, the hand holding hers squeezed tightly, bringing her back into the present.

“Did he hurt you?” George asked, moving beside her and placing an arm around her shoulders.

Ana’s head shot up. “No! It was amazing.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Both of her friends looked at her, confusion marring their brows. Ana watched as they shared a look. In for a penny, in for a pound, as they say. Ana took a deep breath and told her friends all that had happened the day before, how she and Andrew had ended up in bed together, and how it had all come crashing down when her sister arrived.

Both George and Millie had remained silent throughout her monologue.

“You just up and left this morning?” Millie asked.

“I couldn’t stay,” Ana said. “They needed to talk. I was in the way.”

“Did Andrew say that?” George asked.

“No, he asked me to stay... but I couldn’t. It was not my place.”

Ana looked at her hands.

Millie squeezed her hand once more. “I think you need to talk to him. He obviously cares about you... We’ve watched your feelings for him grow over the months you’ve lived with him. I’m not surprised you ended up in bed together.”

Ana’s eyes flew to her friends. How embarrassing. Is that why Andrew didn’t turn her away? Had she appeared so desperate, he felt sorry for her and did not want to hurt her feelings?

“Wherever your head is, forget it. Whatever is spinning around in your brain is not the case.”

“But what if he only slept with me because he felt sorry for me? He must have seen me fawning after him. You picked up on it.” Ana’s voice became

higher pitched.

“You told us about your sex dreams,” Millie pointed out. “Andrew seems too nice of a person to play games from what you’ve told us. He also wouldn’t want to jeopardise your relationship with Olivia.”

The colour leached out of Ana’s face, causing George to sit back in horror. “What has just gone through your mind?”

“Olivia. Andrew’s been dating, as he wants to find a mother for her. I’m so stupid,” Ana shook her head frantically, wanting to get the sickening idea out of her head, “We are the spitting image. Oh, God.” Ana dropped her head into her hands and felt her friend’s hand rubbing soothing circles on her back and shoulders.

“What are you talking about, Ana?” Millie asked quietly.

Ana raised her head and stared her friend in the eye. “I don’t know how I didn’t see it before. There are pictures of her in the sitting room. I’m the spitting image of Eva. I am a long-haired, carbon copy of his ex-wife. What better replacement? A younger model who is throwing herself at him.” Ana put her head in her hands and let the tears flow freely again. How could she have been so blind?

It had been six years since Ana had last seen Eva. Ana had been an overweight, spotty teenager when Eva had left. A far cry from her glamorous, beautiful, and sophisticated older sister. Ana had spent years listening to her father compare the two of them and how she fell short. This morning had been a shock.

Ana had never understood why Eva decided to finish her surgical training in the US, but she had been grateful. With Eva out of the way, Ana had been able to forge her own path. But now Eva was back. Andrew didn’t have to worry about finding a partner. The wife he loved was back and could be a mother to their daughter. The mother she always should have been.

Ana’s stomach turned over at the thought. The thought of Andrew touching her sister like he had her last night. The desperate way he had taken her, sending her soaring, and how after he had held her close. Making her feel, for the first time in her life, cherished. But what if it was an illusion? He would not have had to pretend too hard that she was Eva.

Ana’s mind flew back to the last time she had seen him. She had hidden at the top of the stairs as he pleaded with Eva not to throw their marriage away, their child. How he loved her, and they could work through anything. How

could she have forgotten that? She could never compete with her sister. Who did she think she was?

“The only way to know is to talk to him,” George said.

Neither of her friends could dispute what she had just told them.

“Well, your sister must be one beautiful bitch,” Millie said as George smacked her on the arm. “What? Ana is one of the most beautiful girls I’ve met, and I’m straight. If she’s telling us her sister is more beautiful, she must be a super, supermodel.”

Millie’s words brought a smile to Ana’s lips as Millie handed her a tissue. “You, my friend, do not know how special you are. That is what Andrew sees. He doesn’t see your sister. He sees a beautiful, kind, and wonderful human being who has taken his daughter under her wing and showered her with love and affection. What is there not to love about you? You may look like your sister, but from what you’ve told me, you’re nothing like her.”

Ana leaned forward and hugged her friend. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

A knock came at the door, and Millie’s mum popped her head into the room. “Sorry to disturb you all. Ana, would you like to stay the night? I’m not prying, but I already made the spare room up if you’d like to.” Without waiting for an answer, she left.

Millie agreed. “Space might be just what you need.”

“But Olivia?” Ana said, her thoughts immediately going to the little girl who had so firmly and intrinsically wormed her way into her heart. She would expect her home.

“Message Andrew and tell him to tell Olivia you are having a sleepover with your friends. All little girls like sleepovers, and she’ll understand that.” George nodded at Millie’s suggestion. “I think giving yourself some space will do you some good. You need time to process. If Olivia is there, it’s not like you and Andrew will get time to talk.”

Ana had to agree; her friends were right. Time away would allow her to see more clearly. It was not like she and Andrew had even discussed what they would do when Olivia came home. “Thank you. I’ll message him and let him know.”

Grabbing her phone

ANA: I’m staying at Millie’s. Please tell Olivia I’m having a sleepover, and I’ll see her tomorrow to hear all about her sleepover with Skylar.

The message immediately showed ‘Read’

ANDREW: *We need to talk*

ANA: *Not today*

ANDREW: *Eva has gone... come home.*

ANA: *I can't. I'll be home tomorrow. Give Olivia a big kiss from me.*

Ana switched her phone off as soon as she sent the last message. She didn't want to go round in circles. She should go home and face the music. Home, ha, when had she started thinking of Andrew's home as hers? She really had fallen off the wagon. When had she become so comfortable?

"Great," Millie said, taking Ana's phone and placing it on the table. "So, ladies. What will we do for the rest of the day and this evening?"

Both Ana and George shrugged.

"George, give Julia a call. We can have a girls' pamper session and drink ourselves into oblivion. Forget about our stresses and worries and think about the moment. This is going to be a mindfulness Boxing Day. Mindful that we drink more than we should!"

Ana and George snickered. Ana felt grateful for her two friends as she sat back and accepted the drink Millie had handed her. She needed to forget about what had happened and get into the moment. Ana was twenty-two and had survived breaking free of her family. She could survive heartbreak, too.

Chapter Forty-three

Andrew

Andrew eventually asked Eva to leave, telling her he needed time to think. He had a lot to process after what he'd learned. She had agreed and thanked him for taking the time to listen to her, then she'd given him her telephone number and the address of the friend she was staying with. Ana's text message had been a kick in the stomach. He had attempted to call, but she must have had her phone switched off. He desperately wanted to talk to her, to find out if what Eva had told him was true. They also needed to discuss what had happened last night. His heart rate picked up at the thought of the night they had spent together. He had never felt such a connection to another human being; it was why he had thrown every fear and concern he had to the wind the moment their lips had touched; it was as though a switch had gone off in his head and all he could do was feel. Did Ana regret what had happened? Is that why she had stayed away? He did not know what he'd do if she regretted their night. He knew he'd have to move forward for Olivia. Had he wrecked their perfect little family because that was how he'd seen them? As a family.

Andrew headed to Star and Damian's house to collect Olivia. He didn't know if he should tell his friends what had happened. Would they understand, or would they see him as a desperate middle-aged man, having an affair with the nanny, who was nearly fifteen years younger than him?

Star opened the door when he arrived, her eyes drifting behind him, searching. "No Ana?" she asked, sounding disappointed. Andrew knew Star had taken a shine to Ana. She had told him as much, and he valued her opinion.

"No, she's having a sleepover with friends," he heard himself say, which sounded as ridiculous out loud as it did in his head.

Star raised an eyebrow. "I think you better come in," she said. "The girls

are content playing.”

Star led him into the drawing room, where Damian was lounging comfortably on the sofa. Star motioned to the chair in front of the enormous fireplace that dominated the room. Lucas and Mary were nowhere in sight, so Andrew took a seat.

“Apparently, Ana is on a sleepover,” Star updated Damian.

“Oh,” Damian said, sitting up. “What happened?”

Andrew looked at Damian. “Who said anything happened?”

Star laughed. “Andrew, we are your friends. You two left here yesterday afternoon. Well, let’s just say the sparks were flying. Even Mary and Lucas noticed. Anyone within a five-mile radius who saw you two in the same space...”

Andrew held up his hand. He’d heard enough. His patient and his wife, his best friends... could this situation get any worse?

“We slept together.” Andrew sighed.

Star held out her hand, and Damian placed a five-pound note on his wife’s open palm. “Sorry,” she said, looking sheepish when Andrew stared at her. Then her expression morphed to concern. “She really is at a sleepover?” Star said, her gaze locking on Damian.

“That’s what I said.”

“I thought it was a euphemism for something,” she said. “What happened?”

Star’s demeanour changed instantly, her concern shining out.

“Everything was great, then Eva turned up.”

Andrew sighed.

“Eva... as in your ex-wife-Eva?” It was Damian’s turn to speak. “What the hell did she want?”

“She wanted to talk about the past. Ana didn’t hang around to listen. She left, then told me she wasn’t coming home and that she’d see me tomorrow.”

Andrew dropped his head into his hands. It sounded even worse when he said it out loud. He’d screwed up, and he didn’t know how to fix it. Maybe he should have ordered Eva out of the house, not invited her in. He should never have let Ana leave.

“Ana probably just needs time. You need to give it to her, and when she’s ready, you need to talk,” Star said. “If you need us to take Olivia, then we will be happy to have her stay.”

“You’re pregnant. You have more than enough on your plate,” Andrew said, thankful for such wonderful friends but aware he already relied on them too much.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that. I’m pregnant, not an invalid,” Star hissed at him, making Andrew hold up his hands in surrender. Damian tried unsuccessfully to hide his smirk. He’d obviously heard it before. “Back to the matter at hand. How are you doing? It must have been quite a shock seeing Eva after all this time.”

Andrew’s heart was burning in his chest. “She told me a lot. I still need to process.”

Star nodded. Andrew knew she would understand.

“Does she want to see Olivia?” Star asked. “What I did should not have any bearing on what you choose to do,” she added, understanding where his thoughts had gone. “The fact I let Christian back in was my choice. You must do what is right for you and Olivia. No one else can tell you what to do.”

“Thank you,” Andrew said, knowing out of everyone, she would understand. “She asked about Olivia, but she didn’t outright ask to see her. She opened up to me about the past. Apparently, she’s had a lot of counselling. If I’m honest, my head is spinning.”

Star got up and knelt on the ground in front of him, resting her hands on his. “Only you can decide what is best for the pair of you, and it is probably a conversation you need to have with Eva. She may want to keep her distance, but then she also may want to make amends. Life is short.”

She turned back to look at her husband, the love the two shared lighting a bridge between them.

“Daddy!” an excited voice squealed from the doorway. Andrew jumped up and caught Olivia mid-leap, spinning her around and burying his head in her hair. Holding his daughter grounded him. She was his priority, and whatever was to come would need to be for her, no one else. “Where’s Ana?”

Andrew put Olivia down and dropped to one knee in front of her. “Ana is at a sleepover,” he said.

“Really, with her friends?” Olivia asked.

“Yes, with her friends.” At that moment, Andrew understood how well Ana knew his daughter. She had taken steps to make sure Olivia wouldn’t question her absence, giving him a reprieve. “She said you can exchange stories tomorrow.”

Star caught his eye over Olivia's head. She had come to the same understanding. "Okay," Olivia said, accepting his explanation.

Taking Olivia's hand, Andrew gathered her things before thanking Damian and Star for having her. "Everything will work out for the best. Have faith," Star said after he placed Olivia in her car seat.

He nodded, giving them both a hug goodbye.

"We are here if you need us," Star said as he started the engine.

He knew his friends were right. He needed to understand what Eva wanted, what he himself wanted and overall, what was best for Olivia.

Chapter Forty-four

Andrew

The house was quiet without Ana, too quiet. He missed her warm presence that filled every room when she was there. It was like her life force made their house a home.

He spent the rest of the day talking to Olivia about what she and Skylar had done the previous evening, but she had eventually gone off to her bedroom to play with her new toys. The silence was deafening.

He tried to call Ana again but gave up when it diverted to voicemail for the fourth time. He didn't want her to think he was stalking her. She'd asked for time, and he needed to respect that. It was difficult. The past few months, he had developed a habit of talking about everything with her, and now, when he really wanted someone to talk to, she was not there. It was wrong of him to expect so much from someone so young, he knew that, but she seemed to understand him better than anyone else.

After checking in with the hospital, he was pleased to hear Adrian was recovering well. His latest tests had all come back positive. His family had been with him for most of the day, taking turns to sit and talk to him. It was difficult for them to see; he had tubes coming out of him from every direction, but as Andrew had explained, they were there to take the pressure off his body and allow it to heal.

After Olivia went to bed, Andrew walked into the kitchen and stared at the piece of paper Eva had given him. Before he could change his mind, he dialled her number.

"Eva," she answered.

"It's Andrew."

There was a long pause on the other end of the phone.

"I wasn't sure you'd ring," Eva said.

"If I'm honest, I wasn't sure either," Andrew admitted, sitting down on a

stool.

“I’m glad you did.”

“Why did you really come?” Andrew asked. “What is it you want from me?”

There was a pause. “I know I can’t make up for the past,” Eva whispered.

Andrew could almost visualise her wringing her hands.

“That aside. What do you want? No more games, Eva... please.” Andrew ran a hand through his hair.

“I want to apologise... I signed away my rights as a parent and do not expect to be given a second chance. But I want to make it up to you. I need—no—want you both to know that I’m sorry.”

Andrew heard Eva’s voice catch.

“I need time to think.” Andrew hung his head and sighed. “How long are you staying?”

“I’ve moved back. I’m staying with a friend while I look for a flat,” Eva admitted, taking Andrew by surprise. “The ball is in your court, Andrew. I’m happy to wait as long as it takes,” Eva said quietly.

Andrew hated the sound of hope that filled her voice. What if he decided it wasn’t in Olivia’s best interest to see her mother?

“And Andrew,” Eva added.

“Yes?”

“Thank you... for not slamming the door in my face this morning. I wouldn’t have blamed you if you had.”

“I can’t promise anything. I’ll be in touch.”

Andrew ended the call before she could say anything more. Staring at his phone, he put it down and pushed it away. How had his life turned upside down overnight?

Chapter Forty-five

Andrew

After spending most of the night tossing and turning, Andrew felt no more clarity than he had the night before. The million what ifs floated around and around in his head. What if he let Eva back into Olivia's life, and she let them down again? How would he cope with that? But then, on the flip side, what if she didn't, and Olivia got to build a relationship with her mother? The whole thing was a mess.

He was going to call John, but he and Sarah hated Eva, so he already knew what John's response would be. Sarah had never understood how Eva had walked away from her own child.

There was only one person who could really understand.

"Star, it's me."

"Hey," Star said quietly.

"How did you know it was worth the risk?" He didn't need to tell her what he was calling about.

Star sighed down the phone. "For me, it was a feeling. How would I feel in years to come if Skylar found out I'd kept her father from her? How would I explain that? Especially if she searched him out. It helped that Christian seemed genuine when I met him. It could have been a disaster, but I've been lucky the gamble paid off. In the long run, I decided I could try to protect Skylar, but who was I protecting her from? Was it my place to keep someone out of her life who may enhance it? Yes, it was a risk, but she has gained so much more." Star paused before continuing. "But Andrew, that doesn't mean my choices are the right ones for you and Olivia."

It was Andrew's turn to sigh as he ran a hand through his hair. "I just don't know."

"What is your gut telling you?" Star asked.

"If I'm honest, and although it pains me to say this...it says to let Olivia

meet Eva. If it all goes wrong, then I'll deal with the consequences. Eva seemed genuine. It's not like Olivia hasn't had issues where her mother is concerned. Maybe this will help her."

"How do *you* feel about seeing Eva again?"

"Honestly, it's strange. I thought I'd feel something, but there was nothing. She's been gone so long." Andrew paused. "She's different. Not the woman I married. But in terms of how I felt towards her, there was nothing. I'm more concerned about Ana."

"Have you spoken to Ana?"

"No, her phone was off when I called. She's asked for space, and I must respect that... why, when life was settling down, does this have to have happened? We were just starting out, and now the chances are, it will have died before it's begun." Andrew pinched the bridge of his nose to stem the growing headache.

"What is meant to be will be. Look at Damian and I."

Andrew could hear the smile in Star's voice and knew Damian must be there with her.

"Thank you, Star. Apologise to Damian for the intrusion. You are the only person I knew would understand."

There was noise at the end of the line. "Andrew," Damian's voice appeared. "Sort out one issue at a time, and the rest will fall into place. Ana has deep feelings for you and adores Olivia. Anyone can see that. It won't be easy. Take it from someone who knows. But be patient with her."

"Thank you, I will. Catch you later."

Andrew disconnected the line.

Before he had time to think, he dialled Eva's number. "Andrew?"

"If you want to meet Olivia, you can... But Eva, if you hurt her, I will never forgive you, and you will never see her again."

Andrew heard a sob catch on the other end of the phone. "I promise you won't regret this."

"Make sure I don't. Be here at eleven. I want to prepare, Olivia."

He didn't wait for a reply and ended the call. Was he being rash? He hoped not.

"Morning, Daddy," he looked up as Olivia entered the room.

His daughter was beautiful. Olivia was blessed with her mother's delicate features and his colouring. The past few months had seen a profound change.

She was more relaxed and at ease, and Ana deserved all the credit. She had been a beacon of light in their lives since she had arrived, her impact more powerful than she knew.

“Morning, Sunshine. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Waffles!”

Andrew groaned. Waffles were Ana’s speciality. Where was she when he needed her? His heart lurched at the thought. He wanted, no, needed, to talk to her, but Damian was right. He needed to sort out more pressing problems first.

“How about pancakes?” he asked hopefully.

Olivia laughed. “Nope, waffles please,” she said, hopping up onto the stool next to him. “Ana’s recipe is in the book,” she added helpfully.

She had an evil glint in her eye, as if she knew how much he detested making waffles. He always seemed to get the mixture all over the machine, which made cleaning it a nightmare.

Together they made the waffles. Olivia had helped Ana enough. She told him exactly how to measure out the mixture into the machine.

“Otherwise, it goes everywhere!” she said, mimicking Ana, which made him smile.

His daughter was picking up so many of her mannerisms. Andrew tweaked her nose before they took the waffles to the table.

“What are we doing today?” Olivia asked, having finished her first waffle in record time. He had to admit, they had done a good job.

“Well, I got a phone call this morning,” Andrew said, taking a deep breath and putting his knife and fork down. “Your Mummy is back in the country and would like to come over.”

Olivia tilted her head and looked at him strangely. “My mummy? Eva?”

“Yes, your Mummy, Eva,” Andrew said, scanning his daughter’s face for any hint of what she was thinking.

“Oh,” was all she said, a small frown marring her brow.

“Would you like to meet her?” Andrew asked quietly.

Andrew did not know what he was expecting, but it was something more.

Olivia shrugged her shoulders.

“She’d like to meet you,” Andrew added.

“Okay,” she said, taking another bite, before adding, “When is Ana coming home?”

Andrew sat back, his appetite gone. This is not what he was expecting. He had just told his seven-year-old daughter her absentee mother wanted to meet her, but Olivia was more interested in when her nanny was coming home. Who was he kidding? Ana had never been just a nanny.

“I don’t know Olivia. I haven’t heard from Ana. She is having fun with her friends. She should be home later today,” he said, crossing his fingers.

“Okay,” she said again.

Andrew wanted, no needed more from her, but she was seven. Kids were resilient, weren’t they? Isn’t that what all the parenting books said?

“Great,” was all he managed as he placed the rest of the waffles in a box and in the fridge. “Pop the plates in the dishwasher,” Andrew added.

“All done,” Olivia said, giving him the brightest smile. “What time is Mummy coming?” she added out of the blue.

Andrew drew in a deep breath and tried to steady his pounding heart.

“Eleven,” Andrew said.

He watched as Olivia screwed up her nose and stared at the clock on the wall, working out how long she had to wait. Her head tilt and grin let him know when she was done. They had forty-five minutes until Eva would arrive. Turning tail, she ran out of the room and thundered up the stairs. Andrew took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead. He hoped he hadn’t made the biggest mistake of their lives, but only time would tell.

Chapter Forty-six

Andrew

Olivia had been relatively quiet since Andrew had made the initial announcement, and it wasn't sitting easily with him. But then, how should a seven-year-old act when her absentee parent suddenly turns up out of the blue? When the doorbell rang at exactly eleven o'clock, Olivia had been sitting on the stairs, watching the door for fifteen minutes. Her gaze held a fixed look of concentration, and the smile she offered him didn't quite reach her eyes. Andrew returned her smile with his brightest one, hoping she wouldn't pick up on his apprehension. Heading to the door, he flung it open to the face of his ex-wife.

Eva looked like she hadn't slept. She had tried to hide the dark circles under her eyes with makeup, but Andrew knew her, or had known her. Her discomfort put him at ease. This was obviously as hard for her as it was for him.

"Come in," he said, stepping aside.

"Thank you," Eva said, dropping her gaze and tentatively stepping over the threshold, as if stepping into a viper's den.

Andrew took her coat and turned to his daughter, who was now sitting open-mouthed on the stairs. Eva followed his gaze, her eyes clouding over as she caught sight of the daughter she had abandoned.

"Hi Olivia," Eva said quietly, as if trying not to scare Olivia off.

Olivia remained seated. "Hi," she replied, her gaze fixed on Eva, "Are you my Mummy?"

Eva nodded; Andrew was not sure she could speak as he watched her swallow multiple times.

"Why do you look exactly like Ana?" Olivia asked, her confusion clear on her face.

Andrews' body froze, the internal pressure on his chest making it hard for

him to breathe. He hadn't thought of that. Of course, his daughter was going to see the resemblance. Eva had grown her hair out, so she now wore it long, like Ana. When they'd been together, she'd always worn her hair short in a bob.

Unaware of the firestorm she was about to step into, Eva answered their daughter, "She's... my sister. Ana is your aunt," Eva explained.

"Daddy?" Olivia's attention had left Eva and was purely on him. "Ana is my aunt? Is that why she's not here?"

Andrew looked at his daughter, the pain in her eyes stealing his breath away.

"Yes, but..." Olivia didn't wait to hear any more. She ran up the stairs, and Andrew heard her bedroom door slam.

Andrew turned to face Eva, who was currently staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the place her daughter had just been. As if sensing his eyes, she turned to face him, "I'm s-s-sorry," she stuttered, "I didn't know. I assumed she knew."

Andrew shook his head, his heart going out to the woman in front of him. "It's not your fault. This is on me." Taking a deep breath, Andrew motioned for Eva to move into the house. "Let's sit down. I'll speak to her in a little while, give her time to process."

He led Eva into the kitchen. "We didn't tell her," Andrew said. "How could I explain to Olivia her aunt wanted to be in her life, but her mother didn't?" Andrew watched as Eva recoiled at his words, but if the truth hurt, he was past caring. She had created this issue. "Ana didn't know how to answer the obvious questions Olivia would have had, so why put her through it?"

Silent tears were leaving makeup tracks down Eva's cheeks. He couldn't sugar-coat it, and his anger was aimed as much at himself as it was at Eva. Half his gut had told him this was a bad idea, and the other half had decided it was worth the risk. Had he now damaged Olivia and Ana's relationship with a protective lie? Had he damaged his own relationship with his daughter? He had never seen his little girl so happy as she had been in the past few months. He, himself, hadn't felt as relaxed or happy in years. Had he just destroyed that with one stupid decision?

"I'm sorry, Andrew. I really am. This is the last thing I wanted." Standing up, she moved her cup to the sink. "I think I should go. Let you and Ana talk

to Olivia.” Eva shook her head, her eyes filled with remorse.

“It is probably for the best... Let me talk to her,” Andrew said. “I’ll explain.”

His words sounded hollow, even to himself. He was unsure how he was going to make this up to his daughter.

Eva nodded sadly and made her way to the door. “Is Ana here?”

Andrew shook his head. “She didn’t come home last night,” he sighed. “She stayed with friends.”

Andrew jumped as he felt a hand on his arm, his eyes flying to Eva’s. “I know I keep saying it, but I didn’t come here to ruin your life. I came here to try to make amends for past actions.” She shook her head sadly. “It seems I am making things worse.”

When Andrew remained silent, Eva let herself out and walked away without a backward glance. Andrew slumped against the wall. How had everything gone so wrong?

He braced himself.

It was time to face his daughter.

Chapter Forty-seven

Ana

Ana opened her eyes and grimaced at the light shining through the window, cursing the fact she had forgotten to close the curtains before falling into bed. Not that she could really remember getting into bed. She had a vague recollection of Millie and George sandwiching her between them as they semi-carried her giggling body up the stairs. Ana groaned and buried her head deeper into the plush pillow under her head. What a disaster! Her friends had decided alcohol was the only way forward and had kept her glass topped up for the entire evening and into the early morning.

Julie had turned up after her shift had ended and jumped straight in. A smile formed on Ana's face as she lay back against the pillow, memories of the previous evening flooding her aching brain. Her chest felt loose for the first time in what seemed like forever. She had found her people in George, Millie, and Julie. They accepted her and supported her when she needed it. She'd had no one to lean on before, and it felt good. They had been willing to assist her, not out of any obligation, but because they were kind people.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Millie said, popping her head around the door, "Or should I say, afternoon!"

Ana sat up too quickly, instantly regretting the move as her head pounded and the world swam. "Oooow!" she said, clutching the side of her head.

Millie grinned at her. "Yep, those final B52s finished everyone off," Millie said, plopping herself down on the bed next to Ana, before handing her a cup of steaming black coffee. "I'm glad I refrained."

Ana groaned, "You life saver," and took a long sip of the black gold she had been handed.

Millie grinned at her. "George and Julie just left. They send their love and want a repeat as soon as you are up for it... preferably New Year's Eve!"

Ana groaned at the thought of any more alcohol. She was sure her face

must have turned green especially when Millie's smile widened. "I'm pulling your leg, but New Year's Eve sounds like a plan, if you are up for it," she added.

Ana nodded. Not wanting to let her friends down, but she needed to check with Andrew. Her stomach sank at the thought. She needed to speak to him. It had been very childish of her to turn off her phone, but she had needed time to process. She hadn't been able to handle him or Eva yesterday. She just hoped Olivia had accepted her excuse. Hopefully, they could laugh and swap stories of their sleepovers later that evening, although Ana would need to shower and PG her outfit first.

Ana looked around for her phone.

"It's still downstairs," Millie said. "Why don't you get showered and changed? I've put you a fresh set of clothes on the chair." Millie pointed to the chair in the corner, "No offence, my friend, but you stink," she said, laughing before heading to the door. "I'll make us both a big bacon and egg bap—the best hangover cure." With that, the whirlwind that was Millie Danvers was gone.

Ana staggered out of bed, reaching for the pain relief Millie had left behind. Downing the two tablets, she made her way into the en-suite. It was clear Millie's family was wealthy. Not that Ana had really questioned it after their initial meeting. Her friend was genuine and warm, and having met her mum the previous day, she understood where Millie got her kindness. Ana would make sure she sent flowers to thank them for opening their home to her, especially on a day that was designed for families.

Ana felt more human after her shower. Following her nose she found the kitchen, the smell of the bacon and eggs making her stomach growl with appreciation. Millie's mum greeted her as she entered, kissing both her cheeks before grabbing her handbag.

"I'm off. Lovely to meet you Ana. See you soon."

"Thank you Mrs Danver's," Ana said, as Millie's mum exited the kitchen.

"Don't mind, Mum, she's off for an early supper with the girls." Ana glanced at the large kitchen wall clock and blanched. It was nearly four in the afternoon. Talk about overstaying your welcome.

Ana groaned, "What must your parents think of me?" Ana shook her head in despair. This was not the impression she wanted to make to her friend's parents.

“A brilliant one,” Millie said, dropping an enormous bap filled with bacon and egg in front of her. “Mum was worried about you. She also said, if you need to stay any longer, the spare room is yours!”

The hangover and kindness were too much, and Ana’s eyes welled up. She took a bite of her bap, swallowing past the enormous lump that had wedged itself firmly in her throat.

“Don’t go getting all emotional on me,” Millie said, rubbing her shoulder. “This is what friends do. You are my friend and I look after my friends. Mum is no different. I get it from her.” Millie grinned. “You can blame my entire personality on her!”

Ana chuckled and tucked into her sandwich, her swirling stomach appreciating the sustenance after a night of abuse.

Once she had finished, Millie passed Ana her phone. She stared at it. A heavy feeling returned to her stomach, her heart having moved to her throat. What must Andrew think of her? He probably thought she had acted like an immature little girl walking away and hiding. He would also be worried sick. She had left home over twenty-four hours ago.

Switching her phone on, Ana watched in horror as her phone exploded with missed messages and calls. Her phone pinged rapidly, letting her know she had voicemail messages waiting.

Ana’s eyes flew to Millie before flicking open her text messages. Her eyes widened in horror as she began to read the ever-growing number of messages. Millie moved behind her reading them over her shoulder.

“Grab your bag. You can call him from the car. I’ll drive. I stopped drinking earlier than you.”

Ana’s heart was pounding in her chest, her breathing shallow and quick. Millie guided her to the car, Ana felt like she was choking as she fastened her seatbelt.

“Ana,” Millie said sharply, “You need to breathe! You can’t help Olivia if you don’t hold it together! Call Andrew, find out what’s happened.”

Millie’s tone snapped Ana back into the present. She was right; she needed to get her act together. Hitting redial on her call menu, Ana waited for Andrew to pick up.

“Thank God,” he said, answering. “Ana?” Ana heard him speak to someone else in the background. “Yes, it’s Ana... Ana? Are you there?”

Ana felt herself nod before she realised, he couldn’t see her, “Yes Andrew,

I'm here. What's happened?"

"Olivia's missing," he said, his voice sounding so lost, she wanted to be there to wrap her arms around him.

"How?" Ana asked.

"Eva dropped in this morning. I should have realised," he said, not making any sense.

"What happened?" Ana said, trying to understand what was going on. Had Eva taken Olivia? "Andrew! Talk to me." she could no longer keep the panic out of her voice. If anything had happened to that little girl.

"She put two and two together and Eva told her you are her aunt. Olivia stormed off. I thought I'd let her calm down, but when I went upstairs, she was gone." The despair in his voice broke Ana's heart.

"Andrew, I'm twenty minutes away. Millie is driving. We will find her."

Chapter Forty-eight

Ana

Millie parked while Ana threw herself out of the car and up the steps to the house. Andrew was there with the door open, pulling her into his arms and grasping her to his chest. When he finally let go, Ana saw the two police officers standing behind him, as well as Eva, John, and several of the neighbours. Ana unfolded herself from Andrew's embrace, stepping back awkwardly.

Millie stepped in behind her and introduced herself to Andrew before standing quietly to one side.

Everyone congregated in the sitting room while the police took statements from everyone. Ana's eyes flitted to the window. It was now dark outside. Olivia would be so scared. What had she been thinking? She should have come home, not agreed to drink the night away with her friends. This was all her fault. If only she'd been here, she could have spoken to Olivia, explained.

Ana felt eyes on her and looked up to find Eva watching her. She looked down and realised her hand was clasped tightly in Andrews. Her eyes met that of her older sister and her cheeks flushed. She would worry about this later. This was not about her or Eva, this was about a seven-year-old child, who was out in the dark and cold.

The officer in charge stopped speaking, and Ana looked at Andrew. "What did she take with her?"

Andrew looked confused and shook his head. "I don't know. I couldn't think straight," he said, the colour draining from his face.

Ana got up and ran for the stairs. Throwing open Olivia's bedroom door, she glanced around her. Star was hot on her tail.

"What do you see?" Star asked, "As Mum's, we always know where everything is, even in the chaos." Star put a hand on Ana's shoulder.

Ana breathed deeply. She needed to think. Walking over to Olivia's bed,

she scanned the space. “Her doll is gone.” She looked around again. She was missing something, something obvious. Andrew and the officer were in the doorway. Ana’s eyes froze on the bed. “Her throw!”

Olivia loved her throw. Every time they created a den or a playhouse, her throw had to be inside for a bed.

“Her bedside clock/torch is also missing,” Andrew added, pointing at the spot next to Olivia’s bed. They had bought her the torch/alarm clock recently when she had woken up in the night having had a nightmare. It projected pictures on the ceiling.

Ana sank onto the bed. Where would a little girl go with a torch and a blanket? Her eyes shot up, and she stared at Andrew.

“Your parents,” she said. “Olivia and I talked about camping in the playhouse in their back garden.”

“It’s a start,” the officer at the door said before speaking into his radio. “I’ll need the address, Sir.”

Andrew reeled off his parents’ address. It was a long way for a little girl to travel on her own and was probably a long shot.

It was Star who spoke next. “You both go. If Olivia is there, she will be terrified by now. I’ll stay here in case she comes home.”

Ana watched as Andrew nodded, his shoulders slumped as despair ate at him.

As they walked down the stairs, Millie stepped out. “I’ll drive, and then you can both scan the streets as we drive.”

Andrew’s parents’ house was over half an hour away. Ana’s heart ached as she thought of Olivia walking alone. Andrew was silent, his eyes never leaving the surrounding streets. Another police car greeted them when they pulled up.

“We waited out here,” the officer said. “There appears to be a light coming from the playhouse in the back garden, but we didn’t want to scare her, knowing you were on your way.”

Neither Ana nor Andrew waited for the officer to finish before they flew into the back garden. Andrew reached the house first, calling Olivia’s name.

“Daddy?” a frightened little voice came from inside the wooden structure.

“Yes, Sunshine, I’m here,” he said, throwing open the door and scooping Olivia into his arms.

Ana could not stop the tears that were freely flowing down her cheeks. Her

heart swelled at the sight of father and daughter. Andrew was also crying and hugging Olivia to him like his life depended on it.

“Ouch, Daddy, you’re squashing me,” Olivia said, wriggling in her father’s arms.

“Sorry, Angel, but you had me so worried,” he said.

The two police officers had followed them into the garden. Olivia looked over her dad’s shoulder before hiding her head in his neck. “Are they here to arrest me?” she asked before crying again.

The female officer approached. “It’s okay,” she said softly. “We are here to check you are safe. You’ve had everyone very worried, Olivia.”

Olivia raised her head, her cheeks wet with tears. “Will you arrest me?”

“No,” the officer said again.

It was then Olivia seemed to spot Ana. She squirmed until Andrew put her down, throwing herself at Ana. Ana dropped to her knees on the damp grass, clutching Olivia to her chest as fresh tears fell. Ana rocked her back and forth.

“I’m sorry,” Ana said repeatedly into the little girl’s hair.

Olivia pulled back, her small hands holding Ana’s cheeks as she stared into her eyes. “Are you really my aunty?”

Ana nodded, unable to speak. That was all Olivia needed before throwing her arms around Ana’s neck, almost choking her.

“I’m so happy you are my aunt,” she said, burying her head in Ana’s shoulder.

Ana scooped her up and walked them back to the car. Ana half listened as Andrew thanked the officers. He had collected all the items Olivia had brought with her in her rucksack and was now carrying them close behind.

Chapter Forty-nine

Ana

Millie remained silent during the drive back to Andrew's home. When they got there, Millie dropped a quick kiss on Ana's cheek and that of the now-sleeping Olivia. "I'll call you tomorrow," she said before making her excuses and leaving.

Olivia was clinging to Ana like a baby monkey, even in her sleep. Andrew opened the front door, and Ana headed straight for the stairs. Eva stepped out of the sitting room, and Ana caught her stare. Eva gave her a small nod before stepping back inside. Ana knew she must look a mess as she made her way past Andrew's friends and neighbours, but she was past caring. The child in her arms was her number one priority. This was her fault, after all. She never should have left. She should never have given into temptation and slept with Andrew. It may have ruined everything. All she could do now was thank God they had found Olivia unharmed. As she carried her sleeping charge upstairs, she promised herself she would change. Olivia would come first, whatever happened. That little girl needed her, and she would never be selfish again.

Andrew pulled back the covers, and Ana gently lowered a sleeping Olivia onto the bed. Her adventures had clearly worn her out. Tucking her in, they both dropped a kiss on her sleeping cheek before creeping out. Without saying a word, Ana turned and headed towards her bedroom. She jumped as Andrew caught her arm. Spinning around to face him, Ana's heart lurched to her throat. He looked exhausted and broken as if the past few hours had aged him.

"Thank you," he said, his voice catching, heartbreak written all over his face.

It was almost more than Ana could take. Stepping forward, she wrapped her arms around his waist before she could stop herself.

“I’m just glad I could help,” she whispered, her head against his chest.

Looking up, she watched as a frown marred Andrew’s beautiful features. “Can we talk?”

Ana bit her lip. “There is a houseful of people downstairs,” Ana pointed out.

“Let me get rid of them.”

There was a hint of desperation in his tone.

A tenseness settled in Ana’s stomach. Was she strong enough to speak to him after the past twenty-four hours, or was she going to run away again? Looking at the man in front of her, she knew the answer. She couldn’t hide from him. They needed to talk, if only to move forward.

“I’ll be up here when you are ready,” she mumbled, reluctantly stepping out of the circle of his arms.

Andrew said nothing else. He simply headed back down the stairs. She stood for several moments, eavesdropping as she heard everyone’s relief at the fact they had found Olivia safe and well. One by one, she heard them leave, the front door closing. She was about to enter her bedroom when she heard a noise behind her.

“Ana.”

Ana paused, her hand on the door handle as she dropped her head forward. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes. She had stayed upstairs as she wasn’t sure she wanted to face her sister right now, however it clearly would not be her choice.

“Andrew said you were up here,” Eva said. Ana couldn’t bring herself to look at Eva. Would she know she had slept with her husband? That she had selfishly let her niece down?

When it was clear Eva would not leave, Ana took a deep breath and turned, keeping her eyes averted.

“Ana,” her sister repeated softly. Ana looked up. “I just wanted to come and say how sorry I am.”

Ana swallowed, tilting her head. “No, I’m sorry. If I’d stayed away, none of this would have happened. Olivia wouldn’t have run away,” Ana said, the words tumbling out of her mouth in breaths that were caught in her chest.

Eva’s eyes widened, shaking her head frantically. “This is *not* on you,” she said. “I’m the one who screwed up. I appeared out of nowhere. From what I’ve heard, little sister, you have been fantastic with Olivia. Thank you for

helping my daughter when I didn't."

Ana froze as she found herself enveloped in her sister's embrace. Her own hands hanging limply by her side. She couldn't remember a time when they had ever been this close. Had her sister ever hugged her before? Their family didn't show affection.

Eva stepped back and gripped her face in both her hands, making Ana look at her. "I'm sorry, Ana," she said, a gentle smile gracing her lips. "I want to make up for all the wrongs I've committed in the past. Put things right with Andrew and Olivia. With you. Will you let me try? Will you help me?"

The pressure building in her chest made it almost impossible to breathe. Unable to form a sentence, she simply nodded as Eva pulled her in for a quick hug. Bile burned the back of Ana's throat at the look of hope on her sister's face.

"Thank you," Eva said, touching the side of Ana's face. "I'll call you tomorrow."

Ana stood and stared as her sister turned and left.

The world swam as Ana staggered backwards, her vision blurring. She watched her sister walk down the stairs, a hollow feeling settling in her stomach as a deep pain settled around her heart. Eva was back to stay and wanted to make up for the past. She wanted her family back. Her perfect sister was going to do everything in her power to make that happen.

Ana entered her room, locking the door behind her before turning off the lights. Sinking down on the bed, she sat with her head in her hands, rubbing her eyes hard as if she could wipe away the events of the past couple of days. What a mess she had made of things. How was she going to look Andrew in the eye? Eva in the eye? What was she going to do when he told her he was sorry, and now Eva was back, there was no *them*? How was she going to watch him and Eva together as they rekindled their romance? Watch him touch her, kiss her. He had loved Eva, and she—Ana—had been the perfect look-a-like replacement. She had been too naïve and foolish to notice it before. Andrew was not to blame. She doubted he was even aware. Andrew wasn't a player. He was a family man, and once he realised, she knew it would devastate him.

Andrew had tried to say no, but she hadn't listened. She was the one who had gone to him. What red-blooded male would turn away a willing woman? Ana couldn't bear it. She did not want to come face to face with the horror in his

eyes at his mistake. But she could see it clearly now. She had stepped into Eva's shoes both as a mother to Olivia, and as a partner to Andrew. Andrew had wanted a mother for Olivia. He had been dating, and she had fitted the bill perfectly.

Ana gagged, her hand flying to cover her mouth as a thought hit her.

Had Andrew imagined she was Eva the whole time?

When he had kissed her breasts, had sunk his body into hers. Had he imagined it was Eva who was beneath him? Ana was the impostor in the scene. Andrew had employed her as Olivia's nanny. It was no one's fault but her own. She had forgotten that and got carried away by the feeling of being accepted, of being wanted. Ana had no claim to Olivia or Andrew. Yet she had allowed herself to believe. She had grown to love that little girl more than her own life. Of course, Olivia would want her mum and dad back together. Who was she to stand in their way?

Ana threw herself down on the bed, thankful for the darkness.

Ana held her breath as the door handle moved, the lock catching in place. A gentle knock followed. "Ana?" Andrew's voice whispered.

Ana remained silent, staring at the door, a solid barrier between her and the man she had fallen in love with. Someone who could never be hers.

There was a pause before she finally heard Andrew's footsteps move away. Ana released the breath she was holding as she heard his bedroom door open and close.

Was she a chicken?

Yes, but she needed time to think. Work out how to rebuild her barriers. Protect herself if she was ever going to survive this.

Chapter Fifty

Andrew

Andrew jerked awake for the millionth time, groaning when he realised it was now morning. His heart thundered in his chest as his mind went back to the horror of the day before. Sitting up, he looked around. Something was wrong. It was only then, he noticed the small lump curled up next to him, blonde hair escaping from under the duvet. Andrew lay back down. Olivia had obviously crept in during the early hours. Andrew knew this because he had spent most of the night checking and rechecking Olivia was still where he and Ana had left her.

There was a hammering on his bedroom door.

“Andrew,” came a frantic call.

Jumping out of bed as quietly as he could, Andrew padded to the door, his bottoms riding low on his hips. Opening the door, he faced a desperate Ana.

“She’s gone,” she said, not waiting for an answer.

Andrew stepped into the hall, closing his bedroom door behind him. “It’s okay. She’s in my bed. She must have crept in this morning.”

Andrew watched as Ana sagged. He reached across the space between them and rested a hand on her shoulder, his thumb rubbing soothing circles. Andrew watched as the woman who had grown to mean so much to him fought to get her emotions back under control. Ana took a step back. Andrew found himself not liking the way she was moving away from him. She couldn’t even meet his eyes. It was like they had reverted to the early days when she had first moved in. Had them sleeping together been so terrible? He had been sure Ana had experienced as much pleasure as he had.

Had he been wrong?

“I will grab a t-shirt and make us some coffee.”

He watched as her tongue darted out, moistening her lips. Andrew turned and re-entered his bedroom, a small smile gracing his lips. Maybe Ana

wasn't as immune to him as she was trying to make out.

By the time Andrew entered the kitchen, Ana had already had the coffee brewing. He stood in the doorway and watched as she stacked the dishwasher, clearing away all the cups and glasses from the night before. The neighbours had surprised Andrew with their show of support. Everyone had dropped what they were doing in order to search the immediate area when it became evident Olivia was missing.

Andrew knew he needed to talk to Olivia and tell her about the fear she had caused. He was sure, however, she had scared herself more than his words or actions ever would. That had been clear in the way she had responded when she had seen him and Ana.

His biggest surprise was Eva. He had called her to see if Olivia had followed her. Eva had been beside herself, blaming herself for Olivia's disappearance, especially as the hours ticked by and there was still no sign of her.

When the police arrived and began asking questions, Eva was the first to step forward and take the blame. She had openly admitted how her turning up had been the catalyst.

The police officers were amazing. They began their door-to-door search as soon as they had checked the house, to ensure Olivia was not hiding in plain sight. Organising and keeping everyone calm.

Ana had stopped what she was doing and was watching him. "I'm sorry, Andrew," she murmured. "If I hadn't been so childish and turned off my phone..." She shook her head, her eyes closed, lips pinched together.

"Ana, stop...you had every right to turn off your phone. You needed space, and I respect that." Ana went to speak, but Andrew held up his hand. "I can't say I liked it. I hated not being able to get in contact with you, but that was for more selfish and personal reasons. When I found out Olivia was missing, it was you I wanted to talk to, to turn to... I have got used to the communication between us, and I missed it."

Andrew sank onto a stool as Ana passed him his coffee. She still refused to meet his eyes.

"What are we doing?" she asked, staring down at her own cup.

"Ana, what happened between us... we still need to talk."

Andrew ran a hand through his hair. Why was this so difficult, and why did he feel that if he made one wrong statement, this was going to blow up in his

face, and he was going to lose everything?

Ana shook her head. "I think it's best we don't," she said, shaking her head frantically, her gaze still averted. "This is awkward enough. We made a mistake. We need to go back to how things were... for Olivia's sake."

Andrew felt his heart sink. "Why?"

"Eva is back. Olivia needs to build a relationship with her mother. You and me, will only complicate things."

Ana finally looked at him. "What if I don't want Eva to be part of Olivia's life? We were doing fine without her, the three of us."

Ana gave him a small, patient smile. "Andrew, one thing I have learned about you. You will do anything for that little girl upstairs. That includes letting my sister back into her life. It is what's best for Olivia. Your generosity of spirit makes you who you are." She paused, as if thinking about her next words. "As for the three of us. This has always been temporary. I will only be here until I complete my degree or your parents return and resume Olivia's childcare. Then I'll be out of your hair."

Andrew felt like someone had clamped a vice around his chest. "Is that what you think? What do you think Christmas night was about, Ana?"

Ana shook her head, and she held up a hand as if warning him off. Andrew could see her eyes were bright, and there was a flush to her cheeks. "Please, Andrew, don't make this harder." Her voice caught. "Christmas night was a mistake. We let the Christmas spirit cloud our judgement. We got carried away in the moment."

"Daddy?" Andrew turned to find Olivia standing in the doorway, rubbing her eyes.

"Hey, Sunshine. How are you this morning?" he asked, going over and scooping her into his arms.

Olivia buried her head in his shoulder and squeezed him tightly. Andrew carried her over to the table, where he placed her on a chair before crouching down in front of her. Tilting her chin with his finger, he made his daughter look at him.

"You scared me yesterday, Olivia."

He watched his daughter flinch at his words. She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. She glanced over at Ana but must have seen Ana would not back her up in this argument.

"I'm sorry, Daddy," she said, her bottom lip trembling. "I don't know why

I did it.”

She shook her head as the first tears escaped.

Andrew braced himself. He had to be strong when all he wanted to do was pull her into his arms. “What you did was dangerous, Liv.”

Olivia threw herself into his arms. “Promise me you will never do anything like that again.” Andrew heard his own voice crack.

Olivia nodded frantically against his chest.

“I promise,” she said, holding him like she never wanted to let go. “I was so scared.”

Andrew’s eyes found Ana’s over his daughter’s shoulder. She left the room, her own emotions too close to the surface. Andrew held Olivia until her tears subsided.

Once he had removed Olivia’s tear tracks, he asked her what she wanted for breakfast. Olivia shrugged.

“How about some waffles?” Ana said, coming back into the room.

Andrew watched as she encouraged Olivia to help her. Seeing them together, Andrew realised *he* wanted Ana for himself, not just Olivia. He just needed to convince her they would be perfect together.

After breakfast, Olivia went upstairs to play with her toys while they put the kitchen straight.

“I think it’s best I move downstairs into the annexe,” Ana stated suddenly.

Andrew’s hand stalled where he was wiping the table. “Why?”

“It’s ready, and it was always the plan.”

Ana refused to look at him.

“Ana, we need to talk.”

Ana shook her head. “This will give everyone the space they need.”

Andrew stepped up behind her, placing his hands on her arms. “Ana, Christmas night was...”

Ana stepped away from him, folding up the t-towel and returning it to the rack. “Wrong,” she said, finally looking at him. “I am here to look after Olivia, nothing more. Christmas night was a mistake. We are both mature adults. We can put it behind us.”

Andrew stopped and stared. Who was this woman in front of him? It was as if the relationship they had developed over the past couple of months had vanished. Had giving into his desires been a colossal mistake? Not to him, but he was thirty-six. A twenty-two-year-old may see things differently. Ana

was a student, after all. He remembered how horny he was as a student. She had been looking after Olivia and not going out. Had he been someone to scratch an itch? His stomach repelled at the idea. He had felt their connection, he could have sworn she had too.

“It’s not ready,” Andrew said, trying to think of any excuse to keep her in the main house. This was not what he wanted, but he couldn’t force her to speak to him.

“I only need a bedroom. I can use the bathroom in the gym when you aren’t using it.” Andrew cursed under his breath. She appeared to have thought of everything. “While I’m looking after Olivia, I’ll be preparing her meals and will cook as I always have for everyone. I simply think it’s best if we put some space between us.”

Andrew ran a hand over his face. “Olivia will not like it,” Andrew said, wracking his brain why this was a bad idea. The last thing he wanted was Ana putting distance between them. Best for who?

“Olivia will adapt. I’ll only be sleeping a staircase away.” She looked at him then, “I need to do this, Andrew, please don’t fight me on it. I’ve decided.”

Andrew felt himself nod. “The new furniture is there. We can move your TV and set you up.”

“Thank you.”

“I need to go to the hospital this afternoon to check on my patient.” Andrew said, suddenly needing to get out of the house and clear his head.

“Are you happy if I take Olivia out to meet Eva this afternoon? I would like a chance to get to know my sister,” Ana asked.

“Fine,” Andrew replied.

It probably wasn’t the best idea. He wanted to control the narrative with Eva, but he’d opened the box, he could hardly close the lid now, he also could not think of a plausible excuse. His head was spinning. One thing he knew, Ana would protect her niece with the ferocity of a lioness.

Andrew got up and left. He needed time to think. Work out what had gone so terribly wrong. Why had Ana made such a dramatic U-turn? Did she regret sleeping with him? Had she decided he was too old for her, that she needed to be around people her own age, not stuck with some old man who already had a daughter and a screwed-up past? He couldn’t blame her. Seeing her friends on Boxing Day, they had obviously partied hard. She’d come home in

different clothes, clearly hungover. Had she met someone else her own age? Had she decided she wanted to let her hair down more often now she had a life? Had her financial issues been the real reason she hadn't been going out? She had money now. Andrew sighed and headed for his car. If putting some distance between them was what Ana needed, then he needed to accept her wishes. He would never impose himself on anyone. Doing what was best for Olivia was important. It wasn't necessary for him to make Ana's life so uncomfortable that she could no longer stay with them. He could suppress his longing and go back to what it was like before. He had to!

Chapter Fifty-one

Ana

Walking away from Andrew this morning had been one of the hardest things Ana had ever done in her twenty-two years. Harder than telling her father she was moving out. Her heart had wanted to go to Andrew, throw her arms around him, and talk to him about their amazing night together. Her head had told her if she did, she was being selfish. She needed to look at the bigger picture and what was best for everyone.

Ana had agreed to meet up with Eva. Now she was sitting in a pizza restaurant, watching her perfect sister charm the daughter she had abandoned. Olivia had initially clung to Ana's side when Eva arrived. But as the afternoon progressed, Olivia had warmed up to her, and Ana had to admit, she was surprised at how good her sister was with her.

Olivia had asked about her and Ana as children and then about how she had met Andrew. Eva was all too happy to tell Olivia about her life, skipping any negative bits. But then, her life differed greatly from Ana's. Given time, Ana didn't doubt Eva, the perfect daughter, would become the perfect mother and wife.

Ana's body felt feverish and achy as she watched the two of them together. She prayed Eva did not hurt Olivia, as her sister had always done what she wanted. Andrew, however, had decided that Eva should be part of Olivia's life, and who was she to contradict? She just hoped her sister appreciated the second chance she was being given and would fight, as she promised, to make amends for the past.

"I am sorry I left you, Olivia," Eva said as they were leaving. "I want you to know it was never your fault." Eva glanced up at Ana before returning her gaze to her daughter. "I want to make it up to you if I can. Do you think we can be friends?"

Ana's breath hitched as she watched Olivia tilt her head in the same way

Andrew did when he was contemplating something. Olivia waited a moment before stepping forward and wrapping her arms around Eva's neck. Eva hugged her daughter tight, her eyes closing. Ana watched as tears flowed freely down her sister's cheeks. When Eva finally let go, Olivia reached up and wiped her tears away. "Don't cry, Mummy," she said, "I am your friend."

Ana's heart lurched at the sight before her, a burning sensation taking over her stomach as she watched a mother and daughter cementing their bond. Ana zoned out and stopped listening to what Eva and Olivia were talking about. This proved she had made the right decision. She had to let fate run its course. Her time with Andrew and Olivia had taught her so much. She had learned to let people in. She now had Millie, George, and Julie. Her life was so much richer than before. But Andrew and Olivia had never been hers. It had been a fairy tale. She would always have the memory of her night with Andrew. It was not something she would ever forget, but that was all it could be. A beautiful memory. If giving Olivia back the family she craved was a possibility, she would not be the one to stand in the way.

"Thank you for this afternoon, Ana." Ana's attention snapped back to her sister, who was standing in front of her holding Olivia's hand.

"It's nothing," Ana heard herself say. "It is wonderful to see you two together." Ana nearly choked on her own words, but she knew they needed to be said. She had to remember this wasn't about her.

"I'd really like to spend some time getting to know you too," Eva shocked her by saying.

"Why?" Ana asked. Why did her sister suddenly want to get to know her now, when they had spent the first twenty-two years of Ana's life as virtual strangers?

"I think it might help us both."

Ana was not sure what Eva meant. How could she help Ana?

Eva must have seen something in her expression because she added, "Not everything was as it seemed. I would like a chance to explain my actions at some point."

Ana sighed, "Okay."

Ana did not want Olivia to wonder why she refused to speak to her sister, her mother. She wanted to build their relationship, not risk damaging it.

"Thank you," Eva said before bending down and kissing Olivia on the

cheek, "See you soon, Olivia."

Ana spent the rest of the afternoon setting up her new room in the annexe.

"Why are you going to be living down here?" Olivia asked, putting Ana's jewellery box on the bed Ana had just made up.

"Well," Ana said, dropping on the bed and patting a spot next to her. "I was always due to live here. It was just your Daddy had to order new furniture. Now it's here, and it's the holidays. I have time to move all my stuff."

Olivia plopped herself down on the bed next to Ana, her arms folded. "But I like you in the room next to mine," Olivia said, her bottom lip jutting out.

Ana raised an eyebrow and laughed, "For now, but not next term when I have my sewing machine going all night as I finish my super important assignment," she added, leaning forward and tweaking Olivia's nose, making the little girl laugh.

"But what about me?" Olivia asked. "When will I see you?"

"Nothing will change, only where I sleep. I will still be there to help you get ready, eat breakfast and dinner, tuck you in, read you bedtime stories. Everything we do now, only I'll be sleeping down here. You are always welcome to come down and see me."

Olivia scowled. "I don't like it," she said, once again looking just like her father.

"I still need your help, if you are willing?"

Olivia grinned at her, and they both trudged back upstairs and carried more of Ana's meagre possessions down to her new room. Once they had finished moving all of Ana's things. Ana stripped her bed and put the sheets in the wash, making sure she left the space she had occupied exactly as she had found it.

Andrew returned just in time for dinner, and Ana had never been more grateful for Olivia's incessant chatter. Ana noticed how tired Andrew looked, and so after dinner dismissed him and Olivia from cleaning up, sending them instead to watch television. She would normally have joined them, but tonight she made herself scarce.

Back in her room she pulled out the material Andrew and Olivia had given her. Ana decided it was the perfect distraction to take her mind off the excitement of the previous few days. Getting out her sketch book, she set about designing a dress. Her phone pinged and Ana picked it up.

MILLIE: *How is everything today? How's Olivia?*

ANA: *She's good. I've kept her busy.*

MILLIE: *Are we still on for New Year's Eve or are you staying in with your 'hot' surgeon?*

Ana paused; did she want to go out on New Year's Eve? She looked down at the sketch in front of her. She needed to make some changes in her life. This was going to be perfect.

ANA: *Not my 'hot' surgeon, and yes, just working on my outfit.*

Ana sent Millie a photo of her design and material to distract her.

MILLIE: *Wow, you will knock the socks off everyone in that little number! George and Julie also joining us.*

Ana looked down at her design. It was not her usual style, but weren't you supposed to shake things up and get back in the saddle when things went wrong? Maybe New Year's Eve was just what she needed; go out, let her hair down, have some fun with her friends.

ANA: *I can't wait. Need to get back to my dress or it won't be ready in time.*

Chapter Fifty-two

Andrew

The time between Christmas and New Year went by in a flurry. Eva seemed to spend more and more time with them, which Andrew found a little disconcerting. Olivia was happy, and he had to admit Eva had surprised him. Ana had all but disappeared. He knew she was around when he was at work. Olivia filled him in on her days, but as soon as he got home, she made herself scarce. Either disappearing downstairs or going out. He preferred it when he knew she was downstairs. At least that way, he knew she was not with someone else. The thought was wearing him down, not that he had any rights to her. She deserved to have her own life, not be tied to an older man who had already experienced his youth.

“Daddy, Mummy, look how pretty Ana looks.”

Time slowed down as Andrew looked up. They were dressed to match. Only Olivia’s was a PG version of the dress Ana was wearing. His pulse kicked up.

His heart moved into his throat, causing him to swallow sharply. Ana’s dress exposed her long legs, her hips and breasts hugged by the material in a subtle, yet provocative way. All the blood rushed from his head and into his lap, making him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

Eva was sitting at the kitchen table, a glass of wine in front of her. He’d only invited her because he thought it would be an ideal time for Ana to get to know her sister. Instead, Ana had surprised him by announcing she was going out. Now he was left seeing in the New Year with his ex-wife and daughter. Olivia was happy, and that was all that mattered, or so he kept trying to tell himself.

“You look stunning little sis,” Eva said, getting up and walking over to her sister. “You are so talented. I’m coming to you next time I need a dress.”

Ana looked awkward as Eva lent forward and kissed her cheek. “Err,

Happy New Year,” she said, kissing her sister back.

“Come on Daddy, you need to give Ana a kiss to say Happy New Year,” Olivia said, dragging Ana over to where he was seated. Ana looked decidedly uncomfortable.

A blush covered Ana’s neck and cheeks. Andrew lent forward, dropping a kiss on her cheek. “You look beautiful,” he whispered, inhaling her perfume, his body hyper-aware of her presence. He hated what their relationship had become over the past week. If he could take back Christmas night, he would. He could only hope that over time, the awkwardness that sat between them would dissipate.

Without saying another word, Ana turned and left, Andrew unable to take his eyes off her. It was only when he looked up; he realised Eva was observing him.

“She’s beautiful,” Eva said to him.

“Yes, she is. She will enjoy herself tonight.”

“You can’t fool me, Andrew Dennison,” Eva said, laughing. Olivia returned before he could say anything in his defence. His ex-wife simply smirked at him.

“Can we play a board game?” Olivia asked, jumping up and down in excitement. Since Ana had joined their family, board games had become the family go-to.

“Of course,” Andrew said, happy for the distraction. Maybe a board game would take his mind off Ana and what she and her friends were going to get up to. “Why don’t you set it up? Mummy and I will join you in a moment.”

“You have feelings for her?” Eva said once Olivia had left the room.

“That is not any of your business,” Andrew snapped, before back peddling. None of this was Eva’s fault. He shouldn’t take his frustration out on her. “The point is mute; I am way too old for her.”

Eva held up her hands. “For one; my little sister is my business. I have ignored her welfare for too long. Stood back while she suffered at the hands of our father.” Eva dropped her gaze. “I know I’m out of line. You’ve been kind enough to let me in, but Andrew, Ana is complex, more complex and locked away than you will ever know.” Eva closed her eyes and sighed. “What I want to say is, please don’t give up on her. She cares for you, anyone can see that. The way she looks at you when she thinks no-one is looking, that isn’t someone who doesn’t have feelings... Take it from someone who

knows.” A sadness filtered across Eva’s face, making Andrew wonder who had hurt her.

Olivia returned before he had time to fully analyse her words. He and Eva followed their daughter into the sitting room and began one of many board games until Olivia’s eyes were rolling around in her head. Laughing, they put her to bed before returning to the sitting room.

“Would you like to stay the night?” Andrew asked Eva, as they sat back down, “In the spare room,” he added quickly.

“Thank you,” she said. “That would probably be easier than trying to get a taxi.”

They sat in silence for a few moments, both concentrating on their wine. “What are you going to do about Ana?” Eva probed. Andrew’s heart lurched. This was not a conversation he wanted to be having or should have with his ex-wife. Was she fishing? What were her motives? All he knew was he did not want to talk about it. Just the thought of her name sent a heaviness through his body, leaving his body tingling with fatigue.

“Eva, no disrespect, but this is not really a conversation I want to be having with you,” Andrew added.

Eva shrugged. “I just thought I might help.”

Andrew stared at his ex-wife. She had just entered their lives after seven years. How was she going to help? It is not like she was best friends with Ana. He’d have more chance asking Millie and George for their help. If anything, her sister intimidated Ana.

An awkward silence descended.

“Are you staying in the UK?”

“I want to. I’m applying for jobs in local hospitals. I’m hoping something will come up.” There was a pause. “I’ve done a lot of healing over the past few years. I am emotionally in a place of strength now.”

“I’m pleased,” Andrew heard himself say, realising he meant it.

“It’s strange sitting here with you after all these years. You are a good man, Andrew Dennison, and an amazing father. Watching you with Olivia and seeing the bond you have with her is more than I could have ever dreamed.”

Andrew wanted to know, “Do you think we would have made it, if it hadn’t been for your father?”

Eva looked at him, her head tilted. “What do you think?”

Andrew stared at the ceiling. “If I’m honest. No,” Taking a deep breath, he

continued, "I have thought a lot about what you said and the cracks in our marriage were already showing when you found out you were pregnant. I think that is the reason your father had so much emotional sway over you... We were too different." Andrew looked at Eva. "I'm sorry. If our relationship had been stronger, maybe you would have confided in me about your father's abuse instead of suffering in silence. We may still have been together for Olivia's sake, but I don't think it would have been a happy marriage."

It surprised Andrew when Eva laughed. "Thousands of dollars' worth of counselling. Maybe what I really needed to do was sit down and have a frank conversation with you. You are a special man, Andrew, but we were completely different people. You wanted to settle down, and I thought I wanted that too, but what I really wanted was to escape." Eva sighed sadly. "You were the perfect escape plan. My father thought you were perfect. Head of our class, his colleagues spoke highly of you. Your future was bright." Eva shook her head. "There was no perfect fix. I recognise how broken I was."

A chill flooded Andrew's body. "How is that different from Ana? When I met her, she was destitute, her landlord had attacked her, she was waiting tables, trying to make ends meet to continue her course. I gave her a lifeline. Maybe she thought about us and came to the same conclusion you did."

"The difference between Ana and me? She had already made the break." Eva sat up taller and smiled. "She got out on her own. She didn't need a knight in shining armour to sweep her off her feet. Ana had already rescued herself. Even if you hadn't come along, she would never have gone back. She abandoned a life she loved to escape him and his reach."

Eva's face glowed with pride. "I have kept tabs on my little sister for the past couple of years." Andrew raised an eyebrow, and Eva laughed. "It helped to have friends in the same hospital." It surprised Andrew at the pride in Eva's voice, "They expected her to do great things, and then suddenly, I got a call to say she was gone." Her face went serious. "It took me a while to track her down. Imagine my surprise when I found her living with my ex-husband."

Andrew had to smile. "I can only imagine."

"Andrew Dennison, if I could choose anyone for my little sister. It would be you." Andrew stared at Eva; she differed from the woman he had known seven years ago. "I may be the problem."

"Why do you say that?"

“What does or has Ana said about me?” Eva asked.

“That you were perfect. You did nothing wrong.” Andrew stopped, her words shining a new light.

“Exactly. She does not know what my childhood was like. By the time Ana was old enough, I was toeing the line. What she saw was a mask, my coping mechanism.”

“But you’ve come back. She knows your life is not perfect.”

Eva frowned. “Does she? I haven’t told her. The night Olivia disappeared, I asked her for a second chance. She has probably put two and two together... she thinks I want you and Olivia back.” Eva stared down at her clenched fists. “Regardless of how much she loves and wants you, she won’t fight the perfect person. She is self-preserving. She’s had to do that all her life. In her mind, she can’t compete. She’s probably left us together tonight, hoping to give Olivia and you the family she knows you want.”

Could Eva be right? Ana had changed from the moment Eva had reappeared. Until then, he could have sworn they were on the same page with their attraction and feelings. The night they made love, he had felt completely connected. The following morning, everything had been wonderful... until the doorbell rang.

Andrew ran a hand over his face. “What do I do? I don’t think simply telling her will work. She will not believe me. She can barely even look at me.”

A sharp pain shot through his chest.

“Do you love her?”

Andrew blinked and thought about the woman who had entered his life in a haze of chaos but had turned his life around in only a few short months.

“Yes, I do.”

“Will you let me help you win my sister back?”

Andrew was sceptical. Should he be allowing Eva to help, especially if she was the problem in the first place? She seemed genuine in her offer, and, to be honest, he was not sure she could make the current situation any worse. Communication between him and Ana had broken down.

“Okay, but I won’t jeopardise her relationship with Olivia.”

“Neither would I. I want a relationship with all three of you. I’m certainly not going to do anything that could jeopardise that.”

Chapter Fifty-three

Ana

If Ana was honest, she hated the thought of Andrew and Olivia at home, playing happy families with Eva... but Andrew and Olivia did not belong to her, and they never would. She was the nanny, the aunt, the sister-in-law... not the wife or mother. She had simply fallen into those roles.

Ana realised she'd made a huge mistake as soon as she arrived. Their group had tripled in number, and the club was already crowded. "I love your dress," one of Millie's friends said, shouting in her ear.

Ana smiled awkwardly. "Thank you," she added, staring around her.

"Can I ask where you bought it? I need something like that for a party I'm going to."

Ana realised they were still talking to her. "I made it," she said, surprised that someone wanted to make small talk with her.

"You are so talented. Would you be interested in making me a dress? I would be happy to pay you." The girl's expression was one of hope. "Millie said you're the best dressmaker on the course."

Ana was a little taken aback by the girls' words. "Sure. If you want to get my number from Millie, call me, and we can discuss it."

The girl grabbed Ana in a bear hug, thanking her profusely before wondering off. Leaving Ana wondering what the hell had just happened.

George's uncle had reserved them a table in the VIP section of the club for the evening. Ana found a spot in the corner, away from the chaotic fun the others were having. Ana had gone clubbing before. She just didn't particularly enjoy the experience. The noise, and crowds, just weren't her thing. Surprise, surprise, she wasn't feeling any different now.

"Hey," Millie said, approaching her, "You look like you are at a funeral, not in a club seeing in the New Year."

Ana smiled. She was very aware Millie was watching her every move, and

Ana was determined not to ruin the night for her friends. If Ana did that, it made her a lousy one. She needed to school her thoughts better.

“Are you thinking about your *hot doctor*?”

“He’s a surgeon, and no,” she said, lying. When Millie raised an eyebrow, Ana sighed, “Okay, yes, I was. They are at home with Eva.”

Millie’s eyes opened wide. “The *evil* sister?” she asked.

Ana laughed at Millie’s expression. “Not an evil sister. She’s not that bad. But she is his ex-wife and Olivia’s mother. She wants to make things right.”

“And you think she wants to get back together?”

“Why wouldn’t she? It’s the ideal scenario. You know Andrew was dating before Christmas. He was trying to make a new family for himself and Olivia. Eva turning up is perfect timing. Andrew loved her before. They are in the same field; they have a daughter together. Why wouldn’t they.”

Millie stared at Ana. “But where do you fit into this equation?” she asked seriously.

Ana gave a hollow laugh. “I don’t.”

Millie raised an eyebrow. “You had mind-blowing sex, and you say you don’t figure in this. I beg to differ.”

“I’m putting it down to the Christmas Spirit. It was one night of fantastic sex, but I need to put it behind me.”

“What does Andrew say?” When Ana didn’t respond, Millie stared at her open-mouthed. “You have spoken to him?”

When Ana looked away, her friend continued. “The man I saw the day Olivia went missing was not interested in anyone but you. He watched you like you hung the moon and the stars. I only hope some guy looks at me that way someday!”

“I told him it was a mistake.”

Millie threw up her arms in frustration.

“Please don’t,” Ana said, her voice catching. “I must let him go, Millie. I’m not the right person for him. I was the substitute. You saw my sister. She is beautiful, intelligent and the mother of his child. I remember hearing Andrew beg her to give him a second chance after Olivia was born. He stood in my parent’s hallway and begged. His wish is coming true. He can have it all, and Millie... I want that for him.”

Millie pulled back and grabbed Ana’s hands, scanning her body. “You, my friend, are smoking hot. If your surgeon can’t see that, then he’s blind.”

Millie didn't say anymore. Instead, she pulled Ana in for a hug.

"Let's get drunk," Millie said, waving over one of the VIP waiters. "A bottle of gin, please, and some mixers."

The waiter nodded and disappeared. Ana smiled in thanks just as George and Julie returned from the dance floor.

"What are you two up to?" George asked, looking between the two of them.

"We have set the world right, and now we are about to get *very* drunk," Ana said, wrapping her arm around Millie's shoulders to stop her friend from worrying about her.

"Yes!" both George and Julie said, grabbing the two seats opposite them.

They made a beautiful couple. They were so in synch with one another. That is what Ana wanted.

Ana had never been much of a drinker and soon found her head swimming. The lights of the club danced above her. Deciding she'd had enough, she dragged Millie onto the dance floor. She should have foreseen that Millie was a crazy dancer, throwing shapes all over the place. Laughing, Ana finally relaxed as she moved to the music. She had to admit her friend drew people into her orbit. It did not surprise Ana when Millie attracted the attention of a group of guys their age.

Millie gave her a side nod and a grin. It was then Ana realised one guy had moved closer to her. Millie pulled Ana into a hug, whispering loudly into her ear, "He fancies you," she giggled. "You should go for it. Get back on the horse. Put Doctor Gorgeous back in his box."

Another guy appeared and spun Millie away, drawing her into an elaborate display of dirty dancing. Ana looked around, seeing the guy Millie had previously pointed out smiling at her.

"Hi, I'm Paul," he shouted.

"Ana," Ana replied, giving him a smile.

Maybe Millie was right. She needed to find someone to move on with.

"Do you want to get a drink?" Paul asked, tilting his head towards the bar.

Ana looked at Millie, whose arms were draped around the neck of Paul's friend. She could either stay on the dance floor and dance by herself or grab a drink.

Tapping Millie's arm, she tipped her hand to her mouth to let her friend know where she was going. Millie grinned when she saw Paul standing

behind her and winked. Ana rolled her eyes at her but turned and followed Paul as he fought his way through the crowded dance floor to the bar.

“How do you know Millie?” Paul’s question surprised Ana.

“Er, we go to University together,” she replied. Paul was nice-looking and around their age. His dark hair was short on the sides and long and spiky on top. His dark eyes were kind, so Ana relaxed. “How about you?”

Paul looked over at the dance floor and smiled. “The guy who has Millie wrapped in his arms is Dan. He’s fancied Millie since sixth grade, but she has never given him the time of day... We all went to school together,” he added.

Ana looked over at her friend and grinned. “That seems to have changed this evening.”

Paul returned her smile. “I hope so,” he added, “’Cause if not, I’m going to be spending weeks picking up the pieces of his broken heart.”

Ana found herself laughing. She decided she liked Paul. He obviously cared about his friend.

Paul was studying medicine at the University of Lancaster. He had returned for the holidays but would be heading back in a week. Ana’s heart lurched. She smiled and asked him how he was finding it. He started speaking with such passion Ana’s heart burned. She never admitted to anyone how difficult it had been to give up medicine. But she had made that choice and refused to regret her decision. She half listened as Paul talked about what he would do after the Christmas break. He was in his first year and, therefore, younger than Ana. She loved his enthusiasm and should not have been surprised when he leaned forward and placed his lips against hers.

Ana pulled back immediately, her body frozen, and Paul looked at her sheepishly. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I just thought...”

Ana held up her hand. “Sorry, it’s just...” Just what? What was she going to say? I’m in love with my ex-brother-in-law. I’ve given up everything I loved to escape my abusive father.

Paul placed a hand on her arm. “It’s no problem. I’m sorry. You are beautiful, and I...”

Ana shook her head. “I’m not looking for a relationship, and I don’t do casual flings,” Ana said. “You’re a nice guy. I’m sorry if you thought there would be more.”

Paul smiled, “Don’t be. It’s been nice talking to you... If I’m honest, I’m not here to find anyone either. I came with Dan to keep him company.”

Ana grinned. “You sound like me. The girls convinced me to come out. I’m not really into the clubbing scene, but I didn’t want to let them down.”

They fell back into an easy conversation. Paul talked about a girl he fancied at university. They’d been friends, had a one-night stand, and now she was ghosting him. Ana listened, and they were laughing when Millie and Dan approached, arms wrapped around one another.

The speakers came on suddenly, “Ten, Nine, Eight..... One... Happy New Year!” The club went wild, everyone jumping and kissing one another. Millie grabbed Ana, planting a kiss on her lips before being dragged into Dan’s arms. Paul looked at Ana awkwardly, so she leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He smiled shyly.

“You’re a nice guy, Paul,” Ana said into his ear. “When you get back, be honest with her. If it’s a misunderstanding, then maybe you can fix it.”

“The same goes for you,” Paul said, giving her a knowing look. Maybe he was more perceptive than Ana had thought.

George and Julie spun Ana around and wished her a Happy New Year.

It was three AM when they finally left the club, having detached Millie from the new love of her life and into a taxi. They were all staying at Millie’s house. Her parents had gone to celebrate New Year with friends and were staying overnight.

Millie spent the entire taxi ride gushing about Dan. How she had wasted so many years, and that he was an amazing kisser. George and Julie laughed at their drunk friend, helping Ana get her into the house and into bed.

Chapter Fifty-four

Ana

It was mid-afternoon when Ana let herself back into the annexe. She had slept badly, her mind swirling with thoughts about her future. She had spent the morning listening to Millie talk about Dan and how amazing he was.

Ana was happy for her friend. But by the time she left, she dreaded facing Andrew and Eva, knowing that she had pushed them together last night. Had they spent the night making out on the sofa or, worst of all, in Andrew's bed? The thought of seeing them sitting around, laughing together as one big happy family was more than she could take today.

Opening the door to her room, Ana stopped. Andrew was sitting on her bed, his forearms resting on his thighs. He looked up as she entered, his expression unreadable.

"Andrew," Ana said awkwardly, avoiding his gaze. "Is everything okay? Do you need me to look after Olivia?"

Her heart pounded in her chest as Andrew stared at her. She dropped her bag onto the floor before turning to face him.

As if shaking himself out of his trance. Andrew said, "Happy New Year... I hope you had a lovely evening."

Ana flinched. Since when had they started making small talk? This was more awkward than when she'd first arrived at the house.

She stared at Andrew and waited. Ana watched as his shoulders dropped.

"I wanted to talk. Eva has Olivia upstairs, and I saw you arrive home."

Home.

That word.

This was more of a home than any other she had lived in. But that was part of the problem... it wasn't *her* home. She had overstepped, become too comfortable, and now things were awkward. She had thrown herself at her ex-brother-in-law, and now he was here to tell her it had all been a colossal

mistake.

Ana shook her head. She couldn't deal with this right now.

"I'm tired, Andrew. Can we do this talk another time? I have a raging hangover, and it was a late night," she lied.

She couldn't bear to hear him tell her it had all been a mistake... that now Eva was back...

"You're right. I'm sorry, Ana," Andrew said. "I'm glad you had fun last night. You deserved it. I've said you need to go out with your friends all along." The smile he gave her looked sad. Ana watched as Andrew stood up and walked towards her. "You looked beautiful, and Olivia loved her matching dress. Thank you."

Andrew lay a hand on her shoulder as he passed, her nerve endings firing pulses up and down her arm. She was glad she was wearing a thick jumper. Otherwise, he would have seen her skin pucker at his touch and her nipples turn to stone. She bit down on her tongue to prevent a rising moan as a newly familiar warmth pooled at her core. No-one had ever made her feel the way this man could with a single touch. Somehow, she doubted anyone ever would again.

"It was my pleasure. Olivia helped me. She's becoming very competent," Ana said, stepping further into the room, breaking their connection.

Ignoring his initial statement, Ana picked up her bag, placing it on the bed. As if taking the hint, Andrew left without a backward glance, shutting the door behind him. Ana slowly dropped to the bed, her throat thick with unshed tears. She could do this. She could be professional and survive the pain if only for Olivia's happiness.

Chapter Fifty-five

Andrew

The new year saw all pre-Christmas routines resume. Andrew went back to work. Olivia went back to school, and Ana restarted her course. The difference was the canyon that had formed between himself and Ana.

He had no grounds to complain. Ana was attentive to Olivia and seemed to have developed a bond with Eva. He was the odd one out. He should be happy. Olivia had not one but two doting females in her life and had never been so content. Instead, he was jealous of his daughter and his ex-wife. Ana seemed to nurture the relationship between mother and daughter, helping it to grow, but as soon as he walked through the door, the laughter stopped.

Ana no longer sat and watched television with him after Olivia had gone to bed. Instead, she made excuses about all the work she needed to do and went down into the annexe. Andrew felt more alone in his own home than he ever had before. Work was the only thing that kept him going.

“Adrian is here,” Suzie said, popping her head into his office.

“Thanks, Suzie,” he said. “Show him in.”

Andrew got up and walked around his desk. He could not hold back his smile as Adrian walked into the office, followed closely by the young woman he had met the night of Adrian’s operation.

“Adrian, good to see you,” Andrew said, holding out his hand.

The young man hauled Andrew in for a hug and thanked him, saying that a handshake didn’t feel right when he had held his heart in his hand.

Andrew let the young man hold on to him. It was not the first time a patient had needed that physical connection. They stood for several minutes until Adrian pulled back, moisture making his cheeks glisten. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. “Sorry. It’s just, being home and feeling like I have a second chance. Seeing you, the man who made that possible.”

Andrew smiled and held up his hand. “You don’t need to explain. I’m

happy for you.” Andrew offered them a seat before moving back to his desk.

“Sorry, Mr Dennison,” Adrian said, “I’d like to introduce you to my fiancée, Holly.”

A grin spread across his face at Adrian’s words. “Fiancée? Congratulations.”

Holly blushed, taking a seat. “We couldn’t wait,” Adrian explained, taking Holly’s hand. “We’ve wasted too many years already.”

Andrew nodded, glad someone’s love life was successful. Adrian deserved every happiness.

At twenty-six, Adrian’s life had been over before it had begun. A simple infection had left his heart so badly damaged he’d needed a transplant. Andrew had seen Holly the night of the operation. She hadn’t left Adrian’s side. She clearly loved him. From what she’d told Andrew, they had a misunderstanding, which had destroyed their relationship. However, Adrian’s illness had given them clarity on what was important.

As they headed to the door at the end of the appointment, Adrian turned. “Did you get the girl?” Adrian asked.

Andrew gave him a sad smile and placed a hand on his shoulder, “We are not all as lucky in love. Cherish each moment.”

Adrian gave him a sad smile. It was Holly who spoke next, taking Adrian’s hand. “Don’t give up. The best things are worth fighting for.”

Andrew stared at the young girl and watched a blush spread over her cheeks. “I’m sorry Mr Dennison. It’s just... I had given up on Adrian ever coming back. Life had a dramatic way of putting us back on each other’s radar.”

“Don’t worry about me. It’s a little complicated currently. But I think you might be right. Maybe I just need to be patient. If we are meant to be, then time will tell.”

“Thank you, Mr Dennison. See you soon.” Both left, and Andrew went back to his desk.

Suzie entered his office with two cups of coffee. “Your next patient is stuck in traffic, so I’ve rescheduled them.”

Andrew took the cup of liquid gold she was offering and sat back.

“Adrian looked well. His fiancée is beautiful, and you can tell they adore one another.”

Andrew smiled. “They told you they were engaged?”

Suzie laughed. “Yes, they couldn’t keep it to themselves. He’s a lovely young man, and I wish them both a long and happy future together. You should be proud. You made that possible.” Suzie took a sip of her coffee, staring at Andrew over the top of her mug. “What is happening with you? You’re out of sorts. Is it your ex-wife? Is she causing problems?”

Andrew had let Suzie know about Eva’s reappearance. He put his mug down and ran a hand through his hair. “That good, huh?” Suzie added, laughing.

“She wants nothing to do with me, and she is right.”

“Who? Eva?” Suzie said, looking confused.

“No, Ana. I’m too old for her! She’s my daughter’s nanny. She’s also my ex-sister-in-law, my daughter’s aunt. To make matters worse, Eva is hanging around our house all the time. I can’t exactly tell her to go away, as Olivia has never been so happy. All I want to do is pull Ana into my arms and tell her I love her. That our night together was the best thing that has ever happened to me, but that is not the right thing to do! That is me being selfish.” The words flew out of Andrew’s mouth before he had time to put his brain into gear. Suzie sat opposite him, her mouth a gape.

“Oh, wow!” was all Suzie managed before taking a large gulp of her coffee. “I think I could do with a whiskey shot in here!”

Andrew laughed, “Sorry, you asked, and I over shared.”

“Nope, you obviously needed to share. What are you going to do?”

Andrew frowned. “Why aren’t you surprised?” he asked.

Suzie grinned, “Female intuition is a wonderful thing. Let’s you see what’s coming,” she said cryptically. Then obviously, took pity on him. “You have been talking about Ana for months. It was a matter of time - not *if* something was going to happen.”

Andrew groaned. Was he really that sad and obvious? An older man making a fool of himself over a younger woman. Had his life become a cliché?

“She won’t talk to me. Every time I’ve tried, she makes an excuse. Eva has told me I need to fight for her... but...”

“What? Let me get this straight... your ex-wife has told you to fight for a relationship with her sister? Well, that’s got to be a first,” Suzie said, settling herself back into the chair.

Andrew simply shook his head. He supposed it was unusual for someone’s

ex to fight for their sibling to be in a relationship. Was Eva playing with him, or was she genuine? He didn't have a reason to doubt her. She was trying to make amends. She had always been a straight talker.

“Well, I'm lost for words. I'm not sure what advice I can give. All I will say is, follow your heart. If you love Ana, then make her listen. Show her what she means to you.”

Andrew nodded. He had listened to Ana, but she hadn't listened to him. Was she scared? Or did she not want to pursue their relationship? Had she seen their one night together as exactly that, a one-night stand? An itch that needed scratching. If he shared his feelings, what if she felt guilty and got back together because she felt obliged? Or worse, because she was worried he'd stop her from seeing Olivia.

Ana was young. She should go out with her friends... party. Could he really ask her to give that up to play wife and step-mum? She had her whole life ahead of her.

“I'll think about it,” was all he could bring himself to say.

Chapter Fifty-six

Ana

Ana was late home. Eva had agreed to collect Olivia from school, so Ana used that as an excuse to stay away. The atmosphere between her and Andrew was still strained. Her hope of them returning to pre-Christmas had failed, and Ana was not sure how much more her stretched nerves could take. Millie and George had both told her she was stupid in not fighting for what she wanted, but every time she thought about it, she would see Olivia's smiling face, and she could not bring herself to destroy a little girl's happiness for her own selfish desires.

Ana smiled as she thought of Olivia. The troubled little girl was a thing of the past. Laura Grant, Olivia's teacher, had told Eva and Andrew at parents' evening how Olivia was blossoming. There had been no more issues with other children. Olivia was flourishing in her new environment. Ana had to admit listening to her speak was a joy. Where once the world had been full of shadows, Olivia's world was now full of sunshine and rainbows, exactly how any seven-year-olds world should be.

Entering the house through the front door, Ana was shocked at how quiet it was. She knew they were home as Olivia's bag was thrown on the floor by the front door. Ana automatically picked it up and hung it on the rack. She didn't want a panic in the morning as they hunted for it. Ana could hear talking coming from the kitchen. She moved towards the door, not intending to eavesdrop, but something made her pause. She knew she should go downstairs to her room and get changed, but she couldn't. A sixth sense told her to stop.

"That is great news. Thank you," Ana heard Eva say to whoever was on the other end of the phone. "Of course, there are no issues with me moving. It will be an honour to join your team. I can't wait to start."

Ana's heart hammered in her chest, and she stepped sideways as a wave of

dizziness hit her hard. Ana tried to regulate her breathing by putting her hand out to steady herself. This could not be happening. Eva could not be thinking about leaving them, of turning around and abandoning Olivia and Andrew again. It sounded like she had another job offer. She had mentioned in passing that she was looking, but Ana had not really paid it much mind, thinking she would look close by. Ana rubbed her forehead hard. She could not let her sister do this. It would break the heart of the two people Ana loved the most. She thought her sister had changed, but she obviously hadn't.

Ana heard Eva say goodbye and disconnected the call. Pushing her way into the kitchen, Ana faced off against her sister.

Ana looked over to find Eva smiling down at her phone. As if sensing her, Eva looked up, her smile growing even wider. "Just the person I wanted to see."

A spike of anger rose inside her, and before she could stop herself, she was in front of her sister. "How could you!" she said.

Eva frowned. "How could I what?"

"Don't play dumb with me, you know exactly 'what'".

Eva stood up and turned fully to face Ana. "No, I don't, and if I did, I wouldn't be asking."

"I just heard you on the phone!"

Eva drew back, a look of confusion crossing her face. "It's good news. I thought you'd be happy." Ana watched as Eva's previous happiness disappeared, her shoulders dropping.

"You think I'd be happy? You think I'd be happy you will break their hearts all over again?" Ana choked on the words, "Please, Eva, you can't just up sticks and walk away again. You asked for a second chance, and they have given you one. Please, I beg you, don't throw it away." Ana's vision blurred as she faced her sister. She would not let her sister derail Olivia's and Andrew's lives all over again without a fight. "I heard you say moving was not an issue."

Ana's heckles rose as Eva straightened and laughed. "Ana, please calm down. I'm not going anywhere... Moving is moving here." Eva raised an eyebrow. "You remember I have been living and working in the US for the past six years?"

Ana sank back against the side and dropped her head. "I'm sorry, of course," she said. "I should not have jumped to conclusions."

“No, you shouldn’t. You know what they say about eavesdropping.” Eva grinned, “You can be the first to congratulate me... I am the latest consultant to be taken on at Andrew’s hospital. They have been looking for additional surgeons, especially as Andrew is now caught up in all the television work. Their referrals have increased, and they can’t keep up with current staffing levels.”

Ana’s heart sank. Her beautiful, brilliant sister would now work alongside Andrew. But this was perfect. It is what she wanted for him, for Olivia. Things were falling into place. “I’m happy for you, that’s great news... I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions. Forgive me?”

“You love him, don’t you?” Ana’s head shot up, and she stared at her sister, open-mouthed.

“What!” Ana’s eyes flitted around the room, unable to look at Eva.

Before Ana could move, Eva stood before her, her hands resting on her shoulder, “Look at me, Santana.” Ana froze, her eyes finally meeting those of her sister. “Do you love him?”

Ana felt her eyes well. She shook her head in denial. “I don’t, I can’t,” she whispered.

Eva pulled back slightly and frowned. “Why not?”

Ana looked at her sister in surprise. “You are really asking me why not?”

“Yes, why not?”

Ana felt her temper rise. Was her sister playing with her? “Where shall I start? He’s your ex-husband, the father of your child. You are back in his life. Did I mention... he is your ex-husband!”

Ana wanted to remove the grin spreading over her sister’s face. It was clear she was enjoying her pain. “At least you haven’t used the excuse he’s been making, in that he’s too old for you,” Eva said, her grin getting wider.

Ana realised Eva was enjoying this way too much. It was only then she processed what Eva had just said.

“Andrew thinks he’s too old for me?” Ana asked.

“Yep, apparently, you need to go out and party and be around people your own age. I told him he was being an idiot, but when that man gets something in his head... he hasn’t changed.”

Eva let out a dramatic sigh she usually heard from Olivia.

It was Ana’s turn to frown at her sister. Was she hearing this right? Had Eva discussed her and Andrew’s relationship? Ana felt the blood drain from

her face. Did Eva know she had slept with Andrew? What must her sister think of her?

“Don’t look so horrified. I think you two make a great couple. Or at least would if you stopped trying to pretend you’re not. The chemistry that sizzles between you when you are in the same room is something most people would give their right arm for. Don’t throw away your chance at true happiness for some warped ideology.”

“But I thought you...”

Eva laughed again. “Dear little sister. I am going to say this once. Andrew and I are over and have been for a very long time. I don’t think we ever really were.”

“That’s not true. He loved you with all his heart. He begged you to come back to him. I heard him that day in the hall after you had Olivia.”

Eva’s eyes clouded, and she shook her head sadly. “No, what you heard was a man trying to hold his family together. It was not because we were right for each other. Andrew and I have discussed our past at length. Neither of us should have gotten married. He was my escape route, which was not fair to him.”

“What do you mean, your escape route?”

Eva cupped Ana’s cheek. “I suppose I should have seen it before.” Eva led Ana to the kitchen table and pulled out two chairs. “Our father was no different with me than he was with you when I was younger. I was their first mistake; you were their second. I grew up in the same toxic environment, striving to do my best but continually failing. It only stopped once I made it to medical school, then he couldn’t sing my praises loudly enough.” Eva ran a hand through her hair. “The more I impressed my lecturers, the more praise I got. He was suddenly proud of me. I got the affection I always dreamed of growing up.”

Ana stared at her sister. “But I thought...”

Eva’s laugh was flat, and Ana watched as she shook her head, her eyes empty in thought. “You thought I was the golden child. Nope... only when he’d moulded me into a *Stepford Child*. You were old enough to see the praise he was heaping on me at that point. I got out of there as fast as I could.” Ana watched Eva’s eyes glisten. “I’m sorry. I abandoned you to that monster. Mum was so downtrodden by that point; she could offer you no protection.”

Ana watched a lone tear ran down her sister's cheek. She raised her hand and caught it, pulling her forward and into a hug. Ana could not remember ever hugging her sister. It was never done.

Eva rocked Ana in her arms. "It's been so many years since I've held you," she said into Ana's hair.

Ana pulled back slightly and stared at her sister. Eva grinned. "Did you think I didn't cuddle my baby sister as much as possible when you were born? I used to fight our mother to change your nappies and give you a bottle. You used to call me Var."

Ana swallowed around the lump in her throat and pulled her sister back in for another hug. A man who should have loved them had warped and distorted their past. He had destroyed their family and made his children feel worthless.

"I got Mum to convince him to send you to boarding school," Eva admitted. "Mum was weak. She couldn't protect you. I thought the distance would help. I am sorry it didn't." Eva was openly sobbing now.

Ana pulled back and held her sister's hands in hers, her cheeks wet. "Don't apologise. Boarding school might not have been perfect, but it was a reprieve. I just wish I had known. Together, we might have been stronger."

"Stronger? Your strength, my beautiful little sister, is staggering. You left it all behind to get away from him. You're forging your own path. I gave up my husband, child, and life out of loyalty to that monster. You have so much courage and conviction. I am in awe. Tonight is just one example." Ana tilted her head, and Eva gave her a watery smile. "You came in here tonight like a mother lioness protecting her pack. You would have gone to battle for those you love and care about. Our father hasn't broken you, little sister... you are like a phoenix. You have risen out of the ashes and come back stronger."

They both turned as a key sounded in the lock, announcing Andrew was home. Eva squeezed Ana's hands tightly. "I'm taking Olivia out for dinner with Star and Skylar, then she is staying at Star and Damian's for the night... I've already cleared it with Andrew," Eva said quickly. "You two need to have a proper talk. No more excuses, Ana. I love you both and want you to be happy. If that is together, then I could ask for no more. If it isn't, then I don't want to have been the one to derail you. I want you to find your true happiness." Eva stood and dropped a kiss on Ana's cheek before moving to a confused-looking Andrew by the door. Reaching up, she pressed a kiss on his

cheek, whispering something Ana could not hear. Andrew's eyes shot to Ana's, and he stood holding her gaze while Eva rushed past him.

They were still staring at one another as Olivia ran in and announced she, Skylar, Star, and Mummy was going out to dinner and having a sleepover. She asked Ana if she wanted to join them.

"No, pumpkin, I have a few things I need to do here," Ana said, bending down and scooping her into a big hug. "But you have fun." What would Olivia think if her Mummy and Daddy did not get back together? Would she blame her?

"Hey, what about me?" Andrew said, coming to stand next to Ana.

"You can't come, silly, it's a *girls'* night, and you are a boy!" his daughter added, laughing before throwing her arms around his waist.

"That's okay, have fun with *the girls*," he said, rolling his eyes at Olivia.

Olivia giggled, "Will do. See you later, alligators," she chirped, leaving the room.

"In a while, crocodile," they both replied together, grinning until they heard the front door slam shut.

Chapter Fifty-seven

Ana

Ana turned to stare at Andrew before moving away and putting the kettle on. Andrew followed her before turning her in his arms and running his thumbs over her damp cheeks. He leaned in and kissed her forehead. Ana looked up, lost in the intensity of his gaze. Andrew dropped his head, his lips gently brushing hers.

Ana moaned as awareness flooded her system. Her lips opened beneath his, inviting him to deepen their kiss. As if needing no encouragement, Andrew crushed their mouths together. This was what she wanted, what she needed... Ana thought she had lost him, but there he was, and she was in his arms again.

“Is everything okay?” Andrew asked, pulling away, the skin around his eyes bunching.

Ana clasped his wrists, resting her cheek against his palm. Andrew smiled sadly before pulling her into his chest and holding her tight. Ana relaxed, desperate for the closeness that had all but disappeared. She smiled as she listened to the frantic beat of his heart, a beat matching her own.

Andrew’s head rested on top of hers, as they stood holding each other.

“Want to tell me what I missed?” Andrew asked against her hair.

Ana felt herself grin. “Apparently, I’m too young for you?”

“You are.” Andrew groaned, but Ana swore he pulled her tighter against him.

Ana tilted her head back and stared up into Andrew’s face, her arms around his waist. “Michael Douglas to Catherine Zeta-Jones, or Rod Stewart to Penny Lancaster. I think their age gaps are a little more than ours.”

“Don’t be sassy!” Andrew’s eyes twinkled as he gazed into hers.

“What about Eva? She said there’s nothing between you, but I can’t help but feel I’m a substitute.”

Andrew's eyes went wide at her words, "Substitute? Whatever gave you that idea?"

Ana stepped back and out of his arms, her own circling her waist. "Come on, Andrew, look at us! I'm the spitting image of your first wife... My sister! Don't be obtuse! How can I not think that? You loved her, married her, and had a child together. You might still be married to her if she hadn't left."

Andrew stepped forward and uncurled her arms, taking her hands in his. Walking them both into the sitting room, he sat them down on the sofa, Ana's hands still clasped in his.

"What I am going to tell you is between us." His face was serious. Ana nodded. "You can speak to John about what I'm about to tell you. He will confirm it." Andrew stared into the distance, transporting himself back into his memory. "I nearly called off the wedding. John talked me out of it, telling me everyone got pre-wedding jitters." Andrew shook his head. "I've told no one else, but I knew it was more than that. Eva and I have discussed our marriage in depth. It's all we did on New Year's Eve. There were cracks from the beginning. We were not compatible; we were friends who took our relationship too far. I was Eva's escape, and she was my happily ever after dream. I wanted what my parents had. At nearly twenty-seven, I saw life passing me by. Who else but another surgeon would understand the long hours and life I had chosen?" The look in his eyes made Ana's heart leap into her throat. "I didn't fully understand what my parents had until you smashed into my life and turned it upside down." Andrew cupped her cheek. "I have tried to do the right thing, Ana. I've tried to stay away from you. You've got your whole life ahead of you."

"I'm not like other twenty-two-year-olds. New Year's Eve was a nightmare. Clubbing is my worst nightmare. All I wanted was to be at home with you and Olivia." Andrew grinned at her words.

"What?" Ana asked.

"You said *home*. I like the sound of that." He swept his hand into her hair, holding the back of her head.

"What about your career? The press already finds you interesting. What are they going to think when they find out you are in a relationship with your ex-sister-in-law?"

Andrew shrugged. "I hate the television gig. It's not who I am and not what I want. If there is a problem with our relationship, I quit."

“But it could affect Olivia,” Ana said desperately.

“Olivia’s not a fragile flower. She loves you, Ana. She’d think it was Christmas all over again if you agreed to be my girlfriend. Her classmates think you’re cool after your costume design. Eva’s back in her life. She’s loved and protected. I’m not willing to give up the best thing that’s happened to me on a *what if?* Not if the best thing wants the same thing I do?”

Ana had heard enough. Pushing Andrew back against the sofa, she straddled his lap, one hand planted over his frantically beating heart while the other snaked into the hair at the base of his neck. Andrew’s hands settled on her thighs underneath her skirt, sending electrical pulses ricocheting around her body.

“I’m not and never have been too young for you. I love you as a man, a father. I love the compassion you show those around you. You turn me on in ways that are physically painful. Staying away from you and doing the right thing has nearly destroyed me.”

It was Andrew’s turn to look confused. “Do the right thing?”

Ana looked down sheepishly. “I thought stepping aside would give you and Eva a chance to put the past behind you. Give Olivia the family she craves.”

Andrew gripped her chin, a shimmer of heat running through her body. “Oh Ana,” he said, “Have you not realised what you mean to both Olivia and me? That first night we had dinner together, I kissed Olivia goodnight, and she asked if you were my girlfriend. That was her dream. I think the more you are in her life, the more she wants that dream to become a reality... Like I do.”

Could she believe him? Before she had time to think, Andrew’s lips collided with hers. Ana gasped, allowing him access to her mouth. His tongue teased and coaxed. Ana heard herself groan. Andrew’s arms swept around her, pulling her flush against his growing desire. Unable to stop herself, Ana rocked against Andrew, her hands roaming freely, enjoying the feel of his hard muscles contracting under her touch. Winding them around his head, Ana pulled him closer, their lips and tongues battling. The distance of the last couple of months drove them on, their desire taking over all rational thought gone.

Ana pulled her mouth away. “I need...” she faltered as Andrew’s mouth trailed open-mouthed kisses along her jaw. Needles of desire pulsed through

her body.

“What do you need?” Andrew asked, pulling away but leaving their foreheads touching. Ana smiled and ran a thumb over his swollen lips.

“I need you, all of you,” she said, suddenly feeling brave and wanted for the first time in her life.

Andrew smiled. “I think I can manage that,” he said before pulling her mouth back to his. This time his kiss was so full of love and passion. It brought tears to her eyes.

Ana’s jumper was the first thing to go. Andrew’s lips travelled down her neck, causing sparks of electricity to light up her body. Sliding her bra strap from her shoulder, Ana felt her body melt as Andrew drew her nipple into his mouth, nipping and sucking. Ana almost slid off his knee as the sensations flooded her system. Her core was on-fire, contracting with need at every touch. Her sister was right. They did light up a room sexually. Her body was an instrument for him to play, and boy, could he play it.

A tremor ripped through her as he moved to her other nipple. His talented fingers took the place of his absent mouth had just left. Ana’s breath hitched as the blood rushed through her veins. She held on to Andrew’s shoulders, her fingers digging into the hard muscle of his chest.

Ana made quick work of Andrew’s shirt, groaning in pleasure as she finally touched his bare skin. Heat raged under her hands. Ana rejoiced as a tremor ran through Andrew’s body as she grazed her fingernail over his nipple, causing it to pebble.

Ana shifted on Andrew’s lap, a need to ease the pressure building between her thighs. She threw her head back as his hard desire connected once again with her most sensitive place.

Andrew’s hand snaked its way back under her skirt, his hand finding her swollen centre. Ana gasped, her back arching as Andrew’s fingers teased the silky flesh between her thighs, causing Ana to spread her knees further apart, her body wanting what he was withholding. As if sensing her growing need, Andrew gently slid two fingers deep inside, curling them back against her internal wall. Ana flew up onto her knees, her mouth open as Andrew drove her to the edge of all reason. Dizziness swept through her as all blood rushed south, spots dancing in front of her eyes as Andrew once again caught her breast in his mouth, suckling hard. Ana let out a strangled yell as she fell apart on his lap.

Andrew continued to kiss and soothe her while her body readjusted to the pleasure it had just experienced. Ana's glazed eyes found Andrew's, the desire she saw looking back at her taking her breath away.

Sitting up, Ana pulled his shirt from his shoulders before moving to his trouser button. Her fingertips skated over the straining bulge, currently hidden. Andrew closed his eyes, a groan escaping deep from within his chest. Scooping Ana up, he stood, then lowered her to the floor before removing both his trousers and boxers, freeing himself to Ana's gaze. Ana stared at the man in front of her, unable to believe he was hers. Andrew would never cease to amaze her. His body was a work of art. No wonder they wanted him as their poster boy.

Ana dropped to her knees, her tongue snaking out, capturing the bead of moisture that had tried to escape. Ana looked up, her eyes locked on Andrew's as she took his full length into her mouth. Andrew groaned above her, his hands wrapping around her hair, guiding her. The sounds he made encouraged her to explore his entire length with her tongue and hand.

Andrew grasped Ana under her arms, pulling her away with a groan.

"No more," he moaned as if in pain.

Ana groaned in protest but refrained from complaining as Andrew quickly removed her knickers and skirt before dropping them back onto the sofa.

"However tempting..." Andrew whispered, dropping light kisses along Ana's jawline. "We need to move this upstairs. All my condoms are there."

Ana caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

"I'm on the pill," she said, leaning forward and dropping a teasing kiss against his lips before moving her mouth across his cheeks, grasping his earlobe in her teeth. Andrew let out a pain-filled groan as his hips thrusting forward. Ana relished in the power she had over the man who had upturned her life.

Ana rubbed her bare core against Andrew's naked length, coating him in her need. He groaned again as Ana kissed her way down his neck before sucking on the sensitive spot where his shoulder and neck met. Lifting herself up, Ana gently grasped Andrew's length in her hand and caught the swollen tip at her opening, stretching her with his presence. Ana pushed down, impaling herself, making them both groan. Ana pulled back, teasing them both before slowly lowering herself onto him fully, relishing the feel her body being stretched to accommodate his. His warm, smooth skin glided

easily into her. They were both a hot, panting mess by the time she had finished. Ana's stomach clenched as desire overtook her. Andrew's hands wrapped around her thighs. He stared into her eyes as they began to move. Ana's head dropped back as the pressure inside her built once again. She spread her thighs further apart, sinking deeper. Andrew picked up the tempo, his thumb stroking the bud of nerves, sending her flying over the edge once again. Ana dropped her head forward onto Andrew's shoulder as he joined her, his body shuddering. She could feel him pulsing deep within her core, filling her with his warmth. It felt more intimate, knowing he was leaving a part of himself behind.

They both sat, wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies cooling. Ana sat back, their bodies still joined.

Andrew raised a hand and trailed it over her face as if trying to memorise this moment. "I love you," he said, making Ana's heart stutter. "I love you... not as a mother for Olivia, not as a lookalike to Eva... I love you, Santana Lewis. For all the selfish reasons, a man can love a woman. I love the way I feel when I'm with you. The way you make me smile after a long day. I love the way you predict what's happening in TV shows." Andrew tweaked her nose. "I also love how you set my world alight with just one touch. I love the way you look at me when you think I'm not looking. I love the way you love my family unconditionally. Will you let me love you, Ana?"

Ana felt her eyes fill. "Yes, Andrew Dennison, I think I can let you love me, but only if you will let me love you in return."

The love that radiated from Andrew's eyes told Ana all she needed to know.

Chapter Fifty-eight

Andrew

Andrew woke the next morning, and Ana snuggled into his side. A smile slid across his face. They'd spent much of the evening talking when they weren't making love. It was what he'd wanted to happen on Boxing Day morning, but everything had gone south. This time, however, there were no distractions. With Olivia at Star and Damian's, it was their time. It was Saturday morning, so they could be as lazy as they wanted.

Ana stirred next to him, burrowing further into his warmth.

"Good morning," she said sleepily, a faint blush warming her cheeks.

"Good morning, beautiful," Andrew said, pressing a kiss on her head.

Ana rolled over onto her stomach, her hand over his heart, supporting her head. Her eyes gazed up at him, reflecting the love he felt.

"I'll start again." She dropped a kiss on his chest above his heart, where Olivia's name was tattooed, and said, "Good morning, handsome." Andrew grinned before hoisting her up and kissing her properly. Flipping her over onto her back, he loomed over her.

"No regrets?" he asked, staring down into her face.

She raised a hand and cupped his cheek. "Never. I could never regret this."

Andrew lowered his head once more and dropped another kiss on her lips. She opened for him instantly, drawing him down towards her.

It was sometime later when they finally made it out of the bedroom. They made breakfast together, laughing like two teenagers. He felt younger and freer than he had in years. Ana really brought out the best in him.

Ana sat at the island, coffee in hand. "What do you want to tell Olivia?"

Andrew looked at her surprised, "The truth," he said, stepping between her legs and wrapping his arms around her. "Olivia will love the fact you are officially my girlfriend."

Ana turned her head to look at him. "Am I?"

“Are you what?”

“Your girlfriend.”

“No.” Ana’s face was a picture. “You’re a hell of a lot more than my girlfriend. In all my thirty-six years, I’ve never felt the connection I have with you.”

Andrew watched as Ana’s eyes glistened. Dropping a kiss on her eyelids, he rested his head on her shoulder.

“Olivia loves you. She will be ecstatic you’re my girlfriend.”

“But it might disappoint her that you’re not getting back together with Eva.”

“I don’t think so. Olivia asked me the other day if, now that Eva was back, it meant you would leave. I asked her if she wanted you to go.”

Andrew watched as Ana held her breath. He knew he shouldn’t tease her and wanted no more misunderstandings. She had to understand, she was *it* for them.

“Ana, she burst into tears. She told me she never wanted you to leave.”

A single tear tracked its way down Ana’s cheek. “I wasn’t sure how I would cope if you and Eva had given your relationship another go. I could not have stayed and watched, but tearing myself away would have broken something inside me.”

Andrew hugged her tight. “No more talk of leaving or running away. We are in this together, and I will fight with my last breath to hold us together.”

“How did I get so lucky?” she said.

Andrew closed his eyes as Ana ran her fingers through his hair.

They stayed holding each other, savouring the closeness they had spent the past two months hiding from.

Andrew moved away, taking Ana’s hands in his. Sitting on the stool next to her, he looked into her eyes. “I want to ask you something... no not that.” He grinned at the look of horror that crossed her face. “It’s a bit early for that... yet, but I promise you one thing, it will come, mark my words.”

His heart stuttered at the smile Ana sent his way. “What I want to ask is off the back of something Eva said. She told me you were top of your class in med school. That you gave it up to get away from your father?” Andrew paused. “My question is, do you want to go back? I’m sure we can get you transferred to the university here. I’m happy to support you if it’s what you want.”

Ana's eyes opened wide before she sank away from him, a frown creasing her brow. "Do you want me to go back to med school?"

Andrew stilled. Had he just made an error?

"No, but I want you to have the choice. I don't want you to give up anything you want in this life because of someone else. Not your father, myself, or Olivia."

Ana ran the back of her hand down the side of his face. "No, Andrew. I don't want to go back to med school. Six months ago? Maybe. But now? I like my new life." She grinned at him. "I want a life. No offence, but I have seen the hours you work, and although I loved medicine. I've moved on. With Millie and George, you, and Olivia... even Eva... I've found myself. I don't want to go back to something that has negative memories of me. I'm making new, more positive ones."

"I never want you to have any regrets," Andrew added, knowing he meant it.

He would give her the moon and stars if she asked.

"I promise I'll think about it, but I don't think my feelings will change. I might not be saving lives, but I love what I do." Ana lent forward and dropped a kiss on his lips. "The fact you asked means a lot."

A knock on the front door broke the moment. Andrew rolled his eyes and stepped back.

"And life returns to normal."

Ana grinned at him. Star was obviously dropping Olivia off. Andrew was sure Eva and Star had orchestrated the sleepover to force him and Ana to talk. Removing Olivia for the evening meant they'd had no excuses. What they hadn't realised was he'd already decided that he needed to talk to Ana. The fact he'd had all night to show her what she meant to him had been a bonus. Thinking ahead, he might want to get a lock installed on his bedroom door.

Throwing open the front door, Olivia and Skylar raced past him.

"Come on in," Andrew said to a grinning Star and Damian.

"So, how did it go?" Star asked. "Did you get everything sorted?"

A movement must have caught Star's eye because her face broke out into an enormous grin. Andrew watched as Ana's face grew red at the scrutiny.

Star clapped her hands. "Oh, I love it when a plan comes together."

Ana groaned as Star rushed forward and swept her into a hug. "I'm so happy," Star said. "Sorry to tease. You should have heard Laura when

Damian and I got together. I had days of it.”

Andrew remembered that time. He hadn't known Damian very well then, and in all fairness, he hadn't been Damian's favourite person. Andrew grinned and rescued Ana, putting his arm around her and pressing a kiss on her head.

“Daddy?” Everyone froze. No one had noticed the two girls coming back downstairs. “Daddy, why are you kissing Ana's head?” Olivia asked, her head tilted. Skylar whispered something, making Olivia grin. “Is Ana your girlfriend?”

Skylar whispered something else, Olivia's grin widening.

“Do you mind if she is?” Andrew asked her quietly.

Olivia continued to grin. “Nope, that would be awesome,” she said, running down the stairs and throwing her arms around them. Skylar stood on the stairs, grinning. “Everyone is going to be so jealous.”

Andrew quirked an eyebrow at his daughter, not wanting to ask why. He already felt like the luckiest man alive.

Olivia gave him another eye roll. “Daddy, I will have the best costumes always!”

Everyone laughed, and Andrew watched as Ana pulled Olivia in close.

“Me too?” Skylar asked.

Ana opened her arms to Olivia's best friend. “Yes, you are too.”

Damian and Star stayed for a drink before making their excuses and heading off. They were going shopping for baby items, Star's excitement palpable.

After they left, Andrew knelt next to Olivia. “What did Skylar say to you on the stairs?”

Olivia grinned at him and tapped her nose. “That's my secret,” she said.

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Later that evening, after they put Olivia to bed, Andrew and Ana snuggled up on the sofa, watching a movie.

“Hmm, this is nice,” Ana said, snuggling deeper into his chest.

“It is,” Andrew said, dropping a kiss on her nose.

Ana tilted her head up. “Can I let you into a secret?” she said seriously.

“Of course.” Andrew’s heart hammered in his chest.

“Every time we used to watch a movie together. I used to imagine what it would be like curling up next to you.”

Andrew pulled Ana up until she was straddling his lap. “Is that all you imagined?”

Ana gave him a coy smile. “Oh no,” she said, gently rocking her pelvis backwards and forwards against his growing erection. Andrew moaned and pulled her mouth down to his. “I have a very vivid imagination,” she stated in between kisses.

Ana squealed as Andrew flipped them over so she was lying beneath him. “Did your imagination run along these lines?” he said, burying his head in her neck and kissing his way down to her shoulder.

Ana dropped her head back, giving him better access. As he rocked his hips against her core, Ana moaned, the sound shooting pleasure straight through Andrew’s chest. “This is so much better than my imagination,” Ana said breathlessly, holding his head to her.

Andrew made swift work of removing their clothes, thankful that his daughter was a heavy sleeper. He slid deep into Ana’s body, revelling how she gripped and squeezed him. He could never get enough of this woman. She had quickly become his life. Their bodies craved one another. It was like they had lit a fuse in each other. Andrew felt Ana’s body crest beneath him, drawing him down. It was only then that he allowed himself to follow her into the abyss.

Epilogue

Ana

Eighteen months later

Ana stood with her key near the lock.

“Shhhh... she’s here.”

Ana smiled to herself at the sound of Olivia’s voice. When Ana pulled up, the nine-year-old had been poking her head around the curtain in the sitting room. Ana pretended she hadn’t noticed her, as it was obvious she hadn’t wanted to be seen.

Ana took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Surprise!”

Guests filled the downstairs of their house, but Olivia’s voice was the loudest. Millie and George stood to the side, and Ana raised an eyebrow at them. How had they made it there before she had? They’d left university at the same time as her. Today they had graduated. No more lectures. They were heading out into the big, wide world to earn a living. Well, she and Millie were setting up their own online business. Who knew making costumes and designing her own clothes would have become so lucrative?

Olivia stepped forward and pulled Ana into the house. “Look, Ana, everyone has come to celebrate you finishing.”

Andrew stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. “Congratulations, gorgeous,” he said, dropping a kiss on her lips. She wrapped a hand behind his head and pulled his lips harder to hers, letting him know she would demand much more later. Andrew grinned down at her. Ana knew she’d never have to beg.

Andrew’s mum and dad were the next to step forward, pulling her into a family hug. “Congratulations, Ana,” Andrew’s mum added, her eyes glistening in the light.

Ana spent the next ten minutes greeting their friends and family. Millie and George finally stepped up, handing her a glass of bubbly.

Ana smiled. "This is as much a party for the two of you," she said, grinning at her two best friends. They both stepped in for a group hug. Ana's life was so different now. They filled her life with so much love and hugs it had become second nature.

"Who would have guessed? A group project!" Millie said, "We've come a long way."

"Fate had a powerful hand in our lives that day," George said.

Ana thought back. Without Millie and George, she would never have taken the job at Mount Crystals. Never had the chance to reconnect with Andrew, and she would not have her happily ever after.

"Thank you. Both of you. Your friendship means more than I can ever say."

"That goes both ways. And don't think you are getting rid of us... ever!" George said, sucking on her bottom lip.

"What time is your flight?" Ana asked, patting her friend on the arm.

George grinned. "Eight tomorrow morning." George was flying out to see Julie.

Julie's visa had expired, and she was struggling to get it renewed. She and George had been flying back and forth during the holidays over the past eighteen months. George had applied for a work permit this time, so she was going to see Julie. Their relationship was solid. Ana knew whatever happened, they would make it work.

"Don't be a stranger," Ana added.

"Never," George grinned.

"What am I going to do without you?" Millie said, sobbing.

"You won't be with me. I will always be here... maybe not for a physical hug, but I am always on the end of the phone." George said, hugging her. "Plus, you two need to make this business work. I'll be looking for a job when I come back!"

Millie sniffed.

Andrew came up behind Ana and wrapped his arms around her. Ana sank back into his embrace and watched as her two friends grinned at her.

"Do you mind, ladies, if I borrow Ana for a bit?"

"As if we stood a chance of stopping you," Millie grinned. "She'd follow

you to the ends of the earth.”

Andrew grinned. “At least it’s mutual.”

Andrew drew her away from her friends and into the kitchen. “Someone has just arrived.”

Ana entered the kitchen, and her eyes were immediately drawn to her sister. A wide grin spread over her face. Eva had been away for the past month, and Ana had really missed her. The past two and a half years had seen their relationship develop. No one would know that there were fourteen years between them. The past was exactly where it should be. Both Ana and Eva were only interested in the future.

Ana bent down and kissed her sister on the cheek. “Sorry, I can’t get up,” Eva said, rubbing her swollen stomach.

Ana laughed, dropping her hand to her sister’s ever-expanding waistline. “I think you can be forgiven. How are my niece and nephew doing?”

“Ensuring my wife gets no sleep,” came a voice behind her.

Ana spun around and hugged her brother-in-law. Eva had run from him, but he had followed. She’d battled against her feelings, but he had never once given up until she’d no fight or excuses left in her. For the love he showed her sister, Ana was eternally grateful. Now Eva was only a month or two away from delivering twins. Despite her difficult past, her sister had finally found her happily ever after.

Andrew clinked a glass with a spoon. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?”

Ana felt her colour rise; she hated being the centre of attention.

“As you know, my beautiful girlfriend and her friends have finished their degrees today and are about to embark on new adventures.” Everyone let out a cheer. Ana could not fault all their friends and family. They had been nothing but supportive since they’d announced their relationship.

Andrew clinked his glass again. “To new adventures... ones that I hope you will navigate with me.” Ana’s heart stopped as Olivia came to stand next to her dad. Ana’s hand flew to her mouth as Andrew dropped to one knee in front of her.

“I love you, Santana Lewis. My daughter loves you.” Olivia dropped to one knee next to her dad, grinning madly at Ana. “Will you marry me?”

Ana dropped onto the floor in front of them. “Absolutely. My life wouldn’t be complete without you in it.”

Andrew pulled her forward into his embrace and kissed her to the whoops and cheers of their friends.

A while later, Olivia came up to her and took her hand in hers. “Apparently, Aunty-Mummies are the best, according to Skylar.”

Ana suddenly realised what Skylar had whispered to Olivia that day on the stairs.

“You already have a mummy,” Ana said, not wanting to step on Eva’s toes.

“I do. But soon, I will have two mummies if that’s okay with you.”

Ana’s heart melted as she looked down on the young girl who held a large part of her heart and who had started her on this amazing journey. Olivia had grown so much in the past two and a half years from the shy, withdrawn seven-year-old. To a nearly ten-year-old, brimming with confidence.

“I would be honoured to be your mummy,” Ana said, pulling her into her embrace.

Several hours later, when Ana lay in Andrew’s arms, she rolled over and stared into the eyes of her soon-to-be husband. It was now or never, well maybe not never.

“How do you feel about having a baby?” Ana asked.

Andrew lifted his head off the pillow to stare down at her. “A baby? Do you want one?” he asked cautiously.

Ana grinned at him. She knew he still had issues. He could not easily forget the past.

“I think I would like one,” Ana said, biting her lip.

Andrew hugged her tightly. “I’d love to see your body swollen with my child,” he said, showering kisses over her head. “I just haven’t wanted to ask. I didn’t want to rush you. You have so much to do. You have your new job.”

Ana placed a hand over his mouth to stop him. “Ah yeah, about that. I may be on maternity leave a little sooner than we expected.”

Ana laughed as Andrew’s eyes widened. He pulled her hand away.

“Are you telling me you’re already pregnant?”

Ana raised her eyebrows and grinned. “I found out this morning. I was feeling nauseous, so I took a test. The pill, it seems, is not one hundred per cent! We’re having a baby, Mr Dennison.”

Andrew grinned before pulling her up on top of him. “Are we really having a baby?”

“We’re really having a baby,” Ana said, loving the man beneath her with

every ounce of her being. “I love you, Mr Dennison. We’re expanding our family.” The kiss Andrew gave her stole her breath.

It was a while later when Ana rested her hand on Andrew’s cheek. “Thank you for filling my life with so much love and laughter.”

The love radiating from Andrew’s eyes took her breath away as he pulled her down for a kiss.

“Only you, Ana. It will always be only you.”

∞∞∞∞∞

Thank you for reading!

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Zoe lives in The New Forest, England with her husband, two teenagers, and her four rescue cats and dogs.

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