



PITY
PARTY

USA Today Bestselling Author
Whitney Dineen

PITY PARTY

WHITNEY DINEEN

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, locales, and situations are the work of the author's overactive imagination and the voices in her head. Any resemblance to people living or dead, events, etc., is purely coincidental. And I don't mean maybe.

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GRATITUDE

Thank you all who read and reviewed Pity Date. I was seriously blown away by all the wonderful support! I hope you enjoy Melissa and Jamie's story, as well. I absolutely love them!

*To all the single parents looking—or not looking—for love.
You've got this!*

CHAPTER ONE



MELISSA

“Your total is two thousand forty-eight dollars,” I tell the beaming bride-to-be who’s nearly blinding me with her over-the-top white teeth. She’s like Ross Geller from that one episode of *Friends*.

I used to dream of being just like her—hopeful, excited, no visible baby bump while planning my impending nuptials. Unfortunately, life has kicked me in the teeth often enough that I’m slowly stepping away from that fantasy. Instead, I’m focusing on the fact that women like her are probably more stressed out than your average sky diver during a tornado. *Will he say yes? Does his mother hate me as much as I think she does? Should we really be spending this kind of money on one party? And the most important—Does he know I was serious when I said I don’t clean toilets?* The list goes on and on.

“You’re the best, Melissa!” the petite blonde with the unnatural orange tan gushes. She says this like I just brought her bail money at two in the morning. As she hands me her credit card, she adds, “You must love owning a bridal shop! I mean, could there be a better job?”

I didn’t think so ten years ago when I became my mom’s partner at Bride’s Paradise. I had recently graduated from college and was so full of hope and anticipation about my own wedding I couldn’t imagine anything better. Not that I was engaged or even dating anyone at the time, but I was raised on television shows like *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Bridezilla*, and David Tutera’s *My Fair Wedding*. I’d fantasized about my big day for over a decade at that point.

For a generation that is meant to believe there’s more to life than marriage, we sure spend a lot of time dreaming about it. Being fed a constant visual diet of what our big day is supposed to look like wreaks havoc with expectations. Somehow a wedding has become more about the show and what we wear than about true love.

Had I only gotten hooked on *Law and Order* or *Dr. Who*, I might have become a lawyer or even a Time Lord. Note to self: investigate the kind of credentials needed to become a Time Lord.

I hand the credit card back to Brooklyn as her wedding party circles around her. Her maid of honor squeals—loudly—“Oh my GOD, Brook! This

is it!! You said yes to the dress!” We’ve already taken pictures with the requisite signage and hashtags to ensure that everyone the bride has ever met will know where she bought her gown. Hashtags are the backbone of my business. #BridesParadise #ElkLakeWisconsinWeddings #LoveIsInTheAir #ImSoSickOfMyJobICouldSpit

Fine, I haven’t used the last one, yet. But I’m getting closer every day.

I sigh loudly as the cluster of women exit my shop. Even though it’s late August, it’s still technically summer. As such, Elk Lake remains full of tourists—some of whom are trying to decide if they want to have their wedding here next year. I have three more appointments today. Even though I will assist in dozens of gowns being tried on, I’ll be lucky if one of them commits to a dress. Yet I still will ooh and aah and gush like the future Mrs. Something-or-Another is the most enchanting of Disney princesses. Forest animals will gather around us and sigh at her beauty. Wicked witches will cast spells on her fruit.

“My word, Missy, you look like you’ve just been sentenced to death. Put a smile on your face.” *Yay, my mom is here.*

“Hey, Mom. I just sold another dress.” She loves to know about every sale, which includes the purchase of a mere garter.

She hands me a take-out bag from the diner down the street. “Then why do you look so glum? Every sale helps keep the doors open another day.” Having a bridal shop in a vacation town means we’ll never be forced to close, but my mom doesn’t seem to be aware of this fact.

Instead of answering her, I take the bag and sniff it. “This doesn’t smell like a patty melt and french fries.”

“That’s because it’s a chef’s salad.” She opens the till and starts shuffling through receipts.

I arch one eyebrow in a fierce what-have-you-done-with-my-food glare. “I must have your bag then,” I tell her. Even though she was only carrying one.

“Patty melts and french fries are no way for a thirty-two-year-old woman to eat. You’re not a child anymore, Missy. Those extra calories are going to start sticking to you like a barnacle on a boat.” *Fun. I love nothing more than being likened to a boat.*

Putting the bag on the counter, I retrieve my purse from the shelf underneath. “I’ll be back in an hour. You’ll need to start the next appointment.” As an afterthought, I add, “The bride is an interior designer

from Chicago.” My tone is sharp enough to cut through steel.

“Where are you going?” my mom demands loudly. “I brought your lunch so you wouldn’t have to leave.”

“Had you brought what I asked for, I wouldn’t *be* leaving.” Then, without further ado, I march out the front door. The air isn’t quite as humid at the end of the season, which is very welcome in my current state of mind. The last thing I need is to drown from just trying to get enough oxygen to stay alive.

I’m so tired of brides and weddings and champagne, I’m not even sure I want to get married anymore. Maybe I’ll sell out to Mom and buy that boat rental business for sale down by the lake. I don’t know much about boats, but I do know they won’t talk my ear off or ask me about my own non-existent wedding. And if my mother is to be believed, I’m in danger of looking like a boat so I might as well surround myself with familiar objects.

I don’t start to calm down until I’m a block down Main Street. I have always let my mom make choices for me and I’m sick of it. I often wonder why I don’t stand up for myself, but deep down I know the answer: My mom was a broken woman when my dad left.

I was ten at the time, so I was old enough to know she took full responsibility for the split—she claimed she didn’t dote on my father enough. As if adoration were a one-way street. But once he left, she was determined I wouldn’t grow up and make the same mistakes she did. That was the year my life changed forever.

Margie Freemont—she married my stepdad Howard Freemont fifteen years ago—changed my fashion style from jeans and t-shirts to prissy dresses with an undertone of preppy nerd. She chose the college I went to right along with my major. She declared I would go into business with her—although I didn’t really fight her on that one. She even decorated my apartment for me without asking what my preferences were—it’s not that I hate the pink and green plaid curtains in my living room, but I would have chosen something different. And now she’s telling me what I can and cannot eat for lunch? No, Margie. Just, no.

I storm into the diner like a pillaging Viking hunting for a mutton chop, and immediately catch the eye of my friend Anna. Even though we went to school together from kindergarten through high school, Anna and I didn’t become good friends until she bought her wedding dress at Bride’s Paradise two years ago. Since then, I’ve become close to her *and* Faith. Faith is her bestie who married movie star Teddy Helms. They live here in Elk Lake but

are currently in Los Angeles promoting Teddy's new movie, *Alpha Beast: Attack of the Gorn*.

I stride over to Anna who's sitting alone at a table in the corner. "Where's Chris?" I ask before pulling out a chair and plopping down.

She smiles brightly before telling me, "He's working on a couple of closings today." Chris is a real estate lawyer who is busiest during "the season," when city folks are intent on buying a vacation home in Elk Lake. As if owning a piece of heaven will make their daily hustle and bustle worth it.

I inhale slowly as I study my friend. Anna is quite literally one of the most beautiful women I've ever met. She's tall, slim without being skinny, and her skin is even more radiant than I thought possible. "Are you pregnant?" I demand like I'm accusing her of shoplifting a prom dress.

Her eyes blink rapidly. "Why would you ask that?"

"Because you're positively glowing." I wave to a passing server, hoping to get my patty melt and fries ordered quickly.

Resting her elbows on the table, Anna leans toward me. She starts to whisper which requires I match her posture if I'm going to have any idea what she's saying. "Chris doesn't even know yet," she says.

"Chris doesn't know what? Wait, you mean you are? You're pregnant?!" So much for discretion.

Anna looks around anxiously. "NO!" She obviously says this to squelch any gossip that might start, because she lowers her voice and adds, "Keep it down, will you? I don't need all of Elk Lake knowing before my husband does."

"When are you going to fill him in?"

She smiles excitedly. "Tonight. I'm making his favorite meal and I'm going to tell him over dessert."

"I'm so happy for you." I try to feign enthusiasm, even though my comment sounds forced—like someone is holding a gun to my head. Also, my eyes give away my true feelings when they fill with tears.

"You're so happy you're crying?" She's on to me.

I shake my head. "I'm happy for you, just not for me."

"I told you we need to get you signed up on Catch.com. I truly think online dating might be the only way for people to meet anymore."

"You met Chris at work," I remind her, "and Faith met Teddy at the bakery."

Anna shrugs her shoulders nonchalantly. “Maybe so, but Chris and I met in Chicago. There are a heck of a lot more single people there than in Elk Lake. And as far as Faith and Teddy, that meeting defies even the most swoon-worthy meet-cute in rom-com movies. Which I guess is fitting being that Teddy is an actor.”

“I’m not going to sign up for online dating, Anna. That feels like giving up.” Although, I really do feel like throwing in the towel, so I’m not sure that it would hurt.

Reaching across the table, she takes my hands in hers. Her skin shimmers like the oiled rubbed bronze faucet in my bathroom. Meanwhile, my hands look like two dead fish in comparison, pasty white and lifeless. “I’m a firm believer that everything happens in its time. Your happy ending is right around the corner.”

I shake my head, which causes my wavy auburn hair to bounce around my shoulders. “Just because you say it doesn’t make it so.”

“Life is like a mirror ...” Anna says sagely.

I sarcastically interrupt, “I thought it was like a box of chocolates.”

Her expression is stern. “You’ve got to put positivity into the world if that’s what you want reflected back at you. You know, fake it ’til you make it?”

The waitress finally comes over, and I make quick work of ordering my lunch before saying, “Tell me about some of your bad dates B.C.” *Before Chris.*

She rolls her eyes but humors me nonetheless. “Did I ever tell you about Terrance?” When I shake my head, she continues, “He was a barista who claimed to be on the verge of getting cast in a lead role on *Chicago Fire*.”

“How is that bad?” *Did she not hear the part about my wanting them to be bad dates?*

“It turns out he wasn’t even an actor.” My look of confusion prompts her to explain, “He was an undercover cop. He was dating me because he was investigating the man who owned the real estate brokerage I worked at.”

“So, he was using you?” That *is* bad.

She nods stoically. “Luckily, we only dated for two weeks and things had not progressed to the bedroom. But still, it made me feel like crap.”

“How could he not want to date you for real?” I demand heatedly. “You’re amazing!”

Shrugging her shoulders, she confides, “When I found out the truth, he

told me he already had a girlfriend.”

“*Excuse* me? He had a girlfriend and was pretending to be a single actor/barista? How is that ethical?”

“I don’t think ethics were his prime concern. Do you want to hear more?” she asks.

“Yes.” I’m clearly in a misery-loves-company state of mind.

“I dated a guy named Fischer who stole my television and my bank card. I dated another guy named Frankie who was in the mob—I didn’t discover that until the cops came to my door to interview me—and then there was William. He was a nice guy, but I found him in my closet trying on my dresses.”

The waitress drops my soda as I ask, “He was a crossdresser?”

“Apparently. And while I truly believe, to each his own, I really didn’t see myself sharing my clothes with a prospective mate.”

“It’s a miracle you ever met a wonderful guy like Chris.” My dating prospects feel more hopeless than ever.

“It’s not a miracle. It just wasn’t our time until the day he walked into my open house looking to buy his first bachelor pad. And your guy is out there too.” She sounds so certain.

“If I have to date a liar, thief, and crossdresser first, I’m giving up right here and now,” I declare defeatedly.

“You’ve had your own heartaches, Missy. You’ve more than paid your dues. Trust me, Mr. Right is going to walk into your life any day now, and you’re not going to see him coming.”

“I want to believe you, Anna, but I’m currently having a hard time thinking anything good is coming my way.”

Reality hits me like the wake from a speedboat. I’m nowhere near living the life I thought I’d be. If that isn’t bad enough, I can no longer imagine a future that doesn’t include my mother making all my decisions. With a pathetically long sigh, I realize that if I don’t take some drastic measures soon, it really may be too late for me.

CHAPTER TWO



JAMIE

“Sammy, where are you?” I call up the stairs. The movers just finished loading the last of the boxes into the truck, leaving me standing alone in a room nearly identical to how it was eight years ago when we bought the place. A lot of living has happened inside these walls, so it’s quite an eerie sensation.

“Samantha Jane Riordan ...” I take the steps two at a time. “Let’s go!” When my daughter doesn’t answer, I proceed down the long hallway to her room. The door is closed so I knock lightly before walking in. What I see causes my heart to clench painfully in my chest. My little warrior is sitting on the floor with her knees pulled up to her chin. Her arms are wrapped around them like she’s trying to keep her insides from falling out.

“Hey, honey.” My tone is soft and, hopefully, comforting. “Are you okay?”

She shrugs her rounded shoulders. “I guess.”

“You sad about leaving?”

“Not really.” She unhooks her hands from around her legs and pushes herself up. “I’m sadder about why we’re leaving than actually going.”

“I get that.” Samantha has spent the last year being bullied by a group of girls she used to call friends. We’re not quite sure why they turned on her, but once they did, they went to extreme lengths to make sure Sammy never felt like she belonged. They didn’t stop there, either. They spread rumors about my sweet daughter to ensure that none of her other classmates welcomed her friendship. It’s been agonizing for both of us.

After inhaling a shaky breath, Sammy confesses, “I’m afraid the kids in my new school won’t like me.”

Putting my arm around her, I pull her to my side and hold on tightly. “You’re a very likable girl, Sam. Just because some girls lost their minds doesn’t mean everyone is as stupid.”

“I liked my old friends. I was happy here. You know, until ...” She doesn’t finish her sentence. She doesn’t need to.

Betrayal is not an easy thing to experience at any age, but to have to endure it so young positively breaks my heart. “You have a whole town of

new people waiting to meet you, honey. I promise you're going to find friends."

Her head bobs up and down slowly. "If you say so." Looking around her room for the last time, she says, "I liked living here. It was a great place to call home."

Not for the first time, a fiery burst of anger shoots through me, causing my entire central nervous system to feel like it's about to ignite. Sammy and I did have a good life here—a life that should have continued. And it would have, had it not been for mean girls allowed to run amok. We discussed the possibility of staying in Chicago and having Sammy switch schools, but she didn't want to. She felt like that would have been the final defeat. Conversely, people moved all the time, so there was no shame in that.

In a bid to lighten the mood, I say, "This was a great home, but our house in Elk Lake is going to be even better. I promise."

"Okay." She sounds less than thrilled as her feet start to slowly creep toward the door.

"Grandma and Grandpa promise to visit as soon as we find a place." My parents live about fifty minutes away in Barrington. They are none too happy that we chose to move to Wisconsin instead of heading out to the northwest suburbs, but I don't want to walk back into my past. I want to start fresh with my daughter in a place that's new to both of us. There's something so enticing about a clean slate.

"I'm going to miss them."

"We'll be nearly the same distance from them in Wisconsin that we are here. Just in the other direction," I tell her.

"A different state though."

"Same planet," I tease while ruffling her red hair. It's starting to turn more auburn than carrot, which I'm guessing has something to do with her hormones.

I follow behind Sammy as we walk down the stairs of our house for the last time. I force myself not to look back. "Eyes ahead," I say. I'm telling myself as much as her. "We're on our way to a brand-new future, and it's going to be great!" *Dear God, please don't let me be lying.*

As we leave the home where we created so many wonderful memories, Sammy asks, "Can we stop for one last deep-dish pizza before we go?"

We've been checking items off her "one-last-time list" for the better part of a month. We've already had one last deep-dish pizza four times, which is

clearly one time short of what's needed. "Edwardo's spinach and garlic pie?" I ask unnecessarily.

"Yes, please."

When we get to the car, I open the passenger door of the SUV. Once Sammy's settled, I run around to the driver's side and get in. "Chicago is only two hours from Elk Lake. We can come back for pizza as often as we want."

We drive down Arlington Place for the last time and turn onto Clark Street. "Want to play a game?"

"I Spy?"

"How about the dream game?" Sammy and I came up with this game one night when she was five. She'd had a nightmare she couldn't quite shake, so we started talking about all the good dreams she could have. Over the years, we started calling it the dream game.

Reclining her chair slightly, Sammy leans her head back and starts. "I dream of being popular at school." *Ouch.*

"I dream of never losing my hair," I say.

"I dream about being a cheerleader."

"Me, too," I tell her while glancing at her out of the corner of my eye. Her mouth turns up as she valiantly tries to keep from laughing.

"I dream about meeting Taylor Swift," she continues.

"I dream about being the lead singer in a boy band."

She smacks my arm while laughing. "You are so embarrassing, do you know that?"

"You won't be saying that when James and the Giant Peaches takes the world by storm and all your new friends get guaranteed backstage passes."

"You're naming your band James and the Giant Peaches? Dad, that's horrible."

"How about Jamie and the Jam?"

"What flavor? Strawberry? Raspberry?" I'm clearly not winning her over with this idea.

"Fine, smarty pants. You come up with a name for my boy band."

"I think you need to give up on the boy band fantasy and keep writing slogans for your marketing company."

"Give up on my dream?" I demand hotly. "This is not the *give up on your dream* game, it's the *dream* game!"

"Fine, I dream of having a mom."

“Sammy...” My tone is full of warning.

“I know my real mom doesn’t want to be a mom. Heck, she doesn’t even want to meet me, but that doesn’t mean you can’t fall in love and marry someone who will give me great advice.”

“Doesn’t Grandma give you advice?” I ask. I hate that Sammy’s mom isn’t in her life, but I’m not going to run out and get married because of it. There’s a lot of truth to that saying, once bitten, twice shy, and I’ve spent the last twelve years being very shy of the opposite sex.

“Grandma can’t remember her last period, let alone her first. I need someone a lot younger who can answer those questions.”

I shift in my seat nervously. “I’m willing to bet YouTube has the answers.” Now if that isn’t some great parenting, I don’t know what is.

Sammy huffs, “Are you telling me you’d rather I learn about my body from the Internet than from a real person?”

“Didn’t they have sex ed in school this year?” This topic is the last thing I want to discuss with my daughter.

“Not until next year. And I’ve already asked YouTube when my boobs are going to grow, and when boys are going to start thinking I’m cute. When kids in my new school ask me about my mom, I’m going to say her name is YouTube.”

“Sammy ...”

“Dad ...”

This is not a hill I want to die on, so I tell her, “I can ask around about periods and let you know what I find out.”

As I pull up in front of Edwardo’s, she declares, “Don’t you dare! All I need is for people in Elk Lake to think my dad is the weirdest person on the planet. I’ve got enough strikes against me as it is.”

On that note, we get out of the car and run smack into one of those strikes. Her name is Kelsey Lynn and she’s standing in front of Edwardo’s with her mother, Shelby. Kelsey visibly jumps when she sees us, which causes her mom to step in front of her like *we’re* the dangerous ones. Clearly, she doesn’t remember the day Kelsey brought a dozen eggs to school to throw at my daughter. Or the fake TikTok account she set up in Sammy’s name, for that matter. As Sammy doesn’t have social media yet, a world of damage had been done before we even found out what was going on.

“James. Samantha.” Shelby is a clueless witch who does not believe in disciplining her child for bad behavior. I don’t want anything to do with her,

but I need Sammy to know that we don't cower to bullies.

"Shelby."

"I hear you're moving away," she says with the fakest concern I've ever heard.

"We're moving to a town where people know how to raise decent human beings," I tell her.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

If my eyes were lasers, she'd be dead. "I know you're not always that fast on the draw, Shelby, but I'm pretty sure you can figure it out." Then I turn to Sammy and say, "You know what, Sam? I hear Edwardo's is serving all kinds of questionable people these days. What do you say we go somewhere else?" Without waiting for her answer, I steer her back toward our car. She doesn't start crying until we pull away.

Junior high school girls have got to be the most dangerous beasts on the planet. I pray with my whole heart that isn't the case in Elk Lake.

CHAPTER THREE



MELISSA

After lunch, I do my best not to interact with my mother. When I'm forced to say something, I keep it to single syllables. As the last bridal party is getting ready to leave, she very righteously tells me, "You can avoid me all you want, but I only have your best interests at heart."

"I'm thirty-two years old, Mom. I can take care of myself."

"I lost my mother when I was only twenty, Missy. My life would have been so much better had she lived."

While I'm sad for my mom about the lack of mothering in her adult years, that does not give her the right to tell me how to live my life. The two are as unrelated as saying *my mom died, so you have to eat green beans every day*. Ridiculous.

Changing the subject, I ask, "Do you mind locking up tonight?"

I nearly have one foot across the threshold when she answers, "Why? Do you have a date?" She sounds so hopeful.

"Yep. I'm going to meet my future husband. We're choosing our flowers and picking out wedding colors tonight."

I wish I could get to my phone in time to take a picture of her face. My mother's nearly wrinkle-free forehead ripples up like a Basset Hound's as her eyes bulge out and her mouth hangs open. "How long have you been dating? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not getting married, Mom. I'm just messing with you." *Why is this something I even need to explain to her?*

Her facial features resume their normal location, except for her newly furrowed brow. "That's mean. You know how much I want you to get married."

"Why does it matter to you so much?" I demand heatedly. "I'm starting to think you care more about your future son-in-law than you care about me, and you don't even know him yet!" *Put that in your pipe, Margie.*

"It matters because I love you. I know how hard life can be and I want you to have someone to lean on." She sounds so sincere I nearly give up being mad at her.

The thing is, while I barely remember my parents being married, I still

retain the fog of angst that permeated our lives during that time. It was like we were all walking on eggshells, hoping to keep our world from tumbling down around us.

Then came eight years of living between two houses, which was plain horrible. I don't care how much kids may claim to like it, I know they never like leaving something at one parent's house and having the other refuse to take them to get it. Not to mention the lack of structure and common rules that eats away at their very foundation. "But Dad lets me have chocolate in the morning!" or "Mom says I can shave my legs!" Is it any wonder I played the two of them off each other like a poker whiz on the Vegas Strip?

Instead of reminding her of all these painful things, I say, "Good night, Mom. I'll see you in the morning."

"I won't be in until noon. Howard has an appointment with his orthopedist, and I promised to take him."

My mother drives Howard everywhere like he's a cripple—which he is not. He has arthritis in his left pinky toe. At sixty-six years old, that's the only thing wrong with the man. That is, if you don't count his innate laziness in all domestic matters. My mother is practically his servant.

"Fine, see you at noon." I let the door close behind me without saying another word.

Pulling my phone out of my purse I call my friend Paige. She answers after two rings. "Yo!"

"Am I picking up the pizza or are we having it delivered?"

"I've already ordered it."

"Fine, I'll grab the beer on my way."

"Cheers," she says before hanging up. Paige and I have a weekly Friday night rom-com movie date night unless one of us has a real date. So far, we've seen each other eighteen Fridays in a row. The week we skipped, I watched the movie on my own.

I head up the street a half-block to the liquor store. A blast of cold air hits me in the face when I open the door. I don't know if it's just a Wisconsin thing, but liquor stores here are always ten degrees colder than every other store. It's like they're trying to sober you up long enough to make sure you buy your booze and then freeze you out, so you won't hang around loitering in the aisles.

After grabbing a six-pack of Black Gold and a pack of breath mints, I walk the six blocks to Paige's house. Unlike me, my friend has bitten the

bullet and bought a home of her own. Personally, I don't want the responsibility of yard work and property maintenance just yet. Also, in a bid to feel like there's some excitement in my life, I visit somewhere new for a week every year. Paige is too house-poor for that and counts herself lucky to spend an overnight in Chicago every December for her annual Christmas shopping weekend.

Yet, as I stroll up her overgrown cobblestone path, I can't help but feel enchanted by her little white cottage. Yes, there's moss on the roof and there are more weeds than grass, but the potential is so obvious. You almost don't see the rough state everything is in.

The door swings open before I can even knock. Paige is wearing cutoff jean shorts and a tank top. Her blonde hair is tied up in a blue handkerchief, making her look like an old-school gangster. Holding up the six-pack, I announce, "The party has arrived! You don't have to go in to school tomorrow, do you?" Paige is a seventh-grade math teacher at Elk Lake Junior High.

"I'm going in, but only to put the finishing touches on my room. I don't have any meetings or anything." She steps away from the door to make room for me. "What are we watching tonight? I was thinking *50 First Dates*."

I shake my head vigorously. "That one makes me too anxious. Imagine having to reintroduce yourself to the person who loves you every day? Nope, can't do it."

Walking into Paige's tiny living room, I stoop down to pick up her cat. Claude is a fat tabby who loves me like I'm his own mother. He'll sit on my lap for ear scratches most of the night.

"*Hope Floats*?" she asks next.

"That one always makes me wish I'd moved away and made a name for myself so I could come back to town in a blaze of glory."

"Sandra Bullock's character did not come back in a blaze of glory. Her husband announced on national television that he was sleeping with her best friend." Paige plops down on one of the two loveseats. The room isn't big enough for a full-sized couch.

Claude and I settle in on the seat next to her. "At least she got away."

"*Pretty Woman*?" she tries.

"I can't get past the whole Julia Roberts being a sex worker thing. I mean, yes, it's wonderfully fairytale-like that she wound up with Richard Gere, but yuck to the rest."

“It doesn’t sound like you’re up for a rom-com tonight.” I think she’s hit the nail on the head. “What do you want instead, a mystery? Thriller? Horror?”

The ringing doorbell keeps me from answering. Paige grabs her wallet off the coffee table and jumps to her feet to pay for our pizza. While she’s gone, I pick up the remote and start to flip through channels hoping to find inspiration. By the time she gets back, I’ve settled on something.

“*Midwestern Matchmaker*? I’ve never even heard of this one.” Paige sits down while I hit play and we watch in great anticipation as the camera shows a montage of the *Midwestern Matchmaker* doing her thing to a jazzed-up soundtrack of the “Wedding March.” She looks like an ex-model, which makes me wonder if all the prospective grooms fall in love with her first.

Once the intro is over, she glides in front of the camera like an Olympic figure skater taking the ice. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a tight but fashionable bun, which allows you to see just how high her cheekbones really are. Jealous.

Hello all you Midwestern singles! Welcome to Midwestern Matchmaker. My name is Trina Rockwell and I’m here to help you find love!

Paige and I watch the first episode with rapt interest. Trina interviews a handful of women, offering them basic advice on how to put their best foot forward. She does not, however, suggest any physical changes. For instance, she never tells anyone to lose weight or laser off unsightly moles. Although I wish she’d said something in the case of unibrow girl. But Trina’s philosophy is that there’s someone for everyone and you shouldn’t have to change yourself to find that person. While I love the concept, I’m willing to bet ol’ unibrow would have a greater selection of matches if she waxed a little.

Once Trina interviews the women, she moves on to the men. She says things like, “When you go on a first date, you want to entice the woman to want to know you better. So don’t talk about yourself nonstop and don’t tell her she’s hot before inviting her to your bedroom. Tell her she’s intriguing and you want to get to know her better.”

The guy with the slicked back hair and wannabe handlebar mustache

asks, “But what if she wants to bang?” He inserts a highly suggestive pelvic thrust in case people don’t know what banging is. *These are the trolls us women have to deal with on a daily basis.*

Trina rolls her eyes. “You’re on this show to find everlasting love, Trey. If all you’re interested in is banging, then hit one of the swiping apps.”

He shrugs his eyebrows at her and asks, “You want to swipe on some of this?”

And just like that, he’s off the show.

By the time the first episode ends, Paige and I have eaten the entire pizza, and each had two beers, which is my limit because I work in the morning.

Paige takes a last swig from her bottle before declaring, “I like this show.”

“Doesn’t Trina Rockwell remind you of that girl Leila from high school? She was captain of the debate team,” I remind her. “She wore those mid-length skirts that made her look like she had fat calves.”

Paige cringes. “We wore those skirts, too.”

“Which is probably why I always thought we could have been friends with her.”

“Why weren’t we?” she wants to know.

I shrug. “If I had to guess it was probably because she was even lower on the social food chain than we were, and we didn’t want to be demoted further.”

Crossing her legs until her heels are resting under her knees, Paige says, “That’s so mean. I hate the high school versions of us.”

“I wouldn’t go back in time if you offered me a million dollars. It’s amazing anyone comes out with even a shred of self-confidence.”

We spend the next two hours watching as Midwestern singles are successfully set up. By the end of the third episode, Trina smiles into the camera and announces, “I’ll be matchmaking in my home state of Wisconsin next season, so if you’re interested in applying, just go to our website to submit your audition tape.”

Neither Paige nor I say a word but we’re clearly thinking the same thing. Should we sign up to be on *Midwestern Matchmaker*?

CHAPTER FOUR



JAMIE

My daughter and I spent a week in Elk Lake last summer which is how we decided to move here instead of someplace else. The woods, the water, the charming downtown—all of it felt like coming home. Sammy would sigh wistfully and say things like, “I bet this is a great town to live in,” or “I bet the kids here are really nice.” That should have clued me in that things were changing for her at home. Sadly, that’s something I didn’t find out until months later.

As we pass the Welcome to Elk Lake sign, I nudge my daughter’s sleeping form. “Wake up, we’re here.”

She moans in her sleep before finally stirring. “What time is it?”

“Four o’clock. Which means we have time to get settled into our rental before heading into town for supper.” We’ve leased a fully furnished house for two months while we look for something to buy. The moving truck is going to put all our stuff into a storage unit across town.

I slow down when the voice on the map app tells me I’ll be turning in five hundred feet. Sammy sounds scared as she asks, “This is really happening, isn’t it?” I’m not sure how our new reality is just hitting her, but I imagine she’s been in a bit of denial. I know I have.

“It’s just the next chapter in our story,” I tell her. “If we don’t like it here, we can move to Vermont or North Carolina or Hungary...”

Giggling at the last destination, she sounds less than certain as she says, “No, sir. Elk Lake is going to be perfect. We’re going to be happier here than we’ve ever been before.” I like that she’s affirming a positive outcome. We’ve spent a lot of time in the last year discussing how important it is to vocalize the way you want your life to turn out. Your thoughts and words have power and no one can take that away from you.

“Hungary has goulash though ...”

Sammy arches one eyebrow in a look of challenge. “Grandma makes goulash, and we don’t have to go across the world to get it.”

“We’ll stay here as long as we’re happy,” I tell her. “I’ll do anything it takes to keep my girl happy.” I’d even move to Alaska and race huskies if it would make her smile.

“You won’t get married ...”

“Historically, my dating life has not turned out that well.” Truthfully, it’s been downright depressing. While I have dated since Sam’s mom left us—she was only ten months old at the time—I have never introduced anyone to my daughter. Not until I asked Shelby Lynn out. I told her I wanted to keep things quiet until we were sure we had a future together. She didn’t think that was necessary, and she talked freely about our four dates to her daughter and anyone else who would listen.

That was when Kelsey decided to make Sammy’s life a living hell. As a result, I broke things off with Shelby and she let her daughter systematically ruin my child’s social life. So no, thank you, to dating again any time soon. I’ve had my fill.

Instead of confirming the truth of my last statement, Sammy lets out a low whistle as we pull into the driveway of our rental. “This is really nice. It looks more like a lodge than a house.” It made sense when shopping for temporary digs to get the nicest thing I could find. I wanted us to start this adventure on a high note.

“I thought we should rent in the area where we want to buy. That way we can decide if we really want to live on the lake or we just think we do.”

“Why wouldn’t we want to live on the lake?” she wants to know.

I shrug my shoulders. “I don’t know. There might be an Elk Lake monster who comes ashore every night and vandalizes the kitchens of nearby homes.”

Sammy shakes her head. “Don’t quit your day job, Dad.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you’re good at coming up with slogans, but I don’t think you’re the next Stephen King.”

I fake a pout. “Well, that hurts.”

Sammy is out of the car before I can even shift the gear into park. She runs up the path through the woods leading to the front door with her arms straight out, spinning around in circles. I’m so utterly captivated by her happiness I don’t join her right away. I simply sit and appreciate her joy.

Being the parent of a bullied child brings out fierce feelings of protection. While you want to make sure the harassment ends, you also want justice for your child. You want the perpetrators to be punished so they never do anything like it again. Heartfelt apologies and gestures of contrition would be icing on the cake, but none of that will ever happen without parental interest. And parents just don’t seem that interested these days.

In this age of frantically busy people, very few appear to be keen on keeping tabs on the day-to-day actions of their children. Just add social media and you have all the ingredients for a victor/victim shitstorm.

Sammy stops halfway up the path and flops down on one of several hammocks hanging in the trees. At this moment, I feel invincible, like nothing can or will ever take us down again. I somehow know that being in Wisconsin will charge our waning spirits and give us everything we need to live a happy life again.

Getting out of the car, I follow the path and join my daughter on a nearby swing. "This place is great, isn't it?"

"Fantastic!" she says excitedly. "I could lie here all year."

"You only have a few weeks until school starts," I remind her. "Get your lounging in while you can."

"I want to meet some people before the first day, if I can."

I'm not sure how to go about making that happen for her, but I'm guessing taking her to the beach and into town will bring the most opportunities. "I have to work tomorrow but you can start getting a feel for Elk Lake if you want. I can join you the next day." Even though I own the company and have decided to cut my workload substantially, I still need to oversee operations.

"Last summer a bunch of kids used to hang out at the park in town. Maybe I'll try that tomorrow." Sammy is clearly eager to get going.

"Keep your phone on you at all times, and call if you need anything."

The look of sheer contentment on her face is balm for my soul. Sammy has been through so much and yet she's so full of courage. While I hate that she's had to suffer fools at such a young age, I know she's going to be stronger for it. Life lessons are often painful, but they're a must if you want to succeed in this world.

We lie in the hammocks for another twenty minutes or so when my daughter asks, "Do you ever think about my mom?"

There's no point in lying to her, so I say, "I do." How could I not? Beth was the woman I loved, the woman I thought I was going to marry and have multiple children with.

"Tell me the story again," Sammy says.

"Honey, I've told you a thousand times. Why do you want to hear it again?"

"Because," she says, "we're starting over, me and you. Maybe if I hear it

again, I can finally stop thinking about her.”

I’ve told Sammy variations of the truth about Beth from the time she was little. While I wanted to protect her heart, I also didn’t want to lie to her. I used to tell her that her mom had a very important job that required her to live in another country. That worked for a while but when she started to ask if we could visit her, I had to come clean about everything.

Breathing in deeply, I reiterate the tale that changed both of our lives. “Beth and I met in college, and we dated for six years. I proposed to her the day she told me she was pregnant with you. We always knew we’d get married, but we didn’t feel any rush up until that point.”

“But you didn’t get married,” she prompts.

“We decided to wait until after you were born so we could plan the kind of event that Beth had always dreamed of. But after you arrived, your mom suffered from postpartum depression. She was sad all the time and nothing we did seemed to make a difference. The doctor said her hormones would eventually balance, and she would be herself again.”

“And then what?” Sammy knows as well as I do, but for some reason she needs to hear every detail of this saga.

“And then she got an exciting job offer in London. She wanted to take it, but she didn’t want us to go with her. She said that after a month or two, she’d know if she liked it there and then we could join her. We talked most days, but that eventually lessened. After she’d been gone for three months, I was worried we were losing her, so I left you with Grandma and Grandpa and I went to visit.”

I hear Sammy sniffle quietly and I know she’s feeling the full force of what comes next. “Beth was surprised to see me, and claimed she didn’t have time to hash out our future. But I told her I’d come too far to just walk away without answers. She took a few days off work so we could talk and find out where our future lay. That’s when she told me how much she liked being alone and that she didn’t think she was ever meant to be a mother. She said that she knew what a great dad I was and that I would keep you safe and make sure you always felt loved. She didn’t believe she had the same capacity.”

“And then you came home ...”

“And then I came home. I was devastated but I had you and you were the most important thing in the world to me. I had to rally so I could take care of you.”

“And we never heard from Beth again.” The defeat in her voice tears me apart.

“I told her in London that I felt it was best for her not to contact us until she felt she could be a steady presence in your life. I didn’t want her coming and going and confusing you with her ambivalence. So, yes, we never heard from her again.”

“I googled her last month,” Sammy announces.

“I know,” I tell her. “Your search history popped up on the computer.”

“She’s really pretty. She lives in Germany now. She got married a few years ago.”

“How does that make you feel?” I ask.

“Sad. I can’t imagine a mom not wanting to know her kid.”

“Beth was a wonderful woman, Sammy. She really was. She just couldn’t handle motherhood like she thought she’d be able to.”

“She’s a stranger so it’s not like I miss her. But I do miss having a mom.”

This kid is going to be the end of me. I want to protect her from all pain, but I have not been very successful. “You can reach out to her when you turn eighteen, if you want.”

“I don’t want to be the one chasing her,” she says dejectedly. “If she wanted to know me, she would.”

“We have a great life together, Sammy,” I tell her. “I’m sad your mom went away too, but I think we’ve done pretty well for ourselves.”

I watch as she sits up in her hammock, her head slowly bobbing up and down. “Yeah, we’re a good team.” Then as quickly as she wanted to talk about the past, she seems ready to leave it behind. “Let’s go eat. I’m starving.”

“Should we see if Wisconsin has decent pizza?”

“Yuck, no. I’m not ready to be disappointed. Let’s hit the diner for burgers.”

“Milkshakes, too?” I ask.

“Duh. Mint chip with a drizzle of chocolate sauce and extra whipped cream.”

“The dinner of the gods,” I joke. As we walk up the path to drop our stuff inside, I tell her, “I love you, Sammy. You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“Darn straight, I am.” She nudges me in the side before wrapping her arms around me. Once we’re in a full hug, she says, “I love you too, Dad.”

Thanks for being you.”

CHAPTER FIVE



MELISSA

While part of me wishes I'd moved somewhere else after college—you know, in a bid for total independence—I love Elk Lake and have a hard time imagining living anywhere else. My town is small enough during the off season that even if I don't know everyone, most faces are somewhat familiar. During the season, it feels like a completely different place with the infusion of summer residents.

As I stroll down Main Street, I inhale the early morning air. The aroma promises another beautiful summer day while hinting that cooler temperatures will be arriving soon. I walk into Rosemary's for my daily latte and a raspberry scone. My friend Faith owns the bakery, but she doesn't spend all her days here like she used to before getting married.

If I'm being honest, I'm green with envy that she met a guy like Teddy Helms right here in Elk Lake. Their story is one in a million, which I somehow translate to mean I could never be as lucky.

"Hey, Esmé," I greet the woman behind the counter. Esmé recently returned to Elk Lake after spending a year in France learning how to be a pastry chef.

"Hi, Melissa." The only people who call me Missy are the ones who've known me my whole life, and they more often than not forget to use my preferred moniker. Esmé hands me a paper bag. "I put the last raspberry scone aside for you. You want a latte with that?"

I love that my breakfast order is known, so the flash of sadness I suddenly feel catches me off guard. A vision of me in twenty years pops to mind, and my throat clogs with emotion. I'm still coming into Rosemary's, but the girl behind the counter is different. She hands me my raspberry scone and I carry it to the bridal shop to eat. Surely, there's got to be more in store for me.

"Actually, I'd like a chocolate chip scone today, if you have one."

Esmé's mouth forms an "O" of surprise. "I didn't think you liked those."

"Just trying to shake it up a little, you know?"

She nods her head. "You still want a latte?"

"Yes, please." No sense going crazy.

What's next, no patty melt and fries for lunch? I feel positively reckless.

As I walk toward Bride's Paradise, I pass a man walking with his daughter. They're chatting away having what appears to be a grand old time. It makes my heart feel a pang.

My dad and I used to be like that, but those carefree moments vanished after the divorce. That's when I became more of a mediator than a kid. *Yes, Dad is making sure I eat my vegetables. No, Mom isn't crying every night.* I smile at the passing duo and hope they know how lucky they are.

I take a sip of my latte before putting it on the ground so that I can insert my key into the lock without spilling on myself. When the door is open, I push my way in and turn over the "Open" sign. Then I flip on the lights and mentally prepare myself for the day ahead. I have five appointments, which is a lot. Five brides-to-be blissfully excited about picking out a dress to marry their knight in shining armor. Five anxious women thinking that finding the right gown is a vitally important part of marital success.

After eating my scone, I consult the day's schedule. When I make appointments, I find out what size the bride is and what her basic aesthetic is. That way I can pull out several options, so we have a starting point. This keeps them from being overwhelmed, which in turn keeps me from losing my ever-loving mind.

Shandy Phillips is my first appointment. She's a size twelve and desires a princess wedding but doesn't want anything too big and poofy. She's only five-five and doesn't want to look like a meringue.

I pull seven dresses that I think will fit the bill before my phone rings. It's Anna. "I told Chris about the baby and he's over the moon!"

I try to ramp up my energy. "Yay! I'm so excited for you guys."

"Liar," she accuses. Before I can tell her that I truly am happy for her, she says, "I started your Catch.com profile last night."

"Excuse me?"

"I know you said you don't want to use any of the apps, but I want to show you your profile before you say no."

"You didn't make it live yet, did you?" The panic coursing through my veins is almost electric.

"I wouldn't do that to you, Missy. I just want to show you how classy I've made it."

"Send me the login info and I'll look at it over lunch," I tell her begrudgingly.

"I want to come in and show it to you in person. How about toward the

end of the day?”

Before I can respond, she gets another call and has to hang up.

Even though I know Anna only wants what’s best for me, I still feel like one of Cinderella’s ugly stepsisters desperate to find love. I envision myself squeezing my size eight foot into a size six glass slipper. Good luck to me.

Looking up at the clock, I catch a glimpse of the little girl I saw earlier on the street with her dad. She’s alone and staring at the window display with an expression of longing. It’s a look I know well. Until recently, I did the same thing every time I changed the display. I walk toward the front door and open it. “It’s a great dress, isn’t it?”

She startles before turning toward me. “It’s amazing! Do you work here?”

“I own the shop with my mom.”

The expression on her face freezes. “That must be nice.”

“Yes and no,” I say while offering a noncommittal shrug. “You know what moms are like. They can be real trouble.”

“Yeah.” Her face scrunches up as though she’s in pain. “Can I come in and see the dress up close? I mean, I’m obviously not going to buy a wedding dress. I’m only twelve. But can I look at it?”

I remember being twelve and in near raptures every time a particularly gorgeous gown came in. “I’d love to show it to you,” I tell her while stepping away from the entrance so she can come inside. I still have another twenty minutes before my first appointment.

As she joins me inside, she says, “My name is Sammy Riordan. I just moved to Elk Lake.”

“My name is Melissa,” I tell her. “If you’re twelve, that must mean you’re going into seventh grade.”

“I am. I’m really nervous, too.”

“Where did you move here from?” I ask.

“Chicago.”

“That’s a big change,” I say, leading her to the window.

“I’m hoping it’s a good one.” She sounds uncertain, which I can totally understand. Junior high school can be like that old high school classic *Lord of the Flies*. Everyone is trying to figure things out, but no one knows how to go about doing it.

“Are your hands clean?” I ask.

She looks down at them before holding them up for me to inspect. “I washed them before I left the diner.”

“Did you have the Belgian waffles? Those are my favorite.”

She grins from ear to ear. “With strawberries and extra whipped cream.”

“That’s the only way to eat them,” I agree. Then I hold out the train of the dress for her to inspect. “All of the beads are hand-sewn. It takes two hundred hours to make a dress like this.”

She touches it tentatively. “Two hundred hours! It must cost a fortune.”

“It’s quite expensive,” I confirm. “But hopefully you only get married once, so it’s worth it.” That’s the line I use regularly with prospective brides. I used to believe it, too.

“Did you wear a dress like this for your wedding?” she asks, clearly still in awe.

“I’m not married.” Just saying the words out loud makes me sad. I hurry to add, “I don’t think I’m the marrying type.” Lies, but it helps me to regain control of my emotions.

I never used to mind being single, but I was actively dating then. Matt asked me to marry him after only nine months together. My mom and I threw ourselves into planning a party that would rival any royal affair, but then I found out he was cheating on me. I was so devastated it took me a year before going out on another date. I dated Dillion for a year and thought we were on track for our happily-ever-after, when he was killed in a car accident. At his funeral, his mother gave me the engagement ring he’d bought for me. *Is it any wonder I’m such a piece of work?*

Sammy interrupts my pity party. “I’m not sure I’m going to get married, either. I don’t think it’s all that important.” It sounds like her parents may be less than happy.

“The most important thing is to be happy with yourself,” I counsel. “That’s the first step to being happy with someone else.”

Her eyes light up like this is some deeply profound wisdom. “Huh. So, you’re saying if you don’t like yourself, you can’t be happy with anyone else?”

“I think that stands to reason, don’t you?”

Sammy tips her red head to the side. Her coloring is very similar to my own. “I’m going to have to think about that.” She gently releases the train and turns to look around the store. “Do you only sell wedding dresses?”

“No. We sell bridesmaid dresses, too. A lot of girls in high school buy those for prom and spring formal.”

Sighing deeply, she announces, “I’ll buy my prom dress here if I’m

asked.”

“Don’t wait for someone to ask you,” I counsel her. I waited for Tommy Keyes to ask me as my mom felt it unladylike for me to do the asking. Tommy didn’t ask anyone which means that neither of us went to prom. What a waste.

“I don’t think the guy has to be the one to do the asking, it’s just that I’d be worried I was going to get shot down, you know?”

“That’s exactly the kind of fear boys face every day,” I tell her.

“Do you think there are any cute boys at Elk Lake Junior High?” she asks.

“We could ask my friend Paige,” I tell her. “She teaches seventh grade math, so you’re probably going to have her.”

Sammy’s eyes light up. “I’d love to meet her before school starts. That way I’d at least know someone.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and call Paige. “Are you thinking more about going on the *Midwestern Matchmaker*?” she asks in lieu of a more standard greeting, like “hello.”

I thought about it all night long, but I don’t tell her that. “I don’t want the whole world watching me try to find love.” Before she can respond, I add, “I’m standing here talking to the most delightful soon-to-be seventh grader. She and her family just moved to town, and she doesn’t know anybody. Any chance she can meet you before school starts?”

“Sure. I can stop by your shop on my way to school today, if that works.”

“Thanks, Paige. I’ll tell her.” I put my phone back into my pocket and smile at Sammy. “Can you hang out for a bit? Paige said she’d stop by soon.”

Sammy’s green eyes open widely. “Seriously? That’s so cool, thank you!”

“Excellent. Do you want to help me pick out accessories for the dresses I’ve put aside for my first appointment?”

“That would be awesome.” Sammy claps her hands together in delight. That’s exactly how I felt when my mom first let me help around the shop.

“Good. We’re going to need to pick out veils, tiaras, and gloves. Not all brides wear gloves but the long ones look particularly nice with strapless dresses.”

Leading Sammy toward the accessory wall, I ask, “Do you need to call your parents and let them know where you are?”

She shakes her head. “My dad is going to pick me up when I call him.”

“One of the nice things about living in a small town is having some freedom to walk around on your own.” I can’t imagine Sammy had that luxury in a city like Chicago.

Pulling a tiara off the shelf, she says, “I hope I make friends soon. You don’t know any seventh graders, do you?”

“I don’t, but I’m sure Paige does. Let’s ask her when she gets here, okay?”

Sammy smiles brightly. “You’re my first friend, Melissa. I guess that kind of makes you my bestie.”

“That’s an honor I’m pleased to have,” I tell her. Then we jump into preparing for the first appointment of the day.

I like Sammy a lot. She’s fun, enthusiastic, and while seemingly as vulnerable as any other kid her age, she’s also full of optimism. I smile while appreciating the odd turn of the day.

Who knew my new bestie would be only twelve years old?

CHAPTER SIX



JAMIE

I'm using the kitchen table as my makeshift office until Sammy and I find a house. The view of Elk Lake is unparalleled. The only problem is that beach dwellers below appear to be having so much fun I'm having a hard time focusing on my work. I want to be out there with them.

"Jamie, did you hear me?" Connor, the marketing director in charge of the new baby formula campaign, asks. He's on speaker phone.

"Sorry, no," I tell him. "What did you say?"

"I said we could use the song 'Milkshake' by Kelis. Everyone knows it and once the tune is in your head, it's there for a long time."

"What image would you put with it?"

"I was thinking we could have a mother sitting in a lounge chair feeding her baby in a field surrounded by cows."

"Um, no," I say. "That would seem like we're likening new mothers to cows. I can't imagine that it would fly."

"I disagree," he says. "We're selling formula so we're likening the formula to the song, not the mothers."

"I don't think so, Connor. It's a fine line and the possibility of offending anyone who's just given birth is not the way to go."

"My wife thought it was funny," he says.

"It is funny, but it's also borderline offensive." Changing the subject, I ask, "Do you know that song 'Ring of Fire' by Johnny Cash?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"In the 1970s, Preparation H tried to buy the rights to use it in a commercial."

"OMG!" Connor snort-laughes.

"I know, right? And while they probably would have made a fortune with it, Johnny Cash did not want his song used to describe hemorrhoids."

"How does that relate to baby formula?"

"My point is that being funny isn't always the way to go. Especially when dealing with the delicate emotions of a new mother." It's possible Beth's postpartum depression has made me extra touchy to this topic, but I don't think that's a bad thing.

“What would you suggest instead?” He doesn’t sound pleased.

“How about ‘Baby, Baby’ by the Talking Heads? It’s old enough that we could probably get it for a song—pun intended—and it’s fun and upbeat.”

“Dammit, Jamie, I hate when you do that.”

I take a sip of my coffee before asking, “Do what?”

“Come up with an idea that’s better than mine right off the cuff. It’s annoying.”

“That’s why I own the company,” I tease him.

“Fine, I’ll contact the record label and see how much it will cost and then I’ll storyboard the commercial. I don’t suppose you have any ideas about that, too?”

“Do a sped-up montage with everyone in a family playing with their baby and then end the scene with the father giving the baby a bottle while the mother sleeps. That shows the upside of formula without making the mother feel bad she’s not breastfeeding. Plus, every new mother dreams of uninterrupted sleep.”

“That’s good,” he says appreciatively. “But I’m taking credit for it.”

“Have at it, Connor. I’m going to call it a day and go hang with Sammy for a while. Email me any updates.”

Being that I’m planning on cutting back my workload anyway, I might as well start now. After hanging up, I punch in my daughter’s number. She doesn’t answer, so I send a text. I don’t know why kids respond to texts but act like they can’t hear a phone ring.

I have to laugh when I see how Sammy changed my phone name.

Daddio: You want to go paddleboarding?

Sam: I thought you were working?

Daddio: Paddleboarding sounds like more fun.

Sam: I’m hanging out with my new math teacher.

Daddio: ???

Sam: She’s spilling the tea on everyone at Elk Lake Junior High.

Daddio: When will you be done?

Sam: I’ll call you, okay?

Daddio: Should I go without you or wait to hear?

Sam: Go without me. I'll catch you next time.

How about that? The first day in a new town and Sammy is already navigating her new path like a pro. I should have asked her where she met her new math teacher, but I'm guessing she walked over to the school. Smart girl.

After changing into my swimming suit, I put on my Smart Watch so Sammy can get ahold of me if she needs to while I'm out on the water. Then I drive down to the pier. It only takes ten minutes to get to the other side of the lake where the rentals are. Sammy and I will have to buy our own paddleboards now that we live here.

The kid behind the desk takes my credit card and gets me set up. "We blow a horn ten minutes before the hour, so you have time to get back to the dock if you don't want to pay for a longer rental."

"I remember that from last summer," I tell him with a nod.

"Cool. Don't forget, speed boats are on the other side of the buoys, so stay within the bounds."

Sammy and I got so good at paddleboarding last summer that we went out as close as we could to the buoys to ride the waves created by the boats. We had such a good time, I promised to take her to Hawaii this summer so we could learn how to surf. But instead, we wound up staying put so we could pack up our house to move. To quote Robert Burns, "The best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." I think that goes double when those plans involve kids.

I spend the afternoon on the lake in blissful reflection. The only thing that would have made the time more enjoyable would have been having my daughter with me. Instead, I spend a few hours thinking about the future.

When we decided to move, I promised Sammy I would only work part-time and that would be while she's in school. I don't plan on working during summer break, but as this summer only has two weeks left, there's still some stuff I need to tie up.

I only have six more years with my daughter until she goes to college. The thought is enough to paralyze me with dread. Sammy has been my whole life for twelve years. I'm not going to know who I am without her.

I gaze across the rippling surface of the lake toward the family I've been slowly tailing. There's a mom, a dad, and three kids. They're laughing together and seemingly having the time of their lives. It's a tableau I used to envision for myself.

I spent years being mad at Beth for not staying with us, and for not giving Sammy any siblings. As time passed, the anger didn't dissipate, it only grew. Then when Sammy was six, I had a bout of chest pains I thought would take me off the planet and away from my little girl. That's when I realized anger only bred more anger and that I was the one hurting my family, not Beth.

As strange as it sounds, you have to respect someone when they know themselves well enough to make a hard decision. Had Beth stayed with us and been miserable, we all would have suffered. Not to mention it would have made saying goodbye that much harder, especially for Sammy. So, I got myself a therapist and hired a personal trainer, and I moved forward with my life.

After turning in my paddleboard, I decide to drive into town and check in with Sam. I text her as soon as I get to the car.

Daddio: I'm on my way to find you. Are you still at school?

When she doesn't answer right away, I start driving.

I can see why Elk Lake is such a popular summer destination. It feels like stepping back into an era of simple pleasures. It's the perfect place to recharge your battery. The good news for us is that we live here now.

My first stop is the junior high school where I check out the playground and the adjacent track. Sammy isn't there and I wonder if she's inside.

Daddio: Sam, where are you?

Sam: I thought you were waiting to hear from me.

Daddio: I miss you and I want to hang out. Where are you?

Sam: I'm at Bride's Paradise downtown.

Daddio: Why?

Sam: My new friend Melissa works here. She's besties with my new math teacher.

Daddio: You've been there all day?

Sam: Totally! It's been the best day, too.

I love that my daughter is so happy, but I'm still a bit trepidatious at what kind of adult lets a stray kid spend the day in their shop. She's probably a grandmother who's missing time with her grandkids.

Daddio: I'll be there in five.

Sam: I'll meet you out front.

Daddio: No way. I want to meet your new friend.

Sam: Cool.

After driving the ten blocks to the downtown district, I park in front of the curb across from my destination. I quickly run my hands through my hair, wishing I'd dressed a bit nicer before coming into town. My plan had simply been to pick up Sammy and head home.

After crossing the street, I open the door to Bride's Paradise. I'm not sure what I expect to see, but what I don't expect is to find my daughter counseling a future bride on which dress she should pick.

Sammy eyes the tall blonde thoughtfully before saying, "I don't think your hips are big enough to really carry off the mermaid tail dress, but this one makes you look like a princess."

The woman stares at herself in front of the mirror for a long moment before answering, "You're right, Sammy." Then she signals a woman across the store and adds, "This is the dress, Melissa."

As Melissa turns around, I'm struck dumb. She looks enough like Beth to be her sister. Until she smiles. Then all thoughts of my ex leave my head.

Sammy runs over to me. "Hey, Dad. I want you to meet Melissa."

I know I'm in trouble the second our eyes meet.

CHAPTER SEVEN



MELISSA

Holy heck, Sammy's dad is hot! My eyes linger at what I'm guessing is a twelve-pack under that vintage Pearl Jam t-shirt. I know that's not something I should be thinking about a married man, but I can't seem to help myself. As I approach Mr. Tall, Dark, and OMG-are-those-blue-eyes?—I nearly trip over my own feet.

In a bid to detract from my clumsiness, I smile widely and declare, "You must be Sammy's dad." Butterflies swarm my stomach like a flock of espresso-drinking vultures.

His expression shifts from one of surprise to—was that a flicker of interest??? Wait, I think it's *annoyance*. But why? Without so much as a glance at my offered hand, he says, "Jamie Riordan."

I briefly look at my extended appendage, checking for mud before returning it to my side. I wonder what he'd do if I ran my fingers through that wavy brown hair of his. "Melissa Corner," I say, forcing my thoughts away from the inappropriate.

"Thank you for letting my daughter spend the day with you. I'll make sure she doesn't overstay her welcome in the future." His voice sounds automated, like a droid reciting the lyrics to "Ninety-Nine Bottles of Beer on the Wall."

Also, overstay her welcome? What are you talking about, Mr. Roboto? Sammy and I had a great time today. Before I can say this, my new friend hurries to explain, "Melissa offered me a job, Dad. I'm not bugging her."

"You're only twelve, Sammy. You can't legally have a job."

Is he serious?

"If you can pay a kid to mow your yard or babysit your cat when you're out of town, why can't you pay them to help pick out accessories for brides?" I want to know.

"Because yard work and cat sitting aren't commercial businesses."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Sammy demands.

I quickly interject, "It's not like I'm going to put her on the payroll. I'm just going to give her cash on a bride-to-bride basis."

"I believe the government would consider that illegal," he says rigidly.

“Dad, please! I really like Melissa and if I work here, I’ll be able to meet a lot of new Elk Lake friends.” I’m not sure that’s true as most of our brides are from out of town, but I don’t say that.

Jamie’s tight expression loosens as he addresses his daughter. “I don’t want to put Melissa on the spot.”

“What spot?” I exclaim. “I’m not on any spot. I’m the one who offered Sammy a job. I mean, I would have never paired those pearl drop earrings with that lace dress. I would have thought it too fussy, but the truth is, it was a spectacular combination.”

After a long pause, he finally says, “She can stop by once in a while, but I don’t feel comfortable with her taking any money.”

Sammy shrugs her shoulders. “That’s okay. I don’t really care about the money. I just like hanging out here.”

My mom pops her head out of the back room like a starving dog on the scent of its next meal. “Melissa,” she gushes. “Who’s this?” She strides over to Jamie with intent. I half-expect her to tell him to open his mouth so she can inspect his teeth.

Jamie smiles kindly at my mother. “I’m Sammy’s dad, Jamie.”

Mom beams at him before putting her arm around Sammy. “I’m Missy’s mom, Margie. You have a lovely daughter. Did she tell you she’s going to be working for us?”

“She can help, but she can’t take money,” he tells her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” my mom says. “I got my first paying job when I was twelve. I picked blueberries. We’re paying Sammy and that’s all there is to it.”

Jamie shifts slightly which causes my gaze to move to his bare legs. *Look away!* I practically swoon as a wave of attraction hits me. I’m clearly sinking to a new low here. I mean, I’m not one to pine for married men, and certainly not hunky automaton men, but I can’t seem to control myself.

“That’s very nice of you, Margie. Thank you.” Now it’s Jamie who refuses to look at me.

I take a step so I’m right in his line of vision. “You wouldn’t let your daughter take money when I offered it, but she can take it from my mom?” Somebody has just thrown down the gauntlet.

Sammy appears to be getting nervous by this confrontation because she steps between us. “Thanks for everything, Melissa. Are you good if I come in tomorrow?”

“I thought you were spending the day with me tomorrow,” her dad says. “I took the day off work and everything.”

Sammy touches his arm gently. “I spend every day with you, Dad. I want to be in town as much as possible so I can meet people. Why don’t you take me to lunch?”

It’s clear who rules the roost in their family. “Maybe your mom can come too,” I suggest. I’d like to get a look at the woman who gets to call this grumpy Adonis her husband.

“Sammy’s mom didn’t move to Elk Lake with us,” Jamie says. I cock an eyebrow in question, which prompts him to explain, “Beth is in Germany.”

“She lives there,” Sammy adds.

I open my mouth to say something—anything—but the only sound that comes out is a groan. I try to camouflage the faux pas by clearing my throat and mumbling, “Smart woman.” The look of surprise on Jamie’s face makes it clear he heard me.

Sammy’s sad expression indicates she heard too. *Why don’t I just use a megaphone next time I insult somebody?* “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. I only meant that Germany is nice.”

“I don’t even know Beth. I was just a baby the last time I saw her,” Sammy says. *Come again? What in the world happened to cause a woman to leave this lovely child?*

I’m completely flabbergasted by this news and am grateful when my mom chimes in. “It’s hard to be a single parent, isn’t it?” For some reason, she decides to share, “My husband left when Missy was ten.”

The topic of conversation is obviously making Jamie uncomfortable because he takes his daughter’s hand and declares, “Time to go, honey.” Smiling at my mom, he adds, “It was nice to meet you, Margie.” He quickly ventures a glance at me before lowering his gaze. “Melissa.” *What’s with this guy?*

Sammy offers a quick wave. “Thanks for today, Melissa. I had a great time.” She gives my mom a one-armed hug.

Once they’re gone, my mom announces, “Now that’s a good-looking man.”

“If you say so.” I might have said so too, but then I got a load of his personality. Jamie Riordan may be a fine physical specimen, but his disposition leaves a lot to be desired.

With her hands on her hips, she answers, “No red-blooded woman could

look at a man like that and not have her pulse quicken. My heartbeat is hammering like I just ran a mile in high heels.”

“There’s more to a man than being nice looking.”

“Calling that man nice looking is like calling the Statue of Liberty a pretty little tchotchke.” She winks broadly. “Also, he’s single ...”

“Are you thinking about leaving Howard for a younger man?” *Do it, I silently dare her.*

She physically startles and takes a step backward. “Don’t be silly. Howard is a prize. I’d never leave him. But you, on the other hand ...”

I’d leave Howard in a heartbeat. The only kind of prize I’d liken him to is a plastic ring at the bottom of a box of Cracker Jacks. But I don’t tell my mom that. Instead, I say, “I’m not interested in Jamie Riordan.”

“Why in the world not? He can’t be that much older than you. Maybe six or seven years. And once you hit your thirties that’s no big thing.”

“It’s not that he’s older than me, Mom. He’s ... kinda rude.”

She starts to rehang a pile of veils. “Honey, I think you’re losing it. That man was positively delightful.”

“To you,” I tell her.

She hits me with a dead-eye glare. “I’m starting to think your single status might be your fault.” *She’s just starting to think this? Um, hello birth-giver, you pretty much say this to me on the daily.*

Luckily, my last appointment of the day walks out of the changing room, which keeps me from giving my mother a piece of my mind. “Where’s Sammy?” Tinley Fields wants to know.

“Her dad just picked her up,” I say.

“You have a beautiful daughter,” she tells me. “I hope I’m that lucky one day.”

“Oh, she’s not my daughter.” I nearly choke on my words.

“Really? What are the chances there would be two of you with such a gorgeous shade of red hair?”

Ignoring her question, I take the dress from her. “Let’s schedule your first fitting in three months.”

Tinley smiles. “I can’t wait to show my bridesmaids. They would have been with me, but I didn’t expect to be wedding dress shopping today.”

“They’ll be blown away when they see how beautiful you are,” I tell her truthfully. While I have never seen an ugly bride, Tinley could probably wear a garbage bag and make it look like couture.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a twenty-dollar bill. "Please give this to Sammy and thank her for all her help."

I put the money in the register. "It would be my pleasure." I only wish I could give it to her in front of her dad. For some reason, the thought of irritating him brings me a lot of pleasure, the grumpy beast.

After Tinley leaves, my mom announces, "I need to get to the market. Howard has requested pork chops for supper tonight and I don't have any in the freezer."

This comment reignites the irritation I feel whenever my stepfather's name is mentioned. "Then maybe Howard should get off his butt and go to the store. It's not like he has a job."

My mom looks like I've just slapped her in the face. "Missy! That's a horrible thing to say."

"Why?" I rarely confront my mom about how lazy her husband is, but my patience is apparently wearing thin in all aspects of life.

"You need to respect Howard, Melissa. He's worked very hard in his lifetime. He deserves to enjoy his retirement."

"He's been enjoying retirement since he met you," I remind her. "I have yet to see any hard work."

"Melissa Ann Corner, that's enough. You may not speak about my husband like that, do you hear me? Howard is a good man."

"I never said he wasn't good, Mom. All I said is that he's lazy."

She slaps her hand on the counter so hard she immediately shakes it to release some of the sting. "I don't ever want to hear you say anything unkind about Howard. Do you understand?" But instead of waiting for me to reply, she grabs her purse and storms out the front door.

I'm surprised when moments later I hear the overhead bell ring. I didn't expect my mom to come back in. But then I look up and find that it's not my mother walking through the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT



JAMIE

Sammy has been nonstop chattering since we left the bridal shop. It's clear she adores Melissa, which makes me feel like an ogre for being so rude to her. While I try to discern the reason behind my bad behavior, my daughter says, "We forgot to stop at the grocery store to get food."

I slow the car down and make a U-turn at the next intersection. "Thanks for reminding me. We don't want to have to eat all our meals out."

"Oh, I want to eat out, but I'm talking about snacks. Microwave popcorn, peaches, something with chocolate on it ..."

Beer. Not for Sammy, but for me.

"Melissa says we need to order pizza from Dough Boy. She says it's almost as good as Chicago pizza. The only difference is the crust is slightly thinner. That's probably okay, right?"

My daughter's new friend has made quite an impression on her. Before we left the city, Sammy told me we should wait until we come back to Chicago for a visit before having pizza again.

"Melissa seems like a nice woman," I say noncommittally.

"Nice? She's awesome! Did you know she grew up in Elk Lake? She even went to the same junior high school I'll be going to. Her bestie is my math teacher. I met her, too. Her name is Paige."

"And what does Paige have to say about your new school?" I ask, trying to steer the topic away from the beautiful red-headed shop owner. I was not what I'd call pleasant to Melissa, and I regret it. I'm not rude by nature, but it's been a long time since I've felt as drawn to a woman as I do to her, and it scares me. As I've decided not to date for a long while, I need to not be having feelings like that.

"Paige said there's a zero-bullying policy at Elk Lake Junior High, and that it's a really nice environment for kids."

Her comment catches me off guard. "You told her what happened in Chicago?" Sammy was adamant that she didn't want anyone in Elk Lake to know about her past. Even so, I still planned on telling the administration. I want them to keep a close eye on my little girl.

In my peripheral vision, I see her chin bob up and down. "I did."

“I think that’s a good idea,” I say. “You don’t have to tell any kids, but it’s smart to make your teachers aware.”

As I pull into the parking lot of the grocery store, she says, “I’m not telling all my teachers. It’s just that Paige is kind of a friend now.”

“Did you tell her you don’t like math?”

She opens the car door. “Yeah, but she said she can get anyone to like math. I believe her.”

I breathe a sigh of relief as we push through the automatic door leading into the market. “That would be awesome. Sixth grade math almost killed me.”

Sammy laughs. “Don’t worry, Dad. I don’t think you’ll have to go to YouTube school to help me out anymore.” I spent all last year simultaneously thanking and cursing the internet gods for Mr. Numbers. Mathematically speaking, I’ve clearly forgotten more than I realized I’d ever been taught.

Steering the cart toward fresh produce, I ask, “Should we make a peach cobbler before peach season is over?”

“Do octopi have three hearts?” My daughter giggles, knowing full well I’m clueless on the topic.

“So, yes to cobbler?”

“Duh.” Sammy runs ahead and starts to fill a plastic bag with fruit. Meanwhile, I consult the grocery list on my phone and add more butter, brown sugar, and baking powder to it. Oh, and vanilla ice cream.

When I look up to see if Sammy has the peaches, I discover she’s deep in conversation with a petite blonde woman. I overhear her say, “You’re the best, Paige, thanks.” So that’s Paige.

“You’d better get a few extra,” I call out to Sammy as I join her. I smile at Paige before introducing myself. “Hi there, I’m Sammy’s dad, Jamie.”

Her mouth opens and closes several times before she says, “I’m Sammy’s new math teacher, Paige.” She puts her shopping basket over her arm so she can shake hands.

“Sammy was just telling me that you can get anyone to like math.”

She laughs charmingly. “I think it has more to do with the fun-size Twix bars I hand out when my students get an A or a B on a quiz. Kids will do anything for Twix.”

“I will, too.” I sound flirtatious, which is not my intent.

“So ...” Paige pauses before asking, “Did you meet Melissa?”

“I did. She was very nice to offer Sammy a job.”

“Missy and I used to love hanging out at Bride’s Paradise when we were Sammy’s age. It’s probably why we both have our weddings planned down to a T.”

“I can see how that might happen,” I tell her before nudging my daughter. “We have a peach cobbler to make, so we’d best get moving.”

Paige turns toward Sammy. “I’ll bring over a math book to the shop tomorrow so we can get you started.”

My daughter’s face contorts into a grimace. “Don’t forget the candy bars.”

Paige pulls out her phone and starts to type. “I’m adding them to the list right now.”

As we walk away, I say, “You’re going to start math early? Who are you and what have you done with my daughter?”

Sammy giggles. “I know, right? I’m a whole new person in Elk Lake.” I love how enthusiastic she is. Day one in our new town has gone leaps and bounds above expectation.

After we’re done shopping and we’ve loaded our purchases into the car, I suggest, “Why don’t we call Dough Boy and order in? I’m too tired to think about cooking tonight.”

Sammy immediately pulls out her phone and places the call. She requests our regular spinach and garlic pie, but that doesn’t seem to be an option here in Elk Lake. So, she veers away from the norm. “We’ll take a large pie with sausage, black olives, and red onions.”

I shoot her a thumbs up to support her choice.

After she hangs up, she says, “There seem to be a lot of single ladies in Elk Lake, huh?”

“Who are you referring to?” I ask, like it’s not obvious.

“Melissa and Paige.”

“Yeah, but remember what happened when Lorelai dated Rory’s teacher in *Gilmore Girls*? That was a total failure.” I have watched an enormous number of shows meant to appeal to the preteen-age audience, and *Gilmore Girls* was just the start. We’re currently making our way through *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. And to be honest, I’m kind of terrified.

Sammy rolls her eyes. “Good point. Plus, I don’t need you messing up my social life before it’s even begun. I’m all for you staying single.”

I reach out and gently pinch my daughter’s arm. “You’re a clone, aren’t you? Where’s the real Samantha Riordan?”

She pushes my hand away. “You’ve decided that you’re destined to be alone and that’s okay. Although, after I leave for college, we should get you a nice pet to keep you company. In fact,” she amends, “maybe we should look into that sooner rather than later so your adjustment will be easier.”

“You think I can replace you with a dog?” I laugh. “Way to sell your importance.”

“It would obviously have to be a really cool dog.” I love how easily Sammy and I joke with each other. This kid cracks me up.

“Actually ...” I begin, wondering if I should tell her what’s on my mind. I decide to bite the bullet. “I was thinking I might start dating after you leave me in the dust.”

Her head shakes so hard, the red curtain of waves jostles back and forth like it’s dancing. “Don’t you dare get me a mom after I leave home. No sir, if you won’t find her now, I don’t want her at all.” Her tone shifts from playful to downright angry.

Not wanting to poke the bear further, I concede, “Fine, I’ll happily live the rest of my years alone or, you know, with Rose, the nice rescue dog we get from the pound.” Sammy turns to stare out the passenger side window but doesn’t say anything. “Are you mad at me?” I finally ask as we pull into our driveway.

“Yes,” she answers plainly.

“Why?”

“You know why.” God save me from pre-pubescent girls with a temper.

“I was just teasing you earlier.”

“About dating or getting a dog?”

Avoiding what she really wants to know, I say, “Now that we live outside the city, I’ll happily look for a dog if that’s what you want.” I never wanted to have one in Chicago because we didn’t have a backyard big enough for it to enjoy a good run.

“People with kids get married all the time, you know.”

“Yes, they do, and it even works out for some of them.” I put my foot on the brake and stop the car. “It’s just that I don’t have any confidence I’d be one of them.”

“Because of Beth?” she demands heatedly.

“And Shelby,” I remind her. “That clearly didn’t turn out well.”

“It might have if Kelsey weren’t so against it.” She opens the car door and gets out.

I push the button to open the back hatch before joining her. “You are the most important person in the world to me, Sam. I don’t ever want to make a decision that would be wrong for you.”

She shoves her hands into the pockets of her shorts. “You’re so worried about making wrong decisions that you’re afraid to make the right one.” She doesn’t give me a chance to respond before adding, “You know what? It doesn’t even matter to me right now. I’m worried enough about starting a new school that I don’t have the energy to push you to have a good life.”

Her hands shoot out of her pockets, and she grabs two bags out of the back before continuing, “You have whatever stupid life you want.” Then she stalks off to the front door.

In the last year, Sammy’s moods have gone from downright stable to erratic at best. I used to think it was solely because of the bullying she had to endure, but now I’m wondering if her hormones aren’t going to kill us both.

I finish unloading the groceries alone. I even put them away before looking for my daughter. I find her sitting on the back porch swing, kicking off the deck with alternate feet. She slows down when she sees me, as though inviting me to join her.

I sit next to her and say, “I’m sorry, Sam. I’m not always going to make decisions that you agree with, but I’m always going to try to make the best ones for us.”

“I’m sorry, too.” She leans her side into mine. “I’m just excited and really nervous about moving here.”

“It’s a big change,” I tell her. “What are you nervous about?”

“Everything.”

“Me too.” Questions keep looping through my head. Is this the best place for us? Will the kids here be nice? Is Sammy going to get the quality of education needed to get into a good college? But I keep all of that to myself.

“I think my biggest worry is, will the pound have a dog named Rose?”
Hurray, she’s teasing me again!

“Or will we have to settle on a three-legged mutt with bad breath named Rufus?”

She groans playfully. “Rufus will be a farter, for sure.”

“And he’ll eat our garbage.”

Sammy nods her head up and down. “We might have to get a hamster if there’s no Rose. That’s so sad.” And then like a switch gets flipped, Sammy’s eyes fill with tears. Her moods shift faster than a race car in the Indy 500.

“You’re not crying about Rose, are you?”

She shakes her head. “I’m just full of a lot of feelings right now, you know?”

“I’m full of feelings too,” I tell her. “That’s why I suggest we take it one day at a time and put all thoughts of the future on the back burner. What do you think about that?”

I feel the dampness of her tears as they soak into my shirt. “That sounds like a plan, Dad.”

Parenting is a lot of hard work, but single parenting is a real killer. For some reason, Melissa’s face pops into my head and I have to force it away. It’s one thing to put myself into a position of vulnerability, but Sammy has been through enough.

CHAPTER NINE



MELISSA

I forgot Anna was stopping by at closing time. The last thing I want to do is look at some Catch.com profile she's made for me. As such, I offer a non-enthusiastic wave. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." She strides across the shop floor and puts her laptop down on the counter. "Where do you want to do this?"

"Saturn?" That would happily put off the inevitable.

She motions toward the seating area surrounding the raised platform where future brides model dresses for their friends and family. "Let's sit there."

I follow behind, feeling like a lamb on its way to slaughter. "I don't believe in dating apps," I tell her for the thousandth time.

"There are dating apps, and then there are hook-up apps. Catch is considered the most respectable site for finding partners who are serious about wanting to make a commitment." She sounds like a radio advertisement. Sitting down on one of the overstuffed chairs, she types away on her laptop before handing it to me.

I pull up a chair next to her before taking it. The main profile picture is one I've never seen before. I've got my head back and I'm laughing in pure joy at something. The sun is beating down on me, emphasizing the golden highlights in my hair. I look positively ethereal. "Where did you get this picture?"

"I took it last month when we went out for lunch at that new pho place. Aren't you gorgeous?"

I nod my head slowly. "Surprisingly so. That's certainly not how I look on your average Wednesday."

"Only because you don't smile like you used to." She arches an eyebrow at me in challenge. She's not wrong.

I continue to read down the page. "You have me listed as a bridal consultant."

"There aren't that many wedding dress shops in the area, and I don't want guys you aren't interested in trying to find you."

"Smart, thank you." I keep reading. All the basics are there—my age,

marital history, occupation. When I come to my list of hobbies, I laugh out loud. “Rom-com lover, dreamer, pizza fanatic, championship paddleboarding wanna-be ... You made me sound frivolous.”

“What did you want me to put? Calculus lover, string theory expert, nuclear fusion enthusiast?” She jabs a finger at the screen. “You don’t want to lie. You want to meet someone you’ll match with.”

I sigh loudly. “At least you didn’t say I like to take long walks on the beach ...”

“Oh, but I did,” she interrupts. “It’s right after the part saying you’ve watched the entire *Ted Lasso* series six times through.”

“Only five,” I correct her.

“That’s because you haven’t finished the sixth time yet.” Sometimes I hate that my friends know me so well.

I keep reading until I suddenly stop cold. “Under greatest fear, you said developing a sixth toe? What kind of thing is that to say?”

“Don’t you remember that dream you had last year?” she reminds me. “You talked about it a lot.”

That’s right, I did. I dreamed I woke up with a sixth toe, and it wasn’t some innocuous little nub next to my baby toe, either. It was another big toe, only it was like three times the size of my real big toe. It was awful. “While that may be, I don’t think that’s something I want to share with strangers.” It doesn’t make me sound very sexy.

“So, change it to something else.” Anna shifts in her seat so she can hang her legs over the edge of the chair.

I delete the sixth toe thing, but then sit immobile while trying to decide on something that makes me sound less quirky. I can’t tell them about my fear of tap water ever since seeing that movie *Infestation*. My fear of alien invasion would make me sound like a lunatic. After considerable thought I finally type in spiders. Spiders are nothing if not a reasonable phobia.

I continue reading through my profile until I come across the final topic: What are you hoping to achieve by using Catch.com? Anna wrote world peace, which makes me snort loudly. “What’s your idea of the perfect date?” I ask in my best William Shatner voice, all the while trying to keep a straight face.

She appears to really consider the question before answering, “April twenty-fifth. You know, because it’s not too hot and not too cold and all you need is a light jacket.”

We both take a minute to laugh. “*Miss Congeniality* really was fantastic, wasn’t it?” I ask. “I mean it had everything, the makeover we all secretly long for, and attention from the hot guy who’d previously kept us in the friend zone.”

“Don’t forget the scene where Sandra Bullock beats the crap out of said guy on stage as her talent. I’m always a big fan when the karmic wheel turns.”

For some reason, Jamie Riordan’s face pops into my head—dark hair, blue eyes, chiseled jaw. Yet his most attractive feature was not physical. Nor was it his personality. It was his obvious love for his daughter that almost caused me to ovulate on the spot.

“What in the world are you thinking about?” Anna demands. “Or should I say who?”

I scoot off the chair so I can lie directly on the floor. “A girl came into the shop today and sort of became my new employee.” I spend the next several minutes telling Anna about Sammy.

“And then what? Because that look on your face clearly says there’s something else.”

I inhale deeply. On the exhale, I tell her, “Her dad came in to pick her up.”

“Her incredibly hot, single dad?” Anna guesses correctly.

“Yes. But not yes.”

“I’m confused.”

“He’s hot and single, but he’s super grumpy which is not at all attractive.”

“That’s my favorite romance trope!” Anna practically yells. “Grumpy/Sunshine for the win!” She enumerates, “*The Love Hypothesis*, *The Soulmate Equation*, *The Hating Game* ...”

She’ll go on for hours if I don’t stop her. “Yes, but those are books. This is real life.”

“What’s your point?”

“Anna, romcoms are great, but they’re also pure fantasy. While Jamie Riordan might make the perfect rom-com hero, in real life he probably clips his toenails at the dinner table.”

The look of disgust on her face says it all. “Gross. Why can’t he just be a misunderstood hottie looking for his love match?”

“Because he walked into my shop,” I tell her.

Anna flips her legs onto the floor and stands up before wielding her

pointer finger at me like a particularly sharp letter opener. “Stop with the pity party, Missy. There’s no reason in this world this guy isn’t perfect for you.”

“His wife left him to raise their child on his own. There must be something wrong with him for that to have happened,” I declare while smarting at the pity party comment. I see red every time my mom says that to me. The truth is, I’m not feeling sorry for myself so much as I’m building a spectacular résumé of dating failures.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with *her*,” Anna suggests.

I glance at my friend’s still-flat stomach. “Can you think of one reason you would leave your child and move across the world?”

“No, but that’s because I’d take my kid with me. If there was something bad going on with Chris, I wouldn’t trust *him* to raise her. Which clearly says the problem lies with the ex and not him.”

She’s talked me into a corner. *Could she be right? Could Jamie be the injured party?* “It doesn’t matter either way,” I tell her. “He wasn’t interested in me. Plus, he has a kid. I don’t want to be a stepmom to a twelve-year-old.”

“But you said she was a great kid.” I love when my words get thrown back into my face.

“She is, but I feel strongly that when I start mothering it should be with a person who can’t call me out on the stupid stuff I might say or do.”

Anna sits back down on her chair and points at the computer. “I don’t really care who you date as long as you put yourself out there,” she says. “It’s time, Missy.”

I refocus my attention on the computer screen, and before I can think better of it, I publish my profile. “I think I might throw up.”

She waves her hands in the air like she’s wielding invisible pom poms. “From what I remember, feeling sick is the first step to falling in love.”

“What do I do now?” I ask. “Just sit here and wait to see who likes my profile?” How depressing.

“No. You start looking at profiles and see who you like. You’ve gotta take the bull by the horns.” She takes the computer off my lap and starts to search for single men in our area. “Look at this,” she declares. “Tim Ferris from high school is back in town and he’s looking for love.”

Tim Ferris was popular and gorgeous and one hundred percent out of my league so I’m nowhere near as excited as she is. But I am curious. I lean over her shoulder and look at his picture. “He looks like his hairline is receding,” I declare.

“So? Bald men supposedly have more testosterone than guys with a lot of hair.”

I point to the screen. “Is that the start of a beer belly?”

“More of him to love,” she says.

“Anna, there’s no way I’m going to like his profile. He’ll take one look at my picture and won’t even remember we went to school together. It’ll be embarrassing.”

“Why? You’re not the same person you were fourteen years ago, and neither is he. Some of us grow up and get better with age.”

I look at his picture again. Maybe that belly is a trick of the light. He does have an appealingly mischievous look in his eyes. My hand hovers over the heart button for so long Anna finally pushes it. I feel hot and cold and nauseated all at the same time. I feel like I’m getting the flu.

“Now, we wait for him to see your profile.” She points at an icon in the corner of the screen. “He’s online now, so it’s only a matter of time ...”

I hurry to click the heart icon to unlike his picture, but it won’t let me. “Why can’t I unlike this?” I demand as anxiety floods my body.

She smiles knowingly. “Because Catch wants you to follow your instincts. They claim it’s why they have a better success rate than other sites.” She points at my message box as an ellipsis appears. “Look, someone’s typing.”

I bend over to put my head between my knees, so I don’t pass out. After several moments, I ask, “Is it Tim? Did he respond?”

“It’s some guy named River.” Click, click, click. “He’s kind of cute.”

That causes me to sit up too quickly which once again messes with my equilibrium. I look at River’s profile and tilt my head to the side while I study it. “He looks like a poet or a salamander breeder.”

“Salamander breeder?” she asks.

“Yeah, you know, like he has some odd hobbies.” I look down at the hobby section of his profile and read out loud, “Enjoys quiet evenings reading Dostoyevsky, playing chess, and weaving macramé plant holders.” I shoot Anna a look of pure panic.

“See? No salamanders,” she says smugly.

“I would take lizards over a boring, chess-playing, macramé-loving hipster.”

“He’s clearly intelligent and whimsical,” she counters.

“His greatest fear is climate change,” I tell her.

“He’s ecologically conscious.”

“He’s allergic to peanuts, and I love peanut butter. One wrongly-timed kiss and I’d kill him.”

Anna stands up again and this time starts to walk toward the front of the store. “It’s no wonder you’re single, Missy. You have no sense of adventure.”

“You’re leaving me?” I cannot do this on my own.

“I’m going to the market to buy pickles in anticipation of salt cravings. Do you want to come?”

I’m still looking at the screen when those pesky three dots show up again, and this time the message is from Tim Ferris. The look on my face causes Anna to rush back to my side.

CHAPTER TEN



JAMIE

Sammy and I spent last night eating pizza and playing board games. One of these days she's going to consider herself too grown up for our favorite pastime, so I've decided to cram in as many game nights as I can. Tonight, I'm going to suggest a Monopoly marathon.

Sammy walks into the kitchen while I dredge thick slices of french bread into a bowl of beaten eggs. "Morning." She plops down at the kitchen table and lays her head on it.

"Still tired? Why don't you go back to bed for a while?"

"Can't. We have two brides coming in before lunch." She sounds more like a weary salesperson who's been hawking her wares for decades, rather than a twelve-year-old on her second day of work. It makes me smile.

"I thought I'd drop you off and then find us a realtor. What do you think about that?"

She grunts in what I'm guessing is approval. "Tell them I want a pool."

"Forget a pool. You have a whole lake here."

"You can't swim in a lake in the winter."

"You can't swim in a pool in the winter, either, unless it's an indoor pool."

Sammy sits up. "So?"

"So, I doubt there are many houses with indoor pools here and even if there were, no. We'll ski, skate, and sled in the winter, and we'll do water sports on the lake in the summer."

I lift the bread out of the egg mixture and put it onto a hot frying pan. The satisfying sizzle causes my mouth to water. "Do you want bacon or sausage?" I ask.

"Mmm, bacon." She stands up and walks over to the island. "I'll make the maple butter."

For the next several minutes, we work quietly preparing our morning feast. Sammy and I are both breakfast people.

Once we sit down at the table, I tell her, "I wouldn't mind an outdoor hot tub though."

"Yes! Then I can have all my friends over in the winter for make-out

parties just like they have in all those high school movies.”

My eyes pop open in horror. “Samantha ...”

She flutters her lashes innocently. “Dad ...”

“Tell me you’re joking.”

Laughter fills the room. “Of course I’m joking. I’m not going to tell you about my make-out parties before I’ve even had them.”

“Sammy ...”

“Kidding. Where’s your sense of humor this morning?” While my daughter and I regularly tease each other, this is the first time the topic has included her kissing boys. Sammy is twelve. That’s not old enough for make-out sessions, is it?

I finish chewing the bite in my mouth before asking, “Kids aren’t kissing already, are they?”

Now it’s her turn to look uncomfortable. “Some are.”

“Who?”

“Taylor, Ellie, Kaili, Hallie, Jillian ...”

Even though the look on her face says she’s serious, I hopefully guess, “You’re teasing me again.”

“When did you have your first kiss, Dad?” she demands.

“Why is that relevant?”

“When?”

I lift my shoulders slightly. “I don’t know. I guess I was thirteen.”

“I’ll be thirteen in a few months,” she reminds me.

I’m suddenly not hungry anymore. “Just because I jumped the gun, doesn’t mean you have to.”

She stares at me like she can see through me. “I’m growing up, Dad. Stuff is going to happen.”

If that doesn’t sound like a threat, I don’t know what does. “Don’t be in too much of a hurry, Sam. You’re only a kid once.”

“Yeah, but kids grow up. It’s what they do.”

I stand up before picking up my plate. “I’m going to hop in the shower. I’ll be ready to go in thirty minutes.” I leave her at the table to finish breakfast while I start to panic in earnest. My daughter is heading into a stage in her life that I feel one hundred percent not ready to deal with. *How is she almost a teenager?*

After showering and getting dressed, I pour myself a cup of coffee before calling out, “You ready?”

Sammy walks around the corner looking like a mini adult. She's wearing a spring green sundress and her hair is pulled back in a bun. "You look awfully grown up," I tell her.

"That's because I'm growing up." She shoots me a playful wink before asking, "Should I meet you at the diner for lunch?"

"How about twelve thirty?"

"Sounds like a plan, Stan," she says as we walk out the front door.

"Frying in a pan, Jan." The rhyme game is another of our favorites.

"Lounging in a can, man." It rarely makes sense, either.

My last-ditch effort is, "In Pakistan, Dan."

"Making flan, crayon."

"Flan and crayon don't rhyme," I tell her. "You lose."

Sammy opens her car door and hops in. "Mr. Holt says that imperfect rhymes are still considered rhymes, so it's your turn."

Hurray, another thing I've forgotten. "Okay, fine, it's a draw."

"Only because you can't come up with something else."

Sammy and I drive downtown, both clearly preoccupied, thinking about our new life. Day two feels like it's off to a great start. I hope we find our new home in the next couple of weeks, so we don't have to lease our rental for any longer than necessary.

After dropping Sammy off at Bride's Paradise, I continue down Main Street until I see the sign for Elk Lake Realty. Being that I don't know anyone in town yet, I didn't call ahead. I figure I'll offer my business to whomever is available to talk to me.

After parking, I wait while a mother duck leads her babies in a line toward the trees behind the building. This is not something I've ever seen in Chicago, and I'm downright charmed by it.

Once they pass, I continue to the building. As soon as I open the front door, I'm hit with the intoxicating aroma of fresh cinnamon buns. I look around and spot a lone woman sitting at her desk. She's busy eating. "Good morning," I call out to her.

She points to her mouth and chews faster. After swallowing, she stands up. "Good morning to you, too. How can I help you today?"

"I want to buy a house and I figured this was a good place to start."

She gestures for me to join her at her desk. As she sits back down, she says, "My name is Anna Tanaka."

"James Riordan," I tell her.

“What kind of house are you looking for, James?” She taps away at her computer. “We have a smaller than normal inventory this time of year because a lot of tourists visit and then decide they want a summer place. I’m guessing that’s what you’re looking for.”

“I’m moving here full time,” I tell her. “I’m looking for a minimum of four bedrooms and three baths.”

“Do you have a preference for what part of town you want to be in?” she asks.

“We’d like to live on the lake if possible.”

Click, click, click. “Will your wife be wanting to look as well?” she asks.

“She probably would if I had one.”

Anna looks up from her computer. “Four bedrooms is big for one person.”

I explain, “I’ll need a room, and an office, my daughter will need a room, and my parents will probably visit often.”

“Your daughter?”

I’m not sure why she’s surprised I have a child. “Samantha is twelve,” I tell her.

“Sammy is your daughter?”

“You know Sammy?” I ask, sounding as surprised as I am.

She shakes her head, causing her box braids to bob along. “Not personally, but your daughter is working for one of my dear friends.”

Now it’s my turn to be surprised. “You’re friends with Melissa?”

“We both grew up here in Elk Lake.”

“Then you must know Paige.” I imagine things like this happen all the time in small towns. Everybody knowing everybody.

“Paige went to school with us, too.”

“Do a lot of people stay here after they grow up?” I ask in wonder. I jumped ship right after high school and never looked back.

Anna smiles, showcasing a line of perfectly straight white teeth. “Only the cool ones. Actually, I lived in Chicago for several years, but my husband and I moved back after we got married. We have a baby on the way.” She positively beams when she says that.

“Congratulations,” I tell her sincerely. “That has to be very exciting.”

“For everyone. There aren’t many Blasians around these parts.”

“Excuse me?”

“Black Asians. My husband is Japanese. So, this little guy will be a

Blasian.” She rubs her belly protectively.

“Or Blapanese,” I offer like I’m playing a game with Sam.

She laughs. “Or a Jack.” She scrunches her face up at that. “Nah, too simple. We’re going with Blasian or Blapanese. I’ll talk to Chris and get back to you.” I like that Anna has such a laid-back sense of humor.

“Sammy and I moved here from Chicago, too,” I offer. “We wanted a slower pace, and we visited Elk Lake last summer. We were very impressed.”

She nods her head. “I get that. You want your kid to grow up with freedoms she doesn’t have in the big city. That’s why we’re here.”

“I also want her to grow up with kids who aren’t in such a hurry to grow up.” As in, no make-out parties.

“Good luck with that. Kids are way more mature since the advent of social media.”

Sammy only got social media when we found out about the bullying. We wanted to be able to track her tormentors. “Sammy has private accounts, and I follow them.” She also isn’t allowed to post anything yet. So far, she just uses it for surveillance purposes.

“You guys are going to love it here,” Anna says. “Elk Lake Junior High has fewer than three hundred students so the staff can keep a close eye on everyone.” I briefly wonder if Paige told Anna about Sam’s history.

Bringing the topic of conversation back to why I’m here, I ask, “So how soon can I start looking at houses?”

“I only have four that meet your criteria. I can probably get appointments made as early as this afternoon if you’re available.” I give her my phone number and tell her that any time after two works. I don’t want to miss out on lunch with Sammy.

After leaving the realtor’s, I decide to leave my car and explore the town on foot. I walk over to a park bench and have a seat. The day is already warm, but there’s an underlying scent that lets you know fall is on the way.

I sit for several minutes before pulling out my phone. After typing Beth’s name into the search bar, I click on pictures. I don’t let myself do this often, but I feel like I need to remind myself that Sammy’s mom is a stranger to me. Now that we’re starting over in Elk Lake, I need to make sure that whatever connection I once felt for Beth is good and truly severed.

My heart doesn’t start racing at the sight of her, and my palms don’t sweat. All appears to be as it should until I spot a picture I’ve never seen before. That’s when my blood starts to boil.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



MELISSA

Anna and I spent an hour exchanging messages with Tim Ferris last night via the Catch.com website. Here are the things he remembered about me from school: I couldn't tie my own shoes until the second grade, I wore braces longer than any kid he ever knew, I threw up on the bus on a sixth grade field trip to Chicago, and I twisted my ankle when my high heel broke as I crossed the stage at graduation to receive my high school diploma. It's clear he only noticed me when something embarrassing was happening.

I briefly wondered if he caught that time I sat on a dirty bench on the playground and walked around for the rest of the day looking like I'd pooped my pants. But as he's already amassed a list of my worst moments, I assume that was one memory he was too nice to mention.

Tim asked if I was available for lunch today. I nearly said no when Anna pulled the laptop away from me and answered that I'd love to. I was so mad I barely said another word to her until she left. Her parting jab was, "I'm serious about you finding a good guy, Missy. Even if you're not."

While getting ready for work this morning, I call Paige to fill her in on last night's activities. "You should have told me. I would have loved to have started a profile with you."

"I thought you were waiting for the Midwestern Matchmaker to come to town."

"That's not until next season, and it's only my backup if I don't find someone else first."

I run a wide-tooth comb through my hair before adding a dollop of curl cream. "Come over tonight and we'll work on your profile."

"I can't. I promised my parents I'd watch them in the seniors' pickleball tournament. They're in fifth place and if they win tonight, they go to the championships."

"That's exciting," I say for lack of anything else coming to mind. Pickleball is not my cup of tea.

"It's the second most exciting thing that's happened to them all year." Before I can ask what the first was, she reminds me, "It's not every day you win forty-seven dollars in Powerball."

Getting to the point of my call, I ask, “Do you remember Tim Ferris from school?”

“Vaguely.”

“Vaguely, my heinie. You know darn well who he is.”

“I try not to remember the boys we had crushes on who never gave us the time of day.”

After putting on my light pink sundress with the full skirt, I tease, “So you don’t remember any guys from school?”

“Ha, ha, ha. I remember Hank Jones.”

“Who?” Now it’s my turn to be clueless.

“He played trombone in the senior marching band.” Unlike me, Paige was in the high school band.

“Was he the kid who used to eat his own boogers in third grade?”

“That’s him.”

“You remember a booger-eater, but not one of the most popular guys in our class?” I grab my purse and head to the door.

“That’s my story and I’m sticking to it,” she says in such a way as to let me know she’s still holding a grudge for the lack of quality male attention we received during our formative years.

“I’m having lunch with Tim today,” I finally tell her.

“What?! Why didn’t you tell me that right away? That was your lead, not how Anna forced you into signing up for Catch.”

“Tim was on Catch. That’s how we got to talking.” I run down the stairs of my building before stepping out onto Main Street. My apartment is above the yarn shop that’s a block away from Bride’s Paradise.

“Tim Ferris is on a dating app?”

“I’m on a dating app,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but Tim was like a god at school.”

I interrupt. “So you do remember him?”

“Of course I remember him. You had a huge crush on him sophomore year and I had a crush on him junior year. How does he look?”

I walk through the door of Rosemary’s Bakery and quickly signal to Esmé that I’ll have my usual. That chocolate chip scone was not repeatable. Then I tell Paige, “He looks like himself, only older. We’re meeting at the diner. You should stop by and have lunch, too.”

“You want me to crash your date with Tim?” She says this like it’s something she wouldn’t have come up with on her own.

I hand Esmé a ten while replying, “You would’ve shown up even if I hadn’t asked you.”

“I was going to have lunch there anyway.”

“Oh, really?” I ask. “What time?”

“What time are you meeting Tim?”

“Two,” I lie.

“I was planning on eating at one thirty.”

“You big liar. You never eat that late.” Then I tell her, “I’m meeting Tim at twelve thirty.”

“Oh, thank God. I’d never make it until two. I’ll get there early and find a prime spot to watch you. Should we come up with a signal so I can call you and pretend there’s an emergency?”

“No. I don’t want to be rude. Tim’s moved back to town, so even if we’re not a match, I’m sure I’ll run into him at some point.” After getting my breakfast order, I tell Paige, “I’m heading into work. I’ll see you at lunch.”

After letting myself into the shop, I turn on the lights before going into the back room to enjoy my breakfast. My first appointment is in half an hour, but future brides are known to be early, and I don’t want to leave anyone waiting out front.

I stand up when I hear the bell over the front door ring. See? Early. But when I go out front, I discover it’s not my first appointment, it’s Sammy. “Good morning,” I say while checking out her green sundress. Not all redheads know how to make the most of their coloring, but it looks like Sammy isn’t one of them.

“Good morning,” she says enthusiastically while eyeing my own ensemble. “You look great in pink.”

“You look great in green,” I counter.

“How do you look in red?” she asks while putting her purse under the counter.

“Like a boiled beet.”

“Me too! How about yellow?”

“Like I have a liver complaint,” I tell her. “I bet you look great in purple. That’s one of my favorites.”

“I’ve never bought anything purple.”

“We should plan a shopping trip before you go back to school. I’ll give you all my redhead knowledge.”

“Would you seriously go shopping with me?”

“Sure, why not? That is, if your dad’s cool with it. We could hit a mall in Milwaukee on Sunday.” I’m not sure why I’m pushing to spend more time with Sammy, but the truth is, I really like her, and I do know a few things that might make her entrée into Elk Lake Junior High go smoother. You know, like which colors really pop on her.

“You’re seriously the best, Melissa. Thank you.”

The morning flies by with both of our appointments buying dresses. At this rate, I’m going to have to offer Sammy a full-time job. She’s amazing with our clients.

My mom walks in at twelve-fifteen and hands me a bag from the diner. “Here’s your patty melt and fries.” She sounds bitter about it. I’m guessing she hasn’t forgiven me for insinuating her husband is useless.

“I’m meeting a friend for lunch,” I tell her. “You go ahead and eat it.”

“I can’t eat this!” She shakes the bag like it’s a maraca. “I have high cholesterol.”

“If you can eat all the red meat you cook at home,” I tell her, “one patty melt isn’t going to send you to the hospital.” I’m really not in the mood for Margie today.

“Who are you having lunch with?”

There is no way I’m going to tell her the truth, so I say, “Paige.”

Sammy pipes in with, “I’m meeting my dad at the diner at twelve-thirty. Want to walk over with me?”

Super. My first, and possibly only, date with Tim is going to be witnessed by Sammy’s dad. I don’t know why the idea bothers me so much, but it does. “Sure,” I tell her. “We can ask him about Sunday then.”

I hurry into the back to check my makeup and fluff out my hair. At twelve-twenty, Sammy and I stroll out the front door. I confess, “I’m not having lunch with Paige, even though she’ll be there.”

“Really?” Sammy sounds excited. She probably doesn’t catch adults lying to their parents very often. “Who are you meeting?”

“Just a guy I went to high school with.” I don’t tell her that we reconnected on a dating app. I want as few people to know that as possible.

“Is he cute?”

“Very, but we’re just friends.” I can retract that statement on the off chance some kind of love connection occurs.

“Are you going to introduce me to him?”

I slow my pace while I think about how to answer that. It’s like my brain

and feet are powered by the same energy source and I can only do one thing at a time. “Probably not today,” I finally say.

“Because it’s a date?” Her expression morphs into one of pure enthusiasm.

“Fine, it’s a date,” I concede. “But I don’t think things are going to go well. Tim was super popular in school, and I wasn’t. We’ll probably just make small talk for a bit before going our separate ways.”

She nods her head. “That’s cool. Should we work out a sign so I can rescue you if you need me to?”

“Et tu, Brute?” I’m guessing Sammy isn’t proficient in Shakespeare yet, so the Julius Caesar quote has probably gone over her head. So, I say, “Paige wanted to know the same thing.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I said that because Tim was living in Elk Lake again, I didn’t want to use such an obvious tack if things went south. Worst case scenario, I can always claim I’m feeling sick.” Then Tim can add that to his inventory of sketchy memories of me.

When we arrive at the diner, I open the door for Sammy, before following her in. She immediately waves at her dad, who’s sitting in a booth in the corner. God, he looks good. My fingers start to fidget with the desire to touch his hair again. I don’t know what the guy does for a living, but he could seriously do shampoo commercials.

I force my gaze to move around the dining room to see if Tim is already there, but he’s not. “Let’s go ask your dad about Sunday,” I suggest to Sammy.

She has a bounce in her step as she leads the way to his table. “Hey, Dad.”

He smiles at her before he notices me. When our eyes connect, he swallows visibly and says, “Melissa.” The timbre of his voice rolls over me like warm maple syrup, which must be why I’m about to drool.

Luckily, I don’t. “I told Sammy I’d take her shopping tomorrow and help her pick out some school clothes if you’re okay with it.”

He turns his focus to his daughter. “I thought we were paddleboarding tomorrow.”

She shrugs her shoulders slightly. “It’s just that Melissa is a redhead, and I’m a redhead, and she has some idea of what I might look good in. Please, Dad.” She bats her green eyes at him.

“Where are you planning to shop?” he asks me.

“I thought we could hit a mall in Milwaukee,” I tell him. “They have a much bigger selection than we have in Elk Lake.”

“Milwaukee?” He doesn’t seem overly comfortable with the idea.

“I’ve never so much as had a speeding ticket,” I assure him.

He shakes his head. “Yes, but ...”

“Dad, please,” Sammy begs.

“On one condition,” he finally decides. “I drive.”

A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead. *He wants to come with us?* Sammy quickly sticks out her hand for him to shake. “It’s a deal.” Then she smiles at me. “That’s okay with you, isn’t it?”

Um, no. But of course, I don’t say that. Instead, I go with, “Sure. It’ll be fun.” As soon as my gaze meets Jamie’s, I know it will be anything but.

Before he can say anything else, I feel a hand on my elbow. Turning around, I stare right at Tim Ferris. “Missy?” he asks like he’s not sure I’m the same person in my profile picture.

“Tim, how are you?”

I try to lead him away, but he doesn’t budge. He seems intent on meeting Sammy and Jamie. “Hi there, I’m Tim. Missy and I went to school together.”

Jamie’s eyebrows lift in unison. “So, you’re old friends?” He shoots me a look that suggests he’s not buying it.

Tim shakes his sandy head. His hairline isn’t quite as receding as it was in his profile picture. “We barely knew each other in school. We reconnected last night on Catch.com.”

Sweet Jesus, take me now because I’m about to die from embarrassment. Who tells a stranger they’re on a dating app date? It’s akin to announcing an itchy rash on your nether regions.

Jamie looks at me questioningly, but not unkindly. Which makes my response come off as a little rude. “Is there something wrong with that?” I demand a little too hotly.

“No, not at all. In fact, I hope you have a nice lunch.”

His eyes linger on me long enough to make me squirm. How is it this man is perfectly delightful to everyone from his daughter to my mother, to a guy I went to high school with, and yet he treats me like I’m of no consequence at all? In spite of my lack of importance, I find that I still have to force myself not to throw myself into his arms. I’m so embarrassed.

CHAPTER TWELVE



MELISSA

The diner is busy, so Tim and I are lucky to get a window table. He pulls out a chair for me on the side that will unfortunately keep Jamie Riordan in my direct line of sight. Good times.

As soon as Tim pushes in my chair, he sits down across from me. “You look gorgeous.” Before I can thank him for the compliment, he adds, “I always thought so when we were kids, but I didn’t have the courage to ask you out.”

He didn’t have the courage to ask *me* out? Not likely, as he dated every cheerleader at our school. Unless, of course, he means he didn’t have the guts to defy the social order and ask out someone so low on the popularity ladder. Now *that’s* a depressing thought.

“You look very nice yourself,” I tell him as the waitress drops off our water and our menus. “What brings you back to Elk Lake?” *Also, where were you before, for how long, with whom, and do you have an arrest record?*

“My dad wants to retire. The plan was always for me to move home and take over the country club for him when he did.”

I have no idea what Tim’s dad does at the country club, so I ask, “Does he manage the place?”

“Owns it. Terry Filipo is the manager.”

Holy heck, Tim’s family owns Elk Lake Country Club? That’s huge. And intimidating. “Wow!” I exclaim a bit too loudly.

“I know country clubs are kind of passé with our generation, but I grew up there and I really loved it. It’s a sense of community within a community.”

“Do you remember Anna Walker?”

“Of course.”

“She and her husband Chris belong. They thought it was a good way to break into the Elk Lake business community when they moved here.”

He nods his head. “They’re right about that. A lot of deals go down cruising on the golf course or sipping mojitos by the pool.”

I’m unclear what his new job as owner’s son entails, so I ask, “What will you be doing?”

“There’s actually a lot to it.” He enumerates, “I help plan events for

members, charity balls, golf and tennis tournaments, and I make sure the grounds and facilities are well maintained.”

“Sounds like it keeps you pretty busy.” I didn’t grow up going to the country club, but my mom and Howard joined when they got married. Howard practically lives there.

“It’s also a great place for kids. I spent my summers there growing up.” That’s probably why I don’t remember seeing him down at the public beach where the rest of us hung out.

I pick up my menu and peruse it—as if there’s any chance I’m going to order something other than the patty melt. “Where were you before coming back to Elk Lake?” I ask.

“California. I managed a golf club in the L.A. area.”

“That sounds pretty swanky.”

“I like Elk Lake better,” he says. “Dating in L.A. is like starring in *Squid Game*. Did you catch that series on Netflix?” When I shake my head, he jokingly explains, “Lots of blood and violence.”

“So, you didn’t date a lot?”

“Oh no, I dated. But everyone is always looking for the next best thing. I lost three girlfriends to members of the club and my ex-wife left me for an NBA player she met there.”

“That’s horrible.”

“You don’t even realize how bad it is until you come back to a normal place like Elk Lake.”

“I never left,” I tell him. “I mean, I went to college, but then I came right home to join my mom’s business.”

“That sounds wonderful,” he says.

“My mom or Elk Lake?” I ask for clarification.

“Both?”

I’m silent for a stretch before admitting, “My mom has been on my last nerve lately, and while I love Elk Lake, I often wonder if I should have been more adventurous and gotten out.” You know, like to Majorca or Machu Picchu. Maybe Antarctica.

The waitress comes back and asks, “You ready to order?”

Tim and I both get the patty melt and fries which makes me wonder if we aren’t meant for each other. As I ponder this, my eyes cast around the room, and I catch sight of Jamie Riordan. He’s laughing at something Sammy is saying and I’m literally struck mute as a result. When he’s engaging with his

daughter, he only has eyes for her. Until he glances my way.

My mouth hangs open like Big Mouth Billy Bass about to sing “I Will Survive.” My stomach plummets like I’m upside down on Space Mountain going double-speed.

“Is he an ex?” I hear Tim ask from what seems like a great distance. Yet it causes me to turn and focus on him.

“Who?”

“That guy, Jamie?”

“No!” Much to my chagrin, I shout this. “I just met him yesterday. He and his daughter are new to Elk Lake.” I further explain, “Sammy sort of works for me at the bridal shop.”

“Oh.”

“Jamie is a control freak, and I actually find him quite annoying.”

“That’s a strong opinion for someone you just met,” he says.

I take a sip of pop before responding, “Some people just rub you the wrong way, you know?”

A shadow moves past our table, and I look up to see Paige standing there. “Missy?” She looks at Tim and asks, “Tim Ferris, is that you?” My friend is no actress, which causes her words to sound scripted.

Tim smiles engagingly. “Paige Holland. How are you? Do you still live in Elk Lake?”

“I’m the seventh-grade math teacher,” she offers with a small curtsy.

“That’s cool,” he says.

She turns and looks around the full diner. “I guess I better go find a place to sit. It looks like there’s a spot opening at the counter.” With a small wave, she says, “I’ll see you guys later.”

As she turns to leave, Tim asks me, “Are you two still good friends?” I wonder if he’s trying to decide if Paige’s being here is coincidental or if it was pre-planned.

I decide to come clean. “I told her we were meeting here, and she wanted to see you for herself.”

He smiles playfully. “Is there a signal if things are going spectacularly wrong?”

“No, but we discussed it.”

“What do you think she’d do if I started flashing made-up gang signs at her? Would she come running?”

“She’d probably call 911,” I tease before saying, “Watch this ...”

As soon as Paige glances at me, I start to flick my nose repeatedly. The look of confusion on her face makes it hard to keep a straight face. I look over at Tim and see he's making a cutting gesture across his neck. Poor Paige is completely puzzled.

Neither of us is surprised when she picks up her phone and calls me. I put her on the speakerphone. "What's happening?" she demands. "I thought you didn't want a signal."

Tim answers, "Did you get *my* signal? I needed you to call me so I can get out of this horrible date."

"Haha," Paige says. "I'll have you both know that having a signal is considered smart in today's day and age. One of you might be an axe murderer."

"Are you an axe murderer?" Tim asks me.

I shake my head and respond, "You?"

"Nope. How about you, Paige?"

"I'm about to be." She sounds annoyed.

"Should we ask her to join us?" Tim wants to know.

I continue to amuse myself by saying, "She might get uncomfortable when we start to make out in front of her, but if you're okay with that, so am I."

Paige hangs up and we watch as she gathers her purse and drink. When she arrives at our table, she drops her stuff next to me. "How is this a date if I'm here?"

Tim shrugs his eyebrows up and down several times before answering, "I'm in the market for a pair of sister wives. I think you two would fit the bill nicely."

"Gross." Paige sits down and demands, "So, is this a love match or what?"

"So far, it's just two people getting to know each other. Three, now that you're here. By the way, he knows your being here was planned," I tell her.

"You told him I was crashing your date?" Paige asks me.

"He worked that out on his own."

Tim smirks cockily. "I'm savvy like that. But in all seriousness, Missy and I aren't going to tell you where our next date is going to be. I should find one wife before I add to my harem."

"Our next date, huh?" I ask. I'll definitely go out with Tim again. He's surprisingly fun to be around, for someone who barely spoke to me when we

were kids.

“I figure we’ll need at least three dates before we announce the engagement.”

Pushing out my chair, I stand up. “Why don’t you and Paige discuss our nuptials while I run to the ladies’?”

I leave them chatting away as I head across the dining room. Even though Tim feels more like a friend than a possible romance, there’s no telling what might develop.

When I get to the bathroom, I hurry to do my thing. Then I refresh my lipstick—even offering my reflection an air kiss or two—before exiting the facilities and running smack into Jamie. He reaches out to catch me as I stumble backward from the impact. Yowza!

With his arms around my waist, he says, “Your date must be going well for you to be in such a hurry to get back to him.”

I can’t seem to form a response. He’s so tall and firm and he smells great. I lean into him and inhale his spicy scent. His aftershave has a hint of orange and clove in it and it’s making me weak in the knees.

Jamie moves to pull away, but I unconsciously tighten my grip on him. How mortifying.

“Are you okay?” He actually sounds concerned.

“No. I mean, yes. Yes.” I’ve become a total idiot.

“Do you need me to help you back to your table?”

“No, no, no. No. I’ve got it.”

Morgan Freeman’s voice starts to narrate the scene in my head:

Melissa thought she could keep her cool after falling into the arms of a devastatingly handsome man, but she could not ...

“I’m going to let you go then.” Jamie clearly thinks something is wrong with me. And there must be if I’m having such a reaction to him holding me.

I push away from him and nearly trip over my own foot, which causes him to reach out for me again. “I’m a little lightheaded from hunger,” I tell him, while backing away more successfully.

“What time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?” he asks.

Tomorrow? What is he talking about? Oh right, we’re going to the mall with Sammy. “How about at ten? I live above the yarn shop on Main Street.”

“Sounds good,” he says, but neither of us moves. “I’ll see you then.”

I nod my head. “Sounds like a plan.”

It’s like someone poured cement around us and it’s started to harden. If

this was one of the rom-coms Paige and I love watching so much, I'd call this a love staredown. But that's ridiculous because it's clear Jamie barely tolerates my existence.

"Enjoy your lunch," Jamie says, without making a move to leave.

"Yeah, you too."

Morgan Freeman pipes in with:

Melissa has forgotten how to walk. How awkward ...

I force my feet, one in front of the other, all the way back to my table where my patty melt has been delivered.

"Are you okay?" Tim asks. "You look a little pale."

"You look like you're going to be sick," Paige clarifies.

"I'm a little warm," I tell them after sitting down. "But other than that, I'm good." Liar. Why am I reacting to Jamie like I'm a schoolgirl in love for the first time? I do not even like the man, yet my body does not seem to have gotten the memo.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



JAMIE

“You seem to really like Melissa,” I tell my daughter as we are splitting a hot fudge sundae after our lunch.

“She’s awesome, Dad,” Sammy gushes effusively. When I don’t respond right away, she asks, “Do *you* like her?”

“I’m not going to marry her if that’s what you’re asking.” There’s a definite edge to my voice.

“I think you mentioned that yesterday.” Sammy sounds irritated. “Remember when I told you that your social life is the last thing on my mind?”

“It’s been the only thing on your mind for months.”

My daughter lifts her palms toward the ceiling like she’s balancing heavy trays on them. “Do I want you to get married? Yes. Do I think you will? No. Would I love to have someone like Melissa as a mom? Yes. Do I think there’s a snowball’s chance in July that will happen? No. Would you like me to go on?”

“No.” I put my spoon down with so much force it clangs loudly through the dining room. So much so that nearby tables turn around.

“Plus, Melissa is dating that guy Tim. And he seems great.”

“This is just their first date,” I remind her.

“Yeah, but they’ve known each other since they were kids. That’s got to make it feel more like their tenth.”

“Where do you get your information about dating?” I demand hotly.

“Same place I learned about make-out parties.” She winks at me saucily.

“Sammy ...”

“Dad ...”

We’re at a standstill.

“I’ll give you five hundred dollars to buy school clothes tomorrow.”

Her eyes bug out. “That’s a lot, thanks!”

“It’s not every day you start a new school,” I tell her. “I want you to have all the confidence in the world.”

“If only I had boobs ...”

I nearly spit out the sip of water I just took. Forcing myself to swallow, I

tell her, “You’ll get them when you’re supposed to.”

“Beth had boobs, didn’t she?”

What kind of question is that? “Yes.” I don’t elaborate further, but just hearing her mother’s name reminds me there’s something important I need to tell Sammy.

She nods her head. “Good.” Then she looks at her watch and declares, “Thanks for lunch, Dad, but I need to get going. Our next appointment is at two and I have to choose some accessories.”

She pushes out of the booth before offering me a fist bump—a gesture that has sadly taken the place of the kiss I used to get. Sammy stops off at Melissa’s table and collects her on her way out the door. That’s when I notice Paige sitting at their table. Maybe Melissa’s date didn’t go as well as I thought.

After paying the check, I walk out onto Main Street. I only take three steps before stopping in my tracks and looking around. Elk Lake looks like the set of a Hollywood movie. It’s almost too perfect to be real. Kids are playing in the park, people are walking in and out of shops, the weather is perfect.

Then why is a sour pit of dread forming in my stomach? The article I read online this morning jumps to the forefront of my brain. I wonder if Sammy will still be happy that we moved here once I tell her about Beth.

My phone starts to play “Uptown Funk,” the song I have programmed for non-contact numbers. I look down at the screen and guess. “Hey, Anna, what’s up?”

“I’ve got three appointments for you this afternoon, but I haven’t been able to get ahold of the agent for the fourth. Are you game to stop by now and get going?”

“I’m crossing the street to your office as we speak.”

“I’ll meet you in the parking lot,” she says before hanging up.

As I jaywalk across Main Street, I see Anna leave her building. She seems exceedingly happy. I hope everything works out perfectly for her little family and she never has to face some of the bumps I’ve had.

“My car or yours?” I ask as soon as she sees me.

“Let’s take mine. I’ve been kind of nauseated lately and I’d hate to make a mess in yours.”

Beth was sick for the entire nine months of her pregnancy so I’m not without sympathy. “How far along are you?” I ask.

“Nine weeks. It’s taken longer than we planned, but we’re thrilled to finally have a baby on board.”

“I think the only way to make it happen faster is to not be trying,” I tell her, remembering Beth’s reaction to finding out she was pregnant with Sam. She was not pleased.

As we get into Anna’s Honda, she says, “I know of two girls who got pregnant at sixteen in the back of Buicks. Even though I think it had more to do with their age than the kind of car, I still avoided guys with Buicks. Having said that, when Chris and I were trying, I almost suggested we get one.”

Beads of sweat form on my forehead. Sammy will be sixteen in just a little over three years. “Tell me about the houses,” I say, desperately wanting to change the subject.

Anna reverses out of her parking spot. “One of them is a fixer upper, but it’s got so much charm it might be worth it. The other two are move-in ready, but their price tags reflect that.”

“We sold our brownstone for a decent amount, so I’m good with whatever the price is so long as it feels like home.”

We drive quietly for five minutes when Anna pulls into a long driveway surrounded by trees. The house is a log home with two stories and huge windows. “I love this.” I can’t help the excitement I feel. It’s so different from anything I’d imagined us in.

Anna says, “There are five bedrooms, three baths, and over two acres of woods. You’d have your own dock and boat slip.”

After getting out of the car, we walk the flagstone path to the front door. As soon as Anna opens it, we’re hit with the smell of chocolate chip cookies. “I’m ready to make an offer.” I’m only semi-teasing.

“Don’t you dare fall for the chocolate chip cookie game. That’s an old realtor’s trick to make the house immediately feel like home.”

“Do you use it?” I ask.

She smiles widely. “I take my bread maker to showings and hit you with the aroma of baked bread.”

I release a subconscious groan. “That would work on me, too.”

We spend the next forty minutes touring the house that I will from this moment on think of as my own. There’s even a hot tub on the deck, and the view is unparalleled. “I’m not sure I need to see the other places,” I tell Anna.

“But you’re going to,” she says. “I totally get feeling like this house is the

one that was meant for you, but I want you to at least know what your options are.”

“I don’t want to lose this place though.”

“I’ll call the realtor and tell him you want to come back for a second showing with your daughter. He’ll know you’re serious then and he’ll keep me in the loop about other interest.”

The next two houses are nice, but don’t do for me what the first one did. I ask Anna, “Can I show Sammy the log house?”

She lifts a finger in the air before making a quick call. Moments later, she says, “The earliest would be ten thirty in the morning. Does that work?”

I nod my head. We’ll have to get a later start to Milwaukee, but I don’t think Sammy will mind once she sees this house.

Anna drives us back into town. I say goodbye to her before walking across the street to Bride’s Paradise. I can’t wait to tell Sammy about our new place.

As soon as I walk into the shop, I’m met by the sight of my daughter standing in front of a mirror with a bride’s veil on her head. She looks so much like her mother, even though I never got to see Beth as a bride.

Sammy catches my reflection in the mirror and calls out, “Dad, you’re early.”

“For a very good reason, though.” I walk toward her. “I think I found our new house today.”

“Really? Tell me about it.” She takes off the veil and lays it across an overstuffed pink chair.

I look around for Melissa, but don’t see her. “It’s huge, and your bedroom has its own bathroom. The walk-in closet is bigger than your bedroom in Chicago, and there’s a boat slip, along with a great outdoor hot tub.”

“When can I see it?” she asks excitedly.

“Tomorrow at ten thirty,” I tell her. “So, we’ll have a later start to the mall.”

“We need to buy a boat.”

“Let’s get the house first,” I tell her. “I forgot to mention the best part. It’s a log home.” Sammy used to beg to move into a log house during her Lincoln Log phase as a kid.

Before Sammy can respond, Melissa walks out of the back room with her arms full of wedding dresses. “Are you talking about the house on Wauwatosa Lane?”

“Do you know it?” I ask.

“I used to live next door before my parents got divorced. I was friends with a girl whose family lived there for a while. We even buried a time capsule on the grounds when we were in seventh grade.”

“Did you ever dig it up?” Sammy wants to know.

Melissa shakes her head. “I looked for it a couple of times but forgot where we put it.”

Before I can stop her, Sammy says, “Come with us to see the house. We’re going shopping right after that.”

I want to see the house with my daughter alone, but I don’t know how to say that without seeming rude. Melissa looks at me as though she’s asking my permission, so I bob my head sharply. “We’ll still pick you up at ten,” I tell her. “Then we’ll see the house on our way to Milwaukee.”

Melissa walks over to Sammy and drops her load of dresses on the same chair my daughter put her veil on. “Wait until you see the secret passage.”

“What secret passage?” I demand. I didn’t see a secret passage.

Melissa shrugs. “It leads from the garage to the boat house. It’s totally cool.”

I’m suddenly happy Melissa is coming with us. I’m a sucker for a good secret passage. Now if only one of the bookshelves in the living room pops open and leads to Narnia.

“I know it’s a little early, but do you mind if I take Sammy home now?” I ask.

“Not at all,” Melissa says while walking to the register. She opens it and pulls out forty dollars to hand to my daughter. Sammy reaches out to take it but watches my reaction the whole time.

“You can have it if you earned it,” I tell her.

She pockets it before giving Melissa a hug. I simply turn and walk out the door. Once we walk out onto the street, I tell her, “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“There’s something I need to talk to you about, too.”

“Do you want to go first?” I ask.

When she shakes her head, I change direction and lead her to the park where we sit side-by-side on a bench. “I found out something about your mom.”

“What?” Her face drains of all color.

“Beth is moving to Chicago to head a new marketing agency.” I can’t tell

exactly what thoughts are going through Sam's head, but none of them look good. "Are you okay?" I ask after several silent moments.

"Not really. Did she call you and tell you? Did she say she wanted to meet me?"

My heart breaks into a million tiny pieces. "I read an article online."

"So, she didn't even tell you herself?" Sammy's voice cracks like she's having a hard time reining in her emotions.

"No."

"When is she coming?"

"Sometime this fall," I tell her. "Are you sorry we moved here?"

Sammy looks up at the sky as though trying to keep gravity from releasing the tears that have formed in her eyes. "I'm happy we're here. I don't want to live in a place if Beth is going to be there."

For the life of me, I don't know why Beth would plan to move to Chicago without talking to me first. While it's true we haven't spoken in nearly twelve years, this is the kind of thing that warrants contact. I reach out and tenderly take my daughter's hand in mine. "We don't need her, Sammy. We're doing great on our own." And while I've always believed that, I'm starting to wonder if that isn't just a lie I've been telling myself.

"Yeah, we don't need her." Sammy's enthusiasm is underwhelming.

"What did you want to talk to me about?" I ask, hoping a change of subject will make her happy.

She looks up at me with sad puppy dog eyes. "It doesn't matter now."

My poor baby. I make a mental note to call Beth and give her a piece of my mind. It would be one thing if she came back to the US and lived in New York City or Los Angeles. But coming back to Chicago changes the game entirely.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



MELISSA

Anna walks into the shop ten minutes before closing. “Not you again,” I tease. I may have been mad at her last night when I found out she set up a Catch.com profile for me, but I’m not upset anymore.

“Nice to see you too.” She walks past me and goes straight to one of the lounge chairs. Once seated, she demands, “How was your date with Tim?”

“He’s a nice guy,” I reluctantly tell her.

“And?”

“And Paige joined us so we’re going to give our first date another shot in a more private location.”

“Why was Paige there?” She sounds shocked.

I lock the door and turn over the open sign before sitting down on the chair next to her. “I told her where we were going, and she couldn’t resist the temptation.”

“I would have come too, had I known it was a party. But it turns out I was busy setting up appointments for a new client. You’ll never guess who that is.”

“You’re Jamie’s realtor?” Before she can confirm this, I add, “I’m going along to see the log home tomorrow.”

“Really, why?” It’s her turn to be confused.

“Sammy and I have a back-to-school shopping date that Jamie would only approve of if he got to drive. We’re going to see the house on our way to Milwaukee.”

Anna arches an eyebrow like she’s inspecting a particularly gnarly bug under a microscope. This forces me to add, “I would have canceled the shopping trip altogether, but Sammy needs some help from a fellow redhead. The least I can do is suffer through one day with her grumpy dad.”

“If you say so.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you hardly know Sammy, so the least you could do is nothing. Instead, you’re taking an entire day out of your weekend to help her out.”

“I like her,” I say truthfully. “Plus, I know how hard seventh grade can be

and if I can do anything to make her transition easier, I'm happy to do it."

Anna slips off her flats and puts her feet up on the pincushion stool in front of her chair. "So, it has nothing to do with her dad?"

"I offered to take her shopping before I knew he was joining us. So, no. Now tell me about the house. Isn't it too big for the two of them?"

"It's huge, but Jamie loved it so much I don't think that's an issue for him."

"Did you ever get inside when Stacy Snell lived there?" I ask. She shakes her head. "Jamie said you didn't show him the secret passage to the boat house."

"What secret passage?"

"The one under the garage." How can realtors not know about this?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she says. "You'll have to show me tomorrow."

I stand up and stretch out my back before saying, "I'm going to lock up. Do you want to go out for a salad or something?"

"No, Chris is meeting me at home. We're telling his parents about the baby tonight."

"They'll be thrilled," I predict.

"His mom will probably burst into tears and declare it's the end of the world," she says. "You know that woman has never liked me."

"That will end when her first grandbaby arrives," I predict.

Anna closes her eyes and mumbles, "Dare to dream."

She's quiet for so long, I ask, "Are you falling asleep?"

Her eyes blink slowly. "I'm tired all the time. Seriously, getting dressed exhausts me so much I just want to go back to sleep."

"It's hard work growing humans," I tell her.

She slowly stands up. "I better get going before I spend the night in your shop. I'll see you in the morning."

"See you." Once she's gone, I hurry to grab my purse and follow her out. After locking the door behind me, I decide to get takeout from Noodle House. The alternative would be nuking yet another frozen dinner—which would be my fourth this week—and I'm getting sick of those.

As I head in the direction of my favorite pad thai, I spot a familiar duo sitting in the park. Sammy's head is leaning against her dad's shoulder, and she's looking like her world has just ended. I feel physically drawn to cross the street to see if she's okay, but I force myself to resist the urge. Not only

do I barely know the girl, but her dad appears to have the situation in hand. Also, I can't imagine Jamie would appreciate my presence.

Sammy reminds me a lot of myself as a kid. Scared, excited, eager to please. I never had the self-assurance necessary to catapult me to popularity, but even so, I had a pretty decent upbringing. And after hearing about Sammy's past social difficulties, I'm determined to help her start her Elk Lake schooling career with a bang.

There isn't too much of a line at Noodle House, so it doesn't take long to procure my food and get home. Once I'm through my door, I pull my dress over my head while walking to the bedroom. After slipping on my silky pink nightgown, I pour myself a glass of sparkling water and transfer my dinner to a plate. Then I sit on the couch to eat.

The number one thought that fills my brain is of Jamie Riordan. The man is impossible to read. On the few occasions we've met, he has seemed annoyed by my existence. Which makes the scene in the diner today stand out as very strange. Was it my imagination or was the man wrestling with an emotion other than irritation when he was holding me in his arms outside of the bathroom?

My entire body starts to tingle at the memory—the sensation starting at my toes and ending with my scalp feeling like it's about to jump off my head. How can this man affect me so intensely when I'm pretty sure I don't even like him? Especially since I feel confident that, despite the looks he sometimes gives me, he isn't that crazy about me.

Which brings my thoughts to Tim. Tim is personable, funny, and easy on the eyes. If that isn't enough, he's clearly looking for a real relationship, which is a huge plus in the dating game. We laughed so much today that I can't wait to see him again. The question is, do I feel romantic feelings toward him? Do I want to kiss him?

The vision that pops into my head causes me to gasp out loud in shock. It's an image of me with my arms wrapped around a man, kissing the stuffing out of him. But that man isn't Tim.

It's Jamie.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



JAMIE

“Did you always want to be a dad?” Sammy asks on our way home from the park.

“Yes,” I tell her plainly. Although the truth is, I wasn’t motivated by actual parenthood so much as I was driven to create a family. A family that included kids, but also two parents.

“Did Beth talk about wanting kids before you got pregnant with me?”

This is a question I’ve thought about a lot over the years. And every time I try to navigate the minefield of memories, I’m shocked by what I recall. Beth didn’t talk about kids. She talked about all the things she wanted us to do, and in my head, I always assumed that children were part of that.

“Beth had a lot of plans for her life,” I tell my daughter. “But I don’t think having a family was at the top of her list.” I know this hurts her to hear, but I’ve never wanted to misguide my daughter regarding the reality of her mother. Better to have harsh truths than false hopes.

“Did she want to abort me?” Sammy’s voice quivers.

“The topic of abortion was never brought up,” I tell her honestly. “I think your mom wanted to want you.”

“Like I want to have straight A’s, but I’m not willing to do the work to have them?” Bingo.

“The difference is that you’re smart enough to get straight A’s. I’m not sure Beth’s organic makeup would have ever allowed her to be the kind of mother you needed.”

“So, you got stuck raising me on your own.” Sammy sounds so defeated.

“I know you feel rejected, honey,” I tell her, “but I always wanted you, and I’ve always felt like the luckiest man in the world that I get to be your dad.”

She snuffles quietly while trying to get a grip on her emotions. My wanting Sammy is a conversation we’ve had dozens of times, and no matter how often we talk about it, she can never seem to fully accept the magnitude of my truth. I need her like I need air to breathe.

“I never even got to know my other grandparents,” she says. Beth’s parents died in an airplane crash during our junior year of college. I’ve often

wondered if that horrific event didn't damage her in some irrevocable way. Sammy continues, "Maybe if I knew them, I wouldn't be so sad about her."

"Maybe," I tell her. But the truth is that had Beth's parents lived, she probably would have felt too guilty to leave us when she did. And I'm convinced that would have meant a harder ending for both Sammy and me when the time came.

Neither one of us says anything for several moments, when I point to a tree. And just like that, we fall into the rhyme game.

"Tree," Sammy says.

"Me," I reply.

"Bee."

"Free."

"Shopping spree!" she squeals excitedly before asking, "Are you going to drop me and Melissa off at the mall and pick us up later?"

I hadn't really thought about it. "Is that what you want?"

She shrugs. "I'm happy to have you along, but you can't act bored or ask if we're almost done every two minutes."

"Does that even sound like me?" *The answer is yes.*

"You are the world's worst clothes shopper," she tells me. "Grandma has had to take me for every important purchase because you tell me that everything looks fine and if I like something in one color, I should buy it in six so that we can be done shopping."

"I do that?"

"Dad."

"I know. I'm sorry, Sam. I promise that tomorrow I'll act like I have all the time in the world, and I won't hurry you in any way." It may kill me, but I'm committed.

"We'll see."

When we get back to our house, Sammy declares, "Let's put our swimming suits on and go down to the dock."

"What about supper?" I ask.

"We can have a bowl of cereal when we come back up to the house." Cereal for supper is one of our guilty pleasures.

Sammy and I spend nearly three hours down by the lake. While we jump in and out of the water, she tells me everything about her day. And a lot of what she talks about is Melissa.

"Did you know that Melissa was engaged, and her fiancé died in a car

crash?” she asks.

“That’s very sad,” I say before asking, “Was that recently?”

“Three years ago. He hadn’t asked her yet, but he was going to. His mother gave Melissa the ring at his funeral.”

“That had to be rough.”

“I know, right?” Sammy jumps into the water. When her head bobs to the surface, she adds, “But it must have been comforting to know how much he loved her.”

“Life is hard for a lot of people, Sammy.” I like to remind her of this so that she doesn’t always feel like the world is gunning for her alone. Although, it’s certainly done its fair share of damage.

“It is,” she agrees while pulling herself back up onto the dock. “But now that Melissa is dating Tim, I predict they’ll fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after.”

I don’t know why that thought bothers me so much, but it does. “They’ve only been on one date,” I remind her.

“Sometimes one date is all it takes.” Her eyes glaze over wistfully.

“Maybe in the movies, but that’s not true in real life.”

“Do you know that some Indian couples meet at the altar?” she asks.

“And how many of them get divorced?” I want to know.

“Fewer than you might expect. According to the Midwestern Matchmaker, a successful marriage is about choosing to be in love with someone. It’s not some big chemical explosion.”

Ignoring that last pearl of wisdom, I pick up my towel to dry off. “Are you telling me you want to meet your husband on your wedding day?”

“No. I’m just saying that happiness can be about nothing more than you wanting to be happy. That’s something you say a lot.”

“I do. But I also think you might want to know your future husband for longer than ten minutes before you vow to love him forever.”

Sammy throws her towel at me. “You’re no fun.”

I take a step toward her. “I’m no fun? Me?” Then I reach out to her and pick her up while she squeals in delight. “Would someone who’s no fun do *this*?” I swing her around and around before tossing her into the lake.

Sammy hits with a loud splash and comes up to the surface of the water laughing.

“You better watch out, Dad. I’m going to get even when you least expect it.”

“Is that so?” I run to the end of the pier while she climbs out of the water.

“You’re safe for now,” she calls after me. “But I *am* going to get even with you.”

As we walk up the path to our rental, I tell her, “You’re going to love our new house. The deck is probably twice as big as this one, and it’s on a higher hill, so the view is out of this world.”

“Did you figure out where we’ll put the Christmas tree?” she wants to know.

“We have time to work on that, don’t you think?”

“If the house is as big as you say, we might need a couple of trees.” Sammy has always loved Christmas more than anyone I know.

“One for each of us?” I tease.

“We might need one for Rose, too.”

“Let’s get the house before we get the dog,” I tell her.

Once we’re inside, we both change into something dry before meeting back at the kitchen table. “You in the mood for a nice bowl of high fiber cereal?” This is something my mom asks my dad every morning.

Sammy mimics my dad’s deep baritone. “Just break some bark off a tree for me.”

We both laugh while I take the Golden Grahams out of the cabinet. I pull out two bowls next and fill them to the rim before pouring in the milk. Carrying our feast over to the table, I declare, “I might even have seconds.”

We’re nearly finished eating when my daughter announces, “I’m glad we’re here, Dad.”

“Me, too.”

“I think Elk Lake is going to change us in all the best ways. I’m going to make good friends here.”

I’ve been desperate to see the return of Sammy’s optimism. Up until now, she’s talked a good game, but she’s been afraid to believe in a happy future. For instance, we’d gone months without talking about Beth when Sammy started having trouble with her friends. As that trouble progressed, so did her feelings of abandonment. To hear her sound so excited about this fresh start makes me feel light enough to fly.

Yet, I come crashing to the ground when a vision of her first friend comes to mind. Melissa is kind, beautiful, and appealing in all kinds of dangerous ways, which is why, no matter how much Sammy likes her, I need to keep my distance.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



MELISSA

I'm not sure why I'm taking such pains to look nice today, I'm only going to the mall. Yet the truth pokes at me relentlessly while I ponder the inside of my closet. As stupid as it sounds, I want to look good for Jamie.

Why would I make such an effort for someone who's been nothing but dismissive toward me? It's clear as a summer day that Jamie only sees me as his daughter's boss. I'm no more special than the paint on the walls or a rug by the door, yet I want him to think I'm pretty. How pathetic is that?

After slipping on a deep purple blouse and pairing it with a white A-line linen skirt, I cinch my waist with a woven gold chain. Then I dig through a pile of shoes for matching sandals. Once I accessorize with a pair of large gold hoop earrings, I peer into the full-length mirror before declaring my visage complete. This is as good as it gets.

I'm too anxious to eat anything. So, in lieu of breakfast, I simply sit on my sofa and wait for Sammy and Jamie to arrive. As soon as their SUV pulls up in front of my building, I hurry out of my apartment. I'm on the street before either of them can get out of the car to retrieve me.

I offer a quick knock on the back door before opening it and getting in. "Good morning!" My enthusiasm equals being picked up for a spa day or a trip to Paris.

"Hey, Melissa." Sammy moves to open her door. "You can sit up front."

"Not necessary," I tell her. "I have a stomach of steel and I never get carsick."

"But you're an adult."

"It's your car." We've reached a stalemate.

"Fine," she decides, "but you get to ride up front on the way to Milwaukee."

Jamie looks in the rearview mirror and makes eye contact with me. "Good morning, Melissa."

Staring into his piercing blue eyes for a beat too long, I finally reply, "Jamie. Thanks for driving."

I'm having a hard time deciphering what his grunted response means. Does it mean, *no problem, I'm happy to have you along* or *this day is going*

to be more painful than a root canal without sedation? Please let it be that he's happy I'm going with them. Otherwise, this day is going to be total agony.

I don't try to make any conversation while we navigate the winding road to the house we're going to see. Not because I'm trying to be rude, but because I can't think while looking at the back of Jamie's head. I want to lean in and smell his wavy dark hair. An excess of saliva forms in my mouth until I start feeling like a rabid dog.

Thankfully, Sammy keeps up a steady chatter so there are no awkward moments. By the time we pull into the driveway, I've reminded myself multiple times that nothing of a personal nature is going to develop between me and Jamie. While I can't claim to be unaffected by his presence, the man treats me with the warmth of a December day in Antarctica. That's as clear a sign as any that my interest is not returned.

Anna is standing in the doorway waving when we arrive. As we get out of the car, she calls out, "I brought donuts."

"You don't eat donuts," I remind her. Anna limits her fried food to french fries.

"I may not eat them," she says while patting her stomach. "But this little guy loves them."

Jamie introduces Sammy and Anna once we arrive at the front door.

"This place is amazing," Sammy declares excitedly.

"Wait until you see the inside," Anna tells her while stepping aside to make room for us to come in.

Sammy stares in awe at the huge open room that greets us. The vaulted ceiling with floor-to-ceiling windows makes the space feel like an extension of the woods—like we're in a magical tree house. "I've always loved this room," I say. "Stacy and I used to put our sleeping bags in front of the fire and pretend we were sleeping outside."

"Why didn't you just sleep outside?" Jamie wants to know.

"Mosquitos," Anna and I answer at the same time.

"So, kids in Wisconsin don't camp?"

"Some do," I tell him. "But I'm a mosquito magnet."

"We can sleep outside sometime," Sammy tells her dad. "We can set up a glamping tent."

"What's that?" he asks.

"You know, like a full-on bedroom outdoors. We can bring our

mattresses from our beds, some comfy chairs, and maybe even a dresser and chandelier.”

“You must be joking.” He sounds appalled.

“Of course I’m joking,” Sammy says. “I love to play outside, but I’d rather sleep inside. Less chance of alien abduction.” She laughs nervously.

“A girl after my own heart.” I ruffle the back of her hair. “Alien abduction is second on my list of reasons I don’t camp.”

“Do you guys want to walk around on your own, or do you want me to give you the grand tour?” Anna asks. She points to both me and Jamie. “You two already have the layout.”

“Can you show me which room would be mine, Anna?” Sammy asks.

As they walk toward the hall, Jamie calls after them, “Melissa and I will show ourselves around.” As soon as they’re out of the room, he orders, “Please take me to that secret passageway.”

“Sammy wants to see it too. Why don’t we wait for her?”

“I want to make sure it’s safe. If I don’t like how it looks then I’ll tell her we’re filling it in before we move here.”

“Why wouldn’t it be safe?” I ask.

“Call me crazy, but a secret passage in the woods that no one knows about doesn’t exactly instill feelings of confidence.”

“I know about it,” I tell him as I lead him to the staircase that takes us to the lower level. He follows behind as I open the door to the garage. Pointing toward a rug on the cement, I say, “It’s under there.”

He walks over to the area before crouching down to roll the carpet back. Once he sees the seam of the passage entrance, he looks at me with a confused expression. “How do you open it?”

I look around for the metal ruler that Stacy’s family used to have hanging from a string on the wall, but I don’t see it. Instead, I take a screwdriver off the work bench and hand it to him. “This should do the trick.”

Jamie still doesn’t look sold, but he takes the screwdriver anyway and inserts it into the crack to leverage the door open. Instead of the door popping up, it moves down and slides backward along the ceiling of the corridor below. “It’s as dark as midnight down there.” He sounds concerned.

As soon as I flip a switch on the wall, the opening illuminates. “There’s also a light switch down there.” When he doesn’t immediately descend the ladder, I say, “Move over. I’ll lead the way.”

“I don’t think it’s safe for you to go down there.”

“What? Why?”

“What if the ladder breaks?”

I peek over the opening in the floor and answer, “It’s metal.”

“What if there are rats down there?”

“What if there aren’t?”

“Fine.” He blocks me from moving in front of him. “But I’m going first.” I roll my eyes while resisting the urge to pop off a comment about toxic masculinity. Between the two of us, I’m the expert here.

Jamie turns around and lowers his legs through the opening in the floor. Once his head disappears, I make my move to join him. “Give me a minute,” he calls out, causing me to halt. After a few seconds he adds, “Okay, come on down.”

I scoot through the opening and situate my feet on the ladder. I quickly descend three steps before pushing back to jump down like we used to do when we were kids. Unfortunately, Jamie is standing so close to the ladder that when I jump, I land right on top of him. We go down like a demolished building.

After the inevitable crash, I demand, “Why were you standing so close to the ladder?”

“I was holding it for you so that it didn’t tip over on you.” He sounds as annoyed as I am.

“It can’t fall,” I tell him. “It’s attached to hooks in the concrete.”

“How was I supposed to know that?”

“I don’t know, by using your eyes?” I shift to push myself up onto my elbows. Jamie does not make for the softest landing. As my body moves across his, he releases a pained groan. “Are you hurt?” I’m guessing a hundred and forty pounds dropping on anyone could cause some serious damage.

“I’m ... um... not really hurt.”

If he’s not hurt, what is he carrying on about? And that’s when the shock of my current position hits me like a punch in the gut. I’m lying on top of Jamie!

I hurry to move my knee to the ground so I can slide off him, but I miss the mark—and wind up kneeling him right in the fellas.

“Stop!” he yells. “You’re going to turn me into a eunuch.”

“I’m trying to get off of you.”

But instead of pushing me away to facilitate our separation, he pulls me

closer so that I'm lying along his entire length. He puts one arm around me and rolls us both so that I'm under him. Sweet mother of God, my entire body wakes up with an electric awareness. This is a delicious torture.

"Jamie ..." His name escapes my mouth like the last gasp of air before I shed my mortal coil for more heavenly pursuits. Although if there are more heavenly pursuits than this, I can't imagine them.

"Shh ..." He doesn't move to get up, he just lies on me, wreaking havoc with my senses.

I force my gaze to his face. He looks like he's in pure agony. "Jamie," I try again.

"My God, woman, can't you be quiet for a minute?"

Suddenly my bones feel like they're starting to melt. Why is he so mad? Then the truth hits me. Jamie is turned on by our current situation and he's trying to calm himself down. Which of course ignites a fire in me.

The most gorgeous man I've probably ever seen is lying on top of me, and he's totally affected by the situation. I squirm underneath him which causes him to groan again. "Please stop moving."

"Why?" I practically purr. "Are you uncomfortable?"

"I'm currently in a world of agony," he growls.

I don't know what comes over me, but I take that as an invitation. I move my arms up along his sides until they're free. Then I cup either side of his face and raise my mouth to meet his.

The feeling of our lips touching defies description. It's pure pleasure, it's torment, it's a coming home like I've never experienced before. Every nerve ending in my body is alive and tingling. My heart is beating in overdrive. I have not kissed a man in nearly a year, and I do not remember it being anything like this all-consuming inferno.

He's definitely kissing me back, which makes it even more surprising when he rolls off me and demands, "What was that all about?"

Wait, what? "What was what all about?" I sound like a frightened mouse.

"Why did you just kiss me?"

This is not how this scene would play out in the movies. A thousand thoughts race through my brain, the winner being that I watch too many movies. "I thought you wanted ... I mean, you know, with you lying on me ... And groaning ... I thought ..."

"My knee popped out of the socket when you landed on me," he says sternly. "It's an old college football injury."

Heat floods my face until I'm sure I'm about to spontaneously combust. Not only am I totally and completely confused, I'm mortified. "So, you were groaning in real pain?"

"What other kind of pain is there?" he demands.

"I thought ..." Forget what I thought. I can never look at this man again. I'm going to have to sell out to my mom and leave Elk Lake. Heck, I'm going to have to leave the state. Maybe even the country. "I'll go back up and call an ambulance," I tell him.

"I don't need an ambulance." He shifts to the side before sitting up. He positions his hands around his knee and jolts the joint back into the socket. The popping sound is so loud, a wave of nausea rolls over me.

"I'm sorry." My words are no more than a whisper.

He stands up and shakes his leg before asking, "What?"

"I said I'm sorry. You know, for kissing you." Instead of meeting his gaze, I stare at his chin. When I finally look into his eyes, his expression is undecipherable. He looks angry, confused, and oddly determined. Reaching his hands out, he pulls me to my feet. Yet once I'm there, he doesn't release me.

"I'm afraid I didn't enjoy our kiss." *Well, that's rude.* "But that's probably only because my knee was hurting so badly." *Oh.*

"I don't throw myself at men as a rule."

"Then why was I so lucky?" I can't tell if he's serious or teasing me. I try to take a step back, but Jamie won't release me. "Oh no, Melissa," he says. "You aren't going to get away before you know what it's like to really kiss me."

I forget to breathe as his mouth descends upon mine. Our lips reunite in a burst of longing. Jamie quickly turns me so that my back is up against the wall. He takes a step closer until there's no space between us. As his hands begin to move along my sides, he deepens the kiss and once again groans like he's hurt.

I force myself to stop kissing him long enough to ask, "Is it your knee again?"

"Not my knee ... It's you ... *You* are doing this to me." He stops talking and takes our kiss to a new level of torture.

I don't know how long we're connected, five minutes, an hour, three months? All I know is that it's the most spectacular thing that has ever happened to me. It's romance-novel satisfying, which suddenly makes me

question every other kiss I've ever had.

I'm about to declare these feelings out loud, when Jamie suddenly stops. He steps backward, severing all connection between us.

"What are you doing?" I feel like a child who's had her ice cream taken away.

"I was showing you what it's like to kiss me when I'm not in excruciating pain." Yet his expression clearly indicates he's still hurting.

I'm not sure how to respond. "Thank you?"

"You're welcome. Now let's see what the rest of this passageway looks like." He walks away without turning back.

What just happened? Did Jamie declare romantic intentions toward me? Was he just kissing me because I kissed him? Are we going to start dating? I have absolutely no clue what's going on. All I know is that I'm not done kissing Sammy's dad.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



JAMIE

Holy crap! If I hadn't forced myself to stop kissing Melissa, I guarantee I would be halfway to trying to consummate our tenuous friendship. Although, I don't really think friendship is the word for it. Melissa Corner intrigues me like no one has for a very long time—probably since Beth.

I was serious when I told Sammy I wouldn't pursue any kind of connection with her boss. I thought I'd made it clear enough to Melissa, as well. Then why in the heck did she kiss me? And more importantly, why did I kiss her back?

The answer to the last question is quite simple. I wanted to show her what it was like to kiss me when I wasn't in agony. Also, because I've been thinking about doing little else since meeting her. As I walk along the cement corridor, I try to decide what I'm going to do now. I have to say something to Melissa so she's clear this was a one-off.

When I reach the end of the passageway, I stop and wait for her. She walks toward me slowly, thrusting one foot in front of the other like she's creeping toward the executioner's block. When she's finally within a few feet of me, I tell her, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." Confusion furrows her brow.

"You're sorry for kissing me?" She sounds insulted.

"*You* were sorry for kissing *me*," I retort.

"I was sorry for misreading your signals." She lowers her chin and lifts her eyes sheepishly. "The kiss was nice."

It was nice. It was more than nice. "The thing is," I tell her. "I'm not interested in dating anyone."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't want to date you," I tell her. This declaration sounds overly harsh, but I don't know how else to make myself clear.

"I see." She tips her head to the side. After a beat, she adds, "Actually, I don't see. Why would you kiss me like that if you don't want to date me?"

"You kissed me first," I say. "And I'm only human."

"So, your kiss was a retaliation?" Yeah, she's mad.

"Melissa," I step toward her, causing her to retreat in the opposite

direction. "I'm not interested in dating anyone. It's not personal."

She looks down at her skirt and brushes a smudge of dirt off it before asking, "Why aren't you interested in dating?"

"Because I don't want to confuse Sammy anymore. She already has to deal with the fact that her mother doesn't want her, and I don't want her to get her hopes up about someone else being her mother."

"Have you dated at all since Sammy's mom left?" She sounds horrified.

"I'm not a monk," I tell her. "But I don't introduce my dates to my daughter."

"You haven't gotten serious with anyone in all that time?"

I shake my head firmly. "There were one or two I might have taken things further with had I not had a child, but I don't trust anyone else to put Sammy's best interests above their own. I'm her parent. She's my responsibility."

Melissa shifts from foot to foot. "I don't want to marry you. Heck, I don't even know you, and up until five minutes ago I thought you hated me. But wouldn't Sammy be better off with a father and stepmother than just a dad?"

"I'm a great dad."

"I'm sure you are," she says kindly. "But Sammy is missing out on a mom and you're both missing out on more kids."

"Look, Melissa, there isn't anything you can say to me that I haven't rolled around my brain a thousand times before. The bottom line is that Sammy has already lost the most important person in her life. I can't risk that again."

"What happened with your wife?" she asks pointedly.

"We weren't married," I tell her. "We were together for a lot of years, and we planned on getting married someday. When Beth got pregnant, we set the date for after Sammy was born."

"But she left before that could happen?"

"Beth had serious postpartum depression and she never really bonded with Sammy. When Sammy was still a baby, she took a job in London. She didn't want us to join her until she knew she wanted to stay there. By the time I saw her again, she'd made her break with us and wasn't interested in reuniting our family."

"Has she seen Sammy since?" The horror in Melissa's voice is the same as everyone else who hears our story.

"I asked her to stay away until she was willing to set up regular visitation.

I didn't want my daughter to struggle with feelings of abandonment during her entire upbringing. That's the reason I don't want a long-term relationship with another woman."

After studying my face like she's trying to commit it to memory, Melissa says, "I'm sorry for what you and Sammy have been through."

"Thank you for understanding."

"Would you have wanted to date me if you didn't have a daughter?" she asks, sounding equal parts hopeful and hurt.

"You're a lovely woman and I would have liked nothing more," I tell her truthfully.

"So, we're going to be friends?" God, she's beautiful. I would do anything in this moment if it meant I could take our kiss back. It's agony knowing how perfect our chemistry is and not being able to do anything about it.

I shake my head. "I don't think that's wise. It's clear we're attracted to each other, so friendship doesn't seem like a viable option. I think we should keep our relationship purely professional."

"You mean like I'm your daughter's employer and nothing more?"

"You're also her friend," I say. "And that means the world to both of us."

"So, we're just going to pretend that we never kissed?"

"I think that's for the best."

The tension in the air is palpable, and I can't read Melissa's expression to save my life. If forced to guess, I might say her anger is bordering on murderous. She suddenly springs to life and walks past me to the ladder by the exit. She begins to climb before opening the hatch. I half-expect her to close it before I can join her, but she doesn't.

When I follow her up the ladder, I discover the exit is close to the dock. I look around for Melissa. "I didn't notice this door when I came out here yesterday."

"Secret passages generally blend in for a reason." She turns her back toward me and walks to the end of the dock. I don't join her for fear that the temptation to push me into the lake would be too great for her to resist.

Melissa eventually wanders back in my direction. "We should get moving if we're going to get a day of shopping in."

I lead the way back to the passage. "After you," I say, hoping to at least appear chivalrous. Shy of that, as gallant as possible after kissing her before telling her I don't want to date her.

“You go ahead,” she says. “I’ll walk up the path.”

“I’ll walk with you,” I hurriedly offer.

“Then I’ll take the secret passage.”

Ah, she doesn’t want to be alone with me. “Okay,” I say. “You take the path and I’ll meet you back at the house.” She’s on her way before I even finish my sentence.

I feel terrible about what’s transpired between me and Melissa today; I’m sick at the thought that I might have hurt her feelings. But it wasn’t totally my fault; the woman kissed me first, and what a kiss it was. As I retrace my steps down the corridor toward what I hope will be my new house, it occurs to me that every time I take this path, I’m going to remember that kiss.

I might have to fill the passage in with cement after all. If for no other reason than to try to forget the most enticing thing that’s happened to me in a very long time.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



MELISSA

I'm so mad right now I could spit bullets— and not regular ones, either. The kind that explode into a billion pieces on impact. Who in the world kisses someone like Jamie just kissed me before telling them he doesn't even want to be friends?

I stomp harder with every step like I'm trying to turn a vat of grapes into wine. The image of that old *I Love Lucy* episode pops into my head and I fantasize Jamie is with me so I can do to him what Lucy did to that Italian lady. Grr.

When I get to the house, I march up the steps to the front door. Everything feels different as I step inside. The air, the energy—is the paint color on the wall dingier than before? “Sammy? Anna? Where are you?” I call out.

“We're in the back bedroom!” Sammy shouts. “Hurry up! You have to see this!” Her excitement causes my annoyance to slow to a simmer.

She's in the room that used to be Stacy's. Not only does it have its own bathroom, but decades ago someone knocked a wall down and turned a smaller bedroom into a walk-in closet.

I peek into the blush-pink-colored room. When I don't see Sammy, I walk in and take a left into the closet. She's sitting on the floor staring up at a twinkling chandelier in wonder. “Can you believe this closet?”

“It's changed a lot since I saw it last,” I tell her while looking around. Someone has clearly spent a fortune on a closet system. There are half racks, full racks, built-in shoe racks, and even a purse display. “Forget the bedroom, you should live in *here*.”

“I know, right? I wish Dad would let me post on social media. I'd love to show those girls in Chicago that I've come out on top.”

“It's probably good to keep your new life as far away from them as you can,” I caution.

“But I want revenge.”

“Revenge *fantasies* will get you through a lot of hard times,” I tell her. “But fantasies are better than the real thing.”

“Why?” she wants to know.

Stepping farther into the closet, I sit down next to her. “Because tangible revenge is hard to come by. Also, you don’t want to put any negativity into the world.”

“I’m not talking about hurting them. Just showing them how well I’m doing.”

I nod my head slowly. “I get it, Sammy. I really do. But the bottom line is that you need to live your life in the present and let the past go. If you keep turning around and looking behind you, you’re going to miss some great stuff that’s right in front of you.”

“You sound like a therapist.”

“That was a speech my therapist gave to me after my fiancé died.” I look around and ask, “Where’s Anna?”

“In the bathroom. She says she goes all the time now.”

“That’s one part of pregnancy I’m not looking forward to,” I tell her.

“When do you think you’ll get pregnant? If you do it soon then I can be your babysitter.”

“Sammy ...” We both look up to see that Jamie has joined us.

“Shh, Dad,” Sammy says. “Melissa was about to tell me when she’s going to have a baby.”

His eyebrows raise in either interest or alarm—it’s hard to tell with him. So, I dive in and say, “I don’t want to have a baby on my own. I want to get married first.”

“What about that Tim guy?” she wants to know. “He seems really nice.”

“He is very nice and kind,” I confirm while shooting Jamie a withering look. “And if things go well, then he might actually be the guy I marry.”

“I don’t want to be pushy,” Sammy says, “but I could be a junior bridesmaid?” She looks up at her dad and smiles. “Wouldn’t that be great, Dad?”

“Fantastic.” He clearly doesn’t mean it.

“What did you think of the secret passageway?” Sammy asks. “Was it cool? Was it safe?”

Jamie and I exchange an uncomfortable glance before I tell her, “It was fine. Nothing special.”

He adds, “I think with a little bit of maintenance we’ll be able to use it. That is, if you like the house and want to live here.”

Sammy jumps to her feet and races toward her dad. Once her arms are around him, she declares, “I want to move in today!”

“We should probably wait until the other people move out, don’t you think?”

“Maybe,” she concedes. Then she gestures around the closet. “We better get to the mall. I have a huge closet to fill.”

“I’m not sure Melissa can still go to the mall,” Jamie tells his daughter, causing her to spin around toward me.

“You can’t go?” she asks. “What happened?”

“I think your dad is trying to say that *he* can’t go. He fell and hurt his knee. So, if he won’t let me drive you, we’ll have to postpone.”

“Dad, are you okay? What happened?” Sammy sounds worried.

“Melissa jumped on me and nearly broke my knee.” *The big, fat liar.*

“What?!” Sammy and I demand at the same time.

“Don’t lie to your daughter,” I say heatedly before telling Sammy, “Your dumb dad didn’t step away from the ladder after going down.”

“Dumb dad?” Sammy giggles. Then she looks up at Jamie. “Are you canceling our shopping trip?”

“Absolutely not,” he declares heatedly. “If Melissa is going, so am I.”

Super.

“We better get a move on then, Dad. I forgot all about purses and shoes.” She gestures around in awe.

Anna walks into the closet and jokes, “Is this the room where you plan to do all your entertaining?”

“I love this house, Anna! I want to move in tomorrow,” Sammy tells her.

Anna turns her attention toward Jamie. “Are we writing up an offer?”

He nods his head once. “I think we are. Let’s give them what they’re asking, contingent on inspections, of course.”

“You don’t want me to try to knock off thirty or forty thousand?” She sounds surprised. “It’s the end of the season and things are slowing down.”

“I don’t want to offend anyone by lowballing them. Especially since Sammy and I both love the place so much.”

That is inordinately decent of him, which makes me even madder at him. How dare he be a nice guy to someone else while brushing me off like errant lint on his jacket?

“Okay,” Anna says. “You all go off and hit the mall. I’ll write up the offer for you to sign when you get back. How’s five o’clock at my office?”

“Can you make it seven?” Jamie asks. “We have a lot of driving ahead of us.”

“Absolutely,” Anna says. “I’ll have Chris come into town for supper and we’ll meet you afterwards.”

Sammy, Jamie, and I make our way out of the closet while Anna scurries around turning off lights. I hurry out of the house so I can claim the back seat again, but Sammy isn’t having it. “You have to sit up front,” she says. “Dad says adults get first dibs on the front seat.”

Overhearing this, Jamie says, “It’s okay, Sammy. Melissa can sit in the back.”

He *wants* me to sit in the back? Well, that changes everything. “I’d be happy to sit up front. Thanks, Sammy.”

She beams while securing herself in the seat behind her dad. Meanwhile, I claim shotgun. As soon as Jamie gets in, I chastise myself for being so impetuous as to position myself so close to him for the next hour or so. What was I thinking?

“What game should we play?” Sammy wants to know. She and her dad must pass the time on road trips by playing games.

“How about Slug Bug?” Jamie suggests.

“How about I Spy?” I ask.

“I love I Spy,” Sammy says. “You start, Melissa.”

As Jamie pulls down the driveway onto the road, I look around outside before my gaze lands on Jamie. “I spy a chicken.”

Jamie bristles as Sammy says, “You can’t tell us what you see. You have to give us hints.” She clearly doesn’t understand that I was talking about her dad, which is probably for the best.

I try again. “I spy something black.”

“The road?” Sammy guesses. When I shake my head, she tries, “The writing on the traffic sign?” I shake my head again.

Jamie interjects, “The dashboard?”

“Nope,” I tell him. I don’t know how long this will go on before he figures out I’m talking about his mood.

Luckily, Sammy gets distracted and stops playing the game. “Melissa, did you figure out where you buried that time capsule with your friend?”

“I didn’t even look,” I tell her. “Maybe next time.” Although, I highly doubt there will be another time as I don’t envision hanging out at Sammy’s house. Not if her dad is around, anyway.

“Will you help me build a time capsule?” she asks me. “I want to do one for my first week in Elk Lake. Then when I’m, like, sixteen, I can look back

and see how far I've come."

"I'd love that," I tell her. "We should make sure to take some pictures to add to it."

Sammy asks Jamie, "Dad, will you take some pictures of me and Melissa for my time capsule?"

"Don't you want me in them?" He sounds hurt.

"Yeah, sure. You'll be in some of them. But Melissa is my first real friend here, and I want to document that."

"Okay," he says. He sounds downright glum about it.

The rest of the ride to the mall is filled with Sammy asking questions about Wisconsin life and me answering them. Even though Jamie says little, the energy radiating from him feels decidedly annoyed.

Once we get to the mall and park, I tell him, "Why don't you hang out in the food court, and we'll meet you there after making a couple of stops?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you hurt your knee and probably aren't up for a lot of walking."

"Oh, I'm up for it. Plus, Sammy asked me to take pictures, which I can't do if I'm not there."

This day is going to be excruciating. "If you think you can handle it."

"Quit second guessing me," he practically growls.

"It's okay, Dad. You can take pictures at lunch. That should be enough."

Thank you, Sammy, and please God may your dad not be so pigheaded that he doesn't take you up on that offer.

"I'm going and that's all there is to it," he says resolutely. With that, he gets out of the car and slams his door so loudly everything shakes. Clearly his knee pain is getting the best of him because he's much more churlish than normal. Plus, I saw him wince as soon as he put any pressure on his knee. It almost made me feel sorry for him.

Sammy and I lead the way to the elevator. We get there well ahead of Jamie who's hobbling slowly behind us.

Yeah, this is going to be a fun day.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



JAMIE

My knee hurts like hell. I've been lucky enough to avoid surgery on it since injuring it nearly twenty years ago, but that's only because I haven't had anyone knock me to the ground and land on it. An image of Melissa lying on top of me fills my brain, causing my heart to accelerate like a jackhammer.

"Maybe we can rent you a wheelchair," Melissa suggests when I finally get to the elevator.

"I told you, I'm fine." I jab repeatedly at the call button that's already lit, as if it would ease some of my discomfort.

When the elevator arrives, several people get off before we get on. "Where should we start?" Sammy wants to know.

"That depends on your style and budget," Melissa tells her.

"I want to wear the same clothes everyone else will be wearing. I don't want to stand out too much. Oh, and Dad said I could spend five hundred dollars."

Melissa tips her head back and forth while thinking. "Let's start at Forever 21 and go from there." She leads the way as we get off the elevator onto the second floor of the mall. Pointing, she tells me, "The store is down there to the right."

"Aren't we walking together?" I want to know.

She glances at my knee before giving me a knowing look. "Not if we're going to get any real shopping done."

Nice, kick a man when he's down. I don't say anything while they hurry toward their destination. As annoyed as I am with Melissa, I'm also very grateful to her for taking an interest in my daughter. Before now, the only adult woman to take Sammy shopping has been her grandmother, and from what Sammy says, my mom is all about Talbots and nothing else. Every time Sammy would come home with something, she'd complain she looked like a grandmother on her way to play cards at the senior center.

By the time I get to the store, Sammy and Melissa are nowhere to be seen. So, I find a salesperson. "Did you see a red-haired woman and a red-haired tween girl anywhere?"

She points to the back of the store. "Your wife and daughter are in the

changing room, sir.”

“She’s not my ...” I begin to say but decide she doesn’t care what my relationship is with Melissa.

When I get to the changing area, I call in through the doorway, “Sammy, are you in there?”

“Sit down on one of the chairs out there and I’ll be right out to model for you.”

I do what I’m told and it’s nothing short of ecstasy to get off my feet. I kick up the foot of my injured leg and rest it on the opposite foot, then I lean back and close my eyes for a minute. I don’t open them until I hear my daughter exclaim, “Check out this dress, Dad.”

My eyes nearly pop out of my head when I see it’s a shade of purple almost identical to the shirt Melissa is wearing. Sammy has never worn that color and it looks great on her. “You look very grown up,” I tell her. I don’t share how nervous that makes me.

“The style is appropriate,” Melissa interjects.

“It’s nice.”

“What don’t you like about it?” she demands.

“I said it was nice.” What is she not understanding about the word nice?

She turns to Sammy. “Go try on the apple green sweater and black capris.” When my daughter walks away, Melissa comes at me. “You could at least sound a *little* excited.”

“I thought I did. I said she looks nice. What’s wrong with that?”

Melissa’s wavy hair dances around her shoulders as she shakes her head. “Sammy is terrified about starting a new school. She needs to feel fierce and full of confidence. Telling her she looks nice isn’t going to cut it.”

This information immediately causes me to question every compliment I’ve ever given my daughter. Have there been enough of them to boost her self-esteem? Had I been more effusive, would she have still had problems with bullies? “I’ll try harder,” I concede.

“Good.”

She takes the seat next to me and when Sammy comes out in another outfit, I declare, “You look gorgeous, honey!”

Melissa glares at the side of my head. “Are you blind?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” I lower my voice and whisper, “You told me to be more enthusiastic.”

“*If* the outfit looks good.” She explains, “The sweater is too big and the

pants sag in the crotch. This one is a definite no.” I can’t win for losing, and vow to take my cues from Melissa.

Sammy tries on seven more outfits, three of which are spectacular successes, and the others are varying degrees less than that. In the end, she buys one dress, four outfits, a purse, and a pair of shoes. I’m simultaneously impressed and depressed when the total only reaches half of her budget. Because that means this godforsaken trip isn’t over.

When we leave the store, Melissa checks the map. “Our next stop is on the other side of the mall. If you want, we can hit Juicy Jack’s Burgers in the food court on the way.”

“I’d prefer we eat in a real restaurant,” I tell her. “You know, some place with table service.” I don’t want to stand in line or carry my own food in my current condition.

She consults the map before answering. “Gorilla Plate is on the way.”

“They don’t serve gorillas, do they?” Sammy sounds concerned.

“Probably not,” I tell her. Then I look at Melissa. “I’ll follow you.”

I watch the daring-duo chat excitedly as I stroll behind them. Their hands are animated while they giggle about something. It’s such an enchanting sight, I pull my phone out of my pocket and take several pictures to capture the moment.

By the time I arrive at the restaurant, Melissa has already given her name to the host. When she sees me, she points at a chair against the wall. The thought of not moving my knee is so welcome, I don’t balk.

Instead of joining me, Melissa says something else to the host while pantomiming what looks like a skydiving accident. Pulling out my phone, I hurry and snap another picture. When she’s done, she and Sammy move next to the wall and continue their conversation. I feel like an invalid sitting in the corner by myself, but luckily, we only have a few minutes to wait.

I’m relieved when the hostess leads us to a booth. This way I can inconspicuously put my foot up on the bench in front of me. Sammy and Melissa immediately take the inside seats, while my daughter announces, “This way you don’t have to scoot with your leg.”

“That’s very nice of you.” I offer them both a smile. “I was thinking I’d prop my leg up.” I ask, “Which one of you wants to dine with my foot next to them?”

“I do,” Sammy volunteers happily, which means I’ll be sitting next to Melissa. I could kick myself for asking. The look on Melissa’s face suggests

she'd like to do the same.

I'm about to suggest I sit next to Sammy when Melissa scoots closer to the wall to give me more room. She'd probably be offended if I didn't just sit down, so I hurry to do just that. Our arms are touching, but Melissa can't hug the wall any more. If I scoot over, I'll be sitting on the floor. The only thing to do is accept my current seating situation for what it is—an enjoyable, albeit uncomfortable, distraction.

After the waitress brings water and takes our drink order, we peruse the menu. “I want the bacon double cheeseburger,” Sammy says.

“I'm going with the gorilla burger,” Melissa adds.

I decide on the jungle nachos. As soon as the waitress brings our drinks and we order, I ask, “What's next on the shopping agenda?” But before anyone can answer, the host comes by carrying a bag of ice. He hands it to Melissa, who in turn hands it to me.

“For your knee,” she says. “I'm sorry I landed on you.” Darn if she doesn't sound sincere, too.

Taking the offering, I place it on my knee. I sigh in appreciation as the cold permeates my injury. “That was very nice. Thank you.”

“It's the least I can do after nearly breaking your leg.” I can't tell if she's embellishing for the sake of drama or if she's teasing me. Either way, I don't take the bait.

“I've been putting off having surgery for years,” I tell her. “It's my own fault.”

“Melissa says we need to hit Nordstrom next. They're having their bi-annual sale.” Sammy gets our conversation back on track.

“I might do a little shopping for myself while we're there,” Melissa declares before telling me, “They have a seating area with extremely comfortable chairs. You can sit and enjoy the piano player while we shop.”

“They have their own piano player? That sounds pretty fancy.”

Melissa laughs. “It's probably to soothe shoppers into a trance, so they don't realize how much money they're spending.”

“If it was a commercial,” Sammy wants to know, “what music would you play?” She turns to Melissa and explains, “My dad's in marketing and he comes up with advertising concepts.”

Melissa smiles, but she doesn't seem overly impressed. Turning my attention to Sam, I tell her, “‘Money, Money, Money' by Abba.”

“Oh, that's a good one. What music would you play for our lunch?”

“That’s easy,” I tell her. “‘Cheeseburger in Paradise.’” I’m not a huge Jimmy Buffett fan, but there’s something about that song that makes me want to pack my flip flops and head for Hawaii.

Our conversation remains easy until our lunch arrives. Then between bites, Sammy talks to Melissa. “What kind of clothes are you going to buy?”

“Dating clothes.” She replies, and I nearly choke on a chip.

“Fun!” My daughter is clearly enthused by the concept. “So, sexy dresses that hug all your curves?” I start to cough.

“Something like that,” Melissa says while seeming to wonder if she needs to give me the Heimlich maneuver.

“I’m sure Tim will appreciate them,” Sammy says.

“Let’s hope.”

“You’d better get my dad’s opinion. Even though he’s going to stay single forever, he’s still a man.” *How flattering.*

“I’d be happy to offer my services,” I tell Melissa. As much as I don’t want to imagine her on a date with another guy, I’m not going to ask her out. Also, it’s the least I can do after she took a whole day to help Sammy.

“Well, okay. Thank you.” Had the woman not kissed me like she’d been stranded on a deserted island, and I was her rescuer, I would have never known she was attracted to me. But of course, it’s possible that after my rejection she no longer is.

As we eat, our arms continue to brush against each other, causing a hyperawareness that borders on agonizing. Melissa and Sammy talk about everything from school to clothes, to navigating the minefield of the junior high school social order.

I simply sit and enjoy their camaraderie. Melissa’s counsel is exactly what my daughter needs right now.

I have to remind myself more than once that she’s *not* what I need, because I’m not looking to get involved with anyone until my daughter is older. But if I were ...

CHAPTER TWENTY



MELISSA

To say today was excruciating would be an understatement of epic proportion. Not only did I kiss Jamie, a man who wants nothing to do with me, but I sat next to him all the way to Milwaukee *and* at lunch. Thankfully, I rode in the back seat on the way home.

If that weren't enough, he insisted on camping right outside the dressing room so he could critique Sammy's and my outfit choices. As punishment, I made it my mission to try on every drop-dead sexy dress I could find in my size. If he's going to torture me, I'm going to return the favor.

Not surprisingly, Jamie found something wrong with every dress I put on, including my favorite—a hot pink number with an off-the-shoulder ruffled neckline. He said it showed too much, which is ridiculous because my cleavage wasn't on display, and the skirt was full. As a joke, I tried on one of those Amish-looking numbers that's so in style right now. He claimed to love it.

Instead of taking Jamie's advice and buying the fresh-off-the-prairie number, I purchased three highly gorgeous dresses that I would have never considered had I not been antagonized into doing so.

Sammy bought two more outfits, two pairs of shoes, and some makeup at the Clinique counter. She went well over budget, but her dad seemed genuinely happy about her enthusiasm, so he just smiled and handed over his credit card. I would have loved it if my dad had shown a similar interest in me. And while I always knew he loved me and my brother, who spent what on us was an ongoing struggle during our childhood. As in, *it's not my turn to buy Missy and Joe shoes, or isn't that supposed to be covered in my child support payment?* At times we felt like we were pets that neither of them wanted.

As soon as Jamie and Sammy dropped me off at my apartment, I changed into my shorty pajamas and called to have Chinese takeout delivered. While sitting on my couch eating kung pao shrimp and scrolling through the Catch.com website, I'm starting to think Tim is the only reasonable match for me.

I'm so distracted by the world class weirdos looking for love that when

my phone rings, I don't even look to see who's calling before answering it. "Hello?"

"Hey, Missy, it's Tim." *Speak of the devil.*

I stop reading Made for You's profile. "What's up?"

"I figured we should get date two on the books." He hurries to add, "That is, if you're still up for it."

"Absolutely," I say with genuine eagerness. I need something to take my mind off what happened between me and Jamie this morning. The only plan of attack I can think of is to kiss somebody else and replace the imprint of Jamie's lips. Not that it's a foregone conclusion I'm going to kiss Tim on our second date, but if there's any opportunity, I'm sure as heck going to try.

"How about if we meet up at the country club? We can have lunch there and I can show you around."

Lunch does not inspire thoughts of romance, but it's probably better that I get to know Tim before we get physical. And as nice as our first date was, I still don't really know him. "That sounds perfect. What day?"

"How's tomorrow?" he asks.

I didn't think it could get less sexy than lunch, but somehow Monday lunch really lowers the bar. "What time should I meet you?" I ask.

"How's eleven?"

"I'm looking forward to it," I tell him while trying to decide what to wear. My new dresses are way too over the top for daytime wear.

After hanging up with Tim, I call my mom. She lets the phone ring a spectacular twenty times before answering. I've told her on multiple occasions to send her incoming calls to voicemail after five rings, but as she doesn't like voicemail, she's opted to pretend she has a landline—before answering machines were invented.

"Hello?" She sounds like she's run a mile. That's another thing—when she's home, she plugs her phone into the charger in her closet and leaves it there.

"Hey, Mom," I start to say while wondering how best to continue. "I can open the store tomorrow, but I need to leave early." I don't want to tell her why I need to leave work so early tomorrow, but I'm sure she'll demand to know.

"How early?" She sounds alarmed. "You know that Howard and I have a standing Monday night dinner date."

"Yes, well, I have a date, too." Let the chips fall where they may.

“That’s wonderful! Who is he? How did you meet? Where are you going? What are you going to wear?”

She’ll keep going if I don’t stop her. “His name is Tim, and we went to high school together. He’s recently moved back to Elk Lake.”

“Tim Hodges?” she wants to know.

“No.”

“Tim Greenfield? Tim Mateo?”

“No.”

“Well, if it isn’t Tim Hodges, Tim Greenfield, or Tim Mateo, who is it?”

I inhale slowly, trying to buy myself some time before unleashing the beast that is Margie. “Tim Ferris.”

“*Tim Ferris*, Tim Ferris? You mean Jim’s son? The owner of the country club?!”

She’s so worked up I’m concerned she’s going to have a stroke. “Yes, Mom. But it’s just a second date. It’s no big thing.”

“No big thing? Second date? When was your first? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to make a big deal out of it. You know, like you’re currently doing?” I snag a shrimp with my chopsticks and pop it into my mouth.

“Melissa Ann Corner, don’t you dare accuse me of being over the top. Tim Ferris is an absolute catch! Howard and I see him all the time at the club. Did you know he’s taking over for his dad? He’s very handsome too.”

“He’s also divorced.” I don’t know why I feel the need to say that. It’s not like divorce is a deal breaker, plus Tim’s wife is the one who left him, but I want my mom to take it down a notch.

She acts like she doesn’t even hear me. “We could all eat at the club together some night. Wouldn’t that be fun? Howard will be so excited when I tell him.”

I would rather bungee jump out of a jet airplane than double date with my mom and Howard. “Let’s wait and see if it goes somewhere first,” I tell her.

“Well, there’s always Sammy’s dad if it doesn’t. Not only is he handsome, he’s single, *and* I could get a granddaughter out of the deal.”

Jamie is the last person I need my mom setting her sights on for me. “I’m not dating Sammy’s dad. I’m dating Tim.”

“Tim Ferris,” she exclaims again like I just told her I won Powerball *with* the kicker. “Missy, I’m so proud of you for making this happen. *How* did you

make this happen?”

If I tell her we met on a dating app, she'll lecture me about all the creeps on the internet—like I can't figure out that MrDong isn't looking for actual love. So, I lie. “We ran into each other at the grocery store.”

“Love in the produce aisle ...” I can just see her clutching her hands in front of her heart while staring at the ceiling in rapture like God Himself is waving to her.

“I'm leaving the store at ten thirty,” I tell her. “I should be back by two or three.”

“Nonsense,” she says. “You sleep in tomorrow so you can look your best, and don't you worry about coming to the store afterward. You and Tim just have a nice afternoon.”

I'm one hundred percent certain my mother will spend the entirety of tomorrow planning my country club wedding to her idea of my perfect mate. This confirms that I don't want to be around her. “Thanks, Mom. I'll see you on Tuesday then.”

“Call me tomorrow after your date.” *No.* “Let me know every little thing.” *Not going to happen.* “I love you!”

“I love you, too, Mom. Thanks.”

“Thank YOU, honey ...” I disconnect the call before we can carry on with this ridiculous conversation. I should have just called in sick, but instead I unleashed the Margie beast. Now that she knows about Tim, he's all we're going to talk about—either until he dumps me, or we get married. I feel sick.

I get up off the couch and gather my uneaten food to put in the refrigerator. Then I decide to take a long bath. I'm about to step into the bubbles when my phone rings again. Caller ID says it's a 312 number. *Who the heck is calling me from Chicago?*

“Hello?” My tone is borderline hostile.

“Melissa.” Sweet Jesus, it's Jamie. What in the world does he want?

“Jamie,” I counter.

“I just wanted to call and thank you for going to the mall with me and Sammy. She hasn't stopped talking about it since we dropped you off.”

“Oh. You're welcome. I enjoy spending time with her.” *Not you, you grumpy-face.*

“She's had such a hard year. That really makes your kindness extra appreciated.”

“Well, I know what it's like to be a twelve-year-old girl, and believe me,

it's no piece of cake."

He grunts in the affirmative before saying, "I signed the offer on the house. We should find out if we have it by tomorrow."

Great, bring up the house. I'll never be able to drive down that road again without reliving the kiss between us. That amazingly hot, sexy, melt-my-bones kiss. My knees start to feel weak, so I sit down on the edge of the tub. "Good luck," I tell him.

"About this morning ..." he begins.

"Nothing happened. It's all forgotten." *Please* don't talk about this morning.

"About this morning ..." It's like he doesn't hear me. "I should not have kissed you back. I'm sorry."

"Right. So, you've already told me." This man makes me so mad I want to scream.

"It wasn't fair to you," he continues like he's Thor and I'm some stupid little earthling crushing on a god.

"Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're obviously attracted to me, and I don't want to mislead you about my feelings or intentions."

"Lead me on? Hey, buddy, I'm not sure if you remember, but you kissed the hell out of me *after* I kissed you, so it's clear you want me too."

"You're a very nice woman, Melissa, but nothing is going to happen between us." Why is he telling me this again?

"I'm sure I'll recover," I say as sarcastically as I can.

"Good. I don't usually behave like that."

"Tim and I are going out again, so you can rest assured I'm not going to spend my days pining for you."

"Excellent. In that case, I'll leave you to your evening. And Melissa, thank you again."

"For the kiss or shopping?" I shouldn't have said that but I'm that mad.

"The shopping, obviously." *You self-righteous prig.*

"Oh, will you look at that?" I say. "My boyfriend is on the other line." Then I hang up.

How dare he call me and assume superiority over me? He doesn't get to make me feel that way. I'm more determined than ever to make a go of it with Tim. If for no other reason than to knock Jamie down a peg or twelve.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



JAMIE

Sammy doesn't stop talking about the day until she crawls into bed and closes her eyes for the night. I love how excited she is about everything—the house, her new clothes, Melissa. Elk Lake is turning into the ideal move for her, and I couldn't be more pleased.

Although, that's not strictly true. I'd be happier if Melissa and I had never kissed. Every time I looked at her today, I had intense flashbacks that caused a raw desire to swarm my insides like a hive of killer bees. I got so worked up over it, I wrote out a list of talking points and called her to make sure we were on the same page. It did not go as well as I had planned it out in my mind. She might possibly hate me now. That's not a complication I need in my life. *She's* not a complication I need.

There are weightier issues on my mind. The most pressing being Beth's return to the US. Grabbing my laptop, I take it out onto the deck and open it. I never closed out the article, so that's the image that pops up.

Beth looks like herself, but not herself. Not only is she older and more refined looking, but her features have taken on a sharp and determined edge. Her mouth is pursed in such a way as to warn people she's not a woman to be messed with. I scroll down the page and read:

Uber Corps Vice President Elizabeth Albus is returning to her roots.

Albus recently accepted the position of top dog at the Chicago branch of the world-renowned advertising agency Slogan. According to Albus, thirty-nine, she was born and raised in Chicago and is excited to return home.

When asked what she's most enthused about, her eyes narrow thoughtfully. "The pizza," she decides. "No matter where I've gone in this world, and that includes Sicily, nobody does pizza like Chicago."

Albus's husband Karl and stepson Fritz will be joining her ...

That's where I stopped reading before, and I can't seem to go past it now. Beth has a stepson. A stepson she's apparently been raising if he's moving across the world with her. A seed of rage grows inside of me. How in God's name can she make time in her life to raise another person's child when she can't even make the time to see her own? And how can *PIZZA* be what she misses most about Chicago when her own daughter was there for twelve years? The woman is unbelievable.

I don't know Beth's phone number anymore. It changed when she moved to Germany, and she never bothered to send me her new one. Not that I would have used it. Although, I certainly would have thought about it.

I yearned to share every funny thing our daughter ever said, every tooth lost, every heartache she had to endure. I wanted her to know when Sammy got her appendix out or when she broke her leg roller skating. I wanted to reach out every time she got straight A's or won an award at school. I ached for the knowledge that Beth loved Sammy and wanted to be a mother to her. Yet she never called. She never so much as sent a birthday card.

And now she's returning home with a stepson.

I didn't tell Sammy about that part because it would have destroyed her. She's been through enough this last year without my making her life more difficult.

Moving the cursor to a search engine, I type in Beth's name and company name. Her email address doesn't pop up, but others do, and their formats are all the same.

Opening my email, I type in what I assume is her address.

Beth,

It's been a long time. Too long.

Our daughter is twelve years old now and has just come through a very harrowing year. Her health is fine, but her heart has taken quite a hit. So much so that we recently left Chicago and moved to a small town in Wisconsin for a fresh start.

Sammy and I are both guilty of looking you up online over the years. She is full of questions. We are both full of heartache.

I honestly thought that after we talked in London all those years ago, you would have eventually found your way home to us. I now realize that was wishful thinking. As such, I'd managed to make myself

believe you weren't cut out for family life, that motherhood was a reality so foreign to you, you couldn't assimilate it into your brain.

But then I read an article that you're returning to Chicago with your husband and stepson. What in the actual hell, Beth? How can you raise someone else's child and have no interest in your own? How can you be the woman I loved for so many years when it seems I hardly even knew you?

I told Sammy you were coming back to Chicago. I didn't tell her you were bringing your husband's child with you. But she'll find out, Beth, and it will break her. I never expected that you wouldn't know our daughter. I thought you'd come to your senses and at the bare minimum would take a modicum of interest in her. I'm confounded as to why you haven't.

We created a life, Beth. And I've raised our child alone, loved her alone, and worried about her alone. In a perfect world, she'd never have to know about you. She'd never have to feel abandoned by you. But this is not a perfect world, and the time has come for you to explain yourself.

Sincerely,
Jamie

I read the letter five times over, occasionally changing a word or two, but leaving the gist the same. I'm not going to make excuses for Beth's actions anymore. I don't understand them, and I will no longer try to justify them. If explaining herself to our daughter is the only maternal act she supplies our child, she owes it to both of us to do so.

My finger hovers over the send button for long moments before I finally release it. Then I close my laptop and carry it inside. I go into the bathroom and brush my teeth before climbing into bed. I'm weary to the bone but even so, I don't expect sleep to come easily. I'm wrong. I sleep like a child with no cares in this world. I don't think, I don't dream, I simply float away and it's heaven.

When I wake up in the morning, I feel borderline bionic and hop out of bed to make Sammy breakfast. She's already sitting at the table. "Hey, early bird," I say cheerfully.

While looking at her phone, she answers, "Melissa isn't going into work today."

"Are you still going?" I ask.

Her head shakes back and forth. "No. I'm not sure what to do."

"Why don't we join the country club?" While country clubs aren't that pervasive in modern culture, I grew up going to one and have nothing but good memories.

Sammy shrugs her shoulders. "I guess."

"You might meet some other kids there."

Her head pops up. "You think so?"

"Why not? It could be easier there than hanging out on the beach."

She considers that possibility before asking, "What time should we go?"

"How about right after breakfast. Bring your pool stuff and we can spend the day there."

Sammy jumps to her feet. "Okay!" Then she runs out of the room excitedly. When she comes back, she's wearing her new purple dress and carrying a beach bag.

"That was fast," I tell her.

"Let's have breakfast in town," she suggests.

"Instead of my famous buckwheat pancakes?"

She nods her head. "I want to be out as much as possible." This is a nice change since Sammy rarely ventured away from our brownstone in Chicago if she didn't have to. She was too worried she'd run into the kids intent on creating chaos in her life.

"Give me five minutes to get dressed."

I hurry to put on a pair of khakis—in case the country club has some kind of dress code—and a polo shirt, then I pack my swimming bag.

Once we're in town, Sammy suggests, "Let's go to Rosemary's Bakery instead of the diner. Melissa says they have great scones."

"Will that be enough?"

"It will be if I get a smoothie, too." Her eyes sparkle happily.

As I park the car in front of the bakery, I think about the email I sent to Beth and immediately wonder if it was the right thing to do. My feelings have been so unbalanced since finding out she was coming back to Chicago—

since finding out she had a stepson—that I may have totally lost my mind by ordering her back into Sammy’s life. Not that she’s going to listen.

As we walk into Rosemary’s, my senses are engulfed by the scent of cinnamon and lemon, and the aroma of freshly brewed espresso. My mouth waters like one of Pavlov’s dogs.

Once we order and pay, we find a table in the corner by the window. I blurt out, “What would you do if your mom got in touch with us?”

Her head snaps to attention. “Do you think she’s going to?”

I shrug. “Who knows? I mean, she’s coming back to Chicago. It’s not out of the realm of possibility.”

“Yeah, but we’re not in Chicago,” she says.

“No, but Beth doesn’t know exactly where we are. Plus, my company is still there.”

Sammy’s eyes narrow as she thinks. “It would be weird.”

“Yes, but would it be welcome?”

“I don’t know. I mean, there are a lot of hard feelings, you know?”

Oh, I know. But instead of saying so, I simply nod my head in agreement. “Do you think you’d want to meet her?”

“I’d be scared to death,” Sammy says. “But yeah, I guess I would.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if she gets in touch.”

We spend the next few minutes silently consuming our berry scones and sipping our drinks.

My life is nothing like I thought it would be. I thought Beth and I would be married and have at least a couple more children. I envisioned family vacations and growing old with my soulmate. Life was meant to be so much more, and yet it hasn’t been bad. Just different.

I’m so lost in my ruminations that I don’t immediately realize Sammy starts talking to someone. Not until I hear her say, “I’m glad you’re going to see Tim again. He seems really nice.”

Tim? Crap. I look up to find Melissa standing over us. “Good morning.” I try to force a pleasant tone.

She doesn’t seem as inclined. “If you say so.” Uh-oh. The dislike is real.

Sammy looks between us with confusion. “Thanks for yesterday, Melissa. I had a blast.”

“I had a blast with *you*,” she responds. Is it my imagination or did she emphasize the “you” like she wanted me to know that she did not enjoy her time with me. *The liar.*

“What are you going to wear on your date today?” Sammy wants to know.

“I have a pretty pink sundress that I love.”

“I bet you look great in pink,” Sammy says. “I mean, everyone tells me I do, and as you’ve pointed out, we have the same coloring.”

“I do look *great* in pink.” Melissa stares right at me.

Crumpling up the paper my scone was wrapped in, I say, “We’d better get going, Sammy. We’ve got a big day.”

She stands and begins to clear the mess off our table while asking Melissa, “Do you want me to come into work tomorrow?”

“How about from ten to three? That will cover three appointments.”

Sammy reaches out and puts her arms around her new bestie. With a squeeze, she says, “I’ll be there.”

Melissa holds onto Sammy tightly while saying, “I’m so glad you moved to Elk Lake, Sammy.”

“Me, too,” my daughter answers.

Even though Melissa seems to hate me, I’m glad we moved here, too. Elk Lake is a place of new beginnings—a place Sammy and I can call our own with no history pulling us backward.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



MELISSA

Of course I ran into Jamie at the bakery. I briefly wonder if he slipped a tracking device into my purse yesterday. When I realize I didn't bring my purse with me this morning, I chalk it up to bad luck. *Imagine, me having bad luck.*

I take my breakfast over to the park and sit on a bench to eat it. It's odd not going into work today, but not unwelcome. The truth is that I haven't enjoyed my job for a long time. It's hard to get excited about other women's happily-ever-afters when mine doesn't appear to be in sight. It never bothered me before because I always had an innate optimism about my future. But when Dillion died, it seems he took my positivity with him. There's only so much a person can handle before taking the hint.

I've recently started imagining what my future will look like if I never find a mate. It will probably involve several cats, a lifetime supply of mac and cheese, and an investment in a library of romance novels. Lately, my musings have me quitting my job and moving to an exotic location halfway around the world. You know, one where I don't speak the language, so I don't have to explain myself to anyone.

Jamie's face springs to mind, and I mentally swat it away. I'm clearly drawn to the man, which is strange because I've only met him on a few occasions. But it's been enough to witness how charming he can be to everyone but me, and I'm intrigued. Even though he's usually telling me he isn't interested in me—even when he's kissing me.

His list of good traits is solid though. From what I can tell he and Sammy have a very tight bond—enviable even. I'm guessing he's good at his job as he's the owner of the company. But his refusal to engage in a serious relationship with a woman makes me think that he loved Sammy's mom a lot—and probably still does. That kind of loyalty and devotion is something I dream of sharing with my future partner.

I force my focus to my upcoming lunch date with Tim. I never imagined I'd date someone from my past. Certainly not one of the cool guys—one who never gave me the time of day when we were kids. I call bull hockey on what he said about always thinking I was pretty and wanting to ask me out. Yet at

the same time, I appreciate a well-fabricated lie as much as the next gal.

I purposely cross the street so I don't have to pass right in front of Bride's Paradise on the way to my apartment. It's enough that my mom will ask me copious questions about my date when she sees me tomorrow, I don't need to hear a laundry list of advice on how to capture Tim's heart today. He's either going to like me for who I am or he's not. I'm not going to pretend to be somebody I'm not just to snag a man.

When I get home, I take a long shower before primping for my date. The pink sundress makes me feel feminine and powerful at the same time. After strapping on a pair of beige espadrilles, I grab a sun hat in case we eat outside. I'm not one of those elusive redheads who tans.

By the time I get to the country club, a low hum of positivity has started flowing through me. The only time I come here is with Anna, and I always feel like a fancy lady who lunches. It's no wonder my mom likes it here so much.

As I walk inside the impressive two-story building, I head toward Putters' Lounge. The hostess is confused when I tell her I'm meeting Tim, so she makes a quick call before alerting me, "Your reservation is in the Premier Club dining room."

That sounds ritzy. "Where's that?"

Pointing down a long hallway, she says, "At the end of the corridor on the right. There's a small sign on the door." I wonder if I need a password or secret handshake to gain entrance, but when that information does not appear to be forthcoming, I walk away.

The Premier Club doesn't look like anything special from the outside, so I'm shocked by how elegant it is inside. Even with the abundance of large crystal chandeliers, the décor is very masculine. Dark wood, navy-painted walls, and heavy velvet drapes. Yet the enormous windows bring in so much light that the atmosphere is softened. I wonder if Howard knows this place exists.

I don't have a chance to give the host my name before I see Tim striding across the room toward me. He's wearing khaki pants and a navy blazer. When he reaches my side, he kisses me on the cheek. "You look stunning."

"You look pretty handsome yourself."

"I have a table for us by the window." He gently places his arm around my waist to lead the way. I feel like I'm in a Jane Austen novel or something.

Once we're seated at a round table in the corner, Tim asks, "How about if

I take care of ordering?”

While that’s very gallant of him, there are a few things I will not eat to save my life. “I don’t eat oysters, mussels, or caviar,” I tell him.

“Allergies?” he asks.

“Textural aversions,” I explain.

He laughs. “How about the best hamburger you’ve ever eaten?”

“Now you’re speaking my love language. I have patty melts at least three times a week.”

“From the diner?” he wants to know. When I nod, he says, “They’re good but once you’ve had ours you won’t be able to go back. You game for having me ruin your favorite burger?”

“I want to say yes just so I can try such an amazing thing, but then what happens if we don’t work out and I can never get my new favorite again?”

He arches one eyebrow while playfully saying, “You can always come back with your mom, or Anna.”

“I’ve never heard either of them mention the Premier Club.”

He seems to consider this closely before saying, “They might not be members.” He motions between us with his pointer finger. “I guess that means our relationship had better work.”

I sigh dramatically. “That’s a lot of pressure. Maybe I should just have the shrimp salad.”

“Be optimistic,” he declares enthusiastically. “Someday we might tell our grandchildren that our fate was sealed as soon as you bit into one of the club’s patty melts.”

“That’s quite a reach,” I tell him. “But even so, I’m suddenly determined to try such a life-changing burger.” I close my menu. “If you throw in crème brûlée, I may just marry you tonight.”

“Darnit.” He snaps his fingers dramatically. “We don’t have crème brûlée until the fall menu starts. We do, however, have a panna cotta that will rock your socks.”

“I can’t agree to marriage without crème brûlée,” I tell him primly. “So, no proposing today.”

“Deal,” he says. When the waiter comes over, he orders two goat cheese and mango salads, two patty melts, and two glasses of champagne. He looks over at me to confirm. “Is champagne okay or would you rather have iced tea?”

“Wow, that’s a tough decision.” I make a show of tipping my head from

side to side like I'm in deep thought. "Iced tea or champagne ..."

Tim hands the waiter our menus. "We'll go with the champagne."

I laugh easily. Tim is a lot of fun to spend time with. There's no weird tension, and I'm willing to bet that if I kissed him, he wouldn't tell me he wasn't interested in me. Although, at this point in our friendship I can't quite imagine kissing him yet. I have to force myself not to wonder why I locked lips with Jamie before even going on one date.

Tim and I have a delightful lunch—and he's right about the Premier Club's patty melt. The rye bread is thick and the Thousand Island dressing is out of this world. But it's the mound of caramelized onions that totally blisses me out. "Do you eat like this every day?" I want to know.

"Not if I want to fit into my clothes," he laughs. "I eat here twice a week. The rest of the time I have cottage cheese and whatever berry is in season."

My grimace causes him to add, "You can try that after we're married. Cottage cheese is no way to court a lady."

"Court a lady?" I giggle. "What century is this again?"

"Hey, I'm pulling out all the stops."

"You certainly are," I tell him. "And you're doing a fine job. What do you say you leave me in charge of our next date?"

"A third date plan before the panna cotta? You're on."

As soon as we're done eating, Tim asks, "How about a tour?"

"I hope you're not talking eighteen holes." I lift up a foot. "If so, I wore the wrong shoes."

"No golf today. I thought I'd show you the tennis courts and swimming pool."

"I didn't bring my suit." I fake pout.

"Maybe swimming will be our fourth date."

It's refreshing to have a man freely show his interest. Jamie pops into my brain and I shove him right out. "That's if you still want to see me after our third date."

"Are we going skydiving?" he wants to know.

"No."

"Rock climbing without the proper safety gear?"

"Um, no."

"Walking across hot coals barefoot?"

"What kind of dates are you used to going on?" I ask.

"Dating in L.A. is kind of like getting to know someone in Dante's third

ring of hell. Everyone wants to do whatever the latest craze is, no matter how stupid.”

I release a long breath. “Thank God you’ve come home.”

Tim reaches over and easily slides his hand into mine as he leads me out of the restaurant. “Come on, we’ll start with the pool. We can come back for dessert later, if you want.”

I’m starting to think he really is from another time. Guys don’t seem to be into sweet displays of affection these days.

Tim leads me out of the dining room toward the french doors. Once we’re outside, we cross a white path surrounded by large bunches of black-eyed Susans. As the pool comes into view, I say, “It doesn’t seem very busy today.”

“It’s Monday, so it’s pretty much just moms and kids.” As he says that, my eyes are drawn across the water to somebody who is most definitely not a mom. Jamie’s broad shoulders and tanned chest are prominently on display as he wipes beads of water off his body. My mouth immediately goes dry.

Tim is clearly watching my reaction because he disbelievingly says, “Not an ex, huh?”

I force my attention away from Jamie. “What? No.”

“I think you like him,” Tim says plainly.

“Jamie? Hardly.”

He raises his palms upward and seemingly asks the sky, “Doth she protest too much?”

“No, Tim, really. That man just makes me mad. He’s so ... so ... freaking arrogant.”

“I met him earlier when he joined. I thought he was pretty cool.”

“Maybe *you* should date him.” *Why did I say that?*

“Missy,” Tim says jokingly. “We’ve only had two dates. We’re not exclusive or anything.”

Surprised, I ask, “Are you dating other women?”

“I have a date on Friday night,” he says. Before I can respond, he adds, “I think it’s smart to get to know as many people as we can. That way if we ever become exclusive, we know there’s a real chance for us.”

“I’ve never dated multiple men at one time.” I don’t bother to explain that’s probably because there’s never been more than one man interested in dating me at the same time.

“That’s probably more common in the Midwest,” he says. “But the thing

is, I've been married before, and even though I want to get married again, I'm a little gun shy."

"So, you want to make sure you meet as many women as you can so you feel comfortable knowing when you think you've found the one?"

"Is that shallow?" He cringes slightly. "It's just that I don't believe in fate or destiny. I think that when it comes to love you have to make an educated decision, and the only way to do that is to study."

"So, you're telling me to date other guys, so I make the best choice in the end."

He nods his head. "But in case you're wondering, I don't sleep around. I only date around. I don't have sex until I'm in an exclusive relationship."

Well, that's refreshing. "What happens if we wind up running into each other while we're on dates with other people?" I want to know.

He teases, "I'll tell my date you're my sister and you tell your date that if he doesn't treat you well, I'll challenge him to a duel."

Tim leads the way around the pool and raises his hand in greeting. "Jamie, hello! I hope you and your daughter are enjoying the facilities."

Jamie smiles at Tim before making eye contact with me. "What are you doing here?" he wants to know.

"I'm on a date," I tell him. "But I think you already knew that."

Tim squeezes my hand and asks Jamie, "Would you mind keeping Missy company while I make a quick call?"

I turn my back on Jamie and hiss, "Tim, no. I don't want to talk to him."

He leans in and whispers into my ear, "It's time to study." And with that, he walks away, leaving me with the last person on earth that I want to be alone with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



MELISSA

I stand as immobile as a marble statue while Tim walks away, leaving me with Jamie. I'm torn between running after him and walking out of the country club and calling an Uber to take me home. I've never had a guy try to pawn me off on someone else while on a date with me. Certainly not a guy I like.

I get that Tim thinks he's doing the right thing. I mean, his wife left him for somebody else, and so did several girlfriends. But that must be more indicative of life in LaLa Land than Wisconsin. I'm not saying all relationships work out here, but there's less of a sense of entitlement.

"Would you like to sit down?" Jamie motions to a lounge next to him.

"No need." I point to a nearby table. "I'll just wait there." *Good night, Jamie. Maybe put a shirt on or something?* I avert my eyes from his ridiculously distracting body

"Sammy will be back from the snack bar in a minute, and she'd love to see you."

Tentatively moving toward the vacant chair next to him, I say, "Listen, Jamie, you've made it clear you don't want anything to do with me, so let's not pretend."

"All I'm doing is asking you to sit down, not to run away with me."

"Fine, I'll sit down." *But I won't say anything, and you can't make me.* I'm tempted to stick my tongue out at him.

Once I'm situated, he says, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

I grunt in response.

"Are you a member of the club?"

"No."

After several moments of awkward silence, he says, "Elk Lake is a great town."

"Mmm." I'm not about to make anything about this easy for him.

"Melissa ..."

While continuing to look forward, I lazily look at him out of the corner of my eye. "What?"

"You can sit somewhere else if you want to."

I make a move to stand up when Sammy comes running over. “Melissa! Your date is here at the country club?” She hops from foot to foot on the hot pavement.

Before I can answer her, Jamie asks, “Where are your shoes?” She motions to her chair before perching on the edge of mine to let the bottoms of her feet cool off.

Turning her full attention to me, she asks, “Where’s Tim?”

“He had a call to make. He should be back soon,” I tell her.

“Dad and I joined the club today. Maybe you and I can come here to swim together some time.”

My heart hurts for Sammy. While I would love to go swimming with her, I’m guessing she’d much rather be with friends her own age. “Have you met any other kids yet?”

She shakes her head before leaning in and pointing. “I think there are some girls my age over there, but I don’t have the guts to go over and talk to them.”

I scan the area to see who she’s talking about. “Maybe we should come here together, and we can bring Paige. She’d know who’s your age and she’d even be able to introduce you.”

Sammy’s posture perks up. “Is that okay, Dad? Can I bring Melissa and Paige to the pool? How about Sunday?”

“It’s fine by me ...” he starts to say, but I cut him off.

“You don’t have to come along. I can pick Sammy up.”

“I don’t have any plans on Sunday. I’d be happy to come.” Great, I’ve just inadvertently made plans with Jamie, again.

Sammy whispers, “Two of the girls just got up and they’re walking inside.”

I stand up quickly. “Let’s go after them.” The look of panic on Sammy’s face has me adding, “We don’t have to talk to them but if the opportunity arises, what would it hurt?”

“I’ll come, too.” Jamie moves to stand up.

Sammy and I both yell, “No!”

“Why?” He seems genuinely confused.

“No girl that age is going to talk to Sammy if her dad is looming about.”

“But they’ll talk to her if you’re there?” He’s clearly disgruntled.

“Of course. I look like Sammy’s cool older sister or young aunt.”

He raises an eyebrow. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-two,” I tell him.

“You’re old enough to be her mother,” he says plainly, if not rudely.

“But I look twenty-five.” For once, he’s smart enough to keep his mouth shut. Turning to Sammy, I say, “Come on, let’s go.”

I feel Jamie’s eyes on us as we walk away, but I don’t turn around. What game is that man playing? Don’t make it clear that you aren’t interested in someone, going so far as to say you don’t even want to be friends, and then look at them the way he looks at me. It’s just not good manners. Also, it’s darn confusing.

I pick up my speed until we’re close behind the other girls. When they get to the clubhouse, I call out, “Can you hold the door?” They stop in their tracks and turn around. Their eyes immediately land on Sammy.

“Sure,” one of the girls says.

“Are you members here?” the other asks.

“My dad and I just moved to Elk Lake,” Sammy tells them. “We joined the country club today.”

“What grade are you?” the taller one asks.

“I’m going into seventh. How about you guys?”

“Seventh,” they say in unison. Then one of them looks at me and asks me, “Aren’t you the lady who owns the bridal store?”

“I am. Melissa Corner,” I tell them.

Blondie number two points between me and Sammy. “Is she related to you? You guys look alike.”

“I work at the bridal shop,” Sammy tells them. “Melissa is my friend.”

“Really? That’s cool!” the shorter of the girls says. Then she reaches out her hand to Sammy. “My name’s Regan.”

The other girl repeats the gesture. “Cameron.”

“Sammy,” she tells them.

“You want to come sit with us?” Regan asks. “We were just going in to grab a candy bar.”

Sammy looks up at me, silently willing me to understand the gravity of what’s taking place. “Go on,” I tell her.

“Will you tell Dad where I am?”

“Of course I will. Go have fun.” Super, now I get to spend more time with Jamie.

I walk back to a very interested looking father. When I reach his side, I tell him, “Sammy met a couple of girls and she’s going to sit with them.”

“Did you know that was going to happen?”

“Girls aren’t that big of a mystery,” I tell him. “They would never come over and talk to an unknown girl, but it’s considered okay to talk to them if you run into them on neutral territory.”

“So, you set out to help Sammy run into them. That’s amazing, Melissa, thank you.” He points to the chair next to him.

How long is Tim going to take with his call? I glance at the clubhouse before deciding I might as well wait here where he left me. Sitting down, I explain, “It’s not that amazing. I’m a girl, so I speak the language.”

“I wonder ...” He stops talking but I can practically see the thoughts swirling around his brain.

“You wonder what?”

His eyes look haunted as he meets my gaze. “I wonder if Sammy might have navigated the situation in Chicago better had her mom been around to give her advice.”

“I suppose it depends on what advice you gave her,” I reply.

“I told her to turn the other cheek and hold her head up high.”

“Yikes.”

He looks borderline panicky. “Is that wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, but it’s archaic.”

“What should I have said?” he demands.

“You should have taken her to France or encouraged her to have a party. Maybe gotten her front row tickets to Taylor Swift or bought her a new wardrobe.”

“Really?” This poor guy doesn’t stand a chance navigating the nuances of preteen girlhood. “What would any of those things have done?”

“They would have made the other girls jealous. And if they saw Sammy carrying on with her life in a spectacular way, they would have realized she didn’t care about them. At that point, they would have either tried to be friends with her again, or they would have let things go.”

His continued look of confusion prompts me to add, “It’s all about confidence. Bullies do what they do for a reaction. If you don’t give them one, they lose interest.”

“How was I supposed to know that? When I was a kid, if a guy bullied you, you punched it out and then went your separate ways.”

“That would certainly be easier,” I tell him. “But girls aren’t wired that way. We tend to take a conflict and turn it into a campaign of espionage and

mental warfare.”

“Females scare me,” Jamie says plainly.

I know he’s referring to Sammy, but I can’t help but ask, “Is that why you won’t date them?”

He physically bristles. “I date them. I just don’t invite them to meet my daughter.”

“Too bad,” I tell him. “They might have had some good insights for her.” I know that’s mean, but I can’t help myself.

“The child of a woman I was dating was the source of the bullying Sammy had to endure.”

“What?”

He exhales like he’s trying to blow out a thousand birthday candles at once. “I asked Shelby not to tell her daughter about us until we knew things had a chance at lasting. She didn’t think that was necessary.”

“And her daughter began bullying Sammy?”

“Yes.”

I turn to face the pool and kick my feet up on the lounge. “I’m so sorry,” I say sincerely. “That’s crap and I can see why you’re not interested in Sammy meeting any of your lady friends.”

“Sammy comes first in my life,” he says unnecessarily. It’s clear his daughter is his priority.

“As she should.” I don’t know what else to say.

“So, you see why nothing can happen between us?”

“Not really. Sammy already knows me, and we like each other.” I quickly realize this makes me sound desperate and way too interested in him, so I hurry to add, “But it doesn’t matter now that I’m seeing Tim.” No point in mentioning that Tim is dating around.

“You and Tim already had your first date when you kissed me.”

“So?”

“I’m just saying that you clearly weren’t serious about him if you, you know ...”

“We’d only had one date,” I practically yell, which causes several heads to swivel in our direction. In a quieter tone, I add, “Also, you wanted me to kiss you.”

“I did.”

“Excuse me?” *Did he just agree with me?*

“I did want you to kiss me,” he says. “Which is why I kissed you back.”

“What?” Seriously, what is he saying and why is he saying it? He seems to be declaring himself or something.

“Are you losing your hearing?”

“No, I mean, maybe. Why are you telling me this?” I demand.

“I don’t know. I guess I wanted you to know the truth.”

“Because you want to date me?”

“Yes, but I can’t.” The man is making me crazy.

“Because of Sammy?”

His chin bobs up and down.

I’m beginning to think male warfare might be a bit more complicated than Jamie described. While we’re not physically fighting here, there’s a battle raging nonetheless.

“Thank you for finally admitting the truth to yourself,” I tell him primly.

“I owed us both the truth.” What a boy scout.

“So now what? Are we going to be friends?”

“I’m still not sure that’s wise.”

“Because you want to kiss me?” I’m clearly poking the bear, but I want to know.

“Yes.”

Holy heck. I think I liked it better when I thought Jamie hated me. It would certainly be easier to keep my emotions intact. But now what do I do? Do I let him know I want him to kiss me, too? Do I allow this crazy sexual tension to keep building? Do I keep dating Tim?

I’m so confused right now I don’t know what to do. Scratch that, I know the first thing I have to do and that’s to get some distance from Jamie. Because if I sit here any longer, I might just throw myself into his arms and beg to be kissed again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



JAMIE

My mind is churning like I'm in a butter-making competition at the state fair. I saw that once and was totally impressed.

What was I thinking, telling Melissa I want to kiss her? Especially when I'm never going to kiss her again. Thank goodness Tim came to get her or I might have thrown caution to the wind and acted on my desires.

Telling Melissa how much I wanted her is now at the top of the three stupidest things I've ever said. The others are asking a non-pregnant woman when her baby was due—in my defense she told me she had a large tumor and people often thought she was pregnant—and ordering sweetbreads in a restaurant before knowing sweetbreads are in fact a cow's thymus gland. The person who came up with that name should be under psychological care.

Now that Sammy is happily chatting with her friends—at least I hope they're friends—I decide to check my email to see if Beth has responded to my message. Hunching over my phone to block the glare on the screen, I sign onto my account. My heart starts to race when I see a message from her. Part of me wants to know what it says, and the other part wants to delete it and pretend I never reached out to her.

If curiosity killed the cat, I'm next. There's no way I can't know what's in this email. I click on the message and read:

Dear Jamie,

I've been trying to decide what to do about Samantha ever since accepting the job in Chicago. I know you may find this hard to believe, but there hasn't been a day in the last twelve years that I haven't thought of you both.

I did some research a while back and have concluded that my case of postpartum depression was quite extreme. While not bonding with your child appears to be a commonplace enough occurrence in women with wildly unstable hormones, it seems that I also experienced a form of a dissociative disorder.

While I never thought I was someone else, I truly felt I'd stopped

being me. I didn't feel like a mother, or future wife. I simply didn't experience the emotions I should have been feeling. I was lost and leaving seemed the only way to find myself. So that's what I did.

In retrospect, I probably should have let you take me to a psychiatrist. I should have trusted that you would have helped me do whatever it took to regain my former sanity. And yet, leaving made me feel less crazy than admitting I was crazy.

I don't know what I would have done had you not come to see me in London. But I do know this: I was nowhere near ready to come home to you and Samantha. It's possible I never would have been.

Jamie, you had every right to demand that I make up my mind about being a mother. But at that time, I still wanted nothing to do with either you or our daughter. I was rediscovering myself and I loved only having to be responsible for me. I know how unfair that was to you.

There were many times I yearned to reach out to Samantha over the years. But then I thought about you asking me not to contact her if I wasn't prepared to be a regular part of her life. My history with postpartum depression made me fear my ability to be a stable force in her world. And, more than anything, I didn't want to hurt her more than I already had.

Karl already had a son when I met him. I had no history with Fritz, so there was no fear that I couldn't bond with him. I merely got to know him like I would any other stranger.

The part about the job in Chicago that most interested me was being back in the city where my daughter lived. I could have easily stayed in Europe, but I truly feel the time has come to face the woman who walked away from her family. Even though it's long past due, I need to accept what I have done, and I need to try to make it right.

I would like to get to know our daughter, Jamie. It's probably better that you're in Wisconsin so that we can start out slowly and see where things lead. I don't want either of you to feel threatened by my reentry into your lives. I don't want to upset you more than I already have.

I'll let you know when I arrive in Chicago so we can set up a meeting. Thank you for reaching out, Jamie. It once again proves how lucky Samantha is to have you.

Beth

Even though I'm sitting under the hot sun, my skin feels cold and clammy. Beth wants to know Sammy. Crap. While it's what I've always hoped for, I'm now second-guessing myself.

Sammy has been through a lot lately. So why did I send Beth that email? What did I think would happen?

I suppose I thought she wouldn't reply and that our lives would carry on as they always had. Beth's past neglect certainly gave me every reason to believe that would be the case.

The question now is, do I tell Sammy and give her some notice, or do I wait until her mother contacts me again? Assuming she actually does. That's the thought that makes me decide to wait. I have no confidence Beth will do as she says, so while I wait to find out her true intentions, I will continue to protect my daughter.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't realize I'm being spoken to until I hear the words, "Dad, are you listening to me?"

I look up from my phone to see Sammy standing in front of me with two other girls. "No, sorry. My mind was elsewhere."

Sammy points to the blonde girl on her right, "This is Regan." Then she motions to the other girl. "And this is Cameron."

"Hi, girls," I tell them. "Are you both going into the seventh grade, too?"

They nod their heads in unison while Sammy asks, "They were wondering if I could come back tomorrow and meet some of their other friends. Do you think that would be okay?"

"It's okay with me," I tell her. "But I thought you were working with Melissa tomorrow."

"Shoot, I totally forgot!" She turns to address her new friends. "I'll have to talk to Melissa and let you know."

"Just text us," Regan says.

Cameron adds, "Our moms are waiting for us in the locker room. So, we need to get going."

I watch the scene with hopeful eyes as the girls say goodbye. Who knew I'd be right that the country club was going to be such a good place to meet other kids? Look out, Father of the Year; I might be a contender.

When they're gone, Sammy sits down next to me. "This has been a great day, Dad. Regan and Cameron are really nice. Not at all snotty or bored acting like the girls in Chicago."

"I'm happy to hear that," I tell her. "And they want to see you again"

tomorrow, so that sounds promising.”

While Sammy pulls out her phone and punches in a number, I tell her, “You never call me. You only text me.”

“You’re my dad,” she says. “You get to talk to me enough.” *Ouch.*

Sammy hangs up when the call goes to voicemail. “Do you mind walking around with me to see if we can find Melissa?”

Finding Melissa is the very last thing I want to do, but as I want to help my daughter in her pursuit of new friendships, I answer, “You bet.” I stand up and put on my shirt. “Where do you think we should start?”

She shrugs. “I have no idea. Let’s just go inside and look around.”

After gathering our pool paraphernalia, we abandon our current post and walk into the club house. The cool blast from the air conditioner is pure heaven. “I’m hungry,” I tell Sammy. We haven’t eaten since our morning scones. “Do you want to stop in the Putters’ Grill for a late lunch?”

“Sure, but let’s find Melissa first.”

After searching all the public rooms, I ask a woman at the front desk if she knows where I could find Tim. I figure she’ll be with him if their date is still going strong. “He’s probably upstairs in his office. Just take the elevator up and follow the signs.”

My knee is still a little tender, so I’m not walking very quickly. As such, Sammy runs ahead of me to push the call button. Once we’re in the elevator, she says, “I feel bad for interrupting Melissa’s date, but she knows how much I want to make friends, so I don’t think she’ll mind.”

When the elevator stops, we follow the signs to Tim’s office. They lead to a small waiting room. As there’s no one at the reception desk, I look at the signs on the two doors behind it. I approach the one that says Tim Ferris. After a brief knock, I open the door. I’m not at all prepared for what I see.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



MELISSA

Tim and I are standing in his office saying goodbye. “Even though I don’t have sex before being in a committed relationship,” he tells me, “I do enjoy kissing.” He gives me a pirate smile.

“Are you suggesting you’d like to kiss me now?” I like Tim and even though I don’t feel a crazy-strong attraction to him yet, I think kissing is a good idea. Hopefully, it’ll get my mind off Jamie.

He takes a step closer until our bodies are practically touching. “That’s what I’m saying. You game?”

Instead of answering, I lean toward him and gently touch my lips to his. The initial contact is nice. His lips are soft and his breath smells like mint—*when did he brush his teeth?* Yet there are no fireworks.

Before we have a chance to discover an undeniable chemistry, there’s a knock on the door. Then Jamie walks in. What is *he* doing here?

“Oh, hey, I’m sorry. There was no one at the desk.” He clearly wasn’t expecting to walk in on a romantic moment.

Tim turns his head to look at him, before breaking physical contact with me. “Hi, Jamie. What can I help you with?”

“My daughter was hoping to find Melissa,” he says.

Looking behind him, I see Sammy standing in the waiting room. “Sammy, come on in,” I call out.

Once she joins us, she says, “My new friends want me to go swimming with them tomorrow so I can meet some of the other kids they know. But I’m supposed to work with you.”

“Don’t you worry about me,” I tell her. “Your social life is currently the most important thing.”

“Thank you so much!” She launches herself into my arms and hugs me tightly. “You’re wonderful!”

“I sure think so,” Tim says in a flirtatious manner.

Jamie looks like he wants to throw up. “We should let you go,” he says somewhat uncomfortably.

As he turns around to leave the room, Tim announces, “Melissa and I were just saying goodbye. I’m running late for an appointment.”

That's clearly my cue to leave. "Thank you so much for such a nice date, Tim."

"Thank you." He leans in and kisses my cheek. "What are you doing on Wednesday night?"

"Having dinner with you?" I guess.

"I'll pick you up at six." With that, he gathers some papers on his desk before walking us all out. Once we reach the elevator, he keeps going, leaving me alone with Sammy and Jamie.

Sammy is so excited she's vibrating. "Regan and Cameron are really cool, Melissa. They're nothing like the girls in Chicago. I mean, they're nice and it doesn't feel like they're looking for something to make fun of me about."

"Friendship is defined by mutual caring," I tell her. "Not by trying to make each other feel bad."

"I think Regan and Cameron are going to be good friends," she says excitedly.

Jamie doesn't say anything. Instead, he lets his daughter chatter away about her budding social life.

When the elevator gets to the lobby, Sammy says, "We're going to get lunch. Do you want to join us?" I'd love to spend more time with her, but I'd rather swim with sharks in chum-filled water than be subjected to Jamie.

"I already ate," I tell her. "But you go ahead and make sure to call me tomorrow and let me know how your day goes."

Sammy gives me another hug. "Thanks, Melissa. You'll always be my bestie."

As I turn to walk toward the exit, I notice Jamie staring at me in a very confusing manner. He looks both questioning and angry. *Ugh. Here we go again. What's his problem?*

I don't bother asking. Instead, I walk out of the club and head toward the parking lot. When I get into my car, I turn on the ignition and call Anna. "I just had my second date with Tim."

"And?"

"I can see why you and Chris like the club so much."

"It's great, isn't it? I'm surprised you don't go more with your mom and Howard."

"Ah, but then I'd have to spend more time with my mom and Howard ..."

"I see your point." She laughs. "Well then, I'll just have to invite you

more often.”

“Yes, please,” I tell her. “You’ll never guess who I saw while I was here.”

“Jamie and Sammy?”

“How did you know that?”

“Jamie told me he was on his way to join when I called to tell him that his offer on the house has been accepted.”

“He didn’t mention he got the house.” I don’t know why, but that makes me mad. I was there when he showed the house to Sammy. Plus, I showed him the hidden tunnel. Then it hits me—that might be why he didn’t tell me. He doesn’t want to think about our time in the tunnel. “Tim kissed me,” I announce.

“Was it amazing?”

“It was nice,” I tell her. “It wasn’t some wild passionate thing, but it was fine.”

“Do not undersell fine,” she says. “You can build on that.”

I kind of wish I’d told Anna that I’d kissed Jamie, but I don’t want her trying to push the two of us together. Especially as Jamie has made it abundantly clear that he wants nothing to do with me. Unless it involves his daughter. Then he seems perfectly happy to have me around.

“Tim says he wants us both to date other people until we become exclusive. *If* we become exclusive.”

“The Midwestern Matchmaker does not support that kind of behavior,” she’s quick to tell me. “She says you need to fully engage with one person before you can know if love will grow. Dating multiple people at one time is too confusing.”

“Tim seems pretty certain that’s the way he wants to proceed.”

“Are you going to date other guys?”

“That’s not normally how I operate.”

Anna scoffs. “You can’t let him date other women and you not be able to date other people as well.”

“I’ll keep looking on Catch to see if someone else looks promising,” I tell her. “But in the meantime, I really am enjoying my time with Tim. He’s a good guy.”

“A good guy who plays around.” She sounds angry on my behalf.

“But doesn’t sleep around,” I tell her. “I wouldn’t keep seeing him if he did that.”

“I guess that’s something,” she says before adding, “I thank God every day that I found Chris. I was getting ready to give up on men altogether before that fateful open house.”

“I’m starting to think the convent life doesn’t look so bad,” I tease. “I mean, free room and board, and uniforms so I wouldn’t need to worry about buying clothes.”

“Yeah, but married to God ... how does that work?”

“He’s a decent provider,” I tell her.

“With his own harem of devoted wives. It sounds like a bad television series.”

I laugh out loud at that. “I hope God has a good sense of humor because if He doesn’t, you might be in trouble.”

“He created sloths and star-nosed moles, didn’t He? I think it’s safe to say He’s not going to come gunning for me for one smart-mouth comment.”

“What are you doing tonight?” I ask. “You want to catch a movie or something?”

“Chris’s parents are coming over again. His mother wants to lecture me about the importance of eating vegetables at every meal. And then she’ll sit and watch me consume an entire plateful of them to make sure her grandchild is being properly gestated.”

I redirect the air conditioning vents in the car so they’re all blowing at me. “At least she’s excited about the baby.”

“I’d rather she leave me alone until he or she is born.”

“You should tell her you’re sick and can’t get together tonight.”

“She’d only bring over some weird Japanese tincture to cure me. No, I just need to let her come and hope she doesn’t stay too long. Whoops, I’ve got another call coming in. I’ll talk to you soon.”

After she hangs up, I call Paige, but she doesn’t pick up. I guess I’m going to be on my own tonight. I briefly toy with the idea of going back inside and seeing if Sammy wants to hang out. I know she’s only twelve, but I could teach her some new ways of wearing her hair or something.

I talk myself out of that idea almost immediately. While I know we’d have fun, I do not need to spend any more time in the vicinity of Jamie. And if Sammy came over, I’m guessing he’d join her. If for no other reason than to torment me.

For a guy who claims to want nothing to do with me, he’s sure around a lot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



JAMIE

Sammy spends the rest of the week meeting up with her new friends at the pool. While this makes me hopeful she's found her tribe, I'm nervous about history repeating itself.

As per our routine, I drop her off at the country club after breakfast and then pick her up before dinner. Sammy is clearly achieving the independence she's been striving for, but that alarms me. My whole life to this point has been about her, and I have no idea how to let her pull away.

Standing at the stove, I pour pancake batter onto the hot griddle. Pancakes have been our staple Sunday breakfast since Sammy was two and declared them the "nummiest!" When she walks into the kitchen I ask, "Are we still meeting Melissa at the club today?"

Her confused expression has me adding, "On Monday, you decided we'd meet her and Paige there."

"I totally forgot about that." She picks up her phone and starts to type.

"Are you texting Melissa?" I ask.

"Yup." Her phone promptly beeps in reply. "She says she'll be there at eleven, but Paige can't come because she's behind on getting her room ready for school."

So much for having a chaperone to keep me on the straight and narrow. Not that I'm going to throw myself at Melissa in a public setting, but I'm sure I'll be tempted. She affects me in a way that both surprises and scares me. I haven't felt like this since Beth and I started dating in college.

"You don't have to stay if you don't want to," Sammy tells me.

"Are you trying to get rid of me? I haven't seen you all week."

"Not at all. I just don't want you to feel like you need to stay."

"Samantha Riordan, I'm your father and I miss you. I'm going to the pool with you."

"Cool." She continues to send texts while I plate up our pancakes.

"Are Regan and Cameron going to be there today?"

"After lunch," she says. "They've got church first."

I nod my head. Sammy and I used to go to church when she was little, but somewhere down the line, we stopped. I always felt so busy with my work

and her schedule that it was nice to sleep late one day a week. But now that we've left the city, it might be time to go back.

After we eat, we grab our gear and head out the door. Once we get to the pool, we claim our lounge chairs and get set up for a day in the sun. "Don't forget to save a spot for Melissa," Sammy tells me before running off to talk to someone she knows.

I settle into my chair before checking my emails. I want to find out if Beth has responded to my last one. After discovering she hasn't, I scroll backward and scan through the entire thread.

I reread her letter about wanting to come back into Sammy's life. I responded with the following.

Dear Beth,

While I appreciate your explanation about what has kept you away from me and our daughter, I find it difficult to simply throw open the door and welcome you back into our lives. Sammy has no memory of you. None. To allow you to meet her feels like a risk I'm not sure I can take.

Jamie

Jamie,

I understand how you feel, I really do, but you're the one who reached out to me. You practically ordered me to explain myself. How can I do that if I don't see Samantha?

Beth

Beth,

I think you and I should see each other first and lay down some guidelines.

Jamie

Jamie,

However you want to proceed is fine by me. I'll follow whatever rules you set in place.

Beth

Beth,

What day are you arriving in Chicago?

Jamie

And just as I'm reading our old chain a new alert comes through.

Hi, Jamie,

I landed in Chicago this morning. I don't start my job for another ten days, so I can meet you any time.

Beth

I can't believe she's already in Chicago. I try to figure out what day would be best to see her. Tomorrow is too soon—as is every other day this week for that matter. Next weekend? Maybe.

My mind is spinning as I try to sort everything out, when I hear, "I'm guessing this is my chair?" I look up at Melissa who looks stunning in a hot pink swimming suit with a matching sarong around her waist. Beads of sweat appear on my forehead and my heart starts to gallop in my chest like it's neck-and-neck to win the Kentucky Derby.

I lean over and take Sammy's bag off the seat we were saving for her. "It sure is," I say before commenting, "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

She grumbles as she sits down. I assume that means she agrees with me. "Do you want anything from the snack bar?" I ask, hoping to break down her defenses. I need to talk to somebody about Beth, and while Melissa might not be the best choice—being that I haven't been particularly nice to her—I know how much she cares about Sammy. In short, I trust her judgment.

“Orange juice, please,” she says. “Make it a large.”

I hurry to stand up to retrieve her order. “I’ll be right back.” Not only do I get her a large juice, but I also bring back an assortment of pastries. You know, sweeten the deal a little.

When I arrive back at our chairs, I hand her the juice before offering her the plate of danishes. “I didn’t ask for these,” she says plainly.

“No, but I thought you might like something to eat.”

She picks up a chocolate croissant and sniffs it. “Thank you.”

While she takes her first bite, I ask, “How are things going with Tim?” I sound like I’m asking after her pet piranha.

“Fine.” She finishes chewing before swallowing. Then she takes a sip of juice.

“Where did you go on Wednesday night?” I think that was the night they were planning to go out.

“Why do you care?” she wants to know.

I exhale loudly. I don’t really care but I can’t jump right in to talk about Beth. “Just making small talk.”

“Let’s stick to the weather then.”

“Melissa,” I start to say, but I don’t know how to continue.

“Yes?” she demands impatiently.

“I need some advice.”

Before I can tell her the kind of guidance I’m after, she says, “Quit telling women you want to kiss them but can’t. If that requires a personality transplant, I’d be happy to chip in.”

She’s in a mood today. “Thank you, but I need some specific advice. Regarding Sammy.”

That gets her attention. Sitting up straighter, she demands, “What about her? Is she okay?”

“So far, so good,” I tell her. “The thing is, her mom is moving back to Chicago, and she wants to see Sammy.”

Melissa startles, causing her to nearly spill her drink on me. “What right does she have to upset Sammy’s life?” *I knew she was the right one to talk to.*

“I contacted Beth when I found out that she and her husband were moving to Chicago. Beth’s stepson is coming with them.”

“Her stepson? She has a stepson?” So, it’s not just me that finds that news highly upsetting. Good.

“Beth and I have been emailing back and forth and I was wondering if

you'd mind reading the chain so I can ask your advice."

Melissa immediately sticks out her hand for my phone. Once I set up the thread, I pass it to her. She doesn't say a word as she scrolls to the bottom. When she's done reading, she hands the phone back.

"What do you think?" I ask nervously.

"I'm not sure what to think. I mean, I truly hated the woman when I found out what she'd done to Sammy." She pauses for a moment before adding, "and you. But now, I kind of feel sorry for her."

"I don't feel anything for her," I respond coldly. "But I need to decide what's best for my daughter."

"Did you ask her if she wants to meet her mother?"

"She said she did."

"Then what do you want me to say?" she asks while picking up a bottle of sunscreen and squeezing out a fair amount. She starts rubbing it on her legs, and that is nothing if not distracting. I pull my eyes away and try to focus on the matter at hand

"I want you to tell me that you think it's a good idea. I want you to help me figure out how to make the meeting happen while causing my daughter the least amount of discomfort."

"This sounds to me like something you'd want to ask a *friend*." She clearly has not forgiven me for saying that I didn't think we should be friends.

"You're the only friend I have in Elk Lake," I confess. "Also, I think you're the most unbiased of all my friends. You know, because you weren't around when Sammy and I had to make a go of it on our own."

Her eyes narrow like she's about to dissect me. "Are you saying that you want to be my friend?"

"I would like that," I tell her. "Very much."

She crosses her arms in an ornery fashion before uncrossing them and turning toward me. "Fine. Here's what I think you should do. I think you should take Sammy to Chicago, but leave her somewhere while you make the first contact with Beth. If everything goes well, you can set up a time for them to meet later in the day."

A golf ball-size knot of fear fills my throat. I try to swallow it before admitting, "I'm scared to death."

"Of what? That Beth's going to want to see more of Sammy, or that you still have feelings for her?"

“I have plenty of feelings for Beth, but none of them are particularly good.” I’m thankful my sunglasses are on so she can’t see that my eyes are starting to water. The Cure song “Boys Don’t Cry” pops into my head.

“You haven’t seen her since London, right?”

“Correct.”

“And at that time, you were hoping she’d come home with you.” I nod my head, so she continues, “Beth broke your heart, too.”

I nod slower this time.

“Jamie, I know Sammy has been your sole focus, but you have to let yourself work through your own grief.”

I try to speak but my voice box seizes up.

Melissa reaches between our chairs and puts her hand on mine. “It’s been three years since my almost-fiancé died, and I still think about him a lot. It’s not the same as it was when it was fresh, but I still can’t help wondering what my life would be like, had he lived.”

“I always wonder what Sammy’s and my life would have looked like had Beth stayed.”

“Neither one of us can change the past,” she says. “All we can do is accept things the way they are. We need to process our grief so we can create a new future.” She pauses a moment before adding, “On our own. Not together.”

I squeeze her hand before releasing it. “That’s good advice. Thank you.”

“That’s what friends are for.”

“Melissa, I have a serious question to ask you.”

“Yes?” She looks as anxious as I feel.

“Would you ... That is to say, would you ...”

“Would I what?” she practically snaps.

“Would you consider going to Chicago with us?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



MELISSA

Why in the world does Jamie want me to go to Chicago with them? I stare at him with my mouth hanging open. “You want me to go with you?”

“Sammy adores you and I was hoping you could stay with her while I meet with Beth.”

I lift my sunglasses and gaze at him intently. “You must have a lot of friends in the city.”

“I do.” He takes off his sunglasses as well, showing off his shockingly beautiful blue eyes. “But I’m not sure they’d support what I’m doing, and I don’t want to have to explain myself.”

While I’m pretty sure Beth has forfeited her right to know her daughter, Sammy has the right to meet her mother if she wants to. “I’m sure they’d support you no matter what.”

“Are you saying you won’t go with us?” He sounds borderline panicky.

“I don’t know what I’m saying,” I tell him honestly. “I’m just super confused as to why you’d want me to go with you. You hardly know me.”

“I know you,” he says somewhat passionately. “I know that you’re kind and caring. I know that my daughter means something to you. What else matters?”

Now is probably not the time to tell him that I still want him to kiss me. Even after going out with Tim again on Wednesday night, I have Jamie on the brain in the worst way. “My being there might make Sammy uncomfortable.”

“Not only does she adore you, but talks very freely in front of you,” he says. “I’m guessing if she had a choice in the matter, she’d want you above anyone else.”

“Shouldn’t you give her the choice?” Yes, I’m stalling, but this seems like a highly personal thing for me to be doing for someone who until very recently made it clear he wants nothing to do with me. Now, apparently, he wants me to be his friend, but just so I’ll help him.

“Why are you so resistant to this idea?” he wants to know.

Because I know what it’s like to spend hours in the car with you and all I can think about is jumping on your lap and kissing you senseless. Obviously,

I don't share that bit of information. Instead, I go with, "I could only do it on Sunday."

All the tension drops from his face. "Sunday is great. Thank you so much, Melissa."

I bob my head up and down, but I don't say anything. *Why did I cave and tell him I'd go with him?* I must be a total glutton for punishment.

As I try to avoid his gaze, I see Tim across the pool sitting on a lounge chair. He's clearly not working today as he's wearing swimming trunks and nothing else. I'm about to wave to him when I notice he's not alone. It looks like the scantily clad blonde sitting next to him is with him. I know he told me he was going to date other people, but even so, this is highly uncomfortable.

I'm tempted to drape my towel over my face and fumble my way to the nearest exit. But before I can, he spots me. Tim waves easily which prompts me to stand up and stroll over to him. "Hi there, bro," I call out, remembering us teasing about how we'd react if we ran into each other while we were on dates with other people.

"Sister Missy!" he replies with a smile. "Fancy meeting you here at the pool."

"I'm here with Jamie and Sammy," I tell him.

"How are things going?" Tim was clearly serious when he suggested I date Jamie as well as him. Heck, he practically threw me into Jamie's arms on *our* date here.

"We're going to Chicago next Sunday," I tell him. I don't bother explaining why.

"That sounds promising." He doesn't sound the least bit jealous.

"We're going for Sammy."

Tim notices my eyes turn toward his companion, so he offers, "Missy, this is my date, Shandy."

As soon as Shandy looks up, I see that she's young. Like, not a day over twenty-four. She smiles sweetly. "Hey."

I'm tempted to tell her that hay is for horses, but I'm not sure she's old enough to recognize that particular idiomatic phrase. Heck, she's probably never even heard of an idiom. "Hello to you, too." I sound like her grandmother's maiden aunt.

"Are you Tim's sister?" she asks. I suppose I should be grateful she didn't ask if I was a nun. Not that many nuns hang out at pools in hot pink

swimming suits.

“Yes,” I say at the same time Tim says, “No.”

Tim takes the bull by the horns and tells Shandy, “Melissa and I went to school together when we were kids. We’re dating.”

I’m not sure how I expect Shandy to react, but I don’t expect her to wink at me and say, “Cool. We should get together and compare notes some time.”

“Uh, yeah. I mean, no. I mean ...” *What do I mean? Who tells another woman they should get together and compare notes about the guy they’re both seeing?*

Tim jokes, “I could go to the snack bar if you want to do that now.”

Despite Shandy’s eager expression, I tell him, “I should be getting back to Jamie.”

“Have fun,” Tim says enthusiastically, making me wonder if he even likes me in *that* way. Yes, there have been a few kisses, but none of them have rocked my world. Heck, they haven’t moved it the tiniest bit.

“Tim will give you my number if you ever want to get together,” Shandy calls out.

What’s happened in the dating world since I was last an active participant? It used to be you only had to worry about how to tell a guy you weren’t going to hit the sheets with him right after he took you out for a beer and free pretzels. Now, apparently, his other dates want to get together and spill the tea. That’s a big no for me.

As I walk away, I wonder how to explain what just happened to Jamie. He had to have seen that I was talking to Tim. He doesn’t give me a chance to say anything though. Instead, as soon as I get back to my chair, he asks, “Who’s Tim’s friend?”

I’m tempted to tell him that Shandy is his sister/employee/dog walker/psychic/water aerobics instructor ... anything but the truth. But for some unknown reason, I come clean. “Shandy is his date.”

“I thought he was dating *you*.”

I inhale deeply before letting the air slowly leak out of me. Once it’s nearly depleted, I tell him, “Tim doesn’t believe in only seeing one person at a time. He thinks we should play the field so that if we become exclusive, we won’t wonder what else is out there.”

Jamie inhales sharply like I just told him that Tim has a tail and wants me to move to the middle of the Red Sea with him to start a seahorse farm. “What do you think about that?”

“It makes sense ...” Lies! But I don’t want Jamie to think that Tim and I aren’t on the same page. Just because he doesn’t want to kiss me doesn’t mean a whole slew of other guys don’t. *Top secret factoid: There is no slew of other guys.*

“Are you dating other people, too?” he wants to know.

Hundreds. Thousands. Three million. “Not at this time.”

“Why?”

“There’s no one else who interests me.” I don’t dare look at him, so I focus my attention onto the edge of my towel.

“No one?”

“Not a soul.”

“But you’d consider going out with someone else if they asked you?”

“I’m talking to a salamander breeder who sounds pretty promising,” I blurt out.

“Really?”

“He’s very concerned about global warming and composting,” I tell him. “He’s quite a catch.”

“If you say so ...”

“How about you?” I ask. “I know you said that you don’t introduce Sammy to your dates, but surely someone has caught your fancy in the last week.” Why did I ask him that? I don’t want to know if he’s dating anyone.

“I barely see anybody but you and Sammy.” I’m on the verge of asking if I’ve caught his fancy, but I already know the answer.

“That’s too bad,” I tell him before offering, “Would you like me to ask Tim to set you up with some of the women he isn’t interested in?”

“Hardly,” Jamie scoffs. “If and when I start dating, I’ll find my own companions.” I feel his eyes boring into the side of my head. I don’t dare look at him for fear a Vulcan mind meld might occur.

“There are all kinds of apps out there to aid you,” I suggest helpfully.

“I don’t need apps,” he practically spits.

“Maybe not in Chicago. But there aren’t a lot of singletons over the age of twenty in Elk Lake. Especially in the off season.” I should know.

The truth is, I never thought I was an app person either. Yet, the two whole dates I’ve had in the last three years suggest it might be time to change my thinking. The first date was with my mailman. His exceptionally fine legs caught my eye last summer while he was walking up and down my street. Too bad his personality didn’t match his quads.

The other was with the dry cleaner who helps us get stains out of dresses that future brides leave behind. Although I didn't realize that was a date until he tried to hold my hand over coffee at Rosemary's. I thought we were getting together to discuss a particularly bright lipstick smudge on the neckline of one of my most expensive gowns.

"Apps are for lazy people," Jamie persists.

While this comment makes me bristle, I do not want to fight with him. "I'm sure you're right."

"Are you admitting to being a lazy dater?" he wants to know.

"You'd know best."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It only means that you seem to have made up your mind about online dating and I'm fairly certain I won't change it, so there's no point in discussing the topic with you."

"I don't want to fight with you," he says. "I'm sorry I said anything about how you meet your dates."

"Apology accepted," I tell him. "Now, if you and I are going to be friends, you should know that if we ever go to the movies, I'll require my own popcorn. I don't share."

"Go to the movies?" He sounds worried, like I just asked him out.

I clarify, "You, me, and Sammy."

"You wouldn't even share with Sammy?" Now he sounds amused.

"No."

"And you'd want me to pay? That sounds kind of like a date."

"I would pay sometimes."

"And you'd buy me my own popcorn?" This conversation is ridiculous.

"You'd have to share with Sammy," I tell him. "Do you know how expensive movie theater popcorn has become?"

"What about lunch today?" he asks. "Who's paying?"

"You, obviously. I'm not even a member here. But I'll pay the next time we get together."

"Promise?" he asks like he's looking forward to our next encounter.

"Sure," I tell him, knowing full-well that we'll hardly even see each other after today. I mean, there's Chicago next weekend, but surely his mind will totally be on Beth and not on me. I don't know why that thought bothers me so much. Except that the more I get to know Jamie Riordan, the more I really like him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



JAMIE

Spending the day at the pool with Sammy and Melissa is the most fun I've had in a long time. Conversation flows smoothly, and the only uncomfortable moments are self-inflicted. Like when I stare at Melissa's lips for too long wondering if our kisses were as phenomenal as I recall, or if my lack of female companionship has led me to remember incorrectly. The only way to know would be to kiss her again. That thought marches around my brain for the rest of the day.

At four o'clock, Sammy returns to our chairs with her new friends, Regan and Cameron. "Regan wants us to spend the night at her house tonight. Can I go, Dad? Please?!"

Before I can answer, Regan announces, "My mom is over there." She points across the pool. "She said she'd like to come over and meet you first."

"That would be nice," I tell her. Sammy knows the rules. No going to someone's house before I at least meet the parents.

Regan waves to her mom, who in turn stands up and walks over to us. She appears to be my age or slightly older. Her skirted swimming suit suggests she's more interested in being comfortable than trying to look twenty. I like her immediately. Reaching out her hand to me, she says, "I'm Terra, Regan's mom."

"I'm Jamie." I indicate Melissa. "This is our friend, Melissa."

She seems to recognize Melissa immediately. "Oh my gosh, Missy Corner?"

"Do I know you?"

"I'm Holly Berringer's older sister. Do you remember the time you two had a mud fight at the dog park?"

Melissa's eyes open wide before she cringes. "I sure do. Mud wasn't the only thing we wound up throwing." Her face contorts in such a way as to make it clear what the other thing was.

"How have you been?" Terra asks her. "I understand you and your mom have quite a booming bridal business in town."

"We do," Melissa says. "How's Holly? I haven't seen her in years."

"She lives in Iceland now."

“Iceland?” That wouldn’t have been in my top one hundred guesses.

Terra shrugs her shoulders. “She went on a yoga retreat there ten years ago and decided she never wanted to leave. She only comes home every two years, and we visit her on the odd years.”

“I always wanted to get out of Elk Lake for a while.” Melissa sounds envious.

“Your mom must be glad you stayed though.”

“My mom is the reason I wanted to leave.”

Terra laughs. “Listen, we’re going to order pizza for the girls’ supper, why don’t you and Jamie join me and Rob for a barbecue? We have another couple joining us.”

Melissa gives me the side-eye like she doesn’t know how to answer. She finally says, “I don’t know about Jamie, but I’d really like that. Thank you.”

“I’d love to join you as well,” I tell Terra. “It’s hard to get to know people when you’re new in town.”

Terra gives us the address before saying, “Six o’clock. Just go around the back of the house to the deck.”

After she walks away, Sammy announces, “I need you to bring my pink nightgown with you. Oh, and I need my toothbrush, hairbrush, shorts and a T-shirt for tomorrow. And my tennis shoes, too. Don’t forget my pillow.”

“Would you like me to bring your mattress as well?” How much does one kid need for a sleepover?

Instead of getting my joke, Sammy looks to Regan for the answer. Regan announces, “No need. We’ve got sleeping bags.”

After the kids jump into the water, I tell Melissa, “It’s nice to be invited out. I don’t think I would have enjoyed being home alone tonight.”

“Welcome to my world ...” she mutters so quietly, it’s clear she’s not looking for a response. Louder, she adds, “Terra thinks we’re a couple. I’ll make sure to set the record straight.”

“I already told her we were friends when I introduced you.” I find I don’t mind being mistaken for Melissa’s boyfriend.

“She invited us together and mentioned there would be *another* couple there.”

Ignoring her concern about our being mistaken for a duo, I ask, “What do you say I pick you up at your apartment at five forty-five. We can carpool.”

“I don’t mind driving myself.”

“I wouldn’t want your salamander breeder to get mad at us for creating a

larger carbon footprint,” I tease. “After all, conservation makes for a happy planet.”

“He’s not *my* salamander breeder yet,” she tells me. “But if you want to drive, go for it. That way I can drink.” It sounds like she’s suggesting I’m driving her to drink. The thought makes me smile.

As we collect our things to leave, I tell Melissa, “I’ve had a very nice day. Thank you.”

Her expression is akin to her shuffling across a shag rug in wool socks and touching something metal. “I had a nice day, too,” she finally replies.

We walk out to the parking lot together before going our separate ways. As I watch her get into her car, I can’t help but feel very fortunate she’s the first person Sammy and I met in Elk Lake. Melissa has set the tone for what appears to be a very good life choice for us.

After getting home, I take a quick shower before changing into a pair of pressed khakis and a light blue button-down. Then I get busy packing a bag for Sammy. My excitement for my daughter making friends overshadows my worries. Especially after meeting Terra. Any parent who requires meeting me before a sleepover is my kind of parent.

On the way to pick up Melissa, I stop off at the liquor store and buy a couple bottles of wine. On impulse, I pick up two bouquets of flowers at the outdoor market on the way back to my car.

By the time I get to Melissa’s apartment, she’s standing on the curb out front. I unroll the passenger side window and ask, “Am I late?”

“No, but I was ready, so I didn’t see the point in making you come get me.”

She’s wearing one of the new dresses she bought last weekend when we took Sammy shopping. It’s a citron green number with a form-fitting top that cinches at the waist before flaring out into a full skirt. She looks absolutely gorgeous.

“I brought you flowers, though. They’ll wilt if you don’t get them into water.”

“Why did you bring me flowers?” She sounds like she would be less shocked if I bought her a bouquet of live eels.

“Why not?” I ask. “Friends can buy friends things.”

“But flowers?”

“I got some for Terra as well, and I’m clearly not making a move on her.” I hold up a cellophane-wrapped bundle and hand it out the window to her.

After taking them, she declares, “I love Veronica. They last forever, too. The last bunch I got lasted for three weeks.”

“Do you want me to come up with you while you put them in water?” I ask.

“No,” she practically hisses before turning around. “I’ll be right back.”

I watch as she punches her security code into the pad by the door that leads to her apartment. Her skirt flows around her like she’s dancing a waltz. I’m still lost in my thoughts of appreciation as she comes flying back out only minutes later. When she gets into the car, she hands me a sandwich-sized bag with a handful of walnuts in it.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s for you,” she says.

“Why are you giving me walnuts?”

“Why did you give me flowers?” she retaliates.

“You gave me walnuts because I gave you flowers?” I don’t quite fathom her reasoning.

“I didn’t have anything else,” she says. As I put the car into gear and pull away from the curb, she adds, “It was that or a box of Special K cereal. But the cereal had already been opened so that felt like an odd choice.”

I’m about to assure her it would be no weirder than a bag of walnuts, but I don’t want to hurt her feelings. “Thank you,” I tell her. “I’ll cherish them.”

“You don’t have to be sarcastic.”

“And you don’t have to even the score every time I give you something,” I tell her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as she closes herself off as she crosses her arms across her chest. “Then don’t give me things.”

“If one of your other friends gave you flowers,” I ask, “would you accept them?”

“Yes.”

“I thought we decided today that we were going to be friends,” I tell her.

“I’ve never kissed one of my other friends the way I kissed you.”

“Yes, but that’s all water under the bridge.” I clearly don’t mean that, as kissing Melissa is the only thing I can think of. But given the conversation, I can’t tell her that.

On impulse, I pull over to the side of the road and park the car parallel to a playground. “I have an idea.”

Her brow furrows slightly. “What’s that?”

“What if we kissed again in order to prove to ourselves that there’s nothing but friendship between us?”

“Come again?” It doesn’t sound like she’s going for it. Also, what am I thinking proposing such an outlandish idea? My desire to kiss Melissa has seriously affected my ability to make sound decisions.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she says.

“Why not?”

“What if we like it and want to do it again?”

“What if we don’t?”

“What if we do?” she maintains.

“There’s only one way to find out,” I tell her. “And that’s to kiss again.”

Melissa turns her head so she’s facing me. “What if one of us likes it more than the other?”

“There’s still only one way to find out,” I tell her.

“Are you going to kiss me, or do you want me to kiss you?” She sounds like she’s trying to decide between archaic tortures. *Tar and feathering? Or being drawn and quartered?*

“It would be my honor to kiss you.” She leans forward ever so slightly, which encourages me to do the same. I gently touch my lips to hers and know instantly there’s more than friendship going on.

Blissful moments later, I increase the pressure, and Melissa opens for me, allowing me to further my exploration. The groan she releases indicates she’s enjoying herself as much as I am.

I finally force myself to pull away from her. “So, what do you think? Friends or not friends?”

She opens and closes her mouth more than a few times before finding her voice. “I’m not answering first. What do you think?”

I tip my head back and forth as though trying to decide. The truth is that I want this woman like nobody before, but there’s no way I can tell her that. I finally decide, “I think we could be good friends.”

I want to kiss the look of confusion off her face. “Good friends,” she repeats. “What does that mean?”

“Surely you have other good friends,” I say.

The look she shoots at me is pure comedy. “If I kissed Anna or Paige like that, they’d drop dead. And they’re my two best friends.”

“Yes, but isn’t one of the benefits of having a good male friend being able to kiss him?” *What am I even talking about right now?*

“I’m not a friend with benefits kind of girl,” she says primly.

“I’m not suggesting we jump into bed together,” I tell her. “Just that we kiss every now and then. You know, when the feeling strikes.” I cringe internally when I hear myself say this, but there’s something about Melissa I just can’t leave alone.

“I’m afraid that might confuse me,” she says. “Especially as I’m actively looking for somebody to share my life with.”

I tuck a stray strand of wavy red hair behind her ear. “Tim is dating other women.” Which she does not deserve. I want to tell her how sweet and lovely and beautiful she is. I want her to know that she deserves the world, but I can’t be the one to tell her. I don’t want to give her false expectations of what I can offer.

“So?”

“So, if he’s kissing other people, why can’t you?”

“Because ... because ...”

And right there, I know I have her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



MELISSA

What was I doing letting Jamie kiss me? *Bad, Melissa*, I silently scold myself. But even so, I can't help but appreciate the sheer delight the experience evoked. My extremities are still tingling like they've been brought back to life via electric shock paddles.

The bad news is that I liked kissing Jamie even better than the first time when we were in the tunnel. I've gotten to know him since then, begrudging as it's been. The truth is, he's a straight-up great guy who loves his daughter and wants to protect her no matter what the inconvenience to his life. And that right there is beyond sexy to me.

Regarding his suggestion that I should be able to kiss whomever I want so long as Tim is doing the same, I tell him, "I don't make my decisions based on how Tim makes his."

"Tim is a man whore."

"He's dating around so he doesn't wind up heartbroken again. He's been on the short end of too many cheatings, and he wants to make sure the next woman he winds up with is the one."

"By swapping spit with the free world?" Jamie seems to find this behavior as distasteful as I do. But I don't tell him how I feel.

That comment brings me back to what the two of us just did. "I make decisions based on what's right for me. And locking lips with you every time one of us gets the urge doesn't seem like a safe course of action."

"I promise to tell you if I get the sniffles or feel a cold coming on," he says.

How can such a smart guy be so dense? "That's not what I mean, and you know it."

As he turns down Terra's street, he suggests, "How about if we pick up this conversation on our way home tonight?"

"What good would that do?"

"It would give you time to consider the benefits of having me as a good friend."

"Again," I tell him, "I already have good friends and the definition of our relationships does not include sticking our tongues down each other's

throats.” I feel the heat as my face flushes. I know from experience I’ve just turned beet red.

“Then maybe we should redefine ourselves as *really* good friends,” he suggests.

“I like you, Jamie,” I tell him honestly. “But you and I are looking for different things in a relationship. I’m looking for a guy who wants to be with me, all of me. Not just some convenience to hook up with when the mood strikes.”

He pulls over in front of the address Terra gave us, before jamming the gear shift into park. “I never suggested hooking up. Not once.”

I scoff. “Yeah, but you can’t tell me you wouldn’t jump at the chance to crawl into my bed if you didn’t think there would be any strings.”

He visibly gulps. “I’m only human, Melissa,” he says. “But I’m also a nice guy and if I tell you I won’t do anything more than kiss you, that’s what I mean.”

“What if I want more?” ‘Cause let’s face it, if he kisses me like that for long, I’m only human, too.

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t be able to oblige your burning hot desires for my manly bod.”

“For the love of ...” I can’t help it, I start laughing. “Fine. We can discuss this later,” I tell him while pointing to the clock. “We’re already late and I don’t want to be rude to our hosts.”

Jamie gets out and opens the car door for me. He carries the wine and I carry the flowers. We follow the brick path to the back of the house in silence until we arrive at the wide expanse of the patio. Two couples are already there. Terra and Rob, and another couple that has me gasping like I’m witnessing a murder.

“Tim? What are you doing here?” I demand as my gaze travels to his companion—who I might mention is *not* Shandy from this morning. *How many women is this guy dating?*

To his credit, Tim looks surprised and perhaps a bit embarrassed to see me. “Missy? What are *you* doing here?”

“Terra’s sister Holly and I used to be friends. Terra and I ran into each other at the pool today.”

Tim belatedly remembers his manners and extends his hand to Jamie. “Hey, man, nice to see you again.”

Jamie looks like the only reason he’d take Tim’s hand would be to gain

enough leverage to flip him over *Karate Kid*-style. “Tim.” His arms remain at his sides.

Tim’s date clears her throat to get his attention, resulting in him moving back to her side. “Missy, Jamie, this is my ... um ... my ... Heather.”

Unlike Shandy from this morning, Heather seems to be around our age. “I’m Tim’s *date*.” Her tone is as toasty as a winter day in Antarctica. I suppose she’d have to be a total moron not to sense the tension between me and Tim, making her feel the need to stake her claim.

“Hi, Heather,” I say. “Have you and Tim been dating long?” I might as well try to figure out how many encounters the guy needs before declaring exclusivity.

“This is our sixth date,” she says. Her eyebrow arches like she’s just challenged me to a duel.

“How nice.”

Terra puts a tray of steaks down and comes over to us. “Missy, Jamie, I’m so glad you came! I see you already know Tim.”

“We went to school together,” I tell her. “He was in Holly’s and my grade.”

“I didn’t know that.” When her husband joins her, Terra makes the introductions. “Rob, this is Jamie, he’s Sammy’s dad, and this is Missy. She and Holly were good friends when they were little.”

Rob is only slightly taller than Terra, who is an average height at best. He smiles engagingly before offering us cocktails. “I’ll have a large gin and tonic,” I tell him. “Light on the tonic.”

“I’ll just have a beer,” Jamie says. He winks at me before adding, “I’m the designated driver tonight, and I think Melissa is looking to tie one on.” Nice, out me as a lush. Which I’m not normally, but tonight feels like it might be an exception.

Tim’s date decides to follow Rob into the house. I bet she’s going to slam back some tequila shots of her own. After she leaves, Tim comes over to me and asks, “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I shake off his hand—the one that’s found its way to my arm. “Sure.” I turn to Jamie and ask, “Will you excuse me?” I don’t wait for him to answer.

Tim leads the way to the edge of the deck before saying, “This is uncomfortable, huh?”

Playing dumb, I ask, “You mean running into you on two different dates in the same day?”

He has the courtesy to blush. “You’re on a whole day date with Jamie. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Relieved?” I’m dumbfounded that he could possibly feel anything but total exhaustion, given his current social calendar.

“I deserve that,” he says. “But I told you I’m playing the field. I’m not lying to anyone.”

I suddenly realize I’m not angry with Tim. Sure I’m smarting, but ultimately, he’s a great guy. Who knows what might have happened had he only been dating me. Something might have come of it.

But he’s not just dating me. And to complicate matters, I’ve just been kissing the lips off a man who makes me feel more excited than a kid on Christmas morning with a puppy in her stocking.

“Tim,” I start to say.

“You’re breaking up with me.” He sounds sad.

I shake my head. “I can’t break up with you because we’ve only gone out a couple of times.”

“But you don’t want to go out with me again.”

“Not in a romantic way,” I tell him. “But I really like you and it would be fun to hang out together sometime. Maybe we can include Anna and Paige.”

“Friend-zoned again,” he grumbles before adding, “I like you too and I’ll happily see you again.”

“As a friend,” I tell him. “You should know that you are never going to find ‘the one’ while you’re playing the field like a midfielder in a soccer match.” As in, all over the freaking place.

“I’m just trying to make sure the next woman I commit to is going to be the one.”

“There are no guarantees in life, Tim. None. And by dating all these women, you’re not making any of them feel special. Why don’t you try staying with the one you’ve been seeing the longest and really give her a chance.”

“Jenny?”

“Who’s Jenny?” I ask.

“The woman I’ve been dating the longest.”

“Not Heather? This is your sixth date with her. How many have you gone on with Jenny?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “Nine, maybe ten?”

“You’ve only been back in Wisconsin for a month. Where do you find the

time?” I demand. He merely shrugs his shoulders in response, so I ask, “Do you like Jenny?”

“I wouldn’t have gone out with her as often as I have if I didn’t.”

“Then take my advice and be exclusive with her. You’ve got to give your relationship a real chance if anything is going to come of it.”

Poor Tim looks so confused right now. “I just don’t want it to end like my other relationships did.”

“You can’t protect yourself from life. The big things are always risks. That’s what makes them so worth it in the end.”

“Okay, I’ll do it. I’ll tell Jenny that I want to see only her. But just so you know, the thought scares me to death.”

“You have to break it off with Shandy and Heather,” I tell him.

He nods his head. “And Rachel and Violet.” *For the love of God ...*

Rob and Heather walk out of the house and wind up next to Jamie and Terra at the same time Tim and I do. I take my drink from Rob and take a healthy swig before raising my glass. “To old friends and new friends.”

Tim raises his and announces, “To only dating one woman at a time.”

Heather’s eyes pop out of their sockets like they’re making a run for it. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” she asks.

“Yes,” Tim tells her. “After talking to Missy, I realize that I only want to see one woman.”

“Me?” Heather clamors.

“No, Heather, I’m sorry. It’s not you.”

“Melissa?” Jamie demands angrily. “It had better not be Melissa.”

“Why can’t it be me?” I ask him. “You know I’m looking for a partner, and if Tim wants to be exclusive, why shouldn’t I be exclusive with him?”

“Wait a second.” Tim waves his hand in front of himself like he’s doing a mad hand jive. “You want to be exclusive with me, Missy? Why didn’t you say so?”

“I was just making a point, Tim. I don’t want to be exclusive with you. I broke up with you, remember?”

“You broke up with him?” Jamie wants to know.

Heather stands on a chair so she’s towering above us all before yelling, “What is going on here? Tim, are you breaking up with me for this woman or not?” She flings her arm out in my direction. Unfortunately, she uses the hand she was holding her drink in, and winds up throwing it all over me.

Terra and Rob look like they’re about to expire from the sheer drama

we're all creating when Rob turns to his wife. "I told you it would be fun to invite some new people over."

CHAPTER THIRTY



JAMIE

While Heather waits in the front of the house for her cab, the rest of us sit awkwardly on the patio. Melissa finally declares, “I think I’d better go home and change.”

Terra waves a hand at her. “You can borrow something of mine. I have a slew of smaller clothes I don’t fit into anymore.” She stands up and leads the way into the house. “You can look through those.”

After the women are gone, Rob announces, “This isn’t quite how I expected tonight to turn out. Single life appears to be way more interesting than I remember.”

“Single life is for the birds,” Tim says. Rob and I both wait for him to elaborate. He does. “I hate dating. I also didn’t do marriage very well.”

“According to Melissa,” I say, “You were both dating and married in Los Angeles. That must be a completely different experience from life in the real world.”

Rob rubs his hands together. “Yeah, all the ladies in L.A. have to be totally hot.”

Tim grimaces. “It’s true that Southern California has its fair share of gorgeous women, but it also has more than the standard number of power-hungry gold diggers.”

“Did your ex-wife marry you for your money?” Rob wants to know.

“I didn’t think so, but when she left me for an NBA player, I started to think that might have been the case.”

“Dude, that sucks,” Rob says.

For some reason, I decide to tell them, “My ex left when my daughter was only ten months old. I haven’t gotten serious with a woman since.”

Tim claps me on the shoulder in the way men do when bonding over a shared experience. “I’m sorry, man. That’s rough.”

Not wanting to be left out of the conversation, Rob says, “No relationship is perfect.”

Tim and I both stare at him, so he explains, “Marriage can be dull. The same meals prepared over and over, the same conversations. I love Terra like crazy, but we could use a little spice in our relationship, you know?”

“So, create some spice,” I tell him. “But don’t for a minute think that either Tim or I are going to feel sorry for you. You have a beautiful home, a beautiful wife and family ... From where we’re sitting, you have it made.”

“All I’m saying is that nobody has the perfect set up,” Tim says.

We all turn our attention to our drinks. *How is it that my life has turned out so spectacularly different from what I thought it would?*

The kids run out on the patio to steal a bowl of potato chips when Sammy stops in front of me. “Are you sick?” she wants to know.

I shake my head. “We’re just talking.” That’s when I remember that I need to tell her about seeing Beth next week, but this is neither the time nor the place.

Regan says, “You all look like you could use an antidepressant or something.” Then the girls run off before any further comments can be made.

“I thought about taking an antidepressant,” Tim shares. “But ultimately, I didn’t want to numb the pain. I wanted to remember how bad it was, so I’d never make the same mistake again.”

“And you think dating a bunch of women at the same time is going to keep you from making another mistake?” I want to know.

Before he can answer, Rob asks, “How many fillies do you currently have in the stable?”

Tim’s fingers pop up one by one while he counts. “Five. Of course, that’s changed now that Missy and Heather have dropped out.”

“And because you’ve decided you are only going to see one,” I remind him.

“Yeah, about that. What if I only see one and it doesn’t work out? That’s a lot of wasted time.”

“You can’t think about that,” Rob advises. “You have to give one woman your all while optimistically hoping she’s the love of your life.”

“And if she’s not?” he wants to know.

“Then you start over,” I tell him.

“Like you did?” Tim asks me.

“I have a child,” I remind him. “I’ve made the choices I thought best for her.”

“What about Missy?” he asks.

“We’re friends,” I tell him.

“I think she wants you to be more than friends,” Tim says. “Otherwise, why would she have broken things off with me?”

I take a swig of my beer before answering. “Maybe because you’re a slut, and she wants more than that?”

“I’m not sleeping with any of the women.” *Like that makes it less skeezy.*

“But what kind of connection can you be making if you’re kissing a whole bunch of gals?” Rob asks before adding, “Not that I’m not totally impressed, because I am. I mean, what man doesn’t occasionally think about having more than one woman?”

That’s when Terra and Melissa walk back out to join us. Melissa looks gorgeous in her borrowed dress and the desire to reach out and touch her is intense. She just draws people to herself with her poise and charm. I feel lucky to be her “date” for the night.

It’s clear they overheard Tim’s comment because Terra asks, “What woman hasn’t thought about having more than one man?”

Rob has the nerve to sound offended as he asks, “You’ve thought about other guys?”

“Um, yeah. Why do you think I watch *Outlander*?”

“I thought it was because it had a good plot.”

Terra laughs. “That’s what I tell *you*. But Sam Heughan is the real reason. That man sizzles my bacon every time he pulls Claire into his arms.”

“Terra!” Rob sounds angry.

“What? I’m just picking up on the conversation you were having before we came out. You can’t seriously be saying it’s okay for you to think about other women but not for me to think about other men.”

Instead of answering her question, Rob walks over to his wife and takes both of her hands in his. “You are the only woman for me,” he declares with meaning.

“And you’re the only man for me.”

I feel like we’re on a soap opera set watching a particularly juicy scene play out. Rob asks, “You’d never leave me, would you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Rob. Of course I wouldn’t leave you.” Then she teases, “I mean, how would we divide everything?” Even though Rob doesn’t look convinced, he drops the topic.

Once things are settled with our hosts, we carry on and enjoy a delicious steak dinner. However, I’m sure the night isn’t what it would have been had Heather stayed and we all pretended to be grownups. Instead, there’s an air of melancholy we can’t seem to shake.

After dessert, Melissa stands up and brushes the wrinkles out of her

borrowed dress. “Terra, Rob, thank you both for a lovely evening, but I’m ready to crash.”

“It’s been a day,” Rob says, still giving his wife the side eye.

Tim stands up next. “I’ve got some women to break up with.”

After a round of hugs and promises to get together again, Melissa and I stroll side-by-side to my car. “This was an interesting night, huh?” she asks, while taking my arm. I’m not used to her initiating contact, but I like it a lot.

“Better than dinner theater,” I tell her.

That comment causes her to laugh. “I’m glad Tim is going to simplify his dating life.”

“And you’re okay that you won’t be dating anymore?” I know she said she broke up with him, but I want to make sure that she’s truly over whatever she might have felt for him.

“Tim never sizzled my bacon, as Terra said. He’s a nice guy and I like him a lot, but nothing would have ever come of us. We’re just going to be friends.”

“What kind of friends?” My mind immediately goes to our earlier conversation about the definition of good friends and *really* good friends.

“Just friends,” Melissa says.

When we get to the car, I open the passenger side door for her. Then I go around to the driver’s side. Once I’m settled, I ask, “Do you want to go home, or do you want to go for a drive?”

“A drive, where?”

“Maybe down to the lake?”

“That sounds romantic. I’m not at all sure that’s something friends should be doing.”

“But we’re *really* good friends,” I remind her. Also, she held my arm when we were walking, so that must mean something.

“We are that,” she decides. “Fine, let’s go to the lake.”

I push the button to turn the car on before pulling out onto the street. “Are you going to stay on Catch.com?” I ask.

“Just because Tim and I are over doesn’t mean that I’m not still looking for a life partner.”

I’m both happy and upset to hear her say that. On one hand, she *should* keep dating, it’s not like I have anything to offer her. On the other hand, I don’t want any other guy to touch her. *I know—jerk, party of one.*

When we get to the parking lot at the beach, I ask, “Do you want to sit in

the car or go for a walk?”

“I always want to walk on the beach.” She’s out of the car and slipping off her sandals in no time.

“I like your dress,” I tell her. She looks beyond sexy in the old mini dress she borrowed from Terra.

“Which dress? The first or this one?”

“Both. You look great in everything I’ve seen you in.”

“That’s a nice thing to say. Thank you.”

I know it sounds insecure, but I’m hoping she’ll return the compliment. When she doesn’t, I reach out to take her hand. Leading the way to the beach, I ask, “Do you come here often?”

“As often as I can. I work all day, so that kind of gets in the way of playing.”

“Do you think you’ll always stay in the bridal business?”

“I don’t know. I used to think it was the best job in the world, but I’ve been having my doubts lately.”

“Because you’re not married?”

“As embarrassing as it is to admit, yes. I’m getting tired of helping other women plan their big day when mine doesn’t appear to be anywhere on the horizon.”

“What else would you do?” I ask.

“I thought when I got married that I’d quit work to raise my kids. My mom worked when I was little, and I really missed having her around.”

We stop walking near a large boulder by the shoreline. Pulling her toward it, we sit down. “I hope your dreams come true.”

“What are *your* dreams?” she asks me. I sense she’s trying to figure out if there’s any way our fantasies might overlap. The thought causes my chest to constrict.

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “I used to think they were one thing, and then that changed so dramatically that I’ve kind of given up on having dreams of my own. Maybe someday when Sammy goes off to college, I’ll revisit that. But until then, she comes first.”

Melissa leans back. “I think that maybe our desire to harness our dreams is what actually creates conflict in our lives.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I think we need to just let go and trust the universe will provide.”

“Yes, but when you’ve already tried that and it hasn’t worked out, it makes a person gun-shy.”

“It really does,” she agrees. And with that she turns her head until she’s looking right into my eyes. A world of thought appears to be swirling around that beautiful brain of hers, but the one she shares surprises me.

“I would really like to kiss you. Do you think that would be all right?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



MELISSA

I should not be kissing Jamie. I shouldn't shouldn't shouldn't shouldn't. But I am, and I love everything about it. The feel of his velvety full lips on mine, the spicy scent of him, heck I even love the taste of him, and neither of us has brushed our teeth since supper. Jamie calls to me, and darn if I don't intend on answering that call.

By the time our contact deepens, I'm sitting on his lap straddling his legs. I'm ready to throw caution to the wind and declare my affection for him. I'm not sure exactly what I'd say, but somewhere in my brain I hear the words, "Take me now, you big, strong, strapping, hunk of a man!"

I'm fairly certain I don't say this out loud, which must make Jamie a mind reader because he wraps his hands around my upper arms like he's going to pull me close. But after the briefest of moments, he changes his mind and pushes me off. "I think we need to take a break."

My lower lip juts out into a pout. "Why?"

"Because I'm about to break my vow to do nothing but kiss you."

"What if I want you to break that vow?"

"That's not part of our really good friend deal. That kind of thing would take us into a territory we couldn't come back from."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that we can kiss and still be friends, but if we do more, one or both of us might get hurt."

I'm on the verge of telling him I'm going to be hurt either way, especially if he says he doesn't want to kiss me again. But I don't say that. I've already compromised my heart, so I might as well enjoy him while I can. And being that we just started kissing tonight, I'm nowhere near done with him.

The truth is, I'm hoping to convince Jamie that I'm worth taking a risk on. I know he thinks he can't get seriously involved with anyone, but Sammy and I are already tight, so there's no worry we won't get along.

In a juvenile attempt to make him jealous, I say, "You should know that I've decided to meet the salamander breeder."

He spins toward me and demands, "When did you do that?"

"About two minutes ago."

“When I said that we had to cool things off?”

“About that time,” I tell him. Before he can act all butthurt, I add, “All I’m doing is playing by the rules you’ve set.”

“Right. Good.” He sits up so straight the top of his head looks like it’s trying to dislocate from the rest of his body.

“But I won’t talk about any of the guys I date if you don’t want to hear about them.”

“Friends should be able to talk about anything.” Even though he says this, he doesn’t sound like he means it.

I decide a change of subject is in order. “Sammy seems to have made some nice friends.”

He relaxes slightly. “Isn’t that great?” He shifts on the rock we’re sitting on and moves away from me. “Especially as I’m about to blow up her current sense of peace by telling her she’s going to meet Beth next week.”

“Do you think she’ll be excited?”

“I think she’ll be anxious. It’s not every day the woman who deserts you comes back into your life.”

“I can’t even imagine,” I say. “When are you going to tell her?”

“Probably when she gets home tomorrow. I want to give her time to process it.” After a beat, he adds, “It could be helpful to hear startling news with an objective observer in attendance. It could create a balance that wouldn’t otherwise exist.” He takes a long breath before saying, “I know it’s asking a lot, but do you think you could be there when I tell her?”

While I’d love nothing more than to help Sammy and offer comfort should she need it, I’m not sure my presence is warranted. “Don’t you think that Sammy might be more *uncomfortable* having me there? After all, this is a private family matter.”

Jamie raises one shoulder before letting it drop. “She’s so open with you, I think she’s sort of cast you in the role of a favorite aunt.”

“Does she have any real aunts?” I ask. “Maybe that would be a better way to go.”

“There’s my brother’s wife in Barrington, but she’s not very interested in Sammy.”

“What woman in her right mind wouldn’t love spending time with a great girl like Sammy?”

“Bailey is so into her own kids, she doesn’t feel she can nurture a relationship with Sam. I know this because I asked if she and Ryan would

like Sammy to visit for a week every summer.”

“And she said no?” I find this beyond shocking. Even though my brother lives on the other side of the country and doesn’t appear to be interested in settling down, I still dream of being an aunt someday.

“She said her life was too hectic for her to take on the responsibility of another child.”

“How old are her kids?”

“Four and eight,” he says.

“But Sammy could be like a big sister to them.”

“Sammy has always dreamed of being a big sister,” he says wistfully.

I merely shake my head. “People are hard to figure out, aren’t they?” It may sound like I’m talking about his sister-in-law, but I’m really talking about Jamie himself. There’s no reason he should have stayed single and not had more children.

“People can be a real challenge,” he agrees, not at all aware of the irony that my comment was mostly about him.

Bringing the subject back around to his original question, I tell him, “I’d be happy to come if you really think it would help Sammy. Do you want me to meet you at a restaurant or something?”

“Would you mind coming over to our rental house after work? I’ll cook.”

“The store is closed tomorrow, so I can meet you any time.”

A weird tension fills the atmosphere around us. Jamie stands up and reaches his hand out to help me. “You don’t work tomorrow?” I shake my head. “And Sammy isn’t home tonight ...” I see where he’s going with this, and I start to hold my breath in anticipation of what he’ll say next.

“I’d better get you home then.” That’s not what he was supposed to say. It’s not like I was going to fall into bed with the man, but tonight would have been the perfect night to invite me over for some canoodling under the moonlight.

“You want to take me home?” I ask, sounding as confused as I am.

“It’s getting late,” he says before turning and walking toward his SUV.

I grab my sandals and rush to keep up with him. The man is on a mission to get out of here. We don’t say anything else until we’re in his car and practically in front of my apartment. “Thanks for a weird night,” I tell him.

“It was weird, wasn’t it?”

“Astonishingly so. I mean, first Tim was there and then his date sort of freaked out and threw her drink at me.”

“And we became really good friends ...” He lets that thought dangle in the air.

“About that ...” I’m not quite sure what to say but decide to go for complete candor. “Do you still think that’s a good idea?”

“Do you?” I should be getting used to him answering my question with a question, but I’d rather he just answer it.

“I asked you first,” I tell him.

He pulls over and turns off the engine. “I don’t think you can ever have too many friends.”

Startled by his response, I ask, “You mean like Tim?”

“No. Tim is taking things too far. Also, he’s leading those women to think he’s interested in a relationship with them. That’s not what we’re doing.”

“What is it that we’re doing again?”

“We’re becoming friends. Really good friends.”

“Who kiss,” I remind him.

“Yes. Do you think we should stop doing that?” He gets out of the car to run around and open my door for me.

My pulse starts to race the second he reaches out for my hand. “Stop kissing?”

He moves me slightly to the left so that I’m propped up against the back door. Then he leans in and whispers in my ear, “I don’t want to stop, do you?” His hot breath causes the tiny hairs all over my body to stand at attention.

“No.” I’m practically vibrating in anticipation of what comes next.

“But you’ll tell me if you think we should stop?”

“Grrabbleummmm ...” That translates into great, absolutely, yum, which I’m aware makes no sense.

Jamie leans down so that his mouth is a bare whisper from my own. My stomach rolls over like I just dropped from The Tower of Terror ride at the carnival. “I’m glad we’ve become such good friends,” he practically growls.

“Absosuryess ...” *Absolutely, sure, yes.*

“I’m going to kiss you good night now ...”

My knees weaken. “Yeplëshrum ...” *Yes, please, sure, yum.*

Once Jamie’s mouth touches mine, my soul shoots straight out of my body—destination: stratosphere. If our contact keeps getting better and better like this, I know what I should do.

I should break things off now before he devastates me.

The problem is, I don't have a great track record of listening to good advice.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



JAMIE

It's going to be pure torture when Melissa tells me she's found somebody she wants to date exclusively. Yet even though I know the time is coming, I can't seem to stop myself from touching her. She's so sweet and lovely and feisty. She's everything I've ever wanted in a partner. The problem is, she already knows my daughter, and Sammy likes her. That makes dating her an impossibility because it's not just my heart she could break.

My mind churns all the way home. *What if Melissa and I dated and Sammy knew? What if things didn't work out and Sammy got her heart broken? What if things worked out and Melissa and I could be something more?*

But the question that really surprises me is, *What if I'm not fully over Beth?* I once loved her more than anyone or anything. What if I see her and am thrown back into those old feelings? I know she broke Sammy's and my heart. I know she moved on. She's married, for heaven's sake. But what if I can't separate myself from the old feelings we once shared?

Once I get home and crawl into bed, I toss and turn the whole night while my subconscious struggles to make heads or tails out of my current situation. In one dream I'm at Beth's wedding and the minister asks if anyone objects. "I do!" I shout. "I object! This woman is already married and has a child."

Beth turns around and looks at me in total confusion. "Who are you? Why are you ruining my wedding?"

I proceed up the aisle like I'm floating, and when I get to her side, I say, "I'm Jamie. I'm your husband."

"I've never been married before." She looks at me like she feels sorry for me.

Why is she pretending she doesn't know me? "You gave birth to our daughter, Samantha ..."

That's when Beth rubs her stomach and I notice she's very pregnant. "I'm still pregnant with Samantha," she tells me. "And she's not yours. How could she be when I don't even know you?"

My heart feels like it's taken a direct hit from an atomic missile. *Sammy isn't mine? I'm never going to hold her, love her, or raise her?* It's the single

most painful thought I've ever had.

I take an aggressive step toward Beth and grab ahold of her arms. "Samantha is *my* daughter and *I'm* going to raise her."

That's when her groom intervenes. He forcibly removes my hands from Beth, while telling me, "Don't worry, Jamie. I've got this."

Looking at him is like looking at a mirror image of myself, except this guy is wearing a tuxedo. "You're me," I accuse like I just caught him taking my wallet.

He smiles slowly. "I'm the guy who made Beth get married *before* the baby was born."

"It won't work out," I warn him. "She doesn't want Sammy and she doesn't want you."

"That's not written in stone," he tells me. "You should have gotten married before Sammy came. Beth might have stayed. You might have had a great life together."

My body breaks out into a cold sweat as my brain tries to decide if the message in this nightmare bears any truth. *Should I have made Beth get married as soon as she found out she was pregnant? Would our vows to love each other in good times and bad have been enough to keep her with her family?*

In the next dream I'm chasing Beth all over the world in go-karts. It starts the day she left us in Chicago and moves onto the streets of London. *There's a reason you don't see go-karts cruising Hyde Park.* From London, we move to the Autobahn in Germany. Again, a poor choice for such a vehicle. Yet no matter where we are, Beth somehow keeps a wide distance between us. But when our carts hit the streets of Elk Lake, hers finally runs out of gas so I can confront her.

Pulling up next to her, I say, "You can't leave us. I won't let you."

She tips her head to the side in confusion before taking her helmet off. That's when I see it's not Beth. It's Melissa. "Why are you running away from me?" I demand angrily.

"I'm not running from you," she says calmly.

"Then what are you doing?"

She smiles easily. "I'm looking for the man I'm going to marry." At that, she puts her helmet back on, and despite the lack of gas in her tank, takes off again. This time successfully leaving me in her dust.

By the time I wake up, I feel like I've run a marathon. My body aches,

I'm exhausted, and all I want to do is crawl into a hole and avoid the world. My takeaway from the night is that I'm scared to death of everything—my feelings for Beth; Sammy's emotional security; and finally, my own heart.

I should text Melissa and tell her I've changed my mind about her coming over today. I don't know how to face her after escalating our friendship and then having nightmares all night long. But I don't text her. Instead, I drink a pot of coffee before taking a couple of cyber meetings at work.

At one o'clock, I receive a text from Sammy stating it's time to pick her up. I'm both looking forward to seeing her and terrified. I have no idea how she's going to take the news about Beth already being in Chicago.

Once I get into the car, I connect my phone to Bluetooth and call Melissa. "Hello?" She sounds distracted.

"It's Jamie," I tell her.

"Oh, hey, hi. How are you doing?" I could be her plumber for all the more excited she seems.

"Not great," I say. "I had nightmares all night about Beth."

"I'm so sorry. Can you hang on a second?" She puts me on actual hold. When she comes back on the line, she asks, "What time are you going to tell Sammy?"

"I'm on my way to get her now. I was wondering if I could pick you up right afterwards."

"So not over dinner?"

"We could still have dinner. I just need to tell her what's going on before my head explodes."

"Yeah, I guess I could be ready." She doesn't sound thrilled.

"Would you rather not be there when I tell her?" I'm starting to think I dreamed everything that happened between us last night.

"No, no. I'm happy to come. I'll be ready in twenty minutes." She hangs up before I can respond one way or the other.

When I get to Terra and Rob's, Sammy comes running out the front door. She turns around and calls to her friends, "I'll call you later." I share a wave with Terra.

"Dad!" As soon as she gets into the car, she says, "You'll never guess what happened last night."

"You were abducted by aliens and taken to Mars ..."

"This is nothing to joke about, Dad," she says sternly.

"You watched a horror film and had nightmares all night?"

“I got my period!” she shouts so loudly I almost drive into a stop sign.

“Wow. Yay. I mean, you’re happy about this, right?” I know she’s been wondering when it would come, but it might be scary too.

“I’m thrilled. This means I’m going to be getting my boobs soon. Boys are sure to notice me now.”

“I know we’re close, honey, but shouldn’t there be some things we don’t talk about?”

“I’ve had to treat you like both my mom and dad because you’re all I have.”

Time to change the subject. “Should we stop and get you some supplies?” I ask, hoping to turn the conversation away from boobs and boys.

“Yes, please. I’m going to need pads, tampons, painkillers, and bleach.”

“Bleach?”

“You know, in case I bleed all over myself.” As a rule, men don’t do well talking about this stuff but when it’s your own daughter? It’s rough.

“Do you mind if we pick up Melissa first?” I ask her.

Sammy’s head snaps around comically. “Why?”

“She is going to spend some time with us today,” I tell her.

“Are you dating her?” She sounds appalled at the idea.

“No, we’re just friends.”

“And she’s spending today with us?” I nod my head. “At our house?”

“Or you know, wherever.”

“Dad, that sounds like a date.”

“It’s not,” I assure her.

“Good. Because while I want you to date, I don’t want you ruining my friendship with Melissa. I like her too much for you to screw that up for me.”

“That’s mean,” I tell her. Turning onto Main Street, I add, “When have I ever ruined a friendship for you?”

She’s aghast at my stupidity. “Um, by dating Shelby Lynn?” *Oh yeah, that.*

“Other than that?”

“That was enough, Dad.” I suppose she’s got a point.

Melissa is waiting when I pull up to her apartment and hops into the back as soon as I stop. “Good morning.” She sounds a world more enthusiastic than she did when we spoke earlier.

“Melissa, you’ll never guess what happened last night.”

Like a fortune teller at a fair, she replies, “You got your period.”

“How did you know that?” I demand.

“Melissa and I talk about all kinds of things, Dad. She knows I’ve been hoping my period would come soon.”

“Am I right? You really got it?” Melissa wants to know.

“YES!” My daughter is beside herself. “Isn’t it the coolest?”

“The coolest,” Melissa agrees.

“Dad is going to take us to the store so we can get supplies. Will you help me?”

“You know I will.”

I take a moment to offer a silent word of thanks that I don’t have to help Sammy figure this out. “I’ll wait in the car,” I tell them as I pull into the parking lot.

I pull out a wad of bills and hand them to Sammy while telling Melissa, “Thanks for this.”

“Friends help friends, right?” There’s something cryptic-sounding about that.

“They do,” I tell her. “Is there something you need my help with?”

“Maybe,” she says. “I’ll let you know.” And then she walks away with Sammy, leaving me to wonder what’s going on. Please let it not be something that complicates my life further.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



MELISSA

My mind has been working in overdrive ever since Jamie dropped me off last night. Becoming really good friends with him has left me with only one thought about men. I don't want to date anybody *but* him. The problem is that I have no idea how to make that happen as he's obviously not interested in dating me. Or so he says.

At three a.m., all sorts of schemes start coming to mind, including trying to make him jealous by telling him about a bunch of other guys I'm interested in, orchestrating a full-on seduction, and finally, asking for Sammy's help. Nobody knows Jamie like she does.

Ultimately, I decide that starting a relationship on a manipulative note is probably not the best way to go. More's the pity.

Once Sammy and I are in the store, I steer her toward the feminine hygiene aisle. "You're going to want to get regular pads for the day and something heavy duty for night when you won't be changing as often."

Sammy's eyes glimmer with sheer excitement. "I'm a woman now," she says proudly.

"Yes, you are," I tell her while nudging her arm playfully. "It's all boobs, boys, and drama from here on out."

"I hope there are cute boys in junior high." She's so wistful sounding. I forget what it was like to feel such optimism about the opposite sex.

"I'm sure there will be at least one or two," I tell her while picking out several different boxes of supplies.

"Melissa ..." she starts but doesn't continue.

"What's up, kid?"

"Are you and my dad dating?"

Holy heck, where did that come from? "We're just friends," I tell her.

"Good."

"You don't want me to date your dad?"

"The last time he dated someone, it sort of wrecked my life."

"But I don't have any kids and I'd never bully you," I try to assure her.

She throws some pain medication into the cart. "I just think it's better if you guys don't date."

“Well, okay then.” I’m still not giving up on the idea of me and Jamie. Now I just have two people to convince instead of one. Good times.

After we add a family-size bag of mini chocolate bars to our cart—I advised Sammy on the very delicate sanity/chocolate consumption ratio during her time of month—we head to the front to check out.

She says, “I’m glad you’re here, but why *are* you here exactly?”

This is Jamie’s news to tell, not mine, so I say, “I told your dad last night that I didn’t have any plans today and that I wished I had some friends to hang out with. I practically begged him to invite me over.”

Sammy puts her purchases on the conveyor belt. “It’s perfect timing if you ask me.” She proudly hands the cashier her money before we make our way back out to the car.

When we get there, Sammy gets into the back, and once again I’m sitting next to Jamie. In addition to feeling a little unsettled, I have a strong sense that this is where I’m meant to be—at his side.

Once we get to their rental house, Sammy grabs her overnight bag and before she opens the car door she announces, “I’m gonna go take a shower.”

“Come find us as soon as you’re done,” Jamie tells her. “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

She looks between the two of us and blurts out, “You said you guys weren’t dating.” She sounds mad, like she’s been lied to.

“We’re not,” Jamie and I say at the same time.

“Then what could possibly be so important?” We don’t have a chance to respond before she guesses. “It’s Beth, isn’t it? You’ve heard from her.”

“Don’t you want to take your shower before we talk?” Jamie asks.

“If it’s Beth, I want to hear about it now.” She hops out of the car and drops her bag on the ground and Jamie retrieves it for her. He leads the way to the house. “Come on then. We’ll talk inside.”

I feel the uncertainty coursing through Sammy. She doesn’t follow quickly, like she would if she were excited to hear what her dad has to say. Instead, she stumbles along like she’s on her way to take a calculus exam with only an algebra background. *That’s strangely a recurring nightmare I still have.*

Jamie unlocks the door, drops Sammy’s things in the entry, and then continues through the living room to the deck. He sits on the swing while waiting for us to catch up. When we do, Sammy stands as still as a soldier, seemingly unsure what to do next.

“Come here.” Jamie pats the seat next to him. I sit on a lounge chair across from them.

Once Sammy’s settled, Jamie says, “Your mom would like to meet you.”

Sammy jolts like she’s just been zapped with a taser gun. “You’ve heard from her? When is she getting here?”

“She arrived yesterday,” he tells her.

“She’s already here?” She stands up and starts vigorously pacing back and forth across the planks. “Have you set up a time?”

“I was thinking Sunday might be good,” Jamie says.

It’s clear that panic takes over her brain. “That’s not even a week away!”

I decide to enter the conversation. “That’s almost a *whole* week away. Six full days.”

“Six days ...” she repeats.

“That’s a lot of time to get your questions in order but not too much time to totally take over your life,” I assure her.

“But I have my first day of school the next day.”

“We’ll be home early in the evening,” Jamie says. “You can do this, honey. You’ve been asking about your mom for years, and now’s your chance to get some answers.”

Sammy starts to breathe so hard I’m afraid she’s going to hyperventilate. “Inhale to the count of seven and exhale the same,” I tell her. Then I say, “Sammy, you’re a woman now. You can do this.”

Thoughts appear to flash behind her eyes a mile a minute. “You’re right, Melissa. I *am* a woman. I *can* do this.”

“I believe in you,” I tell her before asking, “Would you like me to go with you? Not to actually meet your mom, but to offer moral support on the way down and back?”

“Would you?” Sammy sounds so relieved, I’m glad Jamie thought to ask me.

“You bet,” I tell her. “I’d do anything for you, Sammy.”

She comes over to my chair, bends down, and offers me a quick hug. “Thank you.” Then she looks at Jamie and announces, “We’ve got this, Dad.”

His expression falters slightly before he replies, “You know we do.”

“I’m going to take my shower now.” Sammy runs into the house, leaving us alone.

“I told you she’d want you to go with us,” Jamie says.

“Yes, you did.”

“Come sit with me.”

I get up from my chair and join him on the swing. Once I’m there, he takes my hand. He doesn’t make any other move.

“How are you holding up?” I ask him. I was serious when I told Jamie that he has to mend his broken heart, too.

“It’s going to be surreal to see her,” he says. “Twelve years is a long time to wonder about somebody.”

“You have a child together,” I tell him. “And you had no closure.”

“Closure,” he repeats while squeezing my hand. “I’ve been in the trenches so long as Sammy’s only parent that I never even thought about my closure.”

“Maybe now’s the time to think about it. Make a list of questions you want answered.”

“I’ve already had my questions answered via email,” he tells me.

“I’m sure you have more.”

“Like what?”

I think for a minute before suggesting, “How about, did you ever truly love me? Did you ever think about what our life could have been like had you stayed? Was there ever a time you thought about coming back to us?”

His lips purse together, and he closes his eyes. I watch as he gains control of his emotions. “I don’t want those answers.”

“I’d want them.”

“What good would it do for me to know that Beth might have wanted to come back to us? She didn’t come back, so she couldn’t have wanted it that much.”

“She might have been scared.”

“I was scared,” he says. “I’ve been terrified every day since she left that I’d do something to ruin Sammy’s life. And I nearly did by dating Shelby Lynn.”

“Every kid has challenges, Jamie. I had them. You had them. They’re just part of growing up.”

“Sammy has had more than her fair share.”

“She has,” I agree. “But she’s also had the best dad I’ve ever known a kid to have. And that makes up for a lot.”

Jamie turns to me and says, “Tell me about your parents.”

“What could you possibly want to know?”

“Everything. I want to know everything. What was your childhood like?”

What were the best parts? What do you wish had been different?"

This catches me off guard. After a long moment, I finally answer him. "I was pretty happy until I was nine. That's when my parents started fighting all the time. They divorced when I was ten and my brother was eight."

"Did your dad stay in Elk Lake?"

"He stayed until he got married again. I was sixteen at the time."

"Does he live nearby?"

Shaking my head, I reply, "No. He moved to Colorado. I only saw him once a year after that."

"Once a year? I can't imagine only seeing Sammy once a year."

"Divorce is hard on everyone," I tell him. "I used to think it was just hard on the kids, but my dad and I had a big talk a few years ago and he shared a lot from his perspective."

"Did you want to hear it?" I know he's thinking about Sammy and Beth.

"I did. When you're a kid, the whole world revolves around you. Your worries and cares are the only ones you really think about. My whole takeaway from my parents' divorce was how it affected me, but I now know how hard it was on them."

"What did he find particularly difficult?"

"My dad felt like he lost relevance in our lives. He said that even though my mom worked, he came from a generation where the woman was the heart of the household. As such, he felt she was more important in her children's lives than he was. He felt displaced."

"Did you see him every week when he lived in Elk Lake?" Jamie asks.

"He got us Monday through Wednesday and one weekend a month."

"That's not much."

"It wasn't," I tell him. "And I've always felt like I was missing out."

"And what about your mom?"

"My mom always said the divorce was her fault. She seemed to think she was supposed to work full time *and* dote on my dad full time. She thought he left because she wasn't enough."

"That's how I feel," he confesses.

I stop the motion of the swing with my feet and turn to him. "You think Beth left because *you* weren't enough? That's ridiculous."

"Why? If I had been able to do more, maybe she would have been able to get well."

"Jamie." I reach out and put my hands on either side of his face. "Beth

had postpartum depression. Her hormones were to blame, not you.”

“It’s easy to say that from the outside, but when it’s happening to your family, you can’t help but feel responsible.”

And just like that I understand that Jamie isn’t just protecting Sammy’s heart by not dating seriously and constantly playing “Come Here/Get Away” with me. He’s protecting his own.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



JAMIE

“I’ve never shared this stuff with anyone else,” I tell Melissa after baring my soul about my relationship and fears regarding Beth.

She starts the swing in motion again. “I’m glad you told me. You can’t keep everything bottled up inside.”

“But now I feel like you know more about me than I know about you.”

“You know about my parents’ divorce.”

“What about your romantic relationships?” I ask her.

“I don’t really like to talk about them. I mean, I’m still single, so it’s not like anything has worked out.”

“What about the guy you were engaged to?” This isn’t any of my business, but now that Melissa knows my story, I want to know hers.

“Dillion,” she says. “We were never really engaged. In fact, I didn’t know he was going to ask me to marry him until after he died.”

“Would you have said yes?” I don’t know why, but I hope she says no.

“Had he asked me right before he died, I wouldn’t have. We’d only been seeing each other for ten months. It would have felt too soon. But if he’d waited a few months ... maybe.”

“Do you think about him a lot?” I know I’m prying, but we seem to have entered a kind of bubble where the real world doesn’t seem to matter.

“Not anymore. And when I do, it’s less about him than what I feel like I’m missing in my life.”

“A partner?” I ask.

She nods her head. “I have great friends, a job I’ve mostly enjoyed, and I love the town I live in. But I want to be a mom and a wife. I want a chance to create the kind of family I always wished mine could have been.”

I feel like the world’s biggest heel right now. I’m dangling something Melissa wants in front of her, and yet I don’t want to stop. I like her. I want her in my life. I just can’t have her in my life in that way.

“You’re a real trooper for coming over today. Thank you.” I lean close enough to her that our arms are touching.

She changes the subject. “What are you making for supper? Because it had better be something good.”

“I’ll make whatever you want,” I tell her. “Even if that means going to the store to buy something other than the steaks I have in the refrigerator.”

“What if I want to order out?”

“I’ll bring in crab cakes from Maryland. I’ll drive to Chicago for your favorite pizza.”

“Impressive,” she says. “But would you take me to the diner for a patty melt?”

“I would. I’d even take you bowling afterward if you wanted.”

Her gaze narrows. “You may live to regret that offer. I’m a fantastic bowler.”

“I’m so good I could have gone pro,” I brag. “In fact, if we had one more person, we could play doubles. Winner decides their prize.”

In response, Melissa pulls her phone out of her pocket and places a call. I don’t know who she’s talking to, but she asks, “Want to go bowling with me, Sammy, and Jamie tonight? Someone is getting cocky and is claiming he’s the best there is.”

Then she looks at me and asks, “Six o’clock?”

I nod in approval while she says, “I think we should ask for a trip to Paris if we win.”

As she hangs up, I tell her, “Prizes within reason.”

Her gaze narrows. “Trying to back out of our bet already?”

“No, but even a master can make an occasional mistake.”

“Master?” She throws back her head and laughs. It’s such a stunning sight I feel a physical reaction to it—kind of like when you drive over a dip in the road and your stomach bottoms out.

Sammy walks back onto the patio wearing a new sundress. She has a towel wrapped around her head. Melissa tells her, “Your dad is taking us to the diner for supper and then we’re going bowling. Paige is going to meet us there.”

“Really? Cool. Can we go early? I’m still kind of hungry, and I’m craving french fries.”

“Cravings are part of being a woman,” Melissa assures her.

“I thought that was only for pregnant women.”

Melissa shakes her head. “Nope. There’s an abundance of scientific evidence to support a woman’s need for fried food during her time of month.”

I clear my throat, hoping they’ll move off this subject. Menstrual cycles

are mysterious danger zones for men, and no matter how long we've known about them, we are never any closer to understanding them. Pointing at Sammy, I tell her, "Go do whatever you need to do and when you're ready, we'll take this show on the road."

After she skips back inside, I ask Melissa, "Want to go for a quick walk down by the pier while we wait?"

"I don't know. We seem to get into trouble when we go for walks together." Her tone is playful, but there's an undertone of trepidation.

"What if I promise to keep my hands to myself?"

"Your hands haven't been the trouble."

"What if I promise to keep my lips to myself?"

Her posture slumps slightly. "Maybe."

"Please?" I ask. I need to be outside of my four walls and there's nothing like staring out onto a body of water to realign myself.

She stands up and makes a move toward the house, which catapults me to my feet. I follow her inside and call down the hall to Sammy, "Meet us outside. Melissa and I are going to walk down by the pier." Her response is muffled but I know she heard me.

Once we're out the front door, I easily take Melissa's hand in mine and lead the way. "Sammy and I spent so much time in Elk Lake last summer I'm surprised we didn't grow fins."

"It's pretty spectacular," she says. "I pity kids who don't grow up on a lake."

"Does Lake Michigan count?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Lake Michigan is so huge it has its own tide. I'm talking about a lake where you can see the opposite shore. Small town lakes, you know?"

"We didn't have access to a lake in the town I grew up in," I tell her. "But my parents took us to Door County every summer for a couple of weeks. And while that's still Lake Michigan, we always had a blast."

"I like Door County," she says. "Just not as much as I like Elk Lake."

"Did you ever consider living somewhere else?"

"Not really. I used to think I'd like to try out something else, but the truth is, I like home. My good friends from grade school are here now, and my job is here. I guess I'm just one of those people who lack a sense of adventure."

"Do you ever travel?" I ask.

"I go somewhere new for a week every year. This year I'm planning to go

to the Cayman Islands.”

“It’s already August. What time of year do you travel?”

“Sometimes I go away in the spring, sometimes in the fall. This year I’m going at the beginning of December.”

“Never in the summer?”

She shakes her head. “Never during the season. That’s when we do most of our business.”

“Do you travel with friends?”

“Not since Paige bought her house. She’s always saving for some project or another.”

“What about Anna?” he asks.

“Married women tend to travel with their husbands.”

“So, you just pick up and tackle a new place on your own?” Before she can answer, I say, “That sounds pretty adventurous to me.”

We’re only a few steps from the dock when she turns to look at me. She bites her lower lip and stares at me like I possess the secrets of the universe before saying, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For thinking I’m adventurous. That means a lot.”

“Why don’t you see yourself that way?”

“I’m not that interesting.”

“What do you think makes a person interesting? Because I think there are interesting people all over the planet. I once met an old lady in a tiny town outside of Sicily and I thought she was the most fascinating person I’d ever met.”

“Yeah, but that’s Italy. I live in Wisconsin.”

“Did you ever consider that people in Italy would find Wisconsin exotic?”

Her head tips to her ear. “I never have. But that’s an interesting point. I’m going to think about that.”

I pull her to get her feet moving again. “I have a friend from college who has traveled the world for his job since graduating, and every time I talk to him, I feel like I’m not doing anything with my life. Last year he told me that he was jealous of me, and he wished he could settle down in one place and grow some roots.”

“Why doesn’t he?” she asks.

“He says he’s too afraid. That he’s lived like this for nearly twenty years

and it's all he knows.”

“Is he married?”

“He doesn't stay put long enough to find anyone.”

“Marriage isn't for everyone.” Melissa stops walking as soon as we step onto the pier.

“It's not,” I agree. “But the reasons for staying single vary.” I inhale deeply before enumerating them. “Some people truly aren't meant for partnership, some sadly never find their person, and some find them but discover they aren't the people they thought they were.”

She interrupts, “And some choose to stay single, so they don't freak out their kids.”

“Yes.” I know it's abnormal to think this so soon after meeting someone, but Melissa is definitely the kind of woman I'd marry if I were interested in the institution.

“I never thought I'd use a dating app to find somebody,” she tells me. “But I'm starting to get excited about Catch.com. I mean, I found Tim there.”

“And then you broke up with him ...” I can't let that one slide.

“Yes, but not because he wasn't a great guy. I broke up with him because he wanted to share his greatness with the free world. We just have different views of what it means to date.”

“And you only want to date one guy at a time.”

“Yes.”

“What happens when you find the guy you want to date?” I'm clearly asking about what happens between us.

“Then I date him.”

Time to spell it out. “I mean what happens with us?”

She disengages her hand from mine and uses both hands to pull her hair back into a ponytail. She places her hands on the railing, before saying, “Then you and I become just friends.”

“No more kissing?” I guess.

“That wouldn't be fair to the guy I was seeing. And before you remind me that I kissed you after my first date with Tim, I think there's some gray area at the very beginning. I didn't know after the first date whether we were going to make a love connection.”

“You didn't,” I feel the need to remind her.

“No, but that doesn't mean I won't. I know what I want in my life and I'm too old to pretend that doesn't matter. While I love living in a time where

I don't have to get married and have a family—which isn't something our grandmothers ever got to choose—I want those things.”

“I absolutely understand that,” I tell her. “But I'll miss being really good friends with you.”

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. “Yes, but that's your choice, isn't it?”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



MELISSA

I need to stop being “really good” friends with Jamie now. He’s messing with my equilibrium to the point where I know I’m already in trouble. If we keep going, the situation will only amplify.

I nearly cheer when Sammy joins us on the pier. “You ready?” Jamie asks her.

“All set,” she says with a wide smile on her face.

As we walk back up the hill to the car, she asks me, “Did your skin break out during your period?”

“It still does,” I tell her. Her horrified expression has me adding, “But nothing like it used to.”

She touches her face and winces. “I have one of those deep-down zits starting to form that hurts to touch.”

“Those are the worst,” I tell her. “But it gets better after a year or two.”

I laugh as her face contorts in horror. “A year or two?”

“Everyone has zits at your age. It’s no big deal.”

“It’s hard being a kid,” she groans.

I don’t want to discourage her, so I don’t tell her how hard it is being an adult. Instead, I say, “Life is about perspective. If you focus on the tough stuff, like the things that scare you, then you’ll never truly get your heart’s desire.” *That’s right, I’m talking to you, Jamie.*

He seems to catch on because he joins in the conversation. “Being an adult sometimes means making the best choices for more people than just yourself.”

“Being an adult means taking chances that can make life better for *everyone*,” I retaliate.

Sammy jumps in. “I thought being an adult meant getting to eat ice cream any time during the day with nobody telling you you’ll ruin your appetite for supper.”

This causes us all to laugh. It also effectively breaks the tension bubble that was building between Jamie and me.

Jamie says, “I eat ice cream all day while you’re at school.”

“Really?” She sounds borderline angry.

“No, but I could,” he teases.

“I’m going to be the kind of mom who lets her kids eat ice cream for breakfast,” she says. Then she turns to me and asks, “What about you, Melissa? What kind of mom are you going to be.”

I think for a moment before answering, “I’m going to be the kind of mom who eats ice cream *with* her kids for breakfast.”

“You’re going to be a great mom, then. I hope we’re still friends when you have kids.”

“I will always be your friend,” I tell her. “You can’t get away from me *that* easily.”

After we get into Jamie’s SUV, we drive into town in companionable silence. Once we reach the diner, Jamie parks at the curb before saying, “Last one to the door is a rotten egg.” Then he jumps out and runs to the diner so he’s the first to arrive. Sammy and I take our time.

When we reach his side, he demands, “What took you so long?”

“I’m not a little girl anymore, Dad,” Sammy tells him.

The color drains from his face. “So, no more games?” He sounds devastated at the prospect.

“We can still play games, but no more rotten egg games. I’m beyond that now.” She sounds older than her years. But I know exactly where she’s coming from. Getting your period is a huge deal for a girl. It’s the first tangible step toward womanhood.

“How about if we play Kiss, Marry, and Kill?” I ask.

“How does that one go?” Sammy wants to know.

“We name three guys, and you have to say which one you’d kiss, which one you’d marry, and which one you’d kill.”

“That’s dark,” Jamie says while leading the way to a booth by the window.

Once we’re all seated—Jamie and Sammy across from me—I explain, “It’s not a real kill list. It’s just a fun game.”

“How about if we change it to Kiss, Marry, and Throw in the Lake?” he asks. Sammy and I nod our heads in agreement.

Sammy starts the game by turning to me. “Channing Tatum, Tom Holland, and Liam Hemsworth.”

“That’s tough,” I tell her. After tapping my chin with my pointer finger for a few beats, I finally say, “I’d kiss Liam Hemsworth for sure. Tom Holland is marriage material, so that means I’m throwing Channing Tatum

into the lake.”

“I agree one hundred percent,” Sammy says, which causes Jamie to grimace. I don’t think he likes the idea of his daughter kissing anyone.

“Your turn, Dad,” Sammy says, “The Rock, Chris ...” She starts to laugh at her joke. “I’m kidding. Your choices are Katie Perry, Kim Kardashian, and ...” She pauses for a beat before adding, “Melissa Corner.”

Jamie’s face flushes a deep red before answering, “As I’m never getting married, I don’t think I should get a turn.”

“Daaaaaad,” Sammy moans, “It’s just a game. Don’t be a party pooper!”

I’m curious to hear how he’s going to answer this, so I turn my laser-like gaze on him. He hems and haws before saying, “Being that Katie Perry kissed a girl and liked it, I might not be her type, but I’d kiss *her*.” And here I thought he’d pick me, especially after all the practice we’ve had lately.

“Who would you marry?!” Sammy asks excitedly.

“Isn’t Kim Kardashian already married?” he asks.

Ouch. I’m about to say as much when Sammy answers, “Nope. Divorced for the third time. She’s free as a bird.”

“In that case ...” *If he says he’d marry Kim Kardashian over me, I’m going to get up and walk out of this diner.* He looks right at me and says, “I’d marry Melissa.”

“And throw Kim into the lake!” Sammy claps her hands excitedly. “What about you, Melissa?”

“No way,” I tell her. “It’s *your* turn. Leonardo DiCaprio from the *Titanic* days, Finn Wolfhard, and Griffin Gluck.”

She doesn’t hesitate. “I’d kiss Griffin, marry Leo, and toss Finn.”

The waitress comes over and interrupts our game. We all order burgers and milkshakes which has Sammy declaring, “It’s like we’re all on our period!”

I laughingly ask Jamie, “Are you manstrating?”

His face turns red. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“Let’s talk about dating,” Sammy suggests. She asks me, “How old were you when you got to date?”

“I was allowed to date on my own when I turned sixteen.”

“You can date when you turn forty,” Jamie declares firmly.

“Forty? Dad, be serious. When can I date for real?”

“Twenty.”

“Daaaaaad ...” Sammy is not pleased.

“Sixteen?” he tries.

“This isn’t the Stone Age.” She quickly glances at me and says, “Not that I’m calling you a dinosaur.”

“Thank you very much,” I say, still feeling a bit like a cavewoman.

“I don’t think you should go out on dates on your own until you’re in high school,” he says.

“That’s two whole years away!”

“You can go out in groups before then,” he tells her.

This seems to take some of the sting away because Sammy says, “Fine. But I still don’t think it’s fair.”

“Sorry about that,” Jamie replies. “But I’m the dad and it’s my duty to make the rules that I think will help you turn into the best version of you.”

Sammy turns to me. “When would you let me date if I was your kid?”

As much as I want to be her cool older friend, I find that I can’t side with her on this topic. “Forty,” I tell her.

She throws her napkin down on the table. “You two deserve each other.”

“Here’s the thing, Sammy,” I tell her. “You can still be friends with guys without dating them.”

“I don’t want a friend, I want my first kiss,” she declares heatedly. “Dad was thirteen when he had his, and I’m almost thirteen.”

“Thirteen, huh?” I ask him. No wonder he’s such a good kisser. He’s had a lot of practice.

“How old were you?” he asks me.

As embarrassed as I am by the answer, I opt for full disclosure. “Seventeen.”

“Seventeen?!” Sammy throws herself back against the booth like I just punched her in the lungs. “Were you ugly? I can’t imagine you were ever ugly.”

“I don’t think I was ugly,” I tell her. “I just had standards. I wasn’t going to let just anybody be my first kiss.”

“Who was the guy you finally kissed?” she wants to know. “A movie star? The captain of the football team?”

“His name was Josh Handler,” I tell her. “He wasn’t a football player that I know of. He was a guy who was a summer visitor to Elk Lake. We’d gotten to know each other the summer before.”

“So, you kissed him, knowing nothing could ever come from it?” Jamie asks.

I shoot him the most penetrating death glare in my arsenal. “That seems to be a recurring theme in my life.”

Sammy doesn’t seem aware of the undertones of our exchange. “What did he look like?” She wants to know.

“He was tall,” I tell her. “With wavy dark hair and blue eyes. He had the best smile I’ve ever seen.”

“He sounds like Dad,” she says. And just like that, I realize she’s right. I have no idea what Josh looks like now, but I’m guessing he might look a lot like Jamie.

I decide to tease him. “You didn’t by chance come to Elk Lake fifteen years ago and pretend to be a teenager named Josh, did you?”

“I would have never pretended to be someone I’m not,” he says. That simple comment feels like it’s cloaked in some hidden meaning. I don’t have a chance to guess what that might be before he says, “I would never tell you one thing and mean another.”

Oh, I get it. He’s saying that he would never tell me he couldn’t have a relationship with me if he thought we could. He’s letting me know that no matter how much he might want to be with me, he never will.

And I’m finally starting to believe him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



JAMIE

Dinner with Sammy and Melissa feels like I've just gone twelve rounds with Muhammed Ali. It's all periods, dating, and dirty looks whenever I have an unpopular opinion. Which appears to be all of them.

After our plates are cleared, I ask, "Would you two like to skip bowling?"

"Why would we want to do that?" Sammy wants to know.

"I think your dad is a little annoyed with us," Melissa says. I'm glad my mood isn't a mystery to her.

"Why?"

"Probably because we spent the whole meal making him feel left out."

Sammy turns to me. "Did you feel left out?"

"I certainly didn't feel like you wanted to hear anything I had to say," I tell her.

"Yeah, but Dad, I'm not always going to agree with you. I mean, I'm a kid, not an old dude."

"I'm not old!" Whoops, I shouted that.

"To me you are," she says. "And you probably are to Melissa, too." She turns her attention across the table. "Do you think my dad is old, Melissa?"

She sputters her response. "I ... um ... that is to say ... no. He's only, what, seven or eight years older than me?"

"Yeah, but if I had a crush on a guy eight years older than me, Dad would have a cow. Like seriously, moo."

"If you had a crush on a guy eight years older than you," I tell her, "he would be nineteen and that would be illegal."

"It's not illegal to have a crush on *anyone*," Sammy tells me. "It would be illegal if we, you know ... had sex."

I crumple my napkin and close my eyes. "If we're going to bowl, there are a few rules I'm going to need you two to follow. No talking about periods, no talking about boys, and no talking about boobs ..."

"What's left?" Sammy demands.

I purposefully pick the things I know she would hate, to make a point as to how much I disliked our dinner conversation. "We could talk about the weather, the Cubs, the upcoming presidential campaign. We could even

discuss Tesla stock, if you want.”

Sammy shoves my arm hard like she’s trying to move me. I take the hint and stand up while she says, “I think you should go home and take a nap. You’re being a total grump.”

“I just don’t want to talk about girl things anymore. I’ve been a real sport.”

Sammy rolls her eyes, then she deepens her voice and pretends to be me. “No dating, Sammy ... no kissing, Sammy ... no drunken parties on the beach, Sammy ...”

“What drunken parties on the beach? We never talked about those.” Beads of cold sweat pop up on my forehead.

“Yet ...” she says. “But I bet you a thousand dollars that conversation is coming.”

“It better not be coming for a long time,” I warn her. “You’re twelve. Please remember that.”

She scoots out of the booth at the same time Melissa does. As we walk to the door to leave, Sammy says, “I’m almost thirteen. That will make me a teenager. Which means make-out parties, boys, boobs ... all the things I’m apparently not allowed to talk to you about.”

“Just no more tonight,” I tell her. “Let me ease into your impending womanhood a bit slower, will you?”

Sammy pushes past me and then spins around angrily. “I’m glad I’m going to meet Beth. God knows I need a mother figure in my life.” She points to Melissa, and adds, “And you’re too stupid to want to date her.”

“Sammy ...” My tone is cautionary.

“What? You told me you’re never going to get married, and I want a mom.”

“You told me you didn’t want Melissa and me to date.”

“So?”

“So, you can’t throw it in my face that I won’t date her when you are the one who doesn’t want me to date her.” I shoot a panicked look toward Melissa hoping for some help, but she keeps her mouth closed.

“You make me so mad, Dad.” Sammy turns around and storms out of the diner.

“What in the heck just happened?” I ask Melissa, who moves to follow her.

“Sammy got her period which means her hormones are on overload and

she's feeling all kinds of things she doesn't know how to articulate."

"When will she go back to being the kid I know?" I feel panicky.

"Definitely by the time she's twenty-five," she says.

"Twenty-five? Did it take you that long?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "I couldn't tell you. My mom and I have always butted heads, so it's possible she'd tell you I'm still a pain in the neck."

"Yeah, but twenty-five? My God. Have I lost my little girl?"

Melissa shakes her head slowly. "She's not going to act like this all the time. Just three to five days out of the month."

"And then she'll be normal?" This has turned into a horrible day.

"Not normal like she's been up to this point. She's still growing up."

Holy crap. I reach out to take Melissa's hand while walking to the door, but she doesn't take it. "No hand holding in front of Sammy unless you want to see her head spin around," she warns me.

"Do you think she's serious that she doesn't want us to date?" I ask her.

"It doesn't matter because you're serious about us not dating," she tells me in no uncertain terms. "You *are* serious about that, right?"

"Yes." It's Melissa's turn to storm out of the diner. She flings the door open and strides through it, leaving me as bewildered as I've ever been.

By the time I clear the cobwebs out of my head and walk outside, they're halfway down the block. It looks like they've decided to walk to the bowling alley. I get in the car and drive around for a few minutes of peace. By the time I get to Elk Lake Lanes, Sammy and Melissa are standing outside the entrance.

They're deep in conversation when I near them, so I slow up a bit. Sammy surprises me by turning around and running at me in a dead sprint. She throws her arms around me in a big hug. I have no idea what's going on.

"I love you, Dad," she says. "I'm sorry about being mad at you earlier."

"You're not mad at me anymore?" I ask, feeling like my head is going to implode.

"No. Melissa explained everything."

I shake my head in confusion. "What did she explain, exactly?"

"She told me that men are pretty simple creatures and that we women confuse them with our intricate thought processes."

"That's what she told you?" Although the more I think about it, the more I see the rightness of her words. Men go from A to B in a straight line. Boom.

Fast. Women like to take a thousand detours going upside down and inside out before finally connecting the dots.

“I get it, Dad.” Sammy slips her hand into mine. “It’s going to take you some time to understand the new me. We’ll work on it together.”

As she turns around to run into the bowling alley, I sidle up next to Melissa. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Following Sammy, she says, “If I win, I want that trip to Paris. I’ve earned it.” Then she walks toward the shoe rental counter. I’m tempted to turn around and go home where I don’t have to deal with any more women.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



MELISSA

Paige arrives at the bowling alley just as we're getting our shoes. "You are NEVER going to believe the week I've had," she tells me.

"Lots of drama getting ready for school?" That kind of surprises me as Paige is the most low-drama person I know.

"Let me get my shoes and I'll tell you about it." She turns to the man behind the counter. "Size seven-and-a-half, but if you don't have those, I'll take an eight." Once her shoes are in hand, we head toward the lane where Jamie and Sammy are setting up their balls.

"Paige!" Sammy calls out. "I'm glad you came." As we get closer, Sammy gives her a hug and excitedly tells her, "I got my period today."

"What? That's so cool," Paige says. "You're a woman now. We'll have to take you out for a night on the town soon."

Jamie glares in our direction, so I say, "But we're done talking about periods for the day. Instead, we want to hear all about your week."

"I had a very interesting interview this week," she says.

"You're not changing jobs, are you?" Sammy doesn't sound pleased.

"Nope. I'm Elk Lake's seventh grade math teacher until the day I retire."

"Then what kind of interview did you have?" I'm confused.

She tips her chin up and to the side before arching one eyebrow—it's the look she always has when she's got news. She pauses for long enough to make me nervous. "I met with a producer from *Midwestern Matchmaker*."

"How did I not know this before it happened?" I thought Paige told me everything.

She grabs a bowling ball off the rack and puts it next to Sammy and Jamie's on the ball return. Then she sits down to put her shoes on. Meanwhile, we're all staring at her for more information.

"The night after we saw the first season, I went onto their website and filled out a form with my information. I know Trina said they weren't filming here until next year, but she misspoke. It turns out, they need to start filming *this* winter, so they have the season edited and ready to air next year."

I don't care about semantics. "Again," I ask, "why didn't you tell me before you met with them?"

She lifts one foot and rests it on her opposite knee while putting on one of her bowling shoes. “Honestly, I was a little embarrassed.”

“Why? I thought you wanted us to do that show together?” I say.

“Yeah, but you’d already gone onto Catch.com and met Tim. I figured you two would wind up together and I’d be hanging on my own.”

“Tim didn’t work out,” I remind her.

“Which is why I told the producer all about you, and she wants to meet you when she comes back through the area in two weeks.”

“Really?” Huh. Maybe I have an alternative to online dating after all. I glance at Jamie to see how he’s reacting to hearing this news. His face is positively deadpan.

Sammy jumps to her feet, taking turns looking between us. “You’re going to be on TV?!”

“Maybe,” Paige and I say at the same time.

That’s when Jamie voices his opinion. He derisively scoffs, “No one ever finds their life partner on television.”

“Excuse me?” Watch out, Paige is about to go on a rant. She’s nearly gotten her master’s degree on this topic. “First of all, there’s Sean and Catherine from season seventeen of *The Bachelor*. They got married and have three kids. Then there’s Whitney and Keith from season twenty-three of *Survivor*.”

“Don’t forget Rachel and Brandon from *Big Brother*,” I remind her.

“And Steven and Allison from *So You Think You Can Dance*,” Paige continues. “Would you like me to go on? Because I can give you another two dozen couples, easy.”

“No need,” he says. “I’ve never watched those shows and I don’t plan on starting.”

“Even if I’m on?” I’m doing my best to sound innocent, but the truth is, I want to see if he’s jealous.

“Especially if you’re on,” he growls before turning around to pick up his bowling ball.

When his back is turned, Paige whispers, “What’s his problem?”

“I’ve been keeping something from you, too,” I tell her. Making sure that Sammy is otherwise occupied—currently cheering for her dad who is just about to take his turn—I whisper, “Jamie and I have been kissing.”

“What?! When? How? Why? Where?”

“All questions a good reporter would ask,” I joke. Then I come clean.

“It’s been about two weeks. It started the day we took Sammy to the mall.”

“You kissed in front of her? What does she think?”

I shake my head. “We did not kiss in front of her, so she doesn’t think anything. Also, you should know that Jamie does not want to date me.”

“What is he doing kissing you then?” She looks like she wants to pick up her bowling ball and throw it at him. I probably wouldn’t stop her.

“I kissed him first,” I tell her.

She jolts back in shock. Historically, I have not been one to throw myself at men. “Really? How did that happen?”

I explain the whole scene that took place in the secret tunnel, which leaves her with a confused expression on her face. “He won’t date anyone because he’s afraid of it not working out?” She sarcastically adds, “Welcome to life, buddy boy. There are no guarantees.”

Before I can respond, Jamie walks over to us. “It’s your turn, Paige.” She glares at him before sauntering away. Meanwhile, he sits down next to me. “You cannot go on that dating show.”

“Are you my mother?” I demand. “Because I’ll have you know, even *she* can’t tell me what to do anymore.”

“Melissa, millions of people will be watching you. How can you make a decent connection with someone, knowing that your every move is going to be dissected on social media?”

“You seem to know a lot about these shows for someone who claims to have never watched them,” I accuse.

“I’ve seen commercials ...” he attempts, but I interrupt him.

“We’re friends, Jamie, so I’ll listen to your opinion, but just so you know, I don’t have to follow it.” Paige bowls a strike and Sammy starts to cheer for her. “Looks like it’s my turn.” I stand up and leave him staring after me.

How dare he tell me that I can’t go on Midwestern Matchmaker? Who does he think he is? He’s certainly not my boyfriend.

I’m so distracted by my anger that I only knock down eight pins, leaving a seven-ten split. Crap. That’s the hardest combo to get a spare on. Behind me, I hear Sammy shout, “You’ve got this, Melissa!” I love how she’s cheering for everybody. In her eyes, we’re all there to have fun and it doesn’t matter who wins.

In a perfect world, that would be my attitude as well. But right now, all I want to do is wipe the floor with Jamie.

Paige calls out, “Hit seven on an angle so it ricochets and takes down

ten.”

I move right of the center line and lift my ball. In my mind’s eye, both the remaining pins become miniature Jamies. As they smirk at me with superiority, I take aim and let my ball fly. Not only does it eviscerate the seven pin—which then knocks down the ten pin as planned—but it hops lanes and takes out another six pins in the lane next to us.

Paige jumps to her feet. “It’s a spare plus six!”

“No way,” Jamie says. “You get the spare but that’s all.”

The rest of the game is both exciting and tense beyond belief. And not all the tension has to do with bowling. Jamie stares daggers at me all night, making me wonder if he has something in his eye.

The game goes neck and neck right up to the end when Sammy’s final strike wins it for her team. While I hate that Jamie won, I love that Sammy had such a cool moment.

“Congrats, kid,” I tell her. “You are an amazing bowler.”

“That’s only because I had no social life last year. Dad took me bowling to try to get my mind off of things.” I’m happy he did that for her, but also irritated that there’s yet another reason to admire his parenting skills.

“That was nice of him. What else did you guys do?” I’d better find out if they became pro at any other sport before placing more bets with them.

“We ate a lot of pizza,” she tells me. *No worries there. I’m pretty sure I could take anyone in a pizza eating contest.*

“Relationships can be hard work, can’t they?” I ask her, remembering my own adolescent dramas.

“Regan and Cameron are so nice though, I’m hoping we don’t have any drama,” she says hopefully.

“Paige and I never did,” I tell her. “Which goes to prove there are some people you’re destined to have in your life.”

Paige comes over and asks, “Are we up for another game?”

“I am,” Sammy says.

I’m about to tell them I am too, when Jamie interjects, “You and Paige go ahead, Sammy. I need to talk to Melissa about something.”

“What?” Sammy asks for all of us.

“Something about going to Chicago next weekend.”

“Oh.” Sammy’s energy drops considerably before she heads to the scoreboard to type in Paige’s and her name.

Paige shoots me a questioning look, so I just shrug my shoulders. Surely

Jamie and I could talk about Chicago during the week. Once we're alone, I ask, "What about Chicago?"

He sits down and takes his shoes off. "Let's get out of here and go for a walk."

"Um, okay." I take off my bowling shoes and put my other ones on, all the while questioning the weird tension between us. Tonight has not been our smoothest interaction.

After we turn in our shoes, Jamie leads the way outside. He keeps walking until he's across the street from the bowling alley on the perimeter of the park. "Thanks for all of your help with Sammy today," he says before pointing at a park bench and sitting down. I join him.

"You're welcome. I think I've mentioned it before, but I like Sammy a lot. She reminds me of myself at that age."

He doesn't say anything else, and the silence starts to get awkward. "What did you want to talk to me about?" I finally ask.

"I don't want you doing that television show."

This man is hellbent on making me crazy. "You don't have any say," I remind him.

"Maybe not, but I don't think it's the right thing for you to do."

"Because I might meet the man of my dreams and live happily ever after?"

"Because I don't want you to get hurt," he says.

I shift on the bench so that I'm facing him. "You have a funny way of acting if that's your motivation."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He has the audacity to sound offended.

"It means that if you were really worried about me getting hurt, you'd stop kissing me all the time."

His face turns even more serious. "You said you were okay with us doing that."

"I did," I tell him. "But I've changed my mind."

"You don't want us to kiss anymore?" He sounds as surprised as I am to have said such a thing. Because the truth is, kissing him is all I want to do.

I confirm, "I don't want to kiss you anymore."

"Because you've stopped liking me?" Could he be any denser? The reason is clearly because I like him more than ever and I need to protect my heart.

"Because I'm starting to look for a serious relationship and I need all my

attention trained on that task.”

“Melissa.” He reaches over and takes my hand. “Are you saying you want to stop being friends?”

I shake my head. As much as I should avoid him at all costs, I can’t imagine not seeing him. “We can still be friends, but that’s all we can be.”

“That’s all we are,” he reminds me.

I remind him, “I don’t kiss my friends the way I kiss you.”

“I don’t kiss my friends like that either,” he says.

“So, you understand?”

Instead of answering my question, he says, “You still need to pay off our bet. My team won the bowling match.”

“Fine. What do you want? Dinner out? A trip to Disneyland?”

He leans ever the slightest bit closer to me, while piercing me with his gaze. Then he gently strokes the side of my cheek. “I only want one thing, Melissa.” My insides turn into a pool of molten lava when he says, “I want one last kiss.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



JAMIE

I thought I'd have longer before Melissa told me she didn't want to kiss me anymore.

Her arms are crossed over her body in what appears to be a protective posture. "You can't tell me that you want one more kiss after I told you there couldn't be any more."

"Yes, I can. I won the game before you told me you changed your mind about us, which means I can have whatever prize I want." If I were as nasty as that sentence implies, I'd tell her I want more than a kiss. But the truth is, I feel desperate. No more kissing Melissa? I can't seem to wrap my head around that.

"Jamie ..."

"Melissa," I counter.

She uncrosses her arms with a huff before saying, "Fine. One last kiss, but that's it."

"Okay." She sits and waits for me to make my move, but I don't. "You have to kiss me," I tell her.

She leans over and pecks at my cheek like a chicken biting the head off a worm. I grab her arms before she can move away. "That's not exactly what I had in mind when I said one last kiss."

"All you said was a kiss. That's what you got."

"That's not what I meant." I should not be playing with this fire, but I can't stand the idea of not having her in my life.

Wrangling out of my grip, she stands up and moves in front of me. Then she sits down, straddling my lap. Holy heck, I wasn't expecting this. She runs her fingers through my hair and grips it tightly before lowering her mouth to mine. The first touch is so gentle that if my eyes were closed, I might not know she was even there. But my eyes are open, devouring every thought that crosses her face.

I try my hardest to let her set the pace even though all I want to do is consume her. Our kiss deepens until she feels like she's part of me. She groans deep in her throat and continues to act on her passions. *How can this end?* That thought is enough to shatter the thread of composure I have left.

But before I can say anything, Melissa breaks contact, stands up, swaying slightly on her feet, and says, “My debt is paid.”

My mouth opens and closes but no words come out.

“Did you hear me?” She puts her hands on her hips in a pose of defiance.

I finally choke out, “Yes. I heard you.”

“Fine, let’s go back to the bowling alley.”

But I can’t let her go yet. “Melissa, do you really want this to end? Because it sure doesn’t seem like it.”

She stabs her pointer finger at me violently. “It doesn’t matter what I want because you are the one who gets to call the shots.”

“I do what I do for ...”

“Sammy,” she interrupts. “I get it, but you’re wrong. Sammy has told you point-blank she wants a mother. You just won’t give her one.”

“She also said that she doesn’t want us to date,” I remind her.

“You know what?” Melissa waves her hands in front of her like she’s performing a magic trick. “I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to kiss you anymore, *really*. You are the most frustrating, infuriating, pain-in-the-butt man I’ve ever met. In fact, I don’t even want to be friends with you anymore.” With that, she turns and runs back across the street to the bowling alley.

Damn. I’ve made a mess of this whole situation, but I don’t know what to do to fix it. The only thing that matters to me right now is making sure that Sammy has the best possible reunion with Beth. It’s true that Sammy has repeatedly said she wants a mom. And what better person to fill that role than her actual mom?

I stay outside and try to get my head on straight, but I fail. If Beth wants to spend time with our daughter, that’s time I don’t get to spend with her. Being that it’s been just the two of us all these years, I’ve gotten spoiled. I don’t want to share Sammy. Certainly not with the woman who abandoned her. Who abandoned us.

When I finally go back into the bowling alley, I’m greeted by a scene that positively melts my heart. Sammy, Melissa, and Paige are all sitting in a circle, laughing about something. My daughter hasn’t looked this carefree and full of joy in months, and it’s a punch in the gut that I’m not part of her current happiness.

Walking over to them, I ask, “Is the game over?”

“Sammy won again, if you can believe it,” Paige says.

“I’m pretty sure she’s going to Harvard on a bowling scholarship,” I joke. This causes everyone to laugh, breaking some of the tension my presence has brought with it. “Anyone want to go out for ice cream?”

“Yes.” Sammy is the first to answer.

“No, thanks,” Melissa says. “I have an early appointment tomorrow.”

“Do you need me to come to work early?” Sammy wants to know.

“You sleep in and plan on arriving for the second appointment at eleven,” Melissa tells her.

Meanwhile, I don’t want my night with Melissa to end like this. “Are you sure you don’t want an ice cream cone to go?”

“No, thank you.” Her tone is as cool as a mountain stream. She turns to Paige and asks, “You ready to go?”

“Yep.” Paige turns to me and Sammy and says goodbye. Her parting words toward my daughter are much warmer than to me. Sammy gets, “See you soon, baboon.” And I get, “Later days, monkey butt.” It’s clear Melissa told her everything that happened between us while we were outside.

Once they’re gone, I ask Sammy, “Did you have a good night?”

“It was so much fun,” she says.

“I’m glad.”

“What did you want to talk to Melissa about? She came back inside kind of grumpy.”

“Just some adult stuff.”

“What adult stuff?” she wants to know.

“Ah, but you see, I can’t tell you because you’re a kid. Adult-stuff, by definition, can only be discussed with adults.”

“If you say so.” Grabbing her shoes, she adds, “I’m only getting one scoop because I had a milkshake at dinner.”

“When has that ever stopped you?” On my most lenient parenting days, Sammy has been known to go through an entire quart of ice cream by herself.

“I have my womanly figure to think about now.” *And* we’re back to period talk, goodie.

“Have you been thinking about Chicago?” I ask as we walk out of the bowling alley toward our car.

“Kind of, but I’ve been trying not to. It’s not something I know how to feel about, you know?”

“I know better than anyone,” I tell her. “Your mom left me, too.”

Sammy looks up at me sadly. “She did a real number on us, didn’t she?”

After we get into the car, I ask, “If she’d died instead of leaving, what would you think about our life without her?”

“I’d totes think we were rock stars. I mean, we’ve mostly had a great time together.”

“It wasn’t our choice that she left, so why can’t we think of ourselves as rock stars anyway?”

She ponders this for a second before asking, “If Beth had died, would you have gotten remarried?”

“Maybe,” I tell her honestly.

“But because she left, you were afraid someone else would leave us too.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is that if Beth died, our lives could have been so different right now.” She hurries to add, “Don’t get me wrong, I’m not wishing death on her. I’m just saying that she totally screwed us over.”

As mad as I am at Sammy’s mother, and as true as Sammy’s words are, a strange feeling of sympathy nudges into my consciousness. “If somebody couldn’t walk, would you be mad at them for not running?”

“No, but what does that have to do with anything?”

“Beth’s mind was so broken, she didn’t think she could be a mother. So should we be mad at her for not being a great one?”

Sammy crosses her arms in front of her. “You’ve been as mad at her as I have,” she tells me. “Why are you being understanding now?”

“Because we’re about to see her again, and this reunion can go one of two ways.”

“And those are?”

I start the car and pull out of the parking space. “We could go in being so mad that no good could ever come from it, or we could try to go into it with an open mind.”

There’s a long stretch of silence before I hear Sammy snuffle. “I changed my mind about ice cream. Can we just go home?”

“Sure.”

“Dad,” Sammy starts to say. I stay quiet and give her the space she needs to gather her thoughts. She finally adds, “What if Beth doesn’t want to see me again after Sunday?”

A sharp pain stabs at my heart. My poor little girl is scared to meet her mother for fear that she’ll be left again. “Beth requested the meeting, honey. She wants to know you.” And so help me, if she tries to ditch Sammy again,

I'll hunt her down to the farthest corner of the globe.

Sammy sighs loudly. "I'm really scared."

"I know, baby. Me too. But with the year you've just come through, I don't think there's anything you can't conquer."

"Maybe, but I don't always want to have to be strong, you know? Sometimes I just want life to be easy."

I couldn't agree more. Beth forced me to be everything for our child and it has not been a piece of cake. Every day since she went to London for that job has been a monumental challenge. Even the days that were full of laughter and fun were lacking because she wasn't there to share them with us.

Sammy suddenly asks, "You don't think she'll bring her husband and stepson, do you?"

She'd better not. I make a mental note to make that part of our agreement to see each other. "No, honey, I don't. She's coming to meet you, and you alone. You are the star of this show."

When we get to our house, I tell her, "I know it's impossible for you to not worry about Sunday, but I think you should focus on your new friends and getting ready for school."

I pull up to our driveway and park the car. When I turn to her, she's slowly nodding her head. "I am super excited about starting school here. Okay, Dad, I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask." We get out of the car and walk up to the house. "I can't wait until we move into the log house, how about you?"

"It's gonna be cool. Especially those make-out parties," she teases.

Once we're inside, Sammy runs off to her room to call her friends. I pick up my laptop, knowing full well what I must do. Once I'm situated on the swing, I go into my email and click on the compose button.

Dear Beth,

Sammy and I will be in Chicago on Sunday to meet you, but I have terms ...

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



MELISSA

I've felt like a raw nerve ever since last night. Jamie makes me madder than anyone I've ever known and that includes my mother. I'm so out of sorts, I even snapped at Esmé at Rosemary's when she told me they were out of scones. But in my defense, I get the same thing five days a week. You'd think she would have put one aside for me.

I don't feel like working today, and I certainly don't feel like fielding my mom's questions about my social life. Tim has been the only topic she wants to talk about since our second date at the club.

I'm currently trying to gird myself for the scene that's sure to occur when I tell her we aren't seeing each other anymore. So, imagine my surprise when she walks into work and the first words out of her mouth are, "I gave that Tim Ferris a piece of my mind, let me tell you."

"Excuse me?" I lay down the veil I'm holding onto the counter.

"Howard and I saw him at dinner last night holding hands with some other girl."

"And?"

"How dare he date another woman while he's dating you? My daughter deserves better than that!"

I feel like I've been transported into an alternate universe where I grew up with a different mother entirely. Yelling at Tim is not what I would have expected from Margie. The Mom I know would have either marched into work and demanded that I take action and get my man back, or she would have asked what I did wrong to make his eyes wander.

"Tim believes in dating multiple women at once," I tell her. "He wants to make sure he knows what's out there, so he makes the right decision when it comes to being exclusive."

"And you're okay with that?" *Who is this woman and what has she done with my mom?*

"I was at the beginning."

"Why?"

"Geez, Mom, I don't know. I guess because I don't have great self-esteem when it comes to men."

She has the nerve to say, “I thought I taught you better than that.”

“Really?” *Where did she get that idea?* While I don’t remember how she was with my dad, she bows and scrapes to Howard like he’s a king and she’s his serving staff.

“I’ve told you time and again that you deserve the best,” she maintains.

I briefly wonder if she’s delusional. “You’ve told me time and again what you think of the men I’ve dated, and it’s never been flattering.”

Her face screws up in a look of genuine confusion. “I’ve told you what I thought about their character.”

“Which has been nothing but a laundry list of complaints,” I remind her.

“If that’s true, it’s because I always thought you could do better.”

I know I shouldn’t say what pops into my head, but as I’ve previously mentioned, I don’t have a good history of listening to my own advice. “I think *you* can do better, too, but I’ve managed not to tell you that every day.”

She jolts like I’ve nudged her with a cattle prod. “You think I can do better than Howard? Howard is a wonderful man. He’s been very successful in his life, and he’s nice to me.”

“Howard treats you like his maid,” I tell her. “And his cook.”

My mom looks so baffled, I instantly regret saying that. When she finds her voice, she asks, “Have you always thought this?”

I nod my head before asking, “When is the last time Howard cleaned the house or shopped for food? Or cooked anything, for that matter?”

She looks like I just asked her what the square root of eight hundred and seventy-two thousand and five is. “I don’t think he ever has. But that’s because the house is my job.”

“I have no beef with women being traditional wives, if that’s their bag, but you are also the only one working. You can’t be everything, Mom. It’s too much.”

“But Howard is retired. I’m not.”

“Even more reason to let him pick up some of the slack at home.”

“But what if he won’t do it?”

“Then kick his sorry ass to the curb. Geez, Mom, you can’t tell me you think I’m worth so much when you won’t even acknowledge your own value.”

She leans into the counter like her legs are about to give out from under her. “Missy, I don’t know where all this is coming from.”

“Then I’ll tell you.” I walk out from behind the counter and take her arm.

Leading her to the seating area, I say, “You can’t be mad at me for making lousy choices when that’s been my role model.” *Yes, that’s mean, but I’m not done.* “We are both better than we’ve allowed ourselves to be treated, and I think it’s time we both realize that.”

She doesn’t seem ready to absorb that information. So, she deflects. “But what about Tim? You can’t seriously be thinking of still seeing him.” We sit down on chairs facing each other.

“I already broke it off with him, Mom.”

She nods her head firmly. “Good.” As soon as that sinks in, she adds, “Oh dear, I owe him an apology then. I probably shouldn’t have thrown that glass of wine on him.”

“You threw wine on him?” I would have paid good money to see my mom stand up for me to that degree.

“Howard wasn’t pleased but there are some things a mother cannot stand by and watch.”

“What did Howard do?”

“He tried to shush me and pull me away.” A lightbulb seems to go off in her head. “In fact, he was pretty condescending about it, too.”

“You see what I’ve been saying?” I don’t want to beat her over the head with the truth about her husband, but I also don’t want to let this opportunity pass me by.

But before I can continue, she says, “When your dad left, I felt like I was nothing. Like I didn’t have anything any other man would ever want.”

I know how devastated she was, and I don’t want to hurt her, but I have to tell her what I know. “Dad once told me that being married to you was like being married to a robot.”

Her posture deflates to the point where she looks like she’s going to slip off her chair. “That’s horrible.”

I quickly explain, “He felt like you could do everything and that he wasn’t needed.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“I was probably twenty-five or so.”

“Why didn’t he ever tell me that?” I want to put my arms around her and hug her, but first I say, “He said he tried, but you didn’t want to hear it. That you acted like you wanted to do everything. He said you were exhausted, but you wouldn’t take any help and it ultimately tore you apart.”

“But I was raised to think I could be everything,” she says. “My

grandmother's generation fought for women's rights. They fought for us to be treated equally."

"You've just made my point, Mom. They fought for equality, not for you to be the husband *and* wife."

She looks so lost and sad that I reach over and wrap my arms around her. I tell her, "I'm not saying these things to hurt you. I'm saying them because it's time for you to let go and be on the receiving end for once."

"I don't think I would know how to do that," she whispers.

"You're sixty years old, Mom. It's time to learn."

"Maybe I should tell Howard I want to go on a vacation," she suggests.

"Maybe you should tell him that you want to go on a vacation *alone*. Give him some time to appreciate everything you do for him."

"*Alone?*" You'd think I just suggested she levitate to the moon. "Where would I go alone?"

"Where have you always wanted to go?" I ask.

"You know, I've always wanted to go to one of those spas where they pamper you. Massages every day, manicures, pedicures, the whole nine yards."

"So go," I tell her. "What's stopping you?"

"Those places cost a fortune. Howard would think it's a waste of money."

"Is it a waste of money for you to belong to the country club so that he can golf every day?" I want to know.

God bless Margie, I see the very moment all parts of the equation finally fall into place for her. She stands up, straightens her dress, and declares, "I'm going home to plan my trip. I can make reservations for two if you want to come with me."

A wave of pure happiness flows through me that she wants me along. But I know I can't, at least right now. "If I go with you, who will run the store?"

"We'll close it while we're away."

While I would surprisingly love to get to know the new self-aware version of my mother, I can't. I tell her, "I need to hang out here in Elk Lake. I might be going on a dating show called *Midwestern Matchmaker*, and I need to be available when they come back to town."

I half-expect her to scold me for considering such a thing, but she surprises me by saying, "I love that show."

"So, you don't think it's a stupid idea?"

"I think you should do anything you want to do, and don't let anyone tell

you differently. Even me.”

This is the craziest day of my life. I’ve always been at odds with my mom. If I said the sky was blue, she’d correct me and say it was gray. If I said the sun was shining, she’d point out the clouds. But in this moment, I feel like we’re forging a new path together. She heard what I had to say, and I really think she listened. From now on, I’m going to do the same.

“I love you, Mom,” I tell her.

“I love you too, Missy. My heart hurts that you’ve ever thought differently.”

“It’s not that I didn’t think you loved me, it’s just that you have a ‘my way or the highway’ air about you. Like you know everything, and I know nothing.”

“I just never wanted you to make the same mistakes I did. I want you to have everything in this world.”

“I know, Mom. But you have to let me journey down my own path. I need your support, not your control.”

She exhales loudly. “So much of my life has been out of my control that I’ve gone overboard trying to take charge of anything I can.”

“I get that. I really do. But from now on, I think you need to worry about you and let me worry about me. We can support each other, but we can’t live each other’s lives.”

She stands up and gives me a long hug before saying, “I do love you. And I promise, I’m going to try to wrap my head around the idea of loving myself.” Then she grabs her purse and walks out the door.

The next several days come and go like all the others. The only difference is that I don’t see or talk to Jamie, and I really miss him. But how can I tell my mother to demand to be treated with respect and not do the same for myself? For this reason, I have not picked up the phone to call him, or even peeked out the window to catch a glimpse of him when he drops Sammy off for work.

Instead, I’ve tried to focus my energy into helping Sammy wrap her head around her upcoming entry into Elk Lake Junior High School. On Friday she even brought her wardrobe into the shop, and we spent hours planning every outfit.

I wouldn’t even have known if Jamie still wanted me to go to Chicago, had Sammy not repeatedly said how happy she is that I’m going. She doesn’t seem to notice anything different between me and her dad.

After a busy Saturday, I tell her, “I’ll see you bright and early in the morning, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Don’t worry about tomorrow, Sammy. It’s going to be a good day.”

“If you say so.”

I wish there was something I could do to take away her anxiety and fear. But I know from my own experience with my mother that we can’t live someone else’s path for them. All we can do is offer love and support while they make their way through their own struggles.

“Beth is going to think you’re great,” I tell her.

She doesn’t look convinced, but she doesn’t have an opportunity to say as much because Jamie bursts through the door like his pants are on fire. “We need to go to Chicago tonight,” he says.

“What? Why?” This from both me and Sammy.

“I just got a call from Beth’s husband. Beth’s been in an accident and she’s in the hospital.” Sammy resembles a deer in the headlights, completely immobile from fear.

“Is it bad?” I want to know.

“It’s not good,” Jamie says. “She’s been taken into surgery.”

I don’t stop to think, I merely push everyone out the door and lock up behind us. When we’re on the street, I ask, “Do I have time to pack some things?” Jamie looks so terrified and unsure, that I quickly add, “Let’s go. I’ll drive.” I’ll buy whatever I might need in Chicago. It’s a good thing it was close to the end of the day, and we’re closed tomorrow. Now I don’t have to tell my mom where I’m going.

I don’t have a new definition for my relationship with Jamie, but I do know that I care for him, and I would do anything in my power to help him. I feel the same way about Sammy.

Jamie hands me the keys to his SUV. His voice is so low, I barely hear him say, “Thank you.”

In an act of pure impulsivity, I wrap my arms around him and pull him into a hug. Then I reach out for Sammy to join us. “You guys can do this. You’ve come so far to get to this point. I just know everything is going to be okay.” Right now, all Jamie needs is someone in his corner, and I can certainly be that for him.

And even though I don’t know the outcome for Beth, I have to believe that Jamie and Sammy are going to weather this storm. The alternative would

simply be too ungodly.

CHAPTER FORTY



JAMIE

My day started out normally enough. I dropped Sammy at her job, and then I did some grocery shopping to make sure she has what she calls an adequate selection of lunch foods. Apparently, peanut butter and jelly aren't going to cut it anymore. Her new friends have told her that wraps are all the rage for lunch, so I needed to acquire the proper ingredients.

After grocery shopping, I cleaned bathrooms and vacuumed. My domestic skills have never been as spot on as they have been this week. I've been so distracted with thoughts of Melissa that I had to do something to keep from going crazy. I chose cleaning.

Twenty minutes before I left the house to pick Sammy up from work, my phone rang. The number was the new one I'd programmed in for Beth. My first guess was that she was calling to cancel. But that quickly went away when I heard a man's voice on the other end. He had a German accent. "Is this Jamie?"

"Yes." I knew who it was, but I couldn't figure out why he was calling me.

"This is Karl Albus. Beth's husband."

"Go on." I had planned on never meeting the guy if I could help it, but for some reason he was calling from his wife's phone, and I had no choice but to find out why.

"Beth has been in an accident. She's been taken to Northwestern Memorial Hospital."

A thousand thoughts swirled through my head at once, but I couldn't seem to slow them down long enough to ask any questions.

Karl seemed to understand because he kept talking. "She is in critical condition and has just gone into surgery."

I finally came to my senses long enough to say, "So I guess our meeting isn't going to happen tomorrow."

"I think you should bring your daughter here tonight."

"Why?" The last thing I wanted to do is sit in a hospital room with Beth's new family. I couldn't imagine anything more excruciating.

"Because your child should have the opportunity to meet her mother. And

as we don't know how the surgery will go ...”

“Could she die?” The thought hadn't occurred to me.

“She was hit by a bus while crossing the street to our hotel,” he said.

My brain couldn't absorb the magnitude of that, but I knew enough to know time was of the essence. As such, I told Karl that we'd be there as soon as we could. Then I flew out the door to pick up Sammy and Melissa.

That was an hour ago. Melissa is currently driving, and Sammy is staring out the window of the passenger seat. For some reason I got into the back. Melissa puts on her turn signal and pulls off at the next exit. “We need gas, and we should run through a drive-through for something to eat.”

I don't think I can eat anything, but I'm so relieved someone else is playing the role of grown up that I don't say anything. After we pull into a truck stop, I get out of the car to pump the gas, but Melissa stops me. “Go talk to Sammy. I'll get the gas.”

I walk to the front passenger door and open it. My heart breaks all over again when I see my little girl. She's slumped in her seat, leaning against the middle console. “How are you doing?” I ask her.

She turns toward me and forces herself to sit up straighter. “Dad ... how can this be happening?”

“I don't know, honey.”

“I feel like we made it happen by talking about Beth dying that night in the bowling alley.” I don't quite remember what we said, so she explains, “Remember how we were saying that it would have been easier if she died rather than going away?”

“Sammy.” I sit down on the running board. “We didn't cause this to happen.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because if saying bad things made bad things happen, then Beth would have died a long time ago.” God knows I've said my fair share of hateful things. Things I now regret.

“Okay.” She seems to accept my words for what they are—a vehicle to pause feelings of guilt. “But what if she dies now?”

“Then we'll be there with her.” What else can I say? I can't tell her that everything will be all right, because it most certainly won't. Sammy has come so close to meeting her mother that nothing short of a reunion complete with a happy ending would ever make a dent in her cumulative grief.

“We'll have to meet her husband and her stepson,” she says.

“I can ask them to leave while we’re there if you want.”

Sammy shakes her head. “No, they should stay.” A lone tear slides down her cheek as she adds, “I want to love her, but I don’t yet. If she dies, she should be surrounded by people who love her.”

I want to turn my head up and scream into the air at the injustice that my daughter has to go through this. When will she have suffered enough?

Melissa peeks her head in the window. “The tank is full. I’m just going to run inside and use the ladies’ room. Do you need to go, Sammy?”

Sammy unbuckles her seatbelt and gets out of the car. They’re only gone for a few minutes. When they come back, I suggest, “Why don’t you get in the back, Sam? You can recline your seat and take a nap.”

She climbs into the back without question. Melissa gets behind the wheel again, so I take Sammy’s old spot. “Thank you for driving,” I tell her. “I don’t think my head is very clear right now.”

As we haven’t spoken all week, I half-expect her to say something terse. “How can you possibly be thinking clearly?” she wants to know.

“This is just so crazy.”

She starts the car and pulls out on the street. “It’s beyond crazy. Do you want burgers or tacos?” she asks.

“Tacos,” Sammy answers from the back seat.

Melissa turns into a Taco Hut and pulls up to the drive-through. After we get our order, she parks long enough to hand everything out. She doesn’t have anything for herself. “Where’s yours?” I ask.

“I can’t drive while I eat, so I’ll grab something later.” I’m about to tell her not to be ridiculous and to eat now, when I remember the reason we’re in such a hurry to get to Chicago.

“You’re a great friend, Melissa,” I tell her.

“I’m pretty sure you’d do the same for me.”

“I would definitely do the same for you,” I assure her.

“Good.” She motions to my bag. “Eat up.”

It takes another hour to get to the hospital and find a parking space. I consider it good news that Karl hasn’t called again. Although, if the worst happened, what would be the point of telling us before we got there?

We hurry through the corridors of the hospital, following the directions posted on the walls. There are only two people in the surgical waiting room when we get there.

The tall man turns and stares right at Sammy. A look of shock crosses his

face before he looks at me. He stretches out his hand. "I'm Karl."

If this were any other situation, I don't think I'd bother to shake hands with him. Totally petty, yes, but this guy married the woman I was supposed to marry. As a result, she's raising his kid, not ours. "Jamie," I finally say.

He indicates the boy with him, who appears to be more of a man. I'm guessing he's a junior or senior in high school. "This is my son, Fritz."

Fritz flushes a deep red before nodding his head at us. "Hello."

I motion to Sammy. "This is my daughter, Sammy." Then I pull Melissa over and add, "This is our good friend Melissa."

After all the pleasantries are performed, Karl tells us, "I just saw Beth in post-op. She'll be taken to her room shortly. We can meet her up there."

We follow Karl and Fritz through the hospital like some kind of weird parade. We don't know these people, and yet we're sharing a key life moment with them. It's surreal, to say the least.

When we finally reach Beth's room, the nurse tells us that no more than two people can go in at a time. Karl motions toward Sammy and me. "This is her daughter. She should go in with her father."

"Are you sure?" I ask him. This is not at all the way I envisioned seeing Beth again.

"You're why we're here in Chicago," he says. "It's time to make things right."

I don't know what Beth has told her husband about us, but it's clear he knows enough to gather that we've been wronged. I touch Sammy's shoulder and lead her into Beth's room. She moves on automatic pilot.

Once we're inside, the nurse asks, "Can I bring you anything while you wait?" We shake our heads in unison, so she says, "She should be up any time now. It looks like surgery went well."

After she leaves, I notice tears streaming down Sammy's face. "This is so strange, Dad."

"It really is," I agree.

"I don't know what to say to her."

"Me either."

We don't have to wait for long because moments later the door opens, and Beth is wheeled into the room. Her head is wrapped, covering most of her hair. There are dark purple half-moons under her eyes and one of her arms is in a sling. The nurse tells us, "She woke up briefly in post op, but fell back to sleep."

The orderly and nurse push the gurney up to the hospital bed and make quick work of transferring Beth into it. Sammy and I stare at her like we're seeing a ghost.

Once we're alone, Sammy moves toward her mom. "I look just like her."

"You do," I agree.

She pulls up a chair next to Beth's bedside and sits down. Then she gently starts to stroke one of Beth's hands. "I have her hands."

Emotion builds in me like a typhoon. Part of me wants to pick up Sammy and run out of here as fast as my legs will carry us, but I know I can't do that. We're here for a reunion and, by God, that's what we're going to have.

Beth stirs slightly in bed. Her head tilts to the side in Sammy's direction before her eyes open. They immediately fill with tears. "Sammy?" she whispers.

Sammy stands up so she can get closer to Beth. She takes her hand and then like the most mature person in the world, says, "Hey, Mom. I'm glad you're okay."

The two of them continue to stare at one another like time has stopped—like they're sharing their life stories telepathically. All doubts about the job I've done raising my daughter disappear. My kid is the coolest.

Beth's gaze eventually moves away from Sammy onto me. "Jamie ..."

"Hi, Beth." My voice cracks when I say her name.

"I didn't plan on seeing you guys like this," she says.

"I'm glad this wasn't planned," I tease.

She smiles like it hurts to do so. "I was scrolling through my phone to see if you were still coming, and I stepped off the curb without looking."

"I probably shouldn't tell you that I didn't send an email then." As far as jokes go, it's a poor one. It's just that I have no idea what to say.

"You're here now," she says, looking between me and Sammy. "That's all that matters."

"Sammy starts school on Monday," I tell her. "We still need to go home tomorrow."

She nods her head. "Of course, but you'll be here for part of tomorrow?"

"We sure will," Sammy tells her. "But you should probably sleep now."

"I'm so tired," Beth says. "Please come back in the morning. There's so much I want to say."

We wait until her eyes close again and then Sammy and I walk out of Beth's room. "She's asleep," I tell Karl. "We'll come back in the morning."

He's eager to see his wife, but before he goes into her room, he stops to tell me, "I'm a firm believer that anything can be worked out to a satisfactory ending. I know you and Sammy have been through a lot, but your willingness to come to Beth so quickly says much about your desire to heal. Together, I think we can make that happen."

I wanted to hate Karl, but I don't. In fact, I may be on the verge of liking the guy. "I appreciate your willingness to move to Chicago to make that happen," I tell him.

"My first wife died nine years ago. It changes a person's perspective on what's important. And family is the most important."

Melissa walks over to us and extends her hands toward us. We each take one, while she tells Karl, "We'll see you in the morning. Please call if there's any reason to come back sooner."

As we walk away, I realize how very wrong I've been about things. How wrong I've been about keeping love out of my life. Love is all that matters, and I vow to do everything I can to live the rest of my days accordingly.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



MELISSA

While Jamie and Sammy were in Beth's room, I made reservations for us at a nearby hotel. I got us connecting rooms, figuring Sammy and I could share.

They're only in with Beth for a few minutes. When they come out, I immediately feel a change in their energy. While this is probably the hardest thing either of them has had to do since Beth left, it definitely feels like it was the right thing.

As we walk toward the elevator, I tell them, "I booked a hotel a couple blocks from here."

"Thank you for everything, Melissa. We couldn't have done this without you."

It doesn't take long to get to the hotel, and when we arrive, Jamie says, "I'll check in if the two of you want to hit the gift shop for some supplies."

After he's gone, I ask Sammy, "So, how did it go?"

She inhales deeply before slowly releasing her breath. "It was so weird. I know this is hard to believe, but I felt like I recognized her." She hurriedly explains, "And it's not just that she looks like me either. It was like I remembered her."

"There's a powerful bond between a mother and her children," I tell her. "We grew inside our moms. I'm pretty sure that's a connection no amount of time or space can ever break."

"But my dad raised me," she says. "He's done everything for me."

"You have a great dad," I tell her. "But who knows? You might have a great mom, too. You just need to decide if you're going to give her a chance to be one."

"I didn't take that chance from her. She chose not to stay. That's on her."

"True." I stop walking and reach out for her to do the same. "But Sammy, you're twelve and have a huge chunk of life ahead of you. You can decide to let your mom be a part of that."

Her voice is barely above a whisper. "I would have to forgive her then."

"Yes, you would. But not forgiving her is only going to create more pain. Why not choose happiness?"

"Would you be able to forgive your mom if she did something like mine

did?” she wants to know.

I shrug my shoulders. “I can’t know that without having lived it. But I tell you what, I’ve been holding a grudge against my mom for a lot of years, and I recently decided to stop. It feels good.”

“What were you holding a grudge about?”

“I’ve been mad at her for not being the woman I wanted her to be. But I’ve recently realized she’s done the best she could. That her choices have been made based on things she didn’t think she could control.”

“Do you think Beth did the best she could?” Sammy doesn’t sound like she believes it.

“I don’t know, honey. But I think it’s possible. And I know for sure that she wants to know you now. She came back, didn’t she?”

Sammy doesn’t answer. Instead, she starts moving again. In the gift shop, we pick up some toothbrushes and toothpaste and even get t-shirts with the Chicago skyline on them, so we have something new to wear tomorrow. After we pay for our purchases, we run into Jamie.

“I upgraded us to a suite,” he says. “I know this isn’t a vacation, but we might as well enjoy it as much as we can.”

“I’ve never been in a suite before,” I tell him.

“Then it is past time.” He offers a shy smile, causing my entire nervous system to flood with chills.

It’s way too early for me to say that I’m in love with Jamie Riordan, and if I were in my right mind, I would never admit to feeling anything like it—especially after that scene at the bowling alley last week. But even so, there’s much to admire about him. He’s a great dad, he has a wonderful sense of humor, and then there are those kisses. How I miss those.

I follow behind as he leads the way to the elevator and then to our room. It’s on the forty-eighth floor, which must mean the view must be spectacular. Yet it takes me a while to confirm this. I’m kind of blown away by the actual living space. I take plenty of time to investigate it, discovering it’s more like a luxury apartment than a hotel.

“Wow,” I exclaim as I look around. “If I lived here, I would never leave.”

Sammy seems much less impressed, which leads me to believe she’s either used to hotel suites or she’s too tired to care. When I finally stop gushing over everything, I tell her, “Let’s share the room with two beds and let your dad have his own room.”

Jamie interrupts, “Sammy and I will take the room with two beds. The

other room is yours.”

“Really?” I’m not about to kick this gift horse in the mouth. I’m going to crawl into that king-size bed and pretend I’m in Tahiti or something.

Sammy gets up off the couch and says, “I know it’s only nine, but I’m going to bed.”

“Want me to tuck you in?” Jamie asks.

She shakes her head. “I’m good. I’ll see you guys in the morning.”

Jamie looks like he wants to go after her, but he chooses not to. When she’s out of the room, he asks, “Want to sit down?”

That’s when I finally see the view outside of the living room. The windows are floor to ceiling and look more like a movie screen than windows. The city below looks miniature and sparkly, a view like every blockbuster movie includes of the city they take place in. “I booked us on the second floor,” I tell him.

He sits down on the couch and pats the seat next to him. “This is better, isn’t it?”

I cross the room and sit by him. “This is amazing.”

“Melissa ...” he starts to say but stops.

“Yes?”

“I have so many things I want to say to you, but I don’t know where to start.”

I really don’t want to hear him tell me how he wishes things were different. I just want to pretend things *are* different. I know I’m only going to be hurting myself, but right now, all I want is to feel close to him. So, I say, “Let’s not talk about us until we’re back in Elk Lake. There’s enough to deal with in Chicago.”

“I’ve missed you this week,” he says.

“I’ve missed you, too.” No sense lying. “How was it seeing Beth?” I ask.

“It was like being in the twilight zone. I didn’t know what to expect, but I didn’t think she would feel like a stranger.”

“She felt like a stranger?”

He reaches over and takes my hand in his. It’s not a romantic gesture. Instead, it’s one of someone looking for comfort. “She felt like someone I once knew, but don’t know anymore.”

“That had to be weird.”

“Beyond so. You would have been so proud of Sammy, though,” he says. “She acted like a little adult.”

“You’ve done a great job raising her, Jamie.” I squeeze his hand to emphasize my point.

Changing the subject, he says, “In other news, I didn’t hate Karl.”

I can’t help but laugh at that. “He seemed pretty cool. Fritz, on the other hand, was a harder one to read.”

“Imagine how strange this whole situation is for him. His own mother died during a critical time in his development, and then he has to worry it might be happening again with his stepmom.”

“Then there’s the whole moving across the world so his stepmom can meet the daughter she abandoned,” I add.

“Makes you grateful for our boring childhoods, huh?” he teases.

“You aren’t kidding.” I lay my head against his shoulder before adding, “Life sure doesn’t always feel fair.”

“Melissa, there’s something I need to tell you ...”

I cut him off. “I was serious when I said I didn’t want to talk about us.”

He doesn’t seem happy, but he agrees, “Okay. But can we at least say out loud that we’ve called a truce?”

“I’m not fighting with you,” I tell him. “And I’m not planning to start.”

“I’m not fighting with you either,” he says. Although, to be clear, he is still responsible for making me mad. I could have happily lived out my days never knowing what it was like to be in Jamie’s arms—to be the sole focus of his kisses. Not having that is going to be pure torture.

I don’t remember exactly when, but I fall sound asleep, still resting my head on Jamie’s shoulder. I don’t remember getting up and moving into my bedroom; all I know is that’s where I wake up in the morning.

I take some time to stretch all the kinks out of my body before looking at the clock. It’s only six, so I don’t imagine Jamie and Sammy are up. Yet when I go out to the kitchen, I find a pot of coffee has already been made. Jamie is still sitting on the couch.

“Did you ever go to bed?” I ask.

“For a few hours,” he says. “How did you sleep?”

I fix myself a cup of coffee while answering, “Like the dead. How did I get into my room? I don’t even remember falling asleep.”

“I carried you.” His tone is so gruffly masculine, I feel my insides flip over.

“Thank you.” I walk into the living room, but instead of sitting next to him on the sofa, I settle into a lounge chair. “What kind of schedule are you

thinking about for today?” I ask him.

“Visiting hours don’t start until eight, so I figured we’d have breakfast here and then walk over to the hospital. You don’t have to go with us if you don’t want to.”

“Do you want me to go?” Sitting around a hospital waiting room all day doesn’t sound like my idea of a good time, but if Jamie and Sammy need me, then there’s no place I’d rather be.

“I’d really like that,” he says. “I have no idea how today is going to go, and it would be comforting to know you were nearby.”

“Then that’s where I’ll be.” I take a sip of my coffee and take a moment to appreciate the sensation of caffeine hitting my blood stream.

We sit quietly for quite a while before Sammy comes out and joins us. She yawns loudly before saying, “I slept really well.”

“You want to go back for another hour?” Jamie asks her.

“There’s no way I could fall asleep again. Too much on my mind.” She curls up on the couch next to Jamie.

He puts his arm around her and pulls her close. “I guess that means we ought to get this party started, huh?”

Sammy and I share a look that is full of questions. How is this day going to pan out? What will Beth really be like? Is there any way to fix the mess she left in her wake?

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



JAMIE

I have envisioned a million scenarios of what it would look like to have Beth back in our lives, and none of them bear any resemblance to reality. Instead of feeling angry at her, which has been the go-to emotion I've always possessed, I feel sorry for her.

Watching her try to carry on a conversation with Sammy makes it abundantly clear that she knows nothing about her daughter. "What's your favorite color?" Beth asks after we've spent a good hour covering more serious topics.

"Green," Sammy tells her. "But not kelly green or pine green. More of a citron green, like the color of a lime. How about you?" Sammy asks.

"Electric blue," Beth says. "I can't wear the color, but I love looking at it."

Once some of the more mundane topics are covered, we experience an awkward silence. Sammy starts to fidget so I finally tell her, "Why don't you go out and see how Melissa is doing?" She jumps at the opportunity.

When she's gone, I tell Beth, "This is going better than I thought it would."

"Really? I'm not sure it's going well at all."

"What did you expect?" She can't have really thought Sammy would jump into her arms and act like she had even the slightest clue how to relate to her.

Beth shifts around trying to get the pillows situated behind her. "I haven't let myself try to imagine how it would be." After a beat, she adds, "I know I'm the bad guy here, Jamie."

"You are." There's no sense in lying to her. "Having said that, you're here. So that means something."

She changes the subject. "Tell me about you."

"What's to tell? I've been busy raising our daughter. In my free time, I've built a successful business."

"Did you get married?"

"No."

"Is there someone special in your life?"

An image of Melissa pops into my mind. “Not in a romantic sense.” Even though there’s no denying that’s how I feel about Melissa. It’s what I want with her. I just have to find the right time to tell her, and hope like hell it isn’t too late.

“Why not?” Beth asks. “You always wanted to get married and have a big family. Did I ruin that, too?”

“You sure didn’t help,” I tell her. Then I explain, “After you left, I dreamed you’d come back to us. I don’t know how long that went on—two years, three, five? But once I realized you weren’t going to, I was afraid to ever let anyone get that close again.”

She breaks eye contact with me and looks down at the blanket on her bed. “What about this Melissa who came to Chicago with you?”

“She’s Sammy’s boss,” I tell her. “She’s a good friend to both of us.”

“Can I meet her?”

The question catches me off guard. “Why would you want to do that?”

“To thank her for everything she’s doing for Sammy.”

“I don’t think so,” I say after a long moment. Getting to the heart of the matter, I ask, “What is it you’re after, Beth? Are you hoping to get partial custody of Sammy? Because you must know I’d never allow that.”

“I would never do that to you, Jamie. I know I don’t deserve anything like that. I guess I just want to know my daughter. Maybe have her come to Chicago and stay with me for a few days from time to time.”

“If that ever happens,” I tell her. “It will be a long time coming.”

“I understand. But maybe as the two of you get to know me better, you’ll feel easier about my being back in your lives.”

“Maybe.” I don’t want to give her false hope. While I’m sorry she’s lying here in a hospital bed with a slew of injuries, I’m still not inclined to make things easy for her. And not out of vengeance either. More out of fear.

The rest of the day is spent with Sammy and me taking turns with Karl and Fritz visiting Beth. The day is overwhelming for all of us.

Somewhere around two, I decide it’s time to go home. I tell Beth, “Sammy has a big day tomorrow and I want her to get home so she can prepare.”

I call Sammy in to say goodbye. When she comes back into the room, it’s clear she’s worried about something. She walks over to Beth’s bed and asks, “The doctor said you’d be okay, right?”

Beth smiles. “He sure did.”

“And you’re going to be living in Chicago?”

Beth nods her head. “I wonder if it might be okay if I see you again soon.”

Sammy turns to me as though to ask permission. “That’s up to you,” I tell her.

My brave daughter decides, “I’d like that. But next time, I’d like you to come to Elk Lake and see where I live.”

“It might be a while before I’m up to traveling.” Beth sounds sad that Sammy doesn’t want to come back to Chicago.

“That’s okay,” Sammy tells her. “Dad and I will be there if you decide you want to come up.” She’s making it clear that moving back to the States isn’t enough of an effort on Beth’s part, and honestly, I applaud her for that. This is one apology that’s going to require a good deal more work.

“I’m so glad you came,” Beth tells Sammy and me. “I’ll come visit as soon as I’m able.”

Sammy concedes, “You can call me once in a while, if you want.”

“I’ll do that.” There’s a tremor in Beth’s voice. “Thank you both for everything.”

Sammy leans down and kisses her mother’s cheek before turning around and leaving the room. Beth looks like she’s barely keeping herself together.

“Our daughter is beautiful,” she finally says.

“Yes, she is,” I tell her. “But her life hasn’t been easy, so if you’re serious about wanting a place in it, you’re going to have some hard work ahead of you.”

“I’m prepared to jump through any hoops either of you have for me.”

“We’ll see ...” It’s not like I’m planning on making things difficult, but I’m sure not going to let her off the hook and welcome her back into the family she almost obliterated. Not without a great deal of trust-building effort on her part. “Goodbye, Beth,” I tell her before walking out of the room.

I don’t have the slightest urge to hug her or touch her in any way. There’s only one woman on my mind and she’s currently sitting out in the waiting room. I don’t know what the future holds for me and Melissa, but I know in my soul that she’s the woman I want a future with. I just need to see if she’s willing to give me another chance.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



MELISSA

The week after getting back from Chicago passes like taking a spin in a blender. It's fast, furious, and borderline painful. I haven't seen Jamie since he dropped me off at my apartment on Sunday night. I have seen Sammy a few times though. She came into the shop after school on her first day to report that she loved everything about Elk Lake Junior High School. She stopped in again on Wednesday and Thursday, but not today because she's going home with Regan to have a sleepover.

Even though we decided she'd only work on Saturdays during the school year, I'm glad she's still making a point to keep me in the loop. Which is more than Jamie's doing. I had hoped that after our trip to Chicago we'd finally talk and maybe even change the parameters of our relationship. But it seems my biggest fear has become a reality. He doesn't want anything more than friendship with me, and even that doesn't look very promising. Friends actually call each other.

True to her word, my mom booked herself the mother of all vacations. Here I thought she'd go to a spa in Chicago for a few days, but instead, she's going to Spain. When I asked her why, she said because she's always wanted to go there and this way if she decides to extend her trip and not come home, she'll be in a place she wants to explore.

Not come home? What has happened to Margie? Clearly, she's ready to do some soul searching, which both excites and terrifies me.

I've got an hour left at work when my phone pings. I look at the screen and see that Paige just texted.

Midwestern Matchmaker will be in town tomorrow! They'll come into your shop at two to interview you. Yay!!! I'll call you tonight and we can decide what you should wear.

I'm not nearly as excited as she is, but I suppose I'll still meet with them. My mind has been so focused on all things Jamie that I haven't even been looking on Catch.com for anyone of interest.

After closing up for the day, I stop at the grocery store to pick up something for supper. I run into Tim in the freezer aisle. "Hey," I call out.

“No big plans tonight?” I texted him after my mom threw wine at him. I apologized on her behalf but haven’t heard from him since.

His shoulders are slumped, and he looks more than a bit disheveled. “Nope.”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” I tease.

“I’m not currently dating anyone,” he says.

“What? Why not? Dating is your sport.”

He shakes his head while pulling out a stack of frozen meals from the freezer. “I broke up with everyone.”

“Why? I thought you were going to give the last girl a shot.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “My heart wasn’t in it.” Once he places his meals in his cart, he adds, “I just read this book about mourning. It suggests you give yourself a solid year after a marriage ends before considering getting involved in another serious relationship.”

“How long did you give yourself before starting to date here?” We never covered this topic when we were seeing each other.

“Two months. So, not a long time.” He says, “I even deactivated my Catch profile.”

“I’ve been thinking about doing that, too,” I tell him. I haven’t looked at it all week.

“Are things working out between you and Jamie?”

“Ah, no. I don’t think so. But I’m thinking about going on *Midwestern Matchmaker* with Paige. Maybe you should check that out. They’ll be in town tomorrow. I could try to hook you up with the producer.”

He rolls his eyes. “The last thing I need is for the whole world to watch me wipe out on the dating scene.”

“You might meet the one ...” I sound more hopeful for his chances than I am for my own.

“You do it first, and if you meet Mr. Wonderful, I might give it a shot.”

It’s weird, but neither one of us is seeing anyone and yet neither one of us is bringing up the topic of us dating again. That ship has clearly sailed for both of us, and I’m happy about that.

We chat for a few more minutes before Tim says, “I’m off to have a nice long evening at home by myself.”

“Call me if you want to chat,” I tell him, even though it’s clear he’s not feeling very social.

After grabbing my groceries, I go home and pop a frozen pizza in the

oven. While I wait for it to cook, I pick up my laptop and sit down on the couch. I have forty messages on the Catch.com website and ten new likes on my profile. Ten likes suggests I might have ten messages, so the number is oddly off.

I investigate and find out that thirty-one messages are from the same account: BrokenHeartedforYou. Just what I need, a stalker. I'm about to delete them all, when I click on the profile page to see what kind of psycho I'm dealing with. The picture makes my mouth drop open in surprise. It's Jamie.

Under hobbies, he wrote: Raising my daughter and pining after a beautiful red-headed shop owner.

Holy what? I keep reading.

Under what he wants in a partner, he says:

I'm looking for a woman named Melissa who will forgive me, tease me, and kiss me like I'm the only man in the world for her.

What's happening here? Jamie started a Catch profile with the sole intention of catching *me*? I spend the next hour eating pizza and reading all his messages. He pours out his heart and soul and tells me everything about what he's feeling.

I wonder what's the best way to respond to him. I could send a reply to one of his messages on Catch, I could text him, or I could call him. I decide that none of those options are good enough. Instead, I change into my prettiest dress, and I drive over to his house.

When he opens his door, he looks shocked to see me. "Melissa?"

I push into his entryway and demand, "Why didn't you just call? I've been furious with you and now I find you've been messaging me through Catch.com?"

"You just now got my messages? I thought you were ignoring me."

"Why would I do that? I've been desperate to talk to you."

"I've been desperate to talk to *you*," he says. "I have so much to say."

I take a step toward him. "We can talk later. Right now, I'm here to kiss you like you're the only man in the world for me."

He looks surprised before taking me in his arms. He brushes his mouth across my ear. "I thought I'd messed things up beyond repair. I thought you didn't want anything more to do with me."

"In the future, if you have something to say to me, you need to just say it," I tell him before pressing my mouth against his. I kiss him with every bit

of pent-up angst and passion inside me. I kiss him like I'm trying to attach myself to his tonsils. I kiss him like he's the only man I ever want to kiss again.

When I finally take a break, I ask, "So are you going to invite me in or what?"

He steps aside and smiles. "Want to come in? Sammy's at a sleepover."

And that's all the invitation I need. While I don't yet know everything about Jamie, I know he's a great guy. He just needs to persuade me that he's my guy. I'm not going to rest until I'm one hundred percent sure.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



JAMIE

I was positive that Catch.com was the most romantic way to let Melissa know how much I wanted to be in a relationship with her. I even asked Sammy what to do, on the guise of creating a marketing campaign. Little did I realize, Melissa had stopped looking for her perfect man.

While we're cuddled up on the swing on the deck, I tell her, "I was starting to sweat bullets after two days had passed and I didn't hear from you."

"You couldn't have seriously thought that I could concentrate on a social life after Chicago."

Wrapping both arms around her, I say, "Looks like Beth finally did me a favor, huh? All that drama distracted you."

"The drama isn't what distracted me." She smiles coyly. "You did that all on your own."

I could kick myself around the block for wasting even a minute of time with Melissa. She's clearly the perfect woman for me. She loves my daughter, she doesn't take any of my crap, and her kisses are otherworldly wonderful. "What do you say we go into town for supper?" I ask. "That is, if you haven't already eaten."

She turns toward me and purrs, "I'm not hungry for food."

"Not even a patty melt?"

Sitting up straighter, she replies, "I could always eat a patty melt."

"Good, let's go. I've been off my food this week and I'm starving."

"You were so worried about me you couldn't eat?" she teases.

"How would you feel if you poured your heart and soul out to somebody, and they never responded?"

She nods her head thoughtfully. "I might have actually called them on the telephone."

"I'll remember that in the future."

A look of alarm crosses her face. "I hope you don't mean you're going to date other women while you're dating me."

"Never. I meant that the next time I want to talk to you, I'll use the phone."

“Good man.” She pats my chest before standing up. “Now let’s go.”

It takes us a long time to get to the diner. There’s more kissing at my house, and then in the car before we leave, and yet more once we park on Main Street. I have never in my life felt as content as I am right now, which makes me think that Melissa was right when she said sometimes we have to get out of our own way.

I’ve been so worried Sammy and I would get hurt again that I closed the door on the possibility of a happier future. Heck, had I opened the door sooner, we probably would have never moved to Elk Lake.

I decide to take my bullheadedness as a sign the universe was keeping me single for the right woman—Melissa.

Walking hand in hand to eat, we stop in front of the diner’s big picture window. I pull her into my arms, and I kiss her like she’s the only thing that’s keeping me alive. When we’re done, I tell her, “Thank you for not giving up on me.”

“I almost did.”

“I know, but you didn’t, and I couldn’t be more grateful.”

As we turn to walk inside, I glance at the window and my heart nearly stops at what I see. Sammy is sitting at a table with her friends and they’re staring at us like they’ve just witnessed a murder. Eyes are wide, mouths open in shock.

I nudge Melissa to get her attention. “We’re busted.”

She doesn’t seem the least bit nervous. Instead, she takes my hand and pulls me into the diner. I haven’t allowed myself to wonder how we were going to tell Sammy about us, but it seems like the moment is here.

“Sammy,” Melissa calls out as we approach my daughter’s table.

“Melissa. Dad.” She shows no emotion other than shock.

“I wasn’t lying to you before when I told you that Melissa and I weren’t dating,” I start to say. But Melissa puts her hand on my arm to stop me from talking.

In front of God and a table full of preteen witnesses, Melissa announces, “Your dad and I would like your permission to start dating each other. And before you worry this might ruin our friendship, I can assure you that if your dad screws this up in any way, I’m keeping you.”

Sammy looks between us before slowly smiling. “You have my permission.” Then she stands up and walks over to us. I open my arms and pull both of my girls in for a hug.

When Sammy's friends start to cheer, I ask, "Would it be too awkward if we had supper here? We'd sit at our own table."

Sammy appears to consider my request before saying, "It depends. Will you pay for our supper?" Four sets of eyes glue themselves to me.

"Of course he will," Melissa says. "That's what dads are for."

"*That's* what I'm for?"

Melissa assures me, "It is now that Sammy is almost a teenager. But don't worry, it'll lighten up after she graduates from college."

All the ups and downs of my adult life have led me to this very moment. And if things work out between me and Melissa, then all the heartache was worth it. Life gives, and it takes, but ultimately, I believe the gifts outweigh the heartache. We just have to be courageous enough to keep going.

EPILOGUE



MELISSA

“Sammy, hurry up! Your mom just pulled up,” I call out to her while busily adding things to the pile of bags accumulating by Jamie’s front door.

Jamie shakes his head. “We’re only going to be in the Cayman Islands for ten days. You look like you’re getting ready to move there.”

“I’ve packed for a variety of temperatures,” I tell him primly.

Sammy skips down the hallway with an overnight bag thrown over her shoulder. “I can’t believe you’re not taking me with you.”

“You can come the next time,” Jamie tells her. “But meanwhile, your mom has made a lot of holiday plans for you while you’re in the city.”

Melissa asks, “You’re not getting cold feet about going, are you?”

Sammy shakes her head. “No, I’m just giving you two a hard time. I’m looking forward to spending time with Beth.” She winks and adds, “She has a lot of Christmases to make up for.”

I hand her a packet of papers. “Here’s where we’ll be staying. There are phone numbers in case our cell phones don’t work.”

Even though we all know Beth is here, the knock on the door causes us all to jump. Sammy races to open it. “Hey,” she says in a friendly way. She’s seen Beth six times since that night in the hospital, but this is the first time she’s spending the night with her. Jamie has been slow to trust his ex, so this is a big move.

“Hi there.” Beth reaches out to hug her daughter. “You ready to go?”

“Yup,” Sammy says enthusiastically. It’s nice to see a relationship developing between these two.

Beth smiles at Jamie and me. “Let us know that you arrived safely,” she says.

“I gave Sammy all of our information,” I tell her.

Jamie walks over to his daughter and wraps her in a hug. “Have a great time and don’t forget to shop for me.” He teases, “I want alligator loafers, and a fur coat.”

Sammy laughs. “I want a Coach bag full of Twix bars.” She looks at me and asks, “What do you want, Melissa?”

I take in the scene before me with a very full heart. “I have everything I

have ever wanted right here,” I tell her. “Just be safe and have a great time.”

Once Sammy and Beth are gone, I tell Jamie, “Everything is working out perfectly.”

“I love you,” he says. He told me that for the first time a month ago and I can’t hear it enough.

“I love you too. Now come on, our first vacation is waiting for us, and I can’t wait to feel the sand between my toes.”

I watch as Jamie picks up a satchel next to the couch. I can’t imagine there was anything left to pack, so I ask, “What’s in there?”

“Just a special surprise for a special lady,” he says.

“Really? Could it be for me?”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Can I open it now? I do love special surprises.”

“Not a chance,” he tells me. Then he says, “Come on, the sunshine is waiting for us.”

And just like that, I realize that’s exactly what Jamie and Sammy have been for me. They are my sunshine. They are the first thing I think about in the morning and the last thing I think about before going to bed. I finally have my guy and he’s more than I could have ever hoped for.

COMING SOON: PITY PACT



Paige Holland here—lifetime resident of Elk Lake, Wisconsin, and dedicated seventh-grade math teacher.

Have you ever wondered if those reality shows, where people find their soul mates, are real?

Yeah, me too. And while I'm totally addicted to those programs, I'm also a world-class skeptic.

Thirty-two single years have either opened my mind to new possibilities or totally caused some undiagnosed mental illness, like pie-in-the-sky-dreameritis.

I'm about to find out which it is, and I'm scared to death. And maybe a little excited too ...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestseller Whitney Dineen is a rock star in her own head. While delusional about her singing abilities, there's been a plethora of validation that she's a fairly decent author (AMAZING!!!).

After winning many writing awards and selling nearly a kabillion books (math may not be her forte, either), she's decided to let the voices in her head say whatever they want (sorry, Mom). She also won a fourth-place ribbon in a fifth-grade swim meet in backstroke. So, there's that.

Whitney loves to play with her kids (a.k.a. dazzle them with her amazing flossing abilities), bake stuff, eat stuff, and write books for people who "get" her. She thinks french fries are the perfect food and Mrs. Roper is her spirit animal.

Join her [newsletter](#) for news of her latest releases, sales, and recommendations. If you consider yourself a superfan, join her [private reader group](#), where you will be offered the chance to read her books before they're released.