

EVANGELINE KELLY

the
WEDDING
Standoff



The Wedding Standoff

EVANGELINE KELLY

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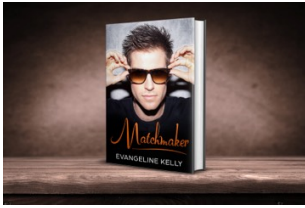
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Chapter One

My parents got married in a courthouse with only my mom's parents and two close friends in attendance.

Back then, Mom thought it was perfect, but as she grew older, she regretted not having a traditional ceremony and reception. Which meant... She was eager and ready to organize mine.

I loved my mom, but her controlling nature had shaped my entire life, making it hard to oppose her. Despite that, I'd learned how to deal with her, and we got along most of the time, particularly when I lived on my own. I knew she had sincere intentions, but it had always been difficult for me to stand up to her. Family dynamics were tricky to circumvent. We had a complicated relationship: not all bad, not all good.

Two weeks had passed since my fiancé, Matt, had proposed, and now that there was a wedding to plan, my mother was like a restless bird, fluttering from one idea to the next. I figured that was par for the course, and my strategy was to manage her expectations throughout the process while honoring my own goals and decisions. I wanted to include her, but I didn't want her to take over. Hopefully, we would be able to get through this with our relationship intact. Our first big test was going to a bridal exposition downtown.

On the morning of the bridal show, Matt and I found ourselves at a restaurant eating breakfast. He'd ordered steel-cut oatmeal, and I'd requested a large blueberry muffin and a cup of tea. He didn't need to go to work until ten, and I'd taken the day off so Mom and I could attend the event downtown. We lived in a suburb of Los Angeles that felt at

times like a small town, but we still had access to “big city” resources.

Matt and I didn’t have a lot of time together because his new position as an Emergency Room physician at an HMO-affiliated hospital kept him extremely busy. The E.R. was understaffed and he often had to take up the slack. I tried not to grumble about it. Having been through the challenging phase of his residency program, I understood the demands of his profession and fully supported his dream. I’d been in the middle of grad school anyway, working toward my own goal of becoming an editor.

Once I graduated, I secured a job with a small publishing house that allowed me to work from home, and it gave me some flexibility. My supervisor, Judy, didn’t micromanage me, and as long as I fulfilled my responsibilities, she was happy.

Matt and I had talked about marriage early on when we first started dating, but we both accepted that it would have to be postponed until I was done with school and Matt finished his residency program. Once we’d both completed those milestones, he was thirty, and I was twenty-five.

Now that things were settling down, we had a wedding to look forward to, and I couldn’t wait to become Mrs. Fletcher. I loved Matt dearly, and I never had to wonder how he felt about me. He’d made it very clear that he was all in when it came to our relationship. He loved me and always found new ways to show it.

“I’m so glad we get to do this today,” I said. “I’ve missed you so much.”

Matt’s brown eyes twinkled, and he took my hands in his. “I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all week. Thinking of you was what got me through some of the difficult stuff at work.”

A wave of emotion flooded through me. I didn’t get to see Matt as often as I wanted, and being here with him made me long to see him more. Tears pricked my eyes and a lump formed in my throat.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He leaned across the table and took my hand between both of his.

“I wish we had more time together.”

His eyes softened as he moved closer. “I hate this as much as you do. I’ve been putting in a lot of overtime, but next week should be better.” He kissed my hand and then ran his knuckles down the side of my face. “At least we still get to hang out now. It doesn’t matter what we do or what we talk about. As long as I’m with you, I’m happy.”

I melted right there on the spot. He always knew the correct thing to say when I was feeling down. “I can’t wait to see you every day once we start our new life together. But first, we have to make it through the wedding planning.”

He laughed outright, just as I felt a vibration coming from inside my purse. I pulled out my cell phone and glanced at a text from Mom. *What time do you think you’ll come over after your breakfast with Matt?*

I’d already told her we would be spending at least an hour and a half together this morning. The plan was for me to pick her up as soon as we finished eating, and then Mom and I would head downtown. The Bridal Expo featured a variety of vendors that provided samples of their work, and they were there to discuss prices and expectations. Mom was more excited than I was, but I was still looking forward to it. I preferred a simple, classic-style wedding, but I was getting the feeling that Mom wanted much more than that. She’d offered to pay, but I declined because I knew she would expect to get more involved if she was funding the event. Thankfully, I had saved up quite a bit on my own, so that wouldn’t be an issue.

Matt and I had previously agreed that I would set aside money for the wedding, and he would save towards a down payment on a house. We had our ducks in a row and we were ready to embark on this new stage in our lives.

I quickly texted Mom back, reminding her of the time I planned to pick her up. It was cute how excited she was, but I hoped this was her first and only text. For some reason, she liked to text me when Matt and I were on dates, and it

frustrated me to no end. Sometimes it seemed like she wanted me to get married but was also afraid to let go. I wasn't sure why this was such a big issue, given that I no longer lived at home, but perhaps marriage symbolized moving on and she was feeling left behind. I needed to be more patient and understanding with her. After all, she had practically raised me by herself since my father passed away when I was six years old. She'd never remarried, but I'd always gotten the feeling it was something she had longed for.

Our waitress walked over to refill our waters, and she smiled, glancing at us. "You are the cutest couple. How long have you been engaged?" She gestured to my ring, a solitaire diamond that sparkled underneath the overhead lights.

"He proposed two weeks ago," I said, grinning.

Her eyes twinkled. "Congratulations. How did you meet?"

"Through friends," Matt said. "Her best friend knew my younger brother."

"Wow, that's so cool," she said, glancing between us.

I leaned forward. "My friend, Sarah, had a party and her friend, Jason, who happens to be Matt's brother, asked if he could bring Matt along since he worked a lot and didn't get out much. She said yes, of course. When I walked in the door, I immediately saw Matt. He was talking to someone else, but he glanced over his shoulder and smiled at me."

Matt nodded. "I'd never met her, but I thought to myself, 'I'm going to talk to her,' and I did."

"That is so sweet," our waitress crooned.

"Not more than ten minutes later, he found me and introduced himself," I said. "We hit it off and neither of us spoke to anyone else that night. I heard people talking around us, but my attention was all on him."

She burst out laughing. "Honey, I don't blame you. You snagged yourself a good one." She glanced at Matt and grinned. "Enjoy this phase in your life. It goes by so quickly."

“That was three years ago, but it almost seems like yesterday,” Matt said, “and now Jason is living in Washington and Sarah is in New York going to grad school.”

I smiled. “Jason will be Matt’s best man and I’ve already asked Sarah to be my maid of honor.”

“That makes sense,” she said. “I’m so happy for both of you.” She winked and left to check on another table.

Matt’s handsome appearance stood out to me that day. He was tall, with dark hair and a chiseled jaw, but it wasn’t his looks that had hooked me. It was when he told me he was reading through a Bible-in-a-year program that I really took notice. I’d wanted a man who showed unwavering devotion to Christ, and as I got to know him that evening, I knew there was something special about him.

My phone started vibrating again as a slew of texts came through from my mother. I read the first couple in case they were important, but most of it could have waited. She kept texting pictures of wedding dresses and venues, things we didn’t need to discuss at the moment. I finally stopped looking and put my phone down.

About twenty minutes later, after Matt and I had finished breakfast and were lingering over second and third helpings of coffee and tea, Mom called. I let it go to voicemail, but then she rang again. Reluctantly, I hit the accept button. “Hey, what’s up?”

“Rachel, you need to pick me up right away.” There was an urgency in her tone that made me sit up straighter. “What’s wrong? Did something happen?” My heart flipped inside my chest.

“I just saw on the news that there’s an accident on the freeway, so we should leave as soon as possible if we want to get there on time.”

I let out a breath. “You made it sound like an emergency.”

“This is an emergency!”

I looked at Matt and rolled my eyes. “There is no set hour we have to arrive. The vendors will be there all day. They’re

not going anywhere.”

“I know that,” Mom said, with a hint of aggravation in her tone, “but the early bird gets the worm. They’re handing out prizes and coupons to everyone who arrives within the first two hours.”

“We’re not in a rush,” I said, trying to even out my voice and not lose my patience. All I wanted was to sit with Matt and enjoy our time together.

Mom huffed. “You’re making this difficult. Come home as soon as possible so we can be on our way. If we miss out on something, I won’t be happy.”

“Fine, we’ll leave in a few minutes.”

“Thank you. Please don’t dawdle.” She quickly ended the call.

I sighed and explained to Matt what Mom had said. Instead of showing annoyance, he seemed amused by all her drama. “She’s living her dream. Let her have her fun.”

“I’m trying, but what about my dream? What if we have conflicting dreams?”

He shrugged. “You articulate what’s most important to you, and you learn to compromise when necessary.”

He made it sound so easy, but it was never easy when it came to my mother. “Please hold me accountable. I always bend to her will and end up following her plan instead of mine.”

“I’ll be here to help, but you’ve got this. Try not to worry so much.”

That was easier said than done, but I hoped he was right. I was probably blowing this out of proportion based on my fear of the unknown. I just had to trust God and believe that everything would be okay.

Chapter Two

The next morning, I woke up with a headache. I ran my fingers through my hair and sprawled out in bed, staring at the ceiling. Going to the Bridal Expo yesterday with Mom had been fun, but it had also been overwhelming. Honestly, I wasn't certain how helpful it had been since most of the vendors seemed overpriced. Mom had been in her element, though. I was pretty sure she believed the more they charged, the better service they delivered, but that wasn't necessarily the case. She had easily been drawn in by their sales pitches.

And while she preferred extravagant and fussy decorations, I'd always had an inclination toward sleek and simple designs. Through it all, I tried to listen patiently to all of her recommendations, knowing how important this was to her and how much she wanted to be of use.

I had agreed to come over to her house a little later to brainstorm based on some of the pamphlets and notes we'd taken. But honestly, I was dreading it. I hadn't seen anything at the exposition that I truly liked, and if it were up to me, I'd have a small wedding and call it a day. But that would break Mom's heart, and Matt had also voiced that his family was looking forward to a larger wedding. He said he couldn't care less either way, being the easy-going guy that he was, but I knew he had opinions on the matter. We both wanted to please our families. I just hoped we didn't lose sight of our own vision.

I rolled out of bed and threw on some clothes before heading downstairs for breakfast. Laura, a friend I'd met in

college, was renting out a room to me. She'd been a couple of years ahead of me, and her parents had helped her purchase a house in a modest neighborhood. When she'd offered to let me rent a room for a fair price, I'd taken it instantly. I preferred renting from a friend, and Laura was easy to get along with. It had been the perfect setup because she hadn't asked me to sign a contract, and I could pay on a month-to-month basis and leave whenever I wanted. She'd said she wasn't renting to me because she needed the money. She just liked having a companion so she wasn't alone all the time, and it made her parents feel better knowing there was somebody there in case of an emergency. We'd grown close, and she'd happily agreed to be my future bridesmaid.

Laura was already in the kitchen when I walked in, her light brown hair gathered into a small ponytail. My hair was darker and longer, brushing my shoulders, but we were about the same height at five foot, six inches tall. She was wearing blue and white pajama pants and a gray sweatshirt. Turning, she glanced at me with a smile. "Hey, Rach. How did it go yesterday with your mom?"

I took a moment to formulate my response while I pulled out the cereal box from the top cabinet and heaped some into a bowl. I reached into the refrigerator and grabbed the milk, tipping my head from side to side. "Um..."

I poured myself a glass and added some to my cereal. Laura handed me a spoon since it was in the drawer closest to where she was standing. I took a few bites while she cooked pancakes on a grill over the stove.

"It was good," I said tentatively.

She snickered. "Don't sound so excited. Was it that bad?"

She knew me so well. I'd shared my worries about wedding planning with her, and we'd already discussed my former frustrations with Mom trying to live vicariously through me.

"It wasn't horrible, but I can't say it was helpful either. My fear is that Mom and I will have a tug-of-war over style preferences."

“At the end of the day, it’s your wedding.” She flipped a pancake and turned the heat down.

“I know, but she’s been looking forward to this my whole life, and I don’t want to disappoint her.”

She lifted a shoulder with the smallest hint of a smile, and I could almost guess what she was thinking. *Glad it’s not me going through this.*

I checked the time and quickly finished my last few bites, practically swallowing them down. “I promised I’d come over this morning to go over our notes since it’s a Saturday and I don’t have to work. Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” she said with a giggle. “You’re going to need it.”

She wasn’t kidding, although I knew luck wouldn’t get me through the days ahead. I needed God’s sustaining power and strength.

With that in mind, I lifted up a quick prayer as I pulled my car away from the curb. *Lord, I want to be respectful. Mom loves me and wants the best for me, but we don’t see eye to eye on this stuff. Help me to speak up and let her know when she oversteps.*

As I continued to drive, I thought about a few of the vendors we had spoken to yesterday, and I contemplated whether there were any I would be willing to follow up with. Quite frankly, I couldn’t come up with one. Not that they wouldn’t be able to deliver on a simple, classic wedding style, but I didn’t appreciate the way they had all attempted to push me into a contract. Personality and professionalism were important, and I had to feel comfortable with whoever I ended up with. Quite frankly, it would be easier to plan everything on my own.

I drove through an upscale area and noticed a large open house sign on the corner. Several vehicles were driving in that direction, and on a whim, I followed them. Maybe it was my way of delaying the inevitable discussion with Mom, but it had sparked my interest. Matt and I wanted to purchase a home

after we got married, so it wouldn't hurt to see what was available. I continued until I saw a house with people standing out front and a large sign indicating the property was for sale. I parked and leaned over so I could see out the passenger side window.

My mouth gaped open at the sight. Goosebumps popped up over my arms and a strange sensation flooded me. It was almost love at first sight, for lack of a better comparison. It looked like a country farmhouse, which was strange since it was situated in suburbia, but it was perfect. And it seemed as if it could have been found within the imaginary pages of a book. The structure was painted ivory with black trim around the windows and frame, and it had a wraparound porch with rocking chairs that seemed ideal for sipping tea on a lazy afternoon. Purple Lantana bushes surrounded a white fence, and the front yard had green grass and a lavender crepe myrtle tree. The wind blew through all the greenery, rustling the leaves, and I felt myself relaxing.

The neighborhood seemed expensive, so I was unsure if we would be able to afford a place like that, but it didn't hurt to dream. I probably should have kept going, but something in me refused to budge. I had to see it. Before I changed my mind, I slid out of the car, locked it, and strode toward the house. Several folks gathered on the lawn talking, and a woman in a navy pants suit stood at the door, welcoming people as they walked in. She had shoulder-length bleached blonde hair and a bright smile.

When I approached, she handed me a clipboard with a form. "Hi, I'm Adrienne. Please fill this out and give it to me before you leave. Take a look around and tell me what you think."

"Thanks. I'm just looking for now."

She nodded. "Let us know if you have any questions."

As I stepped into the house, there was a roomy entryway with a vase of red roses on top of a small table. To the right was a large room with high ceilings and tall windows. A fireplace surrounded by white bricks was a focal point, and

directly in front of me, a staircase led to an upper floor with a balcony overlooking the living room area. I strolled through the residence, taking it all in, and I passed through a distinct dining room that was beside a roomy kitchen with sparkling white cabinets and stainless-steel appliances. Inside the cooking area, a breakfast nook had a window facing toward green shrubs and trees in the backyard. Turning to the left, I caught a glimpse of the pool through another window. I could picture Matt and me drinking our morning coffee before work, staring out at the view. Warmth flooded through me and a sense of giddiness fluttered in my stomach. As I continued to tour the inside of the home, I noted four bedrooms and a master suite. The master bath featured a pair of spacious walk-in closets and the bathroom itself had a whirlpool tub, a see-through glass shower, and a generously sized closet for linens.

A thought suddenly occurred to me. I had put away a generous amount of money for the wedding, but what if I planned a much simpler event and used most of my savings for a down payment on the house? That money, plus whatever Matt had saved, might make this doable. Of course, the property was a little above our means, but with Matt's new job as a doctor, surely we could figure it out. Maybe I was getting ahead of myself, but I couldn't help it.

I quickly filled out the form with my contact information and gave it to Adrienne. I asked if anyone had made a formal offer, and she told me there were a few who were interested, but no one had contacted her yet. She expected several offers within the week, though. I nodded and left in a daze.

As I returned to my vehicle, it was as if everything I had previously wanted had shifted, and now all I could think about was the place on Jasper Street. My main priority was getting married to Matt, of course. Our marriage was extremely important to me. The wedding, less so. And that house... It was a dream.

When I finally made it to Mom's, I couldn't stop gushing. "You have to see it. It looks like it could be in a movie. It would be absolutely amazing for us." What I was about to say would probably throw a wrench into her plans, but the words

tumbled out anyway. “I’m thinking of having an intimate gathering with mainly immediate family and a few close friends. That way—”

“Whoa, there. Backup a little. What did you just say?” She frowned, brushing back her honey-colored hair.

“I was trying to explain that if we planned a smaller wedding, Matt and I might be able to afford the house. Nothing is set in stone, of course. He hasn’t even seen it yet.”

She widened her almond-shaped brown eyes and retreated a step. “It sounds like you’re getting sidetracked. Based on what you described, that house is likely too expensive for you.”

“If you saw it, you would understand. It felt right, and it’s the most beautiful house I’ve ever come across.”

“All the more reason to believe you can’t afford it.”

My shoulders slumped and my mood evaporated in a matter of seconds. “You’re probably right.”

“The wedding should take priority. You’ve been saving all this time, and I can’t imagine why you’d purchase a house before you’ve even gotten married. Keep your eyes on the prize. Let’s finish one thing before we start something new.”

She’d given wise advice, but a rush of irritation swept through me because I understood her motivation. The wedding was everything to her, and she didn’t want anything to disrupt that. I bit back what I wanted to say. Despite it not being her plan, it wasn’t unreasonable to think of the future. Not everyone had to have a big, elaborate wedding. And I couldn’t help it if the perfect house had hit the market before Matt and I had said “I do.” It wasn’t as if we would move in together before we’d gotten married. Mom had to know that, even though she and Dad had done just that. Neither of them had a religious background or inclination to go to church. I’d found Christ at a college Bible study on campus, and Mom had been somewhat supportive, but she didn’t care to talk about it. In the end, she’d made some great points, but it wasn’t her decision.

“I know you like that house,” she said, “but put that aside for now so we can concentrate on other things.” She waved me over to her computer and asked me to sit next to her. She proceeded to show me examples of wedding invitations and several wedding dresses she had bookmarked. “This one is my favorite.” She sat up straighter, her posture impeccable.

She zoomed in on the gown, and it had excessive beading and rhinestones, arranged in an overwhelming and chaotic pattern. The beads overpowered the rest of the dress, drawing attention away from the overall design and look. The dress itself hugged the model’s form but poofed out from the knees. It was awful, but I couldn’t tell her that without hurting her feelings.

“It’s not my style,” I said, hesitantly.

“Are you kidding me? This dress is gorgeous. What’s not to like?”

“For one, there are too many beads. And second, I don’t want something that elaborate.”

She scrunched up her nose as if I’d spilled sour milk. “All right, if it’s not for you we’ll continue searching, but I’ll keep this one bookmarked in case you change your mind.”

I definitely wouldn’t rethink my stance, but I kept my opinions to myself. I knew I should tell her to back off and let me take the lead, so I could show her the designs I preferred. Instead, I kept my frustration in check and let her do what she wanted. I needed to be more assertive, and I had told Matt I would be, but once she and I were together, I felt like a little kid again, unable to contradict her. I didn’t know how to escape our dynamic.

And that dynamic wasn’t new. When I was in elementary school she enrolled me in ballet lessons despite my request to play soccer. She’d said she couldn’t imagine why I would rather kick a ball around when I could look beautiful in a ballerina outfit. My heart hadn’t been in it, but I had done my best. The teacher even noticed my lackluster attitude and talked with Mom about it. Of course, Mom had dismissed her

concerns and told her I loved it and couldn't stop talking about the class.

Months later, I sprained my ankle, and I was relieved when I had to quit. Mom had been disappointed, but she had channeled all that energy into a new endeavor: painting. That was laughable because I didn't have an artistic bone in my body, but I went along with it because she'd insisted it would be fun. I tried as I had with ballet, but I was not very good at it. I started making up stories about feeling sick so I wouldn't have to go to the classes, and Mom never made the connection that she was pushing me into things I wasn't interested in. Consequently, I wasn't able to take soccer like I had wanted, and on reflection, I couldn't help but feel resentful.

“Rachel, pay attention.” She snapped her fingers. “Stop daydreaming and take a look at this one.” She tipped her chin toward the most gaudy-looking dress I'd ever seen with a huge skirt. It even outdid the previous gown, which said a lot.

Before I could restrain myself, I burst out laughing. “You've got to be kidding me.”

“I think it's quite elegant.”

I glanced at my cell phone to see the time. “If we're going to look through those pamphlets and review our notes, we should get started. I can't stay long.”

“Why? What else do you have planned?”

Nothing, but that was a mistake I wouldn't repeat. I needed to always have another activity lined up so I could make an easy exit. “I just don't want to spend all day on this.”

She chortled. “Oh, honey. We've only begun. Prepare yourself, because this will take hours and hours of hard work.”

Putting most of my savings toward a down payment on the house and having a simpler wedding was starting to look better and better by the minute. But first I would have to see what Matt thought of that.

Chapter Three

On Sunday, I convinced Matt to go to the open house with me after church. He wasn't as excited as I was on the drive over, but he seemed receptive, at least. We'd both agreed that we wanted to find a property pretty soon after we got married, but we had never discussed looking before the wedding.

"You're going to love it," I said. "It's everything you could ever hope for in a house and more. I can absolutely picture us living there."

He gave a noncommittal shrug as he continued to drive, and when he reached the corner, he made a right on Jasper Street. "You sound sold on this, but I don't want you to get your hopes up and then find out we can't afford it. If we really like it, we would need to meet with a mortgage lender and crunch some numbers, but judging by the quality of homes in this neighborhood, it might be above our means." He cleared his throat. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but there are other properties to take into account. We shouldn't rush and make a decision too quickly."

I nodded, understanding where he was coming from. "I know it must seem like I'm shifting gears when I'm supposed to be focusing on the wedding, but I truly believe it will be worth it to put more money towards the house."

"What does your mom think?"

"She was discouraging me from buying anything before we get married. Obviously, her main priority is planning her dream event."

Matt chuckled. “My parents are pretty laid-back, but they asked a few times about the wedding plans. My mom wanted me to remind you that she’s still available to help.”

“Would we disappoint them if we had a small intimate gathering with only immediate family and a few close friends?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. His jaw tightened for a moment, and then he relaxed. “But this is our life and our decision, and we can’t let everyone else make those choices for us. We’ll do what seems the most beneficial for our future.”

I loved that Matt was not only practical, but he wasn’t afraid to stand his ground. Reaching over, I took his hand and squeezed it. “I agree, and thank you for being so supportive.”

He laced his fingers through mine and glanced at me, his eyes softening. “You never have to worry about me not having your back. We’re in this together.”

When he said it like that, so full of confidence and reassurance, I was certain I could face the future without fear. He always knew exactly what to say to put me at ease.

Once we arrived, Matt parked in front of the home and we got out and walked toward the entrance. Several people strolled out of the house and we passed them on our way in. Matt turned his attention to a man who appeared to be in his early forties. “What did you think of the place?”

The man smiled. “Attractive location. Nice home. But we’re seeking something bigger.”

My eyes widened. The house was twenty-five hundred square feet, so he must’ve been well off if he had his sights set on something bigger than that. But it worked in our favor because that was one less person we had to worry about.

We walked through the door, and Adrienne, the real estate agent I’d spoken to yesterday, greeted us. “Welcome back. I see you’ve brought someone with you this time.” Her smile lit up as she glanced between the two of us.

“Is this your brother?” She blushed, and there was such a hopeful look in her eye that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“No, this is Matt, my fiancé.”

“Nice to meet you.” Matt reached out to shake her hand, unphased by her response.

She smirked. “Of course. The good ones are always taken.”

Matt was a nice-looking guy, so I was used to this and it rarely made me jealous. One of Matt’s best qualities was that he was as loyal as they came. I never had to worry about him having a wandering eye or giving other women more attention. He loved the Lord, and I had complete faith that he would never cheat on me.

“Is there something specific you’re interested in seeing again?” Adrienne asked. “Or do you have questions I can answer for you?”

I paused for a second. “I can’t think of anything to ask at the moment.”

“Have you had a chance to see any other properties since your last visit?” she asked.

“No, we haven’t looked at other houses. To be honest, I fell in love with this place yesterday when I visited, and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it. I’m hoping Matt feels the same way once he sees it all.”

The corners of her lips turned up confidently as if she knew he would. “I’m glad to hear it. Take your time touring the home and let me know if I can assist you.”

“Thank you.” Matt placed his arm around my back and we moved into the living room. He was quiet, but I could tell he was taking everything in, his eyes assessing and observing every detail. We meandered through the entire house and ended our tour in the spacious backyard. It had a vast grassy section with a stunning garden, a pool, a pool house that could be transformed into a guest house, and a patio section with outdoor furniture, including a fire pit.

“Wouldn’t it be fun to host events for friends and family?” I asked.

Matt nodded. “I’d love for everyone to gather around that fire pit when it’s cooler outside.”

As we were leaving, Adrienne was talking to some people who had just arrived, so we slipped out and stood in the front yard. “So, what did you think?” I asked.

I sincerely hoped we agreed, but if we didn’t, I would let it go and take that as a sign that I needed to focus on the wedding. Still, as much as my mind was trying to be reasonable, my heart wanted this home so badly. My pulse raced as I waited for his reply.

He took a deep breath as he considered the question and then slowly let it out. “I hate to come to a conclusion so soon, but I love it. It’s exactly as you described, and I can see why you were so enthused about it.”

I squealed and flew into his arms. “Really?”

He nodded, a gleam in his eye.

“That’s wonderful. Should we make an offer?”

His arms tightened around me for a second, and then he drew back. “Not yet. We need to discuss our finances and we should also pray about it. It looks good, but I don’t want to make any impulsive decisions.”

“I don’t either, but if we take too much time, we could lose it. This place is amazing, so I’m sure there will be other offers.”

“I’ll contact my financial planner tomorrow and we’ll set up a meeting with him as soon as possible.”

“That’s probably a wise move.”

He pulled me back into his arms. “Until then, why don’t we have lunch and then find a quiet spot to pray? Let’s trust in God’s sovereign plan. If this is supposed to be our house, He’ll make it happen.”

“That sounds like a great idea, especially the trusting God part.”

We’d taken pictures throughout our tour, but we took a few more of the outside. I texted my friend, Sarah, with a photo of the front of the house and a quick message that Matt and I were thinking about it. She texted back immediately. *Wow, I love it. If you guys buy it, make sure there’s a guest room so I can visit.*

I responded. *Absolutely! I miss you. How is school going?*

A few minutes passed, and a message came through once Matt and I had left. *It’s been chaotic. I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch as often as I would like, but please know that I miss you. Call if you ever need me and keep me updated on all the important stuff.*

I sent one last reply. *I will!*

When I’d asked Sarah to be my maid of honor, I told her she wouldn’t have to help with wedding planning. I knew that grad school at Columbia University and a part-time job kept her extremely busy. Plus, Mom wanted that privilege all to herself.

As we were driving, Matt glanced over. “How’s Sarah?”

“She’s good. Busy as ever.”

“I know it’s been hard for you since she left. She was your closest friend.”

“Yeah, I miss her a lot, but she doesn’t plan to stay in New York permanently. And I still have Laura.”

He reached across the space and took my hand, grinning. “And you also have me. You’ll always have me...”

Chapter Four

The following day, I started work early so I could finish in time to pick up Mom. We had an appointment she'd scheduled at a bridal shop, and it was my first opportunity to go dress shopping, so I was excited. I loved that I was able to create my own schedule, as it made all of this easier. But as I drove up to her home and parked in front, a sense of unease washed through me. I was hoping Matt and I could purchase that house, which would mean we'd have to plan a more modest wedding. I hoped Mom would be supportive, but my instincts suggested something different.

My gaze swung to the house next door, and I noted that the for-sale sign was missing. The neighbors who had lived there before had told Mom they were relocating to Arizona because the guy had received a job offer, and I wondered who would be moving in.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and turned off the engine, but I didn't have a chance to slide out of the car before Mom came running across the lawn. She had a huge smile on her face, and she was dressed to the nines in a dark blue t-length pencil skirt, a white silk blouse with a tie at the neck, and navy-blue high heels. She carried a matching blue blazer, draped over her arm. No one could ever accuse her of having poor taste. In fact, she had a classic wardrobe and always looked amazing.

She'd blown out her shoulder-length dirty blonde hair until it was completely straight and curled slightly at the ends. I'd helped her pick out the color years ago at the salon, and she still gravitated toward that shade. When she reached the passenger side door, she opened it and slid in. A waft of

perfume permeated the small space, but it wasn't overpowering. Mom often complained about how people often used too much fragrance. She'd regularly say, 'We want to enjoy the scent, not inhale it.'

She turned and gave me a once-over. "Is that what you're wearing today?"

I drew back, frowning. "Yes, what's the problem?" I was wearing blue jeans and a nice lavender sweater. I'd made sure not to wear sneakers, although I truly didn't think it would've been an issue.

She slowly shook her head in disapproval. "I told you, La Mariée Classique is one of the swankiest bridal shops in the city. They expect their clientele to look a certain way."

I tried to recall her mentioning that part, but nothing came to me. The last thing I wanted was to go anywhere that had a dress code. "They'll get over it, and if they don't, it's not a store I want to visit. Who cares what someone wears?"

Mom's eyes narrowed and I could tell she didn't like my response. "It's about showing respect for the occasion and the establishment. Don't you want to make a good impression?"

Sighing, I looked at her in disbelief. "I don't see how what I'm wearing is disrespectful." I pinched the fabric of my sweater. "This is cashmere after all."

She pressed her lips together and paused as if choosing her words carefully. "Look, I won't micromanage what you wear, but I want you to look back on this day with pride and not embarrassment. Based on the area, it's reasonable to assume the other clients will be well-dressed. Do you want to stand out?"

"If it's as you say, why are we even going to a place like that? I can't afford it. I have a very limited budget, especially because..." I didn't finish the sentence as I fully expected her to explode if I told her I'd made up my mind about having a small wedding.

She didn't seem to notice my hesitation but instead nudged me with her elbow. "If you find something you really like, I

might be persuaded to help out financially.”

That was sweet, but I planned to pay for my own wedding, as offers of financial help always had strings attached.

She waited expectantly, and the longer I remained silent, the more my heart raced. I had to tell her. Procrastinating or dragging it out would only make the situation worse. Gathering what little courage I had, I clutched the steering wheel. “Actually, there’s something we need to discuss.”

“Are things all right between you and Matt?”

“Yes, of course. Everything is great between us.”

“Good. Then what’s this about?”

“Sorry. It’s just... What I wanted to say...”

“Spit it out. We don’t have all day.” She watched me closely, and then her eyes filled with understanding. “Wait a second. This is about inviting my aunt Edna, isn’t it? I know you were hesitant because you’ve never met her, but it’s polite to send an invitation. Her health hasn’t been great, so I’m almost positive she will decline.”

I shifted in my seat and faced her. “No, Mom. That’s not it. Please... Just give me a chance to explain.”

“Fine, I’m listening.” She made a zipping motion over her lips and then folded her hands in her lap.

I released a breath, dreading her reaction. “So, yesterday, I brought Matt to see that house I told you about. You know, the one on Jasper Street?”

Her face drained of color, and a flicker of recognition flashed in her eyes. She knew what I was about to say.

“He loved the house, and we’re considering buying it. We just need to meet with his financial planner—”

“You aren’t serious. Please tell me this is a joke.” Her voice was strained as if struggling to understand how I could have come to this decision.

“I’m not joking. We both agreed it’s our dream home, and we feel it would be worth having a smaller wedding so we can

become new homeowners.”

“Have you truly thought this through? Purchasing a property is a lot of responsibility. Think about what you’re doing.”

“We aren’t rushing into anything. As I said, we’re going to meet with his financial planner before we make any decisions. But if the finance guy gives us the go-ahead, and it’s within our means, we plan to submit an offer. Which means...we would have a small, intimate wedding. That doesn’t mean it can’t still be nice—”

“What do Matt’s parents think about that?”

I picked a piece of lint off my sweater. “We haven’t told them yet.”

“How do you anticipate they’ll respond when they find out?”

I winced. “They may not like it, but Matt is resolute that we should do what’s best for our future.”

“I can’t believe this.” Mom placed both hands on either side of her head as if trying to shut out what she didn’t want to hear. “I only have one daughter and I’ve been looking forward to your wedding since you were a little girl. Don’t you remember how you used to love to dress up like a beautiful bride?”

“Yes, but—”

“This is such a disappointment. And I’m concerned you’re making the wrong choice, Rachel.” She sighed heavily, her forehead creased with worry.

“I’m sorry to hear you feel that way. The last thing I want is to disappoint you, but this is a decision Matt and I have to make on our own.” I tried to sound confident, but my voice wavered. “You should check out the house so you can understand how special it is—”

“I don’t need to see it, honey. I’m sure it’s great, but this isn’t a wise decision. Get married, find yourselves a nice little

apartment, and then start thinking about purchasing a home in another year. You're doing everything backward."

"But that house won't be available in a year."

"Maybe not that one, but there will be others. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

I understood that we were doing things out of order, but did it really matter? If we waited, what if we couldn't find a place we loved? And I knew in my heart of hearts that I would always be thinking about the house on Jasper Street. There was just something about it. I could see us raising our children there. It was exactly what I'd hoped for, and no other home would compare.

I was so frustrated that I wanted to scream, but I held it in because losing my temper wouldn't help the situation. Not only that, but I hated conflict, especially with my mother. It was time for a diversionary tactic. "We need to table this conversation or we're going to be late for the appointment."

"You still want to go?" Mom asked, sounding hopeful.

"Yes, I still need a dress." I knew how important this was to her, as she'd been talking about that shop for days and would be sorely disappointed if we didn't go. I preferred to visit a more affordable place, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to see what else was out there.

She sat up a little straighter, though the frown hadn't left her face. "Well, I suppose we should get going then." She glanced at her watch.

Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed movement outside. A woman approached our vehicle and waved at Mom's side. I pushed the button to lower the window halfway, and Mom and I peered at her to see what she wanted.

"Hi there," she said. "My name is Eileen, and I recently purchased the home next door. I stopped by to take measurements for the drapes I want to buy, and I happened to notice you ladies sitting here in the car. Are either of you the owner of this house?" She pointed to Mom's home.

Mom perked up and motioned for me to roll the window further down. “Yes, I’m the owner. My name is Linda, and I was wondering who was moving in. It’s so nice to meet you finally.”

“Likewise.” The woman had one finger resting on the side of her chin as she studied us. If I had to guess, I would say she was somewhere in her sixties. She had short hair with wispy bangs, and the color was a bright, unnatural shade of red. She smiled, the corners of her blue eyes crinkling. Her green pantsuit had white polka dots and contrasted with her vivid hair, giving her appearance a touch of eccentricity.

“Oh, and this is my lovely daughter, Rachel,” Mom said. “We were just about to shop for wedding dresses because she got engaged two weeks ago.” She rubbed her hands together with excitement. “We have so much planning to do with so little time.” She hesitated. “Do you have any daughters?”

Eileen shook her head. “No, I only have one son, and I moved from New York to be closer to him. He and his wife and kids live a few blocks from here.”

“Oh, how delightful,” Mom said. “What a blessing to be near him.”

“Yes, it is. Well, I don’t want to delay you. I just wanted to stop by and say hello.” She stepped back and gave us a little wave.

I leaned across Mom and smiled. “We’re glad you did, and it was nice meeting you.”

“Yes, thanks for stopping by, and I look forward to getting to know you better,” Mom said. Before I had a chance to press the button to roll the window up, Mom turned to me. “We should get out of here if we’re going to make it in time.”

I pulled away from the curb and headed down the street. “Well, now you know who your new neighbor is.”

“Yes, indeed. She looks like quite a character, but I’m sure we’ll get along just fine.”

Eileen seemed nice, and I was grateful for the interruption since things had gotten tense with Mom. Hopefully, with time,

she would get used to the idea of me having a smaller wedding.

Once we got on the freeway, we drove in silence. Mom was quieter than usual, and she appeared pensive as if working through a dilemma. Maybe she was wondering when she should invite Eileen over for tea, but that was wishful thinking. It didn't take a genius to figure out what issue she was dwelling on. She was most likely trying to find a way to persuade me to forget about the house and cooperate by having a bigger wedding.

After a while, I relaxed in my seat and drove on autopilot, enjoying the silence. But just as I'd grown accustomed to the peace, Mom let out a squeal and reached across the space to touch my arm. "I have a proposition for you, and it's a way to make everyone happy."

Chapter Five

My heart rate quickened at the mention of a proposition. I knew something like this would happen, as Mom was not one to give up without a fight. Bracing myself for what she was about to say, I stared straight ahead and continued driving. “What did you have in mind?”

“So, here’s what I’m thinking. You want the house, and I want the wedding—”

“I want the wedding too—”

“I know you do,” she said, “but you’re willing to sacrifice quality.”

“That’s not true. The wedding will just have to be smaller with fewer people.”

“I didn’t mean to imply you weren’t hoping for a nice celebration. What I should’ve said is that you want a more intimate wedding, which will limit your options.” She pressed her lips together tentatively. “So, here’s the deal. What if I paid for the whole thing so you could put all of your savings toward the house? I’ve offered to help you with money in the past and you declined, but it makes more sense to accept my assistance now. Wouldn’t you agree?”

She had a point, but I would be foolish if I thought this was a no-strings-attached deal. “That’s very thoughtful of you, but I have to inquire. What would you be getting in return?”

She twisted in her seat and frowned as if offended by my question. “How can you ask me that? I’m your mother and I

want to help you. Isn't that enough? If you're asking if I would require you to pay me back in the future, the answer is no."

"But you're retired, and you need to save your money."

She chuckled as if I'd said something funny. "You don't know this, but I started a savings account for your wedding the day you turned thirteen. And before you say anything, I've done quite well for myself, thank you very much. I can splurge on my only daughter's big day without it creating an issue. I've been preparing for this for a long time."

She'd been a branch manager of a local bank before she retired, so she wasn't exaggerating. I had always admired her ambition, but she was used to being in charge. And that made her very persistent.

I felt her gaze as she waited for me to respond. Thankfully, my GPS loudly declared that I needed to get off at the next exit, so I had a few moments to stall. Once I'd taken the exit and turned left, I found myself at a red light, which meant I had to say something.

Mom tapped her knees impatiently. "Well, what do you think?"

I hesitated, not sure what to say. I had said no before because I didn't want her micromanaging me, but it might be worth it if I could put my savings toward the house. That would definitely improve our chances. Still... "I need you to spell out exactly what you're expecting from this exchange."

She tipped her head from side to side with a slight smile on her face. "Well, now that you mention it, I would like to have more of a say in the decision-making so I can make sure it's a stellar event." She glanced at me and winced slightly. "Not to imply that you don't have great taste. You absolutely do, but I've been looking at wedding stuff ever since you and Matt started dating, so I have a better sense of what's out there."

I crinkled my forehead. "What if Matt and I had never made it to engagement?"

"I had a feeling you would. Let's just say my mother's intuition kicked into high gear."

“So the only condition is that you would like to have more of a voice in the planning?”

She paused for a long moment as if considering the question. “Well, now that you bring it up, I think it would be great if you moved back home until the wedding.” She put up a hand. “Before you protest, there are some good reasons for this. For one, it would make things much easier since I won’t have to call you continually with questions. It’ll be more convenient for both of us if we’re living in the same place. Plus, it’ll be nice to have that time together before you get married.”

My heart softened a little. I could tell she truly missed me and wanted to bond before I moved on with a husband. Still, I would be giving up much of my independence. “I don’t know. It’s a lot to consider.”

“What’s there to think about? I’m offering you free money.” She laughed. “Take the help. Seems like an easy choice to me.”

“But that would mean I would have to hand over all the decision-making to you. What if I don’t like something you choose?”

“I would certainly take your feelings into consideration, as I don’t want my daughter to be unhappy on her wedding day. I’ll assume control, but it’ll be a joint effort. You’ll see.”

I lifted up a quick prayer, still uncertain. *Lord, help me to know what to do. I need your wisdom right now.*

I sensed an inner compulsion to be careful. If I handed over the reins to Mom, would it lead to inevitable resentment? What if it strained our relationship? On the other hand, Matt had indicated that his parents preferred a larger wedding, so going along with this would make them happy as well. The last thing I needed was to upset my soon-to-be in-laws. Matt was willing to stand up to them if there was an issue, but based on what I knew of them, they wouldn’t be problematic. They were nice, kind people who wanted the best for their son. Not that Mom didn’t want the best for me. She did, but there was a pride element attached to this. She longed to impress her

friends, especially Marilyn, the one who had a daughter who'd gotten married recently.

I thought about the wedding dresses Mom had pointed out to me the other day and how ugly they were. We were decidedly not on the same page when it came to style preferences. What if I couldn't stand to look at everything she picked? A sense of uneasiness filled me, and my hands grew clammy.

"Well?" she asked. "What's your answer?"

I tapped the steering wheel as if doing so would help me think of a response. "I need more time to think about it, and I should probably discuss it with Matt as well."

Mom shrugged, seeming slightly disappointed. "Go ahead and mull it over, but don't take too long. We need to make a decision soon."

* * *

"Here it is," Mom said as we approached the store. A car pulled away from the curb, and I quickly took its spot, thankful we didn't have to continue looking for a place to park.

We slid out of the vehicle, and I locked it.

"Oh, this is exactly as I pictured it," Mom squealed.

As we walked up to La Mariée Classique, my stomach twisted in anticipation. I would most likely not find my gown here, but I hoped I didn't feel pressured.

The exterior of the bridal shop exuded luxury and sophistication with its grayish-white paint and high-end boutique vibe. A level frame that matched the clear glass door separated four upper windows. Below the frame, larger display windows featured two stunning wedding dresses, one on either side of the door. The shop name was etched in stylish black letters above the entrance.

We ventured in, and I was immediately hit with the soft scent of perfume. The inside oozed with pretension from the ornate crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling to the plush black velvet chairs, set aside for customers to sit in. They arranged the gowns by designer and displayed them behind glass cases. The way they did it reminded me of priceless artifacts in a museum rather than a shop for wedding gowns. Two saleswomen dressed in black suits were assisting other brides, speaking in enthusiastic tones.

A woman wearing a tight black dress greeted us with a thin smile. “Good morning. My name is Daphne. How can I help you? She had pulled her auburn hair into a snug twist in the back, and her makeup was in natural tones, except for her bold red lipstick.

Even Mom seemed a little intimidated. “We’re here for our appointment at four-thirty.”

The woman nodded and went to a small stand. Opening a big black book, she said, “Sinclair, party of two?”

“Yes, that’s us,” Mom said.

The woman’s sharp gaze quickly assessed us. “And which one of you is the bride?”

“Oh, I already love you guys,” Mom said, gushing. “My daughter, Rachel, is the one getting married.”

The woman fixed her eyes on me, and I inwardly flinched. She didn’t exactly give me warm and fuzzy vibes. She touched the sparkling diamond earring on her left ear, showing off a French manicure. “Do you have a specific style in mind, Rachel? Or perhaps a designer you prefer?”

“I’m mainly searching for something with a simple, classic look. Nothing with too many embellishments.”

“Oh, but we want some embellishments,” Mom said hurriedly. She glanced at me. “You don’t want to look too plain on your wedding day.”

Daphne gave me the smallest of smiles. “What type of silhouette are you looking for?”

I scratched the side of my face and shifted, glancing around the store as if I could find the answer somewhere within the confines of the space. After a few seconds passed, I shrugged. “To be honest, I’m not sure what you mean by silhouette.”

“Yes, you do,” Mom said, laughing under her breath as if embarrassed by my ignorance. “Don’t you recall when I went over that with you? We were looking at different styles.”

“Sorry, I don’t remember.” Was I supposed to feel like an idiot for not knowing what they were talking about?

“No problem,” Daphne said in a smooth tone. “We are prepared.” She handed me a card that detailed every silhouette they had with a picture next to each one. I glanced down the list, seeing A-line, ballgown, mermaid, sheath, empire, trumpet, tea-length, and mini.

After taking a few moments to look at each style, I cleared my throat. “I prefer the A-line.”

Mom seemed agitated by my choice as she shifted and grasped the collar of her blouse. “Oh, honey, that’s the most uninteresting of the lot. Why not try a mermaid silhouette? Or even a nice sheath that hugs your curves?”

The woman let out a deep chuckle. “Looks like mother and daughter have two different visions, but no worries. We’ll find something that you both love. I’ll locate samples of all three.”

Mom rubbed her hands together and smiled. “I knew this was the right place to come to.”

I, on the other hand, was not so sure about that, but I was here to make Mom happy.

Daphne showed us around, pointing out different gowns we might like. I chose a couple, and Mom did as well. Daphne added a few of her own selections for good measure.

We headed to the dressing room and Mom held up one of her choices first. “See, I was listening. It has fewer embellishments.”

Still, it was too extravagant, and it included white gloves that went up to the elbows. It reeked of country club vibes, and I was not into it at all. Her second choice was a fitted gown with sheer sleeves and a cathedral train. The whole thing was lace and sequins, and I hated it, but I tried it on first to satisfy her and get it out of the way.

Once on, I stared into the mirror and shook my head. “No, I don’t like it.”

“Why don’t you come out of the dressing room and stand in front of the larger mirror in the lobby,” Mom said. “You can get a better sense of it out there.”

“No. I’ve seen enough.”

Mom tsked. “Fine. Try on the other one.” And By “other one,” she meant the second dress she had chosen, even though there were several others.

I quickly tried it on and had to admit it was a beautiful dress. It was a fitted sheath with a white cape that had an embroidered floral design, and it was quite lovely. It reminded me of something Audrey Hepburn would have worn. The gloves made the gown look even more stylish. I still believed it had country club vibes, but it was elegant.

Mom looked at me with hopeful eyes. “What do you think of this one? It looks gorgeous on you.”

“I do like it, but I don’t picture myself in this dress on my wedding day.”

Mom pursed her lips as if I were being difficult. “Use your imagination.”

“Let’s look at the others.”

The next was a prissy mermaid gown that was so fitted around my curves that it seemed almost indecent. The sweetheart neckline dipped low, exposing more cleavage than I was comfortable with, and the gown itself was very lacy, except for the stiff tulle that protruded out from the knees in a dramatic fashion.

Mom clapped her hands and brought them up to her mouth in a reverential manner. “It looks fabulous on you, and it shows off your figure to perfection.”

“It’s a little tight, though.”

“It’s fitted, but it’s supposed to be that way.”

“How would I even move around at the reception?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Very, very carefully.” She continued to examine the garment, her eyes widening in disbelief as though she couldn’t fathom a more perfect dress.

I had already ruled this one out, but I was allowing her to have her moment. It did flatter my figure, but it was more of a sexy wedding gown, and that wasn’t the look I was going for. Besides, walking down the aisle would be a nightmare, and I would have to hop around at my reception. No way.

“If you don’t get this one, I will,” she said.

I snickered. “First you have to find yourself a groom.”

The smile slipped off her face and her eyes flickered with pain. She picked an imaginary piece of lint off her blouse and stared at the floor. “At my age, that might be difficult.” She was in her fifties, but she looked younger.

My heart dropped, and I wanted to take back that statement, but it was too late. I thought I’d been reasonably playful, but I could see my comment had hurt her feelings. I placed a hand on her arm and tried to smile, but it probably came off more like a grimace. “You’re a beautiful woman, and there are plenty of men who would count themselves lucky to have you.”

“Do you think?”

“Absolutely. And all your collagen supplements have paid off. You don’t look your age at all.”

She brightened considerably at that. “I’ve thought of trying online dating since it’s all the rage among the younger generations, but are men my age on there?”

“Yes, and I think you should consider it.”

She patted her hair and tilted her head to the side. “I just might if Tom doesn’t ask me out.”

“Who is Tom?”

“He’s in my strength and balance class at the gym. He’s very handsome, but I don’t think he wants a relationship.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

She raised her shoulders in uncertainty. “He seems content to remain friends.”

“Well, there are other fish in the sea.”

“Maybe so.”

I tried on the two gowns I had picked out, and they were much better than the others. The first was an all-white A-line tulle dress with layers. It had a V-neck and no embellishments, which was why I liked it. Mom vetoed that one pretty quickly, stating it was too plain and “needed something.” I tried on the second, which had a scoop neckline and sheer tulle straps. The right strap featured a tie at the shoulder, and the fitted bodice wasn’t too tight. The skirt had a tulle overlay with small embroidered flowers, and it was one of the cutest wedding dresses I had ever seen. But it was tea-length, and for that reason alone, Mom said no.

“It’s a sweet dress, but it’s more appropriate for an elopement,” she said.

I tried on the other gowns that Daphne had set aside for me, but I wasn’t excited about any of them. Eventually, Mom stepped out to use the restroom and a lady in the changing room next to mine peeked out. She was an older woman who was there with her daughter. “You need to learn to stand up to her if you want to make it through this unscathed. Trust me, I had an overbearing mother when I was your age, so I know.”

I smiled uneasily. “Don’t worry, I’ve been dealing with her my entire life and I understand how to manage her. It’s better to just go along and try to steer her in a different direction.”

She didn't look convinced. "Take it from me. Defending your boundaries will save you a lot of heartache in the long run." She gave me a knowing nod.

I smiled tensely and remained silent. Everyone had varied experiences with family. This woman had overheard one interaction between Mom and me, and it wasn't enough to make broad judgments. My mother certainly had the potential to steamroll over me, and we had a tug-of-war going on at times, but she usually knew when to stop. And I was counting on that.

Chapter Six

I sat at a small table by the restaurant window, looking out toward the parking lot. Claspings the charm on my necklace, I moved it back and forth nervously. It was a Friday evening, and Matt was running late for our date. I was feeling restless, with a million different things flashing through my mind. I'd waited to talk to him in person about Mom's proposition, and it would be interesting to see what he thought. In truth, I still wasn't sure where I stood on the issue.

There were pros and cons on either side, which made it that much harder to come to a decision. I glanced out the window again just as he was parking in front of the restaurant. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. He slid out of his vehicle and proceeded toward the entrance. He seemed as dashing as ever in his navy-blue button-up shirt and blue jeans. Even with a busy schedule, he'd endeavored to fit in an exercise routine. Being a doctor, he understood how important it was for his health, and his efforts had paid off. His shoulders had broadened and the muscles in his arms were more defined. He looked amazing, and I still had trouble believing at times that he was about to become my husband.

As soon as he walked in the door, I stood and headed over to him. We hugged, and I remained in his embrace for several moments before pulling away.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Not bad, but much better now that I'm here with you. Would you be open to stopping by my parents for some pecan pie after we eat?"

“Absolutely. That sounds great.”

He took my hand and led me to the front, where we looked at the menu. We decided to meet at a soup and salad place, and the aroma of chicken broth and garlic permeated throughout the room. We ordered two bowls of mushroom barley soup and some freshly baked rolls, along with two iced teas.

After taking our seats, we caught up with each other about work. I planned on bringing up Mom’s proposal, but for now, I just wanted to enjoy this peaceful moment with him without any stress.

About ten minutes after that, one of the restaurant employees brought out two steaming bowls of soup and set them down in front of us. He left and returned with the bread and iced teas a few seconds later. I took a spoonful of the soup, savoring the rich flavor of the mushrooms and barley. It was the perfect dish for a cool evening.

“I always forget how good this is,” Matt said.

“I love this place. We should come here more often.” Mom’s proposition was on the tip of my tongue, but I was procrastinating because I wasn’t sure how he would take it. Would he think my mother was trying to manipulate us? Or would he assume it was a nice gesture? I truly believed Mom had good intentions, although I couldn’t say her motives were one hundred percent pure, given her desire to live vicariously through me and impress her friends.

I glanced up at Matt, pressing my lips together momentarily. “So, there’s something I need to talk to you about.”

“Yeah?” He took a roll and split it in half, then buttered it before taking a bite.

“I was telling Mom about the house and how we were thinking of using most of my savings toward a down payment if finances work out.”

He nodded and took a sip of his iced tea. “And what did she have to say about that?”

I winced. “It went over about as well as I thought it would. You know how much she wants us to have a large affair, and she was pretty disappointed when I mentioned having a small, intimate wedding instead.”

He considered that. “I also told my parents what we’d been talking about, and they seemed a little sad. But they said they would support whatever we decide.”

Sighing, I pushed away my bowl of soup and leaned back in my chair. “I hate disappointing your mom and dad. I know this is our wedding, and it’s up to us what we do, but our families have looked forward to this for years and I don’t want to let them down.”

“They’ll get over it. To be honest, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about that house since we saw it the other day. I think we would regret not making an offer, given that we’re both on the same page. After we meet with the financial planner tomorrow, we’ll have a better sense of where we stand. If it goes well, we’ll move on to the next stage.”

“I’m feeling a little antsy, like if we don’t move quickly, we might lose it.”

He chuckled. “Me too, but we have to take it one step at a time.”

“So, anyway, back to what I wanted to tell you...” I took a breath and slowly released it. “Mom offered us a deal when I was telling her about the house. She said she would fund the wedding so we could use all of my savings to purchase a property.”

He frowned slightly. “But I thought you didn’t want her to pay because that would mean she has more control.”

“That’s still a concern, but I’m wondering if it would benefit us to reconsider.”

“Do you believe that’s wise?”

“I don’t know. She specified that she wants to have more of a say over the decision-making, but that wasn’t a surprise.”

Matt nodded and took another sip of iced tea. “Right.”

“But she also said she would consider my feelings. Apparently, she’s been saving up for my wedding since I was thirteen.”

Without warning, the iced tea sprayed out of Matt’s mouth, missing me by an inch. He threw his head back and roared with laughter. “That’s mind-boggling. As far back as when you were thirteen?”

I nodded sheepishly. “It shows how badly she wants this.”

“I will concede that there are positives to going along with her plan,” he said, wiping up the tea with a napkin.

“The biggest positive is having that money go toward the house. One of the negatives is feeling like it’s no longer our wedding but Mom’s.” I sighed. “There’s one more thing. If I take this deal, she said I have to move back home to make the planning more convenient.”

He let out a disbelieving laugh. “Are you up for that?”

“It might not be so bad. I got the sense that she genuinely wants to bond with me before we get married, and I think it could be nice to have that time with her. But there’s a lot to consider.”

“If you want to go for it, I’m okay with that.”

“But what if it’s a mistake to give her that much power?”

He took my hand and met my gaze. “We don’t have to accept her offer if you’re concerned about her taking over. We can still save for the house and have the wedding we desire. Tomorrow, we’ll have a better idea where we stand once we meet with the financial planner.” He leaned in and kissed me softly on the lips. “I love you, Rachel. Don’t let any of this worry you. We’ll figure it out.”

“I love you too. And no matter what happens, I want you to know how thankful I am that I met you.”

He squeezed my hand. “I’m thankful for you as well. It will all work out.”

Once we finished eating, we drove separately to his parents’ house, which was only ten minutes away. They lived

in what Matt referred to as a “neighborhood of track homes.” Every house on the street had a beige stucco exterior, a white garage door, a perfectly manicured lawn, and a red tile roof. Matt loved where he grew up, but he preferred to live somewhere less cookie-cutter. Once we parked, we walked up to the entranceway and knocked.

The door flew open and his mom, Jackie, immediately grinned and pulled me into a hug. “Rachel, it’s so good to see you. When Matt told me you might swing by this evening, I was thrilled. Come on in.” His mom had brown hair that came down just below her ears and a petite frame. Her blue eyes were large and expressive.

“It’s good to see you too.”

We followed her into the house, and Matt’s father, Dave, ambled over and gave us each a hug. He was six feet tall, the same as Matt, and he had salt and pepper hair. In many ways, Matt was his replica because they had the same firm jaw and facial structure.

We talked for a long time about my job as an editor and Matt’s schedule at the hospital. Eventually, we found ourselves sitting around the kitchen island on barstools, eating his mother’s pecan pie. The wedding came up, and before I could think better of it, I shared Mom’s proposal.

“We’re not sure if we’re going to do it,” Matt said.

“Oh, that’s a lovely offer,” Jackie said. “If I were in your shoes, I would take it.”

His dad rose with his empty plate and put it in the sink. “I agree. Sounds like a blessing to me.”

They had both met my mother already. We’d had family get-togethers throughout the years, so they knew each other. Thankfully, they all got along and liked each other for the most part. I wouldn’t say they were best buddies, as Mom had a different style and personality than Matt’s parents. If it hadn’t been for Matt and me coming together, they probably wouldn’t hang out, but there had never been any conflicts.

“Mom will push for a bigger wedding,” I said.

Jackie nodded. “It would be such a shame to have to cut people from the guest list. I have to agree with her on that.”

“How many do you estimate inviting?” Dave asked.

Matt cleared his throat. “If we go with the bigger wedding, I’d guess at least two hundred.”

Jackie smiled with enthusiasm. “That would be perfect.”

We stayed for another hour and Matt eventually yawned and told his parents it was time for us to leave. He had to get up early the next day, as did I. He walked me to my car and we lingered there for a moment.

He drew me into an embrace. “Don’t let anyone pressure you into a big wedding if it’s not what you envision.”

I let out a sigh. “It seems like it would make everyone else happy, so I can deal with it.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded hesitantly. “Yeah.”

“As far as the proposal, I’m leaving it up to you, but if you want my opinion, I think we should do it.”

“Really?”

He kissed me on the forehead and smoothed my hair behind my ears. “Yes, and I believe it will be worth it in the long-run. Whatever problems we encounter with your mom, I’m sure we can work through them. She’s high-strung, but she’s always been fairly reasonable.”

I scoffed. “She’s relaxed considerably, but she’s a micromanager. In any case, I’ve been ruminating a lot about it, and I agree with you. It’s a great offer, considering the house, and we would be fools not to accept.”

He chuckled. “Hopefully, those won’t be famous last words.”

I snickered and pushed against his arm. “Don’t even go there.”

Chapter Seven

The financial planner canceled our appointment because he was sick, which meant we had to postpone for another week. I couldn't deny it made me anxious, but I had to entrust it to God. Meanwhile, I was almost sure someone somewhere was submitting a bid on our dream home, and we were going to miss out. But it was out of our control. Matt refused to make an offer until all our ducks were in a row, and I respected that. It was the wise way to handle this, but a part of me wanted to throw caution to the wind and figure the rest out later. The financial guy had delayed us, but I decided to proceed with the plan as if we were indeed buying the house.

On Saturday, Matt helped me move my belongings to Mom's place. We even carried my desk up the stairs to my bedroom, which had been quite a feat, but we accomplished it somehow. It barely fit because Mom had kept my old bedroom exactly as it was when I was a teenager.

The first day living with Mom felt like I had taken a step back in time. It wasn't as if I didn't visit often, but it was different knowing I would be staying here. Sentimentality took over when I plopped down on the couch in our living room and saw the patchwork quilt draped over the old wooden rocking chair and the stained-glass Tiffany lamp on a small corner table. The brown bookshelf mom got at an estate sale when I was a kid stood tall and proud. It held many of the books I'd read as a child and teenager. This home held memories, good and bad, and I had mixed emotions.

It thrilled Mom that I moved back in with her. She gushed about how wonderful it was, acting as if it was my idea to move in with her instead of the condition she'd given as part of our deal. I was a little annoyed by that, but it also made me realize how lonely she was.

The most difficult aspect was feeling like I had regressed. It was as if time had frozen. All the posters I'd kept as a teen were scattered over the walls. The same green curtains floated over the windows, and the white comforter I'd had back in high school still covered the bed. It was no longer white, though. The shade was decidedly cream-colored now. I was simultaneously excited and nervous about this new chapter of my life, and I told myself I could put up with a lot if it meant getting the house on Jasper Street.

When Monday morning rolled around, I informed Mom that I would be in my room working remotely, and I asked her not to disturb me unless it was an emergency. I explained that I would stop for lunch at twelve-thirty, but emphasized that it would be a quick break because I had a deadline to complete. The publishers wanted to move quickly on the book I was editing, so I needed to focus without distractions. I was in the thick of it when she knocked on the door.

I stopped what I was doing and paused. "Yes?"

She walked in hesitantly as if afraid to disturb me. "Hey, sweetie, I'm thinking of scheduling another appointment at a different bridal gown shop. The lady asked if you have any silhouette preferences so they can prepare ahead of time. Have you given that more thought?"

I quickly glanced at her over my shoulder. "Uh, yeah. I told you before that I like A-line."

She frowned as if I'd given her the wrong answer. "I don't think you've tried on enough dresses to know what you want."

"You just asked for my opinion, and I shared it."

She scrunched up her face. "I'll tell her you're undecided." She left in a flurry before I could argue further, but I didn't have time to run after her.

Thirty minutes after that, she rapped on the door and came in, not waiting for me to welcome her in. “I decided not to schedule with that bridal shop because I didn’t like that woman’s attitude. By the way, when you get a moment, would you mind taking a breather so I can show you some venues I’ve been looking at?”

“Uh... It’ll have to wait until later this evening because I have a deadline.” I had already told her this, but it seemed a reminder was in store.

“It will only take a few minutes,” she whined. “I promise it won’t delay you more than that.”

If it weren’t for my work ethic, I might’ve given in, but one interruption would lead to a second and third. “Can’t, sorry. I’m pressed for time and my supervisor is pushing for this to get done.”

She huffed and threw her hands up. “Fine, we’ll look at it this evening.”

I thought that would be the end of it, but ten minutes later, she barged in without knocking. “Hey, did you move my wedding planner binder by chance? I can’t seem to find it anywhere.” Before I could answer, she started rifling through one of the drawers at my desk.

Looking up from my computer, I gritted my teeth, trying not to lose my temper. “No, I didn’t touch it, but even if I had, I can’t help you right now.” I had tried to keep the frustration out of my voice, but it must have been evident because she frowned.

“Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed.”

“I’m just annoyed because I told you not to disturb me unless it was an emergency, and you’ve interrupted three times.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “This is an emergency. I wrote down important information about different venues, and if it’s lost, I’ll have to start from scratch.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. “I’ll help you look for it when I take my lunch break.”

She smiled, appearing mollified. “Thank you. I promise I won’t bother you again...today.” It was as if she had to tack on that last part because she knew she would be bothering me in the future. She started to leave but lingered at the doorway. “I’m proud of you for being such a hard worker, but if you don’t look after yourself and take more breaks, you’ll burn out.”

Work wasn’t going to burn me out, but she might if she didn’t stop the constant interruptions. I was so exasperated that it was difficult to concentrate on the task at hand. Eventually, I had to forgo my lunch break and work two additional hours. Thankfully, I met my deadline, but it hadn’t been easy.

When I came downstairs, Mom immediately jumped at the chance to talk to me. She chattered on about her friend, Virginia’s daughter, who was having trouble in the dating world, and how happy she was that I found someone like Matt. I nodded at the appropriate times, but all I wanted to do was make a quick sandwich, gobble it down, and then soak in a hot tub of water.

After I ate, we discussed the wedding. We had already agreed that I would get married at the church I attended, but Mom was dead set on the reception taking place in a ballroom of a nice hotel. I preferred something less formal, such as using space the church often used for wedding receptions.

Mom disagreed. “Oh, Rachel, I’ve seen those rooms the church uses for parties, and they aren’t very nice. It’s like trying to put a pretty dress on a hog.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not that bad.”

“It certainly is.”

At that point, I was too tired to argue further, so I shrugged. “Fine. Whatever. We can have the reception somewhere else.”

While I’d been working, Mom found the wedding binder. Apparently, she’d left it in the car and had forgotten all about

it. She pulled it out and went over some of the venue options. We decided on a few, and she told me she would make some calls and set up appointments to visit.

I felt guilty that she was doing most of the legwork, though I would have willingly done it during my free time. Still, I didn't want to discount how difficult it was or come across as ungrateful. "Thanks, Mom. I appreciate the effort you're putting into this."

"Of course. I've been waiting for this your whole life. It's not work for me."

We spent the next hour and a half looking at Pinterest, and that took us down several rabbit holes. After a while, it felt like my brain was shutting off and I desperately needed to escape from anything wedding related. I managed to slip away to take a nice long bath, and my friend, Sarah, called me once I was soaking in the hot water. I didn't get to chat with her often since she was so busy with school, so I accepted the call. She was just leaving a class and on her way to another, but she wanted to tell me about a guy she was seeing. We talked about that, and then I updated her on everything I'd been dealing with.

"I can't believe you're back home," she said. "Are you sure that's a wise decision?"

I let out a laugh. "Wise or not, I'm doing it, and I've got to live with it for now."

"Well, I'm certain it'll be fine," she said, not sounding convinced.

"I keep telling myself it's temporary."

"Good plan."

After we ended the call, I'd only had a few moments to relax when Mom knocked. "Hey, Rach. I need your opinion on something. Can you unlock the door so I can come in?"

I took a deep breath and tried to ignore her. Maybe if I just stayed silent, she would catch the hint and walk away. To her credit, she was an extrovert and could never get enough socializing with people. I, on the other hand, was an introvert,

and I desperately needed space to recharge. It had been great talking to Sarah, but I needed some alone time. Back when I was a teenager, this had been an ongoing issue with us, but she had backed off when she realized it was causing tension.

“Rachel, did you hear me?” She knocked some more.

I sighed and sat up slightly. “Mom, is this truly important? I worked hard today and I just need a few moments of solitude. I’m sure whatever it is, it can wait.”

“I only wanted to ask if you’d be willing to watch ‘Say Yes to the Dress’ with me a little later?”

“How much later?” She and I had watched that show more times than I could count, but it wouldn’t hurt to see it again if it would make her happy.

“Actually, it’s on now,” she said. “You’ve already been in there for ten minutes at least. Dry off before you get all pruney.”

No matter what I said, I couldn’t win. If I agreed, my alone time was over. And if I refused, she would be back in a few minutes to ask about something else. “All right, I’ll be out in a second.”

“Thank you, sweetie. You’re a doll.”

Chapter Eight

As I sipped my coffee the following Saturday morning, I gazed out the window, admiring the view. I'd tried to sleep in, but my body was used to waking up at seven. Eventually, I got out of bed and was now sitting at the kitchen table. Mom was still in her room, so I had a few minutes to myself. Outside, soft shades of pink and orange retreated as the sun began to rise over the horizon. In the distance, low-hanging clouds covered the mountain peaks, creating a wintery fog.

I felt encouraged. Yesterday, Matt and I met with his financial planner to discuss our finances. We tallied up our individual savings and our monthly incomes. We discussed the asking price for the house, and he crunched the numbers for us and said we could make an offer. Even so, we would have to sacrifice in other ways and learn to budget our funds carefully. Neither of us was used to penny-pinching, so that would be a big change if we decided to make the purchase. We talked about it for a couple of hours afterward, and we both decided it was still worth it. We figured we could give up an extravagant honeymoon if it meant we got to come back to that amazing home.

The next step was to meet with the mortgage lender, and I expected things would move quickly after that. I had spent the last fifteen minutes praying that God would open doors for us and grant us the house we so desperately wanted. It was still up in the air since someone else could make a better offer. People sometimes offered cash so they would have the upper hand, but that wasn't something we could do.

I shook my head to clear it, knowing I needed to turn my thoughts to other things. I didn't want to obsess about this to the point that I couldn't think of anything else. Matt had to work today, so we agreed to see each other tomorrow at church. I was disappointed we couldn't hang out, but I was looking forward to a day of rest. My job as an editor had been extra difficult this past week, and Mom had talked incessantly about wedding planning until it was practically coming out of my ears. I wanted to catch up on *Sanditon*, a TV series I'd started watching on PBS, and I intended to do it in my pajamas.

But before I did that, I needed to spend time in the Word. I had my Bible open to Psalm 46, and I read the first two verses.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea.

I reflected on the recent changes in my life that were mostly positive, but those changes had also brought a measure of stress. No matter how difficult my circumstances might be, God would always be there to protect me. I needed that reminder that God was a very present help in trouble. Even if life events escalated to the level of the earth giving way or the mountains moving into the sea, I knew I could trust the Lord to be there for me.

No matter how challenging circumstances became with Mom, the Lord was there, and He would work all things together for good. My mother and I had two distinct personalities. We'd had our fair share of problems in the past, but I was confident we would make it through this next phase in life.

I quickly read the rest of the chapter and stopped at the first line of verse ten. *Be still and know that I am God.* The Lord wanted me to quiet my mind and all the distractions so I could focus on Him alone. In the midst of my chaotic schedule, it was easy to forget that I needed to stop and be still before the Lord. I had neglected my Bible reading lately, but I was determined to improve in that area, especially because I needed the wisdom it provided.

My quiet time came to an end when Mom walked down the stairs, said a quick hello, and headed out to get the mail. I put my Bible away, deciding to read more later. She returned fifteen minutes after that, and she was all in a tizzy.

“You won’t believe what happened. When I was out getting the mail I saw the new neighbor, Eileen. She was freaking out because she hired someone to clean the house today, so she could move her furniture in tomorrow, but the lady bailed on her. She had already set up the schedule with the moving company, and there will be a penalty for canceling this close to the date.”

I took another sip of coffee. “Wow. That’s horrible.”

Mom nodded. “It truly is. I felt so bad for her that I promised we’d assist with whatever she needs. Between the two of us, we should be able to clean the house in a few hours.” She laughed. “She offered to pay us, but I told her she would do no such thing because that’s what neighbors are for. We help each other out.”

Conflicting emotions washed through me. I had a sense of admiration because Mom was the first person to offer a lending hand to someone in a crisis. She had a big heart and I knew she had good intentions. But frustration lingered as well because she’d volunteered my services before asking.

“You should have spoken to me first.” I tried to choose my words carefully, but they tumbled out before I could stop them. “To be honest, I’m not in the mood to clean another person’s house today, and I don’t even know Eileen that well.” I fought back guilt as I said it. Moments ago, I’d felt so refreshed after reading God’s word, and now I was bucking against the notion of helping someone in need. I wanted to help in theory, but I also needed the rest. Helping Eileen was the honorable thing to do, but what about taking care of my own needs?

This was so unfair. It reminded me of all the times Mom had volunteered my services when I was in high school. If a parent needed a babysitter for their kids, she’d offer my services. Once, a different neighbor asked for assistance with

her garage sale, so Mom enlisted me. It was horrible. The lady barely did anything and made me do all the work. I told Mom never again after that, and she listened for a while, but here we were, dealing with the same thing.

“I understand, Rachel, but she needs us. She’s a new neighbor, and we want to make her feel welcome. We’ve all been in that place where we’re overwhelmed and need someone else to step in. If we work together, we can finish quickly and then we’ll have the rest of the day to ourselves. It’s a great opportunity to reach out. Sound good?”

I sighed, knowing she was right, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t still struggling between wanting to help and also desiring a day off. “I was looking forward to some downtime. Can’t we do it tomorrow or later in the week?”

Mom shook her head. “I told you the moving guys are bringing her furniture tomorrow, so the cleaning has to take place today.”

“Oh, right. I’d forgotten you said that.”

She entered the kitchen to fetch a glass of water, and she glanced at me as she passed by. “Hurry up. She’s waiting for us. You should go upstairs and get dressed.”

I resigned myself to the fact that this was happening and I would have to give up my other plans, at least for the morning. I quickly jogged to my room and changed into a pair of sweats and an old T-shirt. When I returned, I heard Mom speaking to someone. Cautiously, I walked into the room, and she had her back to me with her phone perched between her ear and shoulder.

“Oh, no. Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?”

She was quiet for several moments, and then she cleared her throat. “You should go to urgent care with a temperature that high.” There was silence for another minute before she spoke again. “Of course, I don’t mind. Yes, yes, I’ll be there in ten minutes. See you soon.” When she turned and saw me standing there, she winced.

“What’s going on?”

She brushed a few strands of hair from her face. “My friend Dolores is sick with the flu and her husband is away on a weekend trip with their son. She’s too ill to drive, so she asked if I would take her.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

“Me too.” She pressed her lips together. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to go to Eileen’s on your own.”

I jerked my head back. She’d promised this would be a joint effort, and now she was changing the plan. I would have to clean the entire house by myself, and this was not how I’d seen the day going.

She must have sensed my frustration because she waved a hand as she grabbed her purse. “I didn’t know this would happen, Rachel. I’ll drop her off and come back as soon as I can.”

But somehow I knew she wouldn’t return soon. It was a gut feeling that I had experienced before.

Chapter Nine

After Mom left to help her friend, I sat down at my computer, found my favorite search engine, and typed in a question. “What cleaning has to be done after a homeowner moves out?” Several articles popped up, and I clicked on the first one. I nearly choked when I saw the list of chores.

Dust all surfaces, including the walls, ceiling, and baseboards. Wipe down all windows, windowsills, cabinets, and kitchen countertops. Sweep and mop the floors. Vacuum all carpets and rugs. Clean the oven, stove top, refrigerator, dishwasher, and microwave. Scrub and sanitize the toilets, bathtub, and showers. Wipe down light fixtures and fans. Remove all trash and debris.

Basically, clean the entire house.

I couldn't imagine completing all of that within a few hours, but hopefully the house wouldn't require deep cleaning. I finally stopped stalling and headed over. As I was on my way, I lifted up a prayer asking for patience. My shoulders slumped in anticipation of the hard work ahead of me that I hadn't agreed to. Well, technically I had because I was doing this, but I wasn't happy about it. I knew I had a bad attitude and needed to change my mindset before I got there.

Thankfully, Eileen's house wasn't huge. It was a small but cozy one-story home painted in a light shade of sage green, with crisp white trim around the windows and door. A garden lay beneath one of the large windows with several bunches of white hydrangeas in full bloom, as well as bushes of varying sizes filling the space.

The previous neighbors, Alex and Cassie, were a married couple in their thirties, and they'd made a great effort to care for the outside of the home. I'd never been inside, but Mom had when she brought over cookies to welcome them when they first moved in. It had only been a few years, and they had relocated because Alex got a job offer. They didn't have kids, so it was easy to pick up and leave.

As I approached, the door was wide open and music blared from within. I crossed the porch to the doorway and peered in. Eileen was dancing energetically with a mop handle to the song "Sugar Pie Honeybunch." She didn't see me, and I hesitated, unsure whether to speak up or wait until she was done. Lost in her own world, she was clearly having a private moment of fun. It was quite comical actually, and I had to cover my mouth to keep from laughing, not at her, per se. It was just cute how she danced unhindered, something I didn't expect of someone her age.

She continued to twirl around the room with the mop handle as if it were her favorite dance partner, and I couldn't help but smile. She seemed so carefree and unencumbered, and it was infectious. My grumpy mood started to shift and my tense shoulder muscles relaxed as I swayed to the music. She certainly knew how to make the best of a difficult situation. I didn't want to ruin the moment, but I had to say something.

Hesitantly, I knocked on the open door, but she didn't hear me over the music. I raised my voice to say hello, but there was no response. As the song ended and a new one started, she continued to dance, still unaware of my presence.

I crept into the room, trying not to startle her. "Hey, Eileen."

She didn't seem to notice me, so I tried again, this time louder, but she was either completely lost in the music or she was hard of hearing.

Eventually, I gave up and ambled in further. Suddenly, Eileen turned around and let out a scream, jumping in surprise.

That was exactly what I'd been trying to prevent. "I am so sorry. I didn't want to scare you, but I couldn't get your

attention.”

She giggled, placing a hand over her heart. “You just witnessed a crazy lady dancing like a lunatic.”

“You were having a great time. If we could all be that spontaneous, life would be so much easier.” I hesitated. “Mom told me the housecleaner canceled on you at the last minute. I’m sure that was aggravating.”

“Oh, it was. I’m not ashamed to admit I had a little meltdown, but it was embarrassing that your mom happened to see it. I quickly repented and asked for God’s forgiveness.”

“Oh? You’re a Christian?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” She grinned.

“I am as well and don’t worry about Mom. She only wanted to help.”

Eileen nodded with a small smile. “I stomped my feet and let out a scream. Mind you, it wasn’t loud enough to alert the entire neighborhood, but your mom wasn’t standing far away. She stepped right in, wanting to know what had happened, and that’s when she said the two of you would pitch in. Where is she? Is she on her way?”

“She actually got a call a few minutes ago. A sick friend needed a ride to the hospital. She told me she would come over after that.”

“What a nice lady your mom is. She seems like the type that truly cares about people.”

I nodded. “She is.”

“She must appreciate having you at home. I know I would if I were in her place.”

I smiled. “That’s kind of you to say. But actually, I only recently moved back in, and it’s temporary. I’m getting married, and Mom thought it would be easier to plan the wedding if I relocated to her place.”

Her eyes lit up and she stepped closer, grabbing me and pulling me into a full hug. It took me by surprise, but I didn’t

mind. “Congratulations! That’s wonderful news. Do you have a date yet?”

“No, we still need to decide on a venue.”

“I bet you and your mom are having a blast looking at all the options.” I tried to keep a neutral expression, but I must’ve failed because she tilted her head to the side and studied me. “You don’t look too excited. Then again, not everyone enjoys planning a big party.”

I was glad someone could acknowledge that because I was starting to feel like there was something wrong with me. “I just don’t enjoy all that goes into it, but I am looking forward to the marriage part.”

“And that’s what matters the most. As long as you have the officiant and a few people to witness, you’re good to go.”

I laughed. “If you only knew. That’s all I really want. In fact, I told Mom that I wanted a simple wedding with family and a few close friends, but she wouldn’t hear of it. She wants a big, grand event. We have completely different visions.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh, dear. That must be difficult. How are the two of you handling that?”

I explained that Mom had made a proposal to pay for the wedding with the condition that she would have more of a say in the decision-making. Her eyes grew so large I had to stifle a giggle.

“And how did you respond to that?” she asked. “Did you assert your independence, or are you going along with it?”

“Please don’t judge, but I took the deal. There’s this amazing house on the market right now and my fiancé, Matt, and I are hoping to purchase it. I saved up money for the wedding, but I can use it toward the house. We haven’t made an offer yet, but we’re very close.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Well, I wish you the best and don’t worry about me judging you. I would never do that, but if you ever need a listening ear, feel free to stop by.”

“Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“And you’re such a darling for helping me out. I promise it won’t be too much work.” She glanced around the room. “Alex and Cassie did a full cleaning before they left, but the house has been sitting for a few weeks, so the dust has been collecting.”

“Was there any reason you didn’t move in right away?”

She nodded. “I ordered all new furniture, but the order was delayed and I couldn’t imagine sleeping on the floor.” She laughed. “I’ve been staying at my son and daughter-in-law’s house, and I’m sure they’re about ready to kick me out.” She must have seen the look of curiosity on my face because she waved a hand. “I’m just teasing. We get along well, but I’m very aware that they need their privacy. Now, why don’t I show you around?”

She took me on a tour to see what needed to be done. There were three bedrooms, a small living room area, and an even smaller space for a table and chairs next to the kitchen. Eileen asked if I would wipe down the baseboards and vacuum the whole house. There was carpet everywhere except the kitchen and bathrooms, but the rooms were spacious.

“I’ll mop the kitchen and bathroom floors,” she said. “I’d do the baseboards, but it’s hard for this old lady to bend down like I used to.”

“No problem. I’ve been following an exercise program lately that requires a lot of squats, so this will be an excellent test to see if it’s helping.”

We parted ways, and even though I didn’t relish cleaning those baseboards, I was thankful the house was in good shape and didn’t need a thorough cleaning. I filled up a small bucket of water and mixed in an all-purpose cleaner she’d left on the counter. I grabbed a few washcloths and got to work. The time flew by after that. Vacuuming was a breeze, but the baseboards were dirtier than they looked. When I finally finished, I joined her in the kitchen.

She gave me a grateful smile. “Thanks again for all of your help. You did an amazing job, and I would love to say thank you by having you over for dinner one day.”

My time was very limited, and her offer could have come across as an added burden, but I didn't see it that way. I really liked Eileen, and she had such an easy-going personality that I felt at ease with her. "I'd be delighted to take you up on that."

As I walked back home, I let out a contented sigh. That wasn't so bad, and because Mom didn't come, I'd had the opportunity to talk to Eileen alone. Despite our age differences, it seemed as if I'd made a new friend. I hadn't been excited about helping out initially, but the verse that said God worked all things together for good was definitely true.

Chapter Ten

After I returned from Eileen's, I was still able to take a twenty-minute nap and watch a couple of episodes of *Sanditon*. I was lying on the couch when Mom walked in the door. I sat up and glanced at her. "Hey, how did it go?"

She sighed and dropped her purse on the floor before plopping down in the rocking chair. "Dolores is okay. She was dehydrated so they gave her an IV with fluids. The doctor prescribed an antiviral medication and said she could return home. She called her husband and he and their son are returning early from their trip so they can check on her." Guilt flickered in her eyes. "I'm sorry I couldn't be of assistance with cleaning Eileen's house. I told Dolores I would drop her off and come back when she was done, but she begged me to stay with her. She was so weak that she needed someone to lean on when she walked into urgent care. What was I supposed to say? 'No, I'm not going to help you?' I couldn't do that."

Nodding, I let out a sigh, and most of the frustration from earlier faded away. "I get it. You were in a difficult position and didn't want to abandon your friend. You did what you had to do in that situation."

"Unfortunately, the timing couldn't have been worse. How long did it end up taking you?"

I cocked my head to the side. "Thankfully, there wasn't a lot to do. I was there for about two and a half hours."

Mom's brows lifted. "That's much less than what I thought. So, it wasn't that bad?"

I shrugged. “It wasn’t horrible. She’s very nice, actually, and I enjoyed getting to know her. She said she would invite me over for dinner as a thank you.”

“That’s sweet of her.”

Even though I had some lingering irritation with the way Mom had handled everything today, I didn’t share that with her because I understood a lot of it was out of her control. If I’d been in her position and a friend had called asking for my help, I would’ve been there for them as well. I didn’t like that she’d volunteered me, but I knew if I brought it up, it would end in an argument and I just wanted to relax for the rest of the day without any stress.

Later that evening, Mom and I were watching another wedding reality show when there was a knock at the door. She got up to answer it and let out a squeal when she saw who it was. “Matt! What a pleasant surprise. We didn’t think we’d see you today.”

I scrambled to my feet, smoothing down my hair. I was still wearing my sweats, and I looked like a mess. But Matt had seen me at my worst when I was sick, and this was nothing compared to that. He’d previously declared me beautiful under any circumstance, and I was a firm believer that we shouldn’t always try to look our best or there would be a few surprises after the wedding. I wasn’t the type who had to have makeup on at all times.

Mom invited him in and I met him at the entryway. “This is a nice surprise,” I said, smiling.

He chuckled and pulled me into his arms, kissing me on the forehead. “I tried to call you first, but it just went to voicemail. Figured I’d stop by to see if you were home.”

“Well, I’m glad you did. I was probably sleeping when you called. We’re watching TV—some wedding show. You want to watch it with us?”

“Actually, I can’t stay long, but I wanted to let you know that my parents are offering to pay for the cake at our wedding.”

“That’s very kind of them.”

Mom had returned to the couch, but she sat up straighter and glanced at us. “How nice.” Her brows furrowed slightly. “How would that work, exactly? Should we tell them which cake we want, and they’ll pay for it?”

Matt slid his hands into his pockets and leaned back on his heels. “Actually, they have someone they prefer to use, and she’s offering a big discount because she’s known us for so long. Her name is Isabella Giovanni, but we like to call her Izzy. Mom used to work with her, but Izzy quit and started her own business making cakes. Growing up, she made a lot of cakes for us, and she does an amazing job. They taste good too.” He grinned as if pleased with himself. “And between your family and friends and mine, the guest list could easily reach two hundred people. If we utilize her, you could save a lot of money.”

“Right,” Mom said, looking slightly uncomfortable. “Where is she located?”

“She makes them out of her home.”

“Has she done wedding cakes before?” I asked.

“Yes, she’s made quite a few. Let me pull up her online portfolio. I just need to check her website really quick.” When he found it, he handed the phone to me so I could look at the pictures. Mom walked over and joined me, leaning over my shoulder.

“These are beautiful cakes,” Mom said, “but they’re very simple, and she uses real flowers to dress them up instead of showing off her piping skills. They would work for a much simpler occasion, but we need something more...” She waved her hand in the air. “What’s the word I’m looking for? More decorative?”

I scoffed. “They’re suitable for any type of occasion.”

She didn’t look convinced. “Does she make fondant cakes?”

Matt hesitated and took his phone back so he could scan through her website again. “It doesn’t appear so, but I’m sure

she could find a solution for us.”

“She does nice work,” Mom said, “but I have something different in mind. Please tell her thank you, but we plan to go in another direction.”

Confusion washed over Matt’s face as he raked a hand through his hair. “You don’t want to give her a chance? If you have a particular vision, we could sit down with her and explain what we want. She’s very skilled, and I’m sure she could do it for us.”

I glanced at Mom, my brows furrowing. “We should at least talk to her.”

Mom shook her head. “I haven’t had a chance to share this with you, Rachel, but I’ve pretty much settled on the place I’d like to use. It’s called La Pâtisserie de Amélie, and she’s been in the business for twenty years.” She squeezed my arm. “Marilyn’s daughter Kelsey used her, and the cake was fabulous. It’s worth paying the extra money.” She glanced at Matt. “If your parents want to pitch in, that’s perfectly fine, but they don’t have to.”

The crease between Matt’s brows deepened. “Izzy will be heartbroken when she finds out we don’t want to use her. She was going to give us the cake as a wedding gift. Mom said she would only charge for supplies.”

Mom let out an exasperated breath. “I feel bad for her, but we certainly can’t make our decisions based on her feelings. I want the cake to be the very best it can be.”

Matt was usually good at hiding his emotions, but I could tell Mom’s declarations bothered him. “All right. I’ll relay the news.”

“Please let your parents know that we appreciate their offer,” Mom said. “I don’t want to upset them, but La Pâtisserie de Amélie is worth every penny. I’m sure they’ll understand once they see the difference in quality.”

Matt slumped, appearing defeated. “They thought they could save you a little money.” He glanced at his watch. “I

should get going. I need to stop by their house and explain it to them before I head back home.”

We were still standing in the entryway, so I looped my arm through his. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

Once we were outside and away from Mom’s listening ear, we lingered by Matt’s vehicle. “I’m so sorry. She can be a little pushy when she wants something.” I cleared my throat. “Unfortunately, this is what we signed up for when we agreed to her proposition.”

He raked a hand through his hair and glanced away. “My understanding was that she’d have more of a say, not that she would have all the say.”

“I know. Trust me, I’m frustrated too. Why don’t you talk to your parents and see if they’d be willing to have Izzy make a cake for the rehearsal dinner? That might be a good compromise.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. Mom will be very disappointed, though. She was hoping we would use Izzy for the wedding, and I think it made her feel better knowing they were helping out in some way.”

“I hate this, Matt, but I’m in between a rock and a hard place. What do you want me to do?”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Stand up to your mother.”

I bit down on my bottom lip. “Please don’t make this harder than it has to be. I understand it’s disappointing, but we chose to accept Mom’s offer, so we have to go along with her preferences.”

He glanced away, avoiding eye contact. “That’s not how you presented the deal. You specifically said she wanted to take what we want into consideration.”

“She has a high standard, but she’s only trying to look out for us.” I hated that I was defending her when I disagreed with her decision, but I didn’t want to cause more conflict over a stupid cake.

He shrugged. “Okay, well, I have to go. Talk to her again and see what you can do.” He didn’t kiss me goodbye before he abruptly opened his car door, slid inside, and sped away.

Chapter Eleven

After the wedding cake debacle, I didn't hear from Matt for a couple of days. I knew he was upset, but I wasn't sure how to fix the problem. Mom was dead set on using the fancy cake designer, and it would be a losing battle to try to convince her when she wasn't impressed with Izzy's style.

On Wednesday morning, Matt called, and my stomach clenched from the anticipation of talking with him. Neither of us had reached out to the other, but it was important to smooth things over.

"Hey, Matt."

"Hello, beautiful."

My heart warmed at the term of endearment. At least matters were starting on a positive note.

"I'm sorry you haven't heard from me," he said. "I needed time to pull myself together."

"It's okay. I could have made contact as well, but I didn't."

"I want you to know that even though your mom can be inflexible, I don't blame you for how she responded."

"Thank you for understanding."

He cleared his throat. "This has been the dynamic between you two for many years, but I have every hope that one day you'll stand up to her. In the meantime, I should have been more compassionate. I was a little abrupt when I left, and I regret that."

I sighed, feeling so much relief that I could have floated through the air like a helium balloon. It had only been two days since we'd spoken, but it had been agonizing knowing there was tension between us. "Your reaction was completely understandable. I would have been upset too if I'd been in your position. I'm sorry that your mom and dad tried to take part in the planning and got shut down so quickly. Is there any way we can still use Izzy for something else?"

"Actually, my parents loved the idea of having her make a cake for the rehearsal dinner, so it all worked out."

"Thank goodness for that."

At least the cake issue had been resolved and it wouldn't continue to hang over my head.

"Do you have a busy work schedule today?" he asked.

"I took the day off so Mom and I could visit some venues. I told you about it last week, but I know you've had a lot going on."

"Oh, that's right. I have it on my calendar, but I forgot that was today."

We had previously agreed that my mother and I would check out a few places, and he and I would revisit the ones I liked the best.

"Mom lined up three appointments today, and we might stop by one more if we get the chance."

"It will all come together before we know it," he said.

I nodded, even though he couldn't see me. "I'll take pictures and go over them with you later. If you want, we can return on Saturday—"

"You know what? I trust you to make the best decision, and hopefully, that will relieve some of the pressure. I don't care where we get married as long as you're there." He snickered. "You could choose a pig pen and I'd show up with boots."

I bit my lower lip and smiled, thankful that I'd chosen someone with a sense of humor. "You're the best."

“No, you’re the best.”

We both laughed at how ridiculously corny we sounded, but it was nice to be at peace with each other once again.

I cleared my throat. “I’ll do my best not to let Mom steamroll over us when it comes to important matters.” I felt horrible that I didn’t insist on using Izzy. Mom had been correct that her cakes were fairly simple, but I preferred simple, so I would have been happy to go with her. But now that we’d resolved the issue, I wouldn’t bring it up again. No need to stir up trouble we’d already put to rest. I was sure there would be more battles to fight.

Matt was quiet for several moments as he considered my statement. “I know how hard this is for you, babe, but you’ll feel better if you’re more assertive. It’s one thing to compromise, but it’s not fair to have your suggestions completely dismissed.”

“I agree.”

We talked for a little longer and then I hurried to take a shower and get ready. Mom and I grabbed a couple of bagels and hit the road. The first venue we looked at was a gorgeous outdoor vineyard with rows of purple grapevines and a stunning view of the mountains. It smelled of fresh-cut grass and apple spice candles. There was an earthy scent in the air, like a cultivated garden after a rainstorm. We had agreed on this one because I liked nature venues and Mom thought a vineyard would add a sophisticated touch.

A guy named Steve led us on a tour, showing us two popular spaces people used. One was inside a cave on the property, which seemed a little creepy to me, but he assured me it was quite elegant when decorated with lights. There wasn’t air conditioning in the cave, but he said there was a nice breeze that eliminated the need for it. I wasn’t so sure about that. The second location was on a hilltop that overlooked views of the valley below. The freeway took up a good portion of that view, so it didn’t impress me. In California, it was unlikely to rain during the summer, but the

heat could be sweltering. Neither option included a cool space, so I wasn't enthusiastic, and I could tell Mom wasn't either.

"Do you provide tables and chairs?" Mom asked.

Steve shook his head. "You have to rent all of that, but I can give you several referrals if you need it."

After we finished the tour, Steve gave us his card and told us to call him if we wanted to book something.

"What do you think?" Mom asked.

"We can keep looking."

She smiled smugly. "I agree. It wasn't what I thought it would be."

We hopped back in the car and headed to Ojai, a small town about an hour and a half from L.A. I had chosen this venue because of its scenic views and it seemed close to nature. When we got there, we stopped at an office attached to the reception room. A woman provided us with a price list and declared that we could take advantage of their amenities, which included tables, chairs, and a full kitchen with supplies. The prices were reasonable, but Mom had this look on her face like there was an unpleasant odor in the air.

"Feel free to check it out," the woman said.

She didn't plan to take us on a tour, but I preferred not having a salesperson looking over my shoulder while we made decisions.

The property was out in the middle of nowhere, so it provided privacy and quiet, which was a huge plus. The beautiful landscaping included lush green grass and plenty of vegetation. Overall, it had more of a natural look with wildflowers and tall, lush pine trees.

We strode over to the large one-room reception hall and walked inside. It had a rustic barn feel with distressed wood floors and delicate lights strung across the ceiling. A huge window looked out toward all the greenery, providing an excellent view.

“I don’t care for this,” Mom said, looking around. “I mean...if you want to be a cowgirl bride, it might work.” She burst into laughter and bent over, unable to contain herself. She stood upright. “For the centerpieces, we could decorate a cowboy hat with flowers and include a boot or two.”

I didn’t think it was that funny, but I smiled thinly. “What’s wrong with that? The theme would go nicely with this venue.”

“My point exactly. I’m sure this is not what you had in mind for your wedding.”

“I like it, but it’s a good distance from the church. That’s the biggest problem.”

Mom grew solemn, nodding her agreement. “It’s too much to ask your guests to drive this far, but I’m glad you got to see it in person so there aren’t any regrets.”

She was right. I loved the place, and I could picture getting married here, but the distance was too far. I didn’t want my guests driving two hours from the church. The wedding could be held here instead of at the church, but I’d have to give that more thought. It was a beautiful location, but I felt indecisive about it.

“I’m looking forward to seeing another venue,” I said as we headed to the car. I was thankful we were getting along and hadn’t quarreled once. It made the trip more enjoyable, and I had to admit Mom had been good company. I glanced at her. “This is fun.”

She smiled and gave me a hug, then kissed the side of my head. “It is. The best part is sharing this experience with my daughter.”

I hugged her back, picking up the scent of her white lilies body spray. I committed this moment to memory as it was a positive mother-daughter activity that I would remember for a long time.

We headed back to L.A. to view Mom’s favorite choice: The Luxury Palace Hotel. It was a grand hotel, including a fancy lobby with high ceilings, crown molding, marble floors, and a water fountain in the middle. A woman named Susan

Brower showed us the ballroom. The elaborate crystal chandeliers were the first thing that caught my attention. The sparkling lights gave the area a sophisticated atmosphere as if we'd stepped into a glamorous world of luxury and style. The vast area displayed an intricate design on its beige and brown carpet. Two large columns stood in the center, looking like Greek and Roman architecture.

All of it was stunning, but it smelled of industrial cleaning supplies. At least it was clean, but it didn't have a warm and inviting feel.

"Isn't this lovely?" Mom asked, staring at the tiled ceiling.

"Yeah, I suppose so..."

"I'm glad we saved this one for last. It's like the big finale."

"Actually, I was hoping to stop at the beach after this." I would take a nature venue over a ballroom without hesitation, but I was letting Mom get this out of her system. I didn't want to rain on her parade, so I would discretely tell her later which venue I preferred, or if we needed to keep looking.

Mom waved a hand. "Oh, sure. That's not a problem. But I doubt it's as beautiful as this."

"The beauty is in the nature. Blue waves and a sandy beach. It's hard to argue with that."

"Hmmm."

The elegance of the space appealed to her, but it didn't feel right to me. It was too formal and grandiose, and I longed for a relaxed setting that was simple yet classy. In theory, there was nothing wrong with the hotel. If I were visiting with a friend who was getting married, I wouldn't have anything negative to say. But it just wasn't me. And I couldn't picture Matt and me here on our wedding day.

Susan brought us back to her office and served tea and almond cookies. She gave us the pricing list and explained that the hotel had an amazing team that provided all the catering for special events. "If you choose this venue, you have to use the hotel's catering, but the food is like no other. Go to our

main website and check out the reviews. People rave about this place.”

“I can see why,” Mom said. “It’s every woman’s dream. Don’t you agree, Rachel?”

Not quite, but I wouldn’t voice that in front of Susan. “It is beautiful.”

Susan looked at her online calendar and turned the screen so we could see it. “Normally, brides have to reserve this venue at least a year and a half away. But we’re booked up for the next two years.”

Mom’s shoulders slumped, and the corners of her lips slanted down. “Oh, no.”

“But we received a cancelation right before you got here,” Susan said. “It’s for a Saturday, six months from today. If you want to take it, we can start the paperwork immediately. We require a down payment to secure the day. What would you like to do?”

“What about tasting the food?” I asked.

“I can set up a time for you to do that,” she said, “but if you wait, you’ll most likely miss out on booking the early spot.”

Mom’s entire demeanor shifted from disappointment to elation. “What do you think? We’d better grab it before it’s gone.”

I sucked in a breath as they both waited for me to speak up. “We have one more venue to look at before deciding.” And if I wasn’t happy with the beach setting, I wanted to check out a few others.

Mom drew back as if shocked by my answer. “You would trade this for a sandy beach with wind that will mess up your hair? This place is the obvious choice.”

“Still, I’d like to take my time deciding.”

Susan crossed her legs and swiveled in her chair. “Just so you know, I can’t hold this spot for you. If someone else calls

and asks about cancelations, I will have to give the slot to them.”

“Oh, Rachel,” Mom pleaded. “I don’t want to give up this opportunity. Think rationally here. This is by far the best we’ve seen.”

“But we’ve only been to three places.”

Susan shared a conspiratorial glance with Mom. “Indecisive brides lose out.” She handed her card to Mom, who was clearly her most loyal client. “Call me if you want to reserve a date, but keep in mind that I can’t hold that spot. Someone else could easily snatch it up.”

Mom glanced anxiously at me, then turned to her with a bright smile. “Thank you so, so much. We will definitely be in touch.”

After that, we visited the beach location, and it was only so-so. Maybe I had expected more, but the area set up for weddings looked tacky. We would be on display for everyone walking by, and I didn’t like that.

The setup reminded me of a cheap Vegas wedding with fake flowers. Okay, maybe I was exaggerating, but I was disappointed that none of the venues seemed great except the place in Ojai that was too far away.

Mom talked continuously about the hotel as we drove home. I’d done all the driving up to that point and I was starting to get a headache, so she said she would take over on the return trip.

“It was amazing, wasn’t it?” she asked for the third time.

“Yeah, it was nice, but I want to keep looking. It was so formal...”

“But formal is good, especially for a once in-a-lifetime occasion.”

I grunted and closed my eyes, hoping she would stop asking questions. I was exhausted, and that headache was getting worse by the minute. She finally got the hint because she turned the radio on and I promptly fell asleep.

Later that evening, I was lying in bed reading a book when there was a soft knock at my door.

Mom peeked in. “How’s your headache?”

“Much better. I think I just needed to eat and get some rest.”

“Good, I’m glad to hear it.” She walked in and sat on the corner of my bed. “There’s something I want to share with you.” Her eyes twinkled, and she looked like a child on Christmas day.

“What’s up?”

She pressed her lips together and waited a few moments, her hands folded in her lap. “I hope you’re not upset with me for being proactive, but I called Susan and asked if the slot for six months from now was still available, and she said it was.” She paused. “I went ahead and booked it.”

My mouth fell open, and I sat up straighter, adrenaline pumping through my veins. “Wait, what? Is this a joke?”

She shook her head. “I’m not joking. I didn’t want you to miss out on such a fabulous location.”

“But I didn’t even approve it! It’s my wedding day, and I should have a say in where it takes place. I don’t want to have my reception there. It’s pretentious.”

She drew back. “Pretentious? You didn’t say that while we were there.”

“I was trying not to be rude.”

“You kept saying how beautiful it was, and you never once said you didn’t like it.”

“I told you I wanted to keep looking.”

She hung her head. “You’ve been so indecisive lately, and someone needed to make a decision. You’re talking about buying a house with Matt and you haven’t even set a wedding date.”

“We only looked at four venues.”

“I know of brides who settled after seeing one place.”

“Well, I’m not them.”

“You kept making all these positive affirmations. I thought you’d be pleased that you no longer have to worry about the decision.”

“I can’t believe you did this.”

“I’m sorry Rachel, but I was under the impression you liked it too.”

I took a moment to calm myself by breathing in and slowly letting the air out. This wasn’t the end of the world. Surely there was a way to fix this. “Call Susan back and let her know we have to cancel. You can get a refund on the deposit and we’ll keep looking.”

“Unfortunately, that’s impossible. It’s nonrefundable.”

My mouth fell open. “What kind of place doesn’t refund the deposit within thirty days?”

“You have to understand how expensive that hotel is. They’ll lose a lot of money if someone backs out, so they have to hold their customers accountable. We’ve already made the commitment, and we have to live with it now. I’m sure it will still be a beautiful day, and you’ll learn to love it.”

She stood and walked out of the room, and I had never felt more like a teenager who didn’t have the right to make her own decisions. Surely, this had gone too far. What would Matt think?

I groaned and slid down, covering my head with my pillow. He wouldn’t mind having the reception at the hotel, but he would mind that Mom had bulldozed me into it. I couldn’t bear seeing the disappointment on his face when he found out. He knew I wanted something simple, and as soon as he saw that ballroom he’d know Mom was behind it. I’d promised him I would work on standing up to her, but since then, things had only gotten worse.

I grabbed my cell phone and typed out a quick text. *Hey, we found the venue and Mom booked it.*

Moments later, he responded. *That's great! Where?*

I sent him a couple of pictures of the ballroom. *It's at a hotel.*

His text came through seconds after that. *Is that what you want?*

I waited several minutes and then I did something I'd never done before in our relationship. I lied. *Yep. It will be wonderful.*

Chapter Twelve

On Monday morning, as rays of sunlight glimmered through the curtains before I had even managed to pry myself from the warmth of my bed, my phone rang, disrupting my peace. With a deep sigh, I reached over and answered the call. “Hello?”

“Hey, babe. Looks like I’ll be getting off work a couple of hours early today. They had a staff meeting scheduled, but they pushed it back to another day. I thought maybe we could seize the moment and do something together if you’re free.”

“I’d love to.” I smiled, thinking of all the potential things we could do, such as going to a movie, grabbing an early dinner, or taking a walk. But then reality crashed around me like a wave. “Oh, I nearly forgot that I promised Mom we would work on compiling the guest list this evening. You could always swing by and help if you want.”

“Don’t tempt me with a good time,” he joked in a playful tone.

I burst out laughing. “So that’s not what you had in mind for tonight?”

“I’m teasing. You know I’ll be there.”

“Of course. You’re the most dependable person I know.”

“I try.” I could hear the gentle smile in his voice and it made me long to see him even more.

“Oh, wait a minute,” I said, pressing the tips of my fingers against my forehead. “We need the list from your side to do

the final count. If you don't have that yet, maybe you should consider waiting—”

“Mom put our list together the second she found out I planned on proposing. I'll email it to you, and I'll text you when I'm on my way.”

“Perfect. See you this evening.”

After I showered, I walked downstairs to get breakfast and peered into the dining room where Mom was hunched over the table with her address book and a sheet of paper. I had a sneaking suspicion that she was getting a head start on the guest list, a task we had agreed to work on together.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

She glanced at me over her shoulder and said in a singsong tone, “I think you know what I'm working on.” She wasn't the least bit ashamed for starting sooner than she was supposed to.

I shifted my weight and instinctively put a hand on my hip. “I thought we planned to tackle that together this evening.” Plus, I had most of the contacts in a document I could access from my phone, and I could have quickly made an Excel sheet to make it easier. But it seemed that Mom preferred an old-school method to do the job.

“We'll partner up, sweetie. I just wanted to get a basic idea of how many we plan to invite.”

“Matt emailed me his list this morning, so we can consolidate them when we work on it this evening.”

“Great. Give me his list as well. It'll help to put ours into perspective.”

I had my phone with me, so I swiftly pulled up my email, clicked on the document, then sent it to the printer. “Okay, that's taken care of. Thank you for doing this. It'll make it go faster when we sit down this evening.”

“You're welcome. I know how hard you've been working, and I thought I'd lighten the load for you.”

I grabbed Matt's list from the printer and handed it to her, but she frowned as she scanned all the names. “They have a lot

of people they want to invite.”

“I’m sure their list isn’t bigger than ours.”

She shrugged nonchalantly and set it aside. “We’ll see.”

Later that evening, once I’d finished working and had grabbed a quick dinner, Mom walked over to me with a triumphant expression as if proud of herself. “I completed the whole thing on my own. I was planning on waiting for you, but once I got started, I was on a roll and couldn’t stop.” She was about to hand me a stack of papers when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, that’s probably Matt,” I said. “I spoke to him earlier, and he said he’d drop by to help us work on the final list.”

Mom looked like a deer in headlights. “Oh? He wants to help? There won’t be much for him to do, but it’s always good to see him.”

I quickly answered the door and my smile stretched across my face when I set eyes on him. “Hey, handsome. What brings you here?”

He chuckled. “Stopping by to visit my wife-to-be.” He gave me a quick kiss, and I welcomed him in.

He and my mother said their hellos and then we gathered at the dining room table to go over the lists. Mom handed us several papers stapled together, and she’d used plain white paper so the names and addresses were a little uneven, not that it mattered.

“Go ahead and look it over. It wasn’t easy getting a final count, but we have to limit the number of guests because of the price of each plate.”

Matt glanced up. “How much is it per plate?”

Mom hesitated a long moment and then told him the amount. She folded her hands and looked slightly embarrassed. “I know it’s a lot but—”

“Are you serious?” His eyes widened, and he blew out an incredulous breath. “That’s outrageous. What kind of food are they serving?”

“We haven’t decided on the specifics yet, but that figure is the most it will cost.”

“Surely, we can choose the cheaper option,” he said, glancing at me.

Mom reached across the table and squeezed his hand reassuringly. “That’s sweet, but I don’t mind paying. Nothing but the best for you two.”

Matt looked stunned, but he shook his head as if trying to clear it, and then meticulously studied all the names she’d written down. We both reviewed it for several minutes and then he started counting. “So, the final list has one hundred people. It was my impression that we were planning to invite two hundred or more.”

“We discussed that initially, but I can’t afford that, due to the cost per person,” Mom said.

“But you included forty of my guests and sixty of your own. And looking at this list, you randomly chose people my parents and I probably wouldn’t choose if we have to narrow it down.”

Mom flipped her dark blonde hair behind her shoulders. “Oh, we can swap the names out. That’s not a big deal.”

Matt frowned, and it looked as if he was trying to figure something out. “Why is it we only get forty guests? Fifty would be half.”

Mom tensed, her spine stiffening. “Well, I’m paying, so I should be allowed to include more from our side. Plus, Rachel has more relatives than you do.”

“But we have many friends of the family who want to be included.”

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand a second time. “I know this is difficult, but there’s not much I can do.”

“What if we reduce the cost of the meal?” he asked. “We should be able to include more people that way, right?”

“We can’t,” she said, sounding regretful. “The venue requires us to use their catering.”

Matt stood, appearing agitated. “Then we need to find a venue that allows us to bring in outside catering, or one that has more reasonable prices.”

Mom rose as well, stiffly gathering her address book and pen. “It’s too late for that. I already put down the deposit and it’s nonrefundable.” She licked her lips and swallowed nervously. “It is what it is. We have to make do with what we’ve got.” She glanced between Matt and me. “I’ll leave you two alone so you can talk.”

As soon as she left, Matt tipped his chin toward the sliding glass door leading to the backyard. “Let’s step outside.”

Dread filled me because I knew what was coming next. His shoulders looked tight, and the lines around his mouth had grown taught.

Once we’d gone outside and had privacy, we just stood there in silence for several moments. Matt closed his eyes as if trying to calm himself, and when he opened them, annoyance flickered there. “Did you know your mom put down a nonrefundable deposit on the hotel?”

Crossing my arms, I swayed a little. “I had no idea she was planning to do that. I thought we were still discussing the venues, but then she told me she secured the hotel, and I was as shocked as you are. It was my least favorite option, but it’s too late to change it now.”

“When were you going to tell me the complete story? When you texted me and said you’d picked a venue, you made it seem as if you were happy with it.”

I hung my head. “I’m sorry. When I found out what she did, I was upset, but I decided not to express that to you because I didn’t want to cause more conflict. I was hoping it would all work out. But it was wrong of me to lie.”

“I see.” He shoved his hands in his pockets and stared out into the distance. “First the cake, and now this. This is not okay, Rachel. I’m trying hard to let you deal with her on your

own because she's your mom, and I know it will make it harder for you if she and I have a disagreement, but you need to handle this."

"Trust me, I'm aware. I'll talk to her again and see what I can do."

Matt shook his head. "It's not just about talking to her. It's about standing up for what's fair. This is not your mother's wedding. It's ours, and we both deserve to have our families represented equally."

"I know, I know. I'll try harder to rein her in."

Matt blew out a breath of exasperation. "Look, I understand how difficult this is for you, but if I'd known it was going to be this hard, I wouldn't have supported taking her deal."

Frustration washed through me like a tidal wave ripping me to pieces. "Excuse me, but what did you expect? You know how Mom is, and I made it abundantly clear we don't always see eye-to-eye when it comes to the wedding. Don't put this all on me. You wanted this arrangement as much as I did so we can get the house." A tear slid down my cheek and I angrily swiped it away. "And speaking of the house, you've been dragging your feet on the documents you need to submit."

We'd met with the mortgage lender and they'd asked us each to email scanned copies of our driver's licenses, social security cards, and paycheck stubs reflecting one month's salary. I'd taken care of mine, but Matt still needed to turn his stuff in.

He swiped both hands over his face and then wiped the corners of his eyes as if tired. "Give me a little leniency. I've been working twelve-hour shifts lately. I'm doing the best I can."

"So am I. But I'm trying to point out that we will lose the house if we don't move faster on this. I'm really concerned."

He blew out a breath. "Fine. I'll make sure it's done this evening, but you have to work on your mom."

"I will. I promise."

“This is my hill to die on, Rachel. It’s only fair that my friends and family are equally represented at the wedding.”

“I understand.”

“Can you handle this?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “Stop pushing so hard.” I was close to tears, but I refused to break down and cry in front of him because I needed to appear strong and capable.

He left soon after that, but I didn’t walk him to his car. Instead, I picked up the garden hose and began watering the plants, even though it wasn’t necessary. It was soothing, and it helped me collect my thoughts.

Suddenly, Eileen popped her head over the fence, her bright red hair blowing in the breeze. “Hey, neighbor. I thought I heard you out here. Everything okay?” There was concern in her tone, and from her expression, I could tell she’d heard all that was said.

I’d been holding back my emotions, but seeing the sympathy flickering in her eyes, I couldn’t fight the tears any longer. “No, not really.” My voice broke.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, I’m fine.”

She nodded and turned away when I abruptly changed my mind. “Wait. I could use a listening ear right now.”

The weight of the situation was heavy on my shoulders and it felt like Mom clutched one arm while Matt had the other. They were pulling me in different directions, and I didn’t know how to handle it.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

I quickly brought her up to speed on what had developed this evening. “So, Matt wants me to fix it, but when I talk to Mom, she’ll remind me that I agreed to her deal. I feel caught between the two of them.”

She scratched the side of her head as she pondered what I’d just told her. “That sounds really hard. It must seem

impossible right now but try to focus on the love and commitment you share with Matt. The wedding only lasts for one day, but your marriage is the important part. Your love for each other will last a lifetime.”

I wiped away my tears. “I know, and I’m trying to do that. But how do I keep them both happy?”

She snickered. “Sometimes you can’t.”

I stared at her, waiting for her to finish. Surely, there had to be more than that.

She held up her palms. “That’s it. You can’t make everyone happy, and you have to learn to live with it. Figure out what you think is fair and go from there.”

I studied the ground for a moment, taking in her advice. “I think Matt is right in demanding that his family be equally represented.”

She nodded slowly, her lips twisting. “I agree, but maybe he and his parents should help contribute financially.”

“His parents don’t have a lot of money. They tried to pay for the cake, but Mom vetoed that. That’s a long story, so I won’t go into it. Anyway, he has savings, but we agreed that his portion would be applied to the house. Mine was supposed to go toward the wedding, but after Mom made her proposition...”

She winced. “You’ve certainly taken on a lot. I wish I could tell you how to figure it all out, but this is something you have to work through on your own. I will pray for you, though, and I know you’ve got this. You’re a smart woman with a good head on her shoulders.”

“Thank you, Eileen. I appreciate your encouragement.”

She smiled. “My door is always open if you need to talk. Can I say a quick prayer for you?”

“Please do.” We both closed our eyes and she began.

“Heavenly Father, please allow Rachel and Matt to work this out and come to a decision they are both happy with. Relieve Rachel of her stress, and most of all, help her to focus

on what's most important: her love for Matt and her love for you. Amen.”

I opened my eyes and smiled. “Thanks again, Eileen.”

When I returned inside, Mom took one glance at me and paled. “Is everything okay? Matt left in a hurry, and he didn't seem happy. I hope I didn't step over the line.”

I hesitated, wanting to choose my words carefully. “Well, to be honest, we argued, and you're right. He's not thrilled about the choices that were made.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” She walked over and drew me into a hug. “It will be okay. Trust me. It's normal for the future bride and groom to have spats now and then. He'll get over it.”

I stiffened and pulled away. “But we have to do something about the guest list so it reflects both sides fairly.”

Her forehead wrinkled as confusion spread over her features. “But this is not my fault. The hotel catering is extremely expensive, so I had to trim the list. We have relatives we will offend if we don't invite them. Most of his guests are family friends. Relatives trump friends, don't you think?”

“We can't make that determination, and...” I paused, wanting to tell her she was causing a lot of conflict and it was stressing me out.

With a subtle tightening of her lips, she held up a hand. “Fine, I'll make the list more equal. I'm not trying to start World War III.” She chuckled. “That's what you were about to say, wasn't it?”

I nodded reluctantly. “Something like that. And thank you.”

“Absolutely. I'm nothing if not reasonable. In fact, my friend Deloris told me I'm one of the most reasonable people she knows.”

I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot stick, even if someone paid me. She was handling this fairly at the moment, and that was all that mattered.

About twenty minutes later, I called Matt to let him know the good news, but his phone went straight to voicemail. I decided to leave a quick message in case he wasn't able to get back to me tonight.

“Hey, Mom said she'll fix the list, so you don't have to worry.” I hesitated, carefully choosing my words before continuing. “I'm sorry we argued, and I want you to know how much I appreciate you. We'll make it through this. Also, don't forget to send your docs to the lender so we can get approved. Love ya.”

Chapter Thirteen

Matt called me an hour after I left him that message on Monday, and we made up. He also promised he would send his documents to the lender as soon as possible. I knew he was doing his best, considering he was working twelve-hour shifts. I refrained from nagging him, but I was starting to grow concerned that we would lose out if we didn't move faster.

Thankfully, he followed through and sent everything to the lender, and they approved us. In the end, we teamed up with Kendra Adams, a real estate agent recommended to us, and we made an offer on our dream home on Thursday morning. It seemed as if so many steps had led us to this point, and I was excited to get to this stage. I'd asked God to intervene on our behalf, and I knew Matt had as well. Agreeing to my mother's proposition had been stressful, but it would all be worth it if we got that house. There had to be a reason the Lord had allowed me to go through all of this. I understood that prayer didn't guarantee I would get what I wanted, but if I prayed according to God's will, He would grant my request. I just really hoped it was His will for us to be new homeowners.

After all the drama with the guest list, I looked through it myself and made suggestions to Mom regarding who we should remove to equalize the distribution between my friends and family and Matt's. Most of the people I recommended we cut were friends of Mom's, and I didn't even know some of the people on the list. In the meantime, I told Matt we were working on it, and that we'd make it equal between the two families.

Matt's parents invited us for dinner on Saturday evening. From what I knew of them, they were doing it out of the kindness of their hearts, but I was still a little nervous. Mom had a kind heart as well, and most people liked her, but this wedding business was causing her to dig in her heels. I hoped she would use some of her charm because I wanted everyone to get along.

I chose a cute dress for the occasion. The upper half was black with long sleeves and the skirt was beige with a black flower print. There was an onyx tie at the waist, and I completed the outfit with black heels. Mom wore brownish gold trousers with a matching blouse and brown heels. Once we'd finished getting ready, Mom grabbed the bottle of sparkling apple cider she'd purchased, and we headed out. I drove since I was more familiar with the directions. We lived only fifteen minutes away from Matt's parents' house, so it wouldn't take much time to get there.

Once we were on the road, I peered at Mom. "Hey, I was thinking next week we could visit the bridal shop in town. It's the one by the mall. Do you know which one I'm referring to?"

She nodded and looked out the passenger-side window as if lost in thought.

I cleared my throat. "I've driven by that establishment so many times that I'd like to check it out." She remained silent, so I glanced at her quickly. "No comment? I thought you'd be excited."

She shrugged. "It's such a basic store and we have more pressing issues we need to deal with."

"Actually, finding a dress is one of the most important things to take care of."

"I understand that, but... Next week isn't going to work out for me."

I eyed her suspiciously. "That was an odd response." She was always available to look for wedding dresses, and we'd only gone to one place. In fact, she would move heaven and

earth to make time in her schedule if it meant shopping for a wedding gown. “Why the sudden disinterest?”

“Don’t worry. We’ll take care of it soon.”

“All right, if you say so. I might pop in there myself—”

“No, don’t do that!”

I glanced at her, my brows furrowed. “Why not?”

She sighed. “It’s just... I really want to be there with you.”

I shrugged. “Okay, I won’t go next week, but we need to look the following week.”

She nodded once. “I hear you.”

After several minutes had passed, I cleared my throat. “Hey, I’m not trying to annoy you by bringing this up, but make sure you’re diplomatic about everything. I don’t know if their feelings are still hurt over the cake.”

Mom turned in my direction. “But didn’t Matt say they thought it was a great idea to have Izzy make a cake for the rehearsal dinner?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean the way it was handled didn’t upset them.”

“Oh, Rachel, you worry about too many things. It will all be fine. I know how to conduct myself.”

“I’m not saying you don’t. But please be on your best behavior.”

She side-eyed me and frowned. “I promise to be tactful. What do you want from me?”

“That’s all I’m asking. Just be more understanding about the fact that they’re my future in-laws and I don’t need any conflict that will carry over into my marriage.”

Mom patted my leg and snickered. “Rachel, my little worrywart. You have nothing to be concerned about.”

I pressed my lips together and stared straight ahead. “I just want—”

“For everything to work out.” Mom looked at me and smiled.

Yes, that was what I wanted, but it felt like a constant struggle with her. I didn’t say another word until we got there and I’d parked the car in front of the house. “We’re here.”

We exited the vehicle and headed to the entrance, knocking lightly on the door. It swung open and Jackie stood there in a loose, light blue skirt and a white blouse. “Come in. I’m so glad you’re here.”

I walked in first and gave her a hug. Mom followed after, and they awkwardly embraced.

Mom handed the bottle of apple cider to Jackie. “This is for you. Thanks so much for inviting us.” She inhaled deeply. “It smells amazing in here. I can’t wait to try what you made for us.”

Jackie grinned. “This is perfect. I’ll put it on the table now so we can all have some at dinner.”

Dave walked over and leaned in, giving Mom a hug. “Linda, you look beautiful tonight. That color suits you.”

She smiled. “Thanks. I tried to pick a good outfit.”

We all lingered there and didn’t say anything for a full three seconds, and then Matt joined us, to my relief. He was chewing something and had evidently been in the kitchen. He swallowed whatever he was eating and put his arm around me. “It’s good to see you,” he whispered. “You look great.”

“Thanks. You do as well.” He was wearing dark blue jeans and a white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

We all made small talk until Jackie gestured for us to move into the dining room. A white linen tablecloth covered the table, and there was a vase of pink roses in the center. Jackie and Dave brought out a platter of roasted chicken that had already been cut up, a casserole dish with potatoes au gratin, a large bowl of mixed vegetables, and a basket of freshly baked rolls. We took turns serving ourselves and filling our plates. Those of us who wanted the apple cider filled up our

champagne flutes. Matt's parents didn't have any religious beliefs, and neither did Mom, but Matt asked if he could say grace, and everyone seemed pleased. He said a quick prayer and then we all dug in.

Dave glanced around the table. "We've got good food, great conversation, and even better company. What more could I ask for?" He reached over and squeezed Jackie's hand. She smiled at him, and they exchanged an affectionate glance.

"You two are so cute," Mom said, glancing at Dave and Jackie. "I know you've told me this before, but I forgot. How long have you been married?" She took a bite of the potatoes and closed her eyes briefly as if savoring them.

"Thirty-seven years," Jackie said.

"Wow, that's amazing." She looked directly at Jackie and smiled. "I hope I can find someone one day who will look at me the way he looks at you."

Jackie chuckled and blushed, her eyes twinkling. "I hope you do as well." Then suddenly she sat up straighter and glanced at Dave. "Hey, what about Jack Johnson? It's been two years since his wife passed away. Maybe we could set him up with Linda."

Dave shook his head slightly. "I don't think he's ready to move on yet."

"Oh, no worries," Mom said. "I'm not in a hurry. It'll happen when it happens." She sounded so confident, but for a fraction of a second, her eyes flickered with sadness.

I always felt bad for her when she was around other couples. She acted as if being single didn't bother her, but I knew she wanted love, just like the rest of us. And I wanted that for her too.

Everything progressed perfectly after that. Mom was using her charm and winning everyone over—even Matt, who'd been frustrated with her earlier in the week. Matt's parents were sharing funny stories, and we all laughed until there were tears in our eyes. It couldn't have gone better, and Matt and I kept exchanging pleased looks.

Matt took another serving of the potatoes and smiled playfully. “These are doctor approved so eat up.”

“Oh, I like that reason,” Mom said, smiling at his joke. “Thanks for giving me a good excuse.” She chuckled and spooned more potatoes onto her plate.

I had just taken a bite of my buttered roll when Matt’s cell phone rang in his pocket. He dug it out and glanced at the screen quickly. “Sorry, I have to take this.” He stood and made some gestures to me that I didn’t understand before he hurried out of the room.

Jackie shook her head. “They keep him busy at the hospital. It’s a shame he can’t have dinner without being interrupted.”

Several minutes went by before Matt returned and sat down. He set his lips into a grim line, and there was tension in his shoulders. Discouragement washed over his features as he glanced at me. “That was Kendra.”

After taking a look at his expression, he didn’t need to say more for me to understand that the owners had turned down our offer for the house. “Oh, no.” My heart squeezed in my chest, and I had to hold back tears. I wanted that house so desperately, and I had truly believed it would be ours.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked.

Dave leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “What did Kendra say?”

Matt grimaced. “We submitted a bid at the asking price, but someone else offered more. She said the owner accepted the other offer.”

Before I could rein myself in, a couple of tears slipped out and slid down my face. I quickly brushed them away with the back of my hand. “Well, that’s an enormous disappointment.”

Jackie gave me a small smile. “Don’t let it get you down. I’m sure you’ll find the perfect house when the time is right.”

“Absolutely,” Dave said. “Don’t give up. Once you get over this setback, you’ll pick yourselves up and discover a

new house that's up for sale.”

“I'm sure of it,” Mom said. “You can still use your savings toward another house. I'll even help you search for one if you want.”

Matt gave me a look, and I knew exactly what he was thinking. *Over my dead body.*

I couldn't help but agree with him, even though I believed she meant well. The last thing we needed was my mother meddling in other areas of our lives. Matt changed the subject, but I barely paid attention to what everyone was saying.

All the times I'd daydreamed about Matt and me living in that home were a complete waste of time. I knew there would be another house, but I doubted it would be as special as the one on Jasper Street.

Toward the end of the evening, Jackie glanced at Mom with an appreciative smile. “Thank you so much for trimming the guest list so it represents both families equally. We'd like to include some important friends who would be devastated if they couldn't come.”

Mom stared down and pushed the remainder of her food around on the plate. “Actually, that was something I meant to bring up earlier. We were all having so much fun that I didn't want to be a downer, and then with the news about the house, I thought it was prudent to wait until later.” She glanced up and winced. “But I guess you're waiting for an answer.”

My brows scrunched together. “What are you talking about?”

“I tried hard, but the ratio is more like fifty-five to forty-five.” Mom took a breath and released it. “I know that's not what you wanted, but it's the best I can do. And I must remind you that I'm paying for the entire wedding.”

“We did offer to pay for the cake,” Dave said, “but you declined.”

“I didn't decline your help. Izzy's style didn't impress me so I chose not to use her services. Don't get me wrong, her

cakes are nice, but I found someone who can do a significantly superior job.”

Jackie had always been the picture of patience since I’d known her, but she gritted her teeth. “Izzy is an amazing cake decorator and I doubt whoever you chose is better. She would’ve worked with you and incorporated your requests if you had just given her the chance.”

“I understand that she’s your friend,” Mom said, “but I didn’t want to take the risk that it wouldn’t turn out right.”

Jackie shook her head and avoided eye contact. “I can’t believe you’re insulting my friend to my face.”

Matt cleared his throat. “Mom, she doesn’t even know Izzy. It’s not personal.”

“Your mother has a point,” Dave said. “It may not be personal, but Linda didn’t even talk to Izzy to find out more. She appears to be cutting us out of the wedding planning.”

It felt as if the blood had drained from my face as I glanced at our parents. I twisted my hands in my lap and bit down on my bottom lip. “We should talk to Izzy before making a decision. Don’t you think, Mom?”

She stood abruptly, smoothing a hand over her hair. “I realize we’re dealing with a lot of charged emotions, considering the news about the house, but I’m starting to feel a little uncomfortable. I’ve been making the best decisions that I can for this wedding, and I feel underappreciated. It’s time for Rachel and I to get going. Thank you for a lovely dinner.” She turned and headed toward the door and then glanced at me over her shoulder. “Rachel, let’s go.” There was an edge to her voice, indicating she meant business.

I stood as well and glanced apologetically at everyone. “I’m so sorry. We’ll talk later.”

“Actually, I’d like to have a word with you before you leave, Matt said.

Mom held out her hand for the keys, and I drew them out of my purse and gave them to her.

“Go ahead and talk to Matt,” she said. “I’ll be waiting in the car.”

He pulled me aside while his parents quickly cleared the table. “I thought you were managing your mom. Why didn’t you tell me she changed her mind?”

“I had no idea that was going to happen. She agreed to make the changes to the list, and I had no way of knowing she wouldn’t follow through.”

“I don’t appreciate seeing my parents disrespected like that. It’s not as if we’re asking for much. We just want your mother to be fair.”

“I disapprove of what she did, but she is shouldering the financial burden.” It was hard to believe I was standing up for Mom, but I didn’t like his tone.

“Don’t forget, it was her decision to pay for the wedding. We never asked that of her. She offered because she wanted to manipulate you, and you’re falling right into her hands.”

How dare he say such a thing? He’d been on board with her paying so we’d have more money for the house, and now he was acting as if he’d never accepted her terms.

“You’re not exactly innocent here, Matt. You agreed to this. Also, when we talked to Kendra on Thursday, I suggested we offer over the asking price, and you didn’t want to do that. Now, we’ve lost the house and this stupid deal with Mom was all for nothing.”

He covered his face with his hands and then dropped them at his side in frustration. “We couldn’t afford to offer more. We could barely afford the asking price. To be honest, I was feeling uncomfortable about the debt we were about to take on. I still have student loans that have to be paid off. Don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. I wanted that house as much as you did, but it’s probably better that it fell through.”

I stared at him in shock. “You never voiced any doubts. I think you’re just making excuses because we didn’t get it.”

His jaw dropped open, and he gaped at me like he couldn’t believe what I was saying. “You think I’m making excuses?”

You're the one who keeps promising you can stand up to your mother, yet it never happens." He shook his head and mashed his lips together. "Let's talk about this another day. I'm tired, and I need to help my parents clean up."

"Fine." I was so frustrated that I would probably say something I regretted if I continued speaking.

Neither of us said goodbye, and I headed out the door, fresh tears wetting my cheeks. What a disaster. In the short time we'd been planning this wedding, we'd argued more than the previous three years we'd dated. I wasn't sure how to fix this or make it right.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning, I woke up with a headache. The previous day had started so well. My mother had initially been on her best behavior at Jackie and Dave's home, and everyone laughed and had a great time. But when the real estate agent called and informed us that we had lost the house, everything took a turn.

After that, my mother announced that she'd only trimmed the guest list to a ratio of fifty-five to forty-five, causing the entire evening to crash and burn. After my argument with Matt, I hurried to the car, and Mom and I quarreled as well. She refused to take responsibility for her part in it, saying Matt and his parents were being unreasonable. I understood her side to a certain extent, but she created this problem by locking down the hotel ballroom. If she had let me choose the venue, I could have found something more affordable and we would have had the freedom to invite more people. But what was done was done.

I rolled over in bed and wiped the corners of my eyes. It was Sunday, and I was supposed to go to church with Matt, but I just didn't feel up to it. The previous day had been emotionally draining, and I needed time to myself. I rarely skipped a Sunday unless I was sick, but I figured having a headache had to count. Besides, I didn't want to sit with Matt during the service before we had a chance to work through our issues.

I sent him a quick text. *I have a headache, so I'm not going to make it to church today.*

He responded right away. *Hope you feel better.*

That was it. Not even an emoticon. Normally, he would have said more, but I didn't blame him for keeping it simple after what happened. It felt like I had swallowed the pit of an olive and it was sitting at the bottom of my stomach. I loathed conflict, especially when it involved Matt. We'd always been able to resolve whatever issues we had, so I had no reason to doubt we'd work through this too. But it was still discouraging.

A wave of nausea swept through me as I thought about the house I had desperately wanted. The disappointment was so acute that I wanted to cry and have a pity party. But quite frankly, I was sick of crying, and I just needed to move forward and put everything behind me. I had placed a lot of hope in purchasing that house, but it obviously had not been God's will. That didn't mean we couldn't still find a more economical place. It might only be a starter home, but we had many years to work toward obtaining our dream home.

I sat up in bed and placed my hands over my face. If I wasn't going to church, I should at least read my daily devotional. It was sitting on the side table near my bed, so I picked it up and turned to the bookmarked page at the beginning of the next chapter. My eyes swept over the title, and I sucked in a breath. "Finding peace in the midst of conflict." I stared incredulously at the page and almost laughed. There were never any coincidences with the Lord. He knew exactly what I needed right now.

I quickly read through the devotional, and when I came to Proverbs 20:3, I winced. *It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.*

Guess that made me one of the biggest fools out there. I had quarreled with Matt and Mom, and the feeling of being stuck between the two of them hadn't gone away.

More than ever, I needed God's help. I leaned forward on my bed and poured out my thoughts.

"Lord, I come to you with a burdened heart. I know that I contributed to the tension by agreeing to the deal with Mom. I wanted the house so badly that I was willing to give up almost

anything to get it, and that's where I went wrong. No earthly possession is worth sacrificing peaceful relationships with those I love. I didn't realize this would happen, but I should have known based on experience. Guide me in figuring out how to manage this going forward, and please show me how to make things right with Matt. Amen."

My phone rang, and I quickly grabbed it to see if it was Matt calling, but it wasn't him. I'd gotten Eileen's number the day I cleaned her house, and it was her name that was flashing across the screen. I hesitated but then pushed the accept button. "Hey, Eileen. How are you?"

"Good morning. I hope I didn't call too early."

"No, it's fine. I'm up."

"I won't keep you, but I wanted to find out if you were available to come over this evening for dinner. If you already have plans, perhaps we can schedule something for later in the week."

I took a moment to think that through. Did I want to share a meal with someone I didn't know well? She'd been great so far, but I wasn't sure I felt like making conversation after everything that happened yesterday. On the other hand, it would get me out of the house and keep me from sulking. Plus, I could use a break from Mom. "That sounds great. I'm free this evening."

"Wonderful. Does five o'clock work for you?"

"Sure, that's perfect. See you then."

Eileen had prayed for me on the day I'd argued with Matt in the backyard. Maybe I'd tell her what had recently been going on and get her opinion.

I quickly dressed and headed down for breakfast, expecting Mom to be there, but the house was empty. I glanced out the window and noticed that her car was gone. That was just as well. I didn't want to end up in another argument with her, and I wanted time to think through what to say.

I took some pain medication for my headache after I ate breakfast, then showered and took a much-needed nap, even though it was still technically morning. When I woke up, I headed downstairs, and it surprised me that Mom hadn't returned yet. She was probably feeling guilty and didn't want to face me, which was fine because I wasn't ready to talk either.

I watched television for the rest of the afternoon. Having the place to myself was soothing, but my heart remained heavy from so many issues that hadn't been resolved. At a quarter til five, I headed up to my bedroom to change into something nicer for dinner at Eileen's home, and I ended up choosing a pair of beige slacks and a white blouse. I started to run down the stairs but then stopped when I thought about my black cardigan. The weather had been slightly cooler, and I didn't want to leave without it. After heading back upstairs, I rummaged through my closet for five minutes before I finally gave up. Where was it? I'd seen it just the other day.

Suddenly, I remembered that I had moved it, along with a few other items, to the closet in the guest bedroom because I'd already filled up my own closet. I walked into the room and slid open the closet door. I found the cardigan right away and removed it from the hanger. Putting it on, I immediately felt the added warmth. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of white. Curious, I moved the closet door further down and shrieked when I saw a white bridal gown hanging from a hanger, the dress encased in clear plastic wrap with the tulle sticking out at the bottom.

No. This wasn't possible. There was no way she would do this too. She'd acted as if securing the hotel had been a misunderstanding, but this? This was approaching Momzilla behavior. Okay, maybe she wasn't approaching that sort of behavior. She was clearly already there.

I picked up the gown and held it up, then pulled off the clear plastic wrap so I could get a better look at the garment. My eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets. It was the mermaid dress I had disliked the most. It had fit me like a glove, leaving little to the imagination, and the neckline revealed more

cleavage than I'd been comfortable with. If she was planning to buy a dress behind my back, she could have at least purchased one I liked. This was unbelievable.

Let me guess, Mom. The dress can't be returned.

Anger shot through me so quickly I could barely catch my breath. How dare she do something like this? I wanted to scream and cry simultaneously, but I had to get control of myself. That verse in Proverbs about fools quarreling came to mind, and it felt as if I were doomed to that fate as long as Mom and I had to work on this wedding together. I picked up my phone to call her and then put it back in my purse. I was already running late for dinner at Eileen's, and the discussion I needed to have with my mother would take longer than a few minutes.

Chapter Fifteen

There was nothing like chicken Alfredo to take away the blues and get my mind off my problems. The combination of butter and cream and parmesan was heaven to my taste buds. The pasta soaked up the decadent sauce and was the very picture of comfort food.

“Thank you for inviting me to dinner,” I said between bites. “This is so delicious.”

We were sitting at the table and Eileen had plated up the food moments ago. An old-fashioned lace cloth covered the surface, and a small crystal bud vase held one red rosebud.

Eileen appeared pleased by my compliment. “I’m glad you like it. It’s the least I can do after you helped me clean my home. You’re a true lifesaver.” She used her napkin to wipe a clump of sauce off her navy-blue blouse. It had embroidered flowers in yellow, orange, light blue, and white. She wore yellow cotton pants and red flats. It was all very bright, but then again, so was she. Her smile lit up her face.

“So, tell me about the wedding plans,” she said.

I’d managed to keep my mind off all the chaos from yesterday, but the mention of wedding plans made me sick to my stomach. I put my fork down and swallowed. “Well... It’s pretty much a case study on what not to do.”

She raised both eyebrows. “That bad? I take it your Mom is still...shall we say...over-involved?”

I released a bitter laugh. “That’s an understatement. The biggest understatement in the world.”

Her eyes widened. She was trying to hold back a smile, but the corners of her lips turned up the slightest bit anyway. I could tell she thought I was exaggerating. “Now that we’ve established how big the understatement is, give me a few details about what’s going on.”

I told her about the guest list and the drama at Jackie and Dave’s house the previous evening. “It’s been a lot to deal with.”

“Oh, Rachel, I’m so sorry you’re having this much trouble.”

“That’s not even the worst of it. She went behind my back and secured a venue I didn’t approve of.”

“No!”

I nodded and leaned forward, trying to keep my elbows off the table. “This is the kicker. While I was getting ready to come over here for dinner, I headed to the guest room to grab a cardigan, and I found a wedding dress in the closet.”

Her jaw dropped open. She moved her mouth as if attempting to speak, but nothing came out.

“And she chose one she knew I didn’t like.” I forced myself to use a neutral tone so I wouldn’t break down. “It was her favorite dress, not mine.”

Eileen jerked her head back, and her eyes were as wide as saucers. “You’re right. This is over the top. You’ve got to put a stop to it before it causes serious damage between you and Matt.”

“I know, I know. He’s so disappointed that I can’t stand up to her, but he doesn’t understand that I’m really trying, and I don’t know how to change it. I’ve challenged her on what she’s doing, but she doesn’t stop.” I picked up my fork and ate a piece of tender chicken breast. My neighbor was a great cook. It was too bad I couldn’t enjoy it without the weight of my problems on my shoulders.

Eileen stared off into the distance, appearing to think for several moments before turning to face me. “This is not

normal behavior. Something is going on with her. I'm not sure what it is, but you should ask her about it."

"She's always tried to live vicariously through me. When I was a young kid, she put me in ballet when I asked to be placed in soccer."

"The two of you need to have a discussion where you lay out your boundaries and make it clear what the consequences will be if she crosses them." She took a sip of water and set it down next to her plate.

"I know that's what I should do, but I hate conflict."

"Most of us do, but there is no way around this."

"Okay, then tell me what to say to her."

She placed her forearms on the table. "Well, from this point on, explain that you value her input, but you have the last word on all decisions related to the wedding."

"But I made that deal with her, and it gives her the right to have more of a say."

She shook her head. "Having more of a say does not mean she gets to make the final decision. That belongs to you and Matt alone. You have to make that clear or this will keep happening."

"She won't like it."

"Oh, I'm sure she won't, but what's the worst that could happen? If she refuses to pay for the wedding, then you and Matt will finance it.

I took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right."

I suddenly felt too restless to remain at the table. I stood and brought my empty plate to the kitchen so I'd have a moment to collect my thoughts. Eileen seemed to understand how overwhelming this was for me because she gave me space and began clearing away her own dishes.

"You okay?" she asked a few minutes later.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I paused as I leaned my hip against the kitchen counter. "Can I ask you a question? What was your

wedding like?”

She laughed and stared into the distance as if recalling memories from long ago. “It was very simple. Ralph and I got married in the church and we had an inexpensive reception with cake and punch. My mother made my wedding dress to help save money. I’d wanted something with more detail, but it was just plain old white with nothing else. Honestly, that was the only thing that disappointed me.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t like it.”

She gave me a small smile. “It doesn’t matter now. We had a wonderful marriage until he passed away five years ago.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks, but I’m coping. He wouldn’t want me to fall apart.”

“You’re a strong woman.”

She laughed. “Sometimes.”

“What was the rest of your wedding like?”

The corners of her lips turned up slightly. “We didn’t have the money to hire a florist, so I held a handful of roses purchased from the grocery store. They were bound with ribbon, and my bridesmaids clutched daisies picked from our garden. It wasn’t ideal, but it was still very special.”

I nodded. “I wouldn’t mind something like that, but both of our families wanted a bigger wedding.”

“As I said before, you can’t please everyone.” She leveled me with a stern look. “Let me give you one last piece of advice. If your mother continues to be difficult, you have to make it clear that her behavior is hurting your relationship. She needs to understand how serious this is.”

I wasn’t sure if I could do that. In fact, I was almost certain that a discussion like that would explode and cause a million new problems that I wasn’t ready to deal with. But at the very least, I had to tell her I had the final say over my wedding. That part I could do.

“Thanks for letting me vent, Eileen, and I truly appreciate your advice. I know we don’t know each other well, but it helped to talk to someone.”

She smiled sympathetically and patted me on the arm. “Anytime. And my door is always open.”

“I plan to take you up on that.” I stepped forward, and on impulse, gave her a quick hug.

She hugged me back and chuckled. “It’s going to be okay.”

After that, I assisted with the dishes even though she insisted it wasn’t necessary, and then I told her I should head out. She had given me plenty to think about, but I still dreaded the moment Mom and I had to face each other. That discussion had to happen, but it didn’t need to take place tonight.

Chapter Sixteen

At dawn the next day, I woke with a clear head. Eileen was right. I had to put an end to Mom taking control or it would destroy my relationship with Matt. We didn't talk at all the previous day except for our brief texts in the morning, and I missed him.

I felt terrible about what happened, and I couldn't stop thinking about the look on Jackie's face when Mom told her she didn't trim the list completely. Matt had gotten really quiet, and at that moment, I had sensed I was losing him.

The one thing I wished he grasped was that I needed his support. He was frustrated, and I understood that, but I was as well.

We would have to work through that later, but today, I had to attend to the issue of the dress. I jumped out of bed and threw on a beige terrycloth robe, then headed downstairs to get breakfast. Mom was sitting at the table, drinking a cup of coffee and looking at a bridal magazine. My generation preferred searching Pinterest, but Mom still gravitated toward magazines because she was more familiar with them.

Her eyes looked a little puffy this morning as if she'd had a difficult time sleeping, but she smiled when she saw me. "Hey, Rach."

"Hey." I stepped into the kitchen and turned on the electric kettle so I could make a cup of tea. "Where were you yesterday?"

She took a sip and swallowed, continuing to look at the magazine. "I went shopping with Tina." She was one of

Mom's oldest friends, and they had a lot in common, especially because they were both single.

"Oh, nice." I glanced at my choices and picked out a tea bag from my green tea collection and placed it in the mug. As soon as the kettle had finished heating, I poured the water over it. "Did you buy anything?"

She nodded reluctantly. "A few outfits."

"That's great. You'll have to show them to me sometime."

"Okay, but I'm thinking of returning them, so..."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "They're supposed to be for date nights, but when am I ever going on a date? Tina pleaded with me to purchase them, so I gave in, but now I'm second guessing..."

"I think you should keep them."

She lifted her shoulders and laughed. "Maybe I will."

A few minutes passed, and I glanced at her, my stomach constricting. "Hey, Mom, there's something I need to talk to you about." My voice wavered, and that wasn't how I wanted to start off.

She turned to face me, the lines on her forehead deepening. "Look, Rachel, I know you're upset about yesterday and you want me to trim the guest list even more, but it's not happening. I have friends who will never forgive me if I leave them out. I can't risk ruining my female relationships right now. Jackie and Dave will always have each other, and you're about to get married. But I'll be on my own. My friends are all I have left."

And just like that, I understood where she was coming from. My heart squeezed in my chest as I saw the pain and fear in her eyes. No one wanted to be alone.

For the first time in all of this, I felt protective of her. She didn't want to be lonely, and who could blame her for that? I was tempted to chuck the conversation we were about to have and give her a big hug instead. For a moment, I considered

doing just that, but I knew that was my fear of conflict talking. I had to face this head-on or it would not get better.

I cleared my throat. “That’s not what I wanted to talk about, but we need to return to that conversation another time.”

She tilted her head to the side. “Oh?”

Several seconds passed before I finally spoke. “I found the dress.”

She squinted as if not understanding me. “You went shopping on your own?” She must have thought I was saying I went dress shopping without her.

“No. I put some clothes in the guest room closet, and yesterday, when I was looking for my cardigan, I discovered the mermaid gown you purchased.”

Her cheeks turned pink and then darkened into two deep red splotches. “It was supposed to be a surprise.”

“I told you I didn’t like it. How were you able to take it home, anyway? I thought all the dresses had to be ordered.”

“I went back, and she said she’d give me the sample dress for a discount. As to your other statement about not liking it, you were allowing your insecurities to get in the way.” She waved a hand as if I didn’t know how to make good choices for myself. “The mermaid silhouette was the clear winner and you will look spectacular.” She cupped her chin with her thumb and forefinger. “It would look even better if you lost ten pounds.”

A rush of anger pulsed through me and I went from zero to ten in a matter of seconds. I wanted to scream, but I took a deep breath and lifted up a quick prayer, asking God to help me deal with this respectfully.

“Just so you know, I don’t plan on losing weight before the wedding.” I pointed to myself. “This is the weight I’ve been for the last fifteen years, and it’s not changing anytime soon.”

“Oh, honey, I wasn’t suggesting you needed to, only that it would give you a little extra room in the dress.”

I closed my eyes and counted to five. When I opened them, she was staring at me as if perplexed, but I had to be firm. “The gown has to go back. I’m not wearing it.”

She blinked as if I’d slapped her. “That’s impossible. The sale was final because it was a sample. There’s nothing I can do—”

“Then it was a waste of your money. As I said, I will not wear it, and I’ll find a new dress on my own, even if I have to pay for it myself.”

She placed a hand over her heart. “That’s a little extreme. I tell you what, why don’t you try it on again to see if there’s any way you might change your mind?”

I shook my head. “No, you shouldn’t have done that without talking to me. First the hotel, and now the wedding dress. Those are the two most important decisions for a wedding, and you acted without my permission both times. That’s not acceptable, and I won’t put up with it going forward.” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I was doing okay so far, and my tone was firm and confident. “From this point on, everything must be run by me. I have final approval.”

“But the deal was—”

“We agreed you would have more of a say, not all the say. And that’s what’s been happening. I’m very unhappy. It’s caused conflict between me and Matt, and his parents are upset as well. No wedding is worth that.”

She drew back, looking offended. “I did it all for you. I wanted you to have the very best.” Her eyes watered and she glanced away, avoiding my gaze.

I wasn’t so sure about her motives, but I wouldn’t judge that when I didn’t know her heart. Only God knew that. “Okay, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt, but I meant what I said. Going forward, you must run all decisions by me.”

She threw her hands in the air as if exasperated. “Fine. Message received. We can stop talking about it now.”

“Good.” I chucked the tea bag and stirred a teaspoon of sugar into my tea. “I think I’ll skip breakfast and get an early start on work.”

Mom mumbled something under her breath that I couldn’t understand, but it didn’t matter. I’d made my point, and I felt victorious.

* * *

Throughout the day, I kept checking my cell to see if Matt had called and I somehow hadn’t noticed, which would have been impossible because I was taking my phone everywhere, even to the bathroom. But sometimes there were reception issues, which would explain a missed call. There were times when I didn’t hear it ring.

I placed the phone on the corner of my desk and tried my best to focus on my work. A sense of uneasiness washed over me, and then I realized that Matt was usually the first one to reach out and make peace. Sometimes I reached out first, but more often than not, he made the bigger effort, and it shouldn’t be that way. I was still a little upset with him, but it was time to put those feelings aside. I picked up the phone and clicked on his name on my favorite’s list. It rang five times and then went straight to voicemail.

I almost hung up but decided to leave a quick message at the last second. “Hey, it’s me. I’m sorry about everything. I hate when we aren’t getting along. Call me.”

An hour passed, but I knew he was probably busy and didn’t have the time to call back. Another thirty minutes slipped by and the phone rang. I quickly snatched it up and glanced at the screen, but it wasn’t him. My stomach jerked, but I did my best to adjust my expectations. He was continually with patients, so he most likely wouldn’t get back to me until later.

It was my old roommate Laura, so I immediately hit the accept button. “Hey, how are you?”

“I’m great. It’s not the same without you here, though.”

“I miss you, roomie, or should I say ex-roomie?”

She laughed. “I actually called to see if you want to hang out this evening. We could order pizza and watch TV together like we did in the old days.”

“I’m there. Count me in.” I could use an escape from my problems. Laura was one of the most easygoing people I knew, and kicking back with her sounded wonderful. “What time should I come?”

“Doesn’t matter. Just head over when you finish work.”

“You got it. I’ll be there.”

“Great. See you then.”

Matt called ten minutes later. In my haste to grab the phone, it fell off my desk and slid underneath. I stooped down to get it, but it was at a place that was difficult to access. I had to drop down to my hands and knees and extend my arm as far as I could, but it wasn’t far enough. Finally, my fingers grazed over it and I made one more attempt to clutch it, but the ringing stopped. I groaned, but I wasn’t ready to give up. Seizing a shoe, I used it to push the phone to the side, and I was able to grab it at that point. I got off the ground and found my seat, then went to my missed calls and clicked on Matt’s number. Thankfully, he answered right away.

“Hey, I don’t have long but I’m taking a five-minute break.” He sighed. “I’m sorry too. Yesterday was a disaster, but it wasn’t your fault.”

“I’m glad you see it that way because sometimes it feels like you’re blaming me.”

He released another breath. “I’m concerned this might become a regular thing once we’re married.” His voice seemed guarded and untrusting. “What if your mom continues to meddle? Imagine her making plans for our firstborn.” He let out a shaky laugh. “I always knew she could be controlling, but I was counting on you to hold her back.”

“Matt, I will fix this. I won’t let her interfere like that.”

“No offense, but you’ve been saying that from the beginning, and it hasn’t changed.”

“I’m doing the best I can.” I thought about sharing about the wedding gown, and how I’d made it clear Mom had to return the dress, but I was afraid he’d ask why I’d handled that so swiftly while the guest list was still an issue. He would read into it when there was nothing there. Couldn’t he see I was struggling? “I know Mom and I have issues, and I’m working on it.”

“I hope so, because I’m starting to have doubts.”

My heart dropped into my stomach. “About me?”

“Not you specifically. You know that I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. That hasn’t changed. You’ve always been the one for me. But your mom is not respecting us, and I’m concerned this is just the beginning. I’m afraid to enter into a marriage that—”

“I won’t let it go any further. Trust me. I can deal with her.”

“Okay. I’m trying. I do trust you,” he said.

“Then please give me your support. We’re supposed to be a team.”

“We are, but I have to stay out of it or I’ll make the situation worse. If I get into it with your mom, we’ll end up in an argument. Is that what you want?”

“No, definitely not.” We’d always made efforts to get along with each other’s parents, and I didn’t want that to blow up now.

“If you need me to speak up more, I can do that,” he said.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll deal with her.”

“Okay.” He was quiet for several moments, and neither of us knew what to say. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I’ve got to get back to work. Love you. I’ll contact you tomorrow and we’ll figure out a day to meet.”

“Sounds good. I love you too.”

Once I ended the call, I sat there for quite a while, trying to process our conversation. I'd never heard him speak that way. He'd always been so sure of our future together, and he'd never voiced doubts before.

It scared me.

I knew he was committed, but what would happen if things continued to go awry?

I shook my head to clear it. This negativity wasn't helping. I had to stay positive despite the uneasiness settling in my stomach. It would all work out. It had to.

Chapter Seventeen

Later that evening, as I headed over to Laura's house to hang out, the conversation with Matt was still running through my head. It was hard not to think about it, but I pushed it away momentarily, needing a break from all the stress. I started to knock on the door but it flew open and Laura was standing there with a huge grin.

"I saw you approaching through the window," she said, laughing. "Sorry, if I appear too enthusiastic, but I'm famished and I'd like to order pizza soon."

I snickered. "Well, never let it be said that I stood in the way of Laura Johnson and her pizza."

She pulled me into a quick hug and then released me. "It's so good to see you. I've been missing our late-night talks, and it's not the same watching *Sanditon* on my own. The best part was discussing it with you afterward."

"I feel the same way. Maybe we should call each other after each episode."

"I tend to watch it at odd hours, so you might regret that." She headed toward the living room, her easy laughter setting me at ease. "Now, let's get to the important stuff. Pepperoni or sausage?"

"Definitely both."

We plopped down on the couch, and she picked up her phone. She ordered our pizza and told me they would deliver it in thirty minutes. We talked about our jobs and caught each other up to speed. Laura was a high school teacher, and she

always had funny stories to share about eventful things that happened during the day with her students. I shared a little about the editing project I was currently working on. It was nice chatting with a good friend about anything other than the wedding. It was something I'd been missing out on quite a bit lately, and I vowed not to let my busy schedule stop me from seeing my friends.

Laura gave me an assessing look, and it felt as if she could see right through me. "What's going on? I can tell you're preoccupied."

"Am I that easy to read?"

"We lived together, remember? I can tell when you're upset, even though you try to hide it."

I sighed. "A lot has happened since I saw you last, but let's just say the wedding planning has gotten completely out of control, and Matt isn't happy."

"Well, hey, if it doesn't work out, you can always move back in with me," she said playfully. A moment passed and then she grimaced. "Ugh...ignore that. Sorry, it was a bad joke. I was trying to lighten the mood, but it obviously didn't help."

I ran a hand through my hair and forced a smile. "No worries, and I'm not offended. But things have to work out with Matt. I love him and can't imagine my life without him."

"Of course. I completely understand that."

She tucked one leg under her while shifting on the coach. "What is he not happy about?"

"He made it clear he was having doubts when I spoke with him on the phone earlier. I'm really concerned about our relationship." My eyes teared up, and I wasn't as quick to wipe them away because I was here with Laura, and she understood me. We'd cried in front of each other before, so this wasn't new.

She gave me an empathetic glance. "I'm sorry it's been so difficult. Do you feel comfortable sharing more?"

I nodded, then started from the beginning, sparing no details as I worked my way through the whole fiasco. Finally, I let out a breath, thankful I'd come to the end. "So, the bottom line is that he's afraid Mom will infringe on our marriage and try to control us."

Laura nodded thoughtfully. "That's a lot to take in, but I think it's important you prioritize your relationship with Matt."

"I agree, and I'm trying. But Matt sees me struggling to stand up to her. He's concerned she'll stomp on our boundaries after the wedding since she has no problem doing it now."

"Ah...that's a fair point."

"Yeah, and I don't blame him for feeling that way. I haven't done a good job of telling her to back off, but I did put my foot down with the wedding dress."

"You did," Laura agreed. "It sounds like you were firm about that and she heard you."

Just then, a text came through from Mom, and I snickered. "See? She must know we're talking about her." I clicked on the text and read it out loud. "The florist you told me about has an appointment available tomorrow morning. Are you free?"

"She's willing to go to a place you chose," Laura said. "That's a good thing."

"True." I responded back to Mom that I could go, then twisted my hands in my lap until my knuckles turned white. "Pray that I'm able to remain firm for the rest of the planning."

"I will absolutely pray about that, and keep me updated." She brushed her hair out of her face and glanced at the time. "The pizza should be here any minute."

My belly rumbled at that moment and we both burst into laughter. I placed a hand over my stomach. "Perfect timing."

"What are you going to do about the guest list?"

Dread washed through me and I felt sick at the mention of that topic. "That's a huge problem, and I'm not sure what to do about it. I suppose I have to reinforce what I told her before. She needs to adjust the list again. It's just...I feel bad for her

because she tries to hide it, but I can see how lonely she is. She's afraid leaving out some of her friends will cause a rift."

Laura's eyes widened. "Wow, the problems that arise from wedding planning. You're making me want to elope when I find that special someone."

"Oh, you should totally do that."

We both laughed, and it helped release some of the tension in my shoulders.

"The delivery guy is here," she said, glancing out the window.

We stood, and I pulled out my wallet and gave her cash for half of the pizza. She met the man at the door while I busied myself with getting us drinks in the kitchen. She loved iced tea, so I poured her a glass and filled a second glass with water for myself. I carried the drinks to the table, along with paper plates and napkins.

The night was still young, but already a sense of calm had descended over me, replacing the stress that had weighed me down earlier. After she'd paid the delivery guy, she brought the pizza to the dining area and we started eating. We laughed, joked around, and talked about everything under the sun, from what books we were reading to the movies we planned on watching soon.

After we finished eating, Laura announced that we should have an impromptu movie marathon, and I didn't protest, even though I had to get up early the next morning. I needed this, and it was time to restore balance. I'd gotten so caught up in everything else that I'd neglected some of the more important things such as friendship, but that had to change.

* * *

The following morning, my mother and I headed out to the appointment she set up with Floral Haven. As we got out of the car and headed toward the store, Mom placed her hand on my arm. "Now, if they don't have the kind of arrangements

you had in mind, we can always check out the florist Marilyn's daughter used."

I shrugged. "We'll see." I was good at translating Mom-speak. She often said one thing and meant another. In this case, she was trying to tell me in a roundabout way that if she didn't care for this place, she'd try to convince me to go to the florist she preferred.

We walked through the florist shop, the scent of roses mingling with winter jasmine and the sweet delicate fragrance of Amaryllis. The room was medium-sized, overflowing with potted plants and vases of flowers sitting on tables and shelves. Several full bouquets sat on the counter, ready to be delivered. One wall had a refrigerated space with an assortment of flowers for customers wanting to put together their own bouquets. The walls had been painted a soft shade of pinkish-coral, and sunlight shone through a high stained-glass window, casting a gentle yellow haze on the floor below.

A woman with chin-length blonde hair greeted us with a smile. "How can I help you today?" She wore a blue pencil skirt and a matching blue blazer with a striped blouse underneath.

Mom leaned forward. "I'm Linda. I spoke with you yesterday about setting up an appointment this morning."

"Yes, Linda, so good to meet you." She turned to me. "And you must be Rachel...the bride."

I smiled and gave her a little wave. "Yep, that's me."

"Congratulations, by the way. This is such an exciting time, isn't it?"

For a moment, I froze because nothing about this had been exciting. Stressful was more like it. "Uh...yeah."

She chuckled and glanced between me and Mom. "Don't worry. We'll make this process easier for you. My name is Janet, and I'll walk you through the packages we provide and help you choose the one that best fits your wedding. Let's head to the back office so we have more space. Please come with me."

We followed her until she stopped at a large room with a table that had chairs on either side of it. “Go right on in,” she said, “and I’ll be with you in a moment.”

She alerted another worker to cover the front while she was with us, and then she joined us at the table with a large binder.

“We have a wide variety of packages that will fit any budget, so there’s something for everyone.” She opened the binder and turned to the first page. “I prefer the premium package because it offers an array of specialty flowers that would cost more if you purchased them separately. This package comes with some exquisite arrangements.” She glanced up. “Can you tell me a little about your venue?”

Before I had a chance to answer, Mom spoke up. “It’s at the ballroom at The Luxury Palace Hotel.”

Janet’s eyebrows flew up. “Oh, that hotel is top-notch. In that case, you definitely want the premium package. It’s the most popular for brides with venues such as yours.” She placed a price list in front of us and explained everything the service provided. After opening the binder, she showed us pictures of weddings that showcased their floral designs. “This is what you can expect from us if you choose the premium package.”

Large, round bouquets fit over tall, skinny glass vases with crystal beads hanging down. They were beautiful and glamorous and very...not me.

Mom’s eyes lit up as she flipped through the pages. “Oh, wow. These are sensational. This is exactly what we need.” She turned to me, and I knew at that moment the florist had sold her. “Oh Rachel, what do you think? This is perfect for you.”

I smiled at her enthusiasm but then turned to the sales lady with a frown. “Actually, I was looking for something simpler. I don’t like big and fussy.” I could hear Mom sighing beside me, but I ignored her.

Janet folded her hands and nodded, leaning forward slightly. “Okay, what were you thinking of?”

“I prefer small vases with babies’ breath and a handful of roses.”

“Baby’s breath?” Mom asked with disdain. “That’s mostly filler.”

“Fine, I don’t need baby’s breath, but I want a vase with only roses. I’m more of a minimalist.”

“Only roses?” Mom scrunched up her face as if I’d suggested carrot and broccoli centerpieces. “But that’s so boring, and we could do that on our own. When you hire a florist, you expect so much more than that.”

“I have to agree with your mother,” Janet said, giving Mom an approving glance. “You’re going to be in this grand ballroom, and you don’t want these dinky little arrangements in the center of the table. Instead of looking minimalist, it’ll seem pathetic.”

“We sure don’t want that,” Mom said, smiling. “You get me, Janet.” She gave her a two-finger eye salute, showing they were on the same page.

Both ladies laughed as if they were the best of friends, and I felt my vision slipping away. Janet obviously knew how to sell the premium package to women like Mom.

I cleared my throat. “I want to look at the other packages, please.”

Janet’s smile slipped off her face but she remained professional. “Of course.” She gave us price lists for the standard and plus packages and described what each one included, but she was less enthusiastic about those two. After she’d shown us a variety of pictures and samples, she leveled us with a look. “As you can see, the premium stands out from the rest, but it’s up to you. I always tell my brides that we’ll do a stellar job no matter what we have to work with.”

“The premium service is a must,” Mom said, practically drooling over the pictures.

It was now or never. I had to assert my will or Mom would take over with this as well, and I couldn't let that happen. "We'll opt for the standard package."

Mom's jaw dropped open in shock. "But Rachel, the standard bundle won't be enough. We need more flowers in that ballroom."

"We have a set budget to work with," I said, "and there are other things I'd like to include besides flowers." When she didn't say anything, I crossed my arms. "This is what I want."

Mom shook her head. "You're making a mistake. Stop being so bullheaded and learn to compromise."

I almost laughed. "I have compromised for this entire wedding. Let me have this."

She threw her hands up in exasperation. "Fine, but it won't look good."

"You have time to think about it," Janet said. "I can sign you up for the standard package and you can easily upgrade later on."

"We won't be upgrading," I said firmly. "We'll stick with the standard service."

Mom looked as if she was itching to say something, but she remained quiet. As we walked out of the shop, I heard her whispering to Janet. "She can be so difficult sometimes, but I'll speak with her."

Mom could speak with me all she wanted, but I was holding firm on this. It was less about the flowers and more about the principle involved. She needed to respect my decisions.

Chapter Eighteen

On Saturday, I did a few chores around the house and washed clothes in preparation for my date with Matt that evening. The tension between us had lingered, but I was pushing past my negative feelings and trying to remain optimistic. Eventually, all the challenges would be behind us, and we would be happily married. No doubt our story would become an amusing anecdote to share with other couples one day, and they'd chuckle with us as we recounted the trials and tribulations of our wedding journey. But in the meantime, it wasn't easy. I knew Matt loved me. But I also sensed how unhappy he was with the situation.

I had just switched my clothes from the washing machine to the dryer when Mom walked out into the garage to join me. "Hey, I got a strange call from Jackie."

I cleaned out the lint filter and started the dryer, then glanced up. "Jackie, as in Matt's mom?"

She nodded, appearing regretful. "It was weird, to be honest. She was telling me about this long family tradition she had. Apparently, her great-grandmother had a necklace that all the female relatives have worn at their weddings. She doesn't have any daughters or nieces, and she was hoping you would be willing to wear the necklace to keep up the tradition."

My eyebrows flew up. "I wonder why she didn't ask me?"

Mom shrugged. "I got the feeling she was trying to break the ice between us and was hoping I would agree with her. But I told her you couldn't wear it because I wanted you to wear Grandma Helen's necklace."

I gestured for her to go inside with me and we both sat on the couch. “What about what I want? Did you ever stop to consider that?”

Mom squinted at me as if not understanding. “I just assumed you’d want to use your own grandmother’s necklace.”

“I loved Grandma Helen and I miss her a lot, but that necklace is very clunky. Maybe there’s something else of hers I can wear.”

“It has sentimental value, though.”

“You didn’t even put it on for your wedding, Mom.”

She laughed. “That’s not the kind of jewelry you wear to a courthouse. I promised myself that if I couldn’t use it, my daughter definitely would.”

“I understand, but I don’t like it. To be honest, I think I should do this for Jackie. There has to be some compromise on our part. We can’t have everything our way.”

Mom’s lips drooped down with disappointment. “Well, you can wear whatever you want, but it doesn’t seem right that she’s asking for something so personal. At least promise me you’ll think about it before making a decision.”

I nodded. “Fine. I’ll make sure to consider both sides.”

* * *

Later that evening, I was about to walk outside and wait on the porch for Matt to arrive when Mom cleared her throat loudly.

“Hey, Rach, I need you to look at this for a second before you leave on your date.”

I grabbed my sweater and purse and looked out the window as Matt pulled up. I headed over to Mom and quickly glanced at her computer screen. It was a website featuring a classical quartet that was available to play at weddings. That wasn’t what I had in mind, but that discussion would have to

wait. “Matt just drove up and we don’t have a lot of time. I’ll look at it later. Email me the link.”

Mom continued to stare at the computer as if she hadn’t heard me. “They have some great reviews, and I have a feeling they book up quickly. If you like them, we need to move on this immediately.”

I pursed my lips. “Matt and I have always wanted a D.J.”

Mom tipped her head from side to side. “Yeah, but a quartet would be so much classier, don’t you agree?”

I shrugged. “Personally, I think a D.J. would be more fun.”

“Tell you what,” Mom said. “I’ll look for some other quartets and text you the information while you’re with Matt. That way, you can compare different groups and think about what you want. I’m sure you’ll find something you like.”

I already knew Matt wouldn’t be a fan. He didn’t enjoy classical compositions, and we had both agreed on what we wanted as far as music. Besides, my time with Matt was precious, and I didn’t want to spend it on this quartet issue, especially if it caused another problem.

“Actually, Mom, I would prefer that you email me instead of texting. When I go on dates with Matt, you have this need to contact me, and it’s distracting. I’ve addressed this with you before, but it keeps happening.”

She frowned and continued to stare at the computer. “I’m not texting you just to shoot the breeze. There’s always a good reason.”

I hesitated, not wanting this to explode into an argument, but I had turned a new leaf and I was trying to stick to my boundaries. “I love you, and you can text me anytime except for when I’m on a date with Matt. Unless it’s a genuine emergency, send it to my email.”

Her jaw clenched, and I could tell I’d offended her, but she needed to learn to respect my time with Matt, especially because I only saw him once or twice a week at most.

“Fine, I won’t text you, but you’re blowing this out of proportion. It feels like you’re picking on me.”

I sighed and glanced out the window as Matt was getting out of his car. My stomach twisted into a knot. The last thing I needed was for him to come inside and find himself in the middle of another conflict. We’d had too much of that lately, and I wanted a calm and peaceful evening. “Sorry you feel that way. It’s not my intention to pick on you. But I need you to honor my boundaries.”

She mumbled something under her breath I couldn’t make out, but I didn’t ask her to repeat it. I headed toward the entryway. “Don’t wait up for me. Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said as if I’d just force-fed her a bowl of Brussels sprouts, her least favorite vegetable. She’d always hated the smell.

Once I was out the door, I met Matt in the driveway. “Hey, stranger. It’s nice to see your face.” I meant it in a playful, affectionate way, but he scowled.

“It’s not like I’ve been avoiding you. My schedule was horrible this week. I’m doing the best I can.” Clearly, he’d taken my statement as a criticism.

I placed a hand on his arm. “Hey, it’s okay. I wasn’t trying to give you a hard time.”

He sighed, releasing the tension in his back. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. I’m just tired. All I wanted was to relax and have some peace and quiet this morning, but I couldn’t even have that.”

“What do you mean? I thought you had most of the day to rest.”

He started to speak and then bit his lip. “Come on, we’ll talk in the car.”

The knots in my stomach tightened, and the excitement I’d felt at seeing him quickly soured. Something was up.

We got in his car, and once he pulled away from the curb, he cleared his throat. “Work is kicking my butt. I knew the

position would be tiring when I took the job, but I never expected this level of exhaustion. This morning, I wanted... No, I needed to rest in bed and watch TV so my body could recuperate, but then Mom showed up at my door crying, saying she spoke with your mother about a necklace.” He glanced at me with a defeated expression. “All I know is that it’s a family heirloom, and she was hoping you’d wear the necklace on the day of the wedding. I told her it was your choice, but she’s fed up that everything she and my dad suggest gets shot down. She said she only wants this one thing.”

“I’m so sorry, Matt. I got an earful from Mom as well.”

“It seems they got into an argument about it.”

I slid down in my seat, wishing all of this would just go away. “Yeah.”

He blew out a breath. “What are you planning to do?”

“I’m probably going to wear your mom’s necklace.”

“Probably?”

“Mom made me promise to consider it before making a choice.”

“I support your decision to wear whatever you want, but keep in mind that you and your mom have gotten your way on everything, and it seems like you’ve forgotten this wedding involves two people.”

My mouth dropped open. “I’ve gotten my way? How can you say that? You know that’s not the case. Mom has gotten her way.”

He chuckled softly. “Because you let her.”

My hackles rose at the introduction of a sore subject. “I’ve been trying to be more assertive with her. In fact, a few moments ago, I made it clear she was not to text me unless it was an emergency.”

“You mentioned that before, and she didn’t listen.”

“Well, she’s going to listen this time,” I said firmly. Right as I said it, my phone emitted a dinging noise, and a notification flashed across the screen for a new email. I’d forgotten to disengage email notifications, but it was too late now.

“Who is that from?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” I technically didn’t, but I had a strong suspicion.

“Check it. I bet it’s your mother.”

“Even if it is, I told her to email me instead of texting.”

Quiet laughter erupted from his lips, and it slowly grew louder and louder until he was laughing hysterically as if he’d gone off the deep end. “Very firm boundaries, Rach. No texting, but you’ll allow email.”

“Email isn’t as disruptive.”

“Really? Because it seems pretty disruptive to me. It just interrupted our discussion, didn’t it?”

It seemed like he was trying to pick a fight. Normally, I would have spoken my mind, but I didn’t want to end up in another argument. I wanted to snap back, but if I could diffuse the disagreement before it started, we might still have a chance at a peaceful evening. “I wish you could have seen me yesterday morning when we were at the florist. I stood my ground and didn’t let Mom make all the decisions.”

He didn’t comment but stared straight ahead. He was tired and grumpy, but I was trying to ignore it, considering how much he’d had to put up with already.

Neither of us said another word until he pulled into the parking lot of the movie theater. When he said he would pick me up today, I hadn’t bothered to ask what we would be doing because we typically ventured out to dinner and talked. Matt and I rarely went to the movies, because we valued the little time we had. We normally preferred talking or doing an activity together.

He glanced at me as if he knew what I was thinking. “I don’t have the energy to do anything else.”

“That’s fine. I understand.”

I started to exit the car but stopped when he didn’t move. He just stared straight ahead with his hands on the wheel as if in a daze.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He didn’t answer for several long moments, and then he grimaced. “Come on. Let’s go get this over with.”

My heart dropped to my stomach. Was that how he felt about spending time with me? Had the conflict between our families sucked all the life out of our relationship? I wanted to say something to make it all better, but I was afraid of making it worse.

“I think we should cancel the wedding,” he said suddenly, continuing to stare out the window. He wouldn’t even look me in the eye.

I felt the blood drain from my face, and I glanced at him, startled. “What are you talking about?”

“I can’t keep doing this. You’re a different person when you’re with your mom. You let her run over you. You let her run over us.”

“But I told you I’m making efforts. I’ve been really trying.”

“It’s too little too late.” He closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. “I can’t marry you knowing there will be three people in our marriage: you, me, and your mom. It’s not healthy, and I won’t do it.”

“Oh, come on. That’s ridiculous. I won’t let her interfere in our marriage.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me, sadness washing over his features. “You know that’s not true. What you want and what ends up happening are two separate things.”

“So, you’re breaking up with me?” A tear slid down my face and pooled at the side of my lip.

“I don’t want to break up,” he said, his voice cracking. “I love you, but I feel trapped. All I know is that I can’t move forward. Every day I have this crippling anxiety that your mom will take over another area of our lives. It’s the wedding now, but a few months after we’re married, she’ll drop in whenever she wants without calling. When we have kids, she’ll demand constant access to them. I can even see her moving next door to us.” A panicked expression crossed his features. “I can’t live with that.”

I placed a hand on his arm and waited until he looked at me so he could see the sincerity in my expression. “That will never happen. I won’t let it.”

He shook his head, his eyes flickering with dismay. “The problem is... I don’t believe you.”

I recoiled, and it felt as if he’d twisted a knife in my gut and was slowly turning the handle. “So, this is it?”

He didn’t say anything, but then he turned the key and started up the engine. “I think I should take you home.”

“Fine.” Several tears slipped out, but I swiftly wiped them away with my fingers. If he didn’t want to be with me, I wouldn’t beg him to stay. I still had a measure of dignity left, and I wasn’t handing it over. Anger swept through me so quickly, I nearly lost my breath. “You encouraged me to take the deal with her. Don’t put this all on me.”

“Clearly, I was wrong to encourage that. I didn’t realize how far she would go. How far you would let her go.”

Like a wounded animal, I snapped back. “And I didn’t realize what a lack of support I would get from you. We were supposed to be a team, but you dropped out long ago.”

He didn’t respond, and I kept quiet after that. Once he brought me home, I scrambled out of his vehicle and headed inside, going straight to my room.

Mom yelled up the stairs, “Hey, you returned early. Did you get my email? I need to know if I can contact that quartet

tomorrow.”

It was a simple question, but her repetitive statements grated on my nerves. When she wanted something, she had a one-track mind and didn't know when to stop. “No, Mom. There will be no quartet. The wedding is off. Matt and I broke up.”

Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, I woke with a sense of dread. As soon as I remembered the horrible truth that Matt and I were no longer engaged, my gut ached and tears ran down my cheeks. Yesterday, in my haste to get out of his car, I'd forgotten to return my engagement ring. I'd have to give it back later. I buried my face in my pillow and was tempted to stay in bed all day, but it was Sunday, which meant going to church. That would be awkward since the two of us always attended together.

I considered skipping this week, but I didn't want to do that. After what happened, I needed to be there more than ever. I craved spiritual encouragement like a baby craved milk. Before doing anything else, I opened my Bible and read Proverbs 3:5-6. *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

I desperately needed that reminder. With tears in my eyes, I took a moment to pray and ask God to straighten my crooked path. Glancing at the time, I realized I could still make the early service if I hurried. Matt and I always went to the later service, so there would be less of a chance of running into him.

I jumped out of bed and walked into the shower, letting the hot water pour over me as I lifted up another prayer. *Lord, I'm so heartbroken over this. I don't have words to describe the pain, but you know what's going on inside me. Please show me what to do and how to cope.*

The previous day, after I'd told Mom the wedding was off, she'd bounded up the steps and pulled me into a hug. "He didn't mean it," she'd said. "He's tired and overworked. Give it time. He'll come around."

I didn't have the heart to tell her she was the main reason for the breakup, but she had to know all the recent conflict had contributed. She hadn't asked any questions, which was also telling. When one didn't ask questions, there was a good chance they already knew the answers.

Once I showered, I dressed and grabbed a couple of granola bars and a bottle of water on my way out. I slipped into the early service and it felt like I was going through the motions as I sang along to "Be Thou My Vision." Matt was nowhere in sight, which should have been a good thing, but instead of being relieved, disappointment washed through me. Secretly, I'd hoped he would be there waiting for me, and we'd reconcile and apologize for the things we'd said. My eyes welled up with tears, but I discretely wiped them away so no one would notice.

Pastor Larry strode to the pulpit, and we bowed our heads while he prayed. When he finished, he announced that the sermon was on marriage from Ephesians 5, and I inwardly shuddered. Normally, they handed out bulletins with an outline of the subject matter for that day, but I'd been feeling so down that I hadn't collected one. I considered getting up and quietly walking out, but I couldn't decide what to do.

I was still debating that possibility when an usher walked up and asked me to move down so a family of five could sit down without having to slide past me. That would put me in the middle of the pew, making it even more awkward if I wanted to leave. I had to make a decision quickly, but I stood there, gawking at him like an indecisive pianist, silent and unsure of which melody to play.

He cleared his throat. "Miss?"

"Oh, sorry." I moved down so they could find seats, and regret immediately followed. Why me? Despair settled in my

chest, but then just as swiftly, a quiet calm washed through me, and I knew it was the Lord giving me peace.

Maybe He wanted me to hear this sermon for some reason. I decided to go with the flow and stop fighting it. And if it was more than I could take, I'd leave regardless of how awkward it seemed. Hopefully, I wouldn't step on anyone's toes on the way out.

Larry opened his Bible and began his sermon. I followed along, solidifying my resolve to push away rising emotions. I only half-listened as it allowed me to cope, but then he said something that snapped me to attention.

“For couples wanting to preserve their marriage, they must learn how to leave and cleave, which means separating from their parents and holding on to each other.”

I let out a deep sigh, feeling like the worst failure in that area. It was analogous to salt on a wound and I wanted to cry out, “Please stop,” but I held it in.

“This doesn't mean you don't continue to see your parents regularly,” he continued. “Those relationships will always be important, but leaving requires you to form your own family unit and focus on new priorities that you and your spouse create.” His gaze swept the congregation. “For all you young adults who will most likely get married in the next few years, consider this. You may be used to your parents advising you on a matter, but when you're married, your mom and dad no longer make the final decision. It might be hard for them to disengage when they're accustomed to telling you what to do, but it has to happen. Take their guidance and learn from their wisdom, but make your own choices. If you're dealing with intrusive parents, you may need to put some physical distance between you and them.” He shared a story about in-laws who were visiting a newly married couple on a daily basis and not giving them space to start their marriage. They usually arrived without calling first, and the wife finally got fed up and left her husband when he refused to give them proper boundaries.

“This seems like common sense,” he said, “but I've seen marriages crumble when one spouse is so tied to a parent that

they end up prioritizing that relationship over the needs of their spouse. But that's not what God had in mind when He said in Genesis 2:24, *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*"

His words slammed into me like a charging bull, and I sat there, stunned. It wasn't as if I'd never heard this before, but it stung more acutely because of my current situation. I loved my mother, but she was needy and pushy and very manipulative when she wanted her way. She was often helpful, and I knew she loved me, which made it more difficult to draw solid lines in the sand.

People had been telling me this all along in various ways: Matt, Eileen, and now Pastor Larry. And yet, I'd stumbled through the process and messed up so badly that Matt no longer wanted to marry me. That thought was beyond depressing. I wasn't even sure that I could fix it. I could plead with him to give me another chance, but based on what he'd said yesterday, he didn't trust me to follow through. My eyes burned with emotion, and I knew if I didn't leave in the next few seconds, I would start sobbing uncontrollably in front of hundreds of people.

Thankfully, Pastor Larry closed his sermon in prayer and the music director came forward to lead the congregation in singing, "How Firm a Foundation." Everyone rose, and I slipped by the family of five and headed out to the parking lot.

Heavy, dark clouds hung in the sky as I made my way to my vehicle. Matt and our failed relationship consumed my thoughts, and I longed to return to the day Mom had offered that deal and do it all differently. The lure of a beautiful house had drawn me in; a house that had been out of my reach. But if I could go back, I would tell her no, and together, Matt and I would plan the simple wedding we'd wanted all along. If only that were a possibility, but it was too late for that.

I had always known my mother was overbearing, but I had never expected the dynamics we shared to impact my relationship with Matt to the degree that it had. Between wanting to protect her and avoiding conflict, I'd created the

perfect storm that had destroyed the future I desperately wanted with him.

As I started my car, I took a deep breath and tried to push the thoughts out of my head. Thinking about what could have been was only making it worse when all I desired was to go home and crawl back into bed. Once in my car, I called Sarah and told her everything in a jumbled mess of words. “I can’t believe it’s over.” I sniffed.

She seemed shocked at first, but then she recovered. “You guys will work it out. I’m certain of that. Don’t give up hope.”

“I’m trying, but it’s hard.”

“I’ll pray for you, friend.” We talked for a while, and then she had to go to work but promised to call and check up on me later that evening.

I tried calling Laura, but her phone went straight to voicemail. When I drove up to my house, Eileen was outside watering her plants. I slid out of my car and closed and locked the door.

She glanced over and waved, but then she did a double take. I must have looked distressed because concern flickered across her face. “Hey, are you okay?”

I shrugged. “Not really.”

“Would you like to talk about it?”

I didn’t want to repeat everything again, but I longed for the comfort of a friendly face. A crack of thunder echoed through the street and light rain fell from the sky.

She must have sensed my hesitation because she waved me over. “Come inside with me and get out of this weather. You don’t have to stay more than a few minutes, but I want you to try my famous peanut butter cookies. They’re to die for.”

I chuckled at the way she’d said, ‘to die for’ and it was the first time I’d smiled all day. “All right. I’ll try a cookie.”

I jogged over, and as soon as I stepped through the door, she ushered me into the kitchen and poured two steaming

mugs of hot chocolate. After spraying whipped cream on top of each mug, she gave me a teaspoon and a napkin.

“Here you go. Why don’t you have a seat while I get you a cookie?”

I settled at the kitchen table, and she brought me a plate with two large peanut butter cookies dotted with colorful M&M’s. She’d mentioned one cookie, not two, but I certainly wouldn’t complain. She sat across from me while I took a bite.

I groaned as a burst of chocolate and peanut butter hit my taste buds. “This is delicious.”

“Some people love chocolate chip while others prefer peanut butter. Me? I like to mix the two.”

“Who could blame you?” I took another large bite and chewed while she waited patiently for me to tell her why I seemed so troubled.

After a few moments passed, I told her about the argument between Matt’s mom and mine that had resulted in Matt breaking off our engagement. “He said I would allow her to interfere in our marriage, and when I said I wouldn’t let that happen, he didn’t believe me.”

“Ouch.” She frowned and took a sip of her hot chocolate, leaving a dab of white on her nose.

I gestured to it and she immediately wiped it with a napkin. “Don’t mind me. I always get the cream everywhere.”

I used my spoon to scoop up some whipped cream with a bit of warm liquid, and I placed it in my mouth, savoring the flavor. It had been a long time since I’d had hot chocolate, and it was comforting.

“I know it’s hard right now,” she said, “but it’s important to remember that you can’t control everything. Things got out of hand, but that doesn’t mean Matt won’t rethink his position.”

“I understand where he’s coming from, but I thought we were a team.”

She shrugged. “Even teammates fail each other. We’re all flawed in some way. You had trouble dealing with your mom, and he didn’t know how to cope with that. From the sound of it, he’s also burned out from work. I predict the two of you will resolve this, but first, you’ve got to sort some things out with your mom.”

I nodded. “Yeah, she and I still have to talk. I was firmer with her like you suggested, and I communicated that I had the final say over the decision-making, but it was too little too late.” I didn’t bring up that Mom and I hadn’t discussed how her actions had hurt our relationship. She had advised me to confront that head-on, but I’d been too much of a coward to address it.

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I believe in you, Rachel. You’ll figure it out. In the meantime, would you like to relax for a bit with me, or do you need to head home? There’s an *I Love Lucy* movie marathon on TV I’ve been wanting to watch all day.”

“I would love to stay, actually. I could use the company.”

“Great.”

We moved to her living room and sat on the couch. She gave me a heavy white throw blanket and turned the TV on. The rain came down harder, hitting the window behind us, and I soon found myself drifting off to sleep. I woke up thirty minutes later, just as a new episode was starting.

“What did I miss?”

“Lucy and Ethel were hurling pies at each other on stage.”

I chuckled at the thought. “Life would be so much simpler if throwing a pie in someone’s face solved all our problems.”

She snickered. “Here, here to that.”

I snuggled into the couch, finding comfort in the warmth of the blanket wrapped around me. “Thank you for inviting me over. It helps to hang out with someone.”

“Of course, anytime. I’m always here for you. And don’t despair. God will help you through this.”

I knew she was right, but I dreaded more confrontation.
And worse than that, I dreaded a future without Matt.

Chapter Twenty

Monday morning, I woke to wet tears soaking my pillow. I'd dreamed that Matt and I were married, living in our dream house on Jasper Street, and we had a little girl. The three of us were happy, and the longing that had filled my heart was so intense that my body ached with yearning. Everything I'd wanted had been ripped away, and it was almost more than I could bear.

If I had held to stronger boundaries from the beginning, none of this would have happened. I gave Mom chance after chance because I didn't want to deal with conflict, but instead of making things easier, the situation exploded.

Sitting up in bed, I ran my hands through my hair as I contemplated the day set before me. I could grieve and wallow, or I could grieve and take steps to get my circumstances under control. The second option was more appealing than the first. But before I did anything, I had to resolve things with Mom or the problems we'd been having would follow me into the next phase of my life.

I worked steadily throughout the day, my stomach clenching every time I thought about the discussion we needed to have. We would talk this evening. No more procrastinating or putting it off.

I understood why Matt broke up with me. Marriage involved leaving and cleaving, and he didn't trust I would do that. Granted, the wedding planning didn't represent everything. I had carved out a life for myself that was separate from Mom. Moving out had given me independence and

autonomy, but this situation showed me how quickly things could deteriorate when lines were crossed.

I would never give Mom the freedom to control something in my life again, no matter what she promised me. Anything with strings attached was not worth it. I loved my mother, but I could no longer tolerate this unhealthy dynamic.

Later that evening, I summoned all the courage to confront the issue head-on. My heart raced as I entered the living room where Mom was tidying the shelves, totally oblivious to the conversation we were about to have.

I took a deep breath and cleared my throat. “Hey, Mom. Can we talk?”

“Sure, Honey. What’s up?” She used a duster to wipe down the bookcase while she straightened the books.

“It’s important. Can you sit with me on the couch?”

She slowly turned, her brows scrunching together. “Okay... What’s this about?” She walked over and sat beside me, placing her hands in her lap. Her expression grew wary as she waited for me to speak.

“It’s about Matt and me.”

Uneasiness crept across her features and a crease deepened at her forehead. “I know this is stressful for you, but it will all work out eventually. You’ll see. Just give it time. He loves you so much. I’ve never doubted that for a second. A mother knows these things.”

I hesitated, gathering my thoughts before continuing. “That’s not what this is about.”

She glanced at me, confused. “Then, what?”

“I wasn’t looking for comfort over my breakup with Matt. I need you to understand...” My voice broke, and the weight of what I had to say settled on my shoulders.

“Go on...”

“I would like you to bear some responsibility for how things ended. You said you would factor in my feelings during

all the planning, but you didn't do that. You also didn't take Matt and his parents into consideration."

Her hands clenched tightly into fists. "I...tried."

"No, Mom, you didn't."

She glanced down, not making eye contact. "I wanted what was best for you. There's nothing wrong with that."

"That's not true. You wanted what was best for you."

Her head shot up and she stared at me indignantly. "How can you say that? Everything I've ever done is for you."

I held up a hand. "I'm not saying you haven't made sacrifices for me in the past, because I know you have. But I believe you tried to make up for some major life disappointments by living out your dreams through me."

"That's not true," she said, sounding appalled. "How dare you accuse me of these things. I'm your mother, and I deserve more respect than that." She stood, smoothing down the wrinkles of her slacks. Red splotches covered her neck, and her eyes were flickering with outrage. "I won't stay and listen to this. I offered to pay for your entire wedding so you'd have money for a house, and this is how you treat me." Her voice broke. "You need to think long and hard about what you've said to me, and then you owe me an apology." She stormed out of the room and jogged up the stairs. A few moments later, I heard her bedroom door slam.

Well, that didn't go the way I'd hoped it would. In fact, it couldn't have gone worse. She'd painted herself as the victim, and I was the evil, ungrateful daughter who refused to show her the appreciation she deserved. How were we supposed to move on from this if she refused to recognize the damage she'd done?

I snatched up my purse and went over to Eileen's to vent. Only her vehicle was gone and no one answered when I knocked. I placed my palm across my forehead and let out a heavy breath. She wasn't home.

I headed back, but instead of going inside, I got in my car and drove to Laura's house, dwelling on every word Mom and

I had said to each other. I needed to move out of there. As long as I stayed, she would continue to control me while refusing to take responsibility for her actions.

When I arrived, I jumped out of the car and ran to the front door. I held my hand up to knock, but the door swung open and Laura stood there with her purse over her shoulder.

“Rachel. I didn’t hear you drive up.” She studied my face. “Are you okay?”

I wasn’t crying, but I must have looked fired up. “Not really. A lot has happened since I saw you last. I tried to call you earlier...”

“I must have missed it. What happened?”

“Matt broke up with me.” Before I could hold it back, a tear slipped out, but I angrily brushed it away.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, my goodness. That’s horrible. Come inside so we can talk.”

“I don’t want to impose. Were you about to leave?”

She waved me off. “Only to go grocery shopping, and that can wait.”

I followed her into the living room and took a seat on the couch. For the next thirty minutes, I told her about everything leading up to the breakup with Matt, and then we talked about my disastrous conversation with Mom.

“That’s infuriating,” she said. “But I’m not surprised. Your mom has been living in denial for a long time. If she lets down her defense system, she has to admit she made a lot of mistakes over the years. It’s easier to blame it on your lack of appreciation.”

“I understand that, but to be honest, when she told me I wasn’t appreciative, it really triggered me, and I felt bad.”

Her lips tightened at the corners. “And that’s why she said it.”

“We have a complicated relationship. It’s not entirely negative. We’ve had some good times as well, and I know she

loves me. But I'm at the point where I need to pull away for a while. She's my mom and I'll always love her, but if she can't recognize how badly she messed up this time... If she can't admit what she did..." I tilted my head back and blew out a breath. "I can't go on pretending like nothing happened."

Laura grabbed a throw pillow on the couch and held it in front of her stomach. "Well, you're welcome to stay with me. It's been lonely since you left and I'd be happy to let you take your old room back."

"Seriously?" Her offer gave me a spark of hope. Regaining my autonomy was the first step in getting back on track, and I needed to put my life in order.

"Of course. Move in whenever you're ready."

"Is today too soon?"

She laughed. "You're eager to move out of there, aren't you?"

A twinge of sadness settled in my chest. I didn't want to diminish Mom or put her down. I just wanted things to get better and for everyone to own their part. "Yeah, it's for the best."

Twenty minutes after that, I was in my room, packing up my belongings. I wouldn't be able to take everything this evening, but I would come back for the rest. I'd have to find someone to help me with my desk because it was too heavy to move on my own. Laura had told me I could use her dining room table in the meantime, so at least I'd still have a place to work tomorrow.

There was a knock on the door and a sense of dread filled me. "Come in."

Mom peeked in and her face fell when she realized I was packing up my stuff. "You're leaving?"

I nodded. "Yeah, the whole point of staying here was to make it easier to plan the wedding together. But that's off now, so I'm moving back to Laura's."

She brushed a hand across her eyes in an agitated manner. “Fine. If that’s what you want...”

“It is...” I folded a pair of pants and placed them in my suitcase.

“Despite what you think, I didn’t want things to end up like this.”

“I never thought you wanted that. But you had to have everything your way, and you believed we would all fall in line. You figured the wedding might not be my vision, or Matt and his family’s vision, but it would still be beautiful. And you thought everyone would calm down when they saw the outcome.”

She nodded slowly. “I would’ve made sure your wedding was spectacular. I wish you’d had enough faith in me to believe that.”

I folded a few more items and added them to the suitcase. “You still don’t get it. It’s not about how beautiful or amazing the wedding could have been. You stepped over the line, and you didn’t care that you were hurting people in the process.” My voice trembled. “You really hurt me, Mom, and I don’t know how our relationship will recover if you don’t recognize that.” I closed the suitcase and lifted it off the bed.

She sniffed and wiped tears from her eyes. “I’m sorry that you see it that way.”

That wasn’t a genuine apology. She still believed she had done nothing wrong, or at least, she wasn’t willing to admit fault. I pulled the suitcase by the handle and walked past her. “I’ll come back for the rest later.”

She turned and went straight to her room, closing the door behind her.

As I strode to my car with my suitcase in tow, a heavy weight settled over my shoulders. Not that long ago, Matt had helped me move in. I’d been looking forward to a future with him, and we were excited about the house on Jasper Street. Everything had been progressing well for us. Until it all fell apart.

How far we had fallen from that dream, and now I was back to square one. I lifted my suitcase into the trunk of my car and shut the door. After I slid into the vehicle, a sense of peace settled over me. I would be okay. No matter where life took me, the Lord was at my side.

A verse I'd memorized popped into my head. Proverbs 16:9. *The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.*

None of this had been what I wanted. That was for certain. But I was counting on God to establish my future, and I would just have to take it one day at a time.

Chapter Twenty-One

The next few days were really hard. I broke down a few times and depression set in, but I was determined not to let it beat me. I thought about Matt a lot, but each time I picked up the phone to call him, I forced myself to put it down. We both needed space from each other and talking before we were ready wouldn't help. Instead, I got on my knees and prayed for guidance and wisdom. I hadn't given back the engagement ring because I was secretly hoping we would work it out.

I called Eileen and let her know I had moved out and was living with my friend Laura. I gave her an earful, and she was an amazing listener. She didn't offer advice but told me she would always be there if I needed to talk.

When Friday rolled around, I was sitting at Laura's dining room table, immersed in my work. I found a handyman who was willing to help me move my desk, but he wasn't free until Saturday, which was fine because Laura didn't care if I sat at the table. Still, I was looking forward to working in my own room instead of the shared space, and I was sure Laura would appreciate that as well.

The doorbell rang, pulling me out of my thoughts. I rose, curious as to who it was. If it was a solicitor, I didn't have time to hear their sales pitch. But when I opened the door, a man stood there holding a huge flower bouquet in a glass vase with several dozen large pink roses, pink peonies, pink and white hydrangeas, and an abundance of lush greenery. I glanced over the man's shoulder to find a van parked in front of the house with the name Blossom & Bloom written on the side.

The man had a red baseball cap on and a huge smile stretched across his face. “These are for Rachel Sinclair.”

My pulse accelerated. “That’s me.” I signed for them and thanked him before he left, then carried the bouquet to the dining room table and lifted out the note.

I’m an idiot, and I hope you can forgive me. You’ll always be the love of my life and nothing will ever change that. We belong together. I’ll call you later. Love, Matt.

My heart swelled and all the pent-up emotions I’d tried to hold in came out in a torrent. For several moments, I allowed myself to cry without holding it in, and then I headed into the bathroom to get a tissue to dry my eyes. I blew my nose and let out a breath. *Lord, this has been one difficult rollercoaster after the next. I love Matt with all my heart, and I’m so thankful he reached out, but everything that happened has been so unsettling. I desperately want to go back to how we were, but I still feel wounded.*

Psalm 143:7 came to mind. *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.* Only the Lord could heal my heart. Circumstances could change from one moment to the next, but the Lord would never change. He would always be there for me, through the joyful highs and the darkest lows. If I’d learned anything, it was that God was my hope no matter what the future held.

I returned to the table and set the bouquet in the middle so I could admire it while I worked. The heady, fragrant scent of the flowers was soothing and pleasant, like a summer breeze blowing through an open window.

I tried to focus on work after that, but my mind kept wandering back to Matt. Clearly, he wanted to reconcile, and I wanted that too. We had both messed up and hurt each other, but I hoped we’d be able to move beyond our flaws to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Around noon, there was a light tap on the door. I got up to answer it, and Matt stood there, tall and handsome, his brown eyes searching mine, a hesitant smile on his face. He was wearing blue scrubs and smelled like fresh, clean soap. “I was

planning to call you after work, but I couldn't wait that long so..."

My eyes widened. "How did you know I moved back here?"

"I stopped by your Mom's yesterday and she told me you'd gone to stay with Laura. I started to drive over but I..." He dropped his head and didn't complete that thought.

"But?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't want to see me. May I come inside so we can talk?"

"Of course." I opened the door wider and stepped aside. He walked in and followed me to the living room, where we sat on the couch.

He took my hands and brought his gaze to mine. "I owe you an apology. I feel terrible about how I ended things. You were right about me not offering the kind of support you needed. We should have handled everything together as a team, but I let you down. This isn't a good excuse, but I was feeling so burdened by work that I could barely deal with all the details of the wedding planning. I didn't have much energy left at the end of the day to handle it the way I should have."

"I understand your job has been rough. Hopefully, over time you'll adjust to the schedule and workload."

He shook his head. "I nearly ruined the most important relationship in my life because my job got the best of me. I knew being a doctor would be strenuous, but I did a lot of soul-searching the last couple of days and I reached out to a buddy of mine from med school who works in Urgent Care. He said the hours are more predictable as they have set hours and shifts, and the workload is more manageable. He also said the staff have a great camaraderie and the overall morale is good."

"Are you thinking of leaving your current job?"

He nodded. "He told me about an open position and I already applied for it. I have an interview tomorrow."

“That’s great!” A renewed sense of hope filled me and I reached forward to hug him.

He pulled me into his arms, kissing the sides of my face and then brushing his lips over mine. “I don’t ever want to feel that way again. The thought of not having you in my life sent me to a really dark place.”

“Me too. I was depressed, but I was trying to trust God through it.”

He chuckled softly. “I did a good deal of praying and seeking God’s will too.”

Regret clenched in my chest as I considered all the ways I could have prevented this situation. “I need to apologize as well. When we get married, we have to leave and cleave. I wasn’t being assertive enough with Mom, and it damaged my relationship with you and your parents. I’m so embarrassed. What must they think about Mom and me?”

“They’ve calmed down. When I told them what happened between us, they were pretty distraught. They love you and know you were doing your best. They’re not even upset with Linda anymore.” He paused. “Mom said she noticed how much your mother beamed at the mention of being set up on a date. She thinks your mom is lonely, and it affected the way she dealt with everything.”

“She’s right about that, and I’m glad she’s empathetic. But Mom has to learn to deal with her issues so she doesn’t cross so many lines. When you stopped by her house, did she tell you we’d had an argument?”

He nodded. “Yep. She apologized to me, by the way.”

“That’s good. I’m glad she did that.”

He took my hands, gave them an encouraging squeeze, and then laced our fingers together. “Are you willing to start over and plan the simple wedding we wanted initially?”

My heart melted and tears pricked at the corner of my eyes, but they were happy tears. “Yes, and this time, we’ll plan all of it. We make all the decisions.”

He grinned. “That’s music to my ears.”

“Trust me, I feel the same way.”

“Are you sorry we lost the home on Jasper Street?” he asked.

“Yes and no. I loved that house, but it wasn’t worth the trouble we had to go through. I put too much stock in having an amazing dream home when I should have been more concerned with the state of our relationship. At the end of the day, all I want is to be with you, and it doesn’t matter where that is. I’ll live in a shack if that’s all that’s available.”

He laughed. “We both have good jobs, so there’s not much chance of that. We’ll find something we like. God knows best, right?”

I nodded. “Yes, He does.”

He shifted. “I hate to leave, but I have to get back to work. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“That sounds great.”

We embraced again, and he kissed me tenderly one last time. The heavy weight of grief and doubt that had rested on my shoulders lifted, leaving me with a sense of freedom I hadn’t felt in quite a while.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too. So much.”

He smiled and brushed a lock of hair out of my face. “No matter what the future holds, we’ll deal with it together. We’re a team.”

“Yes.” And I knew at that moment that everything was going to be all right.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A few weeks passed, and I settled into a simple rhythm. Laura and I loved hanging out together. It was good to be back and to have a friend to touch base with regularly. She had started seeing a new guy, so we spent countless nights staying up late, talking about him after she returned home from her dates.

Matt got the job at the urgent care he told me about, and having a shift with consistent hours made it easier to see each other. We even joined a Bible study at church for young couples, and life was so much better. I felt more grounded, more balanced and at peace than I ever had before. We ate dinner together most evenings, and the best part was Matt was less tired and more present in the moment. I was thrilled for him because he seemed happier with a lighter load.

As to the wedding planning, we talked in depth about what we wanted and we both agreed on finding a venue that was close to nature. We visited a few locations, and there was one in particular that stood out from the rest. It was a different beach location from the one Mom and I had gone to, and it had a more secluded setting, as the weddings took place inside a spacious structure attached to a restaurant instead of right on the beach. I preferred that, anyway, because I valued privacy. There was a huge floor-to-ceiling window that nearly covered the entire wall with a stunning view of the ocean. The reception would occur in a private section of the restaurant's outside veranda, which had amazing views of the ocean.

It was a distance from our church, so if we chose that location, we'd have to get married on-site to make it easier for

our guests. We needed more time to make a decision, but we were leaning toward signing a contract.

The future was looking optimistic, but there was still one thing that felt incomplete. Mom and I hadn't spoken at all. Having a break from the chaos had helped tremendously, but I missed her and hated that we hadn't resolved our issues. There was a heavy pain in my chest when I thought of her sitting alone at home, even though I knew she brought this on herself. I prayed every day that God would work in her heart and guide her toward self-reflection and growth. Until she owned up to what she'd done, our relationship would remain on shaky ground. I truly wanted her in my life, but I would have to limit contact if she didn't change. I refused to feel that helpless ever again. And I wouldn't jeopardize what I had with Matt.

Midway through the week, Eileen called and asked if I'd like to meet for lunch at Country Cuisine, a new restaurant in town. Due to work, I had limited time, but I had an hour to spare so I happily agreed.

When I walked in, the place had a warm, cozy vibe. A vintage-looking sign had the specials for the day, and a few paintings of landscapes, barns, and scenic prairies hung on the rustic wooden walls. The hardwood tables and chairs looked as if they'd come from an antique store, and the servers wore yellow and white checkered shirts. The room was bright and inviting because of the enormous windows that peered out into the street.

Eileen had already found a table, and she waved at me from a space in the back. As I walked toward her, I passed a glass case next to the cash register displaying several pies and a few delicate pastries. My stomach rumbled.

Once I reached her, she stood and hugged me. "How are you? I'm so glad you could break away from work."

"Me too. It's great to see you." We both took our seats as a server walked over and handed us menus. "I'm doing well," I said. "By the way, I've never eaten here. What looks appetizing to you?"

“The balsamic pear and goat cheese chicken salad is delicious. It has candy pecans that are to die for. That’s what I plan to get.” She closed her menu and set it aside on the table.

“Oh, that sounds good.”

“And because I’m getting a salad,”—she winked playfully—“I plan to follow that up with a slice of lemon cream pie.”

My eyes widened and I let out a snicker. “I think I’ll do the same.”

Once we’d ordered, I asked Eileen how she’d been doing and she told me about her grandson’s birthday party and some drama when their dog jumped up on the table and started licking the cake.

“He went after that cake like it was his last meal, and he even pulled it to the ground. The cat leaped in as well and they demolished it in seconds. You should have seen the horrified look on my daughter-in-law’s face.”

“I can only imagine. Did your grandson cry?”

“No, he barely noticed because he was so engrossed in his playtime with his friends. My son promised to go to the store to pick up a new cake, but you won’t believe what he returned with.”

“What?” My eyes widened.

“He went to the same bakery, but they only had feminine-looking cakes left, so he asked if there was any way they could make one for a boy on such short notice. The worker told him he was in luck. There was a company that had planned a disaster drill, and they thought it would be funny to request a large cake with a disaster zone theme. Apparently, the CEO called in sick and they postponed the event. They canceled the order with the bakery, so my son was able to purchase the cake at half-price.”

“No way.”

She tried to hold back a smile. “The cake had two cars that had crashed into each other, a crumbling building, a police officer directing traffic, and two emergency workers practicing

first aid on injured people. My daughter-in-law cracked up when she saw it.” She burst into laughter, covering her mouth when a few customers stared at us.

“What did your grandson think?”

“Oh, he and his friends loved it. It was a tremendous hit. One boy told his mom he wanted a disaster theme for his next birthday.”

Eileen continued her story, and she had me in stitches. By the time our waitress brought out our salads, we were both laughing hysterically.

She waved her hands in front of her face. “Okay, I have to stop or I’m going to choke on my food.”

A grin tugged at my lips. “I’ll try not to say anything to make you laugh.”

We ate in silence for a few moments, enjoying the tender chicken and soft goat cheese. “This is delicious,” I said. “Good choice.”

After a while, Eileen folded her hands on the table and leaned forward, her mood growing more serious. “Tell me, what’s been going on with you?”

I had already told her over the phone that Matt and I had reconciled, so I didn’t need to update her on that. “We’ve been making decisions together about the wedding. It’s nice that he’s more involved this time, and it’s good we’re on the same page as far as what we want.”

She smiled. “I’m glad to hear it.”

I fidgeted with my napkin before turning to glance at her. “How’s Mom? Have you seen her?”

“I invited her over for dinner about a week after you left, and she cried on my shoulder. She feels terrible about what happened. She knows she was wrong.”

“Then why hasn’t she contacted me to apologize?”

“Your mom is embarrassed about her behavior, and she said she wanted to give you space. I guess she figures your

heart will soften toward her if more time has passed.”

“I suppose she’ll call when she’s ready, but this is the longest we’ve ever gone without talking. Hopefully, she’s not too lonely.”

“Actually, I may be able to set your mind at ease on that account.” She glanced around and then leaned in confidentially. “I saw the same man drive up to the house and pick her up two times. They both wore nice clothing, and it looked like they were going out for dinner.”

My jaw dropped open. “Well, that’s a recent development I didn’t see coming. Has she said anything to you about him?”

Eileen shook her head. “Nope. And I didn’t want to come across as nosey, so I refrained from asking.”

“Well, now I’m really curious. I wonder how she met this guy?”

“I don’t know. Looks as if your mom doesn’t tell you everything.”

“To be honest, I’m glad she’s focusing on herself for once instead of obsessing over me. It’s time for her to get out and do things like that.”

Eileen nodded thoughtfully. “It’s a step in the right direction.”

Once we finished eating, we ordered two slices of the lemon cream pie and it was so good I wanted to ask for a second helping, but I didn’t.

“Thanks for choosing this place, Eileen. I’ll have to bring Matt here sometime soon. He’ll like it.”

She nodded once. “Glad you enjoyed it. And let’s keep in touch. We may no longer be neighbors, but that doesn’t mean we can’t meet up once in a while.”

“I would love that. You’ve been a godsend throughout this entire situation, and I would definitely like to stay connected.”

We paid the bill and walked out the double doors leading in and out of the restaurant. We’d barely taken a few steps

when I spotted Mom standing with a tall man in the parking lot. He had gray hair and a mustache, and he wasn't bad looking for an older gentleman. He took out his key fob and locked the door. They were laughing about something, and then she suddenly glanced up and noticed Eileen and me. The smile slipped off her face and she looked like a deer in headlights.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I could see the panic in her eyes as she stared back at us. She whispered something to the man, and he looked our way, a friendly smile on his face.

I glanced at Eileen. “Did you know she would be here?”

She shook her head. “No. Trust me, I wouldn’t try to force a meeting like this.”

I took a deep breath and walked toward Mom. I had to get to my car, and she was on her way in, so there was no getting out of this. My nerves were in a heightened state as I approached her, and my pulse picked up the closer I got. The guy she was with put his hand on her arm and gave her a reassuring squeeze. It was strange to see a man standing at her side so protectively, as she’d never been with anyone besides my dad. When I reached her, we stood there, staring at each other for a long moment, neither of us knowing what to say.

I finally broke the silence. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Rach.” Her voice was shaky. “I didn’t expect to find you here.”

“I was having lunch with Eileen.”

Mom’s eyes flickered over to Eileen, and she smiled. “It’s good to see you.”

“Likewise,” Eileen said, returning the smile.

The man glanced my way, so I smiled and offered my hand. “Hi, I’m Rachel.”

He gripped my hand, seeming pleased. “I’m Tom. Your mom has shared wonderful things about you.”

“Thank you.”

Mom jumped to attention. “Please forgive my bad manners. Tom, you’ve heard me talk about Rachel, and Eileen is my next-door neighbor.”

Tom leaned in to greet Eileen. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She glanced at all of us. “Well, I should get going. I have some other things I need to do today.” She placed a hand on my shoulder and leaned in. “Are you okay?”

I nodded and gave her a reassuring smile. “We’ll stay in touch.”

After she left, I turned to my mother and her friend. “So, how did the two of you meet?”

“He’s in my strength and balance class for seniors at the gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We’ve seen each other there for nearly a year.”

Now that she’d mentioned it, I remembered her telling me about Tom when we were shopping for a wedding dress. She’d wanted him to ask her out but said he seemed content to remain friends.

Tom chuckled. “I recently worked up the courage to invite your mom on a date and she graciously gave me a chance. Didn’t think she would, though. Glad I took a risk.”

Her face lit up and she pushed her hand against his shoulder. “Oh, stop. I made it easy. I provided you with a few hints that I was available.”

Hearing Mom flirt with this guy was like being in a different dimension. I’d never seen her act that way before, but she seemed happy.

She glanced at me uncertainly. “I know this may seem sudden, but we’ve known each other for a while, and we often interacted before or after classes.”

She was acting concerned, as if waiting for my approval, so I cleared my throat. “That’s great. I’m glad it worked out.”

“Tell you what,” Tom said, suddenly. “I’ll go get a table while you catch up with Rachel.”

Mom smiled appreciatively at him and then turned back to me after he left. We both moved out of the way as two people got into the car a few feet away from us. They backed out and exited the parking lot.

There was an awkward silence, and I could tell Mom was struggling to find the right words. “I’ve been meaning to call you,” she finally said, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because I was ashamed.” She wiped one eye and then the other. “I didn’t want to admit that my actions led to the conflict between you and Matt, so I lived in denial for quite some time. But once you were gone, I had to face what I did.” She let out a shuddering breath. “I am so, so sorry, Rachel. When I look back on all of it, it was like I was in some sort of brain fog. I wanted my vision of your wedding so badly that I didn’t care who I hurt in the process. I deceived myself into believing I was doing what was best for you. But you were right, I was only doing what was best for me.”

“Thank you for acknowledging that.”

“You must think I’m a terrible mother for imposing my preferences on you instead of allowing you to make your own choices. I regret that, and I can only hope that one day you’ll forgive me—”

“I already have.” I pulled her into a tight hug and we stood that way for a long time, both of us sniffing. Eventually, we drew back and I cleared my throat. “I won’t pretend that I’m not resentful over some things that happened over the years, but I don’t believe you’re a terrible mother. You’re the one person who has always been there for me, and you made me a priority. We have a complicated relationship, but we’ll work it out.” I took a breath. “Maybe in the future, we should consider

counseling, not so I can point the finger at you, but to improve our communication.”

She pressed her lips together and nodded. “If that’s what it will take, I’m willing to do it.”

“There’s someone at my church who offers counseling. You could meet him and see what you think.”

She nodded. “Sure.”

“And moving forward, I need to have strict boundaries...”

“I understand that, and I won’t interfere.”

“By the way, Matt and I reconciled.”

Her face lit up and she placed a hand over her heart. “I knew he would come around. That man loves you. Didn’t I tell you it would all work out?”

I nodded. “You did.”

“So, is the wedding back on?” There was a hopeful glint in her eyes.

“Yes, but we’re doing all the planning on our own this time.”

She looked disappointed but she didn’t argue. “That’s understandable.”

“We decided that we still want something nice, but we probably won’t invite as many people as we initially discussed.”

“That’s perfectly fine.”

“We’ll let you and his parents know more once we’ve made the decisions.” I hesitated. “Were you able to get a refund on the deposits you put down?” That had worried me ever since the breakup. I’d been upset with Mom, but that didn’t mean I wanted her to lose money.

“I got the deposit back from the florist.” She winced and glanced down, avoiding eye contact. “I guess it’s confession time. I wasn’t entirely honest with you about the hotel not providing a refund. There would have been a cancelation fee,

but they never said I couldn't recover my deposit. I held off on doing anything at first because I truly believed you and Matt would get back together. But then I went ahead and canceled because I knew the ballroom wasn't what you wanted."

My mouth dropped open in disbelief. "So...you lied to me."

Her face flushed and she nodded. "There's no excuse for that, and I'm sorry. It was wrong, and I shouldn't have done it."

I was uncertain how to address that. The betrayal twisted in my stomach and I wanted to tell her how manipulative she'd been. I lifted up a quick prayer, asking the Lord to guide me in what to say next. He brought to mind the time I'd lied to Matt about being happy with the hotel ballroom. Who was I to throw stones when I hadn't told the truth either? The Lord continually showed mercy to me, and He wanted me to do the same.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Thank you for being honest. You could have hidden it from me, so I appreciate you coming clean. I'm not pleased about it, but I'm glad you realize it was wrong."

We talked a little longer and then I told her I needed to get back to work. Once we parted ways, I reflected on our discussion during the drive home. It hadn't been comfortable, but I felt good about it. Mom had taken responsibility for her part and she was willing to do counseling in the future. That was huge. I smiled as I thought about her and Tom. It had caught me off guard, but I was happy for her. Maybe it would be one of the elements that would help her move forward.

* * *

Mom slid into my car and I pulled away from the curb. Matt's parents had invited us to dinner, and I was slightly nervous, given how things had ended the last time. Several weeks had passed since Mom and I spoke in the parking lot of Country Cuisine, and she and I had gradually begun talking more.

Things were still a little tense between us but we were both making efforts to see each other. The most telling change on her part was that she didn't talk about the wedding plans unless I brought them up. A couple of times she started giving advice and caught herself before taking it further. She was trying, and I truly appreciated that.

"I know what you're thinking," she said once we were on our way.

"What?"

"You're worried I'll cause a problem."

I smiled slightly. "No, actually, I'm not. I think you learned your lesson and you've made efforts to make amends."

She brightened. "Thank you for having confidence in me. I won't let you down."

Mom had called Jackie the previous week to apologize for leaving them out of the wedding plans and not taking any of their suggestions. Jackie had been very gracious and said she was sorry for pushing the family heirloom on me. The two of them talked through it, and Jackie invited us over for dinner.

We listened to calming music on the radio the rest of the way and neither of us spoke. When I pulled up in front of their house and parked, I let out a breath. "All right. Let's try this again."

Mom clutched her purse and opened the car door. "And I'll do better this time."

Once we were on the porch, I rang the doorbell. A few seconds later, Matt answered and smiled broadly. "You're right on time. Mom just finished the meat sauce for the spaghetti." He pulled me into a hug, then stepped back and welcomed Mom in the same manner.

In the past, Matt had made efforts not to argue with Mom or get in the middle, and I saw the wisdom in that now. He wasn't afraid to be more assertive in the future, but he also didn't want to burn bridges, and I appreciated that. He'd helped me get the rest of my things from her house, and they'd chatted for a while. Mom apologized again, and he was honest

with her about his frustrations. She seemed to take it well, and I truly believed circumstances would improve.

Jackie had a huge smile on her face as she walked over and greeted us. “There you are.” She kissed me on the cheek, and then she and Mom embraced.

We exchanged pleasantries until Dave humorously declared he was starving, and that we should all sit down. He quickly came over and hugged Mom and me in one big group hug that ended in laughter. Then he left to help Jackie bring out platters of spaghetti and meat sauce, along with a large green salad and crusty garlic bread.

The smell of garlic, rosemary, and oregano wafted through the room. “It smells so good,” I said.

We all sat at the table and I was thankful there weren’t any awkward pauses or uncomfortable moments. Everyone wanted to enjoy the evening and let the past stay in the past.

After we filled our plates, Dave raised his water glass and said, “To new beginnings!”

We all clinked glasses and I peeked at Mom. I had to give her credit. Most people would have seemed nervous, but she was completely relaxed. When she caught me watching her, she winked.

Dave turned to Mom. “We love Rachel, and we couldn’t be happier that she and Matt worked it out. We gave him such a hard time when we found out they broke up.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mom said. “Matt is wonderful. And I told Rachel, ‘Don’t you worry. That man loves you.’”

Matt chuckled. “You aren’t wrong about that. Rachel is, and will always be, the love of my life.” He took my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm.

“Right back at you, handsome.” I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

After that, the conversation was lively and fun. I passed the garlic bread to Mom, who selected a piece. When she

turned to pass the basket to Dave, the slice of bread slipped from her hand and landed on his lap.

Everyone stopped talking and Mom's eyes widened in shock. "Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. I'm such a klutz." She placed her napkin over her mouth and a giggle slipped out.

We all started laughing, and I patted her leg reassuringly. "It could have happened to any of us."

Dave picked up the bread, eyed it for a moment, and then took a bite. "It's still good. Isn't there something about a twenty-second rule?"

"That's if it falls on the floor," Jackie said, chuckling. "It's only been in your lap."

He shrugged. "Well, regardless, I'd never pass up a piece of garlic bread."

The old saying that laughter was the best medicine might have seemed cliché, but it rang true in our case. We moved on from the previous tension, choosing to forget as we laughed, ate our food, and made new memories.

After dinner, Matt and I did the dishes while our parents sat on the back porch, drinking homemade lemonade. "That went well," I said. I washed a plate and handed it to him to rinse and dry.

"Much better than I thought it would." He chuckled. "The best part was the flying garlic bread."

I let out a snicker. "Mom saved the moment by giggling. It could have been way more awkward."

"I agree. When your mom is like that, she's a lot of fun to be around."

"She's been more relaxed lately, wouldn't you agree?"

He nodded and put several plates away. "Definitely."

"I think Tom might have something to do with that."

He turned and drew me into his arms, grinning. "Love has a way of bringing out the best in people."

My heart squeezed in my chest. “I agree one hundred percent.” I leaned in and kissed him, and he tightened his embrace.

We finished up in the kitchen and joined our parents on the back porch. They were talking and laughing, and Jackie grinned when we arrived.

“So, I have an announcement,” Matt said, putting his arm around my waist.

All eyes eagerly turned to look at him.

“We signed a contract for the beach venue, and we’re getting married in six months.”

Jackie’s eyes widened. “How did you manage to work that out? I would think they’d be booked for at least a year or more.”

“There was a cancelation,” I said, glancing at Mom. We both snickered, and it felt a little like *déjà vu*. “I took a few pictures.” I scrolled until I found them on my phone and then I passed it around.

“These are gorgeous views,” Mom said. “Great choice.”

Matt’s parents were equally appreciative once they saw the photos. “What’s the headcount going to be?” Dave asked.

I cleared my throat. “Matt and I crunched some numbers and decided we won’t have to exclude anyone from the list.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” Mom said, chuckling.

I walked over and gave her a side hug. “The attached restaurant is catering the food, and they’re a lot cheaper than the hotel, so we should be able to accommodate everyone.”

“Good. It couldn’t have worked out better,” she said.

After that, we sat under the stars and continued the conversation. I was glad we were all getting along, and an overwhelming sense of peace washed over me. In the face of conflict, our parents had rallied to bring about a unified front. Matt and I had a wedding to look forward to in six months,

and Mom and I were connecting better than we had in a long, long time.

Nothing could divide us anymore. We were a unit, and I felt like we could take on the world. The evening had been a success. A wave of gratitude filled my heart, and I had a renewed hope for the future. Most of all, I was thankful and ready to move on to the next phase in my life. God had truly answered prayer.

Epilogue

Six months later...

I glanced around the simple room we'd transformed into a romantic haven and sucked in a breath. Delicate yellow lights draped the upper walls, flower arrangements of pink and white roses stood on pedestals, and small vases full of pink orchids sat on shelves, adding color throughout the interior.

The wedding march played over the loudspeakers, and I stepped onto the ivory aisle runner sprinkled with pink rose petals, a sense of delight spreading through me. This moment would change the rest of my life, and I was ready for the next chapter. All the guests stood, and my gaze swept over them, taking in their joyful expressions.

Matt and his groomsmen waited at the front, dressed in cream-colored slacks and matching jackets. His brother, Jason, flew out for the wedding, as well as his old college buddy, Jake. My bridesmaids, Laura and Sarah, wore full-length pink chiffon dresses with sweetheart necklines and short ruffled sleeves. Sarah had flown in from New York a few days prior to the wedding, so we had time to catch up beforehand.

I'd chosen a minimalist bridal gown that suited me perfectly. There were no embellishments or intricate detailing, but it was elegant in its simplicity. It had an A-line silhouette with no sleeves and pleats at the waist. The sheen on the fabric caught the light, providing a luminous effect, and it displayed a timeless, classic design that I adored.

I wore Jackie's heirloom necklace: an opal with a diamond halo. Grandma Helen's pearl bracelet encircled my wrist, and I'd chosen to wear Mom's diamond earrings, which had pleased her to no end. My hair fell down my back in a Dutch braid with small white flowers woven throughout.

When I reached the front, Matt clasped my hand and laid it over his arm. He gaped at me with a sense of awe. "You're so beautiful."

"You look amazing," I said.

We had already had a first look before the ceremony where our photographer took pictures, but Matt gazed at me now in wonder.

Our pastor greeted the guests and gave a sermon from 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. *Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

When he finished, he asked us to face each other so we could proceed with the exchange of rings and marital vows. I glanced over at Mom sitting in the front row with Tom at her side. She exuded grace and elegance in her peach-colored dress. The sheath silhouette came with a lacy peach jacket and the dress reached below the knee. She'd had her hair styled in a French twist, adorned with delicate seashell hairpins. She teared up slightly, but her radiant smile reflected joy and pride. Matt's parents sat together in the front row on the other side of the room. Dave had a wide smile, and his eyes flickered with warmth and approval. He had on a cream-colored suit, similar to what the groomsmen wore. Next to him, Jackie had a serene expression, her eyes glimmering with tenderness. She looked lovely in her sea-foam green, tea-length dress with short sleeves and a tie at the waist. The garment had an overlay with embroidered flowers that sparkled with scattered sequins. Pearl combs secured her hair in place.

I turned back to Matt, and it was a solemn moment. He had tears in his eyes as he lovingly looked at me. Suddenly, a tern

seabird swooped into the chapel through an open door, its wings fluttering with the light breeze, and it landed on Matt's head. The audience burst into laughter and I covered my mouth to restrain the giggles that were trying to escape. Matt was initially taken aback, but then he chuckled as well. With a good-natured smile, he gently tried to coax the seabird to find another resting spot, but it refused to move. Eventually, his best man moved forward and lifted the bird off his head. The bird took flight in his hands and managed to escape out the door. Matt brushed off his hair and leaned in, whispering into my ear. "Did it poop on me?"

I stifled a grin. "No, you're good."

There were chuckles in the audience from those who'd heard us. We somehow composed ourselves and found the strength to say our vows without laughing. After that, the pastor declared us husband and wife. Matt fervently kissed me, and then we walked over to Mom. She threw her arms around me while Tom shook Matt's hand and slapped him on the back.

"You looked absolutely stunning up there," Mom said. "That dress was pure perfection on you. I'm so happy for you, sweetheart." She turned to Matt. "Come here, you."

He stepped closer and gave her an enthusiastic hug.

"Thank you for making my daughter so happy. I couldn't be more pleased to have you as a son-in-law."

"You're welcome, and thank you for raising such an amazing daughter."

We moved on to Matt's parents, giving them hugs and receiving their congratulations.

"We're so proud of you," Jackie said. "And that bird situation... That couldn't have gone better if you'd planned it. We were cracking up. I'm glad it didn't urinate on your head. Or did it?" She gave him a questioning look.

Matt snickered. "No, thank goodness."

After that, we strode down the aisle to "Rondeau" by Jean-Joseph Mouret. The wedding party followed, and Laura and

Sarah gave me hugs once we were outside. Jason and Jake did as well, and they all congratulated us.

Our guests began streaming out, eager to greet us. Eileen ran over in a navy blue and white polka dot sundress and a large wide-brimmed hat with a navy-blue ribbon tied around it. She had a mischievous sparkle in her eyes and her infectious smile lit up her face. A gust of wind blew through the area, lifting her hat up, but she held it down with her hand.

“Congratulations! You did it!” She snickered and leaned in. “The episode with the bird was hilarious. We all knew your love would take flight, but we never fathomed it would come with feathers and a beak. That was pure comedy.”

I giggled at her joke. “It added to the whimsical vibe.”

Our photographer had already taken photos before the ceremony, so we headed to the reception nearby without delay. Each table had a white tablecloth with a light green overlay. Small centerpieces with flower arrangements of pink and ivory roses with delicate baby’s breath created a charming contrast of color. It was all as I had wanted. I kept everything simple and elegant.

We’d asked Izzy to make our wedding cake, and she’d done an amazing job. I was looking forward to trying a slice after our meal.

Mom pulled me aside. “I’ve caused you some frustration and pain in the past, but I want you to know that I’ll always be here for you, and I’ll do my best not to overstep. If I do, I’m counting on you to tell me.”

“Thanks, Mom. I appreciate that.”

She and I had gone to a few counseling sessions together, and it had been beneficial. In fact, she’d started coming to my church, and she and Tom attended the early service. As far as I knew, she was still trying to figure out her relationship with God, but I was glad the Lord was working on her heart.

“You’ve grown into a mature woman,” she said, “and I’m confident you and Matt will have a beautiful marriage ahead of you.”

My eyes filled with tears and I waved a hand in front of my face to keep from crying. “I don’t tell you this enough, but you mean the world to me, and I’m honored to be your daughter. Together, we’ll tackle whatever life throws our way.” And I meant every single word.

Epilogue 2

Two years later...

Matt and I pulled into the parking lot of Country Cuisine and quickly found a space. "There's Tom's car," he said. "Looks like they're already here."

"That's good," I said. "Hopefully, they'll save us a table."

We got out of the vehicle and I opened up the back door to scoop Maddie out of her car seat. She was sleeping soundly and didn't stir when I picked her up. Her thin baby hair swept across her forehead and her chubby cheeks were so pinchable I had to restrain myself from doing just that. She was wearing a cute yellow dress with white flowers and lace at the bottom, and I chose it because Mom had purchased this one for my shower. Matt took the stroller out of the trunk, and he set it up before I placed her in it and locked the straps.

He smirked. "As soon as we go inside, your mom will want to hold her, and she'll wake up."

"I know. Maddie will be grouchy for the first few minutes, and then she'll adjust. Besides, she's already slept a lot today and we need to keep her awake."

My mom was in love with little Maddie, and she'd proven to be a doting grandma. She picked her up any chance she got, and I didn't mind since I wanted the two of them to bond.

We made our way into Country Cuisine and Mom waved us down the second she saw us. We headed over and took our seats. Tom was at her side, and he greeted us with a pleasant smile.

“Can I have the baby?” Mom asked with her hands already out.

I unstrapped Maddie and lifted her up, placing a soft kiss on her cheek. She hadn't woken up yet, but she soon would. I gave her to Mom and then sat down and glanced through the menu. Maddie woke up and Mom swayed back and forth until she settled. Sometime later, after we'd ordered and the server brought our drinks, Mom turned to us with a wide smile. “So... We have news.”

My eyes widened. “We do as well, but if this is what I think it is, our news can wait until another day.”

Mom chuckled. “Oh, don't be silly. I want to hear everything, but after we share ours.”

“Okay then. Share away.” I grinned and my heart pounded a little faster in anticipation of what she was about to say.

She glanced at Tom, and he took her left hand in his, holding it firmly. He looked as happy and proud as a cat who'd just finished a second bowl of cream.

“Well, as you know, Tom and I have been dating for two and a half years now...”

“Yeah?” I prompted.

“And he asked me to marry him yesterday when we went to the beach,” she said excitedly. “I wanted to call and tell you so badly, but I thought it would be better to share this in person.”

“That's wonderful news!” I got out of my seat and immediately hugged her, careful not to disrupt little Maddie, who was still in her arms. “I'm so happy for you both.”

Matt hugged Tom and then we traded places. I gave Tom a hug and Matt embraced my mother.

The right side of Matt's lips quirked up. “We knew this was coming. Rachel and I were saying just the other day that it would surprise us if you didn't get engaged this year.”

Tom chuckled. “I tried to convince Linda to marry me a year ago, but she wasn't ready yet.”

My mouth dropped open. “Mom, you didn’t tell me that.”

She gave me a secretive smile. “I know I’m a blabbermouth, but there are some things I keep to myself.”

Our server brought out our food, and we continued to talk about the upcoming wedding once he left.

“And guess where we plan to get married?” Mom asked.

I had a feeling what she was going to say, but I knew it would bring her joy to share the news herself. “Where?”

She gave me a satisfied grin. “Church, of course.”

That was not what I had expected, but it made me happy. She and Tom had both given their lives to the Lord since they’d started coming to church, and I’d seen so much growth already. “That’s wonderful.”

“And we’ll be having the reception at The Luxury Palace Hotel.”

There it was. That was what I had expected. “You finally get to live the dream.”

She nodded. “And... If I lose ten pounds... Actually, fifteen... I can squeeze into the mermaid gown I bought for your wedding.” She blushed a deep shade of red. “We both knew at the time that it was my dream dress, so I might as well save the money and use it.”

My eyes nearly bugged out. “I thought you returned it.”

She shrugged. “Nope. I stood outside the shop, but I just couldn’t go through with it. It was such a beautiful gown, and a part of me hoped that maybe I’d get to wear it one day. I ended up turning around and taking it home. And it’s a good thing I did because now I have a dress.”

Matt gave me an amused look, and I did my best not to laugh. “Well, I’m glad it all worked out.”

Mom leaned forward slightly. “So, what’s this announcement you wanted to share with us? You aren’t pregnant again, are you?”

I laughed when Matt got a scared look on his face. We loved Maddie to pieces, but she definitely required a lot of work, and we weren't ready for a second child just yet. "No, it's nothing like that, but it's still good news."

"Don't keep us in suspense," Mom said. "What is it?"

I paused for effect. "Do you remember the house on Jasper Street? The dream house I wanted so badly?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"Well, it went back on the market. The owners are moving to an even bigger house."

"No way. Are you serious?" Her eyes grew large.

"Yep. They accepted our offer." It had happened so quickly that I hadn't had time to get emotional, but talking about it brought tears to my eyes.

"Oh, Rachel. You're crying." Mom got up and gave me a side hug so she could continue holding Maddie. She loved me but wasn't about to give up the baby.

Matt put his arm around me and rested his head against mine. "Rachel was so disappointed when we lost it the first time. When I found out it was up for sale, I made sure our offer was so good the owners wouldn't turn it down."

We had lived in a modest apartment for the last two years and had saved up quite a bit. I rubbed his shoulder. "I'm so thankful for this guy for making it happen. And I'm looking forward to many new memories. You and Tom can join us around that firepit and we'll all roast marshmallows."

Mom nodded enthusiastically. "I would love that."

"I wish you all the best," Tom said. "And if you need help with moving, just let me know."

"We might have to take you up on it," Matt said.

I looked at Mom and winked. "And I would love to help you plan the wedding. I have all sorts of ideas."

She burst out laughing and pointed a finger at me. "I'm sure you've been waiting to say that for a long time."

I snickered. “Oh, yeah. A very long time. By the way, I have some great decoration ideas we can look at.”

She let out a cackle, and we all laughed so hard that people started to stare. Maddie looked at us with wide eyes, trying to figure out what had gotten into us.

It was a good moment. One of the best. The kind you remembered for a very, very long time.

As we left the restaurant, my heart filled with a deep sense of joy and appreciation. My family was so important to me, and I eagerly awaited many more moments like these. The future held possibilities and potential, and together, we would embark on the journey before us.

I thought of Proverbs 3:5-6, which had become my life verse. *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

I clung to that promise, knowing that God would never fail me, no matter what came my way.

* * *

Thank you so much for taking the time to read, *The Wedding Standoff*. Evangeline appreciates your support more than you know. If you enjoyed this book, she would like to ask you a favor. Would you be kind enough to leave a review? It would be greatly appreciated!

Feel free to get in touch if you have questions or comments at Evangelineromancebooks@gmail.com

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About the Author

Evangeline Kelly writes clean and Christian romance with characters that grow and change through the difficulties of life. As a child, she enjoyed writing stories for her grandma but didn't pursue that passion until much later in life. She worked for twenty years as a social worker with foster children and tries to incorporate what she learned about human behavior into her books. Evangeline lives north of Los Angeles and loves spending time with her husband and family. Evangeline desires to take her readers through a spiritual journey and hopes her writing will bring glory and honor to her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.