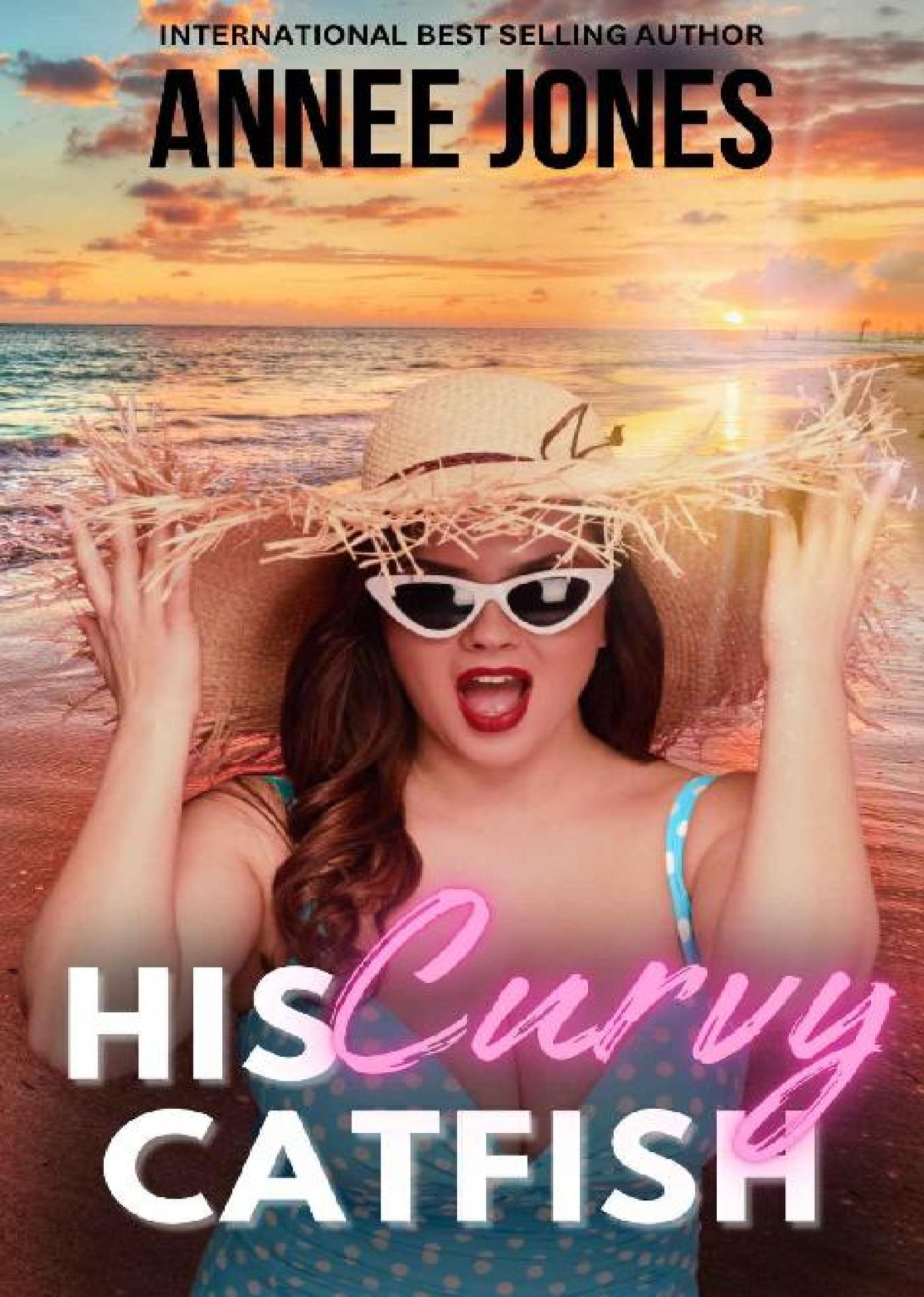


INTERNATIONAL BEST SELLING AUTHOR

ANNEE JONES



HIS *Curvy*
CATFISH



His Curvy Catfish

ANNEE JONES

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His Curvy Catfish

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Cast of Characters

Dani Lane—Model

Jessie Lane—Dani's younger sister, Veterinarian

Steven Martinez—Jessie's fiancé, Medical Resident

Marshall Lane—Dani's father, Dermatologist

Felicia Lane—Dani's mother, Civic Leader

Brayden "Ace" Porter—Server/ former Air Force pilot

Neil Porter—Brayden's brother, Actor

Willow Renee—Dani's modeling agent

Mariah Jones—Dani's best friend, Nurse

Dax Ingram—Dani's ex-boyfriend, Model

Dr. Gillian McCree—Brayden's therapist

Kim Winters—Brayden's ex-girlfriend

Rainey McCall—Yoga instructor

Buddy—Brayden's lab/ pit bull mix

Chapter One



Dani

“Wait!” Mariah cried just as I was about to hit play on the TV remote. It had been another discouraging day for me schlepping around Los Angeles on go-sees. Hence, I was exhausted and more than ready to take my mind off actual reality by escaping into the land of reality TV instead. At least then I wouldn’t have to think about the way each of the designers at my modeling casting calls frowned after I put on their samples and demonstrated my walk. It was clear I hadn’t booked any jobs. The day had been a complete waste, as I knew it would be. And, unfortunately, so did my agent, who had been making no attempt to hide her displeasure with me over the past few weeks and was now tracking my every move like a hawk.

“What’s wrong?” I asked my best friend and roommate as she hopped up off the couch. She’d only just sat down after getting home from her late shift at the hospital and swapping her scrubs for a pajama set. “Did

you get called back to work?" Mariah was a nurse and sometimes had on-call shifts.

"No," she said, shaking her head, making even more of her unruly red curls come loose from her messy bun. She walked through the living room of our apartment to the adjacent kitchen. "I just want to make some popcorn so I can relax and enjoy this train wreck of a dating show to the fullest. Who are these people, anyway? They certainly know how to bring the drama, that's for sure."

"Hot messes," I replied, settling back against the sofa cushions, and pulling my favorite cornflower blue lap blanket over me. "They must be really desperate for love if they're willing to do anything for it. I mean, they don't blink an eye if cheating and lying will get them what they want. At least I haven't sunk so low that I've needed to fake my way into a relationship."

"I don't think love has anything to do with what makes people go on these shows," said Mariah as she tore the wrapper off a bag of microwave popcorn. "They're angling for fame in my opinion, and the fortune that goes along with that for the lucky ones who manage to stay in the public eye."

"You're right," I said. "It's the lure of fame that's the real driving factor. If they only knew. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy."

"Oh, Dani." Mariah put the bag of popcorn into the microwave and pressed the start button. "You haven't been able to book any new jobs?"

"No," I said dejectedly. "And Willow is furious."

“Really?” Mariah leaned over the shiny white granite countertop of the kitchen island. “To be honest, I wouldn’t have known you’d put on weight at all if you hadn’t told me.”

“Well, it’s obvious to everybody else,” I told her. “Especially Willow. She called me in to her office at the agency on Monday and said that she’s getting tired of receiving complaints from designers that I don’t look like my pictures. She said that if I don’t stop yo-yo’ing up and down and get my weight under control, she’ll have to let me go.”

“No! She didn’t really threaten you with losing her representation, did she? I mean, you’ve been with the Willow Renee Agency ever since their scout discovered you at the mall back in middle school!”

“Unfortunately, that’s exactly what she did,” I said glumly, pulling the blanket up higher over my too-thick middle. “And she reminded me that she’s the best in the biz—which she is, given that she’s a former supermodel herself. Sometimes I wish my parents had stepped in and forbidden me to pursue this stupid career.”

“Dani,” said Mariah. “You can’t be serious. You’ve made a lot of money at a very young age, and you’re a household name. Your pictures are everywhere. Practically every woman in the U.S. wishes she was in your shoes. Would you really give it all up?”

“I’m not sure,” I replied, twisting the thin threads of the blanket between my fingers. “I just hate having to be on a diet all the time, and to have my body inspected and criticized like some lab rat. I was so hungry today I almost passed out at my last go-see. Thank God another

model noticed that I wasn't feeling well and handed me a few pretzels she got from the vending machine. However, that maxed out my calorie count for today, so I had to skip dinner." As if on cue, my stomach rumbled.

Mariah gasped. "No, tell me you are not doing this. Nothing is worth starving yourself and jeopardizing your health. I wouldn't blame you one bit for quitting the industry if that's what it's come to. To be honest, I've had no idea how you've put up with the constant judgment for so long. It's not fair for them to treat models as less than human, like you don't have any feelings. I don't think I'd be able to handle it. I know I'm not perfect, but I definitely don't need people reminding me of my every flaw every five seconds."

I paused to reflect. "Yeah, it's a lot to take. At first, it was flattering to be getting so much attention, and it was easier when I was younger. I didn't have to think about my weight back then. My parents also enjoyed the recognition my modeling career brought them, and I was proud to be in a position to help them."

"I can see that," said Mariah. "I'll bet your dad's dermatology practice exploded."

"You got that right," I said. "He manages three different clinics now and supervises a whole host of dermatologic medical residents. That's how my sister met her fiancé—she stopped in to see my dad about something or other one day a couple of years ago and met Steven. And I know my mom's used our relationship to help fundraise for the organizations where she serves on the board."

“Those are not necessarily bad things in and of themselves,” said Mariah thoughtfully, “but not if you’re starting to feel used.”

I couldn’t agree more. I ran my fingers through my long honey-brown hair and sighed, listening to the steady pop-popping of the hot kernels in the microwave. “Honestly, I don’t know how I feel anymore. I think it will be good for me to get away next week to attend my sister’s wedding. I just need to get out of L.A. and spend some quality time with Dax. It feels like it’s been ages since we’ve seen each other.”

“Has he been busy with jobs lately?” asked Mariah.

“Yes,” I replied, reaching for my phone to review the last text exchange I’d had with my boyfriend. “His modeling career is going a lot better than mine, that’s for sure. He was in London a couple of weeks ago and now Paris. But he promised he’d be back in time to come with me to Jessie and Steven’s wedding. They’re getting married at Hillcrest Resort up in the wine country.”

“Oooh, that sounds like the perfect place to get married,” said Mariah as the microwave dinged.

“The resort definitely looks amazing from the website. In fact, Dax and I decided to go up a couple of days before everyone else arrives. I’m hoping he’ll get ideas.” I smiled, thinking of my gorgeous boyfriend with his chiseled all-American good looks.

Mariah laughed and retrieved a large serving bowl from one of the cupboards. She pulled the bag of hot popcorn from the microwave and opened it, sending a swirl of steam rising to the ceiling. The smell of the buttery, salty food flooded the apartment, and my

stomach screamed with desire. I reached for the giant plastic water bottle on the coffee table and hastily drank, hoping that the liquid would somehow drown out my hunger.

“Gabe keeps trying to talk to me about tying the knot,” Mariah continued, pouring the fluffy white kernels into the bowl. “But I’m just not ready to get serious right now. I’m pretty sure he’s the one, but I don’t want to rush into anything. I’d hate to go through what my parents did, with their divorce.”

“Timing is everything,” I agreed. Suddenly the ringtone on my phone played the familiar tune signaling an incoming text message from Dax.

“Tell Dax I said ‘hi,’” said Mariah, bringing the bowl of popcorn into the room and resuming her position on the couch.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text—

Dax: *Dani, we have to talk.*

Wow, not even a ‘hello, how are you?’

I hastily typed a response.

Me: *Is everything OK?*

Uh-oh. *Don’t tell me you’re not going to be able to meet me at Hillcrest for my sister’s wedding.*

The three little dots flashed on the screen, indicating Dax was typing.

Dax: *I’m sorry, but I’m not coming.*

Me: *Are you stuck overseas? Can you not catch a flight in time? It’s okay if you arrive a day or two late. The wedding*

isn't until Saturday. We can always extend our stay for a few days to make up for lost time. I miss you.

I sounded desperate and bit my nails as the three dots began to flash again.

Dax: *It's not that. I met someone else.*

I gasped. He couldn't be serious.

Me: *What? Who? Where?*

Dax: *It doesn't matter, Dani. I haven't been feeling our relationship for a while. My career is skyrocketing, and I need to be with someone who can keep up with me and who I don't have to worry about being photographed with.*

Me: *What are you saying? You're worried about being seen with me?*

Dax: *Look, it's no secret that you've put on weight. The paparazzi are all over it. I saw the latest photos this week in Gossip Girl magazine. It's been fun, but I can't have you tarnishing my image. I hope you understand. All the best.*

I threw the phone across the room as my eyes welled with hot tears.

"Pass the popcorn bowl," I said to Mariah. She handed it to me without saying a word, and I hungrily dug in.

Two hours later, the bowl was empty save for a few unpopped kernels and I'd moved on to a tub of Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey ice cream, taking bites in between fresh bursts of tears. Crumpled tissues lay scattered around me like giant white balls of snow. I felt pummeled.

“I can’t believe Dax would do this to me,” I sobbed for the hundredth time.

Mariah handed me the last clean tissue from the box. “What a jerk! He doesn’t deserve you, Dani.”

“You’re right,” I sniffled. “I suppose it’s a good thing I’m seeing his true colors before we married.”

She nodded and patted my knee. Absolutely. Someday you’ll look back and be glad that at least he was honest about being a selfish, narcissistic louse, so you didn’t have to waste any more time or energy on him.”

“I hope so,” I replied, scooping up another spoonful of the chocolatey goodness and placing it in my mouth. The cold treat helped soothe the heat of my emotions, even though I didn’t want to think about how much sugar I was consuming. Sugar was strictly off-limits according to Willow. But desperate times called for desperate measures—Right? Besides, after skipping dinner, I was starving.

“I’m worth more than just my appearance,” I muttered, even though I wasn’t sure I really believed what I’d said.

“Of course you are!” Mariah slammed her fist into a sofa cushion. “Look, Dani, I see people every day who’ve been injured or are sick. Some will never recover, and lives are cut short. As human beings, our bodies age and ultimately fail. No one escapes. Love can’t be based on superficial things like looks or material wealth, because those things are only temporary. And that isn’t even love, anyway, it’s lust. Love is about much more—

it's a connection on every level, body, mind, and spirit. You have to know that's true."

"I do," I confessed. "It's just that I thought Dax and I had something more between us than just a physical connection, but I guess I was wrong."

"Like I said," Mariah continued, "better that you know now."

"But what am I going to do about my sister's wedding?" I wailed, having forgotten about my trip to Hillcrest temporarily.

"Can you ask someone else to go with you?" Mariah asked.

"Like who? The wedding is in less than a week, and my flight up to San Jose leaves tomorrow." I tossed the blanket from my lap to the side and carried what little was left of the ice cream back to the kitchen. I secured the lid on the container and put it back in the freezer. "Maybe I should call Jessie and say I've come down with the flu or something."

"You can't do that," said Mariah. "You'd never be able to live with yourself if you missed your sister's wedding."

I sighed and studied my now bitten-to-the-quick fingernails. "True. There's no reason I can't attend by myself anyway. I'm not required to bring a date."

"Now you're talking," Mariah replied. "You're a strong, confident, single woman. You're a go-getter."

I burst into another round of tears.

“All righty-y then, moving on to plan B,” said Mariah, grabbing her phone from the coffee table.

“There’s this app called ‘Rent-a-Date.’ Have you heard of it?”

I shook my head and frowned. “Rent-a-Date? Is it some sort of escort service?”

Mariah shrugged. “I think it’s basically whatever you want it to be. My cousin said she used it to find a date for her office holiday party last year. She said the guy was good-looking and nice, and they had a fun night together at the party. I don’t think they made plans to see each other again after that, but Amy said the app was definitely worth it for the price, and she’d use it again if she ever needed to.”

“Hm,” I said, making my way back into the living room. I looked over Mariah’s shoulder as she searched for the app on her phone.

“See, here it is,” said, handing the device to me.

I scrolled through the terms, happy to read that everyone who signs up as a potential date is required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

“It seems legit,” I agreed.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” asked Mariah. “Put in your information and let’s find out if there’s anyone available for Saturday night.”

I took a deep breath. I had to nothing lose. What would it hurt to run a quick search? After keying in my desired geographical area and the date and age ranges, I waited for photos of available men to pop up. A grand total of two. Great. I suppose beggars couldn’t be

choosers. Hopefully at least one of them would look like someone who everybody would believe was my boyfriend. Including me. I hit the tab to view the first option. There was no way the pimply, scruffy-looking teenager smiling hopefully at the camera could possibly be twenty-five years of age or older, which is how I'd set the parameters.

Mariah wrinkled her nose. "I bet that kid used a fake driver's license or something to get on here. Next."

I swiped left and the second option appeared. I sucked in my breath. The guy was not only attractive, but exactly my type. Wavy blonde hair, chiseled jaw, playful smile. I reviewed his specs—name: Ace, height: 6'2", body type: Athletic. Profession: Actor. Hometown: Las Vegas.

"Oh my God," Mariah breathed. "You better book that guy before I do. Not that I'd cheat on Gabe though."

I reviewed the fine print for the fee to hire him. It was more reasonable than I'd expected. Granted, I'd have to buy him a plane ticket, but even figuring in that cost it would be a bargain for what I'd be getting. And who knows? Maybe he and I would even hit it off, especially given that he was in the entertainment industry like me, so we already had something in common. I suspected he was probably just starting out in his acting career, which would explain why he was using the app for a second income stream. I remember how it felt when I was getting my feet wet modeling, and I knew it was even harder for people who wanted to break into the acting world.

“All right,” I said to Mariah. “Here goes nothing,” Good thing I had my credit card number memorized. I typed it in quickly before I had the opportunity to second-guess myself. A burst of colorful digital confetti appeared across the screen and the deal was done. Ace would be all mine for my sister’s wedding.

Chapter Two



Brayden

“What have I just done, Buddy?” I said to my dog, a lab/pitbull mix with a missing eye who I’d rescued off the euthanasia roster from the local shelter. I put the phone down on top of the bedcovers next to me and ran my hand through my dark hair.

From his doggy bed in the corner of the room, Buddy raised his head and looked at me with his one eye as though assessing whether the situation was dire enough for him to expend the energy to get up and walk over to me to offer himself for comfort. As scary as my canine companion might appear

to most, he was really just a big old softie. Apparently deciding he’d let me figure things out on my own, Buddy rolled over and went back to sleep.

My brother would kill me if he knew that I’d used his photo and specs to sign up for a dating app. Offering him or, rather me, up for hire, that is. As if Neil would

ever need any help when it came to women. I laughed bitterly and reached up to touch my right cheek, running my fingers lightly over the rough, raised scars that crisscrossed the surface. Even though it had been nearly two years since I'd been medically discharged from service after the crash, my burn scars were still sensitive. I was grateful when my vocational counselor at the Veterans Hospital found this job for me at Hillcrest Resort. It was hard enough accepting that my career as an Air Force pilot was over. And if I couldn't fly in the military, I didn't want to fly at all. My counselor had honed in on my love for cooking and being in nature. My therapist agreed that moving up here from the Air Force base would be good for me, give me a chance to start fresh and be in an environment that I found soothing. She was right. Napa was gorgeous, and the resort was five-stars, located right on the edge of a nature reserve and with every amenity one could dream of. While I was just a server at the restaurant—Palm & Pine, I had the ability to take advantage of my employee discount throughout the resort. Being here did the trick, or at least it was enough to get me motivated about my future again.

While I loved learning from the resort's expert chefs, who were among the most well-trained and sought-after in the industry, and taking Buddy out for trail runs and long walks along the waterfront, I still hated being in the public's view. Granted, customers always treated me nicely enough when I took their food orders and brought them their plates, but I didn't miss their reactions when first laying eyes on me, no matter how much they tried to hide their looks of surprise,

disgust, and sometimes curiosity. They were all there, written on their faces as plain as day. My therapist kept trying to convince me that most of what I was seeing was in my head, that I was projecting my own reactions onto others, because I hadn't made peace with what had happened to me or accepted how it changed my life. Maybe she was right. I wished I could believe her. Guess I just wasn't there yet. I was starting to wonder whether I ever would be.

But now I'd gone and done it. Gotten myself into a situation. I glanced at the empty tumbler on my bedside table.

"Buddy, I'm never drinking again," I said.

The dog responded with a loud snore.

I hadn't even contemplated dating since Kim broke up with me during my rehabilitation. Who could blame her? I was angry, depressed, and bitter, and I'd taken out my feelings on my girlfriend. She didn't deserve that. But there was no going back, only forward, as Dr. Gillian liked to remind me. I'm not sure why, but the loneliness had been hitting me extra hard lately. Adopting Buddy helped, but it wasn't the same as having a partner. Maybe it was because it was late summer, and I kept seeing all these happy couples at the resort, enjoying romantic dinners, and frolicking at the pool during the day while cozying up by the fire pits when the temperature dropped at night. Guess in a moment of weakness I'd done the only thing I could think of—signed up as a date for hire. I rationalized it by thinking I could make some extra cash to help fund my dream of opening my own farm-to-table eatery one day. Never

mind that I'd used my brother's photo and details. What woman would want to hire me if she saw what I really looked like? Probably none.

"I can't believe this thing actually worked," I muttered, picking my phone back up again. Oddly enough, the woman had specified that I would be acting as her date for her sister's wedding to take place right here at Hillcrest. Since I'd used my brother's address, she'd even agreed to arrange for a plane ticket. Well, what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her. Thankfully she wasn't expecting me to arrive until the day before the event, so hopefully that would give me time to figure out a way out of this. Either that, or I'd have a lot of explaining to do. I still hadn't received any information about the woman who had hired me. Apparently, the site was still uploading all her details. I logged back into the app to see if the information was there yet. Sure enough, there was a notification signaling that her profile was complete. I clicked on it.

"Oh my God," I gasped, making Buddy yelp in fright. "I'm sorry, boy," I said as he hastened over, his toenails clicking on the hardwood floor. I gave him a few scratches behind the ears and let him lick my hand before I turned back to my phone in shock.

It was none other than Dani Lane. The supermodel. The app required signing a confidentiality agreement, which I supposed would make it attractive for those in the biz, since they could be sure their secret would be kept safe. But now my problem was even worse! It wasn't just any woman I'd catfished, it was a stunningly beautiful, famous one. One who I'd had a crush on since first seeing her picture.

An image of an envelope began to blink in the app, indicating an unread message. I opened the email—

Dani: *Hi Ace, this is Dani. I'm booking your flight arrangements now and will send you the e-ticket. Thank you again for your willingness to be my date for my sister's wedding. I'm looking forward to meeting you. Maybe we can text here and there ahead of time? I understand you're an actor.*

I hit the reply button.

Ace: *Hi Dani, pleasure's all mine. My current gig should wrap up before your sister's wedding, and then I'll have a few days off before rehearsals start for an off-Broadway show. Anyway, happy to help you out. Here's my number.*

Best,

Ace

After typing in my phone number, I powered the phone off and reached for the light switch, my mind churning with a strange mix of excitement and dread. I fell asleep half-hoping I'd wake up to find the whole thing had been a dream. If not, I'd need an act of God to figure out what to do next.

Chapter Three



Dani

I rubbed my eyes and stretched in the semi-darkness, then snuggled back underneath the light quilt that topped the vintage wrought-iron bed in my private bungalow. I'd gotten to the resort late last night and after being shown to my cottage, I'd crawled under the covers of the huge four-poster and fallen asleep almost before my head hit the pillow.

I peeled an eye open and glanced at the clock on the bedside table—6.30 am. I'd always been an early bird, waking up at dawn's first light, and today was no exception despite the comfortable mattress and perfect quietude. From the map of the resort I'd been given upon check-in, I'd learned that Hillcrest was comprised of a main building that contained reception and administrative offices, as well as several retail boutiques, banquet halls, the spa and exercise facilities, and the Palm & Pine restaurant. Guests could also stay in rooms located on the ten floors that rose above the main hotel.

The resort's swimming pool was directly behind the main building, along with a casual bar and grill. A boardwalk led from there down to the beach and the waterfront.

The resort also consisted of a number of private bungalows that were larger and offered more privacy than the rooms in the main hotel. Paved walkways led from each cottage to the main building, which had reminded me of the 3D solar system I'd made out of Styrofoam as a science project in elementary school. I was thankful I'd opted for a private cottage, especially given my circumstances. The last thing I wanted was to spend even more time around happy couples when I was dealing with not only the loss of my relationship, but also my tenuous career, which was hanging by a thread unless I could morph my body into a size 0 overnight. There was only so much time that I'd be able to put on a brave face before crumbling.

The first rays of dawn were beginning to stream through the thin space between the curtains over my window. I got up and pulled the cord to draw them open, then padded back to the bed and snuggled underneath the blanket again to take everything in slowly now that I was awake. A short partition containing a gas fireplace separated the bedroom from the sitting area and a latch-hook rug covered the birchwood floor. A glass-topped coffee table had a base that looked like it had been hewn from an enormous tree trunk. A blue and white Afghan lay over the back of an ivory upholstered sofa, and a wooden rocking chair standing in one corner looked like it had been carved by hand. The walls featured paintings of ships and

maritime life, while bookshelves were stacked with hardback antique books. Crystal bowls filled with colorful seashell and rock collections had been placed around the room, adding to the nautical theme. An eye-catching ship-in-a-bottle sat on top of one of the distressed bedside tables.

Jessie and Steven certainly had good taste—this was the perfect destination spot for a wedding. Knowing I wouldn't be able to fall back to sleep, I finally pulled aside the covers and rose with a yawn. In the closet I found two sets of white slippers, and I slipped my feet into a pair gratefully before making my way to the bathroom. Eyeing the claw-foot tub and luxurious organic bath products no doubt provided by the spa, I promised myself a long soak later, maybe before or after dinner. Right now, my stomach was grumbling, and I needed my morning cup of coffee. I hopped into the shower, and once refreshed, dressed quickly, choosing a pair of white capris, peach-colored twinset, and espadrilles. After giving my locks a quick blow-dry, and dabbing my nose with a bit of powder, I declared myself ready for the day. It was Wednesday, and I had the whole day to myself before Ace was scheduled to arrive the following afternoon. The wedding festivities would begin with the rehearsal dinner on Friday night, followed by the ceremony and reception, and conclude with Sunday brunch.

I walked over to the shiny oak writing desk where I'd dumped my purse after checking-in and grabbed the silver sand dollar keychain that held the key to my cottage. I folded the map and slipped it into my pocket along with the keychain. Once outside, I locked up

behind me and then stood for a minute on the doorstep, taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air, filled with the scents of both land and sea. Wispy white clouds floated through the turquoise blue sky, and I guessed the temperature to be somewhere in the mid-70s, given the cool breeze coming in off the water. In the distance I spotted the sails of ships docked at a nearby marina. The views were simply gorgeous no matter which way I looked, and I enjoyed a leisurely stroll along the winding path through the immaculately maintained grounds to the main hotel.

A smiling uniformed bellman opened one of the heavy doors for me at the entrance, and I walked into the lobby, passing reception, and following the signs down a short hallway to the Palm & Pine.

A young hostess dressed in a white short-sleeved top and black skirt stood behind the podium. The plastic nametag pinned to her blouse read *Britney*. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail and freckles dotted over her pert nose. She smiled and picked up a couple of menus.

“Table for two for breakfast?” she asked brightly.

“Um, table for one,” I replied.

“Oh, okay,” said the young woman. “Sorry, I assumed your husband would be following.”

Squashing my over-arching impulse to trip her, I followed her to a table by the window. A small white vase filled with daisies sat on top. The dining area was almost empty. I figured the majority of guests would probably arrive later in the morning since it was still early. A tired-appearing couple with four fidgeting

young children and an infant in a carrier were clustered around a table in the center of the room. One of the little girls with her hair in pigtails suddenly spilled her milk, causing her to promptly burst into tears. The harried mother jumped up, throwing her napkin over the spill, and attempting to console her daughter. She glanced around at the other diners apologetically. An elderly couple nearby smiled over their eggs and toast.

“The all-you-can eat breakfast buffet is included in the cost of your room,” continued Britney cheerily, completely ignoring the child, whose wails were growing into a full-fledged temper fit. “Can I get you something to drink? We have coffee and a variety of teas and juices.”

“Coffee would be perfect, thanks,” I replied.

“Coming right up,” said the perky hostess. “Help yourself to the buffet whenever you want.” She turned and headed toward the kitchen, passing a server coming over with a pitcher of ice water. Wow, the guy was absolutely dreamy. He was probably around my age—mid to late 20’s, with dark wavy hair, a strong jaw, and straight nose. The skin of his right cheek was mottled with bumpy reddish-pink scars. I thought they were probably burn scars, perhaps from a kitchen fire? In any case, his good looks were unmistakable, and his incredible body definitely caught my attention. He must be really dedicated to working out and eating healthy, judging from his muscled torso and the way he filled out his pants in all the right places.

I smiled as he poured ice water into my glass. At first he looked away from me, and I wondered if

something was wrong, but then he looked back at smiled. That was odd. His features, even down to the cleft in his chin, reminded me of Ace's photo on the Rent-a-Date app. But the server—his nametag read *Brayden*—had darker hair and his form was bulkier. Not a bad thing, in my opinion, the more muscles a guy had, the better. I tore my eyes away from him and took a few sips of the cool liquid. He turned and went to refresh the elderly couple's glasses. The dining room was filling up as more people were entering and waiting their turn to be seated. I walked over to the buffet, interested to see what was in the steaming trays and get first pick. I took a plate and walked slowly down the line, choosing scrambled eggs, sausage, and hash browns. A tall carousel of delectable-looking bakery items on a cart caught my attention. Unable to resist temptation, I reached in and pulled out a slice of pound cake. As I was turning to head back to my table, I immediately collided with Brayden, who was returning from the kitchen with a fresh pitcher of water. The plate of food slipped from my hands and suddenly my breakfast was everywhere, mostly down the front of my sweater. If I wasn't mistaken, some scrambled eggs had even slipped down my v-neck and lodged in my bra.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!" said Brayden, quickly setting the water pitcher on an empty table and kneeling down to retrieve my now-empty plate.

"It was totally my fault, not yours," I said, picking a piece of pound cake out of my hair. "I was too excited about my breakfast I guess to watch where I was going."

I attempted a light-hearted laugh, trying not to think about what my modeling agent would do if she

could see me now. Probably fire me on the spot.

Brayden flashed an apologetic smile at me as one of the dining room attendants rushed over with a broom.

“Well, I still think I’m the one to blame here, but thank you for saying that. I’d like to pay to have your clothes cleaned. And I’d be happy to order room service for you...On the house. It’s the least I can do for ruining your morning.”

I waved my hand in the air. “That’s very kind of you, but none of that will be necessary. Trust me, you didn’t ruin anything. I don’t even have any plans for today. I can just go back to my bungalow to change and come right back.”

Brayden looked skeptical. “To be honest, I don’t feel comfortable not doing anything to make up for this. I’m actually off work after the morning shift and as a matter of fact, I have the rest of the week off as well. Pre-planned vacation time.”

We both stepped out of the attendant’s way and Brayden joined me as I began to walk back to the restaurant’s entrance. I noticed he circled around to my other side unnecessarily, so that his scarred cheek was facing the other way.

“That’s nice,” I replied. “I hope you’re going somewhere at least as wonderful as this place. I’m tempted to never go home again, everything here is so lovely,”

“Where are you from?” He asked.

“L.A.,” I informed, not bothering to hide my grimace.

“Ah,” he said with a nod of understanding. “Big city getting to you?”

“You can say that again,” I said drily.

“To tell the truth, I’m not actually leaving the area,” said Brayden. “It’s more of a staycation. Paid time off. My boss told me to use it or lose it,” he chuckled.

I smiled. “A staycation sounds fabulous.”

We stopped by the hostess stand. Britney was gathering a stack of menus and passed us without a backwards glance as she proceeded to lead a family of four to an empty table.

“Listen, I really want to make up for the trouble I’ve caused you,” Brayden insisted. “If you’re interested, would you like to join me this afternoon for a walk on the beach? It’s beautiful, and I’d be happy to show you some of the best vantage points. Maybe around 1 pm?”

I was touched by his offer. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“Fantastic,” he said with a grin. After we exchanged phone numbers, agreeing to text if anything came up, Brayden hesitated a moment as if unsure about something, and then reached over and quickly brushed a piece of scrambled egg from my shoulder.

I burst out laughing as the sweet man in front of me turned bright red.

“Thanks,” I said before waving goodbye, happy to finally have something to look forward to for the rest of the morning.

Chapter Four



Brayden

“Buddy, could I have made any more a fool of myself this morning?” I asked shaking my head as I changed out of my hotel uniform of black pants and white button-down into a pair of khaki shorts and a blue short-sleeved Polo. Buddy wagged his tail excitedly, sensing something new and interesting was in the air.

Interesting was certainly an understatement. Not only was I catfishing a supermodel, but I’d basically head-butted her and ruined her breakfast. Things were not going well, and I was still completely clueless about what I was going to do to come out of this without looking like a total jerk. Maybe I could message her as Ace and let her know that I’d come down ill or something and wouldn’t be able to make the wedding. However, that would leave her without a date, and I’d risk being kicked off the App. for not fulfilling my responsibilities. Even though the extra cash would be nice, I was more concerned about leaving Dani high and

dry. She must have been really desperate to hire someone to stand in as her fake boyfriend. I couldn't imagine what had driven her to that—the woman could have any guy she wanted.

But maybe that was it...maybe she didn't want someone falling over themselves to get in line to go out with her. I reflected as I shaved my face, moving the razor gingerly over the scarred side, being careful to avoid the raised areas. My skin had been too badly burned in the flight crash for stubble to grow anyway. Perhaps Dani simply wanted a companion who wouldn't care whether she was famous or not.

"I can't imagine how it must feel to have everyone think they know you from what they see or read in the media," I commented, bending down to scratch Buddy under the chin. I knew how vulnerable I felt just showing my face every day. No wonder Dani was glad to get out of L.A. At Hillcrest, it was common to have celebrity and elite guests staying at the resort, so none of the staff batted an eyelash. We were even taught during training to refrain from calling attention to anyone. People came here to get away from their busy lives and we needed to respect that and let them be.

I doubted many people would recognize Dani anyway. In person, she looked very different from her pictures—more natural and fleshed out. Definitely not as bony and weirdly elongated as she appeared in magazines.

Although with her height, I suspected she was still underweight and couldn't help wondering what she'd look like with another ten to twenty pounds on her

frame. Curvy girls had always appealed to me. I loved their softness and feminine roundness that was so entirely opposite from my hard exterior. And it was nice to see the supermodel without makeup on for a change, too. I hated the garishness of false eyelashes or the overblown lips that seemed to be so trendy these days. It was almost as though people didn't want to look human anymore. I wondered why that was.

In person, Dani was definitely very human, and in fact, appeared a lot younger than her images in the media. If I hadn't known her age from the App., I'd have guessed she was in her late teens or maybe just turned twenty, certainly not twenty-five.

I slipped my feet into a pair of water shoes, grabbed what I'd picked up at the gift shop for Dani, and then headed for the door of my house. I lived only a couple blocks from the resort, which definitely made my life easier.

Buddy followed, eyeing me hopefully.

"Yes, Buddy," I chuckled, taking the leash off its hook by the door. "You get to come, too."

He let out a bark of excitement and tried to keep still while I snapped the leash's hook onto his collar.

"Let's hope this afternoon goes better than this morning."

Wow. Dani looked even prettier than she had earlier. We'd agreed to meet on the boardwalk by the swimming pool. She was in a pair of jean shorts that showed off her long, tanned legs, and a simple red tank top. Her honey-

brown hair was pulled into a ponytail and hung like a shiny river of spun silk down her back.

She waved upon seeing me.

“Hi,” she said, smiling widely as Buddy and I approached. “Who’s your friend here?” She bent down and opened her arms. The dog practically leaped into them and began covering her with happy licks.

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry,” I said. “This is Buddy. I apologize if he’s a little over-enthusiastic.”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “I love dogs... all animals, really. We were never allowed to have pets growing up due to my mom’s allergies, and I think that just made me want them even more.”

“Do you have any pets of your own now in L.A?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, I travel too much for work.” Standing back up, she extended her hand.

“I don’t believe I’ve even introduced myself properly. My name is Dani...Dani Lane.”

“Brayden Porter.” I grasped her hand and shook it. “And I know who you are.”

I watched her cheeks turn pink.

“Okay,” she said.

“If you don’t want to go on a walk with me, it’s totally fine, by the way,” I quickly said. “I don’t want to bother you and totally get it if you want to be left alone.”

She shook her head. “Thanks for saying that, but I don’t. A beach walk with you and Buddy sounds fun.”

I smiled. "Great, then right this way." I steered her towards the path that led down to the waterfront.

"Sorry if I was awkward back there," said Dani as we walked down a flight of steps. "It's just that I wasn't sure if you recognized me because I know I don't look my pictures...at least, not right now."

"Well, I'm not exactly sure what you mean," I replied. "But I definitely like you better this way. A real human being is always best in my opinion. You may have noticed that at Hillcrest we pride ourselves on being a safe space where people can come as they are. The resort was founded on the principles of getting back to our roots, honoring the natural environment, and restoring health...both mind and body."

"I love that," said Dani. "I did notice that all the food and bath products are organic and locally sourced. It's a very different mindset than L.A. culture. I'd like to learn more about it."

"You should check out some of the classes the resort offers," I suggested. "There are always a bunch of different workshops going on. I'm sure the concierge could tell you what's available now."

"Thank you," said Dani. "I'll have to look into that. I'm not sure whether I'll have time to fit anything in, though. I'm actually here this week for my sister's wedding. The wedding party will begin arriving tomorrow ahead of the rehearsal dinner Friday night."

"Oh, I see...Well, congratulations to your sister. That sounds exciting."

“Thanks,” she replied. “She and Steven have been together for several years, and we’ve all known it was coming for a while.”

“That’s great. It must be wonderful when you finally meet *the one*.”

“I agree, but I wouldn’t know,” Dani said.

“No?” I couldn’t help myself, I had to dig deeper. “Do you have a date to the wedding or are you going solo?”

“Oh, my date is flying in tomorrow,” she said, squinting towards the water. “We’ve...ah...we’ve just started dating, so it’s still too early to tell. ”

“I understand,” I said. “Here, why don’t we head down this way, we can walk along the beach and a little way down there’s an outcropping of fallen logs where we can sit. If you prefer the shade, there’s an embankment with a grassy area that’s easy to get to.”

“Sounds good,” she replied. We stepped off the boardwalk and onto the sand.

“Here,” I said, handing her the bag in my left hand. “This is for you.”

“What is it?” she asked, taking the bag, and peeking inside curiously. “You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“You’ll see,” I said.

She drew out a round glass bowl with an opening on top.

“It’s to make your own terrarium,” I explained. “The idea is to explore the landscape along the

waterfront and search for items that appeal to you. It's called beach combing. Start with a layer of sand, and then you can add rocks, seashells, and a bit of colorful seaweed. That sort of thing."

"How fun!" she cried. "What a delightful gift! You definitely didn't have to get me anything, but I love it. Thank you. I hope you'll help me search for interesting items."

"You're welcome," I said. "I'm glad you like it, and of course, I'd be happy to. Why don't we scoop some sand into it now?"

We both knelt down, and I scooped a couple of handfuls of clean sand into the terrarium.

"Ooh, look!" Dani cried, pointing a short distance away. "Is that a sand dollar?" We rose and walked over to take a closer look.

"Sure is," I smiled. "Good eyes."

"Thanks," she said as she picked up the delicate etched shell and placed it into the glass bowl.

"How long have you been working at Hillcrest?" she asked as we continued down the beach. I unhooked Buddy's leash, and he took off ahead of us, yipping at a couple of seagulls that soared overhead.

"A little over a year," I explained. "Before that I was in Sacramento...Former Air Force pilot."

"Oh wow," she said, sliding her eyes to me in surprise. "Thank you for your service."

I nodded and turned my gaze to the water. "I would have served longer if I could have. I wanted to be

career military. Planned for it, in fact.”

“The best laid plans, right?” Dani sighed.

“Exactly.”

I paused. It had been a while since I’d told anyone my story. Bending down, I picked up a rock with some interesting spots of turquoise in it and rolled it between my fingers. A few moments later, we reached the outcropping of logs.

“Care to sit?” I asked. “Or would you prefer to go up to the embankment? There’s a set of stairs hidden in the grasses.”

“I’d love to see if you wouldn’t mind,” she said.

“Great, that’s actually my favorite spot, personally.”

I called Buddy and we walked a short distance ahead and turned to the overgrown grasses that grew along a steep hill. Behind a boulder was the narrow staircase built into the terrain.

“This is so cool!” said Dani, eagerly starting the uphill climb. Buddy leaped ahead of us. When we crested the top, we stopped to catch our breath.

“This is gorgeous,” Dani said, surveying the lush green grass and trees with low-hanging branches. We selected a shaded area and sat down, stretching out our legs.

“I was overseas when it happened,” I began softly. “The plane I was flying was shot down. I had two crewmembers with me...both friends. I was the only survivor.”

“Oh my God.” Dani gasped and covered her mouth with her hand. Tears welled in her eyes.

“I owe my life to the search and rescue team who got me out of there. As you can see, I was badly injured. I had six broken ribs, a broken collarbone, and my leg was busted in three places. I also suffered third degree burns on my right side, mostly my face. I was initially treated at our medical facility there, but as soon as I was well enough, I was flown back to the U.S. I spent the next eight months going through various surgeries, physical therapy, counseling, etc. Unfortunately, they declared me no longer fit for service, so I was given a medical discharge.”

“You’re so lucky to be alive,” Dani said, placing her hand on my forearm. “I can’t even imagine what you’ve gone through. You must be very strong.”

I glanced down at my fist holding the rock, and opened my palm, offering it to her.

“Just human. All I know is that coming here has been a real lifesaver for me. I adopted Buddy from the local shelter and started over. Being out in nature like this brings me peace, makes me feel less self-conscious. It’s been a gift, really, because it’s brought me closer to actually living my values.”

A tear slipped down Dani’s cheek. I reached and wiped it away with my fingertip.

“How courageous,” she whispered, taking the turquoise rock, and placing it into the terrarium. “I wish I felt less self-conscious, although as a model, I doubt that’s even possible. I’ve been picked apart so much I feel like I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

“I can relate,” I told her. “I felt like that too after I was discharged from service. I spent a lot of time being angry and bitter about what I’d lost. It took me a while to shift my focus to thinking about what lay ahead of me. What I was going to do with the rest of my life. One thing I know for sure, is that I want to make a difference. It doesn’t have to be big or anything, but I want to at least try.”

“I think you’re already making a difference,” said Dani, stroking the fur on Buddy’s back. He laid his chin on her knee affectionately, his tail thumping the grass.

“Thanks,” I said smiling. I began to pet Buddy too, my hand brushing against Dani’s. “I’ve always enjoyed cooking. It used to be just a hobby, but since I’ve been here in the valley, I’ve been learning a lot about organic farming and whole-food cooking. I’ve got a little vegetable and herb garden behind my house now and have been experimenting with different recipes. Someday I’d really like to open my own farm-to-table restaurant.”

“That sounds amazing,” Dani replied. “Let me know if you need any taste-tasters. I’ve been on so many crash diets where I’ve eaten nothing but diet soda and these weird shakes for days at a time, that eating real, fresh food frankly sounds luxurious.”

“In that case, would you like to have dinner with me sometime? In fact, how about tomorrow night?” I hadn’t planned to invite her over, but the words tumbled out of my mouth before I had time to think.

“Oh.” A frown crossed her pretty face. I noticed that she had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of

her nose and felt sad that someone had covered them up or airbrushed them out of her photos. “My date is flying in tomorrow afternoon, so I don’t think I can. I really wish I could, though.”

If I wasn’t mistaken, she sounded wistful, as though she meant what she said.

“I understand,” I said. “Why don’t we head back to the hotel?”

We walked back, our conversation turning to small talk and remarking on the various bits of sea glass and shells we discovered along the way.

After wishing her a good evening, I returned home with Buddy. He lapped up water from his bowl and I gave him a few treats, then grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water for myself. I took it to the den and had a seat on the sectional. Removing my phone from my pocket, I logged into the Rent-a-Date App and went to messages.

Ace: *Hi Dani, it’s Ace. Hey, I’m really sorry about this, but I’m shooting a movie right now and production’s been extended. I won’t be able to fly out tomorrow after all. But I called the airlines, and they’re able to change my ticket to Friday. I should still make it there in time to accompany you to your sister’s wedding. Apologies again for the delay.”*

A few minutes later, my phone buzzed with an incoming text.

Dani: *“Hi Brayden, this is Dani. I’ll be free after all tomorrow night and would love to join you for dinner.”*

Chapter Five



Dani

I bit my lip, not sure why I was feeling so nervous. The *How to Stop People Pleasing* workshop was being held in the resort's yoga studio, located adjacent to the spa on the 3rd floor of the main building. The elevator doors slid open, and I followed the signs to the event.

After I'd taken a long soak in the tub and ordered room service for dinner last night, I remembered Brayden's suggestion about seeing what classes were available this week at the resort and had given the concierge a call. Now I had the day free on Thursday, I figured I'd check them out. When the hotel's representative mentioned there was space available in the *How to Stop People Pleasing* workshop, I'd signed up on impulse. Now, as I found myself outside the yoga studio, I felt suddenly conspicuous. Reassuring myself that surely I wouldn't be the only person in attendance, I took a deep breath and pulled the door open. The scent of lavender hung in the air, and men and women of all

ages, shapes, and sizes sat on yoga mats and cushions around the room. Some were writing in journals, a few were talking softly together, and yet others were stretching or meditating.

A smiling woman, who I guessed to be somewhere in her 50's with fluffy gray hair that cascaded around her shoulders, greeted me at the door with a warm smile. Her bright blue eyes twinkled.

"Good afternoon. I'm Rainey, I'm one of the movement instructors here, and I'm also a licensed massage therapist at the spa."

"Hello," I said. "I'm Dani Lane."

"Welcome," she replied. "Please grab a mat, bolster, and blanket, and have a seat anywhere in the room. You can store your shoes in the cubbies along the far wall. Don't worry if you didn't bring writing materials, I have packets and pens I'll be passing out shortly once we get started."

"Thank you," I said, making my way towards the supply shelves as directed. I slipped off my sandals and put them inside an empty cubbyhole and then chose a purple yoga mat, matching cushion, and a navy blanket. I carried everything to a corner and began to make myself comfortable. As soon as I sat down, I instinctively exhaled, suddenly feeling relaxed. I gazed towards the front of the room, where Rainey had set up her mat facing the group. A stick of lavender incense was burning in a beautiful holder, and there was a large bowl of water with rose petals and floating tea light candles. Watching the candles gently bobbing atop the water,

their flames lightly flickering, had a calming effect and I noticed my breathing slowing down.

I turned and saw Rainey close the door to the studio and the room quieted as she took her place on the mat in front of us.

“Good afternoon, and welcome everyone. I’m so glad you’re all here. Today’s workshop is *How to Stop People Pleasing*. We’re going to spend some time exploring the ways in which we self-sabotage ourselves by giving too much of our power away. We’ll reflect on how this feels in our body, mind, and spirit, and study patterns in our lives that leave us feeling depleted. Then, we’ll explore what it may look like to reclaim our loss of control, and practice making choices from this new, more informed, vantage point. How might we choose to act differently coming from a place of wholeness? This afternoon, we will engage in gentle movement, guided meditation, discussion, and journaling. This is a safe space, and there are no bad questions. The only *bad* question is one that goes unasked.”

As she spoke, I felt my eyes welling with tears. This was exactly what I needed, and I hadn’t known it. I was filled with an eagerness to learn. I looked around the room and saw others wiping away tears, nodding, and smiling. It was true—this was a safe space, and I was not alone in my feelings. For the first time since I could remember, I felt truly at home.

The day progressed with laughter, tears, and even hugs, as group members shared their personal stories of struggle and newfound hope. Rainey provided complimentary binders filled with journaling prompts,

meditation and breathing techniques, and even poetry. When I came to the section titled, *Discovering Your Purpose*, I paused. I'd never really considered my purpose before. I'd been told at a young age that I was to be a model, and that's all I'd ever known. I reflected on my values, my interests, and what I was naturally good at. How could I put these together? What would my life look like if I was living out my purpose?

I knew that one of the reasons I booked so many jobs so quickly was because I had no problem being in front of people. Unlike other models, I didn't have to deal with anxiety when it came to walking the catwalk or public speaking. In fact, I kind of enjoyed being asked questions and having to think on my feet.

I began to doodle as I thought, drawing spirals and shapes of hearts and flowers in the margins of the journaling pages. Then I sketched the outline of a dog and thought of Buddy and Brayden. My heart leaped in my chest. Brayden had more courage than anyone I'd ever met. He'd not only had to grieve the loss of his friends and crew members but struggle to survive himself. And now he was creating a new life that would give him a sense of purpose and fulfillment. I craved the same, and prayed to apply all the lessons I was learning here at Hillview to my life. I just had to figure out how to do that.

Suddenly, I was struck with inspiration. I began to write and cry at the same time. The woman beside me passed me the box of tissues with a knowing smile.

"Thank you," I said. My heart filled with joy as I envisioned my future. I just hoped Brayden would be

open to hearing my idea. I glanced at the clock. I'd be meeting him at his house at 6 pm. It wouldn't be long before I'd have my answer.

"What do you think?" Brayden asked from across his small dining room table. Buddy lay at my feet, and I didn't know which of them had the more hopeful expression. Or which was more adorable.

"This is probably the most gorgeous food I've ever seen," I said truthfully, eyeing the contents of my plate ravenously. "Tell me again what everything is."

"Of course," Brayden replied with a wide smile. "All the ingredients were either gathered from my garden or from local farms and orchards. That means we're eating the freshest food available since it's all seasonal so there's very little processing involved. I'm calling this 'Pan-American Orchard Fare.' It sounds fancy, but it's really very simple."

I grinned. "I love it all even more because we're helping small family-owned businesses."

"Exactly," said Brayden. "Farmers have been hit hard in this economy, and buying from local organic growers not only helps further their livelihoods as well as all the farm laborers, but also encourages sustainable farming practices. Tonight, I've prepared a sweet gem caesar salad with aged cheddar and oregano breadcrumbs to start. The entrée is duck breast with roasted fennel, celeriac, wild plums, watercress, and smoked stone fruit molasses. For dessert, a trio of fruit sorbet."

“Thank you so much for going to all this trouble.” I met Brayden’s gaze, his eyes the color of molten chocolate, and a rush of electricity flooded through my body. His passion for what he was doing made me feel even more drawn to him.

“The pleasure is all mine,” he said. “Can I offer you a glass of Pinot Noir from one of the local wineries?”

“I’d love some.”

Brayden uncorked the bottle and poured the dark red liquid into our glasses.

“What should we toast to?” he asked, picking up his glass by the stem.

“New beginnings,” I said.

“I like that,” he replied. “To new beginnings and new friends. Thank you for joining me tonight.”

We both dug into our meals. Afterwards, I helped him clear the plates and we settled ourselves on the couch with our leftover wine.

“Brayden,” I began. “I want you to know how grateful I am that you shared your story with me, and how much you’ve inspired me. I don’t think I’ll ever be the same after spending this week at Hillcrest.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he replied as color came into his cheeks. “Please don’t give me any credit, though. This is a special place and it’s good when people find some rest and renewal here.”

“Well, I’m happy we’re getting to know each other. I think you’ve probably guessed by now that I’ve been struggling lately with my career. The truth is that my

agent told me if I don't lose weight fast, she's going to terminate my contract with the agency."

"That's horrible!" Brayden reached out and caressed my face with his palm. "Just so you know, you don't need to lose weight. In fact, I'd be worried about you if you do."

"Thank you," I said, my lower lip trembling with emotion. "I've made a decision today...I'm going to leave the Willow Renee Agency. She doesn't get to have power over me or my body anymore. Instead, I'm going to sign with a modeling agency that encourages body positivity. Health is beautiful, and health comes in all shapes and sizes. I want to use my platform to encourage young people to love themselves just the way they are, and to know they shouldn't ever feel they have to change to please others. I've realized that being so focused on myself, I've missed what I could be doing for others and for the things I care about. Like you said, it's time for me to start making a difference."

With that, Brayden placed his other hand on my opposite cheek and drew his face to mine. When our lips met it was with a hunger that was beyond the body and was as though our souls were craving to connect, to become one. His fingers ran over my hair and down my back, and then his arms were around my waist, pulling me closer to him. I leaned into his embrace, feeling the rock-hard muscles of his chest. I looped my arms around his neck and then ran my hand down his scarred cheek.

"You're so handsome," I whispered.

"And you're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on," he whispered back before kissing me

again.

I forced myself to pull away a moment later. "I need to confess something," I said.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he asked, tracing my jawbone with his fingertip.

"My date for my sister's wedding...it's not someone I've been seeing. The truth is that I signed up with a dating app and hired a man to pretend to be my boyfriend. My real boyfriend broke up with me last week. He actually did me a favor by ending it, but I didn't realize it until now. I wish I hadn't hired a date, because I'd love nothing more than for you to be the one to accompany me to my sister's wedding."

Brayden sucked in his breath and looked away. He ran his hand over his mouth. It was clear the moment had been broken. Embarrassment and confusion washed over me.

"I understand that you're probably disappointed to learn what I did," I said. "I'm ashamed, too. I wish I'd had the confidence to come here by myself in the first place."

"It's not that," he said. "It's just..."

"What?"

He sighed. "Listen, we should probably end this now. There's something you don't know."

"What is it?"

He shook his head. "Let me drive you back to your cottage. You'll find out soon enough."

The next day, I was still confused. I'd barely slept a wink. What had I done wrong? What had Brayden meant? However, given that Ace was scheduled to arrive any minute, and the rehearsal dinner was in less than an hour, I had no time to think anymore. I'd spent the day at the spa, getting an array of services from a facial, manicure, pedicure, and hair color and cut, and it felt like a whirlwind. I knew that had as much to do with my emotions as the activities going on around me.

I smoothed my skirt and paced back and forth as I waited in the lobby for Ace to arrive.

The doors slid open, and Brayden suddenly walked in. He was wearing a pair of gray dress pants, sport coat, and tie. My pulse quickened. Why was he so dressed up? Was he meeting a woman here for dinner? Maybe that was what he'd been trying to tell me—that he'd been seeing someone. That would explain why he thought our kiss had been a mistake.

His gaze met mine and he crossed to where I stood.

"Hi, Dani," he said.

"Hi," I said, confused. "What are you doing here? Are you meeting someone?"

"I am," he said with a nod. "You."

"What?" I asked in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"I'm Ace," he said, wincing. "Ace was actually my nickname in the Air Force. The truth is that I catfished you. I'm so sorry."

"I don't understand." I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

“I didn’t do it deliberately,” he said. “Wait, that’s not right. Yes, I used my brother’s picture and specifications instead of my own. My brother is Neil Porter. He’s a year younger than me, and he’s an actor based in Vegas. He has no idea that I pretended to be him on the App. I was embarrassed because of my scars, that’s why I didn’t put up a real photo. I haven’t dated at all since the crash. My former girlfriend broke up with me when I was in rehab. She just couldn’t handle it. I guess I thought lying was the only way I could get a date. Then, after I met you, I wanted to take it all back and figure out a way to get out of it without hurting you, but I couldn’t. I know it’s too much to ask you to forgive me now.”

I began to laugh and cry at the same time and flung my arms around his neck. “Oh, Brayden! Of course, I forgive you!”

He looked at me with astonishment. “Are you serious?”

“Yes,” I nodded as his arms encircled my waist and a smile began to spread over his face. “Don’t you see? We’re peas in a pod. Of course, I forgive you, because otherwise, how could I forgive myself for not loving myself? There’s nothing wrong with either of us, but I think we both have yet to fully understand that.”

He began to kiss my face, covering my forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, and lips with kisses. “My God,” he said. “I don’t know what brought you into my life, but the universe has blessed me with the woman of my dreams. I don’t deserve you.”

“Yes, you do,” I said in between kisses. “In fact, I was hoping to make a deal with you.”

“What sort of deal?”

I smiled. “I’d like to invest in your restaurant. I want to partner with you to advocate for eating in a way that supports the health of our bodies as well as our land and local economy. I want to be a spokesperson for body positivity and use my platform to work for change in our culture and our mindset about the definition of beauty. Will you let me join you? Can we work together?”

“Dani Lane,” said Brayden, pulling me tight against him. “If I hadn’t already started to fall in love with you, I’m falling head over heels now. I think this is a match made in Heaven.”

When he kissed me then, it was truly Heaven on earth and I knew that no matter what life brought from here, I’d never have to go through it alone again.

A Note From Annee

Thank you so much for reading my book—I hope you enjoyed it. If so, please consider taking a moment to leave a review. Not only do good reviews help increase visibility of books you consider worthwhile, but they also let hard-working authors know that their stories make a difference. If my books put a smile on your face, touch your heart, or make you think—well, that’s worth everything to me!

Sincerely yours,

Annee

Sneak Peek: **DEAN**

*If you enjoyed **His Curvy Catfish**, you're sure to enjoy **DEAN**, a short and sweet enemies-to-lovers romcom by Annee Jones!*

Chapter One



Dean

“We’re here today with Dean Montgomery of Dean’s Delectable Delights!” The buxom blonde TV news reporter posed in front of the bakery’s storefront window and flashed her famous 10,000-watt smile at the camera.

Dean shifted his weight onto the other foot uncomfortably. He had no problem making small talk with women – rather enjoyed it, in fact - just not in front of thousands of random live viewers at once. However, he realized he’d better get used to it. Fast.

“Dean, we understand that you’ve been selected as one of the contestants to appear on the next season of the popular reality competition show *Wedding Baker*. Is this true?” The reporter, Stormy Matthews from the local station, shoved her microphone in front of his face. Her bright red acrylic nails glittered like rubies in the late afternoon sun.

He blinked, not sure whether he should direct his answer to her or the camera. He chose her and smiled. Seeing the pretty pink hue that rose in her cheeks in response, he knew he’d made the right decision. Yeah, he got this.

“Indeed, it is true,” he said proudly. “I received the call last week from the network.”

“Congratulations! I know the people here in Sugar Grove will be thrilled to see one of their own on the program. Now, tell us, Dean, how did you get your start? What made you decide to become a baker? Could it be that the name of our sweet town was your inspiration?” The reporter winked at the camera with a set of extra-long faux lashes.

Dean chuckled. “That’s a good theory, Stormy. But I’m afraid the answer is even more simple than that... baking has always made me happy. As a kid, my dad... who’s inside right now in fact,” he said, glancing toward the shop’s window, “taught me how to cook and bake. He was the one who raised me, and it was something we did together that brought us both some joy. We began experimenting with different dessert recipes, and well, I guess you could say I was hooked. I’ve always loved the freedom and creativity that baking allows.”

Stormy nodded. “Yes, that makes sense. But it also requires technical skill, something I understand you also have. Isn’t it true that you graduated valedictorian in your high school class?”

“Yes,” he said, recalling the cheers and whoops from his friends as he walked across the stage to accept his diploma.

“And after graduation you attended one of the best pastry schools in France?”

“It was an honor to learn from the best,” he answered, hoping he sounded modest.

“You could have opened a bakery anywhere in the world. Why did you come back to Sugar Grove?” Stormy was moving her microphone so quickly between them Dean could hardly keep up. He glanced toward the producer who stood watching from behind the cameraman. The producer raised his index finger, reminding him to pause and take a breath before responding.

“My dad...his name is David Montgomery...was the reason,” he said. “I knew that I wanted to open this bakery with him. It couldn’t have been easy for him being a single father. And as a child, I was quite a handful. Still am, as a matter of fact.” He eyed the cute reporter, unable to help himself from the obvious flirt.

Stormy giggled. “I’ll bet,” she said appreciatively. “Do you have a signature dessert?”

“I do,” Dean replied with a nod. “That would be my Funfetti Cake. Want to try it?”

“Of course!” Stormy said eagerly.

“Follow me,” he said, opening the door of the bakery and holding it wide for the reporter, cameraman, and crew to enter. Once they were all inside, he walked over to the counter where he’d strategically placed a freshly baked cake and serve ware prior to the interview.

“This is our Funfetti Cake,” he said, waiting while the cameraman zoomed in on the confection.

“Why is it called Funfetti though?” asked Stormy, her brows furrowing. “It’s completely white. I mean, it’s very pretty with all the roses and swirls, don’t get me

wrong." She quickly added. "It has to do with the taste, I assume?"

"You'll find out in just a second, I promise," Dean replied. Picking up a shiny silver cake knife, he deftly cut into the soft gooey dessert and lifted a single slice onto a plate. At the same time, sugared confetti in a rainbow of colors burst forth from out of the middle of the cake. The layers of the cake themselves were each in a different color of the rainbow as well, separated by white vanilla buttercream.

"Wow! That was amazing!" Stormy cried. "Steve, did you catch that?"

The cameraman gave a thumbs-up sign.

"Want a taste?" Dean asked.

"Um, is my name Stormy Matthews?" The reporter asked with a laugh.

Dean cut a small piece of cake making sure the portion he chose included one of the white roses on top. He speared it with the tines of a delicate fork and held it out to her.

"Aw, isn't this guy something, folks?" Stormy said to the camera. She leaned forward slowly so Steve could zoom in and then placed her red lips around the morsel.

"Mm," she said dreamily, closing her eyes as she chewed and swallowed. "I'm here to tell all of you at home, Dean Montgomery is a winner in my book!"

"Thank you," he said proudly.

"Thank you, Dean, for talking with us today and allowing SWET TV to visit your bakery." She turned to

face the camera directly. "I know folks at home will be excited to learn that you're not the only baker from Sugar Grove who will be competing soon on *Wedding Baker*."

"What?" He snapped his head up, startled. Could he have heard her correctly?

"Oh, you didn't know?" Stormy cooed, widening her blue eyes in mock surprise. "Josie Taylor, of Sugar and Spice, was also selected to be one of the contestants. You are acquainted with her, aren't you? Wasn't she your co-valedictorian of your graduating high school class?"

He ran his hand through his hair reflexively as an image of Josie's beautiful and infuriating heart-shaped face flashed in his mind.

"Yes, that's correct," he said, feeling his cheeks flame and hoping he didn't appear as flustered as he really was. "Um, that's great news," he continued. "Best of luck to her."

"What wonderful sportsmanship!" Stormy replied, grinning widely. "May the best baker win, right? I know everyone here in Sugar Grove will be tuning in to the show eagerly in a few weeks when the competition begins!"

"Um, great," Dean said through gritted teeth. "May the best baker win."

The reporter took a step closer to the camera. "I'm Stormy Matthews, bringing you the latest and greatest in local news from SWET TV."

The light on the cameraman's recording equipment clicked off.

"And that's a wrap!" The producer yelled.

"She sure was cute," said David as he squirted Windex on the front of the cupcake display case and wiped it free of children's sticky fingerprints with a white rag.

"Who?" asked Dean distractedly. He'd just returned from the post office where he'd picked up the shop's mail. He'd been so busy preparing for the interview all week that he'd neglected to run the errand until now, as evidenced by the large stack of envelopes and advertisements currently in his hands. He turned the sign over the front door to "Closed" and locked it from the inside, then walked over to one of the small tables, dropped the mail on top, and took a seat to sort through it.

"The reporter gal...the blonde...what's-her-name," said David, continuing to clean the glass.

"Oh, you mean Stormy Matthews?" Dean looked up from opening a bill. He grinned. "Yeah, she slipped me her phone number after the interview. I have it right here." He reached into the back pocket of his jeans and drew out the napkin on which Stormy had scribbled the digits along with an imprint of her lips in cherry-red lipstick.

David chuckled, shaking his head. "Boy, women fall all over you like cats in heat. I've never seen anything like it."

“Or maybe they just like dessert,” he joked with a laugh. He shrugged. “Not that I mind.”

“Think you’ll settle down one of these days?” David asked. “I’m getting older, son, and want to spend time with my grandchildren...once I have some, that is. You *are* planning to get married and start a family someday...hopefully soon...aren’t you? You’re not a spring chicken anymore either, you know. The big 3-0 will be here before you know it.”

“Thanks Dad,” said Dean. He set the bill to the side and reached for a large manila envelope, noticing with interest that the return address was from the Food Network. “I think I’ll pass on marriage for now. Maybe forever, I don’t know.”

“Now don’t talk like that, son,” said David, shaking the rag in his direction. “Just because your mom decided that being a wife and mother wasn’t for her doesn’t mean that you can’t find a good woman out there. Don’t give up on love.”

“Ha,” Dean barked. “You’re one to talk. You’ve got plenty of years left in you, and you’re not so bad looking, either.”

“You’re just saying that because you favor me,” David replied.

Dean smiled. “Nah, I’m saying it because it’s true. What do they call men over 50 these days? Oh yeah, silver foxes. That’s what you are, Dad, a silver fox.”

David glanced at his reflection in the mirror behind the counter and smoothed his steel-gray hair with his palm. “Really? You think I’ve still got it?”

“Absolutely,” Dean said, nodding. “The real question is why you haven’t dated since Mom left.”

“Aw, shucks, son,” said David, squirting the Windex at an imaginary smear and proceeding to rub it out vigorously. “I’ve been too busy working and raising you.”

“Sorry, that excuse doesn’t work for you anymore,” Dean replied. “Not since you retired from the plumbing union last year. You don’t have to help me here at the bakery – you could be off living the good life in the Caribbean with some hottie on your arm.”

David guffawed. “I don’t think that’s going to happen any time soon, boy. Besides, I love working here with you. Maybe a little too much.” He patted his rounded belly.

“Never say never,” Dean said as he lifted the seal on the envelope from the network. “What’s this?” he muttered, drawing out a stack of papers neatly stapled together in the left-hand corner.

“What’ve you got there?” asked David, coming over to join Dean at the table. “Something from *Wedding Baker*?”

“Yep,” said Dean, riffling through the pages. “Looks like all the information for the competition. Includes flight arrangements, hotel, itinerary for the week, official rules, etcetera.”

“You’re going to have an amazing experience,” said David, leaning his elbows on the marble tabletop. “Proud of you.”

“Wait a minute,” said Dean, stopping to read a section more closely. “It says I can bring someone with me to be my helper.” He glanced up at his dad’s rugged countenance. “Whaddya say, Pops? Ready for fame and fortune?”

David grinned. “Right after you, son.”

“As long as we beat Josie Taylor, I’ll consider it a win,” Dean muttered, shoving the paperwork back into the manila envelope.

His father shook his head. “What is it that you and that girl have against each other, anyway? You’ve been fighting like cats and dogs ever since elementary school over everything from whose team would win at kickball to whose physics project would win the blue ribbon at the science fair.”

Dean reflected. He couldn’t remember ever *not* being competitive with Josie. In fact, Josie Taylor was part of what had given him the motivation and drive to test his limits and push himself just a little bit harder. He loved to see how furious it made her whenever he took the top prize. He chuckled, recalling the fire that flashed in her big brown doe eyes when she looked at him after he won the vote for Class President their junior year. Yep, that was definitely worth going out for the title in the first place.

“Aw, I don’t know, Dad,” he said. “I really don’t remember how our feud started. It probably began in kindergarten when I pulled her little pigtails. She must not have found that as funny as I did. What can I say? We’ve just always been like that. What’s that expression – like oil and water. Josie and I just don’t mix.”

Admittedly, he actually kind of enjoyed getting under her skin, just because he could.

“Well, I don’t know if you’re aware of this,” David continued. “But her father, Roger, passed away suddenly a few years back while you were in France.”

Dean was surprised. “No, I didn’t know that, but I’m truly sorry to hear it. I remember her dad sitting in the stands with her mom and older sister at our sports games and whatnot.”

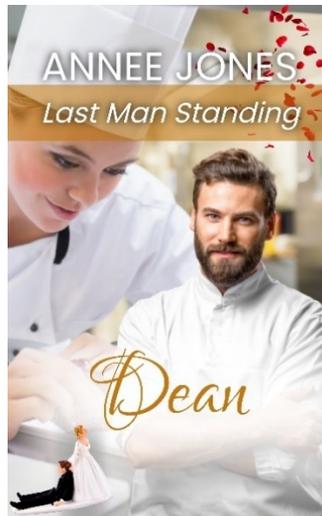
David was glum. “I always liked Roger. Nancy, too, for that matter. Good people. He had a heart attack, from what I understand. Happened out of the blue while he was out on the golf course.”

“That’s a shame,” said Dean. “I wonder how Josie’s doing?”

“I don’t know,” David replied. “But I’m sure you’ll have plenty of opportunities to ask her yourself once we’re in New York.”

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DEAN



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Is there hope for love's sweetness to prevail? Or will this competition make them bitter enemies forever?

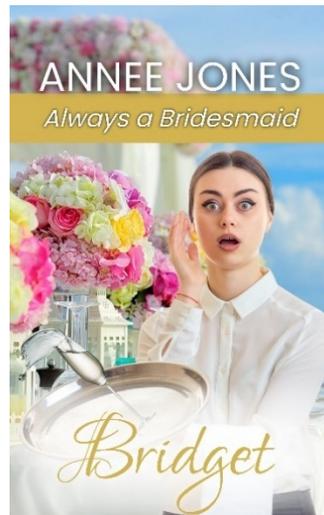
Dean and Josie are the rival owners of the best bakeries in town. Josie is famous for baking the tallest cakes, making all her sweet creations a little bit like her: steady and reliable. Dean is famous for crazy taste combos, explosions of colors inside his cakes, kind of like his personality: a little bit extravagant, a lot flashy.

When they are both chosen to compete on the national TV reality competition show, *Wedding Baker*, Dean and Josie travel to NYC to engage in the ultimate battle for supremacy. The competition forces them into close

proximity and all contestants engage in pettiness and naughty comments while they bake.

Will Josie win the hearts of the audience with her insanely tall and sturdy confections, or will Dean delight the jury more, making him the last man standing in this sweet, sweet war?

BRIDGET



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Will Bridget have the courage to seize the opportunity of a lifetime? And can she find the sweetest prize of all, a love that will never end?

As a food server at a TV network, Bridget Palmer's used to catering to demanding reality stars during their televised wedding ceremonies, but when it comes to planning the menu for her own nuptials – well, there's slim chance of that happening anytime soon since there's no groom in sight. The only man on her radar is her little brother, who she's raising after the death of their parents. She's too busy to date, especially since she's dreaming of opening her own farm-to-fork restaurant one day.

Opportunity knocks when a contestant on the baking show, *Wedding Baker*, drops out unexpectedly and none

other than the hottest actor on television, Slade Morgan, suggests that she step in. She has nothing to lose and everything to gain – but can she trust a man who's always pretending to be someone he's not?

****This is a short, sweet 2-hour read featuring a feisty heroine, a hunky hero, and a zany cast of characters! This story is the 2nd in Annee Jones's Wedding Baker romcom duet, following DEAN. Both BRIDGET and DEAN may be read as standalones—however it is recommended that both be read for maximum enjoyment. Grab your copies today!*

About the Author



Annee Jones is an international bestselling author of romance, fantasy, and mystery. She is passionate about writing stories where dreams come true and love wins!

Professionally, Annee works as a disability counselor where she is honored to help her clients navigate through complex medical and legal systems while rediscovering their wholeness in Spirit.

She also freelances as a professional book reviewer for a major publication and blogs about books for several publishers when time permits.

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