

Catch Me if I Fall



RIVER FORD

SEASONS OF



SUGAR CREEK



Catch Me If I Fall

SEASONS OF SUGAR CREEK

BOOK TWO

RIVER FORD



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Contents

[About the Author](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

1. [Losing a Job](#)
2. [New Opportunities](#)
3. [The Interview](#)
4. [Shopping With the Porters](#)
5. [Nanny—Day One](#)
6. [End of the Trial Period](#)
7. [First Away Game](#)
8. [Surprises](#)
9. [First Home Game](#)
10. [Dating Disaster](#)
11. [Dinner for Three](#)
12. [Movies in the Park](#)
13. [Fletcher Family Dinner](#)
14. [Sara's Birthday](#)
15. [Falling Into October](#)
16. [Not an April Fool?](#)
17. [Homecoming](#)
18. [Teenie Meddles](#)
19. [Heart to Heart](#)
20. [Halloween](#)
21. [Happily Ever Easter](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Thank you for reading!](#)

[Want more?](#)

[Recipes](#)

[Love In Audio by Cynthia Gunderson Preview](#)

[Also by River Ford](#)



About the Author



River Ford is the romance pen name of science fiction author Charity Bradford. She's always loved the Hallmark channel. When she discovered the historic town of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, she knew she wanted to base her first romance series there. Since then, she's let her imagination free to roam the world in search of great romantic stories.

Learn more about River's books, as well as Charity's, on their shared [webpage](https://www.charitybradford-riverford.com/)
(<https://www.charitybradford-riverford.com/>) OR [Instagram](#)
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Author's Note

CATCH ME IF I FALL is part of the [SEASONS OF SUGAR CREEK](#) series. The books do not need to be read in order. They are stand-alone stories that take place in our imaginary small town in Vermont.

Check out all six books in the Winter season, and stay tuned for five new books coming this year for the Fall season. You can learn more about them at the end of this book.

So many people help make these stories come to life. I want to say THANK YOU to some wonderful women who pulled me to the finish line when I didn't think I could write this book at all.

Your questions, comments, and input were invaluable! Mostly, knowing you were waiting on the next chapter made me sit down and write it. This book would not have happened without you.

*thank
you*

Desiree E, Dorothy A, Miranda M, Moira H, and Nari B

Prologue

L

JUNE

Darcy Fletcher frowned at the long line of cars stretched before her. The two-lane country road barely had a shoulder, so the vehicles covered much of the road. It would be a tight fit for two cars to pass each other. She would have to walk a quarter mile in her heels and hope no one ran her over. The number of guests attending her brother Austin's wedding was a testament to his and Jackie's popularity. Darcy knew it wasn't just because Austin had grown up in Sugar Creek. When Jackie quit her job and moved to the small town, everyone fell in love with her.

The two lovebirds' whirlwind romance was the stuff of dreams. One that Darcy feared she'd never get a chance at. She wasn't lucky enough to walk down the street and find her soul mate. With another sigh, she started the trek to Jackie's house.

Missing out on a parking spot up close was her fault. She should have arrived an hour earlier at the least. Unfortunately, poor planning and bad luck meant she hit heavy traffic leaving Boston because of an accident. Now she was almost jogging to her brother's wedding, which started in twenty minutes, in three-inch heels that pinched. To top it off, the mid-June temps were closer to eighty than seventy. She'd probably be a sweaty mess by the time she reached the house.

Darcy frowned. Would anyone care? No one had called to check on her status. Had they even missed her? Probably not. She slowed to a walk. Everyone was too busy with their own lives to worry about her. Carly graduated from nursing school and would soon start a new job at Boston Mercy. Brandon bought Austin's house and was renovating it. Even the youngest Fletcher, Ellie, was running full speed ahead into the rest of her life. She had one summer before she started school at the New England Conservatory. How was it that everyone else found their way so easily?

Not even Jackie's job, which required her to travel everywhere, had prevented her from finding love and settling down. She'd come to Sugar Creek for Christmas and fell in love with Darcy's oldest brother. She only worked another three months so Austin could use his travel coupons to see some of the world before starting a family. The woman even opened her own sound and lighting business in Sugar Creek. Who knew there was a demand for that? But Jackie was picking up jobs for the high school, the town theater company, and even some events at the lodge. Of course, Darcy knew Jackie inherited a lot of money. She probably didn't have to work.

Jackie was the opposite of Darcy in every way. She was petite and elf-like, but Darcy was almost six feet tall. The other woman found true love in a week, inherited a lovely old farmhouse with ten acres of land for Christmas, and knew exactly what she wanted out of life. On the other hand, Darcy couldn't keep a guy interested longer than a month, was moving home at twenty-one, and didn't know what she would do with her life.

She sighed and searched for a reason to smile. It wasn't Jackie's fault she was at odds with herself. Darcy liked her future sister-in-law and would put on a happy face and not ruin the day for the happy couple.

"Hurry, Daddy," a young voice drifted on the breeze.

Darcy glanced down the road opposite the direction she was coming from. A man lifted a small girl in a frilly pink dress from where she jogged beside him. Once settled on his shoulders, the little girl wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her blonde head on his matching one. His hair was short and darker, but the girl's long hair was a halo of light blonde curls. As the father glanced up at his daughter, Darcy caught her breath.

The expression of love on his face was almost blinding. He had a strong jawline, muscles that filled his suit to perfection, and a smile that stopped her world. She'd never seen anyone so gorgeous. The pair reached the yard without noticing her and disappeared around the side of Jackie's house. They must

be guests as well. Darcy didn't see anyone else. Perhaps the girl's mom was already in the backyard?

She took a deep breath, tried to forget the hot dad, and steeled herself for the day with her family. Although she loved them deeply, lately, being around them had grown harder and harder. They all knew where they fit. They knew what they wanted and had a plan to get there, but she didn't. It was the ongoing joke of her life. That's what happened when you were born on April Fool's Day. Nothing ever went right.

Not school, not her jobs, and not the guys she dated.

"Suck it up, buttercup. Get in there and pretend you aren't miserable around all the happy couples." She covered the last twenty feet and stepped onto the porch.

"Darcy!" Ellie shrieked as she flew out of the door. "We've been waiting for you. Why didn't you answer your phone?"

"What?" Darcy swung her purse around to grab her phone. "It never rang."

Ellie took her by the hand and pulled her into the house. "Forget it. Come on, Jackie wants photos with us before she gets married."

"Sorry," Darcy mumbled. Okay, maybe they had missed her.

Jackie had been busy updating the house the last few months. The inside walls were a soft creamy shiplap, but the ceiling and all the trim were wood beams. The two-story high living room had new windows from the floor to the A-line ceiling. They filled the back wall overlooking a field and the Adirondack mountains. Darcy could see the rows of wedding guests taking their seats out back.

The sisters hurried up the stairs to the master bedroom. Jackie stood by another window with a fantastic view.

"He'll see you if you're not careful," Mrs. Fletcher fluttered around Jackie.

The bride twisted her hands as she gazed at the scene below her. Jackie's hair had a slight wave to it for the wedding. She had left it all down except for a pretty French braid across her bangs. The chunk of blue hair had faded over the months and now only showed at the end of the braid. Jackie didn't wear a veil, but her hair kissed the tops of her bare shoulders. Sheer sleeves started a couple of inches from the shoulder, and the neckline made a sweetheart dip. The bodice tapered, and the skirt flared to pool on the floor. It almost looked like an upside-down morning glory. It was too simple for Darcy's tastes, but it looked perfect on Jackie.

"Darcy made it," Ellie announced.

Jackie turned and hurried to hug Darcy. "I'm so glad you're here. Are you okay?"

"Yes, my phone didn't ring. I got stuck in traffic, that's all."

Jackie squeezed her again and then waved at the photographer, who'd been sitting in a chair in the corner. "Let's get going. I'm dying to get down there."

The next half hour rushed by in a blur. There were pictures, hugs, and tears when Jackie tucked a photo of her mother into her bouquet. Finally, they descended the stairs, where Jackie's friend Garrett waited to walk her down the aisle. Darcy discreetly wiped at her own eyes as her mom hurried outside to take her seat. She couldn't imagine getting married without her mom.

Finally, they were ready to begin. Darcy walked into the backyard with the other bridesmaids, her two sisters. Ellie walked in front of her, and Carly followed behind. The lawn had been transformed. Aisles of white fabric-covered chairs with blue ribbons filled the space. It looked like half the town had shown up. A pathway of flower petals had been laid down, leading to the arch overflowing with vines and roses.

The warm sun beat down on her, and Darcy suddenly felt out of place. Well, not out of place, really, but like the air had become charged. It was a strange feeling. She glanced at the guests as she passed them, but nothing seemed unusual. Then

she looked at Austin. The joy on his face was something to behold. Darcy couldn't wait until he got his first look at Jackie.

Right before she moved to her place on the side of the arch, she glanced at the men standing with Austin. Her goal was to see who she'd leave with after the pastor did his thing since she'd missed the rehearsal. The hot dad stared back at her. That charged feeling spiked as she met his gaze.

He's paired with me! Darcy's heart pounded louder than she thought possible. Could Ellie or Carly, standing on either side of her, hear it? His little girl sat on the front row wedged between two Sugar Mamas, her little legs swinging back and forth. Darcy didn't see a potential mother anywhere.

The wedding march started, and she focused on her brother. She smiled as his mouth fell open when Jackie stepped into view. He might have even teared up. Her brother was such a softy.

Garrett placed Jackie's hand in Austin's, and then he took a seat. Darcy had to concentrate on not looking at the groomsmen. She wanted to know if the awareness skittering through her veins meant the hot dad still watched her. Who was he?

Instead of giving in, she focused on the love coming from the couple, pledging their devotion to each other. Austin did cry, probably in relief, when Jackie said, *'I do.'* That made Ellie giggle, and Darcy couldn't help but smile and blink back tears herself. The bride faced Austin, so Darcy couldn't see her face, but that didn't matter. She'd never seen her brother so happy. Because of that, Darcy would do anything for her new sister-in-law.

Before she knew it, the happy couple were lip-locked before a cheering crowd. Then, they broke apart and waved with their hands clasped together.

"Thank you all for being here. The reception is in the barn. Follow us." Austin pointed to the left, where a rustic barn waited with open doors. Then he led Jackie down the aisle.

Carly went next, and then it was time for Darcy to take the stranger's arm. He was taller than her by at least four inches, and the muscles hiding under his jacket were like granite. Darcy felt breathless as they followed the procession toward the barn. The photographer snapped photos the entire time. She stopped to take in the scene when they stepped inside the doors.

"It's beautiful," she murmured.

Lights and gauzy swaths of fabric softened the wooden beams' hard lines. Tables were set up around the dance area, and another arch was situated at the back for the couple to greet their guests. People streamed past her, some heading for the food, others to grab a table.

She had almost forgotten she clung to the hot dad's arm until he pulled away.

"Well done," he said.

Well done? What in the world did that mean?

Before she could ask him, his little girl came barreling toward them.

"Daddy," she shouted. "You did great."

The man stepped away from Darcy and caught his daughter in his arms. "Thank you, cutie pie."

She watched their interaction with fascination. He was gentle and clearly wrapped around the little girl's finger. Darcy wanted to ask his name, but he carried his daughter away without glancing at her.

She stood dazed as he approached Austin and Jackie. After he exchanged a few words with the couple, he left out the side door. Darcy erupted from her stupor with a gush of emotion. It felt like he purposely didn't pass her on his way out. Feeling snubbed, she stomped her way toward Ellie. Who was he? Why didn't he introduce himself? Did he know who she was? Nothing made sense. Especially not how his deep voice had plucked at the chords of her heart.

“Ellie.” Darcy tapped her sister’s elbow. “Do you know who I was paired with?”

“Oh yeah. That’s Coach Porter. He took over for Coach Johnson in March. Isn’t his little girl adorable?”

“Did he just leave?” Her words were more of a demand than a question. “What about wedding photos?”

“They got some of the groomsmen before you got here. Jackie didn’t want to spend hours taking formal photos.” Ellie pointed around the room. “See, she’s got two photographers working, and disposable cameras are scattered around for the guests to grab candid shots as well.”

“But—” Darcy threw her hands in the air. What could she say? It wasn’t her wedding. “Never mind.”

Ellie squeezed her arm. “Mingle and be happy we don’t have to stand in a line all night.”

Her sister drifted away, and Darcy felt hot and shaky. She couldn’t decide if she was angry that Mr. Porter hadn’t talked to her or not. Surely, her feelings hadn’t been hurt by it? She didn’t care what people thought of her. Darcy sighed. At least she pretended that she didn’t care.

Coach Porter. He lived in Sugar Creek.

Because his presence scrambled her brain and made her feel weird all over, she needed to avoid him at all costs while she was home. Plus, he had a kid. Where there were children, there was a mom. Just because she wasn’t at the wedding didn’t mean she didn’t exist.

Darcy moved to sit at the closest table. The last thing she needed was to obsess over a man—especially one who didn’t feel the need to introduce himself.

Carly stepped into the middle of the dance floor. She raised a microphone to her mouth and welcomed everyone to the reception. Shortly after, the newlyweds took their first dance as husband and wife. Darcy’s throat tightened. They were so perfect together. She wanted that. Wherever life led her, she wanted to find a love like Austin and Jackie’s.

Losing a God

ℒ

MID-AUGUST

“So sorry I’m late.”

Darcy Fletcher hurried into Shear Delight, slightly out of breath. She quickly removed her jacket and stuffed it behind the counter with her purse. August meant cool mornings, summer-like afternoons, and perfect evenings, but that, in turn, meant dragging around jackets you’d only need for a short time.

“You’re always late. What’s the excuse this time?” Francine peered over her glasses. She wasn’t in her seventies like Doreen, but she’d adopted the mannerisms of the yarn shop owner. Francine idolized the older woman for her mad sweater design skills and was borderline ‘single white female’ about it. If Doreen was single instead of widowed and at least two decades younger, Francine might have had a chance to take her place.

“I said I was sorry.” Darcy looked around the shop. “No one’s even here, so why are you so huffy about it?”

“Punctuality matters. Why are you late?” Francine repeated.

“Um.” Darcy desperately wished she had a good reason for being late again. The truth was she’d been distracted and lost track of time. It wasn’t even for something cool. She’d gotten carried away planning meals for the next week and couldn’t find a parking spot close to the shop.

“Hun, why don’t you admit this job isn’t for you?” Francine shook her head, but her voice wasn’t as agitated as before. “What is this, job number three or four, since you came home in June? That’s barely two months. You work hard enough when you’re here, but it’s clear you don’t have a passion for the product. You can’t tell the difference between a fingering and a DK.”

“Sure I can,” Darcy bluffed.

“Oh yeah? How about this?” Francine turned and pulled two skeins of yarn out of her bag. “Which is the mohair, and which is the morino?”

Darcy stared at both, hoping something she’d heard during the last two weeks of working at the shop would provide the answer. Finally, she pointed to the pink one.

“That’s the morino,” she said with all the confidence she could muster.

“Nope, they’re both mohair.” Francine shook her head in disappointment. “The only difference between these two is the color.”

Darcy slumped onto the stool. “What am I going to do? I need a job.”

“I’ll speak with Dory. She’s already brought your situation up with the Sugar Mamas. They’ll find something for you.”

That was the last thing Darcy wanted. It was bad enough her dad pestered her every day to join her brothers at Cabins by the Bay (CBB). If the Sugar Mamas got involved, she’d be looking over her shoulder any time she came to town. They thought they knew what was best for everyone, from the simplest things to the doozies that could leave your head spinning. Darcy had already received more suggestions since coming home than she could handle.

Use local honey to help with your allergies. No one likes a red nose, dear.

You could be a nurse like your sister. You’re always helping people.

You should layer your hair and put in highlights. It’ll soften your face and bring out your eyes.

I have a grandson/nephew/neighbor you should meet.

What about teaching? You could do that...

The list went on and on. Every Sugar Mama she’d run into had something to say about her taking the fall semester off college. Sadly, they were usually right about most things. At least she understood why they were focused on her. They

cared, and they knew she was struggling. She'd be grateful but watch out for ways they interfered. Was it so wrong to want to figure it out herself? She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Darcy didn't want to admit defeat yet.

"Do you want me to finish the week, or should I start looking for a new job today?" she asked.

Francine gave her a soft smile. "Going from job to job has to be getting old. Why don't you take the week and think about what you want? What are you good at? What will make you happy enough to stick with it?"

Darcy retrieved her jacket and purse, trying her best not to tear up.

What did she want? She wished she knew.

What was she good at? Nothing.

What would make her happy? Figuring out her life.

Her heart ached for something, but she hadn't figured out what it was. Two months at home hadn't helped either.

"Don't be upset, dear," Francine patted her arm. "You've got lots of people who love you. They're watching out for you."

Darcy couldn't speak. Instead, she nodded at the woman and left the shop with her coat in hand as fast as possible. Her eyes blurred from unshed tears, which she blinked away. She was glad to be home because of all the people that cared about her. Even those who thought she was bossy and selfish were kind and supportive.

But I'm not bossy or selfish. At least, she didn't think she was. Was she? Darcy didn't want to dive into that hole yet, so she tried reassigning her emotions to something safer. *I will not cry over a stupid job I didn't love.*

She stuffed her arm into the jacket sleeve while walking toward her family's store, but her purse strap got tangled. Her arm and purse were trapped, and she felt completely inadequate. How was she supposed to find joy and success when she couldn't even dress herself?

Darcy jerked and spun in a half circle to pull herself free. The jacket stayed on one arm, but the other side slid to the ground as the purse strap finally came loose. It flew out of her hand and bounced off a solidly built man trying to step around her. Seriously, his chest and shoulder width was impressive. The defined collarbone outlined under his long-sleeved t-shirt was surrounded by tight muscles that did something funny to her stomach.

Her eyes slid upward to a strong jaw covered in stubble, amazing lips, a straight nose, and a pair of striking hazel eyes fixed on her with a flinty stare. Just her rotten luck—the one time she wasn't paying attention, she ran into Evan Porter.

This was a face she'd reflected on many times since the day her brother got married. Luckily, he'd been wearing a tux that hid his shoulders and chest better than his current outfit, or she would have been stuck dreaming about those too. His hair was longer than she remembered. It had a wave that was almost a curl, where before it had been buzzed.

The little girl beside him wore a bright yellow party dress and two bows in her hair. She smiled up at Darcy with big eyes. It was *so* inappropriate to gawk at the man when his daughter was with him.

"I'm so sorry," Darcy moaned. She must be bright red from the heat flooding her cheeks.

Evan didn't smile, but his daughter giggled.

"Daddy, you got fowled." She added the 'w' to the word, which made Darcy smile too. The cutie's blonde curls bounced as she jumped up and down. "But she didn't sack you."

That's because the man was solid. He was easily six-three or four with compact muscles. In other words, he was H. O. T.

His daughter's comment brought a smile to the man's lips. "It'll take more than a girl to take me out."

Darcy frowned and bent to pick up her purse. *Girl?* Her competitive side wanted to take offense and step up to the line of scrimmage, but she knew better than to pick a fight in front

of a child. Why should she care what the man looking down at her thought?

Keep your walls up. Darcy managed to get her jacket on correctly, and her purse slung over her shoulder.

“She’s pretty, Daddy.” The girl stared at Darcy with awe on her petite face. It broke loose the tightness in Darcy’s chest. Not everything was a competition.

“Well, thank you very much.” Darcy turned from the dad to focus on the girl. She knelt at eye level with the sweetie and pretended Evan Porter wasn’t there. Too bad her body wasn’t getting the message from her brain. It had been two months since she’d seen him, but the attraction was instantaneous, just like that first time. It buzzed through her, causing her hands to tingle and her knees to wobble. *Focus.* “I love your dress. Are you going to a party?”

The girl giggled again and swayed to make her skirt swish. “No. I like to be pretty. What’s your name?”

“Darcy. What’s yours?”

“Sara. Would you be my friend?” Her eyes were bluer than her dad’s, and they were filled with pleading at the moment.

Darcy’s heart melted. “I’d love to be your friend.”

Evan cleared his throat. “Sara, we need to hurry. I’m sure Darcy has other unsuspecting people to attack.”

Darcy stood and glared at Evan. However, the glint in his eyes might have been humor. It flustered her so much that she didn’t know what to think or say until he pulled his daughter into motion. They made it three or four feet before Sara looked over her shoulder.

“Bye, Darcy.” The girl waved before trotting along beside her dad.



I t took every bit of self-control Evan Porter had to keep from smiling. Most women flirted with him and ignored Sara. Not Darcy Fletcher. After her initial perusal of his body, she had gone all stand-offish when she looked at him. Her body language screamed red alert. While curious about that, he had no intention of following up on the heat between them. However, he'd been impressed by her reaction to Sara.

Darcy changed with their interaction. She'd gone soft and sweet as she bent to speak with his daughter. Those few short seconds sent all kinds of unwanted longings to his heart, mind, and body. The heat was one thing, but getting emotionally involved was different. It would never do to get mixed up with another woman. Especially one as young as Darcy. That's why he pulled Sara away. It didn't matter how beautiful Darcy was or how nice she smelled when she came near. She was younger than Jenna had been when they married and had Sara. What a mess that turned out to be.

"Daddy," Sara drew his attention back to where it should be.

"Yes, cutie pie?"

"How come we haven't seen Darcy since you walked her down the aisle? Isn't she my new mommy?"

Evan stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. What put that idea in Sara's head, and how did she even remember Darcy? Sure, he'd thought about the wedding many times over the last couple of months, but he didn't realize Sara had noticed the beautiful woman too.

"Sweetheart, I didn't get married. You know that, right? I was a groomsman, and Darcy was a bridesmaid. So that means we were there to support the people getting married."

"What do you mean?" She quirked her head to the side. "Like a guard?"

Evan laughed. He loved when she resorted to football as a way to understand something. "You need more girlfriends. Too many football analogies, and no one your age will know what you're talking about."

She frowned momentarily and then got a serious look as she said, “Darcy said she’d be my friend. I should have asked her for a pway day. Can we go find her?”

“It’s play,” Evan emphasized the l sound. Sara had corrected most of her speech problems over the last year, but that tricky ‘l’ popped up occasionally, usually in a blend.

“Play,” Sara repeated the word slowly but correctly.

“Good job, and I meant you need friends your age. Luckily, school starts next week.”

“But I like Darcy. She has a nice smile.” Sara kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk. “What if no one else likes me?”

Evan glanced down at his little girl. She was small for her age, but she was feisty. Although he couldn’t shake the fear that had gripped him during the first two years of her life, she was doing good now, and that was all that mattered. Sara would turn six in September. Although he would always watch for new or returning symptoms, the doctors said she had a normal life ahead of her. So he pushed the worry away.

“Every kid at school is going to fall at your feet. They won’t know what hit them when you smile in their direction.” Evan reached down and swung his daughter into his arms so he could see her better. “You’re a princess, remember?”

Sara giggled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I’m glad I’m your princess, Daddy. You’re my coach, right?”

“You bet.” He continued down the sidewalk so they wouldn’t be late for their haircuts.

“Daddy?” She patted the sides of his cheek. “If I’m a princess, that means you’re a king. Right?”

“Sure.”

“Then where’s your queen? Don’t all kings have a queen?”

Where indeed?

He shrugged and nuzzled his chin into Sara’s neck. She giggled just like he hoped she would and dropped the subject. He opened the car door and watched while Sara tried to buckle

her car seat. After a moment, he helped her and laughed when she scowled at him.

“I can do it, Daddy,” she pouted.

“I know you can, but we’ll be late if we don’t hurry. Miss Colleen is waiting to see you .”

Sara bounced in her seat. “She’s my friend, too.”

As they drove to the beauty shop, his daughter talked non-stop about going to school, making more friends, and what she would wear on the first day. She even talked about his football team. Evan coached the Sugar Creek High team, and Sara had been to most of the practices with him over the summer. She loved watching and cheering for the boys, and they doted on her like she was their baby sister. He listened to her chatter and wondered how they would work out afternoon practices and games.

“I see it,” Sara chirped.

They had reached Colleen’s beauty shop. The place didn’t look like a traditional beauty parlor, but Evan liked Colleen’s no-nonsense approach to hair, even if it meant wading through a sea of pink. Seriously, everything in that place was some shade of girly. Colleen had a heart of gold, though. Plus, Sara liked the older woman. She was unbuckled before he stopped the car.

“Sara, what did we talk about?”

She sighed and let go of the door handle. “Not to unbuckle before the car is off.”

“And?”

“Let you open the door.”

“Good girl.” He got out and opened her door. After she climbed out, he hugged her close. “It’s because I love you so much.”

Sara hugged his neck. “I know, Daddy. I wuv you too.” She pressed his cheeks as hard as she could while laughing at her baby talk. Now that she could say most things correctly, she sometimes pulled out what she called ‘silly talk’ to soften

him up. Yep, his daughter knew how to keep him wrapped around her little finger.

Evan set her down and swatted her playfully. “Let’s get in there and see what kind of treat Miss Colleen has today.”

Sara giggled and ran for the door, yelling, “Miss Colleen, I’m here.”

“Hey, sweet girl,” Colleen greeted her.

Sara grabbed the older woman’s hand to get her attention. “I made a new friend, and we was talking.”

“Were talking,” Colleen corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Sara’s brow furrowed, then she shook her little head and continued. “She’s so pretty, and she’s going to be my bestest friend.”

“And who is this lucky girl?” Colleen prompted with a grin.

“Darcy. She whacked Daddy with her purse, but he didn’t fall down.” Sara laughed again. “Can you make me as pretty as her?”

“You’re already the most beautiful girl in town,” Evan said as he looked around. The walls were pink, and the chairs and hairdryers were pink. Even all the combs in the jar were pink. He didn’t see any other Sugar Mamas, though. “It’s quiet today.”

“Everyone’s got projects to attend to.” Colleen patted the pink chair. “Darcy Fletcher?”

Evan resisted the urge to help his daughter as she climbed up onto the—you guessed it—pink booster seat. “Uh, yeah. Sara will make friends her age at school.”

Colleen nodded as she placed the pink cape around Sara. She picked up her pink shears and glanced at her phone when it buzzed. A smile quirked her lips, and she took a moment to type something, waited, and then smiled even bigger. When she returned to work, her face was calm again, but her eyes twinkled mischievously.

“Have you considered who will watch Sara when you have away games?” Colleen asked.

“No. You guys have helped me so much this summer. Can you and the other Sugar Mamas keep helping?”

“Nope. Our nights will get busy through the end of the year. It would be best if you had a nanny. Sara needs stability. Especially now she’s starting school. Set bedtimes—“

Sara piped up. “No bedtimes.”

“Bedtimes aren’t so bad,” Colleen whispered like it was a secret. “You’ll want friends over to play, and they will have schedules.”

“What’s a schedule?” Sara asked.

“It’s a playbook for your day,” Evan said.

Sara stared at him, her little lips pursed in thought. “I’m not playing football, Daddy. Can’t we keep doing what we want?” Sara asked.

“Moms like schedules for their kids,” Colleen said as she clipped and snipped Sara’s hair.

Evan grunted. “That’s a low blow.”

“I don’t have a mom.” Sara puckered her face up tighter than before. “How do I get one?”

Colleen laughed with a full-belly chuckle. “Don’t you worry about that. It’ll happen in time. But, first, we need to get you a nanny.”

“What’s a nanny?” Sara asked.

Evan kept his mouth shut while Colleen explained it to his daughter. There was no point in telling Colleen he would never marry again. Not while he had his little girl to care for. Her own mother had walked away because she thought being a mom was too much work. He’d never trust another woman to put Sara first. A nanny might be just what he needed, though.

“Do you know of a good nanny?” he interrupted.

“I’ve got someone in mind.”

Evan didn't like the sly look in the beautician's eyes.
"Who?"

"Darcy Fletcher."

"No," Evan bit off the rest of his words when the two females in the room stared at him.

"Darcy can be my nanny?" Sara piped up with wide-eyed wonder.

"What's wrong with Darcy?" Colleen asked.

"Nothing. I'm sure she's perfectly nice. But she works at that yarn place." Evan rubbed the back of his head. Should he know where she worked? It was too late to hide that fact now.

Colleen smiled again. The delight in her eyes spelled trouble with a capital T. "I have it on good authority that she doesn't. This is perfect. She needs a job, and you need a nanny."

"Yay! Darcy will get to pway with me every day." Sara beamed at him.

He wanted to yell no way, but how would he explain it to his daughter? He couldn't admit that having Darcy around all the time would quickly become a form of torture for him. Darcy Fletcher was a temptation no hot-blooded man could resist for long. There had to be some way to get out of this.

"Sara needs someone that can keep an eye on her heart. Darcy's sister would be better. You know, the nurse." Evan didn't know what he was saying. Of course, the nurse couldn't be the nanny. She had recently started working at a hospital in Boston. He lamely added, "Or someone with medical experience."

Colleen raised a brow in his direction.

He tried again. "Darcy doesn't look like the type of woman who wants to babysit a little girl all afternoon. I'm sure she's busy."

"Darcy is great with kids. And think of it this way, she can always call her sister if she has questions." Colleen pulled out a hairdryer. Before she started it, she said, "And Darcy doesn't

run around as she did in high school. She's barely done anything since coming home a few months ago."

Evan couldn't help but be curious. "Why doesn't she go out?"

Colleen shrugged. "I have no idea."

"It's probably because all her friends have returned to college." Yeah, that was it. He couldn't imagine her sitting at home by herself. The few times he'd seen her around town, she'd always been smiling and talking to someone. She looked popular enough.

"Her summer was pretty quiet. She mostly worked and hung out with her family." Colleen added a few curls to Sara's hair.

Evan didn't miss that his little girl hung on every word they said. She watched with big blue eyes. She only sat still in Colleen's chair or when she was asleep. Sara had boundless energy that he was always trying to curb. The doctors said she was fine, but Evan still worried she'd get too worked up and have a setback of some kind. He didn't know if Darcy could handle that.

"She's too young," he sputtered. "What is she, like nineteen?"

"She's twenty-one." Colleen fluffed Sara's hair and removed the cape. "All done. Grab a candy while I cut your dad's hair."

Twenty-one. Legal, but still too young. Evan reached for Sara as she jumped down.

"Daddy, I can do it," she huffed.

Colleen pointed to the chair. "Come on, Romeo, let's keep you handsome."

"Romeo?" He removed the booster, set it aside, and sat down.

Colleen placed a larger cape around his shoulders and spun him toward the mirror where she could point at their

reflection. “You’re trying too hard to get out of talking to Darcy. Who knows, maybe she won’t want to be your nanny?”

“Why wouldn’t she want to be my nanny?” Evan cringed. Why couldn’t he keep his mouth shut? He didn’t want to see Darcy daily, so he shouldn’t take offense that she might not want to see him. Watch Sara. She might not want to watch Sara. He tried to correct the direction of his thoughts.

Colleen silently laughed at him as she worked the clippers over his head. “What are you worried about?”

“Nothing. I need to know Sara will be in good hands. That’s all. It’s hard not being around her.” Evan swallowed and hoped Colleen didn’t see the expression that revealed his new train of thought. It *was* hard not to look for Darcy everywhere he went in town. “With Sara. We’re always together.”

“Sara’s growing up, Evan. Let her do that. It’ll be good for you to have time apart.”

“I like being with Daddy.” Sara had chocolate around her mouth and worked at unwrapping a second mini candy bar. “He’s my real bestest friend. Why can’t he play with me and Darcy?”

“Because he has to lead our football team to state this year,” Colleen said. “Middlebury has beat us the last three years. It’s time we took back the title and went all the way.”

Evan shook his head. The rivalry between the two high schools was the topic of almost every conversation he’d had that summer.

“Oh, yeah.” Sara nodded, and her curls bounced. “But I can help him do that.”

“I bet you can.” Colleen smiled.

Evan added, “You’ll always be my favorite assistant coach. Miss Colleen is right, though. You can’t be on the field all the time. Don’t you want to have tea parties and dress up play dates and stuff?”

“Yeah, but you do those with me.” Sara tilted her head to the side as she looked up at him. Then she climbed into the empty seat next to the window to be taller. She had her feet under her and was pushing up to stand.

“Sara, we don’t stand on the chairs,” Evan reminded her.

“Sorry, Daddy.” She flopped onto her butt and let her legs kick back and forth.

No one spoke for several minutes. Colleen worked on his hair, Sara watched the TV in the corner, and Evan once more tried to think of a real reason not to hire Darcy. All he could come up with was that she distracted him from his daughter. That wasn’t something he should admit to one of the Sugar Mamas. They’d immediately decide to play matchmaker.

Plus, he was a grown man. He might work at the high school, but he could get over a pretty girl easier than the kids on his team. And he probably wouldn’t see Darcy that much. That thought cheered him. Yeah, he wouldn’t be spending time with her at all. At least not more than hello, how was Sara, thank you, and I’ll see you tomorrow.

Still. “Isn’t there anyone else that would be a good nanny?”

“I’m sure there is, but Darcy needs the job as much as you need help. You could give it a try, just for the football season. You can look for someone else if it doesn’t work out.” Colleen brushed off his neck and then removed the cape. “We good with asking Darcy to be your nanny?”

He did need help, and how could he argue with Colleen’s reasoning for choosing Darcy? If she needed a job, he shouldn’t be so determined not to give it to her just because he was attracted to her. “I guess so. As you said, we can do something else if it doesn’t work. She’ll probably get tired of it and quit anyway. Hasn’t she had two or three jobs already this summer?”

“And she’s done a wonderful job at all of them. She’s a hard worker, willing to learn, and good with people. She only quit each of them because she hasn’t found what makes her

happy yet. It takes maturity to let go of things that don't bring you joy."

"Maybe," he mumbled. He tended to see it the other way. Darcy was young. She didn't know how to stick with something and make it work no matter how hard it got. Jenna had been the same way.

"I'll call Teenie and have her talk to Darcy." Colleen swiped his card and handed it back. "Someone will call you to work out the particulars."

"Okay. Thanks, Colleen. We'll see you around." He opened the door for Sara.

Evan suddenly felt like a storm was brewing, but he couldn't explain why. On the other hand, his daughter happily bounced toward the car singing a new version of the ABC song at the top of her lungs.

A, B, C, I'm getting a nanny.

A, B, C, her name is Darcy.

C, D, G, H, it's the best day ever.

"Hop in, cutie pie. How about some lunch?"



Theresa 'Teenie' Fletcher stood at her kitchen window and watched her husband, Adam, putter around the backyard. It had been eight months since he turned Cabins by the Bay over to their sons, Austin and Brandon. He was happier now than she'd ever seen him. Now that he wasn't tied to the family business, he had relaxed and smiled more. It was clear he had found his groove in the subsequent months.

Adam took up gardening to supplement his binge-watching of all things sports related, but her life hadn't changed much. It had been good for him to get outside, and as she watched, she

considered joining him. She didn't like getting dirty but enjoyed his company and was tired of constantly cleaning.

Teenie hung the towel on the hook beside the sink and closed the dishwasher. Before she reached the door, her phone rang. A glance showed Colleen's name on the screen.

"Hey, what's up?" Teenie greeted her friend.

"Ruthie mentioned you've been thinking about joining the Sugar Mamas. Is that true?" Colleen jumped right in.

"Yes, I have." Teenie laughed. "In fact, I was thinking about it this morning. I have a lot more free time now. Getting involved in the community sounds fun. I'm at most of the events already, so why not kick it up a notch?"

"Good. We need more women like you in the Sugar Mamas."

"Thank you." Teenie brushed her fingers across her collar. She'd given thirty-plus years to her family. It felt nice to be wanted somewhere else. "I'm ready."

"Okay, you know about the secret missions, right?" Colleen asked.

"Ruthie mentioned a little about them."

"We all had a first challenge, if you will. It's part of becoming a true Sugar Mama. We'll all help you, but you'll be the lead."

"What do I have to do?" Teenie slipped into her bedroom and closed the door.

Ruthie had been dropping hints for the last six months about how the Sugar Mamas worked behind the scenes all over town. Teenie hadn't asked to join them because she wasn't sure she could pull off the things Ruthie talked about. Hopefully, her first mission wouldn't be too difficult.

"This one is close to home. Darcy is no longer at Shear Delight." Colleen let her words sink in.

"Oh, no. What happened?"

“Francine suggested Darcy didn’t love working with yarn.”

Teenie shook her head. “Let me guess. She didn’t pull any punches.”

“No, she basically fired Darcy but flipped it enough to make it sound like Darcy’s choice. Anyway, I have the perfect job for her, but we will need your help getting her to accept it.”

“Why? Darcy is always willing to try new things.” Teenie sat on the edge of her bed and played with one of the ties on the quilt. “She’s not afraid of hard work, either.”

“Oh, I know that,” Colleen said. “Let’s just say we’ve noticed a few things about Darcy the last two months. Since Austin’s wedding, she’s avoided a certain man around town.”

“Who, and how do you know?”

“She’s been seen watching a certain football coach here and there, but any time there’s a chance they could run into each other, she ducks into a shop or something. But, get this, he needs a nanny for the football season.”

“Oh, he’s one hunk of man.” Teenie fanned her face. She should be ashamed, but what was the harm in noticing? “They looked amazing standing together at the wedding. Do you think she likes him, or is it something else?”

“Well, Francine watched them through the shop window this morning. She said definite sparks were shooting between them.”

Teenie was overjoyed Austin had found a wonderful woman to settle down with. She’d love to see all of her children that happy, and if Darcy was next, so be it. But how could she help?

“So, I just have to get her to accept a job from him?” she asked.

“Butter her up a bit. Get her used to the idea, and then we’ll get them in the same place in the next day or two. We have to work quickly. School starts on Monday.”

“How should I do this?” Teenie had forgotten all about Adam in the garden.

“You know her better than anyone.”

“Thanks, Colleen. I’ll give it some thought and get to work.”

New Opportunities



Darcy needed a distraction. She should have started looking for a job, but she doubted she'd make much headway while her mind spun around Evan Porter as if he were a miniature sun and she was a planet orbiting his gravitational pull. Why did he fill her thoughts? He'd never been especially nice to her. Of course, they'd only spoken to each other twice, but despite his abrupt words, she thought there might be something behind his eyes worth getting to know. Was that why she always noticed him around town?

She shook her head and walked toward CBB. Maybe Austin needed help with his adventure tours? That would be more enjoyable than sitting behind the desk in the storefront or, worse yet, cleaning the cabins after guests checked out. Yeah, a day on Ambrose Bay could be just what she needed to clear her mind. There wouldn't be many of those left before fall settled around them, quickly followed by winter. Maybe she could ask Austin how Evan ended up as one of his groomsmen while they were paddling around. The two men couldn't have known each other long enough for something like that.

Clarissa, the single mom who worked for Darcy's brothers, walked out of the shop holding hands with a tall man. Her brother had mentioned the woman was hanging out with a local doctor. They looked like more than friends to Darcy.

"Darcy, how are you? Shouldn't you be at work?" Clarissa asked. She tried to hide the hand clasped in the man's by shifting her purse in front of it, but she didn't let him go.

“I thought I’d see if Austin needed any help.” Darcy shrugged as if it were no big deal. She tried not to keep glancing at their hands, but she suddenly wished someone wanted to hold on to her like that. Instead, she asked, “Who’s this?”

“This is Jonah. He’s a pediatrician.” Clarissa turned toward the man, and their eyes locked. There was some serious heat passing between them.

Jonah broke the stare and held out his free hand. “Nice to meet you, Darcy.”

“You too.” Darcy glanced at their hands again. She couldn’t help it. “Where are you off to?”

“Jonah just got off shift, so we’re having an early lunch slash dinner before he heads home to sleep,” Clarissa said.

“Oh, well, have fun.” Darcy shrugged and stepped around them to the door.

She had many questions but figured she’d get the scoop from one of her brothers instead of asking the couple. And they were clearly a couple as they walked down the sidewalk. They stayed close enough for their shoulders to brush against each other as they moved. Darcy liked how they leaned their heads toward each other as if afraid to miss a single word from the other. They were cute together.

She pressed through the door, noting the jangle of the bell overhead, and discovered she still liked the sound. Her brother Brandon was behind the front desk. He was older than her by almost seven years, and they had never been close. Not from lack of trying. Darcy had cheered for him and Austin through every sporting event they participated in. When she was younger, she thought they both hung the moon. They were older, wiser, and so cool because of all the freedom they had.

Austin had always been kind and attentive when he could, but Brandon was too busy to be bothered by a little sister, especially after he started dating Summer Blakely. After he left for college and Summer joined the Army, Brandon never really came home, at least not until last Christmas.

“Hey, didn’t think I’d see you today,” Brandon greeted her. “Everything alright?”

“Yeah. I wondered if Austin needed any help with a tour or something.” She shrugged and wandered to the counter. “I just saw Clarissa. What’s up with her and the doctor? I thought she was still married.”

“Technically, she is. However, she told me this morning that the P.I. Jonah hired found her husband. He’s living in Arizona with a second wife and kid.” Brandon shook his head in disgust. “He used a different last name, so he was hard to find.”

“No way. He has another family? Is that why he left Clarissa?”

“I didn’t ask for details. The good news is that it strengthens her case for abandonment if he doesn’t grant her a divorce. They have a court date in a couple of weeks.” Brandon lugged a box over to the tourist rack and restocked the flyers.

“That’s good.” Darcy watched him. He seemed different today, but she couldn’t decide what it was. That was one of the longest conversations they’d had with each other in a long time. She took a chance and asked, “So, how are you doing?”

Brandon glanced over his shoulder and then continued working. “Good. Fall is almost here. I’m ready for cooler weather and the changing colors.”

Darcy leaned against the counter. “Is that so? What do you have against summer?”

His back stiffened, and when he spoke, his voice came out softer than before. “Nothing.”

Even though Brandon wasn’t her favorite sibling, she hadn’t meant to hurt him. She quickly changed the subject.

“So, is Austin around?”

“Nope, he has a group on an extended camping trip up the mountain. He won’t be back until Friday.”

“I bet Jackie hates that. Maybe I’ll swing by and see how she’s doing.” Darcy headed for the door but paused near her brother. “Hey, do you know how Evan Porter ended up in Austin’s wedding?”

“Dustin Birch was supposed to do it, but he broke his leg the week before and couldn’t. Dustin was your escort, so Austin needed to find a replacement quickly. He knew Evan in college, so it worked out.” Brandon finished restocking and stared at her. “Why do you want to know?”

“I just thought it was weird having a stranger in the wedding. I’d met all of Austin’s other friends.”

“Sure.” Brandon replaced the box behind the counter. “Since you’re here, you’re late on rent this month.”

Darcy groaned. She was renting a tiny house on the outskirts of the Cabins by the Bay property. It was tucked into a quiet grove of trees on a little peninsula. She could see Ambrose Bay when she looked out any window.

“I’ll get it to you before Friday. You know Mom wanted to let me stay there free.” She gathered her long hair as if to put it in a ponytail and then dropped it again. “You could do that for her sake.”

“I could, but would that help you in the long run?”

“It’s not your job to fix me.”

“I’m not trying to do that. You’re not remotely close to being broken. Anyway, it’s only a couple hundred dollars.” Brandon raised a brow in challenge. “Unless, of course, you’ve quit another job. Is that why you’re here? I always need help cleaning the cabins.”

Darcy held one hand in front of her and pushed the door open with the other. “Not that desperate, yet. See you.”



Darcy drove to Jackie and Austin's place outside town, but no one was home. She could return to her tiny shed or find an alternative. For once, she didn't feel like sitting by herself. She'd done a lot of that since coming home for the summer. That's what you do when you need to figure out your life, right? Darcy had stared at the four walls pressing in on her for two months. June and July hadn't brought any revelations, and now she was half way through August.

She wanted to feel passionate about something like the rest of her family. Austin loved being outside, Carly felt 'called' to be a nurse, and Ellie couldn't live without music. Brandon was sort of a mystery, but not really. He excelled in business and would forever be in love with Summer. Darcy didn't know if that qualified as a calling in life, but it was what it was. She didn't feel strongly about anything or anyone.

A strong jawline, broad shoulders, and stormy eyes came to mind.

Okay. That's just attraction and nothing else.

She turned her car back to town and her parent's house. Her mom had issued a blanket 'come to dinner' invitation the day Darcy moved out of her old bedroom and into the tiny house. So what if it was only two in the afternoon? Dinner would happen eventually.

She noticed Jackie's car in the drive when she arrived at her childhood home. Darcy liked her sister-in-law. How could she not? The woman made her brother smile, and she was good at being herself. It was as if she didn't care what other people thought of her. Jackie played video games with the kids down at the arcade and convinced a few other adults to try it. She once told Darcy that her mom played video games before she died. Jackie firmly believed it kept her young at heart.

She did tons of other stuff too. Since getting together with Austin, Jackie had spent more time outdoors hiking and camping than ever before. All while starting her own sound and light business in town.

"Darcy, I'm so glad you're here," her mom hurried over and hugged her. "It sounds like you've had an interesting day."

“What do you mean?” Darcy automatically went on alert.

“Francine called Dory, who called Colleen, who called me.” Teenie smiled as if that said it all, and it did.

“I didn’t quit, and I’m not sure I was fired. What does the gossip say happened?” Darcy headed straight for the kitchen and the cookie jar her mother kept full at all times.

“Who knows what the gossips will say, but I was told it was a mutual parting of ways.” Her mom followed. “Does that sound right?”

“I guess.” Darcy poured a glass of milk and took her massive, caramel-filled chocolate chip cookie to the table. “It would have been mutual eventually. I might not have reached that point yet.”

“Oh, honey.” Teenie hugged her from behind and kissed the top of her head. “What are you going to do now?”

Darcy sighed and looked around. “Hey, where’s Jackie? Her car was outside.”

“Upstairs, taking a nap.”

“What’s wrong with her house? It’s not even three o’clock.”

“She gets lonely when Austin is away and doesn’t sleep well. Now, back to you.” Teenie sat down. “Any plans?”

“Not yet.” Darcy waited for her mom to fuss at her. It was one of the reasons she had headed for the sugar overload. She knew she was a disappointment to her parents. All her other siblings had specific goals and were working toward them. But not her, and now she was jobless again.

“Perfect,” Teenie jumped from her chair and started rummaging in a drawer. She found a slip of paper and hurried back to her daughter’s side.

Darcy didn’t expect that response. “How is it perfect?”

“Because I learned about a job today that I think you’ll be ideal for. Can I tell you about it, or should I share why you’d be good at it?”

“How about both?” Darcy hated how needy that sounded, but it had been a while since anyone had complimented her. Well, other than a cute curly-headed little girl with big blue eyes. That probably didn’t count.

“Yes,” Teenie exclaimed and did a little fist pump. “You’d be a wonderful nanny. Think about it. You can cook almost as well as me and are great with kids. And your day would still be your own while this little girl is in school.”

“A nanny?” Darcy popped the last bite of the cookie into her mouth and chewed. It was different, at least. She liked children, and the thought of getting school hours free was appealing. Since she didn’t hate the idea, she decided to try it. “How long would I have to work at night? Could I still go out with friends?”

“That’s something you’d have to ask about.” Teenie pushed the slip of paper to Darcy. “This is the guy that needs help. You’ll have to call him to get the details.”

She glanced down to read the name.

Evan Porter 802-233-3434

“No way,” she muttered. The universe hated her, or she really did have the worst luck ever.

“What’s that, dear?” her mother asked.

“I can’t work for him.” She slid the paper back to Teenie.

“Why not?”

“Um—” Darcy searched for a good reason. “He’s not very nice.”

“Coach Porter is one of the nicest guys I’ve met in a while, and he’s such a good dad.”

“Then why does he need a nanny?”

“Because he can’t take her to away games now, can he? And why do you think he’s mean? Have you ever had a conversation with him?” Teenie asked.

“No, I haven’t.” And that was the point, wasn’t it? Whenever the opportunity arose to talk to him, he rushed off

with barely a word to her.

“You should call him anyway. He might surprise you.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of women rushing to watch Sara for him.” Darcy got up to fetch another cookie. Before sitting down again, she grabbed the jar and brought it to the table.

Her mother raised a brow but didn’t comment on the snacking. “How did you know his daughter’s name was Sara?”

“I met her today, and she was at the wedding.” Darcy pointed at her mother. “You should have told Austin he didn’t have to bring in another groomsman when Dustin broke his leg. I’d have gladly sat on the side with you and Dad.”

Jackie entered the kitchen as Darcy finished her comment. Her hair had grown out, and the woman who came to Sugar Creek with a blue streak had not yet replaced it. Even though she supposedly took a nap, she looked tired.

“There’s no way we would have let you sit out,” Jackie said as she filled a glass with water. “I wanted you to be a part of it. Honorary sisters, remember?”

“But to have a stranger stand up there with Austin’s friends and family?” Darcy shook her head. “It wasn’t necessary.”

“I like Evan,” Jackie glanced at the table, dumped her water, and refilled the glass with milk. “Are these your caramel cookies?”

“Yes.” Teenie beamed and pulled one out for her daughter-in-law.

“These are to die for.” Jackie sat, took a huge bite, closed her eyes, and moaned. “Yeah. Just as good as I hoped.” She directed her gaze at Darcy. “Why are we talking about Evan?”

“He needs a nanny, and I think Darcy should try it,” Teenie interjected before Darcy could say anything.

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Jackie said.

“No, it’s not. The man’s a caveman jock who has barely said three words to me. Why would I want to work for him?” Darcy shook her head.

“Don’t be rude, dear.” Teenie frowned. “I don’t get why you think he’s so bad. You just need to get to know him.”

“I don’t want to know him.” She did, but not for the reasons her mom wanted her to.

“Think of it this way,” Teenie said with a pat on Darcy’s arm. “You’re not doing it for him. That little girl needs a feminine influence in her life. Every time I’ve seen her, she’s used more football references than I can understand. She’s like a pee-wee coach in training.”

“What’s wrong with that? Maybe she likes football?” Darcy was not going to give in.

“Maybe that’s all she knows,” Jackie added. “She’s turning six next month and hasn’t seen her mom since she was a year old. How would she know about anything other than her dad’s world?”

“What happened to her mom?” Darcy felt a tug on her heart. She might be the screwup of the family, but her mom had always been there for her.

“Austin said she left one day and never came home.” Jackie went for a second cookie. “I really shouldn’t, but one more won’t hurt, right?”

“Eat it, dear.” Teenie smiled at Jackie and took a cookie herself. “In fact, I’ll have one too.”

“So,” Darcy drew the word out. “She left. Like Clarissa’s husband? Is Evan still married too?”

“Oh, no. She had him served with divorce papers and signed away rights to her daughter and everything.” This time Jackie scowled. “What kind of woman does that?”

“Poor Sara.”

“That’s why she needs you, Darcy. You can teach her about nail polish and cooking. If you take the job, she’d have play dates at the park instead of the football field. I can see you sitting at the table helping her learn to read.” Teenie got this faraway look in her eyes, then snapped back to attention. “Promise me you’ll give this a try.”

“Mom, this isn’t a good idea. I’ll go back to school eventually. What will he do then?” Darcy tipped her glass to look at the cookie sludge in the bottom of her milk. Nothing beat dipping cookies.

“He’ll have to find someone else.” Teenie waved a hand in the air. “It’s not a lifetime contract. He needs someone for the football season. Commit to that and then see what happens.”

“I don’t know, Mom.” But she did. The idea of helping that sweet little girl had taken root. She kept hearing Sara’s little voice asking, *‘Would you be my friend?’*

“Is there something else you’d rather be doing?” Teenie asked.

“No.” She looked to Jackie, silently begging for intervention. The other woman only smiled and licked the chocolate off her fingers.

“Since the only reason you’ve given is you think Evan is ‘not nice’—” her mom made air quotes. “Which you can’t back up with examples—”

“Sure I can.” Darcy sat up straighter. “He wouldn’t talk to me at the wedding, and today he called me a girl.”

Both women stared at her for a moment and then burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Honey, you sound like you’re in the eighth grade.” Jackie rested a hand on her stomach as she tried to breathe. “Did he pull your hair too?”

“Of course not,” Darcy said indignantly.

“Not that I blame you for reverting to middle school. Evan Porter is nice to look at. Don’t tell Austin I said so.” Jackie winked.

“That’s not. I don’t—” Darcy huffed and fell silent while she collected her wits. “It’s how he said it. I could tell he didn’t like me, so there would be no reason to apply for the job.”

There. That was a real reason, right?

“He’s desperate. School starts in less than a week, and that means football practices every day. The games will start soon enough, and he doesn’t have time to be picky.” Teenie pushed the phone number across the table again. “Call him.”

“Mom,” Darcy whined like she really was back in the eighth grade.

“Don’t be a chicken,” Jackie smirked.

“Fine. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Call now. You’ll need time to meet and hash out the details,” Teenie said.

“Fine.” Darcy picked up the slip of paper and left the kitchen.

She’d give this a shot for Sara’s sake but wouldn’t call him with her mom and sister-in-law hanging on every word.



“Sara, are you going to let me see?” Evan stood outside the dressing room door in the big box store while his daughter tried on school clothes.

The door opened, and she stepped out with a frown. Her shoes were on the wrong foot, and the buttons of her dress were off by one.

“I thought you were trying those on.” He pointed to the pile of clothing on the floor.

“I don’t like them,” Sara pouted.

“Come on, pumpkin. Don’t you want new clothes for next week?”

“Not those. I want dresses.” She crossed her arms and somehow jutted her lip out even farther. That was the first

indication she was about to have a meltdown.

“Then we won’t get those. We’ll try somewhere else.” Evan picked her up and headed for the exit. She wiggled to get down, so he kept talking. “What do you want for dinner?”

She stopped fighting and said, “I want cake!”

He barely held in his groan. This day would go downhill fast if he said no, but he couldn’t say yes. Luckily, his phone buzzed in his pocket. Grateful for the distraction, he answered without checking the caller ID.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi. This is Darcy. I heard you’re looking for a nanny.” Her voice sounded different over the phone than it had earlier. It was stilted—almost like she was in pain. It was nothing like the warmth she’d used when speaking to his daughter.

“Um, okay. Give me a minute to buckle Sara in the car.” He opened the door and almost hung up the phone. *It’s just a short time.* “Hop in, cutie pie.”

“I thought I was your pumpkin?” Sara said.

“I jumped the gun. It isn’t October yet.”

“Why do I have to wait until October to be your pumpkin?”

He laughed. “Oct. There is a ‘ck’ sound in there.”

Sara pushed his hands away from the buckle. “I can do it, Daddy.”

“Alright then, let me see.” He watched to ensure it clicked firmly into place, then moved to the driver’s seat. For a moment, he stared at the phone. He could do this. “Darcy?”

“I’m here.” Her tone had changed. The softness he’d noticed was back. “I can call back later if you want.”

“No, no. This is important, so let’s get it over with.” He glanced in the mirror and found Sara watching him intently.

“Daddy? Is that my Darcy?”

That was a landmine question if he’d ever heard one. His girl had brought the woman up several times since meeting her

that morning. What if he hired Darcy, and Sara grew more enamored with her only to have her leave?

“Just a minute, Sara.” He exited the car and moved to stand by the hood. “Darcy?”

“Look, hiring someone to care for your daughter isn’t something to get over as fast as you can. You should ask questions, find out if they’ll fit Sara’s needs, and ensure you both feel comfortable having them around. It was stupid of me to call, so I’ll let you go.”

The phone went silent, and he looked down. She’d hung up on him. The act was childish, yet what she’d said to him was also true. This wasn’t something he should rush through. Maybe she’d make a good nanny after all.

He took a deep breath and called her back.

“Why did you hang up?” he asked as soon as she answered.

“Why do you think?” The snappiness was back in her voice.

“I’m sorry. Sara said something, and it’s hard to divide my attention when she’s with me.”

“I get that.” She didn’t say anything else.

“We should have a formal interview or something, but I don’t know what to ask yet. Can we talk tomorrow?”

“I think that would be best.”

“Can we meet at Joe’s Waffles at nine? Sara and I always get breakfast there on Wednesday.” Evan held his breath.

“That works. See you then.” After a pause, she said, “I’m hanging up now.”

He chuckled and returned to the car. Sara might get attached to the woman, which could become a problem, but he understood how it might be easy to do. He’d barely spoken to Darcy but couldn’t deny how much he liked her. She was spunky, like Sara. Maybe that’s why they seemed to connect right away.

“Cute pumpkin?” He smiled at his daughter, who laughed at his combo nickname. “What do you say we have breakfast with Darcy tomorrow?”

“And a play date?” She beamed at him.

“We’ll see. We need to come up with questions to see if she’d be a good nanny.”



Teenie closed her bathroom door and called Colleen.

“Teenie, you’re on speaker. Dory, Ruthie, and Rose are here.” A chorus of hellos came through the speaker before Colleen continued, “How did it go?”

“It went well. Darcy didn’t want to do it, but she couldn’t give a good reason for why. I think you were right about her liking him. She kept blushing.” Teenie laughed along with the others. “In the end, she called him but wouldn’t let me listen. She got all fidgety during dinner when I brought it up. Finally, she admitted they’re meeting for breakfast at Joe’s tomorrow.”

“Perfect,” Ruthie called out. “You’re a natural.”

“I don’t know about that, but I know my daughter. All I had to do was make it all about Sara. She got this soft look about her when she mentioned the girl’s name.”

“That’s our thread to pull on,” Dory said. “Rose, will you let Deb know so she can tell the others?”

“Absolutely. Keep it all about helping the girl. The rest will fall into place.”

The Interview



Darcy was a bundle of nerves. She spent an extra twenty minutes on her makeup, attempting to make it look natural. At first, she thought about flat ironing her hair but feared it would appear she was trying too hard. Then she wound it into a bun. That was too formal, and she didn't want to mislead anyone about her nanny qualifications. Finally, she pulled it into a ponytail. Surely, that was appropriate for babysitting?

Her clothes were another conundrum. Should she be dressy or wear something that said, 'I can sit on the floor with your child and not worry about wrinkles?' What did that even look like?

"Just wear the jeans," her mom shuffled the pile around. They were in Darcy's old room since all her clothes wouldn't fit in the tiny house. "And this top. It's cute on you and brings out your eyes."

Darcy looked at the silky blouse with the scoop neckline. "Mom, this isn't a date. It's a job interview to watch a child."

Teenie pulled a t-shirt out with the image of Lake Champlain and a sea monster. "Then wear your Champ shirt."

Darcy laughed. "I need something in between."

Eventually, they put together an outfit that said responsible but relaxed enough to play with kids. The floral short-sleeved blouse was a soft, flexible material, but the cut didn't reveal anything it shouldn't. She paired it with a white crocheted cardigan. It was cute without trying too hard.

“I think you’re ready.” Teenie hugged her from behind as they stood in front of the mirror. “Go get the job and help that adorable girl.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Darcy grabbed her purse and headed to the diner.

The whole time she kept repeating her mother’s words. *Get the job and help the girl.* That was the goal. Evan Porter was the second string in this scenario. Sara was the star quarterback.

Darcy laughed. She didn’t have the job, and she was already thinking in sports talk. Maybe that would help her relate to the man better. At least she knew and understood football. She’d spent the last two years of high school as one of the team managers. Contrary to what people thought, the job was more than providing water for the players. She kept track of their stats, helped with social media, and did whatever the coaches needed her to do. That had been a fun time in her life. Too bad it made it so the team saw her as another one of the guys instead of a dateable option.

She sighed, found a parking spot near Joe’s Waffles, and hurried to the door. A glance at her watch showed she was almost ten minutes early, which was precisely what she was going for. The smell of maple syrup and bacon surrounded her as soon as she stepped inside. She inhaled and almost groaned with contentment. She’d get a fantastic blueberry and pecan waffle out of the meeting, if nothing else.

“Darcy,” Sara called her name and waved from a booth by the window. “You came!”

The smile that worked through every muscle on Darcy’s face was as genuine as it got. Sara was trapped between the window and her dad, which looked like a good thing. She bounced up and down, her little hands flat on the table. There was so much energy and joy in that little body. Evan gently moved her back to a seated position in her booster seat.

Darcy slid across the booth opposite the Porters. “Good morning, Sara. I hear you eat here a lot.”

“Yep. I get the chocolate chip pancakes with a smiley face. Daddy gets the booberry.”

“Blueberry,” Evan corrected her.

“Blueberry,” Sara repeated the word slowly and turned a massive smile toward her dad when she got it right.

“Good job.” Evan turned to Darcy. “Thanks for meeting us here. Breakfast is my treat.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Darcy protested.

He waved a hand to get a server’s attention. “It’s no trouble. Do you know what you want?”

“Yes.”

A middle-aged woman with brown hair, brown eyes, and a rounded figure stepped up to the table with three glasses of water. She smiled but didn’t jump into small talk. Instead, she pointed at all three and said, “Do you want your regular orders?”

Evan nodded toward Darcy.

“Yes, please. Thanks, Janice,” she replied.

Only then did he reply, “Same as always. Thank you.” After Janice left, he faced Darcy and asked, “You have a regular here?”

“Of course. I grew up in Sugar Creek, remember?” She couldn’t decide what to think of his question or how to interpret his tone. It fell somewhere between curiosity and interrogation.

Evan flexed his fingers and pressed them into the table. He glanced at his hands as if surprised at what they were doing and moved them to his lap, where she couldn’t see them. Was he as nervous about this as she was? Why?

“Darcy,” Sara knelt in the seat again while leaning across the table. “Will you be my nanny? Pwease?”

“Sara, we don’t sit on our knees in the booster. It could move, and you’d end up on the floor.” Evan gently moved his daughter back to sitting. For her part, Sara let him do it

without fussing. Evan continued, "Remember, we have to ask our questions."

"That was my question. You said I could ask anything I wanted." Sara batted her eyes at her dad, and Darcy watched the man in front of her melt.

Clearly, Sara had Evan wrapped around her little finger. Seeing it squeezed something deep within Darcy, releasing a gooey warmth. No man that looked at his daughter that way could be all bad.

Darcy cleared her throat and said, "That's the best question, Sara, but sometimes we have to learn more before we can decide."

The little girl tilted her head and asked, "Like what?"

Evan shot her a grateful look, but a teasing glint entered his eyes as he echoed his daughter, "Yes, like what?"

Darcy barely refrained from rolling her eyes, but her lips twitched to a smile before she could stop them. "When would you need me?"

"Every day," Sara piped.

Evan choked on the water he had just taken a drink of. He coughed, and Sara stood again and pounded her little hands on his back.

"You okay, Daddy?"

"Yes." He sucked in air, coughed again, and finally controlled himself. "This would be a Monday through Friday thing, so you would have weekends free. Sara starts school on Monday. I'll take care of the mornings, but I have daily practice until six or six-thirty. So, I'd need someone to pick her up from school at three-thirty."

"Okay. Would you want dinner ready when you got home?" Darcy pulled a tiny notebook with sunflowers on the cover from her purse.

"That would be nice but not a deal breaker," he said.

Darcy made a note and said, "I'm assuming I'd help her with any schoolwork?"

"She's starting kindergarten. How much work will there be?"

Darcy shrugged. "I don't know, but I'll make sure it's done before you get home."

"Thank you. That means I can spend time with her instead of cooking or homework." He looked almost shocked she would do something nice, and Darcy wasn't sure how to take that either. Did everyone think she was a selfish brat?

"When is the first football game?" she asked. It would be best to stick to details and stop speculating on feelings.

"September first, and it's an away game. We won't be home until close to midnight."

"I'll make sure Sara is in bed on those nights." She poised her pen over the notebook.

Sara wiggled in her seat. "I don't like going to sleep."

"But sleep is so good for you." Darcy redirected her attention to the girl. "It's what helps us have the energy to play all day."

"Playing is good." Sara reached for the water glass and knocked it over. "Sowry!"

"Don't worry about it," Darcy said as she pulled several napkins out of the holder on the table. "I spill my drink all the time."

"You do?" Sara asked.

"Sure." She picked up her glass and drank half before setting it on the table and knocking it over. "See?"

Sara giggled, and Evan scowled at her.

"Really?" he asked with one of his eyebrows quirked up.

Darcy shrugged and grabbed more napkins as Evan helped her clean the spill. They finished just as Janice returned with their food. Sara clapped her hands and reached for the fork,

ready to dig into her pancakes. A curved line of chocolate chips melted into a smile, and two blueberries formed the eyes. Evan and Darcy had matching plates of blueberry walnut waffles with whipped cream and a side of sausage.

“I’ll bring you more drinks and a towel.” Janice winked at Darcy. “I’m glad you’re home again.”

“Thanks.” Darcy winked back. The waitress’s oldest son had been a year ahead of Darcy in school. She knew many people thought Janice should be more outgoing, but the woman worked hard to care for her children after her husband was disabled after a car accident. All things considered, Darcy thought Janice smiled plenty, and she’d always had a quiet sense of humor.

After Janice walked away, Evan pointed to Darcy’s plate and said, “Good choice.”

“I could say the same to you.” Darcy caught herself smiling and redirected her gaze to her waffles.

Evan shifted his attention to the side, cutting his daughter’s food into bite-sized pieces. Or at least he tried.

“I can do it.” Sara kept grabbing at the utensils in his hand.

“Hey, Sara,” Darcy spoke up to distract the girl. “Are you excited to start school?”

“Daddy says I’ll learn to read and make friends. I know my ABCs, and I can write my name. Daddy helped me.” The little girl beamed as she talked in her cute little voice. For the most part, she spoke like an older child except for a few words, but her voice still had a baby quality.

“Your daddy is right. You’ll make so many new friends.” Darcy tried to remember her first day of school, but nothing substantial came to mind. By then, Evan was finished cutting Sara’s pancakes, so Darcy directed her next question to him. “Can you make a list of her nighttime routines?”

Evan’s brows creased. “Sure.”

“She has a routine, right?”

“Of course.” The wrinkled brow hinted at the opposite.

From what she'd seen so far, Darcy was pretty sure he let Sara do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. That could make things more challenging, but it was also another reason she should help him.

“Okay, weekdays until six-thirty or seven, with Fridays as late as midnight? Homework, dinner,” she paused and smiled at Sara before adding, “Play dates at the park and tea parties with friends. Did I leave anything out?”

“There might be a few Saturday morning practices or scrimmages, but there shouldn't be many. They'll all be in the morning, leaving your night free.” Evan raised a brow in her direction.

Was he trying to ask her something? And why was he interested in her Saturday nights?

“Okay. Good to know,” she hedged.

“You know, for dating.”

Darcy choked on her waffle. Somehow she managed to swallow. Eventually, she could breathe enough to drink the water Janice had refilled. She didn't dare look at Evan. As much as she knew he wasn't saying he wanted to date her, that was exactly where her mind had gone. But that was dumb. There wouldn't be anyone to watch Sara. Finally, she caught her breath and stopped coughing.

“Last question.” Evan set his fork down, glanced at Sara, and leaned forward. “How long do you plan on sticking around?”



Evan had barely eaten any of his breakfast. Looking away from the beautiful woman sitting across from him was hard. She was something else. Darcy had the appearance of a grown woman, with all the curves that appealed to him and intelligence behind her eyes, but then she did something like

spill her drink to make his daughter laugh. He didn't know what to make of that. Either she was immature or brilliant. More than anything, she made him uncomfortable.

He hadn't meant to throw out the dating comment. It slipped out before he realized what he was saying. Had he meant to reassure her that she would still have a life outside her duties as a nanny, or was he fishing for information? Whatever he intended, she hadn't given anything away.

It was time to salvage this interview and make an escape. Darcy hadn't answered his second question either, so he leaned forward and asked again.

"I need to know she'll have someone for all of the football season. You've changed jobs a couple of times this summer. Will you stay the whole season?"

"Of course." The words made her cough again. She took another drink before fixing her stare on him. "Despite what you might have heard, I'm a hard worker. Everyone who gave me a job knew it was a trial run. We all parted on good terms."

That didn't make him feel any better. "Is this a trial run as well?"

"I was told you only needed a nanny for the season. I'll be here until Christmas at least, so I can do it."

"But will you?" he pressed.

"Why are you so rude?" Darcy reverted to her 'all-alert' body posture with a frown and furrowed brow. "What do you have against me? No, don't answer that. Thanks for the breakfast, but you'll have to find someone else."

Darcy grabbed her purse and slid from the booth.

"Daddy!" Sara screeched. "I want Darcy to be my nanny. Pwease?"

The woman stopped her retreat and turned to his daughter. "Sara, I'm sorry. As much as I'd love to be your nanny, I don't think it's a good idea."

"Cutie pie, give me a minute, okay? Can you sit still and eat your pancakes?" Evan asked.

“Yes, Daddy. But please make Darcy stay.” She tilted her little face up at him and blinked several times.

He knew it was all an act. She’d learned early how to bend him to her will, but how could he resist such a sweet girl? Her early years had been so hard, so full of discomfort and pain. All he wanted now was for her to be happy. That meant getting over himself and making things right with Darcy. It wasn’t her fault he was attracted to her and thus distracted from what was most important—his daughter.

Evan stood and walked a couple of feet from the booth where he could speak to Darcy without Sara hearing, but he could still reach her quickly if needed. He ignored the curious looks from the other diners.

“I’m sorry. Sara is the most important person in my world. I hate that I can’t keep her with me all the time, and I need to know she will be safe and happy,” he started.

“I can do that,” Darcy interrupted him.

He held up a hand. “Let me finish. She’s already half in love with you. If you get bored in a week or two, she’ll be devastated when you leave. I’m concerned about that. I know you’ll eventually return to school, but I’m hoping she’ll understand that when the time comes. It’ll be harder if you quit, and she sees you around town.”

“Mr. Porter, I understand that. I promise I’m here for her as far as Christmas. By then, I’ll know my next steps, but she will be my priority until that time.”

Mr. Porter? He didn’t like the way that felt at all.

“Call me Evan, please. Mr. Porter is my dad. Even the team calls me coach.” He shook his head. That was the least important detail at the moment, but he couldn’t have her calling him Mr. Porter.

“Okay, Evan,” she said softly.

Most of the turmoil inside settled when she said his name. It righted the room and allowed him to breathe again.

“Good.” He waved to the booth where Sara watched them.
“Will you finish breakfast?”

“Depends. What have we decided?”

“I’d love for you to be Sara’s nanny, but only if you promise not to break her heart.” *Or mine.* Evan swallowed. That was not an option. *Too young, leaving, here for Sara.* The words started on a loop inside his head as he waited for her next move.

She nodded and stepped around him on her way back to her seat and their cold waffles. As she did so, he caught the scent of her perfume or something. It wasn’t overpowering like his wife’s perfume. Instead, it was more of a hint of what he might find if he pulled Darcy closer. Lightly floral, but he couldn’t decide what kind.

Darcy had already taken her seat. Both females now stared at him where he was rooted in the middle of Joe’s Waffles. He jolted into motion and joined them.

“Daddy?” Sara crawled into his lap as soon as he sat down.

Evan held her close, replacing Darcy’s scent with that of his little girl—her baby shampoo and the smell of pancake syrup. Yes, this is what was important.

“Yeah, pumpkin?” he asked.

“Can I keep Darcy?”

Evan glanced across the table in time to see how much those words softened the woman sitting across from him. At least it seemed Darcy was just as enamored with Sara. He could make this work and still keep his distance. Now that he was determined, he’d make a plan and stick to it.

The first line of defense? Ensure Sara understands this is temporary.

“Yeah, baby girl. Darcy will be your nanny for this football season.”

“Good.” She kissed his cheek and then twisted around to talk to Darcy. “Can you take me shopping? Daddy doesn’t know what little girls wear.”

Darcy blinked a few times, and her mouth opened and closed. Then she asked, “What about all your pretty dresses?”

“Mimi sends them to me.” Sara patted the dress she was wearing.

“Okay.” Darcy glanced at Evan. “I can help with clothes if you need.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. Could he handle a few more hours with Darcy? The hopeful look on Sara’s face told him he’d try.

“I do love shopping.” Darcy shrugged but turned a full smile at Sara. “We could drive into Burlington. That way, you have different outfits than everyone else buys in Sugar Creek. What do you think of that?”

“Burlington?” That would mean an hour in the car together. “Uh, we can’t find everything here?”

“Daddy, I want to go to Burwington.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he hedged.

“I can take her if you don’t have time. It would be like a trial run for next week,” Darcy offered.

Was he ready to let his daughter spend the day with a stranger? Essentially that’s what hiring a nanny meant, but it felt too soon.

“Sorry, I should have asked before making plans.” Darcy blushed and turned her attention to Sara. “Let’s look around Sugar Creek first. And then, if we don’t find anything you love, we’ll drive to Burlington on another day.”

Sara tilted her head as if thinking about it while Darcy nodded encouragingly. It surprised him how much his daughter wanted this woman’s approval. He could almost see it in her little face as the expressions crossed it. Every battle of what she wanted right then bumped against what Darcy wanted.

In the end, Sara sighed and said, “If you take me.”

Darcy glanced at him, the question clear in her eyes. So he translated for her.

“She’s saying shopping in Sugar Creek is a go.”

The woman actually clapped her hands with delight. “Perfect. When should we go? I know some adorable boutiques in town.”

Evan groaned as his daughter mimicked Darcy by clapping her hands and jumping in her seat.

“Let’s go now, Darcy,” she shouted. “Daddy, let’s go shopping!”

Darcy laughed. “Do you have time today? If not, I’m free all week.”

“Daddy, pwease?”

“I promise not to spend your whole paycheck.” Darcy winked at him.

“That’s not what I’m worried about,” he mumbled.

The second line of defense? Avoid spending more than five minutes in Darcy’s company in the future.



Darcy let herself overthink the situation only once. That was when she walked through Evan’s house to his daughter’s bedroom. She had convinced Evan that she needed to see Sara’s wardrobe before she’d know what kind of clothes they needed to purchase for school. He reluctantly gave in, and she followed them home.

The place wasn’t anything remarkable inside or out. It was a square with a roof, not much landscaping, and probably built in the nineteen-twenties or thirties. It couldn’t even boast of being a craftsman house. There were a few lovely trees in the

yard to soften the structure. The inside was as plain as the outside.

The walls were all white, which in itself wasn't a problem. Her parent's walls were still white. However, her family home was cluttered with photos, artwork, and other things that gave a lived-in feel. The Porter house was empty of most of those things. On the one hand, it felt comfortable enough, but on the other—she couldn't quite put her finger on it—empty, lonely, or like it was waiting for something. There wasn't anything to indicate a woman had ever lived there. The couch didn't have pillows, and there were no blankets to invite you to curl up in the corner with a good book. Darcy also noticed very few photographs of Sara or Evan anywhere in the room besides a recent one on the mantel.

The kitchen opened off the living room by way of open French doors. The cabinets and countertops were from the seventies, but the fridge looked newer. Evan led them down a short hall off the left side of the living room with a bathroom and three bedrooms. Darcy figured one was the master, the other room had been turned into an office, and the last one was Sara's over-the-top girly room.

Where the rest of the house lacked personality, this one screamed little girl from top to bottom. It was decorated in pink, purple, and white. A giant dollhouse that looked like the Disney castle occupied one corner. There were buckets of furniture and dolls to fill an entire afternoon beside it. Impressively, everything was in its place instead of strewn all over the room.

A miniature bed sat on the back wall, and a flower-petal canopy hung over it from where it was attached to the wall. It was lit with fairy lighting. Bookshelves and other toy bins filled the rest of the room. Even the main light had been switched out and replaced with a carousel-themed chandelier—winged unicorns flew around the outside while star-shaped light bulbs hung from the center in a downward taper.

How could such a girly girl slip into football talk the way Sara did? With a shake of her head, Darcy refocused on the closet before her. It was full of dresses in every color and style

a little girl could wish for. Shoes were lined up below in several variations, but there wasn't a tennis shoe or pair of pants anywhere. Darcy turned to the room again but didn't see a dresser.

"Do you have any jeans?" Darcy asked.

"No. I like dresses," Sara repeated once more.

Darcy sat on the edge of the princess bed and patted the space beside her. Sara joined her and snuggled into her side. A rush of warmth spread through Darcy. Not all of it came from the little body smooched up against her. Big blue eyes gazed at her in what she imagined was adoration. No one had ever looked at her that way before, and she couldn't imagine why this little girl did it now. Whatever the reason, she wanted to hold on to it a while longer.

"Sara, I love getting dressed up too, but sometimes jeans, shorts, or something else is better."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't run around the playground in my best shoes and dress. What if I fell and got it dirty, or worse, tore it?"

"I've never been to a playground." Sara's brow wrinkled. "Will you take me?"

"What do you mean?" Darcy asked. She instinctively squeezed the little girl closer. "Why haven't you been to a playground? All kids need to run and play. That's how they make friends."

Evan cleared his throat from the doorway. He had that stern look on his face again. "We'll talk about that before Monday."

"I was sick," Sara piped up.

Darcy's gaze darted from Sara to Evan and back to the little girl. What did she mean by sick, and why hadn't her dad mentioned it? Sara looked like every other child her age. She might have been petite, but that could be genetics. Her skin color was good, her eyes bright, and she had a lot of energy. It showed in the way she constantly fidgeted and bounced.

Darcy looked to Evan once more in question.

“I’ll explain later.” Evan’s face softened just a fraction as he gazed at his daughter and waved toward the well-stocked closet. “Well, what does she need for school?”

Maybe he was overprotective? Darcy didn’t shy away from his gaze as she said, “Pants, shirts, and tennis shoes.”

Something sparked behind his eyes, and he almost smiled, but not quite. Instead, he sighed and turned to indicate they should walk out of the room. Darcy stood, but Sara jumped on the bed twice before her dad’s growl sent her flying off and into his arms.

“What did we talk about, cutie pie?” he asked.

“Don’t jump on the bed,” Sara replied as if she’d said it a million times.

Darcy wondered if the little girl could do anything fun. She’d give her a chance to run and jump with other kids soon enough.

Evan carried Sara to the living room, and Darcy followed. “Might as well get this over with. Sara, grab the book for Darcy, please.”

“Yes, coach.” Sara giggled and ran to a cabinet. She tugged a drawer open and lifted a small photo album from inside. She handed the blue six-by-nine book to Darcy. “This is my baby book.”

“I love baby pictures,” Darcy exclaimed as she sat on the couch. She ignored Evan’s grunt from across the room and patted the space beside her. “Sit and tell me all the stories in here.”

Then she opened the book, and her throat clogged with emotion. The first picture was of a tiny infant covered in tubes and sensors. Sara was bald, and her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. She had spindly arms and legs that lay splayed beside her. Her eyes were closed, and she looked horribly still, even for a photograph.

“That’s me,” Sara pointed. “I was sick, but the doctors made me better.”

“I can see that,” Darcy said. She swallowed a lump and glanced at the bright, energetic girl beside her. Even now, her legs swung back and forth off the edge of the couch.

Sara turned the pages and pointed to doctors and nurses, saying their names and telling Darcy something she remembered about them. Darcy smiled, nodded, and made the appropriate noises for Sara to know she was paying attention, but her mind was full of questions. She glanced at Evan.

“Sara was born with a congenital heart defect. We didn’t know about it until after she was born. We took her home, but by the end of the week, we were back at the hospital.” Evan slumped into the chair across from her. His lips pinched together, and he fisted and released his hands several times. “We almost lost her.”

“I’m right here, Daddy.” Sara hopped off the couch and climbed into his lap. She placed her hands on either side of his face. It looked like she was squeezing, but then she moved his head side to side before making him nod up and down. She giggled the whole time. “Don’t be sad. I’m all better. Doctor Ben and Doctor Jonah said so.”

“That’s right. And we’re going to keep you that way.” Evan released whatever memories had claimed him, grabbed Sara, stood up, and swung her around. She screamed with glee.

The sight of it made Darcy’s heart swell. Evan might shift from one mood to another, but he obviously loved his daughter and was very good to her.

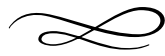
Evan stopped turning and set Sara down. “Okay, cutie pie, let’s go shopping.”

As she followed them toward the door, Evan once more met her gaze. “I should have mentioned her illness before. There’s nothing to worry about as long as she doesn’t get worked up too much. You know, avoid rough play and things that get her heart racing.”

“Okay.” Darcy thought the whole thing was strange.

She wouldn't have done anything to put any child in danger. However, she wondered if running around with friends counted as rough play. Only time would tell.

Shopping With the Porters



Teenie couldn't believe her luck as she watched the shoppers from the other side of the store. Darcy hadn't seen her yet, and the clothes rack was the perfect hiding spot. She had been inside the boutique when Darcy entered hand in hand with a little girl, the dad not far behind.

She couldn't help but think they looked nice standing next to each other, but as they browsed the clothes, Teenie noticed they rarely talked. Darcy and Evan both focused on Sara to the point of avoiding the other adult.

"Interesting," she whispered. "At this rate, it'll take forever for anything to happen."

How would they fall in love if they didn't speak to each other? And did she want Evan for her daughter? He always seemed like a nice guy, but all she had to go on was the fact Austin liked him. It was time to get in there and find out for herself. She patted her hair and headed their way.

"Oh my goodness, aren't you the most adorable thing?" Teenie gushed at the little girl.

Sara looked at her with big blue eyes and said, "I'm not ado...adoble. I'm cute. Isn't that right, Daddy? That's why you call me cutie. Not adore, adorabutie?" She tilted her head and scrunched her nose at the word as if she knew it couldn't be real.

Evan knelt and bopped her nose. "I don't know. That was awfully adorable. You can be both at the same time."

“I can? But what is adorable?” She sounded the last word out carefully.

Teenie bent down and said, “It means you inspire affection.”

When Sara looked even more confused, Teenie’s heart filled with love for the little girl. It had been a long time since her children were so young. She missed how every day was full of new things to learn at that age. It filled her with a desire for grandchildren so she could enjoy this feeling again as often as she wanted. Maybe she’d get her wish one day soon.

“It means you have a way about you that makes people like you,” Darcy said. “Sara, Evan, this is my mom.”

Teenie was aware of two things as Evan reached out to shake her hand. One, she was so proud of how easily Darcy simplified things for Sara. And two, Darcy had called him Evan instead of Mr. Porter. That had to be something, right?

“It’s nice to meet you officially. Austin talks about your cooking all the time.” Evan rested his hand on his daughter’s shoulder. “Is he back from that camping trip yet?”

“Not until Friday. Poor Jackie hasn’t been able to sleep since he left. It isn’t usually this bad. I wonder if she’s getting sick?” Come to think of it, Jackie had seemed extra tired lately. Teenie’s eyes widened as a new thought struck her. “Oh, my.”

“What is it?” Darcy asked.

“Nothing, dear. Just thinking, but back to this cute girl.” Teenie gazed at Sara again. “I’m guessing you’re shopping for school clothes? Can I help pick something out? I haven’t been needed for this in a long time.”

“We need you for tons of other things, though,” Darcy spoke softly as she reached out and squeezed her mom’s hand.

“You’d better believe it, but I miss when you were little. You know, Sara reminds me of you at this age.”

“Oh?” Evan prompted.

Teenie laughed. There was more than one way to help them get to know each other. After seeing how sweet he was with his daughter, she was willing to give the man a chance at being equally as enraptured with hers.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “Darcy was small for her age for a long time. She had a petite frame with big innocent eyes. All of my kids were cute, but Darcy was adorable, just like you. Everyone loved her because she took care of them.”

“Not really,” Darcy said.

“But you did. I wish you could have realized how much you affected everyone around you. If anyone needed something, you were there. You always made sure your friends had a treat and a juice box. It was you that would run for the bandaids, not Carly. You listened and made the other kids laugh when they were sad.”

“Huh, I never saw it that way.”

“It sounds like you were the perfect kid,” Evan mused.

“Oh, no. Not by any means. She could get into trouble as much as the others.”

“I did not.” Darcy shook her head.

Teenie knew it wasn't in denial but a desperate plea for her not to share some of Darcy's more embarrassing adventures. So, of course, she had to share at least one.

“What about when you ripped your Easter dress jumping out of the swings?” Teenie raised a brow but continued to smile.

Darcy blew out a breath and turned to Sara. “See why you need pants? I loved that dress.”

Sara laughed and reached up to grab Darcy's face. She pulled her closer and stared into her eyes. “I knew you would be a good friend. If I get some pants, you should get a new dress. Then Daddy can take us to a party.”

Teenie didn't miss the blush that crept over her daughter's face or the glance between the two.

“We’ll see. Today we’re shopping for you, not me.” Darcy pulled away, and it looked like she put a lot of effort into not looking at Evan again.

“That’s right,” Teenie continued. “Now, come with me. I saw the perfect outfit over there.” She pointed as she took Sara’s hand and started walking. They left Darcy and Evan as quickly as they could. Teenie knew they’d follow, but she hoped they’d chat or something now that Sara wasn’t constantly standing between them.



“So, you ripped one of your favorite dresses jumping off the swings?” Evan watched his daughter walk away with Mrs. Fletcher. He hadn’t meant to ask, but he couldn’t help imagining Darcy doing that very thing as a child. In his mind’s eye, she looked a lot like Sara but with dark hair instead of blond. Her eyes would have sparkled, and her cheeks would have glowed with a rosy blush from the excitement.

“The boys were racing to see who could get the highest first, and then Brandon dared Carly and me to do the same.” She shrugged but turned halfway toward him.

“So, who won?”

“I did, of course. Carly was smart enough not to get on the swing in the first place.” A smile broke out momentarily, and then she grew serious again. “Carly was always smarter.”

Evan wondered at the sadness lurking behind Darcy’s eyes. On the surface, she looked the same as a moment before, but now he wondered at what she held inside. There was a depth of sorts that sparked his interest. Was it possible she was more mature than her mere age suggested?

“I think your mom was right about one thing,” he said.

“What was that?”

“You have a natural way about you that lets people know you care. I can see it in the way you talk to Sara. I’m glad you’ll be watching her. It’s good to know she’ll have someone that genuinely wants her to be safe and happy. Sometimes that’s a hard line. She wants to do everything, but that doesn’t mean she should. You know?”

Darcy fingered a sweater hanging on the rack beside her. Her gaze was riveted to the blue and purple stripes as she said, “So, when I take her to the playground, no jumping out of swings?”

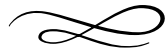
She looked up and met his eyes. That same challenge was there as before. Almost as if she was daring him to tell her no. Her mom might have seen all the sweet soft things about Darcy, but the woman before him also had some grit and convictions. He found it to be an attractive combination, but that didn’t matter when it came to Sara.

“No,” he said, and she raised her brows. Suddenly he was afraid she’d march Sara to the playground as soon as they left the store to do the very thing he was forbidding. And then, he found the perfect solution to get his way while placating Darcy’s sense of adventure. “No jumping out of swings. Not until Easter anyway.”

Darcy rolled her eyes at him, but her face lit up with her smile. “Fine, but on Easter Sunday, I’ll have both of you jumping out of the swings.”

The woman winked and then sashayed away. He couldn’t help but notice the sway of her hips. He swallowed and hoped Darcy would return to college after Christmas. It might be the only way to reclaim his simple life of football and Sara. That’s all he needed. These new thoughts and desires would only break him in the end.

Nanny—Day One



Darcy slept in late on Monday morning. Not because she was lazy but because she hadn't slept well during the night. She tossed and turned, constantly worrying about Sara. After two shopping trips the week before, Darcy convinced the little girl and her flinty dad that pants, sweaters, and boots were necessary for the Vermont fall and winter to come.

For some reason, Evan thought keeping his daughter in dresses would calm her down. It wasn't working, but Darcy was smart enough not to point that out. She accomplished her goal by telling Evan that his daughter needed to be warm and whispering to Sara that she'd love the school playground. In the end, Darcy managed to round out Sara's wardrobe.

That wasn't what kept her awake, though.

No, Darcy had looked up congenital heart disease on the internet. There was so much information, and none of it helped her understand what Evan and Sara had gone through. She had never loved another person more than herself, and her mom assured her that's how parents felt about their children.

What must it have been like seeing your tiny infant struggle to live like that? Some of the photos she'd seen in the book were of Sara at age two. Did she remember being in the hospital, or was she repeating stories she'd learned from her dad?

The questions tumbled through her mind as she prepared for the day. Since there wasn't room for a bathroom inside the

tiny house, Darcy's parents had built a patio off the back side with two additional 'rooms.' One was a composting toilet; the other was a shower stall with a changing room. Room was an exaggerated description in her mind. They were really just boxes lined up on the edge of the patio.

The toilet was a four-by-four closet. The shower was the same, but there was an extra two-and-a-half feet of added space for a bench to set your clothes on and supposedly room to get dressed. Since she had to go outside to access the facilities, and they didn't have a heating source, Darcy didn't look forward to using them once the snow started falling. She'd probably have to move back into her parent's house.

As soon as she was dressed, Darcy opened all the blinds to let the light into her place. It helped calm her some, and then she decided to call Carly. Her older sister would know about heart defects and could tell her what she needed to watch for.

Thirty minutes later, Darcy felt much better. Carly had assured her that many children led perfectly normal, healthy lives after a rough start. She'd even said physical activity was good and could help Sara's heart grow stronger. Of course, she said that all depended on the little girl's specific type of heart defect and how it had been treated. Darcy needed to ask Evan about all of that. She might even have to see Dr. Jonah. He might be unable to share specifics, but he could tell her if going to the playground would be safe.

She tried to set her worry aside as she planned a menu for the week. Evan had made a copy of the house key for her and told her to buy whatever she needed, and he'd reimburse her. After completing her grocery list, she headed to his house to check his fridge and pantry for the items she needed. Next, she made her way to the store.

Darcy was browsing the produce when she heard her name.

"Darcy, it's so good to see you." Ruth Weston smiled at her from the other side of the locally grown tomato display.

"Hi, Mrs. Weston. How have you been?"

“Busy. I’m finishing my projects before fall descends on us as quickly as possible. I love this time of year.”

“Me too. I’m ready for sweater weather, but it is too short in my mind.”

Ruth brushed at her white-gray hair, tucking the short end behind her ear to reveal a pearl earring. Only a Sugar Mama wore pearls to go grocery shopping. “I heard you have a new job. How is that going?”

Darcy swallowed her groan. Even if it bugged her, she knew everyone meant well. “Today is my first day, so I’ll have to let you know the next time I see you.”

“I thought you spent time with the Porters last week?”

“How—“ Darcy shook her head. Small towns were the worst for gossip. After spending a few years in Boston for school, she had forgotten how quickly word spread. What were people saying? She felt the need to clarify her movements from the week before. “I did help Sara shop for some new school clothes, but today is the official first day.”

Ruth clapped her hands. “How exciting! I’ve watched Sara a couple of times. She’s such a sweetheart. Just know she can be a handful too. If you ever need advice, feel free to call me dear. Of course, your mom can help as well. We’re all here for you.”

“Uh, thanks, Mrs. Weston. I appreciate that.” Darcy watched in wonder as the woman waved and headed in the other direction. That had been a reasonably painless exchange. Not once had the woman suggested Darcy consider a specific major at college or tried to set her up with a date. That in itself was suspicious.

Shaking her head, she finished her shopping and headed for the checkout. There was only one lane open, and Rose was busily emptying a cart packed with food.

“Is there a big event at Laurent Mansion this week?” Darcy asked.

Rose laughed and paused her efforts. “There’s always something going on, but this is for my family. We’ve been so

busy I haven't had a chance to shop, and I took the afternoon off to restock my pantry."

"That's a lot." Darcy barely refrained from glancing at her watch. Would she have time to drop her groceries off at the Porters before picking Sara up at school?

"I have a big family." Rose nodded and went back to work unloading. Luckily, the cashier kept things moving across the scanner as quickly as Rose could pull them out of her basket.

Once everything was on the conveyer belt, Rose pushed the cart to the end of the lane and focused on Darcy. She pointed to the groceries waiting in Darcy's cart. "You don't have much in there."

"I only needed a few things for my dinner recipes. Everything else is already in the fridge or cabinets."

"At the tiny house?" Rose's brow wrinkled.

"No, at the Porter's." Darcy tried not to smile. She doubted Rose hadn't already heard about her new job, but she wasn't a hundred percent sure she was being genuine or fishing for something.

"Oh, yes. I heard about that. This will be a good fit for you. That little girl is a sweetheart. You'll be great with her."

Darcy's mouth fell open. Ruth had said almost the same thing. Sara *was* a sweetheart, but would two women say exactly that only ten minutes apart?

"Miss Rose?"

"Yes, dear?" She sat her purse on the armrest by the card reader and dug through it. Finally, she pulled out a checkbook register.

"Um." Darcy was momentarily awed by the sight before her. She'd never used a check register. Shaking herself back to the present, she said, "How many Sugar Mamas have watched Sara since she moved here?"

"Almost all of us at one point or another. He thought we could keep doing it because he has no idea how busy we get September through January." She waved her hands as if to

wipe away the ridiculousness of it all. “Good thing Colleen set him straight. That girl needs someone she can depend on.”

“But this whole town depends on you guys.”

“Exactly. We’re needed all over. You have the time to devote to that special girl.” Rose wrote the amount in her register and then swiped her card to pay for the groceries. After that, she turned and looked right into Darcy’s eyes. “I’ve always thought you had a lot to give. One day you’ll be a Sugar Mama.”

Darcy’s breath caught. She’d never thought about what her life would look like when she was Rose’s age. However, something about how the woman said the words with conviction touched her. Although she liked to tease about the Sugar Mamas being a glittery feminine mafia bent on spreading good cheer, she loved each one of them dearly. The town did depend on them. There wasn’t a single event that would feel the same if those ladies weren’t standing or sitting up front in their tiaras, smiling and leading the way. Could she be something special like that someday?

“You’d better unload your cart, dear,” Rose prompted.

“Thank you, Miss Rose. You’ve given me something to think about. Enjoy your afternoon off.”

Rose left with her groceries, and Darcy moved through the motions of checking out. Her mother had said similar things the week before. Darcy thought she might have been trying to play matchmaker by listing positive qualities, but the oddity of running into two women who said almost the same things made her pause. Was she as good as they thought? And if not, how could she, Darcy Elaine Fletcher, become the person who made a difference in others’ lives? And did she have to wait until she was old?

Her watch showed she only had twenty minutes before picking up Sara at the school.

“Nope, I can start today. I’ll make a difference for Sara.” With that decision made, she hurried to put away the groceries and get to the school.



The carpool line was longer than Darcy had imagined it would be. She was near the end of it, and it wasn't moving. What if Sara thought she'd been forgotten?

Darcy inched forward enough to enter the main parking lot. After finding a spot, she hopped out and made her way to the lines of kids waiting in groups along the sidewalk.

"Darcy!" Sara's little voice carried above the sound of all the kids chattering.

The next thing she knew, a little body slammed into her. Darcy automatically wrapped her arms around the warm, wiggly mass to keep her from falling.

"I knew you'd come. JD said I'd have to sleep here all night, but he was just being mean." Sara spoke fast while she clung to Darcy's legs.

"Excuse me," a female teacher hurried toward them. "Do you have your card? You can't walk up and take a child."

Darcy's natural snarkiness rose to the surface, but she quelled it before it spilled out of her mouth. "I didn't plan on it. What card are you talking about? I'm Sara's nanny, but today is my first day. Mr. Porter didn't say anything about a card."

The woman's countenance changed. She got this dreamy expression for half a minute before giving Darcy a calculating examination. "If that's true, he'll have added you to the list. You'll have to go to the office."

"Okay. Let's go, Sara." Darcy managed to hold her tongue.

"She'll have to stay in line with the others."

Darcy felt the woman was being a stickler for no reason other than she could. This job would require every ounce of

patience she had, and none of it would be used on her charge. She knelt in front of Sara.

“Will you be okay while I run inside? As soon as I get the card, I’ll be back.”

Sara pointed to a group of other kids. “I’ll stay with my new friend Phyl.”

“Good girl, I’ll be right back.” Darcy shot a look of determination at the teacher and strode into the building.

The secretary only took five minutes to pull Sara’s card, check Darcy’s driver’s license, and hand over a cardstock eight by eleven paper with Sara’s name and a number.

“Just put this in your front window when you pull up.” The woman smiled and turned to the next person at the counter.

Darcy returned to the front and walked up to the teacher. For some reason, she felt all bristly, but she decided this would be a chance to practice being nice. She held up the card. “I’m here for Sara. Thank you for keeping her safe.”

The teacher didn’t respond except to turn and call, “Sara Porter.”

Sara hugged another girl with dark curls. If she hadn’t been standing beside Sara, Darcy would have considered the other girl small, but even she was a good six inches taller than Sara. “Bye, Phyl! See you tomorrow.”

Darcy took Sara’s hand, and they threaded their way through the cars. “How did you like your first day of school?”

“It was amazing! Phyl showed me how to run up the slide, and then we took turns on the swing. She had to push me at first, but I can almost do it by myself. Just not as high. Phyl jumped out of the swing like you did as a girl! Do you think I’ll ever be brave enough to do that?”

Darcy laughed at the constant stream of chatter from the little girl. She decided to ignore the jumping comment out of respect for Evan. Best not to rebel on the first day on the job. Instead, she said, “You didn’t get this far by being scared.

Think of all the things you've done that no other child at school has."

"I don't want them to know I was sick." Sara stopped walking and tugged on Darcy's hand. "You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Of course not." Darcy's heart squeezed too tight, but she also felt this growing warmth of affection for Sara. More than anything, she wanted her to feel like she could do anything. An idea came to mind. "Sara, I'm on your team. You get to be the quarterback, and I'm your center lineman. How does that sound?"

"You give me the ball? What does that mean, and what about Daddy?" Sara scrunched her nose up as she tried to work out the analogy.

"He's the coach, right?"

"Yes."

"And what does the center do for the quarterback other than hand off the ball to start play?" Darcy prompted.

Sara brightened. "He tells the other players how to protect the quarterback. You'll make sure I'm safe so I can play?"

"Yep. And we're going to have a lot of fun doing it. No one needs to know you were sick unless you want to tell them. Got it?"

Sara hugged her again. "Can we play today?"

"Of course. Do you want the swings at the playground, or would you like to explore Mt. Rosie?" Darcy opened her car and watched Sara climb into her car seat. Evan had bought a second one identical to the one in his vehicle so Sara could buckle herself. He had insisted he install it to make sure it was secure.

"Swings!"

"All right then. Let's have some fun, and you can tell me about your day."



Evan hummed along with the radio as he drove home after football practice. The team looked good. He hadn't pushed them too hard over the summer but used that time to learn their strengths and weaknesses. Because of that, he made several adjustments during practice. A couple of the guys weren't happy about changing positions, but Evan hoped they'd come around when they saw how much better the team functioned because of it.

Team play was the most critical part of the game for him. He loved pulling a group together to form a well-oiled machine that moved in sync—almost like a dance. Evan had already planted the seeds that the team had no 'most important' position over the summer. Now, he would cement that by ensuring every player understood how his part fit into the whole.

He stopped humming when he pulled into his drive. Evan hadn't thought of Sara or Darcy all day as he taught his classes and then ran practice, but the older model Nissan Sentra in his drive brought both of them to the front of his mind. The beat-up blue car screamed college student. He'd had one just like it except red. The day he traded it in for a mid-sized SUV had felt like a significant milestone.

That car was another reminder of where Darcy was in her life. She was at the beginning of all the decisions to come. He needed to remember that and keep things professional despite how she made him drop his guard.

The garage door slid open, and he pulled forward. He took a deep breath, then gathered his stuff to go in. His goal? Thank Darcy and send her on her way.

The two days he spent shopping with her only enforced how easy it would be to become friendly. She had confidently handled herself, smoothly convincing Sara to buy pants, of all

things. Previously, his little girl had never given in to his suggestion of pants, no matter how cold it got outside. Of course, he would have to remind Darcy that pants didn't mean Sara could run around like the other kids. She wasn't strong enough for that yet, but he hoped one day she would be.

Evan pushed open the door and was immediately confronted with the aroma of dinner. The scent of tomatoes, garlic, and herbs hinted at something Italian, making his mouth water. Darcy stood at the sink with her back to him while Sara stood on a chair beside her. His breath hitched as they glanced over their shoulders to look at him.

"Daddy!" Sara yelled and waved at him. "Darcy's teaching me to cook like her mommy taught her."

"It'll be ready in about five minutes," Darcy said, then she returned to the sink.

Sara hopped down from the chair. He was impressed that she did it carefully instead of leaping like normal. Before Sara ran to him, she glanced up at Darcy, who winked at her. His daughter smiled at the woman, and then the girl he knew returned. She dashed across the kitchen to jump into his arms. Evan dropped his bag and caught her.

"How was your day?" he asked. It took every bit of control to focus on his daughter and not reflect on the woman cooking in his house. When he opened the door, that scene looked exactly like what he'd hoped for with Jenna.

"Daddy, school was amazing. I made a new friend named Phyl. She lives on a Christmas tree farm. She said I can come over sometime and see it. Can we? Darcy said she'd take me if it was okay with you." Sara continued to tell him everything that had happened at school as he carried her farther into the living room.

He sat on the couch with his back to the kitchen. Watching Darcy move about his space as if she belonged made it hard to concentrate on Sara.

"And JD said no one was going to pick me up, but then Darcy was there. I was so happy to see her, but the mean

teacher wouldn't let me go with her. But Darcy fixed it."

"Wait, what happened?" Evan shifted to look into the kitchen.

"The teacher was only making sure Sara was safe. I went to the office and showed them my driver's license, and it was fine. Thanks for remembering to put me on the list. Otherwise, it could have been a different story." She shrugged and set a pan on the counter.

Darcy had said the words calmly, but her expression hinted something else had also occurred. Did he want to know? He did, but he wouldn't press. If she wanted to tell him, she would.

"Miss Sue asks lots of questions about you, Daddy," Sara interrupted.

"Miss Sue?"

"Yes, she's the mean teacher. I didn't know she was mean. She was nice at lunch and on the playground, but she was really mean to Darcy." Sara patted his cheeks. "She shouldn't be mean to Darcy because she's my favorite friend."

"Oh, you are my favorite friend, too." Darcy appeared at the side of the couch. She looked down on them, or at least Sara, with apparent affection. "But, if Phyl becomes your favorite, that will also be okay. She looks nice."

"She is. She pushed JD down when he made fun of me for not being able to make the swing work by myself." Sara snuggled into his lap.

He didn't know who this JD was, but Evan was starting not to like him. Why would a five-year-old make fun of another kid because they couldn't swing? He squeezed his daughter closer.

"But you've got it now," Darcy smiled, then shifted her gaze to him. That smile slid from her face, and she twisted her hands in front of her. "Dinner is ready, and Sara already took her bath. You should know that I took her to the park and practiced swinging. No jumping out of them, though. I know

you said to be careful about the play stuff, but she didn't have any problems.”

Several conflicting emotions hit him at once. He was irritated she had taken Sara to the park on her first day when he asked her only to do calm activities. But after hearing Sara's story, he also felt a sense of gratitude for how Darcy had worked to help his daughter deal with being made fun of for something as silly as the swings.

Before he could decide what to say, Darcy picked up her purse and jacket. “See you tomorrow, Sara.”

And she was gone. Evan stared at the door. The woman hadn't even said goodbye to him. Sara giggled and crawled from his lap.

“You look funny, Daddy. Come see what I cooked.”

He shook the strange emotion at Darcy's departure from his mind and followed Sara into the kitchen. “What did you make us?”

“Pashetti. Darcy let me help but wouldn't let me dump the water. She said it could burn me, but when I get bigger, she'll let me try. Darcy says I have to eat good food so I can grow. How long will it take?”

Evan chuckled as Sara continued to talk about everything Darcy had said over the last few hours without taking a break for him to comment. All the things he'd tried for years to convince his daughter to do were now important because one woman had said it as well. He should be offended, but he was grateful Sara had connected with someone who wanted good things for her.

End of the Trial Period



Evan felt a twinge of excitement as he pulled into his drive Friday evening. Darcy had been on the job a week, and he'd already seen changes in Sara. It was his relief that things were working out that made him glad to be home. At least, that's what he told himself. It had nothing to do with the woman waiting for him inside.

Like every night of the week, he stepped into his kitchen to find Darcy and his daughter putting the final touches on dinner. The house smelled terrific from their efforts. He glimpsed mashed potatoes, roasted broccoli, and some meat.

"What do you have tonight?" he asked them as he set his bag down.

"Miniature meatloaves. Do you want the sauce on yours? It's mushroom with a creamy reduction." Darcy busily plated the food while she talked.

"Sounds good."

"Hi, Daddy. See my baby meatloaf?" Sara pointed to her plate that contained what looked to be a meatball rather than a meatloaf. She also had a spoonful of potatoes and three pieces of broccoli.

"That's adorable, cutie pie." Evan wondered if she would actually eat it. He turned to Darcy with a raised brow. "How was your day?"

Her soft smile almost stole his breath. "It was good. We had a playdate with one of Sara's school friends at the tree

farm. I taught them how to roll down the sled hill. Don't worry. She's already had her bath."

"Then Darcy let me make my own patty. It was gross, but she says it will taste better because I used my hands," Sara piped in.

Darcy laughed. "Food always tastes better when it's made by hand."

"Even the green ones?" Sara asked.

"You promised you'd try. Remember, it'll help you grow tall and strong." Darcy put the two plates on the table. "Do you want me to put the extras in containers before I leave?"

Evan looked at all the food still in the baking dish. "Why don't you join us? There's enough for you and us over the weekend."

"Well, that was the idea. Weekend food, that is. There's also a dish of chicken and rice that you can warm up. I made it fresh today, so it will be good whenever you need it in the next few days." Darcy blushed and twisted her hands in front of her. "I really shouldn't stay. You need daddy-daughter time."

"Okay." Evan lifted Sara off the floor, hugged her, and then put her in her chair. "Why don't you try that broccoli while I walk Darcy to the door?"

Sara gave him a thumbs-up but waved to Darcy. "See you Monday."

Evan reached for Darcy's elbow as she neared the door. "Darcy, I wanted to say thank you for all you've done this week."

Her shoulders inched up, and her brow creased. "Did I do something wrong?"

"What? I'm saying thank you."

"It sounded like there was a 'but' coming."

"No, why would you think that?"

She reached for the jacket that rested on the table by the entryway. "Because I like watching Sara. Usually, when I start

to enjoy myself, something goes wrong. I thought you would tell me the trial was over and it wouldn't work out."

An uncomfortable chuckle escaped as he ran his fingers over his short hair. He didn't know what to make of that comment, but he wished he could find out more.

However, Sara yelled to them from the table, "The broccoli is good, Darcy! How did you make it good?"

"I didn't. You did." Darcy smiled at his daughter and then slipped her arms into the jacket. "Will you need me Monday?"

Yes, and every day after. The thought slammed into him, and he was glad he hadn't said the words out loud. Evan needed to get his mind straight. Darcy was too young. She had her whole life ahead of her and didn't need to be tied down to an older man with a child. He decided to ask a question that would remind both of them that.

"Why did you take the semester off?"

"Oh. I, uh." She sighed, wrapped the jacket around her tighter, and hugged herself like she needed comfort. Evan wished he could do that for her. "I've finished all the core classes and several introductory classes and didn't feel pulled in any direction. It seemed like a waste of time and money to stay unless I could figure out what I wanted to do."

"What about your grades?" he asked.

"Now you sound like my dad." She glared at him, and he remembered how her body language had screamed red alert when they first met. He hadn't seen it all week and hated that it was back now.

"Sorry, none of my business." He held out his hands in a sign of peace.

"It's fine. I was a straight-A student. School has always been easy for me, which makes the fact I have no clue what I want to do with my life even worse. I know I could do anything, but I want to feel excited about it. Is that so wrong?"

"No, it's not. I'm impressed you recognized that and took the time to figure it out. Is that why you've had so many jobs

this summer?” Evan leaned against the wall, wishing she had agreed to stay for dinner so they could talk and eat.

“Yeah. I’ve spent time at the lodge trying on every aspect of the hospitality industry. I’ve worked at the bakery, the dock for summer boat rentals, and the yarn shop. Each one was fine. I didn’t quit because I hated it, but I stayed long enough to know something was missing. I want to make a difference somehow as well as be fulfilled personally. That’s why I’m scared of losing this job. This week has been the best time I’ve had in a very long time. Not just because it’s fun but because I love seeing Sara’s face when she learns something new and knowing that I had a hand in that.”

Her heartfelt plea warmed Evan’s chest. He knew Darcy was being sincere, making his decision that much easier.

“I’m glad,” he said. “The fact is, the trial period is over. I want you to stay. Sara is already changed so much this week. She’s calmer and happier and hasn’t thrown a fit once all week when she didn’t get her way. On top of that, she’s wearing pants and eating vegetables. I can’t image how much she’ll grow up by the end of the football season.”

Darcy’s shoulders finally relaxed. She waved her hands dismissively. “Oh, that’s probably because she started school. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“I think it has everything to do with you. Every night she gives me a play-by-play rundown of everything you’ve told her. She wants to be like you when she grows up. She couldn’t have a better role model from where I stand.”

Darcy’s eyes sparkled as if they were full of moisture. She blinked it away as she looked at his daughter. When she met his gaze again, that spark arced between them. “Thank you for that. I guess I’d better be careful what I say from now on. I promise to stay until the end of the season. Until New Year’s if you need. Maybe longer. Who knows, maybe my calling isn’t some venture I haven’t discovered yet. Maybe I’m a natural-born nanny, and I should embrace that.” She shrugged and retrieved her purse before reaching for the door handle. “See you Monday, Evan.”



Darcy rushed to her car, hoping Evan hadn't heard her heart pounding. It had started thumping uncomfortably when she thought he was going to fire her. She hadn't meant to be so honest about how things seemed to go wrong in her life. Luckily, she managed not to say too much on that topic. The moment intensified when he started questioning her reasons for taking the semester off of school, but at least it wasn't anything new. Her parents, siblings, and every Sugar Mama in Sugar Creek had asked the same questions. Darcy was experienced with her answers now.

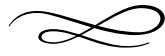
No, her chest was bursting with activity for an entirely different reason. The fear disappeared, replaced by warmth and a pleasant tension she couldn't do anything about. However, knowing Evan thought she made a good role model meant something to her. Probably more than it should.

She turned on the car and backed out of the drive.

"I need to concentrate on Sara and keep my wayward feelings out of it. That's the only way to keep this job and the happiness it's brought me," she said the words to herself, thinking perhaps vocalizing them would make them stick.

No matter what, she couldn't let herself fall for the single dad whose smile made her breathless.

First Away Game



Over the next week, Evan continued to feel disappointed when Darcy rushed out of his house each evening. But he knew it was for the best. It was the perfect routine for keeping things professional. He would come home to find her finishing dinner, say hello, exchange a few notes on how Sara's day had gone, and then she'd leave as quickly as she could. It worked. He found it comforting to think of Darcy in his house caring for his daughter, but he didn't invite her to dinner or try to talk to her at the door without Sara close by. He could keep his interest out of the equation if he didn't spend one-on-one time with her.

Sometimes she would meet his gaze, and something would pass between them. An unspoken tension took root in the five or ten minutes they interacted every day. It wasn't any one thing he could put his finger on. Perhaps it was only that it had been a long time since he'd been in a relationship, and Darcy surprised him. She was organized, great with Sara, and a talented cook. Where did a college student learn to cook like that?

The questions he wanted to ask kept piling up. They'd been accumulating since he escorted her down the aisle at Austin's wedding. He could admit that the first time they met, his interest was purely due to her beauty, but now he knew she was also an amazing woman. She might be young and have moved through several jobs over the summer, but her explanation of why made sense to him. At least she was actively trying to figure out who she was and what she wanted.

Before she took the job, Evan hadn't known much other than Austin worried about her. Her brother often brought up his siblings during their hikes on Mt. Rosie. Evan listened with interest since he only had one sister, whom he barely saw since she lived in California. Austin felt an unusual sense of responsibility for his brother and sisters. Luckily, his new wife, Jackie, gave him something else to focus on. Plus, she lightened his load by becoming his sisters' best friend.

Now, he felt like he was getting to know Darcy through Sara. Every night, his daughter shared everything she'd done with her nanny, as well as every story Darcy told her. They were often about her childhood and how she'd learned one thing or the other. It was amazing how a woman's influence affected Sara in such a positive manner. Even her speech was better. It made him wonder what he'd do when she was a teenager.

"Coach, the gear is loaded," one of his team captains stood in the doorway.

"Thanks. Round up the team."

The boy nodded and disappeared. It was time to stop thinking about the woman watching his daughter and focus on the season's first game against the South Burlington Sea Wolves. He left his office and joined the team in the locker room for a quick chat before loading the bus. Then he would call Darcy and say good night to Sara.

His need to call had nothing to do with wanting to hear his nanny's voice.



"Good night, Daddy. I hope we win." Sara's little voice melted Darcy's heart.

Every time she watched the two interact, she fell more in love with Sara. She even thought fondly of Evan and now

agreed with her mom and Jackie that Evan might be one of the good ones. That's why she ran away so fast every night. She couldn't let her feelings get any more involved.

"Here's Darcy," Sara quipped, pushing the phone back toward her.

She placed it near her ear and tried to sound like she hadn't thought the man on the other end was nice or that she'd been dreaming about his rare smiles at night. "Hey."

"She sounds wired." Evan chuckled. "Good luck with bedtime tonight."

"I'm not worried about it." Darcy tried not to get defensive. Did he still question her ability to care for his child? "We'll be fine. You're the one that needs luck. No pressure or anything, but I've heard people talking. They think you'll take us to State even though we haven't been close in the last four years."

"We've got a great team. Can't you hear them in the background?"

Darcy concentrated on the background noise. "No."

Evan's laugh sent a little thrill through her. "That's right. They're all focused on the game and their part on the team. They know I only expect their best. I told them we might not win tonight because I've shifted some positions. It'll take a game or two to readjust, but once they do, they'll be better than ever."

"That's another rumor I heard."

"Oh, and what's everyone saying?" he asked.

"It's a mixed bag right now. Some think you should have left well enough alone. Others are willing to see what the results are before passing judgment." Darcy mimed brushing her teeth to Sara. The little girl grinned and ran toward the bathroom, and she followed.

"And what do you think?" Evan asked.

With her attention split, Darcy was more honest than she would have been otherwise. "I think it was time to mix things

up. The old coach was set in his ways and didn't always challenge his players. I'm not sure he looked farther than what position the boys asked to play. Plus, you could have gone pro in the last decade. Coach Johnson hasn't run more than three yards at a time in three decades."

"I think that was a compliment?"

"Sorry, yes. I think it's a good idea. And don't get me wrong, I loved Coach Johnson. He was a great guy and coach when Austin and Brandon played, but it was clear his heart wasn't in it the last several years."

"Hopefully, tonight's game will tell if we're headed in the right direction."

"Evan, it'll be great. Most of the team's parents are excited about your changes. You're in a good place if you have the dads' approval." Darcy reached over and dried Sara's face. "I've got to go. It's story time."

"Darcy?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

Evan's voice had a tender note that did funny things to Darcy's chest. She felt warm, mushy, and the beginnings of hope. For the moment, she didn't feel like throwing her walls up. Instead, she let one more truth slip out.

"Don't let me down." She mostly meant the game, but she could no longer deny she was also attracted to the man. That thought sent her into a mild panic. She hung up without saying goodbye.

While Sara pulled on her pajamas, Darcy tried to put her mind at ease. Her problem wasn't that she liked Evan but that she hadn't talked to men other than him for two weeks. Before that, she had worked and spent time with her family. That meant almost three months since her last date. She needed to get a life, and then her job would be safe because she wouldn't start acting weird around Evan.

Yep, she needed to find a date. But first, she needed to get Sara in bed.

“You ready?” she asked the little girl.

“Will you read me a story?” Sara batted her eyes and clasped her hands in front of her.

Darcy tried not to laugh at the theatrics, but she did wonder where the girl learned them. “Sure thing. Do you have a favorite book?”

Sara ran to her bookshelf and pulled out a thick volume of fairytales. “These are my favorite.”

Darcy took the book, patted the bed, and Sara bounced her way to the pillow. After Darcy tucked the blanket around her, she flipped to one of the stories.

Before she started reading, she asked, “You’ve mentioned that you don’t like to go to bed a couple of times. Why not? Aren’t you tired after a day of school and play?”

“Yes.” She didn’t say anything else.

“You can tell me. I won’t laugh. Are you afraid of the dark?”

Sara shook her head. Her eyes were wide as they searched Darcy’s face. “Promise?”

Darcy set the book on the bed and nudged Sara over so she could lay beside her. She wrapped her arms around the tiny body and rested her cheek against the top of her head. The position brought back memories of her mother doing the same thing at various times, and Darcy sighed.

“I’d never do anything to make you sad. Not on purpose. You know that, right?” She felt Sara’s head move. “Okay, what don’t you like about going to sleep? You have this amazing room and a castle night light.”

Sara was quiet for another moment, then whispered, “It’s lonely.”

First, Darcy was surprised a five-year-old knew what lonely meant, but this felt like one of those moments when the

pixie of a girl knew more than she should.

“Can you tell me why?” she prompted.

“I was never alone in the hospital. Then when I didn’t have to go back, Daddy let me sleep with him for a long time. This is the first house where I sleep in my room. I don’t like it.”

“Oh, sweet girl. That’s hard.” Darcy ran her fingers through Sara’s hair. “You know. Sometimes I get lonely at night too.”

Sara sat up. “You do?”

“Yep. So I have a teddy bear from when I was little like you. When I’m sad because I’m not sleeping at my parent’s house where I know they’re down the hall, I pull it out and squeeze it close until I fall asleep.” Darcy tried not to smile, but Sara stared at her with wide-eyed wonder. “Do you have a stuffy you could hold?”

Sara tilted her head to the side. “If you’re lonely, why do you sleep alone?”

That did make Darcy laugh. Such an innocent question with loaded answers. She finally settled on something appropriate for the little girl. She crossed her fingers and hoped it would be enough.

“Because that’s what we do when we grow up.”

“I don’t want to grow up then,” Sara pouted.

Darcy settled her back on the pillow and held her closer. “Then don’t,” she teased. “And for the next ten minutes, I won’t either. I’ll stay right here and hold you until you fall asleep.”

“Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re my bestest friend. But don’t tell Daddy.”



“Coach has a girlfriend,” James, one of the linemen, teased.

“What? No, I don’t.” For a minute, Evan forgot he was the coach and not another silly high schooler. He enjoyed talking to Darcy. She didn’t mind talking about football and had faith in him. It was a good feeling that made him smile. He wouldn’t be ashamed of that.

Plus, he never told her about going pro. She must have looked him up if she knew he could have after college, but he had Sara to care for, so he didn’t. Something about that made his chest swell with pride.

“You have the same goofy grin Benton gets when thinking about Annika. Spill, coach,” Colby joined his teammate in the ribbing. Most of the bus was oblivious to the discussion at the front.

“You’re supposed to be thinking about the game, not my phone conversations. However, there is nothing wrong with smiling when you talk to someone.” Evan held up his phone. “I was telling Sara goodnight.”

“But who did you talk to after?” James pressed. “It wasn’t a Sugar Mama, that’s for sure. You’ve never talked to them so long when they watched Sara. So, coach, give us something to take our minds off the game. Who’s watching the cutie pie?”

Evan pointed at him. “I want your mind on the game.”

“Then you’ll have to tell us.” Colby grinned. “Otherwise, it’ll be all we can think about.”

Evan felt silly. What was the big deal anyway? Hadn’t he decided not to be ashamed of being happy because he spoke with Darcy?

“If you must know, I hired a nanny. That’s who’s watching Sara, and she happened to have some thoughts on tonight’s

game. As does most of the town. Hers were at least positive. Thus, the smile.”

James exchanged a look with Colby before asking, “What’s her name?”

“Darcy.” Evan did his best to sound like it was no big deal.

“Fletcher?” Colby asked. “Please say Fletcher.”

“Yeah. Why?” Evan answered.

“She’s hot. She’s the only reason I didn’t want my parents to stop hiring babysitters.” Colby shook his head. “The day they told me I was old enough to watch my sisters by myself, I almost cried.”

Evan wanted to laugh, but somehow he managed not to. James and Colby both looked too serious to handle his humor. Plus, he could understand that first crush on an older woman. He’d had a history teacher in high school that made school bearable.

“Man, she always brought the best treats, too,” James added. “That woman can cook.”

“She babysat both of you?” Evan asked.

“She probably watched half the team before we hit the eighth grade. She was a junior or something.”

“So, the same age you are now?” Evan teased.

“Oh, man. I never thought of that.” James leaned back in his seat a moment and then jumped back up. “Is she still single? Maybe I can convince her to wait another year for me to graduate.”

This did make Evan laugh. “Can’t you find a girl your age?”

“Sure,” James grinned. “But like Colby said, Darcy’s hot.”

Colby slapped James in the chest. “Dude, get in line. Coach, will Darcy be at the home games?”

“I’m sure she will. Now, we have another twenty minutes until we get to the school. Return your thoughts to what you

need to do tonight.” Evan faced forward to end the conversation. He needed to take his own advice, and continuing to hear how ‘hot’ Darcy was wouldn’t help.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t argue with their less-than-verbose description. He could have listed several traits he found appealing beyond her hotness, and a few minutes passed with him doing that very thing when Evan felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned to see James grinning at him.

“Bet you’re not thinking about the game.”

“James, that’s enough,” Evan growled at him. “Sit back down.”

“You know,” James said as he returned to his seat. “None of us would blame you for liking her. Heck, we’d love her to hang around the fields like Sara. Cutie is great, but can you imagine how the guys would try their hardest to impress Darcy?”

“I’m not dating a woman to make my team better. If you can’t give me your best, maybe you don’t belong on the team.” Evan tried to put some grit behind his voice. It was time to stop the gossip about his non-existent romance.

James’ eyes grew wide. “I’m giving my best. Never mind.”

Evan finally leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes. He could only hope the boy was thinking about football and not worried he might get cut from the team. That wasn’t the message he meant to send, but he needed to reestablish the coach and player relationship. That didn’t include discussing who the coach might or might not date.

The Sea Wolves. Think about the Sea Wolves. Evan pulled out his iPad to watch footage of the other team. He’d get his head in the game one way or the other.



Evan pulled into his garage a little before midnight, satisfied with a good night of football. His team had done him and Sugar Creek proud. They played with heart and won in the last two minutes of play. The bus ride home had been a party.

He chuckled and pulled his bag from the back seat. James and Colby had spilled the beans about his new nanny. They had been correct about her once babysitting most of the team. And most of them agreed with the ‘hot’ assessment. Evan had chosen to ignore their comments while he wrote up notes from the game and ideas for the next week of practice. Let boys be boys, but he would return to being the coach.

Pushing open the door, he slipped quietly into the kitchen. The house was quiet, but the light over the oven cast a soft glow over the area. Setting his bag down, he glanced into the living room. Another lamp was on by the sofa, but he didn’t see Darcy. He could hear her breathing, though. His heart pounded stronger as he walked around the island and stepped onto the carpet.

Darcy lay curled up on the couch with a book clutched to her chest. It looked like she had fallen asleep reading. Her hair was sprawled around her, and her mouth was slightly open. Something burst into life deep inside him.

Even though she looked young, he couldn’t help but appreciate her beauty. Darcy had settled into his life so quickly. She never complained, but she did push the boundaries he’d set when she thought it important. He knew Sara often visited the playground with some of her friends after school. So far, there hadn’t been anything to worry about. Darcy had been conscientious and diligent with his daughter’s health.

She looked so peaceful he hated to wake her. For a moment, he considered getting a blanket and letting her sleep. Then a flickering question of what it would be like to slide in beside her and enfold her in his arms crossed his mind.

That would never do.

No matter how well she cared for Sara, he needed to remember how young she was. This was a job for her. Nothing

more. Someone like her wouldn't be interested in a guy almost nine years older than herself. Indeed, they didn't have anything in common other than his daughter.

But she did look serene. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to leave her there. However, Evan didn't want to expose her to the gossip. Someone would notice her car sitting in his drive all night, and everyone would let their imaginations run. His team was at the top of the list.

With a sigh, he bent over and touched her shoulder. "Darcy?"

She yelped and bolted to sitting. In the same movement, she swung the book at his head. He barely grabbed it before it smashed into his nose.

"It's only me," he said.

Darcy blinked, then finally focused on his face. "Evan?"

"Sorry to scare you."

She glanced at the book, then sat it in her lap. "I must have fallen asleep."

"I didn't want to wake you, but—" he stopped.

Darcy blushed as if she knew what he'd been going to say. She knew as well as he did how gossip in small towns worked.

"No, no. I need to head home." She ran her fingers through her hair. They snagged on a tangle or two, and she tried to work them out. Finally, she reached for her shoes.

"Are you awake enough to drive? Do you want a drink or something?" Why was he babbling like an idiot? He needed to let her walk out the door before he gave away some of his thoughts. Such as how cute she looked, all sleep-mussed.

"I'm good and don't have far to go." She finally met his eyes, and something sparked between them. "Um, how did the game go?"

Evan allowed his pride to show as he said, "We won."

Everything about Darcy changed. She'd been fidgety and anxious, but with his announcement, she brightened. Her smile

called to him, opening his heart further. Her eyes softened while becoming charged with excitement. He'd never known that was possible. What did it mean? She was happy for him, that was clear, but was she also proud of him? Jenna had never been proud of him.

"I knew it would turn out well. Sara said a prayer for every player she could remember before bed. She knew a lot of names." Darcy smiled up at him.

"Any of them sound familiar?" he couldn't help but ask.

"Should they?" her brow furrowed.

Evan laughed. "Most of them know you very well. When they learned you were watching Sara, they went on and on about how you were the best babysitter they'd ever had."

She blushed again. "Oh, my goodness. I wondered. Some of them—" She shook her head. "Anyway, I'm glad the season started well. They'll only get better as they work together more."

Evan wondered what she had been thinking but decided not to ask. Had she liked some of them? Surely not. That would have been a considerable age gap for a teenager. Or had something else happened that she wished to forget? Now his imagination would be stuck trying to figure it out.

"Darcy, what were you going to say?" He reached out and placed his hand on her elbow.

She stilled and gazed into his eyes. "About?"

"Babysitting?"

"Oh." She shrugged. "Nothing. I think some of them might have had a crush on me. That's all. I had to suggest to some parents that it was time to trust their boys to watch themselves."

"I never watched kids growing up. Is that normal?"

"I don't know. They were all good kids, though. They didn't give me any trouble, and the money was good." She tilted her head to the side. "Huh. Maybe I should have thought

about being a nanny a long time ago. I enjoy kids and think I'm good at caring for them."

"You are. Sara has been so happy these last two weeks. Being around you is good for her. She's so much calmer. I can't believe it."

"Maybe she doesn't get wild because she's using up some of that energy on the playground at school." The twinkle in her eyes mocked him, along with her smile. "And after school."

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. She needed to move more than I let her, but I hope you're still being careful?" Evan walked with Darcy to the front door.

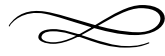
"Always."

Darcy turned suddenly, and Evan found himself standing closer than he had since their trip down the aisle over the summer. The scent of her shampoo and perfume had faded, but he knew if he leaned closer, he'd catch the memory of it on her skin. There was a tangle in her hair that begged his fingers to unravel, but it was her eyes that wouldn't let him go.

Her breath caught as if she felt the tension growing between them too. "Um. See you Monday."

Darcy spun around and fumbled at the door. It had been locked, and it took her a moment to get it unbolted so she could hurry outside. She didn't look back, but Evan stood there until her car had driven out of sight.

Surprises



Darcy tossed and turned until the morning. Something had happened between her and Evan last night. She wasn't sure, but there had been a moment by the door when she desperately wanted him to lean in and kiss her. The thought had scared her. Why would she wish it?

There's no way Evan would ever do that. Confused, she had bolted. It had been a long time since she'd wanted someone to kiss her. Her boss wasn't a safe choice. Darcy needed someone to talk to. Since her sisters were both in Boston, she called Jackie at a reasonable hour.

"Hey," Jackie answered on the fourth ring.

"Did I wake you?"

"No, I just got to your parent's house. It took a moment to fish my phone out of my purse."

"Okay, good. Wait, why are you there so early?" Darcy asked.

"Austin has an all-day hiking tour today. They left an hour ago. I thought I'd see what your mom was up to."

Jackie spent a lot of time with Mrs. Fletcher. Darcy often wondered if it was because she missed her mother so much. She had passed away before Thanksgiving of the previous year. Darcy didn't know what she'd do without her mom.

"Would you mind if I joined you guys?" she asked.

"That would be fun. Teenie said something about fall festival planning. I can't wait to see what Sugar Creek does for

that. You guys have so many activities year-round.”

“Oo, the fall festival is one of my favorites. I’ll get dressed and be right over.”

It didn’t take long to reach her parent’s house. Darcy would have preferred to talk to Jackie without her mom around, but the truth was, she needed Teenie’s insights as well. Her mom was always kind but honest whenever her children asked for advice. And she was usually right about things of the heart.

“Hey, Darcy. How’s the new job going?” Jackie asked as soon as Darcy walked into the kitchen.

“I love it,” she answered. “It’s the most fun I’ve had at any job. Didn’t you tell me once I’d know what I was meant to do when I thought it was fun?”

“That’s my philosophy.” Jackie handed her a plate of pancakes. “You hungry?”

“Thanks. Where’s mom?”

“She took a call from one of the Sugar Mamas and went to the other room. I’ve never seen her so secretive.”

“Maybe once she’s inducted into the club, she’ll tell us what they get up to.” Darcy poured some maple syrup on her pancakes and savored the first bite. Then she glanced down the hall before jumping into the next topic. “So, personal question. How did you know you were in love with Austin and didn’t just like him as a friend?”

“That’s a big one. Why the sudden curiosity?”

“No reason. I realized I didn’t ask for the whole story as it unfolded.” Darcy took another bite and tried to act like it wasn’t a big deal. She should have asked what she wanted to know, but she wasn’t ready to look at herself that closely yet. The April Fool curse would strike as soon as she did, and everything would fall apart.

“Well, I was attracted to him from the very first. And then he turned out to be this nice guy who didn’t run away when I blubbered all over him multiple times. I don’t know.” Jackie

shrugged. “I liked spending time with him. I missed him when we weren’t together and wondered what he was doing. I wanted him to be happy, and of course, there was that ever-growing tension between us. I’d never felt that with anyone else.”

Darcy and Jackie both sighed.

Attraction—check. Wondering what he’s doing—check. Tension that gets stronger every time I see him—check.

“I might be in trouble,” she muttered more to herself than to her sister-in-law.

“Do tell? Is this about—” she broke off mid-sentence as all the color drained from her face. “Oh, no.”

Jackie hurried from the table and rushed down the hall. A door slammed, only to be followed by muffled noises of sickness.

Teenie entered the room and looked around. “Where’s Jackie?”

Darcy pointed down the hall. “In the bathroom. Is she okay? Did she say anything about being sick? I can’t take germs back to Sara. Evan would worry like crazy if she got the flu or something.”

Teenie’s brow creased. “She didn’t act sick when she got here. Maybe...” The door opened, so they waited for Jackie to return. Teenie wrapped her in a hug and walked with her to a chair. “Can I get you something?”

Jackie touched her glass of orange juice and cringed. “Can I have some water, please?”

“Of course, dear.” Teeny pattered around the kitchen as she asked, “Are you okay? That seemed sudden.”

Jackie blushed, and things clicked.

“Jackie, are you pregnant?” Darcy blurted. “Is that why you’ve been so tired?”

“You can’t tell anyone. It’s still early, and my mom had a lot of trouble carrying babies. I haven’t told Austin yet. I want

to make sure I'm past the first trimester."

"Oh my." Teenie clasped her hands and exclaimed, "I knew it. A honeymoon baby."

Jackie's cheeks moved from pink to almost red. "We discussed it before the wedding, but I didn't think it would happen so quickly. My mom struggled to get pregnant, and then she had several miscarriages. I thought it might be hereditary, but I'm starting to hope. We want two or three kids at least, and we're not getting any younger."

"Austin will be so happy." Teenie set the water on the table and rested her hand on Jackie's shoulder. "He hasn't noticed anything?"

"He's been busy with the adventures. They'll slow down as we move into winter. Then it will be harder to hide, but I only have a few more weeks until the second trimester." Jackie sipped the water. "I want to find a fun way to tell him, but I've felt so tired and sick I can't think."

Darcy jumped up from her seat and hugged Jackie. "I'm going to be an aunt! This is wonderful. I'll help you think of a way to tell him."

"Thanks. I'm so nervous. Excited but scared to death, too, you know?" Jackie leaned into Teenie and kept Darcy's hand. "It's what I've always wanted, but I thought I'd have my mom to talk to."

"You have us, dear. No matter what, you can always come to me." Teenie hugged her from behind again before moving to sit at the table.

"Same here. Even when I leave, you can always call me," Darcy added.

All three women held hands and stared at each other for a few minutes. Their smiles grew as the seconds ticked by. Finally, Teenie burst out with, "I'm going to be a grandmother!"

They all laughed, cried, and hugged several more times until Jackie said, "Now our pancakes are cold."

Teenie gathered the plates and headed for the trash can. “I’ll make a new batch.”

“Don’t do that on my account. Who knows if I’ll keep them down,” Jackie sighed. “I’ll eat toast, but Darcy might want some warm ones.”

“I’m good, Mom.” Darcy waved her off.

“What were you saying before I ran off?” Jackie asked.

“Nothing important. I want to know how I can help you. Are you hoping for a girl or a boy? Do you have names picked out?” Darcy decided she’d rather not examine her feelings about a particular football coach and dad. It was much more pleasing to think of her brother as a dad. Austin would be wrapped around the kid’s finger the instant they met—much like Evan and Sara.

So much for not thinking about him.

“No way are you getting out of this.” Jackie pointed at her. “You asked how I knew I was in love, and I want to know why.”

Teenie’s brow shot up, and a huge smile blossomed over her face. “Yes, what’s going on?”

Darcy groaned. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Both women grinned at her, but Jackie asked, “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” Darcy waffled between keeping quiet and going through with her original plan for seeking out her sister-in-law. “No. I don’t know.”

Her mother patted her hand. “Why don’t you talk it out?”

With a sigh, Darcy jumped in. “I’ve been thinking about someone a lot lately, but I wonder if it’s just because I’m lonely. You know? There were people to hang out with at school and things to do, but I haven’t done anything besides work since coming home.”

“Then you should make time to get out more. Go on a date or something,” Jackie said.

“But all the guys I went to school with are back at college. Even my girlfriends are off living life without me.” Darcy slumped over and rested her head on her arms as they sprawled across the table. “Why couldn’t I figure out what to study and stay at school? Where’s my ambition? I had good grades and high ACT scores, but what’s the point?”

“Oh, sweetheart.” Teenie leaned into Darcy’s side, holding her and snuggling close. “Not everyone has lofty goals of changing the world, and that’s okay. You are intelligent enough to do whatever you want. You already make little differences everywhere you go. Those small ripples will grow as they spread, and some of the best changes may come because of it. Plus, many people don’t find their purpose until they’re older.”

“What is it you think you should be doing or feeling?” Jackie asked.

“I should know what my goals are. Austin knew he wanted to run adventure tours even though he didn’t start until this year. Carly has known she wanted to be a nurse for ages, and Ellie is so wrapped up in her music that she’s never doubted where she’ll be five, ten, or twenty years from now.”

“What about Brandon?” Jackie winked. “You left him out, so you’re not the only one living day to day.”

“Oh, he knows what he wants. He just doesn’t know how to get it.” Teenie nodded and headed back to the kitchen to mix more pancakes. “That boy doesn’t care what he does for a living. His focus has always been on who he wants to share it with.”

“Do you think Summer will ever come home to stay?” Darcy asked.

Teenie shrugged. “You know what I think?”

Darcy raised a questioning brow.

“You need to go on a date with the next person that asks you. End of story. Forget about planning the rest of your life and live in the moment.”

Darcy sat up straighter. “You’re right. I need to get back to the things I used to do. Then all the confusing thoughts will untangle themselves.”



Teenie was on cloud nine. Her first grandbaby was on the way. Austin and Jackie would make wonderful parents. She sighed with contentment. This would be the beginning of a new chapter in her life.

If only Darcy would cooperate with Operation Evan, Teenie might inherit another grandchild before long. Darcy adored the little girl and would do anything for her. However, her feelings about Evan were harder to discern. She no longer fussed about his grumpy ways, which was an improvement, but she also didn’t bring him up much.

Could her daughter be immune to his good looks? What about the way he doted on his daughter? Nothing was more attractive than a man who loved children. And yet, Darcy seemed perfectly happy watching the girl and ignoring the father. It would never do.

Teenie clung to Darcy’s comment about tangled emotions. Surely, Evan was responsible for that? It wasn’t like Darcy had time to meet anyone else.

She sighed. How could she move things forward? Darcy had agreed to accept the next date offer, but Teenie had no idea how to get Evan to ask her out. Sitting wasn’t helping her think, so she got up, straightened the cushions on the couch, dusted, and then an idea struck her while she vacuumed. She quickly called Ruth Weston.

“Hi, Teenie,” Ruthie answered.

“Is Scott still in town?” Teenie asked.

“Yes, why?”

“Would he be interested in taking Darcy on a date?”

“I’m sure he would. He asked about her the other day, but I thought we were setting her up with Coach Porter.”

Teenie smiled. “We are.”

“Oh, I see. This is a risky move, Teenie. It could backfire on you, and then Darcy will move across the country,” Ruthie warned.

“Not if I sabotage the date. I need Evan to see Darcy as more than a nanny and for her to see him as more than a dad.”

“Sending her on a date with another man isn’t going to do that.”

“Darcy compares all her dates to all the previous ones. So, after she goes out with Scott, I’ll bring up her shopping trip with Evan. That was sort of like a date.”

There was some rustling on the other line. Then Ruthie said, “I don’t know about this, but I’ll make sure Scott runs into Darcy at the game this Friday. Perhaps they won’t need to go on a date, just talk to each other in front of Evan. Scott’s a good guy. I’d hate for him to get his hopes up.”

“I didn’t think about that. He is a good kid.” Teenie deflated into a chair. She’d have to come up with something else.

“Why don’t you head to Colleen’s? I’ll gather whoever I can, and we’ll discuss it.”

“Thank you, oh, and if we can pull Brandon into this, it will be even better. It’s high time he stopped moping. There has to be a single woman his age we can set him up with.”

“We’ve talked about him a lot and have a list. See you soon.”

First Home Game



It was his first home game as coach. Evan paced before his team, searching for the right words to say. He knew they felt the same pressure he did, at least in a small way. They all wanted to make their community proud, but he also knew the expectations could put them off their game.

“Team, I know how excited you are to show your family and classmates what we can do. Don’t overthink things. Run the plays just like at practice. Let the energy from the crowd pump you up and push you to greatness. Now, I have just one question for you. How did you feel after last week’s win?”

Evan fell quiet as he looked around the room. He met the gaze of each of his boys. He saw the smiles, the pride, but he wanted more from them. The crowd could only pump them up so much. It was his responsibility to stoke that confidence and courage to fight all four quarters.

“Come on now, let me hear it,” he yelled. “How did you feel?”

The boys answered with great, awesome, like winners, and a couple of other things.

“That’s right. Winning feels great. It’s awesome. Last week we didn’t have the whole town watching. So multiply that feeling from last week by every parent, sibling, aunt, uncle, cousin, or neighbor who will cheer for you. Nothing is a given, but if you want that feeling again, you get out there and fight for it.”

Evan tapped his quarterback on the shoulder. “Fire ‘em up, Benton.”

“Let me hear it,” Benton yelled as he held his helmet in the air. “Whose got your back?”

All the team raised their helmets and answered, “You do!”

“Whose got my back?” Benton pumped his helmet with each question.

“I do.” All his teammates lifted their helmets.

“What matters the most?”

“Team.”

“What comes first?”

“Team.”

“How do we win?”

“Together.”

“Whose number one?”

“We are.”

Benton repeated the last question two more times. Each answer was louder than the previous until the reply became a battle roar.

Evan smiled. “Now, let’s get out there and bring home another win for Sugar Creek.”

“Yes, Coach.”

The boys streamed out the door and down the long sidewalk from the field house to the playing field. Evan followed and got his first look at the stands full of family and diehard Carver fans. The visiting team’s bleachers were closest to the field house, so Evan had a good view of the home side as he made the journey. The stands rose up the hillside like an amphitheater.

The bleachers were packed. It was a sea of blue and gold, and everyone was on their feet screaming S.C.H. Only the student and band sections were empty since those students were gathered, ready to cheer the team as they ran onto the

field. He watched as the team ran through the giant banner the cheerleaders held up for them, and the crowd went wild.

For a moment, the energy faded to an unbearable weight. This town expected a lot from him and this team. Could he do it?

And then his breath caught as he stepped onto the astroturf. Sara and Darcy stood on the edge of the crowd of students. They wore matching Sugar Creek Carvers sweatshirts and pigtails. It made Darcy look young and carefree. Sara had big gold bows in her hair. They also mimicked the eye black with thick blue lines across their cheeks, and Sara had blue and gold pompoms that she waved while she jumped up and down.

Darcy met his gaze and smiled. She gave him a thumbs up and mouthed, “You’ve got this.”

Suddenly, that weight lifted, and he could feel the positive energy again. Dang, if he didn’t want to win just for her because she believed in him. Then Sara saw him and lurched forward. Darcy grabbed her before she could run onto the field. She lifted her into her arms and whispered something in her ear.

Sara nodded and then yelled, “Go, Daddy! Fight, win!”

He waved at them and continued toward his team, waiting on the sidelines. The crowd returned to the stands, and he refocused on the game ahead. His girls were counting on him.

Not my girls. My girl. Evan swallowed as he flipped on his headset. *Focus.*



“Darcy, look at me,” Sara yelled as she jumped up and down beside the cheerleaders. She wiggled her hips and shook the pompoms she’d been given.

Darcy thought her wide eyes and huge smile were the cutest things she'd ever seen. The little girl moved her hands from side to side, trying to jump and kick her legs out simultaneously.

“Go, Sara,” Darcy clapped and waved at the energetic five-year-old.

The crowd was on its feet, cheering as well. Thirty seconds were left in the last quarter, and the Sugar Creek Carvers were down by one goal. Darcy glanced at the football field. Evan stood out from his players and assistant coaches. Or were her eyes just drawn to the giant of a man? He held one hand to his earpiece and pointed with the other while he directed his team. While she watched, the quarterback scrambled to find a receiver or a way through the mass of defensive players trying to reach him. He ran right, then spun back to the left while dropping back another five yards.

“Come on,” Darcy muttered.

He set his feet, drew back his arm, and hurled the ball down the field. There was a momentary stillness as those in the stand held their breath. The receiver caught the ball and ran. The crowd went wild. She couldn't hear the cheerleaders or Sara over the stomping feet, air horns, and screams. One of the cheerleaders picked Sara up so she could see what was happening.

Darcy hurried over and took the girl from the teen.

“Will he make it?” Sara asked.

“He might,” Darcy squeezed Sara tight for the last ten yards. The kid crossed into the end zone as the clock timed out. She jumped up and down with the girl screaming for all she was worth. Evan chose to go for the field goal to tie the game. “Looks like we're going into overtime.”

“Go, Daddy!” Sara screamed. Then she took Darcy's face in her hands and said, “I'm hungry. Can we get nachos?”

Darcy laughed and blinked away the sudden moisture that hit her eyes. The simple gesture of Sara holding her face like she had Evan's hit her hard. It filled her with such joy and

longing she didn't know what to do with it. So, she kissed the girl on the cheek, set her down, and took her by the hand.

“Nachos sound wonderful. Come on.”

They took their time climbing the stairs from the field, up the stand, and onto the ground level. The workout didn't slow Sara down. She skipped and twirled as they walked down the sidewalk toward the concession stand. Luckily, most people were too busy cheering on the team to clutter the path. Even better, the line was short.

“An order of nachos and a water bottle, please,” Darcy ordered at the counter. Sara bounced and danced. “Stay close.”

“Okay,” Sara moved to the counter and stood on her tiptoes to see over it.

The woman smiled at her as she placed the nachos down. “Here you go.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said as she picked up the paper boat and the water bottle. “Let's hurry back so we don't miss your daddy's win.”

“Darcy Fletcher?” a male voice spoke behind her.

Darcy turned to find a good-looking man smiling at her. Sara moved behind her and clung to the edge of her hoodie as she peeked at the man. His dark hair contrasted with his green eyes. Darcy knew she should know him, but his name didn't come to mind. All she could remember was he was one of Austin's friends.

“Remind me of your name?” she asked.

He held out his hand. “Dustin Birch. I should have walked you down the aisle several months ago.”

“Oh?” Darcy felt a blush rise. This man was every bit as good-looking as Evan. She couldn't help but wonder if her time at the reception would have been different had Dustin not broken his leg. “It looks like you're leg is better.”

“Yep, I got rid of the boot last week.” He pointed at the nachos in her hand. “Late dinner?”

“It’s for me,” Sara piped up from Darcy’s side.

“Well, hello there. And who might you be?” Dustin asked.

“I’m Sara, and Darcy is my bestest friend.”

“Well, aren’t you the lucky one?” Dustin winked at Darcy. “I wouldn’t mind being her friend too. Would you be willing to share her?”

Sara scrunched up her little face as she thought about it. “I guess so.”

Darcy laughed. “It was good to see you, Dustin. We’re heading back to the game.”

Sara tugged on Darcy’s arm. “I need to potty.”

“Oh.” Darcy glanced at the food in her hands.

“I can hold it for you,” Dustin offered.

“That would be great. Thanks.” Darcy handed him the nachos and water, and then she took Sara’s hand.

“You won’t eat them, will you?” Sara asked.

“Nope. I’ll stand right here and keep them safe for you.”

Satisfied with his answer, Sara let Darcy lead her into the bathroom. Once they had both washed their hands, they rejoined Dustin. Darcy took the food, and the three of them walked back to the stands.

“I hope you don’t mind if I join you?” Dustin asked. “I just got into town and saw the lights. Must be some game to go so late.”

“It’s been intense. We’re in overtime.” Darcy glanced at him.

The man was staring at her with an intensity she wasn’t used to. It was weird, in a way. It should have excited her that a handsome man wanted to follow her around, but she didn’t feel anything. Sara walked in front of them, but she wasn’t hopping anymore. It looked like her energy was finally running out.

“So, what brings you back to Sugar Creek?” she asked in an effort to move past the awkwardness she felt.

“Austin invited me out on the lake tomorrow. I’ll finally meet his wife.”

“You’ll love her. She’s great.”

They stopped talking as they made their way down the stairs. The band started the fight song, so it was too loud to hear each other anyway. Once they reached their seats on the first row, Darcy held the nachos while Sara ate a couple, then she finished them off. The whole time, Dustin chatted about all the things he’d been doing over the summer. None of it interested her, but she smiled and nodded while watching the game and half-listening.

Every time one team scored, the other pushed hard and matched it. Currently, the other team had the ball. They’d pull off the win if the Carvers could keep them from advancing. Darcy wanted to cheer for the defense, but she kept quiet as Dustin talked about the new house he was building in Burlington. Luckily, he didn’t need her to participate in the conversation because the longer he spoke, the more tired she felt.

She jumped to her feet when the other team’s quarterback threw a long pass. “Oh, no.”

The receiver caught it, spun, and ran all out for the end zone. He was too far ahead for any of the defense to reach him.

“And so it continues,” Dustin commented.

“Darcy,” Sara called for her attention. “I’m cold. And I’m sleepy. When will Daddy win so we can go home?”

Dustin raised a brow at the little girl’s words, but Darcy ignored him. Her initial curiosity had worn off in the ten minutes he’d talked non-stop.

“Come here, Sweetie.” She patted her lap. “I’ll keep you warm.”

“I’m a cutie, remember?”

Darcy laughed as the darling crawled into her lap. “Of course I do. But you can be a cutie, adorable, sweetie, and darling pumpkin all at the same time. They’re all happy ways to describe you.”

Sara giggled and rested her head on Darcy’s shoulder. “Okay.”

She then stuck her thumb in her mouth and curled her other arm between them. The moment imprinted on Darcy’s heart. This is what it would feel like when she had her own children to hold and love. The need to comfort and protect was overwhelming, as was the joy at the privilege of being trusted by such a pure and innocent soul.

Darcy rested her head on Sara’s and breathed.

The moment was interrupted by Dustin’s voice. “I think you’re cute, sweet, and adorable all at the same time.”



Evan lost sight of Darcy and Sara during the short break between the fourth quarter and the start of overtime. One minute they’d been standing on the track with the cheerleaders, and then they were gone. He liked that they’d been so close for a while. It was easier for him to glance over his shoulder and find them without losing track of the game. Now he struggled with the desire to search the crowd for them.

Maybe Darcy had decided to take Sara home? It was way past her bedtime, and the temperatures were cooling rapidly. Leaving would be the intelligent thing to do. However, he discovered he’d set his heart on seeing Sara after the game. If they left, his little girl would be asleep when he got home.

Evan refocused as his team took the field. They had won the coin toss, and he chose offense. He wanted to get that next goal in quickly and make the other team fight for every yard to match it.

The next ten minutes stretched for an eternity as he got lost in the game. His team worked hard and gained entry to the end zone, but the other team pushed just as hard and matched it. All the players were getting tired from the back and forth, offense and defense, but the win was so close. The crowd's energy was contagious, and it sustained his team until they finally managed to shut the visitors down on a fourth and goal play.

As soon as his team congratulated the others for a good game, the entire student body ran screaming and yelling onto the field. The band played the fight song repeatedly as the team jumped around, high-fiving each other and hugging. It was the joyful chaos of victory every player and coach lived for. He looked over the heads of the kids in search of Darcy and Sara, but he didn't see them. A glance at the stands revealed them on the first row. Darcy held Sara in her arms, and he figured his daughter was sleeping by her stillness. The woman holding her smiled down at him until the guy beside her touched her arm.

"Coach, we did it," Benton, his quarterback, stood beside him. "That was the hardest game I've ever played, but the team worked just as well as you said we would. Thanks for believing in us."

"All of you should be proud. Now get out there and get the cheer going." Evan pasted a smile on his face and nodded to the team celebrating with their peers.

He listened to their victory cry while keeping an eye on the bleachers from the corner of his eye. The guy stayed close to Darcy. She looked comfortable. She smiled and nodded the whole time while keeping Sara snuggled close. A barrage of emotions warred inside him, none he felt qualified to handle at the moment and none he had a right to give in to.

Evan turned away and joined his team. They all took a knee, and a local pastor gave a prayer of thanks. He refused to look to the stands and followed the boys to the field house.

Ten more minutes. He needed to concentrate for ten more minutes while he gave the pep talk and praised his boys for

their hard work. Then he could head home and write his notes on the game while they were fresh. There wouldn't be time to wonder who had claimed Darcy's attention or how long he'd been sitting with her. It wasn't any of his business anyway.

When he left the field house, he was surprised to find Darcy leaning against his SUV. Sara was asleep on her shoulder, and the guy was still talking to her. The man leaned in and kissed her cheek as Evan approached.

"Great game Coach Porter," the man said as he raised a hand in greeting or farewell. "See you tomorrow, Darcy." Then he jogged away.

Evan tried to keep his cool, but his question slipped out. "What was that all about?"

Darcy sighed and slumped even more against his vehicle. Sara was probably getting heavy. As much as he didn't want a stranger holding his daughter, he wondered why the man hadn't offered to help Darcy.

"My mom is what that was all about. I'm sure of it." She shook her head. "Can you open the door? My arms are killing me."

"Sure." He unlocked the doors and carefully shifted Sara from her arms to his. It brought them too close for his tired nerves to cope with. Darcy was warm, soft, and her floral scent made him wish for things he shouldn't. He cleared his throat and stepped away. "Why don't you open the door."

Was she blushing?

"Yeah." She opened it and moved back several feet while he buckled Sara into the car seat. "Well, guess I'll see you Monday."

"Darcy, wait." Evan shut the door gently and faced her. She wasn't smiling, and she twisted her hands as if unsure of herself. Unfortunately, all the things he wanted to ask, to say, were off the table. His mind couldn't focus on anything else. Finally, he found a safe topic. "How was she today?"

Darcy relaxed. It always surprised him how she softened when talking about his daughter. Part of him wanted her to

react to him the same way. He shut those thoughts down, but that was getting harder every day.

“She had a great day. Coming to the game was the highlight of her week. She’ll be sad she missed getting to party with the winners.”

“Thank you for bringing her.” He shoved his hands into his pocket. “Did you have a good time meeting up with old friends?”

She sighed. “Sadly, no. All my friends are away at college.”

“Oh, I thought,” he pointed in the direction the guy had gone, “he was a friend.”

Darcy shook her head. “Never met him before tonight. Guess he went to school with Austin. You took his place at the wedding.”

“He seemed...talkative.” Among other things.

“Yeah. Ug, my mom is going to pay for this one.” She slapped the side of her leg with one hand.

“What do you mean?”

“She made me promise to go out with the next guy that asked me. Why can’t she understand I’m not seeking a relationship right now?” Darcy shook her head, and Evan thought her eyes looked sad under the parking lot’s lights.

“Why’s that?” Had she been hurt as well? Evan leaned against his car.

She shrugged. “I need to figure out what I want first. It would be awful to find a guy that makes me happy and then lose him because career goals pull me in a different direction. I want something lasting.”

He nodded. That’s what he wanted as well. At least Darcy recognized that and was willing to wait for it. He wished he had done that instead of marrying Jenna before they graduated from college. But if he’d waited, he wouldn’t have Sara now.

With a sigh, Darcy waved in the air and said, “Now I have to suffer through dinner tomorrow. At least he suggested we double with his cousin Julie.” She tilted her head and studied him. “Would you come with us?”

His heart sank. Even though he tried to convince himself that he couldn't, shouldn't, and didn't want anything with Darcy, the fact she was trying to set him up with another woman struck a hard blow.

“I promised Sara the weekend was hers.” It wasn't an out-and-out lie, and he knew if Darcy had asked him to be there for her in a different way, he would have figured something out.

“You're such a good dad. She's lucky, you know?” Darcy took a step or two back. “You need the time together. I'll figure it out. Oh, maybe Brandon would go. He doesn't do anything on the weekends but work on the house.”

She took another step backward but hadn't turned from him yet. Evan wished he could make her stay, but it was late, and Sara was asleep in the car. He had to let her slip away.

“I guess I'll see you on Monday?” he asked.

“Of course. Bye, Evan.” Her voice changed when she said his name, or maybe he only heard it differently. “Congrats on the game.”

And then she was hurrying across the lot to where her car was parked under one of the lights. Evan watched until she was safely inside and pulling away before he got in his car to go home.

Dating Disaster



Evan had spent most of the day driving through the mountains with Sara. They enjoyed seeing the hills and glimpses of the Sugar Creek River. Sara especially loved the covered bridges. By the time they headed back to the town, they were both hungry.

“Shall we get something to eat before we go home?” he asked his daughter.

“Yes,” she squealed.

Evan took the first parking spot he could find and helped Sara from the car. There were a few restaurants close to the square, but none of them called to him.

“Daddy, look.” Sara pointed toward the square. “It’s Ms. Ruth. Can I say hi?”

“Sure. Maybe she’ll have a suggestion for dinner.”

Evan picked Sara up as they crossed the road. Four Sugar Mamas were gathered near the fountain in the middle of the square.

“Ms. Ruth,” Sara called out.

All the women turned in their direction and smiled. Ms. Ruth spoke for all of them, “If it isn’t our football coach and his favorite assistant coach.”

“Nope,” Sara pouted. “I’m a princess. See my dress.” She fluffed the edge of her skirt so they could see it better.

“That you are,” Sharon agreed. Evan didn’t know her very well, but he liked her because she brought back Sara’s smile. “What are you two up to tonight?”

“We’re hungry,” Sara said.

“Any suggestions of great daddy-daughter date night food?” Evan asked.

The women shared a look of pure glee. Evan decided he didn’t want to know what was behind it. He took a step back, but Ruth grabbed his arm.

“Have you been to Vincenzo’s? They have the best pizza in town,” she said.

“I want pizza, Daddy,” Sara bounced in his arms. “Don’t you want pizza?”

“If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll get.” Evan smiled at the Sugar Mamas. “Thanks for the suggestion. Have a nice night.”

He waved and headed back to the car. As he left, he heard all four women laughing. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, but he couldn’t figure out why.



Darcy sighed as she changed her top again. She hadn’t bothered going to her parent’s house to access all of her clothes, so the options were limited at the tiny house. Now she wished she had. Everything looked like she was trying to impress her date, but that wasn’t what she wanted. By the time he left her with Evan after the game, Dustin had become the last guy she wanted to spend time with. He was an attention hog who couldn’t read the unspoken cues she tried to give him. Worse, he ignored Sara, making it hard for her to keep the little girl happy. Luckily, as soon as she’d eaten, Sara was so tired she’d fallen asleep in Darcy’s lap.

Even now, Darcy remembered how amazing it felt holding the child close. She'd been warm inside and out with the experience. Most of the time, she tuned Dustin out, breathed in the little girl, and focused on the sensations the act brought out in her. Darcy could honestly say she loved Sara with all of her heart. It wasn't the surface affection for a sweet child. No, it went deeper. When the girl was happy, Darcy felt that in her soul, and she knew she would hurt when Sara hurt.

By the time she carried the girl to Evan's car, Darcy had thought her arms would fall off, but Dustin didn't consider that as he stood talking non-stop about his latest trip to California. He hadn't offered to help in any way. She'd been so relieved to see Evan marching across the lot to them that she had almost cried. Dustin left, and Evan took Sara from her arms. It was an immediate relief that was accompanied by a sense of loss.

After they placed Sara in the car, Darcy hadn't wanted to leave. Evan was different from Dustin. He asked questions about her instead of raving about his win. It made her feel seen and important.

"Ug!" She threw another blouse across the room and grabbed a t-shirt to pair with her jeans. "I'm not getting dressed up for a date I don't want to be on."

She was pulling her shoes on when light filtered through her curtains. Grabbing her purse, she locked up and joined her brother outside. She slid into his car and buckled up for the short ride to the restaurant.

"I was afraid you wouldn't show," she said as she studied her brother. He was as tall as Austin, around six-four, but he wasn't as broad across the shoulders. That was probably because he sat inside an office as opposed to Austin working outside across a variety of outdoor sports. His jawline wasn't as square as Austin's, but they both had the signature Fletcher baby blues.

Brandon tried to smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Between you and Mom pushing me to get out, I didn't think I had a choice. Just know, I'd rather be working on the house."

“Yeah, this isn’t my idea of a great night either.” She glanced out the window as he backed out of her drive.

“Then why are we doing it?” he asked.

“Mom.” That’s all she said, and it appeared to be enough because he didn’t say anything else until they hit the main road.

“So, you know anything about this other woman?” he asked.

“Not really, she’s Dustin’s cousin, but I don’t know him. You’d be better off asking Austin.”

“Mom is going to owe us both one.”

“She means well. I think she’s so excited about the baby that—” Darcy sucked in a breath and grabbed Brandon’s arm. “I didn’t say that. You didn’t hear anything. Got it?”

“Jackie’s pregnant?” A genuine smile graced his face for the first time that night. “Why hasn’t Austin said anything?”

“He doesn’t know yet. Jackie wants to tell him in a fun way, so you can’t say anything to anyone. I found out by accident.”

“I’m happy for them. Let me know if I can help with the surprise.” The joy left his face as they pulled into Vincenzo’s parking lot.

The family-friendly Italian restaurant boasted some of the best pizza Darcy had ever had, along with the usual fare of lasagne, chicken parmesan, and Alfredo. If she were serious about dating a guy, she’d prefer something more intimate, but this was perfect for the non-date date she’d been compelled to accept.

She sighed and opened her door. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

They entered the restaurant, and Dustin spotted them immediately. He waved them over to a table where he sat with a pretty blonde woman. Darcy was relieved they were seated in the main section of the place instead of the more intimate setting in the room usually set aside for couples. There were

plenty of families around to be a distraction if needed. The woman with Dustin had a friendly smile, and Darcy hoped Brandon would end up luckier than her. Perhaps he could find someone to help him forget about Summer.

Dustin didn't stand when they arrived at the table, but he indicated the woman and said, "This is my cousin Julie. She's visiting from Shelburne."

Brandon sat beside her. "Shelburne is beautiful. I drove through many times while I lived in Burlington."

"It is a wonderful place, but it's so small that even Sugar Creek feels like a big city." She studied Brandon and must have liked what she saw because she inched closer and reached to touch his arm. "Maybe you can show me around sometime?"

Her brother got a deer-in-the-headlights look but answered, "Sure."

The next twenty minutes passed easily enough. With Julie and Brandon there to break up his constant talking, Dustin wasn't as bad as Darcy had initially feared. He was a nice guy, but she felt no spark drawing her to him. She was glad that Brandon had relaxed and looked like he was enjoying Julie's company.

As the server delivered their food, Evan and Sara walked out of the side dining room. She wore one of her dresses as if she were on a date. For his part, Evan looked amazing in dark jeans and a soft gray button-up. Darcy knew it would highlight his amazing eyes. She clasped her hands in her lap to keep from waving to get their attention, but she followed their progress with her eyes. She might not feel drawn to the man beside her, but the one across the restaurant held her attention anytime he was around.

"Darcy!" Sara saw her, squealed, and took off running.

Darcy scooted back from the table to catch Sara as she jumped into her lap. "Hey, Cutie pie. Did you have a date with your dad?"

“Yep. We got pizza. Why didn’t you come with us?” Sara did her thing where she took someone’s face in her hands so she could look into their eyes. “I missed you. You didn’t say goodbye.”

Darcy bopped her nose. “You were asleep.”

Sara tilted her head as she thought about that. “Okay. Next time you come get pizza with us.”

“Sara, Darcy has other things to do besides hang out with us.” Evan stood with his arms crossed, almost glaring down at them.

He hadn’t worn his disapproving face once in the two weeks Darcy had worked for him. Why was he wearing it now? Darcy sat up straighter and hugged Sara closer. She wanted to ask the man how she had offended him this time, but three sets of eyes were watching. Dustin also frowned.

Darcy struggled to stand with Sara in her arms, and Evan reached out to take Sara so she could do it easier. Their gazes locked, and Darcy blushed when she realized how close they were standing. Everything about the man filled her with energy. He was larger-than-life, full of warmth, and the way he doted on his daughter was so attractive that she didn’t have a chance. What had she wanted to say?

“Um, can we talk for a minute?” she asked, hoping her head would clear enough for her to think.

“You’re busy. It can wait until Monday.” Evan dismissed her as he took a step back.

“Sure.” Her brow wrinkled.

It didn’t feel like something that could wait, but Darcy knew he was right. A day of not being together would help them put whatever brewed between them back in the box. He was her boss. She wouldn’t be staying. There was too much to lose if they admitted to their feelings and it didn’t work out.

“Have a seat, Darcy,” Dustin lowered his voice as if he didn’t want anyone else to hear. “You’re causing a scene.”

“What?” She glanced around the room and saw several people watching as they ate. That didn’t bother her, but the strange look Dustin shot at her did. How was it a scene to hand Sara to her father? And what right did Dustin have to tell her what to do?

Dustin winked and said, “Everyone’s watching.”

“So? It’s a small town. That’s life. I’m not doing anything crazy. Just talking to a friend.” Then a delightfully spiteful idea took over. She turned to Evan, who now had a spark of humor in his eye, and moved in to hug him.

Sara was squished and giggling between them, but Darcy was incredibly aware of Evan’s arms, shoulders, and back muscles as her hands slid over them. And then he shifted. Sara wrapped one arm around her dad’s neck and the other around Darcy. Evan’s warm hand moved to Darcy’s waist, pulling her closer. She caught her breath, scared to breathe and break the tension.

Evan gazed into her eyes with his intense hazel ones. His face was covered in stubble, and she wanted to reach out and trace along his jaw with her fingers. The spell was broken as Sara leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Darcy blinked and turned to Sara. After kissing her on the nose, she said, “Goodnight, cutie.”

Then she let go and stepped away. As she did so, her attention was drawn over Evan’s shoulder at the door, and her eyes widened. She knew the woman that entered at a glance even though she hadn’t seen her in years. Her dark hair was pulled back in a low bun. She wore a simple t-shirt and jeans, but the freckles across her nose were a dead giveaway. Summer Blakely was in Sugar Creek.

“Oh snap,” Darcy mumbled, jerking her head toward her brother.

“Brandon?” Summer crossed to their table in a few steps.

Brandon jumped up from his chair. Darcy might not have been making a scene initially, but this was sure to become one. “Summer? When...are you staying?”

Darcy hurt for him. The desperation and hope were evident on his face. But so was the complete absence of expression on Summer's. The woman glanced at Julie and then at Brandon. There had been the barest flicker of hurt before she shrugged.

"I'm home for the weekend. It's my mom's birthday," she said.

"See you Monday," Evan whispered close to her ear.

Darcy shivered and wished she could go with him as he slipped away. Instead, she was stuck watching the standoff happening in front of her. Summer stood impassively, but Julie's brow scrunched as she watched the interaction, and her lips twisted in thought. Dustin was watching everything like it was the best show in town, which flew in the face of why he'd fussed at her. What was his deal?

Brandon had this expression of complete hope and admiration as he stepped closer to Summer. "Why haven't you answered my texts or emails?"

He raised a hand as if he wanted to touch Summer, but he dropped it when she glanced at it. That one look killed his hope.

"I changed my phone and have a new email. I told you it was best if we didn't keep in touch." Summer's eyes flickered to Julie again. "Looks like you took that to heart."

"No." Brandon took Summer's elbow and pleaded with his eyes. "I haven't. Can we talk? Tell me why you've shut me out."

"Brandon, you're better off without me." Emotion finally flooded Summer's face. It was filled with such hurt and loss that Darcy's knees almost buckled. Summer pulled away from Brandon. "Go back to your friends."

She spun and practically ran. Brandon stood for a moment, stunned into silence, then took off after her. Darcy wanted to yell some encouragement, but she had no idea what was happening or what his chances might be. She sank into her chair and groaned when the other two looked to her for explanations.

“Is he dating her?” Julie asked. She sounded a bit miffed.

“Not since high school,” Darcy answered.

“What was that?” Dustin asked.

“What did it look like? Brandon hasn’t seen Summer in years. All things considered, it could have been worse.”

“No, you hugging that guy.”

Darcy threw her arms up in exasperation. “Oh, grow up.”

Then she, too, left the restaurant. One thing was clear. She either wasn’t ready to date, or she’d fallen harder for Evan than she thought possible.



Evan wanted to stay with Darcy. The surprise on her face when Summer arrived made him wish to hold her hand in comfort. He wanted to stand beside her and lend whatever strength she needed. However, Sara didn’t need to see any arguments. He wasn’t sure what the deal was, but Brandon was on a date with one woman, but the look on his face clearly said he was in love with the other. Not the place for a five-year-old.

But that hug.

He was reeling. When he first saw her at the table with the guy from the game, he’d felt the same wave of anger from the night before. Evan had to admit it was jealousy. Why couldn’t he be the one sitting with Darcy and having an evening out? Then Sara ran to the woman he couldn’t stop thinking about, and things grew even more complicated.

Every time he saw Darcy with Sara, his resolve to stay away from her weakened even more. His daughter’s light head next to Darcy’s dark one was as different as possible, but it felt right to have them together. Those thoughts had become more

frequent, and he'd barely been able to keep himself out of the equation. The hug shattered that.

He knew she was going to do it moments before it happened. Her date had made a massive mistake in telling Darcy what to do. Evan watched as her spine straightened, and she got that look of defiance in her eyes. He couldn't help but chuckle inside at her fierce independence and 'I'll show you' attitude.

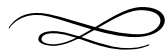
Evan thought her hug would feel stiff and angry because she was making a point. However, she'd been warm, soft, and yielding as he shifted her and Sara into a more comfortable position. He felt her intake of breath beneath his fingers and knew she'd held it as she stared into his eyes. She was so close he noted the shades of blue in her eyes and the scent of her floral perfume.

Holding his daughter and Darcy felt overwhelmingly like holding a family. It was a new sensation he would crave from that moment on. He probably would have stayed that way forever if Sara hadn't moved to kiss Darcy's flushed cheek. The moment was broken. Darcy breathed and moved away.

Then everything fell apart. He said goodbye, leaning in to savor her closeness before retreating.

Now, he had one day to figure out what he wanted to happen on Monday.

Dinner for Three



Darcy usually picked Sara up from school and took her home or to the park to play with friends. Twice now, they'd been out to the tree farm to play with Phyl, and once the little girl had come to the Porter's house. Monday should have been a 'go-straight-home' day since it was raining and nothing was planned, but Darcy was nervous about being there. She knew it was silly, but there it was.

She hadn't talked to anyone since the date Saturday night. She knew Brandon hid at home Sunday, and she couldn't face all the questions her mom would have, so she did the same. Eventually, she'd have to tell her mom how the date had gone from her perspective, but not soon if she could help it.

The lake view from her tiny house helped calm her over the weekend, but that didn't mean she had figured out what was happening between her and Evan or what she wanted. Okay, not technically accurate. She knew exactly what she wanted but also knew it wasn't smart. The reasons why it couldn't, shouldn't, or wouldn't happen had her tied in knots. Every excuse she came up with could be explained away.

Evan is grumpy and mean. Her original reason was no longer valid. She'd caught glimpses of how loving he was by watching him with Sara. His grumpiness seemed to be more about worry than anything else.

He's my boss—only for the football season.

I'll go back to Boston for school, and he'll be in Sugar Creek—she could take online classes, and even if not, two

hours wasn't that far until she graduated.

The biggest question was whether Evan liked her enough to try a long-distance relationship. Darcy wouldn't know the answer until she talked to him, which made her anxious. What if she asked, and he didn't like her at all? What if that made things awkward, and he found someone else to watch Sara? That's what would happen with her luck. She was finally happy, so it was time for the April Fool to get knocked down.

Darcy shook her head. *Not this time.*

"Do you want to see my dollhouse?" she asked Sara.

"You have one?"

"Yep. I live in it."

"Yes!" Sara bounced enthusiastically in her booster seat.

Darcy laughed and headed to Cabins by the Bay. She would focus on Sara and stop thinking about her confusion. Sara's gaze stayed glued to the windows as they drove through the winding road past the other cabins.

The rain dimpled the surface of the lake. The sky was heavy with clouds, and the trees made the trip even darker. And then they came to her clearing. The tiny house had a strand of a hundred white solar-powered lights strung around it that came on at night. There had been enough sun earlier in the day that they were lit up, making the house look cheery and welcoming.

"Is that it?" Sara asked as they pulled into the drive.

"What do you think?"

"I love it! Can we go inside?"

"Of course. I think I have the stuff to make brownies. Should we do that? They can be your dessert tonight."

Sara cheered, and Darcy pulled out her umbrella. Give me a minute, and I'll come to your door. She still got wet trying to get out of the car and open the umbrella. Typically, Darcy would have just run to the door as fast as she could and not bother with the umbrella, but she didn't want Sara to get cold

and wet. Once inside, the little girl touched almost everything she could see as she exclaimed over it. It didn't take long.

"Is blue your favorite color?" Sara asked as she bounced on the couch that opened to a bed.

"One of them. I like all the colors, but I think yellow is my favorite. It's happy."

"You don't have any in your dollhouse."

"No. My dad built this house for me, and then my mom decorated it."

"Why?"

Darcy shrugged and pulled out ingredients for brownies. "I needed somewhere to live. My dad thinks all his girls are princesses and didn't want me wasting money on an apartment in town."

"You're a princess?" Sara got wide-eyed.

"So are you." Darcy laughed and pushed the blobby ottoman close to the small counter. Somehow, she didn't think Evan would approve of it as a stool for his daughter, but it was the best she had. "Come on. Let's get this cooking, and then we can play a game until time to go to your house."

The afternoon passed pleasantly. After mixing the brownies, they played go-fish, read a story on Darcy's phone about pirates and mermaids, and then made up a fairytale of their own. As the rain filled the background with white noise, Sara told a story about a princess trapped on an island in the middle of a lake. It constantly rained, and the water was filled with monsters. The princess was so lonely, but one day a king braved the water and fought all the monsters to get to her.

Sara continued, "He took her to his castle, and they became best friends who cared for everyone in the kingdom. The end."

"Sara, that was one of the best stories I've ever heard. Maybe you'll be a writer when you grow up." Darcy hugged her close and glanced at the clock. "We should head back so we have time to make dinner before your dad gets home."

“Daddy says I’m a princess. That means he’s a king but doesn’t have a queen. Would you be his queen? Then you wouldn’t be lonely in your dollhouse.” Sara’s words slammed into Darcy.

“Oh, cutie pie. Your dad...I...” She hugged the girl and wished she knew the right thing to say. “It’s not always as easy as a story. I’m not lonely here because most of the time I’m with you. We’ll always be friends.”

“Does daddy have friends?” she asked as Darcy put her jacket back on.

“Of course. He’s friends with my brother, Austin. And he has people at the school.”

“And his team.” Sara brightened.

“He sure does.” The rain had switched to a fine mist, so Darcy left the umbrella by the door. “But if we don’t hurry, he won’t have dinner.”



Football practice was excellent. The guys were still pumped after a two-win streak and worked extra hard even though it rained on them the whole time. They were melding as a team with the position changes. Best of all, they had stopped teasing Evan about Darcy. He still heard comments here and there between them, but they had returned to respecting him as their coach and not another teammate. It helped him focus on them until he was in his vehicle heading home. There was something about knowing she was cooking with his daughter in his kitchen.

That’s precisely where he found them when he walked through the door. Sara already had her pajamas on under the apron Darcy had bought just for her. The fabric was a soft pink with deep purple ruffles and white daisies. It matched the one Darcy wore. The woman looked like she’d been caught in the

rain or half-drowned by his daughter during bath time. Her hair was damp, as were her sleeves and the bottom of her jeans. He cleared his throat to let them know he was home.

Sara squealed, “Hi, Daddy!”

Then she held out her arms instead of running at him. He obliged her by dropping his jacket on the back of a chair and crossing the kitchen to lift her into his arms.

“How was your day?” he asked, trying not to stare at the beautiful woman at his stove.

“Great. JD got in trouble because he broke all the crayons. Phyl gave me a flower from her garden, and then Darcy showed me her dollhouse by the lake.”

“She did, did she?” He met Darcy’s gaze and couldn’t help but smile. “And where is this dollhouse?”

Her lips quirked a bit as she moved to pull a dish out of the oven. “It’s a tiny house by my family’s cabin rentals.”

“Her dad made it for her because she’s a princess like me,” Sara piped up. “Daddy, don’t princesses turn into queens when they get married?”

The room grew warm, and Evan didn’t know what to say. Darcy blushed as she busied herself with the rest of the dinner preparations. Sara grabbed his face and pulled his attention back to her.

“Daddy?”

“Um, it depends. I don’t know a lot about royalty stuff.”

“You needs a queen. I choosed Darcy.”

“Dinner’s ready,” Darcy squeaked. She set the dish on the table and spun for the door.

Evan didn’t bother to correct his daughter’s grammar. She’d been doing so much better since Darcy started watching her, and he knew she talked that way when she was upset or anxious. Instead, he plopped her in her chair at the table and hurried after Darcy, who had to stop to shove her feet in her boots.

“Darcy, wait,” he said as he took her gently by the elbow.

She stopped and turned to him, her face stricken with emotion he couldn't figure out. “I didn't...”

“Stay for dinner?” he interrupted, and she went completely still as she gazed up at him. “Please.”

Darcy blinked, and some of the tension left her body. Then she swallowed and nodded her head yes.

Evan decided to press his luck a little further. “Can we talk after Sara goes to bed?”

A little shiver ran through Darcy. He only felt it because his hand still rested on her arm. She never looked away from him as she answered.

“I'd like that.”

“Yay,” Sara yelled and clapped her hands. She was standing in her chair, so Evan pointed at her and said her name. The little girl obediently sat down. “Darcy, sit by me.”

The woman hadn't moved, and he hadn't let go of her. She glanced at him now with a question in her eyes. He was unsure if she sought permission to sit by his daughter or if the inquiry went deeper. Reluctantly, he squeezed her elbow and let her go with a nod.

Her eyes sparkled, and her lips went from a frown to the tiniest of smiles. She was unsure of herself, which boggled his mind. How could this beautiful woman not know how amazing she was?

She took off the one boot she'd managed to get on and set it beside the other one by the door. Halfway to the table, Darcy shifted toward the kitchen. “We'll need another plate.”

“I'll get it. Go ahead and have a seat.” Evan grabbed another place setting, then sat on Sara's other side. From there, he could watch Darcy's face as she interacted with his daughter.

Dinner was the most lively and enjoyable event that it had ever been. He laughed like he hadn't in a long time as Sara recounted everything the kid JD did and all that Phyl said.

Afterward, Darcy offered to do the dishes while he read Sara a bedtime story. Eventually, they sat on his couch, staring at each other.

“So,” he started. “Saturday night, you asked if we could talk.”

She fingered the edge of the sage green pillow in her lap. “I forgot what I wanted to say.”

“Oh?” He shifted closer to her. “Can I ask you a question?”

She nodded, and he stretched his arm across the top of the couch to rest his fingers close to her shoulder. He wanted to touch her but didn’t yet dare to.

“How did your date go?”

Darcy blushed, glanced down at her hands, and finally met his gaze. “It was a complete disaster but also a good thing.”

Evan struggled to shut down his imagination. Had the guy kissed her at the end? Was that the good part? He had to know one way or the other. “Why’s that?”

“Because it became clear who I wanted to spend time with.”

“Darcy,” he breathed her name along with his silent prayer that she had felt something during their hug like he had. “You need to spell it out for me so there are no misunderstandings.”

Her blush deepened, but she moved a couple of inches closer to him this time. “Let’s just say I only had one goodbye hug that night. And I can’t stop thinking about it.”

He trailed his fingers down her cheek and the side of her neck. “Me either.”

“Evan, I don’t want to mess this up, and I mess everything up.”

Her eyes implored him with such concern. He took her face in both hands, willing her to see all the good she had brought into his and Sara’s life without even trying.

“You need to believe in yourself more,” he murmured as he leaned forward.

Her eyes fluttered shut as she met him halfway. He meant to keep the kiss light, more of a question than anything else. However, the moment they touched, she melted into him. Her hands slid up his chest, over his shoulders, and clasped behind his neck. He felt the fire. One quick tug and she was pressed against him as he tilted her head to deepen the kiss. She clung to him as he shifted to trailing kisses along her neck, catching her breath when he found a sensitive spot near her collarbone. The sound drew his lips back to hers.

He didn't know how long they kissed, but eventually, Darcy's voice pulled him to reality.

“Evan,” she gasped his name into his mouth. “We have to stop.”

“I know.” He rested his forehead on hers as they both tried to catch their breath. “Can I take you out Saturday?”

Darcy smiled up at him. “That would be wonderful.”

Movies in the Park



Teenie couldn't contain her grin. Things had gone better than planned last weekend. At least so far as Darcy was concerned. Dustin had been more than willing to play his part in their little charade. He thought it fun to set two people up by jealousy. Plus, he had genuinely thought his cousin Julie would like Brandon. Teenie sighed. That part had been a colossal mess, but she wouldn't give up. She'd concentrate on one thing at a time, and right now, that was Darcy and Evan.

As soon as the Sugar Mamas heard he needed a babysitter so he could go out the following Saturday, she jumped at the chance. It made for some funny conversations with her daughter, but once she explained that it made sense for Evan to drop Sara off at the same time he picked Darcy up, they moved on.

"It's not that cold yet," Teenie chided and pulled the light-weight blue dress out of the pile on the bed. She knew it was one of Darcy's favorites. "This has long sleeves and looks so nice on you."

Tiny white flowers dotted the blue fabric that brought out Darcy's eyes. The v-neck wasn't too deep, and the cinched waist highlighted her daughter's figure. The sleeves spread out in a bell past the elbow with lacy edging. Its flirty skirt hit a couple of inches above the knee.

"You can pair it with your tall boots," Teenie continued.

Darcy held it up to the mirror. “This one always makes me feel pretty.”

“Put it on and finish getting ready. I’ll head downstairs in case he’s early.”

Teenie stepped into the hall and did a victory dance. There was no way Evan Porter could resist Darcy in that dress. She hurried downstairs to wait for his arrival. He knocked on the door ten minutes later.

“Good evening, Coach Porter,” she greeted him and then his daughter. “And there’s that cutie pie. Come in.”

“Please, call me Evan.”

“I remember you,” Sara piped up.

“We’re going to have a lot of fun tonight.” Teenie led them into the living room. She had Evan sit where he had a clear view of the stairs so she could see his expression when Darcy appeared. “Darcy is almost ready.”

“I’m coming,” Darcy’s voice preceded her moments before she appeared.

Sure enough, Evan’s gaze fixed on her daughter as if some inexplicable force drew him. Teenie almost squealed at the raw appreciation in his eyes. She did clasp her hands together and sighed. The dress was perfection. It made Darcy look sweetly flirty and sinfully daring at the same time.

“Darcy.” Sara jumped and ran to her. “You look bootiful.”

Darcy knelt to hug the girl and said, “Beautiful. And thank you.”

Evan finally showed signs of life. He stood and approached Darcy with such intensity that Teenie wondered if he’d pull her into his arms and kiss her right there. She was a little disappointed when he didn’t.

“Sara’s right. You look gorgeous.” He spoke low, but the sound carried to Teenie just the same.

Darcy’s brow quirked up, and she smirked at the man. “What, didn’t think I’d clean up this good?”

“On the contrary. I was afraid of exactly this.” He reached out and fingered a lock of hair. Darcy had left the soft curls down.

“Well, you two go have fun,” Teenie said as she handed Darcy her jean jacket. “Sara, want to help me bake some cookies?”

“Yes,” the girl screamed. She was full of energy and excitement tonight.

They sent Darcy and Evan out the door before heading to the kitchen. Teenie had already pulled out all the equipment and ingredients she needed to make her famous caramel cookies.

“Darcy says you’re a big helper with dinner every night,” Teenie said as she pushed a stool over to the counter.

“I love cooking with Darcy.” The little girl tapped a spoon on the side of the bowl, and then she stopped to stare at Teenie as if surprised by something. “I love Darcy. I want her to be my mommy, but Daddy says they didn’t get married at the wedding. How do I fix that?”

Teenie laughed out loud and hugged the sweet child. “We work together.”

“Two of my friends at school got new moms for Christmas. They said they wished for them. Santa and snowflakes. But I don’t have those. What can I wish on?”

“How about the first star you see at night?”

Sara nodded. “I’ll do it.”

“I’ll make some wishes, too.”



Evan knew he was in trouble the moment he laid eyes on Darcy. He had felt the attraction before, but now that she

was all dressed up for him, it tripled in its force. She'd left her hair down instead of putting it in the messy bun or ponytail he'd grown used to. It looked silky in the living room light, and the curls framed her face, making him want to reach out and touch their softness.

Darcy had spent more time on her makeup as well. She usually only wore eyeliner and lip gloss, but tonight she added some smokey shadow that drew his gaze to her eyes even more than usual. And her lips. They were a soft kissable pink. It had taken all his willpower to stop from kissing her at the bottom of the stairs with her mom and his daughter watching.

He did get lost gazing into her eyes. They were blue, but for the first time, he was close enough to notice light and dark striations throughout. How had he missed them when he kissed her before?

All these thoughts ran through his mind as they silently walked to his SUV. The tension between them was off the charts in a good way. This whole thing could be the worst or best idea he'd ever had.

"What are we doing?" Darcy asked as he slid into the driver's side.

"I thought we'd listen to the band and then watch the movie in the park. Is that okay?"

"That sounds wonderful. I love movies in the park but haven't been able to go the last couple of years." She shifted in her seat so she could look at him more easily. "What are they playing?"

"You know, I don't even know. I should probably look up the schedule in case there's something Sara would enjoy." He headed for Sugar Creek Park, just south of the square. It was the same park he knew Darcy took Sara to after school sometime. There was a great playground and a large open area where people could place blankets or chairs for events like the Sugar Creek Band and movie nights.

"She would love going to a movie at the park. They usually have them until the end of October." Darcy looked out

the window before her following words. “I can’t believe how fast time is moving. It’s halfway through September already.”

“I know.” Evan glanced at her before refocusing on the road. He’d hired her precisely one month ago. How had he ended up on a date with her so fast?

“Can you believe it’s only been a month since you hired me?” she asked.

Evan laughed. “I was just thinking something similar.”

“Oh?”

He pulled into the parking lot that was full to bursting. The muffled sound of music made its way into the vehicle’s interior. It gave him the perfect reason not to answer her unasked question.

“Wow, looks like we’ll have to find a stretch of grass to park on like half these people.” They passed the line of food trucks that had relocated for the night. Evan had to go several car lengths back down the road before finding an opening. “Will you be okay walking this far in those shoes?”

Darcy looked at her boots, then at him. “Of course. They might be pretty, but they’re also very comfortable. Let’s go.”

She reached for the door, and he touched her elbow.

“Wait, let me get it, please.”

Darcy smiled at him, and his heart leaped toward her.

“So this is what I’ve been missing dating guys my age?” she asked.

And his heart dropped back into his chest.

“Maybe?” he mumbled as he got out and walked around to open her door. Even though he’d worried about the age difference, he never considered that she might also have concerns about it. That brought up more emotions to tangle with those he hadn’t figured out yet.

“Evan, did I say something wrong?” She stood at the door, watching his face intently. Her brow wrinkled, and her smile had fallen away.

“No. Why would you think that?” He grabbed the blankets from the back seat to keep from meeting her gaze, but she was waiting when he closed the door.

“Is this a good idea?” she asked.

Evan sighed and ran a hand through his hair while clutching the blankets to his chest. “I don’t know. Come on, let’s find a seat, and we can talk about it.”

“Okay.”

They walked down the road toward the music. The evening was pleasant, with the slightest of breezes sighing through the trees. Evan wondered how much longer until all the leaves burst into color. They didn’t talk, but their shoulders brushed every once in a while.

Despite the questions in his mind, Evan liked having Darcy walk beside him, even if her shoulders had tensed and she was concentrating on looking straight ahead as if her life depended on it. Her light perfume drifted to him on the breeze and made him feel content for the first time in a long time. He shifted the blankets again to free up the hand closest to her, then stretched his fingers to touch hers.

Warmth shot through his arm, and Darcy’s gaze darted to his face. Her eyes held surprise and reflected all the same questions he had. And then her whole body softened the way it did when she talked to Sara. She smiled and threaded her fingers with his. He was so lost. How often had he wished for her to react to him as she did his daughter?

“Was it the age comment?” she asked.

He nodded.

“That was a joke. You have to know that, right?”

Evan sighed. “I know, but I’ve been worried about our age difference since I met you.”

“So, I’m old enough to watch your daughter but not to date?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

They reached the park. People were spread out all over the field. Kids played on the playground, laughing and yelling. A band of about fifteen people played on the temporary stage in front of the movie screen. Their ages ranged from teens to the white-haired generation.

Evan pointed to an open space and said, "Let's grab that spot, and I'll try to explain."

They hurried to a place in the middle of the crowd and a bit to the right of the screen. People with chairs had claimed the back and sides of the field, leaving the center for the blankets.

Darcy greeted many in the community as they threaded their way to the open piece of grass. Several even talked to him by name. Whatever else he had hoped for from tonight, he now knew the fact he'd come with Darcy would be all over Sugar Creek before they made it home.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked, not quite ready for the heavy conversation. Couldn't they enjoy one night before dissecting all the problems and possibilities?

"Maybe later." Darcy sat down and fidgeted with her hands.

He sighed and joined her. "I'll be honest with you, Darcy. The first time I saw you at Austin's wedding, I was..." He searched for the right words. "Floored, stunned, I don't know. It was like getting sacked when you think you're wide open for a perfect throw."

Darcy laughed, and the sound immediately made him feel better.

"No wonder Sara talks in football analogies." She laughed and then prompted, "But?"

If she'd stopped smiling, he might have kept his mouth shut. But she didn't, and that gave him courage.

"I thought you were only nineteen or something. That's too young for an old guy like me. You have your whole life in front of you. Why would you waste it with me?" It might not have been his biggest fear, but it was close. After watching her

with Sara, he no longer thought Darcy would purposely hurt his little girl by disappearing from her life, but youth could be pulled to greener pastures so easily.

Darcy leaned closer to him. “Evan, you are not old. Not by a long shot.”

“I’m thirty-one.” He watched the momentary shock pass through her eyes.

“I should have known that since you knew Austin in college.” She shrugged. “We’re both adults. What does age matter now?”

“Maybe nothing.” He hoped it was only a number because he liked Darcy. “Maybe everything. Ten years is a long time.”



Darcy’s heart pounded. She wasn’t sure what the problem was. Did Evan think he was too old, or did he think she was too young? It was clear he was worried about something not working between them. She wished she was brave enough to ask more questions.

But she wasn’t.

She was afraid of messing this wonderful feeling up before they could explore it and figure out what it meant. If they tried and it didn’t work, she’d be sad, but she wouldn’t have any regrets. However, if this date ended because of their age difference, she’d always wonder what could have been.

“Evan?” She scooted closer until their sides touched. “All I know is I’ve loved my time in your home. You’ve done a wonderful job raising a happy, spunky little girl who knows she can do anything she sets her mind to. That tells me a lot about you.”

His lips quirked in a half smile. “Yeah, a girl who can’t sit still and constantly pushes safety boundaries.”

Darcy took his hand in both of hers. “That’s what all children do, but she’s not doing it to be bad. She wants to learn what she’s capable of. You’re patient with her. Be patient with whatever this is.” She squeezed his hand. Then she leaned even closer. “It’s been a week since you kissed me.”

“I know.” His free hand reached over to trace the side of her face. She closed her eyes as his fingers moved from her temple, down her cheek to her chin. From there, he tilted her face. He leaned closer, sending her heart racing, and whispered, “Do you want me to kiss you in front of all the gossips?”

Darcy swallowed. “Yes, but you’d probably better not.”

This time he chuckled. The low rumble moved through her, and she had to clutch his arm to keep from melting into the blanket.

“Okay, then. We’ll take this slow. For now, let’s listen to the band.” He shifted to give her more space but left his hand in hers. “They’re pretty good.”

She glanced at the band and smiled. “Yeah. At one point in my life, I wanted to learn how to play an instrument so that I could play with them. They always sound like they’re having fun together.”

Evan studied the musicians. “How can you tell? They’re not smiling. At least it doesn’t look like it with their mouths pressed against their instruments.”

“I’ve listened to Ellie play long enough to know that the emotions always come through. She can play the same song, and I know what she’s feeling based on how she plays it. Right now, the music is light, upbeat, and joyful as it bounces along. They’re happy to be here sharing what they love with us.”

“I can see that.” Evan turned his face back to the stage.

Darcy tilted her head as she studied the band as well. That’s what she’d been looking for all summer. A job that made her happy to share something with others. And that’s what she’d found with Sara and Evan.

She loved teaching the little girl simple things like making a swing work, rolling down a hill with her friend, matching cute outfits that fit the weather, and cooking. They also talked about everything that happened at school and how that made Sara feel.

Then there were the moments before bedtime when Darcy read to the little girl. Sara often snuggled into her side until the last possible moment. There was something special about holding someone who completely needed and trusted you. Had Darcy found the perfect job, or had she found something else?

Her thoughts were cut off at the end of the song. Gordon Weston stood and placed his saxophone in his chair before approaching the microphone.

“Thank you so much for being here tonight. We want to shift gears as we close out our last few songs. We have a special treat for you. My lovely wife, Ruthie, will grace us with her smooth vocals for some classic ballads. Let’s give her a warm welcome!” He shifted to the side and waved his hand toward the side of the bandstand.

Ruth Weston was one of the classiest ladies Darcy had ever seen. She was a Sugar Mama, and tonight she was decked out in a floor-length silver sequined gown. The trademark tiara rested prettily on her white hair that didn’t have a strand out of place. The other Sugar Mamas were cheering her on from camp chairs off to the side. All of them glittering in the warm light of the setting sun.

With a wink, Ruthie reached the mic and said, “If you feel the need, come up front and dance.”

The band started, and Darcy was floored when Ruthie opened her mouth again. The woman’s voice was smooth as silk as the song flowed.

“I had no idea,” Darcy exclaimed. Her voice carried all her awe. “Ruthie can sing.”

“She sure can.” Evan wrapped an arm around her as they listened. Ruthie sang *Misty* and then moved into *A Kiss*

Goodnight. Halfway through the song, Evan whispered, “Want to dance?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Darcy’s voice was breathier than she wanted, but would it be wrong for him to know how he made her feel?

Evan stood and reached for her hand. He didn’t lead her to the front of the band. Instead, he pulled her into his arms right by their blanket. His arms were strong and warm as they held her close.

“In case this is the last song, and we miss our chance,” he whispered in her ear by way of explanation.

They swayed much slower than the upbeat song, but Darcy didn’t mind. She liked how his warmth mingled with hers, the muscles in his shoulders moved under her hands, and he leaned down to rest his cheek next to hers.

“But remember this, that a kiss goodnight leads to another kiss,” Ruthie sang.

Darcy pulled back to meet Evan’s gaze. “Do you think that’s true?”

“Hmm?” He had a look in his eyes she’d never seen before. Almost like he’d completely let go and was living in the moment and not thinking of anything.

“That a kiss goodnight leads to another kiss,” she repeated the song’s words.

“I know I’ve wanted to kiss you again all week since that last kiss goodnight. So, I hope so.”

Darcy let the joy wash over her as she rested her cheek on his shoulder. “Me too.”

The song ended, but Evan didn’t release her. They continued to sway as Ruthie introduced the last song.

“This last one is for all the lovers in Vermont,” Ruthie said as she blew a kiss over the crowd. Then the crowd went wild as Frank Sinatra’s *Moonlight in Vermont* began.

Luckily, they quieted as couples all over the area stood to dance. Darcy wished the song would never end, but it did. They made their way to one of the food truck lines and ordered street tacos. When they returned to the blanket, it was dark enough for the movie to start.

“Goonies?” Darcy laughed. “This is one of Austin’s favorites.”

“We don’t have to stay if you don’t want to,” Evan said. He looked worried, which for the first time, Darcy found cute.

“No, it’s a great movie.”

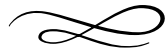
They ate quickly and cleaned up their trash. Then Darcy snuggled into Evan’s side. She could say it was because the night cooled as the minutes passed, but she just wanted to be close to him. Eventually, he wadded the second blanket into a makeshift pillow, leaned back on it, and pulled her down to rest on him. Then he grabbed the edge of the blanket they lay on to cover them.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“It’s perfect.” She tilted her face up to his hoping she wouldn’t have to wait for that goodnight kiss that might lead to another.

Evan didn’t disappoint. He kissed her so tenderly that she knew she’d been ruined for any other man. At the same time, Mikey got his first kiss on screen. Who knew Goonies could be a romantic movie?

Fletcher Family Dinner



Sunday morning, Darcy woke up smiling as her mind was flooded with the memory of the night before. Her first date with Evan had been better than she imagined. It might have started a little rocky, but she appreciated that they had been able to talk about the problem right away and get back to enjoying each other's company.

And his kisses!

They had probably kissed more than appropriate for a public spot, but it had been dark, so maybe no one noticed. Plus, kissing in a place where they couldn't go too far felt safer. Evan's lips brought out feelings in Darcy she'd never experienced before. It was like tossing gasoline on an open fire—all-consuming and blazing bright. He had kissed her goodnight by the car before walking inside to collect Sara.

Darcy's face must have given everything away when they entered the living room because her mom took one look at her and smiled like she knew. That made Darcy blush harder. Evan had gathered Sara into his arms from where she slept on the couch, and Darcy walked him to the door.

As they said goodnight, she dropped a kiss on Sara's forehead. Then she watched Evan put his daughter in the car and drive away. The whole time she wished she was going with them. Which was silly. They hadn't known each other long enough for her feelings to be that deep. After they left, she'd run upstairs to try and sleep.

She knew her mom would want all the details today. Luckily, she'd slept in, and they'd go to church before she had to tell all. Well, maybe not *all*.

"Darcy?" her mother called again from down the hall. "If you're going to church, you need to come to breakfast."

With a sigh, Darcy pushed the covers away. She'd stayed with her parents instead of returning to the tiny house since she usually spent all of Sunday with her parents anyway. That was a perk of still having a room at home.

After filling a plate with eggs, sausage, and potatoes, Darcy sat at the table beside her mom and across from her dad.

"Good morning, Darce," her dad said. "Mom said you had a good time last night."

The blush returned without her permission. "Yeah, it was nice."

Her mom reached over and patted her hand. "I'm glad it went well. Sara is such a sweet child. I wish I had half her energy."

"Right? She listens much better now, though." Darcy dug into the potatoes first. She loved the spicy dish. Her mom knew how to get them perfectly crispy.

"Darcy," her mom said, "have you heard anything more from Brandon? He's been avoiding me all week. All I know about the double date is what the gossip says. Do you know if he spoke to Summer after she left the restaurant?"

"No, I haven't seen him since the date." Darcy shook her head. She was a horrible sister. She'd been so caught up in her own life she'd ignored her brother, who probably needed his family. Brandon would keep everything to himself unless someone forced his hand. "I'll go to his house if he isn't at church and make sure he comes to dinner tonight."

"Thank you. Whenever I tried to talk to him at the store, he changed the subject. I hate to see him hurting."

"Me too," Darcy agreed.

Her dad grunted and swallowed his food. “Leave the boy alone. Some of us prefer to deal with things by ourselves. You bugging him about it won’t fix it.”

“Short of a miracle, I don’t think anything *will* fix it,” Teenie complained. “He may be a grown man, but he’s still my little boy. Brandon loves that girl, but it isn’t enough. It’s been ten years since they broke up. He needs to move on or get her back.”

“You know it isn’t that easy,” Adam pointed his fork at his wife. “Give him the time he needs. He’ll find his way.”

Darcy could see that didn’t make her mom feel any better. She decided to distract her.

“How’s Jackie?” she asked.

“Sweet as ever.” Teenie shot her a look that said, ‘keep the secret.’

Darcy was surprised her mom hadn’t leaked it to her dad yet, but she was also impressed.

She sighed. Another bad sister mark. She was supposed to be helping Jackie think of a fun way to break the news of his impending fatherhood to Austin. She had thought about it but couldn’t decide if he would appreciate something over-the-top and public or something quieter and more personal.

“That’s good,” she said lamely. Then she asked, “What did you and Sara do all night?”

Teenie brightened. “Oh, we made cookies and watched a movie. She told me all about the birthday party you’re planning for her. A real princess tea party. That’s a wonderful idea, and she’s so excited about it. Is Cameron Navarro her friend Phyl’s dad?”

“Ayup. Phyl is as spunky as Sara. It’s so fun to watch them play together. Plus, it’s been nice getting to know Mac better. If I don’t go back to school, it’ll be good to have someone close to my age to hang out with.”

Adam’s gaze jumped to his daughter. “You’re not going back to school?”

Darcy swallowed. “Maybe not.”

“Why not?” he demanded.

She shrugged. “I still don’t know what to study. The truth is, I like being a nanny. I don’t need a degree to do that.”

Her dad shook his head and sighed. Then he glanced at his watch. “You’ve got twenty minutes before we leave for church.”

Grateful he didn’t fuss at her more, Darcy hurried upstairs to get dressed and try to do something with her bedhead before church.



Teenie sighed with relief when Brandon made an appearance at church. He arrived five minutes after the start and slipped into the back row. During the final song, he slipped away before anyone could talk to him.

Austin followed him as quickly as he could get out of the pew. Teenie hoped he could catch his brother. She couldn’t get out of the pew fast enough to have a chance. Instead, she chatted with everyone that stopped to talk to her. When Austin returned, he assured her Brandon would be at dinner.

“Why did he leave?” she asked.

“He’s afraid of running into Summer’s family,” Austin whispered since that family sat in the pew across the aisle from theirs.

Summer wasn’t with them, but Mrs. Blakely looked worn and sad. She was only five or six years younger than Teenie, but the last decade had been filled with stress for the other woman. Having your only daughter join the Army and volunteer for overseas assignments had to be difficult.

“Thanks, Austin.” Teenie patted her son on the arm. Then she stepped across the aisle and pulled April Blakely into a

hug. “How are you doing?”

The woman had lovely streaks of silver peeking through her dark hair. Like her daughter, she had freckles across the bridge of her nose. She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

“Summer left almost as soon as she got here,” April said. “I don't know how to help her.”

Teenie squeezed April's hand. “I know. None of us do. If you ever want to get together, call me. We can cry over them together. And pray. That might be all we have left.”

April nodded, then waved toward the doors that led to the hallway and classrooms. They walked together, and Teenie was sure their thoughts and prayers would stay on their children, who were tied together by the hand of God.

Hours later, Darcy joined her in the kitchen. They talked about Carly and Ellie; both lived in Boston and hadn't been home for months. Ellie had started school at the Boston Conservatory and was loving every minute of her time there. While Teenie missed the noise of having a child still at home, she was happy for her youngest daughter. Most of her children were following their hearts and living the life they wanted.

Carly was a few months into her job at Boston Mercy. She was more than happy with how things were going on that front. Teenie was busy recounting all the doctors Carly had told her about when Darcy interrupted her.

“Mom,” Darcy said. “What do you think Jackie should do to tell Austin about the baby?”

Teenie laughed. It was so like Darcy to be bored with someone else's life story. At least her topic change still involved other people, and Teenie could talk about that sweet bean growing in her daughter-in-law all day if only it weren't such a big secret.

“In my day, we hugged and cried all over our men until we could get the words out. Why does it have to be something other than that?” Teenie asked.

Darcy shrugged. “I dunno. She could have done that if she had just found out, but it's been weeks. He'll want to know

why she waited so long. But if it's fun, maybe he won't think about that? I have some ideas. Can I run them past you before I share them with Jackie?"

"Of course." Teenie tried not to giggle. Darcy sounded so much like the Sugar Mamas when they brainstormed where and how Sugar Creek people needed them.

"Well, I'm stuck between the public ideas and those that only involve the two of them. It's been a while since I've spent time with Austin, so I hope Jackie knows which he'd prefer." Darcy pinched off small bits of dough, rolled them into a ball, and dropped them into the cupcake pan to make dinner rolls.

"Austin would hate to be the center of attention, but tell me all the ideas."

"Since he used to love football so much, I thought she could do one of those candy grams during alumni night. Or she could have a giant banner made and hang it outside CBB so he'd see it when he went to work."

Teenie shook her head. "I don't know about either of those. What else do you have?"

"She could buy a bunch of cupcakes with liners that say 'Congratulations, Dad,' on them, or arranged to spell baby or something. Oo, maybe she can tell him she wants to redecorate one of the rooms at their house. You know, pointing out things individually until he realizes she's designing a nursery."

"I like that last one. Any other ideas?" Teenie started making a sauce for the chicken roasting in the oven.

"She could give him something that a baby would need if he took it camping or hiking?" Darcy placed the tray of rolls close to the oven so they would rise faster.

"We should write all of these down and let Jackie decide. Even if she doesn't use one, it may help her think of the best way."

"I'll do that now. Everyone should get here in the next hour. It's so hard not to spill the news." Darcy grinned and reached for a notepad next to the recipe box on the counter. "How will we avoid it?"

“We’ll talk about your date last night, of course.” Teenie laughed when Darcy groaned and blushed.



Once everyone arrived, Darcy tried to keep the focus on Austin’s adventure trips and how things would change once winter set in. It seemed like a safer topic than how she felt about Evan and what had happened between Brandon and Summer. She asked her mom about the Fall Festival preparations when they drifted from hiking plans.

“The shops on Main Street should have their decorations up by October first. We’re not being too picky since they usually do things right anyway.” Teenie passed the rolls around the table.

“I’m ready for all the hay bales and pumpkins. Do you think Sara would like going to the corn maze?” Darcy asked.

“Yes. She can pick out her pumpkin there as well. You and Evan should take her the first weekend before everything is picked over,” Teenie said.

Jackie quirked a brow in Darcy’s direction, but Austin said, “You and Evan? Did I miss something?”

Jackie laughed and hugged him from the side. “You’ve been so busy you’ve missed a lot of things the last month. I can’t wait until things slow down again.”

“Do you miss me?” He pulled her closer and grinned down at her.

“Always.”

Austin kissed the tip of Jackie’s nose. Darcy thought it was the sweetest thing she’d ever seen. Then he turned to her. “So, Evan?”

Darcy’s cheeks heated. “Maybe. Would that be a problem?”

“No, but take it slow. He’s a good guy. If you’re not serious, don’t play with him.”

“I’m not. I wouldn’t,” Darcy sputtered.

Austin held up a hand. “Sorry, that didn’t come out right. Just be careful, okay?”

“Of course. I’d never do anything to hurt Sara or Evan.” She tilted her chin up defiantly. “Maybe you should warn him not to hurt me.”

“I think I will,” Austin said.

“Well, okay then.” Darcy felt a surprising warmth at her brother’s final comment. At first, she’d been irritated he’d choose his friend over her. Even more hurt because he thought she’d be callous enough to trifle with a man’s emotions. But his last words dispelled all of that. Austin worried about her just as much. That meant something.

Across the table, Brandon stared at his plate and didn’t say anything. He hadn’t said much the entire night, and it was clear he wasn’t comfortable with all the couples talk.

“Brandon, how is everything going with the cabins?” Darcy tried to pull him into the conversation.

He pushed his food around the plate. “Good. We’re fully booked for October through November, and there are only a few vacancies in December. We’ll finish the year strong.”

“That’s great,” their dad leaned forward. He, too, preferred this kind of conversation to the other.

Before he could dig into that topic, Teenie held up a hand. “Remember, no work talk at the table on Sunday.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Darcy sighed. She knew that was the one hard and fast rule her mom enforced, but she was having trouble thinking of topics that wouldn’t lead to asking about the failed date a week ago. “Um, how is Clarissa? I saw her sitting with that doctor at church. Her kids looked pretty attached to him.”

Teenie smiled. “I heard she has a court date in two weeks to finalize the divorce. Word is it will be a breeze since she

isn't asking for anything from her husband. Well, nothing other than that he continues to stay out of their lives. The deadbeat probably won't even show."

Brandon nodded. "Jonah is a good guy. Clarissa has been happier than ever this last year, and I know that's because of the doctor."

"Do you think he'll propose as soon as the divorce is final?" Darcy asked. She cringed almost immediately so much for not talking about couples.

"Oh, I hope so," Teenie sighed. "So, Brandon—"

"Mom," Darcy interrupted. "Can you help me with Sara's birthday this Wednesday?"

"Darcy." Teenie's voice was only slightly annoyed at being interrupted.

"You could come too, Jackie," Darcy continued. "I've already asked Deb if we could have the party at the bakery. She's going to reserve a corner for us and has all these fun treats planned."

"What do you need help with?" Jackie asked.

Teenie glanced at Brandon, sighed, and then refocused on the girls. "The bakery sounds like the perfect place for a tea party."

"Right?" Darcy nodded. Brandon shot her a look of gratitude, then quietly took his plate to the kitchen and slipped out the back door. She kept talking the whole time. "There isn't much to do, but I told the moms they could leave their girls, so it would be nice to have extra hands and eyes to keep up with them."

"Are you serving them tea?" Teenie asked as she waved goodbye to her son. Her brows dipped as she frowned, but then she refocused on Darcy.

"No. Sara wants an assortment of flavored lemonades. Sisters Soda Shop will provide some kid-friendly drinks, but we must pick them up before the party. I have balloons

ordered, but I thought it might be fun to have hats for them to wear. What do you think?" Darcy looked at her mom.

"That would be fun." She clasped her hands together. "What about some pretty straw hats with flowers around the brims? I can get those. How many would you need?"

"There are five little girls and two boys, plus the three of us. Evan said he'd leave football practice to his assistants so he can also come." Darcy counted off on her fingers. "So eight for the girls and three for the boys."

"I'll handle it. This will be so much fun. I miss throwing parties. It's not the same now that you kids are grown up. I can't wait until..." she sputtered before continuing, "until Wednesday."

Darcy laughed and made sure she didn't look at Jackie. Her sister-in-law better tell her secret soon or it would slip out one way or the other.

Sara's Birthday



Darcy got up early Monday morning and headed to the Cabins By the Bay offices. She may have done her best to keep the heat off of Brandon during dinner, but she also felt like someone needed to be there for him. Perhaps talking about whatever happened the week before on that date would ultimately help him move on. Whatever that might look like. She pushed open the door and greeted the woman behind the counter.

“Good morning, Clarissa. How is everything going?” Darcy asked.

Clarissa had left her blonde hair down today, and her makeup looked nice. The woman looked good in the royal blue shirt with the CBB logo on the left front.

“Life couldn’t get much better,” she beamed. “Two weeks, and I’ll be free.” She pumped a fist in the air.

“Good,” Darcy said, and then she quirked a brow in the other woman’s direction. “Any plans for what you’ll do with that freedom?”

Clarissa blushed and shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe.”

“I’m so happy for you.” Darcy stepped around the counter and hugged Clarissa. When she backed away, she asked, “Is Brandon here?”

“He’s in the back.” Clarissa hooked a finger over her shoulder. “Go on back.”

The hall behind the counter was about six feet long with three doors, one on each side of the three walls. One was a restroom for workers and desperate guests, one led to a parking spot behind the building, and one opened to the office. Brandon stood in that room by the window behind the desk. It was high on the wall and not very big, but he was tall enough to see out. They were on the corner of a row of shops, and if you tilted your head just right, you could see the people walking the sidewalks or across the square.

“Hey,” Darcy said.

Brandon jumped and turned toward her. She noticed he looked tired at dinner the night before, and another night hadn’t changed that. The circles under his eyes couldn’t be classified as bruises, but they were dark and heartbreaking all the same.

“Hey,” he said as he sat down. He waved to a chair. “What’s up? I’m assuming you don’t need a new job since it sounded like things were going well with the nanny thing.”

“No, I wanted to see how you were doing. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.” Brandon folded his arms across his chest.

“It’s been a week. Maybe it would help?” she asked.

He sighed, leaned forward, and rested his head in his hands. “I shouldn’t have moved back to Sugar Creek.”

“You’ve been back almost nine months. I thought you were doing well.”

“I was. Until.” He leaned back again. His arms rested listlessly on the arms of his chair. Brandon stared at the ceiling. He looked old.

Darcy sucked in a breath. “Brandon, let me help. I want to be here for you. So does Mom, and probably Austin and Jackie if you let them. You don’t have to do this,” she waved her hand in the air, “whatever it is, alone.”

“I don’t know how to do it with anyone else either. It hurts too much. At least when I lived in Burlington, I wasn’t

surrounded by reminders of what I had. Seeing Summer like that when I least expected it..." He ran a hand through his hair. "She thought I'd moved on. I should move on. She told me to."

"But?" Darcy prompted.

"I could see how much it hurt her seeing me on a date with another woman. Summer still cares, even if she won't admit it or spend more than five minutes with me. How can I get her to tell me what's wrong, what happened between us if she won't talk?"

"You don't know why you're not together?" Darcy had never thought that was a possibility. She'd never been close to Brandon, but she thought he would at least know why he had broken up with his high school girlfriend.

"No. When I left for college, Summer was going to do a service mission for a semester and then join me. She never did, and she's barely talked to me since then. I've tried calling, texting, emailing, sending IMs over every social media outlet, and she won't respond. Whatever happened, she's made it abundantly clear she doesn't want anything to do with me," Brandon groaned.

"What happened when you followed her last week?"

"I caught up with her at her car and begged her to tell me what I did so I could make it right. I tried to tell her how much I've missed her." Brandon choked on his emotion.

His face was so stricken and hopeless that Darcy clutched at her chest above her heart.

"What did she say?" she whispered.

"Nothing. She looked me square in the eye and said it wasn't me but her. Then she told me to forget about us. Doesn't she know I've tried that for the last ten years?" He shook his head, and then he pointed to Darcy. "You tell Mom, no more set-ups. Summer is the only woman I want. If she doesn't want me, then I'll live my life alone."

"Oh, Brandon," Darcy sighed and moved to his side of the desk. "Don't say that. Surely, there's something we can do?"

“Nope. I’ll wait for Summer until the day I die, but I can’t do anything until she’s ready to let me back in.”



Ev an couldn’t keep the grin off his face as he waved goodbye to his assistant coaches and the guys on the field. He’d stayed for most of the after-school practice but was ducking out early to attend Sara’s birthday tea party. His little girl turned six today. He remembered when he wasn’t sure they’d make it this far. Luckily, those dark days were growing farther and farther behind them. He could honestly send a wave of gratitude toward Heaven for letting him keep his daughter.

He also sent a silent thanks for Darcy. She’d not only made a difference in Sara’s life, but she was changing him as well. He was happier throughout the day just thinking about her. She had surprised him, that’s for sure.

Before heading to the bakery, he stopped at home to change into his suit. This was a dress-up affair. While he preferred to be comfortable, he’d do anything for his little girl. It was strange to walk in and not have Darcy in his kitchen. And yet, he could still feel her presence in the room. Her lightly floral perfume lingered in the air, and a fruit pie sat cooling on the counter. He hurried to change and get to the party.

When he walked into the bakery, Teenie met him with a top hat.

“Here you go, sir.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Fletcher,” he said as he took it and plopped it on his head.

Then he directed his attention to the side of the quaint little shop to see that several tables had been pushed together to form one long one. It had been covered with a white tablecloth

with a long gold-colored runner down the middle. Pretty pink flowers and purple sequins had been scattered along that runner. Seven kids sat around that table dressed in their best clothes.

Sara wore her favorite pink and purple dress full of ruffles and flounces. At least, that's what Darcy had called them. Her hair had been curled into ringlets and stacked on her head. It was adorable, but it also made her look older, and that caught in his throat. She wore a silver plastic tiara almost as big as her head. The other girls had smaller tiaras.

Evan was surprised to see two boys among the number. The boys wore suits and top hats like he did. Teenie and Jackie were also dressed up and pouring the drinks for the kids, but he didn't see Darcy.

A door opened near the back of the bakery, and Darcy came out with an older woman. Both carried trays full of yummy-looking treats. Her smile widened as soon as Darcy saw him, and he could have sworn her face brightened. Just one look made him feel like the MVP of the year. Man, he had it bad. He sent up a silent prayer that a relationship with her would work out.

"The King has arrived," Darcy announced.

Sara looked up from where she'd been talking to another girl with long black hair and squealed, "Daddy!"

Evan moved to her side, bent down, and kissed the top of her head behind the plastic tiara.

"Happy birthday, sweetie pie," he murmured as he watched Darcy spread the cookies and other pastries from her tray around the table.

Her light sage dress cinched with a lace band at her waist before falling toward the floor. Everything about the dress was soft and flowy. It moved with her like air. It made him want to reach out and touch it to see if it was as thin and supple as it looked. Every time she walked, the fabric slid aside to show the slit in one side that opened mid-thigh. There was enough fabric that it wasn't obvious, but he kept getting tantalizing

glimpses of long legs. She turned, and he saw the ties that laced up the back, and his mind fell the rest of the way to a place it hadn't in years. Evan swallowed and sat in the chair saved for him next to his daughter.

“Introduce me to your friends.” His voice sounded scratchy, so he tried to clear his throat. All four women in the room laughed before retreating behind the counter, where he couldn't see them unless he turned around in his chair.

“This is Phyl, Alice, Jane, Hailey, JD, and Curtis.” Sara pointed around the room as she listed off the names.

Evan zoomed in on JD while Sara chattered on. The boy came up in almost every conversation with Sara about school. He was surprised she invited him to the party since he always seemed to pick on her. The boy had dark brown eyes and hair. He was a little chubby, and his suit was a bright blue instead of an expected color. JD focused on the table and the transparent plastic plate before him. Every once in a while, the boy would glance at one of the other kids with something in his eyes that looked like fear and hope wrapped in a knot.

There was a story there, but Evan knew he needed to pay attention to his girl. And that's what he did. For forty minutes, he told awful dad jokes that the kids laughed. Whenever the treats got low, Darcy would refill the plates, and he could drink in her beauty. She hadn't said anything to him, but knowing she was there seemed to be enough.

That surprised him. He'd always been anxious when Jenna was in the room but not speaking to him. She'd been a pouter who enjoyed giving him the silent treatment to express her unhappiness. Was that the difference? Darcy looked happy to be here, even if she wasn't the center of attention. Jenna always had to be the focal point of every conversation or group. Even when it was just the two of them. Perhaps, she wouldn't have been a good mom even if Sara had been healthy.

“Do you have room for birthday cake?” Darcy walked toward the table carrying a pink and purple castle cake. Each of the six turrets sported a blazing candle.

“Yay, cake!” Several children squealed.

Darcy placed it in front of Sara and kissed the top of the little girl’s head. Evan wondered if she knew she had done it. The motion had looked and felt so natural, so right.

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” Darcy mumbled.

Then Teenie Fletcher clapped her hands and said, “We’ll all sing while Sara makes her wish before blowing out her candles.”

The kids practically screamed the birthday song. Evan joined them, a sense of warmth and well-being in his chest. Darcy’s eyes glittered in the light of the bakery as she met his gaze over Sara’s head. All his fears about her being too young melted away. She was exactly what he and Sara needed in their lives.

The song ended, and Sara pushed off the table with her hands to stand in her chair so she’d be tall enough to blow out her candles. Instead of fussing at her, Evan steadied her on one side while Darcy did the same. His little girl blew out all the candles on the first try.

“What did you wish for,” JD asked.

Two of the girls closest to Sara giggled. He thought their names were Phyl and Alice, but he couldn’t remember.

The one with dark hair shook her head. “She can’t tell you, or it won’t come true.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“That’s how wishes work. It’s a secret,” the other girl said.

“That’s dumb.” The boy’s forehead scrunched in a scowl.

“Have you ever made a wish?” Sara asked as Darcy cut the cake and placed the pieces on the princess plates.

“No.” JD shook his head. He looked like he wanted to say more, but he didn’t.

Evan helped pass the cake around while he listened to the kids talk about how wishes worked before moving on to what

was happening on the school playground. It was all so foreign and yet so familiar.

Before he knew it, moms showed up to pick up their kids. He looked around and noticed there hadn't been any presents. Was that normal? He didn't say anything. There was no way he'd point that out and make his daughter sad that her friends didn't give her gifts.

However, as each of the children left the table, they handed Sara papers. They were in different sizes and colors. Some were stapled, but others had holes poked in the side and ribbon or string woven through them.

JD presented his last. "Happy birthday, Sara. Thanks for inviting me. I'm sorry I'm not a good story writer."

He placed a stack of papers in his daughter's hand. The front and back pages were blue construction paper with white in between them. The edge had been meticulously lined with staples end to end, so there wasn't any space between them. They were perfectly in line too. The picture on the cover was made from many pieces of colored paper, collage style, and it was pretty good for a six-year-old. A princess with yellow hair and a pink dress stood before a castle beside a lake.

"Thank you, JD," Sara said as she beamed at the booklet. "You make the best pictures. They tell the story for you."

Evan's chest tightened. Who was this wise little girl? JD smiled for the first time all evening as he ducked his head. Then he leaned forward and kissed Sara on the cheek before running for the door.

He'd have to keep an eye on that one.

"I'd almost forgotten how good you look in a suit." Darcy stood next to his chair.

Evan stood and took her hands in his. "This dress is even more beautiful than your bridesmaid one. I don't think I'll ever forget how you look in it."

She blushed and leaned toward him. "You do say the nicest things."

“Darcy, this was the bestest birthday ever,” Sara said as she stood up in her chair. Evan turned just in time to catch her as she leaped toward him. “Daddy, can Darcy come home with us to read all my birthday stories?”

He glanced at Darcy. He’d love nothing more than for her to come home with them, so he asked, “What do you say?”

“Okay.”



Darcy’s heart had been racing all night. She laughed as she followed Evan and Sara to their house because she wondered if she should call Carly and ask for help. Maybe her nurse sister could tell her if she was having problems or simply falling too fast for the single dad and his daughter.

Her breath caught. She was falling for him. It hadn’t taken long, either. Every day she spent with Sara, she couldn’t help but devote a portion of her time and thoughts to the moment Evan would walk through the door. She looked forward to it all day. Ever since she had dinner with them at home, she hadn’t been as quick to run away. She’d helped him get Sara into bed, and then they would talk about his day, her day, music, movies, you name it.

It felt like they were moving slowly until he kissed her, and then things went from zero to sixty, at least in Darcy’s mind. They hadn’t done anything but kiss, but she could already imagine a life with him and Sara.

“April Fool, don’t mess this one up for me,” she whispered as she pulled into his drive.

Evan stood inside the garage, waiting for her. She grabbed the bag holding the clothes she’d worn during the day. Sara had so much fun dressing up with her before the party.

When she reached Evan, he hit the button to close the garage door and pulled her into his arms. His hands were

warm as they skimmed across the exposed skin on her upper back. Then his fingers danced down her spine before gripping her around the waist.

“I’ve wanted to do this all day,” he whispered as he leaned down to press his lips against hers.

Darcy melted into him. She dropped the bag, and her hands wrapped around his neck, desperate to have him closer. Darcy felt adored and protected whenever he held her. She could have stayed in his arms all night, but Sara’s voice could be heard in the other room.

“Daddy, where’s my Darcy?”

Darcy pulled away from Evan’s intoxicating kiss and laughed. He joined her and then rested his forehead on hers.

“You gave her the best party she’s ever had. Thank you for making my little girl so happy,” he said.

“I’d do anything for her,” Darcy breathed the words. In her head, they were followed by, *And I’d do anything for you*, but she didn’t say them out loud. They’d only been on one date. There was plenty of time to find the right way to tell him how she felt. “We’d better get in there before she comes looking for us. I’m sure she’s anxious to read her birthday stories.”

Evan kept one of her hands in his as he led her into the house. “What’s up with that, anyway?”

Darcy couldn’t help but giggle. “Your daughter has an addiction to fairytales, and instead of gifts, she wanted all her friends to write a story about her. They happily complied.”

“Is that normal?” he asked.

“Not at all. Come on, let’s see how Sara’s friends see her.”

They spent the next twenty minutes looking through the homemade books. Each story was simple but so unique in different ways. It was clear that Sara had told Phyl about her hospital adventures at some point because they appeared in her story. The words and drawings showed how each of the children at the party adored Sara for her bright smile and happy ways. The biggest surprise was the book from JD. His

stained glass-like collages were brilliant in their simplicity. The boy had taken a lot of time cutting the small shapes and piecing them together to form the pictures. Sara looked like an angel in the schoolyard scenes as she slayed a dragon in each one. A little boy was always off to the side, alone but watchful.

Darcy touched the boy on the last page and glanced at Evan. He nodded as if he understood her unasked question.

“Sara,” Darcy started, “Is JD nicer to you now?”

“Yes.” The little girl glanced up at her. “You were right. He was sad because he didn’t have any friends. Phyl and I let him play with us. So does Alice when we’re on the playground. He’s not so bad, but some days he sits by himself and won’t talk. Why is he sad?”

Darcy wrapped her arms around the little girl. “I don’t know, but you and Phyl are good girls. Thank you for being nice to him.”

“Let’s get you ready for bed, pumpkin,” Evan lifted Sara into his lap and stood. Before carrying her down the hall, he sent a smoldering look at Darcy. “Will you stay a bit?”

Nerves and anticipation skittered through her entire body. “Sure. Maybe I could use the bathroom to change?”

Neither had changed from their party clothes since Sara wanted to read her stories first. Darcy had kicked off her heels, and Evan loosened his tie, but that was as comfortable as they had gotten with Sara sitting between them.

“Use mine.” He pointed toward his master suite.

“Thanks.” Darcy knew she was blushing because she felt hot all over. She grabbed her bag with the change of clothes and retreated to his bathroom while he led Sara to hers for teeth brushing.

As a rule, Darcy didn’t go into Evan’s room. Ever. She washed Sara’s clothes, but she had made it a point not to intrude on Evan’s privacy. His room was simple, cleaner than she expected, and as manly as Sara’s was girly. The walls were a soft gray, the spartan king-sized bed was covered with a

black and gray comforter with only two pillows, and even the dresser was a sleek unadorned black. Everything was straight lines. This room also didn't hold any photos or anything else to soften things and make them feel lived in.

The bathroom was another thing. The sink held his toothbrush and toothpaste in a cup holder, a razor, and a can of shaving cream.

She quickly slipped out of the dress and placed it on the hanger from her bag. After putting on her jeans and sweater from earlier in the day, she knew she should return to the living room. However, her curiosity wouldn't let her. She slid the shower curtain open and glanced at the shampoo bottle and body wash. Her fingers stretched out and pulled one of the bottles off the shelf, without her permission, mind you, and flipped it open so she could inhale.

There it was. That clean, manly scent that drove her nuts.

"You okay in there?" Evan's voice sounded through the door.

Darcy yelped and almost dropped the body wash. She quickly put it back in the bathtub and slowly tried to close the curtain without the sound of metal scraping over metal. Then she grabbed her dress and bag and opened the door.

"Yep. I'll put these in my car and be right back." She didn't meet his gaze as she hurried past and out of his room.

Running to her car helped clear her head and her nose. Returning to find Evan waiting for her on the couch sent her heart rate up again. He patted the spot beside him, so she joined him.

"Hey," she said as she met his eyes.

"Hey," he replied as he placed an arm around her. "I know you should go, but can we just sit here for a while?"

"Just sit?" she quirked a brow.

He laughed. "Yes. Can I hold you for a few minutes? I don't know how to thank you for all you've done for Sara. And me."

Darcy melted into his side. She snuggled her head on his strong shoulder, tucked her legs under her to scoot closer, and closed her eyes. Evan wrapped his other arm around her and rested his chin on her head. It was more comforting than anything else. And it felt so right that Darcy wished she could do it every single day.

Falling Into October



After Sara's birthday party, Darcy stayed to eat dinner with them Thursday night, and then she brought his daughter to the next home football game. Evan could barely concentrate on the field, knowing she sat with Sara in the bottom row behind him. Sometimes he thought he could pick their voices out of the cheering crowd, but that was ridiculous. His team only teased him about it before and after the game. Luckily, they focused on playing and pulled off another win for the Sugar Creek Carvers.

Evan was relieved to find Darcy and Sara waiting for him after the game without any extra men hanging around. He hated that they had to take two cars home, but he figured his thoughts were jumping ahead to the future way too fast, so it was probably a good thing. After ensuring Sara was buckled, he pulled Darcy to the back of his SUV where his daughter couldn't see them and kissed her goodnight. She sighed as she melted into him, kissing back with all the hope and longing he felt. He was lost in her sweetness when hooting and hollering from across the lot startled him.

"Way to go, Coach," someone yelled.

Darcy pulled back enough to glance over his shoulder. She moved farther away, and he missed her, but he was glad when she stepped around him and yelled back. "Is that Fred Barton? I know your mother taught you better than that."

The two other boys with Fred laughed. They all waved and said, "Night, Coach."

“You’re something else; you know that?” He cracked a smile. “I’ll never hear the end of this.”

“Is that a bad thing?” she asked as she moved into his space again and wrapped her arms around him.

“Not from where I’m standing.”

“Good.” She looked up at him with a serious expression. “The last thing I want to do is cause you trouble, but I like you, Evan. And Sara.” She sighed. “I’d miss both of you if—”

If she left? Maybe he could convince her to never leave again. *Slow down*, he chided himself.

Instead of saying anything, he kissed her again. If Sara hadn’t called out, Evan would have stayed there kissing Darcy all night.

“Daddy? What are you doing?”

Darcy laughed, placed one more quick kiss on his lips, and let him go. “Take her home and sleep well.”

“Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you like to join us for the movie in the park tomorrow? I planned on taking Sara.” Evan wanted to cross his fingers like a kid needing extra mojo for a wish.

Darcy’s face softened in the way he’d always wanted from her. The same way she looked at his daughter. Her expression was caring, and he dared to hope loving. This time it was directed at him.

“That sounds fun,” she said. “I’ll bring food.”

“You don’t have to. I can get something for all of us.”

“I like cooking for you and Sara.” She ducked her head as if those words embarrassed her somehow.

Darn, if they didn’t send Evan falling even harder. Jenna had never enjoyed doing anything for their family that involved work.

“Daddy?” Sara called again. Then her head popped up in the back window. “When are we going home?”

“Right now, sweetie. See you tomorrow, Darcy.” He squeezed her fingers again before pointing to her car, a few spots over from his. “Text me later?”

“You bet.”



The last week of September was the best Darcy had ever experienced. Evan didn't have time to take her on another date, but they saw each other daily. Saturday was a lovely night spent in the park with the Porters.

The weather was chilly, so Sara snuggled between Darcy and Evan while they watched *The Wizard of Oz*. That meant no smooching, but it didn't bother Darcy. Simply being with them was enough.

She wrapped the little girl in an embrace, and Evan leaned over and placed his arm on the outside of hers so that they made a cocoon around his daughter. His hand rested next to Darcy's hip until Sara fell asleep.

“I was hoping she could make it until the end of the movie,” Darcy sighed.

“We can watch it with her some other time.” Evan lay Sara down. “Do you think it's too cold for her? Maybe we should go. I don't want her to get sick.”

“She'll be fine.” Darcy grabbed another blanket. “Wrap her up in this.”

Evan took the thick blanket and tucked it around Sara. “What if breathing the cold air is bad for her?”

“Evan, look around you. There are tons of kids out here watching the movie in the cold air. Don't worry so much.”

“But she’s not like the other kids.” Evan met her gaze.

Darcy could see the concern all over his face. She reached out and held his hand. “When was the last time she was sick?”

“Not since her last hospital stay. Maybe three years ago?”

“Okay. I think she’ll be fine, but if you want, we can call Carly and ask.”

“Your sister, Carly?”

“Ayup, she’s a nurse.” Darcy pulled out her phone. “Maybe I’ll text her so we don’t bother the people around us.”

“Thanks.”

Darcy sent off a text, and Evan scooted closer to her so he could read the answers. Eventually, he was satisfied that Sara wasn’t in any immediate danger of any kind of relapse or heart trouble because it was cold. He simply covered her head with part of the blanket to hold in more warmth and then patted the spot beside him.

“Now, come over here and let me keep you warm,” he whispered.

Darcy smothered a giggle and did just that. They didn’t kiss but lay wrapped in each other’s arms, watching the classic movie for another fifteen minutes before Evan decided it was too cold and he should take Sara home. Darcy sighed but gathered the blankets while he carried Sara to the car.

Sunday, Evan and Sara joined the Fletcher family at church. She’d seen them there a time or two, but they didn’t come every week. More than one head turned their way when Evan sat beside her.

Monday, Darcy planned the meals for the week and went grocery shopping before picking Sara up from school. Then, together they talked about the fun things the little girl wanted to do that week. Then they made dinner and waited for Evan to come home.

It all felt so normal. For the first time in a long time, having a routine made Darcy smile. She was doing exactly what she wanted, and it made her happy. Listening to Evan

talk about his day and watching him smile at Sara's day warmed her from the inside out.

"What are your plans for the rest of the week," he asked a little before they finished.

"Sara and I will help my mom with some last-minute Fall Fest details. That starts next week," Darcy replied.

"I can't believe it's almost October." Evan shook his head. "Football season is going to be over before we know it."

Their eyes met across the table. Something charged passed between them, making it hard for Darcy to swallow the bite she had just put in her mouth. She hadn't thought about what would happen at the end of the season. Surely, he'd still need her. Hopefully, he would want her around. But some little voice whispered maybe he wouldn't. Maybe all the kisses and smiles didn't mean what she thought it did. How would she know? She cleared her throat and put the fork down.

"I can stay," she said. "I mean, after the season ends. You know?"

His lips twitched. "I'd like that."

Darcy sighed with relief. "Okay."

Sara's gaze darted from one to the other, but when Darcy relaxed, the little girl slid off her chair and hugged her around the waist.

"Darcy, I want you to stay forever," Sara said as she squeezed.

Darcy didn't know what to say. At that moment, she knew she wanted to stay forever and be a part of their family. She glanced at Evan and realized she hated leaving every night to go to her lonely tiny house on the lake.

Over the last month and a half, this man and his daughter had come to mean more to her than anyone else. Could she tell him that? Was it too soon?

She bent over to rest her head on Sara's and closed her eyes. The answer to those questions eluded her, so she soaked in a little girl's love and hoped the rest would work out.

Evan didn't comment on that conversation when he kissed her goodbye at the door an hour later. She was glad because she didn't think either of them were ready to make those decisions.

On Tuesday, Darcy was folding Sara's shirts when her phone buzzed. She glanced down to see Jackie's name and a text.

Darcy, I did it!

Did what?

The phone rang instead of a return text. Darcy answered and smiled as Jackie gushed, "I bought the baby hiking boots."

"Really?" Excitement moved through Darcy. "Have you given them to him yet?"

"Nope. They just arrived. I'm going to place them beside my boots in the mudroom. He'll see them when he gets home tonight and takes his boots off. What do you think?" Jackie took a deep breath. "I'm so anxious. What if he's upset I waited so long to tell him?"

Darcy laughed. "He's going to be so happy he'll hug and cry all over you. Don't worry."

"I should wait another week for the second trimester, but every moment we're together, I want to blurt out the news," Jackie continued. "Why is it so hard to keep a secret?"

"Because he's your person. You want to share everything with him. Try and get a picture of his face when he sees the boots. That's the only downside to you not doing this in a big public way. None of us get to see his reaction. It's going to be epic."

"I'll send you a photo of them on the floor as soon as I hang up. They're so tiny. I can't believe we're having a baby. I keep waiting for something bad to happen."

"Oh, Jackie. Maybe you won't have the same trouble your mom did. I bet the two of you fill that house with beautiful babies." Darcy sighed.

She'd never really thought about her future family, but listening to the excitement and joy in Jackie's voice had her mind drifting that way. She wanted a family. Children of her own. Would Evan want more children? Shaking the thought away, she refocused on what her sister-in-law was saying.

"...two more camping trips before winter hits," Jackie said.

"Okay." Darcy had no idea what she'd missed, so she didn't know how to respond.

"You weren't listening, were you?" Jackie laughed.

"Sorry, my mind drifted."

"To what?"

"Nothing." Darcy was glad Jackie couldn't see her blush. "I'm so happy for you guys. I can't wait to become an aunt."

"Oh, Austin is texting me. I'll call you later," Jackie said right before hanging up.

Darcy laughed and returned to folding laundry. It didn't bother her that Jackie didn't want to read texts from her husband and keep talking simultaneously.

It took an hour before the photo of the hiking boots showed up, along with a text saying she took the picture after Austin got home. Darcy blinked back tears at the three pair lined up by the door. Her brother's big boots sat on one side of the tiny hiking boots, and Jackie's medium pair sat on the other. All were brown. Austin's were well-worn, Jackie's barely broken in with a little dirt, and baby Fletcher's were pristine. It shouldn't have hit her as hard as it did, but maybe she was becoming a big softy like her brother.

Next came a photo of Austin. Sure enough, he stared at the boots on the floor with a look of utter wonder. His mouth was open, and his eyes looked suspiciously watery.

"You'll make a great dad, Austin."

The next week passed with times when Darcy was busy and others when she had nothing to do but sit and think. There was only one more game in September—a home one. Then

there would be two away games before Homecoming near the end of October. Time was slipping by quickly. As much as she would be happy staying on as Sara's nanny, would that always be enough?

Would she regret it if she didn't choose a major and go back to school?

Darcy sighed. Her heart didn't want to change anything about her life, but Evan might not be as attached as she was. Eventually, Sara would be old enough not to need a nanny, and if things continued as they were, Darcy would be so in love with Evan that she'd be crushed if he let her go.

"I need to make a decision not dependent on Evan Porter, no matter how much it might hurt," she mumbled.



September drifted into October, and Evan had never been happier. The days were cooler, the nights downright chilly, and the leaves were gearing up for that glorious fall color he loved so much. His team had come together in a tight group willing to fight for every win, and they were doing just that. However, he knew he wore a smile more often because of Darcy. For the first time in years, he felt light and free.

He loved having her in his house, at his games, and their new routine of Saturday night movies at the park with Sara. He loved eating dinner with his girls every day except Sunday and having a beautiful woman to kiss whenever he felt like it.

Life had never been so good. He had Friday night lights, Saturdays with Darcy and Sara, and Sunday church, where he felt comfortable for the first time in a while. Now, for October, they decided to add Tuesday night out.

That was the day he felt he could leave practice a little early to do something with Sara and Darcy. His assistant coach watched over weight training for the team, and he got a mental

break before leaning into practice focused on the Friday opponent.

Tuesday was usually the quietest day in town as the tourists left and the new batch hadn't arrived yet. It allowed them to enjoy being together without the crowds.

But on Tuesday, October third, things were not even close to normal. He left practice early to take Sara and Darcy to town to see all the fall decorations. They also planned to try the new flavors at the Sisters Soda shop. His house was only a ten-minute drive from the square, but traffic slowed to a crawl as they approached Main Street.

"Where did all these people come from?" Darcy asked as she gazed out of the window. "And why are they here now? Usually, the weekends are the busiest for tourists."

Evan looked closer at their surroundings. "I'm not sure they're tourists." He pointed toward the fountain in the middle of the square. "Look over there. Everyone is slowing down to gawk at the group of people over there. Are they paparazzi? What in the world is going on?"

Darcy jerked in her seat to get a better view. "I bet they're here for the Butler wedding. I forgot all about that."

"The what?"

"You know, the Butler twins. Celebrity chefs?" She twisted in her seat to meet his gaze since traffic barely moved. "They came to Sugar Creek last Christmas. They stayed in one of the cabins until the big contest. I don't remember the name of it, but it was the first time the twins competed against each other. Anyway, I heard they're getting married at the Wheelhouse. I guess that's this weekend."

"Do you watch a lot of food shows?" Evan asked.

"No, but I remember hearing about it at one of my other jobs from the summer. I can't even remember who mentioned it, but I bet that's why there's a gaggle of people with cameras attached to their necks." She tilted her head to the side in thought. "I wonder if that's why there were helicopters earlier.

I couldn't think of why someone would be circling our town, but the Butler twins might bring in that sort of curiosity."

"Maybe we should grab something and take it home instead?" Evan tried not to react to the words that left his mouth. *Take it home*. His house did feel more like a home with Darcy in it.

"No, Daddy," Sara almost yelled from the back seat. "You said we could go to the corn maze after sodas. Darcy and I haven't gone because we waited for you."

He peeked at his girl in the rearview mirror. She'd been quiet the whole ride, which was unusual, but it had allowed him to chat with Darcy and almost forget his daughter was with them. That was a strange feeling that he wasn't sure he liked. A glance at Darcy showed her smiling at them both. In fact, she looked like she was challenging him to back out of their planned activity.

"You're right, pumpkin. I'll find a parking spot on the other side of the square so we can get out faster. After the maze, we'll take a different way home. How does that sound?"

"Good," Sara said.

Darcy reached over and squeezed his knee. "She really does have you wrapped around her finger."

His mouth fell open at the censure, but then he saw how Darcy's eyes sparkled, and her lips tilted up at the corners in a soft, dreamy expression.

"Is that bad?" he asked for confirmation.

"Not at all. It's adorable," she said.

She spoke it softly, but Sara heard and giggled. "Daddies can't be adore...adorable. They have to be strong and tough."

"Who says that?" Darcy asked.

"JD."

Evan shook his head. He almost thought they'd get through one evening without referencing JD. He should have known better.

“Well, JD doesn’t know everything,” he said.

“That’s right,” Darcy continued. “Men can be just as sweet and adorable as women.”

“What makes Daddy adorable?” She got the big word right the first time.

Evan pulled into a parking spot and turned to wait for Darcy’s answer.

She met his gaze and said, “It’s in how he looks at you. I can see how much he loves you. He’s still strong and manly, but a softness around his eyes and lips reveals how tender his heart is for you. It’s very attractive.”

His heart pounded in his chest in a way that did not resemble tenderness. It smacked of wonder and caveman pride at her words.

Other women had come onto him, spouting things about how strong his arms were or how gorgeous his smile was. They talked of things they could see outside that wouldn’t mean much years down the road, but Darcy was attracted to who he was on the inside. The fact his daughter came first didn’t bother her.

“What’s attractive?” Sara asked.

“We’ll save that talk for another day,” Evan interrupted while Darcy laughed. “Let’s try a new flavor at the Sister’s shop.”

They walked together down the sidewalk, grateful it wasn’t as crowded as the traffic had suggested. Sara stood between them, one hand in his and one in Darcy’s. She skipped a step or two and then jumped. Evan had been ready for it, but he’d forgotten to warn Darcy. Luckily, she held on tight while the little girl kicked her legs up in the air.

Darcy grinned at him and cocked an eyebrow in challenge. “You thought I wasn’t ready.”

He shrugged. “I should have known better.”

“Darcy, what are you going to get?” Sara asked as they approached the door to the soda shop.

A garland of fall-colored leaves had been strung up around the outside windows, and black and purple spiders hung from strings at various lengths from that garland. Evan was impressed. It gave a fun Halloween vibe, and he figured the sisters could remove the spiders and leave the leaves up for November—double decorating with half the fuss.

“I’m not sure yet, but my favorite is their warm butter beer. They only have it in the fall.” Darcy rested her hand on Sara’s shoulder. “I always think I’m going to try something new, but then I don’t.”

Sara made a face full of disappointment. “Daddy says I can’t have beer.”

Darcy laughed. “It’s not real beer. Actually, I don’t know what it is, but it has a creamy caramel flavor with cinnamon but no alcohol.”

They made their way to the counter to order. Evan smiled as his girls oohed and ahed over the steaming cauldron on the back counter. Darcy picked Sara up so she could see it better. They pointed out other decorations they liked inside, but none interested him as much as they did. They looked like they belonged together. Both of them ended up with butter beer while he decided to be adventurous and try the Sugared Jack. It was a pumpkin chai latte with a cinnamon and nutmeg blend.

As he set the drinks on the table, he whispered in Darcy’s ear. “I thought you should get the Witchy Woman.”

She grinned up at him. “Why?”

“Because you’ve definitely bewitched me.”



Darcy still hadn’t decided whether to return to school or not. How could she when she got to spend days like this with Evan and Sara? After their drinks at the sisters’ shop, they

headed to one of the many corn mazes around Sugar Creek. Since it was early in October and the middle of the week, it wasn't too crowded and hadn't been stomped down by the multitude yet.

They played in a giant sandbox that had been filled with corn kernels. The earthy smell screamed fall to Darcy, and she was glad to share it with the Porters. After that, they shot baby pumpkins from a giant slingshot at targets in a field. Darcy was pretty good at it and couldn't help but blush every time Evan expressed his wonder at her skills.

At dusk, they headed into the tall cornfield where trails had been cut through it. It was shadowy but not utterly dark since a few solar-powered lights had been scattered along the path. Sara laughed and ran this way and that.

"Sara, stay close. You don't want to get lost," Evan called as his daughter disappeared once more around a curve. "If the trail splits, wait for us."

"Okay, Daddy," she yelled back.

Evan reached over and threaded his fingers between Darcy's. That same warm thrill moved all over her body. She glanced at him. He looked so comfortable walking beside her, nothing like that first time they'd met at Austin's wedding.

He met her eyes. "What?"

She nodded toward their hands. "What if Sara sees?"

A thoughtful expression moved over his handsome features, and then he smiled. "I'm okay with that."

"You are?" Her heart rate kicked up a notch.

Evan stopped walking and pulled her closer. "Yeah. More than okay with it."

Darcy didn't have time to form words as he tipped her chin up, bent closer, and covered her lips with his. It was soft and full of, well, everything. Contentment, love, and as the kiss stretched on, the passion she'd felt before sparked and changed how he kissed her.

“What are you doing?” Sara laughed as she barreled into them. She wrapped her arms around them and squeezed as she jumped up and down. “Did you kiss Darcy?”

“What would you think if I did?” Evan picked her up, and they stood in a group hug like they had at the restaurant so many weeks earlier.

“It means I’m getting my wish,” Sara sighed.

“What wish was that?”

“I can’t tell you until it’s all the way true,” Sara squealed, bouncing in their arms.

“Can you tell me what the wish is about, without spoiling the wish?” Darcy asked.

“It’s about you. You’re beautiful, you help me when I needs it, you cook real good, and you make Daddy smile.”

“When I need her,” Darcy corrected with a smile.

“Like that.” Sara put an arm around their necks and pulled them all closer together. “We’re happier with Darcy.”

“Yeah, we are,” Evan whispered.

And just like that, Darcy was a complete goner.

Not an April Fool?



“Hey, Sara.” Darcy glanced at the couch. Sara lay on her stomach, feet kicked up in the air, watching TV. “Should we go to your dad’s game?”

Sara scrambled to sit up. “Really?”

“Yeah, it’ll only take us thirty minutes to get there. We can catch some of it.”

“Yay.” Sara pumped her fist in the air. “Daddy will be so surprised.”

“I know.” Darcy smiled and put a hoodie with the team logo on it over Sarah’s long-sleeve shirt.

It had been a long and mostly dull day. They tried to play at the playground earlier, but the wind coming off of Lake Champlain made it too cold to stay out for long. Plus, none of Sarah’s friends had been able to join her. After twenty minutes, Sara complained her fingers were freezing, and they headed home. They finished homework, made dinner, and then Sara turned on the TV.

Darcy could say she decided to go to the game because Sara looked bored. However, if she were honest with herself, she’d have to admit that she wanted to see Evan.

Everything was going so well between them. Darcy loved every minute they spent together and missed him a lot during the away games. The week before, he’d been out late for an away game, and it was hard to pass up the opportunity to see him at a closer one. Even if she couldn’t talk to him, she could watch how he prowled up and down the sidelines, yelling

plays and instructions to his team. He always looked so powerful.

“Come on, sweetie.” Darcy helped Sara into her coat, grabbed their gloves from the table by the front door, and then grabbed her purse.

During the drive, they sang along with the radio and giggled over how Evan would react when he saw them. By the time they arrived at CVU’s field, it was halfway through the first quarter.

The visitors’ side of the stands was half full and subdued because they were down by fourteen points. Darcy and Sara found a spot near the bottom, as close to the field as possible. Her gaze immediately zoned in on Evan. He was yelling something and pointing downfield. She couldn’t hear him, but she recognized how tense he was.

“Daddy,” Sara squealed.

“Maybe we should wait until halftime, sweetie. He looks busy.” Darcy tried to pull Sara away from the rail where she was jumping up and down, waving at the team.

“But seeing me will make him happy,” Sara said.

She continued calling for her dad until one of the football players noticed her. He waved at her, walked over to Evan, and tapped him on the shoulder. Darcy was close enough to see the frustration on Evan’s face when he turned to the teen. Her gut clenched, thinking he would chew the poor boy out. However, when the kid pointed to the stands, Evan turned toward them and met her gaze.

His scowl faded but didn’t disappear when he focused on Sara waving both hands at him, and then the assistant coach stole his attention again.

Sara sighed and sat beside Darcy. “Daddy isn’t happy.”

“No,” Darcy agreed.

“Is he mad at me?”

“Of course not. The team is losing right now. I think he’s focused on changing that. After the game, he’ll be your

smiling dad again.” Darcy patted the bench. “Come sit beside me so we can keep each other warm.”

“Oo, the seat is cold.” Sara’s eyes widened, and then she climbed into Darcy’s lap.

“We should have brought a blanket to sit on and one to wrap around us. We’ll remember next time.”

Darcy pushed her unease at Evan’s less-than-exuberant welcome to enjoy holding Sara. She knew Evan’s focus had to stay on the game. She hadn’t come to hang out with him. No, she’d come to watch him and give him the support he needed. She’d yell with the crowd and cheer on the Carvers because she was Sugar Creek born and bred, and that’s what she had always done.

The first quarter ended and the second one started. Sugar Creek was still fourteen points behind the Redhawks. Every time the Carvers got close to the end zone, they were shut down without scoring. Luckily, Evan’s defense did a great job keeping the Redhawks from moving any farther ahead as well.

“Darcy, will Daddy win?” Sara looked concerned a little before halftime.

“I don’t know. He’s doing his best, as are all the boys.”

Darcy hated when Sara frowned. She noticed several kids running up and down a grassy patch outside the fence surrounding the field. “Hey, why don’t we go over there, and you can play with the other kids for the last five minutes before halftime? It’ll help warm you up, then we can say hi to your dad and head home.”

“I want to stay for the whole game,” Sara pouted.

“It’s really cold, and we aren’t prepared for it. We have the game next week.”

“Okay. Can we stand by the gate to say hi to Daddy when they go to the locker room?”

“Yes. You can hug him and say goodnight before we go home.”

Darcy gathered the few things she'd brought with them so they could go straight to the car after seeing Evan. It was getting colder, and she figured she should get Sara in bed at a decent hour. She leaned against the fence to watch the game and keep an eye on her charge.

Sara skipped over to the kids with a big smile and asked, "Can I play?"

Two girls nodded, and one pointed to the end of the strip of grass. She must have explained what they were doing even though Darcy couldn't hear them. Then all three took off running. They reached the end and turned around.

After doing this two or three times, the girls' mom called them to her side, and they walked back to the bleachers. Sara headed to Darcy. Before she reached her, she veered off to stand next to a group of boys on the sidewalk closer to the gate.

"Hey, do you want to play?" she asked again.

The boys turned to stare at her. One pointed to the sweatshirt that peeked out from under her coat. Sara had unzipped it so the Sugar Creek Carver logo was visible. She said it made her happy for people to know who she was cheering for.

"We don't play with Carvers," he sneered.

The boy couldn't have been much older than Sara—eight or nine, at the most—but Darcy had never heard a child sound so ugly. She immediately focused on them instead of the game.

"Why not?" Sara asked.

"Because you're stupid."

"No, I'm not."

"Are too." He darted forward and shoved Sara hard.

It took her by surprise; the boy was a good foot and a half taller than her. Sara squeaked as her feet flew out from under her. She landed hard, knocking the air out of her. Darcy ran to her side.

“How dare you! Where are your parents?” Darcy glared at the boys as she knelt beside Sara and pulled her into her arms. She whispered for the girl to breathe and then turned her anger back to the kids. “Apologize.”

The boys laughed and yelled as they ran toward the home stands, “You can’t make us.”

Sara finally got a good breath and then burst into tears. Darcy pulled her closer and rocked her back and forth.

“Darcy? Sara? What happened?” Evan ran toward them.

The quarter had ended without Darcy’s notice. They were close to the gate, so Evan must have seen them kneeling on the ground as he headed toward it for the halftime break. Several of the team stopped to huddle around them, and Evan glared at everybody.

“Boys, get to the locker room and hydrate. I’ll be a minute,” he ordered. Then without waiting to see if they listened, he reached down and took Sara into his arms.

Darcy got herself off the ground. “I’m so sorry. Some boy just knocked her down for no reason.”

Sara held up her hands that were scraped from falling on the concrete. “They hurt, Daddy.”

“Who did this?” Evan looked around the area with fire in his eyes. “Darcy, where were you when all this was happening?”

“I was right here,” she snapped. Where did he think she was?

“Why didn’t you stop him?”

“It happened so fast. I had no idea he was going to be mean to her.”

“You shouldn’t have come. It’s too cold tonight. She should be at home sleeping.” He paced a step or two cradling his daughter in his arms. “And why would you let her play with strangers? Take Sara home.”

Grumpy Evan was back and in full-on overprotective mode.

“She was fine playing with some girls until they left. What’s wrong with her making friends to play with?” Darcy placed her hands on her hips. “Most kids aren’t cruel like that boy. There was no way to prepare for that.”

“That’s why she shouldn’t have been over here. It’s different at home because those kids are all on our side.” He glared at her.

“What an awful attitude. Kids are kids. Most of the time,” she mumbled the last bit. Then she held out her arms. “Come on, Sara. Let’s go wash your hands.”

“We can talk about this when I get home.” Evan kissed Sara’s forehead. “Will you be okay, baby? I have to go to the team, but I’ll stay if you need me.”

“No, I’m good, Daddy. Darcy’s here,” Sara snuggled into her.

Evan softened a little as he met Darcy’s gaze. “Sorry about yelling. Please, take her home, and we’ll talk later.”

“Fine. Good luck with the second half.” Darcy grabbed her bag from the ground without letting Sara go. “Come on, sweetie.”

They slipped into the restroom and washed Sara’s hands, and then headed to the car. The drive home was much more subdued than the ride to the game. Sara fell asleep, and Darcy was left wondering what happened. Evan had fussed at her for nothing. What had he expected her to do? Would he always be so protective and bear-like where Sara was concerned?

She remembered the night at the movie in the park. Perhaps worry was a part of being a parent she didn’t understand, but she thought Evan took it too far.

Darcy didn’t want the girl to get hurt. When Sara hit the ground, Darcy’s heart paused until she knew Sara was okay. She never wanted to feel that way again—scared and so angry she would have shoved that boy down herself if Sara hadn’t needed her—but she also knew children needed to run and

play. No parent, nanny, or teacher could protect them from everything.



Darcy felt unbalanced the week after that game. Evan apologized for yelling at her when he got home, but for the first time in almost a month, he didn't plan something fun for the three of them on Saturday. And he didn't bring Sara to church on Sunday.

The following week, Evan was quieter when he got home at night, barely talking to her. He made excuses about being tired, kissed her on the cheek, and sent her on her way.

There were no snuggles on the couch with a movie, and worst of all, he answered all of her texts with one or two-word answers. When she pushed him on it, he said there was a lot of pressure at work to win the next game and apologized again.

However, Darcy felt like he was pulling away, but she didn't know why. She hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe the April Fool's curse was starting to rear its ugly head? Darcy hoped not, but she clearly needed to decide about returning to school or staying in Sugar Creek. At this rate, Evan might not want her around in a few weeks, much less after the New Year.

She sighed and opened her laptop to research majors that worked with children. By Thursday, she had a few ideas of what she could do. She didn't say anything to her family or Sara, but she decided to tell Evan when he got home from practice.

"Will you stay for dinner tonight?" Sara asked, just like she had all week.

Up to that point, Darcy had left shortly after Evan got home. She missed getting to put the little girl to bed, but it seemed easier than the awkwardness that had settled over them. It was like they reverted to that first week she'd worked

for him—attracted to each other but afraid of what that meant in the long run. Well, making her own plans would be one way to discover what he wanted out of their fledgling relationship.

“Sure. I need to talk to your dad. So, if it’s okay with him, I’ll stay.” Darcy raised her brow as he met her gaze.

“Of course,” he said. But that was it. Something had definitely changed in the last few days.

After putting her plate and Sara’s on the table, Darcy sat beside the little girl. She waited for Evan to say a quick blessing on the food and then pushed her potatoes around on the plate.

“How was school, pumpkin?” Evan asked.

“Good. JD overheard me and Alice on the playground. She thinks I’m cool for getting into a fight at the game, so she keeps talking about it.” Sara beamed at her dad.

“It wasn’t a fight,” Darcy murmured.

“I know, but Alice doesn’t. Anyway, JD stopped and said he’d knock that boy down. Why?” Sara tilted her head to the side as if it would help her figure out boys.

Darcy wished it was so easy. She covered her grin with a hand and glanced at Evan. He didn’t look as amused that Sara might have her first admirer.

She sighed. If Evan knocked someone over for her, she might be confident he liked her as much as she did him. Of course, he’d have to knock himself over for being stupid right now. Why did men have to hold stuff in and not talk about their thoughts?

“Darcy?” Sara poked her in the arm.

“Well, I think JD didn’t like that you were hurt. Since he couldn’t help you, he probably felt helpless and wanted to lash out at the person who hurt you.”

“Does lash out mean hitting people?”

“Not always,” Darcy hedged. Then she looked at Evan and said, “Sometimes it’s being quiet and not doing anything.”

His gaze jerked from his plate to her face. Darcy had no way of knowing what he was thinking, and with Sara sitting at the table, she couldn't ask. Instead, she changed the subject and kept the little girl talking about her day and what she wanted to be for Halloween.

They cleaned the dishes and turned on the dishwasher together, and then Evan helped his daughter brush her teeth and get into bed.

Darcy waited on the couch, growing more anxious with each passing moment. She knew she wanted to do something around children in her future, and she'd narrowed it down to two ideas. Both of them made her excited, but she wanted Evan's opinion. It shouldn't matter, especially after the last week, but it did.

"Hey," he said as he sat beside her. "I'm sorry about this week. There's been a lot on my mind, and I haven't handled the unanswered questions well. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"What kind of questions?" she asked.

"Mostly, why did I act like such a jerk to you Friday night? It wasn't your fault, and you were there to help her. I just get so crazy thinking about Sara getting hurt or sick."

"I know." Darcy reached for his hand. His skin was hot against her cold one. "I understand, but avoiding me doesn't help anything. You said you were sorry, so let's move on."

Evan tugged on her hand until she scooted nearer to him. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and tucked her close.

"I am sorry, and I'm glad you're forgiving." He moved his head next to hers. "How should we move on?"

Darcy tilted her face up. "A kiss wouldn't hurt."

All the confusion and sadness of the last few days disappeared when his lips touched hers. She could almost hear how sorry he was that they had missed out on so much time together.

Darcy melted into him as he deepened the kiss. She forgot everything she'd wanted to speak to him about until he pulled away and rested his forehead on hers.

"Sorry, I got carried away," he murmured. "You said you needed to talk to me about something?"

"Oh, yeah." She snuggled closer and rested her head on his chest. With a sigh, she dove right in, hoping this was still the best thing to do. "I spent a lot of time thinking about my future this week. And I came up with two ideas that I like."

"And?" Evan shifted like he was uncomfortable.

"One requires more school, but the other wouldn't." Her throat closed up. Was it presumptuous of her to think he cared about her chosen route? She moved so she could search his face. He wasn't frowning or smiling. His expression was carefully neutral, and she hated it.

"What are the ideas?" he asked.

"Speech pathologist is one. Then I could work in the school system, which would be cool. The other one I could do tomorrow if I got a business loan and a location. I'd open a shop that specializes in kids' parties. You know, tea parties, pirate parties, sports, whatever the child wants. I'd have dress-up clothes and provide the party rooms and treats. Think how fun it would be to spend birthdays with kids all the time." Darcy liked that one the best, but part of her felt she needed to be a responsible adult with a real job. "But I could help a lot of kids if I did the pathology one. What do you think?"



What did he think? Evan's mind spun. He wanted Darcy to stay in Sugar Creek, but asking her to give up her education was selfish. She might resent him for asking her to stay. What if things didn't work out between them? It would be his fault she had no degree to provide for herself. Plus,

running her own business would be hard, keeping her busy, and there was always a risk of failure.

No matter what he thought, which he wasn't sure he could decide on, the choice had to be Darcy's.

"I think they both sound like great ideas," he said diplomatically. "Whatever you decide, you'll be great at it."

Darcy's brow scrunched up, and she ducked her head to stare at the floor. Did he say something wrong?

"Thanks," she muttered. Then she looked at him and smiled. "I'll have to give it a little more thought before I decide."

"Okay," he said lamely.

Darcy unfolded her legs from under her and stood up. "I'd better get home. Tomorrow will be a long night with the homecoming game."

"Yeah. That reminds me. One of the teachers had to back out of chaperoning the dance Saturday night. Will you join me if I can find a babysitter?" Evan stood as well.

"Are you asking me to the Homecoming dance, Mr. Porter?" she teased.

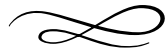
"I think I am."

"Well, no points for originality in how you asked, but full points for the surprise. I'd love to go with you. Do you think we'll get to dance at least once?"

"I'll make sure of it," he said right before he pulled her close for a goodnight kiss.

Evan took his time. If Darcy returned to school, there wouldn't be many more opportunities like this in his future.

Homecoming



“Are you excited about tonight, Coach?” James asked while half of the team listened in. “I’ve heard home games are special for you.”

They were supposed to be preparing for their game against the St. Johnsbury Hilltoppers. Everyone was ready for another win. They’d beat Middlebury two weeks earlier by one touchdown, but the loss to CVU the week before had been hard.

Evan was proud of how his team hit the practice field with renewed dedication during the past week. He liked hearing the teasing in his player’s voice. It was a good indication spirits were high.

If only he hadn’t let football take precedence over the conversation he needed to have with Darcy. It was clear she still didn’t understand how serious Sara’s heart defect had been. Of course, that was probably his fault. He’d mentioned it that first day but never went into details about the surgeries and possible long-term effects. Instead, he’d left Darcy to figure it out on her own. He couldn’t blame her for thinking Sara was just like all the other kids her age.

“You going to have someone special in the stands?” James continued.

Evan decided to roll with it as best he could without letting his personal worries get to the boys. “Yeah, I love having Sara here to cheer us on.”

Benton, his quarterback, smiled. “I like knowing she’s up there, too.”

“Me too,” Colby grinned and then wiggled his eyebrows. “Plus, if Sara is here, so is Darcy.”

Evan couldn’t help the laugh that escaped. “She’s out of your league Colby.”

“Your’s too, Coach,” Benton quipped.

Yeah, she probably was.

“You know,” Fred joined the fun. The running back stood with shoulder pads and jersey in hand as he said, “I’d look forward to home games too if I got kissed the way you did after the last one.”

“Enough of that, Fred,” Evan barked. The thought of getting kissed after the game hit him hard. He wanted that, but his behavior the last week might make that impossible. Of course, she had kissed him last night, so maybe it wasn’t a lost cause yet. “Finish getting suited up. I’ll grab the playbook and be back.”

Talking to Darcy the night before had been good, but it also created a cloud that now hung over him. He appreciated that she had to move forward with her life plans. If only he’d been brave enough to say he wanted her to stay, but if she left, he’d wait for her because she was worth it. Evan knew that in his heart. However, those words hadn’t surfaced until after she’d left. And he didn’t know if those thoughts would have been enough for her.

“Boston isn’t too far. We could do long distance,” he whispered, but did he want to do that? It would be miserable and might all fall out the way he first thought it would with Darcy gone and Sara sad about it. He didn’t want to think about how he’d feel.

Darcy was young, and if she chose to, she’d leave after the New Year to return to her life at college. Evan was a decade older than her, and he wanted a calm, steady life. She might not be ready to settle down yet.

Heck, she was barely legal. At only twenty-one, she still had a lot of parties waiting for her smile and laughter. Just because she took a few months off from those activities didn't mean she was ready to give them up for good.

Could he handle being separated from her while wondering if she was out with friends, maybe dating because that's what you did in college?

"Coach," Benton called from the door. "The team is ready."

Pushing the doubts away, he refocused on the task before him. "Let's get them pumped for a win."



Darcy led Sara down the bleachers to their favorite spot behind the fifty-yard line. From there, they could see Evan easier than anywhere else, even when he moved up and down the sideline during play. She and Sara wore matching hoodies under their coats. She also made sure Sara wore long johns under her jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. There was no way Evan could accuse her of not doing everything to keep his daughter warm and safe.

She even had a backpack full of supplies because it would be a long cold night without them. There were gloves and hand warmers, cushions to sit on, and plenty of blankets for their legs and shoulders. They wore thick wool beanies that were fur-lined with flaps covering their ears. Sara's had double pom poms on top making it look like she had bear ears. It was adorable. Darcy also had a thermos of hot chocolate to keep their insides warm.

Even though they'd made up the night before, Darcy was determined to be extra cautious with Sara. That way, there wouldn't be a reason to argue. They needed time to return to their easy banter before testing their relationship with more disagreement.

Sara stood by the rail while Darcy prepped their seat on the bottom row of the bleachers. She shouted the cheerleaders' names and waved to them. The teens loved it when Sara did that. It's probably why they always invited her onto the track to cheer with them.

Darcy rubbed at her chest. If she went back to school, she'd miss Sara so much. Her thoughts drifted to her conversation with Evan the night before. She had hoped he'd ask her to stay in Sugar Creek, but he didn't. In fact, he hadn't said anything about how he saw their future.

"Can we go on the field with everyone?" Sara interrupted her thoughts.

"Yep. The team should be coming out soon."

Darcy took the girl by the hand and moved to the stairs leading to the track and the football field. The student body was doing the same. They lined up in two rows on either side of a blow-up house-like thing. The team scrunched inside, waiting to run past the flap, down the path made by the crowd, and finally, through a giant Carver's banner that the cheerleaders held while the band played the fight song.

The energy in the stadium was contagious. There would be plenty of time to worry about the future and how Evan did or did not feel about it later. Darcy decided to enjoy the game and the town she loved.

An hour and a half later, the Carvers were up by three touchdowns, and Sara was losing her voice from all the yelling.

"Darcy," she said in a scratchy voice. "Will they have fireworks after the game?"

"They usually do at Homecoming."

"Good." Sara nodded. Then she pointed a few rows over. "There's JD."

Sure enough, the boy sat beside a couple old enough to be his grandparents, but Darcy didn't know them. "Do you want to say hi?"

“Can I?”

“Sure. Stay where I can see you.”

Sara hopped up and skipped to her classmate. Several students waved to her along the way. Darcy had learned that many of Evan’s students knew who his daughter was, and they all kept an eye out for her.

That made her feel good inside. Sugar Creek was a community that cared about those who lived there, even if they’d moved in less than a year ago.

“Hey, Darce.” Austin appeared, Jackie glued to his side. “Can we join you?”

“Of course.” Darcy scooted over. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thanks.” Austin’s cheeks were red from the cold, but his eyes lit up as the blush spread. He tilted his head toward the field. “How’s everything going with you and the coach?”

It was Darcy’s turn to blush. “Good.”

Jackie laughed. “You’re as bad as Brandon. Ask a question; get a one-word answer. Come on, give us a bit more.”

“I like him. He likes me.” Darcy shrugged. Austin gave her that big-brother look that always did her in. “I don’t know if it will be enough.”

“Why not?” Austin studied her face.

“I might go back to school, but even if I don’t, I’m not sure if he can see a future with me.”

“Whoa,” Jackie smiled. “That’s a quick one-eighty. A month and a half ago, you thought he was a meany. Now you’re making plans for the future?”

“You’re right.” Darcy sighed out a half laugh, but then she squinted at her sister-in-law. “You should talk. You hadn’t even met my brother a year ago, and you’re already married and expecting your first child. Hello pot, I’m kettle.”

That made Jackie laugh again. “Touché.”

“Well, let me know if I need to go all big brother on my friend down there.” Austin hugged Darcy from the side. “But go easy on him too. I think change is hard for him.”

“I can see that, especially when it comes to Sara. Speaking of which, here she comes.”

“Darcy, how much longer until the fireworks?” Sara asked. “JD doesn’t believe me when I said we’d get to see them.”

Darcy shook her head. “The third quarter is almost over. So, maybe twenty minutes, depending on time outs.”

“Okay.” She hugged Darcy and ran back to the boy.

“She’s a cutie,” Jackie said.

“She sure is.” Darcy smiled and let her love for the girl warm her up. Then something cold landed on her face, quickly followed by another. “Is that rain?”

She looked around, and random drops splashed down on faces and empty sections of aluminum seating. It was light, and the droplets were small but cold.

“Yep,” Austin sighed. “As much as I enjoy football. It’s been a long day, and I’d rather take my girl home than sit here and freeze.”

“Awe. I’ll never get used to you sounding so sweet, Austin.” Darcy stood and hugged her brother and then her sister-in-law. “I’ll see you at Sunday dinner.”

They walked up the bleachers hand-in-hand. Darcy couldn’t help but wish she had more of that with Evan. Then she turned and waved Sara over. When the little girl arrived, Darcy pulled Sara’s hoodie up so her head would stay dry.

“Do you want to go home?” she asked.

“No, Daddy needs me to cheer for him.” Sara shook her head. “And I want to see the fireworks.”

“If the rain gets heavier, we’ll go to the car, but we can stay a little while and see if it stops.”

Darcy tucked Sara closer to her side, needing the warmth and hoping to keep the smaller body from losing too much

heat to the night. She pulled out the hand warmers, shook them to activate, and placed one in each of their pockets before pulling out an umbrella. It wasn't big enough to keep them both completely dry, but it was better than nothing.

The rain didn't get any worse, and it stopped before the end of the fourth quarter. Darcy was relieved because she didn't want to drag Sara away. But she also felt miserable. Their damp clothes made the night even colder, and her arm hurt from holding the umbrella up.

"I'm so glad that's over," Darcy sighed. "Now we can enjoy the fireworks. Want some hot chocolate?"

"Yes, please." Sara's teeth chattered until after she drank half the cup of warmth. Then she perked up. "Daddy will be happy he's winning. Maybe he won't be sad tomorrow."

"Was he sad last week after losing the game?" Darcy couldn't help but ask.

"Yeah. He didn't smile. I don't like it when Daddy is sad."

"Good thing he has you." She booped the girl's nose.

Sara giggled and snuggled back into Darcy's side.

The game finally ended in a big win for the Carvers. Half of the people in the stand left five minutes before the end. Darcy wished they had too, but she'd do anything to see Sara smile.

As soon as the teams shook hands at the end of the game, the band started the fight song again, and the fireworks began. There weren't many of them, but Sara clapped and cheered for each one.

When they were over, Darcy gathered all the stuff she'd brought and stuffed as much as possible into the backpack. Since the blankets were wet, they weighed a ton. She trudged up the bleachers with her back and arms loaded with stuff. Sara hummed and skipped beside her to the car. After struggling with the trunk, she dumped things as fast as possible.

She watched Sara get buckled into her booster when someone called her name.

“Darcy? What are you still doing here?” Evan glared at her. “It’s too cold for Sara. You should have left as soon as the rain started.”

Darcy swallowed her hello. She’d been looking forward to seeing him after the game, but the fire in his eyes squelched that. It was like a repeat of the week before.

“Daddy,” Sara interrupted before Darcy could say anything. “I wanted to stay for the fireworks. They were great.”

Evan leaned in and kissed his girl on the cheek. “I’m glad you liked them, but look how wet your clothes are.”

“Not that wet.” Sara patted her sleeve. “We had an umbrella. JD was dripping.”

Evan shook his head, then focused on Darcy. “She’s soaked. You’re the adult. I don’t care how much she wanted to stay. You should have known better and taken her home.”

Darcy’s anger rose in the face of his. “If everyone left because it rained, there wouldn’t be anyone to cheer for the team.”

“Not everyone was as sick as Sara as a baby,” he ground the words out. “You know what, I’ll take her home.”

“Fine,” Darcy said.

Her heart was racing from the adrenaline coursing through her. Even though it felt like *deja vu*, she couldn’t help but worry he might be right. Should she have made Sara go home when the rain started? It hadn’t seemed that bad. Darcy had sat through so many games in the rain and snow that a few minutes of drizzle hadn’t phased her. Sara wasn’t bothered by it, so Darcy hadn’t seen the harm in waiting it out. And it wasn’t like she hadn’t been prepared.

Evan pulled Sara from the car and turned toward his.

“Bye, Darcy,” Sara called from over his shoulder, but he didn’t say anything else.

Darcy called out to him, “I don’t think I’ll be available tomorrow night.”

“Good,” he shot back.

His words and coldness hit her like a punch to the gut. Were they really having the same fight as the week before? Why was he determined to blame her for things like other people’s choices and rain? She couldn’t control either of those things.

She drove home and changed out of her cold clothes. Then she sank onto her couch without bothering to pull it out into the bed. What was she doing? Relationships shouldn’t hurt so much over silly things. Right?

Her phone rang with Evan’s name on the screen.

“Hello,” she answered. Maybe he was calling to apologize again.

“What were you thinking?”

Guess that apology wasn’t going to happen.

Darcy huffed out the breath she’d been holding and stood up. “Does it matter? You overreacted again and didn’t give me the benefit of the doubt.”

“Sara can’t be in weather like that. We’ve gone over that. She can get sick easier than other kids. She might look healthy to you, but if she gets the wrong infection, she can end up in the hospital.”

Darcy tilted her chin in defiance even though he couldn’t see her. “I’ve talked to my sister a lot about heart birth defects. Whenever I’ve had a question, I’ve called her. You can’t keep Sara in a bubble. Living life is how she will continue getting stronger. She’s fine. Give her some space to grow. People watch games in the rain all the time.”

“You don’t understand.” Evan’s voice hardened. “Maybe you shouldn’t come in on Monday. I’ll find someone else to watch Sara after school.”

“What? Evan,” Darcy started, but he hung up. “Stupid man.”

She threw her phone on the floor and curled up on the couch for a good cry.



Evan was relieved when Sara woke up Saturday morning and didn't seem affected by her time in the rain. Maybe he had overreacted? He shouldn't have told Darcy not to come to work. She was so good for Sara in so many ways. Plus, after a good sleep, he could admit that much of the argument was his fault. He needed to give Darcy more details about Sara's health issues.

"Is Darcy coming over?" Sara asked as she sat at the table with a bowl of cereal.

"Probably not." Evan frowned. How was he going to tell Sara he might have fired Darcy? Or did he? Maybe he could call her, and she'd still be Sara's nanny, but was that what he wanted? He hated the confusion that had him acting like a jerk. "Tell me about last night."

"It was fun. I cheered, talked to JD, and watched the fireworks." Sara shrugged.

"I mean, were you cold?"

"A little, but so was Darcy. She gave me hot pockets for my fingers, and we snuggled under the umbrella."

"Hot pockets?"

"Yeah." Sara ran to the mudroom and came back with hand warmers. She held them up so he could see. "Hot pockets."

He nodded. Darcy hadn't intentionally put Sara in danger. He probably wouldn't have said anything if she'd been any other little girl. He wouldn't have worried about it. But Sara was different. She needed her caretakers to understand that. He

would try and explain it better to Darcy. That would make Sara happy.

“So, can we do something with Darcy today?” His little girl stared at him with hopeful eyes.

“I’ll call her after breakfast.”

Evan expected Sara to cheer or do something else, like jump up and wave her spoon in the air. Instead, she smiled at him and continued eating. He ate a bowl of oatmeal and watched her. It was eerie how quiet and subdued she was.

“Do you feel okay?” he asked.

“My throat is scratchy,” she answered, pushing her half-eaten cereal away. “Can I watch cartoons?”

“Sure. Go lay on the couch, and I’ll get the thermometer.” He put their dishes in the sink and headed to the medicine cabinet. Once he had what he needed to check her temperature and the bottle of baby Tylenol, he joined her in the living room. “Open up.”

His nerves rattled inside his chest as they waited for the thing to beep. A quick glance showed Sara was slightly warmer than usual, but nothing crazy. However, the fact she wasn’t running around the room scared him.

“I’m going to call Dr. Jonah. He can consult with Dr. Ben if he thinks there’s anything to worry about.” Evan grabbed his phone. Dr. Jonah was Sara’s local pediatrician, but he worked closely with her cardiologist, Dr. Ben, in Albany, New York.

“I’m okay, Daddy.”

But she didn’t look okay. And then she coughed. Evan’s worry shot through the roof.

“Let’s get you dressed.”

An hour and a half later, he tucked Sara in bed for a nap. Dr. Jonah said there was nothing to worry about. Rest, lots of fluids, and good food would help Sara feel better quickly. She had a simple cold like people get all the time, but it hadn’t made Evan feel any better.

He closed her door and glanced at his phone. Darcy had texted a couple of times while they were at the clinic, but he hadn't responded. With a sigh, he punched out a message.

Sara's running a fever with a sore throat. This is why you have to be careful.

Will she be okay?

Doc says she'll be fine.

What can I do to help?

Nothing. I might need you all day Monday if she isn't feeling better.

Okay. Whatever you need.

Evan read over the thread again. It all looked like mundane phrases, but something about them made him sad. He shouldn't have goaded her again about her choice to stay at the game, but he couldn't help it. It was up to him to protect his daughter, even if that meant teaching his nanny how to do it.

He rubbed at his chest. Darcy wasn't just a nanny. Something incredible had been growing between them, but at the moment, he felt like a father chastising a teenager. He looked at her words again. She hadn't apologized. Why couldn't she see how serious this was?

Teenie Meddles



Darcy arrived at the Porter's house by six in the morning so Evan could get to the high school. She felt terrible that Sara was sick because of her. Evan hadn't said *I told you so* yet, but it might happen before he left. Darcy took a deep breath and paused before the door. Should she knock or go in like she usually did? She hated that she didn't know where she stood with Evan.

A shadow approached the door and opened it. Evan was dressed to go but hadn't shaved in at least two days. It wasn't quite a beard but one step past stubble. Darcy wanted to reach out and run her fingers over it to see if it would be rough or soft.

Evan ran a hand through his hair. "Thanks for coming. Sara's still asleep. Her fever broke yesterday, and it's just her cough keeping her home."

"Evan, I'm so sorry she got sick. You have to know I didn't mean for that to happen," Darcy pleaded with him. She wanted him to pull her into his arms and tell her it was okay, that he knew she'd never hurt his daughter.

But he didn't.

Instead, he stepped to the side so she could enter the house. Darcy walked past him and set her purse on the table in the entryway. Then she stood there, not sure what she should do or say.

"Evan—"

"Darcy—"

Darcy twisted her hands in front of her. “You first.”

He sighed. “What are we doing?”

Panic started deep in her chest. “What do you mean?”

He wavered between them. “Us. I can’t deny how attracted to you I am. You’re wonderful, but we’re in different places in our lives. You have everything stretching out in front of you—school, a social life, new jobs, and all that comes with that. My daughter depends on me for everything, and she should be my focus. We shouldn’t have given in to what’s between us.”

“O-oh,” Darcy stuttered. She didn’t know what to say. She wanted to beg him to reconsider. They might be different, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t make a relationship successful. Not if they were willing to discuss things and work together to find a solution. She finally whispered, “I don’t think this is a mistake.”

Evan reached out and ran a finger down her cheek. “I didn’t say it was a mistake. But if you think about it, you’ll realize you’d be happier without us. Look, I have to go. Call me if Sara needs me.”

Darcy watched him hurry across the room and out the garage door without a word. Once the door clicked shut, she whispered, “You’re wrong. I wouldn’t be happier without you.”

Wrapping her arms around her waist, she moved to the small window in the front door and watched Evan back out and drive away. His about-face didn’t make any sense. Sure, they had a few years between them, but that didn’t mean anything. Not in her mind. So what if he was older and had a daughter? Darcy loved Sara. She could see herself as part of the girl’s life. That’s what she wanted more than anything. But she wanted Evan to be a part of it too—as more than her boss.

Darcy sat on the couch and pulled out her phone. It was early, but she knew her mom would be awake. Sure enough, Teenie answered on the second ring.

“What’s wrong?” her mom asked.

“I don’t know,” Darcy gasped as she struggled not to break down in tears. “Can you come to the Porter’s? I need you.”

“Of course. I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Darcy checked on Sara and then paced the kitchen. She made a fresh pot of coffee and then huddled in the corner of the couch until her mom knocked on the door. When she opened it, she fell into her mother’s arms and let the tears free.



Teenie held her daughter. Her heart squeezed at the despair she felt radiating from the shaking shoulders. Things had been going so well. What happened? She pushed Darcy out of the doorway to close out the chilly morning air.

“Let’s sit down, and you can tell me all about it,” she whispered.

They moved to the couch, and Teenie sat down and patted the cushion. Darcy did what she’d always done in high school in moments like this. She lay on the couch with her head in her mother’s lap. Teenie sighed. She hated that her daughter was in pain but missed these moments when her kids needed her. She let her fingers comb through Darcy’s hair.

“Okay, what’s going on?” she prompted.

“Evan—” Darcy couldn’t say anything else for a while.

Teenie comforted her and waited patiently. After five minutes or so, she started talking.

“You really like him, don’t you? And it’s not just the man. You’ve fallen in love with that little girl. You’ve finally grown into yourself these past two months. Your eyes shine with purpose and joy. It makes me so happy to see it. Whatever is bothering you now, we can figure it out. Talk to me, sweetheart. What can I do to help?”

“Oh, Mom. I was so happy. Sara is, she’s so amazing. I can’t help but love her.”

“And her dad?”

Darcy’s head nodded against Teenie’s lap. “Yeah. I love him, but he thinks we’re a mistake.”

Teenie’s hand paused in her daughter’s hair. “A mistake that you’re his nanny, or is there more to this already?”

Darcy sat up and wiped her eyes. “We’ve kissed, and we were spending a lot of time together with Sara. But he got so mad at the last two games. He apologized, but then he said we shouldn’t have tried because I have a social life, and he has a daughter. What does that even mean? I’ve never said anything to him about missing school or that life.”

“Do you miss that life?” Teenie asked.

“No. I didn’t love it while I was there. That’s why I came home.”

Teenie nodded. “That’s what I thought. You told us you needed to find where you fit, where you felt like you could make a difference. Did you find it?”

“Yes, I was going to tell you at dinner yesterday, but I was so upset about Sara being sick that I forgot about it. I want to start my own party business. It would be for kids. Kind of a show up, dress up, and live it up kind of deal. The kids would pick a theme, and I’d have everything for them to enjoy the best party of their life.”

“Would you have your own location or go to their homes?” Teenie asked.

“I’d like my own location. That way I can have a great big dressing room with lots of stalls so they can put on the costumes in the shop. I’d ask Deb Poverly at the bakery if she’d make the cakes and stuff until my shop does well enough to hire a baker. But maybe I’d never need that. I don’t know. There’s so much to figure out, but I can’t think straight.”

Teenie pulled her daughter in for another hug. “Because of Evan?”

“I told him about the idea and a second choice that would require me to return to school. Do you think that’s the problem?”

“Perhaps. Let me give this some thought. Do you think he’s worth these tears?” Teenie crossed her fingers, hoping her daughter would say yes.

Darcy nodded slowly. “If he can see me as an adult, then yes. I might not know everything about being a mom, but I can learn. He just has to be patient with me.”

“Oh, sweetheart. If you love that little girl, you know all you need to about being a mom. We all fake our way through it, you know.”

“Darcy?” Sara’s voice interrupted their conversation. She walked from the hallway in a purple princess gown. Her blonde hair was in tangles around her sweet face.

“Good morning, cutie,” Darcy swiped at her face again to hide any lingering tears. “How do you feel this morning?”

Sara crawled into Darcy’s lap, and the two snuggled into the sofa. “Better. Is Daddy gone?”

“Yep, he had to get to school, but he thought you needed another day to rest.”

Teenie’s heart swelled at the sight of her daughter doing what came naturally to her—loving the child in her care. The two were made for each other, and she knew in her heart that Darcy and Evan belonged together too.

She’d heard about the kiss after one of the games. It had spread between the players, then to their moms, and eventually to the Sugar Mamas. Not letting on that she knew had been the most challenging thing she’d ever done, but the other tiara-wearing women promised her it was for the best.

What she needed now was information. What was that man thinking? He clearly liked her daughter, but something was sending him running away. This called for a meeting.

“Darcy, I’ll let you two enjoy your day,” Teenie said as she stood up. “There are some things I need to see about.”

“Miss Teenie,” Sara raised her head from Darcy’s chest. “Are you working on my wish?”

Teenie smiled. “I sure am.” She bent and kissed Sara and Darcy on the tops of their heads. “It’ll be okay, Darcy. I know it will.”



By the time Teenie reached Colleen’s beauty shop, the other Sugar Mamas had also arrived. Deb, Ruth, Doreen, Annette, Ingrid, Rose, Colleen, and the new one, Sharon, were already seated around the shop. As the youngest member who had not yet earned her tiara, Teenie felt a bit in awe of the other ladies. She’d been friends with many of them for decades, but she never truly knew how involved they were in the community until they invited her to these meetings.

Countless happy marriages owed everything to the behind-the-scenes meddling of these women, but they’d never know that. On top of that, there were businesses and city ordinances that not only got off the ground but found success because the Sugar Mamas approved them. As far as she knew, they’d never used their considerable influence to hurt anyone, but few realized how they kept Sugar Creek moving forward in more ways than one.

Ruth hugged Teenie and motioned to a chair. “Okay, fill us in.”

“Darcy called me in tears this morning. She loves him, but he’s trying to send her back to school. Any idea what’s going on in his head?” Teenie got right to the point.

Doreen shook her head and huffed, “Men.”

“Right?” Rose agreed. “Who can we pull in to find out what’s happening?”

The room went silent for a few seconds, and then Teenie sat up straighter. “Goodness, I’m so slow!”

“Go on,” Deb encouraged.

“Austin can talk to him. They knew each other in college, and even though they haven’t hung out since school started, they spent a lot of time together over the summer.” Teenie felt good about that. Austin was happy, and she knew he’d also want his sister and friend to be happy.

“Good idea,” Ruth said as she pulled out a notebook. “We may need to plan on being more available for this project. For those two to figure things out, they need time together without Sara. As sweet as she is, they can’t talk about the serious stuff with her around. Write down when you’re available for babysitting. Just in case.”

“I’m available at any time,” Teenie said as she stood. “Sorry to run so soon, but I’m going to find Austin right now. Darcy was so sad this morning, and I can’t wait to change that.”

The women waved and wished her well. Just knowing they were there to help gave Teenie more confidence.

“Let’s get this train back on track.”



“**K**nock, knock.”

Evan glanced up from his desk and lunch to see Austin Fletcher standing in the doorway. “Hey, long time no see. What brings you around?”

“Sorry to interrupt your break. Do you have a minute?”

“Of course. The next hour is my prep period, so there’s no rush. Have a seat.” Evan pointed to a chair and waited for Austin to move it closer to his desk. “How’s married life treating you?”

Austin smiled. “Better than I ever imagined. We’re expecting our first baby in April.”

“Congratulations,” Evan reached over and shook Austin’s hand. “Jumping right in, aren’t you.” He wondered if they should have waited, but since it was too late, there was no point in expressing his concern.

“Neither of us is getting any younger, and we’re both ready for a family.” Austin leaned forward. “What about you?”

“Huh? I have a six-year-old. That’s family enough for me.”

“Is it? You’ve been spending a lot of time with my sister. I know how she feels about you, and now I want to know where you stand in this.” Austin pinned him to the chair with one look.

“So, this is a big brother visit, not a friend one?” Evan wasn’t sure what emotion was swamping him at the moment. He could admit he was a little envious of Austin’s joyful marriage, glad Darcy had someone to look out for her, and also peeved that he had to talk about this with a friend. His friendship with Austin was another thing he should have taken into consideration before kissing Darcy.

“It’s both.” Austin sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Look, I love my sister, and I like you for her. She’s been different since you started hanging out or whatever you’re doing.” He held up a hand and said, “And I don’t want to know what you’ve been doing. All I know is my mom demanded that I speak to you about Darcy. So, what’s going on?”

Evan leaned forward, rested his elbows on his desk, and then placed his head in his hands. “Look, Darcy’s great. I didn’t think I’d ever be interested in another woman, but somehow she slipped under my skin. But it’s not going to work. It’s better if I end it before we get in too deep. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“Then don’t. Why don’t you think it’ll work?”

“I have to put Sara first.”

“Cop out,” Austin interrupted him. “We’ve all seen how Darcy dotes on that little girl. Try again.”

Evan’s mind raced. He hadn’t thought it out enough to put it into words. Why couldn’t he make it work with Darcy? Sure, he’d fussed at her for mistakes anyone could have made. That wasn’t enough to give up. So, why was he? Perhaps he was scared. What if he invested his whole heart and Darcy left the way Jenna did? That was the real problem, but how could he describe it?

“Darcy is young,” he said. “She’s not ready to be a mom. Not when there is so much life she hasn’t experienced yet. Pulling back is the right thing to do, you know. For her sake and ours. Sara needs someone more mature that can understand the health issues she’s facing and deal with that.”

Austin cocked his head to the side. “Then why don’t you date someone closer to your age?”

“What? I’m not looking to date. That’s not what we’re talking about here.”

“No, but you sort of were dating my sister. That tells me you are ready. I think Darcy is prepared for any challenge, but the only way you’ll know is if you date other people to compare her to.”

Evan shook his head. How could he admit he didn’t want to go out with anyone other than Darcy? He instinctively knew he’d compare every minute with another woman to the ones he’d spent with her.

Austin stood up. “I’ll ask Jackie if she knows someone to set you up with.”

“Wait.” Evan stood too. “I don’t want to be set up. Just drop it, okay.”

Austin pointed at him. “You have to figure this out before Darcy leaves in January. That means dating now. I’ll be in touch.”

Evan watched his friend leave, and a heaviness he hadn’t felt in months settled on him. What kind of mess had he landed in?

Heart to Heart



Darcy made a simple dinner while Sara watched from her spot at the counter. She hadn't heard from her mom since she left earlier that morning, and now she was nervous about Evan coming home. How should she act? Would he let her stay and eat with them, or would he want her to leave because she was only the nanny again?

"Darcy, why are you so sad?" Sara interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm sorry. Sometimes when you're an adult, you want something you know you can't have, making you sad."

"You should make a wish like I did." Sara's face scrunched up. "But it's taking a long time to come true. Wishes do come true, right?"

"Oh, sweetheart." Darcy moved around the counter to hug the little girl. "That's the hard thing about wishes. They can happen right away, or they can take forever. The thing is, God is in charge of wishes, and only he knows which ones are good for us and when we need them to come true."

"I thought God was good and wanted us to be happy. Wouldn't he make your wish come true just because you were sad?"

Darcy sighed, sat beside Sara, and squeezed her even tighter. "Not always. God is so much smarter than we are. He knows that sometimes we must be sad to recognize when we're happy. That's how we learn too."

A knock at the door ended the conversation. Darcy let Sara go and whispered, "Be right back."

Teenie entered with a smile. "I'm here to finish the day, so you don't have to be uncomfortable."

"What? No. This is my job. You can't just take my place." Darcy rested her hands on her hips.

"Miss Teenie!" Sara squealed, hopped off the bar chair, and ran to Teenie.

"You look like you feel much better. It's good to see some energy again," Teenie said.

"Darcy took'd good care of me," she answered.

"Took," Darcy corrected with a smile.

Sara giggled and took both women by the hand to lead them into the kitchen. "We have to finish dinner before Daddy gets home."

"Good idea," Teenie said. Then she turned to Darcy. "I gave it a lot of thought. Maybe Evan needs to be reminded of what it's like when you aren't around. You can take care of Sara like always, but I'll show up ten minutes before he's supposed to get home so he doesn't get to see you."

"Mom, that's silly. Have you been talking to Carly and Ellie?" Darcy shook her head.

"What do you mean?" Teenie sat down while Darcy returned to dinner preparations.

"That sounds like what they tried to do to Jackie and Austin last Christmas."

"It is? Huh, I didn't know. Well, it worked, so I'm on the right track."

"No, you're not. They didn't fix things until they talked to each other. Sara, would you grab the milk for me?" Darcy asked.

The little girl hurried to the fridge and hefted the full gallon of milk. She wrapped both arms around it and carried it

to the counter. The action made her look tiny and absolutely adorable.

“Thank you,” Darcy said.

“Darcy,” her mother interrupted. “Try it just for today. What if being apart made them willing to talk to each other?”

“No. He already thinks I’m a child. Running away will only confirm that.”

“Darcy, Miss Teenie, are you talking about my Daddy?” Sara inquired.

Darcy knelt beside Sara. The girl might look like she was only four, but she was six. And on top of that, she had spent the first two years of her life in hospitals around intelligent adults. She caught on to things most other kids her age wouldn’t.

“I’m sorry. We shouldn’t be talking about any of this in front of you,” Darcy soothed with her words and with a hand down Sara’s hair. Then she stood up. “Mom, you can head home, but thanks for trying to make this easier.”

“What are you going to do?” Teenie asked.

“Talk to him. If he wants me to leave, I’ll leave.” Darcy turned to Sara and said, “But I want you to know that even if I can’t be your nanny anymore, I love you so much. And I’ll always be here for you in any way that I can.”

“I don’t want you to go,” Sara cried.

“I don’t want to go either, but we have to respect your dad’s wishes too.”

“But Darcy, Miss Teenie said she’d make my wish come true,” Sara pouted and clung to her hand.

“The wish you mentioned at the corn maze?” Darcy asked.

“Yes. My birthday wish.” Sara glanced at Teenie. Darcy saw her mother nod to the little girl. “I wished for you to be my mommy.”

Darcy sucked in a breath as her eyes teared up. All her longing to be just that knocked her to her knees again. She

pulled Sara into her arms and let all the emotion flow out of her. There was love, the need to keep the girl safe and happy, hope for their future and fear that it would never happen. The sobs were nowhere near calming down when someone cleared their throat.

“What’s going on?” Evan asked.



After Austin left his office, Evan thought about Darcy for the rest of the day. His friend had been right about one thing; he needed to figure this out before she left. However, he didn’t need to date anyone else to do that. He needed to let go of his fear and look at how Darcy made him feel, how she cared for Sara, and how hard she tried to do what was right for his daughter.

Once he did that, he anxiously waited to get home and tell Darcy how he felt. The last thing he expected was to arrive and find her sobbing on the floor, holding his daughter with her mom looking on teary-eye as well. None of them heard him enter the kitchen until he asked what was happening.

Sara clung to Darcy by the neck but turned her tear-streaked face toward him. “Don’t make my Darcy go away.”

Evan stared at all three females and felt like a quarterback about to be sacked with no hope of escape. He’d been nervous thinking about how to talk to Darcy, but having his daughter be a part of it wasn’t in the plans.

“Uh,” he managed before his throat closed up again.

Mrs. Fletcher moved and gathered Sara into her arms. “Why don’t we give them a chance to talk?”

“Darcy, please don’t go. Daddy, make her stay. She’s supposed to be my mommy.” Sara reached for Darcy as the tears ran down both their cheeks.

Darcy kissed Sara's forehead and whispered, "Remember, no matter what, I love you, and I'm here for you."

The words shattered his heart, and then put it back together again. How could he have ever doubted this woman? He stepped closer and placed a hand on Darcy's lower back to keep her from moving away. Then he bent down and kissed his daughter's cheek.

"Give us a minute, pumpkin." He turned to Darcy. "Can we talk out back?"

She didn't say anything but nodded, so he led her to the sliding doors by the breakfast nook. He hadn't put much work into the yard yet. The only thing back there was a grill and a few chairs he'd never used. He applied gentle pressure to Darcy's back to keep her moving toward the chairs.

A strange mixture of nerves and peace had settled over him. His decision felt more right now than before he entered the house. Seeing Darcy holding his baby girl, both heartbroken and clinging to each other, reminded him how good Darcy was for his daughter. He could clearly see the love between them.

The real question was whether or not she felt the same way about him as she did Sara. Could she forgive and give him another chance?

The night air was cool enough that he should have let Darcy grab a jacket, but he couldn't stop now. He had to tell her how he felt and fix the tears falling from both his girls' eyes.

The sun sat low in the sky, half covered by his back fence. The orange and pinks spread across the horizon, interrupted by the other houses in his neighborhood. Mount Rosie loomed to the left, and even though he couldn't see it, he knew Lake Champlain sat to the right. It was a beautiful night and the perfect setting to put his heart on the line.

"Darcy, can you tell me what all the tears are about? And what about you going away?" He thought he'd start there and work up to the mommy thing his daughter had thrown out.

She sat on the edge of one of the chairs as if ready to run away. He pulled a chair next to hers and reached for her hands that gripped the edge of her seat for dear life.

“I wasn’t going to leave,” she whispered. “Mom was trying to get me to go before you got home. She thought it would be easier for us, but I told her no. And then Sara told me about her birthday wish.” Darcy’s voice caught, and another tear slid down her face.

Evan gently thumbed it away. “What was her wish?”

Darcy shook her head and squeezed her lips shut as her eye grew wider. Her stubbornness almost made him laugh. There was no way to know what was going through her beautiful head, but he had a good guess.

“Did it have anything with that last thing she said to me? That you’re supposed to be her mommy?” he asked.

Darcy gasped and tugged one of her hands free to rub at her chest. She wouldn’t meet his gaze, but he could see the emotions flickering over her face. The longing was so evident it stole his breath. He reached out and tilted her head so that she would look at him.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry about everything I said this morning. It’s clear you love Sara deeply and would do anything for her. What I need to know is how you feel about me, and can you forgive me?”

“Evan, I’m scared to tell you how I feel. Whenever I think life is good and I’ll be happy, something goes wrong. You mean so much to me that I should have known it would never work, but when you said it this morning—” She sniffled and tried to look away, but he gently pulled her back to face him. She stared into his eyes and said, “It hurts so much.”

The growing hope burst into a blazing fire inside him. Surely, that meant she felt the same as he did? He needed to hear the words.

“Darcy, I’ve fallen in love with you and want to know if you feel the same. Please, put me out of my misery.”

“You, you love me?” She blinked at him, and then her brow creased. “Wait. You aren’t saying that because of what Sara said, are you?”

“What? No. I was coming home to tell you before all this happened.”

“But why?” She leaned away from him. “This morning, you said it was all a mistake and that we would never work. What happened between then and now?”

Evan released the hand still clasped in his and framed her face with both hands. “I had time to do a lot of thinking.”

“At school?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Yes. I couldn’t get you out of my mind, and Austin showed up during my lunch hour. He decided I needed to date other women to have something to compare you with.”

Her eyes widened, and then she scowled. “I’m going to kill him.”

Evan let his fingers caress her face. “Don’t. His suggestion felt so wrong it made me sick to my stomach. That made me stop and think. Why? If you didn’t mean that much to me, why couldn’t I date someone else? Darcy, the more I considered it, the more I knew I didn’t want to share dinner, movies in the park, football games, or even Sara’s bedtime routine with anyone else. Just you.”

“Really?”

The way she looked at him settled the last of his fears. Her eyes sparkled in the setting sun, and she had that same soft expression Sara brought out in her.

“Do you think you can forgive me and be patient with me as I try and let go of my fears?” he asked again.

Her hands darted to his face as she leaned in and kissed him. It was tender yet fervent. He tugged her as close as he dared without pulling her into his lap. And then he kissed her as if he never wanted to let her go, which was the truth. He hoped she could feel it. They still needed to figure out plenty

of things, but it would come. All that mattered was they had decided to give it all they had and see where it led.

“Daddy’s kissing Darcy!” the little voice shrieked from the other side of the glass door.

Darcy laughed as she pulled away from Evan. Luckily, she didn’t go far.

“Should we tell Sara you’re not going anywhere?” he asked.

“Yes.” Her eyes widened again. “Oh, Evan, her wish. What will we say about that?”

“That we hope it will come true?” He was wishing the same thing with all of his heart at that very moment. “If I’m lucky, you will agree to marry me one day, and we’ll be a real family.”

Darcy burst into tears again and buried her face in his shirt. Sara came running out of the house and patted her on the arm.

“Darcy, was it a bad kiss?” Sara asked with complete innocence.

“No, baby.” Darcy laughed and sniffled at the same time. “It was a fairy tale kiss. These are happy tears.”

“So you’ll be Daddy’s queen and my mommy?” she asked as she wiggled her way between them so they were in a three-way hug.

“There’s an excellent chance, kiddo,” Darcy said.

“I’d love nothing better,” Evan added.



Teenie stayed inside the house and cried silly as she watched the scene outside. She and Sara had sneaked to the door, hoping to hear what was happening outside. They couldn’t

hear a thing, but the couple's body language had given her hope. And then the kiss. Teenie fanned her face.

That kiss had been movie worthy, and she was so glad she'd seen it. Of course, that sent Sara jumping up and down with joy. It was all she could do to hold her inside for a few more seconds before she had to let her run to her dad and Darcy.

As good as that kiss had been, seeing the three of them together made Teenie's heart sing. They had looked like a family before, but it was clear all the walls had crumbled, and the path to forever had opened up. She could see it in the love shining from her daughter's eyes.

Sighing with contentment and joy, Teenie dialed Colleen as she gathered her purse and headed for the front door. The other woman answered right away.

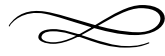
"I've got everyone gathered and ready to put operation Sara's wish into action," Colleen said by way of a greeting.

"No need," Teenie answered between her tears. "They worked it out themselves. The happy couple are currently wrapped around each other and that sweet girl. I'm crying like I did on Darcy's first day of school."

"That's wonderful. Head over and fill us in," Colleen said.

"On my way."

Halloween



“Theresa, you look gorgeous,” Adam Fletcher stared at his wife after she entered their kitchen. “I haven’t seen you this dressed up in years.”

“And whose fault is that?” she teased with a smile. “Is my tiara straight?”

He nodded and then circled her, taking in her floor-length blue-sequined dress. It had long sleeves and a modest v-neckline. Teenie wore comfortable boots under the skirt because no one would see them, and it would be a long night at the square.

The Sugar Mamas would kick off the Halloween party and judge several annual contests. This would be her first year as one of them rather than a participant. Her nerves jittered as she smoothed the fabric of the dress.

“What if people question my Sugar Mama status?”

“Nonsense. They’ve been exclusive, but no one will question you joining them.” He bent over and kissed the tip of her nose. He was a good foot taller than her, so it was a way for him to go. “Let me help you with your cloak.”

He grabbed the heavy wool cloak she’d had specially made. It was a smokey gray that flared around her. The thick fabric would keep her warm, look stylish, and allow her to show off her sparkly dress still.

“Thank you, dear. Let’s get going. I don’t want to be late.” Teenie reverently touched the tiara on her head and couldn’t help but smile. It had been almost two weeks since she left

Darcy with Evan and Sara and hurried to Colleen's to tell everyone how the couple had figured things out. That's when they presented her with her very own tiara.

While she thought she'd get to pick out her own, having one gifted to her was even better. The women explained why they chose the one they did. Teenie's crown had five points, one for each of her children. It meant the world to her that they recognized her true achievement in life would always be those sweet babies she raised over the years. They were all grown up now, but they'd always be hers.

As soon as she reached the square, she joined the other Sugar Mamas for the welcome and kickoff announcements. She didn't have to do anything this go around, but standing with the other women filled her with pride.

"Teenie, you look beautiful." Ruth hugged her after the opening ceremony.

"Thank you. What should I do now?" Teenie asked.

"Mingle, generally make sure everyone is having fun, and keep your ears open for things we might need to help with in the coming days." Doreen winked and wandered off.

"May I join you?" Adam reappeared by her side.

"I'd love that." They linked hands and strolled around the square.

Games were set up along one side: bobbing for apples, a ring toss onto pointed witches hats, a pumpkin-themed skeet ball, a ball drop to win prizes, a fishing booth, and glow-in-the-dark giant bowling pins. The opposite side of the square was full of food trucks and booths, filling the air with the smells of fried foods and pumpkin spice. On the side next to the community center were photo-op cutouts and space for the costume contest to be held later in the evening. Finally, the kids could trick-or-treat at the shops around the square.

"I love our town so much," Teenie sighed.

"And I love you," Adam replied. He gave her a quick kiss before they headed for the food.

“Look.” Teenie pointed toward the fountain in the middle of the square. “There’s Darcy and Evan. Oh, they look amazing, and look at Sara.”

The couple were dressed in matching colors of Sugar Creek blue with gold stitching and accents. Evan was a King in his medieval vest and coat, tall black boots, and a stocky solid crown on his head. Darcy’s dress was cinched at the waist and full in the skirt. Her sleeves looked puffy even though they’d been stuffed inside her cloak. Her crown was more delicate than Evan’s. Finally, Sara’s princess dress was all silver with blue accents. Her hair was curled in ringlets, and she wore a pretty circlet instead of a full crown.

While she watched, Evan kissed Darcy. They honestly looked like a fairy tale come true. Then Darcy and Sara walked away, and Evan headed toward Teenie and Adam.

He stayed in character as he bowed at the waist. “Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher, do you have a minute?”

“Of course, son,” Adam thrust his hand out to shake Evan’s. “Where are Darcy and Sara off to?”

“The bathroom, so we have a few minutes,” Evan answered.

“You three look amazing,” Teenie sighed. “Whose idea was it to be fairytale characters?”

Evan grinned. “Two guesses, and they’d both be correct. Sara loves stories about princesses, so it was a no-brainer. When she told Darcy that she had wanted a queen for me for a long time, they were both all in.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet.” Teenie sighed and rested her hand on her heart.

“What can we help you with, Evan?” Adam asked as he wrapped an arm around his wife.

“Well, sir. How would you feel about me asking Darcy to marry me?”

“That seems fast, but I’m open to the idea,” Adam replied.

Teenie couldn't say a word. The joy inside was overflowing.

"I know it looks fast, but I want to spend the rest of my life with Darcy. She's decided to stay in Sugar Creek and work on a business idea. Getting it up and running will take a while, but I want to help her. Beyond that, I hate saying goodbye every night. Darcy belongs with us, and we belong with her. If she'll have me, I don't want to wait forever." Evan spoke with such earnestness.

Teenie leaned into her husband. "We're so happy for both of you."

"Yes, we are, and I know you'll treat our Darcy with love and respect. You have our blessing," Adam added.

"Thank you, sir, Teenie." Evan finally smiled and bowed again. "Now, to find my girls and make this official."

Adam hugged Teenie as Sugar Creek's coach jogged back into the crowd. As they watched him go, they caught sight of Austin and Jackie. They were dressed all in black with skeleton shirts. Teenie knew that Jackie's also had a baby skeleton on her belly. Seeing two of her kids so happy had her wiping away tears.

"There now, none of that. You'll mess up your makeup," Adam murmured as he wiped the tear away.

"Two down, three to go," she answered.



Darcy locked the door to the Cabins by the Bay office after Sara used the restroom. She figured that was the easiest place to go since all the Fletcher kids had keys. There were no lines, and they could return to the fun much faster.

"What do you want to do next?" she asked Sara.

“Can I try the hat toss thing?” Sara pointed toward the witch’s hats, where a group of people were lined up.

“Sure thing. Do you see your daddy?”

“He’s talking to the skeletons over there.” Sara pointed toward the fountain in the middle of the square.

It was still spraying water, and the city had put purple and orange lights in it for Halloween. Darcy loved how they changed the bulbs for different holidays. She’d miss the fountain until it returned in the spring.

Every year after Halloween, the city brought in a crane to remove the top part of the fountain and place a massive cover over the basin in preparation for bringing in the Christmas tree. She had often sat and watched the process from her family’s storefront. It signaled the start of the holiday season for her.

“Let’s get your dad and say hi to my brother and sister-in-law. You’ll like them,” Darcy said as she took Sara’s hand and led the way.

“There they are,” Austin grinned. “Evan was getting anxious.”

“Was not,” Evan blushed, which meant he probably was nervous or embarrassed about something.

“We’re here now,” Darcy said as she slid an arm around his waist. “Sara would like to do the ring toss. You up for that?”

“I am, but Austin and Jackie offered to watch Sara for a while.” Evan kissed the top of her head and then spoke to Austin. “How about we meet you over there in a few minutes?”

“Perfect.” Austin knelt to speak to Sara while Jackie hugged Darcy.

“I’m so happy for you,” Jackie whispered.

“Me too,” Darcy replied.

Once Sara realized Jackie's costume meant she was pregnant, the little girl took her hand and asked a million questions. Darcy laughed as they wandered away. Evan slowly turned her with his hands until she faced him again. Darcy rested her palms against his chest. He pulled off the kingly outfit so well—all tall and handsome, built with enough muscles to take on any dragon.

“Darcy?” Evan gazed into her eyes. “I have a confession to make.”

“Oh?” Her nerves quivered. A statement like that could be followed by anything. However, she trusted Evan. “Okay.”

“I knew you would change my life the first time I saw you at Austin's wedding. That's why I didn't want to talk to you or anything else. The feeling was so strong it scared me. I took Sara and left before I could get to know you. It was safer that way.” He leaned toward her, his fingers gripping her hips as if he feared she'd back away.

But Darcy was riveted in place. She couldn't say anything, but her mind was going over that first meeting. After Evan left the wedding, she hadn't been able to get him off her mind either. Had she been feeling the same premonition?

Evan continued, “I did everything I could to avoid you all summer, and I made up every excuse I could think of for why you wouldn't be good for us. But then you agreed to be Sara's nanny. I was a goner when you knocked over that glass of water to make her feel better. And it made me mad. I'm sorry I was difficult in the beginning.” He cocked his head to the side and smiled. “And at the end. I'm stubborn and scared of change.”

Darcy reached up and traced his jawline. “I can see that.”

“But you make it easier.”

“I do?”

He nodded. “There's one change I'm more than ready to embrace.”

Evan slid his hands from her waist to her hands, peeling the one from his face. When their joined hands hung between

them, he knelt before her, never letting her go.

“Darcy Fletcher, I don’t want to live without you. Will you marry me and help me raise my daughter so she’ll be as amazing as you when she grows up?”

Darcy had lost all control of her expression. She was sure the smile on her face was the widest it had ever been. Tears also poured from her eyes, and she tried to blink them away. Her throat had closed up the moment his knee touched the ground. He was the picture of a fairy tale come true. Her prince, kneeling and asking for her hand with so much love in his eyes. Her legs gave out, and she sank beside him, cupping his face with her hands.

“Yes,” she whispered.

The kiss that followed was more wonderful than any they’d shared before. It was full of promise for their future. Somehow Evan conveyed his love, passion, and desire to protect her heart without saying a thing. She only hoped he could feel those things from her. More than anything, Darcy never wanted to let this man go.

The sound of clapping slowly broke through the love bubble they’d buried themselves in. And then a little voice she’d know anywhere shrieked with glee.

“Daddy! Darcy!”

And then she barreled into them. Evan managed to hold both of them so that he took the brunt of the fall against the fountain, and Darcy held Sara so she wouldn’t bounce off of them.

“Slow down, pumpkin,” Evan laughed. “There’s one more thing I need to do.” He settled Darcy on the ground, reached for his pocket, and pulled out a platinum round-cut solitaire. “I was so nervous I forgot this part. It’s simple, but it will allow you to have a custom band made to go around it.”

Darcy held out her trembling hand. “Evan, it’s perfect.”

“Darcy,” Sara bounced in her lap while Evan put the ring on her finger. “Does this mean you’ll be my mommy now?”

That broke the tears loose again. “Yes, sweetheart, cutie, adorable pumpkin.”

“Are these happy tears again?” she asked.

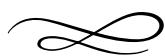
“Most definitely,” Darcy laughed.

She looked from Sara to Evan. His eyes looked suspiciously wet in the orange glow of the fountain.

Life had done an about-face since June. She knew what she wanted more than anything, and they were currently tumbled with her in the middle of the square with tons of people watching them. She didn’t care. All that mattered was she knew where she belonged. Everything was as it should be.

“So,” Sara snuggled in closer. “When can we get a baby?”

Happily Ever Easter



Darcy sighed with contentment as Evan wrapped his arms around her. They stood on the park's edge, watching hundreds of kids hunt for Easter eggs. Sara was out there with her classmates. She dashed from one end to the other full of laughter and joy.

“I’m so proud of you,” Darcy whispered.

“For?” Evan asked, his breath tickling the skin by her ear.

“Letting her run and play like she’s healthy and whole.”

“Well, you’ve consistently proved that to me.” He laughed as if remembering some of their activities over the last few months.

That sent her mind there as well. The Sugar Creek Carvers high school football team won the playoffs and made it to regional champions before getting knocked out in the sub-state bracket. Darcy and Sara attended every game, as bundled up as possible, to cheer on the team and their coach. That was only the beginning of helping Evan allow Sara to live a normal life. It didn’t happen over night, but his fear eventually settle to a manageable degree.

After the first snowfall heavy enough to open the sledding hill at Sweet Pines Tree Farm, Darcy invited Clarissa, her kids, and Clarissa’s new fiancé Dr. Jonah to go sledding with them. The idea was to help Evan see that Sara was more than capable of certain things. Having a doctor around was to put his mind at ease, as much as hers—just in case. As the winter months progressed, Evan let them build snowmen in the

backyard, go ice skating, walk around all the Christmas festivals, and now he was relaxed as his daughter ran with a ton of other kids.

Darcy leaned into him. "It's Easter."

"Yes?" His brow wrinkled in that way she found adorable.

"Mr. Porter, do you remember what you said after hiring me?"

"Remind me."

"You said no jumping out of swings until Easter, and I said I'd have both of you jumping out of them on Easter Sunday."

Evan laughed. "Is that why you brought a change of clothes for Sara, Mrs. Porter?"

Darcy sighed with happiness. "It's been a week, and I still love the sound of that."

She would have married him at Christmas, but her mom said they needed more time to order dresses and plan the reception. They finally convinced everyone that March as late as they'd wait by reminding them Jackie and Austin's baby would come mid to late April.

Their families, the Sugar Mamas, and a few friends attended the small ceremony at the church off of the square. Sara was the flower girl and the ring bearer, which she thought great fun. Darcy chose purple and white crocuses for her flowers and kept everything simple and elegant.

And her dress! She'd wear that dress every day if she could. The crepe and lace mermaid gown made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Especially when Evan gazed into her eyes. The simple v-neckline was framed with lace that cascaded down the long sleeves and the illusion button back. Lace adorned her waistline, and the entire dress accentuated her curves.

"I hope you never get tired of sharing my name." Evan kissed the side of her neck.

"I won't." Darcy turned in his arms for a real kiss. "Sure you won't tell me where we're going on our honeymoon?"

“Nope. Just know that since you have to wait until school is out, I’ll make it worth the wait.”

“I know you will, but I don’t need anything other than you. You know that, right?”

He kissed her again as his answer, and Darcy thought it the most perfect moment of the day so far.

When he finally let her breathe, she leaned back and asked. “So, you ready for the swings after this?”

“I have a secret.” His lips quirked up in a grin she’d grown to love over the months.

“Oh?”

“Sara and I have been practicing, so we’d be ready.”

Darcy clung to him and declared, “You are the best dad in the whole world.”

“And you are the best mom.”

His praise made her warm all over. He became her strongest supporter once they learned how to talk things through instead of getting upset and walking away. Her party place would become a reality as soon as they could find a location because he believed in her. For that reason, they decided to wait a while before having a baby of their own, but Darcy looked forward to that day. Until then, she was happy to be Sara’s mom and Evan’s wife. Luckily, the newest baby Fletcher could arrive any day to keep her mother happy.

“Do you think she has enough eggs yet?” Darcy asked as she scanned the crowd for Sara.

“Let’s find out.”

Evan took her by the hand, and they braved the field of chaos. They found Sara under one of the playground structures with JD. The kids didn’t see them, so the two adults caught the end of their conversation.

“You don’t have to give me your candy,” Sara said.

“But I want to. You’re my best friend,” JD replied with a stubborn tone. “I’ll take care of you until I can marry you.”

Sara giggled, grabbed her basket of eggs, and ran away.

“I’m going to need to keep an eye on that JD,” Evan growled.

Darcy just laughed. Life couldn’t get any better than this.

Epilogue



Vincenzo's was the last place Brandon Fletcher wanted to be on a Saturday night. One, there were too many memories there, and two, he hated blind dates. His friends in Burlington had set him up on countless dates that all ended in disaster. Now that he was back in Sugar Creek, this one had the potential to not only crash and burn but to leave a mile-long gouge mark in his soul. The only saving grace was the fact Julie wasn't from Sugar Creek.

She was pretty. He admitted that as soon as he sat beside her at the red and white checked table. However, many of the women he'd been set up with had been pretty and nice. He sighed. It hadn't been their fault the dates hadn't gone anywhere. He was the only one to blame because he couldn't let go of the one woman who stole his heart but didn't want him.

At least Julie was the complete opposite of Summer. Julie had light blonde hair and blue eyes, whereas Summer had dark, almost black hair and grayer hazel eyes. Julie's skin was a perfect porcelain cream devoid of the splattering of freckles that adorned Summer's nose and cheeks. He missed those freckles.

"Brandon?" Julie's brow scrunched. "Are you okay? It looks like I lost you for a minute."

Brandon cleared his throat in shame. This woman deserved someone who could pay attention to her. Once again, it clearly wasn't him.

“I’m sorry. What were you saying?” he asked.

His focus was once more redirected as a little girl squealed Darcy’s name and ran straight for her. He didn’t miss how his sister’s eyes lit up as she hugged the child. Or how her gaze moved to the man standing by their table.

Brandon recognized the new high school coach from Austin’s wedding but didn’t know Evan beyond that. However, he picked up major heat passing between Darcy and the man. He almost laughed when Julie’s cousin tried to put Darcy in her place.

He leaned over and whispered to Julie, “Dustin just nailed his coffin shut. Darcy doesn’t like to be told what to do.”

Sure enough, Darcy hugged Evan and his daughter with spiteful glee in her eyes. At least that’s how it started, but Brandon saw the moment everything changed. Darcy melted into the hug and stayed there.

Brandon remembered moments like that. Times when the only other person in the world was looking into his eyes, and everyone around them disappeared. He missed it. He wanted it back more than anything, but he didn’t know how to reclaim it.

Dustin cleared his throat, and the couple slowly backed away from each other.

“Oh snap,” Darcy mumbled and turned to him.

That’s when he saw Summer Blakely as if his thoughts had conjured her from thin air. He hadn’t seen her in eight years and hadn’t kissed her in ten, but just the sight of her pulled him to the edge of his seat to be closer to her. Her silky black hair was pulled into a low bun, and she wore a faded green t-shirt with well-worn jeans. She was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen.

His heart pounded stronger in his chest, full of hope and need. He wanted to pull her into his arms where she belonged and kiss her until all the years apart meant nothing.

“Brandon?” Summer stopped beside their table. Her eyes flicked to Julie and back to him.

He stood, bringing him close enough to smell Summer's scent. She had never worn perfume, but he could smell the lemon and mint lotion she always preferred.

"Summer?" He drank in everything about her. She looked better than ever. He wanted to count those freckles and see if there were any new ones. Mostly, he needed to know if she was home to stay. "When did...are you staying?"

"I'm home for the weekend. It's my mom's birthday," she said.

Brandon nodded. He knew that but didn't think Summer would come for it. She hadn't been home in almost four years. His head pounded with all the stats about her in his head. They were jumbled, so he put them in order. Ten years ago, he left for college, and she was supposed to follow after a semester of humanitarian work in Guatemala. Instead, she stopped answering his calls and emails and joined the army. Eight years ago, he saw her when she came home for Christmas, but she avoided him before telling him she didn't love him anymore. Four years ago, Summer had come home for a week in the spring. She had refused to see him then, but he never gave up sending her messages.

"Why don't you answer my texts or emails?" Brandon needed to touch her so badly.

He raised a hand but dropped it when she glared at it. That one look killed all hope. For a brief moment, he'd seen his turmoil reflected in her eyes, but after another glance toward Julie, Summer wiped all emotion from her features.

No, no, no, no, his mind kept screaming.

"I told you to move on." Summer's eyes flickered to Julie again. "Looks like you took that to heart."

"No." Brandon took Summer's elbow and pleaded with his eyes. Why, of all nights, did she have to show up tonight? "I haven't. Can we talk? Tell me why you've shut me out."

"Brandon, you're better off without me." Summer's expression crumbled. Her eyes filled with such hurt and loss

that he couldn't breathe. She pulled away from him. "Go back to your friends."

Then she spun and practically ran for the door. Brandon stood for a moment, stunned into silence, then took off after her.

The cooler air was a relief after the stifling restaurant. He hadn't realized how hot he'd become until he left it. All thoughts of Julie and the date that never should have happened fled from his mind as he followed Summer to a corner of the parking lot.

Her brother's old silver truck was parked under a street lamp. He reached her as she searched her purse for the keys.

"Summer, please. Tell me what I did to drive you away," he pleaded, not caring how it made him sound. He'd get on his knees and beg her to talk to him if she let him.

She turned the key and unlocked the car. Her shoulders lifted another inch as her body tensed. Brandon hated that he was causing her pain but needed to know what happened between them. He'd gone over it a thousand times and didn't have a clue. Slowly, Summer turned to face him. A single tear trailed down her cheek.

"I can't tell you, Brandon. It would kill me for you to know. Can't you remember what we had and let me go?" Her voice cracked.

He couldn't stay away any longer. Brandon pulled her into his arms and held her to his beating heart. Why was she hurting like this? Why couldn't she trust him enough to let him in so he could help her? Maybe it didn't matter. She let him hold her, even though she didn't reciprocate by moving her arms around him. Instead, she left them curled between them.

After a couple of minutes, she sighed and backed away.

Brandon thumbed away the last tear. "Can you at least tell me if it was something I did?"

She shook her head. "It wasn't you."

"Then why—"

Summer rested a hand on his lips. “I’m not telling you. I want you to remember the old me, not this hard, messed-up version of me. Go back to your date.”

“Summer.” Brandon groaned. “This was a blind date my mom set up. I don’t want anyone but you, even now after all this time. Let me in.”

“I can’t.” She opened the door, climbed in, and closed it.

Brandon saw the lock engage. Then she started the engine and drove away without looking back as if she had no idea she took his heart with her.



What could have sent Summer running so far from Sugar Creek and Brandon Fletcher?

Find out next June (2024) in Memories of Summer, Season 3 of Sugar Creek.

Summer Blakely was Brandon Fletcher’s first love. His only love, really. And she’s the one that got away, but he has no idea why. It’s been ten years of wondering and wishing for a second chance. When Summer returns home to recover from injuries sustained during a convoy in Afghanistan, he’s determined to make her talk to him. But will he be able to handle the secrets that have destroyed her self-worth and help her see she’s the love of his life, no matter what?

Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed CATCH ME IF I FALL, consider leaving a review. Reviews are the best way to encourage authors to keep writing, as well as let other readers know what they're missing out on.

Keep Scrolling to get two [recipes](#) from this story as well as to read the [first chapter](#) of Cynthia Gunderson's Fall Season of Sugar Creek book—Love in Audio.

As a bonus treat, there is a playlist on Spotify full of songs that have inspired or influenced my plan for this and the next four Seasons of Sugar Creek stories.

[Seasons of Sugar Creek-River Ford](#)

Want more?

Want to see how Jackie and Austin fell in love at Christmas? Check out the first River Ford story in the Season of Sugar Creek—Christmas

A Home For Christmas

Jackie Hobbs loves the job that lets her travel the world attending comic conventions and playing games until it prevents her from reaching her mother before she passes away. As an only child with no core group of friends to depend on, she dreads a lonely Christmas. The last thing she wants is to go to Vermont as her mother planned, but it's the only way to get the letters her mother left her.

Austin Fletcher has lived in Sugar Creek, Vermont his entire life. He's dedicated to his family's cabin rental business even though he'd rather be in the mountains on an adventure. This Christmas he's tasked with leading a tourist on a special scavenger hunt. It's not snow-shoeing or cold-weather camping, but he's soon captivated by the kind-hearted woman.

Jackie never thought Sugar Creek would be the perfect place to say goodbye to her mother, but with Austin's help, she's learning to smile again. And who knows, he might be the one to give her heart a new home this Christmas.

Brandon and Summer's story will be available May/June 2024 as part of Seasons of Sugar Creek—Summer

Memories of Summer

Brandon Fletcher avoided his hometown of Sugar Creek for years because the memories of his first love were too painful.

He's been back for almost two years without a glimpse of the girl who got away. Maybe he'll finally be able to move on.

Summer Blakeley never thought she'd make the military her career, but there's never been a reason to go home before now. When her convoy is ambushed and she's injured, she needs the peace and quiet only Sugar Creek can offer. She never expected to run into Brandon and all the what-ifs she thought she'd left behind. He's everything she remembers, but if he learns what she did all those years ago, he'd never smile at her again.

Is Brandon finally willing to fight for true love, and is Summer ready to confess her mistakes for the possibility of something better than she ever dreamed of?

Carly and Marcus' story will be available January 2025 as part of Seasons of Sugar Creek—Spring

10 Things *NOT* To Do This Spring

Nurse Carly Fletcher and Dr. Marcus Vaughn have become best friends over the last few years. She wouldn't mind trying for more, but he doesn't want to risk losing what they have. One night in Vegas will change everything. A drunken marriage should have been the chance Carly needed, but Marcus demands they get the marriage annulled. Unable to handle his rejection, and the loss of her secret hopes, Carly flees to Sugar Creek. Somehow, she has to learn how to let him go.

It doesn't take long for Marcus to realize he's made the biggest mistake of his life. He follows Carly to Vermont in the hopes of salvaging their friendship, because it's the best thing that's ever happened to him. Along the way, he may discover Carly was right about them all along, and love was right in front of him.



Consider joining River's newsletter to stay updated about release dates and the opportunity to be an early reader. You can subscribe on her website:

charitybradford-riverford.com

Check out the other books in the Seasons of Sugar Creek Series. They are stand-alone and can be read in any order within their season. We do suggest you read the seasons as listed as many of the books have continuing character development.

Christmas Season 2022

One Last Christmas by Cynthia Gunderson

A White Christmas Lie by Amey Zeigler

A Home For Christmas by River Ford

A Christmas Boyfriend Recipe by Lisa H Catmull

Pining for Christmas by Heather Tullis

Inn Love for Christmas by Annie Ellis

Fall Season 2023

Catch Me If I Fall by River Ford

An Autumn Boyfriend Disaster by Lisa H Catmull

Love in Audio by Cynthia Gunderson

Falling for Her BFF's Fake Fiancé by Heather Tullis

The Autumn Fallout by Amey Zeigler

Recipes

I browsed lots of websites for places in Vermont that shared recipes. Here's one from Harvest Hill Farm in Walden, Vermont. If you click on the link at the end, you can visit their website for more recipes.

Spicy Breakfast Potatoes

Ingredients:

- 4-5 small or 2-3 large potatoes
- 1 onion
- 1 clove garlic
- 1 hot pepper
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- salt & pepper to taste

Directions:

1. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.
2. Cut potatoes into small chunks, same with the onion and hot pepper.
3. Mince the garlic and combine in a bowl. Drizzle with olive oil and melted butter. Add cumin. Salt and pepper to taste and mix together.
4. Spread onto a baking sheet and cook for 25 minutes.
5. Then crank up the temp to 500, stir the potatoes on the baking sheet and let cook for another 15 minutes

until the potatoes turn golden brown.

From [Harvest Hill Farm- Walden, Vermont](#)



This next recipe is from a food blogger named Annalise. You can check out her food blog for more amazing (and easy to make) recipes. [Completely Delicious!](#)



Caramel Stuffed Chocolate Chip Cookies

INGREDIENTS:

- **¾ cup** butter (200 grams), softened to room temperature
- **1 cup** packed light or dark brown sugar (213 grams)
- **½ cup** granulated sugar (100 grams)
- **2** large eggs
- **2 teaspoons** vanilla extract
- **2 ¾ cup** all-purpose flour (330 grams)
- **1 teaspoon** baking soda
- **½ teaspoon** salt
- **2 cups** semi-sweet chocolate chips (350 grams)
- Flaky sea salt , for sprinkling (optional)

Makes about 36 caramels, see Notes

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Line sheet pans with parchment paper.
2. With an electric mixer beat butter, brown sugar, and sugar on high speed until pale, creamy, and mixture sticks to the sides of the pan, 3-4 minutes. Scrape down the bowl once or twice.
3. Add eggs one at a time, mixing and scraping down bowl after each. Mix in vanilla extract.
4. Add flour, baking soda, and salt and mix until just combined. Add chocolate chips.
5. Portion into rounded tablespoons (I use a #40 cookie scoop, 1 ½ tablespoon) and place on prepared sheet pan, about 8 cookies to a pan.
6. Press caramels into the center of each cookie round. Use your hands to push cookie dough completely over the caramel so it's covered and roll into a ball. Return to the cookie sheet.
7. Bake until tops just turn brown, 9-10 minutes. Let cool on the cookie sheet for a few minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.
8. Repeat with remaining dough and caramels.

NOTES from Annalise:

- I have tested this recipe with several brands of caramel candy and they all turned out delicious with slight differences. Softer “old-fashioned” caramel will melt more into the cookie as it bakes, and harder Kraft caramels will retain their shape and cookies will have a slight domed top.
- Caramels should be about 1/2-inch cubes. Cut caramels in half if needed. Roll them in your hands to round corners.
- Serve warm for melty caramel centers. Cookies can be rewarmed in the microwave for 15 seconds or in a 350°F for a few minutes. Cookies are also delicious with cooled chewy caramel centers.

Love In Audio by Cynthia Gunderson
Preview

CHAPTER ONE

Megs leaned against the espresso machine and brushed her curls behind her ears. “He actually called you that?”

“Swear on my life.” Haley sat at the counter and waved her muffin like a judge’s gavel. Her dark hair framed her face in a perfect blunt bob, accentuating her almond eyes and dark brows. “I guess that’s what I get for giving him my number. Paul had a dirty mind even back in seventh grade.”

“I mean, fair.” Megs grinned as Haley took an eager bite of her blueberry muffin and wiped the crumbs from her lips. “Did he show up at Juicy?”

Haley nodded. “Right at closing.” She’d built her juice empire here in small-town Vermont from scratch, and Megs secretly, or not so secretly, idolized her. If she had an ounce of Haley’s confidence, she probably wouldn’t still be working at Green Mountain Grinds. “How’s Bobbi?”

“Not sure, actually. I haven’t talked with her since last week. I think she’s swamped with post-production drama.”

“Oh, the life of the rich and famous.”

Megs laughed and pulled out the top rack of the dishwasher to finish loading. Closing time was in five minutes, and the shop had been empty for the last half-hour. She may actually get out of here on time today, thanks to the pumpkin patch opening this morning.

Haley took another bite. She was her sister Bobbi's best friend, and though Megs was older than both of them by a couple of years, their age gap had evaporated once they were all adults. Since Bobbi left Sugar Creek last year, Megs was happy to be her surrogate.

"Speaking of showing up at closing." Haley nodded toward the front door, and Megs groaned. She'd forgotten to lock up and turn off the 'open' sign.

"Hey, I'm so sorry, but..." Megs started, then froze as she took in the man striding through the door. He was tall, dressed in a collared shirt and fitted charcoal slacks with a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. His dark hair was mussed in an *I just ran my hands through this* kind of way, and as he pushed his tortoiseshell glasses up his nose, Megs momentarily forgot what she'd been about to say.

He approached the counter. "Afternoon."

Megs bobbed her head, then realized her mouth was hanging open and closed it.

"Can I get a latte, please?" The man's deep voice made Megs' heart flutter like a butterfly trapped in a mason jar.

Megs cleared her throat. "Actually, the shop is—"

"*About* to close," Haley cut in. "You snuck in right under the buzzer."

Megs shot her a look as Haley hopped off her stool to go lock the front door.

"You like basketball?" the man called after her.

Haley glanced back in confusion, but Megs didn't miss a beat. "The buzzer comment, Hales!" She sighed and turned to start on the coffee. "Not basketball for me. More like Family Feud."

He chuckled. "Does that show still exist?"

"If I ever had time to watch TV, I might know the answer to that." She grinned and turned back. "Whipped cream?"

“No whipped cream, thank you.” His smile revealed a dimple on his left cheek, and Megs was melting faster than the ice in her cold brew. *Who was this guy?* She knew ninety percent of the people who came into Green Mountain on any given day, and she’d never seen this face before, she was sure of it.

As she steamed the milk, her mind wandered to a thousand different scenarios. World traveler, the kind who would whisk her away on spontaneous adventures? No, the glasses screamed writer. In an instant, she was there on his leather couch in front of a cozy fire and kissing his cheek as she peeked over his computer screen. *She needed to get out more.*

Megs blushed, and she hoped dark-hair-and-glasses guy would ascribe it to her working with molten hot liquid. “Here you go.” She slid the latte across the counter to him. When their fingers brushed, Megs snapped her hand back to her side. “Enjoy!”

“Thanks.” The man studied her for a moment, then turned to find a table, which wasn’t difficult since the entire place was empty. He paused and glanced back. “Do you want me to take this to go? I didn’t realize you were closing.”

“No, as long as you don’t mind me cleaning up in the background, you’re welcome to stay and enjoy the peace and quiet.”

The corner of his mouth curled, and he nodded.

Megs loved being here by herself. She’d curled up more than once in a corner booth after her closing shift to decompress, and the golden light that poured in through the front windows this time of year? Pure magic.

Haley slid back onto her stool and raised an eyebrow. Megs rolled her eyes and turned to find a wash rag, still viscerally aware of the man walking away from the counter. He slid into a corner booth, set his latte on the tabletop, and pulled out his laptop. *Writer. Definitely a writer.*

Haley finished her muffin and pushed the plate toward the sink behind the counter.

“Thanks for keeping me company.” Megs scrubbed the counter and took Haley’s saucer.

“If you pay me in gluten-free blueberry muffins, I’ll keep you company every day.” Haley winked and mouthed *good luck* as she walked toward the door. “See you when? Friday?”

“Maybe, not sure.”

“Not sure about *karaoke*? I’m horrified, but I’ll let it pass this time. As long as you’re there at seven.” Haley waved and pushed out onto the street.

Megs cleaned and sanitized the espresso machine then loaded Haley’s plate into the dishwasher and mopped the galley floor before she got up the nerve to approach the handsome stranger’s table. His messenger bag lay on the bench next to him, and she brightened when she noticed the Champlain Community College insignia emblazoned on the leather flap.

“Champlain, huh?” She set a napkin down next to his latte. “I used to go there.”

“Really?” He looked up from his screen. “Small world.”

Her heart flipped as his eyes met hers. “Sorry, didn’t mean to interrupt, just wanted to make sure you didn’t need anything.”

He looked up at the clock on the wall. Megs knew exactly what it read. Three-thirty. “I didn’t realize what time it was.” He ran a hand through his hair, confirming Megs’ earlier assessment of his perfectly mussed look. “I’ll finish this and get out of here so you can close up.”

Was he working on an assignment? He looked too old to be a student, though who was she to judge? Megs held up a hand. “I didn’t come over here to push you out the door, I promise. I still have to mop.”

“How long does mopping take?”

Hours. She would mop for hours if it meant he would keep sitting in that booth. “About twenty minutes, give or take.”

He nodded and glanced down at his latte. “Great coffee, by the way.”

Megs gave a small bow, and he chuckled.

“You should save that move for karaoke.” He grinned as her eyes widened. *He’d been listening.* He cleared his throat and glanced down at his keyboard. “Where’d you go after Champlain?”

Megs blinked. “Oh, nowhere. I only took a few classes.”

“Sorry, I assumed—”

“No, I get it. I’m sure most people attend and then move on to bigger and better things.”

He nodded. “Why’d you leave, then?”

Megs sighed and motioned at the empty shop. “Because I got an offer I couldn’t refuse.” His dimples came out in full force, and Megs’ heart raced.

“Hey, college isn’t for everyone,” he replied.

And Megs knew what that meant. Her mom had made it clear for the past few years who *everyone* in that sentence referred to. *Everyone* who was lazy. *Everyone* who had no sticktoitiveness. *Everyone* who couldn’t hack it.

“What were you studying?” he asked.

Megs blinked. “Hadn’t gotten that far. But life had other plans, I guess.”

“Ah.” He picked up his cup and took a sip of his latte. “Life is always throwing curveballs when we least expect it.”

“You like baseball?”

His brow quirked as he laughed, sloshing his half-full cup of coffee.

Megs gasped and yanked his laptop off the side of the table. “Sorry, I—”

“No, thanks for saving the important stuff.” He picked up the napkin and soaked up the coffee that had splashed on his fingers.

Megs glanced at the screen and caught a glimpse of the words 'Grade Submission' before setting the laptop back on the table next to him. *Professor?* If she'd had a teacher like him, maybe she would have stayed enrolled.

She flashed a smile and backed up. "I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything else."

He nodded, an amused look on his face as she whirled and strode with purpose back behind the counter to find the mop.



Gideon looked up from his laptop every so often, stealing glances at the curly-haired employee as she pushed the mop over the wood floors. There was a magnetism about her, but he supposed that was the sign of a good barista. He doubted she lacked for tips.

He finished the email he'd been crafting for his Intro to Recording class and pressed send. Their first assignment was due over the weekend, and while he didn't make a habit of coddling his students, he liked to ease them into things at the beginning of the semester.

The space between his fingers was still a bit sticky as he folded up his laptop and tucked it back inside his messenger bag. He slung the strap over his shoulder and moved to pick up his used napkin and coffee cup.

"I can get that." The woman set the mop up against the wall and walked over, tucking her chestnut curls behind her ears. She was adorable in her light-wash jeans, apron, and loose floral t-shirt. Against the brick walls and hanging plants, she looked like a part of the place.

"Thanks again." He handed the cup to her but kept the dirty napkin wadded in his fist. He'd throw his own trash in the bin on his way out the door. "And good luck with whatever life throws at you next."

“Thanks,” she replied, a smile playing on her lips. *She had great lips.* “You too.”

He opened his mouth to ask her name, but she’d already turned to take his coffee cup to the sink. Her curls bounced against her shoulders, and Gideon watched her retreating figure as long as he could before he worried she’d notice him still standing next to the table, gawking.

He should say something. *Ask for her number?* The idea made his hands tingle. He walked toward the trash center and tossed his napkin in the slot marked ‘compost.’ He’d be back in Sugar Creek in two weeks to help with another class at the Champlain satellite campus. He could stop in at Green Mountain then.

“Have a great evening,” the woman called out behind him. His throat was thick as he turned and waved. He only caught the coffee shop hours plastered to the glass in vinyl on the door as it closed behind him.

Two-thirty. They closed at two-thirty on Wednesdays.



Megs walked to her car an hour late without an ounce of regret. Her feet ached, and she needed a neck massage, but she felt lighter than she had all week. Why hadn’t she asked for his number? Or at least his name. She’d thought about it more than once, but then the timing hadn’t seemed right. He was probably married anyway. *Had she noticed a ring?*

Her agent had texted right as she was locking up. She had an audition for a dog food spot, and it paid well. If she recorded her self-tape video right when she got home, the lighting would still be good. Auditions had been slow all summer, so this was a good sign. Maybe things were picking up before the holidays?

Megs slid into the driver's seat of her Honda Accord, then pulled away from the curb. She blew out a breath and mentally calculated what she'd have in her savings account come Friday's paycheck. Should be just enough to finally pay back the loan her mom had helped her get after high school to move to Chicago. *Eleven months*. That was all the time it had taken to crush her dreams and send her back to Sugar Creek.

Now, after dropping out of Champlain, it was community theater, Green Mountain Grinds, and commercial work until she could figure out what to do next. At twenty-five, she didn't love admitting that she still lived in her childhood home with her mother, but she knew it had been her saving grace.

Megs pulled into the driveway and walked through the front door. She looked up, surprised to see Sylvia sitting on the couch with a laptop on the coffee table.

"You're home early," Megs commented as she slipped off her sneakers.

"Where have you been? I thought you closed at two-thirty?" Sylvia looked more frazzled than usual, especially since she wasn't in the middle of a musical run. September meant auditions for community theater—the honeymoon stage of any show. She was surprised her mother hadn't been nudging her to throw her hat in the ring.

"I had to stay late." Megs unclipped her leather waist bag and set it on the end table, then slumped into the loveseat across from her mother.

Sylvia turned the computer screen to face her, and Meg's eyes lit up.

"Bobbi? I didn't know you were video chatting today!"

Her sister laughed. "Yeah, thanks to you, Mom and I have had to shoot the breeze for at least a half hour."

A man with dark hair dipped into view of the camera. "Hey, Megs."

Megs waved. "Hey, Ben." He kissed Bobbi's cheek and disappeared from the frame. Megs looked between Bobbi and her mom. "So, what's going on? Is everything okay?"

Bobbi shrugged.

Sylvia pulled the laptop back to face her and motioned for Megs to sit next to her on the couch. “I had something to tell you girls, so I called Bobbi, but then you didn’t get home on time.”

Megs frowned and slipped past the coffee table to sit down in front of the screen. Sylvia wasn’t one to make a big deal out of things. She was dramatic, of course, but she didn’t have the patience to keep things under wraps. If she’d waited to share until both girls were present, it had to be something big.

“Mom, are you sick?” Megs whispered, and Sylvia slapped her leg.

“No! I’m not sick, just...” Sylvia drew a deep breath and pushed her curls back from her face. “Girls, I’ve made a decision, and I’d love for you to be supportive.” Bobbi leaned in closer to the camera on her phone. “Truthfully, this is going to impact you more than your sister.” Sylvia turned to Megs with an apologetic smile. Her lip wobbled. “Frank and I are moving in together.”

Bobbi squealed, and Megs’ eyes widened.

“That’s—I’m—wow, Mom, that’s amazing!” Megs blustered and threw her arms around Sylvia’s shoulders.

Frank had finally asked Sylvia out shortly after Bobbi left Sugar Creek, and she knew they’d been getting more serious. This shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but Megs still found herself mentally adjusting to the news. *Frank would be moving in here?* That meant no more walking around in her bra and underwear, but she’d gladly give that up for her mother’s happiness.

“Did you think we’d be upset about this?” Megs asked as she pulled back.

Sylvia’s brows pulled together. “That’s not exactly the part I was worried about.” Megs frowned, and Bobbi pursed her lips. “I’m selling the house. Frank’s house is better suited for us, especially with the shop, and with prices going up, it makes the most sense to sell now before the holidays...”

Sylvia continued talking, but Megs stopped listening as the floor seemed to drop out from under her. *Selling the house?*

Frank wasn't moving in here, her mom was moving in with him. She was selling their childhood home. She was selling her *adulthood* home. That meant—

“How soon?” Megs cut in.

Sylvia swallowed and clasped her hands in her lap. “One month.”

“Do you already have offers?” Bobbi asked through the screen.

Sylvia nodded. “Three. I know which one I'm going to accept, I only have to work out a few details with the realtor. Both of us have to be out October seventh.”

Looks like life is throwing Megs a curveball. Love in Audio coming soon.

Also by River Ford

Seasons of Sugar Creek:

[A Home For Christmas](#) (1) November 2022

[Catch Me If I Fall](#) (2) September 2023

Memories of Summer (3) June 2024

10 Things NOT To Do This Spring (4) February 2025

The Wishful Hearts Collection:

[Discovering Her Heart: Kristen](#) (1)

[Training Her Heart: Olivia](#) (2)

[Protecting Her Heart: Rebecca](#) (3)

[Completing Her Heart: Heather](#) (4)

You can now get all 4 of the stories in one box set.

[The Wishful Hearts Collection](#)

Eureka In Love:

Check out the stories from this cute little mountain town. Stories do not have to be read in order to be enjoyed but this is the suggested chronological order.

[The Christmas Dance](#) (0.5) by River Ford

[Chocolate Kisses](#) (1) by River Ford

[Forgetting You](#) (2) by Hillary Ann Sperry

[Landscape Love](#) (3) by River Ford

[Teacher's Crush](#) (4) by River Ford

[Shades of Raven](#) (5) by Tamara Hart Heiner

[After the Fall](#) (6) by Tamara Hart Heiner

[Ghost of Love](#) (7) by Hillary Ann Sperry

[A Christmas Proposal](#) (8) by River Ford

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